

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Joe Aveline – interview transcript

Interviewer: Francesca Soper

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Production Manager. A Flea in Her Ear; As You Like It; audience interaction; Bristol Old Vic, Laurence Olivier; Othello; The National Theatre; props; Leonard Rossiter; Royal Hunt of the Sun; Stage 60; touring; vocal projection; Lesley Wallner; West End productions.

FS: To start off, how did you start in the business? Were you interested in theatre when you were younger?

JA: I grew up in Montreal, in a small English speaking community, there was very very little professional theatre. Children weren't allowed to go out to the movies either.

FS: Really?

JA: No.

FS: That's, surprising.

JA: You had to be 16 in order to go to the movies.

FS: Why was that? Was it just because...

JA: Oh, that's good Catholic, control function.

FS: Right.

JA: If a movie came along with religious content for example Quo Vadis or The Robe, they would say children can watch this one, otherwise there was a blanket ban on children going to the movies so what with that, and the as I said the poor study of theatre in English, I didn't see much I saw very little, saw a couple of pantomimes, I saw some amateur stuff, Montreal also had a theatre in French and Yiddish.

FS: Yiddish?

JA: Yiddish.

FS: Yiddish yeah.

JA: Jewish music...so I came here and, I had done some acting at school and whilst I was travelling across the Atlantic on a boat someone suggested to me that it was very time consuming and that I could waste a lot of time. When I got here I got involved instead working at university onstage, backstage...it was a completely revelatory experience - absolutely - I just completely, this was a whole new and totally wonderful world.

FS: Yeah.

JA: And so I did a lot of that, didn't do any work got chucked out of college at the end of the year, and, I had to get a job, and I got a job by banging on the door at the Hippodrome in Bristol, which is a great big place and started that way.

FS: Yeah

JA: It was a necessity really, had to do it, I couldn't think of anything else I wanted to do.

FS: What was life like in the fifties and sixties? Was it, quite a bad time or...

JA: Well it...I think it's probably best to start by saying I think the war had a kind of, freezing effect and I think the theatre immediately after the war was pretty much like the theatre just before the war, and I started what, eleven or twelve years after the war, so most of the people I was working with had either been in the war - if not that or the first one - and the people I was working for, had between them the two - the chief electrician and the stage manager over a hundred years of experience.

FS: Yeah.

JA: The chief electrician I started working for...

FS: When was that?

JA: Mmm?

FS: When was that?

JA: '57.

FS: Oh right.

JA: At the Hippodrome.

FS: Yeah.

JA: He had started working in 1903.

FS: (gasps) Wow!

JA: That's over a hundred years ago now.

FS: Yeah, that's incredible.

JA: So, yeah it is incredible, you start to realise of course the long working lives and you learn an awful lot from them, but we still were travelling just at the end of the time when tours came in on train, in other words the motorway network hadn't started, and so the quickest way to shift about shows was on train, and so the whole load of...you know you had to go to the railway station and load stuff off a train onto a lorry, lorry to theatre and load again 'da de da da' whereas now of course the lorry just does the whole journey.

FS: Right.

JA: And that couldn't have happened until the motorway started, so I was right at the end of a time when things were, I think much simpler, in many ways, they were less demanding - the theatres had some lights and I was involved in that and so 'what' would come along say 'Well we'll use these and those, and that one, these we won't use', whereas nowadays, of course they expect to re-rig and change the positions and do all that and, and that didn't happen.

FS: Yeah.

JA: It happened rarely, for reasons which are obvious, because it was heavy, it was bulky, it was expensive and basically it was a kind of 'we can do it fairly quickly', so even quite complicated West End musicals would come in on a Monday morning and open

Monday night, just a few hours to fit it up and go. Nowadays of course the time spent between productions is absolutely phenomenal - and the money has changed - and in those days, you'd quite often see in London a sign saying, 'ooh a hundred performances, wow, twelve weeks'. Nowadays that's not considerable you know, people go on for years and years and years and partly because it's so expensive to put a show on that you don't do it unless you're secure to have a theatre. In those days they used to put a show on and send it wandering around the provinces, and when a West End theatre was available they (makes a quick 'phew' sound) shunt it in.

FS: So you worked obviously in Bristol.

JA: Yep.

FS: And in the West End...

