

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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George Ritchie – interview transcript

Interviewer: Steve Nicholson

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Actor and teacher. Audiences; The Bofors Gun; critics; Alfred Emmet; Glasgow theatres; Mother Goose; Next Time I'll Sing to You; New Plays Festival; Questors Theatre; Renée Raymond; James Saunders; school and university productions; Theatre Workshop; touring; Variety.

SN: OK, so George, if we can go back to your first early encounters with theatre then, even before you became a performer yourself. What would be your early memories of theatre, growing up in Glasgow?

GR: Well, as a child I didn't go to much theatre as such – I mean straight theatre. I would go to music hall and pantomime and so on, because my aunt was involved as a chorus girl then, in various shows in and around... in Scotland mainly, but also she would go down to London. And she eventually became the famous Goosie Lyle, because she performed as the goose in pantomime for various famous comedians.

But my memory of theatre as such, before I went to university, there wasn't very much. I do remember, with some pleasure, Uranium 235, which was when the Theatre Workshop was touring in Scotland. And they were then I think, sleeping on the beach, because they didn't have enough money for lodgings. And that was doubled with Twelfth Night, and was touring the halls of the various towns. I saw it in Hamilton in fact.

SN: That would have been with school party that you went or...?

GR: Yes, yes. And that was Ewan MacColl, and of course that whole group – what is her name?

SN: Joan Littlewood.

GR: Joan Littlewood, yes, she was there, yes.

SN: Quite a daring thing for school to go to. I mean quite a...

GR: Yes, I mean my... I suppose... I can't remember whether it was part of that, but the Head of Art at the school, which was a remarkable school I went to, which was in a sense a secondary comprehensive, but also very academic. Scottish schools were rather unusual in the sense that they were... very academic at one level and much more practical at the other, and yet with a huge history of academe really. But the Head of Arts there was married to quite a well known Scottish actress, and he was a theatre man through and through. And each year we did Shakespeare, which he directed. But he also got me involved in various little theatres in the area as a child actor. So whether he was involved in persuading the school to go along to Uranium 235, or whether I went along on my own, I don't remember. But I remember seeing both these shows. They were playing, I think night about, Twelfth Night and Uranium 235.

SN: Do you think the impact of them was to do with the content of the play, or was there something about the way they performed?

GR: I really was too young to be aware of that. I really don't... I don't know. All I know is that it impressed me a great deal. I remember smelling the feet of the actors [which were] obviously in pretty bad state in Twelfth Night. [laughs] Airing their feet in the front row, yes over the ledge of the platform. No, but no I... it was... And Ewan MacColl was a wonderful performer. His voice, his singing was superb, I remember that. And he wrote or devised Uranium 235.

SN: Would he have been in Twelfth Night? Would he have been singing in Twelfth Night?

GR: I don't think so. I don't remember that. I mean, my memory is very patchy for that period. What else, theatre...? Well, I acted in various things like The Browning Version and so on, with little theatres in the area. And I acted, of course, in Shakespeare, and sang in Gilbert and Sullivan for my sins, and also directed my own productions.

SN: At school?

GR: Yes, and performed The Lady of Shallot and so on. It must have been awful really. But I was encouraged - or not discouraged - to do these things. And that was going on all the time really. And the former pupils had their own organisation. And they had a wonderful variety show every year which they did. Yes.

SN: In terms of the music hall and variety things that you went to, would that be with friends or with family?

GR: I think I went with family. And I can't remember to be honest whether that continued, whether I was doing quite a lot of that when I went to university. I can't remember that. I think probably it was. But then we're talking about the early fifties. It was a very strong and rich tradition of Scottish variety theatre. And some were family based. I mean... I can't remember the names actually, but there were famous families –

famous in Glasgow – who performed in their own shows every year in the big professional theatres like the Royal and the Empire and so on. And there was also the Citizen's Theatre, then going quite strongly. And I remember seeing quite a few productions there.

SN: Unity Theatre, did you ever go...?

GR: Don't remember Unity. I don't remember the name in that respect, no. But the Citizen's I do remember. And I saw some quite... I mean, I can't remember in any real detail, but I remember being impressed and enjoying very much what I saw there.

SN: And the variety that you went to, was that risqué stuff?

GR: Yes, some of it was, yes, yes. But as I say, I'm not sure that I saw that as a child or as a student. I can't remember that. And I don't remember very much about it, except that it was quite a heady experience to attend one of these shows, because the audience was very much involved. And they loved these performers, a very strong interaction between performer and audience certainly. Later on I suppose I saw various touring companies with... the time when Gielgud was touring with various things, and I remember seeing... I think... yes, The Cherry Orchard with Gielgud – I think I'm right in saying that – and various things of that kind. Again, when I was... later I think when I was a student, it was in the fifties, yes, the early fifties.

