John Moffat – interview transcript

Interviewer: Ewan Jeffrey

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Actor; working with Noel Coward; repertory; psychology of traditional pantomime; working with Tony Hancock; working with Binkie Beaumont for HM Tennents; the Royal Court; acting with John Gielgud

EJ: My first question is can you give me some general background on your experience with theatre?

JM: Well I started in weekly rep, I did nearly five years. I then progressed to the Bristol Old Vic which was three weekly rep. From there one of those productions came to London under the banner of H. M. Tennent who as you know were very, very powerful management and I think I did seven plays for Tennent's in the West End. And then I did various other jobs and then I was at the Royal Court Theatre with English Stage Company and I did seven plays there and after that, you know, it was jobs here and there, the West End, the Mermaid, I did a season at the Old Vic Theatre in 59, 60, 61 and later I was with Laurence Olivier's National Theatre Company at the Old Vic for three years and that's really my . Well, since then I've done West End plays. I stopped doing theatre in 1988 because the nerves were taking over from the enjoyment and I thought, I think the time has come now to stop doing theatre and at the moment all I do is radio and read audio books.

EJ: Could you tell me about your days in rep? What kind of an experience was that for you? Some of the people that I have spoken to about rep have stressed how much hard work it was, having to memorise three or four plays at a time, have them all in your memory. Did you find that was your experience of rep at all?

JM: The first play I did in weekly rep I found very difficult to learn, it was Twelfth Night and I thought 'I'm not going to be able to do this' but really within about six weeks one had kind of got into the rhythm of learning quickly and when I look back at my five years of weekly rep, I was two and a quarter years at Perth and two and a quarter years at Oxford, so we did very good plays in weekly rep. I never did any rubbish, if we were doing comedy it was usually Noel Coward or Terence Rattigan or Ben Travers. We were doing Shakespeare, we usually had more than a week when we were doing Shakespeare, but we did Shaw and Sheridan and Wilde and even Chekhov, Ibsen, and one got into the habit of learning very, very quickly. I used to count the number of speeches and I'd say 'there are 40 speeches in Act One, it will take me 40 minutes to learn', it got to that point. You also learned what good writers and, translated plays were

difficult to learn. Coward was very easy and Shaw was very easy because they are so beautifully written and the best of all, a wonderful one to learn, was Terrence Rattigan, you barely had to learn it and we'd do the first read through and you virtually knew it, it was so kind of perfect. And when I look back on my five years of weekly rep I remember what fun we had, particularly at Oxford with all those parties on barges and things like that and afternoons on the river and love affairs and you know.

I was interviewed by a young lady called Kate who was writing a book about weekly rep and I said to her, I think it was probably the happiest time of my professional life and she said everyone I've spoken to has said that because t was such fun, I had such a varied number of parts and you found out so much about yourself in a way that I think young actors can't any more. You found what you were good at, what you were not good at, what you would be good at one day if you tried hard. I discovered for instance in rep that I was very good at 18 th century Restoration comedy, it sat on me very easily but I would never have found that out had it not been for that experience of rep. I knew I was good in Shakespeare but not if it was one of the Roman plays. If I got into a toga I felt deeply uncomfortable but in Restoration costume I felt absolutely at home and that was what was good about rep I think, what you discovered about yourself.

I suppose we did learn tricks, short cuts, obviously we must have done that but on the whole, I think the standard, particularly at Oxford, the standard was very high indeed and I think people would be very surprised if they could see one of those productions, they would go how on earth did you do it, that's how people think nowadays. Like they think about live television, how could you possibly do a 90 minute play live on television? Well, we did it all the time, it was how it was done.

EJ: Yes, it is interesting because I was talking about the live aspect and I think it is difficult for people to appreciate the live aspect now. Can you remember any productions that you did in rep that were particularly well received or that created a very strong impact with the audience?

JM: Yes, I can, particularly one. Well I can think of several but particularly one at Oxford when we did Thornton Wilder's Our Town , it just seemed to be beautifully cast. I don't know if you know the play, do you?

EJ: No, I'm not .

