

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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George Cooper – interview transcript

Interviewer: Kate Harris

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Actor. Lindsay Anderson; Arden of Faversham; audiences; Billy Liar; John Bury; The Dutch Courtesan; commercial Theatre; critical reception; The Good Soldier Schweik; Harry Greene; Rudolf Laban; Joan Littlewood; Ken Loach; lighting; Ewan MacColl; Mother Courage; movement training; Jean Newlove; The Old Vic; Gerry Raffles; rehearsals; Richard II; Theatre Royal, Stratford East; Theatre Workshop; touring; Twelfth Night; Uranium 235; voice training; Volpone; West End transfers.

KH: This is an interview on the 17th April with George Cooper. I'd just like to ask, have we got your permission to put this into the British Library Sound Archive?

GC: Yes indeed.

KH: Excellent. OK, can I begin by asking how you started working in the theatre?

GC: Yes, certainly. In my part of the world – that's Leeds – the thought of having a job as an actor was a joke. You know, it's not a proper job sort of thing. But at the elementary school in Headingley in Leeds, I started being in all the plays etc. And one year I got hold of a little pamphlet thing of comic monologues, and I finished up by going round - at Christmas time - to all the classes in the school reading from this comic book. So in other words there was always the hint that acting was in the background... but as regards being a proper job – no way! – it just wasn't a proper job.

So that passed, then the next time I tried any acting was in the army. This was in India, in Deolali and we had the Royal Artillery Depot Players. And there was a very nice old actor called Joseph O'Connor who was in charge – he was a Lieutenant. And we did plays - we did a bit of Noel Coward, and that sort of thing. So that gave me a bit of a taste, you know, again for the theatre. I came back when I was demobbed in 1946 and joined an amateur company, so I was still keen on the acting bit, but it certainly wasn't a way of earning a living. But they kept talking about this company called Theatre Workshop, who'd just been playing at Leeds University – just a month or so before I got back from the army – and how very interesting this company was. They didn't like sort of boxed sets, 3-act plays and all this sort of thing, they were very interested in lighting on the stage etc, etc, and there was talk about this lady called Joan Littlewood, who was a terrific director. So I thought, 'Oh that sounds interesting.'. But anyway, I carried on in my exciting job in the reinforced concrete world, and eventually I thought, 'Oh well, I wonder if I could make a living as an actor?'. And eventually after, what, three years – in other words in 1949 – I thought, 'Right, I'll have a go!', because I was finding the

working in this reinforced concrete business... I think the only word I can think of at the moment is 'dull' you know. And it gets quite involved in mathematics and I'm not a mathematician by any means! [Laughs] So I wrote off to Joan Littlewood, or rather the business manager Gerry Raffles. And although she hated doing it, she arranged for auditions. I mean, how can you tell the talent of an actor just by one simple little audition? Because you might be feeling nervous at the time, or you might be a little bit off colour or something... She much preferred to have sort of little school sessions of about two or three weeks, and during that time she would look at you and see what talent you had – if any. And if, after the end of three weeks, she thought, 'Well he could be some use to the company', you'd be offered a temporary job. And a much better way of assessing people's talent than just a one... what, a ten-minute audition sort of thing. So anyway I had to do this audition, and I was asked to go along with three pieces prepared: a piece of classical stuff, you know Shakespeare or something like that; poetry; and then bring shorts and gym shoes. So I thought 'Hello, hello, hello what's going on here?' sort of thing. And of course it was all due to Jean Newlove, who later... well at the time of course was married to Ewan MacColl. And they were very interested in this movement business. So I went to do my audition and Joan said, 'Oh my dear.', you know 'Oh what have we got! There's going to be problems here.'. But anyway I did all this, and my bit with the gym shoes and the shorts, that seemed to go OK as well, because I was always fairly fit in those days.

KH: What did you have to do in the gym shoes and the shorts?

GC: Oh well, just sort of movement. You know, 'can you sort of... let's see what are you like on balance' or something like that. And you know she followed the teachings of Rudolf Laban, and he used to talk you know about the 'door plane' [vertical movements]... I mean, the 'door plane', the 'table plane' [horizontal movements], and all these things about the room. And he developed a system of writing down movement so you could get a script with a notation thing which enabled you to interpret it and say, 'Oh I see, yes, you stick your left leg there and you... oh yes and your right... you put your arm up there...' sort of thing. And that I found very interesting actually because he [Rudolph Laban] was still alive when I joined the company and he used to come... because they all lived in Manchester of course. And old Rudolf was very interesting to hear about life... it wasn't in Germany then, it was somewhere in the Balkans or somewhere. And he used to say how dance occurred in cafes and all that sort of thing. In other words I suppose, you'd be bit loose on the drink in the first place, and then do a little bit of, 'Come on, let's all dance.'. In other words, movement was a natural part of your lifestyle. So anyway Jean Newlove was his disciple, and she kept us – as I told you before – that half an hour every morning, before we started rehearsals and [Laughs] that would just about... you know, we could about survive I suppose, yes.

Anyway, after I did my audition I got this letter saying, 'We are prepared to offer you a temporary part in the company. And during that period we will see if we can sort out some of the problems, which I noted during your audition.' So I went along and my first play... they were doing Irwin Shaw's *The Gentle People*, and an actor was leaving Theatre Workshop, and I took over his two little parts. And started at the Theatre Royal in Kidderminster, which of course no longer exists.

But the main thing that she saw I might be useful for, was a pantomime, because as usual everybody you know was low on money etc, and the work that they were doing... they were doing a Shakespeare for schools. Whatever the School Certificate was - what choice of Shakespeare - they would do, so they could tour around and show the kids,

you know, what it was like. This pantomime was going to be her compromise with commercial theatre, and it was going to solve all the financial problems etc. It was billed - I think Gerry Raffles coined this phrase - as 'sheer delight for young and old'. Instead it was a flaming disaster! [Laughs] It was so bad that... we played in Barnsley, we played at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East 15 of course, oh about six dates... Hastings, Llandudno... but we just didn't get the audiences. So our attempt to compromise with commercial theatre was an absolute disaster. And after that it was all so disastrous financially that we just didn't do anything. And I was living on my army money - you know when you left the army you were given a sum of money, I forget now what they called it - but anyway that kept me alive. And then eventually in the end of that year - 1950 that would be - Joan wrote and said, 'We're thinking of starting doing a one night stand tour in Wales.' So you know, rehearsals start so and so, and so and so, and all the rest of it. So I reported back to Manchester. And the trouble was that they didn't really have the organised transport that they should have had. And they bought an old post office lorry for £35 I think. And the top of a furniture van for... I can't remember now how much that cost. And because I'd been associated with the building business, they gave me the job of sticking the two... the furniture van top on to the post office lorry! [Laughs] So anyway we managed to do that and set off for Wales. And this is a company of what, 19, 20 people - somewhere around there. And played I think three weeks was our first Welsh tour down there, playing at a different place every night of course.

KH: What were you playing?

GC: Oh we took a little fragment of the Commedia dell'Arte which Ewan had switched about a bit sort of thing, The Flying Doctor and it was great fun to be in. And then we had this play - which we toured actually in Scandinavia later on - and that was Uranium 235, a story about you know the... all sorts of incidents leading up to the development of the atomic bomb etc. I quite enjoyed this touring business, I thought it was good but you had to be fit. I've always maintained that, apart from being an actor, you need to be a weight lifter! [Laughs] Because of all the equipment: your curtains, your props, the electrical equipment. And invariably we'd be playing in a Miners Hall with about three flights of steps into the hall sort of thing. So that was a bit of a problem but we all survived.

