

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Helen Neale – interview transcript

Interviewer: Dominic Shellard

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Actress and theatre-goer. Peggy Ashcroft; As You Like It; Richard Burton; Agatha Christie's plays; critics; Frances Cuka; The Guildhall; John Gielgud; learning parts; Joan Plowright; Terence Rattigan; repertory; rehearsal structure; revue; Roots; Separate Tables; Shakespeare; Stratford; theatre-going; Kenneth Tynan; Peter Ustinov; West Side Story; women.

DS: Hello, it's delightful to be able to meet you. Can I just ask at the beginning of the interview whether we have your permission to place the interview in the National Sound Archive for the British Library so people can quote from it?

HN: Yes.

DS: Thank you very much indeed. OK, I think we're going to divide this interview into two sections – we're going to talk about your theatre going and about your training as an actress and your experience of weekly rep. Shall we start with the theatre going, in the early 1950s?

HN: Yes. Well, the first really exciting thing that happened was my parents booked in for us to have a holiday, myself and my sister and them, at Stratford in 1950. And this was very exciting because this was the beginning of the new Stratford, this was Anthony Quayle, Glen Byam Shaw, only five plays being done, which they started in April - you didn't get the full five in repertory until August, so we went in August. Also, I didn't realise at the time, but I have read Gielgud's letters since, and of course it is the beginning of his second stage as an actor, it's when he takes on the deeply unpleasant part of Angelo in Measure for Measure, plays his first Cassius, which is terrific. And so we went along, and we queued for returns, so we sat in the foyer every day waiting for the box office to have return tickets and we got to see everything that way. But very luckily my father found that he knew somebody in the costume department. He'd been in the Army with them, so I suppose subsequently for three years we always had his tickets so that we didn't have to queue any more. And the first season we saw... The first night we saw Julius Caesar with Gielgud, as I've said, as Cassius, and which I remember the most because... I mean, he just did have the most extraordinary magnetism, never mind that he fell over his feet or he was clumsy or whatever, you could not take your eyes off him, and in those days... I mean, now when you listen to him the voice is strange, because we no longer talk and speak verse in that way, but in those days, it was like the most magnificent musical instrument that sang the verse. And

made sense of it, I mean, he never, ever didn't make sense. And the second play we saw was Measure for Measure. This was the Peter Brook production and in those days, if they said Peter Brook, they said [Lan Fonteribe?] at one end or the other and it was – we knew before we went because it was famous from the first night onwards, it was famous for the pause that when Isabella is asked to forgive, he made her hold this great long, long pause before she finally forgave him and it was, it was the most – it was one of those moments – you see I remember it, however many years it is later, I still remember that pause. Fifty-six!

DS: Amazing!

HN: And that was the very young Barbara Jefford, who had come straight into the company from winning the gold medal at RADA, playing Isabella and the next play we saw... let me get this right, I'm missing one – we saw Lear and it was – I mean [laughs] even at 15, it just, it is I think – how anyone can say it's un-actable I don't know, because I just think it is actually very great theatre.

DS: Who took the role of Lear?

HN: Oh Gielgud. Gielgud. It was very interesting once you, later on to realise that his daughters were almost... one of his daughters was Gwen Frangcon-Davies, who was a contemporary of his, and Peggy Ashcroft was Cordelia and Maxine Audley who was relatively young compared with those two was... Goneril, I think. Yes I think it was that way around. And the Fool was Alan Badell, who was also very young and beginning then. And the thing that I remember – I mean it was a great Elizabethan production, it was Leslie Hurry, it was Elizabethan costume, and having seen (later on) Redgrave's sort of Ancient Britain, I think, 'No, it's full of references to clothing that play, and it's the clothing of the time and it's no good talking about holes and dags and cut cloth if you haven't got people wearing it'. And it was sumptuously dressed, beautiful and Peggy Ashcroft... you never didn't think she wasn't Lear's daughter. I mean, she had this capacity for being young on stage. She wasn't girlish, she just seemed eternally young at that stage in her career, and it's staggering when you realise how old she was really, because she was in her forties certainly. But, she certainly seemed to be in her twenties when she played Cordelia.

DS: You said that you went with your family...

HN: Yes.

DS: ...for say, three years. Would you say that was quite a common experience, that people went as groups to the theatre?

HN: Do you know, I have no idea! I think – my parents were musicians, and so they had... artistic aspirations shall we say, and so this was like a holiday with a purpose. We didn't ever sort of link up with anybody else who was going. I certainly think in the local

theatre - we lived in Exeter at the time - people going to the local theatre at Exeter would go as a family definitely. I mean you went to the theatre as you went to the cinema, and in fact, you were more likely to go as a family to the theatre I think.

DS: Can I ask you some of the details about actually going to the theatre, sort of physically?

HN: Yes.

DS: You mentioned how you were queuing up for the returns...

HN: Yes.

