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Peter Rankin – interview transcript

Interviewer: Helen Temple

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Actor. Audiences; Lionel Bart; Brendan Behan; Peter Brook; Cinderella; critics; dialogue; Joan Littlewood; Ewan MacColl; Oh What a Lovely War; playwrights; Gerry Raffles; rehearsals; Royal Court Theatre; Shakespeare; theatre-going; Theatre Workshop; Kenneth Tynan.

HT: OK, can we just begin by you giving permission for this to be recorded, transcribed and housed at the British Library as part of the Theatre Archive?

PR: You can, and that's OK.

HT: Brilliant, thank you. Where shall we start?

PR: Oh Crikey!

HT: Indeed!

PR: That's what I mean by rubbish... as one sort of works one's way in... so what do you want to talk about – me, or my reaction, or...

HT: Let's start with you and how you got into the theatre.

PR: Let's see what I can do... I came from a very privileged family that lived in London so that - you know, you hear about these people that come into the theatre and they've been born far out in the country and they say, 'I never went to the theatre until I was 17, and then I realised that was it and I got to do it', and I think, 'Oooh dear' it was never like that for me.' I got taken to the theatre when I was five...

HT: Oh.

PR: And I knew that was what I wanted to do, and so I was taken to children's plays like Peter Pan, and when you got home you put feathers in your jumper and you jumped off

the backs of sofas, and there were children's plays by someone – whom Joan insisted was a woman – called Nicholas Stewart Gray, who used to do little children's plays at the Arts Theatre Club. Now, they would seem insufferable now, but because they were stories I quite enjoyed them. Whereas pantomimes... at that age I didn't like somebody coming out to talk to me, and I thought, 'No, get on with the story, I don't want the juggler, I don't want the trampoline artist', and of course you didn't realise at that age there were a lot of people who did want that, they didn't necessarily want the story, they wanted the comic to come out and talk to them and say 'Hello children!', and all that kind of stuff, and I thought, 'No, I can't be bothered.', I developed a taste for that many years later. So that was going on, and then I was taken to... oh yes, there was John Gielgud at Drury Lane, he was doing *The Tempest* directed by Peter Brook...

HT: Right.

PR: ...and that was with huge sets in those days, because people think of Peter Brook as very spare nowadays, but in those days – you have to realise that he developed too – and he had painted scenery like they used to have in those days, designed I think by a guy called Leslie Hurry, who would've probably been a sort of oil-painting type artist...

HT: Really?

PR: ...in those days, and he did lots of shows and that was the style of the day, and you know, you had – there are kind-of 'visions' in *The Tempest*, goddesses and gods come down, and I went with a Swiss girl who said, 'Oooh! – I – oooh, I always get the giggles when anything comes down.' and sure enough it came down and she was in fits. So you had John Gielgud doing *Prospero*, and that was unusual, because you usually associate Drury Lane as a place only for musicals. Straight after that it was *My Fair Lady*, which I was taken to, that was a kind of summation of operetta, musical before you got to... and then the beginning of something else was *West Side Story*, which was absolutely simultaneous because I think that they came out in virtually the same year. I went to see that, and that was kind of jazzy and rather disturbing, with the 'Romeo' character dying at the end of the play, because I was only eleven and I thought 'Oh dear!'. I couldn't get to sleep that night! And then you had the RSC starting up, and Peter Brook who came to talk to us at my school. There was also the National Theatre which was starting up, and I always thought that it was a bit middle-of-the-road those days, than the RSC. Then, my father was directing – well, producing some commercials for eggs, and he said that Joan Littlewood was going to direct them, and it was a very boring weekend and I thought, 'I must get away and watch this.' That is how I came to meet her, and I said, 'I am crazy about the theatre.' And she said, 'Oh don't be silly! Get science-struck! Don't get stage-struck!' At that time she was really interested in the Fun Palace - that was about 1964. I said, 'Well I have tried chemistry and I know that I am a dead loss, I have been at it for two years.' And she said, 'Well, look, we are starting rehearsals of *Henry IV* on Monday, for the Edinburgh Festival, if you sort of happen to be there...' Well I was thinking, 'I'm bloody well sure I'm going to be there!' I remember flying along the pavement when I went back to school that day, because I was still very much at school. So I used to bunk off in the afternoon and go to the rehearsals of *Henry IV*. The first day I arrived and there was nobody there, and I thought, 'I have sunk, this is not going to work' But then the next time, there were all the actors having their lunch, and they were all wearing these floppy relaxing clothes - soft shoes and things - which Joan absolutely insisted

upon. I went into the theatre and there were these benches, which were arranged not facing the auditorium but facing the other side of the stage. It was like sort of schoolchildren in a way, and Joan paced up and down and smoked her cigarette and had this woolly hat that she would push back and forwards, and her black coffee which was always cold, because she always let it go cold. She would take sips out of it, and she would say, 'Shakespeare is white hot! I don't want any daffodils up arses!' She would take a scene anywhere, she didn't go chronologically. So we would suddenly find ourselves doing an inn scene, and she would get people doing different, not their own parts. So suddenly she would say to Barbara Windsor, 'Can you read Falstaff?' Barbara was a bit puzzled by this, I didn't realise it at the time, but Barbara hadn't been around for a long time, so she was a bit puzzled by that and by the end of the week, she left with some wonderful excuse, but she was there to play Doll Tearsheet, and she would have been an excellent Doll Tearsheet, but she got nervous. You see, when she came to do *Fings Aint Wot They Used T'be* in '58-'59 – this is Barbara Windsor – she knew which part she was up for and it had already been performed at Stratford East and she knew it was coming into the West End. It was all fairly fixed, the one change was Lionel Bart writing a number for her called 'Where Do Little Birds Go in the Winter Time?' which absolutely brought the house down and made Barbara. From then on she didn't really look back. So that was Joan's West End period, which... before that as you probably know, it wasn't at all like that. They had to bowl hits into the West End to make money to keep Stratford East going. Because if you look in Howard Goorney's book you will find that the Arts Council just would not support them. They did support the Royal Court, and if you look again in Howard's book you will see the Royal Court's finances paralleled with Theatre Workshop's finances and you will see there is a huge difference! But you see, George Devine was what you would call the acceptable face of what you would call 'different theatre', and Joan was not.

HT: Was he the Artistic Director at the Royal Court?

