

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Kathy Ostler – interview transcript

Interviewer: Roxanne Blakelock

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Theatregoer - West End, Woolwich Empire and Repertory Theatre 1945-68.

RB: I thought we could start with you telling me a bit about you know where you grew up, where you were born and where you went to school, the education you had, background, what your parents did...

KO: I was born in North Kent but my parents we actually lived in Plumstead which is South East London, my father was the Baths Superintendent and I was the fifth child. I went to grammar school there, we'd spent the wartime in Bexley but when I was 12 we came back and lived in Plumstead again. And then I went to the local grammar school.

RB: So what year was that when you...

KO: '46.

RB: So you lived through the war then?

KO: Yes.

RB: Do you remember most of it or all of it?

KO: Quite a lot of it actually, it stands out. I did go to a couple of pantomimes in London in 1945. I think it was Alice in Wonderland and Peter Pan which I remembered.

RB: So you went to grammar school and then so, how far did you take your education?

KO: I went into the sixth form and I did a commercial course and then I worked at Scotland Yard as a secretary, first general and then in the legal department. And then when I was 21 I started nursing and I trained at the Royal Free in London. And when I finished there I went into the airforce as a nursing sister.

RB: So nursing was your career for all your life?

KO: Yes. Although the shorthand typing has come in very handy.

RB: And you remember going to the pantomime when you were very young but do you remember when you sort of started going to the theatre or was it a gradual thing?

KO: I think when I was younger we went to the Woolwich Empire and we probably saw a pantomime there I have a feeling of going to a pantomime and my mother saying, 'look at their dirty knees', and this was the little girls in the chorus because the stage was grubby.

RB: Right.

KO: And they were kneeling down and standing up and it was showing on their knees. And that's stuck in my mind, but I was obviously probably about 11 then. The only thing I remember going to during the war or right at the end were these 2 pantomimes in London.

RB: So during your adult life where were you living...

KO: Oh, well, when I was at the Scotland Yard we used to get a lot of tickets given to us because Bow Street police station used to get tickets for the West End. So I saw quite a lot of West End shows usually free in the front row. The one that stands out for me is The Love of Four Colonels, Peter Ustinov was in it. They sit at the side of the stage, there's two chairs at the side of the stage and the action is going on and actors who are not actually on that scene sit at the side of the stage. And Peter Ustinov obviously knew who was in the free seats 'cos he was making faces at us and asking us 'You alright girls?' and things like that. So I remember that!

RB: Was that unusual having the actors around the stage?

KO: Yes I think it's very unusual... it's an unusual play, as I say it was a gimmick perhaps.

RB: So you were living in London and then ...?

KO: Yes I was living in the nurses' home, yes. But I mean that's what I saw at the time I had very little money so it was only if we were given tickets. I also remember seeing Twice Around the Daffodils which was later a film, but I saw it as a play with Patrick McGoohan, I think it was the first time... he must have been quite young then.

RB: So when you went to the West End was that the only kind of theatre you went to and it was only when you were given the tickets?

KO: Really yes, my parents by then had moved to Folkestone and I think I probably did go to this Repertory theatre there and probably to one of the tea time matinees.

RB: And what did you notice about the other people going to the West End theatres? I mean you were getting free tickets...

KO: Oh yes, we were in the front row filling it up. I don't know I can remember a lot of foreign language being spoken around. And sometimes people whispering at you what's happening, what's going on? Because I presume they'd got the tickets from their hotels. I did notice that. I remember going to a review which was called Intimacy at 8:30 and the youngsters in it, who were like perhaps filling in were Edward Woodward and Fennella Fielding. They were the most junior in it, so it was very entertaining. Also Joyce Grenfell a revue with her in it.

RB: So how well was the theatre advertised? I mean, did you ever used to find out about it or was it just because you were given the tickets?

KO: I think it was because we were given the tickets, yes. Occasionally we did... once I'd got a bit more money perhaps when I was more senior we might go to something in particular. Very keen on, oh goodness I can't remember the man's name, he married Joan Collins – Anthony Newley – I liked him so if he was in a show I'd try to go and see that.

RB: Right. So was going to the theatre a big deal, did you dress up and was it sort of..?

KO: I wouldn't think so, no not then. Sometimes we were told to go in uniform.

