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Brian Sanders – interview transcript

Interviewer: Ewan Jeffrey

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Actor with the Donald Wolfit Shakespeare Company, recollections on working with Wolfit, performing Shakespeare with ENSA, working in repertory.

EJ: First of all, could you give me some general background on you'

BS: When I left school I wasn't sure what I wanted to do but I'd always been interested in plays on the radio, this was in the thirties, I used to rush home from primary school and listen to Children's Hour and the wonderful plays they had on there, and the actors' voices, and I used to spot voices when they were disguising themselves as a character. And when I left school, the Coves Grammar School in Lewisham, I knew I wanted to get into the theatre and I said to a lady who was running an amateur drama company, she and her husband were both actors 'if you ever hear of a job going in the theatre, then I would like it.' And a few weeks later there was the job of an electrician at the Coliseum Theatre in London and this was in June 1944. And I went there and the show closed after six weeks, it had been running for a long time and I switched to the Stole Theatre, now no longer existing, a larger Opera House in the Kingsway. I was there for a few weeks, running the switchboard which is the most terrifying thing I'd ever seen, because all the switches were open, and you got little flashes when you put things on or off. Anyway, the show closed after six weeks because of the flying bombs and I was out of work for a few weeks and the stage director of the Stove Theatre, phoned up and said 'there's a company going on the road and they want an electrician and I recommended you' and it was the Donald Wolfit Shakespeare Company. And it was then August 1944 and that's how I got into the theatre.

EJ: How about the transition from electrician to acting? Did you act as well?

BS: It just, it just happened. I was in charge of some special lighting which we took on tour with us, all round the UK, and in the second week we opened at the King's Theatre, Hammersmith, in August, September 1944 and Donald Wolfit came to me during the second week there and he said 'next week we're in Cardiff and Ben Johnson's Volpone comes into the repertoire and I have to be carried on a sedan chair, the stage carpenter carries the front part, would you mind bringing on the back part?' and here was I being asked by this great actor, would I mind? And each time I turned out, I think it was once a week, I got half a crown because I wasn't a member of Equity, so he said, I must give you half a crown. That's how it began, and fortune was with me again, because at the end of 1945 when we were going to Paris to entertain the troops in January 45, one of the company was a conscientious objector and said 'you can't go a theatre of war', so he was refused permission to go, Donald came to me 'Brian, I shall ask you to walk on in the Merchant of Venice and Much Ado about Nothing and it just went from there, and I got a speaking part later on when we went to Egypt.

EJ: Without any formal actor training, did you find it difficult at all? Or did you learn by imitation?

BS: Yes, partly by imitation, of course watching Wolfit and watching the company and so on, and being interested in acted, I had little roles to begin with, obviously, but I just sort of accepted it and did what I thought I should I do, or what I was asked to do.

EJ: What was Wolfit like to work for? We've had a lot of people talking about Wolfit, some positive and negative aspects of his character. What was your experience?

BS: My experience is: a remarkable actor manager and he was in the old style, in the old tradition of course, of acting, there's nothing wrong with that. Because the audiences used to come and see him year after year. He could be a bit of a handful but he was doing four or five major parts each week on tour and that was pretty exhausting. But to me, he was kindness itself, because when we heard we were going to Paris during the Autumn tour in 44, when we got to the end of the tour, the authorities said you have two girls and one boy under the age of 18, the boy being me, and they can't go because it's a theatre of war. And Donald kicked up a fuss. Eventually they asked us to go with one parent to Scotland Yard and the parent would have to say that they, he or she, were quite happy for their child to go. And Donald Wolfit put a hundred pounds on each of us, and ENSA under whom we were travelling did the same thing. If you think of it, 300 quid from Wolfit in those days for good combat and safe return! And then a little later on, we were going to Cairo, we heard this while we were playing in Brussels, actually at the end of January. The authorities said 'no, definitely not, the three cannot go', and Donald was very upset, because he had his own son who was three years younger than I was and he knew what a wonderful education it'd be for him. And Donald made a terrific fuss and the authorities wouldn't back down. He was a member of the Garrick Club and also a member of the Garrick Club was Sir Bertrand Russell, who was the Chief Magistrate of Bow Street. Donald was carrying on over lunch one day, and Sir Bertrand said: apply for the boy alone, leaving the girls off, and we'll see what we can do. So Donald went all through that again, and I was summoned to Bow Street and I was interviewed by Sir Bertrand Watson for a quarter of an hour, and in the finish he said 'yes, I think we can let you go'. And so I went. Now, it was simply through Wolfit that I was able to go. He could've not bothered. As it turned out, one of actors caught measles the day before we were due to catch the boat to Cairo, so Donald came to me and said 'Brian, now, I'll ask you if you can play some speaking roles' so that was another step up the rung as it were. But he was very kind to me always. When I left the theatre and decided to teach, Donald was wonderful in writing and supporting me and so on. He could be handful, but as far as I'm concerned he was a very kind, thoughtful man.

