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Henry Woolf – interview transcript

Interviewer: Jamie Andrews

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Actor; Pinter's *The Room*. Audience; Bristol University; critics; Eileen Diss; John Lavender; Harold Pinter; production costs; producing plays; *The Room*; Duncan Ross; set; subsequent productions of *The Room*.

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

JA: OK, it's the 20th July, 2007 we're in the British Library conservation centre studio. My name's Jamie Andrews, I'm with Henry Woolf. Henry, thank you very much for coming in.

HW: Oh thanks for asking me Jamie.

JA: So as you know this oral history interview is based around that first production of *The Room*. But before we get to that I'd like you just to explain briefly what was happening in Autumn '56, what you were doing in Bristol.

HW: Well you see I'd just changed the course of my academic – I would not dignify it by the word 'career' – my first steps into postgraduate academia, in... I went to a place called The College of William and Mary on an exchange studentship. And I was supposed to write a history thesis. Am I talking too quietly for your...?

JA: No, no, the levels are fine.

HW: Oh good. Well, I'd been at Exeter in the days when Exeter University wasn't a university, it was a university college and we took London degrees – University of London degrees. And I remember a marvellous production of *The Silent Woman* coming from Bristol University drama department, which was the first drama department in England as you know. And Glynne Wickham who was head and George Brandt were in it. And it was a... George Raul... a wonderful production, it interested me very much.

However I then went to The College of William and Mary in Virginia to write this history thesis. Someone unwisely offered me a part in a play – *Dial M for Murder* – which was so much more exciting than my history thesis, which had an extremely long and tedious sounding title although the subject was really very interesting. The title is enough to

send any insomniac into a deep slumber; it was 'The Influence of the American Civil War into Cotton Imports in the Blackburn Area of Lancashire'. Well this is a very tedious title. The subject's very interesting because there are some myths about that period, as you know the... I'm going to digress for a moment if I may?

JA: That's absolutely fine.

HW: You can always edit me out, Jamie.

JA: No, no, no.

HW: The received history of the period is that the Northern blockade of Southern cotton to the mills of Lancashire during the American Civil War was approved of heartily by the freedom loving workers of the mills. This was not the case. They were fervently supporting Britain's entry into the war on the Southern side for economic reasons - they were all out of work because of this. That was the source of cotton in those days. And far from... the received myth is 'Go to it Abe, free those poor slaves!'. Not a bit of it!

The other thing that's aggravating to a sort of mythology is that all the big bogymen of the right - the landowners, the church - not that the church was exactly a bogymen, but it was really the Anglican church, the middle class church, and the land owners and the mill owners - all these villains mounted an extremely efficient welfare sort of charity, sort of movement during the war. And so I found it terribly interesting, and it is a fascinating subject. However I digress, I promise to get back to drama!

Someone offered me this part and I gave up my history thesis, performed in several plays, applied for Bristol University drama department, was accepted, talked with Harold Pinter my... I'd been at school with, he was my... one of my oldest friends and still is. And he'd written a novel, *The Dwarfs* as you know, very, very good novel - a young man of 22 - wonderful novel. And lots and lots of poetry. Never written a play. Sitting penniless - as we usually were - in a café, said 'I've got an idea for a play', told me the idea for the play... of *The Room*, and...

JA: So when would this be that you were sitting in the café?

HW: In '56 I think it would be then.

JA: So once you'd started at Bristol.

HW: I started in September '56... this would be... I'm wrong, it's been much later than that. Be something like March of '57 I think. In the Easter break I think, and somewhere like that. And then [Laughs] I went back to Bristol and they had impoverished themselves by producing beautiful productions of nativity plays and Passion Plays. I was in several of them, or two of them anyway. Beautiful, beautifully spoken, beautiful productions of wonderful texts, mediaeval texts, but they bankrupted the budget.

So when I said – untruthfully - that I had a new and wonderful play, one of their first questions was... because there was jostling for production space in the, you know that drama studio, the ex-squash court. [Laughs] There was a lot of jostling by the postgraduates for production space. So when I said that my play would cost... they said 'how much would it cost to produce?' And this seemed to be a key question, I said, '1/9d', the equivalent of approximate... I think 47p today, if that, 30 more like – 30 new pence I would think. Their interest sparked immediately.

