

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## David Girling – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Kate Dorney**

**15 December 2004**

Theatregoer 1945-68, on original run of *Waiting for Godot*, John Osborne's *Luther*, George Devine, John Gielgud and the Oxford University Drama Society.

KD. David, I'd like you to try and describe your general experience of theatre.

DG. I've always been interested in the theatre and in my time I've done quite a bit of amateur acting myself. So I suppose even when I was at school we had frequent trips to the theatre. I was at St John's, Leatherhead and it was an easy train journey up to Waterloo to the Old Vic, so we saw one or two productions there, and one or two others elsewhere as well. Then I did National Service and when I came back I was at Oxford where I did a certain amount of acting, although studying medicine I didn't have all that much time for theatre. Then I became a junior doctor and time was very difficult then and I didn't see many productions at all. Then from about 1967/68 onwards I was at the peak of my theatre-going experiences, I was living in London. I saw a lot of productions in London, and I saw a lot of theatre both modern and theatre at the Old Vic at the National Theatre and at the Aldwych.

KD. And the first memorable production for you was?

DG. I think the first would have been some of the one's we went to see from school. I went to see Richard Burton's *Hamlet* at the Old Vic. A group of us went to see that and we were much impressed, and I'm pretty sure that Fay Compton was Gertrude. Anyway, Gertrude was very good, and it made for a very powerful scene between the Queen and Hamlet. I saw Richard Burton and John Neville in *Othello*, they alternated as Othello and Iago. The production we saw was Richard Burton as Othello.

KD. And were you impressed by his acting?

DG. Yes indeed, a lovely mellow voice. You see in his *Hamlet*, it made me realise for the first time what a lot there is in *Hamlet* that's really very funny. There were some lovely comic scenes. And, I don't know quite how you put this, but it's a matter of taking the really great plays and not taking them too seriously, or at least looking for all the possibilities that there are in those plays. Not treating them as objects within a showcase.

KD. Rather than as a great work of literature, seeing them as entertainment?

DG. Yes, and really seeing them as entertainment. There's a lot to be explored in them that can be thoroughly entertaining. Now, also from school, we went to see *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett. Now I think that must have been the first, I think we agreed that it was probably the first production? [ we subsequently established that this was a production done at Guildford Theatre Club in 1956 ].

KD. 1955?

DG. Yes it would have been about 1955, that's right. And obviously some members of the audience had great problems with that because there was a lot of chatting going on, and a lot of people getting very fidgety. And sometimes saying quite loudly, 'what on earth's all this rubbish about?'

KD. Was that directed at the actors?

DG. No, it was just between members of the audience. Maybe we were unlucky, maybe we had a particularly bad lot sitting just behind us.

KD. Conventional wisdom suggests that most people were pretty staggered by what was going on. Did you feel any sense of that? You were taken by a teacher?

DG. That's right, by one of the English masters.

KD. And did they give you any idea of what the play was about before you went?

DG. Yes they did. Every time before a school outing, whether it was to theatre or opera, we'd have quite a long talk and discussion beforehand at school, before going. The teacher would tell us something about the play and various productions, although of course this didn't apply to new plays. I don't think he or anybody knew much about *Waiting for Godot*. I knew it had a reputation for being a pretty obscure play, but I don't think that in anyway dampened our enthusiasm for seeing it because it was good to see some contemporary theatre, by a well known writer.

KD. And did you enjoy the performance?

DG. I found it fascinating myself, because one was actually asking oneself, 'who are these people? What's going on? What's the relationship between them? Who is Godot?'. It's actually quite a long play when you come to think of it, so there's a lot to think about?

KD. Can you remember how they spoke? Did they use a kind of RP? Or regional accents? Because there are Irish cadences to the writing...

DG. I think it's too long ago to remember. The problem is, I've seen a number of productions since then, including, incidentally, an all female production which was rather good. There's no reason why you shouldn't have women doing those parts. So it's difficult in my memory to sort out one production from another.

KD. Of course. After *Waiting for Godot*, after you left school, I think you said the first production you saw was *Luther*?

