

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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George and Mona Mason – interview transcript

Interviewer: Rachel Baxter

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Theatregoers: Vic Theatre Stoke from the 1960s to the present.

RB: So, the Victoria Theatre first opened in Hartshill in Stoke-on-Trent in 1962. In the early 60s, how often did you go to the theatre?

MM: Well, it was quite novel, so at first, went just out of curiosity.

RB: Yes, to see what it was like

MM: Because it was a theatre in the round

RB: Yes, yes

MM: Which we'd never seen before

RB: What were your first impressions of the theatre in the round?

MM: Quite unusual

RB: Yes

MM: For one reason they'd got no ...

GM: Props

MM: No props

RB: Right

GM: I couldn't get my head round it at all

RB: Really?

GM: Because it was virtually a box ...

MM: Which was supposed to be a table

GM: Was the whole plot really

RB: Yes, what did you go and see? Can you remember?

GM: The one I saw was The House of Usher, The Fall of the House of Usher

RB: Right, yes

GM: And to be quite honest, I suppose I was bewildered by it.

RB: Yes, they just had a box for the set did they?

GM: And changed it by putting a tablecloth on, or it was, another time it was an armchair or ...

RB: Right

GM: Etc etc you know

RB: So you had to just imagine it all?

GM: It was very difficult. Having come from a lot of cinema watching ...

RB: Yes

GM: It was very difficult to grasp this in the early stages. I must admit I personally didn't go very often. My interest in theatre came several years later.

RB: Later on, yes. So, can you remember any productions that particularly stick in your mind? The Fall of the House of Usher was one, for either positive or negative reasons?

MM: When Peter Cheeseman was doing the directing ...

RB: Yes

MM: He and quite a lot of the actors at that time stayed and lived round about the area of Hartshill. They were quite a lot of unknown actors, of course, because it was quite a new thing. They took a little bit of the problems of Stoke-on-Trent .

RB: Right

MM: At the time, which was, what year?

RB: sort of 60s was it?

MM: Round about 1974, I think it would be. They took on the fight for Shelton Bar

RB: Oh, I've heard about that one

MM: Which was the iron

RB: The ironworks

MM: Yes, the iron and steel. They did quite a good documentary on that and in fact, after that they made, they got a statue made of a man of fire and he was situated outside one of the big stores which was Lewis' at the time

RB: What was happening, was it that the steelworks closing down?

GM: That's right

MM: Closing down and finishing in the area, which was really ...

GM: Oh it was a big blow to the area. The industry was being lost

MM: Cos it was closed down you know

GM: And all the jobs were going

RB: Didn't they, I heard about one, was it The Knotty ...?

MM: That's right, that was about the railway

RB: Right

MM: It was really the life and death of the North Staffs railway, which was called, they called it The Knotty. It was a musical

RB: Oh right

MM: Documentary that was which was

RB: So they took on current problems

MM: They did yes, in the area, and they also did a good musical called 'Zigger Zagger.'
You remember that don't you?

GM: That was a football supporter

RB: Yes

GM: Well known in the Stoke, to Stoke football supporters and he was the leader of a, a cheerleader if you like and it was based on his goings on as a supporter, you know

RB: So it was based on quite local events and that sort of thing?

MM: A lot of it was

GM: Most of the stuff was

MM: A lot of it

GM: Now they did do

MM: They did one

GM: What was the topic?

MM: About the Pottery industry

GM: A Tolsten one they did...what was it called?

MM: The what one?

GM: Tolsten

MM: I don't know that one, I can't think of that one. Bu I know they did one of the Pottery industry.

GM: The Hobbit

RB: Oh right

GM: They did that. I do remember.

MM: Did you go see that one?

GM: No, I didn't. As I say I didn't see many, I didn't really, I wasn't really keen. I was more interested in cinema at the time.

RB: Yes, yes

GM: Since then, of course, you're now more interested in the theatre than the cinema.

RB: Do you think it was quite important then for the local area?

MM: It was, because it was in ...

GM: Certainly was at the time because it had been a cinema

RB: Oh right

MM: The cinema closed down

GM: And then it became derelict and of course it gave new life to the area

RB: Right

GM: So it was a quite a good ...

