

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Peter Green – interview transcript

**Interviewers: Ewan Jeffrey and Kate Harris**

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Actors' agent; Actors; agency routine; celebrity; The Entertainer; Equity; John Gielgud; London theatre; Laurence Olivier; Manager of the Vaudeville Theatre, London; modern drama; Regional theatre; Repertory; Setting up an Actors' Agency; television; Richard Wilson.

KH: Shall we start from the beginning, where you started your career in theatre?

PG: I was a boy actor from Nesta and Richard Attenborough came from Nesta too and he'd just won the Leverhulme scholarship to RADA and one of the actors, John Barron, who was an actor who was here - died last year - was in the company and said, 'Why don't you try to get into RADA?', so I applied for an audition and couldn't get it because they were oversubscribed. So I didn't do that, but I was envious because Dickie Attenborough had won this wonderful scholarship and gone to RADA and never looked back. I said to my parents, 'I'm going on the stage' and they said, 'No you're not, you're going to finish your education'. However, that was a long argument and I left home when I was 15 and I went off to repertory in Llandrindrod Wells which was a small... very small repertory company operating in a church hall in the middle of Breconshire, which was basically an army training camp for officers at the time because it was during the war, 1945. I was there and I learnt my craft by watching other people, and I got better. In those days, I was fortunate because all the men actors were in the army and I was wearing trousers so I had to be accommodated as it were, so I was lucky and I got lots of jobs, I went to the Manchester repertory company etc and finally I decided I'd come down to London and try and see what my fortune had. But then that was the time when all the actors were coming out of the army so they were getting all the jobs, and I was determined to stay in the profession because I loved it so much and I became an Assistant Stage Manager and worked on various West End productions.

KH: Where were you an ASM

PG: In the West End. I did about five productions in the West End, some of them flops, of course. In those days, before Equity became stronger, you didn't get paid for rehearsals at all, and for instance, I did a play with Angela Badley and Walter Fitzgerald and we had a week in Bradford prior to West End tour and then we came into the Strand Theatre, ran for three performances, and I actually got ten days salary out of that production [laughter] because I'd rehearsed for three weeks for nothing. This is how it was in those days before Equity got a stronghold. So it was a great grind and you had to

get a job on the side. I had various jobs, I - while determined to remain in the profession - took various jobs like packing choc ices in Walls ice-cream factory through the night and actually acting as an overnight watchmen in St Martin's Theatre because I wanted to stay in the profession. By doing that I was able to stay in London and meet people and eventually got better jobs, because there was no point in hiding away in the provinces, if you wanted. In those days London was the centre and you had to be there. It doesn't matter now because most of the profession is out in the television studios so you don't need to be in London at all, you can work from Manchester or Scotland or anywhere, but you couldn't in those days, you had to concentrate on London. It was exciting and one was determined to do it, even it if meant starving in a garret. It's much better now because the pay is so much better and the opportunities are so much better. You can leave RADA now and go into Eastenders and in three months you're a so-called star, which is a complete abortion of using that word, really; you're just an actor. I enjoyed. I was determined to stay and do it and I did, and then eventually I learnt all aspects of the business. I worked for Keith Browse, which was the ticket agency, so I learnt about booking tickets, and finally I was offered a job as manager of the Vaudeville Theatre in the Strand and I was there for seven years. I kind of enjoyed it but I reached a stage where I hated dealing with authority, the Westminster city council and the fire people coming in, everybody was coming in and I wanted to get back to dealing with actors.

EJ: What year was that?

PG: I was there 1955, throughout the run of Salad Days and some plays after that.

KH: Did you have responsibility for programming at all for the shows that went out?

PG: Yes, I had to go around the country looking at various plays to bring into the theatre.

KH: How did you select them?

PG: It's difficult, because I went to Blackpool to see a show and I thought, 'Yes, this is the place for us, we'll get this', but five other theatres wanted it at the same time so it became a kind of auction and we didn't get those shows because the other theatres had a bigger capacity and could take more money, and obviously got a more reasonable rent, so it was like an auction really.

