

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Alan White – interview transcript

Interviewer: Kate Harris

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Actor. Acting style; actors' mystique; actors' strike; Alan Ayckbourne; audience reaction; Canterbury and Leatherhead; censorship; digs; Frank Matcham theatres; Arthur Miller; matinees; new writing; refreshments; repertory; technical changes; touring; Waiting for Godot; writers; Yvonne Arnaud theatre, Guildford.

KH: Can I begin by asking about when you first started working in theatre, your first experiences of working in theatre?

AW: Well, in 1954 I started in a repertory at Leatherhead and Canterbury, Canterbury Theatre was called The Marlowe and the Leatherhead was in the High Street in Leatherhead, and you rehearsed and played one week in Leatherhead and took the same play to Canterbury and rehearsed another play and so on, and the system was you opened on the Monday night and on the Tuesday you blocked the next play, the morning the first Act and the second Act in the afternoon. Wednesday morning off because you did a matinee on Wednesday afternoon. Then Thursday you went through the first Act, Friday through the second Act. Then Saturday you had a run through, sort of stagger through, this was still playing the other one on Saturday, matinee and night. Then you moved to Canterbury, did a run through, dress rehearsal on Monday afternoon and opened on Monday night and then you went on with the next play and that's for three months, play after play after play.

KH: Did you find it a very punishing schedule? Did you find it difficult working to that kind of regime?

AW: It is, and you have to find a way yourself that you can cope with it, and the best way I found anyway is to learn the lines and follow the punctuation, because a writer takes a long while to write a play, sometimes a year, and if the actor paraphrases or breaks up the speeches then the whole thing goes sideways. If you follow the actual words, only the actual words and their punctuation, you can get the part right in a short space of time. You have to learn that, but it's very necessary you know. If you are a writer and somebody is paraphrasing; 'Oh God! What are they doing to my play!' you know.

KH: Where did you move from when you moved from the first repertory theatre that you were at?

AW: I think I did Guildford after that, Guildford had a theatre in the main street before the Yvonne Arnaud and it was burnt down subsequently, but that was a weekly rep. The Canterbury and Leatherhead was a fortnightly, so that was a weekly rep, so they did a different play every week.

KH: Was that transition quite difficult - going from two weeks to one week?

AW: It wasn't really, because you worked out... it really worked out this way, you were open on the Monday night and from then on the second play that you were doing, two hours, generally speaking all plays were two hours long, and you had to go back after you'd finished the show in the night and learn eighteen pages a night. If you didn't learn eighteen pages a night you got behind, so you'd find yourself on the opening night - on Monday night - grasping around, panicking and all the rest of it. So that took you to about... from the time you finished the play, which was about 11 o'clock, got home and then I used to cut out at about 2 o'clock in the morning but just learning right through, and learning this absolutely off the text and off the punctuation in particular, and then it sat together. But you got the Monday night where sometimes, if somebody had been learning it sitting up in bed and when they'd go into a speech, 'Where were you on the such and such?', 'Well as a matter of fact on the night...' you know, this would happen and the most difficult stuff to learn, which people watching television may or may not know, is detective plays, Agatha Christie's, because it's all exposition: so and so did this on that on that and the other, and 'where were you on the night of...', and so for people like John Thaw doing those plays, it must have been terribly difficult because everything is a mass of exposition, practically nothing else.

KH: What kind of plays were you doing when you were working at Guildford?

AW: Those plays were, generally speaking, plays that came from the West End successes so if it was a success they wanted to see it at Leatherhead, and Leatherhead was a commuter zone so you got two different audiences, you got Leatherhead was commuting and you got Canterbury who were rather agricultural, so the timing was different, with the same play it would time fast in Leatherhead and slowly in Canterbury, you had to give them time to get used to it.

KH: Because of the audience change.

AW: Yes, what they did for a living and Leatherhead was closest to London. Timing in London is very, very sophisticated timing. Well, most of the big cities are you know, and there's an extraordinary difference between, from Edinburgh to Glasgow, if you take a slightly risqué play to Edinburgh they'll love it. It goes to Glasgow and they'll sit there and hate it, you know. Everywhere you go there's a different kind of audience that reflects the place. You know, Liverpool for instance, very lively people they are, and this reflects it.

KH: Did you find that the audiences changed over the period, the fifties and sixties? Was there a change...?

