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Eileen Cottis – interview transcript

Interviewer: Matt Willis

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Theatre-goer. The Bells; Brecht's plays; Cinema; critics; Peter Daubeny; Edwige Feuillère; French drama; John Gielgud; International Federation for Theatre Research; Vivien Leigh; London theatre; melodrama; Mermaid Theatre, London; Laurence Olivier; Othello; Oxford theatres; pantomime; radio; Saturday Night Theatre; Shakespeare; Maggie Smith; Stop It, Whoever You Are; television; ticket price; theatre-going; Theatre Workshop; Kenneth Tynan; Arnold Wesker.

MW: How did you get into the theatre? When did your interest in theatre arise?

EC: Well, I couldn't have an interest at the start: I was deprived of theatre for a long time!

MW: Why was that?

EC: This is 1945 to '68, when I was twelve at the beginning and thirty-five at the end. When I was twelve, a) there was a war on; b) I lived in a country village and I had no theatre for ten miles. There was a cinema two miles down the way, and I wasn't on the whole allowed to go to that, unless there was something on that was Welsh (my parents having come up from Bridgend), so we watched Proud Valley -that's the first film I remember. This may seem irrelevant at the moment, but it all adds up in the end. It had Paul Robeson playing a Welsh miner...

MW: Paul Robeson?

EC: Paul Robeson yes, A black American. A black American activist, black American... Very fine singer, but there he was in this film playing a Welsh miner!

MW: How did that come across?

EC: Very odd! Well, he died very beautifully in the end, crushed under a rock fall! I remember that. I enjoyed it no end. When I first went to the theatre I'm not sure... I think it must have been a pantomime. There was a theatre in Kettering, about ten miles away, where I went to school called The Savoy, it came for a time under the

Northampton Theatre Royal and I saw quite a few things there: pantomime, yes, but it tended to be things like Lilac Time and adaptations of Mansfield Park and terribly safe things. The pantomime actually was slightly odd, although I didn't realise it at the time. There was a very talented designer at the Theatre Royal called Osborne Robinson and he used to put the pantomimes together and he used to have a harlequin, which I've never seen at any other pantomime. There was a man called Lionel Hamilton, a very fine, rather hammy actor who came and talked to the school, and he enthused us all one way or another, but what really got me going into theatre was radio. There was no television and there wasn't much going on, it being war-time, and we didn't travel very far, so the radio was on all the time. There was an institution called Saturday Night Theatre which I was allowed to sit up and listen to. So every Saturday night for years and years I listened to effectively 1930's well-made plays. So there were plays by Emyln Williams, there was Mr Pimm Passes By (I think that's by A.A Milne) and Dear Octopus, Dodie Smith, which kept coming up again and again and again. But the nearest thing to what you might call serious theatre I ever heard on it was The Wild Duck, which alarmed me a bit.

MW: Why was that?

EC: An unhappy ending, for one thing.

MW: Yes, that must have been rather shocking at the time.

EC: It was. Dear me it was.

MW: So how did an audience react to the early plays that had an unhappy ending?

EC: Well, I never saw anything you see, I was just listening at home. So my first theatre-going experience was a) private and b) well-made plays, which is a bit unexpected. And I did find about a year ago an unexpected influence on my theatre going I think which is that my mother had a number of old gramophone records - the sort you had to use with a needle you know, that didn't last very long. And she had a two-sided thing called The Death of Nelson which was a) the song 'The Death of Nelson', which John Graham sang in the nineteenth century and b) dramatic interludes in between, so we had Nelson dying, and Hardy, and 'Kiss me, Hardy' and then we had Hardy coming to Lady Hamilton and explaining that Nelson was dead. And for years I remembered this voice going 'O miserable, wretched Emma. O glorious and happy Nelson!' and looking at the record last week I found it was Sybil Thorndike and Louis Castle. She was one of the grand old women of the theatre, she was St. Joan and she emoted most beautifully and I think that's one of the things that gave me a taste - later - for melodrama, which is one of the things I do have a taste for. We went to Stratford from school a couple of times. There was Richard II, there was Romeo and Juliet, I think it was a Peter Brook production and he had a rather young Romeo and Juliet whose names I completely forget, but what I do remember is Paul Scofield - very young, very flamboyant - playing Mercutio most beautifully. I remember that fairly well.

