

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Neil Hornick – interview transcript

Interviewer: Katherine Lofthouse

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Actor and Theatre-goer. Jean Anouilh; Arts Lab.; The Blue Lamp; Butlins; The Crazy Gang; critics; Jack Gelber; the Golders Green Hippodrome; interval music; Danny Kaye; The London Palladium; The Mousetrap; musicals; Oklahoma!; programmes; school plays; Shakespeare; theatre-going; well-made plays.

KL: Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed, Neil Hornick, and can I just confirm first of all that you're OK with this being put in the British Library records?

Neil Hornick: I am OK with that, yes.

KL: Great, thank you. OK, first of all would you mind telling me a bit about your experiences and early memories of going to the theatre?

NH: OK, that I can do with the aid of my trusty file that I have before me here now - which you can't see, that is, the listener can't see. Because I got into the habit very early on in life of making lists of things that I saw and read, so I do have a pretty comprehensive list of pretty much everything I have seen in the theatre as well as in cinema actually, more or less since I started. I did a bit of research to fill out memories, although obviously I didn't start making these lists until early adolescence so I know pretty well what the first theatre show I saw was and subsequent productions in those first few years. I was born in 1939 just a few months before the war and consequently I didn't start being taken to the theatre by my parents until I was about six or seven or eight and this was after the war. I don't remember being taken anywhere during the war, and it was to pantomimes at the Golders Green Hippodrome, funnily enough - as we are in Golders Green now, I didn't move very far. We were actually brought up in Hendon, but Golders Green local was a repertory theatre, not 'rep' in the sense that there was a permanent company there that put on different plays, but it was a venue that put on visiting productions as well as pantomimes at Christmas and productions of Gilbert and Sullivan. The Golders Green Hippodrome was a presenting house for productions on their way to the West End and on tour after the West End and so all the finest West End Productions tended to play there for a week or two with all the leading actors of the day...

KL: That must have been a really good experience.

NH: Well, one sort of took it for granted in those days. Today the Golders Green Hippodrome, having been for some years the venue for BBC concerts, has now reverted to being a church of the evangelical movement, which my wife and I also popped into the other day just to see what it was like. It was fascinating but it certainly wasn't the theatre I can recall.

KL: I can imagine!

NH: So the very first show that I saw there and probably the very first show I saw in my life was in 1946 and it was the pantomime Aladdin. It's significant that my very first visit to the theatre coincided with my very first appearance onstage, and so you might argue that this could have been an influence on the fact that I eventually did turn to the theatre – though there were other influences as well. But it so happened that during the course of the pantomime one of the comedians in the show had a spot where children were called up from the audience, and I went up along with others and I remember him going along the line and asking us a few questions and maybe even asking us to sing a little song or so but I can't be certain of that. But anyway, it was certainly exciting and rather dangerous to go up actually onto the stage... It was not my only experience – I'll come back to Golders Green Hippodrome in a moment – of going up onstage, because in 1948 I was taken on a trip to a Butlin's Holiday camp, and this was the heyday of the holiday camp movement. This was - and remains - the most exciting holiday of my life, and all kinds of wonderful things happened during that week there and one of them was that I entered the children's talent contest and sang 'April Showers' and 'I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now' and I won first prize in my age group - though I have to say that I was the only contestant in my age group! But the significant thing is that 'I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now' was a popular song of the day, known I think by a lot of people there and on the stage, which was compeered by one of the 'redcoats', as I think they were called, in those days - perhaps still are at Butlin's. Backstage was sitting the resident chanteuse - also a redcoat - knitting and watching what was going on, without any makeup, and it seemed that she knew this song, she sang it herself, because the compare gestured to her to come on – after I'd finished singing it – he gestured for her to come on and join me...

KL: Oh wow!

NH: ... and she resisted because she didn't have any makeup on, I remember her gesturing, but eventually she was persuaded to come on and she joined me in a chorus, standing behind me with her hands on my shoulders of 'I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now' – I was about eight or nine years old – and when it was finished she did something that I'd never experienced before... she kissed me full on the mouth...

KL: Oh my gosh!

NH: ... and it was like an electric charge, it was an extraordinary feeling, and at the same time everybody was applauding [claps] and I can't help but feeling that these experiences may have partly determined that I would eventually enter the theatre myself. I certainly wanted to find out a bit more about this kissing lark!

KL: Some pretty good experiences to start you off, I think!

NH: Well, I suspect it created a kind of... magic high-water mark that somehow persuaded me that the experience should be repeated. Anyway, coming back to Golders Green Hippodrome, I continued to go to pantomimes there and I know that there are pantomimes still going on today, the tradition has been sustained, but I think maybe what has to be understood is that in those days, just after the war, there wasn't a great deal more than live theatre – well, there was cinema-going, which was at its peak – but the sort of ancillary activities that today we associate with theatre, such as theatre in education, community outreach - without which no local theatre can hope to survive, because grants depend on this kind of thing – that didn't exist. That really began to get going during the alternative and community theatre scene of the sixties. So theatre itself had a kind of cachet, almost you might say an 'elitist' connotation in those days, despite the fact that there were popular theatre productions and I was taken to them. My parents - who were working-class Jewish people who had come out of the East End, were certainly no highbrows but they did like good, serious theatre, always had - took me to the theatre during the next few years, not only pantomimes but other, classier shows as well and I can remember being quite peeved when they went off to see a play called *Death of a Salesman*, which I'd heard about somehow and they thought I was too young to go, and they came back and they were absolutely knocked out by it. It was Paul Muni in the first London production and I can remember them coming home saying what a fantastic thing it was and my feeling resentful that they didn't take me. But of course they were quite right, I probably was too young for this great, great play, as I eventually discovered it to be and, by the way, a few years ago I had the marvellous experience of attending an event at a London theatre in which Arthur Miller in person was interviewed by Richard Eyre...

KL: That must have been amazing!

