

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Freda Chapple – interview transcript

Interviewer: Kate Harris

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Theatre worker. Formerly Stage Manager in charge of the Opening Night at the Sydney Opera House, now teaches drama in the Institute for Lifelong Learning.

KH: You've worked in the performing arts all your life, could you tell me what first attracted you to pursuing a career in that area?

FC: well that's probably the most difficult question to think about because it's such a long time ago...I suppose, one of the things that attracted me to working in the arts is that I went to a very English boarding school in the 1960's and it was a very cold place not just physically cold but very emotionally cold...in those days, you know, people who were from the middle classes who sent their children away, sent them away to rather austere places to be trained, and the place I was trained in was very, very religious.

It wasn't Roman Catholic but it had very, very religious grounds and they were training us to become young ladies. We were not allowed to run anywhere and there was a lot of time spent on the hockey field...we were being taught to be team players, which I don't mind being a team player at all, that's great, theatre's very much a team player...You know theatre is team building, that wasn't what upset me, but the thing that I found difficult was being cold and not having, allowing any area where I could explore emotions. The whole of my early training was to cover emotions and I felt instinctively within me that the only place within that cold atmosphere was the drama area where for 2 hours a week we were actually allowed to explore what we felt and that was what attracted me to it and I think that was the only place where I felt comfortable. It was the only place where I felt there was any life that I was allowed to express that was me, in this whole structure... and that's what attracted me to it.

KH: OK, you trained at the Rose Bruford College of Drama. Could you describe your early training and how it influenced what you wanted to do afterwards?

FC: Well as you can imagine going to the Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama from a single sex, middle class boarding school, was a bit of a shock, you know, because not only were we, obviously there were boys and girls from the age of 18 to 21, really 17/18 and we left at 21/22 but also this was a place that believed very, very seriously in allowing artistic expression, of building on emotion and building on emotional truth. It was very much Stanislavski training and although in universities we teach Stanislavski, it's not quite the same thing as experiencing 3 years of Stanislavski thoughts and actually getting very deeply involved with everything that Stanislavski believed in which included emotional expression and really going very deeply down into what you actually are

thinking and perhaps exploring very painful subject matter as well as liberating subject matter and so the whole of the training was based on freedom of movement, leading to freedom of expression and freedom of emotion based on proper structured sessions. It was very formal in some ways. It was still at the time when Rose Bruford, who was the founder of the college, was actually there, she still did some teaching. It was a very, very disciplined place in so far as you were there for lectures at 9.00 o'clock in the morning, you would still be there at 8' o'clock at night and nobody minded, you know it was very, very intensive, you know, but we were all there because we just loved theatre. We ate and drank and thought theatre, we were probably very, very over dramatic, but that was what we were, so in terms of the training we had a lot of formal voice training. Of the 3 years each year had a good 50% vocal training, both in speech and in singing, so you really did learn, completely, complete breathing, complete articulation, even down to having a pit prop in your mouth! Do you know what a pit prop is?

KH: No!

FC: A pit prop is a piece of bone that you put, which is about 2 fingers wide and you put in your mouth, like that, (FC demonstrates) and then you learn... demonstrating she says, you learn how to shape the vowel and how to articulate with this piece in your mouth and it literally opens up the whole of the airway, and you had to learn how to articulate and for hours and hours and hours, you were just so conscious of the techniques of voice production and I know where all the resonators are, I know how to throw the voice, I know how to articulate the voice, I know how technically it wouldn't matter if I had a cold I could still produce a voice and so can all the properly trained actors, and that's very important.

KH: OK, Your first professional job was working with the Welsh National Opera? Could you describe your role within the company and what you did?

