

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Lord Brian Rix – interview transcript

Interviewer: Kate Harris

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Actor-manager, Chairman of Drama at the Arts Council (1986-1993); Aldwych Farces; The Arts Council; audiences; censorship; John Chapman; Ray Cooney; early television; The English Stage Company; Equity; farce; Festival of Britain; Feydeau; Tony Hilton; holiday pay; Kenneth Horne (playwright); Philip Levene; Love in a Mist; Cecil Madden; Colin Morris; One for the Pot; Michael Pertwee; Reluctant Heroes; Six of Rix; Vernon Sylvaire; Whitehall Theatre; Donald Wolfitt.

Sections in square brackets [] mark the points where the interviewee has retrospectively corrected errors in accuracy. A few short phrases in the recording have been taken out of the transcript by the interviewee to ease the flow and sense of the transcript.

KH: This is an interview on the 16th April, with Lord Rix [Brian Rix, one time actor-manager]. Can I just confirm that I've got your permission to put this interview into the British Library Sound Archive?

BR: You have my full permission.

KH: Excellent. Can I begin by asking you how you started your professional career in the theatre?

BR: Yes, it began because my mother was a very keen producer of amateur productions. She ran the local operatic society. She ran the local amateur dramatics society in Hornsea, up in Yorkshire. And she did a great deal for the church; she did a great deal for local charities. The vicar in Hornsea ran about six churches around the area and had a lot of curates who ran those, and so she used to take her variety shows in those days around the little village parish halls, and I obviously used to go along to watch them. And I also got involved in school plays. And eventually she started to do bigger productions: Passion plays and D'Oyly Carte Operas. And because of that I became involved in stage management. And I used to put on all the music and that sort of thing – particularly in the Passion plays – all the sad music we played. And I fell in love with the theatre, in an amateur way.

Well the war came, and I'd done a great deal of plays for, a) my mother, and b) at school. When I was seventeen I volunteered for [RAF] aircrew. I was tested as a pilot navigator bomb aimer – for training, but because I was slightly young at the time, they gave me deferred service which meant I had ten months with nothing to do. It wasn't

like nowadays where you could go on to University or something like that - if you were going into the Air Force, you were going into the Air Force. My sister Sheila had been trained at Stratford on Avon - who had a dramatic school then - and from there, she went to join Donald Wolfit's Company, and I knew Don Wolfit because of that. And he was playing in Hull that week, and I suddenly thought [how] marvellous it would be to become an actor. So I went round and knocked on his dressing room door, and said I'd got ten months deferred service. And I practically only had to say that and I was accepted, because young actors were at a premium of course. And I went on stage and I auditioned for him - very badly! - 'Oh what a rogue and peasant slave am I' from Hamlet, and a poem which I'd recited for my mother the previous Sunday - at the Floral Hall, Hornsea - called "Bessie's Boil", which was about a woman with a boil on her bottom who did not like to go to hospital: 'Says I to my Missis: "Ba goom, lass! there's summat I see, on tha mind...' etc, etc. 'And she said, You are right, Sam, It's something, it 'appens it's on me be'ind' and so it went on. And I did these two bits for him, and I got a three pound a week contract to play 'as cast' and Assistant Stage Manager. So I joined Wolfit for his autumn tour of King Lear, Hamlet, Twelfth Night and Midsummer Night's Dream, and I had two good parts: I played Snout in Midsummer Night's Dream, which was fun, and I played Sebastian in Twelfth Night, which I hated because I was playing Rosalind Iden's double and I couldn't be more unlike Rosalind Iden if I tried - she was blonde, wide face, wide cheekbones, snub nose and I was very dark and I've a long face and a hook nose and so on! It was absolutely hopeless, but I did my best. And I played at the St James's theatre at Christmas [1942], in King Lear and Sebastian in Twelfth Night. So I was playing in the West End within six months.

My deferment was added to, so I [left] Wolfit after an ENSA tour - because he had to do ENSA tours in those days - of Twelfth Night, which was pretty grim. The troops didn't really take to it in a [big] way. And I went to the White Rose Players at Harrogate, which was a very good rep company. And there I was for nearly 18 months because the RAF simply didn't want me. And I played everything there; you know, from... the first part I played was a Chinaman for God's sake in The Letter, by Somerset Maugham. And then I went on and I played old men and young men and juveniles and neurotics, oh it was extraordinary. All the popular plays of the time. And from there I went into the Air Force.

And eventually I came out - in 1947 - I realised that life was going to be different from the war, because all the young actors, like Dickie Attenborough and Jack Watling had got out. They were already working - most of them being in forces entertainment anyway and never really stopped working, and Dickie certainly hadn't because he was filming as well. And so I decided to start my own company. And I borrowed money from my father and my uncle who were ship owners, I borrowed a thousand quid and I started my own rep company. Of course I hadn't got a company, and I hadn't got a theatre, and I wrote round to everybody saying I'd got the best company in the country, which was rubbish because all I had was a letterhead! [Laughs]. But eventually Ilkley believed me and I went to the Kings Hall, Ilkley and I opened on Easter Monday, 1948 with a company who I'd recruited only about three weeks before in London - and we'd had one week's rehearsal. And the first night was an absolute disaster!

KH: What were you putting on?

BR: Well what happened was that we put in everything new that we could. A thousand quid, that went a long way in those days. We put in new dimmers and the lighting was better and so on. The scenery was good, and furniture with loose covers which could

change every week for repertory and so on. And the only thing we hadn't done was to check that the lines of the curtains, which were the old fashioned curtains which swagged up to the proscenium arch. The curtain went up on this first night, with all the Council of Ilkley in front and all the free seats which they'd given away to their mates. Round of applause. Easter Monday, brand new company etc, and there was a group of actors round a table in an office in the middle of the stage. And immediately... the rope on the right hand side... the audience left curtain – which was a 100 years old, was rotten and parted – and the curtain came down!

KH: Oh no!

