

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Alan Wallace – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Katherine Pike**

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Stage Manager. Censorship; drawing room comedies; Equity; Repertory; scenery; Separate Tables; stage managers' contracts; touring; West of England Theatre Company.

KP: So you were in stage management since 1956?

AW: That's right. I got my first job in theatre at Festival Theatre Pitlochry in that season. And it was - and I suppose it still is - in the same scheme. You rehearse like mad with 6 plays over a period of about 8 weeks and then you start having first nights twice a week until you've got them all on, then it's like being on a West End run, but you change the play each day so you've got a repertoire of 6 productions running, so it was very strenuous at the beginning because the first news we found out when we got there was that the master carpenter had quit!

KP: Oh my gosh!

AW: So we - the stage management - had to build all the scenery, which I found quite interesting but it quite often got to be 11.30 on an ordinary day when you've got away from work and you've got to be back again at 9 the following morning so with that going on all the time throughout the rehearsal period we were pretty nearly exhausted by the time we got the last play on in May. But I did have the experience of working with a machine that drilled square holes!

KP: That sounds amazing! What kind of plays did you see, or did you work with?

AW: Well in that particular job they tend to have a balance of plays, they had one from a bit after the restoration, they had one by Goldsmith *She Stoops to Conquer*, one play local about St Andrews and the golf open championships you know. We did a play called *Bird in Hand* which dated from 1920s, a comedy, a show by an adaptation of a book by Robert Louis Stevenson. There were six, a varied thing, an idea that you'd come to Pitlochry for a holiday and you'd be able to see or choose from a varied selection of plays in the week or two that you were there. From there I went on to a rep in Chesterfield as Stage Manager and it was here we did a variety of plays a lot of which were called drawing room comedies, the set Shakespeare play you did once a year... A strange year: we had the amateurs in and they were doing their Gilbert and Sullivan and

we did our best [laughs] to help them! We did some new plays which later went into the West End with a different cast. In those days, the system of opening a play in a repertory theatre like Guildford and taking it into town with most of the same cast didn't apply. Your contract kept you where you were, and if it was done later in the West End, that production and not the one before - not the one you had done - would feature in French's Acting addition, so somewhere I have the copy of the play called Ghost Peak with the dated program of when we did it in Chesterfield and the later French's Acting addition which says that the first production was after the date we did it. I always found this rather galling as they obviously didn't regard repertory productions as... not being real.

KP: You mentioned before drawing room plays, what exactly are those?

AW: Well, they were mostly plays about and for the middle classes. There was a play called Mrs Willie for instance - extraordinary title, it wouldn't do nowadays! The sets of these plays tended to include French windows and a lot of summer, people coming and going for tennis, everyone was very middle class except for the servants, and it was a little bit... I don't know what you'd call it, Joanna Trollope writes a lot of books like that - a bunch of very nice ladies who make cakes for the WI and quarrel in the meantime. That's what I mean by drawing room comedies. And we did some Agatha Christie and things like that... What else did we do? We did some classical plays, apart from Shakespeare, we did a very nice production of School for Scandal which went extremely well, a marvellous week we had with that. We did a new musical about the Victorian era which was rather fun too. Then less drawing room type plays were coming along at that time, we did a production of Look Back in Anger - although it's about the middle classes it is by no means a drawing room play!

KP: We've actually looked at Look Back in Anger.

AW: You have, have you? Yes, in its day, it was regarded as quite a departure from what was on offer in the West End for instance; I mean, it went on in the Royal Court which was taking on new writers with new perspectives. Yes we did that. But there were quite a lot of plays going round to the reps in those days. Rattigan was quite popular, plays such as Separate Tables, The Winslow Boy, that kind of thing. It didn't mind too much what types of plays you were doing, it was something of a treadmill really, you were doing a new one every week. So you had the reading on the Monday in the set of the last week's play and then you did the rehearsal - more or less an act each day - which would take you through Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday with luck you'd get a run through and Saturday you couldn't do all that much because you had two performances in the afternoon and evening. Sunday you'd be changing the set and Monday you'd be opening the new play... No, the reading would be on Tuesday, Monday you'd be lighting it - dress rehearsing it. There was no technical rehearsing; you were expected to get everything right the first time, a bit of delay inevitably took place. There were those dreadful occasions when you would be rehearsing with the safety curtain down with the audience already in! Under those conditions it could be stressful!

