

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Auriol Smith – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Jamie Andrews**

**27 June 2007**

Actress; Pinter's *The Room*. Advertising; audience; casting; critics; Dartington Hall, Devon; Drama Department, Bristol University; *The Dumb Waiter*; Hampstead Theatre Club; humour; Harold Pinter; rehearsing; *The Room*; theatre-going; The Green Room Society; Henry Woolf.

Read other interviews about the first production of Harold Pinter's *The Room* [here](#).

JA: OK it's Wednesday 27th June in the afternoon, my name is Jamie Andrews.

AS: My name's Auriol Smith.

JA: And we're at the British Library in the Conservation Centre Study conducting an oral history interview for the Theatre Archives Project relating to *The Room*. OK, I'd like you to cast your mind back to the autumn of 1956 now, and I wonder if you could tell us initially what you were doing at Bristol University at that time?

AS: I was taking a degree in Drama, English, Philosophy. I was in my second year of doing that. And I'd been made President of The Green Room Society, which was the society within the Drama Department, as opposed to the university Drama Society. And I was thinking about what we were going to do in my first term as president. And I decided I'd quite like to do an evening of One-Act plays.

And in the department, as a postgraduate at the same time, was Henry Woolf. And he and I were good friends. I was talking to him one evening and asking him did he know of any new One-Act plays that anybody was writing. I didn't at that time know about his relationship with Harold and their childhood relationship. And he said, 'Well I've got this mate and he's doing some writing, and you know, I'll see if I can see if he's written anything.' And so in fact, he did. And various other people made suggestions of One-Act plays. And then initially Henry came back and he said, 'Oh it's no good...' he said, '...because he's too busy acting and he hasn't got time to finish it. And he doesn't think he can write it.' And we kind of dropped it.

JA: This was still in the autumn of '56?

AS: Yes, yes. And I didn't think anymore about it. I started searching for other plays. And then suddenly about a week later, Henry came up to me, he said, 'I've got this play. Harold's finished it. And here you are, here's a copy, have a read, see what you think.' And I remember I went back to my digs, and I lay on my bed and I read this play. And it was a play unlike any play I'd ever read before. If you can sort of imagine in 1956, you know it was so different, and quite disturbing to read it actually. And I thought this is the most extraordinary piece of writing I've ever read.

And so I got hold of Henry and said, 'This is fantastic, let's do it.' And so in fact, Henry contacting Harold had spurred him to finish that play. And that was how it came to the Bristol University. And then the question was who was going to do it. And of course Henry... then I learnt that Harold had been a childhood friend of his and that he had a very close contact with him. And so I said, 'Well you've obviously got to do it, you know'. And then he said, 'You've obviously got to be in it.' [Laughs] And so that was how it all...

JA: So those are the first two parts to be cast – you two?

AS: Yes, yes we were.

JA: OK. Can I go back a bit, I'm interested in how The Green Room worked. Was it always... it would be one production at the end of the academic year that would be started at the beginning of the year, or were there other events that you were putting on throughout that year?

AS: Oh other events as well. I mean we had a... I don't know if I can remember what else we did that year, it's so long ago. But no we would probably do, like we did this evening of One-Act plays, and then we would do maybe... a musical we did on one occasion I remember. Or we might do a full length play. But we'd probably do three or four things during the year.

JA: And this was all fitted around... you were all full time students as well.

AS: We were very much so. And unlike the practical drama courses at the moment it was very academic.

JA: Ah right.

AS: Very academic. In fact Glyn Wickham who was head of the department when I went up to university there, the thing he said to us on the very first day, he said, 'If any of you are thinking of being actors, you can go up the road to the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School and leave here today.' So those of us who were probably thinking of being actors sort of kept very quiet about it. [Laughs]

JA: So this would have been all the people who took part in this, it wasn't in any way part of credits or part of the course. It was entirely your own...

AS: No, no, it was extramural.

JA: Yes, OK. Can you remember you talked... there were other plays that you put on and you said there were various full plays, shorter ones etc, were they from your memory more canonical, traditional maybe plays or were there other new plays that you were doing at the time? Was it unusual for you to do two new plays like this?

AS: Yes I think it was, I think it was. I mean we might well have done, you know a well known One-Act play. Because part of it really was about... you see this was a very academic course, and so part of it was about giving opportunities for people to act. Because there wasn't really any opportunity for that within your course, except at the very end of the year when... I mean I don't know how long after I left this went on for, but at the end of every year the whole department went down to Dartington Hall in Devon where we lived for about six weeks during the summer. The most wonderful, wonderful place you know, wonderful countryside, free accommodation in the most beautiful surroundings. All the academic work behind you, we used to have wonderful, wonderful summers at Dartington. There was a tilting yard and we put plays on in extraordinary places down there. And we also had, in that period of time, we did a lot of voice work, movement work, fencing, all sorts of things that weren't included within our course. So it was sort of academic work all the year with just two... I think we just had two [practical] classes a week from... we shared with the Bristol Old Vic, Theatre School, we had their tutors come and teach us. And one of the things they taught, which of course has sort of become irrelevant now, was stage makeup. We were taught stage makeup. And Rudi Shelly from the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School taught us movement, he was a very charismatic teacher. And then our lecturers went to the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School and gave them Theatre History lessons.

