

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

<http://sounds.bl.uk>

Richard Pulford – interview transcript

Interviewer: Ewan Jeffrey

3 February 2004

Chief Executive of the Society of London Theatres/Theatre Management Association, on theatre management in London.

EJ: My first question really was could you begin by telling me something about your background how did you come to be the Chief Executive of SOLT/TMA?

RP: [LAUGHS] I can answer the first question more easily than I can answer the second one. My background is I did law at Oxford, I don't want to go any further back. I went into the civil service where I worked for 12 years, I then became Deputy Secretary General of the Arts Council of Great Britain as it then was then after seven years there went in to be General Director in charge of administration of the South Bank Centre with the abolition of the GLC which I did until the end of 1992 and I then worked freelance for nearly ten years as a consultant then I came here in 2002. And how did I come to be here? Well, because they appointed me, I applied for the job and they appointed me so you better ask them.

EJ: What did the freelance work you did involve?

RP: Oh an enormous range of things, working with the government of Bulgaria over quite an extended period, the cultural bulletin of the post-democratic era for example. Advising the Arts Council on a whole range of things, working with the Royal Opera House, Birmingham Repertory theatre, doing work for this organisation, for GNA. I did two reports for the GNA one on the interchange of actors between the UK and the US and one on management training in the theatre. A whole range of things.

EJ: My second question is how do you see that the management of theatres has changed significantly since the Fifties since the war?

RP: I think you have to bear in mind I was only born in 1944 so I was somewhat unaware of the processes of theatrical management until about I suppose about 1970 to be straight about it, probably a little later. I don't absolutely know, I can extrapolate backwards a bit from what's been happening since then. It's become more complex, it's become more multi-skilled, it just had to come to grips with a whole range of things which were previously regarded as essentially extraneous. And in the process I suspect that in many cases it has become significantly less closely focussed on the art.

EJ: So there's less focus on the artistic side of the theatrical process?

RP: Yes, I think that must be the case, unless they're all superheroes. I mean you know you have to spend an enormous amount of time as a theatre manager nowadays, if you're in the subsidised sector dealing with issues of marketing, audience development, inclusion with your accountants, your lawyers and the money men and doing fundraising and all of those things. And you cannot do all of that and at the same time give as much

attention to the art as people were able to when those things were not particularly high on their agendas. In the commercial sector I suspect that isn't quite so true, of course the commercial people, although it has become more complicated for them too, have always had to deal with the moneymen and had to worry about their lawyers and accountants and so on. So it's probably changed slightly less for them, but at the same time the process of producing the theatre has become more difficult in as much as costs have risen inexorably, audiences are more and more difficult to please, and the degree of risk engaged in commercial production has gone up quite considerably.

EJ: I want to also talk about the getting to London Theatre Scheme, what was the original impetus that started that off?

RP: The original impetus of that, it goes back...this is the third year of which there's been such a scheme and it goes back to 9 11 and London was very hard hit by an acute and severe shortage of North American tourists, and Mayor Livingstone decided that he wanted to put some money into promoting theatre in the early part of 2002, well, end of 2001 and early part of 2002. As a means of helping to stimulate the central London economy, it was an economic decision that he took, it wasn't a cultural decision, but he took the decision knowing that the multiply effect of investment in London theatre promotion is quite considerable. And if you really want to stimulate central London economy, one of the most effective ways of doing it, probably one of the quickest ways of doing it, is to promote the theatre because theatregoers spend very expensively outside the immediate theatregoing experience when they go to the theatre.

EJ: Has the scheme proved a success?

RP: Well, the first year it was pretty successful, and he did it again at the beginning of 2003 where it was even more successful and he's doing it again now where the signs are it's somewhat less successful.

EJ: Is there ...

RP: We don't know yet what the final outcome will be but so far it's looking slightly less successful. And I think the reason for that is the first time it was done people were saying 'Oh gosh!' the second time it was done they were 'Oh good - he's doing it again' and the third time they go 'Oh, it's us again'.

EJ: Are there any plans to actually develop the scheme outside London?

RP: No. It's purely London based.

EJ: One of the things obviously that concerns you in major ways is the issue of the funding crisis of London's West End.

RP: I say what funding crisis?

EJ: I was reading the fact that the buildings are listed...

RP: Oh the buildings ... well I wouldn't call it a crisis, there is a problem about how to find the money that needs to be spent over the next 15, 20 years on West End theatre buildings. There's a problem not a crisis.

EJ: It's not a crisis, OK. Do you believe that the government has an obligation to fund the West End?

RP: I don't think it has an obligation, no, that's going far too far, but I think it has a strong interest in doing so, and it's not showing any lack of willingness to address the question of financial support for London theatres from some public source I can put it no more precisely than that. The report produced by the Theatres' Trust argued that there

was a strong case for public support and so far nobody of any substance has said that's rubbish. Most people seem to have accepted that there is such a case.

EJ: So that looks hopeful?

RP: No, accepting there is a case and then finding the money are two different things in present circumstances who knows.

EJ: Are there any issues involved with this in terms of there's the financial damage, are there any other dimensions that are actually causing this problem or is it simply a case of money?

RP: It's a case of money. Yes. Well, and the age of the buildings of course.

EJ: Sure. This was a different article; you stated that 'nobody ever made money out of owning theatres'.

RP: No. Well, they did a very long time ago but nobody's done it for 50 years.

EJ: Do you think this will carry on to be the case?

RP: In all likelihood yes.

EJ: What reason?

