

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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David Budworth – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sarah Strachan

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Theatre-goer. Actors; Alexandra Theatre, Birmingham; Birmingham Rep; censorship; Christopher Fry; musicals; J.B. Priestley; regional theatre; repertory theatre; television; ticket price; verse drama; West End plays; Waiting For Godot.

SS: So, it's the 10th November, 2006, and we're just starting now. I was wondering if you could just give me a bit of background information about your involvement in the theatre. I mean, obviously from your e-mails we know the sort of dates. Can you just say sort of what productions you were involved in and which ones you've seen?

DB: Well I think that would take rather a long time. Theatre's been part of my life for as long as I can remember. And my father had been a bit of an amateur actor, so I grew up in a house with French's Acting Editions around the place, and full editions of Bernard Shaw's plays which I read fairly early on – quite young in my early, mid teens. And then I think my first systematic memories of going to the theatre - apart from a few amateur productions - are when I was in the sixth form at school, which I went into in late September '49. We had... this was in Birmingham. There was a thing called the Charles Henry Foyle Trust which subsidised theatre visits for schoolchildren – sixth formers.

SS: Oh right.

DB: And we used to get tickets for the Birmingham Rep – which in those days was mainly three weekly... did three weekly rep – and also to the Alexandra Theatre, which partly did fortnightly rep and partly acted as a receiving house for touring companies. So I saw quite a lot of things that way. I used to go pretty well every week. Instead of games I used to go to the theatre. Birmingham Rep tended to do slightly more cerebral things. All sorts of things - I have a list. But I think the first thing I ever saw there was St. John Hankin's *The Return of the Prodigal*, I remember, which is... it was revived not too long ago I seem to remember. And they did things like *Hobson's Choice* and they did all three parts of *Henry VI* - which is not something you often see - and Christopher Fry, *Venus Observed* I remember, in particular. So there's quite a range of things there.

The Alex tended to do slightly more popular things. But occasionally, in particular at the end of the season, if they'd had a reasonably good season, had a few bob left over, they would put on something else, something a bit better. And I remember a production of *St. Joan* there they did - Shaw's *St. Joan* - at the end of the season. And then there were touring things as I say, usually pre-London, came as a try out. So there were all sorts of things there as well.

SS: Do you feel that at the time there was a conflict between entertainment plays, designed to make money, to entertain audiences, and the more sort of intellectual emerging writings?

DB: Well it's always been a problem in the theatre generally. Later... my wife was... as an actress, and she was... in the sort of middle sixties, she was in one of the last weekly rep companies which was entirely unsubsidised. And they, you know, they tried to... they had to make money, they had to keep themselves solvent. But they put on... so they put on murder mysteries and things like that. But they also put on... again a Hobson's Choice I remember, and they put on at least three new plays – local ones. Were well attended but - this was in Huddersfield this particular theatre - by local authors. So, you know, that was taking a bit of a risk I suppose. So... But there's always attendance, you know, the theatre's always had this problem of being... trying to balance the books.

SS: Do you feel the subsidies that came into place helped solve that, or do you feel they were sort... they were biased towards certain sections?

DB: Well of course a lot changed over the period. It was fairly well underway by the end of the period covered by the project, in that television – the influence of television – was getting much more significant. And somebody has said I think, that the present day television soap operas have rather in a way, taken over the role that old weekly rep companies had, in that you went along and you saw a lot of familiar faces you knew. Whereas in the old days they were doing a different play each week, now they're doing seven more episodes of something.

There was in... I suppose in the... about the early, late, middle sixties, I can't remember exactly. There was a sudden rush of building new civic theatres. I mean, the old Birmingham Rep which had been built by Barry Jackson before the... between the wars I think, or even back to the first war, was supposed to be redeveloped for a new ring road, which in the event was never built. But they built a new theatre instead which was bigger. The old Rep was about 450, 500 and the new one was 900. Similar thing happened in Sheffield while we there, The Playhouse closed, and they built The Crucible. And all over the country, Bolton Octagon and goodness knows what. I mean, lots and lots of new ones went up at that period. All subsidised, to some degree or other. But even with subsidy you still have the problem of balancing the books.

SS: Of course.