FC: Ah so sweet. It was very sweet. I was assistant stage manager. I went to the Welsh National Opera because... two reasons, one is because I wanted to work in music theatre that's where I wanted to go... I've got a good singing voice and I really wanted to work in musicals and I was thin then and I could dance and everything.. so that was really where I should have been but in those days you needed a full equity card before you were allowed to work in the West End and it's the West End where you get musicals, largely, so you had to have 40 weeks on your equity... first of all you needed an equity contract and then you needed 40 weeks touring in the provinces before you'd be allowed even to apply for a West End show so when I saw this post for the Welsh national as an assistant stage manager stroke singer, I thought well that's going to give me 32 weeks touring and that was pretty well a long way... so when I applied for it I knew what I wanted to do... I needed the equity card and I wanted the touring and I thought I was going to be a singer as well but obviously if you're an assistant stage manager, stroke singer what they really want is an assistant stage manager and so my role in the company was... we had a period in Cardiff before we went out on tour because this was the Opera For All tour, it wasn't the main company so there were 9 singers, an electrician, myself and a company manager and we also took with us the director... the musical director, the conductor and the singers and that was it basically. The company manager sought of kept the production together. So after a period in Cardiff rehearsing it all and I did the usual stage management things, when we were out on the road I'd drive the lorry, which was a furniture van type, with a Luton on top, a three tonne van, lorry. Then we'd drive to wherever we were going, we had the sets in the back. We'd get to the halls wherever they were whether they were village halls or small theatres such as The Pomegranate in Chesterfield or something like that. Unload the lorry, put the set up, we had our own lighting rig with us. Then I'd do the lighting with the lighting guy, plot the lighting, get the costumes out of the van, get all the

costumes out, iron the shirts, do the mending and then the singers would come along and they'd do their bit of rehearsal, then I'd run the show and at the appropriate point I'd get my... I was playing Madame Butterfly's cousin... which was not a big role and the, Ida, which was the sister of the lead sort of take off your donkey jacket that you'd been wearing for your get in, and there you were in costume, you'd dash on the stage, sing your little bit and then come back off again and carry on. So it was all very low tech but very, I mean wonderful experience, absolutely marvellous experience from a learning point of view. I could still now light a show anywhere and I could do it myself and I could you know put the lights up, focus and everything because you, with that kind of training coming on top of the Rose Bruford where we'd also learnt technical stuff. It's so innate in me, it's a core skill, you know it's absolutely there, I can do it now.

KH: Why did you move to the English National Opera? And how did it compare working for a much bigger company?

FC: Well I moved to the English national opera because my contract finished. And I had eight weeks, you remember my 40 weeks? Well I had eight weeks left to get and the guy who was company managing the opera for all was a friend of the stage manager at the English National and it was.. and he said to me, because it was then Sadlers Wells at the Coliseum, and he said to me they're looking for somebody, Freda, to go as an assistant stage manager because they used to tour in those days and they're taking on extra staff just for a 10 week tour, would I be interested? So then there was another 10 weeks, so that was my equity card you see. They were doing the Barber of Seville and Madame Butterfly which I'd just done so I went as a technical ASM to the English National Opera and did the tour with them and then at the end of that 10 weeks I'd got my equity card but I hadn't got a contract, I was out of work because, you know they only took me on for the tour. So then I had the only 5 weeks I was ever out of work actually, I had five weeks when I was out of work thoroughly miserable sort of sniffing round stage doors saying 'I want to be back in the theatre!'. I really, I missed it so much and a luck would have it one of the ASM's left and they rang me up and said do you want to come back, work full time at the Colly and I said 'Well yes please, let me in', you know. It was marvellous absolutely marvellous. I had one year there as assistant stage manager, then I was promoted to deputy stage manager and the job there was different in so far as I was working with a major company. The rehearsal periods were just wonderful in so far as I was there at the beginning of all the productions you know coming in right at the beginning, hearing what the director's concept was, all through the rehearsals and then seeing that production move onto the big stage, taking it with me, learning how to manage, get on with a very, very big organisation. I mean here we have a huge stage whereby the props people on stage left wouldn't talk to the props people on stage right cos they were you know... and the electricians would certainly not move a piece of furniture. It was in the days of very, very demarcated lines... a great bunch of lads though, you know absolutely fantastic. So what it gave me in terms of what was different in answer to your question is I then found that I was mixing with everybody, from very famous opera stars and all their sensitivities and all their worries and all their emotions right down through all the backstage areas and the orchestra and everything. When you're a deputy stage manager with these big companies and you're responsible for a show, you are the person at the centre, absolutely at the centre, you're the hub everybody comes to you to sort out their problems or resolve their disputes and it gave me wonderful communication skills because you just have to draw everything together and somehow just get that show on for that half past seven... So that was different.

KH: How did you end up moving to the Sydney Opera House?

FC: Well...

KH: How did that come about?

