

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Michael Codron – interview transcript

Interviewer: Adam Smith

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Producer. Actors; Alphabetical Order; The Birthday Party; The Caretaker; censorship; critics; directors; 'Dirty Plays' controversy; Entertaining Mr Sloane; Gallery First Nighters; The Homecoming; Jack Hylton The Killing of Sister George; Joan Littlewood; Look Back in Anger; London Arts Theatre; Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith; Donald McWhinnie; Joe Orton; Harold Pinter; producers; Peggy Ramsay; scripts; Share My Lettuce; There's a Girl in My Soup; Kenneth Williams; writers.

AS: You have been described as both a producer and an impresario, although some critics claim that there is nowadays an uncertainty as to the precise meaning of these words. Given the slippage between the two, and that you have been described using each of the terms, but that they are not mutually exclusive, which would you describe yourself as?

MC: I sometimes say impresario but it sounds like the wretched man from Pinocchio, doesn't it? Do you remember that man that tried to capture Pinocchio? But I really am a producer, a theatre producer. Yes, impresario sounds rather evil, doesn't it? [laughs] Perhaps I am evil, occasionally.

AS: So how would you define this profession before 1968, what would it involve?

MC: As far as I'm concerned? Well you're asking me to talk about 1945 aren't you first, when I was all of 15.

AS: What about after you became a producer, how would you define the profession?

MC: No I didn't become a producer until 1950-something.

AS: You're right, we'll do it chronologically.

MC: 1945, I was still at school.

AS: Of course you were.

MC: And I started producing in 1956 I think, or 1957.

AS: Did you have much experience of theatre in your younger years?

MC: Before that? Yes, I did quite a lot at school, I used to write little skits and things like that. At school I had a very good education in English Literature and History, like you. And then I went up to Oxford and I was involved with the OUDS, which is the famous Oxford Drama Society. And also I became president of the experimental theatre club, which was founded by a very well known professor of English called Nevill Coghill, who was famous for translating, or adapting Canterbury Tales. And under him I began to show my interest in new writing really. It was called the experimental theatre club so it was more adventurous than OUDS, and I used to organise evenings of new plays, and I suppose that is where I got my taste for producing. And bossing people around.

AS: So that was where you got your interest in new writing from? As early as that?

MC: Yes. Definitely, Adam.

AS: When did you decide to make theatre your profession?

MC: When I came down from Oxford I had a family business to go into, and so I thought that was my obligation to do that, and there was a crisis in my life which I won't go into now but I mean, not a dramatic crisis, but there was, and the result of which was that I had to make a decision as to what I was going to do. And it was then thought, that what it was that was causing me to be rather unhappy, was that I didn't feel that I could run the family business, and whoever I saw advised me to go into the theatre. And I have to say, to my Father's eternal credit, he agreed. And so I then went to apply to get a job as an office boy with a very famous producer – who you could call an impresario – called Jack Hylton.

AS: Jack Hylton, he was a band man before he was a producer?

MC: He was a band man, absolutely.

AS: And do you think working under him had a large influence on your later career?

MC: Total.

AS: Total?

MC: Total, total, total, total. I would say that I had the luckiest break in that. Some people would say that I didn't have a better grounding because a lot of producers start as stage managers or box office managers, or actors even, or directors. I went straight from being an office boy to a fully fledged producer. But I was in that office, and I saw how shows were put on at the very top. I mean he was doing musicals and revues and plays. And it was only when he went into commercial television – which he did, he was one of the first people to join Rediffusion which was the first commercial television company – that I realised that he wasn't going to concentrate on straight plays any more. And that is when I left. And in total arrogance I think I said, 'Okay, I'm now going to be a producer, at 25'. And I then put on a play which he had optioned but decided not to do. And that's how I started.

AS: Was that Ring for Catty in 1957?

MC: Adam, your research is too good.

AS: How did you decide to suddenly take on this project on your own?

MC: Well, my job with Jack Hylton had been going around and trying to find plays for him to do, and I encouraged him to take an option on this particular play because Richard Attenborough looked as though he was going to be the star of it. And then when Richard Attenborough went to do movies - I think he did Brighton Rock instead – Hylton dropped it and I thought, 'Well, I like the play, why don't I have a go and try and do it?'. And there were loads of pitfalls.

