

## Johnny Dennis – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Matthew Webb**

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Actor. An Ideal Husband; Maria Callas; censorship; Charlie Chaplin; critics; image; Tito Gobbi; Bernard Miles; music hall; Laurence Olivier; opera; preparation; rehearsals; stardom; television; theatre atmosphere; theatre etiquette; theatre-going; RSC; Tosca.

MW: OK, could you just start very briefly, just by telling me a little bit about your first experience of actually going to the theatre?

JD: Going to the theatre? Taken by my father to see *Where the Rainbow Ends* at the Golders Green Hippodrome when I was about four or five and being scared out of my mind, by the... It's a pretty scary piece for a child to be involved with, and that kind of put me off for a bit... [pause] But going to the theatre I suppose would be being taken by my teacher, a wonderful man called Don Kirkman, who encouraged me to listen to music and go into the theatre. So to have a teacher like that to take me to see Shakespeare and whatever was a great, great help and that was that... that got me hooked.

MW: So at that stage you... you sort of went a little bit from the theatre itself in terms of performance to the more musical?

JD: Yeah, well yes. The development is thus that I was... I was... my folks were very working class, there was no... The only history of theatre in the family was that my father worked very briefly in the thir... 1930s with a wonderful Shakespearean company called Sir Frank Benson Shakespearean Players on tours and stuff like that. So that probably got me going. That probably is the gene in there somewhere. But otherwise he... it was... During the thirties it was very difficult for families to make a living, so he came up to London, and they moved into North London, where I was born, and he worked as a labourer on London Underground and my mother worked as a cleaner in flats and... so they struggled. And I had no real intentions really of going into the theatre at all. But again, as I mentioned through the amazing contact with this one teacher... I was hopeless at school, the only thing I was good at was sport - mad keen on that, which was the only thing great. But my teacher - my class teacher - was also the drama teacher, and he got me involved. That's... this is where... You talk to a lot of actors and they'll tell you they've met that one person who moves them into a direction and he can truth... I can truthfully say he moved... my whole life has worked from meeting him and being directed by him.

MW: That's incredible...

JD: Because he then... he was also a director at the Tower Theatre in Canonbury - the Tavistock Repertory Company - which was an amateur company in North London. He was a well known director there, and cast me in small parts in his plays while I was still at school. So I made my first appearance there in 1957. [pause] By this time I was working, doing labouring, and all sorts of amazing jobs. [Laughs] But the work in the theatre in the evening - even walking on - was an amazing experience and with a very good company, so that was really how it got... that's how it all started.

MW: So is that sort of the highlight of your day in particular, because you...

JD: Oh yes! I mean, I was selling newspapers in Piccadilly Circus and I was doing all sorts of amazing things. You know, very good life-building experiences actually for anybody, because it makes you appreciate what... whatever comes next.

MW: Well certainly, because it's always very interesting to hear how people got started in the theatre and you say you attribute this because of your working class background, you attribute this, almost solely to one individual...

JD: Well, yeah, I was keen... I mean, I was very hungry to do something, I knew I didn't want to stay [gesticulates downwards] stay down there. And I knew that there was only one way up and that was sport, which I tried briefly but that wasn't very successful. But the theatre, I just decided that that was what I wanted to do, because I saw that there was a world... I mean, I worked very hard all day, and in the evening was lost in the world - the imaginary world, as it were - of the theatre. And the theatre, that particular theatre company, the Tavistock Rep, started a lot of very good people on their careers: Michael Gambon, Tom Courtney, Sian Phillips and the like. All of them were doing exactly what I was doing, I mean Michael Gambon was a lathe operator, but he was a skilled... being a skilled man. But he decided he wanted to be an actor. So we met the right people at the right time, we were cast in very small parts until you eventually got a 'showy' part, and the showy part came along in 1962... Albert Camus, play called Caligula, which was the story of a mad Roman Emperor and I played Caligula, and it stopped traffic! I mean, I can only describe - being very modest - that it was an amazing production, and it got national press, and it was something you don't... wouldn't happen nowadays. I suppose it might happen on reality television, but from an amateur, being an amateur in 1962, within two months I was rehearsing for a West End play!

MW: Oh that's, that...

JD: I mean, that doesn't happen anymore. That was... The next influence in my life was a man called Bernard Miles - Lord Miles of the Mermaid Theatre - and he was... that would have been an immense influence. Again, it's like... we're talking of influences here, of meeting people who just... just direct you in a different direction, and Bernard was amazing. Again, it was a very small part, but what an amazing experience, and that was professional experience. And I was very, very lucky.

