

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Barry Clayton – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Kate Harris**

**8 October 2007**

Actor. Arden of Faversham; audiences; auditions; Bradford Northern Theatre School; Brendan Behan; Barbara Brown; censorship; critics; The Good Soldier Schweik; International Theatre Festival; Joan Littlewood; Mother Courage; production ideas; The Quare Fellow; rehearsals; Theatre Workshop; West End transfers.

Text in square brackets [] denotes clarifications requested by the interviewee.

KH: This is an interview on 8th October with Barry Clayton. Can I just begin by asking you when you first became interested in working in the theatre?

BC: Well, I mean it's crazy, I hadn't been to the theatre as a small child, but I wanted to be an actor when all the other kids wanted to be engine drivers or something like that. And I was taken with my cousin to see a Christmas show for children. I was obviously destined to join Joan Littlewood, because I thought it was terrible. They were all shouting, 'He's behind you, he's behind you!' and I thought 'this is so grotesque'. And we – both my cousin and I – sat with long, glum faces, amidst these children.

Anyway, then later on when I was at school, I was always in the school plays and concerts, and then in amateur dramatics in Sheffield. And in 1948 I managed to go to - what was then the Civic Theatre School - Bradford Northern Theatre School, which was run by Esme Church. And I was of the age where one had to be particularly lucky, because all the people coming out of the forces at the end of the war obviously had priority. So we 17 year olds – there was Robert Stephens and I – had to be a damn sight better than all these, to us, seemingly older and much more experienced people. And I was two years at the school, and the great thing was that we had for movement Rudolf Laban, who had a centre in Manchester. And he and Stephenson – what was her first name? – Geraldine Stephenson – and he would come. And he was about 75, and he would... 'oh, further back, further back.' and he would come and dig his knuckles in the base of your...[spine]. 'More, more.' And I mean... and he could do all these. We could slash, and we could ring, and we could flick, and all of that you know which...[was basic Laban movement].

When I eventually – four or five years later – went for an audition with Joan [at Theatre Royal], and my letter was at the bottom of the pile. And eventually... she said 'Would you like to join the company?' After four hours of auditioning and improvising, and talking about the theatre, she said, 'Would you...?' and I said, 'Of course.'. And six weeks later, when we were in rehearsal for the first production, which was a series of the O'Neill plays which we were going into at the Theatre Royal in Stratford - and that was

1954 - I learned... she said - because I'd been recommended to write to her - she said, 'When I saw that you'd been recommended by that bitch, I said "he's sure to be crap, and I'll put him at the bottom of the pile".' [laughs] Which is a memory I always have treasured. So it was a matter of overcoming all of these things.

And the first season at Stratford, I mean we were living down... [and rehearsing in Essex] we used to stay with... I can't remember his name, a famous journalist. It'll come to me in a moment [Tom Driberg]. He had a house and he was a great supporter of Theatre Workshop. And we used to stay and rehearse... we lived under canvas at his place, and we rehearsed and then we'd go and sign on and get our dole money – don't tell the DSSS, they may put in a reverse claim! [Laughs]

And then at weekends... because the theatre was being painted, we all had to go in to Stratford and paint the theatre. The first time. I don't think it had been painted for yonks. And we did all that. And then we opened. And virtually nobody came. I mean, it was...

What I love about the Theatre Royal in Stratford now, it really is what we hoped our theatre could be. I mean, you now have wonderful people from all over East London and everywhere, and it's lively, and it's vibrant. And it was really... I mean, the fifties were dreary. You're much too young to know, but it was a dreary period... And we only shared out what came in at the box office. So we got £3 10/- a week. And we did three plays [by O'Neill]: Bound East for Cardiff and one of them set in the Caribbean. And I played Yank, the sailor who was dying. And Harry Corbett was... we played most of it together. In fact we played all of it.

KH: What were your... because I know you were in repertory before you went to Theatre Workshop...

BC: Oh yes.

KH: How did working with Theatre Workshop compare with the work that you'd been doing in repertory?

BC: Oh well there was no...[comparison]. I mean in repertory I worked in weekly rep where you did a new play 50 weeks of the year, and you had a fortnight's holiday. And I was in Morecambe, I was in Colchester, I was [in] Eastbourne, I was in Swansea, doing usually you know, West End after-dinner [upper class accent] 'Oh really Charles, pass me a cigarette, will you darling.' You know, that kind of nonsense, which still goes on. I mean, people think the theatre has changed, and it has, thank goodness! There's a lot of new blood and lots of exciting things. But I walk out of as many London productions now as I did years ago. [laughs] And I think 'why am I wasting my money on this, because you know what it's going to be like'.

Yes... I mean, it was a matter Monday you opened this week's play – Monday night. Tuesday you read through next week's play in the morning, and played this week's play in the evening. And that went on. On Saturday you did a run-through of the play, and then dress rehearsal Monday afternoon. And I reached the stage where I couldn't read an article in a newspaper without automatically learning it by heart! I mean, I had literally to stop reading newspapers, because I'd be able to quote. And I'd think 'why am I learning that rubbish?'. And your brain does become like a sponge. I mean, I could

soak in anything I needed. Sunday morning I just squeeze it, and last week's play is gone.