KH: What were the audience reactions like on this tour, when you took these plays round?

GC: Well not very helpful really, financially. And there came one tour - I forget which one it was now - where things got so bad financially that we had [Laughing] to write to somebody's cousin or something and say, 'Please could you give us a cheque for' - you know, whatever the sum was - 'to keep us alive, because we can't pay for the digs etc, etc'. So it got a bit desperate really from time to time. So in other words it was yet another financial failure. That was the trouble.

KH: The people who did come, what was their reaction to the plays?

GC: What the people...?

KH: Who were watching.

GC: I think the few people that turned up did enjoy these plays. But I do remember one occasion – this must have been about the second or maybe even third Welsh tour, we were playing in Tonypandy, the Judge's Hall in Tonypandy, and 11 people turned up for the audience, we were 19 people in the company. And we got all very bolshy and said, 'We're not going to do it. Eleven people...!'. Joan attacked us of course and said, 'What! Call yourself actors... you know how small the audience is no consequence at all. You've got these people and you must do the play.' But we didn't. We were on strike in other words, really and truly. So that was a little... well quite a novelty actually because to have dared to disobey Joan was really asking for trouble. [Laughs] Anyway we went on tour again, up in the North East. And then we decided on the East Coast of Scotland, and set off in our lorry. And proceeding up on that East Coast road - you know on the right hand side of course, the open side, there's a sheer drop down to the sea – but we were in the left hand lane obviously. And we suddenly left the road and crashed into the embankment by the side of the road.

KH: Oh no!

GC: And Harry Greene came round – he was driving – with the steering wheel in his hand and said, 'Oh it came off in my hand you know!' [Laughs]. As a special concession for what we'd experienced in the way of accident etc, Joan said, 'Oh well, we'll cancel tonight's performance.' So it was very kind of her. So we didn't have to do a show that night. And we got the lorry repaired more or less. Then we got as far - I think it was Peterhead, yes I'm pretty sure it was Peterhead, yes - and we went to find some cheap place to eat, when we came back there was a police lady standing by the lorry: 'Is this your vehicle?' 'Yes, yes, and so yes.'. And she gave us a list, because of course with going off the road we'd damaged the side of the vehicle and everything else. She gave us this list and said, 'You know, you must do these repairs before you take it on the road again.'. And [she] took all our details etc, etc. So that really was the end of the one night stand tours. They weren't paying, and Joan's objective of taking the theatre to the people of the country who'd been 'robbed' of their theatre so to speak, as far as I could see it didn't really apply because there was so few people interested in coming to see us that you know, they obviously couldn't care less etc, etc. So anyway...

KH: This must have been quite demoralising for you?

GC: Oh yes. Yes it was. It was a bit sort of... well, as you say demoralising, depressing and all the rest of it. So what happened next was the fact that... well, we'd heard about the chance of getting a theatre in Glasgow. So Gerry, our business manager, had found a very interesting character - he was known as the 'Mad Millionaire of Mary Hill'! - he was a Yorkshire man in a sort of a donkey brown plus fours, Harris Tweed outfit sort of thing, but he was so taken by this bunch of old decrepit actors etc, etc, that he very kindly let us occupy one of his properties in Glasgow. And it was very kind of him really, but I think he was a bit of a nutter really and truly, because taking on this company was

you know, a bit of a... We were very near the Botanical Gardens up there. And it was quite interesting in that, John Bury, [who] you'll have heard of in Theatre Workshop, decided to feed some carnivorous plants in the whatsit, so he used to kill flies and take them to the Botanical Gardens [Laughing] and feed them to the carnivorous plants as a sort of a pastime. Anyway, the thought of a theatre seemed quite promising actually at that time. And we thought, 'Oh well, it'll be very good'. And meantime, to keep us alive, we went back to doing Shakespeare for schools, and that was our means of livelihood. Then sadly it all fell through. I don't really quite know the history of it. But obviously finance was the big problem, it wasn't on.

Then Gerry heard about this theatre in Stratford East 15, the Theatre Royal. And it seemed incredibly cheap – I think it was £90 a week, the rent. So off we trotted, eventually, down to the East End of London. And it was true that the rent was only £90 a week, but no-one had really thought about the cost of electricity and things like that. [Laughs] So there we were in this old theatre – and it really was pretty dirty, it smelt really and truly. And again, because of my building experience I was doing... mending steps and all sorts of strange things, apart from acting. And we eventually found that the lady we'd taken on, in the box office, was 'dusting the till', as I think they say, you know - having a bit of quiet help yourself money, sort of thing. So we gave her the sack of course. She immediately went to the Local Authorities in Stratford and said you know, 'You've got a bunch of gypsies in that theatre.' - and we were all sleeping in the dressing rooms, which of course is illegal. The sanitary inspector turned up, and Gerry, the manager, had to take him round. When he came to the fact that in the dressing rooms everyone had a bed, he said, 'Well it's Joan's principle that you must relax properly before a show and you can only relax on a bed, really and truly to be horizontal, to prepare yourself for playing whatever part you were doing'. What he didn't see of course was the fact that we were concealing gas rings and electrical devices for cooking food etc, etc!

I quite enjoyed it, it was all very cosy you know living in your own dressing room. And I know in Howard's book [Howard Goorney The Theatre Workshop Story] I think they've quoted me as saying I got very interested in devising new dishes. My favourite was an apple omelette which [Laughs] I should think I'd probably be sick if I had it now! But anyway, that came to an end, we seemed to be getting a little bit better for getting an audience and we were able to move out to digs and that sort of set up.

KH: What do you put it down to, the fact that you were getting a better audience?

GC: Well this is the big problem. Joan liked to think of us as taking the theatre to the people who were robbed of their theatre – dispossessed sort of thing. I didn't really think there were all that many locals in the audience. And this would be now, what, 1953? Peter Brook actually made a comment that we were getting a Chelsea audience rather than a Stratford East 15 audience, and I think he was right, we were not getting the locals in. I'd have liked to have, you know, thought that we were attracting the locals to come and see our theatre... But eventually we started to become quite well known. We still went to the Edinburgh Festival. It was the first time, actually, that we were official, because we had been there before, but we were on the Fringe. And we did a combined sort of Henry IV parts 1 & 2 sort of thing. But it wasn't a really good sample of our work, and it was just about bearable but nothing more than that I would say. Anyway, eventually we were recognised by critics etc, etc, and we getting good audiences.

We decided to do as a pantomime, *Treasure Island*, we had a wonderful set by John Bury, and it actually made money – which was a great thrill as far as we were concerned. We actually made £8 a week each, which was you know, like a fortune in those days sort of thing. And from then on I think we began to appreciate the fact that we were getting audiences. We were getting really good houses etc, etc – bums on seats as they say now. And from then on it was the business of being a recognised company, a very different style, very different approach to the sets, and all the rest of it. And then in 1955, there came this wonderful news about going to Paris, because the French have an Arts Festival every year and they choose companies from various countries, and it just so happened that they were attracted by Theatre Workshop. So we took *Volpone* and *Arden of Faversham* as our contribution: a great success I'm happy to say, and [deepens voice] recognised by the British Embassy in the person of Sir Gladwyn Jebb. Who invited us for drinks after the first night etc, etc – all very pleasant! And then we were further recognised by Bertolt Brecht, allowing us to do *Mother Courage*. It was conditional upon Joan playing *Mother Courage*. Which she said, 'Oh yes, of course I will.' - she didn't have the slightest intention of playing *Mother Courage* at all! But anyway, things got slightly peppery because Bertolt sent over one of his assistant directors and he reported back to Bertolt that Joan was not preparing to play the part, she was rehearsing an actress, and furthermore he'd been locked out of the theatre because he wanted to make a rubber stamp reproduction of the Berliner Ensemble's production of *Mother Courage*, which Joan of course was not going to accept. So Bertolt replied immediately and said, 'If she does not play *Mother Courage*, she will not be allowed to do the play.', so she had to do it in the end. And so we went to the North Devon Arts Festival, and played in the Queen's Hall, Barnstable and [Laughs] found ourselves somewhat short of all the technical know-how, you know, that the Berliner Ensemble have with their wonderful theatres etc, etc.

