

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Andrew Staines – interview transcript

Interviewer: Rebecca O'Gara

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Actor, Assistant Stage Manager and theatre goer; Bertolt Brecht; Derby Playhouse; Doctor Who; Manchester Library Theatre; Northampton Repertory Theatre; repertory theatre; Sheffield Playhouse; Theatre Royal York; The Ghost Train; York Mystery Plays.

RO'G: So could I just begin by asking you how you became interested in working in the theatre?

AS: I come from a theatrical family, my father Geoffrey Staines was a director of productions at the Theatre Royal York from about 1940 to 1958.

RO'G: Right, so you were interested in acting from quite an early age?

AS: No, I was not; I was always very interested in the theatre.

RO'G: Yes...

AS: But, I'd seen too much of the underside of it and I always swore that I would never become an actor, whatever else I did.

RO'G: Yes...

AS: And then after I left school I was in the army for three years, and then I did various other jobs and one day it suddenly dawned on me that I was actually homesick for the theatre. Whenever I got back into the company of actors and theatricals generally, I found I understood the language they were talking – I mean I might think they were talking a lot of bloody nonsense [laughs] – but at least I understood it and that I was homesick for the theatre, and so when I was 25 I got a job at Northampton Rep [repertory theatre] as an ASM and I went on from there!

RO'G: ASM? That's Assistant Stage Manager?

AS: Yes.

RO'G: So what was your first performance that you remember being in – or play – can you remember?

AS: Well that depends, whether as a professional or as a sort of supernumery?

RO'G: Well, either?

AS: I was in quite a number of productions at the Theatre Royal York – not directed by my father, he washed his hands of me generally speaking; the only time I worked for him was just before I left school, I was in that year's pantomime in 1955 – but then as I say, I then turned my back on the theatre I didn't want anything to do with it, but when I got to Northampton I was an Assistant Stage Manager and I just did the usual sort of walk-on as the policeman who said, 'What's going on here?'. Then I would have gone on – I enjoyed it at Northampton – but unfortunately there was a scandal at the end of my first season – nothing to do with me – but the Stage Manager – the actual Stage Manager – was accused of improprieties with the student stage manager – who was a thoroughly nasty bit of work – and so I didn't want to go on working with either of those two, so I handed in my notice, then they both got the push so I would have stayed on if I could but I'd already been offered another job at Sheffield...

RO'G: Oh right, yes?

AS: And I went there – I went there as a Stage Manager – but that didn't work out very well and I found myself being given more parts and after that it was sort of one job after another, all in Rep: Manchester Library Theatre, Perth, Dundee, Ipswich. The trouble was I got myself in a bit of a rut, I wasn't progressing and that went on several years. Then the woman in my life got cancer and so I didn't want to take jobs that would take me out of London, so I got a local job – I was living in Ealing then – and I worked in a department store for about four years and then she got better and I found having taken my foot out of the door it was difficult to get it back in. I mean I got jobs here and there; I was in Doctor Who several times – when Jon Pertwee was the Doctor -

RO'G: That must have been fun...

AS: And just one with Patrick Troughton, but unfortunately it was one of the ones that had been scrubbed so that's not on the books any more! Anyway as I say it was really very difficult to get my foot back in the door and I went on doing the odd jobs that turned up, but it wasn't really leading anywhere and eventually I thought, 'This is just a waste of time', so I kept my Equity card for quite a long time – even though the work had dried up – and then in 1993 the time came up to renew my Equity card, but I thought, 'I really can't be bothered with this any more', so I went and had an honourable withdrawal – which is still valid – which means I could go back if I wanted

to or if anybody's ready to employ me – and that's about the in and out, up and down of me as an actor!

RO'G: Yes... So going back to some of your earlier work, did you have any kind of training? You said you were an Assistant Stage Manager, did you just sort of...

