

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Alan Plater – interview transcript

Interviewer: Kate Harris

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Playwright. Accent; censorship; Peter Cheeseman; Close the Coalhouse Door; dialogue; farce; Alex Glasgow; Joan Littlewood; Look Back in Anger; music in plays; Music Hall; Joe Orton; John Osborne; Sandy Powell; Peggy Ramsay; The Smashing Day; See How They Run; Ted's Cathedral; television; Theatre in the Round

KH: This is an interview on the 7th September, with Alan Plater. Can I just begin with a general question about your first memories of going to the theatre?

AP: Well my very first memory of going to any theatre would be very late in the 1930s, as a very tiny boy, being taken to the Palace Theatre in Hull – a Music Hall – to see, among other people, Sandy Powell who was a great comedian of the time. The first great radio comedian, who coined the phrase 'Can you hear me mother?'. I think he was a Sheffield man originally. And also to see Harry Roy and his band - a Big Band - when the bands were... these were the pop stars of the day. And these are very, you know powerful memories. And in fact you know, forty years down the line, I actually worked with Sandy. I did a documentary for the BBC about the history of the seaside, which we did with the cast of a summer show that was working in Brighton that year. And they were veterans of variety; I think that was the billing. So I actually said to Sandy, 'You were the first person I remember seeing, in The Dapper Chap'. He was still a dapper chap when he was eighty something.

KH: That's amazing!

AP: And one of the great gentle comedians. He was, he was... everything was almost thrown away. So the first formative memories, a lot of them are to do with Music Hall rather than legitimate theatre, if you like. And I remember going to the Tivoli – the Tivoli theatre in Hull – during the war, which was known as the Fisherman's Theatre, which was sort of a down home Music Hall if you like. Seeing Big Bill Campbell and his Rocky Mountaineers... no, Big Bill Campbell and his Rocking Mountain Rhythm, who were a cowboy band. I mean, these extraordinary acts which flourished at that time.

But it wasn't 'til I suppose the immediate post-war period that I started to... I was taken to see plays. My sister, who's six years older than I am, was - is - a great... and is a great theatre goer... she would take me to see things, and then I started going off my own bat, under the influence of our English teacher at school, who would say, 'You

should go to the theatre, boys and girls'. And we had a very successful weekly repertory company called The Salberg Players. And we... and I remember seeing plays which - here we go! - they seemed to have very little to do with life as I knew it. They all seemed to be - and this is facetious - but they all seemed to be about posh people living in posh houses, drinking gin and tonic, and talking in sentences. And I suppose at that time the idea began to form that theatre could be...[different]. What I didn't get was the energy and, if you like, the vulgarity of music hall and of variety. It was all a little bit precious.

I always remember going when we were in the sixth form, you know and you're a sixth form kid and you know everything, you know what the world's about and you're going to fix it. I remember voluntarily going to see *Othello* with the Old Vic Company on tour. And then as a student going to - I was a student in Newcastle - going to the Theatre Royal - one of the loveliest theatres in the land - saw Tyrone Power doing *A Devil's Disciple*, and a production of *Twelfth Night*, probably the Old Vic again, with Richard Burton, Claire Bloom and Michael Hordern, Michael Hordern playing Malvolio. I mean, it was just extraordinary. And these were things that blew my mind.

So I saw this change in the theatre... the formative thing, I have to say - and this is not an original observation! - must have been about '57/'58 when I saw *Look Back in Anger*. And again I can't remember whether it was a touring production or a rep production, but I came out and my head was ablaze, because suddenly I'd never seen a play like this before. And nor had anybody else I think. And interestingly, I saw my English teacher - or ex-English, I think that I'd left school by then - and I was really high on this. I said, 'Hey, wasn't that wonderful Sir?' (I think I still called him sir). And he saw himself as... thought rather as a something of a Noel Coward figure, and he said, 'Well actually I thought it was all rather adolescent.'

And the weird thing is I could see why he thought that, because I could climb in - which must have been the embryonic playwright - I could climb inside his head, and I could see why he thought it was adolescent and shrill. Because in a sense it was, and is, all those things. But I could also see why he was wrong. It's called the generation gap. And what John did... I mean, when I got... I got to know him slightly over the years and I said, 'God! You started more people writing than anyone in the business.'. 'Oh,' he said, 'I'm ever so sorry. Very sorry.' I said, 'Well you've got a lot to answer for!'. [Laughs] Because it released emotion and passion, and I think that's what I'd missed in these rather strange plays I used to go to see.

And I don't know what any of them were, in retrospect, though it must have been, you know, the Hugh and Margaret Williams, and possibly Rattigan and people like that, which were all very sort of tight lipped and inhibited, yes. And I think what else I missed was, everyone talked RP, this is what actors did in those days. And the great actors of that period - Olivier, Gielgud - spoke beautifully. And I thought, 'well, people out on the street don't speak beautifully'.

And if I've got a quest, and this has been going on all my writing life, it is to write a kind of dialogue that is... it's not replicating the way people speak in real life, but is, if you like, I hope a poetic echo of it, like Shakespeare's rude mechanicals. I mean, I'm trying to write about the people drinking down the Boar's Head, and in fact wrote a play set, in

effect, in the Boar's Head. The lovely poetic thing that exists in everyday speech and people don't even know they're doing it. Anyway that's a long rambling answer – you'll get a lot of those. Stop me if I go on!

KH: No, that's fine, that's fantastic. When you were talking about dialogue and regional accents, and capturing the way people speak, in the past you've mentioned Joan Littlewood as being an influence on that. I wonder if you can just say a little bit about that.

AP: Yes, I mean I remember reading an interview with Joan, and I can't remember where it was, or when it was, but she did some radio work with a wonderful producer called Olive Shapley, who worked for the BBC North region in the thirties and forties. I mean, a key figure actually in a lot of all this. Very left wing, probably a card carrying communist, but we will never... [know]. MI5 will be able to tell you, [Laughs] it'll be on their files somewhere.

But Joan did some pioneering documentary work in radio, among other places, in Hull. And she did programmes about the fishing community. And she said somewhere, she said 'You could walk the streets of Hull and hear the people speaking poetry'. I thought, 'Wow! That's rather good'. So I started paying more attention. And I know what she meant. I should have known as a native Geordie - I mean, I come from Jarrow, and people speak in [these] wonderful strutting accents, the Geordie... the Tyneside... all those Tyneside... I mean, there's no such thing as one Tyneside accent, there's a whole set of wonderful variations. But it is an accent that sings. The Hull accent doesn't sing in quite the same way, but it operates at two levels I think. You get the surface of what is being said, and underneath it there's, you know, all the implications, the attitudes. People can... you can learn a lot from the way people say things, as much as what they... And this is subtext, this is the classical stuff that Chekhov was doing, you know, 150 years ago. And it's the essence of drama, the difference between what is actually said, and what's going on behind the eyes. And what is left unsaid is as important as what is... And Hull is full of that, it seemed to me. I mean any Yorkshire man - as you will know, living there - can convey many layers of meaning with the use of the word 'aye'. [Laughs] And I found illustrations of this. I'm very grateful that I was [born when I was]. We used to go farming in the summer when we were kids, you know, in the later years at school, harvesting when farming was labour intensive. And we used to work on a farm in the East Riding of Yorkshire, in a place called Catfoss, for a man called Major Burke, ex-army. And the guys on the farm – the regular, proper workers – all spoke in the old East Riding accent. And we were talking over the lunch break one day about one of us getting work... going to work on a different farm. And one of the guys said, 'Tha'll get minder theer', meaning they won't pay you as much. 'Tha'll get'... and 'minder' - because we had a language scholar with us - is an old Middle German word meaning less. And it had survived in these...[parts]. It's probably gone now, but 'tha'll get minder theer'. And it was like a foreign language. But that was poetic.

