

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Graeme Cruickshank – interview transcript

Interviewer: Marie-Claire Wyatt

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Stage Manager and Actor. James Bolam; Richard Burnett's Penguin Players; Agatha Christie's plays; Carl Clopet; Company Manager's duties; Harry Corbett and Sooty; John Counsell; Cecily Courtneidge; Peter Haddon; Arthur Lane and Audrey Lupton; lighting; Ralph Lynn; Cameron Mackintosh; Mermaid Theatre; Oxford Playhouse; pantomime; Ron Pember; repertory repertoire; Clarkson Rose; Salad Days; stage managing; touring; A View from the Bridge; Wakefield Mystery Plays.

Mr Cruickshank brought his collection of programmes with him, and used these for reference throughout the interview.

MW: Well, you've said you wish to start with your experience as an actor in the 1950s.

GC: Yes, well, just to set the scene, in 1959, by which time, I was twenty... twenty-six. That can't be right. [laughs] I was 27. Lying already, you see! [laughs] I was working in London. I was, at the time, at Harmers, the stamp auctioneers in Bond Street.

MW: I see.

GC: They're now in Chiswick, but never mind. I'd been there about four years, and had worked my way up to the grand position of 'junior describer and valuer'. That had followed a period with the RAF. I was in Egypt with the RAF as an instrument mechanic, and during... I was there in the Canal Zone for about two and a half years. During that time, I made three or four very good friends, one of whom, Ron Pember, later became an actor and director, and he will come into my story as I go along a bit. I came back to England. I got working at Harmers, and during that time, I joined about, in the end, about four or five different amateur drama groups.

MW: I see.

GC: So I was rehearsing practically every night of the week with one group or another.

MW: Oh, good heavens!

GC: Arriving late to work, having long lunch hours and things, but it was an exciting time in London in the mid-fifties, with things like the English Stage Company starting up at the Royal Court, and all sorts of other things, and the air did seem to be vibrant with theatrical happenings. Anyway, eventually, it got to the point, in 1959, where my friend who I've just mentioned, Ron Pember, was actually working in Bexhill with Richard Burnett's Penguin Players, - weekly rep company. He knew that I really wanted to try my hand in the profession, and he got me an interview with Dickie Burnett. When I went down to see him, he actually, at that point, was in a play. They had another company at the Devonshire Park Theatre in Eastbourne, and I went to see a performance and then went to see Dickie after the performance, and he offered me a job to start, and I've got the programme here, the 5th of May, 1959, at the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill with the Penguin Players. Now, the set up... I never worked in subsidised rep, which I take to mean rep companies that had Arts Council support.

MW: I see.

GC: That's not to say that the commercial reps didn't have some form of subsidy in various instances. I know that Dickie Burnett's, he had several, three or four companies at various times, sometimes at the same time in different towns. At Bexhill, it was, he had a non-profit-making company. At Eastbourne, I think it was a bit more commercial, but I am sure that the local councils, to some extent, either gave him guarantees or some sort of advantageous terms. At the De La Warr Pavilion, I started off, as I say, on 5 May, in a rather farcical comedy called Navy at Sea by Ross Hutchinson, and I played my... My professional debut appearance was in a non-speaking role as a cook, a ship's cook. I had to run across the stage in one scene, tossing a pancake made of sheet rubber. And I was also billed, I notice, as... I wasn't down as stage management at that point, but I was acting as Assistant Stage Manager, and for that, for several weeks, I was there, working as an Assistant Stage Manager, and appearing in most of the plays, sometimes fairly big parts, but some of the things I remember about working there... Up to that point, I really hadn't done a lot of stage management, so I was learning on the job. I had no training for it, or no training as an actor, come to that, but I managed to get away with it for quite a few years. But working in weekly rep, I know that young actors nowadays can hardly believe that such a thing ever existed. As far as... Richard Burnett was an actor-manager, and [he and] his wife, Peggy Paige were the leads in the company at Bexhill, and, as I said, he had other companies in other places with General Managers looking after them. Now, what would happen on... I notice... Actually, I hadn't remembered, but I notice some of these productions opened on Tuesdays, but, normally, what would happen, you would open a play on Monday evening, and then, on Tuesday morning, you would block the next play. Now, one didn't get an awful lot of actual direction, and Dickie Burnett in particular... I have a feeling that if he thought he could get away with it, he would have called the company together on Tuesday morning, blocked the play, blocked all the moves etc, sorted out what was needed with the stage manager, the props and things, and then all go away and come back next Monday for the dress rehearsal. But he couldn't quite get away with that.

MW: [laughs] No, not quite!

GC: So, what one would do, Monday - Tuesday morning, rather, is block, if I remember right, block Act One - and most of the plays were three-act plays in those days. Obviously, things varied, depending on the structure of the play. If we were provided with French's Acting Editions, he would normally, and one or two other directors who worked for him, would normally just follow the directions as in the French's Acting Editions.

MW: I see.

GC: A lot of them, of course, were typed scripts of plays that had recently finished in the West End and thing like that, in which case they'd have to do a bit more work and work out the moves themselves, but beyond giving you the moves, you really didn't get a lot more direction. So, then, Monday morning, you blocked, Tuesday morning, you blocked the play. Tuesday afternoon, afternoons were normally free, but if you were on stage management, you had to go out. We used to borrow a lot of props from the local shops and places like that. I mean, if you needed a lot of cutlery and things for the play, you'd probably go to a local hotel, and the shops would receive complimentary tickets.

MW: Oh, I see.

GC: And most of them were very helpful. Occasionally, you had to hire in props. I remember there was one play, an Agatha Christie, I can't remember which one, which required a lobster.

MW: Oh, right!

GC: And we used to hire... I did the play two or three times, actually, at different periods. I will remember what it was, but we used to hire that from a stage property company in London because it was easier. But, very rarely, did we pay money for hiring things. I've made a few notes here. At the De La Warr Pavilion, we did have a Panotrope, which was a twin-deck record player, 78s with a cue bar to, for sound effects. And they did have a stock of sound effects. Occasionally, if you had something very difficult, you would hire from a sound company in London an effects record to play on it. Costumes, of course, all the actors had to supply all their own modern-day costumes. If you did a period play - which didn't happen terribly often - they would hire costumes in, which was all done, sort of... They would send measurements. You wouldn't get fittings and things. It would be a hire company in London, who, if things fitted, you were lucky. Likewise, these wigs. I remember there was one particular wig lady in London, called Madame Gustave, and, very occasionally, we needed a wig or two, and there was a special chart you had to put your measurements on. The effects weren't always very wonderful!

MW: Oh, I see. It must be said that getting suits from anywhere is...

GC: Anyway, going back to the schedule, so, Monday afternoon, if you were stage manager, you'd be returning props, starting to find new ones for next week. In the evening, of course, you'd have a performance of this week's play, and then, after that, you'd go home or to your digs, which reminds me. When I started, when I left Harmers, I had reached... I was getting £12 a week, which, as a single man, living in the parental home, that was fine, and I was able to go to the theatre in London once or twice a week, usually in the gods, and I existed fairly well on £12 a week. When I went down to Bexhill and started in the theatre, I got £7 a week, but out of that, I was able to pay for my digs, which, I think I had full board, digs, and I smoked, which was a lot cheaper then, but... [laughs] But I still managed to save about £1 a week. It was quite unbelievable. However... So, anyway, I keep interrupting the schedule, don't I?

MW: It doesn't matter. We got to about...

GC: So we move on to, we go to Wednesday. Right, Wednesday. By Wednesday, you would have learnt Act One after the show. You go home, you have your supper and you...

MW: Get a cup of coffee, I imagine!

GC: Learn your lines, depending on the size of the part. Sometimes, it was OK, sometimes it wasn't. Wednesday, you'd rehearse Act One in the morning. Now, Wednesday or Thursday, there was probably a matinee. Thursday morning, you would rehearse Act Two, Friday, Act Three, and a run through, Saturday morning. Now, as I said, there was a peculiar thing about, Dickie Burnett's wife, Peggy Paige, who was also the leading lady, she liked to have, I think it was Thursday mornings off because she always did her washing on Thursday mornings. But... Sometimes that happened, sometimes it didn't. I'm possibly exaggerating a bit. Anyway, so there we are. This sets the scene. I was at Bexhill at the De La Warr Pavilion for... from 4th May 'til... Where are we? I'll skip through these programmes I have in front of me. Right, when it got to June, the beginning of June, the idea was when I had been engaged by Dickie Burnett to be at Bexhill at that period, he knew that he would want me. He was doing a summer season at the Devonshire Park Theatre in Eastbourne. When I started at Bexhill, he hadn't got a company in Eastbourne. That meant the season chopped and changed, and he had earmarked me to go there when that season started, but at the beginning of June, we moved out of the De La Warr Pavilion to make way for the summer show. There was a gentleman called Edward Kent, who at that period, for a number of years, put on a regular summer show at the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill, and the Penguin Players, the rep company, moved in to the Egerton Park Theatre at Bexhill, which was a wooden building in Egerton Park, somewhat cramped, and I do remember that summer, it was fairly wet, and being a wooden building, it was always damp.

