

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

<http://sounds.bl.uk>

Richard Iveson – interview transcript

Interviewer: Marc le Deroff

4 December 2006

Theatre-worker. Tommy Bradley; The Diary of Anne Frank; Frank Formby; lighting; nudity; recording equipment; special effects; ticket prices; variety.

MLD: This is Marc le Deroff interviewing Richard Iveson, on 4th December, 2006. Can I just have your permission for the British Library to have copyright of this interview? Yes? OK, thank you. So Mr Iveson, you worked at the Theatre Royal as a volunteer.

RI: Odd job man actually.

MLD: As an odd job man. Could you explain me what your tasks consisted of?

RI: What?

MLD: What your tasks consisted of, as an odd job man.

RI: Well repairs, partly electrician, partly... helping to rig the stage up for who wanted to do any... but I wouldn't entertain trapeze. Well, I wasn't insured for anything like that. And whether they were or not, I don't know. But they used to come and ask me to go up in the line, and anchor stuff up. And I wouldn't do it.

But there was one chap come, and he grumbled about it, because I wouldn't do it. I said, 'No way am I going there', I said, 'because I'm not insured.' I said, 'whether you're insured or not', I said, 'it's your responsibility, not mine.'. And well, we argued the toss. Anyway, it's like a chromium plate, and he used to put it in-between his shoulder blades. And he asked if I'd pull him up on a... when it was his turn on like, lift him up. And lift him up to about eight foot, something like that. And then his wife, or his young lady friend, used to get hold of his ankles and start tipping over and doing, and what-not. And at Monday night he said, 'You're pulling me up too sharp.', he said, 'pull it to the beat of the music. Pulling it up too sharp, you shouldn't do that. Nice and steady.' Tuesday I said, 'Now then, what's wrong with that?' He said, 'You're lowering us down too sharp.' [laughs] So Wednesday he come in, he said, 'Are we going to have it right this night?' I said, 'No because I'm not doing it', I said, 'if you want anybody to do that', I said, 'you can get them. Not me.' I said, 'I've finished. You can do what you like.' 'Well what am I going to do?' I said, 'I don't know.' I said, 'I'm not getting paid, you are.' I

was doing it voluntary more or less. 'And you're getting paid', I said, 'I'm not. So you can find somebody to come and do it.' 'Oh come on, do it just tonight while I get somebody tomorrow. I'll get somebody in tomorrow and do it for me.' 'Aye, alright then.' And I went on... But he went, 'Oh, oh, oh! Stop, stop!' I was looking round to see what was up. And it was all twisted, his rope. And I was pulling him up with his hair!

[Laughter]

RI: It were laughable at the time. So I said, 'Right, that's it now. I've finished.' I said, 'I tell you them... all them ropes were twisted what you've got.' It done three ropes come down and he'd this blade like in-between his shoulder blades lifting him up. I think for me it was just a bit ridiculous what he was doing.

MLD: So being a colliery worker, and being so involved in the Theatre Royal meant that you sometimes stayed from six fifteen after your work, until midnight, could you tell me where this passion for theatre comes from? And what do you think about the importance of theatre for working class people during that period?

RI: Well it's interesting anybody that likes anything like that. You've got to like it. And it's an interesting job, and you meet some interesting folk, and you meet some interesting artists, talking to them. And some are good, and some are bad, and some are indifferent. So you more or less take your pick.

MLD: And so what do you think about the importance of theatre for working class people during that period? Was it something quite important for them or...?

RI: Well it costs too much now for the working class to go.

MLD: Ah, it was too expensive.

RI: Because it's too high.

MLD: Ah I see.

RI: Priced it too high. And they're forced to charge it to pay for the artists aren't they? I remember one incident, there were a play on. And to try and get more in they decided to charge half price for children. And it was only 9p to go in then, at that time – well 9p was a lot of money then. [Laughs] And this woman brought this little kid in, and she wanted a ha'penny change. And there wasn't one in the till, so I had to go next door for two ha'pennies for a penny, for to give her change. And she played hell about it.

