

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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John De Lannoy – interview transcript

Interviewer: Charlotte Chelsom Pill

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Stage Manager and Director. Peter Bridge; George Formby; Bruce Forsyth; foreign touring; Grand Theatre, Halifax; An Ideal Husband; Emile Littler; pantomime; Ian Paul; rehearsals; repertory; scenery; stage management; Stephen D; John V. Trevor; twice-nightly shows; touring; Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford.

CCP: OK, this is Charlotte Chelsom Pill with John De Lannoy on the interview. Now, firstly how did you get into the career?

JDL: Well, I came out of the army after seven years during the war with no qualifications of any kind at all. But my hobby before the war was largely in stage management of amateur shows. I didn't want to waste time or money in training, and go into a new profession. So I tried to make a start and turn my previous interest into my profession. And to try and get that started I put an advertisement in the 'personal' column of The Times saying 'Major retired. Now demobilised. Interested in theatre with hard work, would like to become Stage Manager West End'. And I got one reply.

CCP: And who was that reply from? What did they ask you to do?

JDL: Well it was a man called John V. Trevor who had been doing one-man editions of Shakespeare and a couple of modern plays, round the troops abroad during the war. And CEMA – Council for Encouragement of Music and the Arts, which was the forerunner of the Arts Council – wanted, just after the war, to provide drama to outlying places - villages and schools and so on - which hadn't the facilities, just after the war. So I was engaged by John V. Trevor and this one-man show as Stage Manager and driver of a very ancient ambulance which took all his props. And we went round for two years doing one-night stands in 179 different locations, from Lands End to John O'Groats, literally.

CCP: Wow!

JDL: Schools, village halls, little theatres - all over the place. And it was very hard work, but one was learning the troubles that there could be. I had to do his lighting for him, but he just did the drama. So that went on until, as I say, we'd done two years of that. And I thought I'd had enough and had learnt all I could that way.

CCP: Absolutely. So you'd consider that a better training than, say, going to a theatre school or...?

JDL: Well, I think it knocked a lot of the, sort of, romance out of it for me, and made a practical demonstration of what one was going to be up against.

CCP: Absolutely, so...

JDL: So the next bit... I managed to get a job as a Stage Manager of a twice-nightly weekly repertory company in Barrow-in-Furness.

CCP: Oh right.

JDL: A lovely little old theatre. And I was there for a year and we did a new play every week, twice nightly. And when you were playing one you were rehearsing the other.

CCP: Good gracious!

JDL: And it was a great challenge and all sorts of funny things happened, including casualties and people being ill. And as Stage Manager, very often I had to go on as though I was an understudy, which convinced me that I wasn't a good actor! And I didn't think I wanted to be anyway, I wanted to be in the stage management side. And so that lasted for a year, and by the end of that year I'd been made producer, or what we now call 'director'. I think the thing was that I'd got experience, and because of my army career I was used to handling lots of people and making them do what one wanted them to do. And so I became a director. We then moved on for another year at the lovely Theatre Royal, Leicester – which has now been pulled down – and another year of twice-nightly weekly repertory. Then again down in Manchester at the Playhouse Theatre in Hulme. And they did another year there, twice nightly, weekly repertory. And that was back to back with the big variety house in Hulme, Manchester. So on it went, and by the end of that time I'd done I think 130-something weeks of twice-nightly weekly repertory...

CCP: Twice-nightly.

JDL: ...and if there were any accidents that could happen in the theatre, I'd experienced them!

CCP: Can you give me any kind of example of what you mean? Some disastrous event I suppose...?

JDL: Well, I mean one disaster was... we were doing a play called Mr Bolfry, and the fellow playing the lead suddenly disappeared – literally on the opening day!

CCP: For no apparent reason, he wasn't there?

JDL: For no apparent reason, he just disappeared.

CCP: Oh, right.

JDL: And this was up in Barrow-in-Furness. And somebody had to take the part. And it happened to be me. So I had to play the part in Mr Bolfry, again hiding the script behind bits of furniture and vases and so on. And that sort of thing was apt to happen. Anyway eventually I thought, 'This has got to stop. I've learned enough about the problems of twice-nightly weekly repertory. I must get once-nightly, on a slightly higher level'. So I decided to take over the Theatre Royal, Aldershot, which was fairly near my home. And a partner and I ran it for a year with weekly, once-nightly productions based on the idea that every six weeks we would try and find a new play. And also alternate bringing in well known stars to join our company for a week's production. And we had Jean Kent, we had Ralph Lynn, we had various big stars coming in just for the week to join our company...

