

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Mervyn Gould – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Tom Shallaker**

**4 December 2007**

Theatre Worker. Decline of theatre business; employment pattern; New Theatre, Cambridge; lighting; Number One theatres; pantomime; Regal Theatre, Boston; relationship between Cast and Technical Crew; Sunderland Empire; touring; union membership; West End theatres.

TS: I'll start by asking what your first memories of going to the theatre were.

MG: Pantomime – taken by my mother or an aunt generally, in the provinces. Places like Cambridge New Theatre, now demolished; Northampton New Theatre, now demolished; Boston New Theatre, now demolished.

TS: So pantomime was your first experience as a child?

MG: Like many other provincial people, yes. I lived in the fenlands, so theatres were few and far between, so, less opportunity to go to them really.

TS: So, pantomime was obviously your first experience, what was your first experience of actually going seeing a play? What was the first one you remember and what were your thoughts on that?

MG: I don't think I went to see an amateur play, an amateur production. I suppose my first... ah yes I can remember now, my first pro visit to a play theatre, playhouse, was the Theatre Royal and Empire, Peterborough. To see The Penguin Players in Dial M for Murder, in 1957, so that was weekly rep.

TS: So the experience of going to the theatre, was that more important to you than the actual play you were seeing, or did that play in particular...

MG: Oh yes, I was just an 11 year old school boy: I was on a trip, one didn't think about the play. It was just a magical evening out, going somewhere different, You've got no idea, you must come from a city, you've got no idea how bleedin' borin' life was in fenland villages in the 1950s! That was a magical thing, a trip to Peterborough even.

You know, a major city of 84,000 souls. And the theatre, a real theatre, with cupids and red plush and gilt and things. I'd never actually been inside one before.

TS: So would you say it was that experience that inspired you to want to work in theatre?

MG: No. Yes, I was very interested, but... you're using dramatic language, "inspired me" to work in theatre, no no no! It was just something that would be nice if it ever happened in the future. But in my station in life, I really knew that there was no chance of me working in theatre. My parents had slight artistic inclinations, but they weren't going to let a child of theirs - my father was a civil servant, my mother was a schoolmistress - certainly weren't going to let a child of theirs, who was academically inclined, waste his substance on frittering it away in theatre.

TS: So, tell me then how you actually got started off working in theatre.

MG: I started because even as a small boy I was interested, well, I was interested in architecture, and streetscapes, and with my mother I spent... well, my mother had taken me around churches, not great cathedrals but parish churches we used to visit, ride out into the countryside in the car, mother driving, and we'd always look at the parish church and we went to the museums, and I was one of those strange children who loved it. And I was interested in architecture and streetscapes, and I was also a natural historian. When I say natural historian I don't mean academic, but I took an interest in the past and listened to people and asked questions. The New Theatre Boston closed in March 1960, and I was at the last show which was 'The Billy Cotton Band Show', and I went, the building had been closed and sold to Marks and Spencer's next door to be demolished for an extension, and I got in touch with the manager. Myself and my school friend went around the empty building to look at it, then next door to that was the [Scala], a former cinema built in 1914, which had been closed in 1940. And again I got permission from the manager of the shop to, not Marks and Spencer's - another shop, to go and look around that. So, I was interested in the buildings, and I'd also got to know the manager, simply by talking and asking questions, of the Odeon, the 1937 super cinema, and The Regal.

The Regal was owned by the same firm who'd closed the New Theatre. So I went to see the manager at The Regal and asked him questions about the New Theatre, and they were investing the proceeds from the sale of the New Theatre on building on a stage and dressing rooms to The Regal, the 1937 super cinema. So there was a gap of three years theatre provision in Boston and South Lincolnshire whilst they bought former maltings and then built stage, fly tower and dressing rooms. And Ralph Asford Howden, the managing director of the company, and manager of the Regal, said, because of course I was interested in the stage being built, said, 'We're opening at Christmas with panto, I suppose you'd better have a job.'

TS: Nice.