RB: So it was popular was it? A lot of people went?

GM: Yes exactly and quite a few ...

MM: A lot of people came from out of the area to see it because it was quite novel at the time. I don't know whether there are any more theatres in the round ...

RB: There's one in Scarborough, which was before the Vic but apart from that, I think it was one of the early ones.

GM: Of course, there are quite a few well-known stars now who started at the Vic, namely Robert Powell, who we remember delivering newspapers, don't we?

RB: Really?

GM: For the local newsagents

MM: He was quite young at the time

GM: He'd just started there

MM: Ben Kingsley

GM: Ben Kingsley. He was at the Vic, he started at the Vic

MM: He started there. I went to see quite a few of, what I call the serious ones of the area. Like the one that, they were doing one for the war years of all the women in the area that went at worked at Swynnerton, which was a Munitions Factory.

RB: Oh right

MM: And they did that in almost like a musical type of way and it was exceptionally good.

RB: Right

MM: They brought out the danger of the job that the women were doing cos quite a few did have serious injuries ...

RB: Right

MM: From there. So really the New Vic, the Victoria Theatre I should say

RB: Yes

MM: Started and built up quite a good rapport with the local people ...

RB: Before they went on ...

MM: Before they went on ...

GM: To be the New Vic.

MM: They went on to be the New Vic

GM: They had new premises

MM: They moved up to the Stephen Joseph ... He was the starter of the Vic in Hartshill. Then they went up to Basford. They had this piece of land and it was quite a long time before they could get enough money to even start it.

RB: Right

MM: They were asking for more money form the Council and obviously they were reluctant to give more money because they do get grants from the Council for this. But now, I mean they've gone from strength to strength I should think. Obviously, we've been up to the New Vic as it is now, and seen quite a few of the stars that go there

RB: Yes, quite a lot of big names now, they get there now don't they?

MM: Quite yes

RB: Just going back to the 60s, you had a shop, didn't you, that was close to theatre at the time ...

MM: Yes

RB: Do you have any memories of just the general comings and goings?

MM: Oh yes, yes. In fact, every morning round about 10 o'clock, most of the people who were taking part in the shows, they all gathered there. Peter Cheeseman, there, was the director and these people who we've already mentioned, you know

RB: Yes

MM: They all got there in the foyer and always did the warm up exercises

RB: Right

MM: Actually in the foyer, you could see them at the front, doing the warm up exercises and then another thing that was interesting, in the, when you went to see a show, the lights would go down

RB: Yes

MM: It would go pitch dark and you would hear like very soft footsteps going off and they would just go in the corridor, and you could virtually just, everything was black, but you could see a little bit of movement and it was an outline and the actors were changing, and quickly changing, into something else to come in

RB: Oh right, you could actually almost see them?

MM: Yes and then the light would gradually go up again and that that we've already mentioned which was a box, would be covered with something else, like greenery even to make it look like it was outside and you really had to put your imagination to work, so, which was difficult

RB: Quite different, I suppose from ...

MM: Very different from now, from now when you go to the theatre they have the costumes and obviously ...

GM: Well it made it

MM: But that was because ...

GM: It made you use your imagination and having been used to cinema where everything is on the screen ...

RB: Yes they give you everything definitely. The people who went to the theatre, would you say it was all sorts of classes, was it, like you say it appealed to the local people did everybody go?

GM: Oh yes, I think most people don't you?

MM: A lot, a lot of ... When it first started it was virtually to the area and just the outskirts of the area

RB: Yes

MM: That came and looked. There again, it was a marvellous concept, the theatre in the round, because whichever way the actors were, down on the floor, all the seats went up all the way round and you could see wherever you sat. Which was quite a unique experience.

RB: Did it feel different?

MM: Oh very different, very different. Compared to when we went to the Theatre Royal which was in Hanley

RB: That's a proscenium arch, isn't it? A traditional one?

MM: That is just a traditional theatre

GM: A traditional structure

MM: Which you know, actors came on the stage dressed in the costumes, like they always do, you know. So this was entirely different and a lot of people didn't take to it at first.

RB: Really? I can imagine

MM: It must have been really hard work for such as Peter Cheeseman and everybody who was involved in it...