CCP: Fantastic! Brilliant!

JDL: ...which sort of led one a little bit further up the ladder.

CCP: Right, can you tell me what year that was in roughly?

JDL: That was in... now wait a minute, let me double check this. This was Aldershot... sorry I'll get it in a minute.

CCP: It's not a problem.

JDL: It was '52 I think. Yes '52. And then as a result of that, we did the year at Aldershot and then I got a reputation in the theatre for being able to put together companies - as I had done in Aldershot - for seasons perhaps of six months. And put on a season of plays, engage the artists for it and it was a complete unit in itself.

Now, one of the places that I did this was at the Grand Theatre in Halifax, which was run by a committee whose object was just to keep the theatre open with entertainment of some sort for the people of Halifax. And the president of the society was Eric Portman, the great actor Eric Portman. And his brother was the sort of secretary on the spot. So I had a six-month contract, engaged a group of artists, a scene designer, carpenter, the whole lot, into the Grand Theatre, Halifax. We played for three weeks and business was building up quite nicely. We had a meeting of the Society in the

theatre after the show, on a Thursday I think it was. Absolutely packed and full of applause and you know, excitement after the show and, 'Yes, we must keep this place open'. And the following morning I went in – because it was Friday and what we know as 'Treasury', paying the artists – and of course the roof had fallen in.

CCP: Oh good gracious! Was that a result of a storm or...?

JDL: It was just a very old building...

CCP: I see.

JDL: ...and the roof had fallen in. If it had happened the night before, when we were full, I shudder to think what would have happened. Anyway it finished that season very quickly indeed after three weeks instead of six months.

CCP: Oh, what a shame!

JDL: So there I was up in Halifax, no job, paid up the company from our receipts and that was that, finish. So I thought, 'Oh. Now what?'. Well, I rang up a man called Ian Paul in London, who was General Manager for Emile Littler. Now Emile Littler and his brother Prince Littler were great big people in the West End theatre. And Ian happened to be a friend of mine and I said, 'Ian, I'm in a terrible mess, what am I going to do?'. 'Ah, now wait a minute.' he said, and 'Can you get down to London tomorrow?' I said, 'Yes, easily.' He said, 'Right, 12 o'clock on that day, go to the stage door of the Cambridge Theatre, ask for Mr Tomlin and do what he tells you.' And I... well I don't know what this is all about.

Anyway, I did exactly what I was told. And this fellow, Fred Tomlin, nice chap, said, 'Oh right, come with me.' and shoved a script in my hand with a page turned back. I didn't know what it was; it'd got no title or anything. It was just... there was this script. He said, 'Right' he said, 'I'll cue you.' And so down we went on to the stage – completely black auditorium – and sort of two or three lines of this and sort of thought, 'Oh it's a North Country comedy.' So I turned on my best Yorkshire accent you see, and got one sort of little titter from the blackness in the front, and then said, 'Thank you. Go down to the office.' So I said, 'Oh right.' So I said to Fred Tomlin, 'What, what, what...?'. He said, 'Down St Martin's Lane.' He said, 'Ian is there' - my friend – 'he's there, he'll tell you.'

So I trundled down to St Martin's Lane, to the office and there's Ian. He said, 'You've got the job.' I said, 'But what is the job, I don't know?'. He said, 'Oh it's to understudy George Formby.' I said, 'But I don't play the guitar, you know, the ukelele.' which is his great thing. He said, 'You know...' he said, 'it's all right, he doesn't play it in this thing. It's a nice little family comedy and it's going on tour, and you can be Stage Manager, but you'll have to understudy George just in case, you see.', so, 'All right' I said. So off we go and we do, oh, about six or seven weeks. And it was Mrs Formby... you probably don't know the story. But Mrs Formby was a very, very ferocious lady. And...

CCP: Oh dear!

JDL: ...she was terribly jealous of George and kept an eye on... you know, would George get off with any of the younger members of the company. And anyway she... they were very good though, she and George were... gave me a very good time, and round we went with this show. Well, as a result of that, Emile Littler - who was then producing huge pantomimes every Christmas - said, 'I'd like you to be Stage Manager to a new pantomime which we're opening at the Ardwick Hippodrome - huge theatre, now no longer exists actually - in Manchester, with a cast of Tommy Cooper, de de de de de... And so off we went. And of course in those days pantomimes ran pretty long time. So I learned how to direct a pantomime because I watched this very clever director putting it all together. And the orchestra and scenery and all the rest of it.

