

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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John Levitt – interview transcript

Interviewer: James Morris

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Actor. Accents; backstage team; Caesar and Cleopatra; censorship; child licences; digs; Vivien Leigh; modern writers; musicals; Laurence Olivier; RADA; repertory; South Pacific; television; touring.

JM: Just to begin, I thought we'd start with your early experience of theatre, specifically around 1951. You were in a production of Caesar and Cleopatra by Bernard Shaw, and that was with Sir Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh. What was your experience of that?

JL: Of course it was my first foray into professional performance other than on television, which had happened just a few weeks earlier. Live TV, at Alexandra Palace for the BBC when there was just one channel. In the beginning I was understudying – it was during the Festival of Britain – and Laurence Olivier Productions - that was his company - were using the theatre that belonged to somebody else. And it was the St. James Theatre, that was very special, because it was... Sir somebody Alexander, who was a famous actor in the nineteenth to the twentieth century, and one or two of Oscar Wilde's plays had been performed there. I think it was where... the disastrous time where on the first night of [The Importance of Being Earnest], the father-in-law of his lover Bosie, who was a hereditary peer, had put a cauliflower in his hands and publicly accused him of being a sodomist or something. I didn't know all that as a child, it didn't mean anything to me until later. But it was wonderful, and people like Robert Helpmann were in the company, and Peter Cushing who later became so very famous with his horror movies, and lots of brilliant younger actors like Gillian Bennett and Maxine Audley, Cy Grant and Edmund Purdom who took over from Mario Lanza in the film of the Student Prince - not singing of course, the soundtrack was Lanza - Esmond Knight and Norman Wooland and Niall MacGinnis, and it was an amazing occasion. I took over then, after a few weeks, the part of King Ptolemy, and it was my main scene - in the second act I think - it was with Vivien Leigh, and Sir Laurence, and I sat on a throne - we were meant to be joint rulers, I was meant to be Cleopatra's brother. And Vivien Leigh was absolutely enchanting to me, I have to say she was lovely, and people say 'she was this' and she was that', that she was difficult, but she was absolutely wonderful to me personally: she obviously liked children. And I remember when I left she said - because I went into South Pacific and had rehearsals for that later in that year so I couldn't stay for the entire season - and she said 'oh you didn't let us down' and gave me a kiss, and I sort of was so thrilled. I got some autographs from everybody including Robert Helpmann who wrote across two pages of my autograph book, 'Robert' on one and 'Helpmann' on the other! [laughs]. He was very flamboyant; he used to make people laugh during rehearsals. And Lord Olivier - Laurence Olivier, he was Sir then - gave me voice production lessons. From the stage he stood up with me in the circle and coached me about what people called

'throwing your voice', which isn't quite what it was, and the chest and head voice because I was only... I was a very small twelve year old, just twelve. And there was the smell of make-up around, body make-up, Max Factor make-up and Elizabeth Arden; it was all wonderful, because we were all Egyptians or Romans. And I was wearing a beard! For the first professional thing I'd done on the stage I was having a beard glued on! I'm not sure if they did it by some sort of string that when you did grow a beard it would grow through, but anyway... and Peter Cushing did a wonderful little watercolour of me - because he was an artist as well, used to paint silk scarves and things - and he did a painting of me as King Ptolemy. I've still got it now at home, I meant to bring it with me to show you, James, and he gave me a quarter-pound box of Black Magic, which existed in those days. And then the fantastic thing was, when we were up at the Opera House in Manchester, and I wasn't yet appearing - I had rehearsed of course - I went into the flies with my chaperone and stood right up at the top where the ropes were - the hemp ropes for pulling scenery up and down, it's all electronic nowadays - and was looking down at the scene of where Ruffio, the sort of soldier-servant of Caesar, has slit the throat of - the audience hasn't yet seen that - of Ftatatateeta, who was the nurse if you like - a big woman, played in this case by Elspeth March who had been the first wife of Stuart Grainger, lovely, lovely woman - and she's behind this painted gauze curtain, painted from the design of Audrey Crudders, Michael Benthall directed it... And Vivien Leigh rushes up the stage and says 'Ftatateeta, Ftatatateeta' in a kind of panic, and pulls back this curtain behind which Ruffio had disappeared earlier and you don't know why, (well, the audience might have guessed), and what happens is Ftatatateeta falls backwards over the edge of it and she, or a stage manager, or Niall McGuinness, the actor playing Ruffio, had put red Gordon Moore's toothpaste across her throat in a line, and [inhales sharply] it was one of the most thrilling moments, I've never forgotten it, all those years, over fifty years. It was wonderful! [laughs]