MW: So you'd describe that really as being your big break...?

JD: That was my biggest break ever to play that play, and then to meet Bernard Miles and be told... I mean, I had no... I had no training at all, no training at all, the only training I had was the five years at Tavistock Repertory Company playing small parts. I mean, it's just... just mind-blowing! But I was wise enough... I was wise enough - I'm not the brightest of people, but I realised in... in '62 that I've got to do something about learning the trade - the craft as it were - and I did know someone who was running a repertory company, a weekly repertory company in Bangor, Northern Ireland. Six weeks and six plays, which was, like, learning one play during the day, playing another one at night, and then the next day you learnt the second act of the play you're going to play next week, and throughout the week it's non-stop. Originally I was cast as a small part actor and collector of props, which I used to collect in a handcart from the auction rooms, it's because it was a... it was a small theatre, so they had to... didn't have any money so you had to go and beg for pieces of furniture to go and put in the play. As well as painting the set, cleaning the loos and making the tea. Unfortunately they hired... unfortunately for him they hired me... They hired a London actor from RADA to play the juvenile leads and he came in and did three days there and had a nervous breakdown and was put on the plane back again. And I then had to play his parts - now, talk about luck! - as well as clean the toilets, make the tea and collect the props. So I was playing Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and getting good reviews. But I was also learning... learning the job at the sharp end in front of a professional... in a professional company, in front of a paying audience. Now I feel sometimes I should go to Northern Ireland to Bangor to apologise to everybody in the streets [Laughs] for the performances I gave. Some of them...

MW: Perhaps to bless it?

JD: Were pretty... pretty bad. But I was learning at that sharp end. So to have practical experience at that age... I mean, even I was quite wise enough to realise that that was a lucky break. And from that, amazingly, the Stage Manager there was a man who was very keen to build - or rebuild - a theatre in Greenwich, the Greenwich Theatre. And got me involved, and said, 'When you come back to London, why don't we just all get together and fundraise?'. And they got together, and they took a room [in] a pub, called The Green Man in Blackheath Hill and they ran weekly music halls. And that's how I got involved in music hall, that's again another immense change of career. And five - six - years there we raised enough money to rebuild the Greenwich Theatre. And suddenly... But by this time, hooked on doing music hall. Quite keen to do this. Quite like it. Then you have another period of being out of... Like all actors we struggle of being out of work. And... and things get very tough. And I heard that they had... they were asking people to audition for the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden as extras. But I also was told there was a subsidised restaurant in the basement of this theatre which was very good. So by this time I was hungry, you know - I was really living on cornflakes and bread and jam, and of course you don't get any money from the government, you know, if you're a struggling actor. Anyway, I auditioned, and the director was Franco Zeffirelli, he took a fancy and said 'Yes, we'll have him.'. And that lead to *Tosca* with Maria Callas and Tito Gobbi in 1964, which changed my life, because at that moment I never heard really too much of classical music...

MW: That's incredible...

JD: And then I was an actor in the scenes with Gobbi in the second act, one of his nasty henchman. And playing a small part as a choir boy in the first half. And enjoying the subsidised restaurant, but enjoying the fact that suddenly one was in the most amazing hit, it ran in repertory for that year, and then came back a year later. And I had the schedule then, and looking at it, it's amazing that you piled in all these performances for very little, I mean it was 15 guineas a night or something, but that kept me going - very much so. And then had the amazing experience of meeting wonderful people. I remember one night - it was the big gala night - and I was looking up into the audience and there was all these flashlights going off and I thought, 'Oh that's strange'. It was a big enough stage, and I turned to my mate and said, 'What's all... what are they taking pictures for?'. And he said, 'They're not pictures, they're diamonds!'. [Laughs] So the audience lights were glinting in the diamonds. The Queen was there, and... I remember my dressing room was in the basement boiler room, and I made my way up the side door and I was in the corridor leading to the stage door and I was being pushed like this and we were jam-packed, because everybody wanted to see Maria Callas and Tito Gobbi. And in front of me there was a gentleman with a black Homberg hat and black coat and I couldn't see his white hair at the back and I couldn't see his face, but I was being pushed against him and I kept saying, 'Sorry, I'm being pushed'. He said, 'That's all right don't worry'. We got into the Floral Street and there was a policeman on a horse and the whole of Floral Street was full of people shouting and screaming. Suddenly we moved to the right into Bow Street - again we were being pushed, pushed, pushed, pushed - and I turned into Bow Street and there was like a bit of space and I turned to him and I said, 'I'm awfully sorry, I didn't really mean to push you' and he said 'That's quite all right' - and it was Charlie Chaplin. [Laughter]

MW: Goodness me...

