

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Stephen Wischusen – interview transcript

Interviewer: Dominic Shellard

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Theatre worker. Donald Albery; audiences; The Boys in the Band; The Caretaker; The Intimate Theatre, Lyceum Theatre Crewe; Palmers Green; lighting; rep; Swansea theatre; theatre criticism; theatre going; theatre owners; tickets and reservations.

DS: Can we start by talking about your first experience as a theatre goer with the theatre?

SW: My first experiences will have been when I was between the ages of five and seven, and will have been taken by my parents many times. Firstly, I remember going to the Finsbury Park Empire as a birthday treat to see Barbara Kelly in the touring version of Peter Pan.

DS: What year would this be?

SW: It could have been, I suppose, 1954 - can't quite remember how old I was, but certainly between '52 and '54, and through the fifties going to the theatre was a regular thing. Yes. We had a television, it was bought for me - I suppose as an incentive to recover from pneumonia, and sadly I did recover and they were 51 guineas down the shoot! But we didn't watch it all the time. There was a choice to be made, it wasn't on all the time, it was on or it was off, and Saturdays we used to go to Wood Green Empire. Mainly it was taking, I guess, number two tours or number three tours in those days, of West End successes, so we will have seen a play, such as Meet Mr Callaghan... Reluctant Heroes I remember. What I didn't remember was...[the type of seating] I remember going up into the gallery, I remember my father paying at the door on the stairs as we went up. I had no recollection of the sort of seating it was, until I went back to the Wood Green Empire after it had closed as a television studio to take some photographs, and the gallery was benches! Now, I had no recollection of that at all, and wonder how important that was to anyone. Exploring the rest of the theatre, the Grand Circle - which was the first tier - only had very thin... I would say the chairs were - the seat part - was no more than an inch and a half thick. Rexine covered, and not with those thick counterweighted seats which cinemas used to have, but thin seats which sprung up because there were two coils of spring on the bottom of the seat, fixed to the seat standard. Things which strike me as very odd because you talk about the opulently furnished theatre, well they weren't! I suppose they were more opulent than peoples' homes, but they weren't that special and we went there. I was taken to see The Crazy Gang at the Victoria Palace, which I didn't find funny at all. My mother was a little

offended at the way the humour had gone [although she had been a great fan of their's before the war].

DS: [Laughter]

SW: 'Wasn't like that before the war'. And to pantomimes at the Palladium, and at the Finsbury Park Empire, which closed after the Wood Green Empire. The last thing I saw at the Wood Green Empire - and there will be some conflict of written history and my recollection here - was... The last thing I saw - and it was advertised as the last production before it closed, I remember, because they'd actually done some publicity and I think every house in Wood Green had had a throw-away shoved through the door - was Sinbad the Sailor on Ice.

DS: Right.

SW: I also saw Peter Brough and Archie Andrews at Wood Green Empire and Arthur English. We did see one or two variety shows but they never... it was never what I was more interested in. Then later we started to go to the Intimate Theatre, Palmers Green. I think I must have been 14 when we first went there.

DS: Which would be what year?

SW: '61, to see Seagulls over Sorrento on a Bank Holiday Monday [subsequently checked in the interviewee's programme and found to be 18 April 1960]. Now, that's quite important, because it was sold out at the first and second houses, with standing room only, and one's knowledge of regional theatres these days is that they try not to play on a Bank Holiday if they can possibly help it. At Palmers Green, the normal thing was to do the dress and tech combined on a Monday afternoon, and then hell for leather the rest of the week with what we could remember. But Bank Holiday presented other problems, in that the set really did have to go up and be finished on Saturday night after the previous week's productions, so that we could do the tech and dress Monday morning because of the five o'clock first house, and it seemed to me... I just thought it was very funny. It was very well done - I have no recollection of it being awful, which is what people who look down their noses at weekly now say it was. Good set, and a full theatre, I really was hooked then, I wanted to go every week but we didn't. Soon after that I went every week because I was writing the theatre reviews for the local paper whilst still in the second year at the local grammar school, and I would see 48 plays a year, which is what we churned out at Palmers Green! I guess the standard West End run in those days was much shorter. A play, I remember reading, was well into profit by the time it had done 100 performances. That was the key thing, not so much for the potential audiences. 'Over 100 performances' was always put outside the theatres, but actually there might be a chance of the investors getting their money back, and so plays ran perhaps three, four months in the main, in the West End, so there was always an abundant number available for repertory and when there weren't, there were Agatha Christies to fall back on and there were also those rather dusty adaptations of classics of Jane Eyre which had been written before the War or just after the War, and we could always do one of those.

