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Anne Piper – interview transcript

Interviewer: Kate Dorney

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Novelist and playwright, on *Look Back in Anger*, George Devine, the Royal Court in the 50s and 60, *Oklahoma!*, Bertolt Brecht.

KD: Anne I wonder if you could tell me about your experiences right at the beginning of the Royal Court?

AP: Well, in 1956 we were living at number 7 Lower Mall, which is just by Hammersmith Bridge, and the Devines, George, Sophie and their daughter Harriet, were living at number 9. So was Tony Richardson who had a flat there, and I think about the same time Peter Gill became a lodger of the Devines. But the time I remember best at the beginning was that the English Stage company had started with a flourish at the Royal Court with two plays by well-known writers, *The Mulberry Bush* and *The Crucible* and I remember it as during the run of the blank verse play *Don Juan* but in fact I seem to have got my memories wrong because that played after *Look Back in Anger*. Anyway, there was something very dull playing at the Royal Court, perhaps it was only *The Mulberry Bush* [laughs], and Sophie Devine came round and said the play was going very badly, nobody was buying any tickets and would we, the Pipers, buy tickets? I think she would have given us free tickets actually, to go to the theatre and cause a disturbance of some sort so they could at least get into the *Evening Standard* and cause trouble. The idea was that we should go and stand up in the middle of the play and say 'This is rubbish' or 'How disgusting!' or something and walk out really obviously. Then it would all be reported and people would buy tickets and go to the Royal Court. However, very soon after that, *Look Back in Anger* was put on which I went to with Wayland Young and as Wayland said at the time, 'This is a different voice. We're hearing something new'. The whole scene changed, everybody hurried to see it, I think it was Ken Tynan wasn't it, who first wrote about it and got it enthusiastic about it?

KD: 'I couldn't love anyone who didn't love *Look Back in Anger*.'

AP [Laughs] and so there was no need for our disturbance.

KD: Did you enjoy the play?

AP: Oh yes, very much.

KD: Did you feel that it was speaking on behalf of, as Tynan says very famously, a new voice speaking on behalf of a new generation?

AP: Yes. The trouble was I was already 10 years older than that generation (I was 18 when the war started) and so it certainly wasn't speaking for me, and it certainly wasn't speaking for women. I mean, poor Mary Ure at the ironing board got no chance to speak for women, so I think that at the beginning I was rather struck by the enormous self-pity that was expressed by a man throughout. And in any case I thought that Alan Bates was a much more attractive character than Jimmy Porter.

KD: I've always thought that.

AP: And in fact I've forgotten the name of the actor who was playing Jimmy Porter.

KD: Kenneth Haigh.

AP: Kenneth Haigh, of course, he was the first one wasn't he? So from there then the Court became famous as a place for writers to send their plays and the next thing that happened was that George Devine and Tony Richardson asked me if I would be the first Reader for the Royal Court because they'd been sent 600 scripts and they thought they could manage perfectly well between them but in fact they couldn't. I mean they were producing and directing plays at the same time so I started to be the Court Reader and I used to go round and collect the scripts, I got paid 5 shillings a script, and at intervals when I accumulated enough scripts I took a piece of paper round and somebody gave me some money and I returned them all again.

KD: Were you asked to do that because you were a novelist?

AP: I was a novelist yes. I'd already had 8 novels published, but I hadn't had any plays done. There were two telly plays in the early 60s but I hadn't had any plays then it was because I'd written novels and because I lived almost next door. Although I had to go into the Royal Court to pick them up, I didn't collect them from number 9. It was quite a journey, although of course you could park in Sloane Square, there were no parking meters then. I used to drive up in my sports car with the roof down, collect the scripts and drive back again.

KD: How wonderful! And did you read anything exciting which sticks in your mind?

AP: I think I must have done it for two or three years and there were only two plays of interest the entire time. One was by Wole Soyinka, the poet who afterwards became one of the Royal Court Writers, and Doris Lessing, who was in any case well-known as a playwright, and she did send in a very interesting play which was done, first of all on a Sunday night, and later was done in the West End.

