

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Elizabeth Chater – interview transcript

Interviewer: Ewan Jeffrey

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Actor, working for the King's Theatre Gainsborough, 'outreach' theatre for Holloway Prison in the 1950s, acting in repertory.

EJ: Can you give me some general background on how you came into theatre?

EE: At boarding school I did a lot of what was called in those days, just before the war, elocution, speak out clearly and I had great fun doing scenes and poems and songs and things and enjoyed it enormously and did quite well with it and I did school plays, Molière, French and various other things. But when I came to leave to school I'd got three things I wanted to do. One was professional riding, one was art and one I thought was theatre. But the war was on and I went straight into the Wrens and finished up in Bletchley, so two years later I came out of the Wrens aged 19, and knew that having been in uniform for two years, I must get away from being the same as everyone else. I followed my number one enthusiasm which by that time had become quite definitely theatrical.

It was about that time my mother said that when she was young she wanted to be an actress, she must have been about four at that time, in about 1900. But she wasn't allowed to be an actress, but she was immensely emotional and amusing and beautiful and that's obviously where the genes came from I think. As I knew nobody and there was no-one in the family who could give me any direction at all. I went to a three-year training in Bristol and a friend or the tutor of the woman who taught me and everyone else at school, who wanted to do elocution, speech and drama, she said 'this is what you want, and you must go to a private school in Bristol, and none of us had heard of the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, unfortunately.

Anyway I did the old GSM with Hedley Goodall, who did a tremendous amount of broadcasting, Bristol was one of the first regional centres. He put me in to the staff broadcasting there which was very good for me and I'd devoted to radio and BBC ever since. However, at the end of two years with him I begun to learn an awful lot and realised I knew nothing. And Weekly Rep was the one thing I wanted to get into - but how? So I bought a copy of The Stage one Thursday and there was an advertisement wanting someone to join Repertory Theatre at the King's Theatre, Gainsborough, as a student and as a result of being a student for a couple of months and receiving no wage whatsoever, if you were approved of you got your Equity card. That I knew had to come first, in those days anyway, I don't know so much now. So, desperately excited, because I'm very excitable and it's very exhausting, I packed seven suitcases of varying sizes, I have to add, and also took my bicycle with me and went up to Lincolnshire by train with all these various-sized cases holding any piece or every piece of clothing I could find, belonging to me, or my grandmother, or my mother or school stuff, anything from jodphurs to shorts and bathing costumes to long dresses, so that whatever part you

played that week you got your own clothes, because the wardrobe turned out to be very small.

So I arrived up there and was met by Mr Nicholas Vlieland who was a wonderful character who had been in theatre all his life, he couldn't bear to live without a theatre, so he met me and took all the cases and I think took me to my digs of course, because apart from during the war when I'd been billeted for a year in Bletchley Park, because that where I was working, I hadn't really been into digs. However that was a detail, I soon got used to that, and they got used to me somehow. And that probably that first evening I went down to theatre and there was my name on the programme "Elizabeth Havelock" as Stage Management, so I thought, well that was alright, and I think probably the second evening I was backstage watching a lot of things happening, and during the day I started off tramping round G looking for props because if there was anything the prop company hadn't got in, I think props were kept above the theatre entrance, I think upstairs in the theatre loft. There was obviously a collection of props that was as good as they could muster. I by this time was getting terribly excited and cycled from the King's Theatre which is still there in Gainsborough, and sort of 19th-century, I could draw it but I can't describe it, but it doesn't really matter.

So it started almost immediately, I was doing props and probably on the book and I rather loved being on the book, because one could be a shadow that was a tiny bit behind one. You could be a tiny bit before, knowing whether a pause was despair or part of the timing [laughs]. So that first week went, I think the second week was pretty much the same, and the third week, and then I had my chance to say a few words, and of course I played the maid. And I can remember that. Because I got a laugh and that suddenly was intoxicating, to have a laugh, to get laughter from the audience, because of the way you played a line, and that was heady, I've never got over it. The tears came later, but the laughs came first.

