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Graham Weston – interview transcript

Interviewer: Ewan Jeffrey

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Actor. Birmingham Rep.; Broadway; Warren Clarke; John Gielgud; Home; Ralph Richardson; Dandy Nichols; Sheffield Playhouse; David Storey; television; Mona Washbourne.

EJ: Could I ask a rather general question, could you tell me a bit about your background in theatre, how you actually got into acting?

GW: Yes, it goes back to childhood. At prep school - which I went to when I was nine and started boarding then - I was a very large child, for my age, and therefore a constant source of fun and mirth and laughter at my expense and I thought, 'Well, I might as well give them value for money!'. So I was always fooling about, and always getting caned and thrashed and put in detention and stuff. But we did do a couple of plays a year, at prep school. And I played Henry VIII and George II in 1066 and All That and I thought, 'This is for me! This'll do! And then I can go on, I can go to Hollywood and make cowboy films and ride horses', which I was very keen on doing at the time. And I did ride for many years. And then I carried it on through my public school education at Malvern, in House Plays and school plays and visits to the theatre and then went to the Birmingham Rep Theatre School.

EJ: What year would that be?

GW: That would be 1962. Having spent two years with Michael Croft at the National Youth Theatre at the Scala Theatre and Sadler's Wells, we did a season there. All today's telly stars were in my company: Ian McShane and Howard Bennett and Simon Ward and the likes of... That really made me realise how much time I'd wasted at school over the last four years, particularly as I should have spent more time reading plays and studying the theatre in my spare time, rather than fooling about and going down the pub at Sunday lunchtime and all that sort of stuff. And then I went to my first professional job after eighteen months I think. The principal of the drama school had a pal in Sheffield at the Playhouse, Geoffrey Ost. He phoned or sent a message down to Mary - who was our principal - that they were doing the Shakespeare 400th birthday season of Antony and Cleopatra and Caesar and Cleopatra, and could she send a few boys up to pad out the stage? [laughs] So along with John - forgotten his name - and Roger Darrick, up we went to Sheffield, shared a room - absolutely dreadful with three foot of snow on the ground. And the princely sum of nine pounds a week! The digs were run by a couple called Ruth and Tom, he was a professional wrestler and she was a hooker - a very ugly,

middle-aged hooker, I have to say, but a heart of gold. But whether she actually thought she was going to get a bit of business without tramping the streets of Sheffield or not I don't know... but she did give us very good Sunday lunches along the way! Then after the season I came back and I got a job in a play by Walter Greenwood and while I was doing that, called *This is Your Wife*, with a couple of Coronation Street stars and Avril Angers, who you probably wouldn't remember. No longer with us. While I was there I had a pal who worked for ATV, he told my cousin who told her friend that they were starting up a serial in Birmingham - a daily serial - and I should go and audition, which I did, which was in 1964. It was the ill-fated, ill-famed, infamous, whatever... *Crossroads*, which I joined for a week or two, and they asked me back the next year for a couple of months. It went on from there. Then I did another soap called *United!* about a football team, which was on twice weekly, and from there to the Birmingham Rep with Peter Dews to do a season there, which was the *Richard II*, *As You Like It*, *Peer Gynt*, but to name three...

EJ: So when you were doing television work, you weren't doing stage acting at the same time? Or were you balancing the two?

GW: No. At the time, really, television programmes take up so much time. They certainly used to, anyway, I think nowadays you get a part in a telly play and they do all your bits in two days and then you clear off and they haven't got to pay your expenses. But in the old days, if the programme was *A Play for Today* or *Play of the Month* or *Z Cars* or *Softly, Softly*, the rehearsal period was a week or two weeks and everybody went. And you get to know each other. But that of course was expensive and now it's money, money, money all the time.

EJ: So it was a bit more like a theatre environment, in some ways, then?

