

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Maurice Crutchlow – interview transcript

Interviewer: Bethany Sumner

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Theatre-goer. Peggy Ashcroft; Frederick Ashton's *Fille Mal Gardée*; ballet, Chichester Festival; Coventry theatres; Edinburgh Festival; Christopher Gable; Kitchen Sink dramas; musicals; the National Theatre; S.H. Newsome; Laurence Olivier, opera, Royal Shakespeare Company; set design; star casts; theatre-going; ticket prices; traditional plays; variety; *The Wars of the Roses*; West End theatre-going; *West Side Story*.

BS: I'm talking to Maurice Crutchlow, and I'll ask you a question if that's all right?

MC: Yes, sure.

BS: How did you become interested in the theatre?

MC: I suppose it came from my parents initially, who I wouldn't call mad keen theatre goers but they were always interested. My father was a factory foreman from the age of thirteen to the age of sixty at Courtaulds in Coventry which was a huge factory. My mother was a shop worker but of course in those days you weren't allowed to work once you were married. My father worked a shift system, so six shifts on and two off, and on the two off we always - every week, I would think - went to either the cinema - which we called "the pictures" - or to the theatre, and the nearest theatre was five miles away and that was in Coventry which we were very lucky to have, I think, so near-by, because it was a huge two thousand seater. It called itself "The Showplace of the Midlands". That was printed on the programmes and I think it was probably regarded as the best theatre outside London or certainly in the top two or three. I think it was a lot down to the fact it was managed - I don't know whether he owned it - by S.H. Newsome - Sam Newsome. His wife was Pauline Grant who had been a dancer and did lots of choreography. So we had constant, non-stop top entertainment of every kind within a twenty minute bus ride.

BS: That is really good.

MC: You walked down the end of the road to get the bus, buses were every twenty minutes, it took twenty minutes to get there, you walked across the road and you were in the theatre. So really I suppose it was fairly straight-forward. We didn't have our own

transport; my father never had a car at all. So they took me from a very young age and in fact I can't remember a time when I haven't been going to the theatre.

But it started with going to, what we called then Variety Shows, which were very big, very common because of course television was basically in its infancy and people made their names in the theatre and not from television. Though that influence did come through and they were spectacular; they weren't run of the mill variety shows and every year they had something called The Birthday Show which was unique to the Coventry Theatre. This usually ran for five or six weeks and you'd get three or four top names in that, and it was a very slick, professional presentation from what I remember now. I was only a kid, you know, really quite small, but I vividly remember people like Ken Dodd, Shirley Bassey who I can [visualise] now and people like Beryl Reid, Morecambe and Wise... But then also I noted down sort of names that probably won't mean an awful lot now but who were quite good to see in those days, people like the Kaye Sisters, who were like another version of the Beverley Sisters, if you know what I mean?

BS: Yes, vaguely.

MC: The three girls looked very similar with blonde fringe haircuts. And The Dallas Boys who I don't know if they were brothers but there were five of them – these were all vocal acts. And what I do remember from that as well, I never found the comedians all that funny, I suppose I was too young and I remember my parents being quite bothered that they probably thought I hadn't got a sense of humour! [both laugh] But I suppose it was just being the age I was, because I reckon, you know, I'd be sort of... only perhaps nine or ten when I'd be seeing people like that.

BS: Yes.

MC: One I do particularly remember and it's for something I've noticed later; there was a comedian called Chick Murray who used to do an act with his wife, Chick Murray and Maidie. She had a little accordion, she was a tiny little woman and he was a huge, certainly probably taller than six foot, dour Scotsman...

BS: Oh really?

MC: Who had a very dry sense of humour, and he had a reputation for going on for far too long. I can remember sitting fairly close to the stage, and we must have been on the side because I can see Chick Murray now, in the middle of the stage still doing his act with somebody in the wings frantically beckoning for him to come off stage and it was only years afterwards that I learnt that apparently with Chick Murray that was the norm...

BS: Yeah.

MC: Once he was on, you couldn't get him off. I reckon Mum and Dad took me to my first pantomime there in 1953, which means I would have been, probably nearly seven. [laughs]

BS: And what was it like going to a pantomime there?

MC: Well I loved it. I mean, I just love things like, the place itself with the stage curtain and when the curtain went up I thought it was wonderful and of course they all probably followed the same kind of format, you know but they were spectacular; pretty costumes, nice dresses, good music. So to me it was just, I suppose the spectacle initially rather than what you were seeing and the thing I probably liked less than anything again was the comedy because I hated the slapstick - you know, the custard pie and all that sort of thing. I never liked those sorts of things at all.

BS: You probably have a sophisticated sense of humour.

MC: [Laughs] Well I don't know about that. But one thing I've picked up, because I've actually gone through the Coventry theatre records in the library, is that if I'd gone a year earlier [laughs] in 1952 I would have caught Julie Andrews who was in the Coventry theatre pantomime.

BS: Oh wow!

MC: Unknown presumably, because she hadn't been in My Fair Lady. So she was in Coventry Hippodrome pantomime in 1952 with Mr Pastry, I don't know whether that name would mean anything to you?

BS: No, not really.

MC: So with my parents it was variety shows, pantomimes, musicals, which I still love. I still love musicals but I was introduced to them, again with shows like The Student Prince, Chu Chin Chow, Ivor Novello musicals like The Dancing Years, Glamorous Nights and quite often in those days, the musicals were done as an ice show. I think they used to have problems keeping the ice at the right temperature, because you'd get people madly brushing the stage before it started because it was just done by covering the stage with an ice platform.

BS: Ah yes?

MC: And they had the singers in the boxes sort of hidden away; the skaters must have mimed presumably, that sticks in my mind. One thing I do remember particularly - because I'd actually started Grammar school by this time and had found a couple of

mates who also were keen on theatre - was in 1960, which was going to see the musical called Salad Days.

