

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Paul Williamson – interview transcript

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AF: I'm going to start by asking you for a brief overview of your career.

PW: Well it's a long career! I went to RADA in 1947 – the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art - for a year, then I was called up for National Service, as one was in those days, and I spent two years in the army and then my regiment was sent to Hong Kong in the big emergency when the Nationalist Chinese were being thrown out by the Red Chinese, so they rushed my regiment, amongst others, out there, and I decided to sign on for an extra year, so I was in for three years. That year made me grow up and learn a bit about myself and about people, so it was actually very valuable to me as an actor. So it was well worthwhile doing, I was always going to go on being an actor, but it was actually a bit like a gap year, only even more so, because I got my second pip, so I was a full lieutenant and became a better actor! I came back in 1950 and went back to RADA for a second year because it was a 2 year course in those days, and started in weekly rep in 1951 straight after RADA – there's a story of how I got that, but I won't bother you with that - and lo and behold I was actually being a Student Assistant Stage Manager at the Richmond Theatre, paying them a pound a week, which was a very large sum, for the privilege of washing up the coffee cups, and sweeping the stage and doing all the shitty work, but while I was there, a couple of times I read in for actors who hadn't got to rehearsal yet, that was a weekly rep, they did a new play every week. The director there - in those days they were called producers - the man who put the play on stage is really the director but in those days he was called the producer, just in case it confuses you later on, he was putting together a company, and he asked me to join them as an acting ASM, so I was in St John's, Newfoundland, not a well known centre of the arts, then as now. So for 6 months of winter '51- '52 I was slugging my guts out in weekly rep in St John's, Newfoundland. When I came back after that, the director had by now gone on to another company at Hull, a weekly rep company there, and he asked me over there and I was a full blown actor without any bloody stage management duties, and that was the summer. The same management also ran a company over in Preston in Lancashire, so I was taken over there, still as an actor, thank Heavens, and I did the winter season there, weekly rep. Back to Hull for the next summer (weekly rep) and the other director there had by now gone up to Dundee in Scotland, and after I finished at Hull he asked me to go up there, which I was very pleased to do because it was fortnightly rep, you had only to do a new play every fortnight, which was rather a pleasant change after the

slog of weekly rep! And that took me through another year up there so that was three years work like that. Now, I came back to London (I lived in London in theory) and did various weeks here there and everywhere, little bits of film here and there. In 1960 I did my first TV, but in between I managed to get to Birmingham Rep, which was the premier rep in those days - in 1957, '58, '59. I did three years at Birmingham Rep which was monthly rep and that was really the highest standard. Just to drop a few names, the leading man would have been Albert Finney, who was there for the first year, and then a man called Ian Richardson joined us, who is also rather well known, and Elizabeth Spriggs. Quite a lot of good people were there - some of whom went on to fame and fortune, some of whom kept going - which is actually quite good by our standards. As I say, first telly in 1960, and from then on I alternated theatre, television, a little bit of radio, a few feature films - Exodus I think was my first one, with Otto Preminger, going to Israel, that was exciting. So I had been alternating, then, mostly telly - hundreds of tellys, literally - then gradually when commercials came in, I started to do commercials which are very, very difficult to do, and very, very difficult to get and very difficult when you do them because they are so precise, because the scene is going to be shown time and time and time again, unlike a normal scene - every little detail has to be just so, and it makes the acting of them jolly difficult, and often the lines are very difficult because they are written by committees rather than by proper authors. If you get one it's very nice but it doesn't pay the money that you hear about. I've done several over the years and the last one I did I got about £15, 000 spread over several months, which sounds lovely until you think that you take off 15% to your agent or something. But people talk about £30,000, £100,000 and all that stuff - it might happen to stars but it doesn't happen to work-a-day actors like me. And this went on; some West End work, but mostly provincial theatre and good telly in supporting roles - but we're outside the time that you want to know about now, which is up to 1960 or so. And then I suppose, about five years ago I started to find that the work was getting less and less because there are far fewer parts for old people. I'm now 76 and I started at 22, and if you look at the average telly, or even theatre, you find that there are very few people over 30/40 and those that are there are nearly always semi-stars. So you haven't got much hope. Now I gradually think of myself as being retired, which after 55 years in the business I don't really mind about. I did a telly about three or four weeks ago - Broken News - which I enjoyed very much, and I auditioned today for another film, but it doesn't worry me if I don't work now because I've been at it for quite long enough and I find that the stress is starting to build up. There was a lot of stress in weekly rep, as you can imagine. Do you know...would you like to hear about the schedule of weekly rep? Would you like to hear about that, how it worked? Later on? I'll leave it to you.

AF: Well, what I'd like to ask you first is what was the difference of your experience between provincial theatre and London theatre?

