

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

<http://sounds.bl.uk>

Tudor Williams – interview transcript

Interviewer: Ewan Jeffrey

3 April 2004

Amateur Dramatics actor and theatregoer on acting in *Journey's End* while in the RAF and working in Repertory.

EJ: First of all, can you give me a general overview of your theatregoing experience, when you first started going and why you went?

TW: Well, the first visit was when I was aged 11, which was 1936 and I was taken to London by my father and we had the good fortune to be treated to His Majesty's Theatre to see the musical show *Balalaika*. Terrific musical, loved it and the next day we went to see Gordon Harker in *The Phantom Light* at the Theatre Royal Haymarket. Then we went back to Chepstow and I didn't go to the London Theatre again until I was 17. But I made up for it by staying for a week and going each day, sometimes twice for the matinee.

EJ: And how did you get into the acting side of it?

TW: I've only done amateur dramatics.

EJ: Sure, I was interested to know how you came into amateur dramatics.

TW: Well, I was in the RAF, and the war had just finished, and we were in a camp near Cairo and they brought out educational vocational training and this was to equip us for our lives when we returned to Britain. And they had accountancy, and bricklaying and lots of really useful things, but I voted for amateur acting and piano-playing. Unfortunately, the bloke teaching us the piano gave us one lesson and was sent home, so that was the end of that, so there's now about thirty people who can play just for five minutes! But they started an amateur dramatics society on the camp and I joined it, and loved it, and we did a one-act play *The Hands of Orlac* which is a French Grand Guignol play, where I had to fall down some cellar steps and shout and scream, which I loved. And then we did *I Killed the Count* where we started off with an absolutely idiotic part which I could make no sense of at all, fortunately the bloke above me was posted home so I got his part, which was a bit better, then the bloke playing the Count, he was posted home so I ended up as the Count, much to my surprise. But then I went to another camp and then they decided to put on another play, and would you believe it, it was... *Journey's End* – currently in the West End – and there I had another shouting part, I was the coward in that and we had a great night where the bloke was pointing the pistol at me and saying "I'll shoot you for being a coward" and unfortunately the thing went click, and I thought what do I do, do I collapse or carry on? (laughs) I carried on.

EJ: And how did the audience respond to that, I mean obviously it has huge relevance being in a military setting?

TW: Well, it was ironical that we were doing a First World War play, just after the Second World War had finished! But the main reason for it was that the Egyptians were cutting up rough and saying "Brits out!" and we were in the Cairo area and so the WAAFs had been withdrawn to the canal zone and it was only blokes on camp. So they were looking for a play with only blokes in it and Journey's End was that!

EJ: Post-war, how had visits to the theatre changed? How was the experience different? Could you isolate a few differences?

TW: Well, it was different for me because in that when I caught up with West End theatre it was wartime, and so you had strange things going on then, you were having a lot of early performances, then you were having some performances that were interrupted by sirens and they would say we must stop the performance if they feel things get really close, which thanks goodness they didn't, and so it was nice when I came back from Egypt in 1947 to find that you could go to the theatre and there wouldn't be any curtailment. ..but oh dear I had missed it for two and a quarter years!

EJ: It must have been really strange –

TW: Oh, horrible!

EJ: The project is focused on the time between 1945 and 1968, as the end of censorship was in 1968. When you went to theatre, was it a social occasion for you? Or was it solely for the play, or did you make an evening of it?

TW: Oh yes, often I would go with whoever was the current girlfriend, or with members of the family. But when I went on my theatre binges I was quite happy in a way to go on my own, in that I could choose what I wanted to see. Whereas if you were going with a girlfriend you didn't really want to see Antigone or Oedipus. No. Not ideal!

EJ: So if you were going by yourself you'd choose what you'd see, so what would influence you to go and see a particular play?