RB: To get it started

MM: To get it started

RB: That's perhaps why they used the local area to drum up a bit of interest for it.

MM: Possibly possibly

GM: And no doubt why they used local knowledge and local subjects to interest the people in the locality.

RB: Before the Vic, did you go to the theatre a lot before that turned up or were there other theatres you used to go to?

MM: We really, well I, I used to go to the Theatre Royal

RB: What sorts of shows were on there?

MM: Well, they would put really amateur ... after the war years of course the theatres didn't really have that much did they?

GM: Not a lot, no.

MM: I mean the Theatre Royal was empty for quite a few years.

GM: Although the Theatre Royal did have very big stars of course...

MM: At one time

GM: People like, come to mind, Laurel and Hardy for instance

RB: Really?

GM: Were there towards the end of their working lives and ooo all the big stars went to ... went to the Theatre Royal

MM: And of course they did have, we now have The Regent Theatre, but before it used to be The Gaumont Cinema, wasn't it?

GM: It had used to be a cinema

MM: And then they had, it was a theatre as well, wasn't it? Do you remember we saw Morecambe and Wise there?

GM: That's right. It went to a theatre before it was changed traditionally to a theatre. So from the transition from cinema to theatre, I think they gave it a try and then it was derelict for several years and then the ...

MM: Yes yes and now it's reborn again now

GM: And it's reborn again

MM: Now it's The Regent Theatre

GM: Now it's The Regent Theatre

RB: So what sort of things did they put on there was that more like musicals or...?

MM: They do put plays there, but I don't know because I didn't go to that theatre very much. I just went to the Theatre Royal which, more often than not was musicals I think, you know. And they did have plays, of course, but I think, really, and the pantomimes and things like that, you know.

RB: Yes, and did the Victoria Theatre ever do things like that or was that usually just...?

GM: The Victoria Theatre always had pantomimes at Christmas didn't it?

MM: They had a pantomime, yes.

RB: So they did try and integrate ...

MM: Oh yes yes. When it first started, though, it was mainly shows that were... they did quite a few of the, like, like we've said 'The House of Usher'. That must have been very difficult to put on now. In retrospect, looking at it, you think 'gosh how did they do that?' Must have been very difficult, because they hadn't got the money for props.

GM: Terrifically difficult to interest an audience that had never seen it before and with no props, you see.

RB: What was it about that one?

GM: It was ...

RB: It was quite serious drama was it?

GM: It was more of a, what can I say?

MM: 'The Fall of the House of Usher' it was called, wasn't it?

GM: Yes it was ... difficult to put into words, really.

MM: It was a frightening one wasn't it?

GM: Sort of a horror

RB: Oh right

MM: Oh it was a frightening one

GM: Thing really you know. That was probably the attraction!

MM: And it was all dark you know

RB: Yes

GM: Yes it was and I suppose it was ...

MM: A little bit on the scary side

GM: Oh yes yes

RB: Can you remember what audiences were like, did it tend to be full when you went or was it...?

MM: I wouldn't say it was full

RB: No

MM: Not in the beginning

GM: No never ...

MM: Not in the beginning no I think it ...

GM: I think they struggled to ... It really, it was a struggle to make it go.

MM: Yes yes I think they had quite a few hard times. I think they got the schools to go, in some afternoons, you know

RB: Oh right

MM: To let schools see some of the plays. Possibly if they were putting serious plays on

RB: Yes

MM: I can't remember all of those. They possibly put some of the Shakespearean

RB: Yes

MM: Which I possibly was too busy to even contemplate going to.

RB: Yes yes

MM: But then I think when they were putting ones on for the area, which were true, then you really ...

RB: You'd got a lot of interest in those ones?

MM: Yes, yes, you really felt it had got a punch to it you know ...

RB: Yes

MM: It had got a meaning to it you know

RB: Yes

GM: And we remember one of the actors being used in 'The Black Panther' ...

MM: Oh yes

GM: Murder mystery, don't we? In reality, they used him and he sort of took the part of the Black Panther.

RB: And what was that?

MM: That was a murder

GM: That was the murder in Yorkshire wasn't it? The murder.

MM: Yes

RB: Right, it was like a re-enactment was it?

