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Patricia Noble – interview transcript

Interviewer: Kate Harris

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Script Reader for H.M Tennent. Enid Bagnold; Hugh 'Binkie' Beaumont; finance; first nights; John Gielgud; H.M Tennent's; homosexuality; The Last Joke; The Lyric Hammersmith; My Fair Lady; David Noble; parties; John Perry; Terence Rattigan; Ralph Richardson; Ross; Royal Court Theatre; Daphne Rye; Separate Tables; television; Emlyn Williams.

KH: Today is the 18th December and it's an interview with Patricia Noble conducted by Kate Harris. Can I just confirm that the British Library has your permission to hold copyright over the interview transcripts and the recording?

PN: Yes, certainly.

KH: That's great, thanks very much. Can I begin by asking about how your husband first became associated with H.M. Tennent's?

PN: Yes, it goes back actually to the war: he was a prisoner of war of the Japanese and became friendly with a stage designer called David Folkes, and at the end of the war my husband went into the City and he and David continued to be friends - and tennis partners actually - and one of the... two of the friends of David Folkes were Ralph Richardson and John Perry, who was a director of H.M. Tennent and they made a tennis foursome and this continued for some time and it was just purely a friendship thing. I can't exactly remember the dates - you can probably check this - in the late 1950s, H.M. Tennent took out shares in the newly formed ITV company or ATV company, which didn't do at all well to begin with but then suddenly took off and made a huge amount of money. And so H.M. Tennent was saddled with a lot of money and Binkie Beaumont - the director of H.M. Tennent's - said to John Perry, 'Do you know anybody? We need somebody to come into the company who is going to look after the finances' and John said, 'Well my tennis partner, James Noble, is a stockbroker, why don't we invite him in?'. So that was really how my husband became involved actually with H.M. Tennent, and this was just before we got married and so he was... it may have been just before or just after, but very much in that sort of time and he remained as the Financial Director - he had nothing to do with the productions or anything like that - but the Financial Director of H.M. Tennent until Binkie Beaumont died... in 1991 I think. I think it was 1991. And after that actually my husband had a number of shares - in fact controlling shares - in H.M. Tennent and tried to carry on the company, but he didn't... and the name was bought up by an American called Arthur Cantor, and I think it still exists as a

name - as a production company obviously. So I was involved I suppose from the late fifties right the way through until Binkie's death.

KH: Can I just go back to when you first became connected, through your husband. What were your husband's first impressions of the company when he first started?

PN: Well he was very excited - if you are working in the City to suddenly be working in the theatre is hugely exciting, it means a lot of the glamour and a lot of the fun and a lot of meeting interesting people; and he was pleased, because he was able to bring his expertise into a company that had never had this sort of money to deal with, so it was a very exciting time for him.

KH: I mean, because in that period in the fifties H.M. Tennent was hugely glamorous with the people associated with it.

PN: It was indeed glamorous. We went... I remember one of the first things I went to was the first night of My Fair Lady.

KH: Oh goodness!

PN: And to the first night party afterwards and anybody who was anybody was there. I was scared silly I can tell you! Scared silly, but it was the start of a period of time - I suppose the late fifties and sixties - when it was all glamour, it really was: it was amazing, and we knew all the people and it was a very exciting time for us.

KH: Who were the people you particularly got to know through your husband and the company?

PN: Well, Emyln Williams - Emyln and Molly Williams... Molly Williams became a godmother to one of our children. Ralph Richardson became a very good friend - lovely man. I suppose those two really were very good friends. Some actors were actual clients of my husband, but on the whole not. We became very... I particularly became very fond of John Perry, who was the co-director with Binkie - fascinating Irishman - but we met either at parties at Lord North Street or at their country house. I suppose, you name it, we met them. Not always - I have to admit - not always as friends, but as part of the inner circle of this very glamorous production company.

KH: What were your first impressions on meeting Binkie Beaumont?

