

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Mike Ostler – interview transcript

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Chairman of the Society for Theatre Research, on working as stage manager in repertory theatre in the '60s.

MO: My name is Mike Ostler I am currently Chairman of the Society for Theatre Research, but the story starts a long time ago. I was born in Surrey in a little place called Cheam in 1936. During the Second World War we stayed more or less in the same area except around 1944 then I was sent off to stay with an Uncle and Aunt in Amersham in Buckinghamshire to get away from the bombs. My cousin Sheila was the Box Office lady at the local Rep in Amersham and to give my Uncle and Aunt a break, I was dragged down to the repertory from time to time. My earliest recollections of ever doing anything in the theatre was painting a large black sundial, and I painted and painted and painted, and painted the same space and I swear, in the finished show, when you looked on stage you could see a blacker than black bit on this sundial, which I had painted and everyone else had had to repaint the rest.

In the company at the time was Ann Churchman who went on later on into The Archers on the Radio and I think she played Grace who got burnt to death or something in the very early days and it was quite a drama. The main Producer or Director was Sally Latimer, who was a very very good Director, so they say. Shortly after I left a young actor turned up for a season, because most actors would sign for a four-month or six-month season and play all the plays. This young actor's name was Dirk Bogarde, so you can see that these small Reps were the seeding grounds for the many, many great names.

After the war, in fact in the 50's when I was a teenager I did technical work (Stage Management) for a semi-pro outfit called "The Stepping Out Company" that was run by Norman Reader Frost, who was Ralph Reader's half brother. Ralph Reader known for his Gang Shows and his Forces Shows in the war, but he was also a Producer of considerable merit. One of the big pageants he produced at the Albert Hall swept us all into it, so one of my earliest get-ins and shows was actually working in the Albert Hall, after which, anything else pales into squalor (insignificance).

So I cut my teeth on Stage Management with that group who used to do large shows, at least a variety show in Army Camps, Hospitals, Old People's Homes, Village Halls and at the Albert Hall in this instance we did a couple of routines. All over the South East of England really and we would form the company up in the Summer, rehearse in the Summer, do all the scenery and everything and then tour it out for about six months and then another lot would come along. So that was that.

I then went into the Air Force in 1956-68, I served in Northern Ireland, in Scotland, in the Far East and in Cornwall and at all of these places I got involved either running

drama groups or in charge of the cinema, or whatever. I was Entertainment's Officer in Aldergrove in Northern Ireland, that was exciting, and so I kept an interest and when I came out of the Air Force in 1968 I was lucky enough to get the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School in Bristol. Luckily enough, my interview for the technical course was to meet Roger Jeffrey, the late Roger Jeffrey; who was their Stage Management boss at an interval at the Theatre Royal, Bristol - it was a Matinee. The school students in that year were performing on stage and in the interval in the bar I was interviewed and got a space on the Stage Management Course the following September. So when people tell you it is difficult to get into theatre schools, you really don't really want to believe them, If you are in the right place at the right bar at the right time, you see. On the same course, there were a few actors, of course, that year. Some young sprogs called Jeremy Irons. Tim Piggott-Smith, Christopher Biggins and Hazel Clyne to name but a few. Not a bad lot. Quite a lot of us managed to carve a career out of the theatre from then on so it wasn't too bad. I was a mature student in those terms because by then when I did that course in 1968 I was 32, so I was considerably older than most of the others. When I passed it I went straight up to the Everyman Theatre at Cheltenham as Stage Manager because I was head and shoulders in age than anyone else who was working there. Everyman, Cheltenham had only just gone on to three weekly Rep, it had been two weekly Rep before I got there, but it was on a three weekly Rep system. The Director was Michael Ashdon. The General Manager there was Ray Hammond who was well known in theatre management circles as one of the best. And it was a typical Rep in terms of the fact that people signed up for a six-month contract and they did all the plays that came at them really.

The plays we had in that season I went in there September 69 and stayed over that sort of six-month period. We did some plays, like the Circle. We did A Day in the Death of Joe Egg, which was fairly controversial at the time, it sort of broke new ground dealing with disabled and that sort of thing, which is not something that was mainstream theatre at all in those days.

RB: What year was that?

MO: That was in autumn 69.

RB: Oh, right.

MO: The young male lead was played by Oliver Cotton, who has gone on, and is still working. You see him on the television in film a lot and on the stage, national and so forth, so he had this. He was one of the people that came out of the Rep movement, which as I say, has been the spawning ground for many many a good actor and actresses. Also were the Salad Days, which was interesting because Salad Days, of course, started its life a few years earlier down in Bristol and it was well received and it was a pastiche of the time, but very hard technically to do. It had a flying saucer in it for a start and things like this and we had large floating pieces of scenery, which had to be flown in and out. Now this [shows flyer] was the Everyman Cheltenham flyer. It has, I think, had two updates since then and so this was the day of hemp flying lines on the flying gallery and everything was very labour intensive.

RB: And what year was that?

