

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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David Simeon – interview transcript

Interviewer: Kate Harris

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Actor. Alexandra Theatre, Birmingham; censorship; comedy; drama schools; Cyril Fletcher; John Gielgud; The Guildhall School of Drama; Johnson over Jordan; The Method; John Osborne; pantomime; Harold Pinter; repertory; Derek Salberg; Reggie Salberg; Salisbury theatre; television; Dorothy Tutin; variety.

KH: This is an interview on 10th November with David Simeon interviewed by Kate Harris. Can I just confirm that I have got your permission for copyright on this interview?

DS: You do indeed, absolutely, yes.

KH: That's great, thank you. I would just like to start by asking you about the beginning of your career, how you became interested in working in the theatre.

DS: My first knowledge that I was going to be an actor was when I was round about four years old, and I'll tell you... My grandmother taught me how to read by the time I was two. OK, not Proust, but I could read by the time I got to infant school. I must tell you this story because it actually has a bearing on what happened later. When I got to infant school I was four and I could, as I said, already read and so I was terribly bored watching people put A, B, C and D up on the blackboard, and by the time I was about five, suddenly this horrible man came into the second form of the infants who turned out to be the headmaster of the primary school opposite and he ordered me out, took me across the road, put me on a dais in front of the whole of the primary school, and I was made to read from the Bible at the age of five. And I read it as well as a five year old would, and ordered back again – my life was misery after that, you know, this little know-all who could read. All because I was ill when I was small and my grandmother taught me how to read. So I always knew how to communicate, although not, perhaps, with lots of people around - I found that more problematic, but as I got older I realised that I was the one who always told the jokes at school and I was the one who could read, and I learnt... Because of having asthma at the age of eight until the time I went to drama school, I knew how to project, because asthma... similar to Donald Sinden - who had exactly the same experience as me, when he got to drama school his inter-costal diaphragmatic muscles had been so overused as a result of asthma that he didn't need to learn how to project his voice. What we both had to learn to do was actually to use the consonants: the lips, the teeth, the tip of the tongue, which is what I learnt at drama school. So the answer is that that's when I first wanted to be an actor.

KH: And did you... before you went to drama school were you involved in amateur dramatics?

DS: A bit, but there wasn't much there. My father was a great one for amateur dramatics so I suppose I probably followed him.

KH: And where did you begin your training when you went to drama school?

DS: I got into RADA, I got into Rose Bruford and I got into Guildhall School.

KH: Oh wow!

DS: I know, I got in to all of them! And so the drama advisor at Wiltshire, which is where I came from, he said, 'I've been getting to know you, David' – they had things like drama advisors in those days, you know, wonderful! I'm going to have some water - I mean, he really set me on the right course and he said, 'Don't go to RADA, you'll be swallowed and eaten alive. Don't go to Rose Bruford, it's too matriarchal for you, I feel' - because it was all little old ladies when I went there: 'You will be very good, young man' – [uses accent] talking like this all the time! - 'now please give us a speech.' A speech! I couldn't stand up and make a speech to save my life! So he said, 'No, neither of those, go to Guildhall School.'

KH: OK. Just to stop you, were the auditions quite tough in those days because various people have told me about auditions and said it was quite a terrifying experience.

DS: Rose Bruford was fairly tough: you were there the whole day, it didn't stop, they kept throwing things at you, like, 'Make a speech'! I mean, I couldn't make a speech, I was tongue-tied, you know. 'Stand up and make a speech'! I had never made one before; I am still not very good at making speeches. RADA was fairly tough. Guildhall was tough as well - they're all tough. You had to learn several things, a poem and a speech from Shakespeare and a piece of modern stuff, so I chose Malvolio's speech from Twelfth Night, and by huge coincidence, later on at drama school I played him and got a wonderful review from Darlington for my Malvolio. And before I knew it - and I had been quizzed about this by some students I met up with recently who were there at that time, they said, 'You do realise what you were doing there, David, don't you?'. I said, 'No.' 'Didn't you know?' 'No, know what?' 'Oh we all thought you were going to be absolutely wonderful. Didn't you know? You kept being offered all the parts?'. I said, 'But I just did them!': somebody came up and said, 'We're doing a scene from Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf' - or Sweeney Agonistes, or a comedy or whatever - and I said, 'Yes, I'll do it.'. And then I used to go home to my digs and I'd be learning those lines until four o'clock in the morning, and that's the way it always was.

KH: Could you tell me about a typical day or week's training at the Guildhall, what kind of things you were doing?

DS: You had your own private professor - who was individually assigned to you - who was lovely old Johnny Holdgate. Now, he would teach me verse speaking, actually getting my voice to stop saying 'fish an' chips' - which is what I said when I arrived - and to say 'fish and chips'. That was one thing, then you had music, movement - movement was never my favourite but I did my best, particularly as the majority of the students were girls and that can be a bit embarrassing, when there are eighty of them and only about ten chaps, that can be quite daunting, believe you me, I'm here to say!

