

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Susan Engel – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Jamie Andrews**

**17 October 2007**

Actress; Pinter's *The Room*. Audience; Bristol University Drama Department; Samuel Beckett; characterisation; DramSoc; drama school; Harold Hobson; production; props; Harold Pinter; reviews; the script; Raphael Shelly; Jimmy Wax.

Read other interviews about the first production of Harold Pinter's *The Room* [here](#).

JA: It's 17th October, we're at the house of Susan Engel in North London, and we're conducting an interview for the Theatre Archive Project relating to the production of *The Room*. My name's Jamie Andrews...

SE: How do you do, my name's Susie Engel.

JA: Thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed.

SE: It's a pleasure.

JA: So as we discussed we're going to start by talking about autumn 1956, that's the start of the academic year in which *The Room* was produced. Can you just explain what you were doing at Bristol?

SE: I was doing French and drama. That was my excuse for not going straight into the theatre, because I was really interested only in acting. But I was doing French and drama, and we did French plays as well. And I was a member of what was called DramSoc at the university. I don't know if it's still called DramSoc, the drama...?

JA: Yes, yes.

SE: Is it still called DramSoc?

JA: Is that different from the Green Room?

SE: Yes, I can't remember a Green Room. I don't know whether we had a... Did the Green Room exist in our... in the fifties? I can't remember that if it did.

JA: I've heard there was two: the Drama Society, and the Green Room Society.

SE: All I can remember we called ourselves DramSoc [an independent student organisation]. I didn't do many productions with them. I was a bit snobbish; I liked doing things for the university, for the French department as well. And acting... And I did Electra, Professor Kitto – do you remember Professor Kitto – who was our Greek expert did a... I thought, a wonderful translation of Sophocles' Electra. And we rehearsed that in Dartington Hall, and performed it in Dartington Hall. And then up in the Vic rooms. So that was my claim to fame round about that [time]. And I just did as much acting as I could.

JA: Can you remember the types of other plays that DramSoc was putting on at that time? Was it contemporary, new or classics?

SE: No, contemporary, new was really a rarity I think. In my memory – which is hazy so I can't... but no... which is another reason why, when Henry Woolf came up to me and said, 'I've got this mate who's trying to write a play' and all that, that was a very... it was a terribly fresh and new thing. There were new plays, but the students didn't get hold of them. I mean, there was the new play that... whose name then disappeared. Who had a first night down at the Theatre Royal, and it happened to be the same time when Harold... and I don't know if you know the story, but Harold has told the story in one of his books. He's told it much better than I could. How he happened to be kipping in my flat, and I brought the man who was going to be his agent – I don't know if you know that story?

JA: It's Jimmy Wax is it?

SE: Yes.

JA: How did you know Jimmy Wax?

SE: I didn't know him from Adam, but I was very cheeky and somebody at the first night party... Somebody said oh look that chap there, he's come down from London. Anyway I mean anybody coming from London – and we were at Bristol – was important. And he was a literary agent. And he'd obviously come there because there was this play by John Hall. So I thought 'blimey a literary agent, that's really good, that's exactly what Harold needs'. And somehow I said to him 'come with me because I know where a...' – and I was joking, totally joking at the time – but 'I know where there's a really great playwright, and he's kipping on the floor downstairs', in Royal York Crescent where I lived. And I suppose it was way after midnight, and he must have had a few drinks, or must have thought I was completely mad. But I can remember walking up the hill, and

walking up to Royal York Crescent, and taking him in to the sort of seedy place we had – number 57 I think it was – and going up the stairs and waking Harold, on some kind of a... he was on a mattress on the floor. Saying, 'Wake up, wake up, there's a literary agent here.' 'What, what, what?' 'Yes, and if you show him your play... if you show him The Room, or if we read him some of The Room, you know he might take you on.' And I knew nothing about how these things worked. It was just the chutzpah you have when you're very young. So...

JA: And so he read it.

SE: So he... then we went up another flight of stairs to my kitchen. Harold you know, put on something. And Harold and I, and Jimmy who was a rather special bloke anyway, sat at this little kitchen table and read The Room for Jimmy. And that seemed to be enough, because he almost immediately I think took Harold on, from then on.

JA: And can you remind me, when about was this then?

SE: When?

JA: When, yes.