So that... yes that... so Joan made me listen, she made me... she didn't know it, because I think we'd never met at the time. I mean again, I got to know her later on in life. She just made me listen. And writing, especially drama, begins with listening and looking. I mean [it's] all writing can be. What else? Margaret Attwood, asked by Melvin Bragg, how do you write? She said there's only... it's always the same, it goes in the

eyes, and in the ears, and out the fingers. That's all there is. And I think that's what I love about, you know my favourite dramatists are people who've got ears. You know whether it's... I mean look at the late Henry Livings (a great friend of mine), David Mamet, you know, Alan Bleasdale..., any of the Liverpool gang, Bleasdale and Willie and all of them. And... and Jack Rosenthal yes, who heard this lovely music of speech, and translated it into something that grows bigger than what a tape recorder can give you.

KH: When was it that you first started writing professionally, as it were?

AP: Well that's... I decided that I was going to do this thing when I was still a student in the mid-fifties. I had read architecture, didn't like it very much, wasn't very good, certainly wasn't very dedicated. So I spent more... at least as much time writing, as I did doing the coursework, which is why they threw me out after four years! Writing stuff for all the university... you know, we had a weekly newspaper and a literary magazine that came out once a term. We did an annual Rag Revue, as part of rag week, which was twice nightly at the Palace Music Hall. And with a mate we did sketches and things. And I said, 'This is what I'm going to do', I didn't tell too many people.

So the first thing after I'd left university, I actually sold an article to *Punch* in 1958. That was the first money I received – 15 guineas. And it isn't very good. I mean, there's a copy hiding in the archive, very embarrassing. And then I wrote bits and pieces of architectural journalism. For a while, rather pompously, I billed myself as the architectural critic of the *Yorkshire Post*. That was mainly because there was a man Bill Oliver, who was the assistant editor, or deputy editor, who was a Hull guy. And he decided I could write a bit, so he gave me books to review. So I kind of said I [became] the architectural critic or architectural correspondent. I got a couple of guineas and [kept the] book, you know for...

And the first play I wrote I think would be about 1958 or '59, for a television play competition held by the Cheltenham Arts Festival – didn't win. And I was working full time, I had a proper job in an architects office, so the play, believe it or not, was about a discontented, frustrated architect with the soul of a poet. And it didn't win the competition. But I got a taste for it. I thought 'oh, this is good'. And I'd really got a buzz writing this stuff. And so I used that play as a kind of calling card. I sent it to... you know, bought a copy of the *Writer's Yearbook*, and I sent this play to people in radio and television.

And then I wrote one or... I think I wrote about five plays that nobody wanted. And they were mostly about unhappy young men with poetic souls. [Laughs] And they were not very good. I mean, I think it was Frank Muir or Dennis Norden, one of them said, 'What a young writer needs is a place to be lousy in.' And so there were no courses. I mean nothing, there was absolutely nothing. Your academy was the library. So I'd go down to the library, and any play collections they had in I just read and consumed. They had about three or four collections of television plays. I think there was a BBC collection, a couple of Granada... I mean the notion of a commercial television company not only doing single plays and publishing them, but that's what happened. I mean, it really was another country.

And then... and eventually I had a radio play done in 1960/61. And I got... This was the BBC... the BBC had a genuinely autonomous North Region. So they would do radio plays from Leeds and television plays from Manchester, for the network, but without reference to London. They didn't have to be nodded through by anybody important down here. And it was exceedingly healthy, and if you were spotted as having any semblance of talent, you got handed on. And so I was handed on from radio to television, and did a television play with Vivian Daniels in Manchester. And it just kind of grew.

So it's difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when I became a full-time professional, but I'd committed to it [at the] beginning of the sixties. I'd quit the job at the office, and just said right, I'm going to somehow hustle a living. So I did bits of freelance architectural work, I hired myself out. This was [the] time of Harold Macmillan's boom, he was a prime minister who created a boom by borrowing money, I suspect much as we do now. And all the architects were overworked and understaffed, so I hired myself out at 5/- an hour. A bit like Phillip Marlowe. 'It's 5/- an hour, plus expenses lady.' And I subsisted, and eventually sold a play or two. And by, I suppose '61/'62, I'd become a full time writer without quite realising it. And it was wonderful. But it took about five years I suppose, from the moment the idea formed to it becoming a reality, it was at least five years, which is not long to learn a difficult trade.

KH: Did you see yourself, in the beginning, as wanting to write for a particular medium? Or did you see yourself as just wanting to write?

AP: I just wanted to write, and anyone who would do the work, I thought they were good people. So it started in radio, and I still do bits, still work in radio at regular intervals. Television was the exciting thing, this was the new thing. And of course television grew, expanded massively in the late fifties, early sixties.

I mean, the key point in television was 1953, when the Coronation got the biggest viewing figures. I mean people bought millions of televisions, just to watch the Coronation. Two hundred theatres closed the same year. I mean, mostly Music Halls; the variety theatre just went through the floor at that point. Although there were only two channels, it was taken for granted that a staple part of the diet should be plays. And there were at least two plays a week on each channel, which [means] over two hundred plays a year had to be found. And there weren't any playwrights for television because the trade had never existed. So they had to manage with people they could steal from radio, from the movie industry. I mean, the film industry was in decline at that point, so there were a few old screen writers looking for work. But basically they had to find some new writers, which is why all, if you like, the sitting tenants, I mean people like me and Jack Rosenthal and Dennis Potter, and Andrew Davies, we were all roughly the same age. We all grew up as writers in the sixties. Because they were greedy for people like us. And some of us were not very good, and some of us, even if we were reasonably good, some of the plays we did were not very good.

KH: Did you receive any sort of guidance as to how to write for any medium?

AP: Yes, well I asked Vivian Daniels about this, and I said... because I'd read in reviews... the critics knew nothing either, there was no tradition of television reviewing. So they were making it up as they... everybody was making it up as they went along. I said to Vivian, I said, 'What's this mystique of television writing?' He said, 'Come with me.' And he walked me round the studio. We all... all the plays were made in studio in those days you see. 'This is the studio. You can build bits of things in the studio that look like rooms. You can have about six or eight rooms, a couple of corners. And a camera is a box on wheels with a hole in the front that admits light, and if you point it over there that's what it will see. Point it over there, that's what it will see.' He said, 'That's actually all you need to know.' And there were simple little practical things that if an actor, a character, needed a costume change, so if you're going to have a scene with him in his pyjamas, and then in the next scene you want him going to work in his suit, you've got to write a scene in the middle, that would give him chance to go behind, you know go and get changed. So you had to have something else happening. So... Because they were shot 'as live'. Even if they weren't live they were made as live, because there was no such thing as video tape editing to speak of. So it was simple, practical things like that you learnt. But he always said there's nothing much to the mystique. I mean, that was the lesson.