GM: Yes, a re-enactment

MM: And he dressed up as ...

RB: Was that put on at the Vic?

GM: Oh no, that was for the news

MM: That was for the BBC, that was

GM: For the television news

RB: He was taken from ...

GM: He was one of the actors who took the part of the Black Panther.

MM: Like a mock up of him. They were trying to get somebody as near to the description as they'd had of this man.

RB: Yes, oh right

MM: Quite a few people, now, we've seen on television who started at the Vic...

RB: Right

MM: Who we remember starting at the Vic ...

GM: Absolutely

RB: Yes yes

GM: And who are now sort of big stars

MM: Yes yes there's quite a few

GM: As I say, we've named a few

RB: Bob Hoskins, I was reading apparently started there as well, I didn't realise.

MM: Who?

RB: Bob Hoskins

MM: Oh yes

GM: Jones, I can't remember his Christian name.

MM: Gillian Brown. She, she was ... I remember seeing her there and then quite a few years after she took a part in Coronation St.

RB: Oh right

MM: On the television, and straight away, I thought 'ooo she started at the Vic!'

RB: Yes so it's been a starting place for a lot of people.

MM: Yes yes

GM: Oh yes we've seen a lot

MM: Oh yes it's ...

GM: Of people who've come on since then

RB: Because Peter Cheesman was there until quite recently wasn't he? It was 98, he left, I think it was?

GM: Yes obviously he was in charge of the New Vic until ...

MM: Oh yes yes

GM: Well, 5 or 6 years ago

MM: I mean, they went, round about 1982 to the current site in Basford

RB: Right, to the new one

MM: The New Vic you know and of course ...

RB: Did you like it as much up there? Was it a similar set up?

MM: More luxurious up there

GM: Oh yes, it was, it was definitely more luxurious.

MM: Better lighting, as I say, more props, all them sort of things.

RB: When you went in the 60s, was it expensive? Do you remember?

MM: Now then

GM: Not terribly, was it? It would be on a par with the cinema. I can't really remember.

MM: I can't really remember what the prices were then.

GM: No I can't.

RB: You think it was about the same as the cinema though?

GM: I think it was comparable to cinema prices.

RB: Yes

GM: Might have been slightly more.

MM: And of course there was a lot of controversy. They were wanting money from the Council, you see, to keep it going and a lot of people were objecting ...

RB: Oh really?

MM: Oh yes. Because I think with it being this sort of a cinema, a theatre, theatre in the round, a lot of people couldn't quite come to terms with it and they thought it was going to be, like a white elephant, so to speak

RB: Right

MM: You know, cos it was completely different to what people had known.

RB: They didn't think it was going to take off?

GM: Almost high brow really ...

RB: Oh right

GM: To the locality. You know, because obviously it's a working class area and one feels that it was just a little before its time really.

RB: Really?

MM: Yes yes oh yes. I think it was quite a brave venture really to do this.

RB: Can you remember what people thought? Because obviously you had the shop quite near, what did people in the area think right beside it, were they happy to have it?

GM: Oh it settled down. By this time, we're talking about in the 70s aren't we?

MM: In the 70s, yes.

GM: And it had settled now and it was quite acceptable and everybody knew everybody.

MM: Oh yes, they seemed to go ...

RB: And did everyone know the actors?

GM: Oh, all the actors

RB: They fitted in quite well did they?

GM: All the actors mixed in

MM: Locally

GM: But of course they were unknown actors then

RB: Right

GM: Obviously, had these well-known ones now have come back, they'd have no doubt filled the place.

RB: Yes yes you didn't have stars in ...

MM: We didn't have well-known stars. Oh no they were really all unknowns, that started at the Vic.

GM: Oh, none of them were big stars, were they?

MM: I don't really remember any ...

GM: They couldn't afford it, they wouldn't have been able to afford the stars.

RB: No no

GM: This was the starting ground for them, wasn't it?

MM: Yes, yes, very difficult to do without props, though, when you think about it ...

RB: Yes yes definitely

MM: For any play

GM: Well it's difficult for the actors and it's certainly difficult for the audience to get to grips with it.