MW: Oh, no!

GC: They had costumes and things that grew mould and all that sort of stuff.

MW: Ugh! Horrible!

GC: Anyway, so, I was there... I think I was only there one week before then I moved on and went over to the Devonshire Park Theatre at Eastbourne, where he was starting his summer season. 15th June, he put on *A Flowering Cherry*, a Robert Bolt play - a very successful run in London, it had had, with Ralph Richardson - and Dickie played the leading part, of course, and Peggy Paige... And that was the first one, 15th June 1959, and I am billed, I mention this occasionally, because I had forgotten 'til I looked at these programmes the other day, the structure of the stage management team varied a bit. Sometimes, I was Stage Manager, sometimes as Assistant, sometimes I was lent to Bexhill and didn't do anything or whatever. So, we had a bit of a flow there. So, I wasn't in that, but I was, I was now, oh, I was Assistant Stage Manager at that point. It varied, depending what other people were doing. Now, what happened at Bexhill, the matinees of the rep company were on one day of the week. I think it was Wednesday, and the summer show had their matinee - well, I don't know. I think, well, they certainly, we were able to see their matinees. And what happened the first time I went to one of those, although, Bexhill and Eastbourne, I was popping back to Bexhill occasionally. But I did go, during that summer, to see the summer shows. They did changes of programme. I think they did... I don't know how many different changes of programme. I think they probably had three. What tended to happen, particularly at the seaside with rep companies, although most of the time we were opening at the beginning of the week, either Monday or Tuesday, they would change midweek so that normally, people going on holiday at the seaside went for a fortnight, and in the space of two weeks, they could see three plays if it changed midweek.

MW: Indeed.

GC: That was the idea. I think something similar may have happened. I can't quite remember. There's so much here. Anyway, when I went to see this summer show, I was particularly interested in the dancing ladies, and there was one girl who took my fancy there, and, across the footlights, and within a year, we were married, but I'll come back to that in a bit. I think, in a way, I thought... I certainly fell in love with this young lady, but apart from that, I think, subconsciously, I was looking for some anchor, having given up a permanent job and all the rest, or what was, supposedly, a permanent job, and the insecurity of the theatre. I was looking for a sheet anchor, which I've certainly had with my wife for 46 years now. I might as well say at this point, out of the rep company that summer, three of us married three of the dancers out of the summer show. We're all still, or sadly, one of them, David Blake, who later became the entertainment manager at Bexhill, and had quite a career in that area of the country, he died last year, but we have all three, Ron Pember, who was there, who I mentioned before, married one of the dancers. We're all still, remained married to the same ladies to this day very happily, so that's good.

MW: Indeed.

GC:; How about that? I doubt whether it's possible, but it's all part of the flavour of the thing.

MW: Indeed.

GC: So, I've now got to Devonshire Park, Eastbourne, June 1959. We've only gone a couple of months, haven't we? I mean, just as a matter of interest, some of the plays we did, Meet Me by Moonlight, Anthony Lesser, that was a period piece. I wasn't in that. I was still Assistant Stage Manager. Verdict, Agatha Christie - we were always doing Agatha Christie - Police Sergeant, Graeme Cruickshank. Still Assistant Stage Manager. Now, occasionally, Dickie Burnett would get hold of... sort of guest stars. At Eastbourne, sixth of July, 1959, C. Denier Warren, it was probably a name not remembered now, but at the time, he was a fairly well established actor. At the time, his name meant something to me because I'd heard him a lot on the radio. He did a lot of radio plays, but he had had a career in the West End and what-not, and he joined the company. When you look at this - I've got a little flier in front of me which lists all the cast - C. Denier Warren, and then, there are one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven other names on there. We had fairly big casts most of the time. I think a lot of these little rep companies, the few that might exist now, they have to stick to small-cast plays. Then we did... That was Brothers In Law, Henry Cecil... Henry Cecil and Ted Willis. Henry Cecil was quite a popular playwright in that period. He wrote a number of... He was actually a lawyer, and he wrote a number of plays with a legal background to them. Then we did The Hollow, another Agatha Christie - I think that was the one where the, where the...

MW: With the lobster.

GC: ...the lobster appeared, now I come to mention it. I have played, in my time, a long line of, oh, I wasn't in that. I was in it somewhere else later, but have played a number of... I've played most of the, in my time, most of the Agatha Christie butlers and quite a few of the Agatha Christie policemen. Then we did A Day in the Life of..., by Jack Poplewell. I won't go into that at the moment - things will come up. As Long as they're Happy, Vernon Sylvaine, who was one of the farceurs, Aldwych Farces and things. I did have a small part in that. What do I...? Still Assistant Stage Manager. Alibi, Agatha Christie - we're now into August - yes, butler in that one. Then, 10 August, 1959, Ralph (or Rafe) Lynn, who, by this time, was 77, he was one of the stars of the Aldwych Farces, the famous Aldwych Farces with Tom Walls and others at the Aldwych in the 1920s and thirties. We did a play called Is Your Honeymoon Really Necessary by E.V. Tidmarsh, which Ralph Lynn had originally played the leading role in, in 1944, I think, so it was quite a late one. Now, there are a number of interesting things about this. He came down, and I think he must have gone round various similar companies, playing it all over the place, and it was quite interesting. When we started plotting the play on the Tuesday morning, Dickie Burnett was supposed to be directing it, but in the programme, it now says, 'The play produced by Ralph Lynn.' Incidentally, I'll diverge here, because it says, 'Scenery painted and designed by Neville Usher.' We had a marvellous... at Eastbourne, we had a marvellous scenic designer and painter, Neville Usher. He produced marvellous work, week after week, repainting stock flats and things, but he was really good, because sometimes, in some of these things, things were pretty tatty. Anyway, I diverge, Ralph Lynn and I. We started plotting. Now, at the opening of the play, the setting is he is... He wasn't, I don't know how old the character was supposed to be. He wasn't supposed to be 77, which, by this time, Ralph

Lynn was. I presume he was supposed to be approaching his fifties, but he had a new, young wife, and he arrives at his home after the honeymoon, and he's got servants lined up across the stage. There was a gardener, which was me, non-speaking role, and a number of others, a couple of maids and this, that, about half a dozen servants, and Dickie Burnett set this scene where the main entrance was on the left-hand side of the stage from the front door, coming into this sort of big hall. Yes, because, as usual, with these farces, there was, it was a main hall of a house with staircase and then a row of bedroom doors, not unnaturally.

MW: Mmm. Indeed, yes.

GC: For later developments. Because that does come into the story. But what Dickie did, he lined up the servants straight across the stage, and Ralph Lynn came on with the young lady playing his wife. This was another thing that struck one or two of us at the time. I don't think we'd think anything of it now, but in 1959, the thought of a 77-year-old man with a 20-year-old wife was a little bit off. Nobody said anything about it. It was just a little bit of a feeling there. Anyway, so, Ralph then came on and then he said, 'Oh, no, this won't do,' because Dickie had the servants, as I say, lined across, straight across the stage. He said, 'No, Dickie, just a minute. I'd like the servants lined up a bit differently', and he lined the servants up in a diagonal down to the footlights, across the stage, from upstage down to the footlights, so that when he came on, he... He didn't come on with his wife, because, of course, his first line was – his wife had disappeared somewhere – 'Where's my wife? Where's my wife? Where's my wife?' So, he came on and went down the line, ended up centre stage at the footlights, facing the audience. And on the first night, to jump to it, when he did that, he came on, 'Where's my wife? Where's my wife?...' Down to the front of the stage to the audience, and got a huge round of applause, and turned upstage, and said, 'That's the way to do it!' He did, during the... when we were performing, he did talk a lot while other people were engaged in dialogue. He would talk quite loudly, you know, things nothing to do with it, and it was quite extraordinary. Anyway, he, then, took over the direction, and he corrected people on every single inflection. Consequently, by the end of the week, we'd only actually blocked, I think, two out of three acts - I think it was only three acts - or whatever it was. Yes, it was only three acts. So, the first night was a bit iffy, and so, it was all a bit hair-raising. I think the last act, we never really blocked. There were other things. We were using the French's Acting Edition, and printed in that would be things like, for his part, 'Coffee-cup bus. - coffee cup business.' Now, there's no indication of what that was, and I don't know whether you remember the film *My Fair Lady* with Rex Harrison? He had a thing with a teacup and he put it on his head. Do you remember?

MW: Yes, yes.

GC: Well, this was something similar, but even more involved.

MW: Oh, goodness!

GC: He had a cup of tea. He would put the spoon in it, stir it, take the spoon out, put the cup ... And this went on for ages, juggling this cup and saucer about, but, I mean, from reading the script, you had no idea, and anybody else doing the play, I don't know what they do with it. They'd probably just cut it because they wouldn't know what it meant. Anyway, we proceeded. When we eventually opened the play the following Monday, talking about him talking, he was... In the last scene, I think, there was one scene where they were sitting at breakfast round the breakfast table, and he was sitting upstage facing the audience, and everybody else was there, and I think it was probably the matinee, when the laughs weren't very good, and he, he'd say, quite loudly, in the middle of somebody else, 'Not a titter, not even one tit.' Things like that. All the time.