BS: That sounds brilliant.

MC: Which came on tour... it had been the longest running musical, I think certainly in Britain, at that stage, and it was done originally at Bristol Old Vic as a fill-in show because it had, I think a cast of eleven and two pianos and percussion. So there was no band, that's all it was and it filled Coventry - I will often refer to it as The Hippodrome because that was sort of the old name - it filled that theatre for a week, so that's eight shows a week, two thousand a time and then came back later in the year because it was so successful.

BS: So it was a huge production?

MC: It was a very simple - no it was very, very simple! You know, the music was simple, the staging was very simple but I suppose it was on at the right time. I remember that vividly and also a year later West Side Story coming on tour. That was really a landmark musical; everyone knew it was really because it was so different. I don't know where we were, I think it might have been on holiday, I remember my mother trying to tell someone who we had met how good it was and this woman saying, 'What's it about?' and my mother said something like, 'Oh, it's about the street gangs in New York.' and this woman immediately saying, 'Oh, I don't want to see that!'. You know, because musicals in those days were pretty-pretty: nice voices, nice singing and certainly not the sort of dancing that you were getting in West Side Story.

BS: It's quite a controversial musical, wasn't it?

MC: I think it still works now.

BS: Yes, it really does.

MC: There was also an annual musical production there from the local amateur operatic society, who were extremely strong and I remember vividly a quite superb King and I from the Coventry Amateur Operatic Society.

BS: That's interesting.

MC: The woman who was the King's wife was extremely good and I remember it being very, very moving and that very much, sticks in my mind. So really when I carried on at school, sort of into my early teens years, I got more interested in perhaps what you would call - though I don't like the word - the more cultured side of theatre. Which I

imagine I must have picked upon purely from the programmes and what was labelled 'forthcoming attractions'.

BS: Oh right.

MC: Because whilst my parents were very keen [theatre goers], they didn't go to opera or ballet or concerts. So again with a couple of school friends we went to see the D'Oyly Carte when they came. They would then come every year, so gradually through the years I would manage to see all the Gilbert and Sullivan operas.

BS: Oh wow!

MC: Except for the couple that aren't done very often, like Princess Ida but I think I managed to see all the others and also Sadlers Wells Opera would come every year. So in the first few years I saw things like Die Fledermaus, The Barber of Seville, The Bartered Bride, Tosca... I suppose you would call the easy – well, to me now, the easier operas but... [laughs]

BS: 'Most well known', I think I would say, but...

MC: Yes, well yes OK.

BS: ...I haven't seen much opera so I'm not sure.

MC: Right, yes people can be scared of it. My father never ever saw opera, I think I did actually, yes I did get him to go to Die Fledermaus later on. My mother, when my father died, would basically go to anything if I took her, but not under her own steam.

But also we were very lucky because in the years '61, '62 and '64 the Covent Garden Opera came in each of those years and I'm pretty sure they only went out to Coventry or Manchester and I think it was because of the size of the stages and the facilities. I mean Coventry net didn't have a proper orchestra pit so the band would be well out into the stalls, which of course still happens sometimes in the provinces now though less than it did. So in 1961 I saw Aida, in '62 I saw La Traviata and then in '64 they came for two weeks and I saw La Boheme, Marriage of Figaro, Madame Butterfly and Aida again. But we were also lucky in Coventry at this time because '62 was the year that the new Cathedral was consecrated; when I look back now and see what happened – I mean, they had a three week Arts Festival to coincide with that opening. I expect a lot of fuss was made of it at the time perhaps I wasn't aware of it then but looking back now I think it would be impossible to stage that level of Festival in, certainly a provincial city like Coventry. I mean, we had a week of Covent Garden Opera, a week of Sadlers Wells Opera and a week of the Royal Ballet from the Opera House – not the touring Company. Plus loads of concerts and recitals and new commissions and plays as well. The only thing, looking back now, I kick myself for not going to, was that I missed the first performance of Britten's War Requiem in the Cathedral and also the first performance of King Priam, which is an opera by Michael Tippett which the Royal Opera

gave. I mean, I think there were horrendous problems getting these things on, but Coventry actually did that and I always think it's a pity that Coventry has never, sort of blown its own trumpet latterly, in that respect; that they premiered two of the most important pieces of twentieth century music – but there we are.

BS: Yes.

MC: So then [my interest] built up because these opera and ballet visits became annual. So when they came I would go. Once I started work, I'd go to nearly every show in the week.

BS: Did you?

MC: Both ballet and opera. We were very lucky with Sam Newsome being there because he must have been quite interested culturally because in '64 they put on a six week festival, that's only two years later. They would call it a Festival but basically it was, I think, two weeks of the D'Oyly Carte, a week of the Bristol Old Vic, a week of Sadlers Wells Opera, a week of the Royal Ballet and a week of concerts by one of the London Orchestras, I think it was the London Phil'. Well I don't think you would ever get a London Orchestra to stay in a place for a week now! [laughs] I noticed, I just read yesterday when I was checking on things that they gave two concerts on the Saturday so you got matinee and evening by the same conductor. So, I mean really it was an absolute feast, and I don't know whether you know but the Coventry Theatre is no longer...

BS: Yes I heard that.

MC: I mean it was pulled down a few years ago and you could go on at length about that and it's a great shame but there we go. So, yes parents started me off going but I just kept on going, I think it was seeing things in the programmes which I always bought and still have, up in my loft. [laughs]

BS: That's great.

MC: One thing I can remember as well, where we lived on the main road then was at the end of the street, there used to be a huge billboard every week which the Coventry Hippodrome would have its posters on and I remember it used to be quite exciting to go and see that. Because nowadays you know months in advance, sometimes over a year in advance what's going to be on and of course then you didn't. I mean, perhaps the theatres might have had some idea but nothing was announced. You didn't book months and months in advance.

