

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Sarah Detmer – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Kate Dorney**

**1 February 2005**

Audience member talking about her recollections of Richardson, Gielgud and Olivier, and the World Theatre seasons.

First part of interview missing... but broadly covers Sarah's early experiences of theatre as a student at Lancaster, and a memorable trip to see Pinter's *The Homecoming* in 1965, also KD apologising for her tendency to refer everything back to Richard Eyre after finishing his diaries that morning.

SD. I was bowled over by it [*The Homecoming*] and wanted to see more of theatre. And eventually when I came down to work in London I saw lots of productions, mainly at the RSC and NT including productions with Laurence Olivier, Gielgud and Richardson and Paul Schofield and Eileen Atkins amongst other people. And then I saw, because I'd done a degree in French, I liked to go and see the World Theatre Season at the RSC. And I saw many productions, mainly French, but also a Swedish one, all brought to London by Peter Daubney and I also quite enjoyed seeing productions by the Prospect, the touring company that moved into the Old Vic when the NT moved into the South Bank. And that's about it really.

KD. Do you remember much about *The Homecoming*?

SD. Well, I can remember it being very different, I suppose in a way, because I hadn't really seen a great deal of theatre much before then outside my home town and it was certainly different from plays that we'd read and done at school. It was very striking, it was a bit violent in a way. I was quite bowled over by it.

KD. Can you remember why you went to see it? Did you choose that particularly?

SD. I think I chose to go and see because I'd done English Lit for A Level and as I say, Pinter was the up and coming writer of the period, he was the person to go and see. And I think when I came down, I must have come down to London from Preston where I was living that was obviously the choice to go and see *The Homecoming* before anything else.

KD. So had you read any of his plays beforehand?

SD. Well I think we must have done, I can't remember what I did for A Level after all this time but we had a very good English teacher at school and I'm sure we'd sort of read bits of Pinter and found them sort of strange to read and probably wanted to see what they'd be like on stage. Because they're certainly better in performance than in reading.

KD. And did you experience the famous pause?

SD. The famous pause? [Laughs.] Oh yes.

KD. And how did the audience react?

SD. I can't remember much about that really. They were a bit ... stunned really is the word. I mean Vivien Merchant she was lovely, a lovely actress.

KD. Was there any kind of frisson because obviously you knew that they were married?

SD. Yes, yes I think there was.

KD. Did you find the sexual subtext shocking? The business about was their mum a prostitute?

SD. Um, I imagine, do you know I can't honestly remember anything about that but I imagine there was possibly a bit, it was a bit shocking for its time. That sort of thing was possibly not so much on the stage.

KD. I guess not in that form, in that very bare way.

SD. Bare, yes

KD. Ok, do you have any particular memories of the World Theatre Season?

SD. Yes, the World Theatre Season, I certainly do. I saw Ingmar Bergman's production of *The Dream Play*. That was in 1971 and it was lovely. Very beautiful, very fluid and the music was very lovely. And it was lovely to see plays from other countries really. And then I saw the *Comedie Francaise*, and the one I saw was *La Malade Imaginaire*, Moliere.

KD. Performed in French? And *The Dream Play* was performed in?

SD. In Swedish, it was all done in Swedish.

KD. So was there a different audience for this stuff? Presumably when you went to see *The Homecoming* it was a very different audience?

SD. Yes I think it was very much different. I mean you obviously got people who were either natives of Sweden or France who were coming to see it, or people like myself who either loved the theatre and wanted to see foreign theatre or who were studying the language. And obviously, with the French, having studied French at university I enjoyed that, and I wanted to see an actual French production on the stage.

KD. And how were people dressing for these events? Because the Aldwych was quite grand?

SD. It was quite grand yes. I think we were all much more smartly dressed than we are nowadays. And certainly men wore suits and ties and everything. And when I think the Aldwych hasn't really changed a great deal [laughs]

KD. Slightly less grand...

SD. Slightly less grand now, but when I think all the RSC productions that were done at the Aldwych were absolutely wonderful.

KD. Did you feel that they had an identifiable style, the RSC?

SD. Oh yes, I certainly think they did. Oh yes indeed. Certainly some of the plays that were done at the RSC at that time were wonderful. Oh yes.

KD. Could you describe the style? Horrible question!