EJ: Could you talk to me a bit more about the Cairo experience, the Much Ado performance you did?

BS: Yes, we left on March the 19th, 1945 from Liverpool. And we were on a large troop ship the Durban Castle which was one of the old Union Castle Line that used to sail between Southampton and South Africa. And we had five days in the Atlantic and it was a pretty steady swell and I found myself almost the only person at breakfast because I loved sailing! When we got through after five days, the straits of Gibraltar, Colonel Silver who was the officer commanding troops said to Donald 'have you any entertainment for the troops?' and Donald Wolfit said 'yes, I have three plays by Shakespeare' and Colonel Silver's jaw fell. Fortunately, Captain David Doddermead was the man in charge of entertainments. And he was in, in his civilian life, a professional actor. He persuaded Colonel Silver it would be alright, they wouldn't tear up the seats, they would enjoy Shakespeare. So we played in the Number 1 Dining Saloon, one end of which had a screen in the middle of the side wall. And the stewards used to come in one

side and go out the other. Above the screen was a little balcony for a three-piece orchestra. We had in effect a little Globe Theatre! We had the audience on three sides and we played an all-officer audience *Much Ado about Nothing*. Colonel Silver saw the production and he said 'I am going to allow the ordinary troops into the Number 1 Dining Saloon'. Now this was something that was unheard of. Other troops did not go into officers' quarters. Anyway, they came in and they absolutely loved it, because they got a tremendous reception. So we finished doing two *Much Ados*, two *Merchants of Venice*, with Jessica, Shylock's daughter up on the little balcony to throw down the money to Lorenzo. Then we did one *Hamlet*. We played all this in ENSA uniform because obviously raid wardrobe baskets. But we had the essential props, for example, the three caskets in *The Merchant of Venice*, we had to have those so they were brought up. When we did *Hamlet* before we began Donald announced that he and Godfrey Kenton, marvellous actor, would go through the motions of the duel at the end of the play, but they would not use the rapier and dagger. If one could appreciate the proximity of the audience on the small space which was the stage, somebody's nose or ear might easily have come off! Anyway we played *Hamlet* there, because there were some troops who'd been unable to get in to see a production, we did a performance of *Merchant of Venice* on the top deck. And there were audience all around, and I remember the ship's cat walked across in the middle of the trial scene! And when we left, we were all in tears, and this proves how the ordinary people like myself and so on love and understand Shakespeare, the troops lined one side of the boat when we left and it was quite tremendous, they cheered us off, the band played and we all got on our little boat to go round to the train for Cairo and we were all in tears at this. They were all, almost all of them were going on to India. So there was that affection set up through Shakespeare.

EJ: That's incredible. What about after the war, did you visit the theatre at all, were you working?

BS: Yes I was still working, when we came back, we got home at the end of June 1945 and of course, as we know, VE day had occurred in May, and I did some clerical work but I had my eye on Wolfitt still and he said 'Brian, when we begin again I will certainly want you back' and he went on his Autumn tour in fact in the August-September of 1945 and we toured around the country as we had done before, Nottingham, Birmingham, Cardiff, Cheltenham, Hanley, Liverpool, Leeds and so on. All round, playing to the various audiences and it was tremendous because there were no other companies doing Shakespeare, there was no National Theatre, the company at Stratford played only at Stratford, but Donald toured from 1937 to 1952 in fact, around the provinces and into Scotland and in Wales and we went once to Belfast as well. But it was absolutely tremendous: one would arrive at the theatre and see enormous queues for the gallery, right along the road and the enthusiasm was absolutely tremendous.