JA: Oh I see.

AS: So it was a very good sort of interplay between the two things. And why it stopped, and why Dartington stopped I don't know the answer to...

JA: It's a whole other question I think. So going back... actually one more thing, yours was the Drama Society within the Drama Department...

AS: Yes.

JA: There was the wider Drama Society which covered the university, what were the relations... can you remember what the relationships were like between the two? Was there any rivalry or were different types of theatre that could have been...?

AS: No. You have to remember we were performing all our productions in a converted squash court, which is where I saw *The Room* again. Now in that same room they'd cleared it out, although they've built two floors into it which weren't there when we were there. There wasn't really very much contact between the Drama Society and The Green Room Society.

JA: So where were their plays done then?

AS: Their plays were done at the Vic Rooms which used to be the Student Union, isn't any longer. But on a big proscenium stage.

JA: Right OK. So then you... we're talking about the autumn of '56, you had this play that had come to Henry that got passed to you, you read it. I'm interested in what your theatre background was at that point when you read it. You know things like Beckett had just appeared in London, and whenever... certainly in Pinter's early reviews everyone – I think it was almost obligatory – mentioned Beckett and Ionesco. He was very much lumped in as a part of those continental absurdist. Did you... can you remember fitting him into that tradition, being aware of that tradition?

AS: To a certain extent. I mean you have to take yourself back to a time when, you know drama was not taught in school when I was at school. There was no such thing as a drama class in school. There were plays done at schools, but [we were] not taught drama. So there was no background of drama when you went up to university. So it was a whole new sort of area of education for my years that went up to university. I don't think anybody had had... they might have had a very good English teacher, who taught them Shakespeare very well, you know but they wouldn't have had a teaching... a grounding in drama – not even English drama – at the time. So it's a very extraordinary sort of time.

I used to go to the theatre a lot as a schoolchild because there were three of us in my class at school who were interested in the theatre and we used to take ourselves off, you know to the Old Vic and queue up and stand in the gods and see these productions there. But probably you know that would have been between the ages of 16 and 18, I doubt if I'd been going up to London on my own prior to that. I mean now it's a whole different world, you know for that age group, but at that time.

So of course we, when we came up to the Drama Department we were sort of complete innocents in a way. And drinking up this theatre history and... whole areas of drama we knew nothing really about. We might have seen a Restoration play, but we weren't familiar with dramatic texts at that time. I mean whatever we would have seen we would have probably seen in London, my school was near London. But you know... and we could have... and I think I probably went to the Royal Shakespeare Company. I remember being taken from school to see Donald Wolfitt in *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* at the Mermaid. But on the whole, the idea of going into the theatre was anathema to one's parents at that time. You know it was like going into prostitution practically! [Laughs]

So I mean both my husband and I are... both our parents tried to stop us going into the theatre. And there's something quite healthy about that I think, because there's so much drama now and there's so much encouragement to study drama, but when we were

doing it you really had to fight to go in that direction. And maybe, you know, it really weeded out people who were doing it as an easy option. So you know it was not thought to be a good thing to be doing. And it was how I came to go to Bristol University really because my parents... I wanted to go to drama school right. My parents wouldn't hear of that. You know you go and get a degree if you're going to do something as stupid as going into the theatre you're go and get a degree first. And that was how... and then the compromise happened.

JA: I see.

AS: And...

JA: And I think Bristol at the time was the only place offering the specific drama degree?

AS: It was. It was. It was 10 years old the Drama Department. And the rest of the academic staff really thought it was laughable studying drama.

JA: Oh really?

AS: Yes, I remember...

JA: Even 10 years on when you were...?

AS: Yes, yes. And when I went to see my Philosophy tutor and he said, 'And what else are you studying?' And I said, 'I'm studying Drama and English.' And he said, 'Drama!' And he roared with laughter you know. As if it was the most ridiculous thing to be studying. So you have put our knowledge in that kind of context.

JA: And so the academic study that you would have been doing on the drama side wouldn't have included such recent plays as...

AS: Well it would when we got to... George Brandt taught Modern Drama at Bristol at that time. And he was teaching Brecht and all sorts of... I can't remember the course now, but he was the person who introduced us to Modern Drama. And looked at it... he was the man who taught me really how to look at a play and take it apart and see what it was. And maybe put it together again for a production. So he was very instrumental in everything I do now, George Brandt because in looking at a play which I'm going to direct, you know he's still there sitting on my shoulder. I never really... I never really knew how to read a play productively before I went to Bristol University.

JA: I see. So when you had this play did you... you'd read it, did you share it with, for example George Brandt at the time, asking for his opinion as someone from the

academic staff or was it something that the students wanted to keep to themselves? Or the Society?

