

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Robert Cawley – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sophie Lightfoot

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Theatre-goer. Peggy Ashcroft; censorship; costumes; critics; John Gielgud; Hamlet; musicals; new wave writing; Laurence Olivier; playwrights; Terence Rattigan; regional theatre; Royal Court Theatre; scripts; Shakespeare; star actors; St Joan; theatre-going; theatre in the round; ticket price; Kenneth Tynan; verse speaking.

SL: OK, if we could start with what your first memories of the theatre are.

RC: Some memories?

SL: Yes, do you have anything that...

RC: As a child not - as one would normally do - going to the pantomime, strangely enough. I lived in Woolwich and there was a large military barracks in Woolwich - there still is - and wherein there was a theatre which was open to the general public believe it or not, right on the parade ground and the first thing I saw was a circus - a small circus - in that theatre. The next that I vividly remember was being taken as a schoolboy to London to see John Gielgud in Hamlet, which I vaguely remember. I had the programme so I could say 'well yes, I was there' but really, it was... it didn't...

SL: At what sort of age was that? Can you remember?

RC: I would then have been about 13 or 14. Then really it began when I was in my 16th or 17th year. I was living in Shropshire, and I could get quite easily to Wolverhampton and to Shrewsbury - which had a theatre in those days - and went to virtually to see anything. I would have loved to have worked in the theatre but I've no talent of any sort at all.

SL: [Laughs] I know the feeling!

RC: But just the love of theatre. I'm not over-enamoured of modern theatre with the... open stages. Theatre in the round doesn't really appeal to me; you seem to spend more time looking at the people opposite you than the people performing on the stage. But

once the curtain goes up I'm lost, and it doesn't really matter whether it's hilarious farce or serious and horrible tragedy.

SL: Do you think that you got some of that interest from your family? Were they avid theatregoers?

RC: Not at all, not a jot, not a single solitary jot. I doubt if my father went to the theatre four times in his entire life.

SL: So what do you think it was that interested you particularly? Was it a particular area of theatre that set you off or...?

RC: I don't know. I suppose I love to show off in a way, which normally, one would imagine, would have led to acting but it didn't because I wasn't any good at it. But I just love the theatre. I used to make theatres, make up little theatres, for no purpose because I wasn't clever enough to write a script and act the parts and put little puppets on... I just liked to make the proscenium arch and some curtains that went across.

SL: You talked a bit about – it was Gielgud wasn't it? That you mentioned earlier, going to see?

RC: Gielgud, yes.

SL: Yes, was there something about actors of that period, the 'great' actors... Did you see any other major actors? Laurence Olivier or...

RC: Yes, I saw Olivier several times. I have to say I never thought he was as great as he was rated, except in his Othello which was just a spellbinding performance. It was – you sat there drained, you barely had the strength to applaud, you just... wonderful!

SL: What do you think it was about theatre of that period that had that effect? Was it the persona of the actors themselves?

RC: Oh no, I think it's... I've seen some people nobody's ever heard of but some people can grip you and others – good though they are – have left me particularly cold. I'm thinking in particular of, I know it's out of the period that you've mentioned... oh no it isn't, because he was going before the war, but Robert Morley I only saw three times, and I walked out on two of those occasions because he didn't give the audience the respect that we were entitled to: he ad libbed, he muttered, he coughed when he couldn't think of his words and frankly – and he and Wilfred Hyde-White was another one... [pause] and Derek Nimmo I'm sorry to say – they trod the boards for their own glory and their own satisfaction and to hell with the people who paid good money to come and see good shows.

SL: Do you think that that was a bit of a problem with the famous actors, that they had a bit too...

RC: Some of them, certainly some of them.

SL: I suppose that always varies though doesn't it really?

RC: If you read any of the theatrical anecdotes, you read these things and you just thank God that you weren't at that particular performance when whatever it was happened.

SL: Were there any particular performances where you can remember things going wrong or where there was a bad audience reaction or anything like that?

