

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Bernard Hepton – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Kate Harris**

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Samuel Beckett; Birmingham Repertory Theatre; Bradford Civic Playhouse; Esme Church; The Devils; Directing; Fortnightly repertory; Sir Barry Jackson; Krapp's Last Tape; National Theatre; One Way Pendulum; Penny for a Song; television; John Whiting

KH: This is an interview on 6 April 2006 with Bernard Hepton. Can I just confirm that I have your permission to put this in the British Library Archive?

BH: Oh yes, yes.

KH: I would just like to start by asking how you began working in the theatre

BH: Well, how I became interested in the theatre, it was during the war in Bradford where I lived, and I was a teenage fire watcher and it was very boring, and the lady in charge of us all decided to bring some little one act plays in, and I didn't even know what a play was. I had been to the theatre once, and that was when I was very tiny, to see a pantomime, and we started reading these plays, and as we read them, so doors began to open for me and a sort of magic land was there behind the doors, and I became fascinated by it, absolutely fascinated. So the years went on and this lady saw something in me, I don't know what it was, but she pointed me in the direction of the amateur playhouse there called the Bradford Civic Playhouse. Have you heard of that?

KH: I haven't, no.

BH: Well, that doesn't exist any more, unfortunately, but they had their own little theatre and it was very well noted. They used to do premières, British premières, world premières. Priestley used to be there, he was a Bradford man. It is my claim to fame, actually, that he was born and brought up in the same road as I was. Not at the same time I may say! But anyway, I joined the Bradford Civic Playhouse, and my education in plays and players began in earnest, and I took it extremely seriously. I had fun of course, I had fun because they were lovely people down there, but you know what Yorkshire and Bradford people are like, they can speak a bit posh, you know, rather like that, and I didn't quite know where I fitted in. But gradually I did fit in and so I began in the theatre. Now the Bradford Civic Playhouse had, it was rather miraculous because a lady from the Old Vic in London called Esme Church who was a well known actress and

director at the Old Vic, came up to be the director of the Bradford Civic Playhouse and everyone said, 'I wonder why?' Anyway, we had a wonderful time because she brought such style and delight with her, and we learnt a tremendous lot. Then, one day, I had left school and I was working and I still had no idea of it as a profession, none at all, and I went to her one day and said 'I think I'd like to do this as a job, what do I do?' She said, 'Can you wait six months?' I said, 'Yes'. So she said, 'Well, don't tell anybody, but in six months time I am going to open a theatre school here, and you can be my first student if you want'. And that's how it worked. For two years I was a student, and I was in absolute heaven and the education went on and on and on and I was filled with delight. Then I was asked to go to York Rep and I was there for two years, again I thought this was just wonderful.

KH: Was that a weekly rep?

BH: No, it was fortnightly, there was a week in York, then we went over to Scarborough and a week in Scarborough with the same play, and there were two companies, so that was wonderful. You are going to ask me later on about writers, and I met what I consider to be one of the great writers, had he lived, and unfortunately he died, and that was John Whiting. A wonderful writer, and he and I became great friends. Just as an offshoot, he was having his first play done in London, by Peter Brook of all people, at the Haymarket. He had left York and I had just left York, and we arranged to meet opposite the Haymarket in a pub, and when John was upset his hair was all over the place and it was white, and he came in looking like that and I said, 'What's the matter?'

KH: Was the play *The Devils*?

BH: No, no, no, *Penny for a Song*. He came in looking like that and I said, 'What's the matter?' He said, 'Do you know what that man's just said to me?' I said, 'No'. 'He said, I don't understand your play, John, but I'm going to make it look pretty!' And that's exactly what happened and it wasn't a great success. Anyway, I'm diverging now.

KH: No, maybe we can come back to that later, that's interesting. So you were at York, what kind of productions were you doing at York?

BH: Oh, anything from Agatha Christie to Shakespeare really, I mean, it was a huge diversion. It was a wonderful place to start, because you were chucked in at the deep end and it was lovely, I really enjoyed that. But everywhere I went, including theatre school when Esme – I mustn't call her Esme, I must call her Miss Church, I have a great reverence for her. She's dead unfortunately but when I was with her, when I was in York, I kept hearing about Birmingham Rep, it kept coming at me, Birmingham Rep, Birmingham Rep. I thought 'I must find out about this', so I did and the more I found out, the more I wanted to go there. Nowhere else interested me at all. So how did I come to work at Birmingham?