BS: What were the posters like?

MC: They were huge, great billboards.

BS: Outside of the theatre?

MC: [These were] actually on the wall of some houses.

BS: Oh I see, far outside of the theatre.

MC: We're five miles away from the theatre. I can't remember one of those locally anywhere else, perhaps there were but I certainly can't remember them. The houses are still there but I can't think what's at the side of them now [laughs]. Anyway Coventry of course, in the fifties and sixties was the Boom city. What I thought coming along on the train today, was obviously the Coventry Theatre must have missed the Cathedral bomb, or bombs because it wasn't that far away and it was actually opened pre-war. There had always been a theatre there, but that building, I'm pretty sure was opened pre-war. It must have been because they didn't build it in the war and they didn't build it afterwards, so that must have missed the bomb, which was lucky. But then, in fact Coventry built itself a new theatre, which opened in 1957 called the Belgrade and it was called the Belgrade because a huge donation of wood was given from Yugoslavia.

BS: That's interesting.

MC: I'm not sure [where the link was] but that's why they called it the Belgrade.

BS: Oh right.

MC: - which has just opened itself a new studio and has had quite a lot of money spent on it but having said that it is fifty years old. So that opened in '57, basically with some touring but mainly, of course weekly and fortnightly rep. And again I started going because of these two friends I had at school, so the three of us could get there quite easily and they had a thing called The Young Stagers Club. Which I don't think you paid a membership fee for, I can't remember, but one thing it did enable you to do was get half price tickets for the back two rows of the circle if you booked on the day. So, I reckon that when we started going most of the plays would have cost us four and half old pence, no four and half new pence sorry. So it was about nine or ten pence.

BS: Oh right.

MC: I think the seats must have been, yes that's right, one and sixpence so they would have been nine pence half price which is about four old pence, which is incredible!

BS: Yes.

MC: I actually saw my first Shakespeares there. I remember getting my mother to take myself and a friend to see Julius Caesar, which isn't the easiest Shakespeare play. I mean, my mother had never seen Shakespeare before and wasn't particularly interested but would always go. You know, I was an only child so I suppose you think – education and all that sort of thing. Then they used to do a Shakespeare every year, which considering Coventry is less than twenty miles from Stratford, I suppose was quite unusual but then of course it wasn't quite as easy to travel as it is now.

BS: Yes I suppose.

MC: I mean certainly that doesn't happen too often now. But of course I saw plays by Noel Coward and quite a lot of Bernard Shaw, which seems a bit out of favour at the moment which, I think is a shame because I've always enjoyed the Shaw plays.

BS: Sorry, that was the Royal Shakespeare Company touring?

MC: No, no the Shakespeares were actually put on by what was called the Belgrade Theatre Company...

BS: I see, separate.

MC: Which would be a basic company with, I suppose, they didn't call them guests but I suppose they brought different people in at different times. But there was certainly a core of actors who stayed for... I can't remember, I mean they may have stayed for half the year or less than that or whatever but basically you had a core of people in the plays for the whole of the time. Varying from, you know, Agatha Christies to things like She Stoops to Conquer, a Goldsmith play, an adaptation of Oliver Twist, Noel Coward's Present Laughter, Ben Travers Farce Thark and then the week after Bernard Shaw Candida.

BS: So there was a variety.

MC: You were getting this tremendous variety, but of course then there was [far less] television acting, so actors really were in the theatre rather than TV; so we understand anyway.

BS: Sorry, can I ask what do you remember from the actors, what was your opinion of them at the time?

MC: Yes of course. As to how good they were?

BS: Yes.

MC: Well don't forget at this time I was only... how old would I have been? Twelve, thirteen, fourteen; which is pretty young, so I think it was more the actual plays themselves that I remember. Because it was also quite an important time for new plays being written, things like Peter Schaffer's Five Finger Exercise, because you weren't just getting "nice" plays any more, if you know what I mean, you weren't just getting drawing room comedies you know where the set was a lovely, a nice house – you were getting "real" plays.

BS: So they were quite gritty?

MC: They were getting far grittier the whole of the time and if you're in your early teens that was very, very exciting.

BS: Yes it must be.

MC: And because that whole period was like that, because pop music was getting far more interesting, rather than just being a tune – you know, it was the start of loads of things. I mean, there were some very, very good people in the Belgrade Company. There was an occasional thing that perhaps we didn't like but generally all of this time I was pretty much on a high from what I was seeing and I was very eager, probably to see anything, or as much as I could and actually that hasn't left me, I'm pleased to say! [laughs]

BS: That's interesting. So you didn't like to pass too much judgement on the actors?

MC: I don't think it was not wanting to. It's perhaps that I was more impressed by, or the lasting impression was the overall thing and the excitement of seeing all this new stuff. I'm sure occasionally - because obviously I haven't kept records of reactions - but I'm sure there were times when you said, 'What's he doing on stage?' or 'she's hopeless' and that sort of thing but it's actually the good things you tend to remember.

BS: Were there any stand-out actors or actresses?

MC: Well of course Ian McKellen started at the Belgrade...

BS: I didn't know that.

MC: As a very young chap, and also people like Alan Howard were there and I think Charles Kay at one point. An actress I remember vividly seeing a lot of was Bridget Turner.

BS: Bridget Turner?

MC: Recently I haven't seen the name quite so much but one thing she did which was quite superb was a translation of Moliere's, I think it's *Le Malade Imaginaire* which they translated as *The Imaginary Invalid* - I think she was the "skivvy" maid and I remember that being a tremendous performance. Also Leonard Rossiter was there and one of the things that came on during the Festival for the Cathedral was a play called *Semi-Detached*, which was set in Solihull which is half way between Coventry and Birmingham, so was pretty local for lots of people and Leonard Rossiter starred in that, and it actually went to Broadway with Laurence Olivier in it.

