

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Richard Foster – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Sarah Burbridge**

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Theatre-goer and amateur actor. Acting; censorship; The Caretaker; musicals; Music Hall; Oklahoma!; Harold Pinter; protest plays; Sheffield theatre; television; theatre-going; touring.

SB: OK, first of all Richard, I just wanted to check that it's OK for the British Library to hold the copyright to the recording and the transcript of this interview?

RF: Perfectly all right, yes.

SB: And it will be posted on the website as well, that's OK?

RF: That's fine, yes.

SB: OK, first of all, how did you become interested in the theatre?

RF: From a very early age I was in a family, again, my parents were very interested, always interested in entertainment. My father stage-managed many of the amateur shows in Chesterfield where I was born, and my mother was a very good pianist and contralto singer. So we have really been in it... I was involved in it from a very early age. My first play was when I was ten in a festival of one-act dramas in Skegness, which was highly rated throughout the country and many people came from - and societies - came from all over the country for this one-act play festival which went on for a week like in many places now still [inaudible] they'd have in Sheffield and so on. And I was just a young American boy in play called Happy Journey by Thornton Wilder, which was an American play so I had to talk [imitates accent] with a drawl, and a lot of that was done to mime. Dialogue, but mime of opening a door, closing a door, driving in a car which was just four chairs and sort of, as the car set off you leaped forward and leaned back et cetera. So that was my first experience.

SB: Would you say that was quite different for the time? The use of mime...

RF: It was actually... We won an award called the Elizabeth Allan Trophy which... Elizabeth Allen was quite a well known actress and was on a panel show called What's

My Line?, many many many years ago, and it was won for the most, for the best original play. Right? There wasn't a lot of that sort of thing done at that time, and so yes, it was quite unique I think. Quite unique for that time. I remember one of the winners was a very famous play called Juno and the Paycock, which I can't remember much about, all I can remember is the name, and the lad that won the prize for the best actor under 21 pipped me by half a mark! [Laughs]

SB: What was the name of that, sorry?

RF: Juno and the Paycock.

SB: Juno and the Paycock.

RF: It has been done, and it's still being done by amateur groups but I've never seen it since.

SB: As a teenager in the sort of post-war period of theatre, did you feel that it gave you an outlet to express your views and how you were feeling at the time?

RF: It did in a way, it was one way of - in my teens - it was one way of a soap box thing. When I was in a group then for quite a few years, and we did semi-religious and semi-protest stuff.

SB: Oh right, what kind of things?

RF: We did, we did things like, oh dear me now... Wear the Cross was one, which was about the Fourteen Stations of the Cross, which was done again in stylised drama and that was good for me because at the time I was quite an angry young man and didn't believe in, you know...

SB: It's funny you say that, as I don't know if you know the play Look Back in Anger?

RF: Yes.

SB: They called that the theatre of the Angry Young Man.

RF: Yes.

SB: Is that... would you say that kind of thing reflected how you felt at the time?

RF: Yeah, I think it did. I know at the time as well we did another play called People of Nowhere which was about the refugees after the Second World War, and that was a play about a family who were living in a shack et cetera et cetera and they'd applied to go to America, and it was found that the daughter of this family, she was the only one they wouldn't let go because she got TB. And the whole family - I was one of the sons, Tadek [?] in it, and I was sort of strong protest again, about the fact that we were going to be split as a family and my sister was going to have to be left behind and so that was another protest of splitting up families, et cetera. At the time when families needed to be together after the war, particularly refugee families to build a new life for themselves, you know? And she was being told by the authorities, 'No- you can't go America, you'll have TB' et cetera - and it was a health problem and this that and the other, but it was written by a chap who was - or had been - a refugee, called James Bramsen and it was a very moving... And there was there was quite a lot of violence in it as well, and a person was killed in it and so on because it was in a refugee camp where we were was supposed to be and so on, and there was a lot of violence and pillaging and things.

SB: Would you say that was quite innovative for the time, sort of the emergence of violence on the stage?

RF: Yeah.

SB: Especially more gritty violence?

RF: Yes, it was. Yet I don't think we enjoyed the actual being violent ourselves. We sort of... In those days things weren't videoed, I think if it'd been videoed we'd probably have cringed, you know? And thought 'Oh my god! Did we do that, did we actually do that? You know, did we actually say those words?'

