

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Elizabeth Boxer – interview transcript

Interviewer: Ewan Jeffrey

10 March 2005

Actor, on training at LAMDA, working with Jack Hulbert, repertory theatre in the 1950s and 1960s.

Interview begins with a discussion of various scrapbooks compiled by the interviewee and forms the basis for some of EJ's questions]

EJ: To start off can you give me an overview of how you started to get into theatre?

EB: Well, I wanted to go into the theatre from about the age of three, when i was taken backstage into my father's dressing room and was enthralled by the whole business.

EJ: Did you believe then that you'd go into theatre?

EB: Oh yes, I never thought I'd do anything else.

EJ: When did you actively start to do something about that?

EB: Well, one was in church plays and that whetted your appetite. Oh, a lot at school. It was a very drama-conscious school.

EJ: Which school was that?

EB: Campden School for Girls, we were always doing plays for the Building Fund [Laughs.] Which suited me. I played Hamlet, and Henry V, and Richard of Bordeaux, and Michael McCohen at LAMDA , when he interviewed me, said "Hmm. We'll have to give you a course in femininity!".

EJ: What year was it, when you applied to LAMDA?

EB: That was in 1955.

EJ: What was the process for applying for LAMDA?

EB: You had to do an audition.

EJ: Did you choose the piece yourself?

EB: I can't remember, whether it was sent. Usually one piece is sent to you, and one piece you choose yourself, but I'm not sure that's accurate.

EJ: Was it a day session, the audition?

EB: Oh no, nothing like so long. It was, I suppose, an hour.

EJ: What was your experience of LAMDA, what was it like to train there?

EB: Well, I enjoyed myself there, Michael Waugh was there, oh, the star pupil was Richard Harris who got kicked out after the first year. Michael McGowan was known to my parents, you see, so I did have a help there. I was given very nice parts at the end of

term, and in the finally end of term productions they invited Rep Producers to come and see the plays, and that's how I was invited to Bristol.

EJ: Were you drawn to particular parts, were you cast in particular parts or was it a fairly all-round experience?

EB: It was a fairly rounded experience from the very dramatic to the comic.

EJ: Did you prefer one or the other?

EB: Well, both were very satisfying, I mean there's nothing like getting laughs!

EJ: I agree.

EB: Norman Ayrton was there, and he went on to produce all sorts of people, including opera people.

EJ: So how exactly did you make the move from LAMDA to Bristol?

EB: Well, Ronald Russell, who ran the theatre, came to see the end of year play, and he invited me to go and do one play, I think to find out if one was socially acceptable, and I played Margot in *The Diary of Anne Frank* which is quite a nice little part but it's not a large part.

EJ: Did you adapt quite well from training to professional acting?

EB: Oh yes, I thought it was wonderful, absolutely wonderful!

EJ: So how long were you at LAMDA for?

EB: Two years.

EJ: And then to Bristol, what happened after that?

EB: Well, as I said, I left Bristol after one show in the September of 57, and then I did what was called Special Weeks in various Reps.

EJ: What was your experience of Rep? I was talking to Elizabeth Chater and she said you had to have to plays on the go at the same time.

EB: That's right, you rehearsed one in the day and you played one at night. Well, Bristol was very luxurious because it was fortnightly Rep, but I have done weekly Rep, which is hell. You never leave the script. It's with you the whole time.

EJ: It just seems to me to be enormous pressure -

EB: Well, yes, I don't know how older people manage but when you're in your 20s you can learn fast and forget fast, that's how you managed.

EJ: You mentioned your telegram from John Gielgud, did you act alongside him?

EB: No, my mother staged managed Richard of Bordeaux ... Gielgud's great season at the London Old Vic, and she always kept up him with him and he was generous, very good to her. And he saw in the paper that I had had this accident. I had also met him, because I was absolutely in love with the theatre, and I had an old lady friend who was very well-to-do and we used to go in a chauffeur-driven car, when I was about 13, through the West End of London, through Richmond, where she lived, and we would sit in the front row of the stalls and then go backstage to see Sir John, and there I met various people including Noel Coward.

EJ: Right, what was your experience of Coward?

