

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Ruth Serner – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Jamie Andrews**

**1 April 2008**

Bristol drama student and theatre worker, Harold Pinter's *The Room*. Bristol Drama department; Bristol theatres; course structure; *The Duchess of Malfi*; fellow students; *Look Back in Anger*; Harold Pinter plays; practical instruction; *The Revuians*; *The Room*; Glynne Wyckham.

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JA: 1st April, 2008. We're in the British Library, London. My name's Jamie Andrews. We're doing an interview for the Theatre Archive Project, based around *The Room*, and I'm talking to Ruth Serner. Ruth, can you just begin by telling us what you were doing in autumn '56, how it was you ended up at Bristol?

RS: I had been very keen to do drama, and at the time the drama department was... Bristol was the only one that existed. And I'd never thought I'd get into it, but I applied for three different universities, and I was lucky that Bristol that accepted me on the General Arts Degree, which had drama as one of its components.

JA: And was it well known at the time then that Bristol was this pioneering university in that department?

RS: I think it was well known to people who were interested in that kind of area. What was disappointing to me was that they didn't do a joint degree in English and drama, because that's what I would really have liked to do. But you had to do these four subjects, and one was Latin, or Greek, or Physics or something – none of which I was particularly keen on doing – and you could drop that at the end of the year.

JA: Right. So the fact you said you weren't sure if you'd get in, the fact it was the only department offering a drama course...

RS: Yes.

JA: ...that meant that the standards were particularly high at the beginning in order to get in?

RS: Partly that, and partly that I'd been at a girls' grammar school for five years, and had been very unhappy there. And then I'd transferred to this mixed grammar school, just for the two years in the sixth form. And I had never actually thought of myself as being university material. But this school made it their mission to prove to me that I was.

JA: Right. And it's interesting in terms of the debate nowadays around funding for university, at that time was it taken as granted that you would be able to draw on a grant to support you?

RS: My father was reasonably well off, and I was the youngest of three. So although we got a nominal... I got a nominal grant; it wasn't very much because my brother and sister by then had started working.

JA: OK, right. So did you know Bristol the town before you went there?

RS: No I didn't. My father knew it because he'd been evacuated down there. He was with the BBC, and he'd been evacuated down to Bristol during the war. So he kept telling me about things there, and people I should look up – who I wasn't interested in because they weren't my generation. [Laughs]

JA: Of course, yes. So you arrived beginning of the academic year, autumn '56. Can you remember a bit about your first impressions as to the course, the kind of people who were on the course?

RS: Well can I just tell you something about something that wasn't actually the course?

JA: Sure.

RS: I thought Bristol was a sort of third university in the country at the time. And I expected very, very high standards of everybody you see. And then Suez happened. And there was a meeting in the union which I went to. And great the excitement you see, because one thought there was going to be some sort of really high brow political debate about this event. And what actually happened was that a lot of people stood at the back of the hall waving Union Jacks and singing Rule Britannia. And I must say I was pretty shocked. I thought, I thought I'd come to this high academic place you know, and this is the standard of debate. So that's one of my first really clear memories – feeling a bit disappointed. But the drama department I wasn't disappointed in, I thought that was wonderful.

JA: Were you aware of any of the faculty members there before you went?

RS: No, no. I didn't know anything about any of them.

JA: Who did you... did you have a personal tutor, or who were you most involved with out of the faculty members in that first year?

RS: I think my personal tutor was John Wilders – Dr John Wilders who was a lovely man – very kind and very helpful. And yes I remember him most on the personal level, yes.

JA: Yes. And what was the background can you remember of your... the people who were entering within the same year as you?

RS: Pretty much straight from school. One or two of the men had been in National Service, so they were a bit older, and they were coming post National Service. But most of the people had come straight from sixth form. Didn't have gap years in those days.

JA: Right, OK. And the drama, I mean, you said you did a General Arts Degree, but if we focus on the drama element of it. Can you remember what was the division between practical engagement and theoretical classroom activities in the degree?

RS: Probably about 60-40 I would say, in that first year.

JA: So in favour of...?

RS: Of the academic, yes.

JA: Academic, right.

RS: I think Doctor Wickham once told me that it was his ambition to groom people to start drama departments in other universities. That's what he wanted. That's what he once told me he wanted to do.

JA: Interesting.

