

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Leonie Barnett – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Dominic Shellard**

Sister of Joe Orton. Defacement of books in Islington Library; education; family background; Kenneth Halliwell; homosexuality; Leicester; Joe Orton; Orton's interest in the popular voice; parental role models; play-writing; Prick Up Your Ears; RADA; Peggy Ramsay.

DS: Let's start formally now. Thank you ever so much for coming along. I just need to start at the beginning by asking you whether you're OK with the idea of this being an interview as part of the British Library Theatre Archive Project and that the transcript and the recording will be lodged in the British Library Sound Archive. Are you happy to give us permission to do that?

LB: Yes, I am.

DS: Thank you very much indeed. OK Leonie, so we've chatted a bit about obviously your fantastic brother Joe. Can we just perhaps start by you sharing with us your earliest memories of Joe?

LB: That would be Marriot Road School, which was my infants school and Joe's infant and junior school. He would take me to school on his way to work. There's 11 years difference between Joe and myself, and so I would be about three I would imagine, he'd be about 15/16 I should think. And he was extremely kind. And I think he possibly was the kindest person in my life at that time, and certainly the only one that ever held my hand. And he would sort of take me, walk me to school in the morning and then drop my hand and say, 'Off you go then. In you go'. So that's my very earliest memory. And I would think I would have been no more than four.

DS: Yes. You said that he was the sort of kindest person in your life at that time; can you say something about your sort of family set-up – your parents, how many other brothers and sisters you had, if any?

LB: Yes. There were four of us in total: Joe was the eldest, I was the youngest, I had a brother Douglas who died, and then my sister Marilyn and I you know survived both our brothers. And yes, it was quite a tough childhood. It wasn't any different I don't think from anybody else that lived on a wide spreading post-war council estate. But I think, speaking for myself, I was fairly a sensitive child I think, and so when you are sensitive and open to what's around you... I do feel that my mother was quite cruel – physically cruel – and I think I did suffer at her hands quite a bit. I don't think the boys did quite so much. I know my sister did too. My father was a very... I don't mean this in any sort of mean way towards him, but he was a very cowering, weak figure. I never, ever knew him once to answer my mother back, even in the beatings that she gave to me and my sister, he would never intervene. Because I think if he had of done she'd have probably lashed out at him as well. So his retreat was to go into his garden, because he was a gardener. So he used to go into the garden whenever the rows started. And she would

always goad him about the amount of money that he brought in you know, that she couldn't manage on it. That it was, in her words, and I quote, 'This is neither arsehole nor water cress'.

DS: What was your father's job?

LB: He was a gardener for the city council... for the... yes.

DS: And did you mother work or was she a housewife?

LB: Yes, my mother worked long hours, from about eight in the morning 'til six in the evening. She started out as a machinist in the hosiery. But as her eyesight got worse she ended up charring for shops, and different offices and factories, and places like that.

DS: And going back to this sort of first memory of Joe, you said he was sort of round about 15 and he was going off to work. When did Joe leave school and what did he immediately move into?

LB: Well that's a bit vague, because I really don't remember a lot of that time. I mean I know that when he failed the 11 plus... where she got the money I'll never know, I think she pawned almost everything she had to send him to a vocational college. Although she did think it was an educational college. It was called Clarks College. And I mean it's well documented I think in the diaries and in *Prick Up Your Ears* that she didn't realise that you know this was a vocational college. So consequently he learned shorthand and typing. He must have been what, 15/16, when he left there. And then he went in to sort of just bookkeeping, clerical jobs, you know learning the trade really of not even accountancy I don't think, just a general clerk – you know, filing etc and doing boring office jobs, which he absolutely hated. But in the meantime you see he was attending all these drama, amateur dramatic theatres, rushing from one to the other and complaining bitterly all the time about not getting the... you know he'd get the sort of the guy that walked on with a spear, when he really wanted to be King Lear.

DS: [laughs] Can you cast your mind back to your sort of house? Tell us a little bit about the sort of living arrangements in the house, you know, what sort of room you had, what sort of room Joe had.

LB: Yes, it was an end of... it was a corner house and there was no central heating of course or anything like that. There was just one cold tap downstairs and a huge brick type boiler where my mother used to boil the washing up every... you know to wash our clothes every Monday morning – that was an absolute ritual that. And then there were three bedrooms – tiny bedrooms – upstairs. Joe and Douglas shared one and Marilyn - my sister - and myself shared the other, and then my parents were in the other bedroom. But it was a really tiny house, I remember that, with just a little... but the pantry was enormous. And if you were really particularly bad she'd shut you in the pantry. But you know there wasn't anything to eat in there so... [laughs]

DS: Yes, just as a naughty space.