PN: Very interesting really. The first time I ever met him was actually going racing and my husband, who was very much in awe of Binkie Beaumont - I mean, he was a fascinating, very interesting man - he kept saying to me, 'you must remember he is very important, you must remember this, that and the other'. And I remember I was collected

in the Rolls, driven by the chauffeur called Jack, and we went off to Newmarket racing - just Binkie and I - and he was the nicest, friendliest man you could possibly meet. And I think if you crossed him he could be quite difficult, but to me he was always hugely friendly, hugely supportive, very eager always to find out what was going on. If we were away he wanted to know where we'd been and what we'd done, and he was actually godfather to one of my children, as was John Perry. I found him very, very interesting, he was self educated, so that he always wanted to find out... always wanted to find out more.

KH: He kept his background quite a mystery from people didn't he? Was that something that you had an impression of?

PN: Oh very definitely. He had this amazing old mother who turned up at everything - I still see her actually - but no, he never talked about his past. The story was that he was the illegitimate son of the box office manager at Cardiff, and it could well have been true. It wasn't important to him - it was what happened thereafter I think... And he was hugely clever at picking plays and picking stars. You had to follow what he wanted - I mean, there were certain stars who crossed his path and never worked again so...! But it wasn't a question of keeping on the right side of him, I don't think... I admired him hugely and was actually very fond of him. We all used to go on holiday together - it was like a big family in a way.

KH: When you were saying before about how you had to gain a sense of what he wanted in terms of plays and performers, could you maybe say a little bit more about that, your impressions on maybe how he decided on this.

PN: He had an old friend called Dickie Klaus who actually was the play reader and I actually used to say to Binkie, 'You know, you really want somebody younger to... because there is some young new stuff coming on.', but he had very definite views about what women should be doing and I was the attractive wife of one of his partners and that was as far as it went - he wouldn't let me work at all. But he... so Dickie Klaus on the whole did the sort of initial thing. I don't know where that ability to pick plays comes from, I don't know. I mean he took... for example Peter Shaffer's first play, Five Finger Exercise, was found by Binkie, so he didn't always go with the Terence Rattigan! I don't know where that comes from... it's an innate ability to see things on stage. Mind you, he made mistakes: his production of What the Butler Saw - the Joe Orton play - was not right. The play was right, but it was cast by a lot of stars and it didn't work.

KH: Which is a shame really, because he went on to be... Joe Orton was hugely successful after.

PN: A huge success, and was hugely successful actually with What the Butler Saw, but that production didn't work. So he wasn't totally successful, but mostly he just had... and I think it's a talent - you can't sit and learn it, you can't go to university and learn it, you have it or you don't have it.

KH: What was your husband's impression of John Perry's role in the company? Often that is quite marginalised.

PN: It was in a way. John Perry was the business side of it, but he was not the financial side. He was the one who put the brakes on in a way, that's why you don't hear a lot about him. He was the one who would say, 'You are spending too much money' or 'It's not going to work'. He was the very good partner really to Binkie, who would perhaps have got carried away. He was of course a playwright himself so he had some say in some of the plays that were chosen, but definitely to the outside world he was the junior partner in a way, but he played a very, very important part in modifying things, in seeing things in more practical terms, perhaps, than Binkie did.

KH: So did your husband work quite closely with John Perry on that side of things?

PN: Yes, very closely, more so probably than with Binkie. My husband was responsible for the investment of money and that side of it.

KH: I was interested when you said earlier about the television side of things, because obviously television was just taking off and things. Can you remember much about when they started off with that?

PN: Well it came about because I think Prince Littler was a major... Either he was a shareholder or one of the originators of the independent television, and so he was the one who persuaded Binkie to put money into it. And I think you can look up the archives - in the early days it was not good and they lost a lot of money, and then the public suddenly took to the whole idea.

KH: Were they putting things on that were on in the theatre?

PN: They did do, there was a series of a lot of plays that they put on, I can't remember what they were called, Sunday Night or something, but they did some very, very good plays on ITV in those early days, a lot of which were done through Tennent's.

KH: Oh that's interesting. In terms of productions that you went to see, are there particular things that stand out for you from the fifties or possibly later, when your husband first started working there?

PN: Oh goodness, they were amazing. I suppose the first night of My Fair Lady, the first night of West Side Story of course were fantastic.

KH: What was it that made them so amazing?

