

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Malcolm Farquhar – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Ewan Jeffrey**

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Actor and former Artistic Director of the Everyman Theatre, Cheltenham. On repertory, theatregoing 1945-68, secrets of successful direction, the post-war star system of the West End.

EJ: Can you give me a general overview of your theatregoing experience? Why did you start going, how did you choose what to see?

MF: You been visiting the theatre?

EJ: Yes, visiting the theatre.

MF: Well, that was really brought on my father, because it all started in an amateur sort of way...because he was the acting manager for the Bristol Operatic, and he was a very keen theatregoer and he encouraged me by first taking me to Gilbert and Sullivan, all the Operettas, and in those days in Bristol it was the Prince's Theatre, which was burnt down during the Blitz, and he was very pally with the general manager there and he used to drop me off if he was busy doing other things, and this manager would put me in the stalls and he said "you have a look at this and see what you think". It was extraordinary really, because I saw such a variety of things, sometimes only half-way through because I was yanked out! But I remember there was a particularly steamy play in those days, around 1939, called Desire Under the Elms with Beatrix Lehmann, a famous actress in those days, and it was full of rape and all sorts of things, and when I was eventually pulled out of the stalls my father was very worried and said "I had no idea - did you enjoy it?" and I said "I loved it!", not knowing what was happening! So it was bred by that - we all had the annual panto, I remember I lived for panto, and there was a Jack and the Beanstalk in Bristol and I remember when the giant came through a wall of bricks I was so frightened I had St Vitus' Dance for six weeks! [Laughs.]

EJ: But after that -

MF: Well, after that, then I started...when I was 16 or 17 I joined the Western Daily Press as a reporter and they gave me the job of reviewing the local Rep. It was that, when I really got intrigued because I was seeing such a variety of plays, the comedies and the dramas, and I began to find out who was good and I thought "I think I can do better than him!" [Laughs.]

EJ: Presumably you were assigned to see particular plays, there wasn't a choice involved.

MF: No, I suppose in those days you didn't have such a choice. Money was a bit short with the family. They arranged traditional pantos and Easter productions and everything, but it was more cinema in those days because it was cheaper.

EJ: But you preferred the theatre?

MF: Oh, I much preferred the theatre! It's the old old cliché, isn't it, I remember going backstage and the smell of the greasepaint, it sounds awful, doesn't it? I didn't really like the smell of the greasepaint, I thought "What's that disgusting smell?" and it was size on the flats! [Laughs.] But there's something about the atmosphere backstage of the theatre, it gets you, and if you're going to be an actor, that's what gets you - if not, you find it revolting!

EJ: When you were seeing plays, was this a social occasion, if you weren't working? Did you have a meal or dress up?

MF: Well, having a meal and dressing up didn't really happen until you were in your twenties when you were perhaps got a little bit more affluent. But my first journeys to London - when I used to go up on holidays to stay with relatives who I was fortunate enough to have there - there was such a plethora of stars in those days, you were a bit hysterical about where to go and how many to see and what to choose. And of course in those days, with very little money, I chose the gallery stool. You would put your gallery stool down for one and sixpence, and then queue up for the last hour, and if you were a bit flush you had the back of the pit, which was three shillings, and you felt very well! But my joy of seeing plays and my favourite stars, it was like looking at them from a bird's eye view, up in the gallery. And that is why later on, and I became an actor and again as a director, I would say to the actors on the stage, when I was rehearsing them "I can't hear you! Speak up! The Gallery must be entertained as well!".

EJ: I suppose that must be a useful insight to have, actually, to be up there and realise -

MF: Oh yes! I don't know, it's things you learn by experience and things you learn by attitude and common sense. For instance, when I was directing, later on, I've noticed some directors today only sit in the centre stalls. Whereas the only way to really direct is to make sure that everyone is in eyesight and what the play looks like from the side stalls, from the side dress circles, but nobody seems to do that any more, and that is why you get complaints eventually from the box office saying "I never saw so-and-so, they were out of sight".

EJ: That's interesting.

MF: Yes, as a director, like an actor on the stage, you've got to keep moving. An actor or an actress will say "I think I can't be seen from here, Malcolm!" and she's looking at the seats. So you say, "I'm sorry, but I'll have to bring you in a bit!"