SB: Did you find that the audience were quite shocked/had quite a shocked reaction?

RF: It took a lot of people... quite a few people walked out.

SB: Really?

RF: Yeah. Quite a few people walked out. Whether they couldn't cope with the violence or whether they couldn't cope with the emotion of it, whether they couldn't cope with the fact that they had family, possibly, that had been in that situation. But people did, we had a quite a rave review of it actually in the local press as being - again - a little bit...

SB: Out there?

RF: [Nods] Out there. Bit way out. A little bit, you know?

SB: Talking about these more innovative elements of the plays and expressing your protests, obviously at this time there was still the Lord Chamberlain who was censoring plays, did you find this frustrating or were you as an actor unaware of the influence really?

RF: I think, I think at that time in my life I was unaware of the influence, but we were also of course... The Lord Chamberlain didn't get round to Church Halls and School Halls and that's where we did quite a bit of ours. We were a little touring company. We took our own spotlights for this and this sort of thing and costumes et cetera. All in a van with two or three cars and this is how we did it, and we probably played sometimes to 20/30 people. In the round, on the floor of a hall or inside a Church et cetera, you know?

SB: So, in that respect would you say that the smaller touring companies might have been slightly ahead of the time than more mainstream because you could get away with things like that?

RF: Yeah. It's rather interesting that people say that 'getting away with it'; we didn't even see it as being, not illegal, but revolutionary. It was our beliefs, it was we read a play or our producer read a play and said 'This would be good for us, we can express ourselves this way,' et cetera. I think a lot of us were just in for the dramatic. [gestures emphatically] We were in for the sheer adrenaline fix that it gave everybody as well. That was another part of it. I think some of us probably took it more seriously than other people, in the sense of a protest or whatever. But I'm certain most of us enjoyed acting it. [emphatically] Really acting it. Really getting the character, really getting a deep sense of belief in that character. And learning how to switch on and switch off of course as well...

SB: From the character?

RF: From the character to a normal finish... at the end of the thing we'd pile everything back in the van, drove to the nearest pub and had a pint! [Laughs] And you know, that was the way it was done. That was the way it was done.

SB: Did you have a favourite British post-war play or dramatist?

RF: [Pause]

SB: Anything that particularly...

RF: Well somebody - and I think I've mentioned this before - later on in the... Where would it be? This would be, this would be [pause] early sixties, was it sixties? Seventies probably, it would be. Just going back to that and it's just been done in Sheffield: The Caretaker by Harold Pinter. We went to see that and I was, not in my teens then, I was

in my twenties. But we went to see *The Chairs* for one and *The Caretaker* all in one night at the old Sheffield Playhouse. And I couldn't cope with it at all. It didn't do a thing for me then. It's been on again, *The Caretaker* has. Wonderful. I think I've grown up now. I don't know whether or not at that time I was either too young for it or it was too far advanced for me.

SB: What didn't you respond to, did you just not like the play as a whole or...

RF: I just couldn't cope with the setting of it or anything. It was very wordy, which didn't mean a lot to me at that time. Now it does but it didn't then.

SB: How old were you?

RF: Let me see. I would be twenty [pause, mumbles] I would probably be 23, 25! 25. And still involved... But I moved on in drama a little bit then, even from the days when I was only 15/16. Even at that age, when I was 15/16 which would be roundabout 1959/60, I was doing pantomime as well, at the youth club. So I was involved in theatre at amateur level but loved pantomime. I enjoyed the applause, I enjoyed the audience laughing at me as well. You know, laughing at the situation.

SB: So you preferred that side of to the more serious Pinteresque plays?

RF: I think, yeah, but we'd already done in between that I was in another drama group that we did the protest stuff and I think pantomime, possibly because – again – you're with friends that you're with most of the time, youth club and stuff like that. And you enjoyed their company as well. It was what people call these days 'We had a great crack at it' you know, it was good crack. Everybody together and made up lines in pantomimes and put ad libs in and things like that, which pantomime allows you to do that. Whereas it doesn't in a proper scripted play, serious play, whatever.

SB: Just to go back to what you said about the difference in seeing *The Caretaker* and then now, do you think audience reception of that play has changed as well?

