

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Age Concern Drama Appreciation Group – interview transcript

Interviewer: Alan Lane

Interviewees: Irene Jefferson, Mavis Frost, Barbara Bowles, Cathy Redfern and Jacci Hamilton.

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Comments on theatre in Sheffield in the 1950s and 1960s.

AL: The project's 1945 to 68 and it's a living archive so really just anything that immediately sticks in your mind. You were saying before about Dial M for Murder . Where did you see that?

BB: At the Lyceum. It was the Court players... it was in the days when they had a repertory company. Used to come for about two months or something like that at the Lyceum in the summer. And you had a permanent seat, you paid for a permanent seat and you went every week. They changed the programme every week and you went every week to it. So you got to know the people who were the main characters so you looked forward to seeing them again in next week's performance.

AL: So you bought a specific seat and it was yours for the entire season.

BB: You paid for it each week but you got it at that same price and that was your seat. I think you paid for it each week? Yes.

AL: And one week it was Dial M for Murder ?

BB: Yes and we were only about 17 or 18 at the time. And wed gone with other friends and it was so spell binding, we got so frightened, people of our own age and we're all sitting there hugging together wondering and it was our favourite characters who was the villain in the piece and having to ride home on my scooter. All on my own through Pitsmoor, which was a pretty rough area, was quite scary that night. I sort of shot into the house and my parents said "Whatever is the matter?" and I said "It was a super play but we were so frightened." Probably the next week was a mass comedy so you'd come away feeling quite different.

AL: And you recognised the actors each time so in that sense it was a bit like soaps?

BB: Yes it was similar. Today's soaps more or less each episode is different isn't it? It's got a vague connection but they use so many characters one week then the next week it's probably the turn of the landlord rather than the customers.

AL: Anybody else?

CR: I went to the Court Players regularly but um no one play actually sticks in my mind.

AL: Court players at the Lyceum. They were a rep company?

JH: That was Harry Hanson's court players. Who Harry Hanson was I have no idea.

BB: Oh yes... if you went on a Monday it was two for the price of one.

JH: Two seats.

AL: Anything else?

MF: I remember the Sheffield Flood - that was good. May have been at the Old Playhouse.

JH: The Playhouse did that occasionally didn't they? They had...Alan Cullen was employed there and I know he did specifically children's plays. The old Playhouse was a repertory system and they didn't have, unlikely the Lyceum, they didn't have touring productions. The Lyceum had a repertory for 3 months but the Playhouse was a repertory all the time. And they employed, I'm sure they employed particularly Alan Cullen because they didn't do panto...they did a children's play. At Christmas. And very good they were too. I can remember... I can remember them now- John William and The Bee People .

AL: The what?

JH: The Bee People

BB: And also I remember they recruited a lot from their own local town. The Playhouse took definitely both its actors and its directors from local groups, often from the amateur groups. Because one of the chaps I worked with in the bank he went on to leave his amateur group work for the Playhouse and then he was in London within about two years. And ended up in films and on television. But he started locally at his own local Playhouse rather than going to a drama school or getting a university degree. There was nothing like that in those years...it was purely on talent. You started off as an amateur and became a... if you were good enough to be recruited into the London shows.

CR: I remember the court players there was Terence Alexander. I remember them announcing that he had got... that he was going to go to London . That he'd got this marvellous opportunity. And every time I see Terence Alexander I think o yes I used to see you every week in the Court Players. And one of the leading ladies was Doreen Lawrence, blond very pretty. And I remember seeing that she married Jack Hawkings.

JH: Rep was a real training-ground in those days. People like Margaret Prisely, Keith Barron, they all started doing that rather than going to drama school. There were quite a few people from the Playhouse who made it.

AL: Weekly shows?

BB: Two weekly shows at the Playhouse. On for a fortnight.

JH: And they did I would say more adventurous things than the Court players. They were very much French windows and a chintzy sort of sitting room. Where as the Playhouse/ At this thing from 11 th April to the 24 th July they'd got:

A Servant of Two Masters ; As You Like It ; then they'd go back to A Servant of Two Masters for a week; Waiting for Godot ; Killing Sister George ; As You Like It ; [title unidentified]- you've never seen that... it was a brilliant play I don't know why they don't bring it back.

AL: Who's it by?

JH: It doesn't say on here. The Silver Box , Galsworthy. Then a new Alan Cullen documentary and that's just over three months. So they had quite an adventurous...

AL: What year?

JH: 1967....There were adventurous people back then. In effect they closed the Playhouse and opened The Crucible. The Playhouse was a nice theatre.

BB: I know when Pat McGoohan worked with us in the bank- when he went to the Playhouse he had to go as an ASM, the fact that he was a good actor had nothing to do with it. He started at the bottom and learnt the trade until he started taking the leading parts and then got London .

JH: They didn't import stars then!

BB: Because he was in the television series for ages... The Prisoner . And then he got Alistair McLean's Ice Station Zebra - the lead in that. But he never changed, when I saw him in Sheffield he's "Hi Babs" you know, he was really one of those people who never change. But he could change in his acting. He had a slight Irish accent but not much.

