

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Brenda Plumley – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Sarah Louise Cooper**

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Actress. Assistant Stage Manager; The Birthday Party; Children's Theatre; improvisation; Look Back in Anger; musicals; John Osborne; Palace Theatre, Plymouth; Harold Pinter; props; Royal Court Theatre; Peter Slade; teaching; Theatre Centre; theatre in the round; touring; Tower Theatre, Canonbury; Brian Way; weekly rep.

SC: Could you give me a general overview of how you got into theatre in the first place?

BP: Well, I always acted as a child...

SC: Right, was that at school?

BP: Yes, right through all my childhood and eventually at primary school and then at grammar school. I was quite a shy girl, but I actually had obviously quite a natural ability and I was always picked to be in plays... well, in a rather embarrassed fashion [Laughs] and I actually was chosen in the first year to play Alice, in Alice in Wonderland with the whole of the sixth form playing the rest of the cast, and it was only later that I found out that the English teacher had chosen me because I was a very strange looking child! [Laughs]

SC: Oh lovely! [Laughs] Good...

BP: And I continued acting really all through my early years and hoped eventually to go to drama school, which didn't work out but... I grew up in Bath and I was a member of Bath Drama Club and did quite good parts there and the Bath Poetry Society and read there, and after extraordinary beginnings to my career, not knowing quite which way I was going I went to teacher training college in Cheltenham.

SC: OK.

BP: And there again I acted in quite a lot of plays, although it wasn't a drama school but because it was an educational establishment obviously theatre was very important, and finally when I took my first teaching job in London - again still wanting to be an actress - and having a huge need, I knew that I was going to teach for a couple of years before I

branched out professionally. Then by an extraordinary coincidence I did a drama course and met Brian Way before I even started teaching and I joined his studio, Theatre Centre in St John's Wood.

SC: And what year was that in?

BP: That was 1954.

SC: 1954... So he was what first kind of gave you your big break into theatre then?

BP: Yes, yes.

SC: OK. You mentioned wanting to go to theatre school, did you ever audition? What was the process of that?

BP: No, it wasn't ever considered something I should do, although people did say - to my mother particularly - 'Brenda should go to drama school' but my family weren't that way orientated, apart from my grandmother I think was a music hall artist and my uncle was an actor but it still came out in its own way! [Laughs]

SC: Yes, it runs in the family I think! OK, so you met Brian Way, did you need to become a member of Equity?

BP: No, I taught for two years in primary schools in London and I went to his studio every week which was a very avant-garde studio in St John's Wood, London Road, you've probably read about it... and after two years I gave up teaching and joined on his invitation Children's Theatre, which was taking theatre into schools...

SC: Fantastic...

BP: I was inspired by Brian Way and Peter Slade... and it was theatre-in-the-round in its truest sense, very exciting.

SC: Oh OK, so what was the process like? Would you rehearse pieces to then take in...? Could you talk to me maybe about the rehearsal process and what it was like to work with Peter and Brian?

BP: Yes, we rehearsed in the studio at extraordinary hours, day and night, and we did all our own costumes...

SC: Oh my goodness...!

BP: ...and we travelled in a sort of truck [Laughs] and we did two or three performances a day but we rehearsed in London first before we went out on the road but we were literally on the road... We covered Devon and Cornwall and the Midlands and further North, I don't think we went further than the East Coast... more or less the South Coast, then down to the South West peninsula giving two performances a day...

SC: Oh wow! So you prepared it in London and then you would repeat it... would it be the same every time or would it vary?

BP: No, we had various things... we did Pinocchio, Oliver Twist, Grinling Gibbons [about the wood carver of St. Pauls's]... we did a modern play about police... all put together by Brian... His Pinocchio was brilliant, I have never seen a Pinocchio that surpassed it, it was brilliant writing, I've got that somewhere at home... and it all came to pass in centre halls in schools, and really apart from all our props our only backcloth was a pole with struts and a grey curtain...

SC: And that was all you used as a set?

BP: Mmm.

SC: So that, obviously you could transport easily and get it into schools...

BP: Mmm. We had our skips in the van with us.

SC: Obviously you were performing to a very different audience to most actresses at the time so what were their reactions like to your pieces?

BP: The children?

SC: Yes.

BP: Oh wonderful! [Laughs] Particularly when we did Doctor Dolittle and the children really related to that! [Laughs]

SC: Oh brilliant...

BP: And Brian was a bit over adventurous sometimes because if we said something a bit too enthusiastic and suggest they joined us, the whole school once got up and joined us!

[Laughs] and so we all danced out through the hall and round the playground and back again! [Laughs]... with all the animals.

SC: Oh, the teachers must have loved you!