PR: Oh yes, he was the boss at the Royal Court, George Devine, but of course their work methods were completely different you see, because they did new plays but in the style of weekly rep where you say, 'OK darling, you come in this way and you say your line that way.' It was directed in that very old fashioned way. Whereas Joan would give people ideas to play with, like with *Henry IV*, you would have Poincs which was Victor Spinetti, and you had Murray Melvin who was in fact not being anything in particular, and Joan would say, 'Right, OK, you are now two mods on a street corner.' Because she kind-of saw Prince Hal and Poincs as being mods – I don't know if you know about mods and rockers, which is from the sixties? The rockers were a bit sort of dated. Well, she thought that that was more like the other guy in *Henry IV*... [returns with a book] I'll keep Shakespeare, just in case we need him. Hotspur. Yes, so we have Poincs and Hal who are a bit like mods and Hotspur who is like a rocker, kind of old-fashioned but slightly more honourable in a way. I mean, he is on the wrong side but he is a decent chap. So she would just have them improvising and you gradually got into the scene by them - by the actors - using their imaginations, by using 'parallels' as Joan would call them, parallels from the present day, that you can then transfer to the past. The scene, or rather the characters, would go into you almost physically: into your feet, into your head, into your fingers, rather than somebody sitting there... because sometimes you can have these people who lecture you until you are blue in the face about the times and what was going on - absolutely fascinating - but then the actors get up and continue doing the same old hammy stuff they were always doing before! But you see, Joan broke all of that down and she used to call it 'shit-shovelling', and the other

expression she had was 'acting in the past tense', which means that you have had time to prepare the speech, which means that you colour the words, and everybody knows that you are acting. But Joan had them talking as if they didn't know! I mean, the actor Roy Kinnear, who died some years ago, when he went to the RSC they were amazed because he made the classics sound like it was just Roy Kinnear talking! You listen when somebody talks! [puts on 'hammy' voice] But if somebody is doing that, sound that goes out and back in again. We all think, 'Oh well, we know what he is up to!', and we all fall gently asleep! So that was what Joan was brilliant by that time, well she was brilliant at getting rid of it from very early on! I am talking now about my coming in on things; what Joan got up to before - I don't know if you want to know about that at all? I can only really talk at second hand...

HT: Sure.

PR: And she - and now you see I am actually going round in circles. You know that she went to RADA didn't you?

HT: No I didn't, no.

PR: Well, she was a kid in Stockwell, bright, scholarship, and she decided she wanted... she went to the Old Vic as a treat, and she fell, and she saw Shakespeare - I think it was Merchant of Venice - and she thought 'that's what I want to do', and she directed the production of Macbeth at her school, which was terribly vivid. It [her school] was a convent, and apparently she had the effect of someone having a limb chopped off with a cabbage, and there was a visiting mother superior from France, who fainted, and the resident mother superior came round and said 'Go easy', and Joan thought 'Eughh, boring'. And she also forgot to put the chairs out for this production, and she was only eleven and she thought, 'Um, good note, I'll never put chairs out again, it's so much more interesting when people are always standing up and moving about.' So that was her kind-of start, and then she went to RADA, which she hated, and if you imagine, you didn't get that many grants to go RADA. There were about two scholarships a year, and she got one of those scholarships. Of course nowadays everyone gets grants and they can... well, maybe it's harder now, you could come from any background at any point and if you were any good you got in. And so she was surrounded by people whose parents were all professional people, like doctors, and lawyers and who didn't, I suppose, realise kind-of, who were paying, and she felt, and were taught differently. So there she is at RADA, and I suppose learning a new accent, though she never spoke about that. See, the fascinating thing about Joan was that for the rest of her life her accent was absolutely classless so she puzzled people because they thought, 'Where does she come from?'. Some people thought she came from an aristocratic family, which was utterly ridiculous. She comes from a family in South London and a lot of them are still there, and I know them very well. And she found South London very boring and she couldn't wait to get away from it, and the Old Vic was, in a way, a way out, and so was the Tate Gallery, which she adored, she used to go and look at paintings, she could stand in front of a Constable for one hour at a time - just one Constable - and that was the way she kind of escaped, and then I suppose she thought RADA would be an escape, but she found... she told me, after being taught very stropily how ghastly the place was, she said, 'I used to eat my sandwiches in the lavatory', because she found it so painful, because you see, they meant her no harm the other pupils, but they did talk in a

patronising way, and they'd say – and there's a guy who's still alive, he's 95 and he said, 'I remember Joan well, as soon as we realised she had to go out and do a cleaning job in order to come to the school', he said, 'we took her under our wing'. Well you thought, 'That's very nice, but it isn't, ha ha ha', because it sounds patronising, and they would say, 'Oooh, must be ghastly to be poor', and again, they didn't mean any harm, but it comes over as harm, and so anyway, she left early and hitch-hiked north with a view to getting to America. She was going to stow away on a boat from Liverpool. She got as far as Manchester when she collapsed, because she was hitch-hiking. And she'd won a prize at RADA which was given to her by a guy called Archie Harding who worked in radio up there, and he said 'If you're ever round Manchester way, give me a call', and that's exactly what happened, and she got jobs in radio, and, so that earned her her bread - I mean her keep - and then she met Ewan MacColl, who was then called Jimmie Miller, and they started Theatre of Action together, but you have to remember this was all amateur and done in spare hours, but they had an extraordinary passion that was sort of like nobody else's, and pretty soon after that was when Howard Goorney came along with Theatre Union, which was the second company, before the war, and where they did *The Good Soldier Schweik* and *Fuente Ovejuna*.

HT: So she started working for a radio. Which radio station was it?

PR: She started working for the BBC where she was much admired for her classless accent - because there's a review which you can actually find in a newspaper saying, 'Thank God, a woman who speaks on the radio who doesn't have a plum in her throat' - and so she... and she learnt to do scripts, and she worked with a guy called Wilfred Pickles who was a very famous comic, a northern comic of the time, and he was famous for reading the news with a slightly Northern accent for the very first time on the BBC. She didn't like him but she worked with him, and you have to remember, everything in radio in those days was scripted and she would say – he would say, 'Ooh I was walking down this country lane and there's this little girl who's marvellous at singing' and then the little girl would talk. Now, Joan would find a little girl who really would be marvellous at singing, but it couldn't be done like a documentary, like you just talk to her naturally, she had to read a script and it all had to be vetted. But then Joan did a series of radio documentaries that – the most famous one that does exist, and is gettable, is called *Classic Soil*, which is based on Karl... Engel's view of Manchester in the 19th century. And Joan compared it to what it was like in the late thirties when she was there, and that was quite extraordinary, because they did go out into the street and talk to people, which was very difficult to do because you had to have a big van and block off the ends of the street. There was no question of having a little gadget like this thing in front of me, so that it was a big performance and it was quite an achievement. And on one occasion she did a thing about Prague at Christmas time, and she had a Czech actor who was supposed to write it and perform it, and he didn't hand his script in on time, so Joan wrote the script, and it was sort of something like, 'As I bustled through Prague doing my last minute shopping and the snow was falling in Wenceslas Square', and stuff like that – and she'd never been anywhere near it. And he came in and read this, and then people - Czech people - rang in with tears streaming down their faces, saying, 'Oh God, we were so moved to think of our home town back at...', so that was kind-of what she was getting up to at the BBC. And you have to remember, when she started Theatre Workshop she had just been offered a really good job at the BBC, but so she said, 'I wasn't nobody - understand that, I wasn't a nobody when I started Theatre Workshop, I'd had a good job offer, and I turned my back on it to start my own company to do what I wanted, with a bunch of like-minded people', some of whom had