AS: Did you have much personal interaction with Richard Attenborough?

MC: No. I have had subsequently. He became one of my investors, funnily enough.

AS: And when was that?

MC: When did he become an investor? Years later, he had an investment company through Peter Saunders.

AS: So Jack Hylton had gone into television, and Richard Attenborough had gone on to do a film instead.

MC: Correct.

AS: Did you find that at this time television and film was having an impact on theatre?

MC: No. English films were in their infancy and television was just a new toy. And in fact, television was a huge help to plays in the West End because the BBC would do excerpts from a play – they weren't terribly good, the excerpts, because they just used to put a camera in front of it – but it used to have an amazing effect on the box office.

AS: So television would complement the theatre?

MC: It did complement it, yes.

AS: And Waiting for Catty -

MC: Ring for Catty! [laughs] It was Waiting for Godot. I wish it was Waiting for Godot, but it was Ring for Catty.

AS: Sorry, my mistake, Ring For Catty. So what was the sense among the cast and crew to have a new producer on the project? Was it one of excitement?

MC: What did they think? Well, I think the agents looked at you with great distrust. They want a producer who's established, and who can deliver the goods. And I did find it quite difficult, yes, to get people to trust me. And with good reason, because I was starting out, the plays weren't big successes – my first two plays, as you probably know – and it wasn't until I did a revue with Kenneth Williams, my friend, and Maggie Smith, – called Share My Lettuce – that the tide turned.

AS: Share My Lettuce, which started in Brighton and by the time it got to London was a massive success, how did it feel to suddenly have such a successful play under your belt?

MC: How did it feel? It was a revue. A revue written by Bamber Gascoigne, do you remember Bamber Gascoigne?

AS: I've read about him.

MC: He used to do University Challenge. 'Starter for ten', he was the first man to say that. Well, Bamber was at Cambridge, and I knew him vaguely when I was at Oxford – we were contemporaries – and he wrote this very bizarre revue. And I think Michael Frayn contributed a little to it as well. And we were lucky to have Kenneth, who I knew would be a very good revue artist with all of his different voices. And, though the material was quite quirky, which wasn't to Brighton's taste – because Brighton is quite conservative – by the time we came into the Lyric Hammersmith I think we had got a pretty good show. And it did get good reviews. The tide turned.

AS: I've got to ask, what was Kenneth Williams like at that point in his career?

MC: Well, now one knows of course – from his diaries – what a deeply unhappy person he was. He was a solitary. But as a companion he was absolutely hysterically funny. I mean, you would go out for dinner with him and you would never stop laughing. He was full of these stories, and these voices. All of which he used in the revue. And the public loved him.

AS: You just mention there as well Maggie Smith, would she have been quite an unknown name at that time?

MC: She was starting to make a name. She had made a name for herself in a revue – a new faces revue I think, in America – and I knew of her because she was the girlfriend at one point of a boy that I was at Oxford with. She came up to do a play, and she was obviously an actress of considerable quality. But again it was a catch to get her, I think, and together she and Kenneth were dynamite. You can get it. There's a CD of it.

AS: Of Share my Lettuce?

MC: Yes.

AS: I'll look it up. I think I read as well that it was on this play that you met Peggy Ramsay, the legendary literary agent?

MC: No, long after that.

AS: When did she make contact with you?

MC: How did I get to know Peggy... I forget now, but I must have got to know Peggy when I started to run the Arts [London Arts Theatre] and I can't remember the exact year of that, you might have that written down?

AS: This was during the 1960s?

MC: During the sixties, yes that's right.

AS: And you were producing a new play every four weeks?

MC: Yes.

AS: The sheer logistics of that seem amazing. How did that work?

