

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Peter Nichols – interview transcript

Interviewer: Jamie Andrews

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Playwright: theatregoing as child; critical reception; Bristol Old Vic; A Day in the Death of Joe Egg; the process of playwriting; censorship and the Lord Chamberlain; Privates on Parade; early Variety performances.

JA: Peter, we're going to start by talking about your early experiences of performance. You've written about going to the pantomime at Christmas and the circus in the Summer- what do you remember still about these, what was it that attracted you?

PN: I think it was the glamorous feeling when the circus arrived, because Bertram Mills' Circus, which was the big circus at the time, used to arrive at the local railway station with all their players, all their cast, all their animals. and they would come out of the local, suburban station and parade along our street to go to the Common, where they had their big tent, and they would play for a week, a fortnight, however long it was. So you would look out of the window of our suburban house and find a camel nibbling the hedge, and girls waving from elephants, and horses prancing and all that, and it was simply marvellous, that was. And it was the sense of occasion, glamour and glitter. And then the ordinary Common on which we normally play suddenly became this glamorous place with the tents, and the huge big top, and the lights, and the noise and all that. And then you'd walk in up this sawdust trail through this aisle of tents on either side, with girls shouting. I mean I've done it since, it's still done, some of the circuses still have that atmosphere when they come to town. Of course it doesn't work for me any more because I'm nearly an eighty-year-old man, so it's a bit different from being an eight-year-old boy. But that's how it must have been up till the advent of war, I suppose.

And the other one you mentioned was the pantomime, which came at Christmas. And we would go usually to the Prince's Theatre, which was bombed early in the War, so that was the end of that. They're still doing pantomimes at the other theatre, the Hippodrome, and Theatre Royal which is the Old Vic ... this is in Bristol, of course, and that was how it was then. The pantomime was equally glamorous, with all its flying ballet, and people dressed as animals, and clowns and stuff ... and it was those elements, those almost tatty sort of apparatus of circus and pantomime, that initially attracted me, long before I became aware that theatre could be more than that.

JA: That's interesting that you say it's tatty. Do you think you were aware at the time that you could almost see behind the glamour and the glitz of this, or is that something now that you look back.

PN: No, I just loved everything about it ... like going to the cinema, my mother tells me I used to say let's not go to the Orpheus, let's go to the Odeon, because the curtains are so much nicer there. It was the sense that everything about the experience was important, and I suppose that's something I have kept alive in my writing, that it's not just what happens isolated on a stage removed from the audience, but an entire experience. And I find when critics write about the theatre, I always find it disappointing that they don't acknowledge that maybe they had a toothache, or they had a difficult journey to get to the theatre, or they had a row with their wife before they came, or you know, they were in an uncomfortable seat while somebody was using a mobile phone three seats away. These are the sorts of things that matter to me as much. In fact they're what make live performances what they are. They're distinctive because they're not predictable, they're not like a film shown on a screen which is [?]. And that's the thing I have probably always played on when I've been writing plays.

JA: At some time in your childhood, do you ever remember going to more straight plays, and if not, when was it that you first started going to theatre like that?

PN: It's difficult to remember, everything's difficult to remember, it gets worse. Laurence Olivier said to me he could remember his early experiences but he can't remember last year. I haven't found that, I've found that it's fading and fading and fading, and the more I try and remember, the more I falsify it, so that life then has become almost fictional. Especially because it was the War. I was twelve when the War started, and eighteen when it ended, so my entire adolescence was spent in a blacked out war-time city, in a Europe that was blacked out, the whole of Europe was blacked out, except Portugal. And, it's difficult to remember exactly when things happened. I do know certain things, because I've traced them into history books, in records of the theatre and so on. So I know I saw a pantomime at the Lyceum when I was 5, because I know the date, it's in the books. I think 'Peter Pan' is the first play I remember, if you can call that a play, because it's half a pantomime, it's one of the plays that was based on pantomime, and Bernard Shaw wrote some as well, but until then I don't think pantomime had played much of a part in English drama, except perhaps 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', that has so many of the elements of pantomime in it. So I think 'Peter Pan', and then when I started to read Shakespeare at school.

JA: How old would you have been then?

PN: In my early teens, I suppose, thirteen or fourteen, and I saw it at the Old Vic, before it was the Old Vic actually. Touring companies, and John Gielgud came, I think in 'Hamlet', and I saw 'Macbeth', and I saw lots of Shakespeare.

JA: Did the idea of the school trip exist then, whereby you'd be studying it in class and then all troop off, or was this something on your own initiative, or your parents'?

PN: I think it was maybe a school matinee, I seem to remember it was, but again it's difficult for me, because most of my associations with the Old Vic were when I was

there at drama school there, which was after the War, so it's very difficult for me to say. I do remember coming to London and seeing Phyllis Dixie, since you're onto censorship, let's get onto Phyllis Dixie, because she was the only one who ever appeared nude on the stage, or semi-nude, usually just the top. And she was in a play called 'While Parents Sleep' which was scandalous at the time, and I remember going with either my parents or my uncle to see that, why they chose to take me to that I can't imagine. But you got brief glimpses of breasts, because then of course you had strict rules about what you could do. And at the Windmill when they bared their breasts they had to keep absolutely still, they couldn't move with bare breasts. [PN laughs]. They had to stand stock still. And if that rule was breached, they could be closed by the Lord Chamberlain or more often the local watch committee. Because one of the fears about getting rid of the Lord Chamberlain, the abolition of the Lord Chamberlain, one of the fears people had was that it would open you to much worse censorship by the local watch committee, a body of local bigwigs and busybodies who thought they knew better than us what we should see.

JA: Going back a bit, I suppose, this project is primarily concerned with theatre from '45 onwards, and you're perhaps unusual in this in that your first experience of performance during the beginning of this period was actually in Singapore and touring Malaya with the Combined Services Entertainment. I'd like to ask briefly, what kind of shows were you putting on there and was there ever any short, straight drama that you put on, or was it primarily just musical entertainment.

