

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

<http://sounds.bl.uk>

## Derek Paget – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Hannah Dodd**

**4 December 2007**

Stage Manager. Lionel Bart; Peter Brook's King Lear; directors; Dynamo; The Hostage; King Lear; King's Head Theatre; lighting; Joan Littlewood; Oh! What a Lovely War; John Osborne; Howard Panter; Royal Court Theatre; stage management; Theatre Project Company; Theatre Workshop; touring; West End productions; Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf.

HD: Could we begin by discussing how you got into theatre in the first place?

DP: Sure. I was a University actor and director and at the latter end of my university career at the University of East Anglia I did a bit of work in the Maddermarket Theatre in Norwich - which is a semi-professional theatre, or it was then, I don't know if it still is – a professional director and stage manager. Basically they took me on and helped me out and gave me some introductions and I used those contacts to do the usual thing – writing to people saying 'please will you take me on' and eventually I got one.

HD: And when did you first get involved in the Theatre Workshop?

DP: Theatre Workshop was 1971 - I started '72 sorry: I worked with the lighting designer at the Theatre Royal in 1971, and he alerted me to the fact that there was a job going in early 1972.

HD: OK, and how long did you work in that establishment and in the King's Head Theatre.

DP: It was actually quite a brief time working at Stratford East, Theatre Workshop, it was pretty much eight or nine months in 1972 and I was working at the King's Head during the same time. I started at the King's Head the year before, '71. Nobody got paid anything in those days at the King's Head, it was very early Lunchtime Theatre, but it was beginning to get a reputation as somewhere where people could go to provide a shop window kind of thing for their careers. Actors particularly were beginning to enjoy performing there. I really worked mainly on the stage management, but I did a bit of acting there in summer '71 and we did a production that went on tour to the Edinburgh Festival, that kind of thing.

HD: So was there a particular side to the theatre work, did you prefer the stage management or the acting?

DP: No, I didn't really like stage management, I was useless at it actually! [Laughs] I was a very poor stage manager. I wasn't trained, and as I said I was a university actor, would-be director, really trying to blag his way into a profession in which there were people much more trained. So I didn't really like stage management [Laughs]. Some of it was OK, and I think what I got was, I was very fortunate in getting a grounding for the profession at the time. You know, I did a bit of stage management, a bit of lighting, sound, a little bit of acting and even shared some directing with a man called Howard Panter who is now quite famous. You might have heard of him, he runs the Ambassador's Theatre Group?

HD: No.

DP: Which is, I think, the largest commercial theatre producer in the UK now.

HD: Wow!

DP: [Laughs]

HD: What kind of working atmosphere was there? Was there a good rapport within the group or...?

DP: Are we talking about the King's Head or the Theatre Workshop here?

HD: You could tell me about both.

DP: The King's Head was great fun actually, because it was real provisional, you know, cutting edge kind of stuff, and everybody was... I mean, nobody got paid as I said, it was kind of expenses, and that was the most you got. And it was quite exciting really, [pause] the places were really beginning to be established. Theatre Workshop, it was really the tail-end of Joan Littlewood's career – the last few productions that she did were at that time. And I think looking back - with the wisdom of hindsight - I think she was just very tired. You know, she was a lady into her late middle age, the theatre was pretty ramshackle, it wasn't getting any grant, it never had really had much support from the Art's Council. And it was a bit... yeah, it was not an easy place to work shall we say. People were quite tense, and looking back again I think we were quite tense, it didn't help having a fairly inefficient stage manager! But I honestly think that even a trained stage manager would struggle to cope – there wasn't the money to do things; every one was having to do things... they were building the set on the stage, you know, you'd get in in the morning, the stage was covered in sawdust and our first job was to sweep the stage and clear the sawdust! I mean, there was no workshop, you know? It was just really in a bad state. The atmosphere there was trying – challenging, shall we

say! But it was a good experience and I learnt a lot – probably learnt more from that than I did from the one I enjoyed.

HD: Ah right. You mentioned that Joan Littlewood was doing her last productions. Do you remember what those were?

