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Felicity Skelton – interview transcript

Interviewer: Erin Heidrich

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Actors; Assistant Stage Manager's job; Birmingham Rep.; Ian McKellan; Laurence Olivier; modern writing; Prospect Productions; Salary structure; Terry Skelton; Touring in Ireland; working conditions

EH: This is Erin Heidrich interviewing Felicity Skelton on the 25th of April, 2006. Can I just have your permission for the British Library to have copyright of this interview?

FS: Yes, you can.

EH: So, just for my information, how old were you when you became an actor?

FS: Well, I wasn't exactly an actor. Acting Assistant Stage Manager - Student Acting Assistant Stage Manager - at the age of 18.

EH: And what were your responsibilities then, as an ASM?

FS: Everything that nobody else wanted to do! So: sweeping the stage, making the props, buying the props. On one occasion I got sent out of rehearsal in the middle of London to ask some people who were digging up the road to stop digging the road while people were rehearsing. That didn't go down too well. I think they were so shocked that this girl would come up and actually ask these four really tough men if they could please desist [laughs], because people were trying to act in here. They stopped for a while, but not for long. That was the kind of thing I was asked to do. I spent a lot of time during rehearsal in London going out and feeding people's parking meters - that was one of my chief responsibilities. And a bit of acting - when they needed another monster or another nymph or another old lady then it was on with the slap and creaking on at the back of the stage somewhere and trying not to fall asleep.

EH: So, anything anyone else didn't want to do?

FS: Yeah.

EH: What led to your decision to get into theatre?

FS: Oh, I'd always wanted to. Always, always, always. My father was a very keen - had been a very keen - amateur actor, and at bedtime he used to tell me stories about the kind of daft things that had happened while he was acting. He used to act at Swansea Little Theatre with Dylan Thomas. So, he had a lot of really good stories about extraordinary things that had happened that made me laugh a lot. And, we used to go to the theatre a lot so we were always going to the National and the RSC and to all kinds of other things in the West End. And I just couldn't think of anything else that I would rather do. I just thought, 'No, that's absolutely what I have to do. I need to go into the theatre.' It... just... desperate! [laughs]

EH: 1966 was when you started?

FS: 1966, yes. I left school, I went to a sixth form college and did some A-levels and then my mother said, 'You have got to do a secretarial course.' So I went to the local Tech and I did three days learning shorthand and typing and they gave me some - they decided we'd got to do remedial English, I wasn't sure why, 'cause I'd got A-level English anyway, and we had a Scottish woman with a very high-pitched voice who read us *The Tempest*, every part in it she read herself, in a very high-pitched, Edinburgh Scottish lilt. And three days later I had a job at Prospect Productions and they were doing *The Tempest*, only we had Timothy West playing Prospero and Clive Swift playing Caliban and it was a little bit better. I enjoyed it better.

EH: A definite improvement. So, what are some of the productions that you distinctly remember enjoying when you were with Prospect or with Birmingham Rep?

FS: Well, that first one, of course, was amazing - *The Tempest* - because I had never heard of the company. I didn't really know what I was doing. I turned up on the first day in rehearsal and didn't expect to recognize anyone there or anything and I walked through the door and suddenly realized that everyone there was somebody from the RSC or the National, and actors that I'd been admiring from a distance for years. The atmosphere was fantastic, it was, walking into that first rehearsal, it was that buzz in the air that was almost tangible. And you don't ever get it anywhere else, it's something, something to do with obsession, I think, and with egos conflicting, and... something, I don't know... there's a buzz, and there was a buzz, that just made your blood sing. It was the most exciting thing in the world. And extraordinary. So that was terrific and we went out on tour with that and we toured to all kinds of fairly grim places: Sunderland and Middlesbrough and Belfast and, you know, not altogether thrilling. But it was the best possible training and after two years working for Prospect on and off, I went to Birmingham Rep, which was a thrill, because Birmingham Rep was, in those days, this was the Old Rep on Station Street, full of ghosts - I mean, everyone had worked there. Olivier, Gielgud, you name it, they'd been at Birmingham Rep at sometime or other. So, the whole theatre, the old Victorian theatre, had soaked up all these characters, all those performances, all those audiences, all those directors, the whole atmosphere in that place was just... extraordinary. And I was so thrilled to get a job there and I worked there for just over a year and was off to other places.