BP: Yes... they said such sweet things. I've always remembered one little child going up to Dr Dolittle and saying 'My goosey friend's got Polio, can you help him?'

SC: So you were well received then?

BP: Yes.

SC: Brilliant. So what sort of parts did you have when you were working with the company?

BP: Oh... the Blue Fairy in Pinocchio and... what else did we do...? We were all interchangeable - there were only eight of us so we played lots of parts - I was the Queen in Grinling Gibbons, and a police officer in another thing and... what else did I say we did? [Laughs]

SC: Did you talk about Pinocchio?

BP: Yes, I was the Blue Fairy in Pinocchio... I'm trying to think what other plays we did. Dr Dolittle, different animals... Sophie the Seal [Laughs]

SC: So it would be a travelling company, so you would all be together at the same time...

BP: Yes, we made all our own costumes as well...

SC: Was it ever stressful?

BP: Yes.

SC: Were there any particular moments...

BP: Yes, I actually became quite ill in rehearsal and didn't know why I was quite so tired and just before we went out with the first or second tour I actually had mumps so... that's why I felt so ill, so another actress went in for me just for a week because the

incubation was about a week... because we worked so hard. It was wonderful work, but we did work hard! [Laughs]

SC: Yes. Was this your only job at the time then? I don't suppose you had time to do much else!

BP: Yes, that was full time, I did that for I think seven months actually, which was long enough on tour really... The management tried to treat us when we came back nearer town, and perhaps we would have a decent hotel because we just had to find our own digs as well...

SC: Oh, so it was up to you to find your accommodation?

BP: Mmm... one-night-stands they call them! [Laughs]

SC: Oh lovely! [Laughs]

BP: [Laughing] I don't know whether that is the actual word... going round and literally knocking on doors finding somewhere to stay.

SC: So where did you go from there then with your acting career?

BP: I came back into town... I was a member of Equity by then...

BP: I think so, yes I think so... And then I got an agent so that meant I did some repertory then with Carl Clopêt in Plymouth and Exeter and began to do small television parts.

SC: You mentioned your agent; would they find auditions for you?

BP: Yes, they tried you know... they weren't bad. She was a woman called Phil Payne and she was quite good to me actually because she did find people for me to go and audition for.

SC: And what those audition processes like?

BP: A bit hairy! [Laughs nervously] Auditions are horrible for commercial theatre. I mean, I really hated it - you had to sit outside and feel as if you were just selling yourself... Carl Clopêt was a company I worked for and he was actually the man who interviewed, and he was pleasant enough, but you felt terrified going cold in to do an audition with

somebody that you didn't know whether he understood what you were trying to do or whatever it was... But the first play I did for him was at Exeter I think, and it was with Claude Hulbert and his wife Enid Trevor, wonderful old professionals - Jack Hulbert's brother and his wife - and I did the Maid in that [production of See How They Run.

SC: Right...

BP: And I had a fantastic cameo at the beginning and got the write up in the local press! [embarrassed laugh]

SC: Oh wow!

BP: And when she realised that I was the ASM she never gave me a good write up again! [Laughs]

SC: So you were the ASM for that and had a cameo part?

BP: Yes, but I did have quite good parts even as ASM! [embarrassed laugh]

SC: Oh brilliant! So what was your experience of ASM like?

BP: Very interesting and very busy.

SC: Throughout the production what would your role be then - in rehearsal...? What would you do?

BP: Well, you would make notes... I mean nowadays it's much more controlled but I suppose I was a sort of novice at it really but you were in on the rehearsal... I nearly always had a part anyway, but you were in charge of what we called the Panatrophe which had all these things at the side with great gears and so on [gestures and laughs] and terrible lighting cues and so on... everything! [Laughs]

SC: So you were acting and...

BP: Yes and sometimes rushing offstage to sort out the Panatrophe. [Laughs]

SC: Oh my goodness! You mentioned the response of critics to your performances, did you ever take much notice of those? What were they like?

BP: Not really. I don't think we did actually because if you're travelling with a group of people or you're in a group in rep you're so close together, it's very ensemble playing and you don't really worry too much! At least I didn't... it could be hurtful, but it would be more hurtful if someone in the cast said something...

SC: Yes, because you are closer. You say you travelled around with repertory theatre, did you ever get tempted to go into London? Did you ever want to work in London?

BP: Oh yes but I didn't ever really have the opportunity... I did some television in London, small parts...

SC: OK, what sort of things? What was that like?

BP: I did Ladies in Retirement, I doubled for Prunella Scales in that.

SC: Wow!

BP: It was only a tiny part [Laughs] because my photograph happened to land on a desk, and Dorothea Brooking who directed that thought I looked rather like Prunella Scales, so that was just literally a three or four day job of walking on when she plays the piano and it was just my back view.

