

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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David Coulter – interview transcript

Interviewer: Poonam Ganglani

12 May 2008

Actor. Accent; actor-managers; audiences; censorship; John Gielgud; learning parts; Joan Littlewood; Micheál MacLíammóir; Anew McMaster; motives for theatre-going; new writing; Othello; revue artistes; technique; theatre in the Commonwealth; theatre in Ireland; weekly repertory; Wise Child.

Please note, the section at the beginning of the interview which is marked in italics is missing from the audio recording.

PG: First of all, I'd really like to thank you for coming, and for taking out the time to take part in the Theatre Archive Project, Mr. Coulter.

DC: My pleasure.

PG: You had mentioned earlier that your main experience with theatre has been with Irish Drama.

DC: Well, my initial experience was when I came here to study at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. When I was 18, I got a scholarship to do that. Then I did some work here in fact, as a student. I was able to watch from the wings - the chap who so sadly died recently - Paul Scofield. I carted the spears around off stage, when he was playing Hamlet, and The Power and the Glory, and King Lear at the Phoenix Theatre. I was hybridizing my time between school and watching this going on, which was a wonderful experience. It was a great time in theatre anyway in the 1950s. It was a transition time between the traditional three-act well-written play, and the sudden eruption of the Angry Young Men at the Royal Court, which I observed from where I lived, in the then very cheap place to get digs in Chelsea. And you would walk past the Royal Court on a daily basis and see amazing things happening which was good, as well as the traditional theatre which... People nowadays tend to think the fifties were a boring time, they were not. The fifties were a wonderfully exciting time, when you had lived through the war and the austerity. Suddenly things were happening, and it was... it was extremely exciting.

PG: But do you remember any particular event, or having seen a performance that first sparked interest in theatre for you?

DC: I think the most - and it still is to me one of the greatest performances I have ever seen – was Siobhan McKenna playing Saint Joan, and that was in Ireland. It was the most moving thing I saw, probably next to Laurence Olivier's Long Day's Journey Into Night. It was one of those occasions when, as the curtains came down, you had at least three to four minutes total silence, before the audience erupted... this wonderful actress, wonderful.

PG: This was before you went to theatre school?

DC: That was before I went to school. From a very early age, the only thing I ever thought I wanted to do was act, and... So I went on to do that for a while.

PG: Could you tell us a little bit about how you moved into professional theatre from theatre school?

DC: Yes, from theatre school. In those days, there was the weekly repertory system, and as a young actor, if you weren't snapped up, which most people certainly weren't, by the West End - even people like Eileen Atkins who was at Drama School with my wife, she was a contemporary in fact there - we all started learning the trade of the actual theatre through this system of repertory companies throughout the country. They were a marvellous training in some ways, in that you had to develop the ability to learn very quickly, and to characterize very quickly. I mean, they're scoffed at now as being an inculcation of extremely bad habits, because you tended to be thrown a part at whatever age you happened to be, you know, eighteen and you were playing eighty year-olds. But it did sort of in a sense stretch you, and make you think an awful lot. And there isn't, it seems to me, a substitute for that now. Maybe it's a good thing, I don't know, I don't like to live in the past, but it certainly had its advantages. And the other thing which I found in my teaching life subsequently, when I'd been teaching people - post-graduate students who've come to do acting, doing Drama at university - what we learned to do was to learn, and learn damned fast, because you had a play coming on the following week. You had just, you know... you had a week to learn and that was it. And there now is a bit of a lack of ability to get things into their heads at speed, so that you can then get on and use your rehearsal time more productively. And you do have to, I find with productions I've done, wield the big stick quite heavily to insist that people get their heads down and learn. My own son managed to go through school, and there was never any rote-learning, it was regarded... it was not a good idea for children to learn things by rote, even their times tables. We had no option but to get on with it and learn. It was a very good thing too.

PG: And you feel that it was helpful?

