

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Mark Kingston and Marigold Sharman – interview transcript

Interviewer: Rebecca Marriott

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Actors. Accent; Alec Guinness; Binkie Beaumont; Samuel Beckett; Butlins; Chichester; Robert Helpman; LAMDA; Vivien Leigh; Look Back in Anger; The Norman Conquests; Old Vic; Laurence Olivier; John Osborne; repertory; special weeks; stardom; television; touring Australia; Peter Ustinov; Waiting For Godot; Webber Douglas School of Acting; Kenneth Williams.

MK: Well, I went to LAMDA in 1952 aged 18, and spent most of the year I was there working on losing my Cockney accent, and then at the end of the year we put on a show that producers and directors were invited to and I did a drag act impersonating Douglas Bing, singing 'Comin' through the rye'; on the strength of that, wee Georgie Wood - who was in the audience - offered me the part of the Emperor of China in Aladdin at the Boston Hippodrome. Diana Dors was playing Aladdin, she and her husband Dennis Hamilton, and we became good chums and when we got back to London they asked me over to an evening meal. One of the guests there was Peter Ashby Bailey who was preparing a summer repertory season in the town hall at Bridgewater in Somerset. And he asked me to join the company as ASM, Assistant Stage Manager, playing what he described as 'small parts'. Well the great luck I had - and it couldn't have been greater luck for any actor - was that in the company was Kenneth Williams, who was the character man, and Ken... after the first day's rehearsal of a play called Travellers' Joy in which I was playing an RAF officer, I walked away the first morning from rehearsal and Ken came up and said, 'Is it your intention to lose your voice by the end of the day?', and I said 'Well, not really...!' and he said 'Well let me show you how...' and he showed me how to [in loud and throaty voice] instead of producing a sound being an RAF officer like this, killing my throat, [projecting his voice without shouting in the way Williams demonstrated] he showed me you could do it in quite a simple way without affecting your throat at all, you know what I mean? And that was Ken throughout the season as my mentor and I'm in debt to him. He was invaluable, because he just cut through bullshit and he just told you what was true... and that's how it all started anyway. But no, to go on to Boston Hippodrome which seated, I don't know, a couple of thousand people and stand there as the Emperor at 19 or whatever I was then, and try and command the stage was very testing, but Dors was awfully good and she went on and had a good career but then an untimely death. But they were encouraging and a good group of people. It was the only big pantomime I ever did - I did smaller ones - and that used to be remarkable to see a full house of that size! It was a huge theatre, packed, and so it was a good way into the profession, and then the sheer luck after that of going down to London and meeting someone who's just about

to do a repertory season... can you imagine the luck of that? He says 'Do you want to come and be...' so I've told you that bit anyway, so luck plays a massive part.

RM: Absolutely.

MK: I mean that... I'm trying to think of other instances of tremendous luck, yes, jumping on many years, Marigold and I had done a television series for about 18 months called United!, it was a kind of Eastenders of the time, it was about a football team...

RM: When was this?

MK: We all filmed it in Birmingham, in... oh God... it was in the late sixties. The part that luck plays is that we came out of United!, which Marigold and I were both in, and work didn't come that easily - we'd been in a television soap and it's not like today where Eastenders and that can make you, those days it was [snide accent] 'Oh, you're doing a soap are you?' and looking down their nose, but we did it and we had a great time doing it and then it finished and we came back to London and... [to Marigold] I think you got some work pretty quickly didn't you Mari, in rep, you went to Bromley or somewhere? Did the Bromley. And I was not working and I needed some photographs and went up to a little road off the side of Charing Cross Station to get them, and when I went back to collect them, I did, I set off and it was rush hour and everyone was going on to the train and I thought 'I can't face this back to Fulham standing all the way... I know, I'll nip into the Green Room Club', and that was the biggest stroke of luck ever, because sitting in the Green Room Club was Michael Aldridge, an old chum and he said 'What are you up to' and I said 'Nothing' and he said 'Well you know [John] Clements is casting for a new season at Chichester, oh and there's this part of the sergeant major - it might be right for you, I'll speak to him tonight.' Well he rang me that night and he said 'No, John says too young and too small' and so I thought 'Oh well, that's tough but there we are.' Next day the phone goes and it's Clements saying 'Look, would you like to go along, I've had a think about it, go along and see Ustinov and see what he thinks,' and I said, 'Oh crikey, yes!', went along and saw Ustinov in his flat in Euston Square and chatted to him, but I could see in his eyes that he thought that I was too, you know, too young and too small, the things that Clements had said. And I suddenly twigged that he did like talking about himself, Peter, and it was always, I have to say, immensely rewarding when he did, because he was the most wonderful raconteur who ever lived and was brilliant. So I said 'Could you show me, Mr Ustinov, how you think the part should be played?' and of course he started [puts on a broad and loud cockney accent] 'I am thinking it is all the obvious cockney sergeant major sounds,' and did all that you see, so I said 'Could I take the script home for the night and, er, come back and do it for you tomorrow?' So I went and spent the entire night practicing to be Ustinov as a sergeant major, which I did and he said, soon as I finished, he said, 'Yes, the part's yours.' So the luck of not getting on that train and just making... and I was quite fit at the time, I don't see why I should have worried about standing on a train back to Fulham, but I did, and that job led to bringing the play into light, and meeting Alec Guinness, because Alec Guinness was down at Chichester at the time doing The Cocktail Party. He came to see the Ustinov play and wrote me a very kind letter, then when the season ended, the one play going in to London from that season was The Cocktail Party - The Unknown Soldier wasn't going in - and he asked me if I'd like to take over the part of Peter Quilt in it. Harsh on the actor playing it I have to admit, but, you know, that's not my problem.

And he said 'Would I like it' and I said 'Yes', and I went and met Binkie Beaumont who was part of the management, he ran Tennent's - H. M. Tennent's, the biggest management in London at the time - and I got the part and that led to me doing four or five plays with Alec you know, and the luck of that!

RM: What was it like working with Alec Guinness?