RS: That's why there was quite a heavy academic component I think.

JA: And in terms of periods, can you remember the balance? Was there much study of contemporary or even 20th Century theatre?

RS: Not in that first year, no. We did quite a... you know, Roman and Greek stuff. And I found the Greek stuff very fascinating because there was a chap called Professor Kitto at Bristol at the time, and we used to go to some of his lectures, which I found quite

inspiring. And what else did we do in that first year, academic? Oh yes, Glynne Wickham did a lot of interesting stuff on medieval theatre, you know, sort of did the history stuff. And that I was really fascinated by, because I've always been very keen on Shakespeare, and it was really interesting to see the sort of roots of where Shakespeare had come from – the different routes, the sort of classical and the sort of mystery plays, and morality plays, and things like that.

JA: So it was very much a kind of historical grounding I suppose in the beginning.

RS: Yes, yes, in the beginning it was, yes.

JA: Were you... you talked about 60-40, so the 40% that was more practical, what form did that take in the first year?

RS: Well we used to go to the Bristol Old Vic Drama School for practical sessions. That was I think about as much practical stuff as we did in the first year. But I know with The Room I mean we did the practical things that weren't on stage. We did bits of sort of you know lighting, and stage craft, and box office stuff, makeup. Yes, we did all the stuff on costume with Iris Brooke. She was a great character. And she wrote various books on historical costumes and so on. And we did stuff with her on that. I think we actually made some... and we actually sort of did some making of costumes and theatrical props and things like that.

JA: And that was carried out... I mean Iris Brooke, she was with the Bristol Old Vic?

RS: She was with the Bristol drama department.

JA: OK.

RS: Yes, yes.

JA: So the practical lessons took place at the Old Vic, but still supervised by...

RS: No, the practical lessons at the Old Vic were more the acting side of it.

JA: Right, OK.

RS: And the kind of things like costume and stagecraft, and stuff like that was at the university I think.

JA: And when you were at the Old Vic doing the practical side, did you mix with the actors who were there at the time?

RS: No, no, no. I think we did our stuff on our own. Yes, just in our year group, with a chap called Rudy Shelley.

JA: Ah, I've heard of him.

RS: He was a great character. And then I was very amused to read in Jane Lapotaire's biography that she had the same memories of him that I had – of him telling you not to 'walk like a pregnant nightingale, darling' you know. [Laughs]

JA: Gosh, mind boggling! Can you remember, when you were doing what seems to be a mixture of incredibly practical and actually quite high theoretical, what was your ultimate aim? Did you subscribe to Glynne Wickham's view that you wanted to go out and teach afterwards, or were you much more focused long term on the practical?

RS: Well in the initial phases of my career there I wanted to go on the stage, like probably most people did. But you know, during my three or four years in Bristol I realised that there were a lot of people who were a damn sight better at it than I was. And I probably... you know, I wasn't quite sure that I then... and then I think I would have quite liked to do the academic stuff.

JA: But if you had... I mean at the beginning you say you were interested in a career in the theatre, was there still... was there support from within the department for that?

RS: Well I think one disparaging remark from Glynne Wickham to me once was not exactly support, but maybe reinforcement that you know maybe this wasn't the route I should go down for a full time career. But no, they didn't sort of do... that was very early in the first year you see. I mean, it's another story, but I needed two years in the drama department. No I wouldn't say that... I suppose they kind of maybe had their eye on people who were outstanding. And I mean those people were probably much more determined to do it than I was. I didn't want to finish up selling tickets at the National Film Theatre, which is what a lot of them did.

JA: One other name that crops up, maybe a younger generation than Glynne Wickham, is George Brandt.

RS: Yes.

JA: Did you have any involvement with George Brandt?

RS: Yes, I did.

JA: And do you have any memories of him?

RS: I remember something really embarrassing with George Brandt actually. Now what was the name of that play? The Duchess of Malfi. I remember we were doing The Duchess of Malfi with George Brandt. And I was a real little innocent straight from grammar school. And you know you have to remember [life] was very different in 1956. And we had to write these essays about The Duchess of Malfi. At the end of which he made some comment to me about, 'Well that's fine, but what about the incest theme?' Well to be honest I didn't even know what incest was, and I was 18 years old. And I just... I can't even remember what the follow up to that was. But I remember just feeling such an idiot, you know, because I didn't know what incest was. And he had to explain, and I think he was a bit embarrassed as well. But you know, that's the state of some 18 year [-old] girls in 1956.