NH: ...of the National Theatre! And I was just thinking 'if my parents could see me now, here he is, he's still alive!', and then they invited questions from the audience and I wanted to, I put my hand up, because I wanted to not only ask him a question which I thought might amuse him – all the other questions were quite serious – but I wanted to tell him this little story about how my parents, how I resented my parents for not taking me to see *Death of a Salesman* way back in '52, or whenever it was, but my question was not taken from the floor, so that was not to be. However, apart from these shows that my parents took me to see I was also taken to see rather more lowbrow plays, detective plays, and generally speaking I was taken to see these by my unmarried aunt, my maiden aunt Annie, who was my brother's sister, older sister, whose taste didn't run to the serious theatre, but she liked a good thriller! And consequently I was taken to the West End and to the Golders Green Hippodrome to see detective plays and mystery murder plays of the kind that Agatha Christie wrote and I saw the very first production of *The Mousetrap* in 1952, the one with Richard Attenborough and his wife Sheila Sim, both well-known film stars of the time, and I've been amazed to see how that play has survived until the present. Again, if I can just jump ahead a bit, a few years ago a friend of mine from my old college days – he acted in a play I directed in college – fetched up in *The Mousetrap* in the West End, playing one of the roles there and I thought, 'right' - for years I had wanted to go and see the thing again, and see what it's really like, you

know, from an adult perspective – ‘now’s my chance’, asked him for a free ticket, but no, he explained, it was company policy that you don’t give free tickets.

KL: That’s a shame!

NH: The actors were not given any complimentary tickets! So all right, I shelled out, went to see *The Mousetrap* again, this would be about the year 2000, 2001. Remember, I’d seen the first one in 1952, and as soon as the curtain went up I saw that there was a soundtrack of a blizzard going on outside, the set was empty – I don’t know if you’ve seen *The Mousetrap* or read about it...

KL: No, I haven’t.

NH: ...but there was a terrific blizzard, a storm going on out there! And through the window in this living room set, this drawing room set, I could see snow gently falling. And when I saw that obvious incongruity between the gently falling snow and the sound of the blizzard...

KL: Yeah!

NH:... I knew that I was going to have a good time seeing *The Mousetrap* again. It was just as absurd and enjoyable as I had hoped it would be. And afterwards I went backstage to see my friend and he introduced the other actors to me – it was a strange feeling, they were all younger than me! – and we assembled outside and they posed for a photograph with me and they signed the programme for me and they seemed to be impressed that I had seen the original production, they wanted to hear about it.

KL: It must be pretty nice for an actor to hear about the original...

NH: Yes, I couldn’t say a great deal about it except that I remembered Richard Attenborough, remembered ‘who dunnit’ - I won’t mention it now in case any listeners are still planning to see it – but I think it repays a visit just as an example of a relic of theatre of those days that is still apparently attracting audiences. Anyway, look, another – still on these early memories, which inevitably trigger other experiences of theatre, as you have seen – but another of the memories that I think is significant is being taken to see my first great American musical, and that was *Oklahoma!*. It was the first great post-war American musical, it had played in the West End and then it came to the Golders Green Hippodrome, I think I saw it at the Hippodrome, though I don’t have the programme with us still - or maybe I was taken to see it in the West End. But see it I certainly did and there is just one thing that I recall about it, very vividly, apart from the wonderful music, which was played on the radio as well, so everybody knew "Oh What a Beautiful Mornin' ".

NH: "Oh What a Beautiful Mornin'", I would say, was almost an anthem of post-war recovery: that is how uplifting and delightful and optimistic that song was. It sounds corny, as corny as the corn that is 'as high as an elephant's eye', in the lyrics to the song, but Rodgers and Hammerstein knew whereof they were at, or however you would put it, and they... although I think the musical, or at least the original play from which it was adapted was produced during the war – Oklahoma! dates, I think, from '46, I can't quite remember... anyway, the terrific optimism, the simplicity and – coming back to what I said was extremely vivid about that show – was its colourfulness, and I remember, being amazed by what I thought to be the... I suppose the coincidence, that the cowboys shirts were each of a different colour! [Laughs] It wasn't the case that any two cowboys had the same coloured shirt, and it was wonderful to see and it was wonderful to see them dancing, and I guess that instilled in me a love of the musical as well, I never lost my love of the really great Broadway musicals, as well as some, of course, British musicals. And in due course I was taken to see South Pacific and The King and I, for which I still have the programme. The King and I was performed here with the actor Herbert Lom as the King of Siam and Valerie Hobson as the governess. She was a famous British film star of the day who went on to marry Sir John Profumo, the Home secretary, who was disgraced during the Christine Keeler affair. But way back in 1952, or whenever it was, she was simply a very gracious lady-like and glamorous figure in British theatre. I believe that she retired when she married him as he was in politics. And another thing is that a boy I knew was in South Pacific! If you have seen it, you may recall, that this nurse, Nellie Forbush, who is on one of the pacific islands with all the other nurses during the war, falls for a French planter, a middle aged French planter, and he invites her up to his home and it turns out that he has got a couple of kids, half-caste kids – he has had these kids by a native woman, if I remember the plot correctly. And I was taken to see the show in the West End and the thrill of that was that there was a boy in that show playing one of the two kids called John Levitt, whom I knew from Hebrew classes – being a well-brought-up nice Jewish boy I went to Hebrew classes three times a week – and he was perhaps a little bit younger than me but I knew him from there, and there he was onstage! He of course was also going to some kind of stage school, I think, and went on to become a big noise in Equity... because although I never met him again personally after my childhood was over, I did see his name coming up – he was a spokesman in Equity. I never saw him in another play though, funnily enough.

KL: It's weird how things turn out.