BR: And so half the audience could see only the actors on the middle of the stage. And there was chaos. We should have blacked out, apologised, repaired the damages and started again, but we didn't. Stage director went up into the flies – filthy flies, a hundred years of filth there – lowered a rope with which a stage hand came on and started to tie it. This is all in front of the audience. And the actors realised they couldn't be seen, so they solemnly pushed the desk over to the left hand side of the stage – actors left, the actual prompt corner as it would be in a normal theatre – and I had to make an entrance with a door that opened on stage, so I couldn't get on because the door kept hitting the desk. So I walked round to the window at the back and I climbed in... I got a huge laugh of course and a huge round of applause because I think they were applauding my bravery for the play was *Nothing but the Truth* which is a New York farce and the first act takes place in a New York skyscraper, 44 floors up! [Laughs] And the curtains slowly went up again. And the actors pushed the table back to the middle, and we went on. So that really was my first night. I mean, it was as farcical as that. Well, luckily *Nothing but the Truth* is a farce, so the audience laughed and laughed and it became a sort of extraordinary myth or story that emanated from that. Well Ilkley was pretty disastrous, because there isn't the population there, and in the old days - before me - it used to split weeks, that meant you take a play... a tour in for three days that's all. That's all it could do. So you could see that running a weekly rep was very difficult.

So I looked for somewhere else to go and I found a place at Bridlington, The Spa Theatre [alongside the Royal Hall], which was a lovely little theatre in Bridlington, which is normally only open in the summer. But they said they'd open it for me in the winter. They have a good summer season really, but we opened there in November. And of course the sea was so rough that we couldn't open in the Spa Theatre, we were moved to the Pavilion Theatre, which is a huge great variety hall – totally unsuited for a small rep company – in the middle of the town because the water was coming into the Spa Theatre. And we ran there, and luckily we did a pantomime which made us a bit of money. And then in 1949 Harry Hanson very kindly gave up his repertory season in the summer to allow me to continue. And I continued in the rep, and during '49 I started another one down in Margate – The Theatre Royal, Margate – met my wife, auditioned her for Margate but sent her to Bridlington where I was going to be, and married her six months later... Elspet.

BR: During that summer I wrote for a play - which I just saw in a list of plays because the title appealed to me - called *Reluctant Heroes*. I read it, and I thought it was the funniest play I'd ever read. Of course, it was absolutely up to date because it was all about conscripts and so on in the army. And everybody had been in the army or was being conscripted in the army... or the services. And I put it on for a week in Bridlington

and it did even better than *See How They Run*, which was saying something because *See How They Run* was the marker for everybody. And I was determined to bring it to London. And so in February of 1950, I cast it for a tour, Elspet, my wife, playing the woman's lead in it, me playing the gormless Gregory, Wally Patch playing the sergeant, Dermot Walsh playing Tone, Larry Noble playing Morgan the cockney soldier. Originally Colin Morris, who wrote it, had written five conscripts, one of whom was Welsh and that's why Morgan stayed on as a name, and I can't remember who the others were... and he called it *The Army of Preoccupation*. But then he re-wrote it and cut down the numbers to 11 in the cast and called it *Reluctant Heroes*. And we toured it and toured and toured it, but I was determined to get to the Whitehall Theatre, because the Whitehall had got *Worm's Eye View* on. And *Worm's Eye View* had been running for four years and - which is a play about the RAF in Blackpool, in digs in Blackpool. And I thought that was the ideal theatre to go to. Then I heard that H.J. Barlow who was a nuts and bolts manufacturer in the Midlands, was transferring the play from the Whitehall to the Comedy Theatre, because he'd fallen out with the Whitehall. So I wrote to him and said, 'Will you come and see the play, and could you come and see it in Birmingham, because I'd like to move into the Whitehall?' and he wrote back to say, 'I'll come and see the play, but I can't do more than recommend you to the Whitehall because I'm leaving'. And he came to see it and said, 'Gosh, it's funny!'. And he went back and told the manager of the Whitehall how funny it was. And luckily the manager of the Whitehall left him and stayed with the Whitehall. So they put in another little play called *The Dish Ran Away*, which was a terrible farce - got the worst notices you've ever seen all your life! - and were desperate: they suddenly realised they'd got a failure. And the manager said, 'Well, I've heard about a play called *Reluctant Heroes*, which Barlow said was very funny'. So they rang me up - or wrote to me, I can't remember which - and suggested they came to see it. I went down to London, picked him up, brought him back, and I found myself on the road to Leicester - we were actually playing Nottingham, and of course there were no motorways at that time. And I only arrived back in time for the matinée, about four minutes before the curtain went up with my wife Elspet in the car as well, and a huge dog, a Labrador [called Bastien] - which we'd got by then - plus the manager of the theatre, a fellow called Vincent Lawson, and he came and saw the matinée which was all right, for a matinee - five o'clock show, and there was enough audience to laugh. And he said, 'Gosh it's wonderful!' afterwards, 'It was very funny and we'd love you to come'. So I signed up to the Whitehall and I...

KH: That must have been really exciting to move to there.

BR: And that's how I got to the Whitehall, and opened there on September 12th 1950, having toured from February right through to September.

KH: Did the whole company move with you?

BR: The whole company moved with me, yes. And many of them stayed with me. I was at the Whitehall for 16 years, then I went to the Garrick Theatre on and off for nine years. Then I came back to the Whitehall again for my last year in the theatre. And *Reluctant Heroes* ran for four years. That was succeeded by *Dry Rot*, *Dry Rot* was succeeded by *Simple Spymen*, and *Simple Spymen* was succeeded by *One for the Pot*; *One for the Pot* was succeeded by *Chase Me Comrade*. I then wanted a break, I'd done

16 years on the trot. And I wanted to do [a repertoire of plays] so that I didn't have to play every night.

KH: This was at the Garrick when you went...

BR: No, this was at the Whitehall.

KH: This was at the Whitehall.

BR: ...but the Whitehall weren't very interested. So I engineered this play – a musical with Danny La Rue called *Come Spy with Me*, [that] went into the Whitehall, and I had the option to go back if I wanted to, but I wanted to go to a larger theatre, a larger stage, so that I could try my ideal repertoire. So I moved up to the Garrick and I had an interest still in the Whitehall because I was co-manager with Peter Bridge of *Come Spy with Me*. Eventually I opened my rep with *Stand By Your Bedouin*, *Uproar in the House* and *Let Sleeping Wives Lie*, but I didn't have enough money to publicise it properly. So people kept thinking the plays were on for just a short run. And although I did excerpts on telly – I did excerpts of all my plays on telly – people got confused and they didn't know what they were coming to see. Also, I changed the play on the wrong night: I changed the play on Saturday, which cost me the earth because I had to pay overtime to the staff. I should have changed on Thursdays of course to try and pick up audiences on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, change in the middle of the week, but I hadn't enough money to do that in the end, and so I had to do the best I could and I had to go back to one play. So I chose to do *Let Sleeping Wives Lie*, which had Elspet, my wife, and Leslie Crowther in it, plus Anna Dawson and Leo Franklyn, [and Andrew Sachs]... a lot of people - all my regulars - were in *Wives*. And the rest of them transferred back to the Whitehall where they did *Uproar in the House*. And *Stand By Your Bedouin* bit the dust and just went into storage and never saw the light of day again... although it's been published as *Bang, Bang Beirut*, which is rather appropriate – or inappropriate at the moment, so no wonder it's not done!