TW: The playwright, and certainly the actors I was so lucky, well I consider it lucky, that we had that alumni of players: Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud, Ralph Richardson, Sybil Thorndike and so on. And in fact, from my embarkation leave which was in 1944, which of course was earlier, I had the good luck to go and see Olivier and Richardson with the Old Vic Company in Peer Gynt and Richard III and also to see, in fact I went to the first night of Laurence Olivier's Hamlet with Peggy Ashcroft., and 'The Circle' by Somerset Maugham. That was all packed into three days which included two visits to the Windmill Theatre to see Glen Miller at the Queensbury All Services Club, and Dame Myra Hess playing at the National Gallery. Lunchtime. I don't remember eating or sleeping actually! (laughs)

EJ: The impact of the stars of the stage must have been very strong then. Do you feel it's different now, that we've lost some of that –

TW: Yes, unfortunately, in fact you look through the West End now and think "Who are the stars here?" Fortunately, at the moment, Dame Judy Raines, whom I'm hoping to see on Thursday if I can get in, but after that, you do rather tail off, I mean not completely, particularly when you find they are importing Hollywood actors and actresses – no disrespect to them, but not too trained in theatre – but obviously they've got the name-pulling power.

EJ: But would you say it was a good idea as it gets people in to see theatre who wouldn't normally go?'

TW: Yes, I think it brings in a younger audience who want to see the people who want to see the people that they've seen. But I do notice now that the young lady that

they've who was going to appear in *The Sleeping Prince*, I don't quite remember her name but I notice that that's gone very quiet.

EJ: It tends to be quite short-lived, doesn't it? What about in the 1950s, when we had the 'Angry Young Men' theatre, although it has been academically very neatly-packaged, were you aware of a shift at that time in theatre?

TW: Yes, very much. I used to take the paper that had Kenneth Tynan as the theatre critic and he was always so well worth reading. And I was becoming very much aware of the change and in fact I went up to London for the day and I wanted particularly to see *Separate Tables* because it was my favourite, Margaret Leighton, and then to see the latest American musical *Kismet*. But unfortunately on the Thursday before I went I did read a review in the stage of *Look Back in Anger* and I really hesitated about going and perhaps not going to see *Kismet* and now I really wish I had done. I feel I missed a moment in history, but there you go.

EJ: Can you remember the storm that it caused at the time?

TW: Yes, I'm not quite sure if it was a storm. I think there was a lot of resistance because we liked what we liked and they were asking questions. But...Harold Pinter for instance, I don't think he caused quite the storm we sometimes think of now. In fact in the first year of the Everyman Theatre, they put on his play *The Birthday Party* and he was in it in his stage name of David Baron I believe. And I went along to to it...there wasn't a big crowd there by any means. And I do remember that the lady next to me fell asleep and the gentleman sat on the other side didn't return after the interval. And I don't think it was my influence, I think it was slightly more Mr.Pinter.

EJ: Perhaps it was because he was playing the part that was much older than the actor himself. A character in his Fifties.

TW: Maybe, yes, the other Irish bloke was in it. I can't remember his name now. But I was very struck with it, I thought "Gosh! This is really good and different, but I don't think it was popular , not by any means

EJ: Perhaps it was too challenging at that time?

TW: It was too big a change I suppose, particularly, possibly it was even a matinee audience so...aren't too good.

EJ: I suppose, as originally it completely flopped –

TW: It did, I think it was the Lyric, Hammersmith and it was only saved by the one good review by Harold Hobson in *The Sunday Times*.

EJ: How much were you influenced, talking about reviewers, by critics?

TW: I am a little bit, I love reading reviews, I'll read critics of any sort. In fact the neighbour down the bottom lets me have the *Sunday Times Culture Magazine* each Monday and I quite look forward to it. Why I do this I don't know as I can afford to buy it myself, but it's that problem that if you buy the whole of the *Times* you've got to read it, so I'm still reading it by Friday, it's just endless. But yes, I do like reading reviews. I'm getting a bit fed up with the *Daily Mail* at the moment but I do enjoy like it on an a Friday as Michael Coveney does the theatre and Baz...Does the showbiz rubbish.

