

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

<http://sounds.bl.uk>

## Julia MacDermot – interview transcript

Interviewers: Maggie Speake and Becky Sutton

23 November 2005

Actress. Agent; auditioning; digs; dressers, early career; Rory MacDermot (husband); pre-war theatre; repertory; Salberg theatres; theatrical training; touring; Watford rep.; Wolverhampton rep.

BS: Do you want to just start by telling us how you got into the theatre?

JM: How I got interested?

BS: Yes.

JM: Oh, darling, I always was! I made up my mind very young that that's what I was going to do, and I went to boarding school, and I think when I came out of boarding school it was not long before the war, but you're going from when the war started. I'd been doing quite a bit in reps and tours and things, and when I came here, I'd been here for about a year I think, or maybe a bit more, someone walked in and I thought 'I know that face!', and it was Margot Boyd, I don't know if you know the name, she was in *The Archers* for years.

BS: Oh, right, I knew I'd heard it.

JM: Yes, playing Mrs Murgatroyd, they've been down here quite a lot doing odd episodes in her room. I thought, 'Margot Boyd! I worked with her in Watford in rep!'. Rep those days was very tough: it was twice nightly, weekly rep, three shows on a Saturday. On a Saturday morning they would come in and you'd rehearse, and then after rehearsal you'd tear to your dressing room, try to eat a sandwich while you were getting fixed, and then somebody would come in and say 'Here are your cuts for tonight, for the third show'. And so, sort of between putting on your clothes, eating your sandwich, you had to learn what the cuts were, because otherwise they couldn't get three shows in, so the last one was cut. That was murder! Margot was there too, and she's very funny because she is 92 now, and I don't think she looks it, anything like it, but she does get a bit confused sometimes. We talked about Watford, oh for months: what it was like, and 'Wasn't it hard work?' and 'How did we do it?' and this and that and the other, and then one day she looked at me and she said 'You know, I remember your husband so well, charming young man, really charming' and I said 'Oh,

that's nice, thank you' and she said 'Yes, such a good actor too, but of course my dear, I don't remember you at all'. [laughs] We'd been talking about it! Talking about the dresser, how wonderful she was, and it was the only rep in the country that had a permanent dresser... [laughs]

MS: What did the dresser do?

JM: She was very old – well she seemed old to me then, but I was young mind you! And tiny, always dressed in black. The two things I remember about her, one was if you tore your skirt or something you'd say 'Oh dresser, can you help me? I've got a tear in my skirt!' and she'd look at it and she'd say 'Oh yes, dear, I'll get a little dangerous pin!' It was always a safety pin, which she never had, or 'a little dangerous pin', and then she'd do that, that's one thing I remember about her. The other thing was – which I did for somebody here and they were delighted – you didn't have tissues in those days, you had handkerchiefs, particularly in the theatre, and she used to wash our handkerchiefs and stick them up on the mirror. Well, it's marvellous, because they come off the mirror as if they'd been beautifully ironed. There was a very handsome, still, he was 94 but still very, very handsome – Geoffrey Toone? Maybe you haven't heard of him, you're too young! [laughs] He was here and he always wore immaculate clothes, tall man, beautiful figure, everything. He said to me one day 'You know, my dear, I've got this pink silk handkerchief and I don't want to give it to the cleaning girl, because you know, she may lose it or something' and I said 'Well actually, she's marvellous and she wouldn't lose it, would you like me to do it for you?'. Of course he said 'Oh, you couldn't do it!'. I said, 'Watch me, I promise you!'. [laughs] So he gave it to me and I washed it in my basin and stuck it on the mirror, making sure no creases were in it, and brought it back. He was over the moon, thought it was wonderful!

MS: Can you remember any plays that you particularly enjoyed being in? One that was your favourite?

JM: Oh, I wish you hadn't asked me that darling, it was so long ago. We did a lot of the old ones, like... isn't that dreadful darling? I can't remember one play I was in! Mind you, I was in the theatre only for fifteen years, and then I became an agent because my husband had multiple sclerosis and I thought 'I can't go travelling about the country'. So I became an agent, which I enjoyed.