MK: Oh tremendous, he's such a wonderful actor himself and a fine director and a very humorous, engaging man, he has a reserve about him, I think, to the outside world, but if you're a chum, you're a chum and after a while he ceases becoming Sir Alec Guinness, and it's Alec as a mate, I don't say that grandly, it's just a fact and you'll find anyone in the theatre would say the same. And so I got to know him and we went for many weekends to their home near Petersfield in Hampshire, and Marigold and Merula Salaman were friends, and we saw them quite often through his life and through their life.

MS: Wonderful dinners, the most exclusive London restaurants.

MS: Well I was just going to say about the...

MK: Wonderful dinners, the entertainment...

MS: Restaurants that we had HEARD of, never opened the portals of, and Alec and Merula, they did that for us as well as being very kind, and indeed I think they took to us as friends?

MK: Oh, you're joking – of course!

MS: Well, we were a bit younger than them, and they didn't really know me because they'd never seen me act, and that was really very important to them. But it was great - they had a lovely country house, and we used to go down there at weekends, and it was stunning.

MK: Which eventually was... they lived in this wonderful quiet place, as I said, just outside Petersfield, and it was ultimately ruined by a new motorway put down the side of the hill beyond them and I think I remember seeing A27 Brighton to wherever... and you would sit in that beautiful garden and just hear 'whoosh whoosh whoosh' the whole time. But they stayed there till the end, Alec died, not in the house, he died in hospital and then not long afterwards Marigold – Merula! - had died after less than a year. And he has a son Matthew who I talk to on the phone and now lives well away from London. But it was...

MS: It was the end of an era for us.

MK: Yes, yes, with his death because, you know, when your close chums go, and I think he's the closest friend I've had die, I can't think of any of our close friends who've gone.

RM: If you could tell me, both of you actually, a little bit about how you got interested in theatre, a bit about your background, you mentioned you studied at LAMDA...

MK: Yes before that I'd - again another stroke of luck, I suppose, I started with a stroke of luck. I suppose my life started with a stroke of luck, and that was that I was in a school in London called Greenwich Central, that was between a grammar and a secondary school, it was for us who were middle educated [laughs] and a master came to that school who believed in teaching literature through drama, and I remember the first day he got there, Tom Love was his name, and he said 'I'll teach you drama, anyone not interested in that and getting up and making a fool of themselves might as well leave the classroom now', so I stayed, a lot of them got up and left, but they all came back eventually because it was terrific fun, and that's how acting got into one's system, you know. I thought 'I love this, I'm not much good at anything else, but this, it seems to me, I might have a crack at.' And then after I left school I had to go to work and I worked in the city, a sort of office boy really, then I moved to another firm called Briscott Sales in Fleet Street, and one day a dep came in for one of the secretaries and she started talking about 'You don't want to do this all your life do you?' she said, 'What do you like?' and I said 'Well, I like acting', she said 'Well where do you...?' I said 'Well, I don't do it anywhere,' 'Well, go to Toynbee Hall'. And I went to evening classes at Toynbee Hall and worked on a-e-i-o-u and all, you know, vowel sounds and tried all that, and then it was due for me to go into the army, at that time there was conscription, and I thought 'Well, now's the time to become an actor!' Anyhow, as luck would have it, because of a bad shoulder injury I was given grade four-whatever-it-was at the time, and I didn't go in the army and I went to LAMDA instead and I got a scholarship there.

RM: What year did you start at LAMDA?

MK: Well it must have been about 1952 because I was 18, yes I was born in '34 so it was '52. I got a scholarship, but I had to work because my parents couldn't keep me, although I lived at home for a while and travelled backwards and forth, so like a number of other actors there I got a job in the evening, I worked in a coffee bar for quite a long while. You miss out a fair bit, I have to say, of the extra-curricular work in a drama school if you have to do that, but there you are.

RM: Actually, I was curious, you said you spent your time at LAMDA trying to get rid of your cockney accent, was there a big emphasis on that?

MK: Oh yes. The thing that really charged me up on the first day there, LAMDA had this system where you moved into their little theatre, all the new people in front of the entire school had to get up and do their audition pieces - and that was chilling I have to tell you! - and I had done a piece of Hotspur and a piece of Shaw's from Simpleton of

the Unexpected Eyes which went [Cockney accent] 'Let life come to you, sounds alright that don't it? Let life come to you, but supposing life doesn't come to you? Look at me, what am I? An empire builder, that's what I am, a Cecil Rose that's me' and so it was that kind of character. The other one was Hotspur [Received Pronunciation] 'The king is kind and well we know the king knows. . . .' well I did it and then you stand there and the school is allowed to criticize you. And the guy who did it now lives round the corner, I see regularly, John Bromley, he said, 'Yes, very good, you're of course going to have to work very hard on your cockney accent,' I said 'Oh, but it was meant to be cockney,' he said, 'What, Henry IV?' [laughter] It was still coming through a bit in that, I'm afraid. So that's how LAMDA came about, and it was then I did a year there and then the Georgie Woods/Diana Dors pantomime where Diana Dors was playing Aladdin. She and Dennis Hamilton - her husband - and I became friends, and when we got back to London they invited me over for dinner one night, and in the company at their dinner table was a man called Peter Ashby Bailey who was about to do a repertory season at Bridgwater, Somerset, in the Town Hall. And we were chatting and he said 'Well would you like to come down as an ASM and play parts?' I said, 'Well, yes, I certainly would'. So I went there and the great luck of that was that in the company was Kenneth Williams, who became a kind of mentor because the first days rehearsal, a play called Traveller's Joy I think it was, in which I was playing an RAF officer. And I went at it full throated [in upper class accent] 'Hello old boy! How are you?' and all that rubbish and at lunch Ken Williams came up to me and said, 'Is it your intention to lose your voice by the end of the day?' he said, 'Because you'll never survive, you'll have no throat left tomorrow if you carry on like this.' And then from then on he would just point me, because there's such a simple way of doing it without killing your throat. And then of course, once I'd been given the clues and throughout the season, he was a great, great help. I never saw much of him after the season finished but he once wrote to me when I was doing a television series up north, a very kind letter, and we met and had a meal together, but I never saw him again. But he was a tremendous man and there's been quite recently a programme all about him which I watched the other night with all his friends talking about him and the particular genius he was and had. So then what happened after that? That was Bridgewater.