AS: Well I think... I don't think Henry and I rushed to share it. But ultimately we did with Glyn Wickham who was Head of the department then, and George Brandt. But they... they I don't think... I don't even know... they knew we were going to do it but I'm not at all sure that either of them read it.

JA: OK.

AS: You know, but they both came obviously to see it.

JA: And when you read it you said then that immediately you knew that you wanted to do it, having finished it. Did you think that it... can you remember was there an awareness that this might be a particularly challenging play to present for the audience or...?

AS: No I think when one's young like that one just assumes one can do it you know. I'd be much more intimidated by something like that now than I ever was then.

JA: OK. So in the autumn Henry and yourself have decided to do this play, can you remember when the practicalities of casting the rest of the cast and when rehearsals would have started? Would that have been immediate or having chosen the play was there a gap before that started?

AS: No it would have been fairly immediate.

JA: Can you remember how you found the rest of the company. We've got the programme open here, the first...

AS: Well Susan Engel was a year ahead of me in the Drama Department. David Davies was in my year. Then we had to... Claude I think was a postgraduate. George Odium we really had to look for because there weren't... there were quite a few Black people at the university, but they certainly weren't studying Drama. You know they might have been Law or Medicine things like that, rather than English or Drama or anything like that. And I cannot remember what George was studying but I would suspect that it was Law that he was studying. He was a very tall, graceful man George.

JA: OK and then before we go too much further with the rehearsals for The Room you said you wanted to do a double bill of One-Act plays. Can you remember when you started thinking about what was going to be paired with The Room? It sounds as if you started from The Room but...

AS: Yes I think I did. And I think... I don't remember whether it was James or John Severns now but... Jimmy, he was Jimmy Severns yes. I think he came with this to me, he knew we wanted to do some One-Act plays. And I think he came to me and said you know, 'Can I do this?'

JA: And can you remember anything about that play? Everyone... well The Room obviously was subsequently printed but...

AS: I can't actually. I can't. Isn't that awful, I can't remember anything about it now. Probably if I saw a photograph I would. But you know just looking at the title and the people who were in it I cannot remember.

JA: The only... when the reviews came out later, after the first two performances – or the only two performances – most of the attention was given to The Room I know, but there's a couple of lines on The Rehearsal. And the only thing I've read is that it was sub-Tennessee Williams. And whether that was just because he was an American I don't know but I don't know if that jogs any... rings any bells?

AS: Yes. And that would have been why he brought it to me wouldn't it? Oh dear it says, 'If Paul Harrison is not up to it however, June Watts shows promise.' Oh dear, it's very funny looking back at those sort of things. But that would have been why he brought it to me I imagine, because it was an American play. But I don't remember the content of it. And you don't get an idea of the content from these reviews actually.

JA: No. No it was a very brief mention.

AS: 'A test of dialogue' this one calls it. 'Now and then it's very good indeed.' Very interesting reading old reviews.

JA: OK, well back to The Room then.

AS: Yes.

JA: You'd got the cast together it sounds fairly quickly by... still in the autumn of '56. But it wasn't going to be on until May 1957.

AS: No.

JA: So can you remember when rehearsals would have started in earnest or was that something that went on...?

AS: Well you have to think that they would probably have taken place over quite a long time because they would have taken... it wasn't like it was part of our course, like somebody at a drama course now would have. You know it was done in our spare time. And so we probably only could get a couple of rehearsals a week. So I suspect we would have gone... I mean that first term would have been over and we would have gone back home for Christmas and come back... and I suspect we probably started rehearsing you know quite soon into the beginning of the term really. It's not a long play and I think why would we have rehearsed so long. But rehearsals usually took place slowly over a long period of time. Actually Jimmy Severns may have... may not even have come into the picture immediately. I can't remember now. But... because I think he probably brought a play he knew to me and it was a two-hander as you can see. And I don't know anything about those rehearsals.

JA: OK. So it sounds as though they were carried on separately.

AS: Yes, yes.

JA: So once *The Room*... the cast was together for *The Room*, you were President of the society but it was Henry who is down there as producer. Can you recall, did he then lead the rehearsals and take the production forward or was it a collaborative...?

AS: Yes he did. Yes, he did, he did. And I was acting in it. And of course we talked, and talked about how we would stage it because we didn't have any money. You know the... we did have a carpenter for *The Room* who would have constructed whatever we needed for it. But I don't remember having much of a construction because basically all you need is a table, a chair, a fire and a stove.

JA: And some bacon.

AS: And some bacon yes. I was very interested noticing at the... when it was done at the Old Vic Theatre School, that they obviously played it at a fantastic rate. I can't see where it is now, but it says it was played at a huge rate, which isn't what I remember... I remember our production as having some quite long silent moments in it. I have a very, very clear picture of Susan Engel playing Mrs Hudd. She was quite an impressive... she's quite a tall, impressive, physical person. And just watching her moving about the stage was interesting. And I can remember... my memory is that there were moments of silence in this play. When I saw it recently at the... in the studio theatre there at Bristol, they again played it quite fast. And I thought, 'Why... why... I wonder why they're playing it so fast.' Because it seems to me the play is full of silences. It's very sort of integral to what is going on in the play. It's because people don't speak that things are said and things happen. And I would have injected some more silences, some more thoughtful moments I think into the production I just saw...