And round... I mean it would have been about the same time when I... I'd done two or three plays, and in the reviews the word dramatic structure...[there were] the words 'dramatic structure'. And I asked Peggy Ramsay about this, 'What's this, what's this about dramatic...? Should I know about it?', 'Well of course you should darling!' And she said two things that live with me to this day, she said, 'All plays are the same – lots of little surprises, and every so often a big one.', and in a way that's all you need to know. I said, 'Well how can I learn about it?' 'Oh that's easy darling, just read Ibsen.' And that was an instruction. And if you were not prepared to do that kind of work, to read Ibsen - and by implication she meant read Chekhov and you know, and she just took it for granted you knew Shakespeare. You should read, absorb all the great dramatists, until that became part of your bloodstream. One of the reasons she loved Joe Orton so much was that he was a serious professional, which doesn't get written about or referred to very much. You get you know, Orton the playboy and all of that. He and Kenneth Halliwell apparently used to sit in their little flat, not far from here, reading plays aloud to each other. You know they'd say... and Joe would say to Peggy, 'Oh we're doing the Restoration dramatists at the moment.' And each night they'd read a play, so that he absorbed all this stuff.

And so you had to... you made your own academy. And I think that's why, in a weird way, we all came out different you see. And I think one of the things that worries me now with the proliferation of courses under the deadly influence of people like Robert Mackey and the American screenwriting gurus, is that everything comes out the same, and everything comes out formulaic on that.

KH: Because it provides a prescription of what you can follow.

AP: Exactly yes. And you sit there, 'Oh, I know what's going to happen next', and then there'll be... oh and, he'll go to the... she'll go to the airport... she's leaving his wife

forever, but he'll get in a fast car, and just as she's going through the gate he'll be there. And there'll be little jokey tag line, and they'll roll credits. So you think well, what time's the football on?

KH: When did you first meet Peggy Ramsay?

AP: I think it was... well it was Henry Livings who told...[me about her]. I didn't know there were things like agents. Henry was in my first radio play, and we were sitting in the canteen at BBC in Leeds. And he said, 'Have you got an agent?' I said, 'I don't know what... who are they... what do agents do?' And he said, 'Well...' and he explained what they did. And I think he wrote me a letter with her...[address and details, saying] this is... write to Peggy Ramsay. He said, 'She will get you your just reward.' [Laughs]

So I sent her a play, a radio play, and at no point did she actually say 'You are now my client, I am now your agent'. I would suddenly get little messages saying 'Oh, ring so-and-so at the BBC, he'd like to meet you'. And the first time I ever met her I was absolutely terrified. I mean, she was such an intimidating woman. And you know, she was an old fashioned bohemian. They don't make bohemians any more. Dressed exotically it seemed to me, and talking in a very theatrical voice, very theatrical. I mean, she had been... she had acted and everything, and performed to the back row of the gallery even in a room this size. And loved to say outrageous things, she set out to shock, and succeeded with me very easily. I mean I was a kid from the sticks, I knew nothing. And a terrible name dropper, except she didn't mean it. And she would say things like, 'Oh my God darling, have you ever met Orson Welles?' I said, 'Well, no I can't say [I have]. He doesn't get to Hull very much.' [Laughs] 'Oh, I was sitting next to him at the theatre last night. Oh my God! The man is enormous. More of him was sitting in my chair than in his own.' And all this stuff, this stream of stuff. And totally fearless, totally fearless.

We were in... Shirley and I were in the office one time, this was much later but, in the midst of whatever we'd gone to see her about, she said, 'Oh I must ring the National.' And she picked up the phone, and she rang the then artistic director of the National Theatre and gave him the most almighty bollocking about something. I think because they hadn't boasted enough about winning... she said, 'Every time the Royal Shakespeare Company win prizes it's all over the papers. You've been winning as many prizes as...[they have]. And you've not mentioned it. I mean, nobody knows about it darling.' And she blasted. Partly because one or two of her writers had been involved, and they hadn't had, in her view, proper recognition in the press. And this was... well I can't remember whether it was Peter Hall... it was one [of them], Peter Hall, Trevor Nunn, one of them.

SR: It was Peter Hall.

AP: I think it was Peter Hall. So she was fearless. And she actually imbued fearlessness in the writers I think. And she said you must always defend your work. So when I get pages and pages of notes, as one tends to these days from... if you work in television, rather than roll over I stand my ground and fight back. And this seems not to be the

tempo of the times. It's the tempo of mine; I'm not going to change now. I mean what the hell does it matter? But that was you know, the primary...[lesson].

I mean she saw writers as the centre of the universe, and the writing was the only thing that actually mattered. I mean she... Shirley and I came to London together in 1984, so it was a new life and a new marriage for both of us. Peggy came round for supper one night, a while after we were down, and so we had a little supper party. So she's sit...Peggy was sitting at one end of the table next to me. And she said in a very loud voice, 'Well of course darling, I don't mind what my writers do in their private life. [pause] As long as it doesn't affect the work.'

SR: Looking straight down the table at me.

AP: And this was a warning shot. I mean, she did say to some of them... I mean, I can't be specific because it would be most improper. But, well I mean there was one wife, one client's wife who, Peggy would call and if she would pick... if the wife picked...[the phone up she'd say] 'Oh my God are you still there?' She was convinced, until the writer got rid of this wife, he would never get anywhere. You know, she was... I mean, she was awful in lots of ways. And there are wonderful stories, and terrible stories. But she had a kind of... I don't know, an affection/admiration for me. To the extent that when she died, there were four named writers in the will, to be given mementoes. And I was one of the four, which out of a stable of 40 or 50 – I don't know how many – was no mean honour. And I've got the bench that used to stand outside her office, where people waited to go into the presence. There was this bench, on which many of the most famous bottoms in the world had sat. It's upstairs. We had to have it redone, because it had a big hole. It was a bit clapped out.

KH: The sheer amount of writers who sat on it. Did Peggy try and channel your work in a particular direction, because she wasn't a terribly big fan of writers doing film work and things, was she?

AP: No, she wasn't crazy about television. But I mean... and I was keen to have a whack at the theatre anyway. And I can't remember what the exact order of events was. I think I'd been up to Scarborough. I mean I went to meet Stephen Joseph, who was then running the Theatre in the Round Company, and didn't, and ended up seeing Peter Cheeseman who was his number two. I mean, I never quite worked out the hierarchy of all that. And so my first work in theatre was with Peter, at Stoke.

So Peggy was quite pleased that I working in the theatre, but not pleased that it was in the round, because she was not a fan of theatre in the round. I mean, squaring that with Ayckbourn, I'm not sure how he'd do... he's arguably one of her... certainly one of her most successful clients. And she said, 'Well, I mean the problem darling is this, you go and see a play in the round, and some character comes and sits on the chair. And all he does is breathe, and it's hypnotic.' I said, 'Well isn't that a plus rather than minus?' And she figured that you needed bigger emotions, bigger things happening, to reach out across the... from behind a proscenium arch. I think she was a traditionalist in that respect.

But, no she would watch television. I mean, if any of us had a play on, she would watch it. And what she would then do would be, she wouldn't ring you, she'd ring somebody else. And this was her method, she would – even at first night – she would frequently not speak to the writer on the first night. She would speak to all kinds of other people, 'Well what do you think of that darling?'

I mean I went to see a play of... an Ayckbourn first night in Scarborough – this is donkey's years ago – and she took me out for supper afterwards, and talked to me about Alan's play. And I think it was her way of figuring out what she really thought about it. I think she wanted to see what other people thought. And before she went... rather than say in the heat of the moment, 'Oh that was wonderful darling.' or 'That was a disaster.' You know, just get a range of responses, to help her to figure out what she really thought. Rather than speak in the heat of the moment, which rarely does anything. It's never any use, it's fun, it's fun.