JA: Well I started in Bristol, and then I realised that there was...I mean obviously I'm the lowest of the low - there was a tiering structure - there were people that came in the shows who were sort of resident, I mean sort of touring master carpenters or electricians or company managers or whatever, and I, I realised there was another tier above or two tiers above, and I had to do something about it, if I wanted to stick around in this and so I went to the Old Vic School in Bristol, and I did a one year course, and that led me to the Old Vic itself.

FS: In Bristol?

JA: In Bristol yeah. Now that was a glorious old Georgian building, and I mean phenomenal, and they trashed it, it was an act of supreme cultural vandalism is that they destroyed the stage of that theatre. I cannot think of another country in Europe where they would have done it.

FS: Really?

JA: They would have made another theatre.

FS: Yeah

JA: You know, you can't - a German, or an Austrian or a Frenchman would just, they must look at you and think 'are you absolutely mad?!' To destroy this wonderful document going back to 1766 - so that's the end of that rant. We did a very successful production of War and Peace - great long thing, and we were offered the chance to take it to London in the end of Bristol season 1962, and I remember speaking to the manager, the general manager at the Old Vic, and I said I'm not going to come back. Because I realised, you know that small town Bristol, upper mobility - and I'm still young

- you know, I can see way ahead, and I just took that big leap and a risk. He was a wonderful man his name was Nat Brenner he's an absolute genius. So we went to the London Old Vic, where we were hugely successful again, and from there we transferred into the West End to the Phoenix, and so without any effort at all I found myself working in the West End.

FS: Yeah. What did you prefer, did you prefer working in West End or in provincial theatre? Were there a lot of differences between them or is there any particular one that you preferred?

JA: Well I suppose the difference in the West End is that, first of all, I got the first inkling of time not being the essence because they do take a bit of time. They are very meticulous but equally well – if you worked in repertory theatre like Bristol, you have everyone there within the company, you have the painters, and wigmakers, and prop makers and carpenters, the West End theatre doesn't, I mean all these are contracted services...

FS: So does it feel more like a family in Bristol?

JA: You get a family feeling in repertory theatre, you really do, and there's a kind of pulling together, and all of a sudden in the West End the unions tended to matter a bit more, and all of that. On the other hand they did demand a very high standard of work, on the other hand some of the work was complete crap, awful. I mean there were shows that came into the Phoenix, which is where I was, they lasted a few weeks and went, and then something else would come and last for a few weeks and die, and you know it was so cheap to put a show on by comparison.

FS: So onto your profession; you became a production manager at the Theatre Royal is that right?

JA: Yeah, that was after, now where was I? I...one thing I should say that again, it is all to do with luck. Because the Phoenix had a reputation for not having long runs - don't know why, badly placed, it doesn't seem to be that way now. In 1963, a production of Baal by Bertolt Brecht came in and this effectively, was a dry run for the opening of the National Theatre at the Old Vic for that very autumn. The director was Bill Gaskill, the designer was Jocelyn Herbert, the lighting designer was Richard Pillbrow the company manager was Neville Thompson, all of whom were at the National Theatre three or four months later. And Peter O'Toole was the lead, and he played the lead in the original production of Hamlet at the National Theatre. It was a dry run...I don't know how it worked out, but the producer was a man called Oscar Lowenstein who did a lot of work with the Royal Court, and so it was Neville Thompson who was the company manager, who went to the Old Vic, and he and I used to go and have a drink after we travelled down to home...I used to live in Greenwich - we go as far as New Cross on the train together - and he rang me up in '64, and said would you like to join the National Theatre as a Property Master, for the season at Chichester. Can I say no? Of course I can't say no!

FS: So what does a property master actually do?

JA: The property master is a trade, which has almost died. He should be able to make props, and look after them, repair them, set them, fix them, do everything, and so that the stage management, all they have to do is check that everything is in the right places. One of the things that has happened which is probably not for the best is that nowadays a lot of stage management do a lot of prop work, but as the prop people say, when it goes wrong, they pass it back to the prop people when it needs fixing, so you are there as a kind of absolute back stop - and you have to do all the shopping and everything else - and there was a lovely story from Chichester, which one of the shows was Laurence Olivier's *Othello*, and he comes on, you must have seen pictures of this great hulking creature in black, you know he is black, and he's got this white towelling bathrobe on, and he makes his entrance, and he's got in his hands a rose, little sort of tiny budding red rose, and every time we did the performance of *Othello*, I used to go to the florist and buy two roses, and I would go to his dressing room and say which one do you want, and he would say 'I'll have that one', and I would go back and I would then shave all the thorns off the rose so he could twiddle it in his fingers without stabbing himself, and I bought myself a single stemmed vase and put the other one in my vase and kept it in my prop room; so I had three fresh roses a week!

