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Julia Kellerman [Swan] – interview transcript

Interviewer: Alec Patton

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Actress; Pinter's *The Room*. Audience; Bristol drama department; Dartington Hall; discussing the play; European theatre; foreign theatre festivals; Harold Hobson; *Look Back in Anger*; musical accompaniment; rented accommodation; set and background of the play; theatre going; Henry Woolf.

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AP: ...interviewing Julia Kellerman for the Theatre Archive Project. Then this will... you know this is going to go up online once it's all... once it's been transcribed. You're aware of all that? Just to...

JK: Yes, yes.

AP: Yes, excellent. So you were just saying about the... where it was performed first.

JK: The very first performance was in the drama department's studio at Bristol.

AP: Yes.

JK: And that was our own little theatre. It was very small and it was a former squash court that had been converted into a drama studio. We had a lighting technician who was there, more or less a full-time lighting technician. And there were about four other full-time members of staff. Iris Brooke for costumes, and the lecturers were divided into, say, the head of the department, Glynne Wickham specialised in medieval drama and Elizabethan. And then we also had people coming from the Bristol Old Vic School who used to take us for classes in movement, voice production... I'm sorry, my voice production's not very good today; I've got a catch in my throat. So they tried to make it as like the professional theatre as possible. Although we did have visiting professors from other departments, from the classics department there was a very well – known Greek specialist called Professor Kitto. And he was very interested in acting. He used to provide, with some members of his family, the live music, because they were all musicians. They either played... his wife I think played the harpsichord. So they used to come on... when we took [a] play abroad that family accompanied us.

AP: Oh right, how wonderful.

JK: His son played a wind instrument. And I think Professor Kitto played the violin as well.

AP: Yes.

JK: But I'm digressing a bit, I'm afraid.

AP: No it's great. If I can go back slightly even further, just before we get into the production of *The Room*, so you must have been one of the first students in the Bristol Old Vic drama department?

JK: I was... at that time?

AP: Yes. I mean...

JK: I was an undergraduate in the drama department.

AP: Right, yes.

JK: And we...

AP: What had led you to go...?

JK: To study drama?

AP: To study drama, yes.

JK: Well mainly because when I was... I'd got to A levels. I really wanted to go to drama school. And in fact we had a very strong drama department at school. And three other people from my class of 30 went on to RADA and LAMDA, and places like that.

AP: Oh right.

JK: But my history teacher said 'You've got to go to university'. And she did a lot of research and found that a drama department was in existence – just one in the whole country at Bristol. So I... that is why I landed in Bristol.

AP: Oh right. And where were you... where did you go to school before that?

JK: I went to school in North London, in a convent school actually... in Enfield, in Middlesex. And so it was... it worked very well, except that I did too much drama. I did a lot of all aspects really. This is where the stage managing came in. And I also... Henry Woolf, who was in the play, we did a... that same year in '[5]7 at Dartington, that's Henry in the picture. [shows a photograph]

AP: Oh right.

JK: That's me.

AP: Oh wonderful.

JK: And we did a... There we are. That was in July you see, whereas The Room was in May. We used to go to the summer school in Dartington, and produce a play every year.

AP: Oh how wonderful!

JK: And we all used to audition for every production that was given [by] the drama department.

AP: And this was in that... just looking at the Amphitryon production, so that went to...

JK: Oh that, we took it to Geneva. After it was chosen to represent the UK, this performance of Amphitryon. And you'll see there's... where I talked about Professor Kitto before, this 'orchestre sur la direction de Ann Kitto', and it was all her family who provided the...

AP: Oh, that's great.

JK: We had a little chamber orchestra because there were songs... the music was by Purcell for Amphitryon. And it went very well. And the other people in the festival – it wasn't a competitive festival – there was a company from the Sorbonne, one from Heidelberg, one from Sweden. There were about, I suppose, about ten different European universities who participated.

AP: Oh that's great!

