

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Lionel Burman – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Kavita Naker**

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Theatre-goer 1945-68. Absurdist theatre; audiences; Samuel Beckett; censorship; Club theatres; Eugene Ionesco; London theatre-going; Look Back in Anger; Spike Milligan; Merseyside Unity; musicals; Luigi Pirandello; The Playhouse, Liverpool; production styles; ticket prices; Theatre Workshop.

KN: I'm interviewing Mr Lionel Burman for the Oral History project. Just some general questions to start with. Where were you born and brought up?

LB: I was born in London and lived there through the thirties 'til I was evacuated at the outbreak of war and after a short while elsewhere, moved eventually in 1940 finally to the North West of England, where I've more or less lived ever since. I had a very bad education in those times as you can imagine, so I'm afraid I've got all me vices of an auto-dictat, which means I've more or less had to educate myself to a large extent.

KN: So, your interest in terms of 1945 to 68, were you a student during that time or working or...?

LB: I did my National Service from '46 to '49, and during that time I was stationed for a while in London, only for a short while. I first went to the theatre whilst I was at school as a sixth former, because I more or less dropped out, and I went off the theatre on a few occasions. After de-mob I studied mostly in Liverpool but I was able to visit London fairly regularly and I got in the habit at quite a young age of going to the theatre when I could.

KN: So it was quite a big part of your life.

LB: Well it was an interesting part, I mean that was the austerity period. Life was really awful you know, it was really miserable, and theatre was one of the few things, film wasn't all that good and you often didn't get the chance to see really good cinema outside London. From an early age, I suppose from early childhood, I was inclined towards all the arts, the visual arts and music and obviously drama and everything associated with it, so I was a nasty sort of dropout who didn't do all the proper things.

KN: You did very well for yourself anyway. How often would you say you went to the theatre during that time then?

LB: When I could and when the opportunity was there. The theatre was always something that one had in mind that you could try and go to, and sometimes there was a lot of good theatre, sometimes there wasn't. The ones I remember, of course, are the good ones but I can't remember all of them, not in detail anyway.

KN: I know from our phone conversations that you were a frequent theatre goer between 1945 and '68 but would you say that your experiences were predominantly in the West End in London or much more regional?

LB: Yes most of the theatre you could see at that time would have been in London. Provincial theatre was at a low ebb, except here in Liverpool The Playhouse had a regular repertory of really good plays with an excellent repertory company. There were one or two outstanding actors, like Cyril Luckham, who were really brilliant and they were well presented and well directed so it was very enjoyable. My first experience was probably before '45, round about 1944 when we lived in Southport and I got on the train to Liverpool occasionally and went to The Playhouse where Bristol Old Vic were: they were evacuated there when their theatre was bombed or something. The first production I recall seeing there was *As You Like It* and it really converted me to theatre. The wrestling scene really took me back because I didn't know you did things like that on stage, you know, [laughs] threw each other around, I was only about 15/16. Up to about 19... mine was divided between Liverpool and London up to about 1950 I suppose.

KN: So apart from London and Liverpool which other cities did you see regional plays?

LB: Well after '54 when I graduated, I worked first in Manchester and then in the North East. I was also, by that time, in a job where I got around the country to attend conferences and meetings and so on, so wherever I was, if there was the opportunity to go to the theatre I would do it, so I went round a lot of cities and visited theatres when I could, and that would have been up to the time I came back to Liverpool about 1970, and then I just had occasional visits to London on the whole.

KN: So what sort of theatre? Did you tend to see musicals? The classics? Did you see plays by established playwrights at the time or the new playwrights or was it a variety?

LB: Well all sorts, but because I felt there were gaps in my education, whenever I could see a classic play I would go and see it. One wanted to become familiar with all the Shakespeare canon, and reading desultorily about the theatre you wanted to see all the big names, from Ibsen to Shaw to Arthur Miller and goodness knows what else, you know; any big name or any important production or theatre with a good reputation, if you could you would go and see it. The publicity would often tell you how good or how important a play was, and you'd go and see it.

KN: So in terms of publicity did you read any theatre critics that influenced your decision for what to watch?