SC: Yes...

BP: And I worked for Ronald Eyre in a couple of small parts, he was a wonderful director.

SC: Right.

BP: I knew him from the Tower Theatre in Islington because I was also eventually doing some work there - which is an amateur theatre - in between, but I just kept on working really.

SC: OK. So you went from theatre travelling around schools, then to...

BP: Then to rep...

SC: Travelling around the country and then into television?

BP: Yes but I didn't get very much. I did some quite interesting auditions and I actually almost got the audition for *The Birthday Party* in town, but it was given to a better-known actress, because I had actually played Lulu with Harold Pinter in 1959.

SC: Wow!

BP: With him directing.

SC: Where was that?

BP: At the Tower Theatre in Islington. And he wasn't really known then and that's why I've brought the programme to show you. [holds up programme]

SC: What was it like to be directed by him?

BP: He did it with a woman called Kay Gardner who was a very forceful woman director. He was lovely.

SC: What would his directing technique be like?

BP: Positive... It is so long ago now, but there was certainly nothing abrasive about it and he knew exactly what he wanted. It's a very ominous play *The Birthday Party*. I don't know whether in the archives you saw the write up which I think I gave to the British Library about my feelings about that play. [looks through papers]

SC: I don't think I've seen it... if you've got it with you that would be brilliant.

BP: I think I got all those things ready and didn't bring it [looking through papers] I don't believe it.

SC: That's all right.

BP: I was interviewed by *The Evening News*, which was then existing, by a man called Lewis Cranston. People were interested in *The Birthday Party* because it had been in Hammersmith but it hadn't lasted long and I think he approached the Tower Theatre, I'm not absolutely sure to see if they would do another production of it with Kay Gardner. And I did an interview with this journalist and I actually said I felt the cast was under a spell and it was quoted in the [*Evening News*]... I said I felt as if I was acting under a spell because of the writing. We didn't have a proper script, we just had typed sheets, you know...

SC: So what would a script be like when you received it?

BP: Oh, we had the whole script of *The Birthday Party* but in those days Pinter didn't say a great deal about himself you know, he hid away really - he was very modest and this interview just showed that we felt that it was an amazing production. Margery Withers played Meg in it - the mother - and she actually was a high level BBC producer and from that production she turned professional and became a professional actress.

SC: Fantastic. What was the audience and critical response to *The Birthday Party*?

BP: Well it was strange: it did well, but my Aunt came and she just left in the middle she just... it frightened her so much...

SC: There is definitely something about it isn't there.

BP: Yes. There was a very strong response to it... After that it took off. I did copy the date that it did take off there [referring to photocopies] Oh, there's the quote, I did copy it [referring to photocopied newspaper article on *The Birthday Party*]

SC: Oh I see.

BP: That's the quote that I gave. [referring to the same newspaper article]

SC: Oh, so you were quoted in the newspaper?

BP: ... before it went on. That's the cover of that I've just done for you [referring to a photocopy of the programme for *The Birthday Party*] and those are the dates of that as it was done afterwards [referring to the same programme]

SC: Oh brilliant. I see. [referring to photocopied newspaper article] Here it says that it is 'a controversial comedy of menace'. Would you agree with that as the main opinion at the time?

BP: Yes, because the trouble in those days when you had interviews - particularly with evening papers - was they always wanted sexy sort of answers. They always wanted... if you were an actress they always wanted a photograph of you looking as if you were about to be a showgirl or something [Laughs] but that was a very nice interview actually. When I was here on a day - on a course - with your University I did actually give them that quote because I was too shy to tell Pinter I was in the audience [embarrassed laugh] because he spoke there. That was a day on fifties theatre here, at the British Library.

SC: [Laughs] Oh my goodness! So after the rehearsal process, how would you prepare just before you went on? How would you prepare for a role? What would you do?

BP: Well, you would have a dress rehearsal of course and you would obviously put everything on - perhaps not total makeup if it's just straight but if it was very much a character makeup then you would obviously need to practice that the day before - and it would be run by the stage management exactly like a full performance. And if the director is on the ball he or she would let it run, but if there were hiccups then you would have to stop and so sometimes it would go on much longer than a full production. So if it ended up like that and you were a bit nervy about it all there was that lovely saying, 'bad rehearsal good performance' - and all of us feel like that don't we, so we would all be even more jittery!

SC: Were opening nights a scary time then, would you say?

BP: Oh yes.

SC: Did you notice a change in theatre in the time that you were acting in plays? The Birthday Party for example is maybe the sort of start of something new... What do you think? Did you notice that?

BP: I think it did happen didn't it, the fifties with John Osborne and... Well, Rattigan of course was the rather typical proscenium style theatre, very interesting. Undervalued, I think, Rattigan really - wonderful observations, with plays like Separate Tables and so on, but then I think Pinter, he was one of the bridges wasn't he really, he and John Osborne... and I did Look Back in Anger...

