

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Marjie Lawrence – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Kate Harris**

**6 December 2007**

Actress. Arden of Faversham; auditioning; The Bed Sitting Room; Birmingham theatres; Peter Brook; George Dare; Marianne Faithfull; The Flying Doctor; William Gaskill; Johnny Noble; Joan Littlewood; Ewan MacColl; Middle Age Spread; musicals; Paris International Festival; rehearsing; repertory; Royal Court Theatre; television; theatre training; Theatre Workshop; touring; US; variety.

Note: this transcript has been substantially edited by the interviewee, the audio has remained unaltered.

KH: This is an interview on 6th December, 2007, with Marjie Lawrence. Can I begin by asking you how you first became interested in working in the theatre?

ML: Well actually I can't really remember a time when I didn't want to be an actress, even as a very little girl. And Birmingham was very fortunate - when I was a child, we had lots of theatres: the wonderful Birmingham Repertory Theatre; the Alexandra Theatre; the Theatre Royal where we got West End productions. And because my sister is older than I am, and she was very interested in theatre, she used to take me to all these theatres.

KH: Oh that's wonderful.

ML: So I mean, I went Birmingham Rep probably at the age of ten in 1942 and saw Hamlet and for the first time I saw Paul Scofield ... from then on I was hooked, you know – bitten by the bug... I used to do amateur theatre with my local church group. And I also went to drama classes when I was about 12, every Saturday morning at the Birmingham School of Drama. So I mean, I can't remember ever not being interested in it really. It sort of was my life. Consequently in many ways I was probably a bit ignorant of things like politics, and what was going on in the world generally, because I was just so immersed in wanting to be an actress in theatre.

We used to go to Stratford as well, which was not far from Birmingham, Barry Jackson, who ran the Birmingham Rep, also had a season he was running at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. So we used to get on the workmen's train and go and see all the plays there, on a cheap ticket, early in the mornings – queue up for the balcony seats, and rush up the stairs, all crammed in. So I mean, yes it was wonderful really, I had every chance to enjoy theatre.

KH: And later you went on to train in Birmingham didn't you?

ML: Well yes I did. It didn't have the cachet, of course, of RADA I suppose... or Central. But it was in fact a very good training, a very thorough training. I was there for nearly three years. We covered all the usual subjects which people do in drama schools, and they were generally very good teachers. And of course we put on a lot of plays and had a chance to do theatre in the round, which was then quite unusual, because they had like a converted chapel as their theatre, and the audience sat all around. Then we would go out and we'd do plays in schools. And I actually did a play in the ruins of Coventry Cathedral, which was a marvellous setting. I remember going there, it was a Christopher Fry play *The Boy with a Cart*, and I was a nun in the chorus. We were a sort of chorus of nuns you know, it was very enjoyable. And that was part of my training. And then of course came a time to start thinking about looking for a job.

KH: Did you have any idea what kind of job you were going to try and apply for?

ML: Well I thought of rep really, because then there were many repertory companies all over Britain. And I thought 'well, I'll try and get in'. But somehow I was rather keen to get started quickly, and as I left drama school in the June there weren't any seasons beginning at that time, but I saw an advertisement for a fit-up company, it called itself a touring company, which sounded grand. And the requirements were to be a quick study and have a good wardrobe. So that leads you to believe, you had to take your own clothes and learn a lot very quickly.

So my sister and her husband – she was then married – drove me over to Suffolk where the first meeting was. I arrived in my best dress, and my long white gloves, and my little hat, sort of very Princess Margaret who was the model for somebody like me. I was a bit shattered when I got there and saw how primitive it all was really. And we were given exercise books with four word cues in. That was all. I did 36 different plays in about eight weeks. All just learning the cues, then blocking it in the mornings, going home and learning it, and going on and playing at night.

KH: That must have been so hard.

ML: Well it was hard, because often everybody else was in the same boat, you obviously didn't get the right cues because they hadn't learned their parts, it was often improvising.

KH: It must have been very difficult to have a sense of the play as well if you just had the cues.

ML: Well it was. I mean, they were all really rather funny old fashioned plays. And the man who ran it, George Dare, was probably about 70, insisted on playing the leading roles. So for instance we did *Rebecca*, and I was Mrs de Winter to his Max. I was 22 and he was... well as I say, anything up to 70. And so it was all really rather weird. Some

of the plays I did know the gist of, like Hindle Wakes and they were sort of classic old... oh and we did East Lynne and really Victorian things.

But what was funny, they also used to do a sort of variety thing at the end of the play so that the audience had their money's-worth. And his wife used to do this act of a little schoolboy, you know there was somebody who did it in variety in television. I think Jimmie something, dressed in a schoolboy cap and trousers, she used to tap-dance as well. And then they'd do conjuring tricks, and I mean it was really...

KH: Sounds like quite a strange mix of different things.

