

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Donald Walker – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Alistair Keeble**

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Actor and Director. Doris Buckley; Judi Dench; digs; drama school; The Grand Theatre, Halifax; Look Back in Anger; make-up; scenery; Separate Tables; stage management; Geoffrey Staines; theatre in education; touring; Toynbee Theatre, London; weekly repertory; working with schools; York Citizens' Theatre Trust.

AK: It is the 19th of April 2007, interview with Donald Walker as part of the British Library Theatre Archive Project.

I think a great place to start with the interview, well, the obvious place to start, would be what your first experiences of theatre were?

DW: As a child?

AK: Yes, what drove you to the theatre?

DW: Many people I think would regard their first experience of live theatre as a visit to either the pantomime or Peter Pan. Peter Pan was a regular every single year in my youth, played by various names – now it is more or less only regarded as a pantomime itself, but of course it wasn't a pantomime. And I remember it very well - I remember being rather frightened of Captain Hook, played by Alastair Simm, as it happens, and Jean Faltrobertson was Peter and I remember a great deal about that production and I suppose one might say it had a certain influence. There were no theatre people in my family, there was no background of theatre there at all. My mother had trained as a singer, and I think would have gone into professional singing because she had a very, very good tutor, and my grandfather unfortunately considered that the woman's place was in the home in those days and so he wouldn't let her go any further, and I think in a way her encouragement of me later was her own sort of frustrations coming out. So then there were of course school plays, a great many of them, both at primary school, secondary school later and then eventually public school in Shrewsbury where I played pretty regularly in the school play. It wasn't part of a drama department or anything exciting like that, in those days it was just the English master out of school hours, you know, doing the school play. There were no such things as drama teachers in those days. I then went into the navy, this was just after the end of the war (1945) so it was a bit of an anti-climax, the war was over but of course one had to go. I had joined something which was called the Wise scheme which was supposed to be a scheme for selecting potential officer material – very grand. When I actually joined up they told me very carefully that the Wise scheme had finished, because the war was over, so I could be an

able seaman, so that's what I was in the Royal Navy for two and a half years. Had a very good time. I realised very quickly that you had to look after number one,, and again more theatre because the Entertainments Officer on one of the shore establishments that I was in - it was known as HMS Dryad, it was dry land outside Portsmouth - this Entertainments Officer was made to do the job and he hated it - he was a lieutenant commander and he was very happy for me to do his work for him, so provided I organised the occasional dance and put on the occasional show on the stage he was quite happy... so I had a free hand - that was great. I suppose that was my first experience of directing, and of course it was mostly rubbishy things – revue stuff, sketches and things like that. But nevertheless all that was a sort of experience you know. When I came out I wanted to go to drama school. My father had died by then so my mother wasn't very well off; she couldn't really afford to pay anything for me, so I needed to get a grant. I auditioned at RADA, didn't succeed to get in to the main school but I was offered a place at - they had a preliminary thing, they called it PARADA. I didn't much like the idea of that, so I tried various other drama schools and eventually ended up at a little studio school and it was certainly the right place for me, run by a woman called Doris Buckley, who was ex-Old Vic. She and her husband Horace ran this little school in virtually a couple of attics in West Hampstead. All the tutors were professional people and so we had a very good sound training of what the theatre was really like, rather than the rather artificial experience that a lot of the people got at a lot of the other drama schools – being taught by academic people rather than genuine theatre people.

AK: It must have been a much more intimate experience as well then if you were to go to RADA?

DW: Exactly, because one was an individual, one was treated as an individual. Just before I started that course, I was living in Harrogate then – my mother had moved to Harrogate and I had about two months before the course started. Now there was a very good rep - still is a very good theatre - in Harrogate, the Royal Opera House there, and so I went along to see the director – a wonderful man called Hilary Fisherwhite - and he said that if I liked I could be... work with the stage management as a sort of unpaid student for the time. And so I learnt my stage management during those two months – it was probably the most valuable part or possible thing because it also set the course I was going on, in perspective, because it was a real theatre doing real weekly rep.

AK: To see how it translates into real life?

DW: Exactly, so I was able to sort of judge my training... it was only a short training, I did get a grant, but it was only for four terms. So I was out again, 1949. Doris Buckley's scheme was that at the end of each term there was a form of examination, which was really an audition, so in other words one was preparing audition pieces to do this at the end of term. And at the end of my first term I got my bronze medal, then a silver medal, gold medal, and with a little bit of cramming got my diploma, at the end. Once again she always employed theatre people, and she was a wonderful woman – I was very, very fond of her, brilliant teacher... never gave very much praise, if she gave any at all when she was giving notes after a student performance she would say, 'Yes, that was really quite good, for a student'. She put you right there in your place, that you were not quite yet on the stage and when you got your diploma she always said, 'That is the bottom

