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Peter Lambert – interview transcript

Interviewer: Kate Harris

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Theatre Director. Acting style; Christopher Fry; Manchester Library Theatre; method acting; realism; rehearsal process; repertoire; The Royal Court Theatre, London; David Scace; television; theatre criticism.

KH: This is an interview on 1st December with Peter Lambert, 2005. Can I just confirm that I have your permission to use this material in the British Library archive?

PL: Yes, certainly.

KH: I would just like to start by asking about your involvement at the beginning of the Library Theatre in Manchester.

PL: Well I joined the staff of the Central Library, Library Theatre in 1950 as Manager of the theatre when it was being used by visiting companies: John English from Birmingham, his Theatre in the Round, and then there was a season run by Noel Cliffe and basically it was just hired. Eventually I spoke to the City Librarian, who was Charles Nowell at that time, and I said to him I thought it was such a lovely little theatre that it ought to be one of the central repertory theatres in the country. In those days it was an achievement to do fortnightly rep rather than weekly rep, so he talked to the Libraries Committee and we had a meeting, and I was interviewed by the Libraries Committee and I sold them the idea that it should be a repertory theatre. It was funded by the Libraries Committee on the basis that we shouldn't lose money, because they didn't want to make large sums of money out of the theatre, but obviously they couldn't use the people's money to do something they wanted to do, and it worked - it worked very well. So the first productions, you have some photographs here in the book, the first production was, indeed, of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and from then on it ran for three complete seasons.

KH: So when you started running the Library Theatre did you get a regular company together?

PL: Oh yes, a permanent company.

KH: So how did that work, the recruitment of the company and things?

PL: Well I'm afraid it all came back to me. Basically, I decided what the programme was going to be for a season of say twelve, fifteen weeks or whatever it was, and I then went to London and did my casting because I had my experience as an actor and as a director and founded - built - a company here. For obvious reasons we had a small company to begin with and it got bigger and bigger until we got to Christmas when the Christmas play was going to be on; we knew it was going to be a cast of about 15 and then we reduced the numbers towards the end of the season. It became - it was - a permanent company.

KH: At the beginning of the theatre, was there much opposition to the creation of a new theatre?

PL: No, not at all, no opposition at all. I think it would be fair to say that it was a success from its first night, which was very lucky, and success, I'm not talking about finance, I'm talking about people. Bums on seats, they were interested that Manchester had got its own theatre at last. After all, one has to remember that Manchester was probably one of the earliest repertory theatres in the country with Horniman, and the fact that that had died before the war, and there was no theatre except the enormous commercial things: people were interested.

KH: So what kind of plays were you picking, how did you choose what plays you wanted to put on?

PL: Plays that I liked! Let me see, I can't remember. The first season, I haven't brought the timetable, the programme, for all of them but there was *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Christopher Fry's *The Firstborn* and then the Christmas play was *The Princess and the Swineherd* [by Nicholas Stuart Grey]. I should have, I've got, I'm quite lucky because at the end of the third season, the then City Librarian (Charles Noel had died) said 'Would I like them bound?' and they were nicely leather-bound with gilt edges and things, but I suppose I chose plays which I thought 'We can do it with the size of company available and with the type of actors and actresses we had'. And it worked, it worked well. The first season I didn't direct, the first season Stuart Latham was the director, and then the second and third season I took over, both as artistic director and producer, director, whatever one wants to call it.

KH: What challenges did having a new theatre present to you as a director?

PL: Oh none. I mean just that the theatre is a challenge; there is nothing special about it being in Manchester, nothing special about it being a repertory theatre. I had been in repertory theatres going back to the 1940s and we were lucky in that it was a securely financed theatre.

KH: How was it financed then?

PL: By the Libraries Committee, on the basis that I did the sums and I had to, in fact I don't know if I can quote this but I think I'm right in saying that the first season I made £45 profit! That's the sort of figures we were working on. In fact, we knew how much it would cost to run and we knew how many seats there were in the theatre, what percentage had to be filled to make it profitable. Well, it didn't lose money is all I can say, which was good.

KH: As opposed to the other theatres, I spoke to a person who used to come to the Library a lot in the 50s and he was saying it was a more serious kind of drama that was on there.

PL: Oh yes, yes, they were plays worth doing, rather than what I would call, perhaps unkindly, 'weekly rep plays', but I think we established a fair standard both of drama and of productions.

KH: In terms of the type of actors that you were casting, was there a particular type of actor you were looking for to work here?

PL: No, they had to be good at all sorts. Certainly we had a leading man, we had a leading lady, we had a leading juvenile man and a leading juvenile girl, you've got to have those; but with that and with the extras around, everybody had to be able to play all sorts of parts, character parts or leading roles, it didn't matter.

KH: So when you started the company, how many actors were in the first production?

PL: Oh, that's a question I can't answer, sorry. Shall I pick a figure out of the air? Twelve. That was the sort of figure I have in mind.

KH: About that sort of figure.

PL: Yes, yes, it would be about six of each, six male, six female, all the right shape and size.

KH: Did you have a particular playwright of that period whose work you admired?

