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Michael Seymour – interview transcript

Interviewer: Dominic Shellard

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Stagehand and stage electrician at the Royal Court Theatre. Samuel Beckett; Brendan Behan; critics; *The Entertainer*; Robert Helpmann; Sean Kenny; Vivien Leigh; lighting; *Look Back in Anger*; Patrick McGee; Laurence Olivier; John Osborne; Joan Plowright; Royal Court Theatre; sets; work as a stagehand.

DS: OK, we're here today to talk about your connection with the Royal Court, and I wondered if you could perhaps kick off by telling us how that came about?

MS: Yes. I had done military service - which we all had to do in those days - and I came out and managed to... I applied for the Royal College of Art as a painting student and I was accepted, to my surprise, and so when I moved up to London I was then living on the south coast in Bournemouth. At the end of 1956 I started as a student and like all students we all wanted to try and find extra work because our grants were pretty minimal, although we did have them. And a friend of mine had, after about a term a friend of mine said that he had done a job at a theatre called the Royal Court Theatre in Sloane Square and he had been a stagehand. And he said to me 'If you want a job, they're doing another play and they need an extra person so would you like to do it?' and I said 'Yes, that suits me fine.' It particularly suited me because it meant I could work in the evening, it didn't interfere with my being at the college during the day. So I trotted along and said, yes I'd like to do it. I started on the first evening of this play which was something called *The Entertainer* which I knew nothing about. I had no knowledge of this theatre at all, it was just a theatre and they needed a stagehand. It was this play called *The Entertainer* and I turned up for the first evening, which was a public dress rehearsal. You know public dress rehearsals were really a kind of invited audience show really, usually, and they were just as important at the regular performance. And so I started on that and they wanted someone to work up in the flies which are, flies are the sort of gantry high up in the side of the stage and I was working with two other stage hands and I had to help haul up scenery and lower scenery and all of that. And there were two other guys, they were nice, good... as I say they were good cockney lads who all had other jobs during the day but they worked in the evening. When the curtain went up I looked down on stage and I saw an actor who looked familiar. So I turned to Ted, the eldest of the two stage hands and I said 'He looks like Lawrence Olivier' and Ted looked at me quite contentiously and said 'That's who he is you astro scouser!' I was amazed that I was working on a production with such a famous actor, I mean I had no idea you know! Anyway ...

DS: What had you known about Olivier before?

MS: Well, he was obviously this very well known artist in the theatre world. He had done marvellous productions I think, he had done Hamlet and he'd done many other things, and I think he, at that time, had also been on several films and I think I knew that he was married to Vivian Leigh. And he was... listen, I was a hick from the sticks you know, to me it was like 'oh amazing' so I was very impressed. And there of course actually were other people there like Dorothy Tutin and Brenda de Banzie and which I gradually got to know. Anyway I found that looking down on the play was rather amazing. Unfortunately I do suffer from vertigo so initially...

DS: And you were in the flies?

MS: Yes, and I was in the flies so I was trying to overcome it. But there was a bridge that went across from one side from the Prompt side to the OP side, across just behind the proscenium and you could cross from one side to another if it was necessary. Well I don't... have you ever seen *The Entertainer*? Well in the, I think it was the second act, it starts with a tableau with an actress sitting there depicting Britannia and in this time - and you must remember that this was 1956 - the actress was bare-breasted and she was holding a trident and was naked to the waist. Well all the stagehands came up from below because they were dying to see this and they would go out in the middle of the bridge and gaze down at those naked breasts. I unfortunately couldn't overcome my fear of heights sufficiently at that time to do this. The part was played by an actress called Vivian Drummond and her breasts were indeed admirable. As far as I remember she only had that role in that play, though she did appear in more vocal parts in later productions. I think she plays Alison in one of the *Look Back in Angers*. Anyway I found - quite unwittingly - that I was working in what turned up to be even the most interesting and controversial theatre in London, and all that began to dawn on me as the week went by, and it was also this production followed on from John Osborne's success with *Look Back in Anger* and it was very much the focus of much attention. At the end of the week, on Saturday evening after the evening performance, a substantial party took place on the stage with many theatrical people and other notable, at that time, writers and critics, including amongst them, these people were like Kenneth Tynan the critic and Colin Wilson, an angry young man who had just written a massive indigestible tome called *The Outsider*, which I read simultaneously with Camus' *L'étranger*.

DS: And what did you think of *The Outsider* at the time?

MS: Colin Wilson's or Camus'?

DS: Colin Wilson's.

MS: I found it ponderous, but I was at the stage in my life when I avidly read everything and I having started it had to finish it, you know, so... it's not University Challenge, is it Brain of Britain, 'I've started it, then I had to finish it'?

DS: Mastermind.

