

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Ian Noel Anderson – interview transcript

Interviewer: Jennifer Ball

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Stage worker. Brighton theatres; cinema; comedy; John Gielgud; Howard Goorney; The Lady's not for Burning; London theatre-going; Laurence Olivier; Ralph Richardson; repertory; scenery painting; street entertainers; Theatre Workshop; toy theatres.

JB: OK, just to start off, if you could tell me about your first memories of theatre?

IA: Well, I was very fortunate, I think, in having parents who were quite keen on the theatre and in living in London. The first exposure to theatre I suppose I had was when my father took me to a demonstration of the toy theatre at Bumpus' in Oxford Street by George Speaight, and I can still remember that although I was only have been about 5 at the time. It made a very, very powerful impression on me, as I think you can imagine at that age. So after that we went round and he bought a theatre for me at Benjamin Pollock's which I can also remember. I mean the old man himself in the shop - it's a wonderful shop - showed me all the toy scenes... showed the shop itself in Hoxton Street.

JB: Legendary!

IA: Oh yes, absolutely. And so I had the theatre, but nothing much... I didn't do much with it for about five years because I was much too young to colour and cut-out the characters and perform plays at that time. So I used to play Cowboys and Indians on it and that sort of thing... But then about five or six years later I came to it again - by which time we were living in Brighton - and I got quite enthusiastic during the war, and did quite a lot of performances with friends helping me in the performance. We used to do charity performances for the Red Cross Collection and the Spitfire Fund.

JB: What kind of things did you stage?

IA: Mostly they were things we made up ourselves. We did a version of ITMA - that was a very popular radio comedy programme of the time - and things like that. And one or two of the actual original plays themselves, but not very many because they were a bit complicated for that sort of age. Melodrama at the age of 11 doesn't seem to work terribly well somehow! But then gradually of course, as I got older, I rediscovered the old plays and got really enthusiastic about doing them. I gradually built a permanent toy

theatre in a hayloft over the garage at home and did quite a lot of performances then, right through until I went into the army and eventually left Brighton and it got all taken down.

JB: Another question: following National Service how did you get involved as a scenic artist? In your email you mentioned that there was no formal training given so how did you kind of learn...?

IA: I've always been incredibly lucky I suppose, I've fallen into about 4 or 5 different... not professions, but things to do with my life, totally different. But I tend to fall into them each time without any particular preparation for it, but I had always wanted to be a scenic artist because of playing with the toy theatre mostly. When I finally got out of the army I discovered that there was a repertory company in Brighton working at the Dolphin Theatre, which no longer exists now but it was just down the road from the Theatre Royal and was a sweet little theatre. It had originally been built as a permanent indoor circus like some of the ones they have in Paris, but then it had fallen into disuse and been converted into a theatre. It was a cinema for a while, fell empty during the war, got very dilapidated and the owner of the license of the Theatre Royal - very forward-looking I think - took over the lease and developed it into a Little Theatre. And because he was very friendly with H.M. Tennent, they wanted to try out a repertory company, 'H.M. Tennent Repertory Company' would you believe, which they set up in the Dolphin, playing fortnightly rep., which is very luxurious indeed. Of course, being H.M. Tennent all the scenery was specially made each fortnight at Brunskill and Loveday's in London, which was the scene manufacturing place, everything was perfect and all brand new every time. And I wrote to the Dolphin saying I wanted to be a scenic artist and they actually had a vacancy! I mean this is almost incredible, unbelievable, because there weren't that many scenic artists working around that time, but it just so happened that their designer - who was Jay Hutchinson Scott, a very well known designer, he did all the posh West End drawing room dramas, that sort of thing, really very stylish, a great chap - his assistant, a painter, had gone off to do some other job for a while, so he was short of a painter, so I stepped in. Not knowing how to paint scenery at all of course because it's a bit different when you're working with a toy theatre, 12 inches by 9, when you start working at 15 feet...!

JB: So you went into it with no experience?

IA: No.

JB: So were you kind of apprenticed?

IA: Well, I was his painter and I painted the scenery. He showed me how to mix the paint for one thing so I learnt all about how to do it from Jay, and I wasn't there all that long, because eventually his regular scene painter came back and that was the end of it. I was only there a couple... a few months, but long enough to learn the business. And on top of that, because the Dolphin was only a few doors away from the Theatre Royal and the Dolphin was quite small backstage and had no real access to it properly, we were able to borrow the Theatre Royal's paint-frame because J. Baxter Somerville was

running both of them. There was a gorgeous paint-frame at the Theatre Royal, a really ancient, proper genuine one, and we were able to use that, so I used to work in the Theatre Royal backstage during the week, and then at the end of the week when the change was due I always went along and helped. It wasn't part of the job, and I wasn't actually paid for it, but I wanted to find out how it worked and learn a bit more you see. So I used to go along and help with the change, which was fascinating, and that was how I learnt to handle scenery, and how the ropes worked and that kind of thing, how it was backstage. But it was a wonderful sight because about half past ten, eleven o'clock when the show had finished - both shows, the Theatre Royal and the Dolphin were both running shows - Saturday evening, the crew would get together and strip the set down onto separate flats, fifteen feet by two by six by whatever, and stack them all, and then we would proceed to march them out of the Dolphin Theatre, up the road, into the rear door of the Theatre Royal, and the new scenery would come out of the Theatre Royal scene dock, along the road, and into the Dolphin. And it was quite wonderful at half past twelve, one o'clock, in the morning to see these 15 foot flats walking along Trafalgar Street - is it Trafalgar Street?, anyway, it's the road where both the stage doors are in Brighton. Right in the middle of the night, and these great bits of scenery walking themselves along the road! Absolutely fascinating. So that's how I got to learn the business: on the job, by doing it. Always the best way to do it.

