

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

<http://sounds.bl.uk>

Anthony (A.C.H.) Smith – interview transcript

Interviewer: Jamie Andrews

04 August 2006

Playwright. Acting; Samuel Beckett; Bristol Little Theatre; Bristol Old Vic theatre school; critics; T.S. Eliot; Endgame; Ernest Hemingway; influences upon his writing; Look Back in Anger; musicals; pantomime; Harold Pinter; programmes; Royal Shakespeare Company; Tom Stoppard; theatre-going; Universities' Poetry; Waiting for Godot; Western Daily Press arts page; Charles Wood.

JA: By my calculations, in 1945 you'd have been ten years old, so can you just talk about the first ten years of this project's timeframe in terms of the place of theatre in your childhood, whether you used to go to the theatre a lot, if so who encouraged you, that kind of thing.

AS: When my dad came home from the war in '46, he would occasionally take me to the theatre. He was a very working class man but he was part of that generation, he was born in 1898, he was born in that generation that had a notion of self-improvement, and for instance at home we had a complete set of Dickens. Now, I can't swear my dad had read all or indeed any of it, but... and we had a bit of Beethoven on old 78s and some Schubert and stuff like that, and the theatre was part of that - there was a notion among people of his generation that although they themselves hadn't had any kind of education into it, they didn't have any help in finding their way, there was something out there that was worth getting hold of if you could, and I think my dad probably had that about the theatre as well. He'd occasionally take me, never to what you or I might call serious theatre now, if indeed it was available then, I couldn't tell you, but he'd certainly occasionally take me to a pantomime, which has remained with me - the last play I did I was trying to incorporate certain elements of pantomime. The other thing was musicals, I remember he took me to see Oklahoma - there must be others I've forgotten - this in the West End and presumably not cheap, I mean... he didn't earn much, my dad, but he must have made the effort to take me because he certainly wouldn't have had in mind, oh, I might myself work in the theatre. He had no ambitions of that sort, and indeed when, a bit later on, the time came for me to choose whether I was going to be a little artist or a little scientist/mathematician - because I was quite good at maths, I could have gone that way - he would have preferred me to be, you know, the scientific side because he could see how one might get a job there, but I - by that time - knew that my inclinations were on the arts side, the languages side.

JA: That's interesting, the way you were talking about it, you were talking about pantomime, musicals, what we might think of as mere entertainment or on the

entertainment level, but he was definitely wanting to take you with a kind of educational improving, if you like, purpose in mind?

AS: Yes, it certainly... I never asked him, and he's not here now to ask, but I'm pretty sure he wasn't taking me merely, 'Oh, this'll be an enjoyable night out for little Tony' - which was my family name. Of course, that would have been part of it but he would have dragged me to all sorts of other stuff had it been merely a question of finding an entertaining night out. He took me to things which - somehow he could reach a judgment - were worth going to, and I'm grateful, not only because we're all grateful for what our parents did for us, but particularly - of course I didn't know at the time, I was too little, but I'm grateful now to have some grasp of the way musicals work and particularly the way pantomimes work, because I find them feeding back now. I said just now - it didn't really work because the director didn't really get hold of it - but the last play I did, I had a talking rat and a talking cat on stage, and I would never have had them if it weren't for the tradition in this country of pantomime.

JA: Can you remember how often you used to go as a child?

AS: Not very...

JA: Does it stand out as being a treat?

AS: Oh yes, it was definitely a treat, because it would have cost more, but he took me to the pictures every week, every Friday evening we went to the local Odeon and saw whatever was on, and we also - I don't know whether he encouraged me to do so, but I used to listen to drama on the radio. I remember - it's very hard to put an age on this but I would have been early teens, so let's say it would have been about 1948 or thereabouts - I remember on my own finding a play on the radio, I can't tell you who it was by but it was probably someone like Strindberg, and deciding - I don't know for what reasons, maybe something in the Radio Times - that this play I really needed to listen to, and not understanding a word of it, but nevertheless being terribly impressed that such things could exist, even though I had no idea what was going on, but there was a level of seriousness there that impressed me, as I say, and later on obviously I began to find out more and understand more about such stuff.

JA: While you were still, let's say before you did your National Service, so while you were still in your teens but when you were slightly older, did you take the opportunity by yourself to go and seek out more experimental or challenging theatre in London?

AS: Yes, I was very lucky in that at school later on, in my sixth form time, the way my school course worked was a bit experimental: I jumped from the fourth year straight into the sixth form, so I had three years in the sixth form, which was a bit of luck in itself. The way it worked is I happened to fall in with a bunch of mates at school who had arty interests, and that was absolutely along the grain for me. Until then I hadn't really had any friends like that. I mean, I'd had friends like most boys do who, you know - we'd go to football and I've always played cricket and our shared interests were sport. Fine, I still

have that interest and I've got nothing against it, but it wasn't until I was about... I would have been 15 going into the sixth form, that I started going out with friends who knew more than I did about what was going on in theatre and music as well - music was always important. And with them I'd start to go to... I remember there was a little theatre - it can't have been there for decades now - in Knightsbridge called the Torch Theatre, which seated about 50, I should think, and I remember going with my friends from school to the Torch Theatre and it was a double bill, I can't remember what the first half was, the second half was Salome, Oscar Wilde. So by that time, 15, 16, I was already with their help, with their collusion, beginning to seek out stuff for myself, I was trying to find out what I enjoyed.

JA: This may be difficult to remember, but do you recall if this group who used to go to theatre and helped each other discover more challenging work was seen as unusual, that you weren't just purely into sports?

AS: No.

JA: Was it kind of a self-definition, or was it perfectly natural?

AS: There was never a moment at school of the sort that one could imagine from having read novels and plays where, you know, we were the arty bunch.

JA: That's what I was getting at, yes.

AS: I had the impression there were probably other people doing something similar, I just didn't happen to know them - they weren't my mates, you know. The ethos... It was a good grammar school in Hampton (it's Hampton Grammar School in Middlesex) and the ethos there - and I assume at other grammar schools around the country, like Bristol Grammar School - was that if arty was what your interests were, then that was fine, nobody was going to give you a hard time over that or tease you. So it was perfectly natural for us to follow this interest. Through that, then you start slowly to meet other people; one of my other friends at school, his cousin, I think, woman cousin, was an actress and so one had a first whiff of the profession. I can't say now that it gave me a taste of it at the time, you know, 'I must do that!', but it just created an environment in which it was natural. There is theatre in the world and there are people who are professional actors in the world, as there are musicians, I'd meet one or two of those and so forth. I just began to get a sense of how the arty world worked and 'maybe I can be part of all this'.