rung of the ladder, the people that have given you your diploma consider you ready to start'. So it was a good training. So what did I do then? Well, I had the wonderful opportunity of a choice. One of the teachers at the school, a wonderful woman, character lady called Margot Lister was just about to open in a play in the West End and there was an understudy role going for one of the boys: it was a school play, and there were two boys in the thing and I could understudy one of them. At the same time, I had an offer through letters I had been writing to the York Scarborough Company to be an ASM. So I went to Doris Buckley and I said, 'Which one do I take?' And she said, 'It's your decision', she said 'I'm not going to help you, but just think of the various things. If you go as an ASM you will be starting at the bottom – you will just be doing very small parts occasionally and working your way up. If you go straight into this West End show as an understudy, you may not go on ever – as you're understudying a young person they're probably well and so unlikely to be off. But if you do go on, you're right in the West End and if you make a flop of that you're finished, before you've started'. So anyway I took the ASM job up in York Scarborough. In those days, the York Citizens' Theatre Trust ran the two theatres, so it was fortnightly rep not weekly. It meant that you opened one play in York one week and then took it to Scarborough the second week. Opened the next play in Scarborough, and took it back to York the next week, so you've got two companies doing this all the time. It was very hard work, because even though we had a fortnight's rehearsal, which was quite good really from the point of view of most people who did weekly rep and only had a week, but nevertheless it was very hard, we had very little time off as ASMs because there were props to get, stuff to get ready and everything else and of course you were working on the play that was on that night anyway.

AK: What sort of plays were you performing?

DW: Mostly they were plays that had come off from the West End, it was a very different kettle of fish really, there were far more straight plays in the West End in those days. Well made plays, Noel Coward, Terence Rattigan that sort of thing – the three act play. That was really the fodder for all the reps and they were all waiting for when the play had finished in the West End, had done its tour and then it was released to the repertory companies. So all the play agents would be in touch with the reps, then they would let you know when each play was on, so mostly that was what they were. Some good, serious pieces but mostly it was light family stuff.

AK: Were the plays then that were taken from the West End well received by the audiences up in York and Scarborough?

DW: Oh yes, it was. This was before television really got underway – very few people had television sets, but it was a habit and the way weekly rep and fortnightly rep worked was because of the audience habit. Somebody would always go to the rep on Tuesday nights, and it was that regularity that kept it going: they got to know their company, the people in the company were their stars and they loved to see them in a variety of roles. Much of the time you were totally miscast, of course, but that was the good experience of it. It was very good to go on in a part that you were unsuitable for, and make something of it. You had to do it. Learning, studying was hard work. You finished the show at night, maybe you got back to the digs at half past ten/eleven o' clock perhaps, had some supper then you sat down to learn the play for next week. Every play opened

on a Monday, Tuesday morning you would be doing the blocking of the next play, Wednesday morning Act One without books, Thursday morning Act Two without books, Friday morning Act Three without books, Saturday morning right the way through the whole play. Monday afternoon dress rehearsal. Sunday you were busy building the set and all the rest of it so you know it was quite something, very high pressured – obviously you weren't playing leading parts. When I first started of course, as an ASM I was playing very small parts as well as doing the stage management side. But as you grew up in the company, you started playing larger parts of course, I mean, I was frequently up until 3 in the morning studying for the play the next day. Rehearsals never started until 10, so usually, you know, you got up at nine, had a very quick bite of breakfast and shot to the theatre and that was it. But it was hard work, but the routine of learning the lines and doing it was something which was valuable and something which I've never forgotten. Yes, the difficulty is that you fall into bad habits, you find a quicker way of doing things, a quicker way of getting a laugh, you know – a cheeky way of getting a laugh, which is not always the right way. All those sort of tricks come into it, and you learn from the other more experienced people. One of the big differences I think with theatre then and theatre now with the repertory companies was that when I first started as an ASM the leading people in the company - you never ever dared call them by their Christian names. It was Mr so and so, Ms so and so always – respect, you know, very, very strong – which doesn't, I'm afraid, happen any more nowadays. But that was very, very much on the chord. Now the director of productions was a man called Geoffrey Staines at York – he was in charge of both companies and then there was an individual director for each of the two companies - Alexander Scott for Scarborough, Norman Holt for York. I swapped over companies halfway through the time I was there originally, which was for about three years. I was on stage management I suppose for about 18 months and then I was promoted onto the acting side. So I went over to Norman Holt's company which was known as the York Company, which was the larger of the two companies – generally speaking they did the bigger-cast plays – the annual Shakespeare and that sort of thing would be done by the York company, whereas the Scarborough company did the smaller little plays.

AK: So was that a normal sort of transition that would happen often then? Was it always your intention to move on to become an actor from an ASM?

DW: It was always... although I always did have my eye on directing, even from when I first started. I liked the idea of being in charge of the whole production rather than just playing my bit in it. But having done the stage management, that was the next step really was to go on the acting side, so I did. There was an annual pantomime - as every company did its annual pantomime - which was written by Geoffrey Staines's wife, a very good actress called Pauline Letts, who was very well known in the West End as well at that time and she used to write the script for this. And I always got the same role in the pantomime. Geoffrey Staines always said that my voice was strong and therefore he'd like me to have the first line of dialogue after the opening chorus to quieten the kids down in the audience. So it was always the same part really – a sort of village lad. If it was Aladdin it would be Wishy-Washy, if it was Dick Whittington it would be Idle Jack or it would simply just be Jolly Jim or whatever, so that was my role.