Anyway, *Let Sleeping Wives Lie* was a big success. I then took it on tour for a short time, I did some television then, and then I came back with *She's Done it Again*, which had the best notices of any play I've ever had. It's a re-write of a farce called *Nap Hand*, which Vernon Sylvaine wrote before the war, which was really about the Dionne Quins and Michael Pertwee adapted it for me. And it got fantastic notices, and yet it was the shortest run I ever had in the West End. It's extraordinary isn't it? I took it on tour, it made a lot of money on tour because it was a very, very funny play. I suppose because it was [based on] the Dionne Quins before the war, [it was dated, especially as in-vitro fertilisation was just around the corner].

KH: It wasn't topical.

BR: That's right. People thought of it as an old fashioned play I'm afraid, but it was very funny. So anyway there was a very successful tour, then I came back to the Garrick again with *Don't Just Lie There, Say Something*, which ran again for two or three years... with Alfred Marks playing the Minister and me playing the Junior Minister – he

played the Secretary of State and I played the [under secretary]. And he was a womaniser. And of course that was the first play that Joanna Lumley was ever in – all those years ago. And eventually we made a film of that. Made a film of a lot of them, but this was the only one I ever made in colour, with Leslie Phillips playing the rogue. And we had to make it in a very confined space – and God! It was hot! – in a very short space of time because we didn't really have very much money. Rank's had it, it's [quite often] seen on the telly. [After Don't Just Lie There, Say Something I was in Bit Between the Teeth for two years and] Finally I did Fringe Benefits which finished life at the Whitehall, and on January 8th 1977 - Saturday night - was my last performance at the Whitehall. And that's when I gave it up, and I went a short time into theatre management, running West End theatres, and a theatre eventually on Broadway. But I hated that, I hated being in the front as opposed to being on stage. And eventually I was lucky enough – because I always wanted to go there – to become the boss of Mencap. I became the Chief Executive, then known as the Secretary General, 'til I retired at 65, and then I became the Chairman for ten years, and then after I retired as Chairman I became the President – and I'm still the President today. I do a great deal of work now in the House of Lords for Mencap. In fact tomorrow I've got a big do at Portcullis House, where we introduce a family charter for learning disabled children. And so it goes on. So I had an incredibly successful career as an actor-manager for [thirty] years. I loved it, to begin with particularly. And of course I loved the television because the television made us really.

KH: Can you return to the television, and maybe you can just tell me how the television came about.

BR: Well it's very simple. In 1951, the Festival of Britain started... I nearly said the Battle of Britain! It was a battle as far as the West End theatre was concerned. The Festival of Britain was intended to bring lots and lots of people to London – which of course it did – but they all went to the Festival of Britain because of the light summer nights. They all went to the South Bank, and the West End theatre suffered very badly. But fortunately, just before the Festival of Britain, the BBC Light Programme – which is now Radio 2 – used to do excerpts round the West End. I can't remember the title of the programme, but it was something like 'Round the Shows' or something like that. And they came to me and said, 'Can we do a quarter of an hour excerpt of your play please, on... in May' whatever it was. 'And we're going to do another quarter of an hour with another play...' and I can't remember the title. So I said, 'Yes of course', and we did the first scene of the first act of Reluctant Heroes, which was very funny in its own right. I mean, how often does the curtain go up and they laugh at the scenery?! Because it was a barrack room and on one of the lockers above the men's beds was 'Abandon hope all you who enter here'. And of course the audience - who would all have been servicemen - all fell about... and service women, at this... with the stove smoking away. Oh God! Those awful stoves we had, which didn't heat anything, even a kettle! And anyway, we did this first quarter of an hour, and it had a huge effect. We did a wonderful Festival of Britain. Bigger houses. Whereas the other play on the radio failed, was off in two weeks. So it goes to show audience were very... were discriminating as to which one they wanted to go and see.

And later in that year, or early the next year 1952 – the deputy controller of the BBC television, a fellow called Cecil Madden – had a protégé he was looking after, an artist, and he came round to see me and said, 'Would you allow her to paint you?' and so on and so forth. And I said, 'Sure, sure'. And we got talking, and I was talking about how

successful the radio excerpt had been, he said, 'I've always wanted to do a telly excerpt', and I said, 'Well, I'd love to do one' because you [knew] it must be a fantastic advert.

KH: Which was an unusual attitude at the time, because no-one else wanted to do it.

BR: Well nobody had... It was totally against the Society of West End Theatre Managers, who hated the idea. They thought of television as being an absolute enemy, and certainly had never wanted me to do it. But of course I was an independent manager, nobody could stop me. And the Whitehall thought it was a good idea, and I thought it was a good idea, and the BBC thought it was a good idea. And so I did the first act only of Reluctant Heroes on telly – black and white telly. Had a huge audience, huge appreciation figure, it had a higher appreciation than the Coronation! I think it got 96 and the Coronation was 94, something like that.

KH: And this was the first excerpt was it?

BR: Only the first excerpt yes.

KH: But the first excerpt, play excerpt...

BR: ...ever from a West End play. And the queues were down Whitehall the next day! Not only were the queues down Whitehall, but that night after the excerpt they were ringing up. And of course, the joke is we couldn't do the live performance, we had to get rid of the [paying] audience, then we had to bring in an invited audience and we had to do it later – it was after nine o'clock at night.

KH: Why did you have to have an invited audience? Was that to do with payment?

BR: To do with Equity and... That's right, you couldn't do the television live in front of a [paying] audience. It was something like that, that was the reason. And of course we had a hand picked audience, and many of them had been in the pub 'til nine o'clock and so they fell about, screamed with laughter – we had a fantastic first act.

KH: How did the filming work, just in terms of how they did it?