MS: Yes! Mastermind. And I much preferred the latter, the Camus' L'étranger. In a way I sort of thought he said the same thing but in a much easier to assimilate way, and Colin Wilson was famous at the time for wearing turtleneck sweaters, which he wore on every formal occasion. As the philosophy of the Royal Court Theatre was inclined to be egalitarian at that time, all of the stagehands were invited too and Ted, Alfie and I duly trooped downstairs from the flies, to the metal door and to the stage. There was already a crowd of people gathered there as I pushed the door and then entered and I was almost immediately spotted by a young woman - a journalist I think - [who] rushed towards me with hands outstretched to shake my hand, 'How do you feel now that it's all over?' she enquired breathlessly. I was quite taken aback by this enthusiastic enquiry and said something to the effect that I felt rather hot and sweaty. Almost immediately the interest faded from her eyes and she backed off, making some excuse. It was not until some time later that I realised I bore a striking resemblance to John Osborne at that time and the poor woman had mistaken me for him. And I was often accosted as I walked towards the theatre on evenings by enthusiastic autograph hunters who plainly didn't believe me when I denied that I was him. At a later time I told John Osborne that I was constantly being asked for his autograph and he just said 'Sell it to em.!' Anyway, I continued working there and of course by this time I was getting thoroughly interested and, you know, it's quite novel to see plays from backstage as it were, and I became very, you know... gradually you know knew the peaks and falls of the rhythm of the play, so you were already expecting whatever it was, the applause, the laughter, the hushed silence or whatever it was. And it was... it's funny, I had had a faint association with the theatre when I was much younger but this was like... it completely absorbed me and there is a curious smell about backstage in - maybe in all theatres, but certainly in the Royal Court, which is a mixture, I can only describe it as a mixture of sweat and size, which is what they paint the scenery with to make it fireproof, or some substance they paint on it.

DS: What was the sort of atmosphere as a place to work?

MS: Well it was very... as I said it was very egalitarian, you know, they all kind of... Michael and George Devine would say 'Good evening' and everybody was, I mean we all worked hard, and the man who was what was called stage director and the chief prompt was a man called Michael Halifax and Michael Halifax was a very elegant, calm man who dealt with us with enormous calm and was always helpful, never lost his temper and basically ran the backstage wonderfully and he was a godsend to them. There was... towards the end of *The Entertainer*, they did a charity performance, which... they used to do charity performances every now and then and give the money to out of work actors or whatever it is, disintegrating actors. And as I said I think it was for old diseased actors or some such thing, and it was attended by other people in the profession who willingly paid an extortionate amount of money to attend. The actors all gave their performance for free but us stage hands were paid overtime to do it.

DS: How much were you paid, do you remember?

MS: Yes we were... at that time I think the basic pay for a performance was £6.10[s], and then there were things called 'set-ups' which is if you came in early and had to do

something before they dropped the tabs, like move the scenery around or put some dressing on the stage, and there was what was called 'strikes' and at the end of the play we'd probably take down or take out all of the things that had been used on that act preparatory to the next day when we would put it all back together again. So if you got setups and strikes you could get up to something like £7.15 shillings. We're talking about 1956 that was. That wasn't a huge amount of money, but it was OK and we really made money, you see they ran plays and every six weeks they would change into another play. And we'd work, we'd do two matinees on the Saturday and then it would finish at about 11 o'clock at night and then we'd stay up all night. We'd strike that play, we'd pack all the scenery up, we'd load it onto lorries in the middle of the night and you got paid cash in hand, a thing called a 'get out' and it was £3. And then the next day another lorry would turn up with all the new scenery and we'd unload that and stack it all at the side of the stage and we got a 'get in' for that and that was another £3 so that was good. And of course we'd do overtime, not only overtime I mean I'd frequently work all day and all night on productions. But you kind of... I loved it, I loved it and we'd all start off in good high because we'd have been in the pub next door for about three hours!

DS: Was *The Entertainer* a complicated set, from what you recall?

MS: No it was actually quite... I think, I seem to remember it was quite simple. I think there was a kind of living room set and then I remember the last scene it was just a bare stage and it's very moving that last scene, when they go off, you know, Brenda de Banzie and Olivier. I tell you what really impressed me, because I had never really seen actors up close, was Olivier's enormous professionalism and every night he would come in early - I mean, if the production started at say 7.30, he would come in at half past six while the tabs were still up. And there was a musician - a pianist - and there was a scene in, I think it was the second act, where the character, Archie Rice, does a little dance and sings 'Why should I care' and it's a little song and he does a little dance. Every evening he would come in and he would rehearse just that piece, every single... before every single production, without fail he would do it every night, because I was there. It was something you know, it was amazing to me. Anyway we went on with it for, I think it ran for six weeks but at the end of that charity - the charity performance was on a Sunday and as I say the actors did it for free and we got, I'm afraid we got overtime, the stage hands, and at the end of it Olivier made an impassioned impromptu speech and the fervent thank you's all round, I can still remember he came and he shook everybody's hand, stage hand, everybody - you know, he was so kind of carried away by his whole rhetoric that he couldn't stop, you know, he went on you know flourishing 'thank you, thank you'. It was just amazing as I say, it was - you know, for all of us, even us menials. They gave that party at the end and it was, they gave another party at the end of it and it was rather good because again, as stage hands we were all invited and there were drinks and things on stage and all the actors did their own little impromptu things like Brenda de Banzie did something and Dorothy Tutin did something and Olivier of course did something. But I always remember that Brenda de Banzie's son was there and he was on leave in his National Service uniform and as I said the members and cast took it in turns to impromptu performances and tell stories for all our entertainment. Unfortunately Brenda de Banzie's son decided to do a little skit which went down very badly with Olivier and some of the others, who more or less blew raspberries showing him that he was a mere amateur compared to their professionalism, they didn't like it. I said at the time I thought it was a bit harsh treatment and I felt really sorry for Brenda actually, Brenda de Banzie. Anyway we went on doing that, yes I... in

