

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Thelma Barlow – interview transcript

Interviewer: Gregory Povey

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Actress. Bristol Old Vic; Birmingham Rep; critics; Edinburgh Festival; female theatre managers; Liverpool; Glasgow; Nottingham; repertory; repertoire; theatre grants; Theatre Workshop; touring; West of England Theatre Company.

GP: So how did you get into theatre?

TB: Well... I have to give background: my father died before I was born, and so there was no money in the house at all, because ladies weren't... there weren't jobs for ladies to go out to work, so my mum couldn't work for quite a while. And so by the time I was sort of senior school there wasn't enough money to let me do School Cert and go on an extra year, so I had to go out to work as soon as possible. I did a short-hand typing course, I went to night-school to do more, decided after two or three years it was very boring [laughs] and did drama and speech training at night school – purely arbitrary choice. Just plumped for that. No, no possible idea one could ever become an actress, it was just an interest. I did a lot of amateur work, and the amateur groups in the north were very active and very competitive. And worked in Huddersfield and Bradford where there was a drama school, so a lot of those students, when not working, would do the direction or act in the plays, so it became – I realised afterwards that it felt very much like a professional company, and the standards were high and the plays were wonderful, we did such a wonderful variety of plays there. And then eventually I realised I was enjoying the night-work much more than my day job, so set off for London. I only knew one person, I didn't know how to get in the theatre or anything, but met at Theatre Workshop – oh, I met Ewan MacColl, who was a great folk singer and worked with Joan Littlewood at Theatre Workshop. I met him on the radio, I started doing radio in the north, and he said, 'Well, if ever you come to London, get in touch with Joan Littlewood' – my life's been blessed, charmed. So I did that, she auditioned me, which was terrifying, and put me into this one play, which was because her own company had started to be successful and they were transferring one of their plays, *The Good Soldier Schweik*, to the Embassy at Swiss Cottage and she got together a sort of scratch company just to put something on for Theatre Workshop, an adaptation of hers called *The Chimes*, Charles Dickens... so because of their very strong political principles there, the poor were all good and the rich were all bad [laughs] and so it was a very unbalanced piece, I think! But interestingly enough, Michael Caine was in it, one of his early jobs. I had met up with another friend from the north who wrote plays – Anthony Gill [Hooley?] – and he said 'Let's put on a play that I've written about a Second Coming, let's do it in a church.' Now this was 1954,

GP: Yes.

TB: Very unusual, very innovative. So we went round God knows how many churches in London to see if anyone would do it. Finally found a vicar at St. Giles' here in central London. I can't even remember where we rehearsed it - it must have been each other's houses. And Michael was in it, he was the Christ figure, I can't remember if I played his mother or Mary Magdalene [laughs] but we put it on hoping to get publicity. Hit a newspaper strike, so no publicity! But in that company was a young actor who told me he'd been in the West of England [ed. Theatre Company] the year before, and would I like him to give my name to the director to go do it and join the company, because in the summer - I mean they were always working these things - she had three companies, and in the winter she kept one company going. We lived in Exmouth, in Devon, and toured Devon, Dorset and Somerset. Longest journeys were about two and a half hours, west, east, north, in an old bus. It was wonderful, it was the best, it was one of my most happiest jobs, it was lovely. And we were a very young company; we had to be to live through it! We rehearsed in the morning in Exmouth, went home, grabbed a bit of lunch, and made a sandwich or something, got in the bus in the afternoon and set off to the destination with all the props, costumes, scenery lighting and everything.

GP: What plays would you be performing at these?