KH: I'm sure! Other people that I've talked to who went to drama school earlier have talked about various things about their training, Stanislavski, that kind of thing, was there a particular ideology that was being promoted at all?

DS: No, not at all, not at all.

KH: Not at all, OK.

DS: No, it was free... Whatever you did you approached it the way - hopefully - it was approached. I mean, we did everything from Shakespeare - all the comedies in Shakespeare, which is what I particularly liked - Priestley, Restoration, Shaw... oh, the whole gamut.

KH: What year did you finish your training?

DS: '64.

KH: '64. Was there any sense that the New Wave in theatre had any impact at all when you started your training?

DS: That's a tricky one actually. I don't think so, I think it was still as it was up until probably the early seventies when it became more obvious things, more avant-garde things were being done... only what is avant-garde? Priestley was avant-garde in his day, so was Shaw, so was Shakespeare so I don't know quite where you say it changed. It hasn't really changed, because we're still doing Shaw, we're still doing Priestley, we're still doing Shakespeare.

KH: Priestley has had a bit of a renaissance as well.

DS: He has. My ex-wife is doing one at the moment, she is doing Inspector Calls.

KH: Especially An Inspector Calls, because the National are going to do it.

DS: Yes. I wish they would do Johnson over Jordan again though. That was... When I did it, it hadn't been done for years - only on the radio with Ralph Richardson who originally did it - and it was only about three years ago that they did it with Patrick Stewart, who is a super actor but I cannot see him playing Johnson because that is a marathon play: it is like *Back to Methuselah* with Shaw, it goes on with millions of characters and it all tells the story of a man's death. He doesn't realise he's dead, and so the first scene is total mayhem, he doesn't know where he is, nobody will answer his questions. The second act is horrifying, at a night club where he murders his own son in his tortuous way of trying to get to find out what's going on and it is only that very last act when he begins to realise that actually he is dead and he starts to see friends from the past who come up to him. He is at the Inn at the End of the World, and he is there absolutely distraught with what has happened and a very kind porter saying, 'It's all right sir, I'll take your bags to your room' and then friends coming in saying 'Johnson old chap, it's nice to see you, we'll see you a bit later on in the bar' and he's going 'Oh ... but .. oh...' and they've gone. And then he sees people from his childhood, Don Quixote - his favourite literary character - and then he hears his wife from a long distance saying how much she misses him and the children, that's when he realises, and he is left alone on the stage and there is one figure with him, you don't know what the figure is and Johnson just looks at him and he says, 'Is it a long way?' and the figure says, 'I don't know'. And then he does the Lord's Prayer, that's when you could hear a pin drop. 'And God bless my wife and my children and all my friends forever and ever, Amen.' And then he looks at the figure and says, 'Well, goodbye' and he walks off into the blue. I'll tell you, if they could do that again in the way it should have been done...

KH: It's interesting that you mentioned Priestley, because there was a sense that he went out with the old guard, with Terrence Rattigan. Did you have that sense at all in the sixties?

DS: I suppose John Osborne must have been one of the people - who I knew - one of the people who changed a lot of that, but did he change it? No, what John did was just to put another slant on the way we did it. With more anger, maybe, but all I know is that when I got to know John Osborne, if anyone was capable of doing end-of-the-pier farce, he was!

KH: How did you get to know John Osborne?

DS: Oh, I met him on holiday.

KH: Really?

DS: Yes, we all met on holiday and he got to know my little son - who was very small at the time, [and] who he insisted on calling Oliver, who is now 27 - and we just kept in touch. We became huge friends, we talked to each other a lot.

KH: Can I just move on to your own career after you left the Guildhall, what did you go on to do?

DS: Straight to Reggie Salberg, the blessed Reggie Salberg.

KH: Can you just tell me a little bit about Reggie Salberg?