EJ: At this time, before you were working as an actor, did you have a favourite actor or actress? Did that guide you into what you went to see?

MF: Well, yes, it's rather like people who fall in love with film stars, isn't it? You do have favourites when you're first introduced to them, I think, on the stage. Whether you like them then or whether you don't. I was mad about Gladys Cooper because she was so beautiful and wonderful, I was mad about Cicely Courtenay because she was such a great comedienne, and you admired personalities - they're all dead now, I can't tell you who they are! Isn't it the same when you first meet someone and you think "Well, I quite like them" or "I don't like them" and when you see someone who has this enormous technique... the answer to the whole of your question is really, have they star quality or haven't they? And if they've star quality you either love them dearly or hate their guts! [Laughs.]

EJ: But can you identify that from one performance?

MF: Yes. Once you're hooked. Even if you see plays you don't like or they haven't been very good, you forgive them. I'm sure it's that. And for instance, and also, it's things that come later. The thing that always amazed me : I was never very fond of Peggy Ashcroft

when she was young, I found her accent a bit South Kensington, and then suddenly in middle-age I thought what a brilliant actress she was, and by the time she was going right through to *The Jewel in the Crown*, I worshipped her. So it's funny, your tastes change, don't they?

EJ: You must also see people who perhaps have potential, do you think people could get this star quality or is it inherent within them?

MF: I think it's inherent. I think you can teach people to act...I've been very thrilled sometimes when I've been a director in the theatre and they've been tentative and suddenly some part or other makes them take off, and you think "My God, this ugly duckling has become a swan!" and they become a good and capable actor or actress. But they might not have star quality, and thank God, because you know otherwise we wouldn't have any supporting actors, would we?

EJ: [LAUGHS...] I suppose not! Can I ask you a bit about your acting experience, how did you get involved in acting?

MF: Well, I was very lucky, actually, because having fallen in love with the Rapier Players, a little theatre in Bristol, by reviewing all their things, I decided I wanted to be an actor so I wrote my letter and said "Can I come on?" Now, I was very lucky because it was wartime and in those days there were very few actors who hadn't gone into the Forces, and they were inclined to take anybody, and I got in! [Laughs.] I was very fortunate because it was a beautifully-run Rep, great discipline, and they had an eye for saying "Well, I think he's got potential" and they would guide you. And the first part I ever had was a non-speaking part at a restaurant table, opening up a play, and my knees shook so much with fright I don't think I'd be able to utter! And then my second part was a footman in a play called *Genie* where I had four lines and they trusted me with that. But they watched my potential until within six months they gave me the lead in *Young Woodley*. And I always put it down to their guidance and their faith in me that I had the courage... and one thing about weekly Rep is that it does teach you what you can play and what you can't. And instinctively you know if you're being bloody bad in something or rather good. It was a couple of people who said to me "your talent is comedy, and you're going to be a farceur" and it did turn out that way. And I loved it. When I've spoken to people afterwards who were with me in Reps and things they'd say "We used to watch you doing this and that - how did you learn it all?" Well, I have no answer, I don't know! It's something instinctive. As one gracious lady said to me one day "I love watching you, you've got such comedy in your legs!" and I don't know what she meant! [Laughs.]

EJ: With Rep, how did you find the schedule and timetable? Because talking about Rep in other interviews, it seems to me quite a punishing schedule, a high degree of energy and commitment is required. What was your experience?

MF: Well that's perfectly true. It is. But where I was a very fortunate, this particularly Rep, the Rapier Players where the discipline was so good, we would never have got through unless we had that discipline. We started at 9.30 in the morning, and if you were half a minute late you had to apologise to the company, and on you went. I expect you've heard this before but you had the five days' rehearsal. You had the read-through on the Tuesday, you had Act I on the Wednesday, Act II on the Thursday, Act III in the morning on a Friday and did Act I and II in the afternoon and then all through the play on Saturday morning and then you went back and had dress rehearsal on Monday and the who routine started again. OK, it was hell, but it was wonderful in many ways, because, the great thing was it was the cheek of youth, I wouldn't dream of doing it now, I'd be out of my mind! And also, the actresses were worse off because they had to arrange all their costumes for free. And there was an actress, I expect you've heard of

