

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Renee Goddard – interview transcript

Interviewer: Kate Harris

26 October 2005

Renee Goddard professional actress, stage manager, script reader 1943-1954; Glyndebourne Children's Theatre; Salome; Theatre workshop; Weekly Rep; Oscar Lewenstein; Embassy Theatre; Brecht's Threepenny Opera; Touring in Anthony and Cleopatra with Olivier and Vivien Leigh; Meeting Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble; Reading Scripts for Donald Albery; The first read-through of Waiting for Godot; Meeting Jean Genet; Staging The Blacks; Working in early television.

With contributions from Hanno Fry.

KH: This is an interview on the 26th October 2005 with Renee Goddard and Hano Fry. Can I just ask if I've got permission to put this in the British Library archive?

RG: Yes.

KH: Brilliant. Would you be able to tell me how you first became interested in working in the theatre?

RG: Well I think when I was a child almost my grandma had a radio which was one of the few radios in the street and I used to go down into the street and stand on the steps there and act what I'd heard to the rest of the street. That was the first time I sort of acted and theatre really, we put on plays at school. I remember I was in a French play, La Femme Muette, and I think fairly famous people... Rupert Doone or somebody came to see it. I remember even as a child I wanted to be Little Red Riding Hood, I didn't get the part and I haven't forgotten it to this day.

KH: Later you were involved with theatre with the Free German Youth - is that right?

RG: That's right, it was after my internment. I joined this refugee club and I started a little theatre group in that and we also did plays. There was a love intrigue by...

HF: Schiller. Who's mentioned in the book [book about the theatre on the table]

RG: Spring's Awakening by... who's that? Wedekind. A very famous play and Distant Point

KH: And how did you decide what plays to put on?

RG: I don't think I did. It was very often the director, Mr Weiss, an Austrian.

KH: So did you move from their into professional acting? How did you become a professional actress?

RG: That's really rather a funny story because my war work was in a laboratory producing serum vaccines to keep animals alive for food in Britain and I was the translator of some of these bacteriologists. In fact Fleming was part of this. We used his penicillin and everything and one day they were asked, 'what was it the Germans put in to pollute the water when they were retreating' and I can't remember what they said but they were very excited and this was towards the end of the war that they'd found a wonderful new thing. defoliation, that would be a much worse thing to do if you were retreating and they were so pleased about it, I was absolutely furious at the end of the war that I literally left next day and decided to get a job in the theatre where all you lost, not lives, but money and that's how I came to join the Glyndebourne Children's Theatre. I heard about it because John Allen was in fact at Unity Theatre where I'd vaguely met him I must have done and that actor that I met at Unity Theatre?

HF: Alfie Bass.

RG: Alfie Bass, he was in it and so I auditioned and I was taken on as an understudy and stage worker and then was promoted to acting.

KH: Could you just tell me a little bit about the Glyndebourne Children's Theatre? What kind of work it did and things?

RG: There wasn't a children's theatre in Britain - I don't think there's one now - and the wonderful thing about it was you had a month's rehearsal, which was really a lot for Britain, and then you toured the country in the best theatres in the country because you know, like, in Manchester, whatever the biggest theatre is and it was filled with all the schools around it and people didn't have classes that day. And they loved it, I mean the kids. Well that was it, I don't know how the plays were chosen and we just moved from one big city to another to bring plays that kids might be interested in. Tobias and the Angel, I remember that. I don't remember what other plays we did.

KH: Did the schools pay for the children to go or did each child pay to go? How did that work?

RG: I don't think they did pay.

KH: So how was the Glyndebourne Children's Theatre funded then? Do you know?

RG: I don't know, the Glyndebourne Children's Theatre was started by Mrs Christie of Glyndebourne. She must have put some money in. I don't know how it was funded.

KH: What kind of parts did you play at the Glyndebourne Children's Theatre?

RG: I can't remember.

KH: And from there - how long did you work with them?

RG: I think about a year. We used to, as I say, rehearse in the East End, Mile End somewhere, in the People's Palace, that's where we started.

KH: So after the Glyndebourne Children's Theatre you did some plays for the refugee centre.

RG: Well they were in Hampstead - there was The Blue Danube Club whatever that was, and I and a girlfriend of mine, [Orla Pegla], did songs and I know, did stand-up comedy.

KH: Were you employed to do this?

RG: Well we were paid for it. We did that and I did act in - there were an enormous number of little theatres round London and I was in some of them. I mean I was in a play - I can't remember when it was - The Unknown Woman.

HF: That must have been at The Arts I think.

RG: No, no, it wasn't at the Arts, it was in a theatre by Charing Cross under the arches and there were two women who ran it, and that was with Agnes and David.

HF: Wasn't it called Under the Arches or something? The railway arch - that's a theatre now isn't it?

RG: But that was the time when... was there a man called Herbert Myer... Mayer? With music for children?

HF: Robert Mayer?

RG: Yes he had these children's concerts and he invited some critic, some famous woman, there was a theatre paper from America, and she brought Tennessee Williams with her and this Robert Mayer invited us to his house and I was sort of standing there in the hall and he came and stood next to me and said 'Could you tell me where the john is?' So this was Tennessee Williams and I was just about to show him where the loo was when Robert Mayer came up and said, 'Of course, dear boy' and took him halfway up the stairs and said, 'There you are my wonderful Augustus John!'. That's how I met Tennessee Williams.

HF: But you... tell the story that 20 years later you sat next to him...

RG: ...at the Royal Court...

HF: ...and you told him the story...

RG: ...and I don't think he remembered it.

HF: No, I don't think he remembered it.

RG: Twenty years later he came to England because at the Royal Court somebody was - Keith Hack? Was doing a play by him and I happened to be sitting next to him and told him the story and I don't know whether he remembered it.

KH: And where did you go from these smaller theatres? Where did you move to? Or what was the next thing that you remember acting in?

HF: Well there's Salome in '47.

RG: But I'm sure it was other things as well...

KH: Who did you do Salome with?

RG: Peter Zadek - who's now become probably the best-known theatre director in Germany, but he came to England when he was a baby and went to Oxford - or Cambridge, I can't remember...

HF: Oxford.

RG: Oxford, and he went to the Old Vic School with Michel Saint-Denis and.

HF: Are you sure? Wasn't it with [Michael Cocker Yannis]? Are you sure it was with Michel Saint-Denis?