EJ: Could I talk a bit about censorship? When censorship finished, how did you see the reaction to that? Was the censor important to you in any way?

TW: I think it was very strange that there were some important American plays, I seem to remember *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* being played in New York and not being able to be played in the West End unless it was under a club licence, so if you wanted to see those

few plays you had to join this mythical club which I suppose was an extra way of getting some more money out of it but at least it meant that the plays were put on. I think Olivier put on *Cat* in the end.

EJ: Yes, and afterwards did you notice a big difference in theatre?

TW: I don't know about a big difference, but I think it was a steady difference, and that some plays that were put on that couldn't be put on before, plays with a homosexual content or very violent, perhaps, managed to get through then.

EJ: Do you feel we should be perhaps pay more attention to provincial theatre, to regional theatre?

TW: Yes, yes. Although, I've been taking the stage now for fifty odd years and it's very interesting to read the reviews. And I'm surprised each week, that there's usually two pages on regional theatre and I'm thinking 'Gosh! I wouldn't mind seeing that!' and I think it's terrific that they've actually got *The Crucible* on at *The Crucible* in Sheffield.

EJ: Yes, I went to see it.

TW: Was it good?

EJ: Very good, yes.

TW: There's so much good work that does go on. I think, gosh, Sheffield at the moment, Mr. Grandage! But there are good productions, that some of the theatres are now bonding with other theatres, and therefore it isn't just put on in one theatre but others too, and that this week we've got *Mother Courage* which is a Nottingham Playhouse production. But how sensible, I mean they put on their production, we put on our production, and they just disappear into thin air? Equally, I don't think we would produce that, so therefore it does give us the chance to see something we wouldn't normally.

EJ: In terms of the *Everyman*, you obviously visit it regularly now, but can you remember what you first went to see?

TW: I remember exactly. We moved into the house we are sitting in now, April 13th, 44 years ago and I opened the Gloucestershire Echo and read that the Opera House that had closed was to be opened next month as the *Everyman* Theatre! So you can guess who is in the first night audience! I got a good seat in the Upper Circle.

EJ: And what did you see?

TW: It was a new play called *A Piece of Silver* by N. C. Hunter. He was going to be the new British Chekhov. He had written *A Day by the Sea* and several other plays which were produced by H.M. Tennent who was with a big company. It had Sir Lewis Carson, Sir Ralph Richardson, Sir John Gielgud, Dame Irene Worth and Dame Sybil Thorndike.

EJ: That's quite a line-up!

TW: Yes, but we didn't have them at the *Everyman*. We had Esmond Knight and Joyce Harrow But it didn't get into the West End.

EJ: Do you know why?

TW: I think his moment...it was just about the beginnings of the Kitchen Sink and I don't know if it really caught that, I'm not sure.

EJ: I wanted to talk more about your amateur dramatics. What is the most positive side of that acting experience and what do you find challenging or negative?

TW: I think the challenging thing about it is that it does make you more appreciative of the good professional actors. You realise what a bind it is to learn lines, turn up on time each evening and have to put on a performance no matter what has happened the day before. Oddly enough I was the boy in *The Browning Version* and I was about 23 at the time but being on the short side I was hopefully cast. And that morning I had had such a wiggling at work by the boss. I forget what I'd done, but something terribly dramatic. And I was really in trouble, and I still had to go to do the play in the evening and someone afterwards said "Gosh! That's the best you've ever done!" and I'm sure that must have been dread or fright.

EJ: What kind of places...do you travel much with the theatre?