RB: Oh right.

KO: We had an outdoor uniform: a navy blue gabardine mac and a beret with Royal Free badge on it. I mean they don't do that kind of thing today, butSo I was given free tickets both at Scotland Yard and once I'd started nursing. They would actually put them up on the board in the nursing home 'anybody interested in...' I think if they had a lot of spare tickets they gave them out.

RB: Right so it was the theatres that initiated it?

KO: The theatres initiated it, it was the theatres' good turn.

RB: And they wanted to get rid of the tickets they wanted you to come and see it?

KO: Mmm, what my husband, ex-theatre manager, calls 'bums on seats'.

RB: Yeah. And do you know if that kind of thing goes on any more?

KO: I don't know, obviously, no. I mean, when my husband was the theatre manager here he'd say there was hardly anybody at the show so my two sons and I would go and try and fill the space. And sometimes there were brilliant shows I remember Prunella Scales doing a one-woman show, and there weren't that many here, this is a very bad town for that kind of thing. People always say afterwards 'Oh, if only I'd known!' And yet it's advertised, Radio Essex and the local paper, and obviously on the front of the theatre.

RB: And Prunella Scales was here at the...

KO: She was here...she was doing her Victoria you know.

RB: Oh yes. And both in the early west end shows you went to and also here what sort of people were going, I mean you say there were free tickets but were there concessions as well?

KO: Yes I'm not sure if the elderly could get in free, I know that there was an agency that you could go to where sometimes the tickets were half price for the same reason, that they wanted to fill the seats, but people had to pay. But they had to get them at the last moment. Or the other thing that I'd forgotten is that you could wait outside on tiny little stalls outside, to go in the upper circle, the gods, and then perhaps it was only 2 shillings and sixpence, you see, something like that. I saw Oliver once I was... 10 days after it started the original Oliver. And we went in there, we queued for about three hours for it, and there was no backs to the seats, it was just benches up there on the upper level.

RB: You can get seats if you put the work in can't you?

KO: Oh yes, they were tiny little seats you had to perch on all in rows.

RB: Were there any sort of traditions or rituals you know that theatregoers went through, or what kind of atmosphere was it as well?

KO: Oh I think people were very keen you know, people were definitely theatregoers, they made their... you know they didn't go to be seen like some people today. Previews

didn't exist, at least as far as I know, they might have had people into the dress rehearsal, but they didn't have as many as they have now, you know one for the press, one for the ... you know. To get going because I've found sometimes previews they don't try hard enough, you know, they're going through the motions. Is it perhaps...I'll tell you that later.

RB: Oh no, tell me now.

KO: Oh well, as I say my husband and I went to a preview of King Lear with Anthony Hopkins and he was dire!

RB: Really!

KO: He was so bad, I left at the interval. My husband stuck it out. But later I read in his autobiography that he was terribly unhappy and miserable and depressed and thought everybody else in the cast disliked him, well it showed. Everybody seemed to be lacking in any energy, except Michael Bryant, he was his usual self, and since then I've seen Timothy [West], what's his name? Prunella Scales's husband? But I've seen him in King Lear and it was transformed.

RB: I remember you saying earlier that during matinees here was it that you provided refreshments and...?

KO: Oh yes, well in Folkestone they had actual tables between the seats on which they delivered tea, cakes, biscuits, things like that. You actually, they were called tea matinees. But I've heard, I've read since that some of the actors hated them because try to act with chink chink chink, and also when people are eating as well, are they entirely paying attention?

RB: What kind of theatre was that?

KO: That was a rep. That was general things, you know, all the plays that have been written in the forties and fifties were being re-hashed in the sixties. Mostly comedy or, perhaps a bit of crime, mystery or something like that.

RB: So that was the sixties then when ...?

KO: Yeah. That was the sixties. My parents moved to Folkestone in 1955, so it was from '55 on.

RB: Right. So what kind of shows were you going to see generally, I mean did you see...?

KO: I saw some musicals, I saw the American musicals and My Fair Lady, The Pyjama Game. Just trying to think, oh, sorry about my memory...it's gone. It'll all come back eventually, I'll suddenly remember it. But, Annie Get Your Gun, that sort of thing, Oklahoma.

RB: Well as we're going through the interview if you think of anything just say it.