MC: God knows. I can't remember now. You see, if you're young, Adam, as you are now, these things become meat and drink to you. Yes, it was during that time that I got to know Peggy because she represented Frank Marcus, Charles Wood, Joe Orton obviously who I did, Henry Livings – writers that I was doing – and she obviously then thought, 'Here's a fellow that I can sell plays to'. And I owe a huge debt to her. One mustn't be afraid to admit that luck has played a great part in one's life. You know, meeting people that are willing to help you shape your destiny. Let's hope you do.

AS: I hope so.

MC: What do you want to do?

AS: I've just had an offer to do an MA, and I'd like to go on to lecture at university. At the moment that's my ambition.

MC: To lecture? In where?

AS: At Sheffield.

MC: At Sheffield? You'd like to stay there?

AS: Well I'd like to do my PhD there because I know the department now.

MC: Do you go to the theatre there?

AS: I go to the theatre quiet often.

MC: Who's running it at the moment? It's in a state of flux, isn't it?

AS: They're just rebuilding The Crucible.

MC: So they haven't got anybody running it. What is there now? Just The Lyceum?

AS: There's The Lyceum, The Crucible's being reconstructed, I think it opens again soon.

MC: Right, and The Lyceum takes tours doesn't it, where as The Crucible put on its own plays.

AS: That's right. I saw *The Caretaker* there a few years ago.

MC: Who was in that? David Bradley?

AS: There was a chap off of *Eastenders* [Nigel Harman], and ironically the caretaker from the Harry Potter films [David Bradley]. I can't remember either of their names.

MC: I think it's probably David Bradley.

AS: So we're talking about Harold Pinter now. You discovered Harold Pinter.

MC: We've left Peggy Ramsay have we now? [Smiles] We're moving quickly, Adam.

AS: We're moving backwards now to 1958, Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*.

MC: '58. Yes.

AS: How did you discover Harold Pinter? That must be find of the century.

MC: You think it was?

AS: Well, retrospectively it seems so.

MC: It seems to be. Yes. Well, the thing is it was getting known amongst literary agents that there was somebody looking for new plays, and willing to take a gamble. And I think I had then decided that I would run plays at the Lyric Hammersmith. This is before the Arts even.

AS: We've gone back to before the Arts.

MC: We're going backwards yes, long before. I started putting on plays at the Lyric Hammersmith because I thought it had proved lucky with *Share My Lettuce*, it had a reputation in the past of doing plays that weren't exactly commercial West End plays. So I managed to get hold of people that had a bit of capital and that trusted me and we decided that we would put on a season of new plays there. So I was looking for plays to do. And I think Pinter had written a short play that was put on at Bristol, not at the Old Vic even or somewhere like that, and Harold Hobson – you know, the critic on *The Sunday Times* – gave it a very very good review. A review to make you sit up. So I then said to the agent, 'Can I meet him, and has he got any plays?', and he said, 'Yes, you

can meet him'. So we met – Pinter and the agent Jimmy Wax – in the Regent Palace Hotel. A very unlikely place. And I always... I mean, one of the most famous Pinter remarks is 'The weasel under the cocktail cabinet', isn't that right? He talks about that. And I often wonder if he was referring to the cocktail cabinet in the Regent Palace, and that gave him the idea of it. And then he handed me *The Birthday Party*. And I could see that it was slightly obscure, but not as obscure as the critics thought when they first saw it. But it had a sense of menace about it. And part of that was that he was Jewish and came from the East End. But it was constructed like – I mean, I don't want to put it down – I would say, a rep play. It was like plays that he had been in himself as an actor in rep. It had a landlady, and the lodger, and the girl comes in. And underneath it all of course was this menace that was mystifying. And again we were very lucky to get an extremely good cast. I think our cast was excellent. When they had the 50th celebration of it and Sheila Hancock, who I know, was in it and lots of people... But I still think our cast was pretty good for a play by an unknown.

AS: How did the cast feel about the script? Did they realise it was unusual?

MC: I think they knew they were into something good, and they were as shocked as I was when it was absolutely quarterised by the critics.

AS: So it wasn't a commercial success, but you stuck with Pinter, because two years later you had *The Caretaker*. What was your motivation for sticking with him?