her, she's recently died, Constance Chapman, who was with Lindsay Anderson in later years and she had a play once called *Portrait in Black*. And she had to provide seven black outfits - for weekly rep! And she was borrowing them from her mother, from her sister, anyone she could find, running up a sewing machine at night. And there was a fright and terror, I mean on a first night, when we finished the dress rehearsal at about three in the afternoon, I used to go to the cinema to take my mind off it. I've seen more films halfway through than I can believe! I had to come out and do the show and it kept me sane. I remember reading an article by Harold Hobson and he said 'I've seen more brilliant performances on a first night in weekly rep because of the terror' and he was really right. And that applied to Constance Chapman, who would give brilliant performances, and she'd spent half the afternoon in the loo with fright. And I do think we probably did do things which were exceptional because we were so well-trained. After leaving weekly Rep I went to the Birmingham Rep which was four-weekly rehearsal, I didn't know what to do with it! I had to calm down and do a bit of depth.

EJ: Why do you think so many people go on from weekly Rep to become successful in theatre?

MF: It's luck. I think, you see, the answer is you can't have a better training. It's wonderful because it teaches what you can do and what you can't do. But if you stayed in it for four or five years you'd become tatty.

EJ: Why is that?

MF: "Well, I learn this, find the easy way out, who's for tennis? I think I'll wear my white togs in this and what-not" and I think it's a question of getting too smug, probably, it isn't until you get a longer term of rehearsals that you can find out. But whatever you say, they are thousands who have been in Rep who never get anywhere. Just up to about 20 years ago, when you talked an agreement you say "well, I was in weekly Rep". Now actors aren't, they go straight into television, mostly, and I feel sorry for actors because I meet them sometimes and they say "we'd have loved to have done what you do" But there are no theatres for them now, and their agents say "your life will be on television, mostly".

EJ: It's a shame, with that kind of energy -

MF: It's very sad, it's the decline of the regional theatre that's so sad, because that's where you had your training. When I ran a theatre I would interview and cast and I could get the people I wanted with the plays I had in mind and I could give people six or nine months' work! In a variety of parts, and they thought it was absolutely fabulous and so they should, because it was three-weekly rehearsals then? [Laughs.]

EJ: What was the atmosphere like, working with other people in Rep?

MF: Wonderful. It was wonderful because you had to stick together. It sounds like an awful cliché, but it was like a happy family - it wasn't quite, you always had one or two buggers in there, you worked together as a team, they knew exactly your way of working and you knew their way of working. They were sympathetic if you found a part that was difficult to learn, they were patient, they'd go over and over it again. It stands to rule that those people who were with you in Rep become friends forever. I'm afraid they're watering down a bit now at my age but right up to Constance Chapman's death we were very firm friends and we stayed, you know, and we never forgot our Rep days. Just before she was 90 when I took her out to lunch she laid out all her old photographs and said "do you remember you in that?" and we reminisced about how I'd made such a fool of myself in this or that. So it was a very strong team of actors. We didn't do anything else but learn lines and go on. There were great spates of things that happened

in those days - I see films now that I've never seen in my life, because I never had time to see them in those days!

EJ: So what happened next, after you moved from Rep?

MF: Well that was the first big shift, I went from weekly Rep to four-weekly Rep in Birmingham, Barry Jackson. That was a lovely, profitable time because the plays were so varied and there was a wonderful, strong company there, Robin Bailey, Alan Macnaughton - we were all unknown in those days. Then eventually we took a modern-dress version of Sheridan's *The Rivals* and from then on it was going from big tours abroad, a little bit of live television which scared out of work, or things were a little bit dicey because you lived in London, you kept going because there were at least twenty weekly Reps all around London. I remember we did a special week at Hayes, a special week in Woolwich, and then cross over to Windsor and then back to Richmond. Because there was work, which is not there any more.

EJ: Do you think it'd be harder these days?