And very soon I joined the cast sort of properly, and was playing somebody my present age, nearly 80, or I was the juvenile lead, or I was the sort precocious schoolchild, because I could do my hair in plaits very easily. Then I was in my early 20s. Of course, all I was really wanting was getting into period clothes which I had enjoyed more than anything else. But this N Velland was a man who, despite his red hair, was a good 70 and he realised in me he'd got somebody who'd prompt him on stage if necessary, or provided he cast me opposite me, whatever we're playing I got this gift for things, where I seem to remember. I helped him out of a tight spot because I came to realise it was as well to know his part pretty well as well as your own! Just to make certain. And he had been in the original Salome by Oscar Wilde which played in the West End, in the first showing, which must have been the turn of the century which made him, in 1952, which was when all this happened, the beginning of 1952, because the end of 52 we did Dickens's A Christmas Carol which I didn't know had been dramatised, which of course it had.

Quite a few musicals we did, I could list them but I don't want to waste time on them. Because I could sing very easily at that stage and dance, I got a very varied experience of drama and musicals as well. He had been in Salome so he said, 'right, we'll have Salome ' and one week we were rehearsing, of course, and learning the words whilst we were playing something quite different, probably Johnny Belinda or something, and of course I played Salome and of course I had to make my own clothes for that. Very varied chiffon scarves which I got from Woolworths, you know, all round me, draped, and the dance of course, Bolero was the music, terribly exciting, and because I was doing props, or helping props, I had this terrible head of John the Baptist, covered over in cloth, which was a turnip or something. And this terrible, stagey dialogue of Wilde's in that play. And at the end of a year there I left, not really because - I don't know why I left, you have to

leave sooner or later. But it was a tremendous, wonderful experience for me. I've had so many wonderful experiences since.

When I knew you were coming I went upstairs to get my theatre stuffs, and I found I haven't got it! So it's wonderful to have it up here, but I don't have sketch books and things, I don't collect that. It's over and I would do it again. It was wonderful beginning and I'm very attached to G and the King's Theatre there. Dear Nicholas V who started me off. One doesn't know what happened to him. The point is that it was barely keeping its head above water. The box office staff was all voluntary and there was a devoted old woman of about sixty-plus and she was obviously also devoted to Nic[] V too, and she did anything she could out front. And occasionally he would bring in amateurs, because he couldn't afford to pay another actor for a small part. So I got four pounds each week which I thought was wonderful.

My digs were two pounds ten a week because I had a big bedroom which could have slept two people, but I didn't have anyone to sleep with so I had the big room to myself. Two pounds 10 shillings. And that left me a pound and 10 shillings, so 10 shillings was my odd things, paid for my collection for Church on a Sunday. And the pound I saved until I got 20, and in 20 weeks time I bought myself a wireless. You won't have seen them, it was like a little suitcase, rigid, and you lifted the lid and with that things started playing. And you closed it, and there was a handle like an attaché case. I put that by my bed, and when I went to bed at night, I was so excited, all the things, all the way through the play, you know what it's like. What happened to us there. You relive it all lying in bed. You go through the whole thing. I had to have a radio on so I could go to sleep, otherwise I would have lain there in the dark, in the silence, just going over. Listening to the radio was the reason I slept. Is that the sort of thing you want?

EJ: It's fascinating.

EC: I left with my seven suitcases and bicycle, very much wiser and realising I really did know something, because weekly Rep is wonderful, you know how it goes: the cast list goes up...the first night is the Monday, obviously, and Tuesday morning you start a second play, remembering that every night that week, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday you play Play A, and rehearse Play B all morning and you have take it to the lavatory, to the bathroom, walking across the road, shopping.

I was never without a script because you know Monday it was brand new, you dashed through it to see, so the cast list went up and Tuesday morning the scripts were given out, because Monday had to be kept sacrosanct for the new play, and Tuesday morning you started to juggle and you dashed through it to see if you had a big part or a small part, or how many speeches you had in Act 1, Act 2, Act 3 and so on, and sometimes, because you couldn't afford a whole script you bought what were called 'part scripts' where all you got the last three lines of the speaker before you, instead of the whole thing. That was absolutely dreadful, all you got was the three words, and you'd stand about waiting for these words, you couldn't follow through the whole speech 'right, I come in when he says 'help' three times' - you'd have to wait for that.

[...]