RM: Perhaps you could tell me a little bit about meeting Binkie Beaumont?

MK: Well, yes that was later on, that was when I met Alec Guinness. Meeting Binkie Beaumont was very simple, I only just met to say, 'How do you do?' and do a piece from The Cocktail Party for him, and I had to get back to Chichester because I was still in the company down there, and I did my bit and came off into the wings and thought, 'I've got to get a train,' so I dashed off, and then, of course, I heard from Alec, who said 'Why did you dash off like that?' and I said 'Well, you know, I had to get that train,' he said 'Well, Binkie just wanted to say the part's yours if you want it.' So that was it and then I did The Cocktail Party with him, and, as I said, I did a number of other plays with him. It was The Cocktail Party, Yahoo and Voyage Around My Father, the three that I did there.

RM: How was Binkie Beaumont's style of theatre, how did you find that?

MK: Well, I don't know if it was his style, but he was the principle producer of Tennent's, I mean he was the boss of Tennent's, which was the most distinguished

producer in London at the time. I didn't really know him, I only met him, I would think, a handful of times and that was always very cursorily, I mean so I can't tell you much about him other than he was a slightly remote man he seemed to me, a little haughty, but very generous and encouraging and that's all one needs from a producer and to keep playing your wages because that plays a part too, just making a living to begin with when you're... In rep in Bridgewater I was on 5 quid a week; that's not as bad as it sounds now, but even so all it paid for was the digs and the food - there was nothing over for anything else.

RM: And under Binkie Beaumont how were your wages?

MK: I can't remember, I think I got 80 quid a week, which was quite a leap. But when one goes back and to rep and does other, because I went off and did other weekly reps and what you call special weeks at places, the wages were minimal because they couldn't possibly pay any more. Have I done the Isle of Wight yet? I haven't, have I?

RM: No.

MK: That was my second big season as an actor in rep and I got a job with a management called Barry O'Brian and he did a season each year at Shanklin and Rye. In fact, at some tender age, whatever I was, early twenties certainly, I was a kind of leading man who played all these massive roles one after another, week in week out! No one from the cast, I think, would you know now; there was a divine Italian actress called Liza Gastone, a bit of a film star, she was in it... enchanting girl. I can remember the first rehearsal of the play we were doing with her, when the director said to her, 'Would you move below the sofa?' Which, I don't know if you know any theatrical terms, but it means 'downstage a bit'; and she started to crawl under it which was very touching and very funny. It was a good season, but I did wear myself out, because the parts were enormous. One play we were doing, I remember it was called A Question of Fact, which Scofield had played in London, and it was monumental part, and I did the Monday afternoon dress rehearsal and hardly knew a word and I thought 'I hardly know a word - I can't go on tonight, there's no way I can go on!'. So I went to the end of the pier and got on a boat to go home. Now had that boat pulled out - here again is luck - had it pulled out I'd have been finished, no one would have employed me. I suddenly sat thinking, 'This is crazy,' and I went back and I got through it. How I got through I will never ever know, because from stumbling my way through the dress rehearsal I went on that night and did it, I knew it. Quite extraordinary, this is what happens, I suppose once the terror has been replaced by, 'What the hell?' it all becomes clear. So I did that and that was a good, ooh, whole summer season and I cannot remember now...

RM: What year was that, sorry?

MK: Well, I'm just trying to think, it was certainly in the mid fifties - early fifties, mid fifties? - because I hadn't been at it that long. I'd done Bridgewater and then done a couple of other things - whatever they were - and odd weeks in rep, because there were such things as what they called 'special weeks'. All the repertory companies did it - that meant that when the repertory companies were doing a play that they couldn't entirely

fill with their permanent company, they called in people to do what was called a 'special week'. Yes that's one of the great expressions I remember, 'a special week', 'I've got a special week,' you'd meet an actor in London, 'Hello Charlie, how are you?' 'Oh, lovely, I've got a special week in Crewe!' And our expectations were so low, in a sense, I mean all we wanted to do was keep working, didn't care where it was and what it was. There were degrees of actors' successes from people like, as an example, Albert Finney, we joined Birmingham Rep together. Seeing this 18 year old boy walk on and start to do his bit you knew there was something there you'd never have, you just knew that this was a really special talent and quality of sound. He was able to produce as well, and of course it's been proved, he's gone on to become one of the most distinguished actors in British theatre, one who had the sense to turn down a knighthood! [laughter] And over the years going round rep you meet loads of actors who become friends for a while and you see each other all the time, and then never see again. I did Birmingham first with Albert when he went there in I think it was '56, and then in 1958, having left, I went back for two years and Marigold was in the company and that's where we met, fell in love and got married. We got married after we left Birmingham - I went off to do a tour with the Old Vic to Russia and Poland, Marigold went off to tour in the musical, what was it called? We'll remember the name later... Salad Days!

MS: Yes, all over England, it was lovely.

MK: Yes, you enjoyed that didn't you?

MS: Lovely dancing, yes... a lot of dancing!

MK: While she was doing all that, I was doing my tour, and then soon after that, the Old Vic asked me... Vivien Leigh was going to tour Australia and South America with the Old Vic and they asked me if I would go and play these parts. Of course I was very keen to go and I said 'But y'know, much as I'd love to I just can't because I can't go without my wife being with me' because we were just married, they said 'Well let us meet her' and Marigold auditioned and got into this company and so we went off for this wonderful tour of Australia. We spent 6 months in Australia, during which time one of the venues was Brisbane and we got married in Brisbane - we didn't tell any of the company, our only witness was the church cleaner [Laughter] and then we all met to go off - we had a break after Brisbane didn't we? And we were all going to go on holiday...

MS: I think it was ten days wasn't it? And one of the nice boys had fixed up - it wasn't an hotel...

MK: On the island?

MS: It was a...

MK: Chalet.

MS: And he said 'Would you like to come?' and we did and I think it was ten or twelve of us on this magical little desert island...

MK: Called Heron Island on the Great Barrier Reef...

MS: Yes it was lovely and on that day there were 10 of us I think there were about 12 pigeons and 14 sparrows and then when we came back...

