

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Mary Lowe – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sian Prosser

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Theatre-goer. The Duchess of Malfi; N.C. Hunter; intervals; Manchester Library Theatre; Manchester Opera House; Terence Rattigan; regional theatre; Harry Rutherford (artist); The Sleeping Prince; Stratford; theatre-going; three-act plays.

SP: So, can you tell me when you went to the theatre frequently?

ML: Well, when I went to the theatre for the first time, it was 1953, and I had spent the last two years at Wigan Art School. I'd gone straight there from fifth form - most people went after the sixth form when they'd taken High School Certificate, I went after the School Certificate, and I moved, after two years at Wigan. I had a scholarship to Manchester College of Art to do textile design and I met a young woman there who was in a year earlier than me and she had a friend who was a painter, he lived in Hyde where she lived, and he was a good deal older, about 25 years older than she was, but he had been taking her to the theatre I think, and she knew about things like that. I had no idea, the first time I'd been, I couldn't remember the first thing we ever saw, but we began going almost as soon as we'd met in the autumn term, and we went every Friday, through the whole of one year. Occasionally we'd go the cinema to see a foreign film, l'Estrada or, you know, something like that, Bitter Rice I think another one was called, and we went usually, as you can see from the programmes most of them were the Opera House in Manchester, which is odd, because nowadays Manchester, the Opera House, is more inclined to do musicals. I don't know if they do very many straight plays, whereas at this period it was doing musicals, and Gilbert and Sullivan, and opera, and many straight plays. And there were prime actors of the age, Gielgud and Olivier and Ralph Richardson. And it was, I mean, to me, it was just something to watch and to enjoy.

We also went to the Library Theatre which I liked better, because I like all intimate theatres, and it was more intimate. And one of the things I saw there, which absolutely knocked me for six, was the Duchess of Malfi, where they all wind up dead! And I can see now, and hear, you know, her brother in the dark, giving her this hand to kiss, and seeing her husband and children hanging, it was vivid, it was really vivid. And I never saw it again until I saw it at Stratford a few years ago. And the thing I saw at the Opera House, in the first twelve months I was there up to, say, '58, when I began courting - I was working somewhere else by that time, and also going out with someone that I eventually married, and then unmarried, so this was a prime time, I'm 18, 19 years old, and no real idea of how to be critical, I wasn't critical at all, I just loved what I was seeing, nearly all of it. There were other ones as well. I've lost the Maurice Chevalier programme, I took half of Wigan Art School to see Maurice Chevalier, because there were quite a few Francophiles at Wigan Art School, I don't know why, they really were

very keen on Charles Trenet [laughs]. And I saw Joyce Grenfell twice, and only one programme, and I saw Olivier in something else but I couldn't remember what it was. When I wrote to him a few years ago now, only just before he died, he sent me a signed photograph with a very old, shaky signature and it was a photograph of him as Henry V in 1945, which I thought was quite funny, that was the time before this, before I was going, when he'd done Henry V, and I had to wait 30-odd years to write to him, and I get a picture, an old one [laughter]. And that was the beginning, I think, unless you've anything else to ask about that.

SP: I noticed in the programmes that Laurence Olivier is listed as appearing in the Sleeping Prince?

ML: Yes, that's one I remember very, very well. I don't know whether it was, I remember seeing it, and I remember scenes from it, and I saw him in something else, I forget what it was, but that, that was more impressive...

SP: That was at the Opera House?

ML: That was at the Opera House. But don't forget that we were students, we weren't in the best seats, we weren't even on the... there's the stalls, and the balcony, and what we call the gods, and we were in the top two rows in the gods and it was sort of like that [demonstrates steepness with hands] it was an angle of about, not 45, what's less than that? Scary, at the Opera House, and nowadays I would laugh about 'verdigris'! [laughter], it was quite difficult. I think it was about two shillings, if it was someone just run of the mill. If it was Olivier or Gielgud, it would be 2 and 6, but that was quite a lot because we had to have something to eat as well, you know, twice on the day, we'd eat at lunchtime, and before we went to the cinema, before we went into the theatre, in the UCP.

SP: Ah, the UCP!