DS: Was the theatre at Stratford pretty similar to how it looks today?

HN: Oh, almost. Yes, they have made one or two alterations since, haven't they, because I have been much more recently, and I think they've brought the thrust stage out more. In those days, it was still very much a proscenium stage, even if they opened a production without the curtain being down on the set there and so on, it was still that kind of a stage, but in other ways they've altered... the foyer now feels more enclosed. They've got shops and bookshops and things and then, in those days, the foyer was simply a box office and on the day you could get tickets to stand at the back - there were sort of - some tickets were sale on the day, you could do the returns. Two years subsequently, we saw *As You Like It* and liked it so much that my father queued overnight to get tickets to go and see it a second time. [laughs]

DS: Incredible.

HN: You could go and see a night and then a matinee you see; that was a possibility if the programme ran right.

DS: What did the audience wear? Was it a smart audience?

HN: No, not particularly. I mean we're 1950s - people were still just recovering from clothes rationing. I don't even remember dressing up in special clothes to go. I think we wore very... probably our good clothes but I can't remember that people dressed up at all in that sort of situation because a lot of people would have been living in... I mean we were in a B&B and people were in hotels and things and so on. Not many people had cars, people would have come by train. So, I think all in all, no I don't remember that people dressed up much to go to the theatre in that way.

DS: So the early fifties was a period of enormous popularity for Shakespearean productions?

HN: Yes.

DS: How did your theatre going move on? Did you always watch classical theatre, or did you see contemporary plays, or were you drawn by particular actresses or actors?

HN: I've seen lots of different things. When I first went up to London, I certainly went to see... I saw Tutin in *The Living Room*. Now I have no idea why I went to see that, or whether I – I don't even remember if I went with somebody, I just remember seeing it and seeing her and... she was absolutely lovely in it, very young, very, very, vulnerable. And I also remember seeing, which was such fun and I wish that anybody could revive it - maybe Eddie Izzard ought to revive this! - *Love of Four Colonels* with Peter Ustinov, in which he played four parts.

DS: Right.

HN: In four... it's structured so it does four skits on different types of European drama: there's a Molière, there's a Shakespeare, there's an American one – it isn't European entirely - and there's a Russian one in which he was this old man who sat on a swing and knitted. He was so wonderfully outrageous, and it was such a funny, funny play. It opens with four men sitting round a table: curtain goes up, there's four men sitting round a table, total silence and then [is tumbly?] says 'We seem to have run out of conversation', [laughs] which is lovely...

DS: And off they go.

HN: It sort of subverts the whole opening line thing doesn't it completely, in that...

DS: How would you describe sort of Ustinov's status then, because he's a very interesting person, he was terribly popular...

HN: Yes, he was.

DS: ...but very few people will have heard of him today.

HN: Well, I think they know him as a raconteur today.

DS: Exactly.

HN: And a broadcaster and a story-teller...

DS: Rather than as a playwright and a performer.

HN: Rather than a playwright. At that time, he was thought of as being up and coming, a bit dangerous, a bit, 'What will he do next?' kind of thing. He'd done Romanoff and Juliette or he did... I can't remember which side that comes. And then he had a couple of... Sign of the Dove was not so successful, he had a couple of failures. And then I think really he went into film work and started being in films and he was such a... he was a chameleon in lots of ways you know... well, no, chameleon is the wrong word but he could do – I don't mean that, he was somebody who did lots of...

DS: I don't know, sort of versatile. Positively versatile.

HN: He was versatile and you know, British... they always say British people don't like you to be versatile. So, he was an uncomfortable person.

DS: It's like this ambiguous term of the actor.

HN: Yes, yes.

DS: It could be positive and negative.

HN: Yes, and don't get talking to me about 'stagecraft' – what that word could mean!
[laughs]

DS: Exactly! So you went to Stratford in your teens...

HN: Yes.

DS: And you were obviously very interested in the theatre.

HN: Yes.

DS: Could I ask how that interest was sort of nurtured? Obviously, it was partly due to the fact that you were from an artistic family...

HN: Yes.

DS: Did you ever read theatre criticism or...?

HN: Oh yes. Oh yes. And I read Shakespeare. The very first Shakespeare I ever saw was when I was in school, when I was five, and there was a school concert and the older children did parts of *Midsummer Night's Dream* and I just was...! The language knocked me sideways, but I'd already had my mother reading. I thought that 'come unto these yellow sands' was a nursery rhyme, because I was read it. And when we went home from that performance, I was allowed to look at the Rackham *Midsummer Night's Dream* and I read Shakespeare – I read Shakespeare when I was eight.

DS: Right.