MS: When was that?

JM: I can't remember the date darling, I think it was sort of 1960ish. Yes, because I'm now 87. I was born in 1918. Yes, it must have been about the very end of the fifties or beginning of the sixties.

BS: Did you meet your husband in the theatre? You mentioned he was an actor as well.

JM: No, we didn't, funnily enough. We met at a party. We were both in the theatre. There's a picture of him if you'd like to look at it, by the door, the big one, in the last play he did in South Africa. He had a sort of attack. We didn't know what it was, and he came back to this country and they'd just had a quite famous surgeon out there who'd met some of the doctors, including my husband's doctor, so he said, 'If you're going back to England, I'll give you a letter to [the surgeon]'. So Rory took the letter to him, and he immediately put Rory in hospital and did a lumbar puncture, and I don't think he ever told me what the result was, and he didn't tell Rory either, it was all very weird. And Rory kept going up for jobs and not getting them, which was very unusual for him because he was a good actor. Then he went up once or twice and they went mad about him, and said 'Oh yes, you've got the part' and everything, and there was one in particular, I can't remember what it was, and he came back after the first night and he was in a dreadful state, you know, nearly in tears. He said 'They're going to sack me and I don't know why'. I knew why, because he was having another of these strange attacks, where he appeared to be drunk. So I went to see the head chap at the theatre, and by that time I knew the name of what was wrong with him and I told him. I said 'Please, please, please don't sack him! If you keep him on, he will recover, it's only the nerves have brought on this attack'. I didn't know what I was talking about! [laughs] They kept him on and he was alright after that for a little time. Then he started having hallucinations, which was frightening. He thought I'd been kidnapped, and I was somebody else pretending to be me, and, oh, murder! So I rang the doctor again, and he came round to see him, and he said 'He must go into hospital', and he was frightfully good because he got him into a beautiful hospital at Virginia Water: Holloway Sanatorium. I mean, it's an awful name, but apparently... I think Holloway was a famous architect, and he built this as a private mental hospital. And I said, 'We can't afford it', and he said 'Oh, don't worry, they've got one little wing that is run by the National Health and I'll get him in there'. And he got him in there. A few years after that the whole place became National Health, so that was alright. But beautiful grounds, and cafés, and tennis courts and everything.

MS: Can you remember what it was like auditioning for parts? What did you have to do when you wanted to get a job?

JM: Oh, it was exciting, very exciting, I think. What did you do? Well, if you heard they were putting on a play, you either knew the play or you read the play very quickly, [laughs] and if there was a part and you thought 'That's for me!', you probably – depending who they were – possibly you sent them a CV, a photograph, and a background of your experience and things. Also you would probably have an agent, who, if you were lucky and they were a good agent, would do all that for you. Then either they said 'Yes, come along and read a bit'. So, pretending you didn't know the play at all – you had read it through 'til you knew every word – you went along and auditioned, and if you were lucky you got the part... if you were lucky.

BS: Can you remember what it felt like to be involved in the theatre at that time? Was it exciting?

JM: Very, very exciting. Auditioning... I don't know about other people, but for me gave me a great lift. I loved it.

MS: It must have been really nice when they told you you'd got the part.

JM: Marvellous, darling, marvellous! You wanted to hug and kiss everybody. [laughs] It was very exciting.

MS: Did you notice any changes from when you started working in the theatre to when you finished?

JM: [pauses] I don't think I noticed any changes, because there was still so many reps around. Even when I left the theatre, that hadn't changed, really. Any little village, practically, that you went to, had a rep. I don't think I would like to be in the theatre now because it's so tied up with television. Although television had started when I left, for myself I didn't care for it – I loved the stimulation of an audience and the personal feeling about it all. Television seemed to me impersonal, and you didn't get a flow on it, and you didn't get the terrific lift of an audience reaction. I mean, I never did anything great in the theatre, well, I mean not great in that... I understudied in the West End once or twice, but I didn't sort of play great leads in the West End or anything.