KH: Can you give us some examples of the kind of shows that you put on?

PG: Salad Days was the first, which was the main, then we had a play with a French actress called Francoise Rose, who you've probably never heard of but she was very famous in France, and she made a lot of films and she came over to do a play which was wonderful, except the audience couldn't understand what she said because her accent was so thick, and it was very sad because she was a lovely lady and she was being very

good and she was absolutely bewildered that the audience weren't coming to see her. So that was kind of sad. Then I had another play called *The Bride Comes Back* with Cecily Courtidge and Robert St Hare [?] and that was kind of a light-hearted comedy which ran for a while but in those days the only people who were really filling theatres were people like John Gielgud and Ralph Richardson and the really big names. There were very few big names, you could just put their name on a poster and people would book, it didn't matter what they were doing, if they were standing on their head they'd come and see it. So I got fed up with looking after actors and I decided I didn't know what to do, and I wrote to an agency called Connie's, which was quite a famous agency, they looked after Ralph Richardson, and I got a job with them for a year and learnt that part of the business, and at the end of the year I was sacked because I fell out with Miss Connie. She only... in those days, none of her clients were allowed to do things like *Eastenders* or what they call soap-operas now because they were looked upon as rental jobs, you did that to pay your rent but they weren't considered to be proper acting jobs, so you were only really encouraged to do good theatre, good drama. I knew Geoffrey Underwood, who is here too, who was sitting at my table at lunch, we had a kind of passing friendship and I met him one day and he said, 'What are you doing?', and I said, 'I'm badly out of work and I'm trying to get another job with an agency, but I'd have to buy my way in and I don't have any money'. Another friend of mine who was not related to the theatre at all, I was talking to his wife and was telling her my story and she said, 'Look, Dick – her husband – Dick will give you some money, but only on condition that you start on your own', which I'd never thought about. I was mentioning this to Geoffrey and he said, 'Perhaps I could get some money from my family, why don't we try it?'. In the end we started an agency in one room in Covent Garden with a trestle table and two chairs.

KH: How did you attract actors?

PG: I knew people I'd worked with doing the plays and things and I'd met people through working at Connie's for a year, met a lot of very established people, and I don't know... You know about Spotlight? Yes? I went to Spotlight to talk to Kerry Ellison, who was one of the executors there and I said, 'Kerry, I'm going to start as an agent, what do you think?', and he said, 'Oh, it's a marvellous time to start, you know all these people', and I said, 'Oh yes, but money is rather short'. He said, 'Look, you must be prepared to lose money for nine months, and after that you should be alright', so that frightened me to death. However, we started and it was just amazing, people came knocking on the door [he knocks on the table] saying, 'I'm looking for an agent, will you look after me?', and after four months we were making money, and it was wonderful. We decided we didn't want to be big time, we wanted a nucleus of good actors in whose career we could share because it was a kind of sublimation for us; we couldn't have our own careers but we could enjoy somebody else's and it was lovely. It was lovely. We had people like Richard Wilson, we found people. I found Richard Wilson in the Gorbals at the Citizen's Theatre in Glasgow, and Jack Shepherd. Then of course some of the stars came, Diana Dors and Derek Farr and Muriel Farr came. Their careers were kind of in limbo and we were able to resurrect them. It was marvellous and it meant more than the money, really, it was the enjoyment of sharing in somebody's career that we couldn't have ourselves, we couldn't have that kind of success. It was wonderful, wonderful.

EJ: It's amazing you mentioned Muriel Farr and Derek Farr because I interviewed Muriel but she called herself Muriel Pavlow.

PG: Yes, as she was, of course.

EJ: It was very interesting talking to her. Presumably, did you cast her... I'm trying to work out a kind of timeline.

PG: We gave up in 1986 because Geoffrey, who is much older than me, had a place in Brighton and he used to live in Brighton and he came in one Monday morning to the office in London and said, 'I'm going to give up'. I said, 'What do you mean?'. He said, 'I'm going to finish, I've had enough'. Because we were getting... at this stage we were getting young actors coming into the business who were telling us what they weren't going to do.

