

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Kenneth Brown – interview transcript

Interviewer: Steve Nicholson

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Theatre-goer. Alan Ayckbourn's plays; Bertolt Brecht; Blackpool Tower Circus; incidental music; Manchester theatres; Frank Matcham theatres; musical theatre; John Osborne's plays; pantomime; The Piccolo Players; refreshments; repertoire; revues; Shakespeare; Stockport Theatres; theatre design; theatre-going; Theatre in the Round; variety.

SN: OK, Kenneth, can you just begin perhaps by saying something about your earliest memories of going to the theatre, and how you became interested, and where you were going?

KB: A lot of people say 'oh well, I remember when I first went to the theatre, I remember I went to Peter Pan or something, and tried to fly'. And I really can't remember when I first went, which means I must have gone when I was really very, very small. But I do remember the theatres vividly that I went to. It was in Stockport, and the Theatre Royal was the first theatre that I remember going to. There were two theatres, the Theatre Royal and the Hippodrome. And in the forties I suppose I'm really talking about, although I must have gone at the end of the thirties, the Theatre Royal was a sort of touring place with revues and music hall, and pantomimes, that sort of thing. And the Hippodrome was a bit posher, a bit more select.

The buildings were really quite different. The Theatre Royal was built in 1888 and it was a Frank Matcham building. The Hippodrome was built in 190something, right at the beginning of the 20th Century. It was really in a way rather a cosy theatre. Well, if it was built in that time really I suppose perhaps it was just Victorian or Edwardian. It must actually have been altered by the time I went to it, because really it was very like say sort of thirties-ish, art deco-ish a bit - like the Duchess Theatre in London, kind of intimate. Nicer than the Duchess Theatre because it wasn't kind of too tall like that is. When you go in the Duchess you feel as if you're in a kind of upended shoebox, I think! But the Hippodrome was cosy. But it wasn't like a lot of thirties theatres, like a cinema. It was kind of rounded and embracing like theatres are, rather than end-on like cinemas are. But I did go there. But firstly I do remember going to the Theatre Royal.

SN: Do you think the... Just to interrupt for a minute, do you think those two theatres had completely different audiences because of the different...?

KB: Well looking at all this material that I've got, I see that really the programmes overlapped a lot more than they did in my memory. For instance, the Hippodrome from

1940 was a variety house, so I see from one of these press articles. And then it was only say in 1943 when it became a repertory theatre with the Frank Fortescue Repertory Company, which I could talk about a bit a later. And there had been repertory at various times at the Theatre Royal, but I don't remember any of that. Oh, there's all this kind of rigid... and they both had programmes... pantomimes. But there is this distinction in my mind between the two. Maybe it's just the things that I was taken to, and perhaps we only ventured to the Hippodrome when there was something sort of special on.

In the war, of course, there were a lot of things touring that weren't on in London. And as you know, the Old Vic for instance set up an outpost in Buxton where you could see such as Robert Donat and Constance Cummings in *Romeo and Juliet*. Well of course I never knew anything about that; we didn't go to that I'm afraid. Though we could have gone to Buxton on the train I suppose, but we didn't go to that sort of thing really. And all the time in between I was being taken to the cinema all the time, so that was an important part of my kind of early performing arts experience, going to the cinema. And we also went... oh, on holiday really to Blackpool, where I saw quite a lot of things. But really the Theatre Royal was the most vivid place in my mind.

When you went up to it... the Victorians were marvellous at townscapes, and so this whole block wasn't just the Theatre Royal, but with its veranda or marquee as they call it in America, all sort of wrought iron. But on the left of it there was a pub – one of those kind of old Victorian sort of East Endy looking pubs with a big window with etched glass. But when you went... we didn't go in it of course... well I was a child anyway. But when you went past it out came this smell of beer and brewing through the doors, and up through the delivery hatch that was at the front of it. And all this is associated in my mind with going to the theatre.

And when you went inside the theatre, of course it was... the circulation areas, as you might call them, were very compact and functional. Really I suppose the lobby was perhaps no bigger than this room. But there was a staircase rising up to the circle, which we rarely went in because that was obviously the most expensive part. But on the half landing to this staircase was a gigantic mirror with a kind of gilt frame. And on the mirror they used to paint in what looked like whitewash – some of it was white and some of it was orange – the bill and what was coming next week. And there it all was in this lettering on this mirror. And when you went into the theatre itself we went and sat in that, what I suppose was the pit stalls really. It had originally obviously been the kind of theatre with just benches in the gallery, and orchestra stalls, and pit stalls, and then a pit at the back. And they still did have this early doors system where you could go and queue then. But we... and I think at the very back of the stalls were therefore benches like pits had.