DC: I think it was helpful, and when I get on to my experience as an actor in Ireland with Anew McMaster's company, and Micheál MacLíammóir, both very great actors in their own way, possibly of the Old School... but nonetheless, they could make audiences respond in a most extraordinary way. But we would be in the back end of Ireland,

opening in Galway someplace, and you'd find somebody with a donkey and cart coming down the street, who, because they had learned so much by rote, could actually rhyme off bits of Aeneid, of The Iliad, or Shakespeare... and a man standing there with a donkey and cart, I don't exaggerate. And there was no television, so they came in and they stood for a shilling or whatever it was through Othello, Lear, Hamlet. We did a huge range of classical theatre, a lot of Wilde, some Sheridan, as well as the occasional Agatha Christie potboiler. But it was almost invariably the great classics which drew them in... and stood there, they would stand after a day's work, totally transfixed by the great acting of someone like Anew McMaster. And we as young actors, were working with a man who probably has no parallel in today's theatre. We have great actors, I'm not saying we haven't, we do have some great actors, but the vocal technique then had to be a great deal stronger than it is now. You did not have artificial aids. You filled a theatre with your voice. You had to learn the art of speech, and the use of the diaphragmatic and the intercostal breathing system to project voice in whatever circumstances you were, because nobody was going to help, and they weren't going to put a microphone over your face. That was it. So these great actors were actually in themselves a lesson in technique, huge lesson in technique. And that technique did seem to work in a way, which produced a magic in the theatre.

PG: That you don't find today?

DC: Well you probably do find today, I'm not saying you don't, but it had a quality of its own. They were actor-managers, and the actor-manager system was a very fine type of education, as well as work. You were working with people whose technique was – possibly now, a little bit on the obvious side, a little bit cheesy - but nonetheless, it did work. You could get amazing reactions from audiences, from quite simple audiences. I distinctly remember one night when we were doing Othello, in a quite rural bit of Ireland. There was a large crowded audience, and Mac was about to kill Desdemona - he was playing Othello – and quite by impulsion, a woman stood up in the audience and screamed [Irish accent] 'Leave her alone you big black bastard!'.

PG: [Laughs]

DC: [Laughs] Well, I doubt if you can get many people doing that at the National nowadays! It was a total theatre, and as I said earlier, we didn't have to compete with television. We didn't have to compete with quite so much cinema, and the amazing special effects that [are expected] nowadays... and that have crept into the theatre as well, which is I think... I think it possibly has resulted in the amount of musicals that are crowding out the theatres in the West End, because they can afford spectacle where a lot of theatre... and good plays don't actually need it because it's more... they are about more important things than spectacle.

PG: But what year was this, the play that you spoke about, the Othello production?

DC: That would be about [the mid to late 1950s]. I was there before I joined the BBC, which was... I was there... about four years.

PG: So it was before that time.

DC: Yes. And we did tour quite a lot and we also worked in Dublin. We did an occasional play there. I still remember doing a modern day, a modern-dress version of Julius Caesar, with Micheál MacLíammóir and Hilton Edwards directing that. They were the people who started what was for quite a while one of the premier theatres in Europe, the Gate Theatre in Dublin, where Orson Welles came and did his apprenticeship, and, well, according to Micheál, lied his way in. But he was quite an extraordinary guy, there were legions of tales of the days of Orson. Still around.

PG: But you mentioned that the company toured a lot.

DC: Yes we did.

PG: So I'm assuming that it did come to London as well.

DC: No we didn't. No no. We were touring almost exclusively in Ireland. Mac went off and did occasional guest appearances in America and other places as well, Australia. But he was more or less Irish-bound. But we would do sort of twelve-week seasons, twice a year, and in between whiles, we were working in other theatres or wherever we could get jobs.

PG: But were you ever earlier or after that involved with a British theatre company?

DC: Yes, I went and worked with repertory theatre. In my first jobs after Drama School, there were repertory companies, and one went and worked for people like the Carl Clopet organization. They were all quite well-known in the trade as places that you wanted to get into, but wanted to get out of quite quickly to be honest. They [Laughs]... they were set in their ways and life was not what you wanted it to be, and you went there, and there would be invariably actors still thinking they were going to make it - and they were in their fifties, sixties, seventies - and they weren't, cruelly, they were not. They were bound to repertory life for their entire career, which was fine, but not something as a young actor you wanted to view.