fact in that paragraph I dealt with setting up and striking. So anyway we went on working and I very much enjoyed every moment of it. Anyway when it came to an end, I said to the stage-hand, because Ted, the eldest stagehand was actually the charge hand too and he, I said 'So will I work on the next one?' and he said 'No, you won't' and I was like 'what a shame' so I was rather sad about that. I mean at that time, you probably know all this but the Artistic Director of the New English Stage Company was George Devine. There were three assistant artistic directors, one was Bill Gaskill, one was John Dexter and one was Miriam Brinkner. Miriam subsequently died and also [inaudible] which would have included people like Angelica. And there as a small restaurant at the top of the theatre which was run by Julian Freud or Lucian Freud? Actually... the one who's not a painter. This is a kind of controversial piece but I will tell it to you. One of them was John Dexter who I always regarded as a rather dark character, a little dangerous I thought. He wasn't around for a few months and when he reappeared he proudly related how he just done six months inside for, as he put it, 'over-auditioning' a young boy. I think he would have served a great deal longer if it was present day actually. Anyway I continued to work, not only there but very hard at the Royal College, I was painting and drawing and doing all the things I had to do and doing my history of architecture exams and everything. I was also, poor thing, I was actually married. I had sort of come out of the army, married this girl and then got into the Royal College, and so she moved up to London and she had a job, she worked in what was called the Ministry of Works then, she was a civil servant. Anyway so I thought 'well that was the end of it, I wouldn't do any more'. But then they did another production and it was two one-act plays. One was called the Apollo de Bellac by Giraudoux and the other one was The Chairs by Ionesco. And my friend who got me the job was going to do it but... well in fact I think he did do it but he didn't think they would need anybody else but then they did. So they called me back in, so that was excellent as far as I was concerned, so I presented myself that evening at the theatre. And I have a brief description of the stagehands if you want then, the characters. There was the two... Ted and Alfie were actually brothers, they were very cockney lads and they worked for the LEB during the day, and much later they actually trained as taxi drivers and for years afterwards in London I would suddenly have someone yell at me out of a taxi 'Mike Seymour!' and it was one of them, and on at least two occasions Ted picked me up and gave me a free ride in his taxi. Anyway, they were sort of the most regular ones there and then there was another guy called Percy who was what was called - he was also a 'day man', which meant he was also available during the day to do other things so he was the day man. And another rather dire chap called Bob, I think he had some office job. And I always remember Percy had a huge bush of black hair receding behind - substantially receding hairline. He also had a round growth on his left forehead, which seemed about as big as a golf ball and had an extremely salacious sense of humour. Bob - who was known as Uncle - on the other hand was quiet and rather private and worked during the day for an insurance company. After that there was a stagehand called Fred, who, although apparently a relative of Ted the stagehand's wife, Ted cordially hated him. I felt sorry for Fred because Ted was quite beastly to him. He was in his late twenties and worked during the day delivering fish in a small van and consequently smelled powerfully of his cargo, and because of Ted's treatment of him he appeared quite downtrodden. Anyway these five appeared to be the main core of the stage hands with Ted as the acknowledged charge hand. So I was - my friend Ted Tursley and I were temporaries, and there was another one called Johnny Bickers who was actually a nephew of one of the other ones. Anyway these next two plays were very different. The Apollo De Bellac was a rather light and frothy and gently satirical - I don't know if you are familiar with it? And the second, The Chairs, was darker and more fateful, there was only two principal actors, played by George Devine and Joan

Plowright playing an octogenarian couple and one other mute character called 'The Orator' played by a young Jeremy Kemp who was fresh out of drama school. You have seen *The Chairs*, yes? So you know, in the end it's a non-speaking part, The Orator, and he represents death. The scenery was designed by Jocelyn Herbert, I think it was her first stage production there at Royal Court and she was in her mid forties and was still married to Lusarda, I can't remember Lusarda's first name. The first time I saw her she was on stage with two of her daughters who were in their teens at that time and all three of them were standing. I was up in the switchboard and I remember looking down and there were these three girls painting the scenery, they all had long hair down to their waste and they all had their backs to me and they were all painting scenery and it wasn't until they turned around that I realised that one of them was obviously the mother, I mean she still looked very young but she was definitely older than the other two. I am trying to remember... one of them when they later grew up became quite a well known photographer. Anyway - sorry I keep referring to my notes because it helps me, if that's all right with you.

DS: Of course, yes.

MS: I rather fancied Jocelyn, actually, at the time, and when we had the opening party at the end of the week I seized the opportunity to dance with her. I did not realise until much later that she was having a full blown affair with George Devine. Many years later I was to work with her as art director when she was a production designer on film called *Isadora*, which is about Isadora Duncan, she kind of writes, directed. Anyway apart from working on the main stage during the scene changes, Johnny Bickers - this young lad, the nephew of one of them - and I were given an extra task, this consisted of climbing up into the flies during the performance of *The Chairs*, going out onto the bridge which ran behind the proscenium - the one I had been too tremulous to venture out in order to view Vivian Drummond's breasts, though I had overcome that fortunately. From there at a certain point in the play we were to release a quantity of confetti and streamers down onto the stage, it was like the climax of it - just before they throw themselves out the window, streamers and confetti and all that comes down. Obviously I had to master my fear of heights from this position; at first it was hard but I soon got used to it. I was much more preoccupied with not actually dropping confetti or a streamer too soon. And Joan Plowright at that time was about 24 years old and but I only saw her when she came on stage fully made up as an 83 year old woman, so I had no idea what her age was. And it was not until a later production that I saw her without this make-up and realised that she was probably the same age as me. Anyway one evening Johnny Bickers and I were asked to stay behind and do the dropping of streamers and confetti for the benefit of George Devine and Joan Plowright, we duly did this and they seemed pleased so we did our own, little production for them. Anyway that went on for another six weeks.

