

## Sonia Fraser – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Victoria Carey**

**2 January 2007**

Actress and Director. Accent; A Taste of Honey; audiences; Bristol Old Vic School; censorship; directing; Ibsen; Look Back in Anger; modern plays; repertory; rehearsing; RSC; Shakespeare; theatre-going habits; theatre training.

VC: So, how did you first become involved in theatre then?

SF: Well, I started training at the Bristol Old Vic School when I was 15.

VC: Oh really?

SF: Which I don't think - legally - you could do now. But in those days you could leave school at 15. There was no theatre in my family, but when I was about 14 I went to the Old Vic Theatre on my own, and I saw Richard Burton play Hamlet. And I was right up in the gods and I remember looking down at that sort of square of light which was the stage, and just having a very clear feeling that that was where I ought to be, and that was what I wanted to do. And in the programme for Hamlet there was an advertisement for Bristol Old Vic School, and I wrote off and applied for a place. And went and did an audition and got a place. And then I applied for a grant – a government grant – and then told my astonished parents that I was going to leave home and go to Bristol. And I think they were horrified, and I think they thought they'd let me do it so I would get it out of my system, and they waited for me to crawl back home. But I didn't, I went off at 15 with a sort of... copy of Shakespeare and a pair of tights and thought, 'This is what I want to do.'! And what's lovely is that I now teach at Bristol. So I go back every year and teach there, so that's great.

VC: Oh really? Oh wow! Yes, so, is that kind of what made you be a part of the Royal Shakespeare Company then?

SF: Yes, it was always for me... yes sort of... I took theatre very seriously, which I think people of my generation did. We believed in it as a kind of force – a political force – we were all very left wing and very political. It was sort of Joan Littlewood and all that time. And my first television part when I left drama school, when I was about 18 I suppose - 17 or 18 - was in the Arnold Wesker trilogy. I played his sister in Chicken Soup with Barley and I'm Talking about Jerusalem. So all that sort of... very left wing, very political

Royal Court kind of belief that theatre had meaning, I suppose, for society. And a sort of... yes a passion for... definitely a passion for Shakespeare.

VC: Do you think that nowadays, like, kind of the younger generation now sort of getting into theatre, do you think they still have that kind of passion, and that kind of political...?

SF: Well I teach a lot now, and I hate to sound like a grumpy old woman, but I don't think they do. I think that we had a sort of idealism. And I think people now are much more kind of looking for a career in television, and wanting to be in a soap and...

VC: Yes, the kind of whole celebrity...

SF: ...wanting celebrity, and sort of in a way wanting to make money. Which I think to go into the theatre and want to make money is fairly foolish really, so there are a few people do it.

[Laughter]

VC: So yes, is there any kind of particular production or play during the time of the Royal Shakespeare Company that is particularly fond to you?

SF: The whole experience was wonderful. I think if I look back on everything I've done, that was the happiest time – I was there for two years. And I think I really loved it all. Because the joy of it was the... You know, you rehearsed all day and did a play at night. So from ten in the morning 'til eleven at night you were working. And working on wonderful plays with fantastic people. I really, really loved the entire experience. If I had to sort of rewind my life, those were the two years that I'd live again.

VC: So what kind of... what plays were you actually in?

SF: What plays was I in? I did a sort of middle range. I understudied Dorothy Tutin in everything that she did, so I was her understudy. And then I did a middle range, I played things like Cassandra in Troilus and Cressida. We did The Devils... I did the first production of Les Liaisons Dangereuses actually. I was the... I was in that. And Caucasian Chalk Circle, I did a sort of range of parts in that. And just the whole... yes the whole kind of world of it really. I couldn't think of a specific, you know special highlight, it was all magic.

VC: Oh, well that's good then. You've also worked... I read on your CV that you worked in repertory theatre.

SF: Yes that was...

VC: How was that?

SF: That was fantastic, and I think that is the most sort of, you know, sad thing really which is that for young actors now that system doesn't exist. Because I worked at Bristol - I trained at the Bristol Old Vic and then went into the company. And then I went straight from the company into the Birmingham Rep, and I was there for two years. And then I went to the RSC. So for the first five, six years of my working life, I rehearsed all day and did a play at night. Well you've got to learn, haven't you, from doing that!

