

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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David Ayliff – interview transcript

Interviewer: Matthew Comras

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Director and Stage Manager. Actors; H.K. Ayliff; Equity; King Lear; Laurence Olivier; Ralph Richardson; scenery; sound effects; stage management; the Stage Management Association; technical rehearsals; television; training; Two for the Seesaw.

MC: OK, just to start off, what originally got you involved in theatre?

DA: My father was first of all an actor and then a director: between the wars he was quite a well known director, his name was H. K. Ayliff. My mother was an actress, though she gave it up when she got married, so I used to go to the theatre quite a lot. My father was the staff director at Birmingham Rep throughout the twenties and thirties and I used to go and see all the plays that were suitable for little boys to see, and got hooked like that. And after I left school I went with a touring repertory company as a learner Assistant Stage Manager, and then I did a stint as a scene painter up until the outbreak of war. Then I was in the army throughout the war – pretty uneventfully as it happened – and then after the war I wanted to get back into the theatre. My father kindly pulled a few strings, and people were pretty anxious to help ex-servicemen back into whatever their jobs were... and Lawrence Olivier had been a young actor at Birmingham under my father and he gave me a job at one of the seasons he did at the New Theatre – which is now the Noel Coward theatre – and it was the one in which he played King Lear, Ralph Richardson played Cyrano - Cyrano de Bergerac - and it was funny in a way, because I was the junior member of the team but at the same time I was the eldest because they'd been in it during the war time. Sometimes I think - looking back – they tried to make things a bit difficult for me [Laughs] but I was so glad to be doing what I wanted to do I couldn't have cared less.

MC: So you wanted to be a Stage Manager?

DA: Yes.

MC: You never wanted to be an actor?

DA: I did, until I realised I hadn't the talent! [Laughs]

MC: So you did try to be an actor?

DA: Yes, because in those days a lot of actors trained by joining a repertory company as student Stage Managers - that was if they couldn't get into a drama school. So if they were successful they went on to becoming actors, which always looked rather as though people who were Stage Managers had to be Stage Managers because they weren't clever enough to be actors – that's a cynical point of view I think – anyway, that did happen. One of the things about that Old Vic theatre season is some of the things I did, Stage Managers don't do anymore...

MC: Just... oh sorry! Carry on.

DA: ... such as sound effects. In *Cyrano*, to indicate horses arriving I had a couple of half coconut cones on a stone slab. In *King Lear* obviously, I did the thunder for the storm scene... When I say I did it, we actually had four property men, two with drums and two with thunder sheets, and I had to cue them to do what it is they had to do at certain points in the speech. So I had to listen, and give them a cue when he said 'blow winds and crack your cheeks' or whatever, and if they went on a bit too long I missed the next cue because I couldn't hear what he was saying while he was thundering! Anyway, that worked pretty well, but that's pretty well the last time that sort of way of doing sound effects was used, I think.

MC: What was your role as Stage Manager? What were your specific tasks?

DA: I was called Assistant Stage Manager.

MC: What was it your job to do?

DA: I was on the book - that was really to prompt and to give cues to the lighting and all that - for one of the shows, called *An Inspector Calls*, and all odd jobs... I can't remember them all, I remember the horses' hooves and I vividly remember the thunder.

MC: It's quite interesting actually, because I've been to see *King Lear* – well it was called the *Albery*, it's now the *Noel Coward* - and it was really dramatic: real sort of... sheets of thunder, just quite interesting! So you were Stage Manager during that *Olivier* season, did you have much contact with him?

DA: Yes, quite a bit.

MC: What were your impressions of him?

DA: It's quite interesting, I think, comparing him with *Ralph Richardson*. *Ralph* was a natural actor, he couldn't stop being a perfect actor; *Olivier* did it through sheer hard work and determination. My father didn't think he was a terribly good actor when he

was young, but he was very ambitious and kept trying to get my father to give him bigger and better parts - and was a bit of a nuisance I think - but I mean, he got where he got through sheer hard work and determination, and you can't but admire that. I mean, he was brilliant as King Lear.

MC: How did he play the role, because you can err on either side can't you, mad or...

DA: Yes, it's a tricky role - some people play it too old and decrepit, and some people play it too vigorously, and you have to get the happy medium between them, and I thought he did that brilliantly.

MC: You mentioned at the start of the interview that you went to see plays that were suitable for little boys. What sort of plays were they, as opposed to...?

DA: Oh well, what was the famous one at Birmingham was by Eden Phillpotts called *The Farmer's Wife* - it would be terribly old fashioned now. In fact, it was revived after the Second World War, directed by my father again, in London, and he set it in late Victorian era. In fact it was 1920s but being Devonshire they all had horse-drawn vehicles and things like that - there were no motor cars in that sort of play - but it was very successful and I enjoyed that... I can't remember really... They used to do a Christmas play for children every year, and then between 1929 and 1939 - am I allowed to talk about this?

MC: Yes, yes definitely.

