

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Margaret Jackman – interview transcript

Interviewer: Alec Patton

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Actress and theatre worker. Against the Wind; The Dancing Years; Bernard Gallagher; The Glass Menagerie; Victor Graham; Harry Hanson; lighting; Love on the Never Never; People's Theatre, Newcastle; props; realist plays; Renaissance Theatre Company; Muriel Rowan; Donald Sartain; scenery painting; Shoebox Theatre; sound; special effects (stage maroons); stage furniture loans; stage management; wardrobe.

AP: Great, so if you can just say your name for the record.

MJ: I will - it's usually name and agent! – Margaret Jackman.

AP: And your age too then, if that...

MJ: Yes, I was born in 1937, and I began in the theatre in September, 1957.

AP: Wonderful. And then finally, this is the... you know the interview will go up on the website for transcript, and that's fine?

MJ: Yes, I give my permission.

AP: Marvellous. Wonderful.

MJ: That's how I discovered the project.

AP: Oh great.

MJ: I was... every so often I google my old, you know, fellow-actors' names. And I googled Donald Sartain, whom I had never seen up on the web before, and suddenly he was there. So...

AP: Oh marvellous, wonderful!

MJ: I worked with Donald in 1958/59.

AP: Wonderful. So you said 1957 was when you started?

MJ: I did, yes. But I began really seriously to consider being a professional actor, or rather just going into the theatre - that's the way I looked at it - when I was about 17 I think it must have been - perhaps 16. I saw Peggy Ashcroft and John Gielgud in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and absolutely smitten by it. And I said 'that's what I want to do'. And so after that I haunted all the stage doors, and talked to the stars, and got autographs, because that was the nearest I could get to it. And then one day John Gielgud - who I'd followed all over the country - said to me, 'Are you considering going on the stage?' And I said, 'Can an ordinary person do that?' - I thought you had to be an Olivier or a Gielgud, you know these great families. And he said, 'Of course you can, anybody can.' And so that's really what got me started.

AP: Oh wonderful!

MJ: Yes! And when I came back into business in the eighties I met a niece of Gielgud's, and I told her this story. And she said, 'I'll tell him, because he'll be so thrilled to hear that.' So that was about... well a few years before he died.

AP: Oh wow! Oh fantastic!

MJ: So what I did was, I was at school and I was already sort of signed up for doing a course at Dartford, which was a specialised PE college. And I didn't want to go but I didn't know what else to do. I didn't know how to get into theatre. And so I went up, but I was very, very unhappy there. And so I just called my father one day... no I wrote my father a letter, saying 'I want to leave, I want to...' I didn't tell him I wanted to go on the stage. That took a little while. And they tried to get me into Rose Bruford straight away but... which had not been opened very long. But that didn't happen.

So I came back home and joined the People's Theatre at Newcastle. And they were, and are, an excellent amateur group with a lot of pros in - pros coming out and pros resting and going in. I think if you scratch any Geordie actor you'll find they've worked at the People's... certainly several I've met have said oh yes they started at the People's. Or they'll say, 'Oh, you'll know so-and-so then'. And I'll say, 'Well yes, but not from that, I've met him on a shoot' or something.

And so when I saw an advert in *The Stage* for Assistant Stage Manager at a rep company, The Pier Pavilion, South Shields... Victor Graham was having a mad thought. He was opening a winter... a repertory company - weekly rep - in South Shields on the pier, which was not a very sensible thing to do. But he was used to the west coast at Ayr, and he used to do summer season there. And he decided that he was going to do a winter season. And I saw this advert and I thought 'that job's for me, because I've got the experience now'. I'd been with the People's for about nine months, and I'd virtually done a training there: ASM, lighting assistant, painter. I stepped in at short notice to take over a play... a part in *The Crucible*, at something like 24 hours notice, so they gave me

an audition for the next play and I got juve lead. So I thought I've got plenty of experience there.

And so this bloke came to... Dermot [McMahon] his name was, an Irishman, came to my house and interviewed me. And just before he was due I said to my mum, 'By the way someone's coming to interview me here today.' 'Oh' she said, 'that's fine, yes.' And then he offered me the job on the spot. And after he'd gone I said, 'Oh and by the way, he's offered me a job.' 'That's good.' 'On the stage.' Aaargh! Absolute horror. You know they tried to dissuade me but, well, as far as I was concerned I was a free agent, so that's what I did. Moved to South Shields, starved on a studentship, they used to call it a studentship. I think I got... I started off with about £2 a week, and that was it. But they said that they would train me. And they did in a way, by exposing me to a lot of different roles. I was ASM to the stage manager, and had small roles most weeks, for about three months. And then inevitably the winter set in so badly that nobody came. And we were freezing. And the company, Victor Graham decided enough was enough and finished.

