

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Brigid Wells – interview transcript

Interviewer: Amy Calladine

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Theatre-goer and daughter of Susan Richmond, actress. Lindsay Anderson; diction; dramatic technique tuition; John Gielgud; Hermione Gingold; Stewart Granger; Hamlet; Henry IV; ingénues; Margaret Leighton; musicals; Oh Calcutta!; Paul Robeson's Othello; Laurence Olivier; Oxford University drama; Ralph Richardson; Susan Richmond; Royal College of Opera; set design; Shakespeare; stage management; theatre-going; Kenneth Tynan; wartime theatre; Waiting for Godot; the Webber Douglas Academy.

AC: Right, well, I'd like to start off just by asking you what your first memories of theatre were in this period?

BW: Well, when I was about two I went to a performance of The Barretts of Wimpole Street –and my mother was Arabella – and I can just remember being in a dress circle and seeing this lighted stage and looking at all the ladies with crinolines, and apparently I called, 'There's mummy!' in a loud voice and had to be removed!

AC: Wow, that's brilliant!

BW: But I actually appeared as a bump on the Haymarket stage in '27...

AC: Really?

BW: Because my mother was a lead in a play called Yellow Sands [by Eden Philpotts]

AC: Right.

BW: She was playing an old lady called Jennifer – she was only 35 but she was playing somebody of 80 in a bath chair – and she was married out of the play. She had three days off to get married and had a beautiful basket of flowers, I believe, from the gallery, and then she found she was pregnant quite soon after, and Ralph Richardson, who was in the cast, used to wheel her round in the bath chair and for fun he used to twiddle her around and play tricks with it... and she started to get morning sickness and couldn't cope... and in those days you didn't really tell people you were pregnant.

AC: Right.

BW: And she thought, 'Oh dear! I'm going to be sicker and sicker and I can't stop him twiddling me and I'd better leave while the going's good'. And then of course, she was sorry because she got over the morning sickness, and because she was in a bath chair covered in shawls, she actually could have gone on playing an old lady of 80 more or less indefinitely!

AC: That's great! So, how about after the '45 period? From that time... what memories...

BW: Oh! Well, in '44, the... Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson were playing at Shakespeare at the New Theatre which is now the Albery.

AC: Yes.

BW: And, I used to get up at five in the morning and take the first tube into – I was 16 – into Leicester Square in order to put down a stool in the gallery queue – because you could do that very early in the morning, I think it was 8 o'clock, I can't remember – very early anyway! And so I went and saw everything in the gallery because, at the time, I wanted to go on the stage.

AC: Yes.

BW: And I did a lot of amateur acting and so on, and my mother was very much against it, and said, 'Dear, you will never make an ingénue', and she was perfectly right about that! And in those days you – obviously you could go to drama school – but you could also, quite often, get into a rep.

AC: OK.

BW: As a sort of, you know, extra... and if you were in a repertory company and you were a girl and you were late teens early twenties, you had to be able to play the 'Anyone for tennis?' type of ingénue!

AC: Right!

BW: Which I would have been hopeless at! She said, 'You might be quite good as a character actress when you're thirty', but it seemed like a long time to wait. And she also said, quite rightly, that it was very important to have another trade if you were going on the stage.

AC: Of course, yeah.

BW: So 'get a qualification'. So I in fact went to university... acted quite a lot there. And my best friend also went to university – she was a bit older – and also wanted to go on the stage, so she went to the Webber Douglas after Cambridge, and then tried to get a job, and the only job she could get was a play called Woman of the Boulevards!

AC: Oh, really?!

BW: At the end of the Barmouth Pier with a pretty seedy company!

AC: Oh dear!

BW: And I thought, 'I'm not sure that that's what I [want] to do!' [laughs]

AC: [laughs]

BW: So I didn't!

AC: So, were there any particular productions as an audience member...?

BW: Yes, the Laurence Olivier Henry IV with Ralph Richardson as Falstaff and Margaret Leighton as Lady Percy... and she became quite a friend. My mother knew her – had trained her at Birmingham in the war – and she, of course, was terribly tall and she had to be very careful not to upstage Laurence Olivier as Percy!

AC: [laughs]

BW: [laughs] She had to sort of sit down when he was standing up, or put him on a step or whatever. And he, of course, was a brilliant swashbuckling kind of hero, and Ralph Richardson was a very endearing Falstaff, and my father took me to see him... we went to see him in the dressing room because my mother was obviously in...

AC: Yes.

BW: And when I was 17, he kissed me, and I had a crush on him for about two years after that! [laughs]

AC: Wow, that's amazing!

BW: I used to lurk around hoping to see him again!

AC: [laughs]

BW: I thought he was brilliant, and I loved him in the film of South Riding.