DS: I think Agatha Christie is interesting. What's the explanation for her appeal at that time?

SW: I suppose a lot of people knew the books, they had read the books on railway journeys, and the plays were not [as hackneyed as they are now] – well we played them straight, there was no attempt to gild up the period... In fact, there was no attempt to play period - that would have meant under the terms of the Esher Standard Repertory Contract that the management had to provide costumes. In those days, I don't know if you know but the Standard Weekly Repertory Contract was that you were not paid for rehearsals, and that you had to provide what was called a 'walking suit', which I suppose we would now call a lounge suit, your own evening dress and all the other clothes that were required, unless it was a costume piece when the management had to provide them. So, certainly we played everything as though, 'Wow, isn't this up to date!'. There were lapses. I mean, as the sixties went on into the seventies, the repertoire available to places like Palmers Green was reduced. We were not in any way a progressive theatre when we did present *The Caretaker*.

DS: Sorry to interrupt.

SW: Have I gone too far too soon?

DS: No. Just before we actually get into your sort of practical motion, moving from watching the plays to actually being involved practically in the theatre, I'm interested in what you said about being a sort of teenager theatre critic and wondered how you learnt your trade. Did you read any theatre critics...?

SW: I didn't learn it! I'm a great...

DS: ...or did you just do it?

SW: I mean we have laughed momentarily about someone of comparable age who is still in the theatre, and I think winging it was how you did it then. I was, I guess, audacious. I had gone to see a performance one Bank Holiday - at Palmers Green I think - of *Pools Paradise* (which is on at the Duchess at the moment)... or is that *See How They Run*, the two become one in my mind...

DS:; [Laughs]

SW: I'm very sorry Mr Playwright! And I didn't enjoy it, and I thought, 'Well, I don't know, the guy who wrote for the Wood Green, Palmers Green and Southgate Weekly Herald, always said it was wonderful' and I was beginning to realise that it wasn't always so. And so I passed the odd note of censure in this and sent it to the local paper saying, 'Well I've been to see it and I don't think it's always that wonderful, here's what I

thought' and they printed it. So outraged was the man who had done it previously, that he said, 'Oh if you're writing that sort of thing, I don't see how that's helping the theatre, I'm not going to do it anymore'. And I returned from a holiday in Bournemouth to have a letter which asked me if I would go along every Monday night...

[Laughter]

SW: And I didn't know what for at first and then I realised, 'Oh, yes, I'm supposed to be writing this'.

DS: Wonderful!

SW: So that's what I did. Saw so many plays, God!

DS: And how long was your column? How did... what was your word limit? How...?

SW: Well it depends how much I wrote. I...

DS: So it would expand accordingly.

SW: Yes. But I suppose in those days it worked out perhaps to about 12 column inches.

DS: Mmm, quite significant. So how did you move then into practically being involved in the theatre?

SW: I'm not awfully sure. It was... like everything really that's happened to me, one seizes the moment, and there's never been a great deal of thought about what comes next, but then, that wasn't necessary. There was ample work, if you were prepared to do it, and I did start as a journalist because foolishly enough at the GCE O-Level mock oral, when asked in French what I intended to do when I left school, I said something like 'Je voudrais etre journaliste' because I understood that if you stuck an e on an English word, it could become French! I had no more intention of being a journalist than I had of doing anything else, but there was no career guidance, although this was a grammar school...

DS: Right.

SW: Unless one was a well-endowed girl who went on to the secretarial course, to the delight of the Master who took it! One wasn't given any career guidance at all. I did audition for the National Youth Theatre, and I was doing Front of House work for them in a season at The Scala, where in the cast were Hywel Bennett, Simon Ward, Neil

Stacey, a few others with whom I was sort of pally. And then I didn't know, I worked for a brief while at a newspaper in South London - the South London Advertiser which is now defunct - and we did a centre spread at my instigation on the Old Vic when it was about to open as The National Theatre, and Peter O'Toole was very condescending 'What do you boys want here?' and we told him and he was more condescending.

DS: In '63?