FC: Well. How are we doing? That was again a piece of luck. I'd had two years at English national. I was getting not bored but there was a senior stage manager she was obviously going to stay for awhile. I was young, I wanted to travel, I was only 22 and I thought right, I really want to go and work overseas and it was at the time when Lord Harwood had just taken over at the Coliseum (15.18) and he gave a speech to the whole of the company and one of the things he said in that speech to the company was that he was on the board of the Australian Opera and I thought ooh my father's Australian... I'd quite like to go to Australia so I just wrote to him on the off chance and I said you know you mentioned that you were on the board, I'm your deputy stage manager and I fancy working in Australia, can you tell me who to write to? That was all I did... Can you tell me who to write to? And he very kindly wrote back and said well I happen to know that they are looking for an English stage manager because they're coming up to opening the Sydney Opera House, which I didn't realise when I did this initial enquiry, Would you like me... and some people are coming over to England... would you like me to arrange a meeting for you? So I said 'well, yes please!' And I met the directors of the Australian opera and they did want an English stage manager.

KH: Why were they looking for an English stage manager?

FC: Because at that time, at that time, the English stage managers were very much more technically proficient, very much more, and the whole of the industry was much more technically proficient than the Australian equivalent, So that's why they wanted someone... It was in those days I suppose really when they felt, not so secure in themselves but they would bring in experts and I suppose I was perceived as an expert. I also had another great advantage which was that they were opening with the show War and Peace and I'd just run Prokofiev's War and Peace at the Coliseum. So you know really everything just really, you need luck like that. Right person, right place, right time. You need that luck in your life, so I went out and did that.

KH: How would you describe your experience of being an English stage manager working in an international context? Working in a completely different country?

FC: Oh right, in that context... I think the two years I spent in Australia were just wonderful, they were magical, absolutely magical. It was so exciting, it was very, very exciting because everything was in build mode and I love building, I just love building teams, building productions, it's so creative, you know. It was inevitably difficult in a way, because the Australians didn't necessarily like.. you know I've talked about the stage crew at the Coliseum who would respect me for who I was and didn't have any problem, but of course you take me out there, as a woman for a start and a pom, you know, and put me in amongst the tough Australian stage crew and there were a few interesting moments, you know. There was one time when one of the stage crew, who I can remember, his name was Jimbo. He had a patch over one eye and he was a big muscly Oz guy and he had a T-shirt, the inevitable T-shirt you know, 'Pommie Bastards Go home', so I just went up and he was wearing it during a get in, so I just went up and read it. It was on his chest so I read it and I said 'Jim do you really want me to go?' and he looked at me and said, 'Ah no Fred you'll be alright'. You had to... It was a question really, they tested me, they tested me a lot. One of the electricians particularly wanted to know what certain bits of lights were called and because I could give him the answer, I was, you know....they were testing my knowledge just to see whether I really did know, why I'd been brought here you know, and it was OK. Once you get their trust and more important their respect, then it just became a joy...and of course working on the Opera House in that setting was just amazing. The building wasn't finished that was the thing that most people didn't realise, the actual building was completely unfinished

by the time we opened it, you know. There were, I think we had about 130 people on stage for the opening night, for the War and Peace, and I had them queuing up because the entrances to the stage were so short, so narrow because what had happened was that of the two shells, the one, the big shell was going to be a combined opera and orchestra stage and then the next shell was going to be the theatre stage, well everything got moved down because the Sydney symphony orchestra said we must have just an orchestra hall. The opera was going to be the theatre stage and it didn't have a pit which was a bit of a problem you know, for an opera company! So we couldn't use the revolve that was there because it would have chopped the orchestra heads off! So loads and loads of things to sort of work out so you can imagine that's pretty interesting and being in charge of that lot was quite a challenge. I was only 23 something like that...

KH: That's amazing

FC: But you do things I think when you're young, you just get on and do it, you don't think too much...and I just loved it, you see we come back to why was I interested...you know and if you love something you'll go and do it and work yourself stupid, you know you don't think about hours or anything like that. You just get on and do it.

KH: Did you miss the performance aspect because you moved into stage management, did you miss doing that?

