

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

<http://sounds.bl.uk>

Barry Sheppard – interview transcript

Interviewer: Catherine Cheese

7 December 2007

Theatre Manager and theatre-goer. Arts Council; censorship; Civic Theatre, Chesterfield; Equity; The Kitchen; musicals; National Theatre; new writing; regional theatre; repertory; Ralph Richardson; Student ASMs; touring; Whirligig Theatre.

CC: My name is Catherine Cheese and I'm interviewing Mr Barry Sheppard. So, what was your occupation during the period 1945-68?

BS: Well, for nearly all that period I was in education. From... I suppose I went to primary school in 1944 and finished university in 1962. And for the first three years thereafter I was teaching at a college in Birmingham, and started really in the theatre profession in 1967.

CC: So what was it that interested you in getting involved into the theatre?

BS: Into the professional theatre, it was one of those classic things where there was a teacher... I was at school at Brockenhurst - which was a county high school in Hampshire - and there were several teachers who were interested in the theatre, and we used to get taken to the theatre, at least once a year, if not perhaps once a term. And we got taken to the most extraordinary things, I'm not sure that still happens nowadays... I'm not sure if out of school activities are still encouraged the way they were, which is a pity. But we were taken to the Old Vic, Stratford upon Avon and to other London theatres as well. For instance, I saw Claire Bloom playing Juliet at the Old Vic and I think that must have been round about 1954. She did it twice, and I think I saw it in the second season, when I would have been just about 15. We were also taken to Stratford where we saw Paul Robeson play Othello with Sam Wanamaker as Iago, and that must have been somewhere around 1959. And I also remember seeing John Clements and Kay Hammond in *The Way of The World*, in about 1956 but I'm not sure whether it was at the Saville or St James' Theatre, but both are now gone. John Clements and Kay Hammond were married around that time, but they did what was really quite common at the time, they did repertory seasons in a London theatre. I do remember as late as 1966 that Ralph Richardson did a season in rep at the Theatre Royal Haymarket, with people like Moray Watson and Margaret Rutherford in his company, and they did *The Rivals* which I saw. They did *You Never Can Tell*, and I think they did *The School for Scandal* in that season as well. I remember Richardson played that [Sir Anthony Absolute] as an elderly gentleman with gout! And in one particular scene, there was this large table with chairs around it. He was walking around agitated and you knew at some

point he was going to hit his foot on one of these objects. But he didn't! And so you forgot about it, and then right at the very last minute when you weren't expecting it, he did it. Odd thing to remember I suppose but it's something I do remember about that season in particular.

CC: I'd like to ask you about your involvement as a producer. What kind of productions did you work with? What did your role entail?

BS: Well, as a producer proper in the sort of Cameron Mackintosh mould, I never was. I was more of what you called a Administrative Producer: I worked in a company with an artistic director and I looked after the business side of it. I wasn't necessarily responsible for choosing the play and casting it as such. But that was with Whirligig Theatre - WSG productions - which has [corrected by interviewee: had] an offshoot company called Whirligig, which was a children's theatre company. And that was from 1988 onwards I suppose. And we toured all over the country with children's plays playing in quite large theatres, Birmingham Hippodrome for instance was probably the largest one we played in. But at the time we were about the only company doing that sort of work; doing work for children in theatres, what you might call proper theatres, ie, we didn't go into schools, we didn't go into a theatre and perform in front of the curtain with just a couple of actors and minimum props. It was fully staged, it cost quite a lot of money to put on and we never made any money, and yet the Arts Council never subsidised us regularly. We used to get some touring grants, but never year on year subsidy. Then we all got older and thought it was probably time we retired! It was just about that time as well the Arts Council started to put money into that type of theatre. So we have to tell ourselves that if we hadn't done all that pioneering work then the work that does go on now probably wouldn't have happened!

CC: You mentioned that you were involved in theatre around the change of the practical side of performances. In what way did it change? Was it for the best?

