

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Terence Frisby – interview transcript

Interviewer: Francesca Holdrick

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Playwright, actor, director, producer. Antony and Cleopatra; Peter Bridge; censorship; Robert Chetwyn; Michael Codron; critics; Gérard Depardieu; Barbara Ferris; Globe Theatre (now the Geilgud Theatre); Guildford Repertory Theatre; Sheila Hancock; Hugh Hastings; Phyllida Law; Eric Longworth; Merchant of Venice; Jon Pertwee; repertory theatre; Raymond Rouleau; Donald Sinden; The Subtopians; There's a Girl in my Soup; Edward Woodward.

TF: I left drama school in '57 and worked for the next four years as an actor in rep, mostly weekly rep and that was extremely hard work, you had to learn and rehearse a play in one week while you were performing another one in the evenings and it was an absolutely splendid time as far as I was concerned and I'm sure you'll find a lot of other actors from that era who will tell you how they just loved it. And I played all over the country, literally from Penzance where I spent a summer season, to, I think, York was about the furthest north I went. And during that time I wrote my first play which was called The Subtopians.

When I was at drama school in '56 I went to the Royal Court and I saw a play which just knocked me out. I thought it was the most wonderful thing I had ever heard with this wonderful invective against the establishment being hurled from the stage. It just seemed to make the whole world reel to me. It was called, of course, Look Back in Anger and all I wanted to do as a young actor was to play... Jimmy... Jimmy Porter, which I did twice. [That play] affected me very much and the minute I'd seen [it] I went away [to work] in rep. The second rep job I got I did not get on with the director at all and I'd been there for about six weeks when my letter of resignation and his letter of dismissal to me crossed, so we'll call that an honorable tie and I was left with one week while I was still playing in a play up there. I wasn't rehearsing during the day so I sat down in my digs and I thought 'I'll write my play this week and I'll take it back to London with me'. Well, I finished it some two years later, three years later, in between jobs and while I was working, and I gave it the riveting title of The Subtopians, which of course was guaranteed to empty any theatre it ever played in. And it got noes from everybody. I sent it to the Royal Court and those places which were to me the centre of theatre then, and it was turned down.

Eventually it was read by somebody in the [Arts Council]. It was sent by the man who ran Guildford Theatre, that was the Guildford Repertory Theatre, which is the one before the Yvonne Arnaud which now stands there. And that was run by a splendid man called Eric Longworth who looked like a civil servant and actually played the [town clerk] of the town 'Warmingtong on Sea' in Dads Army and he looked like a sort of ostrich standing there. But this guy was brilliant, he sent my play to the Arts Council, and three of the readers said 'no' and one of the readers gave it a grudging, 'Oh all right, we'll do it, yes,

OK'. So Guildford were given a guarantee against loss of £400 to put it on and we rehearsed it, and did it, and I think I should say at this point, this play was – this play – I did not realize, but it was practically a mirror image of my family. It was a real first play about where I came from and what I'm about, and art, and family, and resistance, reacting against your parents and all of those things which every writer has gone through and mine was absolutely typical. And we put it on there for one week and on the opening night I sat down – I was at that time a chorus boy in a musical called *Scapa*, which was a musical of Seagulls over Sorrento and was written by Hugh Hastings and I'm afraid this musical was doomed to failure, and I was, as I say, a chorus boy, but I was also understudying the lead, Pete Murray. And Pete Murray, on the previous Friday, he had to go on *Top of the Pops* or something to advertise the show, so I went on for him. And of course as always when an understudy goes on if he doesn't actually trip over the furniture or kick anybody or forget his lines, everybody cheers and says how wonderful he was. I wasn't actually, but I got through it. And that wonderful man, Hugh Hastings, who is now in my canon of saints, got me the next Monday night off so I could go down and see my own play, which I was and am eternally grateful to him for. And so I got there and there was this play, as I said, about my family, and I'm sorry to say that the father character in it was a cracking bore, a man who'd lost touch with reality – which was my father. And the mother character was this woman who was under layers and layers of armour plating trying to deal with this business. And so when the first act curtain came down, the whole theatre – it came down not to a lot of applause or anything, but it came down to a sigh of 'Oh', a groan. And what had made all these people read the play and not like it was that they read all this boring dialogue. But it was a man being a bore on the stage and they couldn't read through the fact that you would be looking at the man. And I turned round and walked up the aisle from having done this. I had been putting off telling my parents it was on, and I didn't want them to come. They'd been to see me all over the country acting in rep, and the first two faces I saw as I walked up the aisle were my parents, who were sitting at the back of the theatre, and they were doing something they hadn't done for years: they were holding hands. They both looked at me as white as sheets, and I felt so guilty and so terrible, I can't even tell you. Anyway, in the next two acts – in those days there were three act plays – the next two acts were played to a fair amount of laughter – there was a lot of laughter in it – but to absolute silence when it was wanted. And then, with a very old-fashioned curtain that went in and out with speed of a snail, they took ten curtain calls, which was unheard of. I saw my parents afterwards – and this was a terrific success in its tiny way, in Guildford – I saw my parents afterwards, and my dad came up shook my hand and said, 'Oh, so that's what you think of us, son, is it?' and I thought, 'Oh God'. I could have killed myself, and my mother just stood there staring into the middle distance, which is what she did in situations like that.