BS: The same play?

MC: It was a family, sort of... well, I suppose *saga* is too big a word, but it concerned a quite ordinary family living in a semi-detached house in Solihull. I suppose you would say it was about keeping up with the Jones' as much as anything else. When Solihull - perhaps then, I'm not sure about this I may be totally wrong - perhaps had that kind of image that it was the smarter bit of Birmingham, I mean perhaps it still does in some extent but not so much as it did. And of course there was Stratford as well, which I really started going there on school trips. I started my Grammar School in '57 and the first thing I went to - which was a landmark production actually, although I didn't realise at the time... I mean, I'd been to Stratford the place before, seen the theatre from outside but had never been in. It was the Peter Hall, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which had Charles Laughton and Ian Holm as Puck, Robert Hardy as Oberon but as three of the lovers; Vanessa Redgrave, Albert Finney and Prunella Scales.

BS: Wow!

MC: Now, those names didn't mean an awful lot then, because I don't think even Vanessa Redgrave had done very much at all. But it was a beautifully designed production as well and it was quite pretty and quite traditional and I can still remember that set. It was done with an Elizabethan staircase and entrance and the transformation to the wood was quite cleverly done though I can't remember the detail. Charles Laughton I can't really particularly remember. But then a year later I went to see *The Winter's Tale* at Stratford and I remember being surprised by the ending, of course and that had Peggy Ashcroft and Eric Porter. Something sticks in my mind there. The reason I got to that was I saw an advert in the local newspaper saying there was a coach trip going from Coventry. I booked myself onto it and went on my own; I would have been thirteen. Many, many years later my mother told my wife to be that she was worried sick about me going on my own but of course she couldn't stop me! [laughs] So I was not aware of that at all, and really from that age - from thirteen - I was taking every opportunity and going off on my own. Three years later I remember I managed to get myself to the *Henry VI* in a trilogy called *The Wars of the Roses* at Stratford performance all in one day...

BS: Yes I've heard about this.

MC: The three Henry VI plays were abridged into two and I managed to see the Henry VI at ten thirty in the morning and the Edward IV at three o'clock in the afternoon and I couldn't stay on for the night because I wouldn't have been able to get home, otherwise I would have done. That had a tremendous cast and I can now quite seriously remember Peggy Ashcroft as 'Queen Margaret' because at the start of the first play she was eighteen, nineteen, twenty and at the end of the last play which I saw at the end of the season she was an old hag of goodness knows how old and I can vividly remember that performance.

BS: Yes, what was it like?

MC: Well one thing that sticks in the mind was that she played it with a lisp; she was a French queen who was brought over to marry the young 'Henry' and she was a very young girl to start with but she didn't pronounce her R's all the way through and I'm sure wouldn't have missed one, an actress of that stature. But actually she was very... it was a green dress and I can see her there on stage and she was very, very young to start with but a very powerful figure all the way through. She knew where she was going and of course she ends up as an old hag fighting battles and doing goodness knows what, but that power still carried on. I know there's a video of it at the Shakespeare Birthplace Archive which I keep saying I must go and watch. When I recently saw the Henry VI at Stratford and the girl first came on as 'Queen Margaret' I thought, 'Ah goodness that's wrong!' because of course it just looked totally different. I still, all these years afterwards had her very much in my mind from that performance. I saw Geraldine McEwan and Christopher Plummer in *Much Ado About Nothing*, can't remember an awful lot about that. A very young Judi Dench in *Measure for Measure* which I can remember, with Marius Goring and Donald Sinden of course was doing quite a lot in those things then.

MC: I left school in '64, so the Coventry Theatre and The Belgrade and Stratford were just ongoing, all those years. But of course once I started work I had obviously got a bit more money so I could manage to get myself by train to Birmingham [laughs] or down to London occasionally, so it sort of stretched out even further.

BS: I see.

MC: The year I left school, with one of the friends I had since we first started the Grammar school, I went down to Sussex and we managed to get ourselves to Chichester where the Festival had started; this was the start of the National Theatre basically. We were amazingly lucky in that we managed to see *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, which was highly praised then, less so when it was done again recently. But that had Robert Stevens and a very spectacular effect when he first appeared as the 'Indian chief' with a huge, great sun in the middle of the stage, which opened out like a huge flower and he was standing there behind it and of course he was physically quite a strong actor and that was a very powerful performance. It was about the conquest of Peru and the Incas. Then there was not a particularly good play called *The Dutch Courtesan* which, I think, was a Restoration Comedy [starring] Billie Whitelaw who was a well known actress then.

The main thing was seeing Laurence Olivier in Othello with Maggie Smith as Desdemona, and that was the first and only time ever, I've slept outside a theatre in the open air to queue to get the tickets! [laughs]

BS: Wow! Was there a large queue?

MC: That was sort of the big theatrical event. Huge, yes I mean we could only do it because we were on holiday and staying in a caravan not so far away, but the queue itself - that was a very entertaining experience. The Olivier performance was very powerful, he was very black and very theatrical and it was done in a way that probably Othello would never be played now, and of course I'd never seen Laurence Olivier before so it was very, very exciting.

BS: Yes, did you know the play Othello before seeing it?

MC: No I'd never seen Othello before, I'm sure I hadn't. I'm not sure I realised quite how important Maggie Smith was as well then. The National Theatre did come on tour to Coventry and Birmingham a few years later... It would be probably '66, '67 or something like that and I saw Olivier again in Ibsen's The Master Builder which I'd never seen before and never seen since. Again a very powerful, theatrical performance with a very theatrical ending to the production which is difficult to elaborate on without going into the whole synopsis of the play itself. [They did] Noel Coward's Hay Fever for the first half of the week and then the Ibsen Master Builder, which completely sold out the two thousand seater theatre at every performance because it was Laurence Olivier. The applause was absolutely thunderous, which was really amazing because OK, they always had plays there but I didn't think of it as a theatre where you went to plays, because really it was too big, two thousand seats is far too big.