SN: So where... you went to university in what, 19...?

GR: Well I was at... the year that I joined that little fit-up company we'll talk about in a moment was '56. And that was the year I'd failed my final exams – or one exam, because it was a group of exams we had to get through. So I'd have been... '5[3] I suppose I went up. Yes, '5[3], 195[3].

SN: And that was which university?

GR: Glasgow University.

SN: Right.

GR: Yes, University of Glasgow, yes.

SN: And that was fairly normal, then, to go to the local university. I mean, you didn't think of going further away?

GR: I wasn't that keen as I remember, and my interest then was to be an actor – to become an actor. And therefore university was a sort of... something to keep me going, you know. That was the idea anyway.

SN: So did you carry on doing theatre while you were at university?

GR: Yes, yes. I performed in the yearly university production, which was usually directed by either an actor, quite a well known actor in the area – Ian Cuthbertson for instance was one of the directors – or else directed by one of the lecturers of the Academy for... the drama academy, or Scottish Drama Academy.

SN: And they were productions that anyone, any student could audition for?

GR: Yes, I mean there was GUDS – the Glasgow University Dramatic Society – they had their own committee and so on. Yes, and I mean I think perhaps... well, it's when I played Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* that I began to feel that I had some skill and... Well, I'd acted a lot at school of course, but I began to feel a certain power as an actor. I was well... I mean, the critics chose me - you know, the Glasgow newspapers and so on - chose me as Performer of the Year, and this sort of stuff, so I got a certain kudos from that. Then I played in *Love for Love*, and so on. So I did quite a lot then, yes.

SN: And your family would not have... were not opposed to you being involved as an actor?

GR: Not at all. No, never at any point, no. And as it happened I eventually... I was being pushed to become an actor, not only by my aunt later, but by the head of the arts department at the school, who really wanted me to go on to become a professional actor. But I resisted that I think, I'm not quite sure why. But although I was successful as an amateur actor, I was very nervous even then. I still am as an actor. So it wasn't as if I shone in my role as an actor, I found it quite heavy going, nerve-wise if you like.

SN: So you never considered drama school?

GR: I did at one time, on the strength I think of – I don't know – of a particularly well reviewed performance. I got an interview with the head of the drama college, but he wasn't... there was nothing he could do. And I was still at university, as I remember, then. No, whatever happened I didn't take that... I didn't push my way as one would have had to do. I don't suppose I had a burning ambition really by then. And eventually I taught drama and became involved in drama in other ways. And then went down to London and joined the Questors Theatre after my National Service, and got opportunities to do all sorts of wonderful things – for me wonderful things there. And even then I suppose I was hoping that I might be able to get somewhere, but it wasn't to be. And I don't suppose... I think that it was right that it didn't happen, to be honest, because though I had some skill and talent as an actor, I don't think I was temperamentally suited to it really.

SN: So in 1956 at the end of university...

GR: Yes, well I was in the position where it was a modular degree. I was academically well thought of, but spent most of my months and years at university working on theatre.

SN: Because you'd been studying maths, is that right?

GR: Well maths was one of the modules.

SN: Right.

GR: And I was a mathematician at school. I was known... a medallist and such for maths, and so it was one of my best subjects. But the class was nine o'clock in the morning, and I found that quite difficult [laughs] So... and I just didn't turn up to lessons... to lectures. And so of all the subjects to fail that was a little unusual, because it was my best, or had been my best subject. So I was obviously going to get it, and when I got it I would get my degree. But I had to re-sit it, and it was in that summer... I had to re-sit in September, and it was that summer that I went down to London.

I can't remember the purpose of it. Just to get away and... and it was there that my aunt – without telling me, I was staying in this unusual setup with a friend of hers – and without my knowing it she applied through The Stage on my behalf. It was all hand-written stuff of course, as a junior actor if you like in a touring fit-up company. And without auditioning me or anything they accepted me. And I arrived at the station in Thaxted, to be greeted by the company. My first meeting with [them], you know.

SN: Were you replacing someone?

GR: I don't know. I really don't know. I'm not sure. Probably. There was this young girl who arrived too, and so it may have been a revival of the company in some way or another, because they would come from all over the place. One of the main actors who obviously worked with Renee Raymond – the director and leading actress of the company, and company manager too – he was working in a sweetie factory or something. And she managed to persuade him to leave that and come and join them. So there was all that. And later on, years later, I bumped into – well I didn't actually bump into, I'm not sure that I actually met her – but there she was this Renée Raymond as she called herself, behind a counter in R.S. McColls somewhere... I can't even remember where it was. So there was... they were in and out of the profession.

SN: But this was not a new company, it had existed...