MO: This was in the same season 69/70 and it was a question of all hands on deck to get the scene changes done. In fact everyone, and I am very small, even I was up there lugging these hemp lines and everyone, except I think, the girl in the bar was pretty well brought round because there was lots of pieces to be flown out, lots of pieces to come in. None of it was done on automatic controls or anything. They were counter-weighted but you still had to hit the cue and hit the mark on the right time. So it was all part of

the pattern of learning the job in Rep, which I still say that the best actors and actresses, the best writers, the best anything in the theatre came out of the Rep movement. We had our own props department with an Assistant Stage Manager, who specialised in props and used to spend his time propping around Cheltenham, which is well known for its antique shops.

So I said to him, for the Circle we would like a large dining table and twelve matching chairs please. He would go off and come back with the promise of a Hepelwhite set worth £30,000, and our insurance would be very wary of this because you could do that in Cheltenham. We had three antique shops, who took it in turn to supply the furniture for the performance and they used to get a by-line in the programme, that they were supporting the Rep and furnishings supplied by for this performance – blah blah blah. The next time another one would do it and then after that a third one would do it, and we had to virtually turn one of our dressing rooms into a strong room, we couldn't leave this furniture kicking around the stage between shows. It all had to be locked up very carefully in this vault almost so that it was protected, and luckily during my time there we had no problems.

RB: And did you have to pay for that or was it allocated?

MO: No, No, it was done on a - we will advertise you and you will advertise us.

RB: Yes, Yes.

MO: They were very keen. Very competitive antiques dealing in Cheltenham, they still are, I suspect. They had lots of visiting Americans coming and buying up whole stately home full of furniture and that sort of thing. Very expensive stuff, the prop people in normal places had a much harder job.

RB: Yes.

MO: They probably did not have a choice of furniture shops for starters, they could only go to the one. A lot of it had to be made up or was repro but we were dealing with the real stuff in some cases. So we had to be very careful, because if it was a physical play in any shape or form. I mean, A Day in the Life of Joe Egg, you did not need antiques, you needed sort of 1940/1950 utility furniture stuff. So a lot of that we just had to knock up in the workshop.

RB: What was the budget like, was it quite small?

MO: The budget was minimal, yes. So were the wages, I started out with £17 a week and then it went up to 17 guineas, which is £17.17s, £17.85p in new money, a week.

RB: How much were the actors paid?

MO: Well, some of the younger ones, who just came out of drama school, were lucky to get £15, I think. They used to get an allowance sometimes for their digs. The digs were £3.15p a week and you got breakfast and that's it, and the digs were – there is a whole chapter on its own on the digs around the country and you know the theatres recommended them because they were the ones worth staying at. I actually stayed in one because Cathy and the family stayed in Bristol; she was working in the hospital. Someone had to earn some money and between us we were subsidised in the English Rep movement and most people working in it were doing exactly the same.

RB: Hmm.

MO: We had this ASM who specialised in props. We had a Wardroom mistress and she had an Assistant, part-time assistant and she had to turn up or produce every three weeks a brand new set of clothes, or at least a re-adjusted and re-fitted old set of clothes

because she looked after the stock room. The workshop was a carpenter, he also had a part-time assistant and used to have to knock the sets out and, of course, we had to have our own Director, we had a Director who was on contract – I am sorry, I mean an Art Designer on contract so that was quite an interestingly little Department. We used to go and have a squint at these designs because we could see then two or three shades down the line, what horrors were in those. We did not know the name of the play or anything and we would go and see what the designer had got drawn up and it gave us a clue as to what to expect.

Rehearsals were always done during the day except on Thursdays and Saturdays when we had Matinees for the following play and the same band of actors for the most part were in all of them. Occasionally you had to augment it with some student or other for one specific play which would run – we would open on the Wednesday night, no Tuesday night and it would go right round that week to the Saturday, and then two full weeks after that through to the Saturday. So it wasn't quite three weeks, but every three weeks you had a new production.

Before that, Reps were working on a two-weekly cycle, which was extremely hard.

RB: Hmm...

MO: And in the 40's when the Rep movement sort of kicked off they were working on a weekly cycle, which was virtually impossible because you had no time to turn around anything. I mean the hardest job was getting rehearsal time for all the actors to get their lines together and their moves together blocked out in a week. So there was a certain overlapping of the overlapping with them. They sometimes started rehearsing two plays about you see.

RB: Yes.

MO: So it was very very tricky, but as I say everyone learnt everything and everyone played in every part in every play. The larger places like Bristol, I went back later in Management in Bristol and I was one of the managers at the Little Theatre, which was a small part of the Carlston Concert Hall complex. Council owned so it was a 2,000 seater Concert Hall and the Little Theatre, which I think off the top of my head had something like 356 seats, and it was up in the Circle Foyer, such a large building the Carlston Hall that they could build a small theatre. It has now been removed and there is a bar in that space. So the Little Theatre no longer exists but the Bristol Vic Company. Prior to the revamp of its auditoria in the 70's, the Theatre Royal itself, the main house the Company worked there and they use a little theatre like nowadays; a studio theatre would have been operating and they would run quite lavish shows in terms of being a small stage. There were limitations. It was a pure proscenium, it wasn't a modern studio. It was purely a 356 single seat auditorium. No sideline problems or anything like that. Yes, it was quite good for running smaller shows; the main Theatre Royal took the big season. But they were working on this three-week pattern. In fact 4 even weeks in the Christmas show sometimes ran to 5 or 6 weeks – it was all planned in accordingly. So they were breaking away in the 70's and 80's, well certainly the 70's. The Bristol Vic and everything was breaking away from the established pattern earlier of Rep per se. They would bring in the odd extra, named actor possibly, for a particular performance, and someone like Peter O'Toole might do a whole four-month season and then pop up in the following season just for one play. So the original pattern of a Rep where the same group did everything was breaking down and this was repeated over the country; this wasn't just a phenomenon of Bristol. I happened to be there, so I know it was happening around me.

