

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Peter Bartlett – interview transcript

Interviewers: Kate Harris and Ewan Jeffrey

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Actor. Auditions; BBC drama; George Bernard Shaw; Charlie Chaplin; Edith Evans; Equity; John Gielgud; learning parts; Look Back in Anger; RADA; Michael Redgrave; touring (Germany); touring (UK); Orson Welles.

EJ: Could you tell me how you first got into theatre, your first experiences with theatre?

PB: I did my two years in the Royal Navy, and then I went to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, I won a scholarship...

EJ: That was RADA?

PB: Yes, well, Sir Kenneth Barnes never let us call it anything but 'the R-A-D-A'. He wouldn't allow that other word and I won't ever use it. His sister Irene Vanbrugh would come to the academy occasionally and talk about life in the theatre, and she was so feminine, absolutely lovely. She had long gloves on and carefully took them off, and she taught us how to laugh. While I was at the academy, HM Tennent's, the leading London management, rang up and said, 'Will you send us your youngest-looking actor', and I was the youngest-looking and was taken down to the Piccadilly Theatre where I met Michael Redgrave, who was about to play Macbeth, and I read to him a bit of Fleance and the Third Apparition, 'Oh that's fine,' he said. I was thrilled to meet a film star and my first job was playing the Third Apparition in Macbeth, and he turned to Ena Bowel on the first day of rehearsal and said, 'He left the academy yesterday'. 'How sweet', she said.

EJ: An incredible break to get the chance to act alongside him.

PB: We had all sorts of adventures with Michael Redgrave.

KH: What did you think of Michael Redgrave, what were your impressions of him?

PB: He's a man of enormous emotional power, I admire him very much, but one night the cry of women had become rather peculiar and the audience laughed and there was a deathly silence, I was in the wings, I couldn't see what was happening on the stage, and

Michael Redgrave said, 'Be quiet, be quiet, I shall not go on unless there is quiet!'. The audience were stunned, and he began overacting like mad.

EJ: So this was addressed to the audience then?

PB: Yes, and the stage director said, 'I don't think you should have done it, Mr Redgrave'. 'Oh,' he said, 'I couldn't go on,' and he acted it all out.

KH: And were the audience quiet afterwards?

PB: Oh yes, they were stunned.

EJ: Must have been quite a surprise, really, I suppose. How long was that run, how long were you working?

PB: I think it was eight weeks at the Aldwych. We did a provincial tour, about five weeks' provincial tour.

EJ: What kind of places were you touring, where were you performing?

KH: Where did you go to in the regions? Which theatres did you go to when you did the tour?

PB: Newcastle, Glasgow, Edinburgh.

KH: Oh, OK. Were those kind of standard places you went to on all tours?

PB: I think they were, yes. The number one tour.

EJ: What was the atmosphere like on tour, did the people enjoy it, did the cast enjoy it, did Michael Redgrave enjoy touring?

PB: Yes, I think we all enjoyed it. Michael Redgrave stayed in ordinary theatrical digs because he'd stayed there once before and he liked them better than staying in a grand hotel.

KH: How did you find your theatrical digs? Did the people at the theatre find you places to live or did you have to sort all that out yourself?

PB: There were digs booked, published by Equity. 'Mrs Bronson of Glasgow' that sort of thing. and she charged £3 a week with food. Quite incredible.

EJ: Seems unbelievable now. So after the tour, what happened next, what were you doing after that?

PB: Someone fell ill and I took over the part of Charley in Charley's Aunt at Aldershot. They were short of someone to play Charley at High Wycombe and so the following week I played Charley at High Wycombe, and I stayed at High Wycombe for nine months, had a wonderful time, I played a vast variety of parts.

EJ: Were there particular plays they put on, was there a particular style of play they put on or was it very varied?

PB: It was very varied and the producer would see a West End show and get the scripts and we'd do it.

EJ: Were there any particular productions that you remember, that you enjoyed particularly?

PB: I enjoyed Third Person, Andrew Rosenthorpe, oh, Journey's End – one of my three favourite plays.

EJ: Was it popular with the audience, did you get good audiences?

PB: Oh yes. Well, with the men in High Wycombe, they were thrilled to see such a likeness on the stage, because they'd all been in the war. Very moving, it's a wonderful play.

EJ: I can imagine it must be very poignant to have actually been in the war and then to see the play.

PB: Yes, men would stop me in the street and say, 'I want to tell you how much we enjoyed the production', which was very nice.

KH: Was it a regular cast who performed in the theatre or was it always different people for each production?

PB: I think we tried to keep everybody together and people were brought in for extra parts, but we laughed a lot.