DB: I think on the whole the standard... The sort of really trashy plays that sometimes used to go on have died out, I think you can say fairly safely. But you still have the problem.

SS: OK. A lot... just through my reading, my background on the subject, there seems to be quite a lot of sort of high profile actors sort of getting their, sort of first hold on the ladder at this sort of the time.

DB: Yes.

SS: Did you feel that sort of 'celebrity' – actors being famous in their own right – was coming to the foreground in this sort of period?

DB: Well I mean there were celebrity actors of course who were mainly in West End things, which you know, went on pre-London tours very often in the provinces so one had the opportunity of seeing them. I remember people like Sybil Thorndike and Edith Evans coming to Birmingham, and to Leeds later on. There was a theatre in Sheffield – The Lyceum – I don't remember ever seeing any of those there. Ralph Richardson, Gielgud, you know people like that, Olivier – although he didn't tour an awful lot as I recall. Not until he was in the National anyway.

But rep was an extremely good training I think. And you do notice the difference now in the standard of acting I think, in that I think it was a very good thing for young actors to work in rep for a limited time, not too long. Particularly weekly was bad for people I think if you were in it too long because it was just too quick and superficial. But if you were in somewhere like Birmingham Rep which played three weekly... or in even the Alex which did two weekly, you got a bit more chance to do something properly. And playing a range of parts in a company, over a period, I think does an awful lot for an actor's training. And I'm also a great believer in its benefits on voice production too, because if you watch television today - if you watch some of the things like Casualty or something like - if you get some actors of the old school there, you can hear absolutely every word. But a lot of the younger ones just mumble, you really can't tell what they're saying half the time. And that's theatre training. You know, you stand on that stage and you've got to make yourself heard at the back of the gallery. And if you don't, you're out of work. So that...

SS: So there's a definite difference between the style of TV acting and the theatre...?

DB: I think... Well of course you have to scale it down for television. You know, if you did a sort of full-scale theatre acting for a television camera it would look ridiculous and it would be overwhelming. You've got to scale it down. But the essence, of being clear in what you're saying, still remains.

SS: At the time there did seem to be quite a development of theatre, as in the stage, the lighting, the sort of presentation of new plays. Do you think the way theatres actually produced plays had to change because of the new writing, that the new plays that were being put on?

DB: Not sure about that... Yes, an interesting point, because directors have different styles too, But I mean, some of the more modern plays, if you like, were written in rather a different sort of way, so that you know, the old sort of Victorian thing which was designed for a proscenium arch and sets, flats and tabs and things, was... did get... tend to go out. And of course you can play... play things. You don't have to have realistic sets; you can play with them with very little. Of course, Shakespeare was designed for

very little in the way of scenery - nothing really, in the way of scenery: a few props and that was about it. And then you've got the different styles. So to some extent the style of the play itself does dictate it, but there's a fair amount of freedom I think. So, things do change, or did change over the... yes, but I can't... I don't remember anything terribly sensational as it were.

SS: OK. A lot of the plays that seemed to be produced at the time are also being reproduced now... put on still. Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*, it's on at *The Crucible*.

DB: Yes.

SS: Do you feel that some of the plays of the period have suffered because they were of their time and can't be reproduced in modern setting?

DB: Oh I think that's true of plays of any era. I remember one of things... one of the fairly early things I saw at Birmingham Rep was a play called *School* - by a Victorian author called T.W. Robertson if I remember - which was done as a sort of curiosity I suppose. And that sort of thing was popular in his day, but has died out. Although one of... I think what is true is that the better plays survive, you know. I think Shaw says somewhere that Pinero said at some point, 'They don't want me anymore.' or something. But then one or two of his plays - *The Magistrate* particularly still gets revived occasionally. It's a good play, it's fun. And you know, so yes I think time sorts the wheat from the chaff on the whole. There are other things of course which affect it, which is... One of them being - again - the economics: that Victorian plays were often written for very large casts which people can't afford these days. So there has been a tendency for quite a small number of people... So you know, two, three, four-handers, that sort of thing. But...

SS: Just speaking about plays with a large cast, obviously musicals now are very big business, take a lot of money. At the time, do you think they were actually respected more as an art form, to link in with the old variety performances? Were they seen connected with that?

