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Alfred Burke – interview transcript

Interviewer: Kate Harris

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Actor Alfred Burke on his memories of The Old Vic 1930's; Training at RADA 1937; Repertory theatre; Arts Council Tours; The Young Vic, George Devine and Michel Saint Denis; The Library Theatre, Manchester; New writing; Birmingham Rep; Memories of directors; Impressions of John Gielgud, Ralph Richardson, Laurence Olivier, Ion Swinley; Impact of early television; Censorship.

KH: Can I just start by asking how you became interested in working in the theatre?

AB: Well I used to go to the theatre when I was in my teens, in my early teens. I used to live quite near The Old Vic and I started going to the theatre in The Old Vic in something like 1935. They used to do plays at The Old Vic and then transfer them to Sadlers Wells and then they'd do opera at Sadler's Wells and so they used to alternate and so I used to go there. I was very excited about the whole thing and I decided I wanted to be an actor. I used to see Olivier, Richardson, Gielgud, other people one has never heard of, and no longer heard of, I mean like Ion Swinley and William [Devlin] all very good actors doing mostly Shakespeare, the occasional Chekhov, the occasional something else but mostly it was Shakespeare. So I think it was Shakespeare that turned me on

KH: You went to The RADA in 1937...

AB: That's right

KH: Would you be able to tell me a little bit about your training at the RADA what it involved? What kind of things you were doing?

AB: Well you did in those days, you did what you did, basically you did Shakespeare, Shaw and Sheridan as far as plays went, you also had voice production classes, movement classes. Some very talented people like [Litsy Bisk] used to take the movement classes and the producers, the directors of the plays, of the productions were mostly actors, London actors, like Neil Porter or other people whose names I forget, who used to direct us. And it was that it was the rehearsals and the performances of the plays and voice production classes and movement classes and probably what they still do now, although I expect it's a bit more complicated now.

KH: So when you left there did you go into Repertory Theatre?

AB: No I left that, of course the war broke out so there wasn't much going in the way of...I did a season at a theatre in Henley on Thames and then I was called up, then when that was over I was invalided out. At the end of the war in 1945 I went to a theatre in Farnham, in Surrey, small theatre only seating about 125 people which had kept going throughout the war and I did some performances there and then went on to do a lot of Arts Council Tours.

KH: How did you become involved with the Arts Council Tours?

AB: I really don't remember, it was just one of those things one did. I must have known, or somebody must have known of me from the Farnham days or something like that. I can't remember, or from RADA. But we used to do tours in the areas of England where there were no theatres like the Lake District and Wales and other such, more or less inaccessible places for theatre performances. I remember once doing a performance in Wales, of all things, The Corn is Green with I think about one Welsh actor in it, and when we got there, there was no lighting or anything and the electricity had broken down and we all had to wait for about, including the audience, for about an hour and a half, two hours for somebody to go and fix a light on a hill somewhere so we could get on with a performance of School For Scandal.

KH: Can you remember anything about the audience reaction? I mean presumably some of the people watching hadn't seen much theatre at all? Can you remember what the reaction was like to the tours?

AB: Oh the reaction was always, to the Arts Council performances, the reaction was always very enthusiastic, but very, they were very pleased, very grateful.

KH: What kind of plays were you putting on?

AB: I did, what did I do? School for Scandal, Corn is Green, Importance of being Earnest, I think that's all I can think of at the moment.

KH: And from there did you move into a Repertory Theatre?

AB: No from there I think chronologically, I think it was The Young Vic started, The Young Vic was a company that was started by Michel Saint Denis and George Devine in the 1940's somewhere and used to go all over the country and to Northern Ireland as well. We did Andre [.....] Noah and The Snow Queen and Shoe Maker's Holiday, that's right.

KH: What was Michel Saint Denis and...what were they like to work with, him and George Devine?

AB: Oh they were very... I don't know what's the word. They were very enthusiastic and very helpful and very encouraging and of course very knowledgeable and one learned a great deal from them. They were I suppose the most distinguished professional workers in the theatre that I'd encountered since RADA.

KH: How did their working methods compare to previous work that you'd done at Farnham? Could you say kind of what the difference were or maybe describe what it was like to work with them on a particular production or play?

AB: Well it was ones first taste, no not ones first taste but an early taste of really distinguished theatrical people, who knew theatre, both in a literary sense and a practical sense, and they were the most knowledgeable people that I had encountered.

KH: How long were you at The Young Vic for?

AB: I suppose it must have been, we did Shoe Maker's Holiday, and we did The Snow Queen, I suppose that all in all it must have covered about two years.

KH: And that was touring?

AB: That was touring all the time yes.

KH: And from there where did you go to?

AB: From there where did I go? [looks at papers]

KH: Were you at Manchester following that?

