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Pat Francis – interview transcript

Interviewer: Rosie Taylor

6 January 2005

Theatregoer, on East Ham Palace, Joan Littlewood, seeing Brendan Behan's plays, Chekhov.

RT: Could you tell me how your interest in the theatre first began?

PF: [pause] It's hard to say! I didn't come from a family that went to the theatre, not during my lifetime, and it wasn't a family that went to the cinema either, it was just that there wasn't a great deal to do, I suppose, and there were opportunities locally and I started going, I think to the local theatres. The East Ham Palace and what was then Theatre Royal in Stratford. And it was just something that I did with my friends after work, because I started work at 16 and it was just something we did occasionally.

RT: So was it always the same friends that you went to see plays with?

PF: No, no, different friends, mostly from work.

RT: Did you choose different people according to what kind of thing you were going to see?

PF: Yes, yes, on the whole.

RT: How did you select them?

PF: According to what I thought their interest would be. Some people were obvious choices for something musical or comedy, and other people something a bit more thoughtful.

RT: You were a very regular theatre-goer, according to the letter you sent us.

PF: To start with, to start with, yes.

RT: So what was it about your visits to the theatre that made you want to go so often? Was it just a matter of that it was the main local entertainment, or presumably you enjoyed it, so-

PF: Yes. [pause] It's hard to put these things into words. I was rather starved for culture, you might say. It was a home without books, it was immediately post-war, so I had spent my childhood not being able to go out very far, because it was a very bombed area. And so it was all new and exciting for me, and it was a way of finding out, just things I had never heard of or known about. It was all fresh to me, it wasn't things- I wasn't going to see things because I'd heard of the author or anything like that, I hadn't heard of most things. I just went to what was put on. That's why I went to such a wide variety of things. Whatever was on in the local theatres, I went to. But I was enjoying them, but nothing specific, it was whatever was... but that was the local things. After the war there was a burst of ballet, which a lot of the young girls liked, and there was

also a usage of big venues, like ice rinks they would use for shows, so there were a lot of ice shows on. Well that wasn't so much my taste, but they would use the big venues for ballet, and I saw some of Alicia Markova, Alexandra Danilova, Anton Dolin, Leonide Massine, who were the leading dancers – most of them rather late in their careers, but they were playing these big venues, and people who had never been to ballet were flocking in there, because it was I suppose colourful, and quite different from the austerity that we were used to.

RT: So you said that the area around where you were living at the time had been quite destroyed during the war. Would you say that the theatre buildings and the scene itself was also fresh?

PF: What do you mean by the scene?

RT: Sorry, that was badly phrased. Were the buildings new buildings – you know, was there a sense of it being a new thing for other people or just for yourself?

PF: I think certainly for young people. I think we were all at a bit of a loss after the war, because all through the war we had said "When the war's over, when the war's over..." And when the war was over we were new teenagers, and we didn't know what was going to happen. It was just a rather grey period, lots of rationing and so on to start with, and yes, I think we just generally were all... It wasn't so much the buildings were new, because there wasn't much rebuilding of frivolous things like theatres! But a sense of things starting again. Entertainment – there wasn't a great deal of that.

RT: You mentioned that you went to Theatre Workshop and the East Ham Palace. How did the two types of theatre differ in the kind of performances that you saw there?

PF: Well, the East Ham Palace was at the very very end of a period of variety. So that was really coming out of the old music halls, which had been strong around the area. And I saw it decline and die, really, because when I first went there, I would see- there would be several chorus girls who came on, and then it'd get down to two chorus girls, then to one chorus girl, and then one chorus girl drunk and then it shut! [laughs] So that was a quite different experience there from going to the Theatre Royal, which was rep really, I think it was weekly rep, and they would both change their programmes fortnightly, so I would go to the East Ham Palace one week, and the Theatre Royal the next. But the rep that they had at Theatre Royal was just standard plays – Agatha Christie and that sort of thing. But then it was taken over by Joan Littlewood, who made it a quite different place. She actually encouraged people to join for a very small fee, so you actually felt part of it, you would actually go and meet the actors afterwards, that sort of thing. She would have new plays, and it actually started getting written up as Theatre Workshop in the Observer and things like that! So that it was actually- people began to hear about the place, so you'd have sometimes different people came to see it, but mostly it was a totally different attitude towards theatre. You actually realised that it could be something that was still being written, still vibrant, to do with your own life, and so- I was just remembering, there was one play – I've no idea who it was by, or what it was called, I can remember that it was set on a building site and the stage was just a building site, and I can't remember if there was actually any plot to it! It was just like sitting watching men on a building site! Which was, in its own way, quite fascinating! [laughs] So you would have things like that which were much more to do with the life of the area than the usual Agatha Christie. That sort of thing. So that was different. On Sunday evenings she would have all the major folk singers there, in that folk revival of the 1950s.