ML: Oh it was, it was bizarre! We often slept on the floor or tables, travelled from one place to another in a cattle truck, which smelled of cows or pigs, because they would just get it cheap, loaned by the local farmer to move on to the next village. And of course very little money. I was glad that I had some that my parents had given to me to fall back on, because often you were given something like 17 shillings. So you couldn't afford proper digs. But it didn't last long, it was such a... oh such a tight and cramped experience you know, that you couldn't take much of it. I mean, at the end of eight weeks and 32 plays I thought 'if I don't get out of here, I'm going to have a nervous breakdown!' [Laughs]

But I didn't want to go home, because I had a feeling that if I went back home I might never get off the ground, that I would fall into the comfort of home life, you know. And I would feel a bit of a failure going home. And so I decided to try and stay in Norfolk until I could gather enough money to pay the fare to get to London. And so in the meantime, to do that, I worked... Another actress also left, so we went to a sanatorium to work, quite near, and which was living in. And then we discovered that most of the people on the staff were TB, and so we thought 'oh golly! We don't really want to stay here!'. So we didn't get any money from there because we ran away, I'm ashamed to say, and got on the bus back to Bacton-on-Sea, which was the last place where we'd been with the fit-up company.

And our landlady said 'oh there's a job going with Lady Rawlinson at North Walsham, she needs a cook for a few weeks'. Well! I mean, I'd never cooked at home, I was a terrible cook, I knew nothing about it. But I said 'oh yes, well, I'll do that for a while'. You know, I had my own room, and food was provided, and she paid. Of course they soon discovered I wasn't terribly good as a cook. But Sir Frederick, who was very sweet, found me one morning trying to light the fire in the cook's kitchen, and he got down on his knees and helped me with that. And then she decided to keep me on, just for the summer holidays, because her two children who were home from boarding school liked me, and we were good company. So she said, 'oh well, stay, you know, just to be company for them and do the odd thing'. So I was there 'til I suppose about October.

And then one of the boys who was in the fit-up company had heard of this marvellous company in London, in the East End, in Stratford. I hadn't heard of her, Joan Littlewood, or the company. And he said, 'we all ought to go back to London and try and get a job there'. Well, as it happened we did go back to London. I got a room in Swiss Cottage, he went back to his family, his parents. I had to take a job, because I had to get some money. So I took a job as a filing clerk in Victoria, in an office... it was so old fashioned! You know, you had to sort all the letters and put them in files, and put them in drawers. It was a boring - terribly boring - job, but in a way I was just thrilled to be in London. And in the lunch hours I used to love walking around, and going up Victoria Street towards the Palace. And it was just so exciting for me... though I'd grown up near and

in a big city, London was just so different. And you know, I was so thrilled. I'd been a few times before, once to the Coronation in a coach, my sister and I.

KH: Oh wow!

ML: It had been a few months before that. And I'd stayed with my aunt in Hampstead when I was about 11. But apart from that I hadn't really known London. So I mean it was just exciting really. I used to run out of money sometimes. I remember one night having to walk home from Victoria to Swiss Cottage...

KH: Oh my goodness!

ML: ...because I hadn't got enough for the bus fare. I was so stupid, because the lady I worked with, she would have obviously lent it to me, but I couldn't bring myself to ask. I used to do silly things like that. I wouldn't have liked to do it today, you know, walking through London in the dark and all across London... All the time I was there I was practicing audition pieces when she was out, in the office, and writing up to companies. But finally... I think it was in *The Stage*, that it said Joan Littlewood was looking for two people – a male and female – to augment the company at Stratford. So I wrote off to Gerry Raffles, and I got a letter back saying yes come to an audition on New Years Day, 1954, which I did. Well that was amazing! I mean, I went into that theatre and I thought it was wonderful straightaway, this old Victorian theatre. We had to wait in the long bar, and there were crowds of people there waiting. I was there for about two hours before I was called on stage.

KH: Gosh! That must have been very nerve-racking.

ML: Well it was, because oh God all these people! And the funny thing was that the person running the auditions turned out to be Harry Greene and I thought 'oh he's quite dishy'. [Laughs] Anyway I eventually went on stage, and it was the longest audition. I mean, I did my *Henry VI*, my *Shakespeare*, and I did a piece from *Wuthering Heights*, and then Joan said 'oh I want you to do something in your local dialect, something funny. Just improvise' she said, 'but exaggerate the dialect'. So I did a bus conductress in Birmingham, in a Brummy accent. And she... it made her laugh, she thought that was marvellous. And then she said, 'can you sing?'. I said, 'oh, I'll sing you a song'. So I did that. I mean, I think I must have been on stage for a good half hour!

KH: Goodness!

ML: And before I'd even left the stage she said 'Yes, I'd like you to join the company'.

KH: Oh, that must have been so exciting!

ML: Right there and then. And 'go and see Gerry Raffles in the office'. I mean, I just couldn't believe it, I thought 'how amazing! I'm suddenly in a real theatre and she's going to take me on out of hundreds auditioning'. But I had to work out my notice in the office for two weeks. So I didn't really go down there 'til about the middle of January.