RP: I don't think I've said nobody made money out of it, nobody became rich out of any theatre. There are ... probably the reference you had in mind is where I said and I've said many times we all know some rich people own theatres like rich people own race horses. But nobody ever became rich by owning a race horse, just as nobody became rich ever in recent years by becoming a theatre owner. The returns aren't big enough. I mean the theatre industry as a whole is although obviously the commercial theatre industry is profitable, if it wasn't if it was absolutely and consistently and always making losses then it couldn't function, but by normal commercial standards it's not very profitable.

EJ: I'd like to ask a little bit more about the two organisations the TMA and the Society of London Theatres...What is the most demanding aspect of the position you're in terms of ...

RP: [LAUGHS] The members.

EJ: The members? In what way?

RP: Well, they're membership organisations, you know, it's like the position of trade unionist would be a good deal easier if they didn't have any members. So the position of Trade Association Chief Executive would be quite a good deal easier if they didn't have any members. To be a little bit more serious I mean I think that that they are very different. So far as the TMA is concerned I think the most demanding aspect of the job is finding a way of binding together people from all over the country who face often very different issues and who have a propensity to [inaudible] more when they're in crisis than when they're not, and thus present certain issues about maintaining a prolusion of the industry. In London one of the key issues certainly is how we can do something about the building stock another is what on earth we can... how we can help to restore the image of the West End, both the theatrical image and the perceived nature of the West End as a place to be for agreeable social purposes. Some people find it a bit intimidating a bit scruffy.

EJ: What do you think is the reason for this failure to represent it in its true light?

RP: Well there's always a nugget of truth in these things. There have been periods where the West End has been , ah, a bit like Time Square in New York you know not a

very nice place to be. With a relatively high level of street crime for example which has actually gone down very sharply in the last two or three years but it's still perceived to be a serious problem. But actually in terms of football the West End is a very safe place to be, it looks a bit dingy and that can be a bit alarming to some theatre goers particularly if they're elderly. The transport, well certainly the underground transport is dreadful. Some of these things as I say are perceptions and some of them are real. And you'll hear questions I don't know transport, if everybody agrees there needs to be improvement but the timeframe for any significant improvement is very considerable, which is not in itself wildly encouraging, you just have to live with it and make the most of it.

EJ: Would it also be the shows on offer as well or artistically does that have an impact as well?

RP: I'm not quite sure what you mean.

EJ: Well there's the perceived problem with crime and there's also another dimension, the actual shows that are on offer.

RP: Oh no I don't think so, oh no. Last year it was a bit tricky because of the war but the previous year was the highest attendance of West End shows on record, so there's no reason to suppose that people are staying away because they don't like the shows. I mean if they are there'd be even higher attendances. No, I don't think

EJ: I think compared to Broadway we're doing quite well.

RP: Well in terms of the variety of shows on offer compared with Broadway we're doing very well indeed. But then we always do well by comparison with Broadway because they have nearly all their main theatres are occupied on a pretty well regular basis by musicals and the straight play in New York is not to be found on Broadway by and large. And, and I have to say also that, although I've commented on the increasing costs of mounting productions in London, they are nothing compared to the costs of mounting shows in New York.

EJ: Do you think that, has there been a general reduction in ticket prices?

RP: Where, in New York or in London?

EJ: In London.

RP: No, no there hasn't. Ticket prices have gone up by more than the rate of inflation in the last 10 years or so, production costs have gone up even faster in that period so that ticket prices are not keeping pace with production costs even though they're rising out of general inflation and there's a rather peculiar thing, a phenomenon has emerged in the last 10 years which is a decreasing propensity on behalf of the ticket buyer to be willing to accept cheap seats. Most peculiar, people used to go to the theatre box office and say 'what's the cheapest you've got?', they now go and say 'what are your best seats?'. It's very odd. It's ...well I think there's a fairly logical explanation for it I think people see going ... particularly partly because of the change in the balance between home entertainment and outside entertainment, going to the theatre has become more of an event and people don't want to go to an event and feel that they're getting second best, they want to get the best. It is a very curious phenomenon, I mean of course there are still a few people who like cheap seats and will always get the cheap seats. I mean we run a half price ticket booth in Leicester Square and it's very well used. But a lot of people won't use it, not because they can't get tickets there, I don't know why they won't use it, I mean friends of mine who go to the theatre won't use it. And I say to them 'but you're mad you can get tickets that are half price, I promise you if you go tomorrow there will be tickets'. 'Oh no no, I'd rather...'

EJ: There was some success at the National, wasn't there, with their reduced ticket prices?

RP: I think they're doing very well with their reduced ticket prices for one of the three theatres I should emphasise. And Nick Hytner would be the first person to say that that wasn't specifically subsidised by a commercial organisation as a sponsorship, they couldn't do it.

EJ: No.

RP: As an exercise in marketing it's all very well but they simply couldn't survive if they would try to do it themselves as it were because they wouldn't be able to afford it.

EJ: One of my final questions is how do you see theatre developing from a management perspective? How will it evolve do you think?

RP: Well one of the things that I would like to think what would happen in terms of management is that management might find itself better skilled than it currently is because when I talked right at the beginning about the fact that theatre managers now have to encompass a much wider range of almost [inaudible] than they did before and they're not always very skilled at dealing with them because their experience hasn't provided them with specific skilling that's necessary and I think that has to change and I think it will change. And it ought to make, not only the managers lives easier but it ought to make their organisations lives a great deal easier. I think that's the principal change I want to see in management terms.

RP: My last question is what was it that well one last question, what is your personal experience of visiting the theatre, do you visit the theatre often?

EJ: Well, what is my personal experience well I can't answer the question I don't think. I mean I have thousands of personal experiences of going to the theatre some good and some bad and some frightful and some wonderful.

RP: But I mean you presumably go regularly to ...

I do indeed yes. Oh I mean why go to the [inaudible] I don't go as much as a critic would go but I do go a great deal and like the critics you know sometimes you see things which , you find it very hard to understand why the public show any interest in them and sometimes you see things and you find it very hard to understand why the public don't show any interest in them.