DS: Reggie Salberg, [adopts accent] he talked like this - everyone does a sort of Reggie every so often! - and so I arrived, and actually quite a lot of it is in there. You had to go for an interview at Sally Spruce's dress shop, and go in and very often would be sitting on the loo, not actually doing anything but it was the only place to sit! 'So you did Johnson Over Jordan at the Guildhall, is that right?', 'Yes, Reggie, yes I did.' - well, I didn't call him Reggie - 'Mr Salberg' (I ended up calling him Reggie). 'Well, you'll have to come down and interview for us with Oliver and Diane at Salisbury, so we'll arrange a date for you to come down.' So I went down there - terrified - I did the same audition I'd done at the Guildhall. 'Well, I think we can probably find a place for you, you'll be on stage management to begin with, Simeon.' - he already was calling me that - and I lasted three weeks on stage management because I was so terrible! I couldn't... I was awfully bad at the technical side of things. Then Reggie called me in one day, 'I think we've had enough of you on stage management, you are going to be an actor from now on.' And I was already acting there anyway, I think he knew, he was just testing me out. Years and years later, at Dorothy Tutin's memorial service, Frank Barry (the actor) came up to me - he was another one who started with Reggie - 'Simeon,' he said, 'we've been trying to get hold of you, you are very elusive.' 'Oh, why?' 'Well, I've been trying to get hold of you because I'm having Reggie's 87th birthday at my house, and I asked him who he'd like to be there and, 'Oh, Simeon.''. I was the first person out of all the hundreds he knew, 'Oh, I've got to have Simeon.'! Because what we discovered was... I mean, he used to send me up rotten, and it was only when I went back to Salisbury, had I learnt by then to do the same to him, which is what he always wanted. I must tell you this story about Reggie. We did *The Birthday Party*, and I played Stanley, Stephanie Cole played Meg, there was Michael Poole, Ralph Watson, Chris Harris, Sarah Buchanan, directed by Roger Clissold. I don't think it was a particularly well directed one, but never mind, it was new, it was Pinter and obviously...

KH: What year was this?

DS: That would have been '66. And so of course, did they come? No they didn't. One matinée I was in my dressing room, and it was typical of Reggie, he just opened the door - you could be stark naked and it wouldn't matter! - 'Oh, there you are Simeon, did you see who was outside, out in the audience this afternoon?'. I said, 'Reggie, you know very well I can't see anything, I'm as blind as a bat, I thought the Wood family were out there.' - which is an expression meaning 'nobody, just seats'. He said, 'Well, there were two people out there actually, I wasn't going to tell you beforehand otherwise your performance would become even more eccentric than it normally is...'. I said, 'Thank you, Reggie, who was out there?' - well it was Cecil Beaton and Greta Garbo!

KH: Oh my goodness!

DS: I said, 'Thank God you didn't tell me! Because you are quite right, it would have become more eccentric!' I said, 'well, at least she wasn't quite alone.'. 'Very funny, Simeon.'. I've never forgotten that, I'd love to have known what she thought of it. I think now Pinter is very much into his own, but back then he had trouble persuading people, but it could be that the plays were not very well directed or perhaps not properly cast.

KH: What was your reaction to Pinter at the time, as an actor doing Pinter?

DS: He was new and obviously, you know, when did he first do that? '58 I think, so it wasn't that long afterwards and we certainly didn't learn much about him at drama school. I don't think we even touched him.

KH: That's really interesting that you didn't have any knowledge of him at all at drama school.

DS: Oh, I had knowledge of him.

KH: But no, you mean it wasn't part of the training.

DS: We didn't actually do any Pinter. We did Tennessee Williams and things like that which of course, that was... Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf was roughly the same time, so it is just that it never actually happened that we did Pinter or Osborne.

KH: That's interesting. Because people sort of see it as a big bang and everybody knew about it, but you were doing things in the mid sixties and it was kind of new to you, it's really interesting.

DS: Yes, I think it was, but that's partly because one was young, so you couldn't know everything. Now, if I'd known what I know now, I probably would never have become an actor! [Laughs]

KH: What was the programme like at Salisbury, was it fortnightly repertory?

DS: Yes. It became three weekly in the end, but it was fortnightly.

KH: Did you find that quite a pressure to work under, to be doing a play every two weeks?

DS: Well, when you think that people were doing it weekly, we got off lightly really. No, I thought two-weekly was fine, because I'd already learnt how to quickly get the lines under my belt, which you had to. In fact I would go - always go, even now if I go to a rehearsal for something I'd have learnt the lines before I go there. I don't care. Nowadays it's laissez faire and people think, 'Oh well, it's all right, I've got plenty of time'. Rubbish! You have got to get the lines in there first, get those so you can just call upon them whenever you've got another idea, but they are there for you. It's all very well if you can do improvisation, I don't know if that always works. I've seen cases where it looks positively embarrassing, and you sometimes wonder, those who are very good at improvisation, whether it doesn't actually affect them with the dialogue they eventually have to use, because the dialogue... If a writer has written something, I think you are doing him a disservice by saying 'it doesn't really matter too much about where that line or those words are, as long as the sense is there'. That can work, but sometimes it works against what the writer has actually intended in the first place.

KH: How long were you at Salisbury for?

DS: I went there at the end of '64 and left there at the beginning, the middle of '67.

KH: So you were there for quite a few years then.

DS: Yes, I was, until Reggie kicked me out. 'I think it's about time you went, Simeon.' 'Oh really?' 'Oh don't worry, you're going to join my brother up in Birmingham.' So I went straight up to the Alex in Birmingham for Derek Salberg, who talks just the same only slightly posher, bless them. Oh they were so funny, those two, they really were... I could go on!

