

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Frith Banbury – interview transcript

Interviewer: Ewan Jeffrey

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EJ: I'd like to start on some general questions before focusing on particular details. Can you tell me a bit about your background and what sparked your interest in theatre.

FB: That's quite simple, I was given a toy theatre at the age of six and that was it! I knew what I wanted to do with my life from then on. But I didn't tell anybody really, because I came from an upper middle class family in that period. My father was a naval officer who ended up as a rear admiral. And I think there would have been consternation, not from my mother's part, who was Australian and of Jewish stock. But on my father's part. I never in my mind thought of doing anything else. The only other thing I was interested in was playing the piano which I did quite well, and I might have taken up music, and music came as a great help to me when I was an actor which I was fourteen years. Shall I carry on with my own story first?

EJ: Sure.

FB: So that having been I went, at school, I was at school at Stowe, we did as much as we could in the way of drama but it wasn't a subject in those days that was thought to be quite the right thing, and then I went for one year only to Oxford University where I was a member of the OUDS. In those days they had professional actresses to play in their productions. I happened to be of a year that had several distinguished people like George Devine, Terence Rattigan, Hugh Hunt etc, who were studying there, and of course we had professional actresses in those days. So I performed in Flecker's *Hassan* playing the Phantom Ghost with Peggy Ashcroft as Pervana. Then I went off to RADA and there I did quite well but...well in one sense that I got a job from a public show and within ten days of leaving RADA I was rehearsing in the Old Shaftesbury Theatre, it was bombed in the war, now it's a fire station. With Gus Yorke, ex-music hall comedian of Potash and Perlmutter, and then I went on to act but I'm sure you don't want in enormous detail what I did, but I managed to keep going and I was in Gielgud's company when he did *Hamlet* and then in 1938 that I had a really good part for the first time in London and that was in Robert Morley's *Goodness, How Sad!* From then on I became somebody who had a little bit of a name therefore worked quite a lot and I was in *Intimate Revue*, etcetera, and then I went to the provinces with the Norman Marshall company which was founded by Maynard Keynes in Cambridge and elsewhere, and it so happened, however, that quite fortuitously, I mean I've told this story too much too often I think, but I was asked, because they were in a hole and I was playing in the West End in Tom Robertson's play *Cast*, I was playing the Bancroft part and I was suddenly approached by the then head of RADA, Kenneth Barnes, Could I come and take class,

direct a Pinero play, the person who was going to do it has fallen out. And I said 'I'm not sure I'm any good at directing' and he said 'Oh I'm sure you are' (because he was in a spot) and it turned my life around, teaching these kids became something I grew to like more than performing, really. It just so happened at that time that a friend of mine I hadn't seen for several years, came and read me his play. I was the only person he knew in the theatre...and as a result of that I bought the play * bought the play and eventually after 14 weary months got it on the Lyric, Hammersmith, it was greeted with great success, it then went on the road for four weeks and ended up at the St Martin's theatre. So, if this is not luck, I don't know what is – I found my first professional production in the West End. So I raised some money, formed a limited company and I paid Winnie Brown to write more plays, and he then wrote a very successful one, The Holly and the Ivy which ran for a year and a half, and from then on I got good opportunities. The first one being, N.C. Hunter's play, Waters of the Moon with Edith Evans, Sybil Thorndike, Wendy Hiller and Kathleen Harrison all in one cast. So at that point I was sort of the latest thing. Of course, I'm not the latest thing now at 92! You can't keep on being the latest thing for ever. And I'd certainly ceased to be the latest thing when John Osborne came along in 1956, Look Back in Anger. So that's me personally, a very potted biography.

EJ: That's very interesting.

FB: That should give you some questions to ask!

EJ: One of the first things that struck me was your relationship at Oxford with Terence Rattigan and George Devine. Was there a sense that they were going to go on and be big names?

FB: No, but you knew that George had ideas, he played the Caliph. Terence Rattigan was an absolute charmer. I didn't know, he played a small part, we were friends. No, you didn't feel that this was something in either case. But then very rarely did you feel that, and when you did feel it very often they didn't make the grain!

EJ: What was the atmosphere like in RADA at the time?

