

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Arthur Millie – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Carys Williams**

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Archivist, Salisbury Playhouse. Archival documents; A Streetcar Named Desire; audience; Christopher Biggins; censorship; Stephanie Cole; ENSA; interviews; Oh! What a Lovely War; programmes; repertory theatre; Leonard Rossiter; Reggie Salberg; Prunella Scales; Josephine Tewson; theatre conditions; theatre history; Waiting for Godot; Tim West; Kenneth Williams.

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

CW: So as you are an archivist of the Salisbury theatre, would you like to begin by telling me a little bit about the background to the theatre?

AM: It started off as a Methodist chapel, but gradually the people who had owned it, realised that it was falling around their ears. There [are] five underground streams in Salisbury, and these streams unfortunately cause a lot of flooding – in fact [we have] various photographs of Fisherton Street flooded – and the chapel was falling to pieces, so [the Methodists decided that they] were going to move out. They didn't know what to do with the building then, so they put it up for sale and a gentleman called Albany Ward, who was actually in the motor trade, bought it and didn't do anything to do with cars, he turned it into a picture house, so it was one of the earliest cinemas in Salisbury. That was popular, like many other cinemas in Salisbury were popular, but again, because there were so many other cinemas, it stopped being a cinema. It was called the Picture House, and they opened the New Picture house next door, which is where the City Hall is! So then again, what to do with this building? The war started, and they decided to use it as a drill hall and an army recruitment centre, but it still wasn't used terribly successfully. But then a gentleman called Basil Dean - who was one of the organisers of ENSA, which is Entertainment and National Service Association, which provided entertainment for the troops. The locals always called it 'Every Night Something Awful!' He decided to take it over in 1943 and it became the Garrison Theatre. So it was a theatre available mainly for the troops, because this is an area where you have got a lot of Garrisons, as this is a big area for military. There is actually still a Garrison Theatre open over in Tidworth. So this was a Garrison Theatre open mainly for the soldiers. I will just mention, the price of admission was six pence for officers and three pence for other ranks, and they were allowed one guest each time. That lasted until 1945, and [when] the war finished ENSA moved out. The locals then decided that it could become an Arts Theatre, and so in 1945, it became Salisbury Arts Theatre. During that brief time during the war, a lot of famous people actually appeared here. The third play that was put on

here was *Blithe Spirit*, which had only just been written by Noel Coward, and he actually directed it as well. People like Peter Ustinov, Edith Evans, James Mason, Laurence Olivier, Vivienne Leigh, all appeared in the old playhouse, sometimes just for one night. But then, ENSA moved out, and it was taken over by the local people, and the Arts Council funded it, which is probably another reason why they decided to call it the Arts Theatre. It was officially opened as the Arts Theatre on the 31st October 1945 with a play called *Day of Glory*, which is quite appropriate really!

CW: So from that date were professional companies coming into the theatre or was it more involved in repertory?

AM: Well, it became a repertory theatre, and initially what they were doing was, they would perform a play [for one week and then tour the local villages]. It was a very hard life for them, they would be performing, but they would also be preparing their tours, sometimes in very tiny village halls and sometimes on large stages. But of course, everything had to be packed up in the van, unloaded, set up, dismantled; come back to Salisbury and off they would go again. But eventually, they had two companies; company A and company B, where company A would stay here and perform, company B would go on tour and then they would swap over. But life was very difficult. An [actor] called Malcolm Farquar who is still a director [once said] 'We went to a very small village and we played *Present Laughter* in somebody's sitting room. We played to about 50 people sitting on sofas and chairs.' And that was typical of it. Sometimes they were decent halls, but other times they were just people's rooms. But gradually the Arts Theatre gained a reputation because of the people that were running it, and also because of some of the actors that started to appear here.

CW: So did people travel far to see this theatre or was it mainly brought to them?