DG. Yes, John Osborne's *Luther*. Albert Finney, I'm pretty sure, was in that production. I mean I had a personal interest as a friend of mine was actually in it in a very minor role as a monk. Nevertheless I was absolutely fascinated by that play. I thought it had a huge amount to say about the predicament *Luther* found himself in in standing up against the church of the day, and all the turmoil it creates in his own mind. I think this is what's fascinating about the play, the turmoil in his own mind and the relationship with his own wife, because he marries eventually, and the difficulties that it creates for him. I found it a most persuasive and interesting play.

KD. Did you go as part of a group? How did other people react?

DG. It was just with other members of our family, we were put up for the night by the chap who was in it who lived quite near the theatre.

KD. I know that some reviews of the time were very disparaging because of the references to his constipation and the equation of this in spiritual terms, and the sense that it lowered the tone. Was there any sense of that?

DG. No, I'd read those comments before seeing it and I thought it certainly did not lower the tone, rather it made all the more persuasive as a play, I thought myself. A famous surgeon, Wilfred Trotter, says that if mind and matter meet anywhere, they meet in the large intestine. So I don't think there's any problem about that!

KD. And then I think you said that when you were up at Oxford , George Devine came to give a talk?

DG. Yes, I was a member of OUDS and one or two theatre characters came from time to time to give talks and George Devine was one of the most memorable. He didn't actually give a prepared talk, he just said something about the things that he thought were happening in the theatre of the day, what he felt was going on at the Royal Court , what they wanted to do, he gave us some idea of the enormous range of types of play he was having to read. Quite honestly I don't know how he got through all the scripts he had to read, or how he decided what to put on. He responded to a lot of questions and things like this. And it was just good to get to know him, to get to meet him, and find out something of what he was trying to do. At the time, it was a very lively period for the theatre.

KD. And did you have a sense of a new beginning in theatre?

DG. Yes I think so, yes. It was an exploratory time. He told us that he was sent a lot of what you might call 'traditional' plays as well as more experimental and exploratory plays. He said he was even sent plays in blank verse and things which could have been written in the 17 th century but he didn't put them on.

KD. I think you said that you went to see the first production of Entertaining Mr Sloane , did you enjoy that?

DG. I did actually. I'm pretty sure that that was the first Joe Orton play I'd seen. I was aware that people had found it shocking and in poor taste, but in fact I found it a most entertaining play. Certainly when I went there was a lot of positive audience response. A lot of laughter, and certainly when I went, I wasn't aware of any undue negative reactions from the audience.

KD. And had you read about this response in the papers or?

DG. Well, I'd read in the papers, obviously there'd been some adverse comments in the papers. I can't remember the details quite honestly.

KD. You didn't find it at all...?

DG. No, no.

KD Shocked is too strong a word I think, but were you surprised to see that kind of behaviour on the stage?

DG. Yes, I totally agree. I certainly wasn't shocked, but it was certainly an unusual experience, from my theatre-going up until then. To see a play dealing with such issues, but there we are!

KD. Can you remember where you saw it?

DG. I can't remember which theatre it was I'm afraid, it was in London.

KD. And then I think you said that you saw John Gielgud directing The Rivals ?

DG. That's right, yes. I was up at Oxford from 58-62, it was sometime during that period. There was a production of The Rivals with Margaret Rutherford as Mrs Malaprop and John Gielgud was directing. Interestingly enough the night I went he was sitting right in front of me in the stalls.

KD. Was he on his own?

DG. Yes, just sitting there on his own.

KD. Did he seem to be enjoying it?

DG. I think so, yes. I was fascinated to see how few people seemed to recognise him. He just came in like an ordinary member of the public, found his seat and sat down.

KD. He's very distinctive

DG. Yes I know, I suppose people don't often examine the people they're sitting with.

KD. What were the audience like?

DG. They just thoroughly enjoyed it, you can imagine Margaret Rutherford in the role. She was very well known at the time and I think people had come to see her as much as anything else.

KD. Was there a good cross section, or was it mostly students?

DG. Oh yes, I think there was a good mix, city people as well as university people.

KD. Ok, do you have any other particular memories? I know you've been to see Home , and several plays that featured Olivier/Gielgud/Richardson can you give me a run down of those?