KP: Wow! It sounds like everything went terribly terribly quickly.

AW: It did, yes, everything was compressed beyond belief, which is probably why there was a pressure against doing anything terribly new. Some reps would simply take the French's Acting addition and use all the moves that were given in French's Acting addition, which I always thought was a pretty lame way of doing things, but most directors would plot their own moves: they would sit down with a ground plan and some tiddlywinks and move the characters around. So you would at least have some fresh input into the plays.

KP: I imagine the plays must have seemed quite, not monotonous, but quite repetitive, if the directors are plotting...[cuts off]

AW: There was a fair element of repetition... If you felt that there were too many references to Harrods, yes it was refreshing to do other works. And we did pantomimes of course! [KP laughs] You didn't tend to have very famous people in pantomimes because television didn't have the same reaching power. It wasn't until 1955, I think, that commercial TV started at all, and at that point not very many famous names were on TV at all. So you didn't get the kind of pantomimes you do nowadays, with so and so from such and such a TV show playing Aladdin or whatever. You tended to use the same company. People who had been the detective constable last week may be playing Wishee-Washee this week, or whatever. And it was more of a community thing. It was quite interesting actually because if you were a Stage Manager you did occasionally play a part; you'd find that people would recognise you in the street for about a week and the next week, when you were not playing a part, nobody would know who you were! It was quite an abrupt sort of shut off. I think Andy Warhol's comment on everybody having their fifteen minutes of fame was just about right! [Both laugh]

KP: What did kind of, like, your... because I'm not entirely sure about what a Stage Manager's job actually is, and as you were saying you had to construct the sets... I mean...

AW: Well no, that is unusual. Normally you don't do that. Stage Managers - or stage management in general - are to take charge of the production in all respects except from the direction. Once it starts rehearsing they will be given a copy of the ground plan and they will mark out the set in rep as best as you can because there is another set already there and the set your rehearsing on may be in many respects larger then the one that is on stage. So, in those days you never got a rehearsal room to work in, although when you did you could do a proper mark out. From then on, you would be responsible, one person would be sitting on book taking all the moves, taking any alterations to the script, taking all the cues; an ASM would be going out to get all the props, taking things of that sort. The Stage Manager or Stage Director would be making sure that costume fittings took place and were arranged... In general anything that needed to be arranged was arranged. In general, I think if you tell a Stage Manager something... if you as the Director tell the Stage Manager about something that needs to be done or needs to happen, then you can assume that either they will make it happen or will get someone else to make it happen. If suddenly there is a requirement that a character needs to wear a very big hat, then that must get back to the designer and the designer must deal with it with whoever is providing costume. So they are at the centre of a communication web.

If somebody is going to be off tonight because they are ill, then stage management needs to be the first to know so that they can do something about it.

KP: Oh right. I heard that you also had a brief spell at a drama school, was that doing acting or was it training for stage management?

AW: Well, at first I thought I wanted to be an actor.

KP: Really? [Laughs]

AW: So I went to a school, which I don't think exists anymore, called PaRADA, the preparatory school to RADA, there we learnt the assailant things for acting, voice production, diction, a bit of dancing, ballet type dancing, singing, make-up, [pause] some improvisation, we did various sorts of productions. So I was there for a bit over a year, nearly two years, then my call up came for National Service in the Army, finished that two years later, came back and went there again and found that I had grown out of it and found that I had to actually go and find some work! Quite soon after that I got Pitlochry which started me off in stage management, and I stayed in that because it seemed to be something I could do better. So I never really became an actor properly, although I did hold down at least one job as an actor rather than a stage management person.

KP: Really? What kind of plays did you act in, if you were in any?

AW: Well actually, as a Stage Manager you come in for quite a lot of acting in small roles in various things - quite a lot of policemen in detective stories because they are quite easy to cast, not a lot of emotional scope is required of them! And actually the very last job I did was in an extraordinary production of Aida at Earls Court. And I was one of the Egyptian Army, a soldier - there were about 120 or something of us - and when the music started we had to come out of a trap in the stage and form ourselves in ranks up this set, which consisted of a giant staircase really, and we had a cue from the music where we had to draw our swords and then another to put them back in. It is fairly easy to draw your sword and raise them with everyone else, but to put it back you've got to make jolly sure that it does go back into the scabbard and doesn't go clattering on the floor, so you've got to bring it down, hold it against your thumb and then ram it back into the scabbard. So we had a bit of fun with that at first, but it worked all right. Prince Charles came and visited the company, and we were all allowed to go round and introduce ourselves to him, but they took our swords off us first!