LB: Yes.

DS: Later on, in the sort of 1960s Joe is renowned really for his sort of interest in his appearance, you know, he was a very good looking man, he took a great deal of interest in his clothing; is that something that you can remember vaguely when you were young or is that something that you've only picked up sort of retrospectively?

LB: Well I think that my mother did have a good sense of what looked good and what was not good you know. I mean there were certainly things that you wore that... well she wouldn't allow you to wear because you were... if you wore them you were common. And you know she did have a good eye for stuff my mother, in all fairness to

her she did sort of... And she was very clean too. Meticulous about cleanliness, which I think Joe was too. You know, I mean he was the only man I ever knew in my young years that had clean fingernails, because all the people I knew obviously you know worked with their hands. And Joe didn't, and Joe worked with a pen and I thought that was pretty special. Even before he went to RADA I always thought 'Oh, I'm going to work... I'm not going to get my hands dirty'.

DS: How did the family react to this increasing interest in theatre – his amateur dramatics?

LB: I don't think that they really... I don't know... for sure other kids in the street weren't doing this. They didn't go to amateur dramatics. It was the reserve really then of the middle classes. And working class kids didn't do that sort of thing. But then Joe had had a long period of suffering with asthma and not being able to join in with other kids' sort of games, you know, scrumping apples and jumping over fences, and making carts and... because we lived at the bottom of a hill so kids were always making carts and skidding down the hill. You know I never saw my brother do that. Certainly Douglas, my other brother, did. He used to do those. And made catapults and shot blackbirds and got into real trouble about it you know. But not Joe.

DS: So was there a sense from your perspective, I suppose looking back then, that your mother viewed him a sort of... because he was the eldest... as slightly different?

LB: Oh he was a very... yes, very special child.

DS: Special child, yes.

LB: Yes, he really was. And in a way, I think if she'd have had better resources, financial resources, I think that she would have pushed all her kids. But she just had enough energy I think... and she was 43 anyway when she had me. So I think at the end she'd just about had enough life to live for herself, without breathing life into a young thing like I was you know. But she certainly... she did make an awful lot of Joe.

DS: What did Joe like eating when he was young?

LB: Oh just really basic stuff: steak and kidney pies and jacket potatoes. I mean there wasn't a lot of stuff about. Lamb chops, pork chops, you know, my mother's roast dinners: Yorkshire pudding, roast beef. Just plain, simple food. And I think he really did still enjoy that right 'til the end of his life.

DS: And did he like music as a young boy... as a sort of teenager?

LB: Yes, I mean he did, but it was more or less classical stuff. And that came from my mother. My mother would... my mother thought that she was sort of a failed opera singer and she was always singing.

DS: Was she.

LB: Always singing.

DS: What sort of things?

LB: Oh she would sing the most outrageous songs. She would sing ditties and... but when she'd been down to the pub she would come back and she'd sing sort of "We'll Meet Again" and you know, "I want to get you on a slow boat to China". But she really didn't like Vera Lynn. Oh no, Vera Lynn was a club turn.

DS: No class.

LB: She couldn't sing, and nor could Gracie Fields! So she didn't like that sort of... but I mean people like Kathleen Ferrier, "O My Beloved Father" and all that, oh she loved all that.

DS: They passed the test.

LB: Oh, they passed the test.

DS: So let's move forward a bit then to... obviously this interest in amateur theatre, this amateur dramatics engenders this great love and interest in the theatre. As we know he moves on to RADA. What's your sort of recollection of that transition – that move to RADA? I mean you were still very young when that happened, but what do you feel now the family felt about this you know quite big wrench really – Leicester to London?

LB: Oh my mother... oh yes. My mother loved it. Once she'd had a few drinks she would swan round the pub and she would tell anybody that would listen that her son was at RADA. 'He was the first one in Leicester to go you know. He'd got a grant from the council and the Leicester Education Community' and 'My son's at RADA. Do you know what that stands for?' you know and...

DS: And they go, 'No.' [laughs]

LB: Well they wouldn't know, would they. I mean... you know. I mean it was terribly pretentious of her. And you know when you were around her you wanted to shrink and you know, you always walked in the opposite direction.