MG: I was 17, that month, November '63, and that was the actual start, my very first job in the business. Came to rehearsal, I was ASM, then we opened, and the show was a weekly touring panto. It did a fortnight at Boston, where it opened, then it toured to other dates for a week, and the next stage it was going to was Crewe, The New Theatre, Crewe, which at the time was dark. It had no staff, so they had to take their own staff with them. So I was asked if I would continue the work I was doing, which was ASMing for the show on tour. So I asked my parents if I could go on tour, and they, much to my surprise, gave me permission and arranged time off school - I was in the sixth form at the time - and off I trotted with Barry Wood productions and Babes in the Wood to Crewe, Buxton and Leek. So that was my introduction to the business, yes. Then on tour, the crew, when you said you were from the theatre you couldn't get digs, we spent three nights kipping in a dressing room, three of us of the stage staff, wrapped in old stage draperies from the scene dock. But that's how I started the business, with Ralph Aspland Howden at the Regal, Boston, saying 'We open with panto, I suppose you'd better have a job'.

TS: So, tell me, you went to university in London...

MG: Well, before that, I finished in the sixth form, and every time there was a show at the Regal, which remained mainly a cinema but would do one night stands - 'package shows' they were called - and panto, and then week long shows, old time music hall or variety. And I would work on all the shows at The Regal until I left school in '65, and as you've just said went up to London.

TS: So tell me how your career progressed then, once you were at university in London, because you started working in the theatre as a part timer whilst you were a student.

MG: Well, it's a perfectly normal and standard phrase for you to use, but it makes assumptions when you say 'How did your career progress?', because... I hadn't got a career. I was reading history, and I'd had the foresight to join NATTKE, the stage-hand and electrician's union, whilst I was at the Regal, and I remember going to see the chief at The Odeon to join. He said, 'You don't need to join, mate, just doing part time work at the Regal', I said, 'No, I want to join'. Didn't tell him why, but it meant that when I came to London, I could stand at the stage door, because I was in Chelsea on Kings Road, Chelsea, so, bed and breakfast, as it were, was free. I was near the West End, no problem with the tube and buses, or even walking if I was doing a get-out and had missed the last bus. So I would go, as one did in those days, go to the stage door, line up with anyone else, and asked for either the Chief Engineer if you were wanting electrics, or the Master Carpenter if you wanted stage work. For me, I could do both, so if one didn't need me, then the other one might do. And that's where my NATTKE membership came in because there'd be two or three young blokes, all the same age, very often, say, all fairly much beginners, but not absolute beginners, and the head of department came along and he'd look at you, and he'd say, 'Are you NATTKE mate?', 'No sir', 'Are you NATTKE mate, 'Yes sir', 'Right'.

TS: So it was just joining that union that really helped you get your first jobs in London?

MG: Oh yes, because it was essential, I can assure you in those days.

TS: So that was how you first started off in London. Was there anyone, professionally speaking, when you first started, who you found a great help to get you started, or anyone who made you want to pursue it further?

MG: No, I don't think any one person, because of course, I didn't start with any established company, or rep company. The staff at the Regal, Boston, had been there for donkey's years, and worked for the firm in various other of their buildings and so on. On tour, I also worked whilst I was a student at the Edinburgh Festival. And of course West End theatres all have their own men and their own staffs. So, no, I learned a lot, and bloody fast too, but I can't think of any particular person who was inspiring that I'd met in those days. There was one, in writing, who inspired all of us starting at that time, and that was Fred Bentham in TABS, the Strand Electric lighting magazine. But, I can't say I was inspired by any particular person at that time. Other people later inspired me, but not to start.

TS: Well, do you want to say anyone who later on inspired you, whilst we're on that?

MG: Oh I worked with several people, or got to know them, or read them. Francis Reed, who I'm very proud to say is a friend of mine, is an inspiring man. That's lighting. In stage management, can't say I was inspired in stage management.

TS: Says a lot about stage management.

MG: We're not going into stars, but people I've worked with in that sense. No, you've caught me on that one, I was going to say, if I think of someone later, I'll say so, but obviously, I've answered your question haven't I, I haven't come straight back at you with, Yes! So and so...