RG: No [Michael Cocker Yannis] was an actor in the Old Vic school and.

HF: Oh, you mean Michel Saint-Denis ran it?

RF: Yes, I think so. Anyway, he decided to put on Salome at the Rudolph Steiner Hall and he asked me to play Salome, and I decided I wouldn't because - as I said to him - I intended to become an actress, and I didn't think people would like it if I started in my first play to undress myself and so he offered it to Bernice Reubens, it was her first part, which was in fact I think enormously brave, huge part like that and she did it very well and [Michael Yannis - Cocker Yannis], I think he played Herod and I played Herodias. We also did a curtain-raiser - Sweeney Agonistes by T.S. Eliot, which was great, great fun to do these two plays.

HF: That was with music written by...

RG: [Joseph Horowitz]. No?

HF: Maybe for Salome but surely the music for Sweeney Agonistes, wasn't that Johnny Dankworth? Or was that later?

RG: I don't know. Yes I remember something about Johnny Dankworth but I don't remember - I know it was Joseph Horowitz wrote music for that show and Bernice never acted again.

KH: What was the audience reaction like to those plays- can you remember?

RG: It was very good indeed. In fact somebody from the... Joan Littlewood's Theatre?

KH: Theatre Workshop?

RG: Theatre Workshop came, Ewan McColl, and he thought that I was so good that I ought to come down and see her, which I very much wanted. I mean, that really was what I wanted. I wanted to be in a company and there weren't any, this was the only one. So I went and auditioned, but they all behaved incredibly badly so I didn't join it. I mean they were such a tough group. I was terrified of them.

KH: So you went into repertory theatre?

RG: Yes and I've forgotten...

KH: Why did you want to go into repertory theatre?

RG: Well, I'd heard about this particular company and - I've forgotten where it was - that this particular director was very, very good at comedy and I wanted very much to be in ordinary English comedy plays and indeed I was and it was a weekly rep - terrifying really.

KH: Why was it terrifying?

RG: Well, I mean you had to be in the play for a week while you learn another one, and I think it's pretty horrendous.

KH: Was this the same company who always worked together week after week?

RG: Yes.

KH: What was the rehearsal process like?

RG: Terrible, I mean you kind of read it through the first day, staged it the second day, had to be without the book the next day and it was like that.

KH: And what kind of plays were you putting on?

RG: I can't remember them. I mean they were just ordinary rep plays.

KH: And were you touring at that point?

RG: No, no absolutely based in that company

KH: Did a lot of mistakes get made in the productions as a result of the very short rehearsal space?

RG: They must have done but I enjoyed some of it very, very much. I mean, I remember they were quite careful about scenery and about the clothes we wore. I don't remember much about it I'm afraid. But then I think at that point the government or somebody,

because we didn't have a Ministry of Culture, the government put in money for touring theatres and to have more theatre in the provinces and I don't know what that did for me. well yes, I mean we did this play, I don't know who we were actually, The Merchant of Venice.

HF: This was at Charles Philips.

RG: And we toured it and it must have been to do with that.

KH: And was this your own company?

RG: Not mine, but somebody formed a company and we did the Merchant of Venice.

KH: Where were you touring it?

RG: Everywhere in the Midlands, right round, and I was supposed to play Jessica and the actress who was supposed to play... what's her name.

HF: Portia.

RG: I don't know what happened but I ended up playing Portia, much to the annoyance of my boyfriend - who became my husband - because he played some other small part, but he was absolutely wonderful because he had a photographic memory and when anybody got ill and couldn't play he could learn his part on the bus there. But anyway we went everywhere.

KH: How long did that tour run for?

RG: A long time.

KH: Did you find it difficult maintaining performances in long runs of things?

RG: No, I mean it wasn't a huge part, what was difficult was it was all so cold and I remember wearing long johns underneath my costumes and going to bed with a fur coat on.

HF: Renee's mother was in the fur trade you see.

RG: She was indeed. I very much enjoyed that and Peter Zadek, having directed me before, did that. I also did radio of course. I did a lot of radio during the war and after the war for the World Service - plays.

KH: Were these similar plays to the ones being put on at the theatre at the time?

RG: No. I can't remember why we would be doing plays at the World Service. They were English plays I presume - in German. I also did Intermediate German for schools on BBC. I always played the same girl - I did it for years - the daughter, and I had to learn... and the sort of German I spoke when I first came to England when I was 11 wasn't proper High German - Haute Deutsch - I had to learn it in England and that was really wonderful because I always had an income of sorts.

KH: So that kept you going whilst you didn't have work in the theatre.

RG: Oh yes, I was always working somehow and I also began - I don't know when that was - to go in to television, at where was it... Alexandra Palace, that's right.

KH: Did you prefer working in television to working in the theatre?

RG: No. Not at all.

KH: Why was that?

RG: Well there was no continuity, we were rushing from set to set or something... but I did quite a bit of it including Emergency Ward 10 and stuff like that.

HF: This Confederacy [pointing to list of dates and productions] must have been about that time.

RG: It was also with Charles Philips - well we did many plays and one of them was.

KH: Who was this with?

HF: John Vanbrough.

KH: And which theatre was it at?

HF: I think that was also touring.

RG: And we did Gaslights I remember. You know, Patrick Hamilton's Gaslights.

KH: Do you have good memories of doing that?

RG: Oh yes that was fun and we did Ghosts by Ibsen.

KH: What was your impression of Ghosts when you were in it? Did you enjoy being in it?

RG: Well it was a bit odd because I played the mother and my then-husband played my son. No I didn't enjoy it very much but I did enjoy the Confederacy and I remember particularly I had to be pulled into a corset of the day, I don't know how one was able to act in fact, or to bring one's voice out. Did I say we were doing The Merchant of Venice?

HF: Yes.

RG: I had the most horrendous experience, because one morning a whole number of schools came in, or one afternoon, to see it and I came to the speech 'The quality of mercy'... How does it go? 'The quality of mercy is...

HF: 'Is not strained'..

RG: 'is not strained, it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven etc.' and somewhere half way through the speech, I mean I could hear the kids saying it with me, because it's one that you learn always 'The quality of mercy' speech and it sort of happened that I changed round two words and the entire place started [muttering noise] something I'd done wrong and that so shook me that I forgot my lines and in those days you always had someone on the book and they were shouting my line to me and I couldn't pick it up. In fact I had to stop and go offstage and come back but the fear that I felt over that forgetting of lines never left me. I was always frightened that I might dry and that was in that play.

