

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Maurice Stewart – interview transcript

Interviewer: Kate Harris

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Actor and Stage Manager. Audiences; Michael Bentall; Berliner Ensemble; Peter Daubeny; directing Shakespeare; Jack Hylton; Italia Conti Stage School; Look Back in Anger; new plays; Oklahoma!; Old Vic; repertory; revue; stratification of theatre; television; tours; Sam Wanamaker; World Theatre seasons.

KH: I would just like to start off with a question about how you first began working in theatre.

MS: Ah, an interesting one, because I thought it was all my idea. But I was 17 before I realised that my mother had wanted to go into the theatre and had been refused permission by her father, and I think before I was born she knew that I was going into the theatre, so it was quite a conditioning process. But it was very early.

KH: OK, because then you went to the Italia Conti Stage School didn't you when you were quite young?

MS: Yes. Well, that was at the age of 12, but before that I had been performing with a children's group which really was quite an extraordinary range of singing and dancing and doing pantomimes in working men's clubs, and then when I went to secondary modern school I found myself playing the leads in fully mounted Gilbert and Sullivan productions...

KH: Gosh!

MS: ...so by the time I was 11 I was very seasoned.

KH: Yes, you were a seasoned performer.

MS: And I went down to London on my own from Leicester at the age of 12 and stayed in digs and went to a stage school, so one becomes very self-sufficient very early.

KH: So when did you graduate from the stage school?

MS: Well I didn't graduate. One was working while there and training, so for a year I was in an opera company as a boy soprano, which meant I only did about four performances a week, something like that. Whizzing out to film studios like Ealing and things like that to do kiddy bits, usually crowd stuff and things like that in Ealing Comedies, and one did what was called the Italia Conti training which was... it was really an agency that pretended to be a school at that time.

KH: OK, so you were performing in a diverse range of things, there wasn't one thing that you specialised in at that stage?

MS: Absolutely, because one... as children, one was whisked off to audition for all sorts of things including - because this was all pre-television - there was advertising commercials, just photographic commercials plus anything that came along theatrically, film wise. So I was there for about three years but got a job that took me on tour and I just never went back, so one didn't 'graduate'.

KH: Yes. So from there you went into weekly rep, is that right?

MS: No, first I did a year's tour singing and dancing with a sort of juvenile revue troop, everybody was under 18, so that was an amazing experience in immediately post war England.

KH: Is this the musical revue?

MS: It was a musical revue, and it played what was then called 'number three theatres' which were not the best and in quite obscure places! I mean, you didn't go to Manchester, you went to Salford, Hulme Hippodrome, Queen's Park and everywhere else. And because it was the time when there was still a lot of suburban theatres, even when we came to London - you know, great excitement, the tour is going to London, where will we be going to? - Clapham, Brixton, Camberwell and every suburb had its own variety of theatre and sometimes a repertory theatre as well.

KH: What kind of audiences were you getting for those performances?

MS: Very local. Very local, and quite often very regular. They had a thing called 'permanent bookings' where you went on the same night. In fact when I came back to London after the tour, my landlady had a permanent booking for the Brixton Empress, Friday night, first house and we knew all the people who sat around us, because they all came on the same night. So it was very community based, and the people who were serving in the, you know, on the market stalls across the road are the ones you found yourself sitting next to in the audience and of course at that time they were the people who were on the stage as well, because it was very directed at a working class audience.

KH: What kind of material were you performing?

MS: Well in that case, in the Musical Revue it was just song sketches - what they called 'shoners', which were, you know, do your Scottish scene and you do your Irish scene and you do your... suddenly it would light up with a stain glass window and everybody would sing 'Ave Maria' in the Holy City. Now it's cringe making, but, that was popular entertainment. You see, it's all before television. That... You know, I think one of the things that we should talk about in the interview is this stratification, because I think for your project stratification of the theatre profession - where quite often people were brought up in one or introduced into one medium and you were legit or you weren't legit.

KH: Yes, that is very interesting because a few people have mentioned that kind of terminology, 'legitimate' and 'non-legitimate'.

MS: Yes, and just as though you were West End or non-West End and even if you were in repertory companies there was almost like a class system or a pecking order.

KH: Did you have a sense of that at this stage?

MS: Very early, very early.

KH: You had that sense straight away?

MS: Yes, because we learned about it at Italia Conti because we went for things in all the different groups. You know one would go and be looked at by Robert Donat or Noel Coward to see whether you were the right shape and size, and you might even be taken to see the performance at the Savoy or the Haymarket or something like that, and the next week you'd be out to Collins Islington to see twice nightly variety or a music hall. So we were very lucky, also we got free seats at Conti's. We also went every year to the theatrical garden party where you saw the different worlds, sort of working...

