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## John Gale – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Joy Novell**

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Actor and Producer. Actors; Donald Albery; Assistant Stage Manager; audiences; Ronnie Barker; Binkie Beaumont; Big Fish Little Fish; Boeing-Boeing; Candida; censorship; comedians; comedies; Noel Coward; digs; James Donald; Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be; Inherit the Wind; Lord Chamberlain; On the Brighter Side; Present Laughter; producing plays; repertory; regional audiences; The Secretary Bird; Where Angels Fear to Tread.

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Includes some contributions made by John Gale's wife, Lisel Gale (LG).

RJN: I'd like to start quite simply with the question how and when did you first become involved with the theatre?

JG: I first became involved in the theatre in 1946 when I left school – I was at Christ's Hospital, Horsham – and I went straight from school at the age of 17 to drama school. So I was interested in becoming an actor. I then had to do National Service for two years and I was commissioned in the army – second lieutenant in the Royal Army Service Corps– and when I came out, I went to the Webber Douglas School of Acting and spent two years there where I met my wife, and we married in 1950 and started our acting careers in 1951.

RJN: Acting career. So you initially wanted to be an actor?

JG: I wanted to be an actor, yes, that was my ambition. Though I was always sort of drawn to the idea of being an actor-manager, as young people have exciting ambitions for themselves and they're sort of fun, to be, 'John Gale presents John Gale in, by John Gale', but of course life isn't quite like that and you get to the realities.

RJN: So after you'd gone to the Webber Douglas School of Acting...

JG: Yes.

RJN: where did you go from there? Did you get jobs easily?

JG: Yes we earned a living as actors. We went first to repertory. The first job we had was in the Midlands in the Black Country, and if you want to know where the Black Country is, we were in it. It was Wednesbury, which is between Smethwick and Walsall, and it is the heart of the Black Country. And we started in repertory there. We were on for half a week. Thursday, Friday Saturday was theatre; Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday was cinema and we acted in the second half of the week, and not long after that we did a year in Wednesbury and then we went to Harry Hanson's repertory. Harry Hanson was the king of repertory. He had repertory companies all over the British Isles, well, all over England. I don't think he had any in Scotland, but where you come from, Sheffield, we worked there for nine months at the Lyceum and did a different play every week. Played twice nightly, six o'clock and eight fifteen which, believe me, is very hard work.

RJN: I believe you!

JG: We had to learn the part you were playing the following week, each day as you went along, at the same time as acting in the evening, so it was very hard work, but it was fun and it also taught one an awful lot about the theatre, the reaction of audiences, what worked and what didn't. And after that we came down to London and tried to get work in London with... the first of us to get work was my wife Lisel who got a job with Donald Albery as an Assistant Stage Manager. Donald Albery was a West End impresario who owned the Criterion, the New Theatre - now the Coward - and Wyndhams. And eventually he also owned the Piccadilly. And Lisel understudied Dorothy Tutin in I Am a Camera. And shortly after that I joined Donald Albery as an Assistant Stage Manager and Lisel and I worked together as ASMs on his productions.

LG: And castings.

JG: And casting for about two years I suppose. Two or three years.

RJN: Is there any reason why you went to the Black Country rather than London?

JG: [Laughs]

RJN: So it was work?

JG: In those days the crème de la crème went to London. You know, the competition was huge to get into London. There was no television - or virtually no television, it was just starting in this country, but very, very few people had a television - so of course the main source of employment for actors in those days was the repertory companies. And we played - oh I can give you a list of places we played: Sheffield, Chester, Westcliffe. Oh goodness me I'm trying to think of other places. We also -

LG: Walthamstow.

JG: [Laughs] Walthamstow, yes, Walthamstow. I played Charlie in Charlie's Aunt at the Palace, Walthamstow, but a palace it wasn't! It was a tumble-down old theatre.

RJN: So then when you moved to London, how different was it and where did you go from there?

JG: How different was it from...?

RJN: From up north. It's called regional theatre in the books that I have read. [Laughs]

JG: [Laughs] Regional theatre, yes. Well it came - I think it came - as a great shock [to us], working class areas of the north, which at that time were still comparatively poor. And that is where you had your digs, so we lived in some pretty strange places. Lisel and I were both middle class children, privately educated, it came as less of a shock to me as I'd been at boarding school and I'd also been in the army but Lisel had had a very protected middle class upbringing. And to live and work with working class families in digs, which is what we had to do for two or three years, came as quite a shock. But taken by and large, people were very kind and considerate and thoughtful and they tried to look after you to the best of their ability. They had different standards I suppose, as far as things like food were concerned. I mean, for instance, it sounds a strange thing but we had never, ever had anything but fresh milk, and in the North Country, you got sterilized milk. And it tasted to us, and indeed it did taste, exactly like tinned milk. And so it totally changed the taste of tea and coffee and hot drinks but, you know, one adapted and the theatres were interesting and in those days there wasn't a lot of entertainment except in the repertory theatres, so we played to very good audiences. People came out to see the plays and, as I say, were doing a different play every week, so the experience was absolutely huge.

RJN: Yes.