KH: What do you make them such kind of... Because people do remember them as massive personalities, people who worked with them.

DS: They weren't massive personalities, they were quiet, but my God they pinpointed everything! They knew what they wanted, and they were so kind, both of them.

KH: Was Reggie very involved in the day-to-day life of the theatre?

DS: Yes, he was the overall manager. He never directed - he cast but he didn't direct - and he said, 'Oh, I made a mistake with you, Simeon, you should have played Romeo, not the one who played it.' And he was right. The thing was, I played Benvolio, and the one playing Romeo and the one playing Mercutio - who was far too old - guess who got all the fan-mail! 'Oh, no, we've got more bloody fan-mail for you, Simeon!'. And I was getting all the fan-mail from the girls from the local schools and things, the school parties. 'Maybe I was wrong, you should have played Romeo.' - 'Womeo', he couldn't pronounce his R's, bless him!

KH: So when you went to Birmingham, obviously it was Birmingham Repertory...

DS: It was Birmingham Alex, the Rep was the other one.

KH: Oh right, there was Birmingham Repertory as well, that's kind of what ... Did you find there was a difference in the kind of people who were going to both theatres or not?

DS: Yes, because Birmingham is a city, there is not the same slightly... How do I mean, how do I mean? Salisbury is sort of pastoral in a lot of respects, and it is almost 'the done thing' to go to the theatre, whereas Birmingham, there has to be a good reason to go to the theatre I think. You can't say that about everybody, obviously, but definitely they were equally proud of their theatres but for different reasons.

KH: Am I right in thinking that Birmingham Alex was a more commercially-based theatre than the Repertory?

DS: It was a rep when I got there. It became more after that, after Derek. I can't remember when he actually stopped it being a rep, but it was certainly a rep when I was there. There were a lot who had been there for years.

KH: So you were doing two-weekly rep again at the Alex?

DS: Yes, and we also did tours between Leeds and Birmingham.

KH: What kind of plays were you doing there?

DS: Oh, Crikey! We did Skin Game -Galsworthy - which is where I met Simon Williams, that was his first job, playing my brother. Then we did an awful play called Waiting for Gillian with Rosie Leach and Jack Watling, they're all dead now... no, Rosie's still alive. Then we did Happy Weekend -no, A Quiet Weekend! -all very pot boiler stuff really.

KH: Do you know what the rationale behind the programming was at all, why they selected certain plays?

DS: Probably because they were more likely to get ordinary bums on seats rather than brainy bums!

KH: So there wasn't any sense they were going to try and do Pinter and Arden and that sort of stuff?

DS: No, they couldn't have done that, not on a tour like that. Though you can now, I think, probably more so.

KH: That's interesting. So what was your experience of the people that you were working with? Did people sort of come from similar backgrounds to you in terms of training?

DS: I think a lot, yes, but some probably worked their way up, inveigled themselves into some sort of rep at some point and went through that way.

KH: Yes, I was kind of interested because the people in the decade before you, a lot of them went straight into rep and then that was their training and the impression I got was that less people went to drama school than did later maybe.

DS: I think now there are far too many drama schools, far too many people going in for it with far too few jobs. One has to remember that we all have our... I mean, I wouldn't dream of doing a musical because I know I couldn't do it - I could speak-through singing... But that's what's happened nowadays, everyone goes by the way people look and not actually what is inside them and how they communicate, so we can end up playing parts that are totally wrong for us just because people think we look right for the part.

KH: Did you see your repertory training as a really important part of your training?

DS: Absolutely, absolutely. I mean, I was lucky because you got to know the way people... you learnt not just to communicate with people but actually to live with them, and to get to know them, the way they work, because every actor on stage has got to see what the other person is doing, and the more you get to know them, the more you know - even in the character you are playing, that that is what Raymond or Stephanie or whoever it was I was working with: he will know, she will know what I'm about to do, what I'm saying, he will react, she will react to what I'm saying and you know instinctively... It's not a case of seeing the object, it's purely instinctive. And that's what you learn.

KH: There is kind of this slightly negative view of repertory now, and that they are a bit ...

DS: I can't understand that. All I can say is that they don't know what they are talking about, because they've never been through it.

KH: It is really interesting, because so many of the people that we've talked to have a similar background in repertory and everybody has talked about how much they enjoyed working in repertory and how valuable it was. Why do you think there is that negative perception of it now?

DS: Because it's something they don't know. Also it is self defence. A girl - some Canadian - said, 'Oh, don't you go on about rep?'. I said, 'Well, did you do it?'. 'Well, no.'. I said, 'Well how can you know?'. I would dearly love to think that they could do it again. If I won the Euro Millions Lottery this evening I would unquestionably go to the Windsor Council and demand that I buy the theatre back that my father-in-law started all those years ago. I would demand that I buy it for ten million pounds and I would start up my own repertory with people who would want to be in repertory, because they soon learn.