EJ: Ah, right.

PG: They were revolutionaries and they were saying, 'I don't want to do this, I don't want to do that, I only want to work in television'. They didn't want to work in the theatre and get proper experience and learn their job, and that was kind of taking the guilt off the gingerbread for us because we'd enjoyed being involved in other peoples' careers, so I could understand Geoffrey saying 'I'm sick of it, I don't like the people who are coming into the business now'. We had an assistant who wasn't very good at the time, so I had a place in Spain and said, 'I can't carry on alone because we've been a partnership'. He said, 'Why don't you go and live in Spain? You've always wanted to', so I did. We wrote to all the clients and said 'We're going to quietly close the door at the end of April and we're going out of business', and of course one of them threatened to sue us and said 'You can't do this'. It was terribly embarrassing, and somebody said, 'Why don't you sell the business?' and we said, 'We have nothing to sell, because all the good-will will go out of the door with us. Then another agent came along and said he'd like to buy it and I said 'There is nothing to buy' and he said, 'I want the name'. So he kept the name, which is Green & Underwood, and still functions and I went off to Spain and Geoffrey went off to Brighton and that was fine, I enjoyed that. Then I had a couple of accidents, I used to spend my time homing abandoned dogs and then I had two accidents, the last one I broke my back and I suddenly realised I couldn't run a house in Spain and I would reach a stage where I would need to be somewhere like this and looked after, eventually, so I wrote to Moira and we knew Muriel Pavlow very well because she's on the committee here and she said, 'Oh darling, I'll do what I can', and we had to wait and eventually got in here, and I'm very happy I'm here now because it's lovely. But I don't miss my career, but I don't enjoy the theatre as much as I did now.

EJ: Because you've seen the other side to it?

PG: Seen the other side, and I don't think actors are as good as they used to be, quite honestly. Really, we went to see Maureen Lipman the other day in a play at Richmond called Glorious, which is going to the Duchess Theatre, and she's wonderful and she was

very clever and very funny, but she was surrounded by a bunch of actors that I wouldn't have given room to if I'd been an agent. But she was probably getting all the money and they would be cheaper to employ, you see. That, I find, is a bit sad, because I think it ought to have been a concerted effort with everybody being as good as each other making it a better show, and I think the result is – for me, anyway – I thought it was all rather tacky, you know, not up to West End standard. I shall be interested to see what happens when it opens. But that kind of thing and I find I'm one of the few people that didn't think John Gielgud was the greatest actor in the world. I didn't, I thought he was terribly boring and always the same. Really, I do.

KH: You must have seen him in quite a few productions?

PG: Yes, and I have fierce arguments with people here. I mean, Peter Bartlett, who you've spoken to, absolutely adored him and lived and breathed John Gielgud, and I don't dare discuss it with him now because I can't see all this brilliance. Ralph Richardson, who we looked after, I thought he was clever in some things. I don't think they were really what I call good actors, I think they were stars.

EJ: Why do you think they became stars?

PG: Because they were in everything. Binkie Beaumont, who ran Tennent's at that time, put on all these shows, he had all the access to all the playwrights and the plays and the theatres, and he employed them because he could get them cheaply and they were happy to do it because none of them were making films. John Gielgud wasn't making films at all until the latter part of his career, so they were never really earning big money the way they can now. A lot of people like that, I didn't think Ralph was highly paid as a leading actor, and money became the be-all and end-all, a terrible greed crept into the profession which I didn't care for at all. I enjoyed the joy of being in the theatre and that old cliché, the smell of greasepaint as you walked into a theatre, it was wonderful, it was magical, and you were prepared to die to be involved in it.

KH: The periods when you were working, did you see it as a time of massive change in terms of the style of the shows and plays?

