

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Tony Burrows – interview transcript

Interviewer: Ewan Jeffrey

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Audience member Tony Burrows on his memories of theatre going in the 1950's; Stratford; The Midland Theatre Company; The Coventry Hippodrome; Memories of seeing Gielgud and Ralph Richardson; Impressions of Harold Pinter's plays; Involvement with The Talisman Amateur dramatic Company; Censorship; Hair.

EJ: Could you give me a general overview of your experience of theatre and how you first started getting interested into theatre?

TB: When I was about four I went to a pantomime, Jack and Jill, at the Prince of Wales theatre in Birmingham, bombed during the war, and even then I knew, well, I'd never witnessed, experienced anything like this before. I suppose I went with my parents to things in and around Birmingham where we lived then. Went to pantomimes and Gilbert & Sullivan and Christmas shows at the Birmingham rep. When I was about ten we moved to Coventry, I was in hospital for about two years, came about when I was about, I suppose, 13 or 14 and from then on I was going to see more serious stuff, I was going to see Shakespeare at Stratford and that's when I really started properly.

EJ: Can you remember any particular productions that stood out at the time when you went to see theatre?

TB: I think I remember Jack and Jill at the age of four or five. Yes, I do remember it, very, very vaguely but I've never seen photos so I know it's real, it had Arthur Askey and [Cora Goff] in, I wouldn't remember that without having seen it, but I remember the opening scene with the chorus. I must remember it wrongly because in my memory it was a village scene and there were little fences which came out from the wings, horizontal to the proscenium, coming down the stage, leaving a sort of gangway in the middle. I can't have been like that because nobody could have moved, but that's what I remember, and I remember a sort of scene in the witch's cave or something very, very vaguely later on. I saw Gilbert and Sullivan, I had an afternoon off school to see the D'Oyly Carte production in Mercado somewhere in Birmingham, and that made a huge impression on me. Scenery by Charles Ricketts, which I certainly still remember, a great arched bridge with willow tress falling down around it. I saw the gondoliers and I suppose that instilled a sort of, I still like colour and quite a lot of scenery and go for colour. Small Christmas shows at the Birmingham rep, they used to do Christmas plays. I saw Paul Scofield do Toad, surprisingly, and I saw Paul Scofield and still remember him, I think, in 1066 And All That. I don't know why I remember him but he played a

crusader in one bit. And they obviously sort of clobbered me. I first went to Stratford, I would have difficulty in pinning down the date but before I went into hospital, before we moved to Coventry, so when I was eight or nine, perhaps a bit older, to see *As You Like It*, and Paul Schofield was again in the cast so it must have been after the rep bit, he was playing *Oliver*, and I can remember people commenting on the very sort of metallic quality of his voice which mellowed in time and oh, I can remember it was the first time I think I'd see a cyclorama and I can remember the effects of permi-light, dawn breaking and that sort of thing and thinking that was absolutely wonderful. Yes, those are the really striking things from early on, I suppose.

EJ: Did you have a favourite actor or actress that you followed, or how did you decide what shows you'd like to see or was this something you didn't decide yourself?

TB: I don't know, at that stage I obviously always went with my parents or in a group perhaps which contained my parents, and I knew I wanted to see pantomimes and I wanted to see Christmas shows and knew I liked Gilbert & Sullivan. I suppose, I'd got my preferences but I wouldn't at that stage have gone to see a serious play, I don't think.

EJ: As you were growing up, what did you go and see after you were 13, 14, approaching adulthood? Did you still go to theatre as regularly?

TB: Oh yes, more so, much more. By then we were in Coventry, I went to Stratford regularly with school, school was very good and we went to see more or less everything. I went to see more or less everything from 1952, I think, Coronation year.

EJ: Wasn't it '53, I'm not sure.

