

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Dorien Brooks – interview transcript

Interviewer: Simon Finnegan

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Theatregoer. London: Noel Coward, Priestley, Look Back in Anger.

SF: What are your first memories of the theatre?

DB: My love of the theatre is in the genes. My family background was working class, south-east London, and my parents were born in the late 1880s. The area was richly endowed with music halls that were such a feature of popular entertainment. They were called music halls, but they were really variety theatres, providing every sort of turn; serious songs, comic songs, recitations, monologues, instrumentalists, dancers, jugglers, acrobats. The stars of the day, Murray Lloyd for example, were widely admired. Every family like ours had a piano, and at family gatherings, the music hall turns were re-enacted with amateur gusto; the songs, the patter, the jokes, even the monologues. From my earliest childhood days this was as much lifeblood to me as it was to the grown ups. We moved a bit further out of that area, and I should think that from the time I was five, I started real theatre-going with my mother. In the ensuing years, we must have been to shows in every theatre in the West End. It was so easy and so spontaneous; you could stroll along Shaftesbury Avenue, look at the enticing photographs outside the theatre, and you could decide then and there which one you'd like to go to. No fiddling about with booking. We mostly went to Saturday afternoon performances, and we always went in the gallery. I remember the happiness of coming out of No No Nanette with everyone singing 'Tea For Two'.

As I got older my taste deepened, and for example we saw Sybil Thorndike in Shaw's Saint Joan. In due course, we moved to the south west of London; Richmond, Surrey, and there we had a splendid local repertory theatre, and many others of the same kind within easy reach. When I met my husband-to-be, he was as enthusiastic a theatregoer as I was, and those were halcyon days for us, the nineteen thirties. We were devoted to the Old Vic; one shilling in the gallery for all the leading Shakespearian actors. We loved the plays of J.B. Priestley, Noel Coward, Oscar Wilde. Catholic tastes indeed. It was during that time that the practice of putting stools down earlier in the day, instead of queuing for evening performances, became widespread. We were dead-keen ballet lovers and my fiancé used to put down stools at Covent Garden very early, on the way to work at the printers in the city, where he was still doing a seven year trade apprenticeship. He was always charmed by the flower market adjoining the opera house. A summertime pleasure, although always tinged with anxiety due to the vagaries of the weather, was the open air theatre in Regent's Park. Several Shakespeare plays, and some ballets, were ideally suited to that setting, but there was a wide range, and I particularly remember a performance of Shaw's Androcles and the Lion which went down very well.

The war came, we were married, and my husband was in the R.A.F. Nearly six years, but although all the theatres closed at first, they soon re-opened again, and we would always go if precious leave gave the opportunity. I keep a programme from those days, just as a souvenir. It was printed on crude wartime utility paper, and it carried severe admonitions as to procedures to be followed in the event of an air raid. That particular production was worth every risk. It was a classic performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest* with a cast including John Gielgud, Peggy Ashcroft and Edith Evans. John Gielgud's name must always be associated with Laurence Olivier's, and there were memorable performances of them together when the Shakespeare Company migrated to the new theatre in those days, but it was Gielgud who always took pride of place for us. We kept a treasured remembrance too, of the young Richard Burton in his emergent days at the Old Vic. A note about living in London during the war; it in no ways minimises the horror and carnage of the Blitz, the privations of rationing, and the constant anxieties for our forces in every part of the world, to say that putting up with the black-out was a test of character indeed. Oh the joy when that was lifted and lights returned to our homes, our streets, and in this little chronicle, when theatreland lit up again.

With peacetime came a further chapter in our theatre going. My husband was, by then, manager of a busy general printers, and an important contract was for the printing of London theatre programmes. These were always difficult jobs, wanted in a hurry, and perks were given in the form of complimentary tickets. For the first time in our lives we found ourselves in the posh seats. Once again, halcyon days, particularly with plays at the Royal Court, introducing us to Wesker, and to Pinter, to Osborne and to Beckett. *Waiting for Godot* was a milestone in my life, but it wasn't all serious stuff. The contract included the charming little Lyric theatre at Hammersmith where we saw *Salad Days* and, as when I was a little girl, everyone came out singing. I'm happy to say that the genes were passed on to our son, who has followed the family tradition. An avid theatre goer himself, he introduced us to the Footlights when he was at Cambridge, and in due course there were good times at the schools of our grandsons, with enthusiastic productions of everything from *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat* to *Kiss Me Kate* and *Volpone*.