AW: I don't think they did, I mean, we were researching a play to go on up here in the Shaw by about ten playwrights. It was called Thomas More, the story of Thomas More. It was written by these different playwrights in the time, and was banned because it would have been insulting to Elizabeth. Shakespeare's only writing, actual writing of a scene, is in there, in his handwriting, it's the only one they've got, it's in here [The British Library] and in that time there were so many theatres, I think there were something like fifteen theatres in London, in the early 1600's and the English people, this hasn't changed, they had a survey in the Sunday Times in the seventies, I was in The Mousetrap at the time, because they were comparing this and there were, over the fifty year period, exactly the same number of farces, thrillers, straight plays, musical comedies, opera and ballet, were going on 50 years later, which shows just how the audience doesn't really change and what they're after is that. This has probably gone on right since the beginning... it's just the English people as such, they love the theatre, you know, that's why it's survived, nowhere in the world is anything like in England, you know, theatres.

KH: When we were talking on the phone, you mentioned some of the changes, the technical changes in the theatre - could you just say a little bit about that?

AW: The technical changes, yes they were very important, this happened in the middle of the 1950s. When, normally they were lighting a theatre, it would be a laborious affair. Put that in there, put that in there and so on, and a man called Michael Northern and another man called Joe Davis invented a lighting board which completely blocked in the lighting like you do in a film set, every bit was lit, and this was able to be done in an afternoon, off your lighting board. And before that, because the lighting was dark, I believe when originally they did the plays in the afternoon, in Shakespeare's day because there were no lights. And then in the period of the Drury Lane they had candles, they lit with candles, sometimes that's how theatres burned down, with the candles on the stage, then when they got to this stage the lighting was rather poor, the actors wore Leichner stick make-up - it's a German stick make-up - put it on very heavily and this stood you out, and the women similarly, and then when this lighting was invented by Michael Northern, it immediately looked like make-up on the stage so you didn't use it any more. They put the base like we have a base now, a base makeup, and then men nowadays don't wear any at all.

KH: They don't need it because the lighting...

AW: ...The lighting was so marvellous in it. It was really a great innovation and the other one just recently was Trevor Nunn with the Sennheiser body mic. They were in The Olivier, it's a... any open thrust stage you've got sound going everywhere. So in a normal proscenium stage you had three microphones in the footlights and they, you know the actors knew they were there but they weren't playing to them and the minute you turned upstage the sound went, indistinct or whatever it was. So when we were doing An Enemy of the People, which was the first play he did there, when he took the theatre over, it was in The Olivier. He saw this problem and immediately reverted to

what you do in Musical comedy which is have Sennheiser body mics. Anywhere you could be heard and seen and people listening to it, playing in Los Angeles for three months, and there was a fellow over there that was a sound technician and he said, 'What are you doing on this?' and I said, 'They're body mics'. So afterwards he said, 'I couldn't tell the difference, I couldn't pick it up at all' and the other afternoon I was at the Old Vic, a Trevor Nunn production of Richard the Second and the same thing happened there. This wonderful sound, everywhere they go, every word, which is all you've got on the stage – isn't it - is words. If the audience don't get every word you've wasted your time really, and this worked a treat, but I don't think everybody does it. It's a pity they don't because it really is a help to the audience to hear everything said, and one person monitors it so it sounds like natural sound modulated, that's the only difference, you don't get the raw sound on it, you know.

KH: Do you think that over the fifties and sixties, do you think that acting styles changed?

AW: Well, Olivier reckoned that the acting style changes every fifteen years and the theatre style changes every fifteen years, and the main change that I think, in that time, was that with the uprising of television, television writing became spare, unpunctuated a lot of the time, bit off beat, surreal and so on. Whereas before that the plays were beautifully tailored plays with a first, second and third act, with a beginning, middle and end and then the writing changed with this and so did the acting style change as well. But actors in Shakespeare or something can't do that. You can't busk Shakespeare, it doesn't busk! [laughs] They didn't in those days and it doesn't now, you know. But that was the main, I think television affected it to that degree and the writing now, these writers that I've put down [AW notes on table] William Douglas Hulme, Terence Rattigan, these writers were writing very, very tailored plays which the audience loved, particularly the English audiences you know. And then in the days of, in the olden days when women didn't work, they had matinees and they had tea trays that came round in the matinees. Then when women worked nobody attended the matinees, so now because the contracts are eight shows a week, they still keep the two matinees in. Nobody turns up on the Wednesday so if you want to get a good seat, go and get the cheaper seat on the Wednesday and you'll end up in the front stalls! You know, this is a truth. When I was doing No Sex Please, We're British, it was in a big theatre, twelve hundred seater, that's quite big for a straight play, it's a bit like being shot out of a cannon, a bit you know, but it lived on its Friday night and Saturday night business. It ran for fifteen years just on Friday and Saturday night business, Friday, Saturday afternoon, Saturday night. The rest of the week was poor and the Wednesday, if it's under a certain amount you can cancel the show... that never happened.

