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Howard Loxton – interview transcript

Interviewer: Melanie Woodhouse

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MW: This is Melanie Woodhouse interviewing Mr Howard Loxton on the 18th December 2006. I just need to confirm with you Mr Loxton that it is okay for the copyright of this interview to be placed with the British Library.

HL: It's alright for them to have limited copyright, yes.

MW: Thank you. How did you first become involved in theatre Mr Loxton?

HL: Er, I think simply because I'd been going to the theatre and loved the whole idea, I mean my first memory of theatre is of a pantomime in, I suppose something like 1941 with, oh God I can never remember people's names, this is awful, Mrs Dale, erm Jessie Matthews playing Aladdin and the only recollection I actually have quite clearly is of er, wings and cloths for Widow Twankey's laundry which was very stylised with the great big images of flat irons, it was up in the air, it was totally unrealistic and I really can't remember anything else about the production at all. About a week later the theatre got bombed and, disappeared. I know I must have gone to the theatre a number of times after that to see things like musicals, I mean not this modern sort of musical I mean with shows like oh, The Maid of the Mountains, sort of Edwardian musicals that were still being toured at that time. But at some point my sister was taken to see As You Like It at Birmingham Rep, I was living in Birmingham and I wasn't and I kicked up a hell of a stink about it, and so the next time they went to the theatre, I mean I don't suppose this was frequently, it may have been only once or twice a year.

MW: Yes.

HL: It was a production of King John, it was Peter Brookes first professional production, and I had to be taken to that, and by then I was caught by the whole idea of theatre. I don't think I probably understood a great deal of the play, I remember very embarrassing my father by asking very loudly 'What is a bastard?', which I don't think I got a straight reply on. [laughs]

MW: No.

HL: And I can remember from that basically a death fall down a rostrum and very little else which is surprising because I don't know how old I was by then, I suppose I must have been, probably, ten.

MW: Yes.

HL: But from then , I started, as soon as I got a bicycle, I started cycling to Stratford to matinees, you know twenty miles there, twenty miles back. I don't know how many kids do that to go and see a show these days.

MW: No.

HL: And you know I started collecting autographs and being fascinated by the whole idea of show business. I can't remember if I was already appearing in amateur things by then. Certainly, probably, yes it must have been earlier than that, I was in a church play, I'd done things at school, an improvised piece invented by myself and other kids, totally improvised, we had no script, we made it up ourselves and that would have been in infant school. I suppose I was involved in little bits of nativity plays and so forth. By the time I was just going into secondary school I got involved somehow or other with a friend doing performances with a small, I suppose you'd call it a concert party, but it was a small troupe of people who were comics, singers, performers of different kinds, I mean I don't think we had anyone who did ballet or anything like that, who toured small halls. As far as I know they were all amateur but obviously were paid to do it, and we did things like go to mental asylums and old peoples homes as well. Usually with a stage, I can't remember them ever performing somewhere where there wasn't a stage. My friend and I only did two things for them and one was a compilation of the scenes round is this a dagger from Macbeth, it was the murder bit from Macbeth, and it was the end of Romeo and Juliet, the tomb scene from Romeo and Juliet with me playing the male role and my male chum always playing the female role. How this went down in the middle of, well it went down very well actually in the middle of a concert party, whether it was two kids doing it that made it acceptable, I don't know. I'm sure we weren't terribly good, we thought we were marvelous of course, and that same friend, we obviously we wanted to be actors and had little idea about how to go about it, nobody at school that I remember was particularly helpful, my parents really wouldn't have known anything about it at all, though that's another story in terms my father had some pierot outfits and obviously had performed at some point earlier but I never ever discovered the full background of that. But this friend and I turned up one day at the stage door of Birmingham Rep. and said 'We wanna be actors what do we do?', and we got channeled down to the basement, introduced to a woman who ran a drama school under the auspices of Birmingham Repertory Company, which was evenings only. It was aimed to give you the training with the professional theatre, with a lot of practical experience, you see you also used to help out doing things in the rep and that's really where is sort of started getting involved with the professional stages.

MW: Right, yes.

HL: Now, you know you would be call boy on all the shows at the rep, I mean, not every night but you'd take it in turns with students at the school to do that sort of job and occasionally you'd help doing something else and if there was a show with a very big cast the students usually got some parts, Shakespeare with crowd scenes or the Christmas show, something like that, and after I'd been there for about a year, I think by this time I'd probably just got my school certificate, or was it before I can't remember. But I was doing school all day then going there in the evening, doing my homework at one in the morning.

MW: So, very young, very young. You must have really loved theatre. Yes.

HL: Yes, but that school got turned into a full time proper drama school, largely because they wanted to get them out of the theatre, they were taking up too much space.

MW: Yes.

HL: And, Birmingham Council gave me a grant to go that school full time. By then, I'd already started appearing with all the local reps, playing full voice parts.

MW: Yes.

HL: By the time I'd got to, in sixth form and everybody was saying university, university, university, I was faced with the possibility of having to stay on at school to wait until I could take my R certificate which is the equivalent of A levels for university entrance, have two years of national service, and university before I could actually start a career. You know I was already,

MW: You already had....yes.

HL: getting quite a lot. I was doing special weeks over the playside. I'd done a Christmas tour, and thought I really can't wait this long. It was my fault for being one of those people born at the end of the academic year and managing to jump a year in age, so you know I got my O level equivalents at fourteen and I expected to get my A levels at sixteen and go straight to university. Now to wait to eighteen.....(laughs).

MW: It's still very young though still isn't it, eighteen?

HL: Well you know people used to get the MAs at twelve at one time, back in the middle ages.