GW: Yes, absolutely so. So even though you had a small part or were lucky enough to have guest spot, everybody was together. Particularly out on filming it's important I think, you pack up at eight o'clock at night, and you've got to spend your evenings together. Which is great fun - we had a lot of laughs. But I don't think I really ever did television while I was doing theatre work. I was at the Birmingham Rep for two seasons and we transferred to the West End with *As You Like It* in 1967. Three versions opened in the same ten days, the National Theatre, the RSC and the Birmingham Rep all had productions on at the same time. I think Michael Williams played Orlando for the RSC and Ronald Pickup did an all male version... I can't remember who he played. Anyway, that was great fun. Unfortunately I played Charles the Wrestler - to great critical praise, I have to say; I can say that now because I don't act any more! Unfortunately, I broke my leg after two weeks, so I had to pull out of the show. But then more television and my family arrived, my daughter arrived in 1970. Which coincided with me having a virus infection and I was in hospital or bed for about five months, and then I got a call from my agent, saying that they needed somebody to replace Warren Clarke in *Home* because he was off doing *A Clockwork Orange*, the Stanley Kubrick film. And people [in *A Clockwork Orange*] got mumps and people got hurt and people broke a leg and it went on and on. And they needed to replace him until the film was finished. I'd done a play with him a couple of years earlier for Granada Television called *Catapult* in which we played cousins, and basically Lindsay Anderson had seen anybody of a certain age that could walk and present a paid-up Equity card and he just couldn't find who he

wanted, so in the end he did what they should have done in the first place which was to ask Warren if he knew anybody. And he said, 'Well, yeah, there's a guy called Graham Weston and he's a big slob as well, have a look at him'. Which he did and that was it. I then took over in the West End, I think for about a month, then they phoned up and said they were taking it to New York and they'd like me to go. So over I went, much to Warren's annoyance because he still hadn't finished the film, this bloody Clockwork Orange! [laughs] But he's done all right for himself so I don't feel too bad!

EJ: Can I ask a little about the play itself. I remember when I first read it I found it quite a confusing play, where not much appears to happen. What was your response when you first read the play?

GW: Well, without being facetious I wondered if I could remember the lines! But I was very fortunate in a way, because my introduction to the play was as a member of the audience. When they and I knew that I was going to take over, and there weren't going to be any rehearsal periods... I watched the play every night for about two weeks, which was the only way I could sort of pick up the atmosphere, the moves, the pauses and because I wasn't going to have the rehearsal process of 'what's he going to do next?'... and particularly, I think, with the two masters [John Gielgud and Ralph Richardson]... I won't say that their performances were spontaneous every night but they were electric every night. They didn't change much, perhaps the odd inflection, the odd look, but very much the same and therefore I was in awe of them. I had half an hour's rehearsal the night before I went on for the first time, but that's by the by; I thought it was very nice of them to come and do my bits, I thought. Half an hour before the Half! But I was very moved by the play, and my parents came to see it and my father wasn't a theatregoer at all, didn't like the theatre, always slept through because he worked all his life and didn't have time for these luxuries, but he did come to see me in the play with my mother and he was deeply distressed, deeply moved, as at the time he was about 62 or something. Although it says... I think it's somewhere in the script 'Enter Harry or Jack Stage Left, he's a 40 year old man...' Of course the Sirs weren't, they were both in their early sixties then. Apart from the humour, there's some great lines. I saw it recently. There's some great lines in the play. Very, very funny and beautifully done. But it's the desperation of 'how you cope with life when you get old?' And you're redundant in that you can't work, you can't contribute a lot because you're stuck. In this institution, and every day's the same and yes it is important... [gestures] 'Oh, I felt a spot of rain...' 'Good Lord! Really?' and that's all there is for the rest of their lives.

EJ: And there's a sense of isolation as well, a very fragile relationship between them.

GW: Absolutely, I mean I think from memory - which isn't as good as it was! - I think from memory they actually never have eye contact. Or they didn't when the Sirs were playing the parts. Even the wonderful little scene when Ralph gets a pack of cards out of his pocket and says, I think, 'Pick a card, any card'. But they don't actually look at each other. And when it eventually goes wrong and he says 'the four of hearts' or whatever and Gielgud says 'two of spades', you could hear a pin drop. Every night. Every night Ralph was just cemented to the spot with yet another blow. Not even the card tricks are going very well any more. That's something else that's failed. But they never actually looked at each other. They were completely isolated in the playing of the parts. But having said that they were very 'together'.

