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Ann Jellicoe – interview transcript

Interviewer: Kate Dorney

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Playwright. Censorship; Central School of Speech and Drama; Community Theatre; George Devine; early theatre experience; Endgame; The Knack; Look Back in Anger; Lord Chamberlain; The Observer writing competition; reading plays; Royal Court Theatre; Michel Saint-Denis; Shelley; The Sport of My Mad Mother; Sir Vincent Troubridge; Ken Tynan; Waiting for Godot; writers group; writing.

KD: This is Kate Dorney interviewing Ann Jellicoe on the 21st of May. I wonder if I could ask for your permission to deposit this recording in the British Library and Archive.

AJ: Yes, you have my permission.

KD: Thank you very much and also if I could ask for us to retain the copyright for the interview, us being the AHRC British Library Theatre Archive Project.

AJ: Yes it is, it's fine.

KD: That's lovely. I'd like to start by asking you about your pre-Royal Court experiences of going to the theatre and working in the theatre.

AJ: Right, well, when I was four years old if you please I knew I wanted to go into the theatre, though I thought, you know, I thought I wanted to act, and I'm not quite sure why it should be but it's an interesting question, I haven't really thought about it before but I had a... not an easy childhood, my parents separated and I have a feeling that the world of fantasy struck me that early, that you could go into another situation. Anyway, from four years old, I knew what I wanted to do and went right through school doing as much theatre work as you can do at school. What was your original question?

KD: Yes, your experiences of...

AJ: Oh pre-experiences.

KD: But I think... had you been to the theatre then when you were four?

AJ: I'd been in a dancing class. Oh perhaps it was when I was about four, that might have been it! I was in a dancing class and I remember vividly the performance, you know the sort of performance that dancing classes give, and I was a raindrop in one dance. Oh and another significant experience, I can remember while we were just having, being really rather bored and not bothering and then suddenly thinking 'Oh, I suppose I'd better make an effort'. I was probably about six at this time, it must've, I couldn't have been much younger, and so I really put myself into it and was visibly appreciated, do you see what I mean?

KD: Yes.

AJ: I learnt very early the value of trying your best, which was a very useful thing to learn at that age. Anyway, come the performance it was great, and my father sat in the audience and sent a box of chocolates round to the stage door with his card tucked in the corner, 'Captain J. A. Jellicoe', you know. Oh it was great fun. And so then I went through school doing a lot of theatre work, often just the... apart from the ordinary school productions which I always took a big part in, I also got endless small things. A charade is a very low-key form of theatre but extraordinarily easy to put on, you know, for... but there was one thing which was truly remarkable which when I was organising these charades, I would lie awake the day before it had to put together and in my head write everything. I would have the whole dialogue in my head, and so the next day all I had to do was tell people exactly what they had to say, what they had to do and it was all there. I made an extraordinary, looking back on it, I couldn't even believe it... think of it now. But anyway that was very... and that was I suppose from about 14 onwards, because I was at boarding school so had plenty of time for that sort of nonsense. And then I went to drama school, the Central School of Speech and Drama, and there I did my first productions, oh and indeed, in a sense the first tentative writing, I mean apart from the charades which was a very low-key form of writing. But I did do the first productions with other students and things like that, and did very well, I came out with their chief prize at their public show, but not being a pretty girl, at an age when we hadn't had the Berliner Ensemble and plain girls were allowed to be interesting, you know, I didn't immediately get work. Oh, I did go into rep, that's right, I went into... some friends of mine were taking over a rep at Aberystwyth, because they worked out they were going to run it for some ghastly commercial man called J B Somerville, and they asked me to go and I went, more or less because I hadn't been offered anything else. But it was great fun and you did a lot of work, it was weekly rep and very, very good experience. Then... it's hard to remember what happened. Then I got desultory work. I'm probably missing out vast chunks but I can't remember. Anyway, one day, I suppose in 1955, I can't remember, The Observer announced it was holding a playwriting competition, and I had frequently tried to write plays and could never get myself together or, you know, never finished anything, and so from the conditions - and Tynan was behind it - I realised they didn't want a conventional thing. I think I must have done quite a bit of writing at Central England and...

KD: They didn't have any kind of course in writing no?

AJ: Oh no, no, no! But I did have a lot of experience of theatre, and also at Central there had been a remarkable teacher who used improvisation of a very free kind. He prepared improvisation often just, single you know not groups, just somebody to... and I remember seeing a student... This was very important I think. I remember seeing a student playing a trumpet, he was, it must have been improvising a dream. He was playing a trumpet which turned into a bird and flew away.

KD: Oh!

AJ: And I suddenly realised this was something quite new, never seen anything like... because I, what was it, early... late forties, early fifties, it was mostly conventional theatre and I realised this was something extremely new and when I wrote *The Sport of My Mad Mother* for *The Observer*, I knew first of all that *The Observer* would be ready to look at new styles.

KD: Because of Tynan?