MW: Right.

HL: But that meant I actually decided when I'd done a year full time at drama school to go into the profession proper for a time. I'd have a year before I did my national service. And I went off to do odd weeks in shows for people, went to join a company because I knew somebody already in it, where they were taking culture to people who I suppose didn't get it.

MW: Yes.

HL: Small theatre in the back of a pub, newly constructed in Worcester where we didn't get our equity minimums, we were sort of profit sharing and living on soup and bread rolls, but doing extremely good work, (laughs), to very small audiences and that lasted for, I can't remember, a few months and then it got more and more difficult, and somebody asked me would I go and join another company, doing stage management and I said okay, no, I think I went off and did a special week for somebody first and then joined another company, and from there when that finished something else cropped up and I kept myself working until I went into the forces. Did two years out, came out from the services to do a children's play which had been written for me, amazing, yes, for a company called The Arena Theatre Company, which used what was then a comparatively new, a full thrust stage with the audience round.

MW: Yes.

HL: Not the whole circle.

MW: Yes.

HL: In fact, two thirds of it. And, from then went in, came up to London, started looking for work, got myself a west end job, in a tiny part, understudying another smallish part, well several smallish parts, and doing stage management. Then, from then on, I think things started to go down. So I got myself a good west end agent, who kept on saying you have to stay in London, you have to stay in London, no point going back into rep., and there really wasn't very much in the west end theatre then for somebody who was five foot nothing and didn't look like a typical, I don't know what you'd call it, I think people thought different, if you were northern or midland you didn't look pretty, and you know, you looked rather coarse.

MW: And was that an important thing in theatre, at the time, to look right?

HL: I don't know, I mean, I don't think people were thought in terms of typecasting, anything like the way they do today, I mean, an actor was somebody who could play lots of different things, and audiences enjoyed going to see a company with the same person playing a different character every week and being very different.

MW: Yes.

HL: I mean, yes you would be cast as a juvenile man, but you'd as well as playing the straight juvenile, obviously you'd play all sorts of other things as well. You'd be cast, you'd play as cast. But I think if you were in the West End, and at that time television was just getting going and commercial television was just starting.

MW: Yes.

HL: People, you know, you had to look like the sort of part that was being written for small people, it was the sort of thing that Dickie Attenborough was playing when he first started or Alfie Bass or somebody like that.

MW: Yes.

HL: You were rough and common.

MW: Right, okay.

HL: And I suppose, well I looked about twelve, although I was, you know, twenty one. laughs I wasn't exactly pretty but, I, you know, I sort of was, not coarse looking and so you wouldn't immediately think of me as the young tough, and it was quite difficult because I wasn't gonna be playing the juvenile lead with the tennis racket coming through the French windows, because I wasn't the glamorous door man and I think you know, I found it very very difficult to get theatre work, and thought if I go back into the provinces I won't get a good main job with one of the better reps.

MW: Yes.

HL: I mean in Birmingham or Liverpool, somewhere like that. There is no point in going back into weekly rep., and so on, much that I might have enjoyed doing it, so I stuck around in London getting by on television, relatively small parts for television and every now and again, but I had no financial resources, and this I think is something which is relevant as a lot of people do manage to survive because they've got, either they've got people who can support them or they've been brought up not to be worried about being in debt, and I wasn't, I was brought up not to be in debt. So I ended up moving out of theatre eventually, and first of all editing a journal about television which was again a labour of love, not a proper job that opened up things moving in to publishing. So I left the theatre behind me after a relatively short life, working as an actor. You know, obviously I went on being involved in theatre.

MW: Yes.

HL: Ever afterwards as a member of the audience and having lots of friends in theatre and didn't really go back to being professionally associated with theatre until very recently when I started being a reviewer.

MW: Right.

HL: But, I mean now, that's not then.

MW: Yes.

HL: I think, theatre going was comparatively different for me, in that I didn't find it unusual, people now seem surprised, youngsters don't go to the theatre.

MW: No, I don't think they do as much, which is a shame really, I think it's something that young people miss, I think.

HL: Whether this partly because we didn't have the other things to do, yes we'd got cinema, people were going to the cinema three or four times a night. Well I really find it difficult, this thing which I've been aware of for years, particularly students would say sort of you know, oh we're doing drama at university, but oh no, we never actually went to the theatre very much, we don't go to the theatre very much now, even their tutors don't seem to go very often, but, I, my parents had very little money but had obviously gone to theatre in their youth, it was something, you know, you did when you went out and it may not have been that frequently, people made their own entertainment at home, I mean people played music, played the piano, sang, all that sort of stuff. And I used to do a whole lot as a kid of things like puppetry and marionettes and put on little shows to raise money for the red cross, a penny each for all the people in the street during the war so in that, to that extent I was always a performer, but again I don't think that was unusual, I think it was something other people did as well.

MW: Yes, I think, yes.

HL: But it may also have been a matter of cost, in that you could go to the theatre, in The Alexandra Theatre in Birmingham you could go and buy seating in the gallery for sixpence, okay, right at the back of the gallery, a long way away from the stage and programmes cost three pence, but if you bring that up into contemporary rates it's still a lot cheaper than I think most people would think today, on the other hand if you actually, if you compare it to what a lot of people are earning today maybe it isn't.

MW: Yes, I mean I have always thought of theatre as being quite an expensive thing to do, I mean I don't know that, but I always thought of it as being sort of something that more well off people did rather than the working class people. Is that something you would agree with or is that.....?

HL : I would agree to a certain extent the kind of theatre that I probably went to in my twelve, thirteen, early teens, was probably not what neighbours might have gone to.

MW: Yes.

