

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Pauline Gaunt – interview transcript

Interviewer: Dominic Shellard

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Actress. Accommodation; audiences; Binkie Beaumont; Castle Theatre, Farnborough; community spirit; costumes; Noel Coward; Bernard Delfont; French's Acting Editions; Kenneth Moore; the Penguin Players; props; repertoire; re-writing scripts; salaries; sets; Spotlight; stage management; The Stars Shine for Jack - The Crazy Gang, Marlene Dietrich, Spike Milligan; Suite in Three Keys; television; weekly rep.; West End productions; Irene Worth.

This transcript has been edited: one paragraph has been removed from the transcript, although this remains in the recording.

DS: This is Dominic Shellard, and I'm interviewing Pauline Gaunt at the British Library, on Monday 6th November, 2007. Pauline, can I just ask first of all whether you're happy for this interview to be deposited in the British Library Sound Archive, subject to you checking the transcript?

PG: Yes, I am.

DS: Thank you very much. I wonder if we can start by investigating a topic that's a particular interest to our project, which is the experience of people working in repertory theatre. Perhaps you could explain to us how you first had contact with repertory theatre?

PG: Well repertory was – weekly rep – was my way into the theatre. I grew up in Farnham in Surrey, which had a small theatre – the Castle Theatre. This of course was all in the days long before Arts Council grants, when everything was run on love and ha'pence really. And they had a weekly show, which I always used to go to while I was at school. So my association started during the 1950s. And I used to go and help. And as far as I remember the only permanent staff - front of house - was that there was a box office manager, and I don't think he was really... I think he was retired and was doing it for practically nothing – and there was a part-time wardrobe mistress, who I believe was his wife, but that may not be true. And everybody else, who showed you to your seats, ran the bar, did the tea, were all voluntary.

So at first I used to go just to be in the audience, but as I had long before decided that I was intending to work in the theatre at the earliest possible moment, I started to inveigle my way in as fast as I could to get to know some of the company, and to be included to

help front of house, and then eventually to help backstage – literally starting at the bottom by cleaning out and sorting the prop room and doing things like that. And I was lucky enough to be included and used as a child actor in a couple of productions that they did. And then when I left school – I went to drama school, I went to the Central School in Swiss Cottage – and I used to go back to Farnham, to work during the holidays, and do pantomimes and things like that.

And I really wanted to talk about what it was like during that period of the fifties really, with weekly rep and the kind of things that they did. The theatre was unusual even in those days, in that it wasn't a proper theatre – well, as a lot of theatres weren't. But most were kind of converted halls or church halls or things like that. And the theatre had been a barn, and it was a very old building. And it was a tiny, tiny little stage. And very wide stage – well comparatively wide stage – but not very deep, only about 12 ft deep. And the stage was only about 18 inches off the floor of the auditorium. And the auditorium held, I suppose, about 80 people. And so it was all very intimate, because the front row of the audience were nose to nose with the actors really. And in fact we used to have... there was an architect called Falkland – Mr Falkland – who lived in Farnham, who had a gammy leg and was a mad keen theatre goer, and he always used to come and sit in his own seat in the front row, and put his gammy leg up on the stage for the performance. So the actors had to be careful not to trip over it! And you used to get the same people coming every week. And Farnham was quite a well-to-do place even then, and quite a lot of them had a lot of money – comparatively - and so they were of great support to the theatre in providing the odd bit of dosh, but also goods in kind, or lending furniture and providing things, and having the actors back to tea, and doing garden parties, and all this kind of thing, which was pretty good.

DS: Can you just give us a sense of the chronology of this? When did you first go as a child actor to Farnham, and when did you go to Central as a student?

PG: I went to Central in 1960, and I... it was when I was 18. And I started going to the theatre regularly as soon as my parents would let me out on my own, so I was about 12. So I was going all the way through the fifties.

DS: OK. Now you said at the beginning that you wanted to put on record, really, the mechanics of how weekly rep worked, and I wondered if you could sort of explain the process by which productions were staged.

PG: Yes, well I thought I could just go through the process for the whole week, which was fairly frenetic. I mean, people look back and say, 'oh rep. It was dreadful, and the standards of productions were awful'. But it's true, the acting and the production standard - the values were obviously not as high as you're going to get at the National Theatre. But considering the circumstances under which we worked, I think they were absolutely amazing. And if you had... you had your production, you'd have all of the productions for the month would have been decided by the director. And it would be printed out on little tiny cards which would be displayed all round the town. And you know, you'd go to the shoe-menders or wherever, and they'd all have these little boxes on the counter so that you could see what was going to happen during the month.

