

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Auston Cole – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Dominic Shellard**

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Theatre-goer. Frank Adie; Tommy Cooper; Cecily Courtneidge; Noel Coward; G.H. Elliot; Roy Hudd; Jack and Claude Hulbert; London Coliseum; Murray and Mooney; music hall; new writing; Ivor Novello; Beryl Reid; Sheffield theatres; theatre seating; variety; Waiting for Godot; West End.

DS: Well, welcome to the British Library Austin, and thank you very much indeed for agreeing to be interviewed for the AHRC British Library Theatre Archive Project.

AC: Thank you.

DS: Could I just ask you first of all whether you're happy for the interview to be deposited in the British Library Sound Archive.

AC: I'm totally happy with that.

DS: Thank you very much indeed. And perhaps we can start by discussing how you first became interested in the theatre.

AC: That's quite simple Dominic, and I'm glad you asked me that as a kick-off, because before the war my parents took me to London, to the theatre. And also we had two theatres in Cambridge. I was born in a village not far from Cambridge, and that was our weekend visiting town – now it's a city. And I realised that anywhere I went, if I could get in theatre – that's what as I thought of as I worked so hard, no matter all stages of my life – I found that when I'd finished that, the thought was 'where can I get into the theatre?'.

DS: Wonderful.

AC: Now, as a consequence of that, little wonder then when the war came and I was recruited into a particular service of the Royal Navy. I was sent to London to the Admiralty frequently. I was the youngest in this particular service. And of course the first thing I made for were the West End, London theatres. Whether it be ballet, some opera, or big musicals and some plays. But during the war we were all ready for being cheered

up along the way, so it was mostly a musical I could catch in the West End. And whilst bombing was going on I wasn't going to leave that show unless the stage manager walked out and ordered the cast off stage, and the audience in the shelters.

So it was time and time again, all the places I went, there was one thing at the back of my mind, right away along the line, 'where's the nearest theatre I can get into'. So I hope that explains a really true, deep love of the theatre. It sat on my mind. Work first – I was always a hard worker – and then 'where's the nearest theatre?'.

And so that brings us to the end of the war – in my case 1946 – when I was fortunate enough to get a place in the Honours School of Architecture, at the University of Sheffield. On the first night I was landed in some university digs, and the chap that was going to share them with me arrived a bit later in the day. And the first thing I said to him, after saying hello, 'Do you like the theatre?'. He said, 'Yes.' I said, 'Well we'll go to the Palace Attercliffe tonight if you like.'. And that we did. So it was the first day, arrived in Sheffield, and then lo and behold I quickly got into Crewe Hall [of residence], and I was allowed to stay there nearly the whole of my time at Sheffield.

DS: Sorry, which hall, can you say that again?

AC: Crewe Hall.

DS: Crewe Hall.

AC: Yes. And I quickly found out by going down the town, in the city centre - on the lovely black and yellow trams that were a wonderful ride in those days. I miss them, so I was so glad that the trams have come back now, but that's another story - But down the town I went to seek out where the theatres were. And lo and behold there was the Stoll Moss Empire Theatre, Sheffield, unfortunately now pulled down.

It was 6.15 and 8.45, [in those days] and the artists that were coming there, week after week, not the same ones... were on the Stoll Moss circuit – theatre circuit. And they went from city to town, to town, to city, a different theatre each week. And so I saw all those artists that really were – some of them – known through radio where their act was possible to be an act over radio [could be understood] – sound alone therefore. And [nearly] all the artists that you could read about or find out about, or just hear about, they were passed through the Empire Theatre, Sheffield [and The Lyceum].

And there it was, every Wednesday, three or four or five of us would go to the Empire Theatre, Sheffield. I got to know the manager who stood out the front in white tie and tails, but not the top hat. And mostly I hadn't got tickets, and he would pass me to the doorman, who I would tip, and then he'd get... I think he'd got an arrangement with the box office, because we got lovely seats every week.

