

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

<http://sounds.bl.uk>

Neville Hunnings – interview transcript

Interviewer: Marie-Claire Wyatt

4 September 2006

Theatre-goer. Alan Badel; amateur theatre; Arts Theatre Club; Bristol Old Vic; club theatres; Harry H. Corbett; Margot Fonteyn; French theatre; John Gielgud's Hamlet; Robert Helpmann; history cycles; Stephen Joseph; Look Back in Anger; Tom Milne; Mother Courage; Old Vic at the New Theatre; Old Vic Theatre School; post-war growth in theatre, ballet and music; provincial theatre; Royal Court Theatre; Society for Theatre Research; Theatre in the Round; Theatre Workshop; David Thompson; verse drama; World Theatre Seasons.

MW: Right, I think our first question was what was your first major theatre-going experience and how do you feel that influenced you for your future theatre-going?

NH: Well, the first post-war theatre experience – I went to the theatre once or twice as a small child – was Gielgud's Hamlet in the Haymarket in... I think it was 1944, and I think it was because Hamlet was the set book for the School Certificate that year, and I remember sitting in the balcony with some of my colleagues and seeing the stage as through the wrong end of a telescope...

MW: Oh dear!

NH: ...so very little of it came through, and anyway I was very, very innocent in theatre and so the hugeness of the occasion, the importance of the man and what he was doing was completely lost. So it didn't have any influence at all on me. It didn't put me off but it didn't say 'Ah! I must go to the theatre.' That came a bit later, not very much later.

MW: Yes, you were saying about the Laurence Olivier season at the New Vic, sorry...

NH: New Theatre.

MW: New Theatre, sorry, yes.

NH: Yes, the Old Vic at the New Theatre.

MW: Yes, that's the one. Sorry.

NH: Yes, no, that I think was the real revelation and that must have been when I was in the Sixth Form and, oh, just astounding! I remember three productions in particular... well, four, I suppose. One was the double bill of Oedipus and The Critic, and I remember being very strongly struck by the Oedipus and then laughing like a drain at The Critic. Olivier had sort of changed character, he was playing Mr. Puff, I think it was, and it was real musical stuff and absolutely brilliant. And the other double production was the two parts of Henry IV which was absolutely super and still, to my mind, the best I have ever seen. If I remember rightly, it was Michael Redgrave as the Hotspur. I can remember [him] limping slightly and I don't know whether it was Olivier playing Hal but it was a very, very powerful production; and sadly the team was kicked out. There was some sort of a putsch going on, I don't know what was behind it, it made a great fuss at the time but the season - the company - was a trio of Olivier, Ralph Richardson (who played Falstaff, presumably) and John Burrell and there was some sort of boardroom putsch and they were thrown out so their genius was replaced by Hugh Hunt which was pretty good - I remember some good stuff there too but it was a very, very sad thing that that happened. And I can't remember very much more specifically of that nature about the theatre at that time. It's much more sort of general in form but it was a period of tremendous excitement. I put it down to the post-war...

MW: The lifting of all the restrictions, the...

NH: ...the restrictions, that's right, yes, the sudden coming-back of everything. I mean, some of it had been going on during the war, and some of it was a return from pre-war, and some of it was giving us things which had happened elsewhere but which we hadn't been able to see because of the war, so this was happening - it was in the theatre, it was in the cinema where one was getting all the old French films, the Everyman and Studio One and The Academy, absolutely exciting, ballet coming back and that was a period when Fonteyn and Helpmann - and to my mind the real star was not Fonteyn, it was Robert Helpmann.

MW: Oh right!

NH: The first ballet I ever saw was Coppélia, and I took my children to see it many, many years later and it was a great disappointment. The reason, I think, was because Helpmann was such a brilliant Coppélius, and because he was an actor as well as a dancer - because he was a damn good dancer, he was a danseur noble, but he was a great character dancer as well and he - with Fonteyn as Swanilde - was absolutely brilliant, and then you got the new ballets with Arthur Bliss and The Miracle in the Gorbals and things like that which were all very, very exciting, and - for me at any rate - the Promenade concerts at the Albert Hall. To some extent we say this is a period of excitement in the London theatre and London arts and I wonder how much of it is a period of excitement for me because I was just at that age, last years at school and after that, and discovering it all for myself so that probably added to the excitement but my God! there was stuff to bite on.