FS: Awww! (laughs)

JA: And he never stabbed his fingers, so yes we...in the West End again I was responsible as a prop master if china broke or things crashed or whatever, I used to go along Oxford Street and do deals with shops and things like that, and buy cases of china so we could just break them or whatever. It was my responsibility, and I used to use you know, buy the money, I had a float and everything else A lot of that would now be done by stage management; but equally I would have to fix it, if it went wrong or broke or something like that then it's my job.

FS: So,

JA: So then I went to Stratford East, now Stratford East had been where Joan Littlewood had been.

FS: What, from Theatre Workshop?

JA: Theatre Workshop, and they had been doing successful things like *Oh! What A Lovely War* and so on, and (pauses) at some point the whole energy was sapped out or whatever, and another company went in there called Stage 60, and I knew Stage 60 people, and so they asked if I would be production manager, and that was my first crack at that, along with doing the lighting design.

FS: So what kind of things did that entail then, working as a production manager?

JA: I've got a book about that.

FS: Production Management that you wrote? Yeah.

JA: Um, I write it down as basically saying you are there to provide make sure that everything is provided, that is not to do with the acting, if you like. All the scenery, all the props all the lighting to interface all the various different people involved in all of those various different things, and if you're doing your job properly to make sure that no one is prevented in their work, by anyone else's work. Because a stage is a very complicated space, everyone wants to work there, it's everyone's workshop, you can't all work at the same time – you really do have to get very clever and say you have some time to your work, you have some time to do your work - so I think the production manager has to be, technically competent but more a manager, he has to really make sure that people (pause) provide the services they are supposed to provide on time, and at a price, if you know what I mean.

FS: Yeah. So from going to property master to production manager, was that quite a challenging transition for you?

JA: It didn't seem to at the time, because I had the experience in Bristol in rep, when you did a bit of everything - and we didn't have a production manager, so I had already given some management...they used to sort of, we had a workshop a mile and a half away, and we would have a meeting for every show, and say we'll make these things in the workshop, we'll make these things in the theatre, and the things that would be made in the theatre became my responsibility, and I had other people working under me, and so that I already had some experience, and so I was experienced in carpentry, I'd even been a carpenter in the West End for a bit, and an electrician, and I was doing lighting design, and a property master, so I'd done most of the technical disciplines - I hadn't been wardrobe mistress. So when I became a production manager, I had, it didn't seem to be too big a problem, and also because Stage 60 was taking over the theatre, pretty empty, there was no baggage there were no people there, we had to re-staff it. I had been able to chat up some of my friends, and say look would you like to come and we can all work together, and they didn't seem to mind me doing the job either.

FS: Yeah.

JA: We did some fascinating work, fascinating work.

FS: What was a production that stood for you the most, which one did you enjoy the most?

JA: '64 again, I'd been in Chichester, and Othello, the Olivier Othello was in that season; I went off to Stratford and one of the directors of Stage 60 is a man called David Thompson, who had been for some time art critic for The Times. He's a polymath.

FS: What does that mean?

JA: He's pretty good at everything.

FS: Right, okay.

JA: He also spoke French, and fluent this, he translated, three Euripides Greek tragedies from Greek, into brand new translations.

FS: Wow!

JA: He could also translate Molière and things like that, he'd just sit there in a book just writing it down you know. It's annoying!

FS: (laughs)

JA: And so we did Iphigeneia, Electra and Trojan Women, in repertoire. They were brilliant...we couldn't do enough shows. People were just steaming down the Central Line to get to Stratford, and the guy, who a critic in The Sunday Times said 'If you can't get in the see Othello at the National, go to the Greeks at Stratford East', and I said to myself, I've done both of those. Yeah?

FS: That's impressive.

JA: Yeah. I'm in both of those, mate.

FS: So you feel that was a big achievement for you?

JA: No, it's not my achievement, it's just I happened to be in the right place at the right time. You know, the people that we liked working with had ability yeah? Just the balls to go and do it. I mean, we did some extraordinary things with that Greek thing; there was a composer, a German man called Michael Dress, who made the sound tape out of two pistol shots, and he stretched them and compressed them, and did endless things with them to make the 'tch tch tch tch tch' noises and so - absolutely fascinating - and the designer, had you know, flights of fancy, and it was complex in some ways, but visually beautiful, and challenging and rough and, you know these are dark emotions in these tragedies, these are dark emotions. So that was exciting because we were getting to grips with something, which wasn't sort of average. So that company carried on for a bit, it was never destined to last forever. A lot of things fire, then just fizz, you have to be there when it's going off like a firework.

