

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Brian Cook – interview transcript

Interviewer: Charlotte D'Arcy

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Actor. Accent; actors; Arts Educational School; Arts Theatre, Belfast; audiences; casting; Children's Theatre; the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield; directing; funding; pantomime; RADA; regional theatres; repertory; Shakespeare; television; theatre-going; Brian Way.

CD: I just want to ask you first of all – like – how you got involved in the theatre. You told me that you got interested by school plays and going to the local theatre group... Could you tell me a bit about that?

BC: Yes, well... I mean, school plays were school plays – we did the annual Shakespeare and we had a school drama club and it was an all-boys' school so – I gave them my [St Joan] at some point [laughs] and things like that. And it was just after the war really, a new drama club had started in the town, which was Tunbridge Wells. It had quite an interesting start, there were people like Christopher Fry who were involved in the actual setting up of it and I joined them as a sort of junior member and then did all sorts of things with them. We used to [do] open air Shakespeares and things like that... and then I did my National Service and by that time I decided I would train for the theatre, so I applied to RADA and got in and did a two year course at RADA and in those days you could only really train as an actor – I mean, there were no courses for directors or stage managers – you learnt that on the job when you got out into the theatre. So I did two years at RADA and came out [of] RADA in 1959. I was looking up two periodicals yesterday and when I left RADA in 1959 in the West End of London there were seven musicals, 23 straight plays, five – what one would call – revue and variety and there was the opera at the Opera House, ballet at Sadler's Wells and at the Festival Hall and a visiting ballet company at the Piccadilly Theatre in London. Yesterday's newspaper – there are 22 musicals in the West End of London, ten plays, no revue or variety – that's been replaced by these great 'stand-up' venues and things like that... and variety's the same with these big sort of Kylie Minogue at the Empress Hall sort of thing. And there is still opera at the Royal Opera House and at the Coliseum and there's all sorts of dance programs at Sadler's Wells. But you can see that unless you're a musical theatre person, there's not a lot of employment at the West End for you as there was in 1959. That's quite interesting I think.

CD: How come you decided to go to RADA? 'Cause I read at the time it was really difficult to get in and there was like 30 places or something... What drew you to that one in particular?

BC: Actually it wasn't so difficult to get in then. I mean, you... would have to audition and you not only had to audition for RADA you also had to audition for your grant authority and they could say, 'No we don't think we'll give him a grant', and that was that – even though they were what one might call educational professionals and the RADA people were the theatre professionals. The educational professionals overrode the drama professionals if there was money about. And I got a scholarship to RADA actually, which was helpful. But I'd really set my sights on going to the school which came out of the Old Vic Theatre, which older friends of mine had applied there and were working there and it had people like Michel St Denis working, but it was closed – there was a great [inside] political [happenings] which somebody else, I'm sure, has talked about...

CD: Was this the Old Vic, or the New Old Vic?

BC: The Old Vic... It was the Old Vic and they ran a theatre school, but that closed so there was no chance in going there. So I didn't apply for any others – I could have applied for all of them but I only applied to RADA and I got in. There were more than 30 of us – in fact they took in about... probably 75, but there were a lot of people... you got your report each term and it said 'please come back' or 'don't come back' – so it was a bit sort of...

CD: Quite cut-throat.

BC: So you ended up with about 30 in the end going into the last [term].

CD: Yeah. I remember you said something in your email that you went to go to the theatre a lot – sorry to backtrack a bit – when you were younger and you said you were too young for a lot of the stuff you saw – I just wondered what you meant by that?

BC: Well I [laughs] had a wonderful aunt who worked for one of the big stores as a gown buyer and I don't know whether... [it was] partly because of some of her customers, but she got a lot of tickets for the theatre. She was a sort of bachelor-girl – and I used to stay with her on holidays – and she obviously wasn't going to let a small nephew sort of spoil her enjoyment, so I used to be taken to things that perhaps people wouldn't automatically take a youngster to. I mean I wasn't seven, I was a bit older than that, I was about 12 or 13. But... I mean I enjoyed them and I understood them, theatre was much calmer in those days.

CD: What kind of things did you see? What did you like?

BC: All sorts of things. I mean she had a fairly wide, sort of catholic taste – you know? I saw plays at the Old Vic, we went to see revues, musical comedy, it was lovely, it was wonderful and I remember seeing a musical, which must have been quite something then – it must have been '57, perhaps '56 – a musical called Golden City, which was about the African gold rush, the South African gold rush and it had a complete chorus of negro drummers and dancers and things like that, which was quite something then.

