

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

<http://sounds.bl.uk>

## Sue Thornton – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Laura Teague**

**4 December 2008**

Stage Manager. Alan Ayckbourn; Assistant Stage Manager; Ronnie Barker; censorship; Central School of Speech and Drama; Robert Chetwyn; Michael Codron; commercial stage management; Company Manager; Equity; Michael Frayn; Ipswich Arts Theatre (later the Wolsey Theatre); Betty Jumel; John Neville; Noises Off; Nottingham Playhouse; Nottingham Playhouse repertoire; The Real Inspector Hound; stage management; stage management hierarchy; Tom Stoppard; The Two of Us; understudying; variety.

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

LT: I'd like to begin by asking you about your first experiences of the theatre and what got you interested in pursuing it as a career.

ST: Well this is very, very early, my first experiences, because actually my grandmother's family worked in variety, way back since the end of the First World War, and so when I was a child in the late forties – can you believe this? – when I was a child in the late forties and early fifties, we always used to go and see pantomimes, which – probably by that point some of my grandmother's brothers had died. My grandmother wasn't working in it any more but my grandmother's two brothers had a Double Act in variety, and then one of them died and the remaining brother used to do pantomime. Also, the other brother's wife also was a very famous music hall artist [called Betty Jumel] and so I always used to go and see her in pantomime. So probably from about the age of three I would go every year to see a pantomime, and I would go backstage and see my uncles and aunts and be involved in it like that.

LT: Wow, that's fantastic! So it was a proper family affair then?

ST: So it was a proper family affair, on my mother's side, if you like, although my mother wasn't in theatre and my father definitely wasn't in theatre. And when I was growing up as a teenager, I really loved theatre and I loved to go to the theatre, and I had this feeling, that often happens in families, particularly males in families; if your father's a lawyer, then you go on to be a lawyer, if your father's a doctor then you go on to be a doctor, and I was thinking, 'I love theatre so much', but I absolutely hated performing, I was never ever going to act, never, and so I discovered during my teenage years – I lived in Suffolk at that point – and I discovered in my teenage years I could do quite a lot of

amateur dramatics. And also I lived near to Ipswich, and Ipswich had a theatre – still has a theatre today – which was called... it was called the Ipswich Arts Theatre, and it then became the Wolsey Theatre. It was one of the major repertory theatres in this country, and so as well as doing a lot of my amateur things, I always used to go and see everything they did. I think they probably did weekly or fortnightly rep then, so just look at this pile of programmes that I've brought along here for all the things I thought were good, and there are people in here, who, you know, are today the great actors, [laughs] it's just incredible! You know, last night I was looking at this programme here, seeing if this is the one, where I saw Ian McKellen in it, Edward Fox [shows programmes] –

LT: Oh wow! –

ST: Look [points] Gawn Grainger, these are people – and directed by Robert Chetwyn and this is quite interesting because when I later went on to work in the West End, Robert Chetwyn was the director of the very first production I did in the West End. So I had this fantastic resource to go and see really, I think, good theatre, you know, and it just made me want to do it even more. And so when I was eighteen and it was time to decide whether to go to university or not, I researched whether you could do anything different from university and I knew that actors could go to drama school, and then I found out that there were one or two drama schools – which would have been in 1963, when I was 18 – there one or two drama schools that were doing technical theatre and one of them was the Central School of Speech and Drama and the other one, I think, was RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art), I don't think LAMDA (London Academy of Music and Drama) had started its courses yet, nor Guildhall where I am now, as the Director of Technical Theatre and Head of Drama. So I applied to Central, and I got in, and between 1963 and 1965 I trained there as a Stage Manager.

LT: So what sort of things did they do there to train you?

ST: Well, very much the same sort of things that you'd do now, you learn how professional stage management operates, and we also did all of the subjects related to it, which would be sound and lighting and making props, perhaps doing a little bit of costume, all of those sort of things.

LT: Fantastic, and then you went to the Nottingham Playhouse?

ST: Yes, when I left there in 1965 – my father was very kind of down about it, he thought I was never, ever going to get any work, and three weeks after I left I saw an advertisement in *The Stage* that they wanted an Assistant Stage Manager in the Nottingham Playhouse, and I thought this was absolutely incredible because Nottingham Playhouse from about, I think this was probably about 1963 or 1964, was a new building, it was a fantastic new building and it was led by a great, great actor-director called John Neville and it became the top repertory company in the country - it was bigger than Stratford in the mid-sixties, the Nottingham Playhouse.

LT: Yeah, I was surprised to read that actually, because being such a new theatre it seemed to take off very quickly.

