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Colette King – interview transcript

Interviewer: Cerian Jones

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Director. Bill Gaskill; Central School of Speech and Drama; The Cherry Orchard; Dartington College of Arts; Alfred Emmett; Val Gielgud; Greek tragedies; improvisation; Joint Stock Theatre Company; National Theatre; Oxford University Drama Society; Questors Theatre; Saved; Stanislavski theory; Strawberry Hill College; teaching; Waiting for Godot.

CJ: First of all, would you mind talking a little bit about how you first became interested and involved in drama?

CK: Yes... Well it was really by the back door, because I went to Central because I had a bit of a stammer and the only sentences I could complete were other people's, so that meant playwrights' and poets' and I was quite alright with them. But they... by my third year they cottoned on to the fact that I wasn't communicating much, you know, apart from that, so they asked me to do something about this and the only thing I could think of was putting my back to the wall and if I had a production with a number of people standing waiting for me to speak whether that would do the trick, if it didn't do the trick I'd have to leave. But Central kept turning down the plays I suggested, and in desperation in the end I suggested Goethe's Faust, both parts, translated by Louis MacNeice. Which was a five hour production [laughs] with a gap in the middle for supper and about 80 cast. Didn't mean afterwards I could sit back and say 'Oh, I've produced so and so, and so and so', these people who'd gone on to make names for themselves [laughs] and of course they were students at the time. So that's how it began and I began talking then and haven't, in a way, stopped since. Except... informally I could talk the hind leg off a donkey! Anyway, that's how I became interested, and earlier in the course of course I had worked with little bits of text and enjoyed that enormously... but then after Central I did teach for four years and became involved with Questors Theatre. But the major thing was, after the four years, I got one of these scholarships for mature students to go to university and so I came here, to Oxford, to read English. Intending to become very academic and all that, but somebody had seen some of the productions I had been doing and suggested it to me so I submitted something to be done by OUDS, the Oxford University Dramatic Society, not knowing that women were not allowed to direct at that time, women undergraduates had never directed. And there was a bit of a battle over it and in the end they let me have a go and the very first was Six Characters in Search of an Author - Pirandello - but I also did some Greek things: Oedipus at Colonus and Aristophanes' Frogs, but they weren't... Aristophanes was done by Wadham and Merton, a combination of colleges and so on. But I... through those productions became very interested in Greek tragedy, and Val Gielgud had sent somebody down to look at these productions and he offered

me... he was going to retire in two or three years and he had seven productions of Greek tragedy left and he asked me if I would do the choruses, which I was thrilled to bits about. And particularly as I had listened to Val Gielgud's stuff from the age of about 12, for the BBC Third Program. And I - and I'm sure thousands of people - owe him an awful lot, which I don't think has ever been really acknowledged, that he fed the nation with superb productions of Greek tragedy and Shakespeare and Chekhov and all, and we grew up on this, a lot of us grew up on this. Anyway, that saw me out but... what was your question?

CJ: It was how did you get involved?

CK: Oh yes, I got involved that way first of all, and from there got invited by, well as I say, by the BBC to do these choruses, but then when I actually left they invited me to do... a television directing course, which was fun but which I had no intention of following through because by then I had found work with Strawberry Hill College, a men's college of education which was dealing with young people over several years and that was totally fascinating for me you know, that's how I began... But the interesting thing for me was that in my last year at Central - where I have to admit I found the course very disjointed, nothing connecting with anything else - I did have a tiny, tiny moment of illumination when I was supposed to be in an improvisation which I couldn't do at all partly because of my speech difficulty, but also because they... I didn't know where people were taking when they were asked to improvise, where all the stuff was coming from, it just seemed chatter. But in this particular improvisation I thought, 'Well, I can sit in a carriage with the best of them' and I didn't say anything, but then I looked out of the window and it appeared to be raining and I said, 'Oh look, it's raining', and they were the first words I'd ever uttered that actually came from my own imagination and I was extremely excited by the connection that there was and the picture and the mind's eye and language - how the one provoked the other. So I can remember making a little vow to myself that I would explore this for the rest of my life, because it seemed to me very important. If it was important to me who had difficulties, it would be important for a lot of people, and then I thought most people have difficulties of one kind or another, so that connection between making images in the head and language, and the language it provokes... became central to my thinking. So I left Central at least with that, and where do we go from there?

