

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Anna Korwin – interview transcript

Interviewer: Tom Brandt

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TB: What are your first memories of theatre; how did you first get interested?

AK: Oh, I think I was six years old. I was born in Poland. I was six years old, and I was taken to [a theatre performance]. I don't really remember what the performance was, but I thought it was so wonderful I wanted to be up on stage, and that's when I decided.

TB: Was that something in Britain that you saw?

AK: No, no it was in Warsaw.

TB: Warsaw, really? So how did you first get involved in theatre?

AK: Well, I went to the Old Vic Theatre School, when I was here. And then I had a hard time trying to get a job. I didn't sort of 'fit' anywhere really, and then I met Joan [Littlewood], I did an audition for Joan. She said initially; 'Yes, yes you're very talented, but...' and she wrote me a letter, I think. She said, 'I think you'd do better in France.' - and I'd always wanted to go back anyway - 'Your style' she said. Something that I didn't quite understand but I thought, 'that's that.' And then a few months later I had a call from her, and she offered me Marie Curie in [Ewan MacColl's] Uranium 235, Howard Goorney was playing Pierre Curie, and so I went to Manchester and that's how it started.

TB: What was it like, your first introduction to Theatre Workshop? Was it scary getting involved with Joan Littlewood?

AK: Well, Joan was scary, she was particularly scary for very vulnerable young actresses! [laughs] Which I was. Which is why after two years I left, because I felt I had to grow up and find myself. Because Joan - and I owe really everything to Joan [she taught me far

more than the training at the Old Vic Theatre School] - but she would do something like this: I was Raina in *Arms and the Man* at Theatre Royal, Stratford East, and she came into the dressing room one interval and she said; 'Now. That was very, very good tonight. It was excellent. Now, do something different tomorrow.'! Now, today I understand exactly what it means, [back then] it scared me to death: 'What am I going to do tomorrow?' you know? [pause] She was not a good psychologist with women, that's all. But [Joan's] was a wonderful way of working, because we would read the play, we would discuss the play and the characters, and by the time we went on stage - and we didn't have much time to rehearse at Stratford - the moves found themselves. [We already knew our characters, so] you knew instinctively where you... She didn't do blocking like a lot of directors do. They arrive and they move you like chess pieces, you know. She didn't do that. It all came from the character - it all flowed. And she had wonderful ideas to rejuvenate Bernard Shaw. She said, 'I think when the curtain goes up, I would like you to be cutting your toenails. [pause] And then when you hear your mother coming you run to the window and take this romantic pose' - that's how it starts, the mother comes into Raina's bedroom. And that... it showed you, really, Raina's character. It made a point, do you see what I mean? It made a point. That sort of thing Joan was full of. Very inspiring.

TB: So was this kind of thing much different to the acting styles you had learnt at the Old Vic?

AK: I am in the minority of very few, but I have found some people - one or two people - who'd been to the Old Vic Theatre School who did not enjoy the training, and I am one of them.

TB: Why do you think that is?

AK: I can't say. I was only sixteen or seventeen, when I was there [I was probably too young and immature], but I... [pause] [One of the directors] Michel St Denis, who is revered here as a god, [is not respected and liked by some British actors. Not many, but two or three!]; a friend - actually the director of *Callas* - who knows Judi Dench very well, said to me, 'Well, you're in good company. Judi Dench couldn't bear working with him'. I mean, I am just telling you, you know. He came to see the performance we did [of] *Uranium 235* - we were rehearsing *Uranium 235* when I joined. We were rehearsing in Manchester and Sam Wanamaker - you know this story, don't you? - and Michael Redgrave were there with *The Country Girl* before coming to the West End. And they came to a rehearsal, in a dingy, dingy rehearsal room, with no costumes and no light, and they thought it was a wonderful piece of theatre. They, really, were the movers to get us to the Embassy Theatre in the summer - the Embassy Theatre which is now the Central School [of Speech and Drama], Swiss Cottage. And we came to the Embassy Theatre and I can't remember how long we played - maybe a couple of weeks - and Michel St Denis came to see it. I [played] *Marie Curie* and I had other parts - everybody was playing several parts - and he came to the dressing room and he said, [French accent] 'Ah, Korwin', he said 'you have found yourself, now take care not to lose it!'. He couldn't stop being negative, you know, he couldn't just say 'That was very good', you know. And I'll tell you something very funny which happened. I was playing... among the parts I was playing, I was playing a woman in the audience - I had a quick change - I had to go through a pass door, get into the audience front row and interrupt Harry