TW: A bit, I mean I like to go to London as often as I can, and I like to go to Oxford Playhouse, and just to take you back to 1950, I went up on a Red Rugby Special from Chepstow. I managed to fit in four shows in one day. The Empire Cinema was promoted by MGM at the time and they decided to put on shows to rival Radio City in New York and these were played three or four times a day, and I went at noon and it was a first-class tip-top show, which was excellent, in fact I think it was so excellent they discontinued them after a year. I couldn't stay for the film, I had to go and see...it was *Death of S* had just arrived in England and Paul Mooney was the star and then I nipped over to the *The Ambassadors* where the two Hermiones, Gingold and Baddeley were playing *Fallen Angels* which was disapproved of by the author, Noel Coward, I don't think they good enough, they played about to much, and then to Cambridge for *Sauce Tatare* which starred Claude Holbert who I'd seen on VJ night in Khartoum of all places, so it was a bit of a change for him and for me! (laughs)

EJ: What would you say was the biggest change now, if we can talk about the London theatre experience from the Fifties and Sixties?

TW: I would say, apart from the National, and the RSC earlier on, is almost the lack of new English plays coming in. In fact I find it so difficult to understand that you've got all these writers' workshops, university courses, everyone's writing plays but so few outstanding ones get into the West End, unless it's *Dinner or Democracy* transferred from the National. You get so many revivals, I mean I can't believe they've revived *Journey's End*, although apparently it's very good. So where are the good new plays that should be coming in, and what plays are we going to be reviving in 50 years time, 25 years from today, apart from the ones that Michael Frayn has written, Peter Nichols.

EJ: And Stoppard?

TW: Oh yes, Mr. Stoppard of course. Because then you used to seem to have a good new play every week. In the West End there'd be an opening night of quite a new play and I don't think we're getting the same.

EJ: Do you think the public's appreciation –

TW: Has changed? Yes. I think that is it. Perhaps it's one of the reasons that the repertories are disappearing. I don't we've got quite the old, loyal theatregoing public. Perhaps we are educated into going to watch plays which were two and a half hours long and willing to pay the money. People don't seem to be willing to do that now. I feel sometimes that we're a dying breed, good or bad. In fact I notice quite often nowadays in *The Stage* reviews that in fact I was counting it up in the week – one lasted one hour forty minutes, one was one thirty, one was one twenty. I think there was one that was even less. It isn't too bad if you've only paid say four pounds to go in. If you've paid twenty or thirty pounds for a seat, I feel very short-changed. Although a friend of mine would counter by saying 'well, I'd sooner see ninety minutes of first class rather than going to see two and a half hours' - which you feel drags.

EJ: Maybe the attention span has gone down.

TW: Maybe, perhaps, there's so much drama on television which I mean must make a difference, and we're just used to seeing an hour, we can't...

EJ: Thinking back to your theatre-going experience, are there any particular productions which really stick in the mind as being very good or very bad?

TW: I was ill. And as part of my recuperation I went to Stratford-on-Avon, where else? And it was the time that Olivier was there and his Macbeth production was the one to see. I wanted to book for the evening but there was only standing, which in my delicate state I didn't feel I could stand so I booked for the matinee, and I was so taken with it that I went back to the box office and got a standing ticket for the evening. I did manage the first two acts but I didn't quite manage the last! But I thought Olivier was terrific and Vivien Leigh was with him and that I suddenly realised that of course Lady Macbeth can be quite sexy as well. I mean, she must have this hold over him you know, I mean he goes off the war, comes home and thinks "Oh, yippee!" but of they did other things.

That was certainly... awful (laughs). Yes, I was in the RAF in Skegness and there was the Arcadia Theatre and they put Unrationed Legs and Laughter, and one of the people in it was a Lady Yetta Oilette, I remember the name down the years, and she had a great plastic ball, and she was meant to balance on this, and I think Yetta may have been called up from retirement and forgotten a little bit how to stay on the ball and so in front of an RAF audience it was not a wise idea and she staggered around the stage in a rather antique costume trying to stay on the ball. Yes. I ought to have felt sorry for her too, didn't I? Laughs

EJ: The other question I was going to ask was about the funding of theatre and the proposal for the government to fund the West End, to put in a cash injection due to the Heritage Issue for theatre. Do you have any views on that?