SD. Describe the style, it is an awful question. Well, I think, well, was it stylised? The thing was, you didn't have the set changes, I mean obviously, the sets changed, but they

didn't do the set changes they are able to do now with the computerisation. So it possibly relied more on the actors and the way they spoke, and they did speak, the speaking was always wonderful at the RSC and at the National actually.

KD. Do you mean the projection or the diction?

SD. Both.

KD. And Peter Hall was very keen, or he likes to talk a lot about the way Shakespearean verse should be spoken. You could distinguish that in the productions?

SD. Oh yes, certainly in the productions, yes indeed. Except perhaps that I can remember, Colin Blakely in *Titus Andronicus*, the only time I have ever been to a theatre production where somebody has told an actor to speak up from the audience.

KD. Oh really? That's interesting. Was he speaking in his native accent or was he doing his Shakespearean?

SD. Well, his Shakespearean, and that's the only time I've ever been when, and maybe that was possibly because, I mean *Titus Andronicus* is quite a difficult play to follow anyway. It is, as I say the only time I have ever seen a member of the audience shout to an actor in stage 'speak up'.

KD. And did he?

SD. He did! [Laughs] And then of course I went to see the National Theatre, quite a lot of productions at the NT at the Old Vic. And there again, the wonderful fluidity of those productions, everything seemed to gel, the music and everything, when I look back on it.

KD. Have you got a favourite from those?

SD. One of the favourites, I did enjoy *Equus*, I did enjoy that.

KD. Did you find that, I imagine it's a very strange play to go and see?

SD. It was a strange play, but it was beautifully done and it was at the Old Vic. And obviously the ones with Ralph in which I enjoyed very much. And *Cyrano*, Edward Woodward as *Cyrano*. And I think I remember that because it was one of the texts that I'd done at university. And of course, *Saturday, Sunday, Monday*, I can remember that very well, especially Larry Olivier in the role of Antonio, I can remember him playing with the bowler hat and he was just wonderful. And Joan Plowright was played opposite him in that and there was a real magic between them.

KD. Is that why you went to see it?

SD. Yes, well I think I went quite a bit to see the National, but I think I probably chose the play, because Edward de Filippo was somebody quite unknown to me, I think I chose that because it was Laurence Olivier and Joan Plowright.

KD. What was the, you've put *The National Health* here?

SD. Yes, Peter Nichols, I can't remember a great deal about that one really.

KD. Lots of swearing.

SD. Yes, lots of swearing and then *The White Devil*, John Webster, that was pretty harrowing.

KD. Yes, and *The Front Page*?

SD. Oh yes, the *Front Page*, Hector Macarthy, that was, I should have brought the programme for that because it was wonderful. Yes, of course musicals...

KD. It was very different to the stuff being done at that time.

SD. Oh yes, very different at that time, I mean it's been done since, I've seen the subsequent one, but yes very different and sort of possibly I think I chose it to go and see it at that time because it was so different.

KD. Mm, my friend Richard Eyre did that.

SD. Oh did he? [Laughs]

KD. The one I keep on saying about since I read the diaries! What else have we got here? [consulting Sarah's list] What about A Day in the Life of Joe Egg?

SD. Oh yes, Peter Nichols again, now that was at the Theatre Royal up in York.

KD. It's a nice theatre, but that must have been quite shocking, I'd have thought for York, or rather for the constituency of the Theatre Royal in York?

SD. Well that's right, but both Lancaster university and York university are 60s universities and I went to Lancaster and my husband went to York, although we didn't meet until later. And the universities coming added a lot to the life of the area, and the same with the Dukes Theatre in Lancaster which came into its own.

KD. You used to go and see things at the Dukes?

SD. At the Dukes? Well I can remember it being there and I think it has grown more since the university has got going. And the Octagon Theatre in Bolton is another one that I used to go to from home.

KD. Because that was part of the new generation, like the Victoria at Stoke

SD. Yes, a new generation, and of course one of the first purpose built as a theatre-in-the-round. I think in the 60s that was one of the great things was the growth of these theatres in the provinces really,

KD. Yes, definitely part of the Arts Council campaign...

SD. And of course that was where the Prospect came in, with the touring companies.

KD. Tell me more about Prospect, I don't know anything about them.

