

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Elsie Orme – interview transcript

Interviewer: Anneka Shah

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Assistant Stage Manager and theatre-goer; audiences; children's plays; Colin George; London Theatre; The National Theatre; Geoffrey Ost; pot-boilers; Terrence Rattigan; repertory; Sheffield Theatre; star-quality; theatre going; Arnold Wesker; women's roles.

AS: Mrs. Elsie Orme, what is your occupation?

EO: I'm retired.

AS: What did you used to do?

EO: I have spent a lifetime in industry, we have a small family company making machine tools. I was there from sixteen to twenty-six and then at twenty-seven went to university, started everything late! When I was at university I became very much involved with the dramatic society there. The President at the time was somebody called Antony Eastbrook, who was the president of the dramatic society and became the General Manager of the National Theatre, as it was being built, working for Sir Laurence Olivier.

AS: Which University did you go to?

EO: University of St Andrew's, Scotland

AS: Where is your place of birth?

EO: Sheffield, born and bred.

AS: My first question in the interview: you have already informed me that you have been viewing theatre in Sheffield before The Crucible existed. What was theatre like before The Crucible?

EO: It was very, very different, it was a community, it was fortnightly rep, and it was 80% permanent bookings, people booked for the season. They knew exactly where they were, they knew that every second Thursday they would be going. They may not necessarily like what they saw, but they would come again in another fortnight and maybe it was something that they would like. So our wonderful director Geoffrey Ost, he worked without an Arts Council grant and with this 80% permanent booking their income was secure, and I've a lovely story, Paul Eddington, have you heard of Paul Eddington?

AS: I haven't?

EO: And have you heard of that series: Yes Minister?

AS: Yes.

EO: Well he was playing the Prime Minister, he was at the Playhouse when I was. One evening his wife was going to the first night of *The Firstborn* by Christopher Fry about Moses, and as she was coming out of the theatre at the end there were an old couple in front of her, and the husband said 'Well I thought you'd like it?' [Sheffield accent] she said 'Well I did not' [stern accent]. And another actress, Ella Atkinson, whom you will see if you go into the Lyceum foyer, have you been into the Lyceum foyer? Have you seen that painting?

AS: I am not sure; I have not been there for a while.

EO: Well you must go and have a look at it now. Well I'll tell you this lovely story about Ella [Atkinson], who figures in that painting. She was going up the side of the theatre after having been to the show, and there were two women in front of her and one said to the other that it was the worst thing Geoffrey Ost had done ever since *The Cherry Orchard*, so the next fortnight there would be a pot-boiler from London, you know a London pot-boiler show would be put on, and so people would take the rough with the smooth.

AS: What is a pot-boiler? I've not heard of that before.

EO: That's funny I never thought that you wouldn't know that. A pot-boiler is something that is... well, the soaps are, *EastEnders*, *Coronation Street*, they are pot-boilers. Well... it won't go down in history.

AS: Have you spent most of your life watching or actually being involved in theatre?

EO: Well when I was at St Andrews I was older than the average student. I was twenty-seven when I went up, thirty-one when I came down, so I naturally fell into character

parts, I have always played character parts. And when I came down from St Andrew's, I went back into my father's company and was not enjoying it very much, and so I knocked on the door of Geoffrey Ost saying 'Please can I come for an audition?', and so he said I could, and I did an excerpt from J. B. Priestley's *They Came to the City*, which Ada Reeve played a little cockney lady who come to the gates of paradise and I played a little scene of that and of this little cockney lass at the end of which Geoffrey Ost said 'Oh I see, Mrs. Orme, you do not come from London' [slight laugh], so that put me very firmly in my place. Well, anyway, I became an Assistant Stage Manager, which you will know is another word for dogsbody, and every fortnight you looked at the cast list as it went up on the notice board, and if there is a space for a maid, or a walk on part or something, and there is no name, Geoffrey would say 'Elsie, would you read that in rehearsal'; he never took it away from anyone because he never actually promised it to anybody, so that was how we insisted hoping that we would get a little part. And then I went to Chesterfield, which now it's called The Pomegranate, it was the Chesterfield Civic Theatre and I played the small character parts there 'til I got married, and that was the end of that. I went back briefly to Sheffield when Geoffrey [Ost] was doing a play that had so many character bags in it - do you know what I mean by character bag?