KO: I'm just trying to think of this one with Ethel Mermen, she was a very forceful American actress playing an ambassador or something. That might come to me but that sticks in my mind you know as being very forceful musical.

RB: And did you see any 'serious' plays?

KO: Yes, I saw Black Chiffon after I'd passed what they called School Certificate then, five of us we were fifth formers and we went up to London to see a play in the afternoon. And we just went in to book box offices around, and we must have got there about 1 o'clock and we got into Black Chiffon which was, I think, in the Westminster Theatre and it starred Flora Robson and then when we came out everybody said shall we go and try and see The Crazy Gang but we couldn't get into The Crazy Gang, we got into a comedy which I can't remember the name of, I've really tried. So I actually went to two plays in the same day, that was our entertainment age 15, 16, up to London.

KO: I was going to say you can't really imagine it nowadays.

RB: I can't, I can't, but as I say, the girls went round the back at The Crazy Gang at the Victoria Palace and they met Bud Flannigan and Chesney Allen who were just coming in, and gave us their autographs but we couldn't get seats.

RB: So was that your main form of entertainment then?

KO: Well, I swam a lot you know that kind of thing. And I was in plays at school.

RB: But do you think that was quite unusual that you were going to London to see plays or were there others?

KO: I don't know, as I say five of us went from the same class, so as I say it was a Grammar School so we were doing plays at school. When we were, because we were studying Macbeth we were taken to see Macbeth and it was done by the Old Vic theatre company and I have prayed that I could find a programme somewhere because there were young actors there that I'm sure went on to greatness, I still can see it today although I saw it about 1950, well perhaps even '49.

RB: And in all the different kind of theatres that you went to do you remember much about the costumes or, special effects that were around between the two different kinds of theatres?

KO: I can't remember ever thinking except perhaps at the Woolwich Empire that the costumes were poor or anything. I think they were effective. Most of the plays I saw I suppose were modern day, I can't remember seeing much Victorian or older plays. And I think the musicals they got the money, the American musicals when they come to England, I don't think they were short of money. I did see a couple of amateur performances. I don't think, I can never remember thinking oh dear the set's not good enough or, the costumes aren't good enough. If someone forgot their lines, one might remember that. But that was what astounded me when I went to once weekly rep that people could remember so many lines.

RB: The production of Macbeth you went to see....

KO: Yes, that was a school one it was all school yes, but as I say it was a lot of it was done with just a curtain, you know what I mean, but they did have a bit of scenery.

RB: And were they wearing period costumes?

KO: Oh yes they were, but as I say, but quite often you have Shakespeare without much scenery I've seen that already.

RB: And I don't know what it was like 50 years ago but often Shakespeare now people won't wear period dress.

KO: No, no, these were wearing period dress but I mean it's really stuck in my mind, what I saw.

RB: And do you remember sort of any plays which were up and coming or particularly controversial that you went to see or just heard about?

KO: I went to see Brendan Behan's play, The Hostage and he was in the front row shouting abuse at the actors and arguing with them and they removed him. They were pulling him out and he was stumbling, he was obviously very drunk, he was stumbling and arguing away. Very drunk and very Irish. But it had happened before I'd read about it in the Evening Standard or the Evening News or one of the papers and in the end I think he was banned from the theatre because he would argue with what they were saying and say the weren't saying it properly and things like that.

RB: So did that cause controversy more because of the way he behaved, more than the content of the play?

KO: Yes the way he behaved really, oh no no, I think he wrote the play and then when he was drunk he wanted to alter it as it was going along, but I know it was kind of amusing in a way because we'd known that he'd done it before previously during the run, so it was not a horrible shock you see.

RB: Were there any plays or behaviour that shocked you through...

KO: Well, if we come up to about 61, I was stationed in Lincolnshire and I went to the Lincoln Rep theatre and I saw several what you might call 'serious' plays. I saw Death of a Salesman, and there was that one called Rhinoceros or something. You know some very odd ones. There was also the play where there was two men kissing for the first time and I can't remember the name of that one either, but you know. I was... the boyfriend I had at the time was very, very intellectual and very, very clever, so I was dragged to all these kind of things. But I can't remember being bored at all, and probably it was good for me to see them.

RB: And do you remember being shocked by any of this?