And the other famous story, which I think I've told many times, was when Jack Rosenthal had a play on television. And she called me up about Jack's play. 'Well you're awfully alike aren't you, you two?' I said, 'What do you mean?' She said, 'You both write about failure.' I said, 'No, you're wrong Peggy.' 'What do you mean I'm wrong?!' It was about the only time I told Peggy she was wrong. I said, 'We write about the dignity of failure.' [pause] 'I'm sorry darling of course, of course you do. Quite right, sorry, quite right to correct me.' So it was a kind of... you know not a love/hate, I mean I don't hate anybody much really. But it was...

SR: A wary love.

AP: A wary love, yes. [Laughs] She haunts us to this day, all of us.

SR: Oh yes. Absolutely.

AP: But it's a kind of affectionate ghost in my world. I think it... in one or two of the others it probably wasn't.

KH: I think that comes across in the play that you wrote about her though as well.

AP: Yes, yes, well I wrote the play just... because I've got her picture hanging up in the study, it's to the right of my desk. And I hear her voice every...[play] and I thought if I write a play it'll shut her up. And it worked to some extent. But I do hear her say, when I'm having meetings [with] people who seem to be not behaving well, I hear her voice say, 'All these people are so vulgar, darling.' It was one of her favourite phrases, 'These people are so vulgar.'

KH: You mentioned before working Peter Cheesman at Stoke, he was actually doing some really interesting work then.

AP: Oh absolutely, yes.

KH: Was it *Ted's Cathedral* that you did there?

AP: Oh well done! Yes, that was my full first length play. And I'd done a... we'd done a double bill. The first work I did in the theatre was a double bill at Stoke of two radio plays. What we discovered, radio plays adapted very easily to theatre in the round.

KH: That's interesting.

AP: And not just mine. They did various... I mean various of Alfred Bradley's radio stable from the Norman Smithson. They did a lovely production of a play of his, called *The Three Lodgers*, which was about three lodgers living in three rooms in a house. So yes, I did the double bill, and at Peter's behest wrote *Ted's Cathedral*, which was a weird play really. It's kind of right bang in the middle of what's become my self defining [genre of] gritty, northern surrealism, because it's about a kid who gets a job on a building site, and gets it in his head that they're building a cathedral. And they're not; they're just doing a shed or something. And this becomes his fantasy. So that was the first... and that was, I don't know '63, something like that – '62/'63. I didn't quite get it right, it's a very... I mean I haven't looked at it in 40 years or more, I suspect it's quite crude in many ways, but with a beguiling innocence. I mean, I talk the [I was talking to a] wonderful jazz musician, composer, [inaudible] called Carla Blay... American. And I was talking to her, she's roughly our age, and I was comparing notes with her on the writing process, you know the writing of drama, the writing of music, the making of music. And I said I feel nice. I said it's nice to feel you're... some of the time you know what you're doing, you know how to construct a scene. And I said is it the same with music?. She said, 'Oh yes, I feel much more confident now I know... particular musical shapes and patterns and textures.' She said, 'On the other hand...' she said, 'I think when I knew less I was more interesting.' And I think there is that balance. You've got to... you want... what you want to do is to retain the child's vision, the innocent eye that sees what's really going on. Not what you've been programmed by what you know... or layers of education and various other processes that we go through.

But yes, that *Ted* was the first thing. Interesting went... and this is a sign of the times, we opened it down here at LAMDA – London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art – we'd [they'd] just built a new theatre, but it wasn't quite finished. The audience had to climb past piles of sand in the lobby and things. And both BBC and ITV were there that night, both wanting it for the telly. Both [channels] wanted it for the same... and they were competing – not financially, I mean, it would have been the same very modest fee. And I went with the BBC because they would give me a 90 minute slot, and ITV would only give me an hour, and they wanted it for an Armchair Theatre. And eventually we did it for the BBC with Brian Pringle and Dudley Foster and Alan Rothwell. God! I can remember the cast, most of them. Anyway that's a burble.

KH: But you carried on working with Peter Cheeseman on subsequent things. Was that things that Peter Cheeseman said he wanted to do, or were they things that you'd decided that you both wanted to do?

AP: I think he... but he was developing his stable of young Turks. There was me and Peter Terson, and I can't remember who else we had, but I mean one or two... [certainly] Norman Smithson from Leeds. So yes, and Peter had a very fixed vision of what they should be doing, which was rooted in the community. I mean hence the documentaries of the Staffordshire Rebels and The Jolly Potters, which were all reality based. I mean based on interviews with real people, which is not quite what I was in to.

But yes, we did a play called *The Smashing Day* in '65 I think it was, which was a development of a television play I'd done. But it was very vogueish then to do plays with music. And so we did it with music – with songs. I mean the story is I said, 'Well who will we get to do the songs?' He [Peter] said, 'Well, I thought we'd ask Lennon and McCartney.' I said, 'What!' He said, 'Oh well...' And he was serious. And he wrote to Brian Epstein and said 'Would...' and they were... I mean, the Beatles had already made their first couple of million quid. I said you'll get this... And Brian totally ignored the request for the services of Lennon and McCartney. Because I'd said to Peter what can you offer them? 'Oh we'll give them complementary tickets for life.'. But Brian read the script and loved it, and came up to see it, and eventually put it on in the West End, at the Arts Theatre with Hywel Bennett. It was Hywel Bennett's first West End... [appearance]. It didn't do very well I have to say, but never mind, it happened. And Brian was lovely. The music was written by the two then Acting ASMs in the company at Stoke, they were not yet good enough to be in plays. And they were Robert Powell and Ben Kingsley. And I've got photographic evidence of this – a picture of these two boys, fresh from the 6th form, with their guitars and mouth organs, doing kind of vaguely Bob Dylan sounds. So it was all... I mean it's all memory lane stuff really. But I think the idea of plays with music really probably took root at that point. That music as a key element in the drama...

KH: Was that... I mean that was central to plays, *Close the Coalhouse Door* as well wasn't it?

AP: Absolutely, and I think that's when I began to get a clue how to do it. You know I mean... which was '68. And yes, and we got it pretty well right. I mean there were still things that were not right about it. We did a revival in 1995 in Newcastle, and I did some, you know, small but significant rewrites. Partly because we couldn't afford the same size of cast by then – that's progress. We did it in Newcastle [in 1968] with a cast of ten plus a band – a five piece brass quintet. And a complete colliery band on first night and the last night. By the time we'd got to Newcastle in 1995 it had to be eight people, who also had to do their own music. So that's the way we've travelled and progressed in the period. But yes, *Coalhouse* we got it right.

KH: How did that collaborative process work between you and Sid Chaplin and Alex Glasgow?

AP: It was amazingly casual. Sid's contribution was to provide his front room for a meeting, and Rene provided the libations and the nibbles. And Sid just talked to me about them [the mines], because I'd never worked in... [them]. I mean, my family were in shipbuilding, not in the mines. And we just talked about it. I mean a deal of talking, and then I went home and wrote. And I knew Alex's work, because we'd worked together in radio. I knew his songbook, probably as well as he did. So I guess four or five of the songs already existed, including the title song, which he'd written for a radio program following Aberfan I think – the terrible pit disaster in Wales when all those kids were killed. And then I found moments in the story, in the play, when, you know, a particular song would seem to me, would fit. And what I did in the script, I wrote the lyrics very badly. And Alex read the lyrics, read my version, burnt them and did it properly. Then over the years it became a kind of competition, when we were collaborating, to write some lyrics which were so good he wouldn't burn them, and would use mine, which he did later on in a television series called *Trinity Tales*, which was a television and a stage play. But I think it... yes, the interesting thing about *Coalhouse Door* of course was it was a co-production between the theatre and the BBC.