Corbett with, I don't know what scene he was doing, with George [Cooper] and be quite unpleasant about the play – that this was all nonsense and [Harry] was answering me. We had this sort of improvised dialogue, and the man next to me said, 'Oh shut up! Shut up!' and I had to go on to get to the right cue, so I said to him, [low vigorous tone] 'It's part of the play!'. [Laughs] It was lovely. I was so proud that he really believed [I was part of the audience].

TB: A testament to your abilities. That's fantastic. Did you think as you were doing it – because obviously this is quite a revolutionary period for British Theatre...?

AK: Well I didn't know I was part of that. I'm very proud of that [because now I do!] because that was before the Royal Court [and Look Back in Anger]. [Joan] was very scathing [about the plays at the West End at that time], and rightly so. I mean, it's sort of come round full circle. You cannot dismiss Terence Rattigan, he's a very good playwright, but at the time he was just the pits, as far as she was concerned... [she was also very scathing about] Binkie Beaumont and H.M. Tennent. But we were there before the Royal Court. It's only a question of money, because the plays she was doing, she was doing plays she hoped would get a local audience. We didn't get a local audience in Stratford, people were coming from the West End because this was something new. [pause] What she should have been doing I suppose, really, instead of reviving the classics - which she was doing so that we could survive, because they would get the audience - she should have been doing plays by Ewan MacColl. I think Jack Pulman has written something like that in Howard Goorney's book which I've got, saying that, if she'd gone on doing another style of play, rather than bringing Arms and the Man and Sean O'Casey, Anna Christie - which we did - and done a different take on that, she would have evolved into a more interesting theatre. But there was no subsidy, there was absolutely nothing. I was very fortunate because I had a home in London with my mother and my grandmother and I could just take the tube to Stratford. But they started by sleeping in the dressing room!

TB: Yes I heard about that. It seems so bizarre, now, that people would actually do that in theatre.

AK: You wouldn't be allowed today, we're in a nanny state. This wouldn't be allowed, that wouldn't be allowed and you have to ask permission to smoke a cigarette when it's really necessary for the play. We are just - give me Joan any day! [laughs] With all her faults!

TB: That's interesting you say that, because we recently did a play called The Acrington Pals – I don't know if you know it?

AK: Called what?

TB: The Acrington Pals.

AK: Yes, yes.

TB: And that's a war play and we had so much trouble getting these fake guns – we had to send off, get licences for it, inform the government that we were getting these fake guns. I guess it's quite a departure, I mean you must have noticed all this coming in, this legislation and stuff.

AK: I can't bear it. I tell you what, [when I travel with my one-woman show Callas] if you drape your furniture - which I have to do, because I never know what sort of furniture I'm going to get, if I travel far away I can't take anything with me, so I ask for two very simple chairs and the tables I drape -your drapes have to be fireproof. But on the other hand you can go to the National and see a Shakespeare, and they are running around the stage with lit candles. You tell me, who is going to actually light the drape on your table, actually come up and strike a match. The regulations are illogical.

TB: I suppose when you were at Theatre Workshop, the very fact that a lot of the actors were sleeping in dressing rooms and spending all day together, that must have formed quite a tight bond between you all.

AK: Oh yes, it was a proper company, it was a lovely company.

TB: Does that make it easier to act as a company?

AK: Oh yes! I mean, everybody's understood that [on the continent] except this country. I mean, they talk about an ensemble! They don't have an ensemble, they don't know the meaning of it – there isn't an ensemble! Trevor Nunn tried when he was at the National; he formed a company of actors within the company and the same actors did two or three productions, and then it goes [caput]. But [in France] with theatres like the Comédie Française, and also very much in Germany, and the theatre in Lyons [Villeurbanne], you have people who work together for years. And look at that wonderful Russian theatre [Lev Dodin's company] from St. Petersburg who came here to the Barbican, I've seen several of their productions. They have long rehearsal periods and they work together for years, and it shows. It shows. That doesn't mean you can't do a marvellous production just cast here, there and everywhere, but it doesn't survive, this ensemble idea in the theatre today. At the Royal Court at the moment there is one group of actors doing two plays, Rhinoceros and The Arsonists, but that is just [an ensemble] for three months – it's not the same.