And eventually of course the production, when it went on, cost 4/9d, something equivalent of about £1.50 because my... or £1, because my stage manager, Mary Faith Hubbard – a Rhodesian girl – got a crush on the chap playing Bert Hudd, an American called Claude Jenkins. And I'd said to her 'You cannot give him real food, we can't afford it. You can only give him real bacon and eggs on the dress rehearsal and the performance – or two performances'. She broke her word, and so liked him, that she gave bacon and eggs throughout rehearsal. So production costs soared from 1/9d... 1/6d or 1/9d to 4/6d I think. It was a financial disaster.

We didn't, to be absolutely honest with you, receive huge help from the drama department. They let us put it on but we provided our own furniture, our own props, we had a lot to do. And although George Brandt was very helpful and nice, actually it was the students, it was myself, Susan Engel and the excellent George Odlum who I believe is dead now, God rest his soul. He's dead isn't he, George?

JA: He's dead. He ended up being the Prime Minister of St Lucia, is that...?

HW: Yes, the Prime Minister or something yes.

JA: Yes, but I think he died a couple of years ago... fairly recently.

HW: Yes, I'm really sorry to hear that, he was a charming fellow. Very, very good Riley, wonderful Riley, the best Riley I've ever seen actually.

JA: So if we can just go back to the...

HW: Go on.

JA: ...to the general context in Bristol. You were there for your postgraduate year; it was just a year was it?

HW: Yes, just a year.

JA: Yes, and was producing plays then actually part of the course, or was this something that you were doing as an extramural activity?

HW: No it... the course was undefined. It was one of the lovely aspects of university life then, that one practically defined one's own course. So I appeared in lots of productions, other people's productions and so forth. And I think I might have directed one or two things, I can't remember. But pretty well one was expected to be, as they say, [American accent] 'self motivated' they would say in the States. In other words you were left entirely to your own devices. And so... although you weren't discouraged from doing things at all and there was lots of discussions, very lively place, very, very lively.

Glynne Wickham was a very good head and George Brandt is one of the most brilliant chaps I've ever met. And he's remained a life long friend since those days. And lots of very clever people there, very lively people, and it was a very small department, and bustling with activity. But it was excellent and wonderful to be allowed to do what one wanted to do. And so in the end it did work out well in that respect. And I didn't get a degree, I didn't get an MA or anything like that. And the people there were very interested in bunch of... an excellent American actor, Phil Bruns, there was a guy who was a Korean War veteran, Jim Severns, whose play was the other half of the evening with *The Room*.

JA: I was going to ask about him.

HW: And very, very interesting. But what... and so that was the situation. And it was a wonderful sort of... I nearly said 'compost heap', but I don't mean that in a derogatory way. It was a compost heap in the sense it was extremely nutritious, the general atmosphere towards creativity of all sorts.

JA: So you were a postgraduate in The Green Room Society, some of the other people involved were undergraduates I think. Was that normal for post grads and undergrads to mix, through the Society?

HW: Yes, I think it was, because there was no other source of actors and directors. But there was one... a wonderful man who helped me greatly, and he was the technical director of the department. A great genius called John Lavender, who in all my years in the theatre I've never met anyone anywhere who was as technically accomplished. He was also one of the nicest men in the world. He only died a few years ago. And not just a nice man, a very humorous and human sort of chap who helped students no end and a marvellous man. The kind of chap that encouraged one... encourages one about the human condition. He was such a lovely bloke. So the place was filled with... crammed with a lot brains and a lot of talent. And you were allowed to do what you bloomin' well like really.

JA: So this was The Green Room, which was the drama society specifically.

HW: Yes.

JA: There was another university-wide theatre club I think as well wasn't there? Was there any?

HW: I'm not really sure. I think there was, under the aegis of which I don't remember. I think there was The Green Room Society. I think we had to have some kind of, you know front.

JA: Yes, OK. So you said that you talked to your friend Harold Pinter and you... he told you he had this idea for a play, then how long afterwards can you recall was it that you thought this would actually work, when you realised there was an opening?

HW: About a week later. I went back after the Easter and these discussions were taking place, and I said I had this play. And then I mentioned the budgetary aspects of it, which were encouraging apparently, and I was allowed to do it. From then on I was just allowed to do it and left to my own devices. Not an entirely bad thing. And not at all.

