

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Anthony Verner – interview transcript

Interviewer: Eleanor Carter

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Actor. The Angry Deep; audiences; Binkie Beaumont; comedies; Italia Conti Stage School; Ray Cooney; critics; drama tuition; musicals; The Newcomers; Peter Pan; Terence Rattigan; rehearsing; repertory; ticket prices; television; Theatre of Comedy; theatre-going; Theatre Royal, Brighton; Windsor Theatre.

EC: I'm interviewing Mr Anthony Verner, or Tony Verner, for the oral history project and I just want to start by asking you when you first started working in theatre and your experiences of the early days?

AV: OK. Well I went to the Italia Conti Stage School in 1950, late 1950 and when you were at Conti's there were special classes to get you ready to be in either Peter Pan or a children's show called Where the Rainbow Ends which was on everything, every Christmas. So I went to auditions as a twelve year old (just about to be a thirteen year old) to be in Peter Pan - to play John in Peter Pan. He's the one with the top hat - Wendy's brother.

EC: Wendy's brother, yes.

AV: And there are all these kids on stage and you gradually look around, and they sort of narrow you down, narrow you down until you look around and say, 'Oh, you are going to play John'. So I got it - my first job.

EC: That was your first audition. OK, so from that job then how did you progress further?

AV: Well I was studying at Conti's, so you did ordinary education in the mornings, which was slightly haphazard but good fun, with all these boy actors. And I was there with Johnny Briggs, who went on to be Mike Baldwin and all that in Coronation Street. Who else? Tony Newley, sadly gone, Anthony Newley, Millicent Martin, anyway - Jill Gascoigne, anyway and so you had an agency and you got work. So Peter Pan was the first thing, that was the thrill of being on stage for the first time and all that, and flying on the end of a wire which I've sort of done ever since, so it was good. Kirby's Flying Ballet and all that. Joan Greenwood, very famous actress of her time, in those days, she

was gorgeous and she was Peter Pan. She had a wonderful plummy voice - she was in tons of films and things. She was lovely, brilliant.

EC: So do you feel like... you mentioned flying on a wire, you worked as an actor and you've worked as a director. Do you feel like the technology was changed much?

AV: Oh yes. Golly, yes! Quite a long time before I started work technically and stage managed and things and I didn't become a director until much later. All the things you remember and learnt about when you were a kid stay with you, because that's all I did, except when I had to go and do my National Service - which dates me! - but that was the only bread. But even there I did lots of work, amateur stuff, except I wasn't an amateur because I'd been working for - blimey! - for six years! I'd been an actor for six years before I even did my National Service. It was a bit of a nuisance... actually it was quite fun, I enjoyed it in the end.

EC: So as well as acting though were you a theatregoer? During your National Service or whichever, were you in London, would you see many shows?

AV: No, I wasn't in London. I didn't see many shows, because from the ages of twelve-thirteen onwards I was in a lot of shows in the West End and I sort of understudied or whatever. If you're very pretty - and I wasn't that pretty, but I wasn't bad and I didn't trip over the furniture and remembered my lines - you got the work. And I knew what to do, I just liked doing it. I don't know, it just sort of happened. I was at the Garrick Theatre in *Red Letter Day*, which is a lovely comedy... I don't know, lots of things... Where the *Rainbow Ends* was a Christmas thing, so I did that for three years on the trot at the old Prince's Theatre - which is now the Shaftesbury - Stoll Theatre - no longer there, it's where the Peacock is now...

EC: And when you started this career, this acting career, when did you think, 'this is what I'm going to do?'

AV: Well I just started it and carried on doing it. My stepfather, Jehovah, he sort of got me into it; my mother wasn't totally encouraging and my brother, he sort of said, 'Well, if he's going into it, I want to go too!'. I think he got the first job, actually, out of the two of us, because he came to Conti's... We both passed the audition, so he got the first job understudying in a play called *His House in Order* - the Wyndham's, Godfrey Tearle... anyway. We both worked quite a lot and that paid for our school fees - and you had to, you know, because our parents weren't up to their ears in money, so it paid for that, and you had to bank a third of your money because you were under fifteen: you had to have a chaperone in the theatre every night and you had to bank a third of your money in the post office savings book.

EC: As an under eighteen-year-old?

AV: As an under fifteen-year-old, yes. My first salary was - and my God! When I think people say, 'Ooh is that all?!', but it actually it was eight pounds a week. Now that was in 1951, and actually when you think about it, it was a hell of a lot. And I didn't think 'ooh'... well, I suppose I did actually - eight pounds is quite jolly - paid for some of my fees and I got some pocket money. And yes, I just...

EC: ...carried on.

AV: Yes, I did.

EC: So did you have a sense of any particular theatres you wanted to work at or shows you wanted to be in once you...

AV: No. What I liked doing most of all when I was at Conti's - and they encouraged it. Conti's was very individual, you didn't have to wear uniforms like all of the others... Aida Foster was around, Corona's, all the other stage schools they had uniforms, and they were very good and there was a lot of good people there, but we - Conti's - we were about the individual, you see. They didn't say, 'You've got to do Shakespeare, you've got to do this'. I've never done Shakespeare. I did a bit at Conti's - hopeless. But I used to like comedy; I did a lot of comedies so they sort of encouraged that. So I ended up really working commercial theatre - never worked in any of the subsidised, but that's going on a bit. I did all right, I did a lot of kid's television, tons of that, all sorts of things, yeah.

EC: So in terms of what you did like going to see, would you prefer to go and see musicals or well-made rep?

AV: Ah, now you're talking! Now what I like to see more than anything... Now, I'm musical theatre. I love musicals. Really great musicals and I used to go and see them, I really love them, and curiously enough my daughter now is in musical theatre, in fact she's in this thing we're going to be doing here that's on tonight. But I am a hopeless singer. And we had singing classes at Conti's and I sang quite well... I could put a number over - you had to put a number over - at no great technique, so I could still put a number over at a pantomime do, but I couldn't... not a very good... no! Mind you, some of the guys rehearsing... it won't mean anything for this, but rehearsing here this morning are not much better either. The old adage: 'get a number over and make the audience listen to you!' But musical theatre I absolutely adore and still do and I'd rather go and see a musical... I mean, The Producers - when it first came to the West End, apart from the film but the big musical at Drury Lane - was one of the funniest, best things I had ever seen at the theatre. My daughter Katie and I went to see it and she said, 'I thought you were going to have a heart attack Dad!'. I mean, it was just fantastically funny and brilliant. And great shows, good musicals and Kiss Me, Kate and all those musicals I was bought up on really. I always went to see those.

