

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Jonathan Cecil – interview transcript

Interviewer: Daniel Buckley

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Actor. Amateur Dramatics; Ambrosine Philpots; Bartholomew Fair; Binkie Beaumont; The Birthday Party; comedy; 'Professor' Jimmy Edwards; Sir John Gielgud; Half-Way up the Tree; A Heritage and its History; Home; LAMDA; Robert Morley; overacting; pantomime, Harold Pinter; Vanessa Redgrave; repertory; Ralph Richardson; Reggie Salberg; Salisbury Playhouse; Tommy Steele; David Story; Eric Sykes, television; H.M. Tennent; Tommy Trinder; Sir Peter Ustinov.

Jonathan Cecil (JC)

Daniel Buckley (DB)

DB: Can you tell us how you first entered the business?

JC: Well, I first entered the business, I can tell you...I've always, ever since I was taken to my first pantomime - it's a bit of a cliché but it's actually true in my case, because I can remember it - it was Mother Goose, towards the end of the war, at Oxford, New Theatre – well, I should think it was just after the war – and then Cinderella. I went to these pantomimes and I was, from quite an early age, taken to Shakespeare in College Gardens – because I was brought up in Oxford, my father was professor of English, the Goldsmith professor of English, David Cecil – and so I was brought up on the theatre fairly early age, and I always wanted to be an actor. I don't think I was very good at school or anything, I only got the small parts - I was very stiff and awkward - but I had this sort of idea that I'd have to do it one of these days. And I loved radio plays, and radio was the great thing. In the forties, and fifties, radio was the great – before television had really got going after the war – I mean radio was what we all listened to and I particularly liked comedy programmes, and if you'd asked me at that time I think I'd have said that I wanted to be a radio actor, because that was the big thing to be. However, well as I say I wasn't very good at school, I had small parts in school plays, I used to write sketches and, maybe cribbed from off the radio or off the pantomime, which I did with my friends at Christmas as a kind of a fun thing, and they didn't take it very seriously but I did, I mean I thought. And I used to shamelessly crib all these comedy sketches from the radio or the pantomime and... Anyway, so it went on, and then I went to Oxford as an undergraduate. It was my hometown but I also was an undergraduate at Oxford, and I found that I really enjoyed doing amateur dramatics there. And that's when it started, and when I began to think I wasn't too bad...I was still stiff and awkward, but this was rather effective for comedy parts, playing sort of comic servants in plays, and in the cabaret, Cabaret nights we had. We had... They were all

rather older than me. A lot of the undergraduates had done military service, which I hadn't - I was just too young to have done the national service - but there were undergraduates like, who was an [organ?] scholar and he'd stayed on, Dudley Moore - who became a Hollywood star eventually – but he was there, and Alan Bennett who was a don and we used to have fun doing cabaret. And then after that I went to Stratford because there was a festival of student drama, which we did in the open air, and there was a Cambridge production and there was a Belfast production and there was also an Oxford production, it was Bartholomew Fair by Ben Jonson where I played two parts, two rather showy parts, though they weren't by any means leading roles but they were... It's a great sprawling play and I think it's better done by amateurs on a great grass... in the open air because it's not really got much of a plot Bartholomew Fair. I'm saying all this because this is really how it all started. Because I played these two parts in Bartholomew Fair and one was - they were totally different - and one was the pig woman, there's a woman who sells pigs, roast pig, and she has a rather dippy assistant called Moodcalf[?], a boy, and I remember putting on a false nose [mimes putting on a false nose] as we did in those days, and I had a slight limp and I had this curious walk [mimes limping walk]. And I did this character and I also played Troubadour, which is really almost the best part, although it's a small part, but he's a lunatic and you've got a certain amount of pathos because there's this poor man running around the fair and asking if everybody... he's sort of demented... and I can't remember and it would be boring to describe what the part's about but I know that I was completely different, I had my hair all fluffed out and I had a beard. And so people didn't know I was the same person playing the two parts. And in those days undergraduate plays were covered by the national press, and to my amazement I got the best notices of anybody although it wasn't by any means the leading role, but they said, 'Jonathan Cecil playing two small parts steals the evening.' And we did a performance on Sunday night to which a lot of the actors from the Royal Shakespeare, the real professional actors, – it was then called the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, it's now the Royal Shakespeare – but they came to our parties – we had these bottle parties – and I got to know professional actors for the first time. And they'd been to see our play, and again they said I was the best, and if I wanted to be an actor, well, it's a rotten profession to...very uncertain and all that, which after forty years I have to say I'm in entire agreement with, it's so very uncertain. But the thing is that I went home and I said to my parents, who were very tolerant – and they loved the theatre as I said earlier, they took me to see all these plays and they took me to see Shakespeare in Stratford and all the great actors, Laurence Olivier and Gielgud and Peggy Ashcroft, and the plays at the New Theatre we saw all these big marvellous actors and everything and I became more and more fascinated – and they did nothing to discourage me except they didn't think I was very good, and I think they were right. But when I came back, I said, 'Well, the real actors, the real professional actors, have actually said I'm the best, I'm the one that should take it up.' And so my parents said, 'Oh dear. Well, it's a very worrying profession to be in, but I suppose you'd better have a try if that's what they think.' So then, after I got my degree at Oxford, I went on to L.A.M.D.A., the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, where I stayed for two years and I then, because I was too nervous unlike contemporaries of mine - well two of them have become knights of the theatre, but I didn't know them, I know them now but just, but Sir Ian McKellen and Sir Derek Jacobi, who were roughly the same sort of age as me – they were so confident – Cambridge is so much more confident I think than Oxford – and they went straight into the business, I mean without...whereas I was too scared to do that so I went to L.A.M.D.A. and drama school, I trained. And wonderful, the president, our headmaster whatever you call it, Michael McOwen[?], who had been a very big director before the war and after the war, and he was magnificent, and a wonderful teacher particularly of speaking Shakespeare, and he was a superb teacher.

