

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Frank Bench – interview transcript

**Interviewer: David Miller**

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Theatregoer. Arts funding; audience size; CEMA; commercial and non-commercial plays; ensemble acting; Harold Pinter; theatre impresarios; Theatre-in-Education, Variety; The Winslow Boy; wages.

DM: Perhaps we could start off by telling me a little about your background and family life.

FB: Yes, well, people ask me this and really you're asking me about the early days from 1945 to 65. You've really got to set it back to the thirties. The thirties for my age group at that time, was that the theatre was pure escapism, and this wasn't sufficient. The war years changes all, and the one thing that clearly came out of it, whether you were a veteran returning or whether you were a civilian - during the war years you were - had the opportunity to see good theatre. This was done through different organisations - the one that I clearly remember I will add the title of CEMA, and all I can remember...that the last two letters stood for Music and the Arts. This made an impact upon me and on others. It was an education, and it has...theatre has remained an education for the whole of my life. I'll come back in a second and try and form a few sentences to elaborate on that. Let's see now... You see - I'll go back - as I say, growing up in the thirties, theatre played no part in your education - it was pure escapism, and it wasn't enough - never has been enough - and so, also that period, it puts you in touch with so many people that normally you wouldn't have been in touch with, and this was a most exciting experience for young working-class people like myself. I would try...I wish I could remember the names, but I really can't - the only name I remember in that period that impacted on me was a Professor Cyril Joad, who became well-known in arts during the war and after the war on a radio brains trust - but let's get back to theatre. Theatre was, and I suppose still is, middle-classed, middle-aged and mainly white, but running...and the theatre was serviced by the middle-class, it was in those days, and reflected their ambitions, and their experiences. The gestures that the actors used, the stylised body language, the movement round the stage area was all very stylised, and it gave a...it put a gloss over plays, and it wasn't enough. Now, theatre was in the hands of big impresarios at that time - one of them I remember is Binkie Beaumont, who seemed to have tremendous control of the West End, and you knew where the plays were and which theatres to go to. The other thing that was...that has to be brought into the memory was the amateur theatre at this time. There again, all that was limiting in the professional theatre was also very limiting in the amateur theatre, and this cut out so many people from going to the theatre. So what changed? There grew up a movement, which we now take for granted, is studio theatre. It was given 'small theatre', 'little theatre', in which we explored the social problems of the times, and from this grew a wonderful movement. It was...it didn't...it was ten years on before it really took birth - that was theatre-in-education, and this, it was remarkable. Children, who would sit

bored listening to history lessons and confused in geography would suddenly be confronted by six committed young actors, in a school hall, would lay down a carpet, would group the children round, and I remember one experience I had - Battle of Worcester - every kid at that age at that time would be able to go "Battle of Worcester, 1651", and that would be that with it. They knew all the dates of the battles, but they knew nothing of the background, of the people involved, and theatre-in-education would take a time out of history and perform for them - I remember we put the children on one side as the Roundheads and on the other side as the Royalists, and we involved the children. Afterwards, at the end of the performance, they were asked to make notes of their impressions of what they think. They were then set some questions, and we went back a week or maybe three weeks later to listen to what they had said and in some places to act out what they had said, and the end result of that was that the children were richer and wiser, and so were we as actors. And that was repeated in my own experience not only in secondary schools, grammar schools, and colleges round the Midlands - I have one particular memory of this time, going to a 'sink' school in Birmingham, and distressingly, so many of the youngsters had...were disabled, the vast majority of the with learning difficulties, most of them black children from a very poor quarter, and wondered how you would get through - whether you would be able to get through. The end result is - [chuckling] can bring a tear to your eye, even all these years later - so that is an aspect of theatre that is now firmly established, that cannot...still needs to be supported and given a much bigger airing. I still find, talking to friends and colleagues that there is...that schools can think of reasons why theatre-in-education shouldn't happen, and this is really depressing in the beginning of the 21st century.