DS: Was that at the point when she was then seeing Lawrence Olivier at that point, I am not sure?

MS: No, I think, well, I don't know but I don't think so, I think it was prior to that. I could be wrong but I think it was prior to that. I mean, he was still ostensibly married to Vivian Leigh but I don't think they actually lived together. Anyway after that they decided to bring back *Look Back in Anger*, which I hadn't worked on the original one -

this is the second time. And it [had] appeared the previous year and had adulatory reviews by Kenneth Tynan although the other critics actually hadn't been very supportive of it. So again I had resigned myself as being out of work again when I was approached by Michael Halifax, the stage director and he wanted to know if I would like to become the stage electrician, working as an assistant to Peter Theobald, the lighting director. This assured me of a more or less permanent job, as long as I wanted it. I was secretly delighted, partly because I needed the work but more because I had fallen in love with the whole theatre and the backstage activity. Nevertheless, I was concerned for my friend Ted Tursley who about to marry Gitta, his German girlfriend, he had after all introduced me to the job and I was concerned he might need it more than me. So I told Michael Halifax and he agreed to wait until I asked Ted what he thought. Ted was quite happy that I did it rather than him, partly because he was in the first flush of love with Gitta and didn't want to spend time away from her. So I accepted the job and became part of the permanent staff at the Royal Court.

DS: Was that in '57 then?

MS: Yes by this time it would be '57. The other person I was concerned about was Fred, the long suffering and downtrodden relative of Ted Bolton the charge hand, who was at that time designated as stage electrician. I spoke to him about it but he didn't seem to mind and he continued to work as a supplementary stage hand on some productions. Anyway I was still working very hard at the Royal College, I have to keep putting that in because I did. And because of my new role at the Royal Court and my association with the college I became a sort of unofficial employment agent and whenever a production came on which required more than the basic crew of Ted Bolton, Alfie, Uncle Percy and myself, I was asked to canvas amongst the students for extra stage hands. These I was always able to find, as all of us had trouble managing on our grants so I would recruit people I knew and so on. I think initially I was a bit concerned about Ted the stage hand because there was certain animosity from him, I think he saw me at the sort of toff who had come in. I am by no means a toff but I think he kind of, well I don't know it was maybe it was old ball, young ball, whatever it was. But I really liked him and I think at some point he thought I was usurping his authority but this was quite unintentional on my part. And I particularly liked them all very much, particularly Ted who had a robust cockney sense of humour. We spent a lot of time in the pub, there was a pub next door which has now become quite grand but at that time we all spent, all of us actors, all of us spent a lot of time in the pub next to the theatre. And at first I used to drink light ale but Ted observing this one evening said 'You're not going to drink that gnat's piss, have a proper drink' and he then ordered a stout and mild for me, a thick black pint which I duly swallowed, and after a while I began to like them and was consequently converted to as a regular pub drink. Anyway the theatre continued to be an interesting extension to my life. After *The Chairs*, there was a rerun of *Look Back in Anger*. I hadn't been working at the Royal Court when it first opened with Kenneth Haigh playing Jimmy Porter, this time it opened with Richard Pasco playing that part with Heather Sears as Alison and Vivian Drummond as Helena and Alan Bates as the friend. I had not seen the original and had little idea of its context but I soon found it absorbing and wickedly funny, which I did. I never tired of watching it. All in all during the time I worked there I was to see it 64 times, a fact that I conveyed to Alan Bates many years later at a party, causing him to go quite pale, assuming that I was some mad obsessive fan. Again it was playing to full houses and it became a regular bread winner for the Court. Over the nearly three years I worked at the theatre, *Look Back in Anger* came back again and again. This needs a bit of research because I think I got some of the names wrong. The

cast changed several times although Alan Bates remained constant in his role as Cliff. One production had Mary Ure playing the part of Alison. It seemed at that time she was going out with John Osborne whose doppelganger I was. One even after the performance had finished I was sitting in the pub next door with my then wife June, when the door opened and Mary Ure looked in, spotted me, gave me a big wave and started towards us and at some point realised I was not John Osborne and turned tail and fled out. 'Who was that?' my wife says somewhat acerbically, 'Oh,' I said, 'just Mary Ure!'

DS: That was a good one.