MW: Yes, I know a lot of our interviewees have commented on the opulence of the theatre by contrast with everyday life at that point which of course was still...

NH: Well, that's true too, yes. But when you've got productions and actors and dancers and so on who are so good and the quality was, I think, exceptional. One looks at the theatre now, and there's enormously good stuff but somehow it was concentrated and you had the quality... I was going over the Paris about that time - well this was the early fifties, the first three years of the 1950s when I was at university. I was at school on the Embankment, City of London at Blackfriars, and I went to university at King's College so I was part of the London scene all the time, so it's so easy to do these things. I used to spend my Easters cycling over to Paris...

MW: Goodness!

NH: ...staying in the youth hostel in Boulevard Biencourt and then, for a fortnight, going to the theatre every day and sometimes as many matinees as I could as well.

MW: Wow!

NH: And I did that for three summers - three Easters - and that was terrific not only for the language but for getting theatre...

MW: I can imagine, yes!

NH: ...and that provided a sort of complement to what was going on in London so one felt really the terrific theatre going on everywhere.

MW: Yes.

NH: My one regret is that in Paris I never saw Louis Jouvet on the stage, but one can't have everything and probably I wouldn't have appreciated it anyway.

MW: By contrast with going to Paris and seeing plays and so forth there, I know you mentioned the International Theatre Festival and so forth, did the experiences you had between them tally or did it open to other...?

NH: Oh, it was just another facet of the same sort of thing, really. This is just not London, this is the world. This is, 'aren't things absolutely marvellous and everything's opening up to me' and some of it came rather than me having to go and I think it was Peter Daubeny who started the first of the International Theatre seasons, bringing over companies from abroad. A bit like the Bite seasons at the Barbican at the moment.

MW: Oh, I see.

NH: But then it was all new, so again it was, 'this is what is going on elsewhere which we haven't been able to experience', and it was quite mind-blowing and some of the stuff that was being done was so out of our own orbit, as it were, our own expectations. One of the things I remember, which was not so much a performance - although I did see the performance - was... one of the companies was a French company - it might have been TNP - with Edwige Feuillère as the star, and I can remember Harold Hobson, the great critic, who was very, very open to foreign - he was a very advanced critic in that way, and he was not only a fan of Edwige Feuillère, [laughs] but he couldn't stop talking about it and it became quite a joke in the newspapers and the critics and so on, about it. But the thing that I remember from one of the seasons was the Theatre National Populaire, with Jean Vilar and it was to do with the lighting effects.

MW: Oh yes.

NH: Again, all the theatre I had seen up to then was pretty straightforward, proscenium arch type of stuff, very, very high quality, but straightforward, from that point of view, and I can remember a scene in a play that I saw where the characters were going into a wood or a forest, and instead of flats coming in or painted trees or anything, what suddenly emerged and it did it gradually so you suddenly became aware of it which you had a series of spots in the, up above, shining down vertically on to the stage and making trees out of light. They were columns of light...

MW: Oh good heavens!

NH: ...and the whole forest was there and it had happened! It's rather like things happening behind a gauze and then you light up behind the gauze and things emerge and this was quite a mind-blowing...

MW: I can imagine! I'm just... I mean, it must have been spectacular anyway, but by contrast with what you're more familiar with...

NH: Yes. It just showed what could be done in the modern theatre. And, of course, talking of modern theatre, well, I don't know whether it, yes, it was modern theatre, was the Brecht company, Berliner Ensemble, which came with, I think it was Mother Courage with Helene Weigel.

MW: Yes, I think so

NH: ...and that again was a very impressive and different type of production, and that was part of these seasons. So we were getting a lot of pretty marvellous stuff. And also there was another, which was not part of these seasons but the American impresario, Sol

Hurok, who has written a book I've probably got, I think. But he toured a kabuki company...

MW: Oh right.

NH: ...and this, I think, was the first time that Japanese theatre had been seen over here for quite a long time – I haven't got a local history – possibly ever, and again was a completely different type of theatre. I think it was at the Covent Garden, so it must have been after Covent Garden reopened, and I can remember one particular piece which was Lion Dance – you've got a lion and the cub and the lion is encouraging the cub to climb up a small cliff face as part of his training, and eventually he does it so the whole drama is – and it's all done in mime with the kabuki music – and eventually the cub succeeds and then you get a tremendous dance of joy of the two of them round and round the stage and they both had sort of manes on their headdresses so they were twirling round and the manes were twirling round and the sense of joy and love and everything was absolutely amazing. It was quite different from the kabuki they did at the Sadler's Wells earlier this year which was more proper kabuki, I think.