MC: Yes, that makes me sound as if I'm a bit... more of a hero than I am. It was a great blow that it came off, and I think by that time I had taken the Arts. Yes? So you can see that I was looking... Though I became a West End producer, or you think of me as a West End Producer, all my beginnings were in the fringe, like the Arts, or Bristol, or The Lyric Hammersmith, The Bush. Doing plays there first, which is the correct way to do it, to protect the writer so that he isn't exposed immediately to the glare of the West End critics. And I think that by the time Harold had written *The Caretaker*, I was running the Arts. And the play came to me and I thought, 'I can't afford to let Harold have another failure, what can I do?', and my partner said, 'You can put it on at the Arts, they'll let you put it on at the Arts, and have a director that he likes', – because he didn't really get on with Peter Wood. Peter did a good job but they weren't compatible, Peter and he. And I chose Donald McWhinnie who had done a lot of radio work with Pinter, and then we managed to get Donald Pleasance, Alan Bates and Peter Woodthorpe, and we opened at the Arts. The rest is history.

AS: Was that one of the plays that was every four weeks?

MC: No. I think we ran that for a little longer. No, it may have been, it may well have been.

AS: What do you think that the difference was in the eyes of the audience between *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker*? Do you think they just needed time to adjust?

MC: I think they had to, yes, adjust. And it had got a wonderful performance in it by Donald Pleasance and Alan Bates. You know, it was a magical performance, and people could recognise the brother relationship and the threat of this tramp trying to inveigle himself into a set up. I can never go through... In fact, I'd better tell you, talking about *The Caretaker*, I come back to London every Monday – or Tuesday, as it is today – through Sidcup. Because it's on the way from Kent to here. And when I get to Sidcup I always ring Sandi [Mr. Codron's PA]. And Sidcup has this tremendous resonance – I don't know if you remember in *The Caretaker* – do you? He kept saying, 'I've got to get to Sidcup, my papers are in Sidcup'.

AS: I do remember.

MC: And it's a very sweet harmless – well, it's not that harmless because a boy was killed there.

AS: Retrospectively critics look at Pinter's work now and say it was new wave, that it was revolutionary, that it changed the face of theatre and so on -

MC: Which? *Caretaker*? Do they say that?

AS: Well, I've read it about *The Birthday Party* as well. Was there a sense of that at the time? Did you feel like it was a new wave?

MC: No, I felt a sense of immense relief that he had been acknowledged as a good writer, and we did one or two other things and then he fell in with Peter Hall, and wanted his plays done by the RSC. And so his plays were done here [The Aldwych Theatre] – *The Homecoming* was done here – when Peter Hall was running it. So I then lost him as a commercial producer. He wanted to be done... If a writer wants to go and do it, there is nothing you can do about it. And then of course I had a stronger relationship with him later because he became the director of *Simon Gray*. He did all the *Simon Gray* plays. I saw a lot of him then. And I think I revived one Pinter play, that I hadn't done originally, *The Homecoming*. I did that. I thought, 'Well, I didn't get a chance to produce it so I'll produce it'.

AS: So Harold Pinter started as an actor, become a writer and ended up being a director as well.

MC: Yes, he was a very good director. An excellent director.

AS: Can you see Harold Pinter in the scripts that he wrote?

MC: In his plays? Well I think The Homecoming has quite a bit of his East End childhood in it, yes. He was visited by many more phantoms and ideas than were in his own life I think...

AS: So we're back at the London Arts Theatre now.

MC: Oh, we've gone back to the Arts?

AS: We've found our way back...

MC: Yes, what year are we in now?

AS: We're in the 1960s, I'm not sure of the precise date. Was it a longer period at the Arts? Did you find that, doing a play every four weeks, that you developed a formula for producing these plays? Or was the process far too dynamic for a method?

MC: Well, what I think you'll find is that – and this has been a signature of my producing – is that if I get a rapport with a director I then usually go back to them. Yes? It's like a sort of marriage, in a way. And so you'll find that if you look at who directed those plays, you'll say, 'Oh my God! This man directed and directed and directed!'. So there would be loads of plays by Donald McWhinnie, Patrick Dromgoole – the father of Dominic Dromgoole who now runs The Globe – lots of plays by Robert Chetwyn. I stuck with them. Until they got too grand. [laughs]

AS: What is it that you looked for in a director? What was it that made up this rapport?