AM: There are not many theatres in this area. There is the Theatre Royal in Winchester and the Mayflower in Southampton, but even today, Salisbury is the one with probably the best reputation [in] the South. But certainly in the mid 40s, early 50s, there were not many theatres around and so people would come from far and wide. There would be a repertory company that would be under contract and you would see the same faces throughout [the season], with the same actors playing different roles, and a lot of the locals liked that, as they would [have] various favourites and they would be intrigued to know who their favourite would be playing on that night. People would look out for their favourite actor or actress because they would stay for a couple of years and be a part of that company.

CW: So what is your opinion on repertory theatre? Do you think it was a good way to train actors?

AM: Incredibly hard work. The actors and actresses thought it was very difficult, but it was like an apprenticeship. Timothy West, for example, speaks very highly of Salisbury, because he started off here and it was like an apprenticeship because you never knew what you were going to do next. An actor, called Christopher Benjamin who was here a couple of years ago said that one week he played *Othello* and the next week he was the

Waiter, so the size of the roles would vary. Timothy West was here for about three years and in that time, I think he was in 58 plays. He actually arrived as a Stage Manager and he did the set for *The Ghost Train* and had a big, glowing review. But he was here from March 1957 to April 1960 and was in an incredible amount of plays [playing] a huge range of characters. He played Archie Rice's brother in *The Entertainer* to the Genie of the lamp in *Aladdin*, so he played absolutely everything. But speaking to him, he would say that it was a wonderful experience, as you would just learn everything. In many cases, if there was a shortage of people backstage, you would be put there, and if there wasn't enough people on stage, you would be acting, so it was like a family group and everybody chipped in and did everything. A hard life, but if you are going to learn a job, that is the best way of doing it.

CW: So what were the conditions like for these actors during this time?

AM: Conditions in the old theatre were pretty appalling. The building started off as a Methodist chapel, it was condemned as a Methodist chapel, it then became the Garrison Theatre, it then became the Arts Theatre, and the whole time they had problems with flooding down below and you had rain coming in from the [roof]. People kept saying that they needed a new theatre, but obviously money was very tight. There is a lovely quote from Josephine Tewson, she says she remembers the rain coming in during a performance of *Black Coffee*, an Agatha Christie thriller and says 'Water was continually dripping on one of the actor's heads, as he lay on the floor' - so he was probably the victim- 'there was a puddle on the sofa which one of the actresses had to sit on, my dress was red, but as I walked across in the water, it kept changing colour, and to crown it all, the piano was floating in the orchestra pit!'. But rain and flooding was a continual problem, so during those early days, again, it was a very hard life. You were either playing here or touring, but eventually the touring stopped because they realised that it was expensive. How they managed to learn their lines while performing in one play and rehearsing in another is incredible. But people talk about those times with great affection. They talk about the old theatre with great affection. Yes it was falling to pieces, I mean stage left, at one point was open to the elements, Stephanie Cole talks about a time when you would be wearing these beautiful flowing dresses, and you would have to come out of your dressing room, out into the open, and if it was snowing or raining you would have to have someone holding an umbrella for you. To get onto the stage you would then have to pass the coal hole, so it was a triumph if you managed to get on stage with your dress in one piece [ and still clean].

CW: But I suppose there wasn't the time as well as the money to fix it though if it was always being used for rehearsing and performances

AM: Yes of course, I mean you see photos of the old dressing rooms and Health and Safety now would have condemned them. But again, you talk to actresses and actors about the conditions in that theatre and they say that they didn't really notice, as they were just grateful that it was a job, and because it was such a friendly atmosphere of everyone pitching in and helping each other, it didn't matter to them. Pigeon droppings coming through the roof and rain hitting the corrugated iron roof was all part of the [experience]. They weren't allowed to go to the toilet during a performance as well because the cistern was above the stage, so if they pulled the chain, people in the

audience would be able to hear! But it didn't matter because they were young, they had a job and they were learning their trade.

CW: Do you know how the audience responded to the faults with the theatre?

AM: The audience responded incredibly well because Salisbury at last had their own theatre. People would travel up to London of course, but this was so much more convenient. Salisbury is very much like the centre of a wheel, because whichever road you go out, you are going to hit an important place, like Winchester, Southampton, Bath and Swindon and the people would come in from these places which often made the plays a sell out. Pantomime for example always sold out.

