

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Peggie Faulkner – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sian Evans

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Company Manager. Auditions; African actors; Angry Young Men; Aren't We All; costumes and sets; The Entertainer; Golden City; The Innocents; the London Pavilion; Lord Chamberlain; Stephen Mitchell; Laurence Olivier; pantomime; Terence Rattigan; repertory theatre; Stanley Hall's Wig Creations; theatre-going; wigs; Emyln Williams; The Year of the Seventeenth Doll.

SE: Thank you very much for allowing me to interview you today, it's a real pleasure. I'll just begin by asking you about your very earliest memory of the Theatre?

PF: Well, thank you for coming, I'm very pleased to meet you. I think I told that I am aged ninety five, so I can go back a long time with my memories. One of the first things I remember about the theatre was when I was probably about fifteen or sixteen. In those days, when money was a bit short, we used to go to the theatre, to the gallery door and we used to hire a stool to put outside the gallery, in the street round the theatre and they charged six pence for the stool and then we formed a queue all round the theatre of these stools then when the time came for the gallery door to open we paid a shilling to go up, (mostly a shilling, some theatres might have charged a little more) but we charged up the gallery stairs right up to the top of the theatre and we didn't have separate seats they were sort of semicircular benches all round the theatre, all round the gallery. And of course we always made a bee-line for the front row - and we didn't get a very good view of the stage, you just saw the front of the stage. You didn't see what the actors were doing at the back... that was quite an experience. One of my first experiences of going to the gallery was my mother took me to the Old Vic in Waterloo Road and we put out our stools and then we went upstairs into the gallery and we saw the opera by Verdi called Aida and we had a wonderful amount of music just for a shilling which was wonderful in those days.

SE: That's really good; obviously the other seats were more expensive?

PF: Obviously the seats downstairs in the dress circle and in the stalls people paid more. Another thing about the theatre in those days was that people who had good seats, who paid money to go into the stalls and dress circle, they always wore evening dress, the women were always in long dresses; it was an event to go to the theatre. Nowadays people dress anyhow - even at the Opera House people don't really dress any more unless it's a special night. So...

SE: It's quite a different social occasion now?

PF: That's right... So I can begin by telling you one or two of the early actors and actresses I saw. You must have heard of Gerald du Maurier, he was the father of Daphne du Maurier, who is the authoress and he acted more or less in the twenties and thirties. And he was a natural actor, he moved about the stage and did very natural things - he was the instigator of natural acting. Another actor of those days - a heart-throb of the time - was Owen Nares, very tall, very distinguished actor. Then I went to see (this was quite an event in those days) I went to see Paul Robeson, of whom you may have heard. He was a black singer and he took the part of Othello in Shakespeare's Othello and there was a great frisson going round in the theatre-going public at the time for a black actor to be –

SE: – Was that quite shocking?

PF: Yes, for a black actor to be acting with a white actress, but nevertheless he was a great success and had great acclaim.

SE: So could you tell me sort of how you became involved in working in the theatre?

PF: Yes, later on after many jobs - different jobs that I had - in 1946, I joined an impresario, a well-known impresario, in London, his name was Stephen Mitchell. I joined him as a Company Manager and we put on a lot of very important plays - we put on Playbill by Terence Rattigan, which was two separate plays appearing on the same night and in the one bill.

SE: He did that more than one occasion didn't he? Terence Rattigan put on sort of one, two plays under one title?

PF: Well he didn't put them on, he was the author. He was the playwright and he was very, very popular at the time and one of those plays was The Browning Version which became very famous with Eric Portman and Mary Ellis. Later on we produced Separate Tables again with Eric Portman and Margaret Leighton, that was two separate plays again.

SE: Were these plays... Separate Tables that was quite a phenomenon at the time wasn't it?

PF: It was what?

SE: Quite a phenomenon?

PF: It certainly was and it went to America after we finished at the St James's Theatre - it ran for about a year at the St James's and then it went to America to New York and all the cast, the same cast went with it.

SE: Did you go?

PF: Oh no, I didn't go; I was sort of managing the London office you know.

SE: I guess it was quite exiting at the time working with something that became so popular.

PF: Yes that's right. We produced [pause] The Innocents with Flora Robson - have you heard of Flora Robson?

SE: No, I haven't no.

