

John Sheppard – interview transcript

Interviewer: Kate Harris

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John Sheppard on his memories of going to the theatre in Manchester, London and Stratford in the 1950's and 1960's; Memories of Manchester Theatre in the early fifties; Memories of going to The Opera House; Festival of Britain production of Shakespeare's Anthony and Cleopatra and Shaw's Caesar and Cleopatra in 1951; John Gielgud's King Lear; Memories of going to The Library Theatre; Memories of the company, Jeremy Brett, Robert Stephens, Joan Heath, Bernard Warwick; Jessie Evans, dir David Scase; Memories of productions including The Quare Fellow; Audiences at The Library; Memories of Laurence Olivier and John Gielgud; Memories of seeing Gielgud performing in A Day by the Sea at The Opera House in Manchester in 1953; Gielgud's arrest; Memories of seeing The Entertainer at The Royal Court in 1957; Olivier's performance; Changing impressions of Terence's Rattigan's work over the period; Separate Tables, The Deep Blue Sea; Kenneth Tynan's reviews; JS view of Tynan's treatment of Vivien Leigh; Changes in the way the media portrays actors; JS impressions of European theatre; Memories of Peter Daubney's World Theatre Seasons in the late 1960's early 70's; Memories of going to see Theatre Workshop at Stratford East; Importance of women in twentieth century theatre; Impressions of Theatre Workshop's production of A Taste of Honey 1958; Memories of going to see the RSC production The Wars of the Roses (1963) and Peter Brook's production of Titus Andronicus (1955).

KH: I'd just like to start by asking you about your theatre going experiences in Manchester. If you could just tell me a little bit about the theatres that you went to maybe.

JS: Well I was born and brought up in Manchester and in started my theatre going really in the first half of the 1950's. I came to London in 1957 so I sort of discovered theatre for myself in a way, really it started by being taken to see The Yeomen of the Guard by Gilbert and Sullivan at The Opera House on a school trip and I was sort quite taken. So I started going to the theatre regularly usually by myself and there was a lot of theatre to see then. There was The Opera House which got all the stuff that was coming into London, in those days they didn't have previews in London things got put into the proper shape in the provinces as they were called. So everything that came into London first of all appeared in Liverpool and in Manchester so one saw all the great things at The Manchester Opera House and one also saw at The Palace, the other big theatre in Manchester, The Royal Opera productions came, again that was in the days when The Royal Opera went on tour. So one saw marvellous productions by them, sometimes conducted by John [Barborolli], who was a big name in Manchester of course you know. So there was an awful lot of exciting stuff to see and The Library theatre was part of parcel of that so you know there was a wealth of stuff.

KH: When you say all the great things came to the provinces. What kind of productions are you talking about?

JS: Well I'm thinking particularly of Michael Redgrave's Hamlet and Peggy Ashcroft in Twelfth Night but particularly The Festival of Britain production of the two Cleopatra Plays, Shakespeare's Anthony and Cleopatra and Shaw's Caesar and Cleopatra and these were mounted by Laurence Olivier and were due to come into London as a big sort of celebratory thing and I saw both of them in Manchester and that was very exciting. One small detail that sticks in my mind about that, in The Caesar and Cleopatra there's a character called Apollodorus and that part was played by Robert Helpmann, the dancer and I remember he had a splendid yellow cloak on and at one point in the play he went to the back which was a sea wall and did a swallow dive off the wall, presumably into the sea you know, things like that sort of stick in one's mind but that exciting to see that. I also remember seeing Vivien Leigh in South Sea Bubble, a play by Noel Coward which was at The Opera House before it came here [London] and also there was... oh that's just gone from my head, but every year The [D'oyly Carte] Opera Company used to come in and if you wanted to see them you had to really get up and get in the queue because on the first day of booking the queue went right down Key Street for The D'oyly Carte, they were in their heyday then you know. Oh yes the other things I remember vividly at The Opera House was John Gielgud in that very controversial King Lear, which was designed by a Japanese designer and it was all sort of rubber with holes in, like that cheese with holes in it, the costuming and he had this extraordinary wig which went all the way round his face and it was... exciting to see Gielgud because of course he was legendary but rather dismaying in this very way out production which I believe he was quite unhappy in. So that was another thing which came to Manchester en route for the West End. Also as far as Music Theatre's concerned I remember seeing a show there which had a very successful West End run and it changed it's title from Manchester and London. In Manchester it was The Barretts and Mr Browning and it changed it's title for the West End and it was called Robert and Elizabeth and that starred Keith Michell and I've still got the recording of that and it was a lovely show which had a long run in the West End, again one saw that in Manchester so one was very lucky you know then. More so than these days.