JA: So from the arty world, in 1953 or so you did two years of obligatory National Service. You were saying earlier that you could have possibly gotten out of it but you chose positively to go.

AS: Yes, we were given the choice, it was '54 to '56, I was in the Air Force. We were given the choice, we could have said, 'no, no, I must go to university first'. I forget why,

maybe I was advised by, say, a schoolteacher to do it first but if I was advised or if it was my choice, I'm glad I did, because although if I'd made the other choice and gone to university, by the time I'd finished I wouldn't any longer have had to do National Service because it had been phased out, nevertheless, I'm glad it happened the way it did because I learnt an awful lot during those two years in the Air Force. Time spent actually serving Her Majesty's Interests amounted to... I was a clerk in Oxfordshire, RAF Bicester, time per day spent serving her interests would have amounted to a maximum of 20 minutes in the office.

JA: Twenty minutes a day?

AS: Yes, writing a few things in ledgers. The rest of the time I was reading poetry, because I'd got really interested in poetry by then. Sorry, just a flashback, I was in the school library on my own and I was doing French, Spanish and Latin at A-level, most of these friends I was running around with were doing English and they were talking about this guy called T. S. Eliot in a way that made we think, 'What on earth?', you know, I knew nothing about that, and so in a free period in the school library I looked along the shelves and took down this book, I think it was *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, that edition by TS Eliot, and it fell open at Prufrock and I read, 'I should have been a pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas' and I just thought, my world changed in that moment, I did not know that such things were written or could be written. Of course again, I didn't understand it, I'm not entirely 100% confident to this day I entirely understand what old Eliot is on about, I just knew it was thrilling that such stuff could be written and published and read by people like me. I think it was that moment that I thought, I really want to have a go at this, I started writing poetry. Of course it goes without saying it was rubbish, but you've got to get rid of the rubbish before you have a hope of writing something a bit better. So, by the time I was in the Air Force I was well launched on my own vision of myself as a poet, and given that I had effectively nothing to do all day sitting at a desk, and nobody told me off... it wasn't like at school where people come around and say, 'get on with your work', because there wasn't any work to get on with. I'd sit there reading my way through modern poetry, getting to know people like Eliot and MacNiece and Auden, all those people very well, and attempting to try and write something to go alongside them. Of course, it was not possible for a long time. So, I was grateful for that. I was grateful simply to be two years older by the time I went to Cambridge, because I was very wet when I left school. I'd already done things I've told you about, I'd started going to the theatre and so forth, but I think emotionally I was very immature. I never had a mother, she died before I remember her and that probably set me back emotionally a bit, I think, and my dad was away in the war, so I was brought up by an auntie and uncle, mostly. So, being two years older was useful to me. The third thing was, again in the Air Force I had the same luck as I'd had at school, I fell in with a gang of three blokes, really, I can remember them quite well, and we'd sit around chain-smoking, listening to Brahms, and Sibelius, I remember, and then we became prommers because every week, we were only in Oxfordshire so we could be back home in London, I lived in London then.

JA: You were allowed home for the weekends?

AS: Yes, you had a 36 hour weekend, that's Saturday lunchtime every weekend, and a 48 hour weekend, that's Friday evening, every fourth weekend, so I was back home in

London every weekend. So, we'd be there at the proms, thinking how bohemian we were and again, I look back with... I try not to feel fond contempt, I try just to feel fondness for my younger self, finding his way into music in this case, but also theatre and the other things. And it didn't half help, both at school and then in the Air Force, that I had a gang of mates who were doing the same, finding their way into those things.

JA: And did you say that you did some acting where you were involved in putting on some productions?

AS: Oh yes, at school. I acted in school plays all the way through school. I remember my first stage appearance, I was eight, at my primary school and indeed I can remember my opening lines, 'I am the King of Strand on the Green, the fairest kingdom you ever have seen.' [laughs]

JA: Sounds promising.

AS: [laughs] I remember at my primary school they asked me to write a play, I don't know why, and I failed to, it was very embarrassing, we had nothing ready for when the day came, and we were expected to do this play, and I'd done nothing – I mean, that's another story. But... I don't know why the teacher saw in me somebody who might write a play, but clever old her! Yes, then at my grammar school I acted. Actually, my most vivid memory of that is playing the female lead in the Scottish tragedy; I'm superstitious enough to put it that way. By this time I was in the lower sixth, I was there a year early, but my voice still hadn't broken. I've always been a late developer in almost everything and that was one of them, I still had quite a high voice when I was 16 and so that's why I got to play that part. We were in some kind of competition, so there was an adjudication which took place not after the show in the evening but the following morning after school assembly, so we were all there, 700 of us sitting and I was up in the gallery with my mates who'd started to shave, and the adjudicator was very kind about my performance and then said that it was 'all the more impressive coming as it clearly did from a boy junior in the school' - and I was in the lower sixth! Of course, any praise he'd given me was entirely rubbed out by my mates saying, [aggressively mocking voice] 'Yaaah! Junior in the school, ha, ha!'. So yes, and then in the Air Force, [laughing] because we had more or less nothing else to do, there was a very thriving am dram group on RAF Bicester and I went straight into that and they were mostly See How they Run, stuff by Philip King, I think his name was, that kind of...

JA: Which is back in London at the moment, actually.

AS: Is it? They were that broad, farce, stuff, but...

JA: Was this just to your fellow Air Force colleagues, or was it to local inhabitants as well, your audience?