PN: I think it was the hype in a way - partly. The world was divided into those who had seen it already in New York and those who hadn't; those who had already got the music before. There was none of the... Nowadays if a musical is coming on, you have had all the music almost before it's started. In those days you didn't, and so the actual magic of going and hearing it for the first time. But there were some fabulous plays. A Man for All Seasons, which was just interesting because it didn't really have very good notices and it took off. Five Finger Exercise, the first Peter Shaffer play... I'm trying to think particularly what else. A lot of comedies, of course Rattigan plays - the Rattigan plays were fantastic, from things like Ross to Nude With Violin and they were very glamorous affairs. Now if I go to a press night with my son you put your black leather on and dress down, and in those days I literally wore a tiara and long dress, and I spent hours at the hairdresser having my hair done: it was a hugely glamorous thing, and there were a whole posse of people - I didn't know them - who were always seen at first nights, dripping jewellery. It was fun - it was a mega, mega, mega occasion.

KH: These people that you saw at first nights, were they part of H.M. Tennent's in-crowd?

PN: No, no, they weren't. A lot of them were people who always went to first nights, the rich, the idle, passionate about the theatre, had to be there on the first night. But no, I think not on the whole. The Tennent in-crowd was very small, very, very, intimate group of people really - very small - and I don't think they were other than... you could always get tickets for them, and they were always called 'first nights', now they are called press nights of course, but they were first nights and there was very often a party afterwards, back at Binkie's house, which were quite something... quite something!

KH: Could you maybe describe one of the parties?

PN: The first one I ever went to - as I say I was dead scared - it was after the first night of My Fair Lady and I didn't know anybody, I didn't know a soul. There was always a huge table with food, and it was a house in Lord North Street which had quite small rooms - and it was a double house actually but there were still a lot of small rooms - and so you went and got your food and then you went and sat down. And I remember sitting, rather scared, on the edge of a chair, and I shall never forget, it was actually Emyln William's wife Molly, who I had really barely met, who came up and took me by the hand and introduced me to all these famous people saying, 'And you know Patricia Noble don't you?'. As if they jolly well ought to have done! So... I mean that stuck in my mind, but that was generally the pattern - it was after the theatre was over. Mind you, if you knew it was going to be a success, those were always better than the ones you felt were not, and I went to some parties when you knew it was not going to work. I remember particularly one by Enid Bagnold called The Last Joke.

KH: Ah yes, because she'd done The Chalk Garden and that had been hugely successful.

PN: Yes, that had been a huge success, and The Last Joke was awful - terrible. That party was terrible because nobody knew who to talk to. But on the whole they weren't; on the whole you went around and talked to people, and they went on until one or two

in the morning. And he had this extraordinary cook called Elvira, who was tiny, she must have been four foot six, a little hunchback woman who was the cook from heaven really, she just cooked these amazing meals. So they were very glamorous affairs. Very glamorous and fun.

KH: I was going to ask you, most people see Binkie Beaumont as a very controlling, dominating figure, is that how you saw him?

PN: Yes, I think he probably was, I think he was. He was hugely successful, he had cornered the market in glamorous productions. They were nearly always star-studded, and they gradually of course came to be seen as elitist and not part of the real world but yes, I think he was, I think he probably was. I saw him as a benign, but for people who didn't fit into it, he was definitely, yes. There is the famous Angus McBean photograph - have you seen? - of Binkie, it's a Marionette Theatre with Ralph Richardson and he is holding the strings?

KH: Oh yes, I've seen it.

PN: There was a certain truth about it. He had control of the theatres, he had control of most of the major writers, and certainly actors and actresses would die to work for him so yes, I think he probably was... He had a monopoly really, and like all monopolies, it couldn't last.

KH: Retrospectively, some critics have also laid it on him that he was very motivated by sexuality, and the people he employed, he picked them out because, you know, he quite fancied them and that kind of thing. Is there anything...?

PN: From where I stood it is difficult to answer really I think. Yes, there were a lot of gays of course, and whether he picked them because of that or whether they were talented because they were, I think is not something that I can...

KH: It's a difficult one, yes.

PN: It is a very difficult one, but again, if you are outside it: if you were very straight and not in his good books, yes... I mean, he looked like the arch-devil of all times and people felt very passionately - very strongly - about him because of that I think, yes. I suppose most of his friends - his male friends - might have been gay, which is where my husband was interesting and different.