MW: Oh, heavens!

GC: And he also, because he was, he was still very well known then, and certainly, the residents of Bournemouth knew him well. He used to make a curtain speech at the end of each performance. The matinee, which wasn't terribly good, and full of old ladies, half asleep, we thought he was going to do a curtain speech, but he refused to do it because it just wasn't worth the bother, so that caused a bit of a mix-up with taking curtains up and things. What happened after the first night, having got through all this, got it on, and it went terribly well, and, of course, he was the darling of Eastbourne, and the fact that we'd, particularly, I think, the last act, we'd hardly rehearsed it because of all the time he'd taken sorting out the earlier part. After the first performance, there was a pub next door to the Devonshire Park Theatre called the Devonshire Arms, and we all trooped in there. He bought all the drinks or several rounds, and I think he did that after every performance through the week. I don't know what he was paid. He couldn't have been paid much, but I reckon he'd, by the time he'd paid for a hotel and paid for drinks for the company every night, he probably didn't make anything out of it at all. But, I mean, after the first night, when we went into the pub, he said to everybody, he said, 'I bet you all thought I was a terrible...' but anyway, and then he bought us all a drink. He was lovely really, but it was a bit hair-raising, because we just didn't know what was happening half the time?

MW: Yes, but very generous.

GC: Pardon?

MW: But very generous.

GC: Yes, very generous. No, he was a nice bloke. Now, what happened? We got to the end of the season at the Devonshire Park, and at that point, Dickie Burnett had another company of Penguin Players working in Peterborough, and I was sent up there for two special weeks to play in two plays when they needed extra actors, one of which was, *You Too Can Have a Body*, which was a sort of comedy thriller. In the cast, actually, there were a couple... There was Brian Cant, who later was well known on television for, was it *Play Away* or something? A children's television programme. But, at this time, he hadn't been heard of. Anyway, I did that, and then we did another one. I was there for two weeks. See if I can find the programme... Witness for the

Prosecution, which needs an awful lot of cast, and I played a small part of the judge's clerk. Now, while I was there, I was asked to go back to East... to Bexhill, to the Egerton Park Theatre, because they had a play with quite a large cast, and they were rehearsing the last week I was in Peterborough, and they sent me a part script, which was a thing that was still in existence in those days. You just got a few sheets of paper with your part on with the cues. And I was playing in this thing called High Temperature, a comedy thriller-type thing. I was one of two burglars who... In the opening scene, it's in the dark. In this house, two burglars come in. You can't see them, so by the time... I had written to the lady, Joy Fisher, who eventually became my wife, while I was in Peterborough, to ask if I could meet up with her again, and this was the first time she ever saw me on stage, but she couldn't see me because it was... Well, only a vague outline! Anyway, so, I had that little experience. I had no idea what the rest of the play was about 'til I got there, and I had missed the week's rehearsal. I just joined in at dress rehearsal. It was quite easy for me. It was a very small part, and, you know, half a dozen speeches or something at the beginning. Then I was in another Agatha Christie at the Egerton Park, and I don't... No, I wasn't doing stage management for those two, because I was just a visiting actor. Then I was back in October. How are we doing for time?

MW: Roughly... Half an hour, roughly.

GC: Right, so, back to Eastbourne, Gilt and Gingerbread by Lionel Hale. I'm in it, but I'm not credited as being any part of the stage management, but I probably was doing a bit. Then, A Stepmother, Warren Chetham-Strode in that, and, oh, yes, still Assistant Stage Manager. Sometimes I seem to be Assistant Stage Manager and then go back to Stage Manager and vice versa, but it was all fairly... Wolf's Clothing, Kenneth Horne. At this point, we're in October/November '59. What Dickie did, he put on a play. He had companies at Eastbourne and Bexhill and we had a bit of a treat. We did sort of fortnightly by playing one week at Bexhill, and then the other company would go to Eastbourne, etc.

MW: Which meant you got a...

GC: For about three plays we did that, home and away.

MW: Which, I suppose, meant...

GC: How Say You?, Summer in December, Murder on Arrival - we've got all these murders, sub-Agatha Christie! The Patsy. That was a bit better. It was an American Play, 'by Arrangement with Emile Littler.' - it merely means he had the rights. I'm getting towards Christmas. A Party for Christmas before Christmas, a play all about it, N.C. Hunter, quite a well known writer at the time, and then we did a pantomime. Dickie always did a pantomime at Bexhill and he did one at Devonshire Park, Eastbourne this year as well, Cinderella. Now, we had Clarkson Rose as Baroness Hard-up. Clarkson Rose lived in Eastbourne and I think this was getting toward the end of his career, really, and anyway, he wasn't doing anything that Christmas, and, somehow, Dickie got him to come and do the pantomime with us. And it's quite interesting, the

pantomime Cinderella, I think it had been done at Bexhill the year before, and some of the, where he had to get a few extra actors in, he had all the costumes, and I know he sent the measurements of the costumes for the parts to the agents to supply actors to fit the costumes. Only one or two minor parts. Others were made to... Because, I can see, knowing the names, that some of these names were visiting just for the pantomime. It was very... I don't know who had written the script. It says, 'Lyrics by Richard Burnett', but it was all in... what's the word? It was in verse, rhyming couplets. We didn't have a Cinderella who played the xylophone, but I have heard - and I don't know whether it's true - on one occasion, a pantomime somewhere, because all these people had their speciality acts, there was a Cinderella who played the xylophone, and when she was out collecting wood in the forest, she said, 'Here I am, all alone, I think I'll play my xylophone,' and two flunkies brought on a xylophone! That didn't happen with us, and whether it happened anywhere, I can't really be sure. Clarkson Rose, of course, had been famous for his summer shows, Twinkle, at Eastbourne and, I think, in elsewhere, and, one night, Henrietta Holmes, who was playing Cinderella, ad libbed a little joke, something about Twinkle to Clarkson Rose, so, at the interval, she was summoned to his dressing room, and, actually he wasn't too hard on her. He did tell her off, and said, you know, 'I'm the one that does the funnies,' sort of thing. He did tell her off, but not, it wasn't terribly nasty. He was actually very nice to work with, and he was always friendly. What happened, I can't remember whether we had a tannoy system at Bexhill or Eastbourne. I know... I'm sure at Bexhill when I started, if I was... One of the stage management, usually me, had to go round and call the half, quarter, five minutes and beginners, and then, after that, it was up to the actors. They didn't get calls during the show.

MW: Oh, right.

GC: It was their job to be on stage when [inaudible] and sometimes, that was without a tannoy, so they had to know what they were up to, and I don't remember anybody ever missing an entrance, so mostly, they were well behaved in that respect.

MW: It must have been quite a burden on...

GC: But, I mean, I remember one night, when I knocked on Clarkson Rose's door and called, 'Beginners, please,' and he said, 'Who are you calling a beginner?! Just a little joke. And I think - talking about the rhyming, I think, when he did his own act, he would do his own material anyway. Henrietta Holmes who played Cinderella, I remember her. She... a bit later, a bit after that, a few years later, she was in, played a supporting role in Half a Sixpence with Tommy Steele. I haven't notes, names, what other people have done. Yes, Michael Napier-Brown, who was a stalwart of the Bexhill company when I was there, later, and Vilma Hollingberry, they got married soon after that, and went and he ran the Northampton Rep for a number of years. We had a little thing here, January, 1960, This Thing Called Love. For some reason, we took it down to the Palace Court Theatre in Bournemouth for a week. It's the only time I think I went on tour from there - if you can call it tour. But it's interesting, looking at the programme for that, there at the Palace Court, Bournemouth, we are in January, 1960. The February attractions included the Bournemouth Little Theatre Club for a week, which is presumably an amateur company. 'No performances on Monday or Wednesday matinee', yeah, it was an amateur company, then they had three weeks at least of Barry

O'Brien's company, who was another chap who did a lot of weekly rep and whatnot at various theatres. Anyway, so we did that, and then, I'm still at, we're ploughing through February '60. Hello! We've only done a year.

MW: Well, it just shows the number of plays you were doing.

GC: I don't know whether what's coming out of this. I'm talking a lot about what I did, but whether it's providing any interesting information, I don't know.

MW: Oh, yes!

GC: Born Yesterday, A Love in Idleness, and I'm ploughing through. Dial M for Murder, that was... I did that several times in various places. Always popular.

MW: That's quite a well-known one, isn't it?

GC: Oh, it is a well-known one. There was a film of it with, I can't remember who...

MW: Yes, I can't remember who...

