

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Ruth Silvestre – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Hermione Thomas**

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Actress. Auditions; concert artist; costume; dancing; Joan Diena; Flower Drum Song; Richard Kiley; Kismet; Man of La Mancha; Keith Michell; musicals; rehearsals; singing; sound projection; theatre-going; understudying.

HT: What first got you interested in theatre? Can you remember?

RS: I played Snow White in the school production aged about seven I think.

HT: Aged seven?

RS: I was hooked by that!

HT: Did you go to a drama school or –

RS: No

HT: – anything? No.

RS: No

HT: So, was it always theatre that you wanted to perform in? Was it always the stage –

RS: No, sing –

HT: You always wanted to be a singer?

RS: Mmm

HT: I understand that you were a chorus singer at the beginning of your career.

RS: Mm hmm

HT: Was it always an aspiration of yours to play a lead role?

RS: Well I was - in the first show I did - I was second understudy to the lead.

HT: What was the show?

RS: Kismet

HT: Oh. And did you enjoy the production?

RS: It was wonderful, yes. It was in the old Stoll Theatre.

HT: In London?

RS: Yes

HT: To get the role, did you have to go through lots of auditions?

RS: Yes

HT: What sort of format did they take?

RS: Oh, well there were hundreds and hundreds of girls that wanted to be in it and you just went to one audition after another and I was – curious thing, I had a little scarf which was a piece of almost the first fluorescent material because a friend of mine worked in a costumier (?) and she gave me this little strip of shocking pink iridescent fabric and I wore it around my neck. And so what they would do was they would – you do your thing, you know, fifty of you or whatever to audition and then you would all line up and they would say right 'This one, this one, that one, that one and the one in the pink scarf,' they would say.

HT: Oh, so was it sort of –

RS: Became a sort of –

HT: so you stood out in the crowd?

RS: Yes, yes.

HT: I see.

RS: And there were nine of us in the end after having done about, I think, four or five auditions.

HT: Did this take place over a matter of weeks? Or was it

RS: Yes

HT: In a day?

RS: No no, two or three days.

HT: Yes.

RS: And then you would have another one.

HT: I understand that you took the lead role in the musical Man of La Mancha.

RS: I did, yes.

HT: What was it like stepping into this role after, I hear, the previous actress had been quite publicly dismissed?

RS: No, no it's wrong, that's wrong.

HT: Oh.

RS: It was in Kismet it was quite strange actually because it was Joan Diener and she played Lalume in Kismet and she went off to Paris with the Producer – with the Director for the weekend and it was foggy and they could not get a plane back.

HT: So no scandal?

RS: [laughs] But then the curious thing was that in Man of La Mancha she was playing the lead, this was what, this was '55 to '68?

HT: Yes. Was this at the Piccadilly?

RS: mm hmm. And then I did Flower Drum Song in between.

HT: Was it easy flitting from different roles, different productions or, you know, would you remember your character for each performance?

RS: Oh, that is not a problem.

HT: Not a problem?

RS: No.

HT: Did you ever have to deal with a lot of Press, critics and reviews? Did it alter your performance if they, perhaps if you got a bad review, would you take that criticism positively or were you ever affected by it?

RS: Well I have to say, I only had rave reviews for Man of La Mancha. As far as the Press was concerned, I did one of the previews in Flower Drum Song the lead had lost her voice, she sat up all night talking to her mother who had just flown in from Honolulu or somewhere and so I had to go on and they - the Management - didn't want the Press to know about this, so they said to me, 'Don't tell anyone' and they tried to -and they made me go out of the theatre by the side door. There I was running down Shaftesbury Avenue away from the Press and I suddenly thought, 'am I mad or what?' [Laughs]

HT: You want to take credit for your performance.

RS: So I stopped and tied my shoelace or whatever and waited for them to catch up.

HT: So was that a completely last-minute -

RS: Yes, yes.

HT: - role that you took on there?

RS: Yes.

HT: So presumably you knew the song before?

RS: Well the thing is, what happens with understudies is that you - once the show - while the show is being rehearsed you are obviously - you normally have another part as well, so you do not get to rehearse but you are always watching, you are always listening, but you don't start proper understudy rehearsals until the show opens and then Friday is understudy call. And, on a Friday I do not know about it now, but on any Friday at any theatre of the West End when I was there, you would find an entire second cast going through the show during the day. So you were all moved up and got a chance to play the part, but of course I hadn't done that, you see. If she is off in the preview, you hadn't any rehearsals and you haven't got your costumes made either, so there I was in a bright blue dress, and it should have been a red one and the guy with the follow-spot was going barmy (laughs).

HT: So how long do you have to rehearse for, I mean, as understudy or if you had the lead role? Was it -

RS: Well always

HT: - a quick turnover between productions?

RS: No, no. I mean, you would be very lucky if you go from one production to another. I mean I had years in between - I worked as a Concert Artist. But you normally had four weeks rehearsal, intensive rehearsal and that was intensive, I mean it was ten in the morning till six, seven or midnight if it wasn't right. They would usually let you go before midnight because if they kept you after midnight they had to pay for a taxi to take you home.

HT: Midnight!

RS: They used to break us at five to midnight.