TB: 1953, I don't know, the year they did *Richard II*, *Henry IV*, *Henry V* and *The Tempest*, Michael Redgrave, Anthony Quayle. A lot of those, I did go sometimes with my parents but on the whole I went to Stratford with school and we sat in the back two rows of the balcony always and paid about two and six. From then on, I knew that I was always going to be watching Shakespeare. I suppose the very first time I went, after my initial trip to see *As You Like It* I went when I came out of hospital, my parents said, we're going to give you a treat, what do you really want to do, and I said, I want to go and see [inaudible] at Stratford, which I had read about. Anthony Quayle, Diana Wynyard, directed by [Yul Good], scenery by [Mario Noventrue] and that was just wonderful, so stylish and colourful and everybody wore huge hats, really early Renaissance costumes, that was very important. I suppose I started about 1949, 1950 – I looked this up to check so I was about 14 – I started going to see the Midland Theatre Company. Now, do you know anything about them?

EJ: I don't know a great deal, I must say. I've heard of them.

TB: Professional theatre company who played in effect for three weeks or a month in three different places. They played in Coventry, Loughborough and somewhere else, somewhere in the Midlands, and they did a week in each of these places, so I suppose there was a spare week, probably, I don't think they played three weeks then another three weeks on the trot. They played in the college theatre which still exists and is running. A bit barn-like auditorium, part of the Coventry technical college, very big and cavernous, raked, so you could see well but a tiny stage in relation to the auditorium. Not conventionally a theatre, it had windows down the sides, always blacked out but the windows were there. It's difficult to say, my impression was it that is was of very sound quality and that production values were pretty high considering it was more or less a touring company. That went on for five or six years, I suppose, or perhaps not quite that long, and I went to everything that they did. They did good middle brow sort of stuff, they did a Christmas show and not a pantomime, but they did Shaw and sometimes Shakespeare and plays that I would dearly like to see again, probably not very good but a play called Rain On The Just by Peter Watling which made a huge impression on me. And they did Dial M For Murder and things like that. I suppose then, I remember going with my father to see something, just on our own, but I used to go on my own to that. I didn't have any friends that were very interested in the theatre, not anybody I felt I could say, do you want to go to the theatre with me. I used to cycle down over the hill, you came up and turned left and it's not very far, so I used to get on my bike and go to that. So, Midland Theatre Company and Stratford with school and then The Coventry Theatre was still in existence, was then the Coventry Hippodrome, was pulled down about five years ago. A huge, very 1930s building, very bare and empty. It needed opera or a musical to fill it. Musicals and pantomimes were good there. I once saw Billy Liar there and it was absolutely hopeless, it was just cavernous.

EJ: Dwarfed by it?

TB: Yes, and they had to be miked, it was terrible. Touring stuff, not often opera but I did see the odd opera there, I suppose, ballet occasionally. Shakespeare came down again the very, very early days. I saw Ivor Novello, perchance to dream, but they were sort of extra excursions in a way. Stratford and the Midland Theatre Company were my sort of staple diet from the time when I came home from hospital to the time I went to university, I suppose.

EJ: You mentioned Rain On The Just, can you tell me a little bit more about it, why it made an impression on you?

TB: No.

EJ: One of the project objectives is to actually examine what else was happening in the '50s in Britain apart from Look Back In Anger and say, Godot, trying to tease out these other plays that were happening at the time, but it's no problem if you can't remember.

TB: I know it made an impression on me, but I think it was probably to some extent the sort of play, Look Back In Anger was supposed to be reacting against. I've got a feeling it was set in a vicarage, I could be wrong, and concerned a vicar and it presented some

knotty problem, it was a sort of in a sense social problem play and that is about all can remember about it. I've never read it or come across it since.

EJ: I'll have to chase that up, I think.

TB: Another thing I remember, they did something called *The Queen's Husband* by Robert Sherwood. I don't remember it but it made some impression on me. They were occasionally adventurous; they did the first, I think, production in England of a play by Ugo Betty, who is now forgotten, more or less; *The Queen And The Rebels* and Irene Worth came and guest starred.

EJ: This was at the Midland Theatre Company?

TB: Yes, and she trolled around, did the tour, I assume, and that was very dramatic, but I suspect that had more substance than a lot of them.

EJ: Did you read reviews? You said you went to see everything at the Midland Theatre Company, were you guided by reviews or critics at all?