come from Theatre Union before the war, so that would be Rosalie Williams, and – I can't remember – David Scase, who became director of the [Manchester] Library Theatre many years later, but he was with them, there was John Bury, Howard Goorney, Ewan MacColl and the young Gerry Raffles, who had joined the company just towards the end of the war and then went into the RAF and misbehaved there like nobody's business and kept up with Joan and came back. And so they started in Kendal, which is there in the book, and they toured for eight years – which is where Czechoslovakia, Norway, Sweden comes in – and they did very well there and they were much appreciated... they just were not appreciated here where the Arts Council said, 'Well yes... but you're not really like proper actors', and every time they came, something would go wrong – like, they'd have this beautiful – I was telling you about this girl who was singing in the Wilfred Pickles show, she wound up with Theatre Workshop and she was their number one singer - she's still alive today and she's called Pearl Turner, but the night the Arts Council comes round, Pearl's off because she's got a sore throat and the whole thing dims a little bit, and the Arts Council guy says, 'Yes, very nice, very nice', and smiles a lot and then goes away and then nothing happens, and that went on for ages. They also had a training place called Ormesby Hall during the summer where Joan used to... they used to play marvellous games, and have people come round and play acting games - like sort of gangsters, and cowboys, and things - and of course there was Laban, the movement guy, whom Joan had much admired while she was already at RADA, because that was taught by a woman called Anny Fligg, so that was the only thing Joan liked at RADA, was the movement classes, which were based on the movement of Laban. And then lo and behold, Laban turned up in Manchester after the war, and so Joan went to meet him, and he had a pupil – Jean Newlove – who became the Movement Director at Theatre Workshop from then onwards, and Jean married Ewan MacColl.

HT: Ewan MacColl, yeah.

PR: And so it all goes around, and that was an extraordinary thing, that Joan actually got to meet Laban afterwards, and his system kind-of ruled the movement at Theatre Workshop. If you did it, you could turn yourself into another person through movement. This person, he doesn't move like me, he moves like something completely different, and you learnt how to do that, as well as sort of all the exercises, because he had a partner, Lisa Ullman, who wanted it mostly for education because she thought that was safer financially and movement in drama was considered, you know, a bit precarious, so she didn't want Laban getting too involved – this is Lisa Ullman, his partner – but Joan nevertheless followed that through, and so they toured for eight years and came to... well, Gerry Raffles knew that if they were going to get money, they had to have a base and I think - and that might even be in Dominic Shellard or Dan Rebellato's books - that the Arts Council were thinking of financing things, but only places with bases, and Gerry knew the importance of that – and they tried very hard for Liverpool, but that fell through, and then one day they said, 'Oh look, there's this theatre at Stratford East, they've got about two or three weeks spare, shall we go there?', and they thought, they didn't really want to go. Ewan MacColl said, 'Well if we get embedded there, then we're going through the normal routine of critics coming, and we become, you know, conventional', and I think Gerry thought, 'Well if we don't do something, we're going to fail, and split up', and so they went to Stratford East, which Joan always called a dump, she didn't like it at all, but it does have charm, it has immense charm, and this wonderful deep stage, and so instead of doing one show that you take on tour, or two or three shows that you rehearse for weeks and weeks and weeks, you – they rehearsed them very speedily, and did one show every two or three weeks. But by then she had a

company, and therefore you could work in shorthand. All these exercises you'd done over the years - the Stanislavsky, the Laban, and the use of the imagination, you could very quickly get things together, if you've got a company and you've been trained.

But then you get to 1955 when two of her best actors – Harry H. Corbett and George A. Cooper, I think probably simply worn out, because - from my own experience of working with Joan - it was fantastic, but very, very demanding, and there were times when you felt, 'I just want to go away and do something else, just for a little while, just to give me a break', and I think they'd rather slightly had it and so they went off, but it broke Joan's heart because she thought, 'That's the end of the company' and in her autobiography, she stopped at that point when she did the first draft and said, 'That's it, that is the story of Theatre Workshop.' And the publisher said, 'You must be mad! Because we haven't had *The Hostage*, we haven't had *Oh What A Lovely War*, we haven't had *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be*, we haven't had *Shelagh Delaney*, we've had none of the big things!' She said, 'Oh those were just writing jobs', which is quite amazing because she said, 'We weren't doing the training by then', she said, 'I spent all my time...' They were, in point of fact, I know because how they worked on later shows, I mean they were, we were still playing games all the time, she never worked conventionally, she never told actors where to stand or exactly what to do, she put ideas into their heads. I mean, for instance, if we're doing a crowd scene in *The Marie Lloyd Story*, which is a show in 1967 – not one that Joan cared very much about – but say you're doing a station. Instead of saying, 'Right, well you come on over here, you go over there', she said, now, [that] each of us had to work out who we were at the station, why we were at the station and what we had to do. Were you a porter? Or were you somebody coming to collect an old friend, or what? And we all invented little characters, and because you'd done all these exercises in movement, which is, not to bump it you see, actors are not trained in things like this, sensitivity about what other people are doing on the stage, because they're told where to go, whereas if you're trained in sensitivity, you're not going to bump into people, because Joan taught people to respect each other - she said, 'If you bump into somebody by mistake, you must apologise' - on the stage, because otherwise you're dead. If somebody brushes past you and ignores the fact that they've done that, she said 'you're both dead or you're mad'. And so, she would do an exercise like, the princes – she did it in *Henry IV*, she would walk past Brian Murphy, the actor, and she would deliberately brush his shoulder and then they would turn and they would take off hats that they didn't have and say 'I'm terribly sorry, terribly sorry', and then you had a little human moment which works and so there we are doing this crowd scene in *The Marie Lloyd Story*, but everybody's got that in their heads and in their bodies that you don't bash into people, so if there's a guy who's got a trolley and he's got luggage on, you have to respect that and if you're in a hurry or whatever and so on, and therefore when Joan started the scene we all did what we had to do, our jobs, and there before your eyes was the most beautiful crowd scene without anybody being told what to do or where to go, and it would only take a very little bit of sorting out after that and there you had your scene, because everybody's using their imagination, and that was what appealed to her immensely, was the use of imagination and quick-wittedness, and if actors who are very good performers were dull, then she tended to not be very interested in them and not give them... and so quite famous actors came to auditions and she wouldn't have them because they didn't have this sort of liveliness of spirit which was important to her, although they might be able to do what Gerry Raffles expected, which was called 'Seven performances a week', which means you're utterly reliable, or eight performances a week – two matinees and evening performances – and you would go on and you would give this very solid performance that managers absolutely adore because actors are reliable who do that, and Joan was less interested in that, because it was the sort [of]... quick-wittedness and... light-

footedness as well that she loved in actors, if she could get that. So that's... where have we got to?