KD: So did you have any guidelines? Were you supposed to read each play and write a synopsis?

AP: Well they said, 'don't read the handwritten ones, you needn't worry about them' and 'you needn't read the ones who send a little picture of how they want the stage to look'. 'If anyone's sent in a little picture of 2 sofas is bound to be not worth having', 'or anyone who uses green ink'.

KD: That's incredible! You'd think in a writer's theatre they'd really want the writer to have an idea. It's always struck me as odd that you would want people who were not playwrights to write plays for the theatre.

AP: Yes it certainly was. That's how the Writers Group began. They found that all these plays that began to come in were far too wordy and not really enough action, but it was rather later than that. It was about 2 years on I think that Bill Gaskill decided that the writers needed to be loosened up or able to write more active pieces. Not long speeches where they treasured every word.

KD: That's ironic again, when you consider *Look Back in Anger* .

AP: Which is full of long speeches! Yes.

KD: So had you submitted work to the Court during this period? Is this why you were involved in the Writer's Group?

AP: No. I didn't actually write a play until after I'd been coming to the Writer's Group and in fact been taking part in these improvisations for quite a while, and had also been to America. I think it was the autumn of 1958, I dare say Bill's [referring to William Gaskill's *A Sense of Direction*] got the date when he decided to pull the writers together and certainly I was at the first meeting which he had in the theatre and all the writers that he thought were promising were there. But I think I was there at the time because I was their Reader, because I didn't write my play (*The Man-Eaters*) until the autumn of 1958 and it was done at the Bristol Old Vic in the autumn of 59.

KD: And it wasn't produced by Binkie Beaumont in the end?

AP: No my agent sent it to West End impresario Binkie Beaumont and he was very interested in it because there were 6 women's parts and only 1 man's part. And he gave some money to Bristol Old Vic, (I think he gave them £200 or some princely sum), and they would produce it in Bristol and see how it went. It was given a 3 week run at the Royal Theatre Bristol and Binkie Beaumont came down with his friend (John Perry) to see it, and they said it was very good and they'd enjoyed it very much and that the women were very good, but that they could not imagine that they could cast a man, there was

only 1 man in the play and he'd have to be a star, and he had a very bad time in the play. He ended up being not the villain, but the rather feeble character that these six women turned on and he didn't think he'd persuade anyone to do it. He did persuade one man who was already earmarked to do a run of *My Fair Lady* in Australia, he was going out to do that anyway so he was prepared to spend three weeks in Bristol being got at, but I don't think he realised how bad his showing was going to be until he got to act it. He saw that he had quite a big part and quite a lot to say and he didn't realise what an idiot he was left looking when the play ended.

KD: And can you tell me a little bit about the play?

AP: It's just about a family of women. A mother and her sister who are keeping the family together, the men have disappeared, the sister's never married. There are 3 daughters and 1 son who's a painter who'd gone off to live on a Greek island and paint for some years and is now coming back. And he is the absolute apple of the mother's eye and she can't wait for him to come back. And the 3 women who are living in the house are very dubious about this because they think he's a drop-out ne'er do well, useless. who's never contributed to the family's wellbeing at all. The eldest sister who is a doctor is keeping all these women in the one house, and he comes back, bringing with him, or shortly afterwards, his Russian mistress turns up and turns the house upside down. Because it's a very respectable, for those days, house. I don't know how much you want to go on about it. I thought it might be interesting nowadays because Prunella Scales and Annette Crosbie were in it as very young women.

KD: It's also interesting because there were no, or very few, plays written predominantly about women by women in that [period].

AP: No, and at the time I was slightly, well some of the reviews said 'this angry young woman' came across because all the angry young men had been a bit earlier. But I was sort of overcome by the Women's movement which followed. I mean Doris Lessing wrote *The Golden Notebook* soon afterwards which was very much putting the woman's point of view at last and then it all began. But in some ways I think the *Man-Eaters* may have been, well I was certainly the first Women's Movement play.