TB: Not to be guided by them, really. The only reviews of the Midland Theatre Company were in the *Coventry Evening Telegraph*. They were of a much higher standard than they are today – the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* is still going and still reviews plays it's patently obvious that they send the gardening correspondent or someone aged about 14, I reckon. The most terrible amateur stuff gets praised to the skies. Then I think the standard in reviewing was probably much higher and I was very much aware of Stratford reviews, I cut out and collected and probably I've still got reviews of that history season, half a dozen reviews of each play. And I used to read *Punch*, *Punch* had regular reviews of all West End stuff and Stratford with cartoons by Ronald Searle. And I don't think they guided me because went, well, they no doubt sort of guided my taste, I no doubt responded to them and thought, oh yes, that's good because he says it is. But they didn't direct me to what to go and see because I almost literally did go and see everything at Stratford, automatically.

EJ: Can I ask what your opinions are on Gielgud's acting and work?

TB: I think Gielgud was a great actor. I think this idea that he was only a voice is absolute rubbish. I saw him do *Cassius* and *Benedict* and *Lear* in a season in 1950 or 1951 and they were dynamic and tremendous energy. The sheer range of work which he undertook. Nowadays you go to Stratford and you do two big parts in a season. Gielgud played *Angelo*, *Cassius*, *Benedict*, *Lear*, which meant he only had one night off in six or something. Tremendous stamina. In a sense it's rather old fashioned now to talk of people characterising but he did characterise. *Benedict* was totally, totally different from *Cassius*. I suppose he didn't move wonderfully, I don't know, I can't remember but I think a tremendous actor. I also think a tremendous comedian. Much, much later I saw him in London in *No Man's Land* and that was very, very funny.

EJ: With Richardson, you saw that production?

TB: Yes.

EJ: That's interesting because part of the project is focusing on the archives of John Gielgud and Ralph Richardson, so I'm really trying to find what people remember about them and *No Man's Land* obviously united the two. What did you think of the production?

TB: I've always thought that Pinter is far, far more rewarding for actors and directors than for audiences. I've been involved in amateur theatre too for a long time, I haven't done a lot of Shakespeare and Pinter but I directed *Silence*, and that was absolutely fascinating to do and we spent hours unravelling it and talking about it and deciding what was the best way to get over what, but audiences didn't get a lot out of it and I don't think that was their fault, entirely. I've seen productions of most of them and they really don't touch me. I've never seen *The Homecoming*. I suspect that *Birthday Party* is far more vivid than most of them. I saw *Betrayal* at Northampton about two years ago and it was brilliantly done but for me it sort of happened behind a glass wall, almost.

EJ: People have said that the set for *No Man's Land* was particularly impressive, do you recall that at all, that is was very, very bright and light.

TB: I don't remember that, the set fades into – no. Big drawing room, lots of curtains, cocktails, big cocktail cabinet, but it didn't make a great impression on me.

EJ: What about Richardson, do you think he had similar talent to Gielgud?

TB: Tremendous charisma, you couldn't not watch him. Very odd and eccentric, but tremendous charisma which he never really lost, whatever he was doing. He did a Stratford season, *Prospero*, which I can't remember at all, perhaps I didn't see, and *Macbeth* and *Volpone* and he was fairly awful as both, sort of flat and dry. The famous story, very late on in rehearsals, he said Gielgud was directing – its only something I've read, obviously – and Gielgud was sort of talking to him about it and Richardson was saying, I'm never going to be able to do this, if I can't see the bloody dagger how can I expect anybody else to see it. I think it was outside his range, that sort of imaginative, and *Volpone* was outside his range because he hadn't got the sorts of richness, he was such a dry actor, and *Volpony* needs juice.

EJ: Going from the RSC, Midland Theatre Company, we talked a bit about London, obviously that was later on. What about towards the end of the fifties, were you seeing theatre regularly then?

TB: Yes, but it's in this long period. I went away to university, only three years, obviously, came back, still lived at home, went back to teach at the same school where I had been a pupil, where I stayed for the whole of my life, and after that things get terribly muddled up chronologically. I don't know what I could tell you about the end of the fifties and the sixties, I suppose I did start going to London then. I saw the first production of Look Back In Anger.

EJ: What struck you about that?

TB: Not with it's original cast, I don't think. I can't remember. It didn't make a great impression on me in any sense. I saw Look Back In Anger with John McGrath, do you know him?