JB: Yes, learn on the job.

IA: As long as you've got good people you can watch, and that's the big advantage.

JB: Yes, the 'good people' that you watched – who kind of professionally inspired you when you were working in Brighton? Were there any sets that you saw when you were watching theatre that really amazed you and made you think 'that's what I want to get into'?

IA: Well, yes, a lot of them were quite dramatic in those days because they went in for a lot of painted scenery then as opposed to the engineering that you tend to get these days. I find it a bit flat, not so exciting. There was one wonderful set for a play by Anouilh translated by Christopher Fry, and it was a railway station or something like that - it'll be in program somewhere, but I've forgotten which it was. But there were some really nice sets. One good one was *The Lady's not for Burning*, I enjoyed that one. That was premièred in Brighton, and that's the other advantage I had. I was very fortunate not only growing up in early days in London where there were obviously lots of theatres about and I was taken to them for pantomimes and all sorts of things - and others as well, a very great variety of forms of entertainment which was nice - but in Brighton, having the Theatre Royal there we had all the pre-London tours because it's such a splendid theatre, very close to London - only an hour away - and quite a number of actors lived in Brighton, or if they didn't live in Brighton they could get back after the show to London so it was a really favoured spot for pre-London tours; it was on everyone's list for pre-London tours. And because Baxter Somerville knew Tennent, Tennent used to send most of his pre-London shows there, so it meant that just by sitting in Brighton we could see 40% of the London shows without moving further away. So we saw everything and there were a few premières along with that and *The Lady's not for Burning* was one of them and I was actually there for the first night, the very first night of *The Lady's not for Burning*, Christopher Fry with John Gielgud, and

Richard Burton playing a small part, quite an unnoticed part, just 'A Boy' and... I cannot remember any names, we'll have to make footnotes! But anyway it was a superb performance and very nice. Esme Percy was in it, and I remember, I took my mother, and we actually bought a seat... Although I was working at the Dolphin I didn't get free seats, and we thought, 'We can't miss a Christopher Fry play première with a cast like that, with Gielgud in it', so we actually bought some seats in the circle, which was very rare because my normal spot was up in the gallery you know - always used to queue up for the gallery, which was ever so cheap. But we did get these tickets and we sat through, we looked at the program and saw who was in it, and we enjoyed the first act, then during the interval we saw round the back of the circle there was a bar and Esme Percy was in the bar in his ordinary clothes and he was down in the program to appear so we thought that was very strange, 'What's he doing here? Perhaps he's not well? But he can't be not well because he's in the bar knocking them back'. But anyway it transpired that when he came on right on the end of the last act, he was supposed to be completely drunk, wheeled on in a wheelbarrow and that was his total appearance, so he didn't bother to do anything at all until the last act, but it was glorious, a glorious performance, very good show.

JB: You mention Gielgud, he was particularly renowned. Were there any other actors, because obviously your role was with the visual representation, were there any actors who really affected you?

IA: Oh well, Olivier and Richardson obviously. And that's another thing where I was fortunate, because when I was in the army I was mostly stationed in the Midlands, round that area, so on the odd occasions where I managed to get some leave I would pass through London on the way to Brighton, and so I always managed to catch a theatre on the way, since the trains to Brighton ran fairly late I could manage to get to... If I managed to get to London about mid-afternoon, I'd run round to the theatre I favoured and put out a stool. Now you may not know about this, but its an interesting system they have in London theatres, I think they still do, where if you want to queue up for the gallery or sometimes the upper circle as well, if you go along sometime in the afternoon, after mid-day, there would be a man lurking around there, and in those days it was 6 pence, and he would give you a number on a cloakroom ticket and you would come back half an hour before doors open - which is half an hour before the show, so an hour before the performance - and there would be a row of stools laid out by the gallery entrance and each one had a number on it. And you'd go to your numbered stool and sit down on it for a while, and just before the gallery doors were opened a man would come along and collect all the stools up, and you'd stand up and then, there you are in your queue ready to go.

JB: Oh I see.

IA: But it was rather pleasant, because first of all you could book your place in the queue without having to stand there from midday onwards, and secondly you did get to sit down for a while. And of course that was when you had all the street entertainers who came round to entertain the queues, so you had some very good - and very bad! - street entertainers going round, and some of them worked it so that if they were lucky they could do three or four queues at different theatres, because many of the London theatres are close together. They used to go round, two of them, in turn, one after the

other, follow each other and that was good, because you got a bit of entertainment while you were sitting there waiting, instead of just reading the Evening News or Standard or Star. Three different ones to choose from in those days.

JB: You mentioned the theatre you preferred, which were your favourite London theatres?

IA: Well it depended what was playing. I went for the play or the actor or something like that. Sorry, but yes, I got off on a byline. The Old Vic Company were playing at what was known as the New Theatre because the old one was hit during the war with a bomb, so the complete company moved over to what was then the New Theatre, I can't remember, it changed its name again recently, then it became the Albury, then it became the Coward, I believe although it's got no connection with Coward as far as I know. Anyway, in... where is it, Shaftesbury Avenue, and so it was a great attraction to be able to go and see the Old Vic playing Henry IV [parts] one and two, Richard the - I can never remember if its two or three, but one of them - Oedipus Rex played on the same night as Sheridan's The Critic, which was really something. I mean, you can't get more of a contrast than Sophocles' major drama and Sheridan's send-up. Eighteenth century send-up, absolutely fabulous that was. And lots of lovely things like that which, as I say, I could see en passant en route to Brighton. And for... by queuing up for the gallery, for a shilling, or for one and six. Which isn't really, well I suppose the handy modern terms that's about three or four Mars bars. It's a useful conversion rate which doesn't confuse things too much. Yes, for about three or four Mars bars you could go to a London theatre. Mind you, you're a long way up in the gallery. Especially at the New Theatre. But very well worthwhile. And there were some gorgeous performances from both Richardson and Olivier and lots of other people as well, apart from Gielgud as well, but they were the three principal people, the main ones, the main men.