VC: Yes, definitely.

SF: Whereas nowadays that sort of system doesn't exist, because repertory theatre... you know regional theatre doesn't employ companies. They bring actors in for one play, or specific plays. Whereas we went into a company and you were employed on an annual contract and you played everything. So sometimes, yes, you did sort of put white powder on your hair and play an 80-year-old lady. And... but you were working on a very wide range of plays. And the standard was very high. I mean, I was... I say I was lucky because I only did sort of... two- or three-weekly rep, where a lot of colleagues of my age did weekly rep. Which meant that you started reading a play on the Monday, you blocked Act I on Tuesday, Act II on Wednesday, Act III on Thursday and you ran it on Friday and you opened it the following Monday, whilst still doing another play at night.

VC: Oh really?

SF: And you did that every week. And I have lots of wonderful colleagues and very splendid, sort of successful actors and actresses who did that, and who said it was the first fantastic training ground. But I guess it wouldn't work nowadays because people aren't used to seeing... you know, people are television-trained and are used to seeing - playing - very close to themselves. Whereas you did see sort of, you know, 18 year olds with white powder on their hair I suppose. And it would seem very old fashioned now. But the actual repertory movement, it was a very vital, kind of energised place. Not just for actors, but for writers and directors. I think a lot of the television that we see now came from that repertory movement. Writers, directors learnt their craft. And the other thing that you got was a completely loyal audience. People would come and see every single play. You know, people would say, 'We always come every Tuesday' or whatever. So there was a kind of... and you were... it was... it had a vitality which I think in theatre doesn't happen quite the same way now. Between the... you know, between the community and the theatre company.

VC: Yes, I was going to say... I mean, like you mentioned audiences there like... do you think that nowadays the audiences are completely different? Like, can you notice a difference in their reactions and the kind of people that go to the theatre?

SF: I'm not sure about that actually. I think that a... you know, I think that audiences are, you know haven't changed all that much. But I think the sort of theatre going experience has changed. It felt when... For example when I was at Birmingham, I was there for two years, so there was a great deal of... kind of, people in the town knew you. And also, I have to say when I started... I moved into being a director, and I directed... I worked at the Wolsey Theatre in Ipswich and the Mercury Theatre, Colchester. And there, as a director, one was very involved with the community. I mean, I used to go out and talk to schools, and talk to WI's and do outreach work. I mean theatres still do outreach work with education, but the theatre felt like it was an enormous working part of the town that it was in, and valuable and very, very sort of... much a part of the community really. I'm not sure how much that still happens.

VC: Yes. Yes, like you mentioned just there, you'd moved into being a director...

SF: Yes.

VC: ...like, how does that compare to actually being an actress and being on stage, to being behind the scenes?

SF: Being behind the scenes. It always sounds a rather dreadful thing to say that I got bored with acting, but I did do it for 15 years before I got bored with it. I... When I began to direct it was quite difficult, because surprisingly enough, at that time there weren't that many women theatre directors. So it was very much a male province. And it was also very much the province of men like Peter Hall, who had been to Cambridge – mostly Cambridge or Oxford – so most of the directors were young men straight from university. So crossing the bridge from being an actress to a director wasn't customary. And I was working at Colchester at the Mercury, and I remember asking the artistic director there if I could direct a play in the studio. And he practically sort of patted me on the head and said, 'There, there dear, you're a very good little actress.' [Laughter] But he was very good, he did give me a chance and that was where I began. And I always thought that I was sort of... very ambitious as an actress, but actually I realise even when I was at the RSC, I used to watch rehearsals of plays I wasn't in and I kind of really never left the rehearsal room. And it was actually because I had a passion for rehearsing, I had a passion for the work. And that translated for me better as a director because I was then involved in all of it! [Laughter]

VC: Yes, so do you think it's, like, a lot more difficult then for, say, a woman to become involved in directing? Like did you ever notice the...?

SF: It was then. I don't think it is now. It was when I did it, which is... you know, twenty, twenty-five years ago. And I used to meet... I'd, you know, get a company together or be directing a play, and would often have actors come up to me and say, 'I've never been directed by a woman before.'

VC: Really?

SF: But that won't happen now, because there's so many. Particularly in television and theatre, there are lots and lots of women directors. But no, when I began I was a rarity.