KH: How did you meet Oscar Lewenstein? When did you meet him?

RG: Well I think I must have met him through Alfie Bass somehow, and I was around Swiss Cottage where he'd taken a theatre, The Embassy Theatre .

KH: That was the theatre that he [Oscar Lewenstein] ran at the time?

RG: Yes and he did all sorts of plays. I've got some pictures but I can't remember what they were.

KH: So did Oscar Lewenstein ask you to be in one of his plays? Is that how you became acquainted with him?

RG: No I don't think so. What happened was he was running that theatre and Warren Mitchell was his stage manager and I became the assistant to Warren Mitchell backstage, that's how it started and at some point I was put into some plays and also he brought over, did Oscar, the theatre from Glasgow, Glasgow Unity. He put on a play called Men Should Weep, funnily enough that's on now somewhere isn't it Men Should Weep?

KH: Is it on in London somewhere?

RG: Yes, anyway that's what they did and all sorts of Jewish plays. Anyway my aunt, this Yiddish actor was in his plays, I mean he did a range of plays and I was backstage but I sometimes went on, not much.

KH: Was that because you preferred being backstage?

RG: No, I don't think so, but I quite enjoyed being backstage. I basically worked for Oscar and you know I did things he wanted me to do.

KH: What was he like to work with?

RG: Well he was a sort of firebrand, he was full of energy, he was always doing three things and was very interested in plays and one of the things he wanted to do very early on was the Threepenny Opera. He wanted somehow to get it off the ground and he went all over the place to get backing for it. He finally did later, just before the Royal Court started, he managed to get the backing and he asked me to go and get the designer over from Germany and I was also in it and as I say we couldn't find a Mackheath - absolutely amazing how many people turned that down!

KH: Why do you think people turned that down?

RG: Because you were supposed to sing, and Brecht kept saying 'they don't have to sing, they can speak it, it doesn't matter.' But Sam Wanamaker was my choice but he directed it and he didn't like me because he was an American Jew and he thought that I was a German Jew and the American Jews just didn't like German Jews or something.

HF: He was of Russian Jewish origin wasn't he?

RG: Yes.

HF: You know if you were German-Jewish... it's a sort of class structure almost.

RG: I didn't understand it at all because I was brought up in England and I... absolutely aware of the big class structure still going even now but certainly very bad then and in particular if you had the wrong kind of accent you'd had it and I always felt that my foster mother had given me a dowry by teaching me English the way she did. However.

KH: And do you think that class system ran into the theatre at the time as well?

RG: Oh yes. I mean obviously if you were an actress. When I came out of internment I became a Nippy in a Lion's Corner House. Do you know what a Nippy is?

KH: No I don't know what a Nippy is. [RG gestures as if holding tray]

RG: A waitress, and they were called Nippies with little white hats but you had to go into the kitchen to get the stuff to take out onto the floor to the customers and if you didn't speak cockney or if you didn't say [in Cockney accent] 'A pot 'o tea for two', you didn't get it, I mean if you went and said [in RP accent] 'A pot of tea for two' they'd go 'Oh la de dah then' and the rest of it and so one learnt, one had to learn even there, never mind acting, how to do the different accents.

KH: What kind of audiences were going to see Oscar Lewenstein's productions at the Embassy at the time? Can you remember?

RG: Yes because the Embassy Theatre... was his name Hawtry, who owned it? He ran a bar and when Oscar put on these sort of American Jewish plays or whatever they were Jews didn't drink and they didn't make much money and I remember there was a big fuss about that. So they were local and apparently they must have been a lot of refugees and Jewish people round there, and it went very well - the person you want to interview is Warren Mitchell, he'll probably remember it better than I do. But it was awful being his number two.

KH: Why was it awful?

RG: Well I don't know - he was a bully.

HF: We met him the other day. he was very nice.

RG: Yes he came to Brighton in a play. What was it we went round to see him... and he's still married to Connie. He was in The Blue Lamp wasn't he? Ted Willis' play.

KH: Did you go with Oscar to the Royal Court then, when he moved, or not?

RG: Well Oscar had a lot to do with setting up the Royal Court. I can't remember the detail. Something to do with Mr Blonde. I remember that Lord Harwood.

KH: These were people on the Board weren't they?

RG: Yes before they formed themselves - was told that he really had to be careful of Oscar Lewenstein because he was a communist and Harwood said, 'I've worked with stranger people than that' and didn't mind. But it was set up and there was [Wolf Mankowitz] and Oscar put on plays beforehand together I think. I'm sure.

KH: Before the company was established?

RG: Before that. And Oscar came to Berlin to come and fetch me and work for him at the beginning of the Royal Court - particularly The Threepenny Opera, which was beforehand.

KH: What part did you play in The Threepenny Opera?

RG: Oh, just a whore.

KH: How do you think that production was received when you put it on?

RG: I think it was very successful. We toured it round the West End . It wasn't at the Court at the beginning.

KH: What were your impressions of this play? Had you read it before you were in it?

RG: No. I think my mother once sang me a song of it or something. We had a musical director - he's still around, he's married to someone that we know. I think the audience liked it - The Threepenny Opera - but we did tour it round the West End . I can't remember what makes me think that.

KH: Because this was the first Brecht that was put on in England wasn't it? This was the first production?

RG: Well I think I did something in the Free German Youth, the first professional production yes. I should have thought so. They did it in America after that I believe.

KH: So Oscar brought you back to be in The Threepenny Opera.

RG: And to help him, to work for him because he started his West End production company and did all sorts of plays. That wasn't Billy Liar though was it?

HF: I thought Oscar did that?

RG: Oh he certainly did that, and he also did one with Laurence Olivier - The Entertainer - and brought it to the West End and Turner, another writer.

KH: So when you finished The Threepenny Opera, can you think what you went to next?

RG: Well we put on a show - I brought over two boys: Stephen [Viniver] and Carl Davis, of course, he's still around, he married somebody from Joan Littlewood's set up. Have you heard of Carl Davis? Oh, he's a composer and...

HF: He composes music to silent films as well.