SE: I'll have to look it... I think Harold was... writes about it in his book about Jimmy, and he probably puts the date. But, for some reason or other... 'in May 1957 my first play The Room was presented...' - this is Harold writing - 'I was myself a working actor at the time, and some months later got a job in a touring farce, and one of the dates was Bristol.'. So it must have been maybe June, July, August of 1957.

JA: Right, so after the first production...

SE: Yes.

JA: ...in the Squash Court, yes.

SE: Yes, so we knew each other by then, and there'd been a bit of correspondence. You know like I'd sent him local reviews from the Bristol Evening Post. So that would be the date.

JA: OK, interesting. OK. So back to... we were talking about DramSoc, and you were talking about the kind of plays, saying that a contemporary, new play would have been a rarity.

SE: Yes, I can't remember, I mean I may be wrong there, but certainly nothing of great importance. And we weren't... I mean, Ionesco was a new writer. But Osborne was not yet on the scene. I can't remember the date of *Look Back in Anger*.

JA: That was May '56.

SE: Was it?

JA: So it would have been earlier that year.

SE: Well Osborne was on the scene then, but then maybe there were productions...

[interruption]

SE: ...I can't answer it accurately, but it's a very interesting question that at that age, and being a student, 18, 19, new writing was... new accepted writing was a difficult subject. I mean people who tried to write new plays were up against such enormous barriers somehow. So short of any of us trying to scribble things to be put on, it wasn't an expanding time of new writing, at the university anyway. I don't know what it was like in other places but...

JA: And how about in your lessons, were new or even plays from the previous couple of years being studied, or was the course very canonical as well?

SE: You mean studying...?

JA: As part of the degree.

SE: You mean contemporary playwrights?

JA: Mmm.

SE: Again I may be wrong, you'd have to check this with Auriol, but in my memory contemporary playwrights were not on the agenda at all. We spent so much time... I mean, the whole first year was Greek. The whole of the... then we spent ages and ages on Mediaeval. And we were with Professor Wickham, who was very much a Mediaeval kind of expert. We spent a hell of a lot of time doing mystery plays, which we also performed and did them all over the place. So there wouldn't have been much time. Would have been in my third and... honest I can't remember really digging into contemporary playwrighting. I think possibly because at that time, in those dark fifties, it wasn't a time... I think it's a difficult question to answer, but it wasn't a time when we

all felt 'hey terrific'. It wasn't like it was ten years later in the sixties. There was no... it was dark those mid fifties somehow.

JA: OK, interesting. How about George Brandt – was George Brandt teaching at the time?

SE: He did... well you see he did film more than... he did film. But he... and he also... I mean he did specialise, but he would - dear George, I hope you can hear me up there - I mean he did do... he did modern drama actually. I don't think I was concentrating very much.

JA: That must be it. So that's the background to what was happening in Bristol.

SE: Yes.

JA: Can you remember the first time that you were told that this copy of a play called The Room had arrived...?

SE: Yes, I can remember it very, very vividly. Except... I think I can remember it very vividly because we... so, I was great friends with Henry Woolf anyway. Henry and I were mates, as he was an extremely witty, and wonderful and interesting guy. And one day he comes up to me... and it was on the steps, I can remember where he... it was on the steps of the university that we... I don't know if we used that building.

JA: The Wills Building.

SE: Yes, the Wills Building. And he said this friend... 'I've got a friend' he said, 'who's try... he's at Bournemouth in rep, and he's trying to put a play together. If you're not doing anything next term'... I mean 'next term would you be in on the project?'. It meant giving one's time and that sort of thing. Would you be...? I think it was like next term... would you be in for a project? I'm going to get my... this mate to finish what he's writing, because if he could finish it, if he could get something together and bloody finish it and send it to me, we could put it on. And I said 'fine, that would terrific'. And then I think time passed and Henry kept on saying 'I can't get him to... I'm trying to get him to put this together – to finish it, to make it into a play'. And then came the day when he said 'yes, he's written the play'.

JA: Can you remember then the gap between Henry first mentioning it?

SE: No, I can't.

JA: Because the story always is that...

SE: I can't remember how... in fact you see, that would be interesting, because it would tell us how long it had taken for Henry to persuade Harold to finish. And I can't be relied upon to give you the right answer for that.

JA: Your instinctive reaction there was that you said the play's going to be on next term.