And of course this was all... you see, what changed the theatre, was [its] death knell, was the coronation of the Queen in 1953 when everyone...[said] 'Oh, we've got to have a telly for that haven't we?'. So the nation bought television sets. And then they got Coronation Street or whatever, you know. And they didn't need to go out spending money, they just paid their license fee and took whatever the BBC, and later ITV, was giving them.

KH: So when you first went to Theatre Workshop, could you just describe the audition process?

BC: The audition. Yes, it was a hot summer Sunday, August 14th I think – or somewhere around that – 1954. And Stratford looked totally different then. I mean, it was all upstairs, downstairs, back to back houses. It was a mucky old station, and the whole area was... the docks were beginning to be run down. And there was a terrible smell from – I don't think they will sue me! – from Yardley's soap factory down the road. And things like that. And we all lived in the dressing room you see.

Anyway, you asked about the audition. I did any speech I could remember from any play, a bit of Shakespeare, there was a play in which I played a lawyer – think it was called Libel or something – and various things like that. I would do these. Then Joan would say 'Can you...[improvise], will you do some dancing?' And of course at theatre school we had had ballet and movement, apart from Laban's classes. And then we talked about the theatre, and then she would give me things to improvise. She would suddenly tell me a story and I would take something up like that as an improvisation. And then I remember we sat in [the foyer] – and I never go to that theatre, even today [without remembering the foyer] – the bench in the foyer. Joan and I sat talking. And I still didn't know whether she was going to offer me a job. And I'm trying to sound as intelligent as possible about the theatre, because I did love the theatre. I mean, there was a time when I would go and see everything. I would come to London for a week and get a half crown gallery stool, and see as much as I could. And like some of it, which of course was unforgivable. [laughs] Yes, I didn't mention the things I liked with Joan, because you always had to hold your...[tongue] well we did, we used to hold our [opinions back]... [Occasionally] we held our hand over the flame and we swore we hated the Old Vic and the Arts Council. And I see the present day Stratford Theatre is in more or less the same position that we were. With the situation in those days. We got some money from local councils – peanuts - but I mean, at least they were mildly supportive.

KH: Something.

BC: But then I mean, later on when we were invited to the Paris International Theatre Festival, then it was a whole different... they wouldn't give a penny for anything. And anyway that comes a little bit later.

I mean, we had this early part when we had some successes, like for instance a super production of The Good Soldier Schweik with George Cooper and me playing one of those Czech fancy... [lieutenant], you know... there's a picture of me, I think,

somewhere looking you know, like one of those Central European dandies. And that was a great success. And we did transfer it to Embassy Swiss Cottage, which was a theatre still in those days. And also then to the Duke of York's Theatre for a short run. And this of course was considered by Joan and quite a lot of the older members of the company – I mean older than me, and God knows that's saying something! – who thought this was selling out to commercial interest. And that we all... the younger ones said, 'But we can eat next week.' [Laughs]

KH: How did Joan prepare you for productions and rehearsals and that kind of thing?

BC: Oh well, it would depend what kind of thing. I mean, with the... For instance, the first thing I was in, the O'Neill thing... and we had to learn about what steamships were like in those days, what the physical... [effort needed was] and we would do improvisations, again on Laban's sort of effort, how much effort you put into shovelling your coal. And how you minimise the energy you used, which is if you watch any skilled professional workman today, they know just how much energy [they need]. Whereas I'd be struggling with something and going mad, and that sort of thing.

We would talk about the...[crews] because the ships were – as they still are today, you know - international. There was a... I think George [Cooper] played a Norwegian sailor, and I played this American, Harry [Corbett] was... I think he was Liverpool. I can't remember. But we all developed those, and discussed how they would come, and what conditions were like. I mean, we had to... with all things we had to do research into the background. And not merely the reading of things, but then physical improvisations.

For instance, later on – I'm trying to keep this in sequence – but later on when we did *The Quare Fellow* for instance, Behan – when we finally got him to London, [after] two attempts – came in with this great heap of a play. Great heap, I mean it must have had about 500 pages you know. And we sort of read it, and obviously Joan read it first. And Joan and Gerry and...[others realised] there was a wonderful play in there. But there was a load of it, you know, garbage. Well not necessarily garbage, but not relevant to... I mean, we would do a Stanislavsky analysis, 'what is the super-objective of this play? What are best ways the writer is telling it? Where are the...?' And then we move. Because I remember the first time we ran Act One for him, he sat in the audience, he said, [Irish accent] 'Bloody hell, did I write that? It's fucking marvellous isn't it?!' [laughs] And he was wonderful. And he would come and he would sing the songs, 'Along the Banks of the Old Canal'. But in rehearsal, we would get anybody who had been in a prison to come and talk to us, to show us how it was worked out, [how to clean] your cell with the minimum effort. How you talked without moving your lips, and how you smoked a cigarette or passed a cigarette to your mate so that the screws wouldn't know what you were doing, you know, all of that.

And then it was a gradual improvisation of things, and then getting – as with most things – getting closer to the script as written. But again a script was never... well, Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, yes those, the classics were given some... I wouldn't dare to use the word 'respect', but they were treated as if they might have known something about writing! Though that's unkind to the others, because obviously Brendan also knew something. But this was theatre that he was writing for rather than the things that I think he'd done heretofore.