And the set was rather interesting. I remember the gas fire in The Room was right downstage with all its terribly interesting innards exposed to the audience – all the pipes and everything. And something just between me and you, it didn't quite work in the Almeida production. They had a beaut... although I think she's a wonderful designer, you know the designer for The Room, you know who I mean, hold on a met her just two days ago at the first night... the day before yesterday, but I'm so old now that people's names fly out of my mind.

JA: It'll come to us.

HW: But she's designed so many of Harold's plays... productions. She's a marvellous... Eileen Diss. Eileen isn't it? Diss... is it Eileen Diss?

JA: I'm not sure actually.

HW: Not sure. She's a wonderful designer, and everything went well, but there's one thing the technical side that Susan and I didn't point out about The Room in London. Lovely period gas fire with those sort of very, very easily broken Bakelite sort of things – I loved the Bakelite, they were really some kind of clay or porcelain that gas fires had in those days. These ribs that glowed with heat once they'd been ignited. But what they didn't get right – and I didn't point it out – was that all those fires when lit, lit with a pop, a distinctive pop as the gas ignited.

JA: And they didn't get that.

HW: And we didn't do that because we just didn't have the resources. And they didn't do it, and they did have the resources. But it's entirely my fault, I should have mentioned something. Certainly it was to do with the technical side of it, nothing to do with Eileen's brilliant set. And she had a brilliant set for Monologue later, superb, she's a marvellous designer, one of the nicest people in the world too. Anyway, there we are, now we're back to...

JA: So back to this play arriving. Now how much can you remember how much had Harold told you about the play before he actually started to write it?

HW: Quite a lot, quite a lot. But he then, as I say again and again, he said he couldn't write a play in under six months. He wrote it in two days, he says four days, no it wasn't it was two days. And it arrived next it crackled.

JA: Was it what you were expecting after having had that conversation? Was it? Did it?

HW: Yes and no. The broad outlines yes. The actual bones, blood, veins, arteries, musculature of the play, no. And it was marvellously revealing, because the [inaudible] is nominal, has a very strong dialogue in it. And it's sort of marvellous what this play had was a terrific structure. And it was a wonderful step forward for playwrighting. You should have seen the audience on the first night. They sort of – as I wrote somewhere – they awoke from their polite cultural stupor into a real awareness of something new was happening, that English theatre was never going to be the same again really, because it was terribly funny, and terribly menacing.

And Jamie, may I digress for a moment? I'd asked - I don't mean to say anything negative about someone who's departed this life, but I knew when I read it that it was a marvellous play. And I kept asking Duncan Ross at the Bristol Old Vic School, as opposed to the drama department at the University – very good drama school – to read it. He was always too busy. When he saw my first night, I heard this strangulated laughter and I recognised it as his. And I realised that he was... this was a laughter composed to a large extent of mortification because he could have produced that play. I would have been happy for him to have done it, or anyone to have done it if I couldn't get production space at the University. So he missed the opportunity of doing the very first Pinter play.

JA: That's interesting, because I heard you say at the conference in Leeds about showing it to Duncan Ross beforehand, and I was wondering was that... because at the time it wasn't secure... got a place at the Squash Court [theatre].

HW: It could have been that. To tell you the truth I cannot really tell you the absolute events, but I knew I fell to it as a sort of safety blanket. I thought well I do want this play to be produced even if I don't get to do it. But he didn't. But then he did something terribly interesting I think in the light of later productions of Harold's plays, he immediately used my two leads – George Odlum, Riley, God rest his soul, and Susan Engel, Rose. And immediately he directed another production of the play which was... then went to the National Student Drama... the Sunday Times Drama Festival.

And the poor chap – Wolfe his name is – came to the play the other night at The Hothouse. He's very ill, but he produced copies of comments on The Room as it was produced at the Drama Festival in London. But the most interesting aspect for me was that it's essential for most Pinter plays... not plays like One for the Road or whatever whatever, or Party Time or Mountain Language, but for many other plays like The

Birthday Party the ingredient of humour is not lost, because the menace is redoubled you know.

It's terribly interesting in *The Hothouse* that the ghastly interrogation scene that ends the first Act is all so terribly funny, which is marvellous really. Bill Ross's production – we called him Bill, Duncan Ross, God rest his soul – initiated theatre tradition vis-à-vis Harold, which is terribly negative. It's what I call the grim hand of reverence. The audience was made very aware that they were at an artistic event, and should conduct themselves properly and not indulge in anything as vulgar as laughter. There was no laughter in his production, no laughter of the audience – it was an artistic occasion.

