

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Glenda Jackson – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Ben Sneddon**

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Actress. Arts funding; Peter Brook; censorship; Equity; Look Back in Anger; The Marat/Sade; new writing; Laurence Olivier; politics in theatre; RADA; repertory; RSC; Workers Revolutionary Party.

BS: This is an interview with Glenda Jackson, MP, for the British Library Theatre Archive. Thank you for agreeing to do the interview. If I could start off just by asking you, what sort of thing attracted you to being involved in theatre?

GJ: Well, a friend of mine was a member of a local Amateur Dramatics and she said, 'Come along, it's fun', so I went along and somebody said - as I'm sure someone always does - 'You should do this professionally'. So I was certainly somewhat disenchanted with my life at that time - I was working in Boot's Cash Chemist, had been for two years, and felt there's certainly more that life can offer and I had more to offer life than was being demanded of me. So I wrote to the only drama school I'd ever heard of, which was the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, and I had to have a scholarship as there was no money to pay for the fees, and that meant I had to do two auditions, and they wrote to me and said, 'If we'd had a scholarship, you'd have got it, but we haven't got one for this term.'. So then I think I wrote and sent a copy of that letter to my local education authority - which was Cheshire - and they paid my fees for the full two years, and that was in the golden days when you actually got your fees paid for.

BS: And what was it like studying at RADA?

GJ: Well, I had nothing with which to compare it. I mean, I think I was probably extremely blinkered, I mean, I went and I did work and I went to as many theatrical productions as I could afford and I was probably highly critical of everything I saw - with the possible exception of the Chinese National Theatre which I thought was absolutely fantastic - and it was only really when I'd left, many years later, that I discovered what a hot-bed of personal jealousies and dramams was going on during my years. I knew nothing about that at all. I was told by John Fernald, who'd taken over as director of the school the first term I was there, 'not to expect to work before I was forty because I was a character actress', and that was a pretty good assessment of the British theatre as it was at that time. but then of course John Osborne came along and wrote Look Back in Anger and the whole of British Theatre changed, but that was quite a long way down the line before I began to get a crack at decent parts.

BS: Were you very atypical of the sort of person who would go to RADA or was it a mix?

GJ: No. It was... I think I hit it when it was moving quite dramatically from being a finishing school for young ladies - which is essentially what it had become - to a much more (and this was I think Fernald's approach) a more - much more - practically based college for people who wanted to work in the theatre. It wasn't exclusively actors who were there of course, they did stage management courses and things like that, but I think our year was probably the first time in quite a long time you'd heard regional accents and where it wasn't the overriding priority of the teaching staff to knock those accents out completely.

BS: Where did you go from RADA? Did you go straight into London theatre?

GJ: Good heavens no! Straight after RADA I think I went to Watford and I was in rep in Watford. No, I don't think that was my first job, I think my first job was in rep out in... oh gosh, beyond Barking on the District Line, I think it begins with M. Anyway, I did a couple of plays there, I did a couple of plays at Worthing Rep, but I was not a member of the permanent company. Then I did get this job in Crewe where we opened this theatre that had been dark for a considerable period of time. One of the coldest winters I think we had, and I think our opening production was Summer of the Seventeenth Doll, and we were all in summer dresses and our breath was freezing on the air and we were saying, 'Ooh Pearl, it's so hot' and the audience were sat - they used to bring travelling blankets and hot water bottles to keep themselves warm! And I was 'Small Parts and ASM'-ing and then when that finished... what happened then? Then I went off on tour in a terrible play called A Girl Called Sadie in which I was again ASM and understudy and actually had to play for my, I mean, I went on - I think I was understudying everything - but I went on as Granny in a cotton wool wig at the age of 22! And I was fired from that as we used to play twice nightly and we were in Birmingham and I went to see a film, and it was a circular bus route and I got on a bus going the wrong way round the circle and hurtled into the stage door to hear my understudy uttering my first line, and I got fired for that - which was exactly right - but the director was also the author, and had the leading role and said I was the best Granny they'd ever had, so that gives you some idea of the standards of the company! And then I was out of work for a lot. I did bits at Worthing Rep, I did odd bits of television I think, and then I auditioned for - oh no, and then I did Alfie, I did Alfie in the West End. It started at the Mermaid and then we moved, I think, to the Duke of York's, and for a while I was in that. And I also did Dundee Rep for a time, which Tony Paige was directing. It was an incredible company, I mean Nicol Williamson, Edward Fox, Prunella Scales was there... [interruption] Also I did a stint at the Royal Court with the third production of The Kitchen I think. I can't remember chronologically how these things come out. Anyway, I think I was doing Alfie, and then I did an audition for what became known as The Theatre of Cruelty - Peter Brook - and I went along, and we were told to prepare a piece and I prepared a Dorothy Parker short story which I'd obviously edited down, and I was told to do that piece, but the situation was that I'd opened my front door, these two men came in, they put me in a straight-jacket and I had to use [inaudible], that was an interesting thing to do. And then I was asked to go back and do another audition, and these were more like group auditions and then I didn't hear anything again and then I was told, 'Yes, I was in that', what became known as The Theatre of Cruelty. There was 12 of us and we worked for three months on that, and