MS: I had thought Eddy Judd had played Jimmy Porter, but Bill Gaskill who I passed some of this to earlier in the year told me no, he had never done it, so I think, but Alec McGowan took it at one time. Anyway I was still at the Royal College but during the summer vacation I stayed on in London and worked every night in the theatre. And a friend of mine had bought a barge, who was a fellow student, actually I had met him in the army and they would go away in the summer, they would ask me to look after his barge, so I would stay on the barge which was a converted barge which was at Chelsea Reach, and he asked me if I would like to stay on the barge and pump the bilges and generally look after it. I agreed and moved in there. It turned out that Dorothy Tutin who was one of the actresses in *The Entertainer* also lived in a barge nearby, it was near Battersea Bridge and we would often meet at the bus stop on the way to the Royal Court theatre, she was always very nice to a humble stage hand. Anyway so when I got back, I did go down briefly to where I came from, Bournemouth and when I returned I set about moving into a flat next to the Albert Hall. It was completely unfurnished and what had happened was that the Royal College had owned this row of houses next to the Albert Hall since before the war and they had been requisitioned during the war and it was only in 1957 which is like 12 years after the war, they were de-requisitioned and the Royal College got them back and they had plans to pull them all down and build what is now the Royal College of Art next to the Albert Hall but at the time it was a row of mid-Victorian terrace houses, tall, overlooking the park. So they decided during the couple of years they had to wait before they got planning permission and all the rest of it to let them out to students who were married and it happened at that time I was married. I mean I was fairly young even then - I was still only about 25. And I happened to be in London of course and I managed to see it on the notice board at the college, because I used to go into the college almost every day and continued to paint even though it was vacation. And so I was allocated one of these flats and we moved into it and I can still remember it. It had had no furniture so I had to purchase various pieces of furniture and I managed to get most of it together. The last item was a bed, this latter proved to be something of a disaster, I was still working at the theatre in the evenings and we had lately acquired a stage carpenter called Johnny Glass. He was something of a rogue but quite likable, and like the rest of us liked a drink or two. He volunteered to take me to a place off Tottenham Court Road where I could buy a second hand bed for about a fiver. Before going there we had a rather liquid lunch in the pub next to the theatre and in consequence my judgment was somewhat impaired and I did choose a bed but perhaps not in the best condition, for which I had duly paid a fiver, promising to come back the next day to collect it. I had no transportation myself, but Fred - the long suffering relative of Ted Bolton's - had agreed to pick it up for me in the van he used during the day to deliver fish. So we went to Tottenham Court Road together and loaded it into the back of his van, we then drove to the flat next to the Albert Hall where he helped me carry it up four flights of stairs. I thanked him and gave him a couple of

pounds which he tried hard to refuse showing me that he just wanted to help as a friend. I think he was touched that anyone was nice to him, especially as Ted certainly wasn't. I assembled the bed, but later that evening when June - that was my wife - was already in bed, I undressed, leapt in, at which point the bed collapsed and after that we slept with the mattress on the floor. Sorry that's just a side issue, it's not... but it is in fact true. Anyway we went on there and at some time in the, I think the autumn of that year, there were two one act plays by N.F. Simpson, which one was called The Resounding Tinkle and the other was called The Hole and they were both light satirical comedies and the same cast played in each. [MS talks about personal business]

Anyway the plays continued at the theatre and Ted and I... Ted had finally warmed to me and we became good friends, this continued for all the time I worked there and later in life, one as a taxi driver which he and his brother Alfie became. Every now and then by some accident I would hail a taxi and find that he was driving it and we would immediately strike up a conversation about that time that we worked at the Royal Court, much to the surprise of whoever I was travelling with. Anyway, another play we did that year was called The Epitaph of George Dylan, written by John Osborne and Tony Creighton, which Bob Stevens and Tote Tanly playing the principal roles. I took Bob Stevens to a party given by my friend Chris Claremont on his barge one Saturday evening after the theatre had finished. He certainly enjoyed it. Then we did a play called The Making of Moo, it was written by Nigel Dennis, have you ever read it?

DS: No.

MS: It's a satirical attack on prescribed religions. The principal cast was George Devine, Joan Plowright, John Osborne and John Moffat. It ran for six weeks and I personally enjoyed every performance. As far as I remember we did not do another Nigel Dennis play while I was there, I think they had done one the previous year. It seemed to me that the plays of N.F. Simpson were in the same genre as Nigel Dennis's but who was I to judge, a humble stage hand. Anyway another play I think we did that year was Orpheus Descending which was written by Tennessee Williams, with Gary Cockerel playing the young man and Diane Cilento as the wife and a fading star called Isa Miranda and Diana Cilento was always very friendly to me and actually gave me her LP of Kurt Weil's Mack the Knife with Lotte Lenya singing. The production was designed by Loudon St. Hill an Australian who Tony Richardson was consistently horrid to. The stage manager on that production was Nick Garland. I don't know if you know who Nick Garland is, but, I mean I personally don't read the Telegraph but he is the political cartoonist for the Telegraph and has been for 20-odd years but at that time he was first of all the trainee stage hand and then a stage hand. And he and I became great friends and we shared a similar philandering approach to life at that time. He later became a well known political cartoonist but prior to that he directed under the auspices of Peter Ustinov a stage production of Beyond the Fringe. Anyway that was that. During the summer months we used to have a series of productions from various provincial theatre companies who would do a short stint, I can't remember like a week or maybe two. They would play like Glasgow Citizens, Coventry and Stratford East who brought an Arnold Wesker play called Chicken Soup and Barley which, I am pretty sure I am right, had Joan Plowright in.

DS: Yes, and Roots definitely...