JM: Well I was talking a character called the Stage Manager who talks about the play, talks to the audience about the play, and it is done without scenery or props so audiences come in and think this isn't a proper play but it is such a magical play that they are carried about by it and at the end there was total silence as the curtain fell. We all lined up in a straight line, the curtain went up and the silence continued and then they started to applaud and it had wonderful notices and it had a marvellous effect on everyone who saw it, they just found it so moving. So that's one. I played Mr Puttnam, a critic, that was something I was particularly pleased with and also that's where I was introduced to playing in panto. We were doing Cinderella and I wanted to play Buttons and they cast me as an Ugly Sister and I thought 'I don't want to play an Ugly Sister, I

don't like the idea at all' but when I came to do it I found that I was rather good at it and I was extremely lucky in that my other Ugly Sister was a then unknown comedian called Tony Hancock so that was a very good experience.

EJ: Did you get on well with him?

JM: Yes, very well. And on the last night it was a tradition that the ladies were handed bouquets over the footlights and the men got nothing but on the last night these two boys jumped up over the footlights and handed Tony and me bouquets made out of carrots and onions and bottles of Guinness and then they jumped down and ran away and it was years later that I heard from the horses mouth that one of those boys was Ronnie Barker who lived in Oxford at the time and they thought I was so good as an Ugly Sister that they wrote Mother Goose for me the next Christmas and that's how I came to start playing a Dame in panto.

EJ: When you were working with Tony Hancock did you see any melancholy side to him at all?

JM: Yes, yes. What did impress me about him and what has always impressed me since is that he was almost puritanical about, he would never have a joke that was even faintly blue, faintly indecent, he resisted it absolutely and if you see any of those Hancock Half Hours it is true throughout. I mean he often plays the lady's man, the cavalier and that kind of thing but it is never sexual, there are no sex references at all. I do remember that about him. We were lying on the patio and he said 'I can't say that at all, anything suggestive has to go' and that rather impressed me at the time because I thought, you know, it was an easy route to getting a laugh.

EJ: Can you tell me a bit more about the pantomime aspect of theatre that you became involved in? I don't want to necessarily prioritise this over the other acting but it is something I am interested in, in traditional pantomime, can you tell me a little bit about that?

JM: Well it is a very, very big complicated subject. I just, panto was my first experience of theatre as it was for most children and I found it magical and I have quite good recollections of those pantos I saw as a child. In rep when one did panto one usually got rather poor scripts, rather careless kind of scripts and I thought surely one can do better than this so I started writing scripts myself and trying to get back to the traditional element of the story telling and because I felt that panto was becoming rather polluted and shoddy and it has got even worse now, it is completely out of hand now. So whenever I was free at Christmas I would try and do one of my pantos. I started in Canterbury and for about twenty years I had four or five pantos on at different theatres and I would, I often wasn't free at Christmas of course when I was tied up with the Old Vic or the National or something like that but when I was free I would do it. But it was very much a sideline, a fun thing that I felt quite strongly about, I wanted to re-establish the magic of those pantos that I saw as a child rather than a great mess and melange of pop singers and comedians doing their television act and the story going out of the

window and now they have newsreaders and the Hamiltons [Neil and Christine Hamilton] for God's sake, which is repellent to me.

EJ: Do you think it is a different discipline in panto to say 'serious' acting?

JM: Well, yes it is, because you are conscious of the audience the whole time, you are using the audience, you are talking to the audience but I have often felt that doing Jack and the Beanstalk for instance, the Dame who is Jack's mother has got to tell Jack that the cow has got to be sold and here we are, there is a man dressed as an old woman, there is a girl dressed as a boy and two people inside a cow's skin and there is nobody in the audience that doesn't know this and you can make the audience cry and it is because of the travesty, not in spite of it, that it works. These are instinctive things that they knew about panto in the past and this is what Brecht is all about, isn't it, alienation.? There is such a lot in panto that has been intellectualised later but they knew by instinct.