SW: Even more condescending after that. And then I found the pressures of playing *Deadline Midnight* to a readership of 8,000 over eight editions a bit silly. Went down to take some props that had been asked for by the Marlowe Canterbury from Pollock's Toy Museum, and got a bit more interested. Met a very capable artistic director called Peter C. Jackson, who went from Canterbury to Derby and then I think found himself out of joint with time - bloody good. And then worked in the library for about six months and then managed to get myself into Palmers Green. I thought it - I just went along actually for a chat one day and started, was given a brush and told if I wasn't that busy - we did really have to scrub the stage, because it was bare boards for the local amateurs that week! - and progressed from that. I was called Assistant Manager, but I was practically everything at Palmers Green - fireman, did the box office... If someone forgot - as newcomers to the company occasionally did - that there was a midweek matinee, I would hurtle on as the smallest detective in Christendom, but I had no great desires to be an actor, and Swansea Grand was advertising for an Assistant Manager and I thought, 'Hey this might be what I can do', because I felt quite easy about it.

DS: So how long were you at Palmers Green for?

SW: Oh, well, I was there for I'd guess about a year. Then I went to Swansea, then I went back to Palmers Green. I didn't quite hit it off with the management at Swansea, although, if one talks about standards, the standard of production was better at Swansea, but there weren't the constraints placed upon us. Everyone lived in the town, so we could rehearse any day for how long it was necessary, whereas Palmers Green, the company had an absolute hatred of going out to Palmers Green to rehearse, and they insisted on rehearsing above a pub in Warren Street, possibly because the leading lady, Margaret Gibson, had a young daughter and she lived at Richmond and she might have liked to go home in the afternoon to make sure everything was ready before going on to the theatre at night. So, Palmers Green in its latter days under Douglas Emery, we were only having four rehearsals a week and that may have included the tech and dress. You don't mind if I count it on my fingers?

DS: No, please tell us.

SW: The cycle... First, if we start on a Monday morning, *Old Times Furnishing* from Putney would arrive with a van and the furniture which Dougie had chosen for that week's play, which would be taken in through the front of house because it was the only way to get it in. Then Dougie would point the eight Major [a manufacturing company in North West London] spotlights which we had - that was all we had, two in the front of house ceiling, eight spots on the number one bar, and a few called 'door strips'. Very

grandly called door strips, but in fact they were ordinary lamps on a bit of battening stuck up behind a door, so that when it opened the way off was lit and appeared to be another part of the house. Before that, in the thirties and forties there had been three battens, and in Dougie's time at Palmers Green we had a ceiling which came down on top of the set - two very large flats pulled up and then let in on the set, but in the days before the War and immediately after the War, they had just used borders running across to hide the tops of the flats, so we were almost... so it was a bit of a retrograde step really. Anyway, Monday afternoon would be the tech and dress, when we would hope for the best, Monday evening, the first night. Tuesday morning, next week's play - whole thing through with any luck - blocking. Wednesday, as much as we could of the next bit. No rehearsal Thursday because there was a two-thirty matinée, at which all seats were two and six. Friday, the next bit to finish it. Saturday, we tried to get away without one because there was a five o'clock first house, and then it was back to Monday again. So, there were tricks. There were tricks in learning the part, where I suppose the first line and the last line and as much in the middle as you could hope. But there were... this was a story I used to tell at the time, you know - I suppose a truism - we never had quite so much to learn because they were always 10 or more in the cast. Now I used to say that in the seventies, and people used to look at me as if, 'What a stupid old man', and I began to doubt my own theory until I saw *The Pink Room* at the National, when lo and behold everything of weekly rep came flushing back. Yes, there were a lot of people, no one character had an awfully long speech and how important that first entrance was when the character was delineated by his makeup and costume. You didn't have time to explore the fact that Guy Richler may have been a wronged heir apparent, he had to look like a wronged heir apparent from the very first entrance, and it all fell into place then. That's how the plays were written, that's how they were presented and all we were at Palmers Green I guess, was anachronistic. We had tried... well, the problem is, you're doing 48 plays a year, and the management doesn't quite know what to say about each play on the posters, so the latest comedy success from the Criterion Theatre which was a play called *The Astonished Ostrich* by Archie Menzies turned out to have been played at the Criterion Theatre in 1913. And I suppose you don't know - what can you say about a play called *The Astonished Ostrich*, 'London's pre-first World War comedy hit!'...?

DS: [Laughs]

SW: That would have brought even fewer people in than we were getting already! So, we were getting a little jaded I must admit, and there was an attempt made to become more modern, and we did one week present *The Caretaker*.

DS: Is this before or after you went to Swansea? Is this when you returned to Palmers Green?

SW: This is before Swansea.

DS: Before Swansea.