So I came in with Henry IV and I was absolutely bowled over because, because of this use of the imagination, because of this extraordinary way of rehearsing which I'd never seen before, and we'd just done Henry IV at school, or we were just about to do Henry IV at school and it all felt a bit sort of 'eugh it's not as fun', because Joan had all these marvellous, imaginative exercises to do, and that we got through the play, as I say, not in chronological order to start with, but just taking what she wanted to do, just 'look at this now', and then gradually putting it all together towards the end. It wasn't a success, critics hated it, but there were younger people - this is up in Edinburgh by now - who work, they're around now, they were absolutely intrigued by it because it was at least very fresh and very lively. They were fretful - the critics - about the use of... the way people spoke, because Joan had cockney actors and she said, 'We don't want a cockney howl', the critics would be saying, because they were used to the way the actors spoke at the RSC, where... now, the actors at the RSC for all we know may have once been cockneys but they'd all had that sort of ironed out and they spoke in this, this sort of funny way that was considered the correct way to do it, but actually could sound very dead and old-fashioned... and it was always this, sort of, stream of life that Joan was fascinated by. She didn't like pauses and silences, and once when we were doing a Restoration comedy she said, 'The dialogue has to sort of ripple along like a stream, and if you put anything into that, it's like a stick that you throw into a stream, but the stream still flows on.' And it took us a long, long time to get that, this, and she wanted to get this tremendous sense of liveliness of people in those days, who didn't live very long so you sort of had to live life absolutely to the full, very very quickly and she wanted everything... she didn't want people coming along and going, 'ha ha ha ha ha' which they used to do in the bad productions of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* or something like that, but, 'I want everything as if you're almost about to laugh because you find everything so terribly merry', and we sweated blood to get that effect, and when I see Restoration Comedy now and they go 'ku-duh ku-duh ku-duh plonk, ku-duh ku-duh ku-duh plonk', and they pose and they say, 'This is where I get my laugh and everyone shut up while I say my funny line', and of course we had none of that, we just had this marvellous ripple which, when it worked - and it didn't always work - took your breath away, because it was just so full of life and made you feel so happy.

One of the first things I saw of Joan's was a little pantomime that she did simultaneously to *Oh What A Lovely War*, and it was a Cinderella plot written by Peter Shaffer who wrote *Equus*, very extraordinary because he comes totally from the West End, but he wasn't a fool and he could see what Joan was doing, and he could do what she wanted, which was watch the actors, go home, and re-write the dialogue at night and bring it back in again and... she appreciated that, and they did this Cinderella which the cast absolutely hated. But I saw it at the Wyndham's Theatre about, I suppose, late 1963, and it had the most glorious feeling because you longed to be up on the stage with the actors, and Joan herself said years later, 'That's what my aim is, you long to be up there with the actors' and I thought, 'That's funny' because that's exactly what I felt when I saw this, this funny pantomime they did with Victor Spinetti playing one of the ugly sisters and Brian Murphy playing the other, all lovely people who hated being in it, they thought it was all sort of, crazy, but I, I thought it was one of the most delightful things, because it was my discovery. *Oh What A Lovely War* was already big and was shortly to go to New York, and you know everybody knew it was great, but this funny little children's show, I didn't know what to expect, so that when you find it for yourself, that's the best. So that's how - that was sort of the beginning of me seeing that, and

then doing the commercials that Joan directed, for eggs, and meeting her that way and then going on to work with her on those shows in 19... oh it was just Henry IV.

And then round about '65, in order to make money for the Fun Palace. Now Joan, in 1961, split with Gerry Raffles, weary of the West End and of making hit shows because she, you know, she wanted the training, she wanted to keep her company, all that had got blown out of the window because of constantly getting shows into the West End, and so she split with Gerry both personally... and work-wise, which was painful for him and painful for her in the long run, and went off and got the idea of a place - which she'd had for many, many years, since she was a child, since she had seen university students strike-breaking in the big strike in 19... was it '22? And she never forgave them but at the same time she knew that education was important, so she thought, 'Well how about a place that isn't Oxford, that isn't Cambridge that anybody can go to if they want.' And that really was the seed of the Fun Palace, so Joan had that idea when she was in her teens, but here we are in 1961 and she can't help talking about it, and so an architect listening to her, Cedric Price, hears her, and actually goes away and starts to design one, and this became her great passion in the early sixties and she approached all sorts of people, different places she could do it, like Bromley by Bow or on the Thames, because she adored rivers and one of the reasons we did this Vanbrugh with the stream and the sticks being thrown into it was because it was set by water, and she absolutely adored places set by water and that's why she wanted to do that play, and she hoped the Fun Palace could be there. And it didn't happen, I suppose, because people didn't always... Joan had a marvellous way of talking, that Ken Tynan described as 'visionary' - the theatre critic - but he said, 'The funny thing is, that Joan can make the visionary practical.' But I think these people she was talking to didn't know that, and also because it was called Fun and, Joan actually said many years later, 'I wanted them to know it was education really, and I suppose if I'd plugged that stronger I might have got what I wanted. So she didn't get her Fun Palace, but she came back in 1967 with Fun Palace ideas in her head, like rolling entertainment, so that when we started the theatre up again we did a show called Macbird which didn't do very well, which was based on American play by a writer called Barbara Garson which was about the assassination of Kennedy and it had to be a club performance because that was considered a bit sort of, risky and only one critic liked that evening and that was Tariq Ali, who's still on the go. He was writing for some terribly fashionable magazine - which seems so inappropriate now - and he saw what Joan was up to, because before Macbird, you had one of Joan's actors, Stephen Lewis, coming on into the auditorium doing 'Doctor Lewis' Surgery', and the audience would be drifting in and he would be doing a sort of cod-surgery with jokes, and we'd be asking questions from the audience, and then we'd have Macbird, and the audience were summoned back from the interval by the 'Sheriff of Dallas' coming in with a gun and saying, 'OK everybody, back in the auditorium', which was so much more amusing, because in those days it was always the bell, it was always like being on an aeroplane. All this was new in those days this whole business of having constant entertainment! After Macbird three of her actors, including Stephen Lewis and Howard Goorney, did a little farce so there was this feeling of things going on all the time. The bar was always alive.