PL: I suppose, interestingly enough, *The Firstborn* by Christopher Fry. Nobody has heard of Christopher Fry now, he was a marvellous poet and I think a very, very good playwright but nobody does him now. But that was one I certainly wanted to get in.

KH: Why do you think Christopher Fry has fallen out of fashion so much because he was very popular and a lot of theatres did his work didn't they?

PL: I suppose probably because he was a poet rather than a playwright and modern theatre is to do with reality and kitchen sink and rubbish, he was about beauty, beauty of language, and unfortunately we don't teach children to appreciate English.

KH: On the phone you were mentioning David Scape and some of the actors that were recruited at the time, would you be able to tell me just a little bit about that?

PL: Yes, I would, it is quite interesting, that is why I said I was interested in an article which I'd seen which gave all the credit to David Scape and made me a bit cross.

KH: Was David Scape a director?

PL: He was a stage director, which was like a glorified stage manager, and he had nothing to do with the choice of plays or the cast or directing the plays.

KH: So this was in the early 50s?

PL: This was until the end of the first season in '55. Now, as my stage director he did direct two plays during that last season, and he took over from me as the Artistic Director of the Library Theatre, but by that time I had employed Jeremy Brett, who I suppose people have heard of vaguely now as Sherlock Holmes, Sir Robert Stevens who was knighted after leaving here of course and - I can never remember her name, - Diane Cilento, does that name mean anything to you?

KH: That name doesn't ring any bells with me, but it wouldn't necessarily.

PL: She went off and married 007... who was 007?

KH: James Bond? I don't who that was.

PL: Oh, Scottish actor.

KH: Connery?

PL: That's right, she married Connery or Connery married her. But it was a balanced company in that, as I say, most people could play all sorts of parts. I wanted particularly to have a standard of plays that was not going to be done up the road at Chorlton or wherever.

KH: The choice of plays is very varied isn't it? That's what I've noticed from looking at past programmes.

PL: Oh yes, very varied. There were comedies, you don't have to be serious all the time but you have to be well written.

KH: Did you find you had very loyal audiences at the time?

PL: Oh yes, they were marvellous, they would come, I wouldn't say week after week but certainly fortnight after fortnight, they would come and it was interesting: they would like to meet the cast now and again and if they saw someone in the foyer, 'Oh I saw you last week!'. It was a family affair, and they felt part of it.

KH: Did you feel at the time that the plays you were doing or the way you were working in the theatre was in any way influenced by London or the West End or anything like that?

PL: No, no. I don't see in what way it could be influenced.

KH: I just meant in terms of plays that were being done at the time in London maybe.

PL: No, no, I didn't choose plays because they had been a success in the West End if that's what you mean. No, I chose plays that I thought would be suitable for the sort of audience that we were building in Manchester, and it worked well.

KH: I was going to ask you about the impact of working here, obviously it was before kitchen sink drama and everything, I was going to ask you what you thought about the new kind of drama which came into the theatre subsequently?

PL: I think you'd better turn the microphone off for that! I haven't a lot of time for kitchen sink drama, I must confess. It seemed to me that it was trying to be working class just for the sake of being working class, which is not good drama. Some of the things that they did at the... oh... what was the theatre in London where they did them all?

KH: The Royal Court?

PL: The Royal Court, yes, I saw two or three of them there but no, I didn't go for kitchen sink in particular, I didn't go for West End plays, I went for established plays really: Arms and the Man, The Eagle Has Two Heads, The Way of the World, Murder in the Cathedral, Point of Departure, Romeo and Juliet; they are all standard plays.

KH: In terms of the rehearsal process, just because it was a longer time period, would you be able to describe how you approached the plays in the rehearsal process?

PL: I suppose, yes, in those days, I don't know whether they do it now, but in those days of course the first thing to do was to sit down and read it, and the cast would sit quietly and we would read it together and then I would break it down into scenes, some longer, some shorter and spend time going over and over each scene as it built up towards the climax of the play.

KH: Do you think there has been significant changes in styles of acting between the period '45 to '68? Or from then to now?

PL: I have to be honest - I don't go to the theatre. I really haven't been to the theatre for ages and ages. I think there is a tendency now, rather like this kitchen sink effort, that it's all trying to be realistic which is not the art of acting. It is the art of acting one is looking for in the theatre.

KH: What did you think of what might be termed the less realistic things, people like Becket and Ionesco who also came in, in that period?

PL: Rubbish, absolute rubbish.

KH: Would you be able to say why you didn't like them?

PL: Because it was meaningless, to me it was meaningless and it was meaningless for a purpose, which was to fool the audience into thinking they were being clever and I don't think this is possible. I mean, whoever saw Ionesco really? Wasn't he sitting in a dustbin, didn't he and his wife sit in a dustbin throughout the whole play? Oh really, nonsense is the word I think I was looking for. I'm not saying one has to have realism all the time but I think one has got to have comprehensible English spoken by comprehensible people, and I don't think either of those did.

KH: And subsequently, after you left the Library, David Scace obviously took over and became Artistic Director, what were your impressions of David Scace, what was he like to work with?

PL: Oh very nice, he was a very sound stage director. If I remember rightly he did two productions during my last season and he was certainly a very competent director. In fact, I suspect many of the cast preferred working for him than they did for me.