JM: What was the impetus for you to 'get into' theatre as it were?

JL: It was my singing, really, and also because for some reason I was an absolute dumbclutz at almost everything at school, but sight-reading, for some reason, and being able to decipher the English language on paper by the age of... six and a half, seven? I was a very fluent sight-reader indeed, for some reason. And I had had my head in our concave speaker in our big radiogram - which was about three feet wide and about twenty odd inches deep - and I could lie on my stomach and I would listen to drama. Not just Children's Hour, but adult drama, plays that used to last an hour and a half at least, even two hours, on the BBC Home Service, and all sorts of famous actors - some of whom I later met - Gladys Young and Marjory Westbury... and I became incredibly engrossed by it. I had seen very little live theatre, it had only really been some variety and pantomimes which we went to, even during the war - I was born in '39. I hadn't seen a play, except for in an amateur setting on a school stage, and then I was in things like amateur groups and then I was being asked to sing. I would sing light classics and things... Neapolitan songs, popular ballads and things... they wanted me to tour with the Luton girls choir! I didn't in the end. They wanted me to tour and I was only nine! And then people saw me and said, 'Oh, I know someone who's making a film and is looking for a boy actor', and suddenly I was auditioning for The Mudlark for Twentieth Century Fox for Ben Lyon who was casting then - a once-famous Hollywood actor living in Britain and working as a radio comic... And I didn't get the part, Andrew Wray did, but we were almost exact contemporaries. But eventually we moved back from Luton, where we had gone during the war - I was born in London - and I went to a theatre

school which was run by somebody called Ada Foster who had started as a dancer, and people like Jean Simmons had been there before me, and many well known people later like Barbara Windsor, who was about the same age as me so we're sort of contemporaries, and others, Jean Simmons and so on ... Jean Marsh I mean. And that was how it all began, and immediately by the end of '51 I was going for auditions, made my first film... I did my first TV play, did this play at the St James Theatre, and then went straight into after that to South Pacific with Mary Martin and... Millicent Martin, Joyce Blair and June Whitfield were in the chorus, Sean Connery hadn't quite arrived yet, not when I was there, and lots of people who later became well known. And then my voice broke very early, because I was going to school in the morning, rehearsing filming doing the TV and the theatre as a kind of ridiculous thing really... Nobody pushed me, I was pushing myself, and my parents didn't basically interfere. And then I got a recording contract with Columbia Records to record at Abbey Road Studios where the Beatles later recorded, and as a solo artist I did the show recordings for South Pacific: 'Dites Moi', the French song - I played one of the two little French kids. And I then recorded 'Santa Lucia', but my voice broke so early that that was the only record I got to make, that and the B-Side which was a terrible ballad called 'I want to make my mother proud of me'. So I sang 'Santa Lucia' standing on a box, at twelve, with forty wonderful musicians playing with a conductor, and you used to record it on wax, even then, '51 to '52, and then I started making films. I did Lewis Gilbert's first feature film, called Johnny On The Run, which won a gold medal at Paris. And by the age of fifteen I continued doing TV drama, that was really when I went into my first rep. company at Bromley Youth Theatre.

JM: Picking up the repertory theme, that was 1954 was it?

