

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## John Lewis Jones – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Blanche Hammond**

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Theatre-goer. Bertholt Brecht; The Caretaker; censorship; Noel Coward; The Entertainer; John Gielgud; Harold Hobson; Vivien Leigh; Look Back in Anger; musicals; National Theatre; Laurence Olivier; opera; Joan Plowright; Harold Pinter; Ralph Richardson; Terence Rattigan; Separate Tables; Peter Shaffer; A Taste of Honey; Kenneth Tynan; Variety; Waiting for Godot; Arnold Wesker; Donald Wolfit.

BH: Just to start off with, I wanted to ask you if you could tell me a bit more about your life and how you became interested in theatre?

JL: Well, I was interested in theatre from a very early age. My sister and I were very fortunate: our parents were very keen on opera and on the theatre generally, and when we were very little we were taken, obviously to pantomime - as everyone is - but you know, as a child, and at young age we were also taken to the opera. We went to see Humperdink's Hansel and Gretel which is a children's opera, and that was very good, and then we graduated from there to an opera called Faust by Gounod. Over the years I must have been hundreds and hundreds of times to the theatre, and when I was living at home I used to go virtually every Saturday to Cardiff, and go to the theatre there.

BH: What sort of plays did you see while you were in Cardiff?

JL: Well... mostly touring shows... particularly Donald Wolfit doing Shakespeare, but also Covent Garden used to send out a touring version of their operas, and I saw The Magic Flute and various other operas, and also was The Carousel,[?] which was very much... a very old company which was resurrected a few years ago - I don't know if they're still going at all - but I mean, I like serious plays and I like musicals particularly.

BH: You like both then?

JL: Oh yes, I like opera, I like ballet...

BH: Do you have a particular favourite of musicals or plays or...?

JL: Yes, we've seen... Well, *The Sound of Music*, is not my favourite by any means, but my favourite opera is *The Magic Flute*, which is almost like a pantomime, it's got lovely music, lovely sets...

BH: When did you go and see that, when was that?

JL: Oh gosh... I've seen it many times over the years, I've seen it at Covent Garden and I've seen it in Cardiff and we've been to Glyndebourne. Have you heard of Glyndebourne, a famous opera house in Sussex?

BH: I haven't, no...

JL: It's expensive to go there, and difficult to get tickets, but we've seen a few operas there... And we'd go to ballet; we'd go to Covent Garden. Because of my partner's hearing difficulties we have a reduction on the seats, because I'm regarded as his carer, because if there was an announcement saying 'Fire!' he might not hear it...

BH: I see, yes, so you'd need somebody...

JL: But we enjoy going to opera and ballet, particularly. It's difficult to say which I prefer, I mean I always think, on the whole, I prefer opera to ballet...

BH: Really..?

JL: I like the sound of the human voice... But I like a good, straight, serious play... and recently we've done quite a lot of theatre going... [Mr. Lewis takes out diary listing productions he has seen] but my memories go back to, as I say, many, many years ago... because I was often going. I mean, this is just theatres I've been to since 1999... and, you see, 4th January, 23rd, 27th, 3rd February... we'd go to... for instance, next week, we're going all the way over to Hornchurch - which is a long way to go - to see a play called *Gaslight*, which is by Patrick Hamilton. It was made into a film many years ago with Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergman, it's a Victorian thriller, it's very good - and we went a few weeks ago to Hornchurch to see a play based on the music of Lionel Bart, and apparently a few days before... Cameron... not Cameron Mackintosh, the other one... old Lloyd Webber had come and actually bought a ticket, he didn't ask for a free ticket, he just bought a ticket and he went and sat down and enjoyed it, so maybe it'll transfer; it was a nice, interesting thing... Did you ever see *Oliver!*? Because that's been on for years...

BH: I haven't seen... I've seen the film version, I haven't ever seen the play, no. I do like the film version, though, I think it's brilliant.

JL: Yes, it was very good... what are we in now, we're in 2006 aren't we?

BH: Yes, we are...

JL: And even in 2006, we've started off... In January we go to the Orange Tree Theatre, which is in Richmond - that's a professional theatre but very small - so we saw *A Journey to London* - which was on at the Orange Tree in January, and we went to see *The Bartered Bride*, which is an opera, Covent Garden, then *Sleeping Beauty*, the ballet, and that was just in January! And we saw *Coram Boy*, which is a very good play - it was at the National, we're going again in December - about the man that founded an orphanage for poor, abandoned babies and children, and he got very friendly with Handel who wrote *Messiah*, and a famous painter called Hogarth, and it was fashionable to go and listen to music there and raise money for the orphanage.

BH: Absolutely, yes.

JL: We saw *Figaro* at the Royal Opera House recently, *Firebird*, that's Stravinsky - disappointing, *An Ideal Husband*, no good...

BH: That's a massive list of things you've seen then; you're obviously an avid theatre goer.

JL: Northern Ballet, we go to see Northern Ballet, and *The Lyttelton* - that's the National Theatre again - production of *The Voyage Inheritance*, *Madame Butterfly* at the Coliseum, *Royal Hunt of the Sun* - which we missed when it first came on, extraordinary play by Peter Shaffer; it came on many years ago and we didn't see it - it's been revived...

BH: Do you see quite a lot of original productions then, because I remember that you mentioned that you'd seen *Look Back in Anger*, the original production of that?

JL: Oh yes, I saw the original production of that, in fact I was at drama school with Mary Ure and she was his second wife, he had five wives altogether: an actress called something... Lane, Joan Lane?... then Mary Ure who choked to death, then he was married to a Welsh actress who committed suicide, and then he married two critics, (he hated critics but he married two critics) and the second one... critic survived him so he had five wives altogether.