PF: She was a famous actress of her time. That was in about 1952. Now when I was doing the auditions for The Innocents in 1952 I was on the stage of the Lyric Theatre on Shaftsbury Avenue seeing all the people that were applying for the job and the stage door man rushed into the theatre, into the stalls and called out 'The King is dead!'. Now, that was King George VI died on that day and we wondered whether it would disrupt the...

SE: The auditions? And did it?

PF: No, it didn't actually by the time the auditions were over and then the rehearsals the play went ahead.

SE: What was your involvement in the auditions? Did you...

PF: Well I was sort of taking the details of the various actors, small-part actors and actresses, ushering people coming on and some of them were engaged and some of them were not engaged, you know and I had to sort of marshal them around and ask them what parts they would play to the producers who were sitting in the stalls, listening to what they could do.

SE: Were there lots of people auditioning?

PF: Yes, I mean sometimes... For a musical which we did called Golden City there were many, many people; actors, and singers and dancers all sort of auditioning you know, that was a very busy period... I'm just thinking of what else I can tell you.

SE: Well about Terence Rattigan's plays, they were obviously quite popular?

PF: Very.

SE: Did you meet him yourself?

PF: Oh yes, I met Terence Rattigan, I met Rex Harrison I met Stewart Granger and Jean Simmons his wife... who else did I meet? I met Marlene Dietrich.

SE: Obviously you worked sort of backstage?

PF: No I wasn't actually acting at all in the theatre, I was in the offices managing all the admin at the theatre.

SE: Did you get lots of opportunities to see the plays?

PF: Oh certainly, oh yes

SE: What did you think of...

PF: And our offices at one time were in the Aldwych Theatre. Right up at the top of the Aldwych Theatre there were just the offices, and then on another occasion we had offices in the Lyric Theatre in Shaftsbury Avenue and in order to get to my office I had to walk through the theatre and sort of up some stairs into offices at the back.

SE: So you were obviously sort of seeing rehearsals?

PF: And saw rehearsals, I saw Rex Harrison and his wife rehearsing for a play Bell Book and Candle... But it was only as I was passing through you know.

SE: Yeah, were the rehearsals quite intense then?

PF: Oh yes. They took them very seriously. I mean, it was a very serious business putting on a play and costing a lot of money - even in those days to put on a play it cost a lot of money because these leading actors you know wanted a good salary, of course. And then there were all the sets to build and paint and so on... and the costumes.

SE: Were the costumes and the sets more or less elaborate than they are these days?

PF: Oh far more elaborate.

SE: Really?

PF: Oh far more elaborate. The sets today for straight plays - I'm not talking about musicals but for straight plays - they're very, very really cut down to the minimum aren't they?

SE: Yeah.

PF: But in those days they were quite elaborate and a very interesting point about the beginning - just after the last world war in 1946, I was issued... I had to apply to the board of trade for clothing coupons because rationing was still in operation you know and so we had to have so many coupons for the actresses' dresses, for curtaining or tablecloths or sheets or anything, you know.

SE: Yeah, did you get more coupons with you being... for the theatre?

PF: No, I don't think so. We had to be very stringent in the use of them. They asked us how many we would want at the beginning of the play and I think we mostly managed on what we asked for but in the case of emergencies we asked for a few more, you know.

SE: Yeah, if people ripped their costume and things, I see. So of all the plays you saw around that time was there a particular one that stood out to you or did you have a personal favourite?

PF: Well, there was so many! The theatre after the last world war, the theatre was so exuberant and bright and the actors and actresses were so wonderful in those days. They spoke beautifully, they dressed beautifully and there were many, many lovely plays put on at the Haymarket Theatre with Laurence Olivier and Vivienne Leigh and Yvonne Arnaud. Have you heard of Yvonne Arnaud? No? She was a Belgian actress but she acted all the time in England and she was quite delicious! [laughs] Everybody loved Yvonne Arnaud.

SE: I heard the same about Laurence Olivier as well.

PF: Yeah and Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson - he was a darling, he was a lovely man! So there were many, many plays to choose from in those days.

SE: Yeah, it sort of, I think it had a different role back then?

PF: It was certainly more glamorous and these days... I'm quite fond of a musical but you know the whole of London is full of musicals which I think is not too good. It's not real drama is it? It's not drama, it's just musicals and I love the spoken word you know, the spoken word is lovely I think.

SE: Yeah and you think that is sort of lacking?

PF: Shakespeare and all those wonderful - Sheridan - and people who wrote wonderful plays.

SE: Yeah. So have you always lived in London?