AS: I think local people probably were invited in, I cannot remember who the audience was. It would have been the station of course. It was a curious place, RAF Bicester, because it was headquarters of Maintenance Command, which meant there was... I think there were more officers than men. Which is one reason why we men had almost nothing to do, because on a station... Other stations I've heard of where you'd have one officer to a thousand men, the men had to work hard and would be on parade all the time to keep them in line, but in our case it was a station run for the benefit of the top brass running Maintenance Command, and so we never had parades or anything like that. I don't remember if I cleaned my uniform for the last year of my time in the Air Force! It was unbelievably slap-dash, but very enjoyable in a funny way. So we did these plays – what was I going to say – I think the officers probably came. One reason why it was, it was quite... as an am dram goes it wasn't a bad company, we had a very good education officer, he'd just finished at Oxford himself, he was called Bryn Jones and he ran the group and directed it, and I think he knew what he was doing. I mean, he'd already done his three years at Oxford and got a degree in English, and perhaps he'd had some experience in his own life, I don't know, in the theatre, so we were in good hands, I mean somebody who... Although we were doing crap plays, we were doing them in an adequately am dram way because he knew how to do that. He was a very bright bloke, he took me, in 1955 or '6 - '6 I think - I got quite matey with him. We had to be careful because he was an officer and I wasn't, but he said, 'It's the induction of the new professor of poetry at Oxford today, W.H.Auden, do you want to come?' I said, 'yes'. So I had to be in uniform - those were the rules, he was in civvies, I had to be in uniform - the two of us went down, and because he had whatever the Welsh for chutzpah is, he marched into the... I think it was the Sheldonian, I don't know Oxford that well, and we marched up to the fourth row from the front because he'd seen some seats there and I remember we were surrounded by Cecil Day Lewis, Jill Starkey – you're a French scholar, aren't you, she was the great Baudelaire lady, in my generation anyway – and Lord David Cecil. They were sitting just behind us, I remember, talking, and I was sitting there in my RAF sproggy uniform, but nobody batted an eyelid and then in came Auden in carpet slippers, he'd got something wrong with his feet and he shuffled in his slippers up to the rostrum and gave this inspiring talk. Sorry, this is not to do with – well, Auden did have to do with theatre so yes, alright, we're not entirely off the subject! Anyway, that was Bryn Jones, and I think that was another piece of luck that I encountered a bloke like him on my station who took a shine to me and good things happened as a result.

JA: Around this time there were a number of first performances that we look back on now as milestones, so you can say that '55 was *Godot*, then the year after, '56, was *Look Back in Anger*. At this time, then, you would have been still doing your National Service, but were you following the broader theatre scene, and in terms of *Godot*, given that your interest was very much in French literature, were you aware of the Paris performance in '54, had you heard about it before it came to London?

AS: No, hadn't heard about it before it came to London, but I was there at that little theatre on Piccadilly Circus. I remember... I'm not sure I've ever been to it since, but it was a strange theatre, it was like a Turkish bath, it was tiled, the corridors there were tiled, I remember that. I went with friends, I can't offhand tell you whether it was my bunch of friends from school or my bunch of friends from the Air Force but I went with three or four other people to see it because we'd read about it. I enjoyed it very much, and I have a vivid memory of the conversation afterwards, which was immediately, 'what does *Godot* stand for?', 'what is *Godot* a symbol of?', which was a very

characteristic conversation, certainly of that period and quite probably of any young people in their teens to talk about it in that way. I'm pleased with myself that I remember thinking - and probably saying - 'that's not the right question, all he stands for is what we are waiting for or what Didi and Gogo are waiting for on the stage. That which is waited for, that which is...' you know. I don't myself, I remember thinking and perhaps saying, I don't want to symbolise it more precisely than that, it's fate or all the other things you might come up with, because it's more interesting than that, it's just an abstract quantity, what we are waiting for. And I remember being highly entertained by it. Looking back, I can see that I was being entertained by it, to some extent, in the same tradition as the pantomimes that I'd gone to when I was a boy but I wasn't enough on the ball at the time to realise... to make that connection for myself. I can now, knowing the play much better.

JA: And you seem to have, the way you're describing it, it certainly didn't shock or faze you?

AS: No, on the contrary.

JA: Can you remember the reaction of any other audience members or was it that it was at that time at first it was quite a literary kind of group of people who would have come to it prepared, almost?

AS: Yes, it probably was to a large extent a self-selecting audience. I think I do remember, well among the friends I've quoted, afterwards, not people being offended by it or upset by it, but finding it very puzzling, as I guess it was, I mean, we weren't used to that kind of thing. But being puzzled by it, being willing to be puzzled by it. A lot of people would say, 'load of rubbish because I didn't understand it, because it's over my head, oh, very, very, clever' - you know, that kind of stuff. I don't remember that, I dare say it happened but I didn't myself hear anything of that sort at the... was it the Criterion - I forget which theatre it was - theatre, but I do remember people feeling very puzzled and I was, I can't pretend I wasn't, but I knew I'd so enjoyed it that puzzlement was something I was prepared to put up with as part of the price to pay for how much I'd enjoyed the evening, been entertained by it, made to laugh. You know this, but not everyone does, that one of the things about Beckett, especially his early plays, is they're very funny, there are great jokes in there and for some reason he's looked at as being a bit austere. Years later - are we in the period? Yes we are, we just get in the period - I was sent to interview Mr Beckett and I'll tell you about that when we get to it, this would have been '64.

JA: Talk about it now.

AS: All right, I'll go straight into it. In '64 I'd started working for the Royal Shakespeare Company doing programmes. Mike Kustow, who was a friend, he'd been a postgraduate here at Bristol Drama department, I got to know him, in '63 he started a new kind of programme at Stratford, I mean I think it was new for this country. It cost half a crown, which was a bit much in those days for a programme, but it was, it was a much... Mike, having done his time in France, probably had come across programmes of

that sort in France that we didn't have here, and we still seldom get here. If you buy a programme in most theatres nowadays, you get the cast list and the actors' biogs and some ads for ice cream. And Mike had... I think it was Mike, probably with some encouragement from Peter Hall and John Goodwin, who was the head of publications, had come up with this new kind of programme which contained real, serious background on whatever play it was you were going to see at Stratford. But Mike being Mike, after a year he'd had enough of that and wanted to pass it on, and I got asked, 'Would I like to do it?', and I needed the income at that time so I said 'yes', and for me it was a fabulous education in Shakespeare, because I hadn't done English beyond O-level and I didn't know much about Shakespeare, and in the course of ten years doing the programmes there I saw all the plays done at least once, some of them several times, and read all the critics and the stuff, and talked to actors and directors, and watched rehearsals, and it was probably the biggest bit of luck in my professional life.