EJ: How did Lindsay Anderson actually approach the direction of the play?

GW: This is of course I can't answer because I wasn't there initially... Warren did it with them at the Royal Court, I think, then it went into the Apollo so I didn't get a rehearsal period, which I will forever feel slightly cheated on because it must have been wonderful to have sat in with a few weeks and watch them actually build... create.

EJ: But did Lindsay Anderson give you notes, or were there any changes made to the play, or was it just accepted?

GW: No. He didn't. He said, 'You will watch the play every night for a fortnight, because we can't rehearse and Warren is playing it exactly as I wanted him to play it'. So really I had to imitate Warren's performance... which I think was absolutely right anyway, I couldn't have thought of... There was nothing in it that I thought, this is alien to me or this is alien to the character.

EJ: It's quite a strange thing to do, to copy a performance in a way, isn't it?

GW: Yes, it is.

EJ: It must have been quite hard.

GW: It would've been very hard if I hadn't thought it was absolutely the right way to do it. And I think it was. I saw it recently... and the chap - whose name I can't remember - but he was very, very good. But we had a couple of bits of business with flagpole in the original production which went missing in the tour because the flagpole wasn't there. So... Poor old Alfred, they know that he couldn't hurt a fly and certainly wouldn't think of it anyway. But he has some great lines like 'Do you want a fight?' or 'I'll paint you, in a minute' and he says things like 'Go on then, do you want a fight?' and Dandy [Nichols] says 'No thank you, not today' or whatever. Which is great stuff. But it was difficult missing out the rehearsal period, but as I said I did have half an hour with them to do my bits. But they didn't walk it, they got into costume and they performed it for me while I was rehearsing for them, but they were obviously consummate professionals. They wouldn't have done anything less.

EJ: What were they like as people to work with, Richardson and Gielgud? Was there much banter? Obviously, you've said they were professional but what was it like to work with them?

GW: They were, in many ways, opposites. Sir Ralph was always very chatty and I remember at one stage in the play we were both in the wings together waiting for separate entrances. Every night he went fly-fishing with his walking cane, every night he did a little turn for me. Some nights he'd catch a twelve pound pike and it'd haul it out

of his hands, in the wings. Sometimes he'd catch a tiddler and sometimes he'd get the hook caught on a tree, he was more one of the boys! I mean, he still played tennis every day in New York. I would have to be careful how I included his wife in this scenario. Lady Moo wasn't terribly keen on Ralph sitting in the dressing room with his beloved Dom Perignon and Guinness for two hours after the show. She actually wanted to go out and do the town and be seen with one of Broadway's leading men. But that was Sir Ralph. Sir John on the other hand never went anywhere without the Telegraph to do the crossword. He was obviously the star of the show and had the confidence that goes with - I suppose - with being, as is said, one of the greatest, if not the greatest, English-speaking actor of our time. He stayed in an apartment in New York with a friend of his as I understand it. We were there over Christmas and New Year, and one evening he had a party and I wasn't asked. Which didn't bother me too much, I suppose I went back and had a few beers and a few martinis and thought, 'Oh well, that's life, can't win 'em all'. And the girls, Dandy [Nichols] and Mona [Washbourne] were absolutely outraged that I was not at the party and told him so. They said, 'You ought to be ashamed of yourself'. And he said 'I'm terribly sorry, I must have forgotten the boy' so he phoned about half past seven the next morning and I had a thumping headache and I could hardly open my eyes - I'd been out on the razz, I think it might have been a Sunday, there was no show. And he said 'It's John here. Do you like opera?' and I thought 'Oh, my God. I know what's coming'. And I said 'Of course, I just love the theatre' and he said 'I'm going to a dress rehearsal at 10 o'clock, I'd love you to join me, I'll meet you at the Lincoln Centre' which was very sweet of him. He was very warm, he didn't actually apologise, it was unsaid, I think. We both knew why I was there. And we had coffees and we sat and we nattered and I forget... there was somebody in it who he knew... but that's by the by. And then at lunchtime he said, 'Would you like to come and have lunch with me, I'm meeting Keith'. Keith Baxter was in Sleuth at the time at the theatre next door. Well, I thought, I don't actually know if I can sit round the table with this great man and Keith who I don't know but Sir John does. So I declined the offer, but once again his intentions were admirable. It was very kind of him. But I mean, you know more than I do as you're doing what you're doing about him, but there are many, many stories, are there not, about his absent-mindedness and tactlessness and faux-pas: 'Oh, you're the dreadful man that reads the news... Oh sorry, I mean you're the man who reads all the dreadful news!' I think he said that to Peter Snow, or something. A newscaster. But at Christmas time, we exchanged Christmas presents and mine was brought to my dressing-room by his dresser. I opened it eagerly and it was... [shows a blue and red striped tie] a handmade silk tie from Park Avenue, New York. And I thought, well, it's pretty hideous as you can see. It's squared off at the bottom and it's in horizontal stripes, dark blue, pale blue, red and white and a little bit of white and black lining. Pretty hideous!