And some of the artists I saw there went on [working] for quite a time. And, well, I saw so many, that if some of them broke away from the Stoll Moss theatre circuit run in the summer to go to a seaside show, such as Scarborough, I'd seen so many of them after two or three years at Sheffield and going to the Empire, and the Lyceum, every week, that I could look at the bill on say a big show at Scarborough, and tell you if the show was any good, because I knew probably a third of artists who were in that bill. [Laughs]

But now Dominic, I think probably it might be interesting for anyone that would be listening in later times from your archive, to tell you about one or two of the artists.

DS: Please do.

AC: Now, a man that stands out in my memory is [Mooney of] Murray and Mooney – well it was a two man act. And they were getting on a bit, you know, they were about 50 or 60. And when we turned up one particular week at the Empire Theatre, Sheffield, we went to the 8.45 house. There was a man standing in the auditorium stalls, on the right hand side as you face the stage, up near the orchestra pit rail. He was talking to people as we all went in to take our seats. And he had twill trousers, a nice jacket and cap. And then as usual the first act came on and this man was still standing there. But I thought he was waiting to get into his seat after everyone else had got in, and of course his seat may have been, in my thoughts, at the end of the row, next the side aisle. But he stood there still, because all the seats were full. And the first act came on, which usually at the Empire Theatre, Sheffield, was a dancing act – two girls or a fellow and a girl etc, or two chaps. Terrific opening numbers they always had there. And then the next act came on, and it was Murray of Murray and Mooney.

DS: Whose catchphrase according to the program here is 'even their relations think they're funny'.

AC: That is so. [A saying about the act]. And this is what [happened]... I suddenly then found out why he'd been standing there. Murray, his partner, came on the stage and said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to now to recite a monologue for you.' And he started spluttering away with this thing, I forget what it was now. It could have been something, 'Oh green and yellow eyed monster in the [inaudible] of Amsterdam' or something. And Mooney called out, 'Here, I've bought a goat.' And Murray said, 'Do you mind?' he said, 'I'm trying to get on with a monologue for the ladies and gentlemen. What on earth would you do with a goat?' he said. 'Would you mind not...?' And at this Mooney started climbing up the small little steps at the side of the stage, and as he moved on Murray called out again, 'Do you mind not interrupting, I'm trying to get through with this monologue for the ladies and gentlemen.'. And Mooney said, 'I've just told you I've bought a goat.' And Murray said, 'You've what... what on earth are you going to do with it? You can't take it back to our theatrical digs.' He said, 'Yes I can.' Mooney said, 'I can sneak it in the back way.' And Murray said, 'Well you'll never get away with it.' He said, 'I will.' And he said, 'Well what if you got it in, where are you going to put it?' And Mooney said, 'Oh that's simple, we'll put it under the bed.' And Murray said, 'What about the smell?' And Mooney said, 'He won't mind that!'.

[Laughter]

AC: Now that was Mooney. Now the most interesting thing about Mooney was in 2005, that will still stick in [my mind], Dominic, was what was happening within your 1945 year and '68... 1968. But it so happens that at one of the clubs I belong to, which is the National Liberal Club in London, they had a lunch and talk from a theatre historian from

the British Music Hall Society in 2005. We had lunch first, and he was going to talk to us about the Hackney Empire. And he brought out various flyers, and before we got in a coach and go and have a look at the Hackney Empire, which Griff Rhys Jones had instigated in the way of a refurbishment, and then other people took it on. And we did finally get in the coach, to go over there. But he was... his name was Max Tyler, and this theatre historian from the British Music Hall Society. [He talked about artists who had appeared at the Hackney Empire]. And he started handing around flyers which were the bills of some of the big shows that had happened at the Hackney Empire. And he brought out one with Murray and Mooney on the bill. And I looked at it, turned it over, into the second page, as you can see it right here now Dominic, there. And I said, 'I've seen that guy twice.' He said, 'You can't have done, you're not old enough to have seen that chap. He's been dead for years.' I said, 'I've seen him twice at the Sheffield Empire, with his partner Murray.' He said, 'Well would you believe it?' He said, 'Well they appeared at the Hackney Empire.' And I thought that was a nice link back, Dominic...

DS: Nice link yes.

AC: ...because this man couldn't believe I was that age.

DS: Can I ask you, this sounds to me to a classic music hall act, and the project is discovering that people have mixed views about music hall dying out in the 1950s.

AC: Yes.

DS: What did you feel about the music hall suddenly becoming much less popular towards the end of the fifties? Is it something that you miss?