KH: What were your first impressions of the company?

ML: Well, it was a company meeting... they invited me before I actually joined the company and it was taking place at night so I could go to it. And they didn't play on a Monday and this was a Monday evening I remember. I went down to Stratford and it was dark – everything was in pitch darkness because they'd had a power cut. So it was all candlelit in the local cafe where I went and got myself a cup of tea to pluck up courage. Then I went in and there they were, all in a circle on stage with Joan running this meeting. And I mean, it was just great really, they all seemed so friendly. And next to me was Josephine Wilkinson, the costume lady who was mending a pair of tights - they were playing Richard II at the time! And Howard Gurney said 'oh well, you've got to be a member of Equity now'... it was wonderful. I mean, Joan was her usual vibrant self, swearing like a trooper, which I'd not been used to at all. And I thought 'oh, this is a different kind of language'.

Suddenly there I was in this real theatre, a member of Equity, and I just couldn't believe it. From then on you know, it was like I was... that was it, I was in a lovely theatre, even though it was run down, a lovely atmosphere and lovely people. I got introduced to them, and of course got to know them when I started rehearsing. So yes it was exciting... I mean rehearsing a first play called Van Call, which was set in Stratford, about Stratford people.

KH: Oh that's interesting.

ML: And so she brought some people on stage who were working on the market stalls, and the lady who ran the local café – May's Cafe – she got on stage... she had them all improvising, pretending it was Angel Lane, because Angel Lane then was a market. And so I think we had about two week's rehearsal. But it was easy for me because the others were playing at night, but I wasn't, it was probably the easiest time I had really.

KH: Compared to your time in the fit-up company.

ML: Well yes! And it was really enjoyable. And I felt so safe, because she improvised so much, and you just got to know the other actors so well that I didn't have any of those nerves that I thought I would have the first night – I wasn't nervous. It could have been also that I had got a rather bad cold, I don't know whether it was a cold, or flu, or what, coming on, and a high temperature. And Gerry had given me some tablet – I don't know what it was – to get me through. It may have been that, but I wasn't nervous. And yes, it was wonderful really.

I was then staying in a house in Chadwell Heath, which was the house of the boy who'd come to London and mentioned about going to Swiss Cottage. He was away then

working in Newcastle, and so I was able to have his room. And it was near to the train station, so that was handy. But then afterwards I moved out of there and we were all living in our dressing rooms - illegally of course - because none of us could afford to pay for digs.

So I was there, and I suppose I did about 15 plays during that season. Great contrasts, which I loved... we did an O'Casey, Red Roses for Me, I played the lead in that, Good Soldier Schweik, in which I had a lovely glamorous part. We later took that to the Embassy, Swiss Cottage, over the Christmas period. What was my other favourite? Oh Johnny Noble, because they used to revive this quite a lot. Johnny Noble and the Malade Imaginaire - what did they call it? Oh, The Flying Doctor! - which was...

KH: The Molière piece.

ML: Yes, so I played those two parts. I sung the commentary in Johnny Noble which was very nerve-racking, because the original actress – Avis Bunnage, who had a wonderful singing voice, had to go home. So I had to step into it, the other narrator was Ewan MacColl, his voice was amazing. I felt very aware that my singing voice was not strong enough. But anyway I battled through, and it wasn't too bad. And I really enjoyed it.

It was such an unusual play, because it had grown out of improvisations. It was set at the time of the General Strike, or the Jarrow marches anyway. And so at last my eyes were being opened to politics. I'd been really terribly ignorant up to then. And everybody in this company was left-wing I suppose. I wasn't sure what my politics were. I'm quite sure my mother voted Tory, because her mother had, and all that sort of thing. But my father, as it happened, had been a socialist, so you know I had both sides. But then, I did become more interested in their... well their reason for being really, and the fact that they wanted to open the eyes of people and show what had happened. Of course she really did want to bring theatre to ordinary people. But I'm afraid like so many things, it's very difficult to do that if they don't want to know. We didn't have many audiences from the local people really. But word got around about this marvellous company, and the exciting things they were doing, so people started coming down from the West End. And people like Michael Redgrave and John Neville - a very famous actor who played at the Old Vic. Anyway it was great being part of Theatre Workshop.

And then we had a summer break, and went down to Bradwell in Essex to Tom Driberg's house. We had to live in tents while we trained but went on doing our Stanislavski exercises and movement, because ... we always had to have movement classes on stage every morning, however tired you were. And we used to do that down at Bradwell. And also rehearse some of the plays ready for the next autumn season when we were going back to Stratford.

KH: How was the way that Joan rehearsed different to the training that you'd done at drama school or even the rehearsals that you'd done in the fit-up company?

