

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

<http://sounds.bl.uk>

Eileen Page – interview transcript

Interviewer: Chloe Ingram

17 March 2004

Acting; buskers; censorship; Laurence Olivier; Look Back in Anger; repertory; role of the actor; Shakespeare; star-quality; Television and radio acting; theatre-going; women's roles.

CI: Which medium do you prefer?

EP: Oh, the theatre, of course. The theatre is always my one great love. I have come around more to television, I've just done quite a nice one myself, actually, which will come up quite soon, but because I was very wary of the camera, because you've got that funny little eye, a bit like this microphone. My performance now – it's not a performance, I'm just trying to answer your questions, albeit probably fulsomely and fully, but if I were doing a radio play that is my audience and I play to that. It gives me nothing back, neither does a camera lens, do you know. As someone said about Monroe, Marilyn... the great Marilyn, I think that was an extraordinary filmic great personality. Whether or not she could act I really don't know, because we never had a chance to find out. Whether or not that was just her neuroses working in front of a camera. Certainly she was a commanding personality and I think that's what film does, and as some people said, the camera either loves you or it doesn't, and it certainly loved her. The camera doesn't work for everyone and you have to learn how to use it, and unfortunately if you've been in the theatre most of your life and you come late to television you have very little chance of a learning process of how to work, how to bring the whole of your performance down to essence and just deliver, whereas you would have to project it out to the back of The Olivier gallery, do you understand what I'm saying. So there is that difference. I think there have been some amazing television and film performances, quite, quite wonderful and I love the cinema – I'm not so mad about television – I love the big screen and I've seen some spellbinding things, do you know, and I think there are some wonderful performers, but again for me it's always this extraordinary immediacy of live performance which then the poor actor has to repeat again and again and again, and sometimes it doesn't always work, you can't always make it work every time you do it, because you're a human being, you are not wired up. Unlike television and film where if you fluff a line or you're not happy you can do it again, so your performance in the end is made in the editing room and an editor can destroy your performance by cutting out. So at least with the theatre once the lights go down you are on your own and no one can stop you, provided you've done your homework. The rest is up to you and that great black warmth out there.

CI: Not a lot of young people go to the theatre today, how do you think they could be encouraged to go more often?

EP: If I knew the answer to that I'd be a multi-millionaire, wouldn't it! I don't know, I think probably you have to catch people when they're young, but you see there is so many other choices now and children are given, even the poorest children, they've got all this electrical stuff they can do, and they've got cameras they can make films with. The theatre is a very, very different ball-game and I suppose that for the next period of time it probably will take a back seat, except - I can only speak personally - I have now got this one-woman play about Eleanor of Aquitaine, most extraordinary woman who was the only woman to ever be Queen of England and Queen of France, died in 1202, 800 years ago this very century. She will have been dead in July 800 years and yet still this play that I have brings in capacity houses and people just love it. I do get letters, I get people come around to see me afterwards and say, 'Why can't we have more theatre like this?'. So, all I can tell you is somewhere out there in all that teeming mass, there is a small section of the community - and I have to tell you, it's not all older people, I get 18, 19, 20 year olds come in, and I get wolf whistles and stamps of feet, so I know I've got a young audience. There is that small section who will always be devoted, and that's the word I think, devoted, to the theatre. So, for somebody like me who is at the tail end of their life, that is something that I will do my best to honour and cherish and see that I'm doing my bit of it to give young people somewhere out there, people I may never know, people who I will never meet, some idea of the mystery and the magic of live theatre, which is just narrative, just the spoken word. It's a bit like what Shakespeare says in the chorus to Henry V, I don't know whether you've done that in your studies?

CI: I haven't done that one, actually.

EP: Well, when you go home get out a copy of Henry V and read the very first line, which is said by the chorus, in which he said: 'Oh, for a muse of fire that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention'. And he goes on in which he says: 'Can we cram within this wooden O' - which would have been the Globe theatre - 'the very casks that did fright the air at Agincourt' - which is the arrows, you know - 'Upon your imaginary forces work, think when we talk of horses, you do see them, printing their proud hooves in the receiving earth, for it is your thoughts that now must deck our kings, carry them here and there'. That's what the essence of theatre is about, when you think that theatre started in churches, good and bad, that's how theatre started, with the good and the bad on either side of the altar, and that's what Shakespeare's theatre before they had the first theatre which was called The Theatre. We're not taking in Greek theatre which of course has been going for donkey's years, which was amphitheatre which is theatre down with seats going, you've seen. British theatre, English theatre was a group of people who played in courtyards, wherever there was a space, that's why the other place at Stratford is called The Other Place and there is a theatre I know called The Other Space, because that's the way theatre was done and it was only when James Burbage, who was the father of Richard Burbage who Shakespeare wrote Hamlet and most of those big parts for, found a space in the city somewhere and called it The Theatre and then eventually moved it over and it became The Globe. But we had somewhere to play, otherwise we just played wherever there was a space, wherever there was an audience of three, four, five, we could get food to play for an evening meal or a lump of bread. That was the way theatre began and that was what Shakespeare wrote for. And he painted the scene, 'What country, friends, is this?', that's the first line in Twelfth Night, 'What country friends is this?', 'Illyria'. Because Shakespeare paints the scene for you, whether it's day, night, eventually he says within the narrative of where you are. Do you understand what I'm saying?

CI: Yes.

EP: But of course it does require huge concentration and commitment, and that is something which again we're not used to, we get breaks in television where people go off and make innumerable cups of coffee, cups of tea, put their feet up on seats, blah blah blah. The commitment is that you have to commit yourself to listen and to concentrate, and people's concentration spans are nowhere like – when you think that people used to go to the theatre at six o'clock in the evening and not come out until 11 o'clock at night because they loved it, you see, and there wasn't anything else. Now there are so many choices.

CI: How do you see theatre developing then, how do you see it in ten years time, say?

EP: I couldn't begin to tell you. I don't know whether I'll be around, I'm 77 now, 78 in May, my mother is 103 this July, so if I live to be as old as my mother, in ten years time I'm going to be 88, come and ask me then. I have no idea, all I know is while I've got breath in my body and my passion and my love I will still go on honouring what for me has been, is, a wonderful thing for people to go to, a wonderful – I don't care how they're dressed or what they do as long as the play holds their attention and they listen. It can be political theatre, it can be farce, it can be comedy, it can be an evening of absolute nonsense, as long as it's done well and people come out having had an interesting time, a thoughtful time. You can reach people in the theatre within an hour and a half, you can bring something home to them, quicker than – I'm not against reading books of course, of course, of course I'm not, but what I'm saying is that you can reach out in an extraordinary way and touch people because it's one human being talking to another human being, and you can in fact achieve extraordinary things. Going to a play has changed people's lives.

CI: Thank you very much. Before we finish, can you just confirm that the rights to this interview lie with the British Library?

EP: I guess so. I'm not a great American film star who demands rights and 80%! What I must say is this is my opinion and I speak only for myself. All right?

CI: OK, thank you.