

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Harry Landis – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Dean Meehan**

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Actor, director. Accent; Bertolt Brecht; Richard Burton; censorship, Central School of Speech and Drama; Equity; The Kitchen; Joan Littlewood; Sean O'Casey; Harold Pinter, repertory theatre; touring; Unity Theatre; variety shows; Arnold Wesker; Ted Willis; West End theatre; working-class movement; writers.

DM: OK, so this is Dean Meehan interviewing Harry Landis for the British Library Oral History Research Project. Thank you for agreeing to do this Mr Landis.

HL: Pleasure.

DM: I'd just like to start by asking, basically, how you first got involved with the theatre?

HL: Well, when I was 15, working in a factory, I used to the Hackney Empire every Monday, first house. The reason I went first house was because it was cheaper. And it was cheaper I found out years later that because the band had only just seen the music. The acts turned up Monday afternoon had a run, 4 o'clock, they'd only seen the music once so Monday [first house] could be a bit of a hit-and-miss show. So they made it a bit cheaper, it was kind of a dress rehearsal. Sometimes more amusing than by Saturday night. And I used to go there every Monday, and then Tuesday morning, I used to [work in] the factory and do the show [in the tea break]. Do Max Miller's jokes. Didn't do the dancing and acrobats, of course. Did what the impersonators did. Of course all the people they impersonated in those days are all dead and you've never heard of any of them. Well, there's one left and I'll do a bit for you.

DM: OK, that would be lovely.

HL: [impersonating Winston Churchill] 'We shall fight on the land, on the sea and in the air. We shall never surrender. Long live the cause of liberty. God save the King.' You'll never guess who that was, will you?

DM: I'm afraid not, no!

HL: [Laughs]

DM: It was very good!

HL: Oh good. He was called Winston Churchill. You've never heard him!

DM: I have!

HL: And that was nothing like him you mean! Never mind. Anyway, one day, the shop steward – because I used to do this on the factory floor, cheeky sod I was – and the shop steward said, 'Have you ever been to the theatre? Because you know you should do some of that.' And I said, 'I go to the Hackney Empire every Monday.' And he said... I said, 'Where do you see plays then?' He said, 'In London it's the West End. If you go there, you'll see a smart set with French windows. And the play will be about the trials and tribulations of the upper-classes.' I said, 'eh?!' He said, 'Well, it will all be about posh people.' I said, 'oh'. He said, 'But there is a theatre near King's Cross called the Unity Theatre, the theatre of the trade union and labour movement where they do plays about real people, it's the only theatre in London that does plays that represent actual, real people who go to work and have struggles and I'm going on Sunday with my wife if you would like to come because you ought to audition for them'. So I went! And on that Sunday afternoon, there was a play on about a busman's strike called All Change Here by Ted Willis. Have you heard of Ted Willis? No... He wrote a big series called Dixon of Dock Green on television, because after leaving Unity he went kind of professional. And it knocked me out, because the language spoken was the language I understood, coming from the East End and the characters I recognised from people down my street, and I thought, 'I can't believe it', live theatre absolutely knocked me out. So I auditioned, and started doing plays there. We did old time music hall, I did my impressions in the variety show, in the parks - they went out to the parks and did shows. And then I started doing straight plays there – Sean O'Casey. It was the first theatre in Britain to do Brecht.

DM: Yeah, yeah.

HL: And there were some wonderful things to be part of. Then I did my National Service and when I came back I went to Unity again. A member of the company - one the actors in a play I was in at that time when I came out of the army - he said, 'You should go professional'. He was a headmaster in a local school in South London, he said, 'You should go in for it.' I said, 'Well, how do you do that?' He said, 'If you apply to the local authority - known then as the London County Council, it's the GLC now - they give grants to promising people. Well I went along, did an audition and got a grant and went to Central School of Speech and Drama. And when I came out of there, first job I did was with the Elizabethan Theatre Company touring in Shakespeare. Because I'd done quite a lot of plays and things at Unity, but what I didn't know was where I fitted in – the classics, Restoration, Shakespeare, etcetera, Ben Jonson, because that wasn't done at Unity. It was very interesting, because the Elizabethan Theatre Company was started by graduates of Oxford and Cambridge – Peter Hall, all 6 or 7, Tony Robertson. And they didn't want to learn the business from the beginning, I think that's a bit arrogant really. They wanted to either direct or star – play Romeo or Richard II – and