RB: And did big names bring in more people?

MO: Yes, I think it was the beginning after the crossover effect from film and television that people were realising that artists like Peter O'Toole and John Alderton, those sort of people were known as a name. The whole concept of the original Rep companies, of course, were that they made their names locally, and may well be known locally in the local paper, and got a good write-up. They weren't known in the populace at large, and so it was a sort of crossover time the business changed and Rep gradually gave up because they couldn't sustain themselves against the opposition if you like.

RB: Yes

MO: But after the 70's in 74, I came up to Grays in Essex and I took over the running of the Thameside Theatre, which is actually in this building, on the third floor, you missed it on the right.

RB: [Laughs]

MO: But it was a purely municipal hall, we didn't produce anything, we took in small-scale tours, we took in a lot of children's products. We took in a lot of Davey Woods children's plays: Gingerbread Man and all that sort of stuff. We ran films, we ran one-night concerts and the local amateurs could hire the hall. So it was a sort of art centre type of programming but no in-house production; we didn't have the facilities. There are no workshop facilities on site; there is no wardrobe on site.

RB: Oh, right.

MO: So everything had to be brought in before it was done and got out. So there was a change and in the 70's a lot of commercial theatres, or at least a lot of Council owned theatres were put into the system built up with mostly fairly small auditoria 300, 500, 800 if you were lucky and it was an interesting time. The only way you kept up with actors was that the actors would be touring a show and they would tour it around 8 or 9 or even 10 of these small town theatres with the same play and then they would be out of work. Then another lot of people would turn another one around. So they did not get the Rep teamwork basis, they saw a lot of different locations, different venues, but they didn't see a lot of different plays with the same actors, and I think the acting skills were different then for these one-off performances. But, yes well that's the way it went. I mean I stayed here until 1986 and then I went over to film – cinema, I opened a ten-screen multiplex cinema, but that is another story until I retired.

RB: Yes,

MO: My last year in the cinema management I got a million bums on seats and when I worked it out that was probably more than I got in the entire time that I had been working in live Theatre, in terms of actual bums on seats.

RB: Yes.

MO: So I thought it is time to leave now. So the threat of Hitler's 'V' bomb landing on my little house in Cheam pushed me along a fairly busy and active life in the business really. And so there we are: that is how it started and that is how it finished.

RB: Hmm.

MO: Now I have a good example here.

RB: Yes.

MO: What I was saying about Rep being the ideal grounding for actors.

Exhibit A: This is a Scrapbook for 1953. Fairly well established Rep was and this is a Rep company, this scrapbook, it is a fan's scrapbook. It is selective and they kept the things they wanted to keep.

RB: Yes, I see.

MO: It is based on the Theatre Royal, Horsham in South Surrey, isn't it? Horsham on the Sussex border, and the Rep company was called The Westminster Rep Company and they set themselves up. There is some interesting items in here – they did the Matinee on Saturday at 2.30 evenings at 7.30. Tickets four bob, three bob, two shillings and unreserved a shilling. Monday evening, which, of course, would have been the opening night, you only paid two shillings and one shilling. This was a week Monday to Saturday. Get out Saturday night, technically, set it up on Sunday morning – technical run through followed by dress rehearsal and then, well they probably did the dress rehearsal on the Monday morning and went to the public on Monday night. Now, half the plays you would not have heard of and half of the actors (no, more than that) most of the actors you wouldn't have heard of.

RB: Hmm.

MO I have a little programme here we are. This is the programme for the season.

RB: Very small print.

MO: Little Women was one week. Trial Honeymoon, a new breezy farcical comedy. The Case of the Frightened Lady, Edgar Wallace. Spring Term, World Premiere Performance: New Boys' School Comedy, and so it went on, and there is some typical newspaper articles but they used to get good write-up in the West Sussex County Times and they had great supporters and you could obviously purchase photographs of the performance.

RB: Yes.

MO: And they looked very stylised in today's eyes. You notice the sets are very simple, you just had a collection of flats and while these flats are up here the other set was being painted up with the following weeks oak beams and then a certain amount of swapping around.

RB: Yes

MO: "Constructed at the Westminster Group Studios": who are they kidding?

The Westminster Repertory Company only seemed to operate here, as far as I can find out. They may well have. I don't know what the connection with Westminster was – they may be near the Westminster Arms Public House or something in the past. But anyway, all the local people were advertising in the programme. You paid 6s 3d a programme. As an example as to what can happen to get into the business as an actor, Equity the actors union ran a closed shop, so you had to have your equity ticket to work either technically or as an actor. I have still got my Equity ticket here somewhere, still going strong. And to get your Equity card you had to produce a 6-months contract to prove that you had worked as a beginner, if you like, for six months. .