VC: So, do you think that... did that extend into actually being an actress then? Like, did you ever feel sometimes that maybe, like, the theatre and stage and stuff was quite male dominated?

SF: It was from a directing point of view. It isn't now, but it was then.

VC: Yes, was that acting as well, like being an actress?

SF: Well even now, I suppose, most sort of plays there are more male parts than female parts. I mean... but no, I think women have their place now. And there are women producers in television and an awful lot of women writers. And people sort of... I don't think it is as difficult. No, and I don't think it is as male dominated. Well, the world isn't, is it?

VC: No.

SF: The world has changed.

VC: OK. In terms of, like, the plays that are put on now, like, you've mentioned kind of the way that people are... like, maybe people don't have such a passion, like, the young actresses and actors, but what do you think about the sort of plays that are put on now? Do you think people are doing anything different or do you think it's kind of...?

SF: No I think... If I'm honest, I think good writing is universal and timeless. And there are some, you know, excellent and wonderful writers now, and their work is, you know, universal and timeless. I think that television writing is a great deal less exciting. You know, Play for Today and all that, there used to be one play a week that was a new play by a good new writer that, you know, had excitement and integrity. I think that's missing. But in the theatre I think theatre writers, you know, still arise and I've worked a lot with new writing as a director. And, you know, there's always writers clamouring to sort of be seen. I guess it's slightly more difficult for them now to get plays put on. Perhaps it is more difficult for new writing to get a voice, but there are... you know, there's Paines Plough, there's Soho, there are companies that are giving new writing an opportunity. I'm sure it's always been a struggle! [Laughs]

VC: Yes. Also, I want to ask you, were you aware, like, as an actress of any issues of censorship and the Lord Chamberlain and his powers?

SF: Yes, actually very much so. It's interesting, I was suddenly thinking when I was talking about being in the Arnold Wesker, there was a line in I'm Talking about

Jerusalem, where he says about... the brother in the play is a carpenter, and he had a line about 'Jesus Christ and I, two Jewish carpenters' which was cut.

VC: Really?

SF: We weren't allowed to say it. And yes, I think that censorship was much stronger. Yes, I mean, this is you know, before Oh! Calcutta and all that. So yes, I think I was... there was a great deal more censorship and a great deal more kind of prissiness

VC: How was it... what was the reaction then towards the Lord [ed. Chamberlain]... like, how was he generally...?

SF: Oh well, actors are always kind of, you know, way out and wacky and so there was always a great deal of objection, which is why I think things like Oh! Calcutta happened, because they had to have a kind of shock value. You know, things have to be shattered, don't they, in order to be rebuilt. So, yes there was a great deal of resentment I think.

VC: OK, did you... I mean you're doing directing now, what sort of projects are you working on at the moment?

SF: I... As I say, I work a lot with new writing. The last play I did was a two-hander called Third Finger, Left Hand which I did at the Edinburgh Festival and then brought to London. And I've done quite a lot of work at the Edinburgh Festival. I think the Edinburgh Festival's a very exciting and wonderful institution. Every time you open a broom cupboard there's somebody doing a play in it! [Laughs] And I'm currently trying to get a play on which is by an Israeli writer. And that again, interestingly enough, has ten parts for women, it's a totally female cast.

VC: Really? Wow!

SF: And it's a very interesting play about the Hasidic community in Israel. And it very much is a story of one woman who's thrown out of the community and not allowed to see her children. And part of my passion for it is that it's a cast of ten actresses, so that's one of...

VC: Yes, that should be an interesting mix.

SF: Absolutely, yes.

VC: Going back to the Royal Shakespeare Company, what sort of... what was the rehearsal process like? Because I mean, we've heard a lot about Joan, she'd worked on her kind of techniques, was it at all like that?

SF: No I... Well, I think it... One could say that it varied with the directors. But I worked a lot with Peter Hall and John Barton at that time. It was very intense, I mean, you started rehearsals at ten and you finished at six, and then you went into the play at seven thirty. So it was... you know, the rehearsals were very intense. But they were really very text-based. We spent a lot, lot, lot of time on the text, and how the text was handled and... But then, the actual rehearsal process, I don't remember sort of... lots of improvisation and things like that, which Joan Littlewood would have done.