Now, there's all sorts of wonderful African and Afro-Caribbean actors who've been trained, but then it was quite something. And that [show] was directed by Robert Helpmann. I remember that as being something really quite unusual. But there were lots of things, so that gave me a great interest really.

CD: So it was quite educational for you at a young age really wasn't it?

BC: Oh yeah... yeah. That was the excuse! [laughs]

CD: So your aunty was a big part in kind-of getting you into theatre.

BC: Yeah.

CD: And so I suppose... you said you're going to your drama schools... was that, like, before or after you kind of started going to the theatre or did you to the theatre and then it...

BC: Oh no, I went to the theatre long before I went to drama school. I mean I went to drama school after I did my National Service, so I was 18... I was 20, or a bit more... because the time I came out of my National Service, [the] academic years wouldn't work so I had nearly a year before I went to drama school, so I was, sort of, coming 22.

CD: And you said at drama school, you know, you didn't really learn to be a director or stage producer or anything like that. Was that the kind of side you were interested in?

BC: I was interested in that, yes, but I learnt that on the job really. I went into a company and worked often. You played and you were on stage management, especially if you were young and you learnt stage management by doing it, you learnt direction by watching directors and by being directed. And then somebody much later on had the courage to just let me have a season to direct on my own.

CD: Oh wow! What did you do then – what did you direct and where was it?

BC: I did what Americans call 'summer stock', what we call Summer theatre/Summer Repertory. I did a summer season at a seaside resort and we did sort of 12 plays in 12 weeks as one did then.

CD: I suppose that's quite difficult, you know, repertory theatre, moving on so quickly – how did you find that?

BC: Well we just did it, you know - it's strange, you just did it. That was what was there and you did it and... when one went to a theatre – a repertory theatre – where they did a play every two weeks that was sort of luxury and when you went to a theatre – like Sheffield – where they did a play every three weeks you almost didn't know what to do with the time! [laughs]

CD: I suppose you got used to that, didn't you? How did you, like, become involved in Children's Theatre?

BC: When I left RADA. While I was still at RADA a man called Brian Way and his assistant and associate lady called Margaret [Faulkes] came and talked to us about their children's theatre and I thought they had a lot to say that I agreed with. They thought that theatre shouldn't be something aside and sort of special – it was all very well to put children on a bus and take them to see Shakespeare in a theatre which requires a whole different sort of 'theatre manners' if you like really – they thought it should be very much part of the school day and school education. So we used to take plays into schools and we'd play not on the stage but usually on the floor in the school hall with the audience sitting round and always within the play at some point there was a point where we could involve the audience in some way – I mean very daring. One [play] we did had alternative endings and according to how the audience took the play we'd play whichever ending...

CD: I see.

BC: But he was a wonderful director and I mean one really continued one's training working with him. He was absolutely splendid; great vision, a very interesting man – very interested in people. [He died last year] and been a great influence on things. I'm not sure now I have the same thoughts about it, but it was right for me then.

CD: Yeah.

BC: You know... As times change maybe it's better [that] children should have the social experience of going to the theatre because they don't... because it's not television... they behave differently and [will] chat all through a theatre production, [as] they chat when they're sitting in front of the telly, you know? Maybe it's a different bit of education now to take them to the theatre, which it wasn't then.

CD: Yeah, I see what you mean. How did you find the children reacted, because I read that a lot of his theory was to have theatre as educational for the children. Do you think the children felt educated from it – how you feel they reacted?

BC: I don't know what they felt – I think they couldn't fail to learn from it. I mean they were plays they weren't docu-dramas. – it was about Grinling Gibbons and the Great Fire of London and they couldn't fail to have learnt something about it because he went into the lives of the people that might have been involved in it and what happened to

them and things like that. [Then] we did adaptations of the classics, like Oliver Twist and a wonderful John Buchan novel called Green Mantle and also plays which were supposed to be written for tinies – really imaginative things. And you toured a play for the tinies and you toured a play for the big ones.

CD: And he wrote them specifically for the children?