JK: And there are really... in that year more or less the drama department started up its magazine, so... and there is something here. Of course we were all... that is an article by... I think he was... was he Jim Seaverns? I can't remember.

AP: I think... yes.

JK: The postgraduate students, there were quite a few of them. And we were... I was quite in awe of them really, because they were about... they were postgrads, and they just seemed very experienced and clever. And we were all of course very taken by things like Look Back in Anger which had just opened.

And in fact thinking about The Room, the setting for Look Back in Anger and for The Room, I mean The Room looks as though it's going to be a kitchen sink drama. But in fact it's... there are far more different layers in The Room. And I was thinking as well, we were all at that time... it was post-war years, and things were quite... there weren't many luxuries around. And there was a tremendous lack of student accommodation.

AP: Oh right.

JK: There were a few lucky ones who lived in halls of residence, and they got their... I think their sort of everyday life was easier, except they had to be back at a certain time, something like ten or half past, whereas drama students needed to be out much later really. But those sort of lodging houses were very, very common in Bristol. And I'm sure Harold Pinter must have come across things like that all over the country when he was in rep as well, with these tall... in Bristol the buildings were very... sort of really pretty old and decrepit, and everyone sharing, with basements that were damp, like in The Room, and everyone sharing on the same landing, having to share lavatories and bathrooms. But we found it was a very sort of free and easy way of living, really.

AP: Yes. So it was familiar to you then, The Room?

JK: I'm sorry?

AP: It was familiar, The Room, the setting?

JK: Oh the actual setting was very familiar to most of us. But of course the atmosphere of the play, and the action was very different to anything we'd come across. I mean, we had just become acquainted with plays, like Waiting for Godot, where there's a lot of the unexpected, and you don't quite know if things are what they seem. But with The Room it was really this question of starting off in quite an ordinary setting, and people being quite banal talking about their breakfast and the cold outside. And then you realised as you went on, you learnt all sorts of things about these characters.

And really, when I mentioned to a fellow student that I'm still in touch with, that I was going to come and talk to you about *The Room*, she said, 'Do you remember how we kept saying 'what does it mean? What does it mean?''? And I think we were just quite fascinated by it, because as I said there was this rather ordinary setting, and rather ordinary characters, and then there were the undertones, the political undertones of sort of racism, and women being rather mar... not marginalised, but being rather dominated by the men.

AP: Yes.

JK: And then also the actual way that the characters behaved to each other, that Bert doesn't say a word until he makes his entrance at the end, his second entrance. And then he's just talking about his van. And he doesn't seem to be... he doesn't seem to think of Rose as another person at all. And... I don't know, there just seemed to be so many layers to it. And then of course the ending, which you know was really quite shocking after all these non-sequiturs and people misunderstanding each other, and lost in their own little world, then the actual violent ending, and the overtones then of racism as well. Because George Odlum who played Riley, he was a very elegant... tall, elegant West Indian, who apparently later became Prime Minister of Saint Lucia.

AP: Oh right.

JK: Yes, because another friend from Bristol met him, I would say probably in the last ten years. But he died recently apparently. And he was a very elegant, dignified Riley. And it was very shocking to see this. He was very polite as Riley, and it was terribly shocking to see this chappie come in from his van who hadn't said a word in the first part of the play, to start sort of... to kicking him and attacking him.

AP: Yes, yes, definitely. Now when were you first... when did you first find out about... that there was this new play that the company was going to produce, if you see what I mean? When were you first aware of the play?

JK: I think it was that... I mean, whether... I'm sorry, I can't remember whether I was asked. I know I didn't audition for it, because I was in *Amphitryon* and in something else as well. And I probably wouldn't have been suitable. But I knew Henry Woolf quite well. We all knew him, and he was a remarkable person. And so friendly and such a good sense of humour. I think things were posted up on the drama department notice board. And whether people auditioned for it...