AC: OK.

BW: Which was about the same period. He was very, very good in that!

AC: So, is this sort of mid-forties period?

BW: Yes, and I also – he was in Uncle Vanya which I also saw, and was very moving – and I took some friends from night school who'd never been to a play before, and they thought Uncle Vanya was an absolute hoot! [laughs] And burst out laughing which was quite funny because everybody else was being terribly reverential!

AC: [laughs] Right!

BW: What else did...? I'm trying to think...The Henry IV's are the ones I remember best. And then I saw Gielgud as Hamlet at some point... was he in The Duchess of Malfi, I can't remember? Oh dear. [long pause] I saw Wendy Hillier in Major Barbara. She was an extremely good actress who didn't thrust her personality forward, you know, she was... [long pause] I haunted the New Theatre for a long time.... my mind's gone a complete blank now! [laughs]

AC: That's all right!

BW: My mother was in a rather stupid play called Soldier for Christmas with Robert Beatty.

AC: Right.

BW: It was one of the relics of wartime really.

AC: Right.

BW: And she had to play a comic old lady who smoked cigars, and she hated the cigars and she didn't realise you had to pierce them so she never managed to get them alight!
[laughs]

AC: [laughs] Oh dear!

BW: Until someone explained it to her. I saw a magical performance – I think it might have been before the war – of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with Robert Helpmann. That was quite extraordinary with the gauze screens and fantastic fairies.

AC: Sort of brilliant set production then?

BW: Yes. Contrasted with an absolutely bleak one with nothing but white boxes – I think in the sixties probably – which was... yes it was very odd, you know, to try and do... to try and recreate the forest in a completely sort of peculiar kind of way.

AC: Did you notice, like you were saying, a change as that period from '45 to '68 progressed?

BW: Oh, absolutely! Yes. Oh, *Arms and the Man* I remember very well... again, Ralph Richardson and Margaret Leighton. A very warm, fast-moving performance that was, and I think, it wasn't... They were already in the forties beginning to have quite stylized sets.

AC: OK.

BW: But not totally anti-the mood, I mean, they were still vaguely baronial or vaguely royal in some minimal way. And then of course, the fashion became far more angular, far more – doing some kind of different take on the whole setting – and of course, I didn't in fact – after about the sixties – I didn't go to the theatre very much because I had small children and lived a long way out, you know.

AC: Yes.

BW: But certainly for most of the forties I used to go to Regent's Park again, and my mother acted with Peggy Ashcroft in *Hedda Gabler* in the sixties. The fifties, I'm sorry, in the fifties. I went to see that with... Oh dear! [long pause] I'm trying to think of ... I should have written it all down! Things I did... I saw the *Duchess of Malfi*, which was a powerful... at the Haymarket. I should think that was in the fifties probably, and *The Heiress*, again, Wendy Hillier.

AC: OK.

BW: Also, I think, in the sixties. But again, the fashion was very much more for middle-class domestic type stories.

AC: Right.

BW: Inspector Calls was Ralph Richardson.

AC: That's brilliant! Yes, I did that at school!

BW: Yes! Which was... That was... He, again, was always brilliant at doing sort of humble men with interior...

AC: So, was he playing the inspector?

BW: Yes. He was very, very good! But there was far more... you didn't get these – just two people talking to each other – as you do now, I'm sure partly for financial reasons, you know... the casts were bigger.

AC: Yes?

BW: On the whole, until you get to Look Back in Anger, which I did see, actually...

AC: Oh really?

BW: At the Royal Court, yes, I think it was... it was in... That was the first sort of antihero type play that I remember. Because before that it was Terence Rattigan, and far more kind of stylised drama, and generally speaking, everybody spoke with Received Pronunciation. There was very little in the way of gritty, down-to-earth stuff, you know.

AC: Yeah, that's brilliant.

BW: [long pause] Of course, I remember better really the stuff when I was a small child, like Jane Eyre and a play called The Aunt of England which was at the Savoy before the war... because I was actually evacuated in the war to America.

AC: Oh wow!

BW: I saw Paul Robeson in Othello on Broadway – that was something! He was absolutely brilliant! He had – I should think – more presence than Lenny Henry, although I believe Lenny Henry was very good, you know, in the recent production of Othello.

AC: Oh right.

BW: But Paul Robeson was – in those days, to have a black man playing with white women – was quite sort of thrilling. I was at school with girls who would not go on a train in New York because they might get into a carriage with a black man. Charming girls but they wouldn't.

AC: It's, I suppose, a sign of the times.

BW: So, in those days there was more of an atmosphere around the whole thing you know.

AC: Sort of a buzz around it?