HN: I sat there – and obviously I didn't understand all of it but... it's very easy, it was quite easy to read, easier than some of the books that I tried to read so, yes, I was fascinated and I had a toy theatre and I read books about... I got interested in puppetry at one time and... We had gone to the theatre before Stratford. I mean, I saw Wolfitt's *Twelfth Night* just after the War finished, my father took me to that, and we went to the theatre. At one point, we – it would take too long to tell you, but at one point we lived at Dartington so we saw theatre there, saw Joyce Grenfell in her very, very earliest recital there.

DS: What was your memory of that Wolfitt production?

HN: Very little. I remember very little of it, I was 10. I think I was probably overwhelmed by the whole thing. I was totally uncritical at that stage and I really hardly remember a thing, except I know that I went and was given a copy of *Twelfth Night* so I could read the play.

DS: So, going back to the early fifties...

HN: Yes.

DS: And the Stratford seasons, what motivated you to become an actress?

HN: Well, [laughs] it was a combination of things. One was that I failed Latin, and in those days you couldn't do English at University unless you had Latin. [pause] So, there was that. I had... I loved drawing and I had thought of going to Art College, and I changed schools at 16 and the art teacher said, 'Oh your drawing is far too bad, you can't possibly take the exam'. And now I'm adult, I know she didn't want one A-Level art student, but of course I believed her at the time. And we had a very good – what in those days was called an elocution teacher. She was actually the sister of an actor called George Woodbridge, and so I used to go and we did competitions, and I did well in a competition and then we did a school play and I played the lead in the school play and all that sort of... you know, I began... But I also think there were a lot of other things

which were to do with growing up in the War, having one's life curtailed, having a life that seemed to be very narrow, and I think part of me... I subsequently felt I went into the theatre to grow up. I don't think I knew it at the time, but I think it was a very good thing for me because I went out and got away from home and met all sorts of people and...

DS: Did you go straight into repertory...

HN: Yes.

DS: ...or did you actually receive a training?

HN: Oh no, I went to the Guildhall. I went to the Guildhall, partly because I didn't think I was good enough to audition for RADA. I didn't have a lot of faith in myself.

DS: What year was this?

HN: I went to Guildhall in '53. I went just after Eileen Atkins was there, and it's interesting that everybody was talking about her, so right from the go she was known to be somebody who was going to go places. And, I was there with Frances Cuka, who created...

DS: Taste of Honey.

HN: Yes, Taste of Honey and she was a wow. She was such fun, Frances. She used to wear very, very high heels and used to go clip-clopping along and she had this extraordinary voice – because she was quite small and she had quite a deep voice, and she used to reduce me to hysterics in mime classes because she used to do [laughs] such silly things and...

DS: Can you say a little bit about the training that you underwent in the early fifties to be an actress at Guildhall?

HN: Right, okay. We did... We would have an individual tutor who'd work with us on set pieces. There were all these speeches that... everybody did the same speeches, they all came from these books and they were all printed. Sometimes I hear a play and I think, 'Oh, I did that speech!'. [laughs] It happened the other day, there was something on and I thought, 'I did that speech when I was at Guildhall'. We had a mime class, which was miming – we had a mime to music class... a 'mime and movement to music' class, which was actually some of the most valuable stuff we did. I now know that that... The man who taught us, who was a man called Marriott and he had somehow I think... he must have come into contact with some sort of ideas about Eastern movement, because he taught us all to move from the belly. Now, nowadays that is a

given but it certainly wasn't then. And we did lessons about sort of moving round furniture, I mean really practical stuff that, when we got into theatre, was extremely useful.

DS: Yes.

HN: And we obviously put on plays. We also were encouraged to do as much as we could backstage, so there was... because not only did plays get put on by the students, the music students [did too] and so, whenever the music students put on opera and things like that, the drama students did the scenery, they did the lighting and they did all the backstage stuff for them. So, I can remember helping doing lighting - they had the cronkiest old lighting board, I mean nowadays [laughs] you'd have the Health and Safety people at you - it used to flash, and there used to be wild flashes came from it when they put the handles up and down; and the very bravest - there was a sort of, there was a group who went up the ladders to the flies, and they somehow, they were like [laughs] you know! I couldn't ever bear to do that, I've got no head for heights, but... so we learnt a lot on that side of the theatre as well.

DS: And how did you move from Guildhall into your first professional engagements?

HN: I just answered an advert in The Stage and went along and did an audition, and it was to do repertory at a theatre in Reading called The Everyman Theatre, and I went along there. I started... I did eight months there: I started in the late summer and it went through to Spring and then... It always had to struggle - it was a converted Methodist chapel and therefore couldn't have a drinks license, and theatres earn an awful lot from their bars and it didn't have that money. But we did some fascinating plays.

DS: When you say it was repertory, how many plays?

HN: Oh, one a week.

DS: One a week.

HN: I never did less - I never did more than one a week I should say. I never did a Harry Hanson, which was the twice nightly, and some... I mean, there were awful horror stories about some of the companies.

DS: Well we're very interested in this, in terms of the project...

HN: Oh right.

