

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Phyll and Allan Redgrave – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Neil Redgrave**

**22 December 2004**

Theatregoers 1945-68, on visiting the RSC, Wolverhampton and Birmingham Rep.

NR: What was it like for you to visit the British theatre in the period between 1945 and '68?

PR: At the beginning of that period it was very good because we lived within five miles of Stratford-upon-Avon . It was difficult for us to get away because of petrol and babies and one thing and another.

NR: Yes I see. So what was the period that you actually went to see the plays in Stratford ?

R: That would be '48 to '57.

R: '48 till '57. And can you remember which plays you went to see during that period?

R: Yes. We went to see A Midsummer Nights Dream , As You Like It , and Macbeth.

NR: Yes.

PR: I don't remember any more

NR: Yes I see. And were they all at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford?

PR: Yes.

NR: And which of those plays did you especially enjoy?

PR: As You Like It.

NR: As You Like It . Ok, what was it about As You Like It that you enjoyed?

PR: Because I had done it at school and I had never realized that it was funny.

NR: Yes.

PR: I so enjoyed it because it was fun.

NR: Yes.

PR: Yes.

NR: Did you think it was like an especially good performance of the play?

PR: I don't really remember no, but I know the general enjoyment was quite high.

NR: Right, yes, I see. Were there any actors that stood out particularly from that period?

PR: The only one I remember by name to having seen was Paul Schofield but I don't remember in which play I saw him.

NR: Yes.

PR: But the names are all very familiar.

NR: Yes.

PR: But the names are all very familiar from that period.

NR: It's just remembering which performances they were in is a bit more difficult.

PR: That's right yes.

NR: Ok. Were there any plays that you didn't like from the ones that you saw?

PR: No I don't think so. I think we enjoyed the ones we saw. My remembrance is of having enjoyed.

NR: Yes I see. Good. Do you remember anything about the other two plays that you saw? What was it, Macbeth and A Midsummer Nights Dream ?

PR: I remember Macbeth very well. I remember the gory scenes at the end particularly.

NR: Oh yes. What happened in them?

PR: I'm trying to remember. I'm not sure my memory is accurate but it's something about heads being brought in and general goriness.

NR: Yes, yes because Macbeth's head gets chopped off at the end.

PR: Yes, yes. I remember that. But I don't remember anything particularly about it. I do remember in A Midsummer Nights Dream I remember particularly enjoying the acting of the peasant actors, particularly Bottom, but that was because I acted at school as Bottom.

NR: Oh right.

PR: But I do remember it being very enjoyable.

NR: Yes, good. Is there anything at all that you want to add about those performances, which you enjoyed or which stood out especially.

PR: I think we enjoyed what we saw. And it was a comparatively rare thing for us to go because of the difficulties, so, no; I think we enjoyed what we saw.

NR: Yes. I see. Just going back to the performance of Macbeth again, and you mention the scene when Macbeth has his head chopped off. Do you remember how they actually performed that on stage?

PR: No I don't. I only remember the head being brought in.

NR: Just the head being brought in. Yes.

PR: And general goriness

NR: Yes. Because I imagine it must be quite a challenge for the actors to perform something like a decapitation.

PR: I remember also that Lady Macbeth was very significant in it. I don't remember who was doing the part I really don't, but yes, we really enjoyed it.

NR: Yes great. You don't remember which years those plays were performed.

PR: No I don't remember that.

NR: It's sometime between '48 and '57?

PR: No I don't remember that.

NR: Do you remember how the plays were advertised in the period?

PR: I don't remember specifically but I imagine they must have been widely advertised, local papers and so on and so forth. But I don't actually remember how they were advertised. I do remember how extremely difficult it was to get tickets, unless you were there at the first day or so, they would be fully booked.

NR: Right yes.

PR: So it would be difficult to get tickets.

NR: Yes, yes it does sound it.

PR: Even though you lived locally.

NR: Yes. It must have been very popular indeed for it to be difficult to get tickets.