MW: So do you think from your early experience of getting into theatre via radio that it differs from today, that theatre doesn't have the same draw on the public on the same sort of scale? Maybe due to Hollywood blockbusters or the amount of television shows that are around at the moment.

EC: Possibly. Television made a great difference of course. Television drama's another subject in itself. They don't do Saturday Night Theatre any more, the most they do in radio these days are little bits after The Archers at quarter past two. There are a lot of radio plays on, little short ones, you don't get the full two and a half hour ones. Not very often I think. But radio was what there was, it was all we had. So that's that one. Then we went to London. My English mistress used to go to London and then report back on what she'd seen. She'd seen Christopher Fry when young, when he started. She went on and on about The Lady's Not for Burning, I remember that. I acted a bit at school, but I couldn't very much because my last bus went at 10.15 because I lived out in the village - maddening really! I remember I took part in a pageant at Castle Ashby once - I had one line, I seem to remember, but that's enough of that! 1951 I went to Oxford and started catching up. I've been catching up ever since! When Dominic [Shellard] asked me to do this I told him I'd been to the theatre twice a week for the last fifty years, which turns out not to be quite true because when I went to Oxford I didn't go to much theatre. Instead what I did was catch up on films. There were films all over the place - all kinds of films. There was a film society that I went to. I found in my diaries... I'm afraid I've written all this down, I'm not going to go on and on about it, but I went to Anuschka and La Ronde and Bicycle Thieves and Ghost Goes West and Fires Were Started and The Marx Brothers and The Birth of a Nation and Destry Rides Again all in one year...!

MW: The only one of that...

EC: ...but you see, because there were no videos, you had to go and see a film when it was on. So again, I was rather deprived of the live thing - if you can call a film live, which of course you can't. I'm sorry, go on.

MW: I was just going to say the only one of those I've seen is Bicycle Thieves.

EC: Ah well yes. Dear me, Yes. Well there's an unhappy ending for you. Well, in a way... He's still got the little boy hasn't he, but ooh it rings with the heart doesn't it...

MW: Yes. So did you see any film adaptations of any popular plays of the time, like maybe Olivier in The Entertainer or anything like that?

EC: Yes, well that was a bit later. I saw The Entertainer when it came on - I'll come on to that eventually. If you don't mind me carrying on chronologically, I'll tell you roughly what went on.

MW: Oh, OK.

EC: My first year in Oxford theatre-wise... well, there were two theatres in Oxford: The Playhouse, and what is now The New Theatre which I think back then was called The Apollo but I can't quite remember. The Playhouse wasn't what it had been; Emyln Williams in his autobiography says he got his education in - he was a bit deprived of theatre when young like me, but he got his education in theatre by going to The Playhouse once a week for three years when J.P Hagan was running it. It wasn't what it was [then] when I went there, but we went occasionally. What did I go to? Oh I went and watched Gilbert and Sullivan - caught up with them in my first two years but hardly seen any since. I was a great one for sort of finishing things off, going through a great course of things. Didn't see many short plays ever, but I read my way through. I read a lot of plays.

MW: So if you had a taste of something you wanted the whole experience of it?

EC: Absolutely. There was a point rather later when we went to a Chaplin season at the National Film Theatre for three months solid! Crikey! I've hardly seen a Chaplin film since. I saw a number of college productions you know, things they would do in the garden in the summer and that sort of thing. The only really note-worthy one was John Wood playing Richard III, which went down as a rather good performance I seem to remember. He seemed to be about 7ft tall and moving in all directions.

MW: Do you feel that a reason why you had the chance to catch up to such an extent by going to the theatre regularly is due to the difference in price compared to today? How much was it to go to the theatre at the time?

EC: Well, I went to the Old Vic for the first time the year after, to see Richard Burton in Hamlet. It was one and six upstairs on the hard seats. How much is one and six? Well two bob is ten pence, so it cost less than ten pence. They were hard benches though; they are a bit more comfortable now. But you could queue. You had a fair chance of getting a seat if you queued around the side. I went to the Old Vic quite a lot, but that was a little later because in 1953 I met Peter, who I later married, and he was already theatre-mad so took me to a lot of things and we blossomed out a bit and went to London. I seem to remember at some point seeing Michael Dennison and Dulcie Graham in a thing called Sweet Peril, and I can't remember anything about it at all, which is a bit depressing!

MW: What year was that?