MLD: So do you remember how much it was to see a play at the Royal Theatre?

RI: Ain't a clue.

MLD: No, ah it's alright.

RI: But there were some... there were different prices like. Well you could go up in gods as they called it, and they were cheapest seats there. I think it was about a shilling downstairs – old money like, a shilling. Then the circle would be about 1/4, something like that, or 1/6 happen, something like that.

MLD: And could you compare the television's importance and the theatres at that time? And what do you think about it nowadays?

RI: Well I think a live show is better than television actually.

MLD: And what do you... during that period...

RI: But they had quite a show, them artists at that time. They called them Commonwealth Players. And there were one or two made good, and I think they're on television. But who they are, I've forgotten their names right now. I know there were a few that did well.

MLD: OK.

RI: And one of the best plays that was put on, it was The Diary of Anne Frank, and it was interesting from start to finish. There was a lady school teacher from Featherstone, and she was up to her neck in it. All I know, her first name was Fanny, that's all I know. She was a school teacher at Featherstone. And she was up to her neck in it in plays and whatnot. They called him Jimmy Dearlove that were on... the actual chap who was doing the plays.

MLD: Jimmy?

RI: Dearlove. And he were a friend of Claude Hunters, that's how he came to get that job.

MLD: Jimmy Dulove, how do you spell...?

F: Dearlove.

MLD: Dearlove.

F: Dearlove. I think D.E.A.R.L.O.V.E.

MLD: OK, thank you.

F: I think that's what it is.

MLD: When the theatre changed from Claude Hunter to Constantine, from the Royal Theatre to the Las Vegas nightclub, what did you think about that?

RI: Well I thought it was a good thing. I thought it'd pay, but the council didn't like it. And one of the reasons... one of the main reasons I think it didn't pay, because in 1959 they should have built a bus station, and it was cancelled. And what narked the council and all was Constantine weren't used to inviting folk to aught like that. And he just sent invitations out, and not mentioning the wives, thinking they'd bring their wives with them. And as soon as they walked in, 'What's up with the wife, why didn't the wife get one?' 'You should have brought her.' 'Well it didn't say nowt on the invitation.' 'Well' he said, 'I took it as you'd bring her.' And of course that didn't suit councillors.

And then with the bus station being cancelled, it had to go another two year before they decided to... You see you could come out of the theatre into the bus station and... whereas you couldn't in them days, you'd either to go down into Wilson Street, or come into Bank Street.

F: That's right.

RI: So in bad weather it was a walk.

MLD: What is your point of view concerning striptease shows that were on at the Royal Theatre in 1957? And about the fact that performers had to be motionless if they were in plays, due to the rules of the Lord Chamberlain? What is your point of view concerning that – concerning the striptease shows that were on in order to interest people in the Theatre Royal? What do you think about that?

RI: Well there was allsorts on at one time. Some right good comedians on, some good magicians on.

F: Yes, but they did striptease at one bit.

RI: Oh aye, yes.

F: What about that?

RI: They used to paint... they had gold paint, and we had to lift them onto the rostrum. You've never seen nowt like it in your life. Proper ivory gold paint – not fancy stuff. We were at the back like, there was just a space about that wide, and they had to stand – they hadn't to move. Once you set them on the... that was it 'til they pulled curtains to.

F: What did you think about that?

RI: Well I thought they were stupid myself.

[Laughter]

RI: That was my opinion, because they'd all that paint to wash off when they'd finished. And I don't think it was the proper stuff, I think it was only gold paint that they were using. And they were plastered with it.

MLD: And was it something famous during that time – striptease shows? Because it lasted, in 1957, from... maybe for just two months, so it didn't work properly did it?

F: Did it not work, because you didn't do it for a long period of time?

RI: No, no.

F: No. You don't think it... the people liked it? The public?

RI: No.

F: No. It didn't go down very well.

RI: It didn't go down very well. Only that I think they made a bit of [inaudible] out of that Diary of Anne Frank, because they come from Leeds Empire. They had a look at it, and they marvelled over how we built it under the stage, because we'd, like, a kitchen to make, and then upstairs where they were living and whatnot. And then we had a... we'd to make all in the stage for them to go down, on the stage.