RT: You said before we started the interview, actually, that you were aware of Joan Littlewood's personal involvement with the folk scene. Do you think that it was

something that she personally brought into her theatre, or do you think it was more of a company decision as it were?

PF: I think – this is all hearsay, but I think that Joan Littlewood virtually was the company, and what she said went. And as far as I understand it she was a communist and so was Ewan McColl, and they knew each other – to say the least! And so I think there was probably a political decision to have the folk song, which was very much part of the left wing idea of culture of and for the people. That was their kind of attitude towards theatre, I think, in general, including the folk song.

RT: Would you say that that political agenda of Joan Littlewood's would influence people's interest in going to see her theatre?

PF: I never personally knew anybody who it influenced, but then I couldn't say. Just, you know, as a general impression, my impression is that the people who were interested politically would come from outside the area – that was the people who were writing for the newspapers, who were interested in that. Whereas local people just went for a night out, more, I guess. That's obviously a huge generalisation and just an impression.

RT: Sure. It must have been quite exciting to read about your local scene in the national press!

PF: Yes!

RT: Was that something that was widely read, the reviews at the time?

PF: Yes, yes. I mean, the Theatre Workshop became quite famous, in its day, and it had early performances of Brendan Behan, so I saw *The Quare Fellow* before it ever went to the West End of London, I would see the pre-West End. Which, at the time, pre-West End runs weren't, as far as I know, so common in that day. But that would get taken up and taken there and I saw Barbara Windsor's debut! [laughs] I think it was in *Things Ain't What They Used To Be*.

RT: Was she any good?

PF: She was just a pert little blonde as she is now! [laughs]

RT: You mentioned that the East Ham Palace declined quite significantly in its standard. Could you tell me a bit about the last show that you saw there?

PF: Well, as I say, I was so appalled by this poor girl who had even lost her wig or whatever it was at the time.

RT: Oh dear.

PF: While she danced round – she could barely lift her feet, and when she shuffled round she showed that she had a big bald spot at the back of her head. So obviously they had really dragged the dregs for the chorus girl. And I can't- that is what I remember of that show, I don't remember what I particularly saw then. Earlier – I mean when, in the first days when I went to see it, I can remember seeing Ray Ellington who at the time was quite a noted bandleader, he was on the radio and that sort of thing. And the only other act I can possibly remember was something that was called 'Bouncing on the Bed'. We were puzzling over this in the audience, thinking 'What on earth can that be?'. And it was a trampoline act, and we had never seen a trampoline. And I can just remember these two girls jumping up and down! And that was a typical variety act, really – if you look at old variety acts, you have impressionists and singers and all that sort of thing, and this just happened to be 'Bouncing on the Bed' is the one that I remember!

RT: How did you feel about the decline of the East Ham Palace?

PF: Well, I think it's sad to see anything like that that's been going a long time, but I mainly remember being sad that it was a theatre closing, and I can't say you actually regretted very much the shows that had been on lately. It was so obviously in decline. And in fact, I think it was a sort of sense of a loyalty that kept me going to the end. It wasn't good at that time, though, there were lots of other things that were more interesting. The other place that I would go to was the People's Palace in the Mile End Road, because I didn't go to the West End very much except for ballet. But the People's Palace would have foreign films, that would have shows with- I saw George Melly, and other jazz... Peter King and so on. And they would have plays, and they had ballet and opera, so they had a wide variety of things. And that was the sort of thing that was appeal- as I got to understand what I liked, and what appealed to me, that was much more my kind of thing than the old East Ham Palace variety.

RT: So can you remember any of the plays that you saw at the People's Palace?

