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Bill McDonnell – interview transcript

Interviewer: Michel Reuter

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Lecturer at Sheffield University and community theatre worker. Recollections of working with CAST during the 1970s.

MR: What was your first encounter with CAST, and how did you become an active member of CAST?

BM: I first saw CAST, when they were performing at the Socialist Workers Conference in Skegness in 1978. I was very taken with their performance and taken with their politics, which I shared. And it was actually seeing that performance that made me decide that a) that was a kind of theatre that I thought I would like to do and b) they were the kind of group I would like to do the theatre with. I then saw them again, because I booked them to come to an Arts Centre I was working in in Chesterfield at the time, and after that I went for an audition. They wrote to me and said: 'Do you want to audition?' I went to audition and I joined them in 1980.

MR: So, your first encounter with them was seeing them onstage, so what was the kind of theatre like they were presenting onstage? What was the style like, how would you define it?

BM: CAST theatre were ... we need to go back a little bit...CAST theatre came out of Unity theatre and came out of a period in the sixties, mid-sixties, when the sort of radical forces, that were beginning to pulse through society and which would obviously in the end manifest themselves in the sort of events of 1968 and post-1968 here and across Europe and America, were beginning to make themselves felt. CAST were made up of young, angry young people who were outsiders, outside the mainstream, many working class, who hadn't been to drama school, who hated mainstream theatre, hated drama school students, apparently, because they'd done some work, they thought they were just beyond the pale. They thought most theatre was boring. What they wanted to do is bring to theatre a sort of energy that they saw in Rock 'n' Roll. One of the ways they defined themselves was as the first sort of Rock 'n' Roll Theatre. Roland Muldoon, who is the key mover behind CAST, its creative force and pulse, would always argue that his influences hadn't been say Bertolt Brecht or Piscator, but it had been Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley...it was that energy, that rawness. And so they became famous for an incredibly in-your-face, as it were, well before 'In-Yer-Face Theatre', a very in-your-face sort of stylistic, balletic form of Agit-prop that was very unique. It was unique in two ways: one was that it was a form that was tremendously anti-realistic, which one of the ways he defined it was he called it 'presentationalism', and he said 'we don't talk to each other, we only talk to the audience.' So performers would rarely talk to each other, they would always address the audience; and there would be this sort of three-way dialogue between people onstage and the audience. And the second was the way in which they used a sort of cartoon-style editing technique, so these short, sharp scenes. So, for

example, their first play John D. Muggins is Dead was about the Vietnamese War, it was their response to the Vietnamese War. And it was just a twenty to twenty-five minutes piece of theatre, which could be performed at Rock concerts, which could be performed at public meetings and so on. So that was their style, and it stayed their style really for so long as Muldoon and Claire Burnley, his partner, who was another founder member, were in the group. Because it was very much in a way we realized later, very much about the way they acted. It was very much sort of commensurate with the way he was, and so that was their style. And another important influence worth mentioning was Music Hall. He was kicked out of Unity Theatre, well, they were kicked out of Unity Theatre by the Communist Party Theatre, for trying to revamp the Music Hall nights they had there, which was fairly traditional. He wanted them to become more contemporary, more political. There is a famous minute for Unity Theatre saying that they did conspire with others to overthrow the management committee, which sounds very like the Muldoons, and so they were shown the door. So, when they left they formed CAST.

People have compared him, he was a great stand-up, he is a great stand-up, great sort of political stand-up, very talented and... neglected really... Music Hall was that other element, so it was a real mix of popular theatre forms, very unique to them.

MR: In the books I read people talk about the anarchic character of CAST. Have you got anything to say about this anarchic character?