SC: Oh you did?

BP: Yes.

SC: When did you do that and who with?

BP: That was with the Tower.

SC: Where is that?

BP: The Tower Theatre in Canonbury, again semi-professional... [looking at photograph] I played Helen in that... my daughter scribbled on the back of that because she didn't like me cuddling someone else! [Laughs] That was in the sixties, early sixties.

SC: That's brilliant. So that's you in the photo there?

BP: Yes with a lovely actor called... [Terry Marlow] and then later on I did Pinter's Landscape and Silence, [referring to another photo] That was Landscape, and my husband thought that was the best part I ever did.

SC: Did it change your approach to acting?

BP: Pinter?

SC: Yes.

BP: Yes, because I love poetry. I think the rhythms of his writing appealed enormously to me, the silences... I don't like all his work, but I did find him a very exciting playwright long before he was very well known. [Laughs] It was an amazing encounter, and in fact we travelled home on the train together at night so we had lovely chats because we were on the same line when he was directing The Birthday Party. [referring to programme] He didn't direct Landscape, somebody else did that at the Tower.

SC: So talking about typical runs of productions... How long was a typical run for you?

BP: Well that was weekly rep that I did, the study was awful to try and quickly... [learn lines].

SC: Could you go into more detail about that? What would it involve?

BP: Well, when I was at the Palace Theatre Plymouth that was an old Variety Theatre and they were used to having stuff that holiday makers would want to come to and so on, and we did a lot of light stuff and some heavy stuff but our word study was terrible, particularly as I was sharing a room with another actress and getting our words together was awful.

SC: So learning lines under pressure...

BP: Yes there was one play called Bed, Board and Romance I think and we had to sit round a great big breakfast table and we hardly knew what we were talking about so we were kicking each other under the table to get us back on to the scene that we were in! [Laughs]

SC: No! Oh no.

BP: But you always got by on it. We were very popular, we were invited to so many parties in Plymouth... that was a whole season, I think that was 16 weeks...

SC: Yes...

BP: Even now we were down there and somebody talked about the Palace Theatre and I mentioned I had been there and they went mad actually! [Laughs] Because it was an old Variety Theatre, huge stage... In those days the unions were very strong and we had to keep all the stagehands who had been the original Variety Theatre stagehands, so I was still ASMin then and I had to control these great tough blokes to keep the tabs going up and down this enormous stage.

SC: Oh my goodness!

BP: And they used to play cards at the top before the tabs but... it was quite hairy [smiles]

SC: Yes, so there were some moments that were...

BP: Oh yes, and their gang leader was quite tricky but we were devoted to each other by the end of the run! [Laughs]

SC: So you would say that after a run you would be very close to the people that you were working with?

BP: Oh yes, some visiting people would come in to play parts...

SC: Oh OK, what was it like with visiting people?

BP: I can't remember all their names, I think Joan Rice came once...

SC: Was it difficult to integrate them?

BP: It was OK, because it would be a different play and they might have come down to [do one play]. And we did Agatha Christie and plays like that... my memory is playing tricks now... it was a very fulfilling time, very very hard work and our theatre was right down near the docks so the drunken sailors always used to come round and the police were always there collecting the drunken sailors you know! [Laughs]

SC: Oh my goodness! [Laughs] So what were your methods of learning lines, moves and obviously ASMin under such time constraints?

BP: Yes, well you get your moves OK from the director and you obviously had an instinctive feeling that you didn't mask each other or upstaging... and you fool around saying 'stop upstaging me!' and things like that but I did find word study quite difficult really - it was pretty nightmarish! [Laughs]

SC: Yes. So what would it be like, a typical week, let's say?

BP: I can't remember really, well you would rehearse for the week before in the day but you would be playing a different play at night.

SC: Was that a challenge then, trying to juggle two things at once?

BP: Yes, but as the ASM I had to do all the props as well, and I had a wonderful relationship in Plymouth with Dingles the Department Store, and the manager there just let me have whatever I wanted, and I would just go and collect glass and trays and take it because they got the credits in the programme.

SC: Fantastic. So did you have to do all your ASM duties in that week of rehearsal then?

BP: Oh yes, all the props and glasses, and make the drinks [Laughs]...

SC: And learn your part as well?

BP: Yes.

SC: Oh, I can imagine that was tough!

BP: I didn't play in the Dial M for Murder because it... it is a very tricky one for lighting - I think there were 32 lighting cues - and as I was doing these, because the whole plot depended on that, I developed these terrible chest pains [Laughs] and I had a friend in the Navy down there who came that night and we went into the pub afterwards and he said 'Will you have a drink?' and I said 'I'd like a large brandy please!!' [Laughs]

SC: So definitely stressful at times!

