

Keith Baxter – interview transcript

Interviewer: Rebecca Novell

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All Seasons; celebrity; censorship; directors; Mary Duff; John Gielgud; practical theatre; RADA; Shakespeare's plays; star actors; Tea and Sympathy; H.M. Tennent; theatre traditions; Kenneth Tynan; Orson Welles.

RN: I would like to start simply with: 'Why did you become an actor?' Was it something you always wanted to be? And if you could take us through how you started off and if you did training.

KB: Well I have no idea why, or where it came from. I grew up in Wales, my father worked on the docks. My mother was his wife. And I was born in Newport in Monmouthshire [now Gwent] and I had a toy theatre. I don't know where that came from. It started in a bird cage. I was taken to the theatre I suppose; pantomimes and things. But I knew that I wanted to be an actor; or rather, I was intrigued by all that. And then my father... they were decorating the house and two guys from the docks came up to decorate the living room. They were splashing the paint around a lot and I came in and did the lines of, "Friends, Romans and countrymen, lend me your ears". I don't know where I'd learned it and they looked at me and said, "Ooh you ought to be an actor". So... I was eight. And I told my family I was going to be an actor and I never changed. And they never... they never put any impediment in my way. I'm bound to say when I was sixteen and still going to be an actor, I think at first they thought one would grow out of it, like saying 'I want to be David Beckham' or 'I want to be - you know - an engine driver'. And quite clearly when I didn't change my mind, words like "precarious" began to wend through the vocabulary.

I had a wonderful teacher at school; it always comes down to a teacher. It always comes down to somebody believing in you. And this man, Teifion Phillips, who taught History, but he thought I was a good actor. He came and saw my parents and said 'Let the boy have his chance'. And there was no real resistance, but with that endorsement I did an audition for the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. I got in and did a year. Then I went to do my National Service for two years and when I came back I finished with a bronze medal and a contract with H.M. Tennent, which at the time was the chief producing engine from the West End. So I don't know where the idea came from to be an actor, but it came, somewhere and I never wanted to do anything else with my life.

RN: What was your experience like at the Academy of Dramatic Arts?

KB: It was fine at first. There were lots of things... there were lots of us there. It was a wonderful period. We didn't know that. But, I mean there was Peter O'Toole, Alan Bates and John Stride, Richard Bryers. We were all in the same class and most of us lived in the same flat in Primrose Mansions in Battersea.

RN: Did you say Alan Bates?

