

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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John Holt – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sinead Gray

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Theatre-goer. A Taste Of Honey, audience behaviour; censorship; club theatres; The Entertainer; Grand Theatre, Wolverhampton; Harold Pinter; Joan Littlewood; John Osborne; Look Back in Anger; Oh! What a Lovely War; repertory theatres; revues; Royal Court Theatre; Sandy Wilson's musicals; theatre-going; Theatre Workshop; ticket prices; Waiting for Godot; Arnold Wesker..

SG: Can you pinpoint where your interest in theatre started and why?

JH: Yes I can. It started - as it does with many people - being taken to a pantomime, and I was seven when I went to my first pantomime, which was Cinderella at Wolverhampton. I lived about 15 miles from Wolverhampton, so that was our nearest theatre, and we were taken every year to the pantomime by my parents. I am one of five children and I couldn't wait from one Christmas to the next to go to see this pantomime. I saw Cinderella, then Babes in the Wood, the next year Jack and the Beanstalk, then Robinson Crusoe, Little Miss Muffet, Dick Whittington and so on and so on. All of those were at The Grand Theatre, Wolverhampton, and The Grand Theatre, Wolverhampton played a very important part in my theatre-going, because not only was it a theatre that put on pantomimes but they also ran a very good repertory company, and I used to go to many of their productions.

SG: You said actually when I spoke to you that you miss the repertory theatres now.

JH: I do indeed.

SG: Can you tell me a bit more about this movement?

JH: Well, yes, at that time I think the repertory movement sort of started disappearing in the late fifties, and until that time I suppose most towns of any size had their own repertory company of varying standards. Many of them were weekly repertory so they rehearsed a production one week and put it on the next and while they were performing that production they were rehearsing the next weeks and so like a treadmill going on and on. But it was a wonderful training ground for actors because they had to play all sorts of parts and – well, speaking as for the Wolverhampton, that was one of the better weekly reps. It was run by Derek Salberg, who was a member of a theatrical family who

ran theatres - several theatres - round the country, and it was considered one of the best weekly repertoires. Better than the weekly, they used to run fortnightly companies in the bigger towns like Birmingham and Liverpool and Manchester, and the top of the tree I suppose was the firms that ran them for a month at a time so they could really get down and really rehearse and put on a good show. I think the Liverpool repertory company and the Birmingham Rep were the two main ones and they would run their productions for three or four weeks most of the year round. So it was – just going back to Wolverhampton - they ran their repertory companies between the end of the pantomime and the late autumn and they did have one or two... and the company would finish for that year. So they would be taken on for that sort of six nine month periods, the actors would, a basic company - perhaps ten people - who would... one week they would be playing the lead, the next week they would be playing the maid or some minor part. But it was wonderful training for them, and the towns where they had these repertory companies, the towns were very proud of their company. That's what encouraged the audience to go: they wanted to go next week to see what a particular actor would be doing. So in my days going to Wolverhampton people who were starting in the profession then later on... I don't know whether you've heard of Peggy Mount, but she was a real repertory actress who became a star and I think she's dead now, she died about two years ago but she became very famous.

SG: And did you see her?

JH: Yes, in many productions at Wolverhampton and another I can remember at Wolverhampton was Leonard Rossiter who was in... I can't remember the name, a famous television series... I can't remember what it was called, it was a comedy series, a classic of television comedy in those days... Of course, there were varying standards of acting, I mean, some disappeared and you never saw or heard of them again but as the years went by and the repertoires sort of finished the names that you used to see coming into the repertory theatres then started appearing on television. The actors today I think miss the training. You know, they go to RADA or the other drama colleges, but they don't get the proper experience of projecting their voices and learning to play to an audience and making themselves heard, so they're used to sort of speaking to a microphone where they don't have to raise their voice - either for a television-play or radio or a film - but then they decide they want to go onto the stage and lead a tour of a production but you can't hear them! I mean, I know I've got particular problems myself, but it isn't only me that complains about this.

SG: You said you saw the original production of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, can you tell me what your impressions were of the play at the time.