AJ: Because of Tynan. And the other judges were pretty... I can't remember who they were, but they were pretty open-minded people. I think Tynan was wanting, actually probably wanting to find a new approach and of course the Court had just started. We had had Joan Littlewood I think, yes... yes, one had seen a lot of Joan Littlewood, must have seen *Waiting for Godot* and certainly the plays at the Court ... what dear?

KD: Do you remember anybody leaving *Waiting for Godot*?

AJ: Do I remember anybody...?

KD: It's a kind of myth that people, you know, got up and stormed out.

AJ: Oh not when I saw it. By the time I saw it, which was at the Criterion, it was definitely... 'I could not love anyone who would not love this play'.

KD: Oh really?

AJ: Oh yes, no, no. In fact I don't ever remember hearing stories of people walk out of *Waiting for Godot*.

KD: Apparently when it was first at the Arts Theatre...

AJ: The Arts, before it went to the Criterion?

KD: Yes.

AJ: Oh well, you know, so they did.

KD: Well, no, so the legend has it.

AJ: Yes well...

KD: We haven't found anyone that did.

AJ: Well I don't remember anything like that, and I was certainly in the thick of it. Was I in the thick of it? No, I wasn't really.

KD: You were living in London.

AJ: I was married, my first marriage, we lived in a mews in London and I had a little room, half the size of this, in which I could do what I wanted. Anyway The Observer play competition was announced and I wrote *The Sport of My Mad Mother*, influenced very much really by suddenly seeing... this improvisation was like a door or an opening into a cavern, you know which you could explore. Anyway...

KD: Because it didn't really happen in England at that time did it?

AJ: What didn't?

KD: Well improvisation and to...

AJ: No, no.

KD: It wasn't all about steering you round the furniture.

AJ: This man had worked with Michel Saint-Denis...

KD: Oh.

AJ: At the... oh and, oh yes of course, George Devine worked at...

KD: At the Old Vic.

AJ: I think they used improvisation but it wasn't a common thing, you wouldn't find it in most drama schools. Well maybe you would, but this guy had worked with Saint-Denis and had picked up that... He was called Oliver Reynolds. He was a very, very clever man but without ambition really because he could have done very well. I mean, his contemporaries were George Devine and people like that, a very good director, I learnt an awful lot from him, then he died rather early.

KD: So you wrote *The Sport of My Mad Mother*.

AJ: I wrote *The Sport of My Mad Mother* and I won't say I lived happily ever after but what that did was, it was quite extraordinary, I mean you know I'd be sitting writing in my little room and posted the thing off and *The Observer* said 'We've had 2000 or 2500 scripts you know, we'll start sending back those we don't want'. So you sat and thought 'Well, it's not come back yet' [laughs] and then one day the phone rang and a very sort of Foreign and Commonwealth Old Etonian kind of voice said 'Oh you, you submitted a play didn't you?' [laughs] 'Well, you've won a prize', and there was three beats and I said 'What prize?' [laughter]. So anyway he said 'Joint third' which was... it was clearly, they'd all been able to agree about the first two, one was a play which totally disappeared without trace, two of the... one was called *Moon on a Rainbow Shore*, and I don't remember the other one, but then Wally Simpson and I won joint third, and I mean, you know, the phone rings and within 24 hours you're having lunch with the directors of the Royal Court Theatre and their designer is coming round to your room with a model to... it's unbelievable.

KD: It must really have been...

AJ: It's great fun.

KD: Yes.

AJ: It was wonderful!

KD: All your dreams coming true at once.

AJ: Well it wasn't exactly that, because I didn't have those kind of dreams, but it suddenly absolutely extraordinary, your life was absolutely changed, and George being what he was loved writers and welcomed writers, felt that the theatre could only be really changed by writers. The theatre became... you were welcome to go into that theatre any time you wanted, you knew all the people working there and there was a sort of meeting place for anybody like me who turned up, the Associate Director's office, they were crammed into a small office about a third of this, rather like a coffin. [laughs] But there, and you had free seats at the theatre and... And there were writer's groups meeting. I mean George and the AADs - the Assistant Associate Directors like Bill Gaskell, people like that - all came to writers' groups and we did improvisations together and you know, you just became a part of something extraordinarily lively, of people full

of creativity and energy, it was lovely. And I remember during this time I met my husband, Roger, and my marriage fell apart, but somebody said to Roger around this time, 'Oh, so boring, I have the illusion of being on the edge of everything' and Roger - who has a kind of innocence about him - said, 'Oh, that's funny, I have the illusion of being at the centre!' [laughs].

KD: [laughs] That's a lovely thing to say.

AJ: Isn't it nice, because he was taking photographs, you see, for the Royal Court. His work is very well known.

KD: Mm.

AJ: Oh you know it do you?

KD: Well he's in... all the kind of pictures...

AJ: That's right.

KD: When I looked more closely, they were all taken by Roger, yes.

AJ: That's right.

KD: So, weren't you kind of formative in setting up the writer's group?

KD: Weren't you formative in setting up the writer's group?

AJ: No I don't think I was formative. Put it like this, I was always there. I was certainly there from the very beginning and I suppose, at the other, a very important figure and that was Keith Johnstone, do you know of Keith Johnstone? Impro...