And I know that they were looking for a stage manager. I don't think I was stage manager, I think I was assistant stage manager, because I had a very lowly part. I had to get the set ready and also to fry the eggs and bacon just before the play started, to make quite sure that everything was ready there for the... And one wasn't sure, at first one thought it might be breakfast, but it turned out to be his tea. And I know I was quite in awe of Claude Jenkins, because he was a Fulbright student who was... seemed sort of way above us in intellect and whatever. So that really was... my overpowering memory was being really worried about getting the eggs to the right state at the right

time. Because, well afterwards there wasn't all that much for a stage manager to do. There was obviously the lightning, but I didn't have anything to do with that, yes.

AP: Sure. And what was the set like, do you remember?

JK: Well it was very like the... I've got a copy of the acting edition. It was very, very much like this one in the French's Acting Edition, where... (I should have opened it). Exactly... all the... it might have been changed. I mean, Henry Woolf was the person who was in both performances, so he'd know. But I remember it was very much like this. Now I know... I don't think there were many additional props. There was the sink unit and the window as well as at the back. And the outside world, people who came from the outside world came through the door at the side, at the front. I think it was very like this plan in 1960, but that's much later. I think Henry was in this production too. Yes, he was. So I'm sure as Jamie Andrews interviewed Henry, he must know so much more about things like the set, as he produced it as well you see. He was Mr Kidd, and the producer.

AP: Yes, and of course already friends...

JK: And of course a very close friend of... and Harold Pinter came down for the perfor... I think I remember him; he came down for one of the performances. I think they gave two. I'm not quite sure. And then we realised in later years suddenly there were... I remember this one at the Hampstead Theatre Club, and then all the others, The Caretaker, and we became amazed that we'd given the first production, really.

AP: Yes, of course.

JK: But I think that's the far sightedness of Glynne Wickham that he was very, very keen to encourage new writing for the theatre, because at that time the theatre... these student magazines are talking a lot about the doldrums that the British theatre was in, and that... and I think probably Harold Hobson, one of the reasons for the festivals that he wanted to sort of try to get a different kind of production rather than... there was so much in those days of the drawing room comedies and the... nothing very... well nothing like the things that we had seen on the continent and had done. You know like Ionesco, with The Chairs in Paris that went on for years and years. And Beckett of course.

AP: Yes, and how much European theatre had you seen at that point?

JK: Well quite a bit. Well not... we hadn't seen all that much, but we did have... there was someone in the drama department, one of the lecturers called George Brandt. And he was very interested in... he used to teach European drama I think. So we did talk about and know about Ionesco. And then when we came back from Geneva, after Amphitryon we stopped off for a day or two in Paris and... it was a day I think, only a day. But we did go round the Latin Quarter, and we saw where The Chairs, Ionesco's

play, was produced. But I think Beckett and Sartre were our main interests really – influences.

AP: Yes. When you were in Geneva was there... did you get much of a chance to mix with the other theatre companies?

JK: With the other students?

AP: Yes.

JK: From the other countries?

AP: Yes.

JK: Yes. The funny thing was that the drama department that year, at Easter, had produced a medieval mystery play that we took first of all to Tewkesbury Abbey. And then that was chosen, or it was decided that we would take it to Saarbrücken where there was a drama festival, and of all types of productions. And so we went there before we went to Geneva. It was not all the same the cast, but I had a very small part in that, Pilate's wife. And so we met... there we met a whole lot of German students. And we stayed there for about two weeks I think. And we all went to each other's performances of course, and we all stayed in the same university dormitories and halls of residence. And we all ate together, so we met... we did have a lot of contact with all the other students – and the same at Geneva as well. So we became... I know a friend and I became particularly friendly with some of the students from the Sorbonne. That's why we stopped off. They offered to show us round Paris.

AP: Oh great.

JK: And in fact the friend was June Watts who was in Severns' play. She was the actress in the other part of the double bill to *The Room*. And they showed us Paris...

AP: Oh that's great.