DA: There often was the Malvern Festival, and I went to most of those. The best ones I think were the ones... it started as a Bernard Shaw festival and then they ran out of Bernard Shaw plays, and then they took to doing 'five centuries of English drama', starting with a pre-Shakespearian play like *Gammer Gurton's Needle* and *Hick Scorer* and things like that, and then doing a different century up to a new modern play each week, which was very interesting. They had to stop because they ran out of early English plays - they didn't ever do Shakespeare because that was Stratford's job. So that was '47... It struck me that in the fifties that quite a lot of things happened to stage management...

MC: Yes?

DA: Which... I mean, we're talking about change in the theatre I gather, and stage management changed quite a lot in the fifties. Nobody would have noticed that it did, because nobody notices stage management unless it goes wrong! But for instance, around '53/'54, Equity were trying to negotiate the first stage management contract. Stage Managers had always been actors who did the stage management as well - or instead - because they trained along with people who were training to be actors. And this is why there hadn't been a separate stage management contract. Equity were trying to negotiate the first one for the West End theatre, and some of the stage managers

working in the West End got wind of what they were trying to get and thought it wasn't good enough. And some of them were pretty high powered, because they had just come out of the army, or navy, or air force with fairly high ranks, you know, 'Lieutenant Colonel so and so, now a Stage Manager' and they weren't going to stand for any nonsense now. I was just a Lieutenant, but some of them were a long way above me as far as the forces were concerned. Anyway, they formed a Stage Management Association of people working in the West End, and we got together once a month in an upstairs room in a pub and discussed what Equity was trying to do and what we thought they ought to do instead. We got one of our members elected to the Equity Council and we were able to influence Equity quite successfully as far as stage management was concerned. The other interesting thing that happened in the fifties was with training stage management: there was a woman called Dorothy Tennam [?] who was Stage Manager at RADA - Royal Academy of Dramatic Art - to stage manage the public performances that the acting students put on, and it occurred to her that if it was a useful training thing to acting students it would be a wonderful training thing for stage management. So she got John Fernald, [?] who was the principal, to take on a student ASM to help her stage manage the shows. And that was such a success that they started the first drama school stage manager training course with half a dozen students - something like that - and they helped the carpentry department to build the scenery, helped the design department to paint it... I don't think they ever did washing or ironing for the wardrobe, but they did all those sort of things! They learnt sort of extra things like history of props and furniture and stuff like that and worked as stage management team on the public performances.

MC: In terms of scenery and props and that sort of thing, what were they like, especially in the fifties, how elaborate were they?

DA: Not very! I mean, scenery was much less real than it is now, much less three dimensional, box sets with painted flats to look like wallpaper, and that's one of the reasons why stage management has changed. There's one show that I did later which is a good example; Two for the Seesaw, that was an American play, a two-hander with a set on a semi-revolve - it was her apartment and his apartment, so it revolved like that for her apartment, back the other way for his and halfway for both apartments at once. And that involved an awful lot of cueing, especially lighting cues, because the lighting had to change so often. It also involved the stage management in ringing phone bells and busy signals, because with the two apartments there was a lot of phoning between. And because it was a two-hander, the management thought it would be fairly easy stage management so we'll get the boy understudy to be on the book in the prop corner and do all the cueing. Right towards the end of the rehearsal period, the director, who was an American called Arthur Penn, said, 'This won't do, he's not good enough for cueing the show', so they got me in from another show I was doing for the same management. On the Friday I watched a dress rehearsal, on the Friday evening I cued a dress rehearsal, we went down to Brighton where it opened and did the fit up. I got through the dress rehearsal all right and I got through the first night all right doing this very complicated thing, ringing American phone bells, giving lighting cues verbally - which was a new thing because it had always been done with light signals [ed. as] cue signals but the... there were so many cues you had to do it verbally.

MC: How did that work then?

DA: It worked all right, except I had a chest mic which was switched on all the time so the lighting boys heard everything I said! [Laughs] But as I said, I got through it with sweaty palms and Arthur Penn came up to me after the first night and said 'That was good, David!'. But for that reason it became clear that stage management wasn't 'just something that actors could do', and needed special training, so all these things were developing and Stage Managers were still required to play small parts or understudy. But Equity - being pushed by the Stage Management Association - was trying to get a contract with at least one or two members of the staff not required to play or understudy. I think now - I'm rather out of touch - but I think all of stage management staff are not required to understudy. Another thing happened round about now which... it's not really to do with a change in this country, but it's a way in which stage management has become different in this country to what it's like in America - I don't know if that is of interest?

MC: Yes.