RB: Yes.

MO: So you go to one of the companies. No, you wouldn't, you would go and find an agent and the agent would say "such and such a Rep is looking for two people dirt cheap because they haven't got much money". They will take a couple of starters on as ASMs, Acting/ASMs. They would open the curtains, and make the tea, sweep the stage and do two lines as required.

RB: Yes.

MO: But they were on a contract, they were learning the business, as I say the best way to learn is to get stuck in there. They were learning the business and it was coming along

and so forth. So we have got one here. Now this was the report in July of 1953 on Jane Eyre and it says here "The cast play their truly supporting roles well. Michael Scott has his best opportunity today as the drunkard Hindley". So they gave the impression that this regular reporter had seen him in a couple of other small parts and were being kind to him. So I thought I'd find out about Michael Scott. I discovered that Michael Scott, in fact, was appearing in Birmingham or thereabouts this particular year, or this particular month. So there were two Michael Scotts, which was an interesting complication to my research, as you will no doubt discover when researching this happens. Anyway, I wasn't going to let that one drop and what I discovered was that Michael Scott had been in the Army for two years doing his National Service. Like so many of these young men, they came out of the Army they done their two years and a lot of them did not want to go back to working in Dad's grocer shop or working in the field or whatever they were doing before they were called up or what their Dad was doing.

They had seen a little bit of the World and they saw the "glamour" of the business and so they decided they would have a crack at it. So he finds himself an agent and they said "Oh yes, yes, go down and see June Windom-Davis and Edward Gray. A little place called Horsham. Yes they will give you a contract." So anyway he was doing his work there. When he had finished, including a pantomime, they didn't get a picture of him, unfortunately. "Michael Scott, as Clarence the cockney thief, keeps us amused in his too rare appearances on the stage". Obviously the writer felt he had something in him but he wasn't seeing him very much because he was spending his time changing the scenery and generally working back stage but I am sure his name was in the programme. In fact, yes, his name is actually on this part here, see there. So they advertised four weeks plays. The Case of Mrs Barry, written by the owner himself Olwyn D Fox. The Corn is Green by Emlyn Williams, The Gay Dog by Joseph Carlton: "A rip roaring comedy about greyhounds and bath tubs", it says here and A Strange Affair at St Hilda's - "a new girls' school comedy" - that was funny because we had a boys' school comedy a little while ago. So these programme cards were given out. They also had a member system. People could pay a shilling or something a year and they got a posh card, there is one in here somewhere, which allowed them to, I don't know what privilege they got but they had the kudos of supporting their local theatre.

Anyway, to go back to our friend Michael Scott. After he had done his six months either with this company or maybe a couple of companies, he took his contract to his agent and said "This is my contract could you get my application through to Equity"? So the old agent says, "Yes, alright" - rings up Equity, says "Yes we have got the paperwork - we would like Michael Scott registered". The agency said "Oh, we have got one of them he will have to change his name". "Ah", they said, "Right". He went to the window (this is the story) and he looked out across Leicester Square and he saw the Caine Mutiny and he thought "Caine, that's a nice name." So he changed it to Michael Caine. I often wondered what would have happened if it had been the 101 Dalmatians or something had been there. Anyway that is the story. That is a very early Michael Caine press cutting and not a lot of people know that.

RB: No. [laughs]

MO: But I thought it showed the sort of route in that the people in those days had to do.

RB: Yes.

MO: None of this proliferation of Drama Schools, none of this proliferation of University Departments or that sort of thing. The first one at this time was started down in Bristol by the late Professor Flynn of Wickham, who died last week.

RB: Yes.

MO: And that was an academic drama studies. They had actors on there and Tim Piggott-Smith did a course there before he came to Bristol Vic School, but they worked together. But nowadays you can get a qualification in Drama at varying levels and various institutions, as you well know.

RB: Yes

MO: I know it doesn't keep you warm on a cold night. You can wrap your degree around you, I suppose, if the worst happened, but it does not necessarily guarantee you a job.

RB: Of course.

MO: The only way is to get the practical work in, and, for all its faults, the repertory system doing that actually enforced the people. I mean you had to have a strong constitution to go into it

RB: Yes

MO: You had to really want to do it. So it weeded out the has-beens before they ever started. And I think most of the people that went through, the youngsters anyway, coming in at this period of discussion. If they could make a go at Rep they were alright then and, of course, television, which opened up a lot of whole new things.

RB: Yes. The people didn't really have or very rarely had any backgrounds in drama or any kind of training.

MO: I think the families trained on the job so to speak.

RB: Oh right.

MO: Mum and Dad were in the Rep or in the seaside holiday Rep in the shows that were done in the Summer and shows used to change on a Thursday night, I think. You could be on a week's holiday and you could go and see a play up to Thursday and you could go and see another play on the Friday before you went home - they were thinking of their audience you see.

RB: Yes.