BH: That's pretty amazing really, isn't it?

JL: It is amazing, yes, *Flower Drum Song* [I think they've just revived that, a smaller production, *Donkey's Years*, a very good comedy at the... Comedy Theatre actually, *Donkey's Years*, and Samantha Bond was in it and we saw her - she's a fairly famous actress - but the original production some years ago, it had Penelope Keelson [?] in it, and she's terrific...

BH: When was that then, the original production?

JL: Oh, some years ago, I can't remember how many years ago, quite a few, time passes... We've been to the Regent's Park Open Air Theatre twice to see the revival of The Boy Friend which was brilliant, absolutely brilliant... we saw Boris Godunov - the opera - at Covent Garden, and the Russian Captain ... and Chichester, we go to Chichester, we saw Carousel, which is an old musical, again revived... We saw Don Quixote...

BH: How do you compare the theatre... you obviously go to the theatre now as much as you did back... back after the war?

JL: Gosh, we go more, three times a week, sometimes four times a week.

BH: How would you compare it to... with serious plays now with ones that you saw after the war?

JL: Well, it's difficult to find a good serious play, and a good, straightforward production, I mean some of the productions of opera are messed about so much... For instance, we were recently thinking of going to see a play while we were up in Leeds for the weekend, something called The Duchess of Malfi...

BH: Oh, I have heard of that, actually...

JL: It's a very famous play, and at the end the stage is covered with corpses. Anyway, I saw it in 1946 - the first time I came to London with my father - and we went to the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane where John Gielgud was having a season, and it was John Gielgud was one of the most famous actors of his age, John Gielgud, Ralph Richardson, Leon Quartermaine, Lesley Banks... and it was brilliant, and then... that was 1946, then in 1947 my mother and I came and we saw... the Oklahoma! which was come over from America... and it was brilliant.

BH: What were the effects like in that?

JL: Very, very effective, and of course they made a film of it with... Gordon MacRae was it? I can't remember. And then in 1948 my sister and I were in London, we saw... Annie Get Your Gun.

BH: I've heard of that one as well, actually.

JL: Very good, very good... And of course, they have revived Oklahoma!, several times we've seen it over the years... And I came to live in London in 1952 I suppose, and I went a lot to the theatre, and I still do.

BH: Were you at all influenced back in 1945-68, by the opinions of critics like Harold Hobson, Kenneth Tynan, because I remember you talking...

JL: I used to read them, yes, I used to read them. Now, it was Kenneth Tynan who rescued *Look Back in Anger*, because he said he couldn't love anybody who didn't like *Look Back in Anger*, and they broadcast, I think, a short excerpt on television and people were rushing to see it. But looking back, my opinion has changed, because I think it was... People try to say it changed the direction of British theatre, well it didn't, it isn't anything of the kind, people still went to see Terence Rattigan and various other plays... I mean it was powerful, but now I wonder why...

BH: Not the be all and end all, really...

JL: What was he so angry about? He didn't have anything to be angry about...

BH: A very 'Angry Young Man'...

JL: The first of the 'Angry Young Men', and I was reading something the other day about... oh yes, a book called *The Last Curtsey*, about the last time that debutants went to curtsey to the Queen at Buckingham Palace - they stopped that in 1958 - and this woman who's written this book called Fiona McCarthy, and she was one of the very last debutants to make her curtsey, and she said when she saw a revival of *Look Back in Anger* her opinion had changed and she was much more sympathetic to the father rather than to Jimmy Porter himself. I mean, he was a bit over the top, he was extremely violent in his language...

BH: I can imagine, I've read the play, I haven't actually seen it performed, but I can imagine he would be pretty... a very kind of powerful character on the stage...

JL: Yes, and he says, 'I wish you'd have a baby and it would die', I mean what a thing to say to say that to somebody who you're supposed to be...

BH: Was that quite shocking, did people... was that quite shocking for people at the time?

JL: It was shocking, yes; there was a definite gasp from the audience when he said that...

BH: I can imagine, yes...

JL: No, it was an extraordinary play, I saw it at the Lyric Hammersmith... and I saw Mary Ure in it, she did a lot of plays, actually, it was very sad, she choked to death on... she was... well, I don't know whether she was drunk or what, but she just choked to death, she was only young...

BH: That's terrible...

JL: She was a beautiful, beautiful woman, Mary Ure - U-R-E, very short name - and who else... because they made a film of it with a Welsh actor I think... Did they make a film of it with Richard Burton?

BH: I'm not sure, actually...

JL: I think they did, yes, I think they did... I think they made a film of it with him but I can't remember. As you get older your opinion changes, I mean even as a teenager I used to read the reviews, but I...

BH: Do you think it's got something to do... your opinion changing might have something to do with you getting older maybe, and if your views are changing...?

JL: Oh yes, absolutely. I mean, you may like this new musical Wicked which is doing amazing business in America. Because we were in New York in June and we wanted to go to the theatre, and virtually everything we looked at was already on in London, I mean Phantom of the Opera's there, The History Boys is there... goodness knows how many others. And we eventually we found one, which is a new musical called The Drowsy Chaperone, and we went to see it and the set, the costume and the music were terrific. And it really got a standing ovation, everybody clapped and cheered... and as I say its makers... it's supposed to be coming over to London next year... but it was a marvellous production, really colourful. I mean, if you go to the theatre, I don't think you want to be... I mean, Waiting for Godot, I've never seen it and I never want to see it...

BH: I remember you mentioning that actually...

JL: It's about nothing. Nothing, nobody.... Godot never arrives, nothing happens and it's utterly boring, yet Peter Hall thinks it's a wonderful play and he's just revived it again...

BH: Yes, a wonderful symbolic play...

JL: Oh, fiddledeedee! Rubbish!