the rest of the cast would be gleamed by people leaving drama school like me, who hadn't been to Oxford and Cambridge to have those grandiose ideas of starting at the top, but that's how you're trained if you go to Eton and Harrow, Oxford or Cambridge, you're told, 'You are the leaders and you will start at the top.' And indeed they did! Well, what's left of them now is Peter Hall, the one that's left and the most famous of them. That's where I toured in Shakespeare and learnt the job. Then I went into several reps, and then I went and did one or two West End plays of the commercial nature. I always regretted I was busy doing West End plays, because Joan Littlewood asked me to come and do a play once or twice and I was always in a West End play! But then in 1961, I think it was, everything turned. Well, 1956 it started – the revolution with George Devine at the Royal Court, the English Stage Company. And I was privileged to be in the early plays. I was in Arnold Wesker's *The Kitchen*, playing Arnold Wesker because he wrote about himself as the pastry cook which he'd been in Paris and so he wrote about a kitchen in a restaurant with all the chaos that goes on. What was interesting was the director John Dexter, a very well known director at the time, he said, 'It's very interesting, I had a hard time getting this play on with George Devine. He said, 'Wesker doesn't know much about how the theatre works, otherwise he would not have written a play with 19 parts, because the theatre can't afford large casts like that.

Nor would he have written a play one hour long, because it's not a full evening.' But that's what he's written and that's what we're doing. We'll put an interval in because the theatre wants to sell its drinks and make its profit. And we'll do one or two things to make it a little longer, like we'll have all the lads in the kitchen with the radio on doing a bit of jitterbugging before the chief comes in and they all run to their posts. So they padded it out, but it became *The Kitchen* the famous Arnold Wesker play that opened at the Royal Court. Then I did John Osborne's play *Time Present* with his then-wife, Jill Bennett and one or two other pieces before I went into films. The first film I did was called *A Hill in Korea*. Michael Caine had four lines in it, and he and I shared a room in Portugal where we were filming, in the hotel. He of course had great ambitions, he said, 'I'm going to be a star and then I'm going to be a director, a film director.' I said, 'What about the theatre?' 'Oh I can't be bored with doing the same part every night,' he said. I said, very pompously, [Laughs] 'You won't get anywhere if you don't love the theatre first, that's the roots and all the other media are the branches so I think you've got the wrong idea.' Well he may or may not have had the right or wrong idea but he made all the money and became Sir Michael Caine, which pleased him greatly. I did another film in the desert with Richard Burton, and he was an interesting character. We got quite close out there in the Sahara, and he said, when we were in Nice doing the studio stuff in France, he said, 'Look, I could have done my *Lear*, got my knighthood, and still be driving that old Ford that I was driving there around in Stratford-upon-Avon. Now I'm in this Cadillac convertible and all. But he became a cynic – he'd become a cynic by then. I think I know why, because when you first go into this business, straight from drama school, and you go into rep it knocks the rough edge off. You see what it's about; you see the unemployment, going to auditions, the hard stuff. You learn what it's about, and you slowly get acclimatised to the business. But Richard hadn't got any of that, he'd come straight out of university, he'd gone straight to stardom in the West End and he'd gone to the parties of the big moguls of the West End of that time - Binkie Beaumont being the biggest - and he'd become cynical. He'd gone to the West End, trained by his teacher and mentor, Burton – he took Burton's name, his real name was Jenkins – and he was a young poet who had this wonderful view of the language, of Shakespeare and he found to his horror it was a money-making, profit-making business, and I think that shattering of his dream as opposed to learning the hard way as we all did, shook him and he became cynical, grabbing the money, laughing at it all. In fact when he had his death scene in the desert he did 'Knees Up Mother Brown' then lay down and died

when the man said 'action' - a wonderful man called Nicholas Ray, great director, the man who directed Rebel Without A Cause. I said to him, 'What was James Dean like, Nick?' He said [gruff American accent] 'I hated him when he was alive, I don't see why I should like him now!' And that was that. What can I tell you after that? I did about 400 television shows, the odd play - I did London, Journey's End in the West End, I was in Fame when it came to London the other year, well it's 10 years ago now, the first year. So I've had a full and varied career, met all the leading players of the time, was always active in Equity where I'm now President. I started off being what we call a deputy of the company, which is a shop steward in factory terms, then stood for the council of Equity and then stood as President six years ago and have been President ever since, I've won three elections. So I'm active in Equity and I'm doing televisions - I'm in The Bill next Wednesday, have a look.