EJ: Did you wear it?

GW: Yes, I have worn it on more than one occasion. But we were going on to do the show the night after we'd opened the presents, it might have been Christmas Eve, even. And I said 'Thank you so much Sir John for your lovely present, it's very, very kind of you' and he said 'That's quite alright, dear boy, I do hope you drink it'. [laughs] And I guess he said to his dresser 'Go and buy the boy - who seems to spend most of his time drinking with Ralph - go and buy him a bottle of something' and the dresser thought 'No, I won't, he can buy his own booze. I'll buy him a nice present'. So I told Dandy the story, who thought it was hysterical, and she left the play after our contracted time, which was about nine weeks. She had a television series to do with [Patricia] Hayes and

she got home and was at a dinner party and she told Ned Sherrin the story, and when I got back I got a call from my agent - fortunately, because if you're out of the country for four months... out of sight, out of mind! there wasn't a lot of work when I got back - and he said that Ned Sherrin was doing a film called *The National Health*, with Jim Dale and Donald Sinden, Redgrave and Bob Hoskins and stuff. And he wants you to be in it. He says he's got to meet this guy who's been given a silk tie instead of a bottle of booze. So I did get six weeks' filming out of it and had a lot of fun, thanks to Sir John's gaffe, but I think we only went for nine weeks. At the end of the nine weeks they'd extended for six and they announced that they'd sold the tickets and everything. And I had not long been married and had not long had my first child and I thought 'I'm not sure I actually want to stay here for six weeks, it's a bit *deja vu* now.' It's a big place and if you're on your own, and I was only twenty six at the time, the days are very long. If you're in the RSC and there's thirty or fifty people in the company, that's probably ok, you probably get lots of things to do. But when the next youngest is about sixty... Dandy and Mona, bless them, kept themselves to themselves. I thought, 'I don't know, there's got to be some money in this'. So I said, 'OK, I'll stay but I want a rise'. So, Lindsay said 'OK, I think that's perfectly understandable', but he couldn't get through to the producers, who were Alexander Cohen and his wife Lindy Parkes, so we came to the last night and I cleared up my dressing room, and I walked round to say goodbye to everyone, and from memory Sir John said, 'Goodbye, dear boy, nice working with you'. And Sir Ralph said, 'If you go home on Monday then I'm coming with you because I don't want to rehearse anybody else and I don't want anyone else in the play'. I said, 'I'm actually asking for some more money' and he said, 'Well, quite right too, you've got a young family'. So he hailed Lindsay who was there to close the play down, and he said 'I'll get on to Cohen', and he said, 'Well, do it now and I'll stay with you till you've spoken to him'. So at about one o'clock in the morning I heard Lindsay screaming down the phone (I won't use his language) 'Well, get out of bed then!' So Alexander had obviously said, 'I'm in bed, phone me in the morning' and he said, 'No, the cast are going home tomorrow unless you pay Graham a reasonable wage'. And he had suggested X dollars. So he got the verbal 'yes', and Sir John had left the theatre by then. And I said to Sir Ralph... he said... 'Quite right too, dear boy, quite right that you should. Have a nice weekend and we'll see you on Monday'. But there wasn't any communication from Sir John. I think he couldn't have bothered one way or the other. I don't think, by then, he needed the money.

