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Perry Pontac – interview transcript

Interviewer: Thomas Dymond

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Playwright. Absurdist drama; acting styles; Samuel Beckett; Alan Bennett; John Dexter; John Gielgud; Peter Hall; Anthony Hopkins; Joan Littlewood; the Old Vic.; the National Theatre; Laurence Olivier; Harold Pinter; Joan Plowright; Shakespeare; Kenneth Tynan; Waiting for Godot; A Woman Killed With Kindness.

TD: OK, this is the 8th October, 2007. I'm Thomas Dymond interviewing Perry Pontac. Can I just ask you [to] start, what were your earliest memories of theatre in this country?

PP: In this country?

TD: In this country.

PP: The first play I ever saw in England, but I think the third play I ever saw in my life, was at the National Theatre. There was the opening production, which was Hamlet, directed by Laurence Olivier, with Peter O'Toole and Michael Redgrave and Rosemary Harris and Derek Jacobi.

TD: That's a very grand way to start isn't it?

PP: Yes, and we were standing. My wife and I were standing because we couldn't afford a seat, until a very kind gentleman – or a very bored gentleman – at the first interval offered us his seats in the centre of [the] fifth row. So that's... that was delightful, and we were very impressed. And the second play was at the same theatre, shortly afterwards, was Uncle Vanya, directed by Olivier again, with him and Michael Redgrave, and Rosemary Harris. I think it confirmed me in my devotion to the theatre. And I don't think I've ever seen anything better since.

TD: What were your opinions on the Hamlet, because that was kind of controversial...

PP: Yes, it was. Inexperienced as I was - this being you know one of the first things I'd ever seen - I was thrilled to be there. I thought that O'Toole didn't do the soliloquies very well, but he did the non-soliloquies well. Like an opera singer who does the recitative but doesn't do the arias. But it was... it seemed wonderfully directed.

Redgrave was very good, Rosemary Harris was very pathetic, we all we went mad over her - and with her. And the sort-of most satisfactory [part], you feel [it's] good enough to come back for Uncle Vanya.

TD: Excellent. What was the set like? I've seen pictures of it, but never...?

PP: It was a... this is '63. It was a staircase that rotated as you watched it. And I believe on the first night it didn't rotate - I wasn't there. So the audience had the treat of Sir Laurence coming out and graciously, absurdly apologising for the malfunctioning. As I say, the occasion was so spectacular for me that I can't recall too many details, except a very favourable response.

TD: And Uncle Vanya then, was that Olivier as Uncle Vanya?

PP: There's Olivier... no there's Olivier as Astrov - Doctor Astrov. It was Michael Redgrave as Vanya, and Joan Plowright as Sonia, and Rosemary Harris as the beautiful woman who comes and messes everything up, and then goes away, which is usual in Chekhov plays. It was... well it was understated acting by Olivier. This is all recorded on some kind of recording; I don't know what they call it - Kinescope or something - which is really a potent reminder of what it was like. With the wonderful set that at one point was sort of like rain, then it became transparent at one point. And you could see outside - although I'm not really to be trusted on this. But we did see it twice.

TD: OK, excellent, so it must have... been impressed on you to go and see it again.

PP: Yes, we did, yes. We stood both times but...

TD: Oh I didn't realise you stand then.

PP: You could stand for £10 I think.

TD: Excellent, is that at the Old Vic?

PP: At the Old Vic in the stalls.

TD: Oh wow...!

PP: Yes, yes, yes, you could - so we - that's how we saw everything, except when people... kind gentlemen offer us their expensive seats. But otherwise we stood and didn't mind at all.

TD: That's amazing, that you could stand then and not... did they have set seats anyway and people standing in the aisles or...?

PP: We were just standing in the aisles. I think that the fire regulations weren't so strict in those days. And also it felt... you know we were like 'Les Enfants du Paradis', you know we were... it was rather bohemian to stand there, watch something like that. I wouldn't do it now - I couldn't do it now.

TD: No, they wouldn't expect you to do it now, would they?

PP: No, no, no. Now, it's the centre of the stalls or nothing!

TD: Yes, exactly. So what were your... you came from America.

PP: Yes, came from California. And when I was young I was really quite anti-theatre, because I was born in Hollywood, and so it was the home product that I was pushing. And I thought 'logically theatre can't be as good [as] movies, because they have all the resources. And actors don't make mistakes, they can shoot them where the scenes really take place'. But I went to a Shakespeare festival in the South, in San Diego, at what was called the Globe Theatre, which by the way burned down afterwards. Which was very authentic - so did the other Globe. And saw Romeo and Juliet, and fell in love with Juliet, and particularly with what she said. And Henry IV, Part One. And I decided I'd be a playwright in that moment.

TD: Excellent.

PP: And I decided I greatly preferred the theatre. And all the disdain I had had for the theatre, now I presently have for the movies.

TD: How do you – hang on – why do you think you kind of changed your mind about it? Is it because just seeing something live, or...?

PP: I don't know what it was. I remember I felt there was a kind of delicate tension between on-stage and the audience. The fact that we reacted to each other. I really don't know, because I'm not a very reasonable person. And I don't have that many conversions in life, but that was one of them. And I was just deeply moved, and impressed, and you know, one can't argue with that. I mean, common sense is usually wrong, isn't it?