HT: That's a long day.

RS: Yes.

HT: What sort of a relationship did you have with the director? Were you ever given the opportunity to have your own input or your own ideas staged, or was it very –

RS: No, in fact because all three of the musicals I was in were American productions so the American director came over and it was all set in stone.

HT: A very tight script?

RS: Very tight, yes.

HT: And the stage directions?

RS: Yes, yes. In fact, it was quite funny in Man of La Mancha because Joan, once again, it was then her husband that was directing because they had married you see, and I played opposite Keith Michell because Man of La Mancha was done in two sections, it came on and then business wasn't terribly good and Donald Albery asked the American management to take a cut, and they wouldn't. So he said 'all right, I will take it off,' and this show had been running five years – four or five years on Broadway – so they thought 'joke, joke,' you see, they said 'all right' and so he did! And the notice went up.

HT: Called their bluff.

RS: Yes, and that was the end of January, I think it was the end of January - '68...no, '69. And then I had been doing the mid-week matinee because Joan didn't want to do mid-week matinees and also she went off to Paris to play opposite Jacques Brel to do it in French and I took over to play opposite Keith Michell and then the notice went up and we all cried on the last night. But then, I was lucky because my agent phoned and said they are bringing it back for the summer and Richard Kiley is coming over from Broadway to play Don Quixote you see, so I then got notices. But while we were rehearsing Kiley said [in American accent] 'Hang on a minute, I'm in the dark here' and I said well, you know, 'the lighting plot is as it is' sort of thing, and he said [American accent] 'The lighting plot thickens' I think he said. [Laughs] Obviously it had been switched so that Joan was always in the light and poor Quixote was always in the shadow! So that was quite funny.

HT: You mentioned you were a 'Concert Artist,' could you tell me exactly what the role of a Concert Artist is? Was it singing?

RS: Yes, well it's whatever you are asked to do. It is a totally freewheeling performer, who just gets phoned up and says, 'Can you do Tuesday night half past nine for the Market Traders annual dinner?', or whatever. So you have got to be very very flexible and have your own pianist and you know, Horses for courses.

HT: So, did you ever find – were there any periods where you were unemployed or in the theatre industry did you usually have jobs lined up? Or was it

RS: Not with musicals, and not for me because I was a special sort of – I've only ever played foreign parts, I have never played an English person.

HT: So, foreign language as well.

RS: Yes but, I mean, as far as musicals are concerned I mean, the first one was set in Baghdad, the second set, we were all Chinese [laughs] and...

HT: Was that intentional?

RS: And the third one we were all supposed to be Spanish. So, I never played – I never got into an English musical.

HT: Was that through choice, or just how it happened?

RS: Just how it happened. I used to have very, very long black hair you see.

HT: Oh I see, so you looked foreign [laughs]

RS: Yes, I mean ...

HT: Let's have a look at these photos.

RS: [indicating various photographs] That's Kismet... That's Doretta Morrow.

HT: This is you?

RS: No, no

HT: Oh

RS: No, no... That was Doretta Morrow who is sadly dead now, I was second understudy – these are all American stars. And there's Alfred Drake and Joan Diener.

HT: Oh wow, these costumes are fabulous.

RS: Yes, they were.

HT: Were they quite a feature for the production?

RS: Oh, it was yes. I mean my husband was an artist and designer so he said 'I have never seen anything so vulgar in my life.' [laughs] I said 'darling, that is show business.'

HT: [laughs]

RS: [indicates to another photograph] And that was the artist pass for the Royal Command performance which we did.

HT: Oh, wow.

RS: And Alfred Drake who was, you know, an incredibly sophisticated character, was so terrified at meeting the Queen that he lost his voice completely. Extraordinary.

HT: So, were these photographs from the rehearsals?

RS: Yes. [indicating a photograph] and that's all the girls together, that's me with all the dancers.

HT: Oh, you did have dark hair!

RS: Yes, yes oh I did.

HT: It looks good fun, you are all smiling.

RS: Yes, oh it was.

HT: Was this an after-show party?

RS: Mmm. Yes there were – in the old Stoll Theatre, there was one room for the chorus dancers and singers, and in those days the dancers and singers were separate, you were not expected to do both. So the singers were quite serious singers, I mean my friend Mary, she'd just come from Glyndebourne where she had been understudying in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, and you know, we were all very serious singers.

HT: Mmm.

RS: My friend Judith was at the Guildhall, and... So we had this huge long dressing room, with all the costumes, and blue curtains down the centre and the singers sat one side and the dancers sat the other, and the dancers sat nearest the windows and they'd all come off and they'd open the windows you see, and all the singers would say 'Shut the windows!'

HT: Yes

RS: We could not sing with a sore throat... It was fun. The Stoll is no longer – it was an opera house, it was built by, I think it was Oscar Hammerstein.

HT: Oh, ok.

RS: He built it as an opera house, and it was sort of half way up Kingsway, where there is a theatre there now, what's it called? I can't remember, there's a theatre round the back. They had to put a theatre on the site, but it's quite a small theatre... But the Stoll was great.

HT: So, what was your experience of the West End in the 1950's for example, I mean, can you see a notable change to how it is today? Perhaps in the audience or theatregoers or the general atmosphere?