EC: '53. But what I did see in '54 - in my third year - was a play called The Ortolan and I can't remember who wrote it, but it had a young actress with red hair in it called Margaret Smith. She called herself Margaret Smith in those days you see, and I thought she was pretty good. She was already moving those hands about. Saw my first Footlights in Oxford. It was all right... I read the odd review.... Went to London first to see a play... yes, '54 it was, Hamlet. Then August of '54 went to my first Edinburgh Festival without quite meaning to, we hitch-hiked up there. There wasn't much Fringe in those days, but we saw this and that. We saw Paul Rogers do Macbeth in a rather long kilt. We saw Margot Fonteyn do The Firebird and we took part - without really meaning

to - in a production of Edward II because we found ourselves with nowhere to sleep, not being able to get into a youth hostel. We went round and knew the ETC (Experimental Theatre Company) was putting on Edward II with Ralph Roister Doister and we stayed up all night doing jobs for them.

MW: What sort of jobs did you do?

EC: I was sticking dragons onto tabards with Copydex (that's when I first found out about Copydex and how useful it was). Peter was doing something with wood and there was various crises going on because the director [of] Ralph Roister Doister had just failed his final exams and was undergoing a quiet nervous breakdown and could often be seen walking about the place pushing a broom and looking gloomy. Dreadful stuff it really was. The others were trying to pull it all together and he'd ordered a lot of things... he'd ordered fifty top hats and nobody knew what to do with them and that sort of thing! They were facing a great trouble when they got back I expect, but the Edward II was extremely good. Now who on earth played Edward II? I can't remember. It might come back to me. He was an outside actor and he was good. They played the end... where you don't actually shove a poker anywhere, they did the older version where one of the actors would jump on Edward's chest and he screams and dies, and people used to scream and have to be taken out.

MW: Really?

EC: Oh yes. They used a steel corset.

MW: That must have been incredibly powerful...

EC: It was extremely powerful. Dear me. It was very unnerving. I enjoyed that.

MW: Just going back to what you said about Maggie Smith, which just reminded me about when I first started drama and my drama teacher told me just to look at what she does with her hands. Do you think that she and Olivier were revolutionary in acting, even with something as apparently insignificant as hand movement?

EC: Well they were together, of course, in Othello. We couldn't get into Othello, we couldn't get tickets for it.

MW: Yes, I've seen it but only on DVD...

EC: Yes, yes, yes...

MW: with his greenish looking face.

EC: Yes that make up he used to do so carefully. I don't know how much they had in common. I mean, Olivier's been acting the way he had for years: flamboyant, waving his arms about, stage whispers... you name it. Very, very physical indeed; not 'golden voice', like Gielgud, but I'll get to Olivier in a minute.

MW: OK, that's fine.

EC: We didn't just go to film, we also went to opera. I've been trying to catch up on opera for years but still... Under Milk Wood on the radio, that was 1954... I know what turned me onto melodrama! It was a reading of *The Ticket of Leave Man*, directed by Patrick Dromgoole who's father to Dominic - Not Shellard but Dromgoole! - who's now at The Globe, so one of those dynasties. Opera: '54 we went to *Marriage of Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* at the Vienna State Opera, and we had to queue for that - we had to queue for a lot of things. Now this is a nice one. At the end of '54 I saw *The Boy Friend* and *Salad Days* and a thing in Oxford called *Dark of the Moon*, and I can't remember the name of the author but that stuck in my mind. You don't really want me to go through a list of things do you?

MW: I don't mind.

EC: OK. I'll tell you when I first saw things then. In 1955 I saw Peggy Ashcroft in *Hedda Gabler*. Wow! Playing her really rather nasty if I remember. I remember the voices... I was going for actors by that time. I went to see Beatrice Lillie; saw *The Magistrate* - I'm heavily into 19th century theatre. And my first Paris, a nearish play which was called *Homage a Claudel*. I read French you see, so I'd read a lot of French plays and one thing you do find here are visits to French plays or any French plays that came to London over the next few years. There were a lot more then than there are now - now there are practically none.

MW: I wasn't really aware of the number of French plays being put on over here at the time.