DS: Because there seem to be sort of... The conventional view is that repertory theatre couldn't sort of die quickly enough when television came along: it was slave labour and everybody hated it. However, the views that we're getting from the project, particularly from audience members, is how fantastic, what an opportunity...

HN: Yes.

DS: They were prepared to accept a slight diminution in the standard to have this incredible variety week after week...

HN: That's right.

DS: And I wonder what your perspective as a professional was?

HN: I would agree, and we did some extraordinary things at Reading. The man who ran it, a man called Derek Ballantyne... I mean the funniest one - and of course saddest in view of audience takings - was that he actually put in the Family Reunion by Eliot, but we did it the week after Noel Coward's Happy Breed and the audience assumed that Family Reunion would be so [laughs] - we actually had people walk out during Family Reunion but...

DS: Is this '54?

HN: This...

DS: Or '55?

HN: No, no, we're now '56.

DS: '56.

HN: Because I went there at the time that the Suez Crisis was brewing.

DS: So it's a sort of August '56 time, sort of autumn?

HN: Yes, that's right.

DS: If we just go back a sort of year or so then, just before all the events at the, sort of, Royal Court. How would you feel as - how would you like to describe now as a practitioner, someone involved in the profession, and also as a keen theatre goer, what

was the sort of state of British theatre in say, 1955? Was it a theatrical wasteland as it's sometimes said or was it... was there more going on?

HN: Well I mean, it wasn't, because how could it be when you had Gielgud and Peggy Ashcroft, and you had Richardson and Olivier, and you had all these people who were just performing all the time. You could go to The Old Vic... I mean, you could go to The Old Vic for one and three-pence! What's that now, that's something like 8p! And you could sit up in the gods and you could see... I mean there's the whole thing about the young Burton, and I think that anybody who saw him on stage weeps for what happened when he went into films, because – I mean I'd seen him at Stratford play Prince Hal. He did a season at The Old Vic. You could see really incredible actors at The Old Vic, the [inaudible] have seen nothing.

DS: What was so exciting about Burton? What was it when he came on?

HN: Ah, I don't know, he had that... everybody said because the voice in some ways was quite monotonous, because he hadn't learnt - and perhaps he never did learn - to inflect it a lot, but he had that un-describable thing that you cannot take your eyes off him. He had a contained-ness, he was all of a piece so that – it's the concentration isn't it, I mean this is the Stanislavsky thing about... when you think of really looking for a lost object it's so much more interesting to watch you than when you're pretending to. So... I don't say that he was doing method acting or anything like that, I just think it was in his nature to act, maybe it was because he was drunk! I don't know... I don't care really why he was like that, but he was. I wouldn't say that he was my favourite actor, you know, I mean in lots of ways... and he wasn't, he didn't have a very big range. I mean, you compare him with any of the people who were sort of, as it were, a bit older than him, he didn't even show signs of having the range that Gielgud or Richardson or Olivier were going to have. There was one thing, you know, [that] I wanted to say to you, which I think is really sad nowadays, and I don't know if anyone else has said this to you, but in the past an actor could have more than one crack at a role. Gielgud played Hamlet four times. I don't think there's any young actor since about 1970 who's ever repeated a starring role and had another go at it.

DS: Yes, and I've not heard that before, it's a fascinating point.

HN: Because you see, you read what Gielgud says about his successive Hamlets, and how he was different in each one of them, and people who... I mean, I didn't see any of them, but I know that people who saw them also appreciated what happened, and I think it's really... for instance, I saw... Much later I saw Fiona Shaw play Beatrice on tour in Grimsby. I thought she was a wonderful Beatrice, but I knew there would never be another chance to see her do it, because she'd never go back - there'd never be the opportunity. Now, whether this is film and television, whether it's because there are longer runs, I don't know, but I think it's sad that people cannot have a second crack at a role that they particularly made their own, you know.

DS: You've given a very strong sense of the tremendous quality of the performers. Can we talk a little bit about some of the playwrights up until the mid-1950s? Obviously,

perhaps the most famous at the time, he was British, was Terrance Rattigan. How did you view Rattigan and his plays?

HN: It's funny, I know Rattigan more through performing – I mean twice I performed his *Separate Tables*, which was...

DS: Which roles did you take?

HN: Ah well, I was one half of the young couple in one particular production, and in another production, I was one of the old ladies.

DS: So you were Ann Shanklands in the first production?

HN: Yes, which was somewhere like... I know I did it at Norwich, and I think that may have been at Norwich in rep, and was just a special week.

DS: What year was that roughly?

HN: That would be about... '58 I think.

DS: *Separate Tables* was being performed after the so-called Royal Court Watershed and was still attracting audiences.