JH: At the time yes [laughs]. Well, I should explain that I saw *Look Back in Anger* in October 1956, and it did have a particular resonance for me at the time because up until that time I'd been at school, I'd done my National Service and I'd come from both of those not knowing what my career was to be. I didn't know what I wanted to do, and so I was guided by family friends who thought I ought to go to university. Now, that was fine except that I went to do the wrong subjects. Ideally, I should have been doing Geography and English Literature, but I think probably at that time the only degree that I could do - read for - was History and English, and History was my weak subject, so of course at the end of the first year I failed that history paper and I had to re-sit it before

the next term and I failed it again. So I decided that I was going to do what I wanted to do. And the theatres govern my life - everything I've done has been, in one way or another, to do with the theatre. While I was doing my National Service, for the last six months of my service I had been stationed near London so I could get down to the theatre. And then I went back home to Staffordshire at the end of that and then went to Birmingham University and at the end of that... and I'd failed, I thought, 'Well, what I really want to do is get back to London so that I can return to the theatre-going'. So I looked in the... I had done some library work, been a librarian in the local library in Staffordshire, so I thought I'd look for a job somewhere near London. I looked in The Times Literary Supplement where all those jobs used to be advertised, and there was a job going in Wimbledon Library, so I applied for that, and I arranged the interview on this particular day for six o'clock in the evening on a Wednesday knowing that Look Back in Anger would be having a matinée that afternoon in London. So I went to see Look Back in Anger in the afternoon, then went down to Wimbledon for the interview in the evening at six o'clock. So you know, at that time in my life I didn't know what was quite happening. I was cross with life because it wasn't working out really as I wanted it to. And so seeing Look Back in Anger it really sort of came home to me. I felt, 'Yes, I'm like Jimmy Porter, I'm fed up with the world and I can rant and rave' - but of course I didn't because I'm not that sort of character. But it really did have a great impact on me, and as I look through this little book I can see that I saw it about six times, different productions over the next two or three years. Now, we did go back to see it, I think they revived it at the Royal Court - now, I can't remember exactly when, I haven't looked in here - in the seventies and it had lost its impact. I've read and heard extracts on the radio and it was recently revived I think in Windsor... no, not Windsor where was it? Bath! I don't think it was a very... Peter Hall production, but I don't understand it was particularly brilliant but nevertheless all the critics for that production said that it's a load of rubbish really.

SG: And now historians argue that Osborne's play was a revolution in 1956, do you agree with this from your experience?

JH: Well I think for that time and in my circumstances, and at that time I think it did have a great impact. You know, but things change, fashions change and it doesn't work today. But it did - I'm sure it did - for audiences in that time, and it certainly did for me.

SG: Rattigan, Brecht, Pinter and Shelagh Delany are some of the great playwrights that we've studied that emerged from this period. Do you think there are any plays that have been overlooked or forgotten about, that were about during this time and don't seem to be remembered today?

[Long pause]

SG: Plays or playwrights?

JH: Well one that seems to have... a playwright, Arnold Wesker who wrote a number of plays. I suppose the most famous one was Roots, and that was part of a trilogy; there was Chicken Soup With Barley and I'm Talking About Jerusalem were the other two and

they weren't... I saw them all at the time when they came out. And Roots, like Look Back in Anger, because I could relate to it... have you read it?

SG: It's on our course to study...

JH: About this young girl from Norfolk who is from a farming family, as I am, I'm from a farming family. She goes to London and meets this boy and then invites him back to the... to meet the rest of the farming family and of course he doesn't turn up. She has this outburst, and realises she's not quoting her boyfriend all the time but realises that she's talking for herself. So you never see any revivals of that now, not in the last few years anyway, and certainly not the other Wesker plays, as far as I know haven't been revived.

SG: Do you think that's for the same reason, like with Osborne's play, you suggested they weren't as relevant to life today, does that apply to Wesker?

JH: It could well be, it could well be. See, somebody like Harold Pinter, his plays keep being revived all the time. Well, frankly I've got no time for Harold Pinter, it doesn't mean anything to me.

SG: Did you see any of...

JH: I did at the time, yes, and I suppose it was just a new... It didn't have any particular impact at the time but it was fashionable to like Harold Pinter then. I do remember... I can't remember which plays I saw, but I can remember in those days – this is going back to the fifties – he wrote a lot of sketches for revues, you know it was fashionable, the 'intimate revue' as they called it. It would be these shows... They have completely disappeared, I mean, like repertory companies have disappeared, these intimate revues, you never hear of them now.