KH: Yes, how did you come to Birmingham?

BH: I left York after two years there and I came to London for the first time and I shared a flat in Crystal Palace with an old friend of mine, I think he's dead now unfortunately. And I put myself sort of out of work to be able to get to Birmingham. I went to see an agent called Gordon Harboard – all these people are dead now, it's terrible – and I said 'That's where I want to be, get me in there if you can.'. And it took two years.

KH: So what did you do for two years?

BH: I took a job at Windsor, 1066 And All That, that was great fun, with Leslie Henson. Bromley I went to, when it was, before the new theatre was there, when it was a swimming bath. All these little jobs, but I had trained during the war because King George wouldn't have me because of my eyes, so I trained as an aircraft engineer and I was a draftsman and I took all my stuff with me, and I found a little place near where I lived who would give me some work drafting and that's how I lived, but I put myself directly out of work and said 'I've got to exist of course' and eventually the chance came, eventually.

KH: Was this an audition in London?

BH: No, no, no, it was an audition in Birmingham and I was hired to do two little plays, two little parts in Henry VI Part III and that was 1952, and I went and did these two little parts and I thought, 'I'm here at last, and I'm here and it is wonderful'. It was a wonderful little theatre, they called it 'the little brown box' in those days, and all the upholstery was brown leatherette, it was just delightful.

KH: What made it such a good place to work?

BH: Well mainly Sir Barry, I must bring him in, well obviously I must bring him in because it was his – you know about this, you know it was his theatre, he built it himself out of his own pocket and it was his pride and joy. He was a gentleman, he was a scholar and he was a very talented man. I had never met anyone like him, to meet him, he was like a ramrod, very, very straight and he was always smoking cigarettes through these extraordinary holders that he used to make out of paper himself, and there is a picture in here of him with this in his teeth, and the holder was about this big, it was just a long strip of paper with a cigarette at the end and we were all most intrigued by this, but he used to come to the theatre probably once a week, twice a month, not very often, but he was the reason why we were all there. We knew, it wasn't a matter of being in charge, it was a matter of an aura. We knew what he was like, we knew, we'd read his adaptations, we'd read his plays, we'd read an awful lot, well I'd read an awful lot about the plays.

KH: Did he speak to most of the actors personally then?

BH: Well yes, but on a total... nothing to do with the play they were doing. He would never speak to an actor during a performance or, well, he would, but not about the

performance. If he went and sat in at a rehearsal and saw something that he would probably make a comment on, he would always comment to the director, not to the actor, and that's the way it works, that's the way it should work. In fact, the only note I ever had from him was through Douglas Seal when I was doing, again two little parts in Abraham Lincoln. I was playing a southern gentleman. The note came back, 'Sir Barry says, 'would that young man' – what did he say? – oh yes, 'the trousers on that young man are too short!' That's all I heard. He was, he was the place, you knew as soon as you saw him, you'd no need to know anything about him but you knew that this was the guru, the man, the great man, and there is no doubt at all that he was a great man. I'm going on a bit.

KH: There were a lot of people there at the time that like yourself went on to have big careers afterwards, did you have a sense at the time that there were lots of young budding actors?

BH: I didn't because I was too wrapped up in what I was doing. I don't know whether the others did, we never talked really about it. We never talked about where we were going afterwards because we were so happy being there. But that was, in the early days, in my early days anyway, there was no television and as soon as television came on the scene of course, the agents said 'Would you like this part in television?' and people started getting interested in leaving the company and do whatever they wanted to do on television and films, which was a great shame really because my ideal was always to have a group theatre together.

KH: It was a very close company wasn't it?

BH: It was very, very close, yes, very close indeed. We were all great, great friends and I've never known a company like that either before or since. Again that all traces back to Sir Barry, the great influence of this man. It is very hard to actually pin it down, what his influence was but it was there and it was actually in the theatre.

KH: I was interested in you talking about the parts, how was it all kind of cast, because obviously you graduated to bigger and bigger parts whilst you were at the rep. Was there a hierarchy there and after a while you got promoted?