JD: So I thought, 'this isn't bad', you see...

MW: So for you really, you went from the grass roots theatre to what you'd call perhaps the aristocracy so quickly?

JD: Well it is. I mean, it all happened from being hungry... And I remember on that particular occasion I let myself down badly and I said 'Did you enjoy the show?' and he said 'Yes, I think it was wonderful, the show, yes', and I said - my next line was even more classic! - I said 'I was in that' and he said 'Really? What did you do?' and I said 'Well, I was the choir boy who did the juggling with the plates in the first half and then...' He said 'I saw that, I liked that, very nice bit of business you did there' and I said 'Do you mind if I walk with you?' and I walked through Covent Garden - when it was a fruit market - back to his hotel at the Savoy and... a walk that I shall never forget! And that was all from meeting someone who said 'They're auditioning, but remember there's a subsidised restaurant'. So I was driven by food!

MW: Were you in awe of his presence? Were you influenced...?

JD: Oh absolutely. I mean, you know, I was mad keen on cinema. The fact that there was this man standing before me was just the most amazing experience. But then to meet also Callas and Gobbi, who at that moment I had really no idea who they were, but I certainly knew who Charlie Chaplin was.

MW: What would you say you... you managed to gain experience-wise from them? Or managed to learn...? Did they give you...?

JD: Oh star quality. Genius. I mean, it was the first time I'd ever seen genius on stage. There was one scene where she... I've got some cuttings here. [lifts up papers from the desk] That scene there - which I'm showing to you - which was very nice, but as it's on sound, but it's the second scene where Tito Gobbi (who was Scarpia), is seducing Tosca, and there's a scene - two of them, the whole of the act is just two of them. And it's some of the most great Puccini music, and on the stage you could almost see sparks flying off them. And we were all piled in the wings watching this and I realised... and suddenly the hairs on the back of your neck go and you think 'God I'm in the presence of some amazing acting'. And it was genius. And that was the first time I was ever in the presence of genius, I think.

MW: Would you say that's the moment for you?

JD: That changed my life really, I mean...

MW: So that, that was when you realised that that... this was what you wanted to do? For a career...

JD: This is really what I want to do. I mean that's it. By this time I'd made my decisions. But bearing in mind I've already been an actor [Laughs] two years - virtually two years - and that I'd had a bad spell out of work, meantime I'd had rep, West End, Opera... And then the next job was even better. It was a man called Brian Rix at the Whitehall Theatre, in that same year. And there was a girlfriend who was auditioning, and -the girlfriend is now quite a well-known playwright called Linda La Plant. And she was an actress. And she was auditioning, but I didn't have a spot for the audition so I went and crept in the back and waited until the end of the auditions, and he was about to leave and I said, 'Excuse me Mr Rix, can I audition?'. He said 'Do you have an appointment?' and I said, 'No'. He said 'You're a cheeky bugger aren't you?', and I said, 'Yeah'. He said, 'Oh, all right then, come on', so I did the audition and he said 'Right, you can start next week...' [Laughter] Pure fluke, again fluking, it is... this profession, as anybody will tell you, is luck...

MW: Nevertheless, as you said you hadn't had much previous training, did you...

JD: I'd had no training at all. Well I tell you one thing about Rixy, Brian Rix – Lord Rix now... That's such a disciplined art, farce is such a disciplined art. My God I learnt at the sharp end again! And I got a lot of telling off for being undisciplined, and I thought 'Well, if I've learnt nothing in my business, you've got to be disciplined'. In everything you do.

MW: Did you get disheartened, discouraged perhaps...?

JD: All the time.

MW: Because you said obviously you got... you got a few... very - some might say lucky, some might say due to talent - big breaks, but when you were looking for work before that and you've obviously described to me the poverty of your situation. Did you ever think about going in a different direction?

JD: Oh yeah. I mean, well, actors... all actors in those days did other things, they served in coffee bars and bars, but that's what actors do anyway nowadays. But their job, their craft, they know there's only one thing in their lives, and actors and actresses... I mean, it's worse for actresses I think, because it's a tough... it's a tough game anyway for anybody, but professional actresses it's a very tough world for them. And they give up on all sorts of things, like family and all sorts of things. So... but you have to turn your hand to anything, but I was [grabs hold of table] grabbing hold of the table now but I was very lucky. Because one thing led to another. Luckily if you are in the right place, people see you, and if they're generous enough they'll recommend you to the next job.