The following year, and the following four years after that, I was asked to direct this same pantomime with different cast, different stars in different cities around the country.

CCP: Oh really, which pantomime was this?

JDL: This was Puss in Boots.

CCP: I see.

JDL: And so I had Tommy Cooper first, Bruce Forsyth...

CCP: Wow!

JDL: ...Jimmy Edwards, Tommy Cooper again, and Tommy Trinder in five different Christmas things.

CCP: Gracious, that must have been fantastic working with such big stars!

JDL: Oh it was very exciting because you literally had to see the scenery in, see it built. About four or five days' rehearsal was all you got.

CCP: For the whole pantomime?

JDL: Yes, and put the whole thing together with the orchestra and...

CCP: Is that building the sets, everything, that was all took five days?

JDL: Yes.

CCP: Fantastic!

JDL: It was a great challenge.

CCP: What period was this in?

JDL: Well this started in... now let me just get the dates right. It started in '56. That's right, it was '56,'57, '58, '59... '59, '60 was the last... yes the last one was '60 which was Tommy Trinder at the Golders Green Hippodrome.

CCP: Right, what was it like working with such huge stars? I mean, were they professionals, were they slightly hard to direct perhaps?

JDL: They were... I found them very professional. I mean of all of them, the one I admired most really was Bruce Forsyth. He was then doing Sunday Night at the London Palladium as well as rehearsing with us. And the great thing with Bruce was that he could link up scenes in pantomime which tend to get a bit split up and the story line tends to get a bit bent. Because there are so many variety people in them, you know, with their speciality, and they wanted to sort of find an excuse to use their speciality as the character, and it doesn't always link up very well. But Bruce being a great dancer, a great singer and a great comedian, always could help link them together. And he was a joy to work with. But they were all... they were all great fun.

CCP: Yes, I can imagine.

JDL: Dear old Tommy Cooper, who was sort of a very sad man. You sort of couldn't quite get in touch with him. Jimmy Edwards, well there was always Jimmy Edwards booming all over the place. And Tommy Trinder, the sort of original cockney, lovely man.

CCP: Right, and what was your role in this? Was this management again?

JDL: Well I directed, put it all together and then stayed with it as manager. Yes, 'til the end of the run.

CCP: OK, fantastic! Where did you go after that?

JDL: Well after that what did I do? Let me think. Oh yes, after that... oh yes I was asked by Peter Saunders – who was Mr Mousetrap, the man that put on the original production of The Mousetrap, and was eventually knighted. Well we know he died not very long... well a few years ago. Anyway Peter Saunders got in touch with me and said,

'I've got a new play opening in Bath, with Thora Hird and Ronald Shiner called You Prove It, would you like to stage manage it and bring it into London for me?'. So I said, 'Yes, love the idea.' So down to Bath I went and rehearsals were wonderful with dear Thora who was a great joy – lovely person.

CCP: Yes. How long was the rehearsal period for this?

JDL: That was... I think we did three weeks, yes.

CCP: And that was an average amount of time for...?

JDL: That was... for that sort of play. It was a pretty simple little play. Anyway we did our week at Theatre Royal, Bath and then up to the St Martin's Theatre in London. And we got a pretty poor press. It didn't really work very well.

CCP: Oh dear.

JDL: So he had to put up the notice. He gave me the written notice and I stuck it on the board you know, a fortnight's notice, finish. So I'd just done that, I'd just literally stuck this on the board and of course it's a secret to... everybody in the theatre knows, but nobody else knows that the show's coming off. And suddenly the stage door keeper said, 'Oh there's a phone call for you.' So I said, 'Oh yes.' So, 'Yes, who's that?'. He said, 'My name is Peter Bridge, you've never heard of me?'. I said, 'No I haven't.' So he said, 'Well, you're finishing aren't you?'. So I said, 'What do you mean?'. I said, 'Well...' he said, 'You've put the notice up haven't you?'. 'Oh,' I said, 'How did you know that? I've only just done it'. 'Oh,' he said, 'yes, well, you see Peter Saunders is a great friend and I'm putting a new show into St Martin's Theatre to follow this show of yours that's coming off, and I want a Stage Manager. Would you take over?'.

CCP: Fantastic!