BR: Three cameras. Cameras... one in the box either side, and... or by the side of the box, one in the centre came down backwards and forwards on a ramp. And it was perfectly good, but it was shot a bit like a football match you know, not really a proper script or anything like that – not a camera script and so on. And it was a big success.

And the BBC then came back to me and said, 'Would I do some full length farces?', so I said, 'Well I'll try one'. So I did, in October of that same year, I did a farce – 90 minutes, cut down to 90 minutes – by Philip King who wrote See How They Run and Without the Prince and plays like that. But See How They Run was his very big success – still is a big

success. And Philip had written a play called Postman's Knock, which was quite funny. And I said, 'We'll do Postman's Knock'. And originally I was going to do it with Elspet playing the lead opposite me, but she had a miscarriage literally a week before the [transmission] and she was in the hospital. And so the part had to be taken over by the director's wife, who did very well in a week's rehearsal.

It was extraordinary, because I had to play Reluctant Heroes... I had to cut the intervals because I had to get the play over and done with by nine o'clock. In those days, you've got to remember, the war time curtain used to go up at six o'clock. And we'd only started to take our curtain up by '52, at seven o'clock – but not at seven thirty or eight – seven o'clock. So we went up promptly at seven and by cutting the intervals, we were down promptly at nine. They then had to change the set. I had to run upstairs, get out of my sweaty battle dress and take all the black off my face – make myself look like a young juvenile, [change into a] suit and all the rest of it. The scenery had to be changed completely and up we went at half past nine with Postman's Knock. It went on 'til 11 o'clock, and again was a huge success.

The BBC said, 'Would you do a series of farces?' I said, 'No, not on Thursday nights'. But they said, 'Never on Sunday' or rather Cecil McGivern did that, who was the controller, because was a bit of a religious nut and thought that only dramas should be done on Sunday nights, not farces. So I... we stayed in this state of limbo, and they kept asking me and saying, 'Would you do...?', 'No, no Sundays', 'I can only do Sundays'. Until luckily ITV started. And a programme called Sunday Night at the Palladium and Beat the Clock – with Tommy Trinder in those days, it was before Bruce Forsyth. And Bruce Forsyth wasn't second, I think Dickie Henderson might have been the second one to take over from Tommy Trinder... I'm not quite sure. But anyway, it was so big... the audience at the BBC had gone away completely. And [the BBC] came back to me and said, 'You can do them on Sunday night'. So I signed a contract – the first contract for three years – to do five a year on Bank Holidays or Sundays. And I did them on Sundays, always on Sundays. And the first nine, ten years were all live. So there are no records of half of them. And the first one was done on January 29th, 1956. It was called Love in a Mist, six in the cast, very funny. It was a play by Kenneth Horne - not Kenneth Horne, the 'Round the Horne', but Kenneth Horne the playwright. And it did terribly well. Got the high appreciation figure and again a big audience. And I then did The Perfect Woman, the same year. And then I did Madame Louise by Vernon Sylvaine, then Queen Elizabeth Slept Here which had been originally in New York as George Washington Slept Here. And then at Christmas I did Reluctant Heroes, because the film had been out and so I could do it. And all five plays were smash hits. And then I went on for 17 years with the BBC.

KH: I found it really interesting in your book where you talk about how you preferred doing the television versions of the plays, to doing the films.

BR: Yes.

KH: And I wondered if you could say a little bit about that?

BR: Well the reason I preferred the telly is because, a) they were live b) we had an audience reaction – and there's nothing like an audience to kick a farce along. You need an audience in truth. An audience is part of the act; it's the laughter which sparks

everything. It sparks your initiatives on stage, your ad-libbing or your enthusiasm or you can milk a laugh because the audience are laughing. Whereas if you're in front of a camera, you can't. The camera it's... you know there's a laugh but you can't do more... it's up to the editor, it's up to the director. Everybody else does the film, the actor merely says the lines, hopes to God he says them right, and hopes that he's got the right inflection to get the laugh. But I'll give you an example. When I made the film *Reluctant Heroes* there was a wide shot and I stood up to speak to Lieutenant Dennis in the film. And I made a mistake in my line. And I went, 'Oh God...!' and sat down like this. 'Oh God...!' and all these sort of gestures, and Jack Raymond the director said, 'Right, OK fine, print it over here'. And I said, 'Jack, Jack, I pulled a face and I said, 'Oh God!' and sat down because I fluffed that line'. He said, 'It doesn't matter Brian, you're on edge of frame, they'll never see it'. And it stayed in; it's still in the film today – me saying, 'Oh God!' and sitting down because I fluffed a line. But I was on edge of frame, in a wideish shot. Another thing that happened was there was a line in the play which used to get a big laugh in the theatre because [Manny Shinwell] was the Minister for Defence, and the Sergeant used to look at me and, 'I'm writing Shinwell tonight' and the audience used to laugh because it was contemporary... it came to the film and every one said, 'Well he's no longer the Minister of Defence, who are we going to say?'. So they thought [and suggested] 'and I'm writing the King tonight', which is not anywhere near as funny. So Ronnie Shiner, playing the Sergeant said, 'and I'm writing the King tonight'. The day that the film was shown – released – the King died.

KH: Oh no!

BR: And every single sound track had to have a 'blip' put on it. So of course it was the old fashioned soundtrack – so now, Ronnie Shiner says, 'and I'm writing a bmp, thwp tonight', that's all you hear! 'The King' has been completely obliterated. And that had to be done.

KH: This idea of cutting things out reminds me of the issue of censorship.

BR: Yes.

KH: What kind of impact that had on you, because farce is obviously quite contentious in terms of what's being shown sometimes.

BR: Well Vernon Sylvaine got away with [it, and] of course Feydeau got away with murder because he was Feydeau. And a lot of mistresses and lovers and undressed ladies etc were part and parcel of his plays. So there was really no problem because of the longevity of the plays. But with us, yes there was. There was strict censorship: we were allowed one 'bloody' in a play and one 'God', and anything else was taken out. The Lord Chamberlain - it wasn't the Lord Chamberlain as such, it was his office – and he had a load of Lieutenant Colonels, most of them retired Lieutenant Colonels – who used to go, 'Phoar... can't say bloody here and bloody here... and take them out' and the blue pencil would go through [the offending words]. And every page had to be stamped with the Lord Chamberlain's stamp. And that was the play you had to do. And when you went on tour you had to take the Lord Chamberlain's script with you. And the Watch

Committee – [made up of] local councillors – officially were supposed to watch the play on the first night with the script in front of them, to check that you were actually speaking the lines that had been passed by the Lord Chamberlain. It was absurd.