EJ: From a management perspective when you see a play do you look at it from a management perspective in terms of...

RP: No I don't think so, no I think the only managements I have when I go to the theatre is if I suddenly realise that one of the exit signs is blacked out and then I start to get worried, because it's one of those things that after you've been a venue manager you can never get away from it. It's kind of every time you zip to the theatre you have to sit there thinking oh god somebody's licence is at risk here which I don't think any member of the audience would even think about for a minute.

EJ: It's probably the difference in terms of background -

RP: Well, I suppose I've noticed perhaps more than some other people would any kind of shortcomings in the kind of house arrangements. On some occasions where something goes wrong with the stage I'm slightly more likely to notice it than an audience member, but I don't sit there having management thoughts - I go there as a member of the audience like most other people do.

EJ: Sure. That was very interesting, thank you very much.

Interview with Ian Purves

IP: Right so, shall I talk then about my experience in rep?

CB: Oh, yes that would be great.

IP: It was mainly as a stage designer and also an actor as well because there was no hard and fast dividing line in those days. I began like a lot of people did at university, both as an actor and stage designer, although I was studying English but none the less there was an awful lot of overlap with drama. This is at Edinburgh University and that was in the 50s and I graduated in 1958.

CB: OK.

IP: And then for two years I taught because I wanted to have the qualification behind me as a fully qualified teacher, but then I went into Dundee rep as a stage designer and then as a stage designer I designed any number of shows. It wasn't from the most hectic days of rep, because in the 50s we were always hearing stories from the old stalwarts of course - there was no shortage of them, there never is - who said that you should have been in weekly rep, which is what most of them were in those days in the 50s. But then the Arts Council decided that they would only give support to fortnightly rep because they thought that weekly rep, rightly or wrongly, that it was very difficult to have adequate standards in weekly rep. So they decided to support the fortnightly reps and Dundee rep was among them. So we covered a very wide range of plays from Ibsen and Shakespeare to the latest popular farces. For example, nobody will remember this now, but there was a very popular farce called *The Amorous Prawn*.

CB: Oh, really?

IP: Yes, believe it or not, wonderful title. Wouldn't say the show was all that wonderful, but certainly we did farces like that. We also did *Simple Spy Man*, which is a very popular Brian Rix farce. We also did that. We also did Chekhov and in fact we covered a very wide spectrum of plays, which we had to. It was really in some ways a very difficult time in rep because they had lost the easy dependence of people being guaranteed to turn up, regardless, absolutely at least once a fortnight if not once a week, as so many people did in the 50s and the post war years. But of course television was beginning to bite and both in rep and variety theatre they both really began to feel the pinch by the time I reached rep, which was 1960.

CB: OK.

IP: So, things were really beginning to bite. They were beginning to bite in another way to because the standards both of acting and of stage design really had to move up because of course people automatically made comparisons with what they were seeing on television.

CB: Right.

IP: And so the people tended to give standard performances out of a drawer, which was very much a feature of rep because everything had to be done so quickly. You know an old man; "Oh yes, well old men go like that, don't they, that's right!". Or you could do "a retired Colonel you see you could just absolutely come out of a drawer" like that. Or there are "very funny people like that who talk very northern". Oh, you are expected to be able to do a huge range of accents as well, oh we "did Irish ones as well. I've also played a little leprechaun like that you see too and then of course your mother said oh arr you know the village idiots always went round talking like that, that's right. None of your political correctness then, oh no my dear." So you really had to produce a wide range of accents and because they had quite a small company and I'm talking about - oh

I don't think they would employ more than about 10 actors - you really had to be very versatile. People had to accept the whole thing with a considerable pinch of salt because now a days you know if you want somebody to play say a Chinese person or a, I don't know, a Italian or something, you phone up an agent and you get a person of that ethnic background, but not in our day. Well, for a start there were very few actors that came from an ethnic background at all, back in the late 50's or 60's. But, we would simply put on the appropriate wig the appropriate make-up and get on with it, and people accepted it, you know, complete with all the stereo-typed mannerisms, like you know "Ahh, soo, yes, indeed, honourable friend" and things like that. You know people would be downright shocked nowadays if you did that.

CB: Yes, they would.

IP: But, I mean people just took it with an absolutely straight face in those days and of course there were very few people of an ethnic background to complain about it for a start. The vast majority of the audience were local and they were simply British people without any influx from abroad at all in 99 cases out of 100. So, it was very much I would say the middle class playing to the middle class. There was a fairly wide basis for theatre when it came to variety theatre, an awful lot of people who in those days were referred to as working class and were naturally proud of it supported the theatre, but not so much the rep theatre. That tended to be more of a middle class past time.

CB: Oh, right.

IP: And if you were playing straight parts, by jove you had to be middle class. If you ever listen to old television you'll see that in those days people were expected to talk what was called "RP", that is Received Pronunciation, and all the consonants were sort of slightly clipped and all the vowels were correct you know and Joan Littlewood, the famous producer from Stratford East, had a wonderful phrase for it, she said they all did Shakespeare with roses round their vowels and that is absolutely correct. If you ever hear recordings of broadcasts there are occasionally bits of tape, no doubt of old rep performances, but certainly the easiest ways to access them is from old broadcasts from the BBC or whatever, and the way people speak sounds absolutely repellent nowadays. You know you can't imagine that anybody who was sort of talking in a normal sort of way would have actually spoken like that, but believe it or not that was how you had to speak and it was expected. One of the funniest cases is John Noakes, of Blue Peter fame.

CB: Oh, yes.