JB: To go back to your role as a scenic artist, your work was concerned mainly with visual representation, do you remember yourself creating any particularly challenging sets? Do you remember any plays that demanded really difficult artwork.

IA: Well I was working in weekly rep., provincial weekly rep., fairly tatty provincial weekly rep. and fairly unfunded as well by the management, because it was at a time of course, after the war, when the repertory system was falling apart rapidly, and in fact it closed underneath me, which is why I didn't work, why I didn't keep going. Because television was coming in, the cinemas were still fairly powerful, and bingo, and theatre was dying on its feet so most companies were quite hard-pressed. And working in weekly rep, if you've only got one week to get the set ready, you can't do anything too elaborate, and the plays that were going to get chosen were simple, single-set plays for that reason. So there's not that much scope for going out and doing great stuff, splendid design.

JB: Was a lot of it reused?

IA: All of it was reused! Every time! In one rep. I played in Paignton, we were so short of scenery that I had to paint it overnight for the next day! And the reason for that was,

being in a summer resort, the theory was that the weekly change of play would take place mid-week, so we'd start a new play on the Thursday, and we'd play Thursday, Friday, Saturday and matinee, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, then change the play, and because we hadn't got quite enough scenery for two complete sets most of the time, I had to repaint the whole set on Wednesday night after it was taken down, which was quite an interesting challenge actually! So the local stage staff would come in on Wednesday night at the end of the play, I'd strip the scenery, the furniture and stuff and put it up by the footlights as you always do, they'd come and take the scenery down, they'd lay it around for me, according to my instructions; lay it down sideways because I had no paint-frame or anything like that, had to paint it all sideways on, so I'd have it stacked in the right way for me. Then they'd go off and leave me and I'd boil up my size, and mix up the paint and make a nice stink and smell and set to work. And of course I'd have to move the bits of scenery round, as well: as they got wet I'd have to move them to get to the underneath parts and so on, and beaver away and make sure I was finished in time. It was quite good fun to start with, but I was doing it for about four or five weeks on end and it began to get a bit wearing towards the end. But the worst time of all, it's about four o'clock in the morning when the legs start giving out. Because you're bending down and you've got to be standing all the time, walking about and heaving bits of scenery around. And you've got lovely comfy armchairs and settees sitting in the footlights there. And you think, 'Gosh wouldn't it be nice to have a sit down!' but as soon as you sat down you'd be asleep and the set wasn't finished, so I had to keep going. But luckily around the back of the Palace Court Theatre in Paignton [ed. corrected by interviewee, Palace Avenue Theatre] - which I think still exists, although it's probably been rebuilt - there was a milk depot and they used to open up about five in the morning, so I used to go out, get myself a pint of ice-cold milk straight out of the cooler, and that would bring me round sufficiently to get it finished. And about 9 o'clock the stage staff would come back in and they'd put the set up for me, some of it still slightly wet probably! And then I'd dress the set with new furniture, hang the curtains and so on. And by midday they'd be off on the dress rehearsal for the first night.

JB: You mention the stage staff, what was your kind of role within the theatre company? Was there much dialogue over your sets, do you have kind of artistic control?

IA: That's using a very flattering term for it, artistic control! It's a matter of 'can you paint it in the week and put it up?!' Yes, by and large most of them were very agreeable people, they'd got far more to worry about, they assumed that I could do my job. This is what reps about, it relies on people being good at their job and getting on with it and not mucking about. There's no possible room for temperament or fits of hissy or whatever because there's simply no time, it won't work if that happens, and if it doesn't work the audience won't come and we'll be out of a job. Very simple, it's lovely actually, I loved the self-imposed discipline that theatre has, which I think is absolutely fascinating because it's not imposed from above by anything except perhaps self-preservation, but by and large it's because people genuinely want to do it and they go to extraordinary lengths to make it work. That, I think, is fascinating, and the discipline varies according to circumstances, time of day and things like that. For a time I worked as a stage manager as well in rep, as well as the designer because the stage manager we had got fired in the middle of a rehearsal, which was quite interesting. He was useless as a stage manager actually, he was an actor out of work so he applied for the stage manager's job, and got taken on, but I knew more about stage management than he did, and I'd never done it either but at least I'd watched and seen people do it. So in the middle of

the dress rehearsal the producer really got fed up and at last the match wasn't set on the table for whoever it was who had to light it, that sort of thing, it was the final straw, everything else had gone wrong, so he fired him on the spot 'out of my theatre' and literally he never set foot in the theatre again. You could do that, the director has that power and someone else collected his bags and things and gave them to him and he was on the

JB: What was the regional rep. community of the time like? You said the director had a lot of control, was it kin...

IA: He paid the wages.

JB: So he had the power.