Precisely the same thing happened so often with Chekhov, you know people don't seem to understand very often that Chekhov's plays need warmth and humour and humanity of that sort, to really bring out the poignancy, the tragedy very often of his plays. But no, no, no, there are lots of people who don't fully understand what the plays are about... perform Chekhov with that grim steely, please sit up straight sort of attitude. And Bill Ross was the first of many – I won't mention any other names, although many come to my mind – of people who have directed Pinter without any humour whatsoever.

JA: So when you were setting up rehearsals and leading the production – this first production – you were really aware of the humour and the importance of making that paramount.

HW: Oh yes. Oh absol... well I don't know, Jamie if I may say so, I don't know if 'paramount' is exactly the word. Forgive me it's the academic quibbler in me, it's dying to break out. But not paramount, but absolutely essential.

JA: Right. And can you remember when you were leading the rehearsals, you knew Harold, you obviously had some understanding of the play before you even saw it because you discussed it with him. Everyone it would have been the first time they'd read it. Can you remember what their reactions were?

HW: Yes. They were very, very puzzled, particularly by 'pause' – of the word 'pause'. I remember saying something really stupid; I think one should remember in a salutary way one's more stupid remarks. Someone said to me... I think it was the American... or someone said, [American accent] 'I really don't get this pause business. What is it, you know the pause with this pause stuff?' I said, 'Well, well try this. Just imagine that you're dropping a stone from the top of your head inside yourself, and when it reaches somewhere around your navel you probably will feel impelled to speak.' That is one of the most useless confusing and stupid notes a director could give.

But you see, what I was really trying to get out, to express, was the fact that plays in my opinion are tightly constructed but the pauses are inhabited and populated. And the words there in plays – and Harold's plays, and all plays I think - are there as a scaffolding from which are suspended populated and inhabited silences and pauses. A play has its silences, the world it inhabits is made possible by the words, but all... nearly all... certainly serious plays, have to have these populated spaces. Otherwise they're a barren series of verbal bombardments. Now there's lots of plays that depend totally on barren series of verbal bombardments and they're none the worse for that. Brilliant, marvellous

plays, plays like *Blithe Spirit*. You know they were written to cheer to people up in wartime, they don't depend on, you know populated silences, far from it. You know so I'm not making a blanket statement about 'art', I'm just saying there are many plays which demand that.

JA: So that was the technical... well technical aspect you had to explain to the cast. Did... I was interested, Ian Rickson, hearing him talk about *The Hothouse*, he said that between you all, the cast worked out what the back story was – where people had come from, what was happening. Did that - was there a temptation to do that with *The Room*, because there's an awful lot of unanswered questions?

HW: Everybody asks questions, all the time. And sometimes there were specific answers like what were... what did we think had happened to this house, when Mr Kidd's sister was alive and why this process of disintegration, deterioration in the building and the house, how that come about. It was quite easy to make fairly practical assessments of what had taken place. Although one can never with Pinter pin down the exact, as you know better than me you know. And also there is a possibility of more than one answer to the question. So one was encouraged... or I tried to encourage people not to arrive at specific answers, but to leave themselves the freedom of possibility.

JA: So you would let... you would between you discuss possible options without ever confirming...

HW: One had to, otherwise people would just be wandering around in... you know one had to say there is a strong possibility that... or it seems likely that... Where do Mr and Mrs Sands come from? Well the answer is not... perhaps the most satisfactory answer is not that they caught a 422 bus from Eltham. No, no that isn't the sort of answer satisfactory, probably the more satisfactory answer is you know, is obviously about their relationship and how this house – this lodging house – seems to attract people at the end of their tether. And this process of despair, disintegration, whatever, is symbolic. I thought it's a wonderful first play for a young man. One must remember that, how young he was.

JA: And did... how much contact was there with Harold during this time? He'd sent you the play...

HW: Very little.

JA: ...did he come down and watch rehearsals, did you...?

HW: No.

JA: No.

HW: No, he came down and saw the night.

JA: And were there any changes, when you got the text, did you allow yourself to make any changes to the text, or did you have to go back to him for permission, or did you just run with it as it arrived that first...?

