

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Ann Queensberry – interview transcript

Interviewer: Kelly Jackson

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Actress. Audience behaviour; backstage work; Edward Bond; censorship; George Devine; Ronald Duncan; Equity; William Gaskill; Ivor Novello; Look Back In Anger; Michael Mac Liammoir; Old Vic School; George Radford; repertory theatre; Royal Court Theatre; Jean Shepard; Dalton Trumbo.

This transcript has been edited by the interviewee and thus in places differs from the recording.

KJ: Basically this interview is led by you and what you wish to tell me about your experience in theatre from 1945 to 1968. So, if you would like to begin with your earliest experience of theatre that would be great.

AQ: Well, my parents were singers; during the war they had a concert party and used to entertain the troops. I was often thrown on, quite often actually, to sing – they thought I could just do it because they could – and [also] silly things like acrobatic dancing, but anyway the troops seemed to enjoy it. That's when I was in my teens. When I was 17 I got a job at the St James's Theatre which was pulled down in the fifties or sixties, a beautiful theatre, pulled down to make a block of flats. I got a job there as [the] Call Boy in a play called But for the Grace of God by Frederick Lonsdale. There was an old actor called A E Matthews, a wonderful actor, but he was about 83 and kept forgetting his lines so they got me to [be behind] the fireplace and to prompt him. I could sense when he was going [to] dry and he used to just wander up to [the] fireplace and when [it came off] they took me on tour with them, which was fun. Then I went back and was a Dresser there in a play which Dame Lilian Braithwaite was in, The Indifferent Shepherd, I think it was called. Then I went to the Duke of York's [Theatre] where there was a play by Ivor Novello and was [the] Call Boy there and Ivor Novello was in We'll Gather Lilacs I think, at the Hippodrome. He used walk down after his show and stand behind me for the curtain call, which was rather thrilling, listening to the last few lines of his play [and] still wearing makeup [laughs]. In those days men didn't wear makeup. And then I had an audition [for] the Old Vic School which was in London's Old Vic Theatre and from the bomb damage it still had a great big hole in the roof... anyway I got a scholarship and so I went there and [it] was [run by] Michel St. Denis, Glen Byam Shaw and George Devine, and was very good. About six months before I went there I read a book called All For Hecuba by Michael Macliammoir who was running the Gate Theatre in Dublin and I absolutely fell in love with his character and the idea of his theatre and used to write to him and he used to write back. In my second term at the Old Vic School he came to London and did a season at the Embassy Theatre in Swiss Cottage [of], John

Bull's Other Island and The Moon in the Yellow River and offered me small parts in them, which was of course a sort of dream come true, but we had all been told very firmly that while we were at the school we were not allowed to do anything else in the theatre in case it interfered with [The] teaching. So I pretended I was ill and used to ring in every day, and of course they came, the directors came to see the plays, and saw me, and I was chucked out... Luckily I got a job right away, [at an] old cinema in Hayes, Middlesex, [in a] weekly rep run by Jean Shepard. I was ASM and acting small parts and stayed there for several months and that was great, but every Saturday night after the show we had to take the scenery down and repaint it over the next [36] hours before going on with another play on Monday night, so it was pretty exhausting and we just slept on the floor in the theatre when we couldn't stand up any more and got the show on.

KJ: So you were quite involved with repertory theatre then?

AQ: Yes I was. In Night Must Fall at the end of the first act, it looks as though the young man is going to strangle the woman in the wheelchair, but the curtain comes down, and I was on the tabs, and I pulled and pulled on the first night and it wouldn't come down and I [was] climbing up [the rope] and absolutely sobbing and finally the electrician put the lights out [laughs]. Otherwise the whole play would have been wrecked. Then I got a job in Felixstowe weekly rep, same sort of thing, but I was playing quite big parts then, and that was pretty good actually. At the end of the season they had the first Aldeburgh Festival, the very first one, and it was in the town hall. We took our scenery over on the back of the lorry and performed there one night and I can't remember what the play was but do remember Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears were in the front row, so that was quite exciting.

KJ: How would you sum up your experience in repertory theatre?

AQ: Very strenuous, but when you are that age you can learn more easily, you just learn the part after the show at night, because you would be rehearsing the next day.

KJ: So how do you think theatre has changed from then to now?

AQ: Well I think we were very lucky. I was in a lot of repertory companies and we were very lucky to have that experience because [for] kids now it's mostly [telly and] they haven't got anywhere to go to make mistakes and try hundreds of different parts. Television is just not the same. It's not exciting like the theatre and it's not training, so in that way we were lucky, very lucky.

I [knew] William Gaskill who was running the Royal Court Theatre. I went with him to the House of Lords for [the debate on censorship] when we were trying to get censorship stopped. [We] also went to St James's Palace to talk to the Lord Chamberlain. I was Treasurer of the Royal Court at that time, and [saw all] the work with Edward Bond [and] so many exciting [writers], John Osborne and all those exciting plays.

KJ: So did you see the first performance of Look Back In Anger?

AQ: I did, yes.

KJ: And what did you think of it?

AQ: I loved it, I absolutely adored it. Later I auditioned to take over from Mary Ure but I didn't get the part. I was really disappointed [laughs]!