And there were others. There was an American called - well he was actually British born, but he was brought up and trained in America – called Vivian Mattlong[?] and we had very, very good teachers there, and some not so good teachers like any other academy whatever the subject they're teaching and certainly the danger is of course that failed actors teach at drama schools because they can't get a job and they're not very good on the whole, but as a whole I was happy there. And then, what one did then – and I feel very sad about young people now because they don't go to into...there aren't all these repertory theatres up and down the country as there were then – and I remember writing at least thirty, if not forty letters with a stamped addressed envelope and a photograph before I left drama school. And I wrote them saying come and see me in my final play there, they were all invited all the agents...and so that's really how I got into it. And I went to Northampton, I did one play, The Arsory[?], I did a play at Dundee, I did three plays there, and Hornchurch, I did three plays there. And then I was engaged by writ...and then I was in West End play. I also, parallel with this, I was doing quite well on television, because someone had seen me at my final show at L.A.M.D.A. and they wanted...it was a play with Vanessa Redgrave and it was almost her first television play funnily enough, although she was a well, well established stage actress by that time. I'm talking about 1963 I think. Yes I am, '63, '64, that sort of time. And in those days, well-known actors of the sort of Gielgud and Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson, didn't do television, I mean television was thought...they would do major movies, but they were definitely theatre actors and I don't say it wasn't quite the thing to do television, but it was thought to only be a stepping stone, only something which actors did as a stop-gap between engagements at the theatre. So I did rather well on television when I started because somebody had seen my last performance at L.A.M.D.A., they thought – the director Naomi Caper – thought that I was rather good...they wanted to play opposite Vanessa Redgrave...the part was very dull, and it was just an ordinary young student...she was a working class girl and I was a student who was a welfare officer and I took her about and showed her bits of London, and there's a near, near relationship between the two but it never got to anything, because she's married with children and all that, but it was a nice part, only a dull part because it's meant to be rather a dull and not very...And they thought, 'We don't want just an ordinary, handsome looking juvenile lead', as we called then in those days, 'We want somebody,' – because I've always been a comedy actor – and they want somebody with a touch of comedy, a touch of something amusing, a little bit eccentric, and so that was terrific, it was a big start, I mean to play a leading part on television as your first...so I did that and then I was also a play that started at Oxford called A Heritage [mispronounces word] – difficult to pronounce even now – A Heritage And Its History and – I sound like Eliza Dolittle, 'the rain in Spain' and all that – A Heritage And Its History and it was adapted from a novel by Ivy Hampton Burnett[?], and I started off in that. But then I had my real repertory stint, which was for Reggie Salberg who asked to see me, and I spent 18 months at Salisbury Rep and that was really because it is a great thing, and I'm very sorry for young actors now because they go from job to job, never knowing where the next job's coming from, whereas Reggie – after I'd done three plays there, playing leading roles – he said would I like to join the company and he could guarantee me a year's work, roughly speaking. And in those days, providing you didn't get hopelessly drunk on stage or forget your lines or behave in one way badly or another, you were guaranteed the work. And I think that particular kind of...what should I call it, what is the word I'm looking for...security! You had a year's security, at least, and I had 18 months there I knew that I was there, I was hired, and so that was terrific. I never did weekly rep. I've done a play in a week, rehearsed and played it, but I never went through that agonising thing, and I don't know whether I'd have survived it, where you have to learn one play while playing the other at night and then thinking of the next one

to come...that was a killer. But fortnightly was much the same, I mean you did a play...we did the odd classic, Shakespeare and we did Saint Joan I remember, and then we had three weeks and that was a big luxury. The great thing about it was that you had to - and it comes as quite a shock after being an amateur as I was at Oxford where a lot of your friends are there and all that and people give you a lot of latitude, and if you're any good at all they think you're terrific they don't...once people are actually paying, queuing up to buy tickets, and you've got to really...and you've only got a fortnight to get the play on and perhaps you've got a very long part to learn, but you've got to do it, and that was the great thing I think I learnt from repertory. You learnt how to make an entrance and make an exit. We had old-fashioned directors. It's rather unfashionable now when so many things are on...so many young actors now do television or else they appear in sort of fringe theatres and small theatres and everything. So the thing of actually coming on, establishing yourself and performing and projecting, it's something you can't learn...you can be taught at drama school how to breathe. I'm a bit sceptical about the actual movement classes and voice classes I did at drama school; they were the least, to me, the least successful bits of teaching. They had movement teachers and voice teachers who'd been teaching the same thing year after year after year and unless you really know how to fill a theatre...interesting thing, when I was sort of just starting as an actor I went to see a pantomime at Wimbledon, which is a great huge theatre, the Wimbledon Theatre, and there was this pantomime which had – I can't remember why I went, but I think I must have had a friend in it – and there were people like the young Bruce Forsythe and I can't remember who else but quite well-known performers were in it, it was sort of and - the youngish Bruce Forsythe I say, because Bruce is a great deal older than me – but Tommy Trinder who was a famous comedian, who I never thought was that funny. He was a sort of cheeky chappy Cockney - his great rival was Max Millar the famous cheeky chappy – but he was a Cockney with [deep, rough Cockney voice] a great rough voice and he played Abanazer in Aladdin. And he stood – and I was up in the cheap seats up in the gallery – and Tommy Trinder came on and everybody else was cavorting about and doing this, but they were playing to the stalls on the whole and they weren't getting across. Well, Tommy as I say wasn't my idea of a very - he used to say, [Mimics Trinder again] 'Trinder's the name, if it,' he had this tremendous self-publicist in him, 'If it's laughter you're after, Trinder's the name.' And then he'd say, ' You lucky people.' But he came on as Abner and he stood in the middle of the stage, and you could hear him in every corner of the house, and the others were cavorting about but if you – and might be quite clever dancers or tumblers falling about, like [you might have?] in those days – but if you couldn't hear what you were saying they didn't draw you to them. And I think that these kind of things you learn...I mean so much is learnt on the hoof, you might say, by actually doing it. There's no easy way to become an actor by...you go from drama school training, you go there for two years, I think it's now three years, and teachers are telling you this and telling you that, but then you suddenly find you're out there and people have paid to see you and you've got to hold your attention and all that you've learnt in drama school...I suppose there's an equivalent because my subject at Oxford when I was an undergraduate was French and I'd learnt French since I was about five. We did, I don't know, but you know, voici la table[?] [points to table] and this kind of thing, and reading...and you can learn all these words but when you went to France you couldn't actually speak the language, I mean you were alarmed and they talked fast and that. But the only way I learnt any French – and I went on from about the age of five 'til the age of 17 before I went to France – and then, I mean, I could write French because we had to do French prose, but I couldn't speak it. But likewise in the theatre. You could learn a lot by doing amateur theatricals and performing in front of audiences. You can know whether you're any good, like the people at Stratford told me I was good.