SW: Before Swansea. We did do *The Caretaker*. It must have been when *The Caretaker* had just finished in town [in fact in 1962] and *Palmers Green* was one of those theatres where Harold Pinter, under his acting name, had played. There are so many that lay claim to that, but he just must have moved around a lot. The audience loathed it, I'm not surprised. I mean, how they understood it when we didn't probably know what we were doing with only four rehearsals... I think they were probably better placed than we were, but certainly they banged their seats, they walked out, they shouted 'Rubbish' and that rather coloured Fred Marlowe against doing more modern.

DS: And who's Fred Marlowe?

SW: Fred Marlowe was the Managing Director of a company called G.M. Productions Limited which had controlled *The Intimate*, *Palmers Green* for a brief while, I think, after John Clements gave it up. Then there was a gap and then they were back again and G.M. Productions Limited I think was the last operator of the theatre, although Theo Cowan Limited had either bought them out or taken over their lease. He'd bought them... Fred Marlowe had two sons, Christopher obviously and Peter and I don't think they had their father's flare for getting by on a shoestring, and they were interested to sell and Theo Cowan took the theatre over. That must have been '67, '68 and was presenting shows prior to London. A two and a half week, well... three and a half week run, putting the prices up to seven and six (37½ pence) and was top price whereas we had only been five shillings, which was 25 pence and in those days, that was a significant jump. The first show he presented was a musical version of *The Dover Road* - could it be called *Man With a Load of Mischief?* - which had David Kernan in it and [that] transferred from *Palmers Green* to the *Comedy* for an equal run of about three and a half weeks and he carried on in this way. Ernest Dudley was directing the plays or was Artistic Director, he had been a BBC television producer and an ITV man. 'Armchair Theatre' I think was his thing on television, and he promised to bring his television contacts to the stage in *Palmers Green*. Well even then Jimmy Hanley wasn't much of a draw in *Outwood Bound* and that's the only one, apart from the first show, I can remember, and it floundered and the Catholic Church next door, *St Monica's* (to whom it had always belonged) took the property back and called it *St Monica's Hall*, but now I understand there is a move afoot to make it a theatre again. No, I went from there to Swansea where certainly we had a technical rehearsal and a dress rehearsal and we rehearsed solidly Tuesday through Saturday, because that is how John Chilvers worked the company. Interestingly, I think, all these people who became known as those who had saved theatres by dint of their work - like John Chilvers - had scant regard for the fabric of the theatre. Their thing was to be an artistic director - or a producer as it was called then - the play produced by Douglas Emery, produced by John Chilvers, that didn't mean the money men then - and the theatre at Swansea was a... can I say dump? It was - it isn't now, but it was. The ladies' toilets in the back stalls, two of them had had doors replaced at some time but W.E. Willis was the king of the flea pits in the Rhondda Valley, and he used the same philosophy to the theatre he had in Swansea and these were shed doors which had been painted pink and kept shut only with a latch and the foot of the occupant held against it.

DS: [Laughs]

SW: No shades on any of the lamps around the auditorium, in fact to make it bright enough for people to see where they were going, we used to put the cleaners' lights on first so they could find their way around! And apart from Monday nights and Saturday nights when we were very busy and we had printed tickets, one way of saving money, W.E. Willis had found out, was to use blank books because advanced booking was not frequently used, people would pay on the door, much as they did in the 19th century. So, Willis had the blank books printed with the name of the theatre on and row, seat number, date, and we would write the tickets for the advanced bookings out by hand. The usherettes would come in a little earlier and put pieces of cardboard with 'Reserved' written on them on the seats which had been reserved, and for the rest of the business, when the house opened, we sold roll tickets, like a cinema.

DS: Oh.

SW: And in the end things were getting even tighter or he'd closed the Empire Tonypandy, and we were reduced to using tickets which actually did say 'Empire, Tonypandy' on them and which we were cutting Empire Tonypandy off the top!

DS: So did this parsimony drive you back to London?

SW: Well no, not really, I just found... I just didn't, I didn't sit easily... I was supposed to be doing marketing... Well, I would have understood what I was supposed to do if someone had explained it to me, but I seem to remember it meant getting on a Neath bus and wandering around in the rain trying to find people to put up hanging cards for us. I didn't really enjoy it. One of the directors of Willis Cinemas was the old man's daughter, Jill Lloyd, and we thought that the theatre... we could see some money coming into the theatre if we used it for Sunday concerts, and under Jill's instruction I had written one or two letters to top group managements. John Chilvers opened the post early in the morning and screamed and shouted that no one was going to use his beautiful theatre for this sort of thing. I quite wondered what was wrong with his eyes really, and tore the letter up and 'oh, can't be doing with this'. After I had left, and when Swansea City Council assumed responsibility for the theatre, John Chilvers thought it was very innovative to present Sunday concerts.