KH: What were the theatrical garden parties, I don't even know what they are?

MS: Well the thing is every year everybody working in the theatre in London or available in London went to a vast space, somewhere like the Oval cricket ground, and they had a vast garden party to raise funds...

KH: Oh, OK.

MS: ...and so people signed autographs for a fee and, you know, 'kiss one of the stars for a fee'. They'd run the tombola stalls and things like that. And so we were lucky as

kids from the Italia Conti School, because Madame Conti was very well known and quite well liked in her eccentric way and so we were welcomed on all levels, which was a great... it was really like having an arts foundation course because you entered the theatre knowing the range of alternatives.

KH: The kind of people that were actually at the Italia Conti School with you, was it a diverse range of people who went there to study there?

MS: Ah yes, most of them were never seen again. But you know, Tony Newley, Milly Martin, Jean Bayless, quite a few people sort of rose from the period. There was a sort of reunion about 25 years later, that was interesting, we all had to go and stand under the year that we were at Conti's! It was very thin on the ground the year I went.

KH: So after you had done this musical revue is that when you moved into repertory?

MS: Yes, I... The people who put on the musical revue... the woman, Rose Newton ran two theatres at Bedford and Luton where there was a repertory company and they were going to do *The Winslow Boy*, and so she hauled me out of the revue and I suddenly found myself in Luton preparing for *The Winslow Boy*. I did the pantomime before it, where we did *Toad Of Toad Hall* before it and then I did *The Winslow Boy* and then I stayed on. I opted to stay on and learn something about playing plays. And I was playing, you know, inappropriate parts because I was still only 16.

KH: So what kind of parts were you playing?

MS: Oh I was having to come on as, you know, very small parts usually because the thing with rep, it was usually one set and no more than eight performers, but if there were more than eight, they either called in amateurs or in this case the stage management, especially when you did a Shakespeare and you know, I masqueraded and all sorts of things at far too young an age! But it was very good, hugely good training, just as weekly rep was good training. It was bad to stay in it for too long - you learnt too many bad habits - but it was amazingly good grounding.

KH: What do you think in particular was especially good about the grounding that it gave you?

MS: It's the Noel Coward dictum really, of 'learn the lines and don't bump into the furniture': you got the play on. You had five days' rehearsal while you were playing another play at night - in that case twice nightly, you were doing the play twice a night.

KH: Gosh, so what time did the first performance start then?

MS: Six o'clock.

KH: And what time was the second one?

MS: Eight fifteen, eight thirty? And of course the plays were ruthlessly cut, that was the first thing, and as stage manager that was one of my jobs: to go through the script in advance and just find chunks; and a very good director who was there worked with me on it to begin with and then just said 'you can see the bits we can lose without losing plot'. [laughter] Character didn't matter so much, but plot mattered. So [in] some companies it was even worse, because they did the full play for four nights and then for the Saturday night, when they were doing it twice, they cut it and everybody had to remember cuts for those two performances - that was even worse! But then, you know, I was lucky, we were doing twice nightly, weekly. There were people across Morecambe Bay who were doing two plays a week twice nightly and then you thought 'Oh there's somebody that does it only once nightly per week', then there are people who do a play every two weeks and do it for two weeks, they have two weeks rehearsal and then you dream of Birmingham with three weeks, yes! So that was the scale even within the repertory companies.

KH: What kind of productions were you doing? Was there a particular kind of play that you did in the repertory?

MS: Read the Samuel French and Evans catalogue! It didn't go... The first thing you did when you were choosing a play, you would see how many sets, how many characters. If there were more than eight characters, well, hmm, we can only do one of those every so often. If there's more than one set, can we get it up, get it down, do we have the staff? So you had to... it's pre-television, I keep coming back to that, when people in a provincial city, even if they had a number one touring date with ex-West End shows - if they were lucky and had a pre-West End date, where you saw the shows before they went to London - you only got them released in the provinces when they'd finished in London, so the new releases made up most of your season. But you did a Shaw or you did an Ibsen or you did a Chekhov, you did a Shakespeare because you got the schools matinees.

KH: But the other things were West End?

MS: You had to do drawing room comedies, depending on who was running it, well how prestigious it was. Suddenly they would do something quite obscure, and the audience would drop or they would grumble because they came every week. They were very vociferous in telling... because you lived in the town, you went to the butchers that they went to, you went to the dry cleaners they went to, you would get feedback from the audience, which was wonderful. I mean, it was infuriating, especially from the local amateurs who all knew they were so much better than anybody who was at their local rep. But you've had some very good people talking about provincial rep...