AS: No.

EO: Well, actors playing character parts, he ran out of them, so he thought of me who was recently married and was sitting up there, did I want to play this little part? So that was the last thing I did on the professional stage. But it was fulfilling my dream that I wanted to go on the Sheffield Playhouse theatre stage, as part of the company and not as an Assistant Stage Manager. But I was there with some fascinating people who have done very well, Paul Eddington as I say, have you seen re-runs of *The Good Life*?

AS: Yes.

EO: Well, that is Paul Eddington, the posh one with Penelope Keith, and then he went, as I say, into *Yes Minister* and that became very, very famous with a wonderful script, wonderful. They all got a doctorate from Sheffield University because Paul was originally connected with Sheffield and not only him and Nigel Hawthorne, you know Nigel Hawthorne? He died a few years ago.

AS: I don't.

EO: He played the civil servant and he was knighted, and there was Patrick McGowan, have you heard of Patrick McGowan? Right, well, he became very famous, he was in *Danger Man*. He played, this was a long time ago now and I forget what the one was that he did at Port Merrion, I can't remember what it was called. Peter Parkworth, Angela Thorn. Have you heard of Rupert Penry-Jones?

AS: No.

EO: You are not much of a theatre-goer yet are you?

AS: I go when I can in Sheffield, but I have not been to proper theatre in London, but I do really enjoy it. I've read more plays than I have seen.

EO: Well you have heard of Sir Derek Jacobi?

AS: Yes, I saw him in Don Carlos.

EO: It was lovely wasn't it? And Joseph Fiennes playing in Edward II. I had one of the actors staying with me playing opposite Joseph Fiennes. Heard of Richard Briers? Richard Briers being in The Good Life, and his daughter Lucy was in Cloud Nine, which was about six months ago now. But I turn myself into a complementary theatrical landlady when I see somebody coming that I would like to get to know. I would offer them hospitality and I have had such fun.

AS: So would you say theatre during that time before The Crucible was a lot like a community atmosphere then?

EO: Ah, yes, we were talking about that weren't we? No, it was very different, you had this community at The Playhouse, and we all knew the two ladies at the box office who were very strict about who did what and I went, when I came down from University, one pound a week to be an Assistant Stage Manager, and this was a community and you all know who is sitting all around you because the same people go on the second Thursday night. But when Colin George saw the vision of the theatre like The Crucible he went to Minneapolis where they had one, and Stratford, Ontario and to a certain extent Chichester, that's a sort of fan shaped one whereas ours in The Crucible is two o'clock to ten o'clock, and so the opening night, Colin George did a very unusual thing, he did a happening, have you heard of happening?

AS: No.

ES: That is you go on a stage and you act yourself as you would like to do in relation to someone else, in other words there is no script. Well Sheffield was not up to that, Sheffield did not enjoy that at all, then he did Peer Gynt. He did Peer Gynt with neither Grieg's music or the usual classical way of performing it, so that did not make him any friends. So bit by bit the people who had been coming by every second Thursday fell away because they did not understand it, and he was trying to educate them, and one of my friends, one of the actors who was at The Playhouse subsequently said 'It's no good trying to educate anyone until you have got them inside, and if you cannot get them inside you're wasting your time,' and he could not get them inside. I think he thought he was likely to get a university audience, but I don't think he ever did, so it was up to subsequent directors to try and level it down so that he can get people in. Now, working backwards, you have heard of Michael Grandage?

AS: Yes.

EO: Michael Grandage has been our saviour, he has been here five years and he's like a Pied Piper, you know what a Pied Piper of Hamlyn is?

AS: Yes, I've heard of that one.

EO: Right, he just got everybody on his side, he's a lovely chap and people just adore working for him and he cannot put a foot wrong; every time he makes a production he gets four stars from the critics and told how wonderful it is, and now he is the Associate Director of the Donmar Warehouse - have you heard of the Donmar Warehouse?

AS: No.

