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Donald Sertain – interview transcript

Interviewer: Kate Harris

26 April 2006

Barrow; censorship; The Caretaker; Designers; Dundee Rep; Ewan McColl; Joan Littlewood; John Berry; Lyme Regis; No Man's Land; rehearsals; Renaissance Theatre Company; Theatre Workshop; repertory; Tonbridge

KH: This is an interview on 26 April 2006 with Donald Sertain. Can I just confirm that I've got your permission for the British Library to have copyright of this interview?

DS: Yes.

KH: That's brilliant. I would just like to start by asking how you first began working in the theatre. Maybe you can tell me how you began...

DS: I saw an advertisement in The Stage newspaper for an ASM actor and joined my first company, a weekly repertory company at Tonbridge in Kent as an ASM actor on January 11th 1955 and my first part was Harry - I think it was called Harry - in The Cat and the Canary, which was a pretty well known murder play in those days, and we did a different play each week and I performed nearly all the weeks that I was there and also helped with stage management.

KH: Did you find the time pressures in weekly rep quite difficult because it was such a fast turnover?

DS: Not really, it was a way of life, you accepted it, you know. If you were going to work in the theatre, you accepted you were going to rehearse one play while you were performing the other in the evening and you'd rehearse in the morning, you'd study your lines in the afternoon and then you would perform in the evening.

KH: Was it quite a small company?

DS: Yes, it was quite a small company, we were advertised rather embarrassingly as a company of West End artistes and our names outside the theatre had stars round them, all that was a bit embarrassing, but anyhow we went along with it.

KH: Were there people in the company who had been there a long time and kind of stayed with the company?

DS: Yes. There were two or three who had been with the company for a long while, not only in Tonbridge because the company moved to other towns as well and would do the same plays for 12 weeks or a bit longer. They moved round, it wasn't a repertory company like the Birmingham Repertory Company which was there all the time, this was a company which moved from town to town.

KH: What kind of productions were you putting on whilst you were in weekly rep?

DS: Well it was a mix, a real mix. We did Black Limelight, The Importance of Being Earnest, we did murder plays like The Cat and the Canary as I mentioned and we did...how can I say...a sort of religious play but there is a better description than that. There used to be a well known play called The Passing of the Third Floor Back which was something that we did around Easter and had a lot to do with faith and spirituality; so we did quite serious plays and not just comedies - which we also did - and murder plays. So it was a great mix and as with many companies like that, and repertory theatres themselves, the leading actor who also directed the plays was very skilful in a particular direction and you could learn a lot from him. He was particularly good at what we used to call 'low comedy', and we turned our noses up at it at the time, but you learnt a lot from it and you could see a lot of the tricks which worked beautifully for certain plays and far more effectively than more sophisticated actors would bring to it. The sort of performance he gave over and over again, in different parts, you could see in Arthur Lowe years later. Arthur had worked in that sort of company for years before he became terribly well known and all these little tricks that you see him do in Dad's Army are from those days. Arthur was a very bright guy and a very talented actor and he knew how to use all these tricks, so he was far more selective with them than Jack, who ran the company I was with. Having said that, Jack was very popular with the audience, and you had to respect him for bringing to life all sorts of plays, particularly comedy, which many better actors couldn't do. Is that clear, does that make sense?

KH: Yes, it makes sense.

DS: It was really just the tricks of the trade, and... now they can become an irritation if the play is a much more serious one and you are still just producing the tricks; but if the play is relatively superficial, no problem.

KH: What sorts of parts were you playing when you were there?

DS: Lord! I was playing juvenile leads, for God's sake, once or twice. I must say on the whole I played eccentric roles, what used to be called juvenile characters. You see the repertory company would be leading man, leading lady, strong character man, strong character lady, character man, character lady, juvenile man, juvenile lady and so on. I'd be playing the eccentric, and later on - well I say later on but almost from the word go -

I played parts much older than myself, as we all had to do from time to time, and parts that were usually a bit eccentric, and there is no doubt, looking back, that has almost hounded me because if I had gone on acting I would have found it increasingly difficult to be accepted as a totally straight actor.

KH: Do you have particular memories, is there a particular production that you have good memories of or bad memories of, ones that stand out?

DS: In that period?

KH: In that period, yes.

DS: There were one or two. There was a play called Love's a Luxury that was done at the Orange Tree in Richmond not long ago, and I created a character... well, I didn't create it, it had been created some time before, but for this production it was my creation, of a character called Mr Mole who is the local Scout Master, and I made him very creative and eccentric. When I say I made him creative, I went to town on not playing him straight, and I enjoyed doing it and it was very successful and the whole show was a very happy show, and years later I saw a production of it done by somebody else and I have to say, I know it sounds arrogant but I thought, 'Oh he's not a patch on me!' Do you know what I mean? It's because when you are young you have got such courage and you take risks and I was made that way anyhow, you know, I wouldn't play the straight and narrow and I learnt a lot very quickly when I went to Tonbridge, watching Jack in particular, who ran the company, and one or two of the others in the company, and I started to use the same tricks. And of course you get such experience, you are playing different parts, different ages, all sorts, totally different parts from week to week, it's wonderful experience, and as long as you don't allow the short cuts, because you do take short cuts as an actor because there's not much time. There is a limit to how much you can think it all through and if you do take short cuts, which you have to from time to time, then you must be aware that you are taking short cuts and be on your guard against doing it again in the wrong circumstances.