BP: Oh yes.

SC: But rewarding...

BP: Lighting cues were [important] because obviously actors' performances depended on [them]. If you went to someone and couldn't switch a light on that was meant to go on in a plot [it spoilt the scene].

SC: Talking about lighting, set, props were they important then in plays at the time?

BP: Yes very, very.

SC: So do you think they had an impact on the meaning of the plays?

BP: Yes, if they were incorrect the audience would very quickly know and you had to cover up very fast if somebody made a boob...

SC: Were there any moments where things did go wrong that you remember?

BP: I remember How the Other Half Loves which I actually did at the Tower and there's something to do with a telephone at the beginning of that when I came on and my husband comes in with a waste paper basket, but he forgot to bring the prop - which was either putting the phone in the basket or taking it out, I can't remember - but it was so awful that he just left... he panicked and went off and just left me standing there! [Laughs] That was a prop thing, I think it was a telephone that had fallen into a waste paper basket or something and he went off because he panicked so I just went round the set and sort of smelt the perfume and touched the fruit and so on and he came back on again and started again. [Laughs] It was the beginning of the play!

SC: So pretty important then, to performances...

BP: Very, but all actors can tell you stories like that! [Laughs]

SC: Oh my goodness! Talking of actors, were there any actors, directors or playwrights or anyone that really influenced your performances do you think? Actors particularly maybe, were there any people working alongside you that you thought, you know, they are the ones to learn from?

BP: Yes. There was one who died recently actually, I think he was called Clyde [Pollitt], he was a beautiful actor on stage and whatever funny play we were doing the emotion and the feeling that came from him and through his eyes were just so good, and dear Ronald Eyre who I worked with at the Tower who has died, and he did BBC television, I just did a couple of small parts with him on television and he was just lovely. I always remember he said, 'You're not on stage Brenda, you mustn't make large gestures, bring them in, bring them in' and that stayed with me.

SC: Ah so it was all about 'becoming' the part do you think?

BP: Yes... helpful.

SC: So it wasn't a 'performance' as such? Were you trying to be realistic...

BP: ... I did later as a professional, do a little film in the Film School in Covent Garden, I did it with a young Swedish director...

SC: When was that?

BP: That was not so very long ago, that was in the last ten years.

SC: OK.

BP: I liked the way he directed because I hadn't really made a little film before and he worked like that, I think that was shown in Sweden... in a couple of places actually.

SC: OK. Jumping on to a completely different topic - censorship during the period. Did that affect you at all or was it something that just happened and went unnoticed?

BP: I read about it but it didn't really affect me. I think I accidentally went to The Romans because a friend's daughter was in it, on the first night of that, I can't remember who wrote that [Howard Brenton], at the National Theatre, there was a pretty nasty scene in that which hit all the papers the next day, but because Terri [Diab] was in it I didn't realise that that was what I was going to see! [Laughs]

SC: Oh no!

BP: Terri was the girl, she wasn't in that scene but it did hit all the national papers, it was called The Romans.

SC: Did you ever act in any plays that did have some sort of response like that?

BP: Not really, no I don't think I did... I was aware of it though.

SC: Yes.

BP: I went with a wonderful actor friend who had come back from Rome, to a play of John Osborne's where there's nudity.

SC: Right. Can you remember the name? If not don't worry.

BP: It wasn't The Entertainer... there is a nude that goes across covered in a flag and everybody made a huge fuss about it and I was there with Paddy who was the most glamorous actor from Rome. We were all in a flat together in those days, he was older than me a good bit older and I said to him 'What did you think of that scene, the one they've made a fuss about?', I said, 'What do you think of the nudity?' He said, 'What nudity?' [Laughs] So he hadn't even noticed! [Laughs]

SC: Oh dear. So did you find yourself being cast into certain roles or would you play a variety of different roles?

BP: I think basically I called myself 'juvenile character', I could play character. I did a play for Middlesex University - did I do it for a student...? I did a production there, a friend asked me if I would do it... she was doing a performance arts degree at Middlesex University and it was a play of Olwyn Wymark... Lunchtime Concert and I played an old lady of 80 in that and the actor that I was working with was meant to be about 20 and we were both the same age so that was quite difficult. [Laughs] We did that in-the-round and that was an examination piece for a student.

SC: So these were quite new techniques then?

BP: Yes that was a quite difficult... that just had a centre... although I was used to working in the round so that didn't make me too nervous but again he had stage fright as he came on because he hadn't really [worked that way]. He was a very fine professional actor, but he had total stage fright and there was a great big tree centre stage which was the focal point of the play and he panicked and again I sort of wandered round the tree as this old lady and he recovered. We all go through that in the theatre.