RG: But anyway I met these two boys in Berlin and they had written a show between them. They called it Five Plus One, anyway he asked me to put it on in Edinburgh, after a show I think - a late night show and it did very well. I was asked to help them or something anyway I brought them to London, anyway Stephen [Viniver] became quite famous. He went to America and so on. But anyway, Carl Davis is well known here and now.

HF: As a composer.

KH: So when you came back from Berlin did you stay in England and carry on working with Oscar?

RG: Oh yes, I stayed in England and I settled in Primrose Hill.

KH: And you were doing more producing then, than acting?

RG: No, then I... my great aim in life was to start a children's theatre, because in East Berlin I'd seen a children's theatre in a store. They had a store for children's everything

and in the basement so the mums and dads could buy their stuff in peace, they had a children's theatre and it was either full of children's little films or proper performances and I thought that was such a good idea so I thought we should start one. But I got as far as buying, with other people, what did they say about Hayman there - [points to theatre book] with him?

HF: There's no mention.

RG: A barge by Primrose Hill, which is now a Chinese restaurant. To play on the side of the boat, on the deck

HF: Near Regent's Canal.

RG: To an audience on the side of the canal, I think that was the general idea and I'd got it all worked out and worked up when I suddenly was given a job - what was it? Was it the script department? Suddenly given a job that I couldn't refuse.

KH: An acting job?

RG: No no.

HF: Well that must have been the Head of Scripts at ATV.

KH: So this was later when you were trying to set up the Children's Theatre?

HF: It was in the sixties.

KH: So how did you end up working with the Oliviers on Antony and Cleopatra?

RG: I was in the provinces and I decided to audition, it was announced that they were doing auditions for Antony and Cleopatra and Caesar and Cleopatra and I had done a Shaw, what was it called?

HF: Androcles and the Lion, no?

RG: No, something else - is it down there? Pra and Prola, were the characters and I'd done them, so I went up for the audition of Shaw and Shakespeare and they said I could be an understudy and come to America. And I thought that was wonderful because I was going to have my tonsils out before I went and then it didn't matter because I couldn't speak for a while! Anyway I went and had my tonsils out and went to America.

KH: So did you do the Festival of Britain or did you join after?

RG: No it was during the Festival of Britain but I was just an understudy.

HF: That was '51 and then '52 you went to America.

KH: What are your memories of the production? Did you enjoy being in it?

RG: Oh yes, because he really is an absolutely extraordinary actor.

KH: How would you describe his acting style?

RG: Well, it surprised me a bit, because I mean, in certain scenes, you could literally experience the silence and concentration of the audience, it was absolutely fantastic and in spite of it you could hear him say [whispering] 'Somebody's coughing' or something, you know, he managed to get that concentration on him but he himself could be in several different parts of himself. I mean it was absolutely amazing, particularly I often listened... for some reason we were - Vivien Leigh and I - were by the side of the stage to go on or something and it was all about - was it Eros?

HF: Messenger isn't it?

RG: Eros, no that's his.

KH: Enobarbus?

RG: No, somebody who helps him put on his stuff. Well it was just, I never tired of listening to him and I also made great friends with Robert Helpmann, who was in it.

KH: What part was he playing - can you remember?

HF: He was Caesar wasn't he - in Caesar and Cleopatra.

RG: [imitating Helpmann] 'They called me boy' was the line he said, I remember, anyway I made friends with him and he used to watch... but the point was, while I was in America...

HF: There's that marvellous story, while you were in America - about walking along...

RG: Yes, well I was offered a part in Peer Gynt.

KH: This was whilst you were touring?

RG: No, we weren't touring, we were at the Ziegfield Theatre for a whole year.

KH: Doing Anthony and Cleopatra?

RG: Anthony and Caesar and Anthony and Cleopatra and during that time I was offered a part on American television. The part of Anitra in Peer Gynt. Now she has to dance and I got the part because I went along for an audition and they said [in an American accent] 'You're not American, and the rest of the cast is American' and I said 'oh no Anitra is French' and gave some spiel about this and they bought that and I said, 'In any case Robert Helpmann, the great dancer, is in the cast and he has offered to stage my dance, because I can't dance but he can stage it so that it looks like a dance if you do the camera work properly'. SO he came along with me to rehearsals and it was very kind of him. And one day we were walking back to the theatre and he had a little cape and a silver topped cane and we were walking along and he dropped the cane and an American said [in an American accent] - 'Hey Fairy, you dropped your wand', in those days... and he went and picked it up and said, 'Vanish!'. Wonderful, he was great fun. I met him again years later when he'd gone back to Australia, and we sort of really clicked. It was... in Anthony and Cleopatra, he was a great friend of Vivien Leigh's and people in the cast used to call her 'fag hag' because she'd made friends with a queer.

KH: Did you become close to either of the Oliviers?

RG: Yes, her.

KH: What part were you playing when you went to New York ?

RG: I was understudying.

KH: But later you went on?

RG: I played the, her maid, what was she called... Oh Lord! Well, anyway... Charmian! That's why I remember how she [Vivien Leigh] went 'Oh Charmian, where see'st thou he is now'.

KH: What was she like to work with? To act with?

RG: Well she was right the opposite of Olivier. She never forgot her lines. She never changed - it was absolutely rigid what she did. He often forgot his lines, didn't mind, he made up verse by the yard.

KH: And nobody noticed:

RG: And nobody noticed. And I don't know she... nevertheless if it sounds as if she wasn't any good, she was but it was a bit... she learnt it like an opera. I mean, she learnt when to go up and when to go down and it was a bit like that.

HF: You always tell the story about her looks

RG: Every night before she went on and in the afternoons, she'd stand in front of me and go 'Do I look all right' and I used to think, 'My God! You know, I should look like that!'. She was absolutely perfectly... what's the word?

HF: Proportioned.

RG: Proportioned, absolutely. Except for one thing she hated about herself - can you guess?

KH: No, what was it?

RG: Her hands.

KH: Why did she hate them?

RG: She thought her hands were too large in proportion to the rest of her, and she used to hide them during the day. I mean she would wear gloves for the evening. She was always wearing gloves because she hated her hands. I don't know, I mean she was beautiful, really beautiful I thought she was about fifteen years older than me.

HF: Probably not as old as that but I don't know.