HL: In fact, neighbours probably mainly went to the cinema and they would go to the panto at Christmas and they might occasionally go and see a show. Whereas I was going to Shakespeare, Ibsen, you know.

MW: Yes

HL: The stuff that we now think of as fairly heavy,

MW: Yes.

HL: But that's what the local diet was and yes I saw more popular shows as well, but I, that was partly decided by a scheme which they had in Birmingham which gave, or I think we might have had to pay a, it might even have been as much as a shilling which surprised me if I could have raised a shilling, laughs but there was certainly a scheme which either free or very cheaply, maybe the school paid a shilling,

MW: Yes.

HL: For you to go to matinees, midweek matinees at the Birmingham rep where you had, at that time, one of the best theatres in the country.

MW: Yes.

HL: And the drawback for some people was, that usually meant it was sports day. For some of us that was a disadvantage particularly if we didn't want to, if you were hopeless at cricket, you know I never understood why people wanted to play cricket, rugby, it's alright if it's not too cold laughs but I was very happy to go to the theatre rather than, than to go to, to get very dirty on the sports field where there were no showers, the changing rooms were not yet reclaimed as sports field, they were used as allotments, I think. But that was something which did mean for me personally, yes I was going to the theatre at least once a month at that time without a great deal of expense.

MW: So what were the sorts of plays at that time then that you would see?

HL: Well, as I say, Shakespeare, Ibsen, that sort of thing but also some, you know, relatively new plays that had been in the west end the year before.

MW: Yes

HL: Or just come over from America, I mean Tennessee Williams, things like that and the usual sort of repertoire but Birmingham being Birmingham would obviously have had slightly more high brow repertoire than the average weekly rep would.

MW: Right.

HL: And, Birmingham had, they played a play for a month, so you rehearsed for a month.

MW: Yes.

HL: So that meant you had pretty good standards. What I was doing when I first started working, and apart from if I actually did something at the rep, I did one show at the rep., I was usually going into weekly reps., so you were rehearsing from Monday through to the next Monday morning dress rehearsal, then you know a new show on every week. I at that time wasn't really having to rehearse one show and play another in the evening because I was going, child roles weren't really very often two plays together so the pressure on me wasn't so great, but I had colleagues at drama school who went off and did not weekly rep., but did twice weekly rep, I think this was in Aberystwyth, literally two shows a week. Trying to think what this actresses name was, Jenny, can't remember her surname, she's not someone who I remember going on to do very much afterwards. But, she came after six months, or maybe less with them and meeting she said 'I pretty well only have to look at the cover of a script and I know it now' laughs and certainly she would sight read, speed read through the script and pretty well memorise it in the way which I suppose people used to in earlier times when they would be given an outline of a plot and improvise it pretty well knowing what the plot points were, which once you've done it several times of course, presumably you use very much the same lines, but, I mean, yes film actors quite often have a script, they are given it and have to play it straight away, or given a very short time, and, but that's short scenes.

MW: Yes.

HL: I mean this is whole plays and long parts one after the other, and it amazes me that anybody actually had that facility, it's something which, these days, people don't have. Where memories have changed considerably, not just as actors, but just as people because we have so many sources we can go to for information, like particularly in an age before everybody read people had to remember everything and I wonder whether that had some influence in the past on the fact that people could learn roles very very rapidly indeed. What shall we move onto?

MW: So with learning lines and things like that was it often that it would be more improvisation than having a set script that you....?

HL: Ooh no, no, I mean this was an unusual situation in doing things twice weekly, and again they were supposed to keep to the script, and also you know we had the Lord Chamberlain so we had to stick to the lines. (laughs)

MW: Yes.

HL: No, I think people took it for granted that you learned things and yes don't ask me how one did it but people always did it.

MW: So what time did you change from sort of, being part of the theatre to being more of a theatre goer, and, when did that happen?

HL: I suppose, this would be about 58 something like that, 59.

MW: But you kept an interest in the theatre, at that point, in what way did you stay sort of interested in the theatre?

HL: Well, I, I had decided that if I was going to get another job I would stick it, whatever it was for three years to show I could, then if I ever went back into the theatre, which I reckoned I would do when I was fifty but in fact I never did it. laughs I know I thought that's when my time would come again because I remembered actors who were same sort of size as me, who had been quite reasonably successful as classical actors playing all those sort of, actors like Elliot Maycombe or, who were making a success of being little old men, and I thought fifty was really old, laughs which incidentally is something you'll find still with drama students, because I remember I used to live in the house of somebody who, was director of drama at one of the big drama schools. He would come home and say 'oh students today, one of them came in, he came in all bent up with a walking stick and I said how old do you think you are?' He said 'oh, I'm playing an old man, I'm fifty sir', and you know this guy, he was then not that old, he was about fifty five, but certainly said, 'how old do you think I am?', 'Oh, I don't know sir', 'well I'm five years older than what you're supposed to be playing, I never walk around like that do I?'. laughs, I mean it's strange, people's idea of age is something that depends on how old you are.

MW: Yes, I think.

HL: You used to often I think to see that with very young companies of young actors who you know are playing the old man as the quavering old so and so, ooh yes, he's fifty five, he's sixty, he's sixty five, when you're not that till you're ninety. laughs

MW: So what sort of plays when, as you came out of the theatre, what sort of plays would you then go and see?

HL: Literally anything.

MW: Anything at all that, so these sort of plays that were coming around in the fifties that were, sort of, bookmark plays, were those something, some of those plays that you.....

HL: Bookmark plays?

MW: Sort of, plays, when they look at plays like Look Back in Anger and those sort of plays, were those plays that you would have, at that time, gone to watch?