So then after that it was a case of, you know, the company... Harry had left just after - oh no! He was still with us for *Legend of Pepito* I think, yes so he must have stayed on a bit longer. We had a problem in that we were not accepted by Kenneth Tynan as an acceptable style of acting etc, etc, but he decided that Harry – who came originally from the commercial theatre to join Theatre Workshop, again via the lovely Avis Bunnage who was his girlfriend at that time. And Ken Tynan got Harry to leave the company and have a West End show with... oh I forget now what the show was called, but in other words we were beginning to disintegrate really and truly. Another of our actors, a Canadian – he went back to Canada - and he was getting a bit dissatisfied. And so it was the end of what I call the 'old company' of Theatre Workshop really and truly. Thereafter Joan was certainly... If you read her book - you know her thing, it is called just *Joan* I think...

KH: *Joan's Book*.

GC: ...yes that's right, yes - you'll see that she was really very upset at loosing the old company, but had to you know, get down to forming a new company, and got some very good people as well who adapted to her style of production and all the rest of it. And they just carried on. And as I say, she very kindly invited me to go back to do things. Apart from going back for this very poor *Henry IV* part 1 & 2, I just preferred to stay on in television and doing the odd bit of film stuff etc, etc. And so that was it, it was the end as far as I was concerned with my association with Theatre Workshop.

KH: Why did you decide to leave, was it because the company was...?

GC: It was this sort of strange business, as I say, of... I know that Shirley - my wife - got upset about the business of being on stage night after night sort of thing. At least with television, you don't have to do it eight times a week. You just do your rehearsals and then you record, that was the routine. Sometimes it was live television - like Z Cars for instance - but mostly it was a recorded show [that] you did, which as far as Shirley was concerned was much more acceptable than being absent for six nights a week doing a stage show etc, etc. So I kept declining these things from Joan.

And then as I say, not long after that, Gerry died, and that was a real blow to her. But at last, as I say, she came to see me when I was doing Billy Liar and said that she was off to Africa, and later on I heard about this news of getting friendly with President Bourguiba of Tunisia, who was so impressed by her desire to have this fun city which she thought of... it was an educational thing really and truly. And she was very keen to get kids interested in it. She got one or two very prominent architects to get involved as well. Even... have you heard of these geodesic domes at Buckminster Fuller... they've used this style of construction at that place in Cornwall that has that wonderful garden...

KH: Oh, the Eden Project?

GC: Yes, the Eden Project, thank you yes. Yes, and that's the geodesic dome business. She wanted that to be used as her building sort of thing, but in it all these magical devices where you can press a button and get a lecture on any subject you choose. Then disaster came when she raised the question of women in Muslim society, and President Bourguiba did not like that at all. And so the orange grove disappeared and all contact was lost with the President. So I... Some time after... well just not long after we came here [GC's house], I went to Tunisia to do a thing called... just called AD - Anno Domini - written by an Italian gentleman who had a thing about the Bible and keeps adapting parts of that to make a television show out of. This was what, way back, this must have been '85 I think... no '84, '84 yes. And James Mason was still alive, he was in it... Ava Gardner was still in, playing Mary. And one death defying line I remember from that epic was, 'What was Jesus like as a boy?'. And the poor lady had to say, 'Well he was always hungry.'! [Laughs] Which I thought was the line to end all lines!

But anyway, as I say these short trips abroad were acceptable, and Shirley did come actually. And one we did in Switzerland, in the Italian part of Switzerland - Bellinzona. And it was putting voices along... there was me, Victor Spinetti and an American actress Ruth... no I can't think of her name I'm afraid, that's the worst of old age. And we were putting our voices onto a cartoon series. So Shirley said, 'I'm going to come along', so she came along, and luckily we were in a very good hotel, very super food. And while she was swanning around in Switzerland - whilst we were recording - a good time was had by all. So that was one that she did get involved in.

But apart from that it was a case of you know, you either pick on the domestic life, or you go full time for the working life as an actor, and that is it, that was the choice as far as I was concerned. A long West End run... Apart from the fact that it's mentally stultifying, really and truly, the business of doing it eight times a week. I think no show should last for more than... what, say a few months, say four or five months, maybe six months, maybe, because after that you go on auto-drive. It's interesting actually what

happens - you sometimes lose yourself, in that you say, 'Have I said that line? Well I must have, they're laughing.'! So you know, you are literally... you're not really being there 100%, you're sort of held back a little bit.

KH: Autopilot almost.

GC: Yes, yes. And we had some very strange things in Billy Liar. One night, we'd just started Act 2 and a voice came from the balcony, [man's upper class voice] 'Excuse me, could you start again, I missed the first bit.' You know, everybody looked, 'What do we do, what do we do, what do we do?' So a lovely actress called Mona Washbourne was playing my wife, and she was like a rock. She was very good, she got us all... she kept us on the straight and narrow sort of thing. And in addition to that we had a character one night - the manager, in the first interval, went up to him, refunded his seat price because he wouldn't stop laughing! He was euphoric, he just sort of said, 'Hoo, hoo hoo' [very deep laugh]. He was spoiling it for the audience, he just would not stop laughing, so we had to chuck him out. There were two occasions - Albert did one, and one of the actresses, it happened to her as well - where they had to step forward down to the footlights and say, 'Could you please stop laughing.', because it was just so funny to a lot of the audience. And, 'We can't really say the dialogue if you are persistently laughing all the time.' sort of thing. We got a bit of a reputation for being a rather strange show where we talked to the audience sort of thing. [Laughs]

KH: Billy Liar was really successful commercially, how did it compare working on that production to working at Theatre Workshop?

GC: Oh there was a very good director - again he was very keen on Theatre Workshop - that was Lindsay Anderson. You know he did Clockwork Orange, the film and all that caper. A very good director. He was near to Joan in his production methods. But again, I found myself, from time to time - mostly actually in television - thinking of directors as being just about totally useless as directors, comparing them to Joan that is. All they did, they told you where to move and 'this is a bit of a quick scene, this is a bit of a slow scene' and all that, but their analysis of the script and everything else was nowhere near to Joan's approach to work.

KH: When you talk about Joan's approach, what kind of director was she from your experience?

GC: From my experience, she would say, 'Right, well first of all...' like all companies I suppose, 'let's read this, let's see what there is'. Right, so we'd have the read through, that was the very first thing. 'What do you think, how about that character?' etc, etc. 'Yes, I need to do some work with George on that part and really get into the background of it' etc, etc. 'OK, yes.'. Start rehearsals, 'Right. Right, George, well you're playing this part, have you discovered anything, you know in the writing or anything about the character?' etc, etc. 'Oh yes Joan, yes I have, yes, yes.' So I'd do something and she'd say, 'That was a load of rubbish wasn't it?' because you know, you haven't really thought about this character at all. So she'd reduce you to ruins. You had to be very humble and accept the fact that what you thought was good acting was total

rubbish as far as she was concerned. The only person, incidentally, who came anywhere near... very similar in fact to direction, was Ken Loach. And I did a thing with him, with that lovely actress – who's just died a couple of months ago - Anna Cropper and it was about schizophrenia. And it was a pretty heavy piece. But he was the nearest thing to Joan, in that he wouldn't let you get away with any sort of crummy acting or anything like that.