EJ: Well, I know of him.

TB: We were at Oxford, more or less, together. We were a year out of sync and we went to see Look Back In Anger together and I remember he was very, very dismissive, thought it was very, very immature. It didn't make a great impression on me. I saw it from way back in the balcony somewhere, which I think makes an enormous difference. Though it didn't seem to make a difference to Shakespeare at Stratford. It hasn't always made a difference since, but again, it is so difficult to separate one's own reactions from everything has read and known and so on. By the time I went it was late on in the run and I knew its reputation and so on. I can remember thinking that I couldn't have dismissed as John did but thinking that I wasn't mature enough to dismiss it as very mature. I later directed it, amateur production, the very first amateur production in this country, I think, and that was far more interesting, I got far more out of it than watching it.

EJ: Where was that performed?

TB: The Talisman theatre in Kenilworth, to which I've been attached for years and years. Kenilworth is a tiny one-eyed town, it is a town, I suppose, it's got two theatres, two amateur theatres, each with their own theatre and then there is another one aloft at Leamington, again with it's own theatre so there is very thriving amateur life, and in those days The Talisman, for its time, pretty adventurous stuff. It did all the Arthur Miller plays as soon as they became available for amateurs, it's less ambitious now.

EJ: When were you working with the Talisman?

TB: As soon as I came down from Oxford, 1954 I suppose I started with them, acted Christmas 1955, directed Look Back In Anger fairly soon after that. And just went on doing a couple of shows a year.

EJ: Directing or acting?

TB: Both. And I was director of productions for about a dozen years, which involved more or less choosing the plays, trying to cast them.

EJ: Is this something you're still involved with now?

TB: Marginally, yes. There aren't so many parts for 70 year olds, and anyway I'm not nearly as keen to act as I used to be now, it doesn't worry me now whether I act or not. And I don't direct anymore, I haven't got the stamina. I run something, we do ten shows a year for a week. On the Saturday following every week's run, we do a studio every Saturday night, two performances of something short in our studio and I run that. I'm quietly quite proud of it. We've done Lorca and Pirandello and Pinter, we did Landscape, and some slightly lesser stuff as well but it keeps me going, it's as much as I want to do now.

EJ: What was the audience response now to your production of Look Back In Anger, can you remember how people responded?

TB: I can't, quite honestly. It must have been a bit of a shock for Kenilworth audiences, but before that we'd done the first – no, I'm not sure. The Royal Court did Ionesco, The Lesson and The Chairs, and we had a very ambitious director of productions then and he got hold of The Lesson and The Chairs as soon as they were available after the Royal Court's run and we did those. Now they split the theatre from top to bottom, not just audiences, some of whom were really disgusted, but a lot of the theatre itself though that this was rubbish and we shouldn't do it. Look Back In Anger certainly didn't have that effect, I think it drew quite good audiences, but I can't remember any adverse criticism, really.

EJ: When censorship ended, did you go to see any plays at that time in 1968, were you aware of a change of mood at the time?

TB: Not really, I went to see Hair. Was Hair after censorship?

EJ: Yes, it was one of the first productions.

TB: We went as a party from the Talisman to Hair. This was going to be the big excitement and it mean it left me absolutely cold and I remember being terrible disappointed in the nudity. They stood at the back half in shadow in a little semi-circle around these tiny little figures with big hair. No, I thought Hair was quite beyond all – otherwise, no, I can't remember being affected by the departure of the censor at all. The Talisman has had its moments of shock, I suppose. I'm going to find it difficult to pinpoint dates again but late 1950s we did The Knack, do you know The Knack, Charlie Kerr. It's fairly heavily disguised but it does contain a girl sort of recreating an orgasm, I suppose, in a sense and we had a couple of little letters about that. We had awful problems when we tried to do The Prime Of Miss Jean Brody and the director decided

he did want whatever she's called, I've forgotten, to be naked onstage with her back to the audience, as the script stipulates and the committee got terribly hot under the collar and decided she couldn't and then the director resigned. I suppose that was at the time when the censor was disappearing, that was later, but I do find it difficult to pinpoint dates in this great sweep after I came back from university.