PG: So around what year was this after you finished drama school?

DC: I finished drama school in 1956.

PG: OK. So how would you say that British Theatre, thematically, technically, was different from your experience with Irish theatre?

DC: Probably not all that much. I mean, there was a sort of tradition of theatre which was universal really, certainly in the British Isles. Subsequently I had a bursary to travel around the entire Commonwealth, and I looked at theatre in Canada, in Australia, New Zealand, hither and yon. And the same foundation for theatre was there, that I was brought up in. I went and worked with the Maidment Centre in Auckland, and the theatre in Wellington over in Australia and places. They were still very much the same sort of approach, because they were fundamentally British theatre, which I thought was rather a pity, because they didn't include enough - as far as I was concerned - indigenous theatre, and still the ambition of all young actors that I met, and did some training with in Commonwealth countries, their Mecca was to come to Britain. I was very keen to let them know that Britain did not need them so much as their home countries, where there was still much more opportunity than there was here. It didn't stop them coming anyhow, probably a very good thing. But it was something that was fairly universal. And exactly the same, I was really in television at the time, I went and... bursary to go and do this and exactly the same basis of training, and of production. Which was common about the English-speaking world apart from America because so much stemmed from the BBC. BBC personnel, BBC staff on hand and did their training.

PG: So it had a wide-reaching influence.

DC: Absolutely. You're right.

PG: You said earlier that people now might imagine that in the fifties life was dull, but that it wasn't so, it was very exciting. But how was life like really in the fifties and sixties, and what was the status that theatre had right after the war? Was it a source of entertainment amidst the post-war climate, or was it a social tool that reflected the harsh realities after the war?

DC: I think it was still a wee bit like the sort of a jazz age of the twenties, as a response to the First World War. I think for probably ten years after the war, you had very much theatre as an escapism. There were some very good theatrical imports. There was an annual season of plays from Europe. I remember when I was a student going and seeing a lot of work. I think it was John Fernald who had been head of RADA. He was running the Arts Theatre and he had a season of plays that we would not normally have seen, and they weren't by any means comedy, a lot of theatre work from the Continent. And that was the more serious side. But there was a lot of light entertainment expected from theatre. What's known as the revue world which... marvellous people came out of that like Beatrice Lillie and Joyce Grenfell, and the reviews would play for a year or so of sketches and comedy and music. Kenneth Williams and people came out of that tradition. I suppose first place I'd have seen them - Hugh Paddock - all sorts of people who had very long lasting careers in radio and television and drama, as highly entertaining people. They didn't just disappear suddenly because we had Angry Young Men around the place. There was a sort of combination of the two went on, but it was of interest to look back... it is of interest to look back and see that one lived through a time when... leading up to the sixties, when that sort of supposed abandonment of all principles came about. But in fact, there was a lengthy intellectual debate going on between the classic theatre. There have been... people are sadly neglected but suddenly coming back into fashion like Rattigan, whose plays were suddenly totally scorned when Archie Rice and people turned up. Suddenly Rattigan - who in fact was a fine playwright

and did write some very, very good and very thoughtful works about life and about people – was suddenly discarded because they were considered to be entertainment for the middle classes, which maybe they were, but then who goes to the theatre? Let's face it. Joan Littlewood was working very hard at that time, down in the East End. I worked with her when I was producing in television. She came along on a Frost program that I was directing. And her influence was very strong indeed, and she produced some really remarkable stuff, like *A Taste of Honey* and one of my colleagues in Drama School had played the lead in that initially, Francis Cuka. That was happening coincidentally with the Royal Court, and with the mainstream West End, of which Joan Littlewood disapproved totally, and hated the fact that some of her actors - and used to blame them - for the money went and sullied their reputation. People like Harry H. Corbett, who worked initially for her, went and became hugely successful in television. You may have come across him in *Steptoe and Son*. But there's always been that sort of fight between what people regard in a slightly poker-faced way as 'legitimate theatre', and the light entertainment aspect of it, which was in the fifties finding new ways of expressing itself. It was an interesting time to be around.

PG: Around the mid-fifties was the same time that Beckett and Absurd Theatre started coming in, Ionesco...