KH: I guess he is an example of someone who was within the inner circle but who was...

PN: Yes, who was absolutely straight, absolutely straight. And he loved glamorous women. Not all, but most of his friends were very glamorous.

KH: When you were saying before about how you said to Binkie how he should have someone younger reading his scripts and things, how much were you aware of things happening outside H.M. Tennent's, maybe the Royal Court Theatre?

PN: Not terribly, not terribly actually. On the whole – and this is an odd thing to say, and it may have to be cut out – my husband was not particularly keen, himself, on the theatre as such. Since we separated I have gone to the theatre a thousand times more than he's done, so I think we didn't... we lived as part of a very cocooned little world, but it obviously gradually dawned on us that things were not as they had been.

KH: When did you have that sense, do you think?

PN: It is difficult to tell really. It was all tied up... at that stage Binkie was getting quite ill - his personal life was slightly falling to pieces and he himself was not well - so I think he was more concerned with that and the feeling that he had somehow lost the plot, maybe because of that rather than anything else coming in. We never went to see *Look Back in Anger*, we didn't go to see these things because we didn't go to see them, you know, so I think it was a gradual dawning really - nothing specific, because we didn't look out at all at that stage.

KH: Obviously you were going to see things, I assume, like *The Chalk Garden* and the *Rattigan* plays.

PN: Yes.

KH: Did you feel that they were dated in any way when you were watching them?

PN: Began to think so, yes. Began, yes. They were just... not... It is trying to look back actually - I think I'm looking back with hindsight now. No, I think probably now. Now looking back, yes they were, they were. I mean, there was a place for other things. I think there is still a place for a bit of glamour: the theatre is magic, and I think there is a place for both but it should have to happen that the glamorous bit lost out a lot in order to allow the other side of life to come in, and yes, it's exciting but just every now and then it is nice to go into a world that is not real. I mean reality... we are surrounded by reality anyhow.

KH: So you weren't approaching these plays thinking they were slices of reality in that sense anyway.

PN: Oh no, no.

KH: You see, I think that's one of the things that people sometimes think about these things, that they were trying to depict a slice of life and it is interesting that you don't think that.

PN: Oh that had long since gone, the days when the curtain went up and the maid was answering the telephone was in nine out of ten plays, but I think we all knew that didn't happen any longer. But it was just partly nostalgia I suppose, partly nostalgia - possibly not for my generation, but my husband was considerably older, obviously, and his generation I think and Binkie's generation, that was. But there were other aspects that were tackled, I mean Rattigan's Ross and there's another one I'm trying to think of... I can't remember now, but there were plays that were...

KH: Separate Tables?

PN: Well... well yes, I suppose in a way too, but not the real gritty stuff that was coming in from the Royal Court and Stratford and places like that.

KH: You have mentioned Ross, obviously that made quite an impression on you.

PN: Yes, it did.

KH: Do you want to maybe say why it made that impression on you?

PN: You see, I think we'd all seen Lawrence of Arabia and so it brought a different aspect I think... It was written by a homosexual, so that side in a way... well, it wasn't very obvious because it still wasn't really acceptable in the theatre, but it was much more... it was glamorous I think, and obviously because of the name too, it was focused a lot on his last period really, as far as I remember and much more on the dilemma of the man himself rather than the... There are wonderful scenes in the desert - much more H.M. Tennent stuff in a funny sort of way, that very glamorous stuff. I found it very interesting and very moving really.

KH: Other plays by Rattigan have been revived but it's not one that is revived terribly often.

PN: No, it's not and I don't know why really.

KH: Did you go and see The Deep Blue Sea?

PN: I saw the... Yes, I did. I think I saw both of them, the one with Dorothy Tutin relatively recently and the one with Kenneth More and - was it Vivien Leigh? I can't remember.

KH: I can't remember, that's terrible, I'll have to look, after.

PN: Yes. Yes, I did, and that is seriously dated. With Dorothy Tutin it was very dated.

KH: When did you see Dorothy Tutin do it?

PN: Quite some time ago. The last time it was done, wasn't it?

KH: I'm not sure it has been done recently, I know Separate Tables has been revived.

