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Ian MacKillop – interview transcript

Interviewer: T K Vincent

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Audience member and English Professor. Amateur dramatics; Jean Anouilh; The Blue Lamp; Michael Croft; The Entertainer; involvement in the National Youth Theatre; Look Back in Anger; Laurence Olivier; the Royal Court Theatre; school productions; theatre-going in London and Stratford; Donald Woolfit's Shakespeare Company.

TV: What are your earliest memories or experiences of theatre?

IM: The Open Air Theatre, Regent's Park, where I saw The Merchant of Venice produced by Robert Atkins, probably in about 1950, I should think. I was born in 1939, so '39, '49, '50, it would have been about... I lived in South London and I think I was probably taken by my father to that. My later experiences of the theatre were... my father was very good to me because although he wasn't very interested in anything arty or cultural he did see that I was interested in it and he took me to spend one week a year at Stratford-upon-Avon during which we would see all the plays on offer, so that was very good for me. I think that must have been about 1951 or '52 but I could check that up for you, if you like. I remember that quite well, but also I think my family seemed to have some friends who were in the theatrical profession, and I remember going to see a play called The Little Hut by Andre Rousseau, translated by Nancy Mitford, in which one of these friends was an understudy, I think. It was a play with Robert Morley and David Tomlinson and Joan Tetzl and that was in Shaftsbury Avenue and it was considered to be quite a sort of racy or scandalous play because it was about two men on a desert island sharing one woman. I also remember quite vividly a play that was very important to me because it taught me about sex for the first time, it was a play called Women Of Twilight, which was on at a theatre called The Victoria Palace theatre next to Victoria Station and I remember going with a friend up to London on the train, we walked past it and it said Women Of Twilight and I said, what's that about, and he said, it's about unmarried mothers and I said, how can you be a mother and unmarried, and he then explained how you could be a mother and unmarried, so that was a bit of a revelation! I was also very keen on one particular production from Stratford which I did not see at Stratford but which I saw in London. It was Much Ado About Nothing with John Gielgud and Diana Wynyard and possibly Paul Scofield as Don Pedro in it, I think, and Louis Casson as – ah, I can't remember, the old gent in it anyway, and George Rose as [Dodbury] in The Phoenix Theatre and I saw that several times, maybe even four times, I think, and I waited to get the autograph of the leading actors behind them, so that was something I saw. I was very, very, very, very fond of that.

TV: Do you still have the autographs?

IM: No I haven't, but I do remember I did have John Gielgud's autograph and it was on my programme, I think, but I wonder where that went – I don't know. Anyway, I was very, very fond of that, the music, the design by Mario Andrew, and I thought it was very good, fantastically good, actually. I only had cheap seats. Did I go by myself, I'm not quite sure how I did it, did my parents take me or did I go with a friend or what, I don't know. Shall I continue my theatrical history then? I lived in a place called Upper Norwood in South London and that had very easy access to the West End and to London because the number three bus ran from outside my house and I could take that as far as Whitehall, Trafalgar Square, and then I could walk up Charing Cross Road if I wanted to and I could stop at the bus stop and catch the bus again outside the British Anti-Vivisection League I remember; but I don't remember... I think I must have made these expeditions on my own, but in those days it appeared you were allowed to go out on your own much more, I mean, nobody thought you were going to be attacked or anything, so I went on my own to these things. When I went to school I went to a public school in South London, the same school that Dominic Shellard went to. In the post-war period some of the public schools of Britain were in trouble financially and the Labour government helped them out on condition that they gave scholarships to people who lived in the locality. I had a scholarship to go to it, so I was very fortunate for that. I didn't have any experience of theatre until about the fourth form, I suppose, when I would have been about 14 and I we used to have – do they still have houses, schools?

TV: Mine did. Mine was Nelsons.