MW: It had one of the great stars, didn't it? He came over...

NH: Yes, well, one of the young ones but no, it was very impressive but very much slower and none of this sort of thing. This was a barnstorming thing which was exactly right for the time. If it had been pure kabuki I think it would have been just a few people but this worked very, very well.

MW: Ah! Fantastic! I suppose that the Society for Theatre Research was founded around that time, wasn't it, so...

NH: Yes, part of this international movement, or coming to London, was a conference, an international conference for theatre historians. This was organised by a theatrical bookseller, Ifan Kyrle Fletcher who had his bookshop in Victoria and he was organising it together with, I think, some other colleagues and this was a very important event for theatre history and about the same time he and some colleagues founded the Society for Theatre Research which was doing in Britain what other societies were doing abroad, and whether it came out of the conference, or was just part of the same thing – it was about the same time – and as the Society has got its Jubilee in... I think it's 2008, so it must have been 1958 that this was happening, which would fit, and at that time there was no study of theatre history in the universities in this country at all. It was a purely amateur occupation, people like Sybil Rosenfelt and Muriel St. Clare Byrne and - she of The Paston Letters - and others, what's her name?, who was the... never mind. And it was... the Society was formed and the conference was held to encourage the concern with the history of theatre as opposed to the history of drama so its performance and the physical manifestations of drama, and of course since then there's been tremendous burgeoning of drama departments rather than departments of English and that sort of thing, and theatrical opportunities. And it was at the Society for Theatre Research that I met my great friend at that time, Tom Milne, who was working with Kyrle Fletcher and we both volunteered to help with cataloguing the book collection of the Society and

struck up a friendship and went did things together until I got married and so during the 1920s - not the 1920s, my twenties! - so this will be the fifties and early sixties, in other words precisely the period we're talking about...

MW: Yes, indeed.

NH: ...that he and I were experiencing of these new things and reacting to them. One of them, of course, being the Royal Court.

MW: Yes.

NH: The English... it was the English Stage Society, wasn't it, which was founded by George Devine? And we went, we went to the first production. It was new, it was something possibly exciting but anyway it was...

MW: Something to investigate.

NH: ...said to be new. That's right, yes. And it was the third production that was the Look Back in Anger...

MW: Ah, yes!

NH: ...and that of course was the great scandal or succes d'estime or whatever it is. I know Tom and I argued enormously about it. I was very hostile to the play, he was very pro. I was, in effect, seeing through the very juvenile, political attitudes and things. Nevertheless it influenced me enormously this idea of getting up on Sunday morning and reading the Sunday papers in digs and that sort of thing which, again, for a young man in his early/mid twenties this was all rather exciting... and 'those bloody bells' and sort of thing, [laughs] it was all slightly liberating. But the other major development that we were both very, very attached to was Theatre Workshop. I think we discovered it shortly after Joan Littlewood moved in there, at Stratford Le Bow, and we went out there - it was a bit of a journey - and very few critics did, it was ignored almost completely until Oh, What a Lovely War - and then, of course, you've got things like The Square Fellow and other things, but at the beginning she wasn't doing that sort of stuff at all - it was Shakespeare and the Spanish Golden Age, Lope de Vega and so on, and I can remember a production of Richard II which is still the best production I have ever seen, with Harry Corbett playing Richard - and that was when he was called Harry Corbett, and sadly when he left Joan he had to put in the 'H' in between because there was another Harry Corbett somewhere around that no-one had ever heard of [laughs] but he said I've got the right to this name and you're not going to have it! And so, when you look at Steptoe and Son it's Harry H. Corbett...

MW: Yes.

