

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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David Chivers – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sarah Tough

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Actor and Stage Manager. A Breath of Spring; A Funny Thing Happened on the way to the Forum Ian Albery; Bristol Old Vic Theatre School; Esme Church; digs; Rudolf Laban; repertory; school theatre; Athene Seyler; touring; voice training.

ST: I'd like to begin by asking you about your background in theatre. How did you get into theatre and can you remember your first experiences of it?

DC: Yes I do. It's very interesting, this, because my first experience of theatre was as a seven year old at school, where I was cast as a fairy - which I wasn't very happy about - and it was an open air production. And being a fairy, I didn't have any shoes or footwear and had to cross over a fairly uncomfortable gravel drive to get to the performance area. So, all in all, I'm amazed that I'm in the theatre after that experience! The next year, I was cast in a much... I was much happier about in more ways than one, because I was in a play called The Happy Man, and I was the happy man, strangely enough without a shirt to his back! [Laughs] Well, after that I went to boarding school at Clifton, and I wasn't in a play there which I wanted to be having had this strange other experience. I was in a play which was especially written by two masters who were very good at writing plays with certain students in mind, and I think I was a Company Sergeant Major or something at the age of thirteen in a play, the name of which I can't remember. And when I went into senior school, I made a point of joining the so-called dramatic society, which did a play every year, at what was called commemoration time I think. And strangely enough, I was cast always in all the women's parts! [Laughs] The Importance of Being Earnest I played Gwendolyn, and then in Twelfth Night I played Maria, and then in Shaw's The Apple Cart I played a part called Lysistrata who was the Power Mistress, and that actually was quite interesting in itself, because after I'd done that in the summer term, my house master - who was a rather bluff Scottish gentleman, Forbes Mackintosh [ed. said]: 'I saw you, David, playing last term Lysistrata, the Power Mistress. I think you'll be [ed. you can be] head of the house next year!' But his son, Ian Mackintosh, is also in the theatre now, and has done an awful lot; you may or may not have come across him. He is still sort of involved and doing things. And then the other thing I was going to mention about my playing all the women's parts - I think I told you - Michael Redgrave also played all the women's parts when he was there. And although he left in 1926, almost fifteen or so years later, they were still talking about his Lady Macbeth!! [Laughs].

ST: Would you be able to tell me about what you did after? You mentioned you went to the Drama League course in York. How were you trained there?

DC: I left school to go in the navy. I was quite happy to - I volunteered to go into the Navy, and when I came out of that, I by then had decided I would definitely want to go into the theatre rather than the family construction business, and first of all I got myself on a Drama League course in York, where Esme Church was one of the principle teachers, and a man called Rudolf Laban, who was a movement man. And as a result of that, I joined the theatre school which she was about to start at Bradford at the Bradford Civic Playhouse, a very high standard amateur theatre, but she was in charge of theatre as such as a professional and decided to start a theatre school there. Amongst the students there was an actor called Bernard Hepton, you may or may not have heard of, but he has been interviewed for this system as well actually.

ST: That's interesting. Do you have many recollections of working alongside Laban or Esme Church?

DC: Well yes. With Laban we had movement, first of all by him, but then he became ill, or unwell enough to come over, so he was working in Manchester, and we were in Bradford, and so he sent one of his pupils over, Geraldine Stevenson, whom I'm still in touch with actually. And he had a system of movement which was really particularly appropriate for actors, very much for whole body, and not a ballet sort of movement at all, it was as I was saying earlier, a Kurt Jooss sort of system of being very much in the knees and the legs as well as the rest of the body. He had a marvellous scale of movement: floating, dancing [ed. erased by interviewee], flicking and slashing and so on, which was very interesting. And Esme Church was marvellously good, and I actually participated in a children's play which they wanted to establish as one of the things they did every year, and it was called The Magic Lighter, and I played the part of Nit. There were two characters called Nit and Wit, and I played the part of Nit! [Laughs]

ST: And was this after or during the time you were at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School?