[When it was] the Festival of Britain [in] 1951, I think, I was in a play called The Biggest Thief in Town by Dalton Trumbo who wrote On the Waterfront. At the time he was in prison in America for un-American activities and wasn't allowed to get letters but we could send him the odd telegram. The play was such a success. It was with Hartley Power - it was fantastic, it was just packed all the time, so that was an exciting time too.

KJ: So do you think the abolishment of the censorship was a good thing?

AQ: Yes absolutely. I mean it was ludicrous. They cut such silly things. I hate censorship in any form [laughs].

KJ: Was there any play which stood out from this period which you saw?

AQ: I've got all the programmes since I went to the theatre, which I'm going to give to the Theatre Museum, well it's not the Theatre Museum anymore, [but] the couple [who] collect them, but I keep thinking I want to go through them all. I don't know, I should have thought about this – what really struck me. I just went to the theatre all the time, when I wasn't working of course, [but] if you were working in the West End you could go to other people's matinees and in those days Equity members were allowed in free, which was quite right because you know young people [need to] come [to] the theatre - at any time, particularly now. And there don't seem to be any sixpenny seats in the gallery anymore [laughs]!

KJ: Has anything changed in terms of theatre traditions from then to now in theatre?

AQ: In the intervals there were cups of tea! People had trays of tea which rattled considerably [laughs]. Absolutely appalling! And of course the smoke was unbelievable, there was an ashtray on the back of every seat – most people seemed to smoke, which can't have been very good for our voices. That is much better now. And the fact that often there isn't an interval, I think that is great, I love either having one or none when the play is short enough.

And I love Joe Orton of course, and it's terrible to think that he was sent to prison for defacing a book from the Library, I can't remember [which one].

KJ: Have you got any more anecdotes from your time as an actress?

AQ: When I was in *Mary Rose* there was a scene – I was a ghost and there was a very frightening scene, and [almost] every night somebody fainted, somebody different [laughs], so they had to have a Red Cross person there. But I got cramp which I hardly ever get and certainly never got then. I got cramp in my leg and of course I had to keep very very still and somebody told me to stand on the balls of my feet and it would go, and it did, it's miraculous actually, it still works, and so then I had to, unobtrusively [laughs] grow an inch or two and the cramp would go.

I was in the first production of *Reluctant Heroes* at [the] Whitehall Theatre in 1952 and I was pregnant and couldn't fit into the army uniform at six months so had to [leave] then. Oh yes, I was married to an actor then – George Radford who was the son of one of a marvellous comedy pair – Basil Radford and Naunton Wayne, they were in most of the Ealing Comedies, anyway, Georgie was [the] son of Basil and we decided to mortgage our house which his parents had given us for a wedding present, we were very lucky, to run a theatre at High Wycombe. We ran it, but we were paying much too much rent and although we actually filled the place, we lost money hand over fist. It was when Attlee was Prime Minister and he used to come almost every week to see [the] play which was great! In the end we lost the theatre, and our house. That was rather sad. Then I went off, when my first daughter was one, to be in rep at Ipswich and lived on a barge in Pin Mill with her, and my sister came and looked after her while I was at the theatre, which was most of the time. I used to hitchhike [as] I didn't have a car in those days, and hitchhiked to Ipswich from Pin Mill, it's not all that far. Mostly [in] lorries, they were very good. Then... Birmingham, [the] Alexandra Theatre in Birmingham, I [was in] rep there. I used to hitchhike when we were living in Staffordshire. [It] was an hour away [laughs].

KJ: Any other shows you were involved in which stand out for you in this period?

AQ: I did quite a bit of verse drama. I did a play that Ronald Duncan wrote called *Don Juan* at the Library Theatre, Manchester when I worked there and followed it [with T.S.] Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*. I enjoyed that. I did *Don Juan*, [again in a] theatre festival run by the [same] people who started [The Royal Court and] Ronald Duncan was one of them. [They] organised something called the Bideford and Barnstable Festival, [which] ran every year. Then when CND happened there was a big meeting at County Hall and Ronald Duncan wrote a poem for me. I remember following Vanessa Redgrave who read something and spoke very well, but in fact the poem was so good that I felt I carried it off. [laughs] A bit daunting at the time but then she and I led a march to Downing Street [to hand in a petition]... still that's nothing to do with the theatre! [laughs] That's what we were doing as well! Though it was quite theatrical.

[Once] I was in a play at Wimbledon Theatre, I was [The] Equity Deputy [and] only about [18]. It was one of those [number two] tours, and on Friday night we weren't paid

and I rang Equity and they said well see what happens [at] the matinee. They gave me a number to ring. We weren't paid after the matinee [and] it was quite clear the house was full for the evening performance so they said you're going to have to hold the curtain. I did, and wouldn't allow the curtain to go up until the Equity person arrived [and the Management] was furious as you can imagine. [But] the money was taken out of box office and we were all paid. People [are] always saying [Equity is] no good, but in that respect it was very good [laughs]. But then of course, I think it was Norman Tebbit stopped it being a closed shop which is a great pity.

KJ: Is there anything else you wish to share with me about your experience?

AQ: I honestly can't think of anything at the moment.

KJ: OK, well that's great, thank you very much.

AQ: It's a pleasure.