JG: That I think is one of the problems with - in comparison to today - with... the repertory theatres cast the play, now, by the play, and somebody doesn't go to a repertory theatre for a year or two years, they just go for a play and therefore their experiences are much more limited in the theatre and as consequence it's extremely difficult to find actors nowadays who can project in large theatres. Consequently, you get a great deal more amplification and particularly in musicals the amplification, in my opinion, is quite ludicrous now. You are knocked out of your seats by the noise. A friend of mine went recently to see Oliver at Drury Lane and said it was the noisiest production they have ever sat through and they were just blasted through their seats. I mean obviously it's a huge success, so people enjoy it, but I don't see the justification for that kind of amplification. That isn't what acting should be about.

RJN: You said you became, was it, Assistant Manager?

JG: Assistant Stage Manager.

RJN: Yes, Assistant Stage Manager, sorry.

JG: That's working backstage and understudying. In those days – they don't do it now so much – but the Assistant Stage Manager is really the lowest of the low and you run around making tea for everybody and looking after the actors, and standing in the prompt corner with the prompt book and...

LG: But what led on to... Do you mind me speaking?

RJN: No, not at all!

LG: What led on to John, John's going into production was because we worked for Donald Albery and he was doing a whole lot of plays and we were asked to help with the casting. And this gave us a completely different insight into what we would have had as ASMs, as actors being ASMs and understudying. So we learnt, we had to talk to agents and it was part of what would become the production side that John went into.

JG: Yes, it was part of the transformation from being an actor into becoming a producer, and it wasn't that long after we were with Donald that I did a couple of films. We had our children in the 1950s wasn't it? 1956 and 1959 our two sons were born, and I was making films at that time and – as an actor – and doing odd bits of work in the theatre. But now I was steering myself towards wanting to be a producer, wanting to put on plays and to be in control. The other thing that very much decided me is 1) I was ambitious, and 2) I was very energetic. I was a young man and I hated being out of work. Well, you are out of work an awful lot if you're an actor, unless you are extremely fortunate or become a big star very quickly. So I found it disheartening being out of work, and depressing, and at least when you start in production you have things to do all the time, whether you're actually putting on a play, you're looking for plays, you're reading plays, you're talking to people; you're going to an office every day and so it was a much more exciting time for us. Lisel then was at home looking after the children while I went out and started my career as a producer.

RJN: So, was that in 1960?

JG: That was in 1960, yes. The first play I presented – funnily enough I was away and Lisel went to see a play at Croydon called *Inherit the Wind*, which was with a famous actor of the day called Andrew Cruickshank. He was in a television series: *Dr. Finlay's Casebook*, and a very fine actor he was. And Lisel saw this play and said to me, 'You should try and bring it into the West End', and together with a fellow-producer called

Peter Bridge, who I knew, we put it on with the man who – Clement Scott Gilbert. And that was my first production in the West End: *Inherit the Wind*.

RJN: Was that at St. Martin's Theatre?

JG: St. Martin's Theatre, yes indeed.

RJN: Is it true that there was a film coming out of it at the same time as well?

JG: Then? No. The film came out a bit later. It was a famous film because it had two very great film actors in it, but it had been a big success on Broadway and we brought it into London and then it became a film. I suppose the film came out about a year after we'd presented it in London.

RJN: So that had no effect on you?

JG: No, no effect on us at all. But it was my introduction into the West End and it was a very good introduction because, while it wasn't particularly a financial success, in fact it wasn't a financial success at all [laughs], it lost money. but it was a great succès d'estime. It was a play that people regarded as very well written, very worthwhile play doing in London, so it set me off on a career path which was very helpful.

RJN: So what were the audience reactions to it then?

JG: The audience reaction to it was very good. Those that came, but of course not enough people came – otherwise it would have lasted a lot longer. It wasn't a total disaster, it wasn't one of those plays - of which I had experience in later years - which opened on a Wednesday and shut on a Saturday. It ran for about three months in the West End. And I remember Andrew Cruickshank, the actor who played the lead, saying to me, 'I don't often give advice to young men, John, but I will give some advice to you. After putting this play on, which is an extremely good play, try and pursue quality wherever you find it'. And that was very sound advice for a young man starting off as a producer.

RJN: So you weren't disheartened by it not being a financial success?

JG: No. I mean we were disappointed. It had some very, very good notices. I think the reason it wasn't a success – it was American, it was about the Bible belt in America and, I can't think of the word, the Darwin...

LG: Anti-Darwinian.

JG: What the Christians called - the fundamental Christians - versus the Darwinian theory. That was what the play was about. And it... it has never been a particular problem in Great Britain, that problem. It's still a problem in the United States.

RJN: So it didn't offend Christian audiences?

JG: Oh no, not in the least, not in the least. It was a very well-balanced argument.

RJN: I have here as your next play *On the Brighter Side*.