RF: I do. Very much so. I think it was very... I'm not sure when Pinter wrote this originally, but I think it was - for our age group it was - early and I think for a lot of people it was... And I think a lot of people came out and said it was wonderful but didn't understand it as well. And I think that happens in the theatre quite a lot still, that people go to see something and don't always understand it, but because the acting's been good or the set, or it's somebody that they know, in the sense of a professional actor/actress that is on television, they come out and say [imitates] 'Oh it was absolutely wonderful!' you know? And sometimes you think 'Well, I wonder whether they understood it all?!' I wonder whether they did really mean it, it was [inaudible] they say it because everyone around them is saying it. I think there's still little bit of that in the theatre. I think theatre now and theatre audiences are more honest.

SB: Right, so do you think there was an aspect back then, of critically everyone jumping on...

RF: I thought there's a certain amount... This is one of the reasons why the Playhouse in Sheffield was actually closed and The Crucible was built, because The Crucible they said was going to be the theatre for Everyman. Right? Anybody in Sheffield could then go in The Crucible and sit down... It doesn't work that way. [pauses for drink] It doesn't work that way. Theatre is for everybody, but not everybody wants theatre. Not everybody understands the theatre as 'The Theatre'. Some people enjoy being entertained in a working men's club, there's nothing wrong in that, they enjoy coming to our pantomimes, say, that never go to the Theatre all year but they always go to see our pantomime. Tradition - whatever you like. But it's always a bit of fun and bit of a laugh. They throw dough out and the kids have their bucket game and all, you know what I mean, it's all... But The Crucible never really took off for what I call 'the everyday man', it was still, a lot of it was still a selected audience. But I do honestly think now, because there's been more on the television, and because there's been certain films that have been of a protest nature, et cetera, and of a thought nature, you know - people think 'Oh yeah- he's got a point there!', not just about being entertained, a moral in it or whatever, I think more and more people do enjoy the arts more and do enjoy the live theatre more. Not as many as there ought to be, 'cos theatres are still struggling, very much so for certain things, but I do really believe that there are more and more people that enjoy the live theatre.

SB: How would you compare that back to the post-war period in terms of the people being interested?

RF: Well the post war period was... people got back into it then. There was a period from after the war: late forties, through the fifties. People were desperate for some entertainment. All they'd had was Chamberlain or Churchill on the radio listening, 'We are moving into Russia' or whatever, and all this sort of thing and there was a certain amount of entertainment still, there was the Music Halls and things like this and there was quite a few comedians around in those days, but the actual plays I don't think there was as many then and they started to build up again and of course repertory companies came in as well. So you got actually two plays in a week. May have been an hour and a half play or something like that, but a small repertory company of probably a dozen or 15 people in it that were running two plays at the same time. You got one play at the Playhouse, Monday/Tuesday and it changed end of the week to another play and they ran these two for two or three weeks. And I do think people were quite... not desperate, I don't think the word is desperate, but needed to be taken out of themselves and needed to be transported into a bit of a fantasy world after the heartbreak of war and struggling and so on. It was good. In those days, of course, there was still no television to speak of. Still really no television, a lot of television, not for the normal everyday man, it was again the selected few that had the first televisions and that was... I remember was, I think the first television I saw anything of at all was 1952/53 when the Queen was crowned.

SB: The coronation?

RF: The coronation. We sat and watched a television about nine inch screen, about 20 odd in one room in Lincolnshire, watching this Queen being crowned. [Laughs]

SB: That actually leads to the next question I was going to ask you, obviously the first big American musical that was successful over here was Oklahoma!...

RF: Ooh yes!

SB: ...in 1947, obviously we just talked about the atmosphere and the mood in post-war Britain. Do you think that was what meant for the success of Oklahoma!, what do you think of that?

RF: Oh I think so. I mean Oklahoma!'s a fantastic show anyway and it's still a favourite for many people. Everybody sings the songs and all this that and the other still, and yes, it would be a great lift for people. A lovely, romantic show.

SB: Much more cheerful?