MS: Yes, well that was later, *Roots* was later, this was one of those short stint ones and these productions were only for a short period, a week or maybe two which was well received by us stage hands as we were able to earn considerably more with overtime and get ins and get outs. The weekend change-overs were actually always very demanding, I mean, we would start off with the matinee and evening performance on Saturday, while tanked up with pints of stout and mild etc. We would work all night striking the existing sets presided over by the calm and indefatigable Michael Halifax. We would do the get out about six in the morning, go home to our various home for two or three hours, returning about 9.30 or 10am, refreshed after baths and breakfast, then do the get in, after which we would set up the new set which could take all day with a run through of various scene changes which might take place. This would often take us well into the Sunday night and in my role of stage electrician or I would then be working with Peter Theobald, the lighting director, setting the new lighting, winching up extremely heavy bars hung with big lamps called acting areas, which would provide an overall ambient lighting. The setting of the smaller lamps called P45's and other spotlights to pick out certain areas, also cutting coloured filters to place in front of each lamp, running cables and changing plugs. All this lighting was connected to a strand master switchboard which was in a little cubicle to one side of the top circle. Peter Theobald who worked at the various controls to lighting changes set them on the master gains for overall light changes and working on the minor single lights for alterations. When all was set I would be given a short course in operating the switchboard for that production and after a few nights of Peter operating he would then hand it to me and I would then operate the switchboard for the rest of the run. We would often work all Sunday night as well and continue to the next day Monday rehearsing and making alterations and finally we'd open for the public dress rehearsal on the Monday evening. We did a couple of West Indian plays that year, one was called, by this time I think we are into '58, one was called *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* and the other was called *Flesh to a Tiger* which was written by a West Indian writer called Barry Reckord. *Flesh to a Tiger* starred Cleo Lane in what I think was her first stage play. She was a lovely friendly person, was always joking and laughing with us. I think she suffered from stage fright. She kept a bottle of cognac at the side of stage and there would often be a swig. Every evening a man would come down the stairs to the stage towards the end of the last act and stand next to me watching Cleo, in the final moments of the play. One evening when she came off stage she introduced me. 'This is Johnny Dankworth, my husband'. He never failed to be there at the end of the play, every evening. Towards the end of the first week we were told we would be having one of our opening parties. I remember Cleo Lane turned to me and said 'Are we having a party with all us spades here?' It was a great party with lots of Afro-Caribbean music. I ended up on the toms-toms of black drummer. I was rather good on the drums at that time and at the end of the session I was complimented. I complimented the other drummer on his performance and he returned the compliment by saying 'You're pretty good yourself.' I was rather chuffed about that. We had also done a rather rude Greek comedy called *Lysistrata* with Joan Greenwood and Natasha Parry playing the leading roles. And it was designed by George [inaudible] and the set was on three levels, stage level and another about eight feet up and the final level about 12 feet up. It was not until I went to the top circle that I realised that the last level, the top level was completely invisible from there as it disappeared above the proscenium so a lot of actors were energetically acting and dancing up there unseen by a third of the audience. I adored Joan Greenwood who was tiny and petite and had the most sexy voice I had ever heard at that time. I first saw and heard here in *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, an Ealing Studio comedy with Dennis Price playing the lead. Oh yes, one weekend when we were doing our changeover from one play to another I noticed on the Sunday after we had done our customary get in of the next play and

were busy setting up the new scenery, I noticed a young girl seated cross legged on the floor near the footlights, sewing a large tear in the house tabs which had been lowered for repair. She was rather beautiful with long black hair. I tried to catch her eye but she kept her head bent as she went on sewing, she went on doing this all the morning. I eventually asked Pete who she was, he replied that she was a student. It was customary in that time to take on young hopefuls aspiring to get into the theatre and play them a paltry one pound a week for the privilege. We was around the stage all the rest of the day and by evening she had finished sewing the tabs and was standing around waiting for someone to give her another task. I managed to strike up a conversation with her and invited her to come to pub next door and have a drink. We had one drink, she a gin and tonic, while I had one of my fortifying stout and milds. She was really rather beautiful with long dark hair. I asked her if she was going to be at the theatre for the rest of the week and she said yes. So I said 'Well we should have another drink during the week.' She seemed quite pleased at the idea, so during the week I would take her to the pub every evening, she showed a remarkable capacity for gin and tonics. I reckon she was about 18 or 19. As the week progressed I found her conversation was rather limited to stories about school. She told me that her name was Caroline Mortimer, she also said that her parents were going to the play next week and she would like me to meet them. After a couple more evenings of me pouring gin and tonics into her, I asked her how old she was. To my horror she said 15. I then asked her what her father did and she said well he was a barrister and that her mother was a writer. Great I thought, he she was, underage, I was pouring gin and tonics into her and her father was a lawyer. I did meet them, they were both charming to me, his name was John Mortimer and his wife was Penelope. After that I tailed off my visits to the pub with her. She was as the expression goes, 'gaol bait.' Yes in 1958 there were more very interesting...

DS: So the John Mortimer, the writer and barrister?

MS: Yes, well he was a barrister and he wrote all those series about barristers.

DS: Amazing.

MS: And one of the funniest autobiographies I ever read which was called Summer of the Dormouse, if you want, it's the sort of book that if you're sitting on a bus and you start reading if you will start screaming with laughter and all the passengers look at you as if you're insane. You should try it. Anyway in 1958 there were more very interesting plays, we redid The Chairs with another Ionesco play called The Lesson. It was a tour de force for Joan Plowright who played an 83 year old woman in The Chairs and then after the interval played a 13 year old girl in The Lesson, you know that play. Another play we did was John Paul Sartre play called Nekrassov, a sort of political comedy - did you know he wrote plays?

