

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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William Hemmingway – interview transcript

Interviewer: Chris Furness

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Theatre-goer and actor. Audiences; Burnley theatre; experimental theatre; Look Back in Anger; Joan Littlewood; Manchester Library Theatre; David Scace; schools television; Theatre Workshop; theatre-going; Theatre Libero; West Side Story.

CF: Bill, perhaps you could start off first by talking about your early life and your first recollections of the theatre?

WH: Yes. My first recollections of theatre were towards the end of the war, when the Old Vic were evacuated from London to the Victoria Theatre in Burnley. That of course brought a great influx of interest from the locals, because they were getting better than the average weekly rep. that was in existence at the time. The thing that really brought it to my notice was the fact that my aunt, who was a maid to a doctor and his wife in Burnley, said that she had some actors staying at the house and they were staying for a few months and that their names were Sybil Thorndike and Lewis Casson, and this was picked up by local people who realised they were onto a good thing in Burnley having these stars of the theatre performing.

I do remember vaguely, because I was quite young at the time, going to see 'Othello', which was way beyond the sort of experience I had had, but I was captivated by the skill of the actors and the overall theatrical experience. So I would put that down as one of my first theatre experiences. And at the Grammar School, Burnley Grammar School, there was a strong tradition of drama and very quickly, in about 1943 or 1944, I was involved in what was called the Founder's Day theatre productions, but the interesting thing was that it was nearly always Shaw that was produced, that was the sort of standard drama of the time.

After school I don't remember seeing much drama at all. I did National Service and of course there wasn't much time for theatre then, but in York, where I was at college, we used to go to the Theatre Royal where the sort of plays that we saw were usually the murder mysteries or detective stories or whatever. I don't remember it being particularly exciting. Occasionally we were asked to go and take part as a jury or something in these plays. So the interest stayed there, but it was when I came back to Burnley to do my first teaching job that I started to get really interested in theatre again because there was an amateur theatre company, an experimental theatre company, called The Masque Players in Burnley, and they were really ahead of anything else that was happening in the amateur world, and we did plays like – well the ones that I was in were Penny for a Song by John Whiting, The Crucible, a play by Arthur Miller, and I remember playing Jimmie Porter soon after that. The impact that play had on the public! Soon after it was released we picked it up and did Look Back in Anger. So the interest sort of mushroomed

very quickly. I had a friend – an old friend – a lady who I had acted with who had always gone to the Library Theatre in Manchester and she said ‘You ought to come with me sometimes, because they’re doing so many good plays’. And the sort of plays there seemed to echo the work that we were doing in an amateur way, and it was really a revelation to see professionals doing what we’d been trying to do as amateurs, as you can imagine. And I very quickly got to know the team of actors. I suppose it was the old repertory theatre idea where they kept on the same team of actors most of the time. Now this was 1956 – 1959 and actors that were there – and some of them are still actually performing and certainly one I saw last week is John Franklyn Robbins who was there and playing leads in 1956. So he must be a great age now. There was an actor called David Mahlowe – wonderful actor – and his wife, Marah Stoll, Cynthia Grenville and David Sumner. All these persons you can tell, like 50 years later, I can remember all their names. The plays that they were doing, too, were more adventurous than your average sort of rep theatre. There was *The Long and the Short and the Tall*. I remember seeing my first Lorca play – *Blood Wedding*. Lots of others but they don’t all just come to mind and thinking about them... but it was a terrific experience because the Library Theatre was a very particular sort of theatre – very intimate. You felt you belonged to a club almost. It was like an experimental theatre club.

CF: I know exactly what you mean, because we used to make trips from school to the Library Theatre.

WH: People who went, you know, lost that middle-class thing about going to the theatre and it was just a night out. People often went and they weren’t often involved in what was going on and the ideas in the play. But suddenly, there, you felt that people were in the coffee bar discussing – instead of chatting about family problems. And it, as I said, it sort of echoed the experience I was having in the amateur world and I think these experiences really build up, don’t they, over a time and you get a sort of rich background.

CF: Did you have the urge to go professional at that time?

WH: Well, yes, and the opportunity arose very soon afterwards for me to take a year out and go to the Central School of Speech and Drama in London and there - I actually didn’t do the pure acting course. I just did a one-year course. But of course you were mixing with actors all the time. And there, in my time, Lynne Redgrave was there, Julie Christie was there, Jimmie Bolam was there – you know – big names. And it was a really fantastic year because not only were you sort of living theatre during the day, you were out at night – whizzing off and sitting in the gallery watching all the latest plays.

CF: What year was that, Bill?

