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Christopher Wilkinson – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sue Fulton

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Actor 1963 to present day. On Tyrone Guthrie, the Sheffield Playhouse, construction of the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield.

SF: Now, Christopher, can you tell me please about your time at the Playhouse earlier in your career?

CW: Well, I think it must have been autumn 1963 that I joined the Playhouse as an acting ASM. Geoffrey Ost was the director then and Colin, at that stage, was the associate director and it was largely Colin, I think, who was instrumental in taking me on and it was a marvellous job. They don't have acting ASM's any more, but when you were an acting ASM you did everything, you acted, they'd give you large parts right from the beginning because they needed younger actors and you were even painting scenery, making props, running shows. You were doing literally everything.

So then I stayed acting for about ...I should only have stayed there for about two years at the most in terms of an acting career, as it is really dangerous to stay in the same place, but in fact it was a very strange place in the theatre as they were offering more money each year, better parts, and then I think in about 1965 they offered a two year contract, which was quite extraordinary, you would not get that nowadays at all. And Alice, my daughter, was very young at the time so this provided some kind of security and I was virtually acting every day there, was a part from one in every 6 or 7 so I was really enjoying it. But then after a bit, after about 4 or 5 years I got a bit jaded with the whole process and Colin George was doing a production of Oedipus and wanted the cast to try and devise a curtain raiser before it, in the style of Greek plays where they had curtain raisers by people like Euripides and we were at liberty to do what we wanted and then I found myself emerging as the central writer figure within the group. Lots of people had the ideas but I was doing the writing so I thought "Oh I will try my hand at writing, it was a release to be away from acting". The day I gave up acting was marvellous, I felt great; its like it had gone on too long really. In that time Colin George had been very good to me, so had Geoffrey Ost, they were both really nice people. Colin as a director was, started – he had a particularly good instinct, because he was an actor himself, he had a wonderful instinct for actors and giving actors ideas of where they might go, which would normally be quite unacceptable. I had a wonderful part in Pinter's – The Birthday Party and I remember him saying "what happens if you throw your head back there", and you know "put your head to one side", it was really normally you wouldn't accept that kind of directing but when I tried it I thought, oh God, this is a good idea. So, but as he got, as he did get bigger and bigger productions, which is what tends to happen if people stay in rep. His skills became, more in terms of large-scale productions, which brings with it a lot of work, on technical effects and things like that, so I think there were very few plays he directed from Stirrings onwards,

well certainly plays I was in, which were small casts, plays which were psychological pieces for actors. Well, that was my memory, it was probably quite wrong but he was certainly very clever at that time, his production of *Stirrings* was a mixture between a very clever script from Alan Cullen and then Colin working on it and I think by the time Colin had done his third or fourth production he had really sort of got it to a fine art. I didn't see the last production he did but it sounds great, he had, it was something like a church chorus or something, I have forgotten what it was, when he did it at the *Crucible*. In fact I was in the first production of *Stirrings*, but I was ill, so I was in it for 2 or 3 days, I had mumps I was rushed off the hospital and I was in hospital for the rest of the run, I wasn't in it for long.

SF: Because they actually did it twice more at the Playhouse.....

CW: That's right yes. But by that time I had left. Colin got help to get me an Arts Council Grant for writing, we did a play of mine, which we did with Frank Hatherley. Who was at that time the associate director and an Australian. It was revived back in Dronfield last week by the Dronfield Amateur Dramatic Society, very well, brilliant production, and he also took a great risk in letting me do the last production in the Playhouse, which everybody said, the last production was a product about the empire or something like that, but in fact, the last production was *I was Hitler's Maid*, but it was like it was tagged on to the official season and that was a great risk on his part, it was a marvellous chance to do a play like that in a proper theatre, and very tense. The Theatre Manager, I remember being out front and we had a *Black Museum* out in the coffee bar, and I remember hearing the Theatre Manager literally turning people away and saying "Well I don't think you should come in". And I remember a middle aged lady saying "Don't you tell me what I can do!". So there was a nice sort of tension because normally you would play it, a play like that, in a studio or a fringe theatre, then there wouldn't be that kind of danger about it.