BM: Yeah, it was. I mean this is very interesting actually, because CAST always allied themselves with the Socialist Workers Party, who are sort of Trotskyist, fully ultra-leftist party, and said they were more so in that period. And it was a very strange relationship, because, while Muldoon was most sympathetic the analysis that has to be put forward, he himself and his plays were really focused on exploring the crisis of relationship between this Party and its Marxist-Leninist analysis and the average working class punter, who went to the theatre, went to the clubs, and who Muldoon felt the Party didn't communicate with very adequately. He had this character called Muggins. And Muggins appeared in nearly all their shows in different forms, like John D. Muggins is Dead, Horatio Muggins Rises up, Confessions of Muggins and so on. Muggins is, what Muldoon said, the sort of twentieth century proletarian, is the guy who gets mugged by History. No matter what happens they're the ones who get in the neck, very like Brecht... Muggins is the one under the wheels of the wagon as things move forward. And so these plays, people liked because of their socialist analysis also angered them. A classic formulation was in a play called Confessions of a Socialist, which had Muggins in, and in this play there's a revolution, and Muggins, the hero is on a package holiday in Spain when the revolution happens. He comes back to England and it's all like 'Hi Comrade' and 'Comrade, we've had a revolution, you can now spend your life anywhere you want. You can go and study dialectics, you can learn to be a mechanical engineer, do what you want.' And Muggins says 'Can I fish by the canal?' and they go 'Yeah, okay, everyone seems to wanna do that.' And the point Muldoon was always making is that people are like the Muggins character, that people's aspirations are not really for dialectics. They're for pleasure and joy, and people are anarchic by nature, and that was the anarchy. He was accused by the SWP of being an anarchist. And I always felt that about him. He's the sort of person who, it doesn't matter what system was in place, he would be against it. (laughs) And it's just historical coincidence that the forces against the current system happened to be the SWP. He was very much a libertarian really, he was a libertarian socialist. Yes, it was a very interesting and tense relationship, which both sides gained from, very interesting. But he was always challenging this idea that human beings could be moulded in some sort of straightforward determined way.

MR: Going back to that, because you were part of a travelling company, did you have any special encounters with the audience, because the plays were directed towards the audience? In 1968 in *The Trials of Horatio Muggins*, CAST were deliberately holding up the mirror to the working class audiences. Did you experience any comments from the audience?

BM: Yeah, we did. I think the response to audiences was very interesting. Our whole relationship was very interesting at that period. I can only talk from when I was with the group from 1980 to 83-4. What I found was we had different sorts of audiences, depending on each show. There was a fundamental core audience for CAST shows, which was built up over the years. This audience was to be found mainly in Scotland, the Welsh valleys and in the old engineering heartlands of the Midlands, where the Communist Party was still strong, where the Labour Party tended to be more left, and where you could therefore guarantee a good turnout, for who CAST was a known quantity they like. It was like 'CAST are coming, great, let's go and watch them'. My experience was very interesting, because while there was that audience there, while they were very enthusiastic in those particular heartlands, once you moved outside them, and particularly in that period, you found an evidence that we knew was available in newspapers and elsewhere of a sort of falling away in the confidence of working class communities. People would either sort of not come to the shows, there would be very few people there, or those that did were more likely to challenge you, were more likely to say: 'This isn't the case, we've lost, Thatcher is in power.' So, the audiences were very split. There was this hard core of enthusiasts, who were committed activists, and then there was this wider group, who over the period between '68 and '80 would diminish rapidly, as the Right wing forces in society kicked in. So it depended. And you got some extraordinary situations.