MS: Did you act in a lot of different theatres then?

JM: Oh yes.

MS: All around the country?

JM: Yes, more or less.

BS: Was working in the theatre a lot different when you became an agent?

JM: I don't think it had changed as much as it has since I've left, because friends of mine, a lot of them now of course are casting directors, or were casting directors, and are still working, and they all say 'Oh you'd hate it now, you'd absolutely hate it, it's like selling cans of baked beans'. Not like it was.

MS: Did you used to go to the theatre a lot as well, to watch plays?

JM: Quite a lot, looking for new clients.

MS: What about when you were younger, did you go to the theatre?

JM: Oh yes, my parents used to take me, but when I said I was going to be an actress they were absolutely appalled. They said 'No, no, you're not going to do that! Anything else but that!'. I started, that was before your period, in a very funny way. When I left boarding school I was 17, and I went everywhere, I went to everybody who had a bit of money in the family, and I said, 'Could you spare a bit of money, because I've got to be an actress', but no, nothing. And then, Sybil Thorndike, you've heard of her? She was a very famous actress, and her sister, Eileen, ran a drama school, a very good drama school. It was somewhere... I can't remember... like Swiss Cottage or somewhere. You know, London-ish. I wrote to her in desperation, and said – I didn't tell her I hadn't got any money but I said, 'May I come and audition for you?'. And I went and auditioned for her and she was very pleased, and said, 'Yes', you know, 'it would be fine if you came here'. I said, 'Well, I'd better tell you the truth now, I haven't got any money' and she said 'oh dear', and then she thought about it for a bit and she said, 'Well look, I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll give you a grant and you can come here'. I was over the moon, I thought, 'That's the answer to all my troubles'. I went back home and I said, 'Take no notice of what you say to me, I'm getting a grant from Eileen Thorndike'. And they said, 'Oh, well, how are you going to buy your food? How are you going to travel? Where are you going to get the money to do all those things?'. And I thought... and I thought 'I don't know', and they wouldn't stir, and so I thought 'Well, I'm not going to be beaten yet', and there was a man who'd made a lot of money, he was from the North, you know, one of those North Country business men, and he was married and he had a girlfriend, and the girlfriend was mad about the theatre, so he said 'I'll tell you what, I'll buy a theatre for you', so he bought the Granville at Walham Green, which, I think it was bombed again... it was bombed while I was there, so I went along - no, I wrote up, I made up a wonderful CV for myself, all the places I'd been to, I made a pretty good check that he wouldn't try to find out if it was true or not. [laughs] Of course he knew nothing about the theatre, and when I went to see him, 'Yes my dear, I've decided to engage you, you can play juveniles'. I said 'Thank you so much!', it was wonderful. So, along I went, the first play, it wasn't just the juvenile, it was sort of the lead, or one of the leads, the female lead, and it was called Red for Danger, that I do remember! [laughs] I think I was awful, absolutely dreadful, and, you know... when it said 'she whispers', I'd whisper, and nobody could hear a word! I don't think they could hear much anyway, and when the first night was over, the director – who was a professional director, unfortunately – called me in and said, 'Well, obviously we'll keep you 'til the end of the week, but then you've got the sack'. I said, 'But, I've got to stay, I've got to stay, I've got to learn!'. He said, 'You're right you've got to learn, but you're not learning here under me!' [laughs]. I'd got very friendly with Beryl Machin, she was playing the lead, and then she went to America after that and I don't know what happened to her. I said to her, 'Don't let them sack me, darling, I'll do anything, I'll make tea, I'll put the kettle on, I'll do everything!' and she said, 'Well, I'll see what I can do' and she had a talk with him, and then they decided for, like, tuppence ha'penny a week I could stay on and I could do the prompts, and if there was a maid with one line I could do that, and I thought 'I'm going to work so hard at this' and I watched everybody and how they did things, and read the scripts. I think they were quite pleased they'd kept me, because I did learn quickly, and one day when I was sort of the juvenile by that time, and the war was on by then, and I went into the theatre one morning and all the photographs were shattered, and all the windows and everything. Must have been a bomb, I suppose, because it was towards the beginning of the war. So that little job finished. Well, it was quite a big job actually, in the end. But that's how I started.