DS: But kind of understandable now I suppose, that pride.

LB: Oh yes, yes, but you know it does sort of... most people think 'oh she's a snob'. And you know you're desperate to be like your peers when you're about 13 aren't you. You know, and people would say to you... you know, my friends would say, 'My mum says your mum's a snob'. And yet she was nothing even remotely like a snob you know. I mean, she was just the absolute opposite of...

DS: So that was quite embarrassing then, for a young girl.

LB: Oh yes. And she was always singing. And she was... as soon as she had any money she'd be drunk as well. You know, so I mean she'd come from the pub and she'd have beers inside her, and she'd walk up the street with her cronies and she'd be singing at the top of her voice. And you know you just... you always hid somewhere you know and...

DS: What do you think RADA did for Joe?

LB: Oh well. I think that RADA was a starting point; terrifically important and a big, big boost for him to get in for a start. Because no-one really thought he would. But he tried hard and I can remember, even to this day, him rehearsing that RADA piece.

DS: What was it, do you remember?

LB: Yes, it was *Peter Pan* and it was a piece between Captain Hook and Smee. And he was doing all the actions with the sword you know and the voice of Smee, and then Captain Hook and then Smee again. I mean I can't tell you the exact piece but I'm sure it's in the juvenile diaries anyway. But I think that... oh yes, I can remember him doing that.

DS: Where did he do the rehearsing?

LB: Oh in the bedroom upstairs.

DS: Did you ever sort of go in and sort of watch him?

LB: Oh yes. Yes, and I used to watch him a lot when he did the rehearsing for plays for the Little Theatre and for the BATS players and the Vaughan players.

DS: So were you his sort of first audience in a sense?

LB: Well... and I was in one production, it was called *The Blue Bird* and he played Tyltyl. And my sister and I were fairies and we had to fly off the - not fly literally, I mean we had no harnesses... but run down the side steps of the stage into the audience and up the centre aisle, and then off through the doors at the top. Yes, I mean he loved... he really did love... oh and he was just so enthused by it. I mean I can remember him playing Oberon in... or dressing as Oberon in *Midsummer Night's Dream* and sort of... he had a green candlewick bedspread wrapped round him. And he'd painted the whole of his body with green distemper, which is like emulsion paint now. And across his eye... on his eyelids and on his eyebrows he'd stuck sequins. And he sort of... I don't know what he'd got on his hair; it must have been Vaseline or something like that, because it all stuck up. It all stuck out like spikes - an early punk rocker I suppose. And he kept sort of... I had to stand on the landing and then he would be behind the bedroom door. And then he would open the door and then stride out and say the opening line, you know, "Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania". [laughs]

DS: That's great.

LB: It's wonderful.

DS: You're painting a picture here of a very considerate brother to his younger sister, who sort of involved you in a few things.

LB: Oh yes, he was.

DS: So although you probably couldn't appreciate it at the time, what was it like when he went to RADA? Did you notice the absence?

LB: Oh yes! Oh yes. In fact when he did come home - he used to come home about twice a year then - and when he came home I used to look forward to it so much that I used to hide under the stairs, because I wanted to see him so much, but I don't know, it was a really odd feeling that I was desperate to see him, but it was like you knew he was going back. So it was tinged with sadness. And then he'd find me or he'd see me and then he'd... But you know it wasn't sort of anything that was really... it wasn't like an embrace or anything, it was just sort of, 'Hello you! What have you been up to?' and then you know I used to just follow him round like a little spaniel you know.

DS: Do you think his voice changed?

LB: Oh yes. Oh yes, very much so.

DS: In what way?

LB: I mean well... you know he sort of... it was still clipped with Leicester a little but I mean it... I mean I know that the British Library did release a CD of writers talking. And on there, if you listen to that interview I think with Roland Orton - no relation - you can just detect that he's from probably the Midlands: Nottingham, Leicester, Derby, somewhere around there. Because he just has that little clicked edge.

DS: Around the edge, yes.

LB: But he did have a really nice speaking voice. I mean but you know it was inevitable I think that he would lose that Leicester accent. You know he had two years' elocution lessons before applying to RADA, and then two years at RADA. I mean, you were going to lose that Leicester accent for sure.

DS: So you said that you know RADA was the beginning, you know the real springboard. Obviously we know now that he met Kenneth Halliwell there. When did you first come to realize the importance of Halliwell to Joe's life?