Probably my best experience there was... Victor gave me this fantastic part. I can't remember what farce it was in, but it was high comedy or farce. And there was a cook in it. And he gave me the cook's role, which was really very... you know, quite substantial, and a comedy part, and said to me, 'I want you to do this in the broadest Geordie you can.' So I did. And, you know, everything ran for six nights, and I think it was one matinée, perhaps even two matinées – one during the week and one on the Saturday. And then when I came off on the Saturday night he said, 'Yes that was fine' he said, 'now you've got four weeks to get rid of that Geordie accent.'! And I know I've got it now, because I've relaxed a bit in my older age, and I've been back up in Tyneside, but I did do exactly what he said. I studied, you know, people like... films like Brief Encounter and stiff upper lip, and I learnt how to speak with received pronunciation. I listened to the news readers and such like.

AP: Yes. And this was 1957?

MJ: That was 1957, yes. And then you know, actors had this idea that all actors should live in London. And so I felt out in the wrong place. So fortunately I had a brother who lived in... near Mitcham, Wallington in Surrey, near enough to be called London. So I went to stay with him and his wife for a while, and signed on with an agency – I think it was Vincent Shaw who did both acting and stage management in those days. And I was out of work for probably about five, six weeks.

And he sent me down to Colchester Rep – not Mercury, Mercury didn't exist then – Colchester Rep was in the high street, in an art gallery. And it was a theatre in the evening, and they rehearsed there during the day. And people used to come in and look at the pictures while we were rehearsing. Yes, it was nice, I loved that. And that was for a scenic painter, right, with very little... with no training and just the experience I'd had at the People's.

AP: So you had done... you'd painted the scenery before then?

MJ: Yes, I'd painted scenery, but I didn't know finesse... and in my first week Juanita Waterson, who later went on to work with the BBC, who was a superb designer and

painter, and she just said to me, 'Will you just mark up these doors please and paint them.' And off she went, up to London for the day. And... there was a carpenter there who made scenery – every theatre had a carpenter in those days. Colchester was I think fortnightly rep at the time. I can't quite remember. I know it certainly wasn't weekly. It might have been three weekly, but it... I can't remember. And he... I said to him, 'How does Juanita do her doors exactly?' Because although I knew how to paint flat, and I could paint at the... direction of the artistic director, actually doing it completely on my own was a bit awe inspiring and well, defeatist actually. And he said, 'Well here you are, here's one that's already been done.' So I had to just look at it and guess how it was done, you know.

They simulate shadows by dark lines, and highlight on the outside where the sun, or where a window's going to be. But in order to do that you need to really know what the design of the set is, so you know where the sun's coming through the window or whatever. Anyway I muddled through.

I used to love it, every morning I used to come in and mix the glue size up, mix the paints up. In those days you didn't use emulsion paint, it was all watercolours which were fixed with size so they didn't fall off the canvas, because everything was flats and canvas. And my job in the morning was to come in first and put the gas rings on, and put all the metal buckets on top of the gas rings. And to dissolve... because once you heated it up it melted, and the glue melt, it was horrible smell but I loved it. That to me was the smell of theatre. You went into theatre as an audience and you could smell that glue size. And everyone would say 'what's that peculiar smell?', but I knew what it was, because I heated them up in the morning.

And then after I'd been there for about three or four months I was made redundant. Looking back it's probably because I was a lousy painter, and Juanita had decided I was completely unteachable. And Bob Digby – Robert Digby – was the director at the time. A great, big mountain of a man – who used to drink like a fish – and he said it was a case of last person in, first person then out. And I didn't disbelieve him. He said they'd lost some of their Arts Council grant, which was probably true. And so then... I was working out notice. It wasn't an on-the-spot sack. And at the time you see I really did think it was redundancy, but it's only in my wiser years that I've looked back and saw no, no, you got the sack for being incompetent. I was looking in The Stage again and they said "stage manager wanted. Young stage manager wanted" – that means not much money you see. And it was in Barrow-in-Furness, which to most people who lived in Colchester or London area, would seem the end of the world. But because I knew... because I was a Geordie and knew what was then Westmorland, Cumberland and North West Lancashire, I knew it wasn't really the end of the world. Pretty like it. I mean, go any further than Walney Island up there and you do fall into the sea you know! I don't know if you know that part of the country do you?

AP: Not well, no.

MJ: It's on a peninsula, right, and it used to be Lancashire and it's... it's just the back of beyond. The only thing there really was the shipyards – Vickers Shipyards. So I saw this advert and I thought 'yes, that's my job as well'. And I just wrote to them. And they asked me to phone them up. And I remember very clearly being in a booth – a telephone booth – on the street phoning up, and he said, 'You've got the job'. It's a funny way isn't it to get work, but that's how it was. And so they sent me a ticket – a rail ticket – because otherwise I wouldn't have been able to afford to get there, and off I

went. And had what turned out to be a year and three months' very happy time. I loved it there. It was the end of the world as far as arts was concerned, but it was beautiful scenery, you were very close to the Lakes – not that I had much chance to visit them, because I was very, very busy.

And I was stage manager. And at first I started off with two ASMs, who were on an even smaller pittance than I was. But gradually as the numbers and the audience diminished, my ASMs went off, and you know, they went to training. One of them went to Bristol Old Vic Theatre School I remember. And gradually there I was, stage manager, all on my own, no assistants, doing lights, sound, builds. I didn't have to do the painting, we had a designer – Barry [Dobbins]. I can't remember his surname, but Barry was a brilliant designer. Every week a completely new set, made out of just the same flats that just gets recycled week after week.