NH: Yes. So there are some experiences from my childhood. As I moved into adolescence I started going to see things for myself. I went with friends who were also interested in the theatre, continued to go to the Golders Green Hippodrome, which was my local, and also - we were very lucky – we had another local [theatre], The Embassy Swiss Cottage, who put on rather low-budget productions, but there one could see some of the first plays of Wolf Mankowitz like The Bespoke Overcoat, a short one-acter which had a lot of impact in its day, and musicals like The Boy Friend went on to international success and a film was made of that. And this was a little local theatre that is now home to the Central School - I think it is - the Central School of Dramatic Arts, a drama school now – has been for some decades – but used to be a theatre. So we were pretty well served and of course it was pretty cheap to go to the theatre. Post-war and during the 1950's there still existed in the West End – and I don't think it exists any more – a system whereby if you wanted to go into the gallery and the cheapest seats – which were colloquially referred to as 'the gods' - you could put chairs out, you bought your

ticket or you bought some kind of token – I can't remember exactly how it was done – but you put a chair out, foldable wooden chairs and that was your place and then you could go off for an hour or two or whatever and then you could come back and claim your place in the queue. And the only work of art that I have ever come across that alludes to these empty seats for the gods is a film, also made post-war, by Michael Powell called *The Red Shoes*, about ballet. And in *The Red Shoes* you can see young music and ballet students queuing or putting their seats out for the gods and then running upstairs right to the top to the balcony, as far as you can go, because this was characteristically the kind of seat that a student would take because it was cheap. And how cheap was it? I suppose in those days it would be about one shilling and sixpence or two shillings and sixpence. The theatre programmes themselves, as I can show you here... I will show you in due course – I have just had a look at theatre programmes from 1955 and '56 that I have here, and I see the prices on them are fourpence in 1955 and sixpence in 1956. Now sixpence would be equivalent today to about two and a half p.

KL: Wow, a bit different to the £3.00 programmes you get now!

NH: Very different. And whereas I automatically bought programmes when I went to the theatre in my youth, if I go to the theatre at all these days – which is not very often because it is expensive, there have to be quite special circumstances – I will think twice before buying a programme, because they too are so expensive. And I sort of resent it. I appreciate that there is inflation and everyone has to take a proportion of these things but even so, I think it is rather exorbitant and I am glad that the National Theatre still issues free details of the basic information that you need in a theatre programme.

I still feel I would like to talk a bit more about what it was like in the forties and fifties to go to the theatre. It is well documented that the leading actors of the day were the famous knights Laurence Olivier, Dame Peggy Ashcroft, Ralph Richardson, and Sir John Gielgud, and they still - or at least Ralph Richardson in those days - still held sway at the Old Vic, which was the prestigious Shakespeare venue. The Old Vic also had a cachet on that account: this is where you went to see the really old stuff, and the really posh stuff, was Shakespeare. And I went to see, apart from what I saw or acted in at school – and that's something else, please remind me to refer back to school plays – I saw my first real Shakespeare productions there and it was really very exciting and especially as there were young actors in the cast whom I had not heard of at the time but who went on to greater things in later life. One of the enjoyable things to do is to look at these old theatre programmes that I have still from the early fifties, look down the list of actors – but why don't I attempt that straight away while I am talking about it... here we are, here from the Old Vic from 1956, if I can just find the programme... I have here before me the yellow-covered programmes from the first productions I ever saw at the Old Vic, that is the 1954 – 1955 season. I went to see *Richard II* - I was particularly interested in that play because I acted in it at school, I played *Richard II* – and in this production *Richard II* was played by John Neville who was a great matinée idol of his day but who is not terribly well-known now – in fact the last significant thing he was in was Terry Gilliam's *Baron Munchausen* film, which was a disaster. But if you look down the cast list in secondary roles you find people like Eric Porter, Robert Hardy, Charles Gray, John Wood – who is a leading exponent of Tom Stoppard – Michael Bates, Virginia McKenna – who admittedly was quite famous in those days as a film star – Ronald Fraser, Alan Dobie, John Woodvine and the director Clifford Williams. Then you look at the soldiers, common officers, attendants – these are the extras! – and again we find Clifford

Williams and John Woodvine and Robert Gillespie. Anyway, these people did go on to forge reputations in later life.

I mentioned school. The other day I went along to my old school, which is on different premises, because I was asked to contribute something similar to this - my reminiscences of schooldays in the 1950s, a project being carried out by the boys there - and during the course of the interview I made reference to something called 'speech day' or 'prize day' and the boys had no idea what I was talking about - I had to explain what 'speech day' and 'prize day' were, they didn't have any such thing. And I went on and discovered that they didn't have any school plays either - they didn't put on any plays, there was no drama there at all!

KL: That's really bad!

NH: They were taught English and they read Shakespeare in their English classes...

KL: It's not the same though, is it?

NH: I would say not. I was rather shocked by this because right through infant school, primary school and grammar school extra-curricular drama activities were very much the order of the day and I very much enjoyed... I liked acting and I gradually graduated through smaller roles into playing leading Shakespearean roles at school and I loved it! Except for such moments when Richard II asks a courtier, as he puts it, something like, 'Bring me a mirror straight that I may see the face that something something...', and the courtier boy brought on this mirror and when I put it in front of my face - and this was before the audience - someone had written on the mirror in big letters 'Big head'!

KL: Oh! How mean!

NH: So I had to deliver this speech with the words 'big head' in front of me.

KL: The mark of a true actor!

NH: Yes [Laughs]. So I refer to this because I want to say that being in school plays was very much part of my theatre-going experience and nourishment I would say. It was an opportunity to mix with other kids at the school, and teachers for that matter, on a more informal basis and it was very exciting and I discovered there is no way that you can really get to know a Shakespeare play - you can see it as many times as you like, you can read it as many times as you like, but there is nothing like actually inhabiting it from within, being inside it to discover the juice of the thing, the essence of the thing. And it so happened that my own career in theatre took a turn that did not enable me ever to appear in straight plays. That was a deliberate choice, I suppose, but I rather regret that I didn't have the chance to do any of

Now, are there any aspects of those post-war theatre-going years that are worth mentioning now apart from those that might arise from the programmes I have got