Then later she came back in '72, carried on with that idea and also had Ken Campbell's Roadshow which is when Silvester McCoy came to us in that show. Out in front of the theatre, it was the summer and they would do their show. This is what seemed to fascinate her the most at that period, and for example, she saw a show at the ICA that had been put on by Janet Street-Porter called The Body Show. She liked it, but she thought it needed a bit of structure. She said, 'Can we do it at Stratford? I will think of the structure.' The structure was that Victor Spinetti would be like a sort of fashion guy,

very sort of cool, bringing on lots of models to show beautiful fashions. George Sewell, who was a more sort of burly guy, would be wrestling, and they had double-booked the theatre, so both things had to go on at once, because Joan adored that kind of conflict. Not only that, but you had makeup and things being done in the foyer, so that the whole building was alive, and I think that that was what appealed to Joan more than text at that time. Joan would say, 'Oh I am not interested in plays', and John Antrobus said, 'Well I am!', and I remember thinking 'good for you John!' because Joan was interested in this all round thing, and we did another thing called Nuts which again was a bit of a failure! But it was a marvellous idea which was that ten actors would rehearse a lot of sketches for each night, and you would invite guests – you know famous people – and do their piece whatever it was. But also you would bring in journalists who would leap up onto the stage and tell a story that had happened that day. And we would have a video screen - which was very unusual for those days - which projected a TV picture, a big TV picture so that you could have the news of the day. You could have these sketches, which would be pretty relevant, and you could have some entertainer who you liked very much coming on and doing their funny old thing. You jumbled it all up together and you edited it, and Joan would edit it each night. I was fascinated by it, but it demanded a tremendous effort to ring up people every day rehearse the latest sketch you wanted to do, and pull the whole thing together, and some nights it went as flat as a pancake! And unfortunately it went as flat as a pancake the night the critics came – they were totally mystified! I thought that if you had the devotion to this thing, and the energy it would be no bad thing. I was intrigued by all those ideas but I think that there were people who were impatient with Joan because she was not settling down to taking a person's text. She once had a saying about plays, she said, 'If a play is good, it's bad', and what she meant by that is that someone might send in a play that is beautifully crafted but somehow dead. What interested her, and what she was brilliant at, and what her genius was for, was that somebody sent something, like Shelagh Delaney, where it needed a ton of work, but there was a kind of spirit in it, or a tune, or in the case of Frank Norman this use of Cockney that people didn't know at that time, and it kind-of chimed in your head and you thought 'yes yes' and you do it – you do it now, you don't wait. I mean, Shelagh Delaney's play *A Taste of Honey*, she sent it down to Stratford East, it was accepted almost immediately and done almost immediately. There was no 'Brochure Theatre' where you plan and plan and plan! They were going to do a play by a guy called Cops - who lives round here actually - *The Hamlet of Stepney Green* but they brushed that aside, which was cruel for him, and did *A Taste of Honey*. But that was the way they did things and it was very vital and very alive. Intelligent people responded to that, and less intelligent people who had a very fixed idea of what theatre was, didn't. That I suppose was the Arts Council. Their idea of something you champion was Sybil Thorndike touring a Greek tragedy around Welsh mines, which would have puzzled them no end. Joan wanted her shows to be intelligent but accessible, and she tried her hardest in the touring days to make them like that, and to make them really entertaining. Sometimes on those tours where people think they failed all the time, they didn't! They would have a marvellous night and people would say, 'Oh this is absolutely great', and then they would go somewhere else and they would have a dud night. Well anyway, that is where I have got to. Now. What else do you want to talk about? If anything?

HT: When did Ewan stop working closely with Joan?

PR: That would be about, '53-'54.

HT: Fairly early then.

PR: Well, do remember that she had known him before the war. There had been the agitprop and the shows they had done before the war, there had been eight years of touring, and then about three years at Stratford East, before he thought he was being frozen out. If you read his book, which is called *Journeyman*, he is very tactful, but he felt that he was being frozen out. Then he went off to become a folk singer, with Peggy Seeger, and Joan always respected his songs. Like 'Dirty Old Town' which is still played, 'The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face', and one of Joan's favourites 'I'm A Rambler', which I think is the Ramblers' anthem even now. Gerry respected the songs, but I think he found the texts rather school-masterish. And he wanted something different, and Gerry got his way. Because those plays of Frank Norman, Brendan Behan, Shelagh Delaney, that is what Gerry wanted. I think Joan didn't feel the same as he did, and yet those are the plays that made the theatre internationally famous. But almost in a very strange sort of way, Joan almost didn't care. In the case of *Oh What a Lovely War* that was an extraordinary coming together. As I said, in 1961 Joan left Gerry, left the theatre, and she tried to make a film, which was going to be set in Nigeria with the playwright Wole Soyinka, who is still very much on the go – he went to Leeds university. And that didn't come together. I think she found Nigeria tough, she didn't like the heat. Then she got into the idea of making films, and that is how *Sparrers Can't Sing* came about. It wasn't a film version of the play Stephen Lewis had written, because it was completely different by the time they had finished. But it has great charm these days, because it tells you of an East End that has now gone, and it's like a kind of document when you see it. She cared nothing for it when she made it, she said, 'Go drop it in cement in the Thames, I couldn't care less.'. But she saw it quite recently, before she died, and she said, 'It's not bad is it?'. It does have great charm, and if you ever want to get a tiny feel of how things were it does come up every now and again and it has Barbara Windsor in it, and James Booth, and a lot of Joan's actors from Theatre Workshop at that time.

Of course the place was always evolving, because to start with you had a team of people who were politically aligned and aligned with the whole idea of Theatre Workshop, but you get a feel from Gerry's diaries, notes and letters that he thought they were very keen but not very talented. That sounds a bit blasphemous, but as I said, I am reading between the lines. When two actors, Avis Bunnage and Harry Corbett came along, now they were not so politically aligned by any manner of means, and Joan used to be quite scornful about their politics, but they could do it. They could do what she wanted, and so could an actor called George A. Cooper, and they became her principal actors. Gerry would have been very appreciative of that, because he did like solid, strong performers. He likes clear voices and this whole idea about Performance with a capital P. It makes it interesting because you have two people who have similar ideas and different ideas at the same time. Gerry had his idea about the way he wanted things to go, and the tension is interesting between the two of them because Joan was not like him entirely. He served her tremendously well, because as a young man I think he said something like, 'I will lay down my life for you' - which he did, because he died very young. All his energy had gone into Stratford East. She was very scornful about the building. He stayed there when things were rough, and when great wreckers' balls were in the area - because they were completely flattening the area - he stayed there to make sure that the wreckers' ball did not come anywhere near the theatre. Which might have happened accidentally-on-purpose at that time. So he was different, and I know people thought he was a bit of a rogue at the time, but I think he is a bit of an unsung hero. He wanted to be unsung. He put his name at the bottom of the programmes as General