KH: How long were you at Birmingham for?

DS: Not very long, because that's when I... I was there for about a year and that's when my first telly came, and that meant going to London.

KH: Was television something you had always wanted to get into or was it just kind of...?

DS: I was glad when it happened, but it was never something I was aiming for. Everything that has happened in my life, something happened and I just followed it.

KH: Was television something that you were very much aware of - television drama - when you were growing up?

DS: Oh yes! Oh yes, particularly my friend Nigel Kneale's stuff in the fifties, Quatermass.

KH: So it was something you had been watching from quite a young age?

DS: Oh yes, certainly. I was much more interested in film though, going to the cinema.

KH: So what was your first television job?

DS: It was Sexton Blake, with Larry Payne playing Sexton Blake and I was a mass murderer. Now, the reason they chose me I think was because I looked so innocent so obviously it couldn't be him, and so in the end when it turns out he's murdered his brother, his father and various other poor unfortunates he was the last person, I expect people thought, 'It's bound to be him because he's the one who looks innocent'. So it was a children's programme, it went on for about five episodes and I learnt... My God! I learnt more on that than I did any other time later, because it was done as though it was live.

KH: So they were filming live at the time?

DS: It wasn't live, but it was done as though it was live, so you had to shoot from set to set and be there ready for the next scene.

KH: That's so interesting. So they were recording it but they were still doing it as if it was live?

DS: Oh yes, yes.

KH: That's fascinating. Do you know why they were doing that?

DS: Well I think they hadn't learnt yet how to say, 'Well, we can cut here and...' - whatever they call it - cut and paste? I don't know what they call it.

KH: Do you think that was common?

DS: I think so, yes, I think at that time... I don't think it lasted long, because by the time I got to the BBC, working with people like Wilfred Pickles, we certainly... when we went into the studio, by then that had stopped so that would have been '67, it was Associated Rediffusion and I can't remember what I did after that. Well as I say, I did work with Wilfred Pickles. It was a funny era that, '68 to '69, I mean I worked with Bette Davis, I did a film with her, I was doing rep in Farnham doing an early Aykebourne, which is what started me off on the Aykebourne, because I've done Aykebournes galore, my favourite actually, my absolute favourite - dear Alan! So yes, during that period I think television still... certainly television drama was still doing it as it used to be.

KH: That's interesting. Did you see that there were many parallels between theatre and television at the time, or not really?

DS: Yes, the parallel, certainly with that, is that you relied on the other actors. Each relied upon the other to get it right. I remember one actor got his words the wrong way round - just transposed the sentence - and I quickly came in with my reply which was right for what he said because I was listening, because you had to listen as you did on stage.

KH: That's interesting. When you were working on television did you think, I prefer this to the theatre or was it not really...?

DS: Oh no, no, no. Always, always theatre. Obviously there were some times when you had wonderful times on television, back when you were treated like something special - which you aren't now, you are just a commodity as Stephanie called it, Stephanie Cole calls it. 'You are just a commodity now, David.' I said, 'Yes, and I suppose I am bargain basement!'

KH: Was there a particular theatre or kind of drama that you wanted to do?

DS: Comedy, yes.

KH: Why was that?

DS: Because that was basically what I was right for. You know, the face is funny, with the eyebrows and all the rest of it, and Cyril Fletcher who taught me at drama school, 'Cinnamon' he said, 'here am I ...' Do you know who I mean by Cyril Fletcher?

KH: No, I don't.

DS: Ah, a famous pantomime dame, on the television and on the radio particularly, and he had this very fruity voice and he used to do Odd Odes, 'I tell the tale of Elsie Piper, caught her nose in the windscreen wiper' all of these, that is what he was known for. And he was there ostensibly teaching us comedy and he said, 'Oh Cinnamon,' he said, 'I can't teach you comedy, nobody can, you have either got it or you haven't.' And he's right, you cannot teach people comedy, they have either got it and... no matter. Oliver Gordon used to do farce at Windsor - at Salisbury - and at Windsor, teaching. 'Simeon, eyes out front there, that moment, eyes out front.' 'I know, Oliver, absolutely.' Actually I was almost saying, 'you don't need to tell me' because I instinctively knew, but you learnt to make sure that the lines, the reaction you got, make sure the audience could see it. So it is things like that that you learn but the instinct is something you can't learn. It's just there.

KH: That's interesting. Were there particular... in the sixties were there particular - you mentioned Aykebourne - were there particular dramatists who had an impact on you either in terms of parts you wanted to play or things you went to see?