DC: Yes, this was before I went to Bristol Old Vic. I left after a year for various reasons which I won't bother you with, then I thought perhaps I'd have a go at the family business, so I did, which was disastrous! And I then went to Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, joined that, and incidentally met my wife there, which was rather nice! Sadly not with me now, she died. But that was a very interesting time and it was in the early days of the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. We were actually housed in two old school buildings at the stage door of the Bristol Old Vic Theatre, whereas now they're way up in Clifton in a separate building altogether, but I think we were better off being close to the theatre. We used to go in and... we'd play small parts and small crowd scenes, and so on and so forth, and watch rehearsals... It was very much part of the theatre, as it were.

ST: You've obviously had a lot of extensive training in theatre. What did you go on to after you had finished your education?

DC: After the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School? Well we did seasons... In the summer breaks, we formed a studio company, and did about four or five weeks I think, or six weeks, doing different plays - which I've actually listed there - like Time and the Conways, George and Margaret, Walk Alone and so on... that was down in Falmouth. And we rehearsed for a fortnight: we played one week in Falmouth, and another week touring to different towns in Cornwall, like St Ives, Perranporth, Weybridge and Helstow. There was already a resident company there, and they did the same thing: they played one week in Falmouth, and then a week going round. And I did that for two summer seasons actually, whilst I was at the Old Vic Theatre School, and then after that, I got my first professional job with my wife. We tried to stay together. Not always easy, and not always accepted by different companies. But we managed to get a job together with the Glyndebourne Children's Theatre Company, playing Great Expectations for a Christmas Season in the Library Theatre in Manchester, and then two or three weeks or so in Brighton at the Dolphin Theatre, which is no longer there. It was right next to the Theatre Royal, which is well known in Brighton, but the Dolphin Theatre is now no longer, sadly. But it was rather good, because John Christie invited the whole company out to Glyndebourne to have tea with him, and to see his lovely Glyndebourne Opera House, but that was the old one, not the present one. But I've always, as a result of this, felt a certain attachment for Glyndebourne, and in fact I usually go every year now to the touring season at Glyndebourne, in their new theatre which is very impressive: they completely rebuilt the theatre and turned it round and made it into a semi-circular theatre, as opposed to a straight, rather narrow theatre which was the original one.

ST: So repertory theatre is obviously something that interested you at the time?

DC: Well yes, after Glyndebourne, we managed to get into different repertory companies. Not always together, because as I said, some companies like joint engagements because they were cheaper, whereas other companies had a very definite policy against married couples, and in fact one of them was Sheffield Playhouse, though my wife did join for one production up there while I was there in a season, and in fact Geoffrey Ost was keen for me to join the following season, and he got a job for my wife in a neighbouring weekly rep... I've forgotten the name of the place. Quite near anyway. But they had an absolutely terrible routine. You rehearsed one play in the morning, the following play in the afternoon, and then the play you were doing that evening, so you can imagine...! And at that time, we had a babe, so that was really not practical, and so I didn't join as a result, I'm afraid. But, then I went to the English Ring Actors which was in Penzance: that was another fortnightly rep, similar to the Falmouth one I was telling you about earlier.

ST: What kinds of plays were being performed?

DC: Sort of plays that were being done? Oh, the usual sort of plays... I don't know if I've made a list of them here...

ST: Was it mainly new playwrights' works...?

DC: The Circle, Arms and the Man, Man about the House, Love in a Mist, Sarah Simple, The Night was our Friend, The Farmer's Wife, Autumn Crocus, Black Chiffon... I was actually there, as what was in those days, a Stage Directing and Acting... you know, whenever I had the opportunity or was asked to... but nowadays, they would be called a Stage Manager, because a Stage Director is someone who actually directs the play now - it used not to be, it used to be called the producer actually, but the producer now is known as the management that presents the play, the director is called the director, and the stage management is known as the stage manager, assistant stage manager and so on.

ST: Yes, because this is something you went on to do... What made you switch from acting to stage management? Was there any particular reason?