DB: Well they're different styles. I mean, before my time you've got the sort of light opera type things. Then sort of when I was relatively young, things like *The Boy Friend* and *Salad Days* and one or two other things that Julian Slade and - what was she called... Reynolds? Can't remember her first name now - wrote, were around still. I remember one of the things I saw on my orgy in London, when I had three weeks in London, was *Grab me a Gondola*, which was another musical. So they've always been around. I think there's more of them now than there were, but I don't think the West End has ever been, really, I great place for the very best plays on the whole - or less of it. Years ago I read a book by Norman Marshall - who was quite a well known director in his day - who said that when he first came to London - which I think was in the twenties - he saw all sorts of wonderful plays, lots of Shakespeare and you know, all sorts of things. But none of them was in the West End; they were all in fringe theatres of one sort or another that various enthusiasts were doing. And I think that's still the case really, the West End is very commercial - has to be. And so it's perhaps more musically -

musical-y – you're right more musicals around than perhaps there were twenty years ago maybe. But you know, things oscillate a bit, because you've got The National and The Royal Shakespeare now. And you know, all the various smaller places, fringy sort of places or ones in the centre of London, but not West End. So you've still got the variety there.

SS: OK, obviously you were involved a lot in regional theatre...

DB: Yes, well that's where I saw most of my theatre in the period we're talking about. Yes, because I didn't move to London until... Well I came to just outside London beginning of 1969 actually. So that fits in rather nicely with the project doesn't it? Started going to the National Theatre regularly in those days.

SS: Our course pretty much focuses on the West End, the London theatres, The National, The Royal Shakespeare, Theatre Workshop, a lot of the companies, almost to the extent that while we are aware there are regional theatres and companies did tour, we don't really focus on them. So do you feel that the sort of reputation of the London companies has overshadowed the work... the theatre work that was going around this country?

DB: I think if you're thinking of the theatrical experience of the population as a whole, yes, I think that's certainly true. In fact, when I came to the event you had here at the British Library some months ago, to present the sort of interim findings of the survey - of the project - and Professor Shellard made the point that people had stressed the importance of repertory and provincial theatre. And I think that's a very important factor in, if you like, the national theatregoing experience. So... and there's always a tendency to get focused on it, and also for critics or writers generally to run away with fashions. I was very interested in the one which in fact was the focus of that... Well, the title of the meeting that was here a few months ago, which was 'More than just Osborne?'. And I think if you look into it you may find that the idea that Look Back in Anger changed everything is a quite recent idea.

I mentioned in some preliminary talk – well, e-mails - that in 1965 when I was on the staff of the University of Sheffield, the sociology department did a survey of the audience at the Sheffield Playhouse. And I knew the chap who did the survey, and in fact I went along to the seminar where they presented their findings. And I looked up the report, the two published papers they did of it, and in that he says – Peter Mann, the chap who did the survey, who was not as far as I recall a particularly keen theatregoer – said, relying on only about one rather possibly dodgy reference but... said that the general thing that had... was agreed to have changed theatre was Waiting for Godot. I think that's much more true. Look Back in Anger isn't a terribly good play actually. Although I was rather impressed again at that meeting a few months ago when a woman from the audience said it had inspired her in some way to feel that she was not a repressed member of the community, but could rise up or something. I can't remember exactly what it was, but it had a profound emotional effect on her, which it certainly didn't on me. But thinking about it, I suppose you... it was... it reflected a change in society really, that more people were going to University, particularly from rather poorer backgrounds. So it was new in that sense.

But again going back a little earlier than that, when I was young, when I was still at school, the sort of things that were felt to be influential - or new trends in theatre, particularly - was Christopher Fry, with going back to verse plays. And of course T. S. Eliot wrote at least a couple as well in verse. That sort of didn't actually go very far I suppose, or didn't build up into sort of movement, and the plays tend to get a bit neglected I suppose. Although again, *The Lady's not for Burning* was revived at Chichester a few years ago – that's a very good play. And there were other experiments - he did a play called *A Sleep of Prisoners*, which was about a group of prisoners confined in a church, and they played it in churches. I saw it in St. Martin's in Birmingham, the Birmingham Parish Church in the Bullring there. And then there was J. B. Priestley doing - or still doing - experimental sort of things, and he did... he did a thing he wrote with Jacquetta Hawkes called *Dragon's Mouth* which was a rehearsed reading, which I don't know whether they thought that might start a trend. But you had four actors on the stage with lecterns doing his thing. So there are all sorts of odds and ends going on. And I think theatre evolves really.