VC: No.

SF: It was... you know, it was fairly formal but an enormous amount of work on the text, which I think still continues.

VC: Yes, well you've got to with Shakespeare really, haven't you?

SF: Absolutely, yes. I think, you know that - and I think that's... There's been a tremendous amount of sort of wonderful voice work with people like Cecily Berry. And I... When I was working there, there was a wonderful lady - you can see on my bookshelf I've got her book, *The Actor and his Body* - a wonderful lady called Litz Pisk who took us for movement. So there was a lot of excellent and wonderful technical work on voice and body and movement, which I think the RSC still continues. I mean, actors do workshops, actors do training - you're not just sort of rehearsing, you're being trained and learning at the same time. It's a great foundation for all sorts of work thereafter.

VC: So how do you think like, the audience... Did you kind of ever feel... get a sense of how the audience were reacting when you were performing, like...?

SF: Oh yes, it's difficult to describe what that experience is. You do have a feeling; you know, there's a kind of silence that then gets deeper when you know they're really listening. I don't quite know how to explain it, but you can feel the silence deepen when you know that an audience is really with you and really focused and really hearing. And then sometimes you can feel a sort of restlessness, and then that's your job to kind of pull them back into focus and say, 'Stop coughing and looking for your sweeties and listen to me!'. [Laughter] So, that feeling of where the audience is - and obviously laughter or reactions or - it's quite nice, you can sometimes look out and see people weeping and think, 'Oh, did I make you cry? Oh great!!' [Laughter] So yes, I think one is always very aware but it's a kind of... in a funny way that's part of the craft of the actor I think.

VC: Yes, I suppose you still get that satisfaction now being a director, but is it even more kind of...?

SF: Oh very much so. But it's different because you're sort of in the audience watching and you can feel it, and you can see how things are happening. And just... the process is obviously different because you're focused on what the actors are doing, but you're also very aware of how it's working.

VC: With the Royal Shakespeare Company, what do you think it is about the Royal Shakespeare Company that has allowed it to sort of go right from when it started and it's still going still going strong now...

SF: So strong, and it's so important and its work is so special isn't it?

VC: Yes.

SF: It's a very idealistic ethic I think. It's a value of really allowing people to have the opportunity to do very good and focused work. I think it's because it's subsidised - it allows long rehearsal periods. When I do plays now, in non-subsidised theatre, the most that I can often allow my actors is three weeks rehearsal. So that's fine, I know how to get a play on in three weeks...

VC: That's amazing.

SF: ...but I'm only getting it on. You know, I know that if I'd had five, six, eight weeks – as long as the RSC has to rehearse – the work would be deeper, the work would be better. I think that's one of the sort of wonderful facilities that because it's subsidised they could give actors long rehearsal periods. Very much I think this thing of the fact that it's always a kind of training programme - that actors have the chance to do voice work, movement work, they have the very best voice, movement, dance people working with them. They have the very best sort of technical support - you know, stage management, design it's... it's a kind of 'centre of excellence' in the best sense of the word. And I think that's why it continues to be, you know, exciting and excellent and an ideal place for actors, directors, designers to work at.

VC: And did anyone that you worked with go on to do anything really big? Like anyone... do you still keep in contact and things?

SF: Oh well, yes, well I'm still sort of working, so yes I mean you know all the people like, you know lots of people I've worked with have become very sort of leading actors. And now, you know, a lot of the students that I've taught have become important people. I don't think I could give you a list – it's still sort of happening really.

VC: OK... what else have I got?

SF: How's that on your list?

VC: Yes, with the repertory theatre what sort of... what plays and things were you actually in?

SF: Oh wow! Well the interesting thing was I suppose that we did everything. So you'd do classical plays, I mean, things like sort of... The Alchemist and School for Scandal and The Way of the World, and King Lear. But then you'd do sort of a mixture of... I mean, I didn't ever do sort of things like Agatha Christie, but you would do more popular plays as well. So that again, there was a sort of wide range. And very often you'd do plays that had been successful in the West End, sort of The Potting Shed and The Deep Blue Sea, and things like Rattigan or... Not so much Rattigan, actually, because he was out of it by the time I started working, and sort of, you know... John Osborne had happened and poor Terence Rattigan was, you know, terribly unfashionable. But certainly, things like Osborne and plays that had been successful in London you would then do in regional theatre. So it was a mixture of contemporary writing at that time. What else? I remember sort of things like Epitaph for George Dillon - which I think was revived recently - but that was a John Osborne play. So those sort of, you know... at that time contemporary [ed. plays like] Look Back in Anger would be mixed with Jacobean theatre and Shakespeare.