DC: Yes, Ionesco and those other things...

PG: So how did audiences react to that?

DC: Well they didn't particularly, as far as I could see. I mean, there was an audience for it, yes. In a way, when people like Olivier, the legits of this world, and Gielgud took to being in plays like *Home*, and sloughed off some of their classical background and started playing characters like Archie Rice, it gave a legitimacy to that side of theatre that was slightly scorned by the theatre-going public who thought it wasn't nice. A friend in a play with Alec Guinness who played a transvestite - I'm trying to remember the name of it, it was by Simon Gray, who's now a highly respected writer - *Wise Child!* *Wise Child* was the name of the play, and Alec Guinness played in it. And my friend was saying that when he was seen to be playing this extraordinary transvestite character – he'd been in the Navy or something during the war – he got enormous amounts of hate mail from ex-colleagues that he should do such a filthy play. In fact it was a very interesting play indeed, very interesting. An actor was expected to be respectable at all costs. It was never a respectable profession in the first place, let's face it – as my parents kept pointing out! Yeah, but it was in fact legitimate to be on stage provided you were doing good plays, with a deep thing. Something that was as outré as *Wise Child* was an assault to the audience's sensibilities really.

PG: But do you remember the year that this was staged?

DC: That was probably about... 1963, '64.

PG: OK. And it got through censorship?

DC: Yup. When did the censor get the chop?

PG: It was abolished in 1968.

DC: '68, yes.

PG: In fact we were speaking about it earlier over coffee, the Lord Chamberlain.

DC: Well yes, yes.

PG: So do you remember any particularly challenging experiences?

DC: No, no, not in my experience, I wasn't producing anything at the time. The other thing, I moved into television. I went into the BBC overseas radio initially, in 1960, and had most of my career thereafter in the BBC and London Weekend Television, which I moved to when it started, which was a wider world altogether.

PG: But how was the Lord Chamberlain generally perceived by the theatre society?

DC: Well I think probably as a bloody nuisance really, because anything you wanted to say... I mean, like any censorship, either you approve of it or you don't. And most theatre people tend to be fairly liberal in their approach to life. And the idea that somebody sitting with a blue pencil should score out perfectly legitimate thoughts of highly intellectual and intelligent people is preposterous, absolutely preposterous. It has raised its ugly [head] again when people march on theatres because they're putting on plays which offend Muslims for instance, as has happened. Well this is a form of censorship, which this country has happily been without for a long time. I mean, the fundamental censor is the audience, who walk out or not. It's like having a television set, if you don't want to watch the program, turn it off. You know, if you want to sit there and grumble about it, well you know that's up to you.

PG: Anyway, was there any particular experience that you remember as having been your most memorable in all your years of theatre, either as an actor or even as a spectator? You told us about what first brought you to theatre, but after that, was there anything that has stuck on?

DC: Well, I mean there are things which chronically made one laugh and... try terribly hard not to collapse on stage, there were quite a few of those and particularly in weekly rep. You never quite knew what was going to happen sometimes. I was working down in Farnham, a repertory company, I'd been asked to go and play Cecil Graham in Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*. And I... something happened the first night which I... I nearly choked. But anyway, they said 'Oh well, wait for the matinée', and I said 'What

do you mean "wait for the matinée?"", they said 'You'll see'. My entrance was made down stage, left, and I came sweeping on, and tripped over a pair of feet.

PG: Of feet?

DC: Feet. Yes, feet. [whispers] 'What the?' And apparently this guy came - colonel somebody or other - who came every matinée on Wednesday, and sat in the front row, and he had a wooden leg, which he always propped on the front stage. Nobody thought it advisable to let me know this, so I tripped over his leg.

PG: [Laughs]

DC: No, there were all sorts of things, almost too numerous to mention, like the woman who yelled at McMaster to leave Desdemona alone. There was the occasional witch – one of my dread moments – where I was playing in Macbeth, and at the end was having a sword fight with broadswords, a real one. I mean, it weighed a ton! And I swung my sword and clashed out my back to the audience, and clashed it against whoever's, and I felt my arms in the air and I thought 'That's funny... this sword is only half the weight it was before!'. And I looked and I was holding the handle and the whole of the blade had [broken and flew] off to the audience which was absolutely packed that night, and I thought 'any minute now, I'm going to hear somebody scream their death scream. And in fact, it had done an arc out into the audience, and there was a little 'Ow!', and it came down and went right through the one seat that was empty, row G or whatever it was. Bad moments.

