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Philip Hedley – interview transcript

Interviewer: Alec Patton

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Actor, Theatre-goer and Director Emeritus, Theatre Royal Stratford East. Arts Council; Margaret Bury; critics; Shelagh Delaney; East 15 Acting School; Intimate Theatre, Palmer's Green; directing; directors; Ben Jonson; LAMDA; Joan Littlewood; Michael Macowen; movement classes; Jean Newlove; Royal Court Theatre; David Scase; Stratford East; Theatre Royal, Lincoln; three-weekly rep; weekly rep.

PH: The result of what I did from '60 to '68... It's very clear with me, because I came back... I'm not Australian, but I came back from eight years in Australia in 1960, and '60 to '68 there's all sort of things that are interesting as seeds for what came later.

AP: Great. Yes, that sounds really good. We'll just... now the first thing to say is that this is going to the Theatre Archive project website, the interview. You understand that?

PH: Yes.

AP: And it'll be... the copyright or whatever it is will be with the Archive.

PH: Yes.

AP: Great. Just need to get that out of the way. And then... so and once again you're Philip Hedley and you're... let's get your official title again.

PH: Philip Hedley, CBE if you want that, Director Emeritus, Theatre Royal, Stratford East.

AP: Fantastic, great. And well let's start on sort of at the beginning then.

PH: Well, my involvement with the theatre – British Theatre – apart from as a schoolboy and seeing shows in London when I came for a year in '51, but I returned from Australia, where I was for all my teenage years, in 1960. And the major thing that happened to me, almost immediately, was I knew vaguely of this woman called Joan Littlewood, from reading the New Statesman constantly in my teenage years. And I wanted to know...

wanted to see her work. I wasn't sure if I was going to be an actor or a teacher, or what I was going to be.

And I went out to Theatre Royal, Stratford East, in the East End. I didn't know how far it was from the centre of London and I arrived an hour early. And that proved very significant in my life, because it really was a change on the road to [Damascus]. It was a very dramatic moment in my life. It altered the rest of my life, that visit to that theatre, in that when I got there I'd [arrived early and] having been in Australia for eight years I wasn't used to the British cockney accent. And I think... the cockney accent in films and theatre was mostly middle class people who'd learnt to talk cockney at RADA. It was just before the working class revolution in acting really took place and came into film as well.

So I was sitting in the little sort of coffee area in the bar, listening to two local woman chatting, for an hour. And it was very [entertaining]. They were witty and funny and telling stories about friends and so on, as they put the cups out and cleaned up. And I was listening, pretending to read a book. And I listened to it all, and I so loved the conversation and the accent was new to my ear [that] I left it right 'til the bells had gone to go inside, and went straight from that conversation [to] inside [the auditorium] and the play started. So... it was Ben Jonson's Every Man in His Humour, with a lot of Joan's... old gang in it from the height of her Theatre Workshop days, as she called it.

I was completely stunned, because I knew Ben Jonson was boring. I'd read one play by him at university, and I knew it was difficult to read and so on. And I just couldn't believe it. What was happening on stage – it was one of his East End plays, his cockney plays – was exactly the same as in the bar, the two women. The rhythm, the give-and-take, the whole thing was just [as lively], it was just the same. And had it not been that series of accidents I probably would never have realised that as strongly as I realised it. I just was completely... and I understood [it] all, absolutely.

There was only one longish speech in the middle of it, and perhaps the actor was off-form that night, and halfway through that longish speech I got a whiff of what I thought was 'boring Ben Jonson'. But it was only for a moment. [Otherwise] it was riotously funny, immensely accessible, looked as though it had just been made up on that day. And that completely bowled me over. With the result I did something which you just don't do normally... I was in a daze of disbelief. And I hung around the little foyer they have there, and there was a man in a sort of dress suit I think, who looked vaguely official, as the house manager I assume. And I went up to him and I didn't know what it was I wanted to ask. I was sort of saying 'Well what [is this theatre doing?]... [can I be part of it?], what can I do with this theatre?' I mean, I didn't [know what's expected], I was like an idiot; I didn't know what it was I wanted. And he said 'well, the actors hold classes on Saturday mornings, and there's two levels of class and you could join the lower level'.

And I did that [the next Saturday morning]. It was an actor called Glyn Edwards who'd worked with Joan a lot. And I soon became in charge of marking the roll and so on. And for those who know All About Eve the film, it's a bit of story like Anne Baxter in All About Eve, the one that waits around [and takes the leading lady's part] and finally of course, 25 years later I was running the theatre. THAT'S what I could do, if you see what I mean! [Laughs] Little did they know what they'd got on their hands.

And so [for quite a few months] I went to those classes, and we [did games and exercises which Theatre Workshop did]. I learnt about improvising and objectives, and we did some Shakespeare I remember. The tennis ball speech from Henry V we worked on. And all about how [the chosen image fitted the King's anger]. We did it as a tennis match, which worked brilliantly because that [recurring sound of mocking], you know, mocking the widows, and [as] you [say] mock you pretend [to] hit the ball. 'Mock'

sounds a bit like hitting a ball. It was brilliant, and [King Henry] was hitting tennis balls at the man who'd arrived, the ambassador who'd arrived – King Henry was. Anyway, so that was all very enlightening and I loved it. And then I had to [stop to earn money] then I sort of lost track for a while.

But the beginning of the next year I went to the other extreme [in area] of British theatre, from the fifties, sixties and earlier indeed, I became a ASM actor – actor ASM – a position they had in those days, which doesn't exist, regrettably, anymore. It's a wonderful job. You get the props and you're on the book, and you follow the moves, and then you go on as small parts, as policeman at the end of a thriller or whatever it is you know. And I was there six months... [They did a new production every week. The programme was a mixture of farce, light comedies and thrillers usually from the West End and even some that failed in the West End. We served strictly commercial authors very well but anything willing depth, like William Inge or Shelagh Delaney, we made shallow.]