TD: Yes.

PP: So I mean, it's like poetry and prose. Poetry would seem to be much more limited than prose, because you've got that metre and you've got to rhyme your... but of course that's why it's better.

TD: So you saw some things at the National, and we'll come back to that a bit later perhaps. Were there any other kind of theatres you frequented in that period, or were you quite loyal to the National?

PP: Yes, loyal to the National. I think we went to a couple of plays. I think we went to the Criterion - they did an adaptation of Iris Murdoch play, which didn't impress me. But I can't remember which it was, I think Paul Eddington was in it. But no, that was it. We did some music as well. But we went to see a play - I think a [George] Farquhar play - at the National, with Olivier and someone called Maggie Smith, whom I'd never heard of. And Olivier had the flu, so we didn't... we got out of the queue instead and went to the Festival Hall and saw the 'Messiah', because we weren't to know.

TD: So you missed The Recruiting Officer, an amazing...

PP: We missed The Recruiting Officer, that's what we did, yes. I caught up with Maggie Smith later when the National toured to Los Angeles and she did The Three Sisters and The Beaux' Stratagem.

TD: Oh, which theatre was this at?

PP: Which theatre was it? I really don't know. The Mark Taper Forum I think it's called. But it was truly... there were... these were both... one was an Olivier production, that is to say the Chekhov, The Three Sisters, and the other was William Gaskill. And I was most impressed; I thought she'd go a long way, Maggie Smith.

TD: And she has done, definitely.

PP: Yes.

TD: So what was the production like? Was that another...?

PP: It... well, the Gaskill was I think the best directed comedy I've ever seen. And it's a good play too, strangely good play. If not quite The Importance of Being Earnest! And The Three Sisters, I don't remember what it looked like. I mean, for me the theatre is wonderful lines wonderfully spoken, I'm afraid. So the visuals sometimes pass me by. But Robert Stephens was... well Robert Stephens and Maggie Smith starred in both of them. And it, you know, it made me cry sufficiently. Olivier wasn't in it - he hadn't travelled with [them]. I think Derek Jacobi was in it as well.

TD: OK. Oh excellent. So your theatregoing kind of period, was that from '63 onwards at the National?

PP: Well, if we're limited it to '68...

TD: You don't have to limit to '68, we can go a bit further than that.

PP: Oh well I'm...

TD: I'm happy to stretch.

PP: I'm still going.

TD: Excellent.

PP: Yes I... years later – well not years later, 1970, [I] came back – and I reconnected with Kenneth Tynan, and which I'll... if you want we can talk about.

TD: Yes.

PP: And I saw almost everything that was at the Old Vic at that time, because that was the final few years of the Old Vic.

TD: So how did you become... how did you get to know Kenneth Tynan?

PP: Well, we had left California and come to England... well, to Europe. I had decided you know... and I brought a play I had written, since I'd now decided I was a playwright. And to get it put on, you know while we were here. And we came to London first, and I decided I'd just drop off the play with somebody and come back confident that, you know, the production would be set up by that time.

And so I had read John Gielgud's introduction to *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which is my favourite comedy. And so I went to see him. And he was... I couldn't afford to see the play, which I think was *The Ides of March* at the Haymarket. And he came out [the stage door] dressed like an English gentleman. And I was about to approach him when another American person – I think a fellow from Texas – did and he said, [Texan accent] 'Sir Gielgud, sure liked your play.' They chatted for a while and then he went away, and then I came round and said, 'Sir John, I have a play...' I thought... So I gave it to him. And he was very polite. And then we came back from the continent, there was indeed a letter from him, at the American Express, which was our address. But he didn't say he was going to be doing my 20 minute play at the West End. He said he found it very amusing, but not commercial. Now I was enraged. And I said, 'Well that's what I think of his performances – amusing but not commercial.' And I crumpled the paper

[letter] and threw it down on Regent Street. Then went back and picked it up, of course. But of course that was extremely polite – an extremely polite rejection.

I had already sent it to Peter Ustinov, he was very nice about it as well, and taken it down to the Joan Littlewood's. Of course they hated my play, because it's just all sort of literate comedy, you know, sort of not surprising. And well, time was running out in this country. So there was an interview with Kenneth Tynan in the Guardian, a rather unfavourable one by Terry Coleman, a rather nasty one. My wife said, 'Well, you should get an agent. Why don't you go down and see this Tynan fellow, and he can advise you.'. So I went down to see him – we're being in the same play – and of course I couldn't see him, but I left it [a script] with his secretary. And that... about a week later I got a letter from Kenneth Tynan which said, 'Dear Mr Pontac, I have read your play. I don't think it's stage-able in its present form but I have no doubt at all about your talent. If you come down and see me we will discuss your future.'. I thought, 'Oh that's good, well about time too.' [Laughs]

So I went down and he was very funny and amusing, and rather brilliantly dressed, and said that they had an opening for a short play that John Osborne was going to adapt [from] Lope de Vega's *A Bond Honoured*. And they wanted something to contrast with a piece so gloomy and bloody, they wanted something light and delightful and literate. And that could well be my play. So I thought, 'Well, that's fine.' And he said, 'Also, I've submitted your name and you can be one of the Royal Court playwrights.'. And I said, 'Well unfortunately I'm leaving in two weeks.' He said, 'Oh that's too bad.' He said, 'Well keep in touch.' And so we left.