I was okay and that I might...But until you actually get out there and do it...And I think it's a bit of shame that this repertory system...I think that it was rough and ready, I mean...if I look back, the productions we did which were done in a fortnight were obviously not of the West End or Royal Shakespeare or National Theatre standards because we didn't have time actually to...and so we had to get it off but the thing is you had to do it, you had to do it! People had paid their money. You'd got to go on and you'd got to entertain them no matter how bad you are, and you learnt it in a way more from being bad than from being passably good, you know? You learnt something from that. And that's what I found. And then you know, you watched other actors and some of the older actors would give you a hint and say, 'I think you'd get a better laugh there if you did so-and-so, don't', and it's usually you were overacting actually, 'and so it's a funny line so just say it.' And it's funny and they'll laugh. And I think when you watch television now and you see those comedy programmes, I mean – I'm going bringing bang up-to-date – look at the sort of things that Ricky Gervais and that lot do, I mean if they – I don't know how they'd cope with a big theatre because I don't think they would try it – but the fact is if they've got a funny line they just say it and it's funny. Whereas, you know, when you went out first of all, repertory, you were determined to be amusing. I...From my conversation so far you can tell most of my experience has been in comedy, that's the way life has taken me. Actually in some ways I find that when I get a non-comic part, which I did in repertory occasionally, I found it easier, and almost relaxation, but I also thought that if I have any regrets – like Frank Sinatra, 'Regrets, I've had a few.' – but if I have any regrets, it's that I didn't do parts with more depth. Because you do get typecast, that is one of the cruel things about this business. If you make a success in any particular branch, then, I mean, you're lumbered with it, unless you're very clever. I saw Victoria Wood the other night in a television play and she's a well known comedian, writes her own material, but she'd written this play and there were no particular laughs in it for her, the actually comic parts in the play were written for other people but she has this...a fine actress, I mean, there we are. And probably better, in a funny way, playing someone very serious than...I mean, one's got used to her doing her monologues and songs and things, sketches, but actually, doing this, it was more remarkable. So...I don't know I've lost the thread, I'm always doing that these days...perhaps I always did. I mustn't, well, beat myself over the head; say I'm getting old. Shouldn't do that. No. But where did I go? Well, as I say, now there's another thing which also...there are things which I think about the repertory system which were not so good, I mean about...I mean, I feel sorry for these young people because every time they have to reinvent themselves, they have to do...then don't have that security, that...I'm still trying to find the exact word...expression. But anyway, 'security' will do. But they don't have that and so they can't afford to be bad, as it were. I mean, every part they play, they've got to play to the max...which is good in a way, but it's also more frightening. I remember the first television I did, that one I just mentioned, called Maggie with Vanessa Redgrave, that really was a baptism by fire because I had to be good, because I mean, there I was being seen by half the nation, or at least...It was just before B.B.C. 2 was invented and therefore there were only two channels, so the exposure was enormous. You were seen all over the country and you had to be, you know...I was aware of that. So that, in a way, was more taxing than doing repertory. Now, one of the dangers of repertory, particularly if people stayed a long time, at Salisbury, was that the audience got to like them. It's rather like a soap. The equivalent now is the soap I think. I think something like Coronation Street, or Eastenders, or Emmerdale. The thing is, if the actor is not that good really, and can't be that good because they've got to do it again, got to do about three half-hour programmes a week, not...they do get time off when their story...but they become popular just because the character catches on and the same way in repertory; some of