The next day I went into the theatre... no I went to a celebration that night and I ended up in somebody's flat somewhere and woke up the following day at midday and walked round the corner to buy the *Times* and the *Telegraph* 'cos I was told they were in, and Eric Longworth had said to me last night that as the critics were going out the *Times* man said 'That was a surprise'. He [Eric] said, 'I don't know what he meant by it but that's what he said'. The *Times* and the *Telegraph* gave this play such raves as you have never read. They did not say, 'This man is a promising author', they said, 'This man has arrived', and the *Times* finished up its notice with, 'As for Mr. Frisby if he can go on writing as powerfully as this he may well be what the British theatre has been waiting for since Mr. Osborne discovered Brecht'. Which of course, being compared to my idol was everything I could have wished for. So I phoned up the people I shared a flat with – at half past 12, I had the most terrible hangover, I felt dreadful. Having read these – I felt bloody good by then, and the female half of the married couple, she was an actress, was

in hysterics. She said, 'Where have you been, where have you been, we've had everybody in the world, we've even had Hollywood on the phone, where have you been? And it seemed that these two notices had created a tremendous amount of excitement. I went into the theatre, the Adelphi, where the show was on and there the producers of the show were standing waiting for the chorus boy to come in and they said, 'What about this play of yours?' and wanted to talk to me about it. When I went up to my dressing room everybody in the world was in the chorus dressing room, I can't tell you how marvellous it was. Hugh Hastings, lovely dear Hugh, who'd had this big hit years ago with *Seagulls over Sorrento*, ran for four years, and had now had this vast flop with the musical version of it. He came and knocked on the door and threw the door open and stood there with his arms open and said, 'Oh Terry, I remember what it felt like', and clasped me to his bosom. The net result of this was that we went, a crowd of us from the show all went down on the Thursday to the matinee of my show in Guildford. And Edward Woodward was playing the lead in [Scapa] and he's since done a lot of TV things, become very famous, and he was famous then. We went in to see it and there was a man called Peter Bridge who was the big young producer in London in those days, and he was trying to buttonhole me in the foyer and Eric Longworth was sort of pulling me away and saying, 'Terry, Terry there's someone on the phone for you', like that. And then I went out in the interval walked across the road and stood in the doorway to get out of the rain and Teddy Woodward was doing a little tap dance in the doorway, and he said, 'I want to see that again before I die, I want to see it again, a West End producer standing in the rain outside the theatre waiting for a chorus boy to come off the phone'.

Anyway six [producers] wanted to do it, it was sold in the end to Peter Bridge, who made a down payment which was the first payment to start the building of the Yvonne Arnaud theatre. He bought my play and never did it. He had it for a year and all he wanted to do was put stars in it and no star would take a part in it because there were no starry parts, it was a six-hander, there were six, integrated, interlocking parts.

Anyway, as I say, I had been in rep for some while, and I was [finished] by the end of '62. When it came to the beginning of '63, and he still had not done my play I was in a trough of despair and was offered the job of the director of Bromley Rep, resident director, where I'd been an actor for 18 months. I got on very well with the man who ran it, David Poulson. David offered me this job and he said the rep was going fortnightly, and I took the job on the condition that I could do my own play there. So he said 'yes', and I took the job, and in the meantime I got married. I was resident director at that theatre for one year, and at the end of the year I did my play, *The Subtopians*. And again, the Financial Times came and the Times came again and another paper, another one of the posh ones, rave reviews, 'This is the greatest thing since sliced bread'. And Sheila Hancock, who I had known since I was 14, we'd pulled faces at each other over the fence between the boys' and the girls' school. She was by then well known in London and she got Michael Codron to come and see it. Michael Codron was the best of the young producers around and Michael said, 'It's a very good play, like it very much, sorry it's too late'. Now remember, this is '64 by now, when I had it on. In '62 *Beyond the Fringe* opened and the social realism of the fifties had changed into the satirical tone of the early sixties. That was Michael Codron's judgment and he was the sharpest. He ran the Arts Theatre and although he wouldn't do my play he allowed me to have the Arts Theatre for a month to take the production from Bromley in there. So I ran round, I hadn't got any money, and I got each of the producers who had wanted to put it on originally to give me £100. One of them, Oscar Lewenstein, gave me £150. Peter Bridge, who'd bought the play and never done it, gave me £50, and it evened out so I was £400 short. My mother gave me her life savings – £300 – and we found

another £100 from somewhere [from Robert Peake, who had run the wonderful summer season I had done in Penzance. six years before]. We went into the Arts Theatre and we played there, and the London critics when they saw it they said, 'Oh this is all right, it's not bad, but we've seen it all before haven't we? And it all belongs to yesterday', and we got these very sincere notices of, 'Yes, very good, look out for him in the future but not good enough'. So we played to very poor houses at the Arts and the £1000 that I'd raised that I thought would cover us all the way, we actually lost in the end £1056. My mother was broke, I was broke. I went up to see Michael Codron and he said, 'I told you it was too late', and he wasn't a bit [sympathetic] and I was fed up and thought, 'Oh God, that's the end of everything', but he said, 'Bring me your next play, I'll do it', just like that, and dismissed me as it were, and so out I went and that was that.

Now, while the play was on at Bromley [Philip Levene] who was a well-known writer at the time, he had invented a TV series called The Avengers, and he came along and said – he had a thriller that was going to play in the theatre after mine was – and he said to me, 'I'd rather have written that play that you wrote than everything I've ever written'. I said to him, 'You can have my play, can I have your money?'. He was very rich, he had a Jag and a big camel hair overcoat and looked very flash. He said, 'Don't you earn any money?', and I said, 'No I've never earned a penny writing, all I've got is £100 advance for this and it's all spent'. And he said, 'Oh, come and meet my agent'. So I went and met his agent and the result was me getting with the agent I was with from that day to this [Harvey Unna]. That agent then started getting me TV commissions and I started to earn my living as a writer.