IP: Because he was with them over such a long period and in the early days you can hear him struggling not to say things like that and to be frightfully correct, only it doesn't always last because it kind of drifts back into northern very quickly. There are an awful lot of people in rep who are like that.

CB: OK.

IP: But certainly versatility was the name of the game, rather than to be perfectly honest, subtle acting. In fortnightly rep, you see, you'd be doing a play every evening, and through the day you would be rehearsing the next one. Sometimes if it was a big load if they could see Hamlet coming over the horizon you would have already started on the third play i.e. Hamlet. So you had to keep these things very separate in your mind and frequently people didn't dry up, they didn't stop, they would keep speaking somehow and say any old rubbish and the audience absolutely swallowed it because you more or less had to, because nothing would have destroyed the atmosphere of the play more than people, you know, having to have a prompt unless they absolutely had to. But, one of the most familiar things was that we used to dread plays in which there is a situation in say, the last act of the play, which is similar to the beginning. Because you don't have

any time to acquire a very deep knowledge of the play and if there is some sort of phrase which recurs in both acts you know, you can see this sort of terror spreading behind people's eyes you know, and they think "My God, am I in the first act?" You know, this is like in the matinee or in the second performance or something, because quite frequently there were two houses and because most of your mind is taken up with doing the routine things on the stage, you know walking about and performing or grabbing the props and things. You haven't got a lot of mind to stop then and think am I in the first act or am I in the last act. But eventually by sheer talking, people manage to work their way out of it eventually. But that was a really terrifying situation that could happen quite regularly because we didn't really have time to acquire a very deep knowledge of the plays. The amount of time and effort that was put into the plays did vary quite a bit. When they were doing Chekhov and the Director particularly cared about Chekhov, then there was much more work put into it and people for weeks and even the month ahead would sort of be planning their characterisations and if anyone did sort of offer the standard old man or old woman or whatever it was, you know the Director would say things like "Umm, I think we have seen that performance before, dear" and there was a lot of that went on, so you were expected at least on these occasions to produce a bit more sort of original thought and original characterisation. But certainly with the more routine rep plays people did tend to give routine reppy performances. There was a good deal of that.

But occasionally we would have a star come up and take a leading role. For example we did *The Miser*, which is based on *L'Avare* by Molière and Duncan McCray, who was a big Scottish star in those days of well, everything, variety, broadcastings, rep, in which he'd begun. He'd begun in rep in the Glasgow Citizens Theatre and also films as well. He plays quite a prominent part in the old film of *Whiskey Galore*, which I understand is about to be remade. Anyway, in those days he was a big star, especially in Scotland. But he was very strange to work with on stage, because he was used to being in a big theatre, bigger than Dundee Rep I presume, because he would utter his lines you see like, "Oh indeed Cleone, Cleone. We must be gone we must be gone, you're upstaging me". These quite audible asides used to come out all the time like "Hold it, hold it, no - this is a longer pause, laddie" and things like that. Quite openly, I'm sure at least the front rows must have heard it and we were flabbergasted. "My flabber has never been so gasted". He used to come out with these things all the time you know, sort of not content with directing the thing before hand and acting in it while the play was on, he seemed to be attempting to direct it at the same time whilst it was actually running. But you get used to these things and you get used to people in all sorts of weird situations, because you simply have to get through it somehow. There was so little rehearsal time, people had to be prepared to cope with anything in a way that really hardly happens now in the theatre. They must have adequate rehearsal time and also people are normally picked for a particular production, rather than they are going to be in, you know, six productions on the trot playing everything from an 18 year old to a 102 year old mutant that's been pulled out of a rocket, which occasionally happened. You know, you cease to be amazed at the sort of things you were asked to do. Eventually, you got so sort of numbed in the mind that all you said when they called out these parts was "Oh yeah, how many lines has it got?". We were always very interested in how many lines there were for two reasons. Partly of course you wanted to check that you were going to be sort of gradually moved up the hierarchy and get bigger and bigger parts and not down and down and get less and less. But at the same time, the other part of your mind was thinking "My God, this part had got about 560 pages and how on earth am I going to learn all that in the time?" So, it cut both ways.

Yes, and also as I say, I did a lot of the stage design, which is what I was supposed to be officially doing, because I was playing smaller parts. I was never asked to play leads or anything like that, because I was officially a designer, but I did play quite a lot, particularly when the case list got enormous and they had to rope everybody in. Like in Hamlet and things like that, you know, all the players and player king and player queen and all these different things. So everybody was very much roped in for these larger productions and of course in the pantomime and everything. But there was no real overtime in those days. People think, perhaps, the 50s and 60s as being the hay day of union power, because unions certainly don't have the monopoly nowadays that they once did. Although that's true in television, it wasn't really true in rep in those days because as you gather we're expected to do everything. There was no case of "that's not in my job description!" You couldn't say that. Oh no, you'd be out on your ear. There was no recognised overtime either. Talking about pantomime just made me think of that because literally for about a fortnight we hardly went to bed. If we slept at all it would be on a couch in the green room, and that was all we got and you'd be lucky if you got more than a couple of hours sleep, because there was just so much to do and so few people to do it. And of course they had to produce stuff of quite a high standard because by that time people were making comparisons with other theatres and in particular as I've said, with television. So, you really had to get through an amazing amount of work. Occasionally the people that they turned up, especially if when they weren't actors that they knew very well - particularly for these large productions like the Shakespeare - they might have glowing references and things but they sometimes didn't even understand what they were meant to be learning. Because you know, some of Shakespeare, unless you have the background to it, is quite hard to learn because it is quite obscure. People used to come down to the scene dot and say "Hey, mate, could you tell me what this page means?" and so you would have to sit down and explain it. To do them justice they were very glad after and say "Of course, it actually means something, you know".