KH: In terms of what The Library was putting on, presumably that was quite different to what the other theatres were putting on?

JS: Yes The Library of course was small scale and had its own company. It was in the days of Repertory where nearly every town had its repertory company, all alas disappeared virtually entirely but it was a wonderful training ground for actors who'd go and be part of a company for a year or two and do all sorts of play, you know one after the other and learn their craft as it were. The Library Theatre was one of those, it was more distinguished in that a lot of the Reps were rather tatty and you even in those days, you even had twice weekly rep which meant that you'd be doing a play from Monday to Wednesday and then another play from Thursday to Saturday and that just meant that actors had to learn the part, go through the motions really. Or you would have weekly Rep, you would have fortnightly Rep but with The Library it was longer than that. Things used to run for about a month or so which was quite luxurious you know and it was a permanent company so the nice thing about that is that you get to

know the actors, you get to see the same people doing different things and you have a feeling of, we're a sort of small family. There's the audience and the actors who interact with each other in a sort of permanent way and there were then in The Library Company some people who went on to become very distinguished. I remember there was a young, Robert Stephens was part of the company there and so was Jeremy Brett both alas now dead but they did go on to you know quite distinguished work in the theatre, but they were starting at The Library and it was run by a man called David Scase who was very well thought of in Manchester. I remember he, it was sad in a way, to see him eventually in three of four episodes of Coronation Street but that's alright, I mean it pays well. But David Scase ran The Library very successfully and one went there quite often you know to see things. So that was complementary to the big stuff that was going on in The Opera House and so on you know.

KH: So the audience were quite loyal? Did you go and see the same people every time you went?

JS: Yes you did yes I mean apart from the two that I've mentioned Jeremy Brett and Robert Stephens, there were a leading man and a leading lady who were sort of, they lead the company as it were. Her name was Joan Heath and his name was Bernard Warwick, he had a very resonant voice I remember, not a very tall man but had a presence, an actor of the old school in a way and Joan Heath too gave very solid performances, she wasn't charismatic but she was sound you know. If she was in something it was done well. She never became a star nor did he but they were well known and well regarded in Manchester terms in that Library set up you know and they were there a long time. I don't know what happened to them in the end. Well they must of course now be dead but they never, I mean they never made it big in the West End unlike the youngsters, the Bretts and the Stephens. There was also a marvellous actress called Jessie Evans who did have some success in the West End and I remember seeing her in The County Wife, the Wycherley play and I can't remember when I've laughed more, she was absolutely hilariously funny, she was welsh and I understand, although I didn't see that, that she was also an exceedingly good Saint Joan, this plain sort of peasant girl and she captured that very well. I regret not seeing that, but she was there, Jessie Evans. She did have a bit of success in the West End, again she's long since dead and there was also interestingly enough, there was an actor there called David Mahlowe who did a lot of radio work subsequently, he had a very rich resonant voice and he spelt his name with an H in the middle, M A H L O W E and I thought this was curious and I mentioned it to a friend of mine. Actually a school friend of mine who'd got a job at The Library Theatre on the administration side and he said, 'Oh some of these young actors all have a sort of fetish about putting an H in the middle of their names because they think that has some sort of lucky symbolism so David Mahlowe had this H in the middle of his name you know but it didn't do that much for him because he didn't go onto anything that great you know but that was an interesting little detail.

KH: In terms of the type of work that The Library was putting on, what kinds of plays...