SD. Well the Prospect was a company set up in the 60s by Toby Robertson and it's purpose was, it had no home of its own it was just a touring company. I used to go and see it because there were great up and coming actors like Ian McKellen, Timothy West, Derek Jacobi was in it. And eventually, I never actually saw them on tour, they came down to London and when the National Theatre moved into the South Bank they actually gained a permanent home as well as the touring. Then they went into the Old Vic and functioned in the Old Vic, and as I say, I saw Edward II and Richard II with Ian McKellen and Timothy West there. And also St Joan, that had Derek Jacobi in, Alec McGowran, Dorothy Tutin, Eileen Atkins and that's Toby Robertson.

KD. So they had a solely classical repertoire?

SD. They did, I think, they were, probably through the auspices of the Council, they were a touring company and I think their main thing was to tour with school productions, to take it out. Again, at a time in the 60s when you were moving towards not just reading, when you read plays, but schools for O and A level as they were then, they were trying to make them more alive by having productions. And that was their *raison d'être* principally and I think it grew from there. Then Prospect when they actually came to an end with Toby Robertson, but I did see some wonderful productions.

KD. Looking at those photos [in the programme] they're very lavish productions for a touring company.

SD. Oh they were! Oh exactly! When was that? 68, 69? I suppose it was and the stage really, one of the things was that they have more colour in it, in the programme. I've only just noticed that.

KD. Very expensive to have colour.

SD. And a lot of the programmes, when you see the RSC ones that were just like that, you know the yellow ones, whereas the National's programmes were perhaps a little bit more, there was perhaps a bit more colour in them.

KD. Did you notice a difference in the style of playing between when Prospect moved in and the Old National, because I mean it's the same theatre and nothing structurally had been done? Did you discern a difference?

SD. What, with the Prospect? I actually hadn't seen the Prospect at the National, I mean the Old Vic, before. I'd seen the National Theatre productions, which must have been for them, when they moved into the South Bank, wonderful, because you had the Olivier, the Lyttleton, and of course they were gradually a phased sort of opening, and I suppose they could do so much more with experimentation, with the staging, like you were saying, the revolving stage and everything. Well eventually! But I suppose from the Old Vic, which was far more static really, I mean scene changes were far more something that was trundled around rather than instant computerisation.

KD. If we talk a little a bit now about your experiences of going to see the Old Lions

SD. The Old Lions! [laughs]

KD. That was what Peter Hall called them, that's Ralph and John, Laurence Olivier. So the first thing you went to see chronologically was Home?

SD was Home yes.

KD. Which is why you're here...

SD. That's right! I'm sure I went to see it because it was Ralph Richardson and John Gielgud.

KD. And it had actually transferred into the West End by the time you went to see it?

SD. It had by the time I went to see it, it had transferred to the West End. And I think probably it was such a hit that's why I couldn't get into see it at the Royal Court, because it transferred you see. Also I think, in those days, in these days, this was just his 4th play you see...

KD. Yes, and it was quite a radical departure for him wasn't it? After The Changing Room and In Celebration...

SD and The Restoration of Arnold Middleton,

KD. Because these are all very much from Wakefield and centred in that way.

SD. Yes, and the one about building the marquee, I've seen that somewhere, but I think much later.

KD. I always imagine that like the barn raising in Seven Brides for Seven Brothers, although not quite...

SD. So again, an up and coming, a sort of, I suppose a Pinter...

KD. So you'd heard of him before?

SD. Oh yes, and Dandy Nicholls and Mona Washbourne, I hadn't heard a great deal about them, and Warren Clarke I hadn't heard of. Reading from programme 'Came to London from Manchester in 1969'

KD. Do you remember there being a significant amount of publicity about the fact that they were going to work together?

SD. Oh yes, that they were going to work together, and it was a new play, and it was a slightly different sort of play, a strange sort of play, and of course these two hold centre stage, and they were on for so long together. And I think that was probably, I mean, they both had the most wonderful speaking voices, there's no doubt about it at all. They really did.

KD. And what was your experience of them before that? Had you ever seen them in anything?

SD. I had not seen them. It was my first experience of seeing them on the stage so it was you know sort of a great experience for me as a first time. Moving to London and seeing them.

