

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

<http://sounds.bl.uk>

Joyce Jolley – interview transcript

Interviewer: Louise Harrison

10 November 2006

Actress and theatre-goer. Christopher Fry; Hamlet; Robert Helpmann; lighting; Look Back in Anger; Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith; People's Theatre, Nottingham; make-up; RSC; Paul Scofield; Shakespeare Memorial Theatre; Shakespeare; theatre training; verse speaking; Waiting For Godot; Donald Wolfit.

LH: This is Louise Harrison interviewing Joyce Jolley on November 10th 2006. Could I first ask you, do we have your permission to copyright this interview to the British Library and the Sound Archive?

JJ: Yes.

LH: Excellent. Right, I thought we'd start of with if you told me a little bit about your background and what sparked your interest in the theatre?

JJ: Because at the age of about six my parents sent me to elocution lessons and my teacher taught drama as well and that really sparked me off into an interest in theatre and drama.

LH: And do you remember was there a particular play that, sort of, sparked that interest or..?

JJ: No, pantomimes of course started... started my interest as a small child.

LH: Ah, excellent. Now you mentioned you acted with the People's Theatre in Nottingham, can you tell me a little bit about that?

JJ: It was founded by, well, started by, a chap called Hugh Willet who eventually became Secretary General of the Arts Council, and the Co-op subsidised it and we did absolutely everything and a lot of famous people came from there, Ken Loach was there, Peter Bowles, who else...? John Bird...

LH: Have you seen... did you see Hayfever recently?

JJ: No. I didn't.

LH: Peter Bowles was excellent in that.

JJ: I know he was, he told me he was going to be in it but I didn't go and see it. And we're in touch with a lot of these people: Peter Needham who actually put me in touch with you was at the National Theatre for years. So...

LH: Right, so can you tell me a little bit about what was your favourite production while you were there? What did you particularly enjoy?

JJ: Oh, Twelfth Night, because I played Viola and we did it in the open air and I loved doing that.

LH: And who was your opposite number? Who was your leading man?

JJ: Well Peter Needham played Orsino, and my friend Zoe was Olivia - Zoe Younger [?] as she is now - and Julie Needham played Maria, so...

LH: And so you were open air?

JJ: We did that in the open air.

LH: How did...?

JJ: We did ten productions during the winter, and then one open air production.

LH: And how did you do that in terms of the set and things like that?

JJ: We didn't really need a set for Twelfth Night.

LH: Didn't you?

JJ: Not really no.

LH: Oh OK. Did you see... Over the period after the war - so you know that the Theatre Archive Project is particularly interested in 45-68 - did you see any, sort of, important changes in plays performed after the war?

JJ: Well yes after... well... when was *Look Back in Anger*?

LH: Yes that was after the, yes...

JJ: After that I think change... plays changed radically really.

LH: In what way?

JJ: Well they were more gritty, they were more realistic. You got rid of the drawing room comedy to a certain extent.

LH: So were there any, apart from *Look Back in Anger*, were there any specific examples of gritty realism?

JJ: Well, Pinter... [pause] *A Taste of Honey*.

LH: Yes great. What, what in particular was it that made them so realistic and gritty?

JJ: Well because they were about real families, families in the north - you never had people in the north, except for in *The Wakes* which was, you know, sort of a fun thing... well, more fun, but they were more realistic. I mean, I came from Nottingham and people lived like that and you were actually seeing people on stage who were real.

LH: Yes, was it also, sort of, the issues that they raised as well because *Look Back in Anger* was quite a big thing because of the dialect, wasn't it, it was spoken in a regional dialect.

JJ: Yes.

LH: So was it... was it more that, or was it the issues that people were raising?

JJ: Oh issues, well everything, issues and the dialect because everybody spoke in the same accent until about that period.

LH: Did you see *A Taste of Honey*?

JJ: No I didn't. I read it, but I never saw it.

LH: Did you see the film?

JJ: No I didn't.

LH: Oh the film was actually very good. Where am I now? Did you see any changes, particularly in women's roles after the war?

JJ: Ah, yes I think so, women were very glamorous until after the war and then they became more realistic I think. I wrote something down about that, can't remember... I don't know, but certainly the realistic roles, and they became more dominant as well, the roles were more dominant than they had been and some of the roles were on equal terms with the men, as it were.

LH: Yes? Do you remember any particular plays like that?

JJ: Oh I, No, can't think now...