IM: Did it, right, okay. Well, I was in a house and they had not only sporting competition but rather good, culturally speaking, drama competitions and so there would be six one act plays which would be put on and I think I was in one called Shall We Join The Ladies, which appears in Seven Short Plays, a Penguin book which you can still find in second hand bookshops and I think I got a corpse or a murderer, I can't remember. But then I went on to become very keen on drama and I managed to appear in some plays at my school which were produced very, very well, first of all playing a female part – it was all boys, you see, playing the parts – I played the role of Queen Eleanor in King John. I think this was at my school but it could conceivably have been for The National Youth Theatre but I don't think it was. Then I appeared in Henry IV part one where I played Mortimer. I appeared in a West End hit of the time called Morning Departure about a submarine lost on the bed of the sea, of which a successful film was made with John Mills and...

TV: I've seen that.

IM: Did you? How strange, how could you have seen that?

TV: My granddad really liked John Mills.

IM: He liked John Mills, did he really! Right. Well, I didn't play the John Mills part, I just played the part of a clerk in it but there were two companies for putting on plays at my

school, one was the school play which was usually a Shakespeare play, but there was also a twentieth century drama society which put on a play every year and *Morning Departure* came under the heading of that. Then I think the school play was *Murder In The Cathedral* in which I played a very great leading part which I was very, very pleased about: Saint Thomas a Beckett in *Murder In The Cathedral*. So my career was pretty meteoric then. There was also in my school another good thing, which was called the Shakespeare Reading Society where people would just sit in the library – or part of the school library – and read Shakespeare plays. There may have also been a twentieth century play society so the culture of the school was very good. There was also a very, very good – this is quite interesting isn't it, now, having thought about it. Are you recording all this, I think I'll give it to my grandchildren. There was another thing that was really interesting, there was a very, very good Classics teacher called P.H. or Philip Vellacott who was quite a translator of Greek plays for the Penguin Classics, and I think he also put on - produced - some Greek plays which I may have been to see, but I can't remember that very well. But I do remember I had an early experience of going, some classics were put on in a theatre – what was it called, it was on the King's Road in London and it was performed by Donald Wolfitt from his company. Do you know anything about that company? Well, Donald Wolfitt was a really big play producer and classical actor of the war years and before, but he was very, very crude and melodramatic compared to Laurence Olivier and John Gielgud and those other greats, and he took companies around the country with very, very minimal costumes and scenery and very low pay. You can find out about him in a way from a play that was written about him called *The Dresser*, and it has been filmed with Albert Finney and Tom Courtney. It's quite good because it's about a young man who was the dresser of the star who was the ageing actor, Donald Wolfitt. The company was quite interesting in a way, because there were two leading playwrights who were members of the company and I probably saw them then without knowing it. One was Harold Pinter and one was Ronald Harwood, and possibly there are memoirs by Ronald Harwood, not by Harold Pinter, of that period. Anyway, I saw that and it was a bit... and he also put on, although they were crap, the plays he put on. No they weren't, they were very... they were sort of very low standard compared to what we are used to, but they were quite good. But he did unusual things, for instance he put on a play that was quite exciting at the time, an old play called *The Wandering Jew*, in which this sort of – I'm not quite sure what it's about, it's by E. Temple Thurston but it is about this old Jewish bloke with a long beard who wanders around Europe and is eventually burnt at the stake on the stage. That was quite spectacular: the flames were made with pieces of cloth and blown with fans up from below him, but he also put on a remarkable thing that we have not even seen ever, I don't think lately. He put on the three Oedipus plays by Sophocles, that is Oedipus Rex, Antigone and Oedipus at Colonus. I went to see those and that was in the translation of E.F. Watling - the Penguin series - and that was a bit crude, but you just saw those three classical Greek plays, so it was pretty good, really. So did that, anyway. So here I am at my school and then remember that here I was in *Morning Departure*, *Murder In The Cathedral* and also then I was sort of rising up in the theatre community and I was then going to produce a play of my own, *Antigone* by Jean Anouilh, do you know anything about him, he was very fashionable in those days and his plays are very, very romantic and a bit political, a bit melancholy, quite exciting plays, rather good plays really, I enjoyed them a lot. A big play at that time was *Ring Around The Moon* which was a comedy with Paul Scofield in which Paul Scofield played two parts, two brothers, and there is a remarkable stage direction – exit Hugo left, enter whoever his other part was right, so he had to run around the back of the scenery and come on as another person. Anyway, I was going to produce *Antigone* by Jean Anouilh and I was going to play the chorus; that is the chorus was only a person who comes on at the beginning