PG: Yes, it all changed with what they call the kitchen sink period when the Royal Court had people like John Osborne come along; they changed the theatre completely. I remember hearing someone say that Laurence Olivier said he would never appear in these kitchen sink dramas because they were scum, they weren't what the proper theatre was all about, and Vivien Leigh said to him, 'Well, darling, you'd better learn, because this is the future'. So he went to the Royal Court and did *The Entertainer*, made a big success, it changed his career, of course. But he was sensible enough to acknowledge that acting was changing altogether. The declamatory form of acting was going out of fashion and the school which started in America with Lee Strasburg where Marlon Brando and all those, Montgomery Clift, where they all started, it was a different style of acting altogether, and the English actors had to acknowledge this and learn to do it, and it was fascinating because not being involved you could see the change. You would go and see a play and think, they weren't very good, because they would be

declaiming like Martin Harvey did 300 years ago, whenever it was, and it was an entirely different style of acting. The result was you couldn't always hear what they were saying. If you went to a theatre where what I call the Lee Strasburg type of acting was going on you couldn't always hear. They had no idea of projecting to the gallery at all. Daphne went to see a play with Richard Griffiths which is being filmed at the moment, and I said, 'How did you get on?', and she said, 'Oh, it was wonderful but I couldn't hear a word that Richard Griffiths said because he was acting here, he wasn't acting to the auditorium at all, he was acting in an enclosed... as though he was in a film set or television'. It's quite different styles of acting now, I don't think I could do it any more because I think I belong to the declamatory style of acting, but if I was going to be an actor I'd have to learn to. So there, I've said my piece. Do you want to ask me anything?

EJ: Just a couple of things, really. What was the sort of work of an agent like when you started? It sounds a silly question, but could you give me an average day, what you would do?

PG: An average day, well, first of all we had to be concerned about the client; we weren't running a meat market just for making money the way a lot of agents do, we wanted to be involved in other actors' careers so we had to take on people that we knew nothing about, we'd probably seen performing at RADA or in a lunchtime theatre somewhere and you had to believe in their ability. Like Richard Wilson, finding him at the Citizen's in Glasgow, it was pure chance that I was there. I thought, this man is good for me, he's got something, so he came to us. The casting directors and other directors used to go around the country all the time looking at these theatres. You'd find them at lunchtime theatres in Soho looking for new, young actors, and talking to them, the Granada Studios started a stables theatre company and we managed to get Richard into that, and Jack Shepherd and there were lots of other actors who got in there and Granada paid for all this, and they produced these plays, produced all kind of people who went on to better things because they had no concerns about getting a salary, they were paid and they were allowed to develop and experiment with their careers, and that was marvellous jumping off ground. We didn't have that that until about 1966 or '67; before that there were no opportunities like that. The only opportunities were to get into a weekly rep. so one got involved... there was great excitement if somebody got a marvellous job and of course we used to gather everybody up and say, 'You must come and see this actor, he's got a leading role in the West End'. And we used to drive all over the country. We'd leave the office at four o'clock in the afternoon and drive to Manchester to see somebody in a play and take a casting director or director with us if we could. We did a lot of that.

KH: How many people did you used to have on your books?

PG: We had about 35 and we didn't want any more, we wanted to keep it nice and select because we believed that if we had too many people you couldn't really give them the service that was required.

KH: Was it a range of ages?

PG: Yes, a range of ages, depending on what we thought of their performing abilities, really. If they went off to rep we didn't take commission of that at all, but we always said the commission from our higher-paid actors helped to subsidise our lower-paid actors, and it worked very well, and they all understood this and accepted it. And it paid for all the driving all over the country to see them. But a lot of agents didn't do that, but we did because we were sublimating our own careers in theirs, you know.

EJ: Did it take the edge of theatre a little bit in terms of enjoyment in that you'd see a play and you'd be thinking in terms of, can I make this work for this person?