But the strange thing was there was a breed of actor, and they still exist to this day, that can give a wonderful and touching performance and still appear to be very touched and emotionally involved themselves and they often don't have a clue what the lines mean. They know from the Director which particular knob that they are meant to press, you know. It is rather like playing an organ, you know, they know which particular emotion they're meant to turn out sort of thing. That accounts for it very largely, so certainly in rep it doesn't follow that people were deeply moved even though they might give deeply moving performances, because the only way we understood the words deeply moving was moving from A to B as fast as possible. So people just had to simply, as I say, get on with it and there was an awful lot of getting on with it.

But, the other side of the coin was that it represented a very high degree of professionalism. People had to be able to learn lines fast, they had to be able to get round the stage without falling over the furniture, they had to take direction very fast and they had to remember it very fast. They had to be very versatile in a way that perhaps is not expected nowadays because people tend to specialise more. There is no such thing, for example, of people of, say, your age being expected to play an eighty-year-old granny, which was absolutely standard in those days in rep. If you couldn't do that kind of thing you weren't any use. Oh yes, definitely, you had to be able to do it. So, as far as the stage design goes, there had been an absolutely horrendously low standard of stage design in many reps. I'm not just talking about Dundee and Perth where I worked at later, but I am going by books and photographs. There was a standard rep interior set and more or less all that happened was you used to have a few alternative doors and windows, you would distemper it a different colour every week

(this is a weekly rep) and hopefully put enough props and bits of decoration and old pictures on the wall to distract the audience's attention from the fact that they had probably seen the same set a different colour the previous week. Back stage, it is still notorious to this day in smaller theatres, the standard of the dressing rooms and everything is literally bare brick painted, still in an awful lot of these places. The toilets and other arrangements leave a great deal to be desired. In those days, if it is any comfort, it was even worse.

I can't vouch for this from personal experience, but one of the other stage designers had worked at Windsor rep, which was still in those days or had recently been, a one week rep, and the place where they painted the scenery was flooded regularly to a depth of about two feet and the ceiling was so low in this place, it was a basement or something, that they couldn't put the flats upright, so they had to paint the flats lying sideways if you like. The prospect of painting a whole set of say trees in a wood, or even some elaborate design on the wallpaper, having to paint it sideways is a very awkward thing to do. So I said what on earth used to happen when it used to flood, because apparently it used to flood regularly when the big rivers and the sea coincided. You know the sea drove the rivers back, whatever the name for it is, a neap tide or something like that it was. Anyway, they said we put on gumboots and we got on with it. We had a set of orange boxes they said and we used to prop the flats up sideways on that and paint the scenery. In their gumboots, up to water that deep, how they ever did it God knows. I don't think the health and safety people, who of course didn't exist in those days, would have tolerated that nowadays.

CB: No, certainly not.

IP: Not only was it tolerated it was absolutely expected. You know. Object, what are you objecting for? That would have been very much the reaction only nobody did object. It's really amazing what people put up with when you look back on it through the perspective of time. What else can I say about stage design? The basic way I worked was apart from the odd bits of acting that we were expected to do, we had about a fortnight to prepare each show, but it was minus the acting time that we had to put in, it was also minus things like designing the thing because of course sets have to be designed on paper first no matter how fairly routine they are. To do us justice there were two designers I should say, there was me and somebody else and we took it in turns to sort of plan it and design it and the other person helped to paint it sort of thing. That was basically how it worked. Then, once we had designed all this we had to get it approved by the Director, but of course the Director was not encouraged to object too much because apart from anything else we knew what flats existed. Although we did have a carpenter to rebuild things he couldn't rebuild an entire new set for each one. So depending on the importance of the play anything between $\frac{3}{4}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ of the set would have been used before and simply repainted. Well, it had to be, you see, because the constraints of money and time and the personnel meant that you couldn't just build a new set ad hoc, especially if the play had say two or even three sets. Dundee rep didn't have a full flying system either. You know how scenery in a big theatre is flown? In our theatre as well there is space to fly a complete backcloth and everything. But in Dundee rep you had to roll them up and such was the tightness of people that in the year before I was there they were doing Cinderella and they had to conscript half the cast including poor old Prince Charming, who was a guy not a girl. Anyway, poor old Prince Charming, he went to pull up this backcloth right in the middle of the show and something caught or something and he pulled all the muscles down his stomach terribly. The bloke was in agony. But of course, there was nothing for it they just had to strap him up, probably with gaffer tape, they used gaffer tape for everything, I'll explain about gaffer tape later, and just carry on. The poor bloke was in agony and there were no understudies or

anything, so he just had to still run the rest of the fortnight or whatever it was, dancing the lot.

CB: Goodness.

IP: Oh yes. So it just highlights the fact the actors were expected to do it as well. There is a very interesting film called *The Dresser*, which gives a very transparently-disguised portrait of Donald Wolfitt who was one of the old school of Shakespearean actors and it is very noticeable in that play a lot of these things that I'm talking about in rep. They were doing *King Lear* and whenever they were off stage the actors were expected to work the thunder machines and things like that, which was another job of ours. It was just coming to the point where sound effects were the more awkward ones reproduced. Of course, it was before the days of tape being used for these things, either because the tape was so hissy or unreliable or whatever. I can remember using tape recorders at school. None the less, by 1960, even at the date of 1960 or so certainly in Dundee and Perth, a lot of the sound effects were made the old-fashioned way. For example, thunder was made with a great big thunder sheet. They still use that and the wind machine. That consists of a great big drum with wooden slats that you turn with a handle and then there is a fixed, what would you call it, a fixed loop of silk or some very scratchy material which is fixed so that it stays like that and as you turn the handle the slats hit the silk and it goes weeee weeee weeeee. There was a lot of that done and lots of other effects of the same kind. We had to help to work these things as well. It was by no means a matter of your job being closely defined, it certainly wasn't. You had to be prepared to do almost anything in the heat of the moment. Another thing that we helped to do was produce plaster trifles, now that was a famous thing. Of course the last thing that people want in rep is food that is going to go off quickly, so that most of the food was faked. The favourite thing was to get some plaster of paris and put a little bit of colour in, stir vigorously and it came out a beautiful sort of icing pink and you could ice the top of toffee tins and things like that. Lo and behold: a beautiful cake! You couldn't actually eat it, but usually there would be some much smaller sponge cake provided, usually about three days old for the poor old actors to eat and they had to just make do with that. Fake food was another thing that we often produced, because a tremendous amount of the stuff, no matter how weird and exotic, was produced in-house.