RC: No, not really. I remember seeing a production of... of Camelot with Richard... oh goodness gracious me, this is where age hits you – I'll think of his name in a moment - but he was so pompous, he insisted on taking curtain calls when curtain calls weren't – Richard Harris! – when curtain calls were virtually ceased. And he got further and further downstage and they dropped the curtain and he was left scrambling to get back in, and I was howling with laughter I have to say.

SL: Was there a period in which you started to really notice a change in direction in theatre? Do you remember any particular performances where you particularly started to see a new style coming out or you were shocked by what you saw?

RC: No, I think that over the years, I don't know what they would call it... ensemble acting has taken over. There used to be people like Donald Wolfit who toured 52 weeks of the year touring Shakespeare, who picked not particular good supporting casts so that he was the star and you applauded him and hardly anybody else. The second leads when they came on for their bow got about half a second of it and then he was in the front bowing and hanging on to the curtain. And there is now more ensemble acting and good actors are now quite prepared to take small parts which they certainly were not when I started watching theatre. The star was the star.

SL: Did you notice anything in terms of social realism and that sort of Pinter school of drama coming through? Did you go and see much of that?

RC: I did. I can't say I was greatly impressed to begin with, but you said Pinter... Yes, well Pinter's Homecoming I thought was absolutely marvellous but one or two others, not so keen. I felt that Look Back in Anger, they say was the great turning point in theatre, but I think that's only been said in retrospect, 10 years afterwards.

SL: What did you think of that when you went to see it then? Were you not greatly impressed?

RC: I didn't see Look Back in Anger.

SL: Oh you didn't.

RC: No, no. I use that because they say that prior to that it was only set up for Auntie Maude's afternoon matinée. Certainly as the years have gone on, the use of stage lighting has made a tremendous difference to what you're watching. Where it used to be done by cut outs, now they will back-project, rather cleverly. I'm not sure that it's always to the good. I think if you've got a good play, particularly in Shakespeare, you can play it to one drop curtain in the front and three flats on either side for people to hide behind and one castle wall and a tree, and you've got everything you need. If you can't use your imagination to get into that, then frankly, don't go to the theatre! That's a very old-fashioned view I have to tell you! [Laughs]

SL: Do you think, then, that things like the well-made play – I don't know if you saw any Rattigan – do you think that that was overlooked in light of new...

RC: I think that after Look Back in Anger, yes Rattigan was dropped and I think that Rattigan wrote some of the most wonderful plays. Brilliant, brilliant plays. He and also Priestley who is now having - thank God! – a comeback. They were playwrights. I mean, you had a beginning, a middle and an end, even if the end was left for you to decide which way it went. But it did have an end. Now, sometimes I come out of the theatre shaking my head and saying, 'What the hell was that about?'

SL: Do you think that that's a bad thing then, or do you think it depends on the particular play? Do you think that we've gone a bit too much the way of ambiguous endings and meanings?

RC: I don't know. I think a lot of it is down to the particular directors. They have to do something different. You can't do Shakespeare now in the costume which it was played in from his own day up until the end of the 1940's. Everybody played it in - and OK and it was probably completely wrong - but that is the costumes that people played it in. I don't see how you can have Macbeth riding around on a motorbike. I mean, that's nonsense. But we have had Shakespeare plays with motorbikes which are just beyond me.

SL: Yes, I saw one with a modern ending where they had laser guns.

RC: Yes, I just don't understand it. It's the words you go to listen to. And too many avant-garde directors must do things. Why - and this is politically incorrect, I know - but why anybody should want to go and see a black Macbeth is beyond me. They did

not have black Kings of Scotland. And to see a Romeo and Juliet where you have mother and father of both Capulets and Montagues white, Romeo turns out to be a West Indian and Juliet is from the Far East. I just don't see it. I mean, from the moment they come on, disbelief. That cannot possibly be the issue of that marriage. So from then on you don't believe a word they say.

SL: In terms of reinterpreting older plays, do you think that the plays of the late fifties and sixties lose something when they are reinterpreted today? Do you think that they are so set in their social... in the period they were written that...