GC: Stage Manager, I've been promoted to Stage Manager here. But I'll probably go back again! Depending on who was available, or if somebody had been lent to the other company, you know? Oh, here we are, doing... Oh, that's... Yes, we seem to be... In February, March, we were swapping productions with Bexhill and Eastbourne again. Widows Are Dangerous, To Dorothy a Son, that was a well-known play. Originally, I think, that was... Richard Attenborough, I think, originally starred in that in the West End with his wife. Oh, yes, I'm Assistant Stage Manager again there. It didn't make any difference to money.

MW: No.

GC: Rebecca, Daphne du Maurier, another butler I played.

MW: From what I've heard, that was another absolute staple of the...

GC: Oh, yes, staple. Kept cropping up. We did a rather interesting one here I've never come across, Sunshine Sisters by Ivor Novello. I don't know, I don't think he had much success with it in London. It was about three... It was a period thing about three sisters in early musical comedies. I remember they had a song, 'We're the sunshine sisters, Rube, Emmy and Pearl,' and here they are. It wasn't a musical play, but I think they sang one or two songs in it.

[interruption]

MW: Sorry about that.

GC: It's all right. 1960, I know I was sort of... We'd finished at Eastbourne, but Richard Burnett bravely produced *A View from the Bridge* by Arthur Miller at Bexhill, and I was lent to that. I played... *First Stranger*. I didn't do any stage management. I had hardly anything to do, really, so it was an easy week, but I know a couple of walk-on roles in it were played by local amateurs. It was quite a big cast. Michael Napier-Brown was in that. Anyway, so we've got to May, 1960, and on the 22nd of May, which was a Sunday, we got married at the St John's Church, Eastbourne, which was the church... The vicar there was the local Actors' Church Union chaplain, which reminds me of Good Friday. Now, in those days, a lot of theatres didn't open on Good Friday, particularly in provinces, but I remember we did do a performance on Good Friday, and, strange to relate, before the show, the Actors' Church Union chaplain came on, went in front of the curtain and got the audience to say a prayer. Can you imagine?

MW: Good heavens!

GC: It's unbelievable. Before the show! Anyway, we were married on the Sunday, had Monday off, and we had a flat in Bexhill, but I was working in Eastbourne because I was now... Dickie had another company going at Eastbourne. His season at the Devonshire Park hadn't quite opened yet, but he did put on a festival of Agatha Christie plays at the Royal Hippodrome in Eastbourne, for which I was Stage Manager and playing all sorts of parts, and what we did, we did, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine Agatha Christie plays, and then we did most of them all over again. I think it was about 17 weeks in all, and we thought, 'Oh, this is marvellous. When we get to doing them again, we won't have to rehearse,' but unfortunately, somebody, for some reason, we lost somebody in the company part way through, so we had to rehearse again. And there was another strange thing. There was an actor in it who was playing the juvenile lead parts. I won't mention his name, because he's still around somewhere, but he started playing fairly large parts, but he wasn't very good and his parts got smaller and smaller and smaller, but, then, when we started all over again, he played the same part, the big part at the beginning, so that was quite fun. But we... Actually, one of them, *Love from a Stranger* wasn't... I think it was based on an Agatha Christie story, but I think the play, which, I think, in its time was quite well known, was written by somebody else, but, anyway, we did that at the Hippodrome, Eastbourne. Now, at the end of that season, I decided I could have stayed on there forever, probably. Well, as long as it lasted, because Dickie went... I'm going to have a little biscuit. Do you mind?

MW: Certainly.

GC: He went on for a number, a few years after that. A little bit later, he also had a company at Tunbridge Wells, I remember.

MW: I see.

GC: Can we take a pause?

MW: Certainly, yes.

GC: Yes, how much time have we got left?

MW: We're on 43 minutes so far, so...

GC: Well, I don't think I'm going to get to 1968! I must look at this again, now. Where am I? 1960. Agatha Christie. Right, I'll start up again. At the end of that season, we're sort of, September, end of September, 1960, I decided that I was going to try and sell my talents elsewhere as an actor. And, by this time, my friend, Ron Pember, who had been with bits... We weren't always together, but he was somewhere in the... He had gone to the Mermaid Theatre, which had just started. He had gone to the Mermaid Theatre, for the first *Treasure Island*, which he was in, and I'll... A little bit about him, what happened to him after that. He stayed there quite some time as a sort of assistant. He got on very well with Bernard Miles, and was with him for quite a long period, although Bernard Miles - who I will come into contact with in a minute - was one of those eccentric characters. You either get on with him or you don't.

MW: I see.

GC: Now, at the Mermaid, there were actors who would go halfway round the world to work with Bernard. There were other actors who would go halfway round the world to keep away from him. But people like that are like that. You know, you either love them or hate them, and he certainly had his faults, but he also had his loveable eccentricities, but anyway, what happened with, Ron Pember worked with him off and on over a long period, but, occasionally, he had to get away and do something else, and he went and worked at the RSC and the National and things, but, usually always went back, and over the time Ron directed things at the Mermaid, wrote a few shows and acted in a lot of them. But anyway, at the end of 1960, he had gone to... It must have been the... *Treasure Island* was the Christmas before. He was already there. He'd gone there... The first thing he did was play in *Treasure Island*. He then was involved, in one way or another, either acting or doing other things with other productions, and he was appearing in a play called *Mr Burke, MP*: 'book, music and lyrics by Gerald Frow,' - who at that time was Bernard Miles' son-in-law - 'directed by Sally Miles,' - Bernard's daughter - 'music arranged by Wally Whitton.' They had a little band, led by Wally Whitton, who, I think, later became slightly well known. It was a musical play, *Mr Burke, MP*. It was about a chimpanzee who managed to get to be a Member of Parliament, or somebody managed to get this thing elected and made Member of Parliament. Now, what happened? Another friend who I'd known at Bexhill, Ian Hewitson, was playing a small part in it called *Mr Dogsboddy*. Anyway, he had a nervous breakdown.

MW: Oh, poor man!

GC: And I... At this point, what was happening, I had started a... For the next two or three years, I was doing, in between other things, a lot of walk-on and extra work on television, which... There are a few interesting stories about that, because, in those days, most of the programmes went out live or things like that, but I mustn't go into that now, but if anybody ever wants to talk about the 1960s television, I have quite a bit of experience as an extra and walk-on, where you see a lot of things going on.

MW: I can imagine.

GC: And I had some funny experiences, but I mustn't diverge on that now. Anyway, so I was in London, doing this sort of thing, but Ian Hewitson had left, and Ronnie rang me up and said, 'Oh, can you come and see Sally? We need somebody to take this part over straightaway.' It was quite a small part, Mr Dogsboddy, so I have played a dogsboddy in my time, and I was there for the rest of the run. Now, during that time, I was sharing a dressing room at the Mermaid with an actor called Timothy West, who was playing two or three parts in it, I see here, and another interesting man called Daniel Thorndike, who was one of the Thorndike family. His father was Russell Thorndike, Sybil Thorndike's brother. Anyway, they were a nice pair to be sharing a dressing room with. Now, at this point, we are in November, 1960, and what Tim West had been doing, the last two or three years, I think, the previous two or three years... There was a chap called, what's his name? Counsell. John Counsell at Windsor, the Theatre Royal, Windsor, and I think Tim had worked there, and the pantomime season, he used to, he did, for two or three years, I think, play a small speaking role in the pantomime and understudy all the comics, and he had reached the point in his career when he decided he wasn't going to do any more understudying, so, as I was sharing a dressing room, and by a strange coincidence, my wife was already rehearsing there as a dancer. There might be a picture in here. Anyway, so, what happened, I got in touch with Theatre Royal, Windsor, because they were looking for... I think she knew about it at her end that they were looking for somebody because Tim West had been offered this thing and turned it down and they were looking for somebody. There's my wife there. I went down and, anyway, I did that. Now, I don't know what I was thinking of, because I was understudying all the male comic parts, from dame, and Billy Crusoe and all these funny people, most of whom had to sing and dance at some point. Now, I can't dance for a start, and I certainly can't sing, so how I would have got on...! We didn't have many, many rehearsals for the understudy, because, what was happening was, if we look at the names. Fiona Dixon was in it, playing Polly Perkins. She later, just after that, married... Oh, God, what's his name? Never mind. I'll come back to that if I remember. But Patricia Michaels, who was playing Robinson Crusoe, was going to leave before the end of the, before the end of the pantomime, and she had an understudy who... We had to rehearse that, so I got a few rehearsals with them doing that, and I think, I think it was Patricia Michaels that was leaving. Anyway, it doesn't matter. But, had I had to go on, I don't know... The only part I would have got away with was Frank Thornton, the ship's captain. That's where I first got to know Frank Thornton, who became a great friend after that. I don't think I ever worked with him apart from that, but he lived near us in Barnes, where we lived, and his daughter was a Deputy Stage Manager with me at one point. Anyway, that's really beside the point. There were some interesting people: Louise Purnell, who played Aphrodite, the fairy-godmother-type part, later did quite well

at the National for a while, although I haven't heard of her since, [ed. but he thinks she changed her name] Frank Thornton, Henry Woolf, little Henry Woolf, who was a diminutive actor, but he played, he did quite a few things at the Royal Court, Elizabeth Counsell, that's John Counsell's daughter, Anna Sharkey... Anyway, so, but luckily, I never had to go on. Otherwise, I would have made a complete idiot of myself. Added to which, the other funny people would have just torn me to shreds. I mean, there was no solution. I don't know what would have happened. I really don't know how I had the nerve to do it, because I couldn't have coped.