LH: Because in Look Back in Anger, I wouldn't have called...

JJ: No, some, I'm trying to think...

LH: What's the lead's name? Jimmy and...Alison!

JJ: I think in Pinter...

LH: Pinter particularly?

JJ: It became, women's characters became more dominant, well as dominant, as the men I think.

LH: And do you mean dominant in terms of stage time or in terms of force of...

JJ: Character.

LH: Character, yes.

JJ: Yes.

LH: Right, OK brilliant, ah you called the time when you were visiting Stratford regularly 'the glory days', now do you know, can you elaborate on why this was?

JJ: Because all the great actors of the time would go there, they'd go for far less pay like the Redgraves and Gielgud and Richardson, and also at that time young actors were coming up, Burton, Scofield, [pause] Barbara Jefford, Liam Kearn [?] was there...

LH: Why do think it was that they went there for less pay?

JJ: Because Barry Jackson and Anthony Quail [inaudible] at that time were the artistic directors and I think they just put on such wonderful productions that people wanted to go and act there. They got a lot of acclaim for being there.

LH: So did you go, how regularly did you visit?

JJ: Every year.

LH: Every year?

JJ: [Laughs] Yes.

LH: And what did you see particularly? Because you mentioned Hamlet... and can you describe why that was so memorable for you?

JJ: It was the first production I'd seen of Shakespeare that wasn't in Elizabethan costume. It was Victorian costume, I saw it twice, Paul Scofield alternated with Robert Helpmann, and it was... I mean, Helpmann was very balletic and Scofield was very much more serious and you know, dour I suppose.

LH: And they both played Hamlet?

JJ: They alternated playing Hamlet. Clare Bloom played Ophelia.

LH: Oh right.

JJ: And I just remember that as one of the outstanding productions.

LH: Do you... so you think they represented, they played Hamlet differently?

JJ: Oh very differently.

LH: So what do you mean by balletic?

JJ: Well he was a ballet dancer, so his movements and his... the way he approached it was much more from the ballet angle, much more movement.

LH: Was it more, sort of, yes, a dance rather than a play?

JJ: Yes. Yes.

LH: And Helpmann was dour?

JJ: No, Scofield.

LH: Scofield was very dour? So did he deliver his lines differently or was it the way he moved?

JJ: He did it very seriously, and yes the way he moved was totally different and I would say a very much more serious and thought-provoking Hamlet.

LH: And which production did it for you, which was your preferred production?

JJ: I just think Scofield's wonderful, so yes, Scofield! [Laughs]

LH: So which sort of, what sort of productions did you see during the time you... because you were a regular theatregoer so you went regularly every year to Stratford but I presume you went to other things?

JJ: Yes well, my first Shakespeare was Donald Wolfit, because he was the only person who did Shakespeare and toured, and I think all people of my age in the provinces owe him a lot, I know he gets a lot of flack but...

LH: What does he get flack for?

JJ: Because he was the last actor-manager and he surrounded himself, quite often, by not such good actors so - and he was a ham - but that was the period... it was totally different, and then the Nottingham Playhouse opened and then I began to see different productions of Shakespeare.

LH: Like what?

JJ: Well I saw Hamlet there, John Dirth [?] played Hamlet there and Macbeth... I saw Chekhov.

LH: What did you see, which Chekhov?

JJ: Oh what did I see there? I think it was Three Sisters, but I can't honestly remember.

LH: So you went to see, you visited the Nottingham theatre as a theatregoer before you acted there?

JJ: No, I was acting at the same time as I was going to the theatre, crowds, you know all the young people from the People's Theatre used to go once a fortnight, it was the first fortnightly rep and we'd had as well.

LH: And when was this? Roughly?

JJ: Don't know. Well, fifties, late forties early fifties.

LH: Now, when we talked about Stratford you mentioned Scofield, as you have done, it's... I found a quote on one of the other archive interviews, someone said that he was the last of the sort of... actors who really transformed themselves for a part, what do you think? Do you agree with that?

JJ: No I wouldn't say he was the last of the actors... he really did, but actors still do.

LH: So, I don't, I don't quite know what they meant by that, so can you describe how he transformed himself for a part?

JJ: Well I suppose he, I don't know, thought himself into it. I mean, I've got a friend who's quite a well-known actress, and she said she'd just go on the stage and you... you get into the skin of the part and you do it, and I imagine Scofield just got into the skin of the part. I mean, he wasn't a method actor but... I mean, he could do comedy he could do tragedy and you... you still felt he was a different person. But I think it's unfair to say he was the last actor to do that.