KH: Oh, I didn't know that.

AP: And so we did it in Newcastle at the Playhouse, went straight up to Glasgow and recorded a television version, with the same cast. And I did a quick adaptation, kind of over a weekend virtually, so that we could do it in a studio. And so yes, and it was a kind of back to back thing. Needless to say the television version was long ago wiped, and doesn't exist in any...

KH: As are many things sadly.

AP: And so yes, and that happened a bit. There was a... I forget who was running the BBC drama department at the time, but certainly it was a... they did two or three of these, a co-production between regional theatres and the Beeb. They would do the play and then do a television version.

KH: How difficult was it to adapt that for television?

AP: I didn't find it difficult because I'd done a lot of telly by then. I mean I'd done... I was doing two or three television plays a year. I did 18 episodes of *Z Cars*, and I'd done *Softly Softly*. I'd done a lot of telly, so I was very confident about working in a television studio. I knew ways of making it work. I mean, there was a scene in the play when this government minister comes up on a fact-finding mission. And I think in the telly we had him being interviewed in a studio with a panel of miners [asking] questions... I forget exactly how we did it, but I used television conventions. We did a lot of bold things in those days in the telly. I mean this is... last weekend we were in Stourbridge in the Midlands, where there's an outfit called Kaleidoscope who are fans of old television. And they've been in existence 20 years, and they get together at regular intervals and look at... discuss and look at old programmes with the makers.

KH: Oh that's really interesting.

AP: And you know they've had people like Verity Lambert [who has] been up [there], and I was up last...[weekend] and they'd got together a whole bunch of my work – much of which I thought was long gone.

KH: Oh, how amazing!

AP: And it was an astonishing thing. But I'd forgotten how innovative we were. So that you have the central character in a play talking to the camera, telling you...

SR: That's a kind of bibliography they did.

AP: Telling you...

KH: Gosh that's incredible isn't it?

SR: Yes, it's a more accurate bibliography than ours.

AP: Yes, it's better than mine.

KH: That is probably far superior to anything at the BBC written archives as well.

AP: Chances are.

SR: It was absolutely extraordinary.

KH: Gosh that's amazing!

SR: And they showed us things that we knew had been wiped.

AP: And it turns out that they weren't...

SR: And they weren't, they found them.

AP: They've got...

SR: Like the trilogy.

KH: I should maybe try and get in touch with some of these people.

SR: Well that's why I showed you.

AP: Yes, they're lovely people. There's a genuine...

SR: I'll give you a contact before you go, remind me.

KH: Yes, that'll be really brilliant, thank you.

AP: They're genuine enthusiasts and very knowledgeable.

SR: And so knowledgeable.

AP: I mean, they know my stuff better than I do, a lot of them. But I'd forgotten just how innovative we were. I mean, not just me, but you know, that generation. John Hopkins, who was my contemporary on *Z Cars*, and my first ever script editor, they did a tribute to him at the National Film Theatre last year. And they showed some of his work from the sixties and seventies, and he was doing astonishing things – in the studio. And I knew him very well. He used to... say, 'I've had a great idea' he said 'at moments of high drama, high intensity for a... you just cut to black. Just everything, the screen will suddenly go black.' He did it in a play called *Horror of Darkness* with Nicol Williamson, Glenda Jackson, Alfred Lynch – a three-hander, an amazing play. And suddenly the screen would go black, these characters disintegrating. And this play was made at Granada television. I mean, it's absolutely inconceivable the things that were happening. So, yes, we took chances because we were working for people who were happy to do that. I mean one of the key producers in my life, in television at that time – and still a great friend – was a man called David Rose who...

KH: Yes, I know David.

AP: ...and you see David... well I don't know, he won't mind me saying this, he flew in bombers during the Second World War, which was about most dangerous area of the Second World War, because the casualty rate was horrendous. Having done that, a strong memo from head office wasn't going to have a lot of effect on a man like that. And there was a whole generation running this shop who had been through the war, and who were therefore fearless, who were therefore catching up on lost time – six years had been stolen from them. And they had this great pioneering zeal. You know they wanted to take this thing called television, and I think it flowed over into the theatre too.

KH: I was going to ask about that, whether you thought it had an impact.

AP: I'm sure it had an impact. They'd say, 'We want a better theatre, we want a more democratic theatre, in the...'. I think you know, the great explosion in '68 of students rebelling all over the world, and I mean revolution was in the air. And part of that was there was this passionate urge to share the experience of ordinary people, rather than just a select few. This was no longer a theatre of Oscar Wilde – although I mean Oscar was actually a renegade and a rebel in his own way. But the Noel Coward, Terence Rattigan axis was not enough, which is not to say they were devoid of talent, anything... I mean, Coward was an amazing writer, but he was writing about a tiny, tiny sector of society. [There was] Gertrude Lawrence, a great West End star, but you see nobody gave a toss about Gertrude Lawrence in Jarrow. I mean how would they know about Gertrude Lawrence, you know, she was just a name.

And I think there were huge areas of the country disenfranchised by the British theatre, until John Osborne [and] Arnold Wesker. I mean they were the real pioneers, people like them. They were in fact half a generation ahead of me. And we just picked up the baton and said, 'Well yes, thanks guys we'll run with this as well. And let's all run with it together, and see where it leads us'. I mean this is just in, if you like England. I mean, there were things... there were parallel things happening in Scotland and Wales, and in Ireland certainly. And so it was great. 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive...' And it still is actually.

KH: Did you... you said about impacting on the theatre, do you think it brought about a change in acting styles, the amount of television?

AP: Absolutely, absolutely. Again I've got very early television plays on bootleg tapes. I mean there is one particular play, which stars Alfred Lynch and a young John Thaw - about his second or third part - and June Barry, Angela Douglas as the youngsters. And the oldies, the parents and I think there's a grandfather in it. There are two styles of acting, because you know there's a clip I sometimes use at workshops of John and Alfie. They played the likely lads - I mean before the *Likely Lads* had happened actually. But they do it - and they've already understood how to play to the camera. There are other scenes in the play which are the older folk, the older actors – who have been schooled in weekly rep, and you know trekking around the country doing second touring versions of...[West End plays]. I mean I don't know – who are still acting to the gallery. And they just haven't learnt how... and why would they? And it was... it's very striking.

And of course the accent thing, when we did *Coalhouse Door* in 1968, we scabbled around finding actors who could do the accent, because those who were from the area had spent years getting rid of it. And people will qualify, I mean Brian Pringle qualified because his wife Annie was from South Shields and he had an Auntie Bella in Gateshead – or he claimed to have an auntie, he might have been lying of course. But Brian was actually from Bolton, but he got through. It worked, he made it work. And we just about found enough. If we did it now there be no problems at all, I mean on the back of *When the Boat Comes In*, *Likely Lads*, *Auf Wiedersehen Pet*, I mean the whole Dick

Clement/Ian La Frenais stuff. And my...[stuff]. I mean we did a version of *The Stars Look Down*, the Cronin novel, which is also set in the North East, in the seventies. And we found quite a few... Alun Armstrong, a young Alun Armstrong was in it. So yes, it's easy now. It's no longer an Achilles Heel to have an accent, you know it's the reverse. The tough job now is to find a posh accent when you need one. I mean they are around, but finding a genuine posh actor, I mean is not that easy.

KH: Did you feel that you were part of – this is a bit of a loaded question really – but almost a resurgence in regional theatre in the sixties and seventies?