MF: Oh much harder. I admire youngsters enormously and I'll tell you why. Two years ago they asked me to play an old dotty granddad who lived in a car at the Union Theatre in Southwark, which is a fringe theatre. I'd never played fringe theatre in my life, I thought "what am I doing?" but it was such a gorgeous part. There were 12 in that cast, they were all youngsters, and they all had full-time jobs during the day. They would come in, and I would see them, they would work in bars and things, and sometimes they had to work in an Indian restaurant until 12 at night, and they would learn their parts under the counter. And they were doing it for the love of it and they would cotton on to me, sit me down and say "tell me what theatre was like", a bit like "What did you do in the war, Daddy?" and considering they're doing all this work without pay and that fringe theatre is their Rep. Some come out of it and get a lucky break, they'd come in say they'd got an interview for so-and-so and they were hoping, but they couldn't work or improve on our play, which was a new one, because they were rehearsing. They had time off for rehearsal and they had to make it up for their secretarial job. Awful situation.

EJ: In terms of re-working the script, did this happen in weekly Rep?

MF: No, there was no time, you could just about learn the lines and run through it twice. We always had scripts in those days which we called French's Edition. They had all the moves in for you, in brackets, and you followed those because there was no time to anything different. And then just after the war when paper was still short, we had the most terrifying script which only gave you four word cues. So you didn't know who was talking and you clung on to these four words, you'd suddenly say, "oh, that's me!", you didn't have a sensible script to work on. But that didn't last all that long. I remember, a very interesting case, when we were doing Noel Coward's *Hay Fever* and the lady who was playing Julia, the lead, and she was coming through the French windows and she said "I don't understand this", she said, "I come through the French windows and deliver my first line and it says 'down right' and I haven't got time to get there!", and we pondered on this for a while and then someone said "oh, that was the star's entrance", she had a round of applause, came down centre, then right, and then started the play! [Laughs.]

EJ: With the scripts being less than ideal in terms of stage directions, how did the director deal with that, did it inhibit that in some way.

MF: My best word I can think of is "efficient". There were certain directors who could give you more, if you could take it in and had the time. But mostly weekly Rep was like a machine. Like Noel Coward said, "learn your lines and don't trip over the furniture". Your main job was to entertain as efficiently as a possible. But now and again you'd

have a director, usually a guest director, who could get a little bit more out of you. I remember when we doing a play, Ibsen's A Doll's House and on one Thursday he gave the actress a sharp note and said: "yesterday you were a brown squirrel, today you're only a grey one" .[Laughs.]

EJ: I'm not sure how helpful that was!

MF: Well, she thought, "I didn't exude as I should have done"!

EJ: Why did you move into direction? Do you believe that if you can act then you can direct?

MF: No, I don't think so. There were two reasons why I gravitated... round about 1955 what we called in those days the 'kitchen sink' drama arrived, my type of actor went clean out of fashion. I was what was termed a 'Noel Coward Actor'. It didn't mean to say we couldn't do it, but we didn't have a chance to do it. A new lot of actors came up. Meanwhile I'd gone to Kenya, to the Nairobi theatre where they wanted someone to take over the theatre and that's when I began to direct, and I thought, I quite like this, I think I'm quite good at it. When I came back, I got a job at Worthing, I was living in Brighton then, it was the Connaught Theatre and they took me on both as an actor sometimes and as a director. When I decided I was going to be a director, come hell or high water, I think I did a sensible thing, which a lot of artistic directors don't do, and that is to learn the bricks and mortar. So I went to the Vaudeville Theatre, where I had been in Salad Days and the owner there said "well, come and I'll teach you all the tricks of management". All the arithmetic, bringing the management in, and what it's going to cost, and all the rest of it and by the time, in 18 months, he had trained me I could read the balance sheet and nobody could cheat me. And after that came a lucky break with five West End productions. But that wasn't what I wanted really, though it was great fun, but through that I got the Everyman Cheltenham. So I was able then to bring what I'd learnt in the Vaudeville into the finance of the theatre. What is find is sad now, is that regional theatres are closing because of the ignorance of Artistic Directors who have wrecked them.

EJ: You mean financially?

MF: Yes, financially. That's why I admire Bernays so much. We really thought we were going to lose the theatre. They got Bernays in and he said "I'm sorry, Regional Theatre has got to go, we can't afford it, it's gone" It's taken him all this time, and the deficit is down to hardly anything. I admire him greatly, but that said, he's producing a different kind of theatre that's of no use to actors.