JA: So yes, different times.

RS: Yes, very different times. Very different.

JA: It's interesting you talk about that, because I... my impression from some of the other interviews was that George Brandt was particularly amongst all the staff keen in pushing contemporary – very contemporary – theatre.

RS: Well he may well have been in the later years. But you see I didn't have a lot... I remember him doing a lovely performance – oh, this was after I left actually – of one of the mystery plays in St. Bartholomew's Church. When my mother was in Bart's, and then I picked this leaflet up and saw this was on so I went to it. But I mean he may well have been. And there may well have been a lot more contemporary stuff in the second and third years.

JA: OK. And Bristol is a very theatrical city. Can you remember much about your play-going in the evenings?

RS: Oh well yes. I mean there was the Bristol Old Vic, and of course Peter O'Toole was there at the time, and Wendy Williams. And Peter O'Toole was the great kind of matinée idol of the day. And occasionally you would get... you know, go to parties which he was at, which was a bit mind boggling. And then there was, Peter Jeffrey was at the Colston. And occasionally you know one would go to the Colston. But it was really the Bristol Old Vic that was the place that drew you.

JA: Can you remember any plays that you saw during...?

RS: I remember seeing Peter O'Toole in Look Back in Anger. And I hadn't seen it in London. And I remember coming out of that just feeling like a dishrag that had been, you know wrung out. Quite amazing. And years later I had to teach it to sixth form, and I was in a grammar school teaching at the time. And I just thought 'My God! I can't believe how this has dated'. I can't believe you know, how much everybody was going on about it at the time, but now it seemed so dated.

JA: Do you think it was the performance that struck you or the writing, the freshness of the writing itself at the time?

RS: What in...?

JA: Originally.

RS: I think both. I think both, because a good actor can't do it without the writing there. But I can imagine it being done very badly. And one wouldn't maybe have been so struck.

JA: Do you remember was that sense of excitement at seeing this very new form of theatre...?

RS: Oh yes.

JA: ...was that widespread amongst your contemporaries?

RS: Yes, yes, I think it was actually. I think people realised that we were sort of on the cusp of the wind of change.

JA: Had you been following events in London? Were you someone who would religiously read the Sunday reviews?

RS: Well I don't know about religiously. I mean, I used to like to go up to London to the theatre, particularly the Old Vic, which you could go and sit in the gods very cheaply. But you know money was a big kind of factor in those days.

JA: It's interesting when you talk... going to the Bristol Old Vic as a student, were there reductions, were there cheap ways of getting into see plays?

RS: Do you know I honestly can't remember. I really can't remember. Probably, but I wouldn't swear to it.

JA: Any other plays that you remember at the Old Vic?

RS: Do you know I don't think I can remember any others. And I think that one made such a big impression, that was the one that really lasted.

JA: It's interesting you say you were at parties where Peter O'Toole was as well. Does that imply there was a certain mixing of actors, people studying drama?

RS: Yes, and I think, you know...

JA: Kind of shared outlook.

RS: I mean not many parties one was at where that happened. But you know just like today the word goes round that there's a party on, and somebody invites you, knows somebody, and there you are with Peter O'Toole at the same party. But I don't suppose he'd remember me. [Laughs]

JA: So was he very much a local hero at the time?

RS: He was very much the sort of matinée idol. Yes, I mean it was quite obvious that he was going big places, yes, yes.

JA: Any other theatres – were there any smaller theatres at the time? Was the Little open then?

RS: I don't think so. If it was I'm not aware of it.

JA: So the main... for recreational theatre going it would be to the Bristol Old Vic.

RS: To the Old Vic or the... what did they call it, the Colston or something?

JA: Colston Hall.

RS: Colston Hall.

JA: Yes.

RS: That may have become the Little Theatre. I don't know, no.

JA: No, no, no that's larger. There's the Hippodrome as well which I think...

RS: No, I think... I don't think it was the Hip... I think it was the... well the Colston if they did drama there, that's what...

JA: Yes, I'm not sure.

RS: But I remember Peter Jeffrey there, and then he became such a familiar face on television in the following years.