After about three years there I decided it was time to move on, so I went to a series of repertory companies. I went to Warrington, St Helens – where we were doing twice-nightly rep, now that was another step forward, of course, doing the play twice each evening. Usually with cuts of course, because if it was a long play you couldn't get both

performances in, so usually the first house would be at 6:15 or something like that and the second house would be 8:30 - you never got very long between the two performances and in those days there were no particular rules about it. Nowadays, there are very strong rules about Equity ruling, about how long you must have between rehearsals and the leading performance and how long between two performances and that sort of thing, but we very often had quarter of an hour, you know, just time to get one audience out and another one in! So that was even harder work, in many, many ways and of course I was now playing larger roles, so I did that in Warrington for a while, and I went to various other places down in the West Country. I went down to Yeovil and did a season down there... ended up in Kidderminster. I did two seasons there - as an actor still - and then during the second season the director, a man called Robert Gaston, his father was ill and it just so happened that I was in the office when he was talking to the manager of the theatre about this and saying that he'd have to go. He was a Scotsman and he said 'I'll have to go, what shall we do about directing next week's play?' And so the manager said, 'We'll send down to London and get a stand-in for you while you're away', and I happened to hear this and I had a week out the following week so I said, 'Couldn't I do it?'. And they looked at me aghast and then they said - well, they were in a hole - 'Well, yes, all right if you think you can'. It was quite a simple little play, nice play called Murder Mistaken - I've always remembered - smallish cast and I had a whale of a time. I really did enjoy doing that and I realised during that week that really was what I wanted to do more than anything. The company were very good, they were friends on a level with me really as an actor in the company, but they backed me up wonderfully well, and the play was a success and I got one or two quite nice reviews in the local paper for having directed it. It was a murder mystery and I managed to get the intensity of it - the surprises and all the rest of it - over I think quite well. The following week Bobby was back to directing again and that sort of thing, but the bug was there now, you know?

So my next job really then was... Well, I did quite a little bit in London then of going to various companies; sometimes to act, sometimes to do a one-off production, sometimes a tour. I might direct a tour - so I wouldn't be with it all the time, I'd just put it on, see it on and then leave it, and it was in charge of the Company Manager then after that.

Theatre then on tour - this is quite interesting - touring at that time was always by road. There were many companies who toured who specialised in touring theatre shows - if it was the Royal Opera House of course they would have their own wagons you know - many, many of them for big productions. Otherwise you might just be having a little one-set show you were on tour with which would just be one wagon. Those are the big companies that had it all on the road: ROH, Coliseum - that sort of thing. Otherwise it was by rail. British Rail were very well organised, they had representatives in every single town and if you were on tour the representative would call on the Company Manager - on a Tuesday morning usually - to see what arrangements were necessary for the following weekend: how many tickets did you want for the company? How many wagons did you need? - forty-foot wagons for the scenery. If you had up to ten tickets - that was the minimum - you got your forty-foot wagon free. If you needed more for more scenery you had to pay extra, but I have still... somewhere I tucked away a little bundle of visiting cards from these various British Rail employees who were in charge of organising all this. So it was quite a routine, but you always went by rail, so wherever you were going you'd go by rail. Sometimes some of the stars in the company of course would drive - I mean, the ordinary people didn't have cars in those days anyway, they went on the train, so that was the way you toured. Then gradually, of course, as freight was taken away - after Beeching particularly, when a lot of the smaller lines were removed - more and more was on the road, and there were more and more commercial

companies specialising in moving theatre people around. Started on the South coast, funnily enough: if you were touring between Eastbourne, Portsmouth, Southsea, those sort of places - Hastings. Along the South Coast it was usually with Bishops, they were the first people to start moving theatre companies around, and then it spread until now very nearly every theatre company would be going by road, very little go by rail, but I was still, of course, doing rep before that. The companies that I was visiting were weekly reps - I might go down to Hastings and do a special week, come back to London and then go and do another one in Eastbourne. There were occasions when - this was hard work! - there were occasions when you'd be rehearsing in one town and playing in another, so you had to get away from rehearsal reasonably early in order to get down to town. The other thing about weekly rep of course was that you had to have some time off to learn lines. It wasn't just at night, normally you only rehearsed in the mornings - 10-1, normally, the afternoon would be free - so if you only had a very small part of course, you might go to the cinema or something in the afternoon, or prepare your clothes for next week, whatever it may be. In those days also, of course, artists had to provide far more of their own wardrobe than they do now. The requirement on the Equity contract was that you had to have one ordinary dark suit, one evening suit, and one sports jacket and trousers, that was the essentials you must have, but of course there was requirement very often for other things as well - might be a swimming costume, might be anything from shorts to whatever, so you had to provide a lot more. It was far harder on the women, because they would not dare during one season be seen in the same evening dress for two different plays because all the women of the audience would know: 'Ooh! She wore that in so and so'. So they made a point, you know, of not doing it. Some of the more affluent reps and - York was one of them - would hire a certain amount, particularly evening dresses for the actresses. But most actresses were good seamstresses in those days and they were capable of running up a little number if necessary - and one dodge they used to do, they used to cut all their dresses in half, so that they had separate skirts and tops so they could interchange them to look different! And hair of course as well, they were constantly trying different hair styles to vary it. Very few actresses in those days would have very short hair because they wanted to be able to style it differently for different productions. So you were on your own for quite a lot - far more makeup was used in those early days than is today. One learned one's makeup at drama school, of course, and you put on your standard five and nine which was - five is a very pale greasepaint and nine is a sort of tanned one - a mixture of the two: if you were supposed to be sunburnt, more nine than five, if you were supposed to be very pale - you know, a curate or something - then you put on more five, but you always made up, always. Nowadays, unless it's a particular character role that you're playing and you need to alter your face, seldom make-up at all. Of course this also reflects back into the staging - footlights were in full use always in those days, it was one of the main forms of lighting so you had that strong light coming up like that so that was necessary... nowadays very, very few theatres have any footlights at all, they have more or less discarded them all - so it's far more spotlights and top lighting and far further away from you, so therefore you don't really need it except to change the complexion a little bit, if you need to be pale then of course you will put on a little something or other. So that's very different, particularly for the men, but very often nowadays you just don't put on any makeup at all you know - just go on stage just as you are. If it's just an ordinary straight role, playing your own age, you don't bother. Scenically as well, the big change nowadays is that every set - for even a play maybe at the Mercury Colchester here or the Wolsey in Ipswich - will be a brand new set made from scratch, you don't sort of go back, you don't recycle, whereas in my early days in rep you did all the time. You had a stock of flats - most of the sets were interiors, not very often would they be an exterior and most of them would be in either one or two,