KH: So why did you choose to leave Tonbridge?

DS: Oh well I thought I'd given all my magic, you know, and I was ready to move on. I really thought, one of the other actors in the company said 'Oh, you should go into revue' because I would pop up with different sort of creations every week in a way that wouldn't normally be expected, especially from a young actor, and at the time the revues were very popular – Dora Bryan, Joan Simms, it was the beginning of the Kenneth Williams thing and Maggie Smith; all those revues in the West End were very popular and of course they would come on and do a little bit, have these different characters to play and of course Maurice, the old actor, he said 'You should go into revue, you're a revue actor, you can do the different voices and the funny faces and all this sort of thing'. Those are the words that were used, I thought it was a bit of an insult actually because I thought I was a serious actor. It took me a long time to realise I wasn't such a serious actor, but I had also become terribly interested in the Theatre Workshop thing.

KH: Was that from going to see them?

DS: Oh no, they were becoming terribly famous, and actually a pal of mine kept pushing me into writing to her.

KH: Joan Littlewood?

DS: Yes, so I was pushed into it really, a bit against my will I suppose and I wrote to her and lo and behold, she interviewed me and it all went very well but my God, it was difficult when I joined the company, it was terrible. I was very unhappy.

KH: Why was it so difficult?

DS: Well the work was based on Stanislavski and all this was news to me! I knew that Stanislavski had written *An Actor Prepares*, *Building a Character*, but we'd never rehearsed like that, either as students or in the repertory company, and all this business of breaking the play into units and finding the objective for each unit and all this business of Laban movement, direct and indirect. It was also demanding in the sense that she expected you to give yourself totally to Theatre Workshop. She expected you to be there first thing in the morning and stay all day long, day after day, including the weekends; and there were people I suppose, sometimes I was guilty of this as well, who just didn't agree with what was going on, and, like a lot of other people who were there at the time, we didn't realise until afterwards just how valuable the work was and I learnt so much from it.

KH: What was a typical rehearsal process?

DS: Well, sitting down and discussing these units. The play, the trends in the dialogue.

KH: Would you do that as an ensemble group?

DS: As a group, just sitting around on stage. Then defining the objective for each of them and then the business. I remember as well, talking about new territory. She wanted to do original songs, folk songs, as part of this production, it was a Lope de Vega play called *Fuenteovejuna*, I played Barildo. She had been married to Ewan McColl and she got Ewan to come in and oh my God, they used to fight like cat and dog! It didn't work at all, because she didn't agree with what he said, and he was so clever and he would sit there and talk about a folk song, you know, sung through the ages, that had been passed on, never written down and sounds and so on, he knew it all and he'd sit there and some were very good at this, some of the actors were going along with this as if they totally understood what was going on. I was totally lost, I was just listening and thinking, 'What the hell does he mean?' You couldn't understand a word of it, it was so bright, yes, and listening to his daughter now, his daughter, you know...

KH: I don't know his daughter...

DS: She's the singer who just got killed in a car crash, she carries the McColl name. I think Peggy Seager is her mother, I think Ewan McColl married Peggy Seager and I'm pretty sure she was his daughter, looking at her, I know she has got the McColl name and you can see the facial resemblance, but anyhow that's neither here nor there. And then we would have John Bury, who was the designer and walked around like Jesus Christ, and I suppose it was all the pretentiousness - what I saw as pretentiousness. I mean, I never saw that man smile and he was tall, bearded, sandals on and no socks, and in those days that was pretty sort of...! And I remember Joan announcing that 'of course, nobody will need make up, Camel' - he used to be known as Camel - 'Camel would do it all with lighting'. And he used to come in, it was inappropriate in his position, I remember one day he came in to rehearsals and he sort of watched us doing things and he took over and criticised us for not doing it properly. You know, it was... You could not help but think, 'Who the hell is this?'. So he did his usual, what became his usual, jumbo sets. Later on he came to work at the National Theatre and you could see the same sort of thing there, with the ramp and the map. So if you are doing medieval Spain there is this ramp, and at the back this tableau or map of mediaeval Spain... quite impressive and beautifully lit. The whole thing, once it was on, was very disciplined. She knew what she was going for, I am not underestimating her at all, but on the one hand it claimed to be so democratic, you know, 'We're all in this together, Kinder', as she used to call us - Kinder! - but then it was all dominated.

KH: It is very interesting because the way things appear, I always thought it was very equal and things, but what you are saying it sounds quite hierarchical in terms of power.