EJ: Although his financial situation did fluctuate...

GW: I think he made quite a lot of money latterly when he started making films in a big way.

EJ: Did you get a sense that the cast were feeling it was getting a little bit staid, or that the play... because it's a very depressing play, did you think it took its toll on the cast at all?

GW: I think Sir John, anyway, could walk in to every night and straight back out again. Cry on cue every night. Genuine tears. Have a sniff, wipe his eyes, walk off and carry on with the crossword. He was actually that good. There are famous lines, I can't remember whose, who said to somebody running round the block three times [pants as thought out of breath] to get exhausted - actually it was probably Olivier saying to Hoffman -

'Why don't you try acting?' I mean, Sir John... his voice and his timing and his stature, with that not actually particularly pretty face, latterly. I mean, bald-headed and a very large nose. Whereas I think Sir Ralph was a very handsome man. Sir John was, I suppose... but he had this aura, this presence. But I think he was OK, Sir John was OK, because when Dandy came home, the lady who took over, Jessica Tandy, was an old friend of his. She played Ophelia to his Hamlet on one occasion. And he called her into the company to replace Dandy. She was fine, but not actually quite as Dandy had been. So I think John was quite happy that she should be there. I think Lady Moo was fine, Sir Ralph stayed. Mona was getting old anyway. I think she was glad of the work. It wasn't too difficult an evening for her. But I never saw, in the performance I was with them, I never saw any ill-effects of the sadness, of the sorrow of the play wearing off on anybody.

EJ: It often happens apparently – Pinter, *One for the Road* which took a huge toll on the cast because it was about torture and so on... I just wondered, reading it, it seems so desperately sad in places.

GW: I mean, I don't think it did. It had a great effect on the audiences, as you're probably aware. But not on the cast - it was a job, it was a job they'd been doing for quite a long time. It was a job they enjoyed, and it sounds a bit crass to say they were that good. But they were. They were that good that they could switch off. I mean I think perhaps... Sir John had played many, many parts in plays, the Spanish Inquisition, even *Romeo and Hamlet*, that probably got to him. Night after night. But I think later on in life, particularly in this play, there but for the grace of God could they have actually followed... a lot of actors did in their sixties and seventies in terms of age.

EJ: Did you talk about the play in terms of its themes with the cast?

GW: No. No, I didn't. I did with Warren. Because I saw him occasionally - as I say, we'd met before. We used to go out after the show and have a couple of beers and meet his pals and I'd talk about the play and that was it. 'Do as I do and you'll be ok'.

EJ: It just seems very interesting that five people are doing a play and you're all involved in something that's hugely emotional, and because of the absence of the rehearsal period there was no discussion.

GW: Well, yes, obviously there was for them, there was at the [Royal] Court. But...from November to March, it was about minus thirty at one stage... it was pretty cold over there. And I don't think they went out much. As I say, Sir John had his interests in and friends in other productions that were on at the time. On or around Broadway and I suspect that's how he spent his time. Art Galleries, and having lunches with people, whereas Sir Ralph played tennis every day and lived in the Carlisle Hotel with Lady Moo and his ferret. He brought his ferret over, which he lost one day - that was panic! But he was that sort of eccentric. But Sir John wasn't. I found it strange having been in, by then, many companies in theatre and in television...and what you do the company does and what the company does you do. I find that strange...apart from Sunday mornings... we used to go to - not every every Sunday, perhaps once every three or four weeks - to a

brunch at Seymour Hirsch's apartment. He was the accountant, charming wife and a lovely daughter as it happens. And the girls would come along and have a bit of lunch and a couple of drinks. But I never met the Sirs out of the theatre apart for the first night at Sardi's where you had to go and they'd tell whether or not you'd got a job tomorrow. Apart from the time that he took me to the theatre. Yes, it was strange.