Having no agent, I was still fairly vague about how you got another job, until I caught a hint from somebody that you had to be in this directory called 'Spotlight' and this was in London, in those days in Cranbourne Street off Leicester Square. I probably went home to Bath which is where I lived, with all my stuff, and set off one day for Leicester Square and made an appointment to meet Seal, I think his name was, and he was a director, and he sort of looked you up and down and put you into a category. And then I had to go home and wait, because in those days directors of weekly Rep, or even I think

probably unknown to me at that stage, lots of directors worked there and Spotlight would call people who but that time had paid their subscription and had their picture in the relevant section according to how they played, how they would be cast. So I went up and met this Roger Winton, from Guildford Theatre who was putting a pantomime Cinderella and he wanted a Cinderella and a few other actors as well and Spotlight had put me on his list because I could sing. Sing and dance. When necessary. So I went up and met him and he said 'you look as though you've suffered, you're my Cinderella' so I couldn't believe it, I was terribly excited, so I went off to Guildford to play three weeks as Cinderella and to rehearse for a month beforehand.

EJ: What year was this?

EC: This was 1953. 52 I'd been at Gainsborough and had had Christmas 52 there. And left I expect during the summer, the following summer. So then I went down to the theatre at Guildford, of course it wasn't the one there now which is new, it was the Town Picture Gallery which had a fine theatre stage one end and pictures all round the walls! [laughs.] And my digs there were amazing, it was rather a big house and the woman who ran it, whose name I might remember one day, had a maid who was simple enough to consider that I was Cinderella anyway, although my name was Miss Havelock, I was Cinderella in theatre and out of theatre, very Stanislawski! But I let that be, it was all part of the fun.

Then I found myself with Marianne Grimaldi, who was an opera singer, to sing opposite me. I'm a natural singer, but of course she was trained with the wonderful voice, and two wonderful sisters both of whom were actors, you know, established 20, 30 years and probably twice my age anyway, so I was both sort of ingenue and leading and musical to boot, so I had the most wonderful time there. Because obviously the pantomime was written by the director and the musical impresario, Leslie James, who had written all the lyrics and music together with Roger. So I couldn't enjoy myself more, but there were two shows a day there, and we probably got about four pounds 10 shillings a week. I don't know I can't remember.

But it was two shows a day and they were crammed with people, and in the afternoon it was mainly children, and in the evening it was a little bit more sophisticated. And the Ugly Sisters put some things in in the evening that they wouldn't put in in the day! To get a guffaw or laughter! It was new for me to wear a 'fall' of hair that was even longer than my own was, and to do a quick change which I'd never had to before, and to play your part as you left out, running away and meanwhile you were changing in the wings, and then you were out. This was 'business' that I knew nothing about. So this was quite different because we had weeks of rehearsal before we opened and when we did open we were not learning another show.

Into my dressing room one afternoon came a blind child, brought in by her mother, because the blind girl, having seen the show, was convinced that I had a palace, which she could go and be in, when the show was over. So she came round and I met her, of course, and we talked, which was amazing, I've never forgotten that. So I only stayed there for the length of the pantomime. Then I went back to Spotlight again, and got to Colchester, a theatre run by Bob Digby, and I played with a lot of people whose names are still to be seen today, or they've very recently passed on. It was two-weekly, but it was just a different standard somehow. Bob Digby was completely in charge of everything, a director, and he took us to a prison, South London. A woman's prison, the old one, not the new one. I can't remember the name of it. We were playing a comedy, and we had to take it... I can't remember the name of the prison, it's so famous.

EJ: It's not Holloway, is it?

EC: Holloway, yes. That's it. The old Holloway. Thank you. I remember it was partly... I think he must have known the governor. It was obviously comedy, because you really couldn't get any interest out of taking a deadly, difficult, tragedy. So we went through these gigantic doors which passed, you know, to let people in and out. And then we were directed to a room, two sort of green rooms instead of dressing rooms, something like that. And every door in each corridor of course had a tiny little peep-hole in it and a sort of circle surrounding it, so you immediately could go to the... wasn't a window... just a very small circle in these huge heavy doors, and inside was a prisoner.

And these pale, white-faced women came trooping in, and they could only come to see our play if they were on good behaviour, so they sat there and I think one of them was asked to do something or other, like turning the lights off, or turning the lights on. And we played to this audience of prisoners... women... and Colchester was wonderful, I had tremendous... much more direction there. I mean, in Gainsborough it was 'get the show on, curtain up, curtain down, now the performance, et cetera'. And we did have matinees, even at Gainsborough. Thursday and Saturday, but it was on and off, do the best you can, get through. Whereas this was far more sophisticated and it was a much higher standard, and there were actors coming to join the company who'd been acting for 10 years, and I was still a beginner, but we have to begin, some time or other.