ST: It absolutely did, and so I saw this advertisement for this Assistant Stage Manager job and I went to the Spotlight offices in Leicester Square which is where, to this day still, theatres, regional theatres come in to interview and to audition people, and I met John Neville there and I got the job as Assistant Stage Manager. And each year in September they took on a whole new company for the year, for the whole year, occasionally some people would only come for part of the season but in general they were there for the whole of the year. I was just recalling who was in my company that year, Judi Dench was in the company, Alan Howard was in the company, John Shrapnel, Edward Woodward, these are all people who are now, kind of, you know, our famous, famous actors. John Neville was the major director and he was assisted by an American guy called Michael Rudman, who went on to be a very important director, an American director, and there was a trainee director there, who took a tour [to the Far East] and he was called Richard Eyre, and of course, he went on, is now Sir Richard Eyre went on to be, to run the National Theatre, you know, and to make all the [TV] programmes about theatre history [called Changing Stages]. So it was just an absolutely incredible, incredible company. So in the summer of that year, I graduated I think in the July, and by the August I was in Nottingham with a one year contract as Assistant Stage Manager.

Stage management teams then were very, very different to how they are now. In stage management teams now you usually have somebody called a Company Manager, then you sometimes have a Stage Manager as well, then you have a Deputy Stage Manager, who runs the whole show from what's called the prompt corner, and then you had Assistant Stage Managers, and most of these Assistant Stage Managers today - in fact all of the Assistant Stage Managers - are technical theatre trained. In those days [at Nottingham Playhouse] you had one Assistant Stage Manager that was trained in technical theatre and the remaining six of them, they were all guys and they were all actors, and they were doing what was called 'Acting ASM' and it was how the theatre company could help train young actors who had just left drama school and give them small parts but they also had to do some stage management as well and it was always a nightmare because they never, ever wanted to do it and they were never very keen to do it but they had to, it was the sort-of sword carriers, you know, the sword bearers, the walk-on parts that young actors perhaps get when they go to the RSC or perhaps the National in their very first jobs, so it was quite difficult. In relation to the set-up of the stage management team there was what's called a Production Manager and then there was a Stage Manager and then there were all these Assistant Stage Managers. This role of Deputy Stage Manager hadn't really arrived in repertory theatre.

Nottingham Playhouse had a repertoire season, which is the sort of type of season you see now at the National Theatre and that was quite different from what [they did], say at Ipswich Theatre when I'd been to the theatre. They had a two weekly rep, they'd rehearse the one underneath it, while the one was playing at night and then change over at the weekend, then play that one, then rehearse another one, a very, very hard life. At Nottingham Playhouse they decided in this new theatre to do a repertoire season, which meant - look, here's just an example of this advertisement - there would be all these plays in the repertoire and there would be one Stage Manager looking after one and then another Stage Manager looking after the other so that you did have some nights off. It was quite interesting if you look at the schedule here, you see that like in this one week, Monday and Tuesday they played The Astrakhan Coat, then Wednesday they played The Caretaker, Thursday they did The Astrakhan Coat, Friday and Saturday they did Saint Joan and these were all rehearsed and brought into the repertoire, which

is of course how the National Theatre now works, it has this repertoire system, which makes it much easier to bring things in which are successful and things which are not so successful can come out. So they had the Production Manager, and they had two Stage Managers, and they had one Technical ASM which was me, and then about five or six of these Acting ASMs, who have all gone on to be directors and actors. [Laughs] I saw one on the television on Sunday evening, Donald Sumpter, he was in a television programme. I was thinking 'Oh my goodness, I just remember when you were an ASM along beside me'. Anyway, my job was to get the props together in particular to do the sound effects, which today, of course, would be digital. They weren't even on a looped tape, they were actually on something which was called a panatrope which was two big discs of sound effects or maybe a record if it was a music effect and you had to line up – it had a sort of arm that came out – and you lined up the needle on it exactly on the right sort-of marked spot so that it landed on the record that was going round at exactly the right moment.

LT: Fascinating!

ST: So I did that for the Autumn season, and in January a sort of disaster happened at Nottingham Playhouse, to one of the Stage Managers, he was called Peter, and he had to have an emergency appendix operation, he had to be rushed to hospital, and I had to take over his shows because I was the only person in all these Assistant Stage Managers who knew what to do because I was trained to do it, although it was quite nerve-racking so I was asked to take over his shows and we had within the team somebody who was called a Student ASM who was a local girl, called Annie – still a dear, dear friend – she was training to be an apprentice, so I trained her to do all the sound effects, and everything that I did, and I took over his shows. That didn't mean only running his shows in the evenings of course, he was rehearsing other shows to come into the repertoire, so I then had to take over doing his shows that were coming in, and he was very, very ill and it took him a long, long time to recover, I think he was gone about 8-12 weeks, and at the end of these 12 weeks he decided not to come back and so I think it was by Easter, which is only like, under a year out of drama school they offered me the job of the second Stage Manager at Nottingham Playhouse –

LT: That's incredible!