And we did everything. I mean, we were... [prisoners]. The theatre became a prison in fact you know, in that each evening in that we all... nobody talked to each other, particularly if he was [playing] a screw. Or if Joan came round, we said 'We can't talk to

you love. You'd better go'. We used to treat her rather... well we were... a lot of us were scared [of her]. It was not all the time, but anyway...

And that of course was... it was a play that was really... I mean, the effect, you never quite know until you do it for an audience. And you see it ended with the man being hanged. And we were all over the theatre – front of house, backstage, up in the flies – banging on metal pipes the way they did when a man was being topped, so that the whole theatre was absolutely electric. Because I saw a recent revival of it, but they had a... oh some kind of sentimental frieze which I couldn't bear. And so it was... you know people... there was always... there was a silence that could last two, three, sometimes even more, minutes.

KH: How much input did you feel that other people, aside from Joan Littlewood, had into the way productions were shaped?

BC: Well it depended. I mean, some of the improvisations which we did as a group were sometimes partly incorporated into something, or the idea that we had found in that improvisation, we managed to graft on to the play. It's difficult to describe because it was... things happened. Sometimes you would just look at somebody you were playing a scene with, and you would see that something was happening to them that affected you... I mean it really was [group theatre].

You know in those days, well they still do it, but I mean a lot of actors look either to the left of you or to the right of you, but never look you in the eyes. I remember once working in weekly rep, and said, 'Darling, would you mind looking at me? I'm not going to bite you, just look at me when you talk to me.' you know. And that was considered... [shocking] there was a whole school of acting that thought 'oh no, acting is acting, and we're only pretending'. Which is of course baloney. I mean, obviously all actors are only pretending, but nevertheless there's a different way of pretending.

No, it was... things did come together. Joan would have ideas and sometimes we would add to them. And sometimes she would say 'well, try it' – rather rarely, but she did occasionally! [laughs] And we would see if it worked. And even if it didn't work, you often found out a little bit more about the character you were performing.

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

BC: Oh they were all as nutty as I was! First of all I mean you'd have to [be] mad to have lived in the poverty we lived in, to have lived in the conditions... A lot of the actors lived in the dressing rooms. I, fortunately, became friendly with one of the lovely ladies who sold programmes at the theatre. And she let me stay in her back bedroom for 25/- a week, bed and breakfast. And they all said, 'Oh what [are] you doing to get that?' And I said, 'No, 25/- covers everything.' [laughs] But I mean that... it was rough.

But they were all... and you didn't have to love them, and there were some people I didn't particularly like, but you knew you could trust them to work with. And it was like, in a way, acrobats who... you knew that if you fell over there'd be somebody there to catch you. And I... it is the happiest time of my life in the sense that... I mean, I don't ever feel that I worked, because I mean, I've worked in the theatre, I've worked in films, I've worked in radio, and I've always felt you know, they're paying you... do you realise

they're paying you to do this! And so they should I say, but on the other hand... On the other hand I don't ever feel that I've worked. I've been in some boring productions, and I've made some dreary films, but not many I'm glad to say.

But it was a... not a family, because that's going to sound sentimental and mawkish, and Joan would have hated that. But it was a group. It was a group of actors who had a similar love for a certain kind of way of doing theatre, and wanted to expand themselves and find out just what, if anything, they were capable of. And quite a lot of people came who couldn't stand it you know, who... One said...I'll forget [her name], an actress, and I won't go into the production, who had been in rehearsal for three... she used to come on a motorbike to rehearsals and she... and Joan would be giving her notes and things. And she said, 'Look Joan, if that's the way you want it, play it [yourself], you do it, because I'm leaving.' And indeed Joan did play it because nobody else...[could] [Laughs]

KH: You mentioned, a little bit earlier, about older members and company's attitudes towards things like the West End, and other people oh actually that's you know, that's an opportunity. I wondered if you could maybe just say a little bit about that.

BC: Well... you see the problem was, by this time, we were getting wonderful reviews from Harold Hobson and Kenneth Tynan. And Chelsea and Hampstead, if they say it was good, they would flock to the productions. And we sometimes earned £8 a week when they came. And we were having this... you know, it was a kind of crossover. And some said, 'well look, we've got more money'. And Joan would say, 'Yes, but you're selling out to Binkie Beaumont [H.M. Tennant] and the Arts Council'. [laughs] And we said, 'No, we're not, they're nobody... they're not offering to buy us'. And there was a conflict.

And then of course some of the members of the company by this time had children, small kids - often conceived in dressing rooms at the Theatre Royal, I'm told! And they, you know, needed more to live on unless they had posh families, which most of us didn't. I mean, nobody was posh in those days. Where now... you know, I mean... and I came from Sheffield you see so I was used to living with muck. [laughs] In those days it was a mucky place.

And so when... then what happened in 1954...[and 1955], the second season I was there, the Theatre National Populaire... no, the International Theatre Festival was each year, they came to London, looked at all the West End productions, and they came to see our Arden of Faversham and Volpone, and they wanted us to go Paris. [theatrical voice] 'But darling, those dreadful communists from East London, they have been invited. And look, John... Sir John you haven't even...' I don't know whether he was Sir John by then... you know, all of that went on. And Binkie Beaumont said, 'Who are these dreadful people?'. And we got nothing from the Arts Council.