And the first day of the play, everybody (who had obviously had their scripts previously) and the scripts were - if it was a play that was printed - would always be a French's

Acting Edition. And these were hired and sent down to the theatre. So you sometimes didn't get them until the first morning of rehearsal. They should have been there the previous week, but they didn't always come that early, I imagine because you had to pay for them by the week. And of course if you were doing a play that had been in the West End then the Acting Edition would come with all the moves in it. So generally speaking that's how you did it, because there simply wasn't time to do anything different.

So you'd all turn up on the Tuesday morning at ten o'clock, and if you were Stage Manager you were there early to make sure it was all opened up. And we used to rehearse in a little room over the top of the auditorium. And you'd be there getting the tea and biscuits, and coffee – people didn't drink coffee so much in those days, it was mostly tea - and loads and loads of cigarettes. Everybody, I think, smoked. And my... really my first memories of rehearsals is that you could barely see across the room for the cigarette smoke! Everybody smoked... seemed to chain-smoke all day long.

DS: Out of interest, did audiences smoke as they did in the cinema?

PG: No. No they didn't. And I never remember seeing a sign up saying no smoking, but they didn't. [Laughs] But they certainly did in rehearsals.

DS: So you'd have a smoky rehearsal room.

PG: Very, very smoky, yes. And of course cigarettes, everybody smoked in the plays. All the modern plays, everybody smoked as well, which leads to extra complications if you're a Stage Manager because you've got to keep organising all the cigarettes and everything. So you'd have your... on the Tuesday morning. Rehearsals normally went from ten until one/one thirty. And the first morning you would block... the director would block it all out, which if you were sticking... well sometimes, particularly at Farnham, because the stage was so small, you'd have to re-jig a lot of the moves because there wasn't the space to work them out the way they were before. But you usually used the ones in the book as a starting point. And then of course the director would have his own ideas about things.

Then you'd be dismissed and the actors would go off to learn their lines, study their roles, and if you were on the stage management you then started to get the show ready for the next week, with props and scenery and so forth. I mean the actual number of people who worked at Farnham was absolutely minute, which was why it was such a fantastic place to learn about the theatre, because even then some of the bigger... you know, if you went to Birmingham or somewhere, they had quite large companies and they had their own carpentry shops, and their own chippies and people. We didn't have anything. We had the director, who was producer and general manager as well really. And then there'd be a leading lady, a leading man, character actor, character actress and a juve probably. But a bare minimum of people on a regular basis, largely chosen so that they could play lots of different parts through the season. And then you'd bring in other people as required. But apart from that we just had the Stage Manager and the designer. No carpenter, so the Stage Manager and the designer had to do all the carpentry. And who else? Oh and then, well the stage management team, which would normally be two Assistant Stage Managers and then two others, if you were lucky – there might be two more who were student ASMs, who got £2 a week, and if you played you got

another £2 a week, so that put it up to £4. And the ASMs were on about £5 a week. I think an actor got £7. The leading lady I know, in about 1958, I know the leading lady was on £8, and the director got £9 a week. Mind you, it went a lot further then.

DS: Of course.

PG: So there weren't very many people. So you had to get going on getting all the stuff ready for the set and so forth. And making sure you've got all the right props for the next day's rehearsal.

DS: Where did you store your props?

PG: We had a quite large prop room. It was a rambling old building, having been a barn. And you used to go up under the eaves, and there was this long narrow room which was full of props, ever since the theatre had been there. It was absolutely wonderful. But things used to get reused all the time. So everything would reappear in a different guise, in different plays. And then you used to borrow things. And you used to go round and ask people in antique shops and if it was something specific, like - you needed a wheelchair, you'd go to whoever supplied wheelchairs in your local area. And a lot of the shop owners, they used to get a credit in the programme. So it would say 'spectacles provided by -' your local optician or whatever. But to be honest I don't think - I really don't think - they ever got any extra business for doing that. I think it was really because all the people that we used to go to were all keen theatre goers, and they just were lending a helping hand. I don't think they got... I don't think they made a penny out of doing it.

So then you'd sometimes... and sometimes you'd get it from people who were not shopkeepers, who were also theatre goers, especially if you wanted some... if you needed some nice furniture. And then your heart would be in your mouth for the whole of the week, because you were terrified that their Sheraton was going to get a scratch on it before you could get it redelivered.

So that would take up the afternoon - in fact most afternoons for the rest of the week, getting stuff ready. And then people would come back the next morning - on Wednesday - so you only had four days to rehearse. So it was rehearsals, working on it, and then the show in the evening of course. And if there was a big show coming up, like if you were going to do a Shakespeare or something like, because every year they did one of the Shakespeare's that was on the GCE syllabus. So you'd be trying... or if you had a really heavy part, you'd be trying to learn that a couple of weeks in advance so that you could get your head round it. And that went on, matinées mid-week, two shows on Saturday - late afternoon and evening - and then after the show on Saturday you had the get-out. So you had to get the set out and get the new set in, which had been...