FB: Does that make any sense there, or was I rambling?

DM: No, that's fantastic.

FB: Alright.

DM: OK, so obviously that's...theatre-in-education (as that) wasn't an experience that you had as a child yourself...

FB: No, no, no, no no. I've got to tell you - the theatres, well, your grandfather would tell you that it was the age of deference, David - everyone knew their place, and as a kid, you didn't resent it. You know, that's right. But it was also the age of - well, the forties - the war changed you. You see from the age of deference you went to the age of disillusionment, and that I think is why the Labour government were at the landslide victory in 1945, because people were so disillusioned with the past regimes, and for the suffering - the unnecessary suffering - there was unnecessary suffering, and also they saw that what authority did - authority...I mean we live in a democracy but had seen what authority had done in Germany and in Japan, and those scars for my generation remain, you know. And it never come to terms with it. You know, it's no good saying, you know, because the Germans did this, and the Japanese did that we weren't capable of doing it - no, we didn't do it, there were incidents, but it wasn't part of government policy. But you know, [chuckles] you take a German and lay us both out on the table here, and you can take any organ out of our body - we're both the same, we are human beings - we're both from the same tribe, really, if you go on for all that stuff. And so there was this...and then immediately at the end of the war, with the fear of the Soviets sweeping across Europe, you know you thought, "Christ, when is this going to end?". So you had escapism on the one side, and some of it was so shabby, you know, it was twice nightly - this place was doing twice nightly vaudeville, song and dance acts and the rest of it. And the chances of seeing a real play, because if they had a repertory company in...the repertory theatre at that time, because people...there wasn't big enough houses - you know this only seats 670, but you gotta play to 50% to cover your

costs, and so they...inevitably they play safe. So you got Murder at the Vicarage and this type of stuff, and it was only in the small theatres that we were beginning to experience the theatre that mattered, we were beginning to examine the human condition in...within the confines of theatre - and it's very nice isn't it to sit down in a theatre in the warm there and actors are up there and there's bonding between actor and audience which you get in a small space like you get in the studio here, and so you would leave the theatre and...with something to discuss, you know, over your beer afterwards, but you walk out of the theatre and I'm sure you've done the same, and you've seen Murder at the Vicarage or Mousetrapp - you can't remember a damn line when you get out - there's nothing worth remembering, there's nothing...you can discuss the technical...did they mount it well, what did you think of the lighting, what did you think of that performance, and that stuff, but the essence of the play, there was nothing. But you see, we get back...the...you know, I talked about the theatre-in-education stuff I was doing, but at the same time I was also doing a lot of amateur work, you know. I was asked to go - speaking personally, I don't know whether we need to record this, but - well, I was asked to go professional, but I wouldn't go professional. The wages at that time - and they were considered good - the average wage for an ordinary worker was about seven pound a week, I was earning ten pound a week, the theatre would've...actor was earning ten pound a week - an ordinary rep actor at that period. But, whereas I got ten pound 52 weeks a year, that guy would get three weeks at ten pound [chuckles] and then he would be out of work, you know, and you couldn't bring children up on that. So I never went professional but it gave me an opportunity - and this might be of interest to put in about the Swan Theatre in Worcester - what they had at Worcester was a...this variety theatre, and then it was...closed - variety was dying, there was no doubt about that, after the war, but they weren't replacing it with good theatre - we had repertory companies in, and they would take it on for six weeks, but they were...the central things they were doing, to keep afloat, they'd do a play like Winslow Boy - but they'd play it twice nightly! Now, it's not...you can't do a sensitive play like that. And so you went in and really what you were seeing is people who last year or last month had been doing a song and dance act, were now playing these parts - and they had...they were out of their depth. I mean, they were...if they thought they could play a line for comedy, then they would play it - they'd introduce...I can well remember seeing a guy played Desmond in - I don't know whether you know Winslow Boy, but he's a solicitor. Well, the director had given him a walk right from downstage left right up, and he'd obviously looked it "My God, how am I going to get across there?" - so he introduced a comedy walk.