MW: It's one of those things.

GC: Anyway, after that, what happened? I did a few more... I was doing more television extra work and what not, and then, in May, 1961, they'd started rehearsing the Wakefield Mystery Plays at the Mermaid. Now, during the course of the rehearsals, what they decided, for the crucifixion scene, James Bolam was playing Jesus, and what they wanted to do was when he was crucified up there, they wanted him to appear at the foot of the cross in shining white raiment while the body was still up there, so they wanted somebody who would be the body, and Ron Pember again, who was thoroughly involved with all this, rang me up and said, 'Do you fancy being the body?' So, anyway, that's what I did. I was the body. I also had a one-line part in the last supper. We used to do... during the show, we used to refer to it as 'suddenly last supper', because Tennessee Williams was quite popular at that time. It was quite interesting, because what we did, we did what was sometimes referred to as a Cinderella quick change on stage. James Bolam – I have to call him James. We used to call him Jimmy, but I understand that nobody's allowed to call him Jimmy any more. I haven't seen him for a number of years. There was a crowd. He was... It was a crowd scene, where he was on, and he had a cloak, or I had a cloak. I was in the crowd with the cloak, and we, in the middle of this scrum of a crowd, we swapped over, so when the soldiers got hold of Jesus, it was me, and Jimmy disappeared with the crowd, off stage, and he got into his shining white raiment.

MW: And appeared duly beneath...

GC: And had to appear at the foot of the cross. But it was an interesting experience.

MW: I can imagine.

GC: What happened, I was laid out on the cross, flat on the stage. We had all sorts of technical things, working out how to do it, because they had a sling rope, a single rope coming down and then two halters on either arm of the cross to pull it up. Right. And I was stretched out there, and I had my hands, actually, through a couple of the straps, and what they did, they gave me a sort of harness that I was clipped on, and a little ledge for my feet, which sloped like that. Anyway, I was hauled up. And, now, when it got to the performances, one night, somehow, the ropes got... Oh, at the dress rehearsal, one of the soldiers, - Ron Pember was one of the soldiers. They banged nails in between my... But I think it was a public dress rehearsal on Good Friday, of all days, when one of the soldiers managed to hit my finger with his hammer.

MW: Oh, dear!

GC: And I was lying on the stage, and, you know, the Mermaid was like in those days, the seats went right down to the front of the stage, and my head was there. The first person in the audience was there, and Jesus was heard to mutter a very un-scriptural word! Anyway, but one night, the ropes got crossed across my neck, and as it came up, it was getting tighter and tighter, and it seemed to go on for hours, as they do, these things, and I was thinking, 'Now, either I just don't do anything, and get strangled, and that's it, or I shout out and ruin the whole show,' but somehow or other, at the last possible moment, I managed to wriggle my head through the ropes, and the crown of thorns which was on my head dropped to the floor. Anyway, that was all right in the end, and, then, on another occasion, when they were dragging me across the stage, my toe caught on a nail in the floor or some thing, and when I was up there, looking down, and it must have looked marvellous in the lights, my toe was dripping blood, which was catching the light. Looking down, it was spreading out on the floor. It got to the size of a dinner plate before I... It looked very spectacular. But at the interval – I think it must have been the interval, or the end of the show – it was a matinee, something like that, because what I had refused to do, I was doing Jesus – as Bernard called it, I was 'Spare Jesus', and I was... I played Philip in the last supper, and I was understudying, one or two... It was a very long, I mean, it was a three-hour show.

MW:Yes. Well, they are, yes.

GC: And I was understudying some things right at the beginning, and fallen angels and things or something, but I had been asked if I'd be an assistant stage manager. I refused. But, on this occasion, at the end of the... I think it was probably a matinee or something, because somebody, one of the stage managers said, 'Here's a cloth. Can you go and wipe your blood up?' I said, 'No. It's not my job to do it. You go and do it!' Anyway... [laughs]

MW: How did you...?

GC: But... What? Interestingly, the Queen came. The Queen had never been to the Mermaid Theatre up to that point, and she was going to come to see the Wakefield Mystery Plays. Now, one of the reasons we were told that she hadn't come – how are we doing for time?

MW: Very close to time, but keep going.

GC: Well, we'll stop at the Mermaid, but I've got a lot more of the 1960s, you see.

MW: The Queen coming to...

GC: The Queen. One of the reasons that she hadn't come, we were told, was that there wasn't private loo facilities and things for her, so, at that point, that was when Puddle Dock was still on one side with the barge in it. On the other side, there was a sort of area and there was a little printing works or something, and these people got to hear about this and they had a whole suite made. It was just out the stage door, across the way, and was there opposite. They had a whole suite refurbished with a private loo and this, that and the other for the Queen. Now, what happened, in fact, was the Queen arrived bang on time, as is usual.

MW: I would imagine.

GC: Well, all the traffic's been stopped for her. Anyway, she arrived bang on time, and she sat right in the middle of the seats, because in the stalls, the aisles are towards the side, but she was right in the middle. She had about three people either side of her. Prince Philip didn't come. It wasn't his cup of tea at all. [laughs] And she sat there, and in the interval, she didn't come out. Very well trained, she'd done all the loo she needed to do and all the rest of it. I mean, they are, the royal family are very well trained like that.

MW: But it was rather a...

GC: And she just sat through the whole thing. They didn't move at the interval. At the end of the show, she was taken up – Bernard had an office up the stairs, quite a big room, and he had this marvellous, huge table, which was thick, old oak, that thick. I don't know where it had come from.

MW: Absolutely whopping, yes.

GC: Yes, like half the side of a ship or something. Anyway, and he'd got some refreshments and things laid out, and the entire company were taken up to be presented to the Queen, and what he did, they kept Jimmy and I both dressed in our loincloths and whatnot, and dripping blood and things were at the end, so, by the time it got... It's quite a large cast. I mean, I think there were at least 20, possibly more people in it, 30-something.

MW: I would think easily, yes.

GC: By the time... She had run out of things to say, obviously, poor lady, and so we were presented together, and Bernard said something like, 'And here are our two Jesus's,' and she sort of shook our hands and said, 'That was very clever, very clever.' So, I presume she realised what had happened. Well, I mean, once you see two Jesus's, it's obvious something has happened.

MW: Indeed.

GC: Of course, the other thing, after... When they got me down, and I'm told it was beautifully done, getting me down off the cross, and the lighting and everything were marvellous, and then placed in this tomb, so I was then, there was a little trap in the stage, and I was laid out flat in this thing which is about that. The lid was put down. I then had to slide out the side of it, and Jimmy would come and get in, because he had to rise from the dead.

MW: Yes, indeed. Yes.

GC: At a later point, the top came off, and out he came. And it was him again. Anyway, well, that's got me to the Mermaid. And after that, you see, I'll just say, quickly... Where was I? I was doing a lot more things. I became, during the sixties... Where are we now? We're only up to 1960! I've only done two years! During the 1960s, I worked a lot for Arthur Lane and Audrey Lupton, who were based at Wimbledon Theatre, and did a lot of touring, some of it very tatty, and I was introduced to being a company manager on tour, which is quite a story in itself, but we've run out of time.

MW: Well, I think we can continue for a short while at least.

GC: Well, I'll just keep going, then. Shall I keep going?

MW: Oh, certainly. Becoming a company manager sounds a major step forward.

GC: Yes. At this point, I'm still trying to be an actor.

MW: So if you could tell us something about your experiences of becoming a, as moving from purely an actor...

GC: Well, what happened was, Christmas, 19... I'll get rid of this lot. I'll tidy that up afterwards.

MW: Yes.

GC: I will move to this lot. Christmas, 19-whatever it was... Where are we? '60...

MW: I think...

GC: Sorry, I've...

MW: I think if we could keep to the company manager bit, it would be very interesting.

GC: Well, that's... Sorry, I've jumped. I'm still only on 1961. 1961, Mermaid Theatre. Wakefield Mystery Plays. This must be Christmas 19... Where am I? Sorry.

MW: If we could talk about...