CW: So did the theatre stay like this for a while then or was it moving with the times?

AM: Well I would just like to mention when the name of the theatre changed, which was quite important. In 1953, people were a little bit concerned that the name Arts Theatre was putting potential audience members off, particularly the soldiers, so they came up with all sorts of different names, they had The Lyric, Empress, The Windmill, and then they decided that they would call it the Queens Theatre because it was Coronation year, but the home office would not approve, so then eventually somebody suggested that they should call it the Playhouse, and so that was that. But in those early 1950s, some very famous people came to Salisbury. Prunella Scales who is married to Timothy West started here in 1952 and one of her first parts was as the Oldest Shoe Child in *Babes in the Wood*. George Baker also started here. Also one of the people who did a lot of directing during those times was Leslie Phillips and around the early 50s, Kenneth Williams also appeared here but didn't actually like Salisbury. He said 'Salisbury is madly cathedral and smug little houses freshly painted, all terribly disinfected and utterly boring. Huge notices asking for silence and telling dogs not to foul the paths because the church won't like it, it is all so mock. The pubs are all old fashioned and quite unconvincing and the shops sell jock-straps a la Chaucer with a musty smell.' Now that's Kenneth Williams for you! But I think he actually quite fancied one of the other actors and there was a bit of a falling out, which is probably the real reason why he didn't like Salisbury! But in that short time in the early 50s, there were some very [famous] names that came here. I mean Prunella Scales started here and then left, and then a few years later, Timothy West started here and then left, so they didn't actually appear together until 1999 when they appeared in *The Birthday Party*.

CW: So do you think that the style of plays changed between when it was the Arts Theatre and the Playhouse?

AM: When you actually look at the list of plays, I mean there are some very strange plays that were put on that make you wonder where on earth they have disappeared to, but the list of plays shows that they have pretty much covered just about everything. But later on when Reggie Salberg took over, that was a big turning point. Before him there was a gentleman called Michael Wide who was the general manager of the theatre, and under him, it was reasonably successful, however, there was a constant battle for finance. But in 1955, Michael Wide decided to move on and mentioned this to his friend

Reggie Salberg. The Salbergs were a big theatre family, his brother used to run the Birmingham rep, and Reggie came and took over the Playhouse and really put it on the map. That is why our studio is called the Salberg, because of Reggie. He stayed here for a long time and really built up the theatre and it is thanks to him that we have got this reputation. He arrived at the age of 39 and stayed here for a good 20 years, which is a long time for any general manager. He saw the problems with the old building, as the rain and flooding became so bad that he once had to ask a member of the audience to take down her umbrella! So Reggie had this dream of a new playhouse, but while he was working at the old repertory theatre, he would put on just about anything. There is a quote that he said [about] selecting the season's plays 'There isn't any one audience, at least one in three productions has got to be a Women's Institute play, there must be at least three classical plays a year, and we must also try to do the best of the modern works, and on top of that, you have got your pantomime, the spring review and old-time music hall, if in doubt, put on Shakespeare or Agatha Christie!', so his view [was that you tried to do everything]. He also wasn't frightened about putting on plays that might possible frighten the Salisbury audience. When the old theatre was about to close and Reggie was being interviewed, somebody said to him that it must have been difficult having the cathedral breathing down his neck all of the time, remarking on [any] disgraceful plays that he put on, and he said that he was actually a bit worried when he to put on *A Streetcar Named Desire*, because he thought that the people of the [close clergy] would not [approve of it], but he said that they have seen much worse since! Reggie also said that he remembers an old lady attacking him with her walking stick because she would rather have seen *Charlie's Aunt* for the sixth time instead of the rather near the knuckle kitchen-sink drama that she had just sat through! But he would put on anything, including *Look Back in Anger* and *A Taste of Honey*. He was very good though, and would always warn people, for example he would tell the Women's Institute not to come on a certain week because he knew he was putting on something that might shock a few people. He was totally honest. [It] was terrific for him to be able to be like that. The lady in the box office [Pauline Astin] also did the same thing, and told people if she thought they would like certain plays. Reggie also had a tremendous knack of choosing the right people. He used to go up to a place called Sally Spruce's Costume House, where they hired out costumes and he would interview people there. Some of these interviews are actually legendary. One actor says that he went for an interview there, but because the place was so packed with costumes, the only place to sit was the toilet, and Reggie didn't know whether to offer the actor the seat or stand up! He interviewed Leonard Rossiter from *Rising Damp* and he actually said 'go away and have a sandwich and a pint of beer for lunch and come back later'. So in other words, the audition didn't go well, but Reggie could see something in this [actor] and so wanted to try again later. Thank goodness he did, because Leonard Rossiter joined the company and was a huge success, everybody loved him and he went on to further fame. Stephanie Cole also started here. She remembers being interviewed by Reggie, and Reggie said 'how's your legs?' and she got a bit worried and [wondered] what he could be after, but she showed him her legs and Reggie said 'good, we will have you for the pantomime!' Christopher Biggins also started here. He grew up in Salisbury and was obviously very keen on acting in school and he had a good drama teacher who saw something in him. He was very keen on drama and thought that he would like to work at the Playhouse. So he just came along, went to the box office, but he didn't quite know Reggie's name, and so called him 'Reggie Salzberg'. But he asked to see Reggie, and Reggie appointed Christopher as one of the backstage workers, and ended up sweeping the stage and doing odd jobs, but at least he was learning the trade. He then got his first part in *He Stoops to Conquer* and was also a rat in *Dick Wittington* which was his first pantomime, but he is now synonymous with pantomimes. But gradually he