BS: Really?

MC: It was no problem for this company. I sensed the audience hanging on to every word because here was this very, very famous actor in the flesh! Also the Hay Fever was very, very strong because that had Maggie Smith, Robert Stevens, Anthony Nicholls and I'm trying hard to remember who the Judith Bliss was, and I have a feeling it might have been Celia Johnson. Also the National Theatre had brought the Chekhov Uncle Vanya to Birmingham which had Olivier, Redgrave, Joan Plowright, Rosemary Harris and I think Faye Compton but I haven't checked on that, but I'm pretty sure they were all there and that again was a packed house, you know [you could sense] everybody hanging on to every word. The National Theatre was a new name then, and because this was the first time there had been a National Theatre there had been an awful lot of talk about it, how long it had taken to come into being and I suppose people were very excited at seeing it out of London.

BS: Did it... other people's reactions, you say that it was packed, was everyone just in complete awe?

MC: The Uncle Vanya, I think was regarded as quite a very highly praised production, I mean in a way it had to be with that cast. Though now I tend to say 'too many stars spoil the broth'; but of course they all had a totally theatrical background. I mean, they weren't some television stars and a couple from the theatre. Not that I'm saying anything against television stars [laughs] but it was basically all theatre people; well they were the top range of actors, basically in a play I had never seen before. I don't get on so well with Chekhov now but to see that then was exciting I suppose because [they were all stars of the British Theatre].

BS: Yes because I would have thought Chekhov wasn't very popular amongst a large crowd.

MC: Well I suppose it was a lesser Chekhov play as well wasn't it, so it would be the names that drew them. It would certainly be the names I'm sure. People will still go to see stars won't they? I remember seeing at Coventry Theatre a play called, it must have been a thriller I think, Sign Post to Murder, which had Margaret Lockwood who was a very [famous] film actress. She had done a lot of stage work as well, which of course people would crowd in for the name as they still will now. Understandably so, and I think that is quite right that they should.

So... I've left school and I've started, no I haven't started work because we must have decided my mate and I that our summer holiday after leaving school would be going to the Edinburgh Festival. So in 1964 we got ourselves on the train and went to the Edinburgh Festival and saw four concerts and three plays. Three plays by the Bristol Old Vic and four concerts with very distinguished musicians such as Rostropovich the cellist, Marilyn Horne the singer, that was very exciting. As well, the nice thing about Edinburgh was you could really spend your whole day - if you had the money - going to some concert, or play, or film or whatever. I think we did go to a couple of films as well but I haven't noted those down, and that was quite exciting because you could go to a film at eleven o'clock at night which was unheard of then. [laughs]

BS: Yes, brilliant.

MC: I actually followed that up. I went in '67 and '68 to the Edinburgh Festival.

BS: So that was from '64 until '68?

MC: 1964, I went yes and saw in '67 the New York City Ballet (who I had seen before but I'll come back to that if you want me to) Martha Argerich, Colin Davis, Joan Sutherland, Pierre Boulez and then in '68 I saw Jacqueline du Pre, Daniel Barenboim and an unforgettable concert where Benjamin Britten conducted and Dietrich Fischer Dieskau sang. But on the theatrical side I've noted down I also saw Tom Courtenay, who had made a big film success in things like Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner and Billy Liar, as Hamlet. Don't ask me what he was like, I can't remember, I really cannot remember. [laughs]

BS: Can you remember the production?

MC: Yes it was in the round, it was at the Assembly Rooms and of course that was quite unusual then because Chichester had a thrust stage and that was one of the first of those - Coventry Theatre was standard proscenium, The Belgrade was standard proscenium. I think Stratford had begun to have a thrust stage in the early sixties. So we got more used to the actors being brought near to us but certainly until Chichester I had never sat perhaps at the side, as you quite commonly do now; and at the Assembly Rooms, I don't think it was entirely in the round but it was probably seven eighths [laughs]. In fact I remember seeing a school friend there who I hadn't seen for ages because you were sitting opposite – and also being late back in the interval and almost bumping into [the] Claudius, who was coming through [backstage] and getting ready! [laughs]

BS: What did it feel like sitting in the round, in the Assembly Rooms? Did you prefer it?

MC: I can't remember any adverse reaction either way. Certainly I remember being excited when Stratford had brought its stage more out into the auditorium. It's difficult to remember because it's so much the norm now, in fact it tends to be that rather than the other way round, so I suppose I'm so used to it I don't think about it. I certainly wasn't upset by it but then I wouldn't be at that age because I'm still only seventeen, eighteen and you know and you're just sort of...

BS: Open to new things?

MC: Open to everything. I mean, I think the excitement was still on a high generally probably I was certainly less critical than I would be now because most of the things I was seeing were for the first time. You can't really judge anything on a first viewing and I would still stick to that, though there are some things now that I know I don't want to see again. [laughs]

BS: Anything in particular?

MC: Well they would be after the period that you want to...

Sometimes when my wife and I go, I reckon we go about once every ten days to something because this involves concerts and goodness knows what and I think on average it's probably about once every ten days. Sometimes we will go and not enjoy something and we'll come away and she will say, 'Do you think it's because we are going too much?' and I'll say, 'Well, it could be but I don't think so.' And then you will go to something the following week which is brilliant and you know you are all right, you know that everything is OK.