KH: Where did you work after that, when you'd finished working in that theatre where did you go to?

PB: I did a tour of Little Lamb's Eat Ivy, that's right. I did a tour of Germany, I played Roly Hughgill, a comic part. I loved it, we had a wonderful time in Germany.

EJ: Presumably English performances?

PB: Lord Teller wanted to have a group of actors go out and do plays in the RAF camps.

EJ: Was that part of ENSA?

PB: Yes, I think it was.

EJ: How did that compare with acting in Britain, how was the experience different, do you think, or was it different to act for the troops?

PB: Did we act differently?

EJ: Well, I mean, was the whole experience very different to acting in theatres in Britain?

PB: No, it was exactly the same.

EJ: The audience would respond differently, do you think?

PB: Oh yes, we were very popular and we went behind afterwards to have a drink in the officer's mess, and Heather Thatcher, the leading lady, would let us stay for half an hour and then, 'Come along, we've all got to get in the bus and go back to our digs'. [laughter] She rounded us up because otherwise we'd be too tired, going to a party every night.

KH: What kind of hours were you working when you were performing?

PB: We opened a play on a Monday evening, on Tuesday morning we read the next week's play, on Wednesday morning we went through Act One and Thursday, Act Two. I don't know, but we fitted it all in somehow. But there were times when I had a lot to do, you would sit and after supper everyone would go to bed and you would sit up with a candle learning lines. If you sort of knew it by the time you went to bed, it sank in. The next morning you'd know it, more or less.

EJ: It must have been enormous pressure to have that all the time.

PB: Yes.

EJ: So did you come out of rep, after touring you said you went to Germany, after then what sort of experience did you have with theatre; what did you do after coming back from Germany?

PB: I can't remember what I did after that. There were terrible out of work periods, a few auditions.

KH: Would your agent find you the auditions to go to?

PB: Yes. And I sang.

EJ: Oh, you sang as well. So you did musical theatre as well?

PB: Yes.

KH: What kind of shows did you do, can you remember any of the shows?

PB: I was in Sandy Wilson's *The Buccaneer*. Just a modern play with music.

EJ: Was that with a big cast?

PB: No, a cast of eight.

KH: Was the music live, was there an orchestra?

PB: It was live.

EJ: Did you enjoy doing musical theatre more than, say, straight?

PB: Yes, I think so.

EJ: When you did your acting, you said you enjoyed musicals, were you cast in particular roles, do you think? Did you find yourself taking a certain type of role?

PB: I was always the good-looking juvenile.

EJ: Were you ever cast against that type?

PB: Not really, I wasn't stretched as I should have been.

KH: Did you find yourself working with the same people again and again in different productions?

PB: Yes.

EJ: Is there anybody that you can remember that you really enjoyed working with particularly?

PB: I don't know; you get to know a lot of people.

EJ: I suppose a lot of people come and go, don't they?

PB: Yes. I'm a great theatre-goer, I've seen many, many plays.

KH: Did you go and see plays whilst you were performing, like when you had breaks?

PB: Went to a matinée, or in rehearsal time.

KH: Do you remember any of the productions you went to see, are there any that stand out that you really enjoyed?

PB: Yes, I saw John Gielgud's Hamlet.

EJ: Oh right, that's amazing.

PB: We travelled up from Northampton to see it at Haymarket and he played Hamlet twice in a day.

KH: That's quite a performance!

PB: It's incredible, the thought processes that go on in one's head. Played Hamlet twice. I remember this tremendous vibrancy and emotion, he was wonderful, absolutely wonderful. I saw all the major things, Laurence Olivier's Richard III, Laurence Oliver's Othello. The one I worship above all is Edith Evans, she was absolutely miraculous. She gave me the most moving experience I ever had. She was playing Madame Ranyevskaya in The Cherry Orchard and she was playing a scene with her brother, played by – I can't remember his name – and she was talking to him completely rationally, quite calmly, and suddenly she couldn't speak. It was terrible, it was the most emotional moment I've ever been through, but she didn't give us any warning, suddenly she couldn't speak. Cedric Hardwick was her brother in The Cherry Orchard.

EJ: Was Gielgud also in that production?

PB: No, not in The Cherry Orchard. He has been in The Cherry Orchard but he wasn't in the one with Edith Evans.

KH: Can you remember where that production was?

PB: The New Theatre.

EJ: Did you like the play, The Cherry Orchard, did you think it was a good play?

PB: Yes. I worship Chekhov.

KH: Did you act in any Chekhov yourself?

PB: I don't think I did, isn't it awful! At the R-A-D-A we did Three Sisters and I played Andre, but I never did any commercial theatre.