LH: So was there anyone since who you feel, is... rivals his...

JJ: Oh, Scofield... I'm thinking of males and I can't think now.

LH: No?

JJ: Just off the top of my head...

LH: So what are your lasting memories of Stratford and the RSC, apart from Hamlet?

JJ: Well it wasn't RSC then.

LH: Oh... well, of Stratford, sorry.

JJ: [pause] I don't know, just so much I saw and so much I learned, set designs were wonderful - Leslie Hurry was one of the designers, Moiseiwitsch [?].

LH: In what way were they wonderful?

JJ: Well, they were just different from what I'd ever seen. They were different from the box sets at the Theatre Royal. You know, they were... they used the whole stage...

LH: [pause] Right, you also mentioned Robert Helpmann who's been described as being a very flamboyant character...

JJ: Yes...

LH: Which probably... he's the ballet dancer right?

JJ: Yes.

LH: Right. Probably linked to the ballet dancing, was this...

JJ: You've probably seen him.

LH: Have I?

JJ: He was the Child Catcher in Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.

LH: Oh really? Ah, OK, I was going to ask whether this flamboyance reflected in the roles you saw him in, so you said he was very balletic, but was he...

JJ: Well that was the only time I saw him act. I mean, I saw him in a couple of other things at Stratford, but I think that was his only time he left Covent Garden probably to actually act. I didn't see him...

LH: And even though he was a very flamboyant character on stage...

JJ: He was very balletic and quite different movement just because he was a ballet dancer.

LH: Yes. During your time performing - I mean specifically in the period, preferably - which was your favourite production? Now you've said Twelfth Night...

JJ: Yes.

LH: Something that's not Shakespeare!

JJ: Oh dear! I think, well, I think later, I mean Madame Denouement [?] we ran, that was about 1960 - Christopher Fry.

LH: Christopher Fry, right, for someone who doesn't know what was that about?

JJ: You don't know who Christopher Fry was?

LH: No, you might have to tell me I'm afraid!

JJ: Christopher Fry was, I think, one of our great playwrights of that period. Lady's Not for Burning - you must read these, they are so beautiful. The poetry is beautiful and I saw Lady's Not for Burning at Chichester five years ago and he was there and he died shortly after that actually, but he's a superb playwright.

LH: And you enjoyed acting in this?

JJ: Yes. Yes.

LH: For what reason?

JJ: We did Colombe... the poetry! I just think they're beautiful, they're not done very much now and I don't know why.

LH: I'll have to go and look those up. Where are we? Ah, so you mentioned Look Back in Anger so what, when it came on the stage obviously it received a lot of attention. What did you make of it?

JJ: I didn't see it when it first came out.

LH: Have you seen it since?

JJ: Yes I've seen it since.

LH: What did you make of it then?

JJ: Well I just thought it was a very good play, you know. It just changed... well, like Beckett it changed the theatre like Waiting for Godot.

LH: Yes? In what way?

JJ: Well after Waiting for Godot playwrights started writing differently. We accepted different things in the theatre. I think our horizons were widened by those playwrights.

LH: So you... Well, there was a conference at the British Library in September and it was called 'More than Just Osborne' asserting that Osborne didn't actually have the sort of 'big bang' effect that it has previously been thought he did, but you agree that he was revolutionary, changed everything?

JJ: Yes I think so. I mean, people picked up... maybe they were writing that before then, I don't know, but that was the first time it was performed and then other people followed, maybe they'd written the plays already, I wouldn't know.

LH: Yes, and do you... was this a consensus among your peers? Was this a...

JJ: Yes.

LH: They all agreed with you?

JJ: Yes.

LH: Now, were there any other plays or theatre companies that you thought had a greater impact on theatre at this time? In this period?

JJ: Well the National at the Old Vic - it was still at the Old Vic - obviously had, but that was more classical. I'm trying to think, I don't know, I just... Oh I know! The Lyric, Hammersmith did some very good stuff at that time.

LH: For example?

JJ: That was probably sixties, they were doing Mortimer - John Mortimer - and well, I saw a production of Brand, with, oh, Patrick McGowan and I saw at the National Film Theatre about a month ago, they had an Ibsen season and I saw that production, they'd filmed it.

LH: Oh wow!