DP: Well yeah, there were three and I didn't work on the final one. There was one called The Londoners – I've got the programme somewhere here – The Londoners was an update of a show that she did in the sixties called Sparrers Can't Sing, that was written by a man called Stephen Lewis - he was in a sitcom, a TV sitcom called On The Buses in the seventies, quite a famous sitcom in its day. And he really came back and was updating this play, it was re-titled The Londoners, it was a kind of musical there was a little song in it that Lionel Bart had written – he was around, he'd just been declared bankrupt, he was down to his last Rolls Royce! [Laughter] And the other one was The Hostage, which again was a revival, it was a revival of the Brendan Behan play – one of the huge successes of the kind of Golden Age of Stratford East. And I thought that was a terrific production, it was one of those productions that people sort of get tribal about, you know, we were sort of all in it together kind of thing. But it didn't get much of a write up from the critics, I think probably, looking back, they were hoping it might go into the West End as the original Hostage had done, you know? And sort of bail the place out a bit with a bit more money coming in. But it didn't really work out. And then the final production was a thing called So You Want to be in Pictures, which was written by a guy called Peter Rankin who... well, he became the person who looked after Joan in her final years. I mean, he was her amanuensis... he's the guardian of the flame now, he's supposed to be writing a book about Joan. And he was sort of part of the stage management team at the time and that one kind of sank without trace and then shortly after that, her long time partner and the general manager at Stratford - the guy who'd given me my job - Gerry Raffles, died. Died, you know, quite young... well, in relative terms. He just had a heart attack suddenly when they were in France together and honestly I think she spent the rest of her life kind of mourning his death. You know, it was just one of those things, she never ever I think went anywhere near the theatre again, never did anything any more. She had, I suppose, done what she'd come to do.

HD: So, out of the plays that you worked on and the plays that you went to see sort of in that time, what do you find the most memorable?

DP: I'm glad you've given me an opportunity to talk about that. I'd single out two productions. When I was an A-level student, some pals and I started going to the theatre quite regularly and out of the plays we saw at that time - this would be a good almost ten years earlier, sort of, you know, '63, '64, '65, round about that sort of time. Well, there were a lot of interesting things happening: of course as you'll know if was pre the date that the Lord Chamberlain's office was abolished, so you know, texts, play-scripts were censored effectively by the Lord Chamberlain's office. But Happy End - I'd single out Brecht's Happy End which I saw at the Royal Court, I think some time in 1964. Do you know that play at all? No reason why you should.

HD: No, I don't know that one.

DP: It's a typical Brecht play, in that it's about capitalist corruption really, and it's set in Chicago. Brecht had never been to Chicago, but he'd seen plenty of gangster movies, that's all he needs to know about. It's Salvation Army people who try to reform these gangsters you know [Laughs] - absolutely hilarious. It was very different to the kind of theatre I'd been used to until that point. You know, it wasn't naturalistic, it had songs, it had what I later learnt was called a news panel – one of those things with lights with words that kind of track across. And that brings me to the other production I saw, which I've really kind of made a career out of since! Which was Oh! What A Lovely War, which I saw in 1964.

HD: Yes.

DP: It made a very profound impression on me. I wrote about it in my diary at the time – I was fairly obsessed with the First World War anyway, a lot of books were coming out about the First World War, BBC 2 was doing The Great War documentary series. And that again... I mean, what I always say about Oh! What A Lovely War is that I had no idea that theatre could do these things. You know, could tell you facts and information about how men had died and you know, what little gain they'd made and really gave you a history lesson about the First World War and yet entertained you. And the other phrase I always use about it is that it was a production that could freeze the smile on your face. You know, you'd be laughing delightedly at something and then there would suddenly be this awful picture or statistic and it would just wipe the smile off your face and make you realise that this, as it were, was for real, that this was a serious thing where people have suffered and died and so on. So those two productions and I mean, Happy End was not dissimilar really, it was that kind of Eastern, that European theatre that basically Britain wasn't very good at, at the time. It wasn't a play set in a room, you know, with people talking to each other – it was action, there was stuff happening every minute, it was just great, you know.

HD: Talking about the theatres that you worked in again, how were they different from one another in terms of the types of plays they performed...

DP: They were very very different, I mean, again I was fortunate in that I only worked in professional theatre for about three years but I saw everything that was going in terms of the institution at the time. I've mentioned lunch time theatre clubs which was just catching on. You know, following the abolition of the Lord Chamberlain's office in '68 - I mean, this was what theatre started to develop suddenly, people do stuff without the risk of the censor, you know no need to put scripts in to the censor. So that was, as I said, very provisional, very cutting-edge, very experimental. And then I did a virtually repertory sort of thing at Stratford. But I also worked in the West End as a stage manager on three productions one of which did, as we called it in those days, a number one tour. So I saw that side of the theatre, which was vanishing really in a sense. You know, theatrical digs where, I mean really, there were photographs of Noel Coward on the mantelpiece – you know, just like from a bygone time. And it was, I think, just fading out, that sort of thing. I stayed in theatrical digs in Roundhay Park in Leeds, that was the place where the Noel Coward picture was. So I saw commercial management and how

they handled theatre and really they were looking for the 'next big thing' to hit the West End and catch on kind of thing.