RS: I don't know, it's difficult to say isn't it. I mean it is different in that nowadays people are expected to be able to sing and dance at the same time, also there is a lot more use of the microphones; people have throat mics and things like that, the sound is completely different. I mean, I worked without a microphone. There were mics by the footlights but there was no microphone on your person.

HT: Do you think actors are perhaps less trained to project their voices today?

RS: Oh yes, yes.

HT: So, a completely different level of ability.

RS: But you see it's difficult because you can't get the same level of intimacy unless you're really well trained, unless you've got a microphone because, I mean I did a lot of cabaret and if you don't use a microphone you sing something and then you say [in a raised tone] 'Thank you very much ladies and gentleman,' you know, well that's not what you really want, you want to use a microphone so you can speak to people quietly.

HT: Sure

RS: And it is a whole different technique, but in the theatre, certainly in Man of La Mancha, and we had no microphones then and it was a heavy song to sing, a heavy show to do. And in that, I did have to dance! [laughs]

HT: So if there was a role where it was both singing and dancing, you said it was played by two separate actors?

RS: Well normally you had a chorus of dancers and a chorus of singers.

HT: Oh.

RS: And they were not expected to do both, I mean, you know, we used to – we would not have two left feet, but there were always specialist dancers. A lot of the dancers we had, Juliet Prowse who went off and had an affair with Frank Sinatra, I mean all sorts of – she went off to Hollywood.

HT: Yes.

RS: We had lots of very interesting – and interestingly we had a... Was it Juliet that came in? Somebody came in because Kismet was full of Indian and, you know, Asiatic and Middle Eastern dancing and we had a real Middle Eastern dancer, and she got the chop because she wasn't sexy enough, it was too authentic.

HT: Sort of Bollywood style?

RS: Yes.

HT: So was it common for actors to be dismissed if they were not good enough, or sexy enough as you said?

RS: Yes, I mean 'run of the show' was the contract really, but, oh they could find some way of – not suitable you know – I suppose they probably had a get-out if they did that before, you know, six weeks or something like that, I'm not sure. I'm not sure, but certainly she went and we were all sad because she was rather exotic and intriguing.

HT: Yes. So, at the height of your career, did you find a lot of competition amongst, you know, you mentioned when you went for auditions there were hundreds of other girls going for the same part? Was that constant throughout?

RS: Yes, it is – I have never been terribly good at fighting my corner or seeing the main chance. You know, I remember years and years ago when somebody did a first broadcast, oh she said 'I go round every Friday and I knock on the door and I say 'Hello, it's me'' and I thought 'God, if that is what you have to do to get a career in broadcasting, forget it!' [laughs]

HT: [laughs] Yes.

RS: [laughs] I could not be bothered. But also, I got married and had a child and you know.

HT: Did you continue working or...

RS: Yes, I worked all the time. I worked, you know, a lot but... The world of musicals has changed. I tell you, if you want to know what the world of musicals was like, Steven Sondheim's *Follies* and there is a wonderful song in it; 'Waiting for the Girls Upstairs', and that always reminds me of all our – when we were all first married or with somebody and always we would say you know where are you going, and he is waiting downstairs and somebody would shout out 'He is here already,' you know.

HT: Yes.

RS: My husband had a little blue MG and he used to park it, there was no congestion charge, no problem like that, he would be outside the stage door.

HT: Yes.

RS: It was different. Very different.

HT: You mentioned that your husband said that the costumes were rather vulgar, do you find that what was considered vulgar between 1945 and '68 is completely different to today? I mean you look at what is on stage today and you get rather offensive language and themes. Did you ever notice this about censorship, when you received a script, did you notice the limitations of censorship?

RS: No, I don't think so, I mean *Kismet* was romantic, it was like a fairy story and of course it has been revived recently at the Coliseum I think and how they could put a song on that has something in it like [sings] 'Baghdad, don't underestimate –' [laughs] at a time like this shows to me an incredible lack of sensitivity. Apparently it was terrible, I mean I heard lots of people went they said, 'Oh shall we have a reunion and go together?', and somebody phoned up and said 'don't bother you won't be able to bear it,' you know., it was so awful.

HT: Did you see censorship as filtering out what is vulgar, or did you see it as a limiter for what you could perform?

RS: I don't think it bothered us.

HT: No.

RS: I don't think it bothered us... You know, I ask myself because it is strange, I mean I know people of my age and generation find a lot of the way young girls behave in the

business very regrettable and a lot of them are extremely prudish. Well I used to sell myself with a dress with my boobs hanging out, you know, and sell my sexuality while I was working as a cabaret artist. I did all that so I'm not shocked by things like that. What I find sad is the inelegance.

HT: Mmm

RS: That's what I find, a sort of lack of...

HT: Dignity maybe?

RS: No, not so much dignity but just 'Oh no darling!' sort of thing, you know, we would have known straight away, no! 'No, no not that, that's not doing any good at all.' And I mean we were always very in charge of the situation, absolutely, we didn't need to come on all strong and women's lib, we just knew who we were. I mean I look back at it and think it was quite intriguing, the way we managed, we kept all the balls in the air without having to either be aggressively butch or, I don't know, sort of in-your-face somehow. Difficult to explain.