ST: In the midst of this illustrious company, you know, it was just, just amazing. I was 21, [laughs] so it was just an incredible, incredible thing, but it was a bit like jumping in at the deep end because I was working with some really fantastic actors, wonderful directors, wonderful designers but it was definitely a steep learning curve, as to know how to deal with some of these people but, I have the happiest, happiest memories of it, I'm still friends with many of the people who I was at Nottingham Playhouse with. Interestingly, here is a picture from the newspaper, and this is the picture of us when we first joined, actually there's Donald Sumpter who I saw on the television the other night, he was one of the Assistant Stage Managers, over here I think this is somebody called Giles, no that was Giles Block, Giles Block went on to be the director at the Globe, this is Michael Rudman very, very famous director...there's John Neville over there, Alfie Bass, Ursula Smith, here this [person] is called Alan Dossier he went on to be a great director, a television director. All these people have gone on to be the – this is Alec Guinness' son – they have gone on to be really the sort-of heart of modern day theatre and I was just

looking at who was in some of these, I'm not sure whether I can see Judi Dench in there but she was definitely in that first company – John Shrapnel, great, great actor, great actor – so in this first season we did *Measure for Measure* in which Judi Dench played opposite John Neville, I'll show you a photograph in a moment, *Saint Joan* where she played *Saint Joan*, and she played in *The Country Wife*, by William Wycherley, and I also did *The Caretaker* and I did *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and also some of the other productions. I've brought this wonderful book here, which is '*Nottingham Playhouse 1963-1968*' which has got all the productions and who directed it and who did the music or who did something in it or whatever. This is a couple of productions before I arrived but there's Ian McKellen there who'd obviously just come up from Ipswich, and this is John Neville and Gemma Jones, she's a very famous actor today. And this more moves onto the season that I was in, there's Alan Howard and Judi Dench doing that because Alan Howard took over from John and then John Neville played it with someone called Sarah Jane Gwillim who I was at Drama School with. Here is an example of *Caesar* with Alan Dossier, director now; and Giles Block, National Theatre; Michael Keating; Donald Sumpter; Harold Innocent died recently; John Turner; Ronald McGill; John Tordoff; David Neil. That was *Julius Caesar* and there's John Turner and Barbara Jefford, she was a very particularly famous female actress who did most of the Shakespeare plays at the Royal Shakespeare Company. John Neville playing *Faustus*, fascinating isn't it? There's Ann Bell and John Neville in a production of *Beware of the Dog*, so these were all the productions that were around the time that I was there. Bill Maynard who was initially a comedian in this country and was in variety, who went on to be an actor and he played Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* so we were doing really, really tremendous productions there, which I'm so proud to have been part of, as you can imagine.

LT: Yeah that's fantastic. I see in there that there's quite a lot of Shakespeare plays you did, but then on bill there you've got *The Caretaker* as well –

ST: That's right and that was very early to do *The Caretaker*. That was - *The Caretaker* - the moment really that the Chamberlain had released it from not being able to swear, et cetera, so that was a very important, you know, you could say 'piss off' on stage which you couldn't ever say before. Considering actors and actresses often have quite vulgar language.

LT: Yeah. What was the balance like between traditional and classics and the new-wave plays?

ST: I think there was a pretty good balance actually and I think that John Neville was a person introducing a programme which was very, very varied and maybe if we look at the season that I started, '65-'66, it was *Measure for Measure* - Shakespeare of course - and *Private Lives* with Judi Dench playing in that, and then we did *Richard II* and then we did a new musical called '*Old Yer Tight*' which was written by someone called Ian Williams and then we did a Brecht, *Schweik* in the Second World War then for Christmas we did *A Christmas Carol*. Interestingly - I must just tell you about this because Wilfred Bramble, do you know who he was?

LT: No.