TS: Yes, so by not coming to someone straight away... I noticed that you've worked at Drury Lane Theatre, which London theatres do you think were your favourite to work at? Because you worked at quite a few. Obviously the West End theatres are the most famous in the country. Were there any that you particularly enjoyed working in? For any reason in particular?

MG: I was very very proud of working at the Lane. I thought I'd made it – from Fenland peasant, to the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. The country's most famous theatre. I was proud of that. It was a good theatre to work at, except it was over unionised. But that wasn't the theatre's fault, but it was a stronghold of NATTKE. Fortunately, I was in NATTKE, and I'd got my card, so that was no problem. I worked at the Vaudeville, the Palace. Well, I worked at the Palace the longest, and that was the height of my career, because I was Deputy Chief Engineer. Not my entire career, but my West End career. No, backstage, and during the trials of a show, they're all pretty much of a muchness I'm afraid to say. Because you're sweating, if not physically pumping the scenery, but the

adrenaline of getting a show on. And in those days, in fact probably still are, they were pretty bloody sordid backstage, I can tell you. You know, for the staff quarters, not necessarily the dressing rooms.

TS: So the people who aren't actors or directors don't get the special treatment?

MG: No.

TS: Would you say that work as a stage manager, was it at all routine, or was there something different about every production you worked in?

MG: Oh yes, very much so. And you will have been, presumably you and your colleagues on this research will have been interviewing mainly play legit theatre people have you?

TS: Yes.

MG: Whereas I'm from panto and variety you see. Summer season. So, every show was different, and various production managements. So stage management was very challenging. Of course there were certain elements to it. A panto is a panto. Bits of it are complicated, and bits of it were difficult to run, and cue, but bits of it were simple. In a sense it's a question of mix and match. So the main challenge of course that came in commercial theatre, sad though I am to pour cold water on your research project, is simply the necessity to earn a bleedin' livin' mate. Getting the show in, up, and on: paying bums on seats, on time.

TS: That's the most important aspect.

MG: That's the most important aspect of it. There's no pay, no play. If the management goes bankrupt, you ain't getting paid. Or, you are now because there's a fund, a state aid, but in those original, early days, no: management went bust, so did you.

TS: So as a stage manager did you have any artistic control over the play?

MG: No. None in the sense of direction. But, years ago my father said to me, 'You've wasted your education doing this', and I said, 'No I haven't, I'm a historian, I use my history every day.' But my father, being a civil servant, knew that doing history, the only way you used it was to teach – be a schoolmaster. Teach history. I said, 'I use my history everyday pal. If I send someone out for props, I can tell them when he comes back or she comes back, I know whether it's in period or not. That's part of history.' So, to that small extent, yes you have some artistic input into plays. That of course, is the artistic input area of my life, in lighting. But in stage management, you know, it depends how you get on with the director. It's like everything in life, the job title and the job

description, and the way you're handling it don't always marry. If the director's an old mate, you can suggest things or tweak things. So it varies from show to show.

TS: Would you say then that you feel you got your best chance to be artistic with your lighting or sound design, more than the stage management side?

MG: I didn't do sound design, sound design in my day didn't exist. It was P.A. It did at the end of my career, but we're talking about the beginning of my career, which is in '63, and it didn't exist except on a rising mic through the P.A. system. And lighting in those days in variety was colours, down to reds, full up finish for the end of the song, and so on. So you were still pretty artistic on the lighting board, I can tell you. It was all hand done, and direct operated dimmers. It wasn't the little typewriter desk that you've got, the desk that I'd got at the Theatre Skegness, the desk, what am I saying? The board, was a Stranmaster Grandmaster cross control with 76 dimmers. That was longer than that wall, physically longer than that wall, because you're actually operating the dimmers.

TS: So it was quite a physical exertion operating them?

MG: Oh yes. And with the grandmaster in the centre, and you're using your nose, a hand, a foot, so you could think you were being pretty bloody artistic on some of the changes on the lighting board.