JG: Yes. I put on a play – [it was a revue actually], it had been on television – called *On the Bright Side* with Stanley Baxter and Betty Marsden. Both wonderful comedians. One of the supporting actors in it was Ronnie Barker. I always remember Ronnie Barker in it. He was terribly funny. A wonderful, wonderful performer. We paid him forty pounds a week [Laughs], which I don't think we would have got him for a few years later. But it was a lovely revue. It was an old-fashioned revue and I think would have had greater success if it had been put on a little earlier, but unfortunately for us at that time, there were four brilliant comedians, or four brilliant performers, from the Edinburgh Festival called *Beyond the Fringe*. They opened, and it certainly affected us very badly, but it was a wonderful revue. We had four girl dancers, and if I can remember their names. 18 to 20 year-olds, and three of them became big stars : Una Stubbs, Amanda Barry, and Judy Karne, who was the "laughin" girl in the American television series. So three out of the four girls – who were paid £22 a week – became stars within five years of that show. And of course Ronnie Barker went on to huge success on TV. Unfortunately, Ronnie never did the work he should have done in the theatre. He got a terrible fright. He went to do a play in Birmingham and – I think it was Birmingham – and he had a heart attack and it put him off the theatre. He never worked in the theatre again. He kind of blamed the theatre for having a heart attack, which of course it wasn't the theatre's fault, it was just bad luck. So he stuck to television after that but he was, in my opinion, one of the great actors of the twentieth century.

RJN: Did you find that most of the stars were emerging from London?

JG: Yes, yes I suppose, although it's always very difficult in the theatre to – I don't know quite how to put this – one week... well I mean we were classic examples, Lisel and I. One week we were ASMs and the next week, metaphorically speaking, we were the bosses putting on the plays and finding the money to put on the plays and so on and I remember when we I did a play with Hugh Beaumont – famously called *Binkie* in the theatre. He was the greatest impresario of the middle twentieth century – and I did Noel Coward's *Present Laughter* with him. And I remember the young actress who was [playing the juvenile lead] and she said, 'Are you the new ASM?' [laughs]. I said, 'No, I'm the producer'. She said, 'Oh lawks, [laughs] there goes my career!'. I mean I looked about 18 then anyway, which probably made her think I was too young to be a producer.

RJN: [Laughs] So was *Present Laughter* in '64?

JG: Yes. Oh yes, I've skipped over Boeing-Boeing.

RJN: Boeing-Boeing was quite a big one. 1962 and again in 1964 is it?

JG: What? Oh, in America, yes. Well, it's particularly interesting now looking back on Boeing-Boeing because it has just been revived in the West End. It has been a huge success and all the critics, without exception, raved about the production recently. When we opened in the West End, it was slaughtered by most of the critics, who said it was a trite piece of rubbish. Bernard Levin, who I think was the critic of the Express, famously said at the end of his notice, 'The only thing the management didn't provide was sick bags so we could throw up in them', was an absolutely horrible thing to say, but it was a huge overnight success. It did have rave notices from the Times and Telegraph which are the most important theatre papers. I mean if you can choose which papers to have good notices in and which papers to have bad notices in, then you'd choose the Times and Telegraph and the Sunday Times every time to get your good notices. A rave notice in the Daily Mirror doesn't help you very much!

RJN: [Laughs] Not much has changed.

JG: Boeing-Boeing was very interesting. It was a play that was running in France, in Paris. It was written by a man called Marc Camoletti and somebody brought it to me and said, 'This is the funniest play I've read since The Little Hut', and they read it to Lisel and I, this young man, literally translating it as he went along from the French script. And somehow or another we both saw in it huge comedic possibilities. It was about as unfunny as – well I can't think what it was as unfunny as, it was so unfunny. Anyway, we commissioned him to translate it and we got the most terrible script. It was no good at all and I had to find somebody else to translate it and I was recommended by a literary agent to ask Beverley Cross, who was married to Maggie Smith, to translate it. And he did it in two weeks and I don't think two weeks could have earned anybody quite as much money as that two weeks earned Beverley Cross! He took it away on a Friday night from my office and produced it two weeks later on the Friday morning. I saw straight away that we'd got a very, very funny play. I then had to find somebody to direct it, and quite by chance Jack Minster who's a sort of doyen of comedic directors had heard about the play and hadn't read it and telephoned me and said would I like him to read it, and I said, 'Yes, why not?'. So he came to my office, picked up a script, two hours later phoned me up and said, 'This is absolutely wonderful. I'd love to direct it. Let's try and do it'. So we set about trying to cast it. Jack's first choice for the starring role was David Tomlinson who was a comedian par excellence. A wonderfully funny man and we persuaded him. He was always a very, very difficult man to deal with, David, as comedians sometimes are. They're not at all funny in their private lives.

RJN: They can be quite depressing I've heard.

JG: They can be very funny when they perform and – though David could be quite funny in his private life, but he could also be quite horrible and very, very difficult to deal

with. So it took an interminable time to persuade him to do the play. And I remember saying to him, 'David, if you don't make up your mind, we'll get somebody younger to play the role'. And that seemed to galvanize him into action and he decided he'd do it. We went out on tour and it wasn't very successful on tour. There were moments in it that one could see the possibilities, but it didn't play as well as it should have done. And part of it was we had miscast the part of the maid, and it was a dreadful decision I had to make to sack the girl who was playing the maid and re-cast it. And David recommended an actress he'd worked with before called Carmen McSharry who came in, and the moment that Carmel came in it was transformed and it became a huge success.

LG: You were given the theatre by somebody who thought it would only last five weeks – the London Theatre – who thought it would only last five weeks and be a fill-in, because they had [another] play coming.

