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Cleo Sylvestre – interview transcript

Interviewer: Brian Kamm

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Actress. Audiences; Bubble; Can't Pay Won't Pay; Crossroads; Frank Dunlop; Simon Gray; Alec Guinness; The National Health; National Theatre; Laurence Olivier; Wise Child.

BK: Today is Monday, the 15th of December, 2008. I'm privileged to be speaking today with Cleo Sylvestre about her life in theatre. I'm Brian Kamm, and on behalf of the British Library, The Theatre Archive Project, and the University of Sheffield, thank you.

I suppose it's tradition to start by asking you to just to take us back to the beginning. How did your life in theatre come to be?

CS: I can't exactly remember, apart from the fact that ever since I was really very, very young, I was always interested in Drama, and plays, and I used to go and see -not that often- because I came from a sort of very poor background, but we used to go to the theatre, you know, the traditional times, at Christmas and then maybe, during the year as well, and when I was at school. It was just something that was in me. I just never ever thought about doing anything else, really.

BK: For centuries, theatre has been dominated by white men. And having an identity of a black woman, it gives you an intersectional minority. How did you manage to fit in, or rather, stand out?

CS: Ha. That's a good question. I'll never forget, actually when I was at school and leaving, about to go to college, and I went to the usual career talk with my head teacher, and I told her what I wanted to do, and she said, "Cleopatra, there are no parts for coloured actresses in Britain." And in a way, I suppose that was probably the worst thing she could have said, because it made me even more determined. And it was true, in fact, in those days, you never saw black actors in mainstream theatre, or in any theatre whatsoever. So, to a certain extent, she was right. But I was determined. That wasn't going to stop me. So, sorry, what was the...?

BK: How did you fit in or stand out?

CS: How did I fit in? Well I suppose I was very lucky, because very early on I got a part in a play with Alec Guinness, which was Simon Gray's first play called *Wise Child* and I was playing a West Indian maid. It was a very convoluted story. And from there, that was in Wyndhams which is in West End, and from there I went to the National, because Olivier came to see it one day. And I went on to do a show called *National Health*. I think the real turning point for me was joining the *Young Vic*, which was founded and run by an amazing man called Frank Dunlop, who didn't allow any sort of restrictions on his actors whatsoever. He would have a cast... He just chose the actors he thought were best for the play. So, for example, there was an actor who was quite big, physically, which, again in those days, you probably never saw any big, fat actors on the stage, but Frank didn't care. Because to him, theatre represented life. And it's obviously made for all sorts of people, in the same respect that he let me play roles which I probably normally wouldn't have been considered for by any other director. But Frank gave me that chance.

BK: Tell me more about *Wise Child*.

CS: *Wise Child*, yes. It was Simon Gray's first play. And it was really a baptism of fire, because it had Alec Guinness, Simon Ward, and Gordon Jackson. Three... well, Simon was younger and about to have a very distinguished career. But definitely Alec Guinness and Gordon Jackson were very well known. And I was the only female in it. The Director was called John Dexter, who again had a really formidable reputation. So I was obviously very nervous. But it was a wonderful thing in which to be involved. And I would look, and watch. And I learned so much from just rehearsals, watching everybody.

BK: How was the critical response to that? Having you in one part, and also a gay character as well... before the Theatre Act of 1968?

CS: Yeah, it was um... On the whole, it wasn't fantastically critically acclaimed, but it did get very, very good audiences and it provoked a lot of controversy, as you say, because of those two characters. As you know, Simon Gray went on to become a very respected and well-known playwright. And it was an interesting play. It did break lots of boundaries.

BK: When you first started, with *Wise Child* and beyond that, what did the critics and audience think of you? And what did you think of them?

CS: Well, they were kind to me for *Wise Child*. In fact, I think one of them even nominated me as 'Most Promising Newcomer,' a Sunday Times critic, so that was, yeah I felt really... because I had been accepted. And the audience, the letters I got from the members of the public were very positive. I can't ever remember getting anything that was negative or nasty at all. Yeah.

BK: Nice.

CS: So I felt really encouraged by that. But not just for myself, but I felt encouraged for any other sort of actresses, black, who wanted to, you know, try the West End or whatever.

BK: Do you have a most memorable role?

