

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Perlita Neilson – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Christina Latham**

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Actress. Audiences; Frith Banbury; Bernard Shaw's plays; John Clements; Cicely Courtneidge; Dulcie Gray; modern plays; Oklahoma!; the Oxford Playhouse; repertory theatre; theatre-going.

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

CL : How did you get into the Theatre?

PN: I got into the theatre as a child. My first experience at the London theatres was at The Coliseum when I played one of the children in Annie Get Your Gun. This was the second American musical to come to London: the first was Oklahoma. And goodness know how I got into that because I can't sing! That was a great experience because it was an American director, Helen Tamaris. And there was Dolores Gray who played Annie. There were no microphones then. So I was in that for a year and then I went to a stage school, Ada Foster, that was where Jean Simmons went. So then still as a child I was in various plays – Peter Pan twice, when it used to be at the Scala Theatre.

Then as I got older, I was at the Arts Theatre in London and the director there had me in a play and I was suddenly asked to go to Bristol Old Vic, which in those days proper repertory theatres, three weeks each play, permanent company. It was a wonderful way to learn your craft. So I was there for a season, which was a marvellous experience. Then I came back to London and I had an agent and they sent me to an audition with John Clements, who was a big actor manager and very famous for Restoration plays with his wife Kay Hammond. He was doing a season at the Saville Theatre, I auditioned and he was doing television combined with the theatre. From that audition he offered me a three year contract and the first thing he put me in was The Seagull, playing Nina, which was a very interesting production with Diana Winyard and Hugh Williams and a lovely director, Micael Macowan, who used to run LAMDA. Also when I was rehearsing with The Seagull, I hadn't really had proper theatre training, though I went to [two] little-known theatre schools. And Micael Macowan said to me 'You need Iris Warren,' who was a very good and famous teacher who went on to work at the Royal Shakespeare. I went to her studio and had these lessons which were the best thing that ever happened to me.

When I was in The Seagull, they were auditioning for The Diary of Anne Frank, anyway I went along but I thought quite frankly I'm not Jewish and I wouldn't be right for it. I did one audition but the people who adapted it thought I was alright for that part, I had to

have my hair dyed black. It was such an honour to be chosen to portray someone like that. It was a very good adaptation and the director, Mr [Frith] Banbury said 'Never feel sorry for the people you are playing otherwise it will get between you and your acting.' And Binkie Beaumont came round in the interval of *The Diary of Anne Frank* and said 'Oh it's just great,' which gave me great confidence.

I then went to work at The Oxford Playhouse for a bit. You know, you didn't just do a few previews before you opened in London, you did a proper tour, eight weeks, six weeks and in some cases longer and that way you have some money behind the production when you come to London. In Oxford Playhouse I did quite a few productions for Frank Hauser but the best one was George Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House*. It had a very fine cast: Roger Livesey played Captain Shotover; Dulcie Gray, Judy Campbell. It was then brought to London because it did so well. I played Ellie Dunn and I loved it because I adored Shaw. Shaw gives women such strong roles and such intelligence, it's lovely. So we came to London to Windhams Theatre. And on the first night Sir Bronson Albery – who was about eighty – climbed the ridiculous amount of stairs with a bunch of roses to our dressing room, which was extremely nice of him, I have to say.

I then was in *An Ideal Husband*, with Margaret Lockwood, Dulcie Gray and Roger Livesey again. We toured and when we came to London and The Strand Theatre, it did so well we then transferred to The Piccadilly Theatre. Then we went on a tiny tour again, a couple of changes of cast and then we went to The Garrick [Theatre] for another six weeks, so it was an extremely long run of an Oscar Wilde play. Then I did *Getting Married*, by Shaw, which was another long run. The attitude of the [producer Peter Bridge] was to put a lot of [star] names in so even if they if they didn't like all the actors they would certainly like three or four.

I then did a revival of *Dear Octopus*, Dodie Smith, a lovely family play. The director gave the lead to Cicely Courtneidge who was famous for musicals, she was actually marvellous in a straight play. Just before Christmas we were performing at The Haymarket Theatre and she couldn't believe it after performing in musicals her whole life. We also transferred with that to the Strand so it was very successful.

Then there was a lot of great new plays being put on, such as Ayckbourn plays. They were very fruitful days in The London Theatre and in the provinces, lots of work! I'm so thrilled I was able to experience that. I worked at York Theatre Royal for a whole season which was good experience of repertory theatre but it's not for everyone. In the old days people went the theatre for the names like Vivien Leigh, Paul Scofield.

CL: Do you think it's a shame that we don't really have repertory theatre any more? And that the audience cannot compare contrast and actor playing a minor role to a lead role the next week?

PN: Yes! They used to love that. And people used to buy a season ticket. However now we are out of the habit I don't know if you could get people to do that now.

CL: So would you say today's audience has a different attitude to theatre?

PN: Well yes because they take in lots of food as though it were a cinema. They used to on matinee days serve tea [in the interval] on trays with a great clatter. And there always used to be a little live orchestra before and during the intermission.

CL: It is said that in this period more lower classes and lower middle classes started going to the theatre, would you say that was true?

PN: Oh definitely! It wasn't dress-up and all that any more, that started to go away.

CL: After the abolishment of Theatre censorship, do you think this period became a radical time for theatre?

PN: Yes there was certainly that wave of theatre, such as *Look Back In Anger*, but that wouldn't have happened if not for the Labour party at the time. They had Jennie Lee who was very good for the arts and there was a lot of arts theatre council backing so you could do those things.

CL: Did it feel daunting as a child to perform in the second American musical to come to London?

PN: No luckily not! Because once you were on the stage it didn't seem as big. The other four children, Dolores Gray and the other cast member were like a family.

CL: Is it purely because of your connections you chose to do older, more traditional plays? Or would you have liked to do a more modern play written at that time?

PN: I didn't seem to fall into that category but I did like them. I did like Peter Nichols plays. The only time I walked out of the Royal Court was when I saw something by Edward Bond, and *Florence Nightingale* was meant to be a lesbian or something and I just thought this is ridiculous. But of course there was Osborne and *The Entertainer* and he was rather like The Beatles, he made a big impact!

CL: So how often did you go the theatre during that time?

PN: Well I went to see Matinees when I could and I remember a Russian [company] that was touring who put on *The Idiot*, and starring in it was the actor who played Hamlet, in the Russian film, Innokenty Smoktunovsky, and that was marvellous! Also I remember going to see *Cabaret* which was great! There were a lot of new plays at that time. Michael Codron [presented a lot of] new plays.

CL: In my research it says you performed in New York what was that like, and how was it different to performing in Britain?

PN: I was in a play called Lace on Her Petticoat, in The Ambassador Theatre, which was written by Aimée Stuart. After the London run, a man decided he would like to put it on in America. I didn't enjoy it, I didn't think American theatres had the same atmosphere or audience and I missed London but maybe I was quite prejudiced.

CL: What was Europe like, because some critics say the audiences on the continent receive plays in a better way than the British?

PN: I toured Germany and Switzerland and places, and they are amazing because they are such theatre goers and there were bouquets of flowers at the end of the night. And they are very impressive the way they enjoy their theatres.

As I got older, there was less work but because I was small I was always knocking off my age!!!

CL: Well that's brilliant! Thank you very much