PF: Yes all my life in London and mostly in Maida Vale too, here you know in this district, yes.

SE: Do you think living in London made a big difference on theatre's impact on you?

PF: Oh certainly, I suppose the heart of theatre is London, but nevertheless I have the greatest admiration for the repertory theatres, they do stable work, they're wonderful the repertory theatres. There's Salisbury and York and Chelmsford and wonderful repertory theatres who don't really have a great deal of money to play with but they encourage actors and actresses - the young actors and actresses - to come on you know and also playwrights, young budding playwrights you know, who are trying to get themselves into the West End.

SE: Yeah, we interview people from all over because there are sort of people in around Sheffield but it is predominantly London where the theatre's happening.

PF: Most of our plays, most of the plays we put on, in those days... I don't think it happens so much now, but when I was in the theatre every play that we put on always went on tour for about six, five or six, weeks before it came into London. And during that time the playwright might change a few lines or a few words and the actors and actresses got accustomed to moving about and you know and that sort of thing.

SE: So the tour was sort of the practice before you did it in London?

PF: That's right.

SE: Where did they usually tour?

PF: Well yes, we went to Liverpool, Bradford, Leeds, Aberdeen, Brighton. All the leading theatres, provincial theatres of that time, you know.

SE: You mentioned your respect for repertory theatre; did you see much repertory theatre?

PF: Yes I did I can't remember what I saw now - it's such a long time ago and I have so many things to remember but yes I went to Chelmsford and I went to Bromley in Kent and Salisbury, yes I did go to the...

SE: Did you think it was a good, high quality, the theatre? It was done in such a fast pace, repertory theatre. The actors had sort of a week to...

PF: Yes that's right. They rehearsed for a week and then they went on the second week by which time the other play was coming in doing their rehearsals.

SE: I think that's amazing.

PF: But that's why they were so splendid and they worked so hard all those people you know, the producers and everybody.

SE: Did you ever have an experience of seeing any repertory theatre on sort of the first night when...

PF: No I didn't. I did go down and see some of the plays, but I didn't go on first nights particularly.

SE: In your experience of watching plays back then, did you ever, were there any major hiccups or mistakes by the actors or actresses?

PF: Yes that's a good point. We put on a play called Golden City which was written by a South African and it took place in South Africa - was really about Cape Town and all round there, that's why it was called Golden City. We... that was a musical, and we engaged for the musical a troupe (we had to have the whole troupe) of about six or seven black men. They were a wonderful troupe, they stomped about the stage in African fashion, you know and wore African dress and they ate flames, you know. My real point is that they got rather dirty feet walking about on the stage so one of them went up to his dressing room and washed his feet and took the bowl of water and went like that [mimes throwing out a bowl of water] out of the window with all this dirty water. And it went onto the new hat of a man walking below [laughs] so that was a bit of a hiccup because he came round and he wanted compensation for his new hat.

SE: Did you give it to him?

PF: Oh of course, oh yes we had to of course, and we had to tell all our black gentlemen not to throw their water out of the window any more. And another thing that was rather amusing I came back from lunch one day and saw a young actor moving away from my office door and I sort of called after him and said 'Could I help, what did he want?' And he said 'Well I wondered whether you were holding any auditions?' I said 'As a matter of fact we are - we're holding auditions now for a play called The Hidden King, which is to go on at the Edinburgh Festival'. So I said 'You can go along'. I gave him all the directions to get to the - where they were holding the auditions - and he got a small part. And what was his name? Derek Nimmo, he became the famous, have you heard of him I hope?

SE: Yeah.

PF: Yes, he became the famous Derek Nimmo and he always used to call me his guardian angel because I was the first one to give him a chance.

SE: Did you keep in contact with him then?

PF: Well, I met him here and there - he was a busy man moving about in the theatre and so was I, but yes we used to bump into each other at parties and things like that you know.

SE: So when you worked with Stephen Mitchell how many, was there just one theatre that you worked with, or in?

PF: We worked - I think I told you this before - we had offices a time at the Aldwych Theatre and then later on we had offices in the Lyric Theatre.

SE: Right yeah OK. So within the 1950s era, we're studying it because...

PF: An important time.

SE: An important time especially to the theatre and there was a lot of happenings at the time, politically as well. Did you think that much of what was going on in the outside world came, played an important part in the theatre?]