Manager G. C. Raffles, when it could have been 'A Gerry Raffles Production' if he had wanted, but he pushed Joan in the spotlight, and her name in the spotlight, which she was not totally at ease with. She always told me she was very uncomfortable with that, whilst others would say, 'Oh no, she was very much a star', and all that... I think there were sort of conflicting things going on there. You see, for instance on the posters it would always give you the name of the play, the author, the designer John Bury – who was very important to Theatre Workshop – and 'Joan Littlewood – Director' [Producer was the word used in those days] in big letters. The cast were never, never on the poster, I think that some of the actors at that time when Harry Corbett and George A Cooper left, that things were changing and that Gerry was becoming a boss figure and that it was no longer quite the co-operative that it was – you know, the whole idea that you had meetings and you decided everything by vote. But I think they found that Joan and Gerry had formed a bit of a unit and were going their way, so that they became I always felt, benevolent despots. I didn't mind that, because I always thought, 'Well if you don't like it, then go!' That is the nice thing about theatre: you don't have to be a democracy! You have to be a democracy in a country, but in a theatre, if everybody's always chipping in then there is a terrible slowness about the whole thing. But if you have some bastard coming in saying 'this is how it is going to be', and the bastard is talented, then you might have something. If you think that person is a bastard, and you don't want to work for them, fine - go and start your own company and be your own bastard! I didn't worry about that too much! I came to respect Gerry immensely, and I realise now that it is very likely that those plays Joan was famous for probably landed on his desk first, actually, and he probably read them first. Nobody ever talks about that. He would have handed them to Joan and said, 'What about this? Shall we do this?' I suspect that that is what happened. Because Joan needed a lot of help, this is the other thing. People thought that Theatre Workshop was Joan, and it wasn't - it was different people helping. She did admit it. I always looked upon her as a kind of queen bee – the rest of us were workers who brought the raw material that you would give her, if you were a writer or an actor. She would weave it together - because she was a genius editor - she would weave it all together and you would get your show.

When I wrote a play once, in 1973, Gerry Raffles said, 'You come up with the material. Don't worry about the WRIGHT part of being a playwright. That is what Joan does, she will fashion your play. But she needs the material, you have got to keep it coming.' This was sort of quite shocking for me at the time, because I thought, like a lot of people did, that Joan could make something out of nothing. It was not the case. She needed stuff, and she needed people bringing it from every direction. You couldn't bring her too much – she would cope. She would do this very delicate sort of spider's web weaving. The only trouble is if someone came in who didn't understand her way of working, then Bang bang bang! They would break it all! That happened in the musical Twang, which I haven't talked about, I started to talk about it... she did this musical, Twang, with Lionel Bart – who had written Fings Aint Wot They Used T'be, on which they had worked very happily together – in order to raise money for the Fun Palace. That was a very tricky period because by that time Lionel had got very big-headed, and the script was absolutely nothing. I read it many years later and it was like a seven-year-old child might have written it! Joan thought she could get something together, and to a certain extent she did. But it was that sort of gossamer by the means of games and her going home and writing at night. She managed to get something together, but then when you heard the orchestrations – and by that time Lionel had got very ambitious and loved big orchestras and 'Bang band band wah wah wah waa waaa' – when I heard the orchestra come in for their call I thought, 'Gosh, it doesn't really go with what Joan has written', which was so much more fragile than that! Sure enough, they got up to Manchester to try the show out and the critics said that it was absolutely awful! I think

Joan was asked to make a lot of changes that didn't really interest her and a guy called Burt Shevelove, an American director who knew all about, 'Da da da da daaa daaa daaa!' and, 'Here are the gags kids!' and he would write all that kind of stuff – he wrote *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. He took over rehearsals and he understood that whole business of underlining everything - exactly the way Joan didn't - to make a point with the audience: like they would all wear pink makeup, and Joan absolutely hated... I mean, men never wore makeup in Theatre Workshop except for one or two who secretly put a bit of eyeliner on, but they were the latecomers! The girls might wear street makeup but none of that heavy stuff that people used to wear. Joan would say, 'Oh for heaven's sake! That went out with the gas light! We've got electric light now, you don't need all that!' Burt would make them wear heavy makeup, do all that slap-bang gags and all sorts. That died as well, anyway, so it really didn't work! So that was a bit sad, but that is what I mean by Joan fashioning things that were sometimes too delicate. The audiences needed something a bit stronger because that is what they could understand, that is what they were used to.

Then Joan was invited to go on a sort of course - an international student's sort of thing - that was in Tunis. Peter Brook was also there and he was just talking, lecturing, and Joan would say 'Now, don't go lecturing my students and pinching them and giving them all sorts of bad ideas!'. I think he was rather intrigued by her. She said once, 'The one thing Peter has over me is that he could eat a goat's eyeball.' She actually got a show together with these students, by all accounts. There was a critic at the time called Ronald Bryden for the *Observer* who went to see it and he said, 'This is possibly one of the greatest things Joan has ever done, it is absolutely terrific!' She, in her book, is deeply suspicious of this man. She doesn't mention him by name. She thought, 'He's a critic, Ronald Bryden, he is just like everyone else!' But actually I read his review and he thought it was marvellous. But he also thought it was a pyrrhic victory, in the sense that nobody is going to see this, apart from the people who were in Tunis. That is when she came back and started up again in '67. But she did two years in Tunis, and for her I think it was some of the happiest years of her life, and a happy time for Gerry - who suffered from diabetes - because the sunshine was good, because you expend less energy in heat, and that suited him fine. Joan, she had this phrase, 'Arab time', and she found that she could work, which means you may work at any time but the work will get done. Maybe they would work in the evening when it was cooler or whatever. It was a very happy time, those years in Tunis with those students. Then she would say to the students, 'Well I am off now, you can sort yourselves out', which of course they never did. When Joan went away things had a way of fading away. She was always very sad that nobody followed in her footsteps. I thought she was such a dominating figure, that the kind of person who could have followed in your footsteps kind-of wouldn't have been there because they would have been stropky too! They would have broken away. In recent times when TV programmes were made and I would say 'Come on Joan, you can do this TV programme and then people will know a little bit', and she would say, 'No no no, it is all too late!' Richard Eyre did a series of programmes on the theatre.

HT: Changing Stages.

PR: Yes! With Nicholas Wright. And she was asked to be in that and she turned that down. Then one day we were watching the television and Richard Eyre was talking about the Irish playwrights Synge, O'Casey and Brendan Behan. She didn't know it was Richard Eyre, and she said, 'Oh this is rather good!' and I could have crowned her! I said, 'You could have been on that if you wanted to!' But then again, she said, 'No no no, it is