HW: I ran with it. I don't remember making any changes. But I think it's very important to include those words 'I don't remember'. I don't think I made any changes. I might have done but I don't think so. And Harold wouldn't have liked me to. He's very specific.

JA: I'd wondered.

HW: He's very, very... I don't know about his... quite rightly too. He writes with great care you know.

JA: OK. Now it's not just you were producing the play, directing it, but of course you were also – as you'd mentioned – playing the part of Mr Kidd.

HW: Yes yes.

JA: Can you remember the questions you asked yourself about him? Was he the landlord in fact, did he have a sister, was he just a caretaker? Can you remember modelling yourself on anyone for that role?

HW: No. It's a very good question of yours, but it's like this, intuitively I just identified those... you know how it is with acting, acting is supposed to be becoming someone else. But one can't become someone else. What one can become is one of the hundreds of different personalities that lurk within one. After all, you know, most people go through life giving an absolutely brilliant performance. You know their body language, the way they dress, their hair and all that, and one can't really reproduce it. But what actors realise I think is that they have stronger approximations to the parts they play with them. And Mr Kidd immediately spoke very loudly to me. I identified very strongly with him. And he sends out very, very strong signals. And one of the reasons I think Pinter is such a joy to act, and in some ways very difficult, but in some ways wonderfully easy for an actor, is he sends out very strong, intuitive signals that any actor worth the name can't help picking up on. So I don't think Pinter is a difficult dramatist at all. I think most of the problems that are discussed are invented problems. I don't think there's any real problem about pauses and silences.

As he himself was saying there just last... a few months ago or a year ago we did a television programme, we talked about various things for Channel 4 I think. And he said, you know I've been bedevilled by this discussion of pauses and silences, it gets in the way really. And no I think Pinter's very... it's so... the difficulties with Pinter lie in the fact that it's too rich a mixture to easily digest, or easily dismiss... no I say dismiss, I mean digest and dismiss in the sense of playing it superficially. Not at all, it has the alarming quality of awakening in one normally unexplored areas. But I... but the compensation is,

the lovely side of it is, he is such a theatrically exciting writer, that one gets a very strong message from him.

So I didn't have to ask superficial questions. And I'm not mocking them, they're very important questions, where does Mr Kidd already come from. No, no, no, those sort of things are alright, but the 422 bus doesn't go very far, that's alright they caught the bus, so what. The answer to this, why are the Sands there, what has happened to Rose, what is going on, are much more satisfactorily answered in my opinion, on an intuitive level. Does any of that make sense?

JA: It does yes. That was interesting. There's one very specific thing that I've wondered about, which is that it's obviously a moment of shock when Rose is called Sal because we don't...

HW: Yes a wonderful moment.

JA: ...think that's her name. But I've always wondered, it's never actually mentioned in the text that she's called Rose, no-one ever says Rose to her.

HW: You're quite right.

JA: So if you hadn't read the program you wouldn't necessarily – and you didn't know the play – you wouldn't actually know this wasn't her name. Did that ever occur to you during the rehearsals?

HW: Shall I tell you the complete unvarnished and shameful truth?

JA: I'd love you to.

HW: It is 50 years since that production, you are the very first person who has ever pointed that out to me, and it has never occurred to me.

JA: I should have just kept quiet!

HW: No you shouldn't. It just shows you how stupid people like me who think of themselves as authorities. I don't think of myself as an authority, I just happened to be there at the time you know, and do the play and be in it. It never occurred to me, and it just shows that... So good for you, how stupid I am. It never did occur...

JA: It's a very minor point but it was just...

HW: No it's a major point, and it's a wonderful thing and it never occurred to me. Like my... I had... there's a very good actor in The Hothouse who shares my... we share a dressing room – Peter Pacey. Oddly enough his brother was in The Room when we did – Stephen Pacey – when we did it at the Almeida. And his character in The Hothouse is called Lobb. He said, 'Aren't my shoes they've given me for this part marvellous?'. And, 'Yes,' I said, 'they are beautiful' I said. 'They're made by Lobb aren't they?' And he said, 'That never occurred to me.' And is it... precise... a very similar situation.

JA: The closer you are to something...

HW: It never occurred to me that I never questioned why she was suddenly Sal.
[Laughs] There we are.