JS: A huge diversity that's the thing about it, they really did a lot of different things and of course you don't always remember all the plays you see because sometimes the play might not click or whatever but I do remember that the very first Arthur Miller I saw was at The Library, it was All My Sons and I remember being absolutely steam rolled by the

play you know I'd never encountered anything like it before and came out feeling as though I'd been ground into the ground, extraordinary the power of it and remember of course this is fifty years ago so these things were even more dynamic then because they were new you know. So that was a really, really, notable production that I saw at The Library. The Country Wife I've already mentioned, hilariously funny. Another interesting one which has recently been revived at the Kilburn, at The Tricycle Theatre was The Quare Fellow by Brendan Behan, that Irish writer who drank himself to death at a very early age. The Quare Fellow, mesmerising play and notable in my memory for Colin Welland being in the cast playing the gay lad because, you know The Quare Fellow?

KH: Yes

JS: It takes place in prison on the eve of an execution. And that was you know very sort of compelling stuff indeed and another one that was also interesting, this had an interesting little connection last week because I went to The Finborough Theatre to see a play I've already mentioned to you, not Journey's End, and before we went into the theatre bit the artistic director of the theatre was talking to someone else and they were talking about James Bridie, a Scottish playwright and one was saying to the other, 'all his works are now out of print.' And I thought that was very surprising, so I piped up and said, 'that's really interesting to hear because I remember when I was going to The Library Theatre in Manchester in the first part of the fifties, I saw James Bridie's Mr Bolfry which subsequently was done, or had been before, by Alistair Sim, it's an intriguing play, the devil is conjured up and it's a sort of comedy but with rather sinister overtones as well and the man at the Finborough said that they're going to do a Bridie and Mr Bolfry will probably be the one they'll pick so that was really interesting because I do remember it quite vividly from Manchester and I'm very surprised that Bridie's works are...he wrote a play called The Anatomists which is about Burke and Hare the body snatchers and so on and so forth but he's gone out of fashion. Maybe in the next year or two or three they'll be a big revival of James Bridie, who knows you know, but that was a Library Theatre one that I remember seeing.

KH: Because The Library was quite a new theatre and it was doing quite a wide variety of things, was it attracting a different kind of audience to the other theatres?

JS: Yes I think it was actually, I think it was attracting a devoted audience shall we say, who would be going to production after production after production, a faithful of audience of very serious theatre goers I'd think. Of course that isn't do denigrate the people that went to the big stuff at the opera house I mean I went too but those shows ran for a week and then something else would come in, so you'd get a more diverse audience I think in The Opera House than you would in The Library, they were you know the devotees. It's a bit like the promenaders, you know the promenaders at The Proms, all the groundlings at The Globe, they're regulars a lot of them, and they come to everything come what may, rain or shine you know. So I think that's very nice and of course this is one of the things that the repertory system did nurture this regular audience going regularly to see the people that they knew and it's such a pity that, that really has all disappeared rather you know...Yes.

KH: When you were talking earlier about the big name performers people like Olivier, Peggy Ashcroft, I mean now they're kind of revered as major performers. Why do you think it was that they had such an impact on you when you went to see them?

JS: Well I suppose you could use the word genius in a way I mean I think certainly as far as Olivier is concerned, who did reign supreme in British theatre, I think even over Gielgud. That's not to say that Gielgud wasn't responsible for the revival of the interesting Shakespeare because he was but Olivier had this much wider range of ability in a way and certainly a physicality that Gielgud couldn't match and I think that people like Olivier come on the scene about once every hundred years, I mean the big name before Olivier was Henry Irving and then if you go back you back to Edmund [Kean] and David Garrick and they stand out as being once every century someone like that comes along. I don't think at the moment there's anybody on the scene but maybe in another twenty or thirty years the time will come for another great big starry actor to appear. So I think that really it was the fact that they were so extraordinary, talented and charismatic and talented and there was that star quality and you see in those days of course remember that the charisma that was attached to these people was greater because they weren't as subjected then to all the television interviews, the press intrusion, it didn't happen. I mean you know there was no television really. So they weren't forever on chat shows. The marriage of Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh was rocky for ages but the press never mentioned it. It would be all over the papers these days straight away. So there was a greater mystery about them because they weren't as, they weren't always in the public eye. The allure was greater to see these great names that you really had the chance to see on that stage at that time but you weren't forever seeing them otherwise and I think that, that has rather gone these days, I think we know too much often about performers for their own good you know so I think that was probably why. But of course Gielgud had made a huge reputation in the 1930's with his Hamlet and his Richard the Second and so on. So I mean he was a hugely popular and revered name too, but of course mainly because of the quality of his voice and his huge ability at speaking Shakespeare's verse.