BW: But he stood up in a kind of shiny tunic absolutely straight from top to bottom, and he was this marvellous majestic figure. And a chap called Jose Ferrer was Iago, and he was absolutely great too, he was a very nasty piece of work... thin, and dark, and really unshaven and creepy... a very good foil to this majestic, rather simple-minded Othello.

AC: It's brilliant how these sorts of characters... they stick in your mind don't they?

BW: Absolutely, yes, well that certainly did!

AC: So do you think there was a big difference between the theatre in Britain and America?

BW: Not then, no, because they were – as they always have been – quite keen on British actors, and... No, I mean they brought Shakespeare to life in the same sort of way that Olivier managed to. I wouldn't say there was a massive difference. It was a very intelligent production and no gimmicks obviously.

AW: Yes.

BW: But beautifully spoken. Which again is something... you notice that diction is not what it used to be. I think it's far more difficult to hear people in the theatre now than it used to be.

AC: Yes it can be, yeah.

BW: My mother's generation had to project their voices and did. They didn't have any problem with it. But now you don't necessarily hear. And I think children's school drama is simply frightful, you can hardly hear anything!

AC: [laughs]

BW: They don't seem to be taught to project their voices either. And it's a pity; I mean half the thing is to hear it.

AC: Well yeah, you're paying a lot of money to.

BW: Yes.

AC: That's brilliant. You mentioned as well in one of your e-mails about your time at Oxford and that you did some acting...

BW: Oh yes.

AC: And that your college maybe frowned upon it?

BW: They did. In those days my college would only allow you to be in two productions for the whole of your career...

AC: Really?

BW: Which wasn't much!

AC: What sort of time period was this?

BW: '46-'49.

AC: Oh right.

BW: So it was – you know – it was still rationing, it was still fairly bleak.

AC: Yes.

BW: And of course, there were no mixed colleges or anything like that, no, and you had to be – no men in college after 7pm, oh no – and you had to be back by 11:15. So it was, you know, pretty constricted... we managed all right though! But, I was in The Cherry Orchard with Lindsay Anderson. Lindsay Anderson was the old grandpa whose name I can't remember, but he... anyway, he was in it, and so I knew him, and I was in a revue – I don't think that counted as one of the productions – I was in the chorus in a revue with Sandy Wilson and Donald Swann. Donald Swann did the music and so did Sandy as well. They were there at the same time, and of course, Kenneth Tynan was up with me too.

AC: Oh?!

BW: He was terrifying! He looked like a skull, and he used to wear... he had an apple-green suit with tight trousers and a flared jacket, and a magenta suit, and he wore them alternately... And I once went for some sort of audition with him, and he was still in bed in yellow bed socks at 12 in the morning! [laughs]

AC: Wow!

BW: And I once went to an Experimental Theatre Club party, which was... you were supposed to dress up as a baby, or a child, anyway, I couldn't bring myself to dress up as a baby so I borrowed somebody's very short gym tunic and I went in that, and it was pretty stupid and everyone was playing Postman's Knock, and I, in those days, wasn't really up for that sort of thing at all! But anyway, I went to this party, and then I met Ken on the steps of the reading room I think, and he looked me up and down and he said [imitating his voice], 'I'm passionately in love with you!' and I said, 'Oh yes?' and he said, 'How did you know a gym tunic could be so provocative?!'

AC: [laughs]

BW: [laughs] Well, I fell apart! He was 'engaged' – in inverted commas – to a new girl every term!

AC: Oh really?!

BW: I was not going to be one of them! I don't think... he wouldn't have looked at me really; he was only trying to embarrass me I think!

AC: So he was quite a character then?

BW: Oh yes! [laughs] He certainly was! [pause] Lindsay was very quiet and unassuming.

AC: Really?

BW: He was quite a bit older... of course, my generation at Oxford, a lot of the men were post-war.

AC: Of course, yeah.

BW: And they were quite a lot older... And, I was Lucy in *The Beggar's Opera*, and that was very exciting because we did it in the Oxford Playhouse in the proper professional theatre.

AC: Oh wow!

BW: And I was no great singer and unfortunately Polly was not an Oxford undergraduate at all, she was a music student brought in from outside!

AC: [laughs] Oh right!

BW: And we were produced by a chap called Anthony Besch, who subsequently made his name in opera production and went on to do it, you know, professionally. And then in my last year I was offered the part of Joan in *Saint Joan*, to be done in New College cloisters, and my college wouldn't let me do it!

AC: Oh dear – how terrible!

BW: That, I've never forgiven them for! [laughs]

AC: Dear, so was that just because you'd had your set amount of...?

BW: Because I'd had my two. [nods regretfully]

AC: How terrible, it's heartbreaking!

BW: It was! I really would have enjoyed that!

AC: Oh dear!