RJN: They must have been disappointed!

JG: They were, yes, they were furious. Well, they weren't really. They liked the success. Yes, it's funny how people react to plays because this was a man called Fred Carter, who ran Prince Littler's Theatres and Prince Littler was the biggest theatre owner of that time in the 1960s. He owned about ten theatres in the West End and his general manager, Fred Carter, was a hugely powerful figure in London. I remember him coming down to see the play on the first night at Oxford when we opened out of town and he didn't think much of it. But then a few weeks later he had a theatre that was available and thought, you know, well he could get his rent and what they call the contra – which is all the costs of the theatre – from John Gale for five or six weeks, then bring some show in that he had in mind. But on the first night he said to me, 'Well, you've improved it an awful lot since I saw it'. And I said, 'Yes Fred, that's what you do if you're a producer, you work on a play'. So it was funny how people thought you just sort of sat there and said, 'Oh well, that's good enough!'. I mean you work like stink on a play when it opens and it's very, very seldom you get a play that you don't need to work on. Somebody famously said, 'Plays aren't written; they're re-written', and that is true. I mean plays are re-written. The only one that we did that wasn't re-written on tour was the Secretary Bird, which we'll come to later.

RJN: So, I'm just checking, you said it went on tour. Which theatres did it go on tour to? I've got the Duchess Theatre and Apollo as well?

JG: Apollo's where it opened. It was there for four years and then it became the longest running comedy for some time. It played over 2,000 performances in London and...

RJN: Yes the Guinness Book of Records has it as the most performed French Play throughout the world.

JG: Yes, yes. It's still being done. You know they did it recently in London and funnily enough, Michael Codron, who's a well-known producer and still working, unlike me,

said to me a few weeks ago at a party, 'Don't you resent people putting on your old successes?'. I said, 'Not in the least, Michael.' He said, 'Oh I do! I hate it!'. And it was, you know, quite interesting reading the notices, all talking about this classic French farce, and they'd been so rude about it when it had opened forty years previously.

RJN: I have in the same year that you did Big Fish, Little Fish.

JG: Yes, that was one of my really, really big disasters. That did only last ten days. Big Fish Little Fish was a play I saw in New York. The first time I went to New York and saw it, I loved it. It was very interesting. The theme was about the little fish that live on the big fish in the arts world. In other words the great artists who are surrounded by people feeding off them. I liked it enormously and we had a very distinguished pair of actors playing leads; Jessica Tandy who is a great American actress and husband Hume Cronin, and they were brilliant in it but it didn't appeal to the critics in the least and was a total catastrophe. I mean we opened on a Wednesday night and closed a week on the Saturday. Nobody came at all.

RJN: Really?

JG: And Jessica Tandy had created the role of Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* on Broadway. So she was a very, very accomplished actress, you know. One of the great American actresses of the American theatre. But nobody paid any attention to her at all when she came to London. It was weird.

RJN: That is weird. That didn't, again, dishearten you at all it seems.

JG: Oh no, well you know, you live to fight another day. I mean the interesting thing is that there are plenty of producers who go broke. Famously the great impresario of the 1920s and thirties was C.B. Cochrane, and Charles Cochrane went broke on about four occasions. But you never hear of theatre owners going broke. The people who own the bricks and mortar never go broke. [Laughs] They're the little fish that feed on the big fish, that are the producers. That's my view.

RJN: Ironic! So did you do anything else in 1962? *Devil May Care* is the next one?

JG: *Devil May Care* was Ian Carmichael and Moira Lister. It was a charming little comedy but not to everyone's taste. I don't think it would ever work. It was one of those slightly fantastical plays and, of course, that's always very dangerous in the world of entertainment.

RJN: So what were the audience reactions to that?

JG: Well, again the people that came probably enjoyed it quite a lot but not enough people came. I mean the reason plays come off is because not enough people are coming to the theatre to see it. My heart sinks even now when friends say, 'Oh, well we did this play recently and the people that came absolutely loved it', but not enough people came is the answer. When producers – you read in the newspapers, that such and such a play is coming off because of the credit crunch or because there's a heat wave or because there's a bus strike in London... The successful plays will always be successful. The smash-hits are always smash-hits. Producers think up every possible excuse as to why their play failed and the reason their play failed is because not enough people liked it.

RJN: [Laughs] Simple! Moving on we have Windfall and Where Angels Fear to Tread.

JG: Well, Where Angels Fear to Tread... now we missed out Candida. I put on a production of Candida in 1960 with Michael Denison and Dulcie Gray, who were a famous pair of artists – a married couple – and they were lovely people, absolutely adorable. Very, very good actors. And I'd put on a production of Candida which they had done at the Bath Theatre Festival. I brought it into London and it then became the longest run in the history of Candida. We did nine months in London, which for a sort of semi-classic play by Bernard Shaw, was a [long] run. And then we toured it for a year afterwards. So, that then brings us on to Where Angels Fear to Tread, which also had Michael and Dulcie starring in it with a young actor – who is still a friend of ours, who lives down the road here – called Keith Baxter. He had a very successful career in the theatre. And it was a play adapted from a novel by E.M. Forster. So this was a very distinguished play to do. It wasn't particularly a commercial success, again not enough people came to see it, but it ran for about four or five months. I suppose it's what... the Americans have a wonderful phrase for plays that totter along for five or six months, they call them a "nervous success". [Laughs]

RJN: A nervous success! That's great.