KH: Did you see him in anything apart from the King Lear?

JS: Yes I did. Again this was at The Manchester Opera House and it was a play called, *A Day by the Sea*, by N C Hunter. Nobody would know of it these days, it was a rather Chekhovian piece, set in an English country town with English middle class types. But the interesting thing about that is that, that production in Manchester coincided with John Gielgud's troubles. When he was arrested for importuning for an immoral purpose [laughs] as it used to be called and one can smile these days but in those days, you know, it was a major, major disaster if your name was all over the papers from that point of view and of course he was fined. I remember being in the RAF at the time doing my National Service although luckily for me, I was based at Ringway which is now Manchester Airport so I wasn't that far away from town and I could still get to things you know. But I mean questions were asked in Parliament about whether his knighthood should be taken away and he was opening in *A Day by the Sea* and this was all happening. Well it did open and I remember going and when he came on, there was the most enormous round of applause and welcome to him which must have been nice. But there's an interesting story about...well two interesting stories about that. Sybil Thorndike was in the company and when he turned up after all this publicity she gave him a kiss and a hug and said, 'what a silly bugger you've been.' Which was fun and the

other thing is there's a pub in Stratford Upon Avon called The Dirty Duck which has got all the, on the walls, photographs of the actors who have appeared at Stratford Upon Avon and of course John Gielgud was among them and when this all broke out, the landlord at The Dirty Duck, removed his photograph. Peggy Ashcroft stormed across to the theatre and said, 'unless that photograph went back forthwith no actor from the theatre would ever set foot in that pub again.' It went back. So that was *A Day by the Sea* which again was doing its try out in Manchester when all that fuss was going on.

KH: Can you remember Gielgud's performance in that? Did that make an impression on you?

JS: It did yes because he was playing a sort of civil servant type, very convincingly dressed in a suit with a wig, a very sort of wig of the period, 1950's. It was an elegant performance. There was a sort of certain melancholy to it. It was someone, if I remember rightly, who was hopeful of things which didn't happen. Very Chekhovian in that sense, it wasn't a play that set the Thames on fire but it was a pleasing piece and it was well written. It had Ralph Richardson in it and some really very distinguished actors, so it was a play that all the Tennent organisation. H M Tennent were the people who ruled the West End from the point of view of productions. I mean they put all their big guns behind it and really cast it to perfection and it went down well in Manchester I remember and it ran reasonably in London. Not for a very long time but things didn't run then for years and years, if you ran for a year you were doing very well in those days, so it had a respectable run but it's not been seen since. The National Theatre have never revived it but it was an elegant performance I remember. Mellifluous and you know captivating really, yes.

KH: Did you have a sense of new drama coming in, in this period or not so much?

JS: No not then. I don't think then, if I'm talking about my time in Manchester which was...I mean I left Manchester in '57 so I'm talking about the first half of the fifties really. No that big breakthrough of the sort of kitchen sinkery if you like, happened in the second half of the fifties if I remember. I do remember coming to London in '57 and I do remember that *The Entertainer* in which Olivier was starring, which Osborne had written was the most colossal success.

KH: Did you go and see that?

JS: Yes I did. As a matter of fact I saw it more than once. I saw it first of all at The Royal Court and then it went into the West End and had a bit of a run in the West End but what I remember about that was... apart from the astonishing performances in it, not least him. It was at The Royal Court and it was due to finish at The Royal Court and as far one knew that was going to be the end of it and I'd only just got down into London a few weeks before so I was down in the returns queue outside the Royal Court theatre, four nights on the trot.

KH: Oh gosh!