And from having two assistants as I say, and small parts, I ended up playing juve leads, main character roles, and stage managing. So I'd say to an actor, 'Hey Bernard, hang on to the script for a moment will you, I've just [got to] go on and act a minute or two. There's a lighting cue coming up, but don't worry about it, I shall definitely be off in time for that.' And there was a little lighting gantry about the prompt corner, and so I spent my time going up to the elects gallery, down again, changing records, putting on cues. Nothing so technically advanced as a pan, which was, you know, a double... I know it's a van as well, but it was also a double turn-table... a record player. Yes, we didn't have one of those, we just had a record player.

AP: Was that for incidental music?

MJ: Yes, and also for atmosphere – atmospheric music. You know, you would never... the curtain would never go up without some sort of music. And interval music was usually the suite from Gilbert and Sullivan. Charles Mackerrass wrote a suite ['Pineapple Poll'] that was all taken from Gilbert and Sullivan tunes. And for some reason Don would like that every interval, but I got a bit bored with it.

The company was the Renaissance Theatre Company, which was run by Donald Sertain, and his partner. I didn't know at the time that it was his partner. He... his partner was... I knew him as Austin, but I think his name was Stephen. And he was a teacher. And he used to send money to pay our wages at some time, because the audience wasn't big enough to pay. And we used to look through the curtain - you know, the tabs - there was always holes in the tabs because it was a very, very old theatre. 1867 it was first built, and so it was coming up to its centenary, and there were holes in the lovely plush velvet hangings. And we used to have an eye at it in the later months. And we'd say 'there's your wages Mu!' [for Murial]. And then at first we got paid every Saturday I think it was. And after the final show you'd get your wage packet, you'd get your book for the next week, which were always hired you know, from... I suppose from French.

AP: Yes, I would think so.

MJ: Yes, came in little packets. And Donald would say, 'And I want you to play so-and-so'. Or, 'There isn't a part for you today, but stage management's very difficult', and you'd get your wages at the same time. But then gradually it became Monday evening, and then Tuesday evening. Obviously we'd already had our books and were starting

rehearsing the next play, but not our wages. And so there was some times when I was actually living off bowls of soup and crusts of bread. It's... you know, the artist in the garret, it was that sort of thing.

AP: Yes. Do you remember any of the shows that you did?

MJ: A wonderful combination of shows at Barrow. Donald would mix classics with pot boilers you know. So we did Agatha Christie, we did the things like Ghost Train, and they did that at Colchester as well. But at Colchester they were more sort of classical shows, more arty shows. Where at Barrow where they had to have an audience, and there was no audience to get, but... so you'd do Ibsen. I remember doing... I believe they did Rosmersholm after I'd left, but the one I remember... I can't remember the name of it at the moment. The one where the boy at the end says, 'The sun, the sun.' He's suffering from his father's syphilis.

AP: Oh, is it Ghosts?

MJ: Ghosts, thank you, yes. The memory goes you know, as you get older. And I didn't do any Shakespeare with them. We did a pantomime which was horrendous. One stage manager building a pantomime on her own, and Barry painting all these cloths and flying flats! Just trying to think... a lot of Agatha Christie because that's what people wanted to see. The Whitehall farces as well, you know - dropping the trousers sort of thing.

And there was rather a wonderful Dad's Army sort of play, which ends in a huge explosion, and lots of laughter, because you know they all come out with collars and suits all over the place, and blackened faces and everything. But one of my most exciting moments at Barrow, preparing for that, because I ordered some maroons – stage maroons – and followed the instructions to the letter. Except when it got to the bit about putting this maroon in a dustbin by an open door, so I opened the dock doors. Do you know what I mean by the old dock? It was an old scene dock; you used to load your scenery directly from your painting area straight on to the side of the stage. You could also, in previous time, bring live animals in there. And the carpenter there said that Vic who was a cockney with hardly any teeth, and he always smoked with a cigarette sticking out of his mouth like that. And he said, [cockney accent] 'Of course we used to 'av all ponies 'ere you know. We used to 'av little miniature ponies'. It was a tiny stage, you thought 'well how do you get horses in here?' And he said, [cockney accent] 'Ah they were little 'orses.' you know.

So I'd opened the dock doors, and there were sort of, not exactly back-to-back houses behind us, but terraced houses, little back yards, and then there was us. And so I put the dustbin at the back there, by the open dock door. And I looked at the instructions, and I couldn't decide from the instructions, they didn't say anything about the lid of the dustbin. Whether I was to put the lid on, having lit the maroon, or whether I was to leave the lid off... you know, you know the answer don't you? I put the lid on. I should have known better - I studied physics as a teenager. But I just wasn't thinking and I put the lid on after I'd lit the fuse. Stood back of course, and of course an almighty, bomb-like burst! And the dustbin goes flying out of the scene door, and divides... it stayed intact, but of course the lid went sailing off like a UFO. And I sheepishly went to collect them, and thought 'well yes, I now know I got to leave the... lid off, and perhaps

oughtn't to have such a big maroon next time!'. And that was for that play. About half an hour later, a rather slow policeman arrived on his bicycle and said, 'Everything all right in here?' And I said, 'Yes, why?' 'Oh we had a report of an explosion from the theatre.' And I said, 'Ah yes, yes, yes officer, I can explain that.' And he said, 'Well next time don't put the lid on.' I said, 'I've worked that one out now!'