KD: And because you were also very involved with CND?

AP: Yes we'd all been involved. It all started with me going to visit Ghandi which I had done in

KD: How did you get to visit Ghandi?

AP: Well I happened to be in India at the time. I was sent off to join All-India radio because I'd been working in the Ministry of Information. It's rather a long story and it doesn't really come into the Royal Court, but it is how I became non-violent or anti-war. I'd been on all the Aldermaston marches. In fact I went on a Women's March which the

Youngs will remember, Wayland and Liz were involved in that. We went on a Women's march in 1957 which has just sort of disappeared from history. I was on Woman's Hour next day describing it. It wasn't very big and it went from Marble Arch to Trafalgar Square, there were about 50 women, I don't know what I said on the BBC, it wasn't very many but it was slightly remarkable because it was the first march. It was before the Aldermaston marches started. We were on our own and it was raining, absolutely pouring. So raining, Sunday afternoon and we'd ploughed down Park Lane and we had one policeman come to see what we were doing. We ended up in Trafalgar Square where there was no crowd or anything else. We'd all started getting interested because of the Tests at the time. They were nuclear testing in the air and there was an article in a magazine called Family Doctor which said that the air was going to be ruined forever for our children and grandchildren and we young mothers suddenly galvanised ourselves and went on and got this march going. And from then I went on all 5 Aldermaston marches and by that time the Royal Court writers were marching too.

KD: Bill Gaskill says that it coalesced a lot of groups, people realised they had things in common.

AP: I was trying to think who actually . there were people like Jacquetta Hawkes, the archaeologist and John Priestley who were always in the front of the marches.

KD: I didn't realise that! Really?

AP: Yes, and then Dean of, the current Dean of Canterbury was a keen marcher as far as I remember. I can't think who [else].

KD: Wesker and his wife

AP: Oh yes. Royal Court people went on the march. I remember chiefly, Keith Johnstone with an enormous bag of oranges, Ann Jellicoe and

KD: I think Bill Gaskill said something about Harold Pinter watching from the window of his flat.

AP: I remember Peggy Ashcroft turning up to the Albert Hall. The first year we went the wrong way, we started at Trafalgar Square and ended at Aldermaston so there was nobody there at all. It nearly faded out on the Sunday, started on Friday from Trafalgar Square. I only marched for a day and then I went home, went back on Sunday to see how they were getting on and it had shrunk to about 500 people and it was snowing. They were ploughing through Slough in the snow and there was nobody watching them or anything. And so I went down on the Monday, the beginning of the Monday march, and people had heard about it in the Sunday papers and by that time they were rushing in. There were 4000 of them by the time they got to Aldermaston, except it was a total washout when they got there. They spoke to somebody, one of the marchers spoke, there'd been nothing prepared for the press or anything. I don't know whether the press

even got there And then the next year they reversed it, sensibly, and for ever after it started at Aldermaston and ended at Trafalgar Square. And nobody ever, hardly ever, walked the whole way, people used to join in and drop out, join in again, because it was really quite a long way, something like 60 miles in four days. And there again, towards the end it became a real outing for young people, like Glastonbury, they'd go with their sleeping bags and have a really good time, but it wasn't my game by that time.

KD: I find that it seems so out of character for my vision of the 50s that this is when it all started. One tends to think of that kind of thing happening in the 60s, civil disobedience and demonstrations

AP: You tend to think it started with the Beatles really?

KD: Yes and it's not the case at all. Such a diverse body of people and members of the Establishment do this. There's a big gap between Jack Priestley and Arnold Wesker and it seems odd to think of them engaged in this together.

AP: Yes, I don't know whether Priestley went to Arnold's plays or what he thought of them at all. I'm not imagining it am I that Jacquetta Hawkes, no it wasn't she, who wrote the book, *The Silent Spring* ? An American, Rachel Carson was it?

KD: I don't know.