JS: And each time I got to, you know, within a few people of being at the front of the queue and the fourth occasion, which I think was virtually the last performance, or the Friday of the last performance, I actually got to the front. I was the next one. The next ticket that came in was mine and there was about ten minutes to go before curtain up and a woman, I can still remember what she looked like now... she had glasses and she came in and positioned herself just ahead of me, sort of as though she was lingering, you know and someone came in with a ticket which she went for and we were all...I couldn't believe the effrontery and nor could the people behind me. We summoned the manager of the theatre and pointed out, you know, what she'd done and how disgraceful it was and I remember him, you know sort of backing us up and saying, 'you'll have to give this ticket up' and she was adamant that it was her ticket. He removed the ticket from her hands, literally tore it from her hands and gave it to me, well I paid for it of course and in I went and saw *The Entertainer*, you know but that was an amazing performance again, you know, by him.

KH: What do you think made it so amazing?

JS: Well because it was so unlike anything he'd done before you know, this song and dance man, this awful performer, Archie Rice who is terrible. You know *The Entertainer*?

KH: I've read the play yes.

JS: Who's terrible, I mean he's fourth rate and knows it, that's the devastating part about it but Olivier had got all these routines that he did you know with the top hat and the gap tooth and the cane these louche sort of suggestive jokes that he made which went down like lead weights and he'd got all this of to perfection. This is Laurence Olivier you know, who we'd admired as Hamlet, Anthony and Coriolanus, and all these great classical parts showing this colossal versatility, you know doing *The Entertainer* and of course this was also you know sort of break through drama too. *Look Back in Anger* had already happened.

KH: That's '56 *Look Back in Anger*

JS: That's right, so just beforehand, *Look Back in Anger*, and that of course was the big watershed, *Look Back in Anger* was the pivotal thing really when all the new drama came in and all the so called Northern, working class, for want of a better word, actors, took over from the polished performers that had reigned in the West End hitherto so people like Tom Courtney and Albert Finney and people like that were coming into their heyday with the gritty realistic drama often based in the North of England and people like Terence Rattigan were out in the cold. Noel Coward was out in the cold too rather.

KH: What did you think of Terence Rattigan at the time? Of his plays that is?

JS: Well people enjoyed his plays. I enjoyed his plays but I don't think we realised at the time that they were actually as good as they are now reckoned to be and you know there's a great deal of insight and sensitivity in Rattigan that I think was often overlooked maybe when his plays were first seen and of course, you know, there's been more disclosure about his personal life and the fact that oh what's it called? The one...

KH: Separate Tables?

JS: No that's another one I saw at The Manchester Opera House, yes Separate Tables, Margaret Leighton doing an astonishing double, this hugely sophisticated, beautiful woman in the first play and this dowdy mother dominated creature with the awful hair, you know in the second one. I couldn't believe the transformation that had taken place in the course of an interval you know. No The Deep Blue Sea was the one I was thinking of and of course The Deep Blue Sea we all now know was based on the fact that one of Rattigan's boyfriends did commit suicide by putting his head into an oven, you know. Well of course that wasn't known then. All these things were never mentioned, you know.

KH: So you think retrospectively that's had an impact on the way you see his plays?

JS: Yes I do. I think it has rather. Yes I think he had a lot of insight into the human condition I think and I think we're more appreciative of that now than maybe we were at the time. He was very popular he did awfully well until he was knocked off his pedestal by the...and then everything got into a balance didn't it? Rattigan had a revival and Noel Coward had a revival and everything lived sort of side by side, so it wasn't one thing excluding the other. They were in a sort of balance as it were, you know. But it was an exciting time for all that to be happening too, all this new stuff coming in, you know.

KH: Were there other playwrights, whose work you particularly admired, coming through in that period? Or that you didn't like!

JS: There was someone that I didn't admire actually and Kenneth Tynan of course campaigned endlessly for Brecht. Well I've been to all the Brecht plays that have been written almost. I've seen some of them more than once. I've even seen Baal which isn't often done, but I saw Peter O'Toole do that and the marvellous thing is now, that I feel that I need never go to a Brecht play again in my life because he just bores me stiff and I know that that's not a view that's shared by a lot of other people but I've just never took to Brecht and he was at this time championed by Tynan and I did try you know, I did try and I think that if you've tried two or three times with a play and still find you know, you've done...what I can't bear are people who go to something and then dismiss the whole of the works on the experience of one play you know.