BC: Yes, or a man called John English who was very much concerned – I think – with theatre in the Midlands - in Birmingham - and had a permanent theatre there for theatre and education. He wrote some of them. We did some of his scripts. Oh, it was wonderful - if you didn't mind careering in a banana van over Salisbury plain in a snowstorm it was all right! [Laughs]

CD: That sounds fun actually!

BC: It was very good – good training, you know. An extension to training, really.

CD: So, Brian came to RADA and he... did he take you on as his apprentice or something?

BC: No, they told us – at the end of the/middle of the summer holidays as it were – that they would be auditioning people for a new company, or for three companies they had which went out and I went and auditioned for them and got into a company.

CD: What was he like... how was he as a person? What was your relationship with him...?

BC: He was incredibly warm, friendly... [he had] a wonderful approach to things and tremendous knowledge of so many things. He'd been a conscientious objector during the war and was a great humanitarian.

CD: A good person to work with then?

BC: Oh yes. And very open and never destructive – everything you did was always your contribution and then you'd look at your contribution and see how it worked or it didn't work, but it was never at all destructive. Unlike some directors. [laughs]

CD: No, you can talk about those directors – it's fine. It's all about your opinion so that's OK! I can imagine working with children, you know, you get a great job satisfaction – it's like being a teacher. How did you feel trying to do this with the kids?

BC: It was a long time ago and children were different. I mean, I don't know if I'd want to go into a school now in a fancy frock as it were and face [laughs] a hall full of school children – I mean, they're different. I'm talking about 1961-2, which is a long time ago, you know?

CD: How long did you work with Brian for, and where did you go from there?

BC: I did about two years with Brian and then I went to work at a theatre in [Farnham], a repertory theatre in [Farnham] and... I did about six or eight months with them and then I can't remember what I did after that immediately. But the next significant thing I did was... I went to the Arts Theatre in Belfast. It closed, I think, during the Troubles - the later Troubles - because people didn't often go out very much at night, you know. But it was a professional company [and] it had a lot of local Irish actors who lived in Belfast and who worked a lot in radio in Belfast – radio in Belfast was your big off-shoot of the British Broadcasting Corporation. So you had a lot of actors who worked there and who worked at the Arts. There were some interesting people, some people who really come from the folk tradition, you know.

CD: It's a bit unusual. What made you decide to go to Northern Ireland, because...

BC: There was a job! One went where the work was, you know?

CD: And how do you go about finding... 'I'm going to go to Belfast'...

BC: Well I had an agent who said, you know, 'There's work... I can get you an audition for Belfast, do you want to go? If they offer you a job do you want to go?' And I thought, 'Why not?'. And I did, what? I did about three or four months there and then came back and did... I think that was when I directed my first summer season. And then I went off and worked all over the place. I mean, the wonderful thing was in those days, which isn't the same now – as I was saying [earlier] about the number of plays there were in the West End then. So every city had at least two theatres (if not three) and large towns had theatres and companies in them and you could go and work in a company and you signed on for a season, which might have been say nine months of the year and they perhaps had a pantomime or some Christmas attraction. So you could actually do a lot of consistent work; and the same went with touring because there were theatres in, as I say, every city and in lots and lots of the big towns. It was possible to go on a tour which played different towns every week or every month depending on the size of the show – if it was a show that was a big show with a lot of technical stuff then it tended to go in for say a month. But a big show or a musical would go in to one of the large theatres and [I forget what the big theatre was in Sheffield, the Lyceum was the medium sized theatre]. So if you were out with say an Agatha Christie or a Noel Coward with a reasonable size cast that would be on tour it would go to the Lyceum. If it was a big [theatre], like a Hippodrome where the big shows, the big musicals would go [there]. It's probably not there any more.

CD: It escapes me.

BC: But certainly places like Birmingham had, you know, a Hippodrome where the big shows went. It had the Alexandra where the medium sized shows went and it had its own rep, its own Birmingham Rep which is still there – the [Birmingham] Repertory Theatre. And you could make a living either doing the tours or [seasons]. Now there's provincial theatre which are the larger theatres like the Sheffield Crucible used to be and places like that. So it's much, much harder because the work is mostly telly.

CD: You said you worked, did you work at the Crucible? Or...

BC: I worked at what was the Sheffield Playhouse, which became the Crucible.

CD: Yeah. What were you doing there?

BC: A series of plays... I was there for the Shakespeare quatercentenary and we did Anthony and Cleopatra for the Shakespeare and we did Caesar and Cleopatra in repertoire with it and that was quite interesting. And I did two or three other plays while I was there.