PF: I think... I don't think we ever put on a play which had a political motive, but there were people writing plays, they chose all the things of the day that were going on. You know, it might be politics, it might be something to do with health and doctors, you

know. It might be the thinking about the last war and there were plays about the last war and the navy and things like that, you know.

SE: Were they interesting to you? Did you see many of them?

PF: Well yes, I got around and saw an awful lot you know.

SE: We've studied John Osborne and his *Look Back in Anger* and *The Entertainer*. I think they were quite sort of political and had an important message. Did you see either of those?

PF: *The Entertainer* - did it not have Laurence Olivier in it?

SE: I think it did, yeah.

PF: Yes and the woman who became his wife, Joan Plowright. Yes I did see that play, yes. It was a very sort of unusual play for Laurence Olivier to be in but he gave a very good performance because he played the part of the comedian, didn't he?

SE: Yes on stage and was that different from what he normally...

PF: Oh absolutely because during the war and immediately after the war he did a lot of Shakespeare you know. I saw him in *Richard III* and *Hamlet* and... I also met Robert Helpmann the ballet dancer. I expect you've heard of him? Because he produced one of our plays, He produced the play which I've just spoken about *Golden City* the South African play. He produced that.

SE: When we were looking at *Look Back in Anger*, where we read it's been described sort of as a new wave of theatre.

PF: I have an idea was it not Kenneth Branagh, Kenneth Branagh was in *Look Back In Anger*?

SE: It may have been, I don't know the particular actor that was in it at the time.

PF: I'm not sure but I know Kenneth Branagh was around at that time and Emma Thompson (his wife at the time). Emma Thompson who is now a film actress.

SE: Yeah.

PF: Another person I met was Bryan Forbes who produced one of our plays and later became quite a famous film director, Bryan Forbes.

SE: Did a lot of people that were working in the theatre go on to film?

PF: Stephen Mitchell was connected with two films. He didn't produce them, he directed the business side of it, you know. We did two films one was Mr Denning Drives North with John Mills and the other one was The Last Holiday with Alec Guinness. Now Alec Guinness was a very famous actor of his time.

SE: So after you worked with Stephen Mitchell... How long did you work with Stephen Mitchell for?

PF: Well I worked with Stephen Mitchell from 1946 to 1959 and I was then offered a job with the famous American Theatre owner and producer Gilbert Miller and he wanted me to go to New York and be his secretary.

SE: Oh right.

PF: But unfortunately I had to decline for my own domestic reasons here, I couldn't leave London. So I left Stephen Mitchell in 1959 and then I immediately got another job with the very famous Wig Creations. That was owned by and managed by a very nice man called Stanley Hall. Stanley Hall, have you heard of him?

SE: Yes I've heard of Stanley Hall's Wig Creations, yeah.

PF: Well I had a wonderful time at Wig Creations because we did wigs for everybody, everywhere! We did the whole of the wigs for the first performance of My Fair Lady.

SE: Oh, quite elaborate wigs!

PF: Yes, and we did all the wigs for Laurence Olivier's productions at the National Theatre - whatever the production were, we did the wigs. We sent wigs to the South African Broadcasting Company. We sent wigs to the Reykjavik Theatre in Iceland. We made barristers' wigs - you know, those lovely little wigs that sit on top; they're made of horse hair, all those wigs are - but the other wigs, the wigs for My Fair Lady and all those important things, the hair used to be imported from Italy. it was Italian hair, because it's one of the finest hairs in the world, is Italian, women's Italian hair.

SE: Oh I didn't know that. Was it quite expensive then?

PF: Very expensive. It had all been prepared you know and cleaned and washed, and the story goes that most of that hair came from nuns who had to have their hair shaved off when they took their final orders to go into the church into the nunneries and that.

SE: Very Holy hair.

PF: Yes Holy hair!

SE: That was quite...

PF: So that was a lovely time and during that time I met Marlene Dietrich... on one occasion I met Garbo, Greta Garbo. All the stars came to us for their wigs, Men and women, all the full bottomed wigs like are worn by Charles II, you know, that type of wig.

SE: So you were sort of the number one choice for wigs?

PF: Absolutely.

SE: That's quite exciting. It's quite a different role from what you were doing previously.

PF: Oh quite different, but at the same time there was a connection because I knew a lot of the actors and actresses who came in, you know, I've already met them on productions that we had done.