BW: But there you go! It was quite an entertaining time to be up. Ken Tynan, my first term, decided he was going to put on a dramatic version of The Song of Solomon.

AC: Right.

BW: And he got a whole lot of would be characters along to audition, and we all sat there looking at him mesmerised, and he said, 'I'm looking for a woman of experience to play the Shulamite!', and we all goggled! [laughs] And in the end he got one of the very few married undergraduates!

AC: [laughs]

BW: The rest of us were a bit green for him I think! [pause] Oh! But it was quite a lively time... dramatically it was a very entertaining time. There was a lot going on. Frank Hauser, he went on to be... he was...he produced with the [OUDS Oxford University Dramatic Society], he went on to produce, I think, professionally. Tony Richardson was just after me, who married Vanessa Redgrave, you know, anyway... you know Natasha Richardson who's just had this awful skiing accident.

AC: Oh gosh yes. Liam Neeson's... yeah.

BW: Yep. So it was quite a talented generation I think.

AC: So there was quite a sort of thriving community at your university then of actors and actresses...?

BW: Yep.

AC: Quite a big theatre scene?

BW: Well they'd stopped, of course... before the war they used to bring down professional actresses, they didn't use undergraduates.

AC: Oh, really?

BW: Because that's how Cathleen Nesbitt met Cecil Ramage. She was brought in as an actress for OUDS when he was...

AC: Oh really?

BW: Yes.

AC: So that all changed after the war then?

BW: Oh yeah, they used the home talent after that.

AC: That's great! [laughs]

BW: Except, as I say, not Polly! Polly was brought in.

AC: No, you were... yeah.

BW: [laughs] I think they thought none of us could sing that well! [long pause]

AC: So how...?

BW: But...

AC: Sorry, you carry on.

BW: But I was evacuated – as I said – to America, and when I'd come back in '44 my mum was on tour with – was it with [Queen Elizabeth Slept Here], I can't remember – anyway, she was on tour and she couldn't think what to do with me. She took me round on tour for a bit. [Trevor Howard was the leading man.]

AC: Right.

BW: We played Glasgow and Aberdeen and Blackpool, I think, and she needed a babysitter. During the war she'd been producing both at Birmingham and the Perth Repertory Theatre in Scotland.

AC: OK.

BW: And so she sent me up to the Perth Rep as an Assistant Stage Manager.

AC: Oh wow!

BW: She taught me a bit, because that summer of the flying bombs [1944] we were – I came back before the flying bombs – from America – we were sort-of squatting, mostly with friends, but she was working in London, and I was coming into London with her, and she [had started an opera school with Clive Carey] at the Royal College of Music with the students who were surviving, and I... she taught me to be her assistant stage manager because she needed one, she hadn't got a stage manager obviously in the [opera] school, and of course the opera students were not terribly interested in learning how to do it.

AC: Right.

BW: So I stage managed *The Importance of Being Earnest*... the props and the prompting and everything else – so that was quite good training – and I did some scene painting too I think, anyway, so when I went up to Perth, I did have some clue... and they lived in those days as a community, they all ate together.

AC: So all the company? Yeah.

BW: Two lovely doctor's daughters cooked for them, and, er, I don't think I paid anything, but on the other hand I worked quite hard.

AC: Yes, yeah.

BW: And, you know, I shifted furniture. And I painted flats – and I scraped flats – which is a horrible job. You know, you have to scrape the canvas from behind to get the paint off...

AC: OK, so hard physical work then?

BW: Yeah... and I put the records on for *God Save the King* which, in those days, we used to have to sing at the end of every performance.

AC: Of course.

BW: And one awful day, I put on *Rule Britannia* by mistake! [laughs] And I used to have to go around saying, 'Overture and beginners please!' you know, and knock on the door as call-boys used to do. Because you didn't have any of this automatic playing in the dressing room, which I think actually is quite distracting. I mean, I've been in dressing rooms where it was happening, and to have to listen to the play yourself, and be responsible for your own cues, is much worse, I think, than having somebody come and bang on the door and remind you, you know.

AC: Yes.

BW: Because you can't switch off entirely.

AC: No.

BW: And of course, when I was little, I used to spend a lot of time in dressing rooms.

AC: Of course, with your mother, yes.

BW: Practising with the make-up and putting on costumes. I always remember trying to lace myself into Victorian corsets when I was about 9, and even then, they were quite tight! [laughs] And of course, I had quite a lot to do with the Webber Douglas...

AC: Your mother taught there, did she, if I was correct with my...?

BW: She was [a] director, she taught there a lot and she wrote a book called Textbook of Stagecraft which was still on sale in the eighties.

AC: Really?

BW: Yeah, it was one of the very few textbooks of how to act with actual examples, and I was still getting little royalties from it... it was in print for a very long time. She wrote it in about '35 I think.