RF: Yeah. Much more cheerful: great chorus numbers, a great togetherness of people coming together again to do a show like that. I mean, that was the start basically of a lot of very good musicals, and good plays as well I think. Pity it was American! [Laughs] But no it's not a pity it was American, somebody had to start it and they... Oklahoma! was... They were very talented writers, scriptwriters who wrote those. We're going to do a show next May at the City Hall which is Anything Goes, which is a Cole Porter. Cole Porter's music was good. That's very popular. So yeah, it was a good start, a good platform for that to be... I didn't realise it was forty-seven.

SB: Yeah, it was quite early. I don't know whether you'd agree there was a call for those sorts of forms of theatre?

RF: Oh yeah. I think very much so. And it's gone on from there. We're now 2007, coming up to 2007, which is 60 years ago isn't it? 47 to now? And people and Operatic Societies are still doing Oklahoma!, and Cabaret and you name them, they're all... In fact we're going back to them aren't we, because there's no new shows?! A lot of the old shows are being re-done, re-hashed and so on. I don't know what you can do to some of these shows, other than just do it the same as it's always been, you know what I mean, but...

SB: Do you think that the fact that that formula stays the same is maybe an indication of...

RF: I think a lot of people are still very traditional that go to the theatre that do enjoy coming out of the theatre humming one of the songs. Particularly in musicals, they like

to say 'Oh that's lovely - oh he did sing it well didn't he?' you know? 'Surrey with a fringe on the top' or one of the ones from Oklahoma!. I honestly do think people like that tradition. They still like that tradition, it still sells tickets well - all of them do. Joseph, which has been going, I mean 30 years is it now since Joseph... It's packing it out at The Lyceum, last week - every night - full! Sold out, 30 years old. So yeah, people do like a lot of the old ones.

SB: I know its going back a bit but being around at that time did you get the sense that audience responded better to those forms of theatre rather than the more serious, Osborne, Pinter, Beckett, that sort of...

RF: Yeah, there is an audience. There's two audiences, isn't there really? There's some audiences where people will go and see anything because they love the theatre so they will go and see anything that's coming. And there's the people that are selective. Just like on the television - if they don't like it they switch it off, switch it over to another channel. I definitely think that there are people, yes, who do enjoy musicals more than straight plays. You talk to people 'Oh yeah I like a musical, not bothered about a serious play'. People say 'I don't need to be moralised or anything like that!'

SB: Do you think there's a different motivation for going...? Was there a sense going to those other plays you were being moralised or given a specific message rather than...?

RF: Yeah. I think playwrights certainly... Some of the modern playwrights, again, were protesting. Or they were observing. They wrote a play observing people. I thought possibly Pinter with *The Caretaker* was observation of people and so on and writing a script for those characters.

SB: Because it doesn't have a distinct narrative, does it?

RF: No it's about people, yeah. And so yes, some people would go to that. I still think that theatre then was about entertainment. A lot of entertainment. Good [pause] musicals, good plays - funny plays, comedies. Your farces and your Brian Ricks farces and so on that's been going for years and this sort of thing.

SB: What about *Waiting for Godot*? That came out in that period.

RF: *Waiting for Godot*?

SB: I don't know if you have any recollection of that?

RF: I don't, but there was a series on television, wasn't there? About it.



SB: We've also looked at Joe Orton.

RF: Yeah!

SB: Loot? I don't know if you know that one, I think he did a lot of farcical... I don't know if you've got any...

RF: There were, again... I don't think people really said 'Oh we must go because it's a Joe Orton' or whatever! They'd say, 'Oh we've heard of that, they say it's very good. Let's go!'. I don't think it matters too much who wrote some of it. Some people would. Some people would say, 'Oh no, never liked him, he's never written anything that's influenced me'. Of course, the Bard is the greatest of all. Shakespeare! And we see Shakespeare being re-written in some ways by different groups. But at the end of the day, Shakespeare as it's done at Stratford-on-Avon or anywhere but Stratford is just fantastic. And I've done a bit of Shakespeare, not a lot but a bit. I moved on from there a little bit so possibly I was with the wrong people. You know what I mean? You've got groups... We've nobody in Sheffield really that puts for Shakespeare stuff, or does much of it. You still have the odd group that do, small groups that do but... I enjoyed what I did of it, I'd like to have done more, but...

[interruption]

SB: Right, just to move on, from the mid-1950's, more diverse forms of drama becoming more acceptable more broadly on the British stage, do you have any recollections of this or any more significant... any significance or effectiveness of more stylised drama?