LB: Well, yes, I mean, I read the Sunday papers as a rule, generally it would be The Observer. I also was familiar with the names at least of writers on the theatre for one reason and another, partly because being a member of the Merseyside Unity from '49 onwards 'til I left in the late fifties, we had regular weekly meetings where we had guest speakers and goodness knows what, so that we learnt an awful amount. I was reading up art history and general history. When I dropped out in the sixth form I stayed at school but I just went and hid and read a lot of modern literature and nineteenth century literature, so names were familiar and you felt you had to read. I read history of the theatre, I remember a big American volume by [Friedly and Reid?], I more or less read through that and plundered it for my essays as an art student. I read Stanislavski, and I'd read most of Shaw by an early age, by the time I was in my early twenties, so I was familiar with the perimeters of the subject. I was very impressed by Stanislavski because all the stage tricks he talked about appealed to me. In terms of criticism and critical history, this was an era where there was the problem of realism and naturalism, expression and you had this terrific debate going on in France about 'la engage' and 'la non engage', and this made an impression you know - some of us on the left thought all art had to be engaged, and heroes were people like Ibsen and Shaw and so on, so we got familiar with that stuff.

KN: I get the impression that you didn't see so many musicals.

LB: No. Actually, there weren't many. I think until Oklahoma came there was damn-all. What I did go to when I was in London as a student and a young man [was] you could slip into the back of Sadlers Wells any afternoon for about one and six pence, and you could see operettas and stuff like Schwander the Bagpiper and Merry Widow and you could sit in the back stalls very cheaply and have a nice afternoon at Sadlers Wells. Interesting theatre. I don't like the new theatre there, but still. So it was that sort of thing. The only musical that made a big impression on me was not West Side Story, which I saw when it first produced here, but Candide. I think that that is still probably my favourite musical, partly because of the music, and partly because I like the thrust of the script - despite its deficiencies - and it lends itself to superb performances. Other musicals, yes I have seen some, but they don't make a big impression... it depends what you call musicals, I mean one of the big events was going to one of the first productions at the Theatre Royal of Oh What A Lovely War. I wouldn't call it a musical, it's a musical drama so I mean opera and operetta has been another part of my life as well. I saw my first opera when I was 19, I'd not been familiar with it at all before, and since then I go to the opera when I can.

KN: What style of theatre do you like best then from say the classics or the newer writers up and coming or...

LB: Well, nowadays I pretty well like anything that's well produced and well created, something that really does make an impact. I like everything from sheer pleasure and enjoyment, joie de vivre through deep tragedy I mean whether it's Bombay Dreams or King Lear I don't mind. What I object to is pretty fifth rate productions by rather

ignorant producers. You see productions by people like Jonathan Miller which are a model of how you should present stuff on the stage, and then you see some cack-handed extrovert trying to produce a play and producing misery. You do see people who are hardly better than amateurs who haven't really studied the play. For me, I think what I appreciate above all is a producer and director and cast who have seriously tried to interpret what the playwright tried to say and interpret his message properly, and not use it as an excuse for dressing it up or grinding their own axe - and I've seen a few of those!

KN: So during the period of 1945 to '68 which of, like, the up and coming new artists caught your attention because of the new statements they were making, and what society was going through at the time.

LB: Well yes, up to that period, the beginning and halfway through that period I suppose, the early sixties the major playwrights, the important people were the classics by and large. One of the plays I saw that time that made an impression on me, I can't remember when I saw it, was Shaw's *Widowers Houses*, you know, a well-made play and all the rest of it, a real punch. The effect partly of censorship, but also of the general atmosphere and the general ideological climate in Britain meant that you tended to get the same fairly classical sort of stuff done, then with the Royal Court in the early sixties and then the explosive outburst with Osborne and *Look Back in Anger* the whole scene changed. That really made an enormous impact at the time, it's quite incredible when you look back at it the way it exploded the stage open, and I don't think anything was quite the same since.

KN: Could you repeat that anecdote about your friend who...