When you ask you know about the different styles, again, Sam Wanamaker was good. He would say, 'You know, have you thought about this, and have you thought about that?' Usually you find that theatre directors very carefully choose their cast, and make sure that Doris Brown, or whoever the lady is, is very near to the character that she's supposed to be playing in the play. So the director thinks, 'Well I don't have much to do with her, she's ideal for the part. Right she's got the part.', and that's it. And at rehearsal, perhaps not so much 'darling' goes in... there's lots of 'darlings' being used and all the rest of it. A very sort of, what I call superficial approach actually to the drama itself. But Ken Loach, certainly in... although it was television of course, he was the very nearest thing to Joan in his method of saying, 'You know, I just don't believe you there, you're not right.'. And he was right, he was... as Joan was. She would always say, 'I'm sorry, you were miles off the part' or as I see from my notes from Malvolio, 'nine tenths of this part remains unsolved'. Which is very encouraging isn't it really? [Laughs]

KH: With the classics that you did and the Shakespeare, you got a reputation for doing Shakespeare quite differently to other companies...

GC: Oh yes.

KH: ...I wondered if you could just say a little bit about that.

GC: Well again... for instance when we did Richard II – which we, for a bit of fun called 'Dick 2' – Harry played King Richard, I played Bolingbroke etc etc, and for the first couple of weeks we just talked about the period of the drama – about the times of Richard II etc, etc, working from paintings and things like that, written accounts of what things were in those days etc, etc. In other words, trying to get ourselves into the mood of that period, and also to think what must it have been like wearing costumes like they've shown in that picture there – you know, for movement – so we'd rehearse in clothes as near to the costume that we were going to eventually wear, just to see how it affected your movement. Again this movement thing, going back to Laban, is how important that was in the way you moved on stage etc, etc. And certainly for the ladies, long gowns and all the rest of it, they would rehearse in long skirts just to get that feel of moving etc... all these little details, so you'd finally get around to learning the lines which seemed to be... Again, I don't know whether we were deceiving ourselves, but seemed to be so much easier because we'd got sympathetic into that period. And I never had any problems with lines in Theatre Workshop - it always seemed so easy to get into the part etc, etc. I found in that play in particular that you could really get down to the character. We did it deliberately to clash with the Old Vic Company, John Neville playing Richard II and I can't remember... I think it was Eric Portman playing Bolingbroke etc. We were very favourably compared with the Old Vic production because there was a direct thing about Joan's work etc, etc, not so much interested in making pretty noises and paying too much attention to the 'beautiful verse' and all that sort of thing. Years

and years later, you know, Joan had a chat with John Gielgud, and in that chat I think there was a moment where he says that he'd realised later in life that he was too interested in 'the beautiful sound' of the dialogue and the blank verse and all the rest of it, not really getting into what the man was saying to... you know, well 'I'm going to cut your head off' or whatever it was. In other words getting near to the truth of the line as far I can see.

It was all very interesting, in that Joan would say, 'Look, you are wanting the throne aren't you? You've got to get rid of this homosexual freak, this Richard II, so what are you going to do to achieve that end?' etc, etc. And she'd really get you sort of... 'ooh... I must get rid of this bastard and all this sort of thing.' I think if you refer to write-ups of that period you'll see references to you know using the voice quite differently, not being so respectful of the blank verse business, that's what I'm really trying to say. Not ignoring it of course, but putting life into it, in that when you're saying so and so, and so and so, you thought, 'Well yes, I see he did mean so and so, and so and so' but don't try and make it pretty and classical or anything like that. And you'll see, I think, from Joan's book and various other references that she... in fact even in Murray's [Murray Melvin *The Art of Theatre Workshop*] he quotes things about not making things so acceptable in terms of the commercial theatre, which had a style very different from ours.

We were certainly a really cohesive company: there were no stars, I mean, that was a dirty word to be 'a star' or anything like that. We were a really close company in the way that we worked, we all liked what Joan was trying to do with us etc, etc. As I say, that eventually got to a state where it was just beginning to wear thin in that this business of, 'Well we don't seem to be getting anywhere in terms of recognition almost', that's a slight exaggeration of course but you know, I'd like the odd word of praise from Joan. 'Well it was alright, but I think you could do more in...' so and so, so and so. Eventually this did finish the old company: you know, Harry had left, I had this newly found state of marriage etc, etc, and another of our good actors, the other George – George Luscombe – he went back to Canada and he formed his own theatre company over there. It was very successful, which was entirely due to Joan really and truly, getting an approach to theatre. So it began, as I say, to wear really thin. And a little praise wouldn't have been out of place.

I do recall... I think it was the writer for the *Volpone* and the *Arden of Faversham* – a very good friend of ours, who was Tom Dryberg, the Labour MP – who actually wrote in an article about the Paris Festival, 'Joan was sort of' - I forget the word he actually he used, but I think it was something like 'terrified' – 'that they would realise how good they were, these actors. After her bashing them through in rehearsal and all the rest of it. And she'd be in the wings thinking, 'Oh God, they mustn't think they're so good, I'll find fault somewhere!'. [Laughing] You know... just in other words the hill... you'll not climb the hill yet, you're getting near but you must climb more, you must put more into it etc, etc. And I think that's a fair summing up of what was happening to the company. And I think a bit later on... With all these new companies that she had to form - because of course they transferred the Brendan Behan plays, which again I was kindly invited to be in, but again, I realised it would be the West End so 'pff' as far as I was concerned, it wasn't on, all the... *Sparrers Can't Sing*, *Taste of Honey*, all that sort of period etc, etc - but again and again, 'Right, form a new company', and I think the strain was telling on Joan and she eventually thought, 'Oh well I've had enough' and Gerry had died so that was it. You know and... as I say the orange grove disappeared [Laughs] so she had this business of... I don't know, 'What shall I do?' Literally. You know she wanted to get into a business of helping people with her approach to theatre I suppose, really, and fighting for minorities. For instance she went to Australia and got loads of praise for all her

productions etc, etc, but she got very involved with the Aborigine set up in Australia. She'd get herself involved in all these sort of things... it wasn't acceptable to her...

KH: To go back to earlier when you first started with Theatre Workshop, how did those first impressions in the productions that you did then, compare with the later stuff? Did you feel that the way you were doing things developed and changed?

GC: I think it'd been a... it was moving, it was developing all the time. Because what they had done... Before I joined Workshop they had done the odd little bit here and there sort of thing. Some very good stuff – things like Johnny Noble which I don't even know if there's a script of it still around - and then Ewan did this Uranium 235 which they'd done before we took it on tour in Scandinavia. And I'm sure that Joan must have picked up the business of how do you get actors to play these roles etc... they did that... A Sheep Well... Fuente Ovejuna [by Lope de Vega] or whatever it's called, in which she took part, of course, as an actress. I have to say, incidentally, that she was always very keen on saying, 'When you're on stage, vocally, physically or whatever, too much exaggeration – hamming in other words, and I'm a natural ham, I assure you! – can be bad, too much for you'. And I do recall, this is at quite an early stage, that she was... I think she was in either a little bit of Chekhov we did, or this adaptation from the Commedia dell'Arte, The Flying Doctor, and I thought, 'Hold on, you're doing exactly what you've been telling us not to do, in terms of how you acted.'. In other words - and I think it's quite common - as a director she was terrific, as an actress a little bit you know [high pitched voice] 'Ooh hello, you know how are you, hello.' I mean, I'm hamming it up a bit of course, but she stepped over the mark as far as I could see - a little bit prone to exaggerate things. Which is very easy to do, because time and time again you are aware of this problem of... It's all very easy for a person to say, 'You know, Kate, you shouldn't be doing that, you should be more...' this, that, and the other. And then going and playing a part yourself and you realising, 'Just a minute, he's doing exactly what he's told me not to do' you know. Something happens between directing and acting in terms of how you do the job I suppose, really.