PN: We were centred in an HQ on Singapore island, and various parties were put together, mostly variety shows, or what was then called concert parties, later we would have called them revues, they were half way between a variety show and a revue, and they included sketches and turns and singing and dancing and so on. But we were put together primarily to do a play, called 'Not So Much the Heat', and I don't think anyone's ever heard of it since, but it was set in India, in the forces in India, and I imagine it was rather like 'It Ain't Half Hot, Mum'. It was about a service unit in India, maybe during the War, maybe after the War, I can't remember now, I can't remember anything about it. I know I had the young Officer lead in it, and Stanley Baxter and Kenneth Williams were playing other parts in it, and the rest of the troupe were all playing parts in this, and it was a farce, it was a farce set in the services in India. And the saying it came from was, Oh, it's not so much the heat as the humidity, that's what makes it uncomfortable to be in the Tropics is what they were saying, so it was called 'Not So Much the Heat'. So we started, and we read it, we were assembled for it, we had a good reading of it, it was very funny, we thought it was all going to be great, and then word came from London that we couldn't do it after all, the author had agreed to sign up for a London production, and therefore all the other productions were cancelled. Awful shame for him because he didn't get anything at all out of it. It never got to London as far as I know, or if it did it quickly died. Anyway that meant we were all left stranded without a show, so Stanley Baxter and Kenneth Williams and various others decided let's do a revue, so that's what we did, we put together a show that was a revue, so I was rather left out of it then, because I didn't have a turn to do, I wasn't actually a comedian or a performer in that way. But in fact I did have one, and it was the first writing of mine that was ever performed on stage and it was called 'The Condemned Cell'. It foreshadowed some of my writing, I suppose, in the sense that it was a parody of a melodramatic monologue of a man in a condemned cell orating to himself like the Count of Monte Cristo. And Kenneth Williams still remembered it, I'd completely forgotten it, and when he did his show 'An Evening with Kenneth Williams',

he started quoting screeds of it, and he pointed me out in the audience, and I couldn't believe it, I'm there looking bewildered on the edited version they did. It didn't go in as a regular part of the show because I almost immediately went sick with amoebic dysentery which I got several times. If you got it three times actually they sent you home, I had it twice and then I had some residual intestine complaint, I wasted away to nothing, I looked like Belsen . So we toured Malaya , Singapore , Hong Kong with this revue.

JA: I'm interested in the audience reaction. Were people there because they had to, be, or were they happy to escape from the day to day monotony, were they happy to be entertained by you?

PN: It depended where it was. If we were in a place where there was other entertainments -cinemas and things - no, nobody came. But if it was in some remote unit, where we did go, you'd get an audience. I mean after all, they were seeing Kenneth Williams and Stanley Baxter, who would be future big stars. Though it was a terrible show. It was much worse than I represented in 'Privates on Parade'. I mean that show, the one in 'Privates on Parade', has got very little to do with the show in fact that we did. Though some of the atmosphere, the opening chorus and things like that were very much borrowed from CSE. But when Stanley went to see 'Privates', he said he went in fear and trembling in case he was revealed as a terrible ham or something, but he said, actually I was disappointed because it was nothing very much like the show we did.

JA: Now when you came back to Britain you went into theatre training at the Old Vic in Bristol . How useful do you think that training was for an actor and what kind of aspirations did you and your contemporaries have, was it the aspiration to act at the Old Vic, to make it in London , touring in repertory- what was seen as the end goal?

PN: Well my goal was never to be an actor. I went to Bristol Old Vic because there were no courses for playwrights. There were no university courses in drama. In fact Bristol was probably one of the earliest, they did in fact establish certain theatre studies at Bristol long before there was a Department of Theatre Studies. So people like Glynn Wickham, who later became Professor of Drama at the University , used to come and lecture us at the Old Vic school on theatre history and so on. We were housed above a fruit warehouse, an isolated red brick building, amongst quite a lot of bomb damage. This was 1948 and Bristol wasn't rebuilt any more than any other city was rebuilt for years. They were too busy building houses for the ex-servicemen and people who had been bombed out to bother with the centre of cities. So the centre of cities tended to stay as they were for ten years or more. In fact I don't think they started on the real rebuilding of Bristol until quite late in the '50s. So we were in the middle of Bristol , in the old part around King Street . And the theatre's stage door was just across the road, and we were in this fruit and vegetable warehouse. So we would go in in the morning and pick our way through all the fruit and vegetables, and climb the stairs while they were all throwing cabbages about. And there was our classroom up there, and the other classroom was across the road in a church hall beside the theatre. The great advantage of it was that we were allowed then, before Equity got onto it, to take part in the Bristol Old Vic productions, and it was great for them, because they had a free supply of crowds, so if they were doing something like 'Julius Caesar', it was terrific.

JA: So you didn't get paid at all?

PN: No, no, we didn't get paid, we were just terribly happy to be on the stage, we couldn't wait. I appeared in quite a few productions. It was mostly non-speaking. We did speak, we did have little parts. [PN gets up and fetches photo albums showing photos of his parts in Old Vic productions].

JA: You were just showing some photos of some of the walk-on parts and crowd scenes you did at the Old Vic when you were a student. Did the students ever mix with the leading actors at all, did you get to talk to them?

PN: Yeah. In some cases had affairs with them. Not in my case unfortunately. But some of the girls particularly. It was rather good for the actors to come down to Bristol and find a ready supply of young women, who were adoring and couldn't wait to get in with them. I think we had quite a lot of conversations with them. I had quite a lot of conversations with George Colouris and got to know him, which was exciting to me because he had been in the Mercury Theatre productions of Orson Welles, and in the film of 'Citizen Kane', for me he was a big film star. He had come straight from Hollywood to the Old Vic. I afterwards I assumed he was probably going to be investigated for anti-American activities. A good few of them were coming over then.

JA: And there wasn't any sniffiness then on behalf of these leading actors about mixing with the local students?

PN: No, not really, no they were pretty adaptable. And I afterwards played of course as an actor once I had left the Old Vic school, I went back quite often and played in productions.

JA: I was going to move on to your career as an actor in repertory theatre. You said at the beginning that you never wanted to be an actor, yet you did spend there or four years, I guess, touring in various plays.

PN: About five actually. And playing in early television. And mostly in rep. But I never really pursued it with any great enthusiasm. I enjoyed doing it. I always enjoyed acting. I was never nervous, I never had stage fright or anything like that. I loved doing it, I felt very natural on the stage. But in those days it was very difficult to get a young actor who was a character actor, you had to play juveniles. If you were a juvenile you had to play juveniles, you had to play straight. I wasn't very good at playing straight, I wanted to play comic parts. And when I got the chance, I usually did pretty well, playing in things like 'The Alchemist', small parts, clown parts, comedy parts, that kind of thing. I didn't really pursue it with any great enthusiasm because I always wanted to be a playwright. And that's what I was doing really, while I was resting, I was playwrighting.

JA: You say you were acting in television as well, was that to make ends meet? Could you make ends meet just by theatre acting?

PN: No, I couldn't really. I was living partly on money that my father had given me when I was 21. He was a frugal man and he'd saved 500 pounds in National Savings certificates, which was a lot of money then, he'd done it for me and my brother. And he gave it to us when we were 21. But being frugal, he didn't give it to us, he doled it out to us, rather like a pension. So every time I wanted any more money I had to write and ask him for it. It was typical of a miser, because he was a miser, but he was also a generous miser. That seems an oxymoron, but it happens. You can have a generous impulse- I'll look after the boy, I'll give him some money to see him through - but I'd better not give it to him all at once, because he could squander it.

JA: On his terms.

