

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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James Gill – interview transcript

Interviewer: Elena Thomson

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Actor and Stage Manager. Audiences; Jean-Louis Barrault; censorship; foreign influence on British theatre; Hair; Loamshire plays; method acting; Music Hall; new writing; John Osborne; repertory; Robert and Elizabeth; stage management; theatre design; Theatre Royal, Leicester; ticket price; Webber-Douglas Theatre School.

ET: What was your involvement in British theatre between 1945 and '68?

JG: I was a young actor then.

ET: When did you first become interested in the theatre and what interested you?

JG: I think about the age of seven, eight and nine, being an awful little show-off, and... fortunately there were books in the house, and that included Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare. And so I read some of those, and seemed to know about The Merchant of Venice and Shylock, and one evening I prepared Shylock for my parents when they came in... and I was rather good at it, I think – well, they laughed a lot! And [laughs] my mother used to have a little skull-cap, which looked very Jewish - I don't know why but, anyway, we're not Jewish - but it looked very Jewish and I thought that that would do for Shylock. So I did this scene from Lamb's Tales, and they thought it was very entertaining. And oh, even before that, father used to put me on top of the piano and make me sing Shirley Temple! [Groans]

ET: What was being an actor in this period like, what was your experience?

JG: I'd been to drama school, to the Webber-Douglas, I'd been in the army, and then I was out... out in the wild, out in the world, looking for work. I'd also had some previous experience in my local repertory theatre, which was in Leicester, in a beautiful old theatre which they pulled down in the fifties - it was a miniature Haymarket Theatre - and I had some experience there, mainly Assistant Stage Manager and small parts. That was fine, and then I did my stint at drama school, which was, in those days, more of a finishing school for wealthy girls becoming debutantes rather than serious-minded actresses or actors. There are very few survivors of those days... well, one or two or three or four maybe, who are still involved with the theatre in some way. And then, well, one hoped to get into a repertory theatre, and wrote lots and lots of letters, and then,

finally, I think, just by dint of keeping at it you finally got a job, and I got a job at a repertory theatre on the pier for the summer season at Bognor Regis... I'm such a name dropper!

ET: [Laughs] How do you think that the experience of acting has changed? What was it like acting in repertory?

JG: [Laughs] Well! Acting in repertory... I met a friend, or someone... I acted in repertory in Bradford in the fifties, and we always stayed loosely in contact, always pleased to see one another... and we were doing weekly, twice nightly, repertory. She is now at the National Theatre - very good actress - and my first words after greeting her were, 'Janet, when did we do our washing?' [Laughs] And somehow we did, and we did two performances a night, and we rehearsed the next play during the day, and... We used to go to the cinema once a week, we used to go and see another repertory company in Leeds, and we went to the swimming-pool in the summer and we found time for everything - I don't know how we did it! I've just no idea how we did it!

ET: Do you think the experience of being an actor is a lot less work now?

JG: The experience of being an actor is a lot less work? No, no, no, it's always been tremendously hard work, there's no easy way through to it.

ET: Were you also involved in stage management during this time?

JG: No, not really. In the early days, we used to sometimes have to stage-manage if you had a small part, and I think people still do, but... no, I did several repertory seasons, and didn't get very far, never earned enough money, and finally thought, 'Well, that'll do, I want to work in London', and so I became a stage manager.

ET: And do you think that stage-managing has changed a lot since...

JG: Yes. Immensely. That's why I don't do it any more. [Laughs] Because all the - oh dear, long pause! - all the digital and computerised things that have taken over. The first thing I stage-managed in the West End was a delightful musical, a wonderful musical, called Robert and Elizabeth, about Elizabeth Barrett-Browning and Robert Browning and it wasn't miked in any way, there was an orchestra, there were very fine singers, June Bronhill and Keith Michell, and an excellent orchestra and chorus, and people who could really sing playing other parts. Brilliant direction by Wendy Toye, and we did everything manually: pushing trucks with scenery on them. And now everything's computerised and it takes weeks and weeks of rehearsal, and they always stop on the first night and say, 'We're sorry, we can't go on, there's a technical fault'. [Laughs]

ET: You mention this musical, was the onset of musicals an American influence?

JG: No, no, not at all, it was music by Ron Grainer, and book by... oh, he wrote the Queen's speeches... not the Queen's, Margaret Thatcher's - not much difference really! He wrote Margaret Thatcher's speeches and got a knighthood for it. Lovely bloke [Sir Donald Miller]. So, no American influence at all.