JG: And it's a very telling phrase because that's exactly what it is. It isn't a disaster, it isn't a flop, but it isn't quite a success. And that's what we had with Where Angels Fear to Tread and Wings of a Dove. It's in exactly the same year, with the great Wendy Hiller, Susanna York and James Donald. James Donald was famously one of the most difficult actors of his day.

RJN: Really?

JG: A really impossible man. But a wonderful, wonderful actor. He would have been one of the greatest actors of his day had he not been so difficult. I remember when we were putting the play on, Binkie Beaumont phoned me up and said, 'I hear you've got James Donald in a play. I'd like to warn you John, fifteen leading ladies can't be wrong'.

RJN: No!

JG: And that was James. He was a remarkable actor. He had a remarkable film career. He did some marvellous work in the cinema. He was in the great David Lean film *Bridge on the River Kwai*. He played one of the greatest performances I've ever seen in the cinema, in a film that is hardly ever seen, about the Edwardian stage door Johnnies. It was called *Trotty True* and he played the stage door Johnny. And just seeing James Donald walk down the street to the stage door of one of the Edwardian theatres epitomized, in the way he walked, that whole era of Edwardian England; of the upper classes in Edwardian England. He was a remarkable actor but he just upset everybody. I have got a rather nice story – Wendy Hiller who's a great stage actress, and indeed won an Oscar for *Separate Tables* – she had an opening scene with Susanna York in the play and she had to come off the stage at the end of the scene and she used to – she didn't have time to go back to her dressing room – so she used to sit in the chair waiting for her next entrance. And one night James Donald came and sat next to her and she looked at him and said, 'Good evening Mr. Donald, dear', and he said, 'Oh good evening Miss. Hiller, dear'. And she said, 'And what performance are you going to honour us with tonight?' and he said, "Well, my trouble is, Miss. Hiller dear, I never know until I get on'. And she said, 'No, that's not your trouble, that's our trouble!'

RJN: [Laughs] Brilliant! Did you find that a lot of actors were difficult to work with simply because they thought they were going to be the up-and-coming thing?

JG: No. I mean taken by and large, I loved actors. That's how I'd started my life. I'd been an actor, I understood actors. I understood where they were coming from and the vast majority of them are very, very kind. I mean, if you want to do a charity you can rely on your actor friends to turn up and work for nothing, in aid of charity – always. They are very generous people. They are usually very kind. They can be insecure and funnily enough the people that were most insecure, I found over the years, were the people who were funny.

RJN: Comedians.

JG: You know, you go to people like David Tomlinson, Ian Carmichael. They were difficult because they were so insecure. They never knew where their next penny was coming from – or that's the impression they gave – but they were lovely people. Actors are a breed apart I think. I'm reading at the moment and reading with huge interest and enjoyment, a wonderful book by Michael Ackroyd.

LG: Holroyd.

JG: Michael Holroyd, sorry. I keep calling him Ackroyd; Michael Holroyd. A very famous biographer who's written a book on Henry Irving, the first actor ever to be knighted and Ellen Terry, the great actress of the end of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. It's absolutely riveting reading about their lives and comparing it to the actors that I knew, and there's absolutely no difference. I mean there's a hundred years in between as it were, but there's no difference.

RJN: Yeah. 1964. The Easter Man, Present Laughter. I've got Boeing-Boeing again.

JG: Oh, that was in America, that was in the United States and we – Ian Carmichael played it in America. It wasn't a success on Broadway, though the recent revival was a huge success on Broadway, which irritated me like hell! [Laughs] Amber for Anna was an insignificant little thriller. It was a perfectly alright play, you know, it was very much a pot-boiler, so we needn't waste any time on that. What was the other one?

RJN: The Easter Man.

JG: The Easter Man.

LG: That was a terrible mistake. You didn't choose to do it.

JG: No.

LG: You were doing the film.

JG: I was doing the film, yes. The Easter Man. I can't even remember it. Martin Tickner, my General Manager, chose it. I was producing a film for the Rank Organization in Morocco and was away for about three months. And I don't remember anything about it, except it was a disaster.

RJN: So, not good then.

JG: So we needn't worry about that. Then we go on to – what was the other one?

RJN: Present Laughter.

JG: Oh, Present Laughter well that was – I loved Noel Coward – I mean, one of the great playwrights of all time. You can follow the history of English comedy through the centuries, and I mean you can start with Chaucer I suppose – not that he was a playwright – but you start with the Canterbury Tales and Chaucer. But when you get on to Shakespeare, the great comedies of Shakespeare. And then you go to the eighteenth century, where you had people like Congreve and Sheridan, great, great comedic playwrights writing things like Love for Love. The Rivals he wrote. Sheridan wrote The Rivals... I should know this. You're not reading English I hope are you young lady?

RJN: No.