I only left [Theatre Workshop] because I felt that I was going insane [and found Joan's influence on me oppressive], but I went back in 1958 having grown up, and something happened. I think Avis Bunnage and Joan fell out and I think Avis was either asked to leave - but of course she came back afterwards! - or walked out of Celestina. And I was in London, and I said to Joan 'I'd like to do another play with you', and she gave me Avis' part in Celestina and we got on terribly well because I was much more mature.

TB: It must be so hard at such a young age to come into such an illustrious company.

AK: Well, they weren't illustrious when I came. But they were working in a certain way which was completely new to me, and I took to it. It was the psychological pressure that I couldn't take. I wasn't the only one. She was better with men than with women. Vulnerable young women often had nervous breakdowns. I didn't - I left before [that happened]!

TB: Were you aware of the shift of style in theatre that was occurring away from the Rattigan style, and how did you feel about that?

AK: Yes I was. I thought we were right and they were wrong! I was condemning Terence Rattigan. Now I could quite enjoy a production of one of his plays, there's a sort of moderation in all things. But I went to work and live in Paris and then Theatre... I left at precisely the wrong moment, before they got really famous. And they came to Paris, they came and gave wonderful performances and I could see that if I'd have been in the company I would have played this and I would have played that - Oh it was torture to see that! [laughs] You know when they went to Paris, they had no money, but somehow they got to Paris and they were acclaimed by the critics and they deserved it. They were wonderful wonderful performances: they had gone on and she had gone on and the performances were at a different level, the productions, to when I was there. When I got back into Celestina that was still at that high level. And then of course there were all these transfers of musicals to the West End, [and Theatre Royal Stratford East] became too much like a try-out theatre for the West End, to ensure financial success, unfortunately. That's what happened to Theatre Workshop. They put on things like 'Oh! What a Lovely War' and 'Fings Aint What They Used T'Be.' And I'm not saying they weren't very good performances, they were, very good productions, but it became a little bit like a try-out theatre for the West End. Ewan MacColl had left by then. Things never stay the same, they develop. From up, there is no way but down, for a while. [laughs]

TB: You mentioned Oh! What a Lovely War, did you have any experience of devising plays with Joan in that kind of way?

AK: Of those sort of plays, no, I myself haven't, unfortunately. I cannot sing - I sing flat - I did [have to] sing a duet with Avis, in a Sean O'Casey [play], and I had lessons, and lessons, and lessons, and I finally achieved it. I love music, I am musical, but there is something in me, I was born with an inability to hold a tune. So therefore unfortunately musicals are not for me. It's a great pity because I love - well, I'm playing a singer, and I'm...! [Laughs] Doesn't stop me doing that. So I have never done a musical. And this was what happened to Theatre Workshop, they started doing musicals. And this is incidentally when I met Murray, in Celestina -Murray Melvin. That's when he joined Theatre Workshop, in Celestina.

TB: So how long did you stay with Theatre Workshop the second time?

AK: Just Celestina. Then I went back to Paris.

TB: Speaking of Paris, actually, that's an interesting thing as well, the influences of foreign plays this is a bit later in the period – but Ionesco and writers like this who were coming from outside the British theatre. How do you think that influenced the British theatre?

AK: Oh it has, Ionesco especially. You remember Lawrence Olivier did a production of - the play that is on at the moment. Rhinoceros - for example.

But British theatre is less - unfortunately still less - influenced by the continental theatre. It mostly looks towards America. I mean, I have had the experience of translating and literally putting on plays by a French writer called Pierre Bourgeade, one of them was The Passport. We did The Passport at a fringe theatre called 'Offstage Downstairs', which Buddy Dalton was running at Chalk Farm, a tiny tiny theatre. And Simon Callow, it was his first solo production, he was doing a play at the Bush at the time, but he already had a certain name. I had met him on a... we were working on a television [programme] together a couple of years before. He directed and Peter Bayliss played the other part. And that worked. In those days you could even get the critics to come. And it got reviews in all the important papers. And I did two other plays by Pierre Bourgeade in that theatre, which today would be quite impossible to finance because [finance has] gone through the roof and the critics would no longer go. It's much more difficult to get the critics to go to those sort of theatres. Certainly not the chief critics. I remember writing to the critic of The Times and asking him to come [and review our play] and he finally came.

