

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

<http://sounds.bl.uk>

Marcus Shellard – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sophie Barnard

10 November 2006

Theatre-goer. Accent; American musicals; Bertolt Brecht; censorship; cinema; class; Tom Courtenay; foreign drama; Joan Littlewood, *Look Back in Anger*; political background; revues; Theatre Workshop; Kenneth Tynan; university.

SB: This is Sophie Barnard, interviewing Marcus Shellard, on 10 November at the British Library. Before we begin, can I just confirm that the British Library can hold the copyright of both the recorded interview and transcript today?

MS: Yes of course, Sophie.

SB: OK Marcus, to begin with, perhaps you could give me an overview of your interests in British Theatre during the fifties and sixties?

MS: Well, I'm one of Somerset Maugham's 'scum'! I was one of the first of the totally state-funded University students at the time, and I'm particularly interested in the social and political background to the changes in theatre, and in politics, and in society in general.

SB: There were lots of changes to the theatre during this period, do you think the changes of genres were moving to suit the new audiences in the New Wave and things like that?

MS: Yes, I think eventually. But I do not believe in a totally abrupt change. I do not believe we all woke up one morning in 1956 and said, you know, 'This is an absolute sea-change. All these things, I think, were happening, and there were sort of undercurrents of change and everything, and they all seemed to crystallize... for me they crystallized with *Look Back in Anger* because I was Jimmy Porter! [smiles] I will say more about this later. I'm intrigued now when I read and hear the reactions to *Look Back in Anger*, because it seems to me [there was] this very narrow stratum of people in terms of age, background, and education, who responded to this play, whereas older people either dismissed it or couldn't see the point. Of course people after me I think were, well, younger of course, and not... hadn't got to the same point of education or, indeed, age. So... Well, I'd like to say more about that later perhaps.

SB: Do you want to expand on the demographic change that you were talking about, such as the influx of students at the time?

MS: Yes! Yes, you see the war was – the Second World War – was a tremendous melting pot. It was really the first time when people mixed socially for such a long time – six years – and people came from everywhere: every hamlet, every village, every town, and fought together, lived together, for a very long time. The First World War had done this to some degree, but it was a different kind of context. Obviously the attrition and the fighting was much more intense, and very... not as many people - relatively few people - soldiers and military personnel were killed in the Second World War in terms of the British forces. So there were these six years of living together – and women, of course, played a part in the war as well, fighting and everything. Women were doing men's jobs as we know, so there was this great amalgam of social mix. Now, towards the end of the war, people started saying, 'Look, we are not going to have the same experiences we had coming out of the First World War'. When we came out of the First World War – my grandfather fought in the First World War – and when they came out they were just dumped back to where they were, geographically, socially, in terms of employment, and were expected to carry on despite the 'homes fit for heroes' promise, or propaganda. Now, towards the end of the war, in 1944, the Education Act was passed - the Butler Act - and I think this was one of the key social movements of the Twentieth Century. It introduced the Eleven Plus, it enabled people to go on to grammar schools, to win scholarships to go to grammar schools, and then on to University. It opened up a whole new experience in terms of social, economic, political affairs if you like, to a larger range of people: to working class people. I don't want to say, though, that the floodgates were opened at that stage, because the people who sat the Eleven Plus were a very small percentage of the primary school population, and in fact it was only a tiny proportion that actually won the scholarships and actually went on to A-Levels - which were being introduced – and I was one of the first people to take A-Levels! So... and then of course, A-Levels were a filter to University. It was all a filter you see. It wasn't kind of opening the floodgates, it was to filter, to narrow down... A bit like a beauty contest or something! You were left with the winner - well, you know, the couple [ed. amended by interviewee to 'group'] of winners. So, you actually survived, got your A-Levels, and I think something like five or six percent of people went on to University. Now, the people who went on to University - and by this time, of course, the University entrance was expanding to some degree -and I remember going up to UCL for my first degree – UC as we called it in those days, UCL now to distinguish it from the others – and I think there were fewer than 3000 students there at the time. If you can imagine 3000 students in a large inner city really - or central - college compared with probably... I don't know, there must be 20,000 students I suppose at University College now, and those 3000 students came from all kinds of... came from traditional backgrounds, from public schools and so on, and then there were the grammar school intake - state aided, with grants which had been legislated for in the Education Act of 1944, so the [ed. more] people went up. Now these people weren't revolutionaries, they were political – I mean the people coming from the grammar schools – they were political, and they wanted shared opportunities, but they didn't... At that stage, they didn't want to overthrow the system, perhaps they wanted access to the system, they wanted to be – they wanted an equality of opportunity to join that system.