KH: What were your early impressions when you first joined the company, what were your first impressions of the company?

GC: Oh I was very impressed actually. They were all living in what they called the 'schloss' and the reason for that name was that a very friendly doctor called Doctor Schlossberg in Manchester was very sympathetic again to Theatre Workshop and let them use a big house that he owned as their place. So they split up into little ménages, well into couples obviously, really and truly. You know, if you fancied someone and you could set up a do, fair enough, that's how it went. So I arrived as a single, little old man [Laughs] - actually you see I was 24 years old, I'd been in the army and all the rest of it. I wasn't a sweet young thing by any means! - and I thought, 'Oh I like this' and she explained to me, Joan, in a sort of an introductory lecture about 'we all have our own little favourite in a company obviously, and if you think you can set up with someone, well fair enough that's you. That's your pleasure' sort of thing. And then... This is again very interesting, a little moment... this must have been 1951/52 somewhere around there. A very interesting little event took place... Gerry, as I say, was Joan's... she kept calling him her boyfriend, which always seemed to me to be a little bit out of joint with the time, [Laughs] but anyway her boyfriend. And Gerry took a fancy to one of the

actresses in the company called Barbara Young – who's still around, I think her daughter's acting as well. There came a moment with this place in Manchester where we were - this wasn't the 'schloss', this was a broken down old office which we'd taken over - and Joan went into the wardrobe room to get something and discovered Gerry with Barbara, in what we might call a compromising position. And all this business about, 'you know, we're very free and adult about our relationships with each other etc', it suddenly got all very monogamous! And she called her a trollop and a what-sit and all the rest of it, and she got her kicked out of the company - the fact that Gerry had strayed to this little actress was not acceptable to Joan, and yet she was very insistent as I say on you know, 'It's very adult the way we have a relationship with each other' etc, etc. So that was a little example of how the theory got a little bent when it came to, you know, an actual crisis!

KH: What was your impression of Ewan MacColl's involvement at the company at that point?

GC: We found, actually, over the years in the company that you either were a MacCollite or a Rafflite - you know, these were the two alternatives sort of thing. I was a little bit uneasy with Ewan MacColl, not because he was a deserter from the army – you know, he was Jimmy Miller really and truly and then this name 'Ewan MacColl' is a load of rubbish really, he just thought of it, and he grew his beard and all that sort of thing. He had, in his opinion, some God-given right to get any young actress in the company into bed as soon as possible – that was his thing. You know he was married to Joan pre-war? And I think Joan had got a little bit cheesed off with... You know, he was off again with some other little lady or whatever, whatever. So that didn't last very long. And it was a case of either you went along with this... this was all, you know it's life, you know, it's the way things happen. Or Gerry - who of course later on had, you know committed the unforgivable sin of having another little bird in the costume room – he seemed to be much more rock steady. But Ewan never seemed to accept the fact that Gerry could influence Joan in any way in terms of what she did etc, etc. He seemed to have, in his opinion, some God-given right that he could still have influence over Joan, and ignore Gerry altogether sort of thing. So there were quite a few hot exchanges between Ewan and Gerry from time to time. I always thought Gerry – who was a very, very strong powerful man – he could have sort of picked up Ewan and flung him across the room, but he was always very calm and cool about various things. So there was always that in the background, it wasn't a sort of, 'Oh isn't everything wonderful in Theatre Workshop' or lovey-dovey by any means, there was always this undercurrent: Ewan MacColl wanting to be top dog, and Ewan could never accept the fact that we should have a permanent home, he wanted to keep perpetually touring.

Howard - Howard Goorney - was a definitely a MacCollite, while I was always a Rafflite in how we approached things. I mean, Gerry had some terrible problems. Have you heard the story of how we got the set for Volpone and Arden of Faversham to Paris?

KH: I think I might have read about this, but do tell me anyway.

GC: Yes, well yes. I mean I... [Laughs] Gerry for some wonderful reason had persuaded the official gentleman who dealt with luggage etc, to treat the set as personal luggage.

And he got little pink stickers all over... [Laughing] over the trees that we used in Arden of Faversham and the set for Volpone.

KH: It's quite ingenious really.

GC: Oh it was, absolutely. Oh he... I mean, what that man must have gone through really financially! You know at one time... I do remember one incident... Because Gerry came from a very wealthy Jewish family, he'd stolen his mother's ear-rings to sell for money to help the Theatre, and Joan made him take them back. [Laughs] ...to sort this problem of finance. But I thought the business of getting your set treated as personal luggage was a wonderful stroke etc, etc.

But what that man must have endured in terms of perpetual bills and crises, and threats of legal action and all the rest of it...! But he really was devoted to Joan. I mean, that sounds a bit phoney when you heard he also had a little bit of fancy for various other little ladies, but he was really serious about her position in the theatre. And I'm sure you'll have read or have been told that he did everything - he even bought her clothes and that sort of set up! Because Joan couldn't care less about the way she looked, she always had a sort of a tatty little woolly cap on. And she was very keen on the Gaulois and all that sort of thing... eventually she did stop that. There was a little conflict there, because when we were... I think it must have been the Comedy Theatre when we were playing Uranium 235 there. Howard and I were sharing a dressing room, and we were both very strong non-smokers but Joan kept coming round at night-time, you know, with the notes from the previous night sort of thing, and she would insist on smoking her Gaulois. And we thought, 'Right, sod you!' and we put up a big notice: 'No smoking allowed in this dressing room'. It didn't work, she just ignored it you know she just...! [Laughs] So as I said... I mean, obviously there were all sorts of little ructions going on all the time.

And again, there was a little ruction with an actress called Doreen Warburton who was in Uranium 235, and Ewan was dealing with her at the time - getting her into bed on all occasions. And he was of course married to Jean Newlove at that time, with Hamish - as he was then - a little baby, their son. And Jean was getting very upset about this and so Joan sort of... I don't know quite how she did it now... she somehow got rid of Doreen Warburton. She must have either given her the push straight away, just to get her out of the whole scene so that Jean Newlove could resume happy relations with Ewan MacColl for bringing up a family - because of course they had their daughter Kirsty after that.

KH: I was going to ask you actually, you mentioned her [Doreen Warburton] being in Uranium 235...

GC: Yes.

KH: I was going to ask you about Uranium 235 and what your impressions of it were?

