

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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David Lawrence – interview transcript

Interviewer: Hannah Dummett

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Actor and theatre-goer. Acting styles; Cecil Beaton; censorship; John Gielgud; Vivien Leigh; New Zealand; Old Vic; Sir Laurence Olivier; Terence Rattigan's plays; The Seagull; School for Scandal; Sybil Thorndike; touring theatre; Waiting for Godot.

HD: So how did you get into the theatre?

DL: Well I was interested in the theatre from when I was a very small child, and when I was a very small child we lived in New Zealand, where there wasn't very much theatre to be honest. Most of the theatre was amateur, and [in Auckland] there was a group called the Children's Theatre, which did plays with children about two or three times a year. I did some work with [them]. I enjoyed it and got a lot of pleasure from it [as] I was really very stage-struck. Occasionally, touring companies would come to New Zealand, bringing what were billed as West End successes. They were usually under the auspices of J.C Williamson's, which was an Australian theatre entrepreneurship. They toured throughout Australia and New Zealand – [where] they owned theatres. In fact they were criticised because of their concentration on imported plays [and] musicals, rather than trying to encourage local drama. So we got a tremendous amount of British and American plays and musicals.

HD: So big West End plays?

DL: Yes. Usually, perhaps with second or third-rate casts, and I imagine the casts also would have contained a certain number of Australian, and maybe New Zealand actors.

HD: That's very interesting. So they'd mix them?

DL: They'd mix them, yes. You'd have the stars, then you had the supporting cast. Well that's how somebody like Peter Finch – who became a success in the theatre – was discovered by the Oliviers. In 1948, the Oliviers embarked on [a] great world tour – Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh – [were] at the time, like a sort of – well, somebody described them as being like the 'Posh and Becks' of their day. Of course it was just after the war, when Britain was recovering and trying to promote itself abroad, and they toured as bastions of British culture. They went to quite a few countries before Australia and New Zealand, I can't quite remember which. But certainly the repertoire they

brought to Auckland – [when they were] billed as the Old Vic company – and they brought *The School For Scandal*, *Richard III* – which had recently been a very great success for Olivier at the New Theatre – and *The Skin Of Our Teeth*, by Thornton Wilder, which was a great success for Vivien Leigh. However, the play I was taken to as a very small child, at a matinee, was *The School For Scandal*. The theatre they performed in in Auckland was called the St. James's Theatre, which was partly used as a theatre and partly as a cinema, and it was in art deco Spanish style. It's interesting because in a recent biography of Olivier that I read, there was a question mark as to the venue in Auckland where they performed, so I can set the record straight – it was the St. James's Theatre [laughs]. Being a child I was given a special cushion to sit on so I could see the stage, and the production was designed by Cecil Beaton, who was a renowned photographer and designer at the time. I can still vaguely remember it, and certainly I can remember the famous scene where the screen falls down and Lady Teazle is discovered, and that was Vivien Leigh in a great big hat with a feather. The scenery and costumes, from what I can remember, were very pretty, very highly decorative, which was fashionable at the time in theatre in the late forties.

HD: So quite over the top?

DL: Yes, as Cecil Beaton designs were. I think my mother saw *Richard III*, and it's a pity I never saw the other plays because they would have been interesting. There was also a souvenir programme, which of course has been lost in history...Also, my parents had separated – we'd lived in Brisbane in Australia in 1947. My father was a journalist and critic on the local newspaper, the *Courier Mail*, and he actually met the Oliviers when they came to the city. I was so impressed, with my theatrical imagination at the time, that I wrote a letter to Olivier, saying how much I enjoyed the production. And lo and behold, some months later, I got a reply from him. I was a very precocious child really [laughs] – I also drew a sketch of them in the play. Unfortunately, I can't find the letter. But I do remember him saying thank you for your clever little sketch. He sent a photograph of the pair of them – which I have never seen reproduced anywhere – [this] was autographed. Unfortunately, the signatures faded a bit and [as a child] I went over them in ballpoint pen, so the value is destroyed. But that was my connection with the Oliviers. But there is a later connection. When I was in my twenties, I decided I wanted to go on the stage. So I tried it out and there was a touring company...

