

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Frances Cuka – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Hannah Gumbrill**

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Actress. A Taste of Honey; Avis Bunnage; critics; Endgame; Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be; Guildhall School of Music and Drama; Joan Littlewood; Macbeth; Royal Court Theatre; rehearsals; Russian audiences; Theatre Royal, Brighton; Theatre Workshop; Vanity Fair.

HG: This is Hannah Gumbrill interviewing Frances Cuka. So I'd just like to start by asking what sparked your interest in theatre and how you became to be an actress.

FC: I think it was a long time ago when I was [laughs] when I was, I think I was about five or six, and I played the princess in a school performance of The Princess and the Three Golden Oranges and I didn't have to say much, except when finally the orange did turn up, the good orange, I couldn't stop talking at all so it was... so I got the part, frankly, because I had the longest hair, if you were a princess you had to have the longest hair, and so anyway I played it and the local vicar said to my mother in my hearing afterwards 'That little girl should go on the stage', and later on [laughs] when my mother met the vicar when I was at drama school, he said 'Religion and the theatre don't mix', and she said 'Well it was your fault, you did it, you started her off!' But I did actually have other thoughts, I, at one point I thought of possibly being an opera singer and being an artist, because my father drew, and always was giving me drawing paper and stuff like that, and crayons and paint brushes and paint, you know, boxes of all that...

HG: Encouraging it?

FC: Yes, encouraging it. And I then really thought that, my singing voice went a bit wonky, because I've got hay fever and it didn't, it sort of came and went, and I thought that I was quite good at drawing life drawing, of people, and also of doing flowers and things like that and plants, wasn't so hot at anything else though [laughs] so I decided that I'll stick with the theatre which really was my first love.

HG: Yes, so it grew from the school, the original princess part, and did you keep doing more amateur stuff at school?

FC: Yes well I did things at school certainly, and then of course I did, when I got older, I went into amateur dramatics and things like that.

HG: And was all that in Brighton?

FC: Yes. Well it started in London and then we all moved to Hove, after a while, my father decided we needed the fresh air or something, I think the house got a bit damaged in the war, the second world war, a bit, so I think actually he decided to go down and, you know, go somewhere where it's rather healthy... and I don't know, he fancied Brighton [laughs]

HG: So you went to, was it Guildhall you went to?

FC: Yes

HG: How did you, what was the audition process to get into there like? What sparked you to go to Guildhall? What made you choose it?

FC: Well I'm not quite sure why it was Guildhall. I think it was because possibly that it was nearer the train station [laughs] nearer Victoria, because, it was then, of course, along Fleet Street.

HG: And what was the audition process like? Because now it goes on for months and you get recall after recall...

FC: I can't remember... no I can't remember... I know I just went along and I don't think it was that long. I had already done radio. One afternoon in summer I was bored and I was twelve and I wrote this ridiculous letter to the BBC saying that I had a three and a half octave singing voice, which I did actually have, and I could also sing a light tenor voice if required [laughs], and I would do anything and I had had elocution lessons and I mean [laughs] and I got the letter back saying 'Is this letter intended to be taken seriously' and I wrote back a rather cross letter saying it was, and I think that then the penny dropped that it wasn't some maniac, it was actually a child, so I got an audition for children's hour, and I used to do it all the time, and my headmistress was not pleased with this, so once a month I had to go and have a 'Why are you continuing with this rubbish'...

HG: Oh really? So school didn't encourage it then?

FC: No not at all. And later she wrote me a fan letter and I ignored it I'm afraid [laughs]. I thought 'the old bitch'. Payback [laughs].

HG: So what was the training at Guildhall like? What sort of things did you do?

FC: It was very good I thought. There was a wonderful man called Ambrose Marriot, who was possibly one of the ugliest men in the world, and everybody, all the women, fell in love with him, all the girls, we all fell in love with him. And, I don't know there was something about him... he really had magnetism. He used to smoke a pipe and watch things with his eyes shut and then give you a complete run down on what you had done... It was like 'how did you know?' He was lovely and he was... he was supposed to be the mime teacher, but I mean he taught everything, he did all kinds of things and he did sensible things. I remember he got us all in costume at one point and the boys in tights and the girls in frocks and made us fall down stairs and sit down on cushions on the floor and run around...