perhaps three sets for the play and so it was simply a question of re-painting the sets from stock all the time. So you would strike the set on Saturday night after the show – the stage management and their team and the carpenters would – and on Sunday usually re-build one that had been painted during the week by the scenic artist from the paint shop that would be brought on and re-built and dressed. Furniture usually borrowed – a mixture usually of borrowed furniture from shops nearby and stock stuff that you had anyway, that the theatre owned. Now York again owned a wonderful lot of furniture, a terrific amount of stuff, both in York and Scarborough. The prop rooms were also very, very full of stock stuff for dressing the set with, but again there was usually quite a lot to borrow and every town had its shops which were willing to lend stuff. The general arrangement was 'If you break it you pay for it, if it goes back in one piece, OK!', and each shop who lent stuff would be given two complementary tickets for the Monday night performance for the following week's play: that was part of the free list, so that worked very well indeed. And of course these box sets were regular – it was up to the scenic artist to make them look real with clever ideas on wallpaper, mouldings and that sort of thing round doors and windows, making things look like the light is coming from there. The skill of the scenic artist is rather lost today, I'm afraid.

AK: So was the scenic artist permanently attached to the...?

DW: Yes, yes some smaller companies would only have the one, bigger companies would have two. In the York Scarborough arrangement of course there was one for each company, with an assistant. And of course for a very big show then the company would join in and help usually doing that. If it was pantomime time for instance, there would probably be various sessions where a lot of the company would join in just doing the slapping on and then the artist would come along and do the intricate bits on it later, but now of course, as I've said, every set is designed for that particular production. Less and less scenery is being used in any case – far more use of lighting because there's far more lighting. Back then, even in the Theatre Royal in York, there were only four spotlights front of house, and I think we had ten spotlights on the bar one and otherwise it was batons, footlights and floodlights and so you got your effects the best you could. I remember when I went back to York after all this repertory experience and all these various bits of touring and everything, the last repertory job that I did permanently was Halifax - the Grand Theatre Halifax which I mentioned earlier – this was the first time that I had had a permanent job as resident director... The company was very poor; we had a special arrangement with Equity – normally Equity would have to hold two weeks salary for the whole company, it was a rule – we had special dispensation to only hold one week's salary, and all of the company when they were engaged knew that they were on one week's notice, not two if anything went wrong or we had to close, so it was really almost week to week worrying, so we had to be very, very economical indeed. But it was a wonderful experience for me. I was paid - I remember this perfectly well - I was paid £10 a week to direct, and if I was playing as well as directing then I would get £12 a week, very, very generous of them! Digs in those days of course were cheaper, I think I paid... When I first started in York it was about £2 10 [shillings] a week that you could get full board in digs in York or Scarborough, that was the cheapest. The slightly upmarket ones were £3 a week, and if you stayed in a hotel - as some people did if they only came for one week - then it would probably cost about £5 a week. That just shows how prices have changed, over the years, which is ridiculous. But I lasted in Halifax for 14 months – it was, as I said, probably the hardest job I ever did in my life, because that was weekly, all the time. We were desperately also trying to get an audience in... the old Grand Theatre in many ways was falling down – it was bitterly

cold, we had a heating system which... there was a knack to it – you had to stoke it up in the afternoon at a certain time, because after it got fairly hot all the pipes in the building started to go ‘bang bang bang’ and you had to get through the ‘bang bang bangs’ before the evening performance otherwise it was a disturbance! But it was cold and we knew the audiences were cold - it’s a huge big auditorium and all the heat used to just go up to the top - but we did do fairly good business, fairly good business, and we kept going right the way through.