EC: So do you remember the first musical you ever went to see?

AV: What was the first musical I ever went to see? Cor! Do you know, I can't remember...

EC: Or a time when musicals really started to have such an impact on you...

AV: I think it was Carousel or one of those. Carousel, or... the Coliseum was the place...

EC: Oklahoma! I suppose?

AV: I didn't see Oklahoma! its first time round. I thought you would say... no, I didn't. Carousel was the first one I loved, one of my favourite ones, and the films - of course I went to see all of the films. I suppose you see them now and they seem a bit old fashioned in a way, but those big musical films they made of Carousel and all those...

EC: So would you say you saw more theatre or cinema?

AV: Theatre.

EC: More theatre.

AV: Then, and now I suppose I see more cinema really. Theatre is hideously expensive now. And it's not always very good unfortunately. So I don't go and see everything I feel I should... I have been to the theatre and one of the great places to have a sleep in the theatre! If it's not good theatre, it is really awful. If a film is not good it is sort of all right, but if theatre is not good you know all about what's happening and who's not doing what and all the things, and you either go to sleep or leave the building at the interval.

EC: So as an actor then do you feel that the acting style has changed over the years?

AV: Well I think it has, yes. Not an awful lot though over my time in the business - it was before me, it was back in the thirties it started changing and the twenties. There is some terrible acting going on on television at the moment, which is unspeakable because it isn't acting at all. I'm talking about the soaps, and I was in a soap in the sixties, so... and we used to rehearse and do it all properly. They don't rehearse now, they just do it and that's why... I don't know if you watch soaps?

EC: I try and avoid Hollyoaks! [Laughs] I watch Eastenders.

AV: Well that sort of thing, well there's a good example or a bad example of... Eastenders, well, hmmm... but you see there, all, everyone bangs away at the lines all

the time, it's not really, it's just television sitcom/soap acting. If you actually analyse it you can't watch this, it's unwatchable – you're looking at the time thing, am I talking too much? Keep going.

EC: No, not at all, I'm just checking the mic, no it's fine.

AV: Curiously enough, years ago - well not that many years ago - a friend of a friend who worked at the BBC said, 'I've got some old tapes of that thing you did The New...' - it was called The Newcomers in the sixties. He used to be some sort of archive keeper at the BBC - a funny old bloke who goes in the local pub - so I saw one (because the producers in their wisdom destroyed most of the episodes). They might of re-run it on UK Gold because it was black and white, but anyway it was very interesting to see because it was very good acting. I'm not saying myself, but there were really terrific actors on it, and you could see we'd all rehearsed, so everyone's playing the scenes properly and now you can see it isn't, and they cut cut cut, and they won't allow... the audience attention span is limited to probably about a page! Not much longer before they cut to another scene and cut back again and they cut all the time which they didn't then - you had long scenes that developed.

EC: So you would say the rehearsal process for actors then...

AV: Extremely important, it is one of the curious things. I'm not the only actor... There are a lot of actors who don't like rehearsing, there comes a point when you're rehearsing when you've done that, you've learnt it, you know what to do - everybody's ready, so let's get on and actually get it in front of a public! Ray Cooney, who I worked for a lot in the Theatre of Comedy and all that, he's a great believer in getting a show in front of an audience pretty damn sharp, because it's all very well doing funny things to each other but you need the sound of 'ha ha ha', and you need to have an audience to do that.

EC: So what did that mean for repertory theatre, then?

AV: Ah, well, rep theatre is a whole different ball game, when I sort of grew up...I've got to stop for a second, hang on.

[Interruption]

AV: Where was I?

EC: 'whole different ball game...'

AV: Different ball game... Well, as a kid actor I used to... once you were past the age of fifteen, you could go off to reps without a chaperone: they didn't really want chaperones at reps because they couldn't really afford to have them as well, but after

that you used to do a lot of guest things as a boy actor in plays like Happiest Days of Your Life, Goodbye Mr Chips and all that. But later than that, after National Service, I used to do weekly rep a lot in various places, like Chelsea, Portsmouth... all over. And then you did a play every week, and so you opened on the Monday night having rehearsed it the week before at the start of the season, then on the Tuesday morning you would plot the next play and you'd block it. The Tuesday afternoon you would rehearse Act One and then the Wednesday you'd rehearse Act Two and do the show in the evening and Thursday you'd - it was mostly three act plays in those days - Thursday you'd rehearse Act Three, and on Friday you'd run through the whole thing and then on the Saturday you'd have a run through on Saturday morning and you'd do two shows of the other show you were doing - Saturday matinée and evening - and then break on Sunday and then on Monday you would open the play you'd been rehearsing. And so it went on, week in week out.

EC: So was it gruelling, a gruelling process?

AV: Yes, but you sort of did it. I think now, 'God! All those lines I've learnt!', but it did teach you to think on your feet, and you did occasionally go wrong but you had to sort of think... I wonder what they would look like now?! We felt we were rather good, and you had a little local following at whatever town it was - we did a long rep season in Wolverhampton of all places - they knew you.

EC: And how many people were in the company, was it a big show...?

AV: No, not that many people in the company, because they didn't have that much money. It wasn't subsidised either. So you'd have a juvenile lead - which I was - and then you'd have a juvenile lead lady and then you'd have a leading man and leading woman, that's four, and a character bloke - five - and possibly a couple of ASM's - Assisting Stage Managers - who were also acting. You were allowed to do that then and you're not now, Acting ASM's. So there were only about eight or nine at the most. Some were a bit bigger, but the small ones weren't.

EC: So what sort of year would you say this was?

AV: This is all in the early sixties for me and late fifties and early sixties.