HG: Practice really run of the mill stuff

FC: Well yes... and show off the costume because the boys looked terribly knock-kneed and embarrassed you know [laughs] and the girls tripped up in their skirts, and the whole thing of where the arms went in a costume. In a regency period the arms are carried basically under the bust, because if you stand with your arms between your legs, your hands between your legs, your dress looks awful.

HG: Are those big sleeved costumes?

FC: No. It's the Jane Austin period.

HG: Oh ok.

FC: And if you have the Restoration where you have the big panyard(?) then it's all out from the waist basically... well above the waist, but it's not a very good idea to try and have your hands sort of hanging down because the costume then looks wrong again. I mean he did things that were sort of practical when you went out into the business. So that you kind of felt comfortable in doing certain things.

HG: Was the training very classical then at Guildhall at that time?

FC: Well no he did a lot of... Well yes I suppose in some ways it was... but Marriot did a lot of improvisation... actually he was improvisation, that's what he was, he wasn't mine I got it wrong, and so we did a lot of improvisation and I mean he just sort of encouraged us to use our heads and just sort of get on with it and all kinds of [laughs] appalling things came out of it [laughs].

HG: And then after your training finished, how did you go about getting a job? How did you get your first job?

FC: I got a job immediately actually. Yes I'd been doing some sort of late night sort of cabaret things when I was at drama school –

HG: Is that the singing coming into it?

FC: It's singing and sort of sketches... it was a friend of mine who actually used to write sketches and stuff like that and then I got involved with a late night, a little revue, that was in a very, in a small theatre, sort of round Leicester Square, and I got picked up and went to the Edinburgh festival, and did a show, a sort of late night show up there. And then I did a bit of rep and then I went and saw Joan Littlewood, and got in immediately.

HG: Really?

FC: Yes.

HG: So did you just kind of push for an audition or were you invited?

FC: I wrote to her and said that, you know, I was interested and so she got me singing and improvising and farting about [laughs] and I was in!

HG: Had you seen a lot of Theatre Workshop stuff before then?

FC: No I hadn't seen anything [laughs] I sort of just blagged my way in really [laughs].

HG: Had you just heard of their reputation?

FC: Yes yes.

HG: Oh brilliant. So what was your first thing with Theatre Workshop?

FC: Well the first thing I did... well I only did two things with Theatre Workshop. The first thing we did was Macbeth, which went to Moscow.

HG: Yes, now you told me about this on the phone...

FC: Yes and that was fascinating, that was wonderful and... and then we did, because I played in that, I played young Macduff, in a chest flattener [laughs], and one of the Witches, and that was it I think... yes, yes, young Macduff and one of the Witches, and

there were lots of [laughs] very funny stories about that actually, there was one actually that I was thinking about this morning, and I thought should I say it, well I might as well as you can always cut it out, Dudley Sutton was playing Malcolm, and in the first scene, the Witches were sort of women who were crouching around the battlefield, picking things up you know and stealing from the bodies...

HG: Yes because you said that it was set, was it in World War One?

FC: Well it was between, it was the World War One and then World War Two so it was, it was sort of like, Burnham Wood, they had tin hats with the, you know, leaves in their hats.. so anyway we were crouching sort of rushing around picking up bits from the bodies and stealing and [laughs] Dudley came rushing off and said that in the first scene which he was in, he said he'd lost his false teeth, and the other set was at the dentist being rearranged and if anybody trod on them, it was going to be a total disaster, because his first line was "This is the sergeant, / Who, like a good and hardy soldier, fought / 'Gainst my captivity", now with no teeth, that's very hard, so we went along sort of scouring the bodies and Avis Bunnage managed to pick up the teeth and pocket them so the day was saved. But we were hysterical actually...

HG: Yes it must have been fantastic being on tour... how long were you on tour for?

FC: I'm trying to think how long... we went to Zurich as well and we did it at Stratford as well...

HG: Stratford...

FC: Stratford East yes.

HG: Where Theatre Workshop later had a theatre?

FC: Well yes. Well they had it then. And there was one thing actually that I thought was quite interesting, because I was again, I was thinking about it this morning, was that when I'm killed as the 'young fry of treachery' I used to sort of fling myself on one of the assassins and he pulled out a knife and stuck me in the guts and I did a lot of gurgley noises and fell on the ground. And Joan was very worried about this... she said 'I don't like knives, I really, I don't like knives at all' so she said 'Can you do without?' and we looked at her in amazement and said, 'Well, we'll have a go', and so we mimed it. And she said 'Oh that'll do, that's fine' and so we mimed it. And, in fact this is a name dropper, Peter O'Toole came to see the show, and he came round and he said 'Oh that bit, how did you do it... how did you do that death bit?' and we said well we didn't have a knife [laughs] and he said 'But I saw the blade flash' [laughs] and I thought, well you can get away with anything if you do it with conviction and you've got a good director [laughs].