AC: Yes, because during the war I did get into the Players Theatre, it's not the one that was newly rebuilt when they rebuilt Charing Cross rail station. The old Players Theatre in Villiers Street, which butts up against the Strand, as you well know, was down nearer the Embankment tube station. And in there – in that theatre – I went sometimes during the wartime, and just after the war, and they still had a lot of these really old-time artists that were still going round the music hall circuit, as against the variety theatre circuit. And there were others places in midland towns where they could still go. As a for instance, I was told that Sheffield had 32 music halls - in the districts of Sheffield. And some of them were still going after the war; some of them were half cinema and half variety. They'd switched to that.

So yes, I am sad Dominic. To answer your question that a lot of that died out, because these fellows [artists] that were going on, both [variety and] the music hall circuit which you... as you rightly say was dying out. Why that started to die out, which a lot of us regret it, and it seemed to [represent] an era that was passing. And when you love a subject like the theatre as I do, you notice it. Probably other people didn't notice the slow transition and slide into what came to be total variety acts. Then as we know all that started to go away, and big musicals replaced that in a lot of the theatres throughout the UK. So, yes I do regret that passing, but variety quickly took up so much of my interest.

DS: Did you ever go in Sheffield – sticking with your period in Sheffield for the moment – did you ever go to weekly repertory theatre at the Lyceum? Did you go and see any straight plays?

AC: Yes, I did. I've been to see those, but I cannot recall the names, because they are names that never... except some of the top names, like I can recall Gielgud as a young man and Sir Ralph Richardson, and Athene Saylor, and James Hayter, and Naunton Wayne. All those were classical actors. And they would sometimes come to the Lyceum and I'd go and see them.

Also Ivor Novello shows came there. And my late wife's mother, she was at the Royal College of Music with Ivor Novello's second singer, next to Olive Gilbert. Olive Gilbert being Ivor Novello's first lady singer. The next lady was Mai Ramsey, that is Mai being Welsh. And that was my late wife's mother's friend who was with her at the Royal College of Music. Also at the Royal College of Music - there were three of them - was the wife of Sir Oswald Stoll. Sir Oswald... not Sir Oswald Stoll, I beg your pardon Dominic. Sir Oswald Stoll's musical director, Herbert Griffiths. And he was the musical director for the whole of the Stoll theatres, running right up into Scotland. So there were these three ladies, only one of which had a family, because Auntie Gwen, Herbert Griffiths's wife, she married Herbert but they didn't have children. She carried on her singing, he did the main conducting, and there were a lot of big musicals at the Coliseum.

A lot of people don't realise the London Coliseum was for big musicals just before the war. And Lupino Lane appeared there in *Me and My Girl*. And I must tell you something about that, because this fascinated me. She was known to me as Auntie Gwen, and when these three ladies who were now 80 got together, I would set them going... of course. My late wife's mother was married to a man who was [keen on theatre]... he was one of the top men of the Sun Alliance in London, and he was theatre mad. So he took them along to the theatre. And there'd be Herbert Griffiths, my late wife's mother's friend, husband, Herbert conducting, and Auntie Mai may have been with this party or not, or she may have been in the theatre that week doing an Ivor Novello show, or on tour. Auntie Mai sometimes did come with a travelling Ivor Novello show to the Lyceum. And my late wife Mair who was at Sheffield with me as a medic, she would go down to see her.

But here's the interesting thing about that business of Lupino Lane and *Me and My Girl*. [about 1973] to set them going one night when there were these ladies together. So that was Herbert Griffiths' – the musical director for Sir Oswald Stoll – wife, Auntie Gwen. Auntie Mai who was with Ivor Novello, and my late wife's mother, but she wasn't in theatre, she had this family you see. To set it going I said 'I've just been to see a show at the Adelphi Auntie Gwen'. And I knew perfectly well there was show called *Me and My Girl* in the thirties, at the Coliseum, being conducted by Herbert Griffiths, her late husband – musical director to Sir Oswald Stoll. She said, 'Yes there was.' She said, 'And Uncle Herbert conducted it.' And she said, 'While I was there...' It was Arnold, that was my wife's father's name. 'And he took us in a big party, and we sat right in the front. There was Herbert, was right in front, conducting. And Lupino Lane was the lead. And all the Australian cricket team came to the theatre to be introduced one way and then the other, to each other – of the stars, and then the stars to the cricketers. And I hadn't got a piece of paper to ask these cricketers to give me their autograph. But I'd got this black...' - and she pulled her drawer open did Auntie Gwen - 'I'd got this black evening lame purse with this plain gold interior.' And there Dominic,