But I remember sitting actually sort of in the middle of the stalls, centre of the stalls. [Laughs] And when you sat there, if there was an aerial act as part of this variety show, the people on the trapeze would swoop out, and everybody would scream. And then they'd swoop back again. And sometimes of course there were wires and tightropes and things actually going out, you know to the circle and into the auditorium. So there were a lot of those sorts of shows that I saw. Really, during the war things with... well I suppose a kind of touring equivalent of the Tiller Girls, like six dancing girls. I remember a scene with these girls coming on dressed in their outdoor coats, singing some number – I forget what the number was – and kind of marching along and singing as if they were really going home from the theatre. And they each had a torch, because you did carry a torch with you in the blackout. But as they were dancing one of the torches went out because the girl's battery had failed. But she just went on dancing away with this failed torch. And I remember thinking to myself, 'oh isn't that clever?' I remember

noticing that was what you had to do if you were on the stage. Oh so lots of things come back like that to me.

Looking through one of these programmes I see that G.H. Elliott was at... do you remember G.H. Elliott, or you know about G.H. Elliott?

SN: No, I don't, no.

KB: Oh! Oh, he was a famous sort of Chocolate Coloured Coon.

SN: Right.

KB: A black-face actor. He really was the most famous one that there was. Well, I notice that he was there in... I think it's in 1938. Well I was five then. Now can I actually have seen him I wonder? Can I remember what I saw when I was five? But I remember seeing somebody, and my parents saying oh that's G.H. Elliott. But you see that might have been what we now call a tribute act, and what we called impressionists. So I don't really know if it was him, or later and somebody kind of blacked up and pretending to be him.

The pantomimes were interesting in the war too. You couldn't... there were printing restrictions, and so you couldn't have new posters made. But there were loads of posters from the early 20th Century, like about sort of 1910. And I mean, you've seen those posters such as Marie Lloyd as principal boys with all upholstered hips and feathers and things, well these posters, they were allowed to use those so those were all put up, which of course it seemed very strange and odd, but I thought 'oh well, that is interesting'. And there was my first look I suppose at art nouveau in a way. I mean, they weren't by Mucha or anybody, but they were nice and they were interesting. You had a different pantomime every week for, oh I don't know how long, like for about six weeks or something.

SN: Gosh!

KB: But they toured round you see, like to Hyde and various other places – Warrington and, oh, well, every town - sizeable town - would have a theatre.

SN: So you might have gone not just to one pantomime but two, or three, or four, or five.

KB: Oh I did. I did, I did. And I remember going... well, my parents... I mean, I suppose I'd sort of got obsessive by then really, and they didn't want to go every time. And I remember going in the blackout on my own. We lived quite a long... you could actually have walked to the theatre – briskly, say - in about half an hour. But you would really have gone on the bus. It was several miles. But I remember going... being allowed to go on my own. Isn't this strange? But it was in the blackout... well, the war ended when I was 12, so I was perhaps 11 maybe or something... it's really odd to think... to think

that you could. And then I did actually go and sit up in the gallery, or the balcony I think they called it.

SN: And it would have been an evening performance, not a matinée?

KB: Yes, yes, yes. Yes, yes, yes.

SN: Though even with a matinée it would be dark coming home.

KB: Well it would. But I must have gone after school. And I mean, this was an adventure. But you see of course nobody had a lot of money. I forget how much it was. But obviously it was the cheapest place to sit – that might have been another reason they didn't go as well, because they would have had to pay for themselves too. But I remember going up there and being transfixed, just by the atmosphere of it.

Of course, well it was in prime condition because... not prime condition, but original condition should I say, the theatre, because it was then say 40 like, 50 years old. Once I went with my auntie and my cousin, and we were sitting then in the circle. And I think this was when there were films on, perhaps a bit later than the time we were talking about. And we were sitting in the front row where this kind of upholstered padded velvet came round the circle, and my cousin said, 'Oh hooray, hooray, it's starting, it's starting.' and banged his hands on the velvet and clouds of dust arose. That was the funniest thing in the afternoon really. [Laughs]

[Interruption – door bell rings]

SN: Do you want to answer the door?

KB: Oh yes, excuse me.

SN: OK.

KB: Yes, as I was saying it's extraordinary really that the theatres were... that theatre was then say 50 years old. And then I thought since, well what a shame to have knocked them down. But then you see just think such theatres as the Crucible, and the National Theatre, and the Belgrade, they haven't been there that long, and they're all now being bugged about. [Laughs]

SN: Renovated, yes. [Laughs] Yes.

KB: Because they're not... well actually I mean, the Crucible really wants sort of clearing out really – all those accretions inside that weren't there originally. And of course as we know nobody had any compunction in the 19th Century about sweeping away things

that had been there before. If they didn't get burnt down they were knocked down, weren't they?

SN: Yes.

KB: But that... I think that's an interesting thought, that it had... these things did somehow endure through the war because nobody could alter them really much. They didn't even get decorated I don't think. But it's informed my view really of what the theatre was I think – or it opened my eyes. It made me realise it was a place of enchantment did the Theatre Royal, and so it was wonderful really to be able to go there and see all those things.

When it was knocked down, the man in the house next to my grandmother's – I think he was a property dealer or something – he must have gone and got some items, and in his garden for a long time he had one of these bosomy, curvy ladies who'd been on the front of the circle. I think it sort of looked – looking through the fence – as if it was made out of... well, not cast iron because it was sort of wearing away and holes were... perhaps lead or something. So it was that kind of place. I think originally it must have held about 2,000 people, and obviously they could still squash into the pit, and to the gallery. But nevertheless it was a very intimate place. Of course, nobody knew anything about Frank Matcham then, or... well, I mean he wasn't a household name. Well he's scarcely a household name now, but I mean the cognoscenti will know about him – but not in those days. And it just went the way of a lot of theatres I'm afraid.