KD: Yes.

AJ: Well he was a reader of the theatre at that time. I mean he read plays coming in and he was paid the magnificent sum of five shillings, if you can believe it.

KD: Per play?

AJ: Per play, and for which he produced a report [laughs]. Seems... I suppose five shillings is a bit more now, but it's certainly not... Anyway...

KD: It's interesting, given that the Lord Chamberlain's readers were getting two guineas at that time.

AJ: Crazy!

KD: One guinea for a one act play, two guineas for a two act play.

AJ: God! It's daylight robbery isn't it! Anyway...

KD: Well you were paying for the licence obviously.

AJ: And you've got to have some experience to read, it's like reading music. Anyway, where are we?

KD: Keith Johnstone of the writers' group yes.

AJ: Oh the writers' group. No, it's just that Keith was very... very anti-literary, he didn't like things analysed, and a very strong personality and so we did tend to experiment, actually get up on our feet and do things and...

KD: Were you at the famous mask occasion?

AJ: Oh yes, very much so. I don't think I've ever used masks in a play, I can't remember. You probably know better than me!

KD: No, well, I don't actually, but I know that people talk about it as a very formative...

AJ: Oh it was.

KD: Because that was something he'd got from Michel Saint-Denis as well, wasn't it?

AJ: Absolutely, but it was a memorable occasion.

KD: John Arden used masks didn't he?

AJ: Yes he did.

KD: Didn't you direct him?

AJ: I've never directed John Arden, no I didn't.

KD: Abbey Latham?

AJ: No I didn't.

KD: Oh really.

AJ: No.

KD: Well that's not what John Russell Taylor says.

AJ: What's he said?

KD: He says...

AJ: I probably did, yes. Do you remember I said I cannot remember what I did...

KD: Yes.

AJ: After being in rep... well, at some point, The Central rang up and said 'Will you come back and be a staff producer?'. [interruption] It was not revolutionary in form but it was revolutionary in its subject. That's why... and it... so it was a very... I mean, you know, I came thinking, I was brought up in Middlesbrough and Saltburn, the North East coast and I never dreamt of writing plays about that. You didn't write plays about Middlesbrough with people with Yorkshire accents. I mean Hobson's Choice was probably the nearest to that, but it's a different kind of play, whereas Look Back in Anger was a North Country setting and absolutely... not absolutely, but very true to student life you know, and the social attitude at the time of there were no great big causes and all that, and this was what was blindingly new about Look Back in Anger, but being a thoroughly conventional play, once they got through that shock, the shock was extremely valuable in making people look at it but once they were through it, it's a very easy play. There's no... it doesn't challenge you in form at all.

KD: No, no. Oh so you think that's its strength, that, you know...

AJ: Oh yes.

KD: People will recognise the format and then thought 'oh God!' instead of thinking 'Oh God, I don't know how plays like this work so I can't tune in'.

AJ: Well it's perfectly, once you get past rejecting its message as it were, or its subject - and after all most play-goers at that time were well over 40, or seemed to us to be! I mean, it brought a new audience into the theatre. That, and it's a very easy play, I mean it seems so now, maybe I'm being a bit... no I think it's true. Its form, it's a story, you know, de dum, de dum, de dah, de dah. Where are we now, I don't know.

KD: So you were working in the writer's group then, and that helped form The Knack.

AJ: Yes it did. Yes we were only peripheral, but it was important.

KD: Which really does seem to me to be an incredibly bold play.

AJ: Well in what way, in form or in subject?

KD: In form but also in subject matter, because certainly if you read the Lord Chamberlain's reports they had no idea that women would know, that nice girls would know about these things and would write about these things.

AJ: Ha haaaah!

KD: Absolute apoplexy about all the business of you know the four minute make and all the rest of it...

AJ: Oh Christ!

KD: How could, how could you and he says...

AJ: I could believe that of...

KD: Something to the effect of you know: 'We know Miss Jellicoe is very well educated and all the rest of it, but she seems...'

AJ: Miss Jellicoe's what?

KD: 'Very well educated, but she persists in this kind of undergraduate humour'.

AJ: I can't believe this!

KD: As if there was no, as if you weren't saying anything kind of, as if it wasn't critical.

AJ: I see, well...

KD: As if it was kind of complicit.

AJ: The Knack came... First of all, The Sport of My Mad Mother had been such a... it's like walking into a brick wall - I mean, like being cannoned into a brick wall, the reception of that play, so I thought I'd better write a comedy. I don't know how I actually thought. Well, a comedy with a small cast and that was not deliberate. What I did was very wise, write a comedy with a small cast about sex, or rather, it seems to be about sex. What it's really about is how people should treat other people, but sex is the point then. I don't think I set out thinking that, but I did set out thinking 'I'd better write a comedy'. I'd discovered in The Sport of My Mad Mother, much to my surprise, that I could write comedy. There's a scene where Cone talks Fak up to from I don't know but he talks Fak up till Fak's ready to go up and face them and it has comedy in it and I thought 'oh well' and so... oh God I'm lost again, what am I talking about?