FB: Well, I'd been there as a student...well, you know I just went in and directed these plays and I found I have several very clever students. Who made their names: [Laura Dainer], Brewster Morgan, several others who did very well. The atmosphere was what I find nearly always is – it's wonderful! Student days were marvellous. It's when one came out into the great big world. When one realises one has been rather coddled. You can't help that in drama school. The same as any other school...perhaps...well, it's different I suppose because you're not swotting in the same way as someone who's attempting to pass exams, et cetera. I would describe it as rather jolly. Certainly I enjoyed it and I had the feeling that students did. What it all showed me was that I got onto terms with students and keep them quiet and they wanted to listen they wanted to learn from me

EJ: And as far as directing was concerned, did you consider it before you were given that chance?

FB: No, I'd not considered it as such. I had thought, when I worked with someone like Tyrone Guthrie, 'well, when I do it do it more like this'. There always are some really poor directors around the place, and on the whole I can say, with exceptions of course, I found I wanted more from them than they were able or prepared to give. Often, but not always, Norman Marshall, when he was on form and not feeling a bit lazy, was a marvellous director, for instance. I was in his company, which was founded by Maynard Keynes and Rylands, and to start with that was a marvellous place to be...because I got to play in a lot of marvellous plays. You see there was no subsidised theatre, it was just the beginning. It was CEMA, that became the Arts Council. The rather ironic thing is that it took a war...they said 'what are we going to do to keep people quiet and give them some sort of interest, otherwise they'll get into trouble?' And so this was how they formed CEMA and we had to go at different times, and go round the munitions factories, but most of the time it was in the real theatre. So up till that point, they'd been no subsidised theatre in England. Quite amazing but true.

EJ: Could I ask about Guthrie perhaps?

FB: Oh, he was a marvellous chap but so much has been said about him. What I would say about him was...if as an actor you feels what you are doing is right, Tony says then f*ck everybody else. I don't care what James Agate says in the Sunday Times. Tony says it's ok. It's ok. I was tempted to take a leaf from his book which one can't always do, of course. But it was such fun to work for him. The atmosphere of concentration, combined with enjoyment. It wasn't like being in Gielgud's company. With due respect and much as I admired him, the rehearsals in John Gielgud's company were...you were told how rotten you were, but you were not very often told at all how to get it better. 'Go away and learn to act!' you were told - 'Take some lessons with Marquita Hunt, she needs the money!'. And you thought 'What am I doing wrong, if only he'd tell me, you're doing this that or the other thing'. So I can say I learned when I came to direct a good deal about how not to treat actors. But this was not bloody-mindedness on John Gielgud's part, from my point of view. It was a lack of patience. His mind was like a butterfly, it flitted from flower to flower. I remember one afternoon he was frightful to George Devine. George was playing the First Player: 'You really have a very ugly voice! You must go away and do something about it!'. And your spirits sank. Tony Guthrie would say 'Your voice needs a bit of attention, why don't you go to Bernie Scott who is a wonderful voice man' et cetera.

EJ: I also want to ask a little bit about Rattigan. The first production of *The Deep Blue Sea*, you said in a previous interview it was a 'hear a pin drop' night. Could you elaborate on that?

FB: Well, of all the exciting first nights one's had...and it was a new play and we'd done it for two weeks at Brighton. And on the first night in the Duchess, Peggy Ashcroft and Kenneth Moore played the end of the second act so marvellously, not that they didn't always...but it was amazing. At the end of that, the curtain came down and it was absolutely silent. And it was held. It was quite the most exciting experience in my view.

But they were superb actors in that way. Peggy had, of course, a large range. Not as large as she might have had...she wasn't at her best in comedy in my opinion. And Kenneth had a part that was absolutely tailor-made. He just was the right person for it. So it was the most exciting experience.

EJ: Could I ask about directing Rattigan's plays?