SN: I was just going to ask you about the pantomimes, were they... do you think they were primarily aimed at children? Were the audience mostly children with their parents or not?

KB: Well you see... no, there were a lot of adults there, and a lot of children. And you see how would you know really? You take in the things that you understand.

SN: Yes.

KB: Other things you kind of begin to know what they're about, but you don't really. And it's hard to say. Just after the war...well I suppose at the end of the war, say like about 1945 - 4/5/6 - as you know there were a lot of these Soldiers in Skirts revues touring. And I saw one or two of them. I thought they were totally enchanting. I didn't know why. I don't really now quite know why either. But it just didn't occur to me that there was... well, I say... No, no I didn't even think it was odd that some of the soldiers should have been in skirts and others not. Well of course, you knew the origins of the revues. You knew that there weren't any women available where these revues started. But I remember seeing these and thinking 'Yes, these are quite enchanting really'. But it didn't... I didn't make explicit to myself anything about the sexuality of it, it never occurred to me that a lot of... well, you didn't know what gay was really in those days. Then I was 12. It didn't occur to me that a lot of them must have been gay. I think actually my father might have looked askance at it a bit. But I didn't know why... I think he just thought that that wasn't a very manly thing to be doing. And I think he sort of

looked askance at chorus boys anyway. But I mean, I had no idea why, why he was doing that.

SN: You didn't have any sense of people saying 'oh, that's not a show you should be going to as a child', and hard to get tickets for...?

KB: Oh no. No, we... we just... no, no, no.

SN: No.

KB: No, no we went... I mean, I think... well, no. And I'm not so sure how far my parents really thought that there was anything kind of pansexual, shall we say, about it. I think they probably didn't. You know, I think you know my mother thought it was amusing and a good laugh. So I think, as I say, a lot of things... they don't actually go over children's heads, but they take in as much as they can understand. And after all that's how you learn.

SN: Yes.

KB: As - to go back to the pantomimes - it never ever occurred to me that there was anything odd about principal boys who were always, always women in those days. Well of course any way in the war there weren't a lot of men available. And they had to be playing the baron and the ugly sisters. The ugly sisters had to be men - always I think. But transvestite [travesty] roles in pantomimes... well, and my parents didn't think anything about it either. Now of course you're lucky if you get a female principal boy. You still have to have a dame don't you?

SN: Yes.

KB: I mean a man really.

SN: I think so.

KB: And of course they were the people who... I mean, they were stage artists. Obviously if you went to the big theatres in Manchester then you might get somebody who'd got a name on the radio, or in the films as well. But of course there weren't recording artists like there are nowadays. They weren't... of course there wasn't any television. But the people that you saw in local pantomimes were people that were kind of pounding round the circuits all year long; if they were lucky they got in a summer show somewhere, or they were... you know, this week it's panto and next month it'll be variety and you'd be on the number two or three circuit all your life maybe. Looking at some of the names you know, I don't recognise them, in other words they never became anybody most of them.

But the tours that came to the Hippodrome... my mother, you see, liked... she liked musicals – what we now call musicals, but there was no such term as... it was either a musical comedy or a musical play then. We didn't call them musicals. But my mother loved them. And she had been taken to them as a child by her parents. They used to go... My grandparents had a shop, and on half-day closing they used to go on the tram into Manchester – not Stockport, but into Manchester – to see a matinée of this, that or the other. She saw all sorts of things there, in all kinds of theatres in Manchester she told me about, that of course had long been knocked down. So she was... she loved musical plays and musical comedies, so she took me to some that my father didn't go to in the war at the Hippodrome. For instance *The Belle of New York* was on tour there. And *The Belle of New York* was played by somebody called Ruby Moule – M.O.U.L.E. – who not surprisingly when she became famous became Vanessa Lee. That was, you know, carried me away. How odd that I remembered that name, Ruby Moule, when I don't remember anybody else who was in anything there. *Florodora* was there, that was lovely too. *The Desert Song* was there. So we went to those.

I remember in *Florodora* they had elaborate sets you know, even in... that was quite a tiny theatre really compared with the Theatre Royal. But they had very elaborate settings. It's very curious, I mean you know think of the transport involved in the war, and the trains about and everything. But I remember noticing one scene had a kind of truck - I mean a stage truck, not a truck that you'd drive - in the form of a gigantic staircase in this baronial hall. I mean, this was practicable, they went up it and out of it. But then the scene changed and this truck revolved, and the staircase disappeared, and the archway or whatever it was was on the other side came into view, and other things flew in or were rolled on. And this became I think it's a tropical island or somewhere they go to, I forget where it was, in the next Act. That was really fascinating to see. To see how these things worked. But just the immense amount of baggage that they traipsed about. And you know, think of that being replicated in all those small towns, it's quite staggering really.

SN: And it all seems effective, and the acting seems competent and good, and the set was professional...?

KB: Yes, yes.