Our theatre going virtually came to an end when we retired to East Sussex, with all the new responsibilities of country life. Now I'm alone, recounting so many wonderful memories, and of course, reading the critics, as we used to St John Irving, James Agott, Harold Hobson and occasionally Ken Tynan. I have mentioned the splendid repertory theatre we had at Richmond; this was in a beautiful, historic building. Inside all elegance, with red plush, gilded curlicues and chandeliers. In striking contrast, during our later days there, Richmond became a pioneer in the development of an alternative theatre, in what had been a sleazy pub; *The Orange Tree*. From what I read now, it has become an established success.

It would be tedious and self-indulgent in a memoir like this to trot out too many lists, but the kaleidoscope of actors, plays and theatres flashes across my mind. The great set piece musicals at Drury Lane, Paul Robeson in *Showboat*, for example. Little did we know then, the sophistications of *West Side Story* that were to follow. Another memorable musical bore the hallmark of the master; Noel Coward's *Bittersweet*. His plays were a delight; *Private Lives*, *Blithe Spirit*, *The Tonight at Eight Thirty* series. There was opera, rollicking Gilbert and Sullivan, heartbreaking *La Bohème*, the profundity of Wagner. There were the light hearted Tom Wall's farces, always with the same cast, and always at the Aldwych theatre. They were days of innocent fun. We were not a swearing family, and it was not a swearing world, generally. I began my working life as a civil servant when I was sixteen, and I remember how bold I thought it was when I heard

a colleague say "Not Pygmalion likely!" Ken Tynan would have laughed. Mention of Eliza Doolittle reminds me of the sets for *My Fair Lady*, and the outstanding work of some of the designers, of Cecil Beaton, of Anna Zinhaven, and of the group Motley, who made such original costumes with unusual materials.

Another flash on the kaleidoscope is *Beyond the Fringe* and the new world that opened up to us. Alan Bennett holding supreme place in our estimation. The Edinburgh Fringe introduced us, as well, to Tom Stoppard. His *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* had its beginnings there. It was one of our favourite plays of all time, and we can't name Alan Bennett without thinking of *Forty Years On*. I think of the Rattigan plays. Just the mention of *The Browning Version* wrings my heart. There was a controversial *Morning Becomes Electra*, and an even more controversial *Oedipus*, but enough is enough. I have enjoyed my litany, whether anybody else would is a different matter, but I'll round off with a non-event; we never did see *The Mousetrap*. Now, I've mentioned our love of the ballet; we had experience of that both in the audience and behind the scenes. We had some ballet students living with us for a few years in the 1960s and that was an antidote to seeing Les Cilles figure with too starry an eye. What with darning Pointe shoes, helping with horrendous blisters and washing smelly leotards, all that put the glamour of the footlights well into perspective.

It may not seem to be within my remit to include concerts and so on among these theatrical reminiscences, but it was in London theatres pre-war, that many Sunday afternoon musical events were staged. We often went to Beauchamp concerts in the Opera House Covent Garden and celebrity recitals in the London Palladium. We heard all the leading names of the day there; Chalet a Piens, Solomon, Chrysler among many others. What could have been more theatrical than proms at the Old Queen's Hall, and when that was bombed, in the Albert Hall. It was about then that the Myra Hess lunchtime concerts were held in the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square; a haven of calm enjoyed by service personnel and civilians alike at a time of very great stress. Later, in happier days, we enjoyed the Festival Hall from its opening times, opening days, as well as the well-loved intimacy of the Wigmore. We experienced the thrill of hearing youthful performances by Yehudi Menuhin and by Jacqueline Du Pre, and actually seeing, and hearing, the venerable Rachmaninoff at the piano. A family highlight was the celebration of my son's fiftieth birthday with Mozart at Glyndebourne. Sadly, my husband had died by then, but he was with us in spirit and I can't resist rounding off this musical interlude with a mention of a wartime sally I managed to make when my husband was on some RAF training at Blackpool and we actually heard Barbara with the Halle at the Tower. I must now come down to earth and there is a general point that I would like to make; wireless didn't come to our home until my father made a crystal set in 1925, and we came very late in the day to television. We began to see the baleful effect of TV on the live theatre. We particularly became aware of this when we took the youngsters of the family to the pantomime. Non-entities, so-called TV stars, were implanted into the time honoured ritual with no relevance whatsoever to the proceedings, and cracking television jokes that were meaningless to us. We never have been fans of the ubiquitous "box", but I mustn't end this on a curmudgeonly note. I want to give thanks to the magic of live theatre, the tingling of excitement with the tuning up in the orchestra pit, the lowering of the house lights, the swish of the curtain and for us, in our early days up in the Gods, the fun of looking down at those in the stalls below, clad, as was customary then, in full evening dress. What changes the world has seen in my eighty nine years.