EJ: Do you think there was perceivable difference after the war, the experience of performance had changed in a way, was there relief in the air?

BS: I don't know. I was with him as I say in 44, and people came, people in London came to the theatre came to the theatre in Hammersmith and yet the flying bombs were still there, the V1s were still coming over but it didn't seem to stop people coming. And afterwards, of course, the audience in a way, the audience changed at the end of 1945 because the war was over and troops were coming back, so in a sense perhaps there was a slight change in that way in the audience, there were more young men than there had been. But I can't really say that I remember any vast difference there. At all.

EJ: Did you visit the theatre when you were working?

BS: Very rarely because one didn't have much time! When on the first tour that I did with Wolfit, we started with three plays at the King's Hammersmith, Volpone came in at Cardiff and until we got to Liverpool about five, six weeks later we were rehearsing Much Ado About Nothing which was then brought into the repertoire so we were doing five plays a week, six evenings and two matinees. So we didn't get much of a chance but I do remember once or twice when we had a matinee on a Wednesday and the theatre next door wherever it was, this happened in Nottingham, had a matinee on a Thursday, I remember going in and seeing it, I can't remember what it was now. But that was the only chance one got! Because one was so busy, and of course, on Sunday one was travelling from wherever to somewhere else, and it was a pretty busy time.

EJ: You mentioned that you did some Rep, how did you get into that?

BS: After I'd left Wolfit I was out of the theatre for a little while and then Harry Hanson, who used to run Reps all over the place, he was advertising for an actor and I auditioned for him and played for a few weeks at Wimbledon in fact, at the Harry Hanson Court Players, they were called. The Court Players. It was then that I suddenly realised that I wasn't cut out to be a professional actor, I wanted to teach, not acting but to teach English Drama and Speech, which was always something I was very, very interested in. And so that's how I only did Rep for a short time. The audiences weren't all that marvellous at Wimbledon, I mean in numbers, the theatre was not as I remember as it with Wolfit - absolutely packed.

EJ: There must have been a sense of anticlimax, having worked with Wolfit?

BS: Yes, terrific anticlimax, yes. One of my strongest memories is Shakespeare's birthday with Wolfit. One of the birthdays was in Cairo and we did Twelfth Night that evening at the Opera House in Cairo, and Donald Lane-Smith who was a professional actor, and in the Forces, he came along that evening to be William Shakespeare. He came on stage at the end. Then when we are at the Bedford Theatre, Campden Town, which I suppose for me was the most exciting time for me of all with Wolfit. The Bedford Theatre was an old Music Hall and Donald...it'd had been shut for months if not years...Donald took a lease on it in January 1949 and we played there all through the spring and early summer then we went over to Belfast and then we came and did a short tour and then we returned to the Bedford Theatre and did some more work there. But that was very exciting indeed, because I was talking about the Birthday Celebrations, and on April 23rd we had a matinee, special matinee, for Shakespeare's Birthday and a special evening. And several older actors, some of whom had retired, Donald invited back to play in short scenes and so on. In the evening, wonderful comedian George Robey, who became Sir George Robey, he had played the voice and appeared in Olivier's film of Henry V as Sir John Falstaff. He came along to the Bedford Theatre, Campden Town, that evening and did the honour speech from the play, from Henry V, and he got thunderous applause, of course, and he came off, and I remember, it was the only time I heard him use the expression, Wolfit said 'Go back, duckie, do anything you like!' and Robey went back on stage and did some of his comic turns from when he had been a professional comedian. Wonderful, that was. Quite extraordinary. And again, the atmosphere in the Bedford Theatre, particularly for those two Shakespeare Birthday Celebration was absolutely tremendous.

EJ: Were there any particular performances or experiences with the company that were negative? Were there any disasters?