RC: Well, to an extent. I mean, certainly some of the younger directors have given some wonderful productions. But they all seem to want you to look at the scenery or look at the lighting effects rather than the verse speaking, and I think that verse speaking has become awful. I think diction has become even worse. I think projection is a joke, because drama schools now seem to teach – I have a granddaughter at drama school – they seem to teach them everything that they need to know to go into television and they couldn't project across this room. I've sat in the forth and fifth rows in recent years, in the stalls, and don't know what the hell they're talking about.

SL: So you've noticed that then, a definite shift?

RC: Oh that's been a tremendous loss I think, to the theatre.

SL: I suppose the difference is that famous actors go into film and television now rather than going into the theatre.

RC: And young people are trained more for television than they are for the stage.

SL: What would you say the play that made the greatest lasting impression on you is?

RC: Oh gosh!

SL: Or are there too many to name?

RC: I've seen some wonderful performances. Certainly Olivier's Othello. Paul Scofield's Lear which, when we sat down – we got in rather late and just managed to glance at the programme as the curtain was going up, to see the first act lasts one and a half hours. But you sat there mesmerised. Of the Hamlet's that I've seen John Neville back in about 1955 was spellbinding. It was, incidentally, the first play that Judi Dench ever performed in, she was Ophelia. [pause] What other wonderful ones? I think I'd then have to go on to musicals rather than straight plays for ones that are so outstanding.

SL: Yeah, do you think there was a shift away from musicals and big 'spectacle' theatre towards more minimal theatre?

RC: Well I don't think I agree with you. London theatre now is dominated by musicals, absolutely dominated. Twenty, thirty years ago you'd probably find six. Now it's difficult to find six stage plays.

SL: Do you think in the period just after the well-made plays when elements of theatre became a little less mainstream and there were underground things going on, do you think it was more fashionable then to be minimalist?

RC: I'm not sure. I don't think I can cast my mind to any particular incident that would give me a firm opinion. Sorry about that.

SL: That's all right, [Laughs] it was probably my question. It wasn't worded very well. Did you see any more 'absurd' things, things by people like Ionesco?

RC: Yes. I saw Rhinoceros. I saw the Resounding Tinkle. Then there was – Goodness me, I've forgotten the name of it - where all the things in the dark at night are shown in daylight and all the things that are in daylight are played in the pitch dark and I can't remember the name of the damn thing [Black Comedy].

SL: And what was the reception to that? Was it bewilderment?

RC: Shattered, and howling with laughter as I recall.

SL: Did you have any outlets... Did you have anyone to discuss theatre with at the time?

RC: Well I met my wife through theatre; she was an amateur actress and I did have one little go at trying to do something for the theatre, I went backstage for amateur productions and built scenery which was about the only thing I was capable of doing... not painting it but just being told 'build me something like that and we'll decorate it'. So I built them something like that.

SL: And where was that?

RC: In Eltham, which was an amateur theatre called Eltham Little Theatre. It's now a semi-professional theatre called The Bob Hope Theatre because the nice man left us – or left them – half a million pounds in his will.

SL: Do you think that regional theatres and smaller amateur productions were overlooked in comparison to West End plays? Do you think it would be important to focus a little more on the work of those regional theatres?

RC: Well they weren't overlooked by me, because I went regularly – wherever I lived – to the local theatre when there were rep companies. Particularly at Bromley, for example, where virtually everybody who passed through Bromley rep went onto the West End stage with distinction it seems to me. They stayed there two or three years, disappeared and then suddenly they were working in London on the West End stage. It's a pity that regional theatre has gone. All they now get are touring productions usually with stand-ins for the original stars.

SL: And how did your experiences of regional theatre compare to your experiences of London theatre?

RC: Well it was cheaper! [Laughs] It was much nicer from that point of view.

SL: Did it feel more intimate?

RC: Well you got to know the actors. You'd see somebody one week playing the butler with about four lines and the following week he'd play Hamlet for example. He'd been given time off to just play the butler while he furiously learned several hundred pages of text. So you watched people doing all sorts of different things. It's amazing that after that so often they did go on to the London stage and then were typecast forever. They didn't use the versatility that we knew they had. I watched it regularly.

SL: Do you think that there was more of a social community around regional theatre?