SG: Can you say a bit more about them?

JH: About the revues?

SG: Yes

JH: Yes, well, they were a mixture of sketches about ten minute, quarter of an hour sketches, which were usually supposed to be amusing or sometimes they could be quite sort of dramatic and serious, and then the next number would be a musical number. The cast would be a small cast, say up to half a dozen people, depending on how ambitious they were there might be two or three dancers as well. And so it was really a 'rag-bag' of musical items these sketches. But them had some very talented artists, I mean you've heard of Joyce Grenfell, she... Have you heard of Joyce?

SG: Erm, no I haven't actually.

JH: Oh, well she... well perhaps not, because she has been dead now for... but she was a very talented revue artist. Hermione Gingold was another name that during the war years... I didn't see her in these intimate revues, but they did shows like Sweet and Low and then there was For Amusement Only and what was the... I can't remember them all, but they were all of the same ilk, you know: a small company, a mixture of very amusing items, serious, songs. Living for Pleasure was another one I remember seeing two or three times, but they've just gone out of fashion so they don't have them today.

SG: Did you ever see any productions by the Theatre Workshop?

JH: Yes, I went to Stratford a number of times when they used to perform there and of course quite a number of those shows transferred into the West End. So, I saw Oh What a Lovely War! - suppose that was one of the most... Sparrers Can't Sing... [long pause]

SG: You said you went to see Oh What a Lovely War! by the Theatre Workshop, can you tell me a bit more about this production?

JH: Yes, I not only saw the show but it was turned into a film eventually (but I think the original show was more impressive) and it was really just a collection of sketches and films taken from accounts of the war. I think every word that was used was either a report from the war at the time, or was a song of the period with maybe different words added to make it more poignant or pointed. But it had Avis Bunnage, I can recall in it, the... oh, who else...? I can't remember the names of the other people but it was a very emotional sort of show, and it brought home to you the pointlessness of war, and of course the tragedy of particularly the First World War when so many thousands of people were killed and gassed... yes it was quite a moving production.

SG: Many people think now that the Theatre Workshop didn't have the same funding as other companies and it wasn't around as long and some people now think it's overlooked by the larger companies such as the Royal Court Theatre.

JH: Yes, well, of course it was almost a one woman band wasn't it! Joan Littlewood, she ran it, with some very... I mean, I suppose she took advantage of the actors as she could give them good parts but she couldn't give them much money, so they were happy to work for her to gain experience and to get good parts. Barbara Windsor was one of her regular company members, she was in Sparrers Can't Sing and Victor Spinetti whose book I've just been reading was a leading member of her team. I never saw her personally because she never appeared in the shows but she was, apparently she was quite a character and spoke her mind [laughs] but she certainly put on some very memorable productions.

SG: You said you saw *A Taste of Honey*, which is a Theatre Workshop production. When you saw this at the time, could you tell that censorship was changing in England, because there's hints in the play about prostitutes and a gay relationship?

JH: That's right, yes.

SG: Was that quite noticeable at the time, that these things were being allowed on stage that previously...?

JH: Yes, because as I recall it in *A Taste of Honey*, the gay boy in it... It wasn't made all that obvious – it was sort of hinted at and you assumed. So I suppose, I can't remember what year it was, it was towards the end of this era...

SG: I think that was 1956 *A Taste Of Honey*, I just wonder if the fact that these things were being hinted at on the stage in the fifties, if that was a marked change from the forties or was it quite a gradual change?

JH: Well... [long pause] It was a change, but before that I had seen... because to get over this censorship they created these club theatres and I can remember joining this particular club that was... I mean you paid a minimum fee of - I don't know - five shillings as it was in those days, which made you a member and therefore they could put on whatever they liked for club members. It was just a dodge round the... you know, it wasn't open to the public because you had to be a member you paid your five shillings and bought your ticket there and then.

SG: What was the club called that you were a member of?