I worked on this awful play called – well it wasn't that bad but it wasn't all that good either – it was called Straight Up by a man called Syd Cheatele who has never been heard of since. And Syd Cheatele - in 1970... whatever it was – 2, 3, can't remember – was supposed to be the new Joe Orton, so his play was a little bit risqué shall we say but it didn't do any good, that was the touring show and it finished up in the Piccadilly Theatre in London for a, as they say, short run. I also worked on a musical which was called I and Albert, and it was about Queen Victoria which was directed by the, a person better know for films, John Schlesinger. And there were loads of people whose names I keep seeing in that, because they had all kind of Victoria's children in that, and people like Sarah Brightman was one of the kids that Queen Victoria had, and an actress called Lesley Manville who is in that Cranford production at the moment.

HD: Oh right!

DP: An awful lot of people were starting up around then, were doing things at the time because I think the theatre was very vital. Arts Council was supporting travelling groups - it was really quite an exciting time, I now realise, to be involved. And so you know, the repertoire was different in each one: experimental in the lunch time things and new writers - quite often small cast-y type things than in the commercial stuff. And the Theatre Workshop really trying to kind of revive itself and looking at its back-catalogue again to try and get the theatre going again.

HD: So in terms of the experimental theatre that you talked about, what sort of things were you doing there?

DP: Well the best thing we worked on, I thought, and still think it was the best thing, was a play called Dynamo by someone else who has done very little since – a writer called Chris Wilkinson. He was quite big news at the time, he did various other things which companies like Portable Theatre, you know where Howard Brenton and David Hare made their start in this little travelling theatre group. And Chris Wilkinson wrote this play called Dynamo which we did at the King's Head, Islington, and that was directed by Howard Panter and a man called Frederick Proud who ran the Soho Theatre club, he and his then wife Verity Bargate ran the Soho. Dynamo is set in a strip club and it was a kind of continuous play with four stripper acts, and in the final stripper act the play modulated into a documentary piece about political torture. Which was, you know, strange stuff and I think it was very good. The actresses that were in it, 2 of them were working in Oh! Calcutta! at the time and several of us who were also working on it, I actually acted in that. Several of us were working in the West End, a couple of people from the play that I was working on, which was called After Haggerty by David Mercer – there was a couple of actors from that play in Dynamo. And Howard Panter and I were also on the stage management of that. And that is what tended to happen because, you know, you had your evenings and you had your whole days free, so lunch-time theatre fitted in really perfectly, people were there in London anyway and they could get agents to come along and look at their work. Dynamo really was a big hit, in those days the King's Head just had plays in for the week, well our play Dynamo was so successful that they pretty soon booked it beyond that, I think we played a month there in the end. It

got reviews in all the main dailies. Some of them thought it was pretty strange stuff, a little bit kind of – which I suppose it was in a sense – a bit exploitative of the girls. Again, it was the early times of feminism so I think the play was trying to say something about – because I mean, the political torture ended with the actress who played the stripper literally naked and the character just revealing how empty her life was. So it was a kind of confession but a very strange and non-political, in one sense, type of confession – an actress called Linda Marlow, and her main claim to fame is - more recently I think - is that she's done a lot of work with Steven Berkoff. She's been his main female associate really, Linda Marlow has. And that play was made into a film which was, you know, taken to the Cannes Film Festival – it's in Time Out even, the Time Out film guide – directed by an American called Steven Dwoskin who was I think a pupil or associate of Andy Warhol. It's a film without a narrative, you know, a sort of Warhol-type film. So that was very exciting working on that, and that's the play we took to the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh during the Edinburgh Festival of summer '72.

HD: Could you tell me a bit more about the acting work that you did?

DP: I didn't do all that much really because I was mainly a stage manager working on the technical side, but we also did some other short plays done by, mainly, people nobody have ever heard of which we took to the Edinburgh Festival and did lunch-times in another venue in Edinburgh. With Howard Panter, again at the King's Head, we also did some Sam Shepard plays – Sam Shepard was quite a kind of new thing at the time. And, of course, I was in Dynamo which (it's hard to believe I know) but I played a strip club bouncer in that! There was no dialogue, so essentially I walked round trying to look mean – the whole theatre was set up like a strip club, and the girl whose act came first came on again at the end and if people didn't realise that the show had finished we just kicked them out. It looked as if the whole thing was going to start up and go all over again. So I didn't do anything major and I certainly didn't do anything outside the Fringe. I had a walk-on in The Hostage but that wasn't anything significant either. [Laughs] So as I say, I think the other thing I want to say about the technical side is that Theatre Projects Company, Theatre Projects which was headed amongst other people by a man called Richard Pilbrow who has written one of the standard texts on theatre lighting. And Theatre Projects, for the West End musical that I did, I And Albert, they did projections which were very artful – they were the cast looking like Victorian photographs of Queen Victoria and her family and so on. And that was a series of about half a dozen slide screens and these had to be faded in and out in quite a complex sequence and I was the understudy for that operation and I did operate it and I wouldn't say I operated it like the main operator did. [Laughs] She got it right most nights I didn't get it right, but it was quite fun to do because it was new technology and for technology in the theatre this use of projections was quite new. Lovely War had projections in, which is why I also kind of connect it up in my mind, but really they used... in the sixties between '63 which was when Lovely War was first produced and the early seventies when technology really marched on. And this was real, for the time, hi-tech stuff.