GC: Christmas, 1960, I think it was. I've got a bit out of... What date's this? My wife was working anyway. We were living in Wimbledon at this, now... Yes, Christmas, 1960. My wife was a dancer in a pantomime at...of Mother Goose, at Wimbledon Theatre, which, at that time, was still being run by Peter Haddon, who'd been running it, well, it says, 'His seventh consecutive Wimbledon Pantomime.' Peter Haddon had been quite a well established actor in the West End in the 1930s, in various musical shows and things, and he was now running... His wife, who, by this time, had died, was the sister of Cicely Courtneidge, and he was doing this pantomime, his seventh annual pantomime at Wimbledon, Mother Goose, with Jack Hulbert and Cicely Courtneidge, who were almost on their last legs, and what happened... About halfway through the run, I don't know who's credited with stage management. I can't remember. 'Stage Manager, Wanda Moore.' Well, anyway, somebody, Wanda Moore was there, because she was actually running the prompt corner, but the stage manager in charge of the whole thing, who, I don't know, unless... Anyway, somebody had to go off and do something else, and they wanted somebody to take charge as stage manager as opposed to running... The way they named the staff was a bit odd. Anyway, but... My wife told me about this, and so, anyway, I went and took over. Now, it was about halfway through the run of the pantomime, and by this time, Jack Hulbert and Cicely Courtneidge were no longer a very big draw to be honest, and one... There was a little peephole by the prompt corner. You could look through and see the audience, and it was very sad. You'd look out there and the place was practically empty by the time I took over, except, in the middle of the stalls, there would be a little group of four or five friends of Jack Hulbert's. I mean, there were people like John Gielgud. I remember the night John Gielgud came because there was a pass door on the opposite side of the prompt site. There was a little bar up by the pass door, and you could go through the bar and so on to the stage, and John Gielgud, obviously knew about this, because he came, on his own, through there to see Jack and Cis, and walked across the stage, and, at this point, they were dismantling the final set, and all of a sudden, I... I was standing by the prompt corner, and I saw him come through and start to walk across the front of the stage, and then I saw this flat, which somebody had let go of, which came... And I thought, 'Well, that huge nose is going to get...' Anyway, it just missed him, and he thought it was very funny, so that was all right. And there were lots of other people, Noël Coward and people like that. You'd see them sitting there in the middle of a half-empty stalls, but all their friends came. But that was quite an... I could say quite a bit more of the experience of working with them on that pantomime, but I'd better not delay on that at the moment. If anybody wants to hear about it, get in touch with me.

MW: I think what we'd better do is stop for the moment, let the next interview take place, and then we might see if we can do another half hour after they've finished, perhaps.

GC: Okay, because, what... Just briefly, I did then, what happened soon after that, Peter Haddon died, and Arthur Lane, who had been working for him, and Audrey Lupton, secretary, they formed a company and took over Wimbledon Theatre and did a lot of touring out of it, and I got involved with that, and that's where I learnt about touring – the hard way, because the first time I went out as a company manager, they said, 'Oh, could you company manage a tour for us?' and I said, 'Oh, yes, certainly.' I didn't know the first thing about company managing a tour, but, and, I mean, it's quite interesting, I think.

MW: Oh, definitely.

GC: I think, to a certain extent, what I've been, quite a bit of me has been waffle, but... there we are.

MW: This is the continuation of the interview with Graeme Cruickshank. You wished to talk about a gentleman called Carl Clopet, didn't you?

GC: Well, just before that, if I can go back to the pantomime, because one little point, really, I want to pay tribute to John Inman, actor, who at that time, had been doing stage management and acting all over the place, but the pantomime at Wimbledon, Mother Goose, Cicely Courtneidge, Jack Hulbert. By the time I'd taken over as stage manager, he was no longer around. He'd gone off to do something else, but he had made all the props, or a lot of the props, special props for the pantomime, and I would point out, that I will come to later when I worked with him in Salad Days, I'll continue that story. Now, what happened next, really, we're in 1963. I was doing a lot more television walk-ons and what not, and writing around to repertory companies, and I wrote to Carl Clopet, who was doing this sort of thing, and he was, at that point, about to do a season of summer weekly rep at the Bradford Alhambra, and I went to see him in his little office off Charing Cross Road, and he wanted me to go up, for one special week, to Bradford to play in a comedy, The Amorous Prawn, which had recently been successful in the West End. Anyway, he wanted me to play an American, and I said, 'Well, I haven't much experience of playing Americans. I think I've only played about one part with about three lines in it.' He said, 'Oh, well, of course you can do American,' and he then, sitting behind his desk with the script in front of him, read through the entire part that I was to play with an American accent. So, he read that, and finished up by saying, 'There you are. You can do it,' and that was it, I'd got the job without even opening my mouth. And I went up to Bradford, rehearsed and played the part. I think what my... my American accent was, I think, reasonably acceptable at the time. And it was just for the one special week, but halfway through the week, the director there, his director, whose name was John Kendall, said, 'Oh, we have got a bit of a gap in the company. Next week, we're all right, but the following week, we're doing Agatha Christie's The Hollow, and we're a bit short of actors. Would you like to stay on for another week or two weeks?' So I rehearsed for a week with the joy of not having to play in the evenings like every other member of the company did, and appeared in The Hollow as Inspector who knows, Scotland Yard, and lo and behold, during that week, the same thing happened again, and he asked me to stay on for another week. Jumping a week, I had a week out just rehearsing, and then appeared in

Rebecca. I was the butler. And lo and behold, it happened again, and this time, I was asked if I would stay on to play the leading role in *The Gazebo* by Alec Coppel, which had been a great success in the West End with Ian Carmichael in that part. And I did it. I'm afraid to say I don't think I was desperately good. I think I'd be able to play it a lot better now, if I was young enough, but anyway, I got by, and that that ended that. And then, a little bit after that, writing around to rep managers, they were in a desperate strait at the Intimate Theatre, Palmers Green, I realise, now looking at the programme, because I wasn't originally playing a part in *Guilty Party*, but I did a special week there at Palmers Green in *Guilty Party*, and, then, similarly, I wrote to Arthur Brough, who ran the Leas Pavilion, Folkestone. At this point, Arthur Brough himself was appearing in, I think it was *Half a Sixpence* at the Cambridge Theatre, and I'd written to him and he invited me to come and meet him at the Cambridge, and I met him at the stage door, I think during a matinee in between his entrances. He interviewed me and offered me the part of Captain Barney Fitzpatrick in a play called *True Love – or The Bloomer* at Folkestone, and I went down there, and I think my Irish accent was just about passable. But anyway, I had to dance a polka, which I got away with, just about, but I'm glad my wife, a trained dancer, didn't see me doing it. The interesting thing about the Leas Pavilion Theatre, Folkestone, they used to do the tea matinees, which a number of people have written about. They, on the midweek matinee, they would take out alternate rows of seats in the stalls and put in little tables and, I think they started serving tea in the interval, but then, during the second half, or whatever it was, there would be the rattle of teacups going on.

MW: It must have been very distracting.

GC: Somewhat, but you have to, you see, and I had a problem, I remember, when I was at Bradford with the Carl Clopet lot. When we were rehearsing, quite often, in the mornings, the cleaners would be making a din up in the... and you just had to rise above it, and ignore it, and I don't think that's a bad thing to have to do. I mean, I can appreciate actors stopping in the middle of a performance to tell people to switch their phones off and things, but on the other hand, I think it concentrates the mind wonderfully when there's something to fight against. Let me come to a slightly new period in my life, really, when I started company managing. I was summoned back to Wimbledon. In the meantime, Peter Haddon had died, and Arthur Lane, who had been working for him at Wimbledon as a production manager, or some such title, and Audrey Lupton, who was the theatre's secretary had formed their own company, AL Productions. They formed a partnership in all senses of the word for many years, and they'd taken over the theatre and they were also sending out lots of productions on tour. And I was asked to take a production of *Signpost to Murder* on tour - only a two-week tour, hardly a tour - to West Cliff Palace and the Pier Theatre, Llandudno, and as Company and Stage Manager. Now, I hadn't actually toured properly at all before in any capacity, and I had never acted as a Company Manager before, but they seemed to assume that I would know what to do without much instruction, so I learnt the hard way. I made mistakes, and it's not a bad way to learn anything. Luckily, I managed to get away with it, and, I think, really, although I gave up, a little later, attempts, really, to become an actor. Now, I think I've been acting, the rest of my life, I've been acting being the company management figure. No, I mean, there were things like I didn't realise that one should advise the theatre you're going to of what colour gels and things you want for lighting and all the rest of it, and various other things.

MW: You were talking about settling up with the theatre and paying the actors as well.