KD: The Knack.

AJ: Yes I know I am.

KD: Your decision to make it a comedy and how you discovered in The Sport of My Mad Mother that you could write comedy.

AJ: Oh it was the Lord Chamberlain... well, The Knack... I know what I wanted to say was there was a fairly accurate picture of the way I was living at that time. You see my husband Roger, whom I was not yet married to but I was living with him, had a house like Colin's and he had a lodger like Tom, that was Keith Johnstone...

KD: Oh okay.

AJ: And there was, and I have to say still is somewhere, a hilarious character, a sexual, oh I wish I knew the right word...

KD: Leviathan ...

AJ: Anyway, just like Tolen, just like Tolen, it was crazy and Roger thought this man was wonderful, he'd got all these women, I loathed him. Well I didn't loathe him, I was very wary about him because Roger hadn't had a girlfriend for some time and here he's got this girlfriend and Tolen was determined to keep his hold over this young man. Obviously tried to make a pass at me. I mean that's where the Chinese eyebrows came from.

KD: Oh really! [laughs].

AJ: Yeah, and anyway he got nowhere but...

KD: Good.

AJ: I mean, what a thing to be presented, well I say that. When I showed it to Keith and Roger, I was doing some ironing, it was like Look Back in Anger in a way. I was doing some ironing and Keith...

KD: Whose shirt were you wearing?!

AJ: Pardon?

KD: Whose shirt were you wearing?!

AJ: Oh no, no, it wasn't that low, it's just that I was ironing and Keith was reading the play and sometimes he would read out bits. He really enjoyed it and he read out bits and he'd read something out and then say 'well', and Roger would say 'well' and Keith would say 'well', you know [laughter]. It's just as if the play was just going on, oh it was great fun, it was lovely. Anyway, so there was The Knack.

KD: And you had your...

AJ: Oh in the meantime I'd done The Rising Generation and gone right the way through that.

KD: And you had, but a unique sense of using dialogue, not as a form of communication in the sense that people were used to it, it was emphatically not that kind of well-made phone rings, hello, pick up the telephone, give a synopsis of everything that's happened so far and the next character that's gonna come in, it was very much, it seems to me to be very much a counter-point to the action, it makes action happen.

AJ: Oh I thought it was very important to keep that very strong rhythm. I mean, plays can be so heavy, and now there's an interesting thing... God! It all comes back to you when you talk about it. When we were at drama school, presumably to keep us entertained and the fact that somebody was paying good money for us to be there, Gwynneth Thurburn, who ran it, got hold of Christopher Fry who was still... hadn't had his work put on, and he gave us some lessons in playwriting. Oh yes you asked me if I...

KD: Yes.

AJ: Well I think there were only about three or four but he did say two things of sublime interest; one was 'never have a meal on stage, it's just too much trouble' - so I never have - and the other was 'never have a dialogue with just two people, always have a third person', and if you remember in *The Lady's not for Burning*, somebody is scrubbing a floor while, I can't remember their names, the hero and hero, were having a scene, but Richard Burton was scrubbing a floor you know. [laughter] And this actually opened up the idea that dialogue must have kind of bite in it and rhythm... not rhythm, but the dialogue must have a vitality of its own and the vitality comes from what you're talking about, so it's very interesting, that, isn't it? I'd forgotten about that.

KD: No, and it's very different from kind of, if you look at [inaudible] my dialogue is really...

AJ: Oh my God it's, I don't know, God knows what the time is.

KD: It's half eleven.

AJ: And we haven't even got to community plays yet.

KD: Most of your dialogue is really sparse and then you get these little bursts, whereas if you look at something like *Look Back in Anger* it's all of those kind-of big chunks isn't it, and John Arden again was very much a big chunk...

AJ: Oh well, that's their styles.

KD: ...type person. Yes. So how did you move from the Court to the community plays.

AJ: Community plays. Well I... wait a minute, I shall probably forget or tell you wrong. Here we are... *The Knack* was 1960 something or other.

KD: 1961.

AJ: Had a great time there, went to New York with it. I had a wonderful time.

KD: Oh really.

AJ: Oh yes, it was done all over the world, it's still done.

KD: And did they like it in New York?

AJ: They loved it. It ran for 18 months. Mike Nichols directed - you know Mike, don't you?

KD: Yes. Did you go and see The Maneaters, Anne Piper's play, while it was in Bristol?

AJ: Oh, Anne Piper. No I didn't. When was this?

KD: That was 1961, that's probably why.

AJ: Oh I see. I knew Anne Piper well, having said that. But...

KD: So it was that...

AJ: No it was done. There was a time when I could go backstage in practically any theatre and say 'I wrote The Knack' and somebody would fling their arms round me and say, 'Oh, I was in that'.

KD: Oh how lovely.

AJ: It was done incredibly... four characters, one set, a comedy about sex. Sure-fire, and it's a marvellous thing if you've got a bigish company of actors, you can use your younger actors who often don't get a chance in anything they can get their teeth into, you see. They're all busy carrying spears or playing Third Merchant or something, you know. So I mean, as I say, it's still done, I still get a small royalty from that play.