LB: Oh well I would say after RADA and you know him never coming home again. I mean we always... I don't know, I mean nobody in our family had ever gone away. So it was like you go away and then you come back. You don't go away and then never come back. So clearly the... well I mean you wouldn't want to come back to Leicester would you? I can't imagine anybody wanting to come back to Leicester once they've left it.

DS: Oh I don't know, now. [laughs]

LB: Oh well now, you know I'm talking about the sort of fifties. And I think that meeting Kenneth was you know that springboard that... and Kenneth was everything at that time that Joe wanted to be i.e. educated, informed. You know Kenneth was already writing even then – or practicing the craft. So it was just like he took Joe under his wing. I mean I always had that feeling that Kenneth was... probably feel in love with Joe. And you would. I mean I'm biased, I know, but you would because he was a nice man. But also because he was so good looking and Kenneth wasn't particularly good looking, he was just very ordinary fellow. And I think that possibly in the beginning, that Joe was his pretty, vivacious boyfriend you know. But I mean of course it wasn't ever said outright.

DS: Can you say a little bit more about that. Obviously, you know one of the many fascinating facets of Joe Orton's life is you know he becomes very proud of his sexuality, in a period that was very repressive and never mentioned.

LB: Oh yes.

DS: And I just wondered you know what the sort of family perspective was. Do you think your parents ever realised about the true relationship between Kenneth and Joe? I remember once you said to me that you know it wasn't really until the very end that people really realised there'd actually been... you know they'd had this kind of very strong relationship.

LB: Yes, I don't think my... well my mother died at Christmas 1966 and Joe eight months later in August 1967. But I don't think that my... if she knew, and I think she did, but we have a saying, 'you don't need a weather man to tell you which way the wind's blowing' and I think that's true. I think she knew but she would never admit it. And by Christ, if you ever said anything about John being a poof, as they called it, she would have just lynched you I think. She wouldn't have ever have taken that on board. He could have never have come out to my mother I don't think. Not like most men usually do come out first to their mothers. I think my mother would have died a thousand deaths you know if... and I don't think my father... well they never discussed anything, my mother and father. I never, ever saw them sit down as a couple. You know I mean he'd come in and she'd go out. And he'd come in from work and then she'd just go to the pub or she'd sit and watch telly. I mean he always cooked his own tea and things like that. I mean, she never really cooked for my father.

DS: Do you think there are elements of your father in McLeavy in *Loot*?

LB: Oh yes.

DS: Who was also very henpecked and very...

LB: I think...

DS: ...very naïve.

LB: Yes, I think that weak figure, that weak father or male figure comes out in... well all Joe's plays. I mean you could say the dada in *Sloane*... then you've got the guy in *The Good and Faithful Servant*...

DS: Bossed around by Mrs Welthorpe.

LB: Yes.

DS: Sounds like... it's very interesting isn't it, it sounds quite like the relationship between your mother and your father.

LB: Oh yes. Yes. And then there was Mrs Prentice, not so much with her husband but you know there is that sort of... she's very dominant you know and, 'My uterine contractions have been bogus for some time!' you know I mean it's very...

DS: The wonderful "Y-shaped coffin" line.

LB: Absolutely, yes. I mean she really has a go at him doesn't she and that... I mean I think that's all about exposure to your very young childhood where you know the female, the mother figure, is constantly goading your father, her husband, to bring more money and to be a better father. And she used to trot out very often, 'I've been mother and father to you kids. And I've brought up four kids on one lung'. Well I mean that's a reference to the fact that she had a lung collapse through TB. Mum was wonderful, you see. And you can see... I mean when you hear my mother's voice saying stuff like that, you can see where it comes from. I mean you know obviously he perfected it to that wonderful, elegant, stylised language that he has in the plays. But I mean there is a direct line connection back to the stuff my mother used to say.

DS: Well some of the most amusing sections in the diaries are where Joe has sort of gone out and done something very ordinary, and like sat on a bus – the top deck of a bus to Clapham – and has overheard people just talking and has sort of presented it in a way that's both sort of you know hysterically amusing but also very ordinary. Do you think that's a sort of post-RADA thing, or do feel... was he very perceptive you noticed when you were young at home? Is that something that he always sort of had?