ML: Well, completely different, it was all very fluid. Nothing was rigid. She didn't talk about moves or things like that. The first thing was to immerse yourself into the character really, and do all sorts of improvisations as that character, and also with each other in character... we didn't get on to the script for ages. And so that you really felt you were the person by the time you got around to learning the lines, you know, and

that side of it. And she was never that fussy about moves. I don't know, they all seemed to evolve really. It all evolved in rehearsal out of what happened. And because it was not set down, you didn't say 'oh well he moves stage left, and you go upstage...' you know, there was none of that. And there was none of this business of... like, I'd been told at drama school, 'never turn your back on the audience' and that sort of thing, and 'always walk across stage beginning with your upstage foot'. I mean, all that went out of the window. I used to have to deliver quite long speeches with my back to the audience, because she said your whole body should be speaking, that's how it was.

Back at Stratford, we did *The Long Voyage Home*. But the most exciting one for me that season was *Arden of Faversham* which was an Elizabethan play – beautiful play really. And it was just so interesting to wear lovely costumes. And I remember... I had to do it barefoot, because Joan had decided that I wouldn't be wearing shoes. And one moment I remember was having to run on stage with an actor who was wearing big boots. And suddenly - it was fortunately the end of the performance - his foot landed on my bare toe, crushed it and ahhhh agony, you know! So I'm afraid I then had to play the rest of the run with a plaster cast on my foot – which was a bit out of period really.

KH: Oh no!

ML: But no, it was wonderful and then we were invited to take it later on – the next May I think it was – to the Paris International Festival.

KH: That must have been an extraordinary experience.

ML: Oh, well it was just amazing! I mean, I'd never been to Paris before. And of course once again we had no money, we had to take the set on a passenger boat, you know, big trees it was just three huge trees. We couldn't have afforded to take it through customs and all that business. And yes, we were put up in various places, and they treated us like royalty really. We were met at the station with bouquets of roses for the girls. Such a difference to what...

KH: How did it compare to how you were being received in Stratford?

ML: Oh extraordinary! I mean the other end of the scale really. I mean as I say we were fêted like great stars, because they read about this play, and they'd sent somebody over to see it. And we were invited to the town hall to meet the equivalent of whoever the mayor, or whatever he was, of Paris, and they gave us a special dinner for that, and champagne. And we had our photograph taken with the owner of the Hebertot Theatre where we played. He had his photo taken with us all around him you know. And yes, it was... well it was wonderful really and getting to know Paris.

ML: I had left the company officially just a bit before that, because Harry and I got married in March. He'd left Theatre Workshop anyway and moved on. So I didn't particularly want to stay on really after that, except that I did go back to do *Arden* in Paris. And we played it again in Stratford, leading up to going to Paris. But it was a wonderful experience. We decided to stay on for a while in Paris - friends, actor Zach

Matalon and Barbara Young, an actress, who were working on the Left Bank, you know in sort of the nightclub scene, said 'well, why don't you stay on?' – which we did just for a while. But it was difficult because we rang up somebody in broadcasting, the sort of BBC in the Champs-Élysée – the French BBC – and I remember trying to speak to him in my very poor French. [Laughs] And then he answered me of course in English and said 'don't bother with French, it's OK in English, but no work, sorry'. Anyway, we came back, and started off on the next stage of our careers... that then was for a while my last spell with Stratford. I did a lot of plays, 15, and they were all wonderful. I mean, I enjoyed every single one and every single minute there – though I found it hard. And of course at times Joan was a very hard taskmaster – or mistress, whatever.

KH: In what sense was she a hard taskmaster?

ML: Well she could be... I mean, she used to sit up in the balcony every night, the front row balcony, taking copious notes about the performances. She would then pin them up on the board, just inside the stage door, for everybody to read. Sometimes they could be quite insulting, like saying 'oh, you came on stage like a sack of flour' – really hard, she was quite hard on women, on younger women in a way, I felt. I suppose that was quite natural in a sense... I don't know whether I should put this in really, I sometimes felt she was a little bit off if you were attractive and so on. But that was a sort of natural thing.

I sometimes didn't agree with her, and I did once call her a hypocrite, which didn't go down very well. I thought 'oh, I'll be thrown out now'. But she didn't, no she didn't. She wasn't too well pleased when I said I was going to leave the company and get married. She said, 'oh you don't want to be just some provincial, suburban housewife, you've got the makings of a great actress, this is a waste of talent', all that sort of thing. She was a bit cross with Harry about that. I said I had no intention of becoming a provincial or suburban housewife, I intended to go on being an actress, which I did. And we got into television... really through Harry in a way, in the first soap opera on ITV – Round at the Redways in 1955.

KH: Had you done any television before then?

ML: Just one little thing. I'd done a children's BBC. No I think that was all really.

KH: What were your impressions of television at that time?

ML: Well I quite liked it... you see it wasn't like it is now - we would have a week's rehearsal. And I was trying to apply all the things I'd learnt from Joan – breaking down the script into units and objectives you know, and treating it really seriously. But I suppose then I realised that the scripts didn't take that sort of deep study; it was just a case of doing it really. But it was enjoyable and quite nerve-racking, it was live television. I mean, it wasn't like today where everything's recorded. So I mean sometimes you suddenly dried, it was terrifying, but they did have a sort of button that they could...