HL: See, I don't think then you ever saw something as what you're calling a bookmark play. I remember going to see Look Back and yes I did, I remember very clearly coming out of a theatre with a friend and saying 'oh thank God, somebody said it'. I haven't a clue what I was so excited about. If you look at the play now you think what's so different or important about this, I mean it's not even very political.

MW: No.

HL: I mean, yes it's the sort of the rebel thing. He's kicking against things and yes, some extent one was identifying not so much perhaps with Jimmy Porter as with Cliff, as the working class kid on stage, but this wasn't the first working-class play, there had been good working class, I mean they're not really working class, I mean Cliff is, Jimmy's not.

MW: No, no.

HL: There had been good working class plays before which people tend to forget. And there were lots of other things which were good stuff which, you know, John Whiting's plays which were sometimes not very successful. There was a lot of new stuff coming along, but there always were new plays. Terence Rattigan was just as new in his time.

MW: Yes.

HL: Yes they were aimed to please an audience a little bit more perhaps than people now write. You can now write a play and ignore the audience and get away with it. laughs I mean, you did have to bring in a paying audience then, plus the fact you had the Lord Chamberlain and you know, and that's something you all know a great deal about now, particularly in this building.

MW: Yes.

HL: And it did make an enormous difference, things just didn't get written because you knew you couldn't get it on.

MW: Yes.

HL: And when people make judgments about oh why didn't they deal with important issues? Yes they did, but they couldn't deal with them as openly as somebody would now. I mean, you didn't write about homosexuality, you didn't criticise the government or the royalty or whatever, you know. You had to do it, maybe not quite as much as you did in Eastern Europe, whereas in Eastern Europe everybody put on productions of Hamlet and with political implications.

MW: Yes.

HL: You could do that here but you might not do it necessarily through Shakespeare, you might have a new play that was written in a way that made points which would be perceptible.

MW: Yes.

HL: I mean a lot of academics now play games looking for all sorts of things when they're not necessarily there.

MW: Yes.

HL: And I have just been reading a book on, I think it calling itself A Queer History of Ballet, it seems to have nothing at all to do with queer history or ballet, but it's trying to identify things which might have been taken, and with dubious evidence. But I think if you look at what a number of writers were trying to say, I mean, Noel Coward, you've gotta go back to the vortex, things like that, just about got away with it. You could make a lot of points that are important. Tennessee Williams, you know he got into trouble in this country of course.

MW: Yes.

HL: America was very much easier, there were American plays which did get heavily edited by the Lord Chamberlain. But this whole idea that theatre changes in the nineteen fifties is absolute nonsense, it something which is really based upon the fact that yes, people saw Look Back and the establishment and The Royal Court as providing

something different and there was the encouragement there plus the fact the funding started coming in. Before that, yes some reps. got some Arts Council money when CEMA turned into the Arts Council just after the war, but there weren't very many and it wasn't very much.

MW: No.

HL: No, if you look at a company like look back, look at a company like Theatre Workshop,

MW: Yes.

HL: Who did do some now thought to be quite groundbreaking work, none, no subsidy initially, very little when they did start to get any, compared with say what the court were getting, but even with what workshop were doing you can find all those things being done by other people. Perhaps not altogether as extensively as Joan Littlewood did but other companies were doing things. There were people who were exploring improvisation, who were doing physical theatre, there ain't much new in show business, except technology. laughs

MW: Is that something that you think has changed the way that plays are staged and what sort of things that we have available now...?

HL: Technology has changed things enormously, I mean lighting in particular, if you look at, I mean if you look at historically a lit auditorium,

MW: Yes.

HL: Candles, oils, gas, lowering the lights, eventually electricity coming in, which gave such a harsh light, people didn't like it compared with gas, they thought much more subtle effects were better with gas, but you then got things like front of house lighting, I mean front of house to light the stage.

MW: Yes.

HL: With limes and lime equivalents, I know there was a claim at one stage that William Poel was the first to use spots out front straight on to the front of the stage. I don't think that is actually true, I know he was one of the people who used them, but I think people were doing it before him, but you'd probably only have had four front of house spots mounted on the front of the dress circle in many smaller theatres. You might have had some others at the sides, you'd have had, well I acted in professional theatre where we still had coloured bulb batons, not you know, not lamps that you stick gelatins into. But lamps got smaller in the nineteen fifties and probably a little bit earlier maybe pre

war. Somebody called Paton 24 started being known by the end of the nineteen forties, early fifties, and standard histories will have all this in, but you notice more and more lamps appearing. The west end had many more than you would find in the provinces, and complicated lighting plots like Joe Myersons the lighting for things like the Tennessee Williams plays, we started getting much more localised lighting, now of course, you have hundreds of lamps, enormous electricity bills, enormous costs. I mean more money seems to be spent on lighting now for a show than almost anything else. To some extent, yes you can do wonderful things with it but to some extent it has got out of hand, as in terms of making an effective show you can actually do it quite well and I remember large chunks of the Bill Brydon productions of *The Mysteries* at The National Theatre being done lit by the head lamps on miners helmets. laughs Or, you can do a show in a small location just with candles.

MW: Yes.

HL: You don't need a very elaborate lighting plot and this has gone right through the whole business now, in that if you've got a big musical it costs a fortune to put on, and increasingly, straight shows are costing an enormous amount to put on because people feel that they have to give high production values, elaborate staging, elaborate lighting, a soundscape through the whole show because all, somebody now designs it, I mean the number of specialists you now have, you've got a choreographer, a movement expert, a voice expert, a lighting expert, somebody who designs the sound stuff, somebody else who does the fights, it just goes on and on and on.