KH: When you were performing and they had this afternoon tea thing. Did you find that disruptive as an actor, was it difficult to act through everyone having their tea and things?

AW: Well, when I first arrived in 1954 this was going strong, so I was generally a viewer at the time myself, I was a customer, so the trays... they didn't worry me. But they seemed to get them in and over, they had a system where it didn't interrupt the playing. You know, their timing with bringing it and taking it back, and the order had to be made before they went in and sat down, so they knew exactly where they were going, what

stall, what seat and that. It was a good idea and in those days I believe the actors had a... there was a great deal of mystery. There was none of this seventy-five magazines with all sorts of celebrities in them. And they used to put an extra five pounds a week on the actors' pay so that they would turn up at the theatre in a taxi and leave in a taxi, so that the audience thought they were rich or doing well or something. It was a good idea and they were mysterious then, you know, they were sort of lionised, all of the actors of that period. There always have been, you know, great sort of matinee idols on the English Stage.

KH: The new writing that came in, the new playwrights and the new kinds of drama, what kind of impact did that have on you? How did you react to it?

AW: Well for one thing it made for naturalism, which was good and it also made for different regional accents coming into it, that was very good because before then it was a bit you know, tennis racket in the hand and 'May I have a lend of the car tonight please, father' you know, this sort of style of West End theatre acting went out the window with this. And this is what really, and then you got things like, Albert Finney did a number of them that were very, very good... Billy Liar, you know, plays like that. So then the North, they were always there the north country plays, Hobson's Choice, they were always there but they were sort of special rather than common place and now they're common place which is marvellous, very eclectic, because all of England is following these things turning up every week at the theatre you know.

KH: Looking back, did you have particular playwrights or productions, that were new writing that you enjoyed being in?

AW: Well nearly all new writing you enjoyed because the writer comes through in the thing. I'm doing now, three Australian plays by three different writers and all of them were different and you can feel the writer coming through it and when you're acting the writer takes you over, you know, you're not thinking 'this is me' or, you know, 'I'm going on and I'm Kate'. You don't, you're the character and when you walk on, I'm paying to see you, you walk on and you say 'I'm a sophisticated West End...' and I'm thinking 'Alright, she's a sophisticated...'. I accept you for what you walk on with. So you know that, so then you can free yourself up. If you were asked to write something, a story about bank managers, you would research bank managing, but as an actor they say 'you're a bank manager', and it's got in the programme 'he's a bank manager', and you walk on as a bank manager, they've accepted you as that, so you don't have to prove that you're a bank manager, you just are.

KH: Earlier, before we started the interview, you were showing me some play scripts with the instructions and the pictures of the sets and things from the West End shows. Could you just tell me a little bit about that?

AW: Well French's Acting Editions were put up for that reason because all the repertory, everything that was being played in repertories and regional theatres all over Britain, emanated from the West End. They'd love to see that, they'd heard about it, it was on in London, big success, next week it's on in Colchester or somewhere you know and

then they'd flock to see it. So French's came up with this agreement with the managements of the theatres and producers of the plays, that their, everything could be recorded, every move, when the thing was set, you know, by the time it got to production, all the moves, all the entrance exits, the set - copy of the set, photo of the set - properties, dresses, the lighting plot... everything in this one little book, so that if you were doing a play in a week, if you followed that as a director and actors, then you'd get through. If you followed it as properties and ASMs and things, you'd get through also. It was a very, very good idea and I think it's still going. There was that, and Evans drama people, they were there too you know, but it was a big help. Most directors if they had two or three weeks would rather do it their own way, but if they had a week...