NH: ...but that was Harry Corbett, and it was a great tragedy - and he said so himself - that he wasn't able to continue straight acting, because I think he would have been a brilliant Shakespearean actor or actor generally. He had power, he had ability, and - certainly judging by what he did for Joan Littlewood - there's no question about it but he was sidetracked and it may be Steptoe that did it, I don't know but it was very, very sad. But the great thing about Joan was that not only did she have a very strong sense of directing actors and staging and so on, the typical example of this is from Richard. It's one scene I can remember from it when, towards the end, Bolingbroke is sort of in control of things and is in Richard's castle and says 'Will you come down into the base court, My Lord?' and when Richard does he then goes into a soliloquy about base court and the fall of kings and so on, but he was up high and literally came down into the base court, and that just sort of crystallised this very important figure. I don't know whether other producers have done the same thing but certainly that was a very, very powerful one and it was only later, well, I suppose it was Oh! What a Lovely War, where you saw Joan taking a much more, much stronger involvement in the production of the result, not just producing a play but actually influencing the writing. And she did that with The Quare Fellow and the others and, of course, Oh! What a Lovely War was put together with her and the others and brilliantly so - it's one of the best theatrical experiences I think I had.

MW: Definitely, it's...

NH: And it's interesting that I was talking to Brian Murphy about a year ago at the Theatre Museum on some function or other, and he was saying on tours of Oh! What a Lovely War there were certain parts which went down very well in certain countries, and you may remember the scene which he was the officer, the French officer, urging the troops to battle, Verdun...

MW: Yes.

NH: ...and they go into battle bleating like sheep, and that apparently went down very, very well in France! [laughs] And there was another scene that went down very well in Germany and so on. But also she did some productions which were, which didn't sort of survive, they were just fun. And one of those which I remember was a Christmas jolly called The Big Rock Candy Mountain...

MW: Oh, right.

NH: ...and what was behind it was that she got hold of some American who was visiting, I suppose, and I don't know who he was, I never heard of him again, whether he was - he wasn't a rock star or anything like that but he was a, probably a folk musician - and it was sort of built round him. So it was a great... it was tremendously fun, great fun and enjoyable. And that's the thing about Joan, that one thinks of her as being concerned with very important and significant things but she was a theatre person through and through and she could understand and get across... and again, it's a great shame that she was never given the support - either financial or critical - until much later and then it pulled her in this other direction of the Irish plays and, what was the one

about the prisoner? – can't remember now – and away from the classical theatre because I'm sure if she'd been able to continue along those lines we would have had some really memorable things to...

MW: I can imagine. Yes. Was it well-attended other than by the critics or was it...?

NH: No. At least, our experience was that we were a very small, select group and I've got a photograph at home – I can't find it at the moment but – which shows me and Tom in the auditorium, alone! [laughs]

MW: Oh goodness!

NH: It's probably a bit unfair because it must have been taken during the Interval, but all the same, I don't think there were more than half a dozen or perhaps a dozen people in the theatre at the time, but it was such a marvellous theatre! It still is! You can be such a small audience and yet you get the full feel of a theatre. Normally, if you're in a theatre and there are only a few of you, you get the feeling of desolation round you, don't you? But this theatre, that didn't matter.

MW: Oh! Thank goodness for that!

NH: Yes [laughs]. And the other thing about it is that it was a training ground for actors. I mentioned Brian Murphy, and you remember a series on television, a husband and wife series, with Yootha Joyce, and she was also a Theatre Workshop actress and there were lots of others that come up again and again and again. Never in the top ranks - possibly because they were all sort of very independent! [laughs] - because you've got to be that to work with Joan or somebody like that – Howard Gurney was another one - but one can bring up lots and lots of names which occur, they occur in TV or here and there and were very, very good, as it were, jobbing actors, which is not a nice thing to say but reflects their position in the acting world rather than their qualities which I think were very much greater. But if one goes back to the Look Back in Anger...

MW: Of course, yes.

NH: ...the impact of that, after that of course you got the Arnold Wesker's and the Shelagh Delaney's and so on which was all very exciting which continued that style which, to some extent, was called, what was it...? Kitchen sink drama by hostile critics and there was tremendous critical diversity in the approach to this. But what it did was to bring in to the London theatre a new type of theatre...

MW: Yes, and I guess people starting feeling that they could write like this and...