got more and more parts and eventually went to the Bristol Old Vic Drama School which Stephanie recommended. The rest is history and he has gone on from strength to strength. But he saw something in the theatre and wanted to be a part of it, and Reggie gave him [a chance]. But as regards to plays, certainly Reggie would try absolutely everything, and when you look through the list of plays, even for one year, for example 1960, you have got your Shakespeare, a bit of comedy, you have got perhaps one or two things that might surprise a few members of the audience, but Reggie wasn't frightened of that. He would also always do the pantomime which was the big thing, because it brought in a huge amount of money. But he would do things like the old time music hall [and it] is a shame that they don't do those anymore. You would have your chairman and all of the actors and actresses in the [company] would have to do a song or a dance, so they would [have to] be talented people. You would also have Spring Revues, which were like variety shows. So the people of Salisbury knew that there would be a good programme all the way throughout the year. But because it is a repertory company, you would get the familiar faces, Leonard Rossiter would be here for a couple of years, Stephanie Cole would also be here, and everyone would wonder what they were playing on those weeks, it was the excitement of seeing your favourite actors and actresses [playing different roles].

CW: Due to Reggie giving warnings about certain plays, did that mean that the more controversial ones were better received, as the audiences watching them would more interested in that type of theatre?

AM: Well yes, I mean you would always get people who would think that a play was a bit racy and so they wouldn't go to it, but you would also get some people who wanted to give it a go and they would then be [surprised]. He wasn't afraid to try those [that may] test the audience a bit and that didn't worry him at all. He would warn people though first, but they would [usually] be very well received. Occasionally there would be something that he would try out and it wouldn't work, but if you are putting on a season, you will get some plays that aren't incredibly popular. For some reason, something about the play might be a little bit too modern or perhaps it tested [the audience] a little bit too much, but it is swings and roundabouts. Certainly those plays that had reputations, like again, Look Back in Anger [were] very successful [as was] Oh! What a Lovely War, [It was a risk putting on Oh! What a Lovely War] in this area, because the area is very military [but it] is an absolutely superb play, [although] it is a bit of a micky take about the generals and what they did in the war, so it was a bit risky, but it proved to be amazingly popular and Reggie remembers occasions when the audience would just leave the theatre in tears because it was so emotional. The popular plays, like Shakespeare would get good audiences, but they wouldn't necessarily be amazingly reviewed. Reggie was also asked to talk about some of the plays he had put on just as the old theatre was about to close, and he talked about Oh! What a Lovely War. But he also says 'I remember the worst Macbeth ever to be staged anywhere. A lady asked me if the production was suitable for children, to which I said 'Yes it is very suitable for children, it's the grown-ups that I'm worried about!'" So again, very honest Reggie!