You were asking me about plays we did. We also did those really gritty northern sort of realism plays, which were comedies but had a lot of left wing politics in them. Like, *Love on the Dole*, and *Love on the Never Never*, Walter Greenwood, I think, was the author.

AP: Yes. I think so.

MJ: And they were... they were fantastic to act in. And I can't remember whether... it was probably *Love on the Never Never* when I was playing Mrs Doorbell – Ma Doorbell. Now, she's a character in her seventies! Now, I'm 70 now, but I have been playing seventies ever since I was 18, yes, for some reason or other. I must have looked preternaturally old. Though they didn't have any seventies female actors in the company anyway. But I got them all. And Ma Doorbell was a wonderful character, real Lancashire woman you know. And she drank everybody's Guinness; you know, she drank everybody's beer. Some of it was Guinness and some of it was just ordinary beer. Now ordinary beer you can simulate on stage, Guinness you can't because you cannot get the head. I mean perhaps now you can, but at the time you couldn't simulate it. And so as stage manager I ordered in... I asked if we could have some complimentary crates of Guinness, which you used to be able to do in those days, in exchange for a program credit. And so duly the Guinness came, we rehearsed with it, and then everything was going swimmingly, until the last night when obviously the cast had got together and decided that Ma Doorbell should have to drink everybody's beer. It was a sort of send up of me. So everybody left their beer that night, and some of it was simulated but most of it was Guinness. By the time I had to let the curtain down – because I had to leave the stage, go up into the gantry on the other side to drop the end of show...

AP: So you had to drink it all on stage.

MJ: Um?

AP: So you drank... you went on... you had to go around drinking it all...?

MJ: On stage, yes.

AP: ...on stage. [Laughs]

MJ: Yes, yes. So as each character didn't finish their beer, Ma Doorbell would go round swiping all their glasses and emptying them you see. So that particular night, the very last night of the show, I drank everybody's beer and Guinness. And I was absolutely pissed by the end. There was no way I could get out of it, because there were lines saying you know, 'Ma Doorbell, she's drunk me beer' or 'She's had me Guinness.' And I

remember struggling up the gantry and Bernard saying to me, 'I'll drop it for you tonight.' [Laughs] That was good that, though.

It was just lovely to be in a small company. And that's what you don't get anymore. Colchester, people came and went, and because I was painting I was a bit on the side. But at Barrow it was just fantastic, because we were all isolated, the only actors in the area, local sort of celebrities in a little place like that. And people would stop you in the street and say, [Lancashire accent] 'Ee, I don't know how you do it love. Week after week. All them lines, how do you remember them.' you know. And, 'Don't you get them mixed up? Don't you get one week's mixed up with other?' And we never did, though sometimes people dried badly.

And of course those days you had to have a prompter, because weekly rep there's no way you could get by without someone to... so you'd prompt every so often. That was me as well. Sitting on the book, doing the lighting, checking out when people are going to dry, because there's an art in prompting. If you look at the actors' eyes, you hear them start to speak, and then if you just see immediately before they're going to speak that panic goes straight across, and you know they've lost it. You can feed them that... the first line. And I remember Gerald coming off one day and saying, 'How did you know I was going to dry?' I said, 'You should have seen your face!' - absolute panic across the whole of it.

AP: So during a performance you were running the lights...

MJ: Yes.

AP: ...you were running the sound...

MJ: Yes.

AP: ...you were playing a role often.

MJ: Yes.

AP: You were prompting...

MJ: Yes.

AP: ...anything else or...?

MJ: Anything else? Well, calling people.

AP: Calling?

MJ: Most people came down to... looked after their own calls. There were... there was a tannoy in the dressing room. But one terrible day Bernard – Gallagher this is – was missing. And Muriel Rowan and Donald Sartain were on stage. And they were off the book, because Bernard hadn't come on. And so I went racing upstage to look for him. And well first of all I said to myself 'well, he can't be over there, because he would be on if he was over there in the wings'. And it was one of these old theatres where there was a tunnel underneath you know, and then stairs going up to the wings.

So I went up to his bed - his bedroom! [Laughs] - I went up to his dressing room; he's not there, I called up the other dressing room, he's not there. I rushed down again, went into the coffee bar, he's not there. And all this while Mu and Donald are ad lib-ing. And so I thought 'well, the only place he can be is the other side of the stage, unless he's left the theatre'. So I went rushing under, and there he was talking to Vivienne Ventris Field and they were in... and I said, 'Bernard you're off.' And he said, 'No, no I don't recognise any of those.' I said, 'That's because you're off.' And so he went on. There was a bit of a row afterwards, because he said to them, 'Well if you hadn't ad lib-ed I would have heard the pause and I would have gone on.' And they said, 'But we couldn't have just... you didn't come and we didn't know what to do. We stood there and nothing happened so we ad lib-ed.' They practically made up five minutes! It perhaps wasn't that long, but it did feel like it, because I did go round all those places.

