

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Neil Heayes – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Natalie Dunton**

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Theatre-goer. Peggy Ashcroft; Robert Atkins; Brixton Theatre; Jack Buchanan; Cyrano de Bergerac; The First Gentleman; John Gielgud; Hamlet; Haymarket Theatre; Robert Helpmann; Mona Inglesby and the International Ballet Company; King Lear; King's Theatre, Hammersmith; Esmond Knight; Vivien Leigh; Love for Love; Lupino family; Oedipus Rex and The Critic; Old Vic; Laurence Olivier; Open Air Theatre, Regent's Park; Paganini; programmes; Ralph Richardson; the Savoy Operas; Firth Shepherd; Alistair Simm; Streatham Hill Theatre; the Travelling Repertory Theatre; ticket prices; Rex Whistler; Donald Wolfit.

ND: If we go... you were saying about when you or rather you got interested in the theatre when you were 14 years old?

NH: Yes, 14 years old. As I say, I was very young in those days, I was working. But unfortunately I went along through Farrington Street, these famous book shops they had - book stalls they were, they had them all over the place - and they had this splendid book of programmes that someone had collected from the 1920s. And I thought that was marvellous and I would love to have it. Unfortunately I didn't have enough money with me so I went back the next day with my money and of course the book had gone! So instead I decided to take my own collection of programmes, so I started from when I was about 14, which was just about 1945 just towards the end of the war, '44/'45.

One of the earliest things I did see in the West End was the Shakespearean actor Donald Wolfit. Splendid man, splendid ego! He had his own company and he did a great deal of pioneering work for Shakespeare not only in the West End, but around the county and abroad. He also took these... during the wartime years when the theatres were closed during the evenings, he gave lunchtime versions of Shakespeare, gave potted versions of plays. He had a wife called Rosalind Iden and she was the daughter of Ben Iden Paine or B. Iden Paine, who was at one time the Managing Director and Producer at the Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. That's how they met and that's where, of course, he started his career as well.

He played all the leads, rather like a Richard Burbage of the day; he played all the Shakespearean leads, such as particularly King Lear, now that was his most famous part. In my humble opinion, I've seen several King Lears, but he tops the lot still. I've seen them on television, I've seen them in film and I will say I preferred his Lear to either Olivier - who I thought played him as a fumbling old man - or Gielgud, who was in a very misconceived production and wasn't terribly moving at all, it wasn't his part - he didn't have the physique for the part. Donald Wolfit was quite extraordinary, he looked

like Edward I, old 'Longshanks' when he was battling with the Scots. He strolled on the stage with crown and robe with enormous broadsword which he dug into the stage and then he would proceed. He was a man in the prime of life, elderly but prime of life but he made all the wrong mistakes with his daughters. And gradually, as the play progresses so he deteriorates until he finished up as this tragic slightly mad old man. It was the most extraordinary performance. He used to give the play almost full length; it was the only play that he didn't play at matinées as well as the evenings. Quite honestly he would play Hamlet at the afternoon and Shylock in the evening just like that, quite easily; a different play very night, quite extraordinary. He had an enormous repertoire.

He used to play at a theatre called the Winter Gardens in Drury Lane; it was the most beautiful old theatre. It was all decorated in orange and gold; orange seating, gold ornaments and lighting and a lovely gold curtain. Unfortunately it was demolished when so many theatres did go during the 1950s and 60s, we lost one or two theatres that way, it was tragic. It was before the government decided to put preservation orders on the theatres which they have now. It was replaced in the end by an office block and that awful New London Theatre. Which was really rather a disaster, Denys Lasdun designed it; he should have known better, he also did the National Theatre. But for my money... it wasn't a very good one. So that was Donald Wolfitt. Another...

ND: So you were going to the theatre from as young as 14 then?

NH: Oh yes, younger than that. I started going to the theatre when I was 6, believe it or not.

ND: [Laughs] You were 6! Do you remember?

NH: Oh I do, yes I do, yes I do! The first thing I remember seeing was a pantomime called Mother Goose and that was at the old Brixton Theatre in South London and that unfortunately was bombed during the war and never rebuilt. That was one of the old theatres there.

My family was also very keen on the theatre, they used to take me. My mother was more keen on the straight theatre and musicals. My father was more keen on variety and so the whole family used to go every week to the Empress Theatre in Brixton, this was a very famous old music hall, that alas has now been pulled down. It was for many years taken over to be a bingo hall, I think bingo went down so did the poor old Empress Brixton!

It had one of the biggest stages outside the West End of London, so they could really mount very, very big shows and I do remember seeing those, a lot of those shows there. As I say we also lived in Streatham, which is just up the road from Brixton and there was another famous theatre called the Streatham Hill Theatre. The Streatham Hill Theatre was opened in the 1930s by Evelyn Laye, she was a very famous actress of her day, she laid the foundation stone. Again, a very large theatre, very beautiful and it used to take all the shows, either before they went into the West End or when they went out on tour. In those days shows always toured, they always went on tour - they could afford to do it in those days [Laughs] even the big musicals. In fact some shows of course were specifically designed for touring.

One of the shows I do remember seeing there – now it must have been when I was 7 actually, it was 1937 - it was Franz Lehár's Paganini with Richard Tauber and Evelyn Laye. Richard Tauber was a very famous tenor of his day, he was Jewish - part-Jewish – and so when the Nazis came to power in Vienna, he could no longer go back, so he made his career over here. I'm not sure if he became naturalised, I don't think so, but he certainly stayed here and he sang practically everything, he was a composer, conductor. During the war, when he was no longer singing opera very much, he used to conduct, and he conducted and produced Die Fledermaus, which is one of the famous operettas that he was famous for as well. He also the first German Calaf in Turandot, that was back in 1927/28 I think, but of course I didn't see that!

Anyway I do remember Paganini very well, a most beautiful production. I remember Evelyn Laye; she played a princess who falls in love with the violinist, Paganini. I was terribly impressed as a 7 year old as she came in with a white uniform and a splendid white horse, I thought that was terrific. Then I was very disappointed 'cause I looked down into the orchestra pit and when Paganini was supposed to play the violin as he was supposed to I saw somebody doing it for him and I felt very down about by that, I really did!