And prior to me, I know about a year before, I don't think as an ASM but as an actor, Harold Pinter was at this same weekly rep – the Intimate Theatre, Palmers Green – only he had a different name as an actor, Harold Baron I think it was. I saw his name on a [list backstage] and I remembered it ever since. And his wife worked there at the time, Vivian Merchant. He wasn't the famous Harold Pinter at the time. But I remembered the name.

And so it was [a beginner's] experience that many people had, and it was quite astonishing because weekly rep, so you opened a new play every [week], well, an 'old' play, never a 'new' play. But... except once by the local doctor, an appalling play he wrote. And so you opened on Monday evening, and the rehearsals [for the next play started on] Tuesday morning for three hours, you plotted the whole play within three hours. The actors kept [their scripts in their hands but] started reading on their feet, and moved, and you followed the French's Acting Edition [for the moves from the West End productions] if the set fitted with it. Because we had two sets that was all, which we alternated weekly, with French windows and fireplace and all the necessary that you had to have in sets in those days. And we alternated, and sometimes the French windows were on stage right, and the following week they'd be on stage left, and the fireplace would move to the other side. And we would change the wallpaper during the week, to keep varying the wallpaper on identical sets. And sometimes of course, if the French window was on stage right that week, that might fit with the French's Acting Edition, [but if in] the French's Acting Edition the moves [were] the other way round [compared to our set], we had to change... [The] ASM [had to] change all the lefts to rights and [all the rights to lefts in the script].

Occasionally the book wasn't a French's Acting Edition, and there weren't moves in the script [at all]. That was a damn nuisance. It meant that the director [had to give moves], as they read the play slightly slower than normal reading pace, they would [be], on their feet, and the director would say, 'Sit right, sofa. Move [to] French windows. Move to upstage right door.' And they would write down, just in [initials] you know, move left – ML, down right – DR, they'd write that down as they were reading and kept going and moved as they [wrote]. [They] never questioned a move, except once in a blue moon you'd get a guest [actor] in who would say, 'Why?'. And as soon as anybody said the word 'Why', the whole room would freeze. 'Oh' – eyes to heaven – 'oh God! One of those, we won't get down for a drink at one in the pub downstairs'. It was always rehearsed above a pub. Usually the actor concerned learnt after about three questions, felt the temperature of the room, and didn't ask any more.

Four of the actors were regulars – the older man, older woman... juve man - juvenile lead - and juve girl. And... they were there every week. One woman had been there 13 years doing a play every week, apart from four weeks holiday in the summer. There always seemed to be a part for a middle aged woman. So they'd have the moves [on Tuesday mornings], [then] Tuesday afternoon off to learn the lines for Act I, perform [the previous production] Tuesday evening. Come back Wednesday morning, run Act I three times with the lines learnt, afternoon off to learn lines for Act II. It was always three Acts, and if it was a two Act play we made it into three because of selling the ice-creams and [teas] in the two intervals. Thursday morning off, because you had a matinée on Thursday afternoon of the play you were [already] doing. Perform Thursday evening, of course. Friday we'd do Act II three times, lines learnt, and repeat Act I. Saturday Act III three times, repeat Act II. Monday afternoon [was] the first time you ran the play through [at the full dress rehearsal, and then] Monday night you opened. And that was week after week after week.

I think good actors didn't suffer from it. Probably mediocre or lazy actors did because they learnt [a] lazy mode of non-questioning, which they probably would have preferred anyway, and they'd survive. But I don't think you kill a good actor, whatever treatment [you give] them, they'll bounce back to whatever centrally is good to them. But it was an extraordinary [time]. I did that for six months as the ASM. When I finished that six months, I thought 'well, if this is what theatre is about...' I mean, [that this was the necessary] ladder I had to climb from there, I was beginning to feel I didn't perhaps want this, that it wasn't the kind of life I wanted.

Fortunately, and it was the second moment of [sliding] doors in my life in a way, where a [life – changing] coincidence happened. Fortunately, two weeks late I looked at this two weeks old copy of Stage – and thank God I did! – and there was a tiny little notice in it saying that a Theatre Workshop school was opening, the East 15 Acting School was opening that week. And straight away I knew what it was I wanted to do. Good heavens a fulltime school, with the kind of experience I'd had on the Saturday mornings, which had stopped some [time before and] I couldn't do it while I was doing weekly rep.

And I went straight out, and got accepted on that day, and was in class by the afternoon. I was two weeks late, but was one of the founding students of that [school]. No money, but they never asked... I wouldn't say gave me a scholarship, they just didn't ask for any money. And the teachers were ex or current Theatre Workshop people. Jean Newlove was the movement teacher, and that was phenomenal. I mean, we'd have three-hour sessions with Jean. The school was so poor we couldn't afford any central heating, it was absolutely freezing cold. And you'd be doing movement in [the gymnasium]. It was... a boys' [evening] club that we had during the day, with this big freezing cold gymnasium. And we'd be doing hours and hours of movement with Jean, and freezing cold. I mean, it wouldn't be allowed now, under any [educational] regulations or whatever. And it was absolutely brilliant.

Joan never came to the school. Joan was dead against it...even though she was very close to Jean Newlove, who was our movement teacher – and of course Jean worked with Rudolph Laban, and Jean was Theatre Workshop's movement woman. And Joan was very close to her. She had a baby at the time she used to carry around, who was in fact later the famous singer...

AP: Kirsty MacColl.

PH: Kirsty MacColl yes. Anyway, Joan would have nothing to do with it. As I say, two major reasons, 1) Joan was always against anything that was established. Even something established more than ten minutes. And 2) 'You can't teach acting', [she'd say]. I mean, Joan [was] a mass of paradoxes, and would come out with these huge statements. And of course she was a great teacher, but 'You can't teach acting, nobody can learn how to do it'. Either they can do it [or not]. And then of course she was the one, more than anybody else in British theatre at the time, where you were constantly training in the morning if you were in her company. She's always a paradox Joan.