SB: Was it a kind of frustration?

MS: It was a frustration, and I see that in Jimmy Porter. You see, Jimmy Porter wasn't a kind of revolutionary, wasn't the kind of political animal that came along, say, ten years later with the Communists and the far Left movements. And of course as the Cold War came along, you've got the Soviet, the Pro-Soviet - you've got the split. You were either Pro-Soviet or you were against it as it were. So, the first grammar school people really wanted to... I think Benedict Nightingale said something about going to see *Look Back in Anger*, and he was wearing a blazer, a blue blazer, and brown suede shoes. And yes! That's what people wore, you see, who went to University! No jeans, jeans came along later! No casual clothes and you wore a tie. So you got this - this was the background I think - so when the war ended, people came back into civilian life, and they wanted something better for themselves. They wanted something better for their children, and of course the first people to go into University after the war had been at school during the war and then, soon after, in the early 1950's - late 1940's, people went up to University. My sort of... if I have any claim to be interviewed, it was that I was in Bloomsbury from 1953 - 1957 with [ed. reading for] my first degree, my three years, and then my teacher training at the Institute of Education. It was a very receptive time for the arts and education, and I was reading Classics of course, and we were having [ed. held] play-reading of classical Greek and Latin authors, we had a Classical Society, and of course we had the major production of the college play, and if you remember - was it 1946 the first University drama department?

SB: The Old Vic, was it? Well, it was in Bristol.

MS: That's right, the Bristol Old Vic. Was it called the Bristol Old Vic then?

SB: I don't think it was.

MS: I don't think it was; it was at Bristol. No, it wasn't called the Old Vic then - you could correct me on that - but that first drama department then spread quickly through, so by the time I went to University, Universities were staging major productions. One of my earliest memories at University... When I was in my second year, someone had come down from Hull to read English at University College, and I remember it was such a small college, you just sort of bumped into everybody, we sat on the college steps and - on our street - and everyone knew everyone, and I was in the Classics department and this chap was in the English department, and I remember in 1956 I think it was, the college big drama production was *The Duchess of Malfi* and the leading role, Ferdinand, was played by Tom Courtenay. I've been reading and re-reading Tom Courtenay's autobiography, *Dear Mum* I think it's called - *Dear Tom* it is, *Dear Tom - Letters from his Mother* [ed. *Dear Tom - Letters from Home*], and he describes the very atmosphere and the scene that I experienced. And here he was, coming down from Hull. He didn't want to read English really, he wanted to go to RADA, but he did his English degree... I think he did, I'm not quite sure, he read English anyway - and then of course, when he left University College he went to RADA. I mention him because he then went on to star in the new wave of films like *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* - a magnificent film - and films were important I think at this time, films were very important. But to get back to theatre, it was only a short walk from my college in Bloomsbury - 10 or 15 minutes - to all the West End theatres. I remember, I made friends with quite a lot of

people from all over the country who had come down to read classics or whatever, and at the drop of a hat we would say, 'let's see a film', or 'let's see a play, let's go to the theatre this evening'. Often, even between lectures, or maybe in the lunch hour, we would go down to the West End and we would put down stools. Now, I'm intrigued by this practice because I mentioned this somewhere in a diary I kept at the time. Sophie, are you familiar with this practice of putting down stools?