DS: Do you know, I can't say I did, because everything I came across was a new experience and I was happy to learn it. It was almost... I was almost known for not going to see shows because I'd get too much, I'd be, 'Oh I'd better do it the way he did it', but that of course is not the right way, it is better to have your own mind towards a play and when you approach it as it is totally new to you and then search out the truth in it. This is the thing I have always banged on about, people don't quite understand - 'Oh, actors, they tell lies'. I say, 'Oh, do they? In other words, you don't believe what they are doing on the stage? Look at it that way, if you believe what somebody is doing on the stage, and if they are actually playing a character who is lying, then what I am I suppose to do? Lie? I don't lie, the character is lying, I'm showing the truth of the fact that somebody tells a lie.' So you get a play, there may be some way that you have got to be... like Wilde, Oscar Wilde, you have got to play it the way it would be in that time, Shakespeare has to be played a certain way really, Restoration comedy where everyone is lying has to be played a certain way, but you still have got to do it with truth, it always has to be done with truth - everything, all of it - farce! - right the way through, all have to be done with truth and you have got to know yourself what you are doing. You have

got to, it has got to be truthful to you before you can show it to the sleeping dragon which is supposed to wake up, which is the audience, 'the other member of the cast', because the audience is the other member of the cast.

KH: Did you have any sense that things were changing in the sixties? Obviously theatre censorship had finished, things like that.

DS: I don't think censorship made much difference quite honestly. Eventually it did, because once they had flexed their muscles - which took some years later, I mean, Salisbury wouldn't have put up with... We did *The Philanthropist* down in Salisbury - I played Philip in it - and that was '74 and there is a line in it all about a dirty old man and a young boy on a train, and Noreen said - Noreen Craven, she said - 'Darlings, we can't say that!' (and it was a bit rude, I have to say) so we cut that little bit. And when they finally did it some years later with Edward Fox at Windsor they kept it in, and even then, Edward Fox said to me, 'Did you keep that bit in?', 'Oh no, we didn't, we cut it.', 'I think we should too.'. This is years later, so there still was that element that certain things shouldn't be said.

KH: That's interesting. Did you have any sense that acting methods had changed at all or were changing?

DS: Sadly, yes.

KH: In what respect?

DS: They stopped... they started to stop us doing that... what I call 'heightened reality' where you can really... and I'm not talking about this ridiculous idea of the old actors and doing all of that...

KH: Like Gielgud and all of that?

DS: Well actually Gielgud was one actor of the last century I think who reinvented himself more than anybody else.

KH: That's really interesting.

DS: Oh yes. I mean, I've never known anyone... I mean, this is the man talking about Laurence Olivier, 'Oh when Larry came on the scene of course I realised I was a terrible old ham because he had such spirit and I realised that...'. And I thought, 'hang on a minute, switch forward a few years and you see this play on television with Richard Burton playing the lead. And there is Gielgud, Olivier and Ralph Richardson sitting round a table, and there was Ralph Richardson doing that 'Oh my dear fellow' voice all the time, and there was Olivier sitting there doing his eyes sunk out... doing this ridiculous

face where his eyes used to sink up, and then sitting there very quietly and speaking absolutely succinctly was Gielgud'. He would get right down so he was capable of doing that and also capable of... what I love, is heightened reality, where you can go that little bit more and people go 'wow!', just that little bit more. Not to be over the top - I'm not a devotee of that at all - but heightened reality, that's where some of the best performances come from. When I did Tipping the Velvet on television I insisted on playing the part of the dirty old man as Alastair Simm would have done it. Now, who is to accuse Alastair Simm of going over the top? Of course he did, but he did it and you believed him and you can do that. The trouble is, and funnily enough on the television this morning Brian Blessed - who is not known for his quietness! - was talking about the way certain actors nowadays are mumbling their words, and he's right.

KH: Do you think that was as a result of the kind of training that people had then, where there was a focus on the arts?

DS: Or lack of training, lack of training. The most important thing is to be able to be understood because if you are just going [speaks indistinctly] and people say, 'What? Pardon? What did you say?' and that's what's happening.

KH: I guess what I'm trying to say is why do you think your generation and maybe people slightly afterwards had that sort of voice control whereas people today don't maybe?

DS: Because they were on the stage. You can't get away with it on the stage, you can get away with it on the television up to a point... Except you look at something like Casualty now - which I did the second ever episode of - now I can't hear what they are saying and I've got very good hearing. I call it the show where everyone mutters in corridors! [Mutters] It has got nothing to do with the hospital any more, it's who's having who and why and 'I'm going to punch him because he's drunk'. And you think, 'Come on, please!' I want freshness and we're not getting it at the moment.

KH: I was interested that you mentioned Gielgud. Were there particular performers of that era or possibly later who had a big impact on you or whose things you remember watching?

DS: Oh I think all of them. The knights certainly, all of them. I saw Redgrave for instance - people forget how good he was - and there was a suffering man in a lot of respects but of all of them he would tell the truth. Redgrave is one who always told the truth and he suffered for it.

KH: What do you think made him such a good performer?