TB: Well, Exmouth we did a week, our home/base, and then we went out west as far as Plymouth, as far north as Barnstaple and as far east as Weymouth. So those were the longest, but in between there were places like Chard, Bridport, Dorchester, Chiddock, Sidmouth, Seton - you know, the whole range, it was like one night stands. But we came back every night in that old bus, which broke down and we had to sleep in it, oh, I mean it was nightmare stuff, one thinks now, but at the time we were ecstatic about it, really hard-working, and we did good plays. We took good plays around. Some of them were just village halls - Huish Episcopi was one place, [laughs] I mean, extraordinary place - sometimes they were so small, the village halls, that if you exited stage left, you had to go round the back of the hall to get in if your next entrance was stage right [laughs]. One actress, apparently, one night fell over a sheep in her party frock and never appeared [laughs] in her next scene! Someone had to go. She'd sprained her ankle, or fractured it or something. But it was wonderful. You know, it was very hard work because you had to unpack the whole van, get everything up, and do the play, and then come down. There was one lovely lady who had a furniture shop in Exeter - we played Exeter sometimes - and I think it was about once a month, she would send a huge cardboard box of sandwiches, cakes, lemonade and stuff. And that was our big treat, because we were paid so little and we just had to live. I know that at Theatre Workshop, everybody was paid five pounds - and that was quite low, even then - and they told us that the proper company, the regular company, if they had any left from their five pounds at the end of the week, they handed it back. And that one of the actors hadn't been able to leave the theatre for three weeks because he hadn't any shoes. So they told us all these stories, and it was rather saying 'Aren't we wonderful, that we're suffering for our art' so I got a bit narked at this, I thought 'Oh, come on! [laughs] Yes, alright but don't moan about it!' So anyway, that was a wonderful opportunity to go to the West of England and while I was there, I met and married the

designer there. I was there a year and a half. And I'd better leave a gap or two in case you want to ask any questions.

GP: I was just wondering, the plays you performed, were they new ones, or were they adaptations, were they popular plays or...?

TB: Oh no, no not adaptations of plays, we did the full thing. But, oh, we would do modern plays, or period plays, I don't think we did any Shaw there, and I didn't do any Shakespeare there. But we would do Coward, and they had to plan the plays, you know, for the people that would come and see them. Yes, you would get some fairly good writers who could do a huge variety because they had to keep things lively, you know. I suppose that there weren't many classics because of, you know, the audience, certainly in the summer when we had the three companies and we just travelled all around. But it was three-weekly rep you see, which meant you had plenty of time to work on the script, and that was rare because most of the rep then was weekly, so we thought it was wonderful to have that.

GP: What was the atmosphere of the repertory groups at the time?

TB: Which one? Are we talking...

GP: Yes, the repertory ones.

TB: Mind, I always had great experience. As I said, I didn't really enjoy my Theatre Workshop experience; not that there was anything wrong with the people who were brought together for this company, but we were only there for that one play and I was so disappointed to find the theatre itself wasn't run in the way... and the attitude wasn't what I'd hoped for and expected. But the West of England, that's fifty years ago and I've got friends from those days – a lot of really good friends, because it was very bonding, as you worked so hard, you know.

GP: What were the audience reactions to the plays?

TB: Oh very good, yes. And we did things like, you know, I'm a Camera, was one we did, and that was terrific, because as soon as they were released for repertory, the people who ran it would sort of run, because they'd be the ones in the peoples' minds because the theatre-goers had read about them and hadn't got up to London to see them. So they'd see us. But we were all young, and there was one guy who used to direct, he was a bit older, but we were all playing old people [laughs] and young people, and anything, and you felt convinced that you were convincing [laughs] you know, you're quite sure you could...! You know, you did the makeup, and dyed your hair and did all sorts of things, dyed your clothes, your shoes. We had a wonderful wardrobe there, which was run by a very autocratic lady, who always loved her designers, and because I eventually married the designer I was, thankfully, accepted, but she could be very, very difficult – very good on the costume, but because Exmouth was a place for

retired people, a lot of wardrobes. People would come down, be there to sort out, chuck out all the clothes when someone died, and we had wonderful period clothes, they'd have kept their Victorian ball-gowns and things like that and beautiful kid gloves, it was brilliant wardrobe!

GP: I suppose that helps, working on a budget?

TB: Oh gosh, yes, I'd say! I didn't know whether they got any grant. I can't remember the people who use to give the grants, British Council maybe, or Council of Repertory. I think there was something called 'CORT' – the Council of Repertory Theatres. And they, I think they... because they used to come and check us out, they must have been giving money, to make sure it's being spent properly.

GP: How did you come to work in Liverpool after West of England?