But some people found it very difficult to learn lines. Fortunately I never did, which is just as well, because I carried the book until the Sunday. And then on the Sunday I learnt my lines ready for the dress rehearsal on the Monday, which was really quite exciting. Because Monday I used to get up at half past six and meet a man with a little van outside the theatre at seven o'clock. And we used to drive around with last week's furniture and props, delivering them to all the places that had lent me stuff, while I picked up what people had loaned me for this week. We didn't buy things. I had £5, not to spend every week, that was a £5 float. So I had to spend as little of that as possible. And Donald would make it up every Saturday night. So everything... everything we used was borrowed. I'd even knock on people's doors and say, 'Excuse me I see you've got some very nice Victorian mantelpiece pieces, is it possible to lend them to Her Majesty's Theatre for the week, beginning next Monday?' And you'd be surprised what people would lend. I mean, nowadays they're worth a fortune. The local vicar, who was a canon of Carlisle Cathedral, his name was Charles Nurse, he used to throw his vicarage open and say 'take what you like'.

AP: Wow!

MJ: And he had mediaeval stuff there you know, and Elizabethan stuff.

AP: Oh fantastic!

MJ: And we used to borrow this. It wasn't repro, he was... he came from an old family. And it was just amazing what we could borrow. New stuff, I used to have to go to the furniture stores and just be very nice and pleasant, and ask them if they'd lend us it. Mind, if comes back with a scratch on we're not having it back. So my flat... my room eventually had items of furniture which I had no need for, but had to buy in because

we'd scratched them. So I had a set of bookcases like that. I also acquired... there was one second hand dealer who was absolutely wonderful at lending things, particularly Victorian stuff. And one day she loaned me the most wonderful chaise longue, which I wish I still had. And she said, 'I don't want it, you can keep it.' Unfortunately, you know, a jobbing actor, I had no home to put it in, and it just stayed in the theatre. And when I left it stayed with it, which I was very sad about.

So on the Monday I would collect all this stuff... and not only essentials like furniture and props, but also things that the designer wanted to dress the set with. And so I'd come back with this little white van absolutely jammed with treasures. And we'd shove it all on the stage, because we had to be ready for the dress rehearsal – I don't know whether it was two o'clock or half past two in the afternoon – but... and of course while everybody else is checking on the lines, I'm doing this.

The set was already built; we did that on the Saturday or the Sunday. But the stuff for dressing, and putting all the things in place... I made a lot of props as well. It's amazing, you know, how quickly you can make a pair of pheasants for instance, or mock up a sculpture within a week. You know I look at these places now, you know they've got artistic director, painter 1, painter 2, you know... just incredible.

AP: Now where'd you get the materials to make...?

MJ: Out of my £5 a week, or I just begged and borrowed them again. Again the second hand place was wonderful. They'd say, 'Oh in the back, see what you can find. Just show it to us, and if we want it... if we want it back we'll tell you, but if you can have it you can have it.' And so I did a lot of that as well.

AP: And did people get programme credits for that?

MJ: Yes, yes. They had permanent programme credits for that, yes. We also had... you won't know this, but there was a cigarette at the time called Olivier. It hadn't been going for very long, and it was named after Laurence...

AP: Yes, I've seen the advert.

MJ: You've seen it, yes, right. Well there was a lot of smoking in plays at the time. Mind you, in that particular theatre it was pretty hazardous. You had to be very careful that you didn't set light to any of the wing tabs... And I arranged for Olivier cigarettes. I think... I might not have made that arrangement; someone else might have made that arrangement before me. But we did have regular 200... boxes with 200 cigarettes in every week. And nobody in the cast smoked except Gerald and myself in the company. And so where a cigarette was called for, on the whole they tried not to, or gave the part to Gerald you know. And so Gerald and I virtually had 200 cigarettes a week to divide between us, which is what we did. It wasn't good for the health, and I don't smoke any more, but at the time I was quite a heavy smoker. And obviously there was a credit for that as well. And things like, you know *The Glass Menagerie*? That's something else we did.

AP: Yes.

MJ: A wonderful play. It requires some little glass ornaments. Very difficult to fake, and it needs a lot of them. And so I wrote to Pirelli Glass... when I think now, you know, now you just phone up, or contact them by e-mail – these were letters. And so I had a very short time to do these things in. Perhaps I would know a fortnight beforehand what was coming up, and so I could do some preparation. But at the same time I was rehearsing next week's play, and playing this week's play. So there was quite a lot going on. But I wrote...

AP: So plays were set with that little time in advance. It would be...