GC: Oh, yes. That really comes a bit later, because one of the things, one place, after that, and, I mean, I did learn fairly fast the things you do not do, and I think I coped pretty well. On the whole, I preferred the Company Management side to the Stage Managing side, and sometimes, I was just Company Manager on a big production. We'd have a separate stage manager. Occasionally, I had to appear as well, or possibly understudy, although, during these, most of these productions, we didn't normally have understudies. I do remember visits on several occasions to the Theatre Royal, Bath. The proprietor, or whatever he was there, Frank Maddox, had been there for a number of years, and I think he'd taken over the theatre from his father. He was well known locally, I believe, for his excellent pantomimes, although I never saw one, but on Saturday night, the Company Manager's duty in those days was to go to the theatre manager's office, agree the contra account, settle up, and accept a cheque to forward to the management. I mean, nowadays, all these things are done by accountants behind closed doors long after the event probably. Also, while I'm at that, on Thursday, which was normally pay day, you would have arranged, at the beginning of the week, with the theatre manager, to draw an advance of cash to pay the salaries to the company, but on Saturday, after the interval, it was the custom to go to the theatre manager's office, as I say, agree the accounts and settle up, and normally, he would get a little drink, and with the, in Frank Maddox' case, he would say, 'Right, take a seat.' You'd sit in front of his desk. He would be behind the desk, turn his back to you, and over in the corner, which you couldn't quite see beyond him, was his drinks cupboard, which, in fact, was an old stage prop, plywood safe, but he'd say, 'Whisky?' 'Yes.' 'Water?' 'Yes,' and then you couldn't see what he was doing, and when he turned round, you had a glass which was swimming over the top, but when you tasted it, you realised there was about a thimbleful of whisky in the bottom! And I mean, I don't mind people being mean with the whisky, but don't swamp it with more water than is necessary. However, that was one thing. There was another thing at Bath, and Frank Maddox, which I should mention, although it really comes after the period, it was sometime in the mid-seventies, when I went there with a musical show, and we had a small orchestra, I think, about five-piece orchestra, and the musical director playing the piano, and, on the Monday, when we were fitting up and the musical director came in, he tried the piano - I'm glad he came in early! - he tried the piano. He said, 'This piano just is no good. It's no good at all. You've got to get another piano,' and I went to see Frank Maddox in his office. Luckily he was there, and I said, 'Look, I'm sorry, but our musical director is not happy with the piano. Can we hire in another one, which we will, obviously, have to pay for?' He said, 'I don't know what's wrong with my piano. It's a perfectly good pit piano.' Anyway, he said, 'There is a firm down the road. I'll get one sent in,' and within half an hour, we had a brand new piano. Perfect. At the end of the week, when I went to settle up, I said, 'Oh, by the way, Frank, I haven't had an invoice for the hire of the piano.' He said, 'Oh, well, I've got it here.' He said, 'It's all right, I'll take it off the contra because I'm a director of the hire company.'

MW: Very canny!

GC: So, that was a crafty bit of work on his part. I don't know how many other people had had to hire pianos in his time. Anyway, that was one thing. I think I'd better move on quite a bit. I did a number of different shows on tour for Arthur and Audrey over the years, and interspersed, I was still doing a bit of television work, I notice, in a non-

speaking capacity. There were three years, 1964, I don't want to miss out, if I have, no, it comes later. In 1964, I was largely concerned with the production of *Salad Days*, on tour from Wimbledon. I was engaged as company manager. We had a separate stage manager, so I didn't have to worry about the technical side of things. I had to look after the company and make sure they were paid and happy and had all the things they needed, which, really, I think, during my life, has been my strength, if there is any, was in the pastoral care of the company, rather than the technical aspects. Now, there are several interesting things. *Salad Days*, I was originally engaged to be Company Manager and play two or three parts. Now, there was a bit of trouble in rehearsals, because I can't dance, really. I've got two left feet, and I certainly can't sing, and this was required in one or two of the parts, so, gradually, during rehearsals, the parts were shared out amongst other people. I did end up playing one part, Uncle Augustine, who didn't have to join in any of the dancing and singing, and I briefly appeared, I think, in the opening scene across the back of the stage, waving a butterfly net. In the company, we had a young man called John Inman, who I mentioned before as being a marvellous prop-maker, etc, and he was playing PC Boot, and his later, his professional partner, Barry Howard was playing the police inspector. They had a scene in the police station, where they had a comic dance routine, and I think it was out of that that they developed the idea that they should do a double act in pantomime as the ugly sisters, which, I think they did their first one the following Christmas. Anyway, very soon after that, and I think they started off doing it for Arthur and Audrey. I could be wrong. Anyway, they carried on doing ugly sisters, and eventually, Barry Howard split off and John carried on doing dame parts quite a long time around doing his notable appearances in *Are You Being Served*, but the thing... I mentioned the fact that he had made the props for the pantomime. When they were doing the ugly sisters, I know that he used to make all their costumes, comic wigs, props and everything. Very handy fellow.

MW: Very multi-talented.

GC: I will say, I have seen him in recent years and he hasn't changed a bit. You know, success has not gone to his head. He's a lovely man. Anyway, anything else about *Salad Days*? No. I think we'd better skip on anyway because of time. So, '64, really, *Salad Days* year. We did a long tour, and then came off for a bit, started again. At some point, we went into the Lyric Theatre at Hammersmith for a few weeks. Then, I did one or two other plays, and at some point, I remember, *Salad Days* had gone out on tour again for the same management, but I wasn't with it, and then somebody fell ill or something, and I was asked... I was in between other plays, and Arthur Lane said, 'Oh, you've got to go up to,' - I think it was Bradford - 'and join them and play Uncle Augustine. We've lost...' And I went up there, and, of course, having played this part for weeks and weeks, and it wasn't a very big part anyway, I sort of went, I arrived that afternoon and went on that evening and did it, and everybody thought I was marvellous. And I think they had somebody doing company and stage manager, and I think I probably took over, then, as company manager as well for three or four weeks, the rest of that tour. The following year, we did a production on tour of *The Belle of New York*. We had quite an interesting cast. *The Belle of New York*, of course, is an old 1890s musical comedy. Which has been repeated off and on over the years ever since. We had Marion Studholme and we had George Lacy, who, in his time was a very well known pantomime dame, notably as Mother Goose. He's supposed to have been the best Mother Goose ever, I believe, and he was in it. We had a few problems with him, but never mind. I played a tiny part, I think, but what I remember most about that, I mean, the production, I mean, I think the performances were pretty good. The

production itself was bordering on tatty. We opened it at Wimbledon and we had bits of scenery. It was the old-fashioned formula. You would open with a full-stage set, and then there would be a front cloth, a second set, interval, full stage set, front cloth, full stage set, four sets altogether, plus two front cloths. Now, the front cloths had come out of a show, I think it was called High Spirits, which was a musical version of Blithe Spirit, or something like that, which were totally unmatched to any of the rest of the scenery. The third act, which was a scene, the third, well, the final scene, which was a full-stage scene... I'm trying to remember what it actually was. Oh, 'on the lawn of the casino at Narragansett Pier'. Yes, it was a sort of open air thing with tables and... But the set hadn't been built, wasn't finished. We were doing the dress rehearsal on a Monday afternoon and opening that evening.

MW: Oh, goodness!

GC: They were still building, actually, painting bits of the set and putting it together during the afternoon, so we didn't have a dress rehearsal. The cast sat out in the auditorium, with the full orchestra, and went through all the musical numbers, like... What is...? I can't think of the word. There's a word for it. Anyway, a propesitz or something [ed. sitzprobe]. Anyway, they did that and then we did the first performance without a proper dress rehearsal at all, and it went okay, amazingly enough. Who needs a dress rehearsal?!

MW: Absolutely. It lends an extra zest.

GC: I don't recommend it. I don't recommend it, because I'm giving a lecture later this week about – I mean, later this year – about a performance in 1890, where there was disasters because of no time for technical rehearsals. However, that's all another story. So, that year was largely involved with The Belle of New York. There are probably other things I could say about that, particularly about George Lacy, but there isn't time now. I'm dropping in hints for other people to talk to me. We did quite an interesting production at Wimbledon, a play called The Great Horatio Bottomley, a new play by David Turner with Julian Summers, who was quite a well known actor in those days, which was fun, or interesting. Then, another pantomime. Ah. We come to a pantomime at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, Puss in Boots, also presented by Arthur Lane and Audrey Lupton, 'Starring Hughie Green with Monica Rose and a brilliant cast,' it says here. We also have Harry Corbett with Sooty and Sweep. What had happened, the management, there was a fairly new management at the Lyric, Hammersmith who were largely, I think, Americans, who'd recently taken over, and they'd booked in Harry Corbett with Sooty and Sweep to play twice daily during the Christmas season. They, then, having done that, somehow, Arthur and Audrey had this pantomime available, so they wanted to book that in as well. Now, in order to... Harry Corbett... To pacify Harry Corbett, they said, 'Well, we can write you into the pantomime, so you can do your own show in the mornings. Afternoons...'

MW: 'You're part of the pantomime.'