SB: You told me about it – about setting it up for the afternoon plays.

MS: I remember doing this at Drury Lane in particular for the big musicals that were coming through. You see, it was quite possible to get into the musicals - as big as they were - by this practice. Of course now, if you try and get into some of them...

SB: You have to book months in advance.

MS: You have to wait six months, or go early into the production. Well, we went down and we had these little three legged wooden stools, put them down, and I think we put a number on them or something. We were given a number at the box office – it must have been a sticky tape or something, a label – and we put it down. This bought us a place! Now, I'm not quite sure how it worked, whether you went back and sort of sat there. Maybe it was a bit like the system at Covent Garden – at the Royal Opera House now where you go in a stand-by queue... you go very early and you have 60 places and you can opt out. It may be something like that. But you have to physically have this stool. I'd like to find out more about this! I'm going on a little bit and should pause a little bit for you to ask me a question really I suppose!

SB: No, carry on!

MS: Well, I did see a lot of groundbreaking plays at this time. I'm talking about the early fifties, 1953 – 1954, although from school I remember going to the Theatre Royal, Stratford. Schools would have expeditions, they would have theatre trips. I went to see... I saw Burton, in Henry V [ed. (1951)] I think it was, at Stratford - yes that's right, and I saw him at the Old Vic in Henry IV part one, and I saw the famous Howard production. That was the one at Stratford wasn't it? I'm a little vague here, but I'm sure that's right, I have it written down somewhere. Well, wartime theatre, if I could go back to the wartime period for the moment, the theatres kept going after their initial closure. They were afraid of bombing and so on, but there was this sort of spirit - call it arrogance! - that everything had to go on. Cinemas went on, dances went on, Hammersmith Palace was crowded! If only someone had told the Luftwaffe or something! Well, they knew but they couldn't aim straight or something I suppose. Well, all this went on and theatre went on, and the fare that people were offered were revues, and jolly sort of cheering up shows, you know, and of course revival of classics. And the Cowards. Coward played a leading role in wartime propaganda as you know. And Shakespeare. There was always Shakespeare. Then after the war, there was a kind of mixed offering I think. Again revival, I mean, there were lots of revues. Even in the fifties, I used to pop down to revues like The Boyfriend, Angus Wilson, London Laughs, and somewhere I have made a note of these. And often they'd have... yes, I went to

one called London Laughs. Jimmy Edwards, who was a very popular radio comedian at the time, a kind of military persona I suppose, and Vera Lynne no less! I can't remember a thing about it, but that was the kind of offering, you know, revues. But revues had a role I think, and they could be quite funny. Maybe there is room today for livening up the West End by offering more revues!

SB: Well, you mentioned the mixing of the mediums there. Did you notice a correlation or overlap between cinema and theatre during the period?

MS: Well, I think it was Kenneth Tynan who said cinema had overtaken the theatre, hadn't he. And he said something like 'intellectuals go to the cinemas' - didn't he say that? I wrote this down somewhere... this is Kenneth Tynan in the mid-fifties, 'it's a sombre truth that nowadays our intellectuals go to the cinema and not to the theatre'. Now that sounds a striking thing to say, almost a controversial thing. But it was true! Because when I was a student, it seemed to me that the serious work was coming from the cinema. There were the continental films coming in, the new wave of Italian films, Bicycle Thieves, the French films. I remember going down to a cinema called La Continentale - a very pompous name for 'The Continental' - next to Goodge Street Station. The façade is still there, opposite Heals, and that's where you saw the serious films [ed. and comedies]: Monsieur Hulot's Holiday and that sort of thing - Fernandel. These made you think, and amongst the students the cinema was a serious art form. We had a film society at University College, and we showed weekly all the classic films from the war, pre-war, and it was a serious art and you discussed film, unlike so much rubbish that is poured out now you know, daily. If I said, 'Name a film...' - well maybe you can - 'that's striking in the last year' it will be hard to think of something intellectual.