PR: They were. I imagine they were fully booked all the time. It was no good phoning.

NR: Oh so you had to actually go to the place and buy a ticket in person.

PR: If you really wanted one yes.

NR: Yes.

PR: It wasn't easy.

NR: That sounds very different to today when you can book online; you can book by telephone or by post.

PR: Oh yes, totally different.

NR: Yes, right. And how did you decide which plays to go and see? Were there any criteria that you used to decide what to see?

PR: Well we had to go and see Macbeth because Allan did that at school and we had to go and see As You Like It because I did that at school.

NR: Yes.

PR: But I imagine whether it fitted in with our diaries and getting babysitters and things like that.

NR: Yes. Can you remember anything about the actual theatre building at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre?

PR: Yes. I remember that very clearly.

NR: Oh yes.

PR: Because we were still in the period when people could remember the old one, the old buildings, so there was still a certain amount of resentment about this new 'biscuit box', which wasn't like the old one.

NR: I see.

PR: But we didn't know because we didn't know the old one.

NR: Yes.

PR: But we liked it. We thought it was architecturally pleasing. I think there was quite a bit of local resentment at the.

NR: Right yes. Did you get the impression that that was local people who thought it looked like an eyesore?

PR: That's right I think. Well that's where we picked it up anyway

NR: Yes.

PR: Well that's where we picked it up.

NR: Do you remember how much it cost to get into the theatre roughly; I mean it doesn't matter exactly how much.

PR: I really don't remember.

NR: No.

AR: I would have said at a guess three and sixpence.

NR: My granddad Allan has just said that he guessed it would have been about three and sixpence.

AR: That's in the high balcony seats.

NR: He's just said that that would have been in the high balcony seats.

PR: But we don't really remember.

NR: Do you think that the theatre was more popular with a widespread audience in that period compared to today?

PR: I simply don't know. I only know that the Stratford theatre in which we were interested was very popular. I don't know how popular it is now.

NR: Yes.

PR: Certainly then Shakespeare's plays were very popular.

NR: Yes. I think the theatres in Stratford are still very popular now as well.

PR: Well it's the whole ambience of the by the river.

NR: With it being Shakespeare's birthplace as well.

PR: Well exactly yes.

NR: Did you get a feeling of the sorts of people who went to theatre in the late 1940s and 1950s?

PR: Well in our experience it was people like us. Anyone who was at all interested in the theatre were interested in Stratford.

NR: Yes.

PR: But I have no wider experience than that.

NR: Yes, so was that you and your friends who went.

PR: Yes.

NR: Did you get the feeling that there was a group of you that went regularly and did you recognize a lot of faces in the audience?

PR: No.

NR: Not really. I see. Now have you noticed any other differences between the plays you went to see during that period and the plays that are being performed today?

PR: I think my outstanding thing is scenery.

NR: Yes.

PR: It seems to me that the scenery is more ingenious now, more what's the word I want, way out, more?

NR: Imaginative?

PR: Yes that's the word I want. More imaginative than it was then, very much so. That's my impression anyhow. And the lighting is more imaginative, lighting very much so, than it was then, I think.

NR: So do you think that more effort is put into the scenery and lighting today compared to in that period.

PR: I would imagine so. Anything we've seen in the last few years is either much more imaginative or nothing there at all hardly.

NR: Yes.

PR: Leaving to your imagination.

NR: Yes and how does that compare with the things you saw in.

PR: It's, as far as my memory goes, this is much more imaginative, either more or less, but it is much more orthodox I would have thought then than now.

NR: Yes, so from what you remember was it more a case of there being simply the actors on the stage and the curtain.

PR: No I remember the scenery, but it was fairly orthodox what you would expect, rather than all the this is amazing, you know different, less imaginative I would have thought.

NR: Yes. I see. Any differences in the sound, the way music is used today compared to 50 years ago?

PR: I don't remember. No for me that's not particularly significant.