FS: As your profession of a production manager, it's been said that it's been superseded by other titles, sort of undermined as a profession, I mean do you think that's true?

JA: (pauses) Yes and no. I think there is a very different person called a technical manager, who is the guy who is in charge of, the building, I see that you know...the wording is complex, as you probably understand the West End has a master carpenter, the resident in the provinces is the resident stage manager, they do the same job effectively. In a larger situation where there are several different venues like the Royal Centre in Nottingham or the Derngate in Northampton, there's probably a technical manager in charge of the installation. So the production manager is very much to do with the production, the actual play or a ballet or whatever, he's the guy that works with the designer and so on, and he may, (pauses), it's just, (pauses) I still have that in my sense, any other words are euphemisms to work around it, I don't think that...the technical manager to me, doesn't have to have the creative input, that a production manager has, with the production manager you're the guy saying to the designer, 'look, I really don't think we should do that for reasons, but would it be nice to do this?' It's not always to do with money - and the other thing is, the older you get - if you find yourself working with younger people, which you will, quite frequently you will find that they will take your advice because they understand that you have done it before they were born, yeah?

FS: Yeah.

JA: If you're working with a young designer or something like that,

FS: You've got experience and they appreciate that.

JA: Yeah, this is the thing about the theatre, as an actor, you are young and you play young parts, then you play middle aged parts, and then you play old parts; as a production manager or a designer, you can become a designer at the age of twenty two, and you can still design at the age of seventy two, and you're job hasn't changed, except you've got better, yeah? It's just a build of experience, I've done this, and the other thing is, people tend to just develop kind of relationships. For instance a director called Clifford Williams quite frequently worked with a designer named Ralph Coltai. They had a symbiotic relationship they trusted each other implicitly.

FS: Did you feel that with anyone you worked with?

JA: Oh yes, I had worked with a director and a lighting designer who basically goes home when I start doing the lighting. 'I'm not interested', she says, 'I know it'll be fine, we know what we're doing'. We had trust.

FS: So in terms of all the people that were working on a production, who did you feel that you worked with more and had more of a close relationship with?

JA: Well, over the years there were lots of people, I would like to mention a couple,

FS: Yeah, go for it.

JA: One is a delightful lady now passed on called Lesley Wallner now there is a tape of hers in this pile of tapes at the Theatre Museum, who was the absolute quintessential scenic artist. She was glorious. She was a wonderful creature, she was a wonderful, she was very lively, a very womanly woman - she liked to drink and she liked fun. But she was awfully good and had great principles, and you knew - again she was older than me, a lot than I am, and I would just listen to her, because she was going to be right. You know I would never dream of telling her what to do. I could say we need this done, but I wouldn't tell her how to do it or how to achieve it, because she would absolutely know about it, and she had been at the Old Vic after the war, when they did every single Shakespeare, they did them in a row, I don't know if you know that.

FS: No, I didn't.

JA: Michael Bentle was the director, and they did all the Shakespeare, the whole thing from start to finish, and she just said to me 'it was an education, you know I've just been educated, I've just seen every Shakespeare play!' (laughs) It's taken seven years or something like that! She had this wonderful, sort of open eye, she just loved experience, and she just reflected that. She used to carry a notepad around, little pad, and she'd flip it open, and there were a few pencil lines on it, she said 'I saw this man on Hampstead Heath', and those lines were a person, and she just did it like that, not cartoons, but really you could see the individual, like Rowlandson drawings.

FS: Talking about individuality when you were working on the productions did you feel there was a part of you showing through in the production?

JA: Oh there has to be. To me, if you can't emotionally engage - because after all the final arbiter is the audience. They are in the end where it is, and if you can't feel how they feel or react, you know what I mean you look at it from their point of view? You learn over the years. But, yes you need to have that, you need to sort of be able to sit down when you're talking about something, how is it going to look, how is it going to feel, is it right to do this or that or whatever, and you've got your lighting designer, your sound designer, your set designer and all these people, and you know that somehow you have to fit all that together, and sometimes you do, yes you do become emotional. It's good that it does.

FS: Yeah definitely. Was there a difference in the audiences that were in Bristol and West End, I mean did you feel there was a different reaction?