IA: Indeed. Simple as that. Sometimes in the tattier rep he may have had a financial interest or owned the company. In the more organised ones, there were two or three people who ran strings of repertory companies in different parts of the country. The names have gone again; I used to know them quite well - used to work for a couple of them. Harry Hanson was one, he had 7 or 8 repertory companies spread around the Midlands and the North mainly, and in that case of course he had a manager who ran it on the spot and the manager was responsible to Harry for the final thing, but the manager was the boss in the theatre. On the other hand you see a repertory company is using someone's theatre you see, they don't own the premises so the manager of the theatre has certain say over what can be done in his theatre but he doesn't have much say about what goes on backstage of the theatre. Equally there is a resident stage manager employed by the theatre who looks after his stage, it is his stage, he is responsible for it, he has to service all the equipment on it and he has to supply the staff to run it - the electricians, the stage hands and so forth - and he's got to live with it year in, year out, he's there for good, whereas the repertory company is only in there for a season, or if it's a touring company of course, only a week. So the resident stage manager has a high degree of power over the backstage during the daytime, or at least what happens if you're going to hammer nails into it or take a saw to bits of it, that sort of thing, you can't do anything you like. On the other hand when the theatre company is in residence at the theatre, during the daytime and night particularly they own the stage, they can do their rehearsals, put up their scenery and they can play obviously in the evening, so they own it to the extent that someone else can't come in and start moving the furniture around, that would be decidedly bad practice because it's probably all beautifully set ready for the scene. So there is this strange complication you see, you don't know quite whose is what. Now, during the day the company and the stage is ordered by the manager - the producer, the director, whatever you happen to call him, they used to be called producers in my day but they've changed to directors these days I don't know why. I think it comes from Hollywood films probably, where 'producer' means something else - but anyway, the guy who's organising the show is in charge and he will organise rehearsals, tell the actors where to go and all the rest which is fine. When the performance starts happening a completely different set of circumstances arise. First of all, the theatre itself, the auditorium becomes the property of the resident theatre manager. The stage becomes the property of the local stage manager: not the resident stage manager, the theatre company's stage manager is in sole charge of backstage from the moment the audience enter the theatre.

JB: Did you quite enjoy your role as stage manager then?

IA: Oh, it was great fun because you've got a great deal of power! And in fact, once upon a time, I ordered the director off the stage during a performance. He directed the play, and I ordered him off the stage and he went. It was because it was a play that wasn't going at all well, everything was going wrong with it, the cast didn't like it very much, they were nervous about it, it was a bit under-rehearsed. What was it? Some American thing that takes place in a bar, really dismal. Name's gone.

JB: Was it a modern piece of theatre?

IA: Relatively modern for its time, 1930s/ 40s kind of thing. And everyone was getting quite nervous about it, the cast were distinctly twittery, and I was sort of wrestling with it a bit, and during the interval the director came backstage because he wanted to give some notes to them and tell them what to do and gee them up a bit and I knew that would be totally fatal. They had more than enough to cope with, they knew what was wrong and were desperately trying to cope with it, any more hassle would have sent them right off the edge, so I wouldn't let him. And he tried persisting and I just said, 'Get off my stage'. He went! Of course immediately afterwards I apologised to him, I mean, after the show had finished, and he said, 'That's OK', he was alright about it, he didn't fire me, because that's the way it works.

JB: Did the play manage to – was the play a success in the end at all, or not at all.

IA: Not terribly. It picked up after two or three nights when people got to know what it was about. But it was never a very good play. Meanwhile, back on this 'any nice sets did I paint?', I've forgotten now. Not very many because there really wasn't the time and because you had to use the bits of scenery you had available. In most cases the ones that weren't currently in use on the stage this week, which usually restricted in more than somewhat because you've never really got enough. There was one, one nice disaster, which I could tell you about, somewhere up north. And it was a play - a farce - requiring two different sets, one was the inn or the cottage or whatever, and the other was a bedroom in the inn or the cottage or whatever, and the second act was in the bedroom. We didn't have really an awful lot of scenery, and so that particular point I was very fortunate, the scenery up there was in a dreadful state, it was terribly ancient, oh, 40, 50 layers of paint on it. And it's really not that nice when canvas gets that much paint on it, because each time you repaint it, it puts another layer which is a perceptible layer and after a while you can get more than a quarter inch of paint on the canvas and the canvas gets to feel a bit tired and starts sagging and cracking and things, so it's really dreadful news. So because it was so bad, the company - this was a repertory run by a company from somewhere else, a set of repertory theatres - so they sent up a stage carpenter for me to make some, to make - do - some of the scenery. He did actually make a few bits for me as well, but this was great because I had actually got facilities for someone to do some work for me, and make it all better. And we got on terribly well together. He was an old stage carpenter - I think he had been a merchant navy man - a raving communist, and we spent a lot of time in the pub discussing things. He was really