MJ: You would set a play on Tuesday – block it that is. You'd rehearse Act I Wednesday, Act II Thursday, Act III Friday. If they weren't in three Acts well you made them in three Acts. Saturday you'd do a run through, and then everybody else would have the weekend off while we did the set and learnt lines. And then Monday the dress rehearsal. So it was constantly... And as I say I would have perhaps a fortnight's notice of things that I would need.

And I wrote to Pirelli Glass who make little... used to make little glass ornaments, asking if they had seconds they could let me have. I explained the play, said they'd be smashed. And they said 'we never let seconds come out of the factory, but here are some complimentary glass ornaments'. And enough for the whole week smashing, getting smashed! And I managed to save about three or four of them, and kept them with me for a long time. I don't have them any more. But you know, and that's a program credit as well. But people were extremely generous with loaning things.

AP: That's wonderful. So in terms of programming sort of a season you would... was it on... well, say Glass Menagerie, you found out a fortnight beforehand?

MJ: I think I must have done, because I can't see I could have got Pirelli Glass there within the five days' rehearsal period.

AP: Sure, yes of course. But they... would it have been... would the decision have been made earlier and then...?

MJ: Oh yes, Donald was an actor/manager. I don't know who made the decisions; they came down from on high you know, like the wages. So no, I don't know if anybody had any say in it. Bernard Gallagher might have had a say in it. Perhaps Donald did it all on his own, perhaps he did it with his partner – who didn't live in Barrow, he was working elsewhere in the country. No, these were deus ex machina decisions, yes.

AP: Gotcha.

MJ: Yes, so no we're very small cogs, but essential because the whole thing would have fallen to bits. And I've recently, on eBay, been collecting programs that... from my time...

AP: Oh right, oh wonderful.

MJ: Yes, because [I threw my stuff away] when... I left the theatre after about four and a half years, deciding I really ought to get a degree and be taken seriously, because I was very interested in directing. It was a natural... a natural step from stage management at the time. And when we were appearing... we were playing at the Theatre Royal, York. What were we doing there? Oh, I was with something else yes, because after Barrow...

AP: And how long were you at Barrow?

MJ: I was a year and three months.

AP: Right.

MJ: I think it was something like that. Not much longer, certainly not less.

AP: So you made it though that first winter?

MJ: Oh yes. No, no... that was at... the first winter was at... was at South Shields.

AP: Oh right.

MJ: Yes, Barrow was my third job. So Barrow wasn't cold.

AP: Oh right, yes, Barrow wasn't... yes, gotcha.

MJ: No, wasn't Barrow wasn't cold. Barrow was very nice. Quite a temperate climate in fact, because there's a gulf stream runs down the west coast of Britain.

AP: Oh right, oh gotcha.

MJ: Yes, yes. But in order to go for an audition, because I really wanted to be full time actor - although I liked stage management. I love stage management, I love organising - bossing people around, you know, that's my metier really! I did want to do... be taken more seriously as an actor at that point. And I wrote for an audition. And the only way I could go for an audition would be to leave the company, because there was nobody to

fill in for me. So I gave my notice in. And I remember Donald saying 'was this because of something that happened in the company'. And I said 'no'. Because he had given me a lead role, because we lost our lead actor, whose husband had said 'come back home and look after our children... our child, or I'll never see you again', or something. And so she'd gone back home, and so I got lead role. And then she came back, and so I lost the lead role again, and sort of towards the end of rehearsal. And Donald said 'was that why you're leaving?' and I said 'no, no it's nothing to do with that, it was more personal. And I want to try and you know... I'd fixed up one or two auditions'. And I auditioned with Wyndhams and - who did touring shows - and I auditioned with Harry Hanson who did twice nightly seaside shows. Have you come across Harry Hanson? He had companies all over the country. But I knew as soon as he looked at me that I wasn't his type. He wanted high heels and fluffy ladies, and I just... no way was I going to be a fluffy lady. And so that was a non-starter.

But then I got a job, quite accidentally, I was doing my usual stage door hopping – I was back in Newcastle – and the doorman said to me, 'You're in the business aren't you?' And I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'Well, if you hop round to the Empire they're looking for dressers for a show that's coming in'. And I thought 'oh, that sounds interesting. At least it's in the business'. And I'd never done variety or - because that's what the Empire was, a variety show. So I went round there, and the wardrobe mistress – Claire Scaife – was recruiting for dressers for The Dancing Years. And she recruited me as the company dresser, the chorus dresser. And I'd been with them for about a week, they were there for a fortnight. I'd been with them for a week, and apparently the lead singer – Margaret Mitchell – asked if I would... I could tour, asked the General Manager if I could tour with them as her personal dresser. And apparently Claire Scaife had asked if I could tour with them as her assistant, because she'd been bugging them for an assistant for ages. And so I went. The manager asked for me and said, 'Would you tour with us?' And he explained the situation. I said, 'Well, I have booked a holiday in Germany next... week after we finish here I'm in Germany for a fortnight.' He said, 'Well join us in Sheffield.' which I did.

