Murray Melvin – interview transcript

Interviewer: Dominic Shellard

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Actor. 1950s; audience participation; John Bury; Edward II; Joan Littlewood; stage make-up; Richard II; stage lighting; Stratford East; Theatre Workshop.

This transcript has been edited by the interviewee and thus in places differs from the recording.

DS: Murray, welcome to the British Library. Can I start by asking you how you became an actor?

MM: I don't know really, Dominic. How I did I become an actor? Now, Miss Littlewood would of course say, 'You must never become an 'Actor', you must work against that.'. Well now, after the last War my mother and father helped to start a Youth Club. We lived in Hampstead in North London. The reason for starting the club was, I suppose, to get us all off the streets, and in… what in modern parlance would call 'centred'. The club started a drama section and I became part of that, and we met every week. Now, the woman who ran the drama section was a Jess Harrison, and one week she announced that we would not rehearse the following week, that she was going to take us all to the theatre. She had read that there was a company that she had seen when she lived in Glasgow, they were called the Theatre Workshop, and this company had taken over a theatre at Stratford in East London. Now, she considered them to be the finest theatrical company in the country. So the following week we all met after work and took a long – for those days – long journey to the Theatre Royal in the East End of London. The play we saw was Richard II, and Richard was played by Harry H. Corbett, who much later in life was to become Steptoe in that very famous series. Now, at the same time Richard II was being presented at the Old Vic with John Neville playing Richard. Now, Stratford was run on a shoestring, so there were no long golden cloaks, no long fanfares, no great long processionals coming on stage – just raw Elizabethan language. And you were on the edge of the seat the whole evening. Elizabethan language spoken on the moment, rather than on the breath. I considered that to be the first time I had seen real theatre. It was gobsmacking. Now, we were taken back the next year to see Edward II. That was done on a sloping ramp, the width of the stage. Oh, now, I had never seen that before and neither had many other people. Designed – as was Richard – by the Theatre's then resident designer John Bury, who went on to work at the National Theatre. A sloping ramp with a map of England painted on it, so when Edward was centre stage he was standing in the centre of his England. Oh, it was wonderful! Now, I am going back to… what? '55 – '56, and I've yet to see a classical production that comes up to either of those. And that's what made me determined to try and get myself to that theatre, and

about two years later I succeeded. I obtained a grant to study for a year, and I got my place in a drama school – that old chicken and egg, it still happens doesn't it? You get a grant if you've got a place in a drama school, you've got a place in a drama school if you've got a grant.

DS: Who did you get the grant from?

MM: Guildhall School. But having got both, I then trotted out to Stratford East and said, 'Well, I've got a grant.' And so for a year… 'So if you would take me on as a student, you'd get me free for a year.' Oh, I was in! [Laughs] Poverty stricken – I was in… Gerry Raffles took me in, that's right. And of course, I went as the dogsbody! I mean, I really was the dogsbody – making the tea, sweeping the stage, all that old stuff. And also I was an extra hand to John Bury in making sets. I mean, I did everything. It was very rough and very basic but… I mean, I could go on for hours about that work, doing drains and painting the foyer and all that stuff, but that's what I did.

DS: So what were you first impressions of the theatre at Stratford East?

MM: Oh, well that was extraordinary. I can tell you very clearly - and that's what I noticed in those two classical productions - no footlights, and then no make-up! Now middle fifties that was unheard of, because at that time your productions were mainly painted flats, and then your lighting was lighting those flats from the front to make it look pretty and bring out the colours. I mean, that was the norm. You got to Stratford and there were no footlights. There was often just an open stage, which in those days was still pretty dramatic: to walk in and just see an open stage. You see it all the time now, but you didn't then. You put it in that context, it was incredible! And of course no make-up, because of course the lighting was European. Based nearly all white, very little colour – Piscator, Eisenstein, filmic. Very little front lighting - mostly light from the side of the stage, which of course kept the contours of your face, so you didn't have to go away and paint one on before you went in [inaudible]. You took on your own - going back to Miss Littlewood, 'Stop being an 'Actor'.' You're not… you couldn't hide behind anything, you had to go out there vulnerable. But of course the effect was… always was quite incredible. You sometimes wore make-up… I mean, women mainly wore just a street make-up – a light street make-up. You would use make-up if you were doing something highly stylised like a farce - Labiche. Yes, but then of course you'd paint on your moustache, and you'd paint on your sideburns and you'd push your hair down, but that was legit… But otherwise, no. If someone was playing an old man, you would get away with using the ash from a cigarette just to use as shading round your eyes or just below your mouth. But the first thing you noticed because of that, that there were actually real people on stage. Not covered up with all the paraphernalia of the period. No funny noses, no whatever.

DS: Before we talk about some of the details of the productions that you personally were involved in, I wondered if you could give us a sense of your perspective of what the 1950's were like as a decade?