GR: No, no, it had existed for quite some time. In fact Renée Raymond, who'd be in her fifties I suppose, said she'd been trained as an actress by Tod Slaughter, or in Tod Slaughter's company. Now Tod Slaughter, I think, was one of these, I suppose touring company directors and he had his own company. And she said he had trained her as an actress. So yes...

SN: And did the company actually have a name to...?

GR: I can't remember the name, isn't that strange? Yes, they did have a name, yes. And the set up was quite straightforward, although pretty ridiculous in a way. They would tour to a different village each week. And they didn't have any transport, but they had a couple of skips of costumes, and they had basic scenery. And they'd stuff it all into... they'd hire a cattle wagon, and they'd stuff it all into the cattle wagon and drive to the next village. And they'd play for a week.

I think Mondays we sort of... we used to play more than one play, so there'd be two, maybe even three plays in a week. And the Monday would be spent looking... say it was two plays, we'd be looking at two plays... I can't remember now... on the Monday, and setting up the scenery for one of them, and try to learn parts, and be told... And the parts were all in handwritten exercise books, which Renée had written out. And you got ready, and then you'd perform on a... possibly Monday was a day off, so you'd perform on a Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday. So you'd perform maybe two plays: one play for Tuesday and Wednesday, and another play for Thursday, Friday, Saturday. Something like that.

And the plays were a mixture of things; there were sort of barnstorming plays, like *Murder in the Red Barn*, but also adaptations of film musicals, and this extraordinary mixture of things. And even *Gaslight*. At end of each performance, just like in Shakespeare's time - there were interesting comparisons of parallels with Shakespeare's time anyway - but at the end of the play we would go off to get changed, and I would... Most nights, Renée, who was a comedienne - a very fine comedienne - she would... we'd be taking our makeup off and she'd tell me about a routine she wanted me to be her feed man, feed guy for her. And she'd tell me, and then we'd go on and perform it after some break of ten minutes, and then we'd play a comedy sketch.

SN: Right, and you're...

GR: Then on Saturdays we played a matinée of a pantomime, which was... Renée had a remarkable ability to make up rhyming couplets at the drop of a hat. And her whole... there was an undercurrent in these matinees, where she'd try to make the actors in the company corpse, by referring to things that had... unsavoury things, whatever had happened during the week to the company, as part... interwoven with a story about Mother Goose or whatever, which we were performing to children in the audience. And then we'd play the evening performance of the main play, and then after that on the Saturday I would compère a dance, [we'd] clear the chairs, and there'd be a dance which had a compère or whatever.

On one Sunday we also... on a Sunday we performed for the local lunatic asylum, which was a very strange experience. I don't know how... when we created it. We created a sort of variety show, which started off with singing *Waltzing Matilda* or something. And

we arrived at the door of this huge Victorian echoing building with a big door, and were welcomed at the door by this rather strange looking man, who turned out to be one of the inmates. And we were taken through the hall, which was where they [were] putting... the inmates were putting the chairs out. And as we came in there was sudden silence, and then a hissing sound as we walked through, which was rather unnerving. And we didn't have a look at the people very closely, but got in, put makeup on, costumes and stuff, and came out into the bright... there was some lights, came out singing. And the lights... singing *Waltzing Matilda*, and dancing. And the lights splashed on to the front row, and there were these old ladies with sort of legs dangling in the air, and little moustaches, and giggling, and melancholy old men, and even some young kids. It was so sudden and so shocking that some of us were crying by the end of the actual opening number. And then we were left at the end, the superintendent told us we... we managed to get offstage, and he took us round the back, he said 'you mustn't go through the auditorium, because they'll start kissing you and hugging you, and you'll find that difficult'.

But as far as the plays were concerned, clearly the performances must have been awful, because we didn't have time to learn our lines. We stuffed various cribs around the set. And I suppose the younger ones certainly. And Renée knew everything; she knew all the plays, every word of them. And she used to prompt with this booming voice from the dressing room if she wasn't on. She was usually on, because she played the main part in everything, she was on for most of the play. So we would perform. I suppose being young we had a pretty retentive memory, and we could learn our lines, or some lines, quite well. We managed to get by. Although on one occasion, she used to prompt as I say bellowing from the dressing room, no whispering, no just her voice would boom out.

But there was one time when she was in a bad mood, or something had gone wrong, some upset, she refused to prompt. And we were playing in a play – I can't remember what it was – but we just lost the plot, and the lines. And the first character, say John would be on with Jim, and they'd have a conversation, which was partly to do with the play, and then it would peter out and begin to be made up rather vaguely about whatever, some local flavour to the play. And then John would say, 'Oh well, hello...' and he'd pretend there was somebody off stage and go off to them, leaving the other character on their own. And he would adlib for a short while, then call out the name of one of the actor's characters, and they would have come on. So it would go on for quite some time before she eventually had mercy on us, and sort of voice boomed with a word which would bring us back in line into the story again.