HD: So what sort of things were you encountering as far as technological advances [were concerned]?

DP: Well, me personally was mainly not being able to make things work! [Laughter] As good technicians could. But I suppose, again, the main thing was the gradual increase in

technology beyond a level that I could cope with. At the King's Head, for example, I sometimes operated lights and there was what amounted to part of what was called a Grand Master theatre board which were sets of mechanical dimmers like pub beer handles really and you had to pull these things down and there were chains, it was a very big contraption. And that stood in what was backstage there then, I should think it's changed hugely I hope it has anyway! But this stood in what had been the old gent's loo and it had like a tarpaulin on the roof - I do not know how the fire department passed it really - so when it rained the water leaked in: you did rather worry if you were going to get an electric shock from this thing. So that was a whole mechanical thing from, probably, the 1930s or '40s. But when I went to Leeds, the guy there was working one of the very very new electronic dimmer boards which looked like an organ console, it looked like he was playing a kind of theatre organ! So things were moving on, the transistorised dimmers and eventually computerised stuff was beginning to come in and change things completely.

HD: So was it an easy transition between the various aspects of theatre, the acting and the...

DP: Yeah it was, in one sense it was easy, but remember I said I was really blagging my way through, so because I'd not been trained I had to make things up as I went along or trust people to ask them without them then revealing to somebody else how ignorant I actually was. So I was very fortunate in meeting Howard Panter, because he was a very generous guy and he must have realised very early on in our meeting how little I actually knew - certainly about the logistics and the technical side of theatre - as I said, I just used to tell actors where to move. I never focussed a lantern, I never operated a set of sound gears, and I'd never done anything like that, I was having to kind of make it up. And that's what... if I'd gone to drama school instead of going to university it would have been different, I would have been confident in my skills rather than feeling very vulnerable out there. While I hugely enjoyed the three years I spent in the theatre, I was ready to get out at the end of it - I didn't want to continue to work at the theatre, I knew I needed to go in other directions.

HD: So if we could return to talking about the theatre that you watched, before when you worked in it, what sort of things were coming out on the stage at that time?

DP: The plays that I remember seeing first productions of: I saw the original production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, the Edward Albee play and I was very, very struck by that. And I saw a lot of John Osborne plays. This was obviously a long time after *Look Back in Anger*, but plays like *Luther* which had Albert Finney in it, and which, you know, I thought it was terrific at the time, I thought it was a stunning performance. I hadn't realised how much that play leans on Brecht's *Galileo* for... well I think, for a lot of its ideas. And I also saw *Inadmissible Evidence* with Nicol Williamson which, again, at the time I found very impressive, I don't find Osborne very impressive now but at the time he was 'the man' as they say. [Laughs] I also saw *Wesker*: I'd heard the trilogy that's called the *Chicken Soup Trilogy* on radio, and I went to see *Chips With Everything*, saw *The Kitchen* in the cinema. I mean, *Wesker*... all these people: Pinter, *Wesker*, Osborne, John Arden less so. I didn't know so much about him - worked on a production of his at University. And *Chips With Everything* was done at the Royal Court, so I made a number of visits to the Royal Court - that's where I saw *Happy End*. I saw some of the