HN: Oh yes. Oh yes. And I think, like everything else it takes time for things to work out, but also, people had to make money in rep., and so they would intermingle: you would do – you know, *Look Back in Anger* one week and then another week, you would do... oh, I don't know, *A Likely Tale* or something like that, and that's why it was such a good training you see. I mean, it was bad training in some ways, because of course with only a week to do it in, you could easily get into tricks; but on the other hand, I mean, I came out of rep having played in Shakespeare, having played in Coward, having played in all sorts of different people. Oh, I know what I did do of Rattigan's, the one where he's – this is about a girl, a man who falls in love with a girl in three different things, I can't remember what it's called – I've got it here actually. I have got it because I think I list somewhere the plays I did. This was at... here we are! *Who is Sylvia*. And that was the very first play I ever did in rep: *Who is Sylvia*.

DS: Why do you think people liked Rattigan?

HN: Well, I think sometimes, when you've got a really structured, fairly conventional play, it allows you to appreciate the acting more. It's rather like people who play classical music, in that the player is – becomes really more of, more appreciated and also,

that you measure... Because you've maybe seen the play before, seen plays like it before, in some ways you're better able to rate the actors.

DS: It's very interesting.

HN: I've invented that. I mean, I've only just thought of that, but I think that comes into it.

DS: That's very interesting. You said that you always played... Going back to *Separate Tables*, which I'm personally very interested in because it was premiered in 1954, and the – I think it's a wonderful double bill...

HN: Yes.

DS: The second play has this... well, centres - as you know - on the Major being convicted of a crime, which in the play is meant to be nudging women in a cinema...

HN: But in reality...

DS: But in reality, it's probably written in code...

HN: He was a homosexual...

DS: And he was actually sort of soliciting probably, well in fact that's what Rattigan said it was about, and that was '57. How did that come over in '58? How did people respond to that? Did people recognise the code or...?

HN: I think that the actors knew the code. We knew that Terrance Rattigan was a friend of Noel Coward's and had a flat in Eton Square. There were certain things that were almost like code, you know. I remember the big shock when Gielgud was arrested and that was...

DS: In '53 for cottaging in Chelsea.

HN: Yes, and I think that was a huge shock, and it is interesting that the audience... I mean, when he finally went back on stage again, the audience applauded him, and I think people were much more broad minded than the law givers. I mean, there are some people who never are... I can remember a man on *Any Questions* once saying he thought all homosexuals should be branded. Yes, well you know, there were people - and there probably still are people - who think like that, and you can't do anything...

well you can try to hope that something happens to change it, but I think in the business, as it were, people knew, but you just weren't bothered really.

DS: Going back to the sort of West End, and Rattigan being the sort of star West End playwright, were you aware of any of the work of H M Tennent Limited...

HN: Oh we knew that Ten...

DS: ...and Binky Beaumont, who controlled it.

HN: Oh yes. Binky Beaumont and Tennent, they were the big controllers, you know: you had to be in with them, and they offered a scholarship... I know that RADA people you know, used to get put onto contract and I mean, it was like, I guess, Cameron Mackintosh now, you see all the programmes would say, you know, 'presented by Tennent's' and yes, it was a given, you didn't really even think about it. They were just there - they were providing it for you, jolly good! And same with Moss Empires and people with comedy and the things like the Crazy Gang and other things like that going on. And then of course revues, because I loved revues and I went to a lot and went to Airs on a Shoestring several times, because we got cheap seats for that! And that was the last - that was at The Royal Court and that was followed by Donald Swann, and Michael Flanders and Donald Swann, and that was the end of that - that was then when Devine came in and was - but you know, there was certain people - Dora Brien did an amaze... it was a review, I think this was called For Amusement Only and she played... she did this wonderful thing, she was a girl in a hotel room and it was, this man suddenly leapt through the window as the Spectre de la Rose and she was a completely ordinary girl and this man kept trying to dance with her. It was the funniest, cleverest thing you've ever seen, not a word spoken but absolutely - and she had that kind of face Dora Brien that you know, a sort of, [squeaky, naïve accent] 'Oh! What's happening to me?'. [laughs].

DS: Mentioning The Royal Court and Airs on a Shoestring neatly brings me on to the fact that you were... you finished your training in '56 and got your first engagement in August '56. How did you view - both as an actress and as an audience goer, audience member - what happened at The Royal Court in May '56 and the launching of the new wave?

HN: Well the funny thing was, as I said, I went later on and I saw Joan Plowright in The Lesson and The Chairs and in Roots, oh and I still remember Roots. I can remember crying at the end of Roots when she stood up and said, 'I want to cry now'...

DS: When she found her voice.

HN: When she found her voice.

DS: 'Listen! I'm speaking!'

HN: Yes.

DS: 'It's me'.

HN: It was – I think...

DS: That was a wonderful moment.

HN: In a way it sums everything up that doesn't it in a way because she's saying, 'Here I am, I'm the sort of person the theatre hasn't been about and now I've got my voice', and we listened to that voice, yes. And it was very different from the sort of farmer's wife, sort of country bumpkin kind of person. I mean country people generally in plays were funny servants or funny murder suspects in... Oh God! Acting Agatha Christie is the low! It is, you know, it's the lowest, because her dialogue and plots when they're translated into plays are so awful.