EO: It is a very important word for you to write down; that's in London, it is quite a small theatre, it is made out of a warehouse but it puts on very exciting and unusual productions and his predecessor Sam Mendes, he's now gone to Hollywood, he's made one film - have you heard of American Beauty, that is his first film - he's over there now and Michael Grandage (who has been working there as well as working with Sheffield) will obviously go on to higher things; it suggests that he will be one of the future directors of the National Theatre, but Sam Mendes, like I say, has gone to Hollywood and incoming is a boy called Sam West who is coming next June, he is the new director, and Sam is a fine actor and is going to act as well as direct. He has two famous parents. Have you heard of Fawlty Towers?

AS: Yes.

EO: Do you remember the wife, little perky wife? Well, that's Prunella Scales and she has done a lot of Tesco adverts, very funny Tesco adverts.

AS: Yes, I remember.

EO: That is his mother, and his father is Timothy West who is a very fine actor and Sam [West] is 36 and he's coming to be our Associate Director.

AS: Do you think that the Sheffield tastes prefer the more classical drama? Like a well made play, as you say Michael Grandage has renewed Sheffield and brought back the audiences to the theatre, do you think Sheffield is a place which has a classical taste in theatre? Do you think Sheffield will accept classical theatre? Prefers it?

EO: If in fact you bring someone in like Kenneth Branagh, now everybody's heard of Kenneth Branagh in all sorts of ways. I wrote to him when Sam [West] was appointed

and said we were thrilled about this and was he going to come back and do something else, he wrote back and said he was thrilled that Sam West has accepted the post because he is a brilliant chap. Well, you see, it is marvellous because everyone has heard of Kenneth Branagh, so they did not come to see Richard III they came to see Kenneth Branagh in Richard III, what he was in was purely incidental. Michael [Grandage] has created a young audience night and the previews where you have to be under twenty-six I think, and every seat is £5, and then also there is a dress rehearsal, Have you been to one?

AS: No, I'm planning to next year

EO: And there is a wonderful atmosphere. But the thing at the moment I saw Don Carlos as you did. But I have seen twice, Ain't Misbehavin', which is totally and completely different to Don Carlos. But in each case the audience, the auditorium was full, which was wonderful.

AS: I was going to ask you, before The Crucible existed, were the plays held at the Lyceum Theatre?

EO: The Lyceum is a commercial theatre and is a travelling theatre and yes you either had a Playhouse or you had a Lyceum, yes I see... [Slight pause while Mrs. Orme fetched a folder containing a collection of cuttings about the plays she has seen] This is a book that I collected in my youth... 1947. This is the sort of thing they had at the Lyceum. Yes, at one time the Lyceum had twice nightly, six fifteen and eight thirty.

AS: Was that during the 1950s or is that recent?

EO: Oh, not recent, not for ages, no, I think you will find that some there [in her collection of cuttings since 1947 of the shows held at the Lyceum and Crucible] that are twice nightly. There, [pointing at a page in her folder of cuttings] 1942, that was twice nightly.

AS: Did any of the London stars during the 1950s come and perform in Sheffield Theatre?

EO: Oh all the time, because what they did is they had a run either before or after the stay in London. For instance Don Carlos is being put on in London, and we saw plenty of very famous actors at the Lyceum, not so much so at The Playhouse. Now, The Playhouse was a repertory company, in other words the derivation of the word is repeat, and that was where young actors could learn their trade, and in two years in repertory company you could then hope to be able to ply your goods in London and hopefully get something there.

AS: Do you think Sheffield was a very important place for regional theatre? As Sheffield wasn't the main site for theatre for England, do you think it made an impact with its plays?

EO: Now, are you saying did Sheffield become famous?

AS: How significant do you think Sheffield was as a place of regional theatre?

EO: There were three repertory companies in England which had a very high standing, one was Birmingham, the other was Liverpool and the third one was Sheffield in that order: you know if you have got a job at Birmingham it is pretty good. They had these repertory companies right around the country and it is a wonderful way to learn your trade; but what happens now is they come straight out of drama school onto a soap and you don't learn on a soap how to act on stage, so there has been much complaint over the last few years of the fact that actors are not projecting, not getting to the back of the theatre. That is something that Michael Grandage is very keen on, first thing he says to me after a first night is 'Could you hear?' because I'm hard of hearing.

AS: Also, before, you were saying everyone visited the theatre every Thursday, was that for a particular reason?