SF: The note that you ended on, about dress; I'm particularly interested in the time after the war, when you said you attended the "posh" seats; as a social event how would you describe it? Would you see people you knew there? Would it be a lavish dress? Casual?

DB: A lot depended on the theatre, for example the Royal Court was a . . . how shall I describe it? A cosmopolitan sort of audience; it was different I think, from any other theatre. Not that we knew the fringe theatres, they would be different again. As far as we were concerned, then going for the first time in our lives to the posh seats, we would dress nicely for the occasion. Not dress up, but dress nicely for the occasion, and after all you see, rationing and everything to do with it went on for a long time after the war. Certainly, as far as we were concerned, even when I went to Covent Garden to The Ring, I certainly have never worn evening dress in a theatre.

SF: Would you see contemporaries of yours? Was there a social circle within theatreland? Would you see regular faces?

DB: We sometimes used to go, particularly to the local repertory theatres, we sometimes used to go with friends. Certainly when I was in the civil service, it was commonplace to go with a group of friends at the office, for a little binge. The highlight of excitement in those days being tea in a Lyon's Corner House. As Colin was growing up, certainly in the days when my husband got the free tickets, there were some wonderful Shakespeare productions, and we used to take Colin's school friends. Splendid Hamlet, when we saw Jeremy Brett, who one doesn't normally think of particularly as a Shakespearean actor, but it was certainly one of the best Hamlets that we'd ever seen. So, yes, but having said all that, my husband and I were very much of a pigeon pair, and we liked going together, really, on our own. On the other hand again, that has been so nice for us, that the interest has been passed on to our son, and grandsons.

SF: When you would go with your husband to the theatre, would it be a whole evening? Would you go out afterwards? Would you go out beforehand possibly?

DB: No.

SF: Never?

DB: No. Eating out . . . as I say, I've mentioned the Lyons Corner House. We were not eating out people at all, and eating out certainly was not in any way the fashion that it is now; . . .all the continental food that's come about because of travel, and many, many restaurants, and the pub lunches which are such a feature of life now. I mentioned that I came from a very poor working class background, and we always considered ourselves to be very middle of the road. We've never been going out to dinner people or anything like that.

SF: Would it always be an evening performance?

DB: No, quite often matinees. Well, certainly at the complimentary tickets time, it was quite often that there were complimentary tickets available, and then I would go on my own. My husband would be working and he wouldn't be able to go. In fact, for *Waiting for Godot* I was on my own. You know that was a most memorable occasion.

SF: Tell me a little more about the first time you saw *Waiting for Godot* . Obviously, now it's seen as a ground-breaking event in British theatre.

DB: *Waiting For Godot*?

SF: Yes, and you said it was one of the most memorable experiences of your life.

DB: For the simple reason that when I got home and actually talked about it to my husband, ad inf[initum], he said to me "What was it about exactly?", because he'd read the crits, and they were inscrutable, and I said to him, "Well if you asked me to sit down and write a précis about this, I couldn't do it" and yet I was moved to the very depth of my being. . . I mentioned Ken Tynan once or twice in this, and I wasn't a great admirer of Ken Tynan, but I happened to see, and I've got it...I could show it to you, I've got his

pithy analysis of the play; something about these characters passing the time of their lives, as we ourselves are, sitting in this theatre passing our time. It struck me as being the very core and centre of it, and I so much appreciated that. As it happened, many years later, I saw in *The Times* a letter from a chap who, in fact, had been my son's French master at school. He was saying, why have I been spending all this time trying to instruct my pupils about the meaning of *Godot*, as I have come across so and so, and so and so, and he had found what he thought was a pithy review. So I thought, I must take this up, so I wrote to him, and said, look here, I can do better than that, and showed him my Ken Tynan crit. Well, actually, I set the feud ball rolling, as this retired schoolmaster, he'd been at Oxford in Ken Tynan's time. I had made a point when I wrote, I said I want you to know I'm not a great fan of Ken Tynan; but of course he responded in kind, and told me all sorts of scandalous things about Ken Tynan

SF: Do you recall an air of bewilderment about this play that had appeared?