Secondly she didn't really respect [Margaret Bury, an actor from the Theatre Workshop company] who started the school [with Jean]. Mainly [or] partly because... she wasn't a very talented actress, but then nor was Joan funnily enough [given very big parts]. In *The Hostage*, this Margaret Bury who was the principal of the school, she [had] played Old Ropeen, which is typical because there's next to no lines. She improvised hardly any lines [in creating the play], so the part's tiny, with the one very [clear] objective which was to steal whatever anybody leaves lying around. She's a constant thief and you've got to watch out [for] her. Joan would love a character like that in a play, because it keeps everybody alive. You put a prop down you've lost [it], even a vital prop, if you put it down and don't watch it, you've lost it, because you had a little thief in the company who went round stealing things. One of the many devices to keep everybody alive [and aware]. And she... really didn't approve of this woman, even though the woman was in the company for quite a long time, because she married John Bury, Joan's designer. And Joan and Gerry [Raffles] – Joan's partner – very much did not want that marriage to take place. So Maggie Bury became the villain of the piece, who then started the school, alongside Jean Newlove, who was in favour with Joan mostly. You were never in favour with Joan all the time.

And the school was... remarkable, it was wonderful. I mean you know, in the first year we were the only [group]. We had Jean Newlove you know for, as I say, three hours a morning sometimes, and certainly every day. And Maggie Bury, for all she wasn't a good actress, she was a good teacher, and she was very much using all Joan's games and techniques and so on. So we had the most wonderful course.

I remember we did *Twelfth Night* in the first term, it was built a [lot] around the way [of] working in Theatre Workshop, where not only did you have your regular classes, but [the teachers] were on hand to work on [the play], everybody worked on the play. The teachers all worked on it, it was run like a company. We were extremely varied in talent, from absolutely hopeless [to a few very creative ones]. I think they must have accepted everybody that walked through the door practically [to start the school]. So there was only a few of us ended up staying in theatre... after that two year course. And we performed at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, our final productions on a Sunday night. There I really learnt Joan's methods from her earlier days, much more than I did with Joan when I worked with her [directly] as her assistant for two years in the early seventies. I learnt ...what was the approach behind the techniques of never, it seemed to me, solving a problem directly, never confronting a problem directly [with a superficial, end – product solution]. There's always another way to work. There's another way to go round. There's another way to make the scene or the character or whatever the actor's own, so that they find the solution alongside you in a way as a director. And... and that's kept me going all my life really.

Very funnily, a book's... has just come out by a man I [much admire as] a director [and] I much respect – Mike Alfreds. It's just come out, and [in] the intro to his book on the way of acting that he's devised in his life. And I was terribly complimented to see that there's a mention of that [time] when... during the eighties I did when I taught at LAMDA, he was a fellow director, and a very conventional one at the time. And he

heard about my rehearsals and used to come and watch them. And he says in that book this opened the door to a complete change in the way he directed, and that's in that very good book that's just come out called *Every Night Different*, I think it's called. I was the channel from Joan to his work, really.

So there [were] two glorious years mostly in [the] freezing cold [school], in the winter anyway. London still had fogs in those days, god help us. And then I went off to work in three - weekly rep, again as actor/ASM, [with the director] called David Scase who was [from the] very early days of Theatre Workshop. He ran Liverpool Playhouse, which was I think the oldest working repertory theatre in the country. It was three weeks rehearsal; I mean terribly grand compared to the Intimate Theatre, Palmers Green. Positively art.

But very interestingly, David, like quite a few people when they graduated from Joan, didn't particularly use her methods, except very occasionally. He was terribly conventional. You know you spent three days plotting, doing the plotting with [actors being] allowed to ask a question occasionally. With good actors, very good actors. In fact one of the main people in the company was Patrick Stewart who's now you know terribly famous, and so on, and was very good at [that] time. And another man who went to the Royal Shakespeare along with Patrick, called Charles Thomas, who regrettably committed suicide fairly young. [There were ten permanent members of the company the season I was there (1963 – 1964) and we did plays by Shakespeare, John Osborne, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Pinero, James Bridie, Noel Coward and Brendan Behan's *The Hostage*. No thrillers or farces.]

And I was... I think, because I was from East 15 Acting School, with what it taught, which was essentially what Joan did, without meaning to be at all, I think I was a tiny [piece of] grit on [David Scase's] conscience. He'd try and give me different ways of doing things, which was really [unnecessary] and I didn't realise what was going on. I didn't realise. It was my first proper job really, forgetting the weekly rep. And as I say I was a bit the carrier of his conscience. And so he'd [treat me differently]. I remember I had a tiny part in a play [and] he'd suggest that... and in fact he's one of those directors – and there's many of them – where he'll say at the first [rehearsal], when he starts to plot, 'Now, I don't want you to [act big] I don't want you to worry about [the] end product, about the [first] performance, we'll just work quietly and get to know the play and so on.' And well, coming from [the training] I came from, [I thought] fine, just work quietly. Just talk totally normal [and] realistic level, and worry not that you're in a fairly large theatre eventually, you know. I think we used to rehearse on the stage as well of that large theatre... yes, we did.