So in the summer of '64 I had virtually given up directing and acting although I have done it for 40 years since, but I was a full-time writer and married, living in a house with a 100% mortgage, a little terraced house in Putney. Being a full-time writer was absolute torture, I found, and I went through all sorts of agonies while I was doing it. But I was getting commissions and once I was getting commissions for TV plays that very quickly focused me and I got on with it and learnt to be a writer. I liked it much better when I was writing something and then dashing out to act in something because those two occupations are so complementary. It makes for a very nice rounded life. My first telly play went on. On a Sunday night there was a spot called BBC Sunday Night Theatre [laughs], something like that, and when it went out it went out against a new pop group that was playing on ITV on Sunday night at the Palladium. They were called The Beatles, and the entire country watched The Beatles and my mother and my wife's mother watched the play. I watched The Beatles [laughs] and that was the end of my first [TV] play.

Well the next day or the next week at the BBC, the Head of Drama there, he sent around a memo saying that this play on Sunday night, this was exactly what contemporary drama should be: it was relevant, it was dealing with capital punishment, an anti-capital punishment play, and it was called Guilty, and it was this and it was that and it was all these things that we want for a Sunday night play. I believe he sent that round to shore up the terrible blow he had received on the ratings [laughs]. I don't believe... he may have meant it, I don't know. Anyway the result was I went in to see the script editor there about my next commission, and I said, 'Well, I've got this idea – well I've got this one about banning the bomb, and I've got this one about capital punishment, and I've got this one about honesty with your partner', and these highfaluting subjects, the disestablishment of the Church of England was another one. He said, 'Oh, Terry, couldn't you write a romantic comedy? I've got, look.' And he had a big pile of scripts on the floor and he kicked them and dust came out of them and he said, 'That one's about the bomb and that one's about capital punishment', and so on, and he said, 'Couldn't you write a romantic comedy?', and I said that no I didn't think I

could, what I could do is I could write an anti-romantic comedy. And he said, 'Well, OK, fine, why don't you do that'. So I said, 'Yes, I will', and I went away and wrote this play for TV, an anti-romantic comedy. So I spent a long time thinking about what the occupation of the leading man should be, it was very important, and in the end, in order to give the sexual aspect of the play some frisson I made him a food and wine expert. Thus this thing of his tastes and his physical tastes became part of the imagery of the play. And it was this man who was at the top of his success as a TV pundit on cookery. There seem to be hundreds of them now but there weren't then. I sent my script in and I was called to the BBC and there was a different man [in the script editor's office], and he said, 'Now Terry, this play of yours, it's a comedy'. And I said, 'Well yes, that's what I was asked to do'. And he said, 'Well it's quite glossy. Who in Sheffield for instance, who'd be interested in this food and wine expert living in Chelsea? It's all very glossy'. I said, 'Well, the gloss is only superficial', [Have you heard anything so daft?] and we had this conversation and he said, 'I'm more interested in plays about banning the bomb'. Well, exactly, and I said, 'This is what I was asked to do,' and he said, 'Well I'm sorry, I'm afraid we don't want it'. And I said, 'Hang on, I was commissioned to do this, what about the other half of my – 'Oh, we'll pay you'. 'Oh, fine', I said. I grabbed my play, grabbed my money and ran, because at this point I realized I had written a modern West End comedy.

I had given it the terrible title of Mr. Danver's Downfall, which was just awful. However I went straight home, rewrote it for the stage, and sent it to my agent to read. I said to him, 'Don't show it to anybody', [That was] on a Wednesday. 'Don't show it to a single soul, it's just a draft but I think I'm going to get there with it, and see what you think'. And Friday he phoned me and said, 'I love it, Terry, I love it', and I said, 'OK we'll talk about it next week and we'll see what alterations I've got to make'. He rang he on Monday and said, 'I gave it to Michael Codron on Friday and he's read it I and wants to do it', and that was the end of that. Five years to get my first play on, five minutes to get my second one on.

So I went in and saw Michael again and there was Michael, all smiles and being his old self. I always liked him very much, from our very first meeting, and one of the things I liked about him was that he was gay, but he was very closet gay then, as were most people, they had to be, and there was a wonderful moment when we were talking about the casting of something or other and I said, 'Well, I don't think he's very good in that part, I think he's wrong for it', and he said, 'But he is very pretty', and he very shyly and slyly looked at me and I loved him from that moment on. 'I wouldn't know', I said to him. 'Well, I'm telling you', he said, and he gave me a brief sparkle. It was quite funny that he'd made this admission to a hetero about what he was like, and subsequently he said a joke about himself which I absolutely loved. He said, 'Je suis un peu fatigué', which he translated as, 'I am a little stout poof'. That was the first time I'd heard that joke, but I have since heard it so many times that I wonder if it was his or not. It doesn't matter, we got on like a house on fire. After we'd been to some rather famous directors, who all turned us down, didn't like it, we then went to various of the top leading men in the country to play lead. They all turned us down. They all said, 'I'll play the part if you take the bit out about the man's thickening waistline, and his greying hair, and just being past it'. Now the whole point of this play was, I had structured it on three legs, it was a three-legged stool, and the three legs were, the battle of the sexes – we don't need to talk about that, we already know about that one, the battle of the generations, which was very much around us then, the sixties, remember, and the youth culture coming through, and the battle of the classes. The girl in it was 18, young and pretty and of lower class, but she was one of nature's thoroughbreds, she was 20 times cleverer than him. He was – if you put it in Restoration terms he was the fop character

and she was the wit. He was full of his own vanity and he was an absolute peacock and loved himself and she was the needle, the pin, that pricked him again and again and that was the machinery of the comedy in the play. In the end he fell for her and she just walked out, dumped him, and he was part of her growing up and she was part of his realisation of what he was, except that he never realized because he was too vain and too pompous. And so this was the mechanism that the play was built on and so all these leading men wouldn't...