SC: So these new techniques did have an impact, you think on performers?

BP: Yes.

SC: But not so much yourself. Was it because of your history of going in to schools do you think?

BP: Yes I think so, because I was used to being very near the audience.

SC: But for others do you think it was...

BP: Yes it worried him...

SC: No proscenium arch...

BP: It really frightened him actually, he was a very good actor but he got over it obviously.

SC: Do you have any fond memories of a particular play? Maybe your favourite part? Your best performance? That's a hard question I know!

BP: I played Lady Precious Stream when I was at college.

SC: Right.

BP: That was lovely because everybody adored me in that! [Laughs]

SC: Right.

BP: And I think probably one of the most interesting parts I played was in Pinter's Landscape.

SC: What would you say was interesting about it?

BP: Well it's introspective, and I think I based it on my mother. Character parts I found quite difficult, I nearly always based on my mother who had a lot of angst in her life and that particular character had it, and again the poetry in it was so beautiful... It really stayed with me actually, because the husband in it is such a gruff brewer sort of man and she's just a dreamy middle-aged woman just wishing something different had happened in her life and I think that was the most interesting part... in recent years... or comparatively recent years! [Laughs]

SC: Did you get a chance to go and see any other plays at the time that you weren't involved in?

BP: Oh yes.

SC: And what was your experience as a theatre goer?

BP: The National I went to... well I went to the Royal Court quite regularly, I saw Look Back in Anger there.

SC: What was your response to that in particular?

BP: I thought that was brilliant.

SC: Were you shocked by it?

BP: I felt really sorry for her to have such a bullying husband, but then he was shouting really about the age wasn't he...

SC: So was that a shocking thing to see in theatre or did you not really think so?

BP: Well I thought it was very realistic, and Epitaph for George Dillon I thought was wonderful, I think he wrote that too. I think a Russian director came across and saw that and reckoned that was one of the best productions he'd seen - at the Royal Court - about an out-of-work actor, that's a brilliant piece of writing. Rattigan, I saw lots of Rattigan... and Christopher Fry, I did The Firstborn at college of his - I played Anath Bethiah in that... Oscar Wilde, I've done several Oscar Wilde... J.B. Priestley... I've seen a lot of theatre right through the fifties, I would have to ask you to nudge me really and ask me what I have seen... I go to The Almeida quite often and they do lovely things there, the Almeida Theatre in Islington and I recently saw Tennessee Williams... Zoe Wannamaker in that...[The Rose Tattoo.]

SC: You referred to the Royal Court, and that was renowned really for doing new things, so what was your experience of the Royal Court like? Could you describe it?

BP: It was like a club theatre really, and they had an upstairs theatre as well where they did new productions. It was very exciting to go there... and it meant crossing London which is a bit of a bore because I live in North London and it is right across in Sloane Square, but it's always been a beautiful theatre.

SC: How would you compare plays shown at the Royal Court to plays shown elsewhere? Was there a difference?

BP: Well depending, the Young and the Old Vic do very interesting things, I mean the Young Vic particularly did very interesting things. I loved some of the Children's Theatre the Young Vic did years ago, I used to take my daughter to some of the things there and there was a wonderful group called the Paper-bag players, Martha Graham trained... they danced in sort of sacks and bags and wonderful ditties and the children all learned them. Oh, they were so beautiful.

SC: When was that?

BP: That must have been in the sixties.

SC: Oh, so there was innovation in other places...

BP: And wonderful puppet theatres, and the Arts Theatre always did lovely productions and at Christmas they nearly always had something to bring children in.

SC: OK that's interesting... let me have a look... What were sets generally like?

BP: Flats in my day really. I'm fascinated by sets now, although that one I was telling you about of Alwyn Wymark. The designer who I think is called Vic [Simmonds] but [Olwyn Wymark designed] that set. It was just one beautiful tree and I'm constantly surprised by sets I see now on stage, I mean they are wonderful I think...

SC: So back in that period did sets change at all? Was there a focus on particular things?

BP: I think if you brought in good designers who were very interested in designing... I did some of Ronald Firbank's plays at the Tower and we had to be in a [Firbank] landau centre stage, at the opening. We were sort of up high and we were on little workmen's steps that we had to climb into and sit up to get this perspective of the landau travelling along the fields. My friends that saw it just couldn't believe how wonderful it looked and the way the set had been designed. I do think set designers do wonderful things.

SC: Yes.

BP: And you're not necessarily always aware of it if you are acting - as long as it's not going to hurt you and you are not going to fall down... [Laughs]

SC: Then you don't mind! [Laughs] That is fair enough though isn't it I suppose! Did you ever perform in any Shakespeare or did you ever see any Shakespeare?

