

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

<http://sounds.bl.uk>

## Charles Vance – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Dominic Shellard**

**4 September 2006**

Actor and Producer. A Glass Menagerie; Cyril Cusack; Devonshire Park Theatre; In Praise of Love; Irish theatre; Anew McMaster; Memorial Theatre, Stratford; Arthur Miller; Harold Pinter; Terence Rattigan; repertory; The group of three; touring America.

DS: Thank you very much for coming in this afternoon, Charles. We're delighted to have this opportunity to interview you. Can I just start by asking you your permission for us to place the recording in the British Library's Sound Archive for people to consult?

CV: I would be very flattered that you should want to consult it.

DS: Thank you very much indeed. Now, you're famous for being the longest-running commercial producer in the United Kingdom, but before we talk about the company you first founded can we start as an undergraduate in Belfast and could you describe to us how you moved from being an undergraduate to moving into the professional theatre.

CV: Well, it comes in two pieces. I had actually made a professional appearance - meaning I was paid a guinea at the age of 7 - to take part in a children's broadcast for the BBC called Castles of Ireland and that was the age of 7 and that got me a guinea and I knew I was going to earn a living from then on [laughs], it was pretty safe to say. I was an undergraduate, I was reading law, with the sole purpose, as far as my family was concerned, of going into Parliament. That's the one thing I've never wanted to do! However, I don't regret having read law because what I learned then and the jurisprudence and cross-examination, all of that, and the laws of contract was very, very useful for the rest of my life. But as an undergraduate at Queen's University, Belfast, we had a very... I wouldn't say iffy, but it was mediocre in terms of great quality, ADC, Amateur Dramatic Club, but I was in it and we had some very good actors and suddenly a call came from, literally, metaphorically, across the road, from the Grand Opera House opposite the Great Northern railway station. They had a terrible problem. They were doing some play or other and their leading man - dashing leading man - who was 6'2", a man called Edward Mulhare, had been taken ill and could I take his place? When would I be doing this? And they said in about quarter of an hour [laughs] and that's called show business. And do I get a script? Well, there'll be one that you can wing your way through, I'm sure, and that's what one did, I couldn't even... I think the play was called The Family Upstairs by an American writer called Harry S. Delf. That really covers you with absolute pride of your career, it's wonderful. But...

DS: So were you on stage with the script?

CV: No. Wouldn't do it. I winged it. No. I'll tell you a story about that if we get that far and that is the day when I actually did go on with a script and what I did with it when I went on, which is actually quite an amusing anecdote.

DS: Well, tell us that now. That would be great.

CV: I'll tell you now. Yes, of course. It was when I was running with Devonshire Park Theatre at Eastbourne and I was directing a then very, very famous Royal Shakespeare Company actor who was very, very high-profile in the cinema and in television, and his name was Patrick Wymark. He was also renowned for his unbelievable intake of alcohol which was absolutely awesome but it was... And he did it, and I directed him playing Elwood P. Dowd in *Harvey*. You know the play of *Harvey*, it's the story of an invisible white rabbit. And the opening of Act II is the arrival of Elwood Dowd in his sister's house with *Harvey* and he opens the double doors and I've never... it was... I was pouring fear! [laughs] And I remember saying 'Here you are, *Harvey*. Here's your coat and here's your hat and here's your chair, and this is your script. No, on second thoughts, I think I'll keep that for myself!' [Laughter] And it worked, and so I read *Harvey's* script and I wasn't cribbing at all, you see, so everyone was very happy and I was happy doing the *Harvey's* things.

DS: That's great. How did your acting career develop from Belfast?