But I was at Colchester for a season and that was beginning of 1954. I can't tell you when I left Colchester but the theatre's still there, whether it's Rep or touring, I really don't know. Then I went back to - you know what's coming next - Spotlight and was sent up to Chesterfield, right up in Derbyshire. And digs again, and my digs - I had one room, very different this time, it was so narrow that the alsatian dog that lived downstairs in the main part, he'd come dashing up and see me and sniff around. But having come into the bedroom, which had a bed and a passageway leading to the door, the dog couldn't turn round, so the dog had to back out! [laughs.]

Very exciting there, because we played for a fortnight, but on one occasion, the play we were rehearsing was *The Love of Four Colonels* by Peter Ustinov, a lot of business, of the four wives I was a French wife, I'm glad to say, again one's own clothes, because I had black coat and skirt of my own, and a black beret which looks very jaunty, and a huge flower up here or something, *comme çà, comme ça*. And Nigel Davenport was in that company. I can't remember all their names now, that was really terrific, but on one occasion we had to stay and rehearse after the play, which of course one never did in weekly Rep, because you'd be far too tired and exhausted, so we were running for a fortnight. But we did on one occasion, he paid for taxis to get us all home.

Jerry Glaister, who was a very well thought of director, he went on to be with one of the big television companies, Grampian, up in the North, and I wrote once or twice, but he'd obviously forgotten Chesterfield, or forgotten me, anyway. That's four Reps and having finished those four Reps, I was meeting and working alongside actors who were much more experienced than I was, and they were doing other things, they were doing television, they were doing radio, not video of course, and I was beginning to realise that the field was enormous and I thought, right, I'm going to London.

So I took a huge chance and got myself digs in London, and that's another story because that was television and radio and even club theatre. Oh, well I could include... I can't remember the name of the theatre but it was very near Paddington... however that was the sort of thing that agents would come to, it wasn't a big theatre, it was something like the one at Notting Hill or something. And the latest theatre I did was when my husband was Dean of Battle and by that time I'd run through a few agents [laughs] because I did quite a lot of television in the 50s when it was new and we couldn't wear

black and white, but that's another story, it's not theatre. So I think I've finished really. Have you got any questions?

EJ: Oh yes. One of the things I was fascinated to hear about was the prison visit. How did the women respond to that, in the audience, do you think they enjoyed it?

EC: Oh, they enjoyed it. They enjoyed it, I was very moved by it all, really. Because this was something live and these were new people, and there was a story, and, I mean, there was laughter. And it was something live. We never went again and of course Holloway is now different. But I was appalled, I'd never been inside a prison before, I worked a play at Leyhill Prison in Gloucester which is open air. Oh, and two other things I did in 1951-52, Bath being my home, Bath had a festival, and still does it every year, and Dr (as his was then) Glynne Wickham of the drama department of Bristol University, a great specialist on medieval theatre, so many books are the standard works.

He put on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the open air, outside, in Parade Park in Bath. I played Titania there, and he had Gabriel Woolf who'd just got the gold medal at RADA, playing opposite me as King of the Fairies, and that was wonderful because I'd never before played in the open air. It was the evening, of course, because the lights came on in the trees. We had a wonderful time with that, and next year we did *Coriolanus* and I played Virginia, the whole stage, the seating was set on top of the Roman Bath, the major Roman Bath, so that the play was enacted underneath the columns, with the stone jutting out, I mean, we played there, the columns were here, the water was there and the seats on top of the water. So you got steam coming up, it was all natural, normal. And that was very exciting, and there were two professionals, well, three, in the *Dream*, I was one... the man who who'd just left RADA with the gold medal and also Charles West, who had just left Dartington Hall as a singer, and he was obviously drama-trained as well, so they had full training and I hadn't gone into my first rep then, in 1951. I was still thinking hard about it, but I had had some training in Bristol rep. So that was what you were going to ask me, about the prison?

EJ: I was wondering how it was arranged, it seems like a modern idea.

EC: It does, it does, I was staggered by it, it must have been a liaison between the director of the theatre who must have known somebody who was on the stuff, the governor, that's the way it has to go, doesn't it, nobody would've been standing by arranging things like that. It had to be a private arrangement, I would think.

EJ: I think it's very interesting. Can I also ask about whether you drawn to particular to roles or parts? Did you find that was the case? Did you have a preference for particular roles?