BS: No...I can't remember anything like that because with Shakespeare, you've always got Shakespeare whatever may happen. What I can remember is that on the tour...I think this was a very short tour and it wasn't a desperately happy one... I remember why! Donald had very much wanted to keep the theatre at Campden Town but wasn't

able to do so, and then Henry Irving's old theatre in the Aldwych came up and Donald wanted to use that and take a lease on it, and Mecca Cafe wanted to take a lease on it and the London County Council, I assume it was, in those days, decided to give it to Mecca and Donald was very upset indeed and we had a not very happy tour this was towards the end of 1949, after the Bedford Theatre, Campden Town. And, in the Scottish Play [Macbeth] by Shakespeare, there was a table which was used for the banqueting and it was then used by Donald in the cauldron scene with the three witches. And I used to put this table together and for some reason instead of putting thick wire in the hinges, I put thinner wire! [Laughs] Goodness knows why, I haven't the faintest idea. And...talk about the Scottish Play - Donald got up one end of the table and suddenly there was a cracking sound and the legs flew up from underneath Donald and he ended up on the floor. So he walked up the sloping table and stood at the end above the witches centrestage, and after a short time, that end too cracked! And Donald came down onto the stage, managed to carry on, because the audience didn't know what had happened, we could see, and the three witches, when they left, I've never seen three actors having more hysterics. They had to rush out. It was the theatre in Leeds, in fact, and they rushed out into the corridor and they were just helpless with laughter. And all I can remember was Donald coming off and saying 'What's going on? I might have been ruptured!' [Laughs] But that was the most disastrous thing I can remember, otherwise it was fairly plain sailing. Jolly hard work, but fairly plain sailing.

EJ: Can I ask about this [Reading from BS's diary notes] '16th May, Donald came to see me in a state of great excitement...'

BS: Oh yes! Yes, that was at the Bedford Theatre at Campden Town . I was still there doing this clearing up, by this time actor stage manager, in fact, at the Bedford, and I don't know what I'd been doing, clearing away, anyway, it was some time after the performance in the evening, and Donald came out from his dressing room, which was just by the side of the stage and he was looking for somebody to tell, and he spotted me and said 'Brian! The most wonderful thing has happened! I've just been visited by a married couple who came to see my Company, Advanced Players Association, in 1937, when we were somewhere in the London area, and they have just brought their two youngsters to see Twelfth Night : isn't it wonderful to have these young people in the audience all those years ago and now they're coming to see me and bringing their children'. He was over the moon about it, so excited. This of course is the other side of Wolfit that people don't remember or don't know about.

EJ: Were you drawn to Shakespeare's plays more than other playwrights? The decision to act with Wolfit company, did this stem from a love of Shakespeare?

BS: Yes it did, when I was at the Colf School we were evacuated to Tunbridge Wells, because I'd joined Colt's in August 1939, so two days later we went to Tunbridge Wells, and we read two of Shakespeare's plays, while we were there. One was Henry VI part I, and I thought 'this is wonderful!' and I desperately wanted to play a large part. We were only reading in the classroom and I was given the part of the Host, who I think has three lines. Then, for examination purposes, we did The Merchant of Venice . This was for the old 'O' Levels. We did The Merchant of Venice . Unfortunately, we paid an awful lot of attention to the iambic pentameter and the construction of the verse, etcetera, and not about the characters in the play. I think that has improved since then. Anyway, I had this love of Shakespeare in being concerned with hearing the two plays read. I think the greatest play ever written is King Lear . And Wolfit of course really made his name playing Lear. James Agate, the great drama critic, in 1944, when Wolfit played Lear for the second time, said 'I say this quite deliberately, this is the finest Shakespearean performance I've seen since it was my honour to write for the Sunday Times'. That really put Wolfit up with the others like Gielgud, Olivier, Richardson and so on. It was the

most extraordinary performance of Lear, and I used to watch him at the side of the stage, night after night, tremendous. So yes, my love of Shakespeare was given by reading the plays in class and then by chance, joining the Wolfit company. And it was chance.

EJ: Was Wolfit good at switching off, when off stage? When he had a particularly emotionally-charged performance, did he switch off afterwards?