Another thing about panto that fascinates me, this is not to do with my work in the theatre really but the thing about panto that fascinates me is it reverses so many principles. All musicals end with a great big eleven o'clock number to finish the first half with the protagonist alone on the stage - Jack alone climbing the beanstalk, Dick alone on a high hill, Aladdin alone in the cave, Cinderella alone in the coach on the way to the ball. They knew instinctively that the children go out in the interval but whatever they were doing, eating their ice creams and things, the hero or heroine is on the point of this great adventure that is going to open up, what's it going to be? It is just so clever.

EJ: That's extraordinary, I had never thought of that. Perhaps to return to the acting, what was your experience of the West End and say acting with people like Sybil Thorndike and you mentioned John Gielgud as well?

JM: One of my great regrets is that I never worked with Sybil Thorndike, I always wished that I had. No, I have worked with many of the great ones, Gielgud, Olivier, Edith Evans and Peggy Ashcroft and Noel Coward. Well, the West End when I started in the early 50s was still a fairly glamorous place and those productions of H. M. Tennent's were beautifully-mounted and directed and designed and cast, they were of a very, very high standard and they were done with very great taste. It became very fashionable, once the English Stage Company had started and that big watershed with John Osborne and Arnold Wesker and all those people, it became fashionable to deride H. M. Tennent and it was very, very unjustifiable I think. They did wonderful work by very good writers, they discovered new writers, people like John Whiting for instance and they presented plays with great style and taste and very, very strong casts so I have very fond recollections of the West End in the 50s. I was in, the first thing I did was Point of Departure by Anouilh, that with Dirk Bogarde and Mai Zetterling. Then I was with Gielgud's company at the Phoenix where we did A Winter's Tale and then Much Ado . They both ran for seven months, now you think seven months of A Winter's Tale , it never had such a long run in a commercial theatre, no state subsidy or anything. That was followed by his revival, his famous production of Much Ado About Nothing . Then I did a new play, Boxing Night , that was Kitty Black who cast me in that and then I did the Apple Cart with Noel Coward at the Haymarket. That was a very glamorous

engagement, that was Coronation Year and everything was festive and he was wonderful to work with, I learned so much from him. Then I was in a Christopher Prior play, The Darkest Light , that was with Dame Edith. That was rather heavy going but it ran for a year and was directed by Peter Brook, that was 1954. In 1955 I was in a little comedy of J. B. Priestley's, The Duchess , that wasn't for Tennent's, that was for Tom Arnold and in '56 I joined the English Stage Company.

EJ: You mentioned Noel Coward, what was Noel Coward like to work with? What sort of man was he?

JM: Well he was a total man of the theatre. He was kind of known as a great wit, wasn't he, and rather acerbic and so on but what nobody mentioned until he died, and then everyone mentioned it, was his great kindness. He was wonderful to the company, he gave us lovely parties whereas most stars were rather Olympian in those days. You wouldn't knock on John Gielgud's door or Dame Edith's but Noel was very cosy. I mean he was always inviting us into his dressing room after matinees for tea and Fuller's walnut cake and he did his cabaret act at the Café de Paris after the show. As if the play wasn't enough he then went on to do his cabaret and he took us in twos there to have dinner with him and see his act. He was just very, very kind but it was his professional know how that was so impressive. He wasn't directing it but he was really. If a chair was moved he would know instantly how that would affect everybody else for the rest of the act so it wasn't moved there, it was moved there. So the path was being swept in front of you all the time making it tidy. In those days we didn't do technical rehearsals, you did one rehearsal and then opened on the Monday and we were doing a fortnight in Brighton before we opened at the Haymarket and we arrived to do the dress rehearsal and were told there would be a small invited audience. Well who? Well Rex Harrison and Lili Palmer, I can't remember who but there were about eight renowned actors and actresses out there, friends of Noels. And we thought, this is absurd, there are going to be all these hold ups. Usually these dress rehearsals went on for seven or eight hours or more, until the small hours of the morning. We knew that Noel would know his lines before rehearsals began so we all learned our parts before rehearsals began and it was a perfect performance and the next day I said to Lily Taylor who was Tennent's wardrobe mistress, I said this is astonishing. Usually at this stage there were rehearsals and everything has gone wrong and she said oh no, it is always like this with Noel. Not with a revue because there are new numbers being put in and running order being changed and so on but if it is a play it always like this, he has thought of everything. Shall I tell you a little story?