CS: Um... (laughs) I don't. I did enjoy National Health a great deal. A Peter Nichols play. Cause that was two totally contrasting characters. So that was great fun. And I played Phaedre last year, which I thought was a great challenge. So I'm always... I think at the time, every role that I do, I like to think "Ah, yes, this is really great, a good challenge." Yeah, probably National Health

BK: What was it, about it, that made it?

CS: There were two different characters. One of them, she was a very... she's a West Indian nurse, very down to Earth, very matter-of-fact, very good at what she did. And the other one was this fictional Soap Opera nurse, so she was very glamorous, American. Well, transcontinental really, but based on an American Soap. And it was just lovely, two nice roles. And it was a very great comedy. It was lovely, I like doing comedy.

BK: Who was your favourite and/or least favourite person to work with?

CS: Favourite, probably Frank again. Frank Dunlop. Because I loved the way that he... I loved his whole vision for the theatre, and the way that he brought theatre to people who weren't traditionally used to going to see theatre. And as an actor, I just loved rehearsals with him, because he never... You know you hear of directors... I've been very lucky, really. I've never worked with directors who are malicious. But you do hear sometimes of actors having really bad times with directors.

Frank was never like that. He always assembled a company that got on well with each other. We went on tours. We went to America. We went to Mexico. And obviously when you're spending you know, like twenty-four hours a day with people, virtually, it can get rather hairy. But I don't think we ever had any problems. And that, I think, was due to the way that he picked everybody.

Least favourite, um... I don't know really. No, I haven't. Don't think I've ever worked with anyone and thought "Oh, no" and couldn't work with them again. Maybe at the time, you might think, "Oh, yes," but then, in reflection you think "Well maybe it wasn't as bad as I thought it was."

BK: In reflection, how have you seen theatre change since 1968?

CS: Well in some ways, it has changed. I mean obviously, when you go now to the National or the RSC, casting is far more reflective of the times in which we live, which is a good thing.

I still don't think, this is now speaking as a woman, its changed as much as I would have liked it to have done, in as much as there aren't that many opportunities for women of a certain age (laughs). It's still a very much male-dominated profession. And you frequently look at plays, and you see a cast list of all male. I mean, a wonderful production, *Black Watch* that's virtually [all male]. I shouldn't just single out just that. But there's so many plays that just [have] male casting. Or you just get females in a very minor role. And I would like that to change.

I suppose the ideal is probably that you have more more female playwrights. But there are female playwrights, so I don't know what the answer is. But as I say, it has changed a certain extent. But then again, it hasn't. (Laughs) Sorry, it's not a very clear answer!

BK: Well, you have changed it. You've written stuff yourself.

CS: Yes, I have. But that was again, frustration because I felt that, you know, the opportunities weren't always there. So you create your own opportunities.

BK: What inspires you for acting or for writing?

CS: I think what inspires me is the thought of people coming along and seeing a production, going away either having their lives enriched, challenged, or just entertained. You know, just to go out and have a really good evening. That's what inspires me. And it's just this deep, deep down thing about just wanting... I love being part of the company. I just finished five months with English Touring Theatre And I love doing that. It's great. It's like a family. And I find, obviously, inspiration from other actors. But as I said, what inspires me is the thought that theatre can be a transforming experience.

BK: Do you have any favourite stories you tell people, in relation to theatre?

CS: Oh, crumbs. (laughs) I've got one. Well it's indirectly related. I was doing a children's show a few years back, when my kids where all quite young. And it was right before Christmas. It was based on a cartoon character. And she wore very, very specific shoes. And shoes are always one thing I like to get right for a character. And I said to the wardrobe mistress, "Don't worry, I'm going out most lunch hours, buying Christmas presents for the kids, so I will try and find these shoes, it will save you getting them, coming, getting me to try them on and everything." So I said I'd do that, and I wasn't having much luck. And I went out one lunch hour, and I went to a shop, and I was just about to leave, and I saw another huge section which I hadn't noticed. And I thought, 'I wonder if they got any shoes through there'. So I rushed towards it, and this woman was rushing towards me, and she smiled. And I thought she looked a bit familiar, but I thought, 'well I can't, I've got to get back to work', you know. I want to see if I can find these shoes. So I sort of smiled, and she smiled, and we went like this (emulates trying to go to one side to pass by) and eventually I thought, 'oh I wish this wretch would get out of the way', and somebody came and tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Excuse me. That's a mirror." (Laughs)

BK: (Laughs) Oh my!