MO: Youngsters would be hanging around because Mum and Dad were in the business and they sort of found themselves doing ASM work and ended up by being in the business. Alright, then.

RB: Yes.

MO: That happened - and I mean the Bristol Vic school. I suppose it couldn't have been more than a dozen schools at that time when I was there 1968-69 there could not have been more than a dozen main schools throughout the Country.

RB: Yes.

MO: And it was very difficult to get on an acting space even then. The technicals there - wasn't so many people going for that as I say I got in very rather easily, I think maybe someone had just given up the week before or something, there was a space, but never mind. I needed to do that because when I came out of the Forces, I had been away for 12 years out of, shall we say, the orbit of English theatre and they had invented new lighting control systems; using something called Thyristers, which I had no idea what they were. You used little delicate quadrants to control your lights. Whereas when I had gone away we were still using huge massive strand dimmers for light changes and that

sort of thing. So I thought I felt I needed a technical up to speed of all these gimmicky gadgets, which were never going to last.

RB: Yes.

MO: And then, of course, we got on top of that and some idiot came along with a computer and the whole thing changed again. But that is yet another story.

RB: And on the stuff we were talking about earlier Flying Saucers and things like that -

MO: Oh yes.

RB: How much had things moved on since then?

MO: Well you see, the Flying Saucer was topical at the time. Everyone was talking about Flying Saucers and it was in the comics and the youth culture and they were rated into Salad Days because they needed the input from someone from outer space and so the Flying Saucer was a natural thing to a Flying Saucer. In fact it was just like a big oval and we actually got some flashing lights on it and some tinselly bits and as it came down someone with a smoke machine was pumping in smoke from the wings or something. So it looked as if it was coming from the...

RB: Yes.

MO: Lots of noise coming over the track. And so it was not the best technically produced flying saucer I am sure. It was a bit two-dimensional, but never mind.

RB: Was it high tech for the time?

MO: It was high tech for us, Yes. And, of course, it was quite a show stopping moment. You know, no one had seen anything like it on the stage or no one had seen it on the telly and they had read in the books about it.

RB: Yes.

MO: And comics. The kids knew all about it. That was why it was in the show originally and I did see amateurs do it last week, or a couple of weeks ago in Hornchurch, Queens Theatre, Hornchurch. They didn't do that - they re-wrote the script rather cunningly because they decided, even then, the Flying Saucer effect to make it work, was fairly elaborate. So they produced a Tardis and they made a nice cardboard breeze box and that appeared on the set and the space man came out of it. It wasn't quite right. Oh yes, and later on they worked in someone with a Dr Who scarf. I mean they completely altered the Salad Days but the effect was alright and it was probably easier to achieve. An amateur group, as I say: with the Reps we were almost amateur groups in terms of budgets. But still, there we are.

RB: Yes. I was wondering what kind of – how you decide what the plays to put on and what playwright?

MO: Well, Office Director and the General Manager were the two top salary people and they would get together and I imagine the Officer Director said "what do you think about this one and this one and this one and this one"? And Ray Hammond would have said, "No, you can get rid of that Shakespeare because there is too many actors in it. Yes, we'll do that. Could we do a Jane Austen? Because we have got them two dreamy girls that are in that first play and they might as well stay on and do the Jane Austen" and they looked at it in those sort of terms.

RB: Yes.

MO: And then they would knock up a programme, which covered four months or six months ending up, possibly at the Christmas season, with a Christmas biggy, which might run into a week or two. Going back to Cheltenham, where I said they got themselves onto a three-week cycle and they were performing for 2½ weeks, say. But sometimes on the Monday night when you think all hell would be letting loose, There would be rehearsals and technicians bashing hammers and nails and trying to put the set up. On the Monday night sometimes they would have a one-man show, so you could work during the day, you could rehearse during the day, and then you cleared everything off - just had the black tabs round on the stage. Two sticks of furniture and you had someone doing a one-man show. One of the ones I remember at Cheltenham was Max Adrian doing George Bernard Shaw as a one-man show and he just needed a desk and a chair. Now, he was going very blind at the time. He always had bad eyesight but he was pretty bad and I was a bit worried about it because I said are you going to start with you sitting at your desk? He said "Oh No. I'll walk in". The stage will open just with the furniture and a little spotlight will come up and then I will walk in. So I said yes OK – How are we going to get you from the wing out to the centre of the stage. He said "point me in the right direction boy and when I feel the lights I will turn towards the audience". That was George Bernard Shaw and that is how he did it – well that is Max Adrian and that is how he did it.

RB: [laughs] Yes.

MO: And it was a magnificent performance. But, of course, nothing else could happen in the backstage area during this performance; everyone else had a night off.

But the theatre, Ray Hammond and his merry men felt that they needed the business and income and obviously it was a big draw and people came from all over to see him. He was a great actor. They could not afford to put him in the season but they could afford to have him on the one night. One or two of those were thrown in.

RB: Yes.

MO: On the technical side, we were not over keen because it meant we had to keep a lighting man on and myself as Stage Manager and possibly one of the ASM to run the cues, so although everyone else might have had a night off we didn't. And, of course, we had to be in by nine o'clock – nine thirty on the Tuesday morning to get the rehearsal going, which, on the Tuesday morning would have been the technical rehearsal anyway, which is fairly nerve racking. And so it wasn't something that we would encourage Higher Management to consider but they used to put them in the programme from time to time.