HD: Was this still in New Zealand?

DL: In New Zealand, called the Community Arts Service, which took theatre to the backblocks – to the northern part of the North Island. They did fairly intellectual plays – they did do *Waiting For Godot* – and the play I was in – the one and only – was *The Seagull*. [In 1960] Vivien Leigh came with another Old Vic company, under the auspices of J.C. Williamson's. She was with her then lover, John Melville I think his name was. She'd long divorced from Olivier of course. So I arranged to meet her backstage, but she was [rather distant]. But I do remember people queued up [the] arcade leading to the local Her Majesty's theatre to greet her as she came out of the stage door.

HD: Well she was hugely famous, wasn't she?

DL: Well yes, that was 1960 and she was still very famous. On that occasion, she brought *Duel of Angels* by Giraudoux, *Lady of the Camellias*, and *Twelfth Night*, which I saw and I thought she was dreadful in it.

HD: Oh dear! She was Viola?

DL: Yes. But she was very good in *Lady of the Camellias*, I thought. [The] company I was involved with, the Community Arts Service, was under the directorship of rather a 'pseudo' Englishman, who came in as a sort of overseas expert, and his name was Ronnie Barker. [The Community Arts Service] bought a little building and turned it into a theatre mainly for rehearsal purposes, and I suppose performances in the round, and named it the Vivien Leigh Theatre. She came [to open] this theatre, and there was a great opening [ceremony]. Unfortunately the whole thing collapsed, because a few weeks later, [Ronnie Barker] was had up for indecent assault and arrested [laughs]. The theatre had [homophobic] graffiti written [on its doors]. But we went on a tour with this court case [and] – his disgrace – hanging over [us].

HD: Oh dear...

DL: But we still went on tour for six weeks.

HD: Do you remember which play you were doing? *The Seagull*?

DL: Yes. And so it was acting in little village halls – [and] war memorial halls – in the backblocks of New Zealand.

HD: And did you have a lot of people coming to see you?

DL: Depended on where it was. Sometimes you'd have a handful of farmers and a few dogs...

HD: It sounds brilliant taking theatre to such rural places.

DL: Yes. You had to get there and set everything up. You had to be an ASM as well as appearing, it was very tiring, I could never do it today! Then you went on in a Volkswagen van to the next town. The terrain of New Zealand is not very smooth at all! We [sometimes had to ford streams]. You really had to have stamina to do this.

HD: I can imagine. Was it every night?

DL: Every night for six weeks. Of course you'd have a break on the Sunday. Also you were billeted in various homes, [like] farmhouses. Or local people in small towns would billet you in their homes. Local ladies would make cakes and give you supper after the performance.

HD: That sounds brilliant. It sounds so different from anything there is today.

DL: Yes, yes. And I toured that with another company – I did a schools tour with another group in the South Island of New Zealand. It went on for a much longer time and was extremely arduous.

HD: What play was that?

DL: They were excerpts from different plays like An Ideal Husband, The School For Scandal...The Diary of Anne Frank was one! A mixture of things that were probably in the school curriculum. So three of us actors did a show with bits of costume and props and things, going from one excerpt to the other.

HD: I can imagine that would really bring it alive for the school children.

DL: [We] toured all over the country, right from the South Island right up to the North Island of New Zealand.

HD: Were you just driving in the same van?

DL: Driving in the van and getting out and giving one performance in the morning and one in the afternoon.

HD: Wow, that sounds very tiring!

DL: It was very tiring. But at the same time there were other professional theatre groups starting up in New Zealand. There was [the New Zealand] Players, which was the leading professional [company]. That was run by Richard Campion who was the father of Jane Campion, the film director who made The Piano. They gave tours about every few months of well-known plays, a mixture of classics and modern drama. They tried to keep everything of as high a standard as possible. So there was all this going on. But I think in the end, like a lot of these companies, they ran out of money and folded. Nowadays I think theatre over there is much more regionalised – I haven't been back for some time – but when I last went [I gathered] that in the various main towns, there was at least one professional theatre company. The other memory of West End stars was another tour in about 1955, of Sir Ralph Richardson and his wife Meriel Forbes, and Sybil Thorndike and Lewis Casson. They brought the two Rattigan plays, The Sleeping Prince and Separate Tables.