DB: Well, for one thing, there was the sheer novelty of it; one had never seen anything like it before. The slowness, and the long pauses, and the periods of total inactivity on the stage, and all the rest of it. It was so different, and yet I felt it touched the very core of life. I just have to say that. I'm the same really with plays as I am with books; I don't really like just a plain straightforward tale. I think I could do a good one myself. I enjoy a book that evolves, is a bit otherworldly.

SF: You mention the long pauses. You also mentioned, earlier, Pinter. Did you see any of the early Pinter plays? Did you see *The Birthday Party*? What are your memories of early Pinter?

DB: What I remember about Pinter particularly was his uncanny genius for picking up, sort of, casual conversation. The most trivial sort of conversations really, but once again, they're the essence of pithy. I've often been on a bus and heard people behind me, and thought "My God, that's absolute Pinter!"

SF: Were you a fan of Pinter?

DB: No, not particularly. I wasn't particularly. Colin was; Colin used to go to all the Pinter plays. I wasn't particularly but I always thought he had . . . I've got no time for Pinter now, but I think then he had an uncanny knack of picking up. . . how shall I put it . . . little pearls of wisdom in ordinary, everyday speech.

SF: There was the movement of Beckett, Harold Pinter, and Osborne. Did you see *Look Back in Anger*?

DB: Oh yes.

SF: That's an important play in the lineage.

DB: I wouldn't say, among what are called, for me, the modern plays, I wouldn't say *Look Back in Anger* was one of my favourites by any means. It was obviously earth-shaking, but all this business round the ironing board and all the rest of it . . . I came out of the theatre saying, well, it's a good job we've seen that; we know what's going on. It was a landmark, I know, and is always used as such isn't it? I probably thought "How outrageous!"

SF: Can you recall if there was a certain sense of outrage? As you've said, the ironing board onstage, Jimmy Porter railing against the class system; do you remember a sense at the time of it being a bit dangerous?

DB: There was such a lot of publicity about it, that you couldn't really fail to feel that. It was the general feeling. Who is this bloke, you know.

SF: A bit later on there's Edward Bond's *Saved*. Did you see *Saved* in the sixties?

DB: No I didn't, but Colin certainly did, and friends did. No, I never saw it; I knew about it. You see, I'm the same now, I keep up with the theatre these days by reading the critics, Colin gives me the TLS for book reviews, so you can keep up with the swim. So I knew about *Saved*, but simply from reading the critics.

SF: You've said *Look Back in Anger* wasn't one of your favourite modern plays. What other plays, not *Godot*, not a Pinter, not an Osborne, stick in your mind?

DB: I like *Wesker*; *Roots and Chicken Soup with Barley* very much, and that was when we saw a very, very young Joan Plowright. She was straight from drama school, I should think, then. I liked it very much indeed. We saw another one. . . *The Kitchen*, that was a *Wesker* one.

SF: Anything else at all that you remember about those productions?

DB: What I remember about *The Kitchen*, was absolute frantic sets. I don't know how they did it, I can't quite remember, but scurrying about between the kitchen, and the chefs and the diners. Absolutely frantic goings-on on the stage. You see, they were all at the Royal Court.

SF: The Royal Court today still has the reputation of a cutting edge, or slightly alternative London theatre.

DB: It's not a coach party sort of place.

SF: You described it very well before, as a cosmopolitan theatre. Was the Royal Court considered left of centre, at that time, slightly alternative?

DB: We felt we were, you know, privileged to be able to go as often as we did.

SF: The West End was a very different place then than it is now.