RB: Yes.

MO: And I probably think it was most commercial aspect than artistic aspect, I would have thought.

RB: Yes, and later on, was it the 70's you were saying when they started to break up and brought people in?

MO: The were all men, they were structured differently, as I suggested earlier on; do Jane Austen because we have got a couple of girls that we had in earlier plays and they don't want to sit twiddling their thumbs with nothing to do so we'll do a Jane Austen in that spot. They wouldn't consider that. In later times they would say right, we will get the two young ladies from the drama school who had just left, we can get them cheap and we will put them in for that show.

They come in for a couple of week's rehearsal, they do the show and they would be off. So they would only be paid for that duration of that particular short contract to cover their rehearsal time and their performing time.

RB: Yes

MO: And, of course, you got paid a lesser rate for rehearsal week than an actual performing week. Which doesn't make sense.

RB: No.

MO: Insofar as for an hour's work, because a rehearsal week was a very heavy week.

RB: Yes.

MO: On a performing week, the young ladies, for example, would do the Jane Austen piece and during the day they wouldn't have any more rehearsals to do. But they were paid more just to come up and do the actual performances. Whereas the week before when they were working every hour there was they weren't getting the money.

RB: Yes.

MO: There was a few anomalies in the system and over the years Equity tried to iron them out, there was touring allowance as well if you were not with the Rep company permanently. If you were one of these shows that was touring through, smaller theatres, like the one here at Grays, then you had an allowance – a lodging allowance to help you pay the allegedly outrageous rates that were being charged by theatrical landladies, but they weren't all like that.

But that was built in, so if you were with a touring company you do get an extra weekly allowance whether you were an actor or technicians, whoever went on the tour. So they did their best. But then, of course, later on Equity lost its closed shop status because it wasn't fashionable for any unions to have a closed shop basis. So they said we will maintain equity for the benefit of those actors that wish to join us, but they couldn't insist that every production only hired actors who had an equity card or one of these provisional probationary members who were collecting their six months of contracts like Michael Scott. Michael Scott, you think, where did that name come from because you know that Mr Caine is a Micklewhite – that was his proper name but perhaps his agent decided that Michael Micklewhite didn't sound like your average, it wasn't punchy enough for an actor.

RB: Yes.

MO: When I was at Bristol as I say one of the actors on the course was Timothy Piggott-Smith and as a joke I said, "speaking from the management aspect of this, Tim, you have got to change that name. No way can you get Timothy Piggott-Smith on the marquee outside of the theatre", I said, "to get it on there you will have to use very small letters and nobody will be able to read it" and I said "it is not going to work". So he laughed you see – we all had a good giggle about it.

RB: Yes [laughs]

MO: Later on he said, "Yes I have changed my name". I said, "what are you going to call yourself?". He said "Tim Piggott-Smith", so Timothy went to Tim and that was his concession and he has kept his Piggott-Smith going ever since. So there we are, that's proved how wrong you can be.

RB: Was there like a sense of Community that was sort of lost when it started to break up I mean, more permanent?

MO: Yes, I am sure the teams breaking up were, I mean every six months or so you went your own way. The theatre would maybe keep one or two but more or less that was the end of the contract, and they probably shut for a week or ten days. Maybe for say essential maintenance or whatever, or for the Director and General Manager maybe to have a week's holiday or something. The then would start the next season. They had to have a lead-in to get the next Company in for ten days or a fortnight, so if the theatre was dark the new company would come in and start rehearsing. So they still have to do that. With a complete changeover it will have two complete teams of people trying to fight around the same dressing rooms – it wouldn't quite work. So there was a little gap there and quite often they ended one season of the Christmas play, the Christmas production, which might run a little extended a couple of weeks on and then it will cut and one would disappear. And, of course, they would hopefully get themselves signed up for other Reps and they would move around.

RB: Yes

MO: So, yes, it was a good grounding, it was a good training and I am sure it opened up people's eyes. People later on went into Directing from their own point of view. They would have worked with a lot of actors and actresses in different parts. Not just in one show and therefore they would have an appreciation of what some of these actors and actresses could do because they had seen them be the butler one week, the murderer the next week, the detective sergeant the week after and the spear carrier the week after that.

RB: Yes.

MO: They would know these people had this experience and the capability because they had actually been there when they were getting it. So I think it rolled over into the more senior players later on for actors in business who could recall people.

RB: Yes.

MO: Just looking through the old casting book and looking at the photos, looking at the mug shots and you think, yes I know that one, I remember him, I remember him. I wouldn't want that one, because they had had this experience.

RB: Yes.

MO: They worked their way up to. Nowadays I have a feeling that a lot of the Directors come out of sort of a Director's Kit. They have a degree in one hand and just add water from a big jug and they suddenly become a Director.

RB: Yes.

MO: And their actual theatrical knowledge can be absolutely brilliant, and some of the practical side can be. But I think the actual knowledge of actors in the marketplace might be just be a little... a little indistinct.