SN: ...I mean, you didn't have any sense of it being adequate or anything at all?

KB: No, no. Well, this is very interesting because you know, now when you go to a musical the sound is coming out of the air from somewhere. It certainly isn't coming from those instruments in the orchestra pit. And it might be good, or it might not be. It might be bad like it is, you know, at the Lowry. I once went to the Lowry and it was some flamenco thing, and just a man with a guitar. I think it was Paco Pena or somebody. And that sound actually came out through this speaker at the side of the proscenium. But in those days there was the orchestra at the front – I'm talking about the Theatre Royal particularly – and the rail there with this velvet curtain sort of on the brass rings. And you could sort of... it wasn't sunken I don't think, so you could see them sitting there. The lights were on their music, those like overhead lamps that they have. And they came in and they were tuning up, this kind of scraping.

There was... oh well, they had one of those... I suppose it was a safety curtain, but they had advertisements all over them, as you remember. The smell from next door, the pub, had followed you in. But there was also the smell of size – size permeating the theatre from, you know, from the sets from backstage, especially when this thing went up and there were the velvet curtains. But there was this kind of... the tuning up.

I once horrified my mother because, well, that's the best part. [Laughs] A bit of listening to them tuning up, because it was the anticipation. I think it's really so important to... it's the kind of foreplay, it's coming in all the way. It's seeing the building, it's going through... you know, the places that are being refurbished, like the Alhambra, like the Theatre Royal at Nottingham, like the Lyceum, all the circulation areas have just been swept away and altered. I know they have to be for various reasons. I know it was inevitable. But all this foreplay isn't there any more, and that's so important. And then when they began to play, well it was like... I mean, I suppose... well, you've heard those parody Palm Court kind of things. They're not out of tune exactly, but like a lot of separate people playing. Certainly not like an orchestra! [Laughs] But that was all part of it too. And the curtain went up. And then always they would play through the interval a selection. And maybe you don't remember when they did that in plays as well. But in the fifties there used to be somebody there... well you don't... that's fifty... you don't remember that.

SN: No, not quite, no.

KB: [Laughs] I think they'd stopped in the sixties doing this. But when I first went to London theatres there used to be somebody, you know maybe two pianos or one piano would play during the interval.

SN: And would quite a lot of people stay in the auditorium and listen to them?

KB: Yes, well yes. And also, you see, you could have refreshments brought to you on trays.

SN: Oh right, gosh! Which you ordered in advance?

KB: Yes. Well, you ordered when you went in. And the usherettes would, you know, tout for orders with the programmes. And then they would bring the tray and they would shout 'Q17' or something, and everybody would have to pass this tray along to you. And it had a little bill on it, it would have biscuits and you know a little teapot or coffee, and cups, and a bit of milk and things. But there would be the bill on it and just when... at the end of the interval – and they often went into the second Act if it was a play, or the second half if it was a revue – then they would come round and you'd have to pass it along. And if people hadn't got any change they'd have to pass the change back to them. [Laughs] But this was institutionalised.

And in Drury Lane, I remember when I went to Drury Lane... what must it have been to see? Perhaps it was My Fair Lady or something? But they had, oh up on the way to the circle, upper circle, along in the corridor areas, in the circulation areas, some... there was these enormous pieces of furniture like you might have in a dining room in a hotel. But

what they were for was for slotting trays into. Well like you have in a self-service cafe now, only of course these were all mahogany and enormous, and presumably had to be polished by cleaning ladies. And the trays were slotted into these great pieces of furniture. Whatever happened to them I don't know. Well, in the provinces I don't remember them, but I did see these things at Drury Lane.

SN: And at Stockport would they still have had the trays that were passed along in the interval?

KB: Yes, yes, yes, yes. Yes, yes, yes. When we were at the Frank Fortescue, which my mother also started taking me to in I suppose... well it started there in 1943, but I think I was perhaps in '44; '45 maybe we started going. Yes, I remember we did start going because a boy at school went. This was you know, after I was 11 when I went to grammar school. And he told me about it, or used to talk about it. And I said to my mother, 'oh this is on' you know, so she said 'oh well, we'll go'. And then we used to go every Wednesday evening. But there we used to sit in the circle. Well, there wasn't a gallery there. But it was like a circle in two parts if you know what I mean, like the front circle and then a walkway, and then the rest of it raised up. But it wasn't very big. There weren't very many people there then, because in the back part my mother and I sat in two seats regularly. Behind us a man and his wife sat regularly. And I don't remember there were many other people in that upper part at all.

But what used to happen in the interval was two usherettes used to come in with a tray of coffee – very, very milky coffee in very, very big round, flat cups, like a soup dish almost. So they would come in with these and put them down on the bottom of the steps, which is where we went up to where we were sitting. And then they would say, 'Anybody like coffee?' But very rarely did anybody have any. I used to want but my mother didn't get it because you know she wouldn't have been able to afford it. So we never had any. And hardly anybody did. And I used to wonder what happens to this coffee after... [Laughs] and they couldn't have drunk it all themselves, they must have just poured it away. I thought 'what a strange thing to do'. So they didn't pass them along the rows. But I remember at the opera house in Manchester when I... oh this must have been in the late forties. I wonder what I'd gone to see? Anyway I went with a friend. And you could then still have trays of coffee brought to you in your seats.