FB: Well, I'd known him before and I'd acted in two of plays. I'd known him at Oxford and then he wrote a play called Follow My Leader and it was quite interesting, actually. This was a skit. It was written in about 1935/36 and it was a skit on the Nazis, believe it or not. That is, Goering and Goebbels were supposed to have got hold of the little house painter and trained him to be a sort of robot leader and put a moustache on him and everything, and that really he was a nothing, a sort of doll figure. It was really, really funny and immediately it was sent to the Lord Chamberlain for you had to at that time...whatever went on on the stage, you had to submit the script to the Lord Chamberlain and there were several things that they didn't like, homosexuality was not allowed to be mentioned, and you must not be rude about any head of a state of which you are not on warlike terms with. So, of course, the play was banned. So that was that, and he wrote it in collaboration with a friend of his who was killed in the war. On the third of September 1939 the ban was removed because Hitler no longer the head of a friendly state. Anyway, so then the play was put it in rehearsal, I was offered a part and was only too pleased to get a job. But I have to say I thought 'I don't think this is very funny' and it certainly wasn't. And it opened in Cardiff and it was an absolute frost, and we came out of the Apollo and the director was sacked. We came out of the Apollo and we ran for only ten days, which is no surprise really. Then I worked in a play of Terry's While the Sun Shines. I went on tour first in Europe in Paris, Berlin etc, with Ronald Sky who created the part of the Duke in that play and then when we came back to London I played it for six months at the then Globe, what is now the Gielgud. So I was associated with Terry Rattigan all through his life really, in one way or another. Then after I'd become a successful director with Waters of the Moon and The Holly and the Ivy, I was asked to do The Deep Blue Sea. That's how I came to be. Well, when you ask what it was like to be with him...he demanded a lot of a director. More than most. You had to be at his beck and call. I never known it in the same way for anybody else. I would say at about six weeks or more before rehearsals. But at his beck and call meant delightful talk, lots of good food and drink, and there was nothing to complain about really. And he was a chum anyway. But he was very demanding, and why not, you know? I could tell of stories about him, but they are all in print...

EJ: I was interested in the working relationship and how much input Rattigan liked to have.

FB: A good deal. But I have to say this. We had a reading first. At my house, and the play was much too long. And this was several weeks before we started rehearsal, so a good deal of cutting went on. Then on the first day of rehearsals, Terence Rattigan turned up and he then said to us, being the principals, Peggy Ashcroft and Kenneth Moore, 'I'm going off today, to New York and I'll be back in ten days. So I'm leaving you to it, but I'll be back in ten days.' So he left us and we started rehearsals and during the rehearsals of that ten days we found about four different patches in the play which we thought needed attention of one sort or another. So when he came back, he rang up

that morning and said 'I'm back, come to dinner tonight'. So I told Peggy Ashcroft and Kenneth that I'm going to tell him and I'm going to pick up those points. So I went to dinner. And during the dinner, Peggy rang up and asked to speak to me and asked me how it was going. She was afraid he was going to be very cross. He wasn't cross at all to my knowledge. I only remember one other thing: it was to do with the cut that we wanted to make. But anyway, the next morning he appeared at rehearsals and we attended to these four patches and discussed them and he went away to work on them. Well, not went away at that point, but said 'yes, yes'. Little did I know but only found out a year and half later that after I had left the house thinking that everything was fine, he had rung up Binkie Beaumont and said 'between them, Frith Banbury and Peggy Ashcroft are ruining my play'. Well, I don't know. I've always said Binkie Beaumont was a genius, he's often bad-mouthed now, quite wrongly, only by silly people who've had no experience of him. Rattigan rang him up and said 'I'm coming round now', but Binkie had gone to bed, and Rattigan said 'Get up! I'm coming round now' and anyway he went round and said that, but whatever happened between the two, I don't know. But anyway, as I said, Beaumont was a genius. In the morning, Rattigan turned up at rehearsal all sweetness and light, and one would never have known this was his immediate reaction.

EJ: How did you find out?

FB: I don't know. I think it was John Perry who told me, who was a co-director of Tennent's and he was Beaumont's lover. Beaumont was always accused of favouring homosexuals in the theatre. This, of course, was complete nonsense. That is to say if they could do it and were right at the time, it didn't matter who they went to bed with. It was beside the point. Apart from John Perry, nobody else in his marvellous office was homosexual. I mean, there were three absolutely key people who were marvellous in their jobs: Joe Davis in Lighting, Ian Dow – he was responsible for the producing as it were and Lily Taylor who was the wardrobe mistress who could get a temperamental actress to wear something that she vowed she would never wear. I mean, they were a marvellous team. I was very lucky to be able to work with them. So I didn't lose my identity, my Frith Banbury identity, but sometimes I was employed by Tennent's and sometimes I presented plays in collaboration with them.

EJ: The Binkie Beaumont angle is fascinating, and I wanted to ask a little about that. We are trying to examine the traditional academic perspective that *Look Back in Anger* came along in 1956 and it was the start of perhaps a clean sheet in British theatre.

FB: Well of course, it didn't. If you look at the Russian Revolution, it was in the late twenties...some people were able....not say by 1930 or something like that, the Russian Revolution happened in one day as some people like to think. Any more than the theatre. Well revolutions never do, look at any revolution. It's never as simple as that, is it? Where were we?

EJ: We were talking about Binkie and then *Look Back in Anger* and I wanted to know what impact it made on you.