KD. And did you find it strange to see them? Richardson is obviously much more of an interpreter of contemporary but John Gielgud very rarely ventured into the totally contemporary in that way?

SD. Yes, but I think probably, Richardson, because he was used to doing it, was slightly more laidback than Gielgud, but Gielgud got by on this wonderful speaking voice really. Yes, and quite a twist because as we were saying, you didn't realise at first, you could have thought they were possibly OAPs in a home, or possibly ... but it's not really until near the end that you do realise that it is in a mental home really.

KD. Yes it's very... it's a strange vehicle for them in some ways, and an obvious one in others because it's so contemplative

SD. That's right, and also both on the stage together.

KD. Yes, and interesting for me to have reread the play in light of doing the archive and the research that they're so totally inhabiting their roles in real life. Jack is making the little jokes, and Harry much gentler.

SD. Oh yes, indeed.

KD. And can you remember how much it cost?

SD. How much did it cost? Now having just come down to London and not earning a great deal I probably went up into the balcony into a 6 shilling seat!

KD. So you came all the way from Stevenage to see it?

SD. No, no, in 1970 I had moved down, I came down to London around about then and I was just starting my work in London.

KD. And where did you live then?

SD. Well I lived at Shepherds Bush when I first came to London because of working at the BBC.

KD. Did you know anyone? Was it a word of mouth recommendation?

SD. At the BBC? No, I came down having done a degree in French, the diploma in drama and a short secretarial course, I came down and I got accepted at the BBC as what they called a floating secretary in the radio section. And I was moved around, worked on Farming Today at one point, and at the Radio Times section, just filling in and

then a vacancy came up for working for Reggie Smith in the Drama Department. And I worked for Reggie until he went off to Ireland, he left the BBC. And at that time Martin Esslin was the head of BBC Radio drama. [Laughs]

KD. He didn't recommend the play then?

SD. I don't think he ever spoke to me, I was a very junior secretary and in those days, reminiscing on those days in radio drama work, we typed all the scripts out in the drama department with carbon copies.

KD. Oh wow!

SD. Oh yes, I mean I enjoyed that very much, it was a wonderful experience working for Reggie. He did a lot of the poetry programme, 'Poetry Today' and 'Poetry Now'.

KD. They [RR and JG] did, both of them did a lot of work on radio because of their speaking voices.

SD. Yes they did.

KD. Ok, so, you thoroughly enjoyed Home which is why, did that whet your appetite for seeing them?

SD. Oh yes, I then saw Lloyd George Knew My Father William Douglas Home who of course was then related to the Prime Minister, I don't know whether he was Prime Minister at that time.

KD. And did you go because of Ralph?

SD. I went to see Ralph, and Celia Johnson as well. I went to see that, it was billed as a new sort of comedy. I haven't ever heard of a revival?

KD. I'm not sure, it seems like the sort of thing that possibly would be. I've got a strange feeling that Simon Cadell might have played Ralph's part but that could be my imagination. And what were they like? Again, Celia Johnson very much typecast?

SD. Oh, very much so!

KD. Because it's a farce isn't it. Were they any good?

SD. Oh yes. Ralph I think entered into it with great gusto and great spirit. And James Grout, he ended up on television.

KD. He was Inspector Morse's boss! I don't imagine Ralph being very speedy, which is what farce needs?

SD. Oh no, he wasn't, he was the straight man. Whether they played farce as farce should have been played, but it was fun. It was fun yes, look at Simon Cadell! It's very sad, because he died very young didn't he.

And then this is another premiere at the National Theatre, and that was No Man's Land.

KD. [looking at the programme] I've never realised before that that's him [RR] on the front.

SD. Yes it is. And that again was a premiere of a Pinter play.

KD. And were you drawn by the Pinter or the?

SD. I think the 3 really, the combination. I think having seen Home I probably thought it's Ralph Richardson John Gielgud again and Pinter.

KD. And what about Peter Hall? Did you have much time for Peter Hall, he's directing?

SD. Well I suppose he was one of the big names in the production. One would have thought, anything that was directed by Peter Hall would be a good production.

KD. And how were they?

SD. Oh yes, effortlessly as usual.

KD. Did you have the sense that they were reprising the same role as in Home.