EH: So, 1968, the kind-of ending period of the time in question here was when you'd stopped working at Birmingham Rep and gone on to other things.

FS: Yes.

EH: What about your experiences with a traveling company, versus with a repertory company?

FS: It was strange. I think I said in an e-mail to you that I'd been reading some things on your site and that I'd read the bit from Tim West because I've always had a soft spot for Tim West because he was really good to us. Some of the actors could be absolutely bloody. They were horrible. And there was this, I think, kind of hierarchy in those days. I don't know what it was like in ordinary rep, but I think it was fairly similar, but surely the stage manager had to call the actors 'Mr' and 'Miss'. You didn't call them by their first names at all, it was... they were 'Mr. West', 'Mr. Swift', Mr. whoever it was, and Miss whoever it was, and you practically had to curtsy before you spoke to them. It was very, very hard work. We would open on a Monday night somewhere - although, actually, I think we usually did a technical rehearsal on Monday night and opened on Tuesday, but I can't remember that for absolutely sure - and then we would play for a week until the Saturday night. And on the Saturday night the actors would all swan off back to London and of course me and my colleagues, underfed, underpaid, exhausted, had to pack up the set, the costumes, the props and move on to the next place. And we quite frequently were working and/or traveling all night Saturday, setting up all day Sunday, and quite possibly all night Sunday. The actors would come back on Monday afternoon, reappear in the new place, and start chucking their weight around. You know, 'Why isn't this ready, why isn't that ready, where's this, where's that and why haven't I got a cup of tea?'. So, it was hard work, but Tim West, when he went back to London on the Saturday night would leave a bottle of whiskey for us in his dressing room and that, you know, and he knew us all by name, and he was absolutely lovely to work with... super. But some of them were horrid. One of my jobs, of course, was to make tea, as I say, so, at the interval, every actor had to have a cup of tea and/or coffee on their dressing table, ready for them. But it had to be not cold and not hot, because they'd got to be able to drink it; have the right amount of sugar, right amount of milk. And it was my job to do that. And, of course, some of the theatres we went to would be on three or four floors, the dressing rooms, and trying to get round every single dressing room and deliver the coffee or tea to the right people at the right time, in the right condition and the right temperature without getting it, sometimes - literally sometimes - thrown back at me, and this is for, you know, like four pounds a week. And when we went to Ireland, they used to give me - I used to have to buy, out of my four pounds a week, to buy the coffee and the tea and the sugar and the milk, and then claim the money back off the actors, I used to have to, you know, I'd charge them, whatever it was in those days, sixpence a cup or something, you know, threepence a cup, something like that. And, of course, it was really hard getting money out of some of them at all, they just wouldn't pay at all. Others used to pay me - in Ireland, of course, when we were in Belfast, they would pay me in Irish money. Then, on the Saturday night they'd offload all of their Irish money on me just as we were leaving Ireland to come back to England, and of course I'd be left with all this Irish money that was absolutely worthless. So, some of them were absolutely bloody. But you couldn't complain. That was, you know, that

was what your job was. You were the lowest of the low, and some of them took a great delight in letting you know it. So, it was hard work, but it was exciting. I mean, it really was an interesting, I mean digs, theatrical digs, and all the stories people have about them are true. They really are the most extraordinary places. Or were, I don't know if they still exist to the same extent really. People tend to stay in hotels, because they're all paid better, of course, nowadays. But theatrical digs were extraordinary. Again, Belfast, we used to turn up in Belfast, and the actors were all - well, the whole company was booked into a hotel in the middle of the city, and we all turned up there, and we had gone straight to the theatre and we had spent two days in the theatre trying to set up for this production, and so by the time we'd got to the hotel the actors were there as well and we were met at the door with, 'Oh, no, you can't come in, you've got to go and find somewhere else to stay, because it's full.' So we were suddenly out on our rear at eight o'clock at night on a Saturday night, we were trying to find somewhere to sleep for the night. So, it was fun.

EH: You mentioned in one of your e-mails that there were, as you put it, 'No working conditions.' So, there were no benefits at all?