TB: And that wouldn't happen today.

AK: It would not happen today. Nicholas de Jongh reviewed a play there, one of these French plays, but it was very hard work. Yasmina Reza with her very entertaining [play] Art is one of the few who have broken through. Not very many. England, I think England is still insular. That's from my point of view. I mean, I have lived here since I was a child, but I can see the difference. It's insular. I'll give you an example. My [one-woman play] Callas, it is not about a British person... OK, she had this wonderful reputation, but she's been dead for many years. It's very difficult to fill the theatre with Callas, particularly if the person playing her is not a star, but it is very easy to fill a small theatre if you are doing a play about Eleanor of Aquitaine. Even if the actress – who's a friend of mine, Eileen Page, who is very good, is not a star name. But the fact that she's doing Eleanor of Aquitaine, a bit of British history, it fills the theatre. She's had wonderful full houses, which is great. But why does she, why do I not? This is absolutely not resentment on my part, I'm beyond all that, please believe me. [We are neither of us star names, so it is the play that does or does not attract the public] It's because what she's doing is British, and what I'm doing is foreign.

TB: Do you think there was a similar thing happening in the post-war period?

AK: Yes, people have tried. There was a time when the Gate Theatre was very well known for reviving foreign classics. Steven Daldry was running it and before that as well. They were trying very hard. They try. The Royal Court is now trying, but the accent is

mostly it's... The publicity and the vitality is behind what's happening in the British theatre today. If it's our problem, if it's a problem of abortion or gays or whatever, as long as it's today's British problem. That will get an audience. Automatically. You could almost decide, what kind of play I am going to write in order to get an audience. And do it by numbers, I think one could do that today.

TB: Do you think that influenced a lot of the playwrights who were writing for that time as well, you know in terms of the themes that the themes that they dealt with in their plays?

AK: Our playwrights you mean? British playwrights?

TB: Yes, 1945-68 do you think there was an influence of continental theatre on their writing or was it still very insular?

AK: I think insular. Yes unfortunately, I think insular. The other problem for me is this [British] obsession with class, which you don't have on the continent. Well you have to... of course, there are snobs and of course... but it isn't every day. People are judged immediately. They open their mouth and they are put into a little box. I was just very recently in Paris for a few days. I arrived on the day before the strike, so I did everything I had to do, which necessitated going from one end of the town to the other. I did all that on the day I arrived and after that I had difficulty. But, I took a taxi to get back because I couldn't trust myself on the underground, you know, it was very very full and with a suitcase it would have been impossible. And the man driving the taxicab, everybody... [spoke perfect French]. I was just so aware that everyone spoke perfectly good French, and all the announcements on the underground were perfectly good French, you know. You come here now and [mutters and mumbles, then accent] "Can't understand a word yer saying". I am not talking about regional accents, I am talking about lazy speech. Immediately, you put that person "oh, that's middle class, lower middle class", what does it all matter? In Theatre Workshop there was none of that. It was wonderful.

TB: That's an interesting point, because I think a lot of the plays that were coming out at this period, things like *Godot*...

AK: An enormous impact, that had. But ask yourself why he had to write that first in French. And why did Peter Brook finally go to Paris to start his company? Because he didn't have the support here. It's a shame, isn't it? A [British] National Theatre that only starts in the late sixties, or seventies? And they've had it how many centuries in France? There is no money for the theatre, there is no money for culture in this country - not enough - it's not a priority, it never has been. I experience this when I ring up theatres and get my dates for Callas: 'We've had this cut, we've had that cut', you know? My fees have gone down because they can't afford it. I'm not complaining, I'm just saying that things are getting worse and worse. 'We don't know,' they say, 'whether we will have any funding. Ring us in three months.'