DM: In The Winslow Boy!

FB: Yeah, to keep...because he wanted...he needed...he couldn't...he was untrained in how to make an entrance, you see, but he could do comedy stuff, and it was this kind of abuse of theatre, of plays, that set up...the amateur movement decided - that this theatre was going to close and we knew it was going to become a car salesroom - decided to spend all their time in doing popular plays but doing them intelligently to collect money, which they eventually did, under the guidance of a woman named Sarah Knight, who had worked professionally in the theatre and now her husband was a teacher at the Kings' School, and so she had time to spare - she went and made contacts, demanded this, and demanded from the council, and a beautiful theatre was born, and it flourished - unfortunately, like so many things it has a rise and fall [makes rising and falling gestures with hands], and at the bottom...at the moment, it's right - you know, it's just afloat, and that's all you can say for it. But there, I have seen wonderful performances - that's where I first met Tim West incidentally, he was down there - and, there was this commitment. Let's get on to commitment if you like.

Amateur commitment, and professional commitment that was happening at this time. And because...you're talking late '40s and '50s - this is the time when we were seeing...I remember going to Birthday Party...Pinter's - he opened it here. I didn't see it here, from here it - the guy we met, Tudor, he was involved in it down here. I saw it in a scruffy old warehouse in Birmingham, and watched the audiences walking out, you know - I mean, I said it was one of the...I thought, "This man's got it" - and what a wealth, what a wealth of...we had Pinter, we had Beckett, we had...Wesker - much, very underrated - never could understand why Wesker always has to go abroad to get his plays on the boards, and when they...before they end up here, you know. Can't think of...I did make some notes of some of the other people that [looking at notes] - oh, I'll tell you...on the commercial stage at that time - Rattigan - Rattigan was...the "well-made play". Don't know what you want to talk about there - we can do all this in a...you just sort out from the things I'm saying.

DM: Well, if we can talk a bit about some of the plays you've seen - I mean, because obviously you were an avid theatre-goer - have been throughout your life - and a lot of the plays you mentioned there, things like plays by Pinter, The Birthday Party, and Wesker and so on - I mean, when you saw those for the first time, could you...I mean did you recognise them immediately as...that this was the "new thing" in theatre?

FB: Did it impact? Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. You...became aware...you've got the commercial plays on one side, you've got the non-commercial play, you know...how did it become a non-commercial play? Only because the commercial...the Binkie Beaumonts of the '40s and of the '50s turned them down - they turned them down. And it wasn't until great actors put their own money and their reputation on the line, so "That is a wonderful play, and it deserves to be heard, even if only..." - the idea you know - [adopting a 'theatrical impresario' voice] "Only be heard by 20, or 40, or 50? Good lord, man - we can't do that!" - you know, we haven't got profits - and the thing is, there wasn't subsidised theatre. You must remember that the real - and this is the strangest thing incidentally. In the period from '45 to '64, the non-commercial theatre as distinct from the commercial theatre and the amateur theatre, the small theatre, the Royal Court and the like, were kept alive by the captains of industry. Where they were putting on plays [chuckles] dissecting capitalism and it wasn't coming out very well, and it was only... "dear boy" ...it wasn't about biting the hand that feeds you, this...I cannot remember the name of one or two of the rich men that...they kept those theatres going. It wasn't until 1964, and I have to...this is a fact, I'm not trying to sell you Labour politics, but it was the return of the Labour party, and Jennie...oh, I've forgotten her now...forgotten her surname...the wife - the widow - of Aneurin Bevan was appointed Minister of the Arts, and she came forward with this revolutionary idea of subsidising good plays and theatres. I mean, the Arts Council had been set up, but really the Arts Council, as it still is, as I'm sure you know this anyway - it's getting bit more adventurous, but in that time it only did safe bets. So it meant it was collaboration between people who'd got...you know - you had to match it pound for pound, that was the thing about the Arts Council - it wasn't until...oh, I call her Jennie because I've totally forgotten her surname - came along and said, "No, I'll put in x amount of money into that" - so these shows went on. I mean Pinter would never have got started if it hadn't been for the foresight - I mean he went made a good case to the minister, and got the backing. And Wesker did, and I mean - and I tell you what also came out of it - the new actors that came into it - gone were the 'gestures' [makes a theatrical hand gesture], gone was the stiff body language...the training schools - Mountview was one I think of in particular - were saying there's a new kind of acting required here. You know, they made it quite clear there's going to be television acting which you know, you couldn't possibly gesture on a box, [chuckling] otherwise it fills the screen, doesn't it?