DS: Well there you go, a prophet!

SW: Well and I did.

DS: Yes.

SW: Yes.

DS: So you go back to Palmers Green? Under what guise are you back at Palmers Green?

SW: Again, Assistant Manager, but things were thin. The audiences were getting less and less and I decided I'd better... I couldn't... I felt the writing was on the wall. There was no change in the programme policy as I felt there had to be, and I took it up when I was still writing this occasional column for the local paper and I said to the editor, 'What are they going to do when all these old ladies die?' because Palmers Green's great strength was that people who had the same seats every week. Permanent bookings they were called. And the editor's answer to me was, 'Well, more old people will come', which was about as short-sighted as Fred Marlowe was, but this is an interesting point, I think that in that period, people in their late fifties to late sixties, seventies still went to the theatre every week. It may have been because it was on their doorstep, it may have been because it fulfilled some social need and they met their friends in the bar, but generally I don't think people of that age go to the theatre regularly now. For one thing of course there aren't the theatres, there aren't the plays. As I said earlier, we could do 48 a year. All right, some of them were old hat and shouldn't have seen the light of day, but others were fairly recent plays – well how can you run a theatre now, you can't find 48 plays, you can't actually find 10 that you want to do. One of the big changes that came about at that time was the presentation of a pantomime at Christmas. Fred Marlowe had been absolutely certain there would be no pantomimes. Palmers Green was a playhouse, so we didn't have profits from that to carry us through the rest of the year, but Jimmy and Gilda Perry – Jimmy Perry of Dad's Army fame - had been running the Coliseum, Harrow and it had been sold for redevelopment, and they came to Palmers Green with the idea of presenting a pantomime and that was the first one. Well it wasn't quite that, I think Barry Stacey had presented one, or perhaps he did one after Jimmy and Gilda Perry did it. I can't quite remember the sequence but my recollection is that theirs was the first pantomime with all the people who appeared in Dad's Army, subsequently. Jimmy and Gilda were very loyal to the artists they had had, and some of them were ex-Palmers Green artists in Dad's Army too. I remember it well, because there had been an ad in *The Stage*: The Flora Robson Playhouse, Newcastle was closing, and they were offering for sale their lighting board and a whole array of costumes. The Intimate had - along with many repertory theatres at that time - had a supporters' club known as The Playgoers Society, which had its headquarters - 'The Federation of Playgoers Societies' - at Leatherhead, at the Old Theatre there, and The Playgoers Society had raised money to help the theatre and I think we had 350 quid in it and I phoned the guy, the treasurer, who was a manager for the local Barclays, 'How much have we got in there?', 'Well 350'. So, we phoned The Flora Robson and said 'Oh we can offer you 350'. Oh, they thought that was wonderful! So we had this board which arrived in bits and pieces, and I was helping the guy who was going to put it in for us, put it in and it was really quite magic. I mean, each dimmer, each lamp had its own dimmer, we'd not had that for a long time and...

DS: [Laughs]

SW: It was quite exciting. It was an antiquated board, a very small Strand one [Strand Lighting Company] with the handles that you would screw to interlock with others, but it was a lot better than we'd had. And, that was really the last thing I did properly for it as theatre. I then went off to work for cinemas for a while before going in the end to work for Donald Albery in the West End.

DS: Right.

SW: There was a man to admire.

DS: Can you tell us something about that? Working for Donald Albery!

SW: He was... I don't know quite what the word 'martinet' means but I'm sure he was one. But to the extent we would be given sets of coloured pencils to colour in the carpet in the front row of the stalls at The Albery from time to time as it had got a bit threadbare or we were not – we were not deterred from slipping a sheet of pink blotting paper under the foyer carpet in the Albery either just to hide the fact that it was a bit thin! But one admired Donald because it was his money, he was The Wyndham Theatres Limited, and when he realised after Popkiss - must have been some time late sixties, early seventies, a musical based on, I thought one of the Aldwych farces, can't remember - he knew from then on that failure... that he no longer had his finger on the pulse of the theatre-going public, so he stopped producing. He didn't blame it on anything, he said 'Well, I don't know what they want anymore' so he didn't do it. He was an astute man... not perhaps in the choice of wife, I think he'd married three times! The last wife was a Japanese lady known as Nobuko and we called her 'the iron butterfly'. I was caught one day with a yellow duster over my head and spectacles...