Nowadays, scenery is nearly always built, rather like the decorations that you see here, you see that's made out of that form of plastic. Yes, it may look solid, but it isn't. When you see sets like palaces in films and all the rest of it, it is nearly all made out of this stuff. I won't stop to describe all the process but it's a thin sheet of plastic, which is heated up over a mould basically. That was just coming into use, but most of the time I was in rep absolutely everything was painted flat on the scenery. Wooden panels, oak panels, even picture rails were sometimes painted flat on the scenery. The audience could see that they were fakes, but it was just simply a rule of the theatre, a custom that that is how sets were and it was accepted. Of course, realism in the stage is a very comparative term. Even to this day things are not half as real as people think. It is all a suspension of disbelief and it still goes on very much, if only because of the fact that you can see the actor's faces are painted and things like that. In those days you had to accept a great deal more. The other thing that affected stage design very much was before the modern revolution in stage lighting produced by halogen lamps. The reason is that in the old days practically all the lighting was a modified form of tungsten lamps. In other words very similar to ordinary bulbs such as you have in a house. The big filaments that these lamps have scatter the light a lot so it is very difficult to have a person tightly spotted in a corner and the rest of the stage in darkness, which is quite common place now. You see it in every musical all the time. In those days the light sprayed all over the place and

so they didn't attempt to spot anything very much. It was ok to have flat painted scenery because the lighting itself was very flat and rather unrealistic. That is why they used to plaster themselves with far more make-up than people do nowadays. You could get away with a lot more simply because the lighting was so flawed that it flattened out all the natural shadows of your faces. That is how we were able to play Chinese people and Afro-Caribbean people and everything like that, partly because people didn't know them as intimately as they do now. We had very little chance of meeting black people in the ordinary way of things, unless you lived in London or something like that. The make-up suggested in a stylised sort of way, we thought nothing of painting shadows which were completed unlike the shadows of our own faces - noses out to here type of thing. You could get away with it because it was almost shadow-less lighting.

They also used footlights, which lit you in a very unrealistic way because the light was coming from below, whereas light in practically all real situations comes from above. The whole lighting and scenery thing are really part and parcel of the same thing. It was a convention that people accepted because they simply knew nothing else. It was still very much convention rules okay, as far as stage design went, but it was slowly starting to change. Of course nothing like that changes over night, especially in rep, because nobody had much time to experiment over everything and so it tended to be that people produced a mixture as before. In the given time, experiment is very dangerous. If it failed you had no time to do anything else. That was a very important aspect of stage designing in those days. The other important aspect of stage design was the smell, because it was before the days of emulsion paints.

CB: Oh, right.

IP: Nowadays, practically everything where you want a flat matt finish is painted with emulsion colours and that applies to the stage as well. There is a huge range. You can get it mixed up for you and all the rest of it, but in those days "nay, nay, forsooth". It was a large bucket filled with powdered size glue, which absolutely stank. It was made with animal glue, it was boiled out of animal bones and hooves and everything like that. Unless it happened to be brand new, which it seldom was, the paint was simply made out of a mixture of the colour powder, which provided the colour and the size, and water, which provided the binder to bind it on. It was quite a skill in itself because it didn't come ready made and each colour behaved rather differently. Some colours needed an awful lot of size to make them stick on convincingly, others needed less and of course if you were painting a cloth it was quite different to painting something ridged like a flat or a piece of plywood. If you put too much size on cloth, the cloth went like a piece of cardboard, you couldn't roll them properly. If you did, it cracked into pieces like an old master. It was covered in cracks before you could say knife, so there was quite a skill in getting all this right. It was also bedevilled by the fact that most theatres had to store the scenery in places that were very damp. Also, central heating was not by any means universal in theatres in those days. In the audience, yes, they were well looked after, but the poor old cast and even more the poor old menials who did the scenery and everything like that certainly couldn't expect anything like that. Of course, if the scenery got damp, what happened was that it would get into all the size, which bound the paint. That is why so much old scenery had deteriorated, people are now trying to save a lot of scenery from long ago but there is very little to save because it deteriorated so much. It would reabsorb the damp in the atmosphere and when it was taken onto somewhere hot like the stage and the lights and everything, then the scenery promptly shrunk. The size dried out, the size lost its moisture out to the atmosphere again and the scenery would suddenly go cerrrrrrrr like that. If it would be on a flat the flats would warp or else they would be as tight as a drum. You touched a flat and it went "doingng!" and

backclothes would shrink out of shape. We used to have terrible problems with it. It was by no means a sinecure, painting the scenery in those days.