AC: That's amazing, so it lasted.

BW: Yeah it did last a long time, because nobody else tried to tell you exactly how to do things. And it had little tiny sort-of three-sentence scenes, for three people to do, you know?

AC: Sort of exercises to do?

BW: Yeah – which are very useful – and you had to do them in certain ways, you know, registering different emotions and that sort of thing... and I used to go along... I saw a great deal of Shakespeare that way because the students were always doing it. And the girl in the black tights was always Hamlet! There were a great many Hamlets, to give them all a chance, you know. [laughs] And she did Greek plays and so on.

AC: Oh wow!

BW: And I used to make the papier maché fruits for the offerings, and I was a child in Quality Street and then the students did Henry VIII in the park... in Hyde Park.

AC: Oh wonderful!

BW: Or in Kensington...In Kensington Gardens I think it was.

AC: Yeah.

BW: And I was Wolsey's Page – [he was] a nice chap called Gordon Collyer – and I thought that was marvellous!

AC: So that would be sort-of before the war would it?

BW: Yes. It was just before, sorry, you're more interested in the forties are you?

AC: Well, from specifically '45 to '68, so that post-war period... but obviously some sort of context and background is fine.

BW: Yes, well, after the war of course, she didn't... she kept on at the [Royal College of Music], but I don't think she did anything more than occasional stuff at the Webber Douglas. It took quite a while for it to get going again, because obviously it wasn't a priority.

AC: Of course.

BW: So after the war I think it rather struggled, and she concentrated more on the College, where actually, the theatre was much better; the Chanticleer at the Webber Douglas was tiny.

AC: Really?

BW: Whereas the College had a huge orchestra pit – obviously because it was for music – and the students had to throw their voices across this which was very good for them.

AC: Of course, yes.

BW: And it was the first time that opera students, I think, had actually been taught to act as opposed to sing, so they did straight plays as well as opera to get them into the idea that you should act, even if you're singing.

AC: Yes.

BW: So that was quite good.

AC: So you mentioned theatre in the immediate post-war period... were you aware of any sort of... the effect of war on the theatre and recovery, I suppose?

BW: Well, no, I think there was a tremendous... I mean I think, in a way, it was more vibrant at the end of the war than it has been since because people appreciated it so much, and it used to play regardless of air raids or whatever.

AC: Yes.

BW: You'd hear the siren but you wouldn't leave.

AC: Really?

BW: No! [laughs] You sat there and hoped for the best! And I think people were – of course there was no telly to speak of anyway – so I think going to the theatre was a much more, I think it was a more normal experience actually. And of course, the seats were cheap, relatively. I don't know quite how they'd compare, but I mean, you could go to the theatre for the equivalent of about 10p in the gallery; two shillings, two and sixpence.

AC: So there were different... like there is today... different prices of seats so different people can...?

BW: Yeah but there was – I suppose the very expensive seats were always expensive – but it seemed to me as though it was a more normal pursuit than it is now probably. I don't know... I mean the productions were not so lavish. They were very well thought out, I mean, instead of having masses of... they don't, for example, have a lot of stages that moved or anything like that, the sets had to be changeable by human beings quickly.

AC: Yeah.

BW: So they were probably less elaborate – certainly in Shakespeare – and there was less trickery than there is now in terms of scenery, but on the other hand the domestic drama was usually very carefully done and very accurately... photographically realistically kind of. Probably... possibly more than you would bother with now. Lots of props and so on, but then usually that kind of a play was more static, there were less changes of scene anyway. I remember going to Pygmalion when that was... I mean Pygmalion was – or maybe My Fair Lady with Rex Harrison – that was very lavish, and that was one of the first really lavish productions with beautiful costumes and lots of effects and so on.

AC: So what sort of year was that then?

BW: Was that sixties possibly? I'm terribly sorry I don't remember!

AC: Don't worry about it!

BW: But it was with Rex Harrison who was the sort-of creator over here of it, you know. And then what was rather nice – again more modern I'm afraid – but my mother had taught Stewart Granger as a young student. He'd come before the war to my father – who was a general practitioner – about his acne and depression at the age of 16 or 17, I think 17 or so. Anyway, and my father said, 'Well I'm sorry about your spots and so on, what's your problem?' He said, 'I want to be an actor and my father wants me to go in the army', and my father said to him, 'Well, I don't think you need me, you need my wife!' And he sent him off to the Webber Douglas and he got a scholarship!

AC: That's brilliant!

BW: And so, this was I suppose about '38, and my mother next saw him – she [had] taught him for whenever it was, up to the war – and then she next saw him when she was producing at Perth in the middle of the war, and he was swinging along in a Black Watch kilt and full uniform, and she said, 'Jimmy, whatever are you doing?' – his real name was Jimmy – and he said, 'Don't tell anybody, I'm recruiting for the ATS!', which was the women's [Army Territorial] Service! [laughs]

AC: That's brilliant!