CV: It was amazing because I graduated very, very young. I was 17+ but I mean, 17, when I graduated with Honours in Law and no, I was not going to practise it, and I knew a man who was one of the great Irish actors, not the greatest, but one of the great Irish actors, was a man called Anew McMaster. A great Shakespearean actor, brother-in-law of Michael McClermagh and he toured what we used to call the Irish Smalls, in Shakespeare, and I asked for a job and he said 'Very well,' he said 'you will play *Laertes*, you will drive the van, you're in charge of the wardrobe and you're on 25 shillings a week – and you're playing *Laertes*, driving the van', that's right, and my other ASM had to do about the same thing. The other ASM was a young lad called Harold Pinter and he kind of did okay! [laughs], and that's how it started. I toured for McMaster, I think it would be honest and fair to say because I don't like exaggeration but I was very privileged. I came into Irish theatre at one of the most halcyon periods of its time, I mean, we had the giant – he was a midget but he was a giant – Cyril Cusack, one of the most incredible Joxter Daly's I ever saw in my life in *Juno and the Paycock*. He and his wife, Maureen, were just wonderful actors. Stanley Elsley and Neil McCabe doing the more popular plays, things like *The Winslow Boy* and I played that with them and I worked for Mac, and I then transferred to the Dublin Gate Theatre which was a big step forward, a very exciting step forward because I was actually going to the great, great theatre, *The Gate*, *The Gate* in Dublin. God, it was like going to heaven, and it was run by Michael and Hilton and Lord Longford, and Christine Longford, she was a great authority on Molière. And that's where I worked and it was fascinating because they took me on board as a sort of protégé. They had this thing about me being their protégé. I don't know why but they liked the idea. I think it was the sort of thing, Michael, you see, was born in England, he was born of good Protestant stock, he

became Irish by changing his name, teaching himself the Irish language, and loved the idea that he was going to give a start in the theatre to one of the Jewish race's most famous actors in Ireland's nephew - which was my Uncle Harold Goldblood - and that's where I finished up, and, God, the people with! I mean, this is 1947/48. We were working with Christopher Casson, Paulette Goddard, Burgess Meredith. I mean, these were names, these were famous, famous actors.

DS: What do you remember about Harold Pinter from that period, then? You said you were both ASM's.

CV: Yes, but I mean, we were both ambitious and hungry and both wanted to be actors, and we did and we went on to be actors but Harold, Harold was more physically ambitious than me, he worked harder at it, and he did get himself moved to other places where he'd go and study his classics and work with companies like the then Memorial Shakespeare Company, it was called. It wasn't the Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford, it was the Memorial Theatre which was run by [theatrical accent] Robert Atkins, you see, [theatrical accent] who was the last of the Actor Managers. That's another one, if you want an anecdote you've got it coming very rapidly because I was enjoined to become a member of Anthony Quayle's company...

DS: Is this after The Gate or a bit later?

CV: Oh this is a follow-on, straight follow-on. No, strange things had happened at The Gate. The strange thing that happened at The Gate was that I'd been taken on as a protégé. Harold was there as a protégé. They had taken, years earlier, in 1940, no, in 1939, they took a young man from New York called Orson Welles and Orson lied, told them that he was the star of Theatre Guilds' productions in New York and he would be proud to let them have his talents in their theatre in Dublin and all this, frankly, rubbish. But by the time they had checked up on his credentials he had wowed the audiences and he became a huge star in Ireland, but he had already frightened the proverbial out of the general public in New York when he did his War of the Worlds which actually terrified the whole of the hoi polloi of New York City.

DS: So tell me a little bit then about Stratford, following on from The Gate and how Quayle wanted you to join the Memorial Theatre.

CV: Well, yes, two things happened, actually. I jumped, because there are links that jump, you can't exactly talk for five hours like certain other people I've heard talking here today [laughs] – that's not meant unkindly but oh you try to curtail things and make them fit but... I then did join, in the very early fifties, Cyril Cusack's company at the Gaiety Theatre, and Cyril fancied himself as one of the Great Men of theatre – and he was a great man of the theatre. He was tiny, and he was playing Roger Casement who was 6'5" - you know, the man who was bringing all the arms in from Germany - and then we took the play from the... oh yes, we went down to open the play, and we went down to the Theatre Royal in Wicklow, and it had been... I've forgotten whose theatre it was now – Edmund Kean, it was Edmund Kean's theatre – and we were going down there to open Roger Casement in that wonderful theatre and I said to Cyril 'It's