DM: We'll all tune in!

HL: Yeah! I'm not sure now what else to tell you unless you've got any questions.

DM: We'll go back to the things you were talking about, with Unity Theatre. Obviously it drew you in; it was your background, that's what drew you in. Would the political aspects and the agitprop style...?

HL: Well, that was the training, you see. The training said that art can change society, uplift people, it's not just entertainment, go home and forget it and have another drink. It should move you to change society. When it said all that, it got ingrained. It's very hard to shift something like that, that's what I believe. I remember talking to people in my class at drama school, at the Central School, there was Wendy Craig, Jeremy Brent, Harold Pinter, a load of well known people at the time, and I used to lecture them about this and of course I shouldn't have. Youngsters in drama school they might develop into thoughts like that if they have any conscience about the art of theatre, or any art, but in drama school they're worried about getting an agent, they're worried about getting their first job, they don't want philosophy - yet. So, my enthusiasm I had learned I had to curb. Harold Pinter of course ended up being political and he wasn't a bit political at the time. But suddenly, he's emerged as an anti-American revolutionary, which is very interesting. I see him occasionally, very dour man, he doesn't laugh much, but there you are. He's the genius of British theatre today, he's the Nobel prize winner and all that, so we have to respect him.

DM: Did you ever work closely with him later in your active career or just at drama school?

HL: No, because he left drama school as an actor, changed his name to David Baron and started acting. He started acting with and being - I can't remember whether he was a stage manager - I know he had small parts in Donald Wolfit's Shakespearean company. The other chap, whose name escapes me, who left drama school wanted to be a writer, he became his dresser - Donald Wolfit's dresser - and wrote the play The Dresser as a result of being Sir Donald Wolfit's dresser. So people from their experiences wrote plays. Now what else can I tell you about leaving drama school?

DM: You were talking about the educational style of theatre with a didactic message to give would you say – and you mentioned Brecht as well – would you say a Brechtian style is something you would favour or do you just recognise its importance?

HL: Well, people misjudged what Brechtian style was. The word 'alienation' made people think you've got to stand outside of the character. No theatre works if you don't believe in the character and play it for real. There's no standing outside. What he meant was, we want people to realise as the play's going on, that it's not a question we see problems, then they're solved and people live happily ever after and we go home and have a good night's sleep. The alienation is to say 'don't get too comfortable, realise this is trying to tell you problems of the world which you're part of and this play is telling you what they are and what your conscience should be doing. And the only way to do that is through reality, through real characters. People thought alienation meant making up like a clown and acting unreal. It wasn't at all, but the English did some funny understandings of all that, I'm afraid. But George Devine did some good Brecht at the Royal Court, they were good.

DM: You said it was the 1956 'revolution', do you recognise then, English Stage Company and the Royal Court as the main driving force behind that...

HL: It was then...

DM: ...or were theatres like Unity doing that sort of thing before then?

HL: Well, of course, the thing was that Unity – people always said we should now jump ahead of the Royal Court, and all that – but in fact Unity, although it had some wonderful actors and had six month runs, was an amateur theatre. It took a professional one to take the leap ahead, like the Royal Court who found *Look Back in Anger* and started off that whole trend. But you've got to remember, Unity gave the profession Bill Owen, Michael Gambon, David Kossoff - you've probably never heard of them - John Slater was a well known actor of the time, afterwards leaving Unity, Alfie Bass – have you heard of Alfie Bass? No, see, youngsters know less and less of the past.

DM: We lose touch...

HL: You know Henry Irving, but he's gone down in history! But these were great people and they became West End actors, and Unity produced them from working-class youngsters who would never have had a chance of going to drama school unless they were very lucky. Alistair Sim had a play called *Mr Bolfry* – do you know who Alistair Sim is? No, he's another well-known actor, your professors will know who Alistair Sim is. Alistair Sim had a play called *Mr Bolfry* with a cockney character in it and he thought, 'I know where I'm going', because the profession at that time had no working-class people, tons of them now, you watch the television and you see real gutsy, working-class actors, but at that time, there weren't any. In films someone stands on the street corner with a newspaper going, [false working-class London accent] 'Standard Star

paper! Piper, piper guv!' and it's all phony. But he came to find this working-class soldier in his play and he found Alfie Bass. Alfie Bass left Unity, became a professional, did the play in the West End, then got called up into the forces because the war was on at the time. So he handed the part on to Bill Owen, he left Unity and became a professional. So that way people got into the business, but the Unity training stood them in good stead, the realism, the Stanislavski, all the training we got helped everyone to do it.