PG: Well, it made you more critical of performances rather, and quite often, if you saw somebody and thought, 'Well he wasn't very good, I thought he was marvellous the last time', you tended to say, 'Oh, well, he was in a bad play, he didn't get a fair chance because it was a badly written play, it didn't show him off to advantage', which I suppose in a way was an excuse. Because they weren't always perfect when they performed, I had a very serious argument with one of our clients, a young man I found who had terrible teeth, so we had his teeth fixed and he got to play Hamlet at Leicester. He came from the north, he was a good lad, he had quite a career in the end – he doesn't work quite so much now because he's older and fatter, but when he came on as Hamlet he shuffled on as though he'd come to fix the plumbing and I said to him afterwards, 'Keith,' he said, 'What do you think?', I said, 'I can't say I was overjoyed with what you were doing'. He said, 'What's wrong with it?', I said, 'Well...', and I tried to tell him. He said, 'But you know, this is how I see it'. I said, 'But Hamlet is a Prince, he's not a plumber and I know you can at least walk like a Prince'. And he couldn't understand this at all, he held it... and for the rest of his career he kept saying to me, 'Of course, you don't know what I'm really capable of because you don't see me in the right light' and it wasn't that at all. I felt like saying, 'Have you read this play and thought about who Hamlet is and what he is? Etc'. But that was his style and it didn't stop him working, he went on working as an actor but he didn't like what I said, but you had to say it, it needed to be said.

KH: Did you have particular contacts with particular theatres, so people from your agency would work quite a lot at?

PG: Yes, we had directors whom we knew who became administrators and directors in repertory companies and they of course would... Because when Equity developed a closed shop it was very difficult to get into the profession, so all these students were coming out of the drama schools and had no hope because they couldn't get an Equity ticket, and to get an Equity ticket you had to work in a repertory company or a job for six months and you then qualified to become a member of Equity. You couldn't work in the West End at all unless you had an Equity ticket, and we had one or two directors who favoured us, like Cheltenham and Nottingham and Birmingham, and I used to ring up and say, 'Look, I've got this actor and he's very good, and we think he's wonderful, but he needs a ticket. Can you help me?', and not often, but occasionally they would say 'Yes, in my quota I can take an Assistant Stage Manager, and I'll take him for six months and give him his Equity ticket'. And after that the world was his oyster. But of course these youngsters used to get very restless, and once they'd got into the company

and got their ticket, after about a month they'd say, 'I don't like being Assistant Stage Manager, I want to be an actor, I'm off!'. Then of course the director used to say, 'That's lovely, thank you, what have you done to me, I've lost my quota so I can't get another non-Equity actor' and it was terribly unfair, really, but the new breed of actors were selfish, they didn't give a damn, they all wanted to become stars overnight, which they can do now with things like the soap-operas. I wouldn't like to deal with any actors now, coming into the profession because they don't understand what it means to go out and learn the business, you've got to go out around the provinces and learn about it all. And it tells if people have got experience, you can spot it immediately. Someone like Maureen Lipman, she knew exactly what she was doing in this play and it was lovely to watch because you were watching a professional at work. However, what else, anything else?

EJ: Who did you enjoy working with most? I know it's very difficult to grade that, but who do you think was the biggest pleasure to work with?

PG: Richard Wilson was at the time and Jack Shepherd certainly. It was those that you could do something with; that you could put onto better things and enjoy their careers. A mixture, really, I can't say that I enjoyed a lot of them because some of them were very stropky, as I say; so busy telling you what they weren't going to do. I had one young man I said 'Look, you can go to Nottingham, you can do three plays and they'll let you play a good part in Romeo and Juliet.'. 'I don't want to do any Shakespeare', he said. I said, 'What are you coming into the profession for?' 'I've come in to earn some money.' I said, 'You need to do Shakespeare'. 'No, I'm not going to do Shakespeare'. And he wouldn't do it. He'd sooner stay out of work on the dole. It was this kind of attitude of the youngsters that were coming into the business that made me sour about carrying on. I'm sorry about that, I miss it. Well, I don't miss it now because I'm getting too old, but they were happy days and I think could have gone on being happy if the profession hadn't changed so dramatically as it did after about 1955 or '62, when the Royal Court started doing the Osborne plays, that was the great change, when Tony Richardson came along, this new breed of directors came along and just changed the business completely. So, there we are. I feel I've bored the pants off you.

EJ: No, I haven't actually spoken to an agent before, it's been really good. Thank you.