EO: No no no, I'm making an example, or every Monday or Tuesday or every second Monday or every second... it is just so you've got yourself sort of plugged in to a specific day. Of course you could change it if you wanted to, but it was the regularity of it. I mean we, for instance, there was six of us and we used the early booking system, being one of its square circle, to book our seats earlier, and as soon as the brochure came out my sister was on the phone saying 'We are thinking of going to this one this one and this one'. That really is very good because, if you, as I did when The Crucible started, when The Crucible played it unevenly, it did not play it in that sort of repetition. So you think 'I must go before it finishes' and then you say 'That's funny, it has finished', so you lost the rhythm of it. Now they rehearse for about a month and play for about three weeks but we have got used to that idea now.

AS: What was the audience like that went to the theatre? Were they a middle-class type of people or was there a mixture, a variety of people who visited the theatre?

EO: Oh, now, we had several other theatres, we had the Empire Theatre, we had the Theatre Royal – [the] Theatre Royal was on the site of John Lewis - and there was another one not far from the Moor, and the Empire was on Charles Street crossing. The Moor, that was a very exciting place and as a small child I completely adored it, its variety and they had a number of acts of a juggler or of a dancer or a comedian and you had the numbers up on the side of the proscenium arch of all the red lights saying one two and three four five, and I just adored that, so you have got the division there, that you had the variety of people and the Playhouse people who would put up with The Cherry Orchard, providing they got a light play the following fortnight, and so Geoffrey

[Ost] in that sense did educate them because he got them there under almost false pretences, and they didn't like *The Cherry Orchard*, or *Hedda Gabler* [faint laughter].

AS: Was theatre expensive in Sheffield?

EO: I sat in the upper circle when I went as a teenager, and that was six shillings, but what six shillings equates [to] now I do not know. I think a Playhouse was something like four to five shillings; I cannot be sure, The Playhouse did not suggest that it would keep out the poorer sector of the community, so I am sure it wasn't. I mean, I got a pound a week, so if I got a pound a week it would pay six shillings to go to the upper circle that gives you some idea of the cost.

AS: Are there any specific plays during that period that stand out in your mind?

EO: Yes my favourite play is *The Deep Blue Sea*, heard of that? By Terrence Rattigan.

AS: Yes I've heard of it.

EO: That was the lovely story of, have you heard of Kenneth Moore the actor?

AS: No.

EO: He is long since dead now, Terrence Rattigan was a very, very good writer and you should go out of your way to try and catch a load of some of his work. And have you heard of *The Winslow Boy*? That is really dramatic, *French without Tears*, you don't hear much about that these days. But, yes, Rattigan was very, very good, and of course Noel Coward. There has been quite a bit of reviewing of Noel Coward over the last twenty years; my children are now in their forties and I took them to a lot of theatre at the time, and I took them to *Blythe Spirit*, thinking that this would educate them whether they liked it or not, in fact they absolutely loved it. I found there was a real bridge between Noel Coward and young people in their very early teens.

AS: Are there any plays that you did not like the style of? Or you really just did not enjoy?

EO: There were umpteen! Too numerous to mention! [laughter]

AS: Could you give me a few examples?

EO: What did I go home from? We went home at the interval I remember. *Wesker*, think it was *Chips with Everything*, I was revolted by it. Recently I did not like *Cloud*

Nine, the first time I saw it, but the second time I saw it I began to see that there was something in there that I had not seen first time. I find that I am very happy to see a play at least twice, because it is amazing what you miss, you cannot see everything.

AS: You told me that you read the reviews in the newspaper before you saw the play?

EO: Yes.

AS: During the 1950s did you go to see a play if it had good reviews?

EO: Are you talking about when I was young?

AS: Yes.

EO: No, I think I just soaked them all up.

AS: Oh, I see.

EO: Pass me the book [scrap book with theatre clippings], I will give you one or two instances. See Douglas Montgomery there, he was a film star, Beatrice Falhani was famous, Joan Newell. That's Lady Windermere's Fan.

AS: Have you seen Look Back in Anger, by John Osborne?

EO: Yes.

AS: What did you think of it?

EO: I didn't like it.

AS: Why not?

EO: It was before its time.

AS: What is your opinion about the woman's role in theatre, during the 1950s?