TB: Well, this is where my luck has been so remarkable. The designer who left just as I was joining the company - and the man I married took over as designer there - went up to Liverpool to take over as designer, so that was the big leap for him. To go from three-weekly, travelling rep, to Liverpool where there were doing three-weekly, and sometimes monthly rep, was a huge step. Perhaps it was all monthly, I can't remember. I know they were on the list of places to attain to. And he'd been there about a year and a half, and they were doing *The Glass Menagerie*, and that's one I'd done about four times I think. And the actress was - of course they, the reps, would engage a cast for a season or a year (of course, we called it a season) – and the actress who would have played that – the juvenile, the little sort of role in a company you know: the juves, male/female juve leads and then leads and characters, and everybody had their role - she had... they'd just done a play which somebody was talking about putting money in it to transfer it to London. So they couldn't cast her for the next play. Alan had seen me playing... the designer had seen me playing Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* in the West of England, so he suggested me for it, which was wonderful. So up I went and got the job and they said, 'Would I be free to stay for three months' and, well! 'Yes, I shall' I said, I hadn't been married for very long, but 'yes' I said! [laughs] And then I stayed there for a year and a half actually, because the plays came up and I just got part after part. And again, they were very interesting, we did do Shakespeare and Shaw there, a great variety of plays, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller – we did *The Crucible*. So that was wonderful, and when you've got to that stage of moving up to a company like that, they had great kudos, so they could engage reasonably good – well - very good actors in fact. They had a lovely wardrobe department and scenery department and access, well we actually had two pianists in the pit in those days, there. They used to do the music before the play started, any music that was needed in the play, interval music and going home music. So they were very essential. And that went along with matinée teas, you know, which were current. I don't think they brought their tea into the theatre actually, there, I think they must have had it out in the reception, I can't remember. But that was a beautiful theatre, lovely little horseshoe theatre.

GP: How do you feel that the Liverpool and West of England theatre was perceived in relationship to London?

TB: By whom?

GP: Well, by people and critics and...

TB: By people in the business?

GP: Yes, in the business as well.

TB: Well, I think the main four, I suppose – Bristol, Liverpool, Birmingham and Nottingham – I think they were all regarded as being the top of the repertory heap. And certainly for new plays the critics would come up. They would occasionally come for something else, but they would review new plays up there. And there was an award given at the end of the RADA, kids who were coming out of RADA at the end of their term, and there was a job at Liverpool Playhouse for whoever they decided would get it, so that was also of interest to the press. No, they were regarded very highly as sort of 'the outposts of the Empire', and London's always the centre of it. Some of the work going on there really was... could have been compared very well with London.

GP: Were the reviews something you would pay particular attention to?

TB: Me personally?

GP: Yes.

TB: You can't help being affected by them if you read them, so it's best not to read them. I think you have to say, 'Well that person and that person, I, really I admire their reviews, and I sort-of feel like-minded about things that I see that they've reviewed well or badly...'

GP: Who would they be?

TB: Oh, I can't remember now. God! dear it's a long, long time ago. No, I don't think Tynan ever came up or Hobson did I think... oh I think maybe we had Hobson. I can't remember any others. I mean they were the two main: The Observer and The Times. You bought those every week and read avidly. No, I don't think Tynan ever came up here.

GP: But he was someone you were aware of?

TB: Oh yes, yes.

GP: You were in Smoking with Lulu recently?

TB: Very interesting that play. Very interesting how it came about. A young woman living in Victoria, British Columbia, quite back-woods I think, not right in the centre, was very interested in theatre, and at some car-boot sale or something she bought a pile of old New Yorkers and read all these interviews that Tynan had done in them, and he had done quite a lot because he was commissioned to do them. She suddenly could see that there was a play to be written about his interview with Louise Brooks. I just think that's so imaginative, to pick that up and imagine what might have happened, what their conversations might have been. Very clever.