NH: Well, yes, and you got a lot of it, and I suppose it lead on to the Harold Pinter's and well, of course, it was directly responsible for John Arden and others, so the positive impact of it was very, very strong. But it did have a negative element in that it pretty well killed stone-dead what my memory is of what was good in the London theatre at that time but which was, I suppose... no, I was going to say, which was a better a bit boulevard in style but it wasn't, I'm thinking here particularly of the verse drama – Christopher Fry, John Whiting, T.S. Elliot, Cocktail Party, Family Reunion – these were exciting productions, exciting styles and different from... they may have used proscenium arch - well so did the kitchen sink drama - so it wasn't staging it was what was being staged and the poetic drama was trying to get through to deep things, whereas the new Royal Court drama was trying to get through to social things. Which was fair enough, but not at the expense of the other, and that's the same and that's something I think we've lost permanently now. We never had it again. And the other that we were getting - and again which died out pretty well as a response - was the rather good French theatre, I'm thinking of Jean Anouilh, quite a lot of his plays were being produced and they were good, they were different again and having had these sort of sessions in Paris – although that wasn't really of relevance to me – it was just another thing, these were jolly nice. And not just Anouilh but things like The Little Hut which was a pure, frothy, boulevard comedy but my memory of it again, just like with the Anouilh, was of very bright staging, very light, airy, frothy, but in the good sense of a good soufflé and again that became very unfashionable, and still is. Well, again, this was of its time, and on the other hand it was the Royal Court which introduced Eugene Ionesco and there are several of his plays I can remember, the... well [laughs], I can say I can remember them, I can't remember whether I saw them in London or in Paris [laughs] but I know I saw several at the Royal Court and I certainly saw some in Paris as well. But all this going on at the Royal Court was under George Devine who was part of the group who had founded the Old Vic Theatre Centre. So you had Michel Saint-Denis who was the sort of leader of them, who was a link with the Cartel et Quatre in Paris and had very advanced ideas of what the theatre could do – well, advanced from the English point of view [laughs]. He was bringing in ideas from the continent and this continuation which you had the apostolic succession in Paris from Antoine through Copeau and Jouvet and Delin and so on, and you can find finishing up with Jean-Louis Barreaux. Nothing like that happened in England at all and Michel Saint-Denis was sort of trying to introduce something...

MW: A sort of conduit.

NH: Yes. And he had George Devine and Glen Byam Shaw as the three, the triumvirate, and it was a theatre centre and they had a school, the Old Vic Theatre School which was very, very good – Joan Plowright was there and a lot of others. And they had the Old Vic Theatre for a time and they had a touring system, I think, as well. I think the Young Vic was created at that time...

MW: Yes.

NH: There again, there was another putsch and they were thrown out and guess who came in at the Old Vic? Hugh Hunt! [laughs]

MW: Oh, good heavens!

NH: I only realised this because I was reading an obituary of Hugh Hunt which I found in my papers a few days ago. I don't think he was involved in these shenanigans but it's a very interesting coincidence [laughs].

MW: Slight sense of déjà vu!

NH: Yes, indeed! But there again, that was a pretty scandalous thing and, although the Theatre Centre was more controversial and hadn't got the same critical support as the Olivier/Richardson group had, nevertheless it was reported with some dismay and it killed stone dead that sort of movement of trying to bring in reform. I'm just reading a book on Terence Grey at the Cambridge Festival Theatre and one can sort of recognise some of the influences.

MW: Yes. What sort of variety of productions did you see? I know you wanted to mention some of the amateur productions and the experience of Greek drama, wasn't it, or is that something for...?

NH: Well, before that I would like to mention one particular production which doesn't sort of fit into any pattern but which I found very, very disturbing and perhaps symptomatic of London stage. This was well into the fifties. I can't remember at all when it was, and that's the Alec Guinness Hamlet which was a highly intellectualised renaissance production. He played it with a Van Dyke beard, and the whole production was centred on the corruption of the court and the danger of the court. And when he - again, my memory's all single scenes from plays [laughs] - but after he kills Polonius and you get the 'dead for a ducat' scene and sort of thing and then he runs off and he doesn't quite, he's just getting to the exit and he pulls his stomach back because there are two rapiers and it's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern coming, being sent by the king to find out what's going on and so on. And a brilliant summary of this dangerous place...

MW: Absolutely!

NH: ...that this is where... The production, which I thought was brilliant - and many, many did - was savaged by the critics and it stopped Guinness from doing anything serious of that sort ever again but that was another of these tragedies. It wasn't a putsch quite but it was in the same category.

MW: Rather poleaxing.

NH: A very good word, yes. Talking about putsches, there's another one...

MW: Oh yes?