SB: Do you think it was filling a gap because of the stagnation of theatre at the time?

MS: I think so, yes, because before us I think it would have been more 'intellectual' to seek out a good play. We did of course go. There were serious plays, but they were fewer and further between than the films that were coming out. I'm ashamed to say that I went to the cinema twice a week, and there were all these art house cinemas that are long gone: The Academy on Oxford Street, the classics. They all showed serious films. I'm going on a bit! [aside]

SB: That's fine!

MS: Well... I think there's a figure somewhere showing how many millions of people each week went to - how many cinema seats were sold, you see. It had been a popular form of entertainment during the war, obviously, but after the war you tended to get jingoistic kind of war films. There were too many of them eventually, without being disrespectful, and of course the reaction came later on in plays like Oh! What a Lovely War at the Theatre Royal, Stratford, which was kind of an answer to all the jingoism that had been going on. An interesting aside here is the question of accents. Now, somebody has said that the London stage had had... somebody has mentioned the modulated accents that you had to have on the West End stage to be an actor or for the writer to write for the character...

SB: Like in *A Taste of Honey* when they used regional accents, things like that?

MS: Yes, I was just about to say that... You had to have a kind of middle class accent to act on the stage and Coward, of course, and Rattigan, and Eliot. These were sort of middle class – upper middle class – accents. Home counties - very local - aimed at the audiences that came up to the West End, travelling quite short distances, and the odd thing is the British films after the war – the films of Coward plays, for which he wrote the script later on – they'd be showing sort of battle scenes and glorious incidents from during the war, you know, and you'd have kind of, the officer class, and then you'd have the kind of warrant officer class, the non-commissioned officers, and the private soldier – who was invariably a cockney or a Scot or a Welshman! – and of course they'd be played by someone like Richard Attenborough from a very upper middle class family, who would have this phoney cockney accent! All these actors would say... would have kind of... would end their line of dialogue with 'see'. I don't know where this came from but every cockney accent was 'see!'! [laughs] A bit like the Irish had a thing, or perhaps if you heard 'innit' today for every Asian – must have 'innit' [laughs] – I haven't heard many Asians say 'innit' in my teaching experience! Anyway, what I was going to say was - what I'd like to continue - that in terms of film, we watched films coming from America. They were classless, and we'd seen American soldiers in Britain, and they were smart, and they were handsome, and they had money, and they had better uniforms – nice cloth whereas the British soldier had kind of worsted – and they were envied of course, by the British soldier, especially if the British soldier was abroad fighting and the Americans were over here waiting to be posted or something, or dancing at the Hammersmith Palais! Well, these American films seemed to be classless and of course a lot of British people had seen their relatives emigrate to America - I had an uncle that had emigrated to America in 1912 or something like that - and they came back and they sent back letters with these fabulous stories about life in America, and of course the wartime Britain and the austerity of the fifties - the post war period – you looked at these kind of American films – and of course colour had come into American films as well – as if you were looking into some kind of magic lantern! It didn't matter that everybody was smoking and most people watching the film died later from the effects of smoking! Well, I'm going on a bit.

SB: Well, did you notice a highbrow dominance in culture and in pre-war theatre?

MS: Yes, yes. I think the Lord Chamberlain said, didn't he, in the fifties, that the London stage was very stratified – highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow. And this was very much the case, this was very much the case. I think the Lord Chamberlain thought that it was OK for highbrow people, who mainly came to the West End, to have a little bit of licence or whatever, but you've got to be careful of the, you know, the other people at the other end. That they mustn't be corrupted or something like that! Which was quite funny. But yes, I was very conscious of this highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow. Very much so. So much so that when... you felt that drama especially had something serious to say, and this is where your kind of reaction to it came from. Middlebrow, perhaps you wanted more in the way of entertainment but it had to be good, and well-crafted, and well made, and well acted. Whereas lowbrow, well, you didn't go to the theatre at all unless it was Music Hall or stuff like that! There was this stratification, and you didn't sort of overlap the... and of course it was all well, it was all delineated by class, and