HT: So, did you present yourself in that way to make a success with the audience

RS: Yes.

HT: Or, you know, for future job prospects?

RS: Well, one and the same thing in a way. But... No, I don't know, I don't know. I do find a lot of... It's very difficult to explain isn't it? Sometimes I am sort of shocked by things, I can't give you a specific example but... I don't like cruelty, I don't like people poking fun at people, I think that's unforgivable because you cannot help the colour of your skin, the way you are, whether you are bright or what, you know, I don't buy that.

HT: Mmm.

RS: [Showing the programme] This is the programme of Man of La Mancha by the way which I'm sure they must have programmes somewhere but... Golly, there are a lot of people in here that aren't alive anymore. [Long pause] That was the front of house pictures.

HT: Wow

RS: And the funny little thing that we had.

HT: Is it still performed today, Man of La Mancha?

RS: Apparently there is a production – it's actually Man of La Mancha is in a bit of a class of its own. It was, well it's based on a great classic, you know, it's based on Don Qui-

HT: Don Quixote?

RS: Cervantes

HT: Yes.

RS: And the concept was very interesting in that it started off with – I mean I'll bet somewhere Donald Albery's got this, well Donald Albery's dead, but Ian from the family has probably got the set somewhere, stowed away somewhere because it cost a fortune. It was a drum you can see – I brought those because they are so – this was a very violent scene that was the rape scene and they showed this on television beforehand. [Laughs] They lost loads of bookings, all the coach bookings from Tunbridge Wells all cancelled!

HT: Oh no!

RS: When they saw this thing!



HT: Was it explicit? I mean was it

RS: Well not really explicit, but I mean she was bandaged and flung about and I've got the back to prove it.

HT: Oh!

RS: It was very earthy. What I have got here, [indicates to photographs] what I shouldn't have, and I didn't realise I had got them all are the Tony Crickmay's proofs, his contact point proofs. And I don't know why I've got them.

HT: Wow.

RS: They were scenes from the show you see. This – I mean she, Dulcinea Aldonza he is the girl that Don Quixote thinks is a saint you see, that is the whole thing. She is really the local whore who works for these Muleteers who come and, you know, stop off on their journeys across Spain. But she's got some sort of quality about her, some sort of honesty and he sees this and he decides that she will be his lady and she gets pissed off with it.

HT: [laughs]

RS: And in the end, you know, she gets this rape scene and in the end she gets very very badly beaten.

HT: Yes.

RS: And...

HT: Is she some sort of a heroine?

RS: Well you can see why I got a bad back [indicating photograph] [Long pause] Because he sees something in her, she changes. I mean it is a really serious play actually!

HT: Yes.

RS: She changes and turns into a different person and in spite of the fact she is beaten and thrown about and all the rest of it, she realises that he is somebody special. And at the end when he is dying, she comes and then you have this wonderful song you would sing in a completely different kind of voice. And oh, it used to bring the place down. People used to come eight, nine, ten times, you know. It's a very very moving musical. And I am sure they will do it again because it has got a quality. It's not the music – I mean, 'Impossible Dream' is the great number from it and she hears him sing this and she understands what he means and so that changes her and then she defends him you see against everything, and turns into a different kind of person. So, it's a show with a sort of greatly [inaudible] quality. People used to sob and, oh you know, it was an amazing – it was a part to die for. I mean my career went nowhere after that [laughs] because I had sort of done it all!

HT: Oh, so was it your favourite role to play?

RS: Oh yes, yes. Yes it was – it started off with this huge – what they did was they had the story within the story because Cervantes was thrown in jail

HT: Mmm

RS: for writing this book you know. So what they had was this great staircase that descended from the roof of the theatre which came down slowly slowly slowly onto the stage with the music, you know and everybody was sort of 'it's going to happen.'

HT: Yes.

RS: and down the stage came this ragged figure and his henchman, his Sancho Panza this funny little man who was his servant and [showing photographs] most of these are me, which is why I have got them of course... And...there, that's Kiley as Cervantes.

HT: Is that his own beard?

RS: No... And he comes down and it is supposed to be – oh, he is being thrown into prison!

HT: Oh, I see.

RS: You see. So all these wretched people are milling about and he tells them a story. He says, 'You, you can be the innkeeper, and you can be this and you can be that and I'll tell you this story.' And then it changes and he says 'and I shall be Don Quixote, de la Mancha!' And he puts whiskers on and a beard and he says to his servant, 'you can be Sancho Panza, you have the donkey, I have the horse!' Of course there isn't a real donkey and a horse, somebody does that. And then he says 'and we will go galloping of to La Mancha' and then the whole thing changes and you are in the story. So, you know, it was an incredibly interesting production and very very moving and people loved it, absolutely loved it.

HT: I understand it has been performed in several countries, has it?

RS: Oh yes I think so.

HT: Yes.

RS: But it couldn't go on any longer than than the September or October when we stopped because Kiley was committed to doing something else in America you see, so we just did it for six months

HT: Yes.

RS: right over the summer period and then off he went and then it never came back again.