We had various panics. One particular panic - I really didn’t think we were going to get through it! We’d done a fairly good pantomime at Christmas, made a little bit of money on that but then we had dreadful weather – a real freeze up – immediately in January and of course immediately audiences started falling off and we did everything we possibly could, but it looked as if we were going for a burton. I wrote to two well known people who had belonged to Halifax - who had lived in Halifax as young people - to ask if whether they would be prepared to assist. I wrote to Wilfred Pickles, who you won’t remember, but he was a comedian and also a broadcaster and his name was very, very well known at that time and one other actor who was also very well known at the time - and names escape me a little bit, it’ll maybe come back to me the actor’s name in a moment. But I got no reply from Wilfred Pickles, but from this actor who was, at that time, playing in a play called *Separate Tables*, a Terence Rattigan play at St James’s Theatre in London and I wrote to him. He wrote straight back with a cheque for £100 to help me out with the salaries – that particular weekend - and he said, ‘The following weekend’, he said ‘I’m going to bring the entire production up for a Sunday night performance.’. It was unheard of – a West End play company to come and play in a little provincial theatre, and it happened. We had to duplicate the sets - it was quite difficult, because in London it was being done on a revolving stage, it was two sets, set in a boarding house – the dining room and the sitting room, and it kept changing between the two. Ours had to be strikes and re-sets on each one, but my scenic artist was very good, was very clever and he came down to London with me – we saw the show one night and came back on the night train, ready for rehearsal in the morning and he redesigned the sets and we got them done and the whole production happened, it came up. The company were paid for by this star in the Queen’s Hotel in Leeds, came over, did this production and of course we had to charge large prices. Some of the people in the town were disappointed because they couldn’t afford it, but we did do a lot of publicity pointing out the fact that this was in order to keep the theatre going particularly. So there were £3, £4, £5 sort of prices - doesn’t sound much now, but it was a lot more than we normally charged of course for the ordinary rep - and it was packed out, absolutely packed out and so we made enough money to see us through that very bad weather until the spring came and we were moving again, that sort of thing. However, by that time, because of the hard work that I’d been doing, I was getting ill and I had to go to the doctor. I was getting... really feeling desperately tired – it was just pure fatigue really and he gave me some little pill, some little blue pills and said, ‘You can take these for one month, after that I take no further responsibility’. So anyway I realised the time had come, so I handed in my notice and finished.

Ironically, the man who took over from me - John De Lannoy his name was, very good director, later a production manager for one of the leading London managements - and it was very, very sad, because three weeks into his tenure one night - fortunately after the audience had gone and the company had gone home - the ceiling of the theatre fell in: the whole lot, the whole plaster in the auditorium came down and the building was condemned as unsafe. This was because of course of lack of maintenance over many, many years, and so the poor old Grand Theatre was finished. There was another little ironic thing... During my time there, in order to make a bit of money, I had sold

advertising space on the back wall of the theatre - on the outside, which faced up the hill in Halifax - to Rowntrees, and so they put huge big posters on there and we got a little bit of revenue out of that, and it still had I think eighteen months to run when the theatre was condemned and then was about to be demolished. Rowntrees stepped in and said, 'You can't demolish the back wall there, we have eighteen months to go on our payment'. So they took down all the front of the theatre and backed up this back wall of the theatre for eighteen months. It stood like that, this great big piece of wall, but the rest of the theatre is now a car park. Poor old Grand Theatre!

However, going back to my last night there, I had a telephone call during the interval of the final play that I was doing which was *Rope* by Patrick Hamilton – a wonderful strong play, a play I'd always wanted to do and so it was pure self indulgence because I wanted to play the leading role in that... and I did. But during the interval I had a call and it was from Geoffrey Staines back from York again and he said, 'I hear... I read in *The Stage* that you were leaving, what are your plans?'. I said, 'Well,' I said, 'I've got to have a little rest, the doctor says, for a month', and he said, 'Well, would you be prepared to make it three weeks and then come back and direct the four plays which we're putting on for the Scarborough season?'. By that time the interchange had stopped. Scarborough during the winter was too expensive to run, so they closed the theatre in and we just ran four plays during the summer, then interchanged and repeated them through the season. So that we would do four plays and then the weakest of them would be dropped and then the other three would be repeated one, two, three, one, two, three for the rest of the season. So he wanted me to come and direct those four plays, so I said, 'Lovely! Thank you very much.', and so I had my three weeks' rest, went back to York Scarborough as Associate Director, so having started as ASM I was now Associate Director.

Things hadn't changed all that much. Certain members of staff had changed, but a lot of the basic carpenter, that sort of thing were still there, the same people – the Chief Electrician was the same. So life went on very much the same as it always had done, so once I had put on these plays at Scarborough I went back to York and became Geoffrey's associate, which meant actually that I directed two-thirds of the plays and he directed one third. He usually chose the ones he liked best and I got the other ones. But a number of interesting things happened, because at that time the Royal Court in London had started, the new wave of writers were coming in – John Osborne had written *Look Back in Anger* and those sort of plays were being done and of course as they finished they would be released for reps that wanted to do it. I remember very well being called down to Geoffrey's office and he handed me the script of *Look Back in Anger* - which I'd never seen - and he said, 'I think you'd better look after this one, old boy'. It was just a bit too avant-garde for him and I read it and I thought, 'Well yes, it is, but actually, it's not all that wham'. It is a play which has the same format as the plays which had always gone before, but basically I found the difference was instead of the usual introduction to the play and then incidents happen and then there is a dénouement and it finishes, you sort of got the dénouement first - you got the situation that it was at the end, and then you found out how it happened. That was a new way round in many, many ways and far more intellectual in many ways – the characters themselves were deeper, there was more for the actor to do which was great, you know. So an actor called Vernon Joiner played it and I forget who the girl was, but Geoffrey Dench played the little Welshman - who is Judi Dench's brother - and Dr Dench, their father, was our theatre doctor. We knew the family very well. When I was still an ASM up there in point of fact, Judi was still at school - she's just a little bit younger than me - and she used to get bored during the school holidays and she used to come to the theatre to see if there was anything she could do, and she used to come up propping

