

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Philip Hancock – interview transcript

Interviewer: Jörg Pomplun

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Actor; list of theatre experience; education at drama school; sound in the theatre (music and effects); working with Peter Hall; experience with repertory theatre; idols and geniuses (working with famous actors) ; life as an actor; drama vs. comedy; role of music in the theatre.

JP: I would like to ask you something about your experience with theatre. We basically focus on the period between 1945 and 1968.

PH: I did my training at the Central School of Speech and Drama. That was when I got out of the Air Force after the war. That finished in 1951. My very first job was a play that went to the Edinburgh Festival that year which was Pygmalion by Bernard Shaw with Margaret Lockwood playing the lead, which I thought was delightful. Then I did some repertory in Ipswich, and in the whole season and in a whole year that was absolutely wonderful. Then I did another tour with play that was supposed to go into London but did not. Then I did some more rep. What else did I do? And then I went into a play in London with famous Jack Buchanan. Have you heard about Jack Buchanan, he is a very famous star of the 30s and 40s called As Long As They Are Happy which was the Garrick Theatre in London. During that time, because I do music as well, which I did tell you) I composed the incidental music for the play called I Capture the Castle which went into London. Then I did some more rep in Nottingham and I think Oxford, I guess I'm a bit confused. Then I did a play, a musical play called Marigold which ran at the Savoy Theatre in about 1958 or 9. Then I was in a play called The Connection which was an American play, about drugs and things, which went on at the Duke of York's Theatre which was very interesting. During which time I married my wife. Unfortunately I had a matinee on the day, on my wedding day. So we had a very hurried wedding and I went off after my matinee and my best man took my wife out for the evening. And we had one day as honeymoon for one day. Was back to next Monday to the performance. And then I did an awful lot of television during the 60s. Which were we really want to be, isn't it?

JP: Yes, indeed. Can you tell me something about your education at drama school? What did they teach you?

PH: Oh, we were taught movement, how to move across the stage, how to die, how to fall, simple things like that. But mainly it was the voice. How to produce a voice, big enough to fill a large theatre without ruining your vocal cords, which was the most

important thing I think. We did a lot of productions of plays and that sort of thing. We did exercises like having to recite a poem, which sounds easy but it isn't, when you are in front of a lot of people. We did radio technique we had a sort of studio, specially prepared to do radio. We had talks on television. We had a television producer. Television was in its infancy in those days, but we were taught television technique. I think the education was absolutely fantastic for its time. And we had a chap called Stephen Joseph who was a great devotee of theatre in the round. He started off the wonderful theatre in Scarborough which is still being run by Alan Ayckbourn. And he came to the theatre, to the school, and taught us about theatre in the round. And it was an extremely good education I thought after drama school.

JP: Could you tell me more about your experience with theatre in the round?

PH: Theatre in the round is when the stage is in the middle of the theatre and the audience all around on all four sides of the stage. It is a very difficult thing to do. I was not terribly happy doing it but it certainly works. Because, you know, quite in the way you are supposed to behaving, facing at any given moment. But it was a very valuable experience to do that.

JP: Do you rather prefer the normal type of stage?

PH: I am afraid so, yes. The all the way to the proscenium theatre the way you are protected by the proscenium and the orchestra pit that is how I was sort of brought up and still the way I prefer to do it, or would prefer to do it if I remembered the words.

JP: You told me that you were into composing music for the theatre. Which kind of technical devices did you use for recording and playing the sounds in the theatre?

PH: It was recorded on tape, as far as I remember. That was available at the time. I think it was tape.. It was in the middle 50s, so I think sound tape was available.

JP: Was there a real orchestra playing the music?

PH: No, not in the theatre. It was already pre-recorded. I believe the musician's union was not terribly keen on the idea at the time. They preferred having real musicians in the theatre. But for some reasons they got round that. So we just recorded the music and played it back during the show.

JP: What about the sound effects. Were they mechanically performed or were they pre-recorded?

PH: I was not concerned with that. I was very concerned with the music. I just wrote the music. And they recorded and used it as they wished. But the other sound recordings:

nothing to do with me. If you did use sound effects it was usually on 78 rpm discs. I think the 34 and a third discs were available. Most of the stuff was on 78 rpm, which was pretty tricky.