AP: I think we did feel there was a bit of a sense of being part of a... I mean I hate words like 'movement' because that's... you know those were invented by critics largely.

KH: I know, you see I'm trying to move away from that. That was a bad phrasing of the question.

AP: No I think there was a kind of kinship certainly, so when...if any of us had a first night in the North... I mean I remember Stan Barstow did a show with Alex Glasgow called *Listen for the Trains Love*, about the railway navvies at the old Sheffield Playhouse. And we all turned up. Stan was there obviously, and Henry Livings was there, I was there, we kind of supported each other. And there was a bit of a club... bit of a club feel to it. And you know, so... and if I had a first night in Newcastle they'd all come and support me. And it still survives actually, at Live Theatre in Newcastle, when if Lee Hall has a play [on]... Lee's got a play opening in three or four weeks – three weeks time – and we're going the first night, because it's... I mean it's the gang, you know it's the Geordie mafia. And that's lovely. They've done a couple of portmanteau shows at Live in Newcastle. One of a series of solo pieces called *NE1*, which is the postal code of the theatre – NE1. And Lee Hall and Peter Straughan and Peter Flannery and Julie Darling, bless her. But we all turned up, not to say, 'Ay, mine's better than the others.' Just [to] say, 'Isn't this wonderful?' And it does depress me sometimes when I read things about writers being competitive, because it's not an experience we ever had in the North, and we still don't. And we want everybody to be good, and mostly they are. [Laughs]

KH: I was going to ask you as well about when you helped to set up the Hull Arts Centre, and what was kind of behind that movement?

AP: I think it was... like my flippant way of talking about it is that I was doing a play in Stoke, and I was driving back from Stoke one day, it was Sunday morning. I skidded off the road and hit a dry stone wall in the middle of Derbyshire somewhere, wearing a seat belt so I was okay. And I suddenly thought if we had a place [theatre] in Hull, I wouldn't hit dry stone walls in Derbyshire. And a bunch of like-minded people got together, mid-sixties, and said let's do something about this. And that's what we did. So we did [what] any democrats would do, we formed a committee, started looking around for places we could have a theatre, raising money, I mean all that stuff. And it took five years to find an old church hall in St Stephen's Square, or in Spring Street to be precise, near the square. And we had a friendly vicar on the committee whose job was to get rid of bits of the Church of England that they'd finished with. And he said you can have this for...

and you can have this church hall for £5,000. So we raised money and hustled the Arts Council, and the Gulbenkian Foundation actually came to our aid too, they were very good indeed. And we eventually opened in 1970, in the same theatre they're in now, which has been extensively changed and remodelled and extended since then. But it's still essentially the same place. And opened with a knockabout musical called *Don't Build a Bridge, Drain the River*, because it was before they built the Humber Bridge – with Barrie Rutter among others.

KH: Oh and Northern Broadsides.

AP: [Yes], and [we] packed them out. But then within about six months we were broke, and again everything becomes a cheap one liner. Within six months I say we were on first name terms with the bailiff who was a local auctioneer called Gilbert Bateson. When I was still in architecture I designed a conservatory for Gilbert at his house, out to the West of the City. And so I actually knew him. So I'd be in the theatre and Gilbert would wander in, I'd say, 'What have you come to take away today. Is it the central heating?!' And so it was a big adventure. And I kept trying to console everybody, I said, 'Read the early years of every theatre that matters a damn. Read about the early years of the Old Vic, of the Abbey in Dublin,' I said, 'this is always... this is what it is always like.' And...

KH: Stratford East as well, yes.

AP: Stratford East, absolutely. I said it's about penury. I said if there was any money in it everybody would be doing it. There isn't any money. By definition there is no money in it. And we struggled along you know, and it was tough. And then you know various changes of organising. And then Truck took over, and John Godber moved in. And I think John's done a terrific job. And now we get our brand new theatre in the New Year, and it'll only have taken 38 years.

AP: Can we pause it a bit?

KH: Yes, sure that's absolutely fine.

[Interview resumes]

KH: In an article that you wrote a while ago – I think was for *New Theatre Quarterly* – you wrote about the demise of the single play and the lack of opportunity, or freedom in television for writers, as encouraging people to write for theatre again.

AP: I think it is yes. I mean again I don't want to name names, but I know a number of young writers who've just given up on television. I mean they've given up trying to sell original ideas to television. So they go... whereas they go to the theatre, they're welcomed. I think this is also one of the reasons why comedy's become quite a, you know, a buoyant area. If you want to get onto television as a writer you've got a better

chance of doing it with a comedy idea than a drama idea. So yes, I think theatre has benefited. I think theatre's in a good shape at the moment, from a new writing point of view.

And I think television's in lousy shape from a new writing...[point of view] because there isn't any, really. And the big successes of recent times have been things like *Doctor Who*, which is you know, better done than it's ever been, better written than it ever was, but is a franchise. And *Lost on Mars*, which is again beautifully written, beautifully acted, but is still a cop show. It's finding another way of doing a cop show. And [I've] nothing against cop...[shows] I mean I've written more cop shows than I can count, and I still am. But that's a separate issue. I mean, cop shows are a classic form, like the Western, which you can then use to do anything with. But yes, I think television has betrayed writers. And, I think Jimmy McGovern said this when he was on *Mastermind*, he said that television treats the audience with contempt. And he was right. And I think they've been rumbled. I think it's a very interesting point now, where there's a huge crisis of confidence in television, about how they lie and cheat, and they've been rumbled. And they've got to get their act together, and quickly. Because... and I think the future of network television... I'm not even sure whether it has one you see. I think... I mean our grandchildren, because they're the real barometers, I can see that they're not going to sit down and say oh tonight we're going to watch such and such a thing. You know they're surfing, or if they want to watch something they'll get a DVD out. And I think that's good.

I mean you can't have it all ways. We were full of dismay in the sixties and seventies because people were watching television, and nothing else. And it did hit the theatres. And I mean the downside of opening in Hull in 1970 was, although we did good business initially, some of the things we did... I mean, we were playing to 20 people. And that was largely I guess because of television. And that's gone now. I mean the kids go out, you know they'll go to concerts and clubs and everything. And kids always need to go out, because they've got to get away from the parents. That's just a fact of life. And once they develop the going out habit, the staying in to watch telly is... I mean as an institution in the land, it is under threat. And maybe it doesn't matter you know but I think it's largely been a self inflicted wound by the industry.

People actually like plays. And the odd.... I mean I've done two single... two... yes, I've done two one-off dramas in the last eight years for television, that have gone out at peak time. One was *Last of the Blonde Bombshells*, with Judi Dench and Ian [Holm]. It got very good figures. It was well liked and you know... And then I did a film called *Belonging* with Brenda Blethyn, three years ago, which again got better figures than the thing it was up against – *Silent Witness*, you know a second or third episode of a *Silent Witness*. We got better figures than *Silent Witness*, with you know fairly minimal... [publicity]. There weren't big posters all over the underground or anything like that. So people actually like one off drama. But they only like it if it's any good. I mean if it's crap then they'll turn off, as it...

SR: What about *Billy Two-Sheds*, that's three?

AP: Well yes.

SR: Just it wasn't prime time.

AP: ... that was an afternoon... I did an afternoon play, which again got very...

SR: It got an enormous post bag.

AP: Yes.

SR: He does a one off and the letters...

AP: And it still rumbles on. I mean we've got a request on e-mail from a friend in Newcastle saying he's still trying to track it down, which we must do so.