all too late!' Then another day she would get sad and say, 'Oh! I have been forgotten about! Nobody is interested!' The trouble is, unfortunately, you have to be a bit vulgar and keep at it. You know, Peter Brook keeps writing books! People know he is still there and he still keeps doing productions, whatever it is you think about them. But Joan, at the death of Gerry Raffles in 1975, made a promise that she would never set foot in Stratford East again and she would never direct another show. She unfortunately stuck to that promise. She wrote scripts and she wrote books and that was all perfectly pleasant, she spent a lot of time in France. She did come back once, when one of her writers - whom I worked with for 23 years called Ken Hill - had his latest musical show on at Stratford East in 1995. He had just died and I had taken over the direction. Somebody had rung Joan up in France and said, 'Oh you have got to be here for Ken and it is so important.' Being slightly sentimental she came, and well, she hated it! She gave me absolute hell! I wish that person had never asked her! 'No, you made that promise not to come and it is probably better if you leave it like that, things have changed so much and you will probably loathe it anyway!'. She did loathe it and I thought I would never hear the end of it! So the other thing about Joan in general is that when theatre historians write about her they tend to... well, one thing they do is they put themselves into her, they like the idea and so they start putting their own ideas into Joan and you think, 'Well, no those are your ideas, they're not necessarily Joan's.' - I'm terribly pleased that you admire Joan because you're right, but you're putting... there was a guy called Stanley Reynolds who interviewed her - nice man - for the Guardian, and as you read the article you thought, 'Hang on a minute, this is Stanley Reynolds who is putting words in to Joan's mouth, because he thinks, 'that's what she must think, she must think the same as me', and so he was putting that into her mouth.' And I find that - I met a university prof. the other day, at a book launch and he was saying, 'Well, Joan did this and Joan did that', and I thought, 'You must not be so pragmatic [dogmatic], because Joan, above all, was very wayward and changed her mind about things all the time and she was [a] butterfly, she hopped from here to there and she would, you know, stun people by saying one day, the complete opposite of what she'd said the day before, but you had to live with that and go along with it, because if you didn't - you just sort of dug your toes in - then it would usually be the worse for you.' Because, as I said, she had a very strong personality and in those days, a lot of power, much more power I think than directors have nowadays. That, I mean, just in terms of hiring and firing: if an actor didn't please her, she would find a way of getting rid of them quite quickly, but sometimes you thought, 'Well Joan, I wish you'd looked at that actor more carefully when you first saw him because now it's painful, if you'd looked more closely you would have seen that what you wanted wasn't really there but you imagine...'. Because Joan had this way of, she'd possibly see something in actor - 'He's got it, he's marvellous', and she would flatter him and tell him he's marvellous and great, and it would be terrific for about a week and then she'd think, 'Oh he hasn't got it at all', and she'd turn against him utterly, because in her imagination she made him into this wonderful person. Either Shelagh Delaney or Brendan Behan said 'Oh we don't exist! We are just figments of Joan's imagination!' There was a glint of truth in that, certainly with actors she would think that they were marvellous and then at the end of the week, then they would be painfully dismissed. It was tough on Gerry, because he would know the truth but he also felt that he had to do what Joan wanted because he believed that what Joan wanted was the most important thing because she is the one that had got it. I suppose this goes right back to the business with Joan having it, because he saw that Joan had something that Ewan MacColl - none of the others had. He thought, 'I am putting my money on you.'. So when he said 'I will lay down my life for you', what I think he meant was, 'I will lay down my life for your talent because I believe in that entirely.' That is why her name appeared on the posters and why he

pushed her into the spotlight and why he kept his own name back. I think that is why the other actors found it difficult and eventually drifted away, some of them. They thought it was not a co-operative anymore, Gerry, ruthless, was right, Joan was the one that had it. She once said about Ewan MacColl, 'When we started he was the genius and I was the sort of handmaiden at his foot, but of course it was rather the other way round wasn't it!' That was her being honest. She never wanted to be called a director for example: 'I am a saboteur but I am not a director, I don't use words like that.' One day, in a garden in France, and she suddenly said, 'I was the only tough director England ever had', and I thought, 'Boy wouldn't a lot of actors agree with you there! That is the first time you said what we understand.'. Because that whole visionary chat could be quite puzzling for people - sometimes actors didn't always know what she was talking about. It sounded fantastic, but they didn't always know what she was talking about! But that was pretty down to earth and it was good to hear actually.

HT: When Ewan left the company, did Jean Newlove stay?

PR: No, she left pretty much at that time actually, although she would come back and arrange dances and things, There was never a total falling out, Joan spoke to Ewan on the phone every now and then and of course she took great interest in his children - Hamish MacColl who is still alive and living in France, and the two children that Ewan had by Jean Newlove – Hamish MacColl - Joan always took a great deal of interest in him, he was her godson, and also Kirsty, who died young, which was just the ghastliest, the worst thing that I can think of, in my life because it was so stupid in that if somebody gets ill and they die then you think that is terribly sad. But when somebody is killed by a stupid mistake, that you cannot take in. It just refuses to go in and you shudder at the thought every time you think about it. So Joan, no, she kept in touch with Jean, who still does little performances with her students. Joan used to go to those. And, Ewan MacColl wrote a play with a name like Sea Sinners and Shore Saints or vice-versa and we went up to Manchester to see it, and it wasn't bad, and it was all set in a ship's chandler and they talk about being at sea and the characters in the play, the sailors and things that come into the ship's chandler, and there's a funny old captain played by David Scase who was one of Joan's actors and her original stage manager and somebody she liked immensely and he ran the theatre up there, which I mentioned before, the Library Theatre. So we went up to see Ewan's play, and Joan and I were sitting there when it came to an end, and she'd say, 'Yes but it's all arse about face, there's a character who comes on at the end who says, they say, 'where are you from, young man' and he says, 'Pendlebury' and he got a big laugh for saying that and she said, 'But he ought to have come on at the beginning of the play so it would be almost like the play had been done for him, that he's being given information', and she said, 'Look, you see that guy, the smelly sailor, now listen, wouldn't be great if halfway through Act 2 you brought on a tin bath and made him have a bubble bath or something... and you thought 'Yes, because it would'... and that's a classic thing that Peter Brook would say, about halfway through Act 2 - this is just technical stuff - you need a lift, before you finish the play, and Joan was... she knew about that sort of thing, she didn't talk about it openly but she knew about that kind of thing and she wrote a rather brisk letter, I think it could be in somebody's book, it might be in Robert Leech's book, saying 'it's all arse about face, and I can fix it in no time at all' and I think he either didn't answer, or said 'thanks but no thanks' and... but she would've, she would've done it in ten days and it probably would have been a better play, because she could put action into dialogue which sort of [inaudible] on itself. When she was doing Mrs Wilson's Diary for instance, which I was in with John Wells and Richard Ingrams, with

whom she got on very well, [Richard Ingrams said it's the oldie which is over there – unclear meaning], and now when the original script came of Mrs Wilson's Diary, it was full of these kinds of jokes which sort of, were literary - they worked when you read them on the page but they didn't bounce off, you know actors always say, 'Ooh I do love this play it comes right off the page.' Well, these jokes stayed firmly on the page, but Joan found a way, by getting the actors up on their feet and doing things of making those jokes get up on to their feet, and be funny, and it was a little smasher that show, so that's an example of her taking something that was, that had something in it, but in this particular case, its fault was that it was literary, in somebody else's case it might have been that there was no construction, so she would have to find some kind of construction, which would be more musical - you think of Terence Rattigan who will have, do his structure like, you plant a piece of information which works later on, or you bring on a glass of wine and you leave the glass standing there and somebody says, 'What's that glass of wine' and you have to tell a story of why it's there. She didn't do that kind of construction, she did it musically. Almost like symphonically you know, quick follows slow, or 'if I've got the piccolos up at the top there going 'duh duh duh duh' I want the double basses going 'eh eh eh eh eh'.' and she would do - I think that's how she held an audience, with production, I mean again, not that she ever said these things, you have to kind-of work it out by watching her do it or being in it, actually, being in it's about the worst thing, you need to sort of stand back, because when you were in it, a lot of the actors didn't have a clue what they were up to. They were rushing around the stage in, you know, a total panic but there were many opening nights like that where they thought, 'What the hell are we doing and what is this play?', and then the audience would go berserk and suddenly they realised they were in a classic. I mean, I don't think they quite knew what they'd got with Oh What A Lovely War, they were up and down in rehearsal, sometimes exhilarated and sometimes very, very depressed and actors would say, 'Where are we going, where are we going, what are we doing?' and 'Let me go back to the Royal Court where it's all written out for you' and then, this particular actress did go back to the Royal Court and she said, 'Boy was it boring after that!' Ha ha, she said, 'I never knew where I wanted to be because when I was at Stratford it was all so chaotic and you just wanted a bit of peace and everything sort of written out and you just rehearse it and do it and then I would go there and do it at the Royal Court and I would think, 'Jesus, is this boring!' She was interested but never quite satisfied.