JG: Oh that's all right, I'll forgive you then for not knowing. School for Scandal. Sheridan's was the School for Scandal. And then you go through to the nineteenth century to Oscar Wilde, and then you come into the twentieth century and you've got Noel Coward writing great, great comedies. Present Laughter was a wonderful play by Noel Coward and it was one of the early successes that Richard Briers had in the West End. He was a very young man. He now continually tells me how old he is, which irritates me as he's about seven years younger than me. [Laughs] And he played Roland Mawle in Present Laughter. Nigel Patrick played the lead and Phyllis Calvert, who was a well known screen actress in her day, was his wife. It was a lovely production which I presented with Hugh Beaumont at HM Tennents, which we've talked about. Very successful; ran at The Queen's Theatre and I had the pleasure of meeting Noel Coward at the time, so it was a great thrill for me. I've just been reading his letters too which came out at Christmas.

RJN: So you weren't tempted to go back into acting at all?

JG: No never. Not really, no. I mean just occasionally – when I saw a performance, when I saw somebody playing a part that I could have played – not as well as I thought I would have played it [Laughs] – I was tempted to sort of think, well I should be doing that. But no, not really once I became settled as a producer. The Secretary Bird started off a golden decade for me. The Secretary Bird was in 1968 with the great Kenneth More playing the lead, and we opened at the Savoy Theatre and were an overnight smash hit. Kenneth More was a great actor of his time and a wonderful man. You know, he just was a delightful man. There was an element in him of the boy that never grew up but he was just a sweet, charming, wonderful actor. When I did this film for the Rank Organization in 1966, his then girlfriend – who later became his wife – Angela More. Angela was playing in the film and Kenny More came out to Morocco and we met him and had dinner with his girlfriend Angela and myself and two or three other people and we had a lovely evening. So it was through that, that I was able to send him the play of The Secretary Bird and he read it and wrote to me saying, 'I absolutely love this play but, unfortunately, I am not available for 18 months. If I were available I would do it without hesitation'. So I phoned him up and said, 'Kenny, if I waited 18 months would you sign now to do the play?' and he said, 'You wouldn't wait 18 months would you?'. I said 'I certainly would.' To get the right actor that's the sensible thing to do. He said, 'Oh my goodness! Well yes, of course, I'd love to do it'. So he said 'I'll talk to my agent', who was a man called Laurence Evans – who in latter years became a great personal friend of mine. And I phoned Laurie Evans and said, 'Kenny More said he'd do this play when he's available in 18 months time', and Laurie Evans said, 'Well I better talk to him'. And he phoned me up about an hour later and said, 'Yes he will. He'll do the deal now'. So that's what we did. We waited 18 months and thank God we did.

RJN: Yes, you must have been really glad.

JG: It was a gold mine. We capitalized the play at £8,000, and that was the total capitalization and we made £4,000 a week. So every fortnight we were making one hundred percent on the original capitalization of the play. I remember – so the inland revenue didn't take all my money – I went out and I bought a Rolls Royce. It was a... It was a ten years old Rolls Royce.

RJN: A Rolls Royce nonetheless!

JG: I went to a party at Kenny More's and I drove up in my Rolls Royce and he said, 'Ahh, I knew John when he had a Ford Anglia!' [Laughs]. But that was a huge success and really made me financially as a producer. I mean we'd earned a very good living up to that point but that's what gave us – you know we were putting money into pension funds, and goodness knows what, so we could have an old age in peace and tranquillity. Which we were having until the credit crunch came along [Laughs].

RJN: Oh no! So up until that point, where it really did sort of secure itself, what did you find were the general changes in theatre?

JG: Well, I don't think there were a lot of changes in theatre. I mean there were, of course there were always moments when the theatre changes. And in the modern era of Pinter and Osborne, and some of those writers, you saw a sea change come over the theatre. But in point of fact, the old fashioned plays that were really good like *The Secretary Bird* were still smash hits. Though a few people may have sneered at them and said, 'Well they don't reflect life how it really is'. Perfectly true, they don't in one sense, but you know in Shakespeare's day, when he wrote his great plays, they probably didn't reflect life in his day. What they were, were masterpieces of writing that were using heightened language that people wanted to listen to, and that it was a lot of the theatre is about. The feel-good factor. I mean a play that is going round at the moment which is a huge success is *The Calendar Girls*, which was on at Chichester last...

RJN: Yes, I've seen that.

JG: Have you seen that? Well you know, it's not a very good play. You know luckily this is for the archives because I wouldn't say it until it's open in London. It's not a particularly good play, but it's a wonderful evenings entertainment.

RJN: It's heart-warming isn't it.

JG: It's heart-warming, exactly. It's exactly that. We saw the film of *Mamma Mia* recently. Again, another piece of heart-warming, feel-good fun in the cinema. We went last week to see *Slumdog Millionaire*, which I hated. I couldn't bear it. I hated the violence; I hated the poverty. I know it reflects life in India but I don't want to know about it. I was so disturbed by it, it didn't suit me. Though it's obviously a wonderful film but *Mamma Mia* we just loved. I mean it was great fun and it was a great feel-good factor. *Calendar Girls* was the same and I know will be a tremendous success whatever the critics say in London.

RJN: So – when you talk about changes – there were no issues of censorship?