PG: That was a lucky moment as well!

DC: That was a very lucky moment indeed. And I thought well, 'What would've happened, would I have been had up for manslaughter?' Probably would. Dread, dread to think... no, these little things were sent to try us and they did. Yep, great fun. Of course there's always the occasions on which people don't remember their lines and stand there looking at you. There was a wonderful guy who used to improvise, and you know you'd have to carry on from... what's that wonderful line in Hamlet? 'What hour now? Methinks it lacks of twelve' says the next line, and the next one is 'No it's struck'. And we had a new actor - we hadn't actually seen him in performance who didn't, as it happened, remember lines - and he was inspired to go 'Methinks it lacks of twelve', and he went 'No, not by my watch!'. Thanks. Fine, we all had to stand there and carry on. We wished to be dead!

PG: [Laughs] I guess that happens with every production.

DC: Ah yes, yes.

PG: Just to finish off, do you still go to theatre regularly?

DC: No not regularly, no. I should, but I don't. I live out of town now, and I do go occasionally to see something, although there are a couple of things I would love to see at the moment. The American play at The Old Vic, I'd love to go and see. And I would very much like to see several things that are all at the West End at the moment. There seems to be quite a lot of good stuff around at the moment.

PG: All right. Well thank you very much.

DC: Oh! Pleasure, pleasure! I hope some of it has been of any use whatever, burbling on. But there you go, my life in theatre.

PG: It was really interesting to have a first-hand account, because as a student I've read so much about... names, these are all names to me, Rattigan, Gielgud. It's interesting to hear from someone who's actually worked with these people.

DC: Yes, I've seen them in action. I mean, they were a breed apart really. We don't go in for possibly that style of great acting anymore. Some people deride and say 'Ha ha, it was old-fashioned and stuffy.', it still had an ability to move, you know. I remember watching Peggy Ashcroft and Gielgud when I was quite young, in *The Cherry Orchard*, and that moment where he turns and says 'Oh sister' - because, [they] know, they're losing everything - quite heartbreaking. I mean, he could just do something vocally that just went through you. You know, just hit you, in a totally emotional way. Quite extraordinary. They then showed what a range they had when they started doing plays, by Storey, and Pinter and people. And you think their technique wasn't stuffy as people would assume. They had a tremendous range of ability, and they could do things with a line which you know... which brought out the superb quality of English language. Which again, I think is somewhat debased. I watch and listen to the BBC, with horror quite often. The amount of awful intonation...

PG: Now?

DC: Yes, now. Absolutely awful... and mispronunciation. Those qualities were very valued in days of old. I mean, not meaning to be snobbish, but I was brought up with an Irish accent. The first thing you had to do if you hoped to work in a theatre was to lose your accent. I mean, you still can do it, you can still be as Irish as you like but –or anything else in fact – but it was regarded as essential that you acquire this other dialect called Standard English, on the grounds that it sounded very weird to do Hamlet in Northern Irish, [Irish accent] it would very weird indeed.

PG: [Laughs]

DC: Just one of those things. And that... you fight a battle with your students in a lot of the schools now, because they insist that they will put on a Standard English when they

feel inclined. Doesn't work like that. It's a very nuanced sound. A lot of range, that doesn't exist in most dialects.

PG: Was that in Ireland as well that you had to neutralize the accent, or was that only in British theatre?

DC: Well no, there was a tendency to anglicize for the classics.

PG: Even in Ireland?

DC: Yes, there was. I don't remember any of my colleagues, Irish or not, who didn't use a Standard English while doing Shakespeare or Wilde. Unless you do character work in which case, you could use a dialect.

PG: That's interesting. Anyways...

DC: Anyways!

PG: That's all the questions that I have for you.

DC: Jolly good!

PG: So thank you very much.