EC: So would you say then censorship at that time had any influence over what you were doing?

AV: Not really no. Well you did what would be called pot-boiler plays now - I mean, nice little comedies and nice little thrillers, a lot of Agatha Christie. You learn how to stand there and deliver, then you had to think up, so years later when I went into a soap opera and you did one live... That's what I was talking about, one live a week and one recorded. The live one, boy! Things could happen in those days. There was about twelve or thirteen million people watching because there was no opposition - there was no Sky

or anything like that - so there you were, and you knew that twelve million people were watching you and boom! And you couldn't sort of stop and say, 'Oh, we'll record that again', it was there. Boy! And afterwards you thought of them, piles of them, and thought, 'my God!', but you just did it. It just kind of became what you did, there wasn't any grandness about it. There are a lot of actors now who get on television, do a little bit on a soap and say, 'I'm a star', and you get them in plays on tour because sometimes they get plays and it says 'So and So from So and So in So and So'. And they can't act their way anywhere. They don't know how to sustain a part because they don't have to on television it's cut cut cut and bang, one line at a time.

EC: So in terms of the plays you were in and were seeing, then, would you say it was old writing or new writing?

AV: Mostly old writing, oldish yes. We occasionally did a new comedy or something.

[Interruption]

EC: So when you did the rep theatre, then that was regional but you did work in London as well?

AV: Yes. If I'd been clever, but I've forgot... I used to keep a kind of scrapbook thing that I haven't looked at for ages. Mostly regional. Let me think. Mostly regional... Now when did I get back in the West End again... Ah! Well, in the sixties I was doing - early sixties - a lot of rep, and then I got this audition for this BBC thing, The Newcomers, which I got. I remember it starting in '65 and I remember thinking, 'Cor! I'd like to be in that' because I know a lot of people in it and I thought it was very good and lo and behold I got an interview and got a job in it. It was only meant to be for nineteen episodes, and then they... I was supposed to be a baddie, a nice sort of baddie, but I was supposed to go into prison or something but I got a reasonable amount of... well, the public seemed to like it so the producers asked me to stay on and they'd write me out for a few weeks and then write me back in again, which they did, and I stayed in it for five years, which was nice. That took me right up to '69 which was good and after that in those days it was quite difficult because you couldn't cash - and it doesn't seem that long ago, the late sixties, but you couldn't cash in like you do now: 'I've just been in a soap, I can go on any tour and get paid thousands of pounds - or be in a pantomime'. Nobody gave a toss actually, you were just a character and boom. I worked quite a lot, but it wasn't quite the same and then the seventies, the early seventies were horrible, once the show had finished and it came off ...at the beginning of the seventies after that it was a bit sort of iffy, I did a couple of things with Southern Television - this, that and the other - but it became a bit of a ...thing. By that time I was playing golf as well and I'd come down here but... oh yes, it was a bit tight then, and what happened then? Oh yes, and then I got a nice little part in Windsor Theatre. I used to work at Windsor Theatre when it was run by a man called John Counsell, and Joan Riley was a wonderful director, her son is now a director and he's directed me but, no, she was wonderful - she's gone now sadly, [aghast and blind?] but she was marvellous. I had a wonderful part in an Ayckbourn play, Absurd Person Singular, and out of that I got a lovely tour of a play and toured and everything sort of started building up again and then I went to... through Mark Piper, who's Joan Riley's son, he went to Harrogate theatre so he said,

'Would you like to come up here?' so I said, 'OK', so I went to Harrogate and did... God knows! But it was three weekly rep, a bit easier, not too... one week and two. Even then it was quite heavy going, but we did a lot of new stuff, really quite... and a lot of good old famous, I mean famous good plays...

EC: Classics?

AV: Classics. Greta Garbo and all that stuff, musicals, all sorts of stuff, a great mixture, A Man for all Seasons and all that sort of stuff so it was pretty classy stuff and I thought... I fell in love with Harrogate, so I thought 'this is lovely, I'll stay here', but I didn't in the end because I did a play in their studio and some friends of mine from... I knew Ray Cooney - you know Ray Cooney who ran all those farces Run For Your Wife all that sort of stuff? He bought the whole lot down here. But anyway in about '83, his wife's best friend, Jean Cooke's sister, was on the board of Harrogate - it just shows you how these things connect up! - and Jean I hadn't seen for years. She came up to see this play - funnily enough, Treats, the thing that Billie Piper is doing in the West End now - Treats and I was in that and I got nice notices in the Guardian and all that stuff and so they said, 'Ray sends his love' and I say, 'Ooh, how is he?' and Jean says, 'Why don't you come and work for Ray at Theatre of Comedy?'. He had just started Theatre of Comedy in the West End, so I said 'OK'. Such a curious little thing, she might not have come up, and I left Harrogate the beginning of '84 and I whizzed down there and I worked on See How They Run with Maureen Lipman and Michael Dennis, and I was an Assistant Director and covering a lot of good parts and I went on a lot for Derek Nimmo and a few others and then I got heavily into one which was a big Ray Cooney farce and I did that. Then Swedish people used to do his plays and they said, 'We want to do Two Into One', so I was the Assistant Director on it and I knew it and Ray didn't want to go and do it, so that was the start of going abroad. And that was the start of the real directing thing and from there I did lots of directing in Stockholm - lovely Stockholm - and then all the other... Rome, I did plays in Rome, all in the language - not in English. I worked with English speaking theatres, well, in Stockholm but doing the big shows out there was lovely.

EC: So what year did you start at the Theatre of Comedy?

AV: In the eighties. It started actually in '82 or '83 when Ray got the lease on the Shaftesbury Theatre, so Richard Briers was in Run For Your Wife and all that. That was the first one and I was sort of half involved with that, and then See How They Run - which is an old classic farce - we decided it would revive very well and so we played it down a bit and made it work, and that was a fabulous experience with huge laughs and it was really fun. It was nice to act with Maureen Lipman and all these great people and it was wonderful. Wonderful.

EC: I bet it was. You mentioned the Guardian earlier, so how important were what the critics said to actors at the time?