SN: And do you think the audience, as far as you can tell, knew that things were being made up, and things were going wrong?

GR: I don't know, I don't think so. You see, there was no television at all, it was before television, and therefore the only entertainment these villages – I mean I say villages, there was a mixture of... well I suppose most of the people who came along were certainly unsophisticated theatre goers. I don't think... I think probably they just enjoyed it. I mean, I describe... well as you know, I mean things can go wrong and people don't notice. And I suppose most of the time we got away with it.

SN: And were you getting quite big audiences?

GR: I can't remember that. All I know is that we lived exactly as Shakespeare's touring company, and the companies of that time, which... and we were actually as a... we were actually staying in Elizabethan cottages very often, which had been... had a tradition of receiving actors all the way back to Shakespeare's time, or similar to Shakespeare's actors at that time. And there was a... so it was a tradition on these villages of taking in actors at very cheap rates, to stay in their own houses. So that was... part of the tradition was that. But... sorry your question was?

SN: It was about audiences...

GR: Yes.

SN: ...and I suppose also therefore about how you were getting paid.

GR: Well we were paid... a certain amount was charged at the door for a ticket, and the money was then... I think the term in the profession was 'bottled', but the bottle was the money that was received. And then I think Renée took, let us say a double share of that – but I'm not even sure of that – and the rest of it was divided equally amongst the actors. And there was only one, two... there were only two actors and one... I mean, it was a very small company... and one actress, and then Renée. There was two women and two men. So the money, we lived on that money. That was the bottle.

SN: So you weren't... I mean, presumably you only played in that lunatic asylum, somebody must have booked you and paid...

GR: Oh yes, I'm sure that Renée negotiated that, yes, yes.

SN: But the village halls that you were performing in...

GR: We would had to have hired them I think.

SN: You hired them.

GR: I think we must have done. I didn't... I know nothing about that. I don't remember anything about that. Well I was not involved in it, and therefore didn't even think about it. So I don't know. All I know is that Renée kept the bottle, and distributed money to us. At times it was quite hard. I mean, we got extremely low rates for lodgings, very, very low indeed compared to the commercial level. And we would arrive at a door and ring the doorbell, knock on the door, and say 'I'm an actor blah, blah, blah', and that was your introduction, and that got you your special rate. But there were times when, you know... I mean, I remember some of it was charitable – charity really. I mean, I remember staying in the summerhouse at the bottom of a doctor's garden, and the

doctor's wife, or the maid, bringing me breakfast in the morning. And that was obviously free.

SN: You never had any... there was nothing you were doing that was actually illegal? You didn't have any kind of brushes with authority?

GR: No, no I didn't. I mean, Ken, the stage manager and actor - leading actor at that time - he apparently stole a coat or something, and was persuaded by Renée to take it back. He must have shoved it in the props and costume hamper - one of the hampers. No, I mean apart from that, no. I don't know anything about the legality of it. I mean it's a strange... I mean the acting must have been amateur, pretty hopeless I suppose some of it. But it worked, and it was professional in the sense that we made a living - or tried to make a living out of it.

SN: Do you have any knowledge at all of whether there were lots of other companies doing the same thing or...?

GR: No, no. No, and I think probably that even then... probably there had been, but then I don't think there were. We never saw any... there was never any sense of rivalry with another company in the area. We're talking about a particular area, that is Thaxted in Essex, and then up into Suffolk and then Norfolk. Is it Essex? Anyway Thaxted. Suffolk/Norfolk eventually - north of London, yes. But no I don't remember any other company at all, no.

SN: And one of the sort of background fascinating things is that, this is 1956, the year of Look Back in Anger and all of that.

GR: Exactly. Didn't touch them.

SN: Did you have any... were you reading about theatre in the Sunday papers and...?

GR: I probably was, yes, yes. But it was such a heady experience this, I suppose I just switched off from that entirely. No, in the villages there was just no connection between that kind of theatre and... I mean no, no, they accepted the most awful kind of pieces I think. I mean, Gaslight, Murder in the..., we played Maria Martin, or, Murder in the Red Barn a couple of miles from the original red barn you know. So I don't know. I don't know whether there were any sophisticated people in the audience who had any knowledge of theatre at all. Certainly not the then sort of things that were going on in London, no not at all.

SN: And it didn't make you feel 'what am I doing here, why am I not at the Royal Court and...'?

GR: No, not at all. No, I don't remember being concerned about that in the slightest, no.

SN: So why did you leave? You could have stayed longer with that company?