NR: There's another question about the plays you went to see. Did you get the feeling that they were very faithful to the original Shakespeare texts?

PR: I would have thought so.

NR: Yes. It sounds like they were quite traditional plays in that sense.

PR: I would have thought so yes.

NR: Yes well that's useful. Is there anything else at all that you want to add about those questions or anything at all about theatre?

PR: No I think our knowledge was fairly limited because of our circumstances and after '57 we moved into the country for farming and it was almost impossible to get to anything significant.

NR: Yes.

PR: So we're not much use then.

NR: Yes. I mean I was just wondering if you were aware of the theatre censorship in that period because there was theatre censorship in that period, whereas that's stopped now.

PR: No.

NR: Yes I suppose that's not going to be such an issue in somewhere like Stratford.

PR: No that's right.

NR: Ok thank you very much for your time and we'll end the interview there.

[PAUSE]

NR: We've just got one last part of the interview to do because [Phyll Redgrave] has said that she had a friend who went to see some theatre in Wolverhampton so would you like to say a little bit about that?

PR: This would be in the late 1930s but I do remember that ordinary people went to their local theatre and this particular friend I know went every week to the Wolverhampton Rep.

NR: I see.

PR: And this was customary amongst the ordinary population.

NR: Right yes that's interesting because it sounds like there was a different group of people who went to the theatre in those days.

PR: Oh yes I think so, who went to the local rep. But I do remember that Kenneth Moore was one of the junior leads at that time.

NR: Who was Kenneth Moore?

PR: Oh you forgotten him now because he's died, but 20 years ago he was a very famous actor.

AR: A very famous actor.

PR: Very famous actor yes.

NR: So do think that he drew in the crowds at places like the Wolverhampton Rep?

PR: No I don't think so because he was only a junior lead at that time.

NR: Right.

PR: I think local people were interested in local theatre at that time probably.

NR: Right I see.

PR: And they would have a different performance each week you see.

NR: Oh right.

PR: So there was a terrific turnover of subjects.

NR: I see. Do you know if that was different theatre companies who came in or the same theatre company?

PR: Well as far as I remember, it may not be accurate, there would be the local rep that would do that, but sometimes there would be others who came in from other, but it was customary that they had a program that changed frequently because local people kept going you see.

NR: Yes, so it sounds a little bit like the way that people go and see a different film each week today.

PR: That's right, oh yes, that's right.

NR: Did you have any sort of feeling about how popular the theatre was compared to the cinema in that period?

PR: I don't know. I think the local rep theatres had a real following in a way that the cinema perhaps didn't have a real following. I think people went to see what they wanted to see although young people went to the flicks just for something to do in an evening, but I think the local reps, Birmingham Rep was particularly famous and popular, but our Wolverhampton rep had a very faithful following.

NR: Right, yes, that's interesting because it sounds like there was a particular kind of atmosphere around in that time when people went to the theatre.

PR: Yes very much so, to their local theatre.

NR: Yes.

PR: Oh yes I think so. And this was very available to what you could call ordinary people. It was not over expensive. I think the 'rep' companies worked incredibly hard because they would be rehearsing next week's when they were doing this week's.

NR: Right yes.

PR: But I think at that time it was considered a wonderful ground for actors to start their acting careers.

NR: And that was all in the 1930s?

PR: That would all be pre-war yes.

NR: Right. Did you see if that carried on after the war at all?

PR: I don't know.

NR: So you're not sure whether that carried on after the war at all.

PR: I don't know what the position of repertory theatres is now.

NR: Well the Birmingham Repertory Theatre is still up and running.

PR: That's right, I believe it is.

NR: I don't know if the Wolverhampton Rep is still around.

PR: I don't know.

NR: Well that's interesting. Was that just your friend, did you say it was Jenny, who went to see plays or were there other people as well?

PR: I would presume so as I think it was a popular occupation.

NR: Sorry I meant to say were there other friends of yours who went to see them?

PR: I don't remember.

NR: Right, well that's good to know as well, and thank you for your time