[Laughs] I think what used to happen with my mother, when she took me to the theatre - I used to go to matinées of course, as I was too young to go out much in the evenings - but I regularly had to 'have a bilious attack' and take a note to school saying I couldn't appear that day and of course in the afternoon we went to the theatre! All strictly illegal but there we are!

Years later - another theatre that's now gone – I used to go to... we lived in Hammersmith or nearby Hammersmith, and there was a very famous theatre called the King's Theatre. In fact in Hammersmith at the time there were two theatres, there was the King's and there was the Lyric. The Lyric... there is still a Lyric Hammersmith now, not the same one, it was rebuilt. The King's unfortunately, like so many others, is now an office block. Again, rather like Streatham Hill Theatre they used to have the touring companies and again it was a big theatre so they could take the big things. I think the very first time I ever went there - again as a little boy - and it was Jack and the Beanstalk with a famous dame - pantomime-dame - called Barry Lupino.

Barry Lupino came from a whole family, there was Stanley Lupino who was quite a famous musical comedy star, there was Lupino Lane who later became very famous for one musical called Me and My Girl, but he did have other plays. The Lupino family came over to London in the... I think it was the eighteenth century, they were tumblers, acrobats and they still carried on these acrobatics even the younger generations. Lupino Lane had a son called Laurie Lupino Lane who didn't quite make the big time but he always appeared in his father's shows and sometimes took his father's roles as well. As I say, they were a family and most of their wives they married were on the stage as well, so they were teams. Stan Lupino did a lot of shows with music by Vivien Ellis and Billy Mayerl. I do remember one called Over She Goes, which I did see at Streatham Hill Theatre and... I'm digressing again now.

I'll go back to the King's Theatre – one more thing, of course, about the Lupino, they had a very famous daughter, Stanley had a very famous daughter called Ida Lupino who became a very well known Hollywood film star, she appeared with Warner Brothers and she later became a film director and a lot of her films are still around.

ND: I think I've heard of her.

NH: Yes indeed, yes. She was pretty well known and appeared with Humphrey Bogart and all the stars about that time you know.

Anyway, going back to the King's again, that was at one time under the direction of another quite famous actor - very famous in fact - Jack Buchanan. He was a music hall comedy star and he was also a manager, in other words he presented his own shows and so on. But he was also director of the King's Theatre Hammersmith at this time and he used to have a lot of the famous companies; as I said Donald Wolfitt used to appear there, they had the Sadler's Wells Opera, the Royal Ballet or the Sadler's Wells Ballet it was in those days, they had D'Oyly Carte Opera. That was in the days when it was still run by Bridget D'Oyly Carte, and was steeped in tradition and I was lucky enough to see some of the famous 1930s stars of the Gilbert and Sullivan... There was a splendid lady who played all of the contralto parts called Ella Halman, she carried the tradition of being a rather large lady and she played things like Queen of the Fairies in Iolanthe and Duchess of Plaza-Toro in The Gondoliers, all those sort of roles, the big roles. Then there was a man called Grahame Clifford who took on all the famous comedian roles like KoKo in The Mikado and he was in The Yeomen of the Guard, he was Jack Point, and the Duke of Plaza-Toro again in The Gondoliers. And then some of the old men who really came from the early thirties and very late twenties, people like Darrell Fancourt who was a marvellous Mikado. They did record as well, they are on record, some of those works were recorded with those casts, that was the early days of L.P., that would have been about the 1950s they were still singing then and I would have heard them in the 1940s! What did I see here...

[NH Consults Theatre Programme]

Here we are, that's what they would do. There was The Yeomen of the Guard; and another man called Leslie Rands who took all the baritone roles, Ella Halman who was Dame Carruthers in that one.

And there was Patience. Patience was rather strange. Gilbert and Sullivan always used to think that when D'Oyly Carte came to play they would invariably fill the house, and invariably they did. But they used to take a season every year at the old Sadler's Wells Theatre which used to run from Christmas right the way through 'til about March, and they used to play these things. Well then, eventually the Sadler's Wells Opera went into Gilbert and Sullivan, it was when the copyright came out - first of all it was Sullivan's copyright that went out and then later on W.S. Gilbert's came out so they had no copyright to pay. They did a splendid production of The Mikado, they followed it with Iolanthe and then they got a bit ambitious and did Patience. They took a dive-bomb with that one! [Laughs] Because noone really wanted to go to Patience.

And it was a curious thing but there were more popular Gilbert and Sullivans than others and when they had these long seasons the D'Oyly Carte company, you could see from their three month programme that for every four or five Mikados, they would do one or two Patience and The Sorcerer they did hardly at all, which was a great pity as it was Gilbert and Sullivan's first big full length opera - they didn't perform it for many years, and when they did nobody went. I used to go into the Sadler's Wells and later on when they appeared in the West End, when they put on The Sorcerer, the house was half-empty.

ND: Oh no!

NH: They would pack the place for *The Gondoliers*, *The Mikado*, *The Yeomen of the Guard* but no, *The Sorcerer*, they never did. Very curious, very curious.

[NH consults programme]

Oh and here some theatre prices for you! At the Kings Theatre Hammersmith, you could have the unreserved gallery for two and sixpence and you could have the pit stalls - bit better - for three shillings and if you wanted to pay a top price you could sit in the front stalls for reserved for eight shillings and sixpence or the middle stalls for five shillings – quite extraordinary!

And here we have a sign, 'In the event of an air raid a red light will flash alternating at the right hand side of the stage and a white light will denote all clear.'

ND: It's changed a lot, the theatre experience.

NH: Oh tremendously. Someone said to me the other day 'It's a great great pity that it used to be an art but now it's an industry' and it suffers accordingly I think. It suffers greatly because of that.