great fun - that's the sort of people I like because you can learn so much from them, people who really know what they're doing: my basic education was in pubs, not always, but often. So I decided that to save time - not to save time, to save effort - I could rearrange the scenery of the room, the cottage room downstairs with a slight amendment, and make it into the upstairs, rather than having a complete change of scenery which would have been very complicated, would have had to build a new set within the old one and take it out again for the third act where you go back downstairs. So I decided to do this rearranging by changing the shape of it. I mean, it's all going to be olde-beamy anyway so I mean what the heck, doesn't really matter and you can dress it differently - there's a double bed in the bedroom scene, and there had to be a fireplace and a big sash window. We could bring in the fireplace and the sash window which would be all new and that would be one side of the set and the other bits could all be just rearranged. I worked it out very, very carefully, discussed it with the resident stage manager - it was up in, somewhere in Lancashire, so it was a bit 'dour' so he wasn't that keen on young artistic-looking scenic artists, wasn't too sure about this - but I managed to persuade him it was feasible, could be done, I gave him diagrams, this goes to here, this goes to there, that goes to just there and so on. So we thought it would probably work so we tried the rehearsal, and it was alright, it was OK, took about 5 minutes and it was an entre-acte change not an interval, so anyway we hoped for the best and on the first night the stage carpenter and I went round to help and see how they do it and encourage them to get it right and that was all right. Took three and a half minutes longer than it should do, but at least it was there. And on the second night, got really fed up of this, thought 'Bother this, we won't go round, they know it by now, it'll be fine', so we sat up in the gallery to watch it and the curtain came down at the end and we could hear various bits bumping and things going on. Kept looking at the watch and nothing was happening, eventually curtain went up again and there was the set, we had a quick look round and everything seemed to be in more or less the right place, so that was fine. But then the leading man, who happened to be Howard Goorney who was doing some side-work from the Theatre Workshop because he was a Theatre Workshop man actually, Howard. He was the leading man, and the leading lady is in bed, he comes into the bedroom and tries to light a fire because its very cold and the fire smokes like mad and he says 'cough cough' and has to open the window and so forth. So he came in, went to the fire, tries to light the fire, no smoke coming out of course, so he keeps lighting it and eventually the smoke comes out, big cough cough, goes over to the window, the sash window, tries to open it, and the entire flat went ttttttssssssshhhh and fell outwards, couldn't go far because there was a sidewall which stopped it as an angle of less than 45 degrees. And we couldn't believe our eyes, and poor Howard Goorney is sitting there and his next line is 'Tch tch, I can't open it'. [Laughter] The poor girl in bed is completely corpsed, doesn't know what to do with herself, but she's in bed, she can't get out and help or anything because she's stuck in bed. So he faked his way round it somehow, I can't imagine how, and we kept watching, absolutely horrified and nailed to the spot, and this thing stayed there, out like that, and we couldn't believe it. So eventually I gathered myself together, rushed around the back, there's a little Assistant Stage Manager sitting there on the prompt in the corner and I said, 'Why don't you push it up? It only needs to be pushed up like this' because it had actually got two reveals on each side, hinged so it would stand up by itself, that was the trouble, you got a one foot reveal on either side, it stands by itself but it should be braced at the back and in their haste they'd forgotten to brace it, but it was standing alright so they hadn't noticed. But all he had to do was push it back up so I said, 'Why don't you push it back up?', he said, 'They've got used to it by now' he said. But I didn't hit him, I did feel like it. But that's how not to be clever with scenery in repertory, it doesn't really work, you've got to be safe. You want something reasonably

exciting, because if you've got to get the audience back week after week after week then obviously you need to have something that's a little more exciting than their front rooms, hopefully. But on the other hand you can't go too mad because a) there isn't any time and b) they wouldn't believe it.

JB: Were there any plays that you were involved in or watched that particularly affected you or embodied the spirit of the time for you? Any modern productions that you were particularly passionate about?

IA: Ooh yes, lots of them. Oh yes. In the later wartime period, well and '45 I suppose we can creep in, can't we, things like the Ballet Joos - J, double O, S - who were a really exciting ballet company, used to do what we would call modern ballet but about quite challenging subjects. They had one called The Green Table which was all about the League of Nations and its failures and so forth. Very political kind of stuff, but as a ballet. Very strikingly presented with minimal sets but the odd prop, which is unusual in ballet. And as far as props go in ballet, yes, who was that, um, there was a wonderful ballet company who used all kinds of things in their dancing which struck me terrifically. Things like bicycles and tables, that sort of thing built into the ballet, carting them around the place. Fringe ballet company, it'll be in the programmes somewhere, I've got some old programmes there. So yes, those for the ballet which was exciting. The odd... I very much enjoyed some of the fringe plays by Anouilh, which were fairly standard plays. Totally out of fashion these days, translated mostly by Christopher Fry. Verse plays, Christopher Fry, well, I never really got over The Lady's not for Burning which is fantastic, and some of his others which were all good fun. And of course, T.S. Eliot, verse plays, The Cocktail Party and so forth, which I saw in Edinburgh, which... Lucky again, I was at the very first Edinburgh Festival, in 1947, and the second one in 1948, because I was in the army and my father was covering the Festival as a music critic - which is what he was - so he was sent up with a clutch of tickets for concerts and stuff like that for the whole... I can't remember whether it was a week or a fortnight. There you are, 'Music and Drama Festival' 24th August to the 13th September.

JB: Oh wow, is that the program?

IA: That's the whole program for it, one small leaflet.

JB: So did you get the opportunity to see many things?

IA: Well I was there for about three days and I went to at least three things a day, so yes, quite busy. And Eliot's The Cocktail Party was one of those produced by Martin Brown if I remember rightly. And that was very striking... didn't actually work I thought, didn't work for me, but on the other hand it was exciting stuff. Really I was interested in anything a bit different, new and modern. And of course you can't get better than Theatre Workshop in terms of excitement.

JB: Yes, you mentioned that in your email.

IA: Yes, well I met several of them. As I said Howard Goorney turned up in a rep. that I was in - working for - and that was my first connection. My father was quite keen on Theatre Workshop and they were playing up in Edinburgh one year - may have been that year, I didn't see them - and he went to see them because he was always keen on avant garde theatre, that sort of thing, and left-leaning theatre as far as that went, and from the north, from Manchester so that was all good from his point of view. And he met up with one of them on Carlton Hill in Edinburgh when they were both taking a walk one day and got chatting to him, saying how much he'd enjoyed the performance and so forth, so he got to know them. And then eventually, when they got to their big success, which was Uranium 235 - a play about the atom bomb - they actually got to play it in London, but before they went to London they played Brighton, pre-London, and we invited some of them round after the performance, to home, and they came round and had an evening after the performance, an hour or so and we provided them with beer and sandwiches and so forth. So we did get to know them.