HG: And how was it received in Europe? Because I have read a lot of stuff that's said that Theatre Workshop was really well received in Europe, but not so much appreciated here and was it the same with that... with Macbeth?

FC: I think that Macbeth did quite well here... I don't know... it's a very long time ago... But Moscow were rather surprised by it I have to say because we did go along to see a Hamlet, which was about... well we left, we had to leave, because I think we had to do a show ourselves or something, and I think it was sort of after about five and a half hours we just crept out. And it was extraordinary. They had the court scene, where Hamlet appears for the first time, well he's on at the beginning of the court scene, but he wasn't in this, and he made an entrance in which everybody stepped back and he made an entrance because he was the lead, and it was the weirdest production, it was like going back to the Victorians or something, and so they found our production very, very... I mean they actually, they came and saw it, they liked it, but it was of a complete kind of, amazement to them. Because it was done in khaki and it was done in... I mean the clothes were, the costumes were nice, and once they got out of the war the costumes were pleasant and attractive and I mean, I think it was John Bury... did he do the costumes? Well he certainly did the set... And it went down extremely well, I mean it went down well in Zurich too, and I'm sure we did rather well at Stratford.

HG: And what was Joan Littlewood like to work with? Because I've heard lots of stories and I've seen lots of documentaries on her, and I just wondered what your experience of her was?

FC: It's hard to... well I liked her, but she could be a pain. And she could make you suffer. I don't know whether Murray has told you this, but the first time we did A Taste of Honey, she... well we come on, the mother and daughter come on with suitcases, and she said, 'Well we've got to get this first scene right', and so she said 'These suitcases haven't got anything in them! Put something in them!' and she put stage weights in them, she put god knows what in them, till they were, she really weighed them down, and then she made us go round and round the stage, with Murray being bus conductors and people who wouldn't let us on 'Not with that suitcase you're not getting on'[laughs]... until Avis and I were at daggers drawn, and we're not speaking to her, and we're about to kill Joan [laughs] and then she said 'Right! Start the play!' [In Manchester accent, quoting from the play] "This is the place", "Well I don't like it!"

HG: So she really got you into the mood

FC: You never ever forgot it. You never forgot that frustration and hatred. And everything else that came on the stage was because of the beginning of the play.

HG: What a good way to get you into character

FC: Yes, yes. And she did the same thing with what stage of drunkenness were they at, Peter and Helen, and so she had them in the bar, singing to the piano, and having another one, and people giving them drinks so when they came back they were really

well plastered, and that sort of thing. And she often would work, something like two hours on what had happened before a scene, and then say 'Right do the scene'. And so the impetus carried you through. I mean obviously she... the other thing that I thought was interesting about Joan was that although her... at one point I think we got pissed and went through it... and she said 'Oh gosh. It's too tidy. Lets rough it up a bit'... because in fact it was very tight, but she actually wanted the illusion of it being made up as you went along. But in fact her productions, I mean I've looked at other productions, where the same sort of attitude has prevailed, and you don't get the thing of the focus that Joan had. People would be doing all kinds of things, but if you had to fight... sometimes you had to fight for your space, because there were other people rowdy, like in, say, in... I'm trying to think now... the one in Ireland... well when they were all in a pub and sort of shouting and things, and then you had somebody, she wouldn't get them lowering the sound, the one in the centre had to top them, because that's what it would be like in real life, you know, but nevertheless she would place that person in a place where they would dominate the scene, there would be no... they wouldn't be in a corner or behind somebody or anything like that, they would be, actually the focal point of the scene. So she was very, very... she had immense stage craft. And although her productions looked sometimes as though they were just thrown together, they were not. They were actually put together with great precision. Like watches you know. With all the precision, the clockwork.

HG: Yes it must have been amazing to work with her.