Now here's another company that did a great deal of work towards the beginning and towards the end of the war. It was called T.R.T, the Travelling Repertory Theatre. It was run by a man called Basil C. Langton. His father was also a Basil Langton, so he was very much in the theatre tradition. And he would put on classic plays in four tours but with very well seasoned Shakespearean artists. He mounted a production of Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* and he starred Ann Casson. Now, Ann Casson was the daughter of Lewis Casson and Dame Sybil Thorndike and Dame Sybil Thorndike was the original *Saint Joan*. So of course it carried on the tradition and she was a very splendid artist. In this particular production - this was about 1945 - the cast included Lewis Casson, Basil C. Langton himself, one or two people there that might... Douglas Campbell who was the husband of Ann Casson. They both eventually went to America and they played – no I beg your pardon, they went to Canada and they founded a sort of Stratford upon Avon in Canada between them. They've gone of course.

If you look down here at some of the small parts, it's very interesting to look down on these things, because you see in the cast there was Miriam Carling, she was one of the ladies of the Court, non-speaking in this production, now she went on to be quite a famous television star. There was a programme used to be called... dear me I can't remember, Peter Jones was in it and Esme Cannon, it's on a DVD, it was all about people who made clothes and she was a rather bolshie shop steward. Whenever there was sort of an awkward situation in the store she would call 'everybody out' [raises voice] "Everybody Out" and it became quite a catch phrase of the day.

ND: Was it quite star-centred back then? Like the theatre stars were much more important as actors?

NH: Oh much more important, yes yes. They really did all kind of things and, you know, they went from one production to another. And then of course...and fortunately we can now see them on DVD, you know, so many wartime films and shows starred all these people, as you will see: Olivier, Vivien Leigh, Alec Guinness, Donald Wolfitt appeared in them, Flora Robson and they were all great stars in their own right. Edith Evans...

Now here's a production, it was also in 1945. These plays used to run at the King's Theatre for a week, the opera used to be two or three weeks. Here's one called *The Last of Mrs. Cheyney*. This is a play, a very elegant play of the 1920s it was revived by a man called Firth Shepherd who did a lot of the American plays in the West End. He had a phrase, 'See a Shepherd Show' and he brought to the West End shows like *The Man who came to Dinner*, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *My Sister Eileen*. Then he mounted *The Last of Mrs. Cheyney* with Jack Buchanan, it starred Jack Buchanan so he was playing at his own theatre at this time. It had a very good run at the Adelphi Theatre just before this; this would have been the tour. It had, again, a splendid cast, Coral Brown, who became quite a famous in her own right and she made a very interesting documentary about her life, it was quite a salty life actually. She was Australian and she came over and I think, yes I'm sure she was... the 'very good friend', shall we say, of Shepherd himself so she appeared in many of his productions. As I say, Jack Buchanan played in it, Athene Seyler again who was a very famous comedienne, she did a lot of plays with Sybil Thorndike. She wrote a book called *The Craft of Comedy*, and she was a very accomplished comedienne. Margaret Scudamore was in this. Now that was interesting, she happened to be the mother of Michael Redgrave. So the Redgrave family went on before Redgrave, there was a dynasty before them.

ND: It does seem to all flow into families doesn't it?

NH: Yes indeed, [consults programme] who have we got here?

ND: These have been signed?

NH: Oh yes, I've got Jack Buchanan's signature. And Austin Trevor, he did a lot of film work Austin Trevor, Athene Seyler herself, Coral Brown...

ND: Did you get star-struck, or was it...

NH: Oh yeah. I used to go around with this book actually [Laughs]. It weighed half a ton and I'd get them to sign it on the book. They would all sort of thumb through and see who else had signed, see what else I'd seen. I will say I very rarely got refused, but I can tell you a funny story at the Lyric Hammersmith. Now I heard this on the radio, there was a man talking there, and he was talking about theatres and people he'd known in the theatre. He'd known Alastair Sim, now you've probably heard of Alastair Sim, who did a whole series of things called the *St. Trinians* and did a lot of the *Ealing Studio* comedies years ago, but also the *St. Trinians'* films, he played the head mistress. And also he played in a lot of films... there used to be a team on the stage called the *Crazy Gang* and when they filmed as they did in Britain again in the 1930s of course Alistair was always in their support, they seemed to like him as their comedian support. But

anyway I digress. This man was talking about Alastair Sim and he said 'he of course refused to sign autographs' he said 'but I managed to get it for my son, and I managed to get him to sign a programme' he said 'my son is the only person who has Alistair Sim's autograph'. And I said to myself 'Oh no he's not!' I got it, yes! It was very curious, it was a play called Death of a Rat and there were only four characters and [Laughs] I got... It was Pamela Brown and Robert Harris and I've forgotten the other and Alastair Sim. Anyway they Pamela Brown and Robert Harris had already signed and then out came Alastair Sim and I asked him boldly - I didn't know he didn't sign autographs - I boldly went up and asked him and he gave me a very quizzical look, he didn't say anything, he just signed it. And gave me a slight smile and off he went. But he signed it so there we are, I've got Alastair Sim! [Laughs]

Now where do we go...? Are you interested in the ballet side of the theatre?

ND: Well yes we can talk about that, so you went to many different types of theatre?

NH: Oh yes indeed. Again I go to the King's Theatre because as I say they all used to go there. There was another company just before and during the war called International Ballet and it was run by a woman Mona Inglesby who was herself a dancer but her thing, the Ballet Romberg it was in those day, although it was classical, it was much smaller company and the Sadler's Wells Ballet didn't have the resources coming up from Sadler's Wells Theatre. So hers was the only company that could really mount, what we call the big ballets: The Nutcracker, The Sylphydes, Swan Lake, Cinderella and those sort of ballets, the very big ones. Mona Inglesby was the prima ballerina and she also did some choreography as well, but she also reproduced some of the chorography by some of the great Russian choreographers like Fokine and Diaghilev and so on. She had quite a... a very big company, it was about 30 or 40 of them in it, so of course she had West End seasons as well, very often at Her Majesty's Theatre where The Phantom of the Opera now is and the London Coliseum. Because again, they were big stages that could take her productions, then of course she took them out to the provinces as well.