JDL: So I said, 'Well what is it?'. He said, 'It's a play called Guilty Party, with a pretty distinguished cast, Donald Sinden and so forth and so on.' So I said, 'Well that's very good of you. Yes!'. So straight into another job! So that ran for a pretty long time, but before it finished its run Peter Bridge said to me, 'Look here, I'm putting on quite a lot of shows, I've started as a West End manager. I'm going to put on quite a lot of plays, but I need a Production Manager. And I think, judging by what you've done, you could probably do it for me.' So I said, 'Well let's try anyway and see what happens.'

CCP: So this was veering off slightly from what you'd done before? This was...?

JDL: Well, this was going one stage up the ladder.

CCP: I see.

JDL: I mean, before I was looking after the production which existed, you know from the rehearsal period onwards. And looking after it every day and keeping the people happy and making sure the scenery didn't fall down and that sort of thing. But this was literally starting a new production. Peter would come along with a script and he'd say, 'Right, this is the new play. I have got a director, name of...' so and so, and so and so. I then had to find the staff, stage management, the scene builders to build from the designers work, find rehearsal rooms, everything that concerned with actually putting the thing together.

CCP: How was it that you came across these actors? Just auditioning or was it people that you had worked with previously or...?

JDL: The... how did I come across...?

CCP: The actors that you employed?

JDL: Well I didn't cast the play, Peter used to do that himself.

CCP: I see.

JDL: I would probably find some of the smaller part people. But the main big stars, big names - and Peter was a great one on big names - he would find, as part of the deal so to speak. And I then had, as I say, the responsibility of putting it all together, and then if it went on a pre-London tour - which it probably did - booked the theatres and take it round, nurse it until it was ready to come into London.

CCP: I see.

JDL: And during the time, the ten years I was with Peter Bridge, we actually put on 47 plays in the West End which was some! And we at one time had six running simultaneously. So we would get...

CCP: That must have been a lot of hard work.

JDL: Pretty busy, yes.

CCP: Yes, I can imagine. So what kind of plays were you doing with him? Were they modern plays or...?

JDL: Well we did quite a lot of new ones and quite a lot of revivals. The one that was interesting because it involved me with the Lord Chamberlain was a play [which] in fact was already in existence. We went over to Ireland to see it and brought it over. And it was by James Joyce, it was Stephen D and it was taken from a novel which he wrote called Stephen Dedalus and it was put on in Ireland. And as I say we had to get permission from the Lord Chamberlain for certain lines – which being James Joyce were rather blasphemous – which at that time the censor would not allow. But we got round it somehow or other you know and...

CCP: So were you having to cut lines?

JDL: Well, amend a word here and there. Twist it around a little bit. But the Lord Chamberlain was very helpful. They didn't want to block it, but they had to be careful not to allow certain things to happen.

CCP: Of course. What year was this?

JDL: This was '63.

CCP: I see, so it was after a few amendments had been made to the censorship scheme.

JDL: The censorship stopped five years later in '68.

CCP: Right, but with plays such as A Taste of Honey, which was '58...

JDL: Oh yes, well, that was sort of slipped through the net. But, I mean, the Lord Chamberlain was in full control, up 'til '68.

CCP: I see, I see.

JDL: And the wonderful thing about Stephen D was with these Irish people we brought over – none of whom had ever performed in England before – and now, and subsequently they were great names in the English theatre and film: Norman Rodway, Kevin Flood, Gerard Healy, T P McKenna, Derry Power. All became great names in the English theatre, and we brought them over which was lovely.

CCP: Of course. You must be very proud of having been involved in something like that?

CCP: Oh my goodness!

JDL: Which they did, very good. Along came these carpenters, cut the scenery so that it could be hinged and put back. Got it on the aeroplane, off we went. And opened at the O'Keefe in Toronto, and did our fortnight there. Came back to Birmingham, continued our tour, into the Strand, opened as arranged.

CCP: What was it like portraying a British play for an international audience? Was as equally well received?

JDL: Well, oh yes. Yes, because it was a pretty strong drama, and they loved it. Yes, it went very well.

CCP: Fantastic, that's great!

JDL: So that was just one that we took abroad. I eventually took about 15 over to Toronto, one after the other. We'd pick them up in London – not necessarily our productions – pick them up, their London run finished on the Saturday, load them up, open in Toronto on Wednesday.

CCP: How was it decided which plays were taken abroad?