GR: Well, they were off to Ireland. But my father... and there must have been a letter arrived at my home, near Glasgow, saying when the exam would be – the re-sit exam would be. And he wrote to me and said, [Glaswegian accent] 'Come home and sit your... finish your degree.' And I did.

Just to be fair, the company had disintegrated a little. Renée was ill, she'd hurt her leg, and Ken the youngish stage manager had fallen out with the company – with her particularly – I think over her lover arriving from the sweetie factory to perform his roles. And you can imagine him being a bit... anyway. So the theatre company was... I mean you can imagine in a village, finding at the end of the street the guy who left the company was still around with his dog. I mean, it was a strange feeling. So it wasn't... there's a sense in which the theatre company was disintegrating a little. But she was off to... she was about to go off to Ireland to continue 'gagging' as we called it. To gag was to make up words as you went along more or less, so they were called gagging companies I think. No, so I left because of that.

SN: But in some form that company and some of its work did continue...

GR: I assume so, though I think it was very much at the end.

SN: ...presumably 'til television finished it off.

GR: I think it must have been very close, because I think... I don't know, I imagine... I don't know very much about village life at that time, but I imagine that it wasn't long before television sets would give them something, I don't know, just to do in the evening. There was cinema too to some extent, but not so much in the villages.

SN: Would there be... there wouldn't have been cinemas in those villages at that time?

GR: I doubt it, I doubt it. They would have to go to the local town for that I think. No... But I suppose the basic thing is that this was what they found entertaining. They didn't need to come along and pay to get a ticket to see this stuff, not at all.

SN: And I mean you don't feel... you never felt they were laughing at you...

GR: No.

SN: ...that that was why they went and made fun of the actors?

GR: No, no, no, not at all. But I mean that may have just have been my thick skin.
[Laughs] My belief in my ability, I don't know. No.

SN: Do you have any sense of...?

GR: I talk about it rather disparagingly, but I could... I mean, I gave one or two quite good performances I think.

SN: Do you have any sense at all of the age range of audiences? I mean, were there young people as well as old people do you think?

GR: Yes, a mixture of ages. It was just... there must have been a tradition of doing this, because I mean for instance there was one old lady who played the violin, but she was almost tone... completely deaf. But we... Renée got her to use the violin as accompanying some of the scenes, playing Hearts and Roses or whatever you know. The trouble was that she was so deaf you couldn't stop her. You might signal for a start, but she'd get so involved it would go on and on, the play would go to pieces. [laughs] But I mean yes, we did... she wasn't the only person we employed in that way – 'employed', I'm sure we didn't give her anything! No, there seemed to have been a tradition of this, and it maybe that she was following a circuit she'd followed before. I really don't know. I was too... I mean, you can imagine, I was too involved in getting the next play on to think about things like that. Insensitive I might have been, but one gets so involved in the day-to-day, hour-to-hour, minute-to-minute problem of performing a full length play after hardly any rehearsal at all – twice, and a change during the week – that it was enough to get on with it and do it, and not consider these things. And I didn't consider them afterwards much either, because I then moved on to another world and so on.

SN: And then the Questors, how did you become involved? That was a few years later?

GR: Yes, I think then my young wife – we'd just been married – we spent a couple of years or 18 months in Glasgow where we married, and I'd finished...

SN: It must be late fifties.

GR: Yes, I'd finished my... '57/59 in the army, came back and acted for a while when I did my teacher's training for year, '59/60. And then taught for a year I think, '61/62, so I suppose it would be '63 or so by the time I came down to London. And I auditioned for the Questors Theatre, which was then...

The thing about the Questors at that time was that the West End was not putting on much contemporary theatre, contemporary plays. And quite a few directors and quite a few writers put on their premieres in companies like Questors – particularly the Questors. And so the most famous example at that time I think was James Saunders. You know, James Saunders' Next Time I'll Sing to You was written for a group of

Questors actors. And I was not one of that team, but I played – I don't know if you know it – but I played the Hermit in that, the actor who plays the Hermit in that play. And so Jimmy would come along to rehearsals and rewrite and rewrite and rewrite – we had dozens of rewrites.

And when it was part of the New Plays Festival, Dannie Abse was writing theatre plays then and so on. So each year for some years there was the New Plays Festival, and along to it came Tynan and Hobson for instance. And they came along to all the productions in the New Plays Festival. And the directors were... I mean one of the directors at the Questors at that time was Alan Clarke, who became the guy who directed *Scum*. And he directed me in a couple of productions. And the audience were invited to a discussion after the production, after each performance.

In the case of *Next Time I'll Sing to You*, Harold Hobson absolutely adored it you know, he became involved, very much involved. And he just kept... he wrote one crit of it in the *Sunday Times* was it then, and the following week - which is unheard of - devoted almost the whole of the column to it again. Loved it, absolutely. I mean, I read it again recently, and I must say it seemed to me to have dated enormously. But he loved it.