NH: ...and that's Stephen Joseph.

MW: Ah! Yes, of course.

NH: He was, of course, his great thing... well, he had two great things. One was new writers and the other was new forms of staging, particularly Theatre in the Round and I met him when I went to... he taught at the Central School and he did some extramural classes in play criticism, I think it was. And I went to this and got to know him there and he was about to create a new company, Studio Theatre Ltd. And asked me if I'd join them...

MW: Oh, right.

NH: ...and so I did. So I was on the Board and so I traipsed around a fair amount to some of the - not out of town, so I didn't go up to Stoke-on-Trent or to Scarborough - but to the London productions and again not just Theatre in the Round but theatre sort of slightly different. I can remember a production of Phèdre - Racine's Phèdre - played in English, I think, by Margaret Rawlings and that was played in a small room and we were two feet away from the actress, and it was brilliant! One could feel... 'This is how Court Theatre was like when it was written'. Everyone was right on top and it came over with no artificiality or anything and it had the Racine elements - I don't know if it was in Alexandrines but it could have been so artificial, and I can believe in a big theatre or an ordinary theatre it wouldn't come over with... but this was absolutely brilliant and there was another production - also I think in the Mahatma Gandhi Hall, which was where he did quite a lot of them - of Georg Kaiser's, the book, Masses and Men, and there the audience were not on four sides, they were on two sides, which I've never seen or heard of before or since. But again, very, very effective and he was full of this sort of thing - what is the way to do things and get them interested? The trouble was that he had a bit of trouble with Peter Cheeseman and I was at the board meeting when it all blew up...

MW: Oh dear!

NH: ...and what had happened was that, Stephen, by then, was ill and David Campton, I think, was his representative, who was a playwright that he had developed, and had come with proxy votes, and it was a question of the financial report or something and Stephen was not happy with the way the finances were being managed and... there must have been something going on. I didn't know about it, but at a certain point in the proceedings when this was sort of put forward and all my fellow directors voted against it and then David Campton came up with Stephen's proxy votes which were of course the majority...

MW: Indeed.

NH: ...and overruled them, and then immediately all the other directors resigned.

MW: Oh, good heavens!

NH: I didn't because I didn't know what was going on [laughs] but I was persuaded by the end of the meeting. 'Well, he's rejected our advice. You ought to resign.' So I agreed. Then Stephen phoned me up the next day and I was back! [laughs] But that was a putsch as well...

MW: Absolutely!

NH: ...and what I think... Well, I don't know, I would love to do a piece of research on this; on all these putsches because I get the feeling the Arts Council was involved.

MW: Oh, right.

NH: It was certainly involved in Stephen's affair. Joe Hodgkinson was the Arts Council representative who was sort of handling the subsidy of the theatre and so on and he – or rather, let's put it a little more impersonally – we were given the clear understanding that if we didn't allow Peter Cheeseman to carry on as he was, the Arts Council would withdraw its funding.

MW: I see.

NH: And so we had to give way and, in effect, withdraw. But also, back in the Old Vic days, I think the Arts Council was involved there and I don't know enough about the circumstances or the personalities. I know Llewellyn Rees - who I think was the financial administrator – was... well, was involved somehow and I suspect that in the Old Vic Centre as well because all of these were subsidised operations...

MW: Yes, indeed.

NH: ...but trying to get data for this, I think, would be absolutely...

MW: Nightmarish, I would imagine.

NH: certainly you won't get it from the Arts Council! [laughs]

MW: So far we've - barring the Theatre in the Round and so forth - talked mostly about London theatre and I know you saw some provinces theatre, so...

NH: Well, just one very quick mention, I used to live... well, I was born in Enfield and there was a well-regarded repertory theatre in Palmers Green, the Intimate Theatre, Palmers Green...

MW: Yes, I've heard of it.

NH: ...as far as I know I only went there once. It was run by John Clements who was, again, a very well-regarded, I think he was married to Kay Hammond, wasn't he?

MW: Yes, I think so.

NH: But I can't really say very much, except that I can remember the outside [laughs] rather than the inside, but I did my National Service in the Air Force and I was stationed in the Wirral so Liverpool was my cultural centre. [laughs]

MW: Beautifully placed!