BP: Yes. I did *The Taming of the Shrew*, I was Bianca in a beautiful open air production of that... years ago in the garden of Canonbury Tower [Islington], which was beautiful. Again in the evening, in the garden, it was lovely. I haven't done much Shakespeare. I think I did a bit of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*... oh and I did a bit of Milton's *Comus* too when I was at college, you know with wonderful effects... Firbank's writing is fascinating, Oscar Wilde I've done two or three... but I don't think I've done much Shakespeare.

SC: Did you notice a change in maybe the way that was presented in performance?

BP: Oh yes, I think now, of course in London now they have these wonderful open air productions of them. There was a fantastic one in the park which we never actually got to because it poured with rain when we got there! [Laughs] It closed!

SC: Oh no! But when you were acting did you, even then notice people re-interpreting...

BP: Yes I think so... there used to be a saying 'the actor laddie' - the Wolfitt type of thing... people are much more naturalistic in their approach I think now. I recently saw Present Laughter at the National Theatre - I can't think of the names of the actors in that. That's by Noel Coward of course and the actor playing that is typical of that type of actor and he's good in it because he's doing it in the way it would have been played in Coward's time, but a lot of those things wouldn't go down well now, unless you were doing a sort of pastiche of that sort of work.

SC: Oh OK, I was just wondering whether Shakespeare was different back then...

BP: Oh I think players today play it much more naturalistically don't they, and of course they put them in different costumes and I find that quite difficult because I was used to all the traditional things when I was younger.

SC: When travelling in rep would you say that as an actor you were close to the crew, the director... what was the atmosphere like?

BP: Oh all of you... I mean, people bitched about each other but basically you all just got on together, you lent each other money... oh I also did Arena Theatre of course, I toured with that with John English.

SC: Oh, do you want to tell me about that?

BP: ...under a tent! [Laughs]

SC: Oh, OK!

BP: And I did the wardrobe for that.

SC: So when was this?

BP: That was after Theatre Centre and after coming back... oh I've forgotten, that was before I did the main rep season.

SC: OK.

BP: And we did a Diary of Anne Frank, we did Commedia dell'Arte...

SC: Oh OK.

BP: Again, I did wardrobe in that which was very busy and we had a great big put-up tent like a circus tent... It was Arena Theatre and that was a very interesting experience. We did it in the Cardiff Park and we also did it in the Northumberland Bath Hall in Newcastle, so there we didn't set the great big marquee up, we did it inside the hall.

SC: OK.

BP: And again we were so close as a group, we were part of a team working together and it was very cold up in Newcastle in the winter, there were terrible digs and no heat, just a coal fire to warm the whole house.

SC: What sort of time was that? You said that was after you had done your...

BP: Yes it was, so that must have been 1956... 57.

SC: OK, that's interesting because of the whole new idea of theatre-in-the-round, it seems that those ideas that were established in London theatres and were all new had been happening...

BP: Well I think so actually and I've never looked this up, I think Brian's initiative with Theatre Centre [was a great influence].

SC: Brian Way.

BP: Way and Peter Slade of course... We had very interesting young people that worked with us in the group with our evenings there when we did a lot of improvisations and Peter Coe was there and I think he became the director of Chichester Theatre and that was in-the-round and I'm pretty sure that Chichester was inspired by the work that was done at Theatre Centre.

SC: Oh, OK.

BP: Because those things stay in your mind when you've done productions like that and I think even the National Theatre - particularly the Lyttleton - has got that open feel about it with the revolve.

SC: Yes.

BP: Well, the revolve of course is like the round in the Olivier Theatre. I think all those earlier theatres in the fifties [were influenced]... Scarborough was in the round wasn't it... and they were the early ones and I think they inspired quite a lot of other interesting theatre.

SC: OK. So do you think there was a contrast then, between your experience of repertory theatre and your experience of London theatre? What were the main differences would you say?

BP: I think theatres like the National Theatre and even tiny theatres where you can really see what's happening around you and they use the aisles and so on... The Mermaid used to do that as well, that was very different from the proscenium where you're just watching like a picture book what's going on onstage and I think nowadays it's accepted that these things happen and people come from all directions and so on. I think there has been a move in acceptance in that sort of direction.

SC: So do you think you witnessed this change?

BP: Yes I think I did actually, now that you've put it that way to me.

SC: Yes.

BP: And I actually found it very exciting because I taught children as well.

SC: Do you want to talk about that? What it was like...

BP: Oh, I was so inspired by Brian, I always taught Drama in the way that he did his direction really... [sorting through photocopies] You can have those two because I've found these old ones, that was the Educational Drama Association.

SC: Oh brilliant.

BP: I haven't looked at them for years, but do have them because...[they are very interesting].