RB: Yes.

MO: That is what I think.

RB: Did you think they worked themselves up many years ago?

MO: Yes, absolutely and if you had any worth, hopefully one of the others would spot it on the way up and take you.

RB: I am just wondering how you advertised plays.

MO: Well, the Rep system they had what they called hanging cards and all the shops that supported you and advertised in your programme and all that sort of thing. You

would give them a hanging card, which was probably A4 size or maybe the foolscap size, which preceded A4 but then went on to metric. It was printed on a thin card and usually had a couple of holes at the top and a dog-tag so that you could hang it on a hook; these would be taken out to the shops and they would be given a pass with it for two seats; and also the landladies would get these cards to put in front of their houses. They would also get two seats and hopefully, they would come down on the opening night or the next night and then go and tell everyone what a brilliant show it was. So you got more people in later on.

RB: Yes.

MO: Advertising in local newspaper had to be done but it was a fairly expensive system, but I think most of the Reps signed up for a sort of contract rate, and paid for six weeks but got eight weeks adverts, something like that with the local paper. We would put a block in, which was a fairly static block with the heading with all the borders and the phone numbers at the bottom.

RB: Yes.

MO: And then the advert was just altered with the title of the play.

RB: Oh, right.

MO: So there were fairly simple adverts repeated that way. Local radio hadn't really started in those days or at least it was very patchy, put it that way. There was a local radio station in Bristol, I seem to recall. You tried to organise a competition or something that way by giving two free seats the radio station would run the competition plugging the new play and what was going on. So they would do that. But most of it was done – oh, and they had to have their own supporter's clubs who would get little programmes sent out with what the whole season. That one there was done on a month by month basis, but you could get two months or three months, like a programme booklet with a little synopsis of the play. Dates and times of performances, booking arrangements and the prices. All the sort of stuff you get today but no website access, because they hadn't got those.

RB: [Laughs]

MO: But the most, I imagine, would have been the hanging cards or lobby cards in some places they were called, which were sent out and hung in cafes, in pubs and anywhere who would hang one up for a week and you give them two free seats. The free seats were usually only valid for maybe the first two nights, or possibly the first Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday.

RB: Yes.

MO: But Friday night was usually commercially quite good so it might have been for just the Wednesday and Thursday. But you could get them in early to make sure you had an audience, particularly if it was an unknown play. If it was an Agatha Christie, everyone knew it and they would be there

RB: Yes.

MO: Also you would pay a sign writer to do a couple of large bills to go on the front boards of the theatre, and some of them, of course, had like a posters bay across the front of the marquee for the front, so you could actually have the name of the play up in large letters. They would do that and they would probably do those a long time in advance. As soon as you had the programme you give them the programme and the sign writer would get them all knocked out for you.

RB: Yes

MO: So they would be done on a one by one basis and that would be put in and that really that was it, all there was advertising. We relied a lot on word of mouth.

RB: Yes. There would have been local people coming?

MO: Local people coming, yes. I mean the stage - bless it's heart - used to, still does, run a column of what shows there are in which towns the following week. So if you were in the business and you desperately wanted to see the Ghost Train, you would look down and see it is in York, so you would shoot off to York to see it. That happened in the business but the smaller Reps were not going to pick up people that way. Occasionally an agent, of course, Michael Scott's agent would have said: "Here we have got a young lad down there in Horsham, you'll have to go and see him", and they would get someone who has come to him as an agent to find him some actors for the Summer season at Clacton. The agent might well come down and see him - but he wouldn't be paying for his seat, for the commercial point of view it wouldn't be much good. But he would come and look at Michael Scott making his small appearance in the play. And say "Yes, he's alright, he is the right build and manner, yes we will have him" and then go back to the agency and say "Yes, I have been and seen your lad and he is alright, we will take him on".

He hasn't got a future, this Michael Scott, he will never make it. And so I think that has just about covered advertising. You would have to pay for it, as I say they give out free seats, but you try to do that the first couple of night.

RB: Yes.

MO: The actors producing a play cold with no run-ins at all before the opening night, none of this preview stuff you get in the West End ten days before the Press even get to it.

RB: Yes.

MO: You need to have an audience there even if the play is an absolute disaster, you have got to have an audience to decide it is a disaster. And so the landladies used to come in and the shopkeepers because their pass would say Admit Two to whatever the performance and the dates were.

So that would happen; but they often used to pay for the houses if a play perhaps was alright on Friday nights and Saturdays but during the week was a bit down and if they were not getting the business then they would send out bunches of tickets to the nurses - that is where Cathy [MO's wife] used to see a lot of the plays.

RB: Yes

MO: And the police and places like that, and although they were busy people, would come and collapse in the theatre and watch the show and that is really part of getting them to talk about it now to their mates and get more coming in later.

RB: Yes.

MO: But also you had an audience when looking at the booking plan it is going to be two men and a dog.

RB: Yes - [Laughs]

MO: That is another reason for turning the plays round quickly because if your audience in a small town would support a weeks full of shows but they are not going to support three weeks of shows.

RB: No.