EC: There were a lot more then than there are now. And there had been previously throughout the nineteenth century too. It has sort of packed up here for reasons that escape me. It culminated with Peter Daubeny, but I have seen in London during those years: *Le Audion* by Jean Louis Barrault, *La Comedie Française* (twice if not three times) and some other company which may come back to me if I haven't written it down. Then we went to Stratford for the first time together and saw Olivier in *Macbeth* and Olivier and Vivien Leigh in *Twelfth Night*. Kenneth Tynan was rather rude about the whole thing, but never mind. At that point while I was still living at college, we used to read Kenneth Tynan in *The Observer* on Sunday mornings and Harold Hobson in the *Sunday Times*. We read both so it was nice to compare them, most of the time while I was in college it was reading [about] things in London that I never thought I'd see, but it didn't matter. Tynan was well worth reading, Hobson wasn't bad.

MW: So can you remember Harold Hobson's view of Twelfth Night at all? You said Tynan didn't like it.

EC: Tynan didn't like Leigh. He was very rude about her from time to time. Hobson... I forget. But I can visualise the way she said the lines, and it was so beautiful you wouldn't believe! Then - where am I? Still in '55 - I went to The Player's Theatre for the first time and guess who was singing... Margaret Smith. Still going by Margaret at this time, she hadn't got into serious theatre by this point. I was terribly pleased to see her. We joined the Player's. We went there quite often when we couldn't think of anything else to go to. And that July was the Society for Theatre Research, of which I am now on the committee, and they put on an international conference that I went to and that later turned into the International Federation for Theatre Research, which is a good thing that holds conferences all over the place with theatre performances attached, which is very nice. I saw Emyln Williams doing Dylan Thomas and I enjoyed that no end - the Welsh strain still coming out! Went to Paris that September, went to the Orion, went to Vie a Columbié. I hadn't seen La Comedie Française at that time, but I started thinking about Paris theatres. Went to Stratford again and saw Anthony Quail in The Merry Wives and Olivier in Titus Andronicus, which was something else again! My first stage whisper I think - God! He was frightening! - but again, Vivien Leigh and again, Tynan being very rude about it.

MW: Do you think Tynan had some preconceptions about Leigh that you didn't agree with?

EC: I think perhaps he was right.

MW: Oh right! So you say you had a fair amount of experience watching theatre in Paris. How did the experience over there differ to watching a play here?

EC: Well what did I see. Went to the Opera Comique saw La Rouen, La Mot Saucier saw Sorta Tout, I was very much going for classical things you know, things I hadn't seen. I was still collecting things I hadn't seen, which is why you rarely see me go to a new play. Went to La vie á Columbié now that was interesting, they were doing a Christopher Fry play called The Firstborn. That was some fairly historic theatre in the twenties when Cockbull and others were working there. It was a very little theatre, more like the Young Vic than anything else, in shape. Most Paris theatres were red and gold and classically shaped and had people opening the pews for you as it were, showing you to your seat and expecting to be tipped that sort of thing. If you went to La Comedie Française it was very formal indeed, well especially at the front but not where I was which was usually up the top somewhere at about the fifth floor. But in later years I did once end up on the front row for La Comedie Française because a kindly man took me in. I was wearing a pair of slacks and a sweater and they were not. There were ladies in fur coats smelling rather beautiful, very dressed up. I got some very dirty looks indeed; and it was quite a daring production for La Comedie which did not go in for the experimental and still doesn't. They booed it at the end, they really were very mild.

MW: So do you think over here the audiences were more open to the more experimental type of theatre?

EC: Oh I think so. Well Paris varied but La Comedie Française, never. There were little theatres doing Ionesco and Beckett and stuff. In 1956 I went to L'Atelie Racine at the University of Bristol which I think was run either by Glynn Wycombe or George Raul, they were doing a production with the original chorus or the original walk-around and it was very long and rather boring, yet terribly authentic. Went to Cranks, the review, I used to go to reviews a bit. Went to some more melodrama, went to Lady Audley's Secret and The Drunkard at The Player's Theatre, which was alright. Saw Timon of Athens at The Young Vic, have no idea who was in that. Saw Jean Louis Barrault for the first time, he'd brought his company to London and he did Occupe-toi d'Amelie, the Feydeau play, and Christophe Colomb, in which he'd stand in the middle of the aisle and sway from side to side as if he were on a ship, which was the sort of thing he used to do from time to time, beautiful mover Jean Louis Barrault. I saw Les Enfants du Parodie at school (it was the sort of thing they thought we should be taken to at the time) and I remember being completely confused by the end: I couldn't see why it was stopped when it was stopped; I still don't to some extent. Well I do, I know what happens at the end: there was meant to be an incident at the end that they cut out. Anyway, I'm now in London for a year, at Westfield, and Edwige Feuillère came. Feuillère was a French actress whom Harold Hobson thought was absolutely the cat's whiskers as it were - he was terribly fond of her, he used to go on and on about her. Right. Now I'm in 1957, I saw Joan Plowright at the Royal Court. We used to go to the Royal Court from time to time, but that one sticks in my mind because she had this lovely, broad accent. Saw my first Ionesco, which was The Bald Primadonna at the Arts Theatre. Saw The Entertainer - I've got to The Entertainer! - with Olivier. He had a great time with it. Turning himself not only into a musical comedian but a BAD musical comedian, that takes some doing. Saw my first John Osborne; I got to a few after that. I didn't see Look Back in Anger, but I saw The World of Paul Slickey, which hardly anyone did get to see, he did a musical about journalists and what a terrible thing they were. Saw Luther later and thought it was a serious play... I suppose in its way it was.