them become popular, and by the time that I left I was known, and so that when I came on there was a little buzz from the audience. 'Oh here he is, he's going to make us laugh.' Or whatever. And so, this was the...there's a danger, because then you move out to somewhere else and you think 'Oh yes, well, I think I know how to handle an audience', and you find that, not having ever seen you before, you're met with stony silence when you come on, you have to start all over again. That was the bad thing about rep, people got...and they stayed on and on and on. I don't think I made that mistake actually, whether by...no, I decided that 'I'm not staying on any longer. I've done enough. I've done 18 Months, I've done the best parts that I could play.' Reggie Salberg, who ran that theatre, was very good and he gave me some very good parts, like, I think the last one was Saint Joan, where I played the dauphin, which is a delightful comic part and it also is quite serious in a way and...I played all the Shakespeare, I played Disraeli in Portrait Of A Queen which is not a comic part and Tricula[?] in The Tempest, I don't know, and various farces and a whole lot of different things, and so I thought that's it. The other thing, you never quite knew the lines, I mean if you had a long part, you had this problem...I mean, I've always had a problem, I've always found learning lines hard work, just hard grind. I mean you get to it...once you know the lines then you're okay but before that, you know...and so you got into the habit, all of us did, providing you didn't actually throw the other actors for a loop by giving them a completely wrong cue, you could get away with paraphrasing, and that took me a long time. I suppose I've got rid of it now...no, I don't know. Sometimes you can paraphrase your better than some television scripts I've done, your paraphrasing is rather better than what was originally written. But that's the point, that's another sort of thing you learn, quick, you know [pauses] short cuts...short cuts, that stuff's a danger with repertory, that was the danger really. Short cuts to getting laughs. You know, you knew that if you did so-and-so you would get a laugh, if you banged the door if you exited because you mistimed it, all of these kind of things. And...so, I left. [pauses] Well, I was extraordinarily lucky when I left the business...what am I talking about? When I left the business, I haven't left the business yet.

DB: Don't want that to happen just yet!

JC: [laughs] But when I left the repertory theatre, I came down to London and I went to see David Combeville[?] who ran the theatre at Regent's Park. I'd already done one West End play as I think I said before, Heritage And Its History, which I got good notices and we were quite a success, but it was one of those successes with the critics. Had the kind of notices, I've seen another play get those kind of notices, which keep audiences away. Good notices which keep the audiences away like saying; 'This play needs close attention and, at first, the audience, for the first three quarters of an hour, the audience may be slightly baffled by it, but it repays listening and everything because by the end of the first half, if you kept stuck with it you...' ooh, all that kind of business and of course that means you come off in three weeks on the whole because once the audience, the intellectual audience, have been and gone, well let's say two months, then...Anyway, so I done that, but I was suddenly sent for because someone had seen me in Salisbury I think. There was this play by H.M. Tennant, put on by H.M. Tennant's and I was...Amazing thing, I remember getting the call from my agent and thinking, 'Wow. This is something.' because it was very big. H.M. Tennant's were the undisputed big management in the West End. In fact, it was said, Hugh Beaumont, 'Binky' Beaumont, was the head of Tennant's. Somebody compared him Diagulo[?] from the Russian Ballet. He discovered all sorts of people, I mean, people like Alec Guinness and...well, he had the best people working for him. Dorothy Tuton[?] and Peggy Ashcroft and...I mean he

didn't discover them necessarily, but he got together the best people and...Gielgud to direct...I mean, there was anybody...He inherited H - it was called H.M. Tennant because the management was H.M. Tennant, there was a man called H.M. Tennant – and it was a moderately successful show. 'Binky' as he was always known - Hugh Beaumont - 'Binky' Beaumont was in charge...nobody knows his history, he had a mysterious history, and he was a bit of a storyteller I think because he used to...he told my mother, who happened to sit next to him at dinner once, that his mother had been a sort of high-class tart and that she used to visit rich men, and he would sit there reading a magazine while she was visiting these men and he'd be sitting outside with a cup of tea and wait for her. There was also Beaumont Scheunberg[?], which means the same thing, I mean, a lovely mountain or a lovely town, and he said that his real name was 'Scheunberg' and that he was Jewish. In fact, I think he was a Welsh bank manager's son, very respectable family, and he worked in the box office at Cardiff. And he was ambitious. He watched these plays that used to come to the theatre at Cardiff on tour and he thought, 'I can put on better plays than that. I can do better than that.' And he and - it was no secret, he was homosexual – H.M. Tennant took to him, old H.M. Tennant, and brought him to London as his companion and – I don't know if there was any...whether they were partners or anything – but he brought him there - he was a much older man – but when he died he left the Tennant empire to Binky, who was by that time running it, and Binky immediately, having been given this, then he fired all the incompetent people there – it's frightening, it's rather like reading Richard III or one of Shakespeare's plays – I mean, he was there and he took over. And I would think from the - I haven't got my Who's Who In The Theatre with me, I mean it's upstairs – but the thing is that, I would think that from the late thirties, certainly through the war, when people desperately needed entertainment, people coming back from leave and all that, and though the fifties and into the sixties when I joined the profession, he was the undisputed king. And if you didn't get on with Binky, or if you did something bad, like not turning up on time more than once, or several times to the theatre, if you appeared on stage drunk, something like that, I mean if you behaved out of form or you couldn't remember the lines with the case of old...he was quite ruthless, and if you didn't work for Tennant's, there were one or two other managements – there was Henry Sherrick[?], someone called Henry Sherrick – and I've forgot now, but there were very few...if you fell out with Tennant's you were in a very bad way, you were back into rep, back into the provincial theatre, no matter how much you'd been heralded going in there. He was very powerful. But he was also a man of the theatre, he understood it thoroughly. It was nothing but the best, whether it was costumes, scenery, everything...and actors, down to the smallest understudies and everything, and if he liked you, you were all right. And I don't think that he was ever unfair, I don't think...but there were of course, there were a lot of actors in those days who were very, you know, embittered - there's nothing worse than an embittered actor I don't think - and they would say things like, you know, [puts on slightly effeminate, angry voice], 'Well of course, you've got to be Binky's boyfriend.' Or, 'You've got to,' let's see, you know, and, 'If you fall out with Binky, and of course, he's alright because he's Binky's best friend.' And all that kind of thing went on. But in fact, he was just as...that was a kind of myth, that homosexual thing. I mean, someone said he used to interview people in his flat in – well in his house, he had a magnificent house in Smith Street near Westminster Abbey – but people said he used to interview people in his silk dressing gown, well that doesn't mean anything in particular, I mean, if he did then he did. But he kept himself very much apart, quite rightly I suppose. I can think of, for the laws of libel I won't say, but somebody has certainly modelled himself on Binky in that respect, one of our West End managers. He never got too friendly with the actors because then he thought they would ask favours of him and, 'Oh Binky, can I be in the next production,' and so-and-so. So [?] kept his distance. And I worked for him

