

Neil Roberts – interview transcript

Interviewer: T. K. Vincent

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Professor of English Literature, University of Sheffield, theatregoer in the 1960s, Peter Brook's King Lear (1962).

TKV: Now I'd like to start off with a general question. Please describe your experience of theatregoing in terms of reasons for going, who you went with and how often you went.

NR: Nearly all the theatre trips that I made was organised by my school, my school was very theatre orientated. They put on a lot of plays at school... and... for example Alan Rickman was a contemporary of mine, also Robert Cushman who in the 1980s was a theatre critic of the...the...Observer so quite a number of people from my school went onto be professionals in theatre...and probably went... during the period I'm talking about... which was when I was studying for A Levels in the early 1960s... about four or five times a year.

TKV: Right. Thank you. Please describe what it was like to go to the theatre during the 1960s, for example, in terms of the atmosphere, behaviour and dress code, because critics obviously have this very definite opinion and I'd like to know what it was like from an audience's perspective.

NR: Well, I don't have a very clear memory... it wasn't what I was particularly taking notice of in the theatre but I... But I certainly wouldn't say that the atmosphere or the dress code was particularly formal.

TKV: Wonderful. Did you read critics? If so how much notice did you take of them?

NR: I used to read the critics in the Sunday papers, Kenneth Tynan was particularly influential at this time and one of the productions that I most clearly remember was the Peter Brook's production of King Lear in the early 1960s. It was very highly praised by Kenneth Tynan and I went on a school visit to this production and then subsequently to the visit because we were actually studying King Lear at A Level we talked about the production and compared it with... compared our impression to Kenneth Tynan's review.

TKV: And did you at all, read the opposition's side, the Harold Hobson because obviously... there was... critic say that there was a big controversy, and they'd have like big rows in between the two newspapers?

NR: I was aware of Harold Hobson's reviews... I think I must have read them but I wasn't aware of there any controversy between them.

TKV: Right. Interesting. And what did you feel was the average age of the audience? Like, when you went and... do... Do you have any inkling of why there was that particular age group in the theatre?

NR: I'm sorry I can't... I can't remember at all.

TKV: You can't remember at all. Ok, no problem. Looking back on the period now, do you feel "kitchen sink" and "angry young men" drama reflected the mood of the people around you?

NR: No. I felt... when I started going to the theatre I would say that the so called "kitchen sink" style was probably immediately in the past, for example the only play by John Osborne I went to see was Luther which was of course in a very different style, so I never... I never went to see any plays that I... could be describe as "kitchen sink" style. And I wouldn't particularly say that it reflected the mood of the people around me, no.

TKV: Ok, and which theatres did you visit? The actual buildings, and how do you compare them because obviously the West End was different from the East End and all the rest of it...in London?

NR: Well the ones that I remember visiting are the Royal Court and the Aldwych theatre, which I think, was the National Theatre and I went to at least... I think I went to the Phoenix Theatre in the West End but to be honest I wasn't particularly conscious of the buildings I couldn't... I couldn't say how I would compare one with another.

TKV: So there weren't any particular like stages or anything or any presences that were that you felt were, didn't strike you in terms of memory that were really striking because there was obviously in those times it was supposed to be instrumental...like experimental stages and props and sometimes minimalist approaches rather than all the props and backdrop of the previous decades.

NR: Well all the performances that I remember going to see were on traditional proscenium arch stages, certainly the staging was often quite minimal, I don't... I think most of the, most of the stage sets that I... that I remember I wouldn't... I wouldn't describe as being realist. That in fact I think that when I, when I first did see a sort of traditional realist stage set I thought it was really quite weird, that I was, that I was used to a more, a stage set that sort of suggested a scene rather than one that tried to give you a complete illusion.

TKV: Right. Did you prefer the cinema to the theatre and if so why, particularly at that time, at the time of the 1960s?

NR: That's difficult to...that's difficult to make a comparison, because of course, if I, if I think of films of that period, I've probably seen them more recently and so I would be comparing a recent impression with my impression then. But in general, you have to remember that I was quite young I wouldn't say my judgements were particularly mature but I disliked most of the theatre productions I went to see.