I remember one extraordinary moment, when we'd be performing in Birmingham. We arrived there with this sort of play, called *From One Strike to Another*. It was about the government's legislation, banning secondary picketing, limiting the number of pickets on a gate to six, which was then used against the miners in '84-5. It was very important legislation, and we would take the show round and go look: 'This legislation's important, it's gonna curb our abilities to support each other, to act in solidarity, it needs opposing.' And we got to Birmingham, which was a regular part of the touring itinerary in that time. We had been booked into a city-centre pub by the Socialist Workers Party. We had settled specifications for what we needed for the space, and when we got there, we found we couldn't fit the set in, because the set for the play was fairly elaborate. It was sort of tall, six foot above clearance, and so we couldn't perform. So what we did was, we went and found another pub which we'd performed at before, knocked on the door and said: 'Do you mind if we come in and perform,' and they went: 'Okay, because it will bring drinks in and stuff, bring punters in.' So we left a note for the SWP saying: 'Dear Comrades, it's not big enough for the set. We have gone up the road.' So they came to see the show, and they, obviously, were very miffed and very cross. They sat at the back with arms folded, like this (folds his arms and mimics the facial expression). We went: 'Oh, what's wrong with them? What miserable sods.' Anyway, we did the show, and it went fine. Then they disappeared as a group, and they went downstairs and they had a meeting. And at this meeting they decided that CAST were guilty of petty bourgeois aestheticism and deviation and all sorts of things, because we were carrying a set and proper lighting which meant that we couldn't perform in any hovel that the SWP decided to book. And this was a potent debate that went on during the period. It was this idea that the working class being poor should have a poor theatre, whose poverty was defined not by a pairing away of equipment and stuff, but by sheer poverty, that we could do it in a rubbish bin, and that that would make it somehow more authentic.

And Muldoon's attitude, which I agree with, was the opposite. His attitude was: 'No, we'd give the best... if these are poor areas we bring the best quality theatre, we have the best quality set we can carry.' Roland wasn't actually on that tour, thank God, but his wife Claire was. Now Claire was brilliant, and she was the daughter of mill workers from Lancashire. She was a tough nut, Claire, a big woman. And they came in, the SWP, who'd been for their corks, and they delivered this sort of: 'Comrades, we think, we want to tell you that we're deeply upset and we think that you're guilty of petty bourgeois deviationism and all the rest of it.' And Claire just went: 'What did you call me?' And they went: 'We're saying that you're petty bourgeois.' And she went: 'Yooooou're saying what?' 'We're sayin... 'Don't you ever fucking tell me I'm petty bourgeois.' And she proceeded, you know, the set had been taken apart, she proceeded to start throwing the set at them. So (laughs), so we were upstairs in this pub room, and these bits of rust and things began bouncing down this hall towards the SWP. They were all going: 'Comrades, you know, can't we talk about this properly?' And she was so angry. And then the bouncers came up from the pub downstairs and separated us. They threw the SWP out and we were locked in until everything had calmed down. But that confrontation was very instructive for me, because it summed up so much that was problematic about the way in which we saw theatre, so much that was problematic about this idea that there were specific forms of theatre that belonged to the movement, that there were aesthetics, which were acceptable and ones which weren't. None of which makes any sense when you look through the history and richness of Working Class Theatre, or Brecht, or whatever, it was nonsense. But there was this idea of let's say from the SWP that we should be seen to be a poor theatre for poor people. I mean the problem with the SWP, as with the revolutionary Left in general in Britain, was that they're not very strong on culture, (laughs). They don't understand it, they fear it, and if they do have it, they want it to be like the blue blouses in the 1917 Revolution, they have this very fixed conception. Even the blue blouses at Bolshevik festivals were in fact incredibly elaborate and sophisticated forms of theatre. That was very telling, that was a sort of another response we got.

An equally interesting response was when we went with an anti-nuclear show, and we got a totally different kind of audience. We started to get audiences from CND, and we were booked into communes up in the valleys in Wales, where people would come down with their four-wheel drives and their wellies to watch us. Totally different audience, who then accused CAST, quite appropriately actually. CAST was very good on class politics, but sexual politics were fairly crude and rudimentary. And so, we got into a lot of trouble when we were touring that show. We got into trouble because people thought the show was essentially pessimistic. So, there were different audiences, depending on the show. One of the things I learned, one of the things I found very instructive was to be inside the shows in that period. For me it certainly was to have a very particular perspective on what was happening in the country. And the different audiences reflected in a way the sort of ascendancy of different forces, the ascendancy of different forms of activism, so class politics was being very much superseded by single issue, by nuclear, by sexual politics in a very, very big way.

