

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Yvonne Green – interview transcript

Interviewer: Claire Fayers

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Theatregoer 1945-68, on musicals, Lonsco, dressing up for theatre visits.

CF: What kind of productions did you go and see?

YG: A lot of musicals, partly because my dad was very keen on educating my older sister and I, so he took us a lot and partly because it's the sort of thing you did as a child anyway. So we saw, I can remember three times being taken to see 'Big Bands' with my dad. Once it was with Bobby Breen and I'd never heard of Bobby Breen! One with Sarah Vaughan and it was a time she'd broken her toe and had to sit down but she was still incredibly lively, she was wonderful.

CF: Did you always enjoy performances you saw, or were there any you didn't?

YG: I didn't like farces that we were taken to see as a supposed treat. I can only remember going twice and not enjoying either one of them. I can't remember the name of the main character but it was always the same bloke. They were always farces, they were always at the Whitehall Theatre and they were always loud. It didn't work for me I just thought they were stupid.

CF: So did you see these performances as a child?

YG: Yes I was.

CF: And even then you didn't find it...

YG: I didn't find it funny. I just thought it was loud, just a lot of noise and people running in and out shouting and slamming doors.

CF: Did you see anything by Brecht?

YG: Unfortunately, yes: as a supposed education I didn't particularly want. I was taken by my older sister to see a version of Mahogany and I hated it from the off, as a child I hated it. And to be quite honest at the first interval I left. And I think my sister did too, she realised it was quite unsuitable for a child.

CF: Do you think you'd enjoy it now?

YG: No! Bad memories. You would have to be very politically active to see it as halfway funny. I mean the theatre was nice.

CF: So did you enjoy the experience of going to the theatre?

YG: To be quite honest I didn't feel as involved in the theatre as I did when I was in the cinema. And I can't say why and it's not true now.

CF: Really! So do you still go to the theatre now?

YG: Yes

CF: And you feel more involved now? Why do you think that it? Is it because you're older than you were then?

YG: Partly because I can choose what I go and see and partly because I have more awareness now, I realise it's special, a special treat. I'm not saying the pictures aren't a special treat but you know, it is, something very special and I don't think I quite realised that then.

CF: Do you think that along with your change in attitude to the theatre that society's attitudes to the theatre have also changed since you were a child and went to see these productions?

YG: I do think it was considered quite elitist and not so much now. I mean if you went to a special night then, you would get dressed up and people go in their jeans now. I mean there's nothing wrong in that because they go and that's good.

CF: So when you used to go did people get very dressed up then?

YG: Oh yes, definitely, it was a night out it was special.

CF: So you were made to dress up when you went?

YG: One time in particular my dad was taking us to the theatre one night and my grandma was there and she said: 'She's not going in that!' And I can remember the outfit she made me wear that she had bought me, it was navy blue with red and white piping, I can see it now. It was special and you were mean to dress up and that's good. There's nothing wrong in that.

CF: So when you went to the theatre was it a whole big night out, did you go to dinner before or after or anything?

YG: Oh no! I was a child. It would finish quite late. For example the Big Band performances were evening performances so they would finish quite late so we'd just go straight home.

CF: What did you particularly enjoy seeing?

YG: I think where I realised it was special. In 1956 when My Fair Lady first came out my dad got us tickets but had gone to the pub and his wallet had been stolen with the tickets in. So he said we're going to go anyway and he explained what had happened to the box office and they went along to the seats he said he had and there were two women in there who said they were from South Africa and had won the tickets in a raffle and had come all the way to London to see the show. But we were allowed to stay anyway and we sat on the stairs which is highly illegal and against fire regulations but we saw it! I do remember it, not just for the performance but also when Rex Harrison came on, and I was a child so I didn't know who he was and everyone started shouting and clapping and I thought 'What are they clapping for?!' and the other memory I have of that is that it was a very big theatre, I don't remember which, but I went to the ladies and saw this fantastic machine so I went back to my dad and said 'Can I have some money for the perfume machine?' and he gave me some, I think it was sixpence, and I squirted it and it went straight in my face! So I remember that very very well!

CF: So were things like that typical of theatres?

YG: Well this was a very grand theatre to have something like that.

CF: Was this theatre in London then?

YG: Yes, everything I saw I saw in London because we lived in London but that was a strong memory. I was aware it was special, everybody in the crowd seemed to be 'with' them. I don't remember much but I remember it was visually amazing with lovely things going on across the stage.

CF: You mentioned before the interview that you saw a performance of Ionesco's Rhinoceros what did you think of that?

YG: I don't remember the performance as such but I remember it was Max Adrian and Sian Phillips and I remember Max Adrian was a real larger than life character. stood at the microphone gurning and being very big but I couldn't tell you anything about the actual play.

CF: Was this the performance that you saw the read-through of and what did you make of that?

YG: Yes, I was aware of how strong Adrian was as a character and aware of how a character can influence a performance but I can't remember the actual play.

CF: Do you think that the kind of people who go to the theatre now as opposed to when you went have changed along with the change in people's attitudes you mentioned earlier or do you think it's the same type of people but with a more relaxed attitude?

YG: More people are more likely to go and that's good!

CF: Do you think theatre prices have affected this?

YG: I don't know, as I never paid when I was a child! I went to the theatre with my nan too and went to see Danny Kaye with her, my Grandad didn't go and he was deaf. I remember the audience were all really old and he was really funny, he kept mispronouncing words like 'Chiswick.'! I remember that really well.