JL: My first repertory job, that was... I was directed by a great actress called Catherine Lacy, who was a very distinguished actress. I mean, before the days of TV... She wasn't a terribly well lady, and I later saw her in a play, Queen Elizabeth with Irene Worth as Mary, Queen of Scots... and then I did a new play, called Sundown which was set in the West Indies, as it was called then... And then I did another play, a lovely, lovely play from a novel by Dodie Smith called I Capture the Castle, just finished at the Vaudeville Theatre I think it was, at the West End with Virginia McKenna starring, and Bill Travers was in it in the West End who she later married and he came to do it at Bromley - of course, wasn't far to London. It was very interesting... the disciplines were very strong then. I remember once being quite late - I missed a train - and when I got there - at this stage I was fifteen, you could travel around on your own then, I was still at school then. I arrived late, and I got there well after the half, which was disgraceful - the half being thirty-five minutes broken up, it's always given an extra five minutes - and she - Joan Leif I think her name was - the stage manager was at the stage door, with my trousers, with my costume! [laughs] She made me get into it right there, and not put on any make up - because you always wore make up although nowadays men tend not to wear it very often... and I got a good telling off, and quite rightly...

JM: [laughs]

JL: I was sort of carpeted in her office, on her carpet and she said, 'You must never get the last possible train, you must always get an earlier train' - quite right and I always do, that was a lesson well learnt. And it was very exciting, and you used to dress on stage,

you didn't go to a hall, that was happening later, very few theatres had their own rehearsal space, very few that I knew of then. Quite a number have had them added or built on, like the Lyceum, Sheffield has a wonderful block which has been built on to it, a refurbished and wonderful theatre where you can rehearse. So you would rehearse on stage, and the set would be marked out because you'd only have that space on that stage, and when we worked at Oldham we didn't go to a hall for example, we rehearsed on stage. Anyway, they couldn't afford to hire rooms; they had very little money, repertoires, in those days.

JM: It was... you described it as 'fortnightly rep'...

JL: Oh, right, yes. It was... there were dozens of fortnightly reps, weekly reps; there were dozens of repertory theatres that had mushroomed and of course had been going before the Second World War started. And then you gradually got subsidies going into repertory, and they were usually fortnightly, which meant roughly 12 days rehearsal and you would do a midweek matinee and a Saturday matinee as well. And of course there were some theatres... actors, stage managers and lighting designers, in the way that they do now, sound designers and all that stuff didn't exist then, but they... many would do twice nightly and even change programmes midweek so they would go halfway into the next week. And some would even work between two theatres, so they would move the production - after doing it one week they'd move to a sort of twin theatre that the management had, a few did that as well. Actors worked enormously hard then. If they stayed the whole season, you see, they would stay maybe a year, maybe two, three, four. I know actors who stayed six years in some cases. I never did that kind of length, the most I did was almost a year. But very often you were just going for one, two or three productions, and now young actors are lucky to get more than one play in a row, as it were, which is a shame, because they lose a tremendous experience by not doing that, doing a range of parts and so on. And companies used to be... People - playwrights - would write for a stock size company with, say, eight actors. Apart from your stage manager, you'd have your senior leading man and leading woman, you'd have your leading character man and leading woman, you'd have your ingénues male and female... I never quite understood what an ingénue was! [laughs] They were Bright Young Things, I think that was it... but there were junior character people and so on. And I believe that *The Mousetrap* by Agatha Christie was written for a company of that size. If you go to see it you can actually see what a new play might be like if it was opened in '52, didn't it, November '52? Just think, my career - such as it has been - has lasted longer than *The Mousetrap*! That's saying something, isn't it! [laughs] I long to outlive it! [laughs] No, but I'm glad it's filling the theatres still, which is wonderful.

JM: Sure. You moved on to touring, is that right?