AP: A book called *The Silent Spring* , I think that started it all. It must have been about 1952, the first book to say that these detergents that you're spraying the whole country with are ruining the atmosphere, first big environmental book. Everyone suddenly thought, they've been spraying things in all directions. And it was called *The Silent Spring* because I think birds had stopped singing, there were no birds in the hedgerows because there was so much poison everywhere. And she got onto the amount of poison agriculture was putting onto the land in every possible way just to kill a few bugs and it was killing off everything. That led to Family Doctor and tests, everybody started protesting about the tests after this family doctor thing. They suddenly realised that they were letting off the English bombs in the islands and they ruined Bikini Atholl. Everyone became aware of the dangers. Because just after the war, my husband had been at a Japanese prison camp so he reckoned his life had been saved by the atom bomb, and was rather ambivalent towards my views of the atom bomb. He never marched from Aldermaston he used to come to the picnic just outside the Albert Hall as we were getting toward Trafalgar Square. He'd come down from his office and join us briefly. But when nuclear power was first released and peace came everybody was saying, it comes in my other play, when the bomb was let off everybody said it was the end of wars. How can you have wars when everybody will be exterminated in 3 minutes, how can you fight a war? So we really thought it was the end of all wars and that nuclear power was going to revolutionise peace, and we were not going to need electricity and everything would be wonderful. And it didn't take that long, it took 5 or 10 years before we realised that far from helping peace it was going to lead to far worse wars. Because we had the Korean war to frighten us which was only 10 years after the other one, so we hadn't exactly got down to peace and it hadn't worked out how we thought. I think

people pretty soon woke up to the fact that nuclear power was not going to be the saviour of all and was going to poison us even if we didn't have a war.

KD: And *The Man-Eaters*, does it touch on this?

AP: It does because one of the characters had been on an Aldermaston march I think. They'd already made the bombs so big and I was already making the equation between the penis shaped missile and the circular Greenham common, that came a bit later, but women who surrounded and contained the missiles men seeing who can pee furthest I think that comes in that one. Then let's see who can send the missiles furthest. Jung has the turd in the sky, the great bomb hanging over everybody.

KD: Do you know, because this was performed in 1959 when the Lord Chamberlain was still operating [censorship], plays still needed to be licensed. Do you know if much was cut out of it?

AP: I can't remember.

KD: It's quite subversive for the time and they were always very wary about things dealing with current events.

AP: Yes, I sometimes wonder if they didn't read it properly, or perhaps they did cut it out. They probably cut out the word penis. In fact I don't even remember if I put it in.

KD: And it's also, given the time, I'm really fascinated that Binkie Beaumont was going to produce it. It seems so un-Binkie, Worth dresses and beautiful surroundings.

AP: Well the women were quite ordinary, the voice of ordinary Kensington, living off Ladbrooke Grove in a large house at the time, very respectable.

KD: Ironing board present?

AP: No ironing board, but they were making the fire, there was a fog outside which which was delaying things. We had terrible fogs in London in the 50s, invisible fogs you couldn't see through, before they had the clean air thing.

KD: When I go into the library tomorrow I'm going to find the Reader's Report. You know that they had to write a report about the play? I'll send you a copy.

AP: Really? Perhaps it never got there.

KD: It must have done, they wouldn't perform a play that hadn't been licensed, they would lose their licence. They wouldn't risk it. I'm going to find it and send you a copy. They were so reactionary, they were usually men who had served overseas, governors of various colonies, and the people they employed to do the job [of reading] took exception to all manner of things.

AP: It was mostly swear words wasn't it? There weren't any swear words.

KD: And representations of living persons.

AP: It's the youngest daughter who can't get a job, she's very [rebellious]

KD: [reading out a review of the play]:

Her first play shows the influence of that school [i.e. angry young man] in the flaunting of that kind of sex talk more often heard in Sloane Square London than in King St Bristol.

That's a review from the Daily Mail. How lovely to know that nothing's changed!

KD: Ok, let's turn back to the Writers' Group then.

AP: As far as I remember it was once a week. Is it taken out of Bill's book that it was once a fortnight?