RG: But she looked absolutely wonderful, and one day he came down and in front of the fifty Roman soldiers he said, 'Viv if you get any slimmer, I shall have to have myself castrated, implying that he was huge. Nasty man. Who was it who lost his voice - she? One of them lost their voice and they called in a voice specialist and he came along and he couldn't speak! But anyway he restored the voice... I think it was Vivien but I can't remember. It was a long year there - I did radio, I did television.

KH: Whilst you were performing this - so you did that during the day?

RG: Yes and one day I overslept and I was phoned up by the stage manager who said 'Renee the curtain's going up in one minute' and I wasn't there yet- but I wasn't terribly far- we were at the Ziegfield theatre.

[CD2]

KH: Did you find it different working in America compared to working in England?

RG: Well, of course I mean one wasn't at home at night! You were in hotels, a number of us were at this particular hotel, on 47th street I think it was...

KH: Did you find the theatre different to in England ?

RG: Yes there were different rules. Different union restrictions. You couldn't... you know, you had to have the union doing whatever it is - the props or whatever. Quite a number of people stayed in America.

KH: Why was that do you think?

RG: Work.

KH: Because there was more work?

RG: And there was this great attraction, maybe get to Hollywood or something.

KH: But you didn't want to stay in America?

RG: No.

KH: So after the tour finished you came back to England?

RG: Yes.

KH: Did you go back to working with Oscar then?

RG: Oh yes: it was then that we did the Threepenny Opera

HF: You must have started with Oscar then?

RG: But not at the Embassy, no.

HF: But you mean that you had worked with him before and then worked with him again

RG: Yes.

KH: Did you meet Brecht when you did the Threepenny Opera?

RG: No. Brecht I only met that time when I was asked to meet him.

KH: When were you asked to meet him?

RG: Well, over the Joan Littlewood business.

KH: This was when the Theatre Workshop wanted to put Mother Courage on?

RG: Yes. Ted Allen - he wrote The Boy Friend didn't he? Have you heard of a show called The Boy Friend? Anyway this writer, he said that he had the rights to The Threepenny Opera [later established RG meant Mother Courage] given to him by Bertolt Brecht and I think he produced some sort of, I don't know... and Joan Littlewood wanted to play it and her company to be in it, and Oscar was asked by them to be the manager, to present it and this was announced in The Times.[this production eventually opened at Devon Festival July 1955] Then came a letter from Brecht to say that they certainly did not have the rights, and so they asked me to go and see him, to make an appointment for Oscar and to explain why. So I did. I went over and I went to the East, to the Berliner Ensemble, into their little café thing where they eat - canteen and saw Helene Weigel and was introduced to her daughter Barbara, and met two actresses who had been with me in Belsize Park in the Free German League...

HF: [Betty Leuven]

RG: That's right, that was one of them and [Anna Marie Hausa], the big one! [gestures]

HF: They can't see that gesture

RG: And they wanted to know - and also a number of people wanted to know - what happened to their brothers and sisters in America and something, anything I might know. Anyway I first got to know Barbara and she took me round to her home and she had a lot of records of Brecht singing, so I asked her whether she could let me hear some of them, and then I apologised and said 'I supposed everybody comes here to ask you that' and she said [in American accent] 'Oh no, I'd no idea who daddy was until I got here.' Well anyway, she then got me to talk to her mother Helena Weigal and I explained that I needed to have an appointment with Brecht and they arranged it. Before I went over I phoned my friend from the BBC radio, there was somebody I knew in Berlin. And I said 'Well what have I got to be careful of?' and he said 'Well just don't take any West marks, don't use them, come back before whatever time, because you can't really phone between...' Well anyway he told me what to do.

HF: There's the additional point isn't there that you were worried about going to the East because of your father

RG: Oh yes, I'd always been told to keep away from the communist, Stalinist, East Germany because my father was considered an anti-Stalinist and I would not, I was simply not safe being the daughter, because apparently according to communists, it's worse than Catholics really, the sins of the father are visited upon the children, I mean it was really dreadful.

KH: So you must have been very nervous when you were going across then?

RG: Not really no, but I mean you know, I certainly... when the Free German Youth people wanted to go back to Germany they meant East Germany and they certainly didn't trust me so I knew about that.

HF: Because they were Stalinists.

RG: All Stalinists. In fact it is said - and I think it's true from what I've heard later - that my father was shot in Buchenwald because of the Stalinists who were, anyway to come back to the theatre. I asked to see the play that was on, I don't think it was Mother Courage, I think it was Arturo Ui and I saw Eckhard Shalt who...

HF: Barbara Brecht's husband - was he then?

RG: He wasn't then, but he was a wonderful actor, he's just recently died, he became Barbara Brecht's husband - but anyway, I met Brecht.

KH: And what happened about the rights?

RG: The rights, well, he said, 'Who's the best director in England' and I said I thought it was Peter Brook, 'And who is the best management' and I said that it was Binkie Beaumont and he said, 'Well, these are the people who should do my play, not this little woman out there where you people will go and see her and nobody else will' and I said 'Well, actually you'll get a good notice for it from Kenneth Tynan, sight unseen and Peter Brook and Binkie Beaumont certainly wouldn't want to do your plays.' Anyway I persuaded him I don't remember how, to make an appointment with Oscar to somehow persuade him to find some way to do this play in Britain and he said, 'Yes I want the Berliner Ensemble as such to come to England so they can see how it should be done' rather than you know somebody doing it. Anyway I got Oscar to come, made the appointment, took him and they hammered it out that she could do it as long as he sent a director - one of his, who'd trained with him - to be by her side while they were doing it, while they were preparing it and then he invited us to come with the Berliner Ensemble on the first of May to march through the streets of East Berlin, the first of May being great labour day or whatever and Oscar accepted because he said, 'You know, I'm a member of the communist party and so on' and I said 'No, I couldn't because I had another appointment' and disappeared and said I would meet Oscar in his hotel and when he hadn't turned up by twelve o'clock I didn't know what to do, phoned up my friend at the BBC and he said 'if he doesn't come back, you'll be held here for ages because you're the last person to see him' and I knew I had an appointment to pick up my daughter in Hannover with my grandmother and so I disappeared and said 'look, find out whether he's back here and tell him that I'll phone him as soon as I'm in London' and this is what I did and he never forgave me.

KH: So what had happened to him?

