

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Peter Sampson – interview transcript

Interviewer: Fiona Sagar

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Theatregoer and amateur dramatics actor, on acting and visiting the theatre 1945-68, visiting productions of Pinter, Shaw and O'Casey.

FS: What are your earliest memories of going to the theatre? Can you remember any productions or what it was like as a child?

PS: The earliest memory of going to the theatre probably would be going to Sunday school pantomimes in the 1940s, during the war, but my earliest memory of going to serious theatre would be when I was at school, in Manchester , and I went to see a number of plays recommended by the teachers at school. I can remember particularly seeing a play by a man called Rodney Ackland, A Dead Secret, which starred Paul Schofield in his very young days; he was regarded as one of the great stars of the English theatre at that time. That was quite a thrill.

FS: And why do you think this stuck in your mind, this particular production?

PS: I think possibly because it was my first, and it was recommended to me and a few of us went, and the teacher was very enthusiastic about it.

FS: During your youth and teenage years was the theatre a popular activity for you and for the people around you?

PS: It was very popular with me and the people in the amateur dramatic society at school. I was in a number of productions at school and then I actually got to direct a play at school

FS: What was that?

PS: That was a play called The Bells by Henry Irving, which is a famous Victorian melodrama.

FS: What made you pick that one?

PS: Well I didn't pick it actually; it was picked for me by a teacher.

FS: So was the theatre seen as an expensive hobby or was it quite feasible for... I suppose being post war was it...

PS: I never thought of it as expensive, no, I've belonged since, all my life to an amateur dramatic club of one kind or another, I've always been able to afford the subscription, going to the theatre has become more expensive, but you have to kind of pick and choose.

FS: So obviously in your youth the plays that you studied and directed were chosen by your teachers predominantly, what enticed you to see after this period certain plays? What made you think I really want to...

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PS: Well I was studying English Literature at University, and drama was very much an enthusiasm of mine, I belonged to the amateur dramatic club at Cambridge and lots of my friends were involved in theatre and I just wanted to know what was going on in the theatre, so I was interested in classical plays from the point of view of filling in my picture of the theatre history and in contemporary plays because they were more likely to speak to me and my contemporaries, people like Pinter, Osborne and Beckett and so on.

FS: Were these quite controversial?

PS: Yes they were at the time. The Birthday Party for instance by Pinter was regarded as a total mystery for most people, I think it was Harold Hobson who recommended it as a great work of theatre.

FS: Oh great. And did you study these at University or is this just what you studied socially?

PS: It is what I studied socially mainly, I did a paper in the English Literature exam on tragedy, and there was also a drama element in a paper that I did on literature from 1880 to 1910 which must have included Oscar Wilde.

FS: So was it like more a breath of fresh air being able to study these plays in your own time or did you not see much difference between them or...

PS: I [pause] well, it was much more sociable and friendly and informal, I mean it is what you did for fun, where as what you had to write essays about was more serious and academic.

FS: Did you find there was an immense difference between the, from the pre and post war productions that you either studied or saw in the theatre?

PS: Pre and Post war? That's rather a difficult question to answer because I don't think I go back pre war.

FS: Would you find that maybe...

PS: I was a little boy during the war but I really did not register the war time, I was just growing up then, I no doubt went to the pantomime and I always enjoyed the clowns at the circus.

FS: So would your parents, your parents' generation, would they have been aware of the plays going on, the content, and the ones we were talking about...

PS: Oh I am sure yes...

FS: And they go and see these?

PS: Yes, I mean I think there was a great watershed post war between the plays that had been done immediately after the war which were very much escapist comedies or fantasies, and the what you might call the rebirth of British Theatre with Samuel Beckett and John Osborne, and then the introduction of the American Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, that was a great revelation.

FS: So what was the most memorable production you saw before 68?

PS: Before 68 let me just think...

FS: Or any production that stuck in your...