JL: Quite soon, and, well, of course the first experience I had of that was in Manchester with *Caesar and Cleopatra* when I went to a local school and so on and so forth - it was absolutely fascinating. Because I hadn't been to any sort of theatrical school and I don't know where I get my slightly posh accent from - my parents were cockneys from the East End, and both were children of immigrants and, you know, they really were born and bred and brought up until they were twenty-four in the Whitechapel area, Stepney Green and so on. So when I went to Ada Foster - this is just by the way - she was

saying, 'Well where does he...' , you know, 'He must have had elocution lessons' and I said - my father said - 'Oh no, he's never had any such thing', so I think it was picking it up from the radio, you know, it was very interesting, and some by teachers. It's a funny thing that, you can have a Northern, Geordie or Scottish accent, it doesn't really matter, the whole thing is different now and it's much more socially... interesting...

JM: The whole Look Back in Anger thing.

JL: Yes, yes, and even beyond that, you know, the films in the sixties with Albert Finney that came, with actors with genuine regional accents, you know... You were made to flatten and crush them, and RADA would always do... I didn't go to RADA of course. I went to see, when I was eighteen, to see the deputy principal of RADA in the fifties and I said I wanted to go and he sort of stood there smoking a cigarette through a cigarette holder with his blazer on, his paisley, ah... I can't think of the word to say...

JM: Cravat?

JL: Thank you. And [laughs] with his beautiful grey hair, leaning on the mantle-shelf and he said, 'Oh, my dear boy, you don't want to waste two years here, you've had all this experience! My students would give their eye-teeth...' or 'Maybe you should come to do a bit of fencing or costume work', but he said 'Well have you got a job' and I said 'Yes' and he said 'Well go off and do it!' And I was eighteen then, [laughs] I never got into RADA although I'd saved enough money and I even took my Post Office book in and said I could pay, you know... you couldn't now, it's so expensive... What did you ask me, James?

JM: We were talking about touring.

JL: Right, yes, it was very different then. You toured generally by train, not even by coach, which later became fairly common. Companies would tour en masse, as a group, generally speaking, maybe the stars would go in their cars or would be in the first-class carriages and we would all be in the second-class carriages. Very often, the scenery, but not always, it might go in advance, would, would... This would be a Sunday morning and you'd congregate early, and you would be taken often in a cold unheated train, and [laughs] they'd give you the cheapest carriages and things - second-class carriages - and sometimes the scenery would go on a deal with the actors. And you would have to go... occasionally I'd just go by car, if they had one. And you'd arrive, at a time usually having booked your digs beforehand, and there were loads of digs around, stage doors had them if you got stuck, the stage door keeper would always say 'go to Mrs. So-and-so' and if you hadn't had time, or if you hadn't had an answer back from somebody... And I mean, you were paying - it seems ludicrously low amounts - like three pounds ten in the late fifties to, in 1960 to four pounds, for what was called full board. I mean, that would be breakfast, an evening meal before the show - which you might not have time to get back to if you happened to be rehearsing during the day - and maybe a snack after a show. And also things like... There weren't that many launderettes around in those days. I know that when you got in to the stage door you would wrap your laundry up with brown paper and labels and things, and you would give your laundry to the stage