Scandinavian realist plays, you know, Chekhov, Ibsen, Strindberg, also I remember seeing Ivanov with a fairly stellar cast at the Haymarket. We tended to just go and see what our teachers told us would be good, I mean, we weren't very discerning. I think *Lovely War* we went to see because we were all interested in the First World War - I don't think that was especially something teachers had told us about. We knew Osborne was supposed to be good so we went to see his plays. Saw some stuff at Stratford too, and stuff at the Aldwych, which was the RSC's base in London at the time. So for someone of my generation, David Warner's *Hamlet* - this was the student *Hamlet* who went round with a big scarf around his neck, he looked like a Beatle I suppose because that was the period again. So I guess a lot of us, when we saw that, we identified with him, as a sort of troubled, romantic young man having trouble with his parents and so on... [Laughter] it was a remarkable production. The other production from the time that we saw, was the famous production of *King Lear* by Peter Brook and I forget the name of the person... Paul Scofield playing *King Lear*. That had the famous sort of absurdist bits in, like *Lear* and the fool, because suddenly Beckett and people like Pinter and lesser known people, you'd have no reason to have heard of the absurdist dramatists at the time like N.F. Simpson. People suddenly realised that some of the Shakespearean dialogues were a little bit like absurdist drama - these two mad people sitting on this blasted heath talking nonsense. It was a bit like *Waiting for Godot* and it was played like *Waiting for Godot*. We saw that at a matinée at Stratford, but I've got to admit - before I get too pretentious about that play - that I fell asleep in that! I mean, you know, I was, what, 16 or 17, I can't remember, and we'd gone to the pub before we went to the theatre so I did sleep through some of that. These were like landmark productions I guess at that time, pragmatically if you were going for university interviews it was good to be able to talk about which was I guess why our teachers encouraged us or took us, they took us to Stratford to see *King Lear*. But also because I wanted... I guess at the time, I wanted to be an actor, I did a bit of acting in school plays and so on and seeing these people live was, you know, incredible. As I said, the thing that really struck me were those plays that talk back. Osborne did a bit of that because, of course, Luther got into the pulpit and spoke directly to the audience, and Nicol Williamson - Maitland I think the character is called, he's a lawyer in *Inadmissible Evidence* - he had pieces to the audience, you know. And the best bits in John Osborne, these harangues that the main characters get into, almost doesn't matter if anybody else is on stage, they'll harangue the audience. And there was a lot of energy in those and a lot of energy of the time, that kind of Angry Young Man stuff.

HD: So was there a big culture of younger people going to see these plays?

DP: I suppose there was. I was the first person in my family to go to university, so I guess I was the first person to go to straight theatre very much - you know, 'serious' theatre. I don't really remember much about the audiences, the only thing I can remember from the audiences was some guy - because I thought *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* was so good, the emotions were so... Do you know the play? Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton played the film, and it's about a married couple fighting with each other essentially, and saying horrible things to each other, which is kind of funny and horrible at the same time. You know, the energy is in the anger, and I was very struck by this the first time out, and there was a very fine American actress called Uta Hagen who has written lots and lots of books about acting and she was one of Lee Strasberg's pupils - I now realise she was a very fine actress that I was able to see. And I think I went on about it so much to other friends that I persuaded some of them to go and see it again with me, and by that time the cast had changed over and it was a little

bit lamer and this guy in the audience took an objection to it. I don't know if he was a madman or... he suddenly started shouting back at the stage! And he was ejected of course in the interval, but he was saying 'I don't know how the Lord Chamberlain could allow this filth to pass' - stuff like that. And of course when anything happens in the auditorium that is not supposed to happen, it is a magnet isn't it – it's much more interesting than what is going on on the stage.

That just reminded me actually, another play I saw at the Royal Court was called *The Boys in the Band*, and that was the first gay drama I think I'd ever seen, I think it was the first overtly gay play that had even been done in the West End. I'm not sure about that, there might be something in... Dominic [Shellard] might know something about whether that's an outrageous claim or whether it is true! Yeah, I mean these were all things that I read, the reviews and knew what the critics were recommending.

HD: So there were a lot of outside themes coming into the plays, like you say, about sexuality?

DP: Well it was the sixties, post '56, and there was a feeling that there was a rising generation that wanted to take the old thing – all that stuff that is written in the books about the sixties. So that stuff, that was the early... I actually think that what Stratford East did was more important, but then I would do because I worked there and like I said, it's like a tribal thing. I think that what they did was actually more important than what was going on in the Royal Court. The Royal Court was fashionable and it was intellectual and it fitted in very well with the English, university-educated middle class at the time. So the Royal Court dramatists tended to get all the write-ups, and they'd been subsidised - as I said, Stratford East never got anything. And the second push came following the Lord Chamberlain, the abolition, as you know, the late sixties. I would say that there was a new energy then, a sort of second generation, in fact that's what the two books that were written at the time by John Russell Taylor: one was called *Anger and After* and the other was called *The Second Wave*. And *The Second Wave*, that came out before I started working in the theatre, but that second wave I think really was about the Fringe and the touring groups and the Left Wing theatre that picked up on the exciting ideas that had come out of Europe. And when I went to university I went to theatre a bit in vacations and in York where I was an undergraduate, but you know, I got more interested in doing stuff myself and being in plays and that kind of thing.

HD: So as far as your own work as acting and stage management is concerned, were there any actors or directors or anyone in theatre that influenced you a lot?