CS: I went back and told the cast and I said I could have been there all afternoon, smiling at myself and politely saying 'excuse me'!

What else... More specifically related to theatre... Oh, once when we were doing National Health as the glamorous nurse, I had on a little mini crochet silver dress. And there was one scene where we finish, it was -the story- was a love story between Scottish doctor, and a young black nurse. And we had to finish on a clench, kissing. And on this particular evening, the actor and I kissed, and as we went to pull away, my crochet dress got hooked on his button from his suit. So he realised what was going on, so we went back into a clench again. And this is at the Old Vic, a huge audience. We went back into a clench again, frantically trying, and (laughs) we just basically had to keep on... We tried a few times, and every time we came away, we could still feel this wretched piece of crochet around his button! So we just had to keep on kissing until the button came undone.

BK: Tell me more about your experience with the Old Vic.

CS: That was interesting, because as I said, I went there to do National Health and I was only in one other production, which Jonathan Miller directed. But Frank Dunlop did want me to be in White Devil. Now in those days, the Old Vic, the National Theatre had two different companies, A and B. And I was in one company. I can't even now remember which one. But White Devil play was going to be done by the other company. So the schedules just didn't... rehearsal-wise didn't work out. But I do think now that they would use their actors, they would use them in a much better way. As I say, I was just literally there. They didn't think beyond the box, because the parts, you know, National Health was written for a black actor. They didn't think out of that box and use me in any other plays they were doing. Which I don't think happen so much now. I mean, we've had a black Henry V, so, yeah.

BK: Why is it, do you think, that there was such a lack of black actors when there was even black roles, for instance, Laurence Olivier was painted black to play Othello.

CS: I suppose it was tradition. Because traditionally, that's what British theatre had always done. And it's sometimes quite hard to break with tradition, or to get people to see, you know, alternative ways of

doing things. So I think people like Olivier play those roles because traditionally, that's what always happens in theatre. And there were black actors around, not obviously as many as there are now. But they were mostly restricted to playing slaves, and those sorts of parts.

BK: When you were starting out, were there any other black actors or high-profile black people that inspired you?

CS: There weren't, you see, because you'd look at telly and you'd look on the stage, and there weren't really... I can't really remember anybody at all. I mean, obviously, you'd get people from America in films, but in regards to England... No, I can't really think of anybody. There were a couple of male actors... but as I say, the opportunities weren't really around.

BK: What about women, in general, of that era?

CS: I used to love, well I still like her, haven't seen her for ages, Geraldine McEwan, Maggie Smith, and I suppose prior to that, Beryl Reed I always liked. Tended to be actors who had that combination of being able to play very dramatic roles, and then also be good at doing comedy as well. I tend to like that.

BK: Outside of the work you did yourself, what were your favourite things to watch? You did a lot of television aside from theatre. What did you like to watch?

CS: There was something called Armchair Theatre, which was on television, which I used to love to watch. Theatre-wise, I used to love to go to The Mermaid, which was run by someone called Bernard Miles. And I always used to think it must have been how theatre was in the 18th century. And he used rake up some really good old plays. And of course I used to go to the National Theatre, used to go to the Old Vic. And that was weird because I remember, when I went there, I thought to myself 'Crumbs, a few months back I used to be queuing up for really cheap seats, and now I'm actually appearing here.' So yes, all those sorts of things, and documentaries I always liked as well. But basically, Wednesday Play, Play for Today, and Coronation Street I used to watch as well.

BK: Did you ever experience a turning point in theatre?

CS: Personally?

BK: Yeah.

CS: That's a difficult question. How do you mean?

BK: In a sense, where a certain style, or anything that just changed that from then on would be anything 'before this' or 'after this'?

CS: No, I don't think I have. I suppose it would be, in the middle of the 60's, with the advent of Fringe theatre, and lunchtime theatre, that opened up far more opportunities for actors and you didn't have to be well-known in order to have something performed. So somebody could write a piece, get together a bunch of actors, and put it on without, you know, having to rely on a big sort of production. You could just get up there and

do it as we do here at the bar. I suppose that was a turning point, in a way. But it wasn't one defining... It happened gradually.

BK: Were there any roles that you got, that you were really surprised, or really hoping for? Like an absolute shock?