WH: That was 1959-1960. So that was a terrific time - all that period because in 1956, if you remember, *Look Back in Anger* came to the fore and it sort of changed the face of theatre. I think people just saw it in a different light. It was really talking about what was happening ‘now’ in our contemporary society and all really very exciting.

Just to go on a bit. What happened after that was that I came back here to the north and thought that it would be interesting to do some more theatre work, although I was qualified to teach. I got a job at Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School, and on the way back to London I stopped at the Library Theatre and I had the gall, the cheek, whatever, to just go in there and ask David Scace, this wonderful director, who'd been there for a number of years, if he would like to employ me. I, just at that time, I don't know what it was that gave me the confidence to do that. I went in and he was still rehearsing and I actually said I wanted to speak to him. All I did was to say 'I really want to work here. This is the sort of theatre that I'd like to be involved with, and I've finished my course and I'm, like, going to take a job. But I don't want to take this job and I just want you to know this is what I want'. And he said, 'Ok, I'll try and remember' and that was the end of it and I went off back to London. Then I started this lark of trying to get work in the theatre and the auditioning that all the theatres were into. And then, in November, or perhaps October, suddenly a phone-call from David Scace saying 'Would you like to come up and join the cast of *The Quare Fellow* – Brendan Behan's play. So that was a new sort of play. And I did go up and had this fantastic experience again because David Scace was using techniques... he'd worked with Joan Littlewood, I think, at Stratford, and he was using some of the improvisatory techniques she used, such as Stanislavsky's theories. And so it was again a different experience of the theatre, because instead of just learning your lines and doing the script - in *The Quare Fellow*, as you know I'm sure - it's set in a prison where this fellow is about to be hanged. And it's all really centred round the prisoners and their relationships with the warders. And I remember improvising the actual walking around in the square for ages and ages in a circle to get a feel for what it was like - the boredom and the bickering and the mealy-mindedness and everything. And then to just do that, till when we came to the script we just had a feeling of what it would be like when we delivered the lines. And so that was just fabulous and the other interesting thing, from your point of view, is that I was one of the prisoners and one of the others was Anthony Hopkins – Sir Anthony Hopkins, who was also an AS member. And I remember David Scace used to get really angry with him and more or less told him he ought to go and learn how to act properly. And he went off to RADA from there. Of course we all know what happened from there!

CF: The rest is history?

WH: Yes, and I'm afraid I never reached those exotic heights that he reached. So that was my Library Theatre experience that I really wanted to talk about because it linked up with the enthusiasm that was captured by going to the theatre there. And just feeling this is the sort of theatre I would like to work for. But life ain't like that.

CF: So did you not hear from David Scace again?

WH: No. He just kept the main people on and the rest of us sort of dispersed. I would like to have gone back. I did some bits of things in the theatre, but within 6 months I was offered a job in Schools Television and so I worked there.

CF: What year was that?

WH: That was from 1960-1964 and it [school studies] was just starting – the schools television programmes were just starting. My background of course was teaching and acting and so I had plenty of experience there. And then I got married, so life changed and I had to start earning some money properly.

CF: Thanks Bill, that's all fascinating. Is there anything else you'd like to say about that period in the theatre?

WH: Well, I think it was a very exciting period in theatre. It started in 1956 and I think what was happening was that a wider public seemed to be tuning into it. For instance I remember reading not long ago about John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*... I keep referring back to this because it seemed to be a turning point. An extract was shown on television and that reached a much wider audience, and people who thought it was very much a middle-class experience thought 'Well, that has something to say to me, even though I may not agree with it all'. And I think it began to spread more.

CF: Would you say that was in response to TV?

WH: I think people do pick things up and think 'I'd like to see that if it's in my area', or 'I might read it' – and they just read the text. So I think there were a lot of changes because actually seeing things visually had a strong impact on lots of people. And the other thing I remember from that period was always wanting to buy *The Observer* and read the critics. I think it was Harold Hobson who was theatre critic at the time and of course Ken Tynan. They were fabulous reviews. You just learnt so much by reading about it, and, even if they disagreed with each other, it was a learning curve really. I don't think that critics have the same impact now - but nothing does, does it? What doesn't sound very exciting now was wonderfully exciting to me at the time. And when I think of that period – going down to Stratford E15 and seeing Joan Littlewood's productions. Of course she started at the Library Theatre in Manchester you know, in 1945. She started, when she came out of the forces, with others. They started Theatre Workshop and toured all over the country with this Theatre Workshop. So I'd always known that - and then when she went to E15 she started to draw in all these improvisatory techniques that a lot of theatres weren't using – that was very early on. But she'd obviously studied Stanislavsky and she was great on Laban's techniques of dance and so she used all these methods before they actually came to the script so that they had a deeper understanding of what the themes were. I went for an audition there - I always remember this. And I thought – this is sort of place I would like and as I went to run on stage the sole of my shoe came loose and I was flapping, flapping about on stage and then I – you know when you're actually auditioning you'll try anything if you really want to get in. I said 'I do sing too', so she said 'Right, give us a tune'. Well it was just one of those disasters – you wish you'd never started. I never got in of course.