EO: Well, I think that they're not discriminated against, and it all depends upon who is writing the play, as to whether there is something for the women there. I had a friend

staying here, in total for three weeks, called Cherry Morris, who was in *The Fen* at the studio, and I also think she was in *Cloud Nine*, and she, bless her, is seventy-five, and she's a wonderful trooper, accepts anything that is coming her way. Have you heard of Margaret Tyzack. She is a very famous actress, she was at *The Playhouse* with me and also *Chesterfield*. Margaret Tyzack said when her agent sends her a script of parts she has been offered, some of them are like a couple of tranquilisers, [laughter] so dreary. And this is the awful thing. Patrick Stewart, he's in *Star Trek*, he started a company to try and find plays which he wanted to act in, as opposed to the things he did not want to. One of my lodgers, Lloyd Owen, have you seen *Monarch of the Glen*? Have you seen the new chap, the illegitimate son who has taken over, well that is my friend, Lloyd Owen. He does not like what he is doing, but six months of the year from March to September he plays there for a great deal of money. As he says once he is in there, and he does not want to go to another season, and they are wanting to continue that character, and although it is of no classical value at all, it gives him a considerable income, so that from September 'til March when we are watching what he has done in the last six months, he then can go and do something that he really wants to do for probably very little money. Because it is very little money at *The Crucible*, but they just love to come. So it's not peculiar for women at all, but most actors will suddenly see a part which they do love doing, Lloyd [Owen] did a wonderful part at the Experimental Theatre, what is it called, the Royal Court? Sloane Square...? It's very famous. Peter Gill - the writer - does a lot there, and Lloyd [Owen] was in one of Peter Gill's plays about a farm labourer, *The York Mystery Plays* [ed. *The York Realist*]. These medieval plays that they did in York at the Minster, and they did it with local people. It's that place in somewhere... Germany? Austria? where there is a religious play every third year, with the locals playing the parts. And Lloyd played the farm labourer and he was absolutely brilliant. But all the other ones at the end of the production have got jobs to go to, but not Lloyd. He was saying when you are the star of the show, it is more difficult to get a part, than all the little filling in bits. I saw that [*The York Realist*] three times, that was wonderful.

AS: During 1945 – 68, when you used to go the theatre when you were younger did you used to go as often as you do now?

EO: I have been a widow for the last forty years, so when my children were off my hands I did serious theatre going. But my husband, he died, I would say 'Would you like to go to the theatre?', he would say, 'Yes, darling, if you like, or would you rather babysit?', and he would say, 'I'll babysit'. [laughter] So I was more restricted when my children were small.

AS: I have been learning about the different types of theatre that were new in the 1950s.

EO: Like the thrust stage.

AS: Possibly. We were just learning about different movements, like the angry young men in *Look Back In Anger* and in *Wesker*, or the Absurdist movement in *Waiting for Godot*. Would you say that there were a lot of innovative productions in Sheffield? And how were they taken?

EO: That's a good question, I was thinking about all sorts of peculiar plays now, like the ones where they sit inside of a pile of earth and they just have a head sticking out, Brenda Bruce, I cannot remember what it was called. Unless you say *Waiting for Godot* and *The Caretaker*, Pinter. Because Paul and Richard Briers, the two who were in *The Good Life*, they were very young, they came to stay when they put on a play called *Home* by David Hare [ed. – David Storey], but although it was never said, it was assumed that they were two inmates of an old folks' home and it was brilliant. Now this is a good question because you are asking what impact it had on Sheffield audiences; it's a very still play, there's a lot of thinking and sitting and one comment from one of the Sheffield audience, when they had seen *Home*, they said it was alright but they did not have much to do did they, and of course they were thinking of *The Good Life*. You know, they should have been more careful of the way they had publicised it, because it was nothing like that, it was something that they badly wanted to do. And Richard Briers came again on another occasion when he played in *The Seagull* I think it was. So Sheffield audiences will put up with a certain amount of education providing they have been in before and have had entertainment, which is what *Ain't Misbehavin'* is about. Which was absolutely gorgeous and such a pity that it goes for such a short period.

AS: During the 1950s, what do you think was the most important thing for the audience's entertainment or education? Or would you say it was a mixture?