SS: One of the more unusual plays that we looked was *Waiting for Godot*.

DB: Yes.

SS: The general consensus was the ideas were there, but we basically couldn't get our heads round the presentation of the play. So do you think the sort of... the more unusual, the more abstract plays, sort of shocked audiences into making them thinking about theatre differently?

DB: Oh I think you get a variety of answers... I mean, I didn't see the original West End production of *Waiting for Godot* - I saw a touring production obviously some time later, within a year or two, as I did with *Look Back in Anger*. But you know, you get various reactions. It quite impressed me, but I didn't quite know what to make of it I think. Some people would dismiss it as mere rubbish, but other people would sort of go over the moon about it. I think, you know, when you get something which is a bit out of the ordinary, a bit different, that's the sort of thing that happens. I suppose the only one of that period which I did see in the original West End production was *The Entertainer* with Olivier – after it had transferred from the Royal Court to the Palace – which I did enjoy very much. But that was a... Well it was a superb performance all round, Olivier in particular. But all the supporting cast were all extremely good.

SS: At this period you seem to see a lot of different styles of acting coming through, there's the method acting and then sort of Brechtian school of acting. Do you think those sort of filtered through theatre in general, or were they sort of concentrated to a single period, single company? Did people adopt them as widely as we're led to believe?

DB: I thought method acting tended to be restricted to American film actors. I mean, there's a well known story of Olivier watching Dustin Hoffman I think it was, tire himself out because he had played the part of pushing some great log around. And said, 'Dear boy, why don't you try acting?' Which you know is... I think sums up the differences. I'm not quite sure about Brechtian that was more of a style of production I think really

wasn't it? I am I suppose rather unsympathetic to dominant directors, I think the job of the director is to stop the actors running into the furniture. Perhaps that's slightly dismissive, but you know when you get a production which is dominated by the director, you usually see that the actors are extremely unhappy.

And I suppose my interest in theatre is partially the writing and partly the acting, those are the two things which I regard as more important, or I'm more interested in. And I say being married to an actress for the best part of fifty years I also have seen it from the other side as well, if you like. So I'm not terribly fond of director's theatre, but it does tend to get a lot of publicity and academic interest no doubt.

SS: Oh dear. [Laughs]

DB: If I could add as a slight counterweight to that...

SS: One of the things that really seems to overshadow this period, at least in what we're being taught, is the idea of censorship of writing.

DB: Yes. Yes, it was rather funny actually, censorship. I suppose the thing that was quite spectacular was when it was stopped - when the censorship was ended - you got this sudden rush of people appearing in the nude. And things like seeing Lady Macbeth in the nude - well she would have done in that period, you know, in the medieval period they didn't have nightdresses. No, but they lived in bloody cold draughty castles, and they didn't go round with no clothes on! [Laughs] But again that was partly due... one thing is actresses are very fond of taking their clothes off - or some of them are, not all of them. My wife isn't. But some of them are only too eager to prance around with no clothes on, so I don't think it was difficult to get them to do it. And it dragged the punters in, I suppose for a time, until people got rather fed up with it. So that was certainly one of the things of the end of it.

I think generally a skilled writer can convey things in ways which the censor will find acceptable or perhaps not notice. Of course The Goon Show were rather good at that. I mean, BBC used to be very strict about all sorts of things, and the Goons used to delight in slipping things past them, which they did quite successfully on some occasions. So it can... I suppose that might be a bit more difficult in the theatre. But some of the discussions I remember hearing about over disputed points in the text could be really quite funny. I can't remember the full details of one, but something about somebody being kicked up the arse or something. And the censor said that was all right 'because there was no possibility of entrance' or something! 'We're paid to have dirty minds here' they said, so... [Laughs] It was all a bit silly. The only good thing about the censorship was that you did get copies of the plays deposited, but I think that has now been... plays are now by law I understand deposited in the British Library, so they've got round that problem. Oh of course another one somebody did was once they claimed to have dug out a very old mediaeval play, which was exempt from the censorship because of its age, or you know assumed to be all right. It was a complete fabrication! I mean it hadn't been but they got round it that way. I think that was Theatre Workshop or somebody like that who did that one. I can't remember but... So people got round it.