RC: Yes I think there probably was. In Bromley for example, you saw the same people. I used to go on – oh, I don't know – let's say a Thursday and you'd nod to people you'd seen on the previous Thursday. It was as regular as going to church. You chose that day and you went.

SL: I was thinking about the abolishment of censorship and I was wondering whether you thought there was a noticeable change and the effect that that had on theatregoers.

RC: Well it certainly stopped a lot of old ladies going in Brighton, I know that. They saw people like Ralph Richardson coming on the stage and f-ing this and f-ing that and they were walking out and stamping on people's feet as they rushed to the doorway [in John Osborne's *West of Suez*]. Yes it made a difference but... yes it did make a difference and I have to confess that now I do read the crits very carefully before we go to London theatre these days. Basically because money is not as easy as it used to be and I'm not going to pay 50 quid to hear somebody cursing and swearing and running down something that I possibly like.

SL: Do you think then that critics now have a bigger influence than they did? Or do you think that people like Kenneth Tynan would have had a bigger impact at the time?

RC: I don't think there's mean difference. I mean he was a superb critic. I only ever saw him once - in a bar - and I thought he was the most revolting man [Laughs] the way he was behaving, but he was a brilliant critic. I don't know that I would have necessarily gone to see something that he raved about if I thought, 'No it is not for me'. You can... I don't think I have recently, but you... there used to be a critic on The Daily Telegraph called Darlington, W.A. Darlington, and it seemed to me that everything he liked, I liked. So if he said this was good, I tended to go and see it, if he said, 'It's a stinker' I didn't bother. Whether I missed something by not going I don't know but everything he liked, I liked.

SL: Do you think that the fact that theatre was a little bit more social meant that you saw a much wider range of theatre than you might do today? Do you think that it was more of a regular occurrence to go to the theatre or was that just you?

RC: No, I think the mixture of comedy, tragedy and musicals is much the same although musicals have dominated the last fifteen years and I don't like the fact that shows run for six or seven years.

SL: Not enough fresh turnover then...

RC: Yes... I don't know, twelve months seems to me quite enough for a show.

SL: Have you been to see any new versions of things that you went to see at the time?

RC: New productions?

SL: Yeah.

RC: I'm desperately trying to think... Only in Shakespeare, and most of which I haven't particularly enjoyed. As I've said before, I want Macbeth to look like Macbeth.

SL: So were there any other plays that particularly stood out for you? I'll maybe have a quick look through here [referring to the comprehensive list of plays which RC has attended which he provided]...

RC: Yes, go ahead. They're in alphabetical order.

SL: Oh wow! There's just so many aren't there? [Laughs]

RC: There's about sixty pages. I think there's about 1600 there.

SL: And over how many years is this? Do you know?

RC: It goes back to just before the war. But that was only a couple of schoolboy things, all the rest are from 1943 onwards.

SL: And you mentioned to me earlier how often you went to the theatre, how many times a week did you say would normally go? In your peak that is.

RC: Well if you look at that, there's about fifty or sixty years of play-going there, and I haven't been going regularly in the last five or ten years. So it's got to be 30 times a year to get it up to the 1800 that I guess is there.

SL: And do you think that there is another reason for you not going to the theatre as much? Is it that you're not enjoying modern theatre as much or is it purely financial?

RC: The cost is tremendous and age is a secondary consideration. And thirdly, getting value. I'm not prepared any longer to do as I did as a student for example, in going up in the gallery. I now want to be in the forth or fifth row of the stools or the circle and that financially restricts. Equally, there are so many plays that are on that when I read the reviews I don't really want to see. I could stay home and watch even worse stuff on television if I wanted to.

SL: You talk about the cost there, how much did it used to cost to go to the theatre?