SE: Yes.

JA: So we'll assume that the first mention must have been before Christmas, that sounds...

SE: I suppose so, yes.

JA: So very interesting, because a lot of the stories talk about The Room being produced in a frenzy of three or four days. But clearly that...

SE: Well there is... I think Henry knew from Harold that Harold was scribbling away. And Henry knew that whatever Harold scribbled would be probably worth putting on by the students in the drama department. And then a slot obviously turned up. But I think probably a term ahead. And then it was required for – like it often is – for the writer to hurry up and get it all finished. And I think it was up to Henry cajoling him, and having it ready on time. And as you see from my script, it's pretty... it's a pretty rough, hurried, cheapo job. You know, that's how it happened.

JA: OK, so when... can you remember when you would have actually started rehearsing the play?

SE: You're asking me about dates, and there's no point. I mean, Henry might have... I haven't a clue, put it that way. Dates don't mean anything to me now. They certainly... And I can't remember. Can't help you on that.

JA: Of course. Can you remember how long the rehearsal process took? Was it fairly last minute...?

SE: Can't give you that either, but it might have been. It could have been anything, because I mean obviously we had time to learn lines quickly. And we weren't professionals, so... I can't give you an answer to that. It could have been two weeks. I think probably on average it would have been something like two weeks to rehearse. And then of course, as students, you were busy doing other things. So you'd have to snatch a rehearsal of an evening here, and of an evening there, because we were amateurs, you know.

JA: Did you know the others? You said you were great friends with Henry, did you know any of the others before...?

SE: Yes, but not particularly well. I certainly did, yes we all knew each other.

JA: Who was it assembled the cast together?

SE: Henry.

JA: Right. He allocated roles.

SE: Henry's totally... Henry was - and still is - totally... he's the lynchpin. Absolutely.

JA: And can you remember discussing or showing the text to anyone involved with the university from the teaching staff before...?

SE: Absolutely not. Moreover – and Henry will probably tell you this as well – the drama department were quite adamant in having a) nothing to do with us and, b) being completely unhelpful. I think perhaps we were... we were perhaps overenthusiastic, and we knew that we wanted to put this play on. And we would ask things of the drama... of various people: Johnny Lavender, Glynne Wickham, George Brandt, George Rowell – all the staff and all our professors, 'Could we have a table please?' No, we couldn't have a table. No you can't have an armchair, you can bloody well get your armchair.... I mean there was an attitude of total 'you're on your own'.

And it's kind of important to remember this, and I feel very strongly about it, that that first time when we... that first time when we put it on, it was without any encouragement at all – if anything it was discouragement – and there was no encouragement from the drama department whatsoever. So since then the drama department – in its way this is what happens in history, and it happens in life, and I'm not blaming anybody individually – but then the drama department was very proud in saying 'well we were the first people to put on Harold Pinter, the first performance'. Bollocks is my answer to that! The drama department had a... I mean had a slot where the studio was allowed to be used by students. And Henry, leading us as students, we fought to get the few props that we needed, the lighting we needed, with no help from the drama department whatsoever on that first occasion of the first... Interesting you see.

JA: Interesting.

SE: And then there were good reviews, and people saw it, and I think perhaps... I don't know what happened. I mean, I adored Glynne Wickham in later life as it were, and sort of revered him, but I never got round unfortunately – and then he wouldn't have been

honest anyway – I was going to say, to have got into his mind and said, 'Can you remember being totally discouraging about Harold Pinter and *The Room*?' And he'd probably say, 'Ahh no...' - the way he talked he'd say, 'No I don't think we were discouraging.' Well I'm here to tell you, and Henry would back me up, and I'm sure... I don't know if Henry remembers it so strongly, but I do because I find it happens in life – people saying 'oh it was wonderful, the drama department in Bristol, they discovered Harold Pinter' - well, bollocks to that!

JA: So did they have... they had a slot and they must have at least approved your using the slot.

SE: They had a slot to let students do a couple of plays on that night.

JA: So they wouldn't have approved the script beforehand, it was just...?

SE: They didn't approve... they wouldn't have approved it. I don't think they saw the script.

JA: Right, OK.

SE: And if they had, it would have been 'some rep actor's put something together that Henry, who was a post-graduate student, and some of his mates are going to put on'. And it would have been help... I can remember it was as simple as trying to ask for an armchair and a table as props. And we didn't get them.