GP: inaudible

TB: Where do we go back to? Ah, Liverpool. The theatre itself, and most theatres had a strong, very strong, theatre manager. Well, obviously there's Joan Littlewood; the West of England had a lady called Joyce Worsley, long gone now... well... not so long gone; and Maude Carpenter at Liverpool was known throughout the theatrical profession. She'd started as a programme seller and just worked her way up. She was a battleship! I mean, she really was! Or a galleon in full sail... I don't know which! But she was a very big woman, and heavily corseted, and occasionally, very occasionally, she'd give you a big hug, and you sort of crumpled against the steel corset! She ran the theatre wonderfully well, it was very successful and the staff adored her. She was, again, autocratic, but because she'd come up through the ranks she understood it. And I think, just jumping back, where we were doing everything – I mean I didn't do electrics - well, I did once and made a hash of it! – but you know, you sort of understood how everything works, how you put a set up, put up the braces and the cleating, and the weights, and you understood what the prompter had to do. So it gave you an overall vision of how it all worked and the importance of everybody's job. And that's the lovely thing about creating any play, I think, is the fact that everybody has a really important job to play in it, and, you know, everybody deserves respect... if they're doing the job properly, not if they're not! Back to Maude Carpenter, wonderful name, she was known for her quips, and apparently - I'll just tell you one! - at one meeting they were deciding upon the plays for the following season. I hadn't been there, but they'd done *The Wild Duck*, and somebody said, because they liked to have a really good range, 'Well, what about *The Seagull*?' and she said 'We're having no more bird plays.' [laughs] 'We didn't do well with the last one, we're having no more bird plays.'! [laughs] Dismissed a whole, huge part of theatre and writing just like that! She was wonderful. You needed that, again, you have to find someone to run the theatre well to get the old bums on seats! I went back to the theatre in the seventies, I think, and did some more work there. Oh [whistles] must have sixties, very early seventies before I did *The Street*, and it was not being run in the same way since she'd gone, but beautiful theatre, loved it.

Next was, having gone there, my husband then went to Birmingham Repertory Theatre, we used to meet at weekends, he from Birmingham, me from Liverpool. And they asked me if I would join that company, so [laughs] hasn't it been a charmed life? So I went down there as their juve lead. Well that was even better than Liverpool, because Bernard Hepton was directing. An actor directing, I think, understands these things better. The

director we had at Liverpool was gorgeous, but he was not an actor, might have been at one time, but Bernard wanted a company where every actor was as strong as the next and therefore could... you know, you're not always taking the lead in the play, which was the ideal, I loved that.

GP: inaudible

TB: Birmingham Rep, Sir Barry Jackson's Birmingham Rep. Again, that was sort of the next shelf up, because they were much more of a classical rep than, even the West, so that was you know, very much the next good step. And there it was lovely, because one played a huge variety of parts again. And it was monthly, and it was well run, again by a very strong lady actually. I hadn't actually thought of that until now. Nancy Berman, wow! Gosh! And she ran that rigidly, like the armed forces I think! But they had great charm, and yet they were very much in control and discipline was all there. Ian Richardson had just joined the company there; Johnny Stride had been the winner; and Carolyn Blakestone that I worked with at Liverpool; Terry Nabb. Ian joined and we did Hamlet; that was perhaps the only Shakespeare I did there. % % %

GP: Who did you play?

TB: Hamlet? Ophelia. And then we did a wonderful cod-version of Hamlet called Fratricide Punished, which, apparently, we took it to the Edinburgh Festival. Wonderful title isn't it: Fratricide Punished! And the story went by William Poel, at the turn of the century: it was concocted by wandering players, British, English actors going to France, Germany and somebody said 'What's the latest one Will Shakespeare's written?' and they'd either been in it, seen it, had something to do with it, and they said 'Oh yeah, we'll do that for you.' So they cobbled it together from their memory! It's hysterical, you'd love it, see if you can find it to read, because whole scenes are condensed into two lines and it's hysterical. [laughs] So we took that up – with another... two other plays I think - to the Edinburgh Festival, so we did that, so I had two goes... Oh no, in that, I played Ophelia when we did it in Birmingham and then I played, oh God what was the fop called in that? Oh it'll come to me, it's a long time since. Because I'm just dealing with Romeo & Juliet at the moment, Tybalt is in my head. Anyway, it'll come.

GP: What was your experience of the Edinburgh Festival?

TB: Well, it's nothing like it is now. It would be exactly 1959, it was biggish, but it was nothing like it is now. We played in the Lyceum I think, yes, we did The Yorkshire Tragedy, Fratricide Punished and maybe something else... maybe not, maybe just those two. Well, I had just discovered that I was pregnant, so I was sort of feeling a bit 'Oh dear, oh, what am I doing here? I should be with my husband.' And so I wasn't up to going out at nights and going to a lot of things in the daytime, I just didn't feel up to it. So I didn't do it. My sister lived up in Scotland and my mother was staying with her, so I think they came over a couple of days and we did things, but other than that I didn't go and see things.