SC: Oh brilliant.

BP: The work I did with Arena and with Brian really inspired all my teaching for the rest of my career actually, always.

SC: Did it inspire your acting as well do you feel then?

BP: Yes, oh yes.

SC: Were you able to interact more? What do you think were the things you changed?

BP: You just tried to always achieve the highest standard you possibly could in the pursuit of excellence, but they certainly inspired me in my teaching of children and to give them confidence to do a naturalistic approach. I even do it a little bit with my granddaughter, and if she doesn't want to participate then I only do a little bit. I mean, I might do it through a balloon and talk to the balloon and suddenly the balloon talks. [Laughs] Improvisation is the word!

SC: Talking about improvisation... Do you think that played a big role in acting then at the time?

BP: Yes.

SC: Why was that? What did it give you do you think? Did you use it a lot in rehearsals?

BP: Yes depending on... I think Mike Leigh, he's a film director, does that doesn't he? I don't think they have a script to start with...

SC: OK.

BP: It would be fascinating to work with a man like that... not all directors did it of course and if you're just trying to get a show on the road quite quickly... but good actors that you worked with - Clyde Pollitt is the name! I've remembered now, I could see him working out parts within himself... Good actors and actresses, you can see it happening to them, they're trying to work out... Some people like Wolfitt and so on would have a special technique where they go and bang their ring down and that sort of thing [Laughs] they could still be wonderful actors... There was a more of an introspective approach and improvisation brings that out.

SC: OK, and when did you stop acting and what did you do after that? Did you teach and why?

BP: Yes, I was having my first child and we needed [more security]... I still stayed in Equity and I did some auditions, but my heart wasn't in it - it was too difficult, and so I went back to teaching and I still did work at the Tower Theatre then.

SC: OK. What was your last performance then?

BP: I think it was that little film with the Swedish... [director]

SC: And in theatre what was your last performance?

BP: A musical I think... a Firbank musical, the name of which has escaped me [Valmouth by Sandy Wilson]... It was wonderful doing a musical because I'd never done one before and straight acting is one thing, but to dance and sing and act is very difficult. It made me look at people in musicals very differently.

SC: What was the rehearsal process like in comparison?

BP: A very good director... oh and very strict getting the movements right, very strict almost to the point of tears you know! [Laughs]

SC: And when was this?

BP: Oh this was in the eighties then, it was [1986]... my father died in the middle of it actually but it was an interesting production.

SC: Yes.

BP: And it was [by Sandy Wilson]... he's still alive actually, he wrote Salad Days and [other musicals].

SC: Yes.

BP: This production was based on Ronald Firbank's writing... a terrific extravaganza and that was very tricky doing that but very exciting.

SC: Oh, so you moved to musicals, that's interesting...

BP: Just that one.

SC: Yes just the one.

BP: That was David [Taylor] who directed that.

SC: Is there anything else you want to talk about in particular? Are you sure?

BP: Only the inspiration of teaching drama. It's such a pity now that not enough drama is done in schools and poetry and singing... the singing that comes through good stories and poetry for children and improvisation does wonders to develop children I think... That would be the way that I feel really, because I became a Head Teacher eventually, and if I were going back into it now I still feel that drama is enormously important.

SC: Oh fantastic. I think I will probably end it there but I'm just going to check my questions and check I have not asked you something which I really wanted to know... that is fascinating to talk to you it's been brilliant. I can't believe you sat on a train and talked to Harold Pinter!

BP: [Laughs]

SC: I think that's fantastic... I just think that's amazing I really do. Yes, I think I've asked you everything that I wanted to ask you, that was really interesting.

BP: It's quite strange talking about myself in such detail! [Laughs]

SC: Oh no, I think it was brilliant, honestly thank you very much, thank you... it's going to be brilliant to type that up, it's been fantastic. It's interesting what you were saying about drama though and its impact on children... because nowadays it does still get overlooked even though now you can have qualifications in it at least at GCSE and A Level but there's definitely... it's not really considered...

BP: I did supply [teaching] at different times in between the theatre with some quite difficult secondary children and I did a lot of drama with them because they were already very difficult. [They were] in small groups because they had been badly behaved and I did Pygmalion with them and different extracts from plays and we gave performances to the rest of the school. They were just wonderful because they began to improve in self-esteem because of it as they got into trouble all the way...[most of the time].

SC: Yes.

BP: But suddenly to be able to learn something and present it to the others really helped them.

SC: Yes.

BP: You can bring out the most introverted child and difficult child through drama.

SC: Yes that's brilliant. Thank you, thank you very much for talking to me.

BP: Thank you, Sarah.

SC: Are you sure there is nothing else you want to say? You're sure? OK... I'm going to press the button...