MM: Oh bloody awful! Well, the early fifties. The breakthrough started in middle fifties. I mean, when did the Beatles start? I mean pop groups start? It was…?

DS: Around about '63.

MM: You see, that was late! It was late! The Twist – it was the Twist that was the breakthrough, and that came over from France, like a lot of other good things. That's before Bill Haley and Rock Around the Clock, it was the Twist that was the start. Oh wonderful Twist – I never stopped! Before that you had a formalised society, you'd got a class society. We've gone back to it now in some ways. But you had 'class'.

Now, I never had what you would call a formal education. Never went to school during most of the War. We followed my Father around wherever he was posted – he was in the RAF. So I was thrown out of school at the age of 14 because I refused to learn. What they actually meant was, I was bored with 'two times two' and all that. I mean urgh got over that. But I'd had been out on the… we all had, of my generation, we'd been out on the streets for far too long – so no formal education. If I had no education and no money, I had no way of getting into drama school. Can you get into a drama school these days without a certificate? No? Yes? Dodgy, dodgy! No, it's terrible isn't it? What have certificates to do with imagination? Miss Littlewood had a theatre of Imagination. And because I had no education – no formal education, I'd never been to a drama school – but I obviously had imagination and so her door was open to me because that's what she was all about. I had no parameters of what was expected, and that went for others in her company. She took us off the streets. She took us off the streets and brought us in and we were educated in a different way. One's education was about increasing your imagination – that was Joan's education.

So, the fifties. You had a society, very formal, very stiff, very boring. London… there was one coffee house just off Shaftesbury Avenue - it's where Tommy Steele started! - oh what is it called…? No, it's too long ago! But that coffee house allowed young musicians to strut their stuff, but that was it! Pubs - the meeting houses of the time - closed at ten thirty! There was a coffee shop at the top of Drury Lane that was open until ten – Cor! That was daring! Now, there was a life after ten thirty of course, but by God you had to have money! Remember, at that time you could only drink after ten thirty if you had food. I mean, it's a world away really isn't it – I can't believe I got through it all! But I mean, if you had money you could go to a restaurant or to a night club, but if you were poor, nothing! You all went home because there was no transport. The whole thing, transport started… I mean, everything – still today – everything's geared to transport, and transport in London generally started to stop at ten thirty and dwindled down to about eleven. Now, if you hadn't got the money for a cab – which we certainly didn't have – you walked. And remember, you had to be at work at nine the next morning. So the breakthrough was enormous in the late fifties period, because the class divisions were breaking down. More important the working class voice was beginning to be heard in its own right. God! How did we get through it all! It was that moment in history – the end of the Second World War – everyone was demanding change. Remember, some of those fighting had been through the First World War, and had come back – those who survived – and were pushed down again! No work, no housing, appalling housing conditions. Now the status quo was no longer acceptable. There had to be change… And that's why the Labour Government was elected, and they brought in the welfare state and the Health Service. It was all part of that breakdown period. So music changed. Attitudes changed and the younger generation wanted their space.

DS: How conscious were you of the advent of television in the 1950s?

MM: Oh very much so. I mean, theatre suffered because of it. It was such a novelty. People stayed at home, they didn't go. Music Hall – that great English tradition – collapsed in that period. There was this new toy, so everyone stayed to watch. Same with the cinema, wrap around screens and sound. And then of course colour! Both for cinema and television. I mean, theatre didn't stand a chance, it lost out. In retrospect it's easy, but I have the feeling that Joan started her audience participation bit because of that. It was the one thing the audience at home couldn't do was answer back. I mean, now they can telephone in, but they couldn't actually answer back. And she went back to that Music Hall tradition in a way, of people joining in. And so audience and stage became family. And that's what… I mean, she started it with A Taste of Honey. It started with Honey and darling Avis Bunnage who created the mother. Avis had a wonderful, comedic skill, and in rehearsals would play certain lines out front, or would do a throw-away line out front. And of course we'd all laugh. And I have a sneaky feeling that Joan realised the potential of that. That you wouldn't normally sit there as you normally did, practically covering yourself with holy water as you entered the auditorium. It was a two-way happening. You know, in those days you would try not to cough and respectfully look down at the actors, and they'd respectfully never look through the fourth wall. Now, Joan broke all that! [Laughs] Well, they'd done that in the earlier days when they were working from the back of a lorry in those village halls and working men's clubs.

DS: I think this is an important point here. Can you say something, Murray, about those early days of the Theatre Workshop, because I know you believe passionately that theatre history tends to, perhaps over-focus a little on the Stratford East period? Can you say why you feel the earlier period is important as well for Theatre Workshop?