KH: Yes we have had a few, it's a common theme that has emerged...

MS: The people who have run them know the problems that I didn't know, you know, just being... I knew the stage management problems and when I went back into rep - after trying all sorts of other things - I wanted to direct and I thought the easiest way was to stage manage with a contract where I directed occasionally, it was a very good opportunity to direct. So I went to Dundee where I stage managed but directed...

KH: This is in 1961?

MS: Much later, yes, yes. Because the stage management rather took over from the performing because I enjoyed it much more.

KH: Why did you prefer the stage management?

MS: I think I was beginning to realise that although I was quite good at doing certain things I was never going to be as good as I wanted to be, and because I realised that my overview of the theatre was really as a director, either as a director or a writer so I aimed towards it, and took... you take what opportunities come along.

KH: Because later on, kind of 1955, you actually moved into early television as well didn't you, would you be able to tell me a little bit about that?

MS: The only reason I fell into television at that state, was I had become what they called a production manager. So instead of just being a stage manager running the show every night I was helping the producer to get shows on, and by that time - because when I first went into the theatre, the man who directed a play was called a producer. And then he became a director and a producer was the management. And so I was working for a management called Jack Hylton, who was a quite famous band leader and staged a lot of West End musicals and big summer reviews.

KH: And this is in Blackpool?

MS: I did Blackpool which was a collaboration between George and Alfred Black - who were famous - and Jack Hylton and they always brought the big spectacular opera house show down to London when it had finished in Blackpool. And so I helped bring two or three productions down over a period of years, and Jack Hylton and George and Alf Black both got into early television - the Black's did Tyne Tees, and Jack Hylton was involved in Rediffusion. He had this vast warehouse of scenery and costumes, he had the know-how of fifty years in Music Hall and producing plays so he was a very useful person in early television.

KH: So what was your experience of moving across from theatre to television?

MS: Well, I had to go in as what was called 'floor manager', mainly because quite a lot of the artists who were in our shows, Shirley Bassey and Al Reed and people like that - Max Wall - were going across to do a television for Jack Hylton, so I went with them. And he was very well known around the profession, so you'd suddenly find... and I did one live television show - of which there is no record - with Danny La Rue's first ever television show, Fanny Craddock - the cooking guru and eccentric star - and Josephine Baker from the Folies Bergère. It was amazing to suddenly find the worlds colliding. And early television, Billy Ternent, a famous band leader was doing the orchestra for it and there was no real... Nobody kept the programmes, so these things just went and evaporated.

KH: It's very ephemeral, kind of very much like theatre.

MS: Absolutely, absolutely. Well, even when I went to the BBC as a director we still weren't recording. I wrote and directed three plays, and there's no record of them anywhere.

KH: Did your background in the theatre, did you feel that that helped you?

MS: Oh tremendously, I mean one live television thing I was floor managing, and Max Wall was doing a sketch with an actor who got cold feet and ran out of the building and never came back! So I finished up feeding, feeding Max Wall on live television with a thing I had not rehearsed! But weekly rep you get used to - that's where that sort of bleeding in front of an audience made... this is where the Bruce Forsyth and people like that came from, they were used to audiences, they weren't afraid of audiences and they knew their job. And because they'd managed to practice it. I think now you... I mean, it happens now in the long running soaps, you can see people enter and get better and better and better at doing it and delivering.

KH: Because they're working to kind of a very fast pace aren't they?

MS: Learning their lines, hitting their marks, not causing a fuss. But now you learn more of that at drama school. When I first started teaching in drama schools it was very much... the idea of doing a commercial or anything like that! No, you were training to do Shaw and Ibsen in repertoire. You know, so, no, the actor's profession has changed tremendously.

KH: What would you say are the kind of the main changes over the period that we're looking at in the theatre.

MS: Well, the period you are looking at, I think we should concentrate on, because it was an amazing... It was the post-war period and there were the people who were in the theatre before the war, there were the people who during the war had had an opportunity to either see or try entertaining, a lot of them, so a lot of stars in battle dress came back and so the market was suddenly flooded. The only thing is there was no

money and there were no resources, there was no timber, there was no canvas, we couldn't have new lighting equipment so it was very stark. It was very austere and there wasn't, I mean there were performances when because the water was switched off, the hydraulically supported iron curtain was slowly coming down during the performance, there was no water supply to stop it. And suddenly we couldn't do performances because there were electricity cuts. You couldn't do performances because of the cold winter of '47, you couldn't heat the theatres, so it was really austere and we were on tour.

KH: This was when you were doing the Musical Review?