LB: Yes, at that time I was fairly standard member, a fairly active member of the Merseyside Unity, and my great friend then - who's since died - was Gerry Dawson, who was a superb producer and the moving spirit of that theatre. He wrote the standard history of the Merseyside Unity, and I remember that *Look Back in Anger* was done on television not long after its London debut, of course we hadn't seen it, we'd just read the furore in the press about it. We all went home and watched it and I happened to see Gerry the next day and he said to me 'Did you see that?' and he more or less implied this is the theatre we'd been waiting for, you know, the Unity had been producing all kinds of 'progressive' plays and the classics, but nobody else would produce, but this changed the whole scene. He said 'This says what we see or expresses what we feel about the world' and of course the interpretation then put upon *Look Back in Anger* was quite different to that today. Today you look at the anti-feminist atmosphere of it and so on, but then it was a period of the Cold War, and Macmillan as Prime Minister, and depression and then the outburst of the father-in-law about the British Empire and the hopelessness, you know there's no causes worth dying for. That struck an enormous chord and somebody at last had said things that we were hovering on the verge of, and this was before the Hungarian invasion and the whole political scene blew up. So it was a dramatic moment in British theatre history. I suppose it must have been similar to the arrival of *The Crucible* on the American stage, I don't know.

KN: So were there any other plays during the period that had a very similar impact to *Look Back in Anger* on you?

LB: Yes a lot but not in that way. If you want to look at the political thing there's a lot. Let's see, there's Brecht's *Galileo* for instance which made an impression. Towards the end of that period the *Marat/Sade* at the Royal Court and of course as I mentioned in '63 *Oh What A Lovely War* which turned ideas of theatre on their head in this country. Joan Littlewood really was a similar revolutionary to Osborne in that respect. I've actually got somewhere – there we are – a programme from the first production, 1963 Theatre Workshop. Of course Charles Chiltern and that gang were also active in Manchester prior to this so we were familiar with them. The folksong movement was also a very important part of the background to it and they formed part of this. I'm terrible! At my age you forget names, that's the problem! The folksong movement took off and was a great interest at that time.

KN: We spoke earlier about audiences and the differences you see between audiences then and audiences now, what would you say those were?

LB: First of all, even if you're a student as I was, a grant of three pounds a week in the early fifties you could afford to go to the theatre. As I say, you could get into Sadlers Wells for one and six. If you turned up at Covent Garden before production you could sometimes get return tickets for twelve and six to sit in the front circle, so you could see the most superb opera. Most theatres you could get in. The Playhouse, it cost you about a shilling I think to sit in the gods, very uncomfortable, very high up, but if you were a bit more flush, for a couple of bob you could get into the front circle. As a student or on your own you don't have to be two people booking in ahead and so on, so theatres did tend to be full of young people. It was also a period up 'til 1950-ish when conscription was in force so there were a lot of young service people who, if they were around like I was, could go to the theatre because we'd been educated really, you know, there was a lot of education in the services. My first opera I ever saw, when I was 19, was in Germany in a production laid on for servicemen, I'd never been to an opera before, it made a huge difference to me. You had all this army education and the audiences did tend to be young people. There weren't concessions for the elderly either, and also we had a less educated older public. Televisions had an enormous impact in educating the public one way and another. Nowadays you go to the theatre and if you go to a matinee about eighty percent of the audience is pensioners unless you've got a school party dragooned in. In those days very few schools took people to the theatre anyway. The composition of the audience tended to be a bit younger, somewhat middle class and people up their fifties at the most. For matinees sometimes you'd see elderly couples. You know, they'd serve tea in the auditorium in the interval so trays would be passed down with tea things on them. You'd sit in the interval with this tray on your lap and it was full of ladies in hats. In the evenings, as I say, fairly crowded. There wasn't much else to go to. Nowadays there are a lot of students. In some of the theatres like the *Everyman* here in Liverpool which aims at student audiences and keeps the price down. There's far more elderly people and people who have grown up, I suppose, with the theatre who still go regularly and have a profound feeling for it. I think there's been an interesting change but very hard to define in the nature of audiences. It was tending to be more middle class in the fifties than today so that the well made repertory play was more popular I suppose and people wouldn't respond to say Brecht or Pirandello or Ibsen in the way they do nowadays.

KN: So in terms of atmosphere you say there was a lot more middle class so when you did go to the theatre was it quite a big occasion and you got dressed up?

LB: Not in the fifties, because as I say it was a rather miserable time, people weren't as affluent as they are today. Yes you smartened up a bit. I had uncles and aunts who would go to the theatre and they'd dress up a bit for it. The atmosphere sometimes would be quite middle class yes, it depends where you went. The Theatre Royal was a bit different, it was full of middle class lefties you know - Stratford Theatre Royal I mean, the Joan Littlewood place - and one or two others and a lot of provincial theatre was much less of that kind than the London stage. Here in Liverpool, The Playhouse was rather posh actually, and we underlings tended to go in the gods and so on.