JA: OK. So obviously you... looking at The Room that was put on by one of the student drama societies. I think from talking to other people there were two... were there two societies?

RS: The Room wasn't put on by one of the drama societies.

JA: Ah.

RS: I don't think so. My recollection was that Henry Woolf was doing... in fact I spoke to Henry about this when I met him at the Almeida. He was doing a diploma – some sort of diploma or certificate in drama – and part of his assessment was to do this production right from, you know, from the beginning to the end. And I understood that he had said to Glynne Wickham 'Well, I've got a friend who writes plays, and is it all right to put on something that nobody's done before?'. And Glynne said, you know 'it's up to you what you do'. And then he put The Room on, in the drama department. I always thought it was something that was part of his assessment, and not actually part of one of the societies.

JA: It's interesting. I think there may have been some overlap, because I know Auriol Smith was President of the society...

RS: Dramsoc.

JA: Yes, Dramsoc as in the department as opposed to the university wider...

RS: She was, yes.

JA: So I think you're right, it started with Henry, but then it involved Dramsoc. Were you involved with other Dramsoc productions?

RS: I was more involved actually with the Revue... what they called the Revunians.

JA: Oh, I don't know that.

RS: Which was kind of Revue Society. And we did a tour, we went down to Brighton that summer – '57 it would be – and did two or three weeks at the Pavilion Theatre in Brighton. Did sketches and things like that. I mean there wasn't time to do everything. I think I did one... I think I did that thing R.U.R. with Dramsoc, or it may have been one of the halls of residence – Wills Hall or something. I can't remember that now. But I remember doing that with David Davies, playing opposite him.

But Dramsoc, I think I kind of realised quite soon that Dramsoc had got the real heavyweights in it, you know. [Laughs] Well, people like Auriol Smith, and Susan Engel who I think had just left when I went. I'm not sure if she was in the same year. But I lived with a lot of second year students, and they used to sort of talk about Susan Engel a lot. And another guy who became... Mike McStay they talked about. And he was... they'd just left when I came. But I think I always felt that Dramsoc you sort of perhaps waited 'til you were in the second or third year to get anywhere in Dramsoc.

JA: OK. So were most people in the Revue Society who were in... that tended to be more first years did it?

RS: Well no. Some of them were second and third years. And then I mean there was Julia Blake who I've just got back in touch with. She's gone to... she became an actress in Australia. And I think it was not many first years in it, but I just quite enjoyed that sort of thing. There was a bit of singing and dancing as well you know.

JA: What kind of places when you performed in Bristol did you perform in, for revues?

RS: Oh usually in the Vic Rooms.

JA: It was in the Vic, right.

RS: Yes, yes.

JA: So larger than the Dramsoc studio.

RS: Yes, yes. The Dramsoc studio was... well the studio in the university was quite small.

JA: Was that a major event to be... to take your revue on tour, was that unprecedented or was it...?

RS: I think it was. I think it was the first time. And I don't know whether it happened again. But...

JA: And this was a professional... semi-professional engagement?

RS: Well yes. I mean we were invited by the Brighton Pavilion Theatre. I suppose a lot of amateurish groups did spells. It was great fun.

JA: Yes, I'm sure. So do remember seeing any Dramsoc productions as a member of the audience?

RS: Well, I used to go a lot of them, but I can't remember many of them. Amphitryon, I remember Amphitryon or something. But I honestly I can't... I remember The Winter's Tale. I remember them doing The Winter's Tale with Elizabeth Shepherd playing Perdita. And she made it quite big in Canada. I gather she was offered the role in that thing that Honor Blackman did, that was so popular, with John Steed – The Avengers.

JA: Oh yes, yes.

RS: That's right, she I gather was offered the part in The Avengers and said she'd rather go to Canada. And I don't know if she regretted it after that.

JA: Oh right, well yes. So moving... I mean that's very interesting background. Moving on to The Room itself, as you said it was... in many ways the genesis was from Henry and his work – Henry Woolf and his postgraduate work, but clearly some overlap I think with Dramsoc.

RS: Yes, well I would probably have not known about that at that time, because I was still very new.

JA: So how did you get involved? What was the first time you were aware that this production was going to be put on?

RS: I think that we were asked as first year students in the drama department if we could do... if we could help with the sort of non on-stage things. So that some people were doing kind of lighting, or helping with costumes or whatever, and selling tickets and box office – I think I may have worked in the box... done some box office selling for that.