EJ: Yes, definitely.

JM: About him. While we were rehearsing, we were rehearsing at a new theatre called the Albery and we were going to open at the Haymarket. We had six weeks rehearsal which was very unusual in those days because he only liked to rehearse until Friday lunch time and then start again on Monday afternoon, he had a long weekend which was very elegant. Margaret Rawlings was playing in it and he said to her, 'Rawlings, dear', which is what he called her, 'I notice that you always light a cigarette when you sit on that window seat, are you just having a cigarette at rehearsals or are you planning to do it as part of the performance?' and she said 'yes, I am going to do it, it's been established that she smokes, she is in a temper, she goes over her so she would light a

cigarette just to calm herself down' . He said, 'that's very good thinking, she would but this act has been on for three quarters of an hour already, I have an eleven minute solo speech coming up, there is no smoking at the Haymarket and I think it might make the audience restless'. In those days some theatres allowed smoking but as if he hadn't already got enough to think about with this huge role that was longer than Hamlet and he is not only thinking about what is happening the play but he is thinking about audience psychology six weeks ahead.

EJ: That is phenomenal isn't it?

JM: That is what was so impressive about him, this total know-how. And his wit and kindness and I think I learned more from Noel. He would come out with wonderful little bits of advice. One actor had a difficult line and couldn't get his tongue round it and Noel said, 'think of the key syllable and give it star billing'. Well that's a wonderful little trick, you just think of the trickiest syllable and put it up there in lights and he was full of things like that, little bits of helpful advice that he just tossed into the air.

EJ: Extraordinary isn't it? Working with H. M. Tennent's company, did you have much contact with Binkie Beaumont at all?

JM: No, not very much. Binkie was very removed. We did see him, he would come round and I do remember one thing about Binkie. This was later than my sojourn with Tennent's, I was at the Mermaid and I did a music version of The Relapse called Virtue in Danger and I played Lord Foppington. That was extremely good, Paul Dehn wrote some marvellous lyrics and I was thrilled to be playing this part. We opened at Oxford, we were coming into the Mermaid but we opened in Oxford and it was done in combination with the Mermaid Theatre and H. M. Tennent and Binkie came round and he said to me, lovely performance dear it would grace a Gielgud production but it is a musical, it has to be a little vulgar, come on up stage centre, down to the footlights and play it like Mother Goose. I said, 'you're asking for trouble you know because I know how to do that, I can play Mother Goose and I might go too far' and he said, 'an actor of your taste couldn't go too far'. So I went on that night and did the pantomime works. There was a knock on the dressing room door, 'come in!', Binkie looked round the door and said, 'quite right dear - too far!' That's my main recollection of Binkie.

EJ: That's interesting. One thing that you touched upon when you were talking about Wesker and Osborne... there is a traditional view that in 1956 when Look Back in Anger came on at the Royal Court, that it in some ways completely shook up British theatre and it was a fresh start, and that people tend to look down somewhat on the work of Tennents even though they were beautifully crafted productions. What was you personal response to plays like Look Back in Anger ? How did you feel at that time?

JM: Well Look Back in Anger had opened at the Royal Court just before I joined the company and I just thought it was a rather good play. It seemed quite savage for its time and I know that Binkie had turned it down, it was offered to him and he didn't want to do it but it seemed to me that it was a very good play and I think that any of the actors in that company would say the same as me. I mean we didn't feel that we were doing