MW: Yes.

HL: There's a dialect coach, whereas in those days there used to be someone we called the producer, who we now call the director, who did it all. laughs I'm not saying you might not get slightly better stuff these days because you have all these skills but the expense is enormous and the rehearsal time for all these people to do it is also enormous. I mean what is now expected for a west end show is very much more than it would have been in the nineteen forties. When I think, you know the show I worked on, I think we probably did rehearse for three weeks, slightly over three weeks, but there were shows that went on with less.

MW: Do you think there was more heart in plays, sort of years ago, than what is needed now, because there is the effects and the lights that can be used now, do you.....?

HL: Hmm?

MW: Do you think it can overshadow what....?

HL: What do you mean by heart?

MW: In that, if you haven't got all those special effects and everything, that the performance comes from the people that are playing those parts....

HL: I think that if it works the performance comes from the people anyway, if it doesn't come from the people then it's not going to work well. Yes, it may be a great show, it may dazzle you with spectacle, but, I mean that's like staging the Coronation of George the third or something which Garrett did, well anyway one of those coronations, that's a pageant, and you know there's a limited interest for me in pageants, I remember seeing one when I was four years old and being bored stiff. [laughs] No, I think if you're going to go to the theatre you want some sort of content.

MW: Yes.

HL: It doesn't necessarily have to a text content, though personally I do find myself somewhat alienated by current moves to produce shows which seem to have a content which the audience has to make up for itself. [laughs] I quite like there to be a story or at least an argument, I mean I find that easier, actually, even with things like dance works.

MW: Yes.

HL: Although I can because dance works tend, if they're abstract, to be shorter, you know it can engage my attention, to look at beautiful patterns and peoples skill.

MW: Yes.

HL: But, if you have some emotional content, whether it's following a storyline or following a topic, it may be something which is physically just about human relationships and it's being done in a physical way.

MW: Yes.

HL: But there is something there for you emotionally or intellectually latch on to. People who may have more musical or mathematical minds than me may feel quite differently.

MW: Yes.

HL: And the person who can see the mathematics going on in a piece of Bach or Mozart probably uses a different part of the brain, which, in me is not so highly functional. [laughs]

MW: Are there any moments that you recall from plays that you've been to see, either now, recently or, that may have stood out for you that you...?

HL: That sort of recollection is with me where this kind of interview breaks down because with me almost always memories are brought back by other people talking about them.

MW: Yes.

HL: And, no, it is difficult to recall particular things yet when one tries, the sort of thing I would give as an example of theatre magic, which does partly involve lighting, this again, a show I mentioned, *The Bill Brydon Mysteries*, in the nativity sequence from those, this is a promenade production, the virgin Mary is preparing for the birth of her baby and she starts to prepare swaddling clothes, she is folding up some pieces of linen or woolen cloth. By this time, the performers have started to give candles, they may be electric candles, but they're little tapers, they don't feel artificial, to members of the audience, and you're crowded round to see what she's doing and you can't see very well, you can see that she's folding things and then suddenly the folding things are turned into a baby, it's just a bundle of cloth but it's a baby.

MW: Yes.

HL: And you have lit it with your candle, fantastically moving.

MW: Yes, yes.

HL: A simple piece of physical theatre, but you are totally, emotionally engaged.

MW: Yes.

HL: And that's real theatre and it happens on other occasions

MW: Yes, I think those sort of moments are the ones, when it raises an emotion inside you, I think those are the best theatre moments, is that....?

HL: I think sometimes, one would hope that it can make people have something which goes on outside the theatre, of when people like *The Living Theatre*, Julian Bates company came here and staged a revolution theatre, which you really were supposed to go out and charge parliament at the end of it, never worked with an English audience. I'm never quite sure why. [laughs]

MW: So, for you what is the most important aspect of theatre, that you think brings it to life, that will, sort of invoke emotion in a viewer?

HL: An actor and a person as a spectator and the more you involve that spectator in performance, for me, the better and this does not mean that, you can't stand apart at the same time as you're being involved, I mean I don't think that Brecht wanted you to be not emotionally involved.

MW: Right.

HL: I mean all his alienation theories, in my feeling what he was really saying was we want something more like English acting than pompous German acting. I mean yes he wanted you to observe, but I mean if you look at his plays, no quite clearly you're observing but you can't not be involved in something like *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, even *Mother Courage* but you need to be able to be detached at the same time, hence the songs and all the other things which separate you momentarily and you stand back and you know there are times when you can say 'she's stupid', but I think theatre has to be a mixture of the two, you've got to be able to understand what's going on, you can't get lost in it emotionally unless that's what the production and the dramatist is offering you. You can do both, I mean, you can have a piece of totally didactic writing where you don't necessarily get emotionally involved but you're listening to the argument.

MW: Yes.

HL: I mean somebody like Shaw is very good at making you listen to the argument, but again he was writing for a theatre where you got involved anyway, because there are large chunks which I think people probably find a little difficult today because people aren't used to listening.

MW: No.

HL: I'm not sure that actors are used to dealing with speeches that are quite so long unless they're in verse which helps.

MW: So how did you get involved with The Society for Theatre Research? Was that.....?

HL: I had decided having gone through a series of publishing houses, where either the firm packed up or they closed down my bit of it or something, I took some redundancy money and I decided I was going to get myself a degree because I got sick of applying for jobs where I would fill in a form and because I hadn't got a degree they never saw me, and I suddenly realised this was happening, it was a shift from being you might be very very experienced and if you knew people they would be delighted to employ you but it got to the stage where people started filling in application forms which were then

vetted by a secretary who saw no degree and I realised this is the sort of thing that is happening.