AV: Well it was very nice to read, I don't know if it made the slightest difference! The Telegraph was very nice, the Guardian and all that, there were only the northern editions

so it didn't matter. They came to Harrogate and saw this little studio production. I wasn't bad in it actually, but I haven't been to see the one in town. It went, you know... so he saw nice things, so he said nice things so it was fine. In the Yorkshire Post a lovely old critic, what's his name...he was lovely, he was a bit of a fan of mine at Harrogate, he used to say, 'Ooh, Tony!'... yes, we used to have a few pints together, he was really nice. So that was all lovely. A bit cosy up there though - got a bit too cosy at times! - so to get down to London again was great. So I'd proceeded it all down, and when things weren't going so well I'd go and do stage management or something... you could sort of... I mean, when I was much younger, I could go work - in television you could go and be a floor manager. You would mark out the floors in the rehearsals and work on the shows, so I sort of made sure I've done everything. That's the fun of it you see. Actors now: 'I'm an actor, that's all I do.', and don't know anything about anything else, and I just... as I said before, it is wrong, I think, especially if you want to be in theatre. Television makes it quite easy, you come along and everyone makes you up, you sit there, boom, off you go.

EC: So when you were doing the repertory stuff and then you were in Harrogate doing the three-weekly repertory, what were the audiences like you were performing too? Who would you say they were generally and how did they respond to you, were you popular?

AV: The theatre is the domain - fortunately or unfortunately, whatever - of the middle classes, isn't it? I don't really know what this... I hate this middle-class thing. But anyway. There is a certain type that go to the theatre more than anything else, luckily now all sorts of people go to the theatre. It's pretty ordinary, it wasn't exactly adventurous stuff there but sadly, you see, years after that sort of regime finished there Mark left and went to run Windsor, after John Counsell died, there was a sort of... Harrogate went on, I had left there by then and they had a new director who did all sorts of rather strange pieces as far as they were concerned and the whole place went upside down. It's sort of struggling ever since because Joe Public doesn't always want to see something...

[Interruption - telephone]

AV: Oh, it's Terry Frisby. This man who's talking now is the man who wrote the play There's a Girl in my Soup and they made a film with Peter Sellers in it many years ago, I've known him donkey's years. The other chap used to play the Inspector in The Sweeney. Anyway...

EC: You were saying about Joe Public and how they don't necessarily want to...

AV: Well a lot of the people who go to the theatre want to be reasonably comfortable. A lot of people don't you see, they want to be excited and want to see political theatre and everything; there's room for everything really. But usually in a town like, say, Harrogate or Windsor or somewhere, that is what they want to see. I don't think there's anything wrong with that: if it's what the public wants, we should give it to them. I mean, they go and see stuff in the West End now - mostly big musicals - and it costs so

much money to go to the theatre in the West End now, there's not many concessions, and certainly not for students because I teach/direct at Mountview and they say you should try and see this comedy or that and they [say], 'Well, I can't afford it, because it's forty odd quid, thirty quid or twenty to be right up there looking down at the top of somebody's head!'. Do you go to the theatre much?

EC: I try, yes: I go to The Crucible or The Lyceum, but it is still very expensive. It's very difficult. I've been in London a few days and I, you know, you really have to think about what you can go and see.

AV: Oh golly! I used to have one or two cons you see, 'Could you get me a freebie or a house seat or something cheap?' – but you can't even do that now, it's impossible, so [expensive] – it's mad. People are pouring to see – Oh go on.

EC: No, it's OK. I was just going to ask going back to what you were saying about, you know, to be made uncomfortable and the political theatre and things, were you aware of a time when this started off...? or was it always there from the fifties?

AV: No I wasn't aware, no. I've never done what you would call uncomfortable theatre. I've done some crap terrible theatre, where the audience - and you! – say, 'I can't do this!', but you do it and you die a death and it's just awful, drama or whatever. And some comedies too, which is even worse because not hearing the sound of laughter is one of the most awful experiences - as any comedian will tell you, any play that doesn't get a laugh... So I haven't... I've not really... I haven't done political theatre or anything, but I know I've seen... well, Shakespeare's pretty political theatre too. But erm, actually I haven't done any Shakespeare either. So I'm a fairly sort of middle of the road actor, but I think really now I really enjoy directing and I really enjoy now teaching, but the only thing that worries me about teaching is that, 'ooh, out of all the things they're going out into this business...and it's very difficult and they're not always told by...' A lot of the people who are there are teachers - teacher teachers - and I'm as an actor who's teaching, so I'm a sort of, I'm a pro and some of them have been in the biz for a few minutes but basically they have life letters after their name and they know what to do but they, the students, when I tell them about the business and all certain things they tell you, they sort of say, 'Oh we haven't been told that! And I think, 'ummm, because you should have been really, because that will be an important thing to happen to you' - whatever it is. Like not being late. I mean, silly things like that: Don't Be Late. I was told two things by her, this is interesting... I was told two things by a very famous woman called Bianca Murray. She had taught Noel Coward, she was very old but she was at the Italia Conti stage school and she was a wonderful teacher... Italia Conti's sister - because Italia Conti was dead by the time I got there, it was Ruth Conti her niece - but Bianca, wonderful old woman said, 'There are two things to remember about this business...' she said, when you go 'It's not fair. And don't be late!'. And that's it! You can't be late, and it's not fair because you know, 'Why did he get the part I didn't, and nuh nuh nuh?'. It happens all the time, there is nothing you can do about it. That's the game and when you see... and what is actually not a good thing are these shows that are actually happening a lot: What are we going to do about Maria? that one, you know, we've got the girl in The Sound of Music...

EC: And the Joseph one as well.