MC: That's a very good question. What do I look for? Not a 'Yes Sir, no Sir, three bags full' sort of fellow, but somebody obviously who's on my wavelength, somebody whose casting I like. You know, I've got to feel that the director knows when he reads a script if he's on the right lines of casting. And I'm now doing at the moment – can I jump to 2009?

AS: Briefly.

MC: Yes? Briefly? You will allow me to jump?

AS: I'll allow you to jump briefly.

MC: Briefly? There's a play of mine in rehearsal, called Alphabetical Order which I did in 1975. Is that out of your years?

AS: It is, but it's still interesting.

MC: Oh, it is? So it's quite a modern play?

AS: We go up to 1968.

MC: What? We stop at '68 do we?

AS: Yes, but if we can make a parallel to before 1968 by talking about this play it's fine.

MC: Yes, yes, well we can talk about this play. This play is a play I did in 1975. It was one of the plays that I did of Michael Frayn. I did it at Hampstead. Again, another place like those places I was talking to you about, which isn't exactly a West End theatre. And I was one of the founder directors of Hampstead Theatre so I did a lot of things there. And, with Michael Rudman who was the director. And now I am involved in the revival of it, 37 years later.

AS: So that's full circle?

MC: It is a full circle. So we shall see. It's something I don't usually do – go back and revisit my old plays – because I feel I've done them and what's the point of my hanging around saying, 'Oh no, we did this, we did that', getting on people's nerves? But Alphabetical Order I think is an enchanting play, and I'm quoting it actually because you say, 'What do I like in a director?'. It's the fact that it's directed by somebody that I do admire called Christopher Luscombe. It isn't directed by Michael Rudman again. And he and I do have a rapport, if you like, on casting. So we shall see.

AS: That's interesting. And that demonstrates...

MC: Right, back we go, whizzing back in the Tardis to... [laughs]

AS: We've talked about how your relationship to...

MC: You blush! Which is quite nice.

AS: That was because you mentioned the Tardis.

MC: Because I mentioned the Tardis? Are you a Doctor Who fan then?

AS: Slightly. Sometimes. You've just mentioned your rapport with directors. You are also described, I think it was by Alan Ayckbourn, as a 'quintessential writer's producer'.

MC: Alan said that?

AS: I believe so. I believe I read that in a book recently. And your persuading Joe Orton to change the ending of *Entertaining Mr Sloane* is often cited as evidence for this. Under what circumstances would you look to change a script?

MC: Why did I want to change that particular script?

AS: Well, why did you to change that script for a start?

MC: Well that script... I got Joe Orton, again through Peggy, who hadn't sent it to me. She had heard of Joe Orton through John Tydeman, who was a BBC drama producer, who discovered a lot of writers, and I see quite often now because we are both members of the Peggy Ramsay Foundation. She left a lot of money for new writing and we are some of the administrators of it - John, myself, Simon Callow, David Hare, Harriet Walter. Anyway, Peggy, I don't know why, didn't send it to me. She sent it to Joan Littlewood at Stratford. Maybe she thought it was Stratford East? Of course she didn't like it at all. Much too elegant writing for her.

AS: Joan Littlewood was more a socialist...

MC: Yes, precisely, and there was nothing socialist about it at all. I mean it was rather like Jane Austen in its elegance. I mean OK, it had a violent sexual subtext, but the whole thing was done in this false gentility...

AS: So what was it that you changed about the script?

MC: So, she said, 'I'm getting absolutely nowhere with Joan Littlewood, I've got this script, would you like to read it?'. And that's how I saw it, and I read it, and I said, 'I'm doing it', within weeks. Jumped.

AS: But you changed the end?

MC: Well we didn't change... it finished in – do you know the play?

AS: I haven't seen it, I've read a synopsis.