NH: And so I used to pop off to the Liverpool Philharmonic and the Merseyside Film Society and I can never remember whether it was the Playhouse or the Everyman - I think it was the Playhouse - which was the repertory theatre there, with John Fernald, which was terrific stuff and that sort of reinforced my love of the theatre. I can't remember anything very much about it except that it, the productions were good and exciting and interesting, nothing special. It was good three-weekly rep. But what a good standard to be brought up on!

MW: Yes, absolutely!

NH: Stratford upon Avon I went a certain amount - again I bicycled so... and the things I'd like to mention about that were: it was the first time - I don't know whether ever, but certainly in recent memory - that they had put together all four of the history plays: Richard II, Henry IV and Henry V in the single cycle and I remember seeing that, and all the battles went round about Warwickshire so one really felt in the middle of it. The Henry VI cycle, the four plays in that, were done at the Old Vic a bit later, so that was... when they make a fuss about it nowadays then this is all old stuff by now. But there were two performances at Stratford which, again, I haven't seen mentioned anywhere. One was Margaret Leighton in As You Like It as Rosalind, who was absolutely astounding. She was the personification of love. One doesn't think of that of Margaret Leighton. One thinks of her as a slightly sharper character, but possibly because of that so that she could do the breeches part well but when she has that wonderful speech of 'I'm fathoms deep in love...' or whatever it was you could believe it, and you could feel it and share it. It was tremendous. But the other one which was even more, and again never done - I think they've copied it in a teeny weeny way - was Alan Badel in The Tempest.

MW: Oh yes?

NH: I can't remember who was Prospero but he was playing Ariel, and I think it was the first time they had a man playing Ariel. Usually it was a woman and he brought... rather I suppose like a Japanese kabuki actor playing in a woman's part, he brought an element which women don't get, a sort of hardness, a sense of danger...

MW: Yes, indeed.

NH: ...and whenever he went off flying round the world or whatever it was he was doing there was a sort of 'shhhhh', a hissing sound and again you felt 'This is a dangerous spirit.' People think of fairies as rather dainty and flittering around...

MW: Flimsy.

NH: ...but they are incredibly dangerous if you read the Celtic Lists and so on, and that's what Alan Badel brought to Ariel. I think I've seen men playing Ariel very, very rarely but this one was masterly - absolutely superb. And then finally the other province was Bristol Old Vic, which I went to a season - someone I knew was playing there - and that was the time when Dennis Carey was in charge and I remember one production in particular, *The Wild Duck*, with Robert Edeson playing Hjalmar Ekdal and I think John Neville playing Gregers Werle. Brilliant! Absolutely superb. And Dorothy Reynolds was playing the mother and she of course was the writer, with Julian Slade, of the end-of-term musical *Salad Days*. It was a lovely company - David Bird was another one I remember - who gelled together absolutely perfectly and were producing really super stuff.

MW: Brilliant.

NH: But that's, I think that's all gone now, the provincial theatre, the provincial rep as a touring company. Well, you get productions put on at Coventry and so on which then comes to the West End and so on, so you get some origination but one doesn't get the feeling of continuity.

MW: Yes, I know what you mean.

NH: But this sort of influence came through into London through John Fernald, in fact, at the Arts Theatre which was part, of course, of a... not a new situation of theatres clubs, because they'd been created to get round the Lord Chamberlain largely so it was members only to go in. But the Arts Theatre was something a bit more than most of them, because it was a real club in the sense that it had a restaurant upstairs and if you were a club member, it's a bit like being a member of the Savage or the, what have you. So it was a proper club as well as a theatre and members could go to it. The subscription

- for people like me - was huge and so it was impossible to join it, but they did have an Associate Membership which I think was 5/- a year, which was a bit more like it! [laughs] So I was that, and that entitled you to go to the performances - which was the reason I joined - but they had a coffee bar down in the basement which was available. You couldn't go upstairs to the club premises, but you could go down this coffee bar and so Associate Members could do that. And there were a group of them, about a dozen or more, theatre hangers-on, I suppose [laughs] who used to go there quite often...

MW: Sort of meet for coffee and a discussion.

NH: That's right, yes. And there were... well, I seem to remember the leader of us all was a girl – woman! - called Rosemary Brooks who was related to, was it someone... Editor of The Times or something like that? She was quite well-connected. But she sort of 'held court', as it were [laughs]. It wasn't like that really, but when looking back one realises she was the prime mover. But another person that I remember there very often was Frank Granville Barker who was, he became I think, was he the first editor of Plays and Players? And then went on to Companion Dance and Dancing, or whatever it was, because he's really a dance critic, a ballet critic...