right in the middle was Don Bradman, the famous cricketer's autograph, and all the other team. And I've never known what's happened to it, because... their adopted son came over from Canada [to] conduct the funeral. And I did say to him once 'That ought to go to [the Lords Cricket Ground] museum'. But I thought that was a wonderful story.

DS: What a nice story.

AC: Conducted and run from the theatre.

DS: Now, let's move on now to the next phase that you want to talk about, which is after Sheffield. And how you suddenly became... you were doing a profession that meant that you went to so many theatres throughout the country.

AC: Yes, well Dominic... yes you're quite right, the next phase ran me into... Having graduated from University of Sheffield, I had developed my practice whilst I was a student in the Long Vacation, so there was my practice ready-made [upon qualification]. And I was quickly commissioned by a lot of companies, because they... they all found out that I did not get involved with the corruption in the world of building, which is common knowledge. I would have nothing to do with it. So a lot of these companies would commission me, hopefully for a bit of my professional ability as well as 'being clean' from that side of it. And a lot of the work was literally all over the country. Even as far as Newcastle. So in later years there I was, up at Newcastle, and the council had just taken over the Grand – that grand building, very much like the Coliseum here in London where there are columns [that] stand out on the pavement on a podium. And they'd [newly] painted it inside, the decoration was grey and silver, and it was very, very elegant. And Joan Plowright was there with her family in a play.

DS: Can you remember what year this was approximately?

AC: No I can't remember. Now that's a [pity]... Dominic, I'm sorry about that. And I can't remember what the play was called. But now that's an example you see, I think you were actually after '68, I'm not sure. And Sir Laurence Olivier... had passed away by then, so yes I think it could have been after '68. I'm sorry about that.

By then I'd passed through Manchester, and Coventry. And one week I was doing some work up there, and some building in that area, and I used to stay nearby in a very nice hotel. And I'd quickly got hold of reception upon revival and say, 'Where's your nearest theatre?'. They said, 'Well, it's Coventry.' And they said 'Tommy Cooper's on this week.' So I went to the Coventry Hippodrome. Now, we all know what Tommy does. And he was an absolute hoot. Now one of the acts I remember he did, he had himself raised up on the stage and a simple little bit of scenery, only about three or four feet high, and about ten feet long and it was painted grey. And in the middle was a gothic-shaped door. And he sat behind it and started moving his arms and hands as if he was playing the organ, which music was supplied from the pit, from one of the keyboard players. And then he pushed this grave – [like door] it looked just like a grave in a graveyard with some lettering on it – and he pushed this grave... apparently gravestone away and said... came to the front of the stage and he said, 'I've got some grave news for you.'

[Laughter]

But the most interesting thing about that theatre evening, [the bar ladies] because you know how ladies in these bars like to quickly associate themselves with the stars who come and drink at the bar, who are on at their theatre that week. Well now I booked for the second house. And I went up early. And this... I'd got a circle seat, and I was about three quarters of an hour too soon. Deliberately so I could have a look at the theatre, because I knew it had been refurbished. And this [circle bar] area was beautifully done in red velvet with a long seat at the back of the bar. And so I was sat on that and faced the bar. And there were two ladies in there, real lovers of the theatre. And they wanted me to know that they were now friends of Tommy Cooper. So they started up... there was no-one else in that bar, because the first house was still on. It was again of course the 6.15 house still at that time 6.45 and 8.45. And the first house was still going. And they started up, 'Oh yes, Tommy's...[a nice man]' 'Oh' I said, 'does he come in?' Well I knew perfectly well that he liked the bar. 'Oh yes he comes in a lot doesn't he Lil?' And Lil called back and said, 'Oh yes May, he's one of the nicest men we have here, and he talks to us all you know.' And I said, 'Oh how nice.' And then she said, 'Oh there's Tommy number. The first house will be out soon Lil.' 'Oh yes I thought... yes I think so May. Yes, I thought it was about time.' And Dominic this was all for my hearing, to let me know...[they were now real friends of Tommy Cooper].