JA: So you weren't... were you involved with rehearsals in the lead up to it?

RS: No, no, no.

JA: OK. So the first time you would have seen it was those two productions.

RS: Yes.

JA: And you think you were involved with box office?

RS: I think so, yes. I know I did help in some way, some minor way you know. But certainly not a very big part. I don't suppose I got an acknowledgement in the programme! [Laughs]

JA: Well... So... interesting, so the Dramsoc productions were paying productions for students as well - if you were involved with box office that implies.

RS: Yes, I think so. Or maybe they were free tickets and they only had enough because of the small theatre. I mean, I don't think my memory is good enough to remember whether people actually paid. I think they may have done.

JA: OK. And can you describe the space, the Dramsoc studio?

RS: It was a very small theatre, kind of ramped seats. See I think of that as the drama department studio theatre.

JA: Yes.

RS: Yes. I can't remember it terribly clearly, but just that it was small, and I remember it being very dark when they did *The Room*.

JA: So what can you remember? Did you see *The Room* twice, on both productions?

RS: No, no.

JA: No, just the one.

RS: No, just the one in the studio theatre.

JA: Well, I assume you hadn't heard of Harold Pinter beforehand?

RS: No, no.

JA: Did you have any expectations as to what this play might involve?

RS: Not at all, not at all. I mean, I think... I seem to remember being quite friendly with Henry in a sort of crowd you see. And it was kind of... I think everybody loved Henry so much; he was such a nice guy. And everybody... you know so I think because it was sort of Henry's exam then maybe people just sort of rallied round to help out you know. And he talked about this chap he'd been at school with who did this writing. So I suppose we were just intrigued, but certainly didn't have any expectation of what that would lead to.

JA: And what... can you remember what you did make of it after that... or during that first production?

RS: Well it was quite hard work I think, because one wasn't used to that sort of play. And sort of... it was the sort of thing you went off and talked about for a long time in the coffee bar afterwards. Yes, it was just so different from what had gone before really.

JA: Different in an alarming sense? Did it almost worry or frighten people, or was it something that you embraced as something refreshing?

RS: I think it's difficult – and I don't know how actors respond to this – but I think it's difficult to be alarmed by something that you've seen in production, and you know the people in it. You know that's sort of George, and that's David and so on. I don't know how it would have struck me if I'd seen it absolutely one... we'd probably wandered in and out of rehearsals a bit. So I don't think it alarmed me. But I thought it was kind of a bit weird at the time, and very hard work for the actors doing all that dialogue and stuff.

JA: Do you remember you say it was the topic of conversations in the coffee bars afterwards, can you remember how people tried to grasp hold of it, how people defined it?

RS: Do you? It's really too long ago to remember that, yes. But I mean, it was a play that you took home with you, and you talked about it with the people who'd seen it. And some people said 'Oh I didn't get that you know', and other people said, 'Well what about so-and-so?'

JA: The review, we know there were two local reviewers there from the two... at the time the two local Bristol papers. Can you remember, was that unusual to have this, essentially a student production, reviewed in the press?

RS: No, I think they did go to the student productions, because Bristol University drama department was something quite unique. And I think the Bristol Eastern Daily Press... no the Western Daily Press was it?

JA: Yes, yes.

RS: [laughs] Sorry, I read the Eastern Daily Press a lot now though. No, I think on the whole they did go to things. And we always, you know if we had a show on Revunians or something like that we'd always kind of scabble through to see if there was anything in the paper about it.

JA: OK. And this... The Room was on as a double bill with another One-Acter, which was called The Rehearsal. Do you remember anything about that?

RS: I have no recollection of that whatsoever. No.

JA: Hmm, interesting.

RS: No, none at all.

JA: Yes, we think that was... well, there was two actors, a man and a woman. So clearly it was a two hander. I think shorter than The Room but no it's...

RS: Yes, and it's weird because I knew June very well later. And maybe I hadn't really met up with her then. But I... you know, I can't even remember that she was in this other play that was on.

JA: OK. So it sounds from what you said there was debate afterwards, people were interested in this production. Was there a buzz around the department there was something perhaps more significant than usual had happened?