TB: It's terrible. A terrible state of affairs. Let's move off this topic, because it's depressing me now. [laughs]

AK: Yes, let's talk about something else! But whichever government is in power it doesn't change. I mean, the famous thing that I'll never forget [was] Peter Hall saying that he had this interview with Margaret Thatcher and he said 'She does not understand. There's got to be a profit. You sell something for X, and that is that much more than it cost you. And the theatre cannot fit into that. And if you cannot sell and make a profit like her grocer father, then why should we need you?' In that case no opera, no ballet, no theatre no nothing.

TB: I guess that's part of the reason why a lot of these theatres had to revert to these classics just to keep themselves going. Let's move to something more positive. I wonder, were you aware as a young actress of the ideological debate occurring at the same time? There is the Kenneth Tynan and Ionesco argument that was going on through papers and things. How aware were you, and how were you affected?

AK: I don't think I was all that aware because I was so young. I don't think that I was all that aware... I was in the middle of it. I can see it now much more clearly than at the time. At the time I was just plunged into learning one part after another, having very little rehearsal time, rehearsing one thing and playing another at night, and wondering whether we would get an audience. Kenneth Tynan, I think, made an enormous contribution to [our] theatre. He did put things on the map.

TB: Yes definitely. Well, I mean he said all that stuff about the Rattigan, the Loamshire plays. Basically he was the one saying 'we need something new, we need something different'.

AK: We do. Without betraying the play, without betraying our Shakespeare, we do need to look at [his plays] with our own eyes, with our own ideas. And that is what a lot of people are doing. Sometimes they go too far, for me. I don't quite believe in a black Henry V, I have to say – sorry Mr Hytner. But when Peter Brook did his Hamlet, his short version of Hamlet, which I saw, and it was Adrian... anyway a black Hamlet, and a black Ophelia, and a white Polonius - white Polonius, his daughter Ophelia black - black Hamlet and a white Gertrude, it didn't bother me at all. Because of the way he did it. I cannot explain why it didn't bother me but it didn't, but the Henry V at the National did bother me. I thought it was a gimmick to have television screens on the stage. Particularly with Henry V! It depends on the play. Hamlet is universal, but Henry V is grounded in British history of a certain period, isn't it. It's totally different, you can play around with Measure for Measure, Hamlet and The Merchant of Venice. But it depends which play.

TB: I agree! So when you were acting in Theatre Workshop, did they have any anxieties over censorship? I mean maybe this is something that came in later to British theatre, but there was a lot of controversy over censorship, do you know how that affected you or Joan or the Company as a whole?

AK: No, I don't remember. I don't think in the plays we did there was any question of any... Maybe some of the more modern plays, The Quare Fellow [by Brendan Behan], for example, it was a question of language, what kind of language... I think something had to be deleted. Do you remember exactly when the censorship stopped? In the late sixties...

TB: '68 I think.

AK: 1968, well The Quare Fellow was before that. I think she had to eliminate some 'F' words or something. Yes, she did.

TB: But that didn't really affect too much what you were doing?

AK: I don't think it affected it. I don't think it matters whether people... how they swear and how often they swear, quite honestly that's not what the play was about The Quare Fellow. There is too much attention on that. Now it's gone the other way, hasn't it!
[laughs]

TB: Sometimes I feel – this is me personally – at the moment we've got to a stage now where we were when Theatre Workshop started to challenge the norms that were in theatre. I feel like we've reached a period where we are stagnating again. I don't know if you'd agree with this at all, but it's a different type of stumbling block almost, in that as you've said we've got into this nanny state now...?

AK: We are in a nanny state, and musicals succeed and make a lot of money – when they succeed, yes.

TB: Definitely, and there's a focus on the big famous plays rather than anything new coming through again that we see isn't it.

AK: Yes, you... In order to actually fill the theatre you have to do something very extravagant. And you have to fill that theatre, and you have to have these incredible reviews. You know, everything is incredible and fantastic and all that. This is this wretched cult of celebrity I suppose you know, that obscures things.

TB: It's so hard for someone new I think, especially from a writer's point of view, to come through.

AK: From a writer's point of view if... [pause] You can [only] come through if you concentrate on something quintessentially British, which obsesses the British nation. Like... [pause]

TB: Terrorism?

AK: Class. Oh yes, terrorism. But of course. Yes terrorism, naturally yes.