FH: Touch it.

TF: They wouldn't touch it. [They said] "Well I'll do it if you take these lines out". Well, that's what the play was about. Anyway the very first girl we went to was a girl called Barbara Ferris who was with the Joan Littlewood Company and was in a play called Sparrers Can't Sing. She was in several things, she was in the film of it, very, very good, and she was also appearing at the Royal Court. I said before that we had got turned down by several different directors but I knew all along who I wanted to direct it, I'd seen his work in rep at Ipswich and at the Belgrade, Coventry, and I wanted him. He'd never done a West End play and in the end after we got turned down by one or two top directors Michael said, 'Fine. We'll ask him.' and that was Robert Chetwyn, who subsequent to There's a Girl in my Soup went on to direct many, many West End plays and has now retired and has had a long and honorable career and jolly well deserved to. Now Bob and I were looking for people, one of the very first people we'd been to who was quite a big star was Donald Sinden. Donald Sinden said, 'I like this and I'll do it but I'm not free until' – this was in the autumn – 'I'm not free until next spring'. So we said, 'Thank you Donald, that's very nice of you, we'll look round in the meantime' and while we were looking round we always knew that we had Donald Sinden as our long stop as it were. And then we got turned down, and there was one man in particular who I wanted to do it: [Robin Bailey]. He was a fine actor, made a terrific Professor Higgins in My Fair Lady when they did it in Australia and elsewhere, and he'd been in the West End, he was my sort of actor. And Michael Codron said, 'No we can't have him, no SA'.

FH: SA?

TR: Exactly. And I said 'SA?' 'No sex appeal, it won't do for this sort of play'. In the end [Michael] was persuaded, sent [Robin Bailey] a copy of the play and the man turned it down. I went in and Michael said, 'I think there's something rotten in the state of Denmark'. Suddenly I saw, as with Peter Bridge, that my play is never going to get done, so I said, 'Let's take Donald Sinden and not bother with anybody else.' 'OK we'll settle on Donald'. Michael said 'It means you're going to have to wait some months'. 'Fine', I said. When you think how long it takes to get anything on now, waiting a few months is nothing. Anyway in the meantime Bob and I went and saw Barbara at the Royal Court, and we both agreed it was her. Jon Pertwee was cast as the other leading part and the play was cast in its entirety I rewrote it to bring out the polemic and to make the undercurrent clear and to show what a wonderful three-dimensional West End comedy this was, not one of those old lightweight bits of nonsense. We sat down in Michael's flat the night before we started rehearsal, all of us, to read it, and we'd got halfway into the first act before it became clear to everyone that I had written the play into the ground, it was an absolute bummer. It was just – it was dead – and in the end Jon Pertwee who used to do lots of funny voices on the radio, was saying his lines with

funny voices trying to get a laugh, everyone was realizing that the play had fallen apart and it was absolutely awful. Before I got in my car Michael threw a big wobbly and said, 'That's the worst reading I've ever heard from Donald and I'm going to speak to his agent in the morning.' and I said 'Michael, Michael, don't get on at Donald, it's not his fault, I rewrote the damn thing and let Donald down. They didn't let us down, I've let them down'. So Bob and I – who both knew our rep – and these years of rep now came in –and I said, 'OK Bob, there's six scenes in the play, two scenes in each act, let's break our work down. I'll come in tomorrow morning with a new first scene and you can start rehearsing that and I'll bring you the second scene on the next day and so on. In six days you'll have a new play. I'll have it rewritten for you'. Now when you say rewritten you're taking it and you're jiggling it about, you're not starting from scratch again you're juggling the pieces round like a jigsaw and taking some out and putting new ones in. So I got in the car and drove home and as I was crossing Parsons Green a cat ran out and I ran over it; it was a black cat and I killed it. I went out and looked at it and it was late at night and there was no one to find and I picked it up and I put it in a dustbin, I couldn't think of anything else. I went home and my wife was sitting up in bed and I said, 'It was the most terrible reading, I've wrecked the play and now I've killed a black cat', and burst into tears [laughs]. And then I had to sit down and rewrite the first scene. I'd phoned my secretary in advance and I didn't type then, and she agreed to get up early, at six o'clock or something and she typed the new first scene out early in the morning, and I took it to the rehearsal room. We got it copied quickly and Bob started rehearsing that. Only the first scene, nothing else. So they worked blocking that in and I went home, and – I had forgotten to say that at this time I was a performer and I was in a thing called Play School, it was the first modern children's show on BBC2 which didn't sort of talk down to children, and it's seen as old-fashioned now but it was the latest modern thing then, and I and seven or eight other actors started it. It used to be a chap and a girl did a week's programs each and I did it with Phyllida Law, who was Emma Thompson's mum, and her dad was in it too, and various other people too, some of them quite well known, and we rotated. It happened to be my week that week and I was in the studio all day, [every day] shooting a half-hour program a day of Play School and coming home at night and rewriting the play.