GP: That's a shame.

TB: Yes, it probably is. The others seemed to be going out after the show and living it up.

GP: How long did you stay in Birmingham?

TB: Another eighteen months. No, that was just very well run. There was a very old designer called Paul Shelving who... I mean he was very famous for working with Sir Barry Jackson, and certainly, yes, people did take note of that. I think one was paid a bit more. And we had a flat, and we could actually afford to go out and have tea, Chinese meals at lunch-time and things like that. Yes...! Because it was very near the railway station, we used to go over to this little railway restaurant which had beautiful white table cloths and waiters in big white aprons, and, you know, that really is so far away from the times now. And have egg on toast on... on first nights the only thing you wanted was poached egg on toast because of the nerves - you needed something, but that was it. And then, I think, I stayed on there and Graham Barlow, who was my husband, got a job at Nottingham, because he was assistant designer at Birmingham, so he got a job in Nottingham as designer with Val May and he moved there, and I stayed on in the company until Christmas, when I was six months pregnant, really had to leave at that point, so I just joined him in Nottingham and then didn't work again until the first boy I had was about a year old. And worked in Nottingham.

GP: Follow the leader...

TB: [laughs] Yes. Just, I just did one play and it was a Willis Hall and Keith Waterhouse play called Celebration. It was the première and Oscar Lewenstein decided he'd like to take it to London. Now that was quite innovative then, 1961.

GP: How powerful was Oscar at that point?

TB: Oh, quite. Very powerful. Though I think there were about fourteen of us in the cast, it was the North Country, it was wonderful, the first part of it's a wedding and the second part's the same family in a funeral situation. Funny... very funny play. I said, 'I can't go with this young baby'. You know, people didn't travel around... They used to travel with their babies, but it had come to a point where people didn't want babies in digs and all that sort of thing. So I said 'Well, I can't go'. And they came back and said that he would only do it if a full cast can go, he wants it exactly as it is, so you know, blackmail. We won't be touring, and we'll go straight into the Duchess and blah blah blah. Which we didn't, we then toured for five weeks having signed the contract. So that was a bit nightmarish. Here we hit a heat-wave, a really big heat-wave, up in the nineties. And so theatres weren't air conditioned, and all theatres' takings were going down and so we only lasted about three months, but it was very unusual to bring a repertory company to London, and a North Country play, you know, not the ideal thing for London! But anyway, we lasted the three months. Then, during that three months, my husband had, with Val May who was the theatre director and administrator, got the

job at Bristol Old Vic. So by the time I'd finished the play here, Graham was in Bristol. So we then lived in Bristol for, well 'til 1969, that's about eight years. I had another child. But the Bristol Theatre was really the tops.

GP: Who was there at the time?

TB: Well, Val May was the director and theatre administrator, director, company director... Graham was designing, Chris [Harris?], who eventually ended up running the school in Bristol, I think still does actually, he was stage director. Actors, people came and went a lot, but there was Barbara Leigh Hunt, and Richard Pascoe, I should have looked these up before I came. Really terrific, terrific actors that I can't remember the names of now, but you could look it up, I'm sure you could research them. Peter Baldwin was there, who eventually worked with me on Coronation Street. A lot of actors, his policy was to have a core of actors and to bring in a lot of people in from London, because it had such a reputation people would come and work there.

GP: So, sort of semi-repertory.

TB: Yes, it had a nucleus. And because we lived there and I had another child there, I only did the odd, about one a season, two a season, thinking of the season as to Christmas and then after. Just because I thought 'Oh! If I don't, I'm going to forget how to do it!' [laughs] And then my husband decided to take a degree course as a mature student. Fortunately, thank God, they asked me to play pretty well consistently there, so we at least kept the wolf from the door. I then did the three years he was there working fairly consistently.

GP: How was repertory theatre affected by plays that were going on in London at the time?

TB: Well, obviously you couldn't do it until they were released, either American plays. And once they were released, most reps, like these top ones, would put it in their season.

GP: How did you acquire the plays?