KH: You mentioned Tynan. Did Tynan's reviews have a big impact on you at the time?

JS: Of yes, yes. Yes one opened the paper on Sunday- it was the Observer wasn't it that he wrote for- for the latest Tynan view and he did write so brilliantly so that what, he had persuasiveness I think because of the quality of his writing. Although I think he was very unfair a lot of the time to people. He was certainly very unfair to Vivien Leigh, he had it in for her and he accused Olivier of sacrificing his own talent in order to...and I think that was very unfortunate because Vivien Leigh actually was a much more accomplished actor than he would give credit for, notably her Lady Macbeth with Olivier at Stratford Upon Avon, was remarkable, as was her Lavinia in Titus Andronicus with him at Stratford Upon Avon, both of which I saw. And she gave considerable performances, you know and of course you know, when the need arose she could be the most beautiful woman you'd almost ever seen. I think she was, you know. I mean everybody knows her for *Gone with the Wind* but she did a lot of notable stage work too you know that's been undervalued I think. And then of course she had all the psychological problems that, you know, brought about the failure of the marriage. They were like royalty you see those two, like royalty, then, when they were in their heyday. The King and Queen of the theatre and they lived it up you see and again it was hugely glamorous. It's not a word that's used now is it really, much? You don't talk about people being glamorous anymore. It's a sort of bygone thing isn't it? I don't think it exists now really in a way, glamour.

KH: I was talking to one of the actors who I've interviewed about this and he was talking about how they sent taxis to the stage door to collect the actors, to create an air of mystique for the audience and he said that, that was completely gone. He agreed with you about that.

JS: Absolutely and you know, nobody like that, Olivier, Gielgud, Vivien Leigh, Margaret Leighton, they would never be seen in anything but marvellous clothes, you know, suit for the men, the height of fashion for the women, perfect hair dos. Absolutely this image was constantly being projected, you know nowadays it's trainers and jeans. It wasn't then, it was collars and ties, haute couture for the women and this of course you see, this glamorous thing was kept going because as I said earlier on, there wasn't this constant exposure on chat shows and Parkinson and I'm a Celebrity get me out of whatever it is, you know. That didn't happen.

KH: You mentioned Brecht and I'm just thinking about other foreign influences at the time like Ionesco, Beckett, people like that. Did that have much of an impact on you, their work that was put on?

JS: Well Beckett, of course Beckett was the 50's. I don't recall it. I mean Peter Hall did it in London and I think it was in London...yes it was because it's now the 50th...the 60th... it's the anniversary this year of, he did it at Bath recently for the 50th anniversary so it was 1955 so that was before I went there and it had finished by the time I got there. I did see it subsequently not that long afterwards, I think at Stratford East, that Joan Littlewood was running... and was bowled over by the play I must say, but certainly in the early part of the fifties when I was living in Manchester, there wasn't much in the way of...

KH: That hadn't reached Manchester?

JS: No, No, No. Again down here [London] when I was down here there were some things that I did see which were considered to be more radical than the usual fare that we were presented with. Although it's true to say in this country that European drama has been undervalued and not really very well represented on the British stage but I remember seeing Rhinoceros by Ionesco, that also had Olivier in it, that was at The Royal Court, so you see Olivier was aware of this change, he was, Gielgud caught up in the end. But Olivier was very much aware of what was going on. So there was Rhinoceros and I remember seeing the Pirandello, Henry the Fourth, then early on, mistaking it first for the Shakespeare, I thought I'm going to see Henry the Fourth... and that has been done since. But not really very much in the way of European drama, Chekhov of course, you know, and what there also was, this was a little bit later on but what there also was in the 60's and into the early 70's, there was that wonderful season at The Aldwych, the world theatre season, that was presented by Peter Daubeny, an impresario who had the resources and the interest to present a season for about six or seven weeks, with a different company coming in from different countries all over the world. So you know one got a Greek company doing a Greek play, a Russian company doing Chekhov, an American company with the method, a French company and you know and that would happen excitingly and that was very good and you had translations...there were sets of earphone you could put on if you wanted to hear a simultaneous translation going on and that was very popular. When Peter Daubeny died, that died with him and nothing like that really has happened very much since. We don't really I think even now do enough in the way of theatre from Europe, you know in a general sense, I think we're a bit insular still.