All the time while we were trying to get these leading men Michael said 'We've got to have another title. Mr. Danver's Downfall won't do', and we thought of this and we thought of that and I had written a TV play called You Should Hear Me Eat Soup which was about a social climber, and Bob Chetwyn came in one day – and he was a very diffident man – and said, 'I don't know it's a bit jokey, and you want your play to be taken seriously but what about There's a Girl in my Soup?'. The minute I heard it I thought, 'That's the best title I've ever heard in my life'. I can say it because I didn't think of it. And Michael said, 'No, no it's too flippant, they'll never take it seriously'. So after a discussion I said, 'We'll call it There's a Girl in my Soup until we think of something better'. So we put the title There's a Girl in my Soup until we found something better and I knew that no one was going to think of anything better, not in a million years.

So there I was doing these TV things every day and come the Friday I'd been up all night, [all week] and been in the studio all day and I had to sing a little nursery rhyme to the camera, something like 'Baa baa black sheep', or something incredibly simple. And I stood there and I went absolutely comatose and I couldn't sing it and they tried about eight takes and then they took me off it and the woman did it and the director came and said to me, 'What's the matter with you Terry?' and I'd been doing the show for two years, and I said 'I'm sorry' and he said, 'Well just go home' and I went home and I think I just went to bed for a week.

So we opened in Wimbledon, not bad, did quite well in Wimbledon. What I said to Bob on the rewrite was that we knew from our days in rep exactly what would go with an audience, so when I rewrote it I wrote stuff that I knew would make the play hold up with an audience and wouldn't fall apart. But it wasn't the final draft. We had a six week tour and I rewrote all of those scenes again on the six week tour, so that we had the final polished version in town and that's what I did. Donald Sinden, Barbara had a lot of work, but Donald took the brunt of more knocks than any actor has ever taken ever I should think, he had to re learn all of his part, with the parts put in back to front and all the rest of it. We got to Nottingham in about the fourth week and he'd just put in the second part of Act 2 and at one point he had to have a door slammed in his face which gave him a black eye and he cut from Act 2 to Act 3 missing out the black eye then came back and - didn't quite know what to do – started acting the black eye which hadn't happened. It just made absolute nonsense of the play and we had this very limp night in Nottingham. Prior to that in Wolverhampton, the Mayor had walked out on the first act because he thought it was disgusting, the Mayor's wife stayed she liked it. And we played to the whole of Wolverhampton to no laughs at all until the Saturday night when they suddenly started to laugh.

We played to Cardiff next where they just laughed at the visual business, then we played to Nottingham, Wimbledon wasn't bad, and then we came down to Brighton and by the time we got to Brighton it was starting to look more in shape and a Brighton audience is more like a London audience, and you could hear the audience start to laugh. And friends of mine came round and said, 'Oh, it's going to run forever, it's a huge hit, it's going to be a huge success'. And I don't take any notice of that, everybody always says that, but when one guy said it and I said, 'No, no you're just saying that', and he said, 'I'll bet you a fiver it's on next year'. A fiver was quite a lot of money to us then, two penniless actors, and I didn't take it because I didn't want to [win] the bet, because [this would mean] my play had come off. So I wouldn't have the fiver bet with him.

Anyway there was another story behind this. So the thing was starting to come together and it was really starting to look good but there was another really big point in it too, and that was the attitude of this man towards sex, and the girl's attitude. Barbara got the girl's attitude right on this sort of fatalistic, modern, everybody-wants-to-screw-me-and-I-don't-care-if-they-do-or-they-don't, that very much reflected that sort of girl then. And he, Donald, had a long and honorable CV of roles then, he'd played some terrific Shakespeare roles at the Royal Shakespeare Company, he'd done some of those business plays in town which were all terribly serious and he'd played all those British comedy films of the fifties. He'd done all [that], 'Come on chaps, let's go down and get the girls', and built in to all this was this guilt thing about sex and 'married man being caught with his trousers down' and farces and all that. So we had to say, 'Look Donald, don't you realize this man doesn't give a toss? He loves himself to the exclusion of all else, this is the vainest man that ever lived'. So there was one particular line [when] his previous girlfriend had come in and caught him with a new girl and the [two women] were fighting about it and he had to say in the middle of all of this, 'Please, you mustn't fight over me, I'm not worth it'. And this agonized thing used to come out, 'Please you mustn't fight over me I'm not worth it!', as if his life was breaking up. And I was trying to persuade him to do it exactly the opposite and he couldn't and wouldn't get it. So finally we said, 'Look Donald just take the guilt out and just say the line. Just stand on stage and say that'. That night in Brighton there was Barbara Ferris – and Jill Melford was the other woman – and Donald were on stage and he said this line straight, and a wall of laughter came back at him, and you could see those three actors on stage and there'd never been the sign of a laugh there before. So we said, 'Donald have you got

that now?' Donald: 'Yes, yes'. Terry: 'Now take that even further and be, 'Please, please you mustn't fight over me I'm not worth it'. So he did that and we had one more week at Golders Green and then we came into town.