BH: You wouldn't ever be bothered to see that?

JL: Rubbish, absolute rubbish! No, it's pretentious nonsense. I mean, I've seen very good plays by Peter Shaffer, he did one called *The Public Ear* and *the Private Eye*, two plays together, it was brilliant. And he... Another one that he wrote is being revived, and that's rather nasty - about a boy who goes around stabbing horses with a knife...

BH: That's strange, isn't it?

JL: Horrid, horrid play...

BH: So plays like... Absurdist theatre like *Waiting for Godot*, you're not such a big fan of?

JL: No, I like serious theatre but I don't like pretentious rubbish, in my opinion... Some may... A lot of people think it's brilliant, but I don't... There's a new theatre in Richmond on Thames, they spent millions on it and it's been standing empty! There was one production, Peter Hall did a production of a Shakespeare play with his daughter - who's an actress in it - and since then it's been empty! And it's cost millions, and whether it's going to succeed I don't know. I mean, Richmond's got a nice little Edwardian theatre which we go to fairly often, but they have the same plays that they have at Windsor and Brighton, and Guildford, they sort of come round and round. I mean, I wouldn't go to see an Agatha Christie play, when I was younger I would see an Agatha Christie play but now I wouldn't...

BH: Why's that?

JL: Well I mean they're so predictable and so dated... you almost know what's going to happen and who's going to speak next... Particularly with this one - which I haven't seen - *The Mousetrap*, and there was one... of course you're not allowed to say it these days, *Ten Little Niggers* it was called, and they then turned the title into *Ten Little Indians*, and then they turned it into something else not to give offence to anybody...

BH: That's a point I was thinking about actually, you know when the censorship laws changed in... when was that, in 1968 they changed, do you have any recollections of that, and about the impact that had?

JL: Yes, it had an impact on the theatre, certainly. I mean, what they call 'adult' plays were produced, or plays about homosexuals were put on which previously could only be put on in private theatres, you had to be a member to go and see it. I mean John Osborne wrote a play called *A Patriot For Me* in which German officers were dressed up as women - I didn't see it actually. Then there was a film with Dirk Bogarde called *Victim* - and that was years and years ago - and I think Sylvia Syms was in it, and she's the one

who's just played the Queen Mother in the film *The Queen*, very good actress... and another one of course is - he's mostly called 'Dickie Darling' by everybody - he was Richard Attenborough or Lord Attenborough, he's done many, many things over the years, films he produces, and he's made that marvellous film *Oh! What a Lovely War* which we saw many years ago on the stage, and then it was made into a film with a real star-studded cast... it was very good, and he's now obviously in his seventies, but in his younger days he did a lot of acting - in fact there was an old film of his on the other day about this little girl who's kidnapped, a very nasty episode, very upsetting it was...

BH: You seem quite knowledgeable about who exactly... who acted in different plays, you seem to have a very good memory of that.

JL: I used to have a very good memory but it's not as good as it used to be!

BH: It seems to be good to me, definitely...

JL: I can't remember what I did two days ago but I can remember what I did forty years ago.

BH: It's strange, isn't it...

JL: Well it does happen, apparently, it's what's called short term memory and long term memory, so I can remember now... I can remember the casts of plays and films I saw many years ago...

BH: But not, say, what you had for tea the night before? I'm actually the same...

JL: I sometimes say, 'Well, what did we do last Tuesday, now let's think...'

BH: It just doesn't come does it...

JL: And we put things on the calendar in the dining room... In the study there's a big calendar and we write what we're doing, I mean, yesterday we went to Brighton. It was a gorgeous day, absolutely gorgeous, and we can go for nothing on the tubes and buses, so we go from Kew, one stop to Richmond, fast train from Richmond to Waterloo, fast train from Waterloo to Brighton stopping at East Croydon, we were there in under an hour!

BH: That's pretty good, that's not bad going.



JL: It was a gorgeous day. And if...we could've gone to the theatre if there'd been something on that we wanted to see, because it was such a nice day.

BH: But there wasn't anything much...?

JL: No, but we go to Brighton, we go to Chichester. We've been fairly recently to see a play by... D.H. Lawrence - not T.E. Lawrence, T.E. Lawrence was a soldier! - D. H. Lawrence. We saw a play called The Daughter-in-Law, a very dramatic play in... at a theatre out in Watford. So we do like serious plays, we like J. B. Priestley plays...

BH: I remember you mentioning actually, what do you think... what is it about his plays that makes them enjoyable?

JL: Well, they're beautifully written, they've got a beginning and a middle and an ending.

BH: You like the structure?

JL: Yes, I like the structure, yes, certainly...

BH: I agree with you actually, I do.

JL: If you go to see a play, you expect to see a decently acted play...

BH: Compared to something like Waiting for Godot...

JL: Well, that's just rubbish, isn't it, three people just chuntering on! [pause] No, I like a good play, but as I say I've got a catholic taste, I like opera, ballet, musicals, straight plays, mysteries... I read a lot of mystery books, there's a lot made into films actually by Donna Leon, they're all set in Venice and they've got a very good detective, and of course on television they have a lot of plays based on mysteries and detectives which I enjoy watching, but we don't watch television much. And now that we get free films on... what's it called? Channel... Film Four, but it's usually old films which I've seen years ago. But we use the library, we've had videos and DVDs out of the library...

BH: So when you see a film... you say you've seen quite a lot of the films of plays, but back in say 1945 would you have seen, say, the film first or the play first?

JL: Well, in those days it was fairly rare for a play to be made into a film, it happens far more now. If it's a successful play like The History Boys, make it into a film, a successful serious play like The Madness of George III, a brilliant play, made into a brilliant film with

Nicholas Hytner who directed it as a play at the National, and of course it was made into a film.