with me sometimes and her insight even then as a little girl at school was incredible. She would talk about people in shops we'd been borrowing things from. I remember her once saying there was a rather strange lady in one of the shops. She used to say, 'If you put that lady on the stage, in the Theatre Royal, nobody would believe it was true, but' she said, 'she's very real isn't she?'. And that I've always said is the secret of Judi Dench's great success, because she sees that. She sees the reality in sometimes extreme behaviour, and I've always remembered that, but that's slightly beside the point.

Anyway, I stayed there until Geoffrey actually retired from there: he became very ill and retired. I was supposed to have taken over - they were going to split his role between an administrator and director, and the administrator they brought in and I didn't really hit it off. And I'd been back three years by then and I thought, 'It's time to go, I must go'. So I didn't take up the appointment actually for the following season so that was 'bye bye' York and Scarborough, and off I went sort of freelancing you know after that for quite a long time, sometimes playing sometimes directing. It became very, very tiring indeed, but nevertheless I felt, 'Well, I've tried a bit of everything of the theatre now': I knew my stage management, I'd had good experience acting over a wide range of roles and I'd done a bit of understudying as well and directing still, you know, hit the main spot. I was tired of all this shilly-shallying around and going here there and everywhere.

An advertisement came up in the Telegraph - it was also in The Stage - for somebody to become manager of a theatre in London called the Toynbee theatre. The Toynbee Establishment was a university settlement in East London and they did a lot of social work there, they had a big old building there, they lived there these various committed people who had a number of jobs - some of them were solicitors and that sort of thing but they were committed to doing social work in the East End. They had a big education block which had been built in the 30s and had a theatre in it, largely used by amateur companies but the teaching work which had gone on in this particular building had been taken over by the education department of the then LCC (London County Council). There was a fall out over the rental arrangements and this was 1964 now and the building had been shut for five years. Anyway they came to an agreement and they decided that the theatre should be used not just by local amateurs but to any class or company (amateur company) that was affiliated to an adult education institute in London, so that they could come to the theatre, with good facilities and learn a little bit more about stage craft and that sort of thing and it wouldn't cost them anything. They wouldn't have to hire it because it would be LCC property and they wanted a manager for it, and they wanted somebody who had theatre experience so I spoke to my agent, said, 'What do you think?' and he said, 'Well, could be a good job'. I'd also been out on three tours, fairly recently, they'd all flopped before or when we came into the West End and there had been some very good people in it. Last one I did was with a very famous couple - Jack Hulbert and Cicely Courtneidge and that had come into the Adelphi and we flopped horribly, we lasted a little while and I thought 'I just can't be bothered to go out with dreadful plays, frankly' - I can't be bothered to spend 8 weeks out on tour with a rubbishy play, bring it into the West End and then it just flopped. I wanted to do something different.

So - long story short! - I was interviewed for the job, they gave me the job and I thought just for a year this could be really quite something and this is round about the end of your actual period of study, I think for this particular thing. But it was a completely new branch, as far as I was concerned, being attached to an educational establishment. I'd never considered myself a teacher - I'd never had any training as a teacher or anything - but that in fact was what it was, and to begin with it was just these various amateur groups who were usually a class as, I say, affiliated to the institute and they would come in for a week. I'd give them a chance to use the workshop to paint a set, almost employ