SD. Yes, possibly the same sort of juxtaposition with all these little satellite actors around. I mean there's no doubt that they took over a production, there's no doubt about it. To go back to home, the latest production I saw at Cambridge is more the women you remember, whereas with the original production you could not but go away and think mainly of Gielgud and Richardson. And the same with this, I couldn't remember what Terence Rigby or Michael Feast looked like. They were just satellites for these two great actors.

KD. I think, there's never a moment where they're both off stage, or is there? Maybe the beginning of the second act?

SD. I think they're onstage most of the time.

KD. Slightly different role this time for John Gielgud to play such a seedy character. Did you get the sense, because when you look at the pictures of them rehearsing he looked like he enjoyed it immensely?

SD. Oh yes, and possibly as he got older, he embraced it and got a greater flexibility and enjoyed himself more.

KD. And the first time that Hirst falls down, did you know it was happening in the play as opposed to in real life?

SD. I don't think so, I can't remember that bit really.

KD. The gentleman that I interviewed about No Man's Land before said because of the way that Ralph had fallen, because he's literally smacked the floor, nobody seemed very sure if he was acting or not. And there was a collective gasp and he was getting on at this point

SD. So people thought he'd?

KD. Or possibly, because of the nature of the Pinter plays with those very long pauses everyone was a bit 'oh my god, is he ok?' I mean I saw a production directed by Harold Pinter, had Corin Redgrave and John Wood, which was brilliant and it was the first time I've ever really understood about the Pinter Pause because you're so used to people rustling about and the noise covers everything then very slowly it would stop people looking for their sweets, or looking for a tissue, or crossing their legs and just become completely silent.

SD. Everyone wonders what's happening.

KD. Yes and whether Harold Pinter's going to come out and shout at them. Again this is a very, Home is not sinister, is it? Slightly surprising perhaps, but this is all very sinister, but you didn't have any sense that they'd struggled with it, or that the audience had struggled with them in these roles?

Sd. No I don't think so, I don't think they struggled with it at all, certainly not!

KD. Ok, and the next one is John Gabriel Borkman which I know made Peter Hall very happy that he could get Ralph to do it, and Peggy Ashcroft. Was it a play you knew already?

SD. No I didn't, and I have to confess, I'm not a tremendous fan of Ibsen. I think again I went to see it because it was Sir Ralph and Wendy Hillier, and this young man that you never hear of, Frank Grimes. When I was a student at Manchester University he and another young actor came over from Ireland, they were part of an exchange.

KD. They were on the course with you?

SD. They only came over to see a bit about what the Drama department at Manchester was like, Manchester had, still has, a big drama department, and he came across from the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and I was quite interested to see him in a production, and I must admit I have not heard or seen of him since.

KD. No, you'll have to look on the...

SD. Yes, on the internet. And again, Anna Carteret.

KD. And again it was a change for you not seeing Ralph in the contemporary. How was it?

SD. Well again, I can't remember a great deal about it, but I think it was well done.

KD. Did the audience seem to enjoy it?

SD. Well yes, I mean the Old Vic was always packed whenever I used to go and see anything. It had, it still does, a tremendous reputation, packed with people.

KD. And then the last one was The Cherry Orchard in 1978

SD. By which time they'd moved into the South Bank. And he's really playing an old man, yes, with Albert Finney.

KD. It's a great part, Firs, but it's a very minor part, so how did he ...?

SD. Oh he stole the show! He hammed it up and ran away with the play!

KD. I rather thought he might! Who was playing Gaev? Oh Robert Stephens, so they had a good relationship anyway.

SD. Of course, Robert Stephens in those days was very good.

KD. So he [RR] wasn't a team player in that respect? Mind you it's a gift isn't it? Especially for someone who, according to his biographers, really enjoyed playing the absent-minded, slightly eccentric and that perhaps he wasn't as silly as he was making out. He very much liked to pretend that he was.

SD. He could certainly get away with it. And then the Larry bits.

KD. So the first time you saw him on stage?

SD. It must have been in The Merchant of Venice I think, at the National Theatre, as Shylock.

KD. And we think this is the early 70s don't we?

SD. Yes, the early 70s, I think it was about 1970.

KD. It can't have been the first time he was Shylock can it?

SD. I wouldn't have thought so.

KD. Is that a picture? I shudder to think what he looked like because he did like to dress up, oh he hasn't at all.