BS: Well, I said my first job was in 1967. I'd been teaching drama for three years before that in Birmingham. But in 1966-7 I went on an administration training course organised by the Arts Council. Now that all sounds very grand, and their training courses are quite grand nowadays! In those days, it consisted of sending you out to a theatre somewhere and saying, 'Right, go and learn!', so yes, 'get the experience'. You were very much on your own. I had a nine month bursary; for the first six months I was at the Civic Theatre in Chesterfield - it's now called the Pomegranate - which was just quite a small local repertory theatre, and they don't exist much any more. It was at the time when the Arts Council was probably at a high level of activity, putting quite a lot of money into local theatres. And they had this sort of challenge with local authorities, where they'd offer to put up a certain amount of money if the local authorities put up a certain amount as well. And I think that Chesterfield was the first theatre to take this up. That was part of the change, that there was more money coming into that sort of theatre, but the other more significant change was the two-weekly rep. Up until that time Chesterfield had a weekly rep, had done a different play every week, if you can imagine! The practice would be you'd open the play you'd rehearsed the week before on the Monday night, and then go home and start learning your words for the next one and start rehearsing it on the Tuesday day etc... there wasn't a lot of rehearsal time! How they did it I don't know! But that went then and fortnightly rep became much more the

standard, and three weekly was not unusual either. Now it would be highly unusual to run a play for less than three weeks or even a month. So that was all part of the development. We also were then still having a resident company, ie, that was actors who would come up to the theatre for a whole season which might be six months, and they would stay in Chesterfield and be in every play. So one week you might be playing Romeo, and next week you could be playing in an Agatha Christie production! It was thought to be good training ground, but that is largely gone now, and directors like to cast specifically for a play, and the actors come up just for the play. The other reason why that died out was because actors became loath to leave London when television work was becoming more abundant and film work. And they were afraid that if they were out of London for any length of time they would miss that all-important phone call. So those were really the significant changes, the input of money, the change of reps and the beginning of the end of the resident company.

CC: So in your opinion do you think that these changes were for the best?

BS: Oh yes, they had to be. I just missed weekly rep, I never worked in it, but even fortnightly was bad enough! The work pressure was intense and the plays were well done and well staged, up to a point, but given they'd only had ten days - at best! - rehearsal period, and now it's not unusual for companies such as the Royal Shakespeare or National Theatre to rehearse for three months before...! It shows on stage. Expectations probably weren't so high then as they are now, but you can imagine it was a very desirable improvement.

CC: What kind of shows did you go to see – musicals, contemporary plays, new wave dramas?

BS: I think I saw just about everything that was going! I was born and brought up in a little village on the south coast, not very far from Bournemouth. And in those days it was a distinct entity, the village, there was a very communal feel about the place and life was centered around the village hall. My mother's family was the dominant family in the village, and they sang in a family choir. Every week in the hall there would be a social or a dance and from time to time there would be productions. So I sort of grew up in that kind of atmosphere - it all sounds like something out of *The Archers*, I suppose it was like that in a way... they weren't farmers though, they were fishermen! That sort of thing has always been in my background, and one of my aunts used to be a professional actress, and she used to produce a pantomime every year, which was done in the village hall, but then it would tour around to other villages before and after Christmas, and I was involved in those. I think I must have been in my teens when I started to go to professional theatre on my own initiative. Most of that was at Bournemouth Pavilion and I'd go on a Saturday and watch the matinées - they were not expensive! Just really saw everything that was on... opera - I remember seeing *White Horse Inn*, the musical, on ice! I saw Kay Kendal in *Bell Book and Candle* directed by her husband [Rex Harrison]. So it was very eclectic. It wasn't until high school when I got taken to the classics I was talking about earlier. So it really has been a wide-ranging experience. I like musicals, I went to see *Me and My Girl* last night which was touring. Having mentioned touring, most productions I saw were actually on tour rather than in London, because I was first at university in Bristol then teaching in Birmingham, then a year in Chesterfield moving on to Manchester, so I was never able to get into London. All the Royal Court

productions, I never actually saw at the Royal Court. They were none the worse for that though, but I didn't see the originals. I think it was in 1966 I did go to London and went to the Old Vic - which housed the National Theatre at that time - and saw a number of productions there. One was a Sunday night, it must have been a gala celebration for ten years of the Royal Court; the first half consisted of excerpts from *Look Back in Anger*, and Olivier did his Archie Rice from *The Entertainer*. The whole of the second act was taken up with Arnold Wesker's play *The Kitchen*. It was set in a huge kitchen of a big hotel, so the stage is absolutely crowded and it was manic, Noel Coward played the Maitre D' of the hotel, John Osborne was a chef, Olivier was in it, and I do remember Sibyl Thorndike being brought on by Rita Tushingham. She [Sybil Thorndike] played a new waitress on her first day at this hotel, and she's brought on and shown where she will be working from, and Sibyl Thorndike looks straight out into the crowd, all around the auditorium - and remember, this was the National Theatre! - and her line was, 'I've worked in better places than this!' which brought the house down! That was my experience of the Royal Court. So I saw pretty much everything! The early National days had people like Maggie Smith and Robert Stevens in the company. Maggie Smith I remember in *Much Ado About Nothing*, directed by Franco Zeffirelli.