And it was then [that Michael] Conran, I think it was, took it up to put on at the Arts Theatre, with the [professional] director who [had] directed us, but with a professional cast – that was Michael Caine and Michael Bryant and so on were in it. And it was just a... it then went to Germany I think and then even New York, yes it went to New York as well. But she died not long after that, the director, and it was eventually taken up by some other group.

But rather nicely James, Jimmy Saunders, invited each member of the amateur cast to meet a member of the professional cast. Not necessarily the same part. And I went along to meet Michael Bryant who was playing one of the other parts. So that's the sort of thing that was going on.

SN: And that you were doing in your spare time...

GR: That I was doing while trying to teach. Oh yes, I was trying to teach, very badly because I mean I was just so much involved in the theatre. And one point I was playing... yes, I was playing a... what happened was that Dannie Abse was directing his own production of a play he'd written – who's name escapes me at the moment. And one of his actors became ill.

Now at that time the Questors Theatre, there was the old building, which was just a kind of village hall I suppose – proscenium theatre, quite well altered to become a theatre – but they were beginning to build the complex which is now the Questors complex. And they built what they called the Stanislavski Room, which was a large rehearsal room, but very large. And in fact one of the seasons at the New Plays Festival, they performed plays in the proscenium theatre and – because they hadn't knocked it down and continued to build the proper theatre, which was the present theatre at Questors – and they played in the round in the Stanislavski Room.

And I performed... because *Next Time I'll Sing to You* was written for the round. So I performed in that, but also performed in Dannie's production as well. And we'd do two nights or three nights in *Next Time I'll Sing to You*, and then I'd do two or three nights in Dannie's proscenium production. So I had the experience of acting in a proscenium mode for a couple of nights or three nights, and then in the round, which was a very interesting experience at that time.

And later on we played Godot in the round, as a circus... like a circus, with Pozzo like a circus master. Yes, so then what one did was... what the Questors was doing was giving opportunities for playwrights and directors to put on plays which could not at that time, or were not put on in the West End.

SN: Or even at the Royal Court or...

GR: I don't know. All I know is there was enough interesting work for these national critics to come along to see. Two or three years of that I think.

SN: It would be mostly the play they were reviewing rather than the performance...

GR: Yes. Oh yes. Oh the play... no, no not, they were not... I mean clearly it was the play, yes, yes. Yes. And the acting was of a very high standard certainly, but... and of course some people went on from there to the profession as actors. And certain a large number of directors who were already professional directors, were directing at the New Plays Festival.

SN: And they weren't paid either?

GR: No, not as far as I know. No, they couldn't have been, no, no.

SN: And the playwrights were presumably not paid either. They were hoping to use it...

GR: I assume not. I don't think there was any payment at all. I don't know, but I assume not. I just don't know. Alfred Emmet was a very strong character. He's the one who created the Questors as it was then, and he was a Stanislavski man. And he ruled the Questors with a rod of iron.

SN: So it would have been certain kinds of play at the theatre, that were put on there.

GR: I don't know that that's the case. I don't think there was that. I just don't know. No I don't think so. The most prestigious piece was of course, was Next Time I'll Sing to You, because of its immediate transfer with another cast to the West End, and then to New York I think.

SN: And were you in this period also going to see a lot of the theatre, or were you so...?

GR: Yes, yes, as much as one could. I mean, while trying to teach for the first time in England really – I'd taught in Scotland but only for a short time – so I had to make a living through teaching. And it was a secondary modern school and discipline problems

were rife, particularly for me who was just not interested. And rehearsing, I mean we did all sorts of things, but it was a full... and you were rehearsing night after night, and weeks on end, from one piece and then going into another. I mean I did all sorts of things.

We did a very fine version of *Exception and the Rule* which had been translated by – and then directed by – the then dramaturg or whatever of the Royal Court. And we toured that around in various parts of London. And I performed in T.S. Eliot, Shaw, I played the lead in *Charley's Aunt*, in a musical version of *Charley's Aunt*, because Alfred Emmet's wife was a woman who loved making musicals out of plays. And she... I remember [sings] 'I'm Charley's auntie from Brazil, from Brazil, from Brazil. I'm Charley's auntie from Brazil, where the nuts come from.' But I played in there. So I played a huge variety of roles. I was playing Pozzo one production, and then [Babs]... in *Charley's Aunt* [and several others].

SN: And you were not unusual in the fact that you were doing a full-time job at the same time. I mean the other people who were rehearsing night after night...

GR: Most of the people their work was not important to them, but I mean they had to...

SN: But they were working full-time?