JK: ...and that was a great thrill.

AP: Yes, that's wonderful. And so were you assistant stage manager for both plays?

JK: No. I don't... I think it was just *The Room*, yes, yes.

AP: Yes. And when you performed was it mostly for... the first performance, was it mostly for other students?

JK: It was mostly for... I mean the audience... the drama studio could only hold a very small audience, as it was sort of a squash court sort of width, and then a few benches going up. And I think mostly there were people from the Old Vic Theatre School with whom we used to have classes sometimes, and staff, and other people in the university who were interested. Because there were a lot of students from other faculties, for instance engineering students, scientists, medics, who were very keen on drama as well. And we had... I know one of the lighting engine... not for *The Room*, but for our other university plays, was an electrical engineering student. So there were plenty of people from the dramatic society who weren't in the drama but were interested to see it.

AP: Oh gotcha.

JK: But I think it was mostly the first, second, third year students of the drama department and the Old Vic School who came – and Harold Pinter of course.

AP: Yes. Gotcha.

JK: But it's very strange that... I mean being 50 years ago one has some really vivid memories, and then the more, if one talks to people, other things sort of come back. Because I know when I first sent an e-mail to Jamie Andrews, I'd mixed up Claude Jenkins and George Odlum. But you see, we were all different years. Susan Engel was a much – who played Rose – she was about two years ahead of us I think. Whereas David Davies who played Mr Sands, he was the same year as me. He started in '55, in October '55 I think.

AP: Right, gotcha. So what were some of the... when you said you have some very vivid memories, what are some of your most vivid memories of the time?

JK: Of *The Room* itself, of *The Room*?

AP: Of *The Room*, yes, particularly.

JK: I think... I mean I remember Auriol Smith playing her part as a rather drab, washed out little woman. And he was obviously... David Davies was Mr Sands, and he was obviously domineering and... I'm afraid I can't... I remember Susan Engel having one of these pinafores on when she was dishing up all the food. And she used to play usually very dramatic and classical parts really, but she had a wonderful stage presence, and lovely long dark hair. But for Rose I image, I can't be sure, but imagine she had it tied up in a scarf the way people used to in those days.

AP: Yes.

JK: And she played... she was one of the... there weren't all that many of the drama students who went into the theatre, but quite a few did: June Watts and Susan Engel, and of course Henry. And really of a small department quite a few people went into the theatre. I was one of the ones who... I did too much acting, and so did David Davies. Well not so much acting, but not enough work in my other subjects, that I only lasted two years, which was... So it was a great wrench. I left and...

AP: Oh right.

JK: ...and so did David. But then the third year I did stay on and hung around the drama department, and sold programmes at the Theatre Royal. And that was very exciting because people like Peter O'Toole were just making a big name for themselves, and a lot of other actors who... Peter Jeffrey. And I used to be able to watch every performance, because once I'd sold my programmes I could just watch the play until the end you see.

AP: Oh fantastic!

JK: So I saw *Waiting for Godot* about... I think it was weekly or fortnightly rep. So I could see a play seven or more times with a matinée as well.

AP: Oh right.

JK: So that was a very good theatrical year for me. But then afterwards I did sort of knuckle under, and I did a degree in London and ended up in publishing where I stayed working.

AP: Yes, and what was you degree then in, in London?

JK: It was in French, with Italian.

AP: Oh right.

JK: Yes.

AP: Excellent. And what...?

JK: Well you see... oh, I'm sorry.

AP: No, no, go ahead.

JK: No, Bristol... because drama was not considered a 'real' academic subject you could only... you had to take other subjects with it. And for the first year in a general degree, as well as drama you could take one more arts subject, and then you had to take a science and a classics. So I took Latin and geography, because I hadn't any science in my background at all, and history. And I mean, the drama was fine. And the Latin was all right because everybody had to do Latin in those days. But the geography was a... I wasn't really interested in, and I kept failing it, and failing. And if you failed more than twice you were out in those days. If I'd been good enough at another language then I could have done... you could do German and drama, or as a sort of special degree, or French and drama, another language. But I was there for the drama and nothing else really, and that's... And then afterwards I felt although I was sort of really very, very keen on the theatre, I felt I didn't have the right kind of personality to persevere with it – or the talent, really, so...