EJ: Could you tell me a bit about David Storey, you met David?

GW: Yes, I did. I met him in London, and he came over to New York as far as I remember. He was a charming man with a lovely round face and a smile. He was very gentle and very friendly. We were doing a job together as far as he was concerned. That was my interpretation, anyway. And it wasn't a case of, 'God, I've got to put up with him because Warren's gone', there wasn't any of that at all, with any of them, I have to say. They all said 'welcome', Sir John included. I mean, David... he was a very nice man, a lot of people may forget... This Sporting Life we know about. But Flight into Camden, The Restoration of Arnold Middleton, In Celebration, The Contractor, Home, all great, enormous plays of great importance to the theatre I would think. But a modest man: he wouldn't put his hand up and say, 'Well, I wrote that', I don't think, in any circumstances.

EJ: [gestures to memorabilia] Could we talk about this?

GW: Well, yes. After my drinking tie from Sir John... I forget what I gave him actually, I did buy him a little token or something. But it wasn't a bottle of anything, obviously. But Sir Ralph did like his tot. I bought him a litre - or whatever they are... a quart over there - of Jack Daniels. Which he liked very much. And he sent that [gestures to framed hotel notepaper] to me from the Carlisle Hotel on Christmas Day.

EJ: [reads] 'My Dear Graham, I am extremely fond of the strong - hic - and delightful - hic - whisky that you so kindly sent me. Thank you ever so much, Ralph.'

GW: Yes, it's framed, you betcha... talking early about Sir John being... he was extraordinary. He was terribly modest. In so many ways. I think he was terribly nervous that people would not think the best of him all of the time. And he wasn't particularly into the 'star role'... and I have a picture which I'm showing you now from the play.

EJ: It shows Graham as Alfred holding a table above his head, and there's Ralph and John looking on.

GW: And says across my rather large chest - I wore a white T-Shirt: 'To Graham, All Very Best Wishes, Sir Ralph 71'. When Sir John's dresser took the picture to him and said, 'Could you sign this please, Sir?' he just put... it's fading now... he just put across his own jacket 'John Gielgud'. His dresser brought it down to me and I said, 'I don't want to be a nuisance but I wonder if he'd mind writing 'to Graham' and so he took it back and he added 'to Graham, 1971', and I think he thought 'I'd better put 1971

because Sir Ralph has'... I didn't want to send it back again because we'd be going backwards and forwards all night. But that in no way implies or insinuates anything about Sir John. He was asked a simple question: 'Could you sign this please?', and he signs it. But I don't think he would have said 'is it for you?' or 'who's it for?', whereas some others probably would. They'd ask you, 'What's your name? Best Wishes to Ethel' or whatever. But I have to say it was an immense... the more I think about it as I get older, I mean, I'm sixty now and hopefully not yet getting into the nursing home queue! But thinking back, going back to school, playing Henry VIII at eleven years of age, I think it would have been a very misguided young boy who ever would have imagined that he would end up on Broadway with not one but two of the greatest and most famous actors that this country's ever produced, at twenty-six years of age. It was an enormous privilege. People often used to say to me, 'I didn't know you acted, what have you done?' or 'I heard you were in Crossroads'. Yes, I was in Crossroads, I also did 400 other television programmes as well as Crossroads. I remember somebody saying, 'Have you ever worked with anybody famous?' And I said yes, and reeled off Sir John, Ralph, Dandy and Mona and she said, 'I've never heard of them! What were they in?'. And you think, 'God, where do I start?!' You talk about Elsie Tanner or Meg Richardson or Inspector Watts or Dr Who and they're all over you like a rash. But if you talk about stuff that's really quite important in terms of theatre - let alone your own life - they don't know what you're talking about: 'Mona Washbourne? What a funny name! Sir John Gielgud? I don't know him. What did he get knighted for, why is he a Sir?' Why indeed? I mean, it's hard to explain, is it not? It's an acknowledgment of what you've given to the theatre.

EJ: Thank you very much.