MO: So that is one thing. They had to build their audience out to cover a two weekly Rep and they were really asking them to go to three-weekly Rep. Now, at Cheltenham, we were reasonably successful at it, but if we put on a new play there would be a lot of very thin nights. Whereas if the play had a name either by author or title that people knew or recognised or whatever then you would get you're three-weekly Rep running quite well. But if you put in something new, which they had never heard of, you practically beg you see it. Joe Egg had been around for a few years - it was not well known as a play. It hadn't been performed in many places and I have a feeling that this was very thin in the ground for many performances. In which case the Front of House manager or Box Office Manager or whoever – Manageress - would have rushed around at lunchtime and gone into where all the office workers went to lunch and give out a few tickets.

RB: Yes.

MO: When you give out tickets like that you are lucky to get a third of them in. You give out thirty tickets and you get ten people.

RB: Yes.

MO: Which is not very many.

RB: No.

MO: But if you have only got ten customers in then you double your audience so I suppose then it helps. But it is not an exact cert. If you can target them a bit better, I mean the nurses were probably quite good but they didn't have two pennies to rub together, and anything to give them a night out.

RB: Yes.

MO: You would probably get a high percentage. But if you just went out in the street or in a coffee bar and just walked around giving out tickets, if a third of them were taken up you would be doing quite well. So you can waste an awful lot of time for very little effect, if you're not careful. .

RB: Yes.

MO: With hindsight it is difficult to tell what might have worked better. There wasn't the technology. Nowadays you could say something like that every tenth email gets a free seat, you know. There are all sorts of little stunts that you could pull now. In those days you couldn't.

RB: Yes. Do you remember any particular show that you put on, even if they were new, went by word of mouth?

MO: I think in the end Joe Egg was successful for us but I have a feeling that it started with a pretty thin book, because it was an uncomfortable subject at the time.

RB: Yes.

MO: Nowadays it is not, it is the Way of the World. With a wheelchair whizzing around you wouldn't look at anyone twice, but at the time it was. It was the effect on the family, of course, the fact that there was this child there it meant that Mum and Dad were hovering around and all over it – you know the whole circle, and the family was disintegrated and then pulled back together. So it had a lot of social comment in it and it was – yes we did manage to get some (I haven't one) but there was quite a lot of local press on it. People were writing in, which was good even if they don't like it.

RB: Yes.

MO: Their writing in helps the Company in the longer term because it profiles the name and the theatre was doing something which was that sort of effective.

RB: Yes.

MO: Yes, that was good. Musicals always did well, Salad Days obviously piling them in. Circles was another one – Yes that was quite good. Oh, Bell, Book and Candle was a sort of a bit of a mystery but at the time it was a book, people been reading or had read so they knew it, so that was alright. Yes, I think it was down to the Artist, Director/Producer or whatever to come up with material that would actually do the business. If it didn't do the business, at worst you were going to be in the doldrums for a week or possibly a fortnight, and you just had to ride that and hope that the people would pile back in again to see Babes in the Wood to build up the bank balance.

RB: Yes.

MO: There were very few subsidies. Some local Councils rented out the buildings to Rep companies to a fairly unrealistic low rent to encourage someone to be there to do something, so that was a hidden subsidy. Some of them would give a grant if they asked, you know they might say "Oh yes, we will support this Rep" and will give something like a £1000 to help with their publicity or something like that but I mean it was nothing really but their name had to be put up somewhere to prove that they were supporting.

RB: Yes

MO: There were a few local businesses that you could actually screw for local sponsorship and they would get a credit in the programme, yes that was quite good. Other fund raising – most of them had snack bars and that sort of thing or a bar but not on a regular basis only, usually when the building was open for performances. Nowadays, a lot of these places, of course the ones that are left have got full-time restaurants going all day to get people into the building, whether there is a play on or not.

RB: Hmm.

MO: You just have to take each case on its merits and see what happens. I think most things are tried, it is just a question of some work better than others.

RB: I think we have covered a lot already.

MO: Yes, I think we have, I see you have got your heading there.

RB: Well, they are sort of, not really. On the social side I wasn't sure what to ask you what you had been up to but you have told me a lot

MO: No, well, that's alright I am used to talking.

RB: Well if there is anything else you want to add in, any anecdote stories.

MO: Well no, I think we have probably covered all the things I had written down.

RB: Yes.

MO: A few headings to give you some thought. No, that is just about it. After my time in the cinema management, I retired from that five or six years ago and I now work on heritage things with the local museum here, which is why we are in this room. I also, as I say are Chairman of the Theatre Research. I was on the Theatre Advisory Council, which is a sort of a quango thing, that has now gone into mothballs because it was due for a change, which is unusual for quangos to do that. I am various other groups: The Urban

Society on their Committee and I work on some heritage projects. I was accepted, by the BBC to put in their restoration series, and I have suggested another one for the next series. I have got a cinema over the road and an art deco. If they are going to do a third series I am hoping I would have got that one going by the, sufficiently to put that into restoration. Just high profile things that need a bit of work like that. So I don't think I have lost all those little sneaky skills one adopts from working in the theatre.

RB: Yes.

MO: But I may be channelling them in slightly different directions at the moment. That's it.

RB: That is good.