MK: Many years later we went back...

MS: It was 2000 tourists and it was just awful.

MK: I don't, Heron Island, wish to ruin your reputation, because I'm sure it's still a wonderful place to visit, but it is not the same as it was when you were little chalets and only a handful of people staying there.

RM: How was the theatre in Australia? How did it compare to British theatre at the time?

MK: Well, I had little contact, I didn't know where the Australian theatre was, I mean in Perth... What was the order of our tour? We went first of all to Sydney, which was the nearest you'll get to European in the sense of, I don't know the different people...

MS: Gold, glitter and things like that.

MK: Gold, glitter, whatever, and culture, there was a sense of a culture in Sydney.

MS: It was like a Victorian place.

MK: We went to Melbourne first didn't we? Yes, which I liked very much, but it was at the time at a bit of a low coup once you'd been to Sydney and seen the vitality of Sydney, but I'm told that's not so now, I'm told Melbourne is the most sought after place to live. But we did Melbourne, then we did Brisbane and that's where we got married, did the Barrier Reef, when we came from Brisbane we must have gone to Adelaide, and we did Adelaide and then we did Perth, and Marigold's only relatives really live in Perth...

MS: I never worked out whether they were glad to see me or not [laughter] I think I took them by surprise! But they liked me anyway.

MK: They were thrilled that we were able to meet them, they were only, what? Cousins? First cousins I was told, and they lived there practically since they were born.

MS: Yes they were born there...

RM: And of course you mentioned Vivien Leigh...

MK: Yes, Vivien Leigh, of course, the most divine looking lady and on her good days an enchanting person, but she had other days, you know, she suffered great, I think troubles and melancholy and depression.

MS: I would hear the voice say [shrill, affected voice] 'Marigold! Marigold!' MS: I would hear the voice say [shrill, affected voice] 'Marigold! Marigold!'

MK: Marigold became her sort of amanuensis, she was always calling on her – do tell the story of the boat!

MS: Oh yes! We had taken a flat in Sydney...

MK: In Elizabeth Bay, which is right on the front...

MS: And I was talking to her one evening and she said, [a weak, affected voice is used throughout to voice Leigh] 'Where are you living?' and I said, 'Well, it's just a flat in the dock of Elizabeth Bay.' And she said, 'Oh, I'd love to see it' so I said, 'Oh, Miss Leigh, it's quite small!' then I thought, 'But it has got a boat!', and I said, 'Would you like to go out on the boat with us? Because there's a very nice man who knows all about boats and he would take care of it,' and she said 'Oh, I can't think of anything nicer! And Jack will come,' - Jack was her dear friend, sweet, sweet man - so I said 'Well, I'll go and arrange it'. And I got the harbour master, who came out, and she said, 'What time shall I be there?' and I said, 'Let's say half past one, then perhaps we could have a little lunch somewhere,' she said 'Oh yes! I have a picnic basket and ooh! Everything will be in that!' I thought, 'Oh...' so I said, 'Well that's very sweet of you darling,' – but all this time I was calling her Miss Leigh, I'd been with her for four months – and I think we were going to go for 1 o'clock weren't we? The harbour master was there in a polished cap and we were there and that was all, and then she came down, [to Mark] and it was wonderful wasn't it? It was a full sailor's outfit she had bought, a little cap, and a lovely... all navy blue with hundreds of gold buttons...

MK: Jacket, yes.

MS: And she said, 'Will this do?' and I said, 'Oh, Miss Leigh! It's lovely, how sweet of you [aside] makes us all look silly, but you won't.' She said, 'Are we going to get into the boat now?' and I said, 'Is that alright Harbour?' and he said, 'Well I'd like to...

there's a bit of wave...' so she said, 'Oh alright, let's go into the boat,' she said, so I got her into the boat and she sort of sat there holding very tightly to this picnic hamper, and Jack was there, thank God. Was he there?

MK: No he wasn't.

MS: Nooo... No he was! Yes he was - sorry darling, but he was. Jack Merivale was one of the sweetest men, he was Gladys Cooper's son, and your mummy might remember Gladys Cooper...

MK: I doubt it, far too young!

MS: Ah well, probably. And so anyhow, we sat there and she was clasping this basket and Harbour Master said, 'I'm so sorry Miss Leigh,' he said, 'but it's a bit rough I can't get you out this minute,' she said, 'Oh dear, Marigold, hold my hand,' so I said, 'Oh, darling, it'll be quite alright, [as if to a child] Harbour Master knows what he's doing,' she said, [hysterically] 'I don't know that he does!' And so, my dear, she sat there for 5 minutes, then just stood up and went.

MK: We had to go and have our picnic in our flat...

MS: We had to take her up to our tiny little flat and the picnic was bigger than our bedroom! And it was just ridiculous wasn't it really? And she had borrowed this beautiful outfit...

MK: Bought it, gone out and bought it or something, she never borrowed clothes from anybody!

MS: Lovely cap, everything blue...

MK: It was very touching.

MS: She was funny.

MK: But she was, she could be simply enchanting, then cause great distress in the company because of silly actions. And one example, what was the one in Brazil, do you remember in Rio? It was a very powerful, a very rich man in Rio, who wanted to give her some...

MK: Entertain the Vic, in a big party.

MS: Yes the whole Vic he asked, didn't he? And she came to my dressing room and said, 'Are you going to the party tonight?' and I said, 'Well yes, I think it'll be lovely,' and she said, 'Oh I don't know, I'm worried a bit about it,' so I said, 'Oh please don't darling, I think the gentleman's put it all on and it's going to be wonderful,' I said, 'I hear there's a quarter mile thing up to the hacienda and it's all going to be with little flower girls,' she said, 'Oh, awful,' and I did have to laugh at her, and I made her laugh. Anyhow we did, I took Jack and Sheila...

MK: Well, we all went up, the whole company went and the gates were open and up we walked along and there were all these petals being thrown in front...

MS: Yes it was wonderful and the house itself was really... It's everything...

MK: The house was magnificent.

MS: Yes...