And so it's, you know, it's talking heads isn't it, and you've only got to blink an eye and it cumpers it. They taught them that, but they also taught them...they started this ensemble acting - I have to tell you it was a revelation to see it on the...I mean, before that, the acting that you saw - you would see the greats - I mean, you know, the Gielguds who I'd seen many times, and the Oliviers - they gave a prima donna performance - so did the great actresses of that period. But there was new acting, it was interacting, you know, and the body language - and if you think about this new type of acting, it matched the new writing. And so you went in, and there on a stage uncluttered by an involved set and magnificent furnishings and Christ-knows how many props, you got if you like bare-board acting, you know, or "rough theatre" as some would say. And you'd build up this...you would see it and you would be part of it, you know - I remember taking my mum and dad, who were not theatre-goers, but [adopts a more 'down-to-earth' accent] ooh yeah, they were very keen on the musical and all that stuff - and they didn't know why they enjoyed it but they enjoyed it. Because of this new style of acting that was bringing in and this new kind of writing, and I know...my father was a policeman for part of his working life, he had a great passion for the police, you know, for the police service, and I forget now what the particular thing but they were dealing with, which you see quite a lot now, you know, you see court scenes on the box, you know, like this inquiry we've just had, and that thing and the Hutton enquiry and there was one or two before that, but this - oh, I tell you what it was - do you remember Steve Biko? Steve Biko was a South African black man who was arrested and ended up dead, and at the inquest they said he died of natural causes, and this was then...so angered a playwright that he made of it a stage production. And because my father had been in court, you know, years and years of giving evidence, so he came away [chuckling] totally convinced that he'd been in a real court! That's how clever it was in those days. Anyway - I've wandered, I've wandered - what...where do we want to go to?

DM: Well, no - I mean, wandering's good - that's fantastic. Now, just interesting that you said there about your parents had been very much that they enjoyed musicals, and then seeing this new theatre they became really interested in that. I mean, do you think that this shift in theatre did bring a lot of new people in?

FB: Oh yeah, yes, yes, yes. It's been a long journey, as I see it - I still, like you, go to the theatre, you know, when you can afford it, OK, and I get depressed that the audiences aren't, you know - that you can put a show here like *The Woman in Black* - great play, and all the rest of it - and it's standing room only, you go into the studio, and you'll see BareBones do *Don Quixote*, and, you know, it'll seat 70 in the studio, and there's about 50 people sitting in there, you know - it doesn't play to full houses. But, it's still fulfilling a need - there is still a resistance to be overcome - the one thing that theatre isn't good at, the one thing that...and that is they can sell their main-house productions because they've got...it's built into the budgets. The budgets for 'small theatre' is small, full stop. So that means it's limited publicity, and that's a weakness they have still to overcome...They gotta learn to...because there are still people who are, "That's not for me", and yet when you get them there, I mean I'm sure you have in your life seen it, you know - "Ooh, I wouldn't do that, no I wouldn't do that" - but when they've done it, you know, they're "Wow! I'm going again", you know. That's what I find - there is still that resistance, but...and I don't know why there is that resistance to be quite...I mean I don't know what motivates that resistance to be quite honest with you. I think...it was said at a meeting it's the difference between entertainment and entertaining - that's the difference. Entertainment they feel safe with, as it's going to be [mimicking a chorus line member with leg kicks and hat-doffing] "da-da-da-da-da-da!" - and that's the...but to be entertaining it's got to excite all your faculties, isn't it? And