DP: Joan Littlewood. First and last, Joan Littlewood, who was amazing, transformative. She had this way of being very negative sometimes and she if there was any hint of pretension in anyone or any hint of short-cutting she could be quite hard with people. But she was inspirational even though, as I said, I'm sure she was way past her best, I don't think her heart was fully in it. But still, watching her work was an education.

John Schlesinger was also interesting, but he was a little bit at the mercy of his technical team, he didn't really understand I don't think – his question was always 'will it work?' you know because there was all sorts of technology around the music in *I and Albert* that he couldn't quite deal with. I also worked with Michael Rudman, who is still directing for the West End stage, whose work I think really is unremarkable. I'm not

really very well qualified to talk about his productions, but certainly the production I worked on wasn't a very good play - that was the Syd Cheatle thing. But I didn't find him very genial and interesting... I didn't find his rehearsals very interesting, let's put it that way.

David Jones, who at the time was an RSC director - who is still around - he was really good technically, he was the director for the David Mercer play *After Haggerty* which Frank Finlay and Billie Whitelaw were in, they were in the original cast. And it was interesting watching them work, for about a week, and then it got very dull. Because I was props stage manager I tried to engineer as many opportunities as I could to get out of the rehearsal room because it was so boring! I thought, you know, I must be missing something, but once we started our West End run, the younger actors told me that they were really bored by it as well. And funnily enough upstairs - RSC had this rehearsal room in Floral Street behind Covent Garden Market which was a fruit market - upstairs Peter Brook was rehearsing his very famous production of *Midsummer Night's Dream*. You know, the one that was on trapezes and things. I didn't get to see those rehearsals, but I used to kind of listen at the door and it sounded so exciting in there, noises and music and sounds of activity. It just sounded magic, what was going on in there, compared to our rehearsal.

But I think a lot of stage direction, particularly for West End at that time anyway, it was about making sure that things ran in very careful train lines, and I think that was what David Jones was doing, he was making sure the production was totally nailed down, do you know what I mean? So that it could run in the West End and he wouldn't have to worry about it. Joan Littlewood was quite the opposite, she'd rather something was alive and if it showed any signs of running along any kind of tram lines she used to write these notes and stick them on the Green Room wall. They were usually very insulting to people - people who read them got cross about them - and that's what she wanted you know, she wanted them to just feel a bit different about it. She'd write things like... I mean really, things that wouldn't be allowed in politically correct times. They would be totally insulting to people, and they would say 'How dare she say this!' they would stamp their feet and get really cross and then do something about it. So her style was very kind of involving and exciting and something was happening - if a rehearsal got dull she'd tell people to sing their parts! They'd look at her and 'Go on' she'd say 'sing!' so they'd have to pretend they were in an opera, suddenly. And it was just to kind of pull them out of the clichés they were getting into.

And actually one of the best directors, I thought Howard Panter himself. I mean, he's a producer now and always has been really, apart from those early times. But I thought he was a good director. I haven't seen him for 25 odd years, but when I last saw him he'd just begun his career as a producer. And I said to him, you know, 'Why did you go into production?'. Because we always used to make jokes about producers when we were stage managers together, because we used to think they were ignorant know-nothings who were just in it to get off with actresses - or get off with actors, some of them! - because they were empty-heads a lot of them. And he said 'Well I just wanted to' he said, 'do you remember how we used to send producers up?' and I said, 'Yeah' and he said, 'Well, I just wanted to see if I could do any better!' and so he kind of got into that.

HD: So is there any more you can tell us about the West End theatre that you worked in?

DP: It was a different world. I don't know what it's like now, but a different world sort of financially. And I wasn't hugely well paid, but it was a very comfortable world – taxis home after late-night rehearsals, time and a half - and double time if you went past midnight. It was union rates at the time, so I did OK, I could subsidise work that wasn't paid because I was only doing these couple of hours work in the evening once the West End run had started. There was a certain amount of party culture - producers would throw nice first-night parties, Café de Paris and places like that. I don't think I made the most of that really, I think I was a bit sort of sneery about that sort of thing in those days, I'd love it now! [Laughter]. Those times I thought 'This isn't right, it shouldn't be happening'. And actually the company I worked for was run by a man called Eddie Kulukundis - Sir Eddie Kulukundis as he is now - he was a Greek shipping millionaire, he was a lovely man and he was a very generous employer I think. Otherwise the West End basically it's a place like a lot of theatres where you go in the back and the audience come in the front and you don't actually meet your audience. Stratford tried to be different, it wanted to be a theatre for the community - which I think it is now, actually - and that was Joan Littlewood's dream for it, that it would be a real working class theatre in a working class district. At the King's Head you couldn't help but mix with the people who came, because it was a pub theatre and again, it was much more informal compared to the West End. Touring was funny too, because you got a feel for each theatre very quickly and it often depended on who was managing the place, I mean, in terms of the work we were doing – setting the production up and taking it apart at the end. The crew at Birmingham were horrible, for example! I don't have anything against - I don't think there were any Brummies - but the crew at Birmingham were horrible and really kind of exploited us, but then maybe they had reasons for that. But you know, you had to find out when you went on tour very quickly what sort of place it was you were going into.