PN: Exactly, a gift on his terms. And endlessly remind me- why don't you show more gratitude, boy, and all that. Anyway, no I couldn't support myself as an actor. Particularly as I had to live in London and pay rent. I shared flats, mostly, with other young actors, and aspiring people of various kinds. People aspiring to be playwrights, actors. None of us had much money. But we did manage to live in places now that you couldn't afford to live at all, like Notting Hill Gate, Kensington, because things were different. We paid like three pounds a week in rent, even that was hard to come by. Equity minimum was five pounds. And you didn't get paid for rehearsal either. Or you got three, four pounds for rehearsal. So if you did a special week in a rep, you'd get ten pounds. And out of that you'd have to keep your flat in London, and also pay digs where you were. So it wasn't very viable economically [PN laughs]

JA: Was television better paid?

PN: Yeah, not that much better. What was extraordinary about television then that people can't really believe is that we used to go in and do it on Sunday night, live, because there was no recording, I'm talking about the early '50s and then you'd go in again and do it on Thursday. The repeat would be another performance.

JA: I never realised that

PN: There was no such thing as a recording. So we'd do a dress rehearsal in public for the audience on Sunday night, then we'd go and repeat it on Thursday and get it right. It was all done on the move, so that when I started writing for television, I had to write in scenes where people had the opportunity to get across the studio. So if they played a scene in one place, and then the next scene they were wearing slightly different clothes in another location, I had to write in a bit that would cover them getting across the studio, putting on a different coat, getting into the new set, and the cameras wheeled round and found them.

JA: You were working this out as you went along, it was just part of the natural process of writing, to bear all this in mind?

PN: Yeah, because I knew how it was done, because I was an actor

JA: That does bring me on to another question. You spent time acting, you once met John Osborne who also used to act before he turned to playwriting, Pinter acted. What do you think that experience brought you when you did start to write plays for the stage?

PN: I've been asked that before. I think it's, all of us who were playwrights, I think were all theatre people more than people realise. We were theatre people, we weren't just playwrights. We'd been actors, I didn't find it difficult to direct. I knew what had to be done. I knew all the aspects of theatre. But then I'd grown up knowing them somehow. I mean when I went to the pantomime, I was just as interested in the fact that they were changing the colour wheel on the balcony, or how did they do the flying, how were the ropes arranged, and the front cloth, when the front cloth comes down and it's covered in adverts, that sort of thing. I loved all that, I loved all aspects of it. And I suppose it's meant that I'm now disillusioned with it and I don't really like it anymore, I don't really like all those aspects because I wore out my passion for them. I was what was then called stage-struck, which meant not just the drama but every aspect of it.

JA: That's interesting that you say you were interested in the whole, total control of the theatre, but you didn't really direct much. I know you directed 'Born in the Gardens' in Bristol, but you didn't, unless I'm wrong, direct any other of your plays, did you?

PN: Yes, I did. I directed 'Blue Murder', both in the Tobacco factory and on the national tour. I co-directed, though I'm not really credited, but I really did co-direct 'A Piece of My Mind'. I gave the credit for these things very often to the director. And I think it quite often happens with authors who were so closely allied to the production, that they didn't want to claim part of the director's credit, but you could very often have said that they were co-directors. I directed a revival of 'Joe Egg' at Greenwich, I directed a revival of 'Forget-Me-Not Lane', I directed 'The National Heath' in Minnesota, so I did about 6 productions. I would have liked to have done more, but I didn't get interested in it early enough to make it affect my career, it was only quite late in life. It was actually 'Born in the Gardens' that did it, because when they said would you do a play for us to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Theatre Royal, I said yes on condition that I can direct it. So then I wrote a play that I knew I could direct, which was one set, four characters.

JA: Going back to the mid 1950s, I mentioned briefly that you met John Osborne while you were both actors. Do you have any memories of meeting him then or is it really things you have super-imposed afterwards knowing what happened?

PN: No, I remember seeing him, and I've got this in my autobiography, I remember seeing him in, I think it was 'The Reluctant Debutante', where he played a butler, a part previously played by someone like Wilfrid Hyde-White in the West End. Then, of course, all Reps did only what was in the West End, they did productions afterwards of the West End plays. Very little new drama and most of it modelled on West End lines. So, John

was in that and I thought he was terribly good, very interesting as an actor, because he had this [PN impersonates JO's voice] snaaaarling voice and very scathing personality. I thought he was terrific, I really liked him, he was very unusual. And I was talking to Pat Sands, who was the director of the company, this was at Frinton-on-Sea, the 'Under Thirties Theatre Company' [PN laughs], which we were, still, however whatever age we played, we could play 70-year old men, we'd still be putting grey on our hair, god knows what it must have looked like [PN laughs]. John was in this, and I was talking to Pat Sands, Patricia Sands, who was the director, the woman who afterwards became the producer of 'The Bill'. And she said, we're thinking of getting rid of John, and I said, why, he's terribly good. And I don't know whether it was anything to do with my response, but anyway they didn't get rid of him, he stayed on. And when I told John this, years later, he was very upset by it. I thought he'd be pleased, but I don't think he liked the fact that he could probably say that he'd kept the job because I had put in a good word for him. But, we played together in 'See How they Run', a farce, in which we're next to each other in the programme as, whatever part I played, Lieutenant Corporal something or other, and John is 'The Intruder', which I think is wonderful, he's just called The Intruder, it's such a wonderful prediction of what he was going to be in the theatre when he started writing.

JA: Do you still have that programme?

PN: Yeah

JA: You still actually have it?

PN: Yes, yeah.

JA: Well moving on a couple of years, obviously one of the main Events that is seen to have kick-started new British drama is 'Look Back in Anger' by John Osborne, can you remember how soon it was before you were aware that this was going on at the Royal Court.

PN: Long time, a long time. I was at home in Bristol for some reason, on one of my frequent visits to have my laundry done I expect [PN laughs], and I looked at a copy of 'The Stage', because of course we all took 'The Stage' newspaper then to find out what jobs were available, what new productions were coming on. I see actors still doing it, they sell 'The Stage' all round here now, everyone buys it because there are so many actors here. But I'd bought 'The Stage' and I saw this review of 'Look Back in Anger', which I don't think it was a good review at all, I think it was a very bad one, like most of them, they were so offended by it. It's hard to see now quite why they were so offended, but they were, and I thought, John Osborne, I know that name. It actually wasn't very many years afterwards, when was it? '58?

JA: '56.

PN: '56 was the premiere?

JA: May '56.

PN: So it was only about four years after I appeared with him. Probably '52, '53, that I appeared with him. So I should have remembered better. But we didn't know each other very long and we didn't get very close at all at that time, it was only later in life that we got to be friends. I only appeared with him in a couple of shows, he was mostly off doing something or other smart and glamorous that I didn't know anything about. He certainly advised me against the girl I was going out with at the time, said she wasn't my sort at all. But then he thought I was a gypsy, he put it in his autobiography, he said he seemed more like a gypsy to me than anything, can't imagine that I'd ever occurred to anyone to be a gypsy. Anyway. That was that. But then I went to see the play, eventually, but it was a long time afterwards, I wasn't really very alive to it all, I came very slowly alive to what was happening at the Royal Court .