BH: I suppose you need the popularity there, don't you, you need to make sure people will actually go...

JL: Have you been to the National Theatre at all?

BH: I haven't, no, I haven't. I intend to go definitely...

JL: You should, you can get tickets for £10 very often.

BH: Can you really?

JL: They have this 'Travelex season', they call it, to encourage young people to go. But we walked... we don't often walk out of plays, but we walked out of the play called *The Alchemist* by Ben Jonson. Now, Ben Jonson was a contemporary of William Shakespeare's, not as famous...

BH: When did you go to see that one, can you remember when you went to see that play?

JL: *The Alchemist*? I can tell you exactly when I went to see it, and when we walked out, we walked out in the interval. We thought it was dreadful, they were always shouting - they weren't acting, they were shouting - it was in modern dress, which we hate anyway... Cabaret [Mr. Lewis looks through notebook]... when did we walk out...? It must have been fairly recently we went to see that, because I wrote down that we walked out.... We saw *Guys and Dolls*, we saw *Peter Grimes*, we saw *Wicked*, which was disappointing... Major Barbara, *Richmond Shakespeare*, oh yes, 14th October [quotes from notebook] 'We went to The Olivier to see *The Alchemist*. Dreadful; left at the interval after enduring an hour of overacting'. It was rubbish...

BH: Have you ever left during a play before?

JL: Well I've never actually left during a play - this was at the interval, so we did that on 14th October, but a few weeks before we went to something they call a 'Platform Performance' at the National Theatre, where actors and actresses will either give a talk about the book they're trying to plug or just talk about themselves. Victor Spinetti's doing one fairly soon to plug his new book, but we saw an actress - one of our favourite actresses - she played Aunt Freddie in the *Forsyte Saga* which was a long-running television series...

BH: I remember that being on, I do remember that being on actually...

JL: Well I would have thought you were too young to remember it, because it was sixties it was... Yes, I'm sure it was the sixties.

BH: Maybe they revived it? I just remember I never watched it, I just remember seeing it in the paper.

JL: People used to go and sit and watch it, it was only on once a week, and it had a huge number of viewers. But this actress - whose name escapes me at the moment- was giving a talk; she wasn't plugging a book I think, she was just giving a talk and people were asking her questions, and I asked her a question, 'Had she ever considered directing?' and she said, 'No, absolutely not, I'm an actress and that's all - I don't want to direct'. She was talking about a play that she was appearing in called Suffolk Fayre, and a member of the audience asked her what it was like doing a new play with a new era[?], 'It was wonderful', she said, so we thought 'Right, we'd go and see it'. We went, and we walked out of the theatre with a lot of other people, it was disgusting, there's no other word for it...

BH: Why was it?

JL: She wasn't in it for very long. Well, it was about a male rape, and they went into the most ghastly details about it. You can imagine you could see elderly people getting all twitchy and wanting to get out...

BH: Do you think that censorship might've been a good idea then for things like that in those days?

JL: Well I thought it was totally unnecessary! I mean, it was unpleasant, you know? I mean, people know it goes on but they don't want the gory details about it, and dear friends of ours - she's now a Colonel's widow because her husband died a few weeks ago - they used to go quite often to the National Theatre and they went to see a Mozart thing which was a play first of all then it was made into a film... isn't it awful I can't think what it was called... written by Peter Shaffer and it was about Mozart, and it was called Salieri I think. Salieri was a musician who had said he'd poisoned Mozart but it was never proved that he did, and right at the beginning, there's a lot of absolutely filthy language between young Mozart and his girlfriend - who later became his wife - and it was disgusting, it really was, filthy language... and we walked out and other people did as well. It was unnecessary, I mean, not just the 'f' word, there was most unpleasant language. And I don't think it's necessary, it just upsets people.

BH: I can see why some sort of censorship was necessary, because it makes it a lot more intimate, being actually being in the theatre than say on the screen...

JL: Yes, well, I don't know if you know this, it was Robert Walpole the first so-called prime minister, the first person to hold that title, he brought in censorship, because they were lampooning him on stage, and that's why it started, to stop politicians being mocked and jeered at, and you weren't allowed to have the Royal Family on the stage, oh goodness me. We went to see a play called Crown Matrimonial, and it had Queen Mary in it, the Duke of Windsor, the present.... I mean the Queen Mother who died, she was a lovely young princess, and the Princess Royal - not the present Princess Royal, the other one, Princess Mary - and it was considered shocking... And of course they made a film... we saw it twice, we saw it in the West End and we saw it again in Richmond, and it's to do with the abdication of the king, because he wanted to marry Mrs Simpson and the government were against it, and the Commonwealth were against it...

BH: Tender subject, that, I suppose...

JL: She was twice divorced, you see, so in the end he abdicated, and we got a jolly good king instead of him, George VI, very good... do you remember...? Have you heard of the comedian called Ted Ray?

BH: I haven't heard of him, no...

JL: He was quite famous - he's been dead for years - he had two sons, one was in at the beginning of Classic FM, his name was Andrew Ray - no sorry, Robert Ray, he was a very clever musician - he died, and the youngest son, Andrew Ray, was an actor and he was in this play about the Duke of Windsor; in fact he played George VI and he was brilliant... But that... I mean, there was nothing nasty and unpleasant about that play, it just discussed why he was abdicating, and there was no foul language in it or anything, it was a really good dramatic play, as the film *The Queen* is a good film, it gives an interesting slant on why she didn't want to come down and why they didn't want to haul the flag down. I mean that... what nonsense, because in one scene the Queen Mother turns to Prince Charles and says, 'They didn't fly the flag at half mast for your grandfather', she said, and they didn't, and George VI was not flown at half mast, and all that fuss about Diana! A friend of ours knew her very well, and she was a very strange woman, very strange. I mean she did have a raw deal, she married Prince Charles and he was already having an affair he'd had for years with Camilla Parker Bowles, but he's married her now and I think a lot of people are quite glad... So now, I mean, the queen has appeared many times on the stage with the Alan Bennett plays, *A Question of Attribution*, played by Prunella Scales, and she was marvellous...