MW: Yes.

HL: And, I thought oh I'll go and get myself a degree, and thought what do I do, well may I'll do a theatre degree, may I'll go and teach theatre and applied for a course, a BA at Manchester, and, had an interview and was told to go and see the registrar and sort it all out, and he said 'oh, yes, yes, you can start next September'. 'You mean in six weeks time'. 'Oh no no no, the following year'. 'But I want to start in six weeks time'. 'Oh, I've closed the for....'.

MW: Right, yes.

HL: And I went back without an inkling, and they said, 'Oh you fool you should have just argued', and I said 'Well I was rather deflated, nobody warned me this was the situation, I didn't know you had to apply months before, nobody ever told me that, and I ended up instead do an MA instead of a BA as a part time MA which was when I actually first heard about The Society for Theatre Research because the people who were teaching me were involved in it and I could never go to any of their meetings because I always had night classes when they had their lecture meetings and eventually I started going and got pulled in.

MW: And what's the role that you have within the society now?

HL: Well, Jack Reading, I just started going to lectures, I mean people knew a bit about my background because I'd worked in theatre and in publishing. Jack Reading, when he wanted someone to take over from him running the theatre book prize decided I was gonna do it. So, I suddenly found this is what I was asked to do and I did. [laughs]

MW: And, part of that, is that the reviewing that you do now or is that something separate?

HL: No, no, no, I review plays for a website which is no, I get paid for it but I don't think of it as a fully professional job because it's not being paid normal sort of reviewers rates which I feel a bit guilty about because it's you know one ought to be asking for union rates but I don't think web sites can always afford them.

MW: No.

HL: And I, it means I get to see quite a lot of theatre.

MW: So, I

HL: I think that probably ought to out of the tape.

MW: Okay, well, thank you ever so much for giving me your time and, you know, for giving me this interview, I do really appreciate it.

HL: There's lots more, but we need to know where we are going.

MW: Is there anything at all that you want to put into this that means something to you that.....?

HL: Things like touring conditions, what it was like being a child actor, probably something about being gay in the theatre then, which I probably wouldn't want to go on line but I think might be quite useful because people have different ideas now.

MW: Yes.

HL: You know, the sort of idea, you know, that it was always easy to be gay in the theatre. It wasn't.

MW: Yes. It wasn't.

HL: Well, I mean it was if you happened to be in certain companies. [laughs]

MW: Yes. So what do you feel then, what would the difficulties that you would come across if, as being gay in the theatre what....?

HL: Oh you were illegal.

MW: First of, was that.....?

HL: That was the difficulty in life, plus the fact that when I was a young actor I hadn't an idea about the law or the fact that there was anything different about it.

MW: Yes.

HL: It never occurred to you, as a kid all you knew was that sex was something you weren't supposed to do, any kind, you didn't know there were different kinds. [laughs]

MW: Yes, and was that something that was hidden within the theatre from, sort of, everyone?

HL: It's very very difficult, I didn't think so because I happened to move, I suppose it's because I, when you're very young you don't notice.

MW: Yes.

HL: And because you knew it had to be hidden from everybody, by the time I was sort of, sixteen or something, I don't know, somebody, I had sort of discovered it was illegal.

MW: Right, okay.

HL: And, you had to be careful.

MW: Yes.

HL: Yes, but I mean, you would realise various other people you came across were gay.

MW: Yes.

HL: And, I was young enough then not to see it as being something very important, I mean my experience was that all boys were gay at school. [laughs]

MW: I mean, do you think it was something that changed peoples reactions to other people if....?

HL: I think it's something which a lot of people thought, oh if you don't go into theatre because it's full of homosexuals and certainly dance, that was very much an outside view, and to some extent that was not an inaccurate view of a lot of the dance world, but I think, the, I dunno, the, the general perception meant that, for instance if you were looking for digs, if you were going into theatrical digs, no, no, it was probably alright, people were used to it, people were sharing, but I remember going somewhere looking for a bedsit in London and finding it extraordinarily difficult to get somewhere that would take two men. They preferred girls anyway, you know, because girls were supposed to be not so messy, whatever, nonsense!

MW: Yes.

HL: Men who live on their own, or are used to being on their own are much better, usually at organising things themselves than a lot of women in terms of, you know, not messing the place up, probably in not bringing people back too, because, I don't know, I always found landladies, I mean you find the odd one, 'Oh no we much prefer men because it's much easier to have men'. [laughs]

MW: So was there, there was a stigma attached then, to being part of the theatre, as a man?

HL: I don't think.....

MW: Not now, but.....

HL: I think there was still as late as the forties, as a sort of hangover of the rose of vagabonds thing, it wasn't like being somebody who was working on a fairground, a touring fairground or the circus. There was more of a reputation perhaps that people were going to run off without paying the bills.

MW: Yes.

HL: But there was an element still that being unruly, we were still, you would have found very few actors who had the fedoras and the astrakhan coats, but there was still a little bit of that around.

MW: Yes.

HL: And maybe actors were not thought very reliable, I mean insurance companies were very bad with actors and journalists, you know, it was much more difficult to get insurance because you were thought to be unreliable. And people still certainly very much discouraged you from going into the theatre. I mean I was discouraged because of the difficulty of getting work.

MW: Yes.

HL: But not from my parents point of view, that I am aware of, because they thought it was disreputable. You've got an awful lot of people, probably from the thirties on, maybe earlier who were well brought up.

MW: Yes.

HL: Young lads and lasses who went into show business that were, I'm, whether that was something that they had to do against family disapproval, I don't know, I mean if they were sent to RADA as a sort of finishing school. At one time RADA very much for girls was thought of, I think, as a finishing school rather than real training, like art schools quite often were. It was just a little hobby to keep them occupied until they were married, you know.