MC: Well, the play finished with Sloane killing the father of the two, and then there was some sort of resolution. But not a satisfactory one. And I think I said to Joe, 'Look, the play has got such an elegance to it, it should have an end!', and he then said, 'Why don't we get them to share him?'. An absolutely revolutionary idea at that point, that we would see on the stage a man and a woman having sex with the same boy. To which The Daily Telegraph said that there were snakes writhing under his feet.

AS: And it also provoked the 'Dirty Plays' controversy.

MC: It provoked the 'Dirty Plays' controversy, yes.

AS: How would you describe that?

MC: That was really ridiculous, it was so upsetting really, it starting. I think it was one of the dirty plays, there were other dirty plays that they said I did. And that was why Loot, the second play I chose, was a victim of that. There was an absolute plan to keep it out of London. And it wasn't as if we were having an easy passage with it. We were not. And we were turned down by every theatre really. And then I took it to George Devine at the Royal Court and said, 'I can't get it into the West End, can we do it at the Court?'. And he said, 'No, no, no, I'm not having it at the Court, it's a West End play', and I laughed and said, 'It may well be a West End play but no West End theatre wants to have it'. And eventually it was done, I think, at the Royal Court.

AS: Another remarkable thing about that controversy was the powerhouse support that you had. I mean, Laurence Olivier supported you.

MC: Did he?

AS: I think so.

MC: That was nice of him.

AS: Kenneth Tynan and Peter Hall at the RSC.

MC: All backing me were they?

AS: They were all backing you. Did you know these people?

MC: Yes.

AS: What was Laurence Olivier like?

MC: Well, I didn't know him really. I met him right at the end of his life because I had put on *Enjoy*, the original production, and Joan Plowright was in it. But he was pretty frail then. Peter Hall obviously I did know because we were contemporaries.

AS: He was a contemporary?

MC: Oh yes of course, he's the same age as me.

AS: Why do you think there was so much support for you there? Do you think you were supported in that controversy because -

MC: How does that come about?

AS: Well, let's start from this angle, do you think the controversy was a conservative backlash to the new writing that you had been producing?

MC: Yes, there were lots of rather powerful influences at work, namely Peter Cadbury of the chocolate family. He ran Keith Prowse - which was a leading ticket agency then - and you had to get their blessing otherwise you weren't selling your top price seats, if Keith Prowse didn't like your show. So for him to say 'This is terrible', is quite a blow. And then there was Emile Littler - who eventually became my good friend and one of my investors - again campaigning, saying, 'This is ruining the West End'. And the other theatres were controlled by his brother Prince Littler. We tried to get *The Phoenix* for *Loot*, and the man that ran the Phoenix said, 'No, we'd rather have it dark, than have your play there'. And so I then, I think, as a result of that... Are we in '68? We're still in '68 now?

AS: This is 1964.

MC: Oh good, so I'm a 34 year old fellow? I then said, 'Well, I am resigning from the committee of the Society of Producers, because my fellow producers are campaigning against me. I will remain a member of the society but I won't be on the committee'. So I resigned, and I was going home one evening and I saw a banner headline on one of the evening papers saying, 'Producer of dirty plays resigns', or something like that. As if that's of mammoth interest to everybody.

AS: But in many ways, in the long run it vindicated the cause of new writers because it showed that you were making a difference.

MC: I think so, yes.

AS: On the subject of controversy and censorship, did you ever have anything censored by the Lord Chamberlain?

MC: Oh yes. We're talking about the Lord Chamberlain now?

AS: Yes, the Lord Chamberlain now.

MC: It's amazing you know what one had to contend with, when you think about it, yes? You had a very conservative lot of theatre owners, you then had a really alarming group called the 'Gallery first nighters' – we don't get those any more – who again were terribly conservative, and would boo if they didn't like something. If they thought something was too risqué or they couldn't hear something, or it didn't strike them as their cup of tea they would boo. That's all stopped now. And you had the good old Lord Chamberlain. And every script had to go to him. And it was amazing what they would not accept. I mean, one of my stories, this must be after '68 though, Adam, when was *The Killing of Sister George*? Do we know?

AS: I'm not sure.