F: I think that was the production that he was more involved in, and he enjoyed more, because it was complex, because they did all the sound...

RI: Well they were all railway sleepers.

F: ...and the two layers.

RI: We were carrying railway sleepers up Wilson Street, to the theatre.

MLD: Oh I see. Interesting.

RI: So we daren't build nowt that would collapse or anything of that there – it had got to be solid.

F: It was the first time it had been done, hadn't it? The stage setting with the two levels on it, for the Anne Frank diaries. So it had not been done in theatre before.

MLD: Oh OK.

F: So that's why he's...

RI: And a tape at the back with all the sound recordings that they took. And do you know braces is what they used to fasten the ceiling down with? Them, they call them braces. You hook them on to the ceiling like that and then you screw them into the floor – to hold the scenery up. And we had a bundle of them, and when there was something going off like they'd... you had to bang on the floor to make...

MLD: Ah OK.

RI: ...get that down.

MLD: So apparently the Royal Theatre was quite famous for its special effects at the time.

RI: It were very interesting.

MLD: And what kind of special effects did they have? What kind of special effects?

F: Special effects with the...

MLD: Do you remember?

F: Special effects for Anne Frank, you used to do...

RI: Yes, soldiers marching, and car doors banging, and whatnot, you know. And that were amusing, as they'd a window at back. And it were butchers paper. Now what type of paper it was I don't know. But they pinned it up at the back of the window like that, and dripped plain water, and it looked like that glass as it is now.

F: To make it look frosted.

RI: The people looking through that paper, it made it look like frosted glass.

F: It was special kind of paper that you got?

RI: Well all I knew it were a butchers' paper. And we did a pantomime, one of the pantomimes when Jimmy Ross were playing [inaudible] as he called it.

F: Can't remember that.

RI: Jimmy Ross, he was a nice chap. He got him lodgings with Jack Ashley.

F: No, I don't know.

RI: And he asked me to go to Arkin's at the bottom of town – ironmongers – for some... because the tablets are about that long, and they're supposed to be... what they call them... snails... snails... it's supposed to be a poison for snails.

F: Oh yes.

RI: And gardeners used to use them.

F: Yes, like a pellet.

RI: Well I had to go down into the boiler house and get the poker red hot, and come up and just put the poker... just touch them little things, and [makes whistling sound] shooosh, it's just like snow coming up.

F: [laughs] And that's how you got your snow effect?

RI: Aye. And Jimmy Ross played hell with me. [Laughs] He said, 'I can't get my breath, you're making it too big.'. We had a laugh you know. Well it were all strange to me were such things as that. There was allsorts of game jobs like that.

F: And what about the spotlight? I used to put on the spotlight with the... what did they call it? Where there were two carbons were they?

RI: Aye, carbons... carbons, aye.

F: Yes, to make a spotlight.

RI: Spotlight. Had two 110 volts them.

F: No electric lamps.

RI: One of the singers that used to come... I forget the name... she come from Hull. Marjorie Manner. Marjorie Manner they called her. And you'd to put white spotlight on her, because she'd be in the middle of the stage like, and then she'd go off to the end of the stage at the top of the steps here, and she'd sit on the top of the steps singing. But you'd got to have a white spot on to her. [Laughs] Oh they were keen were some of them with lights.

F: They were good though.

RI: Aye them carbons... them carbons, they run short of them at one time. They were running short, they're supposed to be in the ship carbon... of a ship. Used to adjust them so they just touch... just touching. You know, a brilliant light they were. Brilliant.

MLD: Good. Have you ever talked to a famous actress or actor you really liked, between 1945 and 1968?

F: Was it... who was that singer?

RI: Well I did but... who?

F: Edna Savage was it?

RI: Edna Savage, she was the first. She was the first one... of Las Vegas. First singer.

MLD: Hedda.

RI: I thought she was a lovely woman. [coughs]

MLD: And do you remember any...