MK: Where it fell apart was he - I went into his library and he had a library the size of the Albert Hall! I exaggerate of course, but it was a massive room, every single book in white kid, and I thought, 'I've got to look at some of these books,' and I took one book down, opened it and it was a James Bond paperback. I mean he had everything...

MS: They were all like that, weren't they?

MK: Everything! And they had been just covered in white kid, I mean it was just astonishing. Anyhow, what happened?

MS: Well, I was thoroughly enjoying it, I mean there were some very nice entertaining people and so on, then suddenly that grip came on my arm and that was, I think it was Jack, who said, 'Marigold, you have to come, she's getting funny.' And she'd laid herself out on the floor. She was laid out as though in the fainting position and then the one eye opened and said 'Marigold,' she said 'I have to get out!' I said, 'Oh, Miss Leigh, please, this gentleman's gone to so much trouble, the half mile of school children with flowers and things...' you know...

MK: And packed with all his distinguished friends as well...

MS: And I didn't know what to do, I tried to pacify her but she wouldn't, she just wouldn't, she said, 'I can't stay, and I shall make a real scene if you don't get me out,' oh, and I thought, 'Oh I don't know' so in the end I said 'Well...'

MK: And he came down and was distraught, and she said, 'I'm sorry, I was so overwhelmed by the excitement and the thrill of it all.'

MS: Yes, she did frame it quite nicely, but he had to clap his hands and all the little girls had to go out and take her back with the flowers, it was just ridiculous.

MK: But then, what was even worse, was we got outside, got in the car and she said...

MS: 'Right, now,' she said, 'now we can enjoy ourselves! Where are we going, Jack, what have you arranged for us?'

MK: And we went off to this restaurant and so the man must have discovered this happened because he would have known everything that was going on, oh it was just grizzly but I suppose that was what made her what she was, she was so quixotic and changeable, and enchanting one moment and menacing the next. But it was an experience I would not have missed for anything.

MS: No, and she was very sweet to me really.

MK: Yes, you became her chum on the tour.

MS: And one day when we were on the stage, I think we had just taken the bow, there were only a few of us in this thing and she just came up to me as the curtain fell down and she slapped me with her fan and she said 'There you are,' what was it she said? 'Waiting to play for me, waiting to. . .'

MK: No... Yes, she'd seen you standing in the wings at rehearsals as well because Mari understudied her as well as played her own part.

MS: And she said – she was quite furious in a way, only a tiny way...

MK: Well, what she said, if you remember, was, 'I hate you standing there watching me do it when I know you can do it so much better than I can.' Because Marigold was a far, far better actress...

MS: Well...

MK: Except for rare examples like *Gone with the Wind* in which she's breathtaking...

MS: Oh, yes, wonderful, she is a cinematic actress...

MK: And in Streetcar. In cinema she was wonderful, on stage she was just a bit too thin, just didn't have enough carrying weight...

MS: I think she got bored with it...

MK: It wasn't that, it was just vocally and all that didn't...you see, when you're playing 'Ashley, Ashley...' that wonderful quality you can do on screen, you can't do that on stage. Even the tenderest moments playing the Lady of the Camellias, you've still got to hear her, it's no good lying there going... you've got to pretend you're like that, but project!

RM: A lot of the things I've read about Vivien Leigh have talked about the weakness of her voice, but I did read one story that talked about her depression and how she would be throwing a fit back-stage one moment, but go on stage incredibly poised and ready to act.

MS: Yes, she could do that.

MK: Yes, I think all actors are capable of that. For many years I was a chronic migraine sufferer - I used to have buckets in the wings to go off to be sick into, and this is where I owe Alec a great debt in that the only performance I ever missed once was when he wouldn't let me go on at night because I'd been so ill during the matinée - I know what it's like.

MS: He rang me, I was sitting here, and he said, 'Marigold, I think you must make him come home, I want him to, please, and I don't think he'll do it unless you tell him to,' and I said, 'Well, if that's what you really want, Alec, I'd be very grateful, because I know how these migraines...'

MK: Normally you got through them. If you were not doing your job - if you were socializing, sitting at home - you'd go straight to bed with all the pills you could take and brave it out, because, I don't know if you've ever had migraine, but it's not just a headache, it's intense, and to be on a stage playing a quite vigorous role with one of those was paralyzing. I don't know what set me off on that story...

RM: Vivien.

MK: About Vivien and that, of how you can be one thing off-stage and come on and do it; but if the gremlins are haunting you, or the pain is agonizing, it's an awful battle, and certainly being an actor on stage with migraine was no joke. I never get them now, they went away in my late forties or fifties, and I never had one since. Until then I had them all my life.

MS: And we never saw Vivien again, did we?

MK: No. She asked you to tour for her... with her didn't she?

MS: Yes, she did... [remembering] Understudy! Understudy! No way! So, you know, it was a shame.

MK: But what was your principal reason for that? As well as not wanting to understudy, there was another very good reason...

MS: What was it?

MK: You said to the management, which was, I think, H. M. Tennent, 'Who's directing it?' and when they told Marigold she said 'Not in a million years!'

MS: Robert Helpman! I mean, he's a dancer!

MK: But he'd directed us... well, I say directed, he sat out front and waved a wand or something you know.

MS: Oh it was awful, awful! No, I couldn't go through with it.

RM: What did he direct you in?

MK: The plays we did in Australia: Twelfth Night, La Dame aux Camellias, and Duel of Angels.

MS: It was a wonderful year.

MK: As an experience. The cast... The only one you would know now - who I knew would go on to do best of all of us because of his voice - was Patrick Stewart, who was playing a very small part, had hardly any lines, just a walk on really, but a good lad and I knew... the quality of that voice, if he developed as an actor and got the break that every actor needs... and he got it in spades didn't he? What was it called that television thing he took over?

RM: Star Trek.

MK: Now, you get something like that and you can act as well...

RM: Was he good to work with?

MK: Well he did so little, I mean he didn't work, he just walked on!

MS: You did all the work!