then we staged *The Theatre of Cruelty* at LAMDA where Brook made the playing area where the audience sat and we played where the audience was usually sat. And from that, he wanted to do a production of Genet's *The Screens*, and so there was a kind of break and then we all foregathered at the Donmar Warehouse and I think did the first half of *The Screens*, and then he got bored with it and again we had a break and we came back and he'd come up with Peter Weiss' *The Marat/Sade* and so those of us who'd been in the original 12 were now members of the Royal Shakespeare Company and that's what we did, we did the *Marat/Sade*.

BS: Right, do you have any recollections of the *Marat/Sade*?

GJ: Well, one of the very interesting things for me was that during the rehearsal period - which was very long and mostly improvisation, we did very little initial work on the text, it took a long time getting to the text - was that we all became... How can I put this? We were exploring the parameters of insanity and it was quite astonishing, I mean, we would all come in every day and we'd all bumped into at least 8 people who were mentally ill and they were always there, and it was just because of our heightened searching that we suddenly noticed these people.

BS: The *Marat/Sade*, being a German play – Artaud, and influenced by Brecht - what influence do you think European theatre had on British Theatre at the time?

GJ: Virtually none. I think the amazing thing about what Brook was doing was that he was definitely trying to break away from what he perceived as the stranglehold of the English theatre's reliance - almost exclusively - on text, on that kind of 'everything is in the word.'

BS: Yes.

GJ: And he was interested in movement and sound and gesture and that whole breaking down of those kind of parameters, and it really was like, you know, it was an oasis in the desert, it was just so extraordinary, you know, no one had made demands like that of us before, and it was just wonderful work to do.

BS: Going back to rep theatre. Was that a natural progression for most actors at the time, as they moved towards the West End?

GJ: No, there is no natural progression in the theatre, none whatever. It is still a vastly overcrowded profession, far too many people pursuing far too few jobs, and certainly at that time, the what – mid fifties? - there had been a time when every single town, city, had its rep theatre, even more than one rep theatre. I mean, I remember someone said he could work permanently in Manchester, starting out doing the three-weekly reps, then the two-weekly reps, then the weekly reps. They'd all gone and the kind of... yes they'd just gone, that sort of theatre was just no longer there.

BS: You mentioned Osborne and the Angry Young Men, did you notice a sea-change in the theatre?

GJ: Oh yes, hugely. I mean, when I'd left drama school the bulk of work in reps even then - apart from the kind of set texts, whatever Shakespeare was being done that year, if you could afford to stage it - was what were the French's Acting Editions, which had come from the West End, and they were very clear that there was the male and female lead, the male and female juvenile lead, and the male and female character lead, and the male and female juvenile character lead, and if you didn't fit into any of those boxes then you didn't work.

BS: Going on from there, the Angry Young Men were drawn out by the critics, especially Hobson and Tynan. What sort of relationship did you have with the critics, did you read your reviews?

GJ: I... I suppose I must have done, but you know, critics don't go to... well, you know the local papers go to the local reps and things, but no, I think I learnt early on to stop reading the critics, because they make you self-conscious in the wrong way.

BS: If we could move on to politics. What was - I suppose, were you a member of Equity...?

GJ: You had to be.

BS: Oh, of course.

GJ: You couldn't work if you weren't a member of Equity you know.

BS: Did you get involved in the politics?

GJ: Yes I did, I'm trying to think what year it was. There was an attempt to take over the Equity Council by the Workers' Revolutionary Party - the Redgraves - and I was asked to put myself up for the Council and I did... I don't know if it was a 3 or a 6 month stint.

BS: More generally, do you think the theatre reacted to the politics of the time?

GJ: Oh very much so, of course yes.

BS: What sort of...

GJ: Politics of the time was generally influential if there was a subsidised theatre at all, and you know, it was Labour governments who made something like a National Theatre possible. It was Jenny Lee - the great Arts Minister - who banged on about the accessibility of the arts, of which the performing arts was central point. But if you're saying to me whether theatre reflected party politics, I'm not really in a position to say yea or nay, but certainly theatres like the Royal Court... I can't think of another theatre now, but there were more than that, and certainly regionally those theatres may not have been party political, or necessarily engaged in the politics of their country, but they had a very clear view that the theatre had to be better than it was.