FC: Well, that's a good question, I did and I didn't because I knew that I wasn't ever going to be an opera singer. I mean I have a good voice and I could have made a career in musical theatre, but I was never going to be a good enough opera singer. Where it compensated is that each night, each day I worked with directors who were directing singers to be able to understand the theatre as well as the music and also every night I would stand at the side of the stage and just be overwhelmed by the power of the music. There is nothing like standing at the side of the stage and hearing a chorus of 50 or 60 people...you know, and the thrilling...the sound is just amazing, absolutely amazing. So every time I got a bit frustrated I remembered that experience and of course it was in Australia that I started working as a director you see. So I became a staff producer and that meant that what you did was you worked with the director so that when it came back into the rep you then worked with the singers so I moved more into being a director than being a performer and that really was where my acting skills if you like, came to the fore because I'd got the training, the theatre training, I could bring theatre training techniques to singers who aren't necessarily thinking about the score from a theatre point of view.

KH: You've been involved with music theatre all your life. What do you think that you enjoy about it so much?

FC: I think what I've just said really. With music theatre you have this depth of emotion that can be explored via the music which takes, which takes the text. I mean in music theatre you've got so many texts going on that you haven't, obviously what you haven't just got is the written word that becomes the spoken word. You've got the written word that becomes something else because of the addition of the music and I think I've always been fascinated by what that something else is and where the actor stands in that relationship, because an actor having direct contact with the written word via production and all the things that we are all familiar with as, you know you're familiar with as a student of theatre. You know that it's a team thing, you know that what you're saying is only a response to what somebody else has said. You know that that is how theatre works and you know the liveness, you know that feeling of response to the audience but also when you're working in music theatre you've got two things going on...you've got another discipline which is essentially the discipline of mathematics

because it's timing, structure, very, very structured. You've got the whole business of the conductor who is there and you have to find your place as an actor within that space which is much more difficult to negotiate because you've got the pull of the conductor telling you exactly when he wants you to speak and sing as opposed to being able to hold a pause for example in straight theatre and you know how effective the pause is in straight theatre.. well you don't have that control. I mean recently I did a production for the music department called *façade* and I was one of the two narrators. It was done in the drama studio and we were narrating text in time to the music. So again you've got the same sort of set-up. I was having to fight my own feelings because the conductor was saying 'Now Freda!' and I wanted to say 'Well I don't think I'm quite ready yet'. But you don't have that freedom, yet you have a different kind of depth of emotion because there is no doubt that music can take you to a different level of emotion... for me, not for everyone obviously, for me music and you asked me what's my fascination and that is the depth of emotion that music can stir in me and stir in other people. That is very, very exciting, it's essentially uncontrollable, no matter what that conductor wants to do, at the end of the day the emotion that, that music provokes in me will produce a response that the audience will feel, that is deeper perhaps than just the spoken word. Not necessarily, other people would disagree with me.

KH: I'm going to ask you some more general questions about the performing arts in relation to your interest in theatre and intermediality. Just to start off with could you explain what you mean by intermediality?

FC: Well how long have you got?

KH: In brief perhaps!

FC: It's complex and yet I suppose in a way a very simple situation. I can't give you a brief definition of intermediality except to say it probably extends what I've just said. We've been talking about the actor being, working within two mediums, the music and the word.. now what's happened more and more as British theatre has developed and as technology has developed, we've got more and more incursions of other media into the live medium of theatre and so what we're investigating now is the... what actually happens to the actor and what happens to the text when there are many more texts actually taking place in the same performance space. So what is actually happening, for example if you have either projected film or a film screen as part of the stage design, what actually happens if you have an outside broadcast relayed onto a stage at the same time as a live performance is taking off...so it's those kind of issues that we're looking at.

KH: How do you perceive the theatre as reacting to those new kind of technological advances? Do you see it as being welcomed in general by, or being seen as this isn't traditional, this isn't what we want, we don't want to include those kind of things.