MS: Well, right through to the fifties, right through really to 1951, the Festival of Britain, when everything was going to be different. And I think these milestones are terribly important in people's minds, probably important to the project because people... historians try and make milestones that don't quite hold water and I think the most dangerous one is Look Back in Anger.

KH: That's interesting.

MS: Because that was the one that succeeded. There were these tiny little postage stamp private clubs that were doing new plays, and they all wanted the one that would break the mould, that would set fire to the French windows of the drawing room comedy and put some grit back on the stage.

KH: So what was your impression of Look Back in Anger?

MS: I really only heard about it, because I was working in rep, I was probably in Barrow in Furness or somewhere when heard... we read The Stage, we read about this play and we read the hoo-hah. But I was much more interested... I have always been very attracted to American theatre, I was buying Thornton Wilder, and I was buying Moss Hart and Kauffman, but they were all too big casts so I couldn't do them in rep, I couldn't suggest them in rep. So we heard about Look Back in Anger and we thought, 'Well, you know, so is it that special, is it that good?' Well then of course two years later it was released for rep, we did it. Yes, it brought the audiences in, it's dynamic but I challenge whether it is the watershed. I think with films like Sporting Life and Saturday Night and Sunday Morning being made, it was really the theatre trying to latch on to what was going on in the cinema.

KH: That's really interesting.

MS: That's an opinion, I don't... I'm sure there's a lot of historians who wouldn't agree. But then again a lot of historians have only got the playscripts to go on and the difference between a play on paper and a play when it plays... there are some dreadful scripts, dreadful scripts and suddenly you see them working.

KH: It's very interesting what you said about the cross boundaries though kind of between film and theatre and television, because it is often quite ignored and at that period there were enormous links in terms of all the people who were going from medium to medium.

MS: Of course! You would go to the theatre at night and you would see Joyce Grenfell, Margaret Rutherford, Alistair Sim on the same stage. You'd go to work at Ealing the next day and they'd all be there at five o'clock in the morning.

KH: Yes, and people like Tony Richardson as well were directing as well, weren't they, in a variety of mediums.

MS: Absolutely. Oh, when it came to the Waterhouse Hall plays and things and films, yes and there was a lot of cross-referencing there.

KH: That's very interesting. When you were talking about the period of austerity in the forties and fifties, I was just looking because you were in Oklahoma! weren't you? And that must have been extraordinary, you know because it was such a colourful production...

MS: Oh wow! Well, there's only been a couple of points in my life when I fell off the edge of the world, and that was one of them. I suppose going to London for the first time at the age of 12 was one. Then having done rep, having done my tatty reviews, having dreamed about doing all sorts of things, Oklahoma! was going on and on and on and on at Drury Lane.

KH: Was it '47 that it started?

MS: Started in '47, Howard Keel - Harold Keel - and by the fourth year they had got Carousel waiting to come in to Drury Lane, they decided to move it, they could find nobody to go into it because they all wanted to be in the new musicals. I came down from Barrow in Furness and thought 'What the hell?' I was 17 years old, I'd got to go and do my National Service at 18 and I went and knocked on the door and I was totally unprepared for it, they were unprepared for me but they needed an extra body, so I was suddenly in this amazing musical and it was, it was such a breath of fresh air when it suddenly exploded in London after the war.

KH: Could you just try and describe why it was such an explosion?

MS: Well, two fresh new musicals - and quite frankly they weren't as fresh and they weren't as new as the historians remember them, because both the writers of Annie Get Your Gun and Oklahoma! had both done amazing things before the war, during the war, but Oklahoma! in particular... When the curtain went up on a vivid yellow backcloth and a totally empty stage and an old woman in a chair doing a butter churner,

and it was breathtaking because musicals started with an opening chorus. And so that eccentricity and the sheer impact of the yellow backdrop and everybody thought 'Wow, we're in a new age' you know, there was that moment. And then of course it was a good story, well told with amazing song interludes.

KH: What was your role in Oklahoma!?

MS: Oh nothing, back row of the chorus. If there was ever a straight line I was at the end of it, if ever we did a thing called the 'Oklahoma! V', I was always the one at the very back!

KH: Who was starring in it then, when you were in it?