DS: Yes.

MS: It was made particularly lively by Robert Helpmann's performance as the named lead. His heyday as a dancer was past, he was getting distinctly podgy around the middle, he was friendly though and he was as camp as all get out. Another older actor I

remember in the play was Esme Percy. It was a very busy play for us stage hands and many scene changes. I had to enlist a small army of extra people from the Royal College to work on it. There was one particularly complicated scene change when there was scenery going in and out and large pieces of it being lowered from the flies. It was bedlam for a short period and we all had to choreograph our movements, but one evening I mis-timed a move and a large piece of scenery was dropped on my head, knocking me out. Ted the stage hand rescued me, literally carrying me off stage. There was a climax to the play in the last act when Robert Helpmann was supposedly hiding in another room. At some point he sneezes loudly, initially he would wind himself up for real stage sneeze which went something like [Oh, oh, oh.....Fffff!] as the performance wore on the, the sneeze became more and more exaggerated and so the last day he went [Oh, oh, oh.....Fffff....fff....FUCK!]. This, at a public performance in London in 1958 was regarded as quite outrageous but he got away with it as it was the last night. Tony Richardson had a curious speech impediment which was very distinctive, anyone who worked with him or in his vicinity would usually imitate him perfectly. One afternoon I was in the theatre, I don't remember why, there was no matinée that day. It was probably summer vacation at the college, I was walking around the theatre, checking lights in the various toilets, eventually I was down in the auditorium where Tony Richardson was rehearsing an actor and actress in some play where they had to kiss. I heard Tony Richardson saying 'No, no, no, not like that darling! What I want you to do is to stick your tongue in her mouth and move it around a little.' [speaking with a lisp]. Anyway, yes I think it was in 1958 we also did a production of Shaw's Major Barbara with Joan Plowright doing the lead. And amongst the cast was a tall willowy Vanessa Redgrave playing what at that time was a fairly minor role. Later I was to encounter her again, firstly when I was assistant art director on Antonioni's film Blow Up and then later when I was art director on Isadora. There was a series of plays which included Samuel Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape and Endgame - Fin de Partie... I watched them night after night, confused by the latter but terribly moved by Patrick McGee in Krapp's Last Tape, you know those plays?

DS: Wonderful play.

MS: Yes, John Hurt's just done it, hasn't he? Yes, I haven't seen it. One evening I witnessed some rather amusing encounter in the Royal Court pub which was next to the theatre. I was sitting with a friend having a drink between intervals, when the door opened and in came Samuel Beckett on his own. He went to the counter and ordered a drink. He remained standing at the bar whilst he drank it. Suddenly the door burst open and in came Brendan Behan with what I suspect were a couple of ladies of the night. He was large, disheveled and unshaven, wearing a voluminous sweater with many large holes in it. After he had seated the ladies, he went to the bar and ordered several drinks. While he was waiting for them, standing at the other end of the bar from Samuel Beckett and seemingly ignoring him, he began to proclaim loudly 'Has anyone been to see that crap next door?' Beckett studiously ignored him and, after finishing his drink, he left.

DS: Oh that's fantastic, what a story!

MS: And about this time we did a small play called Sugar in the Morning, it was designed by Sean Kenny, I can't remember who wrote that. It was a rather austere set,

mostly consisting of shallow platforms made out of scaffolding and dressed on its various levels to make it look like a suburban house. The set I think was a product of a low budget, it worked perfectly well though. Sean... do you know who Sean Kenny was?

DS: Yes the designer, Theatre Workshop.

MS: Yes, that's right, Sean Kenny was very friendly to me and repeatedly asked me to visit him at the BBC where he was also a staff designer. I did not in the end take up his offer for various reasons. It must have been about the time the Beckett plays were on that leaving the theatre from the stage one Saturday evening I encountered a disconsolate group at the end of the alleyway leading from the stage door to the street on Sloane Square. The group consisted of Patrick McGee, Jackie McGaren, Sean Kenny and the black writer called Barry Reckord, as well as various wives and girlfriends. Each of the men was carrying a bottle of whiskey because the pub was now shut and they were saying mournfully 'Well where should we drink it then?' I had a moment of insanity and said 'Why don't you come back to my place?' They responded happily and I gave them directions. I lived at that time rather grandly next to the Albert Hall in a flat in a row of old Victorian houses which were owned by the Royal College and scheduled to be pulled down later when the new Royal College of Arts designed by Hugh Casson, was to be built on the site. Actually the rent was quite modest but the address seemed rather grand. Anyway they all piled into a couple of taxis and made their way there with me following on my scooter. When we arrived my poor wife was about to go to bed. She managed to stay up with us for about an hour and finally went off to bed. I then witnessed that curious ritual of an Irish drinking party. It started with great merriment and bonhomie, the stories told, personal anecdotes remembered, compliments given. Then the singing began, bright cheerful ditty's, risqué songs, songs of love and lost which gradually changed into tone of sadness followed by tragedy, then arguments began, politics were thrown in the ring, not to mention religion, aggression grew and there was the threat of possible violent confrontation. Fortunately no fighting broke out and finally as day and night broke they departed still singing softly, arms around each other. Some sliding three floors down on the banisters, three floors to the ground floor and then they were gone.