And we went... we were in America for six years. I did keep in touch. While I was gone, the play which – as my wife reminded me – is called *The Other Side of the Mountain*, because I had forgotten – was offered to Maggie Smith and Albert Finney, who declined it. Instead they did *Black Comedy* by Peter Shaffer – a wise choice I think, although it seemed disappointing at the time. So I stayed behind in California, submitting plays to Ken, one of which was in part a satire on Samuel Beckett. And Ken said that he agreed with my sentiments, but that that would look reactionary, to make fun of Samuel Beckett, and he wasn't going to do that. Six years later I came back with – this is now 1970, so it's beyond sort of our period of study – and linked up with Ken again.

I had finished another play, and he was enthusiastic and said the National was going to do it. And it was about an old man [who] was the main character, and he said Alec Guinness would be perfect, but my play was sacrilegious, so Alec Guinness wouldn't do it. He said, 'Well what about W.H. Auden?' I said, well, I didn't want an amateur in my plays. So he didn't do it either. And the National was about to do it when I'm afraid Olivier was suddenly fired by the management, and Peter Hall took over. And Ken said that that was it, because Peter Hall had no sense of humour. In fact... I thought this was a really memorable remark, he said that 'Peter Hall is always smiling just in case someone's made a joke'.

[Laughter]

TD: That's very astute.

PP: So that was it. So Ken did produce the play, [*The Old Man's Comforts*] at a small theatre – he and Michael White. And that actually was the... although I saw him a few times, was the termination of our professional connection.

TD: Yes. It's interesting, he's an interesting character, because I suppose he went from being a critic to being the other side of the artistic divide, which must have been quite a kind of... almost like a dream come true, but also he must have had many kind-of drawbacks as well.

PP: I guess so. He was such a clever critic; he was such a clever man. He said so many funny things. He gave me advice about my first play - which was a comedy as always - and he said that there was three rules for comedy. What were they? One was [that] the lighter the idea the stronger the plot has to be. That the play should always have a sympathetic character - my plays didn't have. My characters always had characters sort of modelled on me - the ideal me you know, brilliantly witty. And that doesn't always appeal to audiences! So from then on I had to... you know will always have the odd pathetic character. And the third was there must be something stupid in it, he said, because there's this stupid element in the audience and you've got to appeal to it. It doesn't mean it has to be purely stupid in that it'll be shunned by people who aren't like that. But something that everyone can appreciate, I'm sure that's what he meant by that. So I've taken that to heart.

TD: Interesting. I want to ask you a bit about what it was like to go to the National then. Kind of who was going to the National Theatre at that point, who you remember in the audience?

PP: Well it was... I think it was a slightly younger crowd than now. And people did talk about it a lot, just as they say. I mean Ken did tell me, it was remarkable, that... he said '[at the National] we have the advantageous position that if we have a really not very good play and it's very successful we'll take it off. If we have a good play that's not successful we'll keep it running'. I don't think they adhere to that now. He also said that one of the features of a repertory system like theirs is that every part in a play could be miscast. And sometimes that happens, yes.

The Vic, I don't know, did seem to be buzzing a bit more, and you did read about it much more in the papers, as film wasn't quite what it is today. And it [film] wasn't regarded as highly - although Ken liked film and did film reviewing for, I think The Observer. But I thought they [the National]... it seemed bracing. I think the productions were consistently better than any productions I've ever seen. I mean, I did say to someone at the time, 'Do you think this is a golden age?' And they said, 'Don't say that.'! But I think it was, a bit. And that is to say from '63 when I think it began, when we first went - at which time I had no idea I'd be connected in any way - to well, I think actually the departure of Olivier. The standard was very high and the acting was wonderful. It was sort of the equivalent of the... I mean, the British Library, you know? It was a revered institution - [like] the British Museum too. With quality following quality. Marvellous directors, amazing casts. I mean, there were some people of course Olivier didn't want, like Guinness, to whom he never offered anything very good. And Gielgud to whom he offered something that was uncomfortable. But I think I've never known atmosphere like that.

TD: What other productions did you see around that time, because you saw...?

PP: Now if we're doing... back in '63?

TD: Well yes, around then.

PP: Yes, I think those were they.

TD: OK.

PP: Yes, I can't remember any others. There were plenty when we came back.

TD: Well jumping forward to the seventies then, when it was Peter Hall...

PP: Oh my gosh.

TD: ...did you keep up in...?

PP: Well Peter Hall wasn't in charge immediately at that point. I saw everything that was on. What was on? A not very good Macbeth - Tony Hopkins was Macbeth.

TD: Oh right... how interesting.

PP: Ken didn't have high regard for Tony Hopkins' verse speaking. And he is indeed the worst Shakespearean actor that these islands have ever produced – wonderful though he is in other things, and especially in movies. But I remember I was asked to sit-in on a production... well I wasn't asked, it was honour, but Ken said, 'Do you want to sit on a production that John Dexter's doing of A Woman Killed with Kindness?' – which starred the unknown-to-me Tony Hopkins, who had... who had just made his first movie. It hadn't been released yet, but he had been spotted of course. Joan Plowright, Derek Jacobi, Tom Baker, Ben Whitrow, it was a very good cast. John Dexter directing, whom I didn't find particularly sinister by the way, though I know others did.