KH: A cut key.

ML: ...cut off the sound a bit. But it was still... you know your heart would be pounding like that. But no it was a good experience. And from then on I suppose I did more television than anything really.

The next play I did would be *The Knackers Yard*, which was at the Arts Theatre. It was a play by Johnny Speight, who wrote comedy scripts for lots of comics who all came to the theatre to see it because they were backers. Oh, I had done a bit of filming with Peter Sellers in *Only Two Can Play* just before that, so I had met him and Eric Sykes. I got a great agent out of that as well. So from then on really, during 1962, I don't think I ever stopped working at all. It was just one television after another, after another. But I did wonderfully varied stuff, because I worked with comics in *The Benny Hill Show*, *The Arthur Haynes Show* with Eric Sykes. Then I went into a play at the Mermaid called *The Bed Sitting Room*, and that transferred from the Mermaid to the Duke of York's. And that was very popular. I was about to have another baby towards the end of that. And I even managed to do a *Z Cars* just after, so that was in the July and Robin was born in September.

KH: Gosh!

ML: So I really never stopped in those days at all. *The Bed Sitting Room* led on to another play called *Son of Oblomov*... After that I went into a long television series set in Norfolk, *Weavers Green*, which was nice, because I went back to all those villages that I'd played in years before. But this time it was Anglia Television, so of course, quite posh. We were staying in a nice hotel. And that was quite a long session, about 13 weeks on location doing that. And then I went... I did an audition for the RSC, which I really wanted to get into.

KH: That must have been quite an exciting thing to be auditioning for at that point.

ML: Well it was and we did a season of classics, like *The Meteor* by Dürrenmatt and...

KH: That's OK.

ML: Anyway, I did two very good plays there, at the Aldwych. Clifford Williams directed the one. But then the most exciting thing of all was that I could audition for Peter Brook, to be in a play he was doing called *US*. And because I was there in the company I was allowed to audition for him. He'd seen me in *The Bed Sitting Room* and thought it was marvellous. And so I was cast in that. And I think apart from my time with Theatre Workshop which was great, this period in *US* was the most exciting of my whole career.

KH: What made it so exciting for you?

ML: Well, he worked a bit like Joan used to work. We did hundreds of improvisations... about the war in Vietnam. And so we had to improvise being American soldiers' wives,

we had to improvise being the Vietnamese or the Viet Cong – you know, the rebels. And we had to learn songs. We had a good musician come over from New York who wrote all the music. And I had quite a nice song in it actually, which again was exciting, because I had to step forward, centre stage, and sing. And I was working with great people, you know, Glenda Jackson was in it, and Robert Lloyd. Oh they were all so good to work with. We worked for four months on it before we actually put it on stage. So once again, we knew each-other's work inside out, and we'd improvised the characters so much.

KH: What was Peter Brook like as a director?

ML: He was brilliant. I liked him anyway. Joan didn't of course. That was another thing about Joan is that she always criticised other directors and said they were rubbish. And when she knew I was working for Peter Brook she said, 'oh, working for him' - she was very scathing. I said, 'Well I like him, and I think he's very clever. And' I said, 'I think he admires you too' - which I knew he did. And she said 'oh!'... and she was critical about him.

KH: What did you like about the way he directed?

ML: I liked him because he was very quiet, very centred. He never had fits of histrionics. I mean, I'd been used to Joan swearing at us and other directors for that matter who lost their temper. He was always incredibly calm, he was just inspiring really. And he would talk for ages about what we were going to do. He was just an interesting man. I liked the way he worked, because I don't really like people who throw wobbles.

But the funny thing is people had told me he was going to be difficult to work for. And I thought afterwards 'what are they talking about?'. I mean, difficult?! Compared to Joan he was like a saint! I mean, they were both very different, both brilliant. And I just enjoyed it so much. And then of course I went from there into Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* at the Royal Court... it was through Glenda I heard about that. She said, 'why don't you ask for an audition'... William Gaskell was the director. And he had seen me as well in US and liked me. And so I got the part of Natasha, which was wonderful, playing opposite...

KH: That's a great part to have.

ML: Great! Opposite George Cole who was Andrei, and Marianne Faithfull was in it.

It was a bit of a gimmick. Cast as Irina. Yes, that was quite an experience. [Laughs] Avril Elgar was Masha, and she was brilliant. But one night Marianne suddenly keeled forward on to her nose. I thought 'Oh Lord!'. And they had to bring the curtain down because she'd been puffing away at something or other in the ladies. And her poor understudy had to carry on for the rest of the play.

KH: Oh no!