MW: So would you say that it was contact based?

JD: No, I didn't put myself about, but people saw you and said, 'What are you doing next' and I used to say 'Well, dunno really...'. Didn't have an agent. And 'Oh well, I'll put your name forward', and then... but you've still got to go and get the audition, and go to the audition and get the part - I mean none of these jobs are laid on you: you've got to do it, and they've got to take a risk on you as well. [pause] I've never been fired yet, but there's always a first time. [Smiles, laughter]

MW: Well hopefully that won't happen! Obviously you said that opened doors for you...did you at that time then go to the theatre and to the music hall more regularly?

JD: Yeah. I saw everything.

MW: In terms of a new perspective?

JD: Yeah, I saw everything. The only thing I realised, I didn't know anything. I really didn't know... I didn't really know diddly. So I went out and saw everything. I saw

Olivier - my biggest thing was going to the Vic to see Olivier, Richardson, Gielgud... And the foreign companies in those days were very lucky, they had a world theatre season where you would go and see an Italian Hamlet or Russian Hamlet. All in the original language, not know what was going on but be absolutely mesmerized by these performances, and suddenly you realise there are different acting styles. And that was the revelation. And then I went to Stratford a lot, I was a real... a real theatre-goer, a theatre buff.

MW: So you were more sort of a student of the art?

JD: I was a student of the art. And watching Olivier, not ever thinking I'd work with him. He was my model, and I'm afraid to say, a terrible influence in a way that I used to model my delivery on him, which I... I wasn't the only one. The speech patterns were learnt from seventy-eight records of Olivier doing Henry V. I had no speech training at all, and I am a Cockney: underneath this supposedly well-modelled aged voice is a Cockney accent, as in Michael Caine, you know. We revert to our Cockney accent when we don't, when we're working, as it were. And my job - and Michael does exactly the same thing, he never... he didn't have any training as well. But we learnt from listening to records.

MW: So for you, I mean, Laurence Olivier, were you able to ever, to meet him or to work with him?

JD: Oh yes, I worked with him at Chichester. And that was again another amazing experience but that's much further into the distance, into the seventies. By that time, totally in awe of him. Totally in awe.

MW: So would you say it was his performance or was it... perhaps something else that...?

JD: Oh, he gave some terrible performances... some terrible performances.

MW: Really?

JD: Tricky performances. But you knew that, he knew that. But he also gave some of the great performances. Again, a genius. When you see it on the stage, with Maria Callas, and Gobbi, Olivier or Gielgud or Richardson you can see the genius, you can feel the genius. But there would be a matinée or something where he just couldn't be bothered.

MW: So when you were touring, when you were looking for breaks, when you were... networking, shall we say, was there a general, sort of... camaraderie?

JD: Yeah. A lot. The profession is the friendliest. Don't be put off by people saying that people are out there with knives in your back, they ain't. I have only met friendliness and helpfulness in the profession, for the people who can really do it. The people who can't, what we call 'do it', then we don't have too much time with. I'm afraid to say I don't suffer fools, and if someone can't do it - i.e. can't act - I'm afraid that they get a nod, maybe a grunt, from me. Which I'm afraid to say is a terrible weakness to have.

MW: Would you say then that the atmosphere, with those people, with those associates was always friendly or was there...?

JD: Very friendly.

MW: Was there tension?

JD: No no no. Never had any tension at all with anybody I've ever worked with. I believe in going straight in and being open with everybody... I've never met any jealousy, amazingly enough. And I've worked with some of the biggest actors in the world and I've only met professional people. But as I say, the people that you don't get on with are the ones who can't do it, so they kind of, they go to the sideline anyway. I mean you get on, you say 'Good Morning', but that's it.

MW: What about the audition processes? I mean, you said...

JD: Oh that's just heartless! That's just heartless. I mean, the audition process is heartless. But it's the only way - nobody's ever worked out quite a better way of doing it. It is monstrous, but in a way, there's no way you can say, 'Oh, I'm full of confidence, I'm going to go in and get this job', that doesn't work really. Or you go in saying 'Oh well, that's it. I'm not going to get this, there's a lot of better people can get this' and you slouching and [gesticulates] 'Morning' 'morning', you do the job, and then you do the audition and they say 'right, you start next week'. So there's no rhyme or reason, and no good getting the theatre students, going to drama school and being taught audition technique, [Laughs] that's not going to save 'em!