JA: OK. So we've talked about rehearsal, leading up to this... well the first night, the first of two nights, I'm interested in the kind of audience that you would have been expecting, that you normally got for these kind of productions, and if you can remember the kind of people who did turn up?

HW: If I can remember what?

JA: The kind of people who turned up. Was it advertised outside the department, outside the University?

HW: Not much. The critics turned up. It was kind of mentioned I think maybe in the newspaper, I can't remember. It was a full house. And because at University, the drama department had a good reputation, we attracted a mixture of students, academics and people. I imagine very few of what one would normally call the general public.

They were a wonderful audience, and they laughed and then were hushed – totally hushed – and attentive. One of the best audiences one could have asked... It would have been so easy to have an audience for that play who said, what on earth is going on. They weren't like that; they were generous, interested, eager to be excited by a new play. I can imagine all kinds of audiences that would say, 'Ah God does he...'

I remember once being in a play and someone came up with this rather traditional remark from the audience, 'Does it get better later on?' that sort of thing. It was show called The Enoch Powell Show in which we mocked the Enoch Powell and the... on the first night at the theatre at the Royal Court Upstairs, was stormed by the British National Front. And I remember this enormous man in black pullover and black leather, because I was on stage connecting with a right hook I think it was that sent me flying about 20 yards across the stage. And they took over the theatre; the audience that we thought was on our side suddenly produced placards saying 'Good Old Enoch' and all that sort of thing.

JA: Oh, they'd sneaked in.

HW: It was a very exciting evening. I wasn't badly hurt. And the British National Front – terribly funny – they... this is quite irrelevant to what you're asking.

JA: No, it's fascinating though.

HW: But the British National Front, their spokespeople... although their lads, they threw the char woman downstairs, it was really awful. But the lads were thugs, that's what they were. But the spokespeople were beautifully spoken, and they said to the papers the next day, 'Our man was attacked by the actor.' I think he was about 25 foot taller than me. You know I'm about... just exactly five foot... [Laughs] there we are.

JA: Did they... were you surprised then that the audience was with you? Did you expect some – at the very least – bafflement or resistance?

HW: I had no expectations – none. I had no idea how it would be received. We were so caught up in it, we so enjoyed it. It was such a lovely play to rehearse. And what makes it so interesting and [American accent] to use this word 'challenging' – very challenging. So there are many options. You know because a play that is as resonant and poetic really – and I think some of Harold's best poems are his plays – and it's so resonant, there are various options, many options. So one has to choose, so it isn't what to play, the actor has to know what they're playing, or the actors have to agree with the director what they're going for, what's happening. And there are no definite answers to that in most Pinter plays. There's no definite answer, but you have to have an agreement of what you're all think you're doing. But one has to be aware there are many other options.

JA: Yes, OK. Now it wasn't just *The Room*, we've mentioned briefly there was a play called *The Rehearsal* by J.G. Sevens – Jimmy Sevens.

HW: Yes, Jimmy Sevens yes.

JA: Can you remember how... can you remember anything about that play actually, and how that was received?

HW: I can't. I do know that Jimmy Sevens, he was an American Korean War veteran – brave man – he was decorated I think, very brave, very nice fellow. I was so... this is a horrible confession of self-absorption, we were so caught up in *The Room*... it wasn't easy to do you see. It was never easy to do; no-one had ever come across a play quite like this you see.

And its structure was so good. That's one of the things that people seem to ignore about Harold's work, that theatrically they are terribly exciting. In that sense people might say [American accent] 'Isn't this really old hat?' No it isn't old hat, it's as fresh as a daisy, and quite different from any other plays that have come before, but terribly like plays that have come before in the sense of their structure and you know, in that sense they are traditional plays in that way. But the content is so different. But he has a wonderful sense of structure.

And the audience... I didn't know how the audience would receive it. We were so caught up in it, so excited by it. Not in a totally childish way, I think we were all quite grown-up. George Odlum was, Susan Engel was, I was a little bit older than... I was 27 after all, which is old for a student in those days. And we just really were caught up with the doing it, performing it, getting the best out of it. We never did ever get the best out of it; you can't with a Pinter play ever say you've got the best out of it. There are so many alternatives and options, so there's so much to squeeze dry. You know I've done one of his plays, performed one of his plays Monologue, I should think at least a hundred times. There's still things that I need to get out of it you know.