HD: And how long were you staying at each place when you were touring?

DP: A week. So it was dashing around quite a lot, we went to... it was the most bewildering tour, in winter it was Dublin, Birmingham, Southsea, Oxford and Leeds in - I think - that order, which was a really strange order to go in. It was educational, that's why I say I think I was very lucky to see all these different aspects of theatre as an institution. I mean, Southsea in the middle of winter with a play that was the new Orton! You can imagine, maybe? It was a big theatre, big Victorian theatre. It's still there, King's Theatre, Southsea. It was one of those occasions where literally we were looking to count the audience – there's this tradition where if there's more of you than there are of them you can ask them if they want their money back and let them go home. And it wasn't a big cast play, but there was just about more of them than us and we had to go ahead with it.

HD: Did you ever get a chance to do any directing of your own?

DP: Howard and I shared directing for the short plays we did for the Edinburgh Festival. And that was, again, an example of his generosity, he didn't have to do that but he knew that I was, as it were, a university boy who had ambitions to be directing, so we collaborated on that. And that was fun. I always liked directing - after I finished theatre I actually went and trained as a school teacher and did a lot of directing in six years as a school teacher. What those three years in theatre taught me was most of what I then

put into operation in school and university - again, I directed things with students in university. But it also taught me that I wasn't right in terms of skill and personality for professional theatre.

HD: And out of the plays that you did work on did you have a favourite?

DP: Dynamo was definitely a favourite, yeah. That's the one with the best memories, and I thought at the time that it was going to be really significant - it hasn't proved to be. There are other things that were more significant and you can't tell when you're close up. And pretty close after that I would say The Hostage, which was as I said to you, again, it wasn't a production that was hugely successful, it was a terrific play. And it's a play that in a very humane way tells you a great deal about the Anglo-Irish conflict. And those two really are the kind of stand-outs.

HD: And do you have a least favourite that you worked on?

DP: Ooh! [Laughs] Probably Straight Up - it was not a good play. And the tour was interesting whenever you weren't in the theatre and I was promoted, I think, beyond my competence in that production. I was the DSM, [Deputy Stage Manager] and I think that's where I really knew for the first time - unless I did something to try and help this skill short-fall... it wasn't that I had any great problem, I just knew how close to the edge I was sailing, as it were, and close to the wind I was sailing. But it was OK, I've got no complaints about it, it wasn't dire, it just wasn't very interesting.

HD: What kind of things about the time in general influenced you?

DP: Again, Joan Littlewood and, you know, discovering that there were... You have a lot of time on your hands when you're working in professional theatre - if I wasn't doing the lunchtime stuff, there was plenty of time when I had all day really. So I tried to do a bit of reading about the theatre, which I'd never done before, and found out more about Brecht and he's always been very important to me. People like Edward Gordon Craig who wrote about theatre in the early years of the 20th century. Because I was having to do some lighting and as I said technical stuff in general I tried to read up about that a bit, so finding about people like Adolphe Apia, I guess the earliest technician of electrics in theatre. That was quite good, I wouldn't say it was anything like a proper course, it was a bit random and a bit hit and miss. Eric Bentley's work too. I was fortunate enough to see Eric Bentley - who is the great Brecht Scholar. I was fortunate enough to see him a few years ago performing actually, some of the Brecht, some of the things from the Songspiel, so his writing on theatre Theory of the Modern Stage was, I think, the book that I read at the time, which was useful. And certainly something that hadn't been covered in my University course, which had been mainly about reading plays rather than thinking about how they were going to be staged.

HD: And how did this affect you work now that you had all this background knowledge?

DP: Well, lots of ways, I did my own production work, I did my own lighting, I was never at the mercy of technical crews I knew what I wanted technically, which I always regarded as important. And I've always wanted to do and to see theatre that was innovative in that way, that was formally innovative I suppose. I don't want to decry naturalistic theatre, but I do tend to avoid plays that, if I want to go to the theatre or somebody wants me to go to the theatre they say there's this play on I'll say 'is it in a room?', if it's in a room I don't really want to see it. It's great for those who do want to see such plays but I don't really, I want to see plays that will surprise me theatrically and there are plays like that around. Especially plays that are daring, mixing with dance for example, latterly I've got much more interested in people like Matthew Bourne I think is very exciting.