RB: Especially like you say after you've been used to films

GM: Exactly. Where everything is put in front of you, you don't have to think really. Well, this taxed the brain a bit, you know, the imagination and so forth and of course, I suppose working class people tend to go home, have dinner and go out to be entertained. Not really to think. I suppose it was a bit too much. But they did grow into it and now, of course, it's very popular.

RB: So you think it's won them over?

GM: Oh I'm sure it did eventually. I'm sure it did. Had you got the time to go over again, you would probably patronise it more, but at the time ...

MM: Well it was so new

GM: It was new and it was coming to terms with it, really

RB: Definitely

GM: That made it awkward

RB: And did anybody sort of travel to go to the theatre around that time?

GM: Oh I'm sure people came from outlying ...

MM: From out of the area, yes

GM: Oh yes, I'm sure they did.

MM: Not like now, I mean, I think they probably come from a long way ...

GM: Yes, yes, quite

MM: I think they travel quite a way now, and even coach trips, you know

GM: And they certainly had a lot of school children in the early days.

MM: Yes they used to have coaches with school children.

GM: They used to fill it, used to fill the place with school children.

RB: Right, right

MM: If they were putting any of the, you know, the classics on...

GM: Of course, a lot of Shakespearean plays on, wasn't there?

RB: Yes yes

MM: Them sort, they, the children used to go, you know.

RB: Was it quite a big auditorium then?

GM: No. I would imagine it didn't hold more than ...

MM: I wouldn't like to say ...

GM: Difficult to say, about 100, 150

RB: Right, so not that big really?

GM: I wouldn't think it would hold much more than that, would you?

MM: No, it wasn't very big because when you imagine, it was just really a small cinema.

GM: It was only a small cinema

MM: A little village cinema, really

RB: Right

GM: It wouldn't hold any more than 100

MM: With no upstairs was there?

GM: Oh no oh no

MM: So ..

GM: Oh no, there was no balcony, no

RB: And it was just used for the theatre? Was there any other uses for it? Did it have a bar or anything like that?

GM: No, no it didn't have a bar

MM: Used to have a coffee break, you know, in the interval.

GM: It didn't have a bar

MM: But they didn't have a license for ...

GM: I think most used of them used to use the local pub

MM: Yes, yes, when they'd finished ...

GM: When the show was over or even in the interval, they'd probably go up to the local pub, wouldn't they?

MM: Yes yes but, I mean, I don't know whether they went out in the interval ...

GM: I don't know

MM: Possibly, there was a pub quite close to, so they might have nipped along there, but no, there was no bar.

RB: Right

MM: I seem to remember that you could get a cup of coffee you know or a tea in the interval, but nothing else

RB: Nothing very elaborate

MM: No, no

RB: And did they, would you say that theatre was quite a regular past time around that era or was it quite a special occasion?

GM: Special occasions, really, wasn't it really?

MM: I think, it was quite sort of unusual and it took a little bit ...

GM: Of getting used to really, didn't it?

MM: People to coax them to go, you know. I think that is why they started with all the local problems, you know, I think that's why they put them on, to get the local people to patronise it, you know, and go and see it. So I think that was the reason and then once they got used to it, they got more familiar with the concept of it, then they would go and see the other shows and it was doing quite well and then they decided to change sites, you see.

RB: Right and can you remember what, sort of, would make you go and see a play at the time? Because obviously, you said there wasn't any big stars, so it wasn't like they drew you to the theatre. Did you read reviews?

MM: Yes yes and of course it was a night out.

RB: Yes

MM: You know, something different and you, well with us personally, we didn't have to travel very far.

RB: No

MM: Cos we lived quite close to. So, I mean, that was good. But, I think, from my point of view, it was quite unique to be that close to the actors.

RB: Right

MM: Because I'd always seen people on the stage, and then to be actually, well the front row, you could actually, virtually touch them.

RB: Right

MM: You felt you were almost in the play.

RB: Yes, yes, because you've actually got your feet on the stage, haven't you, on the front row?

MM: Oh yes yes

RB: So you feel quite involved in it

MM: In fact, you used to try and get a little bit further back so as they didn't ...

RB: Laugh

MM: So as you couldn't be seen, but it was quite unique to be that involved with the stars of the show.

GM: There was a lot of audience participation too, wasn't there?