GR: Yes, yes, they had to. So it was entirely an amateur set up, top to bottom really. But exciting. And I also for my sins helped to build part of the theatre you know, because the theatre, the complex including the... the theatre itself was I think finished largely by professional builders. But the Stanislavski Room – this huge rehearsal room which was the theatre in the round for quite some time, and the only theatre they had for a while – was built by members. Alfred to the fore. I mean there's a... there are still, and probably to this day it's still there, I haven't been back to look at it, Alfred's bulge, which is this huge wall, and there's a bulge where Alfred's calculations had gone wrong. And he was up and down that ladder brick laying, as I was at that time. So it was quite a... And one was doing that as well as rehearsing, and trying to make a living during the day. Summer holidays of course were reasonably long, so one could... I think much of the building I did in my summer holiday, when there wasn't so much going on in rehearsal either.

SN: And you got audiences at the Questors?

GR: Yes, oh yes.

SN: That you didn't feel theatre's dying, everybody wants to watch film and television? I mean it felt as though you were involved in something living and thriving?

GR: Yes, yes. And I think there was that... there were lots of discussions about you know, 'was theatre dying?' and so on, but certainly the Questors Theatre was not... I mean it was involved in a very lively involvement in theatre, so it didn't... we may have been discussing it, but we were doing something about it I think.

SN: And you weren't discussing it because no-one was coming to see it?

GR: Oh not at all. No, no, not at all. I don't know, I've no idea what the figures were for audience attendance. I think the New Plays Festival was probably quite well attended. And of course there were productions throughout the year. No, I don't remember anything about that. It was not... I just didn't think about it. It can't have been that badly attended. So I mean I always... of course I went to the theatre as much as I could. I particularly enjoyed the international theatre, seeing things like Max Frisch's...

SN: Fire Raisers?

GR: Fire Raisers... not Fire Raisers, the other one.

SN: Andorra?

GR: Andorra... in then the Aldwych it was, where they put on these international seasons. And seeing for instance the Moscow Arts Theatre production of The Cherry Orchard in all its dusty glory, and other things like that. Yes, and that was exciting, to know that each year there was a programme of, usually European, but often also... And there were all the other things going on. There were American theatre companies coming over with their radical presentation. And later, I mean that was quite a while later, there was the Peter Brook things at the Roundhouse and so on.

SN: You didn't go to the Royal Court particularly or...?

GR: Not the Royal Court, no.

SN: Why would that have been do you think? The plays didn't interest you or...?

GR: I don't know. Well it's often the case, in my experience, that amateur theatre companies or amateur actors either... they don't necessarily go leaping along to the professional theatre as one would expect them to. It's a strange, almost phenomenon, but they become so much involved in what they're doing, they don't necessarily relate it much. Not necessarily, I mean some do, and some companies do more than others. No, I don't remember going along to the Royal Court at all, but I certainly went along to all sorts of things at that time, and later.

I suppose later on when I taught in various schools, and opened drama departments, and I would take along sixth formers to all sorts of wonderful things, particularly the Roundhouse I loved visiting. That was later on, and of course down to in that area, when I was eventually in the West Country I suppose, on the edge of it, the Exeter... the Northcott Theatre in Exeter, where there was some marvellous seasons of plays.

SN: I have to ask you because of my own particular interest, whether censorship was something that you were aware of in relation to the theatre you were involved in, or just as a... in terms of your knowledge of debates in the theatre at the time?

GR: No, I must say no.

SN: It did impinge.

GR: It didn't impinge on me, nor on the productions I was involved in. Now I don't know what happened at the Questors Theatre. For instance Next Time I'll Sing to You is pretty... there's nothing much in there that would be controversial in that sense. No, it certainly didn't affect me in any way at all.

SN: And you weren't particularly aware of debates about the need for theatre to get rid of the Lord Chamberlain and...?

GR: No. No, not that I remember. It doesn't mean very much, but no.

SN: What was that story you were telling me about the friend of yours and The Bofors Gun?

GR: Oh yes, yes, this is... yes, yes. My brother-in-law Adrian Secchi who was musical director at the Lyceum in the, I suppose sixties/seventies whatever, when the director I mentioned, the National Theatre director...

SN: Richard Eyre.

GR: Richard Eyre was then at the Lyceum before he went I think on to another theatre...

SN: On to Nottingham I think.