DS: I saw *The Mousetrap* two weeks ago.

HN: Oh! The only time I ever actually felt embarrassed on stage, was acting in a triple bill of Agatha Christie on actors and it was in the professional theatre and I blushed at the lines I had to say. So!

DS: Because they were too, so hierarchical...

HN: They were so bad.

DS: ...or class ridden or just...

HN: No, just so bad.

DS: ...dull for the theatre?

HN: Dull, cliché ridden... You know, you can deal with hierarchical and class ridden, you know, *Importance of Being Earnest* is hierarchical and class ridden and it's fun. But she wasn't fun at all. No, I don't... it's funny, I don't think... it was almost like what they were doing there, but it wasn't what the rest of us, you know, the theme was, with rep., it had to make money. But they did have – I mean it wasn't going to make money like the tours of people taking their clothes off. You know, at that time there were these...

some of the big theatres, the great big theatres, theatres like the Lyceum in Sheffield, would simply house these awful tours of people you know...! Really one step up from being a nude show, and it was... because that was the only way they could fill these big, big theatres. But I think what most rep.s tried to do was to interleave one with the other, and if you've got a really good rep... I went to York for a while. I mean, York could do really good plays because it was in a big town of the sort of audience - their audience there - their captive audience - were people who would appreciate having... I mean, I did Pygmalion there. We did both parts of Henry IV, two successive weeks there. So, you could do things like that but even then I don't remember that they were doing much in the way of things like Roots or Look Back in Anger or anything like that.

DS: Can you describe your sort of working week, if you were rehearsing one play – doing one play one week, another play the next?

HN: Right. So, Monday would be your opening night, and because it was your opening night, it was also your dress rehearsal, and so that was real hard work. It was the dress rehearsal that you hoped everything would be ready. If you were a stage manager, it was nightmare you know, because everybody was doing things like that. I certainly did stage management at one time. Then, Tuesday you would read – in the morning you met to read and block the new play, the first act of the new play, and at night, you would do the old, you know. You would do what would be now the old play, and classically it was always felt that Tuesday night would always be... you'd go through Monday night on your nerves and it would be a great performance, and Tuesday was nearly always – this is when people would make mistakes or fluff or something because you'd come down from that high. Wednesday you might have a matinee... Wednesday or Thursday you might have a matinée so you would block the second act in the morning - because you were always doing three act plays you see - block the second act in the morning. If you didn't have a matinée, the afternoons were off if you didn't have matinées and you very often – I, you know, very often rested, because you would be up till quite late at night. So, and Thursday we'd do the third act. Friday, you would do your first run through with stops and bits and pieces. Saturday hopefully - and there'd be a matinée, definitely, on a Saturday - would be the run-through without your costumes and props, well with some of the props perhaps, without costume and scenery obviously because you were always working in the previous set, and that could be very difficult.

DS: [Laughs]

HN: But you would do your run-through. Sometimes you had a theatre with a rehearsal room, but then that also had the difficulties that you really got used to working in a room without the constrictions of a set. So, generally Sunday was off. I mean, I don't – I can't ever remember going in on a Sunday because... I've gone in on Sunday to paint scenery, but not to rehearse.

DS: How did you manage to keep the two plays separate?

HN: Oh we don't think that's – no problems at all. You people always say that. It's very funny you know, because you're thinking... you're being a different person, you're thinking in a different way and you very rarely did plays that were very alike too, so each play has its, you know, its tone, its language of the playwright. But I don't ever remember anybody doing that. I mean, the one that people always talk about is Dangerous Corner because they have to have the same dialogue, and I've heard of people [laughs] who missed the point at which it's supposed to go wrong in Dangerous Corner. I never was in that myself. But otherwise, no it just never happens. I mean, it was always that – everything you do as a professional - whatever! - has a question like that you know, and that's the one for acting.

DS: It sounds a very, very tiring, demanding but probably rewarding experience.

HN: Well you've got... (a) if you're working in weekly rep, if you were lucky, you're with a group of people you got on with, and sometimes very well, and so you would have the fun that you were working with friends, and sometimes having terrific – I mean we did laugh an awful lot. I mean, it was never... I think it may have been grim those people who had to do more than one play in a week, but doing one play a week was manageable and generally, you know, unless you were a leading man or a leading lady, very often you would get a big part one week and a small part the next you know. You very rarely had it so that you did an enormous part week after week after week. Most producers would be kind that way and try and work it so it wasn't quite – I certainly remember at York, Jimmy Beck - who went on to be in Dad's Army -

DS: Dad's Army.

HN: He played Professor Higgins in Pygmalion and he did have big problems learning it [laughs] he really did! But it is an enormous part to do, you know, with only a week... Terrific part to have to learn!