KD: So was there a kind of sense of expectation after that, that you would write that kind of play?

AJ: You bet there was! I remember meeting Harold Pinter, ooh... just before the first night of something or other... Shelley I think, and we're all having a drink together and he said, 'Well, Ann, you've got to follow up The Knack' and Shelley was a totally different kind of play. It was very silly of me, I should have written another Knack, but

there you go! But you see I got... I'm very interested in history, which is part of the reason for Shelley. I had a very revealing dream when I was doing Shelley of trying to fill a suitcase and I couldn't get the lid closed. What happened with that play was [that] I never lost my veneration of Shelley as a... not, well I don't think that of him now but I did then, I thought he was... it should have been called The Idealist, that play, really. So I never got free of the facts, and so... anyway it was interesting to write a historical play. I'd had the experience of... The Rising Generation was going to be a huge cast, huge cast. I mean, as you know maybe, it was turned down by the Girl Guides. They commissioned me because they'd never read any play, they thought I wrote interesting plays about teenagers.

KD: Oh.

AJ: Yes and I said 'Well, I think teenagers are only interested in sex and jazz' and they said 'That's all right, you write about anything you want' but they soon found out their mistake.

KD: Sex and jazz.

AJ: But it was done at the Court with phenomenal success, it was great fun. Incidentally there's a misprint in there.

KD: Oh really?

AJ: A very important one. I probably couldn't find it now but I didn't read my contract properly because it was only going to be a... I saw later that they had crossed out the thing which says "we'll send it to you for proofreading"...

KD: Oh.

AJ: So they never let me proofread it, so there is a climax absolutely missing at a pivotal point. There you go.

KD: Oh how annoying.

AJ: Well yes it is annoying. Anyway you see those two... think history plays, huge casts, now then after... oh whatever was my last play at the Court? Oh, wait a minute, we had the bloody Giveaway didn't we. I set the bloody Giveaway, that was my attempt to get back to the Mac, which went to Edinburgh where it did terribly well, but somebody said - somebody who knew what they were about, oh that Scottish playwright - said "Ann, this ought never to go into London, it's too innocent".

KD: Oh really?

AJ: But it did go into London because I insisted it did. 'I am damn well going to have my West End performance', and after The Knack I had that kind of power.

KD: When did you get Peggy Ramsey as your agent?

AJ: Very early on. Sport I think.

KD: Did she approach you or...?

AJ: No, no I felt, I had been in touch, I ran the Little Theatre Club, you know, the Cockpit Theatre.

KD: Yes.

AJ: And I'd had some contact with her because she, oh you would hardly believe it, I had discovered this play by this very interesting playwright I hadn't seen before. Bertolt Brecht he was called....! [Laughter] Anyway I was thinking of putting on, not a Brecht, I would never have got permission - well I know that now - but I didn't try, some other play she held the rights to, and I wanted to translate it, but then I didn't do it. But I thought she'd fought for that writer rather well, so I needed an agent and the Court said to me 'Get an agent, you need somebody to negotiate for you' so I went to her and I was almost her second client I think. But she didn't like women, she thought women were dull. Silly cow! Well... she was all right.

KD: That's a really... but that's interesting because it may go some way towards explaining the dearth of women writers...

AJ: Yes because...

KD: During that period.

AJ: When I was literary manager of the Court I found quite a few women, quite a few, yes that's true but anyway Caryl Churchill's another of her writers wasn't she?

KD: Yes.

AJ: She did all right. Oh well, how did I do Community plays? Well, I must say, I'd had my family, which forced me to slow down.

KD: Where were you living, still in London?

AJ: Richmond. Yes, I was living, we had a very nice house in Richmond. We'd moved out of Addison Avenue because really you couldn't have brought a child up there.

KD: That's in The Knack house, isn't it?

AJ: That's The Knack House and we moved to Richmond. I had two children but I did have plenty of help, my husband was very good. He was a photographer which meant he didn't have... he helped a lot with John, but I also had a girl coming in, and when I had two children I had a girl coming in full-time, so it was during that period I wrote The Knack and then I wrote Shelley, The Giveaway, oh various children's plays, as I say... they were great fun.

KD: Flora and the Bandits.

AJ: Ah that's later.

KD: Oh okay.

AJ: That's when I got to South West Arts.

KD: You'll Never Guess.

AJ: You'll Never Guess, that's right, You'll Never Guess, and another short children's play. I tended to write for the ages of my children. You'll Never Guess and Co were when my children just started infant school or something like that.

KD: So did you write them to be put on by children or...?

AJ: No, it was simply that one's mind was tuned to children. No they were put on at the theatre upstairs. I directed them and put them on.

KD: But that again is kind of significant. I don't think any of the men were writing plays for children.

AJ: They probably weren't, no they probably weren't. I'd written another play for children which was put on at the Arts Theatre, what the hell was it called?

KD: Clever Elsie, Smiling John...

AJ: No that was in tandem with the one we've just talked about... A Good Thing or a Bad Thing.

KD: Oh OK.