ML: United Cattle Products! [laughter] We didn't eat tripe I'm happy to say, because I never have eaten tripe. And the Cardoma, you know, either of those. They must have been quite cheap.

SP: Where was the Cardoma?

ML: It was really a coffee house, and, you know, tea. It was the, what are they called? These coffee places... Starbucks! It was the Starbucks of its day. And I think they had waitresses with little pinafores. I may be wrong about that, but I think they did. I think that's about all I can say about that.

SP: I mean, besides the Duchess of Malfi and The Sleeping Prince, were there any other productions that stood out for you?

ML: Absolutely! There were quite a few. I think, you know, after this period had finished in 1968 or 9, there was a kind of hiatus, until '79. And I think what made it more imperative that I start seeing theatre again, and with a vengeance, was the memory of these particular productions. And one of them was West Side Story, with the original Broadway cast, and I just couldn't get over that, I hadn't seen or heard anything quite like that before, and I think we were up at the top, but it was wonderful to see a stage worked, all of it, something happening, and being sung about and worked out all over at all the heights of the stage, and the dancing was brilliant, absolutely brilliant. The Sleeping Prince, that was memorable, The Duchess of Malfi was memorable, West Side Story was. I think even Gilbert and Sullivan because, I went to a girls' grammar school, and they used to do one every year (I can't sing), so I was used to Gilbert and Sullivan, and I quite enjoyed that. I do remember also we saw the Palace, we saw [looks through Palace Theatre programmes] Richard Burton and Claire Bloom in Hamlet.

SP: Oh right, so we're looking at the programme now, dated June 7th 1954.

ML: Yes, that's right, so that must be when I was working in Salford, the first job I had. I couldn't finish the course, we had no money left, so I left at the end of the first year, I didn't get a degree, and I went to work in a textile design studio which I hated, so I must have seen that when I was still doing this job in Salford, on the docks. I couldn't say whether it was the best Hamlet I've seen, I've seen about twelve now, but it was a good one, and he was a wonderful actor, Richard Burton, and Claire Bloom was very beautiful. But you see, that must have come from somewhere else, and it was in repertory here, but it looks as if it only stayed a week, yes, one week. So this must have been one which was in London, and came up for the provinces. They either started in the provinces and went into the West End, or the both, I suppose if it was a 'going concern', you know, people were coming, they would come back to the provinces. They do that now, but I can't imagine there are as many provincial theatres as there were then. I mean, we used to go to the Alhambra, in Bradford, but I think it's closed at the moment. And we saw Oh What a Lovely War! in a tent in a rugby ground, I don't know whether it was Wakefield or somewhere like that, fairly recently, so maybe there are not that many provincial theatres where they would do that, now. But the Lowry is behaving that way, that has a real mixture of stuff, they've got the Bolshoi coming, I haven't got tickets for that. I think you'd have to queue till midnight to get that. Other memorable ones... well, Separate Tables was memorable.

SP: By Terence Rattigan?

ML: Yes. Partly I think because the film must have come out later, and I recognised things that I didn't do then, you know, about this man who'd done something terrible in the cinema, something rude. I mean nowadays this and... what was the film, I've forgotten the name of it... something Encounter.

SP: Brief Encounter?

ML: Brief Encounter. They were both of them covertly about the gay situation, or what would have, could have been, and I didn't realise until very much later how difficult life was, how really difficult life was, I think what may have been, I think it was, and this was the only way they could express their anger, if you like, or anything at all about how they felt.

SP: At the time, did you notice censorship having an effect?

ML: No, no, no, no. I mean, I think I was a bit like Queen Victoria, I kind of knew that homosexual men were around, but I knew very little about them, I did believe in them, but lesbian women I certainly didn't believe in, you know, because I'd lived in Wigan and this was my first experience of somewhere bigger than Wigan, and Wigan during the war, was a very - well I suppose all towns were - much more insular, than they are now, so you wouldn't meet many people, you wouldn't see many cars about of course because there was no petrol for them. There was a theatre, a rep theatre in Wigan, but it burned down, I'm not quite sure when, and the only thing I saw there was a pantomime. Ian MacKellan said he used to go to it, so there must have been more to it than I knew. But we weren't the kind of family would have taken us to see a play. The cinema, yes, but not a play. So it was new, and people were new, and boys were new, because I went to a girls' grammar school, so everything was new, really. There's the West Side Story programme. [Leafs through] When you see these people, like George Chakiris, television brings them to you, you know and they're incredibly old [laughs].