BW: And we then went to a premiere of his soon after the war, when he was with Jean Simmons, that sort of era, and I remember seeing him and he was still wearing a lot of makeup at the premiere, and he said hello and was very nice to us, and then I never saw him again. I don't know if my mother did, until he... just after the death of Rex Harrison he was playing The Circle on Broadway, and they put him into the Rex Harrison part, and brought it over here (the production) which must have been [in the late] eighties I think.

AC: OK

BW: Maybe early nineties, I can't remember. I was still living in Brighton, anyway... I went to see it and I thought, 'Well blow it, I'll go round and say hello'. So I sent a note around and said, 'I'm Susan Richmond's daughter', and he was perfectly sweet, he was then in his eighties I think, and he said, 'Well of course, putting me in [this part] has thrown the balance of the play right out', which it had, because he wasn't meant to be the focus of attention and was, you know. Anyway, we had a lovely chat about the Webber Douglas and so on, and then at the end he said, 'Did Susan know I'd made it?'

AC: Oh! [laughs]

BW: Isn't that sweet?!

AC: That's brilliant! Of course, he was massive wasn't he!

BW: So that was rather nice!

AC: How modest!

BW: And in his [auto]biography he talks about her.

AC: Really?!

BW: Oh yes, and my father as well, because that's how he got into [acting], you see.

AC: So his big break really came from that. That's excellent!

BW: So that was rather fun!

AC: So was your mother working at the Webber Douglas... what sort of period was that?

BW: I suppose about '32 to '39, something like that I should think.

AC: So did she teach theatre afterwards as well?

BW: Oh yes, because she taught, obviously, at the Royal College [of Music].

AC: Right.

BW: And she was in the BBC Rep at the end of the war.

AC: Oh, really?

BW: Because I got to broadcast at one point when I first came back from the States, in a discussion programme called, 'What does July 4th mean to you?' You see it was in '44, I'd just got home. [Pause]

Now I had something I was going to tell you and I can't think what it was now. Oh yes, when I was [at] Oxford [in 1949], I was in a masque directed by Neville Coghill for Princess Elizabeth. She was still a Princess, and she was pregnant and obviously not a very happy bunny, she was – I think – about three months pregnant, and she sat there looking white faced and pretty desperate, and we acted it out in University College quadrangle, and Robert Hardy was 'Rumour' and I was 'Gloom'! [laughs]

AC: [laughs]

BW: And he ran around and... yes. My mother was in the BBC Rep with Timothy West's father, Lockwood West, who was a dear old actor, and we got to know him when he was living in Brighton and I used to go and see him quite often. He was still looking for work in his eighties!

AC: Really?

BW: And he sometimes got it! That's quite nice. My mother's great friend was a woman called Eileen Belden who was in Jane Eyre [a reference to one of the plays Susan Richmond acted in] and who I used to see quite a lot of. And she, of course, knew a lot of people, but a great friend of hers was a woman called Jane Baxter. I don't know if you've ever heard of her? She was a starlet in the films, but she was also in a lot of stage plays. She was in Dinner at Eight before the war, and after the war, she was... she was, you know, one of these very, very charming... she could be an ingénue even into her thirties.

AC: Really?

BW: She was always the sort-of romantic heroine of plays. And there were a lot of plays after the war about servicemen of one sort or another...

AC: Of course.

BW: And she was in this one that ran for ages in which she was a WAAF - you know, a Women's [Auxiliary] Air Force person -

AC: Right.

BW: And my mother's [Queen Elizabeth Slept Here], of course, again was... I'm trying to think of any of the old... [looks through her mother's scrapbook filled with programmes and memorabilia] Oh there's The Barretts of Wimpole Street... that was before the war though. [leafs through pages] This one was the last play she was in, with Peggy Ashcroft and Rachel Kempson.

AC: So what year would this be?

BW: '54 that one.

AC: And this play is Hedda...?

BW: Hedda Gabler, yes.

AC: That's brilliant!

BW: And Peggy Ashcroft, of course, was a superb... Now what's this one? Oh yes, here we are. That's my mum! [points to a cast photo]

AC: Brilliant, yeah... So is this the review of this play?

BW: Yes... [quoting], 'Susan Richmond was first rate'.

AC: Excellent!

BW: [laughs] So that was '54.

AC: Was that your mother's last play, you said?

BW: Yes... on the stage. She did some broadcasting stuff after that... that was the last actual... That was one she was in, in the war. Again, with Peggy Ashcroft.

AC: The Dark River?