And then at one point I was asked by Ken and John Dexter if I would write a diary of it for Plays and Players magazine, which I did. And I was there every day, and watched that grow. It's a play I always had thought was sort of funny [foolish], and I'd written a parody of it when I was much younger, because I found it so laughable. But it was interesting seeing it becoming dignified before my very eyes.

And every day Olivier would come in with Joan Plowright, having driven from Brighton in their taxi. And Olivier would do, when the others were doing sort of training, he would do a song and dance for us from The Entertainer.

TD: Oh excellent!

PP: And I kept wanting to meet him, and kept hinting. And John Dexter said, you know, 'Someday, someday.' So it was curious, because in 1970 Olivier had mistaken me, when I was coming out of Ken's office, for an actor who looked a little like me but just much taller, and he said, 'Good morning.' And I said, 'Good morning sir.' and I was very thrilled. I thought, 'This isn't a proper introduction really.' So the last day of the rehearsals for *A Woman Killed with Kindness* Olivier was there. And we were all leaving, and [almost] the last person to leave was Olivier, and I said, 'Pardon me Sir Laurence, but as we're meeting every day I think it's inevitable that you'll never talk to me.' and I put out my hand, I told him who I was and he turned and walked [silently] away. That was our second and last meeting.

TD: OK.

PP: So I was in the canteen at the Old Vic. I told John Dexter what had happened, and John Dexter said, 'Gave you the old fish eye did he?' [Laughs] So he said, 'Well', he said, 'He and Joan had argued all the way from Brighton.' so it was a bad day to approach [him].

TD: It's really interesting you saw a production pretty much from page to stage.

PP: I saw every... yes I saw the read-through in which Olivier had taken... did the part that Tony Hopkins eventually did, wonderfully, wonderfully, and [he had] this most powerful scene. And I kept expecting Tony Hopkins to do it like that. And one day I was walking from the Vic and there was Tony Hopkins, and I said... I asked him, you know, 'Where's a good place to stay in Wales?', because my wife and I were thinking of having a holiday.' He said, 'Oh come to breakfast with me.' So we went to breakfast and I said, 'Why is it you're not doing that great speech in a [more] sort of dramatic [way]... are you saving yourself?' He said, 'What great speech?' And I said, 'I think that's really a powerful speech.' He said, 'Oh well right, I'll remember that.' And the opening night reviews said that he hadn't done that speech very powerfully, and blamed John Dexter. It really wasn't John Dexter, it was Hopkins [who] hadn't seen it. I mean, he was very sweet to me over breakfast, so I don't mean to be bad-mouthing him...

I did see it all the way, I saw every... I was the... I think I was... I think some of the actors missed some of the rehearsals, but I was there for everything. And it was very interesting. I sort of incorporated a bit of it into a play I was writing as well. Yes, and it was a very good production, couldn't have been better. And Dexter only humiliated one person, and I thought [he] rather deserved it.

TD: Did he have a reputation as being quite aggressive?

PP: He had a reputation of being... yes, yes, very hard on people. But there was a young actor called Dai Bradley – not to be confused with David Bradley – who had been the lead in Ken Loach's *Kes*. He was the boy, and he had [been] plucked from that. And he was really quite good in this. But there was an actor named, I... oh I can remember his name, but I won't, I guess, who sort of... there was supposed to be a little tussle and he

really banged him [the boy] about. And John Dexter said, 'Well just because he's stealing every scene that you two are in, there's no reason to push him about.' And it was true. Other than that, Dexter was fine - he was sweet to me and to all.

TD: So did you see – perhaps you did, perhaps you didn't – like that whole kind-of creating in the background and everything as well, or was that sort of done separately?

PP: The...you mean well costumes and stage...

TD: Yes.

PP: The staging was separate. The costumes were very important. Everybody was extremely concerned about that. There was a lot of music, there was a lot of furniture recreated from the collection in the V&A. And... though mainly it was the strange evolution of the play and of the characterisation. He [Dexter] had them at one point play it like Chekhov, and he had [them] at one point play it like farce. And sometimes the play seemed to improve. I remember Derek Jacobi particularly was... oh Derek Jacobi drew tears with the Chekhov, you know, as he did when I saw him in *Three Sisters* a few years before.

So that... I don't know why, I don't know if this is common, I've never heard of this before, but I think there was a six-week rehearsal period in those days. So... of course actors sometimes, when they get it right, once they've got it right then the next time they'll do it differently you know, because we've already done it the right way... So... but this was a... at the beginning John Dexter had said how he wanted it, and then how he wanted it done. Then we [they] did it all these different ways, which didn't seem to follow the play, but at the end we [they] had reached what he had announced at the beginning was his ambition. So yes, it was the most interesting series of rehearsals I've ever seen – and the longest. And you know, having Olivier tap-dancing in the middle was, you know, a pleasant distraction too!

TD: With Hopkins, because he's obviously now more renowned as a movie star, was it his delivery in the theatre or was that what was lacking or...?