PW: I didn't get to London theatre until '68. I don't think I got my first... I'd have to look it up to check when my first London theatre was - I suppose I did do one. [subsequently established that these were London performances rather than West End ones, and included a production at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith for Frith Banbury] Well, it's even more uncertain, even then, because you've got no idea how long a show is going to run in the West End. It's tragic when you think of the amount of work that hundreds of people put into a show and it's slammed by the critics or disliked by the audience, and it closes in one, two, three weeks. It's worse in the States. I suppose that is the great difference - it was totally uncertain. I've only done one long run in my life, and that was The King and I at the Palladium with Yul Brynner and Julie McKenna [later

corrected by the interviewee to Virginia McKenna], that was a year and a quarter [in 1979], but that was at The Palladium which was London's premier, in those days, Variety theatre. That was fascinating trying to find out how to make a performance last and keep it alive for week after week, month after month. It's different in a musical, I must say. It was much easier in some ways, because you're buoyed up by the music. So I suppose the difference would be, I did do one or two London shows, but never for long runs, but normally if you did a run it's so different from doing a play for a week, a fortnight or a month – you've got to try to make it alive and spontaneous for month after month. It was different in a musical I must say, much easier in some ways because you're buoyed up by the music, as I said.

AF: You were talking about critics. I don't know how much contact you've had with critics, but over your career what were your thoughts on what critics have said about your plays and your personal acting?

PW: Well, the provincial critics were just local journalists, they weren't trained theatre people, and they varied very much from paper to paper, and from town to town. And you really didn't take a lot of notice of them personally. If they said that you were very bad in a part, which was very rare because they are generally just sort of bland, you would think possibly, 'Oh, fuck it!' But mostly all you cared about was, did they give the play a good write-up in order to bring people in? Because that's the main thing - you wanted people to come to the theatre and a good notice in the local paper would bring people into the theatre. That was more important than your personal crit. In Newfoundland, it was very sweet - they used to say things like, 'Must Paul Williamson chew gum quite so energetically?' Because I was playing an American, you see, at twenty-one, so I thought, 'Oh, Americans, they chew gum, so I'd better chew gum to show I'm American to help my accent', so that was when I was very young and immature but I found that very funny. And, 'Why would his celluloid collar not settle in that part?! They were really very provincial shall we say? But they weren't like proper London critics in those days, so one didn't worry too much about them personally, but you did care about whether they gave the play a good write up.

AF: What about audience reactions in provincial theatre?

PW: Well, what can one say? It varied enormously from play to play, from theatre to theatre and from the different theatres in the same town. I find certain places were supposed to be very dour and not very responsive but you couldn't be at all sure it was like that. I played one play, a comedy, in four different places in four different productions, and I played it finally in Chester and they were the worst audience ever. I knew where the laughs were because I'd done it in three different places; once in the south, once in the east, once in the midlands and then suddenly up in the Northwest they were just, 'Unhh!' I talked to local people, friendly people afterwards and I asked, 'What is it about Chester?' and they said, only half humorously, 'We've always been a bit on our guard here because we're so close to the Welsh; and we're not too keen on the rest of England either!' [laughter]. I found that very agreeable and understandable - they were nice people but they just didn't like exposing themselves by laughing in public, which is a bit hard when you're playing a comedy to them.

AF: What about job conditions and salary and job security?

PW: Bloody awful on the whole! I mean, you're paid very little. My pay for my first job was about £7 a week - you've got to make allowances of course for what money was worth in those days - when I went to Hull which was my first full job apart from the ASMing on £7 per week, I do remember this bit, my digs, which were B&B and an evening meal, were £2, 12 [shillings], and 6 [pence] which is a large proportion of £7, well over £2, 10 shillings (£2.50 it would be now). So I had to pay a lot for my digs. In weekly and fortnightly rep in those days you had to provide all your own costumes - modern costumes - every week, which meant that you had to have quite a big wardrobe which you had to pay for yourself - much worse for the girls of course. Many of the weekly reps had arrangements with local shops - big stores - where they would lend the girls clothes for an acknowledgment in the programme. But it was very difficult to have more than one or two suits, you had to have a dinner jacket and you had to have things that would look right for almost any modern play. They would hire stuff for you for any period play - you know, wigs, and proper Georgian costume or Shakespearean or whatever it happened to be, but you had to provide all of your own costumes and make-up - and there was a lot of make-up. Because the lighting was rather crude you had to use a lot of grease paint, and that sort of rather ruled one's life because it was jolly dirty - I mean it was greasy, and you had to wipe it off and clean it off. The other thing about clothes was that there was much less laundry in those days - if you didn't get your clothes washed by the theatre then your shirt might have to last you the week. You'd be sweating in to it through nerves and exertion all week, plus round the collar you'd have all that five and nine, the particular basic colours of grease paint. So it was all fairly sordid. Your digs you had to find yourself and pay for, and they were fairly sordid. I mean, you were lucky if they were clean and quite often there would be one loo or one bathroom for a house of two or three floors and you'd all be rushing around in the morning at the same time if there were two or three of you in the same digs or there might be people going to offices and so on. That was bloody difficult as well, having to go to a strange town and finding somewhere to live - just wallop! Like that. That's continued to this day really. There are very few theatrical digs left now; most people stay in small boarding houses or even hotels, if they're being better paid. But that was very much part of one's life, trying to find decent places to live, and somewhere quiet and warm! I mean, the communal sitting room would be warm but there would be no heat in your bedroom and of course you needed the privacy to learn your lines because most of your life was about learning your lines, learning your lines, on and on and on, particularly in weekly rep. This is why, eventually, I was going to tell you about the schedule.

AF: Yeah, do please, especially with weekly rep, about how much time did you spend learning your lines?