MW: No. That's true.

JD: On the day, you know. Practical experience - and a word of advice to any actor, is to say practical experience you cannot beat. You know, the only way you're going to learn is to go out there and do it. It's no good taking diplomas. I'd go to the States and I'd do these great seminars and talk to these actors and they'd all say, 'Yes, I have a degree in acting' and I sort of stifle outrageous yawn or something, how can you have a degree in acting? You're either a good actor or you're not.

MW: Yeah this is the thing. It's quite a... spontaneous... overflow of talent or... [Laughs] you know, you either have it or you don't, I guess.



JD: Yeah. I mean it's... But then the modern experience is with reality television - it doesn't take an awful lot of time for you to get your name on television, and suddenly you're agent is Max Clifford, you know, and you're on the front page of the News of the World. But then that's your problem...

[Laughter]

MW: Well we could... we could go on with that for a long time actually... So once you'd had the opportunity you worked with Maria Callas, you say... Sir Laurence Olivier, Charlie Chaplin you met, did you from then on - once you'd got the breaks you say that you can either attribute to luck or to... to talent regardless - was it then constant employment?

JD: It was fairly - and I'm grabbing hold of the table again! [grabs hold of table] These scrapbooks in front of me here which tell a story of... great banks of my life, 'cause in 1965, I did a play which again changed my life, Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*. And - a fluke, again - I was in a play at the Theatre Royal, Stratford, a children's play. And someone saw me playing a very small part. And they said 'Ooh well, what are you doing next?', and said, 'Well, would you like to meet the director?' and I'd say 'Yeah, sure', so I met the director James Roose-Evans, and he said 'I'm doing Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*, would you like to audition?' 'Audition? Delighted'. And then we started and it ran for two years...two years. And this is the play...that's the plays and players, and this is all the reviews here. It was an all-star cast, names that won't mean anything to you or anybody of your generation, but all these people were film stars, and big stars of the day. We're talking about 1965 to 1967, two years. Now, a lot of people will say 'How on Earth can you do a play for two years?'. Very easily. If you're on a big hit in the West End, and people are - full houses all the time, that's what you do...

MW: I suppose so.

JD: I mean, you have to keep yourself fresh in your mind all the time.

MW: Success breeds success doesn't it, really?

JD: It does. But I mean, to be fair most actors nowadays will not consign themselves up for more than six months, but it was... again, what an amazing cast, wonderful people... never a problem, ever. Great influences, wonderful people. Almost adopted me, Michael Denison, Dulcie Grey, and they taught me manners. How to leave a stage door dressed, because the stage door was full every night, full of people. If you walk out looking - with great respect - like a stage hand, and they've seen you on the stage and... inelegant, you know. This is the costume [points to his notes] suits like that... they get disappointed. So you have to leave the stage door looking great. And their attitude was that you should always leave the stage door as though you were going on somewhere. You know, to the Savoy [Laughs] or something like that. It sounds crazy now, but in those days, and it... in a way I tried to keep it going, because there... luckily

there are still people waiting at the stage door for you, and you were wearing a... you were playing a character that's... with a suit on or something. You should try to leave them without breaking the romance of it, it is a romantic... this is a romantic job in a way, but it's all about not losing face with that audience. These people are your audience. And they pay... they pay your money.

MW: So you would say you were blessed, throughout your career, with the right advice from the right people?

JD: People who said 'Don't do that!' And if you're bright enough to say 'OK, I won't, I've learnt that'. But again, knocking the edges off all the time. Just to say 'this is what... this is how you behave'. So you hopefully pass that on to the next generation.

MW: What, for you, was the great distinction between music hall and the actual theatre itself?

JD: Music hall... Well, the great thing about music hall is that there's no fourth wall. In the theatre we have a fourth wall - you know, that wall comes down, the audience are behind it, of course you can see them, they don't think you can see us. You know, they're watching us within the play. Music hall, that wall goes up and your job is to communicate with that person in that seat. So it's bang bang, in their face all the time. It's liberating, absolutely thrilling, and I really got the hook on it because up to then I'd been in a lot of plays, learning other people's lines. And suddenly I'd written my own lines, and I do a series of shows around the country, but every time I go back I have to write out another bunch of stuff. I patter - jokes, songs, get some new stuff, so I'm always testing myself, so I go back another time and I can't repeat myself so I go back... every night's a first night. So I am shaking in the wings - am I going to remember these lines?

MW: So it's the creative influence...?

