

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Jocelyn Page – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Rachel Rhodes**

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Actress Jocelyn Page on her memories of the Oxford University Dramatic Society; Working in Repertory Theatre; Memories of Peter Hall and John Barton; Censorship; John Osborne; Working at The Mermaid Theatre.

JP: My name is Jocelyn Page and I was born in 1925 and I got into the theatre because I took dramatic lessons while I was in the Wrens and it so happened that the person who gave me lessons started a small school in Oxford, in which other pupils were Maggie Smith, Ronnie Barker and a few others, and we just had lessons really it was not a very formal school. So that's how I started, although I had been to RADA but I had hated it and anyway RADA closed down because of the war. So come 1949 what I was doing was I went with an amateur production from Oxford of *The Taming of the Shrew* to one of the very first Edinburgh fringe performances and we were living in one of the old, almost medieval tenements in Edinburgh where there were fleas in the mattresses and it was icy cold and a lot of families lived there and it was a real experience because it was the first time I had ever seen enormous poverty and they were so cold, they were so hungry although they were supposed to be looked after it was a shock. Now that is all gone I am glad to say but that was that.

RR: What were the early productions that you worked on at the beginning of your career?

JP: Well that was the first but that was amateur. And then in 1950 I went on a semi-professional tour of America with the Oxford University Dramatic Society with people like John Schlesinger, Robert Robinson, Ronald Eyre, Peter Dewes all sorts of people, and Shirley Catlin who later became Baroness Williams but that was a wonderful experience because a University had never been to America before and they treated us like gods, which made us very ashamed because we knew that when students came to England they were not exactly feted but it was tremendous and we all learnt a lot and that was that.

RR: So what differences did you find in the way the audience responded in America?

JP: They were amazing, they were fantastic, they enjoyed it so much and they used to come up to us afterwards and say they had been terrified and they thought they would not understand a word and they said that after ten minutes it did not bother them in the

least and a lot of the words that Shakespeare used were current American words and used in the same sense that Shakespeare used them and they were just wonderful. They turned up as if we were the greatest people on earth and everywhere we went we had full audiences but the most amazing thing was that we went to minor Universities mostly in the mid-west but also Chicago and New York, but all the Universities had their own theatres, which was even Oxford had not got it's own dramatic theatre, I mean the students had not and it was astonishing they had opera houses and you know, it was very exciting and the exchange of views and their attitudes to the theatre was so, that they were so longing to learn and they thought we knew and of course we did not! [laughs] but it was just wonderful and open and welcoming.

RR: So did you tour within England as well?

JP: Yes, endlessly I did because I joined a Shakespeare company started by Peter Hall and John Barton and we went round and round England doing Henry V and Twelfth Night and that was tremendous because we played in town halls, we played in proper theatres, we played in Methodist chapels, we played in the open air and you just learnt and Peter Hall and John Barton were very young at the time but brilliant. You knew they were and they just could not help it and you learnt from them and they learnt from us and it was a terribly exciting time.

RR: Did you find a difference with the audiences in different parts of the country?

JP: Yes. They were perhaps more reserved in the North but they listened like mad and afterwards they would respond to you as you thought they would respond as you were doing it but that is a terrible generalisation, I do not actually remember them. Also, one time I can remember we once played to seven people at a matinee [laughs] and that taught you, you know, to give your very best even if there were only seven people there it was just as important as a full house and you just learnt all the time, you could not help it but sometimes you were very hungry [laughs] and very tired but it was having a great family around you because I did not have any brothers and sisters and I realised how fantastic it was to have a group of people with you all the time, all learning and enjoying yourself and the whole thing was fun.

RR: When you were working in London you did some repertory theatre, that must have been long days?

JP: Oh yes, a very long time. And learning the next play while you were doing one. But I never did weekly rep, I longed to because they did wonderful funny plays and I never did, I always did rather serious plays because I was not very pretty and I was useful. So I ended up playing old women, which I loved, and all the old nurses in any play that was going and I do not know, I think I had more fun. I think I played what is called character parts and I think in a way sometimes they were more fun than the better looking women had. I just loved it, it was very hard work but everyone was doing it so you couldn't moan because everybody was in the same boat and on the whole I had really good directors, each taught me something. Some would let you do what you wanted and then say try this and try that so that you really felt that you had created the part. Other

people told you what to do from the moment you started and you jolly well did it [laughs] you know, till you got a bit wiser and then sometimes you would think well I know that's not right so what I will do is I will wait a bit and then I will do what I think is right and then the director will say that is right, that is what I meant you to do all along [laughs] so you had little games between yourself and the director. But I did not do that much, I did what I was told.