GC: 'And evenings, or whatever, you're part of the pantomime.' Indeed. And so, they had us... It was Puss in Boots. There's a scene on board ship, and at one point, Sooty and Sweep arrive on the deck to entertain the sailors. So that's how they got away... The main problem from me, as a Company Manager was the dressing room problem, because Harry Corbett had to have a huge dressing room with all his props and everything else and give away stuff for his morning show. I mean, he used to give away bags of sweets and God knows what, and there was all that. The other problem - Hughie Green, not a very easy man to deal with, but, of course, most of the dirty work was done by his sidekick, his minder, called Vic Hallums, who was also given a part as Willie the Ghillie - it's even in the programme - in the show, and what happened... At one point in the show, of course, Hughie Green had to do one of his quiz show prize-giving bits with members of the audience, and on one matinee, one of the stage hands yelled out the answer. So, Hughie Green didn't do anything himself, obviously, but his sidekick, Vic Hallums, sort of managed to get this bloke the sack. Well, that evening, now, what used to happen in these pantomimes, the show would start with a gauze. You'd have a front cloth and a gauze, then the lighting would go through the gauze and you'd have, you know, the town square or whatever and then the gauze would go out. Well, what happened that evening, because this man had been sacked, all the fly crew up in the fly gallery had come down and walked out before the gauze went out, so the management from the front of the theatre were summoned, because they didn't go away. They were all outside the door, the staff, but Barrie Gosney, who was playing the dame, and was a good old trooper, I mean, I was in the prompt... I wasn't actually running the show from the prompt corner, but I was in the prompt corner trying to sort things out and trying to pacify the stage crew. Barrie Gosney just leapt up the ladder up the wall in his, in his gown as dame, and hauled out the gauze. And, of course, the opening scene in the main square is usually quite a long one in pantomime because you're introducing all the different characters, ending up with the principal - in this case, Hughie Green - and by the time it got to the next scene change, they had all been persuaded to go back to work. Another funny thing about that, we had... There was a little joke inserted on board ship, and I can't remember how it worked, but various people went over the side of the ship, and somebody threw up, to represent spray, a shower of haricot beans or something. It looked like spray, but they wanted to have - this is one of Hughie Green's ideas, I think - they wanted to have a midget who dashed on one side, said something and jumped over the side. So we had a midget from, I can't remember. There was Mrs somebody's Midgets. Anyway, a diminutive actor called William Shearer. Well, I think he was in another show at another theatre as well, because that's all he had to do. He had to run on, say something, and he would rush in from wherever else he was working, get changed, rush onto the stage, jump over the side, but nine times out of ten, he said the wrong line when he went over. And then he'd rush back to his other theatre. And he got paid for it.

MW: Very nice too.

GC: Not a lot, but then it all helps. Anyway, that was, so that was the fair experience. Puss in Boots at the Lyric, Hammersmith. Then, the following year... Where have we got to? I've done...

MW: Moving on towards your joining the Stage Managers' Association.

GC: Yes. Are we running out of time?

MW: Just slightly.

GC: Slightly. No, well, the following year was mainly Camelot with Bruce Trent. We did quite a long tour from Wimbledon, not at Wimbledon. We used... We had the joy of half of the Drury Lane sets and the Drury Lane costumes. I say half, because none of the theatres we went to, although they were some of the biggest provincial theatres, could take all the scenery, but it looked splendid. We had a very eccentric stage manager - I was just company manger again - We had a very eccentric stage manager who did a marvellous job of getting it opened in time because it was a terrific and complicated show. I don't think we can really go into all that now. There are one or two stories attached to it for another time. I must mention Night Must Fall, because a little after this, Arthur and Audrey sent out a tour of Night Must Fall, the famous Emyln Williams play about this paranoid young man who commits murder, and in the... I suspect it often gets cut when people do it. There is a prologue, which is the Lord Chief Justice delivering his sentence before, so the whole of the rest of the play is...whatever it's called.

MW: Flashback.

GC: But I appeared as the Lord Chief Justice in this prologue. It was a sort of, just delivering the sentence, but I had to come on in front of a black drape, holding a, sort of, metre-square canvas flat, representing the front of the judge's thing [ed. box]. Hold it up with the wig and all the rest of it, the gown and the black cap, and deliver the sentence, just in a single spotlight and then go off with it. It was quite fun. Anyway, that's the sort of thing one got up to on tour. I haven't said... Oh, well, I'd better... Yes, I must, because I've got to speak about Cameron Mackintosh, early days with Cameron Mackintosh. I, in 1967, I actually, I got the only job I ever got through an Agent of Stage Management. I went to Vincent Shaw, who I had known through other reasons for some time. Anyway, he sent me to see Hubert Woodward. Now, Hubert Woodward was, by this time, quite an old man, but he was still mixing himself up in theatrical enterprises, and he usually, I think, during the whole of his life, probably, latched onto people with money to put shows on, and he would mastermind them, and in this case, a little company called Ariadne Theatrical Managers Ltd, he joined up with. Now, Ariadne Theatrical Managers Ltd was, in fact, a gentleman called Robin Alexander, who, I believe was the, wasn't his real name. He was the son of a fairly wealthy Scottish poet, and I think he had money. I may have got this slightly wrong, and he was teamed up with a young man called Cameron Mackintosh, both 19 years old, and what had happened, Jane Eyre was on in the middle of a 20-week tour, and was about to open at the Nuffield Theatre, Southampton, and the company manager had absconded with the petty cash and the wardrobe mistress. [laughter] And anyway, I was asked to go over, down, and take over as company manager for the remaining ten weeks of the tour. It was a very nice cast. We had Jeremy Hawk, who was the leading man, playing Rochester, of course, and he was an old-fashioned leading man. We did have understudies, and I had to understudy a small part, but he insisted, every week, on the understudy rehearsal, that one of the principal actors would come in and rehearse with the understudies, and he did it himself. That was good. Anyway, that's probably... But Cameron, everywhere we went, the publicity, the local papers would say, 'The youngest

theatrical producers in the business, Robin Alexander and Cameron Mackintosh.' I think they put Robin first because he had the money, and that was, sort of, the beginnings of Cameron Mackintosh, who, I think, has done quite well for himself since. There's probably more I could say about that another time. Soon after that... Oh, I... Have I got time to mention Carry On Laughing?

MW: Very briefly, perhaps.

GC: Yes, well, I did a season at Southsea, for Arthur Lane and Audrey Lupton again, which was called Carry On Laughing. There were two terrible North Country comedies. I won't mention the author's name, but they were called A Drop in the Ocean and Just the Ticket, starring Kenneth Connor, Charles Hawtrey, Jack Haig with Lesley Sarony, Joan Hurley and... We called it Carry On Laughing, but there weren't a lot of laughs. I have to mention my little... Jack Haig, a very established comic actor, and, I believe, serious actor on occasions. I had to appear in one of the plays at the very beginning as a solicitor negotiating the purchase of a property, and he said to me at some point, 'You can say that again,' so, one night, I said, 'Oh, well, I will,' and I repeated my previous line, and I went to him afterwards, as he was the funny man, and I said, 'I'm very sorry about that, Jack. I shouldn't have done that.' He said, 'Look, that's all right, old boy. Don't worry about it,' but he never said that line again, so I never had the opportunity of repeating it! So, he knew what he was doing, even if I didn't. Soon after that, I had... I joined the Stage Management Association, and, in those days, the West End Stage Management Association. I had to join as an associate member as I had not, up to that point, worked in the West End. We're now towards the end of 1967. Anyway, I went on their monthly free list, and the very first one I went on, I got a job at the Oxford Playhouse as Stage Manager in Frank Hauser's Oxford Playhouse Company. Since then, up till about 1990, when I stopped being on it, I never got another job off that free list. But there we are. I managed.

MW: It got you one job.

GC: That started four years off and on at the Oxford Playhouse, which I could talk about now, because some of it comes into the period under question, but I think we've run out of time.

MW: Briefly. If you wanted to just... Just a flavour of what you were doing at...

GC: Yes, a flavour. Because, what we did, they had, generally speaking, there were two Stage Managers doing alternate productions. Quite a few of them, we took out little tours, so, while we were at the Playhouse, I was just concerned with the stage management aspect. When we went on tour, I would undertake the duties of company manager as well. In one or two cases, I did make brief appearances. I have to say I had the honour of having played what I call the... There's a phrase in the theatrical profession about a small part, calling it 'a cough and a spit', and I did play in Ben Jonson's *The Silent Woman*, the part of a priest who has a very bad cold. The whole point is this man's getting married. He doesn't want somebody who makes a noise, and I just wheezed and spluttered my way through this part, so I played the original Ben

Jonson cough and a spit! That which, where I started off at the Mermaid playing a dogsbody, I'm now a cough and a spit. No, I did some very nice and interesting productions with a lot of interesting people at the Oxford Playhouse, although I think it has to be said, by this time, the hey day of Frank Hauser's reign at the Oxford had, sort of, gone slightly off the boil. I've got a feeling that Frank had actually probably been there just a bit too long, but there we are.

MW: Indeed. As a footnote, am I right that the theatre at Bath was one of the ones that you were mentioning that still had the oil lighting?

GC: Oh, yes. No, gas lighting.

MW: Gas lighting, yes.

GC: When I went there in... When I first went there, which was around about 1963, until quite a few years later, the secondary lighting, emergency lighting in the corridors etc, was still gas, so at the half-hour call, the gas man would go round lighting the gas lamps. The same thing applied at the Alhambra, Bradford. I think, probably, till almost if not beyond 1970, because I have a feeling it was still there when I went there with the Oxford Playhouse Company one. But it was quite fun, really because you get the smell of the gas and think what it used to be like when it was all gas. But it was only the secondary lighting, but still, it was there.

MW: Thank you very much indeed.

GC: Right. Pleasure.