AS: Yes, I went straight into the deep end, that was partly because I had done three years as a soldier and when I came out I had had enough of people telling me what to do! And so it was suggested to me it might be a wise thing to go to drama school and do a course – I just couldn't face it, so I – it was the one time my father pulled strings for me, he got in touch with Lionel – I can't remember his name Lionel [Hamilton] – he was director at Northampton and he accepted me as a Junior Assistant Stage Manager and it went on from there. But I had had a certain amount of experience – just through doing walk-ons and things – and one of the things I think that stood me in good stead and which I'm glad to have it on my CV, I was in the very first modern production of the York Mystery Plays in 1951 in the Festival of Britain. I played Pilate's son and then they revived it four years later, and then I played Simon of Cyrene but that was a very interesting time. The director was E. Martin Brown – who was very well known for doing anything to do with religious themes – he directed *Murder in the Cathedral*, the first production of that and various other things. He was a good director, well he was dealing with a very raw crowd for the Mystery Plays because they were most of them amateurs – local amateurs as indeed I was – but they had a sort of nucleus of professionals; Joseph O'Connor played Christ, John Van Eysen played Satan, Judi Dench – first year of all – she was the Angel of the Resurrection, Tenniel Evans was the Archangel Michael, and various other people whose names don't mean anything now. But that was very interesting and thoroughly worthwhile... Trying to think what else... no I think that puts it more or less in a nutshell!

RO'G: Yes OK, and what kind of, I mean did you – as an actor – notice any changes in the kind of audiences that were coming to see theatre? I mean what we've been discussing, was there a change in the working classes going more regularly to theatre, did you notice that?

AS: Not especially, I remember in my school days in York – before the time when everyone had a screen in the corner of their sitting room – the theatre had a very loyal following of all sorts of classes and they came along. They worked a rather odd system – a very practical system really – they had two theatres, the Theatre Royal in York and the Opera House in Scarborough, my father was very much opposed to weekly Rep because he'd been doing that in the 1920s and 1930s and he knew that it could be absolutely killing for actors, they were rehearsing in the morning and performing in the evening and learning their lines at night! So they had this interchange system of virtually two companies which swapped, so they had a fortnight's rehearsal time, whoever was in York then went to Scarborough with whatever play they had on, they had a fortnight's rehearsal and then they performed that in Scarborough and then went back to York! Eventually that proved too expensive to go on doing, but it lasted for quite a long time and then – when they decided it was too expensive a system – they went over to repertoire. The Scarborough company was permanently in Scarborough and they had a repertoire of about four plays on the assumption that summer season – you know the seaside – there'd be a constant turnover of people going on their holidays so they could

see one play one week and another play the next, then somebody else would come in and they would see the next two plays and over in York they just carried on the fortnightly system. But Rep was on the way out by then, television was coming in and it had taken a hammering with the expansion of cinema before that and in a way I was in at the end of the repertory system, all the theatres that I worked in; Manchester Library, Ipswich and Perth... Oh Perth... they had a funny system – again they had virtually two separate companies – and we did one play one week and another play the next week and swapped over, again on the principle that they didn't want to overwork their actors. One did hear stories of the old days before the war, in the 1930s, where, well in one specific case before my father got married he was sharing a flat with the artistic director of the Coventry Company and a couple of the other actors and they'd done the evening's performance, they went back to their flat and they were serving up supper and someone suddenly said, 'where's Hwfa?' – he was a Welsh actor called Hwfa Prys. So they went back to the theatre which was all dark, turned all the lights on and searched through and there he was at his dressing table, flat out, still with his make up on and dead to the world and they had to practically pick up, take him down, because he was so exhausted and I think that was one of the things that made my father swear he would never put any of his company through that sort of thing.

RO'G: Yes, do you think that was a sort of, maybe a change in acting styles...

AS: I don't think it had anything to do with the acting; it was just the sheer sweat of it!

RO'G: Yes, hard work!

AS: [laughs] Yes, I only once did weekly Rep myself and that was a summer season at Southwold in about 1968 or 1969 – I can't remember now – and that was pretty hard grind... but that was interesting too... but most of that generation has fallen by the wayside now.

RO'G: Yes, and did you go – whilst you were acting – did you attend theatre regularly, did you go and see any of the major plays that were on at that time?