AV: And now we've got the Joseph and now we've got the ridiculous Grease one that's on all the Saturday nights and everybody who watches [thinks] 'Oh, I can become a performer, all I have to do is get on one of those shows!'. So the drama schools or the school - the academies - are raking money and people are going and basically most of them haven't got a chance. I've just done the second years at Mountview, and this is the first time ever I can say that at least three-quarters of them have got a good chance: they're the best lot I've ever had, usually you can say 'Please! Just go and do something else, you just haven't got the necessary thing, and you're always late or whatever, attitude' – chatting away when you're trying to tell them something nice. I'd say acting is tremendous fun, it is really and also it's a tremendous privilege to be on a stage standing in front of an audience making people laugh or cry or whatever it is - it is such a buzz. It's the best thing ever, even doing the little show here on Sunday night will be fantastic, even though it's only an hour and ten minutes, but that's the thing! You've got to really... it's a vacation, it's not a job. You can't say, 'I'm going to make a fortune' because I've made a reasonable amount of money and made nothing and where is my next penny coming from? Some make it because they get the soaps, and they get in the top little triangle of work of the pyramid, I mean they work and work and work, I mean it's fine and then, boom, it's finished.

EC: Would you say it's always been like that?

AV: [pause] It's a bit worse now...

EC: For someone coming into acting now from when you did, I mean, how... what are the differences and similarities?

AV: It is worse. Well, the difference is there is no repertory theatre to go and practice your craft - learn your craft, because you can't learn it in drama classes because you will do acting to your friends. You're all the people in the same class and you just have to showcase things at the end in some West End theatre doing a short extract from a play and agencies and casting directors will come and look at you and say, 'Oh yeah' - there is no kind of real way. You might get into a fringe thing or something like that, but there's no theatres - hardly any towns have got... well, Sheffield is very good because it's got The Lyceum, which wasn't open when I played, and for a long time it was dark - dead - and then there is the wonderful Crucible, but that's an exception but the smaller towns, a whole lot of them become touring dates anyway: they don't do reps any more, they just become a touring date. Chesterfield and all those theatres - Wolverhampton - it's a touring date. The show comes in for a week - two weeks, three, goes. Pantomimes boom. That's it. There is no resident company. Frinton, a funny little seaside resort has a weekly rep, I think The Byre at St Andrews, Scotland has a two weekly or something. There's not many left, dozen? A dozen at the most, and certainly no weekly reps - like I say, Frinton is about the only one left, the rest are two-weekly rep. So... that's what's different.

EC: How do you feel about them going then? Do you feel sad that there aren't the theatres and the work being made that was?

AV: Very [Coughs] Well of course...I'm going to sneeze. [pause] Anyway, well that's the difference...I am going to sneeze, sorry. [pause]

AV: It's different because there is nowhere to strut your stuff, so when they say to me, 'Tony what's... what do I do? Do you know anybody I could write to or so and so?' and I can suggest things but of course you can say... I can say to them 'Do you know anyone I can write to?' in the sense that I have got an agent, but you know, it's... it's very difficult. Of course there are more people going to drama schools and there are more drama schools now than there ever were and there's just... and it's not actually as if it's a fair selection process. Now there is a sort of European grant or something for a lot of them but there aren't many things now, are there? I think there's not what there used to be. I think councils, local councils would give you grants but that doesn't happen any more so people with money can afford to go and what, make them... because they've got money doesn't make them any more talented, and people without money but are very talented don't always get a chance, and that's wrong. You have government or governments, whatever, who don't really give a stuff about the arts and you're in trouble and that's the trouble. 'Let's take all the money from the Arts and give it to two weeks for the Olympics!' [sigh] Well, the whole fabric of society should be about the Arts!

EC: Were you aware when you started and up until the eighties how the funding then and how it helped or was it self-perpetuating with the audience numbers?

AV: Well, always, yes, you were but I...I. I never took. A slight contradiction of what I've been saying, I sometimes think that some companies... you can't always rely on subsidies, and I think that unfortunately some companies took subsidies and didn't do the right things with them and rather wasted money, but that was a... they weren't very... they weren't under any kind of jurisdiction or something. You'd see wastage sometimes in subsidised companies, so sometimes it might be a good idea to say, 'Well 'Bums on seats, pays your salary' we've got to get people', but unfortunately it doesn't always work like that and of course you have fantastic competition then. If you think of television and all the different channels now and you can just see anything and there's the internet, films – it's very difficult for theatre but I still think that people like to go to the theatre. The thrill of, for instance, kids going to the theatre for the first time, I mean if I hadn't been in a kids' show first when I started out and you listen to kids yelling and all that sort of big excitement, when you fly all over the place and all that... That is one of the great thrills I've had, and it's stayed with me.

I'll always remember in Peter Pan – Joan Greenwood who was a looker, was a stunning, lovely, clever actress and she played Peter Pan and she was brilliant and you know the famous scene in Peter Pan where Tinkerbell is dying and she says, 'Please! If you clap your hands and you believe in fairies and all that she'll come alive again', what a beautiful moment in the underground scene before she goes off and says 'and now to rescue Wendy' who has been captured by Hook and all that. I used to watch her doing this at the side of the stage, and there were all these rostrums because it was Never Never Land above and then the cave underneath and that's where little Tinkerbell's light

was going out and - ooh! - she was appealing to the audience and she got so carried away, she loved it, she felt it so much, she used to come off stage and run past me, having done this and say, 'And now to rescue Wendy!' and down comes the curtain at the end of Act 3 - four acts in Pan - and she'd be ...crying her eyes out. I remember going to the Stage Manager, 'Scuse me', and I was twelve-thirteen, just thirteen, 'is Miss Greenwood all right, because she's crying?' and he'd say, 'No it's all right son, she's OK'. I remember it because I... she used to do it every time and I didn't... It's making me cry thinking about... sorry, it's things like that. This is what theatre is about you see. That's the real thing and it still gets me now, does me, it just does because it's [pause] and that's the excitement of it all, so I hate to see it abused and messed around. So when they say the star on television has decided to get on the stage and sustain a part for two and a half to three hours, that's acting, or making people laugh in a play that the author has carefully written and make that work.

EC: So do you have a preference for theatre over working in television?

AV: Every time. Even though I've done quite a lot of... but I've done more theatre, but I've done lots of television. The only television I do now are the odd commercials every now and then, which make you money but you spend all day saying two lines and fiddling around. Saying it four hundred times if the clients don't quite like the whatever but that's just for walkabout, work [which] will take me on holiday. I like going to India a lot, so I travel around India. So it's quite good to do the odd commercial every now and then!