TKV: Right. So, you're suggesting that was why you didn't like them the theatre. Did you not go to the cinema that often at all then? At the time then, is that what you are saying?

NR: I didn't go, I didn't go to the cinema an awful lot. I started to the cinema a bit later when I went to university.

TKV: Right. Brecht was considered controversial in his approach to theatre; to what extent did these innovations affect you in his performances of Baal and Brecht on Brecht because you mentioned that you had seen them?

NR: I did mention... I did mention those, Baal was a very early play by Brecht and the production that I went to see had Peter O'Toole playing the lead role and I didn't like that at all, I thought it was a very sort of self indulgent play. The other one you mentioned Brecht on Brecht was actually a show by Lottie Lenya, who was the wife of Brecht's collaborator, Kurt Weill, the composer who composed the music for the Threepenny Opera etc and she was a legendary singer and so I enjoyed that performance very much. But I wouldn't, I wouldn't particularly say that was a... while she was using Brecht's material I wouldn't say that was a particularly Brecht performance. I also went to see a performance of The Caucasian Chalk Circle at, I think, the Aldwych Theatre and interestingly that was also a play that was done at my school. That one, that one I liked more. But I didn't really like Brecht, I didn't like the self-conscious so called alienation effect and I particularly didn't like it when that style of theatre was applied to Shakespeare, as I thought happened in the Peter Brook production of King Lear.

TKV: Right, and in terms of the other methods, like the often splicing of songs and things and interrupting, I mean what parts of the alienation did you not like? Was it the alienating characters, themselves, or the music, or was it the telling you what was going on or what bits did you not like about it?

NR: I think, yes, as you said it was the telling you what was going on, the interruptions of the dramatic, precisely what Brecht wanted to do. I mean I know why he wanted to do it and that he did it on principle and I fully understand what the point of it was. But I just found it, didn't make for me a satisfying theatre experience because the intentions of the dramatist or very often the intentions of director were far too obvious, and again going back to productions of Shakespeare, I'm sorry to say that I've never liked going to see Shakespeare, particularly Shakespeare's tragedies in the theatre because I feel that somebody else's interpretations of the text is being forced on me. And I don't like being aware of, of, of the author's or the director's intentions in that way.

TKV: But don't you then feel that Shakespeare was trying to put across some of his messages through his plays, I mean is it you don't like the director having an opinion or is the playwright? What, whose opinion do you not like seeing?

NR: Well, that's a good question, because I am of course talking about two different things. In the case of Brecht's own plays, he himself is instructing the audience in how to respond to the play and I accept that that is quite valid but I think I would say that if there's any point in comparing a Brecht's play to Shakespeare's play that, that the element of didacticism is more overt in Brecht's theatre. He did it, that was what he thought theatre was about, it was meant to be didactic and so while I think that's perfectly valid, as I say I didn't particularly like kind of theatre. But my more serious objection is to productions of Shakespeare, or indeed of anything that I feel the director's own interpretations are being forced down my throat.

TKV: Right, so, but did you do feel that didactic messages were being made, even though you didn't like it, did you feel Brecht's points were being made in his plays?

NR: In The Caucasian Chalk Circle, I think is the only, if you like, mature Brecht play I saw and yes I would say it was made. And I think it was a very good play, very effective play. Yes.

TKV: And what was your reactions among your friends to the... did you talk about the theatre afterwards?

NR: Yes, we did and I think there were some, there were some people who were much more favourably disposed to it but most of my friends felt the same way as I did.

TKV: Right, were any of them shocked by anything they say, because it was supposed to be... because it was so... the alienation was so weird as it were, at the time, particularly when in the previous, you know, decade it was still in the realism and making it sure it was all fancy dress, you know, the fashions in France and what have you, "the well-made play".

NR: I wouldn't say, I wouldn't say we were shocked, because you have to remember that, this was all in the contexts of school education and I think we were all really quite prepared for it. The only thing that I remember being shocked, if that is the right word for it, in theatre was in Peter Brook's production of King Lear, in which, this is a good example of my objection to the director's intentions being forced on me, in the scene in which Gloucester's eyes are put out in King Lear. At the end of that scene, the servants help him off stage and so they'll put egg on his eyes, to help heal his eyes and Peter Brook cut that bit out because he wanted it to be more shocking.