BW: Yes, I think that was [pause] '43. I don't remember her being in Pygmalion. '53... oh yes, she was!

AC: Oh brilliant! So we've got a programme here from '53

BW: Yes, I must have seen that I think. It was John Clements and Kay Hammond; they were friends [of hers].

AC: Right at the top there. [pointing to Susan Richmond's name]

BW: Yes, under Athene Seyler, who was a very famous actress. I don't think it was a very big part, but that was '53. So that must have been quite... that was sort of, you know, one of her last.

AC: Yes.

BW: [leafing through scrapbook] Well that must have been... that must have been just after the war.

AC: It's wonderful that, you know, you kept all of these.

BW: Well it's quite funny. She and them... and this was Jane Eyre, which of course, was just before the war.

AC: Right

BW: He was Rochester [points to a name: Reginald Tate]. It was a marvellous production it ran for ever and ever.

AC: Really? Yeah.

BW: Unfortunately it's not in very good order... Oh that was, I remember that one - that was just before the war too. That was my mum! [pause] No, I don't think there's anything else from your period as it were. I think these are a bit earlier. [leafs through again] There's The Barretts of Wimpole Street! I wish I could remember all the plays I've seen! [long pause] Oh! The Taming of the Shrew in about '61.

AC: Oh right.

BW: I'm sorry... I should have sat down and...

AC: That's all right!

BW: And thought them all out... because, in fact, I did go the theatre quite a lot.

AC: So that was in the sixties?

BW: Yeah, well, not much in the late sixties because I was having babies!

AC: Of course, you were saying!

BW: But in the fifties I certainly did! Except when I was in New Zealand which I was for a couple of years.

AC: Oh, really?

BW: [long pause]

AC: You certainly kept up going to the theatre fairly regularly when you could.

BW: Yes, when I... Before I married I did. And I mean, my husband likes it too but it's just once you've got children it gets difficult!

AC: Of course.

BW: So I haven't seen very much lately. [In 2008] We went to *The Thirty-nine Steps*, which was quite clever, but it was nothing to do with the book really. And an awful play called *Whipping... Whipping In...* with... oh you know, *One Foot in the Grave*...

AC: Oh, Victor Meldrew!

BW: Yes, yeah! It was a frightfully boring play, and unless you knew a lot about the Houses of Parliament you wouldn't have made sense of it I don't think.

AC: Oh right.

BW: It came to the Theatre Royal at Brighton, I wasn't very pleased. I mean, I haven't honestly seen what I regarded as a really good play for a long, long time.

AC: Since that sort of era really?

BW: Yeah. Because you don't – with only a couple of people – you don't get the interaction.

AC: So those larger casts were something which was more characteristic of the earlier period, you were saying?

BW: Yes. And it did mean that you could work out characters' reactions to each other, I think... very much better than you can now.

AC: Yes, yeah.

BW: These sorts of duologues... Oh I did see *Waiting for Godot* in the dim past at the Criterion.

AC: Oh really?!

BW: But it was... again, I wasn't really tuned in to it really.

AC: No?

BW: I mean, I thought it was quite interesting, but I wasn't... it's not something I would want to go and see again, thank you very much! Not really.

AC: No... Why was that then?

BW: Well... again, it's just two people philosophising.

AC: Yeah, so quite sparse really?

BW: It's not very dramatic.

AC: No

BW: I did see Oh Calcutta!

AC: Oh really! That was post-censorship wasn't it?

BW: Yes, that's right. It was rather forced I thought – I mean, the Brits aren't really awfully good at being flamboyant I don't think – they all looked a bit embarrassed to me! [laughs]

AC: [laughs]

BW: I don't... I mean I wasn't particularly bothered by it, but I wasn't particularly kind of turned on by it either.

AC: So was there an increase in these sort of... obviously, before the censorship fell away... there was still censorship in the sixties still...?

BW: Oh yes.

AC: But you mentioned Look Back in Anger, and those sorts of gritty, more sort-of realistic drama really, sort of a change in tone almost?

BW: Yes, very much I think. Yes.

AC: Sort-of pushing the boundaries?

BW: Oh! Well, I'll tell you what I did see [in the sixties], Loot, Joe Orton? I didn't go for it. You know Joe Orton?

AC: I'm not sure... I can't say I do, no.

BW: No, well he's just died I think. But he wrote plays which very much pushed the boundaries, and to be honest, I didn't enjoy it all... I mean, I wasn't particularly shocked, I just thought it was frightfully dreary. But that was in the gritty and 'nothing is going to shock you' kind of style – and he had a similar kind of life actually, so – I mean, I think he was probably writing about what he knew.

AC: Well, yeah.