SE: So you were quite a familiar face. So I'll just ask you some things that we've been looking at in the theatre. We've looked at state subsidy, you know and the creation of the Arts Council and how it started putting money into plays that, was that a relatively new thing? Can you remember that coming about?

PF: Yes, I think I can. I wasn't really - perhaps this is wrong to say - I wasn't sort of so interested in where the money came from [laughs] a lot of the money, I mean when we put on a play Stephen Mitchell used to pass the word around and this person and that person would put in two, three, four thousand or whatever it was. Because in those days it was a few thousand, these days it's hundreds of thousands. But I know The Arts Council did a lot to boost the theatre you know and -

SE: Yes, that was a good thing.

PF: Yes and I was always very fond of the opera. I used to go to the opera a lot which is course part of the theatre but only it's singing instead of acting. But the opera

productions are lovely and very, very costly. They were always, always very well dressed you know and the stars always wanted very, very big money, all the big singers.

SE: Do you think the money... There's more money spent on it today, but do you think the quality is sort of the same?

PF: I think it is for the opera but quite frankly I'm not very fond of musicals, they don't have the... They're not so grand as the theatre used to be. As I said, the productions they used to put on at the Haymarket were the absolute epitome of elegance and beauty and the spoken word, you know, the finest actors. On one occasion there was a play called, the title of the play was Aren't We All. Just those words Aren't We All and in it appeared Rex Harrison and Claudette Colbert, the American film actress, have you ever seen her? Anyway she came over from America and they appeared at the Haymarket and the whole play went on and I thought where does the words 'Aren't We All' come from? And it was the very, very last words that Rex Harrison said as the curtains came down when it was finished: 'Aren't we all' [laughs].

SE: Was it sort of left hanging, 'Aren't we all' - what?

PF: Yes.

SE: So going back to when you worked with Stephen Mitchell and putting on productions, was it... Obviously it was a big, big massive production. How long did the whole thing take from the very start of auditions to...?

PF: Well auditions could start more or less anytime if you heard of an actor who was going to be right for the part. You might tell him a few weeks in advance, you know, and engage him. And there were the general auditions. Rehearsals took roughly a month I suppose and then as I say everything went on tour so that was another six weeks. So from the beginning of auditions to rehearsals to tours, probably ten or twelve weeks had gone by before it opened in London.

SE: There was sort of a faster turn around back then? More plays were being put on?

PF: Well yes there were more plays being put on but at the same time sometimes we would be on tour and it would be very difficult to have a theatre open in London that we could go into because there wasn't any space; you know, they're all full. So everything was sort of, it was a time of great excitement in the theatre and all the theatres were full you know.

SE: I can imagine. Sort of now I've been to quite a few musicals and things in London and well... they're always there it seems, they're always in the same theatre for years and years and years, it doesn't seem to be evolving.

PF: Well that's what I said just now, so many musicals and they run for so long at the Drury Lane and the Adelphi and these theatres and it seems a pity that straight plays don't come in. I'm a great one for the real drama, you know, the spoken word and of course Shakespeare you know. Have you ever been to Stratford upon Avon?

SE: I haven't, no, I live near Manchester so I've seen things in the theatre around there but I haven't been to Stratford upon Avon, have you been?

PF: Yes I've seen one or two at Stratford one with Kenneth Branagh. I think he played Hamlet and Charles Dance was in Coriolanus, I saw that at Stratford. Charles Dance mostly does film but he is a good actor as well.

SE: Was there a lot of Shakespeare plays being put on?

PF: It's always very popular. Are you watching, by any chance, Little Dorrit?

SE: No I haven't been.

PF: It's quite... you know, I like Dickens and Dickens adapts very well for the stage and for the films it adapts very well for films. They're doing it very well, Dorrit, I like it very much, I think it's finishing this week... I had a book here with a lot of notes in with things to tell you. I can't think of anything else I haven't told you about.

SE: Just the general, your day, the day to day going abouts. How would you describe a normal day working at the theatre?

PF: Well one always had to be in those days in officers at nine o'clock in the morning, what time you finished at night you were jolly lucky. It might be six or seven or eight at night [laughs] especially in the theatre - you know, anytime.

SE: Shall I put that light on for you?

PF: No, I can see without the light actually. Let me just see if there is anything here to tell you about, I've told you about the evening dress, I [can't recollect anything] about Wilson.

SE: I think it's a shame that theatres sort of, do you think it's a shame the way theatres changed since then?