ND: Oh did she?

NH: Another interesting thing was she teamed up with a man called Leslie French, Leslie French was a Shakespearean actor and they introduced, rather interestingly, a combined speech and ballet. She did a ballet on Twelfth Night using music by Grieg. Leslie French played Feste and he actually sang some of the Shakespeare songs in the play.

ND: Did you see that?

NH: Yes indeed.

ND: How was that, did it work?

NH: Oh it worked very well. It was very popular actually, yes. And there was another one which they called Everyman that had music by Richard Strauss and it had décor by

Rex Whistler who again was a famous artist of his day. I'll talk about him again in a moment. Everyman, again it was a combination of speech and dialogue and this time Leslie French played, Everyman is of course the old morality play; a miracle play going back to the medieval times, They actually... Leslie French played Everyman and he spoke the dialogue so it was a kind of combinational of plays and ballets.

ND: And it was good to watch?

NG: Oh yes. Now Rex Whistler, now I'm going to go on now... When the Old Vic Company reopened just after the war at the New Theatre, Laurence Olivier, Ralph Richardson, Tyrone Guthrie, Margaret Laughton, Sybil Thorndike all contributed, either producing or playing. The idea was for Richardson and Olivier... they took leading roles between them and they complemented each other, one played a lead the other a supporting role and vice-versa.

Also, to counteract this, John Gielgud decided to open his own season and he did it at the Haymarket Theatre so they ran... I won't say in competition, but they certainly ran in tandem. He also filled his cast with stars, everyone, people he had played with before. Now, at the end of the war he opened at the Phoenix Theatre with a beautiful production of William Congreve's *Love for Love* and he brought it over to the Haymarket Theatre. I think it was the second play they opened with. I think they started with Somerset Maugham's *The Circle*. Then they brought *Love for Love* in because it was existing and it had the most wonderful cast in it, Gielgud himself, it was a restoration comedy by Congreve. Gielgud himself, there was first of all Peggy Ashcroft and then eventually Rosalie Crutchley took it over. There was Leslie Banks, there was Marian Spencer, Miles Malleon splendid man with no chin who always played eccentric parts. Leon Quartermaine who was a very famous Shakespearean actor, who was claimed to have one of the most beautiful speaking voices on stage. There was Angela Baddeley who played Miss Prue, she became legendary as Mrs Bridges when she became older in *Upstairs, Downstairs*. But of course, again a very famous West End actress. She had a sister called Hermione as well, Hermione was a comedienne, she made some revues.

This was - going back to *Love for Love* - it was the most beautifully mounted production, as it had these gorgeous sets by Rex Whistler. I do recall the stage-cloth was in a checkerboard and these characters, these women in their Charles II period dresses, and they glided, they moved like chess figures across the stage. It was quite gorgeous, but it was played with tremendous style. Restoration Comedy is known to be rather bawdy. In fact I used to find that Wycherley was rather rude and Vanbrugh was distinctly dirty. But Congreve could be crude and witty at the same time and very stylish about it. He also wrote libretti for Handel, for a couple of the Handel operas in fact. He was one of the better of the writers. Gielgud played it absolutely splendidly, well of course all the cast did. The lines were beautifully pointed. But another interesting thing about that production was they had these lovely sets and a young student, I'm not sure he was Oxford or Cambridge, but he was very interested in film at the time but he wanted to film Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* which took part in the eighteenth century. He got permission to use for his interiors the sets from *Love for Love*; he filmed it on the stage there. That young man was called Peter Brook. Now wherever that film is still in existence I don't know but there we are, he became quite a famous producer himself.

The other productions they did, Gielgud did his last Hamlets but I must confess I was rather disappointed. I'd seen another, I thought much better Hamlet – John Gielgud's! But I never saw him in his hey-day as I say. It was his last Hamlet and I thought he was a bit too old, a bit too elocutive somehow, I found he was rather remote but again, he spoke beautifully. The Duchess of Malfi, which was again another Jacobean tragedy, the, as I say Somerset Maugham's *The Circle* which was a high comedy of the period, and *Midsummer Night's Dream*, he played Oberon and Peggy Ashcroft played Titania. Peggy Ashcroft was very often his leading lady.

ND: So did you see all of the season?

NH: I didn't see it all, no. I saw the Hamlet and the Love for Love. I missed out for some reason on *The Circle*, that had - apart from Gielgud - had Yvonne Arnaud and Leslie Banks. Leslie Banks, funnily I was watching him only yesterday evening in a play on DVD, he made a lot of excellent performances of the day and he played Tattle, who was a fop in *Love for Love*. But in *Life With Father*, which Firth Shepherd brought over, he played Father splendidly. *Life With Father* was a delightful play about - and was later filmed with William Powell, Irene Dunn and Elizabeth Taylor - and it was about Father who rules the roost but Mother who makes all the decisions. He could never understand how Mother always got round him. It started off as a series of short stories by the daughter of the house, she wrote these stories about her father and mother and eventually it became a play and finally it was filmed.

ND: Do you think it transfers well to the film, the plays?

NH: Yes it did. They virtually filmed it scene for scene. They rarely did go outside of the house. All the family were red-haired so everyone had to dye their hair red [Laughs] apart from Elizabeth Taylor, she was married into the family. It was the most delightful play.

Now as I said that was the Gielgud season, but concurrently the production from the New Theatre in repertory again of the, what they called the new Old Vic Company, it was the theatre company they got them together after the war. By that time the theatre... the Old Vic had been bombed so they couldn't play there, so they went to the New Theatre which was then called... and eventually became the Albery Theatre and is now the Noel Coward Theatre so things do change. But it's the same building.

Now, they opened with *Richard III*, and now that was one of Laurence Olivier's most famous roles. He filmed it later on but I never thought his film *Richard* was as good as his stage *Richard*. He played it like a great spider. He brought out the grim humour – because it really is a terrible old melodrama - he brought out the grim humour, but he also had this extraordinary evil quality that he got over and which spread over the cast. He had a hunchback and a very long nose that he put on – he always had a nose for every part. He always put a different nose on, I don't think he ever used his own! It really was again a splendid production; it had Sybil Thorndike in it and Ralph Richardson.