SP: So this is the programme for West Side Story, dated '57.

ML: Oh, I have a book as well. Before you go I'll find it, and you can get that copied if you like...

SP: Thank you.

ML: I know where it is. But most of these, the kind of things they did were sort of thrillers like, what's that Agatha Christie one that's been running for about three thousand years? The one in London?

SP: The Mousetrap?

ML: The Mousetrap.

SP: So that's the kind of thing that they...

ML: Yes, and three act, perfectly formed plays, drawing room plays. And I watched, on telly, on film, over the weekend, Look Back in Anger, and I realised how profoundly different, it was really, just how profoundly different it was from these three act plays,

and swish young men coming in in nice white shorts and saying 'Anyone for tennis?', which is how they were characterised, 'Anyone for tennis... or Dennis?'. [laughs] Oh, this one I thought was brilliant, The Lark.

SP: [Reading from programme] By Jean Anouilh.

ML: Yes.

SP: 1955

ML: Mm. I was a bit older of course, then.

SP: [Reading from programme] Translated by Christopher Fry.

ML: That's one that we must have chosen to go to, that one. The rest we went to because it was Friday and we were going to go to the theatre, but if it's after I'd finished at college, when I was working, it would be one that we'd really wanted to see, that we'd heard about and wanted to see. So that's what that one was. [taps programme]

SP: So, where would you hear about plays from?

ML: Well it would be Sheila probably who heard, rather than me. I mean I was only, and I am, your average Guardian reader, Manchester Guardian it was then, and we used to get the bus outside the Manchester Guardian offices, and I still read it. One word that I have that I keep in my vocabulary, I got from a crit, in the Telegraph, and the critic in the Telegraph was called W.A. Darlington, and the headline was, 'When comparisons are otiose', so I've used 'otiose', getting into trouble occasionally for using a word that nobody's heard of [laughs]. I also think I'm quite otiose! [Leafs through another programme] Joyce Grenfell you see was different, and there are other ones where it was bits and pieces, what you would call 'revue'.

SP: So this is another performance from 1955 with Joyce Grenfell.

ML: We've chosen to go to that one too, maybe because the previous one I had, was in the time when we were going to, you know, and we've chosen to go together to see the other one. I liked her very much. It amused me to find that Daniel Massey was a hooper in this one. He was a very well known classical actor, you know, later on, and Raymond Massey's son, and Anna Massey's his sister. [leafs through programmes] There's the one you mentioned, The Sleeping Princess.

SP: Oh, The Sleeping Princess.

ML: Yes. It was wonderful. This is the one isn't it? No, that's the ballet isn't it, the ballet. It was The Sleeping Prince. Stupid me!

SP: Well, I thought I'd got it wrong for a moment!

ML: I mean, I'd heard of her before.

SP: Mona Inglesby?

ML: Yes, yes. I thought I'd only seen one ballet coming, but I must have seen more than one. This was '53, when I was... you know, part of the first season.

SP: [Reading from programme] So that's Henry VIII.

ML: When I was still a student. Yes.

SP: The Old Vic Company.

ML: Yes, William Shakespeare. There are some, you know... there's the odd person you remember now. Eric Thompson who did The Magic Roundabout, Emma Thompson's father, was in that.

SP: Oh right, what, in this? Oh yes! Who was he playing? [Reading from programme] Lord Abergavenny.

ML: Mm. It was not a very big part, there were so many of them. And David Waller still plays Stratford, and television, he does quite a bit of television. [Leafs through] There are so many people doing extra parts, you wonder what happened to all those actors. Here's Vivien.

SP: Vivien Leigh?

ML: Yeah.

SP: Ah, The Sleeping Prince.

ML: Again, these were all familiar names, from film, and from radio some of them.

SP: So this is from 1953?

ML: Yes. That's a three-act play, I think, isn't it? I think most of them were. There you are, one-two-three, yes. That means there were two intervals.

SP: What did you do in the interval?