MW: I see, yes.

NH: ...and there were several others. I can't remember most of their names - Charles Lewsen comes to mind and various others - but there we were talking about theatre things to our hearts' content; and it was great fun because it gave you that centre of gravity, as it were, for what you were and enabled you to let forth in your enthusiasms.

MW: Indeed.

NH: What was interesting was that at this time so many of the theatre clubs were called 'New something or other': the New Watergate, the New Lyndsey... and obviously the older ones had fallen on hard times or something and someone had taken them over and so rebaptised them, but there were a lot of them. I think there were eight or nine theatre clubs – all small, well, mostly small: the Arts was a reasonable sized theatre but a lot of them were only 50-seaters, a bit like some of the small theatres in Paris.

MW: Sort of nice - what's the word I'm looking for? - close-feeling.

NH: I think... I joined the New Watergate which was not a very good place or organisation. I mean, it didn't do anything exciting, except that it put on the last play by George Bernard Shaw which was an absolute trifle! [laughs] and I can't remember anything much of it but that is a claim to fame, I suppose.

MW: Indeed. The milestone, as it were.

NH: Yes.

MW: And now we really do get on to the amateur theatre and the...

NH: Yes. I said I wanted to mention the amateur theatre, largely to mention, well (a) to remind ourselves that amateur theatre is not something to be disregarded. In Leicester at the moment the amateur theatre, the Little Theatre, is the only producer of decent drama - the professional theatre is not! And so it is something that one should remember but there are two productions which I've been very much influenced by. One was put on at my old school, City of London School, and it was a production of *The Merchant of Venice* produced by the English teacher who did all the play productions that they did, and what is memorable about it and what influenced me - and does still in my reaction to other productions of *The Merchant of Venice* - is that he put all the Shylock scenes in front of the curtain...

MW: Ah! I see!

NH: ...and this was a time, of course, when your sub-plots were done in front of the curtain while they changed the scenery for the main ones...

MW: Yes, indeed.

NH: ...and so Shylock was a sub-plot - which of course he is, and by emphasising this, the modern uncomfortableness and lack of acceptance of the discrimination and harshness of the treatment of Shylock is much reduced and he becomes much more of a classical villain, a sort of pantaloony type of villain, or... not so much, well, pantaloony, I suppose, the harsh father who is stopping his daughter from getting married, and of course that is precisely what happens, his own daughter elopes which you got in so much of *Comedie de Theatre*...

MW: Absolutely. Yes.

NH: ...but that's hidden, or rather that becomes a sub-plot in modern productions and is just another example of the way they're being harsh to him and I found that a very - and this was at the beginning of my theatrical experience, or fairly early on - but a striking...

MW: Very striking, yes.

NH: ..revelation. And again I've not seen that suggested or mentioned in any other critical writing. And the other production which is more important, I think, was at the Tower Theatre in Islington, by David Thompson of Euripides' *The Bacchae*, which I think

is the most effective Greek production - production of a Greek play - that I have seen. He had the... he used the chorus properly, that is to say, with a certain formality, a certain opera character to it, and the whole production sort of gained in depth and effectiveness. He went on to take the theatre at Stratford from Joan Littlewood when she left and took that over for a time and put on more Euripides plays, and I was reading yesterday a review I'd written of that series for the... for Encore, and again he seems to have got the character of producing Greek plays...

MW: Yes, indeed.

NH: ...which so many of the others don't have. One's seen a lot of... and in a sense even the Oedipus of Laurence Olivier – although that was so sort of great in its own right – and Sophocles is such a tremendous dramatist that it just sort of bowled everything over in front of it and you weren't concerned with things like how do you fit in the chorus and so on, it just...

MW: Fitted?

NH: ...it was just there. But other productions, no, they go to great lengths to, the break up the chorus speeches into individuals and things, which destroys the whole character of Greek play and so on. And that arose out of amateur theatre.

MW: Yes. Well, I think that's been absolutely fascinating. I notice that time has slightly run out on us but thank you very much for all that. That was absolutely fascinating.

NH: Good, good!

MW: Thank you for coming.

NH: Good to get it off my chest.