We used to have all the flats - the flatage that the sets were made up of - was all stored, and flat. It was very expensive to make, you know timber and canvas and stuff, it was expensive. So you used to have these flats would be used again and again and again. And then they'd be painted in between times in different things. And you'd have the same set of old French windows coming in in all these different disguises.

DS: Do you think the audience - your regulars - were aware of that and it wasn't a problem? Did they sort of admire the ingenuity and the way that things were recycled?

PG: Yes, I think so. I mean, you used to do a lot of living rooms. There were an awful lot of living rooms in plays then. And you used to do... we used to stencil the wallpaper. I did... sometimes I used to have to go and help the designer do that. So you didn't actually wallpaper the flats, you'd slosh in a background colour of pale blue or whatever it was, and then he would... he would cut... the designer would cut a stencil of whatever pattern he wanted on it, and then we'd put that in on top.

DS: You mentioned that the French's Acting Editions were a staple in a sense...

PG: Absolutely, yes.

DS: ...does that mean that a lot of the productions that came to Farnham Rep had originated in the West End?

PG: Yes, quite a few. I mean I had a look back through the playlist of the things while I was going both as audience and after I'd started working there. And I was surprised by how good the plays were that we'd done really. And that it was an amazingly adventurous list. You know, there was a tendency... you had to be careful not to lose your audience. I mean, there were a lot of reps who wanted - I remember later on - to put on Joe Orton, and offended so many of their audience that they never came back again, things like that.

But... and you also had, if people... things were not going to be so popular, like doing Strindberg play or something like that, which a lot of the audience would think is not laugh-a-minute, you'd got to... so your takings were down, so you'd got to then do a real rip roaring comedy - a Ben Travers farce or something - the next week, or, God forbid, Agatha Christie! But actually looking back, I realised that at Farnham, although I did plenty of Agatha Christies in other reps, at Farnham there were hardly any. There were murder mysteries and things, but there were hardly any Agatha Christies, who was an absolute staple everywhere else that I went to. But I made a note of some of the ones... some of them were new, some of them were classics, some of them were straight from the West End. I mean, among the classics while I was going, we did Shaw, we had *The Millionairess* and *Major Barbara*, and Barrie's *What Every Woman Knows*, Priestley's *Dangerous Corner*, *Rattigan's Love in Idleness*, *Easter* by Strindberg, *Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado*, *Eliot's Cocktail Party*, I mean, that's quite a heavy...

DS: Yes, a wide range of classical...

PG: ... wide ranging classical list.

DS: And modern classics, yes.

PG: And then you'd get things that had come in like *The House by the Lake* which had been a great success in the West End, and *The Chalk Garden*, *Glass Menagerie* Tennessee Williams which was of course fairly recent – and then quite a few musicals, *Me and My Girl*, and *Gigi*. And you can imagine this little tiny theatre...

DS: Can you say something about that? If you've got this small core of workers, and you're suddenly going to put on *Gigi*, how did that work?

PG: Well you just... it was very easy, you just eliminate half the characters and double up the rest. And then you don't have a full chorus, but you get people in from the local dancing school and... like we used to do for the pantomimes, and you do have a... you know, you have four or five people dancing and things. But you couldn't have much more, because there just wasn't room on the stage.

The stage was not only... it was not only very small, but it was not very tall either. So that the flats were only I suppose ten foot – less, less than ten foot, nine foot I think. You could... if you reached up you could virtually touch the top of the flats. And when we used to have to put the scenery up, I mean, one of the first things you're learning if you're constructing a set is you have to learn how to throw a cleat line, which is the rope that... Do you know how they work? Well, you have two flats are put together at right angles, or more or less at right angles, and they have metal hooks on the back, which screw onto the back with two hooks coming out. And you have to... a piece of rope is attached to one flat, and you have to throw it up over the peg at the top of the next flat. And then you have to pull it down and cross it back to the first flat, and tie it round so that it holds it securely. And it's quite a skill if you've got a really tall flat in being able to throw this rope over the top...

DS: Loop it over, yes.

PG: ...and get it over this little loop. Well, I never really learnt that, because at Farnham they were so small you could just reach up and put it on. So when I got to work in bigger theatres I wasn't any good at that at all!

DS: Can you say a little bit about Farnham's audience, because that's something that we'd really like to focus on in the project – the type of people who went, what they wore, did they dress up for events, did they...?