MW: Yes.

HL: But I mean there were a number of companies where sort of, the gay thing was, I mean Donald Wolfithall said 'I'd never employ a bugger, despite the fact I'm thinking of two very well known names who were in his company. [laughs]

MW: Yes.

HL: George Devine had a sort of anti gay reputation despite the fact he had several gay directors working directly under him. When John Gielgud was arrested, a friend of mine who is on the equity council, was at an equity meeting when a major actress on the council, and I think, a leading actor both argued to have him thrown out of equity. Again, ignoring, all oblivious to the fact that at least three other people probably, around the table were gay and it may be people just didn't think of it, because I actually grew up with no problems, but I am aware of one or two older friends being very careful about it being known outside of very very narrow circles,

MW: Yes.

HL: and who would not introduce you to friends of theirs who I was pretty sure were themselves gay, both men and women because to have introduced you might have implied something, plus the fact that I was much younger, that was always another thing,

MW: So, it was by association?

HL: You know, being a young person associated with an older one might be thought, you know, what are they doing together? It was alright if you weren't in show business I think and it was perfectly okay to have an interest in a young painter or something like that,

MW: Yes.

HL: but, another person who's an actor and you're an actor, then I think that sort of, I don't know, it seems ridiculous to me, but it was a generation that were being very

careful, and rightly so. I think, it's pretty difficult to know if things were more relaxed in the fifties than earlier. I mean, obviously things were changing in, and there were groups being formed for pressure for changes in the law, if the law hadn't been changed you were still liable to end up in jail, as a lot of people did.

MW: Yes.

HL: You know in one rep. I was in, somebody was suddenly off and I never quite found out why but my understanding is they'd been arrested for some homosexual offence and you know shoved in jail.

MW: It's amazing, really, to sort of.....

HL: And, you know, I presume the company must have known it was coming up, or maybe they didn't, maybe he'd not told them what he was up in court for, because the director went on and played the part the night that he couldn't appear and he wasn't heard of in the business for some years afterward.

MW: I suppose it's something that we don't look, or that you don't realise was so important and so imperative really that that was.....

HL: Well, you have somebody like Dirk Bogarde who never in his life came out. You know, absolutely ridiculous, he'd done things supporting, played victim and things like that, but he would never actually say.

MW: Yes. I mean, really it shouldn't make a difference, it shouldn't, it....

HL: It shouldn't make a difference at all, and I can understand the management box office thinking, from a box office point of view, oh if a gay man's playing the romantic lead the women won't accept it, nonsense. They always have, I mean, Ivor Novello, [laughs] Rock Hudson, I mean I don't think everybody knew about Rock Hudson, but everybody knew about Ivan Ovello, surely, even when he was a leading man in the west end. Maybe they didn't, maybe the public were very very naïve, I mean I heard jokes about Ivor Novello before I even knew what it was. [laughs] No, it's peculiar, you know an actor's an actor, and I can understand it more perhaps now in that actors are increasingly playing themselves, much more than a character.

MW: Yes.

HL: In a way that a west end actor, quite often, in between the wars for instance, west end plays were written for stars who really played a variation of themselves and a lot of actors would claim that's what they always do, they have to find the character within themselves.

MW: Yes.

HL: It's not an imposed performance. What, I mean, the whole character thing has changed so dramatically in that when I was starting in theatre, to be an actor meant you played as wide a range of characters as you could. That was your skill as an actor. I mean, Olivier would play Mr Puff and half an hour later he was playing Oedipus or the other way around and that's what you expected of an actor. Nowadays, casting directors, another new invention in the theatre, I mean yes you have them in the cinema, but a casting director for a play!

MW: Yes.

HL: Now, everybody has casting directors; there was a show recently I noticed there were three casting directors named on the programme for a cast of two. [laughs] I'm not sure who did what, maybe they had to ring up so many people to get them to be in this very bad play, [laughs] but casting directors increasingly do expect you to walk in being the character.

MW: Yes.

HL: Things like commercials, essentially to be exactly what they expect when you walk in. That's not acting.

MW: No. I think it's, do you think that if you have a connection with a character then that is the thing that you need to make the character come to life?

HL: I don't think, if by connection you mean to find something which matches the character.

MW: Not necessarily matches, but something that you can empathise with or that you can internalise that.....

HL: You can empathise with things which are nothing to do with you.

MW: Yes, yes I suppose.....

HL: I suppose one of the things an actor needs is empathy, you must be able to have feelings for somebody who is different from yourself. It's probably why actors for the most part, I don't know about now, but I always used to feel that actors were very good at getting on with other people.

MW: Yes.

HL: It's not just because they like a drink. [laughs] No, you have got to draw quite often on your own experience and maybe this is why people would say, though I never felt it when I was very young that I had to have the experience to draw on. I mean, I thought I knew what it was, I could feel like a murderer or be murdered, or whatever when I was twelve you know. Erm, but there is the old thing of trying to think of something to help you, to get through to an emotion, which is close in your own life, some dramatic experience and erm, and there's the external thing of looking for something you can build, something from the outside. You know, some actors say they have to have the right pair of shoes. The Olivier thing of hearing a ferret in a trap, or a mink in a trap was the scream, the howl he did as Oedipus, which I remember an actor friend saying he remembered that and talked about it to other people, he came across an old diary of the night he actually went to see it and he'd made no remark about it all, in fact he just thought that didn't work very well. [laughs]

MW: So, if then, to finish we look at what it was like as child then being an actor, what.....?