DM: Was that the failing of the professional theatre, that they weren't giving opportunities to working-class actors?

HL: Well that was the style of the day. It wasn't until – you see, everything emerges, does it not, from writers? And there were no working-class writers at that time. After the war, a few people emerged who were working-class writers. Joan Littlewood was training working-class people to do working-class propaganda and plays so they were waiting and then they emerged. First of all that couple whose name escapes me but who wrote *Steptoe and Son*, they emerged so they had to find people who could portray those two characters. Then Wesker emerged and all sorts of working-class writers emerged and plays emerged. Then actors emerged from the working-class – Albert Finney, Peter O'Toole – they sound very RADA now because we've all learned to do RP but we've all learned to do it when we need. I always rebelled against becoming an RP speaker in real life, I kept my roots, but of course, knowing how to use the organs of articulation in order to make the right sounds in speech, you wouldn't tell the difference. Albie was the same, O'Toole was the same – he had a very Leeds accent when I first knew him and Albert had that Salford accent – but they did their heroic Shakespearean leading roles wonderfully and so there emerged working-class talent in writing, acting, directing and there was a turnover. If you look at - well, you can't look at plays of the thirties and forties, but you can look at films, and you can see it was all about middle-class people, [affected middle-class accent] 'Hello Harry!' was the kind of accent they would do in those movies, you look at it now and it is quite shocking. *Brief Encounter* – have you ever seen *Brief Encounter*? David Lee tried to put it on 20 years afterwards in a sneak preview in a cinema and he cried because everyone laughed because Celia Johnson with the [same affected accent] 'terribly, terribly, hello' accent killed it for them, they couldn't believe it. It happened to be the style of the time. Central School was a great leader in giving you that. I think it's been kind of released now; the vowel sounds for RP aren't quite as tight as they were in the twenties and thirties, and they don't teach you that any more. In my time they did and it was useful, but then you mustn't be in a situation where you can't go back to your roots and play a working-class part anymore, which I saw happen to one or two people, they got so posh they forgot how to play a real person [Laughs]. Or a working-class person, I shouldn't say 'real', because posh people are real as well. [Laughs]

DM: Just again to go back to some of things you brought up, like touring around.

HL: Yes.

DM: Whereabouts were you were visiting in the fifties and sixties?

HL: Well it's very sad because all of those theatres are closed - all become car parks or supermarkets - but every little place had a theatre. Let me think where they were - Aylesbury, places like that. Then, of course, you went to Leeds and all over Scotland. A lot of those places have gone now but we used to go into digs; there were a lot of theatrical digs in those days. I used to meet wonderful comedians who were playing up the road in the variety house and they had digs there and some of us had digs there because these landladies had room for three or four people and you'd hear wonderful stories of variety days with the great comedians of the time. That tradition seems to have gone. Variety acts, yes they still exist, but they go on ships now and they do working men's clubs and other clubs where people go to see the comics of the time today. That whole world of the Moss Empires has disappeared, I'm afraid. The Moss Empires, some of them still exist, a lot of them - Chelsea Palace has gone, Holborn Empire has gone, Shepherd's Bush Empire is used for pop music. The Hackney Empire was somehow kept alive and exists but not quite as a variety house as it used to be. It's all different and there you are, life's like that, it's no good regretting those changes that's how life moves on. That was a wonderful era in its time and I was privileged to be a part of that change into that Royal Court 1956 revolution away from Noel Coward, Terrence Rattigan - all wonderful stuff, don't knock it, but it went out of fashion. It's coming back now, because there's a Coward play on at the National Theatre and Separate Tables of Rattigan has had one or two revivals in the West End in the last fifteen years. In general, it's gone. Plays and films are more about actuality and the struggles of existence than they were before. In those days anyone playing a doctor could not have an accent - how can you trust a doctor with an accent?! Now, people play doctors with Yorkshire accents, all sorts of accents. And they're believable because youngsters go and graduate in medical school and are talented doctors and keep their accents. In those days you never saw it because those kids couldn't get into medical school because they couldn't get the qualifications without going to public school or whatever to get to that degree. Now it's much more possible so I think it's a more equal society in those ways, in other ways, of course it hasn't changed to that degree.