JA: It's interesting, on the other hand it's also a very funny play.



AS: Yes.

JA: I think that still stands up. And I remember hearing Henry comment that the Old Vic production treated it with too much reverence.

AS: Oh did he?

JA: Whereas the first... his recollection was that the first... that just your production was a lot lighter and did point up the humour.

AS: Oh it was very funny. It was very funny.

JA: And so... yes I'm interested there, can you remember... you've talked about the pauses and the longueurs and making... not rushing through it, but can you remember how the humour... how that was balanced with the humour when you were rehearsing?

AS: Well I think the humour was very much in the action in the play. I suppose what I felt slightly with this recent production was that they were striving for the humour a bit. Whereas it's so cleverly constructed linguistically – I mean what is said and what isn't said. And you need to let the audience in on that and that's when I think they laugh you see. Whereas if you rush it, to me you miss so much of the humour by doing that, what you get is the woman trying to get the man to speak. And there's much more to it than that. Why isn't he talking? You know might he now, when she says this, might he talk? So that as an audience I think you're on tenterhooks because you think he must speak in a minute you know. And a lot of the humour was in the different ways in which she approached him. And the fact that he didn't answer and she had to answer her own questions.

JA: OK. Can you remember...? I want to talk specifically about your particular role...

AS: Oh yes.

JA: ...but just still talking about the rehearsal process. Can you... the text came from Pinter then back in... or through Henry back in '56, did you as a group... can you remember changing the text much, and did Pinter himself have any involvement in the rehearsal process during that time?

AS: We didn't change the text at all. Not at all, not one word of it. No, Harold Pinter was, I think, down at Worthing acting, he was the actor David Baron at that time. And he was with Vivian Merchant actually in rep, and he was busy. He came to the first performance.

JA: But he didn't keep in touch throughout the rehearsal process...

AS: Well, he may have kept in touch with Henry.

JA: Right.

AS: He didn't sort of generally keep... and he didn't come to see us during the rehearsal period. I know he didn't come to see us because while rehearsing this play I got a very specific picture in my mind of what he was like, because of the dialogue one was playing. And when he arrived – I met him after the first performance for the first time – when he arrived I was so taken aback because he was so unlike the dialogue I'd been playing, to me. He was very smartly dressed, he had an umbrella on his wrist and he was wearing a hat. And he was well spoken you know. And I remember being, you know amazed really that this was the man that had written this play.

JA: So what was the picture this dialogue had conjured up then in your mind?

AS: Well I thought I was going to meet a rather sort of scruffy kind of... you know working class, probably quite humorous guy. And he was of course humorous but he wasn't a bit like the image that I had of him. And he was wonderful because he had really enjoyed the performance. And it was a tremendous reward you know, really to have his congratulations on this play because it was so new to us what we were doing. And so you're always thinking, 'Am I doing this correctly?' you know, 'Is this the right thing?'. But of course our touchstone was Henry, because Henry knew him so well. He knew this dialogue. I mean he understood it so hence he was the best person to direct it.

JA: OK. Well your particular role...

AS: Mrs Sands.

JA: ...Mrs Sands, why had you chosen it... obviously it wasn't the only female role there, can you remember why you chose that role for yourself and then how you saw that character fitting into the play?

AS: Well I think to begin with she's the only young woman in the play. And I probably... I was 18... 19 you know. And looked younger than my years, was small, and I just can't imagine anybody else sort of playing Mrs Hudd. That woman needed some weight and authority and it would never have been for me, I would never have thought of... maybe now I might have an attempt at it, but not then. Not then, it wouldn't have been right. And so I think Henry and I very quickly sort of thought, 'Well, I could play that part in it'.

My... I mean... of course one hasn't got the answers really to what Mr and Mrs Sands are about, and I'm not sure that one should have the answers. Sometimes the question is more interesting than the answers. You know enough about them, you know they're

looking for somewhere to live and that there's some kind of aggravation between the two of them going on. And it is largely about finding somewhere to live I think. And what the episode that involves them does I suppose really, is to let the audience in to this subterranean world that this Black man is living in down there. And that's why Harold Pinter is so clever, because he intrigues you, you see immediately. And that I think is a sort of... is a vital element of the theatre, so that you want the next bit of the story don't you. And I suppose their function was to bring that up into the room. Because they go and nothing really has happened, except we in the audience I suppose are sitting there thinking, 'Are we going to see this person?' you know.

JA: Can you remember modelling, either Mrs Sands or that relationship – the couple – on anyone that you knew?

AS: No, I think I thought it was me. [Laughs]

JA: Right.

AS: I think... you know I thought... I understood... I felt I understood who she was. And although of course it wasn't me because I came from a sort of middle class background, but I understood that... I felt I understood that young woman.