in this play called Half-Way Up The Tree, and I went to see...It was by Peter Ustinov - I don't know if I'm repeating myself – directed by Sir John Gielgud and starring Robert Morley, who was one of the big stars. In those days of the theatre you see, there were these actors and actresses who could guarantee at least, unless the play was absolute rubbish and the critics destroyed it with their...but they could guarantee audiences coming. It's very rare nowadays. Somebody told me there are only two people they thought who could do this; Judy Dench and Maggie Smith. But, I mean, Robert Morley for ex – I can't think of any male actors off-hand – but Robert Morley. I mean, he could guarantee. He was big man of the theatre. Big, huge, enormously fat man who would stand in the centre of the stage with a very quiet, [quiet, high voice] quiet delivery voice. Beautifully spoken, but could be heard in every part of the house, like Tommy Trinder. And anyway, I went up for this part and there weren't...It was quite late on. They were casting the thing and they had to start rehearsing on the Monday, and I think that I went to see Gielgud the Tuesday or Wednesday before. And I remember going to see him and, with his impeccable politeness, Sir John Gielgud said [quiet, slightly elderly voice], 'Oh, how do you do?' He said, 'Would you mind reading the scene on page 44.' I had a long speech there and he went to the back of the Queen's Theatre, the back of the stalls, and I read this and he said, 'Awfully amusing, yes, terribly good.' He was famous for dropping bricks, for saying things before he'd thought of them, and he said, 'Awfully good, terribly good, I think you'd be jolly good in this part. You see, we've seen a lot of young men for this part, terribly good-looking boys, awfully good actors, but they'd have to try to be ridiculous whereas you...' He stopped. But anyway, I got the part. And it was an amazing experience, because a Morley play – now, this wouldn't happen nowadays. I don't think. I can't think of any actors in that position – a Morley play, particularly as the play – Peter himself, Peter Ustinov, directed it in New York, and it was done in Germany and France before we opened – and it flopped in all places, including Broadway. But Robert Morley's idea of a play was that it was a kind of libretto for him to show his own virtuosity. So he would rewrite it, I mean, completely. I mean, he cut out a whole scene and he made an entrance...And Gielgud and he, it was fascinating to see the two men, because Gielgud, had most of his life was a classical actor, and for all his life up to then – he started doing Pinter plays later, and David Storey, I mean, later in life, and movies, quite avant garde movies – but up to then he'd really done almost entirely classics, he didn't know what to do with a modern play, although it wasn't a particularly modern play, but I mean it was, yes, it was about set in the present, and he thought the text was sacrosanct, and therefore, to have an actor who just...and I remember, Robert, who called everybody 'darling' regardless of sex, he said to Gielgud [enthusiastic voice], 'John darling, I don't like this entrance of mine.' He said, 'I just come on. Don't I?' He said, 'What we want is that old-fashioned thing where someone comes running in out of the garden saying, 'Here he comes!' and then I come on!' And I think he got away with it. And he went away. And I remember one of the things that showed me that Gielgud was, and Robert Morley, the total non-contact of these two gentlemen. Gielgud had told us to go home, he'd finished rehearsal, and I'd left my raincoat or my briefcase or something behind, so I came back, and they were still on the stage talking, and Robert Morley say, 'I don't like the end of this play John darling,' he said, 'I don't understand it.' And Gielgud said, 'Neither do I, but I think it's terribly good, it's awfully Jacobian[?].' Well, I mean, Gielgud didn't really mind. If it sort of had a poetic ring to it, then that to him was terrific, and certainly the idea of changing it, in order to make it more comprehensible or something, wasn't at all his line. And it was funny because I also did a television series at the same time that I was finishing doing this play, I did a television series with a well-known comedian, who made a great success on films, international films, later in life, called Terry Thomas, and Terry was very funny off-stage as well as on, and I told him this story about how 'I think it's terribly good, it's all very