RC: Well let me tell you that in round about 1952, 12 shillings and 6 pence was a front stall – that's 63 pence in today's money, the gallery was either nine pence or a shilling – that's four or five pence today, and you could if you were in London early go the stage door at nine o'clock in the morning, give him sixpence and you got a little ticket. And they used to put out little tiny stalls outside and they were numbered. You could turn up half an hour before the show began and take your rightful place as number five or number seven. Then they'd open the doors and you'd rush upstairs (laughs) If you've ever seen the film of 'The Red Shoes' there's a brilliant showing of that where the same thing happens, they've queued for the gallery and they rush up the stairs pushing all old ladies and people who are incapacitated out of their way and then laying down on the front row for their mates to come up and take up the seats eventually. And it was very cheap of course. Now half the galleries in London are closed for safety reasons and I think those that are open charge ten or twelve pounds which is a lot of money.

SL: Do you think that maybe it's because it was more of an accessible and regular thing for normal people to do? Do you think that's why it was cheaper at the time and it's since...

RC: Well few people had television. Most of my contemporaries did but I, for example, didn't have a television set until 1962. I couldn't see there was anything worth watching. It was all very grainy, it was black and white, only 400 lines instead of, I don't know, 800 lines. So everything you know... criss-crossed. So people did go to the theatre more than they do now, and to the cinema. Everybody went to the cinema once or twice a week.

SL: How did the cinema and the theatre co-exist? When cinema started to become more popular was there a decline?

RC: I didn't notice. There was a great dropping-off of theatre I believe, but that was in the early 1920s when talking films came in and I was only six or seven years of age and I don't remember.

SL: How did the war affect how much people went to the theatre?

RC: Oh people stopped. Both to the cinema and to the theatre. And there were wonderful organisations such as the Nuffield Centre in Piccadilly, which I believe still exists. Nuffield was the founder of Morris motor cars and Austin motor cars and he used to buy seats in every London theatre, every night and leave them in the services clubs and if you were lucky and you were on leave you could pop in and say 'What can we see?' You might be sent off to a Shakespeare, you might be sent off to a musical. They were great. And I saw probably more theatre per week during an eighteen-month period when I was in the army, before I was sent abroad than ever. And it was at somebody else's expense! It was great.

SL: I was wondering if you've ever walked out of a performance...

RC: Well I've walked out of as I told you...

SL: [Interrupting] Oh yes, I'm sorry, you mentioned...

RC: I've walked out of Derek Nimmo, Wilfred Hyde-White and Robert Morley who I thought were insulting the audience. I've never walked out in high dudgeon, only disgust. And disgust not of the play, but of the performances being given so slovenly. They should be ashamed of themselves.

SL: So it was more a case of the actors disgusting you rather than the actual content.

RC: Yes. I've been in theatres where they have... Certainly in Brighton twice and once when it was Ralph Richardson – I can't remember who the other one was - and ladies were not tolerating bad language. Mind you, that is a long ... that's about 1960 or 62 I should think, a long time ago. Now I think people are so used to television and the language used on television that it's water off a duck's back.

SL: Do you think that when censorship was abolished there was a split in opinion about how positive that change was?

RC: [pause] There were great arguments about it. I thought at the time that the censorship was quite a good thing, because I feared what might happen, which did happen in certain cases. But it really was very constricting. I can remember in my amateur theatre days there was a pantomime written for the Bob Hope Theatre and there was a character in it called Esa Slyburger and it was submitted to the Lord Chamberlain and he rejected it, that script, and he pencilled through and he had to be called Esa Slyone. I mean, quite absurd. And so, when things like that happened the end of censorship was going to come. And it did, very rapidly.

SL: So I suppose in that sense there was a lot greater freedom than there was before?

RC: Yes... I can't remember the name of the play now, but I saw it at the Royal Court at Sloane Square where they stoned a baby to death in a pram.

SL: Oh, Saved. It's Edward Bond isn't it?

RC: Yes, I was a bit shattered by that, I must confess.

SL: I think that's a very extreme one as well isn't it? We've read that recently.

RC: Yes it was. And you also had... to use the proper words, buggery and sodomy at the National Theatre which Tynan wanted, other people didn't. I think people have stopped shocking to that extent now.

SL: Perhaps that was just after the initial freedom and things have calmed down.

RC: I suppose it was, yes. People went a bit mad.

SL: You talked about the Royal Court there. Did you go and see much there?

RC: There's a fair amount of Royal Court [referring to the list of plays]. I'll leave that with you. But yes, a fair amount.