RG: He finished all this marching and doing and he got back to the station and got on the wrong train. It didn't stop as it should have done in the western zone. In fact he took a train - because he thought they all did - which was a special train for Russian troops and he got on it and got off and the Russian troops surrounded him and he said 'Ah but I've just been seeing your great, this great writer Bertolt Brecht and they said 'Who's that?' They then phoned, he gave a number, he said 'Well, phone Helene Weigel' and so they did and they said in very bad German, Russian German, 'something Bertolt Brecht' and she hung up because she thought it was drunk actors sending her up. So that didn't do any good and he kept saying, 'Look I'm expected by an actress in West Berlin' and they said, 'Yes well, we're all expected by an actress in West Berlin!' and so on. And then they gave him a book to read and put him to bed. It was an English book.

HF: Dickens.

RG: Dickens, I remember that, he told me. And the next morning they thought he really was some idiot to do with theatre or something and not at all a spy or something and they sent him back.

KH: By which time you'd gone back to England ?

RG: Yes, I'd gone to pick up my daughter and went back to England and phoned him and he was there which was marvellous because you know, I hadn't told his wife that I'd sort of lost him, so that was that and it was arranged that this man who I've forgotten, he later went to America this director and you see the direction, the way that Brecht did it was very slow and they told actors exactly what to do, you know, they didn't leave much to anybody.

KH: So it was very controlled.

RG: Very controlled direction. And this business of Verfremdungs...

HF: Alienation.

RG: Alienation acting, I can't remember what it meant and I don't think anybody ever did.

KH: Did it strike you? Did you notice that it was very different to acting.

RG: Well all I know is that I went to see Galileo and it was an absolutely wonderful production and Mother Courage.

KH: Mother Courage done by the Berliner Ensemble?

RG: Yes and she was wonderful and so was [Eckhart] as her son Eilif and daughter... what was she called? I don't know and... anyway she was very good indeed.

KH: What struck you about the performance? What was so impressive about it?

RG: It was more aggressive and more out front. I don't know... the acting I suppose and of course the way they rehearsed. I'm not surprised... I can't remember who played Galileo, but it was absolutely wonderful.

KH: But they had quite a long time to rehearse didn't they?

RG: Oh my goodness yes. Sometimes six months. You know!

KH: And they were paid by the government?

RG: Yes, oh yes I think so.

HF: I would have thought so, yes.

RG: But it was a successful theatre. People came. It was Weigel who was in charge basically.

KH: What was Brecht like? What were your impressions of him?

RG: He was what I'd call hooded. He was sort of sitting in a rocking chair and he sort of didn't look you sort of in the face, he looked at you from under. He didn't quite trust me because I wasn't English. I was a German refugee and I was a Scholem. He'd met my uncle I believe, my father's brother, I don't know why. I know that Peter Brook met him but that must have been later

KH: Did you go and see the production that the Theatre Workshop put on of Mother Courage?

RG: Did they do it?

KH: The one that you got the rights for?

RG: No, I didn't see it. I don't know why.

KH: So when you came back from Berlin what did you go onto do then?

RG: When I came back from Berlin - oh you mean after that? I suppose I just went on working for Oscar

HF: Until you went to ATV.

RG: Yes. In fact what I did is I worked with him whenever he, like he did this play, The Entertainer or other plays I can't remember, and he moved them about the country and I really didn't want to go on doing that.

KH: What were you doing? You were helping with the production?

RG: Yes, all sorts of things.

KH: Could you give me an example of the sorts of things?

RG: Luther for example, we travelled Luther by John Osborne and I wasn't at home enough and I didn't. When I really couldn't get into that first company at the Royal Court where... what's her name?

HF: Joan Plowright.

RG: ...where Joan Plowright got in, I decided to give up acting or anything to do with the theatre really because I wasn't home enough and I decided to go into television.

KH: Was it after that that you started reading scripts for the theatre? Or was that before?

RG: Oh, I read scripts all the time for Oscar.

KH: So that was part of the job as well with Oscar?

RG: Oh yes.

KH: Was that how you came to read *Waiting for Godot* . When you were reading scripts for Oscar?

RG: No.

HF: But there's also *I am a Camera*.

RG: Oh of course - when was *I am a Camera*?

HF: I don't know at the moment!

KH: And that was with van Druten?

HF: He'd written it and he'd directed it, is that right?

RG: He had written it, and he had directed it in America and he came over and I auditioned and I got the part of the German Jewish girl because of a wonderful accent I copied from my uncle and we did it. It was something *Albery* - what was his first name? Who owned the theatre- the *New Theatre*. And the leading lady was *Dorothy Tutin* and [*Michael Gwyn*] played *Christopher Isherwood* and [*Marian Deeming*] played the

landlady who used to say 'Mr Isherwood'. And somebody or other played... you know, the chap with me... I can't remember anyway. We started and we opened in Brighton and Michael Gwyn slid on something

HF: Oh yes I remember he was on stage with a broken leg or something...

RG: That's right, he broke his leg

KH: And he carried on?

HF: That's right, I thought it was in the part when I saw it!

RG: And we came to the New Theatre and it was a fairly small part, and so I was forever waiting to go on, that was one of the reasons I gave up acting: like a soldier, always waiting to go on! And Dorothy Tutin suggested that since something Albery - what was his name?

HF: Donald

RG: Donald Albery, hated reading scripts, we should offer to do that.

KH: Whilst you were doing I am a Camera?

RG: That's right, and there were two scripts in particular, one by an actress. I went to go and see her. Anyway... and one of them was...

HF: Waiting for Godot.

RG: Waiting for Godot.

KH: So who passed that onto you - how did you...?

RG: Mr Albery. He'd been sent it, which was, you know quite likely, and I read it and I said to him... although I've heard Peter Hall's story on radio the other day, which isn't true. This is what happened. I said to him that 'I think it's very difficult to read, and I suggest that from your understudies from your various theatres' - he had three - 'I could do a reading for you, from the understudies. And I would suggest that you also invite a censor...'

KH: And you invited the censor?

RG: Albery invited the censor - I suggested it would be a good idea, '...But it's a very interesting play and we will do a rehearsed reading.' So I directed that rehearsed reading, and I also got hold of Oscar Lewenstein and I said 'Look you should do this bloody play with Albert and Costello [??] I think it would be great fun.' Well, anyway, we did the reading and Albery decided not to have it in his theatre.