PN: Yes, Dorothy Tutin was the last time and it was quite a long time ago and even a long time ago... I think it was done in the early nineties or something like that and it was dated, very definitely. Separate Tables I think would probably date less, because I think there are still places where there are lonely people around, although - the Colonel is it? The Major - the Major is a bit dated now - leftovers from the war I think probably, and I'm not sure that the next generation, - my son - wouldn't find it all a bit unreal, totally unreal.

KH: There is a big debate, because obviously Rattigan was himself gay and everybody thinks there was all this gay subtext in what he wrote. Was that something that you were aware of at all at the time?

PN: Yes, I was and I think I'd better not tell you a story about that. But yes, yes, very definitely. He was very overtly... much more overtly gay than I think probably a lot of other people around that time.

KH: You were talking about visiting Binkie's house earlier, how was that arranged, who did he used to invite to his house, how did that work?

PN: The parties do you mean, or the country house?

KH: The country house.

PN: The country, he would invite friends. It was lovely, a cottage down in Cambridge, Hertfordshire corner there. It had a swimming pool and a sauna and very simple, very simple living - a croquet pitch, the great thing was to play croquet. It was friends, a great mixture. A lot of gays of course, some married couples and it was... everybody relaxed. You know, there are some fantastic photographs which are down - I believe in the Bristol Theatre archives?

KH: No, I didn't realise that.

PN: Who I believe have the John Perry Collection.

KH: Why has that all gone to Bristol?

PN: Don't ask me, I don't know and in fact I tried to go down to see them because I believe there are some quite glamorous pictures of me down there and...

KH: I'll have to go and have a look!

PN: And I arranged my life to go down and see it and they'd closed for refurbishment.

KH: Oh what a shame!

PN: But there is apparently a whole collection of John Perry stuff down there including - and I hope they are there - these photo albums and they are amazing. They are just wonderful, because people took pictures of people very relaxed, enjoying themselves, nothing nasty or anything like that, just a very relaxed time, and they are a fantastic archive and I think also there are some books of the earlier cottage which John Geilgud and John Perry shared. So if you are interested you ought to go down and look at those.

KH: That would be fantastic, thanks for letting me know about that. I'll have to look into that.

PN: I think they have got more John Perry stuff, presumably his plays. I must go down.

KH: Wasn't John Perry put in charge of the Lyric?

PN: The Lyric Hammersmith, yes, he did and they did two lots of productions, they did the H.M. Tennent and then Tennent Productions which was a non-profit making company that John Perry ran.

KH: This is the kind of, loophole in the entertainment acts?

PN: Yes, down at Lyric Hammersmith, a very interesting place. Funnily enough, I don't think I went to many - if any - but yes, he was in charge of that.

KH: Because that was sort of a try-out venue where they did slightly more...

PN: Yes, but a lot of things actually didn't even come in that they did down there. A lot of things - in those days anyhow - were tried outside London where you didn't have these long, long preview times; but it worked very well, the Tennent Productions things and I think - again you would have to check on this - some of that stuff was the stuff that was done on the television, would have been the tie-up there.

KH: Why is it do you think that so little has been – relatively, compared to the Royal Court and places like that - has been written and said about H. M. Tennent?

PN: Because Binkie himself was a very, very private person - he shunned publicity, I think almost more than anybody could possibly imagine. I think that's probably – and you won't get anybody to talk about him. And he was H. M. Tennent... Obviously he worked with Harry Tennent before the war, and in a way it was... I think it is very different from the Royal Court, because the Royal Court was so innovative. What Tennent's was doing was carrying on a tradition, and really coming to the end of a big theatre tradition. Probably more was written about the Royal Court, which was a quite deliberate attempt at doing something different. Tennent's wasn't, and very little has been written about Binkie because there is nobody who will - nobody who knows a lot about him. There was that terrible biography, which was awful. Unbelievably awful!

KH: Yes, I've read it.

PN: Black silk pyjamas and all that sort of nonsense. So I don't think anything will be... and there are still - I know my son finds it quite interesting and he works in the theatre - but people don't know anything about him.

KH: Other than that biography, he is a complete mystery figure.