EC: Yes I did really, because I still am passionate, but I don't very often use it, except I ruin my voice and lose my voice for three weeks. Mime. *Johnny Belinda*, you see, she's a deaf mute. Because I was 5 foot 4 and had fair hair, and I was agile, I did usually get the juvenile leads, which of course were lovely because they were full of *joie de vivre et cetera*, or difficult... for instance, they've just finished it on radio... well, I'll go on and it'll probably come to me...Anything in costume, that was a favourite of mine. Because you have to manage it, it's different, you've got wonderful gestures. It's all much more fun.

But part of the thing I enjoyed so much was going from a maid with adenoids to something more historical, and of course if there was any singing, I got it, because I could sing. Played the piano, off-stage! [laughs]. I mean, dancing was easy, still is, but not on these carpets! Yes, I did have a preference on the whole for playing my age, I think. Oh, *Trilby*. That was what I was going to tell you about, they just done it on the radio, *Trilby*, Du Maurier's wonderful story about the artist's model. Well, I've always my daughter to play *Trilby*, but obviously I expect it's too dated nowadays, but it's a

wonderful drama. That I simply love, because it was period, there was also singing involved. And I mean it histrionic, melodramatic piece, if anything was.

[...]

EJ: I was wondering, too, whether you actually found time to go to the theatre yourself?

EE: That's interesting! No is the answer. I did a lot of sketching, I had a sketch book so I've got lots of sketches of things I did, surreptitiously. No I didn't, you know, except when I wasn't working and there was the opportunity. I couldn't because in these small companies, everybody's involved, I don't think there are many people who are actually acting that week. I can't remember it being me, and of course I didn't have a car. It would be difficult to get to another place to see a show, except when one was between jobs. I expect I missed out, quite a bit, in that.

EJ: I was also wondering, you must have been in London towards the mid-50s, towards the end of the 50s, at that time there was change in British drama with *Look Back in Anger*. Were you aware of that at the time?

EE: I wasn't so much aware of that, I was more aware of the fact that this was place everything, media-wise, sprang out of it. By the end of the 50s, by 57, I was a married woman, by 60 I'd got two or three children and a year or two afterwards I got four, and my husband was first Chaplain to York University, so I dashed up, naturally, all six of us went up there, and by that stage... in London, you see...

In London I found myself doing quite a lot of radio and in those days you were given television opportunities by an audition in the Playhouse Theatre, so you could take your scene along with you. That's where I got my first television from because I did a good audition, apparently, at the Playhouse, and that's obviously put on film and anybody can have a look and see who's useful. BBC TV. And that's where I got my TV job, by which time I'd met John, and there was a marriage in the air obviously, and it's very difficult to concentrate on a new life and be hankering, looking over your shoulder all the time, thinking: what's going on, what am I missing? By this time I would have had an agent who probably said 'well, you know, call me, darling, when you want me, but I don't think you'll be doing that sort of work for some time!'. *Look Back in Anger*, I was in London and *Waiting for Godot*, I was in London for both those things, and I saw *Godot*, I had to stand to see it, I loved every minute of it. I'm not sure I didn't see it twice. I'd been fascinated by it every since.

When we lived in Bristol, went back to Bristol with four children at school there. And I was doing television a lot then. I found myself being asked if I'd teach some drama, which I did of course, and on the syllabus was *Godot*. And *Look Back in Anger*, I was asked whether I would go, and I also did some television, reviewing straight to camera, which I wouldn't be much good at now, but then I did it. It was on books, particularly, so I read the books and then reviewed them. But I was asked if I would give some sort of account of *Look Back in Anger*, and for some reason I couldn't cope with it quite, so I said, no, I just don't think I would, I'd seen the play in Sloane Square, at the Royal Court, *Mary Ure*, but it didn't take me, I must do more of this, and try to be a journalist as well as an actress.

EJ: It didn't strike you at the time as a landmark, or different?

EE: Yes, definitely different, it did. Because hitherto they had been all, like *Received Pronunciation*, I mean voices had changed and relaxations come in, it wasn't all high-pitched and perfectly enunciated, I couldn't bear that much longer. I did notice it was something quite different, but living in London, which is my favourite place, even now...I was very much on my own, I was in digs by myself and working during the day, odd

shops and things to pay the rent, and I didn't have the sort of companionship of clear-thinking, well-read people whose metier was theatre history, such as yours, it wasn't a university life that I had, with seminars and groups. I had to pick up for myself what I could and I was doing quite a bit of broadcasting which I'm keen on, but haven't been able to do since we retired. So that's just about the end of my scene.

EJ: That was absolutely fascinating.