KD: Ann Jellicoe, [in Findlater]

AP: Jellicoe said it was once a fortnight? Well she ought to know because she took it a lot, perhaps it was once a fortnight. It was a very good turn out if it was one week beyond. I seem to think it was Wednesdays and, it probably was once a fortnight yes.

KD: Gaskell says very emphatically that he was determined you wouldn't read each others work, so it wasn't a writers' group in the sense of developing each others material?

AP: Well it did turn out to be like that. Long after Bill had gone when Ann and Keith were doing it. People would come and say, 'I'm very stuck on a scene between a something and a something, how do you think it might work out?'. And we would actually improvise something along those lines. And when my play was being done in Bristol I remember having trouble with one scene and asking for help then.

KD: But most of the time you would spend improvising?

AP: Well it was usually, someone wanted something, somebody started it off by saying they wanted to try something, or they were thinking of writing something. There were some people who were very good actors. Edward Bond was a very good actor, and we never knew what Edward was writing because at the time he hadn't had anything put on. He was very secretive, he would never tell us what he was doing when he was writing and he wouldn't tell us what sort of plays he was writing. He was inscrutable for a very long time, but he was a very good actor so we began to get very interested in what he would in the end write.

KD: And were you surprised when you saw?

AP: Yes. It was pretty strong

KD: It was Pope's Wedding ?

AP: Was that the first one? Yes

KD: That had a Sunday night without décor I think.

AP: Yes of course, this in between thing on a Sunday night. That was a great help to a lot of people I think.

KD: You said before we started the interview that you couldn't have written like Look Back in Anger , that you didn't have that modern vernacular. You said that in a sense you were more like Terence Rattigan

AP: Yes, I think mine was definitely more West End.

KD: But did you? One of the areas I'm interested in is that use of language, in the move toward a much more vernacular style. And in the case of someone like Bond and Arden and Shelagh Delaney, they embraced regional accents into their work.

AP: Well, Shelagh Delaney had a genuine regional accent, didn't she? From Salford. John had been brought up in Yorkshire and had a genuine Yorkshire. I was brought up in South Wales and Edinburgh, but I was totally English and totally middle class.

KD: So did you sense any kind of shift? Edward Bond was the first person, for me, and Pinter as well, who sound like they're writing in a natural working class voice.

AP: Yes. Well of course I couldn't do a natural working class voice anyway being thoroughly middle class, but it didn't seem to me that my middle class female voice was being heard either. Women weren't being heard in general. I think the things they say in my play would be fairly natural, but they weren't on the stage. Well anyway, you'll see when you read it.

KD: But it wasn't clipped backwards and forwards? The idea that in *Look Back in Anger* people were speaking naturalistically was quite misleading wasn't it? For most of us we'd have wandered off before Jimmy got to his first breath.

AP: Yes, I was trying to think. Rather strange that you should say Harold Pinter was entirely naturalistic because he'd written *The Caretaker* and he'd written *Waiting for Godot* .

KD: *The Birthday Party* .

AP *Godot* was first, wasn't it?

KD: That was Beckett.

AP: Oh yes, Beckett.

KD: *The Birthday Party* was the first one.

AP: Was that before *The Caretaker* ?

KD: Yes, it was on in Hammersmith. *The Lyric*?

AP: My Tom [Piper, Anne's son and theatre designer] did the scenery for that at the National about 10 years ago. That was brilliant

KD: So you don't think Pinter was naturalistic?

AP: No. His voice is always so full of hidden menace. It's not to do with what's happening everyday is it? It's really heavily stylised.

KD: I guess so, but he doesn't have that fluency of classic West End, having the right words always available at the right time. People do stumble, they do repeat themselves phrases, and it's always going to be stylised isn't it because you couldn't just sit through

somebody rambling on and on. But it seems, in academic circles, he's always seen as being close to representing speech in terms of patterns and vocabulary.

AP: That's what it sounded like when we were listening to it yes.

KD: What about somebody like John Arden? He was supposed to be really good at the Writers Group?