ST: Well he was in a television series which was about two junk men [Steptoe + Son]. He was a very, very famous TV personality and he came to play in A Christmas Carol - and that was at the end, of the first time, the Christmas, and I'd been there since about August-September, and I had to be in Christmas Carol, not because I wanted to but because it was very difficult to get an Equity card, and the only way you could get an Equity card is if you were an actor so I had to have a very, very small dancing, singing part in Christmas Carol so that I could get my Equity card, so that Equity would accept me, because you had to be a member of Equity to be able to get an Equity contract and Equity pay. Although each repertory company was able to give two Equity cards a year, or three or four, they gave them to the young actors being ASMs and not to me and so I had to appear in that to get it. So, then we did Country Wife – Restoration - then we did some more Shakespeare, As You Like It, then we did Robert Bolt, A Man For All Seasons, The Caretaker, and then we did a new play called The Astrakhan Coat, then we had Saint Joan, yes we had Saint Joan with Judi Dench in it and Measure for Measure again, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Chekov, and Dr. Faustus and then a musical. And in the year that followed – so you can see it's classical stuff, you know, great playwrights and a bit of modern stuff coming in. So in the following season, there was Julius Caesar, Hedda Gabler, Anthony and Cleopatra... a new play by Charles Wood called Fill The Stage With Happy Hours, then Oliver Goldsmith's She Stoops to Conquer, Christmastime: Jack and the Beanstalk, happy memories of that, then Arthur Miller Death of a Salesman, then a new one called Beware of the Dog, then a Henry Livings play Stop It, Whoever You Are, then a Sean O'Casey: The Silver Tassie, then Moliere's The Miser, a new play called Bread and Butter by C.P. Taylor, then Midsummer Night's Dream. So you see we had a really broad range, this was decided by John Neville, the reason why Nottingham Playhouse was great at that time was because he chose the plays and he chose the company. He had been a young actor in the West End, he'd been at Stratford and so he was able to call upon all his friends to be able to come and be part of the seasons that he had there. Then, I think it was virtually at the end of my second year there which would have been '67, '66-'67, he had a big dispute with the council, in Nottingham, because they were putting up a lot of money to fund this, although it had very, very good box office, still you needed to have Arts Council funding and local funding from the local council. I think the borough council at that point started to have ideas of grandeur in relation to their view of theatre and they told him that they were going to choose the plays. Can you believe it?

LT: Right, and how did that go down?

ST: He kind of announced, he called the whole company together and announced to them that, what he thought this dreadful, dreadful thing was going to happen, and therefore that he had handed in his notice, and was only going to do one more season. And so, he did one more season after I left, but I decided at that point that I'd done two years and that if it was all going to end in a year's time anyway, this kind of wonder, that maybe it was time now for me to go back to London. So, in the summer of 1967, along with quite a lot of people, they left, although we had a new set of actors in this second year, and very, very interesting that it started to change from that point onwards, and in the end, he left and he also left the country, and he went to Canada and he worked at the Shakespeare Ontario Theatre there and then he also did a lot of teaching and it's only probably in the last ten years that actually he's ever come back to this country. I'm not sure if he lives here now I think he still lives in Canada, and this was

a great actor of our generation, John Neville. Just before I move onto perhaps the next subject, I don't know whether I'll fill an hour with this, I'd just like to show you this photograph here from a local newspaper which gives a picture of the company that first year, and we were invited to go to Cotgrave Colliery which was near to Leicester, as part of publicity that you would do for the season, and we went to this Colliery and as you can see there are only two female faces here. There's my face here and this is Judi Dench. This is John Neville, and we were invited to be able to go down the pit, and at this point at that pit, no women had ever, ever been down the pit, so Judi and I were the first people to go down this pit, and therefore we had to go into a male dressing and we had to put on these male pit clothes and I remember I was laughing and laughing and laughing in this dressing room putting them on, asking which way round we had to put things on, we laughed so much. Anyway this is after we went down the pit and as you can see they've got slightly dirty faces there, coming up from going to the pit, so very, very historic photograph really, I don't know whether Cotgrave Colliery has got this but I definitely, definitely have got this photograph and it's one of my great treasures.

LT: That is amazing!

ST: So when I came back to London after being two years [in Nottingham] – this would now be in '67-'68, let me just check whether this because I was there '66-'67, '67-'68, so in the summer of 1968 I came back to London, and it was time now to see if I could break into, what I wanted to break into, which was to work in the West End and I also did want to go and work in television and I did in the following couple of years manage to get work in television. But through various contacts I started to contact West End producers to see if I could get a job because I felt that I'd got a very good CV: I'd been 18 months a Stage Manager at the top rep in the country. But it was much harder than I thought, much, much harder. It started to become blatantly clear that to break into what is commercial theatre, a very different to the sort-of theatre I had worked in, I would have to go back to the bottom, and not only would I have to go back to the bottom, I would also... the only way I was going to get a job as an ASM on a West End show was to understudy, OK. And so I did get my very first job on a production which was in a way quite unique, I got my first job as an ASM in the West End on a production by Tom Stoppard called *The Real Inspector Hound* which is only a one-act play, and it was preceded by another short play called *The Audition* by Sean Patrick Vincent, but more interesting was to be working with Tom Stoppard and Tom Stoppard hadn't so far written that much, but of course he had been the author of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and that had had great success at the National Theatre and had won the best play for 1967 so he'd written - he'd only actually been writing since 1960, and he hasn't got much else written here of the plays that he'd done, of course now he's one of our greatest playwrights, so I'd quite like to tell you of my memories of him. So, first of all, apart from being at the National Theatre he had never worked in commercial theatre before and the producer of this show was somebody I was going to go on to work for many times in the future, and he is called Michael Codron. Have you heard of Michael Codron? Because he was in the exhibition here at the museum, the Library, because he was one of the great producers who encouraged new writing, and he put them on commercially, you know, Simon Gray, Tom Stoppard, you name it he - Alan Ayckbourn, he was one of the first people to employ Alan Ayckbourn, and I worked later on with Alan Ayckbourn on various productions in the West End, so this was one of the, sort-of, first outings really of Michael Codron using new playwrights. It was directed by Robert Chetwyn, who had been the director at the Arts Theatre in Ipswich where I'd