FC: Yes. But then she would bugger things up of course. Which I... actually there was a production she did of Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be and it opened in the West End. They'd been doing it for, I think, eight weeks down in Stratford, and they said on the opening night, we were all doing 'Welcome Home Fred' from prison, you know, and everybody was doing this sort of, big knees up, in the street, and suddenly there was Joan, wearing her woolly hat, in amongst them, doing the knees up [laughs]. And of course everybody came off sort of saying 'What?! What was all that? What was Joan doing?' and Joan said 'Well I thought you needed a bit of a kick up the arse'. And she was right, because a first night is where inhibitions and sometimes things set in. And of course everybody was too busy thinking what was she doing there, to actually, you know, care, to worry about the performance. But she could... what was it Dudley Sutton used to say about Joan... the woolly hat, he said, when she pushed it down over her forehead it meant 'It's very interesting, it's wrong, but it actually, it can be improved, something can be done with it', when she shoved it to the back of her head it was 'This is, this is awful. Something has got to be done about this. This is terrible'. But he said when she took it off her head, threw it on the floor and jumped on it, then you left the building [laughs]. But it was, it was great for the future. I mean I really only did those two shows, but I learnt so much from Joan. Funny little things she would give you in rehearsals. There is one thing she said, which I think is probably one of the most important things ever on the stage, and that is, she said, that you always have to act in the present tense, never in the past even when you are reminiscing. You don't say 'Well I remember when I was sitting there... and I remember... oh that you... you came in... and you said this and that...' [said very dreamily], that's boring, you say, 'I was sitting there and you came in and you said' [very matter of fact]... because the mind has got to be in the present tense whatever. And it makes for a, a sort of glitter to the production. It also makes it so much more natural because that's what people do.

HG: And so after Macbeth was A Taste of Honey the next thing you did with the Theatre Workshop?

FC: Yes.

HG: And what was it like being in that? Because, for me I think, A Taste of Honey is as revolutionary as people say Look Back in Anger is...

FC: Certainly. Yes.

HG: So what was it like being in a play with such sort of taboos... such a revolutionary piece of theatre?

FC: I mean I basically thought it was a good part [laughs] and I want to play it. She did a dirty trick on me though, Joan, actually...

HG: Oh really?

FC: Yes. We went in and auditioned, and this was the week before it was going to start rehearsing, and she'd chosen it I think because there were only five characters and one set - because she was not immune to that sort of thing - and so I went in, we went in on, I think it was Friday, and we spent the entire day rehearsing, going through, and I think there were two guys up for, neither of whom I think were really right for Geoffrey, and a couple of people who were up for Peter... I don't think there was anybody else except for Avis Bunnage... and myself, I was the only person who was reading for Jo... And it was very long, I mean it needed a heck of a cut to it! But I could see that there were possibilities in this part. And she said 'Oh I can't make up my mind. Come back tomorrow', and they had a matinee the next day, so we all came up in the morning, and we did the same thing in the morning until she said 'Oh my god the shows going to be on in a minute, oh I can't make up my mind... I'll give you a ring over the weekend'. So anyway we all went off, and that was the Saturday, so one sat by the phone on Saturday night... nothing... Oh she said 'Tuesday, Tuesday at ten is when it starts', so Sunday went by... and Monday, and on Tuesday morning I went round there in a rage [laughs], an absolute rage about to kill somebody and I got there at ten and nobody had turned up, and nobody turned up until half past ten because she had changed the time, hadn't she! [Laughs] So my anger had slightly fizzled out by this point. But they all came in, sort of gaily, through the front of the theatre, and I said 'Am I playing this part or not?' and she said 'Yes of course you are'... and I went 'Oh...' and I have a sneaking feeling that if I hadn't shown up that morning she might have got on the phone to someone else [laughs]

HG: And when you were doing it, what was the reception like because obviously it covers mixed race relations, child out of wedlock, homosexuality...

FC: Yes, yes, yes [laughs]

HG: Did it really stir things up? Or were people....

FC: Yes, yes... I mean, well it.... when we opened it, I mean this is really quite funny, the theatre was so broke, that there was no stage management, we did the stage management. We put our props there, and if our props weren't there, it was our own bloody fault. Murray did all the sound effects, and electricians took the curtain up and down in the first act, and somebody else managed to do it in the second, because Murray was on all the time, and then Avis Bunnage and the wardrobe mistress sang 'The big ship sails down the alley alley oh...' outside the window [laughs]

HG: It really didn't have any money did it!

FC: [laughs] Yes it was completely... there was nobody else. And so anyway we sort of did it, and the reviews came in... and they were awful!