BH: Well the extraordinary thing was that in those days, whoever was the director, the title was Director of Productions, whoever was the director did the casting and hired new people. It was Douglas Seal who hired me for the two little parts and things, and there was no question at all that he, whoever he was, the Director of Productions, was in charge of that. Nobody interfered, nobody, and that was the wonderful thing about it you see, about Sir Barry, he gave the opportunities without interference to young people and there are quotes in there which you obviously know, about how he gets on in the theatre with all the young people, he was always for youngsters. So the Director of Productions was in charge of productions and in charge of who was in the company as well and wasn't interfered with at all. Which was wonderful.

KH: Because you directed there. How long were you there before you started directing?

BH: I think I was there, oh this is a guess really, I started directing – and it is an interesting story this – all three parts of Henry VI which is probably the most exciting thing I've ever been in and for the theatre as well, for Sir Barry. We took it to London, as you know, and when we were reading through it, before we started rehearsal, I think every, not quite every page but every other page there's a battle in Henry VI Parts 1, 2 and 3, or somebody is killing somebody. There was a man, a young man in the company called John Greenwood and I who found that we had weapons in common and we used to practice our swords upstairs in wardrobe. I said, 'Do you think Douglas would let us arrange these fights?' I went and I asked Dougie and he said 'Oh yes, yes' and of course I didn't know then that directors always have somebody else to arrange the fights! I thought Dougie was going to do it. But anyway we started arranging the fights and we had such fun, not only fun but we took it very seriously as well. So when we got to London, the word got round from Michael Bentall, who was then in charge of the Vic, 'Whoever arranged those fights, could they come and arrange for my next production, which is Hamlet?'

KH: Gosh!

BH: So we thought, 'Oh a new career's opening.'. We talked it over, and said, 'Yes, let's have a go' and it was with Richard Burton, a young Richard Burton, and again you see, we did it and we had a wonderful time and then I read in a paper somewhere that Michael Bentall had shot his mouth off and was saying where are our young directors? I thought, 'I am going to write to him, and tell him 'Here, if he's looking'.'. which I did, and it was then that Dougie Seal was having a meeting with him about going – this is pure coincidence – having a meeting with him to go and do some directing for him at the Vic, and when he got into the office and talked to Michael, Michael said 'Have a look at this' and threw the letter to him. So he came back, talked it over with Sir Barry and said 'Well, whenever I'm not here, Bernard will do it'. As simple as that. That was extraordinary. My first production was a world première, believe it or not – I was scared... - it was *The Long Sunset* by R. C. Sheriff, it was my first production, it seemed to go quite well.

KH: Did you find it a big challenge, moving from acting to directing?

BH: No, no. I had been thinking about directing, I mentioned the fights, you see because to do fights properly you have got to be able to direct actors, otherwise they sort of kill each other and it is getting very dangerous otherwise! I'd had that sort of little bit of experience with the fights, and not only that, other people asked us to do fights at Stratford and all over the place and we were still in the company. I don't know how we did it but we did, it was extraordinary. I didn't have much difficulty in actually becoming a director apart from I didn't quite have the skill yet because I'd never done it with a play but it went all right, seemed to go all right, and then Dougie was away again and I took over and did another couple of plays and eventually Dougie left, so without any fuss, with no fuss at all, Nancy Berman, who was a wonderful administrator, said 'You'll direct our productions, get on with it!'

KH: You must have been delighted.

BH: Oh yes, yes. It was a hell of a challenge though, because suddenly I had to hire actors and all that sort of thing which I'd never done before.

KH: Were you in charge of programming as well at that time, were you responsible for what actually went on?

BH: Yes, yes. What I did normally was to have a list of plays that I would like to do, and I would talk it over with Sir Barry and Sir Barry would have a list of what he wanted to do, and we would come to some arrangement, very amicably. If I was fairly adamant about this play, if I thought we must do this play, he said 'Yes, of course, do it'.

KH: What swayed your choice of plays? Were you influenced by what was happening in London?

BH: No, quite honestly, no. I used to read an awful lot of plays. I was to a certain extent influenced by what was happening in London but to be quite honest I don't know, I can't remember how I got the plays. An awful lot in the early days were Sir Barry's, Sir Barry wanted to do this and wanted to do that, like, oh I can't remember without referring to that, and I don't want to do that. Can we stop a minute and have some more coffee?