PG: Oh yes. But then everybody dressed up to do everything then, didn't they? I mean, I don't mean they came in evening dress, but you certainly wore your best, and there were a lot of hats. And I was thinking the other day that one of the things that has changed, and I think one of the things that is possibly... was partly the death of repertory theatre in a way, is that the people lived and worked locally – almost all of them. I mean, there were people who... it was a commuter town, there were people who went up to work in the city, but all the people I was at school with - virtually all of them - their fathers worked in the town. They all had businesses or worked... in whatever they were doing they were there. So people were on hand to come to the theatre in the evening. And I think when people started... when things changed and the

town... Farnham became much more of a dormitory town for London, and people driving to go off and work, and then people working much longer hours, and it just wasn't... you couldn't get home and get to the theatre in the same way. And also in the fifties there were an awful lot of widows around after the war. And it was part of their social life to meet up and have tea, and talk and meet their friends at the theatre. There were a lot of youngsters used to go. And I mean, we didn't have... in those days they didn't have any of the wonderful youth programmes that you get now in theatres. There was no Saturday morning theatre club or anything - there wouldn't have been time for anybody to run it. But there was nothing like that. But I mean we used to go in a gang from school, those of us who were keen on the theatre. And there were quite a lot of young people as well, it wasn't as it sometimes is, you get some West End plays and you go in it is mostly a much older audience. So it was a pretty well spread audience I think.

DS: And what do you feel that the role of television was? I mean, we're often told that television sounded the death knell of repertory. You're talking about a period late fifties, early sixties, when did that begin to impact in your view?

PG: I suppose probably not in the fifties. I think that was too soon. Not enough people had televisions then. I mean the big spur everybody says was the huge number of televisions that were bought for the Coronation, which was '52 or '53. So that made a bit of a difference, but after that it still did take a long time before people had them. And I think that effect really was in the 1960s, that's when you really began to tell.

But there were good sides to it too, because that's when you started getting people coming down and being in productions, and so you start advertising it as having people from television programmes. And I remember having had Peter Byrne - who was in Dixon of Dock Green - came down to do a play. And big excitement, and interviews in the local paper and all that, and that became... it all kind of got bound up with it, it became part of it.

DS: And where did people live? Where did the company live? How did they sort of exist when they were working at Farnham?

PG: With great difficulty really, because Farnham is not the sort of... it's not like being in Sheffield or somewhere where there's lots of digs, and lots of people live in rented accommodation. It wasn't like that then. And accommodation was really hard to find. Now if you were lucky you might find some well-to-do elderly lady who had a spare bedroom, who would let you stay there as a lodger for much less than the going rate. So you did quite nicely. But at the other end of things I know... certainly know one person, who was on the stage management, who lived in the local doss house - which was not supposed to be a doss house by then, it was supposed to be a hostel. But it had been the workhouse. And it was where all the labourers who hadn't got anywhere else to live worked, and they slept... mostly they slept in dormitories. I think he had a room. You had to pay an extra 10/- a week to get your own room. But it was dreadful. But accommodation was so hard to come by.

And I suppose there must have been flats to rent, but being quite a nice area they would have been too expensive for most people. There were... there was a house which was rented, and sometimes you could go and get together and rent a whole house. I did a season in '62, in Guernsey, in St Peter Port, and we rented a house - a lovely fisherman's

cottage – and there were about ten of us. But it was quite a big cottage, it just went up and up and up, into the roofs. And we all shared it, so that was OK. But in Farnham it was a particularly difficult problem finding somewhere to live.

DS: I can see how that would be really exciting for a group of young actors, but what about the sort of character actor, or somebody in their sort of middle age? How do you feel the experience differed for them, or were they just so inured to it in a sense?

PG: I think they were inured to it. And in the fifties you still had people in their fifties say, who actually some of them still didn't have a proper home base. Some of them still lived out of a suitcase from one job to the next, because you could go and... you go into rep and you sign a year's contract, some people... I mean, there were people at Farnham who were in the rep for several years – years and years. So you could kind of settle and make a home there, and then when you moved on to another theatre you rented somewhere else and made a home there instead. So they didn't have a home to go back to in between times.

DS: So real transients.

PG: Yes.

DS: Acting transients.

PG: Yes, much as it always used to be really.

DS: Before we move on to the next sort of phase of your career, is there anything else you want to say about Farnham, and your experiences there?

PG: I was going to talk about the costumes I think, because that's another thing that's gone completely. That everybody was responsible for their own costume. As part of your Standard Issue Equity Contract, you had to provide your own modern dress. You only got dressed if it was – by the theatre – if it was period piece or there was... you know you needed a diving suit or something absolutely special. And it was in the contract that you had to... men had to have a dinner jacket...

DS: A lounge suit.

PG: ...a lounge suit, and women had to have two evening dresses and a cocktail dress. And everybody kept - which nobody does any more I'm sure - but all of the actresses used to have trunks full of stuff that you could alter and adapt, clothes that you'd got. And we all used to lend stuff to each other so it would, you know, feathers and flowers, and putting braid on things and remaking things, and putting hemlines up and down. And then of course there were no dressers either, so if you had quick costume changes

you had to rush off and do it all by yourself. Or if you were lucky there was somebody around - one of the Stage Managers, or one of the other actors - who would help you with it.