HT: Couldn't replace him

RS: No, no, no. He is dead now I think. He was very good, very different from Keith Michell, Keith was wonderful, he was so kind to me because I had never taken on anything like this before, you know, it was, I mean you can see it was very physical as well as everything else, and he was great, very very good and kind. But Kiley was quite different, quite different. Not unkind or anything, but just not there until he got on stage and then it all happened.

HT: He came alive.

RS: Yes, got switched on.

HT: It must have been quite intimidating taking on such a big role?

RS: Mmm. Well, I don't know, you just do it. I mean you get so involved in it. I loved it. I used to go to bed every afternoon at about four o'clock. As soon as my child came home from school I would switch on, listen and be mother or whatever [laughs] and crash out.

HT: So, were you performing matinees as well as evening performances?

RS: Eight shows a week.

HT: Eight shows a week?

RS: Mmm.

HT: Must be pretty exhausting?

RS: Yes, it is.

HT: Looking after a child as well.

RS: Yes, yes. You cannot do anything else. Fortunately my husband was teaching and was home early you know. He was very very supportive, but it is tough. And your voice gets tired and, you know, all that sort of thing. I was only off once. But...

HT: So when you stepped up from understudy to get the role

RS: Yes I was

HT: Did you then have your own understudy? Did someone then step in as understudy?

RS: Mmm.

HT: So, people work up the ladder.

RS: Yes. There always has to be a cover because something could happen. Someone could break their leg half way through a show, you know.

HT: Yes. You said the audience loved it, were they not shocked at the rape scene?

RS: It was done as a ballet really. It was done as a ballet and I mean she was - I think it worked because it was redeemed afterwards. It wasn't left, 'Well tough that's the way the world is.'

HT: Yes.

RS: It wasn't like that. You know, it was redeemed afterwards, and it was stylised. It looked quite violent from the - I mean, my little boy had to come in and Richard had to show how I wasn't getting thumped around really.

HT: [laughs] a bit too realistic.

RS: Yes, yes. 'It was ok, mummy is ok.'

HT: So, in these photos, these wonderful photos that you have, did they ever make up a portfolio, did you have to when looking for jobs, have to present a portfolio or anything?

RS: We were never as organised as that.

HT: No.

RS: Honestly, it was much more amateur. I mean nowadays kids have videos and all this sort of thing and I probably should have been a lot more - Well you have an agent, it's your agent's job really to - [indicating photographs] I mean a lot of these are - I'm not sure, no these are originals, that's Tony Crickmay's original print. I don't know whether he's still alive. [Laughs] But I do have Repros sometimes. You go trotting down the Charing Cross Road to Denby Repros, there we are.

HT: Oh yes. [Looking at photograph]

RS: Down the road, down the steps. You can have those if they are any use to you. [Gives me two photographs.]

HT: Really?

RS: I've got copies.

HT: Are you sure? Oh, that is very kind, thank you.

RS: Yes, well it could be quite fun, won't it.

HT: Well that's fantastic, thank you very much. So, this was obviously at the absolute height of your career getting the role, did you ever go back to being in the chorus after that?

RS: Not the chorus no, not singing in the chorus, I had my own act you know.

HT: Yes.

RS: You have one of these, [shows document] that's the sort of thing you have, you know, which says what you can do and what you have done and your notices and all that sort of thing.

HT: So who would you show this to?

RS: Well I had loads of those, you know, and if I went to do a job somewhere I –

HT: Sort of like a business card?

RS: Yes! Exactly like a business card. They say 'have you got a card?' and I say 'no I've got that, you can have that' and then they would phone you up.

HT: Do you still sing?

RS: A bit, yes yes. I write books though.

HT: Yes I saw, I did a bit of research and have you got a house in the south of France?

RS: Yes.

HT: And you wrote your book, is it an autobiography?

RS: Yes yes, I've done three.

HT: Yes.

RS: I have recorded two of them, but they are – it's the only other thing that really gives me a buzz.

HT: Yes.

RS: as this sort of thing used to so, you know, it's different of course, you don't get a round of applause and it's so nice when people write and say 'I really enjoyed your book' or something like that, because that's the only feedback you get.

HT: Yes.

RS: It was, you know, when you are performing you either know if it's going well or it is not, it's instantaneous whether you have got it right, but with a book you're not really sure, so it's quite different.

HT: Did you leave the theatre sort of at your peak, or did it more or less fizzle out?

RS: No, I was really at my peak with this and then after that there was nothing else. After that I went up for a few musicals. I tried to do Follies but there is a lot of – well you never know, there are lots of reasons why you don't get something. I mean, if they wanted a six foot blonde, obviously I wasn't going to get it, but – and it's so funny because when you go to do auditions for commercials, you walk into a room and it's full of Italian grandmas! [Laughs] You know.

HT: Yes.