Jacovian[?] and we did a not-very-good television series him and me, but I played the second lead and he was the lead, and whenever he didn't like a scene, or he thought a scene was not very good, there weren't very good scripts, he'd say, 'I say Jonathan,' he had this exaggerated upper-class accent he used to use, 'I say Jonathan,' he said, 'I think this scene is rather Jacobian.' Meant he didn't understand it. And so, that was an amazing experience. And of course, what happened was, the play, we opened...it was rewritten - we were sometimes sent home by a frantic Gielgud, who was a very unsure-of-himself, although huge, huge star of the theatre, but he was very unsure of himself as a director in that way - and Robert Morley kept arriving, he'd been to see his secretary, and he would arrive with whole sheets of new...Now, Peter Ustinov - I can't quite get this right because I said earlier that it already opened in America, but it hadn't, it was about to open and it was a flop - but Peter kept rewriting, so poor Sir John Gielgud was suddenly sitting in the stalls, and there were things which were mailed in from America, scenes, and there were also scenes from Robert Morley which he'd written, rewritten the play, and he didn't know [impersonates Gielgud again], 'Oh, wait a minute, no, no, you, you don't do this, no, sorry, there's, there's another, another, page here, so you come on,' so-and-so and it all...oh dear. And there was an old actor in it called Mark Dignam[?], was a stalwart character actor in Shakespeare and, oh, hundreds of plays. And Mark said to me, I remember coming away from one of these rehearsals, these chaotic rehearsals, and Mark said [deep, glum voice], 'Oh,' he said, 'This isn't going to work.' He said, 'I've been in one or two plays like this recently, once they start rewriting it and changing it, it never, never works, it won't be a success.' And funnily enough, thinking at my age now, thinking how I had quite a lot of television work, I suppose I could have gone back into rep, but the thing is I wasn't...this big chance I had, because it was a nice part, it wasn't a big part, but it was a nice little part I had, and I would have been...thinking now, I was very, very lucky to have the part and I thought 'Oh, well, just another flop,' you know, 'Move onto the next thing.' I wasn't terribly bothered. Whereas now, you know, I'd be horrified if I thought I was going to be in a West End success and it turned out to be a flop, I would have been very depressed, money apart from anything else. But I just thought, 'Oh, well, another, I'll just put it down to experience.' However, Mark was completely wrong because he'd reckoned without Robert Morley. The first night in Manchester, I can remember, we opened in Manchester. They were still quite long tours before we come here to shape it up. And the first night in Manchester, and I didn't come on 'til the third act, and I used to do these sort of exercises at drama school, I used to lie down on the floor with a cushion behind my neck in order to get relaxed. Whether it did any good or not I don't know, I probably sat absolutely stiff as...But I was lying there and I was listening to the tannoy[?]. The moment Robert came on, and I can remember his line...And it was an old-fashioned set. This is why I think it was the last, really, of the old-fashioned Tennant's things, where the set always had a French windows in the back, looking out onto the garden, and a flight of stairs going up to the bedrooms or whatever and then there was the front door. And after a scene with the Swedish au pair girl at the beginning and the Ambrosine Philpots who was a well-known West End actress who played Robert's wife, the doorbell rang and he appeared, the General, who'd been away for two years, in Malaya or somewhere, and there was Robert. And I just heard - the audience applauded as soon as he came on, because they used to if a star came on - great applause and then this voice saying, 'Remember me?' And then, you know, there was a great laugh because the General had been away for two years, but he said it in this humble little voice, which as I said, this small voice but which carried, somehow, right the way through the theatre. And then I sort of knew, I thought, 'We've got a hit.' And I wasn't that sophisticated then, I didn't know. I mean, I'd only been in one flop in the West End before that, so I didn't know, but I thought, 'No, he's got it.' He just sort

of got the audience like that, and it was fantastic. And the play ran for over a year in the West End when we finally came in. Only poor Peter Ustinov, who I got to know very well because I did the Poirot films, three of those, playing his assistant Hastings, and so Peter became a great friend of mine, but he wasn't then because he was hugely grand and I was only an aspiring actor then. But he came to see the play in Oxford after it had flopped in America and Oxford was our last date before we finally came into London. And, well, what must he have thought? Because it had flopped on Broadway, in Germany, in France and then, here it was, and it wasn't the play he'd written, it was a play rewritten by Robert Morley but it was getting huge laughs and applause and everything, so what could he think? On the one hand, I mean, he'd got a big success on his hands, on the other hand it was no longer his play! And he came round afterwards and shook hands with all of us and I thought that he might...I didn't know how he'd react, but he came round. And Robert, who was not lacking in self-confidence as you may have realised, but he was a bit abashed because he knew he'd turned the play upside-down and twisted it entirely. He was not a selfish actor. I've met a few of those in my time, in comedy, who don't like other actors getting laughs and all that. Robert wasn't like that. In fact he used to ask for me, he quite liked the fact that I got quite a few laughs and he used to ask for me. I don't think I ever worked for him again in a play, but I mean, he'd ring me and say was I free to do something some evening or something. You know, he liked people who were amusing, apart from himself, he wasn't selfish, but at the same time he knew perfectly well what he had done and he looked a little...And so Peter came up to him, and these two [deepens voice] large men, and he said [impersonates Morley again], 'My goodness,' said Robert, 'By this time, most of my writers are not speaking to me.' And Peter said [deepens voice], 'You mean you stop talking to yourself?' Very good, very quick. And so, that was it. And Binky was...And we had a hit on our hands. And then, when Robert left - because he has a nine-month contract, the rest of us had to stay for a year I think – and he'd realised by this time, Binky, looking at the other [French?], actually this was a mistake he made, but he thought, 'Well, it's not so much an actor we want in this part, to take over from Robert, we want a personality because that's what Robert's done, he's got the audiences in by virtue of his personality. So we don't want some competent actor taking over.' So, he went to the opposite extreme, and there was a popular comedian called Jimmy Edwards, with a great big moustache, who was very popular radio comedian who used to do an act with...He was always called the Professor Jimmy Edwards and he used to play a schoolmaster and this...He was actually quite a nice sophisticated sort of man, he wasn't actually just a coarse music hall comedian, but that was his turn. He played the trombone and the euphonium, and the trumpet, very well...Well, I think he played the trombone, certainly this great big tuba, euphonium thing, and he used to give a lecture, that was his act, it was a lecture on the different musical instruments and he had a xylophone, and he took the – I remember seeing the act, it was a very good act in its way – and he used to get a big pint lager, Charrington's bitter, out of the xylophone and drink it down, and then burp into the microphone, I mean it was that sophisticated [laughs]. And anyway, he'd been in a West End play called Big Bad Mouse, which is apparently a very bad farce. He and Eric Sykes were in it and they didn't know...And so they decided to improvise, and they used to...And it was a huge success. But I know it was different from Robert Morley who rewrote the play but once he'd rewritten it he stuck to the script, whereas they just do anything they wanted. And dear old Jim Edwards used to bring on his trombone and play a bit and Eric Sykes was quite clever at comic business with hand...and they did...And so he decided to cast Jimmy Edwards. Well, Jimmy arrived and he and Gielgud got on actually rather well in a funny way, although it was very funny because when he first arrived and they said, 'The General's arriving.' Jimmy Edwards said [husky voice], 'Perhaps I should come on,' in this very sort