MM: Oh yes. You know I'm collating a book at the moment which is about this – the 'art' of the Theatre Workshop. You know, everybody thinks that '53, when they arrived at Stratford-atte-Bow, is when Theatre Workshop started. But the idea had begun way back in the thirties, in Manchester – Salford. They were an agit-prop group – The Red Megaphones. And the leading light of the Megaphones was a young man called James H. Miller, who was later to transform himself into Ewan MacColl, the folk singer. I mean, out on the streets, in front of the Labour Exchange queues, against the conditions in the mills. Political of course right from the beginning. And she carried on that, carried on that. There was always a political element in all the work. Sometimes with a small 'p', but political.

The conditions in the mills in Lancashire and Manchester, I mean, it was so appalling. Oh my goodness me! You know, those young girls on those huge machines, coping with those threads, getting their fingers and their hair caught under the machinery. Oh, I mean it must have been ghastly! But then they had the big strike because management had – as always, and today reflects it doesn't it – more and more work. Same money, longer and longer hours… We're complaining today everybody's working, you know, doing three jobs at once. They wanted to increase the number of machines each girl or woman had to control. They never stopped rushing around repairing, repairing, replacing needles. Working those long hours and a pittance wage, the poor loves. But what they must have gone through. So The Red Megaphones were out on the streets in

protest. But then after a while you see, they realised that it gets much darker up North so much earlier, and so their audiences were limited, because come half past three, it was freezing cold and dark. So that's when the move came to indoors. To start performing indoors of course, they would need then lighting and some sort of set. So out of that move evolved what they called themselves The Theatre of Action. Theatre of Action became Theatre Union, up to the beginning of the Second World War. And at the end of the War those that survived came together again in Manchester. They decided they'd done 'Action', they'd done 'Union', and so what were they going to call themselves? Somebody said, 'Well, what we need is a sort of workshop.' 'A workshop, a theatre…' came from another member. And everybody started laughing. But Joan thought that was a good idea. And so after much discussion that is what they became – Theatre Workshop. Good isn't it? I mean… And of course today everything's a workshop isn't it? Everything's a workshop. Two people gather together over a cup of coffee and they're having a workshop! I mean…!

So there they were, based in Manchester. They acquired an old lorry, on to that was packed the set, costumes and most of the actors. They toured South, Middle and North Wales, the North of England and into Scotland. Did it for years. The physical pressure on them all was just unbelievable! Everything had to be humped into the venue, the set erected and the lighting fixed. Then a very demanding performance with madam out there taking notes, and after which everything had to be dismantled. Then they would get in that lorry and drive to their next venue, or wherever they were putting their heads down for that evening. And as I say, on the journey Joan would be giving notes on the night's performance, and rehearsing. I mean they never stopped! Never stopped! It was gruelling… Oh! The old members of the Workshop would always say to you… They never talked about anything else but theatre. Their own personal… Of course, if you had to go to the dentist, well, you had to go to the dentist, but that was just boring and got in the way about talking about the next production. Morning, noon and night – they just talked theatre.

Now then, Stratford. They played Stratford for a week, two years before the big move. They were presenting Alice in Wonderland. That was for the '49/'50 season. And Gerry Raffles – who was a member of the company – had taken on the task of Company Manager. Well, everybody had their little tasks and you know, you were in the company but then you also had another title, which was either Company Manager, or Designer or Dogsbody, or Tea Maker, or Duty Roster for meals which they had at Stratford! And he was ringing around trying to fill his touring dates. And he called the Theatre Royal in the East End of London – he didn't know it, didn't know it existed. But you know, 'had they got a spare week over the Christmas period?'. And by happenchance they had, and so the lorry did the trip to London.

Now, some… what, two years later, they'd finished the Edinburgh Festival – and they were one of the first companies to establish experimental theatre in Edinburgh, something everybody always forgets! - in what we now call the Fringe. I mean they first appeared in 1946 at the Little Theatre. The Fringe didn't become official – the announcement from the traverse – until 1962! I mean [laughs] Oh, they were…! So they were in digs in Glasgow resting when they held one of their regular company meetings. And Gerry announced that the Theatre Royal down in Stratford was now closed but available to rent. He suggested they should try it. Now, some members were violently against it - Ewan MacColl because he said they would end up pandering to London critics. Sliver of truth there perhaps, in retrospect. But however, the majority voted that they should go. I mean, they were all worn out, they were exhausted. And they were getting older and it was getting tougher you know, and those winters were oooohhhhh! You see, the majority thought that also it would be good to have a space of their own to

rehearse and play, because up 'til then if they started a new play, they would start it in-between those gigs. You know, in someone's front room. So anyway, yes, down south they came. So they took a lease for six weeks, and it was £20 a week – they didn't have the £20, but they took it just to see how things worked out. And as I say in my book, it was six weeks that have never ended, because the continuum is there today. They opened in February '52 with Twelfth Night; they'd been doing that for the schools. Again, they started what we now call 'theatre in education' up and down… You know, it's a vast industry now, isn't it? But Joan and the Workshop started that down there.

[Recording breaks off]