TB: Yes, it's a shame. Let's get back to Theatre Workshop – sorry about that digression.

AK: Not at all.

TB: When you were working with Theatre Workshop, how did it... what was it like for a young person coming into...?

AK: Well no, it was... What can I tell you? I can tell you an anecdote about Theatre Workshop. Before I joined Theatre Workshop, I did a tour in French classics - because I'm bilingual - with a French company. I was the only person who was cast here [in Britain]. The company actually originated here, but there were two French people running this and we were doing tours of schools and universities and it was *The Imaginary Invalid* by Molière, and I played the wife. And Joan gave me the same part when we did *The Imaginary Invalid* - in English. I think we were going to take it to the Edinburgh Festival, and I said to Joan; 'Joan, please, I don't want to play this again, can I play the daughter?' - which is a smaller part [almost a child], and I was quite tall – and she thought it was a mad idea but she finally went along with it, you know. No-one else would have ever done that. She gave me - I did play the daughter, somebody else played my part and when we went back to Stratford she said, 'Now you go back to your own part!' [Laughs] But that was the sort of thing that "mad Joan" could be persuaded to do.

TB: Not a lot of directors would have that kind of interaction with their actors, would they.

AK: And then she was going to do a French play, *The Respectable Prostitute* by Jean Paul Sartre, I said to Joan; 'Could I please have it?' and she said 'No. No, you can play peasants, you can play aristocrats, but you can't play common people. And this is a common person and everybody's got their limits and I am not going to give it to you.'. So I'm not going to tell you who played it, because that's what she said so I'm going to be discreet. But that was a very good lesson: we've all got limits, we can't play everything.

TB: I think that's very pertinent to every actor, isn't it...

AK: She said, 'You can be vulgar on stage, you can't be common so that's why you're not going to be playing this part', and she was dead right. I couldn't see it. That was 1958, I think. A definite process of learning.

TB: So that was what your first two years was...

AK: And the reality... What she was saying about that first audition I did to her, it was a little too imposed, it was a French school of acting. It doesn't make any sense because there isn't such a thing. If an actor is very very good they... the style, the reality has always got to come first and the style afterwards. She taught me that as well. The truth has to be there -

TB: Within the play?

AK: Within the character - first of all. That's what I learned from her, I didn't learn it at the Old Vic Theatre School. No no no.

TB: So when you came to Theatre Workshop was there anyone was there anyone you particularly admired in that company – or even outside that company?

AK: I thought George [A. Cooper] and Harry [H. Corbett] were wonderful actors, yes, and then we had people who really were not actors but she had to use them in order to, just to be able to cast. And we were short of money. I remember the wonderful John Bury, who was the designer, was roped in to play a part in a Sean O'Casey's [play Juno and the Paycock] and he acquitted himself OK, but he wasn't really an actor. She was strangled by the necessities, you know? She had to cast, sometimes, the wrong people in the parts, or even use members of the company who should not have been used - make compromises in order to survive.

TB: It's such a shame really, it's a tragedy.

AK: At the beginning yes, she had to do that.

TB: But she did do that?

AK: She did do that, and it worked.

TB: I think that's the sign of a great director, when you can make those compromises and actually work with it.

AK: Yes, she was touched with greatness. Yes she was, certainly.

TB: What was your relationship with her like then? Was it a good relationship?

AK: It was a good relationship, but [early on] she did frighten me with those sort of remarks: 'You've found yourself, now go and do something different', which I didn't understand what she meant - now I do.

TB: And what was that?

AK: You find the vitality and the truth again [behind it all], you don't repeat yourself, please don't repeat yourself! I think that was behind the message. But it wasn't put in the right way and I was too young to understand, and I got frightened. What's going to...? Was Joan in the audience? What's she going to say tonight? You know, "Oh My God!".

TB: But do you think that that fear was a good thing?

AK: At the time, yes. You have to go through that.

TB: It makes you a better actor?

AK: Yes! [laughs] And also her habit of taking people – well, people do it in films all the time – she would just engage somebody who'd never had any training or who hadn't acted, straight off the street you know they were...

TB: Really, what she'd pick people up off the street?