MR: Starting from 1976 CAST was funded by the Arts Council. Did that change anything in the creative approach of CAST, or in the perception of the audience, because it was no longer 'free' from the State?

BM: I think it changed it... well I know it changed it profoundly and deeply. And I don't think they were ever the same force again. I don't think the group I was with was as a revolutionary a group or as important or as effective or as politically useful a group as the group of 1965. And the reason for that is very straightforward; there was an illusion peddled by all of us in that period that you could bite the hand that fed you, that you

could be supported by the State and still subvert it. And it was summed up amongst a remarkable statement when Roland Muldoon was asked in an interview, it may be cited in Itzin (see Catherine Itzin : Stages of the Revolution): 'What's your objective at the moment ?' and he said : 'We need more money from the Arts Council, because theatre is very labour intensive, and if we are going to do the kind of theatre we want to do, we need more people to do it.' It was the equivalent of saying : 'our job is to subvert the State, we wish to bring an immediate end to the structures that rule and control our lives, and we would like those structures to give us more money, so that we can do that subversive job more effectively.' All that's nonsense. The reality was that a State that funds you is a State that's very highly confident, it seems to me, that it can contain and control you. It's very complex. There were forces within the Arts Council, there were people within the Arts Council, like Mike Leigh and others, who were very sympathetic, who had also come through the moment of '68. So there's no doubt for a while that the funding came to groups like CAST and Red Light in '76 to '84 precisely because people like them were in positions of power. But it's also true that the effect of funding was that it turned them from being an activist theatre into being a theatre company. And once it became a theatre company, once they started to hire performers and to pay performers, then you come into a different set of economic and political relations. And, I'm not saying that out of that cannot come very good work that's politically useful, but certainly what you found happening to CAST and everybody else is that you lost the ability to respond to the immediacy of political events as they unfolded around you. So, from 1976, even earlier, CAST could no longer...When I joined them, there was a big steel strike in Sheffield, and a really important strike in 1980-81, but we couldn't visit during the strike, because we'd agreed with the Arts Council that we would only tour Yorkshire in May to beginning of June, because we had to be in the West Midlands when the strike was on. Or we had to be in Cornwall, because they'd given us funding. So you compromised in that way. You planned a year ahead, and irregardless of what happened in the world, you had your show to do, and you'd already decided what the show was, what the issues were. And I think that compromised it tremendously. I think it compromised it in another important ways, because you then became people who were, I wouldn't say bought, but you certainly became people who came to see your politics in the theatre as a job, it was an economic relationship. You, therefore, had relations between the company and within the company that became problematic about the handling of the money. You had issues that were not going to be touched. I mean, CAST to their credit, were fairly outrageous, I have to say. But in general you would take an issue like the troubles in the North of Ireland and the Republican surgency, ...who covered that? Hardly anyone. CAST did in '76. Belt and Braces did, ...once, McGrath did it once and then the play was lifted because of legal action. Nobody again went back to the troubles, nobody did anything, nobody visited there, everybody ignored it. Why? Because you weren't gonna get a grant, and you certainly weren't gonna get any bookings if you did shows about the troubles. So, a sort of neo-colonial war being fought on our doorstep, which was actually redefining our own political structures and our own legal frameworks, and in which things were being learnt on the street, counter insurgency techniques, that were then used against the minors here. Very profound effects. You know, we could go : 'Well no one's going to come to that', or 'they'll cut our grant.'

MR: So, did that leave any kind of frustration within the group?