DC: Well I think I had been in various rep companies, as you'll gather from the list I've given you there... And I was at home one day with my brother whose now-wife was at home - they weren't married then. But she worked for the Royal Opera House - for the Production Manager there. And I said to her, 'If you ever hear anything in the Opera House, I might be interested'. And she did! She wrote me a letter saying 'they're looking for a stage manager with the Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet', up at Sadler's Wells, which was part of the Royal Ballet Theatre Company set-up, so I applied for it and got it, and that's how I got involved in stage management! I mean, one had been involved with stage management as a student, you know, because one was taught stage management as well as acting in those days, whereas now they have separate stage management courses. So that's really how I got involved with the stage management, and as a result of that, it was fairly easy to get stage management work in the West End... But I think, as I mentioned earlier, I wanted to continue with my acting, or keep it going a bit, so I was quite happy to be an understudy as well as a Stage Manager, which in those days was quite common. I think it's less common now... I think the stage management tend to be stage management and they have actors who are walking understudies, who understudy various people in the play, so I did that...

ST: Did opportunities ever arise for you to perform?

DC: Yes indeed! I think in Mr Kettle and Mrs Moon, which I was stage managing at the Duchess Theatre, it was a play by Priestley, I understudied John Moffat and someone else who was off sick... no it wasn't John Moffat, but anyway, I played on that occasion.

ST: What was it like for you, performing on stage?

DC: I enjoyed doing it. Well, one rehearsed as an understudy, as much as possible... well, every week, and in those days, one managed to rehearse during a rehearsal period, which nowadays I don't think happens quite as much for one reason or another. And as I'll tell you in a moment or two, I was going to mention the fact that I was in A Breath of Spring with Athene Seyler, and that was a marvellous play. It was really a play of a Robin Hood nature: there were four women who stole furs from the rich to sell them to give money to the poor, and they were supposedly controlled by a retired army manager played by Michael Shepley which I was understudying. And it was a marvellous part, and

about the only male part in the play (there were a couple of small parts at the end which I was also doing at the time). However, he was sick in the West End when I was understudying him, and I played for him there. And then we did a post London tour, virtually with the whole of the London cast, which is less usual nowadays – it does happen I know, but not so much as it did. And... I think it was the first week at Oxford he became ill, and I had to go on for him. And in fact he didn't return for the rest of the six week tour, so I played for him. And I was therefore... I was company stage manager getting the show in at 8 o'clock in the morning, and I remember at Brighton the manager came in at 10 o'clock, and said, 'I see you've got an understudy on. What's he like?' And I said 'He's very good!' And... Athene was marvellous. I thoroughly enjoyed playing with her. And as company manager, I had to pay the cast during the week if they wanted cash or whatever, and she had cash of course, and she said to me, 'You know, David, I don't think I've ever been paid by my leading man before!' which was marvellous! [Laughs]

ST: Can you remember what the audience's reception was like to seeing you perform on stage?

DC: Well, they seemed to accept me, you know, and the reception was very good.

ST: Were any reviews ever written about your performance?

DC: Yes I have, I should have brought some along with me actually! I was looking at some yesterday actually, and I was complimented on my performance, particularly at Oxford, and other places as well. And I remember actually, in Newcastle I think it was (we didn't do particularly well there), and in the interval you settled with the house manager whatever was due to you, which I did during the interval (the second interval it was, there were two intervals in the play), and I was paid in pound notes, and in counting them I cut my finger, as well as having to do a change of costume before going back on again to do the final act. But that was the sort of experience one had, you know, of doing these various jobs. But I was going to mention *The Wrong Side of Park*...

ST: For when you were understudying Charles Heslop?

DC: Yes, I was understudying Charles Heslop. And we opened at Brighton: Peter Hall was directing it, and Margaret Leighton was in it as well: it was a lovely play actually. And in the second week, Charles Heslop was off. Fortunately I had well rehearsed the understudy in the rehearsal period, as I mentioned earlier, which doesn't happen as much now, so I was able to play the part with reasonable confidence.

ST: And did you prefer the acting side to the stage management, or was it nice to have a balance?

DC: Well, it's difficult to answer that: yes and no. I mean, I always enjoyed my acting, but I came to realise that as a Stage Manager work was more regularly available, and so that's why I think I stuck with it really for quite a long time.

ST: Where there any opportunities for you to stage manage outside of Britain? Did you ever travel abroad?