BH: When was that, can you remember a date for that?

JL: Oh, gosh, I can't remember the date for it... but it was three, four, five years ago, it could be easily, time passes, I mean it's been revived since then. And Alan Bennett is one of... in my opinion one of the most brilliant playwrights we've got, and not only is he a good playwright, he's good at writing prose, and stories...

BH: What... who would you say was your favourite playwright, say in that period, 1945-68?

JL: Alan Bennett... well, I like Terence Rattigan plays, but they are considered very dated - well they would be now, but they have revived them - and Noel Coward plays...

BH: Why do you think they were dated, the Terence Rattigan plays?

JL: Well, because people were beautifully dressed and spoke beautifully, and that went right out of fashion...

BH: Posh accents, yes...

JL: Exactly, posh accents, and there was this standing joke about plays where somebody came in from the front and says 'Anyone for tennis?'. I mean it was that sort of thing, and they were very much appealing to the middle class, they weren't really appealing to the working class...

BH: It's a very narrow kind of field there, yes...

JL: Yes it was really, but I mean the musical was the entertainment of the masses, and had been for many years.

BH: Did you see *Separate Tables*?

JL: Yes, I've seen it more than once.

BH: What did you think of that?

JL: Brilliant play, sad but brilliant...

BH: Why was that, why did you think it was good?

JL: Well, it was very clever because it showed what it's like to stay in a hotel as a long standing member or guest of the hotel, and how these antagonisms build up between the people. And this Major is supposed to be nudging this woman in this cinema you see, they tried to keep this from people in the hotel but it eventually comes out, and they have a sort of judgement and this poisonous woman and her daughter, who is completely overwhelmed by her mother she does a lot of twitching...

BH: But they didn't explain it completely about him nudging a woman, they couldn't go into too much depth I suppose because of censorship, could they? I mean they kind of kept it...?

JL: Well, I mean it was quite common for men to go in the cinema and nudge a woman, poke her with their elbow. I mean, it was notorious, then people would be asked to leave, if you moved your seat more than once or twice, then the usher would say 'up, go on'...

BH: Really? That's quite harsh, isn't it?

JL: Oh yes. I don't think it happens now, it happened quite a lot years ago, you know, frustrated unmarried men would go into the cinema, sit next to someone and nudge her, it's a bit pathetic, really, isn't it?

BH: It's quite funny, really...

JL: Well it is, yes... But it was a very good play, I thought. We saw it out at a little theatre with a... it's got a, what do you call it, wheel that goes round... mill... water mill!

BH: A water mill! What's the set like inside, in the actual theatre?

JL: Oh, very interesting... And also we've been to what used to be a swimming pool, near that lovely church with the wedding cake... I can't remember the name of it now... off Fleet Street... It used to be a swimming pool and they've converted it into a little theatre.

BH: Really?

JL: We saw an American musical called... about the devil, what was it... Baseball thing... and also The King's Head which is the worst theatre in London, it's a sordid room on the ground floor of the King's Head Pub in Upper Street, it is terribly, terribly... it's not much bigger than this room, and the seats are all like this and you sit together, but we've seen some very good shows there...

BH: Even though it's not very comfortable...

JL: If you can put up with the uncomfortable part of it... We saw a very good show about Ethel Merman, who was a very famous American singer with a voice like a foghorn, and they made this little entertainment using her old songs, it was brilliant.

BH: Did you ever see *The Entertainer* on the stage?

JL: Yes, I saw *The Entertainer*, I saw the film with Olivier...

BH: What did you think of that?

JL: Rather sad, actually...

BH: It's a very sad play isn't it, well I've just... I haven't seen it performed, I've read it, but just from the reading I can...

JL: Well, I used to read plays, I hardly ever do now, I prefer to go and see them, but I certainly remember *The Entertainer*...

BH: What did you like about that, then?

JL: Well, it was an interesting play because there were so many different characters in it and he, the Entertainer, was ultimately a very sad man, but he tried to put on this façade but it didn't really work...

BH: It doesn't cut, does it?

JL: No, it doesn't... But the film is very good, and I think... I'm sure Olivier did the film, I must have seen it on the stage before I saw the film, I'm sure...

BH: Can you remember when you went to see it on the stage, around about?

JL: Not really... it was a long time ago, it was after *Look Back in Anger*, I'm sure it must've been in the sixties. It must have been because *Look Back in Anger* was in 1956 I think...

BH: I think so, yes...

JL: So it must've been in the early sixties I guess...you can look it up in the book.

BH: Yes... What about... Did you ever see a play called *Mother Courage* by Brecht? Did you see any of that?

JL: No, but it was on last week at Richmond Theatre, but we didn't go and see it...

BH: Have you heard a lot about it at all?

JL: I know quite a lot about it and to me it's one of those boring plays, it's by Bertolt Brecht and I'm not very keen on Bertolt Brecht...

BH: You're not, how come?

JL: Well, I think he's boring, it's very much political plays...

BH: He's very political isn't he...

JL: And I don't like going to the theatre to be bored...

BH: You don't like going to be... make... for people wanting to make you change your life?