Now, Ralph Richardson was an actor who was either very good or sometimes very bad! And in the stage production of *Richard III* he played Richmond - the Duke of Richmond - and he really wasn't very good. He didn't really match up to his... he played Buckingham in the film, which was much more his part, but he didn't get it in the stage

production, he had to play a supporting role and Nicholas Hannen eventually played the Duke of Buckingham. They put in more on the stage than they did in the film. There was the famous cursing of Richard by the three queens, just before the battle of Bosworth, there's the great 'despair and die' scene. They all came in... There was the wife who dies, Lady Anne, there was Elizabeth Woodville the mother of the two princes whom he's supposed to have killed and Queen Margaret the wife of Henry VI who he was supposed to have killed. They all come on and curse him like crazy, but of course that didn't make it into the film.

Also that season they did *Arms and the Man* by Bernard Shaw, Olivier played Sergius Saranoff, Ralph Richardson was Bluntschli and again they were a pair of splendid comedians together.

ND: So they worked well together?

NH: They did indeed yes, yes. *Arms and the Man* has a rather interesting history, because for one thinks that *My Fair Lady* was the first musical based on a Bernard Shaw play but of course it wasn't, it was *Arms and the Man*. Oscar Strauss asked Bernard's permission to make a musical or operetta of *Arms and the Man* and Shaw agreed so long as he didn't have his name on the bill. He didn't want his name associated with it so they changed the title to *The Chocolate Soldier* and it became a very successful operetta and had some numbers that are still performed quite a lot today.

And also in those seasons there was some splendid acting. Richardson did *Peer Gynt*, which unfortunately I didn't see, which I rather wish I had now, but I didn't see that. Another tour de force from Olivier was he played in one evening he played *Oedipus Rex* in the first half which is a Greek tragedy and he played in Sheridan's *The Critic* and he played *Mr Puff* the playwright. He had a Greek nose in *Oedipus Rex* and a splendid turned up nose for *Mr Puff*! I mean they couldn't have been more contrasting. Both productions are memorable, but they couldn't have been more of a contrast between the two [Laughs]. And I do remember that *The Critic*, it's a comedy about the amusing productions of the day and the way they were put on and so on. He lampooned playwrights – though he was one himself - and he lampooned actors and everything. There was a splendid thing when they start to rehearse the play and virtually everything goes wrong, and it's the kind of dress rehearsal. And I do remember the grand finale was *Mr Puff* coming on try to direct and get things right, parts of the scenery fall down and he steps over a sea piece on the ground which promptly takes him up into the wings, up into the flies. Olivier just disappeared up and came down on the curtain. He was a good acrobat as well in those days! Quite extraordinary! But as I say, what a difference between the Greek tragedy of the first half of the evening.

As I say, Richardson could be very good and very bad but one of those brilliant productions they did, I think it was the second season of the Vic. Was there was a production of *Cyrano de Bergerac* which was a great rambling French film, you may have seen that it was filmed only a few years ago with Gerard Depardieu? It is a poetic play but it is a great rambling thing, but it has this marvellous part for a classical actor of *Cyrano*. Again that was a big nose; notice the nose played a big part in those days! Richardson took this role, and I think it must have been one of the best things he ever did. It had a production by Tyrone Guthrie, very fine producer Tyrone Guthrie, he played a lot at the Old Vic - productions at the Old Vic Theatre in those days and he was producer for the Young Vic Company. I do recall that the curtain went up – it's in a play house in Paris - they had virtually all the members of the company on the stage at the

same time, there was about 20 or 30 people and the whole stage swirled with people, it was quite extraordinary. Cyrano, one of the high spots of the first act of that play, picks a quarrel. He's a very quarrelsome man, and he picks a duel with a man and he composes a sonnet while actually fencing which is quite something for an actor to have to do, speaking and fence at the same time which Richardson did and brought off quite remarkably. The last act, he makes a lot of enemies this Cyrano, and he is attacked and he's dying. He's taken to the woman he really loves, who he's never dared speak of his love to her. He made love to her with somebody else playing his part while he made love to her, he spoke his lines to her and she always thought it was the other young man and she falls in love with him. In the end they come together and she realises who it is. She, after the young man is killed in the war, she goes into a convent and he's (Cyrano) taken there to die and they remember each other and recall each other and they realise that what he was and who he is. She realises that she fell in love with the wrong man and it was all down under a great tree with the most beautiful golden light and a great tree and the leaves fell around them. It was the most beautiful stage picture.

Talking of stage pictures, there was another famous production by Gielgud of a play called *The Lady's Not for Burning* by Christopher Fry. Again, a poetic play and he played in it with Pamela Brown, again a super cast was in that. A lovely setting by Oliver Messel who did a lot of stage designs about that time, including the first *Sleeping Beauty* when it was mounted at the Royal Opera House when the Royal Ballet first went there - *Saddlers Wells Ballet* first went there - it was the opening production. He was known for his magnificent stage sets. This one took place in medieval times, I do recall during the course of the play there's a thunderstorm and we had the most beautiful lighting, the stage turned slightly grey as you would get in a thunderstorm. It was absolutely perfect lighting, a most beautiful thing to look at. Nice play as well, Christopher Fry. Pity it's not been revived, so many things are being revived now but nobody's had a go at that. Again it had one of his famous all-star casts.

ND: Did you have a favourite out of Richardson, Olivier and Gielgud?

NH: Not really a favourite. I would add Wolfitt to that of course. Not really a favourite because they were all, I thought, marvellous in their own ways. Certainly Gielgud was the most poetic of actors; he had this beautiful speaking voice, which obviously he got from his relatives I suppose. He was a Terry, one of the famous Terrys. I'll show you some of the Terrys in the other room in a minute. He was what I would call a poetic actor. Olivier was more virile of the two and strikingly good looks of course, but he chopped up the verse sometimes. Sometimes this was effective, sometimes this wasn't very effective but he was far better in the more virile parts. Really Gielgud wasn't very adept... as I say, Gielgud was a Romeo, and he was a Hamlet... in his hey-day he was a Hamlet I think. Olivier gave a very well-considered film version as Hamlet, but again he was a little bit too old.