JA: Before you get onto the Beckett specifically, can I just ask you a couple of questions about... Because it's very interesting about this particular role of preparing the programmes. First of all, you said it was half a crown to buy the programme, how would that relate to a ticket price, to put it in context?

AS: I can't remember, Jamie, but it felt a bit much. Let me give you a different answer, which was I would have expected to pay a shilling, i.e. 10p, for a theatre programme at any theatre in those days – sorry, 5p, I would have expected to pay, to put it in modern terms, 5p – and these were twelve and a half pence, so they were quite a lot more, but they were... it sounds vain, but it's not because I inherited it from Mike, they were well worth it. Peter Hall, and after him Trevor Nunn, thoroughly approved of and encouraged these programmes and I believe to this day they're a bit like that at Stratford, I don't get there much nowadays, but I hope they've maintained that tradition. And then later on, out of our period, I was doing a similar job for the National and they too had introduced that kind of programme and I know that that still goes on. So, that started in '64 and I was also doing a few programmes for the Aldwych and we were doing Endgame at the Aldwych, and I swear to you it was a joke, I didn't expect anyone to take me seriously, I said to my boss, John Goodwin at Stratford, I said, 'You ought to fly me over to... I can't go and interview Shakespeare, but I can go and ask Beckett, what would he like in the programme'. And bless them, they took it seriously and I was flown over to Paris with an appointment and spent two hours with Mr Beckett. It was two hours but it was obvious within five minutes that he was very shy of a young, English wannabe writer, and I'd taken a vow - which I kept - that I was not going to gush, I was not going to say, 'Gosh, Mr Beckett, I think you're wonderful' - I did, but I wasn't going to say that because I think, rightly, he wouldn't want me to. So, I was going to button my lip and respectfully listen to anything he wanted to say, but I hadn't counted on his being with me – I think with most people but with me - not at all garrulous, he wasn't going to make conversation. So, the outcome was some very long, green silences in which both of us pretended that we were thinking deeply about what the other one had just said, like, 'No I won't have a cup of tea, thank you.'! The only time we really got chatting was when, completely off the agenda, I asked him about cricket, because famously he's the only Nobel prize winner to appear in Wisden, and I've played cricket and loved cricket all my life - in fact I was reporting cricket for the Times at this time - so asked him about his memories of playing cricket for Trinity College Dublin, and he loved to talk about cricket.

JA: He opened up when he was talking about...

AS: The spectacularly Beckettian answer to the question, 'What do you want in the programme?' was, 'Nothing at all, the actors' names if you insist.' [laughs]

JA: So what did go in the programme as a result of that interview?

AS: Nothing at all, really. I think a brief note about the history of the play, the history of Endgame, which was a wonderful production by Donald McWhinnie. The night I saw it in the Aldwych I was in the company of six other people, the Aldwych was effectively empty, and it was a tragedy because it was McGowran and Magee, the two all-time classic Beckett actors, and it was a fabulous production, it was one of the highlights of my life, that evening in the theatre, highlight in the theatre I mean, and there were seven people in the Aldwych that night, in '64.

JA: This was part of the world theatre season?

AS: No, it was an independent RSC production, not part of Peter Daubeney's outfit. I'm glad I've remembered that, because that's the important part. We all know about the difference that Waiting for Godot made from 1955, and yet let us remember in humility that nine years later Endgame was playing to seven people in the Aldwych, so it wasn't like the entire country had had a renaissance of theatre in the avant garde theatre, no, and it was a great production, it was terrific.

JA: So from your memory the other, let's say at that time when Endgame was playing to seven people, can you remember the types of shows that would have been on around in the West End, was it still the traditional what we associate with the pre-'56, very conservative types of plays or can you still remember that it was a slightly different atmosphere? Did Endgame stick out, really?

AS: Yes, I think it did because the Aldwych stuck out as being the RSC's implant into the West End. I think anyone you ask that question, you'd have to say, well I'd have to go back and look at the papers to remind myself but my general impression is that despite Waiting For Godot and then Look Back In Anger and then Wesker and Edward Bond for me being particularly important, the West End hadn't changed that much and nor has it to this day, in fact, it seems there is not much I want to go and see, and I think it was like that then, but it's possible if I had the records I might say, oh no, actually there were four plays I might have wanted to see in the West End at that time, but I don't remember that to be the case.

JA: Going back a bit, you talked about the first production of Godot and you mentioned a year later there was Look Back In Anger. Can you remember how you first heard that this play Look Back In Anger was on, tell me how you were first aware of it?

AS: I don't have a sort of President Kennedy moment – indeed I don't have a President Kennedy moment about President Kennedy, I have no idea where I was when he was shot - I don't have a moment like that about Look Back In Anger. It may well have been Tynan, like most people, that very famous review, which we parodied as, I couldn't possibly fuck anyone who didn't adore Look Back In Anger. Or it might have been word of mouth. I read Tynan every week, we all did – I say 'we all', a ridiculously parochial way to put it – all the people I knew who were seriously interested in the arty scene generally, but particularly theatre, would read Tynan, and probably Hobson and the others but Tynan was unquestionably the leader of the pack, so it may have been reading that, but I think in my case it's more likely – when are we talking about, '56, I was still in the Air Force. I probably wasn't reading the Observer every week at that time, I did later, it was more likely word of mouth from someone, somehow the buzz went around and I found myself there seeing that production as well. Very lucky in our timing, my generation, I think, we were just the right age. I do remember quite consciously thinking to myself, I doubt whether I expressed the thought to anyone, that yes, but it's not Waiting for Godot. It would be a quite crude and misleading division to make, but if one had to divide the theatrical audience into the Beckett audience and the Osborne audience I knew I was in the Beckett audience at that time. I was more interested in what Beckett was trying to do than what Osborne did, but I'm not knocking Osborne. At the time, with phrases like 'angry young man' going around, I think it was misleadingly received, including by me. I don't think I got it right then. Looking back 50 years exactly, I can now see that it was in some ways a curiously reactionary play, it was a play about what we'd lost: not about the bad stuff we've got, but the old decencies and virtues. It was almost going back to an England invented by George Orwell. What excited me - what I know I enjoyed - was simply the words, as they had with Beckett as well. I became aware – well, I certainly am aware now – quite early on, I think, that what most excited me about the theatre was not what, say, might have excited Peter Nichols or Charles Wood, whom I got to know a bit later, because they both had a theatrical background, so I know Peter will talk about... he was aware, in a theatre, of the technicalities of what was going on; I wasn't, I didn't have that kind of background. What excited me was what happens when an actor comes on stage and says something, and most of the time not much happens but when something does happen it's a very exciting and mysterious thing. It leads you into that word 'presence' which in the end can only be... it's numinous, it can only be experienced, not defined, but there is something when it happens. And it can happen of course... for me it happened – going back again to my school days – in Olivier doing his film of Richard III, something extraordinary went on there, and I dare say for other people there were filmic things going on that were extremely interesting. For me it was the quality of voice, of him, and Richardson doing Buckingham. It was that amazing quality of voice that Olivier invented for Richard III. So, it was watching Kenneth Haigh, it was what happens when an actor comes on stage and says those words, those extraordinary words, amazing, vituperative rhetoric that I'd never heard and I suppose none of us had. To go back to my Eliot thing, when I was at school, I didn't know that such things could be written as that fragment from Prufrock. I didn't know that such words could be written and performed on stage as the words I heard Jimmy Porter saying from the stage of the Royal Court.