HD: And you saw both of them? When you were a young boy?

DL: Well, I was a bit older then, by 1955! [laughs] I read somewhere that the tour wasn't very successful, but I remember quite vividly seeing them perform, and I think Sybil Thorndike played Mrs Railton-Bell in *Separate Tables*. Ralph Richardson was the Prince, [the role] Olivier played in the film of *The Sleeping Prince*.

HD: Were these plays that came from the West End very popular?

DL: Yes, they were. Particularly the Thorndikes, Sybil Thorndike and Lewis Casson. They came several times on their own, giving recitals of poetry and scenes from plays. They were immensely popular, they liked the country very much. Another one I saw was John Gielgud – he came and gave his *Seven Ages of Man* recital.

HD: What was that like?

DL: Brilliant. But unfortunately a discotheque had opened next door to the theatre [laughs]...so the performance was a bit marred by the sound of this music coming through the stage door! I believe he complained about it.

HD: I was going to say how did he react? He wasn't amused by it?

DL: No he wasn't very amused. Then we had Donald Wolfitt, who considered rather a hammy actor. He was great character actor, but he was a bit of the old school. He did scenes from Shakespeare and a local author in a magazine tried to challenge him by writing articles about 'Donald Bullfit', and Sir Donald Wolfitt didn't like [this] at all. There was a bit of a row. And I saw Robert Helpman in *Nude with Violin* by Noel Coward, which was another play that had been a success in the West End. He gave rather an over the top performance which people thought was very funny.

HD: You mentioned *Waiting For Godot*, were any up and coming plays by new writers performed?

DL: They were, yes. *Waiting For Godot* had a very mixed reception, and a lot of people were very shocked by it.

HD: I can imagine they were – I'm shocked by it!

DL: Well people were shocked and walked out of it and this director, who'd been imported from England, took [*Godot*] all round these country towns. People were so

shocked they walked out and wrote letters of protest to the paper. It caused a great furore.

HD: I'm not surprised, really. Especially in small country towns where you don't see a lot of theatre anyway.

DL: They had never seen anything like that until that time. They were expecting a West End style play and they get Waiting For Godot!

HD: Did you see the production?

DL: I did, and I remember thinking it was rather good. It was very good.

HD: Well I guess it was completely different to anything anyone had seen before. What about any Pinter plays?

DL: I can't remember any Pinter plays. The difficult thing about living there was that it was so far away. You only learnt of these plays by reading magazines like Theatre World and Plays and Players, that sort of thing. Then you could buy copies of the plays and read them, but the opportunities for seeing them performed were very far and few between. Look Back in Anger must have been done at least five years after it was premiered in London at the Royal Court. So it was a long gap. In the meantime I used to get frustrated because the amateur theatre would put on endless revivals of the thirties and forties sure-fire hits.

HD: Plays that you knew already. And it's completely different seeing a new play to reading it.

DL: It is, particularly someone like Pinter. I cannot remember when the first Pinter plays were performed in New Zealand.

HD: So when did you come to England?

DL: I left in 1965. When I came to London it was sort of the tail end...

HD: Well it was just before theatre censorship was abolished.

DL: Yes, I was here when censorship was abolished. I went a lot to the Old Vic and stood, and of course saw Olivier as Othello, and in Love for Love, and all the plays in the repertory at that time – Royal Hunt of the Sun, Much Ado About Nothing, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. I saw all of those when they were first performed.

HD: Were they all very popular?

DL: Yes.

HD: And the Old Vic was too?

DL: Yes. You could stand up at the back of the gallery. I must have had more stamina then [laughs].

HD: I can't imagine standing all the way through a play! So when you got back did you seize the opportunity to see anything as it was coming out, as you hadn't been able to in New Zealand?

DL: Yes, I did. I saw quite a lot of new plays in the late sixties. I remember even walking out of – believe it or not – Peter Brook's *US!* [laughs] I found it hard to take. I suppose nowadays one would have sat through it, I think I must have been rather bolshy! So I went mainly to the Old Vic and the RSC and saw many revivals of the old classics, and the great actors who were around then.