DM: I've read in Colin Chambers' book and from other sources that you yourself have been a producer and director.

HL: Yes.

DM: Do you have any - in the book it mentions Death of a Salesman...

HL: I directed, yes. They asked me, when I came back when I became a professional actor and still visited Unity because I felt a loyalty, they said 'would you, when you're out of work direct a play for us?' I said, 'I'd love to', and I did Death of a Salesman. I told Arthur Miller about it, because I did a play of Arthur Miller's a few years ago at the Wyndham Theatre in London and he was very intrigued about it because it was the first revival in this country, there's been a few since but it was the first one. I learnt to direct. I owe a lot to Unity, I'm afraid, I do owe everything in the theatre to Unity. Eventually I started directing professional and then I became the artistic director at the Marlowe Theatre in Canterbury, directed about 60 plays and then went onto direct national tours and rep productions. I've done a fair fill of everything in this business - been in musicals,

I did Fame, as I told you earlier, in the West End. The only thing I haven't done in this business is circus, but there you are. I've done musical, straight plays, comedies, televisions – Eastenders, I did Eastenders for two years, played Felix the barber. So it's been a full and varied career, met a lot of top people - Sybil Thorndike I did something with. She was a great woman. She said, 'I was a silly young conservative gal until I met my husband, Lewis Casson, and he turned me into a socialist!' she said. So he was a great man as well. He'd been president of Equity – the list of presidents of Equity is quite good. So there's not a lot I haven't seen in this business.

DM: With Equity, I'm thinking about obstacles facing actors during the post-war times – was there great support for yourself and other actors or did you see it more of a struggle to find your own work...

HL: Well, Equity doesn't find you work, you find your own work or your agent puts you up for work. What Equity does is creates a minimum salary, like all unions do in all walks of life – electricians or whatever, factories – there is a minimum a union gets for you above which your agent negotiates. I mean, we're trying to raise the West End minimum – you wouldn't believe the West End minimum today is £381! Who can live on £381 a week? The average wage in this country is £580 and that's every week. Actors don't work every week, so they're not going to get much payment at the end of the year but we're fighting this very hard. I was in negotiations yesterday, funnily enough, and we're meeting again in January and this time we're going to ensure we get a big lift in the minimum, which gives the agents a chance to negotiate above that. They'll say, 'That's the minimum but my actor's been in the business for 10 years, he'll want more than that.' So, it helps them to negotiate upwards and that's the job of the union. Apart from which we've - when I first came into this business, there was no rehearsal pay. You could rehearse for three weeks for no money and when you said, 'why's that?' they'd say, 'We can't pay you because you're not bringing anything into the box office, you're only rehearsing. What are we going to pay you out of?'. Well of course they soon learned when they were threatened that they should budget for paying people while they were rehearsing. We've won rehearsal pay; we've won holiday pay which never existed. If you work for three months in a play then you get a day a month, you get three days' money and so on every where you go, so that will add up, it could add up to a month's holiday pay. That's what you get in the West End in a long run. The union represents you legally if you have an accident on the stage. There's a hell of a lot of things that the union does, unfortunately, Thatcher changed the law so you don't have to belong any more, no more 'closed shop'. But sensible people know it's in their interest because they're protected. I mean, we've had people come to us, saying 'I've had an accident in the panto, could you get me legal representation? I think we ought to sue.' And we'd have to say, 'I'm sorry, we've looked you up, you haven't been in the union for three years. Since you've been allowed to slip away you've done so. You can't rejoin quickly now and get it, you've lost your chance - you should have stayed with the union'. People realise their mistake when they don't stay and they let it go.

DM: If you don't mind me asking, what were the earnings like in the fifties and sixties?