But in fact it wasn't true. I started [quietly but] everybody else was acting much louder all around me, and acting [and really] Acting! Properly, you know. And I thought 'Oh well that's not what we've been told to do, and I'll do what we've been told to do'. And I was very used to listening to the director from my training, and [accepting] whatever eccentric, it would seem, idea, [even] when you've no idea why they were doing what they were doing, you listened and tried very hard to understand, and do exactly what was said, which was usually to explore in some way or other. But it got very [strange as] he gave me all manner of different motivations for each entrance line - he was sort of saying 'Well, imagine that you're an amateur actor and that you've come on to save the show'. [I was]... a groom looking after a horse called *Dandy Dick*, a Pinero play. And I couldn't understand what was going on, because I was getting [more and more instructions like] 'imagine that you're drunk now, and you come on and you shout and carry on'. He wasn't giving this kind of instruction to anybody else, he just assumed that was the way to make this actor work, because I was from... Theatre Workshop, or at least from their heritage. And it wasn't 'til ages later I realised what was going on, he [simply] wanted me to speak up. That was all it was. Like everybody else. You know he

was giving me a ridiculous motivation to speak up, because he was deceiving himself over what he really wanted [when he told us to speak realistically quietly at the first rehearsal].

I noticed that later in my life, several people who worked with Joan who I worked with – Brian Murphy, Maxwell Shaw, [who worked] with Joan in the fifties and sixties – they swung right [back] when they directed themselves they went right back to totally conventional, what we'd call in those days, 'Basil Dean' type directing, where you did the moves and learnt them and didn't ask too many questions, and got on with practicing it. And that was a... it was interesting...

I don't know what I put that down to. I mean it maybe partly that Joan was so extraordinary, and such a paradox, and I was devoted to her way of working, but even when I worked directly with her later, it never entered your head to imitate her, because it would be such a foolish [thing to do], it would be a fool's errand. You couldn't be that person, you couldn't [foretell] the next extraordinary paradoxical thing Joan would say. And she was [also] extremely devious and manipulative, and would say one thing one day and something completely different the next, and have no worry about contradicting herself. If that form of truth was useful the next day she'd use that. So fortunately you were never going to imitate [her], there wasn't that terrible danger of you trying to be a Joan Littlewood, you'd be a complete idiot if you did try to do that. Perhaps [her] actors just felt that she was so much in a world of her own that they swung back to total safety, to what they'd observed and probably experienced elsewhere [before working with Joan], [a] totally conventional way of working, and [they became] more conventional than the most conventional in some ways. [They] would [even] at times be inclined to do that bad thing that sometimes actor/directors are inclined to do, sort of get up and act a bit out and show you how to do it, you know. Anyway that was just... that was David Scase, and Liverpool.

I realised at the end of [the season] as a actor/[ASM], I realised that I was... my third revelation really in a few years, that I was in fact a director and not an actor at all. And that only came about because we used to do youth theatre [shows] on Saturday mornings, every third or fourth Saturday morning. Very conventional compared to now. The kids were [not directly] involved, we'd do little shows for them [with] the actors in the company, you'd do Irish drama, or you'd do Theatre Workshop. I directed that one. And I realised that the three Saturday mornings I'd cobbled together to illustrate something to young people... it was real 'teaching' stuff, [the kids were not actively involved], it wasn't that kind of thing. Joan wouldn't have approved at all. [I realised though] that my thoughts were much more on [the Youth Theatre shows] than [on] playing Theseus in the Dream or whatever I was doing at the time.

And so I... thought 'well, how do I become a director?'. And I thought 'well, I go back to East 15 Acting School and learn to direct there', I'd go and be a teacher there, which I did for two years. And I learnt enormously and carried out exactly, what was now almost orthodox East 15 methods, which were Joan's methods, except Joan's methods were based on [constant] change. So they [never became] orthodox.

And I then had experience for a year which was interesting, which was now... just a minute... '67, the end of the main period you're dealing with. And that was an interesting year. I'd started teaching as well at LAMDA, quite a good school. Schools all go up and down according to who's Principal. It was in a pretty good state at that time. Michael Macowan, the famous older director there who'd been hugely important in its history, his last act in office during the [summer holiday]. I don't know what he was still doing there, and it was the end of his last day, [when]... I went to see him, and he got out a bottle of whisky, which we practically finished off in a couple of hours, and had a

great... wonderful conversation, at the end of which he booked me to go and teach there the following term. [Laughs] Poor next director had me lumbered on him, on the strength of a bottle of scotch!

And that was interesting. It... it was a good run of the mill-ish, British drama school. More inclined towards the 'stand here, move there'. Yes, mostly they were conventional directors and that's why what I was doing was [talked of] as 'oh gosh, what's going on in that room'? Some of the... students complained about me, because I wasn't, you know, [what] they thought [was] professional theatre [which] was plotting the play in the first three days... reading it and plotting it, come hell and high water you know. I'm not even sure I had a reading. And like Alfred's, those sessions, they became sort of known in the school, he used to come and watch me rehearse, which was an immense compliment as it turned out to be. And it changed his way of thinking about directing.

And then I directed in few [regional repertory theatres], which also taught me [a lot]. And... what was very interesting was that I... was it the first professional job directing? I think it was. It was at Lincoln Theatre Royal, and this is in '67, April/May time. And it was *The Rivals*, a totally wonderful play. I mean, tremendous to be given it as a first time [professional] director. But he'd seen a production of mine at East 15 Acting School, of a Henry Fielding play, and so [had] booked me for that, which was very [enterprising of him]. He's just finished being principal of RADA, that gentleman – Nicholas Barter. [It was cast from the resident company]... and it was actors of all ages, and [some] of them from Cambridge and Oxford and so on, as often happened in those days.

And so what I did was, I did 'my book'. I knew about [the] conventional way of working as well of course from my rep experience. And so I did my book out properly with an empty page on one side [on which I planned the moves]; I did moves for the whole play. And [it had] a very good simple set, where the rules of which were terribly simple – like a Shakespearean stage, terribly simple. It was a... good restoration comedy set, even though this is more Georgian theatre, *The Rivals*. And... well it is Georgian theatre. And, [for example] I did the moves so that Sir Antony and Mrs Malaprop enter up stage left, [through an] archway door. And they come down [- stage] together and somebody else comes in [stage right], and one of them moves across down left, and so on and so forth. All written out, thinking 'if I try what I want, the way I want it to work with this range of actors' – most of whom wouldn't have come anywhere near doing an improvisation or something – 'I'll see if I can nudge them into it'. [But if I can't, I'd have my book of planned moves to fall back on.]