GC: Oh I loved it. It was episodic. It was sort of Brechtian in that we were all playing about 10 or 11 parts. And I have to tell you that the quickest changes of costume were to be seen in our presenting of Uranium 235! I've got a lovely story from Sweden: we

were doing Uranium 235 over there and what you had to do was lay out your costumes in the wings for these quick changes etc. There were one or two people to help from the wardrobe or something like that, etc, but we could never be rich enough to employ stage hands - we never used a prompt for instance: that was, you know, an extra body as far as we were concerned! Anyway, we came to the stage in Uranium 235, where we were up to the present time for developing the bomb. And we all had dark, long trousers and long, white coats to make us look like scientists. And the previous scene had just finished and we all dashed off, got into our white coats and dark trousers, and then back on stage, and there we were doing our bit [when] we suddenly realised that one of us – Johnny Armitage – had no trousers; he just had his white coat on! And what had happened, he'd whipped off stage from the previous scene to get his costume and he'd laid it out on the grand piano in the wings. And a large Swedish stagehand had decided he needed a rest, and went horizontal right over [Laughing] Johnny's trousers. And by the time he'd woken him up it was time to go on, so he had no time to put his trousers on! I always think - to this day - that the Swedes watching it thought, 'There's something very symbolic in that. One of them had no trousers, what could that mean? There's some deep theatrical meaning for that!'. [Laughing] That was a lovely example of [Laughs] what can go wrong in the wings etc, etc.

KH: That's a fantastic story.

GC: But you were asking about the piece, it started... you know I've got to really think now about getting the stuff. It was sort of a little snapshot of various periods, I mean, they went back as far as Giordano Bruno being burnt at the stake! But the lighting by John Bury was terrific - this concentration on spots and all the rest of it... instead of just blanket lighting, which is so boring. You can pick out so much more in the drama [by] really being selective with your light – give him a spot for that line etc, etc. You had to be careful about your position on stage, because of course it was all pre-set the lighting, so you had to be on your spot for that particular sequence. But I enjoyed... again you've got to remember that I was what, still in my twenties, and you were very much fitter and more active obviously then. You could... quite enjoy this business of whipping into the wings, whipping on another costume and 'fwwp' off again! So it was the sheer pace of it that really got into you I suppose, really and truly. And it was very well received... As I say, apart from having no Welsh audiences apart from the odd person turning up! Things got so desperate on those one night stand tours in Wales, [that] Gerry issued little leaflets saying, 'If you bring this leaflet along to the Miners Hall tonight, we'll let you in for nothing', and even that didn't work! [Laughs] So, I mean you're getting pretty desperate when you're saying... [Laughing] So as I say, that. And another time he got one of the actresses to put a kettle-drum on, and she had to go round this little Welsh village - wherever we were - beating the drum and saying you know, 'Miners Hall tonight!', wherever the show was. In other words, there was this constant business about... well Ewan always talked about it... this was the lovely theory - and Joan of course kept talking about it - about bringing theatre to people who've been dispossessed. And I have to say I never accepted it. You know, it just wasn't working. We were getting all sorts of posh, you know, theatre intellectuals and all the rest of... And the real people that we were supposed to be attracting into the theatre couldn't care less. We started with Twelfth Night, at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East 15, and I was playing Malvolio... various incidents [took place], they threw pennies on the stage, they threw toffees on the stage, they called me 'Big Head!' when I appeared in my hat. [Laughing] I think the locals who turned up thought, 'Twelfth Night – it must be a

bedroom farce or something. Twelfth Night, cooor!' you know! And then they saw it was Shakespeare they were... [Laughs]

KH: Hugely disappointed!

GC: So... and as I say it really never improved upon that as regards the locals. But we did eventually get an audience, but not the sort of audience that Joan thought she was going to get.

KH: The other thing I wanted to ask you about, which you touched on briefly before, was John Bury's lighting and set design.

GC: Oh yes, yes.

KH: I wondered if you could just say a little bit about that and how it was different from what other people were doing on the stage?

GC: Oh yes. Well, as I say the traditional lighting for the ordinary commercial theatre is... what I would call 'blanket lighting'. In fact, every area of the stage was lit to the same intensity. But you can sort of... you can point your audience - direct your audience - to say, 'look at this character here who's going to do so and so, and so and so', by the simple business of getting a spot on him and the rest of the stage is in - not darkness but very sort of lower key lighting sort of thing. And this... it helps the production. Visually I think it's terrific in terms of, you know, what it looks like sort of thing and in the finished article. And he had studied that... Murray mentions in this book that Adolf... was it Appia or some name like that who...?

KH: I think so, yes.

GC: Incidentally do you realise that John Bury was never called John Bury? We always called him 'Camel'. I used to say it because he could go for so long without a wash! [Laughs] But Camel was a brilliant lighting man and when I first joined I became his assistant. I was like the kiss of death to anything electrical or mechanical! [Laughs] So he had to put up a lot with 'flicking George Cooper' coming up and saying... [Laughs] 'No put that light...' 'Oh no put the light...' Have you heard the story about how they got a lot of their lighting equipment?

KH: No I don't think so.

GC: They had some very big - they're called 'brutes', really big lights - on a stand of course, obviously. And they had got them from a crashed American plane on the Derbyshire Moors and it had been full of lighting equipment for a stage company or something. They used to go from Manchester to get a breath of fresh of fresh air, on to

the moors of Derbyshire etc, etc, and they discovered this plane and thought, 'My God, look at all this!' And they gradually got the lighting out of the plane, and it was a very useful contribution to the Theatre. And Camel was delighted that he got all this equipment for free. So that's how we got our lighting equipment!

But again, trying to explain, you were aware that you were in a spot certainly, if you were going to make a special speech or whatever. But it was the overall visual thing that was the really big thing. There can be nothing more boring, as far as I'm concerned, as this blanket lighting and then everyone speaking on cue, 'oh yes, yes, yes, yes...', and all that sort of caper. But to heighten the drama, the feeling of the mood of the particular scene etc... I mean, it wasn't all spots of course - we did things like Juno and the Paycock for instance, and that was fairly general lighting etc, etc - it was more applicable to the things that had been written within the company that the really talented lighting was shown by John Bury. It was more available for that sort of spirit... if you were doing... You see, we had to compromise a little bit - for instance we did George Bernard Shaw, Ibsen, Chekhov etc, etc, so the spot-light business didn't really apply then, we did use blanket lighting because there was just general dialogue going on etc, etc. And it would become a little bit arty-farty frankly if [when] you were concentrating on whoever spoke, they suddenly had a spot put on them. It just didn't work then. But I always had terrific admiration for Camel. And Sir... what do they call him, I can't think of his name now... who used to run the Shakespeare Company?

KH: Peter Hall?

GC: Peter Hall exactly. He kidnapped Camel not long after...! As I say the company was disintegrating really and truly, and he thought, 'Well, I'd like to have a good lighting man and costume man'. And from that Camel went... He'd married again to this lovely Liz lady, and she and Camel did the costumes and set together, and they got terrific notices for their various things, but that was with the Shakespeare Company or Glyndebourne. Liz, his second wife - I think she's got some Russian background or something - and she was trained at RADA. I think she was going to be an actress at first and then she was a very good artist, she got more interested in costumes etc, etc. [upper class accent] But she still had the RADA approach to speech you see, and spoke rather like this. And they went to Chicago to do some opera that Camel was doing, and after the first night they were all celebrating - it had been a great success etc - and they were having a meal with the producers and Camel and his new wife Liz... Liz was going on about this that and the other, and one of the Americans said to her, [American accent] 'Doesn't it hurt to talk like that?' [Laughs] ...I think which is lovely! But then of course that was not Theatre Workshop, that was into the commercial theatre. But old Camel carried on with his love of lighting etc and making the sets. He did some wonderful sets. He unfortunately died some years ago now - got rather poorly with flipping cancer and all that sort of stuff. They had a memorial thing for Twelfth Night... have I got it right? Yes - at Glyndebourne. This was, you know with the new theatre being built there. And they recreated his set etc, and all the old company were invited to go along. And it really was a very delightful do, because it was all done in praise of Camel, you know, for what wonderful sets he built and all the rest of it - and his lighting as well. And it was a good farewell to what he'd done in the way of theatre etc, etc.