It was really tiny backstage. There were two tiny little dressing rooms, with a desk with just about room for four people squished up together, and they were back-to-back, and just about the depth of the chair – hardly any room to put your clothes on at all. So it was all a terrific squash, and occasionally you'd get things like somebody would go in... I mean, I remember one of the actresses going off and doing a quick change, and coming back and she'd forgotten to change one stocking. So she came back with one brown lyle stocking and one black. And then looked down at her legs during the performance and dried, because she suddenly realised what she'd done.

DS: Oh no! What do you think we've lost by not having weekly rep really any more?

PG: It was a terrific training ground for the actual mechanics of being on stage. And it also taught you to work well with people quickly. I don't think we had our best acting there, but it was a wonderful place to learn about the mechanics of theatre. And it wasn't as bad as people... People write it off, and it was much better than that. There were some very good – and very innovative – work done in rep. And I mean a lot of people started there, that's how they learnt their career.

One of the things it taught people to do was to learn their parts, which learning is... you know, nobody has to study so quickly any more. I mean, this is a real skill that has got lost I think. I think... the only people I can think of who do have learn a script quickly these days is if you're doing a sit-com for television where you work on... and you record it every week with an audience, and you've got to learn your script for that week and get in and rehearse it, and do it very quickly. But then that's only half an hour, not an hour and a half to two hours.

DS: So where did you move on to from Farnham then? Where did you next end up?

PG: Well, I'd gone... I'd gone off to the Central School to study. And I used to come flying back to Farnham to do pantomimes and things. And I also... I went out to Guernsey to work. And at the end of it, when I'd finished training, I was very lucky I got a job with Dickie Burnett down at Bexhill, at the De La Warr Pavilion, which was the Penguin Players. And he ran three theatres. He used to run the White Rose Theatre at Hastings, and he also had a summer season at Tunbridge Wells, at the Assembly Hall. And he was an amazing character, he'd run this theatre for ever and a day. And that was a proper theatre. Oh, and Eastbourne he used to run as well. And they were both beautiful theatres. And the Devonshire Park at Eastbourne was architecturally lovely, and still going strong.

DS: Can you explain how you actually joined the company? What did you do, did you write, were you approached?

PG: No, I was... I got in by chance because somebody else went sick, and my boyfriend was in the company and said, 'I know somebody who'll do it. She can come tomorrow!'

[Laughs] So that's how I got in. But I mean, one did write letters yes. And the other thing you used to have of course was Spotlight, who have a different... different tasks now, but in those days the repertory system simply couldn't have existed without Spotlight, which was... you used to provide your photograph and details, and they were all kept... every body - every director - had the Spotlight for that year, which was all divided up into leading ladies, leading men, juveniles, character, children. And they'd look at... Now of course it's all done online, sort of digital. But they also used to have interviews for... If there was a summer season, say, in Clacton or wherever, they would... the director would interview for jobs for the season in the Spotlight offices quite often. So they always had people coming in and out.

DS: That's very interesting. That's almost an [inaudible] to a company like H.M. Tennent in the West End in the 1950s where Binkie Beaumont controlled 35% of West End theatres, and to be able to work in those theatres you needed to work for Binkie Beaumont.

PG: Yes, yes indeed. Well, I did later.

DS: Great, we'll come on to that. Wonderful! So you've moved to Bexhill, is this in the early sixties?

PG: That was in 1963 I was there. And '64 I was at Tunbridge Wells. And then at the end of 1964 I was lucky to be offered a job, only it almost always [was] who you know. Somebody rang me up out of the blue who'd been told about me by somebody else, and they offered me a job stage managing in the West End, on a show called Our Man Crichton, which was a musical version of The Admirable Crichton, with Kenneth Moore playing the butler. So that was the end of my association with repertory really.

DS: And which company produced this production?

PG: That was Bernard Delfont, so another of the big names. Delfont having done more on the variety side than straight plays. So that was quite an experience really, because I went from having been with very small theatres and small casts, I suddenly found I was working for this company with all these enormous resources and huge sets, and big stars. So it was really chalk and cheese. But it was quite something.

It was directed by Clifford Williams, who was a very, very good director and had been at Stratford and done all sorts of highly prestigious stuff. But it was not something with which he was entirely happy. In fact I don't think anybody was entirely happy on it. We went up to Manchester and we did a month at the Palace Theatre as a preview before coming into town; we were at the Shaftesbury when we came to London. But we did this month, so we actually opened in London on December 18th I think. And the previous month we'd been in Manchester. And Manchester, believe me, in November/December is not a place you wanted to be then. It's improved hugely now.