RB: Oh really, did they involve the audience a lot? Can you remember how, in what sort of way they did it?

GM: Well, I think that was one thing that kept us away!

RB: Really?

GM: Well, you know, it's a bit embarrassing when you're not used to the limelight ...

MM: They'd come, like I say, they actually came out of the audience to go onto the, sort of virtually from the sides, you know, they'd sometimes come down the steps, if they'd come from the back

RB: And that's in between the audience

MM: That's in between the audience. So, you know, and they'd sometimes turn to you, and they'd be talking the part of the play obviously,

RB: Yes

MM: But you'd sort of look and be quite sort of 'is he talking to me?' you know ...

RB: Wonder who it is, that must have been quite strange.

MM: Which was very strange, because obviously you don't, you didn't do that when you went to the theatre.

RB: No

MM: You went, and you sat in your seat and you just looked up at the stage.

RB: Did you like that? Did you think that was better than just sitting back and watching it or did you find it quite difficult?

MM: At first, it was a bit nerve wracking because...

GM: It didn't appeal to me!

MM: It was, I suppose, you did feel a bit sort of, a bit worried in case they were going to say anything to you and you knew, because you could see all round the audience and all those eyes were actually looking towards you wherever the actor was ...

RB: Yes, right, wherever the actor was

MM: That's right, so you felt a little bit sort of embarrassed.

RB: Yes

MM: You know, if they were going to say anything to you. Yes, that was a bit awkward, but, as I say, you did gradually get used to that ...

RB: Yes

MM: The more you went, you know.

RB: Did they have regular reviews like they do now?

GM: Oh yes

MM: Oh yes

GM: In the local newspaper, 'The Sentinel'

MM: Yes yes

GM: They reviewed every ...

MM: Oh they always had someone in to pass comment on it, you know

RB: And do you remember, generally was it like a positive or was it just depending on the play?

MM: It would depend on the plays, of course, there was a lot of reviews on the, the local problem, with the iron and steel ...

RB: Did that have any effect on the problem? Did it make any difference to what happened in the end or had it already happened? Had the steelworks closed?

MM: It was when it started wasn't it?

GM: It was closing and it was a sort of a fight against the closing of the steelworks

RB: Right

MM: And they took up the fight

GM: That's right

MM: You see. It was of great interest that was, but no, it still closed.

RB: Anyway, yes

MM: Anyway, and as with, I didn't go and see *The Knotty*, but I believe that was excellent and with retrospect you'd think 'oh I wish I could go back.'

RB: And see it

MM: And see more of them now, but at that time it was quite a new thing anyway and they'd got no props, so you'd got to, really, sort of put your mind to work.

RB: Yes

MM: Sometimes you'd think, I mean, like you for instance, you said, you leaned over to me and said 'what are they doing now?'

GM: 'Where are they now?' you know

MM: 'Where are they now?'

RB: Yes

MM: That was ...

GM: I was having difficulty following where they were, you know

MM: Because really, your scenery and your backdrop and all that, sets the theme of the theatre, of the play, doesn't it? And if there's nothing there and somebody's talking, you start thinking, now 'where are they?'

RB: Yes, 'who is he?'

MM: And until they've got into the scene, you don't really know where you are, you know

RB: No no

MM: Because it is a lot of the visual ...

GM: But when it went, when the Vic finally went, we all missed it, didn't we?

MM: Oh yes

GM: Even though I for one didn't go much, you missed the place because it did fall into dereliction.

MM: Yes

GM: Until the Britannia Building Society bought it out

MM: And it turned into a building society, you see

RB: Right

MM: But, I mean, there was a lot of comings and goings when it was a theatre

GM: That's right

MM: It was a hive of activity, you know

RB: Yes, I can imagine

MM: People coming out and the crowds coming out at the night time and I suppose dispersing to the local pub

RB: I suppose it was good for the area, in that sense

GM: It was good for the area, oh yes

RB: Going back to the pubs and that sort of thing

GM: Of course, the area was totally different too wasn't it?

MM: Yes, oh yes, it had a lot more shops than it had got now. Since the Vic's gone, a lot of things have changed, haven't they?

GM: Well supermarkets came in and shops disappeared and it's not quite what it was, you know?