JH: I don't... Because it only existed as an audience... I can't remember what it was called, but I remember they ran the place at the Comedy Theatre and one was *A View From the Bridge* by... I think they did three or four at a time. *A View From the Bridge* by... was it Arthur Miller or Tennessee Williams? Arthur Miller I think. And they did *A Five Finger Exercise* by Peter Shaffer which again hinted at a gay relationship between the tutor and the young boy he was tutoring. *Tea and Sympathy* was the other one that they did, in that year, in that period they wouldn't have been able to put any of those on in an ordinary theatre, but because it was club members only they could put them on, so that was one way round this censorship.

SG: I see. Did you see Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* when it was staged?

JH: No I didn't. At least, I've looked through this book and I can't see it, and I can't remember seeing it. I mean, I think I've read it, and I know all about it but no I didn't see it, and possibly because it isn't the sort of theatre that I like... I've never seen it since.

SG: Right, because when that was first produced many members of the audience left during the interval, so I was just going to ask you...

JH: And I have a feeling that it was put on at the theatre at Hammersmith that I mentioned where Sandy Wilson's Valmouth was put on. But, I mean I don't know that people made of it in those days – what do people make of it today?! I was talking to somebody last week who had seen... it's been revived recently, I think it's on in the West End now, and it was revived in Bath back in the summer and somebody I'd been talking to went to see it and she thought it was wonderful! So you know audiences consist of all sorts of tastes and people with different ideas.

SG: Have you ever walked out of a production, like all those people who walked out of Waiting for Godot?

JH: Yes I have, quite a number of times. Not necessarily because the play I considered bad... but I may... you're going to ask me now what I walked out of, but I'll tell you the last thing I walked out of was the National Theatre production of The Alchemist which is still on, and I left at the interval – I went with John – because they'd put it in an up-to-date setting which we didn't think suited The Alchemist, but I suppose the main reason I left was because they were shouting and jabbering away and I couldn't – my hearing – I couldn't hear what they were saying anyway.

SG: And were there any you walked out of during the post-war period?

JH: This period, yes sorry. [long pause] No I don't think... I think I was more tolerant in those days: if I'd paid my money, come what may I was going to stay and see it. And I suppose by the time I went to see any particular production I knew what I was more or less going to see, so I would have avoided the things perhaps I felt might upset me or I wouldn't enjoy and so I just went to...

SG: OK, so when censorship ended in 1968 did you notice any... I mean, I know you said you were a club member of theatres, but did you notice any difference in the public theatres between the plays that had been staged after the war and the plays that were then staged after censorship ended?

JH: Well to be honest, no I didn't really, because I suppose it was a fairly gradual process and maybe the things I was going to see at that time wouldn't necessarily have been censored anyway so no. And I mean, a lot of the shows would have been put on at the Royal Court Theatre and that sort of theatre I abandoned - I wasn't particularly interested in their type of productions and I never have been since. So no I didn't particularly notice any difference.

SG: So what was it about the Royal Court productions at that time that you disliked?

JH: Well I mean about this time I did see... I did see *The Entertainer* which was also by John Osborne, I enjoyed that. I saw *Rhinoceros* which I think was by Ionesco which is rather a strange play but I suppose I got some enjoyment out of it. I mean they did all sorts of things in those days but as the years went by they seemed to concentrate more on new writing, and it just wasn't my theatre.

SG: OK, you mentioned Sandy Wilson, who was a producer of musicals...

JH: No, he wrote them.

SG: Oh, he wrote them, and you saw a lot of his...

JH: I mean, he didn't write all that many, the most famous was *The Boy Friend* and that was where... Ann Rogers and – oh, I've forgotten... Anyway it was a pastiche of the 1920s musical and it was a very successful show, small-scale, very English but succeeded in America with Julie Andrews in the leading role in America. Then there was *Valmouth* which was a completely different show, a musical based on Ronald Fairbanks novel, sort of a bit weird and it contained some very weird characters but it bounced along with you know good tunes but they were very... there was a Cardinal Pirelli in it I remember who was what... today you'd say very camp, very over-the-top. Fenella Fielding played a vampish sort of woman who'd got eyes on the shepherd boy and she wanted to 'spank the white walls of his cottage' was one of her favourite phrases, so I suppose it would be considered a bit risqué at that time but it did have a lot of devoted followers, like me! It's just one of those shows you know that you fell in love with really, you just enjoyed it so much and couldn't get enough of it. Of course it was a bit weird I suppose.