SN: But not alcohol?

KB: No, no. Maybe they weren't... no, no, you couldn't. No, you had to go to... you went to the bar if you wanted alcohol. I wonder if they weren't allowed to have it in the auditorium. I'm not sure. Now of course it's a big thing isn't it, it's supposed to be sort of user-friendly and fetch people in that wouldn't normally go, and make it all accessible to be allowed to take your drink into the auditorium.

SN: Yes, yes.

KB: But I don't think you could have alcohol serve... I don't remember anybody doing. And I think they might have thought oh well no you go to a bar for a drink. I think they

might have thought oh it's a bit sissy really having something on the tray in your seat. I don't know really. I don't know why. But I don't remember any alcohol.

SN: Was there smoking in the auditorium?

KB: Oh yes. Oh yes, yes, yes.

SN: And separated into particular areas or not, in Stockport?

KB: How do you mean? Do you mean smoking?

SN: Parts of the theatre that were smoking.

KB: Oh no, no, there was no non-smoking. No, no, no, no. I don't remember ever going to... I first went to Covent Garden in 1950 I think. And of course you could never smoke in there, though you could in all the public areas. But if there were musical plays on everybody smoked in the auditorium. And of course everybody smoked on the stage. It used to say cigarettes by Abdullah in the programmes. 'Cigarettes by Abdullah, Stockings by Kayser Bondor' the programmes always said. [Laughs] And no, no, everybody smoked in auditor... in the cinema, as you know, you could see the smoke in the beam of the projector. Some people thought that was romantic, like steam railways. [Laughs]

SN: [Laughs] Yes. So just going back then, so after the war you would have gone to the theatre most weeks would you say?

KB: Yes, well we must have done. I mean, I know we went to the rep, which was weekly rep of course. We went there every week. I don't know how they afforded it really. My father only had what was a very labouring job, and my mother didn't work, as very few women then did with children. Although there was only me and I was at school. I suppose I was deemed a full-time occupation. [Laughs] But yes we did.

SN: Very late night if you were going to school the next day, or did you go Fridays and...?

KB: Well yes, it was. Well, they had two... there were two houses you see. So we went to the first. Not of plays, but of revues and musical hall there were two houses, so we went to the first house. It's extraordinary, in one of these things, this material that I got from the library I just noticed that Jean Forbes-Robertson was at the Hippodrome in Hedda Gabler in 1952 or something... no '51, I was still at school then. Why I didn't go I can't imagine. I didn't. But it said Saturdays, I think it said 6.30 and 8.30. I'm sure there was only two hours between the start of each house. I don't know how they got Hedda Gabler into...

SN: No.

KB: It must have been in one and three quarter hours at least to get people out and the next lot in. Unless she was like Ken Dodd and she just went on 'til she'd finished, and everybody had to wait outside. [Laughs] So there were two houses, yes. And the first house was about six o'clock or something, six thirty maybe, and two hour... and pantomimes might have had more than two. Well of course some they do now, some pantomimes. So I suppose it wasn't that late really. And by the time I was going to plays with my mother then I was 12 and perhaps it was thought to be all right. And in the war anyway shows started early. You know Tonight at 8.30? Well, that was the time to have plays and theatre things before the war, but in the war for obvious reasons they were all brought forward and started early. And some shows even might have started just at six o'clock. Then gradually times have crept back a bit, or forward should I say, since then.

SN: So going regularly then you must have started to distinguish between pieces that you liked, and styles that you didn't like so much, things that seemed old fashioned, or things that seemed to speak to you in some way, acting that was better than other acting. You must have started to distinguish...?

KB: I think I liked anything that I was taken to, because it was there, and because you see you didn't have a choice. It wasn't like going to London and you had to think well, shall I go to this, that or that? You either went or you didn't go at all. It wasn't like going to the pictures. Well, and even going to the pictures we tended to go to the same cinema, at least when I was a child. When I grew older I would sort of you know discriminate between cinemas and go because I wanted to see a particular film. But we went to local... two local cinemas when I was a child. And so there were just these two theatres.

I think... and I do... I mean, I would have gone oftener. I remember occasionally saying oh can I... let's go... or can I go? And we couldn't. I suppose we couldn't afford it maybe. But I don't remember... I just remember gobbling it all up. [Laughs] I don't remember discriminating at all. I thought they were all clever, and I thought it was all so absorbing, and so interesting to look at. I think probably I liked things that were glamorous and nice to look at. I remember an act with two girls – well, of course they were grown up to me – who came on doing a sort of dance. I mean, I suppose this was one for the dads really, though it didn't occur to me at the time. I was just kind of enchanted by it really. So they were doing a sort of dance in kind of long divided skirt things, sort of tied round their waists, and some kind of slinky top. So they did this dance together. And then in the middle of the stage there was a gigantic hoop with a screen in it. And they disappeared behind this hoop and were shown in silhouette. And their skirts were removed and they continued this dance. Things that were kind of sumptuous to look at, I think I liked those more than say people who came on and told jokes. And you know, however good they'd been... and I don't think I was mad on things with animals in.