CD: While I'm in the subject area, how did you find Sheffield theatre in general in those days? Were there big gatherings or...

BC: Oh there was a big audience – a big regular audience who came. Lots of people had a permanent booking, you know, they came to each play when it came on, on the same night of the week and often had the same seat – they booked right through the season, and when the Crucible opened it all got messy because they worked a... they worked a repertoire system and people would turn up and find they'd [laughs] seen that play a fortnight ago... The repertoire system took a long time for people to get used to and I think they lost quite a lot of audience that way.

CD: Did you prefer doing the repertoire theatre or the big consistent ones?

BC: I quite enjoyed repertoire when it happened, yes.

CD: There's more variety.

BC: ...it is a case of what day is it [laughs] and what play are we in – it's nice, yeah it's good. And you hold a whole play in your head.

CD: What was your absolute favourite one to do and why?

BC: Oh I don't know, it's very difficult, you know. When... local journalists used to ask me, 'What's your favourite play?' I used to say, 'The play I'm in now' [laughs], which is the safest thing to say really. Oh there are lots of things that one enjoyed doing. I always enjoyed doing Shakespeare. I love Shaw – I mean playing in Shaw is like having a cold shower and it's marvellous to play... Shaw's punctuation... it just takes you through the play it's lovely. Beautiful stuff, very interesting characters to flesh out, you know?

CD: How come you enjoyed doing Shakespeare so much? What was so attractive to you about that?

BC: I think the language really. It's beautiful stuff. Whatever you play, there's usually some nugget that's worth [saying]. [There's] a wonderful sense that people have been doing it for years. Also quite terrifying, you know... I've never played Hamlet, but the minute you step on the stage [as] Hamlet all those other Hamlets are lining up behind you going back to Burbage, [laughs] and that's one of the lovely things about it and one of the terrifying things about it I think.

CD: I see what you mean. Just to go back to... because on the profile I read about you did a lot to do with children's theatre – did you give up on that after you finished working with Brian or... you became the head of drama at the Arts Educational School...

BC: Yes.

CD: How did you... what happened to the children?

BC: I did some... it wasn't so educational, the children's work I was involved in then. Very often in a company they were doing something which was, you know, on the O-Level or on the A-Level syllabus, so you did that and you played that to young audiences... and when I ran the drama department I got somebody in to work with my students on children's theatre – one of the later sort of disciples of Brian Way who came in to work. And I thought it was an important area for them to know about. But... we were quite in the vanguard then. It's on every syllabus now, I had people in to teach them circus skills and things like that. As an actor you ought to be able to do anything and everything, you know?

CD: Yeah.

BC: And it's become much more like that now with the advent of the musical theatre where you really do have to be able to sing, dance, do all sorts of physical things in a way that we never did at RADA – we did movement and it was good, and 'deportment' type movement, and we did very good voice work which is not perhaps needed any more nowadays. But we certainly didn't do much of what one might call 'physical theatre'.

CD: That's surprising.

BC: We did mime but it wasn't called for really and people who had a bent for it went off to study with Étienne Decroux in Paris.

CD: Is there anything you feel would be really important... did you feel like theatre was changing at the time that you were...?

BC: I think that if you speak to anybody that leaves any profession they will say that the profession they just left isn't the profession that they went into. I'm sure teachers would say that; I expect health professionals would say that; I'm sure actors of my generation would say that; and those who are now sort of in the middle of their careers, when they move on will probably say exactly the same. It's got to change, hasn't it? Things have got to change and as well as developing from internal thing it gets changed by all the external things – technical things become so developed; lighting suddenly becomes so developed, sound becomes so developed and that impinges upon the actual performer and how that works.

CD: So you felt like in that time that everything was becoming so much more exaggerated – you know you've got the lights and everything – do you think it detracted away from the acting?

BC: I don't know, because you've still got to be truthful whatever they're doing all round you. [laughs] But no, I think it just changed it and people expect more. If people can see what looks incredibly real on the television, even if it isn't, they expect that amount of realism I think, in the theatre, much more. So there's a great striving to do this technically. When I first went to the theatre there was a genuine understanding between actor and audience – that they worked together and the audience's first job was to suspend their disbelief. They had to believe that outside that door was... [and] there was patently only the back wall of the theatre painted blue – there was a complicit understanding that [they] believed it was the steppes of Russia and the actors believed it was the steppes of Russia, you know?