JA: So how did you find the armchair, the cooker, the...?

SE: Well we got... you know we went across the road somewhere and we found an armchair, and we carried it... I mean everything was done ad hoc, like you would do it at school, if you say were going to put on a school play: 'Please mummy, can we have the kitchen table?' 'No you can't.' 'All right, well we'll find...' It was like that. And it wasn't at all a 'Bristol University drama department discovers Harold Pinter' – not the first time.

JA: So there wasn't... certainly not any official budget or anything, it was all...

SE: I don't think we had a budget. No such thing.

JA: Right, OK. That's very interesting. When you first read the script, when you were shown it by Henry, can you remember what did you think?

SE: Riveting. I was riveted. And we were all riveted, from the first reading. And jumping on quickly from that, some time later – and I can't give you the dates – Harold sent Henry loose pages of *The Birthday Party*. And I can remember Henry saying, 'Hey, I've got...' - this is after we'd done *The Room*, and I'm just... there's an illustration - 'I've got...' I don't even know whether it was finished, or it was... in what kind of condition it was, but he only had one copy and it was single, separate pages. And a few of us sat on chairs, it was in a room opposite the university, there was a café there then. And we... four of us or so, met at this café, sitting at chairs, and we kept on having to move... get up from our chair, and look over the shoulder of the person who had the page of script where you wanted to read. Anyway, we read *The Birthday Party* in that kind of roundabout way. And it was the same kind of atmosphere that one had, that this was just fucking riveting. It was just riveting. Which I suppose is because saying that Ionesco was the trendy writer of the time as it were, I'd read... what year was *Waiting for Godot*? You'd know *Waiting for Godot*.

JA: '55 in England I think.

SE: I mean, I was in love with *Godot* as it were, and seen that about... I'd seen... well I'd seen the Bristol Old Vic version with Peter O'Toole every night for three weeks, because I was so enamoured with it. So Beckett's writing riveted me, but so did Harold's.

JA: Did you feel this was fitting into that context or did you...?

SE: Yes.

JA: ...of Beckett, Ionesco, etc?

SE: Yes.

JA: Right, OK. Were there any discussions during rehearsal that you can remember, to do with interpretation?

SE: No. You didn't do that. You didn't do that if you were drama students. I mean we were student... well we weren't all drama students anyway – George [Odlum] wasn't even a drama student. No. I mean Henry directed us, and perhaps he said you know, don't do it like that, or whatever. I don't think... I think when writing is good you don't have to do that actually, because if writing is that vivid, and you're given a part to do that... of course I was whatever I was at the time, 18, 19, and Rose Hudd is in her fifties I suppose, that doesn't matter, you have to pretend you're in the fifties.

But I don't think any of that... like as that young lady who played Rose this year was asking me about positions, and where we had our armchair and all that. Somehow those things... I suppose they were important, because they always are in a production, but they weren't that important in my memory as it were. I mean what was important was that we were those characters and that the lines... the suspense of the lines, it was very... I mean the play is so weird, and it's full of suspense. And that carried us along,

that kind of 'who the hell's that knocking at the door', and these weird people – so weird.

JA: On a more literal level then, you must... well, did you ask yourself who is Rose, where has she come from, who...?

SE: Of course. I was going to be an actress, so... funnily enough I hadn't been to drama school, but without being to drama school... where actually I learnt nothing. I think if you're going to act and you're going to be any use at all as an actor, you instinctively... I mean, I can remember doing Electra earlier on, and you instinctively do a whole Stanislavski job without knowing what you're doing, because instinctively you're acting a part... you have to go back into yourself, you have to say can... you know this is like somebody I know. That's what acting is, do you know what I mean?

JA: Can you remember the answers to those questions?

SE: Pardon?

JA: Can you remember the answers to the questions you were asking yourself then? Who did you think Riley was in relation...?

SE: Who do I think Rose was?

JA: Rose... who do you think Riley was in relation to Rose? What was the home that she had to go to?

SE: One didn't... I didn't know. I didn't look for answer... I don't think that looking for answers... It's funny how people would work nowadays, or drama school would work nowadays. I don't know that would necessarily help you. Rose doesn't know, there isn't an answer. And if you put an answer in there it would be quite wrong. That's what poetry is isn't it? I mean you don't know. And everybody has their own private... and if they're true to their own private vision, that they don't have to share because they're going to share it when they act, and people are going to think. So kind of doing an interpretation is not the way. Not the way we worked.