KH: Then it was helpful to have the guide

AW: ...you've got virtually three rehearsals before you start.

KH: Did you have a sense when you started your career that there were particular theatres that you'd like to work at, that you'd like to get to, in the regions?

AW: Well, acoustically the old theatres are absolutely marvellous in London, that's why they've kept them, apart from that they're an attraction to the audience but they're beautifully, the sound in them is absolutely wonderful and they're mostly below ground aren't they? You walk in and street level is the dress circle and down below and most of the best theatres, the Frank Matcham theatres and that, are still there. So any big, big, production, or touring production will play these theatres in these regions, these regional theatres, they are all pretty nearly Frank Matcham now. I think he did thirty at one stage in London, there's the Coliseum, there's the Palladium, there's the Victoria Palace... it goes on and on you know.

KH: When did you first come to London, to act in London?

AW: In 1954, and I've now been here 51 years and in that time I've done practically everything. The agency that I came over for is still going, but only in America, it's an American agency. It was American and English combined at the time.

KH: Did you feel that there was a big contrast having come from regional theatre and repertory and then coming to London. Did the contrast strike you or...?

AW: No, I think that, you know, coming from Australia, in Australia you didn't do a play under a month, and it was terribly slack, the discipline. In England, immediately not only the production that's going on but everybody connected with the theatre - people who put the flowers in the foyer, that do the bookings, everything to do with theatre is absolutely finessed in this country, it really is and you learn from it immediately. Everybody is doing their job and everybody is as important as anybody else, and when it goes into London it's the same thing, and all the actors, you know if you're coming from

say an American town, or an Australian town or something, everybody knows everybody else and they're jealous and bitchy. In England you never get anything like that at all. It's so big, it's so vast that I've never met a jealous actor here yet and anybody who gets a break that you know, 'How marvellous, she's in the...' you know. Really, literally it's a wonderful system here, so big, so vast you know.

KH: During the fifties and sixties did censorship have any impact on you at all? Was it something that you were very aware of?

AW: Well you were annoyed at the censorship, but on the other hand the censorship was broken a bit on television in a way, and I mean Bernard Shaw said, you know, she goes up and says 'Not bloody likely!' and in those days it was a sensation, one 'bloody' in a play. So it hit a part of the sixties, early sixties where everything was 'bloody' this and 'bloody' that and 'bloody'... and it was overdone, and now they're doing it with the F word, the same thing is happening all over again and it'll run its course, in the end it'll be terrible. But it inhibits the writer because the writer feels - particularly in films - that he's got to put it in, you know, and it's no description at all, is it really? It's like 'bloody', it's useless as a word you know. It'll always happen, that, I think. It was the same as they did with the nudity, when the nudity was allowed on the London stage, everything had nudity, all the television had nudity, this that and the other, after a while it got boring so they didn't do it anymore, but once it started you couldn't have a play on where they weren't showing at least their breasts or something, you know, it was some sort of nudity and the same in films wasn't it, exactly the same thing. And maybe Olivier's right, every generation the whole thing changes, it probably does, the writing, the acting style, films certainly do.

KH: Did you have a favourite play that you were in that was in the post-war period? That was written in the fifties and sixties?

AW: There were two that I did. One was Doctor in the House which we did at The Victoria Palace, and that was the best comedy part I've ever had I think and it had an enormous success, it ran for eighteen months, twice nightly, twelve shows a week at the Victoria Palace, and then they made so much money out of it that they let the reps have it without the royalty, provided that they put it into the theatre seating or something like this. All of the reps in England afterwards they made so much money after this, and that's a wonderful thing isn't it to do that, have all the royalties for a year on the play in the reps. The other one as a drama was The Price, it was at the Duke of York's and it was Arthur Miller wrote it and directed it, and they'd been doing it on Broadway and so they had all of the moves and everything worked out, and in those days they had big chunk speeches which he still tended to write in, so if you were directing it and you were looking at this as a box, you would work out where, what big chunk speeches were and usually it's off the circle bar, because you can be seen from the top and you can be seen from underneath. Nearly all sort of eye lines were off the circle bar, and there's an exit sign there and an exit sign there [gestures to sides] They are the two other things that speeches can be done off and where the foots go, you can't get any lower than that if you're doing anything introspective, you can't do that or they wouldn't see you, and the Proscenium, like that there, you've got to be inside of that about half way up, thinks, thinks, thinks. So these placings they do, you know, with big speeches, are marvellous because they're just in the right place for the audience to be drawn in. The Yanks are