But I actually had two plays which were banned by the Lord Chamberlain. One was a serious play which was written in the fifties, about a black Chieftain. It was really written about Seretse Khama and Ruth. They weren't called Seretse Khama and Ruth, but it was really a docu-drama of their [lives] written by a Daily Express theatre critic called Michael Walsh and his wife Peggy. They wrote it together. And I took it to the Lord Chamberlain, and he banned it straight away because it was political and because a black man was marrying a white woman. I mean, it's extraordinary isn't it when you think of it today?

KH: It's extraordinary yes.

BR: That was the mid fifties!

KH: Amazing.

BR: And then the second play was Tell the Marines, which was a farce by the Pertwees – Michael Pertwee and his father Roland Pertwee. And they wrote this [as a] contemporary [farce in the 1950s]. The Cold War had started and there was a dispute over an island between Russia and England... or Britain. Which could be a bit like Argentine over the Maldives or the Falklands, it was a very similar sort of idea. And the Russians marched in to claim it, and the Brits marched in to claim it. And the troops got together and decided not to kill each other, but to fire over each other's heads, [for] it was too ridiculous to fight over this. And the Chamberlain banned it because he said, 'You can't see us in any confrontation with the Russians' – but this was the Cold War... So Michael and Roland re-wrote it and took it back to the war, and made it about the Germans, but it didn't work because the joke had gone - because nobody believed the Germans would not have fired at us in the war. And they certainly believed we would have fired at them. So it became a non-starter. So those two plays were banned. But the rest... as I say, we were rationed to one 'God' and one 'bloody', and that was it. And so we had to find euphemisms instead, which were probably just as bad.

But bedroom farce of course... Vernon Sylvaine before the war had got away with murder really. With Madam Louise, with Aren't Men Beasts, Women Aren't Angels, which were all about [an actor] called Alfred Drayton playing the heavy, until he died, and Robertson Hare played the downtrodden husband. And Alfred Drayton always had a mistress, and the mistress was always wandering round in a towel or something like that. And the Chamberlain took not the slightest notice of this. But he did in our time in... bedroom farce really didn't become the norm until the sixties. And just before the Chamberlain went – in '68 I think it was.

KH: Yes, it's '68.

BR: And before the Chamberlain went, bedroom farce was sort of coming into vogue again – but only just. And then it became the staple diet, we all had to do bedroom farce

at that time, which I found rather boring because they were all a bit repetitive. I much prefer the other type of farces where we were doing more contemporary themes you know. There we are.

KH: I was going to ask you about... with regard to the writers and the plays that you did, the fact that quite a few of your writers actually came from within your company.

BR: Yes, they did. Well the reason being of course, they had time on their hands. They came in to play small parts, or understudying or whatever, and the plays ran and ran so they sat in their dressing rooms dreaming up plays. The two best known I presume from a farcical point of view are John Chapman of course who wrote *Dry Rot* and who wrote *Simple Spymen* and then went on [to write] with Ray Cooney, who first wrote *One for the Pot* with Tony Hilton, and [then] *Chase Me Comrade* on his own. He was still playing a small part in *Simple Spymen*... Ray Cooney and that's when he wrote *One for the Pot* with Tony Hilton – who was playing my parts on tour. So the two got together. And then Ray wrote *Chase Me Comrade*, when *One for the Pot* was running. And then after that I had other writers. *Stand by your Bedouin* was Ray Cooney and Tony Hilton. *Let Sleeping Wives Lie* was Harold Brooke and Kay Bannerman. And the same guys who wrote *No Sex Please, We're British*, wrote *Uproar in the House* [Anthony Marriott and Alastair Foot] And then Michael Pertwee sort of came into flower, as far as I was concerned, after the debacle of the *Tell the Marines*, with the censorship. What were you asking?

KH: I was asking about the company, and we were talking about... we'd been talking about the writers.

BR: Oh yes, all the writers... well anyway, so John Chapman and Ray Cooney then wrote together – they wrote *Not Now Darling*, *Move Over Mrs Markham*... oh I can't remember all the titles now. And then they wrote separately and then Ray went into plays mainly. And John went to telly, and started to write Hugh and I or whatever it was called, and he wrote well known pieces for telly [e.g. *French Fields*], whereas Ray stayed with the theatre.

Then Colin Morris left us [for the BBC] – who wrote *Reluctant Heroes* – and he became really the first man to write drama documentaries. And he invented *Z Cars* - it was called *Jacks and Knaves*. It was about the Liverpool Police. He wrote four episodes of that, and then eventually that was adapted by others and made into *Z Cars*. And the joke is that the producer at the very end of *Z Cars* was Colin Morris. And he wrote lots of documentaries, which won awards, on alcoholism and prostitution and all sorts of things.

Then we had a fellow called Philip Levene and he wrote many of the first *Avengers* series. He was an understudy and then played the medical orderly in *Reluctant Heroes*. We had a fellow called Andrew Broughton who wrote things for children's telly – who was a small part actor. We had... oh! He became very big – Clive Brook was an actor who changed his name to Clive Exton. I think he still writes. But he became very famous in the sixties and seventies, writing as Clive Exton – mainly for ITV I think. And I think there were one or two others as well. But they all had time on their hands you see. They didn't know what to do, so they started to scribble upstairs in their dressing rooms. And from that they became... not all farce writers, but they all became writers.

KH: One of the other central strengths of your company was that it was a permanent company.

BR: Yes.

KH: Was that difficult to maintain? How did you keep that together?