RB: But that was quite a central place?

MM: That was quite a ...

GM: Oh yes it was, yes

RB: Cos it's quite a small, almost like a village, wasn't it Harsthill?

MM: Oh yes

GM: Oh yes it was

MM: And more or less everybody knew everybody

RB: Yes

MM: You know, so once that had gone and, like he says, the supermarkets came, your small shops closed, so everything changed

RB: And did the actors, like you say they did fit in quite well with society, did they tend to be the same actors for each play? Did they have a company that stayed at the Vic?

GM: Yes they did and then it changed every so often, I think they'd have the company there for several months or even a year or two

MM: Oh yes

GM: And then you'd have new ones coming in

RB: Right

MM: Possibly they'd ...

GM: Possibly because these had been recognised by ...

MM: Spotted

GM: Somebody who knew they'd got something

MM: I do believe that the Vic went abroad into Europe once

RB: Oh really?

MM: And took the cast and did a play ...

GM: Of course, we were amazed by, mainly, Robert Powell

MM: Yes

GM: Because he was in a long running serial, 'Jesus of Nazareth', wasn't it? On the television and of course this made him a mega star didn't it?

MM: Oh yes

GM: So there's no way we'd have seen him at the Vic after that

RB: No

GM: But at the time we could talk to him quite easily didn't couldn't we?

MM: Oh yes I'd be ...

GM: And you often talked to Ben Kingsley, didn't you?

MM: Yes oh yes. With having the shop, first thing in the morning, my first job, I used to go out sweep the front and obviously these people who were in the plays would come past. They'd always speak say 'good morning,' you know, stand and have a chat with you and they'd go across and, as I say, you'd see them doing the warm up in the foyer, you know

RB: What sort of things did they do, can you remember ?

MM: Oh they were like exer ... like you see the

GM: Just like ...

MM: Like you do your exercises now and they'd stand in a circle and they'd be sort of dancing and jumping about and doing all sorts of things, you know, and I'd stand there in, by my shop window, you know, looking across and thinking 'what are they doing?', you know, 'I wonder what they're doing that for?' You don't realise what, what goes into a play. You don't, an ordinary person going to the theatre, never thinks of all, what the people that are on the stage have got to do before they get to that part of being on a stage.

RB: No exactly. Did the actors... were they local, you know, had they lived in Stoke before do you think or were they...?

MM Oh no, I think

GM: No No

MM: They come from, they come from around, oh yes

RB: But they lived in, obviously in Stoke, while they where there

GM: Yes

MM: They used to rent they used to rent rooms or ...

GM: They'd be in lodgings and so forth

RB: Yes

MM: They all lived local

GM: Yes

RB: Yes

MM: In Basford and Hartshill

RB: Right, right

MM: Yes, yes. But it, as I say, it was, they were quite a local theatre and then it expanded now, that it is quite, quite a big theatre now, of course

RB: Yes, definitely. And did they ever move around? Did they ever do any touring productions do you know or was it all... did they tend just to put it on at the Vic?

MM: As I say, I do know, I know one time they went abroad

RB: Right

MM: And took a play abroad. I don't know whether it wasn't that 'Zigger Zagger' actually, but I can't, I wouldn't, you know, don't quote me on that. But I know that, and possibly, they would go to the school and give talks on things about that, you know.

RB: Right. But the actors themselves didn't tend to be, I suppose if they were only new ones, they weren't didn't have high opinions of themselves really?

MM: No no

RB: They all fitted in quite well?

MM: No they were very, very, sort of ...

GM: Very ordinary, weren't they?

MM: Very ordinary, very ordinary people, very ordinary people

GM: They certainly mixed in with the locals and you wouldn't know them from your next door neighbour, virtually, would you?

MM: You were very surprised when you went and you saw them in these different parts, you know, it was ..

GM: And even more surprised when they appeared on television

MM: And then when you see them on television, you know

GM: You do have to remember that television was also in its infancy and that had taken the audiences away from the cinema, so they were having great difficulty attracting an audience away from the television.

MM: A lot of cinemas closed, you see, didn't they?

RB: Yes

GM: Because of television, yes

MM: And theatres were closing as well

GM: It was a very brave effort, really wasn't it on the parts of theatre in the round

MM: Yes its well worth, I think its well worth going to ...