CC: What was it like for you to visit the theatre during this period?

BS: It was exciting, but also part of my routine and life, which while I was working in production, and whilst I was running [the] theatres myself [this] stopped. Largely because I was actually working in the theatre, was there everyday and every evening, [so] a) I didn't have much time really, and b) when I do get a night off I don't really want to go to the theatre! But since retiring, it's come back into being part of my routine again, at least a weekly event again.

CC: How does theatre going differ from that period to today?

BS: I'm not sure that it does all that much, apart from the technological side of things; it's easier to book tickets online, through the phone or through agents etc, whereas in those days you had to go to the box office... you could do telephone bookings, but now it's more accessible. They try to make it more of an event now, in the sense there are restaurants and the bars stay open after the shows and so on. Back then it was much more a case of, the doors opened at 7 o'clock, you'd get a drink if you were lucky and then you'd get thrown out at half ten or ten o'clock! Nowadays it is much more of a whole event rather than just going to the theatre. And I suppose it's a bit more comfortable than they used to be, particularly the regional theatres because they are newer, but the London ones are still quite [un]comfortable.

CC: Whereabouts did you attend the theatre – I know you were saying pretty much all over, so was there a vast difference from London to elsewhere, or did places differ quite a lot? Say, between large theatres and small theatres?

BS: I don't think so... the only difference, I suppose, was obviously in the price, it could vary enormously, especially in London! What in those days were called 'the provinces' - we now have to call them 'the regions' - if you were used to paying provincial prices,

then that would have been quite a difference to go to London. But I suppose a theatre is a theatre, they don't vary to a great extent.

CC: But in that period, was theatre more centralised around London? Or were there grand shows all over the country?

BS: No no, I think it was much more widespread than it is now. It has become more concentrated now into major centres, it's to do with ease of transport etc, but there used to be touring circuits and they [there] were theatres of all sizes. There was one that was called the 'number one touring circuit', which was the big theatres like Bristol and Birmingham Hippodrome, then there would be the 'number two' circuit, which would be places like Oxford Playhouse, probably Sheffield Lyceum would have been in that circuit because it's not that big. And then there would be the 'number three' circuit, which was the really small and quite tatty theatres. The productions would get passed down through the circuits. Probably whoever did the London one, like Moss Empires, would also own, probably, the large out-of-London theatres, so they would take the production out first to the number ones and then would sell them on to another producer who was a little further down the pecking order, and he would take it round the number two circuits. And finally it came down to the number three circuit manager who was probably quite low. So, there were many many more theatres in the regions than there are now, and probably in unlikely places, whereas now it's concentrated in Manchester, Birmingham etc.. you travel in to visit the theatre rather than going to your local. In that sense it was much more widespread. And with the touring of number one theatres, you had the number one casts: people who were headliners in London would go out and tour, and they don't do that anymore. It would be pretty unusual to see, say, Judi Dench or Maggie Smith on a tour. They might go for a specific play somewhere, but they wouldn't do a tour, which wasn't unusual in those days!

CC: You mentioned on the phone about the Student ASM, where people paid to work at the theatre. Would you be able to briefly explain what the ASM was? What did you think of it - was it beneficial to the students/theatre?