AS: Usually if I had a friend in it who could get me comps... [laughs] No I did go to quite a good few. I saw Paul Scofield play Hamlet – when I was in the army actually – in about 1956 Mary Ure played Ophelia and... no I can't remember who played Claudius and Gertrude, and I saw Paul Robeson do Othello at Stratford that would have been about 1958... yes, I ought to have all this information on the tip of my brain, but it's all dried up...

RO'G: That's OK.

AS: Anything else specific you wanted?

RO'G: Anything really, you said you did some repertory theatre in Sheffield?

AS: Yes, yes that was before they built the Crucible, it was the Playhouse in Townhead Street, and as I say that was the one that had the most extraordinary depressing atmosphere...

RO'G: Yes, why was that?

AS: Well I have a private theory about that, I had started off the season as Stage Manager but that didn't work out and I just became an acting member of the company – somebody else took over as Stage Manager – and I was walking – it was quite a steep hill, Townhead Street.

RO'G: Yes, a lot of steep hills in Sheffield!

AS: And I normally came... I was living outside Sheffield and coming in on the train every morning and I had my usual route, and for some reason just one day, I was walking the opposite way up the hill and on the opposite side from the Theatre and I looked up and there was a long stretch of wall at the top and it said 'Temperance Hall', and I thought that's it, it's bad medicine, you know probably a Methodist thing and they wouldn't have approved of actors or acting and that's the cause of this atmosphere! I never mentioned it to anybody else and nobody ever suggested it to me but I just have a hunch. One of the troubles there was that all the permanent staff; the stage carpenter, the electrician, the wardrobe mistress, had all been there for years and years and were practically part of the furniture and they were – each season a fresh lot of actors and a fresh lot of stage management would come in – and they resented it, they resented us and it was very hard to get any cooperation out of them.

[Sound missing at this point.]

[Note added by interviewee: The missing passage refers to my starting work with London Theatre Centre, which was based in Kilburn, run by Brian Way in the 1960s and it sent out companies performing in schools – simple playlets written by Brian himself for the primary schools, extracts from Shakespeare (with audience participation!) for the secondary schools.]

[The interview continued with AS speaking about his experiences in London as follows.]

AS: ...the plays were designed for primary school children and young secondary school children and we had a basic company of six people and I got a little bit extra, I think I got a pound a week extra because I drove the transport [laughs] and that was quite interesting although they didn't ask me – I got at loggerheads with the Assistant Manager, who was a very unpleasant lady, notorious in the world of children's theatre for being difficult to work with, and they mostly recruited their actors from young

people just out of drama school, so they didn't know how to put their feet down and say you know, 'No you can't make us work until eleven o'clock at night and then be in the following morning at nine o'clock!' but I'd had that bit more experience and I sort of said 'No, I'm not prepared to work on those terms!'. So they weren't going to ask me to come back for another season, but I wouldn't have come back if I'd been asked because they exploited their actors quite disgracefully! Brian Way was the director, he was a very nice person, you could say nice in several ways because I don't know whether he was innocent or naive but he could put his foot down if he needed to, but mostly he didn't, mostly he let things go by that shouldn't have been, whereas his Assistant – and I'm naming no names – she was very – she was quite brutal to the youngsters who had not had much experience, and that made me pretty cross as well... but no when we'd been rehearsing, before we went out on the road we had a sort of public dress rehearsal to which invited friends came and somebody came sort of on my ticket – and they were very experienced – and they said that this was disgraceful, and said, 'if you hadn't been in it, and the fact that we are known to be friends, I would have put in a very strong complaint to Equity about the exploitation of these young actors!' but... trying to think of... I was quite glad that I'd done that, I was very, very glad when it was over... after that I got my first job at Manchester Library Theatre with Oliver Neville directing...

RO'G: What was that?

AS: Well as far as I know some sort of theatre goes on at the library even now...

RO'G: Yes, no I think it does...