AB: I think that the next trip yes must have been Manchester. That was in 1947 I know because it was a desperately cold winter and there was no heating on in the public buildings and Andre Van Gyseghem, an experienced theatre director, had opened a new theatre in the library in Manchester, where we did, where we started off doing Chekhov, we did The Seagull and then we did the Jean Giraudoux, Amphitryon 38 and a restoration comedy. It was the sort of place where, I'm sure that in Manchester they hadn't done that sort of theatre, that sort of literary theatre, for a long time and that went on... I can't remember, well I went on there for a year or more.

KH: What kind of audiences were you getting for those types of plays? Can you remember?

AB: Well all I can say is that they were enthusiastic audiences. I don't know who they were. The sort of people in Manchester who wanted to go to the theatre and who couldn't find, who needed something other than what they could find at The Palace or The Opera House, the other touring dates which were either Musicals or ex-West End successes or pre-West End productions.

KH: So were you working under a repertory system there?

AB: Oh yes, the repertory system, I think at Manchester would have been something like a two week, if not a three week turn round.

KH: So that was a longer turn around than at other places at the time wasn't it?

AB: That was the sort of, the norm with those sort of theatres.

KH: And from there was it that you went to Nottingham?

AB: Went to Nottingham also with Van Gyseghem in what, 1949, that was a two week turn around and that was again the sort of plays that wouldn't come on at The Theatre Royal in Nottingham which was mostly West End tours and all sorts of things, we did Shakespeare, Othello, Merchant of Venice and period dramas like...I've forgotten the names of the plays.

KH: Did you find working in repertory, did you find there was a lot of time pressure? Did you find the working conditions difficult?

AB: Well no because I'd been used to...It was more leisurely than the sort of repertory that I had been used to at say Farnham or elsewhere, where you did a weekly turn round, I mean you did a new play every week and in some theatres of course they did two plays every week, two different plays every week. So it was hard work but one didn't feel pressed.

KH: Did you have a sense that drama was changing over the period? Like in the 50's and 60's, did you have that sense that the new writing was changing things a bit or not?

AB: Well I didn't, no not in the provinces, that was all happening in London, that was in the early 50's in London at The Royal Court where John Osborne was writing. We did traditional plays on the whole, we never did anything modern, anything post-war.

KH: Was it 1950 when you did your first West End production? In Picasso's *Desire Caught by the...*

AB: Ah Picasso's *Desire Caught by the Tail*, yes that was around that time at the little, oh what was the name of the theatre? Just of Charring Cross?

KH: The Watergate Theatre

AB: The Watergate Theatre, yes that's right. Yes that was a little treat in between provincial repertory.

KH: Did you find that a big contrast going to the West End from provincial theatre?

AB: Yes but it wasn't the West End in the sense that it wasn't a big Shaftesbury Avenue, it was the sort of theatre one was used to, a small theatre.

KH: You were at Birmingham for three years weren't you. Could you tell me your impressions of Birmingham at the time, what it was like to work there?

AB: Birmingham I think for me was under Douglas Seale who was the director then and later went to America and it was Barry Jackson's theatre of course, who was still alive in those days. It was a more, I don't know what one would call it. A more high class sort of project. I think it was monthly, it may have been three weekly or monthly I can't remember but there you mostly did classic plays. You did Shakespeare, I mean for instance we did while I was there, the whole three parts of *Henry the Sixth*, Shakespeare's *Henry the Sixth* and took them to London to The Old Vic at the end of the run. On the whole that was costume drama like Sheridan and stuff like that.

KH: Did Sir Barry Jackson have much input into the plays you were doing?

AB: He himself? No, no, no I mean he had an office in the theatre still but he lived in Stratford, but he used to come home regularly and see us, but no the running of the theatre was done by his manager whose name I forget, otherwise it was under the direction of Douglas Seale.

KH: And from Birmingham what did you go onto do from Birmingham?

AB: What did I do from Birmingham? Oh from Birmingham I was out of work for a long time. I came to London and didn't get any work and eventually I got some work at another provincial theatre in Worthing, The [Connaught] Theatre in Worthing, where they did, I think it was weekly or it might have been fortnightly, I can't remember. It was the sort of theatre where you did ex-West End comedies.

KH: Was this the mid 1950's?

AB: Yes

KH: What kind of parts were you playing there?

AB: What used to be called character parts, which meant that you weren't the juvenile lead, I was never the juvenile lead and you played whatever you were given.

KH: Do you think that parts used to be...some of the other people that I've spoken to say that parts used to be much more categorised, so you had juvenile lead, the character actor and each person in the company played that set role.

AB: Oh yes

KH: Would you agree with that?

AB: Yes. Except some little theatres like Farnham Theatre where you could play almost anything, you could play the juvenile lead one week and the heavy father the following week. Do yourself up with whiskers and stuff like that.

KH: How did you go about learning lines so quickly when you were working in repertory?

AB: I don't know how we did it. Looking back I really don't know how one did it. In weekly Rep of course you had to learn a new act every day, every night, after the show. You'd go home and you'd go to bed and start learning your lines for the following day so you'd rehearse an act a day and you had to learn all the lines for one act in one fell swoop. That really was hard work but somehow you know everybody did it. I don't think people would do it now.