BS: That was something which changed about that time [1968], it may well have been abolished the following year. But there was this system of paying the management to be able to work in the theatre. At Chesterfield that year there was a girl who was an Assistant Stage Manager, she was called a 'student stage manager', and her parents actually paid the management to employ her! She didn't get paid herself, but she had 6 months to a year of working in the theatre and learning how it worked. Given that those sort of places were always understaffed and couldn't afford many actors etc, the student ASMs were certainly exploited... Jenny, her name was, she was in a lot of productions as an extra - just a walk-on, never really had a major role - but also running around and making props, borrowing furniture, helping with costumes, that sort of thing. That was something about theatre in those times though! [Although] I was officially Assistant Manager, in the space of about a year I acted in at least three productions when they needed actors. I was in Under Milk Wood, Julius Caesar, and a Music Hall. I directed twice, Next Time I'll Sing to You, and Romeo and Juliet, and on one memorable occasion when the drummer failed to turn up for the Christmas pantomime for one performance - he was lost in the fog somewhere between Sheffield and Chesterfield - I went in the pit and busked my way through the show on the percussion! The point of all that is that it

wouldn't and couldn't happen today! There's no way you'd be allowed to do it now! Because with the increased money available and the greater responsibility that went with it, theatres became much more disciplined, and much more union friendly. Equity would negotiate things, so the student ASM [for example] went. And I - as management and not being a member of Equity - would not be allowed to go on stage, and it was all good fun but I'm not sure it always made for terribly good theatre!

CC: No! So did you not think of the ASM then? Did you think it was beneficial to the student?

BS: Well it must have been beneficial to her, because she did get a grounding for the theatre, and it was up to her really how much she wanted to learn. I don't know if she stayed in the business or not, but yes, it must have been beneficial. But nowadays, to learn what a student ASM learnt, you'd expect to go to a drama school and do a stage management course, and back then, those sort of courses weren't as readily available as they are now. It would have benefited the theatre as well, because it was cheap labour and put a few pennies in the till each week! At the time that was just how the system worked, but when you think about it it's not the way to go on.

CC: Do you know what year the ASM ended then?

BS: I went to Chesterfield at the end of 1966 and I was there until mid 1968, so it would've been during that period that all that went and the unionisation of the theatres became strong. Funny that, because it's less strong now because Margaret Thatcher did away with the 'closed shop'. It was a system where if the theatre had a closed shop... if you weren't in the union, you couldn't work there and people wouldn't work with you or employ you in the first place. It gave the unions a leverage on employers which really got quite outrageous in the 1970s. It wasn't always a bad thing, but they did tend to take advantage of it. So now if you wanted to be an actress you don't have to be a member of Equity, whereas you did back then. Equity would [will] try to recruit you, and there were [are] many advantages to being a member, but you don't have to be a member to be an actress anymore.

CC: The removal of censorship on theatre productions in 1968 obviously made a huge impact on the change and diversity of the theatre during this period. What is your opinion on this?

BS: Well, I suppose being a liberal minded person, obviously it was a good thing, it was the right thing. And that sort of censorship was something that was quite alien to the way of British life, So yes it was a good thing in the sense it went. I suppose people went a bit mad at first, like nudity on stage with Hair, and Oh! Calcutta with the sketches in that show, but they weren't doing anything that hadn't been done before, it's just directors had found ways of doing things more subtly previously. If they wanted to do a bed scene, then they'd get around it by leaving one foot on the floor... That might have been film, I don't know if that was in theatre as well - very strange! People found a way of getting around things. If you wanted to write a play about homosexuality, then there was a way of doing it; you could easily see Noel Coward's Private Lives being done by

four men instead of two women and two men. And those who wanted to read that into it could have done it. So I don't think it liberated people to a great extent, and I think for a while it squashed subtlety.

CC: Did the majority of theatre-goers approve, or did some people not want to see that on stage?

BS: I suppose people did disapprove at times, but they had the choice, and if it was made clear in advance what the play was about then they could make up their minds whether to see it or not - they didn't have to stay. I suppose people did walk out of some things but I don't remember any great riots or people burning down theatres at all! There's this sort of idea that people still have that come 1956 with the advent of the Royal Court and *Look Back in Anger*, that everything changed over night, and that ditto with the 1968 Theatres Act abolition of censorship that everything went wild over night, but in my memory it didn't. It wasn't like that. In 1956, I was still at school and being taken to the Old Vic - we weren't taken to the Royal Court - and ten years later Ralph Richardson was still doing the old style repertory season at the Theatre Royal Haymarket. It was all still flowing on, and musicals were still going - well we were heavily into the American musicals at that time - and *Mame* in 1969 [might have been a bit later] at Theatre Royal Dury Lane, [and] you could still get tea and biscuits brought to you on a tray in the interval. So the old ways didn't just suddenly die and disappear over night! There were perhaps a few more interesting plays around for those who wanted different types of plays. It's not so different.

CC: Thank you very much.