AK: She'd pick people up and she'd give them a part! And sometimes it does work in a film or it works with children. But that, to me, is not what you do. There is a skill an actor has to have, particularly on stage – because you can do anything with film, you can just do God knows how many takes, and you [can] make people [look like they're] acting - even if they're not acting – you can do all sorts of things on film. Which you can't on stage. She had this very rebellious streak, you know, she thought she could turn anyone into an actor.

TB: I think the Theatre Workshop as a whole was quite a rebellious company!

AK: Yes, but I couldn't see it when I was in the middle of it at that young age.

TB: Were there any particular playwrights you liked doing? I mean, there's a lot of stuff coming through the Theatre Workshop...

AK: Well, my great regret is that I haven't really done any Chekhov. He is one of my favourite playwrights and I think he is so misunderstood in this country, so often. When I see the Russian theatre coming and doing it, it's so right, you know. [In England] there is a kind of reverence towards Chekhov that is all wrong, because his characters are well... like Madame Ranevskaya always being played with this [reverence] in *The Cherry Orchard*: 'Goodness, I'm playing Chekhov!'. It's not that at all! [Madame Ranevskaya] is a very silly woman, and if you don't get that... she's a silly silly woman. And it is supposed to be a comedy: he didn't write the word 'comedy' for fun, he really meant it.

TB: Do you think that if someone like Joan had got hold of *The Cherry Orchard* then attitude might have...

AK: Oh, my God! It would have been wonderful! I think she did *Uncle Vanya* - I had left. Ah, probably a big mistake I made, I should have stayed a bit longer. Never mind, you do what you do, what can you say? Joan could see the reality and the vitality and the humour behind what we call revered classics. And she would strip all that and start again, and that was wonderful. And that is what Peter Brook does as well; Peter Brook at his best is just a revelation!

TB: Very much like Joan in a lot of ways.

AK: Well! [Laughs] Very different, I mean, I've never worked with him, I wish I had. [pause] Great you know! I went to a performance of the Beckett, where she's buried half way up to the... what's the title of the play? Oh, *Les Beaux Jours* - *Happy Days*! And he was doing it in French with his wife Natasha Parry. He'd staged it in Paris and they came to *The Riverside* in Hammersmith and it was [part of] some sort of Beckett festival. And I went to see it on the night that they were going to have a discussion about the play afterwards. I was very taken aback because it wasn't a Peter Brook production, it was a very faithful production. And you know Beckett - the Beckett estate - is very ferocious about the way you're going to do his plays. And it was quite wonderful. And at the end there were questions and answers, and I couldn't possibly get up and ask, you know - I'm much too shy in those circumstances - but somebody asked the question I was wanting to ask, which was, 'Mr Brook, you always find something new and a revelation in your productions, and yet this one seemed to be very very faithful to what the author had written, exactly the same as many others'. And Peter Brook smiled and said; 'But that's all a director ever does, he just follows the playwright's intentions.'. Come on! Look at his *Midsummer Night's Dream* for the RSC [and his *Hamlet*]! But he knows when not to interfere. I think maybe Joan didn't know when not to interfere. She [Joan] always interfered, in my experience. I think that is the difference. He was being very hypocritical - purposefully so - it was wonderful.

TB: You mention the word 'interfering', there's a lot of interpretation in Theatre Workshop in the way that she tackled every text very differently... Were you aware of that sort of departure when you were acting in it? How did you feel about it?

AK: Yes, oh yes. I loved it at the time. Like what I told you, what she made me do as Raina [cutting her toe nails]. And [in Arms and the Man] we had a live chicken on stage! [Laughs] You really felt that this was Romania, the Balkans!

TB: I think that's the great thing about Theatre Workshop is that firstly the actors and cast had been together so long and were such a unit and such a group of people that wanted to work together and knew each other so well that they could take a classic and a play that's traditionally set out to do one thing and that they had the ability because they knew each other so well to turn it round and do it in an completely revolutionary fashion

AK: Yes. She was the moving spirit, always. It was wonderful.

TB: Were there any difficulties with playwrights that you can remember?

AK: Well no, because they were all dead! Oh yes there was one, I did Colour Guard, that was George Stiles' play - a new play. I can't even remember what it was about. There's a photograph in Murray's book from Colour Guard. But then she and George got on perfectly well. That was a modern play.