KH: He didn't like it?

RG: I don't know whether he liked it or not, but it wasn't his cup of tea and they decided to give it to Peter Hall at the Arts Theatre. In some way or other they had a hold on that Arts Theatre, I don't know how.

KH: Did Peter Hall come to the rehearsed reading?

RG: No, and Peter Hall now says on radio, the other day, that he liked it, well he didn't, he didn't like it at all.

KH: Did he say to you he didn't like it?

RG: That right, and he had to do it and did it, and I went to the first night.

KH: How did you try and convince the people at the reading to put it on?

RG: The rehearsed reading?

KH: Albery and the people who came - did you talk to them or was it simply a rehearsed reading?

RG: No, I simply... Instead of him reading it off the page which was very difficult, he came to see it. A rehearsed reading.

HF: But you're saying he liked it, but not for himself

RG: I don't know whether he liked it but he thought it was worth doing at the Arts Theatre

KH: So you went to the first night at the Arts Theatre? And were you impressed by it in performance

RG: Yes, oh yes. I was. I remember it very well. But it wasn't a huge success was it?

HF: I thought it was

KH: Hobson gave it a good review.

RG: Who?

KH: Harold Hobson.

RG: Yes. I mean you know, it was just the Arts Theatre. I don't know who did it next. He had a specific... I think he wrote it in French and he had a lady from the BBC to translate it. Yes he did. And I said it was silly to do it at the Arts Theatre, it should have been done with [Abbot and Costello] and if they didn't do that they should have had an Irish cast and you know, something like that.

KH: What did you think of the cast who actually did it?

RG: They were all right, but they didn't get enough of the comedy and there was a lot of comedy in it.

KH: What did you think it was about when you first read it?

RG: I don't know. I can't remember it actually can you?

HF: Vaguely. I can remember quite a bit, yes.

RG: I don't know whether they cut that bit where they pee.

KH: That was because of the censor?

RG: I don't know. I mean it wasn't done in England in those days!

HF: I thought there was a strong indication at least that they were having a pee.

RG: It was a club performance.

KH: Presumably to avoid the censor?

RG: No I think the Arts Theatre was a club.

HF: It was, but it was easy enough to get into.

RG: I mean all those things. There was one where two men kissed. They had to make it a club.

HF: View over the Bridge?

RG: It was a Tennessee Williams wasn't it. Where they had to become a club in those days when there was anything at all.

KH: Did you go and watch that production as well?

RG: Oh yes

KH: Did you find it shocking?

RG: Oh no.

KH: Do you think other people in the audience found it shocking?

RG: I don't know. I think... obviously if there was nothing like that in the play, you got a larger audience. I mean, it reduced an audience if there was something like men kissing or anything at all...

HF: You engineered the first black and white kiss on television.

RG Well yes because of The Blacks...

HF: In Jean Genet's Blacks.

RG: In Jean Genet's Blacks.

KH: This was another play that you put on?

RG: With Oscar - oh yes. I got that girl a job in Emergency Ward 10 and she was in the first black, maybe nurse? In fact the hospitals were full of black nurses but not on air. I got them to write a part, and she was Brixton not black.

KH: And you met Genet didn't you?

RG: I did.

KH: Could you tell me about that? When you met him...

RG: Yes, his agent Rosie Collin brought him to London for us to finalise a deal to put on *The Blacks* and I was asked to go and meet him and I came into the room and said, 'How do you do' and clasped my hands with both hands and said, 'Vous êtes mariée?' which I thought the most extraordinary question - I'd read the book on Genet by Sartre, so I knew all about his thieving and his sex life and everything. This funny small, bullet headed man about as tall as me - which is not tall! - asked me whether I was married and so I said, 'de temps en temps, monsieur' and I was looking at his raincoat which said 'Dachau' so I wondered what the hell he was doing in Dachau buying a raincoat - but maybe it was raining. And he simply said that he had a friend who was a circus artist who'd toppled off a tightrope and broken his back and could I help him find a proper doctor to deal with it, cost what may, in Harley Street, and so I said I could and after that we got on and we did the deal, whatever it was. That's how I met him.

KH: So you quite often had to meet the writers for Oscar and do the deals?

RG: Well I don't know. We probably had done more or less everything, it was just that he came over to see a rehearsal and casting and during that, that was my job to come and take him there and that was when he screamed that he did not want Brixton, New York, or whatever, he wanted blacks, proper blacks, whatever he meant, I suppose he meant Africans or something, but of course they didn't act particularly. It was an entire cast.

KH: Was the casting difficult for that?

RG: Well it wasn't particularly easy. Not too long ago one of these people phoned me up and said 'Do you remember me from *The Blacks*'

KH: How did you go about casting it?

RG: We just, you know, all the agents, anywhere anybody had seen anybody and the difficulty was that once we'd cast them, there was terrible war between them. The ones from, I don't know, hated the ones from South Africa, hated the ones from I don't know wherever.

HF: You had one black from the Olivier company didn't you?

RG: Two, we had two. Oh yes we did have two in Anthony and Cleopatra.

KH: Was that quite unusual at the time?

RG: Well they were the two slaves, and one of them was a lawyer or something, studied law but also played the guitar, he was a very famous singer.

HF: You said he was the most educated of the lot

RG: And one of them had studied medicine or something and the very famous singer, he's still around isn't he? And when we got to Liverpool they couldn't find any digs where they were allowed in

KH: So what did they do?

RG: They had to be kind of looked after by the management and put in a hotel or something, and when we got to America they were removed from the rest of us to another part of the building in the dressing rooms. We were separated and I was quite friendly with one of them, Jan Carew was his name, a poet as well, and he came to me one day and he said, 'I've got a lot of relatives in New York...' - in Harlem, somewhere - and he said '...they're giving me a birthday party and I'd like to invite you'.

