

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Viv Gardner – interview transcript

Interviewer: Liz Sowden

20 February 2004

Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Manchester. British Drama League, Theatregoing in the 60s, Regional Theatre, impact of Brecht.

ES: What do you see as being important developments regarding women in the theatre in the post-war period?

VG: Well, in the post-war period, I mean I think... I think it's that the women's movement made women's theatre visible. I mean in a sense it's a sort of chicken and egg, I think there were a lot of women in the theatre in the 1960s, and I was born in 1949 so I was in my late teens just as the women's movement was all beginning to happen, and those of us who were interested in theatre, it was obvious that we should use our skills in theatre to foreground, you know, our politics, so that there was quite a lot of things that were going on that were also quite fun, involving sort of street performances or performances when I was a student - performances on campus or in the studio which were addressed to women's issues. And I think, I mean, we were quite bullish at that stage, I'm probably slightly less bullish now. So, I think, on a personal level that, you know, the theatre was an important both... a venue, it gave a venue for women's work and theatre that addressed issues, but it also gave us a medium to express ourselves in, those of us who wanted to use theatre, and I think it was, I mean I think in - there are lots of other ways. It's... in doing so, I think it facilitated women moving into drama departments, into the whole field of academics in British universities, and I think there's a whole sort of generation of women who were welcomed into drama departments, who were quite young then as well so there was a sense that they were all quite radical, and they, certainly a number of them, welcomed the sort of energies that women, and young women academics began to bring to it. And then there was a whole process, and again it was to do with theatre practitioners about discovering that women had actually been involved in theatre, and it was when I was in Glasgow, which was my first academic appointment, I saw, I think it must have been Mrs. Worthington's Daughters doing some sketches from the Actresses' Franchise League. Now I hadn't known that women had been involved in theatre and the suffrage movement at the beginning of the century, so there was a theatre company whose whole raison d'être was the retrieval of women's work, showing me as an academic, and I think that, I mean those AFL plays were really the start of my academic career, they were really the start of when I suddenly found that there was a research area that I was really interested, not just, you know I was interested personally, I was interested in it politically, and though, you know, my research has moved on from there it's still is basically in women's theatre, or what women have done in theatre, not necessarily just women's writing, but also their involvement in management and as performers and the people who problematise performance and things like that, so I think there's an enormous amount that that sort of - the 1960s opened up a space and 1960s' theatre

and its involvement in women's, in the women's movement opened up a space, which has carried through into my research.

ES: You mentioned about the street performances. What kind of...?

VG: Oh, they all seem terribly, I mean slightly sort of, I'm not embarrassed by them but now at – on marches people would, you know there would be dressing up, there would be performances on sort of street corners, and in you know, on campus,

ES: This was while you were an undergraduate?

VG: Yeah, it was sort of part of what you did in the late 60s, early 70s was if you had an issue you took it down to St. Anne's Square in Manchester and you did a performance, a sketch.

ES: Do you think that was helpful in the kind of move away from theatre just being in institutions, the old buildings, do you think that was helpful in facilitating women's entry into...

VG: I think it was, I think there had to come a point, probably the proper theatre companies, you know the theatre companies like the Women's Theatre Group, Mrs. Worthington's Daughters, those companies were probably the most important ones, and they were sort of models for us. There's always a...there's always a bind, there's always a double bind with any group that sets itself up with a specific political agenda that it is in a sense it marginalises itself whilst it establishes itself and gains some sort of confidence before it gradually moves, inevitably moves into the mainstream, and I think that's a stage you have to go through, I think we all go through stages where you need to find your own voice, and I think for – it doesn't, it's not as true now, thank God, of the generations of students that I see, women don't have the same sort of I think fear of putting themselves forward, that there was a sort of caution about most of us, even someone like me who's quite brassy. And I think once you'd practiced, in a way, in those groups it was inevitable that you wanted to move into the mainstream, that you wanted to take on buildings. But that being said there still aren't many people, women running buildings or, you know, the major companies.

ES: You said there still aren't many women running institutions...

VG: I don't, I mean there still aren't many women running, , buildings – particularly not in London. I mean, you know, neither of the big companies, have had , women artistic directors yet, so there's still a way to go.

ES: In what area of theatre practice do you think women have had the greatest influence since the war?

VG: That's difficult. That's very difficult. I think there are probably two – no, three – areas. I think that women dramatists have had an impact. I think they probably made greater advances, in terms of where they were, the number of them that there were, say prominent people in the 50s to where they are now. , and that's because in a way it's easier to be a writer than it is to manage a building if you're a woman, particularly if you have family commitments, in that you can do it at home if you've got the discipline, but there are always problems about finding, you know, how you get your play on. There have been some very – there have been some very, very good women working in radio drama, and radio is one of those sort of forgotten mediums where not only do they produce more new work than any other type of venue, they, there's also an enormous number of women. I mean currently people like Kate Rowland, – I'm just trying to think of the – Mel Harris, who was here at Manchester, lots of women have, the BBC Radio has been very open to women and I think women have made, had a significant impact there. And I also think that because a lot of feminists have used performance art I think