KH: Did you find you had much choice over the auditions and the parts that you went for?

PB: No, one was never grand enough. I was in that stage where you are looking for work all the time. So to do a 13 week tour would be a lovely break. But I spoke to non-theatrical people about how much money I earned, they couldn't believe it, so little. At High Wycombe rep I got seven pounds five shillings a week.

EJ: But you must have enjoyed it though, even if the money wasn't good?

PB: Oh, of course, yes. Couldn't save anything, but...

EJ: So would you use Spotlight to find...

PB: I was in Spotlight, yes.

EJ: And presumably you were a member of Equity?

PB: Yes. I feel so sorry that Equity doesn't have the same power as it used to have. They can take someone out of the street and put them in a part on television.

EJ: So, perhaps in the '50s and '60s it was always Equity, was it, that found the parts for people?

PB: Yes. I was in the BBC Drama Repertory Company for two years and did many broadcast plays, and Morning Story, I loved doing Morning Story. It carried live. Quarter to 11 'til 11, a short story. I was so brave, I did them all live.

KH: What kind of stories did you do, can you remember some of the titles?

PB: Not really, just stories.

EJ: Would you kind of act the parts?

PB: Yes.

KH: Did you find it very different, working for the BBC as opposed to working in theatre?

PB: Yes.

KH: Can you explain how it was different?

PB: We didn't have to learn it, to begin with. There is an art in lifting the words off the page, making it sound spontaneous. It's one of the values of...

EJ: So, with Morning Story, it was just you reading the story?

PB: Yes, live.

EJ: What was the other work you did for the BBC?

PB: Radio plays. They hardly do any now.

EJ: No, they don't, do they.

KH: Were the kind of plays you were doing on the radio, were they similar plays to the ones being done in the theatre?

PB: Oh yes, very often they were dramatisations.

KH: It was similar playwrights who were having their plays put on?

PB: Yes.

KH: Can you remember some of the plays that you were in, any you remember as enjoying being in?

PB: The Breadwinner by Somerset Maugham.

KH: What part did you play?

PB: Some 18 year old saying, 'We really think people should be put out of their misery when they're 40'. The Breadwinner by Somerset Maugham. We didn't do enough Shakespeare. We did Shakespeare on the radio but not much.

KH: Why do you think that was?

PB: Because listeners didn't want Shakespeare, I suppose. Harry Andrews was playing Henry IV part one and he turned over two pages at rehearsal and no one noticed.

KH: Did you do much Shakespeare in the theatre?

PB: I don't think I did. I think Macbeth. No. Oh, Orson Welles, I forgot the major thing in my life.

EJ: You worked with Orson Welles?

PB: Oh, it was terrifying. I played John of Lancaster, 'this John of Lancaster, he drinks no sack'. I had a little scene with Orson Welles, I came over giddy every night with terror. He couldn't have been more generous, I was on a rostrum in full armour and a lovely cloak, and he would be downstage with his back to the audience, so he couldn't have been more generous.

EJ: You must have been very nervous, being with Orson Welles?

PB: Oh, I was terrified. I was in Belfast having my breakfast and a taxi driver came to the door and said, 'Mr Welles would like to see Mr Bartlett straight away', so, ashen-faced, I got into the taxi and went off. Mr Welles was sitting on a throne, as I recall, a huge chair, a great purple dressing gown. 'Oh,' he said, 'how nice of you to come and see me', as if I had any choice! He said, 'This line of mine, I think it would be better if we transferred it' – he just made some small alteration which you could perfectly easily have told in the evening. I got in a taxi and went back to my breakfast.

KH: What was he like to rehearse with?

PB: Oh, he didn't turn up, he was dreadful.

EJ: Was he supposed to be there?

PB: Yes, and so whenever we got Orson at rehearsal we did his scenes of Falstaff.

EJ: So somebody would stand in, would they?

PB: Someone would read in. Mr Welles didn't know his lines and the opening night he was prompted and prompted. Oh, at the dress rehearsal, he was prompted, 'You come up on the stage and get to work' he said to the stage director. [laughs] He said, 'I know the part, but I want to have a script with me, it gives me confidence'. Oh, he was dreadful. Gosh, we went through a nightmare. The girl playing Lady Hotspur, Orson never heard her at rehearsal, didn't hear her playing until the performance. 'God almighty! God almighty, she's terrible!'. After the show, he said 'I'm going to try you out as the chorus', and she said, 'But I like playing the part' and she sobbed and cried. I was planted outside the door taking it all down in shorthand. It was lovely. But he gave us a dinner party at the end of the run and he did conjuring tricks. He was fascinating.

EJ: Where did you have the dinner?