GR: Nottingham. It was before Nottingham. But whether it was that production of the Bofors Gun that he was involved in or not... I know that Adrian certainly was involved in a touring production of it. Now whether it was the first production, it probably was – I don't know the history of The Bofors Gun – but I do know that they, either for the tour, or created by the writer himself, they created a character called Kinell, and they've put his name in the programme. He had no part in the plot, as I understand it. This may be terribly muddled, but this is as I remember it. The story is third hand really. And it meant that they could say, 'F'K'nell', and they could say that as often as they liked, because when they said, 'K'nnell, K'nnell', he would come running, 'Yes sir, yes sir.' [laughs] So it sounds ridiculous in a way, but they managed to get... apparently they managed to get

away with 'F'K'nell', just that, nothing else, K'nell. On repeating the story it begins to sound less and less convincing, but that is his story as I remember it. But I think a rather nice story, bearing in mind the restrictions of the time. But it meant that his name was on the programme, of the character. But I mean I need to look at the book. I haven't got a copy, but I need to look at *The Bofors Gun*, to see if it was just that tour or whether in fact it's part of the play. I don't know.

SN: George, before we finish...

GR: Yes.

SN: ...just to jump to something completely different, I must ask you to tell me a bit about the aunt and the mother goose.

GR: Oh yes, yes.

SN: Your aunt who played *Mother Goose* for many years I believe.

GR: Yes, she was the one who got me, as I said earlier I think in this chat, was the one who got me into this company by writing to *The Stage* and blah, blah, blah. She was from a... her mother was a widow - that's my grandmother who was widowed quite young. And she wanted from an early age to go into... well to perform as a dancer and a singer really in the theatre. And she achieved that, and she managed to get a job as a chorus girl. But eventually... I don't know how this... and I've never discussed it with her - and she's dead now though - she eventually specialised in performing in the goose skin in *Mother Goose*. And she became so adept at this, she was crippled with arthritis for most of her life, but she would be bent double and she had quite a complicated goose skin or... they call it the skin. And she could waggle about with various strings and so on, and various battles for tears, so that the actual...

[Recording interrupted]

GR: So eventually she specialised in performing the part of goose in *Mother Goose*. And so the only thing she every played as far as I know, she never played any other skin parts, but she carved a niche for herself large enough to be eventually 'the' mother goose. All the great Dames, and we're talking about Stanley Baxter and other more specialist Dames... and she performed mostly I suppose in London, but they did tour... they would open a production in Glasgow or something, and she would be the goose. So she was in great demand as a goose.

SN: 1950s would we be talking about here?

GR: I would say so, yes, fifties, yes, fifties/sixties, even into the... certainly sixties, maybe into the seventies. And so she performed with these... in these companies, and became very well known within, I suppose at the level of The Stage, the newspaper, and various magazines there were articles about her. She was called Goosie Lyle, and she was... she spent the pantomime season obviously each year as Goose, and then she would spend the rest of the year as a film extra. I mean, she became quite... she was I suppose not just an extra, but she had little bit parts and things – not normally speaking.

But I mean there are some lovely stories about her. She was playing some old tramp, and she sat down in the middle of filming, in some part of London where they were filming outdoors, and she sat down, had a sandwich and then fell asleep. And when she woke up the film crew had gone, and left her in complete rags in the middle of London. This was her story, because she used to say... she embellished her stories. But she had great difficulty persuading anybody that she was not what she appeared to be to, a smelly old tramp.

But she did film extra work extensively, as much as she could, and then start the new pantomime season each year. So that's how she lived.

SN: And she did flying once?

GR: She flew... she was the first... I think, I understand, the first goose – skin goose – to fly, which didn't work awfully well. And she then... and at one point, and she was quite old I think then, she fell off the stage and broke her leg, as goose. But carried on regardless, and then went on the next night, yes.

SN: And what was this skin, this goose skin, what was it?

GR: It's just a... it's a very... it's just she was small, and she would be bent double, and it was just exactly the shape of a large goose. And she would have her elbows tucked in I suppose, and she'd operate these strings for the eyes, and push things for tears and so on. And she'd waddle around in her... with these big goose feet. And normally completely silent, I understand she never made any noise. There wasn't even something for creating noise in the costume. And one point, I do remember this, but I may be embellishing it a little, but my young wife and I, we had arrived in London, no children and staying in some lodgings somewhere – Mornington Crescent or something like that. And she phoned us up, or contacted us, to come round to see her new goose skin. And it was pouring rain, and she was out on the pavement, I swear, strutting up and down in this goose skin!

[Laughter]

GR: But she was fanatical, absolute fanatical.

SN: The costume was made for her and then she kept it from one year...

GR: Yes, oh yes it had been made. Yes, yes.

SN: She looked after it.

GR: Yes. No, she had to pay to have it made, yes. And they were expensive, and it was made with goose feathers and all sorts of things you know – and mechanism. Oh yes, there were specialist makers of skins, as they were called, yes. Skin parts, yes. And there were dogs and everything else. The goose is probably the most famous of all the pantomime animals I suspect, is the goose yes. Because for a pantomime to be called Mother Goose, which is quite something that is.

SN: Yes.