[Tape switched off]

Yes, as far as I was concerned it was very important that I should learn my craft and you could only learn really by doing it. I say that with a little sort of reserve, because actors tend to think they can do it all the time, you know, it's easy, particularly in front of the camera, because the camera does much of the work for you, but on a stage I think the audience teach you. I was doing Confidential Clerk, and I knew the speech I had was supposed to get a laugh, I knew and everybody knew, the Director knew, Dougie knew, everybody knew, and I couldn't get this damned laugh at all. I didn't know how to. Then purely by accident, one night I said it exactly the same and did this – and it brought the house down. I thought, 'What's happening?' That is extraordinary how you learn by the audience telling you.

KH: Do you think styles changed over the period, from sort of 50s to 60s?

BH: Again, not as far as I was concerned. Of course new writers came, that's one of the banes of a director of productions/producers life, you are snowed under with new – you read the first page and you knew this is very good.

KH: So did you get sent a lot of new plays?

BH: Oh new plays, oh dear, yes.

KH: I am quite interested that at Birmingham you did new plays alongside the classics didn't you, that was a definite policy wasn't it?

BH: Oh yes, oh yes indeed. But for some reason or other, yes, I don't know how they came to be done actually.

KH: Was there a kind of new writing you were looking for?

BH: I suppose I was not aware of this but I suppose Sir Barry got a tremendous amount of plays got sent to him as well. His background in plays, you could fill a library with it I suppose, and he knew an awful lot of authors and playwrights, and I suppose through him the new play would come. There was one new play that he asked me to do which was by a Canadian and it was called Strange to Relate and it was the strangest play I have ever come across.

KH: What was so strange about it?

BH: It was totally unintelligible, I couldn't make head nor tail of it, and I told the cast, I said 'Look we've got to get through this, but I'm afraid I can't tell you which way you're going'.

KH: What was it about?

BH: It was about some people in a bar – that's all I can remember about it. Anyway it was a total dismal failure, an absolute failure and the failure was mine. Mainly I think, because I had no direction in which to push it, I didn't know what to do with it at all. So we learn and learn and learn. Oh dear, that was awful.

KH: Before you left Birmingham you took part in a newspaper debate with Peter Hall?

BH: Yes, that was in The Guardian I think.

KH: You were talking about the desirability of the National Theatre, and you said [reading] 'The country needed not one National Theatre, but six up and down the country, all with equal status and grants.'

BH: Yes, and I still think that, but it is an impossible dream because it would cost far too much. The Royal Shakespeare has started, since then, has started touring and there is a touring company with it now, so that has sort of alleviated that a tiny bit and the National, I think, tours every now and again, which is not so bad I suppose, but it's not the same as actually having your own theatre and there are very, very few theatres now around, that are not like Birmingham or Bristol or Liverpool, where the people consider it to be their own, the audience I mean, and consider the actors and the people to belong to them.

KH: Certainly in project interviews we've spoken to a lot of audience members who've said that, exactly the same thing.

BH: That is exactly what it was like all the time I was there.

KH: Why do you think that changed?

BH: Well it changed at Birmingham simply because Sir Barry died, unfortunately, and if I'm honest, that's one of the reasons why I didn't stay, because the aura had gone. It is very strange to try to put this into words actually, but the reason why we were all there was no longer there, it was very odd. Then they were talking about a new theatre and the whole thing got into a bit of a mess and I think they are having a new director at the New Theatre now but the old theatre is used every now and again.

KH: There is an amateur company there now isn't there?

BH: Yes, I think so, I'm not entirely sure but when I was there it was very spare, it was very sparse. The bottom foyer was not decorated at all, it was a place of work. I went back to unveil plaques to Sir Barry, and I went into the theatre, the first time I had walked in that place for an awful long time and it was like a palace! There was carpet on the floor, concealed lighting, there was a bar. I thought, 'Good Lord, if it had only been like this!', but it wouldn't have been the same. It wouldn't have been the same and when there was no carpet on the floor, I got in to the theatre early one day, I don't know why I was there but Barney, who was stage door keeper, said 'There's a guy in there who wants to have a look around'. So I went in and said, 'Hello, can I help you?' He was American and he said, 'No no, I just want to stand here'. I said, 'Oh really?' He said, 'Yes, I've heard so much about this little theatre, and it is a great pleasure to be here'. And that's all he wanted, he just wanted to stand there and have a look, it's extraordinary isn't it. Anyway, that's the fame of the little Birmingham rep.