HL: I was unaware of the fact until a little later that I was actually being patronised by everybody because you were treated as being very young you were not part of things, I thought this is marvellous, I'm an actor, I'm being grown up.

MW: Yes.

HL: I was going off and staying in places on my own, no supervision, I was too old to need a chaperone, and of course, most people went off to work from a couple of years before me, from fourteen anyway. But you got a range of experience, you did grow up very rapidly.

MW: Yes.

HL: You were on your own, coping with living your life, coping with meeting new people all the time, having to adjust to them. It was a marvellous grounding in growing up, it meant when you came to do things like national service I had all these much tougher people who were lost without their mummies! [laughs] You know, who'd come from The Gorbels or somewhere.

MW: Yes.

HL: I just couldn't understand that at all, and you get enormous resources and if you worked in provincial theatre, whether you're there as an actor who's keen on the business or whether you're acting and ASKing you get drawn into all the things that are

going on, so you gain a lot of experience, you learn all sorts of skills, you know and nowadays you get somebody in to design your home and have a makeover.

MW: Yes.

HL: No, I mean you've been dressing sets every Saturday night and Sunday, you knew how to hang curtains, arrange things, put furniture to look best, all that sort of thing, you painted scenery, made props, you'd done all those things. At drama school, you'd have had to have done ASMing because that was part of what you did if you, some plays you'd be stage manager and wouldn't have a role, or you might have a small role. It wasn't, I think, until certainly post war and I think, really, probably post the fifties that you started getting dedicated stage management courses, where people went in saying 'I want to be a stage manager, I want to do the technical things'. People wanted to be in the theatre and they thought if you haven't done anything else, you think being in the theatre is being an actor. You might have done something through amateur work making scenery and so on but you'd think, no, I'm a craftsman, you might go in that way, into working, into building scenery or a firm that made scenery or even doing the technical things as electricians and so on, but I think that would only be if you'd already got experience of doing it in another world, or in the family.

MW: Yes.

HL: You know, if you have those connections already there, for somebody who knows nothing about the business apart from going and seeing theatre, again that has changed because people do know much more about all these things from outside, so you might decide, no, no, I want to be a sound designer. You really probably want to be a pop singer, you got waylaid in to being a studio who got waylaid, then, oh no, I'll now be creative, I'll be a sound designer.

MW: So was, part of working in the theatre was that you did everything?

HL: I think one of the great things was being part of a company,

MW: Yes.

HL: And that's something which changed a little bit as you came in to London, because if you were working in the west end, even if you were on stage management, I don't know exactly what the situation is today but certainly in the fifties, unionism was such that if you were a stage manager dealing with the props there were things that you could do with them and things that you couldn't. There was a property master who had them, and he dealt with that. If you were setting scenery, that had to be the stagehand setting the scenery, you weren't allowed to touch the scenery or if you were it had to be agreed. What you did if you got actors moving the scenery as part of the show I'm not quite sure what the union said about that. [laughs] But, I mean there were, that is the sort of difference. You've now got right through the theatre the whole health and

safety regulations guide, which has become so strong I think it means that you just can't do it, that nobody would have thought twice about, you know, I suppose you took quite a lot of risks but you never thought of them as risks, and you certainly never thought of suing anybody. [laughs] I mean, to go into a theatre now as I did a couple of months ago and be asked to wear a hard hat, as a visitor in, during the day, going to see an old theatre, what about the actors that are on stage? You know you can't wear hard hats in the middle of a show unless that's the point of the show.

MW: Yes.

HL: So are all those things going to hit you when they fall out of the flies, no. I think a lot of that has gone too far, it's because we have to have legislation which is national covering all kinds of employment. You know, whether we get smoking allowed on stage or not, I'm not quite sure what's happening in London, it obviously decided no. I mean I'm happy to come back and talk more.

MW: That's fantastic.

HL: At some point if we can address areas where you do need stuff

MW: Yes.

HL: I can, you know, remember things better beforehand, what I think would be enormously helpful would be if you had some sessions when several people were talking together so that you do spark off memories of individual productions, I can't remember what I saw last week, [laughs] because you know things have piled on top of each other, but once somebody starts talking about something....

MW: It brings it back and it gives that opportunity to discuss.....

HL: Odd things suddenly come into your head and I think, you know as a child actor maybe people didn't swear in front of me. I remember being absolutely scandalised, not scandalised, amused, I remember a production at the Birmingham theatre, a very famous one of Henry the VI, the curtain went up on Henry surrounded by monks chanting away and actress offstage, we went off in a blackout, actress offstage fell over something and shouted out a very loud 'Oh fuck', which must have heard by the whole audience, [laughs] and I don't think I'd heard the word actually said in that sense before. [laughs]

MW: Thank you very much Mr Loxton, it's been a pleasure, thank you.

HL: Well, I feel I've been very disorganised and rambled all over the place.

MW: No, it's really, honestly I've really enjoyed it, thank you ever so much,

HL: No, you're not supposed to enjoy it, let's get something useful on record.

MW: No, but it , I have, it really has opened my eyes to things I wouldn't have even thought about previously.

HL: Things I ought to talk about at some stage, but not now, is things like touring conditions and touring scenery and things like that because that's the sort of thing that has changed quite a lot because everything went by rail, I don't know whether, have you seen a lot of the other transcripts?

MW: I've seen some of them, yes.

HL: Have you had a lot of stage management people talking about those things.

MW: There has been, yes.

HL: I probably ought to have a look at what we've got and see if there's things I ought to add, I mean this is an ongoing thing.

MW: It is yes, thank you ever so much.

HL: Well, thank you.

MW: Thank you.