AP: Right. And so then... so you then went to London and got your degree, and then became involved in publishing.

JK: Yes.

AP: And did you keep any sort of involvement in theatre or was that it?

JK: Oh, I went to see so many... I don't know whether I've got them here. I had a huge interest in the theatre, yes. I don't know whether I put... with these I found in our attic a tea chest with lots of things. Things, even programmes, even before Bristol with autographs from Paul Scofield and John Gielgud and...

AP: Oh wonderful!

JK: And John Gielgud had a wonderful series at the Lyric, Hammersmith. And that was in about 1953 I think. And we were doing Richard II for O Level. And we were all taken as a crowd, as schoolgirls.

AP: Oh OK.

JK: And when I saw what else was in that repertory season, I went back to see Richard II a couple of times, and then also they did Venice Preserv'd, and also The Way of the World, with Pamela Brown and a lot of really, well wonderful actors and actresses.

AP: Oh right.

JK: So I was... but then after I did carry on going to the theatre a lot, yes. Yes, right up until I'm afraid I became a little bit deaf a few years ago, and I haven't been for the last few years. But I hope I shall overcome that.

AP: Oh right. Well you know they do caption performances sometimes, where you can go and they have the words up on a...

JK: Yes, yes, that would be wonderful, yes, yes.

AP: Yes, and they do I think often... I know the Soho Theatre has started doing it, and you know there's sort of one show in a run, or two shows will have the captioning. It's worth looking at.

JK: Yes, yes. No, that's... Of course [with] opera that has happened for a long time hasn't it?

AP: Yes, of course.

JK: Yes, yes. But I have kept in touch with one of... very close touch actually with one of the students was at Bristol at the same time as me.

AP: And who was that?

JK: And through her she's kept in touch with others. So you know, we still... And apparently there is a... I haven't... apparently there was going to be some reunion a year or so ago I think.

AP: OK.

JK: I didn't... I would have loved to have seen the... there was a revival of The Room, wasn't there?

AP: Yes, yes there was.

JK: Yes. But that... I heard about the project at the British Library through a friend of ours who also went to Bristol, and is now in Australia. And he e-mailed me to say he'd just heard about the project, and that the British Library were looking for people who had taken part in the first production.

AP: Oh excellent, yes. Oh that's fantastic. Now how... do you remember much... what the first audiences, how they responded to *The Room* at all when you were... from where you were... from your perspective?

JK: Well as they were drama... most of the audience were probably fellow drama students. I think they were... they liked anything experimental, and they were quite... And they liked Henry Woolf very, very much. I mean, he was... they thought he was such an interesting sort of person, that it was so interesting to work with. So I'm sure... I can only speak for myself and people I... we were so used to seeing performances of classics, of Shakespeare and... that it was very interesting for us to see something completely new.

AP: Yes, yes, absolutely.

JK: And that one could keep... I remember having a script for a long time – of that I don't know what happened to – but one could read it and then see all these... read things into it I suppose. But there were... there was the political side, very much one felt that... And the Cold War was very much something, you know it was very much in everyone's mind then. And the October before *The Room* was produced students at Bristol made... I think universities all over Britain. There was a huge public demonstration. We processed through the heart of Bristol when Hungary... the Hungarian Revolution was suppressed. So we felt we were very sort of... we weren't terribly politically active, but we were... I mean a lot of students were quite left wing. But even so they drew the line at the Hungarians you know having to close their borders again and...

AP: Yes, definitely.

JK: Yes. So all these political things, which must have been there with Harold Pinter right from the beginning really. Whether we saw... whether we were reading it into it I don't know. I'm sure we weren't though.