The very best Hamlet I ever saw was - I saw Redgrave and several others - but the best one in my opinion was at the old Arts Theatre, the Arts Theatre Club in the West Rnd. It was a man called Alec Clunes, who ran the theatre. He was a most, I thought well-considered, poetic, manly and intelligent Hamlet. He didn't over-play it: sometimes they scream and shout, and sometimes they over-do the madness bit. But he got everything right somehow, everything perfectly right. He has a famous son now, probably even more famous than his father, he's called Martin Clunes. Alec Clunes was a I think very under-rated actor. He never quite seemed to get into the Old Vic or the Gielgud companies which was a great pity, but he ran his own theatre, the Arts Theatre.

ND: I'm just going to stop us for a second...

[Interview stopped to plug recorder into power outlet]

NH: [audio lost] ... actors under the direction of Alex Clunes. This was a play by Labiche called *An Italian Straw Hat*, very very delightful play and it was later turned into an operetta by Nino Rota and it is still quite often performed. It was one of these mad mad French plays Labiche wrote a lot of these comedies. There was another one called *Keep an Eye on Emily* which Vivien Leigh played in at one time and Noel Coward translated.

Here you can see some - on this programme, price sixpence [Laughs] I've got here some price threepence! But very often it's quite interesting to look down to see some of the people that became famous later on. There's Peter Jones, now he played the lead in this. Now he went in to, as I say, this comedy... oh dear, I wish I could remember... with Miriam Carlin. He does radio work as well. When you've gone it will come to me of course, but there we are.

And now going down you see *The Bridesmaid's Guest* [Gesler?] there, there was a man called Basil Hoskins, he became quite a well known Shakespearean actor, played a lot at the Mermaid Theatre, he was also a vocalist. But also Roger Moore! He became of course James Bond. He was also a guest.

ND: What was he like on stage?

NH: Well I don't know - he was only walking on! [Laughs] He sort of came and went. [Laughs] It's not until afterwards you think 'Oh my goodness, fancy him being in that'. Same as in *South Pacific* of course, Sean Connery, he was in that.

Now it's interesting to see some of these things. Always invariably the costumes were made by Bermans, there was a famous costumiers in London and furniture almost invariably came from the Old Times Furnishing Company - here they are - properties by Robinson Brothers. They had like warehouses and they would hire out these pieces you see. They weren't specifically made like they are now. And then 'wigs by Gustav', Gustav... they often made the wigs.

ND: Were all the theatres very, like had a specific style, that you could pin-point?

NH: Not... it was going off then. The Haymarket specialised in what I would call the 'upper-crust plays', the classics and it was - ohhh I suppose it still is actually - the flagship theatre in the West End. Apart from the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, it's the main straight theatre. Not quite as much now as it used to be, but it was the place where Gielgud would play, Noel Coward would play... all top people and productions you know. And it was run by H.M. Tennent.

Now here's the *Love for Love* by William Congreve, John Gielgud's production. Sets by Rex Whistler and costumes by Jeanetta Cochrane. Now, I think she had something to do with St. Martin's School of Art, I think she may have been a teacher there as well, or

what became there. But she had a theatre named after her and I don't know if it's still open; the Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre. It's in Kingsway, just at the end of Kingsway.

Yes, Tennent plays 'in association with C.E.M.A', that was the name of Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, which would eventually become the Arts Council. Famous for killing off more companies than anything. They really it did, it was outrageous, they killed so many... they simply withdrew grants from people. They demolished the Ballet Romberg, I know, several other Shakespearean companies went. But that's the Arts Council for you.

And here we have the cast, John Gielgud, Max Adrian who later became a famous revue comedienne – he was an Irishman - and later a character actor, Leon Quartermaine, Leslie Banks, Yvonne Arnaud. She was a delightful French actress, who [was] often over here. Her main forte was comedy, again very comedienne lots of plays written for her, she played a lady called Mrs Frail, who really was frail in her morals as well! Again played it with delightful style. She was also a very very good pianist and she used to accompany a lady called Sophie Wyss, a Swiss singer. It was delightful to hear them talking. They had a very French, fractured French-English accents, and to hear them talking together on the radio was an absolute scream! Because you were never quite sure how much was real and how much was put on; I think they brought out the old French charm. [Laughs] The nurse to Mrs Prue in that was played by a lady called Anne Esmond, but the original in that production was played by a novelist named Naomi Jacobs. I don't know if she ever appeared in any other stage productions but she certainly appeared in that.

NH: Another actor who did a lot of work, Cecil Truncer a famous character actress – actor, I should say! The music to this was written by - to accompany it - was written by Leslie Bridgewater. He also wrote music for a lot of classic plays and I believe he was a resident composer at the Theatre Royal in Stratford-upon-Avon and he wrote, I think, for about 30 Shakespearean productions. He wrote the songs and the instrumental music.

Here's the Hamlet, Abraham Sofaer, again he was a Jewish actor who did a lot of work in the West End and in films as well. Now who else have we got in here that I can tell you about? We've mentioned Marion Spencer... Peggy Ashcroft was the Ophelia in that production.

ND: What was she like to watch, Peggy Ashcroft?

NH: Oh lovely, again a lovely classical actress. You probably only remember her in her older days but I suppose by that time she was probably 30 but she was still a very possible Ophelia, she could still play those parts. Often played with Gielgud in the classical roles.