RF: Well, in those days I didn't. In the fifties, middle fifties I was, what would I have been then? 15. No, I wasn't quite as old as 15, I would've been 13. Fifty five I would've been 13/14. At that period of my life when I enjoyed... I was at school of course. We did a little bit of drama, but it wasn't encouraged at the school I was at, because in Sheffield in those days, most schools were geared for boys to go into engineering and things like that, and so on the school curriculum there wasn't such a thing as drama at all. It was mixed with... we might've had half an hour of drama a week, but then if the local church asked if we would come and do a nativity play, then a few of us would be asked if we'd do it and we'd go and perform for two nights or whatever. I didn't do a lot of drama then, other than from youth club again, which with pantomime... it wasn't until later in the fifties, coming up to 1960, where I actually did more of the protest stuff. So I was just that little bit older. 16. 15/16/17 was when I started to get more involved, and possibly because when I was that age I had more opinions about things.

SB: Would you say having those opinions was important when you were...

RF: Oh yeah. It was nice as well to have those opinions. Whether they were right or wrong! [Laughs] If my father was here now he'd say 'There'd most often be wrong

because you had opinions about things that I didn't even understand!' But you put them into practice by doing theatre.

SB: What sort of, you say 'opinions'- what kind of things, do you mean political or social...

RF: Basically opinions about... I think mine mainly not so much worldwide problems or war so much as local issues of people that didn't behave themselves, say. People that socially were misfits. Which we've got - we're always going to have them aren't we? Very sad in many ways. But I think my protest was about behaviour, and behaviour of young people, old people - whatever. Could never understand why people misbehave or why people knocked old people down or robbed people and things like that. It was a period when really I think I went along with the flow for a lot of it. We all had things about that... but that was growing up wasn't it? It was becoming a man. And I went to... I started work and went to college when I was 15 et cetera. And at that point I didn't do a lot of drama because my college was important. In those days, of course the college I went to was a day-release and evening school. You didn't have any of this all the time then - you had to go to work in the day, full time at work! Apart from you were given half a day off from work to go and study and then some of it you did in the evening so that took a lot of my time. So I missed out a little bit on a certain period which was from 16 to about 21, would have been. In the mean time, I had done a bit in between that but not a lot, but I don't think it actually registered with me because I was too busy studying and passing exams or trying to pass them, trying to pass exams! I'd rather be studying the stage in parts and learning lines but I had to study and make sure I got my certificates and my diploma and this sort of thing in the trade that I was in so soon as I finished that then I was plunged... I went straight out there and joined a group that my wife was in, or part of it at that time, as she was in stuff like I wanted to be in. So I joined this particular group where we toured and this is where we did this touring and so on as well, again, started touring with protest plays, with semi-religious plays. We wrote stuff ourselves. We wrote, we wrote a thing called Way of the Cross, no not Way of the Cross... Cut on the Cross.

SB: So was that Cut on the Cross?

RF: Cut on the Cross, yeah. And that was sketches and things about different situations in families, about social problems, et cetera and we dramatised them. Stylised them a bit and this sort of thing but we dramatised, you know [pause] an old person living with his family and how he was treated by his family, you know. The father of the family, either the son's father, the daughter's father had to come and live with the family because he was too old and the way he was treated and we highlighted this. Things like that. All this social depravation as it were. Think it still goes on now in certain... definitely does as far as old people are concerned, bless them. You know, they are not treated very well in certain areas by the family or whatever. We highlighted all of this.

SB: You were reflecting what you saw then?

RF: Yeah. We were reflecting what we saw, and we tried to make it fairly light, but we definitely put over...

[interruption]

SB: So you were saying it reflected...