good at it and so are they here. I was rehearsing one play in the Yvonne Arnaud theatre, they used to rehearse in the poets centre in Earl's Court and it was a room not much bigger than this, we were rehearsing a thing called Robert's Wife, which was out of a play that had big chunk speeches. And a woman called Diana Sheridan was playing this part, Robert's wife, clergyman's wife, and we rehearsed everything like this and then we got to the Yvonne Arnaud on the Monday which was about a twelve hundred seater and I was sitting there watching him, Murray directed it and he'd say, 'That speech dear, up there at about, yes that's fine' and 'the other...' and he placed every single speech he had in the play and I said 'How did you work that out off the top of your head?' and he said [laughs] 'I did this play with Edith Evans', he said, 'I was six at the time'. He'd worked it all out before so that you'd know exactly where to play everything, and you as the actress, if you're playing off something you know you can relax in it, otherwise where are you? There's nothing worse than sort of wandering, you know, actors that wander round. The other thing is the still side of it. Did you see Lost in Translation?

KH: Yes I've seen that.

AW: Have you seen Broken Flowers?

KH: Yes I've seen that too - Bill Murray.

AW: Have you seen that too? Well he works with a completely still head and they have a thing in Hollywood which they use a lot in the sort of Dynasty and things, where you have a smooth face like that, you just think smooth face and you don't blink and the audience puts their own interpretation on what you're doing so it cuts to him, he's sitting there thinking 'smooth face, don't blink' and you're thinking 'he's upset', he's this, he's that, he's the other. This is in a big close-up. Up to a point that happens on a stage as well, the stiller the actor... The most ridiculous thing is politicians because their body language is worked out, with the man you swing your arms like you're marching, that makes you look butch, Tony Blair does it, George Bush does it, you always see their arms pumping like marching soldiers. And then the other thing, you recognise somebody in the audience, 'Bill!', always there's nobody there but you say it and they say 'Oh, he's a nice fella', you know. But the thing that they do in America, Clinton and company they sit there and they talk like that and Bush and they say, [gesturing as speaks] 'If you want to come back the other time...'. The gesticulating: why?! It's unconvincing for one thing. It sort of comes from Arthur Scargill and the days of [AW articulating every word slowly] 'When He Said That', you know, and Tony Blair does it all the time; but the Yanks don't do it, and Clinton was very hypnotic and Bush is up to a point. Bush is doing the [AW demonstrates in slow American drawl] 'John Wayne sort of break it up - kind of'. Yanks love it, John Wayne did it and somebody called Will [Rodgers] who was a cowboy, a rope spinning cowboy, they pause in mid air. Everything he's doing is quite deliberate. What all of them are doing, because they're actors aren't they? They're working off a speech. The speech is written for them and so they're either looking at it there or they're looking at it on the [tube?] glasses or they're reading off it, and they're acting it.

KH: Did you prefer touring, being in a touring company or being based within a company within a theatre?

AW: Well it's the same as, in any other job, when you're here, you want to be away and when you're away you want to be here! [laughs] It's strange that, but when you are on the road you never play less than a week so you get used to the theatre and the audience and you can discover the city, which is marvellous. A week in each place, this way you learn all about, you know, Wolverhampton or this or that or the other, while working in these beautiful theatres at night and living in digs, you know of the time. That altered, digs, there were theatrical digs, with landladies that cooked you a supper when you came in of a night, into small hotels and guest houses and now it's come back to the digs as the money has got tighter, you know.

KH: How did you go about finding the theatrical digs?

AW: Well they had them in the stage door, they have a list. Every stage door has a list of theatrical digs. So you ring them up, just literally the minute you arrive, it's a very good system. If you've got a digs you put it in to the theatre and they say how far they are away and so on or hotels the same. In Bath there's one called The Round House that's in that... where the big baths are you know and that's a popular actors' one near the theatre.

KH: Just to return to new writing. Did you find any particular playwrights very controversial? I'm just looking at the list of the people that you've got down here [AW notes on table] people like [reading] Edward Bond and Pinter, did you find their work quite controversial?

AW: Well Edward Bond was, I didn't play in any Edward Bond plays but they had one where a child in a pram was stoned...