JB: Is that how you were offered work, through the connections?

IA: Well, it was Howard, Howard Goorney actually who'd seen me at work in this disastrous rep. He did forgive me for that scenery falling out which was amazing. One day when I was... I spent a lot of time out of work as a scenic artist - it's bad when the Labour Exchange gets to know you by your first name, not nice at all! But anyway, I had a call one day from... I think it must have been the business manager, Joan Littlewood's business manager, but anyway, who phoned up and said they were short of somebody to look after some scenery on a fit-up round Wales, and could I do it? And this was just a phone call, one morning, bang. And as it happened, I'd applied for a job as designer for children's television, which was just starting up in London and I was waiting for an interview for it, which was going to be in a week or so. And I thought, 'What should I do?', and I made totally the wrong decision. The only one I've ever made I think, most of them I don't regret at all, but this one was quite totally ridiculous. I turned down Joan Littlewood and said I couldn't do it, and of course I didn't get the job with the BBC for children's television anyway, but you know, that was forecastable, but I really would have enjoyed it. I think it was because John Berry, who was their standard designer, was off doing something or other else and couldn't go on this fit-up tour round Wales. It would have great fun because I think they tended to sleep in the theatres and in the van and things like that, and it would have been quite a gypsy kind of existence, but great fun because they were a super bunch of people and terribly good at their jobs of course.

JB: Yes, did you watch any of their productions then?

IA: I didn't get to see many of them unfortunately, because mostly they were up in Manchester, around there, or touring abroad because they were far better known abroad, far more appreciated abroad. And Uranium 235 was about the only thing I ever got to see, but I mean it was wonderful seeing Howard Goorney work in rep for instance. A Theatre Workshop brought up character working in weekly rep is quite an amazing sight.

JB: Did he adapt to it quite well?

IA: He knocked everyone straight off the stage you know, there was kind of a ten foot space around him as far as acting was concerned. I mean, not on purpose, it was just innate you know and it just exuded out of him, exploded out of him if you like. And it was amazing to see. And the same with all of them, when they came round that evening when we had them at home, I actually took them upstairs to my toy theatre and did a scene from Oliver Twist.

JB: With them acting?

IA: One of them, yes. And the rest were imposed on sitting there and being polite. But it was good fun, I couldn't resist it. I thought they ought to see a toy theatre performance because most of them probably hadn't. But yes, that was good fun.

JB: Do you remember the people who came over that evening?

IA: Oh dear, I'd need to have a cast list in front of me! Steptoe actor, yes, who plays Steptoe? No, it's gone.

JB: Don't worry about it. But wow, what an amazing experience!

IA: It was. As I say I've been extraordinarily fortunate. The other strange thing is that I've always gone fairly mad on going to the theatres, cinemas and things like that. I dug out some old diaries, I've lost the one that I really could do with, in 1946, but in 1947, I made a list of all the things I went to. This is when I'm in the army, and there are ninety-something in the year. And that's theatres, cinemas, variety performances, that sort of thing.

JB: And all over the country?

IA: All over the country. In Ireland because I was stationed in Ireland.

JB: What did you see in Ireland?

IA: Not a lot actually. First of all I didn't get out of barracks all that often because I was doing some infantry training, but we did occasionally get into Belfast, it was just down the side from us, we got to the Belfast - what is it, Opera House? - and a few concerts and things like that, and the occasional cinema, but we didn't really get out all that much. Then I went over to Edinburgh... That's right, I was sent over for a course, and I was able to catch a few things while I was there, I never waste any time! Opera House Belfast, that's the ballet. Cinemas, ah, now cinema, I saw a play by Grahame Green called Odd Man Out as a film, filmed, but that's set in Belfast. It's a wonderful drama about an IRA man who arranges a bank robbery, it all goes wrong, he gets wounded,

and he's on the run and various people are helping him, on the run, to escape. They all had their own particular reason for doing it. And it's beautifully constructed, shot entirely in Belfast, and I went to see it in Belfast which is an amazing feeling because throughout the film you keep seeing the big belltower – clocktower - in the centre of Belfast, in various scenes it keeps reminding you of the time because he's got to escape in time before the police catch him you see. He has to catch a boat at the docks to take him away to safety, that's right, he's got to get there. So you get this clock reminder, and the first thing I saw, coming out of the cinema was the clock tower. Wonderful! It's a wonderful film that, you should try and see it, James Mason.

JB: How did you feel it was converted from stage onto screen?

IA: No, I may be wrong on that. I think it was a short story by Greene that he wrote as a film script. My fault.

JB: No worries, what did you feel the differences were between film, cinema, and the theatre. Did you feel that theatre had more immediacy?

IA: Oh yes, it's much more fun. But I'm very fond of cinema, I think it's great, I love the things you can do with it. Especially if it's done imaginatively. I went to an enormous amount of dross, Hollywood average - and English even worse than average sometimes - stuff, during the forties and the fifties, although there were all these war films and so on which were great, and documentaries, Grierson documentaries, Cavalcanti... people like that. There was a documentary film festival that went on in Edinburgh if I remember. [shows program] Documentary film festival I also went to, and people like that... during the war they made some wonderful training films for the army and everybody else, and really learnt an awful lot about documentary films, non-fiction films and how to do it. And a lot of that went through into the wartime films, so there was a great deal, away from all the Hollywood glitz and glamour stuff, onto much more reality and believable people doing real jobs. Which was exciting at the time because it was unusual, it was strange, nowadays it's too far the other direction, no glitz and glamour. But in those days it was quite a novelty to have real people doing real things.