DS: Because he told the truth. He wasn't into... Like, Olivier was brilliant but he was like a series of rockets going off and sometimes he did go over the top and he lost the truth.

KH: Did you see Olivier in any particular plays?

DS: Again, Uncle Vanya, I saw both him and Redgrave together in the original production.

KH: Ah, that must have been extraordinary!

DS: Yes, a wonderful production and I got... well you could tell from the books that he and Redgrave had their differences, but Redgrave I think was much more vulnerable as a human being.

KH: What about the women of that period, because there were some extraordinary female performers as well.

DS: Oh Dottie Tutin of course! Dottie Tutin I saw playing Viola in Twelfth Night with Geraldine MacEwan playing Olivia, that was a wonderful production and Patrick Wymark playing Sir Toby Belch. I can't remember who played Malvolio, I should remember that! I think it was Basil Dignan but I'm not absolutely sure, because there were different casts. That was a time when I was still at school and our teacher would take us to Stratford, and I saw Charles Laughton's Lear.

KH: Oh wow!

DS: He was pretty old by then and he wasn't very good.

KH: That was a part that he struggled with I think, didn't he, as I seem to remember.

DS: He did, yes, it was too much for him, but you had Robert Hardy and Albert Finney both playing Edgar and Edmund and all of that, so you were at the beginning of something. Finney is a wonderful actor I think.

KH: Quite a few people have talked about him I think, when he was at Birmingham Rep and things, and everyone has really fond memories of him.

DS: I sadly never really worked with those... I ended up doing so many sit-coms and getting to know people like John Cleese and Les Dawson and Dave Allen and Hattie Jacques and John Le Mesurier, Dick Emery, all the Doctor Whos, I know every single one of them, and did you know there were nine Dr Whos?

KH: No, I didn't know that.

DS: Up until Sylvester McCoy. I can name them if I can remember! There was the old boy at the beginning, then there was Patrick Troughton, then there was John Pertwee, then there was Tom Baker, then there was Colin Baker, then there was Peter Davison, then Sylvester McCoy but in the middle of all this there was Peter Cushing of course who I worked with who did the films of Dr Who and then there is one other and I can see him now, he was very tall and suddenly I'm drying again, Richard...? Oh, this is the trouble now - I'm getting to an age where I can't remember names! - but I met or worked with all of them. Oh God, what was his name? He was a great radio actor and he took over from William Hartnell who was the first Dr Who, he took over from him when they had to have all the Doctors together. What I'm saying is that my career did all of this, I did all sorts of strange things and I'm now known as being in Dr Who.

KH: Was there any sense... because obviously in early television there was quite a bit of snobbery associated with it.

DS: I didn't notice that.

KH: You didn't have any sense of that at all?

DS: No, no. In what way?

KH: Just sort of theatre was seen as the serious thing that people went to and television wasn't.

DS: Oh I see what you mean. There was a play written about that, a friend of mine directed it and it was all about an actor who made his name on the television and then he went back to doing theatre and they all just looked at him as though he was rubbish, but in fact that is probably born of being jealous because if you can do both, what's wrong? Quite honestly you need the money from doing television to keep yourself going as far as the theatre is concerned!

KH: Did you find you had to change your acting style when you did television, when you first started?

DS: Well you had to keep it down a bit, as though you are in a drawing room - you are not actually on a huge stage and that is actually quite tricky, particularly if you have got a mobile face as I have. One eyebrow goes up and you can see it a mile off on the screen so you use diligence - have to! That was hard because some people naturally have immobile faces and they are ideal, but I don't have an immobile face therefore I have to control it.

KH: The one thing that we've not picked up on that I was interested in was your experience of the Windsor Theatre, do you just want to say a little bit about that?

DS: Oh yes. Well my father-in-law started it - John Counsell and his lovely wife - and they were my in-laws and I got to know it later on obviously. He started it in 1934, it went bust and then he started again in '38 which is when the Royal Family used to come, they christened it really for him and he made sure of that. He wasn't a fool! So it became... it was a family theatre, but it also became the sort of place where all the big names wanted to be there, like Ivor Novello, Noel Coward, all that lot. And so John still did it exactly the same way as Reggie would have done, he would set his season out with a couple of pot boilers, a Shakespeare when they could afford it, then new plays, then the pantomime. The pantomime of course in those places was the money-spinner, and they were the best pantomimes at Windsor in the old days - not now, they've gone commercial now.

KH: That's interesting about the pantomimes, is it just kind of because... what has changed it?