CJ: You were mentioning Strawberry Hill?

CK: Oh yes, so then the chance to work with young people came - they were all men at that stage, they hadn't got any women students - and... but it was a fantastic beginning for me because a) it was a new department you know, I was able to start the department and I was able to explore not only that thing I had about the connection between image and language, but Stanislavski, whom I'd met - I hadn't heard of all through my Central course but through working with a man called Alfred Emmett who founded the Questors Theatre which was an amateur theatre basically, occasionally the odd actor. But he ran a two year course based on his understanding of Stanislavski, and he asked me to run the second year and he would do the first year, so I had to put my head down and learn a bit about Stanislavski. And it was a great revelation to me, and one of the things I enjoyed about Stanislavski, he kept contradicting himself so you couldn't go wrong, you could pluck the exercises that really fascinated you. And the

ones that fascinated me were to do with... motivation obviously, and objects, and obstacles to achieving those objectives you see, that seemed a very, very rich area. So I developed lots of exercises stemming from those things which stood me in stead over the next twenty years. Stood me in good stead, is that a phrase?

CJ: Yes it is.

CK: [Laughs] And plus this thing about the image and language connection, so I worked at Strawberry Hill for five years, but a little interesting side note there was I had to find plays to introduce... because most of them were fairly hefty, you know, I won't say thuggish but very tough guys, you see. So when I was asked to produce plays, I thought 'God, I've got to find a tough play' and I chose Tamburlaine, which I'd never considered before but I used to think about Tamburlaine in this, the old part of Strawberry Hill which was built by Horace Walpole, as you probably know, and there's a long gallery there and I used to walk up and down thinking about Tamburlaine and then many years after I retired I was reading one of his letters and he's been asked to do a preface to a new version of Tamburlaine, Horace Walpole. So I thought, 'Dear God, he'd walked up and down the same long... [laughs] thinking about Tamburlaine!'. And, you know, it was a little shiver making to think we'd paced the same area thinking about... Anyway, so I started these productions and did several at Strawberry Hill with a little gap to go away and do the BBC's television training for drama, which I... where I was offered a job but by then totally fascinated by what happened to students over a length of time and how they changed and why they changed. So, then Central invited me back to revamp the course they had, which was lovely for me seeing as I'd been so critical of it earlier. So I went to the west of Ireland, sat and thought and came back with this reinforced notion of the image underlying all the different activities. Presented this and they told me that they couldn't make head or tail of what I was trying to say, so I thought, 'I'm going', I left and I went down to Dartington where that thinking became the core of the four year degree course we did there, eventually. And... where have we got to?

CJ: We were talking about... you were just finishing with Strawberry Hill.

CK: Oh yes, and all that time I had started work with the Questors Theatre because... to preserve my sanity! Because the four years between finishing at Central and going to university, going to Oxford, I was working in a very tough secondary modern school and I thought stretching ahead of me were forty years of this kind of battle, and I despaired and I thought 'I've got to take my mind off it' and it worked very well, because the work then I was doing at Questors Theatre then fed back into the work I was doing in the... and I ended up enjoying the stuff. But I do think I would like to sort of emphasise... I don't think enough has been said to acknowledge the tremendously good work that Alfred Emmett did in founding that theatre and fostering it and running the two year course and introducing the notions of Stanislavski when the acting schools hadn't heard of him, you know. Central hadn't heard of him, RADA hadn't heard of him... you know, the students didn't... And a tremendous range of interesting productions did come out of Questors. Anyway, I finally left Questors because they asked me to do a production of *The Cherry Orchard* and I read up reports in the Russian... was it Karkov that it was set near? The papers at the time, I think it's Karkov. And about the attacks on owners, you know, and all this and these little reports, so I interspersed the play with these translations of these newspaper blots, you see. And people from the Russian