JL: No. Well I don't think he'd make me change my life... It's a famous play, a very famous play, *Mother Courage*, and I have seen it many years ago, but I don't remember when... But it's... To me it's a bit boring. Maybe it sounds frivolous and lighthearted, but I go to the theatre to be amused and entertained, and make me laugh, and cry if you go to a very good play like Aeschylus, you know, and they really do deal with raw emotions, but I do not want to go to be lectured about politics...

BH: You feel that's not the best way to get the messages across?

JL: Exactly.

BH: So you go to be, well just for entertainment I suppose...

JL: Well yes, no just entertained... well it is entertainment basically, isn't it? No, I've always been interested in theatre, and as I say we were lucky, my sister and I that we had a very good grounding by being taken by our parents when we were very little to see opera.

BH: It's lovely that you went to see operas when you were young.

JL: Yes, we were very, very young, pantomime was the first thing, I think most children go to a pantomime...



BH: Yes I've been to... I love pantomimes, they're amazing...

JL: There was another theatre in Cardiff called the New Theatre, and we used to go to a pantomime every year, and in those days they only started on Boxing Day and they finished in January.

BH: Did they really?

JL: Yes, Boxing Day was a traditional day for pantomimes to start... And we used to go, and they would finish before the end of January, now they go on for about three months I think... And they used to have a lot of variety shows at the New Theatre. I saw Arthur Askey, I saw Tommy Trinder, I saw Russ Conway, and someone called Ethel Revnell and Gracie West - one was very, very tall and one was very little - you had Tessie O'Shea, 'Two Ton Tessie', great big, fat Welsh woman who played the piano, and they used to have the xylophone, have you heard of a xylophone?

BH: Yes...

JL: Bing bang bing bang! And that was very good... They used to have very good touring variety shows...

BH: I remember you saying that when you lived in Wales you saw a lot of... You were a fan of Donald Wolfit, you mentioned?

JL: Donald Wolfit, yes, people used to laugh and sneer at him, but he did a lot of good work.

BH: Did they really?

JL: Oh, yes, he was a famous ham actor, have you ever heard of a ham actor? He overdid it, he really did, and he would hang on to the curtain at the end, 'Thank you, ladies and gentlemen', but he did some very good work, and he did some television as well, he did some very good plays on television...

BH: What sort of plays was he in?

JL: Well he was in sort of Eighteenth Century plays, that sort of very much over-the-top, larger than life characters. When he was doing Shakespeare he played Julius Caesar, he played Macbeth and he played in Twelfth Night - Malvolio.

BH: Was he convincing, the way he played those characters?

JL: Yes I think so, people always mocked him because he was a bit over the top, but then so was Olivier. I saw Olivier and Vivien Leigh in Titus Andronicus which was a horrid play where she has her hands chopped off, and it's really nasty, and very, very dramatic, and they... The two men who've raped her and mutilated her get murdered by her father and they get chopped up and made into a pie and they serve it to the mother of these boys, she's eaten this pie and it's delicious...

BH: How did they do that as a play?

JL: Anyway, that's quite an infamous play that's not often performed, it's rather nasty and people are inclined to faint! [laughs]

BH: What's it called again?

JL: Titus Andronicus... But she was... I liked Vivien Leigh. Some people say she was a lightweight, but she was the most beautiful woman, she was truly beautiful, she was Scarlett O'Hara in the film Gone With The Wind, she did a lot of stage work in London before she made that. She was very fragile, unfortunately she had mental problems, and she suffered quite a lot. She was a manic depressive - I think that was the word, and her marriage was very unhappy, it was her second marriage, she had a daughter by her first marriage to a solicitor, then she married Olivier, but that marriage broke up and she didn't marry again. But he went on to marry Joan Plowright, and appeared in... Olivier and Plowright have done a lot of plays together.

BH: Have they? What plays have they done together, then?

JL: They did one about an Italian family on stage which we didn't see, but she was very good in a play called Roots by Arnold Wesker, now he was very good, Arnold Wesker does lovely plays...

BH: What sort of time was that?

JL: This must be in the sixties, because it was set in Norfolk, he was from Norfolk, and a lot of his plays were set in Norfolk and they were very much to do with ordinary people, and Joan Plowright played Beatie Bryant, which was quite a dramatic part. But... Off hand I can't think of what they did together, but they did... Oh yes, The Country Wife I'm pretty sure she was in The Country Wife... Wycherley, I think it's Wycherley... but she's very... she's brilliant in this film which we saw last night, Tea with Mussolini, very sympathetic part... She likes to... Did you see a film called Ladies in Lavender?

BH: No, I haven't, no.

JL: Because that was Joan Plowright and Maggie Smith, which was like a fairy story really. This young man gets washed up on the sea shore and they rescue him and they take him home and he turns out to be a budding violinist and it's a lovely film, really lovely...

BH: You just mentioned about plays about ordinary people...

JL: Yes, well Arnold Wesker plays were about ordinary people, called *Roots* and *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*, and they were very much about working class people, and very interesting and dramatic...

BH: Did you see a lot of the Theatre Workshop plays? Because *A Taste of Honey* was one of those that was...

JL: No... I did see *A Taste of Honey*, that was made into a film.

BH: What did you think about that?

JL: It was very good, quite sad really, but Dora Brian was brilliant as the mother, terrible character, climbing out of the window to avoid paying the rent. We saw her fairly recently... I think she's going a bit ga-ga poor thing, she's supposed to be in this play which is touring in Brighton while we were in Brighton yesterday, but somebody else had taken over her part, and it's set in an old people's... in a nursing... I mean a retired actor's and actresses' nursing home, and they do exist, and in fact Noel Coward wrote one called *Waiting in the Wings*, which was very sad, all his old actress friends were in it, very sad... Sybil Thorndyke, Marie Löhr... legendary names, but this one, it had the most... Do you ever read *The Stage* newspaper? Do you ever see it?