MC: We will find out. But I had to submit the script of *Killing of Sister George*, which you may know was the first lesbian play, the first strong lesbian play, and I could not get the script back. I kept saying, 'Can I get my script back please, we're about to start rehearsal?'. Beryl Reid, a famous actress was in it, and Eileen Atkins, but 'No'. And they were sitting on it, trying to prove that it was a lesbian play, but there was no reference to lesbianism in it. You just knew that these two women were in a relationship, and in the end they had to let it go through.

AS: I was just going to say, did you find ways to get around...

MC: Well, they sent the play back, but I later found out from the Lord Chamberlain that that was the reason, that the readers had been trying to find a way of saying, 'No, this is a play about lesbians, we are not having lesbians on the stage'. It was ridiculous.

AS: Do you think there is a case for self-censorship in response to the Lord Chamberlain being so active? Some people say that it went to such an extent that a writer wouldn't write something because they knew it'd be censored, which is censorship in its ultimate form. I mean, it's not even getting written down on paper.

MC: Yes.

AS: Did you have experience of that, or because your writers were new writers did they write it down anyway?

MC: I think they must have had an eye cocked to the fact that it had to go to the Lord Chamberlain. There was a case with David Mercer, do you know that writer? He was a famous television writer, I did a play of his called Ride a Cock Horse, which had Peter O'Toole in it, and again the Lord Chamberlain came up with so many objections to that. So I went with David Mercer and said, 'Why are you objecting to this sort of thing?'. And there was a very beautiful image of a man in a boat, floating along, and lying on top of the girl, in the boat, and he took that out. And I said, 'Why have you taken that out? It's a lovely image of them just floating', and he said, 'It's an absolute straightforward case of rogering'. [laughs] 'I beg your pardon', in as much as rogering can ever be straightforward. Anyway, he took it out.

[Pause. Michael Codron speaks on the phone to his personal assistant, finds out the year of The Killing of Sister George].

AS: So we've just established that The Killing of Sister George was in 1965 and it is therefore perfectly valid to have talked about it. Did you find that courting controversy was good for drawing in wide audiences, or was you conscious of running the risk of alienating some people through scandal?

MC: Well... [pause] This is going to sound like – I'm not being smug, but sort of wise after the event – the thing to get audiences is to be just slightly ahead of them. Yes? And then they think that they've got onto something. Yes, to go in the face of audiences and absolutely shock them is not, but to be slightly ahead with everything, and then they think, 'Yes, this is quite interesting'. So there was this play if you like, The Killing of Sister George, with two women, and no one had seen that before. And there must be rather a lot of lesbians around who were rather delighted to see it up on the stage. In fact one of my main – inverted commas – commercial hits again was booed by the gallery on the first night. That was There's a Girl in my Soup. Girl in my Soup, and it was a huge hit. That I think was after '68, wasn't it?

AS: Girl in my Soup was 1966.

MC: 1966, yes. And we didn't know it was going to be a big, big hit. Again I had Robert Chetwyn. I've talked about directors, a director that I've worked with quite a bit. I think it then had Donald Sinden in it and Barbara Ferris, and it had a very bumpy pre-London tour, really bumpy. And eventually we got it into London by default, because the theatre had nothing to put in and thought they'd put it in for a week or two, and we lasted three or four years. That's just one of those things. But again, one was slightly ahead of the public taste, because the girl did not marry the man in the end. She turned him down. She slept with him, and the gallery reacted violently against that. They thought it was, 'Oh God, another one of Michael Codron's dirty plays!'

AS: But it was a commercial success regardless.

MC: Oh big, yes, it ran for years. It was made into a movie with Peter Sellers.

AS: I knew I'd heard the name. So we've talked about directors and we've talked about writers, what was your relationship like with the actors?

MC: With actors? You've really got onto a big subject now Adam, right at the end. We've got ten minutes left. Some actors I've had very close relationships with. It's the same thing as with the director, that if I find that there's a rapport there ... I mean Michael Gambon, if you look at my walls as it were, Michael Gambon has been in about seven of my plays. Sheila Hancock was in a lot, loads of plays, Maureen Lipman - you know, I've got favourites that I – Kenneth obviously, Richard Briers...