MK: He played tiny bits you know, but he was an agreeable lad. I don't think I've ever seen him since, but that happens in acting - you do a tour with people, you get to know them, you get to become chums in a sense, then you finish a job and you never see them again. I mean, it doesn't happen all the time, but I've made very few new friends over the last few years of my acting; acquaintances that I might see, but not chums, like, I suppose my oldest chum is John Standing who had a good career - I told you, John Clements and Katie Hammonds, Katie Hammonds was his mother - and he's remained a close friend, a writer called Thomas Frisby [whom] Marigold and I have both worked with in rep, and he wrote some good plays and a handful of others, but on the whole...

RM: Working with Vivien Leigh, did you ever meet Laurence Olivier?

MK: No.

MS: Yes. He came into... not with her...

MK: Not with her, no... Oh! We were in Frank Finney's dressing room at Birmingham...

MS: Frank Finney was a friend and we had been to see a play at the rep in Birmingham, and then suddenly the door opened and there was Sir Lawrence and we all dropped deep curtseys and he said, 'Oh God!' he said, 'You were working with her weren't you!' and we just told him a few little stories, didn't want to be rude...

MK: Not knocking her so much as saying what fun she'd been, we'd enjoyed it, and he sat there...

MS: And he said 'Well, I wonder.' Because he did have to take an awful lot of it. How long were they married?

MK: Oh quite a long time.

MS: Ten years? Twelve?

MK: Oh longer than that.

MS: Was it?

MK: Anyhow, imagine being the greatest actor of the British theatre - the leader of the British theatre in a sense because he was a great actor-manager as well - having this very tricky marriage. His life, I believe, and this is speculation and observation, but his marriage to Joan Plowright was such a saviour for him, I think that it just made his life so much better.

MS: Well I hope so anyway. But he was lovely though, wasn't he? He was very sweet, Sir Lawrence. I was thrilled to meet him.

MK: It always struck me as amazing that he knew that we'd been with Vivien. This has been a rather long answer about Viv, it's not about rep, you wanted more about rep?

RM: Oh, no, anything and everything! Did you work at the Old Vic Theatre?

MK: I did when I joined the Old Vic, first of all the one that did the tour of Russia and Poland, I think we did something there then toured all round England, Sheffield included I'm sure. One of the great things actors could pass on to another actor were good digs, so we'd all get the list from everybody of where was a good place to stay, y'know, because we'd all look for something cheap because we were on peanuts. You'd leave a note - the big joke was the famous one, which was a little coded message that read - I'm sorry, it's terribly vulgar - 'The landlady's daughter is very obliging!!' It used to get passed around, an extraordinary story, yes, I mean... unbelievable!

RM: If Marigold could tell us something about how you got interested in theatre, I don't think you covered that.

MS: Well, my mother put me on the stage because she was a very good child singer and she was determined her father let her go, so she put me... I went to the Webber Douglas School of Acting and got chosen by various producers and directors and that was how it started and how it went on. I never became very famous but a lot of people did seem to like me and it was fun, it was great fun for 22 years, I think, maybe more - 25 I think. And then seeing my dead father in the stalls... that finished it really. I thought he would come again, and I didn't know why he'd come the first time, but it was strange. People said, 'Oh go to the hypnotist,' but I knew it was something that meant that I shouldn't go on. And I was getting older darling, 45, 50 or something and I was working hard in all the rep theatres again. And I didn't really mind. Quite honestly, when you've got a nice pussy and a nice husband...

RM: What was your experience of drama school?

MS: Webber D? Not a lot darling, not really, I learned how to point a toe and wave gracefully but not a lot more. There was nobody there that I wanted to emulate. I just wanted to get out. The only thing I could do, the only job I was given was a red-coat at Butlins, which I loved, I loved it, I played the part, I was really very good.

MK: But you were also in his repertory company, weren't you?

MS: Well yes, then he started up a repertory company...

MK: Harry Hanson.

MS: Yes... No, that wasn't Harry Hanson, that was another man, a big man with a moustache and he had a smaller man with a smaller moustache. Yes they were alright, they did all the seaside ones, darling, they were very nice actually, £5 a week, two shows a day and I was the ASM so I had to set up everything; dust the curtains, do the furniture and did the calls while I was getting into my leading lady's costume, it was quite funny, quite tiring. Billy Butlin was sweet to me, really sweet. I don't know why, I mean, he was a bit of a dirty bird, but he knew I wasn't going to do anything with him, we had nice chats and he said, 'Listen, you don't eat much do you?' he said, 'They don't feed you much here,' - it was terrible food in the camp - and he said, 'You know what I'm going to do - I'm going to line up eight whiskeys - singles, up there, go to the bartender and he'll have them under a white cloth, you have all eight if you want.' And he was right real because, you know, whiskey is a very good...

MK: Very good food!

MS: I never ate, and I couldn't find anything...

MK: Marigold always believes it's a very good food! You must have had something!

MS: I had a roll, darling, or a cake, or something like that. You see, I was doing all the parts and I used to make the dresses sometimes, I was very tired and I was only 21, it was harsh, it was.

RM: Did everybody have similar experiences, mucking in with every aspect?

MS: You had to at Butlins, I don't know where else!

MK: At Butlins, I'm sure at Butlins! No, on the whole, even Bridgewater, it was my first job ASM-ing and playing parts you had your duties, but don't forget, in rep, you only rehearsed every morning, then in the afternoon you were meant to go home and learn

the part. Well, if you're ASM-ing as well... I was up round all the shops borrowing furniture for the following week, you know, you had to go and beg: 'Could we borrow that table out your window, you'll get a credit in the program 'table loaned by Carruthers' of Bridgewater'' so it was an exhausting job. But I want to change the subject just a minute on to Marigold as an actress, because she retired a very long time ago because of this experience she's already described to you about the father down the aisle.

RM: Although we don't have that on the mini disc in full, you'll have to tell us that again.

MK: You can tell it, you were in the arms of...

MS: Yes, we were doing a three hander...

MK: Called Period of Adjustment, Tennessee Williams...

MS: A very good play, it had been done all over, we put it on at Bromley with...

MK: Donald Sutherland and Nigel Hawthorne.

MS: Sweet boys... I didn't like Donald really.

RM: I'm not sure I can let that one drop!

MS: Well he was a funny man and I think he still is. But, anyhow it was only for a week, no, it was two weeks we did that one, didn't we? Because he would only do two weeks. And I was sitting on...