here? Yes, there are one or two things. Firstly, speaking of the nourishment that theatre provided, it was provided not only in the theatre and in film adaptations like Olivier's celebrated Richard III that was a great film of its day, as was Hamlet in 1945. Indeed seeing Olivier in Hamlet - that was the first Hamlet that I ever saw, in 1948, that became as it were the 'default' Hamlet for the rest of my life. All other Hamlets were... he was the real Hamlet - although looking back I now see that he was far too old for the part, he must have been in his forties by then, but because that was the first one I saw that became the kind of standard Hamlet. I have seen better Hamlets since - the best Hamlet I ever saw was in Paris in the early sixties. It was Jean-Louis Barrault and it was performed in French, but boy that was a terrific performance! But you could also see plays on television in the fifties and sixties, and that I think is a very significant difference between television then and television today - you just do not see classic plays on television any more. But I understand that the BBC is planning another complete Shakespeare on T.V., which they did way back in the eighties. It was not a very successful series, they got into trouble with it half-way through. Well, I simply wonder how it is going to go down, whether they are going to get any audiences because no audience - television audience - has really been cultivated in a sense, in theatre. When BBC Four was established a few years ago it had a remit for putting on quite classy cultural events and in its first few months you could see plays on BBC 4, admittedly a digital channel - and what is it? - about four percent of the population watch BBC 4? I was one of them! I say 'was' because I don't watch it so often now, and I saw a few plays - good plays too - by Michael Frayn, for instance, on television, but they have filtered that out now, you can't see it any more. Whereas, in the fifties - of course there was no television in the forties until about 1948 - you could see classic dramas by Ibsen, by Strindberg, you could see nineteenth century British plays, you could see seasons of melodrama - I remember seeing melodramas performed with tongue in - well, only the slightest tongue in cheek - with actors like Alfred Marks and Ronnie Barker and Warren Mitchell playing roles in them. And it wasn't only television it was radio! I listened to radio a lot - I think my generation did listen to radio a lot - and we listened not only to all the comedy shows and the variety shows, but in due course we listened to the Third Programme, which is now Radio Three, and the Home Service, which is now Radio Four, and you could hear really good plays on the radio - and I remember them to this day! Plays which greatly moved me, not only serious stage works but adaptations of novels. I heard an adaptation of a novel by Alain Fournier, *Le Grande Meaulnes* it was called in the original and *The Milk of Paradise* was the title when it was broadcast in about 1956 when I was an adolescent, and it deeply moved me. Years later I met a producer at the BBC by chance, a man called [Piers Plowright] at an art exhibition and was reminiscing about this and about BBC repertory actors of the period about whom I felt nostalgic. He had worked with a number of them and I said, 'Oh God I remember that production of *The Milk of Paradise*, what would I give to hear that again!' And a few days later he sent me in the post, unsolicited, a complete tape of that original recording...

KL: Oh that's really nice!

NH:...of that play that I had heard on the radio in the 1950s and it was fantastic to hear again! Of course it was not quite as good as I recalled it, the accents didn't seem to be quite right to me - they were too posh for this rural neighbourhood - but no matter, I had a chance to re-experience it. And the wonderful thing about film is that you can to an extent, re-experience what you first enjoyed as a child, and compare that experience, the real thing, there it is in the film, which you can't do with theatre, except in revival productions of course.

So another aspect of theatre in the late forties and the fifties which contrasts with theatre today is that this was the era of the so-called 'well-made play', which all drama students know is the play with, if not a single set, then usually a realistic-looking set, with a drawing room, with a fairly realistic or straightforward narrative. And of course the well-made play dates from the nineteenth century but it was going strong into the sixties as well and indeed still exists today to an extent. But there was in a sense no alternative to that in those days – all plays, as I recall, or at least the ones that I saw, apart from the musicals which were much more imaginatively staged of course, were 'well-made' plays. Even Ibsen's plays, shocking though they were in their day, were well-made plays. And today I think the range – well, from the 1960s onwards – the range is much greater. But perhaps I am jumping the gun now in talking about the sixties, perhaps I shouldn't get to that yet. But I was part of the movement – the underground and alternative theatre movement – that was really in revolt against the well-made play. Terence Rattigan's *Separate Tables* was the sort of thing we went to see... Noel Coward was at the tail end of his career. And one thing that I should have mentioned is that I can remember the great excitement of seeing for the first time a play – it was at the Golders Green Hippodrome again – which broke down the barrier between what was going on onstage and the audience!

KL: Fourth wall.

NH: Well, *The Blue Lamp* was a very popular film of about 1952 which featured the original police constable George Dixon, played by Jack Warner – it went on to a long-running television series - and it is now forgotten, but there was a stage adaptation of it that toured around. I don't know if it got to the West End but it certainly got to the Golders Green Hippodrome. And in the film version there is a nasty young man, a thief and a murderer, who with his accomplice robs a cinema. And it is in that cinema that he shoots down a copper – shocking! Shock horror – he actually shoots a policeman! Now when it was staged at the Golders Green Hippodrome, what they did – very cleverly – was to change the site of the robbery to a theatre. So what happens is there is a sequence in the play where a comedian suddenly comes out and starts performing onstage, and then you hear some shots coming from behind you, way back in the auditorium, and the actors playing the two criminals actually entered from the rear of the theatre, and ran down the aisle, and jumped onto the stage, frightening off the comedian – I think they were in front of the curtain, right, because this was a front of curtain act – we saw the rest of the play, as it were, of *The Blue Lamp* actually onstage - but in front of the curtain he started menacing the audience and then ran off backstage! I can check my records when I saw it – it must have been around about 1954, I suppose, I would be about fourteen or fifteen – and I remember the tremendous excitement at this, at the fact that you could enter the auditorium, that you could actually stage things offstage and break down that barrier – it was thrilling.

Come to think of it, it wasn't only in the straight play that you could see this happening. A very popular team in post-war theatre, as before the war, was the Crazy Gang - Bud Flanagan and Chesney Allen, Nervo and Knox and - who were the other pair, Jesus, I can't remember for the moment [Naughton and Gold]- anyway, there were six of them plus Monsignor Eddie Grey, and they would put on crazy revues - variety shows - which also had them going into the audience and fooling around with people in the audience. Now I did see one or two of those Crazy Gang shows and I thoroughly enjoyed them. But I have since come to realise that they. Although they were indigenous British comedians, this whole idea of doing things in the audience was most certainly cribbed

from a show called Hellzapoppin that was put onstage on Broadway in the 1940s and which also made a terrific film - one of my favourite American films actually, the Citizen Kane of comedy, in my view - Hellzapoppin. And in the film, in the last half an hour or so, a show is staged which I suppose pretty well recreates what it must have been like in the theatre when you had comedians impersonating audience members, all kinds of crazy things happening in the audience and actors running up and down the aisle - you know - that sort of thing, in those days was very uncommon. And the Crazy Gang did it as well here. And again a personal connection: my uncle's second wife - he had two wives - was a Tiller girl. He had met her, I suppose, as a bit of a stage-door Johnny, or maybe he met her at some function, I don't know, but she was working as a Tiller girl. 'What was a Tiller girl?' I hear you ask. A Tiller girl was a member of a famous chorus line - possibly the most famous all-girl chorus line of its day - who performed often at the London Palladium, which was the big variety venue of the forties and fifties - and still is, I suppose, except that they don't do variety now so much, or do they? I'm a bit out of touch! Anyway, she was a Tiller girl and to this day when we meet I always try to coax some memories from her of those days.