MW: Do you think it's fair to say that after making his mark on his roles such as his one in The Entertainer, that other actors are fearful of doing their own interpretations of these characters?

EC: Because people have such strong memories of him? Yes quite. That is a risk yes; he set his mark on things; possibly not with Hamlet, but Richard III, definitely. Yes, he put people off for a long time with that one. Also possibly not with Othello, people carry on doing Othello, but he was an extraordinarily powerful actor. Oh yes, I lived through the Olivier and the Ralph Richardson and the Paul Scofield and the John Gielgud age.

MW: So did any of your favourites do anything that you thought was a bit of a let-down or was reported as being a bit of a let-down?

EC: Ooh that's a good one! I once saw John Gielgud doing The Tempest, which I didn't like very much. Actually that maybe outside of your period, but he had a cloak which he couldn't quite manage - he was a bit clumsy in one way or another. He had a beautiful

voice, and the rest: like a stick! He had his cloak on the wrong way, and there he was doing a long speech and pulling and pulling and pulling at this thing, failing to get it right. Oh dear, it didn't seem to matter. Otherwise I've never been disappointed in Olivier, but I did think he was extremely good from a very early age - even starting in the films. I wasn't that fond of his Hamlet, it seemed a bit laboured. However, I went to Stratford East for the first time to see a modern dress version of Macbeth with tin hats, I remember that. I didn't get to Stratford very much: it was a bit far. I saw a few things later, but went sometimes during the Joan Littlewood reign as it were.

MW: So you saw a bit of Theatre Workshop?

EC: I caught little bits. I saw Brendan Behan's *The Hostage*, I enjoyed that. Later we started going to Stratford for the panto. In '58 we saw Gielgud's *The Tempest* at Drury Lane, that one I rather liked. That was much better, but he did *The Tempest* several times.

MW: Did he always play the same part?

EC: As far as I remember. He dressed differently - directors would have bright ideas and dress him up in something else, but the voice... I think it probably got more complicated as he went on. I listened (and this is the trouble with talking after the event) to some records of him later, and I think it probably got more complicated and he got more into it as he went on. He liked playing Prospero. Anyway, April of 1958 I was back in Paris seeing *Mes Enfants* and after that I went to La Comedie Française at last as part of a whole, solid week of theatre; that's the sort of thing we got into the habit of doing when we had the time. The third of April - my birthday - I saw *My Fair Lady*. We queued for it and it was tremendous.

MW: Yes, I think they put it on a couple of years ago.

EC: Yes, at Drury Lane they did it didn't they. But Julie Andrews was marvellous, except for the 'beautiful vowels' from time to time... her cockney was a little weird too! But she was very touching; it's a pity she didn't get to make the film. Saw some melodrama again in '58, I went to see *The Silver King* at The Player's [Theatre] (that's Henry Arthur Jones), which in its way is a very fine play. May of '58, *The Mermaid* opened and *Lock Up Your Daughters*; it was very touching, *The Mermaid* - I was very upset when that left.

MW: Can you remember who was in that?

EC: Nope. Not remotely.

MW: What was so touching about it?