KH: Before you left - I was reading in a different book about the Rep - it said that you were in the first production of Beckett at Birmingham Rep?

BH: Me?

KH: Yes.

BH: Of?

KH: Was it Krapp's Last Tape?

BH: Krapp's Last Tape?

KH: The first Beckett production at the Rep, not the first production of the play.

BH: Oh right, yes, Krapp's Last Tape, I wanted to do that and it was with a French play I remember, I can't remember which French play it was. Anyway, it was the curtain raiser, Krapp's Last Tape was the curtain raiser. I thought it was a wonderful play. I am very fond of Beckett, very fond indeed. But I can't understand his novels. [laughs]

KH: What was the audience reaction like to that because Beckett hadn't been done there before? Was it well received?

BH: I don't think it was realised actually. I think there were really very few people who knew who Beckett was in those days. It was received very well, I think it was received with slightly dropped jaw, you know, 'What's going on?', but it was received very well indeed, yes. Have you heard of Beckett's Plays Without Words? I think those are brilliant, absolutely beautiful and when I went to Liverpool, one started a Saturday morning for kids at Birmingham and at Liverpool and we did a whole morning of modern writers and I decided to do the Plays Without Words and I made it up because I couldn't alter the lighting for the play we were playing, I couldn't alter the setting or anything so I made it up. What I did was to sit in a spot and sit and it went out, and thought 'ah' and went to sit in a spot and it went out until right at the very end they were like this, and it went out. I was really quite fond of that little play and the kids were like this at the end and so it worked, it worked very well.

KH: So after that you went to Liverpool?

BH: Yes, disaster, total disaster.

KH: Why was that?

BH: I've tried to explain as much as I can how much freedom Sir Barry gave his people, almost total, and consequently the effort that was put in to making it good for him. When I got to Liverpool first of all they asked me to do two plays: Celebration by Willis Hall and The Miracle Worker, and whilst I was there these directors who considered themselves to know everything about the theatre – they knew damn all - they took me

out, each one, one at a time, slap up meal and all that sort of thing, and asked me, 'If you came to this theatre what would you do?', So I thought, 'Well, they are obviously sort of fishing, so I won't pull my punches' and I told them what I would do. They said 'We've got money in the bank' and I said, 'The sooner you lose that the better' and they didn't understand that at all. I said 'There's no point in doing Agatha Christie all the time, what's the point in this day and age', etc, and all that. Anyway they all gave me what they thought was freedom and when I got there I knew it wasn't, I knew it wasn't.

KH: So did they control what you did?

BH: They thought they had total control and I'll show you that later, but yes, they insisted upon reading all the plays that I put forward and if they didn't like it, they didn't want to do it. Do you know a play called *The Fire Raisers* by Max Frisch?

KH: No, I don't, no.

BH: It is a very strange play, but what it actually says is 'Don't go round with blinkers on'. Well I did that, I did that play and it emptied the theatre. And there was correspondence in the two Liverpool papers, from the Dean of the Cathedral down to the ordinary chap in the street, pro and con of the play, pro and con of the play, don't say that and do that, you know. And the place was alive and I thought 'Great! I don't care if it empties the theatre, it's wonderful'. But the directors didn't like that, no. And when I came to do *Luther*, they said 'It's not another *Fire Raisers* is it?' They never got it out of their system, and consequently I was worn down, worn down, worn down, and eventually I did *Luther* against their wishes, they said 'We don't want that' and I said, 'Well, I'm sorry, it's all done'.

KH: That's interesting because John Osborne by then was quite established wasn't he?

BH: Yes, absolutely.

KH: And he was very popular.

BH: It is a wonderful play, isn't it? And it was the smash of the season, smash. We could have run for two or three more weeks.

KH: So were they quite resistant to new writing then, is that what they were resisting?