JA: You mentioned that you always looked through 'The Stage' and that was how you found out that 'Look Back in Anger' was coming up, but were you not in the habit of going through the Sundays, and reading the reviews.

PN: Yeah, we were, very much so. It was Kenneth Tynan and Harold Hobson, Tynan in 'The Observer' and Hobson, but it was probably a bit later, I can't quite place when that was. Because originally Tynan was working for the 'Evening Standard', and a critic called Beverley Baxter, and Tynan wrote critically of him, attacked him, and eventually got his job. Must have deeply upset Beverley Baxter, not only got attacked but got his job taken away. But, no, it was very much a Sunday thing, taking the Sunday papers, I don't take the Sunday papers now, but then, it was essential, it was like a blood transfusion every week, you had to get that news of what was going on in the theatre. And you got it from these two very different critics, Hobson who was actually a sort of member of the establishment at the same time as being slightly quirky and eccentric. There's a famous saying by Penelope Gilliat, do you know it, that the typical sound of an English Sunday is that of Harold Hobson barking up the wrong tree.

JA: Oh yeah, I have heard that. Do you actually remember reading Tynan's famous review of 'Look Back in Anger'?

PN: I don't remember it. I could lie and say I do, I know it now. It's like I've done this talk for the radio recently about Lord Haw-Haw, and I said I think I remember Lord Haw-Haw, I'm pretty sure I remember Lord Haw-Haw, but I can't be sure. And after all this time, particularly as I said before, my adolescence being during the War, the World War II industry has since happened, and it's now going strong, like crazy, I mean you can't stop it any more than you can stop pictures of Marilyn Monroe. It's just a fashion of the nostalgia industry, looking back at those times. And because everybody dwells on it, reconstructs it, surmises about it, and mostly the people who write about it weren't even alive, so it's very difficult to piece together what really happened, and what they got from history books and photos and you know.

JA: OK, well you say you saw 'Look Back in Anger' a while after it opened, can you remember any other plays during the '50s that you saw, for instance there was the American invasion with people like Miller and Williams.

PN: Yeah yeah. I saw , earlier, much earlier, 'Death of a Salesman', with Paul Muni, the American film actor, I saw 'Streetcar Named Desire' with Vivien Leigh, and before that, of course, during the War, I'd seen 'The Skin of Our Teeth' by Thornton Wilder, which was more influential on me, I think than either of the others. And I saw all these things and in the '50s, we also went and saw the Berliner Ensemble, the Moscow Arts Theatre, Kabuki, anything that visited we rushed to, and saw, and profited by.

JA: In terms of the mechanics of going to the theatre then, you seem to suggest you went as much as you could, was it expensive, was it something that had to be rationed because you were on a teacher's salary at the time, or was it something that you could get the cheap seats.

PN: Oh yeah, the cheap seats, mostly the cheap seats. It was one privilege that Equity members got, which was you could go to Palladium matinees for free. The mid-week matinee, if you had an Equity card, and if it wasn't a total sell-out. So you'd often see very, very good shows, which of course remained an interest of mine, the shows rather than plays. And of course it would be wonderful houses, because the place was full of actors, all enjoying the show, and getting a free show, so even more appreciative. But it was half a crown to get in the gallery, I don't know when that changed, but it was two and sixpence, what's that the equivalent of? twenty pence, less than that. So we queued up, you booked a seat early in the day, you booked a canvas stool. How did you do it, you put your name on it, or you had a ticket, and you paid six pence, or a shilling, so that you didn't have to sit there all day. And then you'd go along and claim that two hours before the show, so you'd still have to sit there for quite a long time, but this was a measure of how popular the theatre was, you know, that it was hard to get in, for almost anything that was good, anything that was remotely successful. And God knows how I got to see some of the things I did, but people must have taken me. Because I can remember sitting downstairs to see 'The Entertainer' in the stalls at the Palace, and I think I was taken by a friend, or an American or something who was visiting. Relatives sometimes took me. I saw Noel Coward at the Café de Paris, I was taken by an American uncle who happened to be over, and he said [PN impersonates American accent] Is there anything you'd like to see, Peeder, while you're in town, coz you could tell me about theater here. And I said, well I'd like to see Noel Coward, he's at the Café de Paris, knowing it would cost the earth [PN laughs]. And so we went along, and I actually saw Coward in cabaret at the Café de Paris. And my uncle turned round to me halfway through, and said, is this guy good? And I said, yes, he's terrific. He said, he'd bedder, be, it's costing so much.

JA: OK, well we need to move on now to the late '50s, early '60s, when your first writing was for television, which, you continued to write even after you started having your stage plays staged as well. What was the status of the television play back then, was it perceived as inferior in terms of being an art form to stage plays, or do you think its profile was actually higher then.

PN: No, there's one joke that sums it up very well. The aerials then were shaped like Hs, they were on a pole like that [PN demonstrates], above the houses, just like they are now, but the shape of the aerial was different, presumably because it only had to receive a certain number of stations, perhaps. Anyway, the joke was that the people who dropped their Hs put them above their houses. And that just about summed up the attitude towards television in the early days. It was considered inferior by most people, even though most people had got televisions, I mean the majority of people had got television when the Coronation happened, that was the biggest advance for television. It's sort of overlooked, but the fact is people went out and bought televisions in order to watch the Coronation. And that was, when was that? About '52? And then over the '50s it became more popular. I acted in serials, I even acted in a version of 'Tess of the d'Urbervilles' for television. I acted in early police serials, and 'Emmerdales' and things like that. All of which were tried out then and are still going, unfortunately. [PN laughs] Nothing really adventurous has been done with it since. It seems to me potentially a great art form which has been just completely betrayed by the people who make the programmes, but still, we won't get onto that. Then along started to come people like Alun Owen, he was one of the early exponents of television drama who did really well with it, plays like 'Lena', 'O My Lena' or 'No Trams to Lime Street'. I hadn't seen any television when I wrote my first television play, or at least I hadn't seen a television play, I think I'd glimpsed it, when I went home my father had one, but I only looked in and thought, oh that's rubbish and dismissed it totally. But when I started going around with Thelma, before I married her, but I was staying with her one time up in Cheltenham, she had television. And we watched an Alun Owen play, and I was completely bowled over, I thought it was wonderful. And from then on, I started taking it seriously, but up till then, and I think it was after I had my first television play put on, I'm not sure, I think it was, again memory fails me, but my first television play was certainly written before I had seen a television play. I used to look in show windows, where the televisions were playing, and say, oh, it's just small cinema isn't it. I was more or less right, really. Talking Heads is still what it is, really, isn't it. You can't do much more in that space. And if it becomes a big screen television, then it would be cinema anyway, it would be big cinema. In fact, it was intimate cinema. It was like, 'Marty' was a very early example of a television play that became a very good film and it was just people talking, and still is and still looks good. Paddy Chayefsky. I got the 'Plays of Paddy Chayefsky' [PN gets up and looks in his book cases for the volume] I was just wondering when it was. 'The Bachelor Party', 'Marty'. 1955, so it was about then. Middle of the '50s. Surprisingly early. And that was a big step forward, to read those plays and to realise what he was doing with them, and I thought, actually it was the first time I thought, I never thought it about the stage, but I thought, I could do that, actually, I could write that sort of thing about my own life. So my first play was 'Walk on the Grass' which was a family study of a party, where things go wrong and it all falls apart. And I wrote that in the evening, while I was teaching in Brixton all day, then I'd come home and write in the evening. And I submitted it to a BBC West of England play competition. And it won one of the prizes and was staged, produced, transmitted.