DG. I think another one to mention is John Gielgud, again as a director. I saw Benjamin Britten's *Midsummer Night's Dream* at Covent Garden . This was in 1974, and that was directed by John Gielgud and it made me realise how important it was to have a good director for opera. It was hugely enjoyable production and I think everybody loved it. I saw Gielgud as Prospero in *The Tempest* in the Old Vic, a Peter Hall production. I was in quite a cheap seat, but in fact, the Old Vic's a fairly small theatre isn't it? I didn't feel out of it at all and I thoroughly enjoyed that. I saw Ralph Richardson as John Gabriel Borkman at the Old Vic. That was a most moving production. I think the extraordinary ability that both John Gielgud and Ralph Richardson have of allowing plays to speak for themselves. And I got the impression that they acted well with other members of the cast. From what I could tell, they were not primadonna-ish in their approach to theatre and I think this sad old man, John Gabriel Borkman came across with this enormous sense of sadness and tragedy which was very persuasive. Because he really finishes up hardly relating to anybody else in the play at all. It was a most moving production.

KD. It's very interesting the way he moved into those kind of roles, as a young actor he was always berated by critics for trying to do any kind of serious part, they said he was a comic actor, and that he should only do comic roles because he was big and comical looking. Borkman is one of the highlights of his career, arguably, and Peter Hall's I think, or certainly Peter Hall would say so.

DG. Yes, well I think it shows the range that those really great actors did have in fact. I saw Olivier's *Shylock, The Merchant of Venice* in Jonathan Miller's production, also with Joan Plowright, she was very good.

KD. When was that?

DG. That was in 1970 I think. And, well I think, Olivier's productions and acting does fascinate me because he certainly does explore parts very thoroughly. And here he was very persuasive as a very put upon Jewish, bit of filth really, who has to try and find his own, somehow has to try and create his own dignity and goes about completely the wrong way, antagonising people instead of eliciting their sympathy. And yet by the end of the play it was phenomenal how he somehow elicited the enormous pity of the

audience. There was a real sense of tragedy at the end of the play, his howls of tragedy at the end had an absolutely devastating effect on the audience.

KD. Oh really?

DG. Yes, yes.

KD. And do you have any recollection of the constituency of that audience? He's now superlatively famous, people are desperate to see him...

DG. I really can't remember much about the audience I'm afraid, what I do remember is that there really was a long pause before the applause started, simply because of the effect the production had had. In a sense we needed to sit in silence really for quite a bit before the applause started. And when it did start it was tremendous.

KD. He was a very different actor to the other two, much more of a grandstander. Do you have a favourite of the three?

DG. I appreciate there different styles of acting and I like to have both styles around, in a sense I don't really want to choose between them. I like them all, they had both approaches to acting.

KD. Fair enough. I think you said that you saw Olivier in *The Recruiting* ...

DG. Officer . Yes. Olivier and Maggie Smith, now that was huge fun! There was no impression of any primadonna-ish behaviour there, I think the whole cast just enjoyed themselves. Even the scene changes were funny. It was just a thoroughly entertaining night at the theatre.

KD. And this is all at the Old Vic? Whereabouts were you living at the time?

DG. At the time I was living, I was still living in Croydon with my family I think.

KD. So you were the right side of the river? It's interesting that they were all performing on the South Bank made a huge shift in theatre going. They'd all been West End stars.

DG. Oh yes, yes, I hadn't thought of that.

KD. And you saw Home obviously, can you tell me a bit about that?

DG. Yes, again the cast all worked together very well. They seemed to be, I'm just looking in my notes, there was Gielgud and Richardson, but also Dandy Nichols and Mona Washbourne. Now Mona Washbourne, both Dandy Nichols and Mona Washbourne, were tremendously interesting characters, who were very good in Home. And then Warren Clarke was the rather strange young man. I enjoyed that enormously. It was the quality of, there was a certain quality of quietness about it, and the reminiscing of these two old men, who actually were quite old men by then, I think. Obviously with great affection for each other. I was impressed with how well they could use sometimes quite long pauses as they were reminiscing, they were thinking about things, or they had just spotted somebody and they were thinking who it was. Just the expressions on their faces and the way they were looking, or just exchanging glances with each other. They really did work extraordinarily well together in that production and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

KD. And did you have any expectations having seen them both separately? Was there a sense of excitement that they were actually going to appear together in a new play by a modern author?

DG. Yes, there certainly was, but I think there was always that sense of expectancy about plays that they were in. They were so well-known, that I think one was always looking forward to seeing what they would do, what they had to offer. I was certainly

very glad to see them in a modern play, it made me realise that there is some good playwriting going on now. It's not all history by any means. Very able contemporary writers producing good drama.