CD: I see what you mean.

BC: And that's what theatre's all about – live theatre is a bond, that sort of bond, that sort of understanding. I think we've got further and further from that and audiences... don't expect to do as much work. They expect it to be done for them.

CD: So do you think that the impact of television probably had a negative effect?

BC: Yeah, except it brought a lot of things into peoples homes and people saw things they would never have seen, so it might have had a negative effect on live theatre, but I think it probably had a more positive effect on people's lives. People are brought into

contact with things that they might not have really bothered to think about in every level, you know? Be it social or planet-wise or whatever. [laughs] It has changed things, certainly, and people have higher expectations and that has changed things. It's much more expensive to put shows on of course because of this, you know?

CD: Yeah, I find it very expensive to go to the theatre these days.

BC: Yes. Yes. Oh... the theatre going I did when I was young – I mean I couldn't afford to visit the theatre at that rate now.

CD: No, I see what you mean. Did you see, through the time you were at the theatre, a change in how theatre... what they produced because you had the stuff in the war and afterwards. Did you see the change and did it have any effect or...?

BC: It's difficult... Yes, I suppose so. It depends whether you look at the West End which I suppose is different from the theatre outside London in the provinces where people were much more [in ownership]. If you got a theatre in a town which is there all the time, the town owns it in a way. Or a certain sector of the town feels it owns the theatre and is much more part of it, whereas I think in the West End you pay your money to be given something.

CD: Do you think the writers had a freedom of expression 'cause the theatres owned it... would the writers feel like they have to write something for the people or do you think they had their own expression at that time?

BC: I think when I left RADA the West End was really run by one man really and I think people wrote for audiences, wrote for the box office and with the setting up of things like the English Stage Company at the Royal Court authors were beginning to have a platform where somebody would support them while they wrote things which it wasn't necessary to get bums on seats. So you could deposit more and more ideas.

CD: Were you ever interested in writing or did you ever write?

BC: No. Apart from revue sketches and lyrics for songs, no, nothing I could call 'literature'. [laughs]

CD: How come? Was it because you never felt the urge to, or...

BC: Sorry?

CD: How come you didn't get into that kind of field? Is it because you felt you had to write for someone else or you just weren't interested?

BC: Um, no. Lots of people have asked me that. Over the years I've written quite a lot of non-performable stuff like articles and things like that and I wrote a lot of sketches. But I think I haven't got what it takes to write something which is full of character development and things like that – I just haven't got that depth in myself.

CD: Well that's your opinion. I'm sure a lot of people would think, 'Actually Brian Cook's a pretty good writer'.

BC: Well you know, one's never tried in that way. [laughs] I had a lot of friends who did musical and cabaret and I used to write lyrics for those songs, and things like that.

CD: Oh, so you got involved in lots of other parts of it as well?

BC: Oh yes, I did a lot of musicals and pantomimes and things like that.

CD: Pantomime – it's a really good art form.

BC: Yes and that's changed beyond...

CD: Yeah. How do you think it has changed?

BC: I don't think it's very good any more.

CD: [laughs] Why not?

BC: We used to tell a story, a proper story; we had people who played proper characters rather than just be recognised because they were in a telly soap or a telly series and it doesn't really matter if they're right or wrong or what they do, you know? And there were people, not only people in pantomime – there were people who had a tremendous following around the country [and had] nothing to do with television. There was a man, for instance, called Philip Barrett who had a company which toured plays and the towns looked forward to his company – the Philip Barrett company's coming – and they went to see him and he was a sort of handsome matinee idol man and he brought his company... and I don't think he ever did anything in London, but his wife did. She was very famous – a lady called Eileen Hurley. But he was a star in the provinces and he was probably the last of a whole tradition of people going way way way way way back to the early nineteenth century, probably the late eighteenth century, where people toured and they were known in the provinces – they were provincial stars. And the same with pantomime – there were people who were panto stars and that's got nothing to do with being in Eastenders. They went round doing panto in the provinces and people looked forward to them coming and wonderful names of people like George Bolton and George Lacey, people like that, they were the stars there.

CD: So the stars were actually [famous due to] their ability.

BC: Ability, yeah, and their rapport with the audience.

CD: I see what you mean. So now the pantomimes are based on the old pantomimes – do you reckon that they've built on top of the old ideas?