KH: I was going to ask you about things that you were writing for television in the sixties and seventies, how it worked with regard to commissioning, whereas... was it you going to them with ideas, or them coming to you? I was thinking about things like *Land of Green Ginger*, and things you know, that draw on your quite... draw on your background I guess.

AP: Mostly I went to them, because there was an ever open door. You know, because it was a... they needed us at the time. They needed people like me to fill all these slots. And David Rose commissioned *Land of Green Ginger*, and I mean he would come to me and say 'Have you got anything?'. In fact I'd written *Land of Green Ginger* in an embryonic form for one of the long departed ITV... [companies]. Associated Television I think they were called, who did... I think they did weekend programs in the North. There was one of these funny kind of... way thing... And they... that's right, they were setting up a series called *A Tale of Six Cities*, and they were going to do six plays, each set in a particular city.

KH: Oh that's an interesting idea.

AP: And I did... it was... it wasn't called *Land of Green Ginger*, it was called *The Surprise of a Large Town*, which is a quote from Philip Larkin. But it did involve a lot of location filming. And they didn't...[do it]. I mean, I think the whole thing fell apart; they didn't do any of them. And then some... you know two or three years later, David was [said], 'Alan, have you got anything?' Because he was... David was... his job title was Head of Drama (English Regions), so he was looking for plays from around the English regions. And I said I've got this thing I did for ATV. So he looked at it, he said, 'Mmm, mmm.' And by then it was possible to make an entire play entirely on location. You could go out with...[cameras] you know, it was no longer a studio adventure. So I rewrote it as a screenplay. I mean... say well we take a camera anywhere. And by then I'd got to [know] the Watersons – a folk group from Hull. Loved their work, and sort of wrote them in as it were. And it was wonderful. Brian Parker, who directed it, he actually came

up to Hull, and I showed him all the locations. I told him how to shoot it. I mean I said you don't have to do it this way, this is...[the way I see it]. And that kind of collective thing.

So with the original work, yes I would go to them. But it was very casual, and very informal. And Peter Willes, who was Head of Drama at Yorkshire Television, he telephoned me one day and said, 'It's time you wrote another play.' 'Fine Peter, would you like me to do...' I said, 'When I get anything, would you like me to do an outline?' 'No, no, no, telephone me and say I've got an idea. And you come to me, we'll have dinner and you can tell me your story over dinner.' And that's how Peter would commit. So you'd go and have dinner with Peter Willes, in the Queens Hotel in Leeds, and say, 'Well, it's about this.'. 'No! Stop! Don't tell me anymore.'. I said, 'Well...'. 'No' he said, 'if you tell me anymore, when I read the script it'll spoil it because I'll know what's going to happen.' And you would tell him the first ten minutes. And on that basis he would commission, and they would make it.

You know, we didn't go through endless rewrites or anything like that. That was partly a technical thing, because in those days if you did rewrites it was a nuisance, because they would then have to retype everything.

KH: So they were less reluctant. And they were reluctant to do that.

AP: You see it was all done with... they had [enormous] typing pools, and everything was... Oh God it's... there weren't any photocopiers, so the only way to make lots of copies was they had to be typed onto stencils.

KH: Oh goodness!

AP: And run off on Gestetners or Roneos, which were these duplicating machines, which you did.

KH: They must have had a huge typing pool.

AP: Yes, they did...

SR: Yes, they did.

AP: I mean I've got... in the archive there are early television scripts, and in the top corner there's a little I-dent as so who had typed it. So that if... I guess if it was badly wrong and badly typed they could say...

KH: They could go back to them.

AP: Mavis did this one.

KH: Yes.

AP: Mavis will have to be spoken...[to]. And they took great pride in accuracy of typing. And so the minute computers and photocopies came in, it gave them a licence... The thing a computer gives you is a licence not to make up your mind. And that's deadly because it gives... and you tend to have more people telling you how to do your work. On *Lewis*, which is my current television thing, we've got two producers, a script editor, and one or two other people – probably three producers I think – so that's four people.

SR: Yes, because there's the one we never see.

AP: There's one we never see. And so it's... and they're perfectly nice, decent people, but they're still a pain in the arse really. When we did *Last of the Blonde Bombshells*, because that went through various manifestations with various people trying to set it up, I think I've got 18 versions of the script on the computer. And hand on heart, we could have shot any of the 18 and the audience wouldn't have noticed the difference, nor would I. And Judi and Ian would have happily have done any of the versions - I mean they didn't know all this - And I was having script meetings with six...[people]. I remember with the BBC, somebody from HBO in the States, and Working Title who were the independents involved, and...plus notes sent from HBO in the States. So there was six/seven people. And most of it was twaddle. I mean it was... so it should have been more fun than it was.

KH: With regard to that idea of having the freedom to do what you want, did you feel as a writer that there was more freedom in terms of content in writing for television in the sixties, because there was still censorship in the theatre? Or the reverse of that, did you feel that it was difficult to write certain things in the plays that you were doing?

AP: You were constrained. I didn't feel... there was certainly constraints on language, but that's not been a problem for me. When I did this afternoon theatre play, which was called *The Last Will and Testament of Billy Two-Sheds*, the producer – again in Birmingham – Will Trotter, who runs drama in Birmingham now, said, 'Look you've got to... it is afternoon theatre so there's no sex, no drugs and no four letter words.' I said, 'Will, you've just described Jack Rosenthal's career and my career.' I said, 'I had an entire career in telly without sex, drugs or rock 'n' roll, and no four letter words.' I said, 'I don't need any of those things, I'm not interested.' I mean as a writer these are not things that interest me. And I think we've had enough of all of them frankly. I mean what is there new to say about any of these things? So it isn't a problem. And I never found... I mean up until 19... I don't know when the Lord Chanc...[And I never found the Lord Chancellor a problem. Where did he go?]

KH: It was '68.

AP: '68. Yes, when we did *Coalhouse Door*...

KH: That's just on the cusp I suppose.

AP: We were actually... exactly, we were right on the cusp, and because it was set in the North East the phrase, 'whybugger' turns up a lot in the text. And the Lord Chamberlain said, 'Wouldn't they say why you... but you're not allowed to say 'bugger'' So we changed them all to 'beggars', and then they just did it in that... in a slightly guttural... because it was... oh, it was an actor from South West Durham who played the one who had most of the 'why ya bugga's' to say. And he said... and he had this very specific South West Durham accent, which is a kind of guttural... He said, 'Well if I say 'why ya begga' like that, they won't know the difference.' And that's what he did. So it always... there was always a hole in the fence you can climb through.

KH: Yes, get round.

AP: It was just... I think the Lord Chamberlain's office, by that time, had just got silly. It was just really silly. It wasn't effective. And I did come to the conclusion that censorship was probably impossible, because if it's going to be effective it's got to be repressive. And if it's not repressive then you may as well not bother. And that the audience is the best censor in a weird way. I remember I was on a writers' panel at, I think the Harrogate Festival – again that same period – with a Czech poet called Miroslav Holub. And he was talking about the worst days of the regime. And he said, 'I have to tell you, censorship is impossible.' He said, 'I have lived through the worst period of censorship in my country, so if they say you cannot write about the system. So we say fine, we will write about ants. And we write about ants, and we say to the censor 'this is about ants'. And the people know it's not about ants.' This was one of the most wonderful things I ever heard. And it just forces you to be imaginative, and that's good. So it's never been irksome. And the work had no go areas I suppose, but I wasn't really... I wasn't particularly interested in...

KH: You weren't interested in that...

AP: No, I just wanted to tell stories about ordinary people who turn out to be amazing, which is what the world is full of it seems to me.