RR: Were there any directors in particular that stood out as people that you enjoyed working with?

JP: I think both Peter Hall and John Barton you could not better them. They were tremendously different. Peter gave you enormous freedom and then shaped you. John Barton was a great teacher, especially in Shakespeare and he just pulled forms out of you, he trusted you and you did not ever have to think that you were speaking Shakespeare. Somehow you just said it and through him, he had great visual sense, terribly exciting. Everything was colourful and his imagination was enormous but Peter was just as clever in a very different way and still is. There were some directors you did not get on with but that was probably me as well as them, but not many.

RR: I wanted to speak to you about the censorship laws. How do you feel that affected the drama of the period?

JP: Oh I think enormously. I think people were very afraid to say what they really thought. I suppose it's a cliché but until John Osborne came along nobody really used that sort of language or spoke up in that way and I did do a play that has come back now called Epitaph for George Dillon, which was one of his early plays that he co-wrote and that was very interesting and sort of bucking the social trend and one play I did with William Gaskill at the Royal Court was called [Bricks and Regatta] and I was supposed to say the word bugger in it, many times, as a very angry old woman. I was not allowed to say it to I had to go round saying beggar, beggar and of course it fooled absolutely nobody and really was stupid, you know, but I did not come across... well there was, you are right, a general censorship. I do not think actors and directors were as politically aware as they are now. I think... I suppose Shaw was extremely politically aware but he was careful. He could not use the sort of language that is used now and maybe it was not necessary. The Apple Cart, one of the very first things I did, was very political it's all about politics and it is still very funny. And I did have a funny experience; I was playing the old queen of some country and I was about twenty odd and I had never done a professional performance before and I was supposed to be able to knit. It was very important that this queen sat knitting while listening to everything and I could not knit at all. So I did not know what to do, I was in a complete panic so I got a friend to knit an awful piece of scarf for me but then come Monday night, there was I with these two knitting needles having practiced like mad but going desperately slowly, and somebody in the front row said half way through the scene, 'She can not knit', And you know, it reverberated around the theatre and I never really recovered from that, I certainly never got any better!

RR: Did that happen a lot, people shouting?

JP: Oh yes. There were famous things in rep called tea matinees, which do not happen now, where people the age I am now [laughs] would come to the matinees and they were cheap seats and you would be served tea, half way through in the interval with a lot of rattling of cups and trolleys and noise and the result was that when you resumed the play after the interval, most people had not finished their teas or if they had they were busy passing their cups along the row back to the tea lady. And you would get things like 'I think I will have a sponge' right in the middle of Hamlet or something, you know, and it was terribly funny because then and you would get all the rattles of the cups and the trolley and nobody would hear a blind bit of the play for the next ten minutes but they were fun. I do miss them [laughs].

RR: Did you find that difficult to work with?

JP: Well you just learnt that most people would not hear anything you said so you just got a bit louder and made it a bit plainer. I suppose you were not doing a very deep play like Chekhov or anything.

RR: It must have been quite rushed, when you were doing the repertory theatre. Did it show at any point in the performances?

JP: Oh yes, I think Monday nights were a bit difficult. You shook and the scenery shook [laughs] and you were all starting at each other hoping to God that the next line would come up right, that your cue would come up, but you always got through it. Of course by the end of the week you were really enjoying it, which was a pity because you came to the end of it. It was wonderful but as I say unfortunately I never did weekly which must have been dreadful because you were doing three plays at once really. But a thing to that does not happen now is, you had to provide your own clothes, and that was not very easy when you were not earning much money. And you dreaded where it said 'scene with cocktails' because you thought I have not got a cocktail dress I have not worn in the last three plays and I have not got the right shoes so you borrowed off people and you sometimes had to go to a costumier and borrow and as I was always playing old women or character parts I used to have wigs and there were great differences between the different wigmakers. The repertory theatre, because it had not got much money would ask you to go to the cheapest one [laughs], which had a join on the wig, which went straight across your head like that and was perfectly obvious [laughs] I won't mention their name but they were famous for being absolutely terrible! So I used to save up like mad and go to Wig Creations, which were brilliant and provided you with stunning wigs, it was worth starving to get a decent wig.