When I said I had started work, it obviously gave me a bit more money but of course you were working all the time so you didn't have all these long school holidays so you would make more of a holiday, when you do get your holiday you make more of it. I was more, sort of, on my own then I suppose because I didn't go to university and didn't particularly want to go to university and I suspect it was partially because I thought - though I don't know why I thought this - that I wouldn't be able to carry on my theatre

going really. I mean, that wasn't just because of that, it was partially because I thought actually I don't think I'm good enough at anything to be able to study it at university and the only thing I would have studied was English and I didn't think my grades would have been good enough and English then was reckoned to be pretty tough at Uni' anyway, so I didn't. So I started work and that enabled me to carry on my theatre going. I can't remember how many days' holiday you were given, but as part of my holiday during the year I would go to London, say from Tuesday until Saturday and do nothing but go to the theatre. This was '65 through to '68 and I think this... [referring to hand written notes] if I just sort of pick one year out because in fact if I look at the week in 1966 which was in the middle of October and it shows the variety of stuff that was on offer. I would always go in the cheapest seats so remember one of these things would have cost me, [for example] something like less than a pound to sit in the slips at the National (it was still at the Old Vic then). So I would do Tuesday, matinee and evening Wednesday and Thursday, Friday, matinee on Saturday. I saw Trelawney of the Wells at the National, Wednesday afternoon The Rivals at the Haymarket which had Margaret Rutherford and Ralph Richardson. The Killing of Sister George at the St Martin's with Beryl Reid, a musical called Robert and Elizabeth which was about Elizabeth Browning, at the Lyric. In the evening of that day The Prime of Miss Jean Brody which had Vanessa Redgrave and I remember I had to stand for that – the only tickets I could get were standing – and again I can see her on stage as 'Jean Brody' because she was very tall and a commanding figure. Of course that play was very unusual, in that you've got this very strong Scottish lady-teacher who taught in the way she wanted to teach to get over to "her girls". Then a musical the night after called Jorrock, that has never been done since, and then another visit to the National on the Saturday afternoon to see the Peter Shaffer play Black Comedy with Derek Jacobi; so that was my week's holiday. Now, if you did that these days, even in balcony seats you can pay twenty five quid in a balcony these days can't you? It would be impossible really. So I'm glad I did that and made the most of it then, and also it was wonderful to have such a variety of things to be able to see.

BS: How did the London theatres compare to Coventry and Stratford?

MC: Well actually, of course Coventry was a very comfortable, huge theatre. There were no London ones as big as that apart from the Opera House and the Coliseum and the Coliseum wasn't going then - I mean, it was still showing films I think. So the London theatres were older, less comfortable, more cramped but that didn't matter at all because of what you were seeing. Because you would also be seeing... how can I say? Even if they were revivals, newer things and not everything came on tour and to see something like a production of Sheridan's The Rivals with Margaret Rutherford, who was really known more for her film acting and Ralph Richardson who I hadn't seen before, and I think that was the only time I saw him and I'm pretty sure that also had Daniel Massey. But it didn't matter because again I keep coming back to this, I just wanted to see as much as possible. There were so many things that might attract you it might just be the play, like Trelawny of the Wells which was a very old fashioned play about a theatrical family which had very good reviews so I wanted to see that. The Rivals because of the stars who were in it, The Killing of Sister George which was again more of a, how can you say? Not an X-rated play at all, but for then was quite courageous I suppose, with an actress like Beryl Reid who I had seen doing comedy stunts in variety shows at the Coventry Hippodrome.

BS: It was a little bit risqué?

MC: Yeah, I remembered Beryl Reid as I say, almost a stand-up act because she had two characters; one was a 'Brummie' girl called Marlene with big earrings where she had a really strong 'Brummie' accent, and the other was a dirty, little St Trinian's School girl called Monica I think. So to see her in this play was quite unusual. Vanessa Redgrave in Miss Jean Brody, I mean that had been highly [praised] as well, so how could you miss these things? [laughs].

BS: Yes. [laughs]

MC: Standing probably cost me twenty pence - I don't know, I can't remember - but not very much. They were all too good to be missed and I did that quite a few times and saw some tremendous things.

MC: Olivier – I think I noted down how many times I saw Olivier. I saw Laurence Olivier in the Master Builder by Ibsen which I told you about, Othello, I also saw him in Love for Love which was a Restoration Comedy – when the National came on tour to Stratford – which I remember not liking the play rather than anything else. Uncle Vanya which I've mentioned, Danton's Death which I can't remember an awful lot about at all but later on - and it might be outside your criteria of years - as Shylock in The Merchant of Venice which was a Jonathan Miller production updated to the Victorian era and he was very Jewish. So he was very much totally inside what you thought of the basic character of the part and again very theatrical. It would be very interesting to revisit some of these to see how they would seem now...

BS: Yes it really would.

MC: Because styles have altered so much, and in some ways I think things are sometimes less theatrical than they should be these days.

BS: So there was a definite acting style back then?

MC: Far more so I'm sure, yes.

BS: Is there a particular genre... because it sounds as though you just wanted to see whatever you could see but you didn't have a particular style of theatre that you enjoyed?

MC: I haven't mentioned ballet much yet, I don't know whether you want me to?

BS: Yes you can.