JA: You talk about the limitations of writing for television. Does this mean that while you were writing for television, a considerable number of plays for television, that you were always, in the back of your mind, aiming that this would take you towards writing for the stage.

PN: Yeah, and I was writing stage plays. I mean one of the plays that came on television was in fact called 'Continuity Man', and it was a stage play, an early study of my father that was rejected by all the theatre producers, and later went on television in a production with Roger Livesey playing my father, marvellous, Richard Pasco, a very good cast, a four-hander, and, did rather well on television, was rather successful. And then I wrote . and then I wrote [PN laughs], it sounds like a musical. And then we wrote. 'The National Health' or rather a play called 'The End Beds', which was about hospitals I'd stayed in when I had a collapsed lung. And nobody would do that, nobody would do it, it was a television play, and we submitted it to everybody. And Peggy Ramsay, my agent then, thought it was my best television play. But, as usual, nobody would do it when it mattered, and eventually, after my first stage play had gone on, Kenneth Tynan and Olivier said, would you do one for us at the National, and I got out 'The End Beds' from the drawer and called it 'The National Health'. And the morning the very good reviews for that came out, the BBC got on and said, do you think this would make a television play.

JA: Did you remind them about their reaction to 'The End Bed'?

PN: What was the point, you know. It was probably somebody different anyway. But yes, I was always trying to write stage plays all the time I was writing television. And television became a chore, actually, I had to churn out so many television plays, and they were original plays, I wasn't writing series invented by other people, episodes. Each play was original in its own right, it started with characters I had invented or borrowed or something, you know, and each one was an original play, we were writing them like nine-pins in those days. Nearly everybody was writing them, John Mortimer, Harold Pinter, you know, everybody was at it, writing television. It was a way of earning a living. We didn't earn much, but we earned some.

JA: You were still teaching at the time, though?

PN: I was teaching when the first plays went on, yeah. After that one was accepted. It had been sent to Granada and the BBC, and the BBC said they would do it, and gave me the prize, I think it was 200 pounds or something . you know they got a cheap transmission of a play, that's what they got for their prize money. But I had also sent it to Granada , in London . Obviously, belt and braces, I was just thinking, you know, if it fails, and Granada got in touch and said they liked it very much and they would like to do it. And I said, well I'm sorry I've already sent it to the BBC, and they said, well give us your next one. So I gave them my next one, which was 'Promenade'. And I started then writing on a regular basis, and on the strength of it, gave up teaching, which I'd never really been happy with, and I'd only done for a couple of years actually, it wasn't as though I was a teacher for a long time. Married a teacher of course, Thelma had been teaching for 6 years.

JA: We are going to move on to 'Joe Egg' now, which was first produced in 1967 in Glasgow . Now in all the accounts I see, it always seems to come up that this was a play about two parents struggling to bring up a disabled child, and it was something you knew immediately would never be accepted for television, and so you turned to the theatre, as that was the only place that would allow this to be presented. Now that

strikes me as interesting to the degree that at that time the Lord Chamberlain was still in power when it came to theatre censorship, and could decide what could and couldn't be put on stage. So does that mean that even despite the Lord Chamberlain, you could still get away with a lot more in the theatre than was allowed in television?

PN: [pause] Yes, I think that's true. 'Cause Tony Garnett, who was the most adventurous producer of television at the time, and did 'Cathy Come Home' and 'Up the Junction', and all the sensational plays at the time that really moved things forward, told me afterwards that he would never have been able to do 'Joe Egg'. Enormously surprising to me. But he may have just meant artistically, it wouldn't have worked on television, I don't know. I certainly never wrote it as a television play, if that's what you mean. It was always a stage play. It wasn't like 'National Health' or 'Continuity Man' which teetered over from one to the other. 'Joe Egg' was always going to be a stage play. Because I had written the script of 'Catch Us If You Can', John Boorman's first film, which we wrote together, more or less, and with that I'd earned 5000 pounds, a huge sum of money in those days, and that was enough for me to live on. And in fact when I said to John, why are you making this, this is a terrible subject, the Dave Clark Five, he can't act, they're none of them actors, what are we going to do with it and why are we doing it anyway. And he said, I'm going to get a Hollywood contract and you're going to get the time to write your stage play. Both of which turned out to be true, he wrote 'Point Blank' after that, and I wrote 'Joe Egg', I mean he made 'Point Blank'. So I just wrote it as a stage play while I had the time to, with the money he gave me. By this time, of course, I had left London, we were living in South Devon. Maybe, we were only in south Devon for a couple of years, then we moved back to Bristol, and it was in Bristol that I wrote 'Joe Egg'.

JA: Were you aware when you were writing it, did you have in mind that at some point this script would come up before the Lord Chamberlain, and that you'd better not go too far with language, or anything, were you almost auto-censoring yourself as you went along.

PN: No, I didn't, no. I don't think I knew anything about the Lord Chamberlain, I didn't have a clue. I may have heard that various people like Osborne, or Orton, had had trouble. I don't know, I don't think so. I don't have any memory of that. I went as far as I thought audience tolerance would take at the time. And it was, for its time, outspoken, and it dealt with things that normally weren't dealt with, which is why it did create a bit of a fuss, and why the Chamberlain was very concerned with it. But not even from the point of view of the disabled child, or handicapped as I still prefer to call her. But it was things like the sex talk in it, when they're talking frankly about having it and doing it and all that sort of thing. It wasn't normally talked about. It may have been talked about at the Royal Court, but then I submitted it to the Royal Court and they offered me one night without scenery. They were doing these Sunday night shows where they tried out plays to see if they'd work, and they didn't want to spend any money on them. They were plays they had no confidence in, that was what it amounted to. Often they were afterwards very successful, I think. 'The Kitchen', Arnold Wesker, I saw that, it was wonderful without scenery, wonderful. And by this time I'd been going to the Court, I'd seen all the plays, Arden, and Osborne, Wesker, so on. So I was thoroughly versed in it all, I knew what could happen and what couldn't. I mean you couldn't have said 'fuck', there were things you couldn't do, but there wasn't all that many. I mean you couldn't

have nudity, I don't think you could have breasts even. I'm not sure [PN laughs] when breasts came in, when breasts became possible.