accent, and clothes and everything. It's almost impossible to say now to somebody who wasn't there what this rigid class etiquette was. You know your place, there were ways... it's not entirely gone today, but at least people don't care so much! People listen to what people have to say today and people are judged by what they say, not how they say it. So yes, going back to the highbrow, we watched the American films, and we watched the American musicals come, but they weren't considered to be highbrow. In a way, you felt that the American culture was very lowbrow. It was very kind of manufactured and commercial. You didn't think it had anything serious to say - not the film... I mean, there were some films - Citizen Kane and so on - which were absolute classics and had a very serious message, but there was so many films that were just commercial fodder. And of course they were churned out, we saw them two a week! Anyway, I'll go back to the point of... then the musicals came in you see, the American musicals came in and we all went to those, OK? Sorry Sophie [pause]

SB: No, that's fine! I was just listening.

MS: Am I going off the point here?

SB: No, I was just going to ask you if you thought companies like the Theatre Workshop... do you think they were popular with the student because they sort of went against the norm? Were people aware they were trying to be revolutionary?

MS: They were political. I mentioned before that the early students going up weren't particularly political. They didn't look for... they looked for reform, not revolution. But it wasn't long, of course, because students were politicised. And I remember in 1953, 10,000 London University students from all over the University - not just we at UC - marched down to Trafalgar Square - wasn't planned, no permission for a demonstration, on November 5th, to protest on a ban on our Rag Week. Can you imagine that! Because we weren't allowed to celebrate Rag Week with carrying Phineas whatever his name was, the college mascot, we weren't allowed to do that you see because the students were getting a bit unruly! And 10,000 of us got together. Well, OK, not a great political demonstration, but once that had been established - and there had been political demonstrations of course before the war, it wasn't the first demonstration obviously - it was easier then to organise political demonstrations. And then when the next band of students came up - and of course the birth rate peaked in 1947, and this was a great tsunami of young people - and nothing was the same again. These young people weren't wanting to sort of just join the people with the, you know, sports jackets and cavalry twill trousers, and brown brogues, and Daks sports jackets from Simpson's and things like that. These wanted to wear their t-shirts and jeans and they had pop music. I want to say more about pop music later on though. So to answer your point more directly, yes, by the time that the - 1953 I think wasn't it, 1953 to 1963, the Theatre Royal Stratford - well, at the end of this period, I was actually teaching in the East End - the real East End - and there were lots of East End characters around. And most of the boys I taught in the grammar school in the East End were... lived locally, lived in the local streets. And just one tube station ride down the road in Stratford there was the ESC, so we took the boys to the Theatre Royal Stratford. Parties were... I mean our school staged a major annual play. Some of the titles were interesting, but I'll come back to that - so we went, we would go down to the Theatre Royal Stratford and there it was a lovely experience. You could smell the grease paint as it were. It was so intimate, and

they engaged with you, and it was a political experience. It wasn't the cozy, comfy, West End settle back – and in the West End of course people would dress in full evening dress. I mean, even now in Covent Garden Opera they no longer dress up like they used to.

SB: Not any more!

MS: Not any more. So anyway, there was Joan Littlewood and her company and I would get on the train at Mile End station and often see Joan Littlewood and she would look around – not so many people seemed to travel as this was about four o'clock in the afternoon or whatever – and she would either get off at Whitechapel as I did, or I often saw her at Charing Cross Station getting her train home, and she was a rather short woman with a kind of knitted tam o'shanter. Very colourfully dressed. Orange and green I remember! [Laughs] It may be a delusion of memory, you know, and she would sort of – she would recognise that you recognised her. [Smiles] And we went to see Oh! What a Lovely War, and that... and it were the nails in the coffin for this kind of pre-war terribly snobby society which we were reacting against really. Sparrers Can't Sing I enjoyed. But they engaged with the... [ed. audience] And there was a big debate in France, wasn't there, about whether theatre should engage. Did you sit there and watch it like a kaleidoscope or something, or did you engage. They engaged with the audience, and of course the boys I taught - the East End boys - they loved it because they recognised these were their people, and that went on until 1963 I think. But she left in 1960 didn't she? That's right, yes. OK?