all the things I'd learned in rep back again to them to teach them how to get a show on in a short length of time with a certain amount of finesse. Some of them took to it very well, some of them didn't like being marshalled about by me and never came back but the other thing was which was quite interesting, although not really part of this brief, was the fact that schools in London started to hear about this. The Inner London Education Authority which had now been created had taken a theatre and I'd get teachers ringing up and asking, 'Would it be possible for me to bring my class of 4 year olds down to see backstage, to see how it works?' and of course at the time I had nothing doing much during the day because all of the amateur companies were there in the evenings. So I said, 'Yes, that's fine'. So whatever the play was, where there would be a set on the stage, I would take a class round and say, 'That's where the curtains are operated, this is where the sound effects are done, this is the lighting board'. At that time we had an old grandmaster, we didn't have a front of house control room, it was backstage on a perch: show them how that worked and all the rest of it. Take them around all the dressing rooms and everything and they were quite pleased, they went away quite satisfied, but I thought, 'this is ridiculous, because I'm showing them what is supposed to be a live art, dead – nothing's happening'. So I started devising little exercises: whatever the set was on the stage, I'd invent a little playlet that would fit into there and I'd do a couple of lighting cues without altering with the setting of any of the spotlights, a few sound effects on the tape recorders and that sort of thing, and a few scene changes with props and so I'd take them down there now, I'd take them in, show them how everything worked first as I always had done and then let them actually run the little playlet. I'd put somebody on the tape recorder, somebody winding the curtains up, and then I'd take one of them and put them in the stage manager's corner with the signals, stand behind them and show them how to run the show. Of course it would be chaos to begin with! Total chaos! But gradually it would fall into place, the most important thing (and I didn't really realise it at the time) was the fact that I was virtually teaching them communications, in that they would learn that they couldn't do it on their own, they needed a leader – a stage manager, someone in charge - and it became very popular. More and more schools wanted these things, every afternoon I'd have a school coming down to do one of these things, so eventually I thought, 'it's too much having to write a little playlet for every one of the thingies, I must write something genuine, with its own set and take it away from the amateurs – we'll do this solidly for a week or maybe a fortnight just for the schools' and so that's how what we called then 'a stage management exercise' was born. Each little playlet that I wrote was never more than about six pages long, crammed full of lighting cues, sound cues, scene changes and everything else. It was a wonderful way for them to learn communications working together as a team – a rather old-fashioned idea sometimes nowadays, but it nevertheless is very necessary - terribly necessary - and knowing that they've got to rely on each other and the actors knowing they can rely on the stage management doing the cues in the right place. And we had a number of related cues – the actor couldn't go on until such and such had happened - and I wrote junior ones, senior ones, we did... the beginning of Hamlet was one which was very popular, fairly well cut and just up to the moment when Hamlet goes off with the ghost of his father – very melodramatic, green spot on the ghost and all this sort of thing and that worked really very well.

There was one very interesting afternoon, one school - a very rough school from North London, I forget what it was called now - used to come in to use our studio on Friday afternoons with their drama teacher. He was quite a good drama teacher but he wasn't very good at discipline and he used to arrive sometimes with only half the class - he lost them on the way. One afternoon he got there - with the whole class! - then had a telephone call asking him to go back to school, another teacher was ill and he had to cover. So he was going to have to take them all back, he said, 'I suppose you couldn't

keep them for me?' and I said, 'It just so happens we were doing a stage management exercise, the Hamlet exercise that afternoon'. So I had a quick word with the rest of my staff, the electrician and my deputy and everything and I said, 'We could just put them on through the exercise' and they all said, 'You can't do Hamlet with them!'. I said, 'Well, they needn't know it's Shakespeare'. Shakespeare's never mentioned: it's just a story, it's a story with things. So we did and of course their reading was appalling, reading from text – because some of them had to read [?] with other things going on, and we stumbled through a couple of times through this little bit and there was one point when somebody had run the tape right off the machine, they were resetting it and I was standing on stage with a couple of these guys and one of them turned to me and said, 'Good this, innit, eh?' I said, 'I'm glad you're enjoying it'. He said, 'Funny dialogue though, all these funny words and what not'. I said, 'Well actually (I thought, 'shall I risk it?') actually, it's Shakespeare'. 'Shakespeare?!', he said, and then he yelled out, 'Hey, we're doing Shakespeare!!' so we continued. When the teacher came back eventually and took them back to school, and they'd had a whale of a time – they'd really enjoyed themselves. A little while later I got a message from the head saying, 'thank you very much for looking after the class that afternoon. Actually' he said, 'it's quite incredible. They were a very unruly class' he said, 'but they honestly seem to be a little bit more with it now,' he said, 'they're working together a lot better.'. And I thought, 'yes you see, these things do rub off!'. And that was the wonderful thing about that whole job - we would only ever meet a class probably once ever, but we did get feedback every now and again to show that it was registering and what we were doing very often, it wasn't just that eventually for the schools we were doing far more schools than the amateur groups doing things like simulation exercises – some text-based things, we would do programmes maybe on a set book to open it up for them, not playing it all but doing little bits of scenes some of them they could join in with and that sort of thing. Dark of the Moon was one that was a set play at one point, which they couldn't understand because it was set in America with rather a - then - strange dialogue, but we found that by doing it, having a few of us professionals playing the leading roles and bringing them in with it for the crowd bits, it was real for them, they were alive, they were part of it. They would go back to school and have no more trouble with it. Also theatre visits - there used to be money available for booking of a matinée for all the London schools to go to the National or somewhere or other. Sometimes very badly chosen - there was one in particular that I went to, to this matinee and it was Ibsen's Pillars of Society, which at the best of times is a pretty heavy going thing, four acts, and I was sitting amongst a lot of kids obviously at the Adelphi and they were all right during Act One when there were new characters coming on and costumes and scenery and everything to keep them busy. Act Two they started to get a bit restless and there was a guy just behind me who kept kicking the back of my seat. In Act Three they were really getting beside themselves and they thought that was the end, but it wasn't, there was another act to go and their teacher – the group I was near, their teacher came down the aisle and said, 'How are you getting on lads?' and one of them turned round to him and said, 'Oh does it go on much longer sir?' and I thought to myself, 'this is ridiculous. All this money, public money has been spent to take these kids to the theatre - they were never going to a theatre in their lives again!'. It was ridiculous, and that's when we started the idea of doing preparation programmes in association with the theatre. We did some with the Royal Shakespeare Company, we did a Twelfth Night preparation programme, we did some with the National and ideally what we would do is have a word with the director first to find out how he was treating it, sometimes they would invite me to go along to the first read-through or something like that so that I would get an idea of the way they were going to treat the script, so we could keep in key with that. So basically we would do our half-day programme on the play, the themes of the play, acting bits of it, little