BS: Did you have any involvement with the agit-prop theatre? Did you see...

GJ: No.

BS: It was in 1968 with a Labour government bringing in the Theatres Act with the end of the Lord Chamberlain's office, did you feel a change then? Or do you think maybe the plays before 1968 were themselves so aware of censorship...

GJ: Well you had to be so aware of censorship. I mean, I remember when we were doing *US*, which was the play about Vietnam - about the Vietnam War actually - the Lord Chamberlain had to see everything, and it was right that it went, not least because censorship is wrong, but because it was ridiculous, simply ridiculous.

BS: Was there a marked change from 1968?

GJ: Well you can't say a marked change - anything that is moving to bring about that kind of change doesn't happen by one act or one strand. There was a kind of general feeling, there was a movement, not just in theatre but in the cultural/intellectual life of the country as a whole that this was simply an anathema, it was absurd. I mean, I think in a way the thing that drove it more than anything was the Lady Chatterley's trial which, I mean, you know, just made it so ludicrous.

BS: You talked about theatre funding, I mean it's obviously still an issue today, the lack of theatre funding even this year... Do you think... I mean, was funding always an issue, especially in the starting days of...

GJ: Well funding... Not on the level of amounts, but on the principle that theatre has a vital and valid part to play in a society which claims to be both cultivated and socially aware, so that the national cake - there should be part of that national cake which is for the theatre (you can spread it for the arts in general, but my interest was for the theatre). And that is an argument we are still having to make, we had an adjournment debate a couple of weeks ago here and I stood up and said, my sense of *deja-vu*, I seem all my adult life to have been making the same argument, that the theatre is valuable, valid, that there should be subsidy for it, and you know when times are good the theatre

should get its fair share and when times are bad, theatre had to take its cuts along with everybody else.

BS: Do you think there is the political will to keep state funding up, to keep funding the theatre, or do you think eventually it will decline further?

GJ: No, I don't think it will decline further, but I think where there is a reluctance to accept the central principle is less in central government - Whitehall government - it's still regarded as a frill by far too many local authorities.

BS: In London there are still theatres being closed...

GJ: Well, I'm not talking about commercial theatres. Commercial theatres sink or swim depending on how well they do. But if you are talking about subsidised theatre, that has to be a theatre which can afford to take risks, where it doesn't... it isn't precluded to show a profit at the end of every week.

BS: Sure. I mean, do you have any recollections of the National Theatre, on the South Bank, were you in any way involved?

GJ: I was never employed by the National Theatre, I went once to meet Laurence Olivier... It was a very fascinating experience, they were still in Portacabins at the back of the Old Vic - the National hadn't opened - and I was on time and he was late and his Portacabin had lots of glass fronted bookshelves and there were photographs on his desk of his family. And this small man came in, wearing striped trousers and a monacle - you know not a tails one - and I must be honest I didn't recognise him! He came in and he made Laurence Olivier in all the reflective surfaces, it's one of the most fascinating things I'd ever seen in my life, he just built himself in all these reflecting surfaces, it's amazing. [pause] But I didn't get the job.

BS: [inaudible]

GJ: As I say, The Marat/Sade was a big thing, the RSC taking over the Aldwych as well so we were commuting between Stratford and London, and of course the big thing was the US Vietnam where the fourth wall was broken down, and people did get up off their seats and climb up on the stage and take the lighter out of Bob Lloyd's hand so he couldn't set fire to the butterflies and things like that, and an audience which sat discussing what they'd seen long after the actors had gone home, so those kind of things, but [pause] And there was a spurt of new writing - we're in desperate need of new writers at the moment.

BS: With the anti-Vietnam thing, it was in the States, part of the New Left was more of an activist-based thing and in Britain the New Left was more of a theory-based thing, but to what extent...?

GJ: Oh I don't think that's true at all, we had our marches - remember the riots in front of the US Embassy? No, I don't think that's true, I mean it was the only topic of conversation or debate or concern really.

BS: You mention the Workers' Revolutionary Party involved in Equity. To what extent was the far left involving itself in the theatre?

GJ: I'm in no position to know. I mean, everyone admired Vanessa hugely and thought she was completely mad, she was constantly raising money for it and saying they were going to be driven underground and they were going to be a proscribed organisation, but I think - I don't know if it still is, I mean, I haven't been to an Equity meeting in decades - but the theatre is a curiously apolitical organisation. I mean, people have... well, you can meet completely opposing political views in the theatre as they can anywhere else, but it's essentially I think apolitical... except we did do good things, like refusing to work in South Africa under apartheid and things like that.

BS: Thank you very much.