gone to when I was a teenager, and I think probably you might be surprised to see who the two stars of it were, [they were] Richard Briers and Ronnie Barker!

LT: Wow!

ST: Ronnie Barker at that point was hardly known as a comedian and he had been a young actor and learned his trade as an actor, although he was starting to write now for David Frost and for those sort-of very critical programmes that were coming on in television, which were very satirical. So first of all there was Richard Briers and he was an established actor. But if you look at Ronnie Barker's CV he started working in 1948 with the Aylesbury repertory company and in 1951 he joined Oxford Playhouse, now most people would never know that he was an actor. So let me just tell you a bit about Tom Stoppard, Tom Stoppard hadn't really quite finished *The Real Inspector Hound*, or he'd finished it and because it was a new play there needed to be lots of changes to it. Up until this point, any plays that ever came into the West End, be they new plays or even plays that had already been written, there would be a tour, [there] would always be a pre-London tour and then [it] would come into London and open directly after it had been round the country for a bit, and that happened to me on other plays that I toured with before they came in. But Michael Codron wanted to try out, I'm not sure why he decided to do that, but he wanted to try out *The Real Inspector Hound* without taking it on tour, so we had a series of previews, which of course they quite normally do now, they pre-view things, and then there is an opening night further on, but that never used to be the way, they used to do the pre-London tour, and get it up and ready, so that by the time it came into London they'd just have a dress rehearsal and then would be opening night. So we previewed quite a lot, I think we previewed for something like two weeks and during this time quite a lot of changes came about because - I don't know if you know *The Real Inspector Hound*, but it's about two critics watching a murder play and somehow they get involved in it. So during these previews every day we'd go to the theatre, the next morning, and we'd re-rehearse various things and in particular Tom would rewrite some things. There was a little prop room to the start [at the side of the stage], and I would sit and he would say to me the new script and I would type it for him, he'd say, you know, he'd just say it out [loud], or from his scribbled notes and I'd change all the script, and we'd have to - no photocopiers then - you'd then have to put, you know carbon paper in and then give out the script, because there was no-one else to do that sort of work, so I helped type out this very first script of *The Real Inspector Hound*. And then of course there was this dreadful fact that I had to understudy, I did have to understudy this, quite a small part, and I had to understudy the part of... I'll have to look it up now, I can't remember the lady's name, I had to understudy the part of... Felicity which was a girl who somehow got caught up in this murder. And part of this story is that during it, they have to play a card game, in the play, and of course you have to have the cards in the right sequence and you have to remember all the cards that you put down, and every time I ever did a rehearsal for it I always got it wrong, and I used to get in such a state before I went to the theatre every night because I thought; 'Oh, what if I have to go on tonight? What will happen? It will all fall apart!' and we were directed by the Company Manager, now these days in productions they have Assistant Directors to direct the understudies, but way back in then, they couldn't afford that and they didn't have them, the Assistant Director role hadn't really arrived, and later on when I was Company Manager I had to direct the actors, the understudy actors. I remember the Company Manager was called Michael Ginesi, you know, holding his head in horror every time we had this understudy rehearsal. But then [he] insisted that we had a rehearsal with the leads, with Richard and Ronnie and all the other people, so



they came in one afternoon to do the understudy rehearsal [laughs] with us and doing it with them was even worse and it made me dry, as we say, all over the place, you know, I just kept getting the words wrong, I remember Ronnie Barker saying to me afterwards, 'Oh Sue, I really hope you don't have to go on! I really hope you don't have to go on!' I said 'Ronnie, so do I!'