TKV: Right, so you didn't like the, some editorial choices as it were, rather than the actual play? Although Brecht's case it was more the fact that it was that was being pushed and pushed and pushed.

NR: That's right, yes. Yes I suppose so, yes.

TKV: Wonderful and what else did you find interesting about King Lear? If anything.

NR: I think the interpretation of King Lear, which I think was interesting, although I felt it was too obvious. He, Brook wanted the audience to not automatically assume that Goneril and Regan are just evil for refusing to, to have Lear staying with them and his hundred knights and so on. The point of the production that I particularly remember which he was trying to get the audience to be more sympathetic to Goneril and Regan.

TKV: Right, and do you find they discrepancies or anything that you found interesting, in terms of the text and what actually happened in the play, in any of the plays, because obviously which Brecht is quite serious about what he wants and how to do it, in other of his plays there might, if you hadn't been there, it might have been wavering slightly on what was in the play and how they directed it and how it was actually acted?

NR: Well, in the case of Brecht I didn't know, I don't remember reading the text so I couldn't really compare the production with the play. It was only really with the Shakespeare that I knew the text very well. And it is probably generally true that you are more likely to dislike the production if you know the play well.

TKV: Right, and how does theatre today compare to what you remember, because you said you disliked theatre then, have you been to any theatre productions now, at all?

NR: I still dislike Shakespeare in the theatre, but I have a different attitude to the theatre now, because I... the whole context [in] which I went to the theatre when I was young was from a literary point of view and I think I would now see the theatre much more in physical... it's the physical aspects of the theatre that I find interesting now. I don't go to theatre in order to see a literary text being enacted, I go to it in order to see something else that you can't get out of a literary text and I have become interested in Japanese... I went to Japan not long ago and saw Noh Theatre and Kabuki. These are obviously highly stylised forms of theatre in which I can't understand a word of anyway, and so that's the sort of thing that I like in theatre now. Something I saw recently that, I thought was very good at The Crucible was the one-man show about Hurricane Higgins, I don't know if you saw that.

TKV: No, I didn't.

NR: Well, it was the one actor, plays this character at different times of life and different stages of history and the physical sort of plethora of an energy of the performance is extremely compelling. So I have a different attitude to theatre now.

TKV: Would you at all, if you had the chance to see, let's say Shakespeare theatre at the RCS, because obviously it's the Royal Shakespeare Company and when they play Shakespeare, obviously it's... they might have a modern slant usually they keep in, stick to the text, as it were, as closely as possible?

NR: Er...[slight pause] No.

TKV: Really? [Surprised].

NR: No. I really, I know this is a terribly [TKV laughs] unorthodox thing to say but I really do not like seeing Shakespeare in the theatre.

TKV: Right, so that's the strength of the performance of the Peter Brook that turned you off [laughs]

NR: [laughs]. No. Peter Brook. No. Stop it. Stop it right there. There have also been other productions, particularly of Shakespeare's tragedies. Shakespeare's comedies are a bit different because I don't think Shakespeare's comedies, they don't seem very funny when you read them and so sometimes the performance can bring something out, but I have never ever seen a performance of a Shakespeare's tragedy that I've liked.

TKV: Right, so is it just his tragedies then that you wouldn't see?

NR: Mainly the tragedies, yes.

TKV: What about the, you were talking about the comedies, which, have you seen any of Shakespeare's comedies then or now, if so which ones and when?

NR: [Hesitates] I'm sure I have but I don't, I don't have any very distinct memories of Shakespeare comedies. But the thing is that's not the... that's not why I go to the theatre for. You see. It's something, something completely different that I think theatre can offer and I'm not really, I'm just not interested in seeing Shakespeare performed, I'd much rather read it.

TKV: Right, what about, this is slightly later but obviously when you went off to university and it was sort of the late 60s early 70s, when you started working, was there anything, did anything bring you back to theatre? Did you go to the theatre then?

NR: The things that I... I didn't go to the theatre a great deal then because I was at university in Cambridge, obviously there was theatre in Cambridge, but I didn't go to the London theatre very often. But in the late 60s the important theatre productions that I remember were two productions of plays by D.H. Lawrence. Lawrence wrote these plays early in the 20th century and as far as I know they had never been professionally performed until the late 1960s when there was a series of Lawrence plays, which was on at the Royal Court and this is, it certainly led to a revival of interest in Lawrence as a dramatist and also a revival in naturalistic theatre. Those productions were very good.