And so I toured with this fantastic, huge company, Dancing Years – it's like touring with Les Mis or something nowadays. With all these dancers and singers and really you know, of the day, top performers in that field. With a mixture of legit actor – we used to say legit and variety, yes. And it was a really interesting company. And I was with them for a few weeks. And touring around all the number one spots, when I went to Cardiff, and we were I think a fortnight at the New Theatre, Cardiff, which I believe is now part of the university. But at the time it was just one of the number one touring theatres. And the general manager... you know the touring manager said to me, 'Look everyone's having a fortnight out, and then we're going up to Edinburgh and we're opening in Edinburgh.' He said, 'You can't have a fortnight out because you've just joined us.' He said, 'You can have week, stop in Cardiff and help Claire to get the show out. And Claire's going up to Edinburgh to do all the cleaning and what-have-you that has to be done on the costumes. And you go and relieve her in the second week.'

So I did that. So I arrived at Edinburgh, arrived at the... I think was it the King's? Possibly we were at the King's. And I announced my arrival. I said, 'Where's Mrs Scaife?' and they said, 'Oh, she's in hospital. She's seriously ill: she's got pleurisy and pneumonia. But she's left all the jobs that you've got to do apparently. Have a look in the wardrobe, she's written everything down.'. And so I took over getting things out from the cleaners and this is where my stage management came in useful you see – organising and telling other people what to do. And so I did that, I got the show up and running. And the general manager said, 'Right,' he said, 'I'll appoint you Wardrobe Mistress now.' [plus we left Claire in hospital in Edinburgh] So from being Wardrobe Assistant and Principal's

Dresser, I became Wardrobe Mistress. But I still held on to the Principal's Dresser job, because Margaret Mitchell wouldn't let me go. So you know there it was. Again the experience in Barrow was very useful. All that multi-tasking that I had to do, I had to do it again. And I stayed with the company until they finished.

And when we... when we called in at York – we were playing at the York Theatre Royal, which is a beautiful theatre, rather like Barrow theatre – they were looking for an Assistant Director. And so I presented myself as Assistant Director. And they said, 'What university have you got your degree from?' I said, 'I haven't got a degree.' And they said, 'And well you are rather young, and we were really looking for a man.' So there it was; my ideas of becoming director were flawed. So when that show finished the seeds were planted that perhaps I ought to be going to university.

But I did a further season, this time with what we now call Theatre in Education. Then it was just a little group of hack actors going round from school to school, being paid for and manipulated by the management you know up in Lancashire. And not getting paid very much.

AP: You were acting in that?

MJ: I was acting in that, but I was also Company Manager.

AP: Oh right.

MJ: [laughs] There were four of us, and I was responsible for the wages. So I used to have to collect the money from the schools, who used to say that there were 200 children there, and you bloody well knew you'd counted 250, you know! And then I used to have to pay the actors out of the takings of the week, stamp their books and then bank the rest for the owners of the company.

And then after that I thought now's... I think perhaps I ought to find out what real life's like out there. And so... which is what I did. I went to live in Wolverhampton... because my... the theatre tour finished there, so I just stopped there. And I got a job in local factories. And then I got a job as a teaching... as a teacher, without any qualifications other than A Level, but they were pretty desperate for teachers! And then I went off to university. And didn't see the theatre again or...

AP: And where did you go to university?

MJ: Leicester.

AP: Right.

MJ: Yes, I met my husband there. And then we went off to East Africa, had children. And so I didn't get back to the business until my... our youngest was 18, which was in 1988. And I've worked in the business ever since.

AP: And how did you come back in 1988?

MJ: You mean with what mechanics did I...?

AP: Well yes, well what brought you back? What...?

MJ: I had al... I always knew I was coming back; it was just a question of when. And when my youngest got into university and was leaving home – in fact he was leaving to live with his girlfriend – I said to my husband, 'Well that's it, I'm going back into the business'. And he said, 'How are we going to pay for the mortgage?' I said, 'We'll manage.' I'd been teaching by this time... I had a teaching career in the meanwhile, because I had a degree. And when we were in East Africa I taught there, so when I came back they skipped the business about needing teacher qualifications. And the local authority recommended that I was given qualified teacher status, so I was. It's just performance you know, that's all teaching is – putting on a show, and doing the reading, obviously, the work. And then I just said, you know, it was time, and if necessary I could do supply teaching. In fact I didn't have to; I was given a generous pension allowance. And I... so I go into schools often now, but I go in as a workshop actor rather than a teacher.

AP: Right. Now was that when you... was that... was it in 1988...?

MJ: Yes.

AP: What company did you...?

MJ: When I started in 1988, I mean, everything was completely different.

AP: Of course.

MJ: And it was all television and theatre was the big theatres. And there was nothing you know? From being a theatre in every small town, there was nothing. And loads of kids coming out of university thinking they were actors, when they hadn't had actor training you know. And so there was a bit of a glut on the acting market. And so what I did was, I had no knowledge of anything other than theatre – no knowledge of technical side, of TV or film. We didn't do that. If you were in the provinces you just went on touring or in residence. And so I thought if I get... some extras work, at least I'll learn the technical side of the business. I knew it was death for actors to do extra work, but I thought I'll look on this as new training. So I did that. And I also did Actors' Centre training courses. It just coincided with an opening of a branch of the Actors' Centre in Birmingham, from the London Actors' Centre. And so we were able to do a lot of really first class courses. And that helped me get down from theatrical performance, down to small-screen performance.