TB: Were there a lot of new plays coming through with Joan?

AK: Not many, no [when I was in the company]. Of course Brendan Behan, The Quare Fellow, George Stiles, and then of course the musicals, Oh! What a Lovely War, and Fings Aint Wot They Used T'Be. That was after my time.

TB: What was it like leaving the company? Did you feel a sense of regret at all?

AK: Yes, she thought I was a fool! And I was a fool. [Laughs]

TB: What was it like doing your last performance – Celestina did you say it was?

AK: No and then I came back and did Celestina. While I was in Paris I kept in touch with her, I was writing to her, and when I was in London I would go and see something I think [plays in Stratford].

TB: Quite a close friendship then?

AK: I really admired her, and I owe a lot to her. I'm not a worshipper, I could see the faults - I can see them better now as I've got older - but she was a great mover and shaker.

TB: It was something that was desperately needed in British theatre...

AK: Desperately needed and I think that it helped the Royal Court revolution as well.

TB: I think it influenced a lot of the stuff that followed...

AK: You see, I've seen *Look Back in Anger* since - more than once - and it seems dated to me now. As dated as Terence Rattigan [seemed] dated when I was with Theatre Workshop, it's very peculiar. And I went to see a revival of another play of [Osborne's] which he'd written with a friend not so long ago and I could hardly sit through it, it felt so dated - I was bored. I had a feeling of looking down your navel - I'm really not interested in that. I just wonder whether John Osborne will really survive like I'm certain Beckett will survive. I'm just wondering whether John Osborne will survive. At the time it was a revolution.

TB:; What was it like when you saw a production like that coming out for the first time? *Look Back in Anger* is a great example...

AK: I didn't see the first production, I was... no I didn't see that first production. I saw the film, and then I saw it when it was revived with Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson, in the West End. And I saw it with Jane Asher. And it seemed dated.

TB: It must have been such an exciting period to be in theatre...

AK: That's not to say that the other things which George Devine did at the Royal Court were bad, they were wonderful productions. And there was... yes, *The Entertainer*...I mean, *The Entertainer* is not as dated as *Look Back in Anger* but didn't make the same impression on me when I saw the revival at the Old Vic, no.

TB: It must have been such an exciting period...

AK: Because we've moved on, you see. We've moved on so much. And Peter Brook when he comes over with his wonderful productions, he does so much with so little. It's wonderful.

TB: Do you think that these kind of productions has heavily influenced the theatre that we see today?

AK: Oh yes, and Harold Pinter as well, I'm sure.

TB: Are you a fan of Pinter?

AK: Yes.

TB: Who isn't a fan of Pinter!

AK: Who isn't a fan of Pinter. [Laughs] One of my favourite of his plays – because I am always fascinated by it - is *Betrayal* and I've seen it umpteen times, last time at the Donmar, and somehow there was a different take on it, Sam West was playing it quite differently, playing the husband, and it was fascinating to see how many facets that play has, it kind of changes with the performances, changes with the actors.

TB: Yes, well that's the great thing about Pinter, isn't it.

AK: It's wonderful it's faithful to the playwright and yet the play is different.

TB: The great thing about Pinter is that he says nothing about it, isn't it. I always think that he and Joan would have got on very well [laughter] I like to imagine.

AK: Yes.

TB: Because for me they are similar characters, in that she was very into reinterpreting text and he purposely created text that is so... could be torn in so many directions. Personally my favourite is *The Caretaker*.

AK: *The Caretaker* is a wonderful play. I saw that not so long ago with Michael Gambon.

TB: That must have been...! I saw it...

AK: At the Comedy Theatre. I think it was – must have been - Michael Gambon... yes it was.

TB: What's the one – can't remember his name... I take it he was playing the *Caretaker*, Davis? That must have been fantastic, there's something about that play...

AK: And then that other one, which premiered with John Gielgud and Richardson

TB: *The Birthday Party*?

AK: No, [No Man's Land]. The first production was at the National and then Pinter himself played the Ralph Richardson part at the Comedy Theatre. I've seen it about three times and that changes depending on who's doing what. But Gielgud and Richardson were just incredible, both of them there...

TB: Thank you Anna.