SB: Well you said the entertainment industry was sort of politicised during the period. Were you aware that there was censorship by the Lord Chamberlain and things like that?

MS: Very much so, very much so, and it seemed like a kind of wall which inevitably would come down because – I don't know when – I mean, we were all reading Lady Chatterley's Lover long before...! I went to Italy and I found this copy - for my sins! - and I started reading it, and you did, of course, because it was all... and then, I don't know when the legislation came. I mean there was the Wolfenden report and then of course there was the Obscene Publications Act which was... and the trial of Lady Chatterley. But it all seemed so inevitable given the fact that... by then I was involved in kind of any left wing politics - as a member of the Labour Party, you had to be. You see, eventually the barriers were drawn, the divide was there, and you had to take one side or the other. And of course when the Cold War got hot - excuse my mixed metaphor there, but you took one side or the other, you see? So if you were worth your salt, you either became extreme left or became reactionary right. And then I was a member of the Labour Party – I sympathised with the Labour Party – and at times I went to kind of more militant left wing meetings as well you see, involved in trade union politics and stuff like that. And you took sides, and there was sharp division, and your culture was determined by that. Now, in the kind of political activity, drama played a great part. And there was a lot of drama that was played out... Long forgotten, you know, trade union groups and workers groups who had dramatic expressions of their life and so on. All that seems to have gone. It's all been so commercialised really, and of course politics is not what it used to be. Politics has now all gone to the centre. The great polar opposites

have gone. It was quite an exciting time to have been alive in really. And then of course... Anyway, that's enough from me for the time being!

SB: Well, you mentioned your affiliation with Jimmy Porter and things like that. It is argued that *Look Back in Anger* and John Osborne defined the post war period. Would you agree, or would you say there were lots of other factors that defined that period?

MS: I think... you see, the French theatre -1950, the invasion of the French, I think we refer to it, don't we? Yes! And Brecht. And, of course, before the British playwrights came along... and there was this ten year gap, wasn't there, filled by the continental and eastern European writers. And Brecht was very popular - in University College Brecht was staged: *Mother Courage* was done and so on - and Brecht was very popular amongst students. Not only as drama, but for its political dimension as well. Big disappointment was when I went to Brecht's house in Berlin, got through the Wall, I managed - I was taken and the actual house was closed on that particular day! [Laughs] That was very disappointing. That was many, many years later though, of course. Yes, and those French plays... and it was in those French plays that you got the political and social issues being discussed. So there was this kind of bringing things on to the scene. And then nobody wanted to hear Coward at that time, or *Rattigan*, and they got a bad press and they dismissed *Rattigan* and Coward. It's only subsequently people have seen things, seen a hidden agenda in plays like *The Deep Blue Sea*, you see, which makes them valuable for the time.

SB: Was that not noticed at the time?

MS: I don't think so. Not by the majority of people. People in the theatre would have mentioned them I would think, but I don't think the hoi-polloi, as it were, would have picked these up - picked the allusions up or the context. So what you got was the kind of American emancipation, this great democracy, this classless thing coming in through the musicals. You got the Education Act, you got the bulge in the birth rate, and all of those from the 1947 baby boomers - who are coming through now and retiring and giving us problems with... you know, I was in the vanguard of them and they are all chasing me now, dwindling away my pension! [Laughs] But they were the movers and shakers. They were the movers, and we lived in a time of moving and shaking, and I don't think there is much moving or shaking going on now, I really don't. We all live in such a calm, you know, yes?

SB: Right Marcus, well I think that would be a good place to end it on that little soundbite if that's OK with you!