PS: Yes, well by 68 I was living in Lancaster, had taken part in many productions then. The first play I directed in Lancaster at the Grand Theatre was The Importance of Being Earnest, which I very much enjoyed and have relived many times since. I think the first

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play that I was in was an Australian play about immigrants to Sidney from... I cannot think where they are from now... Italy would it be? And I can't think what the title of the play was but I had to have an Italian accent which I quite enjoyed adopting. Probably one of the most memorable productions that I was in, in my early years in Lancaster was Juno and the Paycock by Sean O'Casey I have always been very fond of Irish theatre and I think that is a great play and I played Joxer, I was the kind of buddy of the captain, who is the main character in the play a great sort of braggart who makes himself out to be much more important and interesting than he really is, and Joxer is his sidekick who goes along with everything he says.

FS: Was this author a contemporary author?

PS: Well, yeah, perhaps no, a bit earlier than my own time yes. I can't remember the exact date it was written... pre war.

FS: Could you tell a slight difference in the style that this play was written?

PS: Well I think that it was quite unusual for its time because it alternated very down to earth working class comedy with rather grand, solemn, serious moments, which introduced elements of the mass and so on.

FS: Were you aware of the Lord Chamberlain's censorship of plays as a student?

PS: Yes, I always thought it was a joke, because often the words that had to be replaced for the supposed obscenities were equally suggestive in a different sort of way to somebody with a mischievous mind such as any young person would have.

FS: Did it annoy you at all that you were not allowed always to see what the playwright had originally intended?

PS: Yes, I think so, but I tended to get away with it in a sense, one of the great things about censorship is that you can't monitor it all the time all over the place, so I was in many a production which used the author's original words and we didn't give two hoots about the censor. But it was a curious, it created a curious situation for instance, Arthur Miller's play A View from the Bridge which was first produced I think in 1955 in this country, was declared obscene or had a scene that the censor did not like because it involved two men kissing and the play had to be produced in London at a private theatre club called 'The New Watergate Theatre Club' which was just created for the production of that play, and you didn't, the only membership you paid was the price of ticket, it was just a formality to go and see it.

FS: So you still got to see whatever you wanted?

PS: Yes I think so, unless of course it never reached the stage at all like this play in Birmingham for instance which there has been all this controversy about.

FS: Did you feel there was a general urge to talk about taboo subjects, and felt that it was necessary for them to be brought forward through the medium of theatre?

PS: Yes, I have always thought the theatre is a platform for contemporary issues, religious, moral, sexual, social.

FS: How far do you think this was achieved in this period between 45 and 68?

PS: I think rather well actually, I mean when you think of the dramatists of that period who came to the fore with increasing sort of popularity, people like John Arden, Arnold Wesker, Harold Pinter, N F Simpson is probably rather a jokey man to mention, but they were all interested in the life of the country as it was being experienced at the time, so they naturally spoke to people in their own language, they tended write in the vernacular, so we had all this criticism of the plays of Arnold Wesker for instance as

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being kitchen sink drama because they took place in people's ordinary working class people homes and often people live in the kitchen that is where everyone gathers like it is a party.

FS: So there was quite a demand for these plays?

PS: Yes I think so, it's hard to be specific about that, because I mean I was always very excited about it because it interested me, but I think the theatre was popular, yeah.

FS: Did you see anything in any theatre production that shocked you?

PS: I think a shocking moment was the often quoted episode in Edward Bond's play Saved, in which the young men stone a baby in a pram that's been left by a somewhat gormless young woman and I think that caused quite a furore at the time.

FS: Why do you think this was so disturbing for you?

PS: Well it was awful to think it might happen but it comes as a shock when you see something violent portrayed, even though there is no likelihood of it actually harming a real baby inside a pram. It was staged in such a way, you could not see inside the pram, but I think just the visual impact, it takes you by surprise and it is a dreadful thing to see.

FS: Do you think this was purposely made to be shocking for the audience?

PS: Oh yes I am sure it was. Edward Bond was a great stirrer up of people's complacencies.

FS: You think he maybe achieved what he was trying to do through his production?