EB: Oh, he was lovely, now I have to explain, to tell you this story, that my brothers were at the Actors' Orphanage. Coward was President at the time, and in his capacity as

President - it was very much on notepaper - he had sent all the children at one stage a postcard each, which was very nice of him. And this was very much in my mind when I was about to be introduced to him, I think I was aged about 13, and when the moment came, thinking about the postcards, I extended my hand and said "I believe you know my brothers!" and to his great credit he didn't move a muscle. I'm sure he had great fun afterwards, you know, but he was too nice to send me up! [Laughs.]

EJ: When you were doing *Nude with Violin* did you have any contact with him at all?

EB: No, no. That was, you know, it was done at the time by every Rep in the country, as soon as it left London.

EJ: What was your experience of the play? It's interesting looking at the Gielgud Archive that it seemed to polarise the critics.

EB: Well, it wasn't a very good play. You're never as happy in a less good play, than you are in a good one, obviously. Depending on what you play, of course.

EJ: With *The Reluctant Debutante*, can you tell me more about that?

EB: Well, I got that through going to see *Spotlight*, and they said to me 'well you could go along to St Martins', or wherever they were holding auditions, 'and see if there's an ASM job and an understudy if you want to, there's a tour going out', you see. Well, I nearly didn't go, but I thought I'd give it a go and I ended up reading for the main part. Then got it, which was a great joy to me. Because it's a very good part. I mean there were plenty of tours that had gone out with Jack Hulbert, he toured a lot, so I wasn't the first.

EJ: What was your experience of working with Jack?

EB: Do you really want to know?

EJ: Yes, do tell me!

EB: My experience of comics is that that they don't want anyone else to have laughs. And I had a line that I didn't particularly see as a laugh but I used to get a laugh on it. And he used to do a great big Jack Hulbert reaction which was lots of double takes. And if I got a laugh, he didn't get his. He used to haul me over of the coals every night, accused me of pulling faces, but I honestly wasn't - I tried to throw the line away, I tried anything so he got his beastly laugh, he wasn't encouraging to the young, shall we say?

EJ: So what happened after the tour?

EB: Well, after the tour, I can't remember when the Special Weeks were, I went back to Bristol to appear in the company as a regular feature, instead of having just one appearance. And there I had a whale of time.

EJ: This is a really impressive scrapbook. I notice you've cut out clippings of reviews. What was your response to critics?

EB: Well, in Rep, the audience are probably the same, apart from a smattering of newcomers, and they get to know you. And so do the [critics]. Peter Rudford got to know me because he once chastised me for having a peculiar hairdo, you talked to them, you knew them, it was an extended family. I remember on my last show *My Three Angels*, I was playing the juvenile as usual. And I ran on and - this gives you an example of audience participation - there was a loud voice that said 'She's always dancing!' This is typical of the sort of thing that went on in Rep. In Folkestone they have Tea Matinees when they took out every other row of stalls and had tables for two, and the stories are legion of course, and they're rattling their cups and saying 'do you want some more sugar, dear?' you know, and one actor I knew was downstage for a

long time, and he was well-known to the audience and he was listening to a dialogue from another part of the stage. And some dear in the front row leaned up and said 'not a very big part this week, dear?' and this gives you some idea of the friendly family atmosphere. I don't know if it happened in all Reps, but they really got to know you, and you were part of the family.

EJ: And did you find time when you were working to visit the theatre as well?

EB: Oh no. No. Well, that's not quite true, we did find time for the Bristol Old Vic, we'd go to a matinee that was on a different day to ours. We did do that, I mean, you couldn't go to London.

EJ: You couldn't visit the theatre because you were working?

EB: Yes, yes.

EJ: I wanted to ask you about Enid Bagnold *The Chalk Garden*, she was fairly old when she wrote it

EB: Well, I played it with Faye Compton in Eastbourne and then again in Bristol. It was a good part, and I enjoyed it.

EJ: Were you affected in anyway by censorship, at all?

EB: No, no, as an actor, that was all done and out of your hands, so to speak.

EJ: Were you tempted towards London?

EB: Oh, yes, well one hoped to, once one had one's Rep experience behind them, naturally. I auditioned at the Mermaid, you know, you had hopes.

EJ: Some people said they actively avoided London -

EB: Oh no. In fact my father was anxious that I should leave Bristol and get on with trying to get into London. Because he was conscious of the fact that as a female you are useful when you're young and not for very long.