SL: What did you think of their work?

RC: Oh it was a wonderful, wonderful place and I mean some of it wasn't... you didn't enjoy particularly but... It was a super theatre. I've not been since it was rebuilt, reconstructed. In the last four or five years and that's sheer laziness. If you go to an offbeat theatre in Sloane Square you go once, you look what's coming and you book up for the next thing. If you don't go, you don't know what's coming and you don't bother.

SL: Did you feel that that was a particularly underground theatre? Did you feel as though you were part of a movement at all?

RC: I just thought they put on damn good things at very good prices.

SL: Is there anything else in particular that you wanted to talk about in terms of, oh I don't know, anything you noticed in terms of shifts in theatre maybe?

RC: I think I've told you that I object to contriving to cast plays against nature. I feel very very sorry for the young coloured actors and actresses who can't get in and then are upset and angry that they aren't playing the King of France or something. But you can't... in my opinion, immediately you see that you lose all contact with it, you don't believe in it, you don't believe in the character by appearance and you suddenly don't agree or understand what they're talking about. I just don't understand it. I know it's politically incorrect but I'll risk it – on the record here. I know that there are a lot of very very good young actors and actresses. And you do see a lot of girls and boys in musicals now; they are getting their chance in the dancing stakes. But they say it's unfair, they love theatre and so on and so forth but go to a London theatre and in an audience of one thousand you won't see twenty people who are not, to use the American expression, WASP – White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant. About twenty. And yet they demand that they are represented on stage. Well if they were represented on stage by proportion you'd have one person every tenth show which would be absurd, quite absurd. That's a little hobbyhorse of mine. And by the same token I do not see why – and I'm going on to film now – Kenneth Brannagh has made a film of The Magic Flute - the opera - and he's set it in the trenches of the First World War. Now I'm sorry, I just don't see any point in that. There's no relevance at all.

SL: [Laughs] Well, I think that's understandable.

RC: Mozart would be turning in his grave.

SL: In terms of famous playwrights, do you think there was a bigger fame for people like Pinter and Osborne and the Angry Young Men? Do you think we've lost the identity of playwrights? Are they less well known now than they were?

RC: Well of course Osborne and Pinter are still around, Wesker is still around – and excellent as well.

SL: Have you seen any Wesker?

RC: Yes, I've seen Loot and I can't remember the name now... you'll have to look in there. I just...

SL: I think it's unsurprising you can't remember, there's so many plays in here.

RC: Frank Muir once said that you get to a certain age where your mind is full of things and to take on any more you have to lose something. You have to throw one away before you can bring in another memory, and I've gone.

SL: I was wondering whether there was a noticeable generation gap between you and your parents in terms of what you enjoyed and in terms of theatre. You said before that they weren't really interested...

RC: Well, my parents didn't go and they hardly went to the cinema either. They weren't really into art in any form at all. In fact I can't even remember any uncles or aunts, or either of my brothers... I'm just the odd one out. [Laughs]

SL: Do you think that that was your family specifically?

RC: Yes.

SL: Do you think that more widely that that was the case? Was theatre in any way a thing that young people went to see? Or was it just the different types of theatre that split people?

RC: I don't think I'm capable of answering that.

SL: Sorry, it's a bit of a difficult...

RC: No, it's a valid question and I'd probably be answering for the next forty minutes changing my mind with every sentence.

SL: Were there any other famous actors... Did you ever see Peggy Ashcroft or anyone like that?

RC: Oh yes, yes.

SL: And what did you think it was about her and the other famous actors...

RC: Oh she was mesmerising, it didn't matter what she played. There were some very very good actors and actresses around just after the war. They began to make their name – and the war I'm using is the 1939 to 45 war – they'd just begun to make their names in 1938, 1939. Gielgud, Olivier, Peggy Ashcroft, Edith Evans, Anthony Quayle, Alec Guinness, Michael Redgrave... they were brilliant and they could play any part.

SL: Do you think that was their classical training?