So you're going to, you might be an... I'd quite like to ask you a question, I should think, do you want to be an actor?

EC: [Laughs] No!

AV: No. Just to be technical.

EC: No. I like the idea of it but I don't want that life I don't think, to be honest, and I don't think I'm good enough. I think you have to have something very - very special to kind of... I mean, would you start over again? If you were a twelve year old boy now - I mean, I know it's difficult to think... but do you think you'd do it again now?

AV: Probably not, no. I don't know...

EC: Because of job security?

AV: I'm often asked... well yes, and all that and of course there is tons of opposition and not quite so many opportunities, but I wouldn't know that would I, I suppose? Let's just say I was twelve or thirteen again, well, I wouldn't know that but whoever said, 'You must go to Conti's and do that, because you've got...' well, you might go but then you realise there are dozens of these schools now and they're churning out every three years, every year really. Where do they go? I don't know where they go! That's why you see

these people in these ridiculous shows, Grease and the other one they're doing now – Joseph - burst into tears because they've been rejected. It's pathetic - blub blub blub - and it's terrible, it's pathetic. That's the business; it's a tough old game. And my daughter was here a little while ago and she's been in musical theatre and she's done tons... well she hasn't done that lately but she said, 'I don't think I'd do it again Dad', and she's been in big shows in the West End in Grease, boom, the whole bit.

EC: And do you have any regrets for anything you've chosen do to or are you very proud of any particular choices or anything you've done?

AV: Well, I've been quite proud of a few of the performances I've done, but I've just liked... I've just loved the whole thing you see, so it has been absolutely horrid you see to have been kicked in the face so many times. It's rather like being hopelessly in love with a gorgeous woman or something, these things happen, that's it. And I can't think of anything better I'd like to do and when you do do it right and you're getting it right whatever you're doing, it's sensational. Unfortunately what has happened, and I'm not cynical or bitter about it, but there are a lot of people who are now in charge of this business who actually aren't qualified to give you a job, in the sense that they haven't got... then they say 'what have you done' and you say - well, I could say... well, the famous actress who is long since dead, Athene Seyler, said, 'What do you mean, this morning?!' Because you know they don't know, these young suits, they have no idea, very few, it's all changed. I mean, if you go to the BBC now for a job - and I worked tons for the BBC years ago, not with this agent I've got now, this agent before - she was terribly excited, 'I've got you this interview for Holby City!' and I said 'Oh yeah, what's it like?' she said, 'Good part, very important'. I thought, 'Oh OK', she said 'Get down to Elstree buh buh buh'. So I whizzed off down there and I worked at Elstree before and also doing children's films and things there, so it was quite funny going. Oh, there was a film I did there with Richard O'Sullivan and all that stuff... Anyway, so I get there and firstly the bloke on the gate says 'Where!' - it was practically getting into Fort Knox! - and I say, 'Oh, I've come for the thing'. 'Oh. Oh go along there then turn left. Sign here first. Here's your security card.' and all this. Jesus! So then you get there and there's a girl at the desk and you see all these actors are sitting around [rustles paper furiously] and they're looking at their lines, all round the place. I said 'Are all these actors up for the same lines job?' She said, 'Yes, are you up for the clerk of the court thing?'. I said 'Yes, I understand it's quite an important part'. She said 'There you are' and she gave me the script. It's just awful. Now this part, in the old days a Television Director would have been a mate, he would have said, 'Tone would you like to come along? I've got a nice little part – only a couple of days filming and fine'. That'd be it. So she said - so I've got this part, and there were three lines. 'Does the jury do something I don't know?', I said. 'Excuse me, is this it?' She said 'Yeah.' 'So what are they all doing reading over there?'. She said 'They're learning their lines.'. I said, 'This is three lines!' I said, 'I could phone this in, but never mind, I'll wait.'. So, anyway eventually I go up. She said 'Go upstairs and buh buh buh' and I had been warned by my agent that the casting bloke, the BBC have Casting Directors now - they never used to, Directors did it - so you go in and there's this passage, this Kafka-like passage, and there is this small... a dwarf. I don't know the difference between a dwarf and a midget but anyway a very small person – that high. And he's standing at the end of the corridor, so I say, I go up close and said 'Oh hello' and he said, 'I'm Paul so and so' - this is the Casting Director - so I say 'Oh fine, lovely to meet you' and I had to-to, so he said 'Come on in' and off I went and followed the little...gnome along and he sat in his little chair, his little feet dangling and things opposite me, oh he sat on a sofa and I sat in the chair and now he said 'Have you

read the script?' and I said 'Yes'. I said 'Umm, it didn't take me very long.'. He said, 'It's rather an important part you know.'. I said, 'Who's Directing it? You're not Di- are you?' He said 'No, no it's so and so Jimmy, oh Jimmy Gable.'. I said, 'Blimey! How's he these days?' because I had been directed by him years ago. 'Oh, he's very well, he looks...' and he said, 'I've got this...' and he had this little video camera and he said, 'I'm going to film you now. Could you say one of those lines?' and I said, 'Yes, OK' and he said 'I have to record it because I have to send it to the Producers.'. I said, 'Not the Director?' 'No, no. The Producers, not the Director.'. I said 'But this is just one line, or two lines. In a sense two lines?'. So I had to do this line and it just was 'Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury bluh bluh bluh bluh.'. 'Very good,' he said, 'could you lighten it up a bit?' I said "Well it's a very serious moment, this bloke's been charged with murder and drink-driving, he's killed somebody, so I don't think the foreman would be going 'Ha Ha Ha and all this stuff.'. So he said, 'No but I have to give three versions, I have to send three versions.' You see, when you get this sort of thing you think, 'well, the world is going crazy!', so I did it slightly lighter, so he said 'I think that was probably too light, could you do it...' So we ended up doing... and he said, 'Thanks very much, it's been very good to meet you' and I left! A complete waste of my day, all the way to Elstree and back again, for that! I could have phoned it in, and that's happening a lot in the business now. They are employing all these people who are getting paid for...and when there, say I got the part, they say, 'It's a very special role, you're only going to get X number of pounds, which would be below the usual rate' because they have all these other people on the payroll who do nothing. They filmed Spooks down here the other week - you know that series called Spooks?