DC: Well, when I was with the Sadlers Wells Theatre Ballet, yes. Because while I was with them, we played Sadlers Wells Theatre and the big receiving houses in this country, and then we did, first of all, what was called The Rhodes Centenary Exhibition in Bulawayo, which was to celebrate the Rhodes Centenary actually! And we were, as a Ballet company, taking part in that, and we were flown out to that in a series of hops - we had to keep coming down to refuel in those days! And did the season in Bulawayo and flew back. And then we did a season in Holland, Belgium and Germany, at all the main sort of theatres: The Monet in Brussels, for instance, a lovely old theatre. But life there, as far as stage management was concerned, was really the transport between the dates and the theatre: you might get a little bit of sleep in a hotel which we were booked into, but not a great deal, so it was quite hard going. And that was for four weeks that we did that. Then, eventually, we did a season in South Africa - about a three month season - and we didn't fly there, we went out by the Union Castle line: a fortnight out, a fortnight back, like a holiday in itself! And, we did three or four weeks in Johannesburg, a couple of weeks in Durban, and a couple of weeks in Cape Town.

ST: How did you find working in South Africa? How was it different?

DC: Well, it was different in one way, but in other ways, it was as one's experience in any theatre, you might say. Of course, apartheid was still on in those days... Oh yes, Danny Kaye was there as well, and he was playing at another theatre, a different one from us, but we used to manage to get in to see him, and watch him from the wings, which was quite amusing!

ST: Was there ever a favourite production of yours which you stage managed during your time at Sadler's Wells?

DC: Well I think *Breath of Spring*, was probably one of my favourite ones, from what I was telling you about earlier. I don't know any others which were particularly... Well, I think... As I told you, I did go into the Front of House Manager at the Piccadilly Theatre. That was as a result of doing three plays by Simpson, Mortimer and Pinter with Emyln Williams, and I had the pleasure of being Company Stage Manager for that. I think I was understudying as well, I can't remember, but I didn't have to play at all. But as a result of that, I met with Ian Albery, because we played it at the Criterion Theatre (it started at the Arts Theatre and was transferred to the Criterion Theatre.) and Ian Albery was involved with the... You know about the Albery family? Perhaps not... Donald Albery and his family owned three theatres, what was then known as the New Theatre... and the Wyndhams Theatre at the back of it, and the Criterion Theatre, and they had then just acquired the Piccadilly Theatre. And Ian Albery, who I met doing this production, wanted a House Manager for the Piccadilly Theatre, because the one that was there was

moving elsewhere (I don't think he wanted to work for the Albery's because they had a strange reputation in a sort of way.). But Ian Albery was very keen to have a new house manager there, and he particularly wanted someone who had backstage experience, which is an interesting line of thought. Being very much a backstage man himself as it were, he was keen to have someone front of house who was also knowledgeable and familiar with the backstage, and so I accepted the job.

ST: And what did your role as House Manager involve?

DC: Well you're sort of representative for the theatre, you deal with the income management... I don't know whether you realise, but theatre owners don't necessarily put plays on: they're one management, and the management that's producing the play is another management, so there's a certain amount of liaison which has to go on between the two managements. While I was there, most of the time, there was a play called *Amorous Prawn*, with Evelyn Laye in it, and lovely person she was too. And I just had a short period with that lovely French mime Marcel Marceau who came in after the *Amorous Prawn* finished, which was very interesting to meet him. And I left that and went back into the company stage management business doing Henry Sherek's last play which was called....

ST: *Out of Bounds*, by Arthur Watkin?

DC: Yes, that was Henry Sherek's last production, and in it was Sir Michael Redgrave no less, so I had the chance of meeting him and getting to know him a little bit!

ST: And did he live up to the expectations which you had heard about him?

DC: Yes, yes he did. In fact I must tell you about one occasion when... it was an ordinary box set with a fireplace, a window and one door I think. And one night what happened... in spite of it being checked, the door handle came off: he couldn't get out of the set, so he went off through the fireplace, which... he was marvellous! Yes, he was very good to work with. I was understudying but I didn't have to go on... yes Charles Heslop I was understudying again (he was in it), but I didn't have to go on for him. And after that, I joined Theatre Projects, Forum Ventures. Well I joined it originally to do Company Stage Management for *A Funny Thing Happened on the way to the Forum* with Frankie Howerd, which was a marvellous production with marvellous comics in it as well.