Embassy came to see it and they thought it was marvellous, [laughs] great, because they were all strong Communists at the time and they thought this was all a gesture in the right direction, and poor old Alfred Emmett began the discussion, public discussion after the play by standing up and saying, 'Tell us Colette, was your intention merely to destroy?', you see, so I thought, 'God, I've got to resign', and yet I had all the support, you see, from these people that had come back for the discussion from the Russian Embassy. But we - Alfred and I - remained friends until he died. But I then was, I think, well into the productions of the stuff at Oxford and enjoying the new areas of the Greek Tragedy and the chance of kind of thanking Val Gielgud for the work he had done. There must be thousands of people who owe a lot to him and it's never been said. But then I started my theatre-going, and of course I was an avid theatre-goer to begin with, but pretty soon I began to focus on the work mainly of Bill Gaskill who, in my opinion was certainly the greatest director functioning then, if not the whole of the rest of the century. I really think his breadth and his kind of commitment, and he is a superb teacher as well, although he does emphasis the intellectual side of things a bit, which in my approach needs balancing up a lot with the sensory work as well as the... But I remember one exercise he set my students and I thought, 'Dear God, they won't be able to do this exercise', he asked somebody to start off with a short story that had a point and the rest of us had to listen. I wasn't included - thank God! - in this, but we had to listen and then come up with another short story with another point which counteracted or qualified the point in the first story. And I thought, 'They'll never be able to do this!' and you know they kept going for nearly two hours, it was superb, it was just the most mind boggling exercise ever. But we were very, very lucky that Bill used to come down and teach the students, and that happened because we... one summer while I was at Strawberry Hill, I'd been asked to contribute to a course for teachers in the summer, a summer course, run by a man who was then Chief HMI, he was a chemist in fact, he was a scientist but he had this passion to get drama work into every school in the country, isn't that marvellous? Anyway, he asked me if I would contribute, and there I met this man called Peter Stone who had introduced a lot of movement work into primary schools in Yorkshire and his understanding of that work was based on his understanding of... oh dear God, what's it called? You'll know it, movement that's taught now... or was taught. Oh, can I leave that for a moment and give

It's the movement where various basic simple concepts, but they've got very complicated in the teaching, but like change of weight, change of speed and direction and all this... Laban. Laban's stuff. But it was his understanding of it and it was geared to fit the understanding of young children and he had marvellous work going on. So he and I were paired up as a couple to teach on this course and we all went to see Cymbeline at Stratford - Shakespeare - together and I thought it was a superb production, it was one of the first things of Bill Gaskill's I'd seen. And he was invited back for the next day to have dinner with us, you know, the students, and we were talking about mask work. I've always been a bit wary about mask work because it seemed to me it relieved the student of responsibility for what they did or said and I didn't feel comfortable with it, but Bill at that time was great on mask work, so we had a little ding dong about it all. And then - Jim Gill was the name of this Chief Inspector, this scientist who ran the course - he said to Bill, 'Would you come on our course next year to teach?' you see, and Bill said 'Will she' - meaning me - 'be teaching on it?' So Jim said, 'Well I hope so!' and he [Bill] said, 'Well, as long as I can contradict everything she says, I'll say yes!'. [Laughs] So that's how all that happened, and Bill has taught students that I've had from then on at Dartington, you know, and all over, he's very good. I can remember one of his key phrases when working on a text or a sentence or a phrase, 'What is happening in the language, what is happening?' and it really pushes you to think. Anyway that's how, but some of the, I saw, he was appointed for two years just

after the National Theatre was formed by Olivier and I can remember seeing two of his productions, one was George Farquhar's Recruiting Officer and the other was some kind of Restoration thingy, the name escapes me for the moment, it wasn't The Way of the World, it was something else. Anyway, so I was interested, not only in Bill's teaching abilities but obviously his directorial stuff, and so I followed his work when he went from there to found the... to do seven years at the Royal Court, and I particularly, his introduction of Edward Lear's work, no, I don't mean Edward Lear... Bond!