PP: He was... well he was a magnetic actor. I saw him in a Spanish play with Jim Dale. I can't remember... oh yes the somebody and the Emperor of Assyria. I can't remember if it was... Ken said to me, 'You won't like this, it's too modern for you.' And I didn't like it. He said, 'There actually a forklift truck in it.' [Laughs] 'If you know what that is.' And I said, 'Well yes actually, I worked a place where people used forklift trucks.' - *The Architect and the Emperor of Assyria!* I can't remember the author, directed by a Spaniard - And I know Tony Hopkins didn't enjoy it, didn't enjoy the experience, although he was very good in it. I mean, he was magnetic because he had those eyes you know, and you did watch him. And he always touched... he touched every other actor on the stage. I think he still does that in movies, but he touched you when he was eating breakfast too. I mean, he was just in contact all the time. And there was nothing wrong with him because he was a wonderful, you know stage actor. I think it's just that Shakespeare's not his thing. And I think he's said as much too. But I think he didn't have

to say as much if you saw him in *Macbeth*, in which Diana Rigg was Lady Macbeth. And one of the witches was Maureen Lipman.

TD: Oh wow, excellent.

PP: Who's my oldest friend in England, because of the National Theatre connection, because she was with them at that time.

TD: Oh was she... I didn't realise she was with the National Theatre.

PP: She was with the National Theatre, this was in '72 I think. They did a reading of a play of mine that Ken directed at the National, with a wonderful cast. And I've known Maureen ever since. David Ryall and Ben Whitrow and Harry Lomax who was a wonderful old man. We couldn't get W.H. Auden, you see! And yes, she was a witch, yes.

TD: And she's a fantastic actress, isn't she?

PP: Yes, she is, she is fantastic and very sweet as well.

TD: Our university I think has just bought her husband's archive – Jack Rosenthal's archive I, think, recently.

PP: Oh yes?

TD: Because we have... our head of department is... I think he's very interested in him academically I suppose.

PP: Yes, well he's from the North as well.

TD: Yes, yes.

PP: Yes, I knew Jack very well.

TD: And he's a fabulous writer as well.

PP: Yes, yes, fabulous.

TD: OK, I just want to take you back to a couple of other things. You mentioned Beckett earlier; I was wondering what your opinions were on Beckett?

PP: Well, I mean I've... when I was in college, a magazine called Theatre Arts, which in America's where they used to publish the new plays – we would all rush to get it – had *Waiting for Godot* in it. And the pages were in the wrong order and nobody noticed. I mean I found out later the pages... which is a little like an abstract painting being hung upside down, which is exactly like it. Anyhow, so I didn't like it that way either. And I've never liked Beckett... And years later, after my play had been on, I got a job - and this is in London of course, at a school - teaching English as a foreign language to German businessmen, which wasn't as much fun as it sounds. And we would... I would teach them sort of grammar and conversation and things like that. This was near Sloane Square. And then we would go have lunch, which I would linger over as long as possible. And then we'd go to some place of interest, the British Museum, something like that, or Harrods, or whatever. And then come back and finish on adverbs.

And it was the late seventies – I think around '78, but I'm not sure. I know the date, it was the 23rd April – Shakespeare's birthday – because I had this little rule for myself, a pleasant rule, that always on Shakespeare's birthday I would take the student to the British Library, at the British Museum – the Manuscript Saloon – and I would look at Shakespeare's signature. Just something I always did. And... and which I just did [here in the British Library] by the way, because I thought we might talk about this. And this student, [was a] perfectly nice man, but he had been to the British Museum and he wanted to go to the Victoria and Albert instead.

So first we went to lunch at the Antelope. This was a pub in Belgravia, near Belgrave Square, I think. Near the school too. Not far from the Royal Court. And we were just sitting down, I was about to have my Cumberland sausage and mash – and eat it as slowly as possible – when Samuel Beckett came in. And I thought, 'Oh, Royal Court, you know down the street. And I told my student, because I was in rather a bad mood, I said, 'Samuel Beckett just came in.' And he said, 'Who's that?' And I said, 'Nobel Prize-winning playwright.' He said, 'Oh he must be very great.' I said, 'No he's not very great actually, he's not good... very good at all.' And I remembered years before there was a famous poet who had died, at quite an advanced stage. And I thought how sad he had died and nobody had you know told him they didn't like his stuff. So I said, 'And I'm going to tell him.' And I got up and I went over. And it was definitely Beckett; he was drinking Guinness, a pint of Guinness, with that hair. And I said, 'Pardon me Mr Beckett.' And he said, 'Yes.' And I said, 'I've been following your career for a number of years, and think it only fair to tell you how bad I think your plays are.' And he said, 'Oh.' [Laughs] He looked up with a sort of faint smile. And I said, 'In fact I've decided, because of your having been offered it, I'm not going to accept the Nobel Prize. Unless of course it comes within the next few months, because I could use the money.' And he said, 'Oh, you write too?' I said, 'Yes, plays.' He said, 'Ever have any produced?' And I thought, 'He's like a playground bully.' I ever have any produced? I said, 'Well yes I had one produced a few years ago. Produced by Kenneth Tynan.' And he said, 'Kenneth Tynan,' as though there was some kind of conspiracy. And I said, 'Yes' I said, 'it really wasn't very good. It wasn't a very good production.' He said, 'Well is there anything you like?!' I said, 'Well yes, I like wit, I like clarity, I like characterisation, I like poetry, I like plotting. I like all those characteristics of the great man whose birthday I'm celebrating today by telling you how awful your plays are.'