DS: How long were you in repertory theatre for?

HN: My professional life lasted from '56 until roughly '60, well '64 really. My – I'd married – my marriage broke up, I had a small child. In those days there was just no help with children, unless you were lucky and you had a relative. I really had no choice, and so I came out and I actually went and worked as a housekeeper in order to... because I had no qualifications. After all, I'd resisted all pressure from my parents to learn how to do shorthand! [laughs]

DS: [Laughs]

HN: Which is what everybody was told to do: learn to do shorthand typing. I mean, I had done all sorts of things when I was out of work. I'd done cinema ushering, and waitressing and washing up and all these sort of things that everybody did, you know, and it was the norm. I managed to work 27 weeks of the year, which was the Equity

average, and so I did achieve that, but yes, I mean by the time I left it... because I'd had horrendous problems with my husband and everything, which had really affected how I felt about the theatre, and it also had affected my confidence - I had no confidence at all.

DS: Right.

HN: And so really I had to come out of it because I couldn't have sold myself to anybody, I couldn't have gone and done an audition and made people believe that they should employ me.

DS: Couple of things you mentioned a bit earlier that I'd just like to sort of pursue if I may. You talked about the importance to you of theatre critics and theatre criticism, you read them...

HN: I always read it a lot.

DS: Can you think of any that struck you? Who were the people you were interested in?

HN: Well, of course Agate. I've read Agate backwards. I mean I've read Agate about things that I've never seen because he is such an entertaining writer of criticism, of theatre. He loved theatre and he wrote about it in an inspiring way. At the time, we used to read Hobson, of course, because he was in the Sundays, and Trewin, and Dent - Alan Dent.

DS: What about the new breed when they came in the middle of the fifties, people like Kenneth Tynan?

HN: Well, Tynan...

DS: Yes.

HN: Yes, I remember reading Tynan, because I was miffed with Tynan because he was very unkind to Gielgud - extremely so - and very kind to Olivier. Now, I always felt Olivier's verse... it isn't... His verse speaking, it was actually bad. If you actually listen to his recording of doing some of the speeches from Henry V, he speaks the verse badly: he doesn't make sense and he is monotonous, he is extremely monotonous. He had a pattern of speaking, very monotonous, but I mean... I think when he did character acting, I think he really was a character actor and that's what he did extremely well. And...

DS: So you felt Tynan was unfair?

HN: But I think Tynan... I felt – well I felt he'd just got carried away with himself, you know, he thought he was the bees knees. You sort of... there's a thing about criticism - and it's interesting - that the critic shouldn't think more of himself than the people he's writing about, and I'm not sure that Tynan didn't. There are other people who write better criticism because they're actually looking - they're wanting to say what is actually true about the performance they've seen, you know. But, I mean I think he was very good, I think you know... it's like a lot of things that happened about that time, it was another thing that sort of made the establishment sit up and say, 'Oh, wow!'. I mean, I remember – the thing, I mean That Was The Week That Was, I remember that so vividly because it actually taught me about politics. Until that moment, I had not thought politically at all and that programme educated me. I've never seen anybody say that about... but it was an educational programme for people like me who grew up when politics didn't exist as a school subject. Nobody discussed it, you know, people voted as they'd always voted, a lot of them. I mean, I think it was different if you grew up in a sort of miner's home or something like that, but if you grew up in my sort of home... so, you know...

DS: Even though you talked about how you started during the sort of Suez Crisis, is it only sort of retrospectively you look back now at Suez and sort of think...

HN: Oh, yes.

DS: ...'Gosh, there was something...'?

HN: There were awful lot of things we didn't question, right across the board you know, and you didn't question... I was thinking about something the other day, I was thinking actually, I've forgotten it. It was when we were coming down, it was something I was thinking about where, in fact, the sort of status, a woman thing. I mean, I was lucky in a way, because the sort of house I was brought up in, I suppose I was lucky being one of two girls, so there was never a boy to be favoured above us, but there was never any idea - my sister went to a dancing school, I went to do acting you know, and my mother would have liked me to have gone to University, so we weren't just sort of bred up to be... like some people were. I was – I had a lot more freedom, I know, in for instance, like talking at meals and discussing things. I know people of my generation who weren't allowed to speak to, or have – whereas we had conversations about all sorts of things.

DS: One of the things we discussed at the beginning, was the number of really fascinating productions you both saw and, well, before we started this interview, that you saw or had been in. Perhaps we can end by talking about some of these productions, if that's okay?

HN: Right.

DS: I think you said you went to see West Side Story?