wearing evening dress and giving an introduction to all the characters, a great part, actually and quite good for the producer because he will just have that bit and the rest of it he can do the policing, but it was banned by the headmaster. I'm not quite sure why, but I think there was some sort of homosexual thing involved because my school wasn't a particularly homosexual-saturated school but I think there was a little bit of falling in love with the younger boys – not me, actually, though I did, there was one person, actually, who then became, I think, director of the Tate Gallery who I totally adored, I mean, I'd lay down my life for this perfect-faced little creature who I met at a school reunion a few years ago who looks exactly the same but he's 60 now, so I didn't go on... There were no 'gays' then, there were only 'homosexuals' and 'queers', this was the pre-'gay' era and an interesting period, it was the period of *Tea And Sympathy*, thought to be a very exciting play about – actually, what the hell was it about? I think it was about a boy who was in love with some other boy and he went to his teacher to confess it and his teacher's wife seduced him and made him into a heterosexual. That was considered to be very... it was an American play, anyway. I don't know whether it was... but it was thought that the modern drama was too intense and I think possibly because it was mainly because the people who were involved in drama were rather prima donnas and show-offs and rebels and wouldn't wear the school cap in the correct way and a bit of a pain in the neck. None of us became famous at anything, but I think we were a bit like that, a bit awkward. Anyway, another thing that was interesting in the fifties – maybe you know about this but I think it was really interesting – was that you could see all Shakespeare's plays at The Old Vic, do you know that, and I went to see them all, so that was very good, I went to see those. I'm not sure that I have a lot more to say about what I saw.

TV: What about the National Youth Theatre?

IM: This must have been about 1956, yes.

TV: How did you get involved in that?

IM: I'm not quite sure, except that I heard - a friend must have said - 'Why don't you go in for that?' and so I must have gone to, and I do remember that I went to see, because it a bit unlike me because I was shy but I did go to see the director of it, Michael Croft, who was an English teacher, as you know, at Alleyne's School, which was a sort of sister school to mine in Dulwich in South London, and it was thought to be less posh than my school. It was less posh because it had fewer public school appurtenances and it was in a less posh area, but it's not far away, maybe a mile away, but you know how areas can change. Anyway, Michael Croft was a very much respected English teacher there and he was quite famous because he had written a novel you probably know called *Spare The Rod* about tough schools – was it called *Spare The Rod*, I think it was, I'm pretty sure it was. There was an American novel, yes, called *Blackboard Jungle*, well this was definitely called *Spare The Rod* and he had experience in tough school and now I think he was rather luxuriating in being in a not particularly tough school and he started up this theatre thing and he lived in a bedsitting room in a place called South London called Lordship Lane which is near Forest Hill. I went to his bedsitting room and I think there was somebody else there but he was there and he talked for a bit and said, that's all right, why don't you turn up and I think we've got a part for you. But here I just cannot remember if I was in two productions of theirs or not, but I really, really enjoyed it. The

thing about The National Youth Theatre that was always said is that here were ordinary boys performing in Shakespeare, and the word that was always used was gutsy, at the time. I think it would sound a bit silly today but they were supposed to be ordinary blokes, and they indeed also had boys playing girls, to begin with. I don't know why exactly... because it was a boy's school, it began with, and then girls came in. Helen Mirren came in but that was just a little bit after me. Simon Ward came in and maybe I did play in King John for the National Youth Theatre because I'm sure Simon Ward was my son or something like that, is that right, in King John... anyway. Do you know, I don't know. Anyway I certainly was in one play that I really, really enjoyed called Henry V and it was performed at Toynbee Hall – do you know anything about it, it's a very interesting, fascinating place in Aldgate, East London, Aldgate East underground station used to be in the 1890s – it's actually quite well described in a book by me called The British Ethical Society which is in the library but Toynbee Hall and it's history is well described there. Then it became a sort of adult education centre for working people with a little theatre in it, and the little theatre was rented by theatre companies such as The National Youth Theatre and there we performed and I played the French King in Henry V, Richard Hampson, I remember, played Henry V. I expected all these people to become famous but they didn't. There was a man called David Weston who played Pistol in it and Simon Ward - later Churchill on television and various other plays - he played the Dauphin so I was part of the French court. I do remember I just enjoyed it a lot, I don't remember very much direction going on. We rehearsed and we said our lines and sometimes he would say, 'louder!', or 'run on there' or 'put a bit more into it', but I don't remember any very great sort of complicated directing. There was a man – well, it was a boy, really – who was really the great assistant of Michael Croft, and he deserves a place in history, surely, but I cannot remember his name. I can remember his name, it was Paul something, I just think you ought to know that name and there would be a picture of him here. I just want you to have this one because he was such an important guy. He just seemed to know everything.