RG: And I said, 'What, me, the only one in the company?' And he said yes, so anyway they picked me up and we got there and I got into the room with about a hundred people, all black and I'd never experienced that before. That was very strange, and then I realised that it must be very strange for the blacks all surrounded entirely by whites and some of them rushed up to me and said, 'Some of my best friends are white you know', that sort of thing and the others thought it was absolutely disgusting that I'd been asked and it was a very uncomfortable evening. They were... I don't know, dentists, and all sorts of things that blacks did and whites didn't do. Like selling. I can't remember- I was very, very surprised. And he - Jan Carew - said to me, 'Now you see, you think you understand what it's like to be a black and you don't understand a damn thing, this is what it's like for us the whole time', and he really thought he'd teach me. I always thought I understood, and I understood what he was going through and he thought I understand F- all. I don't know what happened to him, but Jan Carew... gosh what's the name of the singer - he's still around? Those were the two black in Anthony and Cleopatra and Caesar but they weren't in this (Genet's play). They weren't black, anyway, they were you know like, what's her name, the woman off... Floella.

HF: Oh she's very black.

RG: Yes, I know, but they weren't African.

KH: When you used to read scripts for Albery, on what kind of basis did you sort of decide whether they were any good or not?

RG: It's interesting you should ask me, I mean that particular question, I hammered out finally when I was head of scripts.

KH: In television at ATV?

RG: Yes, you know: on what basis are we reading, and how do we in fact instruct our readers, and... etc. There wasn't a basis, whether one thought it was interesting to an audience or something absolutely new like *Waiting for Godot*, worth trying out. A good part for a famous actor was something one was looking for.

KH: So, were you looking for things that were - for example - socially realistic, like *Look Back in Anger*, that kind of thing, or not?

RG: No I don't think so. It didn't have to be... I mean, in those days a lot of plays were like that.

KH: What do you think brought about the change in theatre? With the new kinds of theatre like *Godot*, *Look Back in Anger*, what do you think brought that forward?

RG: The chance for new writers.

KH: Because of places like the Royal Court ?

RG: Yes. They were interested in new writers, which West End theatres weren't particularly. They'd do, you know, older plays

HF: It was risk-taking.

RG: And they wanted to use new writers, and they in fact advertised for new writing. The change... I don't know how influential the Royal Court was...

KH: Do you think that there were other important influences that have been overshadowed by the Royal Court?

RG: Yes. I think that the Arts Theatre did some very interesting plays. New ones. And what else... It wasn't just writing. It was directors as well.

KH: How do you think directing changed or directors changed?

RG: I don't know. I haven't really thought about it. I mean, not much because both the people I knew, like Peter Brook or Peter Zadek, left Britain. I mean, there was no place for Peter Brook would you believe it! And [Minushkin] in France who had a company like Littlewood got a lot of money from the government and did marvellously. Littlewood got no help at all, hardly recognition and she did do some very interesting new stuff. The government didn't... I mean all it did do after the war was give money to get tours into the provinces or something. I can't remember the detail of it but they didn't do much to help the theatre. People said 'the theatre will die anyway on account of television', but it didn't and then they said the films would die, didn't they?

HF: But there was some scheme you were involved in? Placing new directors with theatres or new writers...

RG: Oh yes. Directors in theatres.

HF: Or was it writers. Resident writers?

RG: And directors. Television would pay for that, and we selected them

KH: This was when you later became involved in television?

RG: Yes

KH: So it was a scheme that television funded for theatres? When was that?

RG: Hugh Carlton Green was still the head of the BBC, he was part of it. Jeremy Isaacs was to do with it because it was Rediffusion that was paying for it and that chappie I knew...

HF: The chap in Edinburgh, he was involved was he?

RG: No, it wasn't Edinburgh . It was some scheme who came in front of it. Was it the writer who lives opposite Susy? Poliakoff?

KH: Stephen Poliakoff. So this would have been in the seventies was it?

RG: Or late sixties.

KH: Why did you move into television from theatre?

RG: Because I didn't want to travel. I wanted to be at home because of the children I think. And also whatever you did, in the end you were touring something for a while and you always had to be around and you always had to be around in the various places on the first night and so on, or do the deals with them and you were never at home. And also I sort of reckoned that television was the expanding thing. I mean all there was, was BBC 1 and ITV and then came ITV2 and...

HF: BBC2

RG: ...BBC2 and I suppose, Channel Four, so it was an expanding situation where there were always new jobs

KH: Did you find that your theatre background helped you when, when you went into television?

RG: Well I suppose organising things, setting things up... I founded the scripts department and decided what it took on and what it didn't take on, and I really, at ATV, grew myself a little empire, because I would take in the script library and then ask for an extra half a secretary and take in God knows what and take another half a secretary and I can't remember. Lots of things we did.

HF: But you got into it partly because of your experience with writers and plays.

RG: Well I beg your pardon. The reason they gave me the job was that I could find writers.

KH: Which is what you'd been doing in the theatre.

RG: Well I knew them, but most of them weren't allowed by their agents to write for television because it was a step down. It was felt like a step down and I was a great link to interest them to write a play. I mean, we did a series called Love Story - an international love story, so that you could ask famous people like Margaret Dura and she said yes when I phoned her up. She would write her story, a love story, and I said, 'Why are you prepared to write for an English television company when you won't write for a television company in France?' and she said, 'I would not write for De Gaulle'. Anyway we had American, French, Italian and so on and so forth...

HF: Polanski

RG: Roman Polanski, he was working across the street actually in a film - a polish love story. With the sort of single dramas which you could link in this vague way and once these writers wrote for television, others would. But Peggy Ramsay, who owned the best writers, she was very tough, she didn't like it. It was really felt that writing for theatre was really gold compared to television.

KH: So when was this, was this the late sixties.

RG: Yes, well early sixties - '64.

HF: Middle sixties.

RG: Middle sixties. I joined in '64.

KH: So when do you think the change kind of took place - when people writing in theatre wanted to write in television?

RG: There were some very good drama series on ITV and BBC. Who was the famous one? Canadian producer...

HF: Sidney Newman.

RG: That's right. Sidney Newman he was excellent in ITV... I can't remember which company, and then much later Channel Four, I mean, David Rose was brilliant at it.

KH: When you look back at your time in the theatre, do you remember it as an exciting time?

RG: No, I didn't get enough good parts, there weren't enough interesting plays. I was particularly hampered because I didn't look like the English girl next door, I don't don't know what I looked like, I was a 'joli laide' as a type.

HF: Really, is that what they called you?

RG: Yes, and when you see photographs of me I looked jolly nice, didn't I?

HF: I thought so!

RG: But I wasn't...

KH: You weren't what they were looking for?

RG: No, absolutely not the girl next door.