PN: Yes, yes he is, and I don't think anybody will write now, because more and more people... I mean, I wouldn't dream of it! I don't have the material anyhow and I don't think anybody will, I just think he will be part of a mystery, and I think that is exactly as he would have wanted it actually.

KH: I was also interested in what you said about his ideas about women having a definite role, because that's interesting to me because Kitty Black did so much work in terms of reading and things, did you have any sense of a relationship?

PN: I don't know. There was her and Daphne Rye.

KH: She was a casting...

PN: Casting agent, yes. Those two did do a lot of work for him. I think that was fine, what he couldn't do was to separate out for me the role as the glamorous wife and also as somebody who might be able to contribute on the work side and that he... it is a very old fashioned idea actually. A woman either... I mean, his stars were working women: Cora Brown was the most glamorous woman in the world, she worked for him – so it wasn't so much that women didn't work but women... each woman had her role to play. Kitty Black and Daphne Rye had their jobs, the Cora Browns, the Vivien Leighs, those sort of people had their roles and I had my role and I couldn't get out of it.

KH: Did you ever speak to any of the actors about their experiences of working in the company, did anybody every talk about that?

PN: Not really. No, not really.

KH: Obviously your husband was there for quite some time with H.M. Tennent, did he notice any changes over that period that he was working there?

PN: I think he noticed that things weren't being as successful; the plays he was choosing were not receiving the public acclaim that they had done before but again, I think he was as inward-looking as I was really. I know his death came as a huge, huge shock to him - I think it did to all of us - but no, I don't think he really... as I say he wasn't really a man of the theatre.

KH: I presume on the financial side he must have kind of had dealings with the entertainments tax and the Tennents...

PN: I think less so... I think he purely, as far as I know, dealt with the actual investment of stocks and shares - John Perry dealt with all the rest. They worked closely together, but no, I don't think he had anything to do with it.

KH: What kind of things were they investing in?

PN: I have no idea.

KH: Because there must have been a huge amount of money going through that can have been invested.

PN: A huge amount. Again my role - this is a generation thing - my role was not to know anything about that sort of thing. It would not be like that now.

KH: But you yourself, you did become involved in the company later didn't you?

PN: I did later on, yes.

KH: How did that come about?

PN: It came about... When Binkie died there were three people - well almost four. My husband had the controlling share, and Arthur Cantor - who was the American - had brought money in to Tennents, and they employed Helen Montague as production manager and actually John Perry was persuaded to come back for a short time (he had by then retired and he wasn't very happy doing that at all). And it was a very unhappy set-up altogether and Helen... I became quite friendly with Helen Montague, and I think I told her... we were talking about various things and I said I'd always been interested and she said, 'Please come in and read scripts'! And I did it! I literally got the stuff off the streets, just after censorship had finished.

KH: So this is late 1960s, early 1970s.

PN: Yes, early 1970s, yes. Binkie died in '71 so it must have been '72, '73, round about then, '74 maybe, and I read for about 18 months and I used to get piles of stuff and it was an eye-opener. I learnt more swear words in those three years...! The floodgates opened, and anybody who wanted to write anything pornographic just put it down on paper, hand written, typewritten...

KH: So this is literally unsolicited manuscripts?

PN: This is all unsolicited - they had to have somebody who just dealt with the unsolicited stuff, and I think the whole time that I did it there were two plays that I said could go up to the next stage. So I did it for a little while, and I found it actually very, very interesting and I enjoyed it.

KH: Were you given some sort of criteria to look for? I presume by then you were looking for very different things to what you would have been looking for before.

PN: I think so, yes. No, not really - I think more my job was not to look for plays but to discard plays. It was real shovel stuff, but it's a job that has to be done and I did really try and read most of the plays. There were some that were beyond belief and some were illegible actually - it was the days before computers. But there were some that were sort of... sort of quite interesting. But... no, there was really no criterion, just anything that might conceivably be not totally awful went on, as it were, to the next stage. I believe that one of them actually was put on once at some repertory theatre somewhere but nothing... I didn't find Peter Shaffer or anything like that!

KH: Oh well, you can't find them every day!

PN: I know, I know.

KH: When... Obviously that must have been a period of massive transition, after Binkie had died.

PN: Yes, massive, and John Perry really begged my husband to close the company completely. He said, 'I've gone, Binkie's dead, close it up.'. But my husband felt in memory of Binkie - he really wanted to carry it on, but it was never a goer really.