KL: She must have some interesting stories to tell.

NH: Well, she knew the Crazy Gang and two of the members - Flanagan and Allen - were very famous also as film stars and recording artists, especially during the war, when they kept up - helped to keep up - the nation's morale, singing songs like 'Run rabbit, run rabbit, run run run' [sings] in a very distinctive style. So they were very popular during the war and after the war - popular with the Royal Family as well and they appeared in Royal Command Variety Performances very often. So my aunt got to know them and they were as much pranksters offstage as they were on! I can't remember any of the anecdotes specifically, but there was... eventually there was a family connection which I very much appreciated. And another, and perhaps - oh yes two more if you don't mind - perhaps I'm going on too long for you...

KL: No please, this is interesting.

NH: Perhaps... I can see there are two or three other things I have made a note of here that I wanted to mention as regards that era of the forties and fifties. One I have already alluded to: I mentioned the London Palladium. I mention another characteristic of this post-war period was that American film stars would come and play the Palladium and it was really a big thing, not only for them - they regarded the London Palladium as virtually appearing before Royalty, and sometimes they did appear before Royalty - it was so prestigious for these stars to appear over here, and at the same time we flocked to see them - the public flocked to see them - because they were such big stars. I'm referring to people like Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney - who didn't do so well here - and pre-eminently the film star who made it his home as it were, Danny Kaye. In fact the first big star I saw - that I was taken to see at the London Palladium by my Auntie Ann again - was Frankie Laine, who was one of those singers of the early fifties who began to put paid to the crooners, the softer-voiced crooners like Frank Sinatra, who began to lose popularity in that period, when singers like Frankie Laine and Johnnie Ray - who also appeared in films - they had a harsher, more attacking sort of style that was altogether more exciting for youngsters - and they were the link between the crooners of the forties and rock and roll. Anyway I saw Frankie Laine on the stage, I saw Abbott

and Costello onstage – and again I have got a personal connection because one of my school-friends' uncles was their London agent! And I think it was as a result of that that I got free tickets to see Abbott and Costello, who I think were enormously big stars in the forties and fifties – although if you see their films now, or listen to their radio programme, which I did recently when I listened to one of their forties radio programmes – it really is pretty low-brow coarse-grained stuff, although Lou Costello was not a bad comedian in his own right, he was a genuinely funny man. But be that as it may, it was exciting to see these American stars - and Danny Kaye who was again extremely popular in the forties and fifties through his Hollywood musicals and his nonsense songs and recordings, appeared at the London Palladium often, and was so loved by the Royal Family that he befriended them – he became a friend of Princess Margaret and Prince Philip. And the thing about Danny Kaye – one of the things that greatly endeared him to British audiences, apart from the fact that just seeing these big American stars not all that long after the war gave us a great boost - you know, it was a great fillip, to see these people in the flesh - one of the things that he would do, and it became a gimmick on his several return visits to the London Palladium, was that at one point in the show – he would sing and he would do little sketches and he would fool around with the band – but there would come a point where he would ask for the house lights to come up so he could see the audience, then he would sit on the edge of the stage with his legs dangling over into the orchestra pit and he would ask for a cup of tea! Somebody would bring on a cup of tea, then he would sit there, he would sip the cup of tea – he would drink this tea – and he would just have a chat with the audience, he would just improvise. And everybody loved him for this – they loved him for this! It was his lack of pretension apparently, it was the way that he would just be an ordinary guy and relate to English people – and of course it was a calculated stunt in its way.

KL: It's a good one though!

NH: Yeah, I have no doubt that he genuinely loved Britain and he loved the British people and all of that, he loved appearing at the London Palladium – all the Hollywood stars did, it was equivalent to appearing in New York at Carnegie Hall or The Palace Theatre, which is a theatre in New York that all the big stars aimed to perform at – Judy Garland did. So Danny Kaye really – well, the English public fell in love with him, the critics did too, he was such an endearing performer in those days. And again I have a slight personal connection with him in this respect: my parents, I said, came out of the East End of London. And my grandparents who were Yiddish Jews from Polish Russia who spoke Yiddish as well as English, of course, which they learnt, spoke often of a long-lost sister – that's a sister of my grandparents (both my grandmothers were sisters, my parents were first cousins so they had a lot in common) – there was a sister called Martha who had emigrated to New York – to America – and had since become lost. I mean, she emigrated before the First World War and nobody knew what had happened to her. My mother was of the opinion, because of his supposed resemblance to members of our family, even to me – I had very striking red hair in younger days – no longer! – but Danny Kaye also had striking red hair – he was Jewish, he looked Jewish – my mother often said that she believed Danny Kaye was the son of the long-lost sister Martha!

KL: That would be an amazing connection to have!

NH: That was her firm belief. Now, there was one year when he was appearing at the Palladium – it must have been around 1954 or 5, I have a note of it somewhere that can probably confirm it – my mother was holding forth about this again when my cousin Corrine who was older than me and her fiancé Charles happened to be around and Corinne who is rather a forthright person said, 'Right, he's in town, we'll find out!' 'We'll book some tickets, we'll go see the show and we'll write him a letter and we'll deliver the letter. If he is a member of the family we will find out.' So there and then she booked three tickets for her, her fiancé Charles and for me – I must have been about fifteen, sixteen at this time, I suppose – to go to the London Palladium to see Danny Kaye, and we sat down and we composed a letter. And this letter said something along the lines of – it explained the background that we had this long-lost Great Aunt Martha who had gone off to America and we believed it was possible that he was the son of this Martha. My mother said, 'You never read anything in the papers about his mother. You don't know – his mother's name is never mentioned.' Which is untrue actually, because in biographies you do find out who his mother was. 'But if this is the case, after you've read it, please get in touch.' And we left a phone number and address. And we went to the London Palladium and we left that letter at the stage door, before the show began. We saw the show – which was wonderful, seeing Danny Kaye live, what a thrill – and do you know, we never heard anything from Danny Kaye...