KP: Yes, I can see why they would do that! [Both laugh] Wow, that sounds really amazing!

AW: Such was our naiveté that we thought that was funny at the time. Strange that they should think of it!

KP: So after you were a Stage Manager, I heard that you did some work for Equity?

AW: That's right, yes. In 1976 there was a vacancy for an organiser in the West End, and I'd been working in the West End - I did three years with the musical *Oliver!* - anyway, I got this job and spent the next 8, 9 years - something like that - really ensuring that actors and those in stage management in the West End productions were being properly treated in accordance with contracts and agreements, and properly paid, paid on time, and generally enforcing the contracts. Also helping to draw up claims for new and improved contracts, and yes that was really a very stressful eight years indeed. [pauses] Inflation was very high in 1977, and we were having to draw up a completely new structure because the old one didn't work very well. In those days, stage management didn't get a proper contract, they got an actor's contract with a document which varied it in certain respects. For instance, Stage Managers by tradition got full pay during rehearsals, and so there had to be something to vary it for that and all sorts of other things which applied to actors. And this wasn't working particularly well: we wanted proper contracts for stage management, so, then the assistant secretary for theatre in Equity was a very successful bureaucrat - he didn't regard the term 'bureaucrat' as in any way insulting, he said, 'Well, I'm a bureaucrat, I don't make any bones about it!'. And he drew up this schedule which more or less forms the bones of the West End agreement today, it has been in some ways improved and in some ways made worse by association between managers and the union, but the changes which he introduced in 1977 to a large extent have survived. And Stage Managers have their own contracts and are generally, I think, better regarded now than they were in those days - they were regarded as jumped-up stage hands a bit in those days, which is a bit different now, they are regarded now by the better managers as a separate discipline.

KP: Was Equity around before you started working there?

AW: Oh yes, Equity was formed in 1930, in imitation of Actors Equity in the United States. I can't remember when they started, but at or around the time it was founded, a group of fairly well known actors decided that they would assert their right to not work with those who were non-members of Equity. They wouldn't necessarily exercise that right, but they would assert it. And they signed a declaration and in the early months of 1930, this union that was formed... There had been an attempt before, the thing called the Actors Association, but it was too much in league with the managers and it didn't succeed in getting much improvement in actor's conditions. Now there was, for instance, a company which paid you by the number of evening performances you did in a week, so this particular company, I can't remember the name of it, decided to do 6 matinées a week and only two evening performances, and paid the actors for two performances a week! And of course actors were desperate and they tended to feel that they were bound to accept anything the managers offered them. So it was to outlaw practices like that and like, saying to them, 'Well, sorry we have run out of money and you will have to find your own way home' - which happened very often, they would not sometimes get paid for the last week because they affected to have ran out of money, and then the next week they would put on another play and nobody would have anything to say to them. These arrangements put in place by Equity were what to stop that sort of sharp practice.

KP: Wow! [Laughs]

AW: [Laughs] That was a lot before my time, that sort of thing happened in the twenties.

KP: Yeah. I mean, I can imagine that the rights of actors changed quite dramatically, as well, especially the way in which theatre and actors were viewed, especially because of the restrictions and censorship by the Lord Chamberlain.

AW: Yes, yes it did. I mean, actors were regarded rather as vagabonds. Yes, the censorship thing didn't so directly affect actors, as long as you said directly what you were supposed to say, then it was the manager's responsibility that it didn't get in the hair of the Lord Chamberlain. If you did say something that wasn't in the script then you really were for it! [Both laugh]. Actors are there to speak the lines there given and shouldn't elaborate without consulting the director. But yes, there was a strange case of a play beginning with the line 'Buggers! Buggers! Buggers! Bastards! Bastards! Bastards!' and the Lord Chamberlain said, 'Well you can't say that!', and so they said, 'Alright, yes' and so from Monday to Saturday the play was done without that line, but on the Sunday the theatre became a club and so it was only on the Sabbath day that the play could be done with this line in it, so only on Sunday could you say 'Buggers! Buggers! Buggers! Bastards! Bastards! Bastards!' and get away with it, which is one of the odder side-effects of having the Lord Chamberlain whose ruling didn't run in clubs!