TV: Was it Paul Costello?

IM: No. Paul Hill, that's him, yes. I see here there was Barry Rutter performing as Falstaff in Henry IV part one. I don't remember him then, but he became the Northern Broadside actor and director, and specialises in productions of Shakespeare and other plays, I think, which are rather in The National Youth Theatre line: no nonsense sort of productions, a lot of them, rather plain. Sorry, have you any questions?

TV: What about the facilities and space and funding for the National Theatre at that time?

IM: I don't really remember. The facilities were a church hall I think we rehearsed in, in Dulwich. I think we maybe had a day of rehearsal at Toynbee Hall. I remember at some time there was rehearsal in a school canteen near Victoria station. The funding, I don't know where it came from. I think that Michael Croft was always looking for funding and I think – but how it worked financially I really don't know, one just turned up and performed, but where the money came from to rent the costumes - which were quite good - I'm not quite sure. He had a good patron in the form of Sir Ralph Richardson who turned up to see the plays, and he was always struggling for money. There was a National Youth Orchestra at the time and this is what Michael Croft wanted to emulate

but he just had to struggle. He did eventually, I think, give up teaching and managed to get a small salary for himself. I don't know what it would have been, it was probably about £700 a year. That was a teacher's salary at the time.

TV: Do you remember prices of tickets for the audience?

IM: That's a very good question, I'm glad you asked that. No, is the answer but that sort of question is very important, and where did you buy the tickets because I don't know how people got tickets. I think there were advertisements, I really don't know. I think the tickets would have been five shillings, I suppose, what's that? Is it 20p, something like that. I don't know, I'm sorry. Other questions?

TV: You were talking about rebellion at school, which interests me because 1956, the year of the National Youth Theatre, was also the year of 'the angry young man' and John Osborne's Jimmy Porter. You were probably around the age of the angry young man at the time; do you recall anything in relation to this?

IM: I do recall, I was younger than the angry young men but I recall going to see *Look Back In Anger*, not at the Royal Court Theatre but at the Streatham Hill Theatre, and I think Jimmy Porter was played by Alan Dobie, I think, who was – did he originally play Jimmy Porter? But I tell you something I did see at the Streatham Hill Theatre. The Streatham Hill Theatre was a very big theatre in another part of South London and it had big pantomimes, Gilbert & Sullivan shows and touring productions, but I imagine it's a bit like the Watford Empire is today, but I saw one production there that I think was quite significant, *The Blue Lamp*, which was a very, very popular film and it was about a policeman's family, good old British copper's family and it was about a particular criminal, a post-war criminal of the new sort. The old criminals were sort of decent working class criminals with flat caps and Woodbine cigarettes and certain specialisms, and were essentially gentle. But the new sort of criminal was the sort of spiv - do you know the expression, 'spiv' as it was called at the time? A slightly unstable young man who was always doing little deals - and he was played extremely well in the film called *The Blue Lamp* at the time by Dirk Bogarde and you could see this film just by getting it out of the video library and that gives you an exact bit of history of that moment. The film has a voice-over which says, we have a special problem today and it is in these sort of young men. Now the terrible thing in *The Blue Lamp* is that the copper - who became a national figure, Sergeant Dickson in a television series called *Dixon of Dock Green*, played by Jack Warner and he enshrined, he made the historical impression, 'Evenin' all', I think it was. But before it became a television series he appeared in this, and there was a terrible dramatic moment in which the copper confronted the tearaway criminal who drew a gun and, 'put the gun down, sonny, there is no problem, just put the gun down, it's alright, you'll be alright, I'll look after you, alright'. And then he shot him, and the audience was astounded that this fantastically reliable policeman could be shot. This was staged in the theatre in which there was a chase of the young criminal around the theatre, he escaped into the auditorium. So, that was more interesting to me than *Look Back in Anger* which I never really caught on with as being... I mean, I never got sort of involved with *Look Back in Anger*, but I did get involved with *The Entertainer*, which I found astoundingly moving. I maybe still have the copy I bought at the time, yes.