BM: I think...I think it did. I mean I think there was a feeling that you could still do interesting shows, but which will perhaps look and get longer term issues, but I think it's more to do with the fact about the way in which it defined your relationship to activities on the ground. Members of the group found it very frustrating I think at times. I know

certain ones like Kate Rutter, who was an important member, she found it very frustrating, because there was this lack of flexibility now, and it felt like the subject matter we chose:... 'why do a show on nuclear power?' Okay, it's very important, well because there was an audience for it, and that way we could justify our grant. And we tried to insert our politics into that. When Muldoon started New Variety, and we did a show called Sedition 81, which was a great show, great fun. We took it around the student campuses there, and it was just naughty and anarchic: we beheaded the Queen and we shot Princess Di and Prince Charles on their wedding day, and we blew up Tory MP's onstage, we did all this stuff, but ...Great fun, but seriously, it was hardly a dagger in the heart of the system. We played at Sheffield University Students Union, or Warwick University... and students loved it, because it was naughty, and it was funny and it was enjoyable, but it was hardly, hardly class-led theatre, and it was hardly theatre that was intervening in any way in a national debate...and there's room for that theatre. But what I'm saying is because you asked this is that I think CAST themselves were at their most potent and important before grant aid. After that they became a theatre company.

MR: What was the creative process like in putting on a CAST production ?

BM: Bizarre ! (laughs) This is funny I've talked to members since, particularly my friend Kate Rutter whom I mentioned earlier about this. What you have got to consider is Roland Muldoon and Claire Muldoon, his partner, very much... it was bit like sort of Dario Fo and Franca Rame really, very intimate couple. I always felt that all the shows CAST created were basically monologues for Roland Muldoon, which he then divided up and gave some bits to everybody else. And a very specific way it would work,... when we were working on the first show I worked with them, was Muldoon would come in (laughs) and everyone would grab a coffee and a cigarette -there was no sort of warming up exercises, none of that nonsense-, and he would begin to harangue people on the newspapers or the politics or some bugbear in his head that day; that might be to do with the show, might not be. And he would go on, he could talk forever. He'll talk for about an hour, and we'd all intervene and make what we felt were pertinent political analytic comments. And then we'd get on our feet, and he would go : 'Okay, scene one... hmm right... you'll get onstage, right...what it is, is you're all in the factory and you're saying to him...' And he'd start telling you what your lines were, 'blablabla and then she says something like: 'Fuck you, I don't wanna do that right,' and then you come in.' And then we'd go okay and then we'd try it through. (laughs) And then he would go: 'No, no, no, change that, change that!' And all this was being recorded on a big tape recorder. And so we would go through a scene like that, and then he would go: 'Okay, run it again, add stuff in.' And so we might add some extra stuff in: 'Say, Roland, what about if I do this here ?' 'Yeah, alright mate, alright, do that, yeah, try that.' Or he might say to us, like he said to me: 'Can you write a solo piece here for after this moment and you write it, and then I wanna see what it's like. And I said: 'Yeah, ok.' So people would write these sort of pieces now and again and go off if he trusted you. But essentially, these tapes would be taken back home, they would be listened to, they would be transcribed, he might add to them, he would do this with one or others, and then, the next day, we would have a bit of a script and we would begin again. And so it would go, and it would develop. I think he had a sort of conception, but it would begin really on a sort of size of a A4, an opening image and some sense of the politics and analysis he wanted to get in. And then it would develop in this way. Very interesting, really, because while we did contribute creatively, there's no doubt we did, and, obviously, we would add and develop these characters, the process was very much about him, almost like improvising a play... and a great show. He was amazing to watch, because he would leap about going (imitates his voice) : 'blablabla', and then he