When we opened in town Donald was absolutely superb, he'd got this idea in one week, Barbara was always excellent, so was John and we had this highly successful opening night. And I remember I sat in the middle of the stalls in the Globe Theatre it was then, it's now the Gielgud, and at the end of the show there were two well fed chaps in dinner jackets beside me and one of them said, 'It'll do', and I can remember aiming a kick, but I missed. And then prior to that it was a very, very, very hot night and after the first interval I went out and all the critics were grouped in that little road beside the Gielgud theatre and were nattering and I tried to sidle up to them and see what they were saying and I heard one of them say, 'Well if you want to get the black spot off your roses you've got to get the secateurs in tight'. So. The second interval came and the play was starting to slip away from us, it had been going beautifully up until five minutes before the curtain and then suddenly the audience had laughed themselves out and all you could see was swishing programs and [when the second interval came] I got the front of house manager and he, myself, and Robert Chetwyn, we ran round and opened all the doors and we were trying to fan air in and rushing around hysterical doing all this. And the third act started with a very short scene between Donald and Barbara and someone else. It went all right, few chuckles not much and the next scene was the meeting of Jon Pertwee's character with Barbara. And she's a big surprise in his [friend's] flat. There's a knock on the door – and she opens it and this is the opening of the scene – and she had said 'yes' and he just stared. 'Well?' 'What?' 'Can I do something for you?' and he said 'I think it's too late' and brought the house down with it, and we were home and dry from then on. Good old Jon Pertwee, he pulled the audience back and as I say we were home and dry, never mind about what those two men said. And we got these notices the next day which didn't say I'd written the most intellectual and wonderful and insightful comedy of all time, but just sort of said, 'It was very funny and everybody would enjoy it', and I didn't think they were very good, the notices, and Michael said, 'They are selling notices, don't you realize? They'll sell seats'.

I forgot to say on that night in Nottingham, John Perry who, was the manager for Binkie Beaumont – who ran half the theatres in London – came up to see the play, and they had got at the [Globe, now the] Gielgud Theatre which is one of the best sites in town, they had got The Odd Couple by Neil Simon was coming in from Broadway in six weeks time and he went back, and he said to Binkie Beaumont, 'It'll keep the Globe warm for six weeks', and in fact we ran for over six years and we saw off that play and many others. We weren't at the Globe for six years but we were in London for six years because we transferred to a smaller theatre. So there we were with these wonderful selling notices and we had an advance that was not enough money to keep us on for one night, and we doubled that take on the next night and I didn't know what to do. I'd seen the play for practically every performance because of the rewrites and so had Robert Chetwyn. And the second night came round and there were these wonderful selling notices. And Michael was absolutely right, four of them attacked the title and said, 'This is really rather a good comedy for this really rather silly title', or 'this rather flippant title', and he said 'I told you, I told you so', and then he giggled like crazy saying, 'I don't care what they say about the title as long as they say it's funny'. In the end it was time for the curtain to go up and I got my wife, she came with me, and we went to the theatre, didn't know what else to do, that's all I'd been doing, and when I got there, there was Michael, and he'd gone too, and there was Robert Chetwyn, and we all stood in the foyer all three of us saying, 'What are we coming here for? There's no need to, it's all over and it's done'. And Robert Chetwyn went in and looked and it

wasn't a great house, there was a few there and they were [putting] no one up in the circle, and he said, 'There's one man in the circle. Go in and look Terry. There's one man laughing like mad, having a wonderful time'. And I looked round the door and peered into the circle and it was my agent [laughs] sitting there having the time of his life.

Anyway off we went and in a few weeks Donald was way over the top that everybody knows about now. Donald Sinden, 'Please you mustn't fight over me I'm not worth it', and he's been giving that performance ever since. And Robert Chetwyn and I, we always say we invented Donald Sinden. And he went on giving that performance whether it was King Lear or Lord Foppington or whatever he did it for the rest of his life. And the take of the play went up, and I, who had earned not very much money my whole life, I'd got some TV commissions, my wife was a model and she was very much at the beginning of her career as a model, and we earned the first year we were married, £1000; the second year, maybe £2000; £2500 the third year, and then the first year that Soup opened I earned £72000, the second year I earned £100,000, the third year £120,000 as it went all round the entire world and was a smash hit in about 30 countries. And when it got to 1970 the divorce started and by 1971 I was broke, thanks to a lot of lawyers [laughs]

FH: When you were working as a writer, did you go in and have a lot of talks with the director, were you giving him tips about what the characters should be doing or were you just giving him the script and letting him get on with it?

TF: No, I'm very, very intrusive. Remember I'm an actor and a director and I know how I want things to be and a director has to put up with me a bit. Over the years I won't say I've fallen out with directors because I think I cooperate well, and everybody understands in the theatre it's got to be a consensus of opinions anyway, and I've never worked with a director who had such an ego that he wouldn't listen, but once or twice on TV that's happened and they've told me to bugger off or not done [what I wanted]. Robert Chetwyn and I worked very closely indeed and Robert contributed a lot towards some of the lines. One of the best contributions like that on the lines was Donald Sinden who, every time he saw a new women as part of his chat up was to say, 'My God, but you're lovely', and of course when he said it to the girl she said, 'My God but you're corny', something like that. And at the end when he's left alone and he's combing his hair and checking that he looks all right for the next woman coming in, and he's got the mirror, and he said as the last line of the play – which was Donald's idea not mine – he stares into the mirror and says, 'My God but you're lovely', which was the perfect payoff line for the play. It was my line, but Donald thought of putting it there. So you see how a play with the director and the actors, it grows if people are sensible. Those writers who are, 'I've written that word and not a comma to be altered', don't really believe them.