JD: That's really what gets you. And what it... keeps me... keeps me ahead of the game, makes me young, is the fact that I can test myself against that. It's failed. Spectacularly sometimes. Wonderfully! You know, you fall on your arse and it's wonderful! But I mean you've got to be able to fail as well. And you've got to pick yourself up and say, 'Gee, I bet I can do better tomorrow night'.

MW: Would you say then that you found the music hall more challenging?

JD: Yes. Yeah. I mean it... the easiest way... the easiest job in the world is playing Shakespeare with Michael Gambon, because - especially in tragedies, because it's all jokes. I mean... only... we did a... we did a history play - we're not allowed to mention it - but we're both in suits of armour. Now we were killing ourselves underneath these visors and suits of armour, killing ourselves with laughter, while spouting out the lines of Shakespeare. Because it's the funniest thing ever, you know - there's two grown men

facing each other with the suits of armour on. Well, that's... it's when you're in the heavy tragedies that's the funniest bit. When you're in a comedy, it is not funny at all, because it's technically demanding what you're doing, but music hall, you have to have an eye on to what's going around you all the time, because there's going to be something going to happen, something is going to happen in music hall because it's an audience, and actors. That's where wonderful things go wrong. And you've got to be bright enough to hit that. And that to me is like every night a bull fight.

MW: So that's what you enjoy the most?

JD: I love it. It's a terrific buzz. A wonderful buzz. Yeah, it's a wonderful buzz.

MW: What's it like for you, would you say, to be the performer on stage? How would you describe it?

JD: Oh it's another person, it's not me. I'm very shy, I'm very quiet, offstage, but I assume, once I get the suit on, I assume another character, and I am someone else, there's no-one else I can be. I can't be myself on the stage. People have often said 'Would you go and draw the raffle?' at a do, for a charity or something, I have to assume a character to draw the raffle. Because there's no way, I as a person, would walk on the stage, nobody would look at you.

MW: How do you do that?

JD: Well you have to kind of 'gen' yourself up, and it's called technique, you have to 'gen' yourself up and say 'I'm going to get up there'... I mean, I like to be alone for about half an hour before the show. So I'm walking, prowling about backstage, geeing myself up for this, and it's psyching yourself up to do it so the minute the curtain goes up you're 'bang' - you're in there.

MW: So if you were, invited to do a raffle say tomorrow, would you go home and invent yourself a character? A pseudonym?

JD: No no no. First of all I would go and meet the people and say 'How many prizes are in the raffle?'... 'Well you do it on the night'. 'No. I want to know now', so you've got these things and then I can say this and I can say that - you've got to have the lines ready. There's no such thing as ad-lib you see. You've got to have something ready for these people. Otherwise they'd get disappointed when you do arrive as yourself.

MW: So you believe the greatness really is in the preparation?

JD: It's always, always the preparation.

MW: What about... I was going to ask you about audience reactions, did you ever pay specific attention to it? Was there nights when you got a certain buzz?

JD: Oh, every night is different, that's the wonderful thing about it. There is... Not to do with where you are, different parts of the country, they do laugh at different things, I mean I work a lot in Leeds - The City Varieties, I've been working there for about twenty years, so I'm on their kind of wavelength. And they do like it, they do like broad humour. And they love it - the fact you set yourself up as an effete Southerner. You know, the accent comes in, and they fall about laughing. And in Scotland it's exactly the same, I... they love me in Glasgow. You wouldn't think they'd like some bloke who says [puts on a posh accent] 'Hello, how are you?' you see, they fall about laughing. Now down the South, you can't do that. You have to come in and chip in with a Cockney accent or something. So it does change throughout the country.

MW: So you would that perhaps the social element or... perhaps even a class distinction...

JD: It is, yes, you have to pitch it right. I mean Ken Dodd's a genius at it because he's got a file-o-fax, full of what jokes go where. But he's... I mean, the man is a genius, that's how he works, you know he's worked out [begins to laugh] what gets a laugh where.

MW: You come across as very meticulous in the way that you compose yourself, were you in the same way as concerned with reviews, did you read many reviews of your performances?

JD: Well, as you can see I've kept everything [motions to his collection of scrapbooks] only because... in those days, the reviewers were... well, I shouldn't... you shouldn't have done, there were some howlers in here. But as years go by, I don't read the stuff now. And people will say to me 'Did you see what they said about you in The Stage last week?' and I'll say 'Oh no, was it... was it helpful?' and they say 'Oh yeah they like...' 'Oh that's great'. I won't necessarily go and buy The Stage newspaper or the Evening News or any of that because you've got a piece in the paper.