ST: Where was this based?

DC: That was at the Strand Theatre... which they've now renamed the Strand Theatre [ed. subsequently corrected by interviewee to Novello Theatre]... in St. Martin's Lane. Anyway... yes, I did that for about a year. I was also doing the production management for the production as well, which is what often happened in those days. And then after

that, after about a year, I went into the office... a sort of general manager, production manager and general dogsbody for Richard Pilbrow.

ST: What did that involve for you?

DC: Well Theatre Projects was basically was a lighting hire and design company. Richard Pilbrow is a well known lighting designer: he founded the company, principally to hire out electrical equipment, spotlights and things - which he did - and also to design lighting theatre. But he got involved with production in quite an interesting way. One of the things he pioneered was called scenic projection – you have seen it or heard about it: it's used quite a lot now in a big way. But in those days, it wasn't used so much. It was used in *A Funny Thing Happened in the Forum*, which Tony Walton designed. And he got Richard Pilbrow in to do the lighting, and particularly the projection. And Richard Pilbrow pioneered equipment from Germany called Reich und Vogel and it was used to do that production here in England. And then it was done in America by Harold Prince, and Tony Walton again was involved and he persuaded Harold Prince to let Pilbrow come over and do the projection, which he did. And Harold Prince at the time was looking for a new producer to put on these productions in London. He had done them with Chapels, but a chap called Luis Dreyfus was getting old and he wanted someone younger. And he met Richard Pilbrow and liked him. As a result of which we did *A Funny Thing Happened on the way to the Forum* in London. And I'm sorry... I think I said he started on it... it was started in America, but we did it in London with Frankie Howerd. And it was, you know, very successful. A new production company was formed. It was a partnership where Forum Ventures came in. It was a partnership with Richard Pilbrow, Tony Walton and Chapels, so that was the management as such which presented *A Funny Thing*... here in London... No, I'm sorry I misled you earlier about it starting in this country. No. It started in America. It was American. It came over here. But Richard Pilbrow was involved with Tony Walton in a review called *Pieces of Eight or One over the Eight*: there were two revues put on, and that's where this projection came in. And Tony Walton wanted to involve him to do the scenery for *A Funny Thing*...

ST: So you've obviously had a lot of experience working in different areas of theatre.

DC: I have indeed. Yes, I've had a very wide experience, you might say in all aspects of it. Did a bit of television as well, as an actor. David Rose - I was telling you about earlier - he went into television after the Sadlers Wells days, and he told me the other day he did one hundred and seventy six directions of *Z Cars*, and I managed to get in one or two of those.

ST: Just going back to theatre in general and what you remember of it, during the 1950's and sixties did you ever go to see any famous plays in the West End, or famous plays that were just emerging?

DC: Well I'm sure I did, but I can't remember any particularly that I saw during that time, I have to say. But yes, I used to go to the theatre and see shows whenever I could. I'm sorry that I can't particularly remember what I saw.

ST: Was there a particular actor that influenced you, during your time as an actor?

DC: I don't think so, no, I can't remember anyone who I was particularly influenced by.

ST: Just going back to when you worked in repertory theatre, as obviously there's a lot you did in that area...

DC: Oh yes, well for several years I was in repertory companies, yes...

ST: What was the atmosphere like on tour between the cast, and also amongst the audience?

DC: In the repertory theatre? Well repertory was mostly based in one town... you don't have that now unfortunately: that repertory system has more or less disappeared. There are still one or two left, but very few - summer seasons mostly. But sadly the repertory system no longer exists as it did when I was younger, which was a marvellous... sad loss... a marvellous training area, you might say, where you learnt to play different parts and meet different directors and so on. But usually, you were based in one town. Falmouth and Penzance were exceptions insofar as you were based in one town but you did tour around as well, which was an unusual situation. Places like Sheffield were based in one town and you felt very much part of the town - the town welcomed you as part of them.