AJ: There was a third one... oh God, I cannot remember it.

KD: That's the list in the front of the community plays.

AJ: Perhaps it was You'll Never Guess, because Clever Elsie, Smiling John and Silent Peter and A Good Thing or a Bad Thing were at the theatre upstairs. It must have been You'll Never Guess. I can't remember a damn thing about it, except that I remember there was a rather nice... it was about that thing of the girl being in prison and spinning, and the spinning turns to gold overnight, and it was a rather nice effect of when it had to be turned to gold. We did it... the theatre was very annoyed because I demanded yards and yards of silk, real fine silk and if you take your lights from the side and then run along with silk, it completely... it's a wonderful visual effect, and while you're doing it, behind, they can be substituting the wool for gold you see. Anyway there we go, that's all I remember about that one. I don't even know if it was even published. However, when my daughter was eight, I think I just got fed up with London, just got fed up. There were all sorts of funny shortages, like a shortage of salt, a shortage of sugar, shortage of petrol, God knows why.

KD: When was this?

AJ: 1970, 71.

KD: So, coming up to the big kind of industrial unrest I guess.

AJ: I'm very like... Anyway, we'd had a cottage down... very near where we live now, an absolutely idyllic place with roses round the door and thatch and everything and we loved going down there, and we would pile everything into the car every opportunity. And at this stage, yes, the Court asked me, Oscar Lewenstein asked me, to go back to be Literary Manager, which was great fun, I greatly enjoyed it, had to read three plays a day...

KD: God! [whispered].

AJ: I was quite good at it, but as I say after two years or something of this, we decided, we so enjoyed going down to Dorset and so hated coming back to London, and there

was no reason really why we shouldn't go to Dorset, so to Dorset we went, moved down there and I wasn't really thinking but I assumed I would just go on writing plays you see. But actually now I come to think of it, just before I left London, God knows what made me think of it, I thought I would like to write a, I think it was part of the children growing up. The next stage, they'd been small, they were getting bigger and I got the idea of writing a play for a school but I went to a school in some place like Islington, I can't remember now, and they wouldn't have me. Absolutely right, because if I'd been let loose in a London school it would have broken my heart and got nowhere, but down in Dorset, the little, local comprehensive in Lyme Regis - utterly different ball game, and after a while you know, we got settled, you know, 'what am I going to do?', I thought, so I went to see them and the headmaster was really keen, he really was very interested in theatre and that sort of thing and anyway it was agreed I would write a play for them and I wrote a play, but as I wrote it, I hate children playing grown-ups, so I wrote in a lot of adult parts thinking, 'Oh, we'll get the parents to do it,' or something like that. And then a very interesting thing happened because when it was finished I took it back and I sensed resistance...

KD: From the teachers?

AJ: From the school and I realised that the English teacher, who normally directed the school play, felt threatened.

KD: Oh I see.

AJ: So they rationalised it by saying 'It's too big for us'.

KD: OK.

AJ: Because the, no headmaster will wisely go here. Why should they trust me, you know what I mean. If he was going to alienate a whole body of his teachers, he'd have been in trouble.

KD: Yes, well particularly [inaudible].

AJ: So I rather proudly said 'Oh it doesn't matter you know, of course not, it's too big for you' and then I took it away, and then six months later that teacher had left and I looked at this play and thought, 'This is ridiculous, it's a good play' and so I was at that time deeply involved with the Drama Committee of South West Arts and through them with Medium Fair Theatre Company so I went to Medium Fair and said 'Will you help?'. They were a community theatre company, it's disbanded now. Baz Kershaw was very much part of it.

KD: Really?

AJ: Baz has remained a lifelong friend.

KD: OK.

AJ: Anyway they said 'yes, they would help'. They helped with lighting and two, three or four perhaps of their actors took part. The University of Exeter provided a stage management team and again certain lights and the Lyme Regis Drama Company, which is in a way quite surprising, agreed to join in. You know and they are used to nice big meaty parts whereas we had 80 people in that first play. So I was able to go back to the school and say, 'Look, it's not too big for you, we've got all this help' but actually what had happened... we now had a thoroughly co-operative English teacher.

KD: Oh I see.

AJ: So, I mean, I just made it so they could accept it without losing face, but in doing so I begged the gun to involve an awful lot of other people and got a little bit of funding, got a professional designer who lived in the house and I think she was paid the magnificent sum of £250. I may have been paid £250 also so there you go, that's how it started. And then Baz Kershaw, bless him, said - he realised what was happening really before I did - and said to me 'Well, you've got to have an interval, because then you will sell coffee and you will involve more people' and I suddenly realised we were in the business of making jobs because if people help they become involved, and I realised in a way my aim was you see to make people understand how hard it was, how tough it was, what hard work it was and how rewarding.

KD: So that they would value it?

AJ: So that they would enjoy it and pursue it and want to do it. So there we go and it all stemmed from that.

KD: That's wonderful.

AJ: It was wonderful.

KD: So was Baz working as an actor then or he was working in the university?