JDL: Well largely they were very keen to have anything we'd got with reasonable sized names in it, because they normally, in Toronto, got their plays from New York. But sometimes there was a big gap and there was nothing available. And so they'd ring us up and say, 'Can you do it in about three or four weeks time? Can you find me something?' And we would, and take it over.

CCP: Was it the same kind of scenario then, having to cut down the scenery, or did you find an alternative?

JDL: No, later we decided that we would have to make sure that our scenery was capable of being loaded. And of course the loading system gradually got more sophisticated anyway. They could take rather bigger things.

CCP: So that was quite unique then, the first time that you went over to Toronto to...

JDL: Yes, it was.

CCP: ...that wasn't a done thing?

JDL: No, no not at all.

CCP: Gracious! Wow! Just quickly what can you tell me about, say the rehearsal process, how involved were you in that?

JDL: The rehearsal process?

CCP: Yes.

JDL: Well, I would always be there at the rehearsals. You know, one found a hall, usually a room in a pub or something like that. You would take it for a couple or three weeks.

CCP: A room in a pub?

JDL: A room in a pub.

CCP: Really? As a place to...?

JDL: Yes, a lot of the rehearsal rooms were sort of the upstairs room in a pub.

CCP: Oh my goodness, I wasn't aware of that!

JDL: And you'd take that... you'd take a few props along, you know, to sort of stand in for the real props and get on with it there.

CCP: Really?

JDL: Oh yes.

CCP: And this was for plays that were performed in London and for big...

JDL: Oh yes.

CCP: ...with big names, they were rehearsed in a pub?

JDL: Oh yes, yes, yes.

CCP: Gracious, wow!

JDL: Yes, usually an old pub.

CCP: Right, and you were someone involved in that, you witnessed it.

JDL: Well I would be there as Stage Manager, and as Production Manager I would call round... not necessarily stay there all the time but just check with the then Stage Manager and the director, 'Everything alright, anything you want?' and there we were.

CCP: Fantastic. Let me see. What first attracted you to going into theatre? What was it... even before you'd joined the army, what was your attraction to acting?

JDL: Oh I think the fact that it's the escapism I think really. You know, getting outside oneself into another world and creating it, from production side, creating this new world that one was getting into.

CCP: And you found that even as Stage Manager, or Production Manager?

JDL: Oh very much so, yes. Oh yes, because you're very much part of the family that is putting it all together.

CCP: Right, so can you give me an example of this family atmosphere? Where did you find that the most...? I mean, what examples can you give me of... I don't know... the way that you'd eat together or live together or get involved in the whole putting together of a play?

JDL: Well that of course is more true in repertory probably, because they are all living on top of each other really. And you're, you know, week after week after week of working together, so you get that particular closeness... or did in the days of repertory. You don't get it quite so much now, because people are more independent and they just come in for the rehearsals. So you don't get quite the same sort of 'family' feeling that you used to get.

CCP: I see, but that's what attracted you firstly to theatre. And what in the end brought you back after the army to go into theatre again, it was the attraction of getting into another world almost?

JDL: That's right yes, yes. It really was just to get into another world and it couldn't have been a bigger change than from the army.

CCP: No, I can imagine. But you found that that training in the army was very beneficial.

JDL: Well, I think it... when it got me from being a Stage Manager to being a Producer, yes, because one's used in the army to having a gang of troops around one, who one's responsible for. One looked after them and got them to do what you wanted them to do.

CCP: So did you conduct yourself almost as a major? Were you... how do you view your techniques of managing?

JDL: Well it was very much the same thing; you know you had to be firm to be kind.

CCP: I see.

JDL: And you had to like people. I mean, that's the great thing, you had to like people and try to understand people. And above all if you're putting on a show and you're acting or you're directing a person in a character, your interest in personalities is very important.

CCP: Clearly, so that was very important when you talking about Tommy Cooper, you said he was a man that you couldn't quite get to grips with almost.

JDL: Yes, yes it's... I found that people – particularly in repertory – they want... they look for leadership to help them on to produce what's required of them in the play.

CCP: I see, and you felt that you were able to do that throughout your career?

JDL: I think I was able to do that, give them that bit of leadership, yes.

CCP: Fantastic! Have you got anything else that you'd like to add about your time in the period?

JDL: Not really, there's... I mean, there's just so much, but I don't think I missed out anything that really matters - I hope anyway!

CCP: No, I don't think so. I think we've covered everything.

JDL: Good.

CCP: Thank you so much.

JDL: Great pleasure.