BR: Well it came into being because quite frankly it was easy. Because when you signed an Equity Contract... London Equity Contract in 1950 – which they did – they signed 'Run of play', they couldn't get out. None of them could get out. So they were there for four years, or however long a play ran. Eventually I got bored [with Reluctant Heroes] and I found as many parts as I possibly could for them all to continue in Dry Rot. And so it went on. And some of them were with me for 20-odd years. My brother-in-law was with me – Peter Mercier. My sister – Sheila. On and off my wife Elspet – Elspet Gray. Larry Noble was with me for all of 17 years, Leo Franklyn over 20 years. To begin with it was a permanent job, which is very rare in the theatre, but also they enjoyed it you know. Eventually both Peter Mercier, my brother-in-law, and Larry Noble begged me to let them go because they couldn't cope anymore. And of course I had to let them go. But the other [thing] I did was [to invent] holidays, which were totally unknown. Largely because I wanted a holiday myself! I used to bring in good understudies, and then at the beginning of the holiday season – sort of April, May – I'd let two of the cast go and the understudies would go and play those principal parts for two weeks (and I'd bring in other understudies to understudy the understudies), which pleased them because managers could come and see it, their agents could come and see it and so on. And then the next lot would go and they'd take over their parts, and then the next lot would go and they'd take over their parts. And so all the understudies had a chance to play, show their worth. And they were covered all the time by two other understudies. Holiday season ended, they reverted to being understudies if they wanted to, or if they wanted to leave because they got a decent job offer they could do. And the understudies who'd been [temporary] understudies became the understudies [and everyone was happy!]. So it was a sort of package deal which I engineered and of course eventually the whole of the West End... [as] they had to do with the excerpts, had to follow suit. They didn't do it the same way as me; holidays became part of the contract. But I was the first manager to do a television excerpt from a West End play, I was the first manager to... we stopped smoking, we became a non-smoking theatre in 1954, and I was the first manager to give actors holidays – because we had these long runs. And of course that's why people liked staying with the company, because it was a continuous job, it was a marvellous job to have. You got a lot of laughs, a lot of satisfaction, and you got holidays as well which was [unique].

KH: And presumably they also got to do some television as well.

BR: They what?

KH: They also got to do some television as well alongside it.

BR: Oh yes, and tellies of course. They all got tellies and extra money, and so it went on. And so I used them all in the tellies of course, time and time again. And so they all got the extra money there, and they got extra exposure and became well known. So it was a fantastic do. And it lasted for 27 years, in the West End. But I was actually an actor-manager for exactly 30 years. I started in 1947 and I finished in 1977 and I was the last of the actor-managers. I mean, you can get people who say they are actor-managers, but they run for a season or they run for a tour, or they run for a London run or whatever it may be, but they're not actor-managers like I was. Because I was responsible for choosing, putting on, raising the money [for] the plays, the televisions, the films – I was producer of several of the films as well. So you know I... it was an extraordinary achievement really I suppose because I was only 23 when I started.

KH: Gosh, that's amazing!

BR: Yes.

KH: I was really interested earlier when we were talking, when you mentioned that other companies sometimes brought their actors to see your company.

BR: Yes they did.

KH: Could you say a little bit about that?

BR: Yes, well I remember the Royal Court...

KH: George Devine.

BR: George Devine brought his actors along sometimes to say, 'That's how a team looks'. We were a team long before Peter Hall had a team at the Royal Shakespeare at Stratford. Terry Hands, for instance, who was director of the Royal Shakespeare, always admired our teamwork – that inspired him. Other directors, many other actors, became actors or became directors because of the enthusiasm they saw on the Whitehall stage, because of the team playing. I didn't care a damn [nor did any of the others] who got the laughs, as long as we got the laughs. I wanted the laughs all the time, and we got the laughs all the time. Of course I wanted my fair share, but not selfishly. It wasn't a question of 'I'm upstage and you're all downstage with your backs to the audience'; it was a question of 'let's work together'. And that teamwork came off. It frankly could have gone on but after 30 years as an actor-manager, honestly I'd had enough. It was as simple as that. But they were fun plays.

KH: And they were incredibly popular as well.

BR: Oh incredibly.

KH: I mean, the audiences were amazing.

BR: Well the audiences [for the television excerpts and plays] were [enormous]... I think one of them, the audience for... I think it was Come Prancing, which was part of a series called Dial Rix, I think was 21 million! Which is a huge audience. And the awful sadness of that, is that we were against Tony Hancock. And Tony Hancock would be equally as big as we were – if not bigger – but was going downhill, drinking too much and all the rest of it. And he'd got delusions of grandeur and he'd left the BBC, and he started to write his own scripts, which was a disaster for ITV. And [only a] million watched his [final] show. The rest tuned into us. So it was very sad. Then he went to Australia and killed himself, only about six months later. So it was a very sad story. But I mean, I told you the appreciation figure for Heroes, but the appreciation figures we used to get for the tellies were all in the high 70's, 80's, 90's, absolutely incredible. And the audiences went along with them. And, I mean when you think of One for the Pot for instance, as a play, it never makes a good telly, because I played four brothers. And of course if you see it on film it looks as though you're cheating. You know... I mean, you can cut... everyone knows you can cut a camera, start again. But in a play you can't. I actually played four brothers in and out. And I had three doubles who looked like me and had wigs like me, and dressed like me and the same height as me etc – with their backs to the audience. And the audience were fooled, that I'd dive under a table and roll out through a trap door and somebody else would be attracting the attention up stage right or whatever it might be.

And that play was so successful there were 76 people standing – in those [days] you could have standing room, the number was written on the wall of the theatre, of the stalls of the theatre, and the circle – 76 people stood every night for 18 months. Then we've run into that dreadful winter of '63, which started on Boxing Day '62, when the snow and ice came down and people couldn't get to the theatre, so it affected us all. And it lasted 'til about March. And it didn't kill the show, but it never fully recovered again to what it had been before. But imagine being full every performance, 76 standing!

KH: It's amazing.

BR: It was absolutely incredible. But it was like a magic conjuring trick. And people were... a) laughing and b) totally baffled as to how it was done.

KH: What do you think are the particular challenges that farce presents to an actor?

BR: Well physically, enormous challenges. Because you've got to be very fit. If you're playing a lead in a farce you have to... I mean well when I was playing four brothers in One for the Pot, I was running around the stage. I remember I was rolling out, I was diving into trapdoors hidden away from the audience. I was running around the stage... changing – changing my collar, tie – all quick release things – my overcoats, my hat and everything else. Running around, dabbing myself to get the sweat off my face, coming

in again as another [brother] and speaking lines in a different accent and so on. I mean the amount of physical energy expended in farce is huge.

But you haven't got to laugh at yourself; you haven't got to think you're terribly funny. You've got to be absolutely sincere; you've got to believe the character. Of course, you can string an audience along if you've got them suddenly laughing, you can play and make that laugh last longer. You can ad lib that way. But you've got to have enormous discipline, to be a good farce actor you've got to have impeccable timing, good physical fitness, a sense of comedy and a sense of the ridiculous, but above all you haven't to present it to the audience of 'I am funny' or 'This is funny'. The audience have got to decide that for themselves. What you've got to do is present it in the necessary light hearted way, or the necessary way to make sure the audience understand that it's funny. But you haven't got to [bludgeon them into believing its funny].