TB: I don't know... French's used to be the big company. You'd get a French's Acting Edition script, little blue books... or maybe they were all different colours, I just remember the blue ones. And that would be an absolute copy of exactly how the play had been done in London, with a photograph of the set and the cast of course, and everything, every move was written down and expression, and some lazy directors would keep to it. They'd think, 'Well, if it worked for London, it must do here.'! [laughs] I'm afraid I can't think of any actors there, it might come to me while we're talking.

GP: What did you do after Bristol?

TB: Well, then we moved up to Scotland. But that was 1969, and so that's out of your period.

GP: It's fine.

TB: We moved to Glasgow, Graham got a lecturer-ship at Glasgow University, and I thought 'It's alright, loads of work up there'. Edinburgh, Glasgow, there's radio, television, theatre. WRONG! Because we hit a peak of Scottish nationalism. Suddenly there was a great surge of Scottish nationalism and they didn't want English actors. I was deeply hurt, because for the first time I felt a sort of racism, I suppose, and I thought 'Well, come on, one's worked in the theatre all those years with Scots, Irish, Welsh, Australian, New Zealander, wherever, and that's never been a thing to think about'. If they were good they were good, and if they were bad you didn't want to work with them, and that was the only criteria really. It was so insular and awful. I did some radio and the first year, as I say, I did some work with Giles at the Glasgow Cits because he wasn't of that mind. He'd just come up from England too, he was an Englishman in Scotland. But it was everywhere, we'd just hit a very bad time for it.

GP: [inaudible]

TB: I did a play at the Lyric in Edinburgh, no Lyceum, Lyceum in Edinburgh and then Cits. Some radio, and then as I say, Giles said 'We're just going to have to employ youngsters straight from drama school'. But I saw the best Hamlet I've ever seen there during that period. No, wrong, it wasn't the best Hamlet, it was the best Ophelia, all male Hamlet. Everybody was in black and I think it was against a black set probably, but I realised it was her positioning. It's a very difficult part, Ophelia, but where she was placed on the stage in relation to what was going on, the scenes that were going on, gave her a terrific reason to be there and to behave as she did. It was interesting. % % %

GP: Going back to what you said earlier, about how Liverpool and Birmingham were run by strong women, it came as surprise to you...

TB: It did! I never thought of it in that way!

GP: Was the theatre male-dominated at the time?

TB: Oh yes. Oh, everything was, love! God, that's going back a long way. Everything was, yes. And now, I think one just accepted it, and assumed that they were going to be right about everything and they had every right to be there. I've learnt a bit more sense since then! It was a surprise to me. They must have just been found to be good in that job, I think. It's a very responsible job, and maybe it's one of those jobs that men don't want to do, because it's doing a lot of jobs at once

GP: [laughs]

TB: You know, I'm just working this out now, it's quite revealing actually [laughs]

GP: How did the type of plays that were performed from when you started repertory to the end when you moved to Glasgow, how... Did they change at all?

TB: I don't think it did. It didn't, because they have to be, I think they have to fit a lot of criteria. They have to fill the theatre if they can. You're not going to do that with every play. But then some plays have to please your Board, your Trust, they like to know you've got a good selection across the board. If you're getting subsidised by whoever, and if it's an artistic grant, they have to make sure you're doing enough plays that they consider artistically worthy. They have to look right across the board. The second year I was in, I was only in for six months, then a whole year, in Liverpool, our director of productions had been over to America and he'd seen a lot of plays, so he fitted about five plays, I think, American plays into the season. It was like he'd chosen a theme, so we did *The Crucible*, and we did – oh I know, we did, what's that American one, with 'doll' in the title? Oh not American, I mean Australian – we did at least three new American plays that he'd seen and then we always did a musical in Liverpool. At the end of the season, there was always this big romp musical; we did a Christmas play - all the reps did a Christmas play - and they would probably run that longer so that they could be sure to make a bit of money on it. It must have been a hell of a job making things work [laughs] with the money. I look now sometimes, or go to the National. I saw something quite recently, and you thought, 'The money that has cost!' - thousands, thousands, thousands of pounds. And I know it's wonderful and you see wonderful things there, but this wasn't particularly good: what have they done it for? It was huge cast, it was lavishly over-designed. You know... So it is very uneven. The money goes out very unevenly, I think, when you think about opera subsidies. Nightmare! I have never wanted to have any thing to do with that, of the administrative side of the theatre at all.