I think, again, this is the legacy of Littlewood, she expected actors to be multi-competent, to be able to sing, dance a bit. Not necessarily to be brilliant singers or brilliant dancers, but be able to get by – to have a strong thing, and then a couple of things you could bring into play, if they couldn't dance they'd have to play a musical instrument. And I think that's become much more the norm in theatre now, I think people are expected to be able to do more now than they used to be able to. And the best Stratford East actors, the best Theatre Workshop actors, were very adept at changing register I guess. And they didn't need to be mollycoddled - it was relatively easy stage managing shows at Stratford East, because the actors looked after themselves, they didn't expect you to get the props ready for them. All I had to do as Stage Manager was put the props back in, they had these huge like big pigeon holes labelled and they had the stuff put back in there. So I picked them up if they were left on the stage, if they bought them off-stage themselves, rather than just dumping them - which your average West End theatre actor would do, or leave them in the dressing room – they were expected to be disciplined and not called from their dressing rooms or wherever they were. It was a much more democratic thing, you were valued for your work, whether your work was lighting or working in the bar or working in the box office or cleaning the theatre, it really was a feeling of... and it came from, it came from their roots in the thirties as working class people.

HD: So do you think that democratic atmosphere made it easier for audiences to relate to?

DP: Possibly. I think Stratford East shows could either be wonderfully involving or totally shambolic - some critics have said that and it's probably true. I don't recall seeing any of the ones that were famously shambolic. Joan Littlewood did a production - it wasn't a Stratford East production actually, and she always regretted it as a big mistake, but Lionel Bart did this musical about Robin Hood called Twang, which was one of the big disasters of the sixties, I mean it was, like, a huge flop. Lionel Bart sort of thought people had it in for him and it was a put-up job, but I think it was probably a bad show, nobody has ever wanted to do it since. And he persuaded Joan to take it over and she couldn't really do anything with it, nor could she work with these West End... I think she was trying to get West End chorus boys and girls to improvise, and they did, they danced and they sang so she was talking a foreign language to them and the whole thing was a disaster. Bart was an interesting man, I got to know him a little bit because he worked, as I said to you, on this production called The Londoners and he really was... I had him down just as a bullshitter really at that point, but as I say he'd just declared himself bankrupt – he was driving around in, it wasn't a Rolls, it was a Bentley, I can't remember. He gave me a lift once back from Stratford East into the West End and I

couldn't believe this car and he was smoking his big cigar. I'll just tell you this one story about Joan, because this is illustrative of what she was like in some ways. You'll often hear, other people tell similar sorts of stories, she would build people up quite a lot, and she would either build them up to a place which they couldn't sustain or she would build them up in order to knock them down. Though she loved Lionel dearly, so she didn't build him up to knock him down I don't think, I don't know. He was always hanging around and he helped with the songs, he'd written this song Sparrers Can't Sing. And if someone was struggling with a bit she'd turn to somebody and say 'you go and try'. Somebody else would have a go at the part, and that's how she'd conduct her rehearsals. She started saying or implying that Lionel was really good 'Go on Lionel, you go and do it' and he'd go up really confident. In rehearsals he was confident, she built him up to such an extent that when one of the people left the cast, well they were these two tramps pushing around this pram with junk in, were the characters in the play. She built him up and she said he was going to take over, and from the moment she said he was going to take over this role, you could see the colour drain from his face, he was obviously terrified! And come the opening of his first performance in this part, I mean he was... I don't know what he'd taken, whether it was liquid or chemical, I'm not sure what he'd taken but he was totally spaced out. I mean, he didn't know quite which planet he was on I don't think, and he still had that terror in his eyes - it hadn't taken the terror away! And at the back of the set - the set was a kind of Victorian housing in East London, and you had to go into go into what appeared to be the front door, go up these steps, appear in the window for a line of dialogue then go back down the steps and come back out to the pram. Plenty of time, but this was something he'd had difficulties with in rehearsal, and it was just like the Wild West, it was obviously a façade with wooden scaffolding at the back and some rudimentary stairs. Well, he appeared at the window, went through the door, appeared at the window OK, and then for some bizarre reason, he must have thought he didn't have enough time, he jumped rather than taking the stairs and broke his ankle! So it was literally 'Is there a Doctor in the house?' situation, we had to carry on without him, and of course he never, that was his one and only appearance on stage, he was in plaster for the rest of the run. But she had no business really encouraging him to think he could go on then because he was obviously frightened, maybe she did it for his own good and thought it would help him get his confidence back, but it didn't work. [Laughter]

HD: Thank you very much.