

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Muriel Pavlow – interview transcript

Interviewer: Ewan Jeffrey

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Stage and film actor, on working as a child actor with John Gielgud, RSC, theatre and the war, working in ENSA, the crossover from theatre to screen.

EJ: So perhaps we could go back to what we were talking about before. You were saying, on the tour of *Dear Octopus*?

MP: Well, in 1938 I was in a play with a wonderful cast: John Gielgud, Dame Marie Tempest... who else?... Angela Baddeley... oh, a whole heap of stars. And I was a child actor at the time and I had one of the roles in this play and we ran for a year and then in 38-39 rather... in 38 there was the first scare about war and then we ran for a whole year, war was declared we were set off on a tour of England, Scotland, everywhere, which lasted 40 weeks, believe it or not... I really was very spoilt in this play and it was a nice little role which I enjoyed doing as a child and I was a bit spoilt by the older members of the cast. And one evening I was sitting in the wings waiting to go on but just before I went on Sir John Gielgud used to come down because he had an entrance just a bit before me and I was sitting rather gloomily in the wings and he said "What's the matter with you, you're sitting there looking like Hamlet, in deep deep thought" and I said "I'm getting so depressed, do you think I'm going to go on playing nothing but children for the rest of my career?" And he laughed, and then came his cue and he went on. I say this because I was by then I was 17 or 18 and still playing children. I was very small, I looked very young and it really looked as if this was going to happen. Anyway same scenario, he came down about a week later, waiting to go on and suddenly he looked at me and said "I read a very nice play today, a very good play, by John Van Druten and I said to Binkie 'You ought to cast Muriel as the girl'" And he looked at me he said "It's alright, it's not a child, it's an ingenue role!" And how lucky I was, as the play I did was *Old Acquaintance* by John Van Druten and the leading lady was Edith Evans - so, wow! It was amazing. She was wonderful. You know I floundered a bit, because you know, here I was playing a 'grown-up'. And she was very helpful, very generous. But the play didn't succeed. The other actress in it was Marian Spencer and the male lead was Ronald Ward. So we had a short tour and came into the Apollo theatre and ran for three months and then we finished and went on another little tour and that was that. So I had the most tremendous luck in taking that leap from children into adult roles.

EJ: It's incredible to have John Gielgud as a helping hand.

MP: Oh he was wonderful. Very kind. He was always very interested in my progress, because in 1954 when I went to Stratford to do some Shakespeare. I came back to London - I had a break - And my late husband and I were having lunch in a little restaurant in Soho, and Sir John was sitting there, with some friends and he said "And how are you enjoying Stratford?" and I said "Oh, I think it's marvellous!" and he said

"Yes it is! I hear you're very good!", Oh, my dear, I could barely eat my lunch I was so excited! So he had a terrific influence. Terrific help in the early stages of my career. But that was a bit of a jump I made, didn't I? Because after *Old Acquaintance*... The Lunds came over. Oh, goodness, how one's memory gets muddled! The Lunds came over in 44 and we were at the Aldwych Theatre, doing a play by Robert Sherwood called *There Shall be No Night* and we were enjoying a good run, and we came to the Aldwych Theatre one Wednesday morning to perform the matinee and found the front of the theatre had been blown away by one of the buzz bombs. So we were all sent home and again we were all then sent on tour. It was a sort of pattern, we had our London runs, we probably had a pre-London tour but then there followed after the London run always a long tour of the provinces, of Scotland, oh, everywhere. It's a wonderful way of seeing England and Scotland and Wales? So, now where we have we got to?

EJ: We got to Stratford, I think.

MP: Yes, but there was something after *Old Acquaintance* but... oh for goodness sake! I took over from Jane Baxter in the *Rattigan* play at the Globe Theatre, as it was called then, in *While the Sun Shines* and played opposite Michael Wilding and then he left and Hubert Gregg took over so it was all experience, wonderful experience. I really was very fortunate. And then, in 1953, Glen Byam Shaw and Anthony Quayle were holding auditions for the 54 season. So I went for an audition. And the result of that is that I started off with a small part as Bianca in the *Othello* which Quayle was doing, and Leo McKern was playing [laughs]...never mind. So that was exciting And then I played *Titania*, which was a slightly uneasy start but gradually really got into the role and thoroughly enjoyed it. And then my main... then I did Bianca in the *Shrew*, and that was marvellous. I think I had the most beautiful costume of my whole career looking back on it. A confection of blue pink and white muslin, it was just lovely. Oh, I think I can tell you a little story that was relayed to me. Some friends were in front watching the matinee and there were two young men sitting in front of them, and I appeared in this vision of pink of blue and one turned to the other and said: "Oh, yes, there's nothing left to do with Muriel Pavlow but to pour cream over her and eat her!"