AP: Yes he was. Very enthusiastic and also willing to try and something. And his plays weren't exactly realistic either, they were always very historical or

KD: Brechtian.

AP: Yes

KD: Who was your favourite? Of the work you joined in with at the Writers Group. Whose work did you then most enjoy?

AP: I think I was closest to Arnold's really [Wesker]. I thought Roots was particularly good and that was trying to do a woman's point of view, and I thought it did it particularly well. When Beatie has her revelation that in fact she herself is feeling something, it's not just something that Ronnie's told her to feel, was wonderful. That really is a woman's voice speaking, even though a man's writing it. I'm quite convinced by that.

KD: And also there's her mother and sister as well, they're more.

AP: Realistic. They're real people. Far more, and I gather they were mostly based on Dusty's family, which I never met. Dusty came from Norfolk?

KD: Does that make Arnold Ronnie?

AP: Yes, didn't you realise?

KD: Well I, er, I try not to draw those parallels.

AP: I don't think Dusty would agree to it entirely as it makes her look a right wally, as it were, or at least up until the time of her revelation. And it makes her look as if she was created by Arnold which was certainly not at all true. She was a very great character on her own. But she certainly came from Norfolk, from a farming family, and she went to

London and I'm not at all sure they didn't meet when he was working in the kitchen and she was working in the restaurant. Because he certainly worked in the kitchen that was true. He did work in a kitchen.

KD: Did you have a writer's pass so you could go and see whatever you wanted for free at the Court?

AP: I don't remember that, no. I think they were too short of money to give free places.

KD: Oh! It says in the Findlater book 'any writer that they wanted to encourage they would issue with a pass so they could go and see anything for free'.

AP: Oh, I don't remember that, perhaps they never gave me one, I was only a reader.

KD: But mean considering you were hosting the group!

AP: Well just at the first meeting Bill said I don't know where we can go, we need a large room, and I said, we've got rather a large front room It was 30ft by 17 which is rather large, and it was handy for the Devines. As she grew up, Harriet used to come, when she was about sixteen or so. She said that she would kill herself if she ever got to 30, which considering several of us were already 30 at the time was rather hard. She saw that as being horror, over the hill.

KD: And 39.46 So can we talk a bit more about your theatre going? You said that you were a theatre groupie. Can you tell me a bit more about your pre and post Look Back in Anger experiences?

AP: Well before that I had of course been going to all the Terence Rattigan, Noel Coward, who were very good playwrights, no doubt about it. And one called The Holly and the Ivy which I remember

KD: Not the Agatha Christie one?

AP: No I did go to The Mousetrap but much later.

KD: No, I thought there was an Agatha Christie Holly and Ivy .

AP: Separate Tables was later, wasn't it?

KD: 54 I think.

AP: Was it as early as that?

KD: I think so.

AP: I never kept my theatre programmes, I've got a friend who kept them all. KD: What did you make of *Separate Tables* ?

AP: I thought it was brilliant. Maggie Smith wasn't it? The one I saw. So it must have been a later one. *Oklahoma!* How exciting it was!

KD: Tell me about that.

AP: I remember going, it must have been in winter 1947/1948 because I was pregnant at the time. It was absolutely thrilling because it was the first American musical to hit London, England at all. The first we knew about American musicals. All that singing and dancing, and the colour, absolutely wonderful. Translated complete, they brought the whole American production, it wasn't an English production. I don't know what Equity doing to let them in, but it did.

KD: It must have been extraordinary as well, the post-war period wasn't very colourful was it? I always think of everything being in black and white, partly because of the photos, so austere.

AP: No we'd already had colour, the whole war was spent with *Gone With the Wind* in colour in the corner of Leicester Square. You've heard that one have you?

KD: No.