When we went to Blackpool to the Tower Circus... I think that's another Matcham building isn't it?

SN: I think it is, yes.

KB: The whole of that complex. Well the ring... I think they still do this occasionally... but the whole of the ring was hydraulic and would sink into a tank of water. And before it did that they brought on various elements making bridges and walkways and things across it, that people could parade on. And then the ring sank into this tank of water, which I seem to remember spouted out in various places. And there was a kind of parade. Well this of course was a great feature. And I knew it would happen. I'd been told it was going to happen. So I spent the whole of the circus waiting for this to happen at the end, [Laughs] which duly did and was wonderful.

But I don't remember thinking in those days 'well, this is done well' or 'this is done badly'. It certainly... you know, these two girls dancing behind the screen might have been awful, but I just... it was just that they were doing it that was lovely to see really.

SN: And what about plays and... I mean, would Shakespeare... would a Shakespeare ever have come across your frontier?

KB: The first time I went to a Shakespeare... I do remember the first time I went to a Shakespeare play, which was when I was 11 in the first year at grammar school. And it was at the Opera House, and...

SN: Manchester Opera House?

KB: Yes. And it was The Merchant of Venice and it was Donald Wolfit. I have got that programme. And we sat in the balcony, as they called it. And our form teacher... what was he doing there? But he seemed to be there. But he gave the tickets out to the form captain, and said to the form captain, 'Give these tickets out will you?' Well of course they were tear-off tickets in two parts. [Laughs] And I remember this boy, this form captain, who'd obviously never been before, tore them up and gave the different halves to different people. [Laughs] And I remember thinking 'why has he given him that to do, why didn't he give it me? I know how you do tickets at the theatre'.

We went in and I must have followed it. I don't remember being told the story of it. Oh yes, I think I'd had Lambs' Tales from Shakespeare; I think I must have known the story. But I don't... we weren't told it at school I don't think. And we didn't do Shakespeare in the first year I don't think either. But I must have followed it readily. I remember from this vast distance as you know in the Manchester Opera House balcony, you're actually looking down on the actors aren't you? So I must have followed it. But I remember in the trial scene, when it's...

SN: Portia?

KB: No, no, Gratiano, or Salerio, or Solanio, one of these people starting shouting ironically, 'Oh wise judge, a Daniel come to judgement...' and so on. And you're supposed to laugh. And I remember everybody laughing, and we all laughed dutifully at it. Well you see, you kind of learn how to go to Shakespeare don't you? You kind of

learn that there are places that you laugh and places that you don't, before you really... well do we ever understand it fully? Of course not. So that was the first... my parents didn't take me to Shakespeare. I don't think there was any, not at these two theatres that I'm talking to you about.

SN: And was that enchanting, seeing the first Shakespeare?

KB: Yes. Oh yes, yes, yes. I knew it was theatre, and I knew it was something else to find out about. I knew I was going there somehow readily and easily. I was lucky wasn't I really to have had this kind of grounding? My aunt used to take me as well. I haven't mentioned her, but she used to take me to pantomimes in Manchester. She was a maiden aunt and a teacher. She actually taught me to read before I went to school. And she used to take me to pantomimes in Manchester when I was very little. I remember seeing Cora Goffin there. She was a famous star. She was Aladdin. And I think Sonnie Hale or somebody like that was Widow Twankey. She was stretched over his knee and he sewed a patch on her tights, which were supposedly in need of repairing. And I saw Cyril Ritchard and Tessie O'Shea there in Sleeping Beauty. I think we were sitting up quite high then, my aunt and I. Cyril Ritchard came on and he was singing Yip I Addy I Ay. And whenever he sang 'Yip' he kind of leapt up and his legs kind of went all triangular underneath him like a spider. I remember roaring with laughter at this, yes. Not sure how I got back on to that really.

SN: Were you aware of anything like Theatre Workshop who were touring around at that period?

KB: No, no. I didn't know that they existed. Well I mean not a lot of people did, did they?

SN: No.

KB: They weren't inundated with audiences. No, I think we only knew about you know conventional theatre outlets. So I never came across them until indeed they'd gone to Stratford East when I was older. Of course I wish I had. I did see – this was when I was going under my own steam – at Chorlton... this was by the time... we moved to Manchester when I was 17 I think. So I was still at school, and I was still going back to Stockport to school travelling. But at Chorlton I did see there was a company called The Piccolo Players. Where on earth did they open? Some place, it wasn't really a theatre. And then later on in the sixties there was the Stables Theatre – that might be in your research – in Manchester. That was a kind of offshoot of Granada and... well, it wasn't an offshoot but I mean it was kind of under its aegis in a way. It was a live theatre outlet for actors and writers like John Bowen, and actors like Maureen Lipman, and what's his name, Ken Barlow... William Roache. He was there in the Bacchae, believe it or not. But that was in the sixties when you know, things had moved on quite... you know, it was quite different really from... a different movement. That wasn't kind of... oh it was just different... the class thing was different from the impulse behind Theatre Workshop. So I really wish... I really wish I had seen them. I really wish I'd been aware that they were there, but I wasn't and didn't.