MK: You were in the arms... they were both cuddling you in a seat...

MS: They were cuddling me upon a chair and suddenly I looked out and I thought, 'God!'. There was a man in a top hat and a long frock coat coming down the aisle, looking at me, I rose to get up and jump off the stage and the boys held me, gripped me tight and they didn't see him, but I did! And it was, of course the audience, it was really bad for them, darling, they didn't know what happened, and the evening, I think, was you know, very poor for them. But afterwards I came off and the boys were really very cross with me.

MK: I don't think Nigel was as cross as Donald!

MS: Well no, but he was a pig. But it was extraordinary and I don't know why, why should he be in a top hat? I'd never seen him in a top hat or a frock coat, I had not been thinking about him, nothing. But that really started the decay of my ambition.

MK: And career, you then did the Terry Frisby, which we've talked about already, the one at the Mermaid Theatre...

MS: What year was that?

MK: It must have been the early seventies.

MS: Was it '70? That's right it was '70, darling, yes.

MK: And that was when she stopped and it's an interesting thing because at the golf club, which also, I don't know if I told you, is the Stage Golfing Society, which is a very useful society for actors to have because you get a reasonable deal and if you're playing in London it's a lovely relaxing day and if you're not, if you're out of work, it's lovely to go there, and retaining the conviviality of actors, fellow actors because, you know, that counts, but the new secretary of The Stage, a very distinguished actor called Garfield Morgan, who had worked with Marigold at Canterbury proclaimed in front of the entire room that Marigold was the best actor of either sex that he ever worked with.

MS: [chuckle] Quite true darling. [laughter]

RM: I'm sure, I'm sure!

MK: She was magnificent at it and it was a great, great tragedy that she stopped, but there we are. Frisbee would say the same, they'd all say it, anyone who saw you. But you couldn't help it, you couldn't face going on again could you?

MS: No.

[Interruption]

RM: How were your experiences working in regional theatre after the big tours?

MK: What in rep? No, rep was the before the big tours.

MS: They did run simultaneously, I mean, rep didn't knock out the tours or vice versa.

MK: No because you toured in Salad Days for a long time while I was with the Old Vic, [Sings] 'When one start looking behind you...'

MS: Yes, yes, that was lovely.

MK: And you enjoyed that, I know, immensely. But repertory theatre was extremely important to these towns, because there was no television - although the radio filled in for a lot of people, certainly the infirm - but they needed this. I mean, Bridgewater is a tiny - I don't know what it's like now because I haven't been back for donkey's years - but it was a very small town with a quite grand and pretentious town hall and that was the theatre, they had seats there and there was a stage and you got on and did whole seasons there, and they ran for years and similarly all these other little towns you could name, you could virtually put a pin in the map of England and find a town of any size had it's repertory company.

MS: Little village halls weren't they, and if it didn't have them it had the amateurs...

MK: Yes the amateurs, and that was worse than death.

MS: You could get something similar (!)

MK: But little place - Amersham, just outside London where you'd think, 'Why would it...?' had a little repertory company there. All round, you name it, around England and I bet you'll find there was, any town the size of, where is it your parents are living near to?

RM: Near Kidderminster.

MK: Kidderminster, any town that size and even smaller.

MS: Kidder was great.

MK: Would all have their own rep, you know it was an absolutely... it still was still only for theatre goers, no doubt theatre goers are a very small portion of the British public they'd much rather go to the cinema or sit and watch that [indicates television] although there wasn't that to watch. But we used to get people, it was their night out in the week when you were in rep, someone went every Monday, someone went... they had their nights that they went and they always felt they part owned you, only in the sense that you were their treasures for that year, you know, 'Oh yes, Mark's in our company...' It was good, it was good experience, I mean to get a play on in a week was no mean feat, easier when you're younger, but there were a lot of older actors there, still doing it, you know they were in rep and they'd learn the part in a week.

MS: Is the theatre there still, darling?

RM: I don't know of it myself, no.

MK: What, Kidderminster?

MS: Yes.

RM: Well, I've not heard of any productions going on at a theatre in Kidderminster, but I will definitely, now I know, I will definitely do research.

MK: Yes, there was, because Marigold was definitely there, I remember you talking...

MS: There was, and it was quite big, what would you say, 500, 600 seater?

MK: I don't know, I never saw it, I never went to Kidderminster.

RM: I will definitely do some research, but Kidderminster is probably a very different town now from how it was back then.

MS: Yes I'm sure it is. It had every existence to fly...

MK: It was very multi – it wasn't multi-cultural, that was the last thing it was, no one was in those days...

MS: No, but there was land, all sorts of things they could do.

MK: But they were terrific years at Birmingham Rep anyway, just the... of being in a company where you had a month to do a play.

MS: Very nice people.

MK: To us that was so great, you know, we'd done weekly rep, an odd fortnightly which was cobbling a play together, to try and get it done, but to have a month... proper direction, that was one's understanding that, well, this is the level you've got to be at to have any kind of success, and so many, I mean, Olivier was at Birmingham Rep, I've told you Albert Finney, Ian Richardson, Derek Jacobi, they've all done Birmingham Rep.

RM: I suppose things like Look Back in Anger, how did the onset of the Angry Young Man Movement affect you?

MK: Absolutely, absolutely, that affected not only British theatre, but British society in a way, I mean, pointing out that sort of conduct, behaviour, attitude, philosophy, slamming into the British public as Osborne did, miraculously. For all of us, I mean there wasn't an actor alive who didn't want to play Jimmy Porter, because everyone who plays it has the chance to reassemble the part for himself. He was the biggest theatrical playwright influence, I suppose, of my time, other fine actor writers have come along, Ayckbourn and his plays, The Norman Conquests. Have you ever seen them?

RM: Ayckbourn plays?

MK: No, The Norman Conquests.

RM: No, I haven't.