BH: Yes, they were resistant to what was happening in the theatre, which was sort of existentialist really, they couldn't quite understand it. There is a story of Liverpool, with... when the Intendent, who was long before me, he wanted to do *The Wild Duck* and he wanted it done with, oh I can't remember the name of the play but it was another bird, and somebody said, 'Oh not that dumb bird!' [laughs] Which had emptied

the theatre again, you see. So yes, they were business people who didn't quite understand.

KH: But the audiences, obviously if they liked Luther, the audiences obviously weren't of the same mind at all.

BH: No, absolutely not, absolutely. Luther, we smashed the place, by which time I had resigned and to hell with it. I was very, very near a break up myself and they do that to you, those people.

KH: Can I ask you about new playwrights, I know you mentioned John Whiting before, I don't know if you wanted to say a little bit about that?

BH: Oh yes, well, John unfortunately, he died much too young, and I think he would have been one of our great playwrights, I don't think there is any doubt about that.

KH: What I find interesting about him is that he was earlier than all of the others, almost before everything took off.

BH: That's right, he used to write a lot of small plays for radio, and I went to have my hair cut once in Scarborough and he was in the next chair and I said, 'Why don't we do some plays for England, because they have all sort of gone foreign and things?' And he said, 'Oh I'm not very well known in England, but I'm a smash in Brazil!' He wasn't very well known at all.

KH: What is it that you liked about his plays? Was there one in particular that you liked?

BH: I particularly liked *The Devils*, because quite honestly when I saw it first I didn't enjoy the production, but when I saw it first, this was John on the stage, he was telling me what it was like being him and he wasn't being punished and why aren't I being punished like the leading character in the play? It was upsetting for me, we used to have long, long conversations about religion, sex, all those, and he was very worried by these deep thoughts, very worried indeed and...

KH: What do you think inspired his writing, those kind of ideas, because no one else at that time in England was writing like that at all.

BH: No, I really don't know what inspired him, but he was the only real intellectual I've ever come across. He was absolutely precise in his thinking. When I say 'intellectual' I am not entirely sure what I mean, but there was very, very little emotion or sentimentality or anything of that. He looked at things straight in the face and wasn't afraid of it, but he was worried by it, those deep things that were worrying him inside,

particularly sex and religion, and so I think he read the story of The Devils and said 'I've put it in a play, because this is me'.

KH: Why do you think it was that his plays weren't well received, critically well received?

BH: I don't know. I don't think they were ready for it. He was a very precise writer, do you know his writing?

KH: Yes. I've read some of his plays

BH: He is a very, very precise writer, almost as precise as Pinter, almost. Very spare.

KH: People say there are similarities between them.

BH: Yes, a very spare writer and I think, I really don't know why they didn't work too well. I don't know but when I saw The Devils I thought 'I'm embarrassed, he is telling people what he's like'. Anyway, poor man, he died.

KH: Did you have any other particular writers that you liked or disliked?

BH: Oh yes. I didn't know too much about Osborne apart from doing Luther which I thought was a smashing play. There is one quote in Luther which I still don't understand, which said 'If the devil gets on your back, you go one way, and if God gets on your back you go the other and you have no choice in the matter'. I said, 'What, what?' I took it to a monk in a monastery and asked what it meant and he said, 'Do you know anything about theology or philosophy?' I said 'No'. He said, 'Well you won't understand it then', and left it.

KH: Not terribly helpful!

BH: Not at all helpful, but it was there and I suppose Osborne knew it. I knew him before he became a good writer, when he was actually at Stratford. I didn't know him, I met him, that's all.

KH: When he was an actor?

BH: Yes. What appealed to me, because I have a strange sense of humour, was the plays of the absurd theatre, and particularly with N. F. Simpson. I saw One Way Pendulum in London and I didn't understand, I didn't know why this was supposed to be a comedy, and it raised one or two laughs around. And I thought, 'that's very odd'. Then Sir Barry, when I was directing, Sir Barry said 'Have you read this play?', and it was

One Way Pendulum. I said, 'Yes, I saw it in London, but I didn't like it very much'. He said, 'Read it, and see what you think'. And it was one of the funniest things I've ever read. I thought, 'What was the matter?' I got hold of Simpson and I said, 'Am I right in thinking that this has got to take place in an ordinary suburban house?' And he said, 'Precisely'. And what they'd done in London, in a box set coloured yellow where everything that wasn't used, like chairs and tables, everything that wasn't used was painted actually onto the set so that as soon as the curtain went up you knew you were in cloud cuckoo land and that was why there was hardly any laughs. Nothing was funny any more. But in an ordinary formal sort of setting, in an ordinary household, with these weird people...