RS: My recollection is that it was when Hobson and Tynan picked it up, and it was in The Observer and The Sunday Times, that then people kind of thought 'Wow!' you know, 'where's this going to go?'

JA: Because that was later on wasn't it?

RS: Yes.

JA: I think when the Old Vic School did a production in January – or late December/January. Late December '57/January '58 there was quite a gap. Six months or so between...

RS: Was there?

JA: ...between this and then the next version.

RS: Well I think yes, I hadn't realised that. But I think Glynne Wickham had kind of said to them 'hey, you know this is something you ought to see'. And invited them down probably to... I didn't realise it was to that second production.

JA: Yes, yes, the only reviews for the first production I think were in the two local reviews, which were very promising, but didn't go any further. So in your second year can you... you came back in September I assume, was there still some kind of sense that you know this great thing had happened in May, and that something more might happen, or it wasn't really until that second production that it was revived again?

RS: I don't really remember that at all, about people still... it may have been that the sort of people who'd been involved closely in it would have still been saying oh it's going to a second production, this is all very exciting. But I don't remember anything like that.

JA: Do you remember seeing the second production at the Old Vic School?

RS: No I didn't. I didn't. I didn't see it.

JA: Have you seen productions of The Room since that...?

RS: Yes, I went to the one at the Almeida, which was the anniversary of it wasn't it?

JA: I think that was in 2000, so...

RS: Yes, in 2000. And Henry came over. And they did his first One-Act play and his latest One-Act play. Lindsay Duncan... and Henry was in The Room. So I saw that, yes.

JA: Do you remember when you saw this obviously professional production, comparing it in your mind to that first event?

RS: Only sort of in vague memories, because, I mean, it's a long time, 50 years to remember.

JA: Of course, yes, yes.

RS: You know but sort of remember oh yes George Odium was part. And I thought it was Wendy Williams actually, I got that wrong... the woman.

JA: The Susan Engel part?

RS: Mmm, yes.

JA: Yes. So you said you gave up drama, or the drama segment after two years of study, can you tell us why that, or how that happened?

RS: Well one of the options I had to do in this general degree was Latin or Greek – classical Greek. I had never done classical Greek at school, and I loathed Latin. And I had had to have some special coaching just to get the O Level Latin to get to Bristol. Because when I thought you know, in that first school I was so unhappy I just thought well I'm never going to university anyway, so why bother with Latin. I never had worked... So then I had to do this Latin for a year at Bristol.

And at the end of the first year we had to take exams in the four subjects we were doing. And I was doing drama, English, philosophy, and this Latin. We had to take exams in all of those, and I failed the Latin. Then I went down to Brighton and did this Revunians thing you see. And obviously didn't do as much Latin revision as I should have done. They said 'oh well that's all right you can come back and take it again in September'. So I went back in September, and unfortunately I failed it again. So then they said I could do the re-sit in the summer – I'd have to carry it for a year. So I carried on the drama for the second year, with English and the philosophy. And out of my meagre grant I paid a PhD student to, you know, coach me in this Latin. And then this Latin exam came up. And you know I have never in my life – apart from that – just frozen when I've seen a paper. And this wretched thing came up, and I just... I just froze. I just you know, did the most stupid things. I think because it mattered so much to me. And I failed it again.

And then I remember ringing Doctor Wilders. I remember thinking 'well, I'll have to leave Bristol, I can't carry on', and you know, 'what am I going to do?' and all this. And then once... And I remember waking up in the middle of the night and thinking 'I wonder if I could get on the special degree in English and philosophy'. And I rang John Wilders who was my personal tutor, and he was very sweet. And he said to me, 'Well Ruth,' he said, 'I've never known anybody fail a general degree and be promoted to an honours.' [Laughs] So he said, 'But we've got an academic board meeting, and I'll put it to them.'

And so I kind of lived in trepidation for a day or two. And then he rang up and he said to me they've agreed because you're other results were good, that you can do the English and philosophy special Honours Degree. And... but you will have to take an extra year because you'll have to... You know, so my dad luckily agreed to that.