CJ: Oh, Edward Bond.

CK: [Laughs] Edward Bond and Saved and those you know, and being appalled by seeing the baby stoned in the pram and all this. And Lear there as well, both were Bill's productions. But I was also very much aware of the fact that Bill was the man who seemed to be pushing to get rid of the censorship on plays, he was quite prominent you know, and was always on television arguing, or it seemed so. And then of course there were the ludicrous plays, what do you call them? ...The Absurd.

CJ: Waiting for Godot?

CK: No, no, not Waiting for...that's not absurd, that's profoundly right! [Laughs] I did see the first production of that in the Arts Theatre... which was mind blowing: I'd never seen anything like it. But I went a second time because the reaction was so extraordinary to it, yes that was a bit of a devotion I can't quite remember the date of that but anyway... And then after his Royal Court time, and I did see a tremendous amount, but I'm 77 this year and you'll have to forgive me, I can't remember everything, the names and things. But then he and Max Stafford-Clarke, I'm not sure about the timing of this, founded the... oh I mentioned it earlier, where they encouraged all these marvellous... Is it possible to turn it off for a moment?

Before I go on, I've just remembered another magnificent production - I think it was at the National - that Bill did, it was Philoctetes, superb actor, I think his name was Colin Blakely who died fairly early I think. But that was stuck in my mind... But then Bill and Max Stafford-Clarke got on with the Joint Stock and one of the first productions was Stephen Lowe's adaptation of The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist and the way that Bill was directing this, he said, 'Do you need any work done in the department?' Well we were trying to get a space in Plymouth for the third year of the course to do work in the community and I said, 'Yes, we've got a warehouse there that needs doing up', so he said 'Right, good', then the company of actors were going to have to do this work interspersed with rehearsals so they experienced the real McCoy. So we got all that warehouse work done for nothing [laughs] and in return for the space for them to work in and... Then Ragged Trousered Philanthropist took off and went abroad and various places. But there was another very interesting one, Speakers, there were one or two Caryl Churchill things, The Ninth Heaven? What was that called? The one we just mentioned?

CJ: Cloud Nine?

CK: Cloud Nine, yes. And then David Hare, Fanshen, which was about the Chinese revolution and so on. So they did, I think, a tremendous amount of work in getting new works going just as Bill had got new work going for the Royal Court for seven years. And, I think that possibly takes me out of the date that you've mentioned?

CJ: Oh, you can talk on...

CK: Talk on? OK. I don't know whether there's all that much... except that one of the things I'm thrilled about is that various students who've gone into different things, you know, like I said, writing novels, some plays, some performing, some dancing, choreographing, all that, have asked for the thinking underpinning the way we worked so I'm trying to get down while I still have any sign of compos-mentis, to get it out in the form of ten letters addressed to young people about different ways into provoking images in the imagination. And that for me personally is what's come out of my life's work, is curiosity of trying to get that down, in as helpful a way as possible, so people can select and work and develop it. Because the thing I abhor, I don't know if they're around anymore, are little books on 'how to do it', you know, how to do acting, and I think they're death, and they shut doors rather than open doors on what needs to be as understood as the thinking, so the people can invent their own exercises and work.

CJ: So did you implement those ideas when you were setting up the course in Dartington?