DS: Was it the same type of arrangements in terms of digs, or was it a better quality because you were attached to a West End production?

PG: I don't know about any better quality. There was just more digs available because there were lots of theatres in Manchester. So you could find digs quite easily. But I was out in Old Trafford, which was fairly scuzzy. And I mean, I remember because it was just before the Clean Air Act came in, and I remember that it... I'd never been to Manchester - I'd never been to the North before - and I remember being absolutely horrified that you could put on clean underwear in the morning, and the atmosphere was so dirty that by the time you got undressed at night your underwear was all grey! [Laughs]

DS: Incredible, that bad!

PG: It really was that bad. And then I think that... I think the Clean Air Acts came in within a year or so and it all gradually got much better. And of course Manchester's wonderful now – been completely revamped. But as I say it wasn't a very happy production. The producer's weren't happy; there was a lot of American money involved. And there's poor little me being ASM and trying to do things for rehearsals. And I do remember on one occasion... and we had five people standing around the orchestra rail, all giving different lists of who they wanted to rehearse for various things. And the Company Manager... Company and Stage Manager and myself, and the other Stage Managers desperately trying to keep everybody from each other's necks, and sort it all out.

DS: So how did the London run go, when you moved down from Manchester? What was problematic about it?

PG: Actually... I mean, it was fun. It was quite an... it didn't get enormously good reviews, but it ran for about nine months, and I stayed with it for six months and then Delfont offered me a job on a different show, so I moved off it and somebody else took it on. But Kenneth Moore was absolutely wonderful to work for. He was really... when everybody was feeling at their lowest... And I mean we were rehearsing and re-writing right up until we came into town. And so we'd be at the theatre all day rehearsing and rehearsing and rehearsing, and then do the show in the evening. And then we used to stay on... the stage management used to stay after the show, because you had to work out what you were going to do about all the things that had been changed during the rehearsals and the new rewrites that had come in. So we were getting home late, late, late, late. But Kenneth Moore was wonderful. He used to go out and buy enormous great bags of sweets and distribute them to everybody and make jokes, and keep everybody cheerful. He was fantastic.

DS: Can we explore this process of rewriting a bit, because today if you do a rewrite it's just another version printed off the computer. How were you, as an ASM, kept up to date with the rewrites?

PG: Well, I mean...

DS: Lots of different scripts or...?

PG: You started off with your script and then you'd have rewrite... quite often, if it was small rewrites, you'd just rewrote them by hand in the script. You didn't actually get anything much on paper. Or you might get a scribbled handwritten note with it on, which you transcribed into your script. Because I was in the corner - I mean I had the prompt copy so I was prompting if anybody dried - I had to have the bible for the script. Sometimes you would get it typed out, if it was a whole new scene that would appear. But I mean, there's been... we didn't even have photocopying then so it was all being Roneoed you know, those terrible smudgy copies and things. So it wasn't easy. And you ended up with your script was... Unless you were lucky enough to work on the kind of play that was just perfect from day one, you ended up with a script that was a complete hodge podge of pages stuck in, and lines rewritten, and scenes reversed and all that.

DS: So where did you move on to after that experience? You said you went on to another Delfont production, I think you said beforehand that you then worked with Noel Coward?

PG: Yes, that was quite a... well a couple of years later I was very, very lucky, because in 1966 Noel Coward did a play called Suite in Three Keys - well, it was actually three plays which were all set in the same hotel suite, but with different characters. And I was very fortunate, that was put on Binkie Beaumont - H.M. Tennent - and I was very fortunate to be asked to stage manage on that.

DS: Can I ask first of all for your impressions of Binkie Beaumont, and how you came into contact with this very famous figure?

PG: Well I suppose the answer is I didn't very often, because he didn't actually grace us with his appearance an awful lot, except for you know, first read through and first nights and things. I mean he was... he was always very pleasant to me, but he was very grand and very distant. So you didn't really... you had to deal with his associates.

DS: Did he have a sort of aura about him, you knew when you went to work for Binkie Beaumont this was someone who was very significant...

PG: Oh yes...

DS: ...or had that disappeared by the 1960s?

PG: Oh no, no. No, no, no it was definitely still there. But I mean, I never know with people like that whether it's that you yourself know, because you know his astonishing history of all the shows that he'd put on, and that he knew everybody who was anybody, had worked for him over the last 20 years or so. I mean all this freight comes with it when you meet them. And of course I was only ASM you know, I was the lowest of the low. So no it was quite awe inspiring really. But I mean so was Bernard Delfont. He was quite jolly, but he also was terrifically grand. And I mean people... in those days

managements, they didn't notice minions, you know - if you were down at the bottom of the stage management scale you didn't really exist.