JA: Do you remember any contact with Pinter during these rehearsal periods?

SE: Yes, well I can remember the night he was free from his tour. I can't remember how many performances we gave. Perhaps two, three?

JA: There were two performances.

SE: That's all?

JA: Yes, yes.

SE: So the second must have been a Saturday night. I don't know, I can't even remember when it was. But Harold...

JA: Actually it was Wednesday and Thursday, second was a Thursday.

SE: Was it? So Wednesday and Thursday. Well somehow Harold must have managed to get there. Or maybe... I don't even know whether Harold saw it. I mean he certainly was at a party afterwards. And I can remember he was very pleased. He was like one of us, except he was rather glamorous and he was a professional actor. And he was just rather thrilled that his... you know, we'd done his play, and it had gone well.

JA: But there wasn't any interaction before the first two performances, no? During rehearsals?

SE: No, because I think he was on tour and he was busy.

JA: OK. Now when we come to these two – the opening night and the second night – the two nights of the first production, can you remember what the make up of the audience was? Was it mainly students? Did you make any effort beforehand to get...?

SE: No.

JA: ...a wider public...?

SE: I can't remember how many people fit into that little studio. 50? 40? 30? I haven't a clue.

JA: Probably no more than 50.

SE: 25? 30? It was full, and obviously fuller. If there were any empty seats of the first day, there weren't on the second day, because it kind of went down very well.

JA: But those... can you remember, were they mainly students, contemporaries?

SE: Yes, probably.

JA: We know that there were two reviews immediately of the production, was that usual for DramSoc to invite reviewers?

SE: No, not at all. No. [It was not a DramaSoc production]. I think that was unusual. I think. Although when we did other show... no, perhaps it wasn't. I mean there were reviews of Electra... there were reviews of our other shows, but they were done in the Vic rooms. There were reviews.

I mean, I have to say Bristol was wonderfully theatrically motivated – sad that I'm saying it now. Bristol was a very theatrically motivated city. There was the BBC drama department, there was the Bristol Old Vic, there was the Bristol Old Vic School, there was a drama department, and they were the Western... there was another repertory company – whatever they were called, I've forgotten now... the Little Theatre. I mean there were like six or seven organisations, who all competed with each other anyway, but there were all... they'd all be written about. I mean the local paper – it was a local rag – would you know send somebody round for all of them. I mean for most things that they did. So I suppose the drama department was included in that, just naturally.

JA: OK. Now in terms of the audience reaction, can you remember how they reacted?

SE: No, I can't.

JA: Whether people laughed when you expected or otherwise?

SE: Listen, I was a student and so I didn't... I wasn't blasé enough to understand, 'oh, this is...!' It obviously went down well - we were obviously a hit in our way. But that's all I can remember, as a student, you know. So we were a great student hit. But I do remember that... I mean, what I said to you before, earlier, very passionately that there wasn't any... I don't think necessarily that Henry – you'd have to ask him that – whether he gave George Brandt the script – maybe he did – beforehand to read. I don't know whether he did. He would know that. He would probably remember that.

And in my... somehow in my memory there was a... from the actual drama department downwards, from Glynne Wickham downwards, there was a patronising... I mean we were well patronised, 'well done folks' you know, 'you did very well'. But there wasn't... as I say there hadn't been any help beforehand, and afterwards it was just well done folks. That's all, there wasn't... it wasn't big time you know.

JA: So your expectations, the end of the second night, it had been a big hit, did you expect that there would be another production somehow?

SE: I wasn't interested in what we were or we weren't. I was only interested in doing the play as well as possible. And I knew the play was very riveting and very exciting. Bother, bugger what anybody else thought. I mean...

JA: But if it had only been two nights, there must have been some expectation that it's something that should be revived, should be seen again.

SE: Yes, of course, yes. Perhaps it was received much better than... perhaps it was received much better than one had anticipated. I don't know. Because as I say, I keep sort of saying, it's not because I'm particularly modest or anything, but one didn't have particularly high expectations about how many times we're going to do this, and how many great reviews. And as you can see from that little postcard that Harold wrote me, we were thrilled that the reviews – the local reviews – were so good. And he wanted to have lots of copies of them. And that was exciting. But you have to remember it was very small time. I mean, it was tiny time you know.