anything very world shattering, we were just doing a play. The theatre existed originally to discover new writers and they got novelists like Angus Wilson and in my case, Nigel Dennis who wrote The Cards of Identity , to write plays but they were the kind of plays one might have done in the West End and the company consisted of people you would have worked with in the West End, people like - probably the names probably don't mean very much to you - Michael Gwynne, Rachel Kempson, later Peggy Ashcroft came into the company and Esme Percy who was an Edwardian actor and with his stories about Sarah Bernhardt whom he worshipped and Ellen Terry and Irving and you would see the young people, including me, in the company hanging on his every word. So it didn't feel like, so there were those actors and then there were a lot of clever young actors like Alan Bates and Robert Stephens and Nigel Davenport and so on. The second or third play that I did for them was Wycherley's The Country Wife which transferred to the West End, the Adelphi, and later went to New York. So I certainly wasn't aware of being in a company that was changing the face of English theatre. I suppose it did. I suppose it was perhaps, was it politically motivated? I don't know but we certainly didn't feel that and I don't think George Devine had the intention of doing that but people like John Osborne and Tony Richardson and Lindsay Anderson and Bill Gasgoigne probably did but what really upset me is, and I'm sure it has happened in many other instances, in order to bolster up what people are doing now, they have to deride the past and it seems to me unjustifiable. I can remember when the RSC was at the Aldwych, there was an occasion where it looked as if they were going to lose the Aldwych Theatre and I heard, I don't know who it was, it may have been Trevor Nunn, it may have been Terry Hands, I don't know, talking on the radio and he said if this dreadful thing happened there would be a return to the kind of situation that existed in the early 50s when there was no classical theatre in London and I thought, well yes, that would be right. But wait a minute, in the early 50s I was in A Winter's Tale which played for seven months at the Phoenix, nothing has run for 400 performances at the RSC and the Winter's Tale is not a popular play. And Alec Guinness was doing his Hamlet at the New and Ralph Richardson and Celia Johnson and Margaret Leighton were in The Three Sisters at the Aldwych. I got up and got out my Who's Who in the Theatre at looked at 50 and 51 and 52, the West End was packed with classic theatre, there was Ibsen and Chekov and all those French playwrights that were so popular at the time like Anouilh, Giraudoux and Cocteau, T.S Eliot's plays were being done so it was a black lie but you have to do it, you have to say that was all rubbish in order to - I am afraid I have a bit of a bee in my bonnet about that and I am somebody who did all that West End work for H. M. Tennent, I did seven plays for them and then did seven plays for the English Stage Company and it just seemed like a normal progression to me.

EJ: That is interesting. I certainly agree there is a tendency to deride the past.

JM: Have you talked to many people who worked for Tennents?

EJ: Quite a few, yes.

JM: Have they said more or less what I said?

EJ: Similar, yes. I have some sympathy towards H. M. Tennent's company as well as I think a reassessment is necessary and people have created this picture that British drama,

drama in Britain, was safe before 1956, that it was somehow stale and I disagree and talking to people there is a genuine feeling that what was going on was good, it was worthwhile and people were working hard and it was popular too.

JM: I think it may spring partly from the fact that it was a known fact that Binkie and John Perry were known homosexuals, they were thought of as rather effete people and it was a complete irrelevance. They used the best directors and they cast the best actors for the parts. That side of their life really had nothing to do with their professional attitude to the theatre but I think it has got something to do with that, that it was all sort of shallow, trivial, decadent, you know. But it wasn't, it wasn't.

EJ: Can I ask you to turn a bit to Gielgud and working with Gielgud. Was he an easy man to work with in your experience, to act alongside?

JM: Well he was wonderful. Of course it is a well know fact that his mind was mercurial, he had had fourteen changes of thought before you had caught up with his first comment. A very wonderful lively mind and intellect. I remember the first rehearsal for Much Ado About Nothing, how old was I, 27 or something like that and he decided to cast me. I had been in A Winter's Tale and he wanted me in Much Ado and he said to me, 'I have heard you telling stories and putting on voices and I think you can play Verges, who is a very old man and so I did' and George Rose was playing his wonderful Dogberry that he had done in Stratford and we came to this scene, the watch scene and Gielgud said, 'Oh God, I don't know what to do about this, I dread it when the clowns come on, I can't help you with comedy business, I hate it when they drop their spears and goose each other, it's too awful'. We have no tradition of comedy here but I do know when you are not being funny. And consequently he didn't give us funny business or anything like that, he directed the scene entirely from the point of view of character and situation and as a result of course it was wonderful and it worked very, very well.

EJ: And in terms of acting, what was your relationship with the critics like? Did you respond to criticisms that were made or did you read the critics at all? I have spoken to some people who said they never read the reviews

JM: Do you believe them?