KL: Oh no!

NH: ...to confirm that he was in fact a distant member of our family. Which, according to our mother, was proof that he probably was. Because, after all, what would a big Hollywood star want to do – surely the last thing he would want to do is to reveal the fact that he had these very ordinary relations here in London. So my mother was never convinced that his silence was proof that he was not a member of the family. So this is very much tied up with my early theatregoing experience.

Another couple of things – again, I am sure I'm going on too long! – but another aspect of the theatregoing in the forties and fifties which people probably going to the theatre today – young people – would probably find quite laughable is that it was very common – especially in matinee - for there to be some sort of interval, live interval music, supplied by what was then known as a little Palm Court Orchestra, or Palm Court Trio. It was very refined and genteel music played usually on piano, violin and cello. And at the Golders Green Hippodrome for instance - and I have the programmes here with proof that this is the case - nearly every show that was put on would say, 'Interval music provided by the Entracte Players. Now the Entracte Players were just such a genteel trio as I have described. And another aspect of this matinee theatregoing was the tea-tray phenomenon. This happened in the West End as well as the Golders Green Hippodrome and other provincial or outer-London, suburban theatres. And that is you could order, during the interval, tea and biscuits, and since people who went to matinées tended to be rather elderly, and elderly ladies at that, there would be this familiar clinking of tea-trays where you would get usherettes often – I think in the early days – wearing sort of little aprons or pinafores, coming down the aisle with trays of tea and biscuits which they would pass along the rows, and the ladies would consume. Apart, of course, from the ices, which were as much a standard part of the theatre-going experience in the forties and fifties as they are today, and which, incidentally, comes as a bit of a surprise to American students who come over here to study theatre or to go to the theatre because I don't believe that happens in America – or only in the foyer can you buy ices, they don't come into the auditorium, I believe is the case.

But anyway, so there is that – and this has surely been going on for too long – censorship you know all about – censorship came to an end in 1968 and probably we will come onto that a bit later if you have still got time for some reminiscences of the early days of my own theatre career. But there are a couple of things – well I won't mention some of the other great, formative theatre experiences of this period – there were things that had a very strong effect on me. For instance one of them was an American play called *The Connection* which came here around 1961, which was like nothing else I had ever seen, performed by The Living Theatre. I was studying psychology at University College at the time, and also as a subsidiary subject I was studying Philosophy, and my Philosophy tutor was a man called Richard Wollheim who was quite well-known in the philosophical fraternity. And somehow or other the subject of *The Connection* came up and I was expressing my enthusiasm for it – I don't know how it came up, he was my tutor as well as lecturer, tutor in Philosophy – and he was very well-connected, so well-connected that he knew the author of *The Connection*, Jack Gelber who was in town and he said, 'Would you like to meet him?'

KL: That would have been amazing.

NH: But I did meet him! He brought me along to have a drink with Jack Gelber, the playwright, who created this amazing play, *The Connection*, and we had a talk. You know, I was only a student in my second or third year – I don't know now – but what a thrill that was! It was the beginning of my connection with American alternative theatre – that was my first real taste of it. I went to see this play twice and – I forget whether it was the first or second occasion – I actually nearly passed out because there was a shooting-up scene – it was about drug addicts waiting for a fix – and there is a guy who shoots-up and he has a very bad reaction to it and I had a very bad reaction to it in the theatre as well. But I didn't pass out and it was such a wonderful production. But I feel it is a little bit out of the era that we are discussing.

The last couple of things I want to mention is that I began writing reviews of plays that I saw in 1955 when I was sixteen – fifteen or sixteen – and this arose I think because I was a member of a youth club, and one of their activities was they had a sort of little internal radio channel and would devise radio programmes. And I devised a sort of theatre reviewing thing and wrote reviews of some of the current shows that I was seeing and read them out on-air, as it were. And I have still got the texts in long-hand of these reviews that I wrote at the time, I have still got them among this junk that you see before you on the table. So from pretty early on I was taking a critical look at stuff I was seeing – a practice which I kept up and still keep up to this day, I suppose, because I have written a fair amount about the theatre, published a little and also these days mainly earn my living as a script and manuscript consultant – a literary consultant – so I still read plays and write critical reports on them. But the seeds of that were sown way back in the 1950's and I can see when I read these reviews that I wrote that I was very influenced by Harold Hobson of *The Sunday Times* - one of the two major theatre critics of the day – because he would always refer to actors, he would refer to them very politely as 'Mister Robert Harris' – there was such an actor in those days, as well as the current novelist – or 'Mademoiselle Edwige Feuillere'. He was very stricken with her, a French actress of the day. It was always 'Mister' or 'Miss' or 'Mademoiselle', and I notice in these reviews that I wrote that I used the same convention, which makes me cringe a bit now because it sounds incredibly pompous.

Of course - again this is well documented – in the forties and the fifties as well, there were two major dramatic critics. One was Harold Hobson in *The Sunday Times*, an

elderly chap confined to a wheelchair who had very strong and often eccentric opinions, and the other was Kenneth Tynan who graduated to the theatre seat or chair at The Observer after reviewing for The Evening Standard and after having being a performer himself. And that era was dominated by these two figures, who had a tremendous influence on public opinion – it is well-known that Kenneth Tynan's championing of *Look Back in Anger* - 'I don't think I could ever love anyone who doesn't love this play,' to paraphrase him at the time, had a tremendous influence. And so did Hobson, who spotted the worth in Harold Pinter's – who alone detected value in Harold Pinter's first play, *The Birthday Party* – I think Tynan was not all that enamoured with it, if I remember rightly.

KL: I don't think many other critics particularly were.