JA: OK. There's one specific incident... well, talking about your character can you... had you ever played anyone significantly older than yourself before? Can you remember how you prepared for that role?

SE: Oh yes, probably lots of... I mean in sort of just... but not in... not in full length plays. I mean it would be things that you'd read while you were a drama student. And I was always a character bag, as it were, anyway, because I was rather overweight anyway – very overweight. I wasn't a juvenile. I never got the... I knew I would never get the Juliet parts. So, no it just seemed to fit fine with my kind of image of myself as a motherly fat old bag. [Laughs] Which I didn't need to feel, but one... you know how you have images of yourself when you're young.

JA: There's something very specific to do with your character, which is when... her name is Rose we know, and then all of a sudden she's called Sal by Riley.

SE: Yes - don't call me that!

JA: I've always wondered, the word Rose isn't actually ever uttered in the play, so people watching the play wouldn't necessarily know she was actually called Rose at that point – unless they'd read the programme beforehand, which we can assume not everyone would have done.

SE: No, they wouldn't have done.

JA: So it may... this surprise, shock moment when she's called Sal, did that ever occur to anyone that maybe people wouldn't know that she wasn't called Sal?

SE: It's funny question. I don't totally understand your question. I was going to say your question implies an attitude towards a play which would fit plays written before the fifties. I mean I suppose that's why that silly, stupid phrase 'absurdism' and 'surrealism', these were words come in which have got nothing to do with anything. But I suppose there's a reason for it. It's because there is a kind of writing where if something is weird,

poetically not obvious, that has a dramatic... that has a dramatic take of its own as it were. I don't think if a play is being done well, even the most sort of astute of critical audiences would think 'hey! No, she wasn't called... she was... is she called this or...' you don't... it's not the way you think when you're watching a play you know. I don't think it should be.

JA: Yes, no that's true.

SE: I think it's... there has to be a gut reaction, like there is to poetry or to music. Not... you don't think intellectually you know...

JA: OK. So at the end of the run, this was the end of May 1957, the play was next seen in early January 1958 at the drama school.

SE: Yes.

JA: Can you tell us what you were doing between... towards the end of that year? This is the end of your third year.

SE: Yes, I can't, I can't. I'm sorry I can't help you on that. I can't remember. I went to Paris. I was in Paris a lot. I don't know whether I went to Paris then or whether... I can't remember exactly. And I don't think it can be that important, or... I had auditions, or whatever you do to get into drama school, and I know that I was happy to get into the Bristol Old Vic School and do just a one year course, which is what they... I don't know if they still do that, where if you've been a student doing drama at Bristol University, you can do the Bristol Old Vic School in one year.

SE: I think I was the first to do that transition actually. And it was very tough to do that transition, because the attitude... I found the attitude at the Vic School, of the young kids who were sort of dancers and 'Oh, I want to go to drama school' kind of attitude, I was a bit older, I'd been to the university, I'd been to... I'd spent a year in Paris with Marcel Marceau – in Étienne Decroux's company. I felt frightfully grown up, and I thought I was an... you know, I was very arrogant, and didn't really... apart from a few wonderful tutors... tutoring I got from the movement and the voice teacher, one-to-one, I found the Bristol Old Vic School not a very exciting experience. Nor did I find the guy, Duncan Ross – he's not with us anymore either – particularly exciting, artistic figure. I don't think that's necessary, it doesn't matter putting that on record. I was very arrogant. I can't tell you whether... you see, I was arrogant because I had spent... after leaving school, and before going to Bristol University, that's when I spent a whole year in Paris, and joined Étienne Decroux Mime Company. And I had lessons with Henri Rollan at the Comédie-Française, and thought 'maybe I'll be a French actress', because in fact I wasn't born in England. And then I got this place at Bristol. I also had a place at Cambridge which I didn't take. I mean, I got the place at Bristol, and I thought 'well, that probably is better than hanging around trying to get into the Comédie-Française'. So I felt frightfully grand in my tiny... I was very arrogant.

JA: Can you remember who was the driving force behind picking up and reviving The Room again at the school?

SE: At the Vic School?