MS: That's a very good question! It was the replacement of the replacement of the replacement of the replacement by then! Good, good people, I mean Gwen Overton and Clive Owen went on with a very good career as a double act, I think Billy Love did very good things, Peter Felgate who had been in the Fol-de-Rols of the Musical Review was suddenly playing well. People came and went, and another extraordinary thing! It was like an old folks home - anybody who had ever been in Oklahoma!, if they dropped in London would finish up on the stage. They would actually be in the performance - you would suddenly come face to face with somebody you have never met before, but if it was the girl in the green dress, you knew what you did at that moment at that time! It was a wonderful thing. Actually about 20 years later they revived Oklahoma! in New York, and I was there and Charlotte Greenwood - who was in the original - said 'Anybody who has ever been in Oklahoma! let's have a party.' And there were hundreds of people there. So you know, being associated with a big West End musical at any time is fantastic, it's such an adrenaline rush to do a musical, but then it's an adrenaline rush to suddenly find another time... I went back to stage manage - well, I did my National Service, and went back to stage management because I wanted to direct and I had stage managed all these revues, and my agent suddenly said they needed a stage manager at the Old Vic. I said 'Don't be ridiculous, I have never done classics'. And she said 'Well they're going to America', so I was there on the doorstep and I got the job.

KH: Who was running the Old Vic at this time?

MS: It was Michael Bentall, who is a much neglected and sometimes maligned figure. He was one of the people who was ousted because they had these... The people who ran the Old Vic, the Friends of the Old Vic, have this habit of really dumping people, people who made it work and they have these occasional flushings out, it's the same really at Stratford and the new broom wants to get rid of anybody who is loyal to the old brigade. It's understandable, it happens in the BBC all the time.

KH: This was 1960 wasn't it, when you went to the Old Vic?

MS: Yes - 1959, late.

KH: So what were your first kind of impressions? Because you were coming from it from kind of Blackpool revues and things.

MS: It was hysterical. And the people knew where I had come from, I had come from Blackpool revues and the Folies Bergère, and there I was stage managing Hamlet! And it was a very strange interview and the interview was actually with Michael Bentall, and he had got my measure immediately and his eyes twinkled and he blinked a lot. And he actually said to me, well he was at a loss to ask me because he wasn't supposed to do the interview, and he eventually, lost for words, said the old cliché, 'Well, tell me what you have done recently.' and I said 'The Folies Bergère', and his eyes twinkled and he said 'Some of my productions are a bit like grand revue' he said and he was absolutely right, because he taught me that you didn't have... you needed to have respect for Shakespeare but you couldn't have reverence for it. And that was - I spent 20 years in America trying to teach Americans that, because Shakespeare was written as show business, and it happened just to be intellectually very deep poetically, very sound. But it's show business. And it's very interesting to try and just remove some of the reverence from it and at that time Michael was doing that.

KH: He was doing that?

MS: Well, he was taking, you know, the man who was staging the America tour was Sol Hurok, who was the man who took Anna Pavlova and the Chaliapin to America the first time, took Diaghilev and so he wanted audiences. We were playing Hamlet to a 3,000 seater theatre and you know you have to accommodate - in a theatre like that, you have to accommodate the audience, you have to reach the audience.

KH: So you were stage managing that production of Hamlet?

MS: Yes, well, the three productions in the... I was actually... I was running the corner for Henry V with Lawrence Harvey playing Henry V with an amazingly good cast including Judi Dench and all sorts of other people. And we did a third play, what did we do? We did Henry V, we did Hamlet and we did Twelfth Night, a wonderful Twelfth Night - and I was really only running the corner for one of them, and I was doing props for Hamlet which was a scary business when you were touring these vast theatres and really doing three performances a town and then moving a thousand miles, you know.

KH: Oh gosh! Do you have any particular memories of those productions that come back to you?

MS: Oh so many, but we'd need 24 hours! [laughs] No, I feel that there are lots of other things. I think... Because it wasn't even the first Old Vic tour of America, they had done a very, very successful tour two years previously. We did take it to Yugoslavia when we came back from America, which was quite startling, which was quite interesting but I think we'd be more... it would be more interesting because it was such a transitional

time, it was the time in London when Peter Daubeny was doing his World Theatre seasons. I was interested in world theatre, I was interested in the way theatre worked.

KH: Did you go to see those world plays?

MS: Oh yes. Oh I did workshops whenever there was a workshop in the Daubeny season. Rossanno Brazzi doing Italian classical romantic theatre and things like that, you learnt so much. They used to do workshops too at Covent Garden, I mean I was in Oklahoma!, choreography by Agnes De Mille, well it was during that that the American Ballet Theatre came over for the first time and New York City Ballet came over for the first time, and we did class with them.

KH: What kind of impact do you think the World Theatre series kind of had, Daubeny's work had on the theatre at the time?

MS: I think it was enormously valuable because... rather like Gordon Craig, it's not what he achieved, it's what he inspired other people to achieve. And I think there's a few neglected people in the theatre like that and I think Gordon Craig is certainly one of them and Peter Daubeny is one of them because he inspired and I think Michel Saint-Denis was another because the short time he was allowed to run the Vic Theatre School, it inspired so many people. When you trace the lineage of people who came out of it and what they went on to do and I think Daubeny - he gave us a chance to see the Berliner Ensemble for the first time.