JA: And Pinter came, famously, on one of the two nights, and can you remember his reaction – what he thought, firstly about seeing one of his plays being done, it was the first time it had been done...?

HW: He was absolutely delighted.

JA: ...and specifically what he thought about your work with it... on it?

HW: Well I think he liked it. And one of the most endearing things about Harold in relation to his work - true today with The Hothouse – is his excitement at what other people do with his plays and his generosity. And it's an extraordinary thing to say about a man who is so in command of his work, that his innocence in a sense, his innocent delight in seeing his work on stage. In some ways I think that has been a negative thing for him. I think he's often been taken in by people who really didn't understand his work at all, but produced it one way and another. And his generosity of spirit and his openness to interpretation has sometimes I think, led him to approve of things that I wouldn't approve of. But I'm not Pinter, they're his plays. He loved it actually. And he was so excited, he then got... I'm sure he won't mind my saying this, because he said it himself on television a few months ago, he then got extremely drunk. Because one of the actors produced a bottle of Canadian Club, which none of us were whisky drinkers, or rye whisky – I think it's rye isn't it, Canadian Club, I don't think it's bourbon. And he... as he says himself he got extremely drunk. I remember taking him back to his lodgings – our hotel – and Vivien his wife, God rest her soul, opening the door and he sort of fell inside. And they had to work at Malvern – the Malvern Festival I think – I don't know if it was the festival, certainly in Malvern the next day. And he, poor guy, had a terrible hangover. He was most endearing. He was a lovely... he was just lovely and excited and when I say excited I don't mean bubbly, I mean deeply excited and very generous. He loved... the acting was of a high standard I think.

JA: OK so you've had two nights, you've had two reviews from the local press, very positive, can you remember what did you think would happen next? Did you think there would be an afterlife or did you think it would be another play that you'd done at the University and move onto something else?

HW: Oh I didn't anticipate an afterlife. I didn't really think about it. And Susan Engel – Rose – did a marvellous thing because Jimmy Wax came to... the agent – literary agent – came to see a play at the Bristol Old Vic, and Harold happened to be staying with

Susan. And she woke him up and said there's a literary agent here, why don't you come and meet him. It was Jimmy Wax, and they remained... he took Harold on and they remained his agent forever, 'til Jimmy died. And Jimmy's associate, you know Judy Daish is now... you know a charming, lovely woman. And Jimmy was a lovely bloke.

JA: So you had no real expectation as to what would happen to it. We know from what you said that it went to the Bristol Old Vic with Duncan Ross...

HW: Well not the Old Vic, the Old Vic School.

JA: The Old Vic School yes. You weren't involved with that...

HW: In no way except he used my leads. [Laughs]

JA: Was that something that you felt strongly about at the time, or did you not...? Were your expectations at going into professional acting or was it...?

HW: Yes, I was going to go... I was already sort of going into the same company as Harold... as Harold had started with, Anew McMaster the... as you know the actor/manager in Ireland. I wrote to Harold and said I'm going to be an actor, and as he said this many times – I hope you mind if I stray from the language of polite discourse for a moment – I wrote to Harold and said 'I'm going to be an actor, I think I've decided.' And he wrote back saying, 'What do you want to join this shithouse of a profession for?' he said, 'You'll meet very few people you'll want to have a drink with.' I've probably met too many people I want to have a drink with, and although I think his description of the profession is probably justified on the whole, it is nevertheless been a delight to be in all my working life. And it's also got so many diamonds in the ordure as I like to put it – jewels and diamonds – but there is no question that the other stuff is there too.

JA: So in January '58 when this was happening at the Old Vic School you wouldn't have been in Bristol any more?

HW: No, no. I'd left.

JA: So you didn't see that production?

HW: My spies told me all about it. Of course Susan was in it you see. And it went to the Sunday Times drama thing, and there's a book with... that has just come out. Clive Wolfe, you know was the organiser and there a book he's compiled or written and there are various, very interesting references to The Room in it, to that production.

JA: OK. And yet two years later – 1960 – so this is sometime afterwards, it was back in London with *The Dumb Waiter* and you were involved. So you'd been... how did that happen that you were... it was because you were still involved with Harold and he's asked you or...?

HW: Oh we'd been friends all the time you see.