EJ: In what sense?

MF: Experience. A lot of variety and one-man-shows, a lot of tours. Where is the stamping ground for young actors that I had?

EJ: I suppose only television.

MF: Only television, yes. So where there so many regional theatres five years ago, there are hardly any left now.

EJ: Do you think in the future, because young actors can't cut their teeth on stage, do you think the quality of theatre is going to be reduced?

MF: It's reduced already, by lack of experience and inaudibility. I go to the theatre and I can hardly hear what they're saying. It's not their fault, it's because there's nobody there to promote vocal technique and the good old director, I've done it myself, standing at the back of stalls and shouting "I can't hear one bloody word! Would you please speak up, people have paid good money to see you, incompetent that you are!" and that

shakes them. Through my training and being told and been given hell I can be heard anywhere. And any other actor could who has been trained in that way.

EJ: So we're already suffering -

MF: I think it's disastrous, television acting is so laid-back I could go to sleep.

EJ: What was your attitude to censorship in the theatre? Did you find that censorship adversely affected productions?

MF: Personally I was rather glad when it ended. We thought a lot of censors in those days were rather stupid, we had to cut out certain words, but then you could slip things in which they hadn't seen the double entendres. It seems so silly to say "you must cut 'Christ' but you can say 'God' in this scene" - it got absurd. So when the censor came off, I thought it was a very good thing. Now sometimes I wish it was back! There are so many 'f\*\*\*s' and 'buggers' going on, they don't even write a decent script! So they've gone over the top, which is a pity, and whereas people thought before "oh, this is refreshing, now we've got some meaty stuff" I think now it's become too absurd. But still, there it is, that's modern theatre but I think it alienates the public.

EJ: Do you have any strong political feeling on productions in London; do you think the government should be pouring money into the West End?

MF: Well, we're talking about commercial theatre? I've got a feeling it's the commercial theatre's own fault. The worst thing they did was to destroy the star system. That went after the sixties. And that's why people went, as you can tell now from musicals, but once you've destroyed the big stars which people paid good money to see whether it was Sybil Thorndike, Mae West, it doesn't matter, they had a motive for going. Now, you can have very good plays, beautifully acted, which I see in the West End, I'm going up to see one now, called Dinner, but they're not names to the public! So they've had a struggle. And you say "you must go and see this!" and they reply "well, who's in it? Oh, I don't know her, I don't want to be 30 pounds for a seat." That's the trouble, it's got so expensive for a start? What do you do, does the government bail them out, do they learn a lesson? It's all very well the critics saying all the West End now is full of musicals, and one man shows and nothing worth very much, but I've been slightly astonished by the attitudes of actors and actresses to the West End. To get to the West End in my day was the be-all and end-all. I can't think of anything lovelier. Nowadays actors say "I don't want to go to the West End for three months. I want to get on with something else." You can find young actors now, I've heard agents say they won't even do the matinees! [Laughs...] I don't know. The whole vision has changed. But I think the commercial theatre should be allowed to get out of its own mess, quite frankly.

EJ: When working at the Everyman, what was your attitude to critics?

MF: They were generally kind to me, I must say but when I did get a stinker, I would go at them, and say "you sods!" you know [Laughs.] But it was only because I was hurt. I refuse to believe any artists who say "I don't read the critics... oh no, no, after the show's over, after five years I'll read them" - which is absolute rubbish! But I've always maintained we're thrilled when we get a good notice, and sometimes when a notice has been poor, you know it has been deserved. You say under your breath "well, I couldn't agree more, about that, but I'll keep quiet." But the time it really hurts is when we think we've got something lovely, and it's good, and the critic is a lefty or something and destroys it - then I think that is unforgivable. I've reached the age now when I don't read critics, because I don't want my films spoilt, because there are so many stupid remarks, and if you read five critics they're all different, aren't they? So it's best to lay them aside, I think. But they can do damage.

EJ: Do you think sometimes they do it wilfully?