JB: Did people feel they could relate to that kind of thing more, in the theatre and in the cinemas?

IA: I think so, it didn't work quite so well in the theatre I think. In the theatre I think you need a bit of glamour about it, it needs to be a little more enhanced, shall we say? I think the whole art of real successful drama is that it has an extra slight enhancement. Basically from my point of view theatre is when one person stands up, preferably on a raised surface, and is surrounded by a group of people. That's theatre, it starts there. And you can elaborate on that in various ways, but basically that's it. So any market trader is actually in the theatre, in the entertainment business. A speaker in Hyde Park Corner, or anybody who does that kind of thing, the street entertainers who used to do the London queues, some of them were very, very good. The whole act I used to like was, a couple of times, which was really powerful drama in my opinion, was the Chain Release Gang. This was a group of very rough and tough men, dressed in very shiny

suits, and enormous dark blue boots, and either no shirt or no collar and tie, who worked on Tower Hill in London, and I also saw them, later, at the bottom of Charing Cross Road funnily enough, a little space just at the back of the National Portrait Gallery, a little triangle of what used to be grass - I think its all paved in now - but a good pitch for entertainers and I saw them do it there as well. But on Tower Hill it was most impressive, because it was cold and damp and very exposed – very high up, you could look over most of London, and they would mark out an area, there were about 5 or 6 of them at least, a whole mob, definitely mob-handed. And they were gathered in one corner, and one of them would march out round the square, this is on cobbles or paving, square paves, so it makes a nice noise with hob boots on, and he would mark the area, there's a name for that which I came across the other day funnily enough, a cant - slang - name, because I'm very interested in theatrical slang, I'm collecting a dictionary of it. It's called the... not the vampire, but something like that. But anyway, he's the man who marks out the ring, usually for a boxing fight or something like that, in the open air and he walks around to get the crowd enough space. They do the same thing, actually, street acrobats do the same thing, they walk the space, but that's to make sure there's no hazards on the ground for them before they start doing their dances and acrobatics. Partly to delineate the space, and partly to check the ground and so forth. And that's the first act if you like. And then these Chain Release boys, one of them would get completely tied up in great chunky really heavy chains - I mean, to show how heavy the chain was he'd get it and go 'bang' on the ground with it and it would clank on the stones. And he'd get completely tied up in the chains with padlocks all over the place and then he'd be put into a dirty sack, completely covered in the sack, and then he'd – I can't remember what he'd do after that, but that was probably enough, oh well, there was a hood over his head and tied up, and he was like that. And then he works around on the ground in extreme positions and the others... meantime the others are marching round bottling - collecting money, it's called bottling because they used to collect it in a bottle - but collecting money from the crowd. And eventually he gets himself free and great cheers from the crowd, and then someone else comes along and balances things, balanced a bicycle on his chin as I remember, but things like that, really rough and tough stuff, and very dramatic and very bald – 'it's happening now, like it or not, so put some money in' and that was absolutely wonderful drama in my view, so simple, but it's really, really powerful, it doesn't have to be enormously complicated, it can be quite simple, but you've got to know what to do. I was watching a performer, very rarely am I up in London, I don't very often go up, but I had to be up in London recently and I went to Convent Garden to fill a spare half hour or so and they've got some performers there now of course, and they are doing similar types of things. I quite enjoyed it, but it's a lot more sanitised, a lot more polite. Partly because of health and safety and partly I think because some of the guts have gone out of it, perhaps. Or perhaps they just think they have to be more polite about it, you don't actually have to be polite, not necessarily, it was not a requirement and it doesn't necessarily help. I mean jokes and so on, fine, but then again if you get a good comedian, I used to watch Max Miller, Tommy Trinder, they both used to have houses in Brighton, Max Miller used to go into my local, I used to see him at the bar. People like that, Jimmy Johnson, wonderful drunk act, wonderful man. All those comedians they're not polite at all, they're not kind, not polite and they work tremendously well. So I think the important thing is to find where the element of drama is. Of course I was never doing that, my position was never on the stage, I can't learn lines, I can't 'swallow the cackle' as the saying goes, I could never learn lines properly and am not happy out there really, I'm much happier round the back. But my job as a designer was to get the atmosphere right, literally set the scene if you like, so the actors could do their bit to the best advantage. So I did a bit of preliminary work for them if you like, in getting the atmosphere, setting the scene more or less and then they

can grab it and go to town with it. And that's really what I think it was about. You can do some good things that way of course, it's possible to be exciting, but it is only a set. It's not meant to have a round of applause when the curtain goes up. It does sometimes have that, Leslie Hurry was a designer who did ballet stuff and they used to give him a round of applause, that's overdoing it. Oliver Messel was another great ballet designer, we used to call these things 'Messel-ated designs'. Very rude of us, but then again it's all a bit lush and plush and doesn't really work, I don't think. It's alright for some ballets, but it doesn't work in plays.

JB: How do you feel like stage-management and the role of scenic artist has changed. Do you think it's becoming more lush or more understated?