JA: You started off by saying that it wasn't the theatricality of the way that the production was put together, but it was the words and the way the words were delivered. Did that mean that you weren't so interested in trying to read all the texts of all the new plays that were being performed, that what counted for you was actually

seeing them, or did you also, in the same way you read up on poetry, did you read up on theatre texts?

AS: I didn't do much reading of theatre texts, but that's probably because I had - and to this day, and to my dying day, will always have an overwhelming sense of all that I haven't read. I keep *The Brothers Karamazov* unread as my touchstone for what, if I find myself doing a crossword I think, 'You idiot, you're doing a crossword and you haven't read *The Brothers Karamazov*'. So, I doubt whether I found much time for reading plays, but if I had done it would have been more simply for wanting to keep up, seeing what people were up to. I'm jumping forward a bit, by the early Sixties I knew that, although novels was what I was writing and wanted to write, knew that I had a niggling little interest in the theatre, and having seen what Beckett could write and what Osborne could write and a few other people, it would be nice to try, and you can find out what they're up to by reading their plays, but mostly for me it was an important question of getting there and seeing the performance because it was an event, it didn't exist on page, really. Stoppard, my mate all these 50 years, has said somewhere that when he's done his work, the play doesn't exist, it only exists when it's an event with everything that's been added to it since. So no, I was never an assiduous reader of plays, but of course I would read a few, especially if I couldn't get to see them, just read them to see what people are up to.

JA: Moving on a couple of years, we mentioned cricket loving Nobel prize winners, Pinter is someone who hasn't come up yet but who started here in Bristol in '57. Now, you weren't here in '57, were you, so can you remember whether you were aware of *The Room* or was it not until *The Birthday Party* that you'd heard of him?

AS: It was some years after I came to Bristol, because then I married a Bristol drama student and began to get friendly with certain people in the drama department, all the staff of the drama department, as I still am, above all George Brandt, whom I'm still friendly with, I'm glad to say, I saw him last week. They were justifiably very proud of their production record which included *The Room* in 1957 which was the world premiere of anything by Pinter. Jump forward a few years, it is the most bizarre but true coincidence that in that same converted squash court in the Wills Tower of the university, that Stoppard first had his words performed on the English stage. I'll tell you about that when we get there, we're talking about '65.

JA: So two years before Rosen...

AS: Cue me up in '65, Jamie, and I'll tell you how. He'd had something done in Germany which had been derided by a German audience. In that same little - it's not there anymore, you won't know it, but it was a converted squash court - and in there they'd done *The Room* before I came to Bristol and it was Stoppard in '65, but it was the drama department's own theatre, they've got the purpose built theatre now, and I saw stuff by Sartre done by the students and it was a godsend, really, because we wouldn't ever get to see what's on now in Paris, unless you were very lucky, but you got to see that kind of stuff being done in Bristol for tuppence ha'penny to get in, probably free, I don't remember. So, that was a vital element of theatre going for me and for quite a lot of us in Bristol.

JA: I'll come back to Bristol, because obviously it's a very important factor, in a minute, but just finishing with the late Fifties when you were at Cambridge University, I think I'm right in saying that in '58 *The Birthday Party* was put on there before it came to London, before it flopped in Hammersmith it was received quite well in Cambridge. When do you remember seeing that?

AS: I'm embarrassed to say I didn't know that until this moment. I saw it later. I don't remember it... I'm surprised, because it's the sort of thing I would have picked up on. I mean, I was quite self-consciously theatrical and poetical and literary and all that stuff by that time, and I would have... but I suppose – 'Pinter, who's he?' - it wouldn't have registered as a name. I mostly went to see ADC productions, students' productions at Cambridge and I was there... I won't say I was part of the generation, because I was following a different line, I was a poet, I was editing the university poetry magazine, but I was part of that generation of John Bird and Eleanor Bron and Margaret Drabble was an actress then - a rather good one - and a few other people like that. I think Jacobi and McKellen were there at the end, probably a year after me or something, and John Barton was still at King's and Peter Hall had just left. It was a hell of a time in Cambridge student theatre and I remember... for example, the only time in my life I've ever seen the Tennessee Williams play *Camino Real*. It's a very difficult play to catch and not actually that good, to be honest, but it's an amazing experiment by Williams and there it was, I think being directed by John Bird in the ADC and I was able to go and see it. This is in answer to your earlier question, I'd much rather go and see a production - even done by very good student actors - than sit and read it. I'd want the third, fourth, fifth, sixth dimensions that a production will give you. So I remember seeing that and doubtless other things I've forgotten. It was a good time to be at Cambridge and be interested in going to the theatre but no, I'm humiliated to say that I have no memory of *The Birthday Party*.

JA: I certainly wasn't trying to catch you out, but it's just interesting that...

AS: You did [laughing].

JA: Well, I know you've studied French and Spanish, I'm interested in the French, partly for personal reasons, but I guess from the end of the Second World War until about '55 the French theatre was so dominant in England and there was some very interesting writers; Sartre, Camus etc. Obviously you were aware of those writers because you've said that you saw plays by them, but was contemporary French theatre studied as part of your course.