CW: How were the stranger plays like Beckett and Pinter received? Did they go down just as well as the more naturalistic ones?

AM: Yes, I mean he would try all of those. *Waiting for Godot* was certainly put on here. You would get some people that would think that because a play had a reputation, [they] would think 'No, that's not for me'. But you would get the younger element, perhaps the student element that would give it a go. I remember seeing *Waiting for Godot* when I was at college in Chelsea and I thought 'what is this?' as it is quite a shocking and surprising play, but then I thought 'yes, I want to see that again'. But there would be some people that would stay away because they weren't too sure of it. But Reggie tried them, most plays that you can think of, certainly the Beckett's, they were all here for a week or whatever. I mean it must have been wonderful in those days where you either had a play every week, or perhaps later on, when he managed to get more rehearsal time, a play every fortnight, and the whole range of comedies, Shakespeare [and playwrights such as] Beckett. [It] was absolutely fantastic for students who were interested in the theatre, or just people that wanted a good evening's entertainment. Because there were so many plays on throughout the year, people could pick and choose, as they would know that there would be something else on the horizon and they knew that they could trust the theatre and trust Reggie. You would get details of the season then, but there would be several seasons in the year, not like the two a year that [we] have now. To be able to see that enormous range of plays would be amazing. Reggie was also very good at keeping the prices down. He would not charge a huge amount, and so the theatre could be open for everybody. The big snag though was that it was in a theatre that wasn't the best one in the world; when it was cold, it was freezing and in the summer, the ventilation system wasn't very good, so [it] would be incredibly hot. But the people of Salisbury really thought that it was their theatre, and when there [were] financial problems, they would rally around, and back whoever was trying to raise the money. People would pay for tickets even though they couldn't come to the theatre, but they would make sure that the money would be there. They would also do things like babysitting circles and the money would go to the theatre because it was their theatre. Later on as well, when there was talk of raising the money for the new theatre, they had no problem at all. Reggie had this big dream of [building a] new theatre, because he knew that the old one [was falling] to pieces, and the Salisbury people rallied round and raised the money very quickly. I mean they obviously got a lot of grants, and a lot of actors and actresses who had appeared here in the past donated a lot of money, but it was raised in all sorts of little ways.

CW: So how do you think censorship affected the plays that were put on here? I have heard stories of actors handing out leaflets before the performance with the words that they couldn't include in the script on and so I was just wondering if it was that extreme here?

AM: No, I haven't found any protests of people standing outside the theatre and saying 'don't go to that particular production'. But Reggie, and I suppose people before him, were very aware of the fact that the theatre was in a cathedral city, and you have got the cathedral and the Close, but maybe that made them even more determined to have a go and to see what religion thought about [some of the plays]. Occasionally people would complain, like that woman with the walking stick. *Waiting for Godot* was also on in the Salberg, which is the studio in which a lot of experimental drama [goes] on, and somebody recalled that 'after seeing *Waiting for Godot*, an audience member wrote to the theatre saying 'no wonder we lost the colonies if they put on drivel like this!'' So people would write and complain, but Reggie was very good at smoothing over troubled waters, and would apologise if people were upset. But that wouldn't stop him from trying different things though. Somebody once complained about the play *Pygmalion*

because the word 'bloody' was used. Later on in Equus, because there is nudity within it, you would have the 'irate of Salisbury' who were disgusted with it, but then you would also have those who thought it was a fantastic play and thought that the nudity was just a part of it. When we put on Equus in [2000], there was absolutely no complaints, and only great reviews...well it was a superb production. But Reggie was again, sensible enough to say that he was sorry, but [he] only wanted to try out something different and would encourage them to come again and see something more suitable. But no, there was never anyone giving out leaflets and placards in protest, I don't think that has ever happened.

CW: What do you think was the most controversial play that was put on during 1945-68?