PW: Well, you started on... shall we say you started the week really on the Tuesday morning - having opened the previous play on the Monday night - and you blocked through the whole play, that is you had the play script in your hand and you worked on a stage which had been marked up by the stage management with tape and the right furniture, although it would be the evening's set of course; and mostly you went by what the French's Acting Edition said, and on that line you'd come in from the door - left - cross, above the sofa, to the drinks table - right. You'd either write that down, or just tick it if that's what you did. You say your lines, and you work your way through the

whole play - and it was generally three acts like that - by lunchtime. So that's from ten till one. So that's blocking the play, Tuesday. Tuesday afternoon you'd learn Act One by heart, which could be 20 or 30 pages, possibly. I was always the slowest learner, so it was bloody hard work - something like 15 minutes a page, I found to learn a page of dialogue. That night you had to pull yourself together and remember what you did the previous night and you'd have the second performance of that week's play and then after the play, apart from a bit of supper, you'd probably go on learning your lines. Wednesday morning you'd rehearse Act One without books i.e. by heart. Wednesday afternoon - possibly a matinee, but also try to learn Act Two. Do the play in the evening, then in the evening after the play, you'd learn a bit more of Act Two. Thursday morning, rehearse Act Two without books and learn act three in the afternoon, then do the present show in the evening. Friday morning, rehearse Act Three - mostly they were three act plays in those days because they were from West End. You'd then rehearse Act Three before lunch. After lunch you'd do a run through, or it was often known as a stagger because it was more of a stagger than a run! So that was your first chance to have a go at the whole play. Friday night do the show. Saturday morning, another run through - big deal. Saturday afternoon, matinee of the present show and Saturday evening, last performance of the present show. Sunday, in theory, off, although in Newfoundland we did a radio show as well - God help us! - in the evenings. Probably try to get your clothes together, try and find out what you've got; change the buttons to try and make the jacket look different from last week or whatever. You've scrounged around the company, possibly, and said, 'Can I borrow that and you borrow that?' and so on and so forth. Then during the week you've also been doing this - trying to find out what to wear. Also, start looking through the lines and reminding yourself of the bad bits, and possibly even looking at the next week's lines just to think 'how much have I got to learn next week?'. Monday morning is the same. Monday afternoon, dress rehearsal - which was also the technical rehearsal. Nowadays, you have a tech. rehearsal before the dress rehearsal in order to get all the right things ready - you put on the light, it actually comes on, and all the stuff of 'cloth comes down there' and make sure you're not standing under it when the scenery comes in and so on. They were simpler sets on the whole, of course and simpler lighting. So you did a dress rehearsal in the afternoon and that would go on, in theory, until about late tea time - just in time for supper or a bite to eat, but sometimes it went on right up to when the audience were coming in for the first night. And occasionally we never did finish the dress rehearsal. So the first night would include, at the end of the third act, parts which you had never done before in the dress rehearsal. And you did the show, and collapsed in the pub, and then thought, 'Tuesday morning, start the next play.'. Hence... well the only sort-of anecdote I can think about that is the archetypal story of the rep couple in bed together, he's saying, getting a bit frisky and saying 'Oh come on dear, what about it? been a long time..' and she's saying 'Oh, no...', 'oh come on darling, what about it?' and eventually she says 'Oh alright darling, but leave the light on so's I can learn me lines!' And one felt it was getting a bit like that! And of course you only had about ten or twelve people in the company, and there tended to be leading man, leading lady, character man and woman, juvenile man, juvenile girl (or ingénue), second juvenile... and so on, so people tended to be rather hieratical. Luckily I was in good weekly rep companies, I mean, really the top of their kind - the Salberg companies they were called. And you were cast as to what the part actually should be, so if the lead was a youngish man he wouldn't be played by the leading man, who might be forty or fifty, it was played by the young man, so the parts were spread around more. But it did mean at times that the leading man had to learnt the lead every week and the other people didn't have to learn quite so much. But even in my first job, I mean, I've looked at that record, I was playing a lead by my fifth week I think [pause while programmes are checked] Where are we... Victor Prynne,

Private Lives, that's a lead and there are only four people in it! And I played that as an acting ASM, I wasn't even the main juvenile. Juveniles – meant a young man, it doesn't mean, as it would now, a child. So I was playing a large part like that, as well as doing the stage management and there was a hell of a lot of stage management – we had to scrounge all the props, everything to dress the stage, you had to find all the furniture and borrow it from shops and other people's houses and that was fairly hilarious – and it had to go back on the Monday morning, the stage management were working like fury getting all the stuff back and getting all the new stuff in on Monday morning as well as, in my case because I was stage managing as well as playing the part, having to think 'I'm playing a very large part this afternoon and evening'. I've got my letters home from that time, my father kept them for the six months of my weekly rep in Newfoundland, and all I write about, apart from the plays, is 'I'm so tired, I'm so tired, I'm dirty, I can't get clean' and it's absolutely one long slog 'I can't do the part justice'. Because you couldn't really rehearse very much, you only just went through it once and they'd say 'little bit quicker in that bit Paul, little bit more vehement there' and you go back and do that, that was about all you had. No time to look for sub-text, really, you just got on with it. And that's not an un-mixed blessing, because it taught you about a lot of plays in a short time, I mean, four plays a month. And we used to say, roughly, 'Three plays for the audience and one play for us', which meant one decent play and the rest would be Agatha Christie and potboilers which were not so much fun for us – not very deep, but it meant you found out a lot about comedy and drama timing, and reactions with audiences, because you had a different audience for a different play as it were every week.