none of my business, you're the governor, but what are we doing about... do we know where we're staying?' [Irish accent] 'No, sure, Charles, it'll be all right now. What we'll do is we'll go to... I heard about this place down near the harbour, and she's a lovely lady and I saw her, and I thought we'd go down and have a word with her about rooms and things'. So we went down, we really did, a man called John Molloy, Maureen Cusack, Cyril, Emma Dunn [?] (very famous known actor in those days, classical actor) and me playing a minor, minor role but I was in it. And at the Gaiety Cyril said, 'You know that scene in the German High Command, Charles, when you're sitting there beside me in the High Command and we're talking about bringing arms into Ireland? Would it be at all possible for you to be able to reach across to that page and turn it for me, so I can see what the next lines are?' [Laughs] Oh he was outrageous, he really was! And then - this is the beginning of the move - I moved then to the Wanamaker Theatre, was actually called, I think, The Globe... no. It was in Liverpool and it was Wanamaker's theatre in Liverpool, it wasn't The Royal Court, it was... there was the theatre that Wanamaker had destined to be his own, deigned to be his own, and from there I went to Tony Quayle, I auditioned for Tony Quayle and I got Third Spear Carrier from the Left, I think. Just about, I really was Third Spear Carrier from the Left! But, that said, I got invited - because I was a member of the incoming company - to the Founder's Day Lunch. The Founder's Day Lunch was a great occasion, 23 April every year, Shakespeare's birthday, that we had this great luncheon, given by Sir Fordham Flower, the great brewers of Stratford, who had endowed that theatre forever. And Fordham Flower got up and said, 'It's a very sad day in our lives, Your Royal Highness, Your Grace, Ladies and Gentlemen. Today is a sad day because our beloved Artistic Director feels it is time to move his wheelbarrow down the road, his stall down the road; and so it is with our beloved Robert Atkins. He has decided the time is ripe for him to hang up his boots and take life easy, and so it is with great sadness in my heart that I record for you that Robert Atkins will be retiring shortly after this luncheon today. However, without further ado, as is our great tradition in the Memorial Theatre at Stratford, the theatre that we built in 1924, we will ask our beloved Artistic Director, our beloved Outgoing Artistic Director, to say a few words in this, our Founder's Day Luncheon.' Robert stood up - I swear to you - he stood up and said 'I've only got one thing to say: Flowers Bitter is piss!' [laughter] and sat down! Wonderful! You couldn't buy that, could you? No, it was wonderful, and it was there that I learned what it was like to work with great people who were bigger than the world they lived in. That's when you got to learn about people like Ralph Richardson, and the man who put me into rep, a man called Frank Fortescue... there were hundreds of them. When I came into the theatre in England there were four hundred weekly reps in England and I think now there might be four or five.

DS: Did you move over in the late forties? Or early fifties?

CV: No, I came... in the late forties I'd gone to the Savoy Players. I'd then gone to The Gate and stayed at The Gate in Dublin. I then went on touring with McMaster but then we had these wonderful productions that were done with people like, we did this play called Winterset. Burgess Meredith and Paulette Goddard, who were married then, came and did it with Uncle Harry and with Nown[?] McGuinness and, wonderful, all in the early fifties. And it was only a stepping stone from there - he says arrogantly now, when filmed better from this side! [laughs] you know - and I was suddenly being moved along a road by an agent! Rather sinister because he rather fancied me and I didn't sort of conform with that sort of fancying, unfortunately, it wasn't his fault. But he got me an interview and screen test at the Rank Organisation from Weston Drury - Buggs Drury -

who was the founder of the Rank Charm School, and he created a team and made films for the young who were being groomed for stardom. And somewhere or other I found myself in the middle of that. I couldn't believe it. It was ridiculous. I hadn't had any training to be a screen actor. I'd been in plays with people like Stewart Granger and Sonia Dresdell in Shaftesbury Avenue, I mean, Russian plays and Tolstoy's and various other Dostoevskys and you know, we all thought we were terribly, terribly clever, [laughs] very learned young actors, but the trouble was that we were under the regime of a man called J. Arthur Rank and J. Arthur Rank couldn't care a damn about film. All he wanted to do was make films about Methodism because he was a devout Methodist and that was the whole empire had to be made to do: make films about the Methodist Church. Fortunately, he went bust trying to do it and all the great flour mills, all the great Rank flour mills went by the board. And that's the great big step forward of my life, at that stage, because suddenly I was being phoned - and very flatteringly phoned - in the... I went through a very bitter marriage at that time [laughs] - sounds an interesting little sideline! I got married having met a lady on Boxing Day who came back to my small apartment in - just off Manchester Square - in a place called Bentick Street, and she stayed the night and I made a date to see her tomorrow night and she didn't turn up. I said 'You'll never do that to me again.' 'How will you stop me?' I said 'By marrying you.' 'And when are you going to do that?' I said 'New Year's Day.' And she turned up the next day with a special licence and we got married on... I didn't know her from Adam!

DS: What year was this?