KO: I suddenly thought 'Oh, I don't feel shocked at all!', it seemed natural then.

RB: And do you remember Death of a Salesman?

KO: Yes, I thought they did it very well, it was very stark in a way. I've never seen it since. So that's the only thing I can remember. But as I say I must have been five or six or more times there.

RB: You mentioned lots of people who are big stars who you remembered going to see and do you remember that sort of affecting whether other people went to see it?

KO: Well, I did go and see Edward Woodward in Two Cities which was a musical he was in. I'm trying to think it must have been about '69, '70 something like that. And I think we must have phoned up for the tickets cos I came all the way from Bristol to London to see it, and my husband came as well but he didn't see the show he had to do some other business and I thought that was wonderful and the thing that would amuse me the most was behind me were a load of French schoolchildren which I thought was very interesting. I hoped that they would appreciate it.

RB: Do you remember going to any sort of big premieres or?

KO: No I don't think I rose to those heights. As I say the nearest I think was Oliver!, the tenth day.

RB: So, do you have a kind of favourite theatre experience or is it too hard to choose, a favourite play or...?

KO: Oh, I also saw a play because I won tickets. Not a play, a musical. It was called Waltz there was Strauss Waltzes in it, I can't remember what it was called, it was the story of Strauss it was up in London. The audience was packed and they were obviously very enthusiastic lovers of classical music I think, but I dozed off a bit I'm afraid.

RB: So that definitely wasn't one of your...

KO: No it wasn't, but as I'd won the tickets I thought I'd better go. That was when I was living in Bristol and came up to London for that.

RB: So is there one play that you could pick out?

KO: That I really enjoyed?

RB: You don't have to, I'm just interested.

KO: No, I'm just thinking, I've been to so many plays so many places haven't I? I remember seeing is it Private Eye? No it's not Private Eye, it's Public Eye, Private Ear or something in London and that was very good as well. It had a comedy actor in it. I also saw The Tender Trap which was a Hollywood film which they made into a play and that was very entertaining too. Also Come Blow Your Horn which was another Hollywood film that they made into a play, they were very entertaining.

RB: Where were they put on?

KO: Up in London. And when I was at Scotland Yard I went to see a play called The Third Visitor and Sonia Dresdell was in it and also a man that we found was very amusing indeed. And we went round the backstage and I got Sonia Dresdell's autograph on the program I also got his and he drew me a little caterpillar. Now I could not remember, I then lost the thing, I could not remember who it was was in it, and when we were in Singapore we went to see Max Adrian and I thought it was him and he said he was not in London at that period, he remembered, anyway he was otherwise quite polite. And I say it wasn't Max but it wasn't him. He was a very entertaining actor in what was a kind of mystery play.

RB: Was it quite easy to go backstage and get autographs?

KO: Well as I say we obviously had gone together I think, and sometimes you had one girl in the class who's more adventurous than the others and you all traip round the corner. As I say he was wise cracking and making jokes and generally amusing us a great deal. I wished I'd remembered his name, since then I have seen a copy of the play. I went to French's to try and get a copy of it but it was out of print they didn't have one.

RB: Is there anything that you remember negatively or that you didn't enjoy?

KO: Well as I say, some... this Waltz Time or whatever it was called sent me to sleep. Perhaps I don't like... I have seen several musicals I mean even lately I've seen the *The Merry Widow*, which I enjoyed. I also saw that in Scotland with a local rep doing it. My husband did the lighting. You see this is the thing I've also in the Far East been in plays and my husband was the entertainments officer or he did the lighting, things like that so I have seen when I think about it a hundred plays or more in my time. I produced a couple myself they were unfortunately with age you can't always remember the titles. I remember one that had a lot of fur coats in it. It was a comedy, I don't know how long it had been on in London, but it needed a lot of furs that were stolen. And we were able to hire them they were sent out to us on an RAF aircraft. Because you can imagine there with a temperature of about 90 no-one has a fur. These fur stoles and capes etc.

RB: Did you say you acted as well?

KO: Yes I did in a few things yes. *The Gentle Arm of the Law*, it was called *The Gentle Arm* and I was a detective in it. And the local paper said I was "laconically amusing", whatever that means.

RB: Oh.

KO: I know local papers, especially in Singapore.

RB: That was out...