RI: I haven't got cold it's... I'm taking some tablets and they make me cough, and my eyes water.

F: They must... when it were Las Vegas didn't Adam Faith and...?

RI: Aye, they come once.

F: Adam Faith and... What was the other chap? Emile Ford.

RI: Well he couldn't sing.

F: Emile Ford.

RI: He couldn't sing. Emile Ford, aye. He couldn't sing, but he found out that his voice sounded different through a microphone, because he was an electrical engineer at that time. And that's how he got on.

MLD: And do you remember anything about Frank Formby?

F: Frank Formby.

RI: Aye, I remember more about Las Vegas that I know from theatre. There used to be a couple come from Blackpool – Harry Rousden and Sylvie Ross. They're supposed to have packed up and took a tailors – an outfitters – at Blackpool to come here. But I've been to Blackpool a time or two, and I've enquired, but nobody seemed to know. Of course they may...

F: They'd be getting on a bit now.

RI: They'd be getting on a lot I think, you know. There was a chap used to come from Sheffield – him and his wife. And you know them mouth organs, have you seen them, they're only about that big. You remember them, you get them out of...

F: The tiny ones.

RI: Little tiny mouth organ. He put that in and he'd play all damn sorts with it. And he'd a plank about that length, and a roller, and he'd stand on it and then he'd jump over and mess about, and it was right good.

F: What about Frank Formby though. Was he George Formby's brother?

RI: George Formby's brother. [Laughs] That were a case. He'd never no money. And I got him digs at our Doris' mother-in-laws. And he was borrowing money all the time. And they booked him at City Variety, at Leeds. He come to Castleford and then he were going to Leeds for the next fortnight. And he went for his... to Joe's mother, he went... he went there for his... his what you call it?

F: Ukulele.

RI: ...Ukulele and some of his clothes. And she said, 'Aye, you can have them when tha' pays me what tha' owes me!'. [Laughs] So he'd to go to Leeds, and he ain't got it.

F: Oh dear. But they used to...

RI: He went to borrow some money at Leeds, and he managed to borrow enough to pay his digs and...

F: Get his Ukulele so he could work.

RI: Aye.

F: They used to... some of the dancers and people that were on at the Variety, they used to stay at our place – our house.

RI: There were one or two of the dancers then, they went to be Bluebird Girls, from... left here. There was one lass, and she used to do a bit of singing and whatnot, and then she started training dogs. And about a fortnight, three weeks after she finished at theatre, she got on television with these dogs – she'd trained them like, and whatnot. She was doing right well for herself.

F: Is that the girl that was a magician?

RI: No, no.

F: Who was a magician then?

RI: Sheikh Ben Eli.

F: No, a girl.

RI: A girl? Oh I don't know, I don't remember that.

F: I thought it was the girl with the dogs. No.

RI: A woman... later, a woman from Doncaster... and she'd a snake, and she used to do a dance with the snake... well it was like a oil cloth on the stage, just say from that door to the... wasn't the length of stage. And she always told me there were only one stage bigger than that Castleford and that was the London Palladium. There were two – one in Birmingham, and Castle Theatre. And I don't know whether they were at Birmingham and then Castle Theatre, or the other way round, I haven't a clue. But they used to say it was one of the biggest stages. And then... Nellie Scares were cleaning then. And she didn't wash the carpet... you ought to have seen the colour on her when she got... [Laughs] she went stark raving mad. She was [inaudible]. [Laughs] Well it had been shut... it had been shut had theatre for quite a few years – I don't know how many years. That other lady would probably know. And when I first started there, handrails and everything were covered in dust. And it was a right mess.

MLD: I can imagine.

RI: They used to grumble at the dressing rooms. They just whitewashed them, all the dressing rooms. It were a right makeshift job.

MLD: Do you still see plays sometimes, and what do you miss from the post-war theatre?

F: You don't go watch plays nowadays, do you?

RI: No, no.

F: No.

RI: Very interesting...

F: But since you stopped doing that it sort of... you didn't go visiting or watching plays, or go to the theatre or...?

RI: I need a bit of prompting.