ET: So do you think there was any foreign influence in the theatre during that time?

JG: Certainly, American influence, yes, yes.

ET: Did you notice any European influence, people like Samuel Beckett, were they important to the theatre at the time?

JG: They were very important, yes, because theatre should be universal, worldwide... Yes, I saw a production brought over from France by Jean-Louis Barrault and Madeleine Renault, which was very exciting - mime from Paris, just died, what's his name...never mind! [Marcel Marceau] What else from abroad? Oh yes, some Greek theatre, some Russian theatre, I saw [The Cherry Orchard] performed by the Moscow Arts Company - didn't understand a word but, of course, it was lovely, very exciting.

ET: And did you feel it was important to...

JG: Yes, to see it, to experience it, yes.

ET: Do you feel that theatregoing itself has changed, do you think it was more popular then or is popular now?

JG: I don't know, it's difficult to say. It always finds its own level - theatre does, you know. It's always, 'Oh, it's dying' and 'It's dead' and 'It's resuscitated' and it's the same with going to theatre. We've got so many musicals on in London at the moment that it's become absurd. There's not enough room for what would probably be a lot of good plays - difficult to tell. Theatregoing, no, I think it's still the same. It seems to be a lot more expensive now. I know everything's much more expensive, but now they're charging £60 to go into some places to see a musical, and I remember moving people into the Wyndham Theatre in 1972 - that was Godspell - and Ian Albery saying, 'We're proud to say that we don't charge over five pounds'. That was in 1972, which was thirty-something years ago. Well, you won't get much of a seat for five pounds, will you?

ET: Do you think that during this period there was a typical audience demographic, or was it for all levels of society?

JG: Typical? Yes, and there still is, although there are a lot more young people going to the theatre. I think it used to be slightly older people, more established, and then the

young people who were really interested in theatre... now, I think there's a lot more money about than there was then, and a lot of the people who have got good jobs and thirty, forty thousand pounds a year do go, and I don't think those people happened so much then. There are more of them, and they do go to theatre more often. Yes, I've seen them.

ET: Well, I remember that you've worked with some very influential people of the period, are there any you remember in particular?

JG: Oh yes! Lots of people, I suppose. To go back to Robert and Elizabeth: June Bronhill, a brilliant, wonderful, wonderful singer, I heard her, actually, doing - she's gone to Australia now and got on [in years], a bit like all of us... her voice was unique. Keith Michel was there. A real adventurer in the theatre and a lovely, lovely man. What else? What did I do after Robert and Elizabeth? [Referring to scrapbook] There it is. A brilliant play called Little Boxes. John Bowen wrote that, I had to understudy in that - wasn't easy, although I did have to go on... then Hair, I was stage-manager for Hair when it first opened in London. And there we have Paul Nicholas, still at it on television, Oliver Tobias, Michael Feast, saw him the other day being brilliant in Macbeth, Peter Stracher, still around, Annabel Levington, lovely, lovely actress. Marsha Hunt, legendary! There we are. That was a marvellous time. I did a lot of work overseas as well, and went and set up Hair in Amsterdam and Rome, with Victor Spinetti, who's still around and still with us, still buzzing with life and activity. Saw him recently playing Einstein, marvellous, mind-blowing. You're asking me about important people, well, Betty Grable, a star, a star, she shone! She told me once she wasn't a very good actress, well, maybe she wasn't, but she made some wonderful films and she was just such a marvellous person. The cast loved her. Ingrid Bergman the same, a great star, a marvellous actress, all that history of films. Wonderful!

ET: You mentioned working in Amsterdam, did you find that very different to working in British theatre?

JG: Yes, yes, quite different really. Here I used to find... the stage management team had a fairly good and close relationship with the actors, there they seemed not to intermingle so much. And I don't know if that's happening in this country now - I really don't know - but since it's become more technical I think it might have been. But I always liked any team I had to have a good relationship - an easy-going relationship - with the cast.

ET: Well, that's understandable. I remember you saying that you worked with John Osborne and didn't particularly like him...

JG: Couldn't stand him! [Laughs]

ET: ...what was your experience of working with him?