I've watched a lot of modern farce productions, frankly they shatter me because people come on the stage and shout. We used to speak up because you have to speak up in theatre to be heard – don't forget we didn't have any microphones or amplifiers. But modern actors seem to come on and think by shouting a line, or pulling faces or whatever, they're being funny. They're not, they're destroying it. If a play is intrinsically funny it's got to be played with all seriousness and belief, and the character you're playing is a real character.

I played the silly asses, and I played the gumps. You know, I played a lot of North Country, and I played 'em up 'ere [raises voice] and I always had a voice up 'ere when I played those parts! And so the audience knew immediately what character I was, and when I was playing the silly ass I was... be really inclined to be ha, ha etc etc... whatever was required. But you have to play it with sincerity; you haven't to play it as a joke. If you play it as a joke – in my view, and I'm sure in the [view of the] majority of the audiences – you lose the audience.

KH: Why do you think they translated so well onto television? Because other things didn't did they at the time?

BR: No, they translated so well because there was an audience in front. We played as for an audience. We were a bit too loud of course for modern telly, but eventually they got the sound better and the microphones were hanging all over the stage. So eventually we didn't have to shout quite as much. But we didn't pull faces, we did all the right things. And they still stand up today, that's what's so extraordinary – those few that are recorded. Because the majority of them [have disappeared]. The first ten years were live, then another lot were put on to a tape called Ampex, and the BBC wiped the whole lot. To save money, to re-use the tapes – after two years they wiped them. So all our work has gone. And then eventually they kept one or two of the colour ones I think, when they got onto colour telly. But not many. Hardly any of my shows are there. A few are, and a few of them are BBC telly recording where they used to put a camera at the end of the cathode ray tube, you know and film – with white halos round everything. But the majority have gone, which is very sad.

And my son, Jonty who is with the Open University, got the media section there to get one or two out from the BBC – or maybe the Open University had them – and he transferred them to DVD for me for Christmas. And although they were recorded on the BBC telly recording in the very crude way they used to do it in 1960, they come across remarkably well. And the... how expert we were, I mean we got it done in 90 minutes and it was live, remember that. It wasn't 87 minutes or 96 minutes, it was 90 minutes.

KH: How much time did you have to rehearse before...?

BR: Less than three weeks. I mean, that's what's so incredible. Less than three weeks. We had to learn the lines, [we couldn't 'dry' for it was all live].

KH: And you were running another show at the same time?!

BR: And at night time you were doing the play at night, of course you were. And at one time I was doing a film as well. So that really was hard work. I was directing the telly, playing a lead in the telly, I was in the film and I was doing the show at night. That first Christmas in 1956 I was making a film called Not Wanted on Voyage and I was playing Dry Rot at nights, and I was rehearsing and directing Reluctant Heroes [for television]. I had to work on Sundays of course – Saturdays and Sundays. The actors were paid a bit extra but they were very happy to do it. And so I did the three. Well actually I did the four because I was directing as well as playing the lead – Gregory. But of course I was very young and I had a huge enthusiasm, huge energy. It was incredible really.

KH: In terms of directing for television, what were the differences between the stage... directing for stage and directing for television?

BR: Well getting your shots in order. The camera scripts were the same as for the studio, the camera men had [proper shooting scripts]... you had to work out the shots. You directed the play to make sure that people could be separated if you wanted a close up or something like that. But basically you directed it really as for a play. And then you put the cameras round it, and you did the camera script after you'd done all the initial rehearsals. That's the way I did it anyway and it worked pretty well.

[End of CD1]

[Beginning of CD2]

KH: Television allowed you to reach out to a different audience, did that... did you see a change in the make up of your theatre audiences as a result?

BR: We played to the most cosmopolitan audience imaginable. You'd get dustmen, cleaning ladies... not that I'm denigrating them, my God I'm not... sitting next door to the Princess Royal in the front row you know. It was that we were totally classless theatre. Of course that was part of the success, the fact that we were classless. I mean I made a point [of quoting all the papers] when you put out the notices – the good notices – outside the theatre. The Sunday Times, Harold Hobson was a great fan of ours and he used to give us marvellous notices... The Observer were too, and The Sunday Telegraph – the Sundays were very good – but Harold Hobson was particularly good. And if I got a good notice from The Sunday Times and I got a good notice from The

Daily Worker, I used to put the two together... I mean, next door to each other. So that the audience knew that if they were ardent communists they could come and see the show, and if they were an ardent Tory they could come and see the show. Because we were, as it were, ecumenical. We were open to all. And I think that was part of our success.

And there was no snobbery, and seats were a ridiculous price of course. We only charged 13s 6d until *One for the Pot* when our best stalls went up to 15s. When I moved to the Garrick, the best stalls were only a pound, which of course by today's standards is ridiculous. But we still did all right on that. But of course money meant a great deal more in those days, a pound went a long way. Five pounds went a great deal of distance. And there was no real inflation remember 'til the sixties. I mean, the fifties were still roughly the same as before the war.

KH: Did you ever apply for any form of Arts Council grant or anything like that?

BR: No, originally I had a non-profit distributing company as they called it, but I never used it. But I eventually became the Chairman of Drama of the Arts Council from 1986 to 1993, when I resigned towards the end of my eighth year. I would only have been able to go on for eight years, but the Arts Council cut the theatre grant. The Arts Council themselves, cut the theatre grant, and I was very unhappy about this so I resigned.

I also was the first Chairman of another Arts Council initiative which was [the Monitoring Committee for] Arts and Disabled People. I chaired the committee on that, we toured all over the country – meeting disabled people, trying to get them into theatre or live arts or painting or sculpture, whatever it might be – creative arts. And so I worked very hard for those eight years, went to the theatre almost as often as if I had to go to the theatre as an actor. So in the end I was quite relieved that it was over.