IP: Well, I was talking about scenery and how it had to be done with size glue and everything and people always made tired jokes, particularly at three o'clock in the morning, as I told you we had to work all the hours to get it finished. Occasionally we would get so desperate that we used quite old scene paint if it happened to be the same colour and then we kept saying that by the time the audience came in you won't smell anything. There was one particular play, and fortunately it was a play about a murder and the body had been buried somewhere close by, so they probably thought that we were sort of using everybody's senses that it had turned into the smellies or something like that. Anyway, when the curtain went up, you know there is quite a current of air that goes up if you suddenly lift the stage curtain. You could hear all the audience sniffing and if that wasn't bad enough when they came to review it in the local paper they said it was too much to say that the whole play stunk, but certainly the first act did. We got so bored with trotting out these routine, because an awful lot of plays get set in drawing room sets and drawing room comedies and things like that. We were feeling quite subversive and rebellious anyway, so we just went away laughing into our beards about it all. Nothing happened to us I'm glad to say, but it must have been quite an experience for the poor old audience because the smell is absolutely awful. It's like rotting bones, ghastly. Oh no, emulsion paint is certainly an improvement because although it has a smell it is usually very transient. It's not particularly nasty or anything. So that certainly comes into it. I am trying to think of all the things I was talking about out there. Oh yes. One of the things was that when I was there, which is why I moved to Perth rep, because Dundee rep actually burnt down whilst I was there, in quite dramatic circumstances. We were painting scenery for the pantomime and as I said before, the painting went on and on and on. There were certain things like the backcloths, which for reasons of space, we couldn't paint anywhere except on the stage. It was a case that we were using the stage at least half of the 24 hours and the actors would be using it the other half. I think that what happened was the lighting equipment was being left on and on and on, literally for days, if not weeks, without ever being switched off. It finally got so overheated.

They had a wooden roof above Dundee rep. It took place in a hall, which had originally been called the Oddfellows Hall, never a name more appropriate, but anyway. I was painting a backcloth, which blocked my view of the stage because the backcloth was very far forward on stage and they had a safety lantern type thing, stages still have them actually. It is a gadget that is like a sort of giant ventilator with flaps and it forms a sort of lantern as it's called on the roof on the theatre. The idea being that if there is a fire on the stage the flaps will open automatically and the fire will be sucked vertically up restricting it to the stage and protecting the audience, who hopefully are safe on the far side of a safety curtain. Anyway, there was no safety curtain down in this case, but there was a backcloth, which blocked my view of the stage. I heard what I thought was the wind roaring in the lantern, as it often did, through all the drafts and everything, and as I painted away in my sort of semi-comatose state never having been properly to bed for about a week, I thought "that's an awfully loud wind and it seems to be getting louder. - I don't suppose that there could be anything wrong ", so I'll have a look. I went round behind the backcloth and here the whole of the grid above was in flames. It was a mass of flames. I rushed and got the other designer, as I said when we slept at all it was on the couch in the green room, and he dialled 999 and after what seemed an age the fire people arrived and it was mostly volunteer because at that time they didn't have a full crew available. The crew took one look, especially the volunteers, and said "I've never coped with a fire like this. What do we do? What do we do? It's a theatre, I don't know

what to do, I don't know what to do". We actually took charge and told them to get the fire out from there, that's the source of the fire. We proceeded to rush up to the flies and drop all the scenery in that we could, because it was mainly the scenery that was on the fire. You see nowadays, I'm glad to say it's a regulation in the theatre that backcloths and everything are not hung on wooden poles but metal poles, like we have, like scaffolding poles. In those days it was wood, solid wood. We hastily dropped in all the backcloths that we could to get them away because it didn't really have much of a hold on the roof itself, luckily. On that occasion, they were able to stop the fire, but it was a terrible mess and the pantomime was just due to open and everything, but somehow we managed it and the publicity out of it was wonderful. People who had never dreamed of setting foot in the theatre were delighted to queue up outside and gawp and watch the disaster taking place. It was mainly the tops of the flaps that were badly burnt and we had to re-canvas and repaint them. There were shots of various dainty actors pretending to take part with smiles on their faces and just so that the newspapers could get the publicity shots of them supposedly painting the ceiling. On that occasion they managed to get away with it, but it was no more than about six months after that, exactly the same thing happened again.

This time it happened when we were all away at lunch, so by the time that we got back it was too late and the whole theatre was ablaze and the whole Oddfellows Hall was a write off - a total write off. The theatre was without a home for ages. Luckily, it was the summer so they put up a big circus tent and we did some shows in there. After that, they did have to close down for a long time and then they did reopen in their present home. They have a purpose-built theatre that of course, needless to say, took a long time to build, but they are still soldiering on. I went off to Perthshire where the situation was a bit different because it was mainly variety theatre. It was certainly fascinating because some of the characters in the variety had to be seen to be believed. Most of them had been doing the same act all their lives. It was just about the last days of popular variety. You see television is a tremendous devourer of talent and you can't obviously produce the same material on television week after week if you have a series or a spot in a series or something, like a comedian or something. You have to have new material every week. This was a huge shock to a lot of people, even to the likes Morecambe and Wise because they had about two or three routines each of which would provide, I don't know, 20 minutes half an hour's material and that would do them. Of course after they had done a week in Manchester they would go on and do exactly the same material in Sheffield, and then they would do in Blackpool and so on and so on. This material would literally, in some cases, like there was an old comic called Sandy Powell, whose great catch phrase was "Can you hear me, Mother?" Literally they used the same material for a lifetime and so this was a big problem because as I say they had a big variety season in Perth rep and we were expected to paint the scenery for them and they were casting around like mad for different materials but they did mostly manage it.