SF: The Playhouse had a loyal set that had the same seats every fortnight.

CW: That's right, yes.

SF: Regardless of what was on they didn't come to the theatre because of a specific play?

CW: Well yes, but that is a bit of a generalisation but I am sure that was the case, rather like here to a certain extent, in Chesterfield. Colin also virtually commissioned the first play I did and directed it and then got it down for a Sunday night performance and the *Royal Court*. I was doing it once I had got through my first grant I was then employed as a kind of assistant director on a couple of things but to be honest assistant directing in the theatre, you don't do anything. I think I did 2 or 3 in the old Playhouse, one was very interesting – a Czechoslovakian or a Polish director, who came over to do *Macbeth* and that was fantastic to be on because here was, he'd been in *Auschwitz* and he was a kind of sculpture/painter, and Nigel Hawthorne was playing *Macbeth*, it was quite an extraordinary thing to be working on. But then I was assistant directing on a thing called *Listen to the Trains*, but really I was just sitting ogling the young actresses and acting as ship's doctor. And then at that time they were planning the *Crucible*.

SF: Can you remember when you were first aware there were plans afoot?

CW: I don't know the time but I imagine it was about 18 months or two years before, I imagine it was 1968.

SF: I think they actually first started talking about it in 1967 but I don't know how far that sort of came through to you.

CW: Well, I don't know what Colin has told you but the big problem for Colin was it was all tied into Tyrone Guthrie, and Tyrone Guthrie come to direct Peer Gynt, with Tyrone Guthrie's actors. Now when Tyrone Guthrie died, suddenly Colin was presented with a difficult problem. One, he'd done the play himself before, and in my view its never a terribly good idea to do a second production of a play you have done before but I don't think Colin had any choice but he also had all these actors who were very well known in America and had their own ideas of how they wanted to work and probably thought of Colin as being a kind of substitute director for the Great Tyrone Guthrie. Douglas Campbell was acting in the Button Moulder, a very, very powerful presence in the theatre, a very strong CV both as a director and as an actor, and I remember him and Colin sort of arguing on intellectual points about the meaning of the Button Moulder's speech and there being a kind of tension in the air a kind of, the lead actors from Colin's time at the Playhouse were in more subsidiary roles so that too weren't particularly happy.

Because suddenly they had been relegated or delegated to a lower rung of the ladder, simply because these supposed stars, Robin Gammell now is a Hollywood actor. I think Colin was under terrific pressure, opening a new building, suddenly having to take over from Tyrone Guthrie, suddenly having to inherit the whole idea of what Guthrie might have done with it and what he would do with it.

SF: How far, can you remember when it was first mooted that Tyrone Guthrie was going to do the initial play?

CW: In my memory that was very early on. Colin came round one day, separate to that, and he asked me because I was a long serving member "We have being looking at plans with the architects and it would be good to have some feedback from the actors, about what kind of dressing rooms they would like. So I called a meeting of the actors and it being the sixties, being quite the sort of feeling of sort of freedom and our idea was that an actor, backstage should have been a private place where, if necessary he commit suicide. It didn't matter how small it was, but it should be a private place. But that a communal dressing room was also very important, where actors could talk and they'd meet each other before a show. So we had an idea that you would have a room where it had a central joined area with smaller dressing rooms leading off it. And I remember him coming to me several months later and saying "well they accepted all your plans, well nearly". He said, "I mean we've got the individual dressing rooms but they couldn't do the communal. So it rather missed the point. So the dressing rooms in the Crucible are very nice but the only communal area really is the Green Room. So in a way it had totally missed the point, but it was good that they even offered us for some king of consultation, and to be honest in new theatres, the dressing rooms are often the last thing that they put work into. The other problem for Colin was that he was using a new building for the first time and that, I don't know whether you remember, they had these triangular towers on the stage, called something like tetrahedrons, something like this, the whole staging was based on. This was inherited from the Guthrie Theatre and the idea was you clad these things in a different way. One you could wheel them around.

SF: I've seen lots of steps making a pyramid but I know that they talked in Peer Gynt of having lifts and stuff.