HL: Well, my first wages was £6 and ten a week. Ten being ten shillings which is now 50 pence. So £6.50 was the wages. And £7, you could get £9 – Elizabethan Theatre

Company was £9 a week. The Royal Court with The Kitchen was £35 a week. That was a big hike up. Of course, everything's changed since then – you could get a flat for £12 a week. Now you can't get a flat for £200 a week – well, you can of sorts in Balham I suppose. So that was the kind of money it was, yeah.

DM: I'll just go back again to a few things you've been talking about. You were offered opportunities by Joan Littlewood. Were you ever able to take up any opportunities with her and Theatre Workshop?

HL: No, I was always busy. It's a shame, but I was a great fan. I was always there, all my friends were in the company, I went to see everything. They were wonderful. She was unfortunately – Kenneth Tynan said 'this company out there at Stratford East is a wonderful company', because the West End didn't know about them, 'a wonderful company, they should be in London in the West End.' That was their downfall because an enterprising management said, 'Bring that play to my West End theatre.' That was the end of it. From starting off in Manchester playing to miners and all sorts of working people, then coming to London having found Theatre Royal, Stratford East then going to the West End, the whole thing collapsed.

DM: Do you see that with Unity coming from the same background as Theatre Workshop from the working-class...

HL: Well, Unity burnt down, that was that problem. Also it petered out. I have to say, even if it hadn't burned down it would have petered out because evolution is evolution. Once the Royal Court with professionals and real money starts putting on plays about real things, and once the RSC started putting on plays against the Vietnam War, so the thrust of Unity's stuff - we would always pride ourselves, we started it and other people took it up and that's all you can ask. You can't say, 'How dare you steal our thunder!' What you say is, 'Thank God the mainstream has taken up our cudgels, we can retire, let them fight that battle now, it's moved on' and that's what's happened. Now every pub has a rough old play about working-class people and that's great. People are finding their feet that way, learning the business because these days there's no rep to go to. You've got to go and find a job in one of those rooms above a pub on the fringe and learn your business there. We have in Equity got a code of conduct up for fringe regarding how people are paid and not paid because people will work for nothing just to get the practice. So, we're getting them organised now at the fringe in the theatre and we'll see what comes of that.

DM: When you were performing in rep, what were the plays you were doing and how often were you doing them?

HL: A play a week you did, it was murder! You opened up on Monday night in a play and Tuesday morning you started next week's play. You rehearsed that until four every day and went in the evening to perform the play you opened with on Monday. By Friday, you could stagger through the play, then Saturday afternoon and evening you had two shows. Then Monday morning you dress rehearsed and opened in the next one. On Tuesday morning you started rehearsing the third one and so you went on

until it nearly killed you. It was all right for people who played themselves - leading men who went on in their sports jacket and the scarf around their neck being a leading man with their leading man's voice just had to learn the lines. But when you were a character actor playing a costermonger one week and a Scotsman or something in another, each was a whole new study and I couldn't take more than six months then I had to pack it in. But I always recommend people, in those days, always used to say, 'don't do more than a year', because it will knock the edges off you correctly, you'll learn the business - out of drama school you've still got to learn, the rehearsals and the new way of learning starts in rep once you've left drama school. It's a whole new turnover of learning, but after a year you could start getting into bad habits, shortcuts, not studying the depth and psychological and emotional qualities of the character. As a result of that, you'll become a rep-hack with no dept to do bigger things, so don't do more than a year was always the advice to give.

DM: What were the plays you were doing in rep?

HL: The plays were invariably the West End plays that had been on and then the copyright was allowed for rep once the West End had finished with them, because they wouldn't let you do them otherwise because you would take business away from the West End or Leeds or where the big theatres were. So, the rep plays were the West End plays, all the Noel Cowards and the Terrence Rattigans and sometimes the old Victorian pieces. One learned a vast variety of plays that were unknown to you, you know, and it was a great learning curve. I thoroughly enjoyed it but it came a point where I wouldn't do any more. I'd do the odd guest somewhere for a part that was wonderful, but other than that I wouldn't do more than one play anywhere and there was always the West End beckoning anyway. So, it was an interesting decade after decade. Then television started developing, then colour came in. Then the biggest challenge in early days, of course, was that television was live - there was no recording, and the mistakes that were made and you had to get out of in live television, which was all right in a play if you can get out of trouble, but live with millions watching. Then it became recorded and being made like a film in bits and they'd stick it together. It lost that first night edge. Something about doing a live television - five, four, three, two, one, the finger points and off you go, it was like a curtain going up in a West End play. Now, you go in leisurely and do different scenes all day like in Eastenders, you know, you'll do three or four scenes a day and it becomes two episodes a week. It's much easier. The tension's gone. Youngsters don't know that, they've got the tension of doing it anyway because they don't know about live television. The only people who know about live television are the people who read the news because they have to do it live [Laughs].