EC: It was a musical. It was cheerful. It was a sort of new shape: I tend to think of theatre as being red and gold and a specific sort of shape, but *The Mermaid* was a new shape in my mind, allowing a sort of good view for everyone, the sort of theatre that became more popular later on. Then they pulled it down and put it in an office block, where it never worked terribly well, and now it's gone, which is a great pity. Anyway I saw Robert Eddison doing *The Bells*, even more melodrama. Robert Eddison had a beautiful voice. He sat on the STR committee for quite some time; he was chairman for a bit. We were always quite glad in some ways when he didn't come to meetings because that meant that he'd got a job. He was in and out of work a bit.

MW: I read *The Bells* and quite liked it.

EC: Well, it's an odd play for a melodrama, and in some ways it's not really a melodrama at all. It is a melodrama the way Irving did it and the way it's been done in Britain, but it started life as a short, naturalistic play for heaven's sake! The Irving way of acting it however is more melodrama than naturalism, yet really quite striking by the sound of it.

MW: So was *The Bells* generally well received then when it came out?

EC: Oh he lived off of *The Bells* for years! People have tried to revive it - Robert [Eddison] did it as well as anybody can I suppose. It was revived in Greenwich not long ago but it didn't quite take. I like my melodrama a little bit more full-blooded. Anyway, I saw Harry Secombe in *Humpty Dumpty* and 1961 I've now got to and I saw my first Henry Livings play. This one was called *Stop It, Whoever You Are* and is set in the lavatories of a factory of some sort and this was at The Arts Theatre. We went to it because at the time I was doing various things on the side - I was cooking in a coffee bar with Henry [Livings]' wife, so we thought, 'we have to go to this play' because it was the first thing that he had written. When we went various people walked out of it, which was quite interesting really.

MW: Why do you think that was then?

EC: The lavatory jokes mainly. He did a couple more later and I saw one or two, but that was mainly out of a sense of duty. Went to Paris in 1961 with The International Federation [for Theatre Research] and this is what I mean by the Federation being a good thing - they had a meeting in Paris, and you could go to a different theatre every night if you wanted to go: there were lots of theatre tickets around. So we started getting involved in more abroad theatre as it were.

MW: So is the International Federation still around today?

EC: Oh yes. They're still with us, very much so. We met this August in Helsinki, although we didn't see very much theatre that time and what we did see was all in Finnish. Some trips are more rewarding than others but most of the conferences had nice theatre tickets attached. July of 1961, *Beyond the Fringe* - we stood for that, and went again!

Don't often go to the same play more than once - unless my ruddy son is directing it and then we have to go again! I remember a lot about Beyond the Fringe. November of that year was my first Pinter, *The Caretaker*, which was on in Oxford oddly enough. I liked it a lot, it's nice and approachable. It's a good one to get started on I think.

MW: Were Hobson and Tynan still writing around that time?

EC: Not as far as I remember. Notoriously they were for *The Birthday Party* but I missed that one. I never used to go looking for little experimental plays back then, I'm still catching up. I was still getting what I thought I missed for the first eighteen years of my life; that feeling lasted a long time. But if *The Caretaker* was at the Oxford Playhouse at that time, Hobson and Tynan must have known and been in London at the time. Perhaps they were, because the play must have been fairly well known to have been transferred to Oxford.

MW: So do you get the feeling now that you have successfully caught up on what you missed?

EC: No. But now I much more readily go to plays that I haven't seen, but based on the same principal of 'bagging another one' I'm always ready to go and see a play that I haven't seen before. I'm a little apprehensive on going to new plays unless someone recommends it; I went to my first *Sarah Kane* a last week, *Blasted*, it was in German. I'm not convinced... it was beautifully acted and I shall read some more, but I'm not sure that I'll go and see any more.

MW: But maybe in a few years that will all change.

EC: Yes, maybe in a few years. Give me time. There was a Henry Livings play called *Nil Carborundum* that I saw in 1962, I can't remember anything about it at all. In May of '62 I went to *The Whip* (which is a melodrama) at the Metropolitan Theatre on Edgware Road - which was an old music hall that was falling down, it got demolished not long afterwards - put on by Arnold Wesker with the aim of raising money for Centre 42 - Centre 42 was Wesker's idea of bringing theatre to the people - and it then went to The Roundhouse. I have edited a book about *The Roundhouse and Open Space* but I went to the original money-raiser for Centre 42 and I have forgotten completely who was in the cast. Lord Montague drove a car onto the stage, I remember that. I was told rather later that they made very little money at all, so it was all a rather large waste of time, but it was an example of another rather good melodrama. Melodrama runs through my theatre experience as a theme. June of that year I saw Vanessa Redgrave in *As You Like It*, which is another of those performances people go on and on about. Vanessa Redgrave was enormously tall, wearing this cap and swaying to and fro in the wind. It was very good indeed. We went out into a pub afterwards and had a drink and told the barman all about it because we were deeply depressed by it. We went to the Establishment, which is the nightclub that Peter Cook founded after *Beyond the Fringe*. It didn't last very long but various people came and performed there like Annie Ross and Lenny Bruce, but I missed that one.