BC: Yes. They've still got the basic idea but it just sort of gets lost – the story gets really thinned. Pantomime always has its element of what we call 'variety'... you had someone who had performing dogs on the variety circuit – if they were in the pantomime they'd work them into the pantomime, they were still very much part of the pantomime.

CD: Did you enjoy doing the pantomime because, you know, there's no fourth wall and you get to interact with the audience?

BC: If it's done properly it harks back to a very, very old tradition in that – like, as I say, with Hamlet, the minute you step on stage with a pantomime there's a whole load of people lining up behind you [laughs] which is lovely.

CD: So do you think – you think that pantomime has changed for the worse, it's not quite the same as what it is now – do you reckon that that's the last era of this kind of theatre...

BC: It's possible although then suddenly somebody rediscovers it, don't they? Which is a lovely thing really and it starts to reform again – if you look at Shakespeare, I mean... we talk very much now about either the actors of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, you know, or we talk about the directors of *Midsummer Night's Dream* or the designers of *Midsummer Night's Dream* and somewhere in there is Shakespeare and every now again somebody just rediscovers Shakespeare.

CD: You watch it for the beauty of the play and not just for the faces that are in it.

BC: Yes. Or, well, the sort of concept of it – Hamlet with the court dressed as playing cards, well fine... but somewhere along the line there's Shakespeare in there and some people suddenly realise that.

CD: What kind of good directors at the time do you... were you either influenced by or worked under?

BC: When I first went into theatre there was a man called Tyrone Guthrie who was very much one of the greats. Wonderfully witty Shakespeares – wonderful with the text.

Everything sprang from the text. He was very good. And then there were very good directors who could cope with the sort of play that we were doing then, which was often someone who was keeping a lot of temperamental actors happy. [laughs] People had great careers and were always employed because they were good at keeping people happy, as actors were employed because they were good company members. If I were forming a company I'd look obviously for people who did good [work], but if it was a choice between good people – if I knew one was slightly trouble and one wasn't – then you'd go for the one who wasn't trouble... because people have got to work together in all sorts of circumstances. And we weren't as exposed then at the beginning as one was towards the end of my time. In the 1960s and early seventies we didn't let it all hang out [laughs] and it wasn't nearly so exploratory as it is nowadays – it's very good and wonderful stuff comes out of it, but it was different.

CD: Do you think there was a good cohesion between all the members of the cast, like the directors and the designers – did they work really well together at the time?

BC: Yeah. Although I think there's got to be an occasion whatever system you follow, whatever method you were otherwise... [the cohesion] doesn't happen really.

CD: Out of all of your long history in theatre, what would you say has been the highlight of it?

BC: I think one of the most useful things and educative things that ever happened was the Old Vic did a folio plan where over five years they presented the whole of the [Shakespeare] folio and I was always able – between when I wasn't working or if I could get to [it] – I managed to see every play in the folio. That was a wonderful service that the Old Vic did and I think that was super – that give one a working knowledge of all the plays really and that was good. I think the coming of the National Theatre after years of birth pangs... In those first seasons you really got an ensemble company - as you did with the RSC at that time – you got a real ensemble company working together in a way that we've not seen in this country really, the sort of thing you'd see if you went to the Comedie Française. I think that's all changed a bit now probably because of people's commitments – it's very difficult to get actors to commit to – well I say actors, I mean their agents probably – you know, people tend to do theatre work between telly jobs and who could blame them?

CD: [laughs] More money.

BC: Who came blame them? But yes.

CD: I'm sure you wouldn't have chosen to go on the television... I'm sure theatre would have been...

BC: Yeah. I mean, I did some television but I don't enjoy television.

CD: No... Theatre's a nice old tradition.

BC: Yes – I miss the audience.

CD: The audience makes it real for you.

BC: And... the curtain comes down and you share this experience with three, five, ten, twenty other people on stage and that's something you've done. You do your little bit on telly and they say 'thank you' and you go home and get on the Tube and it's not the same at all.

CD: How did it feel for you in front of this big audience and you've just done a spectacular play and there's the rapture from the audience – how do you feel after that?

BC: Well it takes you a long time to come down even if it's not rapture – there's so much adrenaline released when you perform that you have to come down a bit and that's why actors are night birds, you know? They're not living it up really, they're trying to live it down. [laughs]

CD: So you enjoyed acting pretty much more than any other thing or...