AS: Felicity Kendal, recently?

MC: Felicity Kendal, I mustn't forget Felicity Kendal.

AS: I've read that critics often talk about producers having mixed feelings about stars and the star machine -

MC: Well they're wrong. No no, look. However much I might get, inverted commas, 'lauded' for being a man putting on new plays I always did new plays with stars.

AS: Have you ever tailored a production for a star?

MC: Have I done one because of a star? Yes, and it was an absolute disaster.

AS: One of the definitions of an impresario is that they must be like a dictator and impose their personality on a production, if you're fashioning it for the star -

MC: I did do one play, I usually don't. If a star comes and says, 'I want to do something', then I don't think they would go to me. They would go to one of the other producers who do revivals really. But in fact it was again Peggy – the famous Peggy – who had a playwright and she said, 'I don't know what you think of the play, darling – or Codders she would call me – but Ralph Richardson wants to do the play'. I should have said one of the favourite actors of mine was Alec Guinness.

AS: Alec Guinness?

MC: He was in several plays of mine. But Richardson I had never produced, and she said, 'I don't know what you'll think of the play but he does want to do it', and so I did do it. And it wasn't good. It had a wonderful cast as well. It had Michael Bryant in it. It had Michael Gambon, Geoffrey Keen, very good people in it.

AS: And what was the name of the play?

MC: That's a very good question Adam. I've banished it from my mind. The play was called... We'll think of it... I'm fascinated by a crane, look, behind you. This is rather symptomatic of my life as a producer. Look, this is how producer's act.

AS: That is a fascinating crane.

MC: Look. It's going to come up in a moment with a load of shit. What was it called? [pause].

AS: Do you say we've just got ten minutes left? I've just got some broader question -

MC: We'll think of the title.

AS: We'll come back to it. The themes of the period as we'd call them now. A lot of theatre historians refer to the 1950s as an angry decade. They say that the 1940s were a decade of austerity and that the 1950s were one of affluence, angst and unrest. They often cite John Osborne's 1956 play Look Back in Anger as evidence for this. That was 1956, just before Ring For Catty.

MC: Was that before?

AS: I think it was. Just before.

MC: Was it just before? Yes it was.

AS: Did you see Look Back in Anger?

MC: Yes, of course I saw it.

AS: And what did you think?

MC: I thought it was OK. It had Alan Bates in it, and it had a very good performance from Kenneth Haigh. Mary Ure was in it. It was excellent. I didn't I don't suppose think it was as earth-shattering as it seems in retrospect. And now I think they do not see it as the landmark that it was. It did have a huge effect.

AS: Did you feel when you went into producing in the late 1950s and 1960s that it was an angry period from the perspective of theatre?

MC: No.

AS: No? Not necessarily? Do you think that's something that we've projected? If you had to characterise some of the main issues and feelings of the period, from the perspective of the theatre, what would you say that they were? What issues would you say were hot topics in the Zeitgeist?

MC: In those days? Well we were ten years away from having won the war weren't we? So we were starting to try and live our lives again, I think, in a civilised way. I think there was a lot on in the West End theatre. If you looked at all the plays that were on it's a much much more impressive list than there is now. There were wonderful playwrights from Europe, and there were very good English plays as well. The West End is not what it was. And that is because of television. And that is also because actors don't want to act in the West End. God, I'm talking about 2009. I'm not talking about 1968 now.

AS: That's alright because it was a parallel. We mentioned earlier Joan Littlewood, who was doing her working class theatre on the other side of London.

MC: Now that's where the anger was, and very well channelled by her. Yes.

AS: Which was very much about class. Did you ever feel that issues regarding class played a part in your plays?

MC: Well I suppose they must have done must they not?

AS: I mean class is always there, but was there ever an overt influence?

MC: Yes it's always there. I don't think I did Lords and Ladies the whole while, no. I did my own sort of, my own strata of society. And put it on. But with again that slight, just that little nudge. It can't be called avant garde but it is just a slightly new angle on something. And then you find the public will accept it. I think we'll have to call it a day now Adam, do you mind?

AS: That's fine. That's been brilliant, thank you very much.