CV: It was 1950, which was actually my 21st birthday, December 6 1950, was my 21st birthday and then I was under contract, still to Rank, and going away filming, I mean in, literally, the studios: Denham, Pinewood, occasionally Lime Grove Studios at Shepherd's Bush, and I came home one day from the studios and, seriously, I came home from the studios one day, two weeks after I'd met her, Vicky Vance as she became, and I found four men in my bed with her [laughs] I mean, gobsmacked, yes indeed! And that is when Charles decided that he was going away and he went to Paris, no money, got a job because I was - oh, I was going to say bisexual! Bilingual - and I went and made a couple of films in Paris and I thought, 'This is the time I stay in Paris, I'm not going back, she's a bloody con. What am I doing with this? I mean, I'm mad.' And I bumped into, oh no, I went to the restaurant, the Maxine, and I met the Master Chef and I asked if I could be his slave in the kitchen. That's where I learned to be...

DS: Cordon Bleu

CV: Cordon Bleu. Well, I had a Cordon Bleu in Entrees. I didn't like... I wasn't a pudding man, I loved savoury things and knowing how to do Poulet de Leon[?] and stuffing the legs of a chicken with Foie Gras and all that rubbish and it's bearable! [laughter] Gets you off a sort of hook!

DS: So how long were you in Paris for, then?

CV: About six months. I mean, that was six months I'd dedicated, really, to being in the kitchens of Maxime, and then I worked my way down to the south, of France. And I was in the South of France and – gets a bit boring here because it's not theatrical in a way, because I am now living in the South of France in the most extraordinary circumstances. The Cannes Film Festival is going on. I'm swanning around, there are people who know me there but they don't know that I'm not working and I haven't got anything and I'm playing this game and I'm wandering around like, and Curd Jürgens appears on the terrace at the Carlton Hotel in Cannes. My great theory always having been, if you're going to... if you need to pee and you're in The Strand don't go into the men's loo, it's messy, go into the Savoy! You haven't got any money to put in the sixpenny tray so don't put sixpence in the tray, just go and use the Savoy's loo. And it's the same principle. I'm sitting on the terrace at The Carlton Hotel in Cannes and a gentleman called Curd Jürgens came up to me – and I know him in London, German, very fine German actor, Dorothy Dandridge, they were making a film called Tamango, and Eddie Constantine, and he says 'Charles, will you come and help us because we've no fucking knowledge of what's going on here. These guys, they're making a film about the British Navy in 1805.' I said 'That's Nelson's time.' 'Would you be our expert?' 'No, I'm not an expert on Nelson and warfare in 1805.' 'Well, you'll be there and we'll get you...' Anyway, he got me into the film and I mucked about on the film and I earned enough out of the film to buy a boat which I bought. We called it, I called it Sterne. S-t-e-r-n-e. I bought Sterne and I took it to Toulon and moored her underneath the bows of the Genbarre which was the flagship of the French Navy and I prepared her, over the next nine-ish? Nine-ish months, to sail her across the Atlantic alone, and that's the [inaudible] to sail across the Atlantic alone.

DS: What a feat!

CV: Not really. Bloody stupid in a way, in a way, because [laughs] I had no idea what I was going to be doing. I didn't have any idea what it was going to entail. You just don't! You do not know!

DS: How long did it take you?

CV: I love telling, I love answering that question. You ask me how long did it take me to cross the Atlantic in a small boat which was 32 feet long and I always say that I crossed the Atlantic a foot a day! [laughs]. This was a 32 foot boat and we got there in 32 days, and that was an extraordinary experience.

DS: And what did you do with Sterne?

CV: I made my landfall, I was supposed to landfall in Martinique, which is fairly due south of St. Lucia in the Caribbean, beautiful country, beautiful waters, and I was wrong. When I made my landfall I was off course by 100 miles. I made my landfall in Castries which is the harbour of St. Lucia. I had thought I was going to Martinique! But the awful thing was [laughs] I threw my lines ashore and these lovely sort of West Indian sailors who were throwing ropes onto bollards and all that shit and they were wonderful, but they thought I'd just sailed round from the next island! [laughs] And I went ashore

and just went... I couldn't walk, I mean I was wobbly, you know, the Tweenies or something, I was wobbling around the streets. I was awful.

DS: So were you tempted not to go back to the theatre?

CV: No, never. No, no, no, never.

DS: So you went straight back to the UK?

CV: No, I went across America in a sort of haphazard way. I joined a company that was calling itself The National Theatre of Ireland, for want of a better name. Sarah Allgood, Meryl Neal, Barry Fitzgerald, Arthur Sinclair, all had been at The Abbey. And there were several of us like me that were invited to join this Irish company which we actually toured America in on a Greyhound bus. And I never saw any of the towns we went to, because we drove into towns, 7, 8, 9 o'clock at night, put up the set, did the play, packed the bloody thing and drove off again until we finally got – so this is getting boring, isn't it? –

DS: No, not all, no.