[laughs] Which I thought was rather sweet! So that was that, and then I came to my main role of the season which was *Cressida*, in *Troilus and Cressida*, opposite Laurence Harvey, and Leo McKern again. Leo was such an interesting actor, he played one of the comics in the *Dream* and he played *Ulysses* in *Troilus and Cressida*. And the contrast showed what a magnificent actor he was. Oh what a delightful person! Really sweet person. Very talented. So we've got to 54. Perhaps I should of said...if we got back a bit to 46, so it must have been after we played at the Apollo and I did a film which was an adaptation of a play, *The Shop at Sly Corner*. And the leading man in that...we started off, I didn't have a leading man, they were casting but couldn't find what they wanted. And I was having wardrobe fittings on one occasion and the woman came in and said "We've found your leading man!" and I said "Oh, good! Who is it?" and she said "Derek Farr", at which point I nearly fainted because he was my pin-up, believe it or not, I thought he was marvellous, he had such wonderful blue eyes. And the first scene I had with him I had to come flying down the stairs and throw myself into his arms and kiss him. And that did it! I married him three months later. And we had a very long and happy marriage, and he died in 86, so you know, personal life and professional life were intertwined, so that was that. Whilst I was Stratford, the month of June was my my birthday and Derek gave me a book, called *Reach for the Sky* by Paul Brickhill, and I read this, I was still working at Stratford, and when I finished it, I phoned my agent and I said, "Look, if they ever make this into a film, and I'm sure they will, I want to play the wife." I've never done that before, or since, but that's what I said. And he said "Right I'll make some enquiries". They were interested, but I had to do a test, so I did a test for the role

of Thelma and I got it. But before that I had this extraordinary little run of films in the early and mid 50s, starting off with Doctor in the House and Doctor at Large, it was my first experience of being in a smash-hit movie, and it was a very sweet experience and I thoroughly enjoyed it. So there we are, What have we got to now? Oh yes, the Stratford season, which, looking back on it, was one of the most exciting, for my development as an actress the most valuable work I did in the whole of my career. I just loved it, it is a real highlight even today in my memory. Then I came back, did another film with called Simon and Laura with the late Kay Kendal and Peter Finch, also both gone now. And then I went on a tour of South Africa with the Rattigan play, a different Rattigan play, a drama, In Praise of Love, it was called, about a woman who is dying of cancer. Sounds rather a sad story, but -

EJ: This is where the husband keeps it from her -

MP: Yes, That's it, and Robert Fleming plays the husband and he was a delight to work with, and Robert Beattie played the close friend. And we toured South Africa for three months. That was a marvellous experience, loved seeing that, we went all over the place, really, we started in Pretoria, we came down to Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, East London, Port Elizabeth.

EJ: How was the response from the audience?

MP: It was terrific, it really was. It was a very successful tour. It was all...it's been such a marvellous career, from the point of view of giving one such wonderful opportunities for seeing the world. Because after that Derek and I did a long tour of Australia and New Zealand, that lasted for 14 months and came back and did a play at the Aldwych which flopped. Then we went back to Australia and New Zealand for another year. On both these tours we were doing commercial comedies, the first one was Odd Man In... No, the first one was The Gazebo, which flopped so we did Odd Man In which we had done in London, with just three characters. Derek played the husband, I played the wife and we had a lovely Australian actor, sadly he's dead now, called Noel Ferrier. No, he played the husband, I played the wife and Derek played the intruder. Again, it was a wonderful experience, even went down to Hobart, top to bottom of New Zealand in the winter, very chilly, and in Australia we also went to Brisbane, and it was sort of steamy hot at times. So, there we are, where have we got to? Well, gradually theatre roles were not so prolific for me and gradually of course television was taking over. So I began doing much more television. And still now do the occasional odd little role. And it's a long career. It started in 1936, and it's still jogging very gently along now. So it's quite a while. But you only wanted one period!

EJ: It's really interesting. I'm very interested in the tension...perhaps that's the wrong word...between theatre and film and television work. Did you act differently, did you have a different regime or attitude to your work?