AP: It was on for 4 years in the corner of Leicester Square, in colour. I don't know how they managed to make it in colour before the war but they did. And it just stuck there, a sort of feature there in Leicester Square. And then *Oklahoma!* came along to cheer up in 1947 which was a very bleak year. Everything was frozen, even the water. We had a standpipe and a bucket down the street to get water because the frost was so thick. It had frozen after the snow and the buses were staggering down the streets in the ruts. Luckily I had a flying suit left over from the war, an airman's flying suit, made of silk. It zipped up and I was very pregnant, it was like a bear, extraordinary. I'm mixing up the winters, I think it must have been 48 for *Oklahoma!* Genuinely that time just after the war, why the poor Labour party didn't get through their attempts to make everything fair, because it was still so gloomy and grim and so dark and cold, that nobody could stand it any more. We'd had rationing for 10 years by the time it began to loosen up, and that was all sad too. One hoped, the Beveridge Report came out during the war, and we thought everything really was going and to be good and better and we really believed that there would be a National Health for everybody and everybody was going

to live happily ever-after and as I say, the Labour govt were knocked out by the shortage of everything and the cold, and the lack of colour, and light,

KD: It must have been an awful time.

AP: Yes. It was wonderful in a way. I mean we weren't dead, but somehow we'd expected peace to be instantly much better and it wasn't. I mean it couldn't be, there was nothing much of anything, there'd been no manufacturing, it had disappeared into making bombs and there was nothing left to make tables and chairs with. Utility furniture. Everything was rationed.

KD I've often wondered how theatre survived. Costumes and stuff. The people we've spoken to, their recollections are that costumes were very sumptuous and sets were very elaborate. So where was the stuff coming from unless it was left over from before the war?

AP: I think it may often have been in the wardrobes and things. There certainly wouldn't have been new silk to use. My son Tom the stage designer is always doing things in silk no which seems to me amazing, but apparently you can't fake silk. You can't do it with polyester, it doesn't look right even from behind the lights apparently.

KD: So, why did you?

AP: Well certainly we were all protesting and complaining right from the start. As I say I think the starting point was this silent spring book which was the start of the environmental movement. I have seen it quoted somewhere recently as being very influential.

KD: When you first started going to the theatre.

AP: Well I'd always gone to the theatre. I met my husband in a play at Cambridge. Everyone was keen on the theatre in Cambridge in spite of it being the war. It didn't seem to matter at all. I acted in five plays in my first term at Cambridge.

KD: What kind of stuff did you act?

AP: We were doing, well I met my husband doing a play called The Trojan War Did Not Take Place , it was later done in England as The Tiger at the Gates . I think that was a 50s play, Ring Round the Moon and Tiger at the Gates .

KD: Ring Round the Moon is Anouilh

AP: This one was Giradoux. Tiger at the Gates it was called then. I went to it in the 50s. It was a very, very wordy play but quite interesting. I went down to audition for Helen of Troy. I mean we all auditioned, went down from our women's college because this men's college wanted women in the play.

KD: Were you reading English?

AP: Yes, we were reading English but they'd just said that they wanted to audition, I'd already acted all over the place. One just did, or one volunteered to anyway. Anyway I went down with a friend, she got Helen of Troy and I only got Hecuba, mother of 50, which was obviously more suitable for a girl with glasses, rather plump! I had to wear my glasses for the audition on account of having to read because I couldn't see a thing without them. I'd whip them off afterwards, but I had to keep them on for the audition. But anyway my friend was a much better Helen of Troy and luckily she paired off with Troilus and I paired off with Paris which was, in private life, so it didn't matter that we got cast the wrong way.

AP They wanted the audience to take things seriously, but they wanted to entertain them as well. There weren't vast audiences you see, apart from the Osborne things.

KD: Even he said that if as many people had been to see Look Back in Anger as said they had the Royal Court could have supported every failure in the world afterwards

AP: Yes because they had the film rights as well, didn't they? No, it didn't lead to a great rush of social drama. I remember going to a play of John's, Arden's and there were hardly any people in the audience at all. I mean about 15 people, I'm amazed that it went on at all. It was Serjeant Musgrave's Dance I think.