KH: What were they trying to do, were they trying to move in a different direction to what Binkie did?

PN: No, no, they weren't. The trouble was they were trying to do more or less the same thing! And Arthur Cantor was really not a man of the theatre; my husband really didn't know anything really about the theatre; Helen Montague knew a huge amount - I mean she was a lovely, very talented woman - but had no business brain at all, no business head at all, so she had wonderfully great ideas... I mean, they put on one or two plays, they put on Billy - you know, the musical of Billy Liar. I'm not sure it wasn't the time - you'd have to check on this - that Cameron Mackintosh didn't do his first sort of thing of some of the Sondheim songs. Now you'd need to check on that, but it's certainly about that sort of period. But it was not going to work, and I'm afraid there was an acrimonious split up and the whole thing just fell apart. And Arthur Cantor bought the name of H. M. Tennent and I think traded with it for films or something, for a while, and the wonderful office in the Globe Theatre - that was a very famous office, with a famous lift - went, obviously. I still go... when I go to the Globe, I look at that door where the lift goes up to the office.

KH: Did you used to go to the office much?

PN: Yes, I did quite often. I don't know why, but I did used to find myself there occasionally.

KH: What were you going there for?

PN: I honestly can't remember. Obviously I went a bit more after Binkie died, perhaps it was then, it's just that I have memories of going up in that lift, probably more so in the time after Binkie's death. I can't see why I would go before then actually.

KH: Prior to your husband's involvement in H.M. Tennent, had you been much of a theatre goer?

PN: I'd always loved it, yes, I had enjoyed it hugely and since then have done a massive amount of theatre-going.

KH: So you had been to see H.M. Tennent productions before?

PN: Well not a lot, because actually I'd been to university and worked and not really lived in London, so I'd been if I was in London but really not on the whole. I had been to the theatre when I was in Edinburgh at university and that sort of thing, but I'd not been a London theatre-goer simply because I wasn't in London.

KH: Were there particular performers that stood out to you over the period when you were going to watch quite a lot of productions?

PN: Oh, well, Ralph Richardson was always one of my... he was a marvellous actor, partly because I liked him, he was such a lovely man. You see, we were lucky: we are at a period when we'd got Ralph Richardson, John Gielgud, Paul Scofield, Edith Evans, Peggy Ashcroft, we were spoilt for choice and they all worked for Binkie. Vivien Leigh, she didn't all the time work for... when she wasn't sick she worked for Binkie, so it's difficult really to pick out one.

KH: What was it about Richardson that you liked?

PN: I loved his eccentricity. He was eccentric: he rode a motorbike, he had a ferret, he had a wonderful story about his parrot that stood on the back of his chair... and I liked his wife - and she was not easy, not easy! She was always very nice to me, but I think because he was different, he brought something to... OK, in some ways he was always Ralph Richardson when he was acting, but brought something to a part. I mean that wonderful... he and John Gielgud in *Together At Home*, it was just wonderful. I remember him saying - we went back to see him, and I took my daughter actually, and he gave her a rand, a gold rand which she still has actually. I remember saying to him, 'What's it all about?'. And he said, 'I don't know, ask the writer!'. And only somebody like Ralph would do it - he was a mixture of eccentricity and being a very good actor. John Gielgud was amazing, you could sit at John Gielgud's feet and listen to him talk and reminisce and gossip and do the... One day I stupidly said to him I liked doing the Times crossword, so we down at Knott's Fosse and he did the Times crossword in pencil, rubbed it out, handed it to me and told me to do it. I'm gossiping now, does that matter?

KH: It's fine, carry on, that's fine.

PN: So he was different. We holidayed together with John Gielgud, but you could never get close to him the way you could with Ralph. The other person I was very fond of was Emlyn Williams, although he could be quite sharp, so yes, there were some I was very fond of and to others we were just part of the Binkie retinue I suppose in a way.

KH: You were talking about Gielgud's acting style, since then a lot of criticism has been levelled at him.

PN: Yes. He had this stunning voice and I think he used it in a very affected way. Looking back on it now, it certainly doesn't work in today's world, but he had a magnificence about him that was extraordinary really.