RF: It did reflect, although we tried to lighten it as I say and make it funny in some ways, there was a moral there. And a very - as far as we were concerned, a very serious moral there, about the way grandpa was treated, about the way children were being treated in some homes and this sort of thing. I can't now remember the whole of the run of it but we did, I mean I sang a couple of songs in it about 'The Devil Wore a Crucifix' and all this, that and the other. It was a good number but it was a protest song. And we did that and we toured that all round Sheffield and Derbyshire and so on, again - Church Halls, school rooms, this, that and the other. Sometimes to 30/40 people, but it was also good fun of course! You know, you did it sometimes for the sheer hell of it, as well as doing it for the right reasons. We had a great leadership in those days. We had an excellent producer and director and he was a very talented man, and again, believed in this. We also had an excellent secretary, bless her, who is still alive and she was just the one who kept everything in order as far as bookings and everything, she was just a fantastic lady and I think that, again, helped me to respect people like the directors and the admin side of it. I'm now learning in this new job I've got now in the theatre about the admin side of it and so on and how it's very very very hard work and not very rewarding at times but it will!

SB: You said there's a lot of opportunity for protest when you were in this touring group, is that what motivated you to join that particular group or was it just they were the only one in the area at the time?

RF: I think it was two reasons. Two reasons. I liked the drama, the way it was being done, which was again, this stylised thing. In some of the things we did were stylised in the sense that... I think I liked this sort of non-costume thing, where we had a costume which was, I remember was black trousers and a grey top with a cummerbund, a purple cummerbund. Things like this. I don't know if it was a uniform or what. It made you feel part of - because we all had the same costumes - so we were all part of that team so there was no star. Even though there was somebody who had a lot more lines, I mean I had the lead in two or three things but so did somebody else, but we all worked as a team for it. Everybody supported and bounced off each other and you supported each other with that and inspired each other, very much so I think. Some weren't as good as others but in a small group of probably ten of us, the majority of those people were very talented people but they've gone on to not... I can account for... out of ten of us possibly there's been two or three that have continued through their life with theatre. The rest said, 'It was good while it lasted' and leave it there, which is fine. I just moved on again to something else and so on. I ran groups, I ran youth groups and so on and youth theatre groups and we did one or two things again that were protest. By this time I'm in my thirties and they were of their age group, well I had them from nine years old to about 16/17, something like that. And that was again, they were probably doing

things through me, if you know what I mean. That was my way of being able to protest later on in life. I don't know. I think it was up to a point. I think some of it was, yeah.

SB: What do you think the most important changes were in theatre, sort of between the... just after the war and the late sixties?

RF: Well I think the biggest changes was the fact that we had a tremendous amount of talented people who had come up through the music hall situation, through the war, entertaining the troops et cetera. When they went into the army or the air force or whatever, their job was to keep morale up et cetera and the majority of them would be actors who were just actors but very good at it. It started to change once you got musicals coming in. Suddenly the actors said 'Ah, now then, we need to do more than just act. We need to learn to sing a bit and dance a bit.' And I think that was the start of the theatre changing to - not all of it - but a lot more people auditioned, let's say - or got auditioned - for parts in musicals rather than just a straight play. And they had a go at musicals and they enjoyed the musicals and so on. You hear people now, don't you, you hear actors say, 'I've loved doing films, I've loved doing musicals but I'm just longing to get back to the stage and do a play. Just do a play.' I think there's a heck of a difference between the two. Heck of a difference. To concentrate on just pure dialogue - dramatic or funny, doesn't really matter but to have just dialogue to work on with no light relief of a song or whatever... So yeah, it was a very, very... I thought it was a very important period of the change in theatre after the war but it was about everybody was relaxed again weren't they? People were relaxed so they could enjoy it more, were allowed to enjoy it more. They'd had all the protests hadn't they? They'd had all the sadness of war. They wanted to be, they wanted to do happy stuff, you know, do happy things - your Oklahoma! sand all the musicals that came in at that time, were a massive amount - brilliantly written and I don't think we can churn them out like we could then now. You know, you've got your modern writers and so on and so forth but no I thought that was a big change and a big change for actors and actresses as well. They had to be multi-talented, which has moved on now and even more so.

SB: So you're saying that earlier on they could have just relied on straight acting?

RF: Yeah, I think so. Not particularly the ones that did music hall because most of the music hall ones were just singers - lot of the music hall was singing, with the odd comedian, the odd juggler, whatever, but a lot of them were singers. Nowadays you get the singers that suddenly, they get a chance to act as well, from a pop group, which we know about - pop singers, suddenly they're in a musical because they can sing and you suddenly find as well they're quite talented at acting as well. I don't think that happened as much then. I think you got the people, younger people, again, that said, 'Wow! There's chance here to have two strings to my bow- straight act, musicals' et cetera. That is only my opinion.