And then an interesting thing happened, because when I went back to Bristol the English Prof was a guy called L. C. Knights. And I was all set to do this you see, and then Glynne

Wickham called me to his office, said he wanted to see me. And I went in, and I said, 'Look you know that I came here to do drama, and I would you know sort of feel terrible about this.' And he said, 'Well...' he said, 'what I'm prepared to do is to let you carry the drama and sit the third year exams with the others, and we wouldn't be able officially to give you a degree, but I would write you a sort of thing which you could present...' you see this is when he told me he wanted to start these new departments. And he said, 'I would give you a thing in writing to say that you actually done the work, and you'd sat this exam and it was just circumstances.'

So I went off thinking 'OK, now I become a serious student, and I do this for Glynne and for myself', and all that. And then within a few days I got summoned to L.C. Knights, and he said he was absolutely furious about this. And he said you know, I had to sort of give in over this one. The trouble was I'd got a... unfortunately I'd got a bit of a reputation I think for being a bit of a flippertygibbert, because in the first year I'd been the Rag Queen, and a hairdresser had taken it up. And so this hairdresser was always using my hair for a model. Well, I got free hairdos, and you know occasionally I'd turn up with pink hair and things, which you didn't do in those days. And I think Knights possibly thought 'not that one', you see, and said it was totally irresponsible of Glynne Wickham to have suggested this to me. And he wasn't prepared to let me do the English if I was carrying the drama as well. So I mean, I had to back down in order to get a degree.

JA: So you backed down on the drama.

RS: I had to, because otherwise I wouldn't have come out with a degree after all this. And I then heard via the grapevine – now how true this is I don't know – but I heard that Glynne Wickham and L. C. Knights were not the best of friends, and that there was quite a bit of competition between them.

JA: It's interesting. Do you think that points to some kind of institutional rivalry with this young upstart department that was clearly attracting an awful lot of attention?

RS: It could have been. It could have been, yes. It could have been, yes. So I finished up with a Degree in English and Philosophy.

JA: So does that mean you didn't have any further involvement with Dramsoc?

RS: I... well you see I had to work pretty hard then to catch up with all this. I think I probably didn't do many performances after that, because I had to get... I had to sort of think OK mate, the fun's over, get on with it, get your head down now.

JA: Yes. Well the first time that Pinter came to national attention I suppose would be the spring after, in 1958 when *The Birthday Party* was first produced – well in the regions and then at London Hammersmith. Do you remember keeping an eye on this... the kind of gradual rise of this certain Pinter and remembering...?

RS: Yes, yes I did. Yes, I did. Yes, I liked... if I could I went to his plays.

JA: Did you see The Birthday Party then, in the early...?

RS: Yes, and I remember the one I loved was The Caretaker. I remember seeing The Caretaker shortly after I was married. And you know the sort of 'Well, I've got to get down to Sidcup' became a sort of family... And you know every time you were putting something off, and unrealistically, it became the sort of family phrase, 'well I've got to get down to Sidcup' and get my papers before I can do that, you know.

JA: But you say you saw The Birthday Party as well, that would be the play before. Was that in London, can you remember or on one of the regional tours?

RS: I can't remember. What year was that?

JA: That was '58. It only played six days in London at first, because it was rubbished by the critics.

RS: Oh well I wouldn't have seen it... I wouldn't have seen it then. I can't remember when I saw it, but I'm sure I've seen it at some point.

JA: Well it was revived afterwards so, yes.

RS: Mm, mm, probably a revival later, yes.

JA: Yes, OK. And can you remember finally when you left Bristol, was the idea that Bristol had nurtured, found Harold Pinter kind of on the institutional radar, or was it something that kind of came and went?

RS: Yes, I think so. I think anybody who'd been involved... You know but sometimes if he comes up in conversation and I mention it, people don't know. You know I say 'oh well I was actually hanging around when his first play was produced'.

JA: Did you stay in contact with any of the people? You say you were friends with Henry or part of his group.

RS: Well not close friends. I mean, we all sort of rubbed up against each other at various things. And I think it's a case now of me remembering a lot of people who have made it. You know and they wouldn't necessarily remember me because you know I've never been a big celebrity or anything like that.

JA: Right, I mean so you say you saw Henry at the Almeida production, but was that...?

RS: Yes. And I went up to him, and I said, 'Oh Henry, do you remember me.' He looked a bit puzzled at first. But then after... you know after we sort of talked a bit he said, 'Yes of course I do remember you now, yes, yes.'

JA: OK great. Well I think we've covered most things there. So thank you very much indeed.

RS: Thank you.

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