KO: That was in Singapore when I was in the airforce, yeah.

RB: Were there any plays that you, even if you didn't see them or even enjoy them that you felt were memorable or important sort of in a broader scope but in British theatre, that perhaps were a turning point or they've got a lot of

KO: Well I didn't see, oh dear what's that one with ...I can't remember. It was the first really earth shaking play and I was working at Scotland Yard and somebody said we can go to see it. And I think it had Richard Burton in it probably.

RB: Look Back in Anger?

KO: That's it, yes. And for some reason I didn't go...I went somewhere else. But they came back and they were talking themselves very enthusiastically about it. I did see Richard Burton in a few things when he was young yes. And a friend of mine she went for an audition at RADA and he was there. Now I think he was about 23 at the time so I don't know if he was still at RADA or he'd come back to help with the auditions. But she did not get on, she was a little plump and I wondered if that was it even in those days.

RB: Mmm, yeah.

KO: I don't know what happened to her she was a Jewess and I saw her once on the television in a play as a rather plump fairy. But though she actually went to the Guildhall School of Drama in the end, so we lost touch.

RB: So the Repertory theatre that you...

KO: Oh the one I went to in 1949 that was the Wheeler Salisbury Repertory company and they were at the Royal Artillery Woolwich which was actually kind of on the parade ground, but I went 51 weeks running with girls from school, sitting in the gallery. So you really got to know the cast and you must have seen every play written say in the '30s and '40s and probably some written in the '20s. but how they could go on week after week and they seemed to know their lines. I think they sometimes made them up but the sets were good, you know they were killing themselves doing work like that. And when you went backstage they were always very cheerful and gave you their autographs. And I remembered the young actress in that she seemed to be destined for higher things but I heard later she married and she just did a little work, her name was Anne Windsor and she was really brilliant, but there we are. Cyril Wheeler I noticed about five years later or more I saw him once on television on what was called Central Court or something or Crime Court or something like that, and he was playing an usher. I thought oh dear, how sad, 'cos he was very versatile. So whether the company bust or the theatre decided they couldn't go any longer but suddenly it all stopped. And I did have all the programs but my sister lost them for me in one of her house moves. That would have been wonderful.

RB: Are there any plays that...

KO: Stuck out? They did the Ghost Train that's very good, that's an Arnold Ridley. The Happiest Days of Your Life, that was very entertaining as well. And Margaret Rutherford had been in the film. I can't remember, we enjoyed it, we looked forward to it and usually went to Saturday matinees.

RB: Were they cheaper?

KO: Oh I'm sure they were for school children about 15 or 16. You see my friend that I'll give you the telephone number of, she went there often with her sister. Or with me and other girls from school. But we were definitely the fans going round the back. I did remember an actor who played in it, I think he must have come one week, probably to play the lead to give poor Cyril Wheeler a rest, his name was Anthony Eustral and later when we bought Halliwell's Film Who's Who I noticed his name in that. I mean he's dead now but he had actually acted in some films in America. But as I say I did, over the years, notice some people's names but they never made it big as they say.

RB: Mmm. And when did you, I mean what sort of role did you have in theatre, I mean did you just come to see plays or...?

KO: I came to see.... My husband was the theatre manager so we came and saw quite a lot of plays.

RB: Did you ever do anything in the production?

KO: No I decided. When I was in Singapore and I was in plays there and then I went in for an audition and I didn't get it because she said I couldn't do a northern accent. And then I was doing a lot of work kind of backstage and I put myself up for stage director or something like that and they gave it to a man who hadn't done a stroke. So I was very annoyed and left. My husband still went. And I think I thought no I get too upset if I don't get parts I'd better not do it anymore so I didn't. I never joined another theatre company or amateurs or anything like that cos they can be a bit back biting I feel. And also very much in Singapore you were very kind of relying on each other on the RAF station you see and er, we did some good plays there, especially ones about the Far East. Like the one set in Changi Jail which was just down the road. We'd got all the right equipment, we'd got all the right costumes you see and we knew what to do.

RB: And when you were coming to the theatre here is that the only theatre you went to?

KO: Oh I went, we'd see a few plays in London, and Southend. You've got Cliff's Pavilion at Southend, they are amateurs, they do usually musical shows. They were the operatic society.