CV: We finally got to Pasadena. Now Pasadena Playhouse is one of the most magical theatres in America. There are some dreadful theatres in America on the touring circuit but Pasadena Playhouse was run by a fellow Ulsterman who'd won the Academy Award for his performance as Robinson Crusoe and his name was Dan O'Herlihy and Dan O'Herlihy got the Academy Award for his performance as Robinson Crusoe in the film. And through Danny – this gets ridiculous now; it has to come out. The thing I always say to people, anything you want to think of as being a lie, say so. You can do. It doesn't upset me in the least, because I know what I did, I'm not bothered.

DS: So what was the next adventure?

CV: The next adventure was extraordinary because I was at Pasadena Playhouse still playing... we did five nights of Juno and the Paycock. I was playing Michael, the boy who loses his... if you know your Sean O'Connor, and Danny said to me 'You know, you are bloody photogenic.' I said 'I'm not, actually. Very flattering of you.' Only now I was talking about this, again, now, because I was talking to of one of my fellow Ulstermen, you see, and I was saying to him, [adopts Irish accent] 'Sure enough, now, I've got a very good like physique, face for cameras and that, but it's not very good really because I've got this lump on the side of my lip.' He said 'Why have you got the lump on the side of your lip?' 'Because when I was about four weeks old my daddy came home from work and came up to the bedroom and saw me crying in bed and he looked over and saw the stitches in my lip and he got out his handkerchief and he said 'You can't do that to a child' and took all the stitches out! And I've had this lump ever since! [laughs] but, nonetheless, I remained an actor, but he introduced me to Paramount. It was unbelievable, Paramount gave me a contract. I mean, it's nothing.

We talk about film contracts now and they're all a bit, you know, I say 'Really, old boy haw-haw-haw!' You know, it's all a bit like that, but in fact I did get a film contract. Nothing happened. I made a film. I made one film and I didn't even know it was going... I knew we'd shot it, because we were doing it and it was one, the boss man, the hero, the whatever, the Sheriff, was a, this is the reason I wanted to get into movies, of course, because I wanted to be in a western, didn't I! And I became the Sheriff's deputy, looking 12. I looked like the Milky Bar Kid! [laughs], if you remember those days! And this benign little face. And I was treated like a, quite a spoiled child, I don't mean nastily spoiled. They spoiled me on Paramount, and they were lovely to me.

DS: And was the film never completed, or never shown or...?

CV: It was filmed, and happily, it never, until years later... no, everybody thought 'Here's another one of those awful – it's not even a 'quickie' – it was American westerns, when in doubt. For Broderick Crawford, I mean Broderick Crawford was a great actor but those great films that he made like All the King's Men and things about more serious... But no, he made this awful Western film and I had these lines that are treasured in my archive [laughs], I mean, they really are...! I mean, we're all standing in this terrible set on a back lot with swing doors saloon and you go up to the bar and you put your dollar piece, whatever it is, down in the thing and the guy gets the schooner of beer and he does that, and it stops dead there by you, it never misses, it just lands there and he shoots one down at me and of course I get it wrong and then comes a classic line when - I just pee'd myself - when Broderick Crawford turned to me and said 'Kid, saddle them up and we'll cut them off at the pass.' [laughs] Now, anybody who'd ever actually said that... but he did [laughs] and it's something to cherish. You know, I couldn't not enjoy that moment.

DS: Wonderful. Let's forward then on to going back to the UK.

CV: Back to the UK.

DS: How had the theatre changed in the UK between you leaving and you coming back?

CV: Oh, dramatically. No, I came back to a tragically declining theatre.

DS: What year was it?