DB: I've made it clear from what I've said; we thoroughly enjoyed what we called the sophisticated modern plays. I'm not talking about your way out ones, but I'm talking about Noel Coward for example, things like that. We absolutely loved the *Rattigan* plays. In a way, you might say, having moved on from Oscar Wilde, that sort of thing.

SF: Develop that for me, that period. The late forties and fifties, *Rattigan* and Coward; it's a definite type of English drama.

DB: Yes, of course. As you well know, there was nothing that Noel Coward despised more than the Osborne type of thing, and therefore, those plays, they'd still got that. . . a certain elegance about them.

SF: What do you remember about any *Rattigan* productions that you saw?

DB: I'm thinking of *The Deep Blue Sea* and *The Browning Version*.

SF: *The Deep Blue Sea* is a brilliant piece of work. What are your memories of seeing *The Deep Blue Sea* for the first time?

DB: Deeply, deeply moved. They were polished, finished sort of plays.

SF: Anyone else from that period? Where you thought 'That's a great production'?

DB: Can't think off hand, other than what I've mentioned.

SF: Apart from your husband, did you have an outlet to discuss the plays with other people?

DB: Yes, with like-minded friends. Not so much in the family. As far as the family was concerned, it was those early days with the music halls and all that sort of thing that I

was deeply involved with, and lapped it up with my mother's milk, really. You can imagine; very impressionable young child, only child. Later, different friends; friends in the civil service, friends at Richmond generally. A very nice neighbourhood with very nice friends generally.

SF: How did you travel to the theatre?

DB: There's nothing more boring from a person of my age than talking about how cheap things used to be. I couldn't resist putting in a "shilling in the gallery". Well now, you see, from Richmond which is on the outskirts of London, a south west suburb of London, we used to pay, on the train to go up to an evening performance, ten pence. Ten pence return on the train. Richmond to Waterloo. A shilling to go in the gallery. We didn't have a car for years and years and years. Anyway, if you had a car, even in those days, parking wasn't easy. I can remember we used to go to the Savoy theatre, because we used to go to Gilbert and Sullivan at the Savoy, and it was just at the time when they were first beginning to take cars away to a pound, and that was a nightmare, although it didn't affect us very much. Another theatre was the Duchess theatre, a little theatre rather off the Shaftesbury Avenue track, where we used to see the JB Priestley plays. Now, I've got quite a few of those in print. Richmond had a very good library, and you could always get the current plays in print, and I've got Rosen here somewhere. Ones that were great favourites, and I've certainly got a collection of the JB Priestley, 'The Time Plays' as they were called. Yes, they were, once again, a bit otherworldly sort of plays.

SF: An Inspector Calls recently has had a rebirth. Did you see An Inspector Calls?

DB: Time and the Conways is one that I'm particularly thinking of. I Have Been Here Before is another one.

SF: Any memories about those Priestley plays, anything about the productions?

DB: Yes, the thing that you would have realised that I like by now; something a bit otherworldly about them, something not just mundane. One Priestley play, in particular, that I've always enjoyed immensely, it occasionally comes up on the radio, and that is Dangerous Corner. Have you ever heard of that play?

SF: I haven't. Is it good?

DB: Yes, I think so. I can tell you, very shortly, what the scene is. You have a house party, a family, fun and games and somebody says "Can someone hand down the cigarette box?" and somebody says "Oh yes, so and so gave that to so and so as a present", and then an argument starts; yes and no, yes and no. From that develops the most terrible drama of every kind of adultery and everything. Then, the curtain goes down; that might be two or three Acts. Then, the curtain comes up again, and you have the absolute re-enactment of the opening scene, and you get to the point where somebody says "Oh, that was given to you . . ." and they just pass it off; it was a dangerous corner. It's a wonderful play.

SF: I'm interested in the fact you've mentioned Priestley, Rattigan, Coward. In that time up until 1968, there was censorship on the plays, they're submitted to the Lord Chamberlain. There's a breakthrough in 1968, where certain things are allowed on stage that hadn't been allowed previously. Do you have any memory of that? Do you remember that censorship stopping?

DB: Yes, you see, I mentioned the fact that when I was a young girl at the office, this woman said "Not Pygmalion Likely!" You see, I knew Shaw well, I've got all Shaw's plays, and I thought "Good Heavens! This is going it a bit!" As I said, a lot depends on your family background; we are still not a swearing family- we certainly weren't then.