BC: I liked directing. I enjoyed directing. I loved working with the students, but again as the job went on and things changed and I did less and less actual hands-on work with the students and more and more work in the office filling in forms and trying to get grants and all those sort of things...

CD: Not where your heart is really, is it?

BC: No. But it was enjoyable when it lasted.

CD: When did you become the Head of Drama...

BC: Arts Ed 1968 and I did it for twelve years.

CD: Twelve years?

BC: Yeah.

CD: How did you manage to that? Because I know that – I read a little bit about it – it seems quite an influential school with some good pupils off it.

BC: Yeah well [originally] it didn't have a drama department, it's changed with the way that educational funding has worked. Arts Educational was really the second big dance school... If you came up to all the criteria - and it was to do with height and width and breadth [laughs] as a dancer - you got into the Royal Ballet School. If you didn't quite meet those criteria - if you were an inch under or an inch wider or whatever - and you were still a good dancer or had good potential, people tended to go to Arts Ed and it was a big dance school and... The way the Royal Ballet School fed students into the Royal Ballet, Arts Ed used to feed them into the Festival Ballet, which is now the English National Ballet. So it had a dance department, a children's school and that was that. Then, through various circumstances, they moved and one of the things in their move [meant] their building had a proper theatre... and they decided that they would [drama had been taught as a sort of ancillary subject really until then] and they wanted a proper department on a proper footing and in various ways and through various means I was asked if I could start it.

CD: So you were the first head of drama.

BC: Yeah, yeah, of the drama department.

CD: How did you go about building that up? Because that's a hell of a responsibility!

BC: Well yes. I knew people who I knew were teachers anyway and we had a small permanent staff because there's a limit to how many fencing lessons you could have in a week, so you don't need a large permanent staff - you need a good flow of people teaching specialist subjects. I had a permanent movement teacher and a permanent voice teacher and two other people who were on permanent staff who did productions with students and things like that. Then we got in guest directors and specialist teachers - people who came in and did mime for so many hours a week and fencing and stage fighting and circus skills and all that sort of thing.

CD: So you got to inject into it what you thought would be [beneficial]?

BC: Well yeah. I mean I had to sit down with the two people I asked to help me start it and sort out what we thought - one of them was somebody who was at RADA with me and whenever we got together and started talking about the old days and how we would train and we would say, 'What we really ought to have done...' [laughs] so we thought we'd put it together.

CD: That's a great opportunity, isn't it? That's pretty spectacular.

BC: And I did that. During my time there with Ralph Jago who ran Webber Douglas and the then head of Central School (a man called Bill Russell) we decided that we really needed some sort of body apart from the grant funding bodies that would accredit us. We formed a conference of drama schools - at the beginning it was Ralph, myself and

Bill Russell and whichever one of our secretaries was taking the minutes [laughs] usually in someone's sitting room. But then it became very important over the years, long after I left it – I mean now it's something quite big in its own right. We set that up... because there were all sorts of schools quite apart from the big ones, which were cropping up. Money for vocational training suddenly became available (for a very short time) and all sorts of places were opening up and we thought, really... that the vocation money should go to the schools that were already established.

CD: How do you feel funding was in that time, because you're saying stuff about it started getting more funding toward the end of the time we're talking about here – how did you find it at the beginning? Was it a struggle to get...

BC: It was quite a struggle, yes. I mean, the school didn't get anything. It was underwritten by its own business, obviously, but we were reliant on student fees – government funding for vocational courses was very hard and it was tough when I went to apply for a grant. I got a scholarship in the end so it was all right but it was quite tough and the educational funding people kept saying, 'Why don't you go to such-and-such a college because it has a teacher training course', and I'd say, 'Well I think people should pay me not to teach!' [laughs] So it wasn't easy... we would audition some very good students and some of them weren't in the end able to get funding. We established a couple of scholarships, but that's only a couple, you know?

CD: As much as you can afford.

BC: Yeah. Yeah.

CD: There were a lot of struggling actors at the time then?

BC: I think they're always struggling. [laughs]

CD: I suppose so, yeah.

BC: [laughs] I don't think there's ever been a time when actors haven't struggled, you know?

CD: You sound like you've always been going around the circuits.

BC: I was very lucky. I did have times of unemployment but I never left one job without knowing where the next one was coming from. Now I knew there might be a gap in between, but I always knew what I was going to do. And I was very, very lucky and I wasn't particularly good but I was useful. [laughs]

CD: Don't say that! I'm sure you were very good, otherwise nobody would employ you.