BS: When the play was over he would switch off, yes. Especially after Lear, of course, which was quite exhausting. But it was interesting to see him before a performance began. With *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, he was always in a very frivolous and in fact would play pranks on other members of the company during the performance! It was all done with great good humour. Before *Malvolio* he was always seriously discussing something. Before the *Scottish Play*, it was very wise to keep right out of his way. Before *Lear*, I remember, he was extremely nervous. I think the reason for that was that he realised that if he was really on top form then was going to give the great performances of all time, which is perfectly true. I used to listen very carefully for a pointer near the beginning of the play, when he's cursing Goneril, he says 'turn all her mother's pains and benefits to laughter and contempt'. And if there was a certain inflection on the word 'contempt' then I knew we were in for a devastating evening, it was going to be marvellous anyway, but that was the signal for me. It was interesting, because he'd gone through the storm scenes and gone, and dear old Shakespeare gives his main actors a rests, and *Lear* gets the rest, and the next scene he's mad on the heath, just near Dover. Before that scene, before he went on for that scene, Donald would come out in his dressing gown and he would sit on what I called the Hamlet Chair, it was used for *Hamlet*, he'd sit there and with *Rosalind* who became his third wife, and he would hold a little a posy of flowers that he was going to take on with him when he meets the blind Gloucester, that's the greatest scene ever written, as far as I'm concerned, and he'd sit there, pick at the flowers and in an old man's voice he'd say 'Brian, I think we need a little more rosemary here...as you know...I throw it on the stage when I'm on....I think we need a little more' - it was all done as an old man. Then, when the time came, he would get up from the chair and *Rosalind* and I would remove his dressing gown and then he'd go on. That was extraordinary.

EJ: Can you remember working with any particular actors that stick in the mind?

BS: Yes. Godfrey Kenton, I mentioned a little earlier. He was with Wolfit on that first tour, and he went on acting, I did some radio acting much later on in the seventies, eighties, nineties, and Godfrey was in those and he was in his early nineties! And I can remember his performances as *Laertes* and, oh many other parts, he'd been an actor at Stratford and I remember him very well indeed. Joseph O'Connor joined us at the Bedford Theatre, and he played *Hamlet* in the Wolfit production and that was a tremendous. He was very nervous, because he was quite young. Brian Johnson, who came second in the Eurovision Song Contest, was a wonderful jester in *Twelfth Night* and sang beautifully, which is to be expected, I'm trying to think...there were one or two very old actors that people would not know now...Patricia Jessell, she died unfortunately when she was only in her forties, and she was a wonderful *Scottish Lady*. She also was a wonderful *Goneril*. She was quite well-known as an actress in her day. It was a terrible shame, she was very unwell. Donald tended to gather round him people who weren't 'names'. I don't think really this was because he wanted to tower above everybody else. I think that the money side of things, he couldn't afford to pay vast salaries, and so he had a company, a very good company, but there were no stars as such, except for the people I've mentioned. Godfrey and so on.

EJ: This has been absolutely wonderful.

BS: It's wonderful to remember it all.

[NB. Interview ends, but BS remembers a further anecdote:]

BS: During the summer of 1949, we came back from a short tour to the Bedford Theatre and we put on what was called Harlequinnade and this was full of sketches, songs, dances, short plays and so on which Donald Wolfitt had performed in the twenties in remote villages in Wales. Particularly in Shropshire, and so on, and if you think of the twenties, they really were remote there. And a lady called Eleanor Elder and her husband formed the Arts League Travelling Theatre. This company of about a dozen people went round these remote villages and I remember, too, Rosalind Diamond was in the company and so was Norman Sherry who became a very well-known radio actor and in fact played Winnie the Pooh on Children's Hour. At the Bedford Theatre we put on Harlequinnade and that was enormous fun. Donald I remember told me a story once of how, when they were in a remote village in the twenties, he was in a short play in which he had to, I don't think he had to beat his wife, but he had to go for her. Suddenly, without any warning, a Welshman got up in the audience and started approaching the stage and called out to Wolfitt to leave the lady alone and was taking his coat off! And so he really was, you know, caught up with what was going on, and he had to be restrained and told that really Donald Wolfitt wasn't attacking the lady and it was only acting. But that's a wonderful audience story I think.

EJ: It is.

BS: Oh, in Harlequinnade we had Archie Harradine who was very well known at the Player's Theatre, the music hall theatre under Charing Cross Road Railway Bridge, he came along and performed.