would go over this side and go: 'And now I'm gonna say this' and then he'd go: 'And then she says that'. And you just sit there going: 'Okay, okay.' (laughs) And then he would say: 'Now you do it. You know, now you do it, now you take over.' That was the way the plays were written, and gradually a script would be created on a tape recorder. I can remember: once he asked me to collaborate with him on a play called Hotel Sunshine, which was the play about nuclear war and CND. And we went to this hotel in Coventry, I think it was, for a few days to write, but the thing was, once we had decided the characters, we started to work out the plotline. But he was very impatient, because he was an improviser at heart, he was somebody who was brilliant on his feet. And so he would sit there with me and I would go: Well, you look Roland, we can have the scene round this way or that way.' And he would go: 'Yeah, yeah, whatever, yeah okay, shall we have a break now. 'I would go: 'Well, okay. But we haven't...' 'Yeah, we'll come back to it, yeah ok. We'll have a break, have a drink, have a think' So we'd go for another thing, come back and then I would go: 'Look Roland, what about if, coz I'm not sure, this is a bit rough here, and if these go off then, then where, how do we bring this theme back in?' And he would go: 'Well, we could do a bit of that, a bit of this...' And so eventually we had a rough draft of five or six scenes, but no real dialogue. Then he would go: 'That's it. Let's go. Let's go home then.' So we would jump in the car and get back to London, and we would start on our feet. So, as I say, a fairly unique, unique, except I know this is how Dario Fo wrote a lot of his stuff. So, again, Muldoon very like him in a sort of very talented clown, who really should always have done stuff on his own. (laughs) He wasn't very good at being in a group. He couldn't hack it. He was a democrat who couldn't hack sharing and (laughs) ... He was a collectivist who'd like to be in control and all look paradoxes. So that was what it was like.

MR: So, being a member of CAST, was that a full time job in a sense?

BM: Yeah, it was because of the grant. I was paid a full wage, well not a full wage, a sort of minimum wage. That was a full-time job for me for three years.

MR: And did you spend your time as a member of CAST on the road, or did you have some kind of resident space where you could gather and rehearse?

BM: We had a rehearsal space, yeah. We used to use an old church hall behind Paddington station, which we hired: a very derelict and bare space, very cold, as I remember, and damp. We would rehearse there, and then the shows would go on the road. So there would be a process of probably six weeks rehearsal, three months touring, six weeks rehearsal, three months touring... perhaps there was a little less touring. We would basically do two to three shows a year, and that is how it would work. And sometimes they were in repertory, but by and large there was just one show a go. It would do its tour, funded by the Arts Council, and then another one would be prepared.

MR: Did CAST feel any pressures because of the Arts Council funding, any pressures to put on productions?

BM: Oh, yeah! In fact that's a very interesting question, because what it did was, I remember Muldoon saying this, it obliged CAST to create and work in a form that didn't suit his particular talents. He was a variety man, he was a stand-up, he was short, sharp, sketch-led intelligence, and very good at it. When he had to contrive, as he once put it, 'the trouble the Arts Council make is you have to have two hours and an interval' So every play was timed: is it long enough, will there be an interval, because that's what the Arts Council will want. So, that was very powerful. It is as important an impact of grant aid on CAST as the political, directly political. It was this issue of form and the way in which he felt very constricted by a model of theatre, which didn't suit his talents. And I think it showed. As he tried to do bigger pieces, but using this improvisation in method, they were weak, I think we accept that towards the end it was not just theatre that

wasn't perhaps reaching the audience as it should, sometimes it just wasn't very good theatre. And I think that was an effect of grant aid as well.

MR: So, towards the end, did CAST just run out of steam?