MW: So you feel you can distance yourself from...?

JD: I think it's... I... a lot of people will say 'yes' or 'no' about this and I believe Judi Dench never reads her reviews, because she was stung badly, when she was about my age - much younger sorry, when I was young and she was young - badly and I remember how this happened, and it put her back several years, because they attacked her as being no good at all. So I think when you're being vulnerable you've got to be very careful. It's a tough enough business as it is actually, without people being unhelpful.

MW: How would you say has theatre changed throughout... throughout the period that we're referring to?

JD: We're talking about here... it's changed... it's more relaxed now. It was very formalised: when we went to rehearsals in 1964, 1965, you went in a shirt and tie, jacket or suit, polished shoes. And you behaved yourself. And there was a certain decorum: you didn't meet actors, you waited until they said 'Oh, call me Charles, call me... whatever'. There was that decorum. And everybody will say 'Right, we're all going to lunch, and all the artists... some of the stars will go somewhere else, and you would go to the sandwich bar. You didn't hang... tag along to the stars. You learnt your place, there was a class system. But that has gone. Nowadays I find myself, having a meal with Ian McKellen in Leeds - or I did a few years ago - in the same fish and chip shop. So - between shows. So that's gone, all that distinction has gone. Which is... you know, it's different.

MW: You obviously went to the theatre a lot at that time - presumably you still do now. In terms of performance, would you say there was more energy, more dynamism in the sixties with the emergence of new theatre?

JD: I would say... funny enough you should say that. I - and at risk of being called an old fogey - I would say the more exciting young actors were coming through. And that's nothing against what we have nowadays. You still see some electronic performances, but I... when you... when you're trying to make your mark, let's face it if you've got Olivier as your mark, and you've got Gielgud and you're in the same period. You've got to be someone really good to make your mark anywhere. And there were some very exciting young actors - Ian Holm and David Warner, people like that charging at these things. Great directors, Peter Hall, Peter Brook, exciting... it was the most exciting time, the sixties. It was a fascinating time for theatre, things were happening all over the place, John Osborne was happening, everything was happening, you know - Wesker - the whole world was changing.

MW: That's what I was going to ask you, because my own personal heroes would be Osborne, Pinter, Edward Bond and the like. How do you feel those playwrights impacted or were reflecting politics?

JD: Well they were reflecting the time, John's play *Look Back In Anger* changed everything. That changed - overnight - virtually changed the whole English theatre. Terence Rattigan one night was in, the next day he wasn't... wasn't in at all.

MW: 1956, wasn't it?

JD: Yeah. It was... as quickly as that. And certainly the management realised, they were quick to move some of these managements - H.M Tennant, people like that... and Olivier was quite swift as well. He saw the way things were going, and he got into *The Entertainer* - got Osborne to write him a part, said, you know, 'Write me a part', and he wrote *The Entertainer*, which again changed his whole career. And then Gielgud and

Richardson came along a bit later in the seventies and were playing David Storey and Pinter as though they'd been doing it all their lives. Actors are very adaptable, but I... I happen to think that that particular time was the most exciting time ever. I don't get so excited when I go to the theatre these days, because I see so much scenery. I'm not keen on scenery, I like actors. I don't like director's theatres, I like actors working. I think we get carried away with enormous sets and director's viewpoint, everything has to be played on bicycle if you're playing Hamlet or something.

MW: Yeah I remember I saw *As You Like It* last year, and it was very flamboyant, a very sort of ostentatious production...

JD: Yeah, I think you take away from the magic of it. And I don't think it helps the actors terribly much either.

MW: What about... I was going to ask you a little bit about censorship...

JD: Ah! Funny you should say that, in one of these scrapbooks I have here, when I was playing Caligula and it is a fairly... it's about incest as well. So he's having a love affair with... there's a facsimile of the Lord Chamberlain's report there, and that's how it used to look like. Yeah? And it said that this part... they'd seen it, 1962, July 1962 and... it can only, the play... 'the scenes of incest can only be played on Sundays, to a club audience'.

MW: I have read about this actually, that they would go and perform to club audiences to avoid those restrictions.

JD: So that's the play, and there's the... that's the charter you've got. And that said that it could be played... and we weren't allowed to play those scenes. Except on a Sunday, in front of a club audience. And that went on, oh way, way into the sixties.

MW: So you would say you were personally affected?