JG: Oh gosh, oh yes! Oh indeed there were. On the Brighter Side – going back to that, we had a wonderful juvenile in it, who's now an old gentleman like me, called David Kernan and David's been in musical theatre all his life. He had a lovely number in it which was... At that time in history frozen foods were just coming in, and this was a little comic song about frozen foods. We had these four girl dancers. One was Miss Strawberry Mousse, one was Miss Brussels Sprouts, and so on, and they had little bikini costumes with strawberries on their breasts and bikini bottoms with brussel sprouts – whatever they're meant to be. And it was a charming little song and at the end of it the pay-off line was 'There are fairies at the bottom of my garden'. And the censor put his blue pencil right through 'There are fairies at the bottom of my garden' and so I dressed up in my best collar and tie and I wore a bowler hat and a rolled umbrella. And I went to St. James' Palace where the censor presided. I'd made an appointment to see him, and I went in and said to him, 'Look, we can't do this number without the pay-off line', and he said, 'Well I'm terribly sorry Mr. Gale, but it has homosexual connotations'. So I said, 'Well it doesn't really. It's very harmless. It's just that there are fairies at the bottom of my garden'. He said, 'Now, come come Mr. Gale. You know perfectly well it has homosexual connotations'. So I said, 'Colonel Pen, can I show you who the two fairies at the bottom of my garden are?'. And he said, 'What do you mean?' and I said, "Well, I have the two actors who come on as the two fairies at the bottom of my garden and they're outside in their costumes waiting to show you'. He said 'Oh yes, bring them in'. And they came in and one was dressed as fairy liquid in a bottle and the other was in a package of fairy snow. And I said, 'These are the fairies at the bottom of my garden!'. And he said, 'Oh, I say, that's terribly amusing. Of course you may use it'. So we were allowed to use it.

JG: Now, to go back when were acting. Lisel and I went on tour with a great [ballerina] called Moira Shearer, who was the Prima Ballerina at Covent Garden and made a great film called The Red Shoes as a dancer. And we went on tour with her. As her first [acting] job ever, when she played Sally Bowles in I'm a Camera, and I played the American opposite her – and Lisel was the stage manager of the production and she understudied Sally Bowles. We went on tour, which actually was a very, very long tour; 40 weeks all over the country and everywhere we went, because of Moira's fame, the theatres were packed to the rafters. I mean absolutely packed to the rafters. Everybody wanted to see this woman who was one of the great beauties of her time. A really lovely, lovely woman and also a lovely person and married to Ludovic Kennedy who was a great television personality. And we got to Eastbourne and we opened on the Monday night. By the end of the performance there were two policemen, an inspector and a sergeant at the back of Lisel. Lisel had the prompt script.

LG: And they were standing there until it was finished.

JG: They said, 'We've had complaints about the show'. And we said, "But it's been passed by the Lord Chamberlain', and they said "Well, we'd like to see the script that the Lord Chamberlain's passed'. So we had to send to London – when the Lord Chamberlain passed a script, every page was stamped – and we were able to show them and they allowed us to continue the play for a week. But I was playing the American and I always remember, I was sitting in my dressing room – I didn't come on till the second scene of Act One and I was sitting in my dressing room, making up and getting ready to go on. And I thought, 'That's funny, there's something odd going on'. I was listening to the tannoy and overheard Moira Shearer and the actor playing opposite her and I

thought, 'There's something odd'. And I couldn't think what it was, and I suddenly realised that the audience weren't laughing. It was a comedy and they always laughed but at Eastbourne it was greeted in stony silence. And I went down to the stage and I said to Lisel, who was standing in the prompt corner conducting the performance, 'What on earth's going on?'. She said, 'I don't know. They're not reacting at all'. I said, 'Well that's very weird', at which point she brought the curtains down on the first scene. Moira Shearer came off the stage and she said, 'Oh John, thank God it's your scene next' she said, 'you'll make them laugh, you always do'. But we'd been greeted in stony silence and perspiration was on her forehead. She was so unnerved by this because the show had been such a success everywhere we'd been. But suddenly at Eastbourne, greeted in stony silence.

Well, I went on. I didn't get a single laugh during my scene which I'd never failed to before. And I always got applause when I left at the end of my scene when I walked out of the door. And I walked out of the door with a line 'So long Chris, you sexy old bastard'. And, as I said the line at the door, I heard this terrible hissing sound. And I walked off to nothing, no applause, and the hissing sound was an intake of breath from 600 people in the theatre. Who all went [breathes in] when they heard the word bastard. [Laughs] When you think what goes on today it is very, very strange.

Many years later we did a play called No Sex Please We're British which became the longest running comedy in the history of world theatre. It ran for 16 years in London and when we were on tour before the West End showing we had Michael Crawford and Evelyn Laye playing the two leads. And we were trying to book the tour when we were setting the play up. Eastbourne refused to have it because of the title: No Sex Please, We're British.

RJN: Why Eastbourne?

JG: Well, they're very narrow-minded in Eastbourne is all I can say. I don't know why Eastbourne. They called the police in when we were there with I Am a Camera and... what was the other one that we did with Lord Chamberlain?

LG: Waiting for Godot.