AJ: No, he was working with Medium Fair. I'm not quite sure what he was, he might have been an actor, they were a bit of a muck-in company... he might have been an actor, he might have been a director, I can't remember. He certainly hadn't started his university career.

KD: OK.

AJ: And so I lived happily ever after and did, I don't know how many plays.

KD: Down in the South West.

AJ: Oh yes, but I also did one in Denmark, and it's a pity that came so late because I could have started... I think I would have gone all over Europe frankly, or America, because my successor did go to America, and made a bit of a dog's ear of it too, but still...

KD: Do you wish that you'd ever gone back into London to do one?

AJ: Oh I did attempt, I did think about it. I actually, that's right, now wait a minute. No it was Leeds, I went to see Jude Kelly at Leeds to talk about doing one there, but somehow it didn't materialise, I don't know, but then she put me onto somebody working with the community at the National Theatre and I was quite interested in doing a play of the area around the National Theatre, Brixton and Southwark but then I went for a walk round Brixton. Now I think one of my strengths is I know my limits, and I knew I could not cope with a tough area like that. If you think, all my work has been done in quite safe and fairly coherent communities, I mean I once went up to Middlesbrough because they invited me up there - they'd got plans to do a community play, and they said 'Well, we're having a bit of trouble'. I'd gone to see something else, but incidentally they said 'we're going to do this community play' and they described me where they were going to do it, and the next day I drove down to it, it was a part of Middlesbrough not far from the docks, and there was a vast, big field, probably three football fields or something like, and on one side was a real working class slum kind of area and another side was what happens when you move up a notch and you go into a semi-detached house, all neat, and council housing, neat front lawn, and they wanted to the community play to bring these two lots together and I saw instantly the working class there would say 'I'm not going to work with those shits over there', and the middle - well not middle - class, would have said, 'Well, I'm not having you play with those dirty children from over there'. You couldn't possibly... you cannot social engineer in that way, it won't work. What you have to do is approach it tangentially, you do a play there and then maybe you do a play there and maybe people who love being in the first play will be in the second, do you see what I mean.

KD: Yes.

AJ: You cannot... you're not God.

KD: That's really interesting. It's very interesting that you had that kind of awareness about knowing your limits and didn't try, you know, to go round Brixton or Lambeth or something...

AJ: There was an idea of doing one at Chelsea Hospital to celebrate the Millennium, but again I saw it was, I didn't want to just... I wanted to do the whole of Chelsea but I thought 'It's no good, I can't do it'. And I won't take on something that I don't think... I can't follow through.

KD: Well that's very interesting.

AJ: Oh that doesn't mean I'm not extremely ambitious. After all it was an extraordinary thing to do but I knew I could do it.

KD: That's really yes and so has it kind of changed your... did you ever have any... regard is not the right word, did you enjoy going to conventional well-made theatre. You know, did you like Noel Coward...

AJ: Oh yes...

KD: And Terence Rattigan.

AJ: Oh yes, I liked going to the theatre. I get very annoyed when I see poor theatre. Of course I did some translation... I have yet to see a production of *The Seagull* which really satisfies me. Anyway, yes but...

KD: But you felt that you wanted to...

AJ: But the funny thing is, I did think about writing a conventional play but once you've got used to an endless supply of actors and you must get as many women as possible, you know, I was... and you just can't be bothered to. Anyway you know, I just love that form of theatre, I love the participatory, the promenade theatre and everything. It's a wonderful form for...

KD: It must be very important in the kind of small community like Lyme and places where...

AJ: Dorchester. Dorchester's about to do its fifth community play.

KD: Wow.

AJ: David Edgar is going to write it with us - I mean, you know I got David Edgar to write the first one? Well he's kept in touch ever since and we've had various writers and I only have anything to do with it insofar as I'm President of the Dalton Community Play but five plays is not bad going is it?

KD: No how do they fund them now?

AJ: Well they've got £17,000 in the bank for a start from the other ones and...

KD: Wow.

AJ: I know: wow! And they'll do it.

KD: It's really interesting actually for someone, it's kind of like it's come full circle, David Edgar because he started with the abject prop stuff didn't he and then he...

AJ: I suppose he did, yes.

KD: Remember, I think it's in the preface to *Destiny* or something, he says he got to the point where he wanted to write plays for the kind of people who were very smug and didn't assume that they could have anything to do with racism, you know that they weren't racists etc and so now he's back round to the community.

AJ: Well...

KD: Small cast, large cast, large cast.

AJ: I have to admit he is writing it with his partner who was a product of his Birmingham thing, but she seems a very live wire. They came and spent the night with us, they're not messing around. Dorchester has a research group, they've been down, I think they've been down just this last week but they've certainly been about three or four times working with that research group. They're taking it very seriously and I thought David was just really making it possible for her to write a play, not a bit of it, they're both on it. I'm very impressed actually. I've got a great deal of affection and respect for him and Howard Barker. Howard you know wrote *The Poor Man's Friend* and we're still dear, good friends, I love Howard.

KD: We're doing one of his plays at the Drama Festival on Monday.

AJ: Oh really?

KD: Possibilities, yes.

AJ: Oh, will he come up do you think?