VC: Did you ever see a production of... have you ever seen a production of Look Back in Anger?

SF: Oh yes, I saw the first production.

VC: Do you want to tell me about... really!

SF: Yes. Oh yes, I'm very happy to tell you about that. I bore all my students talking about the first production of Look Back in Anger! It was at the Royal Court, and I was just about 18 I think. And it's really difficult to convey how exciting it was. But because I was very much a working class girl - my parents came from, you know, the East End of London - and I'd spent two years at drama school learning, you know, how to do Terence Rattigan and come through a French door swinging a racket and saying, 'Anyone for tennis?'. And suddenly to go to the theatre and see a play which Kenneth Tynan talked about, a play that spoke with a voice of its generation.

VC: Yes, did you feel that though watching it?

SF: Oh, it was so exciting! I went on my own, and when I came out of the theatre I was so excited I couldn't go home and I couldn't sleep. And I actually walked London all night.

VC: Really?

SF: Yes. I couldn't... I couldn't go anywhere or do anything - I just walked London all night. It was so exciting to see... to be in a theatre and think, 'Yes I think that, I believe that.' You know how sometimes you can read a book and you think, 'Oh, I've always thought that and I've never seen it written before.' you know, 'I'm not alone in the world.' It was the most fantastically exciting and life transforming experience.

VC: Really?

SF: Yes.

VC: So do you think most of the audience felt that? Was there a sense... because I mean some people reacted quite badly to it, didn't they?

SF: Oh well yes, the older generation thought it was shocking and terrible and why didn't he just sort of give up the sweet shop and get a job... the sweet stall and 'get a job' you know. But no, I think for people like myself, a sort of you know... it was as exciting and transforming, and it was a voice – you know the voice of a generation. It's just in reading it or seeing it again now... because it doesn't have that impact.

VC: No, it's not often put on any more anyway, is it?

SF: No and it does... It's really difficult to sort of understand how exciting it was. But it was because it sort of gave a voice to a whole generation of people who kind of... hadn't seen themselves on stage before. I think the... I've always thought it was a bit like... it must have been a bit like the first time people went to see *The Doll's House* in Norway. Because we see *The Doll's House* now and we see people in crinolines with mutton chop whiskers and it all feels very old fashioned, but the audience who went to see *The Doll's House* would have been dressed like the people on stage – they were their contemporaries. And if you think of the silence there must have been in the carriages going home afterwards, when everybody had seen their marriage on stage!

VC: Yes, that's true.

SF: And I think there must be a parallel between, you know, that sort of impact of Ibsen, and the impact in my generation of John Osborne.

VC: Do you think there were any other plays around at that time that did something similar, or maybe something equally controversial?

SF: Yes, all the plays. I mean, *Live like Pigs*, *Wesker* to a degree you know – *Chicken Soup with Barley* – all those kind of, what they called 'Kitchen Sink' writers, were all sort of using the theatre to express something they felt passionately about. So the theatre

wasn't just a... You know, it wasn't something that people went to for Saturday night entertainment, it was a force for - hopefully - changing the world.

VC: Did you ever see A Taste of Honey?

SF: Yes, I did.

VC: Yes, how was that in comparison, or just on its own?

SF: It was also very exciting, it didn't have quite the same... For me it didn't have quite the same impact, but it was... it was a very exciting piece of writing. But it was interesting, wasn't it, because it was... Shelagh Delaney never quite followed it through; whereas John Osborne did and he went on to write more interesting plays. But yes, all the theatre at that time had this passion.

VC: So you think, don't think that we've still got that then or...?

SF: Oh I think... Yes, I wouldn't say 'not at all'. No I don't... I definitely wouldn't say not at all. I think it... You know, there is still theatre to be seen that has passion and excitement. Yes... no I... You know, I wouldn't dismiss today's theatre in any way. There are still wonderful writers, and I've just seen a play which I'm going to do with Dennis Kelly – Love and Money – at the Young Vic. It's a smashing play - it's a wonderful piece of writing. So no, I wouldn't dismiss today's writers in any way.