HD: You're so lucky to have seen all of them – and met some, and got a letter from one of them!

DL: Got a letter, yes! That is the most extraordinary thing. The sad thing is, I cannot find the letter. I tried to find it before I came today...it is very sad. And the photograph that went with it. But it is amazing that somebody like [Olivier], who was at the time so successful and such a big star, found time to do this. It's not as if a secretary wrote it – he signed it himself. It was a short letter but even so.

HD: So the only acting you did was touring round New Zealand? Or did you do anything else?

DL: Well, when I came to England, I somehow lost interest in acting. The 'bug' left me. I did other things – I really had a very variegated career when I was younger. I did some semi-professional acting at the Tower Theatre that used to be up in Canonbury. They [performed] interesting plays.

HD: New ones?

DL: Yes, I was in a play by the currently popular Polish dramatist Slavomir Mrozeck (?). At the time, in the late fifties and sixties he was one of the voices emerging from [behind] the iron curtain, and they put on one of his plays.

HD: How long did those run for?

DL: Oh, they could run for three weeks, quite some time.

HD: Were they popular?

DL: They got quite a good audience. A local audience or people who were friends of the Tower Theatre. Unfortunately the Tower Theatre is no more, the tower was sold. It's an old sixteenth century tower in Canonbury, Islington. They rehearsed in the tower, in these ancient rooms lined with oak. They had a very nice little intimate theatre attached, which held about 300 people, with a raked auditorium. It was very well fitted out.

HD: Was the whole thing completely different to how theatre is managed today? Like what you said earlier about the actors doing the set-up when you were touring...

DL: With something like the Tower Theatre, you were either backstage or in the play, there was no cross-over. I believe even here, touring repertory actors took on other jobs...

HD: Yes, make the costumes, put up the lights...

DL: Yes, all that sort of thing. You did need a lot of strength for that.

HD: And did the Lord Chamberlain's censorship come through to New Zealand?

DL: Yes, I should imagine that as they followed everything that Britain did in those days – Britain was looked upon as holy – they followed the Lord Chamberlain, so that plays must have been censored. And certainly films were very much censored. People would see films abroad – particularly foreign films – and then they'd see them in New Zealand and many scenes had been cut, usually for religious or moral reasons.

HD: The whole thing of censorship baffles me now. I've seen manuscripts of the Lord Chamberlain's cuts – it's terrible.

DL: Yes, and when you consider the people he was dealing with! All these famous, well-known playwrights! And the comments that you see from this man. Either you laugh at them or you get very angry. It must have been very inhibiting to a dramatist, or anybody writing, to sit down to write a play – a bit like people in Stalin's Russia, say – and have this thing over your head – "I mustn't say that".

HD: You could either restrict your play or...

DL: Well some, of course, ignored it. They did write about forbidden topics and then very often – like Terrence Rattigan did in *Separate Tables* – they'd change the situation. For example a captain supposedly molested a boy in a cinema, and it was changed to a girl.

HD: It must be strange for a playwright to write a play and then for the audience to see something different, it's shocking.

DL: It is really.

HD: Do you think there is a noticeable difference in the way that the old, classical actors – the Oliviers, John Gielgud – acted, compared to actors today?

DL: Yes there is. I think they concentrated more on things like the voice, musical speech. Projecting, getting the sound over, almost like singing the lines, getting the feel of the poetry. Whereas now, it's become much more naturalistic, and a lot of the poetry is sacrificed to get the meaning or to make it more realistic, more viable to the audience. Other things I think are sacrificed – you do notice this when you go to the theatre a lot – is the projection is not good now. It is very difficult sometimes, especially with younger actors, particularly in places like the National Theatre or the RSC, to hear what they're saying.

HD: Yes – I went to the National a few weeks ago and I wasn't right at the back but I was really straining to hear. I think it is because they rely on microphones a lot of the time.

DL: Well a lot of them are working in television or film, where they don't have to project, where they rely on the microphone. So when they go onstage they don't think to project their voices.

HD: They probably don't have lessons anymore, either. It was probably part of being on the stage in the West End back then – you were trained to project.