JA: Yes, oh yes.

HW: We'd never lost contact. And he said... you know invited me to be in it. But then I got a job with Orson Welles while I was... why I auditioned for Orson during the run of *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter*. And there's lots of pictures at the Court of... Nick Selby and George Tovey in that production. And it's in the café at the Court. And there's photos on the wall you know, and so I didn't... I wasn't at the Royal Court...

JA: No this was the Hampstead...

HW: ...I just did the Hampstead, a new theatre club, and it was run by a very nice man, what was his name?

JA: Jimmy Roose-Evans.

HW: Absolutely right. And then we went... it went to the Court and a very good actor called John Cater played Mr Kidd. He was very good I'm told.

JA: Was there a reason that you weren't... you didn't transfer, or that was because you were involved with the Orson Welles project?

HW: Yes, I was rehearsing for - *Chimes at Midnight* it was called.

JA: Right, so that's why you didn't go to the Court?

HW: Yes, oh yes.

JA: Ah I was interested. How did... can you remember how the Hampstead Theatre Club production was different from your first squash court production? I know by this point Vivien Merchant had stepped into it.

HW: Well it was a very professional production. Vivian was awfully good, Thomas Baptiste was very good. And the set... Auriol is a marvellous Mrs Sands, as Lia Williams

was at the Almeida. And it was just... had a generally, I think... I don't know, I can't tell you. Because I could tell you why I can't tell you – I'll tell you why I can't tell you, what a ridiculous thing to say - is because I was involved in it. I was acting in it I recall. And I seem to remember that I preferred myself very much in the original production, and didn't think very much of myself in the second production.

JA: And by the point that Harold was directing the second production, he'd already had the experience of *The Birthday Party* being closed in under a week as a result of some fairly vituperative criticism from most... almost all of the press.

HW: That is an understatement, yes.

JA: Well... can you remember was he affected by that, did he feel that this was one last big chance to have a London production of one of his plays?

HW: No, I don't think that Jamie. I'm sorry if I sound blunt – No! – a rather rude no. I think that none of us had great expectations of anything much. We were very... still young you see. 1960, we were... a job in hand you know. It wasn't the kind of career you planned or thought about. We might have had hopes I suppose, propped up, hello it might run another week. I don't know what, I don't know... I can't speak for Harold what his hopes were, but it was a... it was marvellous that he was doing it you know.

And the Court, rather belatedly you know, asked it to transfer there. For me it was very apparent that the Court, which is supposed to be a writers' theatre, didn't really embrace Harold at that time. Okay they... I thought it was a rather... sort of rather... well I don't know, not reluctant, that is too strong, but it wasn't a widely enthusiastic thing from the Court in those days.

I don't know why someone said to me the other day, 'Do you think it's because there was some anti-Semitism?' I thought that was very bizarre. I said, 'No, I don't think George Devine or anybody was in anyway anti-Semitic or anything like that. Absolutely not.' But they were... and the only reason I mention that is because it is rather strange, rather strange that it had to wait 'til 1960 to go to the Court. This extremely interesting young man who - you showed me these reviews from Bristol- obviously a brilliant playwright – that is rather a long time to have to wait. And...

JA: There wasn't much afterwards either was there, with the Court?

HW: No there wasn't. It was a sort of feeling he wasn't their sort of playwright sort of thing. I don't know what their sort of playwright was. I suspect people who would be more socially involved, like dear old Edward Bond who Susan, my wife and myself, have acted in his plays a lot. And Susan was the first missionary woman in Narrow Road to the Deep North, and I was in *Early Morning* you know, and other plays by Bond. But he was the sort of chap the Court liked in our day. Classics, you know Webster, Shakespeare and that... but Bond, who was a terrific writer, you know socially, Harold couldn't be pinned down really. He was his own man.

I have to say something that is much more important, why Duncan Ross's production was tremendously important, and he deserves tremendous praise, it was that production that Harold Hobson saw. And that has to be remembered.

JA: Yes, OK. Well that's great, we've got to the Royal Court, we've got to 1960, I think we've worked through a lot there so thank you very much indeed.

HW: And that's it. Poor you, poor Jamie, you've had to put up with my, you know what do you call it?

JA: Musings?

HW: Meanderings!

JA: No well, that's exactly - I'll stop the tape - no that's exactly what we want!

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