ML: You know, I've tried this too. I think they may have come out with ice creams, you know, but it was such a long way down that we didn't go.

SP: By the time you got down you wouldn't have had time to get up again.

ML: Well, exactly. Sheila gave me a piece of William Blake to read at one point, when we were going up the stairs, a bit from the Book of Thel, at the end of the Book of Thel, and I was so taken aback by it that I stumbled and fell down. [laughter] I don't know whether she was trying to do away with me! [leafs through] This is Ralph Richardson, John Gielgud, Lockwood West.

SP: So this is A Day by the Sea, by N. C. Hunter, again from 1953.

ML: Yes. N. C. Hunter is another famous name for perfect three act plays. Lockwood West, I used to hear on the radio, and he has a famous son, called Timothy. And an even, well, I think somebody who would be an even more famous grandson, Samuel West.

SP: Oh, yes, of course. So you've got this dynasty.

ML: Yes. I saw Samuel West a few weeks ago in Sheffield. And I saw him in Stratford, the best Richard II I shall ever see, I'm quite sure, and I've seen about eleven of those. He's a very, very good actor. I think Tim's okay, you know but perhaps Lockwood was the least successful.

SP: So, this was a production that was directed by John Gielgud, in which he also appeared.

ML: Yes.

SP: Do you have any memories of him?

ML: Of this one? No, no, very few, very few, and yet look, there are some famous people. Lewis Casson as well. No, I don't remember very much about it at all. It's a comedy. Yes, it must have had us rolling in the aisle, but I can't remember it. I have to

admit, I've misremembered some of the ones I've seen since then, of the 107 it was, some of them have just gone by. The Royal Exchange now, in Manchester, does a lot of world premières, and very often you think that must be the only time it's ever seen, you know, you have no faith in them. See a murder, there, see, another three-act murder play, like *The Mousetrap*. But the only way you would hear about these people otherwise is by film, or radio. Television didn't come in till... '53 was the coronation, wasn't it? And everybody borrowed a television from next door or went into, or you went in next door. [leafs though] Another three act play.

SP: So this is *Down Came a Blackbird*.

ML: Yes, I remember some of that, but I couldn't tell you what the story was. You either enjoyed it, you know, and certainly, I enjoyed all of them. I don't remember being bored, at all. [leafs through] And another three act play.

SP: *Waters of the Moon*, from 1953.

ML: Yes, another N. C. Hunter one you see, a comedy. He must have made a fortune doing those three act plays. *Sybil Thorndike*. She was married to Lewis Casson, who was in the other one. Catherine Harrison was in a very famous bunch of films about a cockney family. But I don't remember very much about that one either. Isn't it funny? [Now comes to Library Theatre programmes] At the Library Theatre, it was much more like... have you been to Stratford at all?

SP: No.

ML: There's a much smaller theatre, although with that, *Alice in Wonderland*, cast of thousands, no they're all, they're all doing about 4 parts [laughs]. *Alice in Wonderland*, that was a Christmas one.

SP: When you're saying it was a much smaller theatre, what do you mean by that?

ML: Well what I like best, at Stratford there's one called *The Other Place*, and initially it was a Nissen Hut, which was very, very cold in the winter and very, very hot in the summer. But it was very, very small, and the number of people who were watching would only be about 100, 120. And there was *The Swan*, which is a thrust stage, and we used to sit round both sides. The main house at Stratford - which is going to be changed - was a big one, you know, and I liked the intimate ones best. They closed *The Other Place*, because they had to charge too much for the seats, which is a shame because it was a wonderful theatre. So, the Library Theatre was much smaller.

SP: When did you used to go to *The Other Place*?

ML: Oh, since 1979, yeah.

SP: But the Library Theatre's still going, isn't it?

ML: It is, and you know we haven't been there, we've never been there... I think we should go; I don't know why we haven't. I suppose because we were going to Stratford so often, and always had a season ticket for the Royal Exchange, which meant we saw 4 plays in a season. There's the Duchess.

SP: Ah, here's your programme for The Duchess of Malfi.

ML: '53, November '53.

SP: So that's starring Barbara Lott as the Duchess of Malfi. I mean were these... were the actors in the Library Theatre Productions as illustrious as the ones that appeared in the Opera House?