EC: I love Spooks.

AV: Yes, it's quite good.

EC: I love it.

AV: They filmed it here. I think it's going out in the Autumn, not until the Autumn, they filmed in the changing room, they filmed upstairs, I think they filmed a bit in here. Anyway, they filmed around. I'm not sure they didn't film in here, anyway they filmed around. And the place the week before, there must have been about twelve people wandering around looking at things and Paul Thornley, who knew some of them because he does a lot of BBC, and a couple of the other boys said, 'Christ!' he said 'No wonder we can't get any money because all these Techos, all of them...' Sorry to be rude. But all of them come down to recce the place, and the place was heaving with people, but the actors will be well down the list. The actors unfortunately are well down the list in the priorities. The actors should be the... of course the reason the curtain goes up is that the people get a look at the actors. The writers and the actors should be the top pot people. I think. That is the probably a rather long answer to your question of about an hour ago, that is the problem with the business.

EC: Today?

AV: Today.

EC: And it didn't used to be like that?

AV: No, you felt slightly more important as an actor then, though probably an actor could sit in now and say, 'Tony, you are talking rubbish: so and so and so and so happened' but it didn't... But it's never been... well, as I said: 'It's Never Fair and Don't Be Late.'! It's never been terribly fair but I just think you had more chance then.

EC: And even in terms of rehearsal time, like you were saying as well...

AV: Oh God, yeah!

EC: In terms of, you know, getting to grips with a character...

AV: Well I think in the theatre you still have a chance for all that. But, I don't think that, I know with a lot of these series, well, I know a lot of the guys I play golf with who do a lot of these series, who don't rehearse at all, hardly rehearse, if at all, because of all the tight schedules. So they say, they might say for a soap – let's do all the pub scenes now; it doesn't matter about the sequence, or anything: 'We're going to do all those now, now we're going to do all those now and boom and edit it all together.'

EC: You told me about a bit of anecdote about Binkie Beaumont earlier and I was wondering if you could just share your memories about Binkie Beaumont or H.M. Tennent.

AV: The thing about... I've got to be careful. Binkie Beaumont was just one of THE great characters, and there is always the thing about... you say, 'I'm going to see Binkie Beaumont' or go up into the office because you saw him as well from some part or something at the West End and you had to get into this lift. You had to get into this tiny lift, and quite often... well, I'm not sure we should say all this really, it's a bit sort of – it might sound homophobic or something but it isn't – it's just what they usually called Merryman.

[Interview stops briefly as another gentleman has found us, Ian Ashpitel who is the Captain of The Stage Golf Society who has just played nine holes]

AV: Anyway, Binkie Beaumont was just one of those characters, I mean, if you got... sometimes you got squeezed into this tiny lift with someone you didn't particularly want to... Do you remember the film The Producers, the actual film, not the film of the musical, the original film which they show every now and then on telly?

EC: I've only actually seen the modern film really.

AV: Oh right. There is a wonderful scene in that when the terribly gay producer and all his things and his minion has to go down and pick them up and they have to go up in this tiny lift and it all gets... and it's just, when I was quite a young actor then, and you had to be quite careful because you often ended up with hands on your knees and all that sort of stuff and 'this is how to do your make-up and how to do this and how to do that'. You were a prey to some nice charming chaps in the business and when I first went I was quite innocent - 'Oh aren't they so nice and friendly' - and this was going on and you start to realise quite soon, 'this is not quite right' but still. You just ignored all that, but it was quite tricky. So Binkie Beaumont was just famous [for this sort of thing], and all the gay... of course Terence Rattigan the great writer, there was a sort of coat room... but they were fabulous people, I mean, they loved theatre, that was thing: they loved theatre and they ran it really well and were beautiful people because they cared about the theatre. Now there is a producer called - now I mustn't be rude about people, but there are some producers who aren't very good you know, who pretend to love the theatre and they don't: they pay peanuts, they don't give concessions to students and things and they just aren't good news. Now I'm not going to name names because it would be rude, but it's just... and they're the ones who don't help actually - they think they are but they're not, they don't really care: they care about stars, if they can get stars in it, run the title and all the rest of it they don't really care about... I mean, you must have been reading about this problem with understudies since poor old Connie Fisher is off - she did her voice in because foolishly they let her do eight performances. Almost impossible to have done that. And another - Richard Griffiths - was ill after the first night of *Equus* and a bloke had to go on and read it as the understudy because probably... of course the management won't pay for rehearsals for the understudies almost until the thing's opened, so if a disaster happens in the first two days, the poor actor who plays the understudy hasn't had time to do it. He may know the lines but he hasn't had time to do it properly and this happens because most of them just won't pay and they won't give them the hours... Musicals they do, musicals from the top, the swings and things are doing it right the way through.

EC: Have you ever been in that position as an understudy?

AV: Yes I have, this is why I tell the story. And I always swore I would never be an understudy, and I did it at the Theatre of Comedy early on but I was always on so much in farces because there is a high mortality rate because you run around, you bang, you faint, you crash things - there's always someone off, so you're basically on nearly every week, like in a musical you're on nearly every week. I mean Katie - my daughter - was in *Crazy For You*, she was the swing, which is your claim to fame as an understudy you cover everything and after the first night she was on almost every night until the - well then she was promoted to playing a part, but she was on every night playing something because there is always somebody off - and the same with farces and things. But this particular instance I was doing a favour to Ray Cooney in a show in town, not that many years ago, three years ago just over the Christmas period and he just sort of said, 'Would you cover those two parts for me?'. I said, 'Christ, Ray, it's two massive parts!'. It was the sequel to *Run For Your Wife*, *Caught In The Net* it was called, with Eric Sykes - and of course Robert Doors he was off, he said 'You'll be all right, Tone!', I said, 'Robert! I haven't had a rehearsal yet, I've had two rehearsals!'. 'Ohhh...' and the Company Manager said - oh uh oh! - and I decided to go on eventually after a long type thing and I had to go on with the book - very difficult in a farce. I knew it would end up, it's all,

not matching, and the main leads never bother rehearsing with me, you see, they don't turn up, they just turn up at the half, you know, the half hour call before and they say 'Oh', and I say, 'Well, hasn't anybody told you I'm on tonight?' and, 'Thanks very much for turning up for rehearsals at three o'clock!' And it's 'Oh, I was doing something else' because they usually get the message and they can't be bothered, then they go on and I have to do it with the book. It was... and I got fired two days later and I had to take Bill Camer out, oops, I just gave his name away, the producer, I had to take him to... Equity said 'we'll fight it for you, because we think this is you know, disgraceful, and we're trying to get him anyway' and in the end they had to sort the Producers Guild and I had to go and meet and, ooh, it was the whole bit and I lost.