JA: No I don't think so. No, I think you get a different reaction when you go abroad. (pauses)

FS: Well, obviously in Canada with the whole sort of...

JA: We took shows to Canada, and the National Theatre had a production of *A Flea In Her Ear* by Feydeau directed by the guys, one of the directors of the Comedie Française. (pause) It was hilarious. It was wet making. It was really dangerous to watch it! (laughs) And we took it to Winnipeg it was the simplest thing was had to do, the facilities in Winnipeg were absolutely appalling. Laurence Olivier was in it playing a sort of butler type part, and this Winnipeg audience just sat there like puddings. It was difficult to work out what could make them laugh, and you just thought, well, what is it? And maybe they think because it's the National Theatre of Great Britain and it's Laurence Olivier that it's somehow serious, or meaningful or something like that instead of this absolutely, totally outrageous farce, with double and treble entendres all over the place. Your sides' split, you ached, and yet these people sat there ('eeeugh' sound made with mocking tone demonstrating vacant expression of audience) like that. Now that's because it is a small town in the middle of a huge continent, I mean the audience in Los Angeles was up there, because that's showbiz town, yeah intellectual...

FS: There's more culture around you.

JA: Yeah, yeah. And Montreal again even though we were in English, Shakespeare is pretty well known, and lots of other stuff, they liked it, New York critics came up and they loved it. So I don't think there's much difference, and I think Bristol perhaps was practically (pause) the wrong, what's the word, the wrong sample. Bristol had been the first university to have a drama department in the country - 1946, and the Old Vic company starting up there - 1946, and quite frequently the critics from London used to come down to review the shows in Bristol, so it was a sophisticated audience. Now whether that would have applied in Colchester, or Norwich, or, do I get myself into trouble? No I'll stop it.

FS: (laughs)

JA: But do you hear what I'm saying?

FS: Yeah.

JA: If there is a kind of strand of culture and it's a university town, and all those things, you know what I mean, all those factors. So I didn't see an awful lot, and I mean there was some awful stuff in London anyway.

FS: When you worked at the National Theatre in Chichester, you worked with Laurence Olivier, what was that like for you working with him?

JA: Well, what happened was, after Stratford, shortly after I left Stratford I went back to the National Theatre, and I took over technical manager of the touring, and eventually I got put into production management as well, so I had two or three bites of working with Laurence Olivier. Now there can be, no (pause) no better employer, no more respected person - sometimes we thought he was completely mad, but you had to respect him. He was absolutely through and through, he had this ability that he could direct, he could run a company, he could act, and he had an ability to be (pause) human. Oh I could tell you lots of stories, I'll tell you two; at Chichester, the news came through one afternoon, that the father of one of the company had died. We did a different play from the afternoon to the evening, it was Othello in the afternoon, and Royal Hunt of the Sun in the evening - there's another story. The stage manager said to Olivier, 'what should we do?' He said 'I should tell him shouldn't I? I'm the head of the company, it's my job to tell him that his dad's dead.' And so he asked someone to go and get this man from his own dressing room, and go and see Sir Laurence in his dressing room, and the guy gets there, and Sir Laurence tells him 'da de da you're dad's dead'. And he then said 'look if you don't want to play this evening you don't have to, I do understand, we'll put the understudy on', and the guy thought about it and said, 'no I'll do it, my dad was in the business, I'll do it I'm not going to stop'. And Laurence said 'Yeah you want some time by yourself, what room are you in?' And the man said 'I'm in dressing room so and so and so and so', and he said 'oh right'. So he goes to this other dressing room and says 'where does so and so sit?' He says 'sit there' and he said 'oh I'll sit there', and he said 'would you have all these things taken to my dressing room, they're his'. And so he sat in the other blokes place. He said 'you sit here until you've finished in my room by yourself, compose yourself, think it all through'.

FS: So he was a very caring man?