CK: Oh yes, yes. They were governed by a very naïve understanding of what Laban work was, that I got from Peter Stone, this movement man in Yorkshire, and certain things I understood about Stanislavski. But then work that developed from little, tiny starting points from ones own life, for instance, I can remember when I was about 12 opting out of something called 'music' because they just used to put a record on and talk about it very boringly afterwards. So I remember absenting myself from the lesson by, there was a grid in the ceiling and I used to change my size and go up into the grid and have adventures you see [laughs] and come down a thin thing like a spider, all this. And I kept very quiet about these exercises because I thought people would think I was a lunatic. But later on they became part of one's thinking in acting, you know, this thing of changing size and seeing things from different angles and all this, it was great fun. And there was another incident that happened many years later, it was a student at Dartington, in those early days he was unusually... you know, had his ear clips and head shaven and all that, but he was quite earnest. But I met him in the garden once and he seemed very down and I said, 'What's the matter?' and he said, 'I think I'm going to have to leave this course because I don't really understand what it's about. Occasionally you mention myths, and I don't know what a myth is, and I don't know how to find them.' So we agreed to have a fortnight for him and any other student who was interested to come at lunchtime with their sandwiches, I'd supply the coffee, and they would come with a short story from the Greek, I told them where they could find them and all this. And the exercise was to try and connect their short story with anything they'd heard from other people, and when there was a gap I'd try and fill the gap with... you know, that sort of thing. We did this for a fortnight, it was marvellous fun and that was it then, and about two or three weeks later I passed this bloke - his name was Max, I can't remember his surname - in the garden and I didn't recognise him for a moment because he was transformed, literally! Physically he walked differently, he looked... so I

thought, 'Oh he's fallen in love', so he said, 'I was just on my way to have a word with you, you see, about this exercise we did'. So I said, 'So, have you fallen in love?' and he said, 'No, no, I haven't fallen in love, no, no'. So, he said, 'I was coming to see what, to find out why hearing those stories has made such a difference to my life?', you see, so I said, 'Well that's marvellous to hear', and we sat and tried to work out why it should be and whether it was, obviously the stories were touching on something profound, but I think things like... It was in a different clime and a different time and this effort to transcend one's own time and enter other times must have a bigger effect on us than we realise, and that convinced me yet again about the, you know, the importance of images that we do select and carry in our minds. And he was as happy as Larry, he said, 'I feel... it sounds ridiculous, I feel as if I own the world', which is marvellous. And so all this kind of reinforced my idea about the images, and see if I can make it a bit clear to myself as to why it has to happen, or why it does happen. I think that is all I can remember for the moment; my mouth is... is that how long? How long have we taken?

CJ: About 35 minutes.

CK: Pardon?

CJ: 35 minutes.

CK: Oh, well, do you want to ask any more questions?

CJ: Well you mentioned you saw Edward Bond's *Saved* and *Waiting for Godot*, and I was just wondering if you could talk a bit about that? Because they were quite influential and especially the stoning of the baby, what you thought or what the audience's reaction was?

CK: Well, I think we were all shocked at the time, yes. I can't remember specific things that were said, except afterwards there was a great hoo-ha about it. But funnily enough, Bill was speaking about it the other day on the phone, he mentioned, it was an incredibly bold thing to do in the theatre you know, it could alienate people forever. Similarly, Bond's *Lear* was very bold whereas *Waiting for Godot*, you couldn't call that bold in the same way, it was like planting a time bomb, but not setting it off, letting it set itself off again and again over the years. I produced it many times, *Waiting for Godot*, yes, since then, because it's a great play for, as in my mind is Chekhov's stuff, even translated, for finding...the kind of informing of the line which results only after rather precise and careful questions of the actor, and of himself, because the possibilities of the way it should arrive or be delivered are so immense and all that, you see, has opened the way up in a lot of theatre. I mean, in my opinion Chekhov and Beckett are the two biggies of, Chekhov just gets into the 20th century, but the two people that really matter in terms of informing everything else. I wish I could be more eloquent on it.

CJ: Oh no, that's great. OK, thank you I'll leave it there. Thank you very much for your time.

CK: Thank you.