doorman or woman - it was usually a man then - and he would give it to the laundry people who would come and collect it and deliver it back during the week, it would take two or three days and back it would come. So you would be able to keep touring with the same clothes, basically, and the theatre would tour a trunk for you or something like that. Because you did long tours then. The grading of tours is interesting, you know. You would have number one, two, and three tours, so you would have the top grade tours - things going to the Manchester Opera House or other major theatres, major touring theatres, and you would have sometimes going to the same theatres a tour of a thriller or something. And there would be musicals touring, pre-West End runs, post-West End runs, tours, and some... In the earlier days - I remember when I did Peter Pan, Margaret Lockwood, and later another year with Sarah Churchill - some of the actors in it, I mean one of our actors had been the apparently favourite Captain Hook of James Barrie, J.M Barrie, and never performed it in London, he did it for seventeen or eighteen years on tour only. And the tours were long, I mean, even we were touring until April after a London run which was twice daily, you would then go on tour with the kind of set-up and the Sunday travelling that I've just mentioned. Week by week - you wouldn't stay longer, though sometimes I guess runs in some provincial theatres they were longer (we used to call them provincial theatres, we call them regional now). And we were twice daily, and Margaret Lockwood could fill - and Peter Pan could fill the theatre - in a matinée as well, which was pretty remarkable even then. Big theatres - two-thousand seaters, sixteen-hundred seaters and so on. In all weathers, I can remember arriving in Newcastle in the snow and not having any digs. And there were what were called 'variety digs' and what were called 'legit. digs' - legitimate theatre that is, so absurd isn't it to call it now, what kind of snobbery there was there! [laughs] But the variety... sometimes you'd stay in the same digs, but I can remember staying in digs - Mrs. Cowan in Leeds - where Frankie Howard will have stayed and Phyllis Dixie who was a famous... I don't know what you'd call her now, a sort of deserge; she kind of stripped but she didn't show all she had, as it were! It was all very tactfully done, a very demure lady I believe who would knit and all that sort of thing, so I was told by Mrs. Cowan, she was very homely. [laughs] And so I hadn't seen a straight play in live theatre until I was in one, interestingly enough.

JM: Your involvement in television plays and radio drama was something...

JL: Yes! What were you going to say, sorry?

JM: I just wondered what was your experience, specifically with the television plays, first, how was that... set up?

JL: Well, it wasn't as technical then as it is now, and you couldn't edit with video the way you could by the sixties, you... But even then it wasn't very sophisticated - they could only do large sections - they could do small sections but it was frightfully expensive to cut into a video-tape. So what we did, the BBC, you would very often, certainly in '51, you would... a 'lally-pally' as it was known - you would do two performances live, so you would do a Tuesday and you would do a Thursday, a full-length play, and they were all actors who worked a lot in the theatre and, you know, they couldn't technically do the wonderful things that they can do now, and there was no digital technology like you see in Dr. Who now and so you couldn't have... Science-fiction was more difficult. Even when you see... when you saw The Quatermass

Experiment some years later you could still - very well done as it was - nevertheless it was not sophisticated in the way something would be now. It was very exciting, and you would rehearse it like a stage-play, you would rehearse for two weeks or three weeks and... I mean, now you don't rehearse, it's the same as filming, you learn your lines in advance, you go in and you do it in the same way as filming and they edit things... Some things are live you know, I was hardly ever involved in quiz shows and things, but basically you do it in little bits, you know from somebody's point of view over your shoulder, and over theirs and to your face, two shots or... I mean it's all like filming, TV, now, but then you would do a whole act and then might have an interval, we had an interval and the Potter's Wheel would go on, on the BBC - which was one of the famous little interval films that they had, some wonderful ones and that was one of them, and you know the horses, great cart-horses ploughing, and things like that, with lovely music, very English music, and one of a stream, beautiful things, and oh it was rather thrilling, actually. Then I did lots of children's drama and serials, and things like Muffin the Mule would be tucked away in a corner with Annette Mills and her little baby grand piano I think it was and Janet Russell who would be operating the puppet on the strings, Muffin the Mule. Annette would sing and talk to the puppet and play and dialogue, while we were waiting for her to finish that, it was live, and we were... Sir John Gregsam, I was sitting with him, and something about the South Sea Islands and we... biographical play, and we... it was Jennifer, one of the children's announcers would come in and announce us. And when we did the play. When we did The Golden Door for example - Alexandria Palace - Sylvia Peters came in, in a beautiful evening dress, looking absolutely pristine and would announce us on a special little set that she was on... It was all black and white, there was no colour until much later on. So it was very interesting, a completely different way of doing drama, and the writing was different because you didn't write entire little scenes and shots like you do now, like with films.

JM: Was there a hierarchy, was there a perceived sort of hierarchy of different types of drama, like television and radio, or was it all seen as one... one and the same?