JP: In our talk we had before the interview you told me something about working with Peter Hall. Could you tell me something about that?

PH: Yes, that was in Stratford. I did a couple of seasons in Stratford upon Avon which was fascinating, I loved it. I played small parts and understudying. But it was a great experience. We did all seven histories from Richard I to... no what are the seven histories? Where do they start? [...] We did a whole lot of histories which was absolutely fascinating. But in my second season I was also engaged to play smallish parts and to be deputy musical director because the actual music director was away doing an opera at Covent Garden. So they found out that I could do music and I deputized for the whole season, which was again an amazing experience. But we had a band; I think eight musicians in those days. And I did lot of orchestrations and that sort of thing. It was fun.

JP: So what was so special about working with Peter Hall?

PH: He sort of produced a performance. He watched what we were doing and then used it to the best way he could for the play, if you see what I mean. That is what I found very stimulating. And all his co-directors did the same. They waited in a way to see what is going to happen and then coordinated all the efforts of the players. Very hard work, but it was fun.

JP: Did you enjoy more freedom of expressing yourself in comparison with other directors you worked with?

PH: You know it was a matter of time. In rep you are so pressed for time. You have to get on a play on in a week or a fortnight or whatever it is. But in this case we had about 8 or 9 weeks rehearsal which in a way was a disadvantage in that you kept of putting the final for as long as you could, rather than: it has got to be done like that. You see what I mean? So the final decisions were left open for a long time. It was not until several weeks we opened that the thing actually sort of settled down. Many people said that they came to the first night and then went to the same show a few months later and it was a totally different show. It is a...I cannot say mature, but it has changed over the time which was fascinating.

JP: So what did you prefer?

PH: I think I prefer the short rehearsal time. I do not know why, perhaps just angst to get the thing on, you know?

JP: How did you prepare for the shows? Was it just about learning the text?

PH: Yes, it was learning the text but also watching what other people were doing. As I just said I prefer the quick way of working. In a sense you just did what you thought was right and the producer would put it all together as far as he could. But in a way you were not really coordinated with the other actors. Whereas if you had an 8/9 week rehearsal period you could see and watch and observe what everyone else was doing. And you have got the feel of the play better and you could mould your own performance into that production that was going ahead. I do not know, I cannot make up my mind which I prefer but it was all great fun.

JP: What was your most favourite play you have ever performed in?

PH: I don't really know... I have to think about that...

JP: Comparing theatre today with the theatre after WWII, what do you think has changed during that time, for example concerning the abolition of censorship in 1968?

PH: It has changed, as I said earlier, but in a sense it has not changed. I think it is the approach that has changed. When I was learning, we trained, we learnt how to speak, we learnt how to put your voice over and that sort of thing. Nowadays they do that but I do not know, in our day the audience was terribly important and could shape the performance you gave. I think in a way that does not happen nowadays. Possibly because of television, which is a different animal altogether. And even highly trained actors doing television – it is confusing. I do not know what I am trying to say, but it confuses the approach you make to a play and a performance. I have done an awful lot of television, which I enjoyed, but I still being an old actor, I prefer to have real people in front of me. Even I did some comedy in television with an audience in the studio. But it is not the same thing. Because, when you have an audience in the studio, everything in the back of the studio, you have sound booms and people making signs at you all through the time, and you are not in contact with the audience. The audience is watching the thing on monitor screens – if you see what I mean. It is not the same thing at all.

JP: So how do you get a response from the audiences in the theatre? Did you make eye contact with them?

PH: Yes, you had to be aware every night or at every performance that there was a different set of people there who had different ideas of what they wanted from the play. There were some audiences who would react very quickly to a situation and some audiences would not take in the point sometimes. So you had to sometimes elongate the action, just to make sure they were getting the point. Some audiences found things screamingly funny and fell about, some audiences felt it was the dullest thing in the world. So in those occasions you just have to go very quickly through and hope for the best. When audiences were really laughing and enjoying it you played it up to the audience and made it as funny as you could. But it just made a different play. The audience is so important in the theatre it becomes part of the play, I think.

JP: Could you tell which kind of audience would rather laugh and which do not?