KN: So are there any other similarities and differences between seeing a play in the West End or London compared with regional theatres?

LB: The difference really was not on the stage but in the auditorium and the foyers. It was a different atmosphere, there was more of a sociable sort of atmosphere on the London stage, it was more of an occasion. In the provincial theatres I went to you tended to turn up and then go in and see the play, it wasn't quite a social gathering before you went in, and of course bars were very busy too, it was an important part of the theatre going period then. It depended, I mean, there were some theatre bars that I remember were really super. There's one in Scarborough I think, a big theatre there that was taken over, a Victorian pub bar, and so did the Theatre Royal at Stratford because what you'd got was the middle class lefties and working class activists would gather in this lovely bar they had with huge pub mirrors in the intervals, and it was really riotous and we'd all drink and shout and talk about the play. There was a bit of a difference yes, more businesslike outside London I think in the theatres.

KN: And do you see much of a difference or similarities in the plays of 1945 and '68 to today?

LB: Well, audience reaction. I think today I get the impression by and large audiences aren't so familiar with theatre, I mean, with drama. The audiences who came up 'til the fifties and sixties I think did know something about drama and there was a receptivity, whereas if you go now you find that it's a new experience for some people, that they're not familiar with the plays or the context, they don't know as much... I mean this is a generalisation. Certainly I find that some of the theatres I go to for instance if I go to Theatre Clywd at Mold with enormous foyers you know you sit around and drink for ages, coffee and tea and drinks and people talk away, you get the impression with the conversations you overhear and the way people go on that the play is a new idea to them. I recently went to a production of Dreigroschenoper there and very few people even know who Brecht was I think whereas in the past you would be more committed certainly in London. That's just an impression, I may be wrong.

KN: How innovative do you think that theatre was on reflection? Do you think there was a big era at the time compared to the structured plays of before, I mean, Terence Rattigan was accused of being a quite structured playwright, whereas Osborne came and broke all the boundaries.

LB: Well Osborne is still a well made play writer I mean it's three acts and things precede I mean he subverted it a bit in the third act didn't he by turning it on its head but the well made play was one of the things, it still is but you had imaginative drama. I can think of productions I saw in the forties which were hardly what we're talking about: *Skin of our Teeth*, Thornton Wilder is certainly not like that, *Galileo* isn't like that. Neither, I suppose is the *Marat/Sade*, *The Silver Tassie*, those are plays I can recall seeing which are not quite like that, but I don't think we made a distinction. If a play worked, like so many of Shaw's plays work or Ibsen's works, it's still inspirational and carries a message. Sometimes the plays – there are plays you see [that] attempt to be fully expressionist and really they just fall flat because it's simply empty rhetoric in a way and a spectacle. You can find the same within one dramatist. I worked with a production of Lorca's, *Casa de Bernada Alba*, that's a well-made three act play but I also saw a very inspiring production of *Blood Wedding*, which is quite the antithesis of that, that's within one writer you know? Even with Shaw as I say you know *Heartbreak House* is hardly the standard three act drama, is it, so I don't think this is necessarily a problem and of course if you go back to classic plays where they often work is where they work outside the boundaries of the well made play, even Molière or Vanbrugh you know so it's not something I really quite go along with.

KN: We spoke about *Waiting for Godot* earlier, what did you think of that Absurdist Theatre of the time which started to emerge?

LB: Ionesco... Some of the Eastern playwrights from Eastern Europe that occasionally you saw, certainly some as I say *Mother Courage* even and Beckett, Daniel Foe, these are really exploiting the theatre to the limits in some ways. Let's face it *Waiting for Godot* is an ordinary play in a sense that things succeed act after act and they change from act to act only slightly. I can see that more in terms of the aesthetics that were coming in in the fifties and sixties. The influence of existentialism, the idea of time and duration, so that for me quite a lot of Beckett is more like music than drama in a way, it's musical variations. What I said earlier about knowing the context of a play is important with Beckett, I think you've really got to know something about the background he came from not only in Ireland and his interest in sport and activities but his experience during the occupation and then the enormous influx of existentialism and the whole Sartrean ideology to which he reacted and responded and he was involved in all that so that if you have got an imaginative insight into that you can get far more out of it and there's a sense of hopelessness in *Waiting for Godot* and in *Krapp's Last Tape* and pretty well more or less everything else is written of endurance against hopelessness, but unless you have got real feelings about that kind of emotional response I think your response to Beckett may well be superficial. It's very deep and tense and it really takes a bit of courage to get into Beckett I think, a great playwright, a great writer. You can compare him in some way to the other arts, to Giacometti for example, and as I say, think of him in the context of satire, so he's a big figure, whereas an anarchist playwright like Daniel Foe is of a different order, though the theatre they produce is sometimes the same. Of course this has had an enormous impact on the modern stage in ways of production and forms of acting and so on. It has loosened it up and revolutionised it in a way but it