MS: So after the war, was there a lot more theatre than there had been during the war? Did more people start going to the theatre?

JM: I'm trying to remember, I think when so many years have gone by, and we were working so hard, maybe some people do remember, but I can't.

MS: So you were doing a different play every week then?

JM: Oh, yes darling.

MS: How did you manage to learn all your lines?

JM: I sometimes wonder. I do wonder! A quite interesting thing was that at Watford, it was Winnie and Andy Melville who were running the theatre, and they were awfully good to me, awfully good, and that must have been just after the war. Rory was discharged from the army, because he'd been in the army during the war... what did you ask me?

MS: I asked about if there were more people going to the theatre after the war.

JM: I think they probably started to get fewer, because of television. They'd been quite short of men during the war - that was the great difficulty. Watford was Rory's first job when he came out of the army, because they built up a sort of association, some well-known actor was head of it, and people who came out of the war who'd been actors, they were awfully good to them, and they worked like an agent for them but they didn't charge them, and they got Rory... after that he was fine, he didn't need them.

One of the nicest theatres, I think, was Wolverhampton, very famous theatrical family who ran a lot of reps, the Salbergs. The original Salberg who I never knew, he was dead before I started, he had quite a bit of money – he was an exporter and importer – and he was walking about in Birmingham and he saw this theatre and he went in and had a look round, it looked a bit broken down and everything, and he started talking to the man who owned it, and the man said 'I can't make it work, it's not doing well, I'm trying to sell it now'. So Leon Salberg thought 'Right, I'll buy it'. So on the spur of the moment like that he bought the theatre, had it all done up, must have had a flair for it because he got proper professionals in, not like the man who took me in I may say. [laughs] By the time I went to Wolverhampton, two of his sons ran theatres in various other places which I cannot remember where they were now, but I did work in the other theatres, and one of his daughters had married Basil Thomas, who was a writer, and he wrote quite a lot of plays that went on in the West End, and he was mad to run a theatre. He didn't want to act in it or anything but he wanted to run it because he was interested in the way it worked. I don't know who bought it actually, but they got Wolverhampton, which was a beautiful theatre, beautiful, and quite big and they were very, very successful. And if Birmingham, which was near of course, needed somebody extra, instead of bringing them in from outside they could probably find somebody in

the Wolverhampton company to send over, and the other way around, so it was a lovely place to be because you got a lot of experience with really good people.

MS: So where did you live when you were working in all these different theatres?

JM: Oh in digs.

MS: And what was that like?

JM: [pauses] Interesting. Yes, interesting. They were quite good in places like Wolverhampton, some places they were frightening. The person who rented you the room or whatever it was you had, she generally did the cooking and everything and the shopping, and sometimes it was very frightening. [laughs]

BS: When you were acting, were you always in rep. theatre?

JM: No, I did quite a lot of tours. Generally plays that had just come off in the West End. The ones I enjoyed very much, or the one I think I enjoyed the most, was – have you heard of Dulcie Gray and Michael Denison? They were husband and wife...

MS: Yes, I have heard of them.

JM: You have. They did a play called The Four Poster, and Andy Melville, who'd been running Watford - this is some years after - was looking for an understudy for Dulcie, and it was a two-handed play, and it was a difficult thing, for somebody to play opposite Michael – who was her husband in fact. So he asked me if I'd do it. And I'd just got a letter from, I think it was Cheltenham rep, from a man whom I'd auditioned for some time before, saying they'd got a place for me and would I like to go along, so I had the two jobs and I thought 'Which shall I do?' and I thought 'Yes, I'd like to do The Four Poster'. So I did The Four Poster and after that the other understudy, the male understudy, and I, we went all over the country doing The Four Poster because of course with weekly or even fortnightly rep you couldn't really rehearse that because it was an ordinary length play, just the two of you all the way through, nobody else in it. That I enjoyed very much.

MS: Thank you.