SG: And how much did it cost to go and see productions in the fifties, like a West End production in London?

JH: Well the very first show that I ever saw in London was *Kiss Me, Kate* - the musical *Kiss Me, Kate* at the London Coliseum, and I seem to recall... and I sat in the stalls, in the front stalls, I went on a day trip down from Staffordshire to London and I sat in the front stalls and I paid fourteen and sixpence, so those seats today, for a similar musical, would be fifty pounds wouldn't they, fifty or sixty pounds? Mind you, fourteen and sixpence then was a lot of money but that's how much it was, and a programme would be... so fourteen and sixpence that would be about seventy five pence in today's money and a programme would be two and a half pence, it used to be sixpence, I think that's two and a half pence. So that would be the top end of the price range, but a lot of my theatre going when I came down to live in London would not be in the front stalls by any means! It would be up in the gods, and in those days you could... they had what you call 'the gallery stools' they would put out... you could go along in the morning and pay for a gallery stool - you paid sixpence I think - and then a stool was put out and you went and you got your place in the queue, and the seat was numbered, the little stool, a wooden stool outside the theatre and you paid sixpence for that and that was your place, and you came back with your ticket and you sat in that stool for, sort of, half an hour before they let you in, and then you paid probably about fifteen or twenty pence

for the seat and those would be right at the top of the gallery, so that was the sort of price range in the fifties.

SG: And do you think the whole experience of theatre-going has changed since the fifties? I mean did you used go out...because now they do packages like go to the theatre and have dinner, did you do that then?

JH: A lot of... no, I wasn't into really 'making a night of it' sort of thing, as far as having a meal and that sort of thing. Mainly, I suppose because for a number of years – I mentioned in the libraries, so when I left Wimbledon Library I then - see, this is another way the theatres have run my life! When I worked in Wimbledon Library I had two days off in the week because I worked at the weekends, so I'd come up to the West End for the shows, and one day I was walking down the Charing Cross Road and next to the Garrick Theatre was a library, and I thought, 'Fancy working in the library in the West End, this would be wonderful!' And coincidentally in the Library Journal that following week there was an advert for a job in this library so I applied for it, and I got the job. So I was working in Charing Cross Road, in this library for nearly a year, and then I was transferred to a reference library in Leicester Square where I worked for five, six years. So of course I was on the doorstep for all the theatres, so I would just after finishing work in the library at say half past five I'd just try and get a ticket for a show, or I may have got it the day before... You know, all the theatres were on my doorstep so it was just easy-peasy - it wasn't a question of making arrangements and picking up friends. Sometimes I'd go on my own, sometimes I'd go with a colleague from the library, and it became sort of just a casual occupation really.

SG: And have you noticed any changes in the make-up of the audience, kind of the people that go and see the theatre?

JH: I don't know, when I go now – but then because I'm getting old and I tend to go to afternoon performances, and so afternoon performances tend to be older people, you know, there's lots of grey hairs about! So I don't go all that much to be honest in the evening. One of the things I have noticed about audience behaviour. I mentioned earlier that I went to see this musical *Wicked* at the Apollo Victoria, and in the old days if you went to a musical... I mean people would sit and applaud at the end, but at the end of that show everybody got up clapping and cheering, but I never... Audiences never did that in my younger days - they would sit there, and I mean they would boo if they didn't like it – which you don't get today, in recent years I've not heard any booing at all – but they would also cheer but they would never get on their feet... get onto their feet and cheer, they'd sit there and do it. And talking of booing, one of the shows that I do remember myself booing - and a lot of the audience booing - because this was the first night I went, a show called *The World of Paul Slickey*, which was by John Osborne - a musical by John Osborne - and of course it was a disastrous show, and I happened to go to the first night and the audience really booed that, I'd never... it was really quite frightening, I'd never heard booing like that in an audience, so you don't get that today. I suppose in those respects audiences have changed.

SG: Did you see any plays by Brecht?

JH: Yes I think that was one of the shows - now you're going to ask me which! – at the Theatre Workshop, but I'm afraid I can't remember the names of them. It would only have been one or two, of course *Mother Courage* is going round now, I notice, at our local theatre in Richmond, but I haven't seen a Brecht play for a long time.

SG: Ok, well that's just about our time up. Thank you.