MW: Did it happen a lot that after you went to see something exceptional that you had the urge to tell as many people about it as possible and sort of 'spread the word'?

EC: Up to a point, yes.

MW: Or were you just happy to go and enjoy it on a purely personal basis?

EC: Well if I had any sense I'd have written things down at the time! I always told my students to write things down when I was teaching an MA in Modern Drama Study much later - one of the things we used to do with them was to encourage them to go to the theatre and write up on what they'd seen. If only I'd have done that life would have been a lot simpler. Peter used to write things down - he wrote an account of Macbeth somewhere, and as you know an account brings the experience back very vividly, otherwise you are left with vague memories of rather fine acting, and I don't have much memory of scenery because I don't have a particularly strong visual memory so I don't remember very much about the designers. I remember the actors quite well; I can still hear some of their voices in my head on occasion.

MW: So it is always going to be the performances that will be the part of the experience that'll stay with you for years.

EC: I think so, yes. Unless you write down things you've been to. You write down things you've seen. Keep a diary. Oh! I've finally got around to Brecht. I only caught a bit of Brecht but I went to something Lottie Lenya was performing in. I went to Caucasian Chalk Circle at one point too.

MW: Oh I was in that once.

EC: Oh really?

MW: I was the Fat Prince. It was quite an odd thing to be a part of for me, because even though the cast was so big, the intertwining stories meant that you only really knew a few of the people who were involved.

EC: Oh I see. That's quite interesting. I liked that one. I took to Brecht later but at the time I hadn't got around to that sort of thing really. I think I've got to 1963 by this point, and by now I was on the Society for Theatre Research committee taking the minutes, and I've been doing the minutes ever since. I saw La Comedie Française at The Old Vic again, they kept on coming and they hadn't been for ages. In May there was An Evening with Sybil Thorndike and Louis Castle, they weren't acting though, it was just an evening of reciting things that they remembered. They read various poems and did little bits together but it was still pretty good. She lived to be ninety; she was there at the last night of The Old Vic I think. I saw her at a lecture once too; someone said something

about William Powell, and Louis Castle said something - he was on the platform - and then this voice from the audience said, 'No, no, no Louis. It wasn't like that at all!' She was a lovely woman. In 1963 I'm afraid my diary stops, so I shall have to do it out of my head, but what I remember after that is a lot of the Peter Daubeny stuff. Somebody ought to write this up; Daubeny did to an extent but there should be some work done about his contribution and how he brought all these foreign companies to London and the influence it had on directors and such. Now, what else do I remember from after 1963? I remember *The Birds*, some more Barrault, theatre from Czechoslovakia as it then was, *La Comedie Française* again, the Moscow Arts Theatre doing Chekhov. I remember an American company doing Chekhov as well - I got into Chekhov pretty late. I really regret the fact that foreign theatre companies don't come across to Britain very much these days. I'm not at all sure what went on, but I think something did.

MW: So do you think that that's going to be a big problem for the growth of British theatre in the future?

EC: Yes I do indeed. I mean one thing (I don't know whether I agree with them or not) is that the Germans do seem to like Sarah Kane. They say (or some Germans say) that she is in the 'German tradition'. She's in the 'expressionist tradition'. British theatre doesn't like her much because it goes for naturalism, sensible naturalism of a sort but more or less basically naturalism, which is possibly why she doesn't get put on much over here very often. I may come around to Sarah Kane if you give me time. I think I've finished, but as you can see I never quite caught up with having never gone to theatre very much when I was young.

MW: Even though you obviously tried hard to remedy that.

EC: Yes. We tried very hard indeed. We took both of our children to the theatre at a very early age. I think by the end of this period, I had taken my son David to the Young Vic when he was just five and it had just opened. We went to the Young Vic a lot in the early days and he took to it very nicely.

MW: OK. Thank you very much.