CS: Most of them! I think most actors, when you get a job you think 'Oh my God, I can't believe!' (laughs) Well, National Health I think, and Wise Child and again playing Phaedre last year... Just trying to think of some of the others I've done. Oh yes, I did a play called I.D. with Antony Sher, playing a South African, a Cape Coloured. And I was quite surprised to get that, because I knew they had actually been to South Africa to look for someone, particularly because Antony Sher is South African, and he was there at the auditions. So I was surprised to get that, and delighted.

BK: Has there anything that you were not been involved in, that you wish you had been?

CS: Theatre-wise, I suppose I'd like to work with a company like Complicité. In fact, I've just been working with ETT whose work is rather similar, and Shared Experience. I've never auditioned for the RSC, I'd love to, because I've done a lot of Shakespeare. Who knows, one day maybe.

BK: What would you pursue today, if you could pick something to do?

CS: A particular role? This changes from day to day, really.

BK: What's it today?

CS: (laughs) Today, I think I would quite like to do some Joe Orton. I like Joe Orton. and there's some meaty parts there for women. Maybe Entertaining Mr. Sloane.

BK: Looking at the way theatre is today, and the way it was a couple decades ago, in what ways is it massively different?

CS: I think there are far more musicals. And the whole thing, there are far more... When I started out, if you were a name on telly, it was quite difficult actually; it was almost a stigma regarding theatre work. But now it seems the opposite. There's so many reality shows, and people find themselves winning a reality show and they go and, you know, star in a play. I suppose in that perspective its changed a lot.

BK: Were there any "favourites", any favourite plays of yours that you would view more than once?

CS: There are certain plays which I would have loved to have seen again, that usually get booked out. For example, The Mysteries which came over to Wilson's a few years back, which was a wonderful experience. Years ago, Ariane Mnouchkine brought over a show to the roundhouse, 1789 Théâtre du Soleil. And there have been things along the years, where you go and you think 'Wow, this is just amazing', and it has a profound impact on you.

BK: What accomplishments within other people around you, stick out? Actors or writers, people that became bigger or greater afterwards? Anyone you're proud of? Any friends of yours?

CS: Yes, though not really sort of household names. I used to be very friendly with Maureen Lipman whose done really well. She's done lots of West End shows. Most people in Britain probably know who she is. I've got one friend who is a fantastic actress, and we always used to say to her when she was younger, 'You will come into your own when you are middle-aged', well you know, sort of late 30's, early 40's, and she's recently been getting quite a lot of work. She's recently been in Dr. Who, quite a few episodes.

BK: You've done that yourself.

CS: Years back! But Jacqué King, she's a lovely, lovely actress. Who else... There's an actor called Ken Cranham, who I think has done really well. Fantastic actor, I've known him for years. In fact I've just worked with him last year for the first time. But often, it's quite frustrating because there are people that you think should do well, but for some reason or other, they don't. And there's no rhyme or reason to it.

BK: Did you ever work in television and theatre at the same time?

CS: Yes, yes.

BK: How was that?

CS: It was funny, because it was [from the] sublime to the ridiculous. It's when I was at the National, and I was also doing a soap called Crossroads. It actually came in for a lot of stick,

Crossroads, but I always had a soft spot for it, because I dealt with a lot of social views which were particularly relevant for the day. And yes, I would be going off and doing the theatre work, and so I wouldn't be in Crossroads, 'cause they'd write me in when when I was off because the National worked in blocks, so we'd do a block, and then Crossroads would write me in when I was off for a block, and people living in my mom's council [estate] used to say to my mom "Ms. Sylvestre, we haven't seen Cleo on the

telly recently," and my mom would say very proudly, "Oh no, she's working at the National Theatre." and they'd say "Oh, nevermind..." (laughs)

BK: A lot of actors talk about the differences between acting in front of a camera, and acting in front of an audience. What is your take on that?

CS: Oh it's totally different, totally different. I think my problem is because I love theatre so much, I don't always scale down enough when I'm doing telly. But I just love the personal contact, because each night in the theatre is different, and you can feel the audience, you can feel the theatre. And there's a magic about it which I don't think you can get on [camera]. I don't know, that's just me as a performer. I mean, it's obviously great when you're involved with a powerful piece of telly, because that can be transforming, you know, for the audience. But no, it's a totally different feeling, yeah.

BK: Have you ever had any friend that went into theatre and crossed over and never came back, into television/film?