PF: Now, sometimes I can remember plays I saw locally, and I can't quite remember which ones it was. I know I saw Eugene O'Neill's Anna Christie, and I'm not quite sure whether that was People's Palace or one of the early things at Theatre Royal. As I say, I saw an Agatha Christie, the name of which escapes me though I've seen it since. It is one of the well known ones, I could tell you a bit about the plot but I can't tell you the name. It's hard to remember- I find it astonishing, really, how few actual names of plays I remember. I can remember that I used to go and I can remember a few operas, a few ballet performances and a few plays, but not clearly many. At the People's Palace I saw some Shakespeare. I saw Donald Wolfitt... somewhere on a heath and I'm not sure if it was in Macbeth or King Lear! Because I only remember the feeble attempts at portraying the storm, I'm afraid.

RT: So how did they do that?

PF: There was someone seemed to just bang a tin tray once in the wings, which I thought was a bit feeble, they could have at least banged it a few times! [laughs]

RT: So that was not a typical level of technical skill, then?

PF: No. Again, he was someone- I think they used to tour West Ham and thereabouts when they were in their decline. So again, it was late in his career, but he was very famous, so you went to see Donald Wolfitt, really. The production was nothing much, it was just his voice, really, that was what was supposed to be the attraction, and that's all they seemed to bother about.

RT: So, in other plays that you saw at the period, would you say that the use of light and sound and so on was better than perhaps in the ones featuring celebrities? Would you say they made more of an effort with that kind of thing, or is that oversimplified?

PF: When you got to Joan Littlewood, it was obviously a totally different approach to presentation. The others were just standard rep – you know, the drawing room, with a French door at the back. I can't remember anything very outstanding in the way of décor, but when you got to Joan Littlewood, she would just use it in quite a different way. I think, on this building site one, as far as I can remember the curtain never came down, it was just up as the building site when you came in, it was still up as the building site- So it was just a different approach altogether from proscenium arch, and, you know, the lights going down and this kind of thing. It was a different- it was more as if she was trying to include the audience.

RT: Is that something that you preferred as a theatregoer?

PF: I just enjoyed it all, really! I found it all interesting, I- Certainly it was more interesting at the time, but I just feel there's room for all sorts. [laughs]

RT: Do you still attend the theatre today?

PF: Not nearly so much. We did for a long time, but now I quite often just go to the local amateur one, because I know people in it and that sort of thing. But when I have been recently, it's more often been to the Orange Tree in Richmond than to the West End. Just for the sheer effort of getting there just doesn't seem worth the bother!
[laughs]

RT: So, based on the theatre you do see, then, how would you say that the range of productions on offer would compare to the kind of range that was available when you were living at home?

PF: Oh, I think it is wider. [pause] Oh yes. I mean, the thing is, it changed during my time at home, in those few years, so it was moving towards the sort of things you have now. Since I don't go so much, it's not really fair to say, but I mean, there was a period, which I'm sure was before 1968, when they had seasons of foreign companies come over, and that I enjoyed, and I don't see so much of that I think now, not as a regular season of plays from France, and even Moscow. I saw *The Cherry Orchard* in Russian and it was marvellous, although I don't speak a word of Russian, and yet the playing was so incredible. And I didn't even like Chekhov before I saw that! But seeing it in Russian, I felt I absolutely understood the Russian temperament for the first time. And so that was quite different, and I don't- I mean, as I say, I don't follow enough, but I don't see that there's that quite range now.

RT: So in these foreign language productions, how – apart from the language obviously – how did they differ from the things that you saw from the UK?

PF: Well, taking Chekhov, since that's what I saw. Now, I had seen some of Chekhov in Stratford, whether it was when it was Theatre Royal or- I think it was when it was Theatre Royal, early days. So, then, Chekhov was played as gloomy, gloomy, gloomy stuff, and I could scarcely sit through it, it was so depressing to me. And then I saw that they were called comedies and they ought to be played- and I thought "How on earth could you play that as a comedy?" But when I saw *The Cherry Orchard*, the company was noted for ensemble playing, and you could see that, because it was as if someone's mood would change and they would take the whole of the company with them, they would suddenly all lighten, and then someone would go down and everyone would go down, and you could almost feel it, palpable change in atmosphere. And I had never seen anything like that, and I still haven't! That was a marvellous bit of just- the company, how they rehearsed it and how long they rehearsed it I don't know, but that was different to anything I'd seen. And again, that's at the beginning of when the English began to realise that Chekhov could actually be funny, and since then I have seen productions where the comedy is brought out, but in the early days it was played very depressingly.