So anyway, I stayed with this production for about six or seven months I didn't stay for the whole of the run, you did have to sign a contract for the whole of the run but if the producer had another production coming up and you were, or you went to another production where you were upgraded to a more senior role, Equity allowed you to get out of your contract and so because I'd been a Stage Manager [before], I didn't really need to do this ASM stuff but I was only doing it to get into the West End, so I was asked by him - by the producer - to go onto another production, that would have been in 1969-70 where I was going to be the Deputy Stage Manager, because Deputy Stage Manager had arrived as this role in the West End, which hadn't quite arrived in repertory companies and so I moved on to rehearse and work in another production in the West End at the Prince of Wales and one week after I left the ASM who took over from me had to go on. I missed it by just one week, you know, with the most enormous relief! At that point, in the West End, in the late sixties and maybe early seventies we had this hierarchy of there being a job called a Company Stage Manager, a Deputy Stage Manager and Assistant Stage Managers, mainly Acting Assistant [Stage Manager] because they didn't want to pay for the understudies although there were occasionally for Richard and Ronnie there were walking understudies, do you know what a walking understudy is? Somebody who sits in the dressing room and, you know, is there every night and ready to go on. Sometimes you'd have an understudy who was part of the company and they upgrade and then maybe one of these acting ASMs will take in the lower roles or something like that. But I missed it by one week and never ever again, because that was my only time as an ASM in the West End. I then went on to be a Deputy Stage Manager because I had been that role really at Nottingham Playhouse.

And then after doing quite a few productions, I kept asking Michael Codron; 'Can I be a Company Manager?' and he said to me, 'No, no, no you can't be a Company Manager. Only men are Company Managers, only men, only men, only men'. And the Production Manager was the person who appointed everybody, and there was this time in 1972, when they were going to do a play called- an Ayckbourn, called... [Time and Time Again] I know this is not within your [time] range, but they invited me to go to lunch to discuss about being Deputy Stage Manager on this play [with] Tom Courtenay by Alan Ayckbourn. I said to [him] 'Can I be the Company Manager' and [he replied] 'No, terribly sorry, you know, only men are Company Managers' and I said 'Well who's going to be the Company Manager? And I said 'Oh, look that is not fair. I was at drama school with him, I have done more experience than him, I've done two years at Nottingham Playhouse, I cannot see why, you know, this is just not on', they said 'Terribly sorry, Nick [Bromley], you know, Nick is moving over from his production and we've already invited him to do it, so can't do'. But I really did want to work on an Ayckbourn play because he was now the up and coming, early seventies, he was the up and coming playwright and so I agreed to do it. Three weeks before the show was about to start rehearsals this guy called Nick was on a production called Butley at The Criterion and the lead actor was going to have to leave and the director wasn't available to re-direct somebody to take over and it was a very successful play, so Nick had to stay because he'd directed the understudies, [he] had to stay to direct the next actor coming in, so they looked and looked and looked and they couldn't find anybody and so in the end they asked me to be Company Manager and I think probably one of the first women Company Managers in the West End.

LT: Was that something prevalent at the time with women being quite inferior to men in terms of roles?

ST: I would say so, certainly in the West End there were never any women Company Managers, but now it's quite common and once I had become Company Manager it was then easy to go on because it was like you knew the secrets, because there are secrets to do with Company Management. When you are Company Manager you are in charge of that production for the producer, you know all about the financial situation, you know all about the box office, you know how much the lead actor is getting, you know his percentage every night based on how many people are in the house, you know the agents, you know everything and so it is incredibly interesting.

There is one more story that I would like to tell, and I know it's a bit outside this period but I would love to have it written, I would love to have it recorded for posterity, OK. I think this is probably about 1970...probably about 1971, Michael Codron again, and this is a production by a writer, very, very famous now, called called Michael Frayn, it was directed by MC [Mark Cullingham], but Michael Frayn was a very up and coming playwright at that point and he wrote four short plays, specifically for two characters. Lynn Redgrave was one of these and Richard Briers was the other - noting of course that I had already worked with Richard Briers, and I in fact was the Deputy Stage Manager on this production. It, as I described to you, went on tour before it came into London and in fact while we were on tour Michael Frayn took out one of the plays because it really, really wasn't working and never got any good response because they were all comedies and I in particular loved this production, I really, really loved it, and I got to know Lynn and Richard very well on it. But the fourth play in the series - the first one was called Black and Silver, the second one was called The New Quixote, then there was Mr. Foot and then finally there was this one called Chinamen and Chinamen was a play that actually didn't have two characters in it, actually it had four characters in it, and they had to play two characters each and how they did this was by rushing offstage and changing their clothes and slightly changing a voice, or changing a wig or sometimes an understudy being seen to crawl behind a sofa which you'd think was the actor and actually wasn't, was somebody else and a bit of doubling like that and so it was absolutely frenetic, it was so frenetic. From the minute it started, [I was the] Deputy Stage Manager in the prompt corner giving all the cues and making sure everything is happening and I would look forward every single evening to the moment we would do Chinamen because from the minute it started the tears would stream down my face. Not only was it funny onstage but more funny [was what was going on] offstage and when finally, the curtain came down we all would just cry with laughter about the events of that night, who had tripped over who etcetera. So, it's quite common for the playwrights, who'd written plays, to come in perhaps once a week or once a month or whatever to see how it's going, or maybe they might bring their guests in etcetera. Anyway, one night Michael Frayn came in I said to him 'Oh are you going to watch the show tonight?' and he said 'Yes, yes I am' so I said to him, 'You wouldn't like to come backstage for the last one would you?' and he said 'Why, Sue?' and I said 'Because it is so funny and I just don't know if you realise how funny it is backstage and I just know you'd love to see it to see what we have to achieve to get, what's on stage, you see, what we have to do back there, to get it on the stage'.