VC: Have you seen any plays recently, like any Royal Shakespeare plays?

SF: I haven't just recently I must admit. I haven't been... I think the last sort of classic thing I saw was Galileo at the National with the wonderful Simon Russell Beale.

VC: OK. Is there anything else, like, about just the period in general or anything you'd like to add, anything that you think kind of stood out or... anything in your mind that you can remember, any significant events or...?

SF: Yes, the... I think the thing that really interests me is how in England which - or Britain, which is a... in some ways a kind of philistine country – theatre, you know, doesn't get... You know, in Germany every town has its own theatre, there's huge subsidies. And yet we produce the best actors, the finest theatre, somehow there's a tradition in this country which does produce work of a consistently fine quality. I think that, you know, I'm obviously fairly prejudiced towards some of our drama schools, but you know, the training for actors is incredibly intense. The students I work with start at eight thirty in the morning, and finish at five, six at night – every day. There's a rigour to the training and to the work that actors do, which produces very, very, very good work I think – very good work. And it sometimes, it's almost in spite of itself! [Laughs]

VC: Do you think kind of... sort of post war theatre, do you think there was ever like an issue of class or was there ever... did you ever feel any kind of... that there was any sort of class issues going on?

SF: In the theatre?

VC: Yes, and... well, both in the theatre and kind of, what was portrayed on the stage.

SF: No, I think that... I mean, maybe that was one of the excitements of the time that I was in the theatre with *Look Back in Anger*, which was that all the class barriers were broken down. But I would say as a very, very much as a working class girl – I mean, you know, my family literally came from a slum in the East End – the joy of being in the theatre was that it was a classless society. I think that's why I loved it. It didn't matter who you were, it mattered what you did. I think one of the slight differences that... I meet voice teachers nowadays who say, 'Oh, they encourage people to keep their own accents'. Whereas I, you know, got rid of my cockney accent in about two weeks at drama school. Because I knew that I had to be able to speak RP. So I suppose in that way... in those days yes, you did have to speak RP and you know, know how to behave like a lady and how to pour tea with one little finger crooked and all those sorts of things. And nowadays, possibly, there's almost a kind of inverted snobbery. You know, people are kind of, you know 'I'm workin' class and proud of it.' Whereas I kind of believed that I had to become able to play you know, queens and ladies and things. But the theatre itself I think has always been classless. But yes, you know the actual... the class thing that changed was that working class roots became not only acceptable, they became fashionable.

VC: Yes, definitely.

SF: So I think lots of middle class girls put on Liverpool accents! [Laughter] So that they would sort of, you know fit in better.

VC: OK, I'll just... Do you think the reasons why people go to the theatre nowadays have changed as to what motivated people to go back then?

SF: What makes people go? Yes, I wonder if nowadays people don't go much more... if you look at the amount of musicals that there are in the West End. But even if you go to a regional theatre you know there's several musical theatre [ed. productions]... whereas there were many, many, many more straight plays. People went to the theatre, yes to have an evening out, but I think they went more to be stimulated, to be interested, to have their thoughts changed. And maybe now it is something people do for 'a night out'. People go, you know... every theatre has a restaurant, every theatre has a bar... well everyone – they always used to have bars. But none of the old theatres had restaurants because it was... People went to 'the theatre', whereas now it's 'a night out' - you expect to have a meal, you expect to sort of meet your mates, you expect to sort

of see something that isn't too demanding – or is just interesting. I feel that it had more purpose, and people went with a more serious outlook.

VC: Yes, I suppose nowadays like nothing's really that shocking any more, is it?

SF: No, and people are kind of... Yes, more looking for 'sensation' than sort of 'interest'. People want to have a 'nice' time. [Laughs] Whereas I think that theatre-goers in the olden days, or you know in sort of... yes if you think of sort of Ibsen and Shaw and Chekhov, there was a feeling that people went to the theatre to have their window on the world changed. I think people now don't want their window changed; they want to go and just be comforted and have a nice time.

VC: Yes. OK, well we'll leave it there then. But thank you very much for your time.

SF: Lovely. Thank you very much Vicky.