PF: Oh I do, but I mean I might be considered, well I would be, I think, considered old fashioned in that I don't like all these gimmicky musicals. I don't think they're very

attractive really. I don't mean that the people don't work hard in them, they do and the costumes are usually very good, but the actual story of the musical doesn't seem to me to be worthwhile, you know, it's not like drama but as I say I'm an old person and I'm probably a bit biased.

I don't think I told you about the Lord Chamberlain, did I?

SE: No, you haven't tell me about that.

PF: I'm talking about the period nineteen forty six and into the fifties (I think just about that period). Every play that we put on, a finished script had to be presented to the Lord Chamberlain and I used to take these scripts to the Lord Chamberlain's office which was just at the back of the St James's Palace. They would read the play and they would take out any line or any suggestion or any action which they considered improper or whatever you know. Now I don't think any of our plays were treated in that way. We never had any line or action taken out.

SE: Really?

PF: No because I think people like Terence Rattigan and Emyln Williams and all those big writers they knew the limits to which they could go, they knew that they should never put in lines that you know would be objectionable in any way. So at the end of a week I used to get a call from the Lord Chamberlain's Office saying, 'Everything's alright, come and fetch the script' and then it could go ahead you know.

SE: Was it all taken very seriously, the censorship?

PF: That's right.

SE: I've read like a bit about how other playwrights who obviously wanted to put swear words or whatever in and their way of, like, getting around it, so I think the rule was that they couldn't say it in a theatre but when it was classed as a club they could say it. So when on a last night if it was in a club they could put all the swear-words in.

PF: That's right, but these days from what I gather and from what I've seen, I mean anything goes! Sexual Acts and swearing and everything else, which I don't like.

SE: Did you think that the Lord Chamberlain's censorship was a good thing for theatre then?

PF: I think it was in its time, but it became a bit sort of old fashioned, people were moving on. So I think that phased out about 1960.

SE: Yeah, 1968 yeah. I imagine it seemed that people as soon as the censorship was removed people were just putting in things that...

PF: That's right; I mean anything goes even on the television anything goes. They can say anything, they can swear, sexual acts and things...

SE: Some people think it's a good thing in that we're allowed to express –

PF: I think it's a good thing but I think there should be limits.

SE: Definitely.

PF: Because you don't know what young people are watching, especially with the television, I mean children can be watching these days. One thing I didn't tell you and that is that a great friend of mine - her name was Elaine Kemble and she was a direct descendant of Sarah Siddons and the Kemble family. Now she was a great friend of mine, she's dead now but going way back to the famous Kembles and Sarah Siddons.

SE: Do you want to tell me a little more about her and how you knew her?

PF: Well I only knew her... she wasn't in the theatre, she was just an ordinary girl and she got married and she had children and we were friends all our lives but she was never... she was interested in the theatre, but never in any way connected with the theatre, not at all.

SE: Has the theatre always been a passion of yours?

PF: Yes I've loved it and music and by music I mean music per se and the opera - as I've said I love opera - but I do love the theatre and I don't go as much now as I did because of course my age but a friend is very kind and takes me to the opera occasionally which is lovely. I love the atmosphere and the going in and the curtains going up.

SE: My grandma recently went to the Royal Opera House, she loved it.

PF: What did she see?

SE: I can't remember what she saw but she did enjoy it.

PF: Many times I've been there and seen Margot Fonteyn dancing at the Royal Opera House and also of course the operas themselves.

SE: So.

PF: A friend of mine was able to use a box - she sort of had the right to use a box occasionally - and she used to take me. So we sat in splendour in the box watching the operas and the ballet. That was very nice.

SE: So when you started working with the Wig Creations, how long did you work there for?

PF: Now as I said, I started in 1959 and I worked until 1968 by which time I was seventy- five. So I worked until I was seventy-five and at that time I thought I deserved a rest. So I retired at seventy-five.

SE: And rightly so, that's a long time to be working!

PF: Yes but I did love, I loved it in the theatre itself and I loved it at Wig Creations. Anything to do with the theatre I loved. The smell of the grease paint!

SE: Was it still as sort of vibrant in the seventies and eighties as it was in the fifties and sixties, the theatre?

PF: Yes I think it's only in the last twenty years that it's become so many musicals. I expect you probably don't agree with me but I just don't like all these musicals.

SE: I definitely see what you mean, because when I'm looking back at the fifties and I can only read about it but there just seems to be so many plays, budding playwrights that I don't really see any more.