KH: Did you go to see that production?

MS: Oh yes, yes I still have the programmes, yes. In fact I am now worried what to do with all the programmes, yes.

KH: Do you have good memories of that production of the Berliner Ensemble?

MS: Well, I have better memories of Trumpets and Drums - which was the Recruiting Officer. It was just so economically staged but so impactfully, but you, of course, you get those first impressions, and then you see it happen again and again and again because Dexter were doing it, Gaskill was doing it, Blatchley was doing it. They all learnt... No, they were all inspired by it. They didn't just steal it. They picked up the ball and ran with it. That's what theatre's about.

KH: That's interesting, because a designer I interviewed, she talked about going to see that other Berliner Ensemble production, she said how it has inspired her work.

MS: OK, absolutely, well I worked briefly with Jocelyn Herbert, who was at the Royal Court for all those new plays and those Christopher Logue's and things like that was

doing these extraordinarily impactful... The impact... And another wasted opportunity in British theatre was a magazine in English and French called World Theatre and it's what inspired the young theatre workers of the world, as Gordon Craig called them. You know, because Gordon Craig, because he inspired Stanislavski and Reinhardt and Norman Bel Geddes in America and Tennessee Williams. They all picked up the ball and you know...

KH: Could we just move on to when you moved into the BBC television drama department?

MS: Yes.

KH: Would you be able to just tell me what you were doing there, and how you kind of moved into that and why you decided to kind of move out of it again?

MS: Well, like everything else it was a bit of a mistake! I had been trying to get a job in television for several years, I had had several interviews, I had always been turned down and I had also been dabbling with writing plays and eventually I had written a play and people said 'Oh dear, I don't think so' and I thought 'to hell with this' and I sent it direct to the Head of Drama with a very cheeky letter and they bought the play.

KH: Who was the head of drama at that point?

MS: Sydney Newman had just moved over from ABC. And anyway, I was subsequently told, when I had to admit that I had written it and the script editor knew me and he said 'Oh God, how are we going to tell Sydney?' and I said 'Well, don't.' I had written it under a different name because I knew Sydney - you know, I had to invent a very continental sounding name to even get the play read by Sydney's department. Anyway they did the play, and then the producer came over to me and said 'We really need writers in television who can direct, would you like to do the directors course?' So having tried to get the directors course for several years, I was suddenly given it. I did it, I enjoyed it, I was engaged for the beginning of BBC2 - Michael Peacock wanted experimenters, and I had always been... well a renegade if not an experimenter! And so I had a six months contract to work for BBC2, and then the powers that be - typical BBC - said 'You've had your fun, now you're going to be directing this weekly series called Compact', and I said 'No I'm not!' and I realised I wasn't an establishment person, a BBC person. And quite frankly I'm a theatre person, not a television person. But it was a wonderful opportunity.

KH: So were you directing, what kind of things were you directing in the drama department?

MS: Well I did several one-off plays, and then I did a series called Detectives, which really was a series of eight different detectives and they were looking for a series out of

any of the detectives so - I did say it was still quite experimental at that time... and it was called, in the drama department, we were very, very carefully segregated.

KH: OK, so I was asking you about Sam Wanamaker and your experiences of working in Liverpool?

MS: Well Sam's project to run a prestige rep in Liverpool at that time, I found it quite questionable because there was a highly prestigious rep already in Liverpool at the time, but he found this Victorian theatre, he talked an American woman into financing the total restoration of it and his plan was to make it very starry and run a really first class restaurant in it run by the man who used to run the Café de Paris in London, and he could get star names to come up there and he put on a very well mounted season of very good productions. I only went up to do the Christmas musical which I was going to stage manage - the Christmas musical which was Finian's Rainbow, which again was heavily political because Sam was very political. But it was an experience he wanted, to become a theatre manager and run a theatre and it was an extraordinary little block of time, and it prepared him, I guess, for coming up with the Globe project. He saw himself... like Bernard Miles he saw himself more as an entrepreneur, and he loved the fundraising, he loved the schmoozing the press, he loved quite frankly screwing money out of people, you know. [KH laughs] That's what he enjoyed. His fund raising for the Globe probably killed him, but it was... he enjoyed that greatly, yes.

KH: What was he like to work with?

MS: I didn't get along terribly well with him. But then again there's... he actually said later on he said 'You know, there are people you respond well to, and there are people you don't respond well to.'. But you know, it was a working relationship, it worked, he was running a very, very good theatre, and he did it beautifully if you accepted that he was a performer running the theatre, he acted running the theatre.