ML: And they just said 'we're very sorry but Miss Faithfull is indisposed'. So ever after that we lived in dread, is she going to get through the night, because sometimes it was like you were talking to somebody who was in a goldfish bowl, she never seemed to look at you and focus. But she was lovely. And actually in a way she was quite beautiful as Irina, because she was... she just had this lovely quality. And even though she'd never had acting experience she got away with it, because I think what was happening, she'd think of the line before she said it. So it looked as if she had this great deep thinking going on. [Laughs] But I enjoyed that. I was quite sad in way, we could have transferred with that to the West End, but I think it was George Cole who didn't want to do it. He'd got other commitments.

KH: How did working at the Royal Court compare to working at Theatre Workshop?

ML: Well, it wasn't so different really then, because I think directors had taken the lead you know. And he used to do a tremendous amount of improvising, just as Joan would have done. He'd take a meal scene where we were all round a table, and he would have a real meal laid on at rehearsal. And then we would improvise in character the whole thing. And as a theatre it wasn't dissimilar, it was smaller than Stratford, but it did have a lovely sort of horseshoe shape. And so the audience was not far away.

Funny thing there though, it was before the days of no smoking in theatres and you used to see... the exit signs lit up at the back. And so sometimes it was quite hard to concentrate, somebody would be lighting up a cigarette, or you'd see the exit sign, and it would be a bit hard sometimes to look into the middle distance. And then the worst thing of all was, the front row of the stalls was really close to the stage – it was like an apron stage. And one night somebody had stuck their box of chocolates on the front of the stage...

KH: Oh no!

ML: ...right on the stage. And I had to do this great sweeping walk as Natasha, right across down stage in my negligee... I was going to tell Andrei off or something. So I'm afraid I just kicked them into the audience, because I thought, 'Gosh! They'll be sticking their drinks on the stage next'.

In a way I think that Joan had brought about a revolution. Well she did. And I think it quickly filtered through to the more adventurous companies, like the Royal Court, Peter Brook had already worked in a very experimental way in any case. So I mean that was quite similar in many ways, except he was just such a different sort of person.

KH: A different character.

ML: Yes. But no I've... you only want to go up to '68 you said in theatre don't you?

KH: That's kind of the period that this project focuses on.

ML: Yes. So I suppose that would be it really. I'm trying to think when was it...The Three Sisters... it was 1967.

KH: Because you... how did playing in the West End, in the bigger theatres, the more traditional theatres I suppose, how did that compare with the work that you'd done at Theatre Workshop?

ML: Well they weren't incredibly big theatres. I mean the Duke of York's was small; The New Theatre was big. But it seemed to work out. Make Me An Offer was a musical really, a lot of singing in it, and with an orchestra. I loved that actually. I mean, I would love to have been in musicals had I been able to do all the things necessary. Because when the overtures struck up, you were in the dressing room and however flat you might feel, suddenly you'd hear the overture and oh, wow! You know, you're all ready to go on. It was great really...Make Me an Offer. Roy Kinnear was in it, all good actors, Sheila Hancock and a lovely old character actor Wally Patch. We used to give him lifts to the theatre and he'd tell us stories about the early film days down at Denham Studios. Of course he'd been in films right way back in the twenties and thirties...

KH: Did Joan ever come to see you in the things that you did, that weren't Theatre Workshop?

ML: I think she only came to see The Bed Sitting Room. Yes, she came to see that. No she didn't come to the RSC plays, no she... No I don't think she did.

KH: Did you carry on going to see things at Stratford, when you weren't working?

ML: Some of them yes. Not many, because I... quite frankly I hardly stopped working all through the sixties. Yes I saw some. I saw The Square Fellow, and I saw Taste of Honey.

KH: What did you think of them?

ML: I thought they were good, great, yes.

KH: Did you...?

ML: I don't think she ever produced any bad work, but maybe sometimes. I mean there was one play I went back to do, which was a disaster, called We are just not Practical. I can remember what year that was now – '61. And that was a mess, quite frankly. It just didn't work because there wasn't enough of a good skeleton of a play to start with. You know and if it's all improvised it can become very messy. But that was the only thing that I didn't enjoy. I would have loved to have gone back for other plays, but I just got swept up in so much television, and we just never stopped.

KH: Well that's wonderful though.

ML: Well it was. I mean, it was great, because I was able to stay in London. And by that time I'd got two children, so I didn't have to leave them, whereas you know, if you're going travelling around in theatres all over the place... I only left them if I went up to Granada or something like that. But I suppose I did about 400 televisions over those years.

KH: That's extraordinary!

ML: I mean, it just went on and on.

KH: Did you have any particular programmes that you worked on that really stood out?

ML: Yes, I suppose the series Weavers Green in which I had the lead part for five months was on location in Norfolk. I enjoyed that a lot, because it was revisiting the places I'd known. And then there was a series called Danger UXB which was about unexploded bombs in the war. And that was the first thing I think Anthony Andrews did. I was playing his landlady. I did a lot of episodes in that, which I enjoyed. Later I went up to Manchester to see Sarah, my daughter and to do a Coronation Street, I had some scenes with Pat Phoenix in that. But that was Sarah's first professional job at the Library Theatre, she was playing Ann Frank there at the same time. So I was able to go to see her in her first professional production, at the same time as I'd been doing the Coronation Street.