FS: No, none at all. No, four pounds an hour—no, four pounds an hour! My God! No! Four pounds a week. The minimum wage for a student ASM was a pound a week. But Prospect were very generous and we got four pounds a week. I think it was something to do with the London Weighting or something like that, and then when we went out on tour there was an extra three pounds a week touring allowance, but of course you have to realize you could actually get bed and breakfast in those days for five pounds a week, for bed and breakfast. So, things were so much cheaper. But nevertheless, I mean, I had the backing of my parents, and most student ASMs had backing from their parents, because you really couldn't live on four pounds a week or seven pounds a week. But there were students who were so desperate to get into theatre and so keen to work in theatre that they did try to live on it and they would end up begging. Really, literally begging. There was one, the year before I went and joined Prospect, I kept hearing about this girl who'd fainted regularly because she wouldn't eat for days on end because she hadn't any money. And they actors would have to feed her in the end because she kept fainting. And they'd have to let her sleep on their floor, because she couldn't afford anything at all. It was tough, and, as I say, you worked all night. There was no such thing as overtime or anything like that; I mean, that was a joke. We did get overtime - when I went to Birmingham, we used to get overtime, I think we got, if you worked after two o'clock in the morning on a Saturday night, you know, doing your thing - and bear in mind you'd started work at nine o'clock in the morning - if you then worked after two o'clock on the Sunday morning, you then got a pound for every four hours after two o'clock in the morning. So if you worked from, say, two until eight, you might get that's, how many hours is that, six, so you'd get £1.50. That was your overtime. At eight o'clock, it stopped. So, I mean, the fact that you actually hadn't had a break, that was irrelevant. At eight o'clock you were back on ordinary pay.

EH: So did you prefer working at Birmingham Rep where you were in the same place all the time, or did you enjoy the touring?

FS: I enjoyed the touring. Partly because with the touring you got different actors all the time. Each tour that we did, there were different actors. And the variety of

production we did was probably a bit wider as well, we did classics and kind of more modern things as well. But, Birmingham was great, we had some super actors there. I was there when Richard Chamberlain did his Hamlet, which was interesting. And yes, it was good work at Birmingham, it was good work. They were just different experiences. But equally challenging and interesting.

EH: One of the more interesting things I thought that you mentioned in the e-mail also was when you talked about seeing Laurence Olivier in Othello and finding him boring.

FS: Yes, very, very. I never could see the point of Olivier. I mean, I... I went to see Othello, I was sitting in the front row, which, I don't know, maybe didn't do it any good. But he came on and I just thought, you know... get over yourself, really. Totally unconvincing, and his whole style - I suppose I was possibly the next generation, I think that's the thing. I think Olivier was very much a, well, one of the last actor-managers. And he was a larger-than-life character who liked to perform larger-than-life. Whereas I suppose my taste was for something a little more naturalistic in some way. And this whole performance thing, it just seemed to me the whole time he was saying, 'Look at my performance! Look at my performance!' Instead of saying, you know, 'This is Othello,' he was saying, 'This is ME, being Othello!' And I just thought, 'No it isn't. It's just you, mate. It's just you with some funny brown gunge on.' It was weird. I was bored, I must confess, I was bored. Other things I saw him in I liked better. I saw The Dance of Death, I saw him do that, and I liked that a lot better. But, in general, I didn't... no, not really.

EH: So, you think it's a product of your generation that sees Olivier as overdone?

FS: Maybe, I think he was part of a kind-of dying breed. After that, I mean I would think the next people after that were people like McKellen, you see, Ian McKellen, who was, I mean still is a huge performer. There's no doubt about it. One of the best things I saw McKellen do - and this is out of your period, it's much more recent, but it's still a good twenty years ago now - when he was with the Actor's company and he did a thing called The Wood Demon. And he had a scene in that when he came on and he moved around a table which was in a very cramped space and had people sitting around it and he danced around this table so lightly, and just his movement, the way he moved around that table without falling over any chair legs was so impressive, and, it was a performance, and yet that kind of performance was different to anything that Olivier did. Olivier... I just thought he was a show-off. Whereas Ian McKellen, even when he's showing off, still has kind of a... more depth. I know I could be shot down in flames for saying that [laughs], but, you know...

EH: I will admit - I don't study theatre, I study folklore, but I saw Olivier in the first movie I'd ever seen him in, Henry V, and I thought, 'This is the big deal?' I felt the same way you did, seeing him on film. So, you mentioned seeing Ian McKellen, or working with Ian McKellen? Did you work with him?