SS: There are always ways.

DB: I think it's all calmed down again now.

SS: Obviously censorship ties into the sort of major taboos of the age...

DB: Yes.

SS: ...things that was never mentioned. Do you feel it was sort of theatre's accepted role to try and challenge these in some way, to keep pushing the boundaries?

DB: Well, I think some playwrights have tended to try that, yes. I wouldn't say it was the dedicated role of the theatre to do it, I think it depends on what you're trying to do. I mean, you know, Bernard Shaw's use of the word 'bloody' in *Pygmalion* was quite sensational at the time. And of course it did produce a big effect, because it was unusual. I mean, then you got to the other extreme where... can't remember the name of the play now... but there was one around in the sort of late fifties, sixties where the word 'bloody' appears in every sentence virtually. And I mean it just loses all effect then. But then you know, on language generally, things just change with fashions you see. You can't use words like 'nigger' or 'coon' these days you know - it'd cause a riot. But you can use four letter words fairly freely and nobody bats an eyelid, you know, which is... it used to be quite the other way round. And this is just a change of fashion, words by themselves don't mean any... Well I mean, they mean something, but the emotional effect is not inherent in the word, it's in the context of the society of the time. And what's acceptable at one time isn't at another. But it doesn't make any difference to the word itself. I think it's changing fashions really. So the theatre and writers generally tend to be in advance of the general public. That's as you would really expect.

SS: In retrospect a lot of people working in theatre – writers, directors, actors – can be sort of clumped together in movements or sort of generalised terms. Do you think at the time people had any idea of what sort of impact they were creating in terms of sort of long term effects of productions?

DB: Difficult to say what they thought really. I think classification into movements and periods and things like that is very much an academic exercise, and has its role I suppose. I did my time as an academic long enough, although not in this sort of area. So yes, but it's like in art you know, you get art history which is classified into periods. But I don't think... but people like-minded get together and do similar things and they want to promote what they're interested in, or the way they think the world should be perceived or what they want to say. But I don't think they... I mean I don't think they say, 'I will join this movement and therefore I must do this.' It's 'I want to do this and if other chaps want to do it as well, fine. And you know, if somebody wants to call us by some particular name, so what.' I think it's that way round really.

SS: It seemed at the time theatre was on easier to access, easier to sort of interact with in terms of audiences getting to see new works. Whereas I find at the moment, theatre

seems more a sort of elitist form of entertainment. Do you think this is mainly due to cinema and television or...?

DB: Well, cinema has been a factor, I mean... I suppose... I think cinema audiences have been going up a bit recently, but they dropped off dreadfully after television came in. I mean, during the war and round that sort of period, and post war, the cinema was very dominant. There were cinemas on every street corner practically. I lived opposite one, I remember, in suburban Birmingham. And the people who go to the theatre have always been a minority. But when you had things like the weekly reps or the local reps, probably people went more regularly, a bigger proportion of the population possibly. I mean, I don't really know, but I imagine they did. But I mean, there's still a reasonable number of theatres about. It's always been a bit of a minority taste, I think, the theatre you know. Theatre's always been in a bad way. If you listen to Flanders and Swann, their version of Greensleeves, it starts off with, '1543 was a very bad year in the theatre.' [Laughs] And you know I mean it's been the same all the time. But I think one thing has changed I think, because I don't really go much these days unfortunately for one reason or another but... and in any case I'm not exactly a broke student anymore. But one thing you could do when I came – when I had three weeks in London and saw 14 shows plus 2 jazz concerts – the... you could go in the gallery for... I think it was about 7/6d or something, or 10/6d maybe sometimes, depends on the theatre. The price range was I think bigger, you know from the most expensive to the cheapest seats. So I think it was possible to see really good things for less, relative to one's income – or you know the average income or whatever you like – then than it probably is now. I mean, I believe West End theatres charge enormous prices for the gallery even these days. I mean, I'm able to go in the stalls or the dress circle but, you know the... I think that has been a change. I'm not sure about the repertory theatres that are still going, what they're like financially. I mean they're always tried to keep their prices down. But again, you know, get back to the economics.