DS: And what about Noel Coward?

PG: Oh he was wonderful! I went into it with some trepidation because I mean he was by then, you know he was a legend. And sometimes it turns out when you work with legends they have feet of clay. But it turned out that he didn't, he was just perfect. And he'd been... we were supposed to be going off to Ireland, and we were supposed to be going to Dublin for a month to do the play, and unfortunately he'd been really seriously ill, and he wasn't well enough to go to Ireland at all. So we had to rehearse it and open cold in the West End, which was jolly hard for him. And he... when we started rehearsing it he was still very poorly, but he wouldn't...

DS: What was wrong with him, do you know?

PG: He'd had intestinal trouble. And he was quite frail. But he was such a gentleman. And he thought... unlike some of the management he actually did include - and thought of - everybody. He was wonderful. And he'd even made a point... I mean there were only two of us on stage management, there was a very [good] Company Manager called Edward Burrell and myself. And it was a very simple show to run, so we didn't have any other stage managers. And he had... Coward had found out from the director before we started the names - our names and the other people who he would meet in the theatre - so that he would be able to address us all by our first names when he came to rehearsal for the first day. And I thought that was just brilliant that he'd actually taken the trouble to find out. He was wonderful.

DS: Did he act in the production, or did he direct or was he...?

PG: Oh no he was in it, he was in it.

DS: He was in it.

PG: And, no he didn't direct, it was a director called Vivian Matalon, who later went off to America and worked a lot there. And then it was... well basically it was a three hander, there was Coward and Lily Palmer, who had been quite a famous film actress, and Irene Worth who of course was a wonderful stage actress. And then there was a guy who was the waiter who had a very minor part. But basically it was the three of them. And I... one of my jobs before we started, because the performance was delayed was that I had to go to Irene Worth's house every day for some time, and go through her lines with her, because Coward insisted that everybody came in word perfect on the first day.

DS: Right, that's interesting.

PG: And of course she'd been working on a lot of classics and was terrified by this, and was afraid that she was going... although she knew him quite well I think. But she didn't want to let the side down. And of course we didn't have the Irish time, so we were short of time. So I had to go and do her lines with her, which was fun because she was a most interesting and charming lady.

DS: So when it opened what was the reaction that you can remember?

PG: Well it was a big success. I mean, it was a limited season, and it sold out you know within hours of going... of the box office opening really. We played to full houses every night. And backstage was like *Who's Who in the Theatre*, because everybody came to see it who was anybody in the theatre. And they all came round to see Coward afterwards, so you'd come up off from the stage after the show and there would be Olivier and Vivian Leigh, and everybody you could possibly think of would be there coming to see him. So it was a very special experience.

DS: It just sounds magnificent.

PG: It was.

DS: So exciting.

PG: It was, it was very, very exciting. And I'll tell you something else that he did, that Binkie Beaumont or the whole of Tennent was terrifically grand.

DS: So what theatre was this in – sorry – which was the theatre that it...?

PG: It was at the Queen's.

DS: Oh, the Queen's yes.

PG: And they... Binkie always used to throw very grand first night parties. But the stage management were never invited. And Vivian Matalon – the director – and Coward told him that he'd got to invite Edward and me. And so we were the first Stage Managers who'd ever been invited to a first night party with H.M. Tennent.

DS: And probably only the master could persuade Binkie Beaumont of the necessity of that.

PG: I'm sure there was no saying no to him. But he was just delightful.

DS: And was it a limited run because he was not very well or because...?

PG: Well partly because he wasn't well, and partly because he had other things he was going to do, so... I can't remember exactly how many weeks it was now. But it was just as well it was limited, because I was actually pregnant, and so I sat in the corner getting bigger and bigger and bigger. And I have this beautiful letter that he wrote. He wanted to know whether... he said it was going to be a little girl, and he asked me to let him know after the show finished. And I wrote and told him when my daughter was born that he was absolutely right. And I have this lovely letter that he wrote to me about her afterwards.

DS: So how did your life change after your daughter was born? Did you continue your connection with the theatre?

PG: Oh yes, yes I did. But I stuck really with theatre in the West End, because my husband was directing and acting and running companies, and flitting about all over the country for work – as one did. And really somebody had to stay home and look after children and I... so I worked for many years. Well from '64 was when I started working in the West End, and I worked until 1979, which was when I started working in television. But for the whole of that time I worked in the West End, going from more or less from one show to another.

Because it actually... if you're... it's not as stretching as it might be, but if you're fortunate enough to get on to a show that runs for a long time, once you've actually... especially if it isn't a musical and you... musicals tend to have a lot of people within, there is extra rehearsals called, all at the drop of a hat and all that. But if you've got a straight play it actually, once it's on, works out to be a fairly easy week. And of course your show... most of your working week is the evenings. So I used to have an au pair who would babysit for the children in the evenings, and then I could go in for matinées and understudy calls and things like during the day. But a lot of my daytimes were free, so I could be free with the children. So it did work, that worked out quite well.