And I'm a young director of course, and they may have known [a] first time [one]. Well you've got no authority that you're walking into the room with. But [if] I had grey hair like now I would have had more authority automatically, you know. And I started on a very simple exercise of getting them to do it... to do the skeleton of the play, the actions of the play, in their own words, [with their own moves], and do the whole play in this way. And they [went along with it] and I... I think I'm quite good at making something into a game, without people knowing where I'm going. I've got that bit of deviousness from Joan, I suspect. But... they were a bright lot, and they got quite excited about it, they quite enjoyed this. It was unusual, but they didn't believe I'd go on doing this, you know, I'd turn serious after a while and start directing properly. [Laughs]

So I did that, I started on that and lo! and behold I kept going. And I kept it going for about two or three days, by which time they could do the whole play, in their own words, and moving where they'd chosen to move on a fairly free set, with very little furniture, if any. What was really fascinating to me, because I hadn't expected this quite, although it was pretty obvious, but a good half of what they did was exactly what I'd written in my book, the moves I'd decided at home you know. Another third was a

mirror image of what I'd written in my book, because [for example] if Sir Antony [and Mrs Malaprop entered together], [and] if he happened to come on up – stage [of] Mrs Malaprop, you got a certain pattern. If he came on [down – stage of her], if it was the other way round, if she came on upstage of him, you got a mirror image of what you've got in your [director's] book.

And this was terrific for me, because it made you realise just how once an actor's got the basic rules of the style, if you're doing it in the round, or [if] you're doing it as I say with something as simple as an archway at the back and two downstage arches, and you've got rules about the park is over there, and the big house is over there, or whatever it is. You know, all that plotting is [unnecessary]. 90% of it turns out to be what anybody logical would do. I mean if [Hedda Gabler] was going to burn the manuscript, she usually tends to go to the fire to burn the manuscript you know. Or when she says 'Sit on the sofa with me, [then] it's on the sofa, and the other lady sits because [Hedda]'s the more dominant character, or whatever. An awful lot of it is terribly obvious.

I enjoy doing Shaw very much, of course he give loads of moves. [But] I try to start [fresh] well, I do start in the same way, a much freer way. And you discover that 90% of your moves are what Shaw actually wrote in his [instructions], he was very good at that kind of stagecraft from his period. And any decent leading lady knows she goes to the door [to exit] she goes to the door, turns and [starts] her final line, opens the door properly, and then finishes the line so she can close the door 'bang' on her final laugh line, or whatever. You know, you do both what is truthful and then what is theatrically obvious creeps in. And that's how he wrote it, that's what he meant to happen. And you go back to the book, lo and behold!, there it is, what you've spent three days discovering is 90% already written down. But you've discovered it. And the actor's discovered it, and it's their own. You don't have that boring time of having to work to make it your own, it is your own.

And in that year [1967] when I was teaching at LAMDA, I directed at Manchester Library Theatre a huge epic children's play. And very oddly I directed a production at the Royal Court. I say 'oddly' because of course the Royal Court was the other end of the revolution, so called, of '56. And do you know, I forget to this day why I got to [do that] oh yes, I assisted on a main stage production at the Royal Court as well. And that was an eccentric experience.

It was very good because I'd had by the [end of] '68 I'd had experience of the two major revolutionary theatres – remembering that the fringe hardly existed in those days at all, it came in late in '68. And Joan was the mother and grandmother of much that happened in the fringe. And indeed the grandmother of [the] Theatre in Education, [movement], which also I got a glimpse of... but Oh What a Lovely War massively influenced the Theatre in Education movement when it started in the mid sixties, at the Coventry, Belgrade.

So I'd done the two major new play theatres, and I'd done the extreme of archaic old fashioned repertory as well. And it wasn't 'til years later it dawned on me what a terrific experience all that was you know. And it led into [a great deal more work but]... it was the Joan strand that won out. When I started in sixty [nine], very beginning of [it], I was appointed [at] the end of '68 to run the Lincoln Theatre Royal, having only done two professional productions by then... or three... oh no, I suppose the Royal Court as well, it'd be four. It was a school show I did [on the main stage], but it was Live Like Pigs by John Arden, which they'd done as a premier eight years before. And I did a production which... oh no, we rehearsed upstairs; it went on the main stage that's right. But only during the day it was on... but it was an interesting experience. And in a way Joan, as

you would expect really, totally won out in my life and the kind of work that I did thereafter.

And Lincoln, starting as I say, I was appointed at the very end of '68 for two and a half years there, which seemed like a very long time when you're 30, and which is ridiculous because later I did 25 years at Theatre Royal, Stratford East. But it seemed an enormous long time [then]. I [thought 'I] may get stale', and I left [which] was ridiculous. But I had the glory of an almost permanent company for two and a half years. And I could work in the way I wanted, and we'd do warm-ups [and improvising in rehearsal], which in rep was regarded as, you know, you can't [do that], how can you possibly afford time to do a warm up? And so you've got to get on with it. [But] Thursday mornings we took out to do sort of a session for our own good.

I remember Peter Brook's Empty Space came out around that time, and I gave my assistant director, Clare Venables, the task of 'you read that book, it looks like four long chapters, and so we know about it, devise four Thursday mornings where you do one chapter each and devise ways of us doing it physically. We've not got time to read it. You put us through it, and then we'll know about it'. And we... learned [together], we were a company, the glory of a company, up to 25 actors, which is unheard of now.

And we had two companies. Mostly they were divided into two because we'd open at the Lincoln Theatre Royal for two weeks, then we'd tour to about three or four other theatres in the region. Sometimes it was two [or] three, it depended. Sometimes they didn't tour at all. It was a very complicated schedule. It meant that a couple of times a year I could combine [the] lot together and have 25 actors in the company. Mostly I had about 12, which even these days are regarded [now] as rather a lot, which is ridiculous.