Then dear Gerry Raffles, who was always a... there was a Friends of Theatre Workshop, you know, who were sort of regular supporters. And he found that if you had a certain number of people travelling, you could have a luggage van to yourself. And so he said... he got all the Friends and said, 'Right, we're all going to Paris.' And he booked... And we took the scenery... we loaded it at Stratford into a van, Railway Union wouldn't let us load it on to the train, nor would the Seaman's Union - quite rightly - at Dover, or wherever it was. And then we unloaded it out of the train in Paris at Gare du Nord. And it was... because... and then we all arrived bringing the scenery you see. And the stage hands at the Herbertot who said, 'Mais ou sont les comedians?' And we said, 'Nous sommes les comedians, we're the actors and we're also the scene shifters.' [Laughs]

KH: What was the experience like of performing in Paris at the Festival?

BC: Oh it was... it was really... You know, I'd read about Diaghilev and Nijinsky and the Ballets Russes... and you thought... I thought it must be a bloody exaggeration, nobody... What happened was we moved into the Herbertot and we rehearsed. And nobody was coming. The British Embassy, 'No, no we don't need tickets' and all of that. However, as it got nearer to the opening performance, they told us at the box office that the British Embassy has asked for tickets and so-and-so. And I will never be... I mean the... first of all curtain up at nine o'clock. You looked through the hole, and I said, 'It's just like bloody Stratford, there's about 35 people there.' [laughs] And then half past nine it was perhaps half full. Quarter to ten, three quart... ten o'clock they decided it was full enough, up would go the curtain. Well I mean, we were not used to that. And then they'd bang on the... in the wings you know, and the curtain goes up...

And the atmosphere was electric. I mean, there was Harry Corbett giving an amazing performance, and a wonderful actress called Barbara Brown, who was really a nice dumpy little English lass who suddenly became this electrifying, sexually avaricious woman. And then George Cooper and I played the two... because we were engaged by Arden... no, by the lover, Mosby I think, yes Mosby is his name, to murder her husband. And of course we were a total... I was Shakebag and he... I can't remember what he... And we made a total cock-up of every attempt to murder him. And... but it was... and then at the end, the curtain went down and there was silence. And you could hear a pin drop. You stand on the stage and you think they're all dead. They must be dead, why aren't they clapping? And then the curtain went up, and it was... literally there were 25 curtain calls. And the theatre cheered to the echo you know.

And then afterwards, two wonderful things which I'll never forget, it was... Gladwyn Jebb was the British Ambassador, and he had a wife with a hat like a galleon. And they said, 'Oh darlings, that was wonderful. We had Michael Redgrave and Peggy Ashcroft last year doing Antony and Cleopatra. It was... we couldn't hold our heads up, but this is really wonderful!' They invited us to the British Embassy even. And the other thing, after this electrifying... [show] Joan came round with some notes, to Harry and to George and me, and [we] said... 'Piss off Joan, if you didn't like it, they did.'! [laughs] And it was rare we dared to be... [so bold]

KH: That sounds wonderful. You mentioned, when you were talking about the established theatre's attitudes to Theatre Workshop being asked to go to the festival. You mentioned people kind of saying, 'Oh these communists...'

BC: Oh yes, well you see... I mean most of... Let's face it you see, I'm... it's now all forgotten, and we have a Labour Party which is slightly to the right of Genghis Khan - but not quite as far as [David] Cameron, as far as I'm concerned. I mean, they're all triumphant mediocrities who have forgotten any kind of past or political or economic or social history. They don't want to know, you know. You even mention the word 'socialism' - let alone 'communism', which of course are now considered totally dead. And yet the mess that we have on the planet is frankly because of lunatic capitalism at its worst excesses. And now... they used to have the Soviet Union as it was proudly called in those days, to hold the reins on them a bit. I mean in the competition of the

Cold War. But now there's nothing. I mean it's avarice and greed and oligarchs from Murmansk to Manhattan. Anyway, I won't talk politics.

So we were radical and we were people who thought 'Why do ordinary people – the kind of people you'd meet in the shops on Angel Lane, or the kind you can still meet on Chapel Market – why should their world... I mean, now it does happen more than it did'. But in those days the theatre was an after dinner entertainment you know, or an Agatha Christie. I mean 1952, when I was but a child *The Mousetrap* opened.

KH: *The Mousetrap* yes.

BC: And it's still going strong you see. And it's cosy, it doesn't threaten you, it doesn't challenge you, it doesn't make you think. It doesn't make you think that 'why the hell am I living like this, when they're all poncing about up there?' - I use the word loosely. You know, and so there was a radical element.

I mean I... When I was a kid, I would never have [believed] two things, (a) I never would have believed I'd have lived as long as I have and done as much as I have, because I was sure I was going to die quite early. And I would never have thought (b) that we'd still have Royal families and the whole feudal circus that passes for political democracy, or that we'd still have you know, religions. I mean, I was... I mean the working class were all agnostic if not atheist, as I have always been. I mean, I couldn't believe in Father Christmas when I was three, so why was I going to believe in anything that followed those kind of myths?