AS: No – it might have been, I mean one had modules you could choose from, you had options and there may have been an option which would include... no, I doubt it very much, Jamie, very much. It was exceptionally old fashioned, the French curriculum at Cambridge. This wasn't true of the Spanish, looking back. Even at the time I was aware that I thought the Spanish course was a great deal better constructed and better taught than the French course. I wasn't at all happy with the way the French course was constructed. I don't remember that I came beyond Proust in terms of periods, I think

that was the most modern thing. I remember reading in Robert Graves's memoirs that I think Tennyson was as late as the English course at Oxford came in Graves's time; it was the equivalent in French. I doubt it but I can't be absolutely sure, somebody might tell me, 'Oh no, you missed it, you could have done Sartre, Camus, those people', but I don't think so. So no, educationally I had no experience of those people, it was a thing I found for myself.

JA: This is slightly off track, but you alluded to the fact that you were much more involved in poetry at university in terms of editing a magazine. Can you talk a little bit about that and the kind of people that you worked with and indeed that you found or discovered as part of that.

AS: Well yes, I can drop one colossal name but I have to use a few sentences to get there. I edited a magazine called Delta, which was a literary magazine but chiefly poetry - we had a few articles on prose fiction but mostly poetry. This led to my being invited to be one of the founder editors of a new venture - which got a bit of backing from the Arts Council - called Universities' Poetry, which was an annual anthology of the best student writing from across the country. One of the people we published in our first anthology was called Seamus Heaney, who I believe has written a few more since! Another enormous name I'll drop, I said we had something to do with prose fiction in Delta and I published a very good article by a man called Brian Way about the early novels of Hemingway, and it was so good I thought, 'Hemingway ought to read this', and I didn't know how to find out an address, so I just put it in an envelope, 'Ernest Hemingway, Cuba', and posted it. About four or five months later I was in Pamplona at the fiesta, and he was there - it was the first time he'd been there since 1933 - and the last time, this was '59, and I met a Mexican - you meet people all the time in a place like this, it's a mad place, Pamplona, during the fiesta - called Al Carlos and we were talking about Hemingway and he it was who told me it, he said, 'he's here'. I said, 'You're joking!'. He said, 'No, he's here, do you want to meet him?'. I said, 'You're joking!'. He said, 'No, I know him'. And he was one of the few Mexicans I've ever met who didn't lie - he knew Hemingway and introduced me to him. Why I tell you this story is that again it was a very lucky break for me, I was able to say to him, 'Did you get the magazine I sent you with an article in it?' and he'd got it a week before I met him, and that was lucky because he liked the article, as I expected he would, and so of course I was persona grata, and then he said, 'Sit down and have a drink', and I sat with him and had a drink for a while, and there were other people around the table, and of course there were an endless stream of kids coming up to him and he was polite, he saw himself as being sort of doing public relations on behalf of the Pamplona fiesta, so he wasn't going to be Hemingway-rude to people, but he was curt, he didn't want them to hang around, and I would have been in the same boat - 'How do you do, nice to meet you, bugger off', you know! - if it weren't for the fact that I was able to say, 'Did you get that copy?', 'Oh yes, sit down and have a drink'. So, a very lucky break to meet the great man. Sorry, where did this start from, oh yes, people I met and people I published. Yes, Seamus Heaney is the famous name from later on Universities' Poetry. Delta, there were some very good, serious people around Delta, both as my predecessors as editors, like Peter Redgrave, Chris Levenson, Philip Hobsbaum, these are all people who've made a certain reputation for themselves. The people I published, I don't remember now that there were any names which would ring big bells in 2006. There may have been and I apologise if I've forgotten people.

JA: The student journalism leads on, I guess, to the reason you came to Bristol, which was your first job after university.

AS: That's right, I'd been arts editor of Varsity, which was the Cambridge University newspaper, and fallen in love with the whole business of newspapers, so when the question arose, 'What am I going to do for a living?', newspapers was something that I was really interested in, and I got myself a job here in Bristol because I had a girlfriend here. It seemed easy in those days; if my girlfriend had been working at a hospital in Stoke-on-Trent I think I probably would have gotten myself a job in... You know, maybe I'm wrong, but it didn't seem so hard then as I'm sure it would be now. So I got myself a job here in Bristol and the girlfriend lasted six months but Bristol has lasted ever since, I still love this city and wouldn't leave it.

JA: I know you were arts editor, but did you start off in the arts section or did you start off just as a junior reporter here?

AS: There wasn't an arts section. It was invented. I'd been here nearly a year, I'd been working for the Evening Post which then incorporated the Western Daily Press morning paper.

JA: So for the interview, we're talking 1960?

AS: I came to Bristol in January 1960, the first month of the Sixties. It was the end of 1960, December, in fact, that Richard Hawkins, who was the editorial director of the outfit, who himself was a composer and he didn't really want to be a journalist, it was his family made him because it was the family firm. It was a time when the posh papers in London, the Observer, the Sunday Times, people like that, had started really to blossom in terms of arts coverage. Until then, even in the days of Tynan's review and Look Back In Anger, it was a fairly constricted section, it wasn't like now where it's everywhere, but by 1960 the posh London papers had started to realise that there was, to put it crudely, a consumer interest in the arts and they were giving more space and employing better people to write that stuff, and Richard felt, well, why shouldn't the Western Daily Press, the morning paper of the group, have this once a week. So, he decided to have a weekly arts page and asked me if I'd edit it. I didn't need asking twice. I'd been doing other kinds of journalistic work until then, but that then became 90% of my work on the paper. The downside for me was that once I'd said 'yes' ('please!'), he said, 'When you're thinking about what you're going to do on the page, I'd like you to give plenty of work to a young local freelance you might have met called Stoppard'. I'd met Stoppard once and my heart sank because I knew he was a provincial jerk. I rang him and through gritted teeth said, 'Mr Hawkins said, 'we're starting an arts page' and you might like to contribute occasionally'. And Tom answered, 'Yes, he'd like to kick off that very week with a piece on the new wave, the nouvelle vague'. I remember thinking, 'I'm going to have my work cut out subbing that into some kind of shape when it comes in', and when it came in it was wonderful, I didn't change a word and we became - he was my best man when I got married a few years later, and we spent most of our time together for three or four years and are still to this day very good friends - enormous slice of luck! That of course had its effect on me and theatre. I was already, from what we've been talking about, I was already interested; Tom was

obsessed. Tom, like me, wanted to write novels and he did write one called *Lord Malquist and Mr Moon* - which I think he'd prefer the world to forget! - but he was matey with Peter O'Toole, who'd been acting here at the Bristol Old Vic, and he was down at the Old Vic, he was reviewing the Old Vic plays all the time and he was pretty much in love with the theatre already and coming soon to the point where he knew that's where he wanted to go. As I say, I saw myself as a novelist with an interest in the theatre, with maybe a contribution to make to it, but it took a long time before that came about. Tom was right there and so of course spending virtually all our lives together and writing stuff in the arts page about it, now we were really picking up. Pinter came to Bristol University to do a conference and Tom was there and we were in on that and Mike Kustow was here and Geoffrey Reeves, and Kustow was on about Max Frisch and we were doing stuff in the arts page about that and we'd really taken off, and I hope some of the readers enjoyed going there with us because we suddenly had our own playpen that we could play in, it was my page.