And then we chatted a little while longer. And then I left him and went back to my now cold Cumberland sausage and mash, and my student. And then we left to go to the

V&A. We passed the Royal Court, and there was a big picture of Samuel Beckett on the front. The student said, 'It's the man! It's the man!' I said, 'Yes, yes.' And we went to the V&A, and there was a little collection called 'Portraits of Beckett'. 'It's the man! It's the man!'

TD: Oh excellent.

PP: So I went home that evening and I mentioned to my wife. She approved of what I'd done, but she said, 'Do you think that's going to make any impression at all on this world-wide universally adored and honoured man?'. But I didn't know. But the next day in the Guardian there was an article on Beckett, and it said, among other things, he was having this festival stuff at the Royal Court, but he was rather a hermit [recluse]. And who can blame him, because during World War II he was shot at by a sniper, during the occupation of Paris. And only the other day a young unknown-to-him man approached him in a pub in Belgravia, and said, 'Mr Beckett, I have been following your career for a number of years, and I think it'd be fair to tell you how awful I think your plays are.'

TD: Poor Samuel Beckett.

PP: So that was our... that was our last... we never met again.

TD: Was it... it just... was it his... the absurdity of the plays or...

PP: I just don't like them. Well I mean, it's hard to say they're pretentious, because then you have to say whether [what] they're pretending, and I don't think they're pretending anything too much. I really blame... well, if I blame anybody I always feel I should blame critics for accepting and honouring it, rather than the person who does it. But I do think he was a very bad influence. Fortunately not... pretty bad, but not as pervasive as it might have been. I know there's a play [by him] in which there's a certain amount of seconds that somebody sits on stage and then walks off. And that's really a little hard for me to take seriously.

TD: Yes.

PP: And I think he certainly had an influence on Pinter, whom I don't admire either – although he did send me a nice letter years ago.

TD: Did he?

PP: And I thought, 'Well, I must have been all wrong [about him],' which is pretty nice. You know he said [something pretty nice about me] to my agent, and I thought, 'Well I'm wrong. Clearly I'm going to have to re-read these plays.'. But I [still] didn't like them too much. And it just doesn't... just doesn't please. It's sort of an... with Beckett it's that

he just seems to be... Even if one liked him, he just seems a bit overrated. But I read something which said that he was the greatest literary... the greatest cultural figure since Dante. I don't know, it seemed a strong to... So no, well, I'm not an admirer, but he didn't suffer [a lot] from that.

TD: It's interesting that the National kind of at first was quite wary of the kind of slightly absurdist-type plays, but then began to embrace them later I suppose didn't they? Because they did do some Pinter didn't they?

PP: Oh yes, later they did. Well I know Ken had a kind of argument with Ionesco about... I guess it was about Rhinoceros or... and which he...

TD: That was the Royal Court.

PP: Ken thought it was a bit of dead end, and thought it was rather rightwing. And I know he famously said... talked about the privileged despair. I think that was about Beckett. And he was a good friend of Pinter, because their politics agreed. I mean my politics agree with Pinter, and I admire his politics and his courage and all of that, but it's just... it just the plays I don't like. And I don't think under... when Ken was the literary manager that there was very much absurd stuff going on. Although I maybe wrong.

TD: No I don't think so. I think there was mostly... avoided that I think.

PP: Yes, I mean, Peter Hall you know embraced Beckett from the beginning. And has never stopped you know, reminding us of that. But I think... it wouldn't be natural Olivier territory either.

TD: No, sure.

PP: I mean there was one... there was a wonderful production of Pinter by Peter Hall, No Man's Land with, you know, Gielgud and Richardson. I mean, I still think... I don't think it's any good as a play, and I know Ken thought it was only because they were such wonderful actors. And of course, that was the fun of it, you do get wonderful actors who can all sorts of things with the material. But yes, I would rather have seen them do something good you know, but I did enjoy it. I saw it twice.

TD: Which playwrights on the contemporary scene did you kind of admire in the seventies and perhaps late sixties?

PP: Well I didn't... I mean I think John Osborne was a useful thing. I think it did break up you know, the Binkie Beaumont business. Although I wasn't around for the Binkie Beaumont business very much.

TD: Sure.

PP: Peter Nichols at the National, who taught me that plays don't have to read well to play well, which was a great shock to me. I couldn't imagine that being true. And so I did like his stuff. And I do like Alan Bennett's stuff a lot. I think... probably the only modern playwright who's influenced me, and I do know him a bit because he wrote in about a radio play I wrote. And I think Alan Ayckbourn's good, and his plays – as I told him once – that you know, that I thought they didn't read well, but they really played well. And Brian Friel's a wonderful writer at the moment. And you know, plenty of people in the last century, you know Sean O'Casey and wonderful writers, all sorts. I didn't much like the absurdists, and I think N.F. Simpson was funny, but otherwise I didn't much go for that. It seemed... it just doesn't appeal at all. And I can't understand what there is to it.