of husky voice, I think a great deal of whiskey contributed to this husky voice, 'Ah,' he said, 'I think they say, 'The General's arriving' and I come on in a bowler hat and umbrella, I think, wouldn't it be more amusing if I came on in full regimental...' And Gielgud said [impersonates Gielgud again], 'No, I think it's terribly funny if they say 'The General's arriving' and then there's just this ordinary man in an ordinary suit with a bowler hat and umbrella.' 'Oh,' said Jimmy Edwards, 'That's a joke is it?' And so, it was a bad start. But, Jimmy was no good because he was not an actor. He couldn't make the lines work for him, unlike Robert, and he was left with all these Morleyisms and he couldn't make it work. And poor Ambrosine...And Robert was very wicked, Robert Morley, he was delightful, and very generous, and he used to take us all out on tour and have a big Christmas party. I mean, you couldn't not like him, but he was monster in a way, I mean not caring what he did to other people's plays and all that. Ambrosine said, 'What am I going to do? I'm allowed to get out of this play after nine months, it's in my contract that I can leave when you leave.' Because they'd worked together. She was immensely elegant, an actress, the kind you don't see anymore. Sort of, real West End...she wore her clothes beautifully, and she used to have rings and everything, and everything was worked out. Very detailed, and very amusing actress, I mean very witty, but very nervous, and she didn't like anything different. I mean, if there was a glass on the table [gestures to a glass on a table], and it was suddenly...the stage management...was meant to be there so she reached for it [reaches for glass] and it was here – you can't hear this when I'm talking into the radio – but if the glass was on one side of the table and then suddenly someone moved it to another part of the table or onto another table, she would forget her lines and go completely to pieces because everything was worked out like clockwork. And she was a lovely lady, delightful Ambrosine, but she said to Robert, 'Should I stay on?' she said, and he said, [impersonates Morley again] 'Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, you'll love it Ambrose, you'll love it. Jimmy Edwards, terribly nice man, frightfully nice man, you'll like him, and just ask for more money and stay on.' Which is completely cruel because she hated working with Jimmy Edwards. She never knew what he was going to say to her and he used to do funny sort of...he used to look at the audience when her back was turned as if to say 'Ohh' and she turned into sort of, the comic wife. She turned into the Marx Brothers' Margaret Dumont, a dignified lady who used to appear on the Marx Brothers. She was sort the butt of Jimmy Edwards. And there was one...Well, he didn't get Morley's laughs, it wasn't good, didn't work, it wasn't that good a play. And Peter, I had enormous admiration for and I also liked him enormously as a man, I mean, we worked together, but he didn't...I mean, the play wasn't that good, and Robert had really made it, it has to be said. And when Jimmy Edwards came in, he couldn't make it work because, also, in the other, Big Bad Mouse, he had Eric Sykes to play opposite, and they got laughs together. But we'd been doing the play, we were almost on automatic pilot, we'd been doing it for nine months, nearly a year probably if you include the tour, and suddenly...so he had nobody to play off, and we just said our lines. So Binky, who had made this mistake in casting him, said, 'Jimmy, in the last act, let yourself go.' Well this was not very good advice really, or good advice according...because, he had to sit on the banisters, he had to come on in khaki shorts like an explorer in the last act, a big hat on, and he had to sit on the banisters and I sort of knew what was going to happen, knowing his kind of comedy, and he sat there, and sort of [pretends to sit on banister]...and one night, his shorts split with a great ripping sound [makes ripping sound], which of course, he loved, that was his kind of humour, but Ambrosine was appalled. And she rushed across to me, across the other side of the stage, she said, 'Have you got a hanky?' and I said [fumbles as if looking for hanky], and she took it from my pocket and she went over to Jimmy Edwards, who was sitting there with this silly grin[?]...and she was terrified that he would actually expose himself with his torn