doesn't obviate what happened in the past. If you were going to produce some of the more explosive Shakespearian dramas like *Measure for Measure* or *Coriolanus*, I think you would have to do it in the context of what we've seen on the modern stage in the last twenty years, you can't do it in any classical format, whereas if you're going to do something like *As You Like It* or *Two Gentlemen* or whatever, this is a more mannered way, you'd have a far more mannered artificial way of doing it I think. As I say I respect directors and producers and cast who try to work with the grain of the writer and not impose their own vision on it.

KN: So what you said about Beckett, in terms of context do you think it would be received in a very different way today, it had a lot to do with the time and the feeling of the society?

LB: Oh yes, there's no doubt about it. I think it makes an emotional impact on me. I grew up in that period and of course I spent the period from the end of '46 to '49 in Europe, in Germany most of the time, and I saw the aftermath of the war. I had relatives who were sent to the camps and worked in the *résistance* in France so that was part of my background, so the atmosphere and feeling of that era is very much part of my outlook and so there are works of art that I respond to. In the same way I'd respond to Beckett, I would say I respond to Shostakovich's 'Eighth Quartet' or Messiaen's 'Quatuor pour la fin du temps'. It all makes an impact in the same way I respond to much of Brecht and the writing and novels of Gunter Grass, they all fit into this emotional world that I understand and can respond to. That doesn't mean to say that I can't find the same thing in the Renaissance or the European Enlightenment, but it's a different order of experience.

KN: So experiences today, are there any plays or new innovative writers that you've experienced that embody the expression of today's society?

LB: Well I find that a difficult question. Yesterday's society, I mean, going back twenty/thirty years, you could look at people like Arthur Miller of course. I've recently seen the most superb production of *The Crucible* for example, which has strong echoes, but when it comes to contemporary theatre I think for me it doesn't make the same immediate impact, because at my age you're looking back more, so the young playwrights on the London stage, and one or two French productions I've seen, and especially some of the television productions one sees do have *zeitgeist* in them but I don't feel it quite so intensely, and it would be hard for me to come up with something, more probably something on television than anything on the stage that I have seen in recent times. Nothing like the impact of say Osborne had in his day that says 'that's it, that's what it's all about', you know? I'd like to think more about that because I'm sure there is something in my mind but I can't put my finger on it in terms of contemporary life and outlook.

KN: We did speak earlier about you going to see some of the plays in a club kind of atmosphere because of the censorship of the period. Could you say some more about that?

LB: Well, yes, I mean, it was always in our consciousness that there were plays that either were messed about with, like *A Hero for Me* had to be tailored to fit the censors' predilections, and that there were some plays that you couldn't really see at all in the normal theatre, and one of the attractions of belonging to Unity was that you could see such plays. When I was in London fairly regularly I was a member of the Soho Theatre Club, I haven't got any of the programmes but it did a whole series, they were near Cambridge Circus, a small theatre, they regularly sent out bulletins and whenever I was in London I'd drop in to see it. You had to go through the routine of joining a club to see quite innocuous sort of plays really and there was also a hesitancy on the main stage of putting in anything that was perhaps going to be a bit controversial so that it wasn't often you could see plays like *The Silver Tassie* or even plays from the Eastern bloc, behind the iron curtain. Even plays like *Death of a Salesman* were rarely seen, so yes it had a crippling stranglehold. The fact was, if you had a nude on stage you couldn't move, you know and all that, it's silly but then it was a very puritanical era in terms of sex, so it was always very dangerous. I remember, and this would be 1946, I think it was the Duke of York Theatre in London I saw Thornton Wilder's *Skin of our Teeth* with Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh. Vivien Leigh came on in a very revealing tight costume, there wasn't much left to the imagination and a real gasp spread through the audience, you know, something we take for granted today. Plays like Wilde, I mean, *Ideal Husband* was a little bit shocking to some of those audiences. You had an audience in some respects who knew what they were going to see and in other respects were open to all kinds of reactions to what they saw on stage that we might take for granted today. I think producers sometimes played up to it. I remember going to the Birmingham Rep in 1953 or 4 where they put on *Pericles Prince of Tyre* and they quite outrageously played up all the bawdiness and rudeness and the brothel scenes, but by that date because it was Shakespeare you got away with it, you can make all sorts of gestures and nudity on stage, but I think ten years earlier it would have been difficult.