DS: [Laughs]

SW: ...saying [mock Japanese accent] 'Hurro everyone?'... but we'll gloss over that. I still worked for him and there was a tale told – I don't know if we're allowed tales in this rather than fact, of when he was presenting - or his son was presenting - Very Good Eddie at the Piccadilly. Donald and his wife were in on the auditions, and this fellow came on and stumbled, he could not remember her name. 'Good morning Sir Donald, good morning Gazebo'.

DS: Oh no!

SW: And they very kindly – Donald was a bit of sadist, he recalled him and the boy came on again and this voice at the back said 'Hurro, Gazebo here'. Whether that is really true or not, I don't know. It was one of the few moments of joy one had working for Donald Albery. He was a good man. The theatres were in the main, well maintained. He had certain rules which I think it would behove present theatre owners to observe.

DS: Such as?

SW: The dress of the staff. You were not allowed to sit on a box office window unless you had a collar and tie and a jacket. His belief was that if we were taking two pounds fifty off people to see David Essex in Godspell, they were entitled to someone wearing a jacket, collar and tie, taking that money. And he did do his best in difficult

circumstances, I think, to look after the theatres. Wyndhams was restored, a great deal of money over a few years, was spent on restoring Wyndhams and the restorations started during the first run of Boys in the Band. There was paint and stuff everywhere, the tabs were still the original ones and a bit threadbare...

DS: What did you think of Boys in the Band?

SW: Then? I thought it was, 'Wow!'.

DS: Wonderful.

SW: Yes. I had gone with one of my own 'musicians' to see it, and oh well...

DS: Was that the first London run?

SW: The first London run.

DS: Right.

SW: And I thought, 'Wow, this is okay, this is all right!'. I saw the revival at the Aldwych - which had come in from the King's Head - about 10 years ago and, what on earth did we make all that fuss for, and why would anyone have revived it? It seemed to me to be so much of its time that ground was 10 years ago broken. What was the point, it was only as an historical piece and as such might make interesting reading if one's doing a course in English playwriting, but certainly it wouldn't, shouldn't have seen the light of day again. It was tedious, trite and had absolutely no point at all, but then it was something different.

DS: Content is everything isn't it? Content is everything.

SW: I think so. I think... I mean when people say, 'Oh we shouldn't have done this', you can't really criticise the past unless you were there.

DS: Yes.

SW: Things which people do must have been... well, one assumes they were right at the time, and we can't judge what they did. We can hope to find an explanation.

DS: Yes.

SW: And certainly I thought Boys in the Band was really good.

DS: Quite exciting, Yes.

SW: I remember that the line on the poster - as the tag - must have been 'The Boys in the Band is not a musical', and the theatre was busy. First...

DS: What year was that? Was that early seventies?

SW: No, no, it was before that surely, because the Lord Chancellor's Office had gone in '68.

DS: Lord Chamberlain in '68, yes.

SW: Lord Chamberlain, yes, '68. Hair was the first show.

DS: That's right.

SW: Boys in the Band...

DS: '69, '70?

SW: Do you know, you will have to look it up...?

DS: It's something like that, yes.

SW: I can't remember. I think it was, say '69, '70 and then check. It was very interesting - in the office at Wyndhams, were all the old copies of the authorised script, and there was one for Sparrers Can't Sing, oh with a blue pencil, and something like the 'The rude noise mentioned on page 3 must not be represented by a raspberry'.

DS: [Laughs] Yes, that's interesting. How did you - what sort of interaction did you have with the Lord Chamberlain, your Lord Chamberlain?

SW: Well I didn't, because I wasn't in the West End at that time. Neither, at Palmers Green, did we present plays which had not been licensed before.

DS: Right.

SW: So, one assumed in fact they'd been published by French's or someone else that they had had the Lord Chamberlain's licence...

DS: Yes.

SW: And so I didn't deal with that but I understand from managers I met that there would be a representative from the Lord Chamberlain's Office pop in during the run of a play, many times during the run of a play to make sure that the play as presented was as the authorised script, and Spike Milligan was telling a story once about – it was An Evening of British Rub... not An Evening of British Rubbish, one of his plays [later established to be The Bed Sitting Room] where the Lord Chamberlain had said 'the line 'gets all the dirt from the back of your shirt', must be changed to 'gets all the dirt from the front of your shirt''. Which was possibly worse, as Spike Milligan said at the time! There were quite a few of those scripts, I don't know what happened to them, as well as old programs going back donkeys years, because each theatre in the group sent each of the others a programme for the current week, so that we could check to make sure that the information about our own theatre was correct, and his group at that time comprised the Albery, or the New as it had been, the Wyndhams, the Criterion and the Piccadilly. The Piccadilly was a separate limited company, I think DA had just bought the share capital of it and acquired it that way, that was the Piccadilly Theatre Limited.