I knew at the end I was not destined to be an actor, although I've done other things since, but professionally you've got to have things going for you, and luck – just you're the right person for that, at that time. And that happened at the Old Vic, because Tommy Steele was playing Toby Lumpkin in *She Stoops to Conquer* and they were looking for an understudy, and I must have looked a bit like him and they were very keen and asked if I could play the guitar. And of course I couldn't so I said 'Not really, but I'll learn'. But they'd thought 'Yeah I've heard that before – out!'

Well – I think it might have been about the early sixties the Theatre of Cruelties started to become very sort of at the forefront. Peter Brook had picked up these ideas and he used them in a lot of his productions. The one I remember was the Marat/Sade – about the inmates of a mental institution. Again the improvisation was important because they were all really gross figures and when it started on stage I went to see it. And they'd obviously worked so hard at it and the Theatre of Cruelties became something that one became aware of in those days, and later on when I was living back up here, I remember going to the University Theatre at Lancaster and they had over a Polish company doing a play called The Constant Prince.

CF: What year was that?

WH: I'm not sure of that – it was certainly in the sixties – might have been late sixties, but it was the intensity of it which seemed to me to be part of the Polish tradition. We sat around – it's like a box which would only be twice the size of this area we're in now, and you just looked down into this pit and there was only one row allowed around, and we looked down at this incredibly intense physical theatre taking place. It was all in Polish. But what had changed was that theatre was becoming less wordy in some cases and much more emotional and intense, and you were absorbing more through theories rather than words. And it was a profound change in theatre and, you know, in ten years we'd gone from very formal, boring, three act plays to all sorts of experimental theatre.

CF: It was a fantastic period of change.

WH: Yes... and I'm sure it's still happening. I'm sure there are new movements all over the place. At that time it did seem rather startling because I don't think there'd been quite as much – certainly not in the general theatre going experience. [Pause] What I'd omitted to say was that during that period of the fifties the Palace and the Opera House were the other big theatres in Manchester, and I was looking at some old programmes that I had. They were doing things like The Bartered Bride and The Mikado, but bringing in bigger companies to do things like The Aspen Papers and The Complacent Lover, the Graham Green play, but the startling thing was really in 1958 we heard that a production called West Side Story was going to Manchester before it went to London, and we went to see this production and we were absolutely bowled over by the energy and dynamics. The story-line, the way they converted it - it was just a memorable experience. 1958! You know, it's a long time ago isn't it? There's nothing really that's been any better, in my opinion, since. It really sent shock waves, I think, through the South Pacific circles and all these other musicals - so that was something really I felt I shouldn't omit from this diatribe that's going on at the moment.

And the other thing that I really wanted to mention was a production I saw in Edinburgh. I was at the Festival, and we went to see Theatre Libero from Rome and they brought over a play called Orlando Furioso. It was on a new ice rink! – there was no ice but we were all just spread around in the middle of the rink just wondering what was going to happen. Then it suddenly started and these huge contraptions on wheels came hurtling in from three sides and all the audience had to disperse - you know so that these could come through. And all the action took place on these great trestles that were towering over us and then they would suddenly move again and you had to jump again. And so your nerve-endings were absolutely charged up and you were trying to

understand what was going on, in Italian, but it was physically such an exciting experience of theatre and I suppose I wanted to mention it because that's an example of how theatre changed from sitting back in the stalls watching three-act plays. There were all sorts of innovations coming into it - so that was absolutely great. And I think finally I should say that I moved away from this area and went to live and work in Exeter where I was doing some work with Exeter Festival Theatre. Good, interesting drama, but when we came back we discovered that the Theatre 69 was in operation – so we've really gone just slightly over the edge of the period you're interested in. And that was Theatre 69, which was at the University in Manchester and which is now The Royal Exchange Theatre, and they were doing some serious things at that time. So that started a new period for me that I'll be talking about at another time.

CF: Well thank you very much indeed Bill – so unless there's anything else...

WH: I'll probably think of all sorts of things afterwards, but that's probably given you something to build on.