MP: Yes I suppose one did. Theatre was something unique, I think, in acting. And stands apart as something very special. Films were a lot of fun. It wasn't that we didn't take them less seriously, we worked very hard. But there was a sort of joie de vivre, shall we say. Of course one misses the audience, but there is a chance with the retakes of doing things again, you know, perhaps getting it better the next time, or perhaps having lost it on the first take, who knows? And then, finally, television which I say has the nerves of both theatre and films. Because if you do these sitcoms, occasionally I've done a guest appearance in a sitcom, it's quite terrifying because you have the nerves of theatre acting because you've got an audience, you have the nerves of filming and knowing you can't stop, and you've got the nerves of television itself, you know, it's an accumulation of nerves, it's a very nerve-wracking business. But the more you do, the more you relax into it. It took me a while. And of course pre-war I used to do a tremendous amount of

children's roles for the BBC Radio drama. That of course was marvellous, and we turned up on September the 3rd 1939 at Broadcasting House to rehearse, and of course we were all sent home that morning because of the declaration of war . Which was good grounding, I think

MP: Would you like to know how I began? [laughs]

EJ: [laughs] Yes, very much so.

MP: Well, it's very strange, I had rather late schooling because I'd been very ill as a child, and in fact everyone thought I was going to die. But I didn't, I got better. And then I started school, and at school we had an elocution teacher and a dance class. I enjoyed them both, I enjoyed the elocution, I thought "Oh, I think I'm going to be an elocution teacher" because she used to arrive in her own car! And I thought "this is wonderful, this is what I'm going to do, because then I'll have my own car." This was 1935, I think, and then I rather enjoyed the dancing, I was a bit unsteady on my pins looking back on it, but I thought "oh, it might be rather nice to be a ballet dancer", but thank goodness that didn't come to pass but because I'd've driven everyone mad with my lack of balance. So that was that. And at the time, my mother, for reasons I've never quite worked out, we were now living in Rickmansworth and she used to send me to the Methodist Church on Sundays for the Children's Classes. And there was a marvellous minister there at the time and he wrote little playlets for us children to perform. And so I was cast in these plays, and he came one day to my parents and he said "I think your daughter has acting talent, would you let me take her up to London for a professional audition, because there's a man there called Sidney Carol and he does Children's Shows, and he casts every September, and I expect it was things for pantomime. And so up I went, terribly embarrassed about the whole thing and it came to my turn and I did a rather unsteady little tippy-toe performance on my points, and the voice from the front said "Very nice dear, can you do anything else" and "I said I could do an Irish Jig in my tap-shoes" and he obviously quailed at this generous offer so he said "I see, anything else?" and I said "I could recite" and he said "You recite for me", so I did my little recitation, it was one of the A.A. Milne poems, and a few weeks later there was a children's agent sitting in the stalls, she used to sit in on these rehearsals, obviously looking for talent and she contacted my parents and was sent for an audition for a play which I didn't get. Then, somebody else, oh no, then I went to do...a marvellous cast. HM Tennent was putting on *The Old Maid* by Zoe Aitkens and the cast, my dear, was Lillian Gish because it was going to be her return to the British theatre, Sebastian Shaw, Dame Irene Vanbrugh, I mean it was the most fantastic cast, I've had the most fantastic luck in working with some of the most wonderful people in the theatre, and backed by the elocution lessons and presumably a certain amount of deportment from the dancing lessons, I really learnt by example from these people. It really was the most fantastic schooling for a young actress. So there... I'm lost again. I worry a bit because I think I've gone back too far for you!

EJ: No, it's very interesting, there is the coincidence and luck and talent obviously as well, all coming together.

MP: They say it's all being in the right place at the right time and I had the most tremendous luck, you know, obviously backed by a certain amount of talent because one had to audition, you didn't walk into a part without auditioning or so on, and I kept up the elocution lessons and things, so there we are, full circle, as it were!

EJ: Were you ever tempted to go into formal actor training, to RADA for example?

MP: Well, there was a funny time when I'd gone to an audition at RADA because there was a general feeling, there were always opinions and guidance from people, and I