HG: Really?

FC: Most of them yes, they were awful. But there was Alan Brien, I think in The Spectator, and then at the end of the week, we got a wonderful Kenneth Tynan, who gave us a rave review. In the interim we'd also had Graham Greene, who wrote in The Times a letter saying that the best play in London was on at Stratford East. And Joan paid him back by, when we actually moved into the West End, he had a play on in the West End and we had a banner headline 'The best play in the West End – Graham Greene' [laughs]. She wasn't going to pass that one up! And so I think on the strength of that it packed the theatre out... because it was, 'They say it's awful, they say it's great... what are we going to do... lets go and see it!'. And so we had really managements fighting over it, and we went into the West End and Wyndhams some time later...

HG: And so how long did you do it in Stratford East before you transferred?

FC: I can't remember... I think it was about six weeks... five or six weeks... it wasn't very long.

HG: And then was it really successful when you went into Wyndhams?

FC: Yes. Absolutely. In spite of the fact that it was dreadful. It was an absolutely shocking show when we went into Wyndhams. And it was very strange how the critics turned around... because one critic had said 'A Taste of Honey? It's more like a taste of school books and marmalade!'... and then said 'Well I didn't really like it on first looking at it... but now I realise that it has a great deal of merit to it' and did a twist and a turn. I

mean it was quite interesting the gyrations that some of them got into, because actually it wasn't a good show. There was a terrible flu epidemic and we had all got it... I think Avis got it first and she was a bit better... Murray and I... I got it the next and I lost my voice for the opening, well the preview and the opening night and had all kinds of... well I went to, obviously, a specialist and had things done, I had things put down on my vocal cords a long wire with a swab on the end, - because I don't have any uvula, it was taken out with my tonsils years ago as a child which is very unfair of them, I mean they might have told me, but it also meant that I had to fabricate a vibrato when I sang so it was not a good idea I don't think to take them out - so anyway I got through it but I mean as Murray said, he said - Famell(?) pastilles used to be the thing at the time and Famell(?) syrup was sort of for your chest and your throat and all that - and Murray said, 'Ere Mike Todd's going to make a smelly of it, hav' you heard?' [cockney accent], and I said, 'No', and he said, 'Well the only thing that you'd smell on this stage is Famell(?) pastilles and Famell(?) syrup'. [Laughs] We had them under the bedclothes, we had them everywhere [laughs] in the kitchen... if you needed a Famell(?) pastille quick! [Laughs]... So God knows what the show was like really, I mean I know I wasn't very good, because I was very under the weather, I had a temperature...

HG: Was it well rehearsed or was it just the flu that made it...

FC: Oh it was the flu. They took out, when we rehearsed it at Stratford East, they were re-doing the theatre - I think on the strength of going into town and things like that - they took out all the radiators and changed the boiler, and did all that, and it was freezing down there, it was the most terrible January and February, and also the doors were open as well, it was really terrible, we all got it. It went from one...

HG: Well thats the problem with theatre isn't it, once one person has it

FC: It goes straight though a cast, yes. But nevertheless we weathered that storm, and actually the show did, it did incredibly well.

HG: And how long was it in Wyndhams for?

FC: Just around a year I think it was... well no it wasn't actually because it moved, because The Hostage came into Wyndhams, and we moved out to The Criterion.

HG: And were you in it all that time?

FC: Yes.

HG: And did it finish then?

FC: Yes.

HG: And then it went to Broadway, is that right?

FC: Yes.

HG: Do you think that it had an impact and changed theatre in the way that people say *Look Back in Anger* did? Do you think that *A Taste of Honey* also contributed to that change?

FC: I'm not sure. I mean I think that things were changing, I think *Look Back in Anger* probably changed things, and then started the wheels turning or the ball rolling, and then *A Taste of Honey* came in and suddenly... I mean you know, *Look Back in Anger* is a man's play, you know, the women are... by the ironing board, but in this particular thing you had two very strong women, at loggerheads, you know, and shouting –

HG: And it was by a female playwright.

FC: By a female playwright. So suddenly, I think we had all the other things that came up, the homosexuality, the black prince, you know, and so it was a play that everybody wanted to go and see, so it did extremely well in that... people, it was talked about, and you know, it was, discussed...

HG: Because it was something new and different.

FC: Yes.

HG: And it did approach those issues.