that's probably the difference - that they feel...that people stay away as they're wary, I think that's the only reason. Other than that I can't think of a reason. [Looking at notes] I'm just looking down here...you know, while I was waiting for you...I'll give you plays that...'big' theatre that I saw. Five Finger Exercise, d'you know it?

DM: I've heard of it, yes. Shaffer, isn't it?

FB: Yeah, that's it, you got it. The Devils. Abelard and Heloise. There was one that never made it - All Good Children. One that made it to the point of [chuckles] awfulness was Murder in the Vicarage, which I've mentioned. Beckett, of course. I've done...I've played...Godot - done Pozzo, and I've directed it. And we did very good houses, I'm happy to say on that. Taste of Honey - I remember seeing...wonderful play. Roots - you know, Wesker's Roots. One of the great ladies of the English theatre - Dame Edith Evans. As I say, a prima donna made certain. She always...in those days...I'll give you a little idea - this is the stage area [maps out a stage on table with papers]. Here's the fourth wall, we're the audience. Strongest space on the stage is always considered downstage left - [chuckling] and by God she keeps down there! You know, like, "Oh, where's Edith? She should be there!", you know - and she was...but she was really...she had a voice - and you've probably heard her, you know, from the record of when she did with Gielgud The Importance of Being Earnest, you know, the famous [mimics Edith Evans as Lady Bracknell] "Handbag!". But in Dark is Light Enough she stretched herself - it was a moving performance. Wonderful people that were around then. Tell you another one - Paul Schofield as a young man did Ring Round the Moon - that was...Royal Hunt of the Sun was one I remember. Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? - there was a lot of good plays. Rattigan, I mentioned earlier - you might want to get this in - the thing about Rattigan was he...the "well-made play". You know, you may ask...this is, for my writing, is the guide. What is the "well-made play"? You gotta have your exposition - who we are, where we are, why we are. Then you gotta have the development - if you put the roots right - [tapping table with finger] where we are, why we are - in the opening scenes, then your development will flow [slides hand across table in a 'flowing' movement] from this. Then you can take...your development may take you into farce, it may take you into murder and mayhem, it can take you into whimsy - whichever you've decided on. If you've got the roots right and the [tapping table and sliding hand again] development right, a denouement, as night follows day, must logically come. So the logic is there. And if you look at any of Rattigan - I tell you the other one that I always...which I was taught, and which is always... "How do you learn about exposition?" They say to you take hold of Priestley, and read the first act of When We Are Married - and it's there, set out, and it's so beautifully set out, it holds you all the way through. And the other thing that I like about that, and it is right, and I've tested it, you know - look at it this way, that way and the other - one of the great writers...the difference between good and bad writing - characters. See, the thing that used to annoy me about so many plays of my youth - the...they made them stereotypes, and I never believed that posh people were Hooray Henriets and chinless wonders. There's one or two of them, there must be, all society. Neither would I accept that all the maids had to be [adopting Welsh accent] from the valley, you know little Welsh girl, going "my Mam" and all that stuff. And the trader or the smart boy [adopting thick Cockney accent] was Cockney, "Wot 'o mate?...A'right then?" - and all the stock characters produced stock lines, stock situations - predictable from the curtain up to curtain down. So that was the kind of theatre that I found most unattractive - and I've done it, and it's...I don't know if you do any acting but it is very...it's lovely to romp around the stage as it doesn't require much of you, and you get the laughs, and all the rest of it, and the houses get full - then there's the other side. There's always the picture in my mind of breaking through those bewilderment of children and seeing that, you