DS: And how did you move from Albery to Crewe?

SW: I'm trying to remember. I'd left Wyndhams - The Wyndhams Group - after a few years. I think I was already out of date and the theatre was changing and it seemed an odd thing, I had certain beliefs that theatre had to be affordable and I remember Godspell going to two fifty and the next show in was Scofield in The Tempest and that was a four pound tour. Then Teeth and Smiles I think had gone to five pounds and whereas for Godspell with David Essex, it was 90 pence in the gallery, those seats are now costing you about 15 or 20, and I wonder where all of the money goes! If you go back to Albery, head office was his office and his secretary. When Brian Rix was running The Whitehall, Brian Rix was the producing manager as well as the theatre lessee. His office was his dressing room or another one next door. The money would go from the box office round to his office, and then it would go in the safe, and the artists would be paid out and the rest of the money would go into the bank. But now you seem to have so many people living out of the box office pound and Donald ran - as all the theatres did at that time - the reserve account, on the contra account. Do I need to explain what the contra is? In the West End at that time, there would be for the theatre when Donald was not producing, if another producer had it, there was the rent and at the time of Absurd Person Singular, the rent on the Criterion was £1300 a week, which the producer, Michael Codron, had to have at Albery's office by noon on every Monday. That was just for the four walls. In addition to that, every week was the contra account. Indeed we owed the producer, the box office receipts less certain charges, which were all the wages, front of house and backstage, all the electricity consumed, all the cost for printing the tickets, everything, except the catering staff, the bar staff and whatever, because they were not part of it and there was a charge of, I think, £10 a week in those days, put in the contra for high level cleaning, which meant that the reserve account

amassed this sum over the years and when the time came to give it all a bit of scrub, the money was there. Cameron McIntosh now charges each patron 75 pence per ticket at The Prince Edward for theatre restoration. Now actually, I think it was restored 12 years ago and I don't know why he still wants the money for it, but in other words, it's like service charge in restaurants, you want the audience to pay not only for seeing the show but towards the upkeep of the theatre. That should all be part of the ticket price. I felt a bit sore at that and the night I was there, the iron didn't come in so I did feel a little note to the Fire Brigade might help things get back to normal.

DS: [Laughs]

SW: Anyway, that's what the contra account was. That was usually done in The Wyndham Theatres Limited by the theatre's firm of accountants who were Baker Rook, well originally it was Wood Albery and Co, the Albery being another member of the family then it became Baker Rook and Amsden and I think it's Baker Rook Tilley now. They did that based on all the information from the books in each theatre. At the Piccadilly, because nothing had changed and it was still the Piccadilly Theatre Limited, the manager had to do the contra and, as part of my job for the firm was to cover – I didn't understand why I had to leave Wyndhams and go and give someone else a holiday at another theatre whilst someone else took over from me, but I seemed to be the only one able to do the contra, so I covered at the Piccadilly as well and that's where all these things about high level cleaning and everything came to light...

DS: Yes.

SW: And how I realised how the whole thing was financed. In other words the theatre owners didn't spend a penny of their own money any more, it all fell on the producing manager. Now it had to be, in the terms of the contract, that if we owed them money as we usually did even having made as many deductions as we possibly could, the cheque had to be at the producing management by twelve noon on the Friday. If it was the other way round, we expected our cheque by the same time and there was a producer whose cheque never quite got to us and we always saw two or three times at the Piccadilly, that's by the by, that's how it was then.

DS: Sure. So, the Albery episode came to an end.