EC: Oh no! When was that then?

AV: 2003, not that long ago. So I sort of said 'never again!' and I've never worked for Bill since and I'd done lots of work...

EC: You mentioned Terence Rattigan so what...

AV: Only because I met him, because when he used to play at the Theatre Royal, the Theatre Royal in Brighton was one of the big dates. The shows opened there before they came into town, it's not so much now, but it was the date and Terry Rattigan was there and they used to have a bar backstage called The Single Gulp - can you imagine! A bar actually on the stage or just behind...!

EC: On the stage!

AV: Well, just literally in the prompt corner, the prompt corner would be right there then in the...

EC: What theatre was that?

AV: The Theatre Royal in Brighton, gone now, gone a long time. So you gathered in there after the show, so I remember playing the fruit machine with Terence Rattigan and Noel Coward there and God knows! And it was fantastic, because it was a terrible play written by a guy called Anthony Higgins whose name is up there somewhere way back: he was a member of The Stage, he must of joined The Stage and Kenneth More - remember Kenneth More? - he was directing it, and I was in it and I was also the stage manager as you could do in those days and so that's... but the play... unfortunately it didn't run, it folded in Liverpool, but they all came down to Brighton because Kenny More was top film acting, directing and people in it were pretty classy so but it was a croc of rubbish, it was a war thing, it was terrible, everything happened offstage! People staring offstage saying, 'Oh look! The submarines are coming now, Oh look out here comes...!' And it was just sound effects and actors standing around stage looking off stage, set in the war in Malta. [ed. The Angry Deep, January 1961 Theatre Royal, Brighton]

EC: So were people able to get drinks during the performance?

AV: You could if you wanted, but you know, it was frowned on; but you could certainly get a drink in the interval.

EC: And if people were sitting there with refreshments...

[Interview interrupted briefly by Mr Ashpitel who asks for the key to be dropped off and to invite us for a drink afterwards. I'm urged to give my order and we ask for a lager shandy and a pint of Youngs. We carry on]

EC: Is there anything else you would like to share...

AV: I could go on for another two hours!

EC: I know! That's the lovely thing about you!

AV: Oh don't say that! But I could! Because there are lots of things that happened, lots of adventure you know. Going off to rep as a sixteen – seventeen year old on your own arriving in a town like Dewsbury, now Dewsbury in those days in the middle fifties, late fifties, it's just a smoky horrible... When you arrive there you don't know, you just go on the train, you get there chuff with steam train, you know, and you get there and you've got your case and you're a young boy actor and you arrive and your digs are freezing cold and you go in the theatre and there are all these people there. I can't remember what the play is called now - Goodbye Mr Chips or... and none of those sort of things happen and then Leicester and - oh God! - all these terrible queens are chasing around after you and you're thinking, 'Go away!' and it's all horrible, but you know, you have some adventures and you learn to be independent about things. I love travelling now, and I suppose I must have learnt about it then because people say 'How can you go off to India on your own?'. I say, 'Well, because I can. I used to tour on my own. I used to go; it's just fun to do.' It was just part of... I have thought about writing it all down but you know, I have had some really weird adventures in the business, really strange.

EC: And gained a lot from...

AV: Oh yes, oh blimey yeah, I sure have! So whenever anybody says 'you can't do it' I say 'yes you can, it's all sort of... anything is achievable in the business' but unfortunately what is not achievable is that you are not guaranteed work now, and you pretty well were then, in the fifties and sixties certainly. And I'm not sounding like an old codger, because I actually believe in today and tomorrow, that's all gone and it was all good fun, terrific but I don't go 'ohhh' - I don't look back and say, because the years do go on and that's the end of it: we're all going to be brown bread one day... and your

lovely self, look at you and you've got such a smile, you could melt what have you's at nine million paces, so I mean you, you're going to be successful I can tell that.

EC: I hope so.

AV: You will, you will, you've got that sort of positive thinking – what's your star sign?

EC: Scorpio.

AV: Woah ho ho!

EC: I know.

AV: Terrific. Boom. Sagittarian me. Bang.

EC: Oh, are you?

AV: Travellers, Ramblers, Gambles everything because you've got to enjoy life because otherwise see you've got to enjoy everything you do, so I can't go around saying, 'Of course you haven't had – where would if you'd had – gone for this sodding job and have so and so happen.'. That happens, but that is just part of the tapestry of it, it is not the end of the world and of course one of the great things is The Stage Golfing Society because you come down here and there are some lovely people here and you just come here and play golf and say 'oh, I can't do the route, sod it!'. And you get on and do the next thing and the next thing and away you go and suddenly something happens. I mean, some of the guys can be going through one bad or a few bad times and suddenly you get, 'Oh, I'm back with the RSC and I've suddenly got telly and I'm doing voice-overs!'. And this was a guy - a lovely actor - Jonty Stephens who was going through hell: he was like a shrunken, tall bloke who was like 'Ooh Tony, Tony!'. I suddenly I saw him the other week: 'Hi Tone!' Boom and that's the fun of it you see.

EC: Well if there is anything else you'd like to say or we could leave it there now, we have been an hour.

AV: Crikey! We'll stop; I'll phone you up if I can think of anything else.

EC: We'll stop there. Well, thank you very much.

AV: No, thank you, my darling - it was an absolute thrill.