RB: And how regularly did you.... were they all Mike's shows that were here?

KO: Oh, well he was a theatre manager so whatever he had on that I would like I came to. But of course he gave that up and he went into the cinema working as a cinema manager so I didn't come so often. But I always come to the pantomime here which is excellent. Yes and I think very well supported as well.

RB: Is the theatre quite a big part of the community here, I mean, are many local people coming?

KO: Well, I would say that not enough. I think people don't support it enough really. We have drama competitions here, and people don't come in. you know they're just not interested.

RB: And have things changed over the years?

KO: Well as I say I don't know how much longer it will go because people aren't interested in coming. All that comes are the actors relatives you see, well if people come from all over Essex, it's a shame to come here for the – it's a week – you know a couple of plays every day or something and there's not much audience. Sometimes you get quite a few on the Saturday night for the winning play and all the etc. but it is disappointing.

RB: And years ago was that different?

KO: I think more people came it depends where you advertise you see, and who you speak to really. There are quite good amateur companies here and they have their following. Some people don't like one act plays, because it's usually the competition is one act plays and they don't like them. and the other place I've been to is Hornchurch, the Queen's Theatre at Hornchurch. When my husband was theatre manager here they used to send him tickets, so we used to go to plays there as well. Some of which were transferred to the West End.

RB: So people are definitely going to the theatre less, or certainly round here anyway?

KO: I think so, but whether they ever go much. It depends, they go to the pantomime they're as keen as ever. Because the same people are in it, the same dame and he's very popular indeed you see, Damien Williams. The same people are in it and the same production company do the pantomime, I think they're based at Southend or Westcliff somewhere like that.

RB: And do you know what plays have been put on here recently or...?

KO: No I don't really I think perhaps it's when my husband left and I've been doing a lot more things now I'm retired. My evenings are occupied a lot.

RB: Is there anything important that I haven't asked or you feel you haven't told me?

KO: I'm just trying to think, I can't think of anything really, but I'll give you that telephone number shall I?

RB: Yes. Or any interesting anecdotes or stories you know that even if you don't think they're relevant they might be interesting.

KO: What, theatre ones?

RB: Well, yes.

KO: Yes.

RB: I mean, do you remember any sort of historical events that were kind of really affected

KO: I mean I was too young for the bombs in the war when people were turned out of theatres. Er my sister is not well enough to answer you she's 12 years older than me. In Bristol, this is quite good, this was a Sheridan play, it was put on at the little theatre and the curtain didn't go up. My husband was the box office manager then, the curtain didn't go up when it should have done. And then onto the stage came the stage manager to explain that earlier 3 members of the cast had been injured, so so-and-so would play such and such part, it was *The Rivals* I think... would play one part, so and so would play another part. And the assistant stage manager would read another part so that we wouldn't be disappointed. And I thought that was really too much, I think it was a car accident you see, so this man came on in costume with a book behind him and he kept having to look. I mean all in all it was, you didn't feel oh I want my money back, it was quite entertaining. I've also been to plays there where shall we say affronted elderly have walked out. They didn't like some language or something like that. But I've been here where people walked out but that was an elderly comedian telling jokes or singing a song about a dog that weed called *Pissing Pete* and these two old ladies got up and walked out. My husband was amused anyway. You see what I mean, that sort of thing. At the Old Vic we saw... at the Theatre Royal Bristol we saw *A Midsummer Night's Dream* it was the opening play after refurbishment and Sybill Thorndike spoke and several people who later became quite famous were in it. Christopher Biggins was in the audience near us and laughed all the time because it was...and Tim Piggot-Smith sang and played...I also saw Jeremy Irons there doing a play for a school, and what's his name, Simon Cadell who's died since. I remember all of them 'cos my husband trained at the Bristol Old Vic as a stage manager so he was the same year as all of them. I'm trying to think of other things, oh I can remember Hayley Mills, she was in a play there and she was atrocious but never mind. She did her best, she could not sing, and when it went to London another actress went into it. And she and her husband were having a row backstage I could hear them, but never mind - that doesn't matter. But I felt really sorry for her she should never have been put in it - as I say she was fine except it was supposed to be a musical, she had such a thin voice. As I say that was a bit of a scandal. But anyway my husband worked there so he'll know more than me.