SN: You continued going to theatre in Stockport through your adolescence?

KB: Well you see when we moved away I stopped going there and I went to Manchester. So that was when I was... by the time I was 17. And I'd really stopped going to the Theatre Royal by then, because I think I got a bit snooty. I still went to Stockport Garrick which was the amateur theatre where you could see all kinds of plays really. I remember seeing Johnson over Jordan there for instance. It was really a most ambitious production.

And a lot of times you wouldn't see things done that weren't thought to be popular for obvious reasons, except done in the amateur theatre. Like I remember in the Experimental Theatre in Manchester seeing Tennessee Williams plays, and at the Unnamed Society you would see things. Top of the Ladder I saw at the Unnamed Society. So you would see things that you couldn't see in the commercial theatre there.

But I suppose... see, she wouldn't... Joan Littlewood wouldn't have thought of herself as alternative theatre. I'm sure she wouldn't. I'm sure she would have thought of herself as the real theatre, sort of from the wellsprings of the people so to speak. But in a way that was what it was, because it wasn't commercial and popular in the sense that commercial things are. So yes, I do wish I'd seen it.

SN: Did you have any sense through the fifties that theatre was changing, or that it was dying, and you know film and television were taking over?

KB: I think yes, this is all... this is really very interesting, very interesting. I realised the venues were closing so it was shrinking back in that sense. Although you see people went to Manchester throughout the war to see things, and from Stockport people readily went to Manchester to plays in the fifties. So even when these other venues were there... So in a way they were being deserted, but really they were kind of drying up. There was... something was changing. So there was that sense that that was happening.

And when the Arts Council had subsidised or arranged tours, well quite a lot of those things I saw. But it was really when Jennie Lee became Arts Minister I think that things changed. So from the sixties on you began to be able to see all kinds of things anywhere which you never could have done in the fifties. I don't know where you would have had to go to see 'Tis Pity She's a Whore, or The Man in the Moon, or Rosmersholm. I really don't know what you would have had to do to see... well you'd have had... well you wouldn't have seen anything Jacobean really at an amateur theatre. You might have seen Ibsen if you were lucky. You would have seen Chekhov maybe. So I don't know where you would have had to go to see those things. But with the development and spin-off of subsidised smaller adventurous companies, it almost didn't seem to matter what plays they were doing. I mean I don't think you ever would have... you'd have been lucky if... you'd have had to go to Stratford or the Old Vic to see All's Well That Ends Well for instance. Well, I've seen All's Well That Ends Well several times now in places. I've seen the Lawrence Batley in Huddersfield. [It] was actually very bad, but it's been there. [Laughs] And there were a lot of people there.

And now it is really most interesting that young people, you know, teenagers, are going to see all kinds of things with impunity as you might say. And they just sort of... they don't know they're seeing rarities, which they still are really. They just think they're

seeing a play. So in a way those old venues closed, and in a way there was sort of shrinkage. And in a way... you see the victim, the corpse in all this is popular entertainment really, I think. All that we have now... I mean... well, I mean even working men's clubs are not there any more as they were, you know, say in the heyday of Batley when Frank Sinatra and Muhammad Ali and these people might turn up there. But popular entertainment isn't there any more. It's been replaced by television, and I suppose by mass events for young people, or people who think they're still young. So I think that's the loser really.

I don't think... it's not very happy really for... state of affairs for cultural historians I don't think, to think that that... Well I mean, there are still people like Ken Dodd, I've mentioned him before. He's a survivor, and wherever he goes the kind [of] a gathering, a popular gathering, that was there in the music hall. I don't remember the music hall, but the variety shows that I was talking about, and certainly those pantomimes in those days, that's still there when somebody like Ken Dodd appears. But it seems rarer. Yes.

SN: To what extent during the fifties did any of the experimental and revolutionary events like *Look Back in Anger*, like Brecht, like Absurdism, and Beckett, did they impinge on your theatre-going consciousness?

KB: Oh yes. Oh yes, yes, yes, yes. I knew that was the way... oh I was going to say the way things were going. I mean, it didn't seem revolutionary in a way; it just seemed the latest thing. But I did go to see *Look Back in Anger* yes. I've seen it a time or two. And I remember a colleague of mine, she said to me... well she must have been to see it as well. I must have said to her 'why don't you go and see it?' But she must have been to see it. And she said to me in a puzzled and unhappy kind of way, 'But I don't know people like that.' [Laughs] And I remember saying, really too smartly really, 'Oh well, everybody I know is like that.' But they did seem... you know, the people in it seemed recognisable in a way that they don't now. And I mean, it just did seem simple. In those days nobody ever thought... everybody thought then oh Osborne is new and things have got to be... have got to change. Now of course we can see all that – nostalgia isn't quite the right word in Osborne – but all that identification with what was there before. Colonel what's his name in *Look Back in Anger*...

SN: I've forgotten.