But he got so poorly in the end that... He came here with Liz, oh, some time ago; he had to be helped out of the car because his legs had sort of more or less... and he was a big man, he was six foot three, and rather heavy. You know, when you think of it, I

think there's about two of us left. There's me... [Laughs] I'm 82... [Laughs]. And there's Harry Greene still, and Harry joined us during one of our Welsh tours.

KH: He must have been one of the only members in the audience!

[Laughter]

GC: Oh dear, oh dear. You become aware of, you know, what time is doing to you, in terms of... I mean, I find myself now thinking, 'Gor blimey! I'm absolutely knocked if I do half an hour's good work in the garden!'. And you suddenly realise... at 82 mate, don't be stupid, you're not as strong as you were! You know, just have little sit down and take it easy.

KH: I think the last thing I wanted to ask you was whether you had a favourite production that you were in, or a favourite role?

GC: Oh well I suppose without any question Volpone was the way... She [Joan Littlewood] cut a lot of it actually. She cut a lot of it after he's revealed as being a fake - she cut all that stuff out, when he was on trial etc, etc, so it got a very nice pacey production. I mean, you can really go to town with Volpone in terms of how you play the part. And also - very close to that actually - I think Schweik... playing Schweik in *The Good Soldier Schweik*. Because... I don't know if you've seen any of the photos from that production...? It was a reproduction again of what they'd done in the 1930s, and, you know, from Murray's book that as far as he could make out, Theatre Workshop - with Joan - was the first to use back projection in this country in a production. Which was... because of course they were very fond of the Piscator and all these German characters who were brilliant with all their equipment etc, etc. So Schweik, Volpone I think are favourite roles etc, I suppose yes. Not very exciting I suppose... and I enjoyed Bolingbroke as well, come to think of it really and truly. Because he's a real, you know he's a real bastard, out for power etc. How Harry [Greene] survived that I just do not know, because Joan decided to accentuate the homosexual thing. And so Harry obligingly... because you always did what Joan told you to do, played it you know [camp voice] a little bit sort of like this. And we had a school audience on one occasion, and they of course took the mickey. As soon as they realised how Harry was playing the part they went, [high pitched camp voice] 'Ooh, hello' and all this business was going on. How Harry survived that I do not know because... He did, he played it, but it nearly finished him, I'm sure, because I mean, Joan had to sympathise with him afterwards, and saying you know, 'Little sods, they were just sort of being you know, crummy, as far as I'm concerned. You know, just ignore them.' I had a little instance of that when... I think it was... Yes, it was during *The Dutch Courtesan* - I had this wonderful part called Cockledemoy, I had some lovely lines like, 'And when he's dead I'll piss on his grave' and 'I'll make him fart crackers' and all these lovely lines. And one night we had an audience in - I don't know where they were from, the British Legion or something - who went 'Ooh, ooh!' - you know, there were all sort of shocked noises coming from the audience. And that did upset me a bit; it threw me off my balance rather. And Joan went for me and said you know, 'You do not pay attention to stupid people in the audience who react in those ways.' She pulled me up by the socks and said, 'Right keep on saying those lines and ignore what they say out in the audience.' You know, from time to time,

as I say, she would appear and put you on the right path. And she was very, oh combative about the roles I played after... She came to see me in *Billy Liar* and said, 'Oh no, no. It's not really very good.' Although it was a great commercial success and all the rest of it, she didn't approve of it at all.

KH: Why didn't she approve of it?

GC: I mean, Lindsey Anderson, as I say, was a very keen Theatre Workshop friend and all the rest of it. But I mean, I never asked her, 'Well what would you have done?'. I should think in the first place she wouldn't have bothered doing it, because it was a commercial play. You know, it was as simple as that really and truly. She would have said, 'I don't want anything to do with that.'. The only time she ever said, in so many words, 'I will just do the commercial theatre approach to this, we'll make some money, I'll go commercial. Right.', and that was when they did this disastrous pantomime - 'Sheer delight for young and old', you know, based on *Alice in Wonderland* and all that sort of thing. And it was total disaster: the audiences didn't like it at all etc, etc. And she contradicted herself, because she was not a commercial director, and it just wasn't acceptable to the audience. You know, it's... I was playing Tweedle Dee, the executioner and the back legs of the White Knight's horse. [Laughs] And I was absolutely knackered by the end of it - after we'd done this pantomime. And I got tonsillitis [Laughs] and thought, 'You know, this is the end, I'm going to die' sort of thing! But then... As I say, after that, by the autumn they started this dreadful business of the Welsh tours and sticking furniture tops on old lorries. When you think, if it had been the other way round, if we'd have been travelling South down that road, if we'd have gone off the road we'd have gone down a cliff face! [Laughs] As it was we very conveniently crashed into the embankment on the left side. When you think, what, there were 19 of us in the back of that lorry! I've got a lovely photograph of the lorry, and everyone's doing things which look vaguely intellectual, but there's just me getting tucked into a big sandwich which was... [Laughs] I became known as the local pig in the company! As I say, with my superb culinary contribution: the apple omelette! I mean, that was a masterpiece as far as I was concerned. Can you imagine an omelette with apples in it! [Laughing] Oh dear, oh dear yes.

KH: [Laughing] I think those were all the things I wanted to ask you. I don't know whether you've got anything else that you want to add? Anything to do with Theatre Workshop?

GC: I can't think at the moment. No. I'll probably remember things you know when you've gone and say, 'Oh why the hell didn't I mention that?!'. I mean... Summing up, in a way when we toured abroad the fantastic write-ups we got were absolutely incredible. I remember after the Swedish tour - and they had more than one tour of course - but the one that I was in 1951, 'this Joan Littlewood's name should be written in letters of fire and pressed upon the eyes of the British Theatre public'. Things like that, because they could just see... and that was doing Uranium 235, this episodic thing. But it was the way she treated it. And as I say I enjoyed doing that because it was, you know real action time. And for the poor actor who went on without his trousers, it certainly was action time! [Laughs]

No I can't think of anything because in that period... I did about five and a half years in Theatre Workshop and loved it really and truly because I thought how lucky I was. It was only the insistence really of the director of the amateur company I was within Leeds, who was a total fan of Joan Littlewood, who kept saying you know, 'Oh sorry you missed this thing.' As I say I arrived too late to see them in Leeds. I don't know how impressed I would have been actually, because of course I still didn't think you could get a job as an actor. You know, that wasn't on, you had to have a proper job – like being in the drawing office trying to design reinforced concrete! So I don't know what my reaction would have been, actually, to that. But I eventually became... It's like that photograph that they've used on there [Murray Melvin's *The Art of Theatre Workshop*] as well, I mean that really is a good... that's the Canadian actor who went back to Toronto, George Luscombe. But that gives you a good... I'm sure Ewan is there by the fire... but I'm not too sure who the hell that is. Because they did this play... ah this is something I haven't...

KH: Is this *The Other Animals* that picture, is that what it's from?

GC: This is from *The Other Animals*, yes that's right yes. The thing is, Harry and I were playing most of the parts in our productions at Theatre Royal, Stratford East 15, and Joan decided that we deserved a little rest. So her idea of a rest was to send us to Rudolf Laban's Art of Movement Studio in Addlestone, in Surrey. You know, to get away from rehearsing plays and all the rest of it, into this new environment of a little movement etc. 'Alright, thank you very much Joan.', off we went. After the first day at that, we both rang her up and said, 'Are you trying to kill us?'. [Laughing] Because we were both knackered by all the movements that we'd had to do, you know at this place.