TS: Did it take a long time to get to grips with that? Because that sounds quite complicated and difficult to do.

MG: It is complicated and difficult to do. But it doesn't take any learning. It's the feel of things that you know, you either ram the dimmer up and down with no thought, or you're prepared to do it. Actually learning how to do it took very little time at all. The fact is I knew a little bit about electrics as well, which helped with the old dimmer fades. So you get all sorts of, like everything, like being a milkman perhaps, you get your satisfaction in ways unseen to the general public, in little touches that satisfy you, but may not be noticed by anyone else.

TS: That's an interesting thought that. So what would you say then that you preferred? Did you prefer doing stage management or lighting, or was there any particular part that you preferred doing over other jobs?

MG: This is going to sound awful and trite, and if I heard anyone say it to me I'd say bollocks. For a long stage of my career I just didn't care what I was doing as long as I was getting the money, getting the status, and working in theatre. Now doesn't that sound pretentious?

TS: It does.

MG: I wouldn't say that if any of my pro friends, if we were in a bar and any of my pro friends were here. I would turn teetotal rather than say that! I just loved being in the business. But I wasn't stage-struck, in that I was doing it as a business, obviously, because you've got to eat, or pay rent or a mortgage. But, stage management or lighting? Difficult to answer because for now they're both, nowadays, one of the great differences between now and then, is that theatre is totally compartmentalised; I'm told that techies don't mix with the company. Well in my day, we were a company. And if you needed to be on stage, you put slap on and put on a costume, and went on stage. You didn't say, 'I'm a stage manager', or, 'I'm an electrician', it was very different. No, I just think that I was a reasonable stage manager, I was a, to use a phrase from the sixties, I was a shit hot board operator, a reasonable chief electrician because I knew about electrics, and I just enjoyed working on shows and being part of the magic and mystique, hidden at the rear. That's put it very pretentiously hasn't it? I shan't be giving any more interviews like this.

TS: So how much would you say that the roles that you did have changed then over the years. Other than obviously what you've said.

MG: The roles haven't changed. The stage manager, or the DSM, still, or nowadays it's with headsets and microphones, still gives the cues. The lighting designer, gets a bigger fee than they did in my day, and probably has a shorter time, uses different equipment, it's fairy lights, moving lights. When you got off at Pancras there was a truss across the arch roof with fairy lights on, you wouldn't have noticed it because it was tucked right up there, but I did. No, the tools have changed, the jobs haven't. What has changed, so I'm told, is that, as I've just said, before we were a company but now you're either cast, or a techie. Well, that divide, you might be a bit snobbish about some of the hairy monsters down the feeding scale, but you were still a company, stage staff. But now apparently, the techies don't mix, you know, lighting men only mix with electrics, and so on. It was much wider in those days, and people like me, who were men of the theatre, I wasn't particularly a stage manager, I've performed, not just walked on as a spear carrier, I've played parts. So, to me I'm a man of the theatre, I'm not a stage manager, or an electrician, I just worked in the business, or the profession.

TS: Would you say that you ever wanted to do more of the acting or directing? Did you feel that perhaps you'd like to have a go at that?

MG: Oh yes, but also I knew that I wasn't good enough.

TS: What made you think you wasn't good enough?

MG: I knew. Well, you know, I wasn't pissing around in small scale provincial theatres, you know, I've worked with the best, I was working in Number One theatres with top people, whether it was panto, variety, or plays. So you know that you're shuffling around, and I hadn't, I would have been a competent director, at getting people to move around the stage, but not to inspire the performers, no. No, you know, I knew my

role, and it was backstage. Or front of house, I've been a front of house manager, and so my role out front is in dinner jacket, and being a confident figure in the foyer. That kind of thing I can play. I'm very good at playing those roles, but not particularly on stage.

TS: So do you regret the fact that perhaps...

MG: I regret nothing! I've had a fantastic time. From a Cambridgeshire village, to Number One tour dates, company managing in them, or being resident in them. West End experience, and then as a university technical tutor, and now as a historical author. I've had a fantastic career. Not being in the public eye, not a famous name, but very satisfying, even financially, adequately rewarding. There aren't that many of us who started in 1963 who can say that.