JA: Did you get much reader feedback, did people write letters?

AS: Quite a bit.

JA: Were people shocked by this new page or did they...

AS: The best answer is the bottom line accountant's answer, which was the circulation was up 2,000 every Monday, and there was no other reason in the Monday paper - it wasn't the fatstock prices, that was the only difference in the Monday paper from the rest of the week! - and we put 2,000 on a circulation which was quite low at that time, it was probably about 20,000, it was a 10% increase. Later the circulation went up and then the editor - not the editorial director, Richard Hawkins, but the paper's editor was a man called Eric Price, known to Tom and me as Eric Prick, who hated the arts page, he was ex-Daily Express and a total philistine. Once the circulation got high enough he was powerful enough to kill off the arts page, but he didn't have the power to do that in the early days, so the arts page ran for something over three years, and Tom was here until September '62 and we were in effect joint editors of it. I was the one who was paid, but we made sure Tom got lots of stuff in the page and was paid fees for everything that he wrote. Tom had a better visual sense than I have, so he used to help a lot with layout, he loved coming up with snazzy ways of laying out this broadsheet page, it was a big page so you had lots of scope for layout, and he was writing stuff as Tom Stoppard and sometimes we wanted another piece by him in, so a piece by Tomik Straussler would appear, earnest students of the Western Daily Press in 1961/2 will find Tomik Straussler and they will know who he is. I had a pseudonym as well, Charles Hockley. Tom and I hit it off just like that, the only thing he didn't like about me was that I'd met Ernest Hemingway, he was so jealous, but apart from that we were in each other's pockets. I mean, Beckett had Joyce, I think it really helps to have someone around who is keen and enthusiastic and in Tom's case very sharp and insightful into what's going on. It's a great piece of luck for any writer, I think, and I guess most writers find it in some way; I mean, Hemingway had Scott Fitzgerald. We're talking about different kinds of relationships but they're there and there is a little element of emulation, but at least in the case of Tom and me, very little of that. I knew from the start, a) I thought he was a terrific writer, and b) he was a different writer from what I wanted to do, and he would have certainly said the same about me, so I don't think emulation entered into it, really.

JA: I was wondering whether there was any rivalry in terms of the fact you only had one page a week, in terms of whose articles got in?

AS: No, we were totally on each other's side, we were just very keen on our thing. We were really proud of that arts page and 2,000 a week, as I say, it put on, and yes, we got feedback, enough people around the town would talk to us about it to give us the feeling that on the whole it was a good thing that we were doing.

JA: And at the same time you were both, I guess, writing prose fiction. You said that Stoppard wrote a novel at that time, your focus was very much the novel, but something I want to pick you up on - in 1965 you said Stoppard actually had this first play, his first English play preformed.

AS: Yes, by this time he was living in London but he was back in Bristol a great deal and together we'd done a BBC TV series with John Boorman called *The Newcomers*, Alison, my wife, and I and Tom had played important parts in that, so Tom was back in Bristol a lot, in touch, and I can't remember why, Charles Wood was still around, Peter Nichols, I think he'd just left Bristol but he was a Bristolian, he was in touch and we knew them both. There was a one act play by Charles Wood called *Tie up the Ballcock*, which was a parody of defence instructions in the event of a hydrogen bomb falling. Tom, I knew, had got a one act play, a two hander called *The Gamblers*, which hadn't been done and I think there was at that point no immediate prospect of it being done, and I knew that I wanted to try my hand at writing for actors, and somehow the imp entered into me to in effect be a producer and I was quite friendly with people at the Old Vic school, especially Alan Dossor, who is still around as a director, and with Alan and actors from the Old Vic school, and somebody's permission from the drama department, we used that famous ex-squash court theatre we've already mentioned to put on an evening called *The Black Man* and it consisted of *Tie Up The Ballcock* by Charles Wood, *The Gamblers* by Tom Stoppard and some stuff by me called *The Black Man* but it wasn't a play in my case, I mean the other two were plays, mine was a kind of collection of wannabe pieces that were sort of trying to find their way towards being plays. You can forget my contribution except that I got the event on, but that was the first time Tom had ever sat in an audience in England and heard his words being said on stage.

JA: So just a one evening, one-off performance, was it?

AS: I think it was probably three evenings, I can't be certain but my memory is I think it was more than one, anyway, two or three evenings. It had some good people in, Jane Lapotaire was a student here and Jeremy Childs, who is still around the profession, Bill Stewart, these are names that have endured in the profession. And we... as I remember, it wasn't a commercial proposition of course but as I remember we did okay in audiences, there probably still is and there was a good theatre going audience in Bristol for that kind of experimental stuff by people nobody had ever heard of at that time.

JA: It sounds from what you're saying you had plays on with Wood and Stoppard and you've mentioned Peter Nichols, it seems like this whole mass of young writers who were around Bristol at the beginning of the Sixties, you all were connected. Looking back it seems like a scene, would you describe it as that or would you describe it as people naturally colliding because you all had the same interests?

AS: It wasn't a scene, because apart from the arts page - which was a very important exception - there wasn't a public scene. We didn't have a theatre where we could get our stuff on. The Bristol Old Vic then, as sadly now, wasn't at all interested in new work.

JA: Was the Little Theatre around?