TV: Did you see *The Entertainer*?

IM: I did, yes. Not at the Royal Court Theatre, but I saw it at whatever that theatre is that *Les Misérables* was on until very recently, and I also saw *Titus Andronicus* there - this was a sort of double season, that was the point at which Laurence Olivier was moving out of his marriage and he played these two great roles, this ancient, classical role and his new style role in playing Archie Rice. I was really fascinated by that and I bought the play and when I went away to university, I took it adoredly with me and I think I became a bit of a joke at university for being so keen on this play. So, that was a thing that happened to me, but then at university I completely stopped all theatrical things at all and gave it all up because my teachers and my fellow students, who were highly tooled, intelligent people, thought it was just complete crap. Theatre was crap and really I gave up being interested and going to the theatre, I'm afraid, because the thing to go and see - if you were going to see anything - was films, and I can't think of what theatre I would have wanted to go and see. The first theatre that I thought was any good was *The Assassination of Marat Sade* by the inmates of Charenton. Do you know that play, the *Marat/Sade* play it's called?

TV: I don't know that one.

IM: It would be quite good if you wrote that down, because that was the first play that quite a lot of young people thought was worthy of an intellectual's attention and they didn't really - I don't know whether, in 1960 I wasn't living in London then, you see, but in 1960 to '61, '62, '63, I can't ever remember anything that I wanted to go to London to see. There was something I saw in London before, another playwright at the time that has gone away, like Jean Anouilh was Christopher Fry. I don't know if you know anything about him, but I saw a play by him that I thought was really moving called *The Firstborn* at the Embassy Theatre with Alec Clunes as the hero, who was the father of Martin Clunes, *The Men Behaving Badly* guy. That's just something I saw. I didn't see anything at the Arts Theatre - yes, I did, for God's sake, yes, I did see something really important at the Arts Theatre. It's a very small theatre off Charing Cross Road and I did see something that was very, very striking for me. I could have seen *Waiting For Godot* there, couldn't I, but I didn't, I don't know why. I did see *The Maids* by Jean Genet, an alarmingly weird French play set in a brothel, isn't it, with people dressed up, men dressed as women, I think, on very high heels. Anyway, that was the first avant garde thing I really saw. The next thing I was keen to see was this play called the *Marat/Sade* play. I suppose I could have gone to see plays by Pinter but I just didn't. I missed out on those and they only came to me eventually when I became a teacher in universities and I had to teach modern theatre. I can't think of much else that happened to me. Have you any other questions? I liked your questions about how much were the tickets and so on. Go on.

TV: Going back, if we can, to *The Entertainer* where you saw Olivier, what moved you so much about that, you seemed quite enthused by it?

IM: It think it was, 'I have a go, ladies and gentleman, I do have a go', and I was very moved by the songs, the 'Why should I let it touch me? Why shouldn't I sit down and try to let it pass over me?'. I wasn't so moved by the famous movie moment where he

talks about the black woman, but it was that sort of, I think it was so pathetic, that soft shoe shuffle song and dance thing, and the rather black... it was all very, very black. It was a very big theatre, whatever this theatre was called, very big theatre and it all took place on the stage of this theatre, being the stage of the theatre that Archie Rice was performing in and then it would cut to the room that they were arguing in, Brenda De Banzie as Phoebe, the wife of Archie, and I can't remember, it must have been Joan Plowright as the daughter, I suppose. But I just remember a real impression of sort of bright lights of the performances and black, black, blackness of the dreary scenes of quarrelling and so on. I don't remember anything really much to do with the, you know how she came in, the girl that she went off with and planned to marry to get the money from, I don't remember that at all, that comes out of the film quite well.