KH: It was more surprising.

BH: Do you know it?

KH: I don't know the play at all, no.

BH: Oh! Do read it. There is a young lady in it looking in the mirror who says, 'I can't go out with arms like this!' It is wonderful stuff, wonderful stuff. Yes. Simpson.

KH: Did you go and see a lot of new theatre; did you see much of the stuff in London?

BH: No, I didn't, I didn't. I couldn't. I don't know, I've mentioned all these plays that keep coming in and you haven't had a time for anything else, it is extraordinary. I got a bit fed-up after a while, you know. You say, 'That's no good', you know [chuckles] it's awful, it really is awful, you are probably throwing away genius but you need a reader, and nowadays this is what people have, they have assistant directors and they have directors. When Nottingham Playhouse was moved to the new one, I put in and said 'Will you give me an interview?'. So I went for an interview and I told them exactly what I thought was necessary, mainly an assistant director, a reader and all that, and what I got was, 'Oh, you want to be another Barry Jackson do you?' So I got up and went.

KH: So in a way he was very ahead of his time in terms of the administrative side of the way he ran the theatre.

BH: Oh yes, but in those days you see, the director did everything and it was too much, well, I thought it was too much.

KH: Did the critics ever have much influence on what you did?

BH: No, I never read the critics. There was only one critic that I used to read and that was a friend of mine who was a critic called Gareth Lloyd-Evans and he was a

Shakespeare scholar and he lived in Stratford and he became a great friend of mine. He gave me some roastings, believe me, he wasn't just kind, but he was a great, great friend and he did me a great disservice by dying [laughs]. I miss him greatly, he was the critic in The Guardian and very well known, but other critics, no. I used to read Trewin...

KH: He was the main one for Birmingham Rep wasn't he?

BH: Yes but not all that much, no.

KH: Just in general, what sort of changes happened over that time, do you see it as a period of change?

BH: Well yes, in what I've been talking about, the people employed in the theatre, not necessarily just the actors but the people, the directors. You go to a theatre now, a provincial theatre, there aren't many left now, the provincial theatre and there are probably two or three people who direct now. There's a staff of probably three or four designers, and there's a full staff for the wardrobe. You didn't have that in my day at all. We did it on a shoestring. But most of those people, most of those places now are subsidised. I don't know.

KH: Just going back to what you said about the National Theatre, do you think the National Theatre took away from the repertories because they have had so much funding?

BH: I think so, yes, yes I do, and I think that's what I meant by saying there actually should be six up and down the country instead of just one who takes all the money, and the RSC takes all the money, and I think it is a bit unfair quite honestly. How it has got to be resolved, if it is ever resolved, I have no idea because it is going to cost a lot of money. It is the same with opera, you know.

KH: You did a lot of early television as well didn't you?

BH: Oh yes.

KH: Did you find many parallels to working in theatre and in early television?

BH: Not much, no. I came out of Liverpool and I joined the BBC in their intake of up and coming directors and producers for the new BBC2 and went there and I was at their school but I didn't want to be a director, I wanted to be a producer, I wanted to say 'I would like that, you write it and you direct it', you know. And that's what I was for two years, but I'm not a company man, a big company man like the BBC, I can't be doing with that so I came out and nobody knew me as an actor then so I had to rely on one or

two friends to sort of push me around a bit and give me some parts. No, acting is quite a different thing in front of a camera, quite a different thing. Projection for instance, you have to learn in the theatre to project to the back, but all you have to do is to think right, it is a different technique altogether.

KH: I think those are all my questions, I don't know if you have got anything that you would like to add.

BH: I don't think so, no, I don't think so. I have had a very good career, I was very, very, very fortunate in working in Birmingham, I think that was my university, no doubt about that. That and Esme, or Miss Church. I have been very, very fortunate because I have always been, well yes, some people say you make your own luck and to a certain extent I think you do but you have got to be fairly tenacious I think.

KH: That's great, thank you.