KH: What had he got you doing?

GC: Well the thing was it was the... I mean Jean Newlove should be here really to say what they must have done to us. But in the way of movement etc, etc, and we just weren't ready for! We just thought we're going to have a rest. But we were doing all this [gestures], and up and down, and round about, and twiddling your arms and various dimensions and all that and...

You know that Laban invented – I think that's the proper word – this isocohedron, which he later found out is a crystal - actually - in crystallography. It did exist. And what it provides... if you think of those geodesic domes etc, it made little points where you could sort of say, 'Oh that joint there, that's the door plane, but going forwards.', sort of thing. In other words it provided like a reference map for all his movement things etc. And he was a fascinating character old Laban. He was interested in all sorts of movement, in religious movement, fighting – you know, unarmed combat and all this sort of thing. The poor man died not long after I'd joined Theatre Workshop in 1949. You know he had his own ballet company in Germany, and he was thrown out of Germany by Hitler who called him 'this erotic Jew' - Laban had to go. So he came over to Manchester and started things there. A pupil of his, Kurt Joos, did a famous ballet called *The Green Table*...

KH: I've heard of it.

GC: Yes, yes, well he was a Laban product. I can quite see why Joan got interested in him, because when you think of the movement... say you go to see, what some commercial theatre production then, say in Chichester or whatever, in Portsmouth.... When you think of the actual movements called for in the part, they're very limited. So to break out of that, this bit of movement, bit of sound, bit of lighting, you could create another world. You know, instead of just do sitting here, talking to each other sort of thing, what could you do with that? Not much really, obviously, because the dialogue is meant that way to sort of... you know just between the two of us. But with Joan's productions you always had this... Again, she was always prodding you to know you can do better than that. 'Just a little bit more with that...' so and so. That kept you on your toes. If you were humble enough, if you thought... if you were a real big-head and thought you know, [deep voice] 'I'm God's answer to you know to the maiden's prayer for being an actor!' sort of thing, you were in trouble, with Joan. You had to be really, 'Yes, yes I see, Joan, yes thank you very much. You're right, yes.' And so you would try to do what she's sort of insisted on saying, you know you should so and so, or a little bit more... less. And again, to repeat myself, Ken Loach was the [only] director who came anywhere near her, really and truly. Lindsey Anderson good, Sam Wanamaker good, but they just didn't have that sort of dedication thing which kept Joan alive. Have you heard any of her radio work at all?

KH: No I haven't.

GC: We did... is it Mrs Gaskell's, Mary...

KH: Mary Barton?

GC: Mary?

KH: Barton?

GC: Mary Barton of course, yes thank-you. We did it for BBC 2 up in Glasgow, and it was a business of... a lot of the actors were not really familiar with the Lancashire cotton town accent, so they turned up from somewhere in the BBC records, part of her production about the cotton industry, which she'd done for the BBC I think in the 1930s. And it was fascinating to hear, because she was interviewing cotton workers, you know getting them to be relaxed and in front of the microphone – there was no vision of course, no television – there was just the microphone. And they were using it to say, 'Now this is how you get... you know it's that very distinctive Lancashire [Lancashire accent] 'No, don't put it down th'er' this sort of thing like that. And: 'Put it in'th oven' and things... all sorts of little speech things which differentiate between the Lancashire and the York... I mean, I'm dead Yorkshire of course, with Leeds etc. You know [Yorkshire accent] 'wa'er and but'er, put some more but'er on that will ya'. [Laughs] And I've always had... I mean, I'm not particularly proud of it, but I let everybody know I'm from the North and that's fairly obvious.

KH: Yes, well it's like me, I'm pretty Northern too!

GC: Are you, are you?

KH: Well yes, I know about that kind of Lancashire thing because it's all sort of [Lancashire accent] 'cook and look and boook' and...

GC: Yes, oh yes.

KH: Because my grandma and granddad are from Lancashire.

GC: I had a terrible time very early on. This was during Uranium 235 wasn't it, yes. There was something about the Spanish Civil War, and I was this sort of soldier, sort of topless with an army strap thing on and all the rest of it. And I had to say, 'Butcher's, butcher's!' you know to the fascist or something. But being from Leeds I said, 'Botchers, botchers!', [Laughs] because I tried to be posh! And she incidentally... Joan when I first joined said, 'You've got a slightly Jewish accent.' And she was right, because I had been working with a company... I was the only non-Jew in the company - they had started out as an amateur company in Leeds and then had trouble getting audiences and all the rest of it - and had split up. And the bit that I joined from the split had decided to go - they were all Jewish - to do charity things for Jewish efforts. And I'd obviously picked up this slight Jewish accent - which I wasn't aware of - but Joan was very... because she'd got a very good ear for things, you know, in terms of accents and all the rest of it. And so I was a bit surprised that I'd picked up this accent. And the first time I heard my voice on a tape recorder I thought, 'What the bloody hell am I doing? I'm hopeless, it's a horrible voice!'

KH: Did you do a lot of voice work in Theatre Workshop?

GC: Oh yes. Yes, yes, yes.

KH: What kind of voice training did you do there?

GC: The voice training, distinctive pronunciation of things. For instance, little bits of Mozart, if you sort of did it so diddy dum, diddy dum, diddy dum, getting more precision in your speech... oh Gilbert and Sullivan, you know some of the speeches from that - lovely stuff to get - tripping beyond... on the tongue sort of thing. Because it's very easy to be sloppy and miss out little phrases and all the rest of it. They had had, at one time - before I joined - a very good speech man, who I don't think... I don't know what happened to him, whether he just died or what. But they had to rely on Joan herself to carry on with the speech thing. So it was getting this sort of precision. And, 'You gabbled that line, George' you know and 'You weren't very good, what did you say then? What were you trying to say?' and all this going on you know sort of thing. Eventually I think I did manage to make myself heard and understood. And hopefully the

vocal quality improved, because as I say it was such a shock hearing myself. I honestly thought, 'God, horrible!' You know a nasty little voice, sort of 'Hello, what you...'
[Laughs] And I'd been doing a few plays you know with the amateur companies, with the company in the Army in Deolali etc, etc, so I should have been a little bit better than I proved to be eventually. I don't know whether it was the Leeds thing in the background all the time, but it certainly was not acceptable as far as I was concerned.

I think eventually, certainly in Volpone – because there's such a range of character in that. You know when he does the street thing of the mountebank bit, you suddenly could really blow the roof off really in terms of how you projected your voice etc, etc. I've got one or two write-ups that say that 'George Cooper nearly had the roof off the theatre'. Not just being loud, but with the quality that was part of the role that you were playing etc, etc.

I suppose that was... again when we were doing movement and all that sort of thing, to get on with the voice in particular we split into pairs and you pressed your fist against the diaphragm of your partner, and said to your partner, 'Right, push my fist away.' In other words you made them use the diaphragm as a... which is just a muscle actually, so you [gestures]... go like that do a push, push the fist away to get your diaphragm working. So that the voice comes from down here [gestures], it doesn't come from having a head voice, which is... Unfortunately from time to time you are aware of people just... she or he, you're just using your head voice, you know, it's not really coming from way down. Obviously the character determines, you know, a lot of it in any case... So little things like that I think eventually, they got through to Cooper and improved the general level of performance which was to be hoped for actually!

KH: That's great. I think we'll leave it there.

GC: Yes, yes.

KH: That's fantastic, thank you so much.

GC: Oh not at all, my love. No it's just... as I say I'll probably think of all sorts of things when you've gone.

KH: I know I'll be the same, I always do this afterwards. I think, 'Oh why didn't I ask that?'