AS: Yes, but we did some Brecht – Caucasian Chalk Circle – I think that was the first thing I was in, and I was in a Shakespeare – can't remember which one that was – that was in 1964 and then 1965 I came into the company as a full time member and we did... The Representative, Rolf Hochhuth, it's a play about Pope Pius the Twelfth and his relationship with the Nazis. I would say Hochhuth wasn't a playwright – he was a writer – but I've never been in a play that went on so long, in fact, we did the first provincial, it has been done in London, but we did the first provincial production and then various other companies had a go at it, but it was such an enormous swag-bellied script that no two companies ever did the same version, but again that was interesting to do, it was heartbreaking – you know – it was all about Auschwitz and the gas chambers and all that, but again its one that I'm glad to be able to put on my CV... Oh yes – I'm missing out some – after that season at Manchester I went to Derby, to the Old Playhouse in Sacheverell and actually going through this it occurs to me that practically all the theatres I've worked at are now defunct! [laughs] There are still playhouses and theatres in the towns but they're not the ones I acted in! But Derby playhouse was a very strange place [laughs] you couldn't get onto the stage from the opposite – in actual fact our prompt side was opposite prompt – we were on the stage right for the prompt corner, and if you wanted to enter from the opposite prompt side you had to go underneath the stage...

RO'G: Gosh!

AS: It didn't happen when I was there but they had a big H girder holding up the stage – and it was far too low – and apparently the season before I went there somebody had done a quick change in his dressing room, rushed down went swooping under the stage to make his entrance and ran his forehead right smack into this big beam and knocked himself out cold! And they had to stop the performance and give people their money back I think! After that it was lined with hessian and sacking and god knows what, and large notices saying 'Duck' or words to that effect [laughs]...but yes, the director there was [Ian Cooper] but it was his last season and they were given a completely new management and I don't think it worked very well, I think it was only two or three years after that they closed the theatre at the Derby Playhouse and built the new theatre. Oh yes! Another thing I'm quite proud of I think I was in the very last production of The Ghost Train – by Arnold Ridley – that was done the traditional way. I mean people still do productions of it but they use the sound effects by having a tape recorder running. Whereas before I think there were as many people backstage doing the sound effects as there were on the stage and it was quite a big company. I mean about ten or twelve people giving a performance and another ten or twelve – I mean there is a ghost train – it all takes place in the waiting room of a provincial station in Cornwall after dark, and a train is held up, it arrives late and all the people get out expecting to pick up their connection and there isn't a connection because the last trains have gone, and then a strange woman turns up who says – 'Oh, that's right'. It's the porter first of all who says, 'You can't stay here all night, this place is haunted!' – but they refuse point blank, they're not going tramping off across the moors of Exmoor, and then the rest of it is all about the ghost train, which does come, you can see it come into the station through the glazed window, the dark windows, and everybody gets the heebie jeebies then and... that's right the porter tells them a tale about how thirty years before there had been an accident, a bloke – the station master at the time – had stayed on late for a special train that was going through, and they rang through from up the line and said it was coming and he said right he would go and change the points so that it went over the bridge across the local river; he went out to do this and had a heart attack and was found dead – when it was all over – on the platform, and the train came through and the points hadn't been changed and it went into the river with about ten people – late travellers – and it's said that on certain nights of the year you can hear the same sequence happening – and of course they do hear – you see the lights going past and you hear the wheels trundling, well the wheels, traditionally they nailed batons across the back of the stage, right up stage, and they pulled a garden roller across to give the rhythm of it, and they had the lights flashing and they had somebody with a cylinder of compressed air going [change in voice] 'tchoo tchoo' [laughs] I can't remember all the other things that had to be done but as I say we did that way and I don't think it's ever been done like that since.

RO'G: No, [laughs] I suppose

AS: [laughs] No, and our local bobby was walking his beat one evening and he popped in and said he'd just like to see how this was all done, so we said yes – he was the local PC Plod or whatever – and it was just when they introduced personal radios and I always imagined him getting back to the station later that night and the sergeant saying, 'What were you doing down at the railway station at half past seven, you're supposed to be somewhere else?!' [laughs]...

RO'G: [laughs] Good use of props then! And what about, just going back to some of the things you said before, the relationships between directors and actors, was it generally good relationships?

AS: Depended on the company.

RO'G: Yes...