CV: Well, the crossing was '56, so it's got to be around late '56, '57, and the awful thing was the theatres were rotting, one after the other. The world of the people like Sainsbury's and Littlewoods and empires were being built out of theatre buildings as stores, as supermarket, well the word supermarket hadn't happened yet. It was terrifying and I am very proud of what I did after that, because it really was scary. I came back and I got a phone call from a man who was a very strange agent. His name was Michael Williams, a bizarre creature if ever there was one. He said 'I didn't know

you'd come back.' I said, 'What did you know about me going?' He said 'Well, somebody told me you'd been playing Maxim de Winter in America.' I said 'Yes. What's that got to do with you?' He said 'Well, my wife is running a little rep in Hythe in Kent and they're doing Rebecca next week and they're looking for somebody to play Maxim de Winter', and I went 'Ha, ha, ha' like that. I said 'You're actually, Michael, asking me to go to Hythe in Kent to play a part for which I've been paid, thank you very much, some hundreds of dollars a week, to play over a certain length of time in America. Is that what you're..?' 'Oh yes, but you'll enjoy it.' I said 'Will I?' 'No, you're very talented. I'm going to enjoy it.' He said 'Well, I would be very grateful if you would meet my wife; it's her company, and her father's helping her put it together.' And the lady's name was Imogen Moynihan. Her father's name was Patrick Moynihan whose father was Sir Bartley Moynihan who was George V's surgeon, whose great-grandfather, this lady, my wife now, her great-grandfather was Andrew Moynihan who got the VC on the first day of the Crimea. It's an extraordinary story! And I joined it. I said 'Well, what's in it? I mean, why am I doing, why would I want to do this?' He said 'Because they need you to do it. We've got nobody to play it.' And so farcically I said 'I see, so you want me to play Maxim de Winter next week and it changes the show on Thursday but today's Monday' - that means you've got three days' rehearsal then you open on Thursday - 'I see. Yes.' I can't unlearn what I've learned because I've played this bloody part for six months in America, on and off. Anyway, I do it. I do it with Imogen, my wife, and we do Rebecca and it's bizarre because none of them know what the hell they're doing except for her. And this little theatre in Hythe - and this was interesting from your point of view, what you're exploring at the moment in my life - is the fact that that is, that going down to Hythe in Kent to appear upstairs at the Institute - that's what it was called, the Institute - with bentwood chairs and a little stage at that end of the room, and the people who appeared there for her because they all adored her. One of them, for example, was Ray Flynn, the great Aldwych farceur. He was her godfather and he said 'Oh, I'll do a play, darling. I'll do one of my mine.' And I gave my Maxim de Winter, and the next thing is that I see 'you're not going to make this work. I mean, you're not going to even take the rent doing this, running your own theatre.' I said 'When I left university there were 400 reps in this country. There aren't, twenty real ones [left]. I tell you have got the ones that are still doing it...' And I told them. A man called Jack Watling who's a film actor at Frinton, there's a lady called Jill Freud who's married to Clement Freud who's a Liberal MP and she does it at, oh God, it's in Suffolk! I've lost it. Somewhere in Suffolk. I can't remember it. Wintolph or Aldborough. It was more identifiable than that.

DS: So was this what motivated you to set up your own company, then?

CV: Well, what happened was that this was happening and I said, 'Well, there's obviously going to be some sort of renaissance in rep. I haven't got anything. We started living together, Imogen and me, and I said 'We're going to go and we're going to do a rep season for an extraordinary man called J. Baxter Summerville who owns the Lyric Theatre at Hammersmith. He has a lease on the Town Hall Theatre, Cromer, in Norfolk, and he's got a sort of a lease on the Hunstanton Pier Pavilion', also in Norfolk, near the Royal residence where the Queen Mum grows her heather... oh no, lavender, it's her lavender grows there. And I said, you know, I dread the thought of being in this company for more than just doing this season because it'll be fun for us just to do it and go up there and be actors doing it. And by the end of the season we got together with this other actor and I said to, he was called Ben Hawthorn, and I said 'I'm going to form a company with you and Imogen and we're going to call it the group of three, theatre of

today – lower case everywhere. Lower case: 'the group of three, theatre of today'. Please reply to this next, [laughs] because in those days you wrote in the name of the theatre you were next at. And we did this and at the end of the season that we were doing for Mr. Baxter Summerville at Sheringham and at Cromer we had formed our little company, on the 10 October 1960, to do a production – this is ridiculous, I mean, this is on the Norfolk coast which is very, very scary in the winter, I mean, it's cold – and on the Norfolk coast we go to this little theatre, it's not even called the Little Theatre, it's called the Empire Cinema... Empire Theatre at Sheringham and we're going to do Tennessee Williams' A Glass Menagerie.

DS: Yes.