PB: At a local pub. They had a banqueting room and a long table. But of course the greatest name in my life – how I could have forgotten, I don't know – Charlie Chaplin.

KH: Where did you work with Charlie Chaplin?

PB: Oona was going through Spotlight. 'I think this will do, Charlie,' and she picked out a photograph of me, I was sent for to meet Charlie Chaplin. I was thrilled beyond words, I was vibrating with awe, and he was kind, 'oh, that's fine, yes that's very good, I shall see you on Monday'.

KH: What did he want you to perform?

PB: The Countess from Hong Kong, starring Marlon Brando and Sophia Loren. It was the last film that Chaplin directed. They were never sure when Mr Chaplin would want us – I was Marlon Brando's cabin steward and they never knew quite when Mr Chaplin would want me, and so it was cheaper to keep me there all the time, so I was there for 14 weeks, watched the whole making of the film.

EJ: Where was this?

PB: Pinewood. I got to know him well, he was kind.

EJ: Was he very different from his screen persona?

KH: Was he like you'd imagined he'd be before you met him?

PB: Yes, I think so. 'I'm pooped!', he would say at the end of the day. He wouldn't wait until the end of the day, you're supposed to stay until 5.25, but 5.15, 'I'm pooped!'. But I went to the knighthood party and I was saying goodbye and Oona said, 'Charlie and I are very fond of you and we love your letters'. I said, 'Well, I love writing them, so I'll continue!', so I had a correspondence with Charlie Chaplin. But he was fascinating.

EJ: Did you prefer working for films than theatre, or did you prefer the theatre?

PB: Oh the theatre, every time.

KH: Is that because it was live?

PB: Yes, I think the communication with an audience is valuable.

KH: Did you find that the kind of plays you were performing in changed over time, so it was kind of a different style of drama, or did you find it was kind of the same? The

plays you were in, did you find that the style changed after the war into the 50s and 60s?

PB: I don't think so.

EJ: When *Look Back in Anger* came about, were you aware of a big change in theatre at the time, with Osborne's work?

PB: I suppose so, yes, *Look Back in Anger*, yes.

KH: Did you ever see *Look Back in Anger*?

I saw it at the Royal Court, saw the original production.

KH: What did you think of it when you went to see it?

PB: I admired the actor playing the leading part, he never stopped talking, Kenneth something. Tremendously long part. Oh, people play such long parts.

EJ: Were you quite surprised when you saw the set for *Look Back in Anger*, because I think it was one of the first plays to have a kitchen sink, to have the ironing board, was it a big shock to see that?

PB: No.

EJ: So the set didn't strike you in any way?

PB: No, I don't think so. Kenneth Hague, he played the leading part. I've missed out the greatest name of all, even greater than Charlie Chaplin – Bernard Shaw. I was the youngest actor in Bernard Shaw's last play and he didn't want the whole company to go down, 'Bring the youngest', he said to the producer, so I was taken down to Eyot St. Lawrence and met Bernard Shaw. He wrote an inscription, inscribed 'For Peter Bartlett, a young rip who, on the strength of having created the part of Fiffy in *Buoyant Billions*, now demands my autograph; here it is, G. Bernard Shaw, 5th November, remember, remember, 1949.

EJ: That's incredible.

PB: Isn't it wonderful.

EJ: Did you talk to Shaw much?

PB: Well, I was with Esme Percy, who produced it, so I sat there listening, most of the time. Again, an infinitely kind man. Esme Percy said, 'Can I take Peter into the garden?' – 'Oh, yes'. I went into the garden and saw the summer house where he wrote his plays. On a swivel - he could turn it around to face the sun.

KH: Did Shaw have much input into the direction of his play or did he just let the producer and director do it?

PB: I think you leave an awful lot to the producer. They have an overall picture, but if you're doing something very uncomfortable you would say so. I played Claudio in *Much Ado About Nothing*, a fascinating part.

KH: Where did you play that?

PB: Open Air Theatre, Regent's Park.

EJ: Who were you acting with at the time?

PB: Ruth Dunning played Beatrice and Anthony Sharp played Benedic. Not terrifically well known. There is a wonderful line, 'Lady Beatrice, did you weep all this time? Ah, now weep a while longer.' It's so moving, it's a beautiful play.

KH: Do you remember when that performance was in Regent's Park, what year it was?

PB: '63, I think.

KH: Did you find that in the period that you were working that the performances of Shakespeare changed, the way they were performed and directed?

PB: I don't think they did vary from a fairly straightforward interpretation. Actors in Shakespeare love doing it because in a way it's easy, the words are there, so rich and glorious.

KH: Thank you.