And, by and large, it wasn't. When Ken Tynan set the ball rolling, you probably think I'm left over from the days of the dinosaurs, I think it shows a very paltry vocabulary, too much of it.

SF: With hindsight, there is now a lot of writing about Rattigan's private life and how it was concealed at the time; and the fact that his plays were written to be played by two men as opposed to a man and a woman. Watching Rattigan, or Coward, at the time, there was no sense of transgression?

DB: No. What you've got to bear in mind is, I can't tell you the date of the Wolfenden report, but the fact is that what was a punishable offence in those days was beyond the pale; it wasn't discussed and that was that. And that's the difference.

SF: You mentioned three actors, and I'd be interested to hear anything else. Gielgud is one that you said was very dear to you. Can you remember the performances?

DB: Oh we saw him in countless plays. We saw him in all the major Shakespeare roles. We saw him in countless plays, and I've seen him in films, I've seen him everywhere right up until he was very old.

SF: What was it about Gielgud, without being technical, what was it about the actor, the man?

DB: Presence, I would say. He himself said, as you probably know, that he walked knock-kneed or something like this. . .but he'd got wonderful presence. Now, Laurence Olivier, who was such a matinee idol I would say, really. I know he was a dominant figure but he never carried the conviction for me that Gielgud did.

SF: Peggy Ashcroft?

DB: Oh wonderful, absolutely wonderful. She was a person who got such a wonderful stage career behind her, and then, I've always thought this was a very funny tale really. . . I've spoken to you. . . you've gathered what I think about television, and I heard Peggy Ashcroft in a radio interview say that she was picked up by a cab, when she'd been in *The Jewel In The Crown* I think it was. She heard the taxi driver on his intercom thing say "I've picked up the famous television actress!" We saw Peggy Ashcroft very young. Judi Dench we saw at the Old Vic. . . in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* I suppose it was. Very, very young indeed, yes.

SF: Any other actors that you saw early on, that then developed. You mentioned Richard Burton.

DB: Oh yes, this was before he fell for Elizabeth Taylor, put it like that! He had a wonderful sort of star quality. I still like him for *Under Milk Wood*.

SF: At that time, the late fifties and early sixties, obviously culture in Britain , and the world I suppose, was changing quite rapidly. The advent of the 'Angry Young Men', of *Saturday Night* and *Sunday Morning* , *Room at the Top* , those novels and films. A slew of novels that are made into films that are about a very definite type of British culture. In a way, the drama of that time; *Look Back in Anger*, early Pinter perhaps, reflects a similar view of the world. Do you remember there being much crossover between theatre and the novels? Do you remember it being a time of change, conscious of a changing attitude?

DB: Probably. You mention *Saturday Night* and *Sunday Morning* for example, and *Room at the Top*. Yes, that was a time of great change; I'm thinking of actors like Albert Finney and so on. Rachel Roberts.

SF: That follows on to a bigger popular culture; it's maybe the first time that working class writers have written about the working class with working class actors playing the parts. That's one view. I'm interested if you remember, at the time, of that being a definite shift.

DB: Oh yes, there's no question about that. Up to a certain point, I don't know quite what date, perhaps it is up to *Look Back In Anger*, but up to a certain point, there was a more sort of ladylike, gentlemanly representation; you got the occasional buffoon like *Doolittle*.

SF: At the peak of your theatre going, how many productions would you see? One a week?

DB: How difficult to say! It wouldn't have been necessarily one a week, but on the other hand, it would have been, over a year, perhaps forty or something like that. We were very keen.

SF You mentioned "a shilling in the gallery". Explain to me the process of actually going to the theatre, and handing your money over. What was the set up in the theatre?

DB: Well, there were generally separate sort of doors with which you went up to the gallery because you went up by a staircase, and there was a little sort of ticket office, guichet thing, where you handed in your bob, and there you were. The front of the house of course was quite different; the grand entrance to the stalls and all the rest of it. As I say, we generally went in the gallery. We did occasionally go in what was called the pit, which was the rear of the stalls. Certainly, for occasions like taking the children to the pantomime at Richmond theatre, which we always used to do, well then we would go in what is my favourite seat in any house, and that is the front row of the dress circle, as it was called. For people like ourselves, there was the fun of looking at the rest of the house, looking at the audience and all the rest of it. Only once did I ever go in a box, and that was a terrible disappointment. It was during the war, with some friend, and it was to a ballet performance actually; in a box you see, you get such a distorted view. . . and a stiff neck.