GM: And in an area like this, I think

RB: Yes

MM: It was, they did have quite a job to raise money to keep it going. So, I mean, really all praise to them, really to the stage they're at now, you know

RB: Yes absolutely. And just another question was about Alan Ayckbourn, because he had quite a big influence on them, didn't he? Because he started it off with Stephen Joseph when it first opened, I think

GM: That's right yes, yes Alan Ayckbourn was one of the main contributors to the, to the play wasn't he? We get a lot of his plays

RB: Did you go and see a lot of a lot of his?

GM: Well, as I say, I was never really into the theatre till later on and the Vic was long gone then and, me personally, I didn't really get into it, you know. You certainly saw more of them than I did, didn't you?

MM: Yes yes. But having to try and remember them, obviously ...

RB: It's quite a while ago isn't it?

MM: Its quite a while ago, yes, yes. Obviously, things stick in your mind that you've seen, that I suppose have made an imprint there, you know. With the, what I call, plays that are ongoing, well, you could, you could say you'd seen that. But then, you start thinking, well, 'did I see that there or have I seen that since?' So, I can't really quote on that. But things like the things of the area do stick in your mind, because they did make an impression on you and the actors and actresses really took wonderful parts, you know

RB: Did they, so they must have had to go out and research lots of things?

MM: Oh they would, yes. Because, I mean, the munitions factory at Swynnerton ... I can vividly remember the part in the play where they've got, it was like a, one of these, what do you call them, a belt, a

GM: A conveyor belt

MM: A conveyor belt system with the bombs and they pour the powder in and it would be running along, you know, on this conveyor belt, they'd obviously made this up ...

RB: That was on the stage was it?

MM: This was, yes in the centre, you know, and all the girls, the women, had got the turbans on, like they wore in the, when they worked on the factory and one was holding the shell and another was pouring the powder in and it was going along. Then all of a sudden, in this particular play ...

GM: Wasn't it called 'I don't want to set the world on fire'?

MM: Might have been

GM: I've got a feeling it was

MM: And as it was going along

GM: Which was the name of a song during the war

MM: All of a sudden, you heard one almighty bang, which shocked everybody and one of the women had had this accident. It had exploded and the change in the, you could hear a pin drop, you know, and the way that they put it over you felt quite sort of sad and it made you realise what a lot of work went on and a lot of people didn't even know the accident ... you know, you talk about the war years, when the accidents and the bombs and every thing but nobody really knew how many accidents happened at this particular place, you know at this factory

RB: So its been, its obviously been really good for putting on...

MM: History of the area

RB: History yes, and probably bringing stories to people's attention that they didn't know went on?

MM: Oh yes, yes. And they did that wonderful. I know there wasn't a lot of scenery there, but they got, they got the atmosphere of it and your imagination, you were actually on the factory

RB: Its obviously really stuck in you mind as well

MM: Oh yes. All this time after

GM: Then do you remember they did one of Harry Bailey, who was the newsagent and they did one ...

MM: Frank Bailey

GM: Frank Bailey, I should say. And he was in the war and they did one of, what was it called? 'Hands up, the war's over'

MM: Oh yes, yes

GM: I think that's what it was called, 'Hands up the war's over' and they did a play and that was based on his experience in the war

MM: He had a shop next door to us

RB: Oh right

GM: He'd been captured during the war and they did this, they did the whole play

RB: So they got his life story and wrote it?

GM: I don't know who wrote that do you?

MM: No I don't know who did, who did it

GM: I don't know who wrote it, but it was sort of researched on his experiences

RB: It must have been quite strange for him

GM: Oh yes, I think he was a regular visitor

MM: One of the actors would help him out and take papers and that's probably how he

RB: How he got talking sort of thing

MM: Yes yes. Telling him about his war years, you know, so I mean, those are the sort of things that you felt, was a good, a good theme, to get a place going, you know

RB: Yes and it had a real sort of community spirit, obviously?

MM: Oh yes

GM: That's right

RB: Well, that's been really interesting and I want to thank you for all your ideas and thoughts. It's been brilliant. Thank you very much.

MM: Thank you

GM: I just wish we could remember more