JA: What specifically about her?

AS: Well her... well, the need that she had for somewhere for them to be. And I can understand the irritation, that the husband is quite pedantic in a way and I think that kind of abrasion between them I understood very well with this... I'd seen that in my own parents. And so you know, as an actor you pull in everything I suppose you've experienced to try and help you create a character. But I didn't... of course you never actually see yourself as an actor so you don't know whether you've done it well or badly until somebody tells you.

JA: OK. Well before we get to the... talking about the first night... well there was only two, the two nights that it was on.

AS: Yes.

JA: Is there anything else you remember from the rehearsal process? Was it... did it always seem a logical progression towards the first production... towards the production or was there anything that blew you off course that you can remember?

AS: No I think the only thing really that... it didn't exactly blow us off course, but we didn't know what it all meant. I mean we felt we knew some of what was going on, but

we didn't know what it all meant. And what Henry was so good at was setting everybody's mind at rest about that. And not trying to solve all the problems in the play.

JA: Can you remember any explanations that he did have for you?

AS: Well I think... I remember one thing that we discussed which was the fact that the visitor... Mrs Hudd goes blind when the blind man is beaten up. And whether that was some kind of transference that was going on or was it symbolic you know. I can remember discussions about that. I can't remember all the conclusions we came to, but I suspect Susan Engel herself probably had to come to some conclusion about that you know, because she was the one that went blind. But I don't remember anything specific.

JA: It'll be interesting to talk to her about that.

AS: Yes.

JA: And another thing that I'm curious about which you may not be able to answer, is that when Riley comes in and he calls her 'Sal' and that's a shock because we know her name's Rose. Except do we know her name's Rose because it's never actually said in the play is it? And it's only if you'd read the programme that you'd know that. Was that... can you remember that ever coming up?

AS: Yes I can remember discussing that actually. And my memory of that is that it raised the question as to whether she'd had a previous relationship with a man, and whether it was this man. And whether her name was actually Sal, but in the new relationship she'd changed it to Rose. Or whether she had a relationship with this man and she'd concealed her real name Rose and called herself Sal to him. And then you sort of get into quite deep water because you think well why's he down there in the cellar. You know and is that why Bert smashes him, because he suspects something between Rose and him, and him calling her 'Sal', you know, probably makes one think that more.

But my memory of those discussions is them going... you know getting deeper and deeper into things like this and then Henry sort of saying, 'Right, now just leave it alone now.' You know because you're not going to get an answer to this, so let the audience puzzle. And they'll each have their own version of what happens. Which is a bit like... I suppose I feel like that about poetry. You know we each read the same poem and we get something different out of it. And I think Henry was very wise to sort of suggest we didn't try and pin everything down.

JA: But you... it sounds as if then you did try with some points, AS: Well yes. You know and I didn't get a chance to ask the cast that were doing it last month whether they puzzled about things like that. yes.

AS: Well yes. You know and I didn't get a chance to ask the cast that were doing it last month whether they puzzled about things like that.

JA: Because Pinter of course notoriously...

AS: Shuts up!

JA: ...refuses to answer that question so it just doesn't matter which...

AS: Yes, well I think he's quite right actually because if he answered it, it would pin it down wouldn't it? And it's more invasive if you don't pin it down; it makes you think more actually. Once you've got an answer it's done and dusted in a way isn't it?

JA: OK, well I'd like to move on then to the performance which took place in... over two days on a weekday in May. Can you remember what were your expectations about the kind of people who you thought would or should come in terms of the audience makeup? And how widely would it have been advertised or how would people have known it was on?

AS: Well it would obviously have been well advertised within the university – particularly the arts section of the university. Then of course you know there were a lot of people interested in drama who weren't part of the Drama Department. And so it would have gone up on the board in the union, in the Victoria Rooms as was then the union. So a lot of... anybody interested in drama might think oh a new play, I'll go and see that. So I think we expected quite a few people from within the university to come. We thought our tutors would probably turn up and maybe their wives. We didn't expect... we did think people from other faculties might come out of curiosity. I mean, I know some of the faculties found the whole idea of a Drama Department laughable but I think some of them were intrigued: 'what goes on down there in that corner of the university?', you know, they would have come. And my memory is that we had two very good audiences. So I'm not quite sure what the mixture was because I probably was too nervous really to take all that in at the time.

JA: We know there were two reviewers from the Bristol Evening World and the Evening Post, was that usual that the local papers would send their people to review?

AS: Well I remember the Evening Post coming to a lot of things. I don't remember the Evening World coming so much. But they were invited. And I suppose a new play – I mean, the name didn't mean anything to them at that time of course – but a new play they might be persuaded to come and review. But I mean people didn't get reviewed like the young people do in university now on the whole.

JA: In what way?

AS: Well just people didn't... the newspapers didn't think it was necessary to cover student things. You had to woo them.

JA: Can you remember how you did that, how you got in contact or was that established before your...?

AS: I don't think I did it.

JA: All right.