TKV: And do you have any opinions of whether the legacy of Brecht has, because obviously some plays have Brechtian elements, but do you feel it's true that as the critics say, he really started the movement of alienation and all the rest of it?

NR: I don't think... I don't think I would like to make a generalisation about it but what I would like to say, we've got rather quite fixed on Brecht, and the other huge influence in theatre was in the time when I was seeing it was Beckett.

TKV: Yes.

NR: And you mentioned critics, and now, the critic, and again a more academic critic, again who I didn't like but who was also extremely influential in the early 1960s was Jan Kott, who wrote a book called *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* and the chapter on King Lear in that book was called *King Lear or Endgame*, and so the idea is that you interpret Shakespeare, and this is, I think, a way of interpret Shakespeare that you will certainly find is completely different from the way it was looked at in the lectures you would go to in this Department, for example. Which would be looked at with more historical context, the idea is that you try to look at Shakespeare plays as if they were written yesterday and obviously this particular case it was suggesting you could look at King Lear as if it was a play written by Samuel Beckett.

TKV: And talking of the other playwrights that, of the time, did any thing impinge on you, in terms of like the works of Pinter or the other playwrights?

NR: The only playwright that I really liked at the time, I never saw him the professional theatre but was acted at my school and at University was John Arden's *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*. That's the one play that really made an impact on me and that really I thought was extremely good and that's also, perhaps paradoxically in the light of what I have been saying was very Brechtian influence.

TKV: And the idea of a cyclical theatre, was some elements were in Brecht, but started by *Waiting for Godot* and other plays and in a sense a little bit of Ionesco as well, in *The Lesson*, which you haven't seen, but the idea of theatre not ending as it were and not having a "proper end", did that occur to you at all when you saw any plays?

NR: I'm not sure that any of the plays that I actually saw performed affected me in that way, but as a general theory, not just about drama, but about works, sort, of art in general, that was something that I was very familiar with, that you don't expect things to end. A play or a novel can be open-ended. Particularly I get that idea in theatre but obvious Beckett was an example of it.

TKV: Yes. What about the idea of not knowing what the theatre... what the characters within a play did just immediate before or immediately after the play ended or began, because that came in Beckett, the Ionesco, in Brecht, in all of them. In fact, that theatre was sustained in one small part of time?

NR: I don't think that was an idea that would have seemed particularly strange to me because I think I got that idea from quite a different context from Shakespeare criticism, there...there's an essay on Shakespeare that was very influential when I was young by L.C. Knight, who back then she used to be professor in this department and she wrote an essay called *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?* And this is an ironic title and the title is making fun of a of an older very influential critic A.C. Bradley, who's book on Shakespearean tragedy was one of the important critical books on Shakespeare. The point of this essay, *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?*, is that, that sort of question, in other words, precisely what sort of lives did these characters have outside the play is completely irrelevant. The characters only exist in the play. So it is actually Shakespeare criticism, and this is criticism, which had been written in the 1930s, it wasn't very contemporary criticism. But it was through Shakespeare criticism rather than particularly through Beckett or Ionesco, that I got that idea. Though no doubt it would have been reinforced by the knowledge of what was going on in contemporary theatres.

TKV: So as far as you are concerned, from a young teenage, you know, middle teenage years, that actually a lot, what the critics describe were revolutionary, weren't quite as revolutionary as they painted it?

NR: [Hesitates]. Perhaps not. But I think you have to remember that I, I see that I hadn't been to the theatre before so I didn't have any preconceptions about what the theatre

was like. I didn't come from the sort of background in which people went to the theatre. I don't remember going to the theatre before I was 15 or 16. I went with the school. So, I didn't have any preconceptions of what theatre was like and I was very...sort of...literary student so I was reading modern literature, which seemed to me a matter of course that theatre should reflect...sort of...developments that I was encountering in Modern Literature.

TKV: Wonderful. Thank you every much for help in this project. That's the end of the questions.

NR: You're welcome