SB: No, no, that's what we're looking for! So you think that shift to entertainment as opposed to sending out a message was far more important and significant for the time?

RF: I think so. Yeah, I do indeed, yeah.

SB: Obviously now you're now involved in an Operatic Society and doing your pantomime and everything, but you mentioned before I think when we spoke that to start with you were obviously more involved in straight drama...

RF: Just straight drama, yeah. I came from straight drama, yes.

SB: What made you move from one to the other?

RF: I think the thing was, at the time that I did move I met... I met a director who is now being forced into retirement because of having strokes - two strokes - but I got to know him through going to his house and delivering... He used to breed cats and so on and Siamese. I used to bring a bit of cat food for him from my butcher's shop. He got chatting and I at that time was running a youth drama group from one of the local theatres, an amateur theatre in Sheffield and I got chatting to him about it and he said, 'Well why don't you come along, you know, and see what you think? We're doing another show, come and audition and come and join us for the music'. And I was made very welcome. I enjoyed the music, it was a show that we were doing called Follow a Star, which was a rock musical of the Nativity. Brilliant show! And I got a part of one of the kings in it, but it started off as a modern dance thing and suddenly it went into this Follow a Star and we all had... and we were all in rock suits, you know - Elvis Presley!

SB: When was this?

RF: 77- 77/78. Either 77 or 78. Anyway, I did that show as a king in that and then we were doing pantomime. At that time we were doing a show in May/June I think it was and then a show- the pantomime- January/February. And I auditioned for a part in pantomime and it was Goody Two Shoes, which is not a well known panto and it's not good! Not good - wasn't a good script. But I applied and auditioned for the part of the wizard in it and from then on I got the parts of the wizard, or the baddie, or Abanazar for so many years. And my youth drama group, I passed it on to somebody else because I felt that I'd gone as far as I could with them and so I passed it on to somebody else to do it. It didn't last long after that, because I'd worked so hard with these kids and it was two nights, sometimes three nights a week then and it got that even in those days, I used to drop these kids off on my way home - I used to have a car full of kids! Dropping them all off, 'cos in those days not everybody got cars for one thing, and I think I just got tired of it as well. I needed a change, to do something that I wanted to do.

SB: For enjoyment?

RF: For enjoyment! Purely for my own enjoyment, selfishly or not, I decided that's what I wanted to do. For my own enjoyment - to do that. And I've been with that group ever since, that society ever since. I've done the odd play, but very very odd, because that takes - when we're rehearsing for a show or panto it's three nights a week and it is intense. And my wife was very involved with me for many years as wardrobe mistress in

this particular society that I'm in still, but again she went as far as she could, she wanted to do other things, so she's moved on.

SB: So ultimately it came down to, as an actor, it's more important on a personal level, I suppose, to get enjoyment from what you're doing rather than showing your protests and your political views?

RF: I think yeah, you do change your mind. Things change - your life changes.

SB: So it basically came down to a more personal level...

RF: We are still, but they were a very professional group as well. Very high standard, very high standard. I'd like to think we still are. We are still a high standard for an amateur company, but I found the standard very challenging as well. A challenge to me personally. I was working alongside some very talented people. Very good singers. Very good actors and actresses as well and lovely people and still got a lot of friends - in other societies as well that we've made through the years as well and long may it continue. I'm probably winding down a little bit now, I've got a grandson that wants to, but it's up to him - he has to want to do it. He has to want to do it. I don't think anybody should... Encourage - yes, force - no! You don't get them that way and you need a certain amount of natural ability. Got to be natural ability. Doesn't matter whether you're good looking or whatever, you know. If you enjoy acting, if you enjoy being a character, then do it! Go on, do it somewhere, go and do it in a group or whatever. Do a one man show if you want to. But it's about applause for the majority of people. For the walk out at the end - the applause! Simple as that.

SB: The thrill of it...

RF: Treading the boards... You don't need fixes or anything for it, I don't need anything - the fix is the audience and working hard at a character or whatever and the reward is at the end of the day knowing that you've done a damn good job at it, you know and the audience have enjoyed it.

SB: OK then, thank you very much for your time Richard, it's been very good, thank you.