FC: That is a very general question. I think that a lot of artists are actually welcoming the new technologies. They're seeing them very creatively but perhaps not necessarily in the mainstream English theatre, yeah? You'll find it more in the experimental theatre than you will on you know, if you look at what's on in the West End for example, there's not necessarily an awful lot of it. But what you are finding that's on at the West End is a lot more crossing over of genre. I mean obviously Jerry Springer: The Opera is the classic example at the moment isn't it, you know? What Sondheim's doing is very, very interesting, but again you see Sondheim isn't seen, hasn't been seen as mainstream... he's becoming mainstream now but if you go on the continent there's some very, very inventive work going on and it's certainly coming here, you look at what Opera North is doing, incorporating film into their opera now, into their concert performances, there's a lot of crossover work been happening and it is interesting and I think it is innovative but it isn't necessarily something that the commercial theatre will be too happy to

incorporate because of course commercial theatre is commercial theatre and needs the audience to support it, so there's certainly that part of it. And perhaps England is less happy, always to move as quickly as our European cousins. You see the English theatre traditionally is very much based on the word, it's based on books essentially. You read any of your classic turn of the century...or even later, much, much later, you think of the plays that you've been reading, you can read them like a book. Very, very, very wordy, they're not really based on the more philosophical and abstract world of performance space.

KH: Why do you think that attitude is more prevalent on the continent? Why do you think you see...why do you think we are so traditional in that respect?

FC: I think because it partly comes from philosophy, I mean the French have always been great thinkers, they're very happy to think in abstract forms which we haven't necessarily got the same tradition, we, you know, we have got some very, very good people now, I'm not denigrating our tradition but you asked me why was it different and I think also you've got the position in Europe where people are much happier to experiment...we're just perhaps a little bit more staid here! We perhaps just know what we like and like what we know and perhaps haven't necessarily...this is such a generalisation... you know I'm very, very conscious of the fact that this could be hugely challenged, you know. I think you know, well put it like this, I went to the Holland Theatre Festival and, this June, and everything I saw was what we would consider experimental and what over there they just consider as the norm, now that is the difference. To them everything is theatre, everything is performance and they're very happy to embrace, a very wide... they don't see it as just going in and paying your ticket at 7.30. It's the norm to have people climbing on pianos and having huge puppets. They don't see it as anything unexpected.

KH: Do you think that live performance or theatre itself can compete with the kind of, you know, ever-growing, we all watch videos, we all watch dvd's, it's all accessible from where we sit at home, we don't need to go out anymore...do you think there's an issue of competition? Or do you think it's just a broadening field?

FC: Well of course there's an issue of competition. But you're asking a question basically underneath that.. will theatre die? Or will theatre survive? You know, you're right we do all buy DVDs and go to the cinemas, cinema's hugely popular and a few years ago people had written off cinema and look how that's come back. Theatre will always survive because theatre essentially has something very important to say, important theatre will always have something important to say about the state of England, the state of the nation in any country, that's what theatre is about. Theatre is about having important things to say and you can only say that in a direct way... to people who will come and listen. You look at the work of David Hare, the most important playwright we've got at the moment I think, who is political, theatre's always been political and it always will be political, it isn't just entertainment, never should be and theatre will survive, I think because it's got... it is inherently political, it should be dangerous, both in form and in content and you can only be dangerous if you're prepared to put yourself up there on the line, live, yeah? Film will disappear in one way and will never be as dangerous because it doesn't involve live people saying, 'this is important now and you're going to hear my voice Mr Blair, Mrs Thatcher, whoever you are... Now', because theatre will always talk to the public directly and whether to make them laugh, cry or go and do political action... and that's why theatre is important because it's for us and you will always get people who will both love being in theatre and people who want to write for theatre. It isn't a pulpit, it isn't to preach, it's to get us to look at the world differently, that's what theatre is, in my view and I think that's why I've always wanted to work in it and why I always will work in it and why always my students will consider

the importance of theatre which is to ask you to put yourself in a different place and look at the world differently and cinema doesn't do that in quite the same way.

KH: Do you think in the future there's going to be an ongoing crossover between the mediums of film, television and theatre

FC: Yes

KH: Do you think that's the way it will go, that more and more we'll see that crossover, that it will be less traditional, less focused on the word....

FC: Well not necessarily, I mean I think you'll get more and more exciting productions where there are lots of intermediality and lots of media working together and although I'm very interested in that, I find the whole thing fascinating, it's also quite nice sometimes just to go to a small theatre and hear somebody talking to you and not be bombarded with other images because you just want the other experience so there's room... you know, we are a broad church, there's room for everything and at the end of the day you know, the people will decide what they want to hear.

KH: OK thanks very much, that's been brilliant.