But they used to get to know you very well, your landlady would say 'what are you as this week?' which always used to amuse me – 'as!' - and then the other story you'd get is you'd have to go to the occasional party after the show with the local bigwigs – local councillors and aldermen, you'd be up north and they'd say 'Oh, I enjoyed it, I had to laugh...' – you'd 'have' to laugh, and you'd been working your socks off! – 'Very good, very good, what's your real job, what d'you do in the daytime?' Then I'd start to explain this schedule to them 'Oh, I thought you'd made it up', yes, and this used to hurt a bit, you know. Or they'd have this awful 'nudge, nudge, wink, wink' thing 'all them actresses, eh, ooh, soon as the curtain's down, at it like knives eh?' And you think...'!' Knives... I never understood... quite a common slang phrase then, 'at it like knives'... what the connection with sex is I do not know. But it was 'At it like knives then, well...!' It was much more like the story I've told you – you'd be bloody lucky to take ten minutes off from learning your lines! Right, sorry, on and on! When you got to fortnightly it seemed heaven of course, and monthly then you really were digging into the sub-text and doing proper rehearsals for three and a half weeks, and you'd have two dress rehearsals and a tech and so on, and it was another world.

AF: Could you elaborate, in weekly rep, what were relations between the actors and the crew...

PW: Well, you're very close, because of course some of the stage management are acting, very often the stage management are acting every week and there's the stage manager and two ASMs and they'd be the junior ones of the company, and so you'd be sweeping the stage and making the coffee and so on and then going home to learn your lines after that, after each show. And you'd take it in turns at running the show, actually sitting in the [prompt] corner, pressing the bells, making the cues and all that stuff, then dashing on, doing your part and dashing off. One of the earliest parts I did, I

had to be killed at the end of the first act so I could go off and prompt the other two. So relations, well, they're all part of the same thing, you're not separate.

One of the things I regret about today is that because it is now so much more technical, because everything is computer-driven, and the lighting and sound effects are much, much more electronic, you are trained as a stage manager quite separately from the people who are trained as actors, and that is a pity, because when it was simpler you knew about each other's problems and therefore you'd be more understanding about it. The famous thing is you'd have a box of matches, which someone has to use to light a cigarette. You'd always have the heads of two of them sticking out slightly, just where the box is ajar as it were. The reason for that is that if you're nervous – which you always are on stage – you open the box and either you'll spill the bloody lot, or you're scrabbling trying to get them out. If two heads are ready, you pick one out straightaway [makes sound effect of lighting a match] and you're away. The fact that the person's cigarette is going like... because they're nervous too... little things like that. If you're a stage manager only, you might say 'For God's sake, what's all the fuss about. Bloody actors!' But if you've been acting too, you'd understand. We used to tape the underside of cups so they wouldn't rattle with nerves of the saucer, because you'd be frightened and so on... And you'd understand that if a stage manager left a chair off - a vital chair off - which I did once, and someone has to come on and say 'sit down, will you' and suddenly realise there's no chair, you're making an absolute fool of an actor and you realise how awful a mistake it was by the stage manager. On the other hand if you knew how hard the stage management were working on that particular change of scene, you'd understand it, and I think that's valuable. And that is lost today, totally understandably.

AF: Could you talk about career progression and how you'd go around getting a job, and how you'd go around getting better jobs?

PW: Casting directors didn't seem to exist for most of my career up until the 1960-70s and then they were mostly for films only. Most of my jobs came either directly from one to the other, like the first three I told you about where each director took me on to the next, or one director saying to another, 'I'm casting so and so, have you got any ideas?' Or they'd ring up a reputable agent of whom there were far fewer and say 'I need an actor to play so and so, have you got anybody?' And the agent would say, 'Well, yeah, look at page 345 of Spotlight', the casting directory, and every actor, virtually, has their picture and small details in it. It was about three inches thick for the men and three inches for the women when I started. I was in Spotlight offices this morning, and today it's a foot and a half wide there are so many more people in the business. Also there were probably only about eight or nine thousand members of Equity as actors when I joined in 1951. There are now 34,000 members of Equity, and many, many are not even members of our union. Because... Mrs Thatcher's so called reforms, she destroyed the unions back in her political times. She said we can't have a closed shop, which meant we couldn't protect our members any longer and people will now get all the benefits we fought for as a union over the last sixty, seventy years without actually being a member of the union, and we're not allowed to do anything about it. We can't bar them in any way, we can't refuse to work with them and they are, some of them, quite well-known people, not paying their very small dues in order to be a part of our union. I mean the sort of things we've fought for... When I joined you only just got paid half-salary for rehearsing and of course you were working your socks of rehearsing, but you only got half your salary for it; and that had only just been achieved. And then much later we

managed to get holiday pay. So you were allowed a week's holiday a year, paid. That was quite something.

AF: Can you remember when that was?