KH: Did it attract a different kind of audience to the people who went to the kind of established Liverpool theatres?

MS: To begin with yes, it attracted a slightly snobbish audience because it was the latest thing. It was only... By that time there was a great need for the Everyman, there was a need for a working class theatre for working class people, this was a Victorian theatre, completely refurbished, doing ex-West End plays and bringing in people like Orson Welles to do Sunday nights and things like that, so it was very prestigious.

KH: I was also really interested in slightly later in 1962, when you were working with the repertory players and producing new plays for single Sunday night performances?

MS: I think that brings us back to a very good topic, which is the way that plays were discovered before television. And we have to go back to this watershed of before television, because everything changed with television. It opened up so many

opportunities, and in that time if you put a play on in the West End it had got to run for a year. And then you got actors who never went out of the West End and they stayed around for a part in the next West End play, usually very much in the same idiom. If you weren't doing Shaw or Chekhov or Ibsen revivals, you were doing smart new plays. You've had Frith Banbury here talking about H.M. Tennent plays and things like that, very establishment. Sometimes very adventurous, because Tennent's had this as it were non-commercial stream where they could bring in Anouilh and things like that and get them translated by Christopher Fry. But you would get actors in the West End for a year, bored out of their mind, eight performances a week, nothing to do during the day. And the repertory players called on this wonderful pool of actors to read new plays: any play submitted got read, whether it came from an agent or whether it came direct to the repertory players - they were looking for new plays to give a one night performance, and the policy was to actually stage the play as well as they could for one performance in one of the theatres. And the theatre managers very kindly donated the use of their theatre for one performance, and it even reached a point where the set was demolished for the play and a set was brought in on the Sunday morning, put up, performed in the theatre and by Monday evening you were back running your own show. You didn't change the lighting but you could... it was nice to go to a theatre that had a flexible set, or several sets which meant, one, the stage was cleared. I directed plays at the Queen's Theatre, at the Comedy Theatre, at Wyndham's Theatre and they were all... you know. One was during the Brendan Behan play, *The Hostage*, it had a nice empty stage; at the Queen's, *Joyce Grenfell* was there; I can't remember what was at the Comedy, but I know we stripped a set and brought in just a few flats and you know, a rather stylised set for it.

KH: Where did these new plays that you were doing come from? Where did you...?

MS: We advertised in *The Stage*, the agents knew, the agents would occasionally not... if they thought there was a real chance of a play getting picked up by West End management they wouldn't let it. Sometimes even a management would come to us and say... Michael Codron would come and say 'Not sure about this one, if you want to give it a performance, if you want to give it an airing...' But then again, the agents were also hoping that one of the reps would do the play. But to get it done one performance with good actors in the West End, it was a very laudable enterprise. It began to die with television because there were so many places to send a new script that you really didn't want it shop-worn so you didn't... It was nice to get it read, I was on the play reading committee for a while and by that time it was beginning to not be economically possible to do it in a West End theatre. So it rather, it fizzled.

KH: It's interesting that the West End supported that, and the management supported that, it's very interesting.

MS: Yes, well, I think... as I said, a play read, a play read cold and a play performed are very, very different, so sometimes you think 'I wonder what this will be like, let's give it an airing', so... But new plays, you see there was also all the club theatres who were also looking for new plays to do as long as they were stageable. So there was a market for new plays. Unfortunately the establishment knew what the audience would pay good money to come and see and what they wouldn't. It would only come if there was a star and all this sort of thing.

KH: What kind of plays were you doing on the Sunday nights?

MS: I did a Bridget Boland play... well, Bridget had written several quite well known scripts but she'd got one, it was about Don Juan, so she couldn't get it staged. And it was quite a modern comedy, but set... it was quite a quirky play. A woman called Maise Mosco, who I did a play of hers which... and her agent was desperately trying to stop messing about writing plays and write novels, because she was writing, she wrote a very good series of quite successful novels about the Jewish immigrants to Manchester in the twenties and thirties which became very successful, but her play *The Happy Family* did eventually become the film *The Nanny* with Bette Davis. So you win some, you lose some. I did a very nice play about ghosts, but my main triumph there was to get two of the members of the cast of Richard Rodgers' musical at Her Majesty's to star in it, so I had High Hazel and Jeffrey Hutchins do a one night stand, you know, which was great.

KH: You also worked at Dundee repertory in the early sixties.

MS: Yes.

KH: Did you find that different to working in Scotland to working in England, in London, is there a...?