AS: I don't think I did it. I think somebody else took on that role.

JA: And can you remember... you said it was a good audience, can you remember any reactions that you picked up actually during the performance? Anything you got from the audience?

AS: I just remember being so surprised that they laughed so much. Because...

JA: Right. In the places you expected or...?

AS: And in places I hadn't, because although one was aware of the humour there, one hadn't realised quite how it would work on the audience. And I can remember waiting to make my entrance when Sue Engel's character had already got a lot of response from the audience, and thinking this is amazing you know. Because you were nervous because you didn't know quite... you know it was new territory and you didn't know quite what was going to happen or whether the audience, students were going to get up and shout 'boo' or 'rubbish' you know. You couldn't predict that so it was a wonderful feeling when they did respond so warmly to it. And then the tutors also responded very well to it. And then Harold himself responded well to it which was the icing on the cake.

JA: Can you remember why he thought it was so positive? Can you... any specific comments?

AS: No I can't actually. Not really. I can't. I just remember that he did think it was very good and he thought Henry had done a very good production. And I think he was... in a way I think he was surprised at what he'd written. You know that was part of the pleasure for him, it seemed to me that he could have been coming down to see a student production that could have been... it was very brave of him to come really because... and I suppose he came because he knew Henry. But it could have been, you know an awful production couldn't it, and very badly done in some way. And as an author you don't half expose yourself if you come into that situation so it was quite brave of him.

JA: Do you know if he came on the first night or the second night or both?

AS: He came on the first night.

JA: And did he come back and...?

AS: I don't think... I think he had to go back to wherever he was performing. But he came on the first night I remember.

JA: And can you... once... so this, the two performances took place, can you remember after the second performance what you thought next? Did you think... well can you remember what your expectations were? Did you think that was it or that there would be an afterlife for the play, or the author?

AS: Well I suppose I didn't really think about that because we weren't so entrepreneurial you know in those days. Really nobody thought of... I mean Harold may have thought of doing something else with it, but I don't think any of us thought... we just thought... we were delighted that it had gone so well and that Harold had liked it and it had been a success. But I suspect we were on to the next thing. Everybody who was involved with it I think was very impressed by the play and by the writing. So that certainly stayed in their mind. But there weren't the opportunities, where was it going to happen next you know. It was a One-Act play, where was it going to happen next?

I mean I didn't even know that it would happen... it didn't cross my mind that the Bristol Young Vic were... the Bristol Old Vic were [interested] but looking back I can see oh yes that would have been a wonderful thing for them to do. So I wasn't even thinking that it would have any life actually. And then of course, when these club theatres like the Hampstead Theatre Club began in and around London, all sorts of opportunities arose for doing productions. Because obviously a play like that where were you going to put it in the West End, it wasn't going to go into the West End. Hence you see some of Harold's productions are at the Tavistock Theatre and somewhere called the Little Theatre. And you didn't think in terms of it going on to another life really on the whole. Not as a student you know.

JA: Right. Well this was in May, presumably the academic year would have ended fairly soon afterwards what did you do [inaudible] because I know it was on, you mentioned the production at the Old Vic in Bristol, you weren't involved with that is that correct?

AS: With the one at the Drama School?

JA: Yes.

AS: Oh yes, no, no. By the time that was done at the Drama School... was it done the next year?

JA: I think it was January '58.

AS: January '58, well I would have boiling up to my finals then because I would have been starting them in May [inaudible] I didn't go to see it. I'm not aware that I knew that it was going on at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. Because that wouldn't have been a public performance would it, I don't think. Oh yes it must have been, because they reviewed it.

JA: Well... it was reviewed... it was part of I think... I think it was part of a student festival even.

AS: Oh it then went to the student drama festival.

JA: Yes.

AS: Yes that's right. Yes, it went to the student drama festival. And Harold Hobson has reviewed it there.

JA: So you don't remember that production at all?

AS: No I don't remember the production at all, and I don't think, apart from Susan Engel, I don't know anybody that... of the people that were in it.

JA: I think Henry was still involved with it. Did you... were you still in touch with Henry... by this point you were still in touch Henry?

AS: I was sort of... I was certainly in touch with him... yes because he was still at the university. I think. He might have left actually. No he might have left by then. Although I was still very much in touch with him because we acted together after I left university. But then I was going to America on my Fulbright scholarship and I kind of... for a year you know I lost touch with what was going on.

JA: When was that... which...?

AS: Well, I went to America in then end of '58 – October '58 – and was there all through '59, and didn't return to England I don't think until '60.

JA: And when you did return fairly soon afterwards I think...

AS: Almost immediately.



JA: ...the Hampstead Theatre production.

AS: Yes.

JA: So how... you must have been in touch with Harold Pinter...

AS: I don't think I was in touch with Harold at that time. Although of course after that I did *A Night Out*. But I don't think I was in touch with Harold while I was in America. I was in touch with Henry while I was in America so Henry would have known when I was sort of coming back I think.

JA: So he would have been instrumental in your...

AS: Possibly, I don't know the answer to that actually. You can ask him!