DM: We'll just finish talking about any particular anecdotes of plays you saw in the fifties and sixties that you thought were particularly memorable.

HL: Well, all the stuff like, that Olivier did, *The Entertainer* - Gielgud and Olivier were kind of on the way out as old hat. And then suddenly, John Osborne writes *The Entertainer* and gives new life to Olivier and Gielgud does - I've forgotten what the play was of Pinter's - and he found modern theatre. They were costume actors - Shakespeare, Restoration - suddenly, they're in modern dress finding a new lease of life and it saved their bacon. Then other films came on in their late middle age for them to play and it was great. What else was there, what other plays were there? So many

plays. There was that whole new wave of those funny French plays that had messages, Ring Around the Moon and stuff like that that had all kinds of qualities which were different to English theatre. There was a lot of stuff and the great actors like Scofield emerged who we don't hear much of. He's a wonderful man, he won't be interviewed at all. Doesn't want to know, does the odd thing occasionally, and hides in the country, doesn't seek publicity. But he's still there, still alive and still able to work. And I think that's the last of that old school. The new young knights – Gambon's a Sir and Tom Courtney's a Sir. They've all emerged. Tom came up with that Long Distance Runner and what's that film called where he thinks he's all different characters? I can't remember what it's called now but that made him [Billy Liar]. There was a wonderful era in those days. But now I think we need some new writers to emerge. We're treading water at the moment. I go to the National because I'm on the Olivier Awards panel so I have to go and see everything. Unfortunately at the moment, here we are 2007, it's mostly musicals. Having said that, there's a spate of things coming out - I saw Macbeth, wonderful! Ian McKellen's Lear I'm seeing in ten days, wonderful notices. There is a whole resurgence of wonderful stuff and long may it last.

[Pause]

DM: It's very interesting you say that there's another need for another revolution. Is that a bad thing or...

HL: It's bad that they're not emerging. There are some young women writing wonderful stuff that's a bit different. The Donmar does wonderful work. And the Almeida in Islington does wonderful work. They do some wonderful work some of these smaller theatres. The big boys, well, they don't want to put their money in things that are too risky without a big star in it. Judi Dench, Maggie Smith, they can command big money, money in the box office. Without big names they won't take risks with too many plays that aren't sure-fire. And that's a shame really.

DM: That just reminds me of the fifties and sixties with Maggie Smith as a rising star then in plays like Oh! What a Lovely War, I know she was in the film version of that. It's obviously quite cyclical and it's just going through a re-generation process now.

HL: That's it, yes, that's it. They're the only two who can guarantee money in the box office, Maggie Smith and Judi Dench. They sell out before it opens, even if it's rubbish. I can't think of anyone else who's a cert box office draw.

[Pause]

DM: I think you've said very, very good stuff, it was very interesting.

HL: How long have we done?

DM: Quite a while now.

HL: Not an hour have we?

DM: Not yet. We could carry on, we're nearly at the hour. I don't mind! [Laughs]

HL: [Laughs]

DM: There's so many more things we can talk about, what comes to mind?

HL: There's so many things and I can't think of them yet.

DM: There's loads of ways to get into things.

HL: Do you edit all this?

DM: Someone will, someone will. I mean, they might leave this in, it's quite nice. We've looked at things like the Lord Chamberlain and things like that, have you got any experiences with censorship?

HL: [Laughs] I was in a play with Jill Bennett when it came out on the news and in the Evening Standard at five in the evening, you had to be at the theatre at five to seven for the half. [grand style] 'Lord Chamberlain no longer exists in the theatre.!' They kept it for films because they thought ordinary people went to films and they needed to be guided. But the theatre was for more educated people, they could be discerning. Therefore we can do away with the Lord Chamberlain and censorship. The minute that happened - and Jill must have been the first to break the taboo, that night she said while I stood on the stage next to her, 'Abso-fucking-lutely not!'