And lo and behold we... I mean, we're living in a world where, in my view, you know religious fascism of any kind is prevalent everywhere. And I don't care what particular thing they believe in, if they threaten the freedom of ordinary people to say 'you want that, you have it, but you're not imposing your views on me', you know. And so that was the thing. And of course it was the years of the Cold War. Stalin died in '53, and you know, that changed a lot of things in Eastern Europe, because I subsequently lived in Poland after I left Theatre Workshop. I went and I studied at the Polish Film School and came back as a film director, and worked as a film maker for, oh 30 years in television and cinema. All...

And you see I used to say, 'Joan, you changed my...[life]', 'Anybody else who says I changed their life I shall bloody well shoot them!'. But she had, because she had made me not only see that things could be different... And particularly I enjoyed making documentary films and things for Granada, and things like that. But that's a next stage of my life. But certainly the analysis of a script or a story that we got from Joan – which was partly Stanislavsky but partly looking at things, finding what the actual essence of the story was – and keeping that in your mind whilst you were shooting or whatever.

KH: Could I ask you about... this is something we've talked about before, about when you were involved in the *Mother Courage* production.

BC: Oh yes... well that was wonderful, because that... we had just had... well that was 1955... was it '55 or '56? It was '55.

KH: I think it was '55.

BC: Yes, '55 Mother Courage. And that... oh, that was an amazing thing, because I've already told one story, because the lady who walked out and said 'If you want to play it that way' was the one who was playing Mother Courage.

Anyway, to link it with that, we were playing in Paris the second time. We took The Good Soldier Schweik... I can't... I don't remember what the second production was. Anyway... and as usual of course we were stuck in the theatre or we were rehearsing somewhere. And Joan... Oh no, that must have been 1954. Yes, it was '54 we did Mother Courage, yes. And she said 'tomorrow morning we'll meet in the Tuilleries Gardens. So we thought 'My God, we might be going on a sight seeing [tour]'. And anyway, it was a sunny day, and we're all sitting there in the Tuilleries rehearsing of course. She was not... you were not going to miss rehearsal. So we rehearsed in the...[Tuilleries].

And it was... it wasn't Mother Courage, it was a Mexican play, the name of which I can't remember, but I'll... but it was a nice... and it was a light, easy play [The Legend of Pepito by Ted Allen]. She said, 'It's not... you won't... it'll be an easy play.' Well nothing was ever easy with Joan because she'd always find hidden depths in it. Anyway we were rehearsing that and then we came back and rehearsed more. And Brecht had sent, from Berlin, a man with a minute by minute photographs of Helene Weigel and the Berliner Ensemble production. And Joan took one look at it and... [laughs] 'Look, we're doing it our way. And we can't get a... [cart like that], we haven't got the money to build a cart like that.

KH: How did the man from Berlin react to this?

BC: Oh he... in the end he was locked out of the theatre! He was taken off for drinks, he was taken off for sight seeing tours, which he was a bit... but then in the end she literally forbade him to come into the theatre. And I think relationship between her and Brecht – because he died soon afterwards I think, but I don't think – I think they were not...

KH: Not so good afterwards.

BC: No, no, because they were both demigods...

KH: Well he had very specific ideas.

BC: ... demigods and demigods. [Laughs] But yes it was... and then we went – of all God-forsaken places - we took it to the North Devon Arts Festival in Barnstable, where they'd never heard of Bertolt Brecht, and who could blame them you know! And they all... I can't remember. Frankly it was a whole week that the less said about it, I think, the better.

KH: We've briefly mentioned The Quare Fellow, I wondered if we could maybe talk a little bit about Brendan Behan and your involvement in that production.

BC: Well that, as I said, it was... it came out of improvisation. I played various parts in... first of all at the Theatre Royal in Stratford I played the embezzler who's a sort of posher Irishman who's been fiddling the books, and was trying to maintain his grandeur in prison, and getting sent up by the rest of the...[prisoners]. And then I also doubled that with the prison governor, who has a lovely scene on the night of the hanging when he comes back in his dinner jacket from some function and asks how things are. Asks the warder who's on duty – Crimmin I think his name was but I'm not sure who... anyway Dudley Foster played him. And he had this very quiet scene in which he said... you know, who's an Englishman of course, being an Irish prison. And he sort of says, 'Oh it's dreadful business this isn't it?'. You know, that kind of man, but not in any sort of posh... just that lovely way a certain sort of middle class man can be very... sound very sympathetic. 'Oh yes, it is really awful. Must have been frightfully...' you know, that sort of...

And then I played something else when we came to the Comedy Theatre... because Joan would always... you know she said, 'Oh you've done that long enough, let's try something [else].' And I can't remember what I played. I know I didn't go on 'til Act Two, which was always nice. We had a... I had a dressing room at the Comedy Theatre with a shower, which was a luxury.

KH: How did the West End... in your opinion how did the West End transfers affect the company at Stratford?

BC: Well I mean the... you know, in a West End theatre there's this show this week, it has a run and they're friendly and helpful. What management thought... I mean, management would take anything if it was making money you know. And when it wasn't making money who takes a cut in salary? The actors! Because when we opened in The Quare Fellow £20 a week we got! But we opened of course in June or July, hot summer, so our salaries were quickly cut to £15. But again, more than we had ever earned. I mean, I remember on the first night we went... there used to be a guinea or anything you can eat for a guinea. Steak house kind of... which, I mean, steak! We'd never have afforded steak! And we went, and we had posh supper with a bottle of wine, because we knew we were earning money. And as far as the management concerned... As I say, again we were being backed by people who had been Friends of Theatre Workshop for a long time, whose names I'm afraid I can't remember. You know, from Woodfall and the Royal Court, some of the people there. I could look...