AM: I would imagine all of the [obvious] ones, the Look Back in Anger, A Taste of Honey and Waiting for Godot, all of those that we have mentioned already, anything that is a little bit controversial, they have all been here. I don't think, as I said before, that any of them were huge flops. It is interesting when you look at the list of box office receipts for a particular year, because Reggie liked to publish them, and you look through them and think 'I wonder why that one is at the bottom?' But sometimes you can't explain these things. It might have been a comedy that you thought, that might have done well, but for some reason, the Salisbury audience didn't think it was very good, so it was down the bottom. It is strange, obviously with the Shakespeare and Agatha Christie, you were guaranteed a full house, and the pantomime as well would be at the top, but sometimes the controversial [plays] did pretty well. But certainly, every single one that you can think of, they have all been done here during those early times because people weren't afraid to try them out and obviously for the actors and actresses, it was a tremendous experience for them to be able to [appear in them]. If something is doing great in the West End and you get permission to put it on locally; give it a go!

CW: So did you manage to ever go to London to see any theatre then?

AM: Me personally?

CW: Yes. Did you manage to see Theatre Workshop or Royal Court or anything?

AM: Well, I have only lived in Salisbury since 1982, so have had to find out about the history of the old theatre and Reggie and people from asking others. But I was in college in Chelsea in the 60s, which was a fantastic place to be in during that time and where it was all happening. The Royal Court theatre and everything was just on the doorstep. I was also a member of the drama society at the college and we put on [plays] like The Crucible and so on and it was a good time and because you were in Chelsea, everything was on the doorstep and you made sure that you saw everything. As regards to the people of Salisbury, I'm sure they would go up to London and quite often a play would start off here as well and then be transferred to London, which is good for the [theatre's] reputation here and good for finance as well.

CW: So did any touring companies come here or was it just Salisbury's own theatre [company]?

AM: Yes, what they used to do, during the summer, because there is always a sort of closure, where you have got maintenance, they used to have touring companies coming in for a week, which again tended to be the old faithfuls like an Agatha Christie, usually starring somebody off the television which would bring in the crowds. They don't tend to do that now though. They do have touring companies coming in occasionally, linked up with another theatre. But most of the plays that are put on here now and in the past are Salisbury Playhouse productions, so they are very much 'in house'. The sets are built here, the costumes are made here and the rehearsals are done here, which is now quite rare.

CW: So is there anything in particular that stands out as one of the most remarkable documents in the archives from the period 1945-68?

AM: Well it is mainly full of programmes, but when you look at the programmes for [examples from] the old Garrison Theatre days all they are is just one little piece of paper. But it's fantastic because you open the little piece of paper and you look at the cast and think '[Goodness]', 'Peter Ustinov, Edith Evans'. Then you look at the programmes as you go [through the years it] is fascinating how much they [have] changed. We have also got some early photographs, not a great deal of them though. I suppose one of the [most] interesting photographs was of when Noel Coward was here, it's a signed photograph which is a bit special and there are also one or two pieces of correspondence. But in [the early] days, the people who ran the archives never thought about getting any signed photographs [or programmes] because the actors were unknown to them [at] that time. But what we do now is during the production, we send a programme around and get it signed because in ten, twenty, thirty odd years, who knows? The first production at the old theatre was a sort of variety show, the second one, the first play was Emyln Williams, *Night Must Fall* and he directed it, appeared in it and signed the programme, so that is a bit special. So again, obviously, we keep that in a special place. But it is fascinating to anyone who is interested in the theatre and anyone who is interested in history, because you are actually plotting the history of the theatre, but also the history of a lot of important people who actually started off here and you can see their careers [evolving]. They had the programme *Cash in the Attic* from here, because they were raising money to build the extension and they came and said 'have you got anything in the archives to sell?' and I said 'no! Anything we have got in the archives, I'm afraid we want to hold onto.' It's when you look at the programmes over the years, or the photographs over the years and the development of different actors and actresses and seeing their career evolve, that's the interesting thing. I would rather look at that than any one document.

CW: Well, I think our time is almost up now, so I better leave it here, but thank you.