shorts, and she took my handkerchief and she spread it across his lap and he said [booming voice], 'Are we having lunch?' [laughs] And she said, 'Cover yourself! Cover yourself!' and he said, 'Oh come on my dear, it's not the first time you've seen me split me drawers!' That's supposed to be a sophisticated West End comedy, you know...[laughing] So this was disastrous! And it went from bad to worse, I mean, everything turned to...And there was a speech which was one of Peter's less...it was a very, very long and rather boring speech, which Robert Morley used to get away with by taking it breakneck speed, it was one of his things, [impersonates Morley] speaking extremely fast with this...to old Mark Dignam[?], who I mentioned earlier, who was playing the vicar, and he did this speech which he just about got away with by taking it...Well, Jimmy Edwards could never learn it, and by the third act he'd had a few whiskeys, and so he used to, oh, it was...went on and on. And on this particular night – it was the only night when he really went well, because he was a farmer, Jimmy Edwards, I mean, he had a smallholding or whatever, or a farm somewhere and that was his other life, he lived in the country. And the farmers were all in, because it was the Smithfield Show, Smithfield Market, on a Saturday night, and they laughed and laughed at whatever he did – and he went through this speech, [impersonating Edwards] going on, unlike Robert, thinking what the Hell comes next, with all this and that, and poor Mark Dignam[?] was looking at him, wondering whether to say, to prompt him or let it go and he said, 'You're looking pained Vicar.' He said, 'Don't blame me, I didn't write this rubbish!' This got a huge round of applause from the farmers, but it was a disaster for us, because if you say a play you're in is rubbish, the audience will agree. And so from then on, we didn't get a single response for anything. So, he thought this was rather good. This was Saturday night. So the following Monday, he set it up and he said, 'You're looking pained Vicar. Don't blame me. I didn't write this rubbish.' Silence from the audience. And Ambrosine, who was the most professional, would never have adlibbed any, she said [impersonating Edwards], 'I didn't write this rubbish.' She said [feminine voice], 'And you don't know how to say it either!' And that got a round of applause. I've never known a more electric moment on any stage, but it was her sheer exasperation. And that was...Well, shortly after the play came off and another play came on which was not a great success, starring Tommy Steele, and on the very last night, Jimmy Edwards going absolutely barmy and saying things like...there were people sitting in a box in the theatre and it was fairly thin on the Saturday night, it was a fairly empty house and he said to the people up in the box, he said, 'I don't know what you're doing up there, there's plenty of room down here!' And then, when he got to the end of this dreaded speech, which he hated obviously, to the vicar, which he never got right, but got through it, and he got through it, and he got to the end of it and he said so-and-so-and-so-and-so, [impersonates Edwards] 'And good luck Tommy Steele!' And that was the end of that. Well, that's the story of Half-Way Up The Tree as it came off. And I think I've really come to an end, that's my story of working for H.M. Tennant's. Funny, practically everybody in that is dead. Gielgud, Peter, Robert Morley, Ambrosine...yes, there's an actress called Bridget Armstrong who's still one of my greatest friends and...yep. Pinky Johnson, who played my fiancé in this play, she long gave up the theatre, she was a favourite of Binky. And there was Pinky [laughs]...and he used to invite her down to stay in the country and one always imagined him saying [effeminate voice], 'Hello Pinky, this is Binky.' But anyway, she sells antiques, much more sensible than theatre and...well, that's about all I have to say.

D.B: Yes, that's fair enough. Is it all right if I just ask you a few extra little bits...

J.C: Of course.

D.B: If that's all right?

J.C: Yes.

D.B: Just quickly, I don't imagine there's anything too much to it, but just sort of in comparison, you're saying repertory, even when you're only doing it fortnightly, obviously it's quite a heavy workload because...

J.C: Oh, very.

D.B: You're getting ready to do another play and...how exactly does it compare, work-wise, to the West End?

J.C: The West End, I mean, once the play's on, the only problem there is really keeping it fresh. You can just, as I said earlier, you can get onto automatic pilot and you don't realise...And also, when the play first opens, I mean, the first two months of a play, the audiences are very bright, very smart, and they come to see the latest things, and they get all the subtle points. I mean, then the coach parties arrive, and the terrible temptation is, if it's a comedy, to start overacting or overplaying because you're not getting the same results, it broadens out. Gielgud was marvellous in that he used to come back and see the play, and he would tell you. And you can't always tell that you're beginning to overact without someone telling you. And the other ac – I've been in several West End plays since then – and the other...Lindsay Anderson, particularly famous for his films if... and *Lucky Man*, he was particularly...But he was also a very god stage director, and he also used to come in and in the same way tell us, and he told us that Gielgud and Ralph Richardson, who were in a play called *Home by David Story*, he directed it, he told us, he said, 'I mean, the great actors, it's not just the lesser actors who are inclined to.' He said, 'John, Ralph Richardson,' who was a very eccentric actor, very much, 'his performance gets more and more eccentric and wild 'til it sort of doesn't correspond to any known human being. Whereas on the other hand, Gielgud begins to think that he's overacting and he becomes so subtle that he's inaudible.' So that's the thing about keeping it fresh without sort of...well, you see, Morley was an object lesson in that, because, I mean, say what you like about him and his naughty bits, and his riding roughshod, he never let the audience down, and if he felt something, some line or something was getting stale, he would change his way of saying it.

D.B: Then just briefly, certainly when we're looking at period from late fifties until sort of the seventies, when we look at it academically it's considered to be a period of great upheaval, lots of new playwrights coming, writing very different sorts of things. I know you weren't, sort of, directly involved in playing any of tho...well to my knowledge you weren't directly involved in playing so many of those new plays, but did you notice it was having an impact at the time, at the type of jobs that were coming up, audiences, things like that?

J.C: Yes, I think so. I mean...I'm just thinking, I mean, the point is that although audiences still liked it, and they liked Robert Morley, it's rather the other way round actually, from what you say. The critics and the younger and more sophisticated kind of audience, they thought that Half-Way Up The Tree, this play with Robert Morley, was very old-hat. We were really doing a play which was...Someone even said, 'Was the set,' with the French windows and all that, was that meant to be a take-off of old-fashioned theatre? Oh no, I was very much aware. In fact, when I was up at Oxford, I mean, a sort of revelation to me was The Birthday Party of Harold Pinter, which came into town, it was a terrible flop, but I remember seeing that and thinking, 'My goodness.' I mean, it was called The Birthday Party; it was set in a seaside boarding house, and John Slater, who done lots of television and sort of comedies or movies playing detectives. I thought it would be just an ordinary comedy or thriller, when I got this extraordinary dialogue of Pinter, these extraordinary pauses and menace, I thought, 'This is something quite different.' I was fascinated. I thought that was the beginning of modern theatre.

D.B: Yes. Okay. I think that's everything then, unless there's anything else you want to add at all?

J.C: No, I don't think so. I've rabbited on like mad.

D.B: Well, there's no problem, we're interested in absolutely anything, so, thank you very much.

J.C: Not at all.