And we did Laban and we had a wonderful time doing commedia dell'arte with a commedia dell'arte expert who came from Jacques Lecoq, via East 15 Acting School to us. Alison Steadman - now famous - was the actress-ASM, who played Ophelia while she was still getting the props. And it was a glorious experience. And that group still all know each other, and part of each other, like a university group might be you know. It was a glorious time that. I don't know if you wish me to go into...?

AP: Yes, no that's fantastic.

PH: Is it all right?

AP: Yes, that's great.

PH: Well, I did that for two and a half years. And I was on the Arts Council Drama Panel by then. And I did a lot for the Arts Council; I've got a lot of involvement in funding on the inside and the outside.

AP: Which year was this?

PH: I was on the Arts Council drama panel in... probably in 1970 roughly I was on that.

AP: Right.

PH: And I've been on ten Arts Council committees since [then].

AP: So was that just... was that the point – I can't quite remember – but there was the point that the Arts Council started really looking at fringe, and looking at the new things that happened.

PH: Yes. Yes, I was there pretty much around that time. At my third meeting was an amazing experience. Was it my third...? I was on the Young People's Theatre Panel to start with, that's right, and suddenly we were combined with the main panel. And it was my first or second main panel meeting, with what I regard as significant figures at the table, who were much more famous than me. Three critics, Bamber Gascoigne included.

And fascinatingly - which is a real reflection of the whole period that this is mainly dealing with - Joan Littlewood was on the list to receive money or not. I think she'd received the odd bit at one point way back, but very, very little. And suddenly she was on the list again wanting to [do a season with] Gerry Raffles – her partner, her lover, her manager, her everything – wanted to do a season at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East. But because she hadn't been a regularly funded [client before], she was on the New Developments list.

Now, she'd done Oh! What a Lovely War, Taste of Honey, all the famous shows, and all that work that we know her for. And she was on New Developments! There were 12 companies on New Developments I remember. One of which was Michael Croft's National Youth Theatre, [which wanted to start a professional company] nearby to the British Library in the Shaw Theatre.

AP: Yes.

PH: And he wanted to start a professional theatre at the Shaw Theatre, with graduates from the National Youth Theatre. Now, he'd never directed professionally. And he wasn't a very good director professionally. He was better with young people, and had no natural talent for [it], he wasn't a brilliant director. A good man, a good campaigning man, but not a brilliant director. And so he was on the list. And I remember there was a group called The Yorkshire Gnomes were on the list, who nobody [on the panel had heard of before]. There was about 24 of us in the room, none of us had seen their work or heard anything about it. Nor had we [heard] of all the rest on the list. We only knew Joan Littlewood, Michael Croft, and then these other dozen, ten, or dozen companies who nobody'd seen, none [of the officers had seen them either]. And it was the most lunatic conversation that we're meant to be discussing, what do we give to this... pack of twelve companies. And I was a very new boy, and still in a listening mode, and then I began to realise that Joan Littlewood was not accepted per se as a good thing. It slowly dawned on me 'I'm going to have to defend her'. And it was [shocking]... the discussion went on, and it took me ages to gather my forces, because it was like, to me, trying to defend Stanislavski or [Brecht, which I never imagined I'd have to do].

AP: Yes, of course.

PH: [I couldn't believe it]...you know, why am I... Brecht... what am I... why do I, junior me have [to] in this company, to defend Joan Littlewood? Well! And there were a few in favour of her – Oscar Lewenstein the producer was on the [panel... who'd produced Joan's...Joan's Mother Courage when she did that. And another couple of people. But it was mainly the people on the Young Theatre panel who were the adventurous ones in favour, including the famous American and British actress Constance Cummings from films. She was pro-Joan Littlewood through her left wing husband. But suddenly it became clear that there was possibly a majority present who were not in her favour.

And I remember at one point, I said, when I gained courage, I said 'look, this conversation is completely ridiculous. Why are we having it? We can't decide between these 12 companies, when you've got ten companies we've never heard of, [and] a man... an amateur' – which I'm afraid he was – 'who wants to start a rep in the Euston Road, which I don't think is a geographical priority for the Arts Council, and a world famous director.' And J.W. Lambert, the critic, who was chairing the meeting said - the three critics [on the panel] were against Joan, entirely against her - and he said in response to [my comments] 'We don't all think she's any good Philip.' And I said, 'Jack, I didn't say she was any good. I said she was world-famous.' And I said, 'If you went to Moscow now, or New York, and you talk to anybody there who could name three English theatre directors, they can name Joan Littlewood.' And the meeting went on.

And they wanted to... she'd applied for... just a minute, £54,000 I think, and we had £82,000 or something in our kitty. 54,000 to do a year's work at Stratford East, to return there. And they voted for [what] somebody suggested, one of these critics, giving her £13,000 to test her out for three months. This was an [insulting suggestion]. I mean, I was apoplectic. And they had a vote, and it went six to seven against Joan. But I'd voted against. And Jack, in the chair, said, 'Philip! What are you doing?' He said, 'You've kept us here an hour overtime, going on arguing about Joan [Littlewood]. Now you've voted against her. What are you playing at?' And I said, 'Jack, I will not... I will not have my name attached to voting three months work to Joan Littlewood to test her out.' And I said, 'When that goes in The Guardian...' and I said looking at him very [hard], I said, 'When it will go in The Guardian [tomorrow] Jack, I will not have my name on the list of people that did that.'