CS: I know people that have done telly, and they've done so much that they've then got frightened about appearing on stage. They felt that they wouldn't be able to do it again, yeah. And I think that's sad. I knew one person in particular, who was a very talented actor, and she said to me, "I couldn't go back now and do theatre, because I've done so much telly." But normally, people seem to marry the two.

BK: Tell me about some of the directors you've worked with in the past.

CS: Well, I've already mentioned Frank [Dunlop]. Gordon McDougall was another one I worked with for a long time at Oxford Playhouse. And again, Gordon had that ability to assemble a good company together, cause we all used to get on very well. I did quite a few plays, I can't remember how many now. Probably at least six for Gordon. He's a thinker, Gordon. He's very intellectual. So it was a different process. Not saying that Frank isn't a thinker, but it was a different process working with Gordon. Who else was there.... John Dexter. He was the first sort of big director I worked for. He directed *Wise Child* and as I said earlier, I had heard rumors about him from people. They would phone me up, and say "Congratulations, but... you know, we know he can be a bit of a tyrant." Whether it was because of the cast, he was fine. I didn't actually get any lashings, any verbal lashings from him, which I believe he was quite good at giving! You hear stories of actors being reduced to tears.

I've just worked with a young director called Kate Saxon, whose very, very dynamic. and that was a lovely rehearsal process.

BK: Did you ever have any favourite theatre venues in London?

CS: I loved the Young Vic. Haven't worked in the new Young Vic. I've just been to Richmond, which is a lovely old theatre, which is great. Lots of fringy places that were fun, fun to work in. Sometimes quite a challenge. Like we've had here today, people

walking around. But the pub theatres sometimes, you know. I remember doing a play last year. A South African play, and it was a very strange piece. And at one stage, I had a line about the silence. And you could more likely than not, hear the football, you know and I'd say this line about the silence and you'd hear "Aye ah f'in 'ell!" and people sort of swearing, cursing, because the football was going on in the main part of the pub. It's got its interesting sort of challenges.

BK: What were other funny challenges, things you had to get through on stage?

CS: I remember doing a play with Bubble once, it was Can't Pay Won't Pay, and I don't know if you know anything about Bubble, but they used to have a tent, so they pitch up the tent on a big space. But they also went out to communities. So we'd do lots of community halls and everything. And this particular play, we'd taken to a community venue in Brixton. Now, black audiences on the whole are very vociferous, and sometimes it's as if you're not actually there. They think they're watching telly, so you can hear comments quite freely "Oh look what she's doing there!" and they'll talk as if you're not actually live there, in front of them. So they'll talk as if you can't hear them. Anyway, on this particular day, we had just started the play. And the setting was a kitchen, table and chairs and everything, there's myself and the other actress. And at the top of the play there's been a power cut at the supermarket and we've been looting, and we put all the stuff underneath our coats so it looks as if we were pregnant. And we were on stage going through this scene about what we would tell our husbands and everything. And this guy comes in late, a member of the audience, and he started to drag one of the chairs, one of our prop chairs, thinking it was something for him to sit on. So suddenly in the middle of our kitchen there's this guy shuffling across and someone said "No no, come and sit over here, leave them there." And I looked at the other actress, and I don't know, it was just so difficult, trying to contain, not laughing. It was awful! And I'm very bad at corpsing. Sometimes quite difficult.

BK: Have you ever broken out in laughter on stage?

CS: Not nearly. I've come very close to it. Just try and incorporate it into the performance, really.

BK: Did you enjoy comedy or drama, one over the other?

CS; I think there's something very uplifting about doing a play when you can hear people falling about with laughter. Because it's just great, when the whole audience just roars about with laughter. It's great tonic. On the other hand, if you're doing something very passionate and dramatic, the silence is equally as potent. So it's difficult, but maybe the laughter wins at the end of the day, especially in these troubled times.

BK: You've been interviewed many times before. Is there anything that you've never been asked before, that you've ever been wanted to be asked?

CS: No (laughs) Ask me, and I'll tell you!

BK: Finally, based on everything that you've seen and done throughout your career in theatre, what would you give as advice to aspiring young actors?

CS: Don't be put off. If you want to act, then just do it. It's not safe, it's not easy. But if you have the passion and the commitment, then go for it. And all the best, really.

BK: Good words! Well, thank you.

CS: Thank you.