JA: Oh yeah. But he knew what was expected of you know, (pause) we were doing a 'get out', you know shunting out all of the stuff at the end of a show on a Saturday night or something like that, and he would loom up alongside me in his coat, or overcoat or whatever, and I would say 'the bloke in the blue overalls over there, his name is Eddy, he's the chief electrician', 'Oh Eddy thank you so much, it's been a great week', and then I'd say (imitating his subtle talking to Olivier) 'the guy in the brown dustcoat is Fred, he's the resident stage manager', so that's the kind of, he knew he had to do it, and he did it, and never failed to do it. And yet, on a couple of occasions, he would say something like, (pause) we were doing a play, an arable play, and the director was an Argentine guy who lived in Paris who was as mad as a hatter, but produced wonderful stuff...and so we're sitting talking about how we can fit all these ideas into the Old Vic, and the guy keeps on referring to Théâtre Italien and he says 'what's all this Italian theatre bollocks he's talking about?' and I said it's the French word for proscenium arch. 'Oh!' (laughs) 'It's one of those, it's what they call it Théâtre Italien. And so he was trying talk about how the Vic was Théâtre Italien and he didn't want one. We were going to take the props down for him. And then once I once was on a plane with him, and General De Gaulle had just died, and he was reading The Telegraph, and he just said to me, 'what's hegemony mean?' and I said 'well it means like a man with huge, great control and power of earning, as De Gaulle. 'Oh.' I thought, well you're commander of the English language and you didn't know that word, yeah? You see what I'm saying?

FS: Yeah.

JA: And yet when we toured to Brighton, he invited everyone to dinner, in his house.

FS: What in Brighton?

JA: Yeah, yeah, but he said 'I can't take everyone so some of you come on Wednesday night, so of you come on Thursday night.' And you get to his house, and he waits on table, he gives everyone their dinner.

FS: What was that like, having dinner at his house?

JA: Wonderful, yeah it was lovely. I mean, he was so funny, he could be hugely funny, there were a lot of funny instances when suddenly the red mist would go by or whatever, but there were endless stories...it was a terrible (pauses) rehearsal room at the National Theatre, it was a bunch of leftover wooden huts from the war, and they were in a kind of car park space just up the road from the Old Vic, and so the rehearsal room had wooden posts all over the place to hold the ceiling up, otherwise you're going to fall down, and so in comes Mark Bergman to do Hedda Gabler so I get a call, 'the rehearsal's just started in Mark Bergman going through the bloody roof saying (extravagant hand gestures)'I'm a great artist I can't possibly work in this space with all these wooden posts holding the ceiling up, why can't I have something better?!' And the stage manager already said this what we always have, and he said, 'not good enough for me!' So the only thing to get Sir Laurence, and explain what the problem was, and Sir Laurence comes wandering in, and explains how he can use the wooden poles (laughs) he says 'when you get a bit tired you can always lean on them!' (laughs) He said 'I've rehearsed Othello here, and I used to lean on this one or that one!' (laughs) So having done all that, there was nothing more that Mr. Bergman could say! (laughs)

FS: Lost for words!

JA: As I said, he just had this ability - there was a human side to the man, and an understanding...I mean you go on, 'what's going I can't understand no one seems to be concentrating, what's the problem?' and we were in the West End at the Cambridge Theatre and someone said that there was the World Cup semi-final going on in Mexico City. 'Oh right, fine. So that's it.' So he sends someone to the hotel across the street, he said 'ask them if they mind the company go and watch the television, no ones going to do anything you're right', and so the entire company of Merchant of Venice, in full costume, walk across Monmouth Street into the hotel on Seven Dials, and sit there and watch the second half of the football! (laughs)

FS: That's ridiculous! (laughs)

JA: And then they go back and finish the second half! And the same thing happened with the landing of the moon! The staff had a telly, it was all black and white in those days, and he (Olivier) said to the master carpenter, 'would you mind if the company

come into your room, because you've got a telly, no one else has got a telly, but you've got one!' But he (Olivier) wouldn't dream of invading that space, because it wasn't his space, it was their space. 'Would you mind if the company watch your telly?' The loyalty - and the company was so upset when he had cancer, they were (pause) destroyed.

FS: So were you working with him at the time when that happened?

JA: Yeah. He'd been in and out of St. Thomas's, he had prostate cancer, and when he came to look at a rehearsal they would want to wrap him up in marshmallows, you know what I mean.

FS: With other actors and actresses that you worked with, did you feel any loyalty, with, or you know, a good friendship like the one you had with Olivier?

JA: Oh yeah, there was another guy called Leonard Rossiter, who did *Rising Damp* and all that, and he was in the company at Bristol, and again he had that ability - he died too early, he died, only 55 or something, but he had that ability to energise and make fun and lead from the front. I think it's important. In Bristol we used to have Monday off we did three weeks of a run, so the first Monday was usually a day off for the rehearsal, and to give the company a long weekend or whatever, and Rossiter would say 'let's all go to Worcester to watch cricket' or 'lets go to Weston Super-Mare and have a paddle', and we'd rent a mini bus, and off we'd go, and that was Leonard, sort of leading, making it yeah? Let's do something, sort of bonding thing.