JA: You mention Arnold Wesker, and I know in the interview that he has done for this project, he talked about the Lord Chamberlain as being just an irritant, and the thing that mattered was to get the play on, and if it involved jumping through a few hoops, or bartering a bit, it didn't really matter. Was that how you saw it when you went in for your interview, that as long as you came out of it with your play passed, you didn't mind giving up the odd word here or there?

PN: Yeah, that's right. Again, it's become confused by time, but when I wrote it up in 'Blue Murder', a fictional version of it of course. You could say I was the author, and the director character was much more based on John Boorman than it was on Michael Blakemore in fact. It was sort of somewhere like John Boorman as a barrow boy, which he wasn't ever, but he was a bit of a ruffian, and he was a tough guy, John, and he would have dealt with it like that, I'm sure [PN impersonates JB]. But actually what I've got in the play there, is that I'm standing up for the purity of it, and then switching as I realise I'm not going to get it on unless I switch, and then John shouting the odds and that sort of thing. So it's actually quite hard for me to remember now what my attitude actually was. I know Michael and I were both absolutely astonished by some of the things they suggested, such as she should be played by a dummy. I actually remember, I think, Colonel Johnson saying, you know, Archie Andrews sort of style. Archie Andrews being a famous ventriloquist dummy at the time. But they weren't concerned about the presentation of the child so much, as the fact that while she was on the stage, the father and mother talked about going to bed together. And we had to sort of piece out their attitude by asking questions, you know, it was so hilarious really. Because they'd say, you know we can't have a child on the stage hearing the parents discussing sex. And we'd say, but they're married. And he'd say, yes, but the child is listening to them. And we'd say, but she's not a child. She's a child actress, and by the rules of the time she had to be at least eighteen. So she wasn't even a child, she was an eighteen year-old child playing a twelve year-old. And one of the reasons I made her as old as she was, was one so that she could be played by a sentient actress, and two, that she would be allowed to be played. So an eighteen year-old could convincingly play a twelve year-old, but she couldn't play an eight year-old. And at the time I wrote the play, which was '66, our child was only six. So I upped it to make her possible, you know, possible playing time for an eighteen year-old actress. And so we said, but she'd be played by an eighteen year-old, it couldn't be any less because of the regulations, and they said, but yes, the audience won't know that will they? [PN laughs] So we said, what do you suggest? And they said, well, could you wheel her off before this conversation takes place, and leave her off-stage, and then bring her back on again after it's happened? And we said, but she'll just be behind a piece of scenery, and anyway she'll have heard it all in rehearsals. And then they said, but yes the audience won't know she's. [PN laughs]. It was justice being seen to be done, a perfect piece of English hypocrisy. You know, out of sight, out of mind.

JA: And this was 1967, the Lord Chamberlain's powers over the theatre were abolished in 1968, were you keen in subsequent productions to reinstate, not to have the child wheeled off, to reinstate language.

PN: Yeah, yeah that happened almost immediately. The fact is that though the Chamberlain laid down all these rules, once he'd given you a licence, he didn't really care. So it was obviously broken all over the place, and anyway his power was just coming to an end like you've just said. [PN gets up to find the text of 'Joe Egg' and leafs through]. First published in '67, but I'm not sure if this is .

JA: Because in theory they were meant to be going around afterwards to actually check that you, or the playwrights, stuck to the rules that had been agreed.

PN: I don't think they did, you see, no, I don't think they did. And we put back quite a few of the things he'd cut, because they were so absurd and we had to agree to them. But the first edition, the first printed edition of the play, came out with that cut in. I'm just trying to find it now. [PN leafs through the text of 'Joe Egg']. Here it is, I think it is here. Sorry there's a pause while I try to find it. No, there is an edition, and people all over the world have been doing this mysterious thing of her being wheeled off. I just wonder if it's in the acting edition [PN finds another text of 'Joe Egg']. Bri exits up wheeling Joe. There you are, there it is, it's in the acting edition. And then they have the scene. Bri rises, goes to the kitchen and returns wheeling Joe. So there it is, it's in the acting edition, I hadn't thought of that. People who did it by Samuel French must have thought, what on earth has he done that for?

JA: With 'Joe Egg' you had the chance to travel and see it presented, well, first of all in Glasgow, then in London, but afterwards it went to America, to Paris, Germany, Spain I think as well.

PN: Italy .

JA: Yeah, all over. It gave you the chance to experience the rituals of the first night etc. in all these different cities. How did they compare?

PN: Again, it's very funny about memory. I mean obviously, New York was very exciting. Because when the original contract came from Glasgow, we had these clauses in it, which said, in the event that the play transfers to the West End of London to be presented in a proper manner, and you know, it's got all this legal technology, so we thought, ha ha, and in the event that the play transfers to Broadway, in the city of New York in the United States of America to be presented in a proper manner - ha ha- in the event that the play is made into a film, you know and all these things happened, and it was from a little play in Glasgow, it really was Cinderella time. And Albert Finney and Michael Medwin, who were jointly Memorial Enterprises- Albert Memorial ha ha- presented the play in London , took it to London , with the casts that we wanted, which was the original cast, with Joe Melia, Zena Walker, Joan Hickson, they brought it to London . And then subsequently, there was a slight whiff of betrayal, as 'though it got all the good reviews and it won the Evening Standard award, etc. etc., it didn't somehow get a very big audience. At which point the producer should have said, right we've got all these awards, we've got all this press, you know, bang it home to the public, make them come and see it. Because the other offer we'd had, was to go to the National Theatre with it, in which case we wouldn't have had Joe and Zena and Joan, who had

gone up to Glasgow to do it and were, in my opinion, doing it as well as anyone could possibly do it. And Michael and I agreed on that, so that's why we said no to the National and brought in the original production. Then Albert, instead of keeping it on, closed it in London, and himself took over the leading role of Joe Melia, and went with Zena and Joan, and John Carson and the original set and production done by Michael Blakemore, to Broadway and did it for eleven weeks, and wouldn't do it for any longer, even though it was packed out the whole of the time. And then we realised in retrospect that what he'd done was to take it to be a launch pad for him on Broadway as an actor, and also to promote his film 'Charlie Bubbles' which was just coming out at the same time, and was a bit dodgy. So, in other words, although I'm very grateful to Albert, and we subsequently did three or four plays together, I do think he was a little bit, what shall I say, a little bit two-faced over that. 'Cause I think it was a self-promotional exercise. But, you know, we got a house in Greenwich out of it, and we call it the Albert Hall.