CV: And we packed it, we packed it! Oh, it was better than that, I mean, I don't want to, I can name drop from now on for phase 2 of this thing if it ever gets any further than this little meeting today, but I mean, a lovely man called Norman... God, he was the manager, the... oh God! This is... Alzheimer's is creeping up on me now, I think. No, he was the General Manager of the Arts Cinema... and the Arts Theatre in Cambridge. Norman Cromby, not Cromby, it was, oh God! It begins with a 'C'. It doesn't matter. And Norman came and saw our little effort. I was playing the gentleman caller, Ben was playing Tom, my wife was playing Laura and this other lovely lady called Joan Shaw, who was the wife of a then-don, a metallurgist at Cambridge, and she played Amanda. And we did it at this little theatre in Sheringham and that was on 10 October 1960. And on the – I lie if I get it wrong here – it is something like the 8 or 9 February 1961 that it goes to the Arts Theatre, Cambridge, where by mere chance Tom Williams turns up and sees it and comes backstage and said 'No-one will ever do this play again while you're alive. It is your play.' Madness! I think he fancied me, but that's another problem! [laughs] Which we didn't have, that was another woman because we didn't have to cross. But I had exactly the same thing happen to me. We then went and formed the company and we'd done The Glass Menagerie and we then did a couple of little tours of plays like The Marriage-Go-Round. There was a film star called Derek Bond, a very funny play about academics who have got a very beautiful Swedish girl coming to stay with them and they're trying to find out why she's come over because he has a very fine mind and her father is a Nobel prize-winner and he says 'Catherine, what brings you to America? Why do you come to visit us?' [A line spoken by Catherine in Swedish] 'Ah ha! Swedish! Could you put that in English?' She says: 'I have come 12,000 miles to see you because... because...' He said 'Yes' and I say 'Because' and you say 'Because I want you to be the father of my baby.' And he says 'Where is it?' [laughs] which I think is a wonderful line for a play! [laughs] Which is very funny. To cut a long story short, we formed our company, we toured The Marriage-Go-Round, we toured a terrible production of an awful play called Boomerang which was thrust at me by a literary agent who should have known better, and it did me a lot of harm trying to put that thing on. It didn't matter. You learn from bad mistakes and you learn even better by really bad mistakes.

DS: Did you feel you... Was there something sort of exciting about the fact that in one sense you were swimming against the tide, because earlier you said that sort of repertory theatre was sort of diminishing yet you were making a success of it.

CV: Well, repertory, per se, 400 hundred theatres running weekly reps all over the country in twice nightly massive theatres like the Ardwick Empire and, these huge mausoleums up in the north around, Ardwick Empire was another one, there were dozens of them. The Moss Empires, the Stole Theatres, the Emmy Littler Theatres, the Prince Littler Theatres, there were hundreds of them. But, no, I wasn't trying... I thought I was... I wasn't sure what I was reviving, but I knew that I wanted to be creating theatre, and whether it was going to be touring, whether it was going to be based somewhere or whatever it was going to be... I was going to create living theatre again, somewhere. I know what I want to do now but that's a big jump and that's another conversation, months ahead. Sorry. The point is that I do believe - and this getting to be a bit profound... Oh, yes, to finish the bit about, we then moved into the Civic Theatre, Chelmsford. It had been built and they came to me, 'would I like to run it', Civic people in Chelmsford. And I ran a rep. there for seven years and I was doing, in the second year we'd gone to a first night at the Garrick. There was Alan Badell and Sian Phillips who were doing Man and Superman and I went into a restaurant just off Leicester Square, this lovely lady who ran this French restaurant, and we were with this lovely couple who were saying 'What are you planning to do next, Charles?'. And I said 'Oh, it's so exciting. I'm thrilled to bits. It's my own company and I'm doing... Dennis Spencer is going to direct it, which is a joy because he's a great director and I'm going to be doing Death of a Salesman, and it's going to be sensationally exciting to do.' It was just amazing I get a play of that calibre, and when you think of what happened to the man who wrote it... and I mean, he had written at the same time that terrible indictment of McCarthy which was called The Crucible and there, in this restaurant, I'm shown him saying 'Basil, you know... so and so, and so... 'Could I kibitz in your conversation? You know the scene where Willy is planting the seeds? Would you be kind enough to think of planting them on the other side of the stage?'. Arthur Miller [laughs] was sitting at the next table and he came and kibitzed my rehearsals and was there for two weeks! Wonderful experience.

DS: Towards the end of the sixties?