AP: Well you said that you were all talking about what it meant, and discussing it early on, when you first were working on it.

JK: Oh yes.

AP: You mentioned discussing it. That must have been... those must have been interesting discussions.

JK: Yes.

AP: Trying to work it out.

JK: And of course I mean we did spend an awful lot of our time chewing the fat and talking about all sorts of things, like students do. So then this was a play that we felt it was something that we could talk about very... And to know that Henry actually knew the writer was a thrill as well, in a way.

AP: Yes, of course.

JK: Yes, yes.

AP: Well that's... And do you remember kind of talking or trying to... like working things out about it? Do you remember just making... because obviously it's such an open play, in terms of how you determine it in terms of you know who Mr and Mrs Sands are, or why they've come in – all these aspects. Do you remember talking about sort of what the background was, trying to...?

JK: Well we talked a lot about you know, as my friend was saying what did it mean? What did the building with all those rooms represent? Who was Riley supposed to represent – there must have been, you know there was some... there seemed to be some meaning behind it. And also the feeling that the whole place was... it was an enclosed area, and it was a little world on its own. And then outside... there was this window where Rose... people looked out. And the outside world was quite sort of hostile in a way, because she was always talking about the cold and the...

AP: Yes.

JK: But I think that's probably a bit to do with the aftermath of war. People... you know heating, central heating wasn't by any means universal. And people did... and the way Rose goes on about her... what a nice rasher of bacon it was. I mean people used to be very keen on... you know be very pleased if they got a decent piece of meat or whatever.

AP: Yes, sure.

JK: Because I remember the food we had at Bristol, I mean, it wasn't all that... the refectory food was pretty bad. And I remember we used to go and eat at the bottom of Park Street, there was still a British Restaurant. I don't know whether... have you heard of British Restaurants?

AP: No.

JK: They were like prefab buildings that were put up during the war, where people who had been bombed out or... you know they gave cheap meals. It was a national thing. And that was still going on in 1955/56.

AP: Oh wow! Oh right.

JK: So we... and you actually could eat quite well there for almost nothing. So we used to go and eat there. Now I'm diverging again I'm sure...

AP: No, no, it's...

JK: ...but it was all sort of... you know the background made sense to us, that people would get excited about something really, you know, luscious to eat.

AP: Yes. No, of course that's great having... getting it that sense of it, of what the show came out of. Is there anything in particular, any other things particularly that you wanted to say or wanted to talk about?

JK: About?

AP: Because that's been great. Everything you've said has been really, really interesting.

JK: Yes?

AP: Yes, it's been marvellous.

JK: I don't. Just to remind myself I've made... I don't think so really. The humour of course of *The Room*, you know where there was... it was, you know, there are at least... oh so many occasions where the humour comes through. And the mixture of the sort of sinister side, and then you know I think it's... who's saying that it's very damp in the basement, but then it's even damper... it's even more damp upstairs.

AP: Yes, yes, yes.

JK: And that's because the rain comes through. And things like... and I think it was one of the Sands said in the basement they couldn't see a thing. And somebody asked why not, and the answer is there wasn't any light. You know, that sort of obvious... And all the contradictions as well, and the... And so much in a lot of the characters. But I think the main thing that stuck us was the atmosphere, how mysterious it was. And one didn't know what was going on from one moment to the next really. There was a sort of

suspense there. And the things... and the threatening feeling, for instance when Rose realises that somebody has said that that room 7, which is the room, that that's vacant.

AP: Yes, definitely.

JK: And of course it's not. And she thinks she's completely safe there.

AP: Yes, absolutely.

JK: Otherwise I don't think... These were just notes I made of the people in the department.

AP: Sure. Well that's wonderful. Well, thank you so much.

JK: Oh thank you. Well, I'm afraid it's very bitty and...

AP: No, it's great. It's great to have that.

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