TD: Jumping forward, are you still regularly attending the National?

PP: Yes, what did... yes we are. What have we got tickets for? Well we... well the RSC actually, we did do... go to Stratford. The first we've been there since 1963. The first time I'd ever seen a play there, just to see the... well this was an old play however, it was King Lear with Ian McKellen, which reduced me to such tears and I was so overwhelmed that I'm not seeing it again. I don't know whether it's coming back, but I am seeing the RSC's Seagull.

TD: Oh excellent, he's playing Dorn I think.

PP: I don't think he'll be playing it in this one...

TD: Oh is he not?

PP: ... because he's doing Lear in the evening or in the afternoon, or something like that.

TD: Might be slightly tired!

PP: Yes, I think he might be a little tired. But it's a very good performance. I think it's probably although the best Lear I've seen.

TD: So you said you went to Stratford in '63.

PP: Yes, but I didn't see anything.

TD: Oh OK.

PP: I only saw the grave and the river and all of that. No I didn't. And I've never been in the Memorial Theatre, and I guess never will be.

TD: So you must have been at the Courtyard Theatre was that, for the...

PP: Yes, that was the Courtyard.

TD: What did you think of that theatre?

PP: Well if you got... had very good seats it was fine. And we were sort of seven rows back. I know that there were... had been some complaints. I mean nothing's more satisfying than having a good seat and seeing people in bad seats [Laughs] in the far distance.

TD: Yes, that's true.

PP: Oh good, you feel sort of buttressed. But it was fine, didn't miss a thing. You know, and you know, all the perspiration was there to be seen. And you know, as I say, a really terrific production. A couple of actors weren't as good as they might have been...

TD: What did you think of the... I haven't seen, I'm hopefully seeing it... I think I've got tickets for it...

PP: Yes, I really suggest you do, because it's pretty withering.

TD: Oh excellent.

PP: Especially when... sort of as soon as he... as soon as Lear says he hopes that his daughter's organs of increase will wither. That... you begin to wither at that point. And she withers. And then you're gone after that.

TD: I was just wondering, because you seem to talk so eloquently about Shakespeare, about which other productions you've seen of Shakespeare, which you have admired or thought were problematic perhaps or... there must have been many?

PP: Well I... I think... what is his name? Marvellous director that works a lot with Simon Russell Beale whom I greatly admire – who was in one of my... I wrote a parody of Shakespeare for the radio called Hamlet Part II. And Simon Russell Beale played the

clown. [laughs] Pathetically enough, but he was fine. I wanted an actor like him, and I didn't think I'd get him. Anyhow I really do admire the stuff he is in, and I think when he's directed by Sam Mendes that he's particularly terrific. But he's always good in Shakespeare. And speaks it wonderfully, and acts it wonderfully.

There are really just too many Shakespeare productions. I think the... the one was 19... in [the] early seventies, the Jonathan Miller production of *The Merchant of Venice* with Olivier, and Joan Plowright and Derek Jacobi in it, was wonderful. Sort of pro-Semitic I felt it was, and you know, rightly so. And you know, quite withering. And a great... oh I saw *The Tempest* that Peter Hall did very early on in his reign, in which John Gielgud was sort of acting separately from everybody else, but he did deliver the speeches very nicely, although it was a bit gimmicky.

TD: Yes. You seem to have seen quite a few things of Joan Plowright, I was wondering if you have...

PP: Well she was... of course she was... not only was she married to the governor, she was really... she was very good, and I think that was her golden period. And she could make you cry very easily, and make herself cry very easily, which helped. Yes, well, she was in a lot of the stuff in those days. And I did have a talk with her. She never spoke to me during the rehearsals of that play, just because she didn't know who I was. And then John Dexter gave me a little hug, in his way, after I had published the diary of the rehearsals. And so then it was OK to talk to me in the canteen, and so she did. And [we] talked about *The Merchant of Venice* and why they picked it. And they almost weren't going to do it, but... because it was so hard on the Jews, and then there was the Six Day War, and the Jews were triumphant – the Israelis were triumphant. They figured 'well, they could do a kind of jokey production, especially if the director was Jewish' – Jonathan Miller. And yes, I think she was in a sort of golden period at that point. And then that... she's going into movies, but I think she's particularly a stage actress, so very strong, and moving yes. I was an admirer, and am an admirer.

TD: You mentioned briefly earlier Joan Littlewood, I was wondering how aware you were of other theatres around the time of the early sixties when you were in London, and back in the seventies. And how... if you were aware of them and how they were influential or non-influential.

PP: Well I mean, they weren't influential on me. And when the RSC came to town I was... you know, I was, you know, aware. And this was with Peter Hall at the time. And I know that Ken Tynan said it was like the civil war, that the National were the Cavaliers, and the Roundheads were the RSC. And both of them were needed. Although politically obviously, he would side with the Roundheads, but aesthetically he was with the King's men. But no, I'm not much with the others. No, we just regularly went to the National. We loved the Old Vic. And then when we came back of course we just resumed our relationship with the National.