There were various wonderful Scottish acts. I think a few of them are still going, like the famous Alexander Brothers. I had better watch because this is going to be on a permanent record and I'm going to get sued for libel or something like that. They absolutely hated each other off-stage, those poor old Alexander Brothers. You can't blame them. I mean it's happened with an awful lot of duos and comic acts because they are literally bound hip and thigh. They are travelling around the whole time, they're expected to be always together in the dressing room, at rehearsal, on the stage and so if you gradually go off a person it must be a terrible situation. It's like being a Siamese twin almost with someone you can't stand. People's little mannerisms and everything get terribly exaggerated anyway, and they absolutely loathed each other. But then of course

the poor things, as soon as they came onto stage they had to switch on these cheesy grins and it was the old pals act and "My dear old brother over here" and all that and you knew perfectly well that they were absolutely loathing each other. There were quite a few acts like that as well. Painting the scenery was easy though, because they definitely had what you might call simple tastes. They would come and say "Right, we want a Scottish backcloth. We want lots of heather, we don't care about the rest, but we want lots of heather". Well, heather's not a thing that shows very much in nature on a hillside, it just sort of gives it a subtle purple tinge, but believe me there was nothing subtle about the scenery by the time we'd done it. I looked as if somebody had attacked the backcloth with a purple shaving brush and there were masses of purple. Not content with that, they insisted on having it all covered in glitter and goodness knows what so it looked nothing like real heather. None the less they were perfectly happy and they would come in with their over life size kilts and sing about "Marching through the heather" - 15 choruses of that sort of thing and scenery to match, so they were perfectly happy. Most of these acts had to make do with scenery. It was the last days in some ways of stock scenery. I was telling you that sets weren't always painted completely new, but at least in rep they had some sort of conscience they made it look at least superficially like something different. In the better plays they made a real effort, like in Hamlet they built a very big multiple set with a whole lot of wraps and all sorts of things. It was about a months work for the carpenter. They had to get somebody else to help him. So for the big productions when they really pulled out the stops, they were good, but of course it was compensated and taken out of the other things which had to sort of put up with more or less anything. In the variety theatres they didn't even have that, they would have about five standard backcloths and then there were organisations that were well known in the Scottish theatre. Mewtrees was the particular one. It was a hiring firm that hired out complete sets, costumes, props you name it, to amateurs as well as professional groups. So the variety theatres could easily just phone up Mewtrees to send up a backcloth of the outside of a castle or the inside of a boarding house, because an awful lot of the jokes and sketches hinged on what went on in a boarding house and the awful landladies and things like that. Then the awful day came when Mewtrees burnt down and that was even more of a shock than Dundee rep burning down. The whole place was literally gutted and it was vast. You can imagine that if a firm goes in for all the props and general weirdnesses and all the backcloth and everything else for I don't know how many shows they would cover but they provided all these amateur musicals, you see. Amateurs do a huge number of musicals, everything from Rosemary to all the usual things they did in those days, like The Desert Song and all the rest of it, Gilbert and Sullivan. They had a huge amount of stuff and all of this was destroyed. All of a sudden, these variety theatres like Perth rep where part of the season was variety and the ones that were variety all the time like the Metropole in Glasgow and all these others ones that were the notorious graveyard of English comics, who absolutely dreaded going there. The story about Des O'Connor when his response there was so bad when he got on the stage that he actually fainted as it was the only way to get off. They didn't just stop at rude four-letter words and rude remarks, they literally threw things and it was dangerous. Lots of them were riveters in those days because of course a lot of the people were working on the Clyde that supported these variety theatres. They had things like massive rivets in their pockets and they came on purpose to throw these rivets at the actors. I daresay you've heard at football matches how even somebody throwing a penny can do serious damage. Of course, it is thrown so far and there is so much weight behind it by the time it gets down to the people below, so similarly, people throwing a rivet. It's a mercy nobody was killed.

I was just reading the other day about Frankie Howerd who got a very bad reception at the Metropole in Glasgow. He just dies a death in this Glasgow theatre. He was alright

until he said something about "Of course I've got Scottish blood as well. I'm half Scottish" and they took this completely the wrong way and there was this terrible howl of rage. It must have been really frightening because of course the place was jammed to the rafters on a Friday night and there wouldn't be one person who was sober - no fear. He heard this noise and it sounded like an axe going through a pipe and afterwards they realised that one of the riveters had flung this massive great handful of rivets and it had just missed his head like that and hit the metallic pipes in the wings. So there you go. They were literally risking life and limb, it wasn't just reputation in those days. I think I have covered a bit about most of the things that we did. I never finally got to the end of this wonderful story about the variety theatre.

Yes, when Mewtrees burnt down they were really stuck. There was an old actress and her husband called Gracie Scott and they used to do all these sketches and they were very, very good. They were quite surreal actually because there was one where the woman goes to the psychiatrist and she is quite convinced that this cabbage is her husband you see and she says "Now if I bring him out the bag" and she solemnly brings this cabbage out the shopping bag and puts it on the table "You will be kind to him now won't you? Talk to him very carefully". So the poor old psychiatrist has to go on and on talking to this cabbage. Anyway, she was doing something that was supposed to happen at Granny's and they couldn't get a backcloth like it for love nor money because Mewtrees had burnt down. It was supposed to be at the fireside, you see, and this girl comes in with her boyfriend, who doesn't get on with her parents, anyway they are all supposed to be sitting round the fireside in Granny's so the conversation when Gracie phones up Mewtrees in high dudgeon goes something like this: "They've got a real problem with their backcloth". "Oh dear Gracie, what is the problem?" "Well, it's supposed to be inside Granny's and we're supposed to be sitting round the fireside warming our hands. It's this muckle big hillside and it's got snow all over the landscape and there is bare trees and everything. It doesn't look very real." The understatement of the century I should think. "Well, we've lost most of our stock, Gracie". "Well you'd better get up here and paint Granny's again as fast as you can because I'm not going on that stage with this blasted heath again". There was a lot of that that went on. So there we are. I think that's mostly what I can think of.

CB: That's absolutely brilliant.