BC: I was useful. One of our tutors at RADA always said, 'When you enter a company you should turn up like the plumber with his bag of tools, knowing exactly... people should be confident that you always know exactly what you're going to do' and I think I fulfilled that criteria, so people would employ me. And there was much more work about for people like me.

CD: What kind of work?

BC: You know, there are the companies I have talked about but there was always work for younger character people – I mean, I was never a leading man, with the profile, and I was never tall enough but there were always things to do, parts to play.

CD: What kind of age range was there – was there a lot of young actors?

BC: That's another thing. I mean in those days you played much more across the range – certainly people like me, you know: I played people's old dads when I was hardly old enough to father anything, you know! [laughs] But nowadays... the casting – and certainly very much with telly – the list comes through to the agent, character this that and the other, a civil servant of 45 and they're quite strict. Even if they think you're 55 you look too old, and if you're 35 they think you look too young... In the theatre you played if you were 35 or 55 if it was right for you.

CD: So was it a lot more relaxed then, do you think that was a good...

BC: Audiences accepted it more somehow – again because of the reality of television I mean there were actresses around who had a lot of success playing children. They were small, they were slight and they played children for a long time. Nowadays you have children.

CD: I know exactly what you mean.

BC: If you go back through some of the journals like Theatre World, which have got pictures of all the productions in those times, you'll see children being played by...

CD: And it wasn't strange? It was perfectly acceptable.

BC: No. I mean they didn't play little children but probably somebody playing a 14/15 year old would probably be in their twenties

CD: Do you think – 'cause I know you were saying that young people play all ages – was that because they didn't feel they could employ young children or older people or just because they were the best?

BC: Well licensing laws were slightly more difficult, although in many ways they're stricter now, but you couldn't employ people under 12 at one time. Now you can.

CD: So there were a lot of people around the same age doing it then? It sounds good. I've pretty much gone through my list, is there anything you wanted to add that you think would be interesting.

BC: I don't know, I don't think so. I'm not quite sure what you're trying to fill in actually – for all this great project.

CD: Oh anything, anything that you feel... we've got lots of people, so...

BC: ...I think, as I say that the theatre I left isn't the theatre I came into but I think everybody would say that.

CD: Yeah, definitely.

BC: And I was also in the theatre in a very interesting time. Certainly... one was very aware of the change – all that sort of 'anger and after' bit, one was very aware of it and the certain amount of conflict it caused [coughs] in the profession.

CD: What kind of conflicts are you talking about?

BC: I think... there were a lot of actors who were basically ladies and gentlemen and there was a new sort of actor coming through, you know, who weren't and came from – I think at one time the sort of people who were coming through were the people who in the old days wouldn't have thought of going into drama school [and] certainly their parents couldn't have afforded to have sent them there.

CD: A new shift of people coming into it.

BC: Yes. I mean "no names no pack drill" but I can remember [that there] was somebody coming into a company to play a particular part when they were just out of drama school and they came from the Midlands with a heavy Midlands accent and they were very very good and I remember the director saying to me, 'So-and-so is so good but I don't know what else he's going to do in the business', and he actually never stopped because that was the way it was going, you know? And when I left RADA those sort of people – I say "those sort of people", that sounds awful, that's not what I mean

at all – but actors from a different sort of background were beginning to come in and then the plays were written for them.

CD: So you saw the change in plays with the change in people coming to the theatre?

BC: Yeah.

CD: That's interesting.

BC: I mean that's a generalisation but I think it's true. I was looking yesterday at Plays and Players for '59, which is where I got the date of how many plays and how many musicals and things were on in London, and there's Arnold Wesker's *Roots*, which is a wonderful play and brought people like Joan Plowright – that was her first big break really – and looking at the cast [it all takes place in an isolated farm in Norfolk]. Looking at the cast, I mean none of them were from Norfolk, you know? Nowadays you'd probably find at least three people in the cast who were native Norfolk.

CD: To bring some authenticity into it.

BC: Yeah. And... that's it.

CD: That's all really brilliant, thank you very much.

BC: Is that helpful?

CD: I'm very very pleased – thank you so much for your time.

BC: It's a great pleasure.

CD: It's very nice of you to have talked to us about this, thank you.