KH: Is it Oscar Lewenstein?

BC: Yes, you know, Oscar Lewenstein and people who had been friendly with the company, were in actual fact backing it in the West End when we went. And then we had a kind of... then we took it on tour. I mean, I remember... I think it's the longest thing I ever [did try] I think I was in it for ten months. And no matter how hard you work and how hard you... to keep fresh, when you suddenly know the curtain goes up, you're there, you say so-and-so, I say so-and-so, he sings that, and it's... it was really tough.

KH: That sounds wonderful. You mentioned, when you were talking about the established theatre's attitudes to Theatre Workshop being asked to go to the festival. You mentioned people kind of saying, 'Oh these communists...'

BC: Oh yes, well you see... I mean most of... Let's face it you see, I'm... it's now all forgotten, and we have a Labour Party which is slightly to the right of Genghis Khan - but not quite as far as [David] Cameron, as far as I'm concerned. I mean, they're all triumphant mediocrities who have forgotten any kind of past or political or economic or social history. They don't want to know, you know. You even mention the word 'socialism' - let alone 'communism', which of course are now considered totally dead. And yet the mess that we have on the planet is frankly because of lunatic capitalism at its worst excesses. And now... they used to have the Soviet Union as it was proudly called in those days, to hold the reins on them a bit. I mean in the competition of the Cold War. But now there's nothing. I mean it's avarice and greed and oligarchs from Murmansk to Manhattan. Anyway, I won't talk politics.

So we were radical and we were people who thought 'Why do ordinary people - the kind of people you'd meet in the shops on Angel Lane, or the kind you can still meet on Chapel Market - why should their world... I mean, now it does happen more than it did'. But in those days the theatre was an after dinner entertainment you know, or an Agatha Christie. I mean 1952, when I was but a child *The Mousetrap* opened.

KH: *The Mousetrap* yes.

BC: And it's still going strong you see. And it's cosy, it doesn't threaten you, it doesn't challenge you, it doesn't make you think. It doesn't make you think that 'why the hell am I living like this, when they're all poncing about up there?' - I use the word loosely. You know, and so there was a radical element.

I mean I... When I was a kid, I would never have [believed] two things, (a) I never would have believed I'd have lived as long as I have and done as much as I have, because I was sure I was going to die quite early. And I would never have thought (b) that we'd still have Royal families and the whole feudal circus that passes for political democracy, or that we'd still have you know, religions. I mean, I was... I mean the working class were all agnostic if not atheist, as I have always been. I mean, I couldn't believe in Father Christmas when I was three, so why was I going to believe in anything that followed those kind of myths?

And lo and behold we... I mean, we're living in a world where, in my view, you know religious fascism of any kind is prevalent everywhere. And I don't care what particular thing they believe in, if they threaten the freedom of ordinary people to say 'you want that, you have it, but you're not imposing your views on me', you know. And so that was the thing. And of course it was the years of the Cold War. Stalin died in '53, and you know, that changed a lot of things in Eastern Europe, because I subsequently lived in Poland after I left Theatre Workshop. I went and I studied at the Polish Film School and came back as a film director, and worked as a film maker for, oh 30 years in television and cinema. All...

And you see I used to say, 'Joan, you changed my...[life]', 'Anybody else who says I changed their life I shall bloody well shoot them!'. But she had, because she had made me not only see that things could be different... And particularly I enjoyed making documentary films and things for Granada, and things like that. But that's a next stage

of my life. But certainly the analysis of a script or a story that we got from Joan – which was partly Stanislavsky but partly looking at things, finding what the actual essence of the story was – and keeping that in your mind whilst you were shooting or whatever.

KH: Could I ask you about... this is something we've talked about before, about when you were involved in the Mother Courage production.

BC: Oh yes... well that was wonderful, because that... we had just had... well that was 1955... was it '55 or '56? It was '55.

KH: I think it was '55.

BC: Yes, '55 Mother Courage. And that... oh, that was an amazing thing, because I've already told one story, because the lady who walked out and said 'If you want to play it that way' was the one who was playing Mother Courage.

Anyway, to link it with that, we were playing in Paris the second time. We took The Good Soldier Schweik... I can't... I don't remember what the second production was. Anyway... and as usual of course we were stuck in the theatre or we were rehearsing somewhere. And Joan... Oh no, that must have been 1954. Yes, it was '54 we did Mother Courage, yes. And she said 'tomorrow morning we'll meet in the Tuilleries Gardens. So we thought 'My God, we might be going on a sight seeing [tour]'. And anyway, it was a sunny day, and we're all sitting there in the Tuilleries rehearsing of course. She was not... you were not going to miss rehearsal. So we rehearsed in the...[Tuilleries].

And it was... it wasn't Mother Courage, it was a Mexican play, the name of which I can't remember, but I'll... but it was a nice... and it was a light, easy play [The Legend of Pepito by Ted Allen]. She said, 'It's not... you won't... it'll be an easy play.' Well nothing was ever easy with Joan because she'd always find hidden depths in it. Anyway we were rehearsing that and then we came back and rehearsed more. And Brecht had sent, from Berlin, a man with a minute by minute photographs of Helene Weigel and the Berliner Ensemble production. And Joan took one look at it and... [laughs] 'Look, we're doing it our way. And we can't get a... [cart like that], we haven't got the money to build a cart like that.