KH: Oh that must have been great.

ML: So that was lovely yes. I did many lovely television plays, of course they used to do dramas called the Wednesday Play. And I did one called The Bone Yard by Clive Exton, with a great part and that was wonderful to do.

KH: Did those plays strike you as – the Wednesday Plays that is – did they strike you as breaking new sort of ground in what they were doing, and the subjects they were talking about, or not really?

ML: Well I think it depended on the writer. I mean, Clive was an interesting writer. And it was such a good play, it was so well written. I don't know that it was new ground, but what was so wonderful was that they always chose good writers. You know, Hopkins – is it John...?

KH: Yes, John Hopkins.

ML: And one had rehearsals. I did one of his and we used to have a week's rehearsal, you know, in a church hall somewhere.

KH: In that sense it's more... a bit more like that theatre isn't it?

ML: Well it was, you got to know the part, you got to know the other actors. Opposite Bob Hoskins in *All Who Sail in Her* I found it so easy to do. I mean, now it's just dreadful really. I mean you're given your script, you learn it before you go, and it's rehearse, record and that's it – bang, bang, bang.

KH: It sounds a bit like your fit-up company. [Laughs]

ML: Well yes in a way, it is yes. I hated it once it got into that mode really. I didn't enjoy it any more at all. But it was lovely once when we had a lot of rehearsal. Oh, there was so many things. There were series like *Angels about nurses*, I enjoyed that a lot because I'd be meeting up with actors I'd worked with like Bill Owen who I'd worked with in *Oblomov* he had a part in that television series, I'm trying to think of things that stand out in television, but there were so many. I mean years and years of it really, from '62 as I say right up... well you're only covering up to '68, so I mean I worked non-stop, after that. The next theatre play would have real West End, but that was 1979, so that's going past your period. But it's interesting for me to tell you anyway because that was a really different experience.

KH: What was that that you were doing?

ML: Well it was called *Middle Age Spread* and I was playing Richard Briers' wife, he was in it, and Paul Eddington – fresh from their success in *The Good Life*. But I wasn't Felicity Kendal! You know, because those two were in it, they'd sort of expected her.

KH: That's interesting, that television had had such a big impact.

ML: Oh yes. Oh they all wanted television people after that in theatre. It was such a shame really, that in 1954 when I began you had to have done your apprenticeship in theatre, nobody would touch you in television 'til you'd had experience. Later on it was the other way round, they didn't want to know you in theatre if you hadn't been in television, because it got bums on seats as they said...

KH: How much do you think your training that you did with Theatre Workshop helped you, in the later work that you did?

ML: Oh I think it helped me tremendously, because it laid the groundwork really for my whole attitude to my work. And the fact that I had a serious approach to it, it wasn't just

learning lines, go on, do it, don't bump into the other actors, which people were often told in rep companies. No, it was the thing of interacting I think which is what I learned, and which stayed with me – the importance of working with the other actors, not just for yourself and out front, which I found a bit I have to say in *Middle Age Spread*. But Joan's training helped me tremendously. I wouldn't have done without it. Without Theatre Workshop my life would have been totally different. Everything changed – I met my husband there, I wouldn't have met him if I hadn't gone there. And so I wouldn't have the children I had. I wouldn't have gone on to do all the films I did, because Harry was very good at getting me interviews with casting directors. I mean, I was never very pushy at all, so I needed somebody with his personality to sort of...

KH: To get things done.

ML: ...trigger me along, yes. And so... I mean, I was in *Only Two Can Play*, which was lovely, with Peter Sellers. I loved that. And *Stranger in the House* opposite James Mason. Oh gosh, without looking up my notes I wouldn't be able to remember them all.

KH: Yes sure. I think there was one other thing that I wanted to ask you in relation to Theatre Workshop. You've talked about the importance of improvisation, and how you used Stanislavski to break down the parts etc.

ML: Yes, the scripts, yes.

KH: I just wondered if you thought there were other... what for you were the other main influences that you took from that training?

ML: I think the physical – the physicality of it really. I know that we also did a lot of mental work, and talking through the characters, but the fact is we did movement every single day... and up to that time I'd been a little bit inhibited in my movement, because I suppose even though we danced and everything at drama school, it wasn't quite like... I mean Jean Newlove had brought Laban training to us, with different efforts, the physical efforts and the fact of working along these lines probably had a great influence.

Obviously Joan's personality was always there in your head after that, you could almost hear her saying oh throw away all that rubbish that you learned at drama school, just be the character and move and break through. It doesn't matter if you make a mistake, you've got to learn to fail on stage – not be afraid of failure, which is very hard, to trust yourself to fail. So I think I owe all that – I don't do it any more – to her, yes definitely... and I'm so thankful I had a chance to do such a variety of work.

KH: It's extraordinary the different types of things.