RC: I think it was. And they had the ability to be heard wherever they were. And frankly I don't think they would have acted today with the subordinate casts being unable to project and wanting to be miked, which to my horror they've started doing on the stage on occasions. Which to me... if you can't reach back that far, go and do something else, go and dig the roads.

SL: I've heard people say before that it was their stage presence. That they were just mesmerising in a way which people now aren't.

RC: They were. They could hold you even when they were in repose and if they were very naughty they did, and take the attention away from the action going on on the stage by casually rolling a cigarette or taking a pipe out and knocking it. Donald Wolfitt was a shocker at doing that: 'Watch me doing whatever I want to'. So if he didn't like what was going on the stage then very naughty, he did. And people watched him doing nothing.

SL: Do you think that the social realism of the late fifties and sixties actually reflected the society that you were living in, or do you think that it was a bit false, a bit extreme?

RC: I think it was all false. Much as I like Rattigan you couldn't really believe in many of the stories, many of the plots. Priestley you had to throw away belief. There were so many time plays that you didn't know if you were in this century or the next century or a dream or what. So I don't think that that was the social times at all.

SL: Do you think that it became more represented with newer playwrights?

RC: Yes I think it did. When you got the Look Back in Anger, the new theatre... A Taste of Honey and plays like that which were quite shattering. I think they're better now, mark you, than they were then because we've now grown more accustomed to the conditions that they were in. For example, in The Entertainer which I saw Olivier in

which was excellent, but it was brand new and it was quite shattering. Now Robert Lyndsay did it last year, or this year, and it was far better. Even though it was set back in the Suez crisis which was 1960 or something.

SL: Was there a new take on it?

RC: No, they played it as it was then and it was... perhaps it was my generation looking back, I'm not sure what a new generation like people of your age would have thought of it.

SL: Well that's interesting, because my question earlier about whether theatre can be reproduced, that does seem to suggest that it doesn't really lose anything.

RC: Yes. Certainly going back to that, it was good. And seeing Max Wall in - oh heavens: gone, gone! - in a play that was done twenty years ago, thirty years ago, seeing him in it five or six years ago just before he died was good. It was up to date. Entertaining Mr Sloane is another. Going back on that, seeing it four years ago I think it was better than when I saw it twenty four years ago and I don't think they changed a line of the script.

SL: What do you think the difference is?

RC: I don't know, I don't know. Well I do, I think it's because we've grown accustomed. When the new wave came in it was to shock and they admit they were out to shock people. And they did shock people. Not necessarily to the point where you walk out of the theatre but you came out with a bit of a jolt. You'd think 'blimey what was all that about?' Now we know what has happened in the world since, we know what happened in the world at that time - not just their little bit, but all the other bits - and you can look back at it I think with greater enjoyment.

SL: I suppose if you see individual plays from that period after a break it's like seeing it for the first time I'd imagine.

RC: I'm afraid you'll find in there quite a lot of repeats for example. I mean Hamlets, I used to collect Hamlets - I'd go anywhere to see Hamlet and the same with St. Joan. I'd go anywhere to see St. Joan. On one occasion once in Brighton and once in Bath the following week! [Laughs] I wanted to see it again. [It was to see Jane Lapotaire who, with Barbara Jefford, were the two best Joans I ever saw. The best two Hamlets were John Neville and Jeremy Brett. I see from the list of plays I have seen there are 16 Hamlets and 13 Joans, but I think there are a couple more for which I have lost the programmes!]

SL: Is there anything else you want to mention? Any other particular plays that stuck out for you as favourites?

RC: Well, if I only had two plays I could go to, two straight plays, in my life again it would be St. Joan and it'd be Hamlet. But not modern version Hamlet! [Laughs] And St. Joan set in France not in Wigan or something.

SL: [Laughs] I can agree with you there. Well if there's anything else... has that covered everything?

RC: I should think you've covered... I'll think of other things afterwards I've no doubt. I hope it's been of some use.

SL: Oh it definitely has.

RC: When I responded to the last letter I did put down at the bottom 'I hope I will be able to contribute something of interest to your project although I have my reservations'. [Laughs]

SL: No that's great. Thank you very much.

RC: My pleasure.