RS: And I was never fat enough! That was my trouble, you know when you got older and you had black hair and they wanted you to play an Italian grandmother they are

always round, you know, and I never was fat enough. I used to go in and think oh no I won't get it no, doesn't look right. You have to have something which – This was me, [Man of La Mancha] it was absolutely right for me. It was physical, it needed a big voice and it needed a person who knew what they were doing with their voice because, one of the songs when she has just been beaten, and he comes and he says 'oh my lady' and all the rest of it and she sings this terrible song that starts off 'I was spawned in a ditch by a mother who left me there, naked and cold, too hungry to cry, I never blamed her.' I mean this sort of song, 'What are you on about you stupid, old twit! Keep on telling me I have some sort of quality, I am nothing!' And this was an enraging song, and you finished up screaming and falling on the floor and that used to pull the place down. Fortunately because I would lie there gasping! Thinking 'go on, go on' because it gives me time to recover. But it was very dramatic, very dramatic. It was a sort of important thing in a way, because what it said was that if you can see some good in somebody and believe in them and tell them often enough, it will change them and I mean in the world at the moment, my goodness me, you know, that's the sort of thing you need.

HT: So a musical with a moral ending.

RS: Yes, yes. I am afraid so.

HT: Perhaps that is why it was so popular.

RS: I think it was, I mean it ran on Broadway for five or six years.

HT: Yes.

RS: It was really – people used to make a pilgrimage to go and see Man of La Mancha sort of thing, but, I don't know if it will come back. I hope it comes back before I snuff it, then we can go to a lovely first night party or something!

HT: [laughs]

RS: That would be nice.

HT: Will you be highly critical of the performance though?

RS: I don't know I don't know, might not be might not be. She has got to be gutsy that's the thing, she's got to be real, you know, it's no good playing it like a – as if you're very conscious of how beautiful you are or something like that because that doesn't work at all.

HT: Yes.

RS: I used to say to myself, 'She's been washing up all the morning'.

HT: So that was your favourite role in your career?

RS: Mmm, yes, yes by far. There were all sorts of people that wanted it. It's funny I was watching the television quite a few years later and there were two singers on there, I can't remember who they were but they were quite well known, did quite a lot of television... and they were singing this song with special lyrics saying, you know, how they always wanted to do this and how they both wanted to play Aldonza in Man of La Mancha and none of us got it, and I thought no, I did! Made me laugh.

HT: Was that at the time when you had the part?

RS: No, this was

HT: After

RS: this was about ten years later, you know, and they were doing fine in some musical extravaganza on television and it just made me laugh! I thought, oh well them as well, I know everybody auditioned for it.

HT: So looking back at your career, I mean is this, your role in Man of La Mancha, is this your greatest memory, or do you have –

RS: Mmm.

HT: Yes.

RS: Yes. I have done masses of concert work, but that's different. You see when you are in a musical, you have a costumier, you've got the musical arranger, you've got the orchestra director, you've got the make-up person, you've got everything, the lighting. My son is a lighting designer. And it is just your job to be the character, you don't want any fuss, you know that everything else will work if you just concentrate on what you are doing, I mean it is a hundred percent concentration, that is what it is. You know, eight shows a week and you don't go out partying at night, you – that's off.

HT: It's your job isn't it.

RS: Yes yes, it's your job and it's your responsibility because you are not the only person in the show. You know it's...

HT: Did you ever have performances when something went wrong, any mishaps or anything where you had to think on your toes?

RS: Think on my feet, well we had – Keith was off for a holiday, I can't remember what happened but anyway somebody called, somebody from the Opera house came and sang it. Emile Belcourt. For a week and obviously things were different and he would put his arm round my neck and press on it, I had this wig, a huge wig you can see it was a wig, absolutely massive thing and of course it was put on for me every night, the hairdresser would come and do it and if he leaned on it too heavily I was terrified it was going to fall off.

HT: During performance you mean?

RS: I was terrified he was going to pull it off. You can see from those acrobatic things, I mean I was being thrown backwards and forwards

HT: Yes.

RS: and the whole thing had to be really really glued on. It took ages afterwards getting it off. My head itched and you know, hundreds of pins. I was like [impersonating through gritted teeth] 'Don't lean on my wig, please don't lean on my wig.'

HT: [Laughs] So, are you still a regular theatre goer now?

RS: Yes, I love the theatre, I'm afraid I don't go as often as I should do. I mean prices are terrible.

HT: Mmm.

RS: I went to Covent Garden last week and we paid, I don't know, what, sixty-five pounds for a ticket and I thought 'now this I can understand,' there were forty people in the orchestra, there were about sixty people on stage, the costumes were to die for, it was a wonderful production. But you go to the theatre and there are five people on stage, the decent seats are forty-five pounds, I mean I think that is really naughty.

HT: Yes.

RS: I don't know what they are going to do

HT: So you think it's more for profit now perhaps, the theatre?

RS: Well I think if you want to go and see something really badly then save up and go and see it, but I think if you're just taking a chance on something, take a chance on the Fringe.

HT: The Fringe?

RS: Yes, because you are closer. I mean The Chocolate Factory for instance, I went to see Maria Friedman do her one woman show at The Chocolate Factory, she was wonderful, absolutely wonderful. And I was nearly as close to her as I am to you.

HT: wow.

RS: You know.

HT: A completely different experience.

RS: Absolutely, absolutely and there are some – now there are some very good Fringe theatre – some where you climb upstairs and sit on an orange box, you know.

HT: Yes.

RS: I'm getting a bit passed that, but there are some which are terribly well run. The Chocolate Factory is one of them and the Donmar as well, you know, you're closer you see and it makes a whole difference. I think if you're going to have to sit miles and miles away, it's got to be powerful stuff to make it worthwhile, and that is why you get so many musicals of course.