FC: Yes. It also had a difference to it in that we had a little band in the box, and we knocked down the fourth wall, as well. That was another thing, with people talking to the audience... you know... And actually also the play changed as it went on, because things got shoved in, well certainly on the opening night in London, Avis Bunnage said that she'd had a letter from her father in Manchester that said [in a Mancunian accent] 'I have got flu' and we thought really [laughs], we all have, 'I have got flu. I cannot come to your first night. I am in bed. Under the doctor' so we all fell about at that [laughs], so Avis on the opening night put in – because you know she has a cold at the beginning – so she put in 'Oh by rights I should be in bed. Under the doctor' [laughs] and it was like hello, it's not in the published script, because I think the scripts came out before, so that little bit never found its way... In fact, when I played it in New York, I mentioned it to Hermione Baddley - who was playing mum then – and she said 'Oh I don't like to change it if it's not in the script' and I said 'Well Avis did it for a year in London. It was in the London script' [laughs].

HG: And was that your last involvement with Theatre Workshop?

FC: Yes... I obviously went to see shows there, and there were a couple of things that I was supposed to do down there, but Joan could change her mind at the last minute and, you know, a play that was going to go in... there was... a couple of plays that I was going to do and... well they offered me them, and I was definitely going to do them, and they said well we haven't got anything for you at the moment, so could you walk on in this that and the other, you know, some play or other... and I said 'yes ok', if you'll put those two plays in writing, and Gerry Raffles would not do so, so I didn't do it... And then they never did it. They never did those two plays. I'd done A Taste of Honey in the West End and then I'd had a year at Stratford, Stratford-Upon-Avon, by this time, and I wasn't really... I didn't feel...

HG: You didn't want to take a backward step?

FC: Well I wouldn't have minded, you know, if I had these two rather marvellous parts... but I had to have some kind of guarantee that I was going to get them, that they were going to be there you know...

HG: So what did you do after A Taste of Honey? What was your next move?

FC: Oh god what did I do? Well I did quite a lot of television, and I did some plays and I did all kinds of stuff...

HG: I read you did a lot at the Royal Court, was that just after that period, in the early sixties?

FC: Yes I did a thing at the Royal Court but that was actually really between doing A Taste of Honey in Stratford East and actually opening in the West End because there was a six months gap, and I went to the Royal Court then and did a whole load of plays there.

HG: What was that like?

FC: Well that was fun... that was really nice. Yes it, it was a new season and a whole load of things...

HG: Because it had just opened again, re-opened again in the early fifties hadn't it?

FC: Yes I think it had been opened for a while actually, I'm trying to think when it was really opened...

HG: I'm sure it's 1952, I've got that in my head for some reason...

FC: No because I mean Look Back in Anger had been there, so it was, it had been, you know, it had become...

HG: The place to be.

FC: A very good place to be, because I went back for another season later and - when Bill Gaskill took over - and this time it was... oh I can't remember, it was a very famous... he had a very famous, he had a wonderful reputation... I can't remember his name... never mind it'll come back... so... I went and did a lot of very peculiar things there. I did Endgame for example.

HG: Yes, what was that like?

FC: [laughs] Well it does have the best entrance in the world I think. As the old guy bangs on the dustbin lid, with the biscuits, and says 'Nell, Nell' [in a funny voice], and then, very slowly, the bin lid rises, and me in incredibly heavy old age makeup and wig [laughs]

HG: Yes I've seen photos of it actually.

FC: [Laughs] Yes. Pokes my head out and says 'What is it my pet, time for love?' [laughs] And I've always loved that first line. I thought it was wonderful. And I did... Live Like Pigs, which was great fun to do, that was really... I messed around with being blond in that [laughs], it was daffodil. And it was an exciting season to do, but then of course I always knew, they did say, that when A Taste of Honey comes into the West End you can go, so I did.

HG: Yes. And then you went back to do A Taste of Honey, and what did you do after that? You said you did some TV and...

FC: Well I did a musical. Of course I went to America for a year as well.

HG: Was that to do A Taste of Honey on Broadway?

FC: Yes I did it on Broadway and I toured it as well.

HG: Oh wow.