They didn't rescind the vote, they just started talking again. And I'm almost ashamed that all I got was six months for her. But that was the attitude. It's very fascinating that it was the critics who were against her. I mean, some critics were terribly pro, but who weren't there, like Ken Tynan you know. And Harold Hobson [was] against her, having attacked like mad when she went to [the] Paris [Festival in 1955] to represent Britain, apparently. 'What is this dreadful company from the East End... this ragamuffin company from the East End of London doing going to Paris?' Later he came round to her work completely, and became a great advocate of hers.

[But] Joan would work for hours to get two conversations happening at the same time, so you could just catch on to both of them, and you had to work quite hard to do so, and make [both of them understood] and she'd work in a sort of jazz-type way to make it overlap and intertwine and so on and so forth. And it's a classic example of completely different judgements, that they felt that – and those critics probably felt – there [were] obviously professional rules she disobeyed. So clearly she can't be that good, you know. Not being able to see, that's exactly what she wanted to do, and that she worked very hard to make it look like it was improvised when it wasn't.

And they... because they heard you know, stories about improvising going on in rehearsal, and occasionally in performance. Well, in performance [it] would be when necessary. [The actor was not to] ignore the fact that Brendan Behan [was] shouting out [from the audience] in *The Hostage* about how dreadful his own play is, answer him back and get on with his dreadful play, or whatever. Or if somebody's you know, suddenly goes into a fit of laughter and can't stop you incorporate it in what you're doing, in some way, depending on the style of the play that you're in. And it became a myth about Joan that it was 'Oh you said what you wanted on stage'. That was complete rubbish. You worked very hard in rehearsal to make it sound as though it was totally fresh, and she'd you know, give constant notes to make sure it stayed fresh. And actors sometimes found it so infuriating because the laugh they got regularly every night was when she'd attack them and change it, and they wouldn't get a laugh for three nights. But three nights later they'd [discover something] and the laugh would be fresh again. Then she'd change it again. Drive them potty!

But there was, beyond that, there was an observance that you know, you must be theatrically truthful. If props [are missing or] if blatantly something's gone wrong on stage you incorporate, you use it, you make something of it. And the actor Howard Goorney who wrote *The Theatre Workshop Story* was the most brilliant at that. He loved something going wrong, it was an opportunity... and you shared it with the audience, you involved them in the problem. And the audience [would say] 'Oh we'll never forget that night they got involved in the problem of keeping of the play going', sort of thing, you know. And all that that influenced the rest of my career, and I then went... Shall I just leap to my time at Stratford East and leave it?

AP: Yes. Yes, go for it.

PH: But I suppose that having directed several reps and spent six months... six years freelancing all over the world, having been invited by Joan Littlewood and Gerry Raffles three times to take over Theatre Royal, Stratford East, before and [by Joan] after Gerry died. And after Gerry died as well, she wanted Shelagh Delaney and I to run it together, which idea she proposed. And Shelagh said, '[What] a ridiculous idea, don't be stupid. You can run it yourself, Philip.'

AP: I didn't realise Shelagh Delaney was still involved at all in the theatre.

PH: Yes, well Joan felt she stayed friends with Shelagh. I mean they fell out at times, but as I say falling out with Joan [was a common occurrence]. I know some people took it very seriously, dear Nigel Hawthorne took it very seriously when Joan suddenly attacked him. And he took it to heart, and for several years she didn't speak to him. And he was very, very upset about that, but wrote her a letter not long before his death, and there was reconciliation towards the end.

When I was running Theatre Royal I used to go in and out of favour every six months. But usually I was happier 'out', because when you were 'in' you were only waiting to go out. At least you knew where you were when you were out. And indeed a classic example of that is that having asked me to run the place, and with that extraordinary invention of hers, I think she felt I was... in some way too straight, certainly not sexually so, but I was too organised, [too diplomatic]. When they approached me to be [their] assistant, when Gerry approached me to be assistant to both of them – and I remember

the moment exactly because my heart [sank, and my head was elated]. Did my [heart] sink or what? I think my heart sank, yes. I thought 'oh no, don't tell me I've got to go through all that, of you know, working with Joan'. You knew you were going to go through [the mill]. I'd run two theatres by then, and that wasn't what was concerning me. It concerned my friends, 'But you can't go and be an assistant to anybody, Philip, you've run two theatres...' and [other career stuff], which was absolutely rubbish. I mean, you're offered to work with Joan Littlewood, you work with Joan Littlewood, whatever it is to do. You'll regret it for the rest of your life if you don't. And I remember feeling at the same moment, I think my heart sank and, 'Oh God it's going to be hell!'. And my head sang with how totally wonderful it's going to be. Funnily it was the other way around from the way you'd expect.

I knew I was going to do it straight away, to be assistant to both of them. Theatres had so much less staff then, and [Gerry] was running it as administrator and manager, and she was the artistic director of course. And what an extraordinary job to be assistant to her in rehearsal, and assistant to him in dealing with all the boring stuff. And in particular he said to me, 'Well you know how to handle the Arts Council Philip, and I can't do that kind of thing.' So one of my jobs was handling the Arts Council.

And indeed when Gerry died and it sort of slaughtered Joan, she approached [me] again about running the place, but indirectly that time. I'd been out for a meal with Joan and Gerry about running the place. And I turned it down three times. I can't believe it now, but like Julius Caesar in the Capitol, no to the crown three times. And didn't do it 'til six months later, [no] six years later. To my great surprise. I would have thought I would have leap at it normally, but it wasn't in me. I'd just spent six and a half absolutely solid [year] working, running two theatres and working with Joan for two years, and I was just [tired and] I was burnt out really. I couldn't do that kind of commitment, oddly.