JA: But can you remember if the reaction of the audience differed in any of these cities, either to the humour, because it's a very funny play, did people laugh in the same places? And also can you remember if people reacted differently to the scenes with the handicapped daughter on stage?

PN: I can't really, I don't think there was a substantial difference. I remember walking up the aisle in the interval on the first night, and hearing someone say [in American accent] Well, it's not a play, is it? What is it? And some of the reactions were that it was just a chunk of autobiography. But others were ecstatic about it, there was some very good writing about it. And some very interesting writing. Harold Clurman, who was one of my proxy heroes, because he'd written the book about the American Group Theatre, which I'd always much admired, and thought very highly of and longed to be in such a company myself. You know, the idea of being Clifford Odets writing for the Group Theatre in America, it was just as far as I was concerned perfection. It was like being Brecht, or Molière, or any of the people who could write for a given . well you know, Alan Ayckbourn, for a given theatre company. Which is something most writers lack, and I certainly lacked by not going to the Court, not being accepted by the Court. Perhaps if I'd said yes to that night without scenery. I don't know. Life is full of ifs and ands. What in fact happened was that the reaction was very good to the play. But our names, Michael Blakemore and I, were so played down that some people in New York thought that Albert had written the play and directed it. And for years afterwards I would meet people, and they'd say what have you written, and I'd say 'Joe Egg', and they'd say [in surprised American accent] you wrote Joe Egg? My name was kept dark. So I didn't have the kind of debut that other English playwrights has when they went to Broadway. It wasn't presented in that way, it was presented for Albert, it was a vehicle for Albert. And in a whole two thirds of a page advert and résumé of the critiques in the 'New York Times', my name was mentioned only once, right at the end.

JA: Was that the same in other countries, in Paris or Spain, or Italy .

PN: No it wasn't so much, no. I began to be mentioned and talked about there. Of course those people weren't seeing my play, they were seeing a translation of my play, which is a very different thing. They weren't actually hearing my words. And it's something that one tends to forget in talking about foreign literature and drama, that in fact what they were seeing in Paris, was a play by Claude Roy based on a play by Peter

Nichols. And I know this 'cause I worked with Claude fairly closely on that and two subsequent plays, he did 'The National Health' and 'Forget-Me-Not Lane'. At one point, 'Forget-Me-Not Lane', I was at the dress rehearsal, and my poor French, I hadn't really realised what he was doing, and I suddenly thought, he's missed out a whole great point there, that's really important. And I pointed it out to him and he was terribly embarrassed, and he went back to the script and he said I've missed that entirely.

JA: Can you remember what that was?

PN: Yeah, it was the point where, I'm not sure I can describe it, but it was the point where the wife somehow susses, or the husband somehow susses that the wife has been having an affair. It's hardly dealt with because I was writing after all at a time when my mother was still alive, so I didn't want to tamper with that in real life. But it was quite clear in the English version, it was like a frisson, and it was really quite important, you know, and he kind of missed it.

JA: Is that the bit where the father talks to the son, and asks him if she's been having .

PN: No it was another bit- I know what you mean, that scene, oh God, no, I can't remember. It's gone, it was certainly quite an important point in the play. Anyway, gone now.

JA: Never mind. Well I'm going to end with a question on criticism, which you've touched on. Firstly, with your early plays, and even to this day, do you always turn straight to the papers to see what they've written. And secondly, how do you feel that theatre criticism now differs from when you were starting out in the late '60s, early '70s. Do you think that the critic has too important a role now in terms of making or breaking a play, or has it always been thus?

PN: Well, you know, you're talking to somebody who has ceased to be a playwright for quite a long time. I mean, I write plays, as you know, and I write plays all the time, I never stop writing plays because it happens to be the form I write in. You know, it's a shame really, I was saying, an opening line for a talk by me or an article by me about my work might be- At an early age I got into the bad habit of writing plays - because I think it is a bad habit in some ways, it's a literary style that is half something else, you know there's something I say in my diaries at some point, you know Beckett and his campaign to purify the theatre. It's like being a vegetarian in an abattoir. And I do think there is something coarse and muddled and knock-about in the theatre that I have always tried to exploit in perhaps an ironic way. So that people who think . you know Steve Sondheim said to me, I thought you liked all that bawdy humour, why don't you like 'Carry On'. And I said, I don't like it because it's coarse. And he said, but I thought you liked all that coarse humour. But my coarse humour is used in a subtle way, you know it's very difficult to point this out, 'cause you sound as though you're boasting. But there is a difference between 'Privates on Parade' and 'It Ain't Half Hot, Mum', and if people can't see that, then it's my bad luck. But I've always used the coarse elements of theatre, and put them in a context where they might become something a bit more, or might have an ironic turn to them which gives you a nice feeling. I don't know about the

critics. I suppose I cared about them as much as anybody else in as much as they were a means to a livelihood. After a while I began to think that they weren't a means to a livelihood, and that audiences decided for themselves. But they're certainly pointers, they're pointers to ... in fact it's probably a bit like a horse race. You know, people have all sorts of reasons for backing a horse. It might be that they have a part ownership, or it might be that their friend is a jockey, or it might be that they got a good tip from the steward, or it might be that they just fancy it from studying form. It might be a million reasons why anyone backs a horse. And it's like that with a play, there might be a million reasons why anyone goes to see a play, in other words backs it by paying money to see it. And, you know, it can be 'cause Maggie Smith's in it, or, it's . you know, one of those might be it's had good reviews. But much more likely it's, my wife tells me it's very funny, she liked him in the television play, you know, he's always rather good. Or somebody at the golf club told me, or whoever. Or more serious people. But then it depends on which audience you're talking about, doesn't it too. The West End audience is different from the National Theatre audience, is different from the RSC, from the Royal Court , from the Donmar, from the Soho Poly, from the one upstairs in the pub in Islington. And they're all audiences, and all of them may lead to a major production. But without a major production, without a shop window, it's very difficult for a playwright to make a way, you know. And it happens very accidentally. 'Joe Egg' is almost a perfect example of it, something that everybody rejected, that a friend put on in Glasgow , very much against the will of his committee. You know he fought it through and got it on. The odds were very much against it, I thought it would have three 3 weeks in Glasgow and that was it, you know. And here we are, thirty-seven years later, and it's just been on Broadway again. So I don't know how much . I mean Hobson hated my work and gave 'Joe Egg' a terrible review. Made it very personal 'cause he himself was crippled, and his parents had been Christian Scientists I think, and refused to have him treated when he had infant polio. So he walked on a stick most of his life. You might have thought it would endear him to the play.

JA: Yeah. He just thought it wasn't right to be presented, it wasn't a thing that should be on the stage?