PW: No, you'd have to ask Equity for that, but perhaps thirty years ago, something like that, and these things the non-union members get the benefit of and they don't bloody join! Where did I start off? How did you get a job? Agents. Yes, you had an agent, you hoped. It was difficult to get an agent; but far more difficult now. I'm so sorry for young people now – it's a much, much harder, business now, even than it was then. See, I went straight into rep from RADA and wasn't out of work for the first three and a half years. Many people now come out of drama school and don't work for a year, two years because the competition is so horrific, that's for the young people, let alone us oldies! So mostly it was word of mouth, the casting. I don't remember being called in for an interview until possibly the 1960s and then you're starting to get casting directors who were advising the directors and they were bringing in a number of people to audition for that director having contacted several agents and they'd all look you up in Spotlight, and see what the person looked like, and you'd come and do all kinds of auditions.

AF: Did you personally or did you know of anybody who had any experience or encounters with censorship while it was still enforced?

PW: No I've got no personal recollections of that because during all those years we were doing very few new plays and it's the new plays, of course, that would have been subjected to the censor's office. The only time we had trouble was when I was at Dundee we wanted to do André Obey's Noah, which is a lovely, classic play about Noah, who talks to God and says, you know – of course God is over the audience – 'Build a ship, God? You say there's going to be a flood? How... HOW big a ship?!'. It's a lovely, reverent, sweet play, but when it was projected that we were going to do it at Dundee, which is a very dour town, the local religious bigwigs got hold of the idea that we were going to do some blasphemous play at the local rep and we had trouble there until we sent a copy of the script to the local Roman Catholic bishop and I believe that of the Anglican – what are they, the Wee Free? - and they passed it when they saw that it was actually a very reverent play. It's typical, happens to this day, such as the business with Jerry Springer: The Opera. None of the people knew about it before they made a fuss about it, and it's a play, a satire on ignorant superstition and ignorant, wrong kind of... general ignorance of religion and how... the fallibility of people, how they long to appear on TV, even if that means bashing their partner across the head in front of a TV audience – you know what The Jerry Springer Show is like? – it's an awful thing, but the [stage] show's a send-up and a lesson [about] intolerance really, but, as I say, because we didn't do new plays on the whole, we didn't have them passed by the Lord Chamberlain all the time.

AF: As an actor, during that period, how did you feel you were perceived socially?

PW: I think that they found us quite intriguing in little provincial towns. I suppose that they looked down on us socially, some people did. But mostly people thought we were

rather special. In a small town you were known after three, four, six months, and you were known. In the library I'd get a book and they'd say 'I hope you enjoy that book Mr. Williamson'. I could even go to the station and they'd say, 'Oh! Off to London this weekend?' And you'd begin to think that this is not very nice because you are very much under observation the whole time. But there was this lovely feeling of... they felt you were their players, their actors, and you'd get lovely presents of socks that had been knitted by the dear old ladies out front and so on. Most of the gay actors used to get things like that because - unconsciously I think - I think the dear ladies thought they were sort of safe with them! Slightly sort of stronger more dangerous, handsome young men who weren't gay didn't get quite the same attention. But you also had to be on your guard, because you'd be walking down the street and people would smile at you because they thought they knew you because they'd seen you every week across the foot-lights. (We used to have foot-lights in those days, you don't nowadays.) And you had to remember - you had no idea who they were - but you had to be quite alert (if you hadn't got quite good eyesight) to smile back. Otherwise they're bound to be some important councillor's wife who'd run back and say, 'So-and-so cut me in the street today'. I think we were looked at as quite entertaining odd people. Even this little talk I've got to give tomorrow... a quantity surveyor is not asked to give a chat to the local Rotarians! Although his job is extremely important and probably has got a lot of interesting sides to it. But me, an ordinary hack, working actor, they do want to ask to chat. So there is this sort of thing, it's still glamorous, which it ain't, but they've still got this idea that it's something different. Well, it is something different. It... it's rather special. I mean, there's a famous story if you want. It encapsulates our sort of business. It goes back possibly to the twenties when people were even more out of work and broke and so on. An old actor and a young actor trudging along a road because they can't afford a fare so they're walking to the next town because they hope there's the possibility of a job there. Probably carrying their luggage. And they come round the corner of the country road and there's a little verge. There's a Rolls Royce drawn-up there, with a chauffeur-butler laying out a magnificent repast with all the young people about to enjoy the champagne and the canapés. And the young actor says to the old actor, 'Sir! Look at that. Oh, doesn't it make you so hungry and so on. Look at that, wouldn't it be marvellous to be like that.' And the old actor says, 'Ah, but always remember, laddie, they cannot act.' [Laughter] And if you understand that, that's slightly the way you feel: a kind of arrogant fortune at being something special because you can act. And I love that. It's told at people's funerals. It was told at the funeral of one of the first people I ever worked with in Newfoundland, a super actor but he was in weekly rep, he was not a star, just one of the thousands that never get into the public consciousness. But you must not get bitter about it. That applies to any profession. You can be as good as you like in your business, but if you're not a public success, people will think you aren't a success, but you are, you're a person in your own right. End of chat by Uncle Paul! [laughter]

AF: Are there any particular productions during that period that were of particular interest to you? That really had an effect?