know, from suspicion to bewilderment to understanding, and that for me is what my theatre is about. Although, I mean, I'm fortunate, you see, where I live - I'm here, I can come down here, I can go to Worcester, I can go to Stratford. I'm very fortunate because my daughter is...works at Stratford, you know, at the Royal Shakespeare, so I get the [chuckling] comps and get into those shows. And then down to - one theatre that we have to put in there is Bristol Old Vic. That was...Bristol Old Vic - the actors were big names. When I first saw Peter O'Toole he was as old as you, and he was magic then. The first time I saw Richard Burton - that man stood...you've been to Stratford, I'm sure - now, the depth of the stage isn't as deep as you would think, but right to the back wall, right up on some rigging, he came in in the last scene of this play - he was playing...he was playing the lead but...is it Henry IV Part 1 and 2 and Henry IV Part 1 - he just comes in on the last line - something like that, I can't remember. But I'm sitting right at the back, you know, it was just sky above me - and in those days it was...you sat there for two shillings and sixpence, whatever that is...thirteen pence or whatever. So I couldn't be further away - and suddenly this bloke comes on and you know, the stage is full. There's well known actors doing the lead and it's the end of this great play, you see, so who's that super who's just walked on there? And he's got one line. That man had magic - absolute magic - presence, you know. So English theatre, in my lifetime, has produced some dreadful stuff, but it's also produced some giants - so if you want to get any of that in, I'm ready to go...

DM: Well, I mean, you mentioned just a few moments ago about your writing, and how certain plays have influenced you - I mean, you were mentioning sort of the "well-made plays" of Rattigan and so on. What other sort of styles or particular playwrights sort of influenced the work you do - perhaps you could just tell us about some of the things you've written?

FB: What I've written and why I've written? Writing only came for me very late in life. In the early days, yes - we would write our own work, and we would all pile into the back of my van or somebody else's van, and we would play the village halls, and I tell you one of the other things...we played an asylum...we used to visit an asylum - and they were, they were dreadful places - thank God that's all past, and it's under stone - unless some of these horror stories we read are true - but they were dreadful places and...because what was on offer - only, at that time - if you wanted to do small plays you had to turn up French's Acting Edition. And if you look at one-act plays of that period in French's Acting Editions they are dreadful - they really are dreadful and in the...you couldn't accept them. It was impossible to say, "We can do this" - the only we can do this is to strip out that and that and work on a minimum set - you couldn't carry all that stuff, I mean, and it served no purpose. You see, that was the other thing of this period, is the box set, you know, and now...the disappearance of the box set, and using the thrust stage and the theatre-in-the-round, and the studio - in other words an acting area, and you gotta do it there...this stretches actors, as I said in this ensemble acting, and the writing matched it. And if you ask me why I wrote, is because I loved playing - that's vanity, 'course it is - directing was a joy and I was privileged to direct quite a lot at Worcester and elsewhere. After that, just - and I don't want to dwell on this one - illness overtook me, I had to have a new heart and all the odds and sods. The one thing you learnt at the end that, that all the pressure of a performance is out - you know, [chuckling] if you want to see next Christmas, you don't risk it! So, I returned to writing, and I built a rapport with the artistic director down here, and they did one of mine, and they're doing another one, and what...it's...how can you say - you can't think of a reason for it - it's just fun, if you like, whether it ever sees...you know, you hope it sees the light of day, I mean it...I do...I try...I only write for the studio - I was a bit worried when they said they wanted this last one "We're going to put that on main stage then"

- so "It'll die a death", you know, it isn't...I wouldn't know how to write for main-stage  
 - I personally write because I love trying to build up that bond between the actor and the audience. That to me is the, y'know, is the...and the actors - there are as I say now so many actors that are readied only to do that kind of work, I think they're very, very...you know, generous to be like that. Go on then...how're we doing for...you want to have...yes, I've almost talked myself to a standstill - ask me some questions, take note of them, and then I'll try and keep the thing moving for you - how d'you want to deal with...how d'you want to do this?