PS: I don't know, we were saying, I was saying earlier that theatre was popular, I suspect Edward Bond has never been popular and he has almost ceased to write these days, but he would have a very strong view of the seriousness of theatre.

FS: Have you ever walked out of a production you have seen or wanted to?

PS: No I never have because I always want to get my money's worth and I always feel as with local reviewers who walk out of amateur productions without seeing the second half they are missing the best bit. I have occasionally thought I do not know how I am going to endure this but and occasionally I can remember I was extremely frustrated by a production I saw at a theatre club in London by a play, well it was a kind of two one act plays purported to be two one act plays called Games after Liverpool by James Saunders, and the plays took place in a fairly kind of conventional way in the first half of the evening, but then the actors all stayed on stage afterwards and confronted the audience and asked them what they thought of what was going on, and I thought that was a bit of a cheat because we'd paid money to see a play.

FS: Was this quite a modern, well new thing for you to be confronted by the actors?

PS: Yes, yes.

FS: Was that perhaps guite experimental for them?

PS: Yes it was yes, the famous occasion in the theatre which I wasn't at when the actors refused to go away when the play was over, was the play about Vietnam, the war in Vietnam, and the actors lined up at the end as if to take their curtain call, and then, but they did not leave the stage and they stayed staring in silence at the audience and of course the audience fell silent and gradually walked away.

FS: And why did they do this?

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PS: Well because the actors and director and so on felt so strongly about the issue of the war in Vietnam they wanted people to go away thinking about it and talking about not to think they had just seen a show in the theatre that they could forget about.

FS: Was this effective, do you think?

PS: It certainly caused a stir at the time, yeah.

FS: Has any play you have seen influenced your political policies or your desire to change society?

PS: Numerous plays affected me politically. I can remember doing a production of a play by John Arden called Sergeant Musgrave's Dance, which challenged my instinctive pacifist views and made me realise how difficult it is to hold a completely pacifist position in certain circumstances where your own individual life is threatened. It is a very cunning piece of theatre because at the end of the play the deserters, solider deserters, who ostensibly are recruiting young men to join the army during some earlier historical war at the end of the nineteenth century, they brought a gatling gun to show the population in the town's square and they turned the gun on the whole crowd and threatened to sort of blow them up, and that's what they are driven to in their desperation, you cannot force people to make peace.

FS: So you would say theatre has the power to alter your morals maybe or your views?

PS: Yes, I think so, very much.

FS: And was this quite important during the 40s, 50s and 60s, any more so than today, in your opinion?

PS: Yes I don't get the impression that the theatre these days has quite the same impact as it did in the 60's, but then there has been this recent controversy about the Muslim or anti Muslim play in Birmingham, which it's a hard to tell really, and I think ones own individual attitude changes and mellows with the years, so I certainly was very much affected and got very excited about certain issues that were confronted in the theatre in the 60's.

FS: Is this because they had never been confronted before?

PS: I'd never confronted them before and my contemporaries had not confronted them before, and it was not generally thought to be right to challenge political or moral orthodoxies before, I don't think, though it has been done of course in the past, with someone like George Bernard Shaw was always putting his foot in it.

FS: Could you elaborate a bit more on that, George Bernard Shaw putting his foot in it?

PS: Well, let's think, in P ygmalion for instance, he has the flower girl who is being taught how to speak properly by the professor of linguistics, she turns the tables on him because he continues to treat her as though she is a kind of pupil, still the flower girl who wants to better herself, instead of understanding that she is a human being with feelings, and has taken on board what he has taught her as far as pronunciation is concerned and does not need to be treated like some bundling.

FS: So what was Shaw trying to say through this?

PS: I think he was trying to explore four people, the complications of human relationships, the dynamics people in a teaching situation. I mean interestingly the same situation of the male teacher and the female student, mature student is in Educating Rita, and in David Mamet's play, what's it called, where the student, the American, Oleanna, she actually sort of takes him to the university's board of inquiry or something

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because she regards his treatment of her as offensive and not respectful of her position as a woman.