SS: There does seem to be a lot of sort of amateur dramatic societies, and then there does seem to be a leap up to the big professional companies. Whereas I get the feeling at the time there were more sort of either semi-professional or smaller theatres operating that could stage different plays. So do you...?

DB: Yes I think that's probably true because... I mean, I mixed in circles of people who were sort of on the amateur/professional divide if you like. And you can get... I don't know, I haven't seen any amateur productions for some time, but you certainly could get extremely good amateur productions in some places. And some of the people did perhaps help out in the local rep sometimes. You know, there was a bigger cast play than usual and a few more parts around, they would tend to pop in that way. My wife got her first job in rep – although she was a pro in a sense – that way. She went on at an hour's notice I think with the book. So yes, I think you're right, there was a bit more of a gradation, and it's a bit more of a jump now. So what people will tend to do is to try and get small parts in television I think. You know they're going in for professionally...

SS: Was there a lot of crossover between television and theatre acting at the time? Were people sort of exploring it as a medium and then were turning to theatre, or were they sort of tempted away into television?

DB: It depends on the people I think. Yes, I think in the very early days of television when they actually did things live. Well there weren't really any television actors as such of course in those days, they were all theatre actors. It gradually developed, changed. And I suppose some people preferred television. I don't think anybody nowadays is solely a theatre actor, or very few. People would often do a bit of television - it pays better, and doesn't involve so much work. You know, eight shows a week is hard work. Example of a soap star, who I won't name, but who went to play in the West End – God knows why they cast her but they did – and she just couldn't cope with eight shows a week. And it is a different... does demand a bit more discipline I think. And it's harder work for less money. But it gives you a lift you don't get from doing television.

If I can tell a little story, I was on a cruise not too long ago, and happened to meet in the lift a very well known actor. And I said you know, 'I've enjoyed your work over the years, thanks very much. Particularly going back...' and I named a particular show I'd seen him in the Olivier National Company. So that's going back 30 years or so. And his eyes lit up! And he said, 'That's what I really like, the theatre.' But I mean he's much better known from his television work, which no doubt pays the bills, and is physically easier. But you know, you get that effect I think.

SS: Are there any particular plays of the period you feel have been overlooked, in terms of the recognition, either the staging or their academic recognition nowadays?

DB: I would say Christopher Fry certainly, because I enjoyed his plays. Not so sure about the Priestley, Priestley tended to be a bit overbearing sometimes. Yes, I think his best play by far is *When We Are Married*. But - which I would only go and see in a Yorkshire amateur production now, it's not the sort of thing that professionals can cope with these days. I think that, and particularly that I would say. Offhand I can't just think of anything else, sort of springs I mean... Robert Bolt, I don't know whether *Flowering Cherry* is sort of never seen again is it? I don't think. *A Man for all Seasons* is, that seems to still get trotted out. I'm not sure whether some of them would stand up to repeated treatment. But I think the Christopher Fry ones certainly would if played properly.

SS: So out of... I know it's hard to pick a favourite out of all the plays that you've seen, but is there one that particularly stands out from the period as either something that struck you as unusual or just different or just one you liked?

DB: Oh I think the things that stick in the mind are more productions than plays. I mean, I remember a wonderful production of *St. Joan* which was a very early National touring production I think – or it could have been an Old Vic still – which I thought was absolutely wonderful. Barbara Jefford I think was Joan. And then for some reason a double bill – again Shaw curiously enough – *Village Wooing* and *Fanny's First Play*. *Village Wooing* gets trotted out every now and again, *Fanny's First Play* is very rarely done I think. That was one of the most exhilarating evenings I've ever had in the theatre I think. It was at Leeds Theatre Royal, and I remember I couldn't bear the thought of getting on a bus or a tram to go home after I saw it. Walked all the way back up to Headingley to... just elated! I think those two, more than almost anything else stick in my mind from that sort of period. Some a bit more recently but probably just outside

your survey. Olivier's Long Day's Journey into Night which I saw twice. But that was in the early seventies I think.

SS: OK, until you can think of anything that... any point you wish to make that we haven't covered?

DB: I think we've probably covered most of it really. Yes.

SS: OK that's brilliant then, thank you very much.

DB: OK.