TV: I've seen the film.

IM: The film is quite good in its way, very good in its way and there are some excellent parts in the film where Olivier goes off – has he got a caravan or something that he takes, or a beach hut that he takes this girl to, Leslie Anne whatsername, I can't remember, well he takes her there and he talks to her and he's just so exhausted and depressed and ironical and that's good bit of the film, but I think the fact that it is so realistic northern new wave cinema-type like *A Kind Of Loving* or what's that one with Rita Tushingham in it, *A Taste Of Honey*.

TV: Sheelagh Delaney's, yes.

IM: I just thought it was not so compelling, really, but I was very compelled sitting at the back of the stalls looking at this vast proscenium arch and then with the little picked out figure in the spotlight of Archie dancing and then shifting to these black scenes and arguments, so I was very moved by that, yes. I used to take all the time in those days a magazine called *Theatre World* and I loved looking at pictures of plays I hadn't even seen and if you can look at old copies of *Theatre World* you can learn a lot about what it was like all the time. Anyway, more questions.

TV: You said you weren't that much affected by the angry young men and Osborne's *Look Back In Anger*. It's often described as a pivotal period in British theatre, 1956, with that play, so how do you feel about that, what are your thoughts?

IM: It was said to be pivotal and it was very pivotal, or rather the Royal Court Theatre was very pivotal, I think. It was pivotal because it gave parts to a different type of actor, more working class actors, I suppose, and more actors that didn't wear a lot of make-up, actors who were visibly a new sort of actor, I think. And I think that the National Youth Theatre was part of that new sort of actor thing in which a certain actorish refinement was cut out of the theatre. So, I would have thought the institution was more important than the actual quality of the plays. The first season at the Royal Court had *The Mulberry Bush*, did it, by – did it have a play by Iris Murdoch in it, and it later on had a play, *The Good Woman of Szechwan* with Peggy Ashcroft. It had, rather importantly, *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*.

TV: Oh, John Arden.

IM: Yes, that was thought to be, by people I knew then, to be a more important play than *Look Back in Anger*. It was thought to be more radical, more colourful, more poetic, more imaginative, more anarchic. I wouldn't like to say that *Look Back in Anger* seemed a bit of a joke. When I went to university, my tutor, who was very supercilious, I wrote an essay on Hamlet and I remember him saying, 'You're just making it sound like *Look Back in Anger*, aren't you, a lot of people quarrelling and so on'. So, the received opinion that it was a really great moment for the theatre passed me by, actually. There was something else that I saw... I did see *Separate Tables*, the one that Dominic liked so much, with an actor who seems to have been forgotten but I really liked called Eric Portman, who tended to play really rather prosaic people, bank managers, maybe, with some terrible secret. He played the major in this and also the Labour MP. I think Margaret Leighton appeared in this as well. If you wanted to know what actors were like at that time, they tended to be a bit like Laurence Harvey, who scored a lot in *Room At The Top* but also performed on the stage quite a lot, and they were rather sort of willowy and androgynous, perhaps, and certainly not very butch. The butch actors tended to come in this period, I think. So that play was but on at the St James's Theatre, I think, which was a theatre that has been run by Laurence Olivier in one of his missions as a theatre manager. Other questions, continue.

TV: Finally, going back to prices and tickets and things like that. You said you got the number three bus, what were your normal habits if you were going to go and see a theatre play, just out of interest?

IM: I would have got to the plays in London by train, I think. I lived quite near a station called Sydenham Hill station, you could catch a train into London in, I think, 16 minutes. Victoria station you'd catch a number 24 bus to Charing Cross Road, which was not very far from most of the theatres. I suppose I would have come back by myself and probably my father would have met me at the station because it was a certainly very spooky walk of one mile to the station, I suppose. I didn't get my bus to the station and I didn't go to any local theatres at all, there were none in my nearby locality. What the fare was I don't exactly know. What it may be on the train, one and sixpence, perhaps, I don't know.

TV: That's brilliant, thank you very much for your time.