ML: ...with comics, classics, straight plays and comedy, and television, it was... I'm glad I wasn't put into a slot! I know that you get on more successfully commercially if everybody knows you as a certain type. Like, 'you're a Barbara Windsor type', or 'you're a something type'. They couldn't put me in a box you see. And so in a way my strength

was also my drawback. My versatility held me back from being a name, because I was always jumping from one part to another. But for me that was just the best part of it all, and I'm just so thankful that I could have that wonderful, varied experience. And even right up until a year ago, I thought I'd have to give up, walking being difficult for me now, but a part came up in *Doctors*. The casting director remembered me from previous work, and said oh... you won't have to walk about or anything, just be in bed. And so it was just nice again to be in front of a camera. And it was in Birmingham which was my home town. That was just a year ago, so I thought 'well, you never know I'll still be...' There might be something that comes up on stage, say a wonderful part in a wheelchair. I think there is something in *A Little Night Music*, I remember seeing it. I do love theatre, there's nothing like it. That buzz you know, that... I used to travel up to the theatre in London because we'd moved to the country for a while and I was doing a play in the West End and I used to be quite tired going up to town. You know, I'd meet my little girl from school before going... On the way back, on the train back to Hampshire I'd be absolutely lively because audiences give back so much. That's the wonderful thing about theatre.

However now television is just a nightmare to do, because you know, not only do you not get to know the actors, but you get nothing back really. You do it and then you go home, and think oh well you think you might see it when it's shown a few months later, when you'd forgotten all about it. It's... no, it's not the same. Mind I enjoyed doing tv's *Unnatural Causes*, because that was a P.D. James, and once again I went back to Norfolk – it's strange isn't it? It's like I kept being called back to those counties. And once again what a different experience, because here I was a lead in it, with well known actors. And anyway I'm rambling on now, I did so many televisions and some of them just stand out. I loved my weeks in soaps like *Coronation Street* and a run in *Crossroads*. On the other hand I loved doing the big dramas, like my parts in *Z Cars*, I loved *Z Cars* – you probably would never have of it, before you were born but...

KH: No, I've interviewed David Rose, the producer of *Z Cars*.

ML: Oh gosh yes.

KH: So I've interview... and quite a lot of people, like yourself, are in *Z Cars*, so I have seen a few episodes.

ML: Oh I did five... I did five *Z Cars*, different characters. I did... you know, I kept going back. And they were diff...

KH: I mean, that was a phenomenal success story wasn't it?

ML: Oh yes. And there were different policemen every time... But I mean, that was live. What a thing that was, you know you'd be one end of the studio, and suddenly you had to be on a set at the other end. And I remember being lifted up there by a sort of camera-dolly or what do you call them... right from one end, carried across to the other end. Just in time to make the entrance into the next scene. Oh another television I must

tell you the one that stands out was a lovely play called There's a Hole in Your Dustbin, Delilah. And it was written by... he was married to Maureen...

KH: Oh, Jack Rosenthal.

ML: Yes, Jack Rosenthal. He wrote it. And that was wonderful, with Frank Windsor. And I played a rather tarty person who's following them in their dustcart. You know, very high heels and... no, that was lovely that, because they were a great team. Jack MacGowran was in it. And all great actors, I remember that. Michael Apted directed it, and of course he went on to do films in Hollywood. So that was quite an experience. Anyway, I must stop now...

KH: I think I've come to the end of the things I was going to ask you about. But I don't know whether you want to add anything about any other things that we've talked about?

ML: Not really.

KH: It's been really interesting. It's been really great.

ML: I mean, there are all sorts of little moments that come up. For instance when I dyed my hair – or at least my landlady dyed my hair – when I was in The Flying Doctor at Stratford. I was staying with people in Chingford. I'd just finished Red Roses for Me fortunately, in which I was fair. And I decided I wanted to have black hair. But not only did she give me black hair, this lady, but they gave me a home perm as well...

KH: Oh no!

ML: And as they took the rollers out there were just little stumps of hair left.

KH: Oh my gosh, that must have been terrible.

ML: My hair came out with the rollers. Ah... I thought 'oh my God! What am I going to do, how am I going to tell Joan?' And I was so frightened to tell her on the Monday, or whenever it was... yes, it must have been the Monday, we weren't playing that night. But Julie Jones, who was wonderful, said 'don't worry' I'll go on and warn her', she said 'it won't be such a terrible shock'. I was expecting the ceiling and the roof to fall in around me. And when she saw me she just went off into peals of laughter! Joan said 'oh, that's bloody marvellous for the clown,' she said, 'you really look like a clown now – a female clown'. Then she got Tom Driberg's wife to take me to her hairdressers in the West End, who trimmed it into shape. It had come out a sort of plum colour, the perm on top of the black was plum coloured tufts. But Joan thought this was marvellous -

fortunately it fitted my part in The Flying Doctor. But moments like that were so funny really, they often come back to you, and I have to laugh...

KH: I think that's a good point...