DA: Before the war there was always a Business Manager and a Stage Manager with any company, and the business manager did the salaries and liaised with the box office and made sure the accounts were correct, and the stage manager was just responsible for the stage and playing small parts and understudying. But during the war - because of the man power shortage, so many people in the forces - they simplified the business manager's job, did some of it in the headquarters office and made the senior stage manager do both stage management and business management, which meant that the senior stage manager wasn't in rehearsals all the time, so the number two had to be in rehearsals all the time, with the director, taking down all the new moves and notes and things that the director gave to the cast and the... At that time the senior chap was called 'Stage Director and Company Manager' - no he wasn't! He was called 'Stage Director' - sorry! - the number two was called 'Stage Manager' and the number three was called 'ASM'. Then when they came to negotiate a contract which was to include all these changes, the management wouldn't have the number one being called 'Stage Director' because it was confusing with the Director - which is fair enough - so he had to be called 'Stage Manager and Company Manager'. The number two didn't want to go back to being called ASM after being called the Stage Manager, so they had to invent a new title and eventually they came up with 'Deputy Stage Manager', which is what he's called now, which was unpopular because you know the awful noises you get from an orchestra bit when there's a deputy...? It was that sort of idea! Anyway, we're all used to it now, but they don't do that in America: they have a Company Manager who is responsible for the business side and a Stage Manager who is in rehearsals all the time and the result there is that directors don't mind taking advice from their Stage Manager. In this country a director doesn't want to take advice from somebody who is only a deputy, so that is the difference between American stage management and British stage management, and I think it is a shame. [Laughs]

MC: Which one do you think is better, the American or the English version?

DA: Well, what was the British before the war.

MC: Oh I see, yes.

DA: I mean, I think the senior stage manager should be doing just the stage management and not splitting two jobs, but it's like that for good and all now, there's no changing it.

MC: So the war had an effect on the differences in stage management, do you think it had an effect on different sorts of plays? Did you notice a change from your earlier plays to your post war plays?

DA: Oh well, plays change... I was just wondering about the plays I did. Well, Two for the Seesaw was a different sort of thing, but some of the ones I did around now were pretty old fashioned... Witness and Prosecution is an Agatha Christie whodunit - it's a very good one actually.

MC: Do you think there were any plays you were involved in or that you saw that were a reaction to the war, that wouldn't have been produced before hand, before the war?

DA: Not that I did, I don't think.

MC: What do you think about the popularity before and after the war? Do think there was any difference there?

DA: Well, there was less competition before the war because there was no TV.

MC: Was that a major factor then, the advent of television?

DA: Well, there's much more employment for actors now with TV, and some stage managers went into TV to be floor managers.

MC: After the war, was there any sort of concerted effort to try to bring more audience numbers in? Maybe because television detracted from the popularity?

DA: Probably.

MC: Because, I think, didn't... during the Olivier season at the New Theatre, they slashed the ticket prices.

DA: Did they? I didn't know.

MC: To try to bring more people in I think. But certainly after the war...I mean, is it just hindsight that it was, you know, a real golden era of theatre, did you experience that or was it just more of the same for you?

DA: I don't know - I probably didn't think in those terms... I'm not sure that you do when you're involved. I was more worried about my next job. I was constantly worried, when a show came off, when I was going to get another one but touch - well it's too late to touch wood now! - but I did pretty well, and I wasn't unemployed for very long. I mean, Look Back in Anger is always quoted as the turning point isn't it? I don't really know if it was, but I didn't really do anything like that then.

MC: Did you ever go to see Look Back in Anger or any Pinter or anything like that?

DA: Well I don't think I went to see very much, because I mean, you can only go to matinées if they're doing a matinée day, so I'm not very useful as an observer of the theatre.

MC: I think it is quite interesting though, because it is very much heralded - especially between 1945 and 68, it is very much heralded as golden era, and it's interesting to know that perhaps when you are involved in it, it didn't seem as though it was at the time.

DA: No, you're too close to it. It's not cricket, going and seeing a different play every night, you can't do that. But I definitely noticed scenic methods getting more complicated: one thing that has developed because of that is what they call the 'technical rehearsal'. You used to just have a dress rehearsal - or several dress rehearsals - and you got the scene changes right or else! But nowadays over the past 20 years or so - or more - you have a technical rehearsal and you keep stopping to get scene changes done properly and the technical things done properly because some of them are so...

MC: When was that technical rehearsal introduced?

DA: I don't know, I suppose the sixties... I don't know - it would be more necessary for a big production like a musical. I didn't do many musicals for some reason, it just so happened.

MC: Was there a leaning towards the musical theatre in the sort of fifties/sixties?

DA: Oh I think so... Maybe not so much now, mostly older ones being revived. My daughter's working on Guys and Dolls this very moment, she's a modern day sound operator which... I mean the period you're dealing with is up to the end of the Lord Chamberlain.

MC: Yes, that's right.

DA: Well, since then sound has developed in leaps and bounds because of computerisation.

MC: Were you involved in any plays that were affected by the Lord Chamberlain and his readers and censorship?

DA: Well they were always checked by the Lord Chamberlain, he had them send two copies of the script... I don't know, probably small alterations were made. But after the Lord Chamberlain was abolished I did one show which nearly all the cast spent nearly all the show with no clothes on at all! But that's not within our period!

MC: OK, great! Is there anything else that you want to talk about?

DA: I don't think so. I seem to have been banging on rather as it is!

MC: OK, well, thank you very much.

DA: Thank you.