DS: They were friends.

AC: ...that they'd got a close association with Tommy – a star for that week. And that sort of thing, I think it adds colour to just my going to the theatre. And I hadn't even seen the show then. So that was one little item.

But then of course there were other theatres I got to in Cardiff. Now I can't remember much about that, because Mair and I, we usually went to a big... there were orchestral concerts there. So there's no sort of what I call real theatre colour of interest there for me to speak of, Dominic.

DS: One of the things that we've obviously discussed a lot with people that we're interviewing is the change of theatrical taste in the mid-fifties, with the introduction of social realism. Plays by John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, plays by people like Brendan Behan and Theatre Workshop. And I wondered if that was a noticeable shift in your theatre going in the fifties, or whether you preferred to carry on going to the music hall or the West End.

AC: Well Dominic, that's simple to answer, because, yes the moment they came out there was such dramatic reports in the newspapers, say about John Osborne's plays, and Brendan Behan's. And so I went to see them. And I went to see a lot of plays. Now I particularly liked [to see new work] so... I went to see *Waiting for Godot* – Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* – at the Arts Theatre at Cambridge. And I was with a party of four, and when we came out at the interval I said, 'I'm not going back in there' I said, 'he's making such a knot out of life, I don't think I could stand to wait to see how he unravels it.'. Well as we all know *Domestic Godot* is still not unravelled.

Now then... so you see I went to a lot of these plays, though my favourites were Noel Coward and Oscar Wilde, because they were... they had what Ken Dodd would call, in

their truism – in their story about life. They could come up with a... what Ken Dodd would call a 'shaft of wit'. And it was funny as well as about life. Then you get other plays that are really about a serious life, and try to... what I call 'message plays' – plays with a message about life. Now, as time went on Dominic, I must tell you I got sick to death of seeing those, because I'd had life and mine was hard, working 'til 1am and 2am in the morning for about 30 years. I loved the work, but it was hard. So in the end I decided I didn't want to see that, except lest it be Oscar Wilde or Noel Coward. So that's my answer to your question there. I did just go to a lot of them when they first came out, but I don't go and see any new play which I suspect from reading the critics' words in the London papers, that is a message play – a story about life.

But let me tell you something about... funny about Noel Coward. You've heard of Beryl Reid of course. Now she did a lot of things. She was in funny programmes, funny plays, all aspects of the theatre she seemed to touch. And working. Well now, all of a sudden she was given a part in a Noel Coward play. And Dominic, I have to tell you outright I've got a good recollection but some of the things I can't remember. There's so many miles of information I have, I can't remember it all. I can't remember the play she was in. I think it was at Leeds. And she was so pleased to get this part, because it was a fairly different thing for her. And when the show was over, there was a tap on her dressing room door, when the first evening... the opening night was over. There was a tap on the door, and she said, 'Come in.' and it was Noel Coward. 'Oh' she said, 'Mr Coward, I didn't know you were in the theatre.' 'Oh' he said, 'I had to come and see how you got on Beryl. And you did splendidly.' he said. 'Oh' she said, 'but I was so nervous Mr Coward.' - Dominic, I should say here that she was telling this on a chat show on TV, about 1970 or 80. But she'd been in the play before that, so I think it was in the bounds of 1968... up to '68. Anyway she said, 'But I was so nervous Mr Coward.' 'Oh' he said, 'you did splendidly.' He said, 'For the nerves' he said, 'eat plenty of carrots' he said, 'they're good for the nerves.' He said, 'Besides which it will make hair grow on your chest.' She said, 'But I'm a girl Mr Howard.' 'Oh' he said, 'Beryl, you give up so easily!'

[Laughter]

DS: That's wonderful. Now you've got some other memories and recollections that you wanted to share with us.