PF: It was lovely all these Irish playwrights, as I said Sheridan and Henry James' plays, just all –

SE: Did you ever see any of Shelagh Delaney of her plays? Or anything from the Theatre Workshop?

PF: Wasn't she the girl who wrote about somebody come back?

SE: A Taste of Honey?

PF: That's right. Yes I think I did see them, I can't really recall them, I've so many plays up here in my head I can't sort of remember them all, you know.

SE: Yeah... Do you have an absolute favourite?

PF: Well, I did like Terence Rattigan and Emyln Williams. Emyln Williams wrote wonderful plays, *The Corn is Green* and *The Winslow Boy*, no *The Winslow Boy* was Rattigan.

SE: I read that Rattigan, did he use lots of his own life experience, his own experiences into his plays? Was that apparent?

PF: No I don't think so.

SE: Were they quite serious?

PF: They were very serious yes, they had serious topics. Like the *Browning Version* was a very serious topic, and *The Winslow Boy* was the story of a young boy who's at University and was accused of taking a five shilling postal order or something like that. The parents took it to court and there was a great court case about it. So that really had a very profound subject matter you know.

SE: Was the subject matter of the plays ever sort of affect society, did you think at the time?

PF: I don't know that they affected society but they certainly became a talking point, people used to talk about the plays in those days, people used to talk about the subjects you know.

SE: Especially with *Look Back in Anger* and the whole term *Angry Young Men*, when that came around was that genuinely like that or was it also partly due to the media and the medial hype surrounding the play?

PF: No I think there were a lot of *Angry* - in ordinary life - there were a lot of *Angry Young Men* - and women too, because things were a bit difficult after the war.

SE: In what way?

PF: Well, rationing went on for quite a long time, and there was a lot of unrest a lot of unemployment and young men became *angry* and so did the women.

SE: It was a time when the real lives of ordinary folk was being put onto the stage, rather than sort of the way it was in the drawing room plays?

PF: Yes, I don't think I ever went in for drawing room plays - there was a sort of thought that the curtain went up and there was a settee and two chairs and they always had a staircase in those days - nobody ever had a staircase in their sitting room! - it was always a staircase and there was all these doors there, and doors there and French windows at the back and it was all so stereotyped. And the actors and actresses really were given nothing to say. It was all very trivial, but then people like Emyln Williamson and Rattigan came along and they had something to tell the public you know.

I'll tell you a play that I did see and I don't know much of the detail. I can't remember who wrote it but it was an Australian play it was written by Australians they had brought it over here. I can't remember much, it was called The Year of the Seventeenth Doll, that was the title of the play: The Year of the Seventeenth Doll. The curtain went up and there was a dog stretched out on the settee and we all sat and looked at the dog and the dog sat on the settee and looked back at us and we still went on looking at it. And this went on for minutes, you know, people began to think, you know, 'has something gone wrong?' He must have had a cue from the wings you know, someone flipped their fingers and he got up and then the play started but it was such a clever introduction of us all sitting there looking at the dog and the dog looking back at us. [laughs]

SE: A real dog [laughs].

PF: A real dog yes. The Year of the Seventeenth Doll.

SE: Sounds interesting. So have you got anything else that you would like to share?

PF: Well, I can't really think of anything, I think I've covered all my little bits.

SE: Was it an enjoyable time in your life working within the theatre?

PF: Oh certainly, but very, very hard work, oh very hard work. People think that the theatre is glamorous which of course it is, but if you're working in it it's far from glamorous. It's very hard work and for the actors and actresses.

SE: Getting everything organised and the time limit and things.

PF: And acting the same story every night. You know, Separate Tables ran for a year and then it went to New York and there's Eric Portman and Margaret Leighton saying the same things to each other every night for eighteen months. It must get very tiring.

SE: Was it the same actors and actresses for the whole year?

PF: Yes. I think I've told you everything. I've told you about Derek Nimmo... Marlene Dietrich was very nice, now I'm sure you've heard of her, the German film actress. She was a film actress and also she went on to do a one woman stage show, where she used to sing extremely pretty and also very pungent sort of songs. She was a wonderful, wonderful creature. I saw her on the stage several times.

SE: Going back to your earlier life; did you ever get any experience of the music hall scene?

PF: I think I have been to the music hall, I can't really remember whom I saw.

SE: Was it...