DS: It was. I mean, I've discussed this with others, we all agree... I'm not sure Brian Murphy would agree because Brian was a terrifically loyal person, but there were actors who just went along with it because they saw it as their future and Brian went along with it because I think he truly believed in it and he has the sort of talent that could grow in that environment and he is such a lovely man. I mean I've seen - have you ever watched *The Last of the Summer Wine*?

KH: Yes.

DS: Well he's in that now and I've seen him do bits of movement and I think, 'Oh heavens, that's vintage, that's come from Theatre Workshop, that has.'

KH: What sorts of movements do you mean?

DS: Well, I watch it because a pal of mine is in it and she always wants me to watch because she is having great difficulty moving and they have to handle the camera work very... and she always wants me to let her know if it's showing that she can't move properly, but when Brian came in to it I thought I'd better watch it for that reason as well, and for one week in particular, right at the beginning, he came on with another

character, apropos of nothing really, as they do in that... doing some sort of movement, which he did beautifully. A lot of people can't even do things like that without being slightly out of time and the other actor wasn't totally with it whereas Brian was, this is something he has known over the years... all of us have known. But it [Theatre Workshop] was hierarchical, there is no doubt about that and to pretend that it was democratic is just not right; and in particular Joan's partner, Gerry Raffles, and the square now is named after him of course after he died in that awful accident, many years ago now. He in particular, I just thought she appeared to believe one thing and was doing it all for particular reasons whereas he seemed to have his eye on the main chance and that was all. There was a façade of democracy - for the first time ever I suspect, the cleaners were listed in the programme, which was nice - but it was a façade, nobody had any real say except Joan and Gerry Raffles. And there were one or two of the actors who were closer to her than the others, and that was that.

KH: I was quite interested in the types of audiences that went to Stratford East, did you have an impression of that when you were there?

DS: Oh yes, it was the in thing. They all trailed, instead of going to the West End, particularly these bright theatre goers, the intellectuals and arty-crafties, they all came to Stratford East. Kenneth Tynan, you see, raved about it, and we did very good business. I always remember one Sunday performance in particular when, perhaps it was in the afternoon and the bar was open and people were more likely to hang around afterwards than they would do late at night, and I remember the place was seething with all sorts that I don't suppose go there now.

KH: Was there any sense that Joan Littlewood was trying to encourage people who lived in Stratford East to go along?

DS: Oh yes, she was very much a local girl. A few years later when I was at the - when I say a few, it must have been quite a few years later - when I was at the Young Vic, Frank Dunlop wanted her to come and direct a play. By that time she had already resigned but anyhow I phoned her up and she said 'I don't want to do any more, All I want is to do plays with the kids' and she was doing plays outside the theatre, in the square outside with the local kids. Oh no, all the locals doted on her. At that time it was close to the local community and quite a few people did come in from the local community, I mean it was as close as any theatre anywhere in the land and she in particular wanted the youngsters there, but I remember we used to go to the Angel Café every lunch time, in those days you always had lunch and you ate meat and two veg, apple pie and custard and a cup of tea for one and tenpence, which is what, about 10p!

KH: How many productions did you do there?

DS: Only the one.

KH: Was it your decision to leave, you decided it wasn't for you?

DS: Well I was only cast for the one, I wasn't cast for the next. I wasn't sorry... well, no, I would have gone along with it actually if she had said 'We want you in the next show' but no, she didn't. I think she saw I wasn't happy. There were a few of us that didn't stay but she did tend to cast show by show.

KH: So what did you do next?

DS: So then that was when I decided we must start the Renaissance Theatre Company. I wasn't satisfied with the way the theatre was being run, or the standard of the shows for that matter. To begin with there were all sorts of things at Tonbridge in weekly rep, it was quite wrong to say 'all seats two shillings' – mind you today I would probably think it was a fine idea, but also their Front of House was terrible.

KH: In what respect?

DS: It only had a bar or ice cream, you couldn't have any coffee or anything like that, and of course people might be travelling in from the countryside in Kent and you couldn't even get a sandwich or a biscuit or anything like that, and I started to believe in a big way that a theatre had to be a social centre as well as a performance venue, so I wanted to show, I thought I could do it much better than anybody else and I'd also thought 'Okay, I've learnt quite a bit, I've done all sorts of parts I thought I never would and I've learnt all sorts of things at Theatre Workshop'. There could be no doubt that within months of leaving the Theatre Workshop I realised how I'd benefited.

KH: What do you think were the central things that you personally benefited from?

DS: Making the best use of your body as an actor, making the best use of your voice, your appearance and your body, using your body to good effect without any superfluous nonsense. Everything that you do on stage has to be to a particular effect and you have got to be totally in control of your body from your toes upwards and she'd teach that. We had to go round picking things up with our toes so that we were aware of our feet, we had to become aware of all of our body, and then use it all so there wouldn't be any tightness or stiffness, you wouldn't constantly be doing this in one position, whatever you were supposed to be acting. The body had to be more relaxed than that, you had to be totally in control, and that brought about the Laban thing of direct movement, indirect movement and so on, all the way through. And similarly with the voice, you had to use your voice to the full, in a way that was attractive to the audience and totally in keeping with the character and at the same time you had to be sure you weren't losing your voice so it means staying healthy and using your voice to the full.