KH: Saved

AW: Mmm, he was a controversial sort of writer and so is Howard Brenton up to a point and David Hare, but David Hare's a marvellous human interest writer; and the Americans, we were doing a Thornton Wilder called Our Town and he was ringing up from New York every night to see how the rehearsals had gone in the day and the fellow that was directing it, directed his plays all round the world, you know, it's a wonderful play. But then years later, Priestley for instance, we were doing Dangerous Corner, he turned up to see it...

KH: Gosh!

AW: Old man, and you think... everybody was so honoured because he was a great... and he said to the woman who was running the thing, he said, 'I never liked this play' [laughs] 'I don't like it' and the other one was Ben Travers who wrote all of the comedies, Rookery Nook, we were doing Rookery Nook and he turned up, bright blue eyes, you know, in his eighties, still writing.

KH: Did he have much impact on the production?

AW: Oh, everybody knew he was with... in front you know, and you think that's marvellous. There was one thing happened when *The Price*, the Arthur Miller play was opening at the Duke of York's, and man who was playing the old furniture dealer, David Bower, was taken ill after a fortnight of playing with angina trouble, so they got the fellow over who was playing it on Broadway called Harold Gary, they put him up in the Savoy Hotel for the time that the other one needed to recover and on the same floor was Charlie Chaplin, his idol, so he rang Chaplin up, and day in day... on the intercom, 'Come and see the play, come and see the play', and eventually he said he'd come and he said, 'Charlie Chaplin's in front tonight.' The following night he turns up absolutely distraught and they said, 'Didn't he come?' and he said, 'He came alright! He came round to my dressing room, he took me through every bit of my part and showed me how I should have played it' [laughs].

KH: What part were you playing in this?

AW: I was the cop, I've brought a programme, he comes on at the beginning of the play, there are two brothers in the Depression, which is what Miller's about and always about, two brothers. One brother stays and looks after the family, which is the cop and the other one goes off and becomes a doctor and there's always this feeling of the wife of the one who stayed behind, that the doctor, Harold Gary, this is the American who took over at the time, I've forgotten what date that is. Has it got the date? [looking at programme] No. Anyway Delbert Hughes was the fellow that... it's a wonderful play and it's always been a favourite of mine as a serious play and the other one *The Doctor in the House*.

KH: What was Arthur Miller like to work with?

AW: Absolutely wonderful. He was sort of very dignified, tall, dignified and straight, everything is absolutely straightforward and they'd worked this production over. So [Delbert Hughes] was giving the moves and things and Miller was giving the eye lines more or less, 'Play that speech here or in the centre of the circle bar' and it gives you a sort of relaxation if you know what you're doing and where you're doing it. And I went to see *Death of a Salesman* [on in London at time of interview]. Did you see that here?

KH: I haven't seen it here but I have seen a production of it before.

AW: Well I mean this is absolutely, it comes from Chicago and he again has got these massive speeches and they're all worked out on eye lines so that everybody looking down can see, everybody looking up, sideways, it's like framing a picture you know. And that was the favourite one. They did another thing there that was most extraordinary; the people that put this on were a big American company and they took over, they did *Plaza Suite* which had been a film, in one theatre and they did *The Price* in the other. They had a package arranged with the Savoy Hotel where they flew over

from America, customers, punters, and put them up in the Savoy on the Friday night, took them shopping in the West End on Saturday, show on Saturday night, to which the actors out of the two plays, they were both American plays, were invited to Savoy where there was a champagne, scrambled egg supper, so they met the actors. Sunday morning they flew back. And there was a fellow from Santa Barbara, a theatre owner, and he said 'Look, across America, if you've seen a play on Broadway OK, but the snob thing is to say 'I saw it in London''. It's true. They're like that.

KH: We were talking on the phone about the touring and the number one tour and the number two tour, could you just tell me a little bit about that?

AW: Yes, well, the number one were the big cities: Edinburgh, Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Brighton etc. The smaller ones were Bath, places like that, Darlington, they were the sort of number twos. They were generally taking tours that were touring plays for two or three months, and the number ones were taking plays in and out of London. And they were bigger and more expensive, the seats to those. The number twos were every other form of regional theatre that there was, I think generally. They didn't ever say they were number twos, but this was always considered to be number one and they're big theatres. Manchester is, I think, a two and a half thousand seater, the Manchester Opera House. There's the Lyceum in Edinburgh and The Kings, the Royal Court in Liverpool, that's a Matcham, The Royal in Newcastle, that's Matcham, Nottingham – The Royal in Nottingham - that's Matcham, The New in Oxford, that's Matcham. They're all Matcham theatres and they're all different - amazing architect.