TW: Yes, I'm all for money for the Arts. I hate to see it squandered. There have been so many rotten building programmes, the Coliseum is at long last opened, I think the Hackney Empire was way, way behind. A friend of mine works at the Palace, Watford which was due to have opened with pantomime. It didn't, it was therefore due to open with a new play by a Swedish lady, can't remember the name, and that has gone by the board. And they hope to open in May but even that seems in doubt. It seems incredible that so much money gets poured into these rebuildings, which- haven't they got project managers? You know? It's as if they get hold of the wrong building firms, and I did see a suggestion by Andrew Lloyd-Webber of combining the Apollo and Lyric theatres together, saying that it would be a good idea to have a larger theatre than what they've got, and this brought home to me when I went to see 'The Price' at the Apollo in January and the money was a little bit expensive so, having watched Anything Goes at the Drury Lane, leaning slightly to the left, I bought a ticket where we were advised to lean forward. And I thought it was a funny thing to say, and when I went up and looked up and there were these rails there, they looked more like cattle stalls, and we did have to lean forward rather, and anyone suffering from vertigo would have to leave quite soon! And perhaps Andrew Lloyd-Webber's got something and that these two old theatres would be better as one theatre.

EJ: Do you think we focus too much on the West End, one criticism could be that people focus too much on London theatres, to the detriment of other theatres nationwide.

TW: I suppose it's natural and I suppose it's a good thing to think there's a criterion for an actor to aspire to join the RSC or the National Theatre. Something I like about the National is the fact that they didn't just go into a group of actors who all grew old

together, I think Michael Grand was the longest serving one, it's lovely to see all these young people given a chance and then pop off back to the provinces or onto television. But at least they have their chance. It must be lovely to say "Oh, I appeared at the National". But there are so many good regional theatres, aren't there? The Royal Exchange at Manchester, and the Glasgow Citizens, I'm amazed at their productions, and I love the way they've used their theatre by carving it up, it seems to me. As long as there's four or five seats there, it's a theatre.

EJ: Do you have a favourite theatre in Britain?

TW: Well, I suppose the Everyman because I go there so much. I like the Oxford Playhouse, I can't understand the way they've numbered the seats, because in every matinee performance I go to, there's always shuffling, changing seats, old people putting on their glasses which immediately fall off and they look down at the numbers on the floor. The Everyman was so sensible that when they resealed they embroidered the seat numbers in the back of the seat so you just look at it and you know what your number is, so you don't get this awful swapping around. In London there are many I like: The Ambassadors I used to like very much, I went to two of the Sweet and Low revues, which were gorgeous, I like The Gielgud because I knew it so well when it was The Globe, I like the Albery because I knew it when it was new, and of course they had, can you believe it, Sadler's Wells ballet there and then the Old Vic company which was almost like the starting of the National, really.

EJ: In terms of the Everyman, what changes have you seen since you first went 44 years ago?

TW: Of course they made so many changes, changing it from an Opera House to a new theatre. They have brought in air-conditioning, they've done the reseating although long-legged people complain still about the distance, but being on the short side it doesn't worry me quite so much. The box-office is a vast improvement and I think computerisation is a big improvement on the issuing of tickets. I sometimes feel a little bit nostalgic for the days in which behind the box-office clerks there were all these pigeon-holes with all the tickets in there, and they used to pull them out and they used to stamp them! I mean, how they ever reconciled it all, I can't imagine. But even then, you still get problems with the tickets, but I think it's a much better arrangement. But I also like the introduction of café-bars. The Everyman also does meals and so on and you do feel that so many theatre buildings nowadays are so well used. Thursday morning at the Everyman is the WI market morning so you go and buy a pot of jam, go and have a cup of coffee just in time for the matinee at two o'clock, you see the coaches come up, we all stagger off, walking sticks, all that style, probably come in for a nap! But, yes, great.