MC: Because that [interest] is very strong still and ongoing, and it's quite interesting in a way, because no one is quite sure how this came about. I mean, I vividly remember - as a very young child - sitting on my mother's knee watching a television programme which I reckon was Coppelia, and from things I've looked up it was on in 1951, so I'd have only been four. There was no interest whatsoever in the family in anything like that, so it doesn't come from anywhere there. When at school, we started our routine Belgrade Theatre going, so that we considered going to everything that was coming up. They used to have Ballet Rambert once a year, so we went and I don't think it ever occurred to us really that we didn't want to see it or we might not like it. I mean, I think it's stronger than that but certainly I knew I wanted to see it and did like [ballet] very much from the start. I was also lucky in that, the town I went to school, which was in Nuneaton in Warwickshire had a very good public library which had a very good theatre and ballet section. I found out later it was because there were people who worked there who were very interested, so they used to order all the new books. [laughs] And so I could open things like Ballet Annual and start reading about all these [productions] that were happening and the pictures looked very interesting and quite often they used more way out music like Stravinsky. But from seeing it locally, i.e. the Ballet Rambert visits and then when the Cathedral opened we had the main company from the Opera House and I saw the original cast of the Ashton Fille Mal Gardee and that was absolutely wonderful! [laughs] The next night I saw Beryl Grey in Swan Lake, which looking back wasn't quite as wonderful, but the names that I saw in that performance, I'm glad I saw then. When I say it wasn't quite as wonderful, it was because I suppose I've seen Swan Lake so many times since and I treasure Fille Mal Gardee as one of the greatest works of art theatre but that's the only reason why I word it like that. So then, whatever came, I would want to see but also, I think I must have noticed this magazine called Dance & Dancers which I bought and it was a monthly magazine, and I think I bought that during the Coventry Cathedral Festival, and of course that told you all sorts of things about [dance] all over the country, and all over the world. I carried on buying it until it folded in the nineties and have since bought loads and loads of back copies and have nearly a complete set. That really was my lifeline for ballet and dance, because now you know so much in advance and it's so easy to get information from the internet, from the media and whatever, you know month and months ahead what's happening. But of course then you didn't so I needed to have this magazine so I knew what was coming up. I also used to write to the provincial theatres asking them to send me leaflets, I remember. Again was lucky from Coventry because this again was down to Sam Newsome, that in 1961 he put on a week of ballet at Coventry Hippodrome which was a purely Coventry thing, it went nowhere else, where he got dancers from all over Europe to come and do a specially arranged programme in Coventry. And we booked - I can't remember who I went with, it must have been one of the chaps from school - early in the week and it was so good that I remember I went again to the Saturday matinee. We didn't have a telephone at home and if I had needed to book a seat or anything like that, I used to go to the local sweet shop and the lady there would phone the theatre for me! [laughs]

I'm sort of thinking where did I get all the money from for this but you could probably sit on the back row of the upper circle at Coventry Hippodrome for two and six which would be twelve and a half pence. OK, it was a lot more money then but I wasn't asking my parents for money all the time so I must have saved my pocket money.

BS: Yes.

MC: So, I saw the original cast of Fille Mal Gardee, I saw Fonteyn and Nureyev many times. My first visit to Covent Garden was in 1964 and this [came] from reading Dance & Dancers and that was when I saw New York City Ballet, the full company, at the Opera House, and although I've never managed to see them all that much, I've loved New York City Ballet ever since and could go on at length – but that's a different subject. Then I found I could get to the Opera House to Saturday matinees by coach from Coventry, so that's what I started doing. I saw the Macmillan Romeo and Juliet in its first year with Christopher Gable as Romeo. I remember saying afterwards that I couldn't imagine anyone else doing Romeo because Gable was very theatrical – he became an actor afterwards. He left the ballet quite early to do acting and it was far more of a theatre performance - well no, that is probably unfair, but the theatrical side of that performance – the acting was very strong. And I also saw the Ashton Enigma Variations at its third performance again by going on a day coach trip from Coventry.

The Gable [memory] was nice because I've been involved with the ballet in Birmingham since, for quite some time under the Friends Organisation and do pre-performance talks for them. Years ago Gable came up and I actually did a talk with him, which was amazing to be able to do. He was a very effervescent talker and theatrical then, and I've very happy memory of that occasion because I had seen that Romeo so early on.

BS: Sorry, how long was that after you had seen him and gave a talk?

MC: Well, much later - I mean, he had well retired from dancing and acting. I think he had gone... I think he was running Northern Ballet Theatre then, so that would have been in the eighties, might even have been early nineties, I can't quite remember, but a long time afterwards.

BS: Were these large scale productions, the ballets?

MC: Yes. The Romeo and Juliet is a vast production and there is some difference now you see because we do get bigger things out of London now, possibly. I think in the old days they might have been adapted for touring or scaled down.

BS: Oh, I see.

MC: Now they might have to be, to some extent but far less so. I mean, certainly a lot of the Birmingham Royal Ballet productions now are as big as anything you will see anywhere else because generally the public are so used to seeing things on television and film that they won't accept a smaller scale.

BS: Yes, their expectations.

MC: I mean, there are still times when you go to see something where the set is "one chair", which will be just as effective as something with huge, great sets and a huge cast. So in a way it's not important, but there are times when you feel you need [lots of] people on stage. I don't think many theatres now can afford to employ extras because it

is too costly, but also there are times when you would be happy to have less, I suppose.
[laughs]

BS: What were the sets like? Was there a common theme of what plays and productions looked like? I'm just thinking of...

MC: Well I suppose in a way all the theatres would be different, because the Coventry theatre was a big touring venue basically. So with pantomimes, musicals, variety shows and whatever, they would be generally nice scenery, nice costumes and nice is an unfortunate word because I'm sure they were, at their time extremely good but you think of them as pretty and spectacular. Huge dresses and whatever, because that was what people were wanting and expected, you know like when *My Fair Lady* was first done the Ascot scene made a huge effect because it was all black and white with these huge hats, and I think there is still a very big place for that, but these days it costs an absolute fortune.

BS: So there was lots of glamour?