KH: What were the aims of the Renaissance Theatre Company, what kind of

DS: Well the aims were to put all that into practice and certainly, when we did our first season at Lyme Regis and we carried on in the second season as well, we had a Front of

House to start with and there was a welcome at the front door. I was determined that when people came they could get coffee. It couldn't be licensed but there were all sorts of things and everybody got to know us, the locals did and all that and also in those days, it is unbelievable but in those days the seaside repertory company – because Lyme Regis is seaside – they'd do a different show every week throughout the season and I thought 'Why do that? Most of the people who come are going to be holiday makers because the locals are far too busy, they can't come to the theatre, they're far too busy'. I mean, they do at some point...

KH: But not every week.

DS: No, so we did four shows which we repeated. So at the beginning of the season from April onwards we gradually introduced the four shows, and then we repeated them for two or three nights each so that people on holiday could see three plays in one week or four plays in a fortnight, and it worked like a dream.

KH: What influenced the choice of plays that you were putting on?

DS: Oh our personal taste. We all said we were going to do better quality plays, I mean we were arrogant youngsters, you know. We didn't like the... We got the theatre from the local council, beautiful little theatre on the cliffs there, for £20 a week and without any permission whatsoever we painted it red and black and the local preservation society complained. There was a woman called Lady Abbot Anderson who took me to task in a big way and I got so rude, oh it was dreadful when I look back! But the next year it had been painted green when we got back and I thought 'oh we'll leave it like that, I'm not going to argue with anybody' but then the plays, we wanted it to be a little bit highbrow and Jeremy was there, we did a play that was typical of our Tonbridge days, because it amused us to do that, we did a play called Lady be Careful. We did something from my student days, which was Shaw's Candida, we did a totally new version of Sweeney Todd which a pal of mine wrote, a melodrama, it's quite good, and the fourth play... what was the fourth play? Well other plays that we did either in the first year or the second was An Inspector Calls, the Priestley play, and Bell, Book and Candle and a new play by Robert Morley which had been a West End comedy called Hippo Dancing, so it was a mix, rather like that, and it worked pretty well and it was an absolute joy to do, an absolute joy.

KH: What kind of company did you have? Was it quite a small company and people you had asked because you had worked with them before?

DS: I had worked with them all before except for two or three. You see Bernard Gallagher, another pal of mine who became a very successful actor in mainstream theatre, I worked with him in Barrow and Dundee. We were all... they were all pretty good people.

KH: You did two seasons in Lyme Regis and then...

DS: Yes, '56 and '57.

KH: And then you moved to Barrow-in-Furness.

DS: I moved to Barrow because that theatre came our way for £30 a week. It was almost derelict but the most beautiful theatre. From the outside terrible, it looked like a tram shed – whatever a tramshed is supposed to look like! - but inside it was an absolute gem, 1864, absolute gem, it was enough to make you weep.

KH: So that was your permanent home.

DS: That was the permanent home and the kids had broken into it. It was owned by Joe Curry, who was John Curry the ice dancer's father, so we moved in and Joe Curry, although not the easiest man to get on with, at the end of the day he was very supportive. And we moved in there

KH: So is this 1957, 58?

DS: We actually opened in January '58, yes.

KH: Did you have a permanent company?

DS: It was a permanent company; people were often there for a long time, a year generally, two years.

KH: Was that quite unusual?

DS: No, that was more usual. I mean we weren't at all... because in those days the company I've described before we started to talk, the leading man, leading lady etc and all that sort of thing, we didn't conform to that at all. We were a young company who wanted to do special work and we knew we had to do, well, what used to be called pot-boilers because we had to live on whatever was taken at the box office, so we did comedy, we did murder plays but we also did classics. I remember when - the Arts Council couldn't believe it! - one year we did Ghosts, Ibsen's Ghosts, one of my favourites, and the following year I decided we would do Rosmersholm, a difficult play, and I remember I advertised it - and I didn't think there was anything unusual about this at all - I advertised it as Rosmersholm by Henrik Ibsen, author of last year's Ghosts, you know, just to remind people, and it was not an easy play. I always remember, because a lady called Mrs Rawlinson... We used to have 'two for the price of one' on a Monday night - place used to be packed! - and I always remember her going up to her mates, it was all very friendly, she said, 'Well,' - this is after Rosmersholm - she said 'I've done the washing today, and after seeing that, I feel as if I've done the ironing as well.' They

were very forthright in Barrow. They became so loyal and supportive and wonderful audiences to play to.

KH: Were you weekly in Barrow?