DM: Perhaps if you just tell us a bit about...you've mentioned writing, and so on, but also you've been quite involved with, sort of, the running of theatres on sort of various boards and committees. Is that, sort of like, your way of giving something back to theatre?

FB: Oh yes, yes, yes, yeah, yeah - if you like...this theatre, they were...I was...how I got into this theatre - I'll just briefly say this because of time ticking on - but when I won...you know, to get on the borough council you gotta get elected. I got elected as a councillor, I got onto the leisure committee of the local authority - local authority has put money into this theatre, and I came in as the guardian, I wore two hats, you know - love of theatre, but let's...guarding public money, and the loan that this theatre had had from the council. And so I sat on the board here, which means that I helped to...the director would sit at that end, and we'd all sit round, and he'd say I want to do this programme, and it was...this is the 'high-risk', this is the 'low-risk', you know, obviously pantomime, that's the money-maker etc., and you would agree it, then he would say I...you know, go through all the business of the theatre, and I made my input. After I left the council - well, in other words lost the seat - then they asked me to stay on here...Where I'd been fortunate before that period, was that John Doyle was the...who I'd known as the director at Worcester was...won the job of opening...re-opening this theatre after its big refurbishment in '87, and it was then that he...because I was in catering, that's how my wife and I made our living, fed the kids...said right, run the Green Room...A Green Room in a theatre is like the works canteen, but you also have an extra job, you become father-confessor, and mother superior, we...as we two, my wife and I...when you know, you would get actors there, [adopting posh male actor voice] "Has my agent rung yet?" Or the girl would come, you know, full of floods of tears - [adopting tearful female actress voice] "Oh darling, he left me!" and you know, and all this business go on - I mean you know, it's drama every day [chuckling] in the Green Room - you know, and you want to say "For Christ's sake eat up your sausage and chips, and please get to rehearsal - I want to get cleared up!", you know...so that was a wonderful experience. A wonderful experience for one thing, which I don't know whether it's unique to the theatre, but it is a wonderful experience - we thought, looking at these young, eager people coming in, and saying, they're not going to take...we're going to be like fish out of water, and they just...age means nothing - that's one of the joys of it - it just means absolutely nothing. And of course then I'm meeting old actors, I met...one who died...Peter Russell who died last year, another old actor here, you know, from my earlier days, so that's...it's given you a little bit of my background. And at that point I'll shut up and you tell...

DM: OK, well, I think we're going to have to start...

FB: Move on.

DM: ...but I think what I'd like to just sort of end on is just - obviously in your life you've seen a huge change the style of theatre, but I'd like to ask you about is whether...what sort of state you think theatre's in today - is it sort of...healthy...or does the future look a bit bleak for theatre, or...