KN: So you think that censorship shouldn't have been around? Do you think it would have been a very different era had it not been so strict?

LB: Well with reservations, because I think the people who would have wanted to see plays not just for sex but for political or artistic reasons want to see plays that the censor prevented or held up. Those people would have gone anyway, because all you had to do to join a club was apply 24 hours before, wait 24 hours, you could go and see it, or you'd join a club of which there were some so for motivated audiences it didn't make any difference. For the general public I think it didn't make a great deal of difference, but once censorship had gone and opened up and liberated the theatre people did respond to it.

KN: You have a list of plays that you've seen in London and outside of London, do you want to have a go at running through that?

LB: Yes these are the ones I can remember or that I've found programmes for. I've kept very few programmes. I'll give you a quick run down. Before round about 1945 the first really emotional experience I had in a theatre apart from going to the Playhouse in Liverpool for odd matinees for Shakespeare and the classics was at Unity Theatre in Kings Cross in London where they put on Priestley's *They Came to a City*. I must have been about 17, it was before I went in the forces, and in its period - 1944 - we had

these idealistic views of what would happen after the war, and it really corresponded to the views of a lot of people and it really made a huge impression on me, and of course Unity did do some really good productions, so that was one of my earliest really strong memories. As I say about '46, '48, '49 when I was in London I would visit the theatre and the ones I can remember are like I say Thornton Wilder and O'Casey's *Roses for Me*, I think at the Haymarket, which was very good. Then it was the Arts Theatre was the club theatre, it was either there or at Wyndham I saw Wilde for the first time: *Ideal Husband*.

The other London experiences... that came later when I was able to visit occasionally. One of my great enthusiasms is for Brecht bile. Nowadays everybody loves it but you were considered a bit bonkers then to care for it. I remember a production in 1956, possibly the first production on the London stage, of *Dreigroschenoper*, which was very well done; little, heartless thing. That was at the Comedy Theatre. There was a theatre in Soho, I can't remember exactly where it was, but there was a superb three hour production of *Man and Superman* with an outstanding cast, the actors of whom I've forgotten the names of but they were really very important in their day, and it was riveting because it was an intellectual exercise. All these were presented in a very traditional way on the London stage with flat lighting, painted flats and scenery and everybody acting up to the stage so that all the effects were done really for show rather than for the sake of the play, but the play came across. Another place I remember vividly was the Mermaid at Puddle Dock where I saw a couple of productions including *Galileo*. That was interesting, because it really was an intimate atmosphere. You entered the theatre, a very comfortable nice theatre – of course demolished years ago – and on every seat there was a free programme. It was a committed theatre for drama and all the plays they put on were done wholeheartedly.

In '63 you got the beginnings of the comedy movement and what I remember mostly from that was a couple of Spike Milligan's productions at the Duke of York's and the Comedy, we talk of Beckett and Ionesco, they really were anarchic. They open up things, you've got people like Ivor Cutler, who was really in his element, and it created a feeling of joy in the theatre that was preceding Monty Python and all that sort of thing. Then there was Joan Littlewood at the Theatre Royal, which I've mentioned, that was again a committed atmosphere there and the Royal Court which I was only able to visit once or twice. The one I remember most vividly - was in '64 I think - was the *Marat/Sade*. That was performed with great intensity and a very carefully considered production with the entire cast committed to the production. There was an electric atmosphere on the stage and in the audience, you had this wonderful audience down there in Sloane Square. You're talking about class, they were really middle class intellectuals, and you had to keep up with them really, and it was quite an experience which was unforgettable.