FH: When you were an actor did you ever have writers coming in and saying to the director, 'No, I want them to do something completely different'.

TF: Well you said that rather sharply and nobody would act like that. It would be negotiated: 'Couldn't you just, don't you think?', and you'd discuss it and so on and sometimes you disagree, and sometimes you agree. And I must say Robert Chetwyn did my next three plays. I did my own first play so I didn't have to fight with anybody, and then Robert Chetwyn did the next three and I did my next one after that and I got on

with the director very well each time [laughs]. And the last couple of plays I had someone else again and we got on well, they were all good men of the theatre who were versed in a good solid background of repertory theatre and knowing their craft.

I produced *Girl in my Soup* in Paris in 1970 because it had been bought by somebody in '66, like it was bought for the rest of the world but it didn't get done for some reason or another to do with French theatre. So by 1970 it had been translated and there was this man who ran the Theatre de le Madeleine, Andre Bernheim he was called, and he was willing to put in on there provided I put up the money. Now then I had masses of money in a Swiss bank account which was [earned] in the four years between '66 and '70. I could afford to do it. It cost £13,000 to put on in Paris, it cost £6000 to put on in London in '66. If you'd put £1 into *Girl in my Soup* in London in '66 you'd have got £60 back, that's how much money it made. It was huge.

FH: That's incredible.

TF: Yes it is. Only to be matched by musicals nowadays. So anyway I went over to produce it there and Andre knew the theatre and very early on he got to direct it a very famous French director and he'd done all the Arthur Miller plays in Paris, [Raymond Rouleau] including a wonderful French film of *The Crucible* called *The Witches of Salem* which starred Yves Montand and Simone Signoret, big names at that time. So [Raymond] was directing and he'd got these very famous people and a very, very good girl called Elizabeth Weiner, who played the girl. She was brilliant and they got this boy to play it – besides the leading man there's a young man, the girl's boyfriend, who's a sort of younger, downmarket version of the leading man. And he's a job, and he's self-centered, and he's masculine, and he's ghastly, and the girl is better than both of them put together; that's the point. And he's got a pop group which he's absolutely useless at, that's quite obvious. He has a big hangover scene and it wasn't working, the boy playing him in Paris couldn't do it. And after we'd been rehearsing it a couple of weeks I was in the stalls with the director and I said, 'Look he's not getting it, he's not getting anywhere near it. What should we do? Either he's got to get it by the end of the week or we have to get someone who can do it'. And he put his arm round me, this director, and he walked me up the aisle of the theatre and he said, 'Now, listen Terry, you've written a lovely play and it's a very good translation, look it's absolutely excellent, look', and by then we'd got to the foyer of the theatre, 'Outside it's Paris and it's spring it's full of beautiful women, why don't you go out and enjoy yourself'. And he shoved me through the front door of the theatre and closed the door after me and went back in again [laughs]. And I stood on the pavement and thought, 'Hang on I'm the producer, I wrote it and it's my money and I've just been thrown out!' [laughs]. It was the most charming brush-off I've ever had. And this boy got it and did it beautifully, the scene, and he was a young actor and it was his first chance and he was called Gérard Depardieu.

FH: Did you have any problems with censorship?

TF: I'm so glad you asked me that. With *The Subtopians* when it was done at Guildford, Guildford was a club theatre and because of the rules of club theatre you didn't have to go to the Chamberlain but if you went to a public theatre..

FH: You had to go to the Chamberlain.

TF: You did. So we played at the club theatre. In a big, big row between the father and the two sons in the play with the two sons lined up against him, he says, 'You two stick together like shit to a shoe'. And nobody, nobody said 'shit' on stage in those days. You didn't say anything, the Lord Chamberlain wouldn't allow anything.

[Interview pauses to change location]

FH: You were saying nobody said 'shit' on stage.

TF: So I asked my friends after this line was said, 'You two stick together like shit to a shoe', if they'd noticed the four-letter word, and they said, 'What four-letter word?', and the thing had fitted in so nicely that it hadn't struck anybody so that was fine. Now when I came to do it at Bromley theatre two years later, this was not a club theatre, so the play had to go to the Lord Chamberlain's office and he found about 20 things we couldn't say, including, 'You two stick together like shit to a shoe'. Now I went into the St James palace to negotiate the changes with these people. You could go and argue with them you know. And there was a Major Penn, a well-known character. And I went and sat down in a room with Major Penn and a Colonel Someone. He wouldn't allow, 'You two stick together like shit to a shoe', but he would allow – and I said, 'It's got to be shocking because it's a terrible row and it's a climactic moment in the row.' So he allowed, 'You two stick together like dogs in heat'. Well, I mean, when they said that line onstage in the next performance the audience went 'eeugh!' whereas nobody noticed 'shit to a shoe'. Also the father had to say about the boy he'd been here there and everywhere, 'Frigging about with all these jobs', and this man wouldn't allow 'frigging'. He said, 'We all know that's a euphemism for another word, don't we?' And I said, 'No, I didn't.' I just played innocent, see, and I said, 'No what's it a euphemism for?' And he said, 'Well, we all know the old naval saying, "frigging in the rigging".' [So I said] 'No I didn't, no.' And I said, 'Well if it's a euphemism, surely it's all right, that's what euphemisms are for'. But no, he wouldn't allow it, so I had to say 'mucking about' and that's all [the father] meant, mucking about with jobs. And at [another] point he had an exclamation of surprise when somebody came in and [the character] said 'Jesus Christ!' and [Major Penn] wouldn't allow us to say 'Jesus Christ' on stage, and I said, 'No, no, no that's a prayer at that moment. He says Jesus Christ. He's praying', so he allowed that. So every time I wrote 'Jesus Christ' from then until the censor was lifted I put before it, this is a prayer, so 'Jesus Christ' was always passed. And there was a joke that the father had to say that the boy finished off for him, this was the key line that I wanted back because without it, it destroyed the scene, and the father had to come in and make this terribly weak joke, ' "Oh well," said the hedgehog as he climbed off the lavatory brush, "we all make mistakes"'. The censor wouldn't allow that but I got that back.