TS: So obviously, the career you've had, you don't regret anything, and you've clearly enjoyed all the work you've done?

MG: Why should I regret it? Theatre is a lot of bleedin' hard work mate. And very unsocial hours, and in weather. It's all very well for you academic drama types, but you haven't been there, shovelling scenery up the ramp, up the get out ramp at Her Majesty's, Aberdeen, that's in a snow storm at two am on Sunday morning. It's not all arts and graces you know. Airs and graces. It's bleedin hard work, and for unsocial hours, and not a great deal of money. And, of course, job insecurity, or rather job short security. You do a panto and it's three months, end. Summer season, end. So you're constantly looking for new work. Four jobs a year I used to have to get: panto, spring tour, summer season and autumn tour. Then back to panto.

TS: And was there any time that you perhaps found insecurity, if you couldn't perhaps find jobs? Or was you always OK at finding them?

MG: Oh, I'm pleased to tell you, son, that I had three weeks out.

TS: In your whole career?

MG: With one exception. And that was when I missed a summer season in 1977, and that was because my parents had been in an accident, and my father was in hospital, and my mother was at home, but she had heart trouble. So I went to look after her and drive her to the hospital, so for personal reasons, and by the time they were OK, it was too late to get summer season. So that was the time I was out. In 1977. That's the only time.

TS: Did you have to move around a lot then?

MG: Oh yes.

TS: And did that bother you, not settling in one place?

MG: No, there is one thing, there's a stage manager, production manager, Denise Newton, a friend of mine, she can live out of a suitcase for the whole of the year. I couldn't, I needed... I was divorced and I needed a rented flat. I needed somewhere in the country that I knew if I was ill, out of work, sacked, sick, whatever, somewhere I could go to with a couple of carrier bags and close the front door behind me. So once that was set in the back of my mind, no, I didn't bother about touring. Either weekly touring, or doing a season, where you'd get a flat or a flatlet for two or three months, something like that.

TS: Do you think it would have bored you doing a job where you stayed in the same place for the whole of your life, or many years at a time?

MG: Probably, but in asking questions like that you're going into the 'if only...' school of history. What I can tell you is, although this is going off topic a little, that I live very happily in Loughborough. Which by in large is a small country town, a small country market town. But at 18, I couldn't wait to get away from a small country market town. I remember saying to myself, 'From now on I'm a city and big town boy', and indeed I was. I wouldn't have been happy - I can certainly tell you this - staying in that Cambridgeshire village, or that Lincolnshire market town, whatever I was doing. I wouldn't have been happy staying in that atmosphere, claustrophobic atmosphere.

TS: So you feel you've gone full circle now, and you're quite happy to have settled?

MG: Well, most people do, yes, yin and yang, and whatever, but it tickles me, having said, 'I'm never going to live in a village, whatever', and it tickles me now that I'm happily living in a small country market town. I find... the things that I hated as a boy, people knew who you were. They might not know your name, but they knew who your mother was, or your father was, or they knew your name. I think that's wonderful in Loughborough now. I go into tradesmen's shops and they greet me by name. So yes, you do change, but no, I wouldn't have been happy staying in those particular places. I don't know whether I'd have been happy staying in one, let's say theatre or cinema building either. I think I wanted to see how other people lived and worked.

TS: So, tell me, then you moved to Loughborough, and started working at the university theatre there?

MG: Yes, well I didn't move to Loughborough, you see, you go to where the job is, don't you? You know, I went to Sunderland Empire, in fact I did three seasons at Sunderland, and I had a flat in Sunderland for a time. But then a job came up at Loughborough, and I applied for, and got it. I decided to give myself a break of two or three years from touring, because I felt that would be useful, it would be another string

to my bow, a bit of university lecturing, and my mother had just died, and I hadn't been able to go to her funeral, because I was opening a show in Gloucester. So I hadn't even gone to my mother's funeral, and I thought, 'well, I'll be in spitting distance of Pa if he gets old and needs me', something like that. So I went to Loughborough University as a new experience, to give myself a break for two or three years. I'd got no idea, A) that I would spend 17 years at the university in the same job, and B) that I would then decide to stay in Loughborough, having bought a flat. That wasn't part of the plan at all. But as you get older, priorities change. Perhaps I'd done enough travelling.