RR: So what was the money like?

JP: I really cannot remember. I know that for The Apple Cart I got four pounds because I was not a professional actress. Then I got eight pounds and I remember eight pounds going on for quite a while and then ten and then fifteen and then twenty and

then twenty-five and I seem to remember that in rep where I spent a lot of time it was sort of twenty, twenty-five I think. I might be quite wrong though.

RR: How did that compare to the salaries of the men?

JP: They were probably about five pounds more but it was sort of an unwritten law that you didn't ask anybody else what they were being paid. I am sure people did but I never dared and nobody ever asked me. Though you always did with your female chums in the dressing room, you always knew exactly what everybody was getting. You could live very easily on that money then. Not of course if you were married and had children, I can't imagine what that was like, because I didn't get married until towards the very end of my career. I imagine it must have been really tough. But no one ever thinks of giving it up because you love it so much.

RR: Yes. I suppose there must have been a lot of travelling involved?

JP: Yes. And the train calls were great fun. They were lovely, I loved travelling on the trains. And you used to be able to afford a breakfast, a British Rail breakfast sometimes and they were great and lasted you the whole journey and then there were the people that you did not want to come and sit in your carriage but always did and then you tried to sit with your friends [laughs] but they were great fun. I do not know why because the trains were usually dirty and usually cold [laughs] but it just was. Again, you were with the company. Sometimes you did not know where you were going to go when you get off the train, you had an address but you were not quite sure what your digs were going to be like and you just prayed. On the whole they were wonderful. And old theatre landladies are a race apart. They looked after you like mothers and they gave you hot water bottles and they fed you beautifully, the mattresses were not always quite so good but they were very motherly and sometimes you did not get the right ones you had to go down the list and you opened the front door and there was a terrible smell of tomcat and you knew that there wasn't going to be any hot water when you got back from the theatre and you knew that it was probably done by a geyser which was terrifying when you put a coin in and the gas went whoosh like that, and it was absolutely terrifying, you know, and you knew they would take the plug out of the bath so that you had to pay sixpence to get the plug back to have a bath but you just laughed about it.

RR: Did you find a lot of difference when you were travelling around between the bigger theatres and the smaller ones?

JP: Yes because the dressing rooms are so important and even now they are awful in some theatres, even in London. But it makes such a difference because you are nervous always, you are tired, worried as to what the stage is going to be like because the set probably will not fit on some of them. So the short rehearsal you had before you go on the evening is vital because everything is slightly different and so a dressing room is terribly important and really they were mostly pretty ghastly. Some people used to carry their own light bulbs around with them because it was pretty sure that most of them would be broken, the ones round the mirror the lovely thing is that you would always find messages from somebody you knew who had just left the theatre to go on to the

next place and they would write a message in lipstick on the mirror saying 'hello, god bless, careful of the second step down' you know, and it was lovely. I must say I was flooded out in one place, in [Henley] I think it was, on a tour where they had a very heavy rainstorm and the theatre was really not maintained very well and suddenly half way through Henry V you walked back into the dressing room and we were up to our ankles in water! [laughs] Bit difficult sloshing back onto the stage. But no, Oh London it was wonderful the difference, but even then, you know, you did not always have a good dressing room but the excitement was tremendous.

RR: Did you find a difference in the atmosphere in London?

JP: Oh Yes. I think you had to work a bit harder, you know. I used to be very nervous the first time but I loved it because they, the audience teaches you. A lot of actors say, I think somebody did at lunch, that 'oh it's that sort of audience' well very often it was you who made that sort of audience and you learnt to speed it up, pick it up, do anything, you know. You could get suet pudding audiences that did not want to be there and had had too much lunch, been dragged there. And you would get a general atmosphere of sloth but I used to think, I used to listen to the tannoy in the dressing room of the performance and I used to think no we have done that, that scene was far too slow or whatever and therefore you would have to go back and remedy it, listen to the audience.

RR: So did you find that audiences responded differently to different productions of the same play?