AS: Mostly I got on very well with most of the directors I worked with, there were one or two I found a pain in the neck, but I think they'd probably reciprocate... but no generally speaking – again no names, no pack drill, because the people involved are still alive – but there was one theatre I worked in where the director – he was a good director and he was a very nice man – but he had a personal inner clique, his girlfriend and subsequently [her] cronies were all in the company and they could do practically what they wanted and those of us who weren't of the inner circle could be jumped on quite hard and I didn't like that, I didn't approve, I mean I got on very well with all the people individually but no – you know – I suppose you would call him the leading man and he was the ex-boyfriend of the director's girlfriend and he really did take advantage of that and he was an abominable actor – there were no two ways about it – and he got away with murder for sort of not – he's the only actor I've known who was in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* playing Bottom, and he was still carrying the book on the dress rehearsal – and that just wasn't on!

RO'G: No definitely... You said you'd travelled around quite a bit as well, around various parts of the country, did you, was it mainly in the North or London as well?

AS: London? No, well I mostly did understudy jobs in London, but yes otherwise I've been all over the place.

RO'G: Yes and did you notice any kind of change in the kind of styles in the various places, in terms of what plays were on?

AS: I think on the whole we generally, mostly, played the old pot boilers, you know Agatha Christie will always fill a theatre and Travers farces, all the farces, those were quite fun to do... and as I said I did the summer season at Southwold and those really were – we did a thing called *Midsummer Mink* which went down very well, it was the most appalling load of tosh but it went down very well with the holiday makers! That was a summer season... We did *The Importance of being Earnest* that season and that was fun to do, but I think the rest of it was... one I did twice, once in *Canterbury*... what was that called?... about three physicists who've all been abducted on the basis that they were off their rockers and they were actually under the thumb of a mad psychiatrist who wanted to set up a business using their brains... what was that called?... no, no it's gone!

RO'G: That's OK.

AS: That's right though, I did that at Canterbury and then a bit later on I did it at Manchester Library Theatre... It'll probably come back to me if I don't think about it!

RO'G: That's OK; you said you did some Brecht as well did you, at Manchester?

AS: Oh yes, that was the Caucasian Chalk Circle.

RO'G: Yes, and what was that like? Because it was sort of a new style?

AS: Yes, well it was interesting to do, I'm glad to have done one; I wouldn't particularly sort of want to do a lot more! But then, I've done a couple of Shaw's and that was interesting to do and I wouldn't want to – I don't have a very high opinion of Shaw as a playwright, too much talk not enough do... Interesting actually – I had the same criticism, I wasn't in either of the plays but I saw two Harley Granville-Barker plays and he was more or less contemporary with Shaw, they both had the same thought, of sort of everyone was sitting down round a table and talking, discussing whatever the point of the issue was, but it was just bloody boring! [laughs]

RO'G: [laughs] Yes, a very different kind of style?

AS: Very different kind of style, I mean of its period but I just don't think it works nowadays; it didn't really work in the 1950s!

RO'G: Did you get a lot of audiences in for those kinds of things then?

AS: Oh yes! Yes I think they did pretty well... but I think those sorts of plays, people go to them because they have a reputation, you know, and whether they go back another time I don't know! But no, it was interesting because Oscar Wilde does still work – properly done – but Shaw and Granville-Barker no, not for my money anyway!

RO'G: Yes, did you get, was there quite a lot of that as an actor, quite a lot of new, what am I trying to say?! Did you get a lot of new scripts that were trying to do something different at that time?

AS: Yes, one got the proportion of newcomers, new plays, you know one welcomed them because you weren't doing the same old stuff... No it was a very interesting episode of my life and it's very interesting – after I gave up my Equity card and went into doing other things – I found I didn't miss it all, not even now! I'll read a review in the paper or I'll see someone talking on TV about their opinion of this and that and I don't have any feeling that I want to go back to it, I've done it and that's finished with! I'll go and see a play if a friend of mine is in it, but otherwise, just going to the theatre to see a play, very seldom, very seldom.

RO'G: Do you think theatre has the same draw to it now, as it did back then?

AS: I really don't know! I really have turned my back on it to such an extent that I... I used to be quite close friends with Patrick Stewart and I think one of the last times I went to the theatre was about three years ago when he did Ibsen's *The Master Builder* and that was interesting – but again just the once – I wasn't mad keen to go and see either Ibsen or Patrick again, perhaps I'll go back sometime, but not immediately... Can't think of anything else that's relevant...