SD. No, he hasn't. It was done, quite strange. You can see Joan Plowright and Anna Carteret...

KD. They're in a sort of Ruritanian costume

SD. And then he's

KD. Oh that's very interesting that he should not dress up, he's obviously got it out of his system, or he's responding to the fact that productions were much more, not naturalistic, but less hammy.

SD. He was hammy though. You know, he really was. He was a ham, and I can imagine, he was a great actor but he was hammy.

KD. In a way that John Gielgud wasn't?

SD. No.

KD. Or Ralph?

SD. Or Ralph no,

KD. Really? Hurray!

SD. No, I don't think they were, I think they were better.

KD. Oh really, what's this?

SD. Here he is with Antony Nichols

KD. Ok, so just for the purposes of the recording they're wearing frock coats, pinstripe trousers and top hats and the women are dressed in well, Ruritanian? High ruffly dresses, so a period dress production rather than its own period. So what was it like watching him with Joan Plowright?

SD. Well I think they were good together.

KD. Interesting, because in this production there is no romantic frisson between them.

SD. No, I mean she is, still is, certainly was then, had a wonderful speaking voice. His equal on the female side. And certainly when we get to that, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, where they play the couple, they were excellent. I can remember, again, a bit hamming it up, the way he played with his bowler hat. That remains with me even if there are other parts of the play I don't remember.

KD. I find it interesting that he was in this actually, De Fillipp, because again, Richardson was in lots of these at the National beforehand, and the way you've described playing with the bowler hat, it seems like a very Ralph move.

SD. Yes, yes.

KD. It does seem to a certain extent with the contemporary work that he [Olivier] followed rather than lead in the field, he wasn't always the first person to do it. And what's this?

SD. Oh this is Amphitryon 38 which is the National Theatre at the New Theatre. One of the ones which I'm pretty much sure was built between the wars. Why? I possibly went to see that because it was a French play, Giradoux, translated, and it had a very young Geraldine Mc Ewan in it.

KD. And did it, did he make any mark on it? It's a very strange thing for him to do?

SD. Well you can see by the costumes it was a very strange thing to do. As I say, one of the few, well the only one I ever saw that was actually produced by him.

KD. So your sense that Ralph and John were better and less hammy, was that a feeling that you'd had anyway, that was confirmed by seeing them on the stage?

SD. I think so.

KD. That's interesting I wonder if it's a generational thing?

SD. It could well be.

KD. Because for me to watch something like Henry V is verging on the

SD. Hilarious, yes.

KD. Not because of the period, but because he is always so obviously

SD. Him, yes.

KD. And I guess, if you started to go in the 60s he was a long way past his prime as the chief interpreter.

SD. Oh exactly. And of course, he certainly did wonderful work at the National, but I sometimes think he's a bit overrated as the actor of his century.

KD. It's interesting nobody of my age knows who Ralph is at all. Nobody.

SD. Oh really? Oh gosh.

KD. Or even really John, I think if I took a picture of them both to my friends and said this is a picture of Ralph Richardson, this is a picture of John Gielgud, I don't think they would know which was which. But Ralph has fallen almost entirely under the radar now and I wonder if that's because he was so much the contemporary interpreter, always. You know, he did the work with JB Priestley in the 30s and 40s, rather than the classical actor.

SD. Yes, maybe that is true.

KD. I mean who would you say now is the, you still go to the theatre a lot, the classical actor?

SD. The classical actor now? Well, I suppose, although you don't see Derek Jacobi often...

KD. You see him a lot in Sheffield.

SD. Oh really? He possibly is, eh, I suppose Michael Gambon is an inheritor in a way. Ian McKellen, I would have loved to have seen him as Widow Twankey at the Old Vic, and I missed that one. I bet he really enjoyed himself.

KD. It's interesting because again, that's a Gielgud/Richardson binary. The very physical and earthy with the very sort of

SD. ethereal yes. Of a slightly older generation, Paul Scofield was wonderful, his speaking voice was absolutely tremendous.

KD. That sort of generation got lost in the 56 furore really didn't they? They just didn't get the space to mature in that way?

SD. Yes, and I suppose Timothy West, he is a great versatile actor really.

KD. Ok, that's brilliant. Thank you very much.

SD. Thank you.