DS: We were weekly for quite a long time, then I devised a system by which we put – oh dear, now can I remember exactly how I did it? We would get the play on on a Monday night, and then we'd rehearse the play for the following week from the Tuesday onwards, but then on the Thursday or the Friday we'd also do some initial work on the play after that, do you see what I mean, so that each Tuesday you weren't starting totally cold on the play. And it helped enormously and then eventually we became totally fortnightly, each play did run for two weeks. Sometimes for longer.

KH: Were you being funded by the Arts Council at this time then?

DS: It was entirely our own money, as it had been ever since Renaissance Theatre started from Lyme Regis until 1961, and then we got the grants from the Arts Council and the Labour council in Barrow Town Council, and Vickers Armstongs.

KH: In terms of programming what things were you doing? Were you being influenced by things that were being done by the Royal Court?

DS: Oh yes, very much so. Not so much by the Royal Court although we certainly took up Wesker, and a director joined me, a chappie called Derek Knowlby who had been a trainee director at the Royal Court with John Dexter and later on became well known for the first production of *Rozenkrantz and Guildenstern* at the National. But he came up and he was very keen to do, he was an associate director to me and he was very keen to do the Weskers because he'd directed *Chips with Everything* on tour and obviously wanted to do things he had done already. I had done *Roots* already and he did *Chicken Soup with Barley* and I think it was *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*.

KH: Yes, that's the third one isn't it.

DS: And we had a very adventurous programme, very. All right, we did the West End comedies and the murders, it had to be a mixed bag and I believe it should be a mixed bag, people want to go to the theatre for all sorts of different reasons, it doesn't have to be serious all the time and we did Shaw, a lovely production of *You Never Can Tell* and *Candida* again, we repeated *Sweeney Todd* which is one of our famous productions.

KH: Were you still doing people like J.B. Priestley and Terrence Rattigan?

DS: Yes. I can't remember doing Terrence Rattigan at Barrow although I quite like Terrence Rattigan. Priestley, we did *An Inspector Calls*, I think we did *I Have Been Here Before*.

KH: It is quite strange because there is this received opinion that they were totally out of fashion by the mid 50s, 60s, but it is interesting that you were still doing them and people were obviously enjoying them?

DS: Yes, we did Noel Coward, *Private Lives* – oh, that was another one we did at Lyme Regis, *Private Lives* - and *Hay Fever*. I think *Private Lives* is a remarkable play. No, I know what you mean. A lot of it was 'spin' as they would say nowadays. As they say in politics, the Westminster Village. I mean in London there is the chattering classes about the arts, as well as everything. I mean, utterly sickening because half the time they are just putting these shows on for each other. I saw this loud and clear when I came to the Young Vic, it just horrified me, horrified me. I knew now I'd never thought the Young Vic would do that. The London theatre scene assumed that once *Look Back in Anger* had happened, and Beckett, and the Royal Court, that was as good as it could be, everything else was old-hat, and there was a tendency, a strong tendency to go along with that and there were awful times in the sixties after I moved to Dundee, when I've had actors say – and they were all very friendly, it was a very good company up there – say that what was happening between them on stage was far more important than what was happening between them and the audience.

KH: Do you think that was as a result of that shift?

DS: Oh yes, oh yes. Definitely. I had people who came up to Dundee, trainee designers from Royal Court, who had no idea how to do technical drawings at all, they weren't learning the craft at all. Derek Knowlby would come up to Barrow and later to Dundee and he never really learned his craft, he would just decide what he wanted it to look like and then said, 'Well, it's not my job, you have now got to sort it out' and come up with the ideas – awful!

KH: Why do you think that happened, why did people have those attitudes?

DS: I think that work, you see, quite quickly becomes very self indulgent, and you could see this happening in Theatre Workshop. People became full of themselves 'we're far more important than anybody else', you know and it was just like the painting thing, 'Oh, we don't really need to learn the techniques at all, we can just splash paint on the canvas' and of course it was popular for people like John Piper to design a play. Well all John Piper did was do a picture and some other poor sod had to come along and put it into some sort of theatrical expression and they all pick it up, all the kids pick it up and what's more they think this is the smart thing to do, I must be artistic so I don't have to bother about learning the technical side of it, but the joy of working with a theatre designer who knows his skill through and through, on the technical side as well as any other, it is amazing. At the Young Vic I worked with Carl Toms, famous theatre designer, and he was an absolute dream and he'd learnt his business through and through. He worked with Oliver Messel and they knew... I mean, Carl used to go off

shopping with the wardrobe supervisor to choose materials and so on, they got totally immersed in it whereas, as I say, I had people coming up from the Royal Court, and one in particular I remember, all she produced was a sketch of the set so I said, 'Well, we're going to need a bit more than this you know, because we've got to have it built.' She didn't know! I had to get somebody else to sit down with her, and it starts to cause tension.

KH: I was quite interested in you saying that you were a permanent company, because other people that I've talked to say that television had a big impact on the idea of having a permanent company and staying for more than one season. Did you have any sense of that?

DS: No, not in those days, not in the fifties and sixties. I wasn't aware of that until I went to the Young Vic in 1970, and that was partly because the Young Vic is in London and it's so near to the national television places.