FS: Do you still work in theatre at the moment?

JA: No. I decided when I got to retirement that I wanted things to be different, so I moved out of London, and I still do some training work, and some consultancy work. I've just been asked to do a book on props, which I may do or not do, and I've done that book over there (pointing at his book *Production Management*) So, no I'm not really involved in the shows, and I don't really want to be. I have so many colleagues who I have watched, who have, the only word I can use is diminished, they do a bit less, a bit less, and a bit less and I thought no I'm really quite enjoying life being different. It's actually electrifying.

FS: Do you still go to the theatre regularly?

JA: No, I never did.

FS: What was the most recent production that you saw?

JA: Well, the pantomime at Derby. (laughs)

FS: Oh right (laughs) Was that good?

JA: Yes, brilliant, absolutely lovely.

FS: What was it?

JA: Peter Pan. It's not really a panto, it a Christmas show. I never, I went to watch lots of things that friends were in or had designed - I've never been an avid theatre goer - I am more likely to go to a concert and go listen to music.

FS: From what you know about theatre today, do you think theatre has changed in terms of the things your friends have done, do you think there's a huge difference in theatre now than from when it used to be?

JA: (pause) Huge is not the word because the audience is still people, and there are fashions so that we now seem to be going through a 'vogue' of recreating musicals we did some time ago, Chicago and things like that. I think people have become a little over the top, in the technical areas in gizmos and effects and things like that, when in the end, it is the words of the actor that are what it's about. Now to emphasise that - when I was at the Old Vic School in Bristol, all the scripts for all the shows we did had been retyped by the school, omitting all the stage directions. All you work on is the words of the actor, nothing else matters, but the words of the actor, lets the focus right. So it never said 'it's a lovely, good library 'de da de da de da' or 'the windows are open', nothing like that just the actor. I think that's the important thing and I think that sometimes, modern theatre is losing its spontaneity - if you've got a huge musical, there's Lord of the Rings coming up on Drury Lane, sometime ago it was Miss Saigon, I did an article about the production of Miss Saigon, and I found out that the cast started rehearsal two months after, they started installing the set into the theatre. Now at this point it becomes, it seems to me, impossible (pause) you could not have said, 'wouldn't it be a good idea' if, because the guys, would say, 'well it's already built.'

FS: It's too late to alter anything.

JA: It seemed to me that the rehearsal process is a growth thing. I quite like working in studio spaces a lot.

FS: Why is that?

JA: Because they tend to be more flexible, and because they, they tend not to demand huge great sets, so from a lighting point of view you can have more fun, and flow with it and create with it, do you know what I mean?

FS: Yeah.

JA: It almost like saying, some of these big musicals, I've used the expression, are 'theme-park theatre' - The Producers has now just finished in Drury Lane, it going to take two weeks to get it out. Sometimes it takes even longer, because they have done structural things to the building by contract they have to put back again, and so that becomes Alton Towers doesn't it? (laughs) It's Disneyland; it's not the spontaneity of the individual actor in front of an audience, or working out how it is going to be, so I somehow think that's a factor, and also from an actor's point of view, it's economically impossible now for a rep company to engage a bunch of people, keep them and give them lots of parts, because that used to be your training ground, your bedrock, your apprenticeship, you came out of drama school, and you went to work and played all different kind of parts, in a rep, and I also think that nowadays, people are so used to getting miked, that basically actors don't seem to have in many cases the 'zap', the projection to get out, I mean - the National Theatre - we didn't mike, ever. It just didn't happen.

FS: In the production of The Caretaker, which was done at the Sheffield Crucible, there was an actor Nigel Harnen, who's from Eastenders, and apparently he just didn't project his voice because he was so used to using microphones, which I think happens quite a lot, because...

JA: In the old days people used to say 'speak up!' you know.

FS: (laughs) You don't really get that now do you?

JA: No we don't, and it's kind of like, why don't you? It was so British, just complained, you know 'can't hear you! I've paid my money, speak up' You can watch people do it...it's getting the projection, and again it's this actor audience relationship. You can get it wrong - have you ever been to the Lyttleton, at the National? The three auditoriums, the Lyttleton, the Olivier and the Cottesloe The Lyttleton is the nearest you get to a sort of conventional proscenium arch.

FS: I may have done I'm not too sure though, maybe when I was younger.