JA: OK yes. So it's 1960, Hampstead Theatre Club which was fairly recently set up by James Roose-Evans.

AS: James Roose-Evans yes.

JA: And that was a professional engagement.

AS: Yes.

JA: Can you remember the... how the rehearsal process would have differed from back in '57... '56.

AS: Well, yes it differed quite a lot actually because... well we were rehearsing in what was like a village hall. That was where the Hampstead Theatre Club was at that time. And Harold Pinter himself was directing it which of course at the time one was less... one wasn't aware of how lucky one was to be being directed by Harold Pinter if you see what I mean. Although one was... one knew one was lucky because it was the author and you know, one assumed that he could he could give you all the best direction.

And that involved... that was were I first met Vivian Merchant who was playing this time at the Hampstead Theatre Club, she was playing *Mrs Hudd*. [inaudible] rehearsals were great. I remember the rehearsals being great fun. I also remember that every day Harold used to bring in bits of script and he used to get us to read them aloud to him. And that was *The Caretaker* in its beginnings. And he'd sometimes bring in poetry that he'd written and we'd read that as well. I remember the rehearsals being sort of quite relaxed and we were all very poor and we weren't getting paid – only expenses. And so

every day he took us to the pub at lunchtime and he insisted we drank Guinness because it was full of iron. [Laughs]

JA: Kept you going.

AS: And so... yes. And so he used to buy us all Guinness at lunchtime I remember. And sometimes I seem to remember we rehearsed in his flat.

JA: Where would that have been?

AS: I can't remember where it was now. But they had a little baby then, who's Daniel.

JA: Yes, of course.

AS: And for sometimes we were... I can remember going to his house... I cannot remember where it was though.

JA: Can you remember any differences if Harold was directing this play, how his approach differed from Henry's back in Bristol? Either in the way he rehearsed it or the way that he wanted... the things he wanted to bring out from it?

AS: Well he... I remember being very impressed by his knowledge and intellect. And sometimes he said things that I didn't fully understand. I remember that at the time. And Henry... I think Henry sometimes didn't understand either. But he was wonderful Henry at sort of... kind of sort of saying 'Ah yes, yes.' and sort of laughing it off. But of course Henry and I both knew the play terribly well at that point because we'd worked on it and done it and so forth. So I don't... I can't remember that Harold wanted me to do anything very different from what I'd done originally. And it's not... it's a small part. Vivian of course was different from Susan, they were very different and equally wonderful in it I thought. There was something I think about Vivian's Mrs Hudd that was darker than Susan's, in my memory.

JA: Can you remember how that was brought out or how that was apparent?

AS: I don't know, it's something to do with the two personalities I think you know. I can remember feeling sometimes that Vivian's Mrs Hudd was quite frightening in a way, whereas I don't remember that about... I remember all the humour surrounding Susan's performance. And they were physically very different of course. But...

JA: And then the production began at the Hampstead Theatre Club, can you remember there the type of people who would go, the audience makeup for the production, and again how they reacted compared perhaps to the Bristol...?

AS: Well we were doing it this time with *The Dumb Waiter*. And I don't think... that wasn't the first performance of *The Dumb Waiter* to my... I think *The Dumb Waiter* started somewhere else. I think I'm right. And... but it was the first time I'd seen *The Dumb Waiter*, which again you know is such a fascinating play, *The Dumb Waiter*. What is going on you know. And I remember watching rehearsals sometimes for *The Dumb Waiter* and thinking this is a fantastic play. Of course I hadn't seen *The Birthday Party* because I think that was when I was in America.

JA: Were you aware though of what had happened with *The Birthday Party*?

AS: Yes I was. And it was sort of a big disappointment, and I thought oh, I thought this was wonderful playwright you know and what's happened. But it wasn't talked about very much. And Harold was on to this next thing, *The Caretaker* you know, his mind was...

JA: So he was looking forward...

AS: Yes.

JA: ...at that time.

AS: I think so yes. But they were a very successful double bill *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Room*. I don't remember whether as a double bill *The Rehearsal* and *The Room* were a good combination, but I do remember them being a very good double bill *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter*.

And the audience, I remember some of the audience afterwards being very mystified you know and worrying about the play, both plays I think. Although there was a huge amount of laughter again in that production, probably in slightly different places. Because I think you know Susan's humour was different. But it had a very good response again. What it did... I mean we were in quite a small hall, but what it did in the way of audience you know, how many people came each night. Nowadays I would be very aware of that kind of thing, but I think at the time as long as the response was very good I wasn't sort of counting numbers.

JA: Well can you remember even the type of people? Would it be young people can you remember?

AS: I think it was quite a cross section actually. No I can remember older people there too. Not at the university but at the Hampstead Theatre Club. I don't know who made up the audience; it would be very interesting if one could have... if one could find a... you know a chart of who was there. It would be very interesting.

JA: How about the staging? I know you said that it was still done on a tight budget, presumably there was still more money available than there had been first time round. Can you remember any differences in the way that it was staged or lit?