KH: Do you have memories of a particular director who you enjoyed working with?

AB: Well of course Michel St Denis and George Devine were both directors that one would remember. Douglas Seale at Birmingham, I remember with a great deal of pleasure. Andre Van Gysegghem who was a very good director and a very good actor.

KH: What do you think made them such good directors?

AB: I don't know, I just don't know. It's a, what makes people a good director, it's a mystery. I mean I did a lot of directing in my day at Farnham, I've no idea what sort of director I was but these were people, they were good organisers, they were well read, cultured used to be the word, they knew what they were doing, they knew their history of the theatre, they knew all sorts of things that we didn't know.

KH: Do you think styles of directing changed over the period as drama changed?

AB: Well no not really because you still, to be a director you can't be an ignoramus. You must know what you're talking about and you should know and most of them did, as it were the history of their own theatre if only from working at it. You would have to be knowledgeable and you would have to be like Peter Hall say, who is still at it. You'd have to be very knowledgeable about all sorts of things.

KH: Do you think styles of acting changed over the period?

AB: Oh yes they have, they've changed because of the nature of the plays that were written and the plays that are written now, they're different sort of plays.

KH: As an actor how did the changes affect you?

AB: I think nowadays you're more responsible for yourself as an actor. You are expected to take more responsibility for yourself and you do. And your own opinions for instance, nowadays would be much more important than they were in my time when your own opinion didn't count for much. You did what you were told or what was suggested to you. The sort of thing you did was imitate older actors actually.

KH: Which actors of the period do you think had the most impact on you?

AB: On me... well on my generation it was undoubtedly Gielgud and Richardson and Olivier and actors Ion Swinley and [Leon Gen] all the actors that used to be at The Old Vic before the war, Jack Hawkins.

KH: Just to go back and focus on maybe say Gielgud, what was it about Gielgud's performances that made such an impression on you?

AB: The fact that he, I think that as it were, he jumped on the platform at the beginning of the play as it were and never got off it until the play was over. It was, and so was Olivier and so was Richardson, a level that they brought onto the stage with them which was you know a level all on its own. This was the dramatic level and they stayed on that, it never let up. It was not colloquial or anything like that, it was rhetorical in the best possible sense and people don't do that anymore on stage.

KH: What was your impression of the new writing that came through in the 50's and 60's? What was your personal reaction to some of the writers and the plays?

AB: I think we all took it in our stride. That was the sort of play that they were writing nowadays and that was the sort of play you did.

KH: Did you have a particular new playwright whose work you particularly admired?

AB: John Osborne's plays, which I was never in, Arnold Wesker's plays, which I was never in, those sort of plays.

KH: What was it that impressed you about them?

AB: Well I suppose they were more like life. They were more like the life that one knew. They were more colloquial and they were racier altogether.

KH: Did you prefer working in regional theatre? [referring to AB career in 40's, 50's when he worked mainly in regional theatre]

AB: Well I would have liked to have worked in London as everybody would because on the whole London was your home. London was where you lived, was where you got the jobs and that's where you wanted to be but it was expected, one expected not to be in London, one expected to be in the provinces.

KH: Did you find that television had a big impact on the profession?

AB: Oh a big impact. I mean once commercial television started in 1956 I was in it all the time. I spent most of my life from 1956 until oh god knows when in television. Some BBC television but mostly commercial television, that's where the work was.

KH: Did you find that the training that you'd had in theatre helped you when you went into television?

AB: Oh yes because all the early television was live and so you were just giving another performance. You rehearsed for a couple of weeks just like being in Rep and then giving another performance and hoped it would go alright without disaster which mostly it did.

KH: Have you got any memories of particularly difficult performances in Rep as a result of the fact that there wasn't much rehearsal time.

AB: No not that I can call to mind. I'm sure there were but I can't call them to mind apart from those occasions when you thought god I don't know these lines when you walked on the stage and you hoped for the best, that used to happen regularly anyway.

KH: Was there a particular playwright whose work you enjoyed performing in?

AB: I used to enjoy Ibsen. I used to enjoy Shakespeare we used to do a lot of Shakespeare in the provinces, mostly of comedies, I always enjoyed Shakespeare and enjoyed Ibsen and Chekhov. I mean the amount of, as it were, what used to be called classical drama which included Ibsen and Chekhov and foreign playwrights was done a lot in the English provincial theatres.

KH: Did you find that the audiences in the provincial theatres were very loyal?

AB: Oh yes because they were regular, they were going to come again you know. Full of people who came to see everything.

KH: Did censorship have much impact on your work over the period?

AB: Censorship? No, no.

KH: Did you have any sense of censorship at all during the period or not?

AB: No, none at all. Well because mostly they were plays that had been done before if they weren't classics, they were plays that had been done before so they had passed through the censor. One didn't do, one did sometimes new plays, but very few new plays

KH: I think those are all of my questions I don't know whether you've got anything else to add.

AB: No not that I can think of except that the provincial theatre was a great place to be.