JP: Oh yes, every night. It is absolutely true you never get two alike. And that is why it is so exciting and that is why when you come off stage you really do have to wind down because you have been on such a high, getting through it and that is why nobody ever wants to do anything else. If you want to do it nothing will stop you. But I do think this is all about theatre and I do not know much about television because I did very little and I hated it because I couldn't cope with not having an audience there but worse still I could not cope with having to look for cables on the floor and marks on the floor and cameras that I did not really know what they were doing and I was a complete fool. I was offered to have a part written in for me in Emergency Ward Ten, that Stephen was actually in and I was so frightened with what I'd been through and I said no I cannot possibly, I'm just going to do two plays in rep and they thought I was quite mad but I was so relieved, you know, I do not think I could ever have done it, I wasn't right for it.

RR: So you prefer the theatre then?

JP: Yes, but a lot of people don't. But I think television has changed the theatre enormously because you do not need really good voice production to do telly whereas when you get into a big theatre you need to have learnt how to produce your voice or you cannot be heard and very often people who go to large theatres having done not very much in the theatre, takes them quite a few weeks to learn how to produce the voice properly, but they do.

RR: So was that something you were trained in or did you have to learn it from experience?

JP: Yes I was trained, I did spend long enough at RADA to do voice production and again this little school in Oxford, Isabelle, who ran it had not only a marvellous voice herself but she was very insistent on how to produce voice. I was very lucky.

RR: Yes. So was that the same for other actors? Were most people trained in it or was it something that a lot of people had to learn?

JP: I think a lot of people do because now it is so expensive to go to drama schools and actually I do not, this is my opinion, I do not think you can teach anybody to act. It is useful to learn how to dance, it is useful to learn how to do mime, it is useful. But the most important thing is voice and therefore I think you need to spend some time at a school, to have a good teacher, just to teach you how to produce your voice and how to breathe, which is the secret of it. But I do not really think you need three years.

RR: Ok. Just to come back to something you mentioned earlier, we were talking about various audience responses, and you mentioned John Osborne a while back. I was just wondering how you thought audiences responded to that?

JP: Oh I remember the excitement of going to it, it was thrilling and you knew those people but they had never been on the stage before and there were people actually saying things like 'you cow!' you know, and 'you bitch!'" and why they said it. Men being insecure and women not understanding and the hope that roles, well they weren't reversed but I suppose it had been done in older plays but in a different way but this was just so exciting and the actors were so young. It was...it was thrilling.

RR: So did you find audiences responded well to this or was it a bit shocking?

JP: No I think they were very excited. I think maybe older people, I do not know how older people took it. I think they may have been astounded but I think shocked is probably the wrong word I do not think it was shocked, but I just found it wonderful and I longed to do something like it.

RR: Did you find him as a playwright particularly inspiring?

JP: Yes I thought he was wonderful.

RR: Ok. Just to sum up, is there anything you feel you would like to add just as an overview of the period as a whole?

JP: The last period of my profession was spent at The Mermaid Theatre, which was very exciting. This fantastic new building that had been built brick by brick by Bernard Miles and his wife and he was just a great character. He did not know the meaning of failure or cannot or will not. Did not know what those words meant and I spent a long time there doing several plays and that taught me a lot because it was a thrust stage and he was just inspiring, maddening, [laughs] wicked but it was great fun. And I suppose, you asked me about directors, I suppose the most inspiring director I worked for was Michael Elliott, who started of course The Royal Exchange theatre in Manchester and became the greatest British director I think. But I also worked for Tony Richardson and Ken Tynan, Toby Robertson and several others but Michael was almost hypnotic. I do not know what it was about him. He had high, high intelligence, which he expected out of you and you knew it and I do not know whether you have ever met anybody but if they are that inspiring in the way they talk to you, you do it! I do not know where it comes from but out of you it comes and I was in Brand, which made a great sensation with Patrick McGoohan and he was an actor the like of which I have not seen since, of his age, I mean. People like Michael Gambon are I suppose about his equal but he was younger then and he was just huge. His presence was frightening, he was meant to be frightening but I just wish that he had, I do not know where he went but he didn't stay in England very long except to do The Prisoner. He was amazing and again created this feeling in the theatre every night, that you just had to do you best every night.

RR: Quite demanding then?

JP: Yes very exciting.

RR: Ok. Well thank you very much for talking to me.

JP: Thank you.