KP: That's quite amusing! What's your favourite play that you worked on during the period of 1956, I'm looking at 1945-68, the plays between this period?

AW: Possibly a production of Eugene O'Neil's A Long Day's Journey into Night. I was involved in a repertory production of this in Lincoln, and the actor Freddy Jones - who is rather elderly now - gave a marvellous performance as the father, it was one of the highlights I could remember.

KP: What's the play about?

AW: It's about what would now be called a 'dysfunctional family'.

KP: Oh, right.

AW: A bully of a father, the mother was a drug addict, two sons both wastrels and unable to cope. It was in fact his own family, one of the critics wrote with surprise that it was... Although he made this huge drama, he didn't make any mention that his mother, who had been on whatever drug it was that was fashionable in those days and been absolutely helpless in the face of it, decided she wasn't going to do it, cured herself of it in six weeks and never went back to it. That doesn't figure in the drama at all. It is a very dark drama and is about 4 hours long but it's a fairly famous title, a dark play, a fine bit of work.

KP: Did you work with any big playwrights during the period, I mean themselves?

AW: There was a play - the first West End play I did was by a man named Thomas Murphy, an Irish playwright, and he sits down quite a lot and had written quite a lot of plays in Ireland. The theme of this was about an Irish family in Coventry or Birmingham, I forget which, and they are again very dysfunctional and violent, a drunken bully of a father, no mother, this bunch of sons one of whom is married and it is all about a looming confrontation with another Irish clan the Mulryans. And they are going to have this punch-up and there are going to be no weapons, and all of a sudden, this clan, the Kearney's, draw weapons on the Mulryans and put them to flight, and they come back and triumph. Then there is a giant quarrel between two of the brothers and one of them gets stabbed. It is a pretty memorable play, and it was amazing that such a gentle person such as Tom Murphy should write this violent play because he really was, and probably still is, a lovely man! But he incorporated in this play a tale of a fairly tough chap who went around having bitten off somebody's ear, he went around with it in a matchbox! So he told this story in the middle of the play. One of the brothers corrects the brother who is telling the story and says, 'He bit off his ear...half it'. [Both Laugh]

KP: You must have seen some surprised audience reactions to plays like this?

AW: Oh yes, we got a lot of people walking out on that! Yes, it was too much for some people. Lost a few people there! But generally audiences... if something gets too much they will just laugh.

KP: I guess that's a way of dealing with it.

AW: Yes it lets the steam out of it a bit. I remember being rather moved by Diary of Anne Frank.

KP: When was that on?

AW: Well we did it in a rep in Bromley in about 1958, something of that sort. How are we doing?

KP: OK I think, I think I am exhausting my list of questions though!

[Interruption. AW's wife calls from far off asking whether KP is bored or not]

KP: No this is really interesting, I would never have found out about the period or thought about it if I wasn't doing this module, and it's really interesting to find out how theatre has progressed during the period, up to now.

AW: Yes, it has changed a great deal.

KP: When did you retire?

AW: Well that's a good question really! The last theatre work I did was in the eighties - late eighties - since then I was doing other things, market research, that sort of thing. I went on working until last year, maybe a couple of years ago, winding down gradually. I was 70 when I stopped having a pay packet.

KP: Have you done anything else recently? I mean, have you gone back into the theatre?

AW: Any work I do is by way of proof-reading, which is a very different discipline, but I'm still chairman of the stage management association and this keeps me, to some extent, in touch with people working in theatre.

KP: You said you worked at Festival Theatre Pitlochry, is it in Wales?

AW: No it's in Scotland.

KP: Oh right, so you got to travel about quite a lot?

AW: Yes, you had to be prepared to travel, so I spent 6 months in central Scotland and then the next job was in Chesterfield and Derbyshire. After that I went to the West of England theatre company - that doesn't exist now, but it was based in Exmouth on the south coast and we used to take plays round on one-night dates to theatres and halls in Devon and Dorset and Somerset. So we'd have one company playing in Exmouth and the other company going dotting around and then they would swap over, so each production would have a fortnight to rehearse and then it would play for a week in Exmouth and then a week on tour [pause] that was the next one. So you moved around quite a bit on what was known as 'the bus', which was a converted lorry, a converted removals van with the scenery on top and us on a sort of little capsule underneath. From there I can't remember where I went [pause] I am trying to remember the order in which I did these jobs. Lincoln, Nottingham... Lincoln was another one where they had two companies, one would be in Lincoln and the other one would either be in Rotherham, Loughborough or Lincoln, and that was another quite interesting thing because of course you had to keep track of all the scenery. A given designer may want a piece of scenery that another designer was using so instead of it being in Lincoln it was in Loughborough, so they couldn't use that piece of scenery and they had to use another flat or whatever! So you had to keep a pretty accurate tally of all the scenery the theatre possessed and where it was and what it was going to be used for. An additional burden on the stage management to look after that!