FH: That's good.

TF: When it was done, at the end of it all, they used to stamp each page, every page of your script had a stamp on it to show that it had been approved by the Lord

Chamberlain's office. So it went out and we had done the alterations, and we had it back, and a minion came back in with all my pages stamped. Meanwhile Colonel Penn was saying, he was talking about 'these modern plays, I think they're so much easier to write than plays with good English'. And I said, 'Oh, oh you write plays do you?' and he said, 'No I don't', and I said, 'Well how do you fucking well know?' and went [laughs].

That was '62. In '66 [four] years later, the same thing came up with *Soup*, and there were masses of things that they weren't going to allow, but we got them all in and there was one where they had totally misread a line which was this man, this working class man, admiring an attractive woman. And he says, 'Oh she's lovely. Lovely long legs. Right up to her bum', which was a well-known saying. And either through a typing error or their misreading, became 'Lovely long legs. Right up her bum'. And Michael Codron said, 'You see, Terry, as far as the Lord Chamberlain is concerned, anally speaking nothing must go up or come down'. That was wonderful, Michael doing his gay thing again. And I said, 'But this is ridiculous. They've misread it', and he said, 'Yes, we'll have some fun with them'. While we were rewriting on tour we should have been sending each page back to the Lord Chamberlain's office and we thought, 'Can't be bothered with that'. So the twice-rewritten version of *Girl in my Soup* was never OK'd by the Lord Chamberlain and played illegally in London for two years until '68 when Roy Jenkins, yeah, banished [censorship].

FH: Do you have any stories about you in Rep.

TF: OK. In *Worthing* I played the Prince of Morocco in... *Merchant of Venice*. And in it the actress who played [Shylock's] daughter was called Sarah Miles and she was Jessica. As the Prince of Morocco I had to play the casket scene, you know, and I chose the gold one. and I had to play a scene with Portia and her handmaiden, Nerissa. And my lines were 'I would outstare the sternest eyes that look, outbrave the heart most daring on the earth, yea, pluck the young sucking cub from the she bear, for love of you, dear lady'. Now you've only got to say that last line and you can see the trap that was waiting for me. And sure enough on Saturday night I said I sucked the young fuckling cub, or plucked, or flucked, or did something, I fucked the young pucking cub. I had three goes at it to get it right and then finally I stopped, by which time the audience were in tears of laughter and I came to a blinding halt, having done all these various versions, Nerissa had turned round and walked off the stage, she was laughing so much, and Portia had turned her back on the audience. All the audience could see were these terrible shaking shoulders, and of course I'm standing there. And, as happens when you're terribly, terribly nervous like that, sweat just broke out in every pore and was pouring down my face. And of course to play the Prince of Morocco I was blacked up, so I looked like the Black and White Minstrels show, with black and white stripes. So I tried to say my next line and Portia turned round, just took one look at me, snorted and walked off the stage. We couldn't finish the scene [laughs] and that was the end of that. There were so many things that used to go wrong on stage because it was weekly rep, you know.

I did a production of *Antony and Cleopatra* in Lincoln Rep and in it there was a scene when Pompeius, [Octavius] and Antony, they met to have a discussion about whether they were going to have a battle or not. And they decide that they won't have a big battle. Instead they'll go to the barge or somewhere or other and have a big dinner, a banquet and sort things out. So those two scenes took place, and I was one of Antony's men. And there was a scene in between these two big scenes with the big characters where the clowns, they would have been, the servants, came out, the ASMs, whatever

they were in those days, and set the tables and put some chairs out and tables. And this scene with these terrible sort of Shakespearian jokes was – it was an absolute horror of a scene. And the director looked at it and we all sort of looked at it, and the ASMs, and the director said, 'I think we'll cut that.' And we all said, 'Yeah, yeah, cut that. Let's get straight on with the two big scenes'. So we got to the dress rehearsal and there [we all] were with Antony and Pompeius and Octavius there, in [our] armour and everything. [We] finished the scene and we all went off and we were all getting our armour off, offstage to get into togas. And suddenly Antony put his head round the corner of the proscenium arch and shouted to the director, 'It's no good Ken, we can't do the change. You'll have to put the scene back.' And suddenly you thought, 'I'll bet this is how the scene got here in the first place. I bet you they did a dress rehearsal and Burbage put his head round the corner and said, "Bill, we need a scene here while we do the change". And he [must have] said, "Oh God, just write something for the ASMs to say. They won't get a laugh anyway. Just give them a couple of gags just to fill in". And so [Bill] said, "Go on. All right. [scribbling mime] Just go on and say that"'. And I thought 'I bet that's how the scene got there in the first place: practical theatre. Forget literature, forget art. It's got to work.' I like that story for that reason.