So he came backstage and watched it. I don't recall him saying anything particular afterwards or whatever and then I think probably in about 1981, I go to the theatre one night, to see a play by Michael Frayn called Noises Off and the first act of Noises Off

you see the play [on stage], the second act it turns round and you see what's going on backstage for that same scene and then it turns round for the third act to the show on tour several months later after lots of difficult things have happened, and as you watch [it] you know everything that's going on or could be going on backstage. And the night I went to see it –funnily enough it was at the Savoy Theatre - I am sitting behind Michael Codron, the producer and he produced it as well. And I tapped Michael on the shoulder in the interval and I said to him, 'Michael', I said, 'I think you've got me to thank for this play', and he said 'why?' and so I said, 'Well actually when we did *The Two Of Us*, I invited Michael backstage to see how we were doing *Chinamen* and I know he got the idea from there, he must have done, you see'. So Michael was very generous bought some champagne and everything in the interval and I was just back from sort-of maternity leave at that point so he was being kind to me anyway.

Anyway so it goes on and so I sort-of slightly dined out on this, whenever I see *Noises Off* I say 'that was down to me', you know, but I've never, ever, had it confirmed. The play was brought back into the National Theatre repertoire a few years ago, and at the National Theatre, one of the main parts played by a friend of mine called Susie Blake and then when it went into the Piccadilly Theatre, Lynn Redgrave came over from America, because actually she went over to live in America and did a lot of work in films and television in America, came over to play it, and by this time I was teaching in drama schools, so I sent her a card. I read something in the newspaper first of all, where she said, Michael Frayn came backstage when she was playing *Chinamen* and that he wrote the role for her because he realised that it was such a funny thing, you see, that he wrote the role for her. So I sent her a card and said 'Lynn, I'm so glad you said that because up until now it's only been my thought that that's where he got it from because, you know, I did invite him back that night, you see'.

Anyway, so I did know that [it was true] but something even more interesting happened two years ago. I live in Richmond now, two years ago, we have a local theatre called *The Orange Tree* run by Sam Walters and occasionally on a Sunday evening they have, you know, events, etcetera and they have an event once a year called 'Desert Island Plays' and they invite four people to come along to discuss which plays they would like to take along to a desert island, and my dear friend Diana Devlin, said 'come along Sue, we're going to see this tonight, I'm going to get you a ticket and we're going to go because Michael Frayn's in it', you know, I was telling her the story, you see, 'Michael Frayn's coming along' anyway, I go to this thing and they're discussing various plays, there's Michael Frayn, there's a critic, there's Alan Clarke from *Hampstead Theatre*, and I can't remember who else was there, but four people. And Alan Clarke, this director was talking about one of Michael Frayn's plays which was an earlier play, I don't know whether it's listed here, no probably not, but he apparently wrote a play about Enid Blyton and he was talking about this play, and he said to Michael, 'That play when I saw it, had the very beginnings of *Noises Off* in it', you see, and I pricked my ears up [laughs] and then Michael Frayn replied 'Oh, no, that had nothing to do with *Noises Off*'. He said '*Noises Off* started the night I was invited backstage on *Chinamen* to see what was going on backstage and I realised that what was on the stage that there was also another play going on backstage and I was invited to see it, and I wrote it for Lynn Redgrave'. And I turned to Diana and I went to Diana, 'That was me!' and she said 'I know, Sue!' [laughs] and so afterwards I went to the bar and I thought 'I'm not letting this man go out of here until we've met again', so he came through from backstage and I grabbed his hand really quickly and said, 'Hello Michael, I don't suppose you remember me but I was Deputy Stage Manager on *The Two of Us* and I was so pleased that tonight that you mentioned that it was when you saw *Chinamen* backstage that you started *Noises Off*', I said, 'because I was the person who invited you back to see it

because I was the person who told you how funny it was'. And he went 'Sue', he said, 'lovely to see you again, I don't remember that it was you, but you know, if it was', and he kissed me on the cheek, 'I think I owe you a lot of money'. You know, so we talked and we talked about how it was going to be in America and Lynn Redgrave was going to play it in America, but, so maybe recorded for posterity, the very start of Noises Off was when Michael Frayn, of course that was 1971, so a bit, a bit later. Now, any more questions that you've want to ask?