KB: Yes, I've forgotten his name. That seemed at the time a kind of sort of figure of fun. Not figure of fun, but sort of... Colonel Redfern... an old fuddy-duddy. Well of course I was young then. But I mean, I'm not the first to point this out am I? In fact I'm only really repeating what others have said, this kind of... And look at Billy Rice in *The Entertainer*, this kind of regret, this sort of conservatism that was in Osborne. And look how it in fact tortured and warped him in a way in the rest of his life, this conflict that was in him. So that did seem... yes it did seem new.

And Brecht of course seemed wonderful. I was doing National Service when Brecht came to the Palace Theatre in London – the Berliner Ensemble I mean. And so I didn't actually see *Mother Courage* then, because I'd been unable to get away. But of course everybody... you knew about it, you knew exactly what was happening, you knew the impact of it. And later on I did see them when they did come to do *Coriolanus* – his version of *Coriolanus*. And they did his version of *Edward II* at the National Theatre at

the Old Vic. And all these things just seemed wonderful. I mean, the theory of it, alienation effect and those things. And the staging, everywhere new had to be built so that they could rush Mother Courage carts round the space. [Laughs] And you know [they were] even going to do the Barbican like that I think.

And also you see in a way these things kind of related to Tyrone Guthrie movement that... and the theatres that he had abroad, and the other Stratfords, and the theatre built at Chichester, and our very own Crucible – and the Olivier Theatre. Those ways of staging those now... you know from today's perspective, those seem as if they're now here forever. And it's not just I don't think that we're stuck with the theatres.

And also... well and the 'in the round' movement has been really... has brought a revolution too. Stephen Joseph at Stoke-on-Trent in that old theatre before they built the new one, you know taken over by Peter Cheeseman, and the Ayckbourn Theatre that used to be in the library and then was in the Westwood School, that [was] really much, much better a space than what they've got in the Odeon I think. It is remarkable that some spaces are just so wonderful to be in... is the way the auditorium... the planes of the auditorium relate to the acting space, or the stage, or whatever it is. And you know it is just perfection.

And I saw... I mean, I know the old school, Westwood School, Scarborough was hopeless from a working point of view. I mean, it caused them an awful lot of trouble and grief doing things that was wasteful in that sense. But it was just a wonderful space to be in. I once saw... or I did see the premiere of Neville's Island there. And all it was – well as you know it takes place on an island with the sea – and there was nothing there except this empty space in the middle. I suppose there were some... I don't remember what kind of floor cloth there was. But it wasn't all raised up or anything. And the different entrances – I think there were three or four entrances to that space – from which people emerged. One was obviously coming from the sea. But it was as if you were actually on that beach. However, you know if it was done at the Olivier or somewhere or... well, it has been done in numerous other places. I've never seen it again. I wouldn't want to because it was just so perfectly done. And yet they could do elaborate things there too.

Oh, there was another water scene in Way Up Stream where there was the cruiser and water and the two dived into it at the very end. Or did they dive into it or were they just poised? I think they were poised to dive into it, a blackout, and that's the end of the play. I don't think they actually submerged. So they could do quite elaborate things there as well if they wanted.

But as I say, some spaces are just so wonderful it is... The Coliseum is too, I think. It's just the relation of the stage to that space. Some places are awful like the Library Theatre in Manchester, which is popularly supposed to be intimate, but I think it must be hell – I've never acted in there, but I think it must be hell to act in there because the theatre is too wide for its size. And the stage is kind of perched up too high for the space. And it seems... you know, it must be like acting off a mantelpiece I think. I always think of Alice Through the Looking Glass when I go there, and I think good heavens. I've seen wonderful things there – many wonderful things there. But I think it's... I think they've been wonderful in spite of the theatre itself.

Oldham Coliseum is wonderful. And they keep saying they're going to have a new one and knock it down, and in a way that would be a shame because there's just so much atmosphere in the place. It's wonderful. Actually I haven't been for a bit. Its programming has gone down the tubes a bit I think. But that seems like... I mean that... you know when you go there you feel oh well popular entertain... popular theatre is still alive. The audience is so local and so heterogeneous, so I like going there. Although the

auditorium is not comfortable to sit in, it's a vibrant space. There are, you know... so I think some of these building developments have been wonderful. Not that that's new of course, the Oldham Coliseum.

But I think theatre in the round, amphitheatre-shaped theatres, have changed the nature of plays in a way. Oh it's very interesting – it is five/six years ago – anyway it was before Nicholas Hytner when suddenly a little movement appeared to be welling up to say oh well the National Theatres are too big, and in particular the Lyttleton's awful. [Laughs] And I don't know if they were actually going to twin it, or triple it, or quadruple it, but they put all kinds of other little spaces in and said how dreadful it was, the Lyttleton itself, and nobody liked being in it. Now there are these... oh what are they called... 'Monsterist' playwrights aren't they?

SN: Oh yes, yes.

KB: Who they say they're going to write big plays. I don't know if you can actually do that really. But it's just interesting. And it's very interesting to see what they do with the plant. But as I said before, you know, throughout theatre history they've knocked it down, and burnt it down, and rebuilt it, and altered it. I'm sorry to say I haven't... oh this is what I haven't done... oh and this is all too modern really isn't it for this project? Perhaps I won't go there now. [Laughs] I'll come back to it another time.