FS: I didn't work with him, he used to work with Prospect Productions, but he worked with them the year before I was there and the year after, and I missed it, which I wasn't

very happy about. I saw one of his first-ever things, which was this, A Lily in Little India [points to programme] and that was before he was known. And, he was gorgeous and of course I fell passionately in love with him, not realizing he was totally and utterly gay. It was a super play, I really enjoyed it. I just adored him. And, in fact, my last theatre job was, I spent thirteen years in Bolton, which was where he came from of course, and I did actually work with him there, eventually. Bit special.

EH: You mentioned missing the proscenium arch. What is it you miss about it?

FS: I do miss it. I do miss it. In those days, back in the sixties and before that, when you went to the theatre - and I'm talking particularly about the West End because I lived in the South East, I lived in the Home Counties, so we used to go up to London to the theatre - you would go into this huge red plush rather itchy auditorium, and in front of you would be a huge red curtain with gold braids and gold tassels on it, and some soft lighting, and if it was a musical in particular, of course, the orchestra would eventually filter into the orchestra pit and you would kind of peer to see if you could see them at all, and then the music would strike up, live orchestra. But even if it wasn't a musical, the excitement when the lights went down and you could hear that rumble as the curtain rose [imitates sound of curtain rumbling], and you didn't know what you were going to see when the lights came up on the stage, and you didn't know who was going to be on that stage or what was going to be on that stage or what was going to happen and it was like Christmas. It was wonderful. There was an excitement and a buzz and the smell of the greasepaint and all that which of course you don't get anymore, because people don't wear makeup like we used to. There's nothing that does that now. And although I'm not opposed to open stages, I mean, I've worked, most of my theatre life I worked in a place that didn't have a proscenium arch, I do miss it sometimes. I do think sometimes it would be nice just to have a good, old-fashioned curtain, with a light on it, and the lights go out, the curtain goes up and then the lights come up and there's something. And it just would be lovely, I think. Because, there's it's just the excitement, it's the buzz, it's the... it's the... sense of occasion, it's the, it's the... revelation... and the sense that you're present at a real event. Whereas now, you're all sitting there and you're chatting and the lights do a bit of something or something and somebody says, 'Will you all turn your mobiles off,' and then people come on usually rather drably dressed and they strike attitudes and start talking, you know, and it's not the same. It's just not the same. I went, I was thinking about this, and I think the most recent thing I saw in the theatre was either this year or last year, it was Mary Stuart in London. It was brilliant, it was wonderful, it was an absolutely super production. And I loved it. But the idea of that being done like that on a stage back at the time we're talking about is unthinkable. I think it would've been booted off the stage if it had been done like that then, with so little in the way of props and scenery and costume and everything else. I just can't see that it would've been a hit then because we demanded costume, we demanded light, we demanded sound, you know, we wanted it all, we wanted to be thrilled and entertained and excited. And now it's all more intellectual, and considered [in haughty tone] 'Oh yes, that's very good, yes...' You know, and that's fine, that's fine, but I do sometimes miss, you know, the old days. [laughs]

EH: Your husband's involvement [Terry Skelton] - when was he involved in theatre?

FS: He started as a ballet dancer with the Rhomba a long, long time ago, because he was a lot older than me. So he went down to the Rhomba when he was 18, so that would've been 1950. And then from that he got involved in cabaret, he actually was too tall to be a professional dancer, he was teaching at the Rhomba and training there. And then he went into cabaret and he started doing, so during the fifties, he was doing, he was in various musicals as a dancer, and then after the show he would nip off to somewhere like the Savoy or somewhere and do cabaret at sort of eleven o'clock at night, so he'd be nipping round London. He was in, at one point he was in Charlie Girl, well, for years he was in Charlie Girl in the West End, and then when the curtain came down he would nip over the road to the Savoy or somewhere and do cabaret, with various friends and things, as a dancer. And then he started singing as well because, I mean, he could sing very well. So he went into singing and things and worked at the Player's Theatre and he worked in all kinds of places. And he did various films. He was shortlisted to play James Bond, actually. When George Lazenby got it, he was down to the last two, but, unfortunately gave it to George Lazenby. I'm quite glad because I'd never have met him if they'd give it to him. And then he was in, he became an actor gradually, so he kind of worked from, through, you know from being a dancer to being an actor, and he was in Jockey Club Stakes in the sixties in London and he did a lot of commercials and a lot of television and stuff like that. But he did quite a lot of theatre and then he worked in various reps all around the country as well, and a bit of touring. But I think the touring was a bit later, that was in the seventies, mostly. But yes, he also went to Ireland on tour, that was probably during the sixties, I think. Oh, it was during the Troubles so it possibly wasn't, because the Troubles started after we left. So no, it probably wasn't during the sixties. But he said they were on tour and every time they left a town the bombs would go off and they'd go to the next down and do their show and they'd pack up and go to the next one and then a bomb would go off. And he thought, he said, they were all surprised that no one actually came and questioned them [laughs], to see if they were leaving bombs behind everywhere they went.