PN: Yeah, I mean he did the worst thing that you could possibly do for a 'Sunday Times' readership, which was to say that it was a Howl of Despair. Can you imagine somebody saying, oh, I'll spend thirty quid on seeing a howl of despair, you know that's really going to be fun, what an evening out. I mean he didn't mention the fact that it was funny. I always tell people, you know, do it like Noel Coward, not Strindberg, that's my antecedents. My antecedents are entertainers, you know, and Noel Coward is a fine entertainer, and you know, that's how I wrote the play, I wrote it as a light. I didn't write it first of all like that, I wrote it first of all as a rather serious and grim play. But then I realised it was hopelessly wrong like that, and it had to be, it had to be funny. And, I think, the answer to how reviews and views of the play change, is that once you get known, and once 'Joe Egg' became assumed to be an important play, or an interesting and novel play, then their attitude to it changes, and then they're no longer really critical in the same way. When it comes back now, it gets very respectful reviews indeed, really, and you know, there's no controversy any more. Barry Norman, I went on television once, to talk to him later on about some book or other, and he said, he led me aside. He was compering the show, and he took me aside, and said, I'm very sorry about what I wrote about 'Joe Egg'. And I said, I'm sorry, I can't remember what you wrote [PN laughs] Worse thing to say to a critic. I mean I didn't go through and say, oh God, look what the 'Daily Express' said, you know. And he said I walked around for two hours

outside the theatre afterwards, trying to make up my mind what I could possibly say about it, I was so upset by it. And I think that was true for a lot of people. Hobson, clearly, he wrote two columns, hating it and saying my attitudes were disgusting. And I gather Tynan wrote a review of it, but I never read it, I gather it was in America, he wasn't writing for 'The Observer' then, it was Ronald Bryden, Tynan had by that time moved to the National Theatre and was Olivier's literary editor. And Bryden in fact was the one that got it moved, so he was a very important element. He went up to see it at Glasgow and got some hot tip from somebody or other, went up and saw it, and wrote a review that came out on the second Sunday of the run, it was running for three weeks. So it started say on a Wednesday or a Thursday, and ran till Sunday, another week, then another Sunday, that was the one when his review came out, leaving only another week for it to play. For the first 2 weeks the houses were very thin, despite the fact that it had had rave reviews in the local press, and it was partly because of 'The Guardian's review by Cordelia Oliver, local critic, that we got it transferred. But their reviews had had no effect on the local audience, these were the people who were writing for the local Glasgow audience, and what it showed was a terrific disrespect for them and a snobbery about London, you know, we're not going to see it unless somebody from London tells us it's good. Bryden went up and wrote about it and praised it and you couldn't get a seat for the next week. So there's a measure of how a critic can influence, you know, and I think Hobson had a very, very bad effect on our audiences, you know, by calling it a scream of agony, he was making out like it was Francis Bacon, it wasn't.

JA: Did you ever challenge him about that?

PN: No, I never challenged any critic about anything. I thought, they do their job, we do ours. But it's terrible when they do it so badly, you know. It's sort of unspoken, I don't want anything to do with that lot [PN laughs], you know, and it's true I think, I mean one can be friendly with them, I think. And I think I was always very taken by Irving Wardle's writing, 'cause he was one of the first people to review 'Joe Egg' in a way that, you know, almost brought tears to my eyes, it was so warm. You know, he said, this is one of those occasions when the audience can feel the ground moving beneath their feet.

JA: Yeah, I remember reading that.

PN: You know, he just made it seem as if it was tremendous, he didn't qualify it at all, he just said it was terrific. And that's what you want [PN laughs]. You don't want people saying I didn't like the scenery in the second act, you know, forget it, tell me more [PN laughs].

JA: You must have bumped into critics a lot, just as part of the fact that you were all involved in the theatre. Was it almost an unwritten rule that you wouldn't bring up reviews if you knew that they'd reviewed your play, and you'd just pretend that it didn't happen, that it wasn't part of their job.

PN: Yeah, it was very much that sort of thing, yeah. And sometimes I've been rather annoyed when critics have assumed that they figure larger in my mind than they do,

than they do. There's an occasion when they were doing 'Joe Egg', a revival, at the King's Head. And the critics had been given a meal before the play, one of the ways in which producers butter up the critics, so they were all sitting having their meal because it was a dinner theatre. And I arrived with some presents for the cast, you know, usual ritual of taking some presents and cards and good luck and all that, and putting them around the dressing room before they arrive. And so I arrived to do this, and had to walk through and there they all were sitting there. And I just thought it was funny, you know, and I just said Ooh Hello, like that, and we all went hello, and one of the critics, I forget who it was now, wrote: clearly he was completely fazed by this and fell back in amazement or something. Well I did, but it was only a joke, you know- Oooh look at all you lot here - you know. I mean, I'm perfectly OK with them all, I don't grumble, I don't think they're very good. As I've said before, I don't think they review the event. They try to review the play as it happens on the stage, which is like ignoring the audience. On occasion they will mention the audience, usually in a scathing way. I've said that nice thing about Irving Wardle, but he also reviewed the first Michael Frayn play to come on at Greenwich . And he said, he was sitting next to me as it happened, he said, when Eleanor Bron comes on, doing her embarrassed hostess routine, the audience groans. Wasn't true. The audience lit up at the thought of Eleanor Bron coming on doing her embarrassed hostess routine. As far as I could see it was a completely prejudiced remark about somebody he knew at Cambridge or Oxford or something, you know.

JA: I suppose the problem is to all you insiders, you would be aware why someone might be prejudiced, but of course the average person reading it in a newspaper won't be aware of these ties that link the reviewers and the playwrights in some way, so they'll take it at face value.

PN: That's very true. I mean I go and visit my brother and sister-in-law in Bristol, and very often they talk about people on the telly, not just playwrights, but people, performers, people we know, and you actually have to bite your lip not to say, the reason he said that was, I know the inside story on that. It's a sort of coterie of people, it has to be in a way, it inevitably is, and I think however much you declare that you're not coming to this party, that you're not part of this game, you can't help being. It's the circle we move in. I can remember once, somebody said, I was round at my sister-in-law, somebody said you seem to be talking about famous people all the time. And my brother said, well they're the people who are in his job, aren't they. Which is quite right, you know. It's very difficult. I mean we do sometimes say, rather than saying Steve Sondheim, we will say somebody we were with the other night, because you get sick of the reaction, like this you know - oh fuck another famous name - [PN laughs]. In a way to us they're not famous names. They're just part of the circle in which we move. I mean they are famous, all right, I mean you can't help knowing when you're in a restaurant with Lauren Bacall that you're in a restaurant with Lauren Bacall. But on the other hand, you know, she is an actress, and she's been in the game a long time too, and you're all part of the same trade.

JA: Well that's great, that's very interesting. I think we'll leave it there. Thank you very much indeed.

PN: All right.