BM: Well, what happened was that, while I was with them, Muldoon had always wanted... he went back to its roots. There is a remarkable sort of symmetry to his career. He had started with Music Hall, he wanted to have modern, contemporary Music Hall at Unity. And during the time I was with the group, he decided that that was the way forward. He could see the way things were going politically. He could see that Margaret Thatcher and the Conservatives were eventually going to realise that people like him were being funded. But they always did actually. We were always pursued at the time by Tory MP's, one in particular Teddy Taylor, who used to raise questions in the Commons all the time about why CAST was being funded. So, there was always this issue. I think Muldoon was trying to think ahead. And what he decided was that the time was right for what he called New Variety. And these would be packages of performers: they were comedians, they were dancers, they were musicians, they were actors in sketches, and some of the most important talents actually were to come in the period now began their life in New Variety or were involved in it. If you look at people like Jeremy Hardy, if you look at people like Linda Smith, if you look at people like Ben Elton and Jo Brand, all these people went through New Variety, in Brixton and around London, where it was set up. New Variety was this idea that there could be a form of left-wing, radical entertainment that could sell itself and could exist without aid. As it happened, it coincided its founding with the fact that Ken Livingston, for the first time round, was leader of the Greater London Council and was committed to a policy of cultural equalisation, that he wanted to use funding to have a more representative culture in London, and in particular black and gay-lesbian culture. It was wonderful timing. So he put some funding into this. You had this parallel process whereby the shows were going out with us in them, but actually in the pubs, in the clubs around London CAST were beginning to build this New Variety circuit. I don't think he ran out of energy. I think he just put his energy back into the thing he was best at, which was this idea of a popular rather than a political theatre. And it is an important distinction actually. The Muldoons then went on to take over the Hackney Empire, which they still run. It is tremendously successful in the middle of East London, wonderful sort of eclectic and catholic series of events and cultural: you can have King Lear one day with whoever, Joseph Fiennes, and the next you'll have a load of clowns from Russia and the next you'll have the black comedians competition and the next you'll have a sort of really naughty, on-the-edged, politically incorrect farce from Jamaica, and then you'll have, Hamlet, and then... So, a wonderfully rich mixture of theatres and it is felt very much to be Community theatre. And a member I was interviewing recently, and he was saying that, he (Muldoon) says: 'I'm never happier than when I sit there and watch one of these black farces, because it's popular theatre. And that's what my soul's always been.' And I think, and this is a distinction that is hard...difficult to get precisely, but he, like Fo, I think he believed that popular forms of theatre were the most powerful way to generate and to communicate political perspectives rather than political theatres that tried to be popular. In other words if you start with popular forms, give people a laugh, you know, do a bit of dancing, do a bit of stuff, these popular forms, these idioms, which people... which belong to the people, then that's where you can intrude your politics, and Music Hall had, Music Hall had a radical cutting edge. And so he's a great popular theatre man, rather than a political theatre man, I think, although, you know, those politics are very strong. I think he..., his heart is always in the popular theatre forms. And so he would say to me: 'Yes, I know its politically incorrect...the show (laughs) in some ways, but it's great fun and they love it, and they come to it.' Now the

SWP wouldn't be going- Sorry comrade - and he'd go: 'Fuck you then, I mean, you know, do you want empty theatres? No, let's get them in here, and next time they'll come to something different.' So, I think, his life and CAST's have gone full circle. They started at the Unity Theatre with New Variety, they ended up at the Hackney Empire with New Variety, and in-between they became a theatre company in response to very specific forces. They created forms of theatre, which made them very well-known, they were really, really popular and famous in the late Sixties, early Seventies. They went on to get grant aid which I think corrupted that process. It changed them into a other political theatre company, some good stuff, some not so good stuff. But I think now back at Hackney Empire I think he is doing what he is best. I remember Kate Rutter saying to me: 'Roland should never have tried to be in a theatre group. He's doing what he's good at, he's a song and dance man, he's a variety man, he should have always stuck to that.' But the reason he didn't stick to that was because those days were the days they were and the political forces were the ones they were, and therefore theatre of the kind we did seemed a response. But CAST basically belong to Music Hall and popular theatre rather than to a tradition of agit-prop. In fact he would always say: 'We're not agit-prop, we're Agit Pop.' That was his sort of way. 'We're artists.' He was intensely angry about being called agit-prop, intensely angry, because he used to say, and he is right, that agit-prop is very much about 'this is the message, comrades, this is the action, go round get it done, progress the revolution', which he would agree with if that was the circumstances. But he was saying: 'we were always questioning, we were always doubting, we were always trying to undermine, to question them, the commissars. We were creative artist, we were mimes, why do reduce us?' And it is true, they are reduced. 'Agit-pop', Music Hall, that's CAST.

MR: Were you part of New Variety as well?

BM: I helped in the early days in some small ways to set it up, and we used to perform now and again in it, but not to a great extent, no, I left not long after that.

MR: Thank you very much for this interview.