TD: What's your opinion of the new – well I say the new, it's quite old now – the National building, and the change it must have gone through from the company being at the Old Vic through to the kind of brutalist National Theatre building.

PP: Yes, well I... I mean I was opposed of course. But there was always the plan to build it, and Ken was in favour. And the originals... there's a photo of him at the original site. I think they changed the site.

TD: Yes.

PP: But laying the first brick or something like that. And I believe... and there's another picture of him in mourning because they hadn't built it. But he took his cue sort of from Shaw who was all for it wrote an essay on it, or a tract of some sort. You know the theatre is necessary, organise it. This was for National Theatre, and Ken took that forward. So he was all for it opening there.

Of course it never felt the same, but it has housed some terrific things. And the Old... I preferred a kind of proscenium stage, and so did Ken. He was against the open stage. He thought that was absolutely necessary in Ancient Greece, and also they had sunshine. And also there was no top [roof], but he felt the appeal of the proscenium stage, and I sort of do too. But although I've come around, I like the studio theatres, because I think they're very good. I love being that close to seeing you know, great acting from a few feet away. So I... that... the little theatre is it...?

TD: Is that the Cottesloe?

PP: The Cottesloe yes, yes. And the... I don't think the... I object to the fact it's [the theatre's] called the Lyttleton, because Oliver Lyttleton was nothing but trouble. And I remember Richard Eyre said, 'Well, they should change their name to the Tynan.' I remember there was a little celebration of Ken and... but they never did, never will. And they were also going to drop the Royal from the name, and I don't know if they've done that yet.

TD: I'm not sure, there's very big letters NT everywhere isn't there.

PP: Yes, well there was a theory that they put the Royal on because of the Alan's play about the... well one of which had the Queen in it, and Prunella Scales. And lest they caused offence, they made up for it by adding the Royal. I don't if that's true.

TD: I wonder what that play was called, the Alan Bennett one.

PP: It was called the Question of Attribution...

TD: That was it, yes.

PP: There were two, and one was called... see the first was... oh no the whole evening... The whole evening was called... Question of Attribution was the short one. It's a title from Shakespeare but I can't remember...

TD: Yes, I can't remember it either.

PP: Yes.

TD: I just remember I've heard about that production and there was sort of meant to be a wonderful moment of the corgis come on first, and the Queen...

PP: Yes, it was a wonderful production [Single Spies], it really was. And it transferred to I think the Queen's Theatre, appropriately, on the Strand. And I asked Alan Bennett if I could meet him afterwards, and he said, 'Well somebody... somebody I'm very nervous of is coming afterwards.' And I thought 'oh, a member of royalty'. And he said, 'I can't... I haven't got good enough coordination to juggle two people.' So I came beforehand and he gave me tea, it was very good, and laughed in his sort of interesting silent way. It was very sweet. And then went to the performance and there was Alec Guinness, only laughed once the whole evening. And this was the man that apparently he was meeting later.

TD: Oh wow!

PP: Yes, it was a wonderful play.

TD: I just want to ask you quite a...probably perhaps too big a question...

PP: Please.

TD: ...because you're obviously from America, I was wondering if what were kind of – and from the West Coast as well – I was wondering what kind of the main differences were you saw in acting there on the stage and acting here.

PP: Well I greatly prefer British acting to American acting. It's hard for me to see that the Americans are acting sometimes. It's not so much the stage, although it's that as well, but even on television you can see the reflection of this. I could name 15 English actors seem to me great or nearly great artists, who are very concerned with the words they say and the characters they're playing. And American actors are much more concerned with making a good impression, looking good. The British actors don't mind, you know, being despised. I didn't really like Richard III which we sort of admire... but... which reminds me of an anecdote, which I'll tell you in a second. But I don't admire American acting. I think also American playwrights probably tend toward appealing to that kind of non-acting. It's all about looking in a sort of bland appealing way. And with no great

emphasis on the precise lines. And there's somebody told me that they were acting with a well known elderly English actress at Chichester in... I think it was School for Scandal or something. And she... sort of she forgot a lot of her lines, and then when she came off she said to my friend, 'Well I think the audience got the general idea.'! And I think that's what American actors want - you to get the general idea. But you know, there's no kind of precision. To me it's awful like... English actors are like string quartets you know, playing together and trying out different possibilities, and being all sensitive [to nuances]. What was I going to tell you about there?

TD: Hang on... I can't remember what we were doing. We were doing about American acting...

PP: I said I'd return to that. Can we hear it?

TD: We can do if I pause it...

TD: OK we're off again.

PP: No, I remember. Years ago I went to see Ken Tynan in his office, and he wasn't there. And he came a little late. And he said, 'I've just been with Sir Laurence and we're planning a tribute to the Old Vic, with many stars in it. And Sir Laurence said to me... he said, '[Dame] Sybil Thorndike will be there, and the old bitch will probably come on her crutches.' And he said, 'I'll kiss her goddamn hand.'" And then Ken paused and he said, 'And you wonder why he was such a good Richard III.' That's all.

TD: Just to finish up, are there any more anecdotes you want to share, and to put on to record at all, which you can think of?

PP: If you could push the magic button I'll see.

TD: Well if there's anything else you want to come back to or anything, what I can do is we'll send you a transcript and you can always add to it.