Here was one of the famous Olivier productions with Vivien Leigh. Who again I thought she was a very patchy actress. She had one famous part I think, or two famous parts, one was of course Lady Chatterley - not Lady Chatterley, Lady Teazle! - and of course Scarlett O'Hara on the screen. And somehow she always seemed to bring a Scarlett O'Hara into her performances. She was much better in that I thought brittle, what I call 'catty types' of parts. When she went to play things like Antigone, she was really rather lost. It wasn't very good. Olivier made a splendid actor - actress - out of her, I think. He brought the best out of her and she was at her best in his stage productions, which she appeared in a lot. They did a play by Thornton Wilder called The Skin of our Teeth,

which he called a history of the world in comic strip. And it really was a comic strip - most extraordinary play, absolutely crazy. It started off... there were three periods, it started off in the ice age and it carried on to the great flood and it finished off in the reconstruction. The ice age and the deluge were comedies, but the reconstruction was very serious, it takes place in the future after the atomic war and so on. The extraordinary thing about this play was they would break off in the middle of the play and come and talk to the audience and explain something about what was happening in the play or what they weren't going to see, really quite extraordinary.

ND: Did it work?

NH: Oh yes, it was great. It was terribly... very, very funny. Thornton Wilder was a splendid American playwright actually, it was played on Broadway by Tallulah Bankhead and Vivien Leigh took over. She played Sabina who was the... sort of the femme fatale of history. She played all the femme fatales... There was a Mr Antrobus, who was like Mr Everyman and she was always leading him astray right the way through to the end. But oh dear, this was a time when Vivien Leigh was going through her troubles and a friend of mine, he was... at the time of this play he was apprenticed to a photographer and they went along to photograph this production and oh dear, Vivien Leigh was so very difficult. In the finish she sort of threw things at the photographer, and she really...

ND: I heard she had a temper.

NH: Oh yes. They had to sort of go through all this with her. And of course you know she died rather tragically in the end.

[NH consults programmes]

Ah Peter Pan... I did see Peter Pan several times. Frances Dayou [?] was a very musical comedy actress, she played Peter Pan. Then we had Donald Wolfit. Lets see what I can find... I wanted to talk to you... Just bear with me...

ND: That's no problem.

NH: Ah yes, my first visit to Stratford-upon-Avon. In 1944/45 there wasn't a Royal Shakespeare Company as such, and for those two seasons, '44 and '45, Robert Atkins, who was himself a famous Shakespearean actor and producer, he worked a lot at the Old Vic and I think he worked back in the days of an actor-manager called Ben Greet and a lot of his company came from there. Ben Greet I think was going in the twenties and thirties but during the thirties and later in the forties, as I say Robert Atkins. He more or less founded the Open Air Theatre in Regents Park. He played there for years and years and years and years with a company, they had lots and lots of people working for him.

But they did in those days; they played eight plays in a season, one of which was a non-Shakespeare. And you had a leading man and a leading lady, you have juvenile leads

both male and female and they played all the roles. There was a man here and now this will actually amaze you, for absolute range. The first time I went there he played Mark Antony in Antony and Cleopatra. The next night he played Henry VIII, the next night he was Benedick in Much Ado About Nothing, the following night I think he had night off; yes they gave him a night, he didn't play in Twelfth Night. He played in She Stoops to Conquer, which was the non-Shakespeare play, and he was Charles Marlow in that. He then played Iago in Othello and – now, Merry Wives, what did he play in Merry Wives? – oh, Master Ford! All in the space of a week!

ND: That's amazing isn't it?

NH: Not only was the range... I mean, the different types of things; I don't think any actor could do it now, quite frankly, I just don't think they'd have the stamina for it, or the memory. To remember all those enormous parts in one... The same happened to many other actors, it was an interesting cast. There was a young man there called Andrew Falls who gave up acting that year and became an M.P. Anthony used to tour himself, he played parts in the West End but eventually he went to America and on Broadway, did a lot of Shakespeare on Broadway and I believe a lot of television out there, but he never quite got the break in the West End that he should have had. Again, you know, he was more or less ignored by the Gielguds and the Old Vic and the Gielguds.

ND: So they were kind of controlling really?

NH: Well they were. He played for Gielgud – oh, he played for Donald Wolfit! He played roles with him but never with the big companies.

Also, playing the leading lady that season was an American actress called Claire Luce, who had really a rather... not what I thought a very refined American accent. You do sometimes catch it in some of the old films, that sort of awful twang they had. She came over originally to play in a play called Of Mice and Men; she played in the West End with John Mills. She stayed over I think she played here during the war and shortly after. Who else do we have on here...? Ah yes, David Peel, he was the juvenile lead and he played things like Claudio in Much Ado About Nothing, Romeo of course, young Marlow, in Twelfth Night he was Orsino I would have imagined, was he? Yes, he was Orsino. Othello, I think he had a night off, yes he had a night off. I think they got one night out, so they played seven plays out of eight. Which was quite something...

ND: What was that like, seeing eight plays with the same cast?

NH: Fascinating, because they were so different. They all come on looking different every night.

ND: You didn't ever think...

NH: You see, Shakespearean playing was quite different then to what it is now, it's more... you see it on television now, it's more conversational. Then it was 'played' more... And of course the Warrington was quite a big theatre, you had to play out. Of course the parts were written big because the Globe Theatre was big in its original day, it was a big theatre. I would imagine - I've not been to the current Globe Theatre - but I would imagine that's rather large but again they have to play out because they're in the open air too so you've got to do that. Unless they're very carefully miked, which of course possibly you would be today, I wouldn't...

There was another young man here playing the smaller parts. He wasn't in all of them I don't think. Yes here he is. One of the minor parts in *She Stoops to Conquer*, Eric Porter, who later became known for *The Forsyte Saga* and a lot of good work at the Old Vic, lot of good work at the Old Vic. Here it is autographs all over the place, you can see, as I say Robert Atkins himself, and Andrew Falls [?]...

ND: I mean, you've got such a big collection haven't you, can you remember when theatre started to kind of decline? It's not as popular in the same way.

NH: [affected] It's changed so much now. I suppose it began its real decline in about the... I should suppose about the 1980s, when most of the... bit what I would call the great actors had retired by then, or were retiring, really rather, you know, elderly, and there weren't the young ones so much coming along.