BH: I haven't, no...

JL: Well, we take it every week, every Thursday, and it had the most cruel review of this play, I've never seen such a disgusting review... and it's being toured, it's in aid of combined theatrical charities, well, I mean that shouldn't make you change your opinion, but it was unnecessarily cruel, it really was. If you get hold of a copy of this week's *Stage* and read it...

BH: I'll have a look.

JL: Some libraries have it, but you should read it, *The Stage* is quite an interesting newspaper.

BH: So critics.... you say you've read a lot of critics between 1945 and 1968, were a lot of them very slating about plays?

JL: Well, they could be, yes. I mean Harold Hobson was notorious, and so could Kenneth Tynan be, but you see if you've got any intelligence at all you don't read a review and say, 'Oh, I'm not going to see it because of that'. Sometimes you agree with what they've said, but I don't think, even though I went to see this new play, that I would agree with the cruel way he's criticised everybody and everything about it.

BH: Sometimes you think they're just trying to look clever, don't you?

JL: Well exactly, yes, you've hit the nail on the head, they try to think of a clever phrase, and they think 'That's brilliant, we'll use that' and we'll crucify them... it does, it can destroy a person, it really can. If you're sufficiently hard-hearted and don't pull back from saying what you consider to be the truth... I think it's very sad really...

BH: Comparing Harold Hobson and Kenneth Tynan, they had kind of a bit of a rivalry going on didn't they, and they didn't agree a lot...

JL: Yes, he was considered to be the new boy on the block, Kenneth Tynan, and Harold Hobson was a man in his sixties or seventies I suppose, and had been writing for years and years... And I'll tell you who's a very good critic in my opinion, the critic of The Daily Telegraph called Charles Spencer...

BH: I haven't heard of him, actually...

JL: Oh, he's quite well-known. He was an alcoholic, poor man, but he's cured now and he went to see something recently, and he said it was absolutely awful. It was by this author called Mark Ravenhill, who wrote Shopping and Fucking, and apart from that he's written other plays - I've seen another one of his which was disgusting - and this was about some horrible people, and they go to visit this friend who's got a swimming pool, the swimming pool is drained, and she dives in and gets the most horrible, horrible injuries, and they sort of gather round her, it's a really, really nasty play... I mean, if we'd read the review of that I certainly wouldn't go and see it, it's just thoroughly unpleasant...

BH: I suppose you can kind of glean from things not what they're saying but what the play's kind of like and see whether it's your sort of thing.

JL: Well, if a critic... You obviously don't want them to give away the plot. If you were reading a review of The Mousetrap, you wouldn't expect the critics to say 'who dunnit' - you dunnit, he dunnit, she dunnit...

BH: Then there's no point in going at all.

JL: No, absolutely not. I think you need to take a balanced view and read more than one critic - if you read the critic in the Telegraph you wouldn't necessarily agree with what the one in The Sunday Telegraph, and The Times...

BH: So read them both, take them with a pinch of salt...

JL: Exactly, a pinch of salt and using your intelligence... I mean, if it's a new play by a new playwright - you've never heard of him, you've never heard of the play - well, you need to find out a little bit about it before you go to see it. Because if you go in and you hate it... I don't believe in walking out if I possibly can because I don't think I've ever walked out in the middle of a play, I've waited 'til the interval. But when we saw this play called Suffolk Fayre we weren't the only ones to walk out in the interval, and you could see that people were really upset by it. I mean, sex seems to be the thing that everybody wants to talk about these days and see on stage, and the 'f' word is used constantly.

BH: It goes so far, doesn't it, and it just... it becomes like they're doing it for the sake of it.

JL: This production of Cabaret... As I say there was a bit too much nudity for me, but it didn't seem to bother the audience, it didn't bother me unduly because ultimately it's a very sad story, because this Sally Bowles has got no talent at all, but she thinks she's brilliant. The film I thought was terrific with... see, the name's gone! Judy Garland's daughter... come on...!

BH: I'm thinking...

JL: You're thinking... I'm thinking too... Yes, Judy Garland's daughter... Liza... Liza Minnelli, but she was very good... But musicals... I think, on the whole, I like musicals, Oklahoma, Annie Get Your Gun, Carousel - I like American musicals. And, of course, occasionally, English musicals... I'm old enough to remember - although I never went to a performance by Ivor Novello. I read all about him, and there's a young man called Paul-Something-or-another who writes books about him, and he wrote a play about him, and his aim is to bring back a musical by Novello to the National Theatre, but I don't think he'd ever succeed because they are very dated, and very much Latin [?] sort of thing and tango, the setting, there's lots of changeovers and dancing girls. I think it wouldn't work, people would laugh it off the stage I think, it's become very, very dated and full of clichés.

BH: What about things like Oklahoma!?

JL: Well, I mean that was considered absolutely stunning and new, and it was based on a play called *Green Grow the Rushes* I think, or *Lily*[?] was it... Anyway, we happen to know an old lady who died a couple of years ago (she was just over a hundred years old) and her step - her half-brother had been responsible for bringing it on in America, and it was with Harold Keele, who was a famous singer. And we saw it, as I say, in 1947, it was on in America first, then it came over to Drury Lane. And after the war a succession of American musicals came over. They did extremely well over there, and then they came over here, and in those days, in 1947, they still served afternoon tea.

BH: Did they really?

JL: In the interval, and it was passed along the rows, a tray of tea and biscuits. We couldn't get cake, didn't have a lot of money, just biscuits, and apparently actors hated doing matinee because the rattle of the teacups, ladies stirring their tea...

BH: It must be really annoying...