LB: I think... yes I think that's about observation and listening. And he was always... he would listen. He loved to be a fly on the wall. I mean I can remember, even before you know he was living with Kenneth and he brought home with him a tape-recorder – one of these old Grundy type things with the spools on. Yes, a *Krapp's Last Tape* I always think of. [laughs]

DS: Yes. [laughs]

LB: And in the house – the second home we lived in, in Trenant Road – there was a serving hatch. And he would hide the microphone behind a loaf of bread, and so when different people came in to see my mother he would switch this recorder on. And then you know she'd had insurance men and... well she always called them insurance men, no matter who came in, but they were usually tally men.

DS: Tally men, what do they do?

LB: Oh well they came to collect debts that you'd borrowed money for something or you'd had cheques for clothes or furnishings, or whatever, and you paid for it weekly. And they used to come round and collect from you a certain amount... well you know she'd pay one one week and then she'd give them some sob story that she couldn't... you know I can't pay you this week for whatever reason you know. But he loved all that. I mean, he loved the idea that... And then neighbours would come in with their... you know, their complaints. Like I remember once a woman coming in and she'd scolded herself. And she said, 'Look at my chest Else' - and my mother's name was Elsie but

everybody called her Else - She said, 'Oh look at my chest Else' she says, 'It just looks like frogspawn'.

DS: [laughs]

LB: And she'd obviously burnt herself with this boiling water or steam or something. And there was all these blisters. And mother said I think, 'Oh it looks just like frogspawn'. You see, and Joe loved all that. And he'd howl laughing when he closed the hatch back up you know. And yes... and he liked to watch the television without the sound on.

DS: Incredible. OK, so let's move on from RADA. So he sets up home in their famous flat... sets up home with Kenneth in the famous flat in Islington, and then something incredible happens I suppose in the life of anyone's family - a son goes to prison. How did that impact, if at all, on Leicester life?

LB: Oh not at all. Not at all.

DS: Did your parents even know?

LB: Oh yes. Oh yes. My father was the one that sort of discovered it first. I mean I remember it distinctly. I mean he was sitting downstairs nine-ish probably in the evening. My mother went to bed, probably because she hadn't got any money to go to the pub with. She'd go to bed very early my mother if she didn't go to the pub. And he was reading the *Daily Mirror*. And there was an article inside, and the headline was 'Gorilla amongst the roses'. And my father, being a gardener, thought this chimpanzee or a monkey had got loose in a flower bed you see. Anyway he read the article and read that you know that John Kingsley Orton and Kenneth - I forget Kenneth's middle name - Halliwell had been sent to prison for defacing library books. And by carefully cutting out something that was not even remotely to do with the front cover and then either superimposing or inserting something that was really... well I suppose a bit of an... he was just being a bit of an anarchist really. I mean, he was just pissed off I think with all the bad stuff that was in libraries and that he... you know, so he thought I'll show them by doctoring these books. They were things like *Etiquette* by Lady Lewisham and he'd have a sort of... you know a ridiculous Greek statue you know standing in... you know a torso, sort of a Greek torso in a bath with Nurse Edith Cavell I think it was. And she said something like, 'My duties during the Second World War amongst the soldiers were...' - oh, I don't know, sort of - 'numerous and varied'.

DS: [laughs]

LB: And of course there's this huge naked man she's sitting in front of, and it's just wonderful because she's at sort of... sitting on a table at a bath, and this statue is in the bath, head height to his genitalia you see. I mean those book covers, you know, they're wonderful. They really are great stuff. I mean the Islington Library, I mean they cosset them now.

DS: Oh yes. So what did your dad say?

LB: Oh he just went upstairs and said to my mother that John had been sent to prison for mucking about with library books.

DS: I wonder how she responded.

LB: Oh she was... well she just couldn't believe it for a start, because she didn't think her lad was capable of anything like that you see. She just thought that you know he was working away in London and trying to get jobs in repertory theatres. But of course they were learning their craft and in the meantime were amusing themselves doing these sort of... well defacing library books and inserting new blurbs in... you know for what was happening inside the book. So I mean you know, I mean they were... it was just a prank

to them I think, foolishly really because I mean they got found out. And I don't... I can't believe that they didn't ever think that would get found out you know. But I think if they... I mean, I suppose they would have stopped it eventually anyway, and they got caught before they actually stopped anyway you know.

DS: There's one school of thought that Joe came out of prison transformed in a certain way. Do you subscribe to that?

LB: Oh yes. I do, yes.

DS: In what way do you think?