NH: No, no, it was a flop! But Hobson saw it and Hobson also appreciated *Waiting for Godot*. So for all his idiosyncrasies –and he did have some very peculiar ones – he had an eye for what was significant and he also had an eye for the continent. In those days there was not very much coming from abroad – though probably more than today – but what did come from abroad tended to be French, and what French stuff came over tended to be either by Jean Anouilh or by Jean Giraudoux, so Anouilh was very popular here – some of Peter Brook's early productions were of Jean Anouilh's early plays, at least one well-known Anouilh play, the English title was *Time Remembered*. And again I have a personal connection that I have just remembered, between me and Jean Anouilh [Laughs]! Because by 1961 – after I had left college – I was living in Paris for a while, and among other things I took a job which I saw advertised in the so-called Alliance Française that some local school was being taken on a skiing trip to the Swiss Alps and they needed 'surveillants', that is to say, 'supervisors', to help with the kids in France. Probably today as then the kids not only had the attention of teachers but they had so-called 'surveillants' who helped with discipline, getting them ready, making them dress up properly for playtime, making sure they had all their books, you know, a very useful role. So they needed 'surveillants' to accompany the kids on a school trip. Well I had never skied, I had never been to the Swiss Alps – it was a great opportunity. So I went off for two weeks with these kids to the Swiss Alps – I failed miserably at learning to ski, I didn't make a success of that. But the kids were delightful, I loved them all – except for one! There was one kid who was such a bloody spoilt brat – his name was Nicholas Anouilh and he was the son of Jean Anouilh and he was really – as I recall now, perhaps I exaggerate, or need to exaggerate in order to justify what happened – but in any case he was at the very least a nuisance, and was known to be a nuisance among the other teachers. And it seems that at one point I must have struck him!

KL: Oh no!

NH: Well, maybe I slapped his bottom or something, I don't know, he was a very annoying child. Anyway, during this skiing trip in 1961, we were still there, one of the teachers who was friendly with me, drew me aside and showed me a letter that he had received from Jean Anouilh...

KL: Oh no.

NH: ... complaining about the fact that this tutor – a tutor – had actually physically assaulted his son! And it was a very unpleasant letter. But the teacher actually laughed it off as if to say, 'we've had this sort of thing before'. But I can claim to have had a letter of complaint made about my treatment of his son by the great French dramatist of the forties and fifties, if not of the thirties as well, I think – Jean Anouilh. So I hope all you listeners out there are duly impressed and will treat me with more respect in future!

So where were we? Oh we are still in the forties and fifties. Look, I think that is probably more than enough isn't it. Apart from anything that I might show you, and I did find a couple of odd things of interest when I looked through this, before you came here, among these files of mine dating from 1955 and '56, which seems to be about the earliest that I have obtained programmes for. Now one of the things that I wanted to show you in one of these programmes – here's a programme for Look Back in Anger – I think it may be here – the 1955 issue – there are the Golders Green – the characteristic Golders Green Hippodrome programmes.

KL: They're quite different from what you get now.

NH: Yes. And I have got some of the original reviews – look, there's Harold Hobson on Separate Tables, there are my own notes on Separate Tables – hang on, I know exactly what I am looking for – it must be in one of these if you just bear with me – ah! Yes, this would be it. Look, this is a programme for The Old Vic's Romeo and Juliet, and what I wanted to show you – of course, you can't see it on the audio tape but I can describe it, is the pictures of the actors at the back of the programme – you see these portraits of the actors. And the thing about these portraits, I'm sure you can see, is how snootily they're shot.

KL: Yes, they are all staring off into the distance.

NH: They are all staring off into the distance – the male actors are well Brylcreamed – it's very much a case of luvvie-profiles and moody backlighting.

KL: None of them are even smiling.

NH: That's correct, yes – there are six actors here and they include such luminaries as Paul Rogers, Coral Browne, who died recently, Richard Wordsworth, who was to achieve fame as the spaceman in The Quatermass Experiment on television, who gets eaten up by fungus, Jack Gwillim, John Neville, very much the young matinee idol, and Claire Bloom, who appeared onstage only a couple of years ago, I believe – this would be very early in her career. So there you are, you see, this conveys something of the mystique of the actor – the serious actor, the serious Old Vic actor at any rate – in the early fifties, and I don't think you see photographs quite like this any more.

KL: No, nothing like this.

NH: They've got a real fifties feel, haven't they?

KL: It's really interesting to see something like that – it's so different from how it is now.

NH: So look, I think I'll shut up about all this – all of this unless there are any specific things you would like me to expand on or me to talk you through any of the stuff.

KL: Yes, that's brilliant for the forties and fifties. I think that's brilliant for the early experiences. Yes that is exactly what we needed.

NH: Good. How does it compare, I'm curious, how does it compare with the sort of things other people may have told you or recorded or is this your first interview?

KL: This is my first, I think some people got actors and...

NH: Oh, I see. Well, one last thing that perhaps I will say is that in the mid-sixties after I came out of a postgraduate drama course – a directing course – at Bristol University Drama Department, I began writing for Plays and Players, which was a theatre monthly of the period – I think it long ago become defunct – but they had a series then called 'All Our Yesterdays' in which regular writers wrote on a given year of British Theatre, what things were like in this given year. Now I was given - assigned - the year 1951, for which I did a lot of research, and I have made a copy of the article I wrote for Plays and Players. It was written in 1966, but this is a survey of British theatre and more specifically London theatre, but it does refer to what was going on elsewhere, in 1951. And at the end of the article I go on to refer to what was just around the corner, what was coming in the way of Waiting for Godot and Look Back in Anger and Theatre Workshop – Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop, all the radical developments.

KL: Yes, some very interesting progression.

NH: Yes, it wasn't just the sixties that opened things up – things were happening in the fifties as well, as they do in every decade. But anyway, I will donate that to your archive.

KL: Thank you so much! That's brilliant. OK, well thank you very much for letting me interview you.

NH: I'm just going to say a little bit about my own entry into the world of professional theatre – it was via a postgrad course in drama, in directing, at the University of Bristol drama department where I got involved in a production called Daladidactics, which enabled me to assemble a whole show of my own, co-write it on the theme of Dada and surrealism. That had a great influence on me and led me to really pursue a career in experimental and alternative theatre. But when I graduated in 66, thanks to some contacts I had I began working with Charles Marowitz, who was a leading American

director in London at that time, and I became his kind of assistant in an experimental workshop he was running, and during this period, 1966 to 1968, there was a lot of experimental and so-called underground theatre bubbling up in London and probably elsewhere, and certainly in New York – we knew about the – the – the ... theatre I referred to earlier that put on The Connection...