JG: Well, this was actually when I was a student at the Webber-Douglas, just after I left my grammar school. He was there, he was stage management and playing parts. Very good-looking bloke, but he used to look down on me, from his tall height. He used to... he was very vegetarian, and if we had any food on stage he would buy this awful stuff, nut cutlets and things, and then there was nothing to eat afterwards! I just... I think he bullied me, but then I was only seventeen, eighteen and he was about twenty-two, twenty-three, maybe? A little bit older? I don't know. I'm sure he forgot all about me very quickly!

ET: What did you think of his work?

JG: I didn't care for it - still don't - and I don't think it's because I didn't like him to work with. I don't care for it especially. I did a tour of schools in Austria, with Look Back in Anger, but it had been cut to one hour to fit in with the school curriculum, and I thought it was much improved - because it runs three hours if you do it all... his use of words, his construction of sentences, never struck me as being true to reality.

ET: Because obviously at the time he was hailed as presenting a very real life situation, with the kitchen sink dramas. Do you not agree with that?

JG: No, I don't think I do. I don't think this is how people spoke to one another. It never did ring true to me.

ET: I think I agree with you! There was a transition during the time from the well-made play of people like Rattigan, to the Angry Young Men movement. Was this transition as big as we are led to believe today?

JG: Oh yes, it was very big and very important, and John Osborne was very influential in it. I'm not putting any doubt on his importance to the theatre, he was frightfully important, and absolutely necessary. I'm just saying that I don't care for what he did. And since then we've had a good many realistic writers, excellent writers - we have a lot now, and of course I can't think of any at this moment! But they're all out there and they're all coming in, and that's good.

ET: And in theatre in general during this period, was it more realistic or a form of escapism?

JG: Oh, it was much more escapism I think, yes.

ET: Did it educate people, on politics and society of the time?

JG: No, I don't think so. Oh, Shaw did, Shaw was brilliant at it. His plays were educational and made people stop and think. And Lonsdale. Quite a few people of the

time, they made comments - and very valid, very useful comments - about the way things were with the people at the time. Like Dickens with his novels.

ET: Do you think the theatre of the time was quite a good medium for comments to be made on society?

JG: Yes, I'm sure it was.

ET: And do you think that's important for theatre to do?

JG: Yes.

ET: Well, obviously during this time there was growing cinema and television, did this affect theatre at all?

JG: Of course it did. Immensely. Oh, cinema was going to kill the theatre entirely, and you might as well pack up and go home. But it didn't. So was television- it didn't. And whatever else comes along, theatre will survive. It's been going since... [Laughs] for two and a half thousand years, is there any reason why it should cease to be now?

ET: Were there any groundbreaking plays, or were you aware at the time that it was quite a groundbreaking time for theatre?

JG: Oh well, I'd have to go back to the fifties... I mean, Hair was groundbreaking, because we weren't allowed to say 'fuck' onstage, we were not allowed to appear naked onstage, with the Lord Chamberlain and everything, it was simply not allowed. So we had to wait until the Chamberlain came out of office and then we went on the next night - we were ready for him! Well, the groundbreaking stuff was what happened at the Royal Court in those days.

ET: You mentioned censorship; were you very aware of censorship during this time?

JG: Very. Yes.

ET: And you felt that its abolition improved theatre?

JG: Oh, yes, immensely! I mean... there was a lovely Irish play I did, Philadelphia Here I Come!, lovely play. And we weren't allowed to say, 'For sure, talking to him is like pissing into the wind'. Now, there's nothing anybody could find offensive in that! It's a vernacular, it's Irish, it's very typical. I mean, I can't understand why you couldn't say 'fuck' - odd things about that time. But it was there, and for such a simple line like that,

to lose the Lord Chamberlain's form of censorship... now, I think it's responsible presenters who make their own censorship, their own rules, as it were, they make sure they don't go beyond the bounds of acceptable decency. And lots is acceptable now.

ET: Did you have any particularly favourite theatres during this time?

JG: Any favourite theatres? My very favourite theatre, my very first theatre, the Theatre Royal in Leicester, has been pulled down. It was like a miniature Haymarket - it had columns in the front, it was beautiful, and a Gallery, and a Circle, and a painted ceiling. It was exquisite, but, gone. So that was a favourite. What else? I went to the Haymarket the other, that is just an unbelievably beautiful theatre, and a very old theatre, and these old theatres still seem to work so well, unlike some of the new ones. Like the National - it's ugly from the outside, it leaves a lot to be desired from the inside, I think. But still.