EJ: I don't believe them at all, I think everybody reads reviews. Did you respond to criticisms made?

JM: No, I don't think ever. Because in any case, different critics say different things. I remember when I was playing the Dauphin in Henry V getting on a bus with the New Statesman and a magazine called Time and Tide, they were two rather intellectual magazines. The first one said "John Moffat rescues the part of the Dauphin from its effeminate stereotype and presents him as a dangerous masculine soldier" and then I opened the next one and it said "John Moffatt was a girlish Dauphin." How could they both be right? So no, I never took any notice of the critics. I was very lucky really, I hardly ever had a bad notice. I know it sounds very vain to say that but it is true. I don't

think there were any critics for whom one felt great respect, perhaps J. C. Trewin, especially as he really did know about Shakespeare.

EJ: And maybe Hobson as well, Harold Hobson?

JM: Well Hobson was so erratic wasn't he? You never knew how he was going to react. I was a favourite of Harold Hobson's, he was always nice about me. The worst notice I received from him was when he said, "John Moffat, for the first time in my experience, fails to find anything interesting in his part." And it was true, absolutely true.

EJ: Did you find when you were working in the theatre, working as a stage actor, did you have time to visit the theatre, did you visit the theatre much?

JM: Yes, I used to go to matinees. Of course when you are working in the theatre you can only go to see matinees that don't coincide with your own matinees. I did try to see as much theatre as I could and all kinds of theatre too. As well as the kinds of theatre that I was doing, I loved to go and see people like Beatrice Lilly and Frankie Howerd. Yes, I did go to a lot, I was stage struck.

EJ: Can you remember any particular productions in the 50s and 60s that really moved you, that you thought were really very powerful, to see as a visitor rather than act in?

JM: I think it was before the 50s really, that season at the New Theatre with Olivier and Richardson, the Peer Gynt and Richardson's Falstaff and Cyrano. I think they seemed to be magical but of course I was very young then, it was before I became a professional actor. Strangely enough the things that really had an overpowering effect on me were not in London but were in New York and I can think of the two things that I think were great theatrical experiences were Frederick March in A Long Day's Journey Into Night , which seemed to be a towering performance and also that first production of West Side Story in New York was an astounding experience. It was one of those things where everything was at its best - the music, the lyrics, the orchestrations, the scenery, the lighting - everything all came together and released ones imagination in the most thrilling way. I am trying to think, I mean I saw lots of very good things in the 50s and 60s and I shall think of something after you've gone I'm sure.

EJ: Yes. I wonder, do you think there is something in America, say in New York and Broadway, that they were able to achieve these large scale productions that at the time London couldn't quite compete with that?

JM: At that time, I don't know whether it is true still but at that time there were a great many Americans who were wonderful actors and singers and dancers, whereas here at the time, I don't think it is true now, I think young people now are expected to have all those skills, but here you would think she sings so beautifully you have to excuse the fact that she is not a very good actress or she acts so well you can't really expect her to sing as well. I think that may have been a part of it. I am greatly in awe of young actors

nowadays, they are so clever the way they can turn their hand to . I suppose it is because so many of us started in rep but now they have to do three years in drama school so they learn all those skills.

EJ: Can I ask you a question about censorship? Was there any time during your time as a stage actor when censorship became an issue at all or was it never an issue for the plays that you were involved in?

JM: Oh the only thing I can think of was later than you are talking about which would be in 1969 or 1970, I was in a play which was so near to a political - I can't even remember what it was about now but some political situation in Malta and the play went the lawyers and they said there were several libel suits could be brought against this play and it could even lead to an international situation and it had to be rewritten, but that's not really censorship is it, that's not what you're talking about. I never came up against censorship at all.

EJ: I think H. M. Tennent were very careful that that perhaps wouldn't become an issue. Can I ask if you had a particular favourite director you liked to work with, who inspired you or you liked to work with or were they good in different ways?