EJ: That's quite depressing!

EB: Very. Well, there isn't a market you see, for females. Not really. As a juvenile...I don't know how different it is now. Certainly, then, there were juveniles, and if you couldn't remember your lines there was a market for the elderly. But there's not much for the middle years unless you're Celia Johnson.

EJ: I think it seems strange.

EB: Does it?

EJ: Why isn't it the same for men?

EB: There's always more work for men. Always. Oh yes, if you phoned up Spotlight and asked them, or the Radio when they had a Rep, the Radio Rep, I forget what it is, the proportion of men to women, but they're very much more more men than women. Even now.

EJ: I would have guessed the other way round.

EB: Really? Maybe the situation's changed with television.

EJ: I'd like to ask about television, and your move there. Could you tell me about this move?

EB: Well I got married in 1960 and moved to Bristol, back to Bristol, which was quite a good place to be outside London, because there was the Little Theatre where I had

worked, there was the Old Vic, where I did do one show, there was... the Commercial, there was BBC TV and Radio and there were little commercial companies as well. So you do what you can get.

EJ: It's interesting, comparing this to other interviews, because some interviewees resisted television -

EB: I don't believe people did. To actors, work is work. It's not just a means of earning a living, it's the joy of getting a job.

EJ: So were you on Equity?

EB: Yes, I was a member of Equity... you had to. To be a member of Equity you had to have a job. It was a bit of vicious circle!

EJ: I'd also like to go back to Censorship. Did you perceive a change in theatre at all?

EB: When did it end?

EJ: It was 1968.

EB: Well, I'm afraid I was busy with babies [Laughs.] One wasn't conscious at the time of the change -

[Interview pauses]

EJ: Did you decide to stop acting?

EB: No, it gave me up!

EJ: Would you like to have gone back into it?

EB: Oh yes, what happened was that I had my babies and I was fully engrossed in that. Then I started to get back into work in Bristol, it was all happening, mainly I may say it was commercials not plays. Now I was aged 33 when this happened, perhaps I didn't have enough tenacity, and my contacts were all in Bristol, and no-one [in London] wanted to know a female of 33.

EB: Well it is sad, but it's typical of the way theatre spits you out.

EJ: Do you have any particular memories of performances in Eastbourne or Richmond?

EB: Well, I played with Graham Crowden, in *The Waltz of the Toreadors*, and I was one of the two awful daughters, and we were supposed to come on together. And one day the other girl wasn't there, when I was about to go on and I didn't know what to do, whether to wait for her or to go on, so I did wait and we came on late, and Graham Crowden, a great character, at the end of a long spiel he said 'And come on time, next time!'. We were leaving, fortunately, as he said this!

[EB and EJ browse programmes and memorabilia]

EJ: Do you think you got in comedy more, that you were chosen for comedy?

EB: I suppose I didn't have a chance to do Shakespeare and do the grand tragedian roles.

EJ: Would you have like to had done them?

EB: In retrospect yes, but at the time I just enjoyed myself so much. You were just delighted to get the next play, the next part. Especially in Rep. When I say especially in Rep, I mean when you join a company and do a play every week for a season or more. This is the play I was in at Chichester when I fell on my head, and only played the first night.

EJ: Did that happen onstage?

EB: No, outside, on horseback. But it did good business for the play!... This was an organisation of West End actors and actresses who put on new plays on a Sunday in a West End theatre, the actors weren't paid, but it was a very good shop-window for them. It ran for I don't know how many years, and I had my stage managing experience through them, because my father, did a lot for them. I stage managed a play that went on to the West End. This is how they made their money, they produced *Seagulls over Sorrento* and *The Happiest Days of Your Life*, very popular comedies at the time.

EJ: What did being a stage manager involve at the time, what sort of responsibilities were there?

EB: Well, you ran round, if you were an ASM you ran round and got people's coffee, you were a general factotum. Then I was elevated to Stage Manager, then you were on the book, the prompt book and did anything and everything. In the stage management line, you put the props on, and changed the props in intervals, you know, you prepared them.

EJ: Absolutely fascinating. They are in immaculate condition.

EB: Well, they're not looked at much, they're much treasured! [Laughs.]

EJ: I think I'll stop there. Thank you very much.