JA: Mmm.

SE: Rudi Shelly. Raphael Shelly he was called. Very, very, very important, and interestingly... I mean like I've been in productions, as for instance in 1988 King John at Stratford, and I was... as usual I was the oldest. And there were about five generations of actors, had all been taught by Rudi Shelly. And he came to see... and that's very exciting when you're in a company. And the 20 year old, the 30 year old, the 40 year old, the 50 year old, 'Oh yes I remember Rudi.' And he sort of, he had... anybody who was taught by Rudi Shelly would remember his quirks. He was famous.

JA: So he knew of The Room from that original production presumably?

SE: Yes. He did.

JA: And can you remember any differences in the way that was... The Room was rehearsed and performed the second time round?

SE: Yes, absolutely. Not so well. Not so well.

JA: Because?

SE: None of the excitement, none of the... You see, you know like you were asking questions before about what did I think about Rose and... I think if you do something intuitively with passion, and it's absolutely new, you can't beat that. And then you do something again, you know drama...

I've never been very... I mean in those that is – I think they've got better now – but drama school to me has always been a strange kind of anomaly. I don't think you learn much in drama school. And you certainly didn't in those days. And, apart from Brian Blessed, my mate, we were a group... I mean I suppose I was in a group of 35 – apart from Brian – that nobody else survived, or survived in the business, which was typical of drama school... you know drama schools.

And the other thing is it's very hard when you've done a play, and you've done a part, and you've got other people to do it with. And you keep on... your harking back, 'oh so-and-so was much better' kind of feeling. But it got the attention of Harold Hobson.

JA: I was going to ask, yes.

SE: So there you go.

JA: And can you remember, was that a great event when you read Hobson's review?

SE: Yes, yes. One kind of thought 'oh, brilliant...! Of course he's right, because I knew all that'. But then Harold Hobson's review, from then on the professors at the drama department, and the rest of the drama department, preened themselves, and were thrilled and excited with the success – yes, wonderful. And of course we did it here first.

JA: Oh, so it wasn't until after that second production they thought...

SE: Yes, it wasn't until we got the big... Harold Hobson big guns, which were big guns, I mean they really were. Hobson, he wrote kind of... you know he said this is the best thing since sliced cheese and... So suddenly... suddenly the drama department was very proud of what it had done – and it hadn't done nothing. It had just had a slot available. I'm being very nasty about that, but I feel so strongly. It happens in this business so often that some people take other people's glory from them. And it was... I feel so... it was Henry Woolf's glory, and Harold's glory. It wasn't... nobody else helped at the time, that's how... But perhaps that what happens when...

JA: It's important to set out that side in the record anyway to balance it. Can you remember was Pinter involved at all with the second production?

SE: I can't remember. And I'd be quite... I can't remember, and he'd have to remember that.

JA: You don't remember him... did you sent him copies of the... I know you sent him copies of the original review, I assume he saw the second review, or do you remember sending copies to him?

SE: Yes, yes. Absolutely. He was thrilled. Do you want to stop for a second...? I'm just... there's a couple of postcards that I did keep. Where are they?

JA: So you can't remember whether Pinter was there at the second performance?

SE: No I can't, I'm sorry.

JA: Then the next time The Room was seen was two years later in 1960, in London. Now I know you weren't involved in that production.

SE: What, did I see it?

JA: Can you remember if it impinged upon you? What were you doing at the time?

SE: I was... it impinged on me because I was very upset that I wasn't playing the part. But I totally understood that Vivian would be playing the part, but I also thought... I thought Vivian was absolutely spiffing. She was a professional actress you know. So I kind of thought 'well of course he's going to give it to his bloody wife, and of course I wouldn't get it because...' what's the date, 1960 that it was on?

JA: It was spring, I think March – March and April.

SE: Yes. Well I was also at the Royal Court before I went... I mean I'm very muddled but I got... I was kind of busy with the beginning of my career, so...

JA: But you remember seeing the reviews or seeing that it was on – your play?

SE: Yes, of course, of course. I can remember that.

JA: Great, well that leads us up to the end really of your involvement with *The Room*, so thank you very much.

SE: It's awful that one... the things one can't remember and the things one can remember.

JA: Well it's just as interesting to see what you can and can't remember, so it's... it all counts.

SE: Yes. You've got something that's...

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