BW: But it was... It wasn't entertainment, and it wasn't to my mind particularly moving, or... it didn't do anything for me anyway, but I mean it may have done for some people.

AC: Well, yeah. That's brilliant!

BW: Now what else have I seen? The trouble is I tend not to keep programmes any more because I can't keep the... there's too much junk!

AC: You get so many of them, don't you. [pause] Sort of the things that really stood out, you know.

BW: Yes. Well, Gielgud as Hamlet... certainly.

AC: When was that sorry?

BW: [pause]

AC: Approximately!

BW: I would think it was in the fifties... probably. I mean he was very elegant, and of course, his diction is amazing... a very soulful kind of Hamlet. I saw Donald Wolfitt a few times who was a bit hammy, but on the other hand... I mean he was much more in the style of people like Irving.

AC: Oh really?

BW: I mean he acted everybody off the stage, you know. But he did a great service. He did a lot of Shakespeare productions... and sort-of quite brought them to life really. I'm trying to think who I saw... I saw some very good [plays] with Richardson. I saw Olivier as Richard III.

AC: Oh wow!

BW: And of course, he was a master of disguise as it were, I mean he made himself into this hunchbacked... rather creepy individual. Slightly mannered perhaps, but it was very effective. [pause] And who else have I seen? [long pause]

AC: Don't worry too much.

BW: No. I'm sorry! [laughs]

AC: That's all right! [laughs]

BW: I'm rather... I should have actually thought about productions more... my husband's got a much better memory than I have! Of course, in the recent past I haven't been to the theatre much at all, mainly because London is a long way, it's expensive, and the Theatre Royal is slightly hit and miss, you know... in Brighton. It does get things from time to time, but... usually by the time they've come, you've missed them, you know. I think the last time I came to London for a show was Billy Elliot with one of my grandchildren!

AC: Oh, that's great!

BW: But... yes, what were a real tonic of course, after the war, were the big musicals which started to...

AC: I was going to mention... yes!

BW: I saw South Pacific for example...

AC: That's brilliant!

BW: ... with the woman from... the woman who made it famous whose name I can't remember, but anyway, the American actress...

AC: She played Nellie?

BW: Yeah! And that was very, very lively... and of course, the sort of exuberance and staging that we hadn't seen for a long time. And I also saw Salad Days, which was a much lower key thing... but actually, I enjoyed it, actually... it was very sentimental and nostalgic. Especially if you'd just come down from university... because that's what it was about, you know.

AC: Yes, yeah.

BW: And that was a much more British... Oh! I'll tell you who I saw several times, was Hermione Gingold.

AC: OK.

BW: Have you come across her? She was a brilliant, very comic, very bawdy, very sharp comedienne... and she was in various sorts of vaudeville-type shows, and extremely... I mean, of a witty, sophisticated kind... which again, you tend not to get now. You know, very well-dressed, very wicked... very much now. She was very different from Jonathan Ross, you know!

AC: Well... [laughs]

BW: Or Graham Norton, or any of those... but quite as naughty I think, but in a more elegant way!

AC: Wow, it's fascinating!

BW: We saw them quite a lot. Now what did I see Laurence Harvey in something? I think that was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*... Laurence Harvey and Margaret Leighton. Margaret Leighton was a very good actress, and a very nice person... but she was terribly tall, and this was a disadvantage for her... and she went and married Laurence Harvey, who was much shorter... not a very nice man, and it all came unstuck.

AC: Oh really?

BW: Yes! [laughs] But, he was quite a good actor. [pause]

AC: That's all right, yeah that's brilliant!

BW: so... but I think in the forties and fifties, I think technique loomed larger. Actors, I think, worked harder to kind of polish their performances... which didn't necessarily make them more unnatural... I think it was a bit more studied probably than it would be now, but at the same time, it communicated itself probably [rather] better I think.

AC: That's interesting, yeah.

BW: My mother would have regarded, I think, quite a lot of modern productions as rather slipshod!

AC: Right, so that sort of technique and the focus of the craft really...

BW: Yeah... yeah. Focus on the craft and focus on the diction to make quite sure that people would hear it all. [pause] I saw some Racine, Phaedre.... But I think that was *Comedy Française*, so it's not really relevant, again, that's a very static kind of – there's very little action – but they, of course, had superb delivery, so you heard everything, and

they... I've never known people convey so much sexual tension with so little actual action. [laughs] It was astonishing!

AC: So what was that?

BW: It was Racine's Phaedre. That was, I think, at The New Theatre... it was certainly in the middle of London somewhere. I'm terribly sorry, I think going to have to run!

AC: Don't worry about it, that's absolutely fine, but thank you very much Brigid...

BW: Well, no, I afraid there's not very much. I should have... If I think of anything, I'll let you know.

AC: OK. Well, thank you very much.