KH: Obviously he had connection with Theatre Workshop, did you have any connection with Theatre Workshop in that time?

PL: No. Well only that in 1950 I think, 1950/51, Joan Littlewood brought Uranium 235, one of her Theatre Workshop productions to the theatre.

KH: Did you see that?

PL: Yes, I saw that. Marvellous, marvellous.

KH: Could you say a little bit about seeing that production or the way Theatre Workshop worked at that time?

PL: Not after fifty years, sorry, no, I can't. I know I did enjoy it, I was very impressed. I was very impressed I think by the fact that it was not formal in any way; it was the informality of it, people just wandering around the stage talking to each other which was very impressive in those days.

KH: Why did you leave the Library Theatre?

PL: Because I had an offer from the BBC to go and be a television drama director, I had a contract for two years with them. You can't turn down Aunty BBC! I had done five years, from '50 to '55 and I thought that was long enough and as I say, at the end of the last season I played Richard II and I had a television director, whom I knew, to direct it, and he said, 'Why don't you come and join the BBC in the Drama Department?' and I said, 'If BBC telly rings me to say 'Why don't you join?', I will join'. So I went.

KH: So you were acting as well as directing whilst you were there?

PL: Yes, yes. I mean, you can't be an actor and not take the opportunity. I played Tybalt in Romeo and Juliet and I played Richard II. Oh and I played Puss in Puss in Boots, how about that!

KH: Was it difficult to act and to direct at the same time?

PL: I didn't have that problem, no. When I acted I got David Scace or Harry Latham or whoever [to direct me].

KH: So how were directors recruited then? Were they people who had been here before it became the Library Theatre Company?

PL: No, because there was nothing before it became the Library Theatre.

KH: It was touring before wasn't it, the Arts Council?

PL: Visiting companies or visiting one man shows, there was no director.

KH: How did you try and reach out to members of the public when you first started the company, to encourage audience members, that kind of thing?

PL: I didn't.

KH: People just came?

PL: If the play is good and the performance is good, they will come, and they did. There is nothing one can do to sell the theatre, I think, other than good plays well produced.

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

PL: I don't know, sorry, I have got to answer that I really don't know. I don't see how the style of directing can change except... well, yes I do in one sense... there is an awful lot of nonsense talked about 'Let's get into the part. Let's feel it', you know, the Theatre Workshop, no... what is it called? Where you have to live the part? Method, that's the word I'm looking for, all that rubbish. That's not the skill of acting.

KH: That's not the way you rehearsed then.

PL: No way! They do what I tell them or they're out! Anyway...

KH: Did you have much resources for scenery and costume and that kind of thing?

PL: I had what I needed. Not a great deal of resources, no, but I had what I needed. I had Sally Jay - do you know Tony Jay who wrote Yes, Minister?

KH: I know Yes, Minister.

PL: Well his sister Sally was a scenic artist. Sally was my senior designer here, and I had a carpenter and an electrician, and we made what we needed; hired costumes from London when we did a costume drama. There were no limitations, but on the other hand I couldn't go silly: I was limited to the amount of cash available.

KH: Did you have any plays of the period, not necessarily ones that you directed but plays that you saw, that you particularly admired?

PL: I think if you are in the theatre you don't have much chance to go [to the theatre], so one doesn't see them [new plays]. Of course there was no competition here in Manchester because there were only the enormous theatres... of course the Opera House was open in those days. I saw one or two plays at the Opera House but I don't think I was particularly influenced one way or the other, in the sense that I knew what I wanted to do in the [Library] theatre here and it worked, touch wood.

KH: Did you have a good critical reception from the press?

PL: Yes, very. Now that would have been fun, I could have brought you all the notices from all the three local newspapers, for all the productions

KH: So the press were generally quite supportive?

PL: Very, very supportive. Oddly enough, one of the best papers was the Bolton Evening News, now how about that? Fred Isaacs in the Bolton Evening News wrote very, very good criticisms of the pieces and he was very supportive. All the critics were; they were very kind.

KH: Was there any national criticism, did any national newspapers cover any of the work done here at that time, do you know?

PL: Basically, no. In those days it was still the Manchester Guardian and if something, I'm trying to think of an example but if something unusual was going to happen, like the first night of a new play, then we would get the Telegraph and Times critics in, but not very often.

KH: Did you try and encourage new writing and new plays? Was that something that you wanted to do?

PL: Not really, in the sense that I hadn't got time. The point was that we had to make the thing pay for the length of time that we had the theatre available. If it had been a reasonable income over a longer period then yes, I would have encouraged new playwrights, but not in those circumstances.

KH: It was simply a financial consideration.

PL: That's right.

KH: That's interesting.

PL: It worked.

KH: I think those are all the questions that I have. I don't know whether you have anything else you would like to mention?

PL: Not particularly, no. I think it was...one of the things that I found satisfying is that it took over from what had been one of the best repertory companies in the country when I was just down there, down the road, but it was nice to see good notices, it was nice to employ good actors and actresses and I enjoyed myself.

KH: That's great, thank you, thank you very much.