LB: Well I think that you know he'd lived this almost monkish life with Kenneth, and they had, both of them, worked... their lifestyle was that they worked for six months every year, and for the rest... and they usually worked during the winter months for six months, from say October 'til April. And from April until October they had six months off, and they wrote. But in-between time they were writing a lot together. I mean getting a lot of rejections. And just writing all sorts of stuff, but they were both very keen on a writer called Fairbank who sort of wrote in this very elegant, stylised way, but was outrageous. And I think Joe sort of comic voice gravitated towards... but he didn't just want to be... he would never have approved of Whitehall farces. He didn't want to be just ordinary; he wanted to be the best. And he really wanted to have a go at society. And he was very angry at the way he'd been treated I think, especially by being sent to prison for such really quite a minor offence. And of course he always maintained – well, not to me of course, because he never came out to me – but it was always maintained that you know they got sent to prison because they were homosexual and not because... you know, they were going to make an example of this pair you know. And there was a lot of homophobia about – more so then I think you know than ever there is today.

DS: As you were growing up did you ever visit the flat or did you ever come down to London?

LB: Oh yes.

DS: Can you tell us your memories of the flat?

LB: Oh that was tiny. And sort of one wall... the ceiling was sort of black and yellow like... they looked like tiles. There were squares... really, really awful. And then on one wall there was just paintings cut out from art books and pasted on the wall – you know, huge things all classical stuff and stuff from all the... well the sort of Renaissance art. And then there was Goya's, there were Velasquez, there were just everything you can imagine. Anything that was classical or even remotely considered.

DS: Was he proud of it do you think. When you first went down, was he proud of his flat or...?

LB: I think Kenneth was. I think there was an element of 'I want to shock'. But it was bloody well done. It was wonderful; I loved it. I mean you know I'd never seen anything like this before. It was just... I liked it a lot.

DS: And did he meet you at the...?

LB: But Kenneth Cranham said that he didn't like it. I mean, he felt it was so claustrophobic the place; it was like noise for the eyes. But I must admit I never found it like that. But then you know, I was impressed with him. I mean he just impressed me.

DS: Did he meet you at the station?

LB: Oh yes. Yes, yes. Or I did think... by the second time I think or the third time I walked to the flat, because I mean the Angel was not very far. You know you get off at the Angel and just walk down, and you're on Noel Road pretty quick. And oh he was so sweet! He really was. And he'd always made such a fuss and...

DS: Yes. Can you give us a sense of the dates? When would have been the first... what year would you have first gone down do you think?

LB: Well I would have gone down first I think... I mean the first dates were really early, in that you know he was still at RADA... no, probably not RADA, but just after they finished RADA and they got that... they had a flat in Maida Vale and then eventually they moved to Noel Road. But we went down at least once a year, but we never went to the flat – that was my sister, and myself, and my mother. But he never took us to the flat; we never, ever met Kenneth. And it was just sort of him doing his duty, traipsing us round London, which he must have hated. But it was a trip out, a day out for us. But as I got older I must have... and I did go to see all the plays with him... well just the two really, because you know he was dead by the time *What the Butler Saw* was produced. And so I suppose I must have been what 19/20.

DS: And you did meet Kenneth?

LB: Oh yes, then I did meet Kenneth.

DS: What was your first impressions when you first met Kenneth Halliwell? Was he introduced as a friend or a...?

LB: I don't know, there was some tension there between them. I felt there was tension anyway. I felt that... you see I'd never met Kenneth before John become Joe Orton if you like. I never met Kenneth previous to that. We were never allowed into that sort of relationship. I only knew Kenneth... I only got to meet Kenneth when Joe became the writer. And I felt that there was tension there. I sensed it almost immediately.

DS: Sorry to interrupt, can you just think about that first... what was the date of that first... what year do you think that would have been?

LB: Oh that must have been what, 1963/62... '63.

DS: And even then you were beginning to detect a tension in the air.

LB: Oh yes. Yes. A resentment almost I think.

DS: What did Kenneth look like?

LB: He was smaller than Joe, completely bald.

DS: Was he wearing a wig when you saw him or was he actually bald?

LB: No. No, no. No, he didn't wear a wig when I met him. And a very quietly spoken man. Very... not forthcoming. Reticient. Really hardly said anything you know. And he always... and the other thing I thought was really odd was he sat on the edge of a chair, perched almost. I mean the point is you don't... yes, you don't... in your own home you relax.

DS: Yes, it doesn't look relaxing does it.