And so I did extras work for about... probably about six months, and got a lot of experience. Particularly as quite early on the Assistant Director in charge of extras had recognised that I could act, and so I got a lot of featured stuff and so on. And then I just fell lucky. One agent's... extras agent sent me up to All Creatures Great and Small, because they wanted someone that had the potential perhaps to become a character. They wanted someone who could act, even though it was a non-speaking role, and I got it. And in fact they wrote the part in for me, for the future series, which was nice. I only... I was only in it twice, but still it was nice to have it written in for me. And also very soon after that - and we're talking '88 still, yes - I went for an audition in Birmingham for Precious Bane, which was based in Shropshire. And I got a very small role in that. But the director I worked with was a really top notch director [Christopher Menaul]. And I've recently worked for him again, which is great.

AP: Oh right, how nice.

MJ: Yes. And so that's how I got started again. Theatre I did myself in the main, until I was doing some theatre work in Birmingham and one of my co-actors said, 'Have you seen the advert in The Stage? Pentabus want someone, an older person, who can do complicated things on stage.' And she said, 'I think it's your role.' And so I wrote up... it was somebody I knew, because I'd worked with the Artistic Director [Steve Johnston] when he was doing something for Welsh National Opera in Birmingham, and I went as Stage Manager. It was a community thing. And I went and auditioned for that and got the role. And so it was a one-woman show, and I toured off and on, for the next 12 years with that show. Not entirely for Pentabus. I did it for Pentabus for three tours and then... That was '93 I think it was written.

AP: And what was the show called?

MJ: Against the Wind. Yes, you'll find it if you google it. Or you'll certainly find it up there somewhere. And it was written Therese Collins who worked... who was a writer/actor for Pentabus, which is a Shropshire based theatre - a touring theatre company. And it was absolutely fabulous. I had to build a windmill while I was on stage. I mean obviously it's all cod, you don't actually build the windmill, but you've got to put the sails together and build the motor and so on. So it required something... someone that had some technical know-how. And it was just a wonderful show, I loved it.

And then I'd done my last show with them, and I was kicking about doing other things and... I got a phone call from New Perspectives, which was then based in Mansfield, Gavin Stride. And he said he said he'd seen the show, loved the show, he'd now got the rights from Therese Collins and would I go and play the part for him? And so I didn't even have to do a competitive audition, which is fantastic - really nice. And I toured the other half of England.

AP: Oh right, wonderful.

MJ: Having done the west side with Pentabus, I did the east side with New Perspectives. That was probably about three or four months. And then after that, I thought 'this show

is too good to throw away'. And I asked Therese if I could play it on my own. And so I designed and built a little set that I could tour on top of my car. And brought in a Stage Manager - and two Stage Managers eventually, one later when the other one had to go off and tour doing something else. And until a couple of years ago we toured that off and on. Rural touring, sometimes at festivals by invitation. But then Eileen, who's the central character, and I were too far apart in age. And the script became dated because the benefit system has changed and so on. But that was an absolutely fabulous play to do, and I loved doing it. And it was the reason that Shoebox Theatre - which is what I help run now, the community little group in Tamworth - that's how it was founded. It originally founded as, you know, Margaret Jackman trading as Shoebox Theatre. But I never wanted it to be that, it's just that's the only way I could handle it at the beginning. And then as soon as we could, we wrote a constitution and had a little meeting, and made it into a community group...

AP: Wonderful.

MJ: ...which is what it is now. But we're just putting in an application soon to make it into a community interest company. Do you know what they are? It just ensures that all the funding that you've spent on equipment doesn't get dissipated. That the equipment can be handed on to a charity afterwards.

AP: Right, oh great.

MJ: That you can never... you can never lose that stuff that you've built up. Either it or the proceeds from the sale of the equipment stays with the company, or with another company.

AP: Oh excellent, oh great. And that... just to, to finish up I looked at the Shoebox website, you know it seems like a certain amount of what you do with Shoebox is a bit like what we're doing here with social history.

MJ: A lot of that. We particularly like to take older people into younger... with younger children. You know, what they call inter-generational exchange. But you know, it's just older people talking to younger people, but within a theatre context. So on the train coming down I've just been planning an evacuation workshop.

AP: Oh wonderful.

MJ: So I've got about four... probably five older people. Everyone, like myself... old enough to remember the war and to have lived through the war, some of whom have been evacuated, some of whom had evacuees staying with them. But together we actually do scenarios. And we've got a little scenario where the kids supposedly arrive in this hall from a train, they don't know where they are, and they've got to be billeted. And the people waiting are expecting nursing mothers and pregnant woman, and they get landed with a class of children. And so they don't want to have them. And it's just

an idea to try and get the children to feel how awful it is to have to be chosen, and asked questions like, 'Are you a bed wetter? You haven't got nits have you?'.