JD: Oh it is. Yes, I mean, that was part of the game. That's what you did. And then suddenly of course it all changed when the censorship came down, I think it was the seventies actually. And then Kenneth Tynan then wrote *Oh Calcutta!* and that sort of thing and then... again all that changed anyway.

MW: So that was quite liberating?

JD: Yes.

MW: Or did it not really affect you so much?

JD: It affected everybody in the theatre, really. It liberated, but I didn't think always for the better. Personally.

MW: What about the Royal Shakespeare Company?

JD: Never had any dealings with them actually. Most of my Shakespeare was done in rep, or Chichester. The only time I ever worked for the National was in Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale*, in which I played the soldier - which was fascinating: new piece of musical theatre, with some wonderful actors. But... and the actors were in the company at the time, Jacobi, Petherbridge, and Hardwick and all these people. But the Royal Shakespeare Company I tried to audition, but they weren't interested. There was a style, I wasn't their bag. I don't think I was their bag at all.

MW: So for you it was more about...?

JD: I was actually... I was very busy, doing other plays.

MW: So would you... obviously we've spoken of the emergence of some new plays in the sixties, would you say you were more likely to be accustomed with those or were you more...?

JD: Well, funnily enough, I was jumping from Whitehall farce, wild expense, wild wonderful expensive costume styles and everything else...and then I'd be doing modern plays as well, Pinter, and I'd be jumping from one to the other all the time. And that was exciting, and then of course a lot of television as well. And you playing... you were... quite well known as a character actor, which I am, I'd be playing lots of characters as well. So I was very lucky to be tested, at lots and lots of occasions. And that was very lucky, and that... that keeps you fresh. You know, you weren't a Royal Shakespeare actor, only in Shakespeare. But then you had to sign yourself up for two or three years.

MW: So you'd never - and no disrespect to you - you'd never be caught up in complacency?

JD: Typecasting. No, I wouldn't, no.

MW: Fresh challenges?

JD: Always a fresh challenge. A lot of people say, 'well why don't you think music hall is typecasting?'. Well it isn't really, for the reasons I've been saying to you. Every night is different. And being in a play for two years never bothered me. Loved it. Do it again if someone asked me.

MW: What does the future hold then?

JD: Well... always something different. I've just finished a season at the Watermill, Newbury which is one of the most beautiful little theatres, very high reputation around the world, they're celebrating forty years this year. And I did it, about thirty odd years ago and they said they were doing a review, of... the best hits over thirty, forty years. And I hosted it. Which I finished about two weeks ago. Yeah, almost two weeks ago. Since then I've been chasing around... they took it on tour, so I've been chasing around playing little theatres with it. And that's finished now, start rehearsing tomorrow for a show that goes on at the Wimbledon Theatre in London in January. And then have a number of Christmas concerts coming up.

MW: Really?

JD: I'm reading... well, not reading, but introducing carols and reading Christmas messages out at various different places. I like all that, I mean it's fun. I mean... Christmas entertainment, a lot of people, a lot of actors do it. 'Let us be merry' and all that sort. I get on my Dickens kick - I don't mind, I mean, it's once a year.

MW: Well thanks - thanks for taking the time to speak to me I mean...

JD: No, I've been delighted. I only hope I haven't run you out of tape.

MW: Oh not at all, no. I was going to ask, was there anything else that you wanted to discuss? I think we've touched on...

JD: Well, there's television, which I've been very lucky with over the years. But the notable ones - Doctor Who again - talk about influences, you go along to an audition or something, and again you will certainly find yourself in the Doctor Who syndrome, people tapping at your stage door, and they want you to go to conventions and all things like that, that was great fun. With Ken Dodd, that was the one with Sylvester McCoy as Doctor Who, but that was great fun. Films, lucky enough to be in some biggies, Great Escape, Great Escape 2 with Elizabeth Taylor, with again Franco Zeffirelli in Italy... big movies. A lot of big action movies. Over the years, playing again lots of characters. Teaching, I love to teach, I love to coach, I love to direct, so it's a full life. And really we've touched on it before, it's to the next job. An actor will always say 'Ah that was last week, but now I'm looking to the next job'. Not because I want to eat, but because I'm interested to find out what the next job is. I'm not very good at sitting down. I've had a couple of days of sitting at the Garrick Club, reading the newspapers and I'm just beginning to get itchy, but now I start tomorrow, you know.

MW: Well that's wonderful, a fresh challenge on the horizon every time. That's excellent. Well thanks very much for your time.



JD: Pleasure, pleasure Matthew. Wish you well and to all who's listening.

MW: Thank you.