MLD: Plum tin?

F: Prompting with the...

RI: Sit in the wings, and when they were stuck, you just mention what they were stuck with, you know when they were talking and what not. Because the audience couldn't hear, they couldn't... the audience couldn't. You had book, and following it through – the play like. And that's what they call it – prompting.

MLD: Ah OK.

RI: There was another thing I could never get to the bottom of. I don't know whether your friend would know about it or not. There was a pantomime come, and Claude said to me one of the days, he said, 'Oh', he said, 'be careful with that panatrobe won't you?' 'Panatrobe, what's the hell's a panatrobe?' And I said, 'What is it for?' He said, 'It's a recorder, for recording.' So I'd never heard it afore. And there isn't many that has. Unless there's some of the old theatre hands that knows about it. A chap were going to look it up in the...

F: Dictionary.

RI: ...dictionary. He couldn't find it.

F: What is it? Panatrobe?

RI: Panatrobe.

F: Panatrobe.

RI: Now whether they were kidding me then or what I don't know.

[Laughter]

RI: But I had to be careful with this panatrobe, that's all I remember. Earl Armstrong, he was one of the first... what was it...? I think it was... it wasn't Babes in the Wood. It

was one of them fairytale, and she were out here, and she were knocking on a bit, and she played hell because she wanted to be a fairy.

[Laughter]

RI: And they'd only one sheet of music, and Claude Hunter and Cyril Carr – and Cyril Carr were the piano player – and Claude, he was up to the neck in re-writing music for these club turns and whatnot. They used to go to him to re-write music, and they stopped up all Sunday and Monday morning, making sheets out for music for them. Earl Armstrong he called himself, that one. And there were only three of them when they come. [inaudible] you know.

MLD: So...

RI: I don't know where he dug them up from. But he knew a lot of artists did Claude. And he got the job at Kenley colliery at one time, booking, they have a big club there – booking there. But I don't think Jimmy Corrigan ever entertained him. But he finished up at Blackpool, he died in Blackpool anyway.

F: Who, Claude?

RI: Mmm. I don't know whereabouts. I don't know what he were doing, but he had a lot of friends in Blackpool. He always said one of the dwarfs were [auditor?] at Blackpool Tower. One of the dwarfs, when them seven dwarfs come.

F: Oh that's right, seven dwarfs... Did it start off... when Claude took it over, he opened it up... with it being closed for years, did he start off with variety first, and then do plays?

RI: He started with pantomime first.

F: Pantomime first.

RI: Earl Armstrong.

F: Yes, and then they went on to plays?

RI: There were one or two pantomimes.

F: Yes.

RI: Tommy Bradley. And for timing you couldn't beat that chap, for timing. He used to go into the [inaudible] playing dominoes and having a drink, and he say, 'Right, shan't be long.', and go round back. And he'd walk out of the back door and come in upstairs door, because he hadn't far to walk round. And he walked straight on to stage, do his turn. Then he'd walk off and go back to his beer. [Laughs] He wasn't a second out. He wasn't. It was marvellous how that bloke did it. Of course he'd done it for years I suppose.

And we were in circle bar once when dwarves were there, and there were... what do they call him...? I think they called Arthur [inaudible] I'm not sure – he were a well known rugby player, right well known. And he stood by the circle bar – crossed it like that. And there's a door comes from backstage at that side. And the door opens. He said, 'I'm sure somebody were coming in there.' I said, 'Aye he's come in, he's here.' 'Well I didn't see him.' And he said, 'By gum', he said, 'you'd make a right scrum-half you would, wouldn't you?' He bought him a drink every night he come in. It was like giving a donkey strawberries – I don't know whether donkeys like strawberries or not, but it's a saying. And he couldn't half drink some beer. He used to go in Queen, opposite. And you know how chaps go and stand at the bar like this, they go to the table and just stand like that. And there'd be six of them like that. It were comical to watch them.

F: I don't know.

MLD: So that was very, very interesting Mr Iveson. And I want to thank you for your time, and that's it.

RI: No problem.

MLD: Thank you very much.