TS: I'll say! After listening what you've said there.

MG: Oh, I haven't told you half of it. I haven't mentioned Bury St Edmunds, my favourite theatre, where I did a season. Anyway, sorry...

TS: No, go on...

MG: No, no, It's your interview...

TS: I'm interested in what you've got to say, why Bury St Edmunds?

MG: Oh, I love Bury St Edmunds, I mean, 1819, theatre history oozing out of its every pore – that was magical. We had lovely shows, and nice people coming. It was just the atmosphere, and knowing that you'd been in the building, not physically with the boards because the stage had been renewed in 1965 because it had been removed in 1925, but, you know, you knew the pores of the building, it had held the greatest names of the past 200 years of theatre.

TS: So you felt a lot of pride working there?

MG: Oh, yes! As I told you, I was a historically minded child, so working in an 1819 theatre, with the sweat of all those pros over the years, seeping out of the walls was magical.

TS: So, going back to Loughborough, your role at the university there, was it just as a lecturer, or did you work in the theatre there?

MG: No, I was technical tutor in the department of English and drama. They do drama there too, you know. You can get a degree in drama, and they do postgrad work, and I was the technical tutor. I taught stage management and lighting on the technical theatre course, and was house and stage manager for the university theatre. So if you'd come to a play at the Sir Robert Martin Theatre, you'd have seen me there in the foyer in dinner jacket and gown. I was probably the last house manager to stand out front in dinner jacket.

TS: Yes, you don't see that any more do you?

MG: No.

TS: I didn't realise that that's the way it used to be done, that's really interesting. So, have you enjoyed working with students and helping bringing new people into working in theatre and doing your role? Or have you not really thought about that, judging by the look on your face there?

MG: We were not a drama school. We were not training stage managers or lighting designers, but I'm very proud of the fact that four or five people over the years made it into the business and did very well. For example, one of them, until he was made redundant recently, was head of scenery and props at Yorkshire Television, and Anne Lincoln is the senior stage manager of the English National Ballet. They're two people I trained. So I'm very proud of that, but I am not a natural teacher. I can coach people, but not teach and encourage them, and I think they probably thought I was an utter bastard, so I can't say that I felt any sense of helping young talents blossom and flower really, I just kicked them up the bum in the way that I've been trained to, I'm afraid to admit but got to be honest about it. But also, it was wonderful for me because it gave me time off. I could trollop off during the long vac to do summer season, and I had enough time to do a short panto during the Christmas break, and on salary, and on a reasonable pension thank you very much. So I've done a hell of a lot better than many other people in the business because of that career change, switch, whatever.

TS: I've read that you received a grant from the Society for Theatre Research...

MG: Yes.

TS: Do you want to tell us a bit about that?

MG: Yes, it was that that came out of Sunderland Empire, and when I got to Sunderland Empire, it's a vast barn of a place, have you ever seen it?

TS: I've not, no.

MG: It's also a bleedin' ugly theatre as well, actually. But again, I thought that was magical, it was opened in 1907, and I was doing work in the library when I was there on the history of the cinemas and theatres, and it was whilst I was in the North East that I conceived my gazetteer, I'm working on a gazetteer - at the moment of England only - of pro theatre and cinema buildings. Two sections of which are on the Mercia website on the internet. I got the idea from that just outside Sunderland. Anyway, the man who built Sunderland Empire was a chap called Richard Thornton. I became fascinated by him. He started as a teenage fiddler, he was a pit boy, but he could play the fiddle, and