JL: Television was looked down on quite a bit. Radio drama wasn't, because it was, I mean you were... it was different, radio drama, it's such a different medium, it's a medium of the voice and the imagination in a way that nothing else is, and a great medium too, I think, for drama, radio. And I've done a lot of freelance work and I was in the schools rep for a year for the BBC too when I was in my teens, but hierarchy... no, I just think... I don't know how seriously television drama was taken until just a few years before colour came in, but there were some wonderful things and lots of classic plays and some marvellous, marvellous riveting performances, but I... again, having said I didn't see a play on stage until I was in one, if you see what I mean - professionally that is - I'd seen variety and pantomime. I'd hardly seen television 'til I was in it or on it, because we didn't have a TV 'til I was... 'til 1951, when we moved to London.

JM: And that was quite a common experience for people, would you say?

JL: There weren't that many sets then, I don't know what... After the war, the TV, the BBC re-opened its television service, it had closed down in the war mostly, although I think the coronation had, maybe the first coronation bits of it had been on TV - the one in the thirties, '37 with George VI, I'm not sure. But I can remember when I was... I mean, TV was still comparatively speaking in its infancy in 1953 when the Queen was

crowned in Westminster Abbey. I was filming at Walton-On-Thames studios, and I was one of the leads in the films and I was doing films with the Children's Film Foundation then - people like Peter Butterworth, a sort of comic and I was the kind of straight man to Peter which was lovely, he was a delight - and I asked Don Chaffy our director - who became quite a big-time director in major movies for a while - I said to him, 'Mr. Chaffy, may I have the day off to watch the coronation?', and he worked out a schedule so that I could, which was wonderful of him and I, like you see these shots occasionally of families sitting round, you know, sitting and watching the TV, I've seen occasionally retrospectives now on the television of the coronation. Yes, and I had a chaperone then. Of course, as a young actor you would be, you would have to be still going to school, and I think sixteen, just around that time the school age, the leaving age had gone up, anyway I had a chaperone, fifteen, I think it was around that time and I had a tutor with me as well and it was lovely. I remember sitting out in the grass and doing lessons and things... it's all a bit, seems a bit romantic to me now, that isn't the word I'd like...

JM: Idyllic.

JL: Mm, a bit dreamy. It seems extraordinary.

JM: So, in the sixties you were coming into more, kind of traditional approaches...

JL: Oh yes, I was doing lots of rep and stuff then and I think I mentioned to you earlier that I didn't have...the censor, the Lord Chamberlain's office were still censoring plays which goes right back several centuries into the 1700s really, although there was kind of censorship in Shakespeare's time as well really - you had to mind your p's and q's, what you said! [laughs] But... I was doing Chips With Everything at the Sheffield Playhouse, and we were doing it simultaneously... it was an almost unique thing that happened really, Arnold Wesker heard the Royal Court had taken it on and wanted to do it, and that a very great theatre director was directing another production with John Hurt playing one of the two or three main roles in it. And he, Wesker offered it out to eight repertories, I believe, and only eight took him up. The Glasgow sits was one of the eight, and the Sheffield Playhouse I understood was not, and Geoffrey Ost who was running the Playhouse then - this is prior to the Crucible Sheffield you understand, that was built specially, which is a huge success as a regional repertory theatre now run by Sam West - and we again rehearsed on the stage [laughs] with parasols instead of... Because we couldn't... they couldn't afford to hire the rifles they needed - they're jolly expensive to hire, there's a company called Baptiste used to hire all that - so we literally, we had a warrant officer from the Air Force locally who came and rehearsed us in the drill on the stage, and some of the actors later became very well known. And we then opened it simultaneously, within a couple of days maybe, of the Royal Court opening, and as they got the cuts we got the cuts from the Lord Chamberlain... Absurd cuts when you look at the cuts, if you look at the script - again, I meant to bring it today to show you before we did this recording. But silly things, like, my character called Dodger - AC2 Dodger Cohen - said, you know, something about sperm, they were a kind of... he was all spouting at things, sitting polishing his boots with candle-wax and so on and spit you know - as they did in the army then [laughs] - and cross-legged on the stage and he's talking about, [adopts an accent] you know, 'Ow many spermatozoa there are in...' [laughs] And the Lord Chamberlain cut it out! That was the kind of thing which I thought - even then, I was in my early twenties - I thought was perfectly absurd. I mean,