LB: And he never did look relaxed to me. I mean I don't know, it must have been difficult for him too. You know he never had any siblings. You know, both his parents were dead. Really Joe was all the family he had. And Joe had family, although you know I don't think Joe wanted to be associated that much with the family. I mean it wasn't... he was sweet and kind, but I mean I just felt that you know... he was a square peg in a

round hole with the family. But he was still extremely polite and sweet, and extreme good manners – very well-mannered.

DS: What did Halliwell look like in terms of his attire? What was he dressed like?

LB: Oh shirt... just a... you know I never saw him in a tie. Sort of 1950/60s stuff you know. Just slacks and shirt and a tweedy coaty type thing.

DS: And how did he treat you? I mean how were you introduced and what did you feel sort of as Joe Orton's sister coming in? There's this man you've never met, not quite sure of his position I suppose.

LB: Well he was very polite Kenneth was, but he never sort of opened up a conversation. He would wait. And even if you ask him a question he wouldn't sort of... well I mean personally I was a bit in awe of him too I think, because you know you're very conscious of the fact that here am I, barely able to spell my name at that time, in front of these two guys. I mean not so much Joe, because Joe knew where I'd come from. Joe knew all my weakness, you know but Kenneth didn't really. And I was very much in the mode of keep your mouth shut, don't say anything.

DS: If we fast forward to like this month and last month, we've got this play in the West End, *Prick Up Your Ears* which purports to depict the relationship between the two of them. I know you've been involved in a small scale way, in the sort of genesis of that production, but when you actually saw the play did you feel it was accurate, did you feel there were discrepancies, what was your impression about *Prick Up Your Ears*, the relationship between the two of them?

LB: Well I never saw the relationship like the writer sees it. I never saw Joe and Kenneth's relationship like John Law saw it. And with this Simon Bent play, I mean, they have to... I mean Simon Bent is working from *Prick Up Your Ears*, the biography, to some degree. And I personally do not see Joe as this sort of Johnny come lately, Jack the lad type figure that's bursting about like a firecracker on the stage. Joe wasn't like that, and so I don't really identify... what I'm seeing on the stage is just something that two people have put together, who never knew him, and therefore you know it doesn't relate to anything that I know about my brother and his partner. It has no bearing on their relationship at all. But I suppose the audience, seeing it for the first time... it's a shame really... I think what's a good idea is that... is to use Kenneth as the main figure – the protagonist. You know it's always been Orton...

DS: Yes, at the centre.

LB: ...at the centre, and Kenneth was this guy that sort of was crucially important to the birth of the playwright Joe Orton. But I really think that their relationship was much more controlled than I see it on the stage. And much more sedate, and much more involved with one another, where you know we only see Joe bursting in and saying, 'Have you been out today? You want to go out; you must get out' and taking his underpants off and chucking them on the side. I mean I just feel to myself I don't see my brother... you know, he was a very serious writer in many ways... well not many ways, he was a serious writer. And I think their relationship was so intense. Joe, I'm sure, sort of was like a sponge. And Kenneth literally just poured in... you know and they soaked it up together. And then they go to prison, they're separated for the first time, and Joe sort of has this revelation and thinks... and then reads a lot of stuff in prison anyway – rubbishy stuff – and then comes out, almost immediately writes *The Ruffian on the Stair*. And it's accepted by the BBC. And then you know John Tydeman introduces him to Peggy Ramsay. And Peggy Ramsay embraces immediately. She does see that this is a completely wonderful new talent. Oh she does sort of say things like 'your play is derivative'. But I mean you know she doesn't want to make him...

DS: [laughs] Yes that was part of her strategy wasn't it.

LB: Yes, of course. And the other thing is she was in awe of him. I mean I'm sure she was. I mean she loved the idea that when she got out her purse and offered him some money on that first meeting, because he was living National Assistance of £2... I don't know... a few shillings a week – before decimalization... he refuses it. He says, 'I don't need your money'. You know, it's wonderful that. And she loved that. She loved the idea of the person struggling in his garret, you know trying to write and be successful. And I think that she was extremely important to Joe – Peggy was.

DS: I can already see from the time that this is going to have to be a two part interview I think.

LB: [laughs] OK.

DS: Because I think... and what we might do, with your permission, is in another interview actually explore the plays and your... because we haven't even touched on the plays yet. But can I take you sort of back to the biography of *Prick Up Your Ears*? I mean it's interesting to hear your perception that you know the play is a different depiction of your brother. Are there any other aspects of the biography *Prick Up Your Ears* where you sort of think no 'that's not quite how I, Leonie, see it?'