FS: Going back a bit, because we were talking about how contemporary productions don't have the same affect as they did then, is that correct?

PS: Yeah.

FS: Do you believe everything is out in the open now and our, well my generation is not easily shocked. And do you think this is a shame for theatre, that it does not have the same effect on society?

PS: Well think it is always rather dangerous to say that something won't happen again, because low and behold tomorrow something will happen that stirs people up, and there are so many ways in which the theatre works on an audience, it's not necessarily what the writer says through the actors, through the characters, it maybe in the way in which the whole play is staged, I mean it may not even be a play text that is very easy to understand on the page, but the actors, performers, bring it alive and create a visual impact or choreographic impact and use music and lights and so on and that can be quite influential.

FS: Theatre still has the power to change people?

PS: Oh yes, I am sure it does.

FS: Maybe going back to Saved you said you found this quite shocking. Do you think today's generation would find it as shocking as you did?

PS: I would have thought they would, that particular scene, yes.

FS: Did you read the reviews that were going round before you saw productions, most famously by Hobson and Tynan, and did this ever influence you to go see a play?

PS: Yes, it might well have done, I do tend or have in the past anyway, rather less these days tend to be influenced by reviews.

FS: Most famously Hobson and Tynan disagreed guite a lot on productions...

PS: Yes, yes.

FS: Which one did you tend to opt for?

PS: I tended to opt for Tynan, but I would often hedge my bets by looking at what Hobson had recommended, because I didn't want to miss anything and I would have missed something if I had not seen The Birthday Party for instance.

FS: You went to see The Birthday Party?

PS: I saw it very early on in its production, when would that be? 50 something, late 50 was it 57?

FS: Yeah, I have got it written down.

PS: 57, 58.

FS: I have got in between, well just before Wesker I have got it as.

PS: Right, yes.

FS: And has that production stuck in your mind?

PS: Yes, oh yes.

FS: Quite different to other plays you had seen?

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PS: Yes.

FS: Does Pinter style stick out for you in any way?

PS: Yes, it was funny and baffling and kind of gripping.

FS: Did you have any favourite characters in the play?

PS: Well I, the kind of theatre, the scene, some sort of scene between actors are very much written for actors to enjoy and Pinter himself is an actor before he is a writer or director and he enjoys creating parts and scenes for actors to do and the first scene of that play in the boarding house between the sentimental mother and the somewhat mentally defective son is made for actors to enjoy, and then of course the cross examination by the two [pause] mysterious.

FS: Yeah, I am not quite sure who they are...

PS: No, no they are sort of representing some kind of external authority are they not? And that quick fired dialogue is great fun to do.

FS: Quite unique as well. So how much would you say the theatre has influenced your life?

PS: I should think a lot; actually people tend to associate me with the theatre even though I do, do other things. And I love going to the theatre, I like, there is a ritual element to it that I enjoy, I know what to do and I can completely relax when I go to the theatre because I know what is going to happen. Well I don't know precisely what the play is going to be like, but I know how to approach it you know to sit in my seat and shut everything else out for 2 hours.

FS: So you go to see productions more out of enjoyment then education I suppose?

PS: Yes, yes, these days especially, but I still have a slightly puritanical, kind of germ in my make up which tells me that such and such a play by such and such an author is one to look out for and check up on, so I go, but I find that enjoyable even if it's also education, I mean it might be informative about events that are happening the other side of the world, or to people I couldn't possible meet in real life.

FS: You have stuck to the theatre and plays as opposed to many people who have gone to musicals.

PS: Yes I don't much like musicals, though I have enjoyed some modern musicals, the Steven Sondheim type musical I like.

FS: Well, do you have anything else you would like to add about the theatre between 45 and 68, which I have not given you the opportunity to answer?

PS: What can I say? It's an absolutely central art form and a way of involving a large number of people in a collective enterprise, both audience and what happens on stage and backstage, which I think is just a great social good.

FS: Great thank you very much, end it there.

PS: My pleasure.

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