ET: Are you a regular theatregoer today?

JG: Yes, I'm going to the pantomime on Thursday. To the Hackney Empire - oh, that's a favourite theatre, since it's been restored, it is absolutely stunningly beautiful. By the great theatre designer... it's gone, it'll come back. Matcham, Frank Matcham, designed many beautiful theatres in London and the Provinces. He was the best, also did the Coliseum, several theatres in London.

ET: So you still find theatregoing as enjoyable as you did in the past?

JG: Oh, yes, yes.

ET: Do you feel anything defined the theatre of the time?

JG: Did anything define it?

ET: Yes, any common ground between plays, or was it very diverse?

JG: It's very diverse. I mean, theatre then still included Music Hall. We had three theatres [in Leicester]: the Opera House which was a touring company, the Haymarket which was repertory, and the Palace which took in the Music Hall.

ET: Did Music Hall have quite a big influence?

JG: Yes, yes.

ET: Do you think that's still present today?

JG: Well, Music Hall as such barely exists in theatre. We've got the variety people who appear on television, but nothing like the old beltors. I remember being backstage at Shepherd's Bush Empire, when the Music Hall was going on, and there was everyone standing around smoking away, telling dirty stories to one another, and what it was like last week with so-and-so... it was almost a different world. But it was still important theatre. And one of the most important things - I'm going to the pantomime - is pantomime, a very, very important form of theatre, because it is what a lot of people see as their first experience of theatre. And it was mine, and I loved it!

ET: Do you think pantomime has stayed quite similar?

JG: Yes, yes, it doesn't change much. People say, 'Oh, well, you get people from EastEnders and Coronation Street doing it' but, we always have. We've always had big names appearing in pantomime, all the old music hall artists, they were big stars and they nearly always appeared in panto as well. I can't say I like the two cleaning ladies playing the Ugly Sisters in Brighton! [Laughs]

ET: Do you have any very significant memories of the time?

JG: Significant memories... just somehow, when I was talking to Janet - that was Janet Whiteside, lovely, lovely actress, she does a lot of teaching as well - how did we cope with it, how did we do it? And it's fascinating. I think if someone had set up a camera and recorded one of the performances, I don't think we were bad, I think we were OK - we wouldn't have gone on if we were bad. We knew our lines, perhaps not very securely, but we got on and we did it. And what has been a very influential thing is the coming about of method acting, which was happening then. And it's a very important part of working in the industry - perhaps more in the film, of the method - established by Stanislavski, but we couldn't spend eighteen weeks exploring the role and his reasons for being. I remember an actress at Bradford saying, 'Yes, darling, I've got a method: learn it and say it!'. [Laughs]

ET: You mentioned before that you thought your training was almost like a finishing school; do you feel that it trained you adequately for when you actually became an actor?

JG: No. Not at all. I'm trying to elaborate on that, but I don't think there's any need.

ET: In acting today, do you think it's changed with method acting, the fact that they can explore the character, or do you think it hasn't really made any difference?

JG: Yes, yes. It has given it an awareness, an air of competition. If I was to choose between method actors and the grafters, I'd choose the grafters. I've seen grafters at

work, on audition, and, my God, do they go for it! They're hungry for, you know, for the part, and that's very important nowadays. And I'm making comparisons again, but I recently saw a fringe production of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, at a London fringe theatre, with a cast of about twenty, and an audience maximum sixty, and it was one of the best things I've ever seen in theatre. It was wonderful, it was exciting; I went along a few nights later with four, five friends. And another fringe production of *Hair*, where they brought it from the Vietnamese situation to the Iraq situation. There they have these marvellous songs, marvellous book, marvellous message - awful word! - but it was there, very strongly, and it was wonderful. To see young actors working, and they really were greedy for, you know, to work in the industry.

ET: Well, finally, is there anything else you think is important in the theatre of this time?

JG: Well [Laughs] I suppose it laid the foundation, we were getting to the end of the French windows, and the drawing-room, and the grand piano, although there was some damn good stuff there too, Rattigan and Coward, and they're doing a lot of Lonsdale now, down at The Orange Tree in Richmond, and a lot plays from the last part of the last century. Is anything else important? No, it develops into another form of theatre, there's room for everything there, it's a universal world, it's an amazing industry which goes on in spite of so many things.

ET: Well, thank you very much, that was really interesting.