gather I was very near to getting a scholarship all being well and then somebody said to my parents, 'she will need of course financial backing, there'll be things, you know that kids need at drama schools', and I think my parents, who always, bless their hearts, were very hard up, and I think I was gently guided into other directions. In between, after I played my first grown-up role, I went to the Oxford Rep to get grounding in ingenue parts, because you know it was quite a leap from child acting to the next one, so I did do some good work there, mainly *Mary Rose*, a Barrie play that was my great moment and looking back on it I learnt so much through experience and example from my peers. The Oxford thing was very good for my memory, you do have three plays concurrently running through your head, last weeks, this weeks and next weeks. And that was a very jolly time I loved that and thoroughly enjoyed it. Then in 42 I came back home and was called up into a factory and I thought "Ooh, I don't think I'd like that, I'd rather be a wren" and I remember having an interview in the local recruiting office and indicating that I'd like to be a Wren, I think really because I thought the hat was so attractive but I was gently guided into ENSA to the drama department and off I went round and round England, Scotland, the Army camps, the Naval bases and the Air Force, and the Air Force hangars and I'm told I have a very strong voice, and I'm not surprised, because if you're do performing in an aircraft hangar, you've got to make yourself heard or the audience would walk out, it's rather sweet. My learning experience in the acting profession I'm convinced came live experience working there.

EJ: Did you feel at the time when the post-war new wave of dramatists coming along and we had Pinter, *Godot*. Did you feel a change in theatre at the time, did you feel like something was taking place.

MP: Yes We both went to see *Look Back in Anger*, we both realised we'd never seen anything quite like that before, and gradually more and more with Pinter and all these plays, of course, one is not blind to the fact that things were changing and I'm not going to give an opinion as to whether it was better or worse, it was development, life doesn't go on and on steadily on one stream, it does branch off here and there, some branches fall by the way and others do develop into rather exciting alternatives.

EJ: That's interesting because this is something that in a way has polarised some interviewees. Some people who say it was fantastic, while others say it signalled the end of H.M. Tennent, it was the beginning of the end, so it is interesting to hear it described as development. I would agree.

MP: You see, each era, There are eras aren't there? And this ushered in an entire new era and a lot of very exciting work came from that. I never really, by then, I was established in my own little way, it was very English, which always made me laugh because I had a Russian-born father and French mother. I'll tell you one fascinating thing, oh goodness, I'm missing one of the most important thing one *Dear Octopus* finished after a 40-week tour of England, we'd now reached 1942. And Gielgud, because all the theatres were dark, because of the bombing Gielgud got together a wonderful cast of Margaret Rawlings, Ursula Jeans, Roger Livesey, Angela Baddeley and did *Dear Brutus*, and he cast me as the dream-child, and we opened at the Globe Theatre, we had a performance at 11.30 in the morning and matinees were about... Everything finished around 5 o'clock, there was no evening theatre because of the bombing, so it finished at 5 o'clock so everybody could go home, actors and audience. So he has been a tremendous influence on my theatre career, thanks to him I had these wonderful opportunities of not getting stuck in children's roles, I mean obviously I wouldn't nowadays, but there was a risk of me going on playing children because I looked very young far longer than I would have wanted to. So I was very lucky. It's a lucky career!

EJ: Did you go to theatre as well, when you were working?

MP: Yes, occasionally, but not all that much, you could only fit in a matinee and I lived outside London so there was always the question of getting up in time and then what to do between the gap before going to the theatre in the evening. If you were doing a matinee yourself you had a little routine of going out and having some food and then coming back and starting again. I suppose looking back on it, I wish I had organised myself better to see more I feel I missed a great opportunity to see some very exciting theatre.

EJ: I suppose there's a different angle when you're actually working...

MP: Yes it is. You can come away being deeply moved by a matinee performance of something and you've got to pull yourself together and sort yourself out and do your performance that evening and there can be a distraction from the job in hand.

EJ: When you were doing your stage acting, how did you respond to critics and reviews. Did you read them, did you have favourite critics?

MP: Well, I can't say I had favourite critics. Yes, I used to read them, if they said nice things I was of course delighted, if they perhaps panned me for something then I'd "oh bother! Where have I go wrong?" I never sort of thought "Oh, horrid critic!" I always felt the blame was on myself, which is pathetic really, but that's how I was, and still am, frankly.

EJ: I suppose the last area that would be interested to cover would be censorship, because the project is interested in what happened at the end of censorship, in 1968. Did it have any bearing on your work at all?

MP: Not really because, how can I put it, I was always cast as a nice girl. I mean, directors or producers wouldn't cast me as a little floozy girl, so it never arose, do you know what I mean? Somebody once said to me...I hope I can remember the word... I was a a quint...

EJ: Quintessential?

MP: Thank you. You say it for me! [laughs]

EJ: Quintessential.

MP: Quintessential English girl. And that was very much accentuated by my roles in films, so I suppose...Well I tackled Cressida, and you'd hardly call her a nice girl! And had quite a success with that.

EJ: That's excellent, that really brings me to the end. Thank you.