ST: What did you do for accommodation when you were touring?

DC: Well you went into digs. There were various digs lists available: Equity used to have a digs list, and a body called The Actors' Church Union had a digs list - which incidentally, I am a treasurer of still, the Actors' Church Union is based at St Paul's Church in Covent Garden, which is known as the Actors' Church - and they used to have a digs list. I don't think either organisation have one now, because digs are not so readily available when the repertory system disappeared... well, the touring system still went on... but the digs lists became less available, or less digs I suppose became available. But it was mostly a matter of getting a recommendation either personal or from these lists to go to, and you obviously wrote and got the accommodation as soon as you possibly knew about it.

ST: Did you make a lot of friends when you were touring, or was it more professional?

DC: Well I think it was more within the company. What is so extraordinary is... because the company was such a close-knit thing, you got to know people very well. And if you didn't see them for some time, and met them again, you just took on where you left off. It was very much that sort of situation.

ST: Is there anything else which you'd like to talk about which we haven't covered?

DC: I might tell you a bit about the voice training I had. We had a very good voice trainer at the Bristol Old Vic, a chap called Leonard Bennett, who had done a lot of work as an actor, a director... he'd been abroad: he'd taken part in the Spanish Civil War and what else... And he trained with a woman called Kate Emile Benke and used her system of voice production, and she was responsible for curing King George V's stutter: she was quite a remarkable woman in fact! And this system of voice production depended on not just breathing from the diaphragm, but from the whole back, and so on. And that I think was a very good system, which helped one enormously in producing the right sort of sound in the right sort of way... What I find now, when I go to the theatre... I don't always hear what they say, because actors have lost the ability to project in the way that one learnt to project in repertory, which is very sad I think. But it's a fact, which one has to acknowledge unfortunately.

ST: Were there any other areas which were particularly focussed on during your training?

DC: Well we were automatically taught movement, even at Bradford Civic, there was a movement person there, and a voice production person there as well. But at Bristol, I spent longer at Bristol, and had this very excellent voice production teacher, who lived down near Kingstow actually (used to come up from Devonshire). I suppose... at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, there was the end of the year production called Noah by Andre Obey, and I actually played the part of Noah, and my wife played Mrs Noah! (Well she wasn't my wife then, but... Mary Sedgwick). That was very enjoyable as such - a very good part in fact!

ST: And how did you get on working with your wife on stage?

DC: Oh I enjoyed it very much. We got on very well I think. As I was saying earlier, unfortunately, it wasn't always possible to get [work together]. We did in fact probably make a mistake in trying to get work together, so that we may have got jobs separately else where and missed out on certain experiences which we might have had. But we did manage to do quite a number of so-called joint engagements, with the exception of Sheffield!

ST: And was that quite common for couples to work together?

DC: Oh yes... As I said, repertory companies were quite glad to have joints, because they would come for less money than individually. I seem to remember that our first joint engagement was about 10 pounds a week.

ST: Did you find that your work was pretty constant – or did you really have to search for employment?

DC: Well, it tended to be a bit spasmodic at times, and one had to do other things. I remember working at Christmas time at Waterloo Station sorting the mail. If I saw someone I knew, I used to hide quickly! And one did other jobs as well. I remember I sold Dove polish actually. I went round in my car (I had a car at the time) and I was warned never to leave your bag at the gate because a dog might come along and pee on it! Various jobs like that, one did... temporary jobs. There was always a certain amount of work available in that way you had to take, because you couldn't always get what you wanted in the theatre.

ST: Did you go through an audition process to get your roles?

DC: Often you had to, yes. You knew about the auditions, and applied for them. In fact, I remember now doing an audition for *A Breath of Spring*, for a director called Alan Davis who was actually at one time in charge of the Bristol Old Vic Theatre. And I did this audition, I think I'd done a piece up in Sheffield... a very good piece with a long speech in it... and I'd just done it in Sheffield, and I did it in this audition, the result of which I got the job of Company Stage Manager and the understudy in *Breath of Spring*.

ST: Well I think we've covered everything there! Thank you very much.