DS: Comparing you to other interviewees that we've had, it strikes me that you've had a really sort of special experience. On the one hand you've been immersed at the beginning of your career in repertory theatre... I hesitate to say the sort of two polar extremes of British theatre, but there's the repertory theatre and then...

PG: Oh no, they are two polar extremes, yes.

DS: ...Binkie Beaumont and Noel Coward. And I wonder just by way of sort of concluding remarks really, you could reflect on the sort of strengths and weaknesses of the two, because certainly 'til very recently repertory theatre has had a really terrible press. Most theatre histories talk about well, you know: 'thank God it was killed off by television'. But equally Binkie Beaumont and that type of theatre, until recently, was heavy criticised as well. But now I think there's a more broader understanding of the

two. And I just wondered how you felt about the slightly dismissive attitude that luckily has been challenged now, I think.

PG: I think there is always, as things change and new things come in, whatever was immediately before always gets knocked and pulled down. And then it's just like architecture. I mean, I remember, you know, when thirties stuff was all considered awful. And then as... and then you suddenly find it's all fashionable again and people... usually it misses a generation, and then you start looking at it again and say 'oh well actually it's really rather good'. And I think that applied to theatre as well.

I think it's... there's room for all of it really. Everything made a big contribution in different ways. Though what you did have in repertory - because you had people working together for such a long time - you had the communal theatre thing which you got with people like Joan Littlewood's company, and some of the other companies as well. There is an awful lot of good that comes out of people working as a group together for a long period, and doing different plays together. I think that's very beneficial. And I think that's something that has been lost a bit. Because even at the National now you don't get people... when I look at the cast list, you know they... you don't get people being in all of the productions. Sometimes they're only in one of the productions, and they're not working as a team all of the time. So I think that's something that's lost. But then you know we do have wonderful things like the National now which we didn't before.

DS: Absolutely. Are there any final observations you'd like to make? Have we covered the ground that you wanted to cover?

PG: Oh I did want to... I did want to mention one particular production, just in case nobody else had ever mentioned it, which was a one off way back in 1965. And at the time when I was working for Bernard Delfont, and Jack Hilton the band leader died, who had... I mean apart from being an amazing band leader and on a par with Paul Whiteman and people like that, he had then become a very, very successful impresario, and had put on lots of musicals. And his last one was Camelot, which was at Drury Lane. And when he died, Delfont's organised a big show in his memory, which was called The Stars Shine for Jack.

And I was asked if I would go and be an ASM on it, just for this one-off production. And it was slightly outside my field really, because it was all variety people rather than plays, or even musicals. But it did just have everybody in it. We had the Crazy Gang, who had all retired, were re-formed to do a part of it. And one of my jobs during rehearsals was to rehearse with the Crazy Gang. And we had a room at the Victoria Palace, which of course was their old theatre where we rehearsed. And they all came ambling in, shuffled in. But they were so funny, they were lovely. So they came. And Arthur Askey was in it, and Shirley Bassey and Dickie Henderson, and the Goons. And on the actual night of the show I got deputised to keep an eye on Spike Milligan who has a habit - had a habit - of going awol. So I was put down to never leave his side and make sure he's in the wings at the time he's supposed to walk on stage. And we also had Vera Lynn who arrived looking as though she'd been out walking the Labradors, all tweedy and then appeared resplendent in blue tulle for the actual show. It was great.

DS: Amazing!

PG: And then the top of the bill was Dietrich, who arrived... I don't know what I was doing, but I happened... she arrived early and there was nobody there, everybody had gone for lunch, except me. And I was on the stage in Drury Lane, all by myself, and I looked up and suddenly there's Marlene Dietrich, all by herself. She'd just got out of her car and walked in – no entourage, nothing – and come to do her... to rehearse her piece.

DS: Amazing!

PG: She was great.

DS: What an experience!

PG: Oh yes. And then she actually appeared... she was absolute object lesson in how to dress, and how... she appeared in this wonderful soft jersey dress. She had this clingy kind of Greek dress, in very light beige, which was right from under her chin down to her toes, long arms. And when she stood there under the lights and they lit it, she just looked a million dollars, absolutely wonderful, because she was not young herself by then. So that was a wonderful bonus of having been involved with the Delfont organisation, to be asked to work on that show...

DS: To work on that show.

PG: ... and seeing all those people at close hand.

DS: At a prestigious event.

PG: Yes.

DS: Yes. Well thank you ever so much indeed for sharing your memories with us. That's been really fantastic. Thank you.