HT: Yes.

RS: But they're not – I haven't really seen anything which blows me away recently, apart from Maria Friedman, I thought she was absolutely exceptional, but she's an exceptional artist. Do you know her work at all?

HT: I'm not familiar with it I'm afraid, no.

RS: She has just been in Broadway in something. She was in Sunday in the Park with George, do you know anything about Steven Sondheim? Give yourself a treat!

HT: [laughs]

RS: What sort of stuff are you studying?

HT: We're looking at a bit of Harold Pinter and John Osborne and, you know, A Taste of Honey and

RS: Oh right.

HT: Uranium 235, Oh What a Lovely War, you know, very much within 1945 and 1968. It's just interesting because we've been focusing a lot on censorship and the sorts of audience that would attend, the theatregoers, the shift how it is today and everything – it's an interesting course.

RS: Mmm. We always think that Pinter – we actually knew him, not terribly well, and we were at a lunch thing and my husband kept saying 'We must go, we've got to go to Sidcup,' and of course it's in the, which play is it? The Caretaker?

HT: The Caretaker.

RS: Somebody's having to go to Sidcup, because we had to go to Sidcup to see my mother -in-law.

HT: I see.

RS: Yes. Now that I did enjoy. I went to see The Hothouse at the National... last summer, last summer. And – or was it the summer before? Crikey, honestly when you get to my age it just flashes by. Because Henry Woolf was in it and we went to see him afterwards and he went to school with Harold Pinter.

HT: Oh, ok.

RS: Yes, they were all at school together and he was in it, very good, excellent. That's a scary play Hothouse is a scary play.

HT: The Hothouse.

RS: a scary, scary play.

HT: A thriller?

RS: Yes. That's about manipulation and people being – Well you know, Pinter's got this thing about – He's very political.

HT: Violently maybe?

RS: Yes. I went to the National recently to see A Slight Ache and what's the other one? It's a double bill at the National with Simon Russell Beal, very good, very good, he's a good actor. Terrific... But the National is not terribly good for sound, particularly if you sit up in the 'Olivier' in the big theatre. If you sit high up.

HT: Yes.

RS: It's very hard to hear. I mean my hearing is not one hundred percent, but it's not that bad. I don't use a hearing aid or anything like that.

HT: Are the actors mic-ed up?

RS: I don't know.

HT: Bad acoustics maybe.

RS: Mmm.

HT: Makes a difference to a performance, doesn't it?

RS: Oh God, but some people are so - their diction is so wonderful that you can hear no matter where or what, but it's a lost art you see, if you've always got a little microphone tucked into your lapel, you...

HT: You don't speak up.

RS: No, you don't speak up. It's the same with singers. I get - it's my hobby horse, my son says 'Oh mum, leave off,' but I mean I write words and when I think of how long it takes to write lyrics for a song, you say 'shall I put glimmer, or shall I put glow? Or shall I, you know that won't fit,' you know, and you do all that and then some berk comes and puts a microphone [acts a microphone pressed to her mouth] right there and you can't understand a word and I think why don't they just sing la la la? Why don't they just make it up as they go along? Because somebody sweated over those words.

HT: I mean a lot of lyrics are almost poetry, aren't they.

RS: Yes.

HT: Like you said.

RS: Yes and you should be able to hear them, I mean they should touch you, otherwise why are you singing them?

HT: Mmm.



RS: You know.

HT: And also with lines as well and dialogue when they deliver them, they often get lost.

RS: Mmm. A Taste of Honey, she never did anything else after that really, did she?

HT: Delaney.

RS: Not much.

HT: Did you ever – Joan Littlewood worked with that play I think.

RS: Yes, and who was in it? Rita Tushingham and Dora Bryan.

HT: Yes.

RS: That's right, yes.

HT: I think she's here today actually.

RS: Is she?

HT: I think one of my friends is interviewing...

RS: Oh right.

HT: Or someone who played Jo in A Taste of Honey anyway.

RS: And Malcolm – I can't remember who played the gay...I can't remember. Rita Tushingham still works, I saw her in something and she was very good as well.

RS: It was fun, it was fun. There was a sort of – and you see Hair came out then, and I can remember going to see it and thinking – What year was Hair? And singing, you know, 'This is the dawning of the age of Aquarius' down Regent Street and larking about, you know, it was really – We all knew each other of course and I was doing cabaret after the show, particularly when I was in Flower Drum Song, not this one, I was worn out, but in Flower Drum Song I only had a small part to play, although I was understudy to both the leads in that and I used to go and do cabaret afterwards, and it was quite funny because we would line up and take one curtain call or maybe two, or maybe three and it was Friday night and I'd got up early and I'd got a cabaret and I was desperate to get off as the curtain came down for the second half and I thought, Oh right that's it, so I ran across the stage and up it went and there was I half way across, you know, sort of stand still, I got a rocket for that. And then we went to the – I can't remember which club it was, and there were all the boys from West Side Story came round and the doorman wouldn't let them in because they had all got sideboards and they all looked like villains you see, because they'd got these amazing – they were all Puerto Rican and things like this and they had all got these dark sideboards and we said 'They're in West Side Story, they're not villains for goodness sake, don't you know what's going on?'