PF: The London Pavilion, that theatre which is near Oxford Circus do you know it? Just down that alleyway, the London Pavilion. They used to have wonderful... what did you call it?

SE: Music hall.

PF: Music hall, yes. They used to have music hall and they used to have revue and that sort of thing. And... quite a lot of leading people, leading singers used to come. I can't remember all there names, there was that famous American who used to crack jokes - Bob Hope! Bob Hope and all sorts of Americans, used to come to the London Pavilion.

SE: That was just a series of musical acts which declined a bit.

PF: The music hall as such I think had died out before - even before! - my time, although there was a theatre very near here, in the Edgware Road... Metropolitan. And they used to have you know the old music hall.

SE: Yeah.

PF: But it was really a bit before my time.

SE: Yeah.

PF: I'm sure you're looking at the clock, are you anxious to go?

SE: Oh no, no I'm just getting a train soon but, no it's fine.

PF: Where are you getting a train to, Sheffield?

SE: Sheffield yes.

PF: Where from?

SE: St Pancras.

PF: Oh the new St. Pancras yes.

SE: Yeah. So... have you got any concluding comments that you would like to tell me about? I think we're studying this period because it's sort of been described as a Golden Age of theatre, which you're sort of, anyone is willing to, is able to disagree with –

PF: Well all I can say really in conclusion is in the time I was in the theatre it was really very, very glamorous and we had all the leading actors in those days. Wonderful people with wonderful voices and wonderful presence. I was talking right at the beginning about the gallery and going to the gallery. And the actors and actresses could project their... you always heard them. You couldn't always see very much, but you always heard their voices, came soaring up. No microphones and all that nonsense.

SE: They worked harder back then?

PF: Yes and they had wonderful voices, very well trained voices.

SE: Do you think there's a, any particular reason for sort of the change that's come about in theatre? Do you think maybe it's got sort of to do with television and the role of cinema?

PF: Yes, it may be. The cinema of course is still very popular. It faded out perhaps about twenty or twenty five years ago but it's come back with a bang - people love the cinema don't they.

SE: Yeah, I work at a cinema and it's busy all the time.

PF: You do? What do you do?

SE: I just sell tickets and usher people in.

PF: Yes, why not, lovely, yes to be in the box office taking all the money, yes.

SE: None of it goes in my pocket!

PF: I like the cinema, I like going to watch a film but I'm very choosy. I just don't go every Friday night come what may, I like to choose what I'm going to see, you know.

SE: There was sort of... with regards to repertory theatre, there was sort of a people did just go to what was on, sort of anyway because it was sort of like out of habit and things.

PF: What, to the theatre?

SE: Yeah.

PF: No I don't think they went... They chose their play or even the theatre because as I said before the Haymarket, you always knew you got a good play or a good production at the Haymarket, always.

SE: Yeah.

PF: So people didn't just go because it was Friday night.

SE: Yeah I think it's different in London but like up in like Northern cities when there's just one theatre, it was sort of like the cinema people just went, when the repertory theatre was on but I imagine that would be different in London because there's so much choice.

PF: One thing I didn't mention was that we... just once a year we used to do a pantomime and the pantomime was always staged in Aberdeen. But we used to, I can't remember all the, what I call the pantomime names, but we used to do you know Jack in the Beanstalk and things like that. Just once a year we'd do that. Did I tell you about the Seven Dwarfs?

SE: No you –

PF: No I... Oh on one occasion we put on Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs at the St James's Theatre in London and one day - I knew they were coming - I heard a lot of panting and puffing coming up my staircase to my office and I had eight of these little people [laughs] coming into my room and they were charming little people. We had to engage the whole group, we couldn't just have one, we had to engage the whole group

and they were charming little people and I said to the lead man, 'Do please sit down' you know and he said, 'Madam, I can't even get on a chair, but' he said 'I will lean on it and rest myself'. And I felt such a fool that I had even asked him! But you know, it's a natural thing to do [laughs].

SE: Yeah.

PF: And they were beautifully dressed: he said, 'Do you like my overcoat?' and I said 'I think it's a very smart overcoat' and he opened it like this [action] and it was all lined with tartan, beautiful little overcoat but they were only this height [action]. So that ran for about eight weeks I suppose at the St James'.

SE: Was it popular then?

PF: Yes, it was for the children at the time.

SE: Yeah.

PF: You know.

SE: OK, yeah... well thank you very much I'd love to talk to you further because you seem to have lots of things to talk about.