PW: [pause] There was such a succession of plays. Oddly enough, as a 22 year old ASM, very early on... I was talking about *Private Lives* by Noel Coward which was my first leading part though I was only a 22 year old ASM. Do you know the play at all? Don't suppose you do. Victor is the very sort-of straight-laced new husband, pompous and so on... And the director, who happened to be this lovely actor, he said to me, 'Stop acting, just say the lines.' And I realised that I had been acting pompous, acting the part as

opposed to being it, which is the essence of good acting. I think we were all obsessed with being little Alec Guinesses, where you vanished into the part and were totally unrecognisable. And most acting is not like that, you can adapt yourself and your own personality to the part. So that taught me the lesson that if it's a good play then let the lines do the work for you. When I was at Birmingham Rep eventually and Albert Finney was there, he had only been about a year, a year and a half in the business; very confident, I don't mean arrogant, I mean confident. And I would sit out front and watch him in rehearsal and the thoughts went 'pyoing!' out of his eyes and across, and I, perhaps the same day, had been doing something and the director had said, 'Yeah, that's alright Paul. What about trying so and so?' I said, 'I've been doing it!' And he said, 'Well, I didn't know.' And I hadn't got at that stage the way of conveying, projecting my thoughts in the way that Albie had instinctively. So that's the other end of not over-acting by doing it or thinking about it strongly enough, that again, let the lines work, the thoughts go across clearly to an audience. Those were minor turning points I think.

AF: Do you have any recollections of your own theatre going at that time? Or did you not have time...?

PW: Oh, you always went to the... but there wouldn't be a theatre because you were nearly always the only theatre in town because in those days the weekly reps were in all the towns, there were fifty, a hundred of them. All the small towns had their own small one. Later in 1969-70, I was in a company in Manchester called the Stables Theatre Company [Granada Television's experimental company] and the local rep there was fortnightly and we used to go to see the shows there and you'd go and see them and they'd be very good, totally efficient, but they were slightly shallow, what we would call 'reppy'. You were supposed not to do too much rep as opposed to longer West End theatre because it would make you take short-cuts and it meant that your work was shallow. They would swing the cloak extremely effectively, if they were doing a period play, but you wouldn't feel that they really knew why they were swinging the cloak. Doing too many Agatha Christies and all the rest of the potboilers and all you could do was go for the surface of each character, you couldn't dig and show the different sides of the character in the sub-text, which is just like poetry can be. Shakespeare, as you know, can work on about three levels.

AF: Would you say that applies to a lot of the shows you were in

PW: In weekly rep probably we were pretty shallow. Because you only had time to get the thing on. We were on thin ice. 'What the Hell happens next?', just trying to remember your next line. Fortnightly you had time to work a bit. When I got into monthly rep, my '57, '58, '59 time, you had time to really take a play apart and put it together again. The danger in fortnightly was you took the play apart and didn't have time to put it together again, because that's the essence of rehearsing a good play. I remember one thing, because we all wanted to be – the good actors wanted to be - so effective, I would come out with all the work I'd done on a part and the director would say, 'Get on with it Paul, get on with it.' I'd say, 'Well yes but don't you think.' He'd say, 'Never mind that, this play is just written with you as the juvenile, that's your job. Get on with it.' If you dig and make it more interesting you actually throw the balance of the play because it isn't written to have a very interesting juvenile young man come on. It's just supposed to be that that man fulfils a certain fairly shallow purpose. You dig where

it's worthwhile digging, you think about what's behind that and behind that and behind that. That can happen in quite a lot of plays. You have to know how much is worthwhile doing according to which particular level of play you're doing but you mustn't throw the whole balance of a play by indulging yourself. But we all wanted to be little Alec Guinnesses. I remember playing Lane in *The Importance of Being Earnest* - I did it in rep, I'd been playing the young men, so I thought I'd play it as a character - so I came in at least an hour before and whitened my hair and put lots of lines on my face and crept across the stage like this... Totally unnecessary, there's no reason for Lane to be an old man, he's just a rather superior man-servant who says [accent] 'Here are the bills, sir'. A slight edge to the voice, perhaps, like that, but there's no reason for it at all, and all you've got is the audience saying, 'Why is Paul creeping across the stage with lines all over his face and so on?' Also of course, I didn't creep across the stage, I often just walked perfectly normally, forgetting that body-movement is more important than what you've got on your face. The way you move your arms, your hands is just as important as make-up and wigs and so on. But it took me some time to learn that. Also of course it wasn't until I got on telly quite a lot... and after live telly, as it was for many years, they started to record and so you could see yourself and so I noticed that I've got very particular physical characteristics and there's no point pretending I'm a little five foot four thin little man just because I think that's ideal for the part I'm playing. I'm not like that, I'm big and six foot, so you have to find the essence of that little man and play it as yourself, of what the audience can see of you. I learned that also from Albert Finney to a certain extent. Instead of trying to go into the part and totally vanish into this characterisation he was a very definite person and he would draw the part to him and fit it to him and put it into his head and his characterisation which suited the part, rather than trying to be the part in an impossible way. Guinness would play Hamlet in a quite different way than Finney, not just because he looked at the part differently and the meaning of the part but because they were different physically and you had to sort of think about that, which I found I did in the end. Watching yourself on telly is very handy at times, because it teaches you all sorts of things - it would have been very good in my early rep days because I would have learnt about how I tend to thrust my head forward when I'm emphasising something, which is a very ugly thing. Drama school teaches you a hell of a lot as well. Although I found the trouble at drama school, at RADA, was that it eroded my confidence. It wasn't until I got into rep that I built up my confidence again because there wasn't anybody there criticising you quite so mercilessly as in drama school. They [the staff] tended to be - I don't think this is true now, but they tended to be out of work or failed actors who took it out of their students and they would use sarcasm. I think you must never use sarcasm on any student. I remember when I was about 17 and a half when I first went there, and Fabia Drake said, 'Must you walk like a gorilla, Paul?', and to a teenager that was terrible, you really feel hit and I was then terribly aware of how I moved and so on. She should have said, 'Straighten up a bit, Paul, think of being pulled from the top of the head, you know, that's much better' and encourage you in the right way rather than sarcasm. In rep there was nobody being sarcastic to you. They were just saying, 'Get on with it, get on with it!'. And you did. People would say useful things to you. Again, the lovely actor in weekly rep, I sat next to him in the dressing room, and about the third night of a play, he'd say, 'Why are you breaking that line up like that?' - it was a comedy and I was going de-dum, de-dum, de-dum. And I said, 'Well, I'm getting all these little laughs' and he said, 'Try running it together tonight' and I'd run it together and get a big laugh at the end, and that's much better comedy and I'd learned a whole new area of comedy timing because of that one man saying 'try so-and-so'. But for the last 15-20 years, when I've been in theatres myself and I was then an old man of 45 like he was, I would never dare say that to a young actor because they tend to be terribly self-sufficient and arrogant now and say