KH: Did you have any sense of television having an impact on theatre at all in the fifties and sixties in any respect?

DS: It didn't take our audiences away. Everybody assumes that it did but it didn't. In Barrow in particular, the local television people, BBC and Granada in Manchester, they were very interested in Barrow. Barrow became very famous, because we were a strong community theatre and we did all sorts of things for the children, we had a youth theatre.

KH: That was quite unusual for the time isn't it?

DS: It was, yes, we did Theatre in Education and so on, and it was all a bit of a trend-setter, so we used to have all sorts of people coming over. I know there was one programme they actually did on the theatre, they came... the television people came along but they must have come on other occasions. We were written up in the national press quite a lot.

KH: You were at Barrow for quite a long time weren't you?

DS: Six years.

KH: So what made you decide to move on?

DS: Well talking about a designer – and just before I say that, a designer again who knew all the technical side, when we got to 1964 that was the year of Shakespeare's Quater-Centenary and I decided that it would be very good to build a reproduction of the Globe Theatre and to show that you could do any sort of play on it, so we did

Hamlet, Merchant of Venice, The Rivals and See How They Run and Oh! it was marvellous, so exhausting but once they were on we did them in repertoire. It was an absolute dream: they worked beautifully and Richard Hammond, who was our designer, he really rose to the occasion and he was a highly technical person – he knew his technical drawing and all this! - and he studied all the evidence that there was on the Globe Theatre, dimensions and all the rest and it was absolutely beautiful what he created, absolutely beautiful. If I had stayed in Barrow I would have left it there, I would have made that the basis of a northern classical theatre and in some ways, now that is key to my career, in some ways I think now, 'Should I have stayed there and forgotten about Dundee?'. Dundee was pretty good certainly, but... I mean... I didn't totally enjoy being picked, but there was a terrific opportunity at that particular time in Barrow but I was so tired, you know - I mean, six years! - and I got the opportunity and I was headhunted for Dundee and flattered to be asked because it was a prestigious company and I went there.

KH: I don't know a great deal about Dundee.

DS: It is a Scottish company. Mind you, in those days it was an English repertory company in Scotland, it was well known as that, but it was very... a lot of well known people worked there. Michael York was there, Jill Gascoine, ah, all sorts.

KH: What were you head-hunted to do there?

DS: To be director and administrator. I mean, I had decided to leave Barrow anyhow but I had no sooner left than the Arts Council phoned me up and said 'Would I be interested to be General Manager of Dundee?'.

KH: Was it quite a different experience, moving to Scotland and being kind of in a Scottish theatre as opposed to an English?

DS: No, not really. I had never been to Scotland before, ever and I learnt quickly that you have to decide it's a foreign country. My history started to work overtime and I thought, 'Come on, this was a foreign country until the Act of Union, and even since the Act of Union not much has happened'. The Scots are nearer to France than they are to us and once you accept that, fine. If English people go up thinking 'Don't they have this, don't they have that,' you know, 'Oh it's not like this in England', then you're finished. You have to accept that it is rather like going to Spain or Portugal, or anywhere for that matter, and it's a different country. Their heritage is vastly different from ours but they are marvellous people, I love the Scots, I've got so many friends, they are so hospitable, so generous. I mean they are very careful about every penny but once they decide to spend money, they will spend it, and they value your friendship.

[end of track 1]

KH: Was there any sense when you were in Dundee that there was more of an emphasis on showing Scottish new writers?

DS: Nobody pushed me on that one, I think that this is partly because the heritage of the company was very much that of an English repertory company, but we did do Scottish plays because I wanted to do Scottish plays. It was interesting; we used to do Shakespeare quite regularly and it was interesting that Macbeth was immediately more popular than any of the others you see, it is part of their heritage, but they would go for all the comedies, the English plays, and it was three weekly or monthly.

KH: That must have been quite different to what you were used to?

DS: Oh yes, and a much higher wage level and so on. In those days, there probably still is, there was more money for the Scottish companies, more subsidy, than there was for the English.

KH: Why was that?

DS: I'm not sure actually.

KH: That's interesting.

DS: Yes, they had grants that were normally higher than you would expect in England.

KH: So were you still trying to do a broad range of plays?

DS: Oh we did... Yes, we did *The Hostage*, *Antigone*, *You Never Can Tell*, I mean these were plays I'd done at Barrow anyway, we did *Ghosts*, *Semi-Detached* I remember, David Turner's play, which is very much from the Midlands of England - Coventry, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, no, they did *Henry V* after my time there, not long after... Oh we did... *Sergeant Musgrave*.

KH: Oh, *Arden*.

DS: Yes, that's it.

KH: How did that go down in Dundee?

DS: Oh dear, it emptied it, emptied it! [laughs]

KH: Arden wasn't very commercially successful was he?

DS: No, no. It wasn't long afterwards that there was all that hoo-hah, remember when he got shut out of the RSC? The RSC were attempting to do - this was in London, at the Aldwych I think, and they were attempting to do one of the Arden plays, it must have been one of the new ones, and he turned up to one of the rehearsals and it all got tense and difficult, and they were banned from the theatre.