people used to say the Lord Chamberlain had to have a dirty mind to think of some of the things, or he and his colleagues - I presume it wasn't always him - that they actually thought of these things that the public would think that he actually could, had to imagine the if you like almost double-entendres, you know, which they weren't, very often. It was just laughable, and anyway it came to a time in the end, after a lot of pressure, in the sixties. But again then I didn't do that many long seasons then. I mean, I did a few productions in a row, which was very interesting and there were lots of people you know... I was working in Oldham, and several of the people - including somebody who was sweeping the stage at that time - became one of the great stars of Coronation Street for years, and somebody who played my mother - [but] who wasn't much older than me, Barbara Knox - is now one of the famous cast members and so on. And so, yes, it was... TV was really coming into its own at the time, I was doing a lot of rep, I... Then I was able to... I had to fight really hard, because I had been a singer, not just to do musicals, but to do Octavius Caesar in Julius Caesar, you know? Until the years went by, when I was doing a play by Bernard Shaw, I was doing The Relapse playing Lord Foppington, I was playing Arturo Uí in The Resistible Rise of Arturo Uí, Tristan Sara in Travesties by Tom Stoppard, and I was doing those all in a single season, which, you know... I had to fight to be able to get to that situation, because you still had the odd thing, and even today where if you do musicals you aren't seen as a so-called 'straight' actor, you might get some comedy work. It's an absurdity, and it still exists to some extent in casting, perhaps less so now, where you have more people who have a variety, a range of abilities and skills.

JM: What was the most rewarding role for you at the time?

JL: At the time, in the sixties? [pours drink] One of the things that thrilled me to bits was Puck in A Midsummer Night's Dream, and it wasn't that long after I'd come back from New York where we did Chips with Everything - I was one of the principals in that - and I loved doing that so very, very much, and I did it at The Everyman in Cheltenham, which is a superb, superb theatre, late nineteenth century and early-Edwardian theatre, absolutely beautiful playhouse, holding about seven hundred with balconies and so on, beautiful plasterwork, lovely with perfect acoustics. And I did that in a repertoire season with somebody like Pat Kirkwood and her then-husband - she'd been a great star of the forties and fifties - and Hubert Greg was a sort of light comedy actor who was famous for presenting music and records on Radio Two, a wit and raconteur, so people like that, and very fine actors who were starting their careers, like David Horowitz, were in that company and it was a real repertory company in those days. Josephine Tuson wasn't in any of the productions that I was in, she was a long-standing member of the cast who's now famous on television as a comedy actress. Yes, I mean it was thrilling in a way, and you had... Yes, I meant to tell you, James. What we haven't got round to mentioning before was you would have student stage managers, Assistant Stage Managers who would work for two pounds a week. Would work themselves stupid, they'd be terribly exploited, but they would get a training, they would get a free training, and they would act as walk-ons and small parts and things, other characters, rather than having to hire in young actors from London or whatever, so you also had young acting ASMs - Assistant Stage Managers - and the hierarchy was basically... Sometimes you'd actually have a 'stage director' if you like, or would now be called a 'company manager' I think, or 'technical manager' - there are various names for it - who would buy in all the materials for the building of the sets, would liase between all the different departments of set design and scene making and costume making, would co-ordinate rehearsal schedules and things like that. So you would have the stage manager, that person, you had a

production manager then you would have a deputy stage manager at least one, you would have an ASM, often two sometimes, student ASMs, it depends how big the schedule was, but that was what repertory was like then.

JM: I just wanted to ask, do you think that you saw any... what was the, the sort of big changes in your career at the time, sort of fifties to '68. Did you see any...