MF: I think Milton Schulman used to in the Evening Standard . I thought he was outrageous. And Kenneth Tynan because it was the fashion then, the Daily Mail , they were saying: you must go for this because it's the latest thing. We're booing in the galleries and we're getting rid of this kind of theatre. And when I directed Henry James's The Boston Story at the Duchess Theatre and I had Tony Britten and Diana Sheridan in it, I thought "oh my God, Milton Schulman, God help us!" And then to my astonishment he gave us a lovely notice, I thought "there's something wrong here!" [Laughs.]

EJ: While working as an artistic director, what was the most challenging part of the job?

MF: The first thing you must do is get all the departments together. That includes the scenic designer, the electrician, they're all equal to me, and if you neglect one, they get a bit po-faced. As regards the actual play, you have to have the confidence of the cast, they're all different types of people so you put your cards on the table and say "this is the way it's going to be done, this is the way I want it to be done, but I'm quite open to views, but don't expect there's going to be something where you're going to come on with two white Pekinese and they're not necessary", or what they do with Shakespeare these days. I mean usually I've been very lucky with cast, because they work together. If there is friction, sometimes they would keep it from the director, and I've heard afterwards that somebody's quarrelled with somebody backstage and now they're not speaking and everything like that. The calibre of a good artist is that it doesn't show when they come on. As long as it doesn't show. If you have problems, they say "I don't see it this way!" and you think "hello, there goes the red light!" and so you say "why don't you see it this way?" and they say so-and-so and I say "yes, let's go up this alley, let's see what happens, and if you're right then we'll give it a go, but I think you're going to come to a blind alley" and very often the actor or actress, if they're worth their mettle, will say "you're bloody right, you know!" and you start again. You mustn't be a dictator. That's the first thing, I think, that's trouble, and you mustn't be weak. You must listen to everyone's point of view and very often, as I said to somebody once, you've got to be a bit of district nurse. Because if something has suddenly gone awry and an actor or actress downplays or bursts into tears, you realise something private in their lives has happened. They're not wrecking the play. It's up to you to sort out this and find out what it is. Because nobody can direct unhappy people, that's impossible, and nobody can direct people who are opposed to your direction. You have to know your limitations, on the other hand so must the actor or actress. Mostly it's smooth sailing, sometimes we hit rough seas over some of the points I've made but that's quite exhilarating, otherwise it'd be rather boring! What I'd rather be frightened about is people who walk out of a production in high dudgeon two days before you opened. Or that sad case we had recently of Roy Marsden who gave up a part because of stage fright. I've encountered one or two of these things and it's very sad thing that happened. It's opened recently at Liverpool and he was brave enough to say "I can't go on, I can't do it". Olivier had it, didn't he at one time? Those things, that are psychological - Ian Holm was off for 14 years after The Iceman Cometh .

EJ: David Warner as well.

MF: David Warner, yes. These things make you very sad and frightened for them but there's very little you can do, except say "come on, you must mend yourself" and you do everything you can to help them. Psychological problems I don't think you can deal with on the stage. In my career I've suppose I've been very lucky. I've had a kaleidoscope of actors and actresses I've played with or worked under me in direction, and very few have caused trouble. I remember one, that owing to change of schedule,

took me to Equity, said I'd broken his contract but I won it because I hadn't broken it, I'd just changed the date. But he was a very unpleasant gentleman anyway! But I've been very lucky and had very few like that. What I'd really like to see is the Regional theatre back again and going back to the Everyman with Philip Bernays, he does feel the same, the panto is home-grown now, and he put on a Shakespeare, Twelfth Night, and I think he'd like to see it back with some home-grown products. Because he knows that that's where true theatre is. And he also has a problem with the Everyman only being 660 seater, he can't compete with Malvern or anything, that's over a thousand seats, and there's not enough good stuff on the road to do twelve months. Now and again he has some pretty disappointing productions among the good ones. I don't know if you saw that Asian version of The North Country Comedy and it had rave notices everywhere, I think it opened in Leicester, and it came here and, oh dear, it was empty. Because that's Cheltenham : "Oh we don't want to see one of those coloured things!", and I don't think he gave it enough publicity and the press let him down, the critic didn't arrive. It was a superb production, so good and very original, but as Bernays would say to you, that's the luck of the draw, isn't it?

EJ: Yes.