RT: So these foreign companies- well, that foreign company that you saw, was very much collaborative, which as I understand it is the kind of way in which Theatre Workshop put their plays together as well.

PF: Yes. Yes, that's true.

RT: Would you say that the devised collaborative nature showed through, or not?

PF: Sometimes it did. It wasn't so star-struck. And you had poor...I have to say, Avis Bunnage [?] is ugly, or was ugly, I'm not quite sure if she has died now. But she would get star parts, and that was nice, because she was a good actress, and you don't see that often in the theatre, someone with really quite plain, getting to play the Queen, and that

sort of thing. And you would- people would change parts, and so you would see them as- I saw who became Harry H. Corbett later on, he was Harry Corbett when I saw him, before he played in Steptoe so he was unknown then, and I saw him as- I think it was Richard the Second. And then the next week, you know, he would perhaps have quite a minor part in a play. And so that was different. But the actual playing, it wasn't- Perhaps it was a bit different, but it wasn't so noticeable as it was, I would have said, in the Moscow production.

RT: So, am I right in understanding, then, that the Theatre Workshop didn't have 'stars' in the way that some other productions did?

PF: I'm sure they tried terribly hard not to! But obviously some people get taken up a little bit, you know, or approved, they just have attractive personalities, I suppose! They get noticed more, but I'm sure their policy was not to have stars. And they didn't- certainly didn't take stars in from outside, anybody who became a star later didn't start as one, before she used them.

RT: No. So would you say that, in that respect, the way she used her actors – Joan Littlewood, this is – related to her known communist sympathies?

PF: I would say certainly it's all very much the way she saw life, and the way society should work, yes.

RT: Was she personally a celebrated figure at that time?

PF: I hadn't heard of her, but then I hadn't heard of many people! [laughs] She became known, through her work there, I think is probably true to say. That's certainly how I began to see people outside knew of her. But she was an unpretentious sort of figure – if you bumped into her, she was quite ordinary. She would say "Why don't you come and stand inside out of the rain?" and that sort of thing, you know, she saw you queuing up outside. She was quite-

RT: Did that happen to you?

PF: Yes, yes it did.

RT: Ooh, how exciting!

PF: In fact it was the wind, I think. She said "You look cold, why don't you come in the theatre?", but I was waiting for someone outside, so I, in my shy way I wouldn't go in. [laughs]

RT: Oh, that must have been great, having a personal meeting with someone so high up in the theatre.

PF: Well, it did - As I say, in West Ham you didn't have much contact with anybody, and it felt quite a moment, yes.

RT: Okay. Do you have any clear memories of stage sets at all? And specifically, how they might differ to the kind of thing you'd see in rep today.

PF: [pause] No. I think it depends partly on the style of the play, doesn't it. I mean, if you're seeing a drawing room comedy, all you can do is to put it in a drawing room, really. I don't remember any at the moment, anything. As I say, apart from the difference that Joan Littlewood made with some of her sets, being so open and not using the curtain and that sort of thing. No, I mean... they did what they could, they probably had quite small budgets, but I wasn't aware of any problems, it wasn't what interested me. I was interested in the speech, really, so I suppose I wasn't a good person for criticising sets!

RT: So, when you went into a theatre that didn't have a curtain across, did that make you feel more involved with the action on the stage? Oh, that's a very leading question! But how did it affect you, when you saw that?

PF: I suppose first of all it would be surprise, because it's just different from what you've been used to, and curious, I suppose, as to what was going to happen on the set. Yeah, as I say, I would enjoy it, but I - it didn't make me feel that I never wanted the curtain back. I could see that some kinds of plays it was suited for, and others it would spoil half the fun to see what was going to come.

RT: Okay. Is there anything else that you'd like to discuss?

PF: I can't think off-hand, no.

RT: Okay then. We've come to the end of my questions, so thank you very much for your help.