'Oh, all right, I know what I'm doing' and they don't, and they often know only about telly and they're not awfully good very often in theatre because there is quite a difference. I've seen three shows recently, three performances by leading people in plays at Richmond here, pre-London, and they're people I've admired greatly on telly but they didn't have the extra inner energy and projection which was necessary for theatre. They were playing it very well but they didn't get it over, which is what is required for theatre, it's just that much different. The audition I did yesterday was only in a room and I read the part and the director said 'Yes, very nice, can you take it down a wee bit, we're quite close to you on this' – it was actually on camera and I just remembered for the umpteenth time – partly because you're nervous – you go 'va-voom' and partly that this is a film and you don't need to project, you just say the lines and think the thoughts and the camera will pick it up

AF: Did you tend to be cast in any particular roles?

PW: In the early years, as I said, it was fairly hieratical, I was 'the juvenile', so all the young men, I would play, that's why when I played something like Lane, I thought 'Oh, I must be different'. You did vary them quite a lot. I gradually learnt to play comedy, particularly pompous comedy, and in good rep later on it wasn't so formulaic. There were [varied] parts and you were cast differently from your standard nice young man. But being a nice young man is very difficult, being apparently yourself, is not as simple as it looks, because you're using your own personality but doing it with assurance and realism, you've got no character to hide behind if you're playing almost yourself. Normally if you're playing a character part, you can go into that part and you're protected in some ways as your imagination creates this marvellous character and that is very reassuring to your confidence. You may be grossly overdoing it, but that's another story.

I don't think people realise how uncertain the business is. I've told you this story about 'look at people living this luxurious other life' you live really hand to mouth, in a way that no other profession or job did at that time. It took a long time to get used to the idea that I don't know what's happening next week most of the time, and if I got a three month job, that was enormous and you really have this feeling of 'I'm quite different from the rest of the community because they all have jobs with a gold watch at the end, this was before the days where everything changed, well under Thatcher really, when nothing became certain. In our day we really were hand to mouthers. People lived out of suitcases. The thought of having a mortgage...! I remember the first actor I knew who had a car, it was quite extraordinary. It was when I was at Birmingham Rep, 1957-58 an actor had a car. It was unbelievable to me that anybody could afford a car, let alone afford to run it. So that sort of shook me. Another of the famous stories, it probably goes back to 1900 when actors were actaws, and the two actors met in the park one day and one said, 'Ah! Charles how are you?' 'Oh! Very well, thank you James. How are things?' 'Quiet I suppose, quiet?' It's a euphemism for, 'You're out of bloody work are you?' Then Charles says, 'Oh no, no. As a matter of fact I've secured a role - a small role - in the new production at the Royal.' 'Oh, my word!' 'Only a small role, but there is a practical meal in the third act.' – in other words you could eat. Therefore you got a meal that night, even if it was only on the stage. Though mostly practical meals were pretty awful because you had to be very careful that it wasn't anything that was difficult to chew because you probably had to talk. Almost everything was made out of mashed potato, coloured in different ways, so that you could put it in the side of your mouth and carry on talking clearly. But if you were given something to chew for instance it was

really quite difficult. [laughs] Same way that you didn't have real alcohol of course, but burnt sugar and these sort of things so you could toss it back. The only difficult thing to fake is beer. It's very difficult to get a head on fake beer. So we used to have real beer and try to have either fake glasses that looked to be fuller than they actually were or try not to take more than one or two sips. I do remember a play called Saloon Bar, which is in a bar and there's a lot of drinking of beer and so on and on the last night particularly you had two shows; either a matinee or two shows on Saturday at five and eight, so you'd been drinking a lot by the end of the evening. We were out on our feet and desperately needing a pee. And you're there at the curtain call, the manager giving a bumbling speech, with everybody with their legs crossed behind him saying, 'Get on with it Reggie, get on with it! We've got to get to the loo!' Sorry!

AF: At the same time, you seem to be saying that nowadays the work is even more precarious, in some ways?