EH: One thing we're looking at by compiling these oral histories is trying to reassess our impressions of a period in theatre that we look at now as transitional. You mentioned reading Tim West's interview and he recollects changes during the period as gradual, and not, as he puts it, 'right-angled turning points.' What were your impressions of the change in theatre in the 1960s?

FS: No, he's quite right. Things never happen quite like it says in the history books, do they? I mean, it's always, something has probably happened before you realize that it's happened, and then things go on happening after the official starting point. So yes, no, he's absolutely right about that. Where I was working, we were doing, with Prospect, we did do new work. That picture I was showing you, that was a play called The Gamecock which was a new piece, and we did another piece called... I can't even remember... No Man's Land, which was filmed, it had been written over and over again. But both of them, I mean The Gamecock was about the enclosures and a period - I mean, a costume piece - although it was a very modern structure of play, a very daring, courageous type of structure, and the other thing, No Man's Land, was about the first war and about people being shot in the first war, so again, it was in period costume and things. So they weren't modern in the sense that they were set, contemporary plays. And the same thing at Birmingham... when I went to Birmingham, most of what we did there was in costume of some kind. I can't off-hand think of anything we did at Birmingham that was actually in modern dress at all. If we were doing a modern play, I mean I can remember thinking, 'Oh gosh, we're doing something ever so modern.' We

had a studio theatre at Birmingham. And we did, for instance, *Waiting for Godot*. Well, I mean that, actually, wasn't that up-to-date, you know. And they were two old tramps, and they were, you know, it wasn't exactly modern, in that sense. And, the other thing we did, which we all thought was rather daring, was *Miss Julie*, but I mean, that's Strindberg, you know. It wasn't really... you know... but that was the kind of thing that was pushing the boundaries a little bit in the kind of set-up I was involved in. And, going back to *The Gamecock* again, we did have, it was a strange piece, the leading man had various speeches directed to the audience, which was quite a thing. And there were scenes, kind of ensemble scenes, it was Brechtian I suppose in many ways, in that there would be a kind of ensemble scene where there were lots of characters discussing things. And then there were almost like front cloth scenes where this guy had to come on and address the audience and tell them what was going on. So that was all quite modern. And there was a terrible time in, actually the curtain wasn't there - it wasn't supposed to be, because there was a day in Belfast when somebody actually dropped a curtain on him just as he went on to do his last monologue before the interval, and he was standing there swearing saying 'Get that curtain up...!' And of course the audience were trooping out... so I don't know what we did, in the end. That was a bit trying. Of course, some terrible tempers. So... but it... certainly we were aware that things were changing. And when I first started trying to write plays, I certainly was trying to write, kind of English stage company, kind of *Look Back in Anger* rip-offs. Because one was aware that that was going on, that was happening. But I think it took a while to get up to Birmingham and to the tour that I was doing. So it was very definitely a kind of gradual thing. We were still very much doing things like Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw, Shakespeare... at Birmingham we did, again, Shakespeare... We did some new stuff, but it tended to be things like musicals and stuff like that. But a lot of it was kind of fairly stock, and things like thrillers, we didn't do so many at Birmingham - the next place I went, [?] was just after, had been doing for years, when I got there, they used to do courtroom dramas and things like that, which were the most tedious things, but went down terribly well with the pensioners. In fact, at [?] we had a running gag in the stage management that we would try and get, we had a Bentwood hat stand in our prop department and we would try and get it on stage in every single play that we did. If we could possibly find the space for it on the set, we would get that Bentwood hat stand on because it fitted into everything that we did there. Because everything we did was the same, really. [laughs] And that had been like that for years.

[FS spends several minutes going through the various programmes and scrapbooks she has brought with her].

EH: Thanks so much.