JG: Oh yes. No that was reading. We read Waiting for Godot to the Lord Chamberlain, for Donald Albery when we were working for Donald. And the Lord Chamberlain wanted the word 'whore' cut out and 'tart' put in its place. I said, 'But sir, whore comes in the Bible'. And he said, 'Oh does it?' and I said, 'It certainly does'. He said, 'Oh, well I suppose we must allow it then'. Now tart was a much nastier word than whore, funnily enough. I mean a much more derogatory term. And there was something else. He didn't like the word 'piss'. What did I go to see the Lord Chamberlain about when I told him about Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'be? There was some play that we were doing, which he wanted – some alterations made and I went to sort of argue with him. And during the course of the argument I said to him, 'I don't know why you're trying to change this play, because my wife and I went last night to see Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'be' and I said, 'What's going on, on that stage is nobody's business'. He said, 'What's going on in Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'be?' and I said, 'Well you know, such suggestive things being said and done on the stage that you know, it's quite ridiculous that you're asking

for these changes for a classic play which is about a 12th century nun and monk'. And he said, 'Oh right. Oh well, all right', and he didn't make any changes to our play.

The next day I walked down to my office in the Strand Theatre and there on a big billboard was 'Lord Chamberlain goes to see Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'be and demands changes!'. I said, 'Oh my God! I didn't mean him to do anything like this. This is terrible'. And by this time we were on very good, friendly terms – sort of more equal terms when we worked for him – with Donald Albery. I phoned Donald up and I said, 'Donald, can I pop in and see you this evening on my way home?' and he said, 'Yes, of course. Come and have a drink at six o'clock'. So I went to his office at six o'clock and I said, 'I have a terrible confession to make and I'm so embarrassed I don't know how to tell you'. He said, 'Why, what have you done?'. So I said, 'Well, I went to see the Lord Chamberlain yesterday about Abelard and Eloise and changes he wanted, which we've managed to sort out. And I did say that Lisel and I had been to see Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'be, which we thought was quite disgusting'. And Donald said 'Oh! Well I'll open a bottle of champagne, John. If we could look out of the window now, we could see the queues round the theatre because of this headline in all the papers!'. [Laughs] It had the opposite effect and everybody rushed to see it. But the Lord Chamberlain's duties in latter years were quite ludicrous. You know I mean, even when we were quite young admittedly – so we're talking about 50 years ago – were absurd what they were doing with the censorship. I think now, I'd like to see a bit more censorship on television.

RJN: Yes, it's gone the other way.

JG: The pendulum has swung so far the other way. He was a colonel [in the army]. It was Colonel Sir Eric Penn as the Lord Chamberlain. He was the person who decided what was allowed and what wasn't, and it was absurd.

RJN: Yes.

JG: I mean absolutely absurd. And you know 'the fairies at the bottom of my garden' are an absolute classic example of the sort of trivia that he would stop. Because it, in his expression, had homosexual connotations. Well, you know by that time, homosexuality was of course illegal at that time – which is also a scandal – which was changed fairly soon after that. It was totally accepted in the theatre. But people like Hugh Beaumont, who was a famous homosexual, who presented plays and was one of the great impresarios of the twentieth century – I mean he was secretive to the point, well I don't know to what point – I mean he was so careful in what he did but he was famous as a homosexual but he never, never publicized himself. Now it's swung the other way where everyone has to go round telling everybody that they are homosexual. You know, who cares, you know? I mean in the theatre it – famously there's a story that goes round and I don't know how true it is, but Nicholas de Jongh, of the Evening Standard, said that he would never give Derek Jacobi a good notice in his newspaper until Derek Jacobi came out as a homosexual. Well, that's an appalling state of affairs.

RJN: Yeah.

JG: If Derek Jacobi wanted to keep his private life private – after all, those of us who are not homosexual don't rush around telling everybody that they are heterosexual, you know. It's sort of swung the other way. But it was so dangerous in our youth that people were terrified. I mean they were really, really frightened. There's a famous story of Binkie Beaumont having a party with a lot of gay friends that was raided by the police and an actor called Tom Gill held the door against the police for a while, just for a few seconds, and Binkie Beaumont and a few others got out. Out of the back door, as it were, while Tom was holding the door. And Tom was sent to prison for six months for obstructing the police in their duties. But Binkie kept him in work for the rest of his life. But that was the sort of thing that was so wicked you know, in our youth it was really nothing to do with anybody else.

RJN: So it was known in theatre? So it wasn't a secret?

JG: Oh totally.

LG: The theatre – what's wonderful about the theatre – the theatre has no class system. It's only how good you are that matters.

JG: Yes absolutely.

LG: Not where you come from, how you sound, what colour you are, what religion you are, what sex you prefer. Nobody cares. And they haven't... I mean, it was the same when we came into it in the late forties.

JG: Yes, yes it was. Absolutely. The only thing that interested people – there was a wonderful actor who played many leads at The Royal Shakespeare Company in the sixties and seventies called Eric Porter. And Eric Porter played the lead with Kenneth More in John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* on television, which was a huge success when they did it. And Eric Porter's father was a bus driver, but nobody cared. Eric Porter was a wonderful, wonderful actor. Nobody gave a damn what his father did.

RJN: That's great. This has all been really interesting. I mean is there anything you want to add about the period? It's just a time issue, I wish I could stay!