JJ: And it was still an outstanding production.

LH: Oh brilliant! And so the Lyric, why was it so, did it have such an impact do you think?

JJ: It had a company which did very good plays and I suppose some of those actors were pretty unknown and the productions were excellent. And there was the Kings Theatre in Hammersmith as well...

LH: What... what went on there?

JJ: It was the same sort of things, Wolfit was there for a time, I can't remember what he did. Sorry, I can't remember.

LH: Don't worry. Right, so we were talking about changes earlier, so you mentioned on the phone that you thought lighting changed, in what way did that..

JJ: Lighting changed... well, you lost the footlights so the actor is much closer to the audience - there isn't a barrier, and lighting now is fantastic: it's so subtle, because

you... you've got the console at the front of the theatre, whereas in the old days the lighting board was at the side in the flies...

LH: Right and what sort of...

JJ: And so you had a wheel, a great big wheel and you had to turn the wheel to dim the lights or... there was no touching buttons, it was very physical.

LH: And was there... so... because Brecht was interested in the colour of the light, wasn't he, sort of a steely blue light...

JJ: Well there were always gels, but... I mean, there were different colour gels, you know, yes they did, I didn't know Brecht did that.

LH: Well apparently they used to perform in streets and so the only things they had were car headlights which had that quality to them.

JJ: No, I don't, I don't know anything about that.

LH: Is there anything else you wanted to tell us about?

JJ: Well that changed make-up of course.

LH: Oh wow, go on, tell us about that.

JJ: Well everybody was very heavily made up, because if you've got footlights and lights shining down, you had very heavy make-up, once the footlights went you got more subtle lighting and actors don't use the make-up they used to do because they don't need it any more.

LH: Oh right.

JJ: They did use make-up, but nothing as heavy as they did in those days.

LH: Oh wow, I didn't know that, that's very interesting. So what do you think about theatre at the moment?

JJ: I think there's some excellent theatre, but I also think that young actors don't have the training that they had. I mean, they probably do at RADA and LAMDA but there a

lot of people just training actors for telly usually and then you get television actors on the stage, you can't hear them, they don't enunciate, they can't project.

LH: Do you think television had a, sort of... had that effect? Because television was making its advent around 1950-ish wasn't it? Do you think it had...

JJ: It took a long while, it took a long while.

LH: And do you think it had, did you see change?

JJ: Now a lot of young people go and think, 'I want to be a television star!' and then they do a part in the theatre and they don't know how to act. They don't speak... they can't speak verse, they are very bad at speaking verse. In fact, I believe the Royal Shakespeare Company now have a six month course for teaching actors to speak verse, to speak Shakespeare!

LH: Whereas back in the fifties was that something that...

JJ: They would have learnt that at RADA or wherever... Central School.

LH: So the quality of acting from 1940 to 1960 was higher you think than now?

JJ: Well theatre acting, yes, with... and they, they taught them to move, I think they moved better. When you see people moving in costume now, they don't always move as well as they should... and that's not always the case, but I think there's a lot of people just transferring from television who shouldn't be on the stage unless they've had more training, and that's one of the problems.

LH: Oh right, now you've brought your Shakespeare Memorial Theatre Guide...

JJ: One of them, yes.

LH: Why did you bring this to show me?

JJ: Well I thought you'd just be interested, because the programmes for 1951 to 1953 are there and you can see who the actors were and you can see who were the people who were there who became stars later like Burton, Robert Hardy, um, who else? Well, Clare Bloom I suppose, William Kearn [?], Donald Sinden. All those people were in small parts - well Clare Bloom wasn't and Barbara Jefford wasn't, but the others were all in small parts.

LH: Right, oh wow. Yes, so this is, is this before or after the make-up change?

JJ: Oh this is before.

LH: This is before, I was going to say they're... I can see what you mean about very heavily made up!

JJ: Yes.

LH: It's very peculiar! And is Hamlet in here?

JJ: I think so. That's Redgrave of course, [turning pages] Henry IV. I don't know, to be honest. If it isn't I've got it in another one. No it isn't is it? No.

LH: No?

JJ: It's not in there.

LH: OK, right, so there's nothing else you want to, sort of, tell us about you time, sort of, acting or theatre, visiting the theatre during this time that we've been talking about?

JJ: No I don't think so.

LH: Right, shall we conclude the interview?

JJ: [Laughs] Yes.

LH: Right, OK, thank you very much.