KD. Yes, and nice I think, at that stage that somebody wanted them for the role.

DG. Indeed. Yes. The same was true of Alan Bennett's *Forty Years On*, which Gielgud was in. I just remember feeling glad and impressed that they'd actually asked him to do the part, that they were still available for doing all sorts of types of play, which was good.

KD. And you saw *No Man's Land* as well?

DG. Yes. [Laughs] Although I have to confess I can't remember very much about that production. That sounds a terrible thing to say! With Richardson and Gielgud, it was a Peter Hall production at the Old Vic, but I just cannot remember much about it, I don't know why. A blank in my memory I think.

KD. I wonder if they merge in peoples' memories? They are very similar in some respects, in terms of the reminiscing, their static, there are only two other characters that have any real impact...

DG. Merge with *Home* you mean?

KD. Yes. There is for me a sense in which they seem to reprising the roles. It's interesting actually particularly given what you've said in this interview, Ralph Richardson was approached for *Waiting for Godot* and he wouldn't do it because Sam Beckett wouldn't explain to him what the play was about. And he said he couldn't possibly do a play where he didn't understand what was going on. This is in 1955, nine years before he's done *An Inspector Calls* which is similarly a puzzling play, but it was clear to everyone that it has a strong moral message. Then in the 70s he does this work with Pinter who, again, absolutely refuses to offer any kind of elucidation. So he'd obviously come a long way by that point.

DG. That's interesting because I got the impression that John Gielgud was happy to try his hand at anything, I don't know whether that's true.

KD. Yes. Ralph had always been the interpreter of contemporary work right the way through from Priestley and did a lot more contemporary work than Gielgud and Olivier, so that's interesting, because Gielgud was directing, you saw him directing opera, perhaps you saw him

DG. In a wider range of activities, yes.

KD. Can you give me a sense of what other stuff you were going to see around this time? Were those key pieces, and how did they fit into your theatre-going as a whole?

DG. Let's see. I saw quite a lot of the RSC productions at the Aldwych. It was a good opportunity to see a lot of Shakespeare for one thing. I saw *Titus Andronicus* with Colin Blakely, a strange play perhaps, but part of the corpus. Richard Johnson as Antony in *Julius Caesar*, there were Trevor Nunn productions. And of course I saw Peter Brook's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the acrobatic one. That was great fun.

DG I thoroughly enjoyed that because there was some really very good visual comedy in it, you know real comedy, because of the sheer physical exuberance of it all. Women trying to stop their lovers from running off stage and things like that, huge fun. I was very lucky to get into that, I just went on spec on the night and happened to get a return. I'd tried booking and had no luck, so I just went on spec to see if I could get a return and I was lucky.

KD. As someone who acted would you like to have a go at it?

DG. I don't think I had the physical capability to do it! Mind you Olivier was also a very physical actor, it can have a huge impression if it's well used.

KD. That was a great thing to go and see, did you know of Peter Brook?

DG. Yes, I was aware of his directorial abilities and interests. So I saw a lot of Shakespeare, I saw Saturday, Sunday, Monday Eduardo de Filippo, which was great fun. At the National with Laurence Olivier and Joan Plowright. That was just a hugely enjoyable play. I think one of the things that impressed me about that was that there were a lot of characters in it, a lot of small parts, but even the small parts had contributed hugely to the sheer fun of the play and the production. It was just hugely enjoyable. I saw Equus with Alec McCowen and Peter Firth, the Peter Shaffer play. I enjoyed that, I thought it was most impressive.

KD. Again, another visually striking play.

DG. Visually striking and also an experimental type of play. I thought it was great. Actually it must have been around then that I saw Paul Schofield in Amadeus, Paul Schofield and Simon Callow, I mean that play fascinated me because of the extraordinary way the music works, Mozart's music works in the play. And the way that the music is brought in and actually fulfils a hugely important dramatic part in the play and the relationship of Mozart and Salieri to the music. It's an enormously original idea, well a very effective idea if not original, Mozart's great rival is the only person in the play really who really appreciates what an extraordinary talented Mozart is and this of course has a devastating effect on Salieri. I'm sure it's not historical but it makes for a very good play of course. In a sense, from the dramatic point of view, Salieri could have kept quiet and his own career would have continued to flourish but he was the one who, the only person in the cast if you like who realises how much greater Mozart is than Salieri.