JM: I always liked working with Wendy Toye who was just so adroit and clever and delightful and created a wonderful atmosphere at rehearsals which everybody wanted to work and we all had great fun. She directed on the whole very lightweight things, musicals and reviews, a Noel Coward review called Cowardy Custard and the review that I mentioned to you just now, Virtue in Danger . My best experience as regard director was that I had the privilege of being directed by Ingmar Bergman when we did a production of Hedda Gabler .

EJ: What year was this?

JM: For the National. The only way I can really tell you about how wonderful he was is by going into a whole lot of details of things that he did. I can only tell you that Maggie Smith who played Hedda Gabler said, 'you know that this is the best experience we can have and we can never meet it again, don't you?' I suppose so. Years later when I was working with her again I said to her, 'do you remember what you said about working with Ingmar Bergman?' and she said 'yes, and I was right, wasn't I?'

EJ: Can you give me some sort of clue to how he worked?

JM: Yes, he was immensely concentrated, he wouldn't rehearse for more than four hours because he said 'with the intensity of the way I want to work, four hours is enough'. Nobody was allowed to leave the rehearsal room, nobody was allowed to come in or out of the rehearsal room because his concentration was so sharp. A dog barking outside in the street could throw him so we were all keyed up. About every half an hour he would let you open the door or window and have a cigarette if you wanted to but nobody was

allowed to read a newspaper or do a crossword or anything like that. I was playing Judge Brack and I was playing him in that sort of rather traditional boulevardier smooth sort of way which obviously wasn't what he wanted. Now whereas most directors would go into a long diatribe about him and his personality and the social levels and all that kind of thing, Ingmar said 'I want you to play that scene again and this time I want you to keep your knees that far apart'. Now I couldn't play it the way I had been playing it, sitting in that position and the character changed and I began to feel like a different person. Having done that as a scene with Maggie, having done it he said, 'these are my knees, these are my thighs, this is my sofa and that is my woman'. That is just one instance. He seemed to be able to tune in to each individual actor and direct them. With Maggie he would say, 'she is so clever, she pretends not to be listening but she takes it all in'. That is what Maggie wanted to hear. With Sheila Reid he would say, 'my darling little Sheila!' and get round her that way. This person he would bully, this person he would coax. He just seemed to tune into people, 'this is how I can get what I want from them'. He did a very remarkable thing, we had a long rehearsal period at the National because people were in plays in the evenings, so we had seven or eight weeks usually and he had to go to Vienna I think, he was directing something there and the original plan was we were going to rehearse for a fortnight with Ingmar. He had done the production previously and he was going to repeat this production then he would go away and Laurence Olivier would take over, this was the plan. We were coming to the end of the fortnight and he called us all together and he said, 'I have discovered I can come back at the end of the fortnight. I can leave you for a fortnight and then I can come back and go on working with you and if you agree I would like to go to our blessed Lord - Olivier had just been created a peer - I would like to go to our blessed Lord and go, "Lord, we do not need you, go away". I had the experience in Sweden of falling ill and having to go away and leave the cast alone and when I came back something very interesting had happened. It wasn't my original idea but I have always wanted to try the experiment again and I would like to try it with you, I'd like you to rehearse on your own for a fortnight, don't let anyone else take charge, just talk about the play and the scenes, four hours, no more, don't let anyone else into the rehearsal room, no one and then I'll come back and see what you've done.' And he did this, it was extraordinary, and he came back and we did a run through for him and we were all on tenterhooks and he said 'it is very interesting, very interesting, you have all these notes behind your ears that I have given you and you are using them but something has happened but there is one thing you can't tell, you can't tell about variations of tempo and so on so I am going to take what you have done and sometimes I am going to do this with it and sometimes I shall do that with it.' That was how we were.

EJL It must have been quite nerve-wracking being left for a fortnight knowing he was going to come back.

JM: Knowing he was going to come back, yes. [laughs] That run through when he came back, we were all rather highly-strung but he was a genius, I don't think there is any doubt about that. There are other people I have loved working with, usually they were actors, people like Noel Wilman, I loved working with him, David William. They had been actors and they understood the process you were going through. As this is going to be launched in the British Library I am not going to tell you about the directors I hated because they are very famous and I'm not going to say!

J: That may be wise! [laughs.] I think we'll probably end on that note.