ML: Well, no, I don't think they were. But astonishingly, or perhaps not astonishingly, some of them were going to be.

SP: So here's The Eagle Has Two Heads by Jean Cocteau.

ML: I've got a vague memory of that, but it is only vague. I think they were local, probably, to Manchester. They would probably have done radio, but they looked around a lot more, than the more commercial ones, like the Palace and the Opera House. Now I saw this one at the Royal Exchange, this is 1956.

SP: All My Sons

ML: Again, we've chosen to go to this one, you know, we've sought it out. Sheila was working in Manchester then, anyway, you know, and would be reading the newspaper.

SP: Can I have a look at this programme actually [takes programme for All My Sons]. Yeah, when I was photocopying this I noticed that the director has put a little note in the programme saying that the impact of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman was so great that they really wanted to produce more Arthur Miller plays. Do you remember people being really excited about Arthur Miller at the time?

ML: No I don't, but funnily enough we saw one last year at the Lowry, there was one at the Lowry, and I'd got three tickets, but I wasn't able to go in the end and my friend

Jean was furious and hated it, absolutely hated it, and she would never go and see a play by him again.

SP: Really?

ML: Hmm. I don't know why, she wouldn't say. But, yes, I saw John Thaw in the Exchange. [Leafs through programmes] I was just looking for somebody who would be famous, because... There! Robert Stephens.

SP: Oh yes!

ML: You see.

SP: Playing Dr Skillingworth in Escapade.

ML: The Headmaster. I think that's probably a three-act play. Yes. And they're always in things like [reading from programme] 'the living room in Hampden's house in London', 'Dr Skillingworth's study, in Ferndale School near London'. They're very middle-class, aren't they! But there's another one which, in his autobiography (or it's ghosted)...

SP: Robert Stephens' autobiography?

ML: Yes, now where's he gone.

SP: There he is - he's playing Bishop of Carlisle in Richard II.

ML: Jeremy, Jeremy, Jeremy, where are you. He wasn't in that one. As I say, this actor grew up to play Sherlock Holmes. Robert Keegan was in Z Cars.

SP: Ah yes, he was playing Fra Timoteo in Mandragola.

ML: Of course he did a lot of television. And he was in the RSC, Nicolas Nickleby.

SP: So this is a programme for The Hans, the Witch and the Gobbin.

ML: That was much later, that was when I was teaching in Manchester.

SP: Oh yes, in 1958.

ML: No it wasn't, it was still before I was teaching. I went back to college when I was about thirty and became a teacher. What was his name? Jeremy what? Brett, oh honestly. Jeremy Brett. He grew up to play, you know, a definitive Sherlock Holmes. And at this time he was only a young boy. And Robert Stephens said he looked after him. I mean, Jeremy Brett was gay, and Robert Stephens most decidedly was not, you know, but he really thought the world, the absolute world of Jeremy Brett, they were very, very great friends, which Stephens always cooled a bit by saying 'Nothing like that in it!' But they're... and there's another one that I knew, who had been a teacher, I wish I could remember his name, and he went on to write plays. He appeared in the Library Theatre, when he was still teaching, and then he went on to write plays, for everywhere, you know, film. I think he was the one who said, when they'd made that film of the Olympics, with the blokes who are running, do you remember? What was it called? And it won the Oscar. And this actor said 'The British are coming', he was the one who started as a teacher, with some friends of mine, who went to the Library Theatre, and then gone on to do film scripts and plays.

SP: So he wrote the script for that film?

ML: He must have done. You know the one I mean, don't you? You shouldn't be forgetting the names of things, that's my job! [laughs] But I think this gave me the thirst, which returned you know, as soon as I could do it. I mean I thought you had to, to get to Stratford, I thought you had to get dead men's shoes to go on the mailing list, I thought I had to go and queue at an unholy hour in the morning to get a ticket. And it's not, it's quite easy to get a ticket, you just ring up and off you went, you know. And it made things much easier. And I could go there on my own, which was something else. I couldn't have gone at this age [pointing at programme] on my own, I couldn't have gone to Manchester, to the theatre on my own.

SP: How come?

ML: I was too chicken, I suppose. Or too young.