GP: How lavish or bare would your sets have been?

TB: Well, a) depending on how much money there was, and the ingenuity of the designer, to a large extent. And then you'd have to think, we've got something coming up with three sets, so they'd have to pace their money through the season. And they are hugely expensive to make, but all the big ones, all the big reps had their own workshops, you just hoped you'd get a good designer who'd be able to keep within the budget. I don't know if it ever did. That must have been a nightmare working out budget, clothes, staff, crew. Hated it!

GP: Do you have any particularly fond memories of any production or play?

TB: I have very fond memories, actually, of before I became professional, when we were up in Bradford. The director I worked with a lot there, and the actor - actor-designer - are still my very close friends, and I live quite near them, and they did sets and direction on *Lulu*, so it's been a lovely coming together again. And on some plays I did up in the

Leeds in the Playhouse there, since I left Coronation Street. You do meet people in life, which you either know now or will find out, that you just have huge rapport with and you just have a sort-of shorthand of speech, you know almost before they say something what they're going to say about direction, and that was David Giles and Ken Miller. I mean David's done wonderful work. He eventually went professional about a year after me and Ken. David was trained as a professional, but he chucked everything up, came to London and took his chance. He's really had a wonderful career since. Those are the sort of warm memories. Then the West of England, where, again, one bonded with people because of the excitement, it was so exciting, you were young and you were having the opportunity to play all these parts and be very much part of the putting the set up, getting the lights rigged up for the dressing room, ironing the costumes. It was the most encompassing experience I think. You got paid nothing, you did your lines going home in the bus for the next day, it was just absolute focus on the job. I loved that.

GP: It would be an education you'd recommend.

TB: Oh, yes. I don't know where people'd get it now. It would be very hard. I think there are companies that probably base themselves and travel around with their sets and costumes. I don't know much about them, I'm sure there will be. It worked. I don't know how much it would now, with people staying home to watch television, but it certainly did then. That was their big excitement in all these villages and little towns, seeing us once every three weeks. So that was a very warm. I mean I've enjoyed it all; I've really had a brilliant, brilliant time. Again, a lot is to do with the people. Immensely. A lot to do with the work, but it makes or breaks it if you're working with good people, and people that you like and get on with. I am just thrilled that I've got so many friends from those days, from Birmingham and Liverpool, and everywhere and we're all still in touch. And we all still go to the theatre, not together, but you keep the theatre still going, it's very much at the fore of your mind. It's taken over life really. Neither of my sons have gone into the theatre, one did for a short time, but it wasn't for him. It would have been if he'd gone in when I did, but it's a different being now. Very different. It's tougher, it's not harder work. It's more... I don't know how to put it... it's still the warmest of all the media. Radio's still got that nice sort of feeling of coming together and working together, but there's a toughness about, and a brashness about television on the whole... I mean that's why I enjoyed the last one so much, it wasn't there. But it's a bit more dog-eat-dog I think. And one was always warned about 'Everybody's out for you! Watch your back!' the cattiness and all of that. I have not found that at all. Maybe I'm just insensitive and I never noticed it! [laughs] Passed me by. I mean now, I'm going to meet Peter Baldwin who I met at West of England Theatre Company, and then again at Bristol, and then again in Coronation Street. These things just go on. And, you know, as much as having enjoyed the work, and now I'm enjoying watching theatre, I don't want to do any more, those are the sort of building blocks in your life. They mean a lot, and you shared so much, and I really admire actors, because the responsibility and the vulnerability is huge. You just stand up there to be knocked down really, like something in a fair ground. There's always people out there saying something, the critics. Do they even realise how much work has gone into this? You might not like it, but these people do. And the responsibility because you're just trusting, you've got to trust the person. You go on stage at half-past seven and you know you won't be off 'til half-past ten and you think 'Please God that everyone says the right thing and we get through the play and tell the story.' You know it's a fantastic thing to do every night, isn't it?

GP: Very much a team process?

TB: Oh yes, that's what I love. That's what I love about it. I love that. And that's why now, in television, because you just learn it, go in and do it, there's not much time to rehearse it in most things, there is in a few, and you can tell which ones they are when you watch. Is that bonding and creating together? You're all in the same boat and you're trying to make sense of something and make it the best you can.

GP: Thank you.