FB: No, I think what has got to happen...actually it's the same as the day before yesterday. The...people see theatre so much as entertainment and not entertaining, and the...but new writing is beginning to make it's mark - if you notice now, as you...never mind how many theatre programmes you pick up on the way back, from other theatres down there, and you will find new writing is...I mean, probably gotta talk about here, about new writing, which is so important, you see, you come into the theatre - [counting them off on his fingers] actor, stage manager, director...two things...those are like the three areas - and lighting, I mean those are the four main areas. Actor or director, you got to have an Equity card. You want to be a stage manager, you want to go in the lighting box, you got to have a BECTU card. If you want to be a writer, you know, you don't have to have anything. All you gotta have is a play - and that is the difference in that...So, once you got your play, how d'you get it on? Y'know, you know and I think this wants to be recorded - some...you think about...and I'll stop for a second...Every day, a new play hits the desk of a...artistic director in a theatre in this country, and every country, every day. In other words there are thousands of plays. Some will be dreadful, some will be OK, some will alright if they add this, that and the other. One or two will be bloody marvellous. How do you know? How do I know? Who makes the decision? And the problem for...that the theatre faces is the same that it faced the day before yesterday. If you are established, if you have interested a well-known actor, who's 'box office' in other words - so you got box office from the performer, you got box office then from the writer, you'll have no trouble in getting a director for it. And it won't be long - there'll be no trouble in getting half a dozen angels to put money into it, and it goes on. So, the successful people can...will...even if they fail, they don't lose - they've got the ingredients there. The door remains open for them, OK - the door is shut for the non-professional. Until he becomes a professional - that is wrong - we have not overcome that problem. That is the problem for the...that was in the past, and that was it that will be for the future. Now the only way that so many of them got through, of the established writers, was subsidised theatre. Arts Council money, or...backing from someone. And that is what we need more of - we need exposure, and exposure doesn't come cheap. That's what I would say, and that...if there's one thing you want to record on that, it's exposure doesn't come cheap. But, it's absolutely essential for a theatre to keep going, because it's the...when these old writers die, as die they will, as I, y'know, along with me...there are young writers, I'm sure you've got in your English department, I'm sure - you're even probably thinking of - may have done, I don't know - written plays. You got to have an outlet, and that's all I'm saying, you know, and that's the question that people have gotta...it was the question in 1945, it was the question in 1955, in 1965, we had a part answer, but here we are, going towards 2005, the problem still remains.

DM: Do you think if we bring in fresh blood into theatre...how do we bring in fresh audiences as well?

FB: If we're going to bring fresh blood in, fresh audiences, then new writing has got to be established - and I don't know how, I don't know the mechanics of it, I don't know how all this...I have a ...My own dream, and I don't want to put this down, but my own dream is that rather than - say in my particular case - I know what it's going to cost to put this damn play of mine on it that studio. I'd rather that all that money...and they set up a theatre reading club, where every Thursday we know a play has been rehearsed in the morning, the actors give us a reading over lunch, we have a pint and a sandwich and y'know, and the reading, and then there's a talk out, and then we all go home. And that means instead of one play well-produced every six months, we have six plays, one per month. You know, there'd be some stuff that we, you know, sit there like that [folds his arms and frowns], but that's what's needed. If we don't get that, how are we - how are

people like you going to get started? If you decide to write a play tomorrow, David, where would you go, what would you do? I ask you. To get it on. You wanted to get it...I mean, you want to sit...If you write a play, you're going to want to sit in on that audience, you're going to want to clock it, you want to see how...what the...how the actors work the lines. You've been sat with them in rehearsals and they've said, "This won't work" - you've written them a new line in, OK? Then you want to see how it happens, but happens means you keep one eye on them and one eye on the audience. Did they love it? Did they hate it? Did it work? No, it didn't work. Next time - you're making notes all the time. That is what should be happening, and it isn't. It's just, you know...I mean, I'll give you the final instance before we go back to this type - this is absolute truth. My daughter is - and her partner, he's a designer - she's a costume supervisor. It's a lovely job, takes 'em all over the world, and do this, that and the other. But the thing that astonishes me - I know what it costs to put on a show - on those big shows like Stratford and the rest of it, they get six-figure...to just dress the damn show. You know, they'll fly out to Italy just to buy a bloody hat, I mean - sorry, shouldn't swear, but - it's that kind of thing, it's those...what I'm trying to say to you is theatre brings out the worst in the society - extravagances, it brings out...you must find the right word for me...is it bigotry - I think it must be - and prejudice, still comes there. And on the other side there is all this enthusiasm and energy, and it needs channelling, and...it's getting pushed along - you know, a bit of it, but there's a lot of plays - and that's what breaks my heart, I think if we could get into...break into the director's room, I bet you if we opened the play cupboard, there'd be plays there had never been opened. It's wrong - that's all I want to say. Anyway, go on, ask me more about...

DM: Well, I think we're going to have to leave it at that I'm afraid...

FB: Have we finished?

DM: We've pretty much got to the end of our time, so thank you very much indeed.