HN: Oh! Now, West Side Story, that – you know, if I have sort of my great theatrical moments, going to see West Side Story. I heard about it on the radio because Anthony Hopkins - the musician, not the actor! - had given a talk about it and said how the music was very influenced by Stravinsky, and I went off down - I was rehearsing at the time at Aldershot, but I went off down and got tickets and we went to the second night. And, you know, everything about it, the music, the dancing and I tell you one of the things that was a real eye-opener was the lighting, because in those days lighting was used in a very functional... you know, you lit the actor and that was about it. But in West Side Story the lighting painted the scenery and it was oh, everything about it was...! Oh God, couldn't sleep, couldn't sleep!

DS: [Laughs]

HN: It was – it's so difficult to be precise and say the energy, the energy that came across the footlights, and of course being... having come from a musical household, I responded... I still think it's a great score, it's a wonderful score. Stravinsky or no Stravinsky, it is great. And George Chakiris incidentally was the other part - he played the Mercutio part, not the Tybalt part, which he played in the film. Yes, it was wonderful, that was absolutely, you know!

DS: You describe it as one of your great theatrical moments.

HN: Yes.

DS: What other ones were there in that period? I mean, you talked a bit about The Lesson and The Chairs, do you want to say a bit more about Joan Plowright?

HN: Yes, that was... that was just amazing, because they're quite difficult plays and I don't think I'd ever seen anything like them before. I mean, this wasn't like Roots. Roots is actually quite a conventional play, but The Chairs, I mean they keep putting out chairs for all these people who are supposed to be coming, and then The Lesson, which is even weirder. And you couldn't believe that this actress – the fact that she could be these two so totally different people - even coming from rep. where people were different people, but in consecutive weeks – not within, you know, minutes as it were! And I can still remember, this thing, she has to say, 'I have the toothache', doesn't she?

DS: Yes.

HN: And she... there was... Every time she said it, you know, it had a slightly different inflexion. And, yes, that was very exciting. Gielgud's Lear. When Gielgud said the five 'never's, [pause] it was so terrible, you thought you couldn't bear to hear him say it again. It was just... you could see it was one of – it just went right into your stomach, it

really made you feel what loss is about. Really, just, absolutely amazing! And The History Programme, the history four at Stratford, that was very exciting, people playing the roles right through.

DS: Yes.

HN: And... But also Redgrave's Hotspur, because he did it in a Northumbrian accent which got everybody sort of going 'Oooh we can't understand what he's saying', but it was explosive because it's an explosive accent you know, and when he said, 'My liege, I did deny no prisoners' and it all came out in this sort of Geordie... it was a terrific performance, that one, and he'd just done... and you'd seen him do Richard II the night before, that was a big, big jump, and Badel and William Squire's Shallow and Silence. You know, I do think in all of Shakespeare that scene... well, I suppose it's like Roots in a way, it gives voice...

DS: Finding the voice.

HN: You know, we've heard the Chimes at Midnight [inaudible] but... and also, in that I think Quayle was a wonderful Falstaff. Some people criticised him for being cold, but I think he was a fabulous Falstaff, I really do.

DS: What about a couple of sort of 'hair on the back of the neck' moments from your experience of performing or a particular production, or a play that you were involved in that even 50 years on really, looking back now, you think, 'Gosh that was exciting'?

HN: Well one very little thing, when I was at Reading, the leading lady was Leanne Orchin and we did a play in which we played sisters, and I only had a little tiny scene with her, and I was bugged... [it was] inhibiting me as an actress that I was afraid of losing my lines, I was always afraid of it. But, it was a small part and I suppose because of being a sister, I suddenly found I played that part more truthfully, I've actually got a photograph of that one, I've actually got a photograph of us together somewhere doing that, and we actually do look like sisters, it's quite interesting, we look like a pair. If I can find it among my photos, and – there we are.

DS: Oh yes. I see exactly what you mean.

HN: And...

DS: Cheek to cheek.

HN: I had the first experience of actually doing something, you know, and really creating something that was a whole and, yes I remember that. And the other thing, I was very

lucky to be able to play Rosalind in... it was only at High Wycombe, but just playing Rosalind, you know, great experience!

DS: A wonderful role.

HN: It was just a great experience, having read the play at eight first of all, to actually end up doing it, was – it was wonderful.

DS: That's lovely.

HN: But I do think, when I saw Victoria Hamilton do it at Sheffield, I thought she was – I just loved it.

DS: It was one of the great *Crucible* performances wasn't it?

HN: Great production, a wonderful performance by her and just the whole thing. In fact, they're doing another *As You Like It* this year, and I can't bear to go. I don't know if that's wrong of me but I don't want to see it again after her. All right, I mean it's a boy being a girl being a boy being a girl, but she was just a woman in an awkward, terribly difficult situation, instead of the way that, say, Margaret Leighton did it at Stratford, when it was a bit like a principal boy, you know, she was a Rosalind, generally they're Rosalinds who quite enjoy being a boy, get rid of the skirt and let's get into trousers, woooopee.

DS: Yes. Thank you very much indeed for sharing those wonderful memories. Thank you.