IA: I think it's probably become totally technical. Almost totally technical. Certainly from what I perceive, the designers... most of them probably never lay a brush on canvas any more. It's large scale engineering on a very complicated scale, and stage management as well, it's computerised to a large extent. I'm sure there are still people touring plays around, I don't get to see many of them these days, as a complete contrast to when I was going all the time, in the right place to see them. Now, it's something of a theatrical desert here in Bournemouth and I don't go to the theatre from one month to the next. I don't go more than twice a year I would think probably, which is really sad, and I haven't been to the cinema since I can't remember when. I've probably seen enough to last most people a last time and I can always remember what it was about and picture some of them. There was some great performances and dramatic moments. Let me tell you about Oedipus Rex and The Critic at the Old Vic. Lawrence Olivier... it opened with Sheridan's The Critic which was a short one act, eighteen century farce, a skit on playwrights and so on, and Olivier is a wonderful... he loved false noses – a lovely false nose, powered up, white powered wig - periwigs, doing his camp best, he thoroughly enjoyed the part, you could see him really revelling in it. And a wonderful denouement after these various gags and so on (there was a play going on, and the critic was criticising it) and they're changing some scenery on stage and Mr. Puff, who is Olivier, is stepping across a piece of scenery which goes up with him on it. He is raised aloft, stuck on this thing, a wonderful piece of comic farce scene. And that closed the first part of the show. The second part of the show is Oedipus Rex, Greek tragic drama, woe, everything is dark and dismal, grey drapes, blue-grey drapes, costume drapes and everything. And there's a magnificent scene in that where Oedipus, who has discovered he's married his mother by mistake, tears out his eyes, happily, off stage, but comes on immediately afterwards, with red eye-sockets, being led on by two young boys, saying, 'Woe, woe' in the best Olivier fashion. And this is in contrast to Mr. Puff going up on the scenery, an hour before hand, is amazing, quite startling contrast. To even have thought of doing those two together is quite shattering, but to perform them both is amazing! Funnily enough, I met a chap in rep who'd been one of the two boys with the Old Vic company and he said it was quite amazing, just before the scene, Olivier would be just off stage, because he put on the red eye makeup without going to his dressing room, there wasn't all that long, and he'd be doing this and chatting to people, talking to people, giving instructions and so on, and just before his cue came he would grab the two boy's arms and go on 'Wooooooe', immediately, bang just like that, just grab them and go on and it was there. The minute before he'd been giving instructions, telling people off, but just woooooof, and straight off. Which I can well believe, because that really was his method. Whereas, in contrast, Ralph Richardson, who was at least as good an actor, but in a totally different way. He took it much more gently and meaningfully I think. And I'm sure it must have taken him a while to get it organised before he went

onto the stage. This same chap was telling me, they did Uncle Vanya I think in the same season he was there, and Richardson used to come off the scene with actual tears in his eyes, which is an enormous contrast of the two styles, both certainly equal in skill and in effect and so forth but by totally different means, entirely different ways of going about it. Gielgud on the other hand, did it mostly vocally I think. I mean, such a voice, such a beautiful voice! I once had the unfortunate experience of walking out on Gielgud when he was watching. It happened when I was working at The Dolphin Theatre, because that's when *The Lady's not for Burning* premièred, and as I said I used to paint scenery in the Theatre Royal paint-frame. We'd got a fairly heavy show coming up, so I had quite a lot of work to do. The trouble with using that frame was that on Wednesday afternoon there was a matinee on stage. The paint-frame is just at the side of the scene dock, beside the stage and it used to make an enormous noise, because it's a vast wooden frame which is about eighteen foot tall and twenty-five foot wide, heavy built frame which works through a slot on the floor by means of a winch which you turn, and it was counter-weighted of course. So you nail the scenery on to this frame, when it's downstairs, wind it up through the floor and then on this first floor level you can paint at eye-level and then wind it up a bit and paint some more, wind it up a bit and paint some more so you can get at the whole 15ft length of the flat without having to get up and down ladders. What you can't do of course is step back and see what you've done, because you've only got about six foot of platform to work in, but at least you can get at stuff very easily. The snag was that because it was a very old paint-frame and in any case I suppose this enormous frame made a heck of a noise when you were winding it up and down. So on a Wednesday, when there was a matinée on stage, I had to know exactly when the interval came so that I could plan my working to wind it to the next stage during the interval and then work away on that and then wait for the second interval and wind it to the next position. And this particular day, this particular week, I timed it – I always got the timings of the plays at the Royal so I knew when the interval would come, which was a very necessary part of the business – I'd finished all I could do, and there was a good half an hour to wait before the next interval and I thought 'I really can't... I'll go'. And *The Lady's not for Burning* was progressing downstairs, and it must have been its third performance, because I think it opened on a Monday and this was Wednesday matinée. And I mean, really, third of all public performances! So I washed my brushes up, nice and quietly and crept downstairs to the area beside the stage in the wings there, and it's all dark, the stage is nice and lit up. And there is Gielgud in his tights and his jaunty little hat that he was wearing, wonderful sight, pacing up and down and thinking, obviously going over his lines. And I've got to go past him down all the way through the scene dock to the doors at the end, the stage door right at the back. So I'm trying to go awfully quietly you see, creeping along, but I don't know whether to go slowly so as not to make a noise, or quickly and go bang bang. And I gently crept past him, without looking at him all the way down, and I could feel his eyes on my back the entire way to the stage door. And I thought, 'What have I done? To John Gielgud! Walking out in front of him, right in front of his very eyes!' Which was really dreadful. But I had been to see him, and I went twice in fact.

JB: Fantastic. Thank you very much for doing this interview. I think we'll just leave it there, thank you very much.

IA: You're very welcome.