SW: It came to an end because – what happened? I think I had decided to seize the opportunity of acquiring a cinema lease and doing some more myself. In the course of that, the Lyceum Theatre, Crewe was going through a very bad time. The council had been running it under – Crewe Council had been running it under a self perpetuating trust, which thought the way forward to make money to keep the theatre going, this will have been in '84, in the days of cutbacks, would be to mount some tours, which would bring money in but as always, I think the cost of touring is under estimated and Crewe Theatre Trust ran out of money with a tour on the road and the theatre was forced into closure. Someone else took the theatre on, I'm not sure that I need to say who, you can find that out by looking it up, and within nine months was already in very, very serious trouble. I had been working for Lord Portman and he had decided to shut his theatre in

Hereford because it was costing him too much money and I said to the guys at Crewe, 'Hey I can do this' and they said 'What's the cost going to be?'. I said 'Well I don't know, initially nothing but we'll have to negotiate it', so I took on – I mean it was just – it really was like something out of the 1950s where there were ads in The Stage every week of theatres to rent. I did take it on and I did manage to keep it going for seven years, with local amateur use, the occasional tour coming in and a throwback to weekly repertory. We didn't sustain that for more than two years, we did then do 10 days because we needed, I thought, more of a throughput of plays and in the end the council was giving £21,500 pounds per annum as a grant, which I had to earn at the rate of a pound a seat for every ticket sold, so the incentive was not to do anything uplifting! Had they been clever and said £1.50 for every seat left empty, we could have developed a programme, but the way of earning the grant was by seats filled, which was not constructive at all. And, I mean we kept going, it cost me a lot of money, I lost an awful lot, and eventually I threw in the towel and said, 'I really cannot do this any more' and one of the council officers said, 'Well you really were rather second-rate weren't you?', and I said, 'Yes, you try and be first rate on 21 bloody thousand', out of which they took £10,000 rent and rates! [laughs] No, I...

DS: It sounds an achievement to me.

SW: And I was, I will admit, I was much maligned. Of course some bills weren't paid, of course we hid outside when the electricity man came - which was a throwback to the fifties with friends of mine who were running [laughs] The Theatre Royal, Portsmouth at that time, which I may if you've time, just mention briefly later - but they... it couldn't be done any other way. I'm pleased that I kept it going, I am not pleased with the way we had to do it, but nevertheless, it wouldn't have been there still and now the council give themselves £265,000 and there are far fewer plays now than there ever were.

DS: Yes.

SW: It may well have had an extension built and a lovely bar where I saw on television once, you can get a Cappuccino coffee there... So what. It's the play surely, it is the play which is the thing and people used to ring up, 'Well who's in it?'. 'It's a repertory company, it's the play'. 'Oh well, oh no...'. Or when we had Hinge and Brackett, there was some bills outside, 'Oh Hinge and Brackett - oh no, we've seen them, don't wanna – no, we've seen 'em once'. Danny La Rue brought a show and I heard this woman say, 'Well of course it won't be Danny La Rue, he wouldn't come to Crewe, it's someone who looks like him'. And we had a café, we were running a café in the theatre, steak and kidney and chicken nuggets, nothing special but people seem to want them. 'Oh' said this woman's friend 'Chicken nuggets', 'Oh no, you can't say that here love, it's the theatre, oh no, it's a bit posh. Theatre... 'chicken nuggah'.

DS: [Laughs]

SW: Oh there were moments of unintentional mirth.

DS: Okay, we need to come to an end in a minute.

SW: All right.

DS: But looking back over your long and varied career, you wanted to say something about Portsmouth, but could you also just reflect on what you felt was the most sort of personally exciting period. What was the kind of...?

SW: I think working for Donald Albery.

DS: Right.

SW: Really. And I think the trouble was I had become blinkered myself, and so we were not as progressive at Crewe and the other places as we might have been. The trouble was, I think, looking back, I was living someone else's past. All these people, who look back with great affection on the repertory today, 'Oh those were the times when the rep was here'. Well, people remember them as the times but I'm not sure the repertory was fabulous for building a regular audience, and certainly Palmers Green was going long enough through the BBC2 and ITV gestation period for it, to counter the belief that the coming of those channels killed it off. No they didn't, Palmers Green staggered on through that. What I can tell you from looking at books I remember seeing of the Pavilion Cinema, Hoddesdon, much later but books of the time of the Coronation. At the time of the Coronation, at that cinema attendances dropped by 50 per cent, never to go back to the level they had had before. And, as people bought televisions, I suppose and they suddenly found, not that they would go – not that they would watch television every night but the days of going to the cinema three times a week and, or fitting in the local theatre, those had stopped.

DS: They were starting to go...

SW: And my mate, Geoffrey Wren, who had been running The Theatre Royal, Portsmouth as well as The Theatre Royal, Norwich at one time on lease, said that he noticed and they learned, as ITV opened up around the country, so audiences fell pretty drastically then. They survived but never reached the levels of pre-ITV.

DS: Thank you very much indeed.