KD. Again, that kind of ordinary tragedy in which you see someone destroyed.

DG. Yes, and the fact that Mozart is such an unattractive person in the play. He's a vulgar sort of person. And Paul Schofield was phenomenal as Salieri.

KD. That was at the National as well.

DG. Yes I think it was. People who take that trouble over nurturing their talent, really see the possibilities in, not just the old classics but the new plays as well. It's tremendously healthy I think.

KD. What about Dandy Dick?

DG. Dandy Dick, yes, Pinner this was at the Garrick. The great feature of that was Alistair Sim. It was the first time I'd seen him on stage and it just made me realise what a lot he could achieve by the way he moved, the way he looked at other members of the cast, his facial expressions, the way he dressed. Just the way he behaved on stage, the way he related to other characters. It's quite a light play in a way, just so very enjoyable, an enjoyable production, at the Garrick in about 1973.

KD. And then you said Faustus?

DG. Yes Ian McKellen. Around that time and subsequently I went to see a lot of plays that he was in and I was fascinated to see how he developed as an actor. I think I'm right in saying that he started off a bit primadonna-ish in some of the early productions so it's interesting to see how he has since mellowed and what a very good actor he became, and still is and how well he now can work with other actors on stage. Faustus was great, I think one of the features of that, for the good and the bad angel he uses

hand puppets so it's easy to see what's going on in his own mind. It's a real tragedy Faustus I always think, because it needn't have happened. There's a lot going on in his own mind, he thinks his pact with the Devil is irreversible, he's decided that and it's not the case. And of course that marvellous speech at the end of almost total despair is almost unique in English theatre I think. A speech of total despair like that was hugely impressively done. 'Ah Faustus thou now hast but one bare hour to live' I was most impressed with that.

KD To round it off have you ever seen anything that you just thought was dreadful?

DG. Oh yes! Now I can't remember what it was, it was in Oxford and just a piece of political propaganda. It wasn't really proper drama at all, just the cast haranguing the audience.

KD. Too early for agit prop?

DG. Yes, it wasn't that. I just can't remember what it was called.

KD. And did you leave?

DG. Yes, it's the only time. I didn't walk out, I just left at the interval. A lot of people just got up and walked out, even during the performance. I got the impression that after the interval there would be very few people left in the auditorium. Why it was put on I just don't know. I'm afraid I've forgotten who the author was, what the play was called, it just wasn't worth remembering. That's the only time. I always say that those of us who do a certain amount of performing ourselves, my sympathies are always with the cast and I always want them to succeed if you know what I mean. So I'm always feeling very positive about them, even if things are not very good, or it's a rather disappointing production, my sympathies are still with the cast and the production. I mean I've heard some very very cruel things said by members of the audience in productions, which I would never dream of saying because the cast do the best they can, they do their best with the material they've got, because not every play put on is a good play, let's face it.

KD. That's a lovely attitude. Very humane.

DG. I think this is what live theatre's all about. It's why it's much more interesting to go and see a play than it is to see a film, although obviously there are some very good films and I thoroughly enjoy them. But it's not the same as being a member of the audience, being part of the team, because the actors and the audience are really doing something together aren't they?

KD. Would you like to finish with your Terence Rattigan anecdote?

DG. Oh Terence Rattigan, yes. Well one of my great regrets is that I didn't get to see the originals of some of his London productions. When I was an undergraduate up at Oxford I did appear in one or two Trinity Players Productions. I was at Trinity College and Terence Rattigan was an old member of the college and he used to come and see our productions, and this was at the height of his fame then. And he probably had about two or three plays on in the West End at the time. And I said how nice of him to come and take the trouble to come and see a rather indifferent, I dare say, college production!

KD. And would he come back and talk to you?

DG. Oh yes, he'd hang around afterwards. He wouldn't necessarily talk about the play we'd been doing but he'd be around. And I just thought how nice of him.

KD. Yes and an extraordinary insight into how their lives were that he'd actually take the time to come and do that. I can't imagine that happening now.

DG. No, no I suppose not.

KD. Well that's lovely, thank you.

DG. Thank you.