DS: Television, that's what did it. Particularly television and soap stars - how do they know about how to do pantomime? They don't. You can't. As I said before, you can either do comedy or you can't, and kids go along and they say, 'Why is that man with that bird, what's that got to do with Cinderella?' - meaning Emu! What's the point? If you watch children - and I have - if you watch them going along to a pantomime, they know about Cinderella, they know about Babes in the Wood, they know about Aladdin. They want the fun, they want the laughter but they also want to see the romance. Because I can remember seeing pantomime in Bristol when I was small and I absolutely adored it, I was completely taken over by it, but I was taken over by the story, not because so and so was in it. You ask a child, 'Have you heard of...' I'm trying to think of someone, somebody in, what's that thing called? Hollyoaks. He wouldn't know what you were talking about. 'That's not Cinderella, that's the girl who's on the television', they'd say.

KH: Obviously in the sixties you had the National Theatre starting up...

DS: Well, really it started after that.

KH: The company got itself together, although obviously the building didn't open until later. Did you have any... what were your thoughts on the National at that time?

DS: Well I was going to go up to - various of them did from that company - except I was put off by a director. I had just been doing *The Knack* with him - strange man - he said 'I wouldn't bother going, David.'. 'Why not?' 'Well, actors like you, you're three a penny.'.

KH: How rude!

DS: I don't know why he said that. He's now dead so I won't speak ill of the dead, but I thought that was a pretty unpleasant thing to say.

KH: The Knack is an interesting play, was that a difficult play to do?

DS: No, that's when I learnt that I could do - what did Marlon Brando call it? - The Method. It was put down in the... Everyone said, 'Oh, he is brilliant this chap, David Simeon, he can do The Method'. I wasn't doing The Method, I was doing what came naturally, that's all and I used the lines and I just lived it, that's all you do. You must never ever forget that The Method - this 'mumble and scratch' as they called it back then! - was actually basically just a fad. To me Marlon Brando is not the greatest actor in the world. Never was the greatest actor in the world.

KH: Did you think at the time...

DS: Jack Lemmon was the greatest actor in the world.

KH: Did you think at the time though that it was a fad, the Method?

DS: I didn't even think about it, I just did it as it came off the page. Here he is, this rather naïve character, what's his name? Colin - the one that Michael Crawford played in the film. He is terribly naïve you see, and the other ones are knowing, but because they are so knowing and he is so innocent they can't really do anything about it. He will believe anything anyone tells him and they think they have got him, but of course because he is so innocent, it doesn't hurt him, so that's the way I played it, with Vivienne Heilbron playing my girlfriend. It is such a long time ago that, it was 1967. I think it was just about the last thing I did at Salisbury.

KH: Just to return to earlier, possibly my final question unless you have got anything to add. You mentioned - obviously - that you knew John Osborne, did you talk to him about drama? Was that something that you talked about together or not?

DS: Not a great deal. I don't think he really wanted to talk about his... I mean, he certainly told me things, and he was very bitter about the way he was dealt with. But no, I think he just treated me as a friend who he could have rude jokes with, and I did... He said 'Have you got any jokes for me?', 'Yes, yes, I've got a few jokes!'. And that's the way it was.

KH: Did you go and see his later plays?

DS: Yes. Actually, Déjà Vu, he told me afterwards - which was his last play - he said, 'Do you know the character who is offstage called the Rev Dave?' I said, 'yes'. 'That's you,' he said. So actually he did write about me, although you never see him. I said, 'Well that sounds like the sort of part I normally play, John, you never see me!'

KH: What were your impressions of his later plays?

DS: Oh I think Déjà Vu is a very good play, and I think it will be resurrected again eventually, it is a very good play. That and The Entertainer and Look Back in Anger are the three, oh and Hotel in Amsterdam with Scofield, that was brilliant, I saw that, absolutely wonderful.

KH: What made it wonderful?

DS: Scofield! There's a man, there's an actor and he just... he tells the truth.

KH: I think those are all of my questions, do you have anything else that you want to add?

DS: No, I don't think so, I'm just trying to think, all of these people I've met in my life, like Les Dawson, one of the kindest and nicest men you could ever wish to meet.

KH: Les Dawson and people like that are quite interesting because they came out of this variety tradition, and actually that is something I was going to ask you about, did you go and see variety shows and that sort of thing as you were growing up?

DS: I don't think we had much of a chance. It was after the war and there wasn't a great deal around where I was, there were only the pantomimes I saw. If my gran had had her way I would have seen them all, because she used to go to the music hall, the old time music hall. She remembered seeing Harry Lauder going out on stage and singing Keep Right On to the End of the Road, and the night before he had found out that his son had been killed and he had to go out on that stage and sing Keep Right On to the End of the Road and I don't know how he did it: I don't know how anyone could do that. And the tears were pouring down his face as he did it, but he still sang it and she remembered that. So variety you see... the person to ask is Jonathan Cecil - I said this before.

KH: I have written to Jonathan Cecil.

DS: Well he will definitely do it, I know, but it is probably best at his home I think. That's my dear old friend, Jono. He'll fill in all the gaps.

KH: Well that's great, thank you very much for the interview, it has been a pleasure to meet you.