FC: Yes, so when I came back I did a musical. In fact I did *Vanity Fair* ... which was not the greatest success in the world I have to say. It was, I always felt that it was too much, they, it was a small musical... and we had a very large fussy set and it was.... masses of chorus line and extras and so on... I've subsequently seen it – they did it, you know when they were discovering musicals at the Theatre Museum – and there were some new songs that had been written and everything was much simpler. And it was lovely. It worked. We had a lot of rearranging and a lot of rewriting of it, and I personally thought that it was a wonderful script to start with, and I thought that all the messing about and fussing about with it didn't do it any good at all... There were some wonderful songs in it, I mean it was Julian Slade, but the trouble was people didn't like Julian Slade having gone from major to minor, as it were, you know, he had some quite scary numbers in there, and that didn't go down too well. It looked wonderful, the costumes and sets did look wonderful, but I have to say that I thought the director had some very strange choices, including, there was a number as we all went off to sea and we had the ship moving off – it was posh stuff – and all the sailors were singing 'Goodbye bouncy betty goodbye, keep the bedsprings going until I come back again' oh I don't know, and a lot of sailors leaping about, and the girls, they had these dock gates, and they were wearing these wonderful Regency costumes, with splits and they had these flesh tights, so they looked as though they hadn't got anything on underneath, until they moved and then you realised they had, so they were dancing and they had their hair all over the place and they looked like real right old sluts, but they were beautiful old sluts, lovely old sluts [laughs], and suddenly the director took into his head – and this was not long before we, we were down in Bristol at the time, so before we came into London – and he suddenly said 'the costumes... they're awful, this is a family show, we can't have it' and he put them all in gingham with waists totally out of period with full skirts and coloured tights, and we were going through with all the luggage to the ship while they were all around us dancing and I said to George(?) 'we're in the middle of Oklahoma' it was awful. And there were certain things at the end... oh the beginning, the beginning... the beginning was nice, they had a woman with the most incredible voice doing the 'Vanity Fair' number, it came very deep 'We come away, to Vanity Fair' [singing] and she was selling outside the school, she came on with a Napoleonic hat and a shawl and a skirt, you know, ratty but kind of slightly roughish, and she had round a neck a tray with all the bits and pieces, you know the scarves and the bits and stuff, and they all came out... and suddenly the director decided – you know she's got this wonderful voice – that she must play it as a boy! And suddenly this boys costume was made for her and she didn't know how to do it, she was a singer, she wasn't - and she actually had this extraordinary singing voice, it went up and up and up, she came on and sung when everybody went to France, and she sang in French but an octave higher and it was absolutely wonderful – but she put a woman's makeup on with false lashes and the director thought this was fun and we were all appalled by the fact that this was... and he had people with pigs heads at the end, sort of walking in Hyde Park, you know, and I thought 'No, no, no' it's not... the novel, ok you take liberties with a novel, but you don't make it some kind of... peculiar in that way. We hit some terrible, terrible weather and it was freezing cold with snow, which didn't let up, oh and fog, we had fog and snow and it didn't let up until we actually came off and then the box office was flooded with bookings. I mean nobody in the theatre was doing well, even Laurence Olivier was in a play that didn't do that well.

HG: And when was this?

FC: 1963 I think.

HG: So it was a difficult time for theatre?

FC: Certainly the weather made it difficult but after that it was alright [laughs]. It was just terrible... I remember George Baker driving me home, or part of the way home, and there was this terrible fog, and we were driving down the Mall and I was looking out of the car... 'I can still see the curb... no I've lost the curb, the curbs gone' and in the end 'Georgie there's a tree!' and he stopped the car and we had gone across all the lanes of the Mall and were up a tree on the other side of the Mall. So it was terrible, terrible fog. We don't get these anymore.

HG: Yes it's hard to imagine what it was like because obviously I've never seen anything like that.

FC: I've never known it, I've never known it since.

HG: Everyone calls this period of theatre from 1945 to 1968 the 'Golden Generation', would you agree with that as obviously you are still a working actress now, so do you look back and

FC: 1945 to 1968? I think there are still some wonderful things now. I mean I don't ... I think it did start to happen, I mean all kinds of things... television started – well television I know started in the thirties – but you know satiric programmes and various other, cocking a snoot, I mean you've got Dudley Moore and Peter Cook, Beyond the Fringe, all the kind of breaking down of a lot of barriers, and a lot of things that you could say. I mean people used to do radio in evening dress [laughs] I mean you know, reading the news! And there was a whole load of things that you couldn't say on the radio... I mean you couldn't mention pregnancy!

HG: Yes I heard that you could never say that someone was pregnant, not just even in broadcasting, in general life people wouldn't mention pregnancy.