KH: How did the man from Berlin react to this?

BC: Oh he... in the end he was locked out of the theatre! He was taken off for drinks, he was taken off for sight seeing tours, which he was a bit... but then in the end she literally forbade him to come into the theatre. And I think relationship between her and Brecht – because he died soon afterwards I think, but I don't think – I think they were not...

KH: Not so good afterwards.

BC: No, no, because they were both demigods...

KH: Well he had very specific ideas.

BC: ... demigods and demigods. [Laughs] But yes it was... and then we went – of all God-forsaken places - we took it to the North Devon Arts Festival in Barnstable, where they'd never heard of Bertolt Brecht, and who could blame them you know! And they all... I can't remember. Frankly it was a whole week that the less said about it, I think, the better.

KH: We've briefly mentioned *The Quare Fellow*, I wondered if we could maybe talk a little bit about Brendan Behan and your involvement in that production.

BC: Well that, as I said, it was... it came out of improvisation. I played various parts in... first of all at the Theatre Royal in Stratford I played the embezzler who's a sort of posher Irishman who's been fiddling the books, and was trying to maintain his grandeur in prison, and getting sent up by the rest of the...[prisoners]. And then I also doubled that with the prison governor, who has a lovely scene on the night of the hanging when he comes back in his dinner jacket from some function and asks how things are. Asks the warder who's on duty – Crimmin I think his name was but I'm not sure who... anyway Dudley Foster played him. And he had this very quiet scene in which he said... you know, who's an Englishman of course, being an Irish prison. And he sort of says, 'Oh it's dreadful business this isn't it?'. You know, that kind of man, but not in any sort of posh... just that lovely way a certain sort of middle class man can be very... sound very sympathetic. 'Oh yes, it is really awful. Must have been frightfully...' you know, that sort of...

And then I played something else when we came to the Comedy Theatre... because Joan would always... you know she said, 'Oh you've done that long enough, let's try something [else].' And I can't remember what I played. I know I didn't go on 'til Act Two, which was always nice. We had a... I had a dressing room at the Comedy Theatre with a shower, which was a luxury.

KH: How did the West End... in your opinion how did the West End transfers affect the company at Stratford?

BC: Well I mean the... you know, in a West End theatre there's this show this week, it has a run and they're friendly and helpful. What management thought... I mean, management would take anything if it was making money you know. And when it wasn't making money who takes a cut in salary? The actors! Because when we opened in *The Quare Fellow* £20 a week we got! But we opened of course in June or July, hot summer, so our salaries were quickly cut to £15. But again, more than we had ever earned. I mean, I remember on the first night we went... there used to be a guinea or anything you can eat for a guinea. Steak house kind of... which, I mean, steak! We'd never have afforded steak! And we went, and we had posh supper with a bottle of wine, because we knew we were earning money. And as far as the management concerned... As I say, again we were being backed by people who had been Friends of Theatre

Workshop for a long time, whose names I'm afraid I can't remember. You know, from Woodfall and the Royal Court, some of the people there. I could look...

KH: Is it Oscar Lewenstein?

BC: Yes, you know, Oscar Lewenstein and people who had been friendly with the company, were in actual fact backing it in the West End when we went. And then we had a kind of... then we took it on tour. I mean, I remember... I think it's the longest thing I ever [did try] I think I was in it for ten months. And no matter how hard you work and how hard you... to keep fresh, when you suddenly know the curtain goes up, you're there, you say so-and-so, I say so-and-so, he sings that, and it's... it was really tough.

KH: Did Joan used to come on those tours with you?

BC: No, no. And indeed she rather left us to our own devices. She... because there was a whole period when she hardly came to the theatre after that. And Camel – John Bury, [the designer], he was always known as Camel – sort of ran the company. And we did things like... which I don't... we did a Shaw play, which I can't remember [Captain Brassbound's Conversion]. We then did a Webster [The Duchess of Malfi], and we did something else. We did three productions, the names of which – and indeed anything about them – I've completely forgotten. And I might even have got the names wrong.

But there was a whole period when she... she was then... I think she was giving birth to her Fun Palace idea. And I think she'd rather finished with us. And then it was... the thing that reignited her was when Gerry found Oh! What a Lovely War. And that of course turned into her greatest triumph. Well not hers, the whole company. I mean, it was a wonderful show. I'd already left by then.

I'll never forget the last night I took my curtain call, and I was saying to myself, 'I've enjoyed the last ten years, but I will never do this again as long as I live.'. Because I knew there was no other theatre I wanted to go and work in. And also I suddenly looked reality in the eye, and I said 'I don't want to be a 45 year old actor who is still having to go out and sell himself for any kind of crappy part in any kind of show, whether I like it or not, purely because I need the money'. So I went to Poland and I studied at the Polish Film School. And thereby hangs another story. And I came back as a film director, and to... you know, and because again I'd learnt a tremendous amount about a whole new thing. Not entirely new for me, I'd always had a feeling for film. And of course the Polish Film School is even more demanding, in many ways, than Theatre Workshop.