I can truthfully say it was an amazing time. I look back on it now. But I've been very lucky in my life because I've never been out of work as an actor. Nobody... I don't think any other actor in the world could say that. Because in the war I went straight from Donald Wolfitt – my first job – to the White Rose Players, straight into the Air Force. Came out and I became an actor-manager. So I gave myself a job for 30 years. And I was always working, never stopped working for 30 years. And then I went into theatre management for a short time, which I didn't like. Then I went to Mencap and had a second career running a major charity – we're now probably the biggest disability charity in the country. Last year 2005/6 we spent £167 million on care, on housing, welfare and so on. And as I say I became the boss of that and then I became Chairman, now I'm President. That's been a fantastic career.

And of course my third career is as a politician [manqué] in the House of Lords, where I've stuck rigidly to either the Arts or occasionally cricket if it ever come up – because I'm a very keen cricketer, being a good Yorkshireman from the old days. And I can still tell you the pre-war cricket team! [Laughs]

And then I became, as I say a politician here and I do the work... a lot of work here for Mencap, for people with a learning disability and their families. And I'm involved in so much legislation at the moment: The Mental Health Bill which is going through the Commons starting today. We've already dealt with it in the Lords. And then before that The Mental Capacity [Act, The Disability Discrimination Act, The Equality Act], so it goes on – back, back and back. And I've been involved in all of them, because people with learning disability are involved in all of them.

KH: Could I just... I think this is probably going to be my last area of discussion that I wanted to ask you about – we mentioned before, over lunch, [Six of Rix], and I just wondered whether you could tell me a little bit about that?

BR: About the...?

KH: About [Six of Rix], when you did provincial theatre...

BR: Oh yes, well that was an interesting idea. Vernon Sylvaine wrote six very funny plays... well five very funny plays, the sixth was not so funny but it was OK cut down. And I got Michael Pertwee to edit them down to 50 minutes each. And I persuaded the BBC to give me the money to do them back to back – two 50 minutes, so it was a double bill. Over a six week tour... well it was a ten week tour; I did two weeks, back to rehearsal, two weeks, back to rehearsal. And then I did four weeks the last lot. So the total tour was ten weeks, with rehearsal time in between each group. And I had reversible scenery so that they could virtually turn the scenery round and it became some other set. And I went on tour.

And so I had the income from the tour which was fantastic – that was mine – and the BBC were paying me for the whole production so it was a very profitable ten weeks. And it was called Six of Rix, which was six of Vernon Sylvaine's [farces], adapted by Michael Pertwee. We did [the first] two plays, 50 minutes [each], in the Opera House, Manchester. And we recorded. And then the second one we did at the Alhambra, Bradford, which would be the second week. The third bunch we did at the Theatre Royal, Norwich. We rehearsed for three weeks, the two plays – 50 minutes each – took them out, did the two weeks on tour, [recorded the television programmes], came back to London, three weeks rehearsal, two weeks out again, back to London, two weeks rehearsal and then four weeks [tour ending with the last two television recordings]. So everybody gained. The actors got two salaries, I got two salaries and I got a small profit from the tour. The BBC got something cheap, because they were also able to use their regional OB units, which was fantastic for them. We were going round regional theatres, so the BBC were fulfilling their charter.

You know, I would have done it more often, but by then my career with the BBC was coming to an end. My career [as an actor-manager] really was coming to an end [too]; I was getting fed up with the whole thing by then. But [Six of Rix] was extraordinary really. I mean, you could do it with any author who's written five, six plays; you could do the same thing – if you wanted to. But I don't suppose anyone else wants to! But that was Six of Rix.

KH: I think those were all of my questions but I don't whether you've got anything that you'd like to add about the Whitehall or anything we've not covered?

BR: Well, there were two reasons why I left the Whitehall. One is that I wanted to buy the place – buy the lease. And I kept coming to the table with my solicitors and my backers and my bankers – on three occasions. And the Whitehall management reneged; I mean, they pulled out of the discussions. And I was getting pretty cheesed off with

this. I was also getting pretty cheesed off that I couldn't try my [repertoire] idea at the Whitehall because of the size of the stage – it was only 11 foot deep remember, on one side, and only 17 foot deep on the other. I couldn't get enough scenery on the stage. And that and the fact that I was falling out with the management as to my future there, I thought, 'Well, I'm going to teach them a lesson!'. But instead of flouncing out and letting them get on with it, I made the mistake of [joining Peter Bridge] and putting in Danny La Rue to [fill] the gap – with the option to go back. But [when that time came] Come Spy With Me was doing pretty well and it seemed a pity to take it off. And so the Garrick were very keen to have me, so I went across Trafalgar Square to the Garrick. Which of course was a mistake because eventually the management of the Whitehall sold to Paul Raymond who started to run plays there, like Pyjama Tops and so on, which were very different from mine I [can] tell you.

But... then eventually I went back [to the Whitehall] with my last play, Fringe Benefits. But by then I was on the point of retirement. And as I say I did retire on January 8th, 1977.

KH: Well thank you very much, that's been fantastic.

BR: Well I hope it's all right.

KH: Yes, it's absolutely fantastic. I'll send you a copy. Sometimes people think of things and they think 'Oh, I really wish I'd said that'.

BR: Well I've another quick story... just got time before half past three... which you can put in. In 1960 – ten years, four months and three days I think you'll find it is in the book – we beat the run of a team for farce.

KH: The Aldwych was this?

BR: The Aldwych farces. Which were a big success... [but] we were only doing our third play and they'd done 13 in their ten years, four months and three days. We were doing Simple Spymen – which was our third play, which was still hugely successful. And on the night we beat the record, I came on stage at the end and told the audience what it was all about, and invited all the people either on stage or people who were in my tellies – people like Dora Bryan, Ronnie Shiner, Naunton Wayne, Hattie Jacques... I invited them to come along and 'serve' the audience. We gave every single member of the audience a glass of champagne – in plastic glasses I hasten to add, but the champagne was real! - and they all drank the toast to the Whitehall and I made the speech and it was a marvellous evening. I had a big party afterwards and then we had another even bigger party [on the Sunday] at Pastoria's, a big restaurant we all used to go to. And on that Sunday all the old [Aldwych actors]... well those who were alive, Ralph Lynn, Winifred Shotter, Robertson Hare, Ben Travers himself [the main playwright, he wrote 9 of the 13 Aldwych Farces]. They all came to the do. It was fantastic. And that's a great record and that's something of which I'm immensely proud. [Remember] we held our team together, on and off, for 27 years. They only held theirs together for 10 years. It extraordinary isn't it, the difference?

KH: It's an amazing achievement, yes.

BR: Yes, so there we are.