PH: No. It is different every performance. Until you start the play and get the first response or non-response then you can shape your performance according to what they are up to – if you see what I mean-. That is what it makes so fascinating. Every performance is different.

JP: Can you tell me something about your work in repertory theatre?

PH: It was just very hard work. A day started at 10 o'clock with rehearsal, 10 to 1, you rehearsed then. Then you had lunch break and then you rehearsed from 2 to 5. Then you went home and had some tea and started learning the play that you were working on. Then you went back to the theatre. We did the play in the evening from half past seven to half past ten. We went now back to have some supper, maybe a pint on the way, and started learning the words again for the next play we were rehearsing for, and then back to work at ten o'clock. It was very hard work, but it was such fun. It was such fun. You had to be a very solid unit, the whole company. You had not have time to make rows or "why did you do that" and "I want to do this", you just had to get on with it. And it cemented the whole company together. It was just great fun.

JP: Did you actually have an idol, an actor you specially admired?

PH: No, not me really personally. I mean, I enjoyed amazing performances all done from the great actors of the time. But again I found you cannot really learn from geniuses like Olivier and Gielgud. You go and stand in the corner and you watch them and they do such amazing things. If you try to do the same thing you just be copying them, which is not good at all. You have to find your own way. So in a way you cannot really learn from geniuses like that.

JP: What is so amazing about them?

PH: You may have heard about Jack Buchanan. He was a very famous star during the 20s, 30s and 40s. When he first came to rehearse with the company I went into the rehearsal room, which was about full, about 50 people, press and staff and management and all that, the only person in the room you could look at was Jack Buchanan. You know what I mean. He just stood out. And when he walked on the stage the audience was so overwhelmed by it. I do not know why it is, but I thought it was just genius. That is why I am saying: if you have not got it you cannot just learn it. But it was amazing the way big stars like that could take over an audience completely.

JP: Do you remember any outstanding directors or actors you have worked with?

PH: Oh, there are so many. There are names few people would know these days. There are so many amazing people I worked with but I cannot really single them out. I will say

that I did work with quite a few quite big stars and they were all absolutely wonderful to me. You know, you often hear they do not really care about anything. No, no, I found the bigger the star the more conscious they were of other people in the cast. They did not bulldoze their way through and saying I am a great star. They were extremely quiet about it and certainly helped me to do various scenes and “wouldn’t you like doing that” or “if you perhaps moved up there” and little things like that they were saying, apart from that the director would say. Oh, they were so kind, and really were kind. And I learnt a lot.

JP: Before the interview you mentioned that you had to bring your own costumes to the rehearsals.

PH: Oh yes. You had to provide all. Whatever you were playing – except costume play, where they did at least hire period costumes – but all everyday clothes: your sports jacket, your shirts, ties, shoes, evening dresses – dinner jackets and that sort of thing – hats, you had to provide, always out of your meagre salary. But as I said before: you did all that and you managed to save out of eight pounds a week.

Another strange thing that happened about that time was that you were not paid during rehearsals. You were only paid when you started at the actual performance. So you may have done three or four weeks rehearsal for nothing before you actually got paid. But that changed very soon after I started being an actor. But that was one of the things you just accepted. And then equity for example we thought is silly. Yes it is silly, why am I not being paid for all this damn hard work. I mean, rehearsals were far harder work than the actual performance and you did not get paid for it, which was weird. But that is all over now. You get full pay from the top, you know, which is fair enough.

JP: That might have been another advantage of repertory theatre in contrast to the Peter Hall production, for example, as there was less time for rehearsal and more performances during the week you might have been paid more.

PH: Yes that is right yes... No I do not regret it, you know. When I look around and see other people’s jobs I am so glad that I was in the theatre. And as I said earlier on, you are constantly out of work. That was part of the job to be out of work. You did so many odd jobs to make up the money. As I said: petrol attendant, petrol pump attendant. I was a packer in a wool factory for a long time. You did all these weird jobs and you met totally different sorts of people. And it was so useful for when you are acting it is great

JP: Did you have the impression that during your work at the theatre the process of analysing and interpreting a play for yourself changed the way you performed and that it enhanced the whole performance?