I mean, you look down the theatre list now and you see about a quarter of them are revivals, plays that are revived, same with the musicals, they're just not producing them now. And of course they can't afford to do productions with a cast of fifteen or twenty, you've got casts with two or three hands. I mean, there are still good actors, there's no question about that. There are still good actors, but not of the sort of quantity there were in these days. I mean, you could go down the back on some of these [gestures to programmes] you'll see what was on in the West End at the time; it was quite astonishing the choice you had.

Very under-estimated actor I think was Robert Morley, became a sort of caricature of himself really in his later days which people mostly remember him now, but he really was a very considerable actor. One of his earlier parts when he was quite a young man, he went to the United States or Hollywood, and he appeared in *Marie Antoinette* with Norma Shearer, and he won an Academy Award for his *Louis XVI*.

But he played the Prince Regent - he had the right shape for it actually, the Prince Regent - in a play called *The First Gentlemen*, which had so many revivals I cannot say. It's a very fine play about the love-hate relationship between the Prince Regent and his daughter Charlotte. Wendy Hiller was Charlotte; again a fine actress - stage and screen actress - did a lot of work on screen. In fact she was the Eliza Doolittle in the first talkie version of *Pygmalion* with Leslie Howard. Here she played the Princess Charlotte... interesting play, because Charlotte died in childbirth otherwise she would have been Queen. The child died as well and so the next daughter came along or the next heir came along, who was the Duke of York who also died before reaching the throne and it was his daughter Queen Victoria. So if Charlotte hadn't have died she would probably have been queen. So there we go.

Ah yes, another American play by Firth Shepherd, *A Hasty Heart*.

[NH consults programmes]

Ah yes here we are. Alistair Sim, and he signed his autograph! Oh Terence Morgan, he was the other actor in it, Terry Morgan.

ND: Can you remember much about the lifting of the censorship, you know, when the new controversial plays came in, like Edward Bond's *Saved*?

NH: Oh yes, yes. There were a lot of those. I mean, plays like *Victoria Regina* were banned at one time from the professional West End theatre because you weren't allowed contemporary or recent crowned heads on the stage. All that's gone now. But of course yes, there was other plays, I mean a play about Oscar Wilde which again Robert Morley played in, that was banned. That could only be played...what they used to have were club theatres, what they called club theatres...

ND: Yes.

NH: ...which didn't have licences, and they could mount these productions, and did quite happily.

That was the *Romeo and Juliet* that Basil Langton did, and again, he had a very good cast. Esmond Knight was in that, and now he was a very good looking, classical and modern actor and he was tragically blinded during the war and he made his comeback, came back to the theatre. He was coached by his wife, I think his wife was Nora Swinburne, and he went back on to the stage and he was virtually blind. I think by the time he got round to playing these roles he was partially sighted, you see, where he was playing parts like *Mercutio*, that you had to... but I can't remember how they got around the sword fighting... but he was virtually blind, I don't know how they got around that I'm sure. But anyway, they did.

The cast... also... playing a page believe it or not, Eric Porter, and the daughter Juliet was played by Renee Asherson, I think it was her first big stage role after she played in *Henry V* with Olivier. Who else have we got in here? Basil Langton himself played *Romeo*, he hadn't really got the shape for it, the physique of it, he was a little bit too old.

[NH consults programme]

*Sleeping Beauty*, that was the first big production after the war that they had, it did have people like Margot Fonteyn playing in it, Robert Helpmann. Robert Helpmann... Now *Sleeping Beauty* was a ballet is a very unbalanced ballet, the hero doesn't appear until the second act after the prologue - interval. So he doesn't come in until virtually the end, so Robert Helpmann who was playing that part, decided [Laughs] to do a Laurence Olivier and he played the wicked fairy Carabossa in the first act and then came back as the prince. I don't think in many... I think Frederick Ashton did that and one other.

Here's *Oedipus* and *The Critic* with Olivier.

ND: Was that at the Old Vic?

NH: This is the... ooh yes, also that's Olivier's autograph on that one as well. Oh that was Oedipus and The Critic that night, and there was Richardson as Falstaff, I unfortunately didn't see that, but again an interesting... Harry Andrews was in that I think that was his first season after he demobbed. I think he joined the Old Vic Company after he was demobbed. Sybil Thorndike was in it.

ND: Big stars.

NH: Yes. Michael Warre... He was a... I don't know quite what happened to him, he played a lot of juvenile leads in the Old Vic company but he eventually just left the stage and became a scene designer. Designed a lot of scenery, but why he gave up acting I'm not quite sure. I see Margaret Leighton was in the company there, Miles Malleon - the chinless wonder! - George Rose, who did a lot of Shakespeare work and eventually he went to America and became quite a big star on the American stage. Sydney Taffler, who was best known I think for her playing crooks and seedy characters in films.

ND: I think we're starting to run out of time a bit...

NH: Are we? Oh yes, I'm sorry I haven't...

ND: No it's fine. Is there anything you want to add? Your most memorial, sorry memorable, production you saw?

NH: Well, I say the most memorable of mine was Love for Love. I think that really stuck in my mind; I came out sort of breathless after that. But as I say, there were things like Richard III and Oedipus and The Critic, Saint Joan which was - with Ann Casson - was very fine. But as I say they were the great days and they were all round about 1940s and 50s. I think one of the last great years of the theatre, the great years when there were still so many of these people who had come up through the 1920s, 30s and 40s that they were still in their prime. Really I'm afraid they could run rings around some of the actors today. I mean, they could just walk on to a stage and they would take the stage. You know, people sort of amble on these days. I think television has kind of ruined this sort of acting they do these days.

One little bit of interesting thing I did discover, that while he was at RADA John Gielgud, his teacher - one of his teachers - was Claude Rains. Now Claude Rains again, quite a... very famous actor over here and he went to Hollywood and he became one of Bette Davies's favourite actors. She always liked to act beside him and apparently he got sparks off her, she got sparks off him for some reason. She said 'he was the only actor who could upstage me on screen' and he did - he stole scenes from her and she loved it! She made several films with him, some of her best films were made with him as well, quite extraordinary. Well there we are.

ND: That's great! Well thanks so much for sharing all of this.