SF: I know this is a very difficult question to answer because it's so general, but the audience make-up of that time; was it younger people? Was it people with young families? Older people? In the post-war, late forties and early fifties, do you remember it being a young person's theatre?

DB: I would say all age groups, but more mature people in the stalls, in the expensive seats and so on. Going to the theatre was very, very popular. It was pre-television days.

SF: Have you ever walked out of a performance?

DB: It's funny that you should ask that, because when I was getting these notes down, it occurred to me no, I never did. I don't think I was ever so disgusted with a play that I thought I'd have to. I have heard of people who did.

SF: Can you think of a play that you went to see, that it was painful for you to sit through, where you wanted it to be over?

DB: I can't really... I mentioned *Oedipus*; that was John Gielgud, of course, at the Old Vic, and that was a startling production, in every way. I sat through it uncomfortably, shall I say. I suppose because of my background, I've always had to live reasonably economically; having paid we were going to stay.

SF: You mentioned the critics, you were a keen reader of certain critics. There is a new book about Ken Tynan; do you think that the great critics are no longer? At that time,

English theatre was blessed with excellent critics, insightful critics. Who was your favourite critic? Who would you read first out of everyone? Hobson?

DB: Well, you see, a lot has to do with family background about this. My mother left school at fourteen, my father at about twelve. Education, education, education. It has been said, but it is so important. I had the good luck to get a grammar school scholarship. One of the first things at the grammar school, we were advised, if not made, to read *The Observer*, for one thing. We had to read the leaders in order to practice précis writing, and we had to read the theatre critic, and we used to read the film critic.

SF: Do it was because of *The Observer* that you started?

DB: That was right, yes. Then it becomes a way of life; I'm the same now. You just like to keep your finger in the pie.

SF: Would you say you were influenced by the critics? Would they make you go out and see a show that maybe you wouldn't have previously thought about going to see?

DB: Well, you had your own sort of approach to these things. I would never, I think, be absolutely persuaded to go, but you'd get an impression of whether you thought that it was going to be something that you thought was your cup of tea.

SF: Just tell me a little more about the theatre programme printing that you were close to. You mention that it was difficult, and they were wanted quickly. What are your memories of that?

DB: There would be things like cast changes and so on that had got to be altered, this sort of thing. The printing world, I don't know what it's like now, I mean I'm going back to the days of capstan and my husband's seven year apprenticeship, you know, hot metal and that sort of thing. A different world, I know that. Everything in the printing world was always rushed. I suppose with the newspaper world it's a bit like that still, I think. I forget how much the programmes were, but they were nothing like as expensive as programmes are today, and for one thing they were much simpler you see; they weren't great tomes with God knows what in, as they are now. So, they varied according to the style of the theatre, this sort of thing.

SF: So, it was for a number of theatres that they were produced, it wasn't just one theatre?

DB: Oh no, this covered a wide range.

SF: That was an interesting insight.

DB: It was wonderful, absolutely wonderful, but it was very labour intensive. All these things had to be folded, all these departments working on folding, and goodness knows what. It was exciting. I've still got quite a few theatre programmes.

SF: Would you always buy a theatre programme when you went to the theatre in those days?

DB: Oh yes.

SF: Always?

DB: Yes. Apart from everything else, to keep. Now, we've mentioned my books; when my husband died, and I had a hip replaced, I gave up my nice big country home with lovely garden, and came here to this minute flat. I kept the core of what was absolutely vital to me, but a lot of stuff had to go, and many of the theatre programmes went. I had piles and piles of stuff... I didn't send them anywhere. . . a lot of the stuff I didn't even mention at the time. I had to make decisions. . . I wanted all my books, I had a lot

of old tapes and CDs, and I've got a mass of memorabilia. I'm a great diary keeper. I've got diaries, big things, not just little diaries. So I just had to make the choice. I'm happy with what I did, except that every now and again I think, "Damn! I wish I'd got..."

SF: Well you can't keep everything in your life.

DB: Well, when none of us are born with a crystal ball!