KH: Did you have a sense, when you were working in Dundee, that theatre had shifted at all, that there had been this big change, you know, the myth that surrounds that period now, did you have that sense?

DS: yes, yes I did, but it is very interesting because it was sort of coming back, turning on itself, because it was at Dundee - as I told you - when the actors, in fact it was Sam Walters who is the founder and director of the Orange Tree at Richmond, who said to me, 'All I'm worried about is what's happening between me and the other actors, I'm not concerned with the audience.' Now that was sixties stuff, straight from fifties Royal Court and all the rest. Now, I remember we used to get people coming up from the Royal Court because that was when Michael York got spotted by Bill Gaskell, Bill Gaskell came from the Royal Court and there was another director from the Royal Court who came up. We used to get quite a few people coming up. One of them saw, it was a Shaw... Now, I love Bernard Shaw and I think I know the best way to do Bernard Shaw. He and I - it sounds arrogant, here we go again - but we're on the same wavelength and he or somebody else talks about some of his long speeches being like arias and technically you have got to handle them so you don't run out of breath, but you've also got to speak them - and all the dialogue for that matter - as if it is ordinary talk, but it is not ordinary talk, it is carefully crafted dialogue, the same as Shakespeare. Do you know what I'm trying to say? You approach them like that and you speak the speech as Shakespeare would say, and we used to work on the text like that. Yes, you're there with each other, you are communicating with each other, but you are communicating in Shavian terms and you are speaking Shaw's language and you let those ringing phrases, those arguments come across clearly and beautifully, in standard English where necessary and with an accent if necessary, as with Eliza Doolittle or with her dad and so on, and he gives plenty of examples of how that accent should be. Now this guy who came up from the Royal Court just couldn't get over it, he said 'Oh it's all so clear,' he said, 'how did you get actors to speak so clearly?' I couldn't believe this. I thought, 'This is Bernard Shaw, surely we all know...'. That was the first time I realised that things were coming back to more traditional values. The sloppiness of 'we don't have to bother how we speak on the stage' was starting to boomerang on people. It has come back again loud and clear, mainly because there is a new generation or more of actors who want to work in television or film and they don't work in the theatre at all, so if they have to work in the theatre they come on, you can hardly hear what they say, or they have obviously got a voice problem

KH: Do you think that is partly to do with the repertory training that you had, the fact that it is not there so much any more?

DS: Yes, I think that is also a reason. The point is, even with subsidy, but particularly before subsidy, you had to entertain the audience. It sounds old hat to say this but that's what the entertainment industry is about. You have got to come on and entertain people otherwise they won't come again and it means you'll starve at the end of the week, it is simple as that. In that respect the straight actor has so much to learn from the Music Hall. This is what...

KH: Now that's interesting.

DS: This is what Olivier understood so well, you can learn so much from the Music Hall. I used to say to actors, I mean there are times when an actor – well basically this always has to happen. Whoever the actor is, whatever the part is, you have got to come on and shine, you've got to immediately get the audience's attention. I remember the first time I saw Paul Scofield at the Birmingham Rep and I was only a kid: this actor came on to the stage and I went 'Ah, who's this?'. I thought 'That's what it is'. It is what a woman called Elizabeth Percy at RADA used to call electric light and it is absolutely true. There are times when I have said to actors 'When you come on stage at this particular point' - but in any case it is a basic rule – 'you have got to take over' and it is just like Gracie Fields coming on and taking over. Joan Littlewood used to talk about Gracie Fields and say... she said to Avis Bunnage once 'When you come to this moment, you have got to turn to the audience and you sing your heart out, you have got to do your Gracie Fields' and it is absolutely right and actors won't accept that, you know, often because they think no, this is the straight theatre and that's Music Hall or popular theatre.

KH: Are there any productions that you remember from the fifties and sixties, or the forties when you were younger?

DS: Other people?

KH: Or just playwrights that you remember.

DS: I was also brought up on Donald Wolfit. We all went, Donald Wolfit toured all the time pretty well, although he did seasons in London, and he was with the Old Vic and I saw him do Tamburlaine and it almost makes you weep to think. That man used to come on to the stage - talk about Paul Scofield - he used to come on to the stage and oh my goodness, how did he do it? We were students and of course he was the old actor/manager and he hogged the stage and so... but we used to love it. I saw him do, I think pretty well everything I saw him do were memorable: Tamburlaine, Lear, Shylock, Clandestine Marriage.

KH: What was it about his performances that were so...?

DS: Oh they were just electric. Volpone...out of this world! They were just electric. He came on and you just couldn't keep your eyes off him and he'd got this, it's what Olivier had as well, a sort of animal magnetism.

KH: I was just going to say, so many people associate that period of actors with that magnetism.