EO: Well I think always it is wise to have a mixture, because you have got to try and get the various sections of the community, especially if they look upon *The Crucible* as an elitist function then you are going to get a lot of people. When *The Crucible* was first opened some of the city councillors made the most stupid remarks, for example, whether they might actually go or not; well until they have gone they cannot make a reasoned decision, opinion, about it. And another councillor was heard to say what he would like is to put on *The Mousetrap*, well, we can put *The Mousetrap* on if he can put something else on alongside it. But of course Michael Grandage has done a lot somehow, he just draws them in and I am sure that Sam West will do likewise. So I hope you will go and see him because Angela Galvin the Managing Director, says she does not want him to direct upon *The Crucible* stage until he has acted. I was talking to his mum, and she said she did not know that. I do want him to act, I don't want him to leave that because he has done some wonderful – you've heard of Walton's music for *Henry V*? The film *Henry V*? From time to time the Symphony Orchestras play the music from *Henry V*. Sam did this at Sheffield and it was lovely, beautiful.

AS: I have got a list of some of the plays that we have been studying in my literature course that we have been talking about, I was wondering whether you could make a few comments about your experiences, if you saw them? I'll just show you the list. We have been studying these plays, reading them and discussing them in class.

EO: This is the work you have been doing? Well I have told you what I think about Terrence Rattigan, I think he is a very, very experienced and excellent playwright. I don't know Ionesco's stuff at all. I do know *Waiting for Godot*, my nephew did it for O levels and we went along to Nottingham to see it. Again, I found it difficult. Oh yes, *The Entertainer*, I was sorry I did not see that, because Laurence Olivier played the lead. It's

very interesting, because here is this great classical actor who wanted to play this vaudeville character, but at the moment Sir Ian McKellen, is playing Widow Twankie in pantomime. A friend of mine said, 'What, again?!', and I said I didn't know he had done that before, well he does it all the time. [Laughter] Again, I find Brecht difficult, I've seen Mother Courage.

AS: When did you see that?

EO: I suppose about 1956. Shelagh Delaney... that was a lovely play that was, real gritty stuff. And Harold Pinter, I've not seen The Birthday Party. Oh I did, I saw it at The Crucible, and I saw The Caretaker in London, I saw it with my husband who was not particularly prepared to be as patient as me, so that didn't help.

AS: When you were watching theatre in the 1950s did you find that there were a lot of different things on or did you think that there was a certain type of plays that were being performed?

EO: Certain type of play? Well, they were certainly getting away from a beginning, a middle and an end weren't they? And one tries very hard to understand it.

AS: Thank you very much for talking to me I have found it really fascinating.

EO: It's a pleasure

[End of track 1]

EO: I'm very sad about the situation of what The Playhouse did every Christmas. They had a children's play, not a pantomime, but a real make-believe children's play. They were lovely they were beautiful little fairy stories. I remember on one occasion a lovely actress called Ursula O'Leary, now since dead, she was looking for a ring under the bed and on the first row there was a little girl standing on her seat and she said 'it is under there, I can see it, it is under there'. It is lovely when children are so taken up with it like that. I have four grandchildren and two of each and the seven year old went with his father to see Snow White, I didn't think he would like Ain't Misbehavin', and my son-in-law said half way through the evening there was a little girl leaning over the balcony saying 'she's not dead you know, excuse me' [said in a slightly different tone of voice with some light laughter at the end]. And it is lovely when they are so... I took my nine year old grandchild who is very much into drama and dancing and tap and ballet, and she sat absolutely transfixed in the evening with Ain't Misbehavin'. The lovely front-of-house manager Chris Reece took them back-stage and she loved that and she was absolutely thrilled with the things she saw.

AS: They are lovely the plays they put for children, I think they should definitely keep doing that.

EO: Well we were very lucky, when my husband died my children were eleven and nine, something like that, and I had this friend who was at the National and we used to go to London and they use to put us in house seats, have you heard of the term house seats?

AS: No

EO: They are seats which the front-of-house manager always saves 'til the last minute because Prince Charles might come along, or the Queen, or what have you. So they need to always be able to put someone in a good seat at the last minute. So we were allowed house seats and we were also taken back to the front-of-house manager's office in the interval and met people, the famous people who had come that evening. We met John Mortimer, we have not talked about him have we...? And numerous other people, it was great fun. And my son consequently said he wished he was older so that he could have appreciated this privilege even more. I loved that period when Tony was at the National, because we saw everything.