KL: The Living Theatre.

NH: The Living Theatre of course! Jesus what's happening? It's called a 'senior moment' or CRAFT moment – 'Can't Remember A Fucking Thing'. We knew The Living Theatre, we'd seen them in London, for that matter, because they came over, and we were also seeing productions by La Mama and The Open Theatre in the mid-sixties. And through this Dada surreal show that I was involved in, in the drama department in 1955 – 56, I had developed great interest in surrealist workshop techniques like using automatic speech and free association as a means of loosening up actors. I started an improvisation workshop troupe of my own and carried on with this kind of activity through the late sixties. Now my first sort of semi-professional production was in 1967 for something called 'Angry Arts Week', which was a major gathering of theatre people and literary people and poets at The Roundhouse in Chalk Farm - which had only recently opened for performance events - in protest against the British Governments complicity, as it was called, in the American war in Vietnam. A friend of mine was on the Angry Arts committee and asked if I was interested to contribute, and I proposed to put together a show that could be put on at The Roundhouse every evening in addition to all the other events that were going on. And that's how it developed – I devised a show called The Gang Bang Show – I won't go into all the details of that but it was presented every evening – and I wasn't paid, none of the actors were paid, and I don't think it was very well performed either because we had just got the actors that we could get, people who were willing to be in it, they weren't necessarily the best people for the roles. One of the contributors to the show was Eric Idle of Monty Python's Flying Circus, but by proxy. One of the co-writers was a guy called Peter Buckman who went on to write some books about alternative political lifestyles, and he told me that Eric Idle had written some of the sketches that he contributed because he was so busy at the time – I don't know precisely which ones – before Monty Python's breakthrough in '69. So I watched Eric Idle's career with great interest as a result of that. Anyway, that production had to be submitted – the script of that production, because it was mostly scripted – had to be submitted, as all other scripts had to be, to the Lord Chamberlain's office for vetting, and we received notification that a couple of lines and phrases had to be changed. One of them was the word 'SHAT', S-H-A-T, which was used as a sort of an acronym for some sort of organisation in the show. The notification came in the form of a very elaborately calligraphic – no, it's not calligraphy – well, the calligraphy was elaborate – on this document – which I have to this day and which I have had on display in various exhibitions. This must have been one of the very last productions to be so vetted by the Lord Chamberlain – in fact it must have been '68 rather than '67 that this happened, must have been the last few months. And a year or two ago I got acquainted with people at the British Library who are involved in archiving sound and also theatre and I learnt that a copy of the Lord Chamberlain's actual review, the report on our production that would have been submitted to the Lord Chamberlain by their man who would have read the script, was there and I could see it if I wished. So last year I went along to the British Library and there laid out for me was the report on this, my very first production way back in '68!

KL: Oh, that's amazing!

NH: It was only a paragraph and it wasn't very much. All that it said was that we recommend that these phrases be cut. It said this is some kind of – it was a sneering report – some kind of anti-American revue, something like 'its standard is such that it is really not worth bothering about, but we would require this to be cut.'

KL: Oh!

NH: [Not worth] bothering about in the sense that it is not worth banning it or taking it very seriously – words to that effect, that's what I discovered only last year! [Laughs]

KL: Must have been an interesting flashback.

NH: Very. It was very interesting. So that is one of the things that I recall about those early days. This must be very well documented elsewhere and is being documented by my friend and colleague, the actress Cindy Oswin who has performed her own account of those early years on the fringe, at among other places, the British Library. And I have been attached to the show with various items – books, programmes, photographs from that very period that I have put on display as an adjunct to that talk she has given. And I have also appeared onstage with her, recalling these early years of the sixties and seventies. But I assume that 1968 is your cut-off point because that is when censorship ended.

KL: Yes, it is.

NH: That is the era. Well, by 1968, between '65 and '68, things were going through a major upheaval with underground companies like The People Show beginning to perform in bookshops and in other unlikely venues. This is the period when Jim Haynes established the first Arts Lab in Drury Lane, in the heart of theatre-land, by God, the Arts Lab being the sort of arts centre where you could go in and see not only a play but you could see underground movies, you could see art exhibitions, you could have something to eat, there were happenings. It was something quite radical and revolutionary in its day, and I still maintain that even our own National Theatre when it eventually opened in 1972, I think it was, was a posher version of the Arts Lab, because the whole National Theatre, was conceived in such a way that it had restaurants, it had things going on in the lobby, performances, it had exhibitions, all of these things which you did not see in the theatres that were originally established in Edwardian times and earlier in the West End of London in the forties and fifties. But the sixties interest in breaking down barriers between audiences and players and the emphasis it put on the theatre as a kind of communal communion kind of experience really opened things up – Multi-media, that was the order of the day as well, and happenings, so the well-made play, the straight play that you simply sat in front of and observed, was now only one other kind of theatre performance that you could see among all these new developments and radical

experiments that were taking place and spreading the word from America to England and vice versa, and also on the continent with Grotowski and other such names.

Well I won't go into all of that, because I am sure you know about it and other people have written about it at great length with more authority than myself. But I was thoroughly committed to this alternative stream, and stayed so during the seventies and eighties, and I remember with great affection that early period of the late sixties when so many exciting things were happening, and of course it was the era of flower power and 'the permissive society' and I felt proud knowing Jim Haynes as I did personally, that we were the very first company to use the Arts Lab – in fact, even before it opened because I knew Jim from my earlier association with Charles Marowitz, they knew each other. I felt at the heart of the movement even if perhaps not one of its most distinguished practitioners. We were doing stuff that was, seemed to us to be pioneering in those days – and when I say 'we' I mean a lot of alternative – or fringe theatre – as it was then called, Performance Art. But now we are shifting to the seventies when we get to Performance Art and that is another story, all the different names we would put to this alternative movement. So I think I will shut up there, I think I have probably said as much as I need to say, but if there is anything you want to ask me in the last few minutes go ahead.

KL: I can't think of anything specific, you have been brilliant, you have covered everything I wanted to know, so thank you very much.

NH: OK, you're welcome, I have enjoyed it. That's it.