MS Well I am a Stewart so it's not that different! But I was very aware at the time when I first went to Dundee it was very Scots, and I responded very well to it. It was a very good prestige repertory company. Even when I was there, Tony Paige had just finished directing there and Nicol Williamson was there and I even had Brian Cox as an ASM. But you know, there were people, it was a place for up and coming people so it was well worth doing. Then Donald Sartain took it over, there was a fire...

KH: Oh! I've interviewed him as well.

MS: Have you? Good, good. Now there's a theatre person.

KH: He's a lovely man.

MS: And Donald, Donald was running because Donald took over Barrow in Furness later...

KH: Yes, he told me about that.

MS: And then Donald invited me to Dundee. I had been there in the Nickel Street theatre as stage manager and directing and Donald invited me back to direct where I did

several fun productions, quite memorable productions. One of them was exciting because we finished up - has anybody talked to you about Spotlight and the fact that they used to send people round to visit the reps on a sort of annual tour?

KH: No, people have... well not really, no.

MS: Good, well Spotlight was very, very good, and I am going to make a fool of myself now because I can't remember the man who was so, so good at going to repertory theatres and spotting young actors and then mentioning them to West End managements or people at better reps, he was very, very good at that. And I wish I could remember his name off the top of my head. But he came up, and he came in the interval and he said 'Is there a telephone, can I make call?' and I said 'Yes, use the office' and he said 'Well it's to America.' I said 'Fine.' The next thing we knew there were helicopters arriving, because there was a child in the show - she was a the wardrobe mistress' daughter - and she is the girl who played the child in Chitty Chitty Bang Bang the film, so he really, you know, he really...

KH: He was good at spotting them.

MS: He was a very good talent spotter.

KH: I think that takes me to the end of my questions.

MS: That covers it really, yes.

KH: But I don't know whether there is anything that you would like to mention that I've not covered.

MS: No I think, no I think that's, I am very interested in the project because I hope and I am assuming that eventually it will become word-searchable, will it?

KH: We are indexing it over the summer, yes.

MS: I think, you see that will be so good because you've had so many people who have got so much to offer and I think there might, God knows there are enough people to offer who talk too much but it may be that you could steer people back to some of the people, because you see suddenly when you get somebody like Frith Banbury, when you get somebody, even like David Kirk who can tell you about a whole area of theatre that other people can't, that's where the historians really need to spot the gaps.

KH: Yes definitely, definitely.

MS: In their training as it were. And you know the eyes light up when something is mentioned like that. I like the continuity of the theatre because there are always old people and young people learning from them. I was lucky because I worked with a stage manager who had staged Noel Coward's Cavalcade and all the big spectacular revues, so Danny O'Neill was by that time almost blind and I went in to one show with Danny - you know, to look after him - because he was so well liked. But of course, every night after the show, somebody came to the stage door to see Danny and it was a legend. Because it was people I thought were dead some of them, but at the same time there they were and they still continued - it's like the opportunity to work with Jessie Matthews, you were working with people from a different era! And it still works. It was lovely, and just before she died I met Gretchen Franklyn who had been having all that wonderful time in Eastenders and I said, 'Gretchen, my first memory of you is of Boy Babe at the Leicester Opera House in pantomime when I was...' She said 'Shut your mouth!', she said. Let's leave it there shall we?

KH: I think there was actually one question that I meant to ask you that I have not asked you. Just kind of whether you, because historically speaking academics and researchers have kind of looked at it and that period and sort of said 'Oh, The Royal Court, oh, Laurence Olivier!' Did you have that sense at the time or was it kind of much broader for you?

MS: Well there were other periods at the time because the Saint-Denis period at the Old Vic was a big period, you know. The Royal Court new plays policy was enormously important, and I think the connections are much looser than historians think - they are much more comfortable if they can find pigeonholes, but while Pinter and N.F. Simpson and Osborne and [pause] other names disappear at the moment, but while they were doing new plays at The National - and of course Wesker is completely ignored at the moment, mainly because of his politics - but at that time Pinter and N.F. Simpson were writing sketches for revues. Because there was a lot of theatre intellectualism which strayed - you get it better now in television because you get Bird and Fortune and things like that and you realise that light entertainment doesn't have to be totally idiotic. So it was wonderful that Bamber Gascoine and people like that were writing revues, sketches for Michael Codron's revues, and also we have not talked about the fact that somebody can go so out of fashion, like Noel Coward.

KH: And then come back into fashion...

MS: Twenty five years in the wilderness, a laughing stock.

KH: It's the same with Terence Rattigan as well.

MS: Very much so, well, I think that history doesn't repeat itself, but my goodness you know, we sometimes learn from what we've thrown out with the bath water.

KH: That's great, thanks very much.

MS: OK, good.