AS: The Little was, but that was run by a separate company called The Rapier Players who were a nice company and had some good people acting for them, but they weren't at all cutting edge, new stuff, they were doing standard repertory theatre. So the student theatre - it had a name I expect, but I can't remember, let's call it the squash court theatre - was really the only venue where you had any hope of getting new work on at that time. There was the arts centre, that had been started in '61, I think it was, or '62. Charles Wood was one of the people behind starting that theatre, but that didn't, as I remember, do new plays. It did interesting work, I remember them doing an Edward Bond there and people like that, but I don't think it did new work. So, the scene existed only in a social sense, that we knew each other. Somehow, I can't remember how - well, I do remember how, Charles Wood was working for the Evening Post as well, except that he was using his talents as an artist to do little drawings for what are called 'display ads'. If you want to advertise, 'Jamie Andrews will mend your shoes', and take a one square inch box in the paper, you might want a picture of a shoe, or a cobbler or something, and Charles was your man to do a little drawing for you and that would slot in. Unbelievable, isn't it. I mean, let me say now in case we don't get to the point where I say it, I think Charles is the best writer of his - i.e. my - generation who is not a household name, i.e. he's not Pinter, he's not Stoppard, he's not even Peter Nichols, really, his great mate, they were each other's great mates. I think he's a fabulous writer, wonderful writer, Charles, in a totally undisciplined way - he needs tough directors because he can't, you know...

JA: In the early sixties am I correct in saying that out of all this group he was the person whose profile was highest initially? I'm mainly maybe thinking of, he did film work, didn't he, that must have been...

AS: Had he done film work by then? I'm not sure he'd done it by then. Later he did Charge of the Light Brigade for Dick Lester and famously on television in the Eighties he did Tumbledown after the Falklands War. And he had a play at the National, H, directed by Geoffrey Reeves, who was ex-Bristol. He had Veterans, I think it was called, at the Royal Court with Gielgud, but I don't think in the early sixties that we're talking about, I don't think Charles had much of a profile. But in '67, which is conveniently within our dates - just! - I've already said that McWhinnie's production of Endgame at the Aldwych in '64 was one of the great moments of my theatre-going life. So was Geoffrey Reeves's production of Dingo by Charles Wood at the Arts Centre - so I'm wrong in saying they didn't do new plays, here was a new play being done at the Arts Centre by Charles

Wood - with Tom Kempinski, who later became a film producer but he was an actor then, a very good actor. Tom Kempinski and Henry Woolf, who has mostly been based in Canada all his life but he was in that original production of *The Room* in '57, Henry was back in Bristol, I don't know why, for Geoffrey Reeves's production of *Dingo*, and *Dingo* at the Arts Centre in 1967, it transferred to the Court and I saw it but it somehow didn't work as well in a biggish London theatre; in that little arts centre it was sensational, it was tremendous. That was the moment when I decided Charles Wood is one of the greatest writers of my generation and of course he's known within the profession and he's paid his wages by film work and he's done excellent stuff on television, like two series of *Don't Forget To Write*, directed by Alan Dossor, who'd done that thing of his all those years ago. But you have to tell people who Charles Wood is, you don't have to tell people who Pinter or Stoppard are, and I doubt if you have to tell people who Peter Nichols is, really, although his work isn't done as much as it used to be, still he's a known name and people know the kind of stuff he writes. Charles doesn't, I think, have that kind of imprint and it's a great shame because I think he's the most naturally gifted, he's a kind of primitive writer in the sense of primitive painters. He's just got genius gushing out of his pores and it's never been properly trained or disciplined by him but it's always there, every time he writes.

JA: I'd like to ask one more question about Bristol because we have touched on the RSC work earlier, and I really want to know if I'm correct then, because it seems that there was all sorts of theatrical inspiration bubbling in the Sixties in Bristol, all sorts of writers who would later go on to work all over the world, but apart from your saying the Arts Centre put on *Dingo*, it seems difficult for these local writers to actually have a forum to put on their work. I'm thinking that Peter Nichols had to go to Glasgow to get started and then London with *Joe Egg*; *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* didn't get on in Bristol, it had to be put on in London. It seems that whilst it was such a theatrical city and it was the first drama department in the country, all sorts of theatrical innovation going on, it seems somewhat that there wasn't a greater access to the new plays.

AS: I know, a huge opportunity was missed, and you could say is still being missed, sadly, probably you could say it will go on being missed. Somebody pointed out back in the Sixties that we have in this city the elements of what they had in Moscow. We have an excellent theatre school, we have a famous repertory theatre in the theatre world, and we have a university drama department. If the three of them would find a way of working together... I won't finish that sentence, I'll finish it with three dots! The fact is, they never really have. There is a certain amount of exchange and interchange, as far as I know they're not hostile to each other, but they've never been brought under the same banner and taken forward, and it could be terrific if they did, and that was true in Bristol in the 1960s. Val May was the director of the Bristol Old Vic from '62 to - I think - about '74, I will give him credit, he did one production I'll never forget and still admire, and admire his courage in doing it. He put on a new production of Erwin Piscator's legendary - from, I think, Berlin in the Thirties - stage adaptation of *War and Peace*, and this was a fascinating thing to see for at least historical reasons, but actually theatrically it was well worth seeing as well, it was a very impressive production. That really came from out of left field as far as Val May was concerned.

JA: I guess the one name we haven't mentioned is Brecht. Piscator and Brecht are obviously often associated, that didn't open up performances of Brecht in Bristol?

AS: No, except through the drama department you might... yes, I saw one or two things at the drama department which were by Brecht or about Brecht or something, but no, the Old Vic stuck to high quality standard rep stuff, a bit of Anouilh here and there, a bit of Iris Murdoch, that kind of thing. Nothing really theatrically cutting-edge going on there. So, the answer to that earlier question of yours is that they did, in 1963 I think it was, they did give Peter Nichols and Charles Wood a week each at the Little Theatre of one play by them. Charles's was Cockade, I forget what Peter's was.

JA: I think it was The Hooded Terror, wasn't it?

AS: The Hooded Terror, well done. And I think each of them played to about 30% and a little after that they had the opportunity of a world premiere of a play called Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead and they said it didn't fit with their production requirements, so all sorts of opportunities were there and missed.

JA: Well, we're going to have to stop there, I very much enjoyed that and I wish we could have gone on for longer, but unfortunately the tape is almost out so thank you very much for your time.

AS: Thank you, Jamie.