HT: How did critical reception go down within the company?

PR: Well Joan herself never – actors never believed her, but I think I do and I think I know why – she used to say, 'I never read reviews.' Gerry Raffles said, 'Well, I am afraid I do have to read reviews, it's part of my job because I have to sell the play. If it has got good reviews I have to tell people it has good reviews and I've got to show photographs.'. She didn't like photos either. He thought that they were very important, because you had to get out there and sell the company, because Joan she couldn't sell anything – well, that's not true, she could – in a mysterious sort of way, she could sell very, very well indeed, but not in a conventional way, but Gerry knew that he had to go out there and flog things by the means of photographs and reviews and things. She would say 'I never read reviews', and people would think that she meant this in a very superior tone by saying that she didn't read reviews. But then she said, 'If I had read reviews I would have probably given up', and that is another honest remark because they would have affected her and she didn't like to admit to ever being affected by anything, you know, that she was very sturdy and brave. I remember after the first night of Henry IV with the reviews, which were stinging, absolutely stinging! The cast were

sitting on the end of the stage kind of numb! I was sort of very puzzled because it was the first thing I had ever done to do with professional theatre and I said something like, 'Well the rehearsals were absolutely riveting!', and one of the actors said, 'Yes, that's not the point', but he was slightly conventional I thought. But I thought they were interesting. I have done rehearsals with actors since with directors which have been incredibly boring - telling the actors to come on here and go off there and not sort of use their imagination. So reviews, Joan always thought that Theatre Workshop always got terrible reviews - it is not true, every now and then people would write pages and pages. Ken Tynan went absolutely berserk over *Oh What a Lovely War*, he said 'I stormed out of the theatre in a rage', which is what Joan wanted. She didn't want to depress people by having blood and guts and mud. This is again to do with her earlier experiences in theatre.

She once did a play that Gerry Raffles... which was based on his experiences of being a Bevin Boy, which was teenagers were sent down the mines during the war to make themselves useful - that's not the career you were going to have, you were jolly well just going to have to do it. He wrote this play and I am sure they did it very well, and they did it in a mining area and nobody came, but then she worked out, 'well of course they don't come to see these plays - they have been down a pit all day, they don't want to watch one all night!'. So she knew she had to find a kind of stylisation, which she did with *Oh What a Lovely War*. There is no blood and the guns are not particularly real, and there is no brown - she hated khaki. Everything is very black and white and very up, so Ken Tynan would come out at the end of the show in a rage but he wasn't depressed and that is the important thing. He also gave a marvellous review for *The Quare Fellow*. He had been very anti-Joan until then, or sniffy shall we say. She had done *Mother Courage* in 1955 at the Devon Festival and that had all gone rather wrong. He thought it was very disrespectful. Joan had been obliged to play *Mother Courage* at the last minute - now that is a whole story almost like something on its own - but anyway it didn't go very well and he was a bit fed up with Joan and with Theatre Workshop for having botched up the first major production of a Brecht play in this country. But with *The Quare Fellow* he wrote about Ireland having produced all of the best comical dramatists. I don't think there is any such thing as an English comedy dramatist, we have never written one! They are all Irish, and if you go back, sure enough if you go back through Shaw and Synge, O'Casey and right back to the Restoration comedy writers, most of them are Irish, and Oscar Wilde - it is extraordinary. He praises Ireland and he praises Brendan Behan and he was knocked out by that, and yet it was the most ghastly subject, and he came up with a marvellous quote from Shakespeare which was something like 'to move wild laughter in the throat of death' because that is about hanging and that is terribly funny and honestly funny. It is not trivially funny. I suppose that is why Joan thought he was a great writer. He had written tons of stuff, put it this way - Brendan Behan - so in this case there was a play there and Joan just had to edit it and sort it out and work with the company. When it came to *The Hostage*, by that time Brendan was very famous, and finding it hard to concentrate and settle down and write, and probably drinking more than was good for him although Joan always defended him. He was not as much of a drunk as people thought, it was just that he was slightly diabetic which meant it only took a few drinks before he was right half seas over. I think it was nice of her to defend him, *The Hostage* really did have to be pieced together with phone calls and him coming in and talking to the actors and remembering what he had told them. There were some early scenes but as the play went on there was less and less there. This was a marvellous example of the cast not knowing what they were doing, but Joan - because of this extraordinary genius for editing and listening carefully to what Brendan had said, and piecing it all delicately together - there you are! it's there! and it is great! And again Ken Tynan thought that was marvellous too. He used the word which

was very popular with Joan, which was commedia dell'arte, because she loved commedia dell'arte. There was a marvellous commedia dell'arte actress called Isabella Andreini and she was really, I think, one of Joan's idols. It sounds like Michael Caine, but not a lot of people know that, I think, that whole business of a company going around the country and living on its wits. Also, the other thing that interested her about commedia dell'arte is, the thing about Joan is that people used to say, 'Oh, she does theatre for the working class', and she would say, 'Fuck the working class!', and that she gave working class actors a break, which she did, but that wasn't a chief interest. The thing is, she loved a jumble, that you would have lots of people coming from different backgrounds but with the same aim. So she found out that in commedia dell'arte. There were some really well-educated people who joined the company, but others were very good clowns. But they came together and did this thing of these minds all coming together and working, and she used to talk about the collective mind, like scientists all working on the same project but with all their different brains going into it. I think that it is a lovely theory but with Joan in the end, she did dominate because that was her instinct. I don't think you can hold that against her. She was this very powerful person with a great, great sense of theatre. Some of us went along with it, and other people walked away. They said, 'No, we'll go off and do it the boring old way, we like it nice and clear. You come on and you pause and you say your lines, there is a whole language where they talk about blocking. You set the moves and things like that.' Joan never blocked anything in her life! I didn't know what it was until I was about thirty or forty. Yet that is what actors knew all their lives elsewhere. 'Have you blocked the play yet?' if you worked in weekly rep - funnily enough, Joan had known about that when she had worked in Rep as a young girl. She never spoke about it, she kept that rather well hidden.