CF: So did you find that entertaining then?

YG: Yes I did, he was a very funny man and the audience were so involved they absolutely loved him so you felt so involved

CF: Did you find the attitude of the audience to the play influenced your enjoyment of it?

YG: Yes, because I didn't know who it was. I know it was at the London Palladium because it was at a special theatre in a special place

CF: You mentioned you also saw amateur productions...

YG: I did see one amateur production at the Central School , productions by the third year students, they still do them now, still going strong. I don't' remember much of the play but I do remember waiting in the foyer with my sister and her friends and being bored because they were talking about something I didn't understand.

CF: Even though you can't remember much about many of the performances you saw do you feel that theatre played a big part in your childhood?

YG: No, not a big part and I would've thought that when I was a child, not many children would have gone to the theatre, except to see Peter Pan or something. Especially a child from my background which was not upper class or anything like that. I was unusual to have gone.

CF: Did you feel privileged then to have these experiences as a child?

YG: Some of the productions, I didn't know at the time they were as big as they were. For example I saw a production of *Oliver* with the original cast and being blown away by it. It was a very good musical, perfect for children. I went with a group of other children, not my family, which was different as we discussed it afterwards. But it really was a good show. I think it was one of the most enjoyable performances.

CF: Do you think theatre had a bigger role in society when you were a child or now?

YG: No, because more people are likely to go now it would have more influence now, if people went to see performances that were influential. Because nothing is banned!

CF: Do you recall the abolition of censorship?

YG: No, because I wouldn't have seen anything that would have been banned or subject to censorship

CF: Do you think that now the fact that nothing is banned has had a positive or negative impact on theatre?

YG: I don't know, it just hasn't come into my experience

CF: Overall did you feel your experience of theatre was positive?

YG: Mostly it was something connected with music and productions at the Unity Theatre which was a communist theatre where I felt they were just preaching to the converted and you came out feeling really upset!

CF: So you didn't enjoy these performances then?

YG: I can remember one that was all about the atom bomb and Hiroshima and I hated it. I just thought no, it just upset me

CF: So did you feel too young and naïve to be seeing performances about things such as Hiroshima ?

YG: No, I think they were just preaching to the converted

CF: Are there any other memorable performances you can remember?

YG: Yes, I went to see a radio show with a very young Bob Monkhouse in it and Alma Cogan was the star – a real star of the time and she got very dressed up, I remember her dress and I thought it was so impressive someone would get dressed up for radio!

CF: So you can remember her outfit?

YG: Yes, it was a dress with a very tight black top and shocking pink skirt, it was wonderful. The only other thing I really remember is having to see a production of Shakespeare in a Shakespeare theatre and it was rubbish. We had to write a crit on it. I remember the actor knew there were all schoolchildren in the audience and didn't care. They said at the beginning; 'Look how this man is rapt' and I thought, 'he isn't rapt at all, he's just come out to say his lines!' It was awful. You could tell. It was a school trip, so we didn't pay. As far I was concerned it was a trip to Warwickshire, it must have been summer as we sat outside on the grass.

CF: So you didn't feel that theatre played much of a role in your education then?

YG: No. It was very special though, even for adults appreciated that then.

CF: Do you feel this has been somewhat lost?

YG: Yes. Unless you go to a first night of something very important. It's become more ordinary and I don't know if that's a good or bad thing. I think it's a good thing, it's more accessible and people are more likely to go and have the experience and that's

good. But I think it's a shame people don't think it's special enough to get dressed up for.

CF: Do you think theatre is still thought of as elitist and pretentious and is that feeling justified, then or now?

YG: It was true and is less so now and that's good. You can have people terribly precious about this kind of thing, including the cast. It's like, 'Don't be such a snob' They would never do television back then and it's just snobbery. It's very hard to get into but they're such snobs. And it's a lot cheaper now and therefore more accessible. People from my kind of background just wouldn't go.

CF: So did you go because your dad was keen on it?

YG: Partly, and partly because I was mixing with the right kind of people, such as my nan who took me to see Danny Kaye. But she had to make a special effort to do so and she lived in the West End so it wasn't so hard to get there. But it was just as easy for her to take us to the cinema. She liked it so she wanted us to like it, as with my dad. My sister was the 'preachy' one!

CF: Are there any other memories you'd like to share?

YG: Yes, I remember going to the Royal Opera House and it was incredibly elitist. It was very, very special. I saw Grace Bumbry. Somebody must have given me a ticket because I wouldn't have bought one. Grace was absolutely incredible, I was right at the back of the gods and even I, who have no experience of theatre, knew it was special. I could tell, this was good stuff, from right at the back of the gods, you could hear her loud and clear. She had such a presence. You knew you were getting quality. It didn't matter if you liked opera, it was irrelevant, you knew you were getting something special. I do remember the Opera House and seeing fantastic chandeliers, I'd never seen anything like that before. And I'd just been given this ticket, it was amazing! It was such a treat. I was completely in awe of it. It was fitting and right, it is special, it should have all this pomp around it. It should be special. There have to be places that are special

CF: Do you think it retains that still?

YG: Yes, I've been back and it does. It lets in more ordinary folk. It's because of this class barrier that I would've thought that was for toffs. It wasn't my thing at all but I enjoyed it. Not the music, the performance. That anybody could make that much noise! Not these silly asses in the farces but with such beauty.

CF: OK then, thank you for agreeing to this interview and sharing your experiences with us.