DL: They were trained to project, and use grand gesture. Some of it today would be seen as highly theatrical. But it was effective.

HD: I can't really imagine it because I have never seen anything like it – I've never seen anything grand and over-the-top.

DL: Well you got it with Olivier, Wolfitt and Gielgud.

HD: And when you acted, were you told to do it in the same style?

DL: Yes, when I acted – and the bit of training I had, albeit in New Zealand – Stanislavski, the famous Russian director, his so-called method was very much in vogue. There was this thing of thinking yourself into a role or basing it on experience. But also we were taught things like elocution, about projecting your voice and doing exercises so you could throw your voice out like a sort of rainbow arch, as they described it, so it could be heard at the back of the gallery. And we were given dance movement exercises, to strengthen the body and make it more supple. Another thing they were very keen on – I suppose they still are today – was improvisation, where you were given a set scene or character and you had to act it out or put it into different situations. I used to enjoy all that.

HD: It sounds slightly less glamorous than it is today, although much more useful.

DL: Yes, it wasn't very glamorous. At the time, I found it all very exciting, but then I was younger. I don't know what it's like now, I should think it's much more competitive. I think there is so much unemployment, particularly in Britain, and so many people are trying to get onto the stage and television that it's probably highly competitive.

HD: There are also so many drama schools now, which are all so hard to get into – thousands of people applying and only a handful getting through.

DL: Well they used to have auditions in New Zealand for people to get a scholarship to go to RADA, but I rather flunked my scholarship. I think they were horrified because I gave Oswald's last speech from Ghosts [laughs], when he's dying of venereal disease! No, I didn't get into RADA unfortunately.

HD: It sounds original at least! Have you seen any plays from the forties, fifties and sixties more recently?

DL: I saw No Man's Land but that's Pinter from the seventies, isn't it? I haven't seen a great deal recently.

HD: So you haven't seen any of the plays you saw in New Zealand when you were younger?

DL: I haven't. A few years ago there was a revival of the original version of the second Separate Tables at the King's Head, which was very, very interesting. They have been reviving a few of them at the Donmar Warehouse Theatre in the West End. They recently revived The Chalk Garden, which was a popular play of the fifties – unfortunately I didn't see it. At the present time, they are doing T.S. Eliot's The Family Reunion, which is also from that time. Again, I haven't got along to see it, and the Donmar, unfortunately is a very difficult theatre to get into.

HD: Well I guess that directors don't think that these plays are as relevant now as they were.

DL: There is a certain interest in it, for some reason there is an interest now in the plays of particularly the fifties – plays of which a lot had been written off. Although Rattigan's plays have been acknowledged as being great plays with important themes, which are usually embedded in the drama – there is a subtext there, regarding issues like homosexuality and social conditions, that sort of thing.

HD: Yes, I think it's difficult to bring it forward 50 years and make it relevant.

DL: Yes, it's a bit like seeing some of the old films of the time; things are a bit quaint. You look back and you're seeing it in the context of that period.

HD: Yes, things that would have been shocking then aren't anymore.

DL: No, not at all, I find that with a lot of Victorian drama I look at; things that were once considered shocking, you wonder what was all the fuss about?

HD: To finish, you say it was mostly British theatre that was shown in New Zealand?

DL: It was mostly imported British theatre. For theatre workshops and little amateur groups – I was in one or two plays by continental dramatists of the time. I was in Sartre's *Les Mouches* which was based on the Electra legend, and *Blood Wedding* by Lorca. Another time [I was in a play by] Arrabal, who had certain vogue for theatre of cruelty at around the time of Ionesco. *Tar Babies* it was called. But those plays were fashionable at the time and they haven't really revived very well, although I did see Ionesco's *The Chairs* a few years ago, and that was effectively done.

HD: Yes, I saw *Rhinoceros* a couple of years ago and that was very good. I think his theatre of the absurd lives on, I think it's quite easy to put it on.

DL: But some of the other trends of the time are now a bit pretentious!

HD: I think that's all I have to ask, unless you have anything you'd like to add?

DL: No, I can't really think of anything else.

HD: Thank you then.