AC: Yes. Could I mention another man that always struck me as remarkable, because... and his name was G.H. Elliot and he was... he went under the name of 'The Chocolate Coloured Coon'. Now he 'browned up', not blacked up. He had a white suit and a white trilby hat, quite light. And he was thin, he looked gaunt, he had this brown make-up on, and he sang always Lily of Laguna. And it went, as you probably know, [sings] She's my lady love. My... That one. And what happened was this... he was so light, he'd dance like a [wisp]... as if he weighed no more than a feather. And he really feathered himself [across the stage] when part of the song was reprised by the orchestra, and he didn't sing that part, he broke into this kind of feathery dancing, using quite a bit of lateral space. And his legs would go out to the right, and then to the left, and then he'd come back. Then he'd join in [sing] again to finish the number.

Now what fascinated me about him, not only was it the same act – I saw him I don't know how many times – but there was all this story about his brown make-up. And he kept his dressing room door locked when he was making-up, because it was a secret as [to] why he wasn't blacked up [browned]. Everyone knew how to do that [black up];



you could buy the stuff in a tin. It ruined a lot of actresses' skin you know. But brown, where did it come from, how does he do it. So his dressing room was locked, so he kept it a secret. Well one night he was at the Empire Theatre, Sheffield, and I got hold of this manager afterwards that was still wandering about the theatre in his white tie and tails. I said, 'Now look, what's this big secret about G.H. Elliot locking his dressing room to get that brown on his face?' He said, 'Well don't tell anybody else' he said, 'he just lights a candle, holds a cork over it, and when it's cool he rubs it on his face.' [Laughs] And then there's... just a moment Dominic there's...

DS: That's fine, take your time.

AC: Now, you will have heard of Jack and Claude Hulbert. Now they were at Cambridge in 1921, Dominic. And they took... both took a Masters Degree. And when he played the Arts Theatre at Cambridge [post World War II]. He was... Jack was married to Cicely Courtneidge. And now Cicely really felt that she had married something special, because he was a Cambridge Masters Degree man. So Cicely kind of ruled the roost a little bit over other actresses who weren't... who in those days certainly most of them hadn't been to stage school. [Also] whenever he came to Cambridge [I understood] he used to like to walk round the collegiate area and he'd go and see if any of them [his tutors] were alive, his old tutors at one of the colleges. [He loved walking around the collegiate precincts of Cambridge in the mornings]. So I thought I'd just mention that.

His brother Claude, he [was playing] a barrister in one of Will Hay's black and white films you know, and Will Hay made an idiot of him, because he said Will Hay had been had up in court for writing begging letters. And Claude Hulbert as the barrister said... 'But' he said, 'you're 55 and you've been telling everybody in your letters you're an orphan.' He said, 'That's right, my parents died 25 years ago.' [Laughs] And Will Hay made it absolutely...

Claude always used to come in [on stage] from the back of the stage. But his wife [Ann] used to come out first, and she said, 'I wonder where Claude is?' And Claude would whisk in from the back of the stage and say, 'Here I am darling. Here I am.' And that was Claude... that was Jack and Claude Hulbert. Just a little bit of colour there only, but nothing particular about the shows or plays they were in.

But there was something else I wanted to tell you about Noel Coward. But let me think of... look at one or two little names I've got written here Dominic. The... Oh yes, just after the war there was a... still ongoing, a wonderful [little] theatre, I used to stay at a little place I had at Holland-on-sea, about three miles up the road from Clacton-on-sea. And no amusements were allowed up at Holland-on-sea, but you just went along the front, two or three miles, you came to Clacton pier. And it had allsorts of things on it including a lovely ballroom, and a scenic railway, two theatres – one was banned for use because it was unsafe – but the Ocean Theatre was still going. And in the season there, Frank Adie - the producer who I knew, because he lived [near] where I'd got an apartment there... and it [also was] our childhood coast, being born at Cambridge, and I was now practicing at Cambridge. And this is all in the time period '45 to '68. This would be about 1960 I should think. And Frank Adie, I'd ring him up and say, 'Frank I'm bringing a party down and they're staying with me, could I have six good seats?'. And along there we would go and find that Dick Emery was on for the week.

DS: Oh, Dick Emery.

AC: Yes, because he could get back to London quickly if he had to do some TV work. And also I think he was probably glad to get away from London a bit where his life was crowded out with TV work and theatre and everything, and radio and allsorts of things. And it gave him a bit of a breather. And that was a wonderful show.