AS: Well of course the situation in The Room is so poor isn't it? I think they had much more lighting at the Hampstead Theatre Club in my memory. And you know... whereas at Bristol we had to just sort of root around and try and get the props we could. We had somebody supplying that to us at Hampstead there, they had some kind of stage management who were doing that. So I think we probably got better props you know. Costume-wise I don't know if there are any pictures of the Hampstead Theatre Club production are there?

JA: I haven't seen any, no.

AS: No, isn't that odd?

JA: Although there must... yes there must be somewhere but there's none with the reviews that I've seen anyway so.

AS: Yes that's very odd. No. Because I'm surprised there aren't because of The Dumb Waiter.

JA: Yes.

AS: But you know one was still very much in the situation where we provided our own clothes.

JA: How did it work... it was two One-Acts on the same night so how did it work in terms of... I know obviously The Dumb Waiter needs that... the central dumb waiter. They're both in fairly squalid environs. How did it work in terms of adjusting the sets can you remember?

AS: Well it was changed over... we had an interval and it was changed. I don't... we must have had stage management doing that because certainly we weren't involved in that. I think we always played The Dumb Waiter first, that's my memory. That The Dumb Waiter came first. That was very funny, Nick Selby and George Tovey – a big guy and a little cockney guy.

JA: And then after... the same production then transferred to the Royal Court in the same year, can you remember how that happened, and I know you didn't go with the play to the Royal Court...

AS: No.

JA: ...so why was that?

AS: I'm just trying to remember who directed the Royal Court one. Do you remember?

JA: Not off-hand.

AS: Oh I marked it here. Oh no I haven't, that's Hampstead but we want the Royal Court.

JA: There's no programme so...

AS: 'These two will set you puzzling'. [Laughs] Oh there's a photograph.

JA: That is The Room yes.

[AS points to a photo of Vivien Merchant]

JA: But I see what you mean about the frightening...

AS: Yes.

JA: Oh, that's a particularly anguished bit of the play.

AS: Yes.

JA: No I don't know about who directed... So we're just looking at the programme for the Royal Court transfer of the double bill of The Room and The Dumb Waiter.

AS: Where's the cast list?

JA: And it seems that it was directed...

AS: By James...

JA: Antony Page.

AS: Oh yes. Yes. But does it have a cast list then I can... oh yes I know the actress that was playing that and she was totally different from me, so he obviously had a specific idea. She was blond. I don't know who that is. Michael Caine played Mr Sands now, I am surprised Henry didn't do that. That's interesting isn't it?

JA: Because Henry at first was Mr Kidd.

AS: I mean, I'm surprised he didn't do... it was John Cater.

JA: Yes, yes.

AS: Sorry, sorry yes. I was... I'm surprised he wasn't playing Mr Kidd in the Royal Court one. But as you see, neither he nor I were in it.

JA: Can you remember if that was directorial decision was it?

AS: I don't... well yes presumably...

JA: Presumably...

AS: ...we weren't asked to be. I mean Harold might know more about why Henry and I weren't in that. What date was that?

JA: That was March...

AS: March.

JA: ...so it ran for a month or so before transferring I think.

AS: And when was...? Yes.

JA: Do you remember going to see the Royal Court production?

AS: No I don't. I don't. I find that very odd that I had...I can't remember seeing it. I just... what date was our one at the Hampstead Theatre Club?

JA: I think that was February 1960.

AS: So it was almost immediately afterwards wasn't it?

JA: Yes, it seemed to go almost immediately.

AS: And these two went with it. And Henry and I didn't. And the only person who... oh and Vivian and Thomas Baptiste went with it.

JA: Baptiste yes.

AS: I don't know the reason. I can't tell you.

JA: Oh it'll be interesting to find out. Can you remember what you did do after the Hampstead Theatre Club production?

AS: Yes, I think quite soon after that I think I did A Night Out on the radio for Harold. And I don't know what date that was, A Night Out, but it's probably in here somewhere isn't it? And then I went into rep.

JA: Was A Night Out at Harold's suggestion?

AS: Yes, it was. Yes. So I was one of the office girls who had her bottom pinched.  
[Laughs]

JA: We're leaving behind The Room now but I'm curious as a final question, did you ever play any Pinter then after this flurry of 1957, 1960, did you ever play any Pinter after that?

AS: Well actually when I was on tour in America with 'ACTER' which is group of actors who go to American universities and do a Shakespearean play with five actors. And they also always took another play which was performed for the students. And we took Harold Pinter's Old Times, and I acted in that. I mean I love his writing, absolutely love it. But no I never was in... I don't think I've ever done... I don't think I've ever been in a Pinter play in rep or... I suppose they don't... I don't know do they get done a lot in rep? Well rep doesn't exist anymore.

JA: I think... certainly not back... yes, back then I imagine not.

AS: No, no. So no that was the only other play, which again I love that play, Old Times.

JA: OK, well that's fantastic thank you very much for your time indeed.

AS: Not at all.

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