JA: Well it's very long, because if you sit in the balcony, or the circle or whatever it is, you can't see anyone in the stalls. So, you know you get this disembodied noise - the part of being in the audience is to share the experience. So I've got these other people down there, with whom I can't share, because I can't see them, and they can't see me, you know what I mean?

FS: It's quite disjointed.

JA: Whereas if you go into a more conventional theatre, you can see the people in the boxes, you know what I mean? Hello, we are all here together. And somehow, that, again, they've over designed it.

FS: So do you think the structure of the theatre is very important in terms of bringing everyone together?

JA: I think it is, I think it's important for people to see each other, and...

FS: It's kind of to play off people's reactions.

JA: In the long run, huge amounts of money have been spent in this country - millions of pounds - but in the long run, just, just Joan Littlewood, she goes to a derelict little theatre in the middle of the East end, in a very poor area, and does magic.

FS: Did you ever meet her?

JA: No, no.

FS: Obviously you heard a lot about her.

JA: I've a lot about her and her bloke Gerry Raffles was still around in the theatre when we there, and he was a bit of a character, he drove round in a sort of convertible American, bright blue Buick you know, it's a bit of a lad here! These are larger than life people – and John Berry, the designer he was another figure down there, so again another larger than life person - so I think it's almost like he's saying, they somehow want you to think that if you get all these things right then it will be great, which is absolute nonsense, because in the end it's the show isn't it, it's the production, that ability to reach out to the audience and affect them, so people do things in found spaces don't they? They find a space, and think 'oh we can do it here'. And so, it's not necessarily the building you can blame it things aren't going right, it's the fact that you simple haven't got the mix, the energy, the whatever; the chutzpah, good Yiddish word.

FS: (laughs) Thank you very much for your time Joe, just to finish off, what do you feel was your most memorable moment, when you were working? If you have one?!

JA: I have 75! (pauses) Well I'll have to give you two, because they balance each other. The opening night of Royal Hunt of the Sun at Chichester, the plays about the conquest of Peru, I guess you already know.

FS: I actually don't know about it!

JA: And so the key figure is the Inca, the Inca King. And of course the Spaniards just wanted the gold and all that stuff, and so there was this coin, this large coin on the wall in front of you, and it opened out like a flower with petals opening round like this (hand

gestures imitate the opening of a flower), and so there was this King person dressed in white feathers - and gold - and all these people in Chichester, and this (the coin) was just going to open like that (imitating flower opening), and I remember, it's like a thousand people going (gasps), wow. And it had been very carefully handled, there had been no pre-publicity, no pictures, nothing, this was an absolute surprise. And these people, no one would have ever been as surprised as they were, and all this breath went (gasps). That was just, amazing, you've got 'em, you've got 'em! And (pause) on tour in Venice, with As You Like It, the stage manager spins around to ask somebody a question just as we coming onto the final sequence of the show. The final sequence of the show involved various things flying up and down, all kinds of things happening, and some lighting changes, and there was one spotlight on the middle of the stage for the actor giving the final speech. As he spun round he managed to pull the socket of his headset out of the wall, so he was incommunicado, so the man finishes his speech, nothing happens the light stays there, things are still flying up and down, the musicians are still playing the same twelve bar thing, (mimics violin playing) twelve bars, twelve bars, twelve bars like this, and the entire National Theatre company try and cram into one spotlight to take their curtain call. And by this time, everyone is in tears! (laughs) And you just think, oh there's nothing you can do! It's pitch black, you can't find a socket to plug it back it back into the wall, and they've run out of words to say!(laughs)

FS: So what happened after that then?!

JA: Well, luckily they could slink off into the darkness, so they slunk off into the darkness, and eventually they managed the get the message to drop the curtain, and then when the curtain came down the guy on the lights realised he had to turn on the house lights. I mean it was just one of those things that you realise, there was so much going on and he had just lost control of all of it. And because the musicians were told to keep on playing, they just kept on playing, no matter what was going to happen they had to keep on playing, because they were told to keep on playing until they stopped! (laughs)

FS: Oh, that's funny.

JA: Oh there have been thousands, but let's be honest about it, in the main it goes well, in the main it works, that's the usual isn't it? I mean all the teaching I've done - I've taught at the Central School of Speech and Drama, is you say, this is not that amateur sort of thing you know, good luck, or break a leg or whatever, you do it, you know it's going to work, you've rehearsed it, it's got to work, it will work, and that's how we make our living. That's how we make our living.

FS: That's great, thank you very much Joe for your time.

JA: Thank you.

FS: Thank you.