KH: You mentioned Stratford East and Joan Littlewood. Did you see a lot of Theatre Workshop's things.

JS: Quite a few. We used to traipse down there on the underground and tramp down those little Coronation style streets which I think have all since gone, it's been redeveloped, to the theatre there. Yes I can remember vividly going down there to see Oh What a Lovely War, and being absolutely sort of stunned by that, the way it was done with this Pierrot group and this radical use of songs to put the message over, it was really quite devastating and also A Taste of Honey.

KH: Did you go and see the first run of that?

JS: Yes, yes and that went into the West End as well. Yes Murray Melvin and was it Rita Tushingham on stage? I can't quite remember, it was certainly Murray Melvin who did the film. Robert Stephens was in the film too. So that marvellous, that transferred into the West End as did Oh What a Lovely War and did, I think Things Ain't What They Used to Be, which I saw there as well and Sparrows Can't Sing and this of course was the undoing of Joan Littlewood, she had this great big success and we were all traipsing down to see the plays in Stratford and they were becoming more and more successful and popular. Then they would transfer into the West End with her company and she'd have to start all over again. Her success really was her undoing in that sense and in the end she gave it up and went off to France and believe it or not. Joan Littlewood, this left wing, more left wing than you can get, married a French aristocrat! [laughs]. And

of course she began in Manchester didn't she? She was a moving force in Manchester but that was before I was theatre going in Manchester, that was in the forties. No she was an amazing woman actually, amazing woman and I think on the whole you know if you think of theatre over the span of the twentieth century, it's been women that have been almost the biggest influences in a way.

KH: That's very interesting. What do you mean when you say that?

JS: Well I mean there was Miss Horniman if you think of Manchester, running the Gaiety [Theatre] but then later on in London there was Lillian Bayliss

KH: At the Old Vic.

JS: At the Old Vic, responsible for the creation of The Old Vic Theatre and Sadler's Wells you know, because she was working in tandem with Ninette De Valois and you know in those early days things used to alternate, one week they'd be at The Old Vic and then they'd trundle over to Sadler's Wells and that became much too cumbersome so in the end The Old Vic was for the plays and Sadler's Well was for the ballet but I mean that was the precursor of The National Theatre all that stuff, that was Lillian Bayliss and then there was Joan Littlewood doing this astonishing work down at Stratford, again revolutionising the way theatre was presented and the way audiences were incorporated into it and engaged into it. So you know they were, I've mentioned four names, Miss Horniman, who was way back, Joan Littlewood, Lillian Bayliss and you know they were huge I think.

KH: Just to go back to A Taste of Honey, did you find that a kind of a surprising or shocking play when you saw it? Or not?

JS: Well I didn't personally but I remember it went into Wyndham's Theatre and some friends of mine from Manchester were coming down for a stay and I'd been big friends of theirs in Manchester and we'd gone to the same sort of amateur theatre company in Manchester then so I thought that this would be a nice play to take them to [laughs]. I think they were shocked beyond measure so I realised by their polite reaction at the end that maybe I should have gone for something a little bit less explicit than, because it seemed to be quite explicit then, it wasn't that much really but it was an awfully good play. The interesting thing is isn't it, that she never had another success. She had one more play The Lion or something, I can't remember the exact title, which had oh nowhere near the same success and that was that with Sheila Delaney, she sort of disappeared from view, she's still around but she's not fulfilled that early promise. I suppose everybody's probably got one play in them but it's sustaining it isn't it? But I do love it, I love the film, in a nostalgic way. Have you seen the film?

KH: I haven't seen the film, I've read the play.

JS: If you get chance to see the film, because the film opens when the titles are running, it's sort of a bus journey around Manchester and all the well known sites in Manchester you see on the screen while the credits are coming on at the beginning. It's Dora Brien of course, wonderful as the mother, Rita Tushingham and Robert Stephens yes and Murray Melvin, yes, with that long [Plantagenet] face.

KH: What do you think it was about the play that you liked so much?