bits of it, important bits of it so they got the structure. Then they would go and see the play and then we'd have a third session which would be a debriefing sort of on it and it worked very well. The companies were pleased with it... One we did (again, I thought it was a very bad choice) was Restoration Comedy at the National and I thought you know, 'it's not the sort of thing that is suitable really for school kids.'. So rather... instead of doing too much on the play itself, we put our preparation thing rather more on the audience of the time that might have gone to see the play originally. So we did the manners of the period to a large extent, we did little extracts from other plays of the period, we did the dressing scene from *The Relapse*, Lord Foppington having all his clothes on, so they would understand the sort of clothing they were wearing – that sort of thing. The manners of the period, we had them going around the studio greeting each other - the men with hats and canes and the ladies with fans. It was rather fun actually, some of these gawky cockneys going around, they enjoyed that but they got the feeling of the period. That was what we did, and they went then to see the play and when we did the de-briefing (we took them all back to the National to do the de-briefing), one of the girls in the company said 'you know, that matinée was one of the best audiences we've ever had!'. As I said, these simulation exercises when we would simply take a sort of social thing, we did one on child abuse – a difficult subject to do, but we built a flat on the stage, blocked off the auditorium, built it into a flat, everything worked and everything else. Put a problem family in there, the kids we had to excuse, they had gone to see their granny or something so that they weren't actually there, but there was evidence of them – toys in the bedroom. We divided, a class would come in and they would be divided between all sorts of departments, some were in educational welfare, some of them would be NSPCC, some of them would be other departments that were involved with young people – health department and one thing or another. Each department would then get a message from somebody to introduce this family. I looked after the NSPCC. I went on a little course to find out what they did and so I had one of the dressing rooms as our little office. I just had two from the class who were trainees and after I'd explained a few things about what we were going to do a little telephone rang and I put them on and of course it was one of our people in the other room, but she said she was a neighbour of a family in a tower block in *Tower Hamlets* and she was very worried because the little boy who normally went to school with her daughter hadn't been seen for quite a long time, but they had heard some crying at night in the flat, she was very worried about it and did she think we could do anything about it? So I said, 'Well, I think the best thing we can do is go visit', so I sent them off, they were all sent on their own - it was quite difficult because every department had to visit the flat, but we had to time it so that they didn't all appear at the same time. When they got there they would get a fairly... they would speak to this neighbour first of all - the neighbour had just a front door, there was no inside, they didn't go inside - she saw them on the doorstep, told them where the flat was and then they knocked on the door. This woman came to the door, not very helpful, eventually – providing they did it right - she'd invite them in. If they were hopeless she wouldn't let them in, they'd come back to me and say, 'She won't let me in'. So we played it for real, all morning. In the afternoon, after the break, there would be a conference. All the various agencies coming together, together with the parents, to decide what should happen to these kids. The other thing that was quite amusing was that there was apparently a boyfriend - the mother had this boyfriend - and he was obviously involved in the fact that the abuse of these children. They never saw him... oh yes they did see him, they did see him on one occasion. It was pretty obvious, there were only two bedrooms – one was the kiddies bedroom, and the other one was a double bed and that's where he must be sleeping. Some of them picked up on that, others didn't want to know. We had a school from *Hampstead* who didn't

want to know. They told me 'No, he was sleeping on the sofa, in the sitting room'. We put beer bottles around and that sort of thing.

Then we did one about a redeveloping part of East London, one of the docks – we invented the dock, we took some photographs, some genuine photographs of rather derelict buildings in a part of dockland and it was a question of whether or not it was going to be housing, industry, recreational area – so they had the chance to design something, again in different departments. During the tea-break in the morning we had a model, a lovely big model which our scenic artist made of what it could look like with lovely little housing developments, a riverside walk and one or two little units for in light industry – that sort of thing, it would have been very nice indeed. They were all standing around this when a journalist from the local paper came in - which again was one of us - and while they were gathering around it he sort of joined them and then he started a conversation with them. He said, 'Well, what do you think about this, this idea for this container centre?' and they said, 'Well, what container centre?' and he said, 'Oh, don't you know it? They're an American company, taking this over – it's going to be huge, they're going to have to bulldoze all that through.'. They said, 'They can't do that'. So the rest of the day then was a sort of negotiation about how they could adapt their ideas, what could be kept. There was this one house that we had taken photographs of, which had an order on it, it couldn't be pulled down. There was also an old people's home, so again it was social problems. Then we had a public enquiry at the end of the afternoon and an inspector arrived (one of us, of course) and so they all had to stand up: the American man stood up and explained why it was important for the container centre to be build and they had to stand up and explain why it was important from their point of view. This was wonderful because a lot of the teachers said a lot of the kids who'd never uttered a word in class were up there on their feet getting in there. This is what I call using theatre in education, not being a theatre in education group (there are plenty of those), but using theatre as a tool in education.