CW: That's right, I think they did have some lifts. These towers were very soon discarded, they didn't work out how to work in that kind of space, dealing with a totally new theatre. Some people, some staff had been inherited, some staff had to be new and I think also in the beginning we were working in steel which we'd never had done in the Playhouse, so you had a man running a workshop, cutting steel, welding steel, well it was a totally new technique, in a way it was quite extraordinary, he managed to get

Peer Gynt on at all, in my mind. I stayed for that as assistant director and at the end of that I said thanks very much I was offered assistant director on Treasure Island, which was the next thing they did but I said "no", I've had enough, because really it was a waste of my life. Then I didn't come back to the Crucible, I was working, it wasn't talk of the Meatwhistle? It was then I was working backstage doing the stage door and things like that, and then I got sucked back into acting because someone had dropped out and someone said "You've got an Equity Card".

SF: So back to Tyrone Guthrie, so you say it was quite early on the whole as the theatre was being planned, Tyrone Guthrie was part of that plan?

CW: The reason he was part of the plan, yes I am sure, would be that Colin had to, Colin had been to see Guthrie.

SF: Colin and David Brayshaw went over to Canada.

CW: That's right, so once they had put forward the idea of an open stage, which was quite revolutionary in many ways, they then had to sell it to the Board, so one of the obvious ways of selling it was that Guthrie would come over and the link with Guthrie's name, even City Councillors may have heard of Tyrone Guthrie at that time, you know, so he would have been involved very early on and was linked to the design of the theatre.

SF: He died May 1971, was it a sudden death?

CW: I think it was a sudden death because he was all lined up to do it.

SF: Were you aware ofbecause the reviews weren't sparkling, how were the cast coping with that?

CW: I wasn't aware of that, I went up to the end of the rehearsal period and then I didn't have to, it wasn't like a touring production where you would take over as....., be running the shows, I had left by that time.

SF: It's just that the reviews weren't as good as the audience figures suggest. Especially for Treasure Island it got to 70 – 72% of the auditorium average – but the reviews were not good.

CW: Now I do remember something now the key thing was David Brayshaw, who was the administrator, wanted to open with Stirrings in Sheffield and I was adamantly against it.

So although I had no say, I was asked about this and I was passionately against this, I thought this was a very negative way of opening a new theatre. But when Peer Gynt was commercially and wasn't critically successful there was a feeling, David Brayshaw had been another person who had been ever so good to me. He lent me money on the basis of some money that was due to me and in trust with somebody else, and I found out later I am pretty sure he lent it to me, personally he had said it was his solicitor's office that was doing it, so I've got to owe David but, David, one he disapproved of my plays, and two I think he felt his judgement had been right. I think it was wrong, I am not saying Peer Gynt was the right play to open with but I think it would have been a disastrous mistake to open a new theatre, a revolutionary theatre with something which had been done three times before. I think Colin could see that too, but that was the alternative production.

SF: What was it like adapting to the arena stage?

CW: Well...

SF: Did you find a lot of problems, were you aware of problems with the other actors?

CW: No, but I know that when I later worked on it and Claire Venables was director and Mike Boyes was there, but that time there was a kind of, certain rules had been established which were known as certain rules so clearly then, like you always act on the diagonal, you can act with your back to one of the vomitoria openings and you are actually in a strong position, but there wasn't time really to explore that kind of thing so some of the effects were very head on as far as I remember, but Colin had been and seen shows and I'm sure he must have talked to Guthrie so he wouldn't have been ignorant of this. There were a lot of things to learn about the theatre over the years that weren't known then.

SF: It's a progression isn't it?

CW: So yes I'm sure it did create quite a number of problems. I don't remember them at this time. It was more a question of getting the show on.

SF: Have you been back to the Crucible recently?

CW: Not for a long while no, I've been to the Studio last year I think. But, of course, I don't live near, I live in Huddersfield now. I have been to the Studio – they have altered it but I still think the Studio would only really work in a passion that would excite me was if the entrance was outside.

SF: A separate theatre?

CW: Mmm...and then younger people might come in Weren't part of that kind of established theatre. But that's the same as any studio theatre. Very few theatres who can afford studio work at the Most of its touring, so they're no different from anywhere else. And I believe, I've heard from other people that there are some great productions going on.