RO'G: Anything else?

AS: Oh yes, damn it! The one I couldn't remember – *The Physicists* – rather a weird piece when I come to look back on it... Is there anything else that occurs to you?

RO'G: Nothing really, just anything else you can think of, any memorable...?

AS: Well I can certainly fall back on my repertoire of anecdotes of *Doctor Who* – because those were a bit weird! I was in one *Doctor Who* called – the names go from me – it was '*Planet of the Spider*' that's right – where some spiders from another planet called *Meta-Belis Three* get transmogrified into the present day and they're of course wanting to take over the world and I was a Buddhist – I mean not a real far eastern Buddhist but a British Buddhist... and there are six of us doing experiments that we shouldn't be – and in fact it is we who give them the... they come and take over our souls or our minds, or whatever and of course the Doctor has to pull out all the stops...

RO'G: Save the day!

AS: Drive them back and it was the last one that Jon Pertwee was the Doctor – that was interesting. I was in one – he had been the Doctor for several episodes then – but he had a sort of change of personnel and he had Katie Manning as his female side-kick and Roger Delgado as the Master, the first one that he played as the Master, and then I was in two or three others after that and then there I was in Jon's final one – and it wasn't part of the story really but they got Tom Baker in on the last day of rehearsal so that he could be transformed from Jon Pertwee to Tom Baker – I was very interested, standing on the side lines and watching them do it. I rather regret that I never went on to do an episode with Tom Baker.

RO'G: Do you think, kind of like, the influence of TV draw away from theatre? In terms of like, maybe less people going to the theatre?

AS: I honestly don't know, as I say, having said goodbye to it, I haven't sort of, kept my ear to the ground, I just don't know what it's like working in live theatre now. I know what it was like for me as a young man, but as I say I'd done it, I'd enjoyed it and now it was time to move on... I mean obviously I run into some of the old gang from time to

time but mostly we talk about time was, don't concern ourselves much with times is... It's quite a funny experience just once in awhile if I go to a party somewhere and I see somebody I recognise, and saying to them you know – well there was one time, bit naughty of me, but I ran into somebody at a party and I said – well we were standing sort of together, side by side at the bar waiting to get a drink and I said out of the corner of my mouth 'I would never of thought of you, that you would stand up an old friend!' and she did this enormous double take – because she had known me when I was sort of 19 or 20, and just before I went into the army, I didn't have a beard in those days, and we'd both been in the same pantomime at York, the last thing before I went into the army – and she looked completely blank, so I said, 'Well, do you remember so and so?' – and it was the bloke who always played the big bad baron – 'Do you remember so and so who always played the Dame, and do you remember Shirley who always was the principal boy?' – and so then I said, 'supposing I said Geoffrey Staines to you?' and she looked at me and I said, 'Well I'm Andrew!' [laughs] she was absolutely flabbergasted I mean it was thirty years since we'd last seen each other!... That was part of the fun of being in the theatre but not of the theatre when I was still at school because I didn't always do acting jobs, I got called in sometimes as the – to paint the scenery – and in fact she had married the bloke who was the – did all the designs for the theatre – and I'd worked for him that time, I didn't know her as an actress, I knew her as Ricky's wife, but unfortunately he wasn't at the party because I'd have liked to have seen him again, but no doubt she went home and said, 'You'll never guess who I saw?'... What is the final upshot of this?

RO'G: To conclude just anything else you can think of? There's quite a lot, I think you've covered most aspects!

AS: No, I know it'll all come back when I leave! [laughs] It really is very irritating can't sort of put my finger on names and places.

RO'G: Oh no, what you've said has been really interesting.

AS: Do you act at all, I mean as an amateur?

RO'G: No! [laughs] No, don't think I'd be very good!

AS: If you don't try it you'll never know!

RO'G: [laughs] Well, I guess so [laughs]... Well excellent, I think that should be about it then?

AS: I think so, yes.

RO'G: Well, thank you very much it's been really interesting, everything that you've said.

AS: Jolly good!

RO'G: Thank you.

AS: OK.