Outside London, I've mentioned Liverpool and a number of other places. In the forties and fifties Birmingham Rep made an impression on me, and of course Liverpool Playhouse, you had a whole monthly or six weekly programme like Beryl Bainbridge has recorded, it's exactly like Beryl talks about. I remember seeing Beryl on stage as Ariel in *The Tempest*, I've never forgotten the impression she made, she was a charming young girl and she should never have married Austin but still... I saw a whole range of plays there. I mentioned an actor in the fifties called Cyril Luckham who really was an outstanding actor. I remember him as Uncle Vanya, where his makeup was that of Lenin - you could have taken him for Lenin - but it was the most moving performance. They also did a production of Pirandello's *Enrico Quattro - Henry IV* - which was far better than the professional production I've seen going round on tour recently. It was done meticulously and entirely in the 1920's characteristic of that Pirandello period.

Pirandello is an underrated playwright and I wish we could have seen more of him. I have seen a student production of *Man with a Flower in his Mouth* and it is a shocking play when you really see it on stage.

Liverpool Playhouse was a good experience; you could see Shakespeare and Brecht. They did an imaginative Shaw production of *Pygmalion*; much better than the film anyway. Bristol Theatre Royal I did see an effort there on a classic scale - this would be '62 - to do Ibsen's *Brand* which is almost impossible to do, but they had a huge effort at it with a big cast and it did come across, so the provincial theatre really was committed and trying. In Manchester in the later sixties the university had this contact theatre where I saw the best production I've ever seen of *The Tempest* with movement directed by Litz Pisk, most imaginary, a huge heap of sand on the stage to portray the island, and an almost naked cast chorus doing gestures rather like seagulls or whatever was needed to throw light on the action, so it was a really modern imaginative production of *The Tempest*. I was working in Manchester from '60 to '65 so you had quite a lot of theatre. You had the library theatre which did this production of Lorca *The Blood Wedding* and a lot of the standard works and the Palace and so on. At the same time, I was going regularly in Liverpool in the early fifties to *The Unity*, where we did a whole series of plays. I did the sets and the scene painting for quite a lot of them - Molière and Lorca as I say, and Shaw and Shakespeare - so you got a good grounding. I must say that some of the productions were as good as you could see on any stage and this was done by a committed cast. I remember a production of O'Casey's *Gunmen for Me* which was terrifying, and done by Jerry Dawson and directing the most meticulous amateur cast, so I've got nothing against good amateurs. I saw another good amateur production in '64 in Newcastle at the People's Theatre [of] *The Keep* by Gwyn Thomas again, it was most imaginative.

You had receptive audiences in the provinces, I think people went not because it was a social occasion but because they wanted to go to the theatre. It's been interesting. I think anybody who hasn't regularly gone to the theatre over their life has missed out a hell of a lot. The difference between watching a film on television and going to the cinema and seeing it with an audience in a dark auditorium on a big screen is the same difference between seeing something on television as actually being in a theatre, because the audience... in my experience the different natures and changing natures of the audience reflect what's going on in society and their reception to the play is part of the production, and sometimes you find it irritating and sometimes not, but it's part of the experience. Where you get a really committed audience going to a really good play, it's an experience that's unique of its own kind, it's very much of its own genre and an experience you won't get any other way.

KN: So, is there anything else during that period that you'd like to tell me about or shed light on?

LB: Well on the stage and drama... we've covered a lot of ground

KN: Even if it's just about the experience of actually being there or anything that really struck you. Did you meet anybody famous?

LB: There was a theatre in Liverpool which got burnt down - it was arson I think - but it was off London Road, the Shakespeare. During the time I was in Liverpool it was taken