JL: Oh, it was! They discontinued that many years ago. But we go to matinées mostly because we're both elderly now, we don't like being up in the West End at night, it's rather nasty, especially by Leicester Square and Piccadilly and Covent Garden, it's horrid, full of drunks and druggies. So we try to go to matinées only... Sometimes, if we're going to Covent Garden and there's not a matinée - and they don't often have matinées of operas, we go to an evening performance and we scoot out and we rush to Leicester Square, we get off home as quickly as we can. Because London is nasty, I'm afraid, and particularly around Piccadilly, Leicester Square, that area. Particularly Leicester Square, I think, it's most unpleasant. It used not to be like that. It's a sign of old age, isn't it when you say 'It wasn't like that when I was young'!

BH: Was it really not like that before?

JL: No it wasn't, it wasn't, there was no drug problem in those days: drug taking was almost unheard of. I mean, the play called *The Vortex* by Noel Coward, that was about a young man who gets addicted to drugs, and it was considered pretty shocking.

BH: When did that come out, then?

JL: After the war, must've been... *The Vortex*... it was revived fairly recently and it was considered shocking. Of course, in Hollywood, the stars had been taking drugs for many, many years. Tallulah Bankhead was notorious for taking drugs. Drugs and alcohol - what a combination!

BH: Then it spread...

JL: I'm afraid it's getting worse, it really is, it's horrid... Anyway, now we both go to matinées now, we've both got grey hair it's all right! But when we used to go it was full of old ladies. Matinées in this country keep the theatre going, they're full of what's called the blue-rinse brigade. If you go to a matinée of any show it's full of elderly ladies and occasionally elderly gentlemen, and occasionally students. But the National is trying to attract students by offering special deals, you can get a £10 seat...

BH: You can get them quite cheap can't you? At The Crucible they've got discounts for students. I went to see *The Caretaker*, that's one of these plays by Harold Pinter.

JL: Did you like it?

BH: I did quite like it, actually. Did you ever see it?

JL: I'm not very keen on Harold Pinter, I've seen it on television, all those pregnant pauses, you think he's forgotten his lines, there's this long, long pause...

BH: It's got to be done well, hasn't it? I think the actor who played the *Caretaker* was brilliant, he was absolutely brilliant. But the others not so much, it wasn't really very convincing, I don't think.

JL: Well, it's interesting that John Gielgud, and Ralph Richardson, and Laurence Olivier wanted to get in on the act, because these young playwrights were coming out, and John Gielgud and Ralph Richardson appeared together in a play - I can't remember the name of it now - and it was considered shocking that they should appear in a play by a new playwright, because they'd both been Shakespeare actors.

BH: Why was it shocking?

JL: Well, because people have a habit of thinking, 'Oh, Olivier is a Shakespeare actor', and Gielgud is a Shakespeare actor, but they did appear in modern plays.

BH: Do you think they did modern plays as well as the Shakespeare ones, is there any comparison between them?

JL: Well, it's a different technique altogether - it's more naturalistic acting with these modern plays, and you could rant and rave when you're doing Shakespeare and speak like this...

BH: Yes, because I suppose that's how it's meant to be done.

JL: Yes exactly. But when you think how Shakespeare plays are in a little round theatre, you had to shout to be heard, but now if you went to the National Theatre or The Lyttelton, it's huge, and The Olivier's huge. But then there's a small one called... I've forgotten it... there's three big theatres, there's The Olivier, The Lyttelton and I've forgotten what the other one is called, but they have small productions there, you know, trying out new plays by new authors...

BH: Because wasn't... Theatre Workshop was very much like that, wasn't it?

JL: That's right, I never went to the East End to see any shows there, but they did bring Sparrers Can't Sing to the West End, and I saw it then with... she's now in EastEnders, what's her name... the blond, the busty blond... Barbara Windsor! She was in Sparrers Can't Sing... And Victor Spinetti, who's now doing this talk at the National. We saw him... we saw... We go to Wimbledon, there's a huge theatre in Wimbledon - in fact they've got a job to fill it, it's so big - and we saw a production of The Merry Widow. Unfortunately, the safety curtain stuck - you know the safety curtain, it's a solid, steel thing - it stuck and they could not move it. So they had to come and act on about 'that' much stage in front of the safety curtain.

BH: That's a bit tricky.

JL: Oh, it was very tricky, but it's interesting. And sometimes, plays get turned into opera, I mean there was a play called - it's an opera now - Turn of the Screw, it was written as a play by Henry James and adapted as a play from a story of his. I saw it as a play and then it was turned into an opera, then he wrote the music for it. And there was one opera... Today, before we came away from home, a big envelope arrived from Covent Garden, I opened it to look what it was and it said there's a new opera by this man called Ades, A-D-E-S, and he's the one who wrote an opera called Cover Her Face, which is a line from The Duchess of Malfi, and it was about the infamous - because she was infamous- the Duchess of Argyle. Frances Sweeney her name was - she was involved in a sordid court case... having sex with various people, and he's written this opera about her, which I haven't been to see and I don't think I want to. And they've written an opera, would you believe, about Castro, can you imagine! An opera about Fidel Castro, can you imagine! They've had some very funny productions of operas at the Coliseum over the years, we saw something called King Arthur, which is beautiful music by Purcell who is one of the most famous English musicians.

BH: When was that on?

JL: We saw it fairly recently and we hated it, because all the dialogue by the playwright... his name escapes me at the moment... they kept that all together, so they just did it as an opera and you couldn't understand what was happening. There was some very nice singing in it, but... it got criticised very much, and rightly so because it was neither one thing or the other. The costumes were a rag bag, as if they'd been told, 'Go and look in the clothes basket and pick out what you want'. That's another thing. I like to see well dressed productions, not people dressed in rags. Anyway, how are we doing for time?



BH: I think we might have to finish it now, thank you.