But one or two people that started there was Billy Dainty. Now I understand that Roy Hudd appeared there for a week... for the season I should say, the season, not a week. This was a season show. When he was a young man, Roy Hudd. Frank Adie used to come up to London – the producer – and sort out... pick someone that was up and coming. And then he'd give them the season, and they'd often finish up as stars. Those names, dead, that I've just listed off. And they were very good shows.

But here's the most interesting thing, Dominic, about that theatre, the Kingsman family owned it, and it was finally sold to the people that owned Walton pier, and they turned it into a pinball place. But that's another story. But Mr Kingsman allowed Frank a lot of leeway – Frank Adie, the producer. And the orchestra, 36 in that orchestra, in a seaside pier pavilion theatre. And I said to Frank, 'Where did you put them?' He said, 'Well...' I said, 'You've only got a small orchestra pit.' He said, 'They went under the stage.' I said, 'Well they couldn't breathe under there.' He said, 'That's right.' He said, 'You see how I can do that is, on the money allowed for producing a show, is that a lot of the people that work locally would do anything to get in that show. And if they can play an instrument they would come for a £1 a week', and still that money just after the war, and play in that orchestra.

DS: Wow!

AC: Yes. That was quite remarkable to me to hear.

DS: Amazing, yes.

AC: But that was nice to see those artists in later life go right to the top. And...

DS: Can we just sort of concentrate for the last part of the interview on how you actually went to the theatre – where you liked to sit and... It would be nice to get a sense from straight after the war how you bought the tickets, and where you decided to sit in the theatre.

AC: Very interesting question and I can answer it Dominic, because I... my luck has always been if I sat in the wrong seat I got the biggest man in Northern Europe – not just the UK – in front of me. Six foot six, bull neck, and your [my] head was going from side to side to see round him to see the show. So I began to get very particular about seat choosing early in my theatre going life.

Now, at the Ocean Theatre, Clacton, I knew all the seats there. And Frank Adie knew which seats I liked. So I used to ring him in good time so he could get me those seats. Now come to London, while I was still in practice at Cambridge, I would bring big parties from Cambridge – 12 and 14, including my parents and some of their friends. And then

I'd ring up Sheffield...old Sheffield students who were still friends, because there were about 40 of us [who] stayed friends. And those who are alive – [well] we're still all friends. They'd come down and... from Sheffield or wherever they were living, and join me, by arrangement of course, and for this purpose I had... what they issued in those days, every London theatre would give you a little seating plan on a piece of paper which they'd printed off. So I could ring from my office at Cambridge and – in good time of course – and pick out the seats so we got a good view. So that's how I did that.

Now I find this... since you asked... you made a point about preference for seats in fact. I found that if you sat on the side... if there was three blocks of seats, two longitudinal aisles, sometimes there's a lateral wide one as well. If you sat in the side, right hand block, you can turn your head more easily to the left than you can to the right. Now if you got [seats] on the aisle of the side block against the aisle, and about five to six rows back, you could look across the width of the aisle – so there was no [blockage of view] there at all – and even this party of say of six, I'd have three in front and three behind me, they were looking at an angle across, between the heads, because their shot, their vision line, was between the heads in front, at an angle.

DS: This is where your expertise as an architect came in isn't it? Angles.

AC: Yes, whereas if you sat in the middle of the stalls, the person's head, ten to one... not in all theatres, they did stagger [seats] then sometimes, but they didn't like doing that because it made a ragged edge to the aisle. So you were moving your head from left to right all evening long looking round the guys head and neck in front of you. But if you sat at the side, even though sitting in from the aisle, their view line was at angle, and it went [saw] between the heads in front of them. So that's how I chose seats. And I was able to do this because I had these [seating] plans of all those London theatres.

And I must tell you one thing that I'm still astounded at, but I think I'm going to go this week, because I met this lady only about a five years ago, in a theatre foyer... I can't remember her name but she used to appear with Dick Emery. And she's now in Bad Girls and she's been on TV. And we had a little chat there while she was waiting for a friend. She is in the show at the Garrick. And do you know Dominic, that's the one London theatre I haven't been in yet. But I think I'll go later...