PW: All the reps have gone – virtually all, there are a few left - and then they only cast for two or three plays. At the same time, people don't want to go to the provinces, they'd rather hang on and do two lines on telly, on The Bill, for three months pay-equivalent in the provinces working their socks off. So there is that great difference. The majority are not that devoted to being in 'The Business' as I think we probably were.

AF: Are you nostalgic for that time?

PW: Not really. I regret the good bits of it and I'm bloody glad that the bad bits are gone. I mean weekly rep was not a good thing to do for more than six months or a year because you picked up bad habits, you learned how to do things in a shallow way. On the other hand it taught you a lot about the construction of plays, how audiences reacted to plays, as I said earlier. It taught you about comedy timing and drama timing. But if you did it for too long you were probably unable to stop being reppy for the rest of your life. Rather like National Service. I wouldn't bring it back now. A lot of old blimps who look like me – I've played them! – say 'bring back National Service, that'd teach the bloody youths'. Well, the army won't want a whole load of recalcitrant youths back under their hands and the whole idea of society is quite different now. We were brought up in the war, we were used to doing what we were told, we were used to hieratical society in many ways. And so you were called up, went into the army, did what you were told to a large extent, you didn't question things. But to put a whole load of reluctant teenagers, some of them semi-criminal into the services now would be totally counter-productive. What could be done is if there were some form of compulsory service for a definite purpose, like VSO, that's marvellous, because you actually are doing something for somebody else, not just for yourself, and you learn about self-reliance and self-discipline and things that actually are very important in life and that, if it could be somehow arranged, would be productive, but just National Service for the services, hopeless I think.

Also, we're not the sort of feckless lot, theatre people, they're thought of as feckless. In the early days particularly it's very difficult to get any kind of insurance. Household contents! I've been turned down for it because I was an actor, and therefore irresponsible. They thought I would be a pop-star trashing hotel rooms sort of person. That did hurt. You couldn't hire a car because you were irresponsible, only an actor, a

rogue and a vagabond. That has gradually changed, luckily. Insurance people used to work to a hierarchical list: Anglican clergymen were at the top and it went down, down, down, to journalists, actors, publicans. Something like that. Now they realise that there are irresponsible actors and responsible ones, and most of us have a wife and two kids in Sidcup like everybody else. There's still this illusion among the press and insurance people that we're a different breed, but we're not, we're just people of every sort of social scale and sort of person who happen to be good at acting, which is quite different from being a person who is only one particular sort of person. You'll be interviewing several people, I hope, and find we're all totally different, except we're – I hope! – good at acting. And love it – that's the other thing, you're privileged to do a job you love doing despite the horrors. First nights are horrors, especially in theatre. A lot of telly now is horror because you don't get any rehearsal – all the soaps and similar, you just get up there, do it – you don't even say the lines aloud sometimes. The last time I did a big part was in *Doctors*, a lunchtime soap. I was playing the lead and I had three days of what gradually became a nightmare, I'd learnt my lines very well, but they started to go under the pressure 'Ah, nice to meet you, Paul. Know your lines? Good, Well, over there on that line, cross over here on that line and then over here. Right, shall we shoot?' You're starting to shudder before you know, because you've no chance to learn the character aloud. All you've done is to learn the lines at home. Less than weekly rep! At least you had a morning on each act and two run-throughs in weekly rep. But now you've got less than that. The same with *Eastenders* or anything, you just get up and do it. I mean, they're marvellous, terribly good. On the other hand, they've only got one character to worry about; we had a different character every week. But it's only by doing it and standing up there that you find your way around that character and also you relate to the people you are working with and you can get something from their eyes which helps you. Quite often panic, which doesn't help you! You can watch somebody starting to dry, starting to lose their lines. You can see it starting to go there. But that, *Doctors*, taught me a lesson, that I don't really want to do it now, the stress is awful. And I was doing a part [accent] a man that talked like that and never stopped 'don't answer back because Ah know what Ah'm telling you...' – went on and on and on like that – that was a particularly difficult thing to do. But the thing I auditioned for today, he talks more slowly, he can take his time, he's only got short lines and I'm perfectly happy to do that. How I got through my weekly rep days being a slow study I do not know and I wouldn't want to go back to it and I wouldn't want most other people to go back to it. Clare – my wife – has done weekly rep fairly recently, there are a few left, mostly on the East Coast for some reason. And she was doing things like *Arms and the Man*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Butterflies are Free*, quite 'big' plays. We did Shakespeare once or twice in weekly rep. I did *Taming of the Shrew* in Newfoundland. Admittedly Petruchio and Katherine had an extra week's rehearsal on their own, but the rest of us had to do it in a week. Must have been dreadful! The only thing I think now is that many of the people I was in weekly rep with I've seen since and they are still bloody good actors. So it can't have been as bad as it might have been. There were plenty of really bad reps but I was probably in some of the better ones and very fortunate. There were twice-weekly reps as well! They did three shows – performances - and then did the other three days of another play. Hardly rehearsed at all. They mostly did plays that most people had been in before; the old classics like *Rebecca*. Most people have been in it, I mean I've worked my way through *Rebecca* playing several parts. They'd ring you up, say, 'Have you been in a *Rebecca*. Playing what? Right, come in next week.' And they must have been really tatty. No, I wouldn't be nostalgic for that. Nostalgia – depends what you mean by the word - I think of it with affection but I don't think of it with envy.

AS: Wonderful

PW: That's covered it; that's covered it!