DM: [Laughs]

HL: And I was flabbergasted, because it wasn't in the script. She just did it because she knew she would be the first. So that's my experience of censorship stopping! [Laughs]

DM: It's interesting that you say the theatre was seen as for the more educated, upper-classes when the whole thing of revolutionising the theatre was that it brought working-class people to the theatre.

HL: It did but only in certain areas of things. The Royal Court for instance, everybody started wearing jeans and open-necked shirts instead of suits and fur coats. But the

West End still kept a bit of a quality of that, some people even went in dinner jackets to see plays, providing they weren't rough plays like smooth revues or posh comedies. So it was still considered that the theatre was for middle-class, educated people, at least by those people in authority that made those decisions. They may have been wrong, but it was just loosening up. For their money, you could lose the Lord Chamberlain but we must still keep censorship in movies. But you go to the cinema now and there might as well not be a censor for the things you can see with a warning for 12 year olds not to see it, under-12 whereas things that we used to be stopped from going to when we were 16 were nothing compared to what 12 year olds can see now! So, I mean it's really silly, they shouldn't have any more censorship in the cinema because no one's taking much notice of it.

DM: It's strange that it's so far behind theatre in that way that it's still there and the movement behind abolishing censorship in the theatre was obviously so powerful, do you have any references to that time when the Edward Bonds were pushing boundaries?

HL: Well, Edward Bond, of course, they banned his play. So the way to get around it was to put it on at the Royal Court on a Sunday night as a private membership because you see Unity Theatre - going back to Unity Theatre, something that was never done then that's done a lot now is you can lampoon the prime minister. You can have people taking him off. People did Blair, people do everybody and take the mickey out of them rotten. In those days - it's in our DVD which you should get for your library...

DM: I will do.

HL: ...it shows you how Chamberlain was lampooned at the beginning of the war and it was outrageous. 'Lampooning the Prime Minister on stage! How disgusting.' And so they tried to ban it. What they did was actually, being crafty, they're very crafty, a policeman bought a ticket saying he was a member - because Unity was a private members' club - trade unions joined for their whole membership for about ten quid and you could join for two shillings for a year yourself - but this copper got in without showing a membership card and they took them to court to close them down. When he said, 'Right, this theatre will be closed forthwith.' The clerk of the court whispered to him, 'You can't do that Sir, because it's not a public theatre, it's a private club', 'Oh, fine £20!' Why am I telling you this? Censorship. Were we talking about censorship?

DM: Yeah, yeah.

HL: That's how Unity was treated on that score. When I did a film, A Hill in Korea, I had to say, 'I don't want them coming over here and telling me what to do.' My mate says, 'I'll tell you what to do', and I said, 'I'm not a contortionist.' Get it? No. Well when he says, 'I'll tell you what to do' he means 'go fuck yourself.'

DM: Oh, OK! [Laughs]

HL: I said, 'I don't want them coming over here and telling me what to do all those bloody....' And he says, 'I'll tell you what to do', and I said, 'I'm not a contortionist.' The censor cut, 'I'm not a contortionist'...

DM: But not...?

HL: ...because he said it can only mean one thing. Whereas if we leave the other line in it can mean anything, there's no double meaning in it, it can only mean 'go and fuck yourself' when the fella says, 'I'll tell you what to do'. That's how stupid the censorship was in those days. Nowadays you could actually say 'go and fuck yourself' and I could say, 'I'm not a contortionist' for a 12 year old even! But in those days it couldn't go on in the cinema.

DM: Is there anything else you want to bring up about the period? Anything I haven't touched on?

HL: I can't think so. We were doing at Unity – they were doing just before me arriving at 15 – they were doing revues to open a second front and comedy sketches, fighting politically to win the war, and plays that Sean O'Casey – I remember meeting him – he only allowed Unity to do *The Star Turns Red*. Wouldn't allow anyone else to do it. He never did well in London, O'Casey, the London audience didn't get him at all. Those were great days for me, I was learning all the time. Cor, this thing called theatre was wonderful! And when I got into the big wide world after drama school, it was all a big eye opener and movies and West End plays and things. So, now I work between doing things like *The Bill* that I'm on in a minute that I did the other week. I'm working in Equity for the bettering of actors' lives and finances. So, I feel it's been a good job well done.

DM: Thank you very much.

HL: Thank you.

DM: Thank you.