PH: I have to admit that I did not do that. I was very lazy. I have to admit. I did as much – or perhaps a little more – than was necessary to get the performance going. I never dug very deep and I am ashamed to admit it. I wish I had; I may have got a bit further had I put more into it. I might have got more out of it. But that was me: I did as much as

– or a little bit more perhaps – than was necessary. You know, when you come on stage and or deliver a funny line and the house goes wild with laughter. I mean, what more do you want? By trying to dig deeper. You know, I preferred comedy and I was quite good at comedy. But I never felt a need to dig any deeper than I did. I am ashamed of it. I wish I had.

JP: So did you actually performed in any Pinter or Osborne plays?

PH: No, not as a rule. I did mostly like comedy or musical. When I was in rep and we did straight plays or dramas and things I felt terribly uncomfortable. And fortunately the producers or directors seem to know this and they always give me small parts in these things, so that I need not be around to much. But I found it rather depressing – well no, not depressing – but awkward. I was not right for drama at all. I preferred comedy. That was theatre. Television is again different. I mean, I did quite a lot of television drama. It was a different feel. But we are talking about theatre. And I was not a digger, I am afraid.

JP: Do you think that the audience in that time rather preferred well-made plays and comedies?

PH: Well, in those days yes because that was what they were used to. I mean all the writers of the 20s and 30s and 40s were amazingly good playwrights. They just beautifully constructed plays. And I think the audience got used to that sort of things. That is what they were used to. And I think Pinter and all the other moderns brought a completely new field to the theatre, which – you know – was a good thing. They added to the attraction of the theatre. I am sure they did. But that was not my cup of tea, I am afraid...Thank you very much for listening to me. I hope what I have said is of some use to use to you.

JP: It is very interesting

PH: I just have so enjoyed my time and I have not got much time left. But I really have enjoyed my time as an actor, being fun, and as a musician, too. Even in a way having composed music is in a way even more satisfying. Even when you arrange somebody else's music for certain orchestrations you are still leaving your little fingerprints on the arrangements. I loved it hearing your own stuff being sung or played or whatever

JP: So I reckon music played a big role in your life?

PH: Yes, I think if it had not been for the war, I would have been a musician rather than an actor. I was chorister in a cathedral for five years and it just got into my blood. But along came the war and I joined up and I found it was easy to get in, to act and make people laugh. So after the war I decided to be an actor. But if it hadn't been for the war. I would have gone into music. It has been terribly important to me, amazingly important.

JP: Do you think that music changes the way the audience perceives a play?

PH: I think it can help. Incidental music is just sort of to underline or quietly to underline a mood that you wish to present to an audience in a play. I do not think it is terribly important.

JP: It isn't?

PH: I think film music is... Yes, it is, it [music for theatre] is quite important. Because if the right kind of music is written for a play it helps to establish the mood the producer wants to establish. Yes it is, I am sorry, it is important. So I sort of decry my own abilities in that direction. I think, you know, when I have written such music I say that is all right, you know. And it has been quite important to a play and I hate having to admit it. You know what I mean. I do not think I was clever as I think I am. If you see what I mean.

JP: Which kind of social status did an actor during that time have? Was it an occupation which was appreciated by the people?

PH: Yes I think so. Certainly in rep when you were in a town – in a repertory company for a year or so - you became part of the town and people waved at you in the street and said: "You were terrible last night", you know. It was great to be part of that society. I think it is the same when we got to the West End – if were in a West End play – you impinged less upon the street company. I was so proud to be in a West End play, that was wonderful. I think actors were possibly passed over or taken a lot for granted – which is fair enough – but I do think we do contribute quite a bit to people's happiness or unhappiness, whatever it is.

JP: Do you think that theatre during the war had a stabilizing effect on the people's emotional state?

PH: I do not know. I really cannot tell. As I told you, I have never really thought about such things, I have just done things and enjoyed doing them. But I am not really thinking what the result would be. I very much doubt that theatre has had any effect on the general direction of life in the 20 th century. But it might have, I do not know. Individually people obviously have been to a play and it has changed their lives. But that is individually, you know. Oh yes, it has had that sort of effect. People who have seen a painting that has changed their lives or listen to a piece of music. Yes I do not think generally it had but I am very likely to be wrong.

JP: Thank you very much for this interview.