JL: Gosh, this is isn't quite answering your question, but I was thinking about this coming on the Tube coming here this afternoon, that I have thought about from time to time. When I started as a very young professional, at twelve - just twelve - you had to be twelve in order to appear on a stage or you could not get a licence. You had to have a licence then, I'm not sure from whether it was the local authorities, I think it was [them] that you had to have it from, I don't know which department, but anyway you had to have a licence to appear on stage, and you couldn't appear if you were under twelve. I'm not sure what would happen if you were in a pantomime from a dancing school or something, they used to have pantomimes for the troops very often locally. But what I was about to say was that I worked with all these actors like Wilfred Hyde White and Henry Oscar and actors who actually reached back to great theatre companies that had existed in the twenties and thirties and even forties, that no longer existed, and who had direct connection, if you like, almost with Henry Irving and people: Martin Benson, Martin Harvey, people like that, there were lots of great actors and several big touring companies who toured classics and Shakespeare and so on and of course there was Sir Donald Wolfit who was touring classics at the time and I was fortunately able to see tour a number of times in other theatres. And yes, so I think acting styles were changing, as I... You know we mentioned about the sixties, Albert Finney and all those films, people like Anthony Richardson and John Slazenger were directing, and I actually... We were getting influenced by Marlon Brando, by plays by Tennessee Williams, by Arthur Miller and William Ingen, and I'd done all three of those writers, certain plays by them in my time. So styles of acting were changing very much, and I noticed today there is a problem if young actors don't get enough live theatre experience other than in a small fringe theatre or above a pub or a very small studio theatres they aren't used to projecting their voices and while you often have sound designers - and I don't mean to say it mockingly, because they're important because sound and sound effects are very important often to a theatre performance and they can be really important sometimes, intrinsic to the, to what the play's saying. But I don't like being miked, I don't like working into mikes as it were in live theatre which you do when you do musicals, then it's a whole different ballgame. And you still have the peculiarity of when the song stops or the music stops and you're speaking and you... I can remember being told at the Victoria Palace some years ago doing *The Pyjama Game* that, he said, 'Well actually, you know, you don't need mikes' and they had to constantly turn them down, because my natural volume - projecting - was too high or too big, but young actors often have difficulty and also projecting and dealing with enunciation so that it sounds natural too but suddenly... like in the Globe Theatre you get such a distinctly different way of working, which is a kind of reproduction as far as we know of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, from the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century. And so there are real differences now, and also I find odd things, like sometimes younger directors, even very distinguished ones, they'll have actors... I can remember seeing a Tennessee Williams play at the National Theatre, and there was one particular character - this scene was in half-light as it were, this particular scene - and I hardly ever saw the face of this who was a minor character but important nonetheless - all characters are important - but the director never gave us a chance to take a real look at that character and that actor

playing that character, and this was a distinguished director and I was quite irritated and surprised you know. And actors tend to want to play up-stage, because we eye-ball each other a lot now - like I am with you at this moment - because it helps to make a reality, you know, a truth, a connection sometimes, and to hang onto things sometimes [laughs] for dear life, but yeah... so, there are differences you know but I obviously wonder things... I mean, I went to a small studio theatre the Lyric Hammersmith the night before last and saw a wonderful performance of a play by a woman called Rani Mughti, which was about a Muslim family - oddly enough acted by Sikhs and Hindu actors [laughs] - the director was Muslim. But it was a wonderful piece of writing, by a Northern company based in Manchester and it was so good, it was just superb, but it was a very small theatre holding a hundred and fifty, and a lot of those actors... and I know that they're going to play much larger theatres and they're going to find that difficult.

JM: OK, well thanks a lot, I think we've reached the end of the interview...

JL: OK. Sorry, I've talked a bit fast, haven't I? I was a bit conscious of time.

JM: It was brilliant. Well, thanks a lot John.

JL: It was a pleasure. Thank you.