DS: Lovely.

MS: It was a moment there of insanity. I have reason to remember Patrick McGee with some affection, he saved me from being beaten up in the pub once night. Oh my gosh, at some point somebody, well there were some rather nasty young lads, they were Teddy Boys and at one point one of them was about hit me because he had said something rude to the wife of one of my friends who was sitting at the table near me. And this guy just punched me in the face and so I got up and I'm not a fighter really but I sort of got up and posed and I wrote it down here, I said, I told him not to speak to her like this and he got up and punched me in the face. I got up and although not a physical fighter myself, I made some effort and raised my fists. Suddenly Patrick McGee was by my side, he must have been sitting in the back of the pub and saw what was about to happen. He thrusts his knotty forearm between us said 'Don't you punch him Michael, he's not worth your punch.' They took one look at his craggy Irish face and vanished like smoke. The most memorable play for me that year was *The Long, The Short and The Tall* by Willis Hall. It was a great cast which included Peter O'Toole freshly arrived from

the Bristol Old Vic school. Robert Shaw and Eddie Judd. It was Lindsay Anderson's stage debut as the director, he hadn't directed stage before. It was a great play, set in some jungle in South East Asia surrounded by Japanese during the Second World War. I loved it and much later it was made into a film with Lawrence Harvey playing Banforth, the part played by Peter O'Toole on stage. Anyway one Saturday evening after the play had been running for a couple of weeks, the last tabs had dropped and the audience had departed. I was alone on the stage clearing some things up and through a door on the prop side of the stage, the door which is really there as a fire exit, not for access from the auditorium, a man emerged 'I say' he said 'where can I find the boys?' I assume that he was looking for the cast so I directed him where to go upstairs. He thanked me saying 'My name's Noel Coward.' I later saw him and had a conversation with him in the pub next door.

DS: Wow!

MS: I was finding it difficult to decide on a subject for my final year thesis. Andy my friend had already started on his and was doing something erudite on cowboys and art. Or maybe cowboys and film or maybe westerns in general. I forget which. He was putting together a beautiful volume, nicely bound with all sorts of illustration. Time was passing and I suddenly realised it was only three weeks before it had to be handed in. One evening in the theatre I had a sudden brain wave - why not write a review of theatre critics, focusing on their treatment of recent plays in the Royal Court. I approached the publicity manager in the front of house office and asked if I might ready any cuttings that they might have on their first three years of work under the English Stage Company. They very kindly gave me access to all the material that had accumulated, and every evening before the theatre opened I would sit at the empty top circle bar and read the reviews and gradually compose a searing critique of the critics, based on their frequent changes of tune on a production like *Look Back in Anger* which had been reviled by a number of critics when it opened but then became a considerable success after being reviewed enthusiastically by Kenneth Tynan, subsequently to be applauded by those same critics when it was again shown in the Court. I had two reasons to choose this subject, I had nearly always found critics both in art and the theatre singularly lacking in judgment, preferring to demonstrate their own minimal writing styles rather concentrating on the careful analysis of the work they're reviewing. The other reason was the readily availability of this research material at the Court. Also by quoting large sections of the review I was able to make up the 3000 minimum of words relatively easily. It was a third reason, that was that the essay was to be assessed by Basil Taylor, the hapless Reader of Architecture of my first year at the Royal College, also himself a critic. I thought this might 'tigger' him up a bit. The title of the thesis was *Those Who Cant*. I was only interested in getting a pass-mark, it was something we had to do but did not seem to have much bearing on my ability as an artist. But to my surprise, when the results were eventually posted on the notice board I found that I got a B+, it was Andy - whose work was far better presented and whose diligence required a far greater amount of work than mine - only got a C. He was slightly baffled by this discrepancy. The last play I remember working in during that year was John Arden's *Live Like Pigs* which had Robert Shaw and Eddie Judd and a lovely drunken actor called Wilfred Lawson. He was nearly always drunk. Brilliant as an actor but totally unpredictable on his performance. There was the sequence in the second act when he gets into bed and would frequently lie there farting loudly. The other and final play I worked on was *Look after Lulu* with Vivien Leigh starring in it. It was interesting as the first play I worked in had Lawrence Olivier in it and then the last one Vivien Leigh. It was

towards the end of 1959 and I was in my final year at the Royal College, my personal life was in something of a turmoil and I needed to go into exile for a while. I left London and went off to live in Bristol for a year in taught at Gloucester Art School. To me, that three years were some of the best of my life. Not only was I at the Royal College of Art, the most prestigious art school in the country, if not the world, but also I was working every evening at the most controversial and interesting theatre in London, witnessing and working on revolutionary plays with great people.

DS: I have got one final question, do you still have your thesis that you wrote about the critics?

MS: Well sadly I don't. I have searched for it. You know, I have lead a fairly peripatetic life and I am amazed at the very few things that I have managed to retain. I have still got the first painting I did when I was at Royal College of Arts which amazingly has survived other mistresses, wives, people stored it in their garage and I finally managed to get it back. And I have searched for that because actually I was rather pleased with it because I had put, I called it Those Who Cant and I had a little quote from Tristram Shandy about those who can act, those who can't become critics or something to that effect but no, sadly, if I could find that I will let you have it, I would like to read it myself and of course in those days - no typewriter, all written by hand.

DS: Well that was fascinating, thank you very much indeed, thank you.