But funnily enough [many] years later, after I'd been running it for about [fifteen] years, [around 1995] she attacked me in some interview she did in the Standard, and called me a shit, and said that I'd wormed my way in to the Theatre Royal. I'd come from nowhere and wormed my way in and taken over. I suspect genuinely forgetting that she'd asked me... that I'd been asked three times to do it. [Laughs] But you didn't take offence. I didn't, oh sorry, I didn't take offence, because I always used to say that knowing Joan was like knowing King Lear on the Heath. That you know, you'd wait for your turn to be abused, and it's going to be wonderful language when she does it. And there could well be a grain of truth in [the abuse] about you and your spirit, or your balls, or [your parentage]. It was well worth listening to. And you knew you probably [would survive], you would come back in favour, and you know you knew you'd come and go. And I was a little surprised when people took such – but she could be vicious – but took such offence.

Very tragic in Nigel's case, because he really was upset about it, because he said she completely altered his way to act... he wouldn't... she and Sheila Hancock both said the same thing that they learnt about acting from Joan. It revolutionised what they'd been doing for years. They realised they were barking up the wrong tree – [they were] quite good [when] barking up the wrong tree, and quite successful at it too. But they nevertheless reordered themselves after working with Joan.

I'd become Chair of the Board [around 1977 after] John Bury the designer was on the board. Joan was on the board, [when] I became Chair of the Board. And then during that time Joan, with the third director [after her reign] who was battling to keep it going, despite Joan in a way, she attacked the third director – disgracefully in many ways – who left. [But the board] couldn't work out whether [the third director had actually] left or not, it was such a dramatic scene we couldn't quite tell what the end result was – the

board couldn't. [So] I went out for ten days. I said I'd go out and make sure the wages were paid as chair. And it turned into 25 years. I started doing [the planning] and I accepted [the job] for three months, while we appointed somebody. I still didn't think I wanted it. And it was during that time two things happened, 1) the Arts Council tried to close it, and I didn't dare tell them [I was temporary] because they knew me well by then, [and]... they thought I'd got the job. And I didn't dare tell them I hadn't when I went to this meeting, because I realised at the meeting, 'My God they're going to close it!'. So I suddenly came out with a policy, and all the shows I was going to do, which I invented on the spot. Any show I'd ever heard anybody say they wanted to do, it was in the programme. So I lied like fury. And they gave me a year and a half to turn it round. And I discovered through that process I did want the job. And so I did [it for 25 years].

And I think the main thing about that is the wonderful phrase [Joan] said to me in the five hour interview I had to be her assistant or not, her knowing [at the time] that Gerry was championing me to do it – had already asked me to do it in a way, but there had to be a meeting of course. And in the middle of that she came out with this wonderful phrase which I use often. She sat forward in her chair and [beat the air as she] said, 'You see, I found my life on the rock of change!' And that wasn't a paradox to Joan. The only safety was danger. That's not... it just wasn't a paradox. That's how she how she lived her life. And as I say, she was against anything that was established for more than ten minutes, an organisation or the way an actor said a line. She was automatically against it. The great thing about Stratford East is, if you want to "found your life on the rock of change", and if you had a community policy, [policy in – built in me before I met Joan]... I think I developed that aside from Joan, and then chimed in with Joan. I ran Lincoln like that, very much part of the community. It was my natural thing, always. And community involvement and education, and accessibility, and in every way you handle everything in your theatre. That was naturally part of me, amplified and increased by my two years with Joan.

But it's the perfect place to do it, because of all the boroughs in the country – 600-odd I think there are – where [Stratford East] is, is THE borough [Newham], with the most rapid changeover of population. So you're in the most changing borough in the country, the most changing community. You're in the one with the least white people. You're in [the one] with [the] highest percentage of young people. In the whole of Britain it does those three things that borough. So change is inbuilt to the borough. So if you have a community policy, change is inbuilt to you, and keeping up with the borough and involving the new communities arriving. And there's over a hundred languages spoken in schools in that borough. I mean, it's beyond belief, it's wonderful, it's wonderful. It's like riding a bucking horse, it's brilliant. It stayed dangerous, which is why I believe I stayed. There was always something to do, there was always the Arts Council to battle with, and I led lots of campaigns in British theatre during that time [from that base], and spoke out more than anybody except perhaps Peter [Hall], well not as noticeably as Peter Hall, but as much as anybody against the Arts Council while accepting money from them you know. And I always used to say that biting the hand that feeds you is part of the artistic director's job. And of course I got a lot of that from Joan as well. But she brought out an awful lot that was natural in me already, which was great.

And of course as it changed and my job became involving particularly black and Caribbean, then African and Asian communities – now it's even more varied with Central Europe and Eastern Europe as well... involving them became the natural campaign. And I had 25 wonderful years there in those terms where I learnt about my own racism, which I had to learn about, and to dig it out, which you never, never finish doing I don't believe in life. And it was a wonderful privilege that, that there was a real... cause

[which] just landed on me, you know. And a cause from which I could learn a great deal and go on learning.

And then in the last ten years of my 25 I'm very proud of the whole musical theatre development course that I started, with the great help from two lecturers from New York University, who come over every year still, in July to take this musical theatre directors course [for composers and] writers course, with a new group every year. And [the lecturers] love it.

The only thing that I [want to] add [here], [as] I'm just trying to summarise and finish this, is that there was, alongside the glory of [the job was] the privilege of putting on what I wanted, new work. For the first 20 or so years I didn't consult the board about what I was going to put on. I didn't tell them. I mean, it was possibly the only theatre in the land subsidised with a board and public money [where the Board was not involved in that]. And I used to say 'well, they'll get the brochure like everybody else'. Tremendously arrogant. But I didn't dream of discussing the artistic policy with the board, because the main thing of the artistic policy – and that theatre remains exceptional – because with Joan there over 20 years, me there 25, if you skip the six year gap if you see what I mean – but I was [from] there, I was in the heritage – and now the new director who's been there three years, Kerry Michael [was] my protégé and worked with me for seven or so years. That theatre's been handed on inside one heritage. There's nowhere in the country which is like that. Where there's an inheritance of a very broad inheritance of absolute involvement in the community, new work all the time, take risks, be dangerous, be difficult with the Arts Council, and so on.