LB: This is a criticism that is second hand. But I think the biggest problem with *Prick Up Your Ears* is that John Lahr, heterosexual, in a way superimposes his heterosexuality onto a homosexual couple. And I don't think it works, because I don't think for one minute that Kenneth Halliwell was a woman. He wasn't wifey; he didn't toe the line. You know he didn't do the supportive role as wives did then – not so much now but did then. And I think that that's the problem, that Lahr always tries to see it in relationship to a married couple – a man and a woman – and I don't think it works. It doesn't go. It won't go because it's... you really have to understand that it was more like a partnership but that Kenneth Halliwell was like crucially important in the fact that he was doing all the educating. Joe was sort of, you know the tutor if you like. It is this sort of Pygmalion type thing almost isn't it. You know that one is the teacher and the other little thing is looking up, and then all of a... the balance tips – the scales tip in you know what seems to be dramatic...

But I just think – not just think – but I just think that Joe learnt his craft, and Joe was a better writer in the end than Kenneth. Kenneth couldn't do it in the end. Kenneth could never have written those plays. But Kenneth was a great editor; a great asset to Joe. And I don't think Joe was going to leave him. I really don't. I'm not saying he never would have left him; I'm not saying he wasn't getting pissed off with his moods and his behaviour and his... it's terrible living with someone who is depressed, like Kenneth was towards the end. It must have been awful for Joe – and awful for Kenneth too. I mean you know you fall between stools all the while with them don't you. It's a love/hate relationship all the time. It is for me anyway. I mean I can hate Kenneth one minute and embrace him for the importance and the input on the other you know. I mean it's a really...

DS: Fascinating. Where do you think that Joe got his confidence to be so proud about his sexuality in the early sixties – you know several years before homosexuality was even decriminalized?

LB: That's a tough one. I don't know really, because my mother was... she was so anti anything to do with sex or... you know anything that was remotely... even if she saw you know two dogs at it in the street she'd walk in the opposite direction. I mean she wouldn't... she'd never expose any of us kids I don't think to... But I don't know... and living in London I suppose as well, it's so different to Leicester. And I don't know, I mean

how can... I don't know when Joe had his first you know sexual experience. I mean we know that... I mean, I assume it was with his brother. I mean because it usually is with your siblings isn't it. I mean, I don't know, but I mean that's my experience.

DS: [laughs]

LB: And then there was the incident in the cinema where a man took him in hand as they say. And I think that... and the other thing is as well, I really do feel that having a mother like we had, plus the women that he was trying to date in the early years, pre-RADA, they were all in the theatre. They were all middle class people or middle class people's daughters, and they just dismissed him as, you know this little fella that used to just sort of always be hanging around in the makeup room and sort of had walk-on parts. And there's some lovely stories in those early diaries of his of being rejected by Dorothy and by somebody else. And those early rejections, I think, you know make him a bit sort of... I don't know, misogynist in a way. I think he was a bit of a misogynist. I don't think he particularly liked women. There's no evidence in those diaries that he liked women. I mean, I think he respected Peggy Ramsay, and I think in a brotherly way he loved me very much. You see this is another... this is me self-deceiving probably. And I think he was fond of his sisters. Yes, I do.

DS: What do your grandchildren feel about having this... does it mean much to them that they've got this famous...?

LB: Well I have five grandchildren – one, Charlie, he's 15 and he wants to go into drama. I took him down to see *Prick Up Your Ears* and he loved it. He absolutely loved it. He says, 'I've got to do this, grandma, you know' and I said to him, 'Oh well it's really tough so you know, be prepared for a lot of, you know, rejections'.

DS: Yes. Is his surname Orton?

LB: No, it's Nott – N-O-T-T. But I'm sure that Charlie will sort of... he'll do something in the theatre I'm sure, because he has a real passion for it and he's a real exhibitionist. And, I don't know really, I just... I'd like to think that one of them would sort of follow in the footsteps. But how can you say. I mean as long as he just doesn't end up being a librarian. [laughs]

DS: There's nothing wrong with librarians.

LB: No.

DS: I think that's a good point to end on actually. We'll pick that up... that'll be the first questions next time... "You said about librarians..."

LB: OK then.

DS: Thank you ever so much indeed.

LB: You're welcome.

DS: Thank you Leonie.