KD: I don't know, I don't even know if anybody's asked him to be honest. He does, the Wrestling School always bring their stuff to Sheffield.

AJ: Yes I know I saw one here many years ago, The Crucible.

KD: I'd like to end, can you tell your anecdote about St Vincent Troubridge Bart and the Lord Chamberlain.

AJ: Oh yes, well I was a member, in fact one of the earliest members of the Committee of the Society for Theatre Research, in which there was Muriel St Clare Byrne and all sorts of golden oldies including Sir St Vincent Troubridge. I cannot resist calling him Sir St Vincent Troubridge Bart. He was a very big florid man, obviously an Old Etonian as they all were, because they all knew what was best for us and you had to have an ex-guards officer and an Old Etonian for that one, for that job as I say because they knew how to quell the [inaudible]. Anyway, the old St Vincent Troubridge Bart was a member of the, was also one of the censors... that's right, one of the censors, and the Court wanted to put on Beckett's... it must have been Waiting for Godot, I cannot remember.

KD: Endgame?

AJ: You might remember the line.

KD: The bastard who doesn't exist.

AJ: 'The bastard and he doesn't exist'.

KD: Yes, Endgame.

AJ: And the censor wanted to change that to 'The pig, he doesn't exist'. It took us to realise that the convoluted mind of the censor had taken bastard - as I'm sure Beckett fully intended it to be - as a reflection on the Virgin Mary. 'The bastard, he doesn't exist'!

KD: Oh I see.

AJ: Exactly. So anyway the Court fought this tooth and nail, because Beckett wouldn't have anything to do with it, he wouldn't have it changed. So finally they arranged a little private meeting with an extraordinarily distinguished audience - if you think of it that way - like Edward Bond and Keith Johnstone and you know, all the Court, and anyway...

KD: And Beckett. Was Beckett there?

AJ: Oh, I don't think Beckett would have graced that dirty occasion with grovelling before the stage censor by any means.

KD: Oh of course, yes.

AJ: By any means, no. However, there sat George Devine up on the stage but the rest of us...

KD: Well, because he was in the play wasn't it?

AJ: He was reading. Yes that's right. Anyway George wouldn't have trusted anybody to deliver the line with the requisite tact – hide it! Anyway they said 'And you meet this Sir St Vincent Troubridge; you know him'. So I met him at the door of the Court and he was clearly slightly miffed not to be met by George himself but he allowed himself to be conducted up to George's office or something like that. So there we all sat through this reading and when the line came, the line. There is a line that says 'let us pray' and there's then a pause and then George Devine said 'the bastard, he doesn't exist'. He really hid it.

KD: And what happened?

AJ: It didn't get passed.

KD: Oh, it didn't get passed.

AJ: I cannot remember what actually happened but he didn't get away with that line. They're not fools those men, God they know what's going.

KD: No Peter Cheeseman told me a brilliant story though about when they were doing... A Night to Make the Angels Weep, I think it was, and it's set in the North... no, where's it set, Worcester or somewhere. Oh no, it's The Mighty Reservoir, no, can't remember which play it is, but there's a line where, there's a recurring joke about a character called Denzel playing on his knackers. [laughs] They're apparently the wishbones of an animal, and you play them like you play the spoons, but there was also loads of effing and blinding in it and they went to see Colonel Eric Penn, who was the controller and he said 'You know, it's people like you, Mr Turzon, who are undermining the moral fabric of society' etc, etc.

AJ: Quite right, quite right.

KD: And they eventually decided that they could leave in the playing on the knackers, as long as it was made clear that it was a variety of North Country castanets!

AJ: Oh how sweet.

KD: But I think it's lovely that they managed to kind of...

AJ: Actually, you know, one more story, I did have a big correspondence with the Lord Chamberlain over *The Knack*, and part of it was conducted by telephone and it went something like this 'Oh, haw haw haw, Miss Jellicoe, I'm afraid this is going to be rather a difficult conversation'. So it went something along the lines of 'If I take out 'bum', will you allow so and so" .

KD: Yes, no, they're all like that. 'Cut 'bugger' but leave x'.

AJ: That's right, oh not as bad as bugger but anyway when the play went to Cardiff, no Bath, in the winter at the Theatre Royal which was really, now people did walk out there.

KD: Did they?

AJ: Well occasionally, but somebody walked out the Royal Court Theatre...

KD: Out of *The Knack*?

AJ: Yes, and they were heard to say in the auditorium as they went out through the foyer, 'But mother, I can't hear anything dirty!' [laughter]. Anyway when I got to Bath, which was full of elderly invalids, no really, it did call certain things like kangaroos nipples and things like that which Lord Chamberlain, I persuaded him to keep them. They really did cause offence and I thought 'Oh'.

KD: It's very weird, the things that make people upset isn't it, I think.

AJ: Yes, but then you see when the play came to London - as I think I've told in some book or other - I was sitting and I thought 'God! This is not obscene, this is quite child-like, it's quite innocent', but there was some very sophisticated theatre people. Anyway, I'm going to...

KD: Yes. Thank you.