over by Sam Wanamaker, who really was a wonderful person and I got to encounter him, he made an enormous impression on me because he was such a huge personality, a big man too but with a kind of relaxed authority about him that immediately make a chord, and I got in touch because Gerry ran a film society for him, because cinema was another thing I was greatly interested in and still am, and taught at one time. I remember he was building up the whole cinema repertoire, so I gave him a whole bunch of cinema magazines - I ran a film club for quite a few years, I had a whole pile of Sight and Sounds, so I went and gave them to him and he made a big impression on me. He also put on a production of A View from the Bridge there, which again was quite an event because he could really direct a superb production, and it was authentic-looking and made a huge impression on the audience. You tend to meet people of course. Another person I met through Unity was Martin Kettle when he was at the Open University. His work on Blake I think is still extremely valid, I mean, the Open University booklet he did on Blake is still well worth studying and he gave some very good lectures on the theatre and literature which were worth attending. One of the nicest people I ever met was Ivor Cutler who came up here and did the work with Milligan, a charming man, and again a deep reservoir of humour. I'm really an outsider in professional theatre, I only just go to it. I think the people who made an impression on me after this period is a great playwright, now in France, who produced A Midsummer Nights Dream. I remember meeting some of the cast afterwards and I was very impressed with them, but it was just odd social contact you know, nothing special. I could never claim to be associated with the professional theatre in any way, I'm just a member of the audience really, and I'm quite happy with that.

KN: Okay, is there anything else?

LB: Yes, I suppose there is something I care about, and that's education. It's wonderful to see the theatre now deeply into education, and schools and colleges go to the theatre quite often. I remember one performance recently at the Clywd, where we managed to get the last two available seats for the National Theatre's touring production of Dreigroschenoper, and when we got there we found we were the only two people over 45, it was entirely filled with sixth formers. I had the same experience recently when we went to see a play at the Playhouse, I think it must have been Faustus or Doctor Faustus - the Marlowe play - and what struck me then on both those occasions, and since whenever I've seen kids, is for me it makes the theatre more enjoyable - they make a hell of a row, they laugh hysterically at any jokes, they respond emotionally to any tragedy or anything like that, a wonderful audience response, they've obviously been taught something about theatres so they know what's going on, and for me I don't find it distracting, those are the groundlings and I think that's lovely. I feel that theatre/drama is such an essential part of education that it should be something for everybody, and it's not just acting, it's the whole concept of theatre and what it conveys to people. A lot of modern audiences don't really have an informed background to the plays they go to see, and I hope that changes in future years and we get a real theatre culture, and one that's integrated with film and music and literature and so on so that people have a rounded response. My only worry about this is that the National Curriculum is really stifling all that creativity and I only hope we can overcome it, partly I think because of the education of teachers themselves. I'm very dubious about the calibre of some of today's teachers and the stresses and strains they're under, it's hard to find a really inspired teacher but that's what we need in education and what we need in the theatre. The other thing that really occurs to me is I think some of our producers and directors need a bit of educating too, outside of fairly narrow perimeters of having

to do a whizz-bang modern production. I think they really need to study in depth the playwrights whose works they're showing in the context of the times they were written, and then see them in the context of the modern era. You can measure it really, by the way that some plays might be presented like, say, *Measure for Measure* or *Coriolanus*, you know, Shakespeare, very political plays but how do you get them across to modern audiences - you can't interpret them in a traditional Shakespearian manner, but it would be throwing the baby out with the bathwater to put them entirely into a wholly modern context, you've got to find the right interpretation, and for me the model of doing that was the work of Jonathan Miller, and I think I've said it a great deal.

KN: You've been very, very helpful. If there's anything else you can go on...

LB: No, I don't think so. I just think we should have a lot more theatre in this country. Liverpool only has two really good performing theatres, plus a few fringe things like Unity and so on, and minor theatres - often semi-amateur - touring with small groups. We really need to spend a vast amount more money on the arts, including the theatre. You go to Berlin, or Hamburg particularly, and they've got five or six theatres each, and they're all performing good stuff and they've all got audiences. I think it's very sad. A city the size of Liverpool ought to have its own opera company, it would do if it was in Bergamo or Turin or somewhere. I think there's a thirst for it, people would like to have it, but they depend upon government subsidising the arts far more greatly than they do now, and we do need people at the top who can allocate the funds properly and spend them properly and appoint really inspired people to run the theatres. Well you'd better put a stop to it, I go on forever.

KN: Thank you very much for your time

LB: I found this, which I must have done round about 1950, one of the London theatres and I can't remember where it was. [A sketch of the audience.] I found it in an old sketch book, most of that stuff is thrown away. The only really interesting programme there is probably the Joan Littlewood but these are the sort of things I went to.

KN: I'll see if I can get a photocopy of those.

LB: Well you can have it.

KN: Okay, thank you very much for your time.