DS: Yes. Gielgud didn't have the magnetism but he won you over by his magnificent handling of the text. [chuckles] there was a lovely story the other day... this was Peter Hall and normally I don't have much time for Peter Hall but anyhow, this is a good story. He was talking about the influence of pauses that Beckett sort of introduced, and Pinter with his pauses took this up [laughs] and they were doing a play called No Man's Land, Corin did it not long ago actually with John Woods, and I saw it, of course, with Gielgud and Ralph Richardson. When they were rehearsing it

KH: The first production of No Man's Land?

DS: Pardon?

KH: Which production was this of No Man's Land that you saw?

DS: Oh it was way back, years and years ago.

KH: Was it the first one?

DS: Yes.

KH: Oh, OK

DS: I wonder where it was? Probably at the Court. Well he said in rehearsal it was the wow... I mean, if there was a pause in rehearsals, up until the time of Beckett and Pinter people always assumed you had forgotten your next line. They were both reaching a certain age anyhow and he would go, 'Is it you, Ralphie?' 'No, I thought it was you, Johnny'. 'No, there's a pause!' And that – you put your finger on it - that makes it all so stupid really, because you don't pause just for the sake of it, you only pause if you believe it, you know. Anyhow, the stories are legion about Gielgud and Richardson but they were marvellous.

KH: What was your impression of that production?

DS: Oh very good, wonderful.

KH: Did you see many of Pinter's early plays?

DS: Pinter? [pause] No, because, see, they were happening when I was in Barrow and Dundee and we were doing our own productions of them. Caretaker, which I think is a lovely play and I tell you, we did it at the Young Vic and our tramp was Stephen Lewis who was brilliant. Do you know Stephen Lewis? He was brilliant. I knew Stephen... I had known Stephen for a long time on and off, because he had been at Theatre Workshop – not in my time - and he was ... very interesting actually. Though he'd been at Theatre Workshop, he came to me one day and complained about the way rehearsals were going on *The Caretaker*, so I said 'What's up then?' and he said 'Ooh well, it's the actor' - it was Jeffrey Cassoon who is a very good actor, a very creative actor - but he said 'We can't move forward at all and he always has to sort himself out, question this and question that' and I said, 'Stephen, that is exactly what it was like at the Theatre Workshop!' I mean, Stephen just wanted to get on with it pretty much the way we used to in the earlier rep days, so obviously Theatre Workshop hadn't rubbed off all that much on him.

KH: I think the only other question I wanted to ask you was, did you have any sense of censorship having any impact?

DS: Oh well, the Lord Chamberlain, you mean? I had some lovely times with that, funny little time because in Barrow in particular, but in Dundee as well, we put on plays by local authors.

KH: So you had to send them to the Lord Chamberlain?

DS: Yes and there was one very gifted chappie who worked at Vickers Armstrongs, Ron Watson, a lovely man God bless him, he died far too young and his wife, he left a wife and children. He came to me, I remember I was playing *Pantomime Dame please forgive me*, and it was between the matinée and the evening performance and he came to me and said he had written these plays, so I said, 'Oh yes, leave it with me', we chatted, and I looked at the play I thought, 'Blimey, this is good stuff!'. It was all sort of vintage, *Coronation Street* stuff, you know, and this was the early days of *Coronation Street*, the really good days, so anyhow Bernard Gallagher who was with the company at the time, I said 'What do you think, Bernard?', because Bernard was very bright on this sort of thing, and he liked them and we did some editing on it and put it on and it was an absolute wow. It was set in Barrow but it was so funny, you know, it had got everything going for it. I was in it, Bernard was in it and so on, oh, it was... I think the first one was *Seeing Red* but another one, *Sounding Brass* and then there was another one, *Paddy's Pig*. There was at least three that we did and *Coronation Street* took him on, Granada Television, and Ron, at the end of the day, was always one for making no compromises at all, not putting up with any pressure, and he said 'I'll be able to do so much but I'll not be able to keep it up all the time', so he opted out after a time but he wrote some of those early *Coronation Streets*.

KH: That's interesting.

DS: Anyhow, we had to send the plays to the Lord Chamberlain and I always remember the one coming back. He had got a line, 'poor old bugger' and it came back 'delete 'bugger', substitute 'sod''. I mean! I knew this was monstrous because in Barrow if you said 'Poor old bugger' it was a term of endearment, if you say 'Poor old sod' they would go [gasps through his teeth] and they did! In a big way. Funnily enough, I was only thinking about this the other day. I strongly suspect I just slipped it back in again later on, because I thought, 'They don't know what they're doing'. I had that sort of thing happen over and over again, you know, but they were the last days of the Lord Chamberlain and it was a nonsense. But I didn't have to do... They didn't ban any play, it was only small things like that. I think they did it probably with... did they do it with Roots? 'Bugger' gets mentioned in Roots so I think they probably banned that one.

KH: Those are probably all the questions I wanted to ask you, I don't know if you have got anything you would want to add or mention?

DS: No, I'm fine, thank you for being so tolerant.

KH: No, it's really interesting, thank you.