KD: Oh yes, he says in the introduction to a volume of his plays that he virtually bankrupted them

AP: Yes I mean even the serious minded people weren't keen on being made miserable for the whole evening, that's the trouble.

KD: Do you remember seeing any of the early Brecht stuff?

AP: Yes, we went to Caucasian Chalk Circle and Mother Courage when the East Berliner Ensemble came in the 50s. It was terrific. Caucasian Chalk Circle was terrific but Mother Courage, we didn't stay until the end, we left at half time

KD: Really?

AP: Because I had gone with my husband to that and he wouldn't stick it til the end. She'd been trundling this caravan round the stage for 2 hours, and he said I can't take any more of it! He was a Jap prisoner of war and he loved Waiting for Godot which he said summed up the entire experience of being a prisoner of war. He need never write anything about it, according to him, it expressed the total life of being a Japanese prisoner of war for 3 years.

KD: I wonder if anyone's ever thought of that interpretation? I've read ones that say that they're the French Resistance which is why they're hanging around waiting for someone they've never seen, but that's a new ...

AP: Well he said it felt just like being a prisoner of war again. So he went to that and thought it was marvellous, but when he saw Mother Courage trundling round with her caravan, as I say, there was a circle thing in the centre of the stage and she seemed to be going round it all the time.

KD: Did you stay for the silent scream? The famous silent scream?

AP: No. I can't remember a silent scream anyway. Is it like the Norwegian picture?

KD: Yes. When she hears that her Swiss Cheese has been killed and she can't betray any feeling because they all be killed because of the quick change over of sides. It's in every book you read about post-war British theatre, they talk about the silent scream.

AP: Well I missed it!

KD: Good, because it suggests that maybe it wasn't such a big thing after all.

AP: I did stay to the end of the Caucasian Chalk Circle alone, I do remember seeing all of that. It was very good colour.

KD: They were very worried about coming over. Brecht wrote a note to say that they must be patient because the English are used to playing very quickly, and all the rest of it, and that they will take a while to get used to it. Did you notice a huge difference in there style of playing?

AP: Well I suppose that was what caused my husband to say that after 2 hours he couldn't stand it any more. And of course, it was in German, which didn't help. He could speak German, but I couldn't, which didn't help. Funnily enough, my son-in-law, who's married to Emma, who's coming down in a minute, who lives in France, is a director called Keith Hack, and he went to train with the Berliner Ensemble. He's a German Jew, and he went off to from school to train with them. And spent something like a year with them learning the trade.

KD: Doesn't sound like it would be much fun.

AP: Well he was very serious then, and so were they. He's pretty serious now.

AP I'm trying to remember the name of playwright called Fred who came to stay with us for 2 weeks in 1960. I remember Bill ringing us up and saying he needed someone to put him up. I think he was the one who wrote the play about the baby being stoned in its pram, or was that Edward?

KD: That was Edward. Did you go and see it?

AP: [very emphatically] No I did not.

KD: No?

AP: No of course not, I don't want to see babies stoned in prams.

KD: So you knew that was what was going to happen before it opened

AP I certainly didn't go to the first night, so I did know. I wasn't in tune with their plays at all. The one I loved was Nigel Dennis.

KD: Oh Cards of Identity . That's the other play that was on at the beginning.

AP: Yes, that was brilliant and that was very funny.

KD: They weren't really laughed a minute, it must be said. What about A Patriot for Me , did you see that?

AP: I saw it a few years ago because my son was doing the décor, with all the double beds in it. It was on at the Barbican. Peter Gill did it and it was a very gloomy play. Peter had a favourite of his to do the lighting and he wouldn't let Tom even go to town on the drag ball. He wasn't even allowed to have lighting and colour in that.

It didn't go at all well for them [at the Court] financially. The only way they all made money was from Tom Jones. Marvellous version of The Entertainer with Olivier, sore feet and everything. He did a silent scream in that, did they get famous?

KD: How did you pick what you went to see?

AP: By knowing something about it. I went to all of Arnold's, I was warm and friendly to Arnold, he was a very nice man.