there's a lot of very, very interesting women, and have been right from the 1960s working in performance art. Where again their, probably their politics which has drawn them to theatrical or performance modes, rather than building, being interested in sort of more traditional forms, have sort of pushed the boundaries there. and probably, probably, there are a lot of, and again this is an area where, which I think is important, a lot of women went into teaching, certainly in the 70s, a lot of women went into teaching and into theatre in education because that was, that was expected, when I was at school there were two things that you were expected to do. You were either going to be a teacher or you were going to a nurse. So that there was a sort of, already there was a, there was a pathway into education. So, I think, I mean that's where I started, was teaching in secondary schools and people didn't really mind that quite as much as other areas of drama; but I think women have always gone into education, so I think drama, there were a lot of very good women, I mean the most obvious one was someone like Dorothy Heathcote, who were working in schools and working with schools through theatre in education companies, and again, because there wasn't the same sort of hierarchy, a lot of theatre in education companies were all founded on sort of, you know democratic or ensemble principles, it was easier, there was less resistance to women. And women were able to set up, women set up their own companies, they could take the initiative in those areas in a way that it was much more difficult for them to make any sort of inroads into traditional building-based companies.

ES: What particular – were there any particular figures, playwrights or plays or movements which inspired you in your interest in theatre?

VG: Well I was brought up by , by parents, a father in particular, who was very much involved in the British Drama League in the post-war period. He used to do a lot of directing for the British Drama League and the serious amateur movement in the 50s and 60s was actually my grounding, that's where I learnt to love theatre, I did an enormous amount of it, and a lot of people are often really very sniffy about , the amateur, you know, the am-dram movement. But there was, and probably still is, I know very little about it now, a lot being done. But that's where I first encountered Anouilh, I, you know, Arthur Miller, plays like, Giraudoux, we were doing, my, you know the Amateur Dramatic Company in Whitstable in Kent was doing, , good plays. And that's where I first learnt about performing and about performance and about and sort of began to encounter serious drama. And then when I went up to, having failed singularly to get into university when I was 18, I then went and worked in London and during the time that I worked in London I used to go to the theatre twice sometimes three times a week, which was absolutely fabulous. It was dead cheap then, it was, you could get student vouchers and things like that so it was a fantastic time, and I think, but the real, I think if I'm talking about any production that sticks in my mind from that period it would have to be, and the one that's influenced me most, was Leonard Rossiter in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, because I think I was always politically conscious, I was probably more – I was probably more of a socialist than I actually was a feminist at that stage. I was also, as an actor, was never a psychologicalised actor, so and there was a type of performance which I could, I identified with, I recognised as being, not just in terms of its subject matter but also in terms of its performance style something which I thought was amazing, extraordinary because it was ironic, it was funny, it was challenging. And I do think it was that particular performance, which I actually saw three times in the end, that really introduced me to Brecht and he continues to be, , you know the writer that I return to, dramatist that I return to again and again and again.

ES: Do you think – I was going to ask you about that actually! What kind of impact do you think Brecht's had on British theatre?

VG: Both directly and indirectly, an enormous impact, I think probably on a generation of directors and performers, the generation from the middle of the 50s through to, who were hearing or knowing about Brecht's works, perhaps seeing Brecht's work, and because it coincided with a period of increasing politicisation – he was the obvious one, I mean if you wanted a socialist playwright, you know, there he was, there he was making ... , so I think there was a direct line that came from Brecht's own work. But then there was, you know, again I think it's a sort of chicken and egg, you know the theatre was ready for a change in dramaturgy, a change in the way it looked on the curtain and things like that and Brecht was already there and doing it so, you know, you get people like John Berry, the designer, who was then working in the RSC, and you begin to see that filtering down, so you know, even in Whitstable in your amateur dramatic company, you suddenly, you know people who've been reading about and maybe even seeing some of the work that Berry was, you know, doing, were bringing that down, it was trickling all the way, it was trickling all the way down. I think his politics got lost on the way, I mean I think that now, you know we have all the sort of superficial Brechtian theatrical techniques at our hand but his politics is usually lost in most performances.

ES: Do you think that's a good thing, or...?

VG: I think it means that you're not doing something, I mean I'm a sort of a bit of a purist in that way, I think his, if you take any of his greater plays, his great plays, that what drove him was a sense that the world needed changing, and that that's what it, that's political, that is a political, and that if you don't – you don't necessarily have to see it as he saw it, as you know a Marxist response to it although that is his response to it, but I do think that if you don't recognise that that's how the plays work and what drives the plays then there is something missing. There is something missing from that. Mind you, that being said, I've just seen the RS- the National, toured a fantastic performance of The Threepenny Opera. I've never enjoyed The Threepenny Opera as much as the recent performance that came up to Contact at Manchester. But a lot of the politics, a lot of the sort of analysis that there is, was taken out, partly through the re-translation of the songs. But it doesn't stop it from working in a different way.

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