he used to play for entertainments north of Sunderland, Marsden, and then later on he became a publican, and he opened one of the earliest music halls by expanding the pub into the carpenters' and stone masons' yard next door, and eventually built his own little circuit, and he was the original partner of Moss in Moss's empires. And I, as it were, feel I discovered him, and it's supposed to be my P.H.D., I'm half way through this unfinished piece of work, and that's what I got the grant for, to go back to the North East, to the libraries and so on there, and so I did work, strangely enough, coincidentally enough, talking about Richard Thornton, his great grandson has recently got in touch with me, wanting to know more about him. And I said 'yes, I'd love to', and I was going to see him this afternoon, I was going to bring my laptop and scanner down, but I didn't give him enough notice of this interview, and he could only spare me early afternoon, and I said, 'There's no point, mate, you know, I don't know how long the interview's going to go on for'. But I'll come back down again and see him. I did say when I got Boston Spalding book out, that as soon as I finish Boston Spalding I'll get back to Richard Thornton. And I haven't done very much in the two years since Boston Spalding has been out. But I still treasure Richard Thornton, and if you ask anyone, they'll say, 'Speak to Mervyn Gould', because I'm terrified that someone else will find out about him and get work out before I can. But that's what that grant was for. The work is still sitting there. Unfinished. Well, a work in abstention, thank you.

TS: Well thanks, I think we can end it there...

MG: If you're happy, you don't want to know any more about, for instance, there's one thing, when I started in '63, several people hadn't worked for three years, theatres had been closing down at the rate of one a week.

TS: Do you want to talk about that then?

MG: Yes, I'm very keen on that. Between 1956 and 1959, theatres were closing, music halls, variety palaces, whatever you want to call them, were closing down at the rate of one a week: 156 over three years. When I started in '63, there were some people who hadn't worked for three years because the producing management hadn't put on a show for three years. That's pretty frightening. I wasn't, thankfully, in the business whilst it was collapsing, but people I got to know later like Don Orty were. Now there's a man who your project should interview, Don Orty, still working in the business over 50 years later. But it was just so nice to see these troopers, because of course, there was no, tiny unemployment benefit, but a lot of them hadn't really paid in enough, but it was really quite frightening, and the first proper theatre I went to, the Theatre Royal and Empire went in about October, November, '57. That was closed and demolished within 18 months. It was in 1959 and 1960 that New Theatre, Northampton went. It was about the same time that Cambridge New went. So I was certainly a boy growing up when buildings were coming down rapidly, including the New Theatre, Boston in 1960, and that does make a big difference to you because when you ask very simple and straight forward questions like, 'What inspired you?', well, there was nothing to inspire me because my experience was of theatres closing and being demolished. So you were conscious that the business when I started was... you know I was... you'll get other people telling you all about the greatness of the West End, and famous rep theatres in the provinces, but I was touring into places like The Grand Theatre, Leek and Buxton Opera house, now you'll have heard of Buxton Opera House, but now that it's been

gorgeously and expensively restored, but it wasn't then, it was a seedy cinema, run down, last redecorated before the war. When I played it for a week in January 1964 it was all a very different world.

TS: So, was there a lot of people who were tired of this, or do you think there was a feeling of people saying, 'Well, there aren't these jobs going, we can move into something else,' or was there a real feeling of people staying at it?

MG: Well, a lot of women were married, so they could go and live at home of course, but there were pros who just broke up because they couldn't find any work. I don't mean broke up, they just had to eek out whatever living they could. They had no money. One of the things that I should have said about going to Loughborough University, as it happens Loughborough, that in my 20s and 30s, I'd seen old men, some of whom had been big names and been managers themselves, owners of summer seasons, Headley Claxton, had owned his own summer season, played near Margate, and he was company manager for Salberg of The Alexandra, Birmingham. And I'd seen these touring company managers in their 60s and 70s flogging around, and they were out of touch, you know, young, thrusting turks like me weren't interested in old farts like them, they didn't know anything about new Thruster boards and whatever, they didn't want to know. And of course, it took me several years to realise that they had to keep working. It wasn't because they were particularly in love with the business, it was that they couldn't afford to give up because...

TS: There was nothing else for them to do...