CV: Err... '66, '65. '65 - ish. I'm not being, sorry, I'm not being over-accurate but it's not inaccurate, because by '69 big things had happened to us. We'd gone to Whitby, we'd gone to Cambridge, we'd gone to Western-Super-Mare, we'd gone to Torquay, we'd gone to Malvern. The group of three were listed as having fourteen rep companies all over the British Isles and in the middle of it, and invited - dreamland - I'm invited by a man called George Hill who was a librarian in Buxton with his lovely wife, Thorny, Miss Thornhill, who was a nurse at the big hospital in Buxton, and George Hill invited me to become the Artistic Director - in his words 'You'll be the Actor Manager of our Devonshire Park Theatre.' I couldn't believe it, I had that theatre for ten years.'

DS: That's wonderful. That takes us up to the end of the sixties which is the first part of this interview. I just want to end this section by asking you about Terence Rattigan. Somebody who's sort of, at the beginning of your career...

CV: Terence? No, I knew Terry very... I knew Terence very, very well.

DS: ...was terribly popular and towards the end... Could you just conclude this interview at the moment by saying a little bit about Terence Rattigan, Charles?

CV: I met Terence Rattigan through a friend of his who wrote books about gypsies. His name was Rupert Croft-Cook and Terry Rattigan, of course, was starting his world theatre series which was an amazing undertaking at the Aldwych. His own plays were fading. He'd passed a certain point of sell-by. I mean, some of the earlier plays, I find what he wrote in the thirties, French Without Tears, some of those plays that he wrote that tragic play that he wrote for Kay Kendall and Rex Harrison – In Praise of Love – but In Praise of Love was two one-act plays, as you probably know.

DS: What about the wonderful Deep Blue Sea or Separate Tables?

CV: Both of those are great, great pieces of theatre, but Terry was his own worst enemy. Sadly. I loved him dearly. He was a lovely man, frightened to death about his sexuality. It frightened him because it was illegal and he didn't have that sort of guts to face it because it was not an easy time. Certainly whatever language we use now, whether you're gay, camp or queer – that awful word – whatever you are, to be it then was very scary. He was married to a very wealthy lady and they had a magnificent house in Charles Street. I used to go to dinner there, I used to go to meet Terence there and talk about his play. I mean, some of the plays that that man wrote were amazing: Adventure Story and the play about Nelson...

DS: Which are the ones transferred into rep? Which ones did you feel were...?

CV: I still do. I still do In Praise of Love. I think the Deep Blue Sea is a wonderful study, as is Separate Tables. Separate Tables is a better play because Deep Blue Sea puts the characters on the mat and you've no opt-out, you can't get out of what he's created, and you're trapped with this... with Hester Collyer, with Freddie. And I played the Judge in it years and years later but...

DS: Judge Collyer.

CV: Yes, Sir William Collyer, Hester's husband, just my little bit of knowledge of what I would do. I like to remember the things I do. I think of those brilliant studies and the great studies are even better than that. A man who could give us in extraordinary duologues – I mean, why he had to write two plays under one title – it was a cop-out. The Browning Version is a great play. You don't need playbill, that farcical rehearsal of Romeo and Juliet with those two old queens playing it [laughs]...

DS: Harlequinade.

CV: Harlequinade. Yes, well it's the same thing with In Praise of Love because In Praise of Love was Before the Party was the first play and After Lydia was the second play.

What I said to Terry, I said 'Make it one play, single, just called In Praise of Love and it is after Lydia, what is going to happen after Lydia', and if you know...

DS: How did he respond to that?

CV: Oh, very positively. By then I was inside, I was inside, and remember the fears and ghosts were, not the ghosts but the gremlins, bit by bit by bit. In many ways, it's an enormous embarrassment to me to talk about people's sexuality because (a) it's none of my business but when they are dear friends and it's hurting and it hurts them then it hurts me, and trying to find ways in which somebody who had hypersensitivity that Terry Rattigan had, who suffered as bitterly as he did from being what he was and there was no way it was coming to an end. It couldn't. But then you know, I presume you know who they are, I presume, In Praise of Love...

DS: Yes.

CV: ...you know who the characters are...

DS: That's right. It's all in code.

CV: Well, Rattigan is the friend. Rex Harrison is the ship and Kay Kendall is the lady who's dying of leukaemia and I was there in Porto Fino when she was dying. So you knew what was happening. But the things that man gave us, I mean, the stuff that he wrote, extraordinary plays that he wrote. Some are very complex but enormous insight, enormous depth, you know? And you wonder sometimes why was it that this man, in many ways, wasted a phenomenal talent on a form of mediocrity. Is that cruel? I don't know.

DS: No. That's a perfect point to pause.

CV: [laughs] Is that a good thing to do?