KH: Did you feel that there was a change in regional theatre during the fifties and sixties?

AW: Well, you see as the writing changed, affected by television, and became more surreal, more regional, everything in the writing. I mean Pinter and up to a point Beckett was a bit responsible for this. Pinter, that sort of playwright, they wouldn't look at them at first but as that took over then the regions followed suit, the whole thing followed suit.

KH: Have you played in Pinter's plays?

AW: Pinter's plays... I've never done a Pinter but I've seen a lot of them. I saw recently *The Caretaker* with Michael Gambon and absolutely wonderful in it he was, wonderful, then I saw another one of his at The Comedy and it didn't work so well, some do and some don't. Some go out of date I think even.

KH: Did you go and see his plays when they first came out at all?

AW: Well yes, that's the one that Peter Hall, that was the breakthrough for Peter Hall, he did it at the Arts Theatre. Waiting for Godot, is that the one you mean? Oh, did you mean Pinter?

KH: Did you go and see the Waiting for Godot at The Arts?

AW: Yes.

KH: You saw the very first Waiting for Godot?

AW: Yes, it drew the town, it was a big success, and the only play that I've played in of Beckett's is Happy Days. A lot of them are women's plays you know, he's a wonderful playwright.

KH: Just to go back to that first production of Waiting for Godot that you saw. What were your impressions of that production?

AW: Well to me, I can see any play in a theatre, good, bad or indifferent and I'm interested, I love it. It can be a bad play even, I'll sit there and I'll think it out, I'll go along with it and think what they're doing with it. The awful thing is that when you're acting, if you're acting, in cinema or television or something, you're thinking of the technique a lot of the time, I mean the technique of the production, so you're thinking 'Where's that lit?' or 'Why are they...' - the whole thing is going along with you. If it's that good that it completely absorbs you and you don't notice any of the technical side of it, it's wonderful.

KH: Was that production like that, did it absorb you like that?

AW: Well, I mean in films for instance you're wondering what's digital and what isn't, and then you see Lost in Translation and you're completely transported by it, not so much Broken Flowers, although it's similar in a way isn't it? It's a bit like Sideways, did you see that?

KH: Yes

AW: There's a mixture of Sideways and Lost in Translation isn't it? But they're wonderful films, like Updike's novels about America, you know, the small town and that type of community, local community and everything.

KH: You mentioned about playing in Happy Days. Was that a difficult play to do? Did you find that difficult?

AW: No, because Beckett is sort of hypnotic to watch and also to play in. The main part in *Happy Days* is the woman's part and she's in a pile right up to there and the husband is groping around, and we did in Leicester. Leicester's got a big theatre and a studio and we were doing that in the studio and *Arms and the Man* in the big theatre at the same time and they loved it and it's wonderful to play in. He switches into French, which he was writing in a lot of the time wasn't he and when he does, there's a piece on *The Merry Widow*, and the ordinary melody [sings] 'I love you' and the end of it is called [heure excise?] in the French and the last bit of it 'every touch of fingers, tells me what I know, says to me it's true, it's true you love me so.' It's a beautiful translation of something that isn't in English at all, a French way, a romantic way of looking at it.

KH: How do you think the audience reacted to that play, when were you playing...

AW: Oh they loved it.

KH: When was it you were in it?

AW: Oh must have been ten, fifteen years ago now. The woman that was playing the woman in it, Pam, I'll remember her name in a minute... was the ex-wife of John Osborne and he came up and saw every single performance she did there, so much was he interested in the original sort of, the relationship they had, he was there right throughout. And the other time while I was there, as I say, this is ten, fifteen years ago, Anthony Minghella was a school teacher and he wrote this play called *Whale Music*, he used to sit in this box-like small theatre, watching the rehearsals of it and from that he has gone on and on and on. His writing on women was uncanny – *Truly, Madly, Deeply*'s another one - and he's got a wonderful sense of a woman in his writing, really good women's parts and of course so it was in *Broken Flowers*. I've never seen Jennifer Lange that good.