HT: What so they weren't letting them in because they weren't looking like respectable theatregoers?

RS: Yes, quite. They'd all come to see us you see, we were all friends.

HT: For support, yes.

RS: Yes.

HT: So was it like a community then? There was no resentment amongst you?

RS: Well, there was a bit, there always is people in any job aren't there?

HT: Yes.

RS: I mean, wherever.

HT: Competing for the top role.

RS: I was always a bit green about things like that, you know, even when as a student I see afterwards, oh I see, I see why she was being so nice to so and so, it never occurred to me.

HT: So, would you recommend a career in the theatre?

RS: No, not unless you are prepared for loads of heartbreak. Not unless you – I mean my goddaughter's an actress, my best friend, both her daughters are in the business and as they say, you can make a killing but you can't make a living. It's very tough, very tough and you've got to be able to – I think what's galling now and it's galling for every profession, not just in the theatre but writers and everybody is this cult of celebrity where you can do something totally stupid and wave your knickers in the air or do something absolutely ridiculous and get on some crass programme, you can make yourself a career out of nothing at all!

HT: Yes, look at reality TV.

RS: Yes, yes. What was it, a wonderful line in Judge John Deed, they had one about reality TV and the writer wrote, 'it is the talentless watched by the mindless.' I thought that was rather good.

HT: So, cynical of the audience then.

RS: [Laughs] Well. And you know when they say, 'you have to give an audience what they want,' I mean they enjoyed hangings at Tyburn, but we don't still do that, I mean you don't have to give audiences what they want in actual fact.

HT: Yes.

RS: You have to surprise audiences, you have to give audiences something they didn't know they wanted, but they did and that is a whole different ball game.

HT: Yes.

RS: Pinter can do it... Are you doing Osborne are you doing John Osborne?

HT: Yes, and I'm trying to remember the name – oh, The Entertainer.

RS: Oh yes.

HT: We looked at that and – I mean, we've discussed Look Back in Anger, but I've – I mean, it was a very...

RS: Bit overrated quite honestly.

HT: Do you think?

RS: When you look at it, I think so, yes.

HT: They say that was the turning point of theatre, didn't they?

RS: Yes I know, well I can remember seeing it and thinking well this is a bit boring, it wasn't a turning point for me, it didn't tell me anything I didn't already know, really and truly. It only told people seventy plus things that they didn't already know.

HT: Yes.

RS: and I think that for the younger people it was – I thought, oh why doesn't she get rid of that ironing board, you know.

HT: Yes. Do you not think that it was a first for theatre though? I mean I know it was conveying everyday life on the stage

RS: I suppose it was, but I don't know. But you know, theatre is quite strange now, you long for the well-made play, go and see something that's really got – The first time I went to see Art, I didn't see Finney, I saw three other actors I can't remember who it was and I thought well she didn't work very hard, she could have written a second act, fancy getting away with this.

HT: Yes.

RS: and it wasn't until I saw it the second time, I saw it with Barry Foster , Nigel Havers and Roger Lloyd Pack. They'd been touring it for months and they were so close the three of them that it suddenly worked, it suddenly became, you know, a really viable piece of theatre.

HT: Do you think theatre now compared to the 1950s or 1945-1968, do you think it's perhaps more to entertain an audience rather than to educate? Do you think certain plays before 1968 were there to educate.

RS: I don't think they were there so much to educate, I mean we do now have our David Hares and you know I mean everything he writes is because he is angry about something or another.

HT: Yes.

RS: Then there was that wonderful play, which I can't remember the name of; I'm hopeless at names, about the railways, about accidents on the railways, you know. It was done at The Cottesloe, I can't think what it was called, but it was all set on stations and you know, that was because someone was angry.

HT: Yes.

RS: And they can write – I think when you're really whipped up about something you can write a brilliant play and I... think it was more craftsmanship with the Victorians and people like that, but of course we're getting those all revived again at things like The Orange Tree. That's another very very good Fringe theatre.

HT: The Orange Tree

RS: The Orange Tree at Richmond. Sam Waters, I've done classes with Sam Waters. He's very bright and he's very original and he knows how to run a theatre and he digs up plays that people haven't seen for donkey's years and puts them on really well, but he'll give new stuff a plug as well, he's good. Got to have somebody who – I mean running a theatre, it's your life really.

HT: Yes, it's a lifestyle I guess.

RS: Mmm, that's the kind of person. But I do think we need theatre, I mean football is fine but it's got such huge, a huge hold on our society and it's quite strange, you go to India and they say [in Indian accent] 'You know David Beckham?' and you say 'not personally.'

HT: Yes

RS: and you think well, maybe that's a good thing, maybe if they're thinking that maybe David Beckham can unite the world, if he could please God, but I'd like it to be the theatre, I'd like it to be something a bit more... you know?

HT: Yes, sure... Well Ruth, it has been an absolute pleasure. Thank you very much.

RS: My pleasure. No I've enjoyed it.

HT: Good. Is there anything else you would like to add?

RS: Don't think so, no.

HT: That's great, thank you very much.