KH: I think one of the last areas I wanted to ask you about was the amount of cross-fertilization in your work [between the] kind of things in radio and then in television, then on the stage. And the difficulties, or I don't know, the pleasures of that as a writer, of transferring things to your different mediums.

AP: I suppose I probably have been at it so long that I don't think about it very much. I try to work... I try to work backwards and think... I try to write the sort of things that I would like to see. So I sit... so when I'm writing I'm doing two... [things] I'm sitting in

the midst of the play, but I'm also sitting in my armchair, or I'm sitting in the theatre thinking what would I find exciting at this point. Is this going to be amusing, is this going to be moving, is it going to be silly? And back to... where are the little surprises, where is the big surprise?

I'm a great fan of Raymond Chandler who always said if he didn't know what to do, if he got stuck, he'd have the door open, and there would be a guy with a gun. So I tend to do the guy with the gun trick, and then think of a reason why he's there and why he's holding the gun. And Henry Livings who I suppose was a kind of mentor – a mentor/mate – he always said if he got a bit stuck, if he thought the play was getting a bit dull he'd have the door open and somebody would walk in from another play, and become a kind of lord of misrule, and rush around hitting everybody with a pig's bladder, just to wake them up.

And so I've never really been... I've never really been that bothered by this transferring from one form to another. I think it's an overrated problem. I think there are some stories that fit comfortably into one rather than the other. I think you can do anything on radio for a start. And I think you can do anything in the theatre. I think you can't do anything on television. Television's a very literal medium actually, very limiting in lots of ways.

And there's a thing that directors in particular don't want to acknowledge, what works best on television is people in rooms [talking].. I mean they all... because a lot of them have got one eye on Hollywood, they don't want to believe this. You will never do a car chase on television that will get within light years of the car chase in *Bullitt* or in *The French Connection*. I mean, you don't have the million dollar budgets that will allow that. What you might do is a kind of comical comment on it, which we did in a series called *Get Lost*. We had a car chase on a caravan site on the Yorkshire coast, which had a ten mile an hour speed limit. So they had their chase at ten miles an hour. So that became a kind of comment on *Bullitt*, and a parody if you like. And [was] resolved when one of them... one of the cars ran out of petrol, because the other guys drained the petrol tank. So I mean it was all kind of silly as I say it, and I don't know how we ever got away with this stuff, but we did! [Laughs]

So I think... I mean we were zapping aimlessly one night, not long ago, and we caught part of an episode of *Tinker Tailor*, and it was Alec Guinness searching a room. Where Alec Guinness, this quiet man, face on him like Buster Keaton. He's looking for something. He's a spy and he's looking for something. And it was hypnotic, absolutely hypnotic. And all he was doing was... he was not in any danger, there weren't any shadowy men outside in a black saloon car with the engine running. Just a man in a room. Absolutely terrific.

SR: Yes, couldn't take your eyes off it.

AP: And it's much better than screaming and shouting. There was a great football manager called Bob Paisley who managed Liverpool – a Durham man, Country Durham man, very quiet spoken. And I mean most football managers scream and shout, not him.

And he said, 'If you want people to listen, speak quietly.' So that's wisdom. So a lot of my stuff speaks quietly, and not a lot happens really in conventional plot terms, which I suppose is the Chekhovian bit of me. I'm more interested in people being, than in people doing. The plot is sort of...

And I think this possibly goes right back to those early plays I saw in Hull at the new... you know the high drama would be end of Act I, in runs... you know, in comes the daughter of the house and says, 'Mummy, Daddy, I'm going to have a baby.' And it's shock, horror, and the curtain would fall. You think 'well, yes, yes, that's all right'. And then it turns out afterwards that either she's not really going to have a baby, or she's been married all the time. I mean the resolution was so boring, you know, I feel, 'So what? What have I spent two and a half hours listening to these people witter at each other about things that don't really matter very much? And where are the big belly laughs, and why doesn't anyone fall over? And you know, why don't we have a custard pie gag?'. I mean in a way the plays from that period that have worked... that have survived best, are maybe the farces – aside from all the work that Joan was doing, which we didn't really see in Hull. So this was something happening. But we went to see a revival of *See How They Run*, which is a farce from the fifties – Philip King?

SR: Yes.

AP: Who was actually a Beverley man originally, Philip King. And it's just about vicars and bishops and things, and comical clergymen.

SR: It's absurd.

AP: And it's absolute... and set in the Second World War, because there's an escaped German prisoner in it. And it was wonderful, absolutely wonderful.

SR: We just laughed the whole way through. And the audience was magnificent.

AP: And as one of these... a line in it - which I think Tom Stoppard said - the greatest line in 20th Century English theatre was, 'Sergeant. Arrest several of these vicars.'
[Laughter]

SR: Just wonderful.

AP: And it's not the line, it's the set up. And we loved it. But as you sat down before, the music they played were tunes from the period, including *Deep in the Heart of Texas*, which probably won't mean a thing to you.

KH: It's doesn't mean anything to me.

AP: [sings] 'The stars at night, are big and bright. [clap, clap, clap clap] Deep in the heart of Texas.'

SR: And you have to do the clap.

AP: You know, and the entire audience joined in the... [clapping] because they were all kind of our age.

SR: They were all our age.

AP: And we didn't mean... nobody meant to do it, it was just an automatic reaction.

KH: Instantaneous.

AP: And we all looked around and said... and we all clapped, because we all know how to...

KH: Just to finish off, I wanted to ask just a personal response really, whether you have a particular theatrical memory, or a particular piece of theatre that you were involved in, that has been a highlight for you.

AP: Of my own?

KH: Yes.

AP: Oh *Coalhouse*, I think *Coalhouse* obviously in, you know in the period we're talking about, because I became aware that we'd struck a cord with an audience on Tyneside. Peggy came up to see it, came up to the first night, and sort of five minutes in she grasped my hand and said, 'My God darling, this is revolutionary.' And the atmosphere was absolutely electrifying.

SR: And for Peggy to say that.

AP: Because they hadn't actually seen themselves and their own experience on a theatre stage, and not solemnly you know. But...

SR: Joyfully.

AP: Yes, there was a great explosion of joy and saying you know, 'We will win in the end.' And I think that's... if there is a kind of underlying theme that seems to run

through life, we all... we will win in the end. And not only had we uncovered something in the audience, I think that we had uncovered something in ourselves as play makers. I think Alex and I and Sid thought 'Jesus! You know, this is... this is a bit... almost scary you know?'. And there are... I mean, every seat was sold. I mean the word of mouth just... every seat was sold [It was word of mouth.] And there were stories of exiles coming up to Newcastle to see a football match, on Saturday afternoon. Went to the theatre, say, 'We'll go to the match this afternoon, have you got any tickets tonight?' 'No we've only got tickets for the matinée.' So they went to see the play, they went to the matinée instead of going to the match! I mean...

SR: This is unheard of.

AP: ...from Geordies this is... So from that whole period I think that was the Damascus moment. The mistake of course was then trying to repeat it. So... and you go off in different directions. And it is... I mean I had... we had a letter from the Newcastle Lit and Phil, which is the Literary and Philosophical Society – which again is a wonderful subject for a play, but Shelagh Stephenson beat me to it actually – pointing out that next year is the 40th anniversary of *Close the Coalhouse Door* and they're planning some kind of commemoration... 40 years! Where did they go you know, who was that boy? What became of him?

KH: I think that's a good point for us to leave it, but thanks very much. That's been absolutely great.

AP: You're very welcome, very welcome.