FB: Well, you see, I was thought of and was indeed a member of the Theatre Establishment, and George [Devine], who had worked for Beaumont in his time and he directed Rebecca, you know, the original. However, George had this bee in his bonnet and started the Royal Court and of course that sort of venture has to be done by people with bees in their bonnet and George, actually, well he killed himself, actually, running it, the Royal Court. But, of course, the impetus...they had to rubbish the other side. Now I talk to Bill Gaskill about it. Very interesting. Well, when he ran it, one was regarded, because one worked at the Globe, as a sort of fiend. And I remember George coming round and telling Peggy she shouldn't appear in this rubbish play, and all the rest of it. In order to do what they did do, which is a hell of a lot, they had to make it as if they St Joan wresting France from the Goddamns. You know? You see, that's how it went. Well, as far as I was concerned, I went to see Look Back in Anger and I simply thought 'oh, this chap can write marvellously, but my God does he need a blue pencil!' That was my reaction to it. I went to all the plays at the Royal Court and some of them were marvellous and some of them were less good, but of course, having been a conscientious object during the war, having always...up till we had a dose of Stafford Crips, I'd always voted Labour when I was young.. but one was put in this position, the label was tied to one. It didn't make all that much difference, except that one was regarded as the lowest of the low by the young ones at the Court and when it comes to it, practically speaking, the whole thing falls down, because what was quite ironic and funny about it was that in 1959, Kenneth Tynan organised a young play competition. And it was won...and I have to say, I'm afraid, a piece of political...the right thing to do politically. It was won by a play called Moon on a Rainbow Shore by a Trinidadian black writer and I came to do that play, it came my way, and I worked with him on it, and it seemed to me not a very good play as such, but it was a fascinating subject, particularly at that time because that was when people from the Caribbean were coming over, you see, and it's about a young chap has this wonderful idea that Liverpool and Birmingham as if it was Valhalla, you see. Anyway, what happened with that was that Beaumont got together with George and they presented it, after it had been on the road, they presented it at the Royal Court. So there they were, in cahoots, so it was quite funny! But that was the only time I worked at the Court, I suppose you could have said it was the only time they'd have me! But I've had been happy to work there if I'd been asked. But of course, the impetus to do what they did came from tying labels onto people such as me. But now looking at it historically, it is true to say it made all the difference, but that is taking it out of the general context of what was happening socially at that time. After all, we had the beginnings of the Welfare State, but by the time the Tories got in in the beginning of the 50s, they were concerned to a certain extent in trying to put back the clock and make it, as it were, pre-war. Well, naturally the young people of that time resented this, and dare I say it, the not so young, because George wasn't as young as all that. So what happened in the theatre was only a reflection of what was happening in society as a whole and coming out of the 60s and all that that stood for. That the Royal Court and now, you know, it is seen as great revolution, and the idea has grown up that nothing then was happening in the West End, well of course the West End was going on pretty well as it always did, but of course when the National Theatre came along, that's when the West End began to lose out, because the middle-of-the-road play was taken over to a certain extent by the National so that the commercial theatre had less and less plays of quality and if they were of quality, they very often came transferred from subsidised houses. That's partly the reason that the West End is in such a state today. But nothing can be done about it because that's how it is and so you have to say that if you could down the list of the plays now in the West End you'll most of the ones that are of any quality have started off somewhere else like Don Carlos, for instance, in Sheffield. That's an instance of it. Or the Almeida or the Donmar or somewhere like that.

EJ: Could I ask one more question? I read that you said there was difference directing men and women, and you said that women were easier to direct, with some exceptions...

FB: Yes, I think that is so, in my experience, and partly because with some men, actors, I think deep down there's a feeling, particularly with someone like Ralph, that it's not really a man's job. And it's those that resent direction, unless you treat them very carefully, and I found out that the way very often to get Ralph Richardson to do what you thought was the right thing was tell him to do the wrong thing and then he would do the opposite. I don't want to make too much of this, but it is my experience that on the whole, actors are very much more nervous than actresses. I don't mean nervous of going on, but nervous of being criticised, of being told what to do and how to do it. So you have to find out what treatment is right for each person, I find. On the whole you don't have spend so much time thinking about how to put it when it's a woman. I suppose it comes from my own experience, because really the thing that has pleased me more than anything that has ever been written about me was that Dennis Blakelock who's a marvellous actor and director too, did *A Trip to Scarborough* at the Arts Theatre, Lord Foppington I played, and he said that of all the actors he'd experienced, I could take criticism more easily more than anyone else and didn't mind that. And I thought, oh yes, I wanted to be told and some do and some don't.