KP: Was the set really minimal around then, or was it quite elaborate?

AW: No. In the case of the West of England theatre company it was physically smaller, these flats were only 10ft high - I think that's right, maybe even less - but there was just as much scenery as you'd get in a conventional play, not as much as you would get in a massive musical or of that kind, you know, if they wanted a full set, generally speaking you would have one. In Lincoln, again, you would have separate transport for the actors and the stage management but the scenery had to go into a separate lorry, you did use 12ft flats for that, but again, you would use a full set, you would make a particular compromise for the fact that it had to go on tour. So you had to be pretty nippy getting it up, and of course those people who were on tour had to be rehearsing as well in order to get your fortnight of rehearsal in so they had to rehearse then get in the bus and then go and do it over there and... like that. You only put it up in the other three venues once and left it for the week, so you didn't have to take it down each time as you did in the West of England theatre company, so it wasn't as difficult as that. I remember once celebrating for getting in, we were doing a play called *Separate Tables* by Rattigan at Bricksham in Devon for a hall and we had to get the scenery in up a spiral staircase - a spiral fire escape type staircase! - in the middle of a thunderstorm with these ten foot flats which acted like a windmill when the wind got a hold of them when you were trying to get around this crazy outside staircase, but we got it on alright! The stage curtains when we got there were not quite adequate and so we had to hold them shut because they didn't quite meet, so there we were doing scene changes involving whole restaurant style tables - which we had to pile on top of one another in a stack in the wings because there wasn't enough room in the wing - because the action moves between the dining room and the lounge of this old people's home... no, it's not an old people's home, it's a hotel which contains a number of old people and young people who eventually have a baby.

KP: This is actually the first play we studied at the beginning of the module. It was a really good play.

AW: What, *Separate Tables*? It is a good play isn't it!

KP: It's amazing.

AW: Yes, I can remember that with quite a lot of amusement and affection. I had done it before somewhere where, it wasn't quite so difficult because we were in a proper theatre... So yes, that night was one of the most alarming get-ins I've ever had to do because as I said it was thundering and blowing like no-body's business, and I thought I was going to go out to sea because of the stuff I was carrying up the stairs. It was not too easy carrying the arm chairs, tables and sofas and that sort, but there was no help for it so we just had to do it. But it went down quite well.

KP: [Laughs] Where do you think the best place you have worked at is? I mean in terms of stage management, what theatre?

AW: In terms of facilities, the Westminster Theatre was very good, they had excellent dressing rooms and they were extremely nice to us, and the green room facilities were good, and certainly good from that point of view. As to [pauses] mustn't stray out from 1968 should I? I should think that that was one of the best.

KP: Is that situated in London?

AW: [pauses] I've gone, I lost the plot for a minute then! What was I saying?

KP: The Westminster Theatre?

AW: Yes, it was not very far from Victoria Station. I think it's gone now, a great shame, very well equipped.

KP: As a concluding question then, in all that you've done – stage management, your hand in acting and working with Equity, what would you say was the more prominent aspect of it for you, or what area did you prefer working in?

AW: If we were only considering the period up to 1968, I wouldn't be at all sure really, I think the year or so at the rep at Bromley - what was then the New Theatre, which is being demolished in favour of the Churchill Theatre, it was on the high street, I think we probably did as good work there as anywhere. Yes I think that would probably have to be it. But it was a near thing! [Chuckles]

KP: [Laughs] Is there anything else you would like to contribute or to talk about?

AW: Well, I can't think of anything today, but I will probably think of lots of things tomorrow!

KP: OK, well thank you very much for this interview!

AW: You're very welcome!

KP: It has been very interesting.

AW: Well I hope you will be able to make some use of it! [Laughs]

KP: Oh, definitely!