FC: Yes, yes. And so I think a whole load of things came out into the open. Some people say it's not for the better, I think it was because I think the repression was not a good thing at all.

HG: So it was more of a great period of change?

FC: Yes, yes. I think subsequently a lot of wonderful stuff has come up so I wouldn't say that everything happened then, and nothing afterwards, because it didn't, it's not true, you know, there are certain productions that I've seen that I just thought were absolutely wonderful... but I, certainly I think it freed things up, it freed things like... not that I, I mean I did watch things like... certainly when I was a kid at school, I was interested in the theatre, obviously, and I was doing radio and stuff as well, and I used to

go down on, I can't remember whichever day it was, it was a school day, and I finished school and then we had our little packet of sandwiches and we had our little chairs, you know stools, with the little bit of stuff they make deckchairs with so you could actually sit, and we had that tucked under one arm and we would rush down Montpelier Road down to the Theatre Royal – in Brighton – and then we would sort of get ourselves to the head of the queue, and stay there, and make sure that if somebody went off or something that you held the place, and then once the doors were open to the gallery you had your elbows out like a chicken so that nobody could get past you, because the place to sit was right in the centre, they were benches – it was different to how it is now in the gallery – and there was this brass rail in front, and the thing was that Brighton Royal is very steep, it's very high.

HG: Oh I get very scared when I go up in the gallery there!

FC: Oh yes of course! And you know Juliet on the balcony was frequently cut off at the waist, you know, so you didn't get the head, so what we used to do, we use to have to get that front row with the brass rail and then we would hang from our knees from the brass rail so that you could get to see [laughs]

HG: [Laughs] Oh my god!

FC: [Laughs] Yes so I saw a great many things from upside down from the gallery in Brighton.

HG: Wow that's seriously high, so that's a very brave feat to do that.

FC: [Laughing] Yes I'm terrified now. I get terrible vertigo. [Laughing]

HG: Even walking down the stairs I get worried I'm going to fall and then just go over the edge!

FC: Yes, but I saw all kinds of people when I was hanging by my knees or one knee, whatever [laughs], clinging on like a limpet!

HG: Olivier came down, he did a few things at the Royal didn't he, because I've got an autograph actually from something he did there. [Laughs] Well that's such an amazing story!

FC: He also did, when he did... not Look Back in Anger the next one...

HG: The Entertainer?

FC: The Entertainer! I've done it, so I should be able to remember it. He was at the Hippodrome then, because it was at The Palace in London and then when it went on tour it came down to the Hippodrome. But he lived down there.

HG: Yes! Nice house in a very nice area.

FC: [Laughs] Very nice house!

HG: So what would you say was your favourite play that you did from that period? Is there anything that stands out as something that maybe helped you grow as an actress or that was just really fun to do?

FC: I don't know really... I mean A Taste of Honey covered most of the time really, doing it here and in America... and I mean that was an extraordinary experience going from here, to Broadway, and then touring it.

HG: Where did you tour it? Did you go all over?

FC: Well yes! Midwest, we did huge theatres... I think it was Des Moines and Omaha... I think that's a two thousand eight hundred seater house... without any, I don't think we had any... I mean they always tried to bung a bit of amplification on us, but we always chucked it out, it was awful, you always heard it coming back! It was horrible. And Chicago, I liked Chicago, that was great fun.

HG: How did the Americans receive it?

FC: Oh they loved it!

HG: So was it better than in England?

FC: Oh no, no, no. The first time I met American audiences, the first time I met American... on Wednesday, because, you know, they have the one day when they have the matinee - which is a shame because nobody can get to see anybody's shows - but it's the Wednesday and that's when the out of town ladies come in, and they stand in a queue waiting to go in and they are terrifying, they are very loud, they have all their shopping, and they are showing it off to each other, and they are screeching, and they've got masses of makeup on and their hairs been done, and they are smart, and I walked round the corner and went 'Ahhh' [petrified voice] because I saw them. They were the most wonderful audience in the world. They laugh, they cry, oh they sob [laughs] and they stand up and cheer at the end. Oh they are wonderful.

HG: Well I think that's it for my questions unless you think that you have got anything else that you think would be useful?

FC: [laughs] Not particularly, no.

HG: It's been absolutely amazing talking to you. A real pleasure. It's been really fantastic. So thank you very much Frances!

FC: [laughs] Not at all!