LT: I would like to know, actually, in 1968, with the abolition of the Lord Chamberlain's censorship, what impact that had on where you were at the time and what impact it had generally?

ST: Well, I think first of all we were able to do *The Caretaker*, and up until that point I can't say that I was aware of it, but I now realise that I was aware of it, that places like the Royal Court and The Arts Theatre became these club theatres so that that sort of experimental work could be going on and therefore actors knew that there were wonderful playwrights around and there was a whole load of new young people coming up as writers that because they were being so honest and so modern, in the sixties, we're in late sixties now, you know, that it was a terrible shame that you couldn't actually pay to go to the theatre to see and it was free, and I do sort-of remember that when we did *The Caretaker* at Nottingham there was this amazing sense of liberation that happened, that there was an incredible freedom, and some people might say that that freedom has gone too far, but why should it be? Why should the state control theatre? Because in a way that's what was trying to happen at Nottingham, and it might well have been because he did *The Caretaker*, you never know, that actually that John Neville had to leave because he chose a play that was so controversial, it might well have been that.

LT: Yes, very possibly. What do you think the audience response was, between you've got the variation, did people prefer the new plays, the ones that were allowed through after censorship, or was censorship seen, should it not have been abolished, was that the response people had?

ST: No I think people were interested, this is the sixties, for goodness sake [laughs] this is the sixties, there was such a new movement going on there in absolutely everything, that it, the fact that it took 'til the late sixties for the Lord Chamberlain to be abolished, the blue pencil, the red pencil whatever it was, that changes had to be made, because it was being written, but the changes, various changes had to be made, so, you know, my memory is that the response was good, the people wanted to see new playwrights, wanted to see stuff like that, and the Royal Court became incredibly popular theatre.

LT: OK, fantastic. And then finally, what did you get most enjoyment out of staging, your personal memories? Or even as an audience member what did you most enjoy seeing?

ST: ...What did I like seeing?... Well I think I did like seeing all the new stuff that was coming on in the West End, but I think that my memories of it are working with great

actors, I think that's my memory and loving to be around actors. And it's not a matter of being star-struck, some young people these days coming into technical theatre are star-struck and I suppose you can imagine it's so - but when you work with great actors, particularly say, when you're looking at classical theatre, maybe Shakespeare, and Restoration and Brecht and things like that, you - it's a bit, it's very hard to say because it's the real reason I ever worked in theatre was to be able to be in another place, taken there by people, could you understand what I'm saying? And that would happen every day in the rehearsal room, you would be in that place, where it was happening, with people creating it in front of you, and you almost being an audience member there and you know, people like Judi Dench, they were great right from the very beginning. Judi Dench is one of the most amazing people speaking Shakespeare, she only has to open her mouth and you understand Shakespeare, John Neville was the same, Alan Howard the same, I've just recently seen Hamlet and Patrick Stewart is just incredible, he just opens his mouth and you understand it and it's because he completely understands it, he understands the rhythm of it, fabulous. So I love being around great, great artists, even now when I go to theatre today it is to see great plays but it is to see great actors, it's the actors that I love.

LT: And what, finally, would be your advice, I know you're a teacher now, what experience from the 1960s can you bring forward to your students?

ST: Well, I think that I learnt very early on, professionalism of theatre, and that professionalism has to exist in the actors and has to exist in the all the people that are together creating art. When my students come in I always say 'Theatre is a collaborative art', although the actors are on the stage performing it, without the Set Designer, without the Lighting Designer, without the Stage Manager, without the costume department, without everything, it would be nothing. One of those things absent from it, it all falls down, so it may not be that people would go to the theatre because I was the stage manager, that would never be the case that people would go to the theatre because I was the Stage Manager, but it is an appreciation that this collaboration goes on, to create great art, and the actors are the people that stand out front and the directors are the people whose names now bring it all together, as a sort of, the leader of the team but it is everybody's contribution to that, that creates great art and is still the case today. Very highly professional.

LT: Fantastic. Thank you very much.