SP: You've already spoken about going to the theatre in the fifties, and more recently. I mean, can you think of any major contrasts between the two eras of theatre?

ML: Well, as far as actually going there and being there?

SP: Yeah.

ML: Well, I mean you would think, that people would dress in evening gowns and stuff like that.

SP: Is that how it was in the fifties?

ML: Well no, if they were, it was in [the] stalls, and I don't remember them being at all... and we were just, you know, we'd been to college, and we were wearing what we'd worn at college, and we were not very well-off; it wouldn't have been posh. I think I would have been surprised to know that people had been having a drink, you know, that would have come as a surprise to me.

SP: You mean during the interval, or while watching the play?

ML: What did you say?

SP: During the interval or having a drink while watching the play?

ML: No, at the interval, at one of the intervals, they always do. And I don't remember how they got our tickets. I don't remember if Sheila went for them, or if this friend of hers bought them for us, you know, she would say, well, if she wanted to get tickets he would get them I imagine. I don't remember going to queue for them ourselves at all, because it would have been somewhere different for each of them and I don't remember at all how we did that. And I went back to Wigan by train and she went back to, gosh, Hyde, by train. [Points at sketch hanging on wall] That was done by this friend of hers.

SP: Oh right, this picture on the wall?

ML: Yes. It's a cartoon, showing himself going to Paris.

SP: Oh yes, and he's wearing a Trilby hat.

ML: Yes indeed.

SP: And he's carrying a suitcase in one hand, and an artist's palette and stand in the other.

ML: And an umbrella isn't it?

SP: Oh yeah. I don't know whether it's an umbrella or a stand.

ML: He knew Dégas and Sickert.

SP: Really?

ML: He made a living, painting, and he did a programme on children's television. He would go to a place like Wigan and do some drawings, and then talk to the children and finish these drawings off, telling them about the place he'd been to.

SP: What was his name again?

ML: Harry Rutherford. The street where his studio was, you know, when he was extant, was pulled down, and there was a new street built called Rutherford.

SP: Oh, that's nice.

ML: Mm. Yeah. So I mean I suppose I could thank him for being a theatre type. And, being honest, slightly obsessive! [laughter]. Admitting to it. Anything else to ask, any more questions?

SP: Well, is there anything else that you would like to add?

ML: I can't really think. You know how you go over things in your head, when you're going to sleep, and you think 'I'll say that, and that, and this,' and it all goes straight from your head. And you do say some of the things that you'd intended to say but not in the way you'd intended to say them. No, I think, theatre has made me whole.

SP: Really?

ML: Yeah. Well it should have done, I've been to enough productions, and I think it has, I think it has. I mean, I had a depressive illness in '67-8-9, and I've not been depressed since – I get down a bit, but I really do think it's made me complete. And that's why I did a lot more than just going to see it, you know, and I read about it after all this, whereas I didn't read anything, when I was nineteen. But I did enjoy going. But Stratford is the magic land. Lyonesse. There's a poem by, I know this isn't apposite, by Hardy, and it's about Lyonesse, and it begins, 'When I set out for Lyonesse, a hundred miles away', and the last line is 'When I returned from Lyonesse, with magic in my eyes.' And that's what Stratford was: Lyonesse. And you came back with magic in your eyes. I know that sounds sentimental, perhaps I am. But it had me dancing when we parked the car: 'We're in Stratford! We're in Stratford!'... Yeah... And I owe that to these performances. I could so easily not have met Sheila. And then I would just have gone home every Friday night, you know, and taken care of my sisters and brother. So yes, I've got a lot to thank these productions for. And I think, you know, I have looked on the website, and I wonder how many people you're going to get from the provinces, you know.

SP: You mean for the project itself.

ML: Yes.

SP: Do you think so many people are talking about their experiences of London?

ML: Some of them are, yes, indeed, some of them are. And the ones who are theatricals obviously do, because that's where they want to be, and that's where they've been trained and everything. But you don't know how many little old people are going around with magic in their eyes, you know, for the same reasons, really. And I don't know if it was more wonderful then, with Gielgud and Ralph Richardson and Laurence Olivier. But I have seen some wonderful actors, absolutely.

SP: It's been fantastic to speak to you. Thank you very much.

ML: You're welcome.