MK: It's absolutely sublime, three plays running together back-to-back - I told you earlier - when you're in the garden one night, the dining room the next night and the living room the next night and they absolutely meld, I mean, if you saw last night, Gambon or Tom Courtney, Penny Keith and Felicity Kendal, we were the cast, saying, 'I've just got to go into the garden for a moment,' the next night you'd see the garden, you'd see her come in from that scene, it's absolutely cross-fertilised, I mean, it's a remarkable piece of writing, and it was an almighty success, a great pleasure to be in, there's nothing like being in a big success in the West End, it feels good. I wouldn't want to do that anymore, I can't anyway, I can't remember, I couldn't possibly do another play, I don't even want to do a telly, because of what's happened in memory terms - I don't want to act ever again, I just can't face it. Not even a telly, I mean, odd people have said 'Do you want to do a telly?' I don't even want to do that, I've 'turned it in' as they say. But my expectations from Greenwich Central were very limited, I have to tell you, and to have had the life I've had and meet the wife I've got, I mean, I've been terribly privileged really.

RM: I guess acting, if it goes well, is a charmed life.

MK: Oh! It is, it is! I mean, you've got to be prepared to be unemployed often for quite long periods, and you've got to be prepared for rejection, you know, you've got to be prepared for all that. But you've also got to be prepared to take your chances when they come, each one you go for, if you get it you get it, and then once you've got it then the work begins.

RM: You mentioned earlier that you didn't particularly mind what parts you got as long as you were getting parts...

MK: Well, in rep, you couldn't mind the parts because they were just allocated - every week you'd get a book slung at you 'You're playing that, you're playing that,' but the chances of distinguishing yourself - of course you need to play leading roles, get them, and playing leading roles is thrilling. I think what I've enjoyed doing most in my life as an actor, was the Oxford Playhouse. I did a tour, *Death of a Salesman*, I played Willie Loman, and what a part to play! You just can't believe the energy to play it, the vocal power and energy you need to play it, and the coloured nature of the man. It was just a wonderful play and a wonderful part to play, and I think I like that as much as any part I've done. That, again, was in rep, of course a repertory company, the Oxford Playhouse, run by Nick Kent who now runs Tricycle, and Nick offered me something at the Tricycle a couple of years ago. Darling, what areas we're missing out that you'd like us to...

RM: Actually, what I'd be quite interested in, is when you weren't acting what plays you'd go to see as an audience member?

MK: As a theatre goer you'd go to see whatever was on. First of one would always go to see plays one's chums were in, then you'd read reviews or you'd get word of mouth, someone would ring you and say 'You've got to see this or that' and you did, but in recent years we hardly ever go.

RM: But from the 1950s and 1960s any particularly memorable performances that you saw?

MK: Well, almost everything that Olivier did was memorable, from *The Entertainer*...

RM: How was that received?

MK: Wonderful reviews and it really was... Is it being done by someone else now? I can't remember... I've heard it mentioned of late in some context...

RM: It was quite a departure for him at the time.

MK: Yes a departure in playing that kind of man, I suppose it was, because he'd done massive Shakespeare. But he wasn't just a Shakespearean actor, he'd done lots of other contemporary stuff. But that was such a surprise to see him doing it, wonderful, louche, strange nature of Archie Rice... is it Archie Rice? It is, isn't it?

RM: Yes.

MS: Did he do it at the Royal Court first?

MK: Mmm, that's where it was done. All Osborne's stuff was done there first. That was another great thing that came on to the theatrical scene – John Osborne – he kind of changed the face of British theatre. It wasn't just Osborne, all those other contemporary writers, you know, really good writers, David Hare now, Pinter...

MS: Wesker.

MK: You know... Wesker. All of these writers that came on had had their time, David Hare's still in his. Did you see, by any chance, Harold Pinter's acceptance of the Nobel Prize speech?

RM: I didn't, but I've heard amazing things.

MK: Just wonderful, I mean, he tore Bush and Blair to shreds, you know, he just did. He just spoke fluently and straight – he's not being very well as you know, perhaps you don't know, but he has been rather ill, and then he had this dreadful fall when he bashed his head. He couldn't go to Sweden to accept the prize, but he was able to broadcast his speech which they played at the ceremony and somebody collected his prize for him. Again, an immense influence in British theatre. Oh, one's leaving out so many, all the other playwrights – John Mortimer...

RM: Beckett...

MK: Beckett, of course that was again, when Godot first arrived, I mean, the shock of that – no one had ever seen anything like that on the London stage before.

RM: How did it affect you personally?

MK: Well, I don't know, but it affected me in the sense that it was a miraculous piece of theatrical experience.

MS: Strange...

MK: Strange, incomprehensible, mystifying, acute... it was just a startling experience to have in the theatre.

RM: Did you know instantly that it was going to be...

MK: A success? I suppose by the time I got to see it was a huge success – when I say 'by the time I got to see it' I didn't see it for, say 3 or 4 months, it was already acknowledged as a masterpiece and it's been done quite a number of times since, hasn't

it? But it was stunning to sit in that little theatre at the Royal Court to see this astonishing play being presented to you. Oh, Peter Bull's Pozzo one will never forget. But an amazing cast, and you realise that if that's the way theatre's going, that's not too bad.

RM: The National Theatre, when it started off at the Old Vic...

MK: Again, it was Olivier, and one could see that was the beginning of something very special and necessary, I think, in the British theatre. I think that the National Theatre fills a very clean spot in the profession and produces wonderful work – not all of it, but no one can do it all the time, but on the whole it does good stuff. And it's attracted, mercifully, an audience, you know - it does well.

RM: One last thing, we've talked so much about Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier, how much of a star system did you notice at the time and how did it affect theatre?

MK: Well it was essential, because it's stars that bring people into the theatre.

MS: But at that time it was very specific, wasn't it? The star thing, and then you had the lower ones [to Mark] like you and I.

MK: People are generally... I wouldn't say this entirely, but generally the stars of our profession have made it very early on. Pat Stewart is an example of someone who made it much later.

MK: Examples of the star system, I mean who are people now who would perhaps fill a theatre with a reasonably good play? Ian McKellen, from the word go you could tell how good he was, I don't know if he did rep at all, I can't remember if he did repertory theatre. He did Oxford or something?

MS: I think he did, didn't he talk about it when we were having dinner that time?

MK: I think he only did special weeks, I don't think he ever did a season. Jacobi, he did Birmingham Rep, he was there just after us.

RM: Thank you.