AL: You were saying about the flood, one of these Alan Cullen documentaries.

MF: Documentary? It was performed as a play... based on the flood.

AL: Was that something the Playhouse did quite regularly? Factual based?

BB: Well the Crucible still does it now- because I was in the one they did for the blitz. Sheffield Blitz Night . Bit Hot Outside . And they recruited the non speaking parts from the various associations that did it. Because the stories were made up of people's stories. They first of all put out an appeal for people on Blitz night who lived through it for your story and then they went right through and decide what to put together. And then because various groups like WRVS were involved in it so they said could we have three of your ladies so we all said yes. So we agreed amongst ourselves, and they were quite happy to do this that we would have three different people each night for the week because none of us had time to do three weeks.

AL: This is at the Crucible?

BB: Yes, we had a dress rehearsal and the opening night. I was on on the opening night- only been on stage once. Never been an actor. And we were the opening people, we had to walk onto the stage carrying our teapots and trays going into the air-raid shelter

AL: What year was that?

BB: Ten years ago now- it's not in your time but what I mean is that they carried on doing that- and the other thing Charlie Peace thing about the gang warfare that Sheffield used to have.

MF: 1987 was the Blitz thing.

AL: Does that come from the Alan Cullen stuff from the Playhouse?

BB: I don't know.

AL: Is it a natural movement from that though?

JH: I don't know whether he wrote that but wasn't he to do with Stirring in Sheffield .

BB: They do a lot of local theatre.

JH: And that was tied to specific times in Sheffield at a time when grinding was a very hazardous trade and the unions were trying to get a foothold in it and there was a lot of violence. So they put all that together to make a story about it and then added a few bits for comic relief, there was something about installing gas wasn't there? When they

put gas in to light the streets. But it was based locally, there was a serious story behind it but they'd got a bit of light relief. They had that musical hall scene with Dorothy Vernon. A Bird in a Gilded Cage. That was in there. I think it is probably a tradition that goes back quite a while and the Crucible to an extent keeps it up.

AL: Irene?

IJ: I don't know whether it was in the year's span. But when I was working in London it was the time when The Mousetrap celebrated its jubilee perhaps? But it was the time when you could book a stool for half a crown around the theatre. And you could leave it there and go away and come back. And it was fabulous evening because all these people were dressed and the rest of us in the pit, no the gallery. It's still running isn't it. I think it was a wonderful show.

AL: And you caught it on a stool for half a crown?

BB: It saved your place in the queue.

IJ: Yes, and we got complimentary tickets because we couldn't afford to go but I was a nurse. And we were given two complimentary tickets and no-one used to want to go but I always did.... It seems such a long distance away from what you pay to go to the theatre now- the price. Half a crown was a lot of money, we needed a complimentary ticket but we were able to go.

BB: The theatre encouraged a lot of people to go- with that and two tickets for the price of one.

IJ: And when the RSC were at Stratford and they used to do two plays in a week- we used to get there complimentary tickets. I mean they did that now.

AL: I wonder if nurses get free tickets now?

BB: Well Sheffield Council members do, my friend works in the library and up until two years ago she used to get complimentary tickets. They used to send offers of tickets to them if they'd got a play that wasn't doing too well they'd send them down to the library and she'd take me. A lot of people still cannot afford the theatre. Not the audience they're trying to get for the shows, because students can get it for cheap but you're not a student for life. A lot of unemployed people would enjoy the theatre during the daytime to the matinees....

AL: Do you think they were better at selling these two for price of one offers and so on in the past?

BB: Because people would go knowing you could get in. You didn't have to book in advance. Like for a London show now you have to book for months. When I was in London for a month we went every night, the bank were paying! We could get a seat.

IJ: How can a family afford or even a couple? It's very expensive.

BB: Making graduates do drama school before they can work in the theatre automatically ups the expenses. You want a graduate salary if you've borrowed 10,000 for university training you're going to need to be paid a lot more than the lad who went from our bank who worked his way through the theatre. He never got paid that money until he was in London. They didn't have all these layers of management they have now.... If you look at the Playhouse- they had someone running the front office, and the stage manager who run the back and that was the sum total of their financial necessity.....

JH: This is from 1961. We're getting older and this is from the RSC at Stratford. I saw Vanessa Redgrave there and it was just magic. In As You Like It, playing Rosalind. So

fragile and such a look on her face. I mean I know what she does is important but I wish she had left the politics alone she would have absolutely been the best actress ever, ever, ever had she done more of it. And that was wonderful and it was the first time I ever noticed lighting. I know nothing technically about theatre. But the lighting in this was done by Richard Pilbrow and I've never noticed it before. And it was the simplest of scenes- little hillock with a tree on it. And they managed to convey the whole lot through that. And it really was just magic. And I just had a look through the programme. Director: Peter Hall; Ian Richardson- it's a Who's Who. It was brilliant at the time it really was.

AL: That's a highlight to leave it on.