JS: Oh well I think it's the marvellous way that Delaney captured the northern humour within the very sad context of this girl who is so lonely and this slatternly mother who is only interested in the next boyfriend and she can't keep her boyfriend for very long either and this louche boyfriend that Robert Stephens played with the funny eye and it's intensely sad, she's made pregnant by this black sailor who then disappears out of her life, befriended by Geoffrey isn't it? The Murray Melvin character who is as camp and gay as can be but has this heart of gold so it's incredibly sentimental in a way, you know. I mean he's a bit like the tart with a heart of gold in that way, but she finds this friendship and they're dependent on each other, you know. But it's laced with Northern humour which gives it a grittiness so you've got the sort of treacly stuff but you've got the gritty as well and I think that's quite potent you know and I just love it. I think it's a marvellous play and I just wish it could be revived on stage but I don't know if it ever will be you know. I think it's the sort of thing that The National should have a go at sometime. But you've really got to have actors who can get that northern special sort of you know...some of the people from Coronation Street, get them in and do A Taste of Honey, you know [laughs].

KH: And you also saw a lot of the RSC stuff didn't you?

JS: Oh yes.

KH: Was that in the late 60's?

JS: And beforehand I used to go to Stratford and see, when it was the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre before The RSC came into existence and one went and saw the plays at Stratford and then The RSC came on the scene and of course that was so exciting with The Wars of the Roses which was the...

KH: Did you go and see that?

JS: Yes all in one day I remember. Morning, afternoon and evening, I wouldn't be able to do that now. I wouldn't have the stamina now but I did then and that was 1964, that was the... centenary, 1564, yes the four hundredth anniversary. Some of that is on this new record that's been put out, The Essential Shakespeare. David Warner, big, big star, his Hamlet, his Hamlet for students, with an immensely long scarf, and all the students sort of flocked to it because it was...his Hamlet was speaking directly to them, you know, it was a sort of generation really. I found him a bit of a plain actor really in a way,

perhaps I mean I was a bit older, I was beyond student then. But it was a notable production you know. As was *The Titus Andronicus* that I've already mentioned, that was there with Olivier, and that one, one had never seen the play before you know really, there was nowhere near as much Shakespeare around in those days. Peter Brook directed it and it was an astonishing production and you know, the plays so gory with all these dreadful things that happen. They had a team of St John's ambulance men all around the theatre because at every performance people were fainting. The worst moment apparently, I sat through it open eyed but even so, the worst moment of the performance was when Titus chopped off his own hand and he turned upstage and then this sort crunch sound and that was when people went down like nine pins [laughs]. But that was very exciting, that did come to London and I saw it again in London and that's when, when I saw that in London, that's when I stood as close as I am to you, to Elizabeth Taylor and it was in the days when she was married to Mike Todd and it was the interval and he'd gone to the bar to get some drinks and she was by herself and I was standing next to her because I was by myself. And the thing I remember about it particularly, she was devastatingly beautiful but the thing I remember most about her was the deep, deep sort of purple almost, eyes, her eyes were a deep, deep blue which were quite amazing you know. So I stood next to Elizabeth Taylor at *Titus Andronicus* of all things but yes so that was notable. That was notable. Lots and lots of good things you know.

KH: I think those are all of my questions that I was going to ask you. Have you got anything else that you'd like to add about the period or anything? Any playwrights or plays that I might not have managed to find out about! [laughs]

JS: [laughs] Yes well it's a question of racking ones brains isn't it. I think I did mention all the plays that stick out...oh a marvellous Christmas show that I remember at The Library, they did a production of *Pinocchio* which used all the space, I remember people coming off the stage and down the gangways and so on and so forth and that was something that one hadn't seen before much and that was joyous. I remember that one rather vividly. I'm sure as soon as you've gone, or the tape has been switched off, I'll probably think of all sorts of other things but I can't at the moment think of anything although things do sort of come up and down in one's memory. It's been a nice sort of reminiscence about those days [laughs].

KH: That's great thank-you. Absolutely fantastic. I wish I had a memory like yours [laughs].

JS: Well those were the days when things made big impressions. You can see a play now and forget it next week [laughs].