EJ: So, in the Fifties and Sixties, there weren't any café bars, or forms of refreshment in the theatre?

TW: Not very much. We did at the Everyman. It started with a little restaurant and I think it was "The Young Bar" at the top. "The Yakes" I think they called it. I don't think you were encouraged into the West End theatres much before the performance started, which does seem a loss of revenue. Also, you do get the theatre tourist nowadays which we didn't very much.

EJ: And did people in your experience often go to the Stage Door to congratulate people afterwards? Or is this something -

TW: I don't know. Funnily enough, it's something I've never done. I don't know why, I'm a fairly nosy parker and a bit star-struck, and you would have thought I'd have been down there giving it my two penn'orth. But I haven't, apart from one time at The Berkshire Playhouse where I thought they'd got the script wrong, with my superior

knowledge (laughs) only to find they put me right, and it was a deliberate mistake and it was part of the character, so I was wrong, so that put me off! (laughs)

EJ: How do you see theatre changing in the future? It's a very general question.

TW: Well I'd like it to be more user-friendly. I think it's a good thing that for instance at the Everyman they've got a varied programme. We used to have a fortnightly or three-weekly run of a play, and you might get the odd extra performance but not necessarily. Whereas now we seem to have productions which start on a Monday or perhaps Tuesday, and if they start on Tuesday they've usually got someone else in on a Monday and they also have Sunday performances. And a big thing that has happened is the introduction of the studio theatres, and I think they are terrific. For instance we went to the load of laughs Antigone last Saturday and I think that it was great to think that there in the old theatre you have the old warhorse HMS Pinafore but equally you have a Greek Tragedy. A friend of mine who is quite a big theatregoer said afterwards "It's the first Greek Tragedy I've seen". I was quite struck by the terrible things that befall the royal family and I suddenly thought perhaps our own problems nowadays aren't so new as we thought. But I do think the more user-friendly they become, the better. And of course you do get all these gimmicky sales things, which I'm not quite so keen on myself. But obviously kids catch the parents for extra toys, books and all the rest. But it's got to be appealing to the public, or the public aren't going to go.

EJ: Do you think we'll get more young people in the future?

TW: I think that in the Everyman it's very noticeable that you do get these very different audiences. I went to Dave Gorman's Googlewhack Adventure, and I couldn't believe that on a Monday night one man could hold the theatre packed. I looked around the audience and thought 'I don't believe this! Seventy per cent of this audience is male'. And a good sixty per cent of it were around the thirty mark. Needless to say that didn't And they were enraptured by him. It was staggering And I couldn't believe it then that this, to me quite tallish bloke held the stage...he didn't stop....there was no interval, he went straight through, had us all laughing away. And I went into the bar with a friend to have a drink, he was going to sign whatever it was, I don't know. And a bloke just brushed past me, and I thought 'Who's this bloke?' and then he sat down and started signing books! I couldn't connect him with the bloke who I'd been watching for two and half hours.

EJ: He must have had great stage presence, then –

TW: Yes, of course and then you get the shows for the women, the male semi-strip shows and then you've got the audience totally reversed. I don't go to that, I don't want to be a minority of one! Yes, you've got to have perhaps more variety. And also of course they put on the kid shows, they time it for half term. Andy Pandy and Bill and Ben, a great double-bill then... What is staggering to me is that we have the Russian Allstars Ice Show, where the Everyman stage is not terribly large but they freeze the stage, this company comes in, they've been coming for about five years, it is an absolutely first-class production, I was sat in the front row because it was about the only ticket I could get, chips of ice were coming up, and nobody fell over, and if they fell off they would have landed in my lap. But it was packed full. That's audience power for you, isn't it? And they were on for a week and a half. That was really good.

EJ: That was actually my last question, so I think I'll stop there and thank you very much, it's been very interesting.