MG: No savings, no pension schemes, and I think it was partly that, and I thought, 'I don't want to be bleeding tarting my arse around the provinces, these get outs at two in the morning, when I'm in my 50s and 60s surely', and I think that's why, like so many other people at a certain age, they went into television, or went sideways into administration, or into teaching. You know, they probably took similar career moves for similar reasons, because we'd seen these poor, broken down old buggers flogging their guts out.

TS: And you didn't want to be there yourself...

MG: And we didn't want to be there ourselves, no. And even so, during my career, I remember the shockwave that went around the profession when The Alhambra, Glasgow closed, that was a Number One theatre. There were only thirteen or fourteen Number One theatres in those days. When we heard The Alhambra closed, we were at The Sunderland Empire at the time, we couldn't believe it that that had gone, and that was in the seventies. We thought that because all these civic theatres had opened in the sixties, we thought that the business was safe, as it were, but suddenly, when a Number One like The Alhambra, Glasgow goes and it's the beginning of the seventies, you think, 'Christ, what'll happen to us?' and I was at Sunderland at the time, and we were very definitely second run to Newcastle, although Sunderland was a Number One, we were a Number One A, as it were in comparison to Newcastle Royal, and so because theatres are very often a political football, it could have been us going as well at that time. It

didn't, but it might have been. So, even in the middle reaches of the profession, there was still an uncertainty.

TS: Do you feel that's changed today or do you think there's still that element there of insecurity?

MG: There must be, because I've just finished work on a book on, a booklet, on Basingstoke, where the Corn Exchange is being converted into a cinema theatre. Burned out, rebuilt in the twenties, and then reopened during the war, and then became the Haymarket, and was run by a theatre trust, a theatre association first, which ran it from circa 1952/53, very successfully, the theatre was rebuilt internally for three million in the nineties, and political considerations and the Arts Council attitude, politicised attitude, closed the theatre in February, and the theatre trust was disbanded. Now it's being run directly hands on by the council through its subsidiary, the Anville Concert Hall, and there's no longer a resident company. So, you know, because The Arts Council has changed completely since the animal that I knew in the sixties and seventies, so now the theatre's just, the Haymarket's just reopened at the end of September, but it was closed from February to September, and as I say, there's no longer the resident company in there, so, yes, it's still a political and artistic establishment football, and quite frankly, I'm glad to be out of it. I'm glad to be retired.

TS: So, you had your pretentious moment before, I'm going to ask a pretentious question to finish with...

MG: You're excused pretentious, you're a young academic, I allow pretentious...

TS: What advice would you have to anyone who wanted to go and work in the same area that you have done? Someone of my age, say, who's just about to start a career. What advice would you give to them?

MG: The same advice that everyone has given everyone else, especially in and about theatre, all the time: 'Go and get your head examined! Don't do it.!' But it's a world, the theatre that I worked in, a friend of mine dates its death at 1979, which, coincidentally is the year I started at Loughborough. That was the last year of full length summer seasons. The theatre I mentioned to you of four jobs a year, panto, spring, summer, autumn, it isn't there. I can't rue it or regret it, it isn't there to go back to. Apart from the fact I'm too old and knackered in health. It just isn't there, so I haven't got that thing. In any case nowadays, then as I say, went into the West End, knocked on the stage door, now, I think I'd have to say to people, you've got to a drama school. Not a university for a drama degree, but go on a stage management or lighting course at a drama school.

TS: Somewhere like RADA. or The Old Vic?

MG: Well, RADA, LAMDA, Guildhall. One of those. And that also gives you a background so you can go on and teach, something like that. Admittedly, you see, I

always had a qualification, so that if theatre for any reason hadn't worked out, I could have gone and done something else. It rather tickles me that I was teaching at a university, and I was teaching honours degree students without any shred of qualification apart from the best of all, that of bleedin' been there and done it. But, you know, a degree in history is no basis for teaching stage management and lighting. That used to tickle me, but it didn't matter.

TS: Right, well, Mervyn Gould, thank you very much for your interview today.

MG: You're very welcome.