KH: What other things did you see him in?

PN: Golly, golly, golly... Some Rattigan - he was in *Nude with Violin* wasn't he? I'm trying to think back. He was in *Home* wasn't he? I don't... Funnily enough, I didn't see him in *Shakespeare* - I never saw his *Hamlet*.

KH: Oh that's interesting.

PN: Yes, his *Hamlet* was before my time I think. The *Lear* he did in Stratford so I didn't see that... I'm trying to think what else I did see him in.

KH: It's hard to remember things sometimes.

PN: It is - it was a long time ago! I can't remember what else, I really can't remember what else. I just remember sitting listening to him talk. Funnily enough we were all in *Torricello* once, sitting on one of those stones in *Torricello* because he would just open his mouth, and he knew he had a lovely voice and he used it beautifully. He used it on the stage mostly to very good effect but it was a definite... you can hear his records now and they are very declamatory in the way that... Well at least you can hear it, which you can't always nowadays!

KH: Did you notice a change in acting styles?

PN: Oh very definitely, yes, very definitely.

KH: When do you think you kind of noticed that change?

PN: I suppose when I started going to not only H.M. Tennent things really, because there was a definite style about those very highly charged romantic pieces that was perhaps very special to them. The regional accents and all that sort of thing. You heard the maid, they always had an accent but on the whole no, they were people, or else they were the outsiders who came in. So yes, the style has changed. I think - unless I'm getting deaf, which I'm not! - I don't think that people always project in the way that makes it easier to hear, and they should be able to project so that older people can hear actually, it's not fair otherwise.

KH: Especially in some of the London theatres because people are so far back in a lot of places.

PN: Yes, yes. And I think you would never have failed to hear Gielgud, Richardson, Olivier and all that lot - and Alec Guinness of course too - people like that. So yes, it's changed. It is much more naturalistic probably, but that goes with the sort of theatre, the sort of plays that are put on. When you go back to Shakespeare again, I think a lot of modern actors do find it very difficult to project Shakespeare in a way that is both understandable and audible. I still go passionately to Shakespeare but luckily I know most of the plays now.

KH: So it's not too much of a problem if the odd bit goes missing. In terms of the kind of audiences who were going to H.M. Tennent, was there a particular - that's a difficult question, but do you know what I mean?

PN: Yes, well probably. You see theatre tickets were considerably - even relatively - cheaper in those days, so you did get quite a mixed audience. You'd get quite a noisy audience sometimes if they didn't like it. I mean Last Joke was scary.

KH: What happened?

PN: Well people were booing and shuffling... it was horrible, really horrible. I think again because we were very snobby and we never went less than the first week of any production, we tended to see the people who always went early in shows but no, what I like about it nowadays is that on the whole it is a much younger audience. They went through a period when it really was only older people who went. I went to Avenue Q the other night and I must have been the only grey-haired person in the place I think! But no, I think theatre audiences I think on the whole go hopefully because they want to go to the theatre.

KH: I think I'll just finish by just returning to John Perry and Binkie if that's OK? I wondered if maybe you could just say a little bit about the relationship between them, if you had any sense of that at all?

PN: Yes, they were very good friends - they had a relationship for many years, but like a lot of relationships it fell foul and it is always difficult when you are working partners as well as having a relationship, so it was quite hard I think... And for a while after the relationship had broken up they worked together, but John Perry was getting old, he was getting tired and so he felt happier retiring. I obviously only saw the friendship side, and as I said before, they were a very good partnership because they bounced off each other in a very good way. I see them, obviously, with rose coloured spectacles, because they were very good friends and I think they were part of a hugely successful period in the theatre; and it may have gone forever, but it was still at its time, I think, magical.

KH: I think those are all my questions. Do you have anything you would like to add that I've not brought up at all that you think is important maybe?

PN: I don't think so. No, I think not. For me it was a very interesting time to have lived through. It is quite nice boasting to my grandchildren about all the people they see on the telly, 'Oh they were a friend of mine!'. But it was very interesting, and I am very fortunate to have been... I wasn't privy to the most intimate details of the workings of it, but I knew enough to know it was how it went, yes.

KH: I think we'll stop there but thank you very much.