But I know their entrance exam [lasted three days]. They knew I'd worked in the theatre and they said to me, 'You've been at theatre school haven't you, yes?' And I said... and they said, 'Have you got a diploma?' I said, 'No.' They said, 'Why not?' I said, 'They don't give you diplomas in England.', 'Why not?', 'Well they said if you can act you don't need a diploma, and if you can't act a diploma won't help you.' And they fell about laughing. [laughs] But it's possibly less true today than it was then, but it certainly... you know, it was part of the...

KH: What kind of impact did you feel that Theatre Workshop were making on British theatre at the time? I know that's a really general question...

BC: Well, you see you had... several things, we've already... you mentioned Lindsay Anderson and you mentioned the films that were being... some of the films that were being made then. There was a whole period in these... because the sixties you see, I didn't come back to England 'til 1966, so a lot of it had already happened. But there had been a change in the kind of films that were made. I mean, plays... or films like *A Taste of Honey*, I mean, that was made would not have meant... [whispers] it even featured a homosexual, but don't tell everybody, they might not have noticed! You know, I mean all that kind of...

And of course the other thing was the ending of censorship, you see, because I remember Joan used... we used to write – in some of the later productions – they would write in absolute nonsense, with some rude – or unknowable rude words. And the censor would not know but wouldn't want to show ignorance. And then it would get through the censor you know. Or we would just ignore the censor and play the script, which was usually improvised and you know, people like Brian Murphy or somebody else would say, 'I'm supposed to say this, but my next line is...' kind of thing. [Laughs]

And so it had... and then there were other things like *Oh Calcutta!*, not that it was... you know, and all of that sort of thing was happening. You got suddenly an easy... because I mean when we were... when we left the Comedy Theatre in fifty [six]... whenever it was, the Comedy Theatre became a club theatre so that plays like Tennessee Williams, was it *Summer and Smoke* or... no, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* or...

KH: *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *View from the Bridge*.

BC: Yes, or the one... the other one which was...

KH: Was it *Tea and Sympathy*?

BC: *View from the Bridge*. Arthur Miller's *View from the Bridge* because it had hints of homosexuality... I mean, now you can't get away from it. Everybody's doing it.

KH: There was another thing that I wanted to ask you actually about Stratford East, what was your impression of the audiences who were going? I mean, you've mentioned the impact that the critics had in pulling an audience from outside Stratford East...

BC: Yes, yes the critics had a... Well I'm afraid there's an awful thing that the English do... of turning anything that might have any danger of being radical, or questioning, or demanding, into 'oh they're treasures, all of them'. And I think, to a certain extent, Theatre Workshop became a treasure, and it showed how liberal and how [progressive]... you know they still do all that, they still kid themselves how wonderfully liberal and democratic [they are], and if you asked them the meanings of the words they won't know.

But you see whatever, Oh What a Lovely War, well it can't be timeless because now generations have grown up for who those songs from the First World War don't mean anything. I mean I went and saw... it was done in Warsaw, and I saw a Warsaw production where they translated 'Oh what a lovely...' and in Polish it didn't mean anything, because it didn't have any echoes for a Polish audience. And it wouldn't now for people in their twenties or early thirties, because that period is dead and... well, in fact the day before yesterday dies faster than 1914 to people today I think.

KH: Did you have a favourite production that you worked on whilst you were with Theatre Workshop?

BC: Arden of Faversham certainly. Good Soldier Schweik, The Quare Fellow are the ones that immediately come to mind.

KH: What was it about those productions that made them...?

BC: Oh we got to that moment where – and this sounds crazy what I'm going to say – but you see to me acting is doing nothing but with precision, which you get in to... you... Not that introspective stuff that all hippy method men in American movies. [American accent] 'Honey I've gotta style...' And that means I'm really feeling my character. No, where you can just be yourself and let whatever happens flow out of you and risk it. And if you fall flat on [your face – tough].

I'll never forget learning... I was playing in Sweden, and three of us... It was Arden of Faversham, we were touring Scandinavia. And I had to eat a sausage sitting under the tree. And I just sliced it and ate it, nobody said anything. And it was... I remember seeing a French company of actors doing something just as wonderful. Not Jean Vilar, another French company, where they just sat there and crunched lumps of sugar and watched leaves falling. And it was nothing, and yet it had the magic of reality, and the pain of reality. Don't burst into tears. But that was to me what was exciting, and you could see people being transformed.

You see, because that Barbara Brown, the first night of Paris, they thought they were going to see someone like Maria Casares who was Theatre National Populaire, Jean Vilar, and she was, you know, the great diva of an actress. And Barbara managed something like that. And they came back with 'Où est Barbara Brown?' they were all... and they saw this dumpy little lass in her... virtually in her gym slip you know. I mean that's an exaggeration, but I mean she... But what Joan and Harry and the play had found in her was something electrifying.

And that was what... when you could see people, and everybody in Paris, that first season in Paris, everyone was transformed. Even the poorest of actors was transformed into something, somebody, in a team of people who were all unique and yet totally diverse.

KH: I think that's a good point for us to draw to close, unless you've got anything else that you'd like to add that we've not covered?

BC: I don't know, I've talked a dog's hind leg off haven't I?!

KH: No it's been really good, it's been really...