MC: Yes that's right. With plays at the Belgrade, the plays were becoming more realistic because you were starting with the 'Kitchen Sink' era. So if I put myself at an older age when I was seeing those things, I'm not sure how I would have reacted. If I had done thirty years of theatre going and then had been faced with a 'Kitchen Sink', I suspect I would have had to have been pretty broad-minded to think, 'What's going on here?'. You know, like the John Osborne play, *Look Back in Anger*, and when the Belgrade did the three Arnold Wesker plays quite early on which unfortunately I didn't see. But of course they were plays about ordinary people living in terraced houses, so the sets would have been that sort of set, rather than a French windows, Noel Coward, big settee, posh people I suppose you might say, talking "properly". And of course that is where I suppose *West Side Story* was such a big shock because if you think of how *West Side Story* starts, how the music starts: I mean, it's not an overture, you are just straight into that fight. OK it is a choreographed fight, but it's still very powerful rather than something like *Oklahoma!* when you get your overture and your very nice song to start with.

BS: Yes.

MC: I mean don't get me wrong, I think *Oklahoma!* is superb! [laughs]

BS: You just mentioned the 'Angry Young Men', I know that was quite controversial at the time, did you see that?

MC: *Look Back in Anger*, no I didn't – not until much later.

BS: Oh sorry, *Look Back in Anger*.

MC: The people who were writing them like John Osborne, were referred to as the 'Angry Young Men' – we weren't seeing drawing room plays. I'm sure there were things produced that weren't drawing room plays before then but I wouldn't have seen enough of anything then to be able to comment on it, I suppose that's the best thing to say.

BS: Yes but you weren't effected so much because you were younger?

MC: I think so.

BS: You were quite liberal?

MC: Yes, I mean I think you can tell from what I've said anyway, and my tastes are very, very varied. I don't know why and it's fantastic, I'm just very pleased they are and that goes for music as well. I can listen to a very wide range of music and in art, I think it's always easy to dismiss something just because it's new or initially you don't like the look of it. That is why, in a way I think the interest in ballet is quite pertinent and interesting because generally Joe Public still, I would think, would think of ballet as "pretty girls in tutus" which of course is a very, very tiny part of it but it still has this [image] of pretty, pretty. I can still sit there and enjoy Nutcracker immensely. So there's something to be said for that as well. I suppose it was because I was a teenager, wasn't I and you would really be eager to be seeing all those things.

I had a friend who wasn't quite as interested in theatre but was far more musical than I was and we would listen to contemporary classical music by getting records from the library, probably because it seemed a bit, sort of way out and quite courageous to do.

BS: Can you name any pieces that you listened to then?

MC: Yes Janacek, does that mean anything?

BS: Yes.

MC: Janacek string quartets, Stravinsky - who I still listen to a lot of now and am still amazed by the number of people who find Stravinsky very difficult.

BS: Yes there are a lot actually.

MC: Lots and lots. [It has been said] 'Stravinsky was the greatest composer of the twentieth century – unfortunately nobody likes him'. [laughs] There is a strong element of truth in that. I am very grateful to ballet for developing my interest in music as well because I've listened to a lot of music which I would probably never have listened to if I hadn't have been interested in ballet.

BS: I see.

MC: For example, Vaughan Williams' Job and a lot of Stravinsky pieces.

BS: Yes, that is interesting. Did you ever see any Harold Pinter plays?

MC: Not until later and still not an awful lot.

BS: Were there any directors or producers of plays and theatre that you admired or saw?

MC: I don't think I took as much notice of the directors then quite honestly, where it's very, very important now. If I think back to the weekly, fortnightly reps at the Belgrade then OK, there was someone in overall charge but they must have had different directors in. I can't say much on that because I took little notice I suppose. Certainly the RSC, "Stratford" as it was then, I can't remember when it started calling itself RSC, had different directors but no, if I was seeing a Shakespeare for the first time I was more interested in what the play was about. What it looked like, did I follow it and who was in it, so no I don't think directors were important. Well, they were... [laughs].

BS: But not to yourself?

MC: That's interesting isn't it because one would note down conductors of an orchestra but then of course you don't have actors in an orchestra, do you?

BS: No you don't.

MC: So, of course they are visible, which directors aren't, but I'm certainly more careful on directors now and then, of course in something like opera in those days generally the productions were fairly traditional. They might have been visually, getting slightly different, like the black and white Traviata at the Opera House, but direction-wise I think they were still fairly traditional.

I think one thing generally I would say is that whilst I've always maintained a good cross-section of things, there has always been a variety all the way through and still is. Certainly on the more cultured side it's less easy to see such a variety of things in a short space of time. Whereby because of expense, things have to be given a run of a week. I mean for instance Stratford would have a touring winter season when the Shakespeare weren't there and it still was a proscenium theatre then with a pit, so would take Sadler's Wells Opera and the ballet etc. So one year we had both the opera and the ballet for four weeks, or three weeks each and you could see three programmes within a week perhaps four with the opera. Whilst opera is still a little bit better than that, because of costs now, certainly the repertory is more restricted which is a shame. I can't come down to London now and get the variety that I need [in a short space of time].

BS: Can I just ask you one more question? I know it might be difficult to answer but what is the one, kind of standout feature from your memory of theatre? It is a bit of a vague question.

MC: Yes, I don't think I could possibly name one particular thing. Certainly going to my first visit to Covent Garden which was to see New York City Ballet, the early visits to Stratford, but also I miss the Coventry Theatre dreadfully. I mean, I remember speaking to the local newspaper when it was in the throes of being threatened with closure and realistically you knew it couldn't possibly continue. But I think it's a great shame, really, for what people are missing.

BS: Yes.

MC: Yes, there are still big theatres around, but there is not the wealth of variety going into the live theatre now within such a short timescale as there was but I'm still getting tremendous enjoyment out of it. [laughs]

BS: There definitely aren't enough theatres about from the sound of how many there used to be.

MC: Yeah. So I can't pick you one thing but I've been theatre going now for nearly, getting on for fifty years and my enthusiasm has not waned.

BS: We have covered a lot. Well, thank you very much.

MC: A great pleasure, thanks.