KH: Did you have a sense with The National Theatre starting and The RSC, did you have a sense that it was a changing time in theatre?

AW: Oh The National Theatre is the sun, the moon and the stars. In the fifty-one years that I've been here. It is the greatest sort of development of the theatre and they do the best shows and from an actor's point of view, there's three theatres in the one round the South Bank, and from the actor's point of view you don't work every night, you do maybe three or four performances a week while you're rehearsing something else, and over a period of seven years I was there and then came back again.

KH: When did you first start working there?

AW: About twenty years ago. And you see, you only do a production, we did it for two years, *Enemy of the People*, and then went over to Los Angeles with it for three months. For actors it's just a dream, the whole of the thing is laid out, I know they've criticised the architecture, but there's a workshop there where the sets are painted that's right

beside where you're working. It's like a film studios where you see the things coming in and out, and it somehow gets you going when you see the set coming up and you're working and that. It's an absolutely wonderful thing and the people that have been there, Peter Hall then Richard Eyre, Trevor Nunn, isn't he the third one that's going at present?

KH: I was going to ask you about directors. Do you think the relationship between actors and directors has changed over the period that you've been working?

AW: Not really. I mean, the best directors get the best casting, so that's half the problem, is the casting of the actor. The best directors say very little, Trevor Nunn endlessly fiddles with where the scene is placed, the placings, until he gets it right. He's wonderful with crowds, and Richard Eyre gets a kind of pace going throughout which is great. It is motivated right from the word go, it sweeps along, everything I've seen him do has done that. They're great directors really and Alan Ayckbourne, he's a marvellous director, he's been working at Scarborough all those years and we were doing *Tis Pity She's A Whore* and everything he writes, everything is in his head for three months – everything! - and then he sits down and he does it in ten or eleven days, the lot, and it's fool-proof. The dialogue's fool-proof, it's so funny and he himself is the kind of fellow that finds almost everything funny you know. And he had some jugglers coming in at the end of this very big finale and the jugglers are coming down like that and they stop and they juggle and the lot come through the middle, and every time they came down they juggled and the stuff fell, he was [laughing] going away. He's kind of like Wodehouse, you know, the second half of the century, he chronicles the English sense of humour, Wodehouse did it earlier on with Bertie Wooster and all that.

KH: One of the things we've talked about on the phone was the actors' strike. Which you mentioned as quite a big thing that happened...

AW: Yes, well '61 to '62. It lasted a year. 1961 to 62, and what happened was, that the TV companies up to that point had simply negotiated with the agents for the fees that the actors were getting, and the TV companies banded together and wanted to structure the fees and wanted to set a minimum which the actors feared would become a maximum. So they struck, so for a whole year nobody in Equity accepted a television job at all. So everybody went on the road for six-month tours of, I did six months with *Doctor in the House*, which I'd played in London, and six years too old for the part now, as well, which wasn't so good, and they were using, I was in a thing called *The Flying Doctor*, the television thing, they were using that as publicity because it was to do with doctors, so everywhere they went with these six-month tours they were - Taurus was the company that did it - they put up what shows they were in on television just to keep the thing going. Anyway in the end they caved in, and the minimum did become the maximum which is what they'd feared, and anybody up to that point, they were booking, well it's happening in the cinema now, they were booking famous actors to play parts, that all fell away because the famous actor was getting, you know, £4000 for it and the smallest actor was getting £200 for it, that was the disparity. So they structured it so that the lowest fees, the single shot, half hour, two and three times a week; the second lowest fees are the hour length, two or three times a week series; then you get into the plays that last an hour and a half, two hours, they're the big money. Also the writing, the writers that come up with a two hour play it's different to when

he's writing Coronation Street, three or four episodes a week. So it's the only time the actors have ever struck that I can remember in fifty-one years and it didn't succeed but they did it, they jacked up, which is something.

KH: I think those are all of my questions. Have you got anything else you'd like to say about theatre in the post war period?

AW: Well I just think that having worked all over the world, that the English theatre is absolutely head and shoulders above anything else in the world and the people that work in it and the people that come and see it. Anything you go right back to Shakespeare's day and beyond, and in that respect nobody gets near them, they love words, they love writing of any kind, they love acting, that's what keeps it going, it's the people that keep the theatre going.

KH: Thank you.