KB: Alan, yeah. I taught Alan his Welsh accent for *Look Back in Anger*. Yeah we all lived in this flat in Battersea and it's astonishing looking back. We used to go to a movement class called YAT. I didn't really like going; I didn't find that that was doing me any good. And I remember coming up the stairs at the mansion. It was five flights. In front of me was an actor called Leo Ciceri and he was- I think he was rather keen on him. He was talking to Sean Connery and they'd both been to YAT and they were having this deep conversation. And Alan Bates and I were coming up behind them and I said 'I don't think that's going to work!' [laughs] But we were all very young, we were all very young. It was fine, the Academy. In fact, in first it wasn't. It was hard at first. Before I went to Korea to do my National Service. But there was a remarkable teacher at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, called Mary Duff. She was an astonishing teacher. So astonishing was she that Dorothy Tutin, who was a great actress, until Mary Duff died, if Dorothy was asked to do any great role, whether it was *Madame Ranevskaya* or whether it was *Cleopatra*, or whatever, she always went and talked to Mary Duff, and so did another great actress, *Rosemary Harris*, who now lives in America. And Mary was there - she was extraordinary, and she told me in my last term at RADA, before I went to Korea, before I went to the army. We were doing a perfectly ordinary play and an actor called *Ronald Fraser* was playing my father and I was very miscast. I was only nineteen and I was playing the Earl of Clarendon. I didn't know how to play an Earl. Anyway, the leading part - the boy couldn't do it. And she said, 'Is there anybody else who would like to have a go at this?' and people were terrified of her. I was terrified of her! She told me I had the most ugly voice. She said, 'You sound as though your mother digs for coal with her fingernails'. And when you're told that you either keel over and give up or you take it on board and say 'Well I'm going to do something about my voice'. And we all did. *Albert Finney* had a very north country accent. I mean you can still hear *Albert's* timbre in his voice. You can still hear *Peter O'Toole's* but we were all doing the exercises. Peter had rather a sibilant 'S'. I mean, we were all doing these exercises. And I grew up - the theatre that I grew up in was dominated by actors, all of whom spoke magnificently. And I was talking about this to *Judi Dench* and *Maggie Smith* the other day. The three of us were out for lunch, saying we all wanted to talk... not like *John Gielgud*, but we all recognised how wonderful voices were. We didn't want to sound like *John Gielgud* or *Larry* or *Peggy Ashcroft* or *Edith Evans*, but we saw that extraordinary tool that the voice is for an actor. So when this woman, *Mary Duff* said, 'You sound as though your mother digs for coal with her fingernails', and I listened to it and I thought 'I've got an ugly voice. Who wants to listen to that?' And you know, you forget when you got to the theatre, *Hamlet* for example, he never stops talking. And it's all very well to say 'Well, I'm a Scouser, I'm a Geordie' or whatever. If you're stuck with that it's like being in a tin drum. But you listen to these actors because they have wonderful voices. Anyway, *Mary Duff*... I said I'd have a go at this other part. I think because I was emotionally - and nothing to lose. And it was an extraordinary role in a not very good play, called *The Paragon*. And everyone shut up when I'd finished and she said, 'You are a dark horse, aren't you?!' and she wrote to me every month I was in Korea. She was a huge influence on my work as an actor. When I came back two years later, everybody was back. *Peter O'Toole* had been in the Navy, *Alan* had been in the Air Force, *Roy Kinear* had been in the army - we were all back in this flat in Battersea, but we were all two years older and we'd all changed.

RN: So what year was that?

KB: 1953. I went in to the... and 1955 when I came out. And I graduated in 1956.

RN: 1956. So you talk about how many of the people may have taken the criticism quite badly...

KB: No. That's what you were there for.

RN: Yeah.

KB: I was once asked and I will never do it again, and I was paid a prodigious amount of money and I'm not going to name the Academy, but there is a kind of Academy. It's an American Academy and students pay a lot of money and they come over and I'm not going to name the place. I was asked 'would I give two weeks', so I was paid quite a lot of money and I thought 'this is rubbish'. I wanted to say to these youngsters, 'Give up, right now. Give up. What is the point?' You know, if you're going to work in the theatre it's a life that is controlled by rejection. Everybody faces that and it goes on all your life. I mean when Olivier had this extraordinary success with Vivian, doing the "Scottish Play" - you know what I mean by that, the "Scottish Play"? Well I have to be superstitious because the day I signed a contract to do it my mother had a stroke and died a week later. So I thought that's enough about the "Scottish Play".

RN: Yes!

KB: But Olivier had a great success and was wonderful and he got the money to do it; just! And then Playboy stepped in, and Playboy made a film directed by Roman Polanski. So Olivier, even Olivier- you know, you live rejection. And if you're no good and not talented it's much easier to say to somebody of sixteen, 'give up, don't break your heart'. Don't break your heart doing it. The theatre is just the most wonderful life in the world, but there are fallow periods. And if you're not talented, you break your heart. I think it's particularly true of girls. I mean, girls who are ambitious, they give up an awful lot, children whatever, pursuing a dream. And if you make a mistake, maybe there are some people - a late developer or something - maybe there are a few little fish that should be, but by-and-large I see young people now still going to work in academies, who are paying a lot of money, and they're incredibly untalented. And it's kinder to say so. Mary Duff saying to me, it was a wake-up call: 'You want to do something about it? Can you do something about it?', you know, so I did.

RN: Constructive criticism. So what were the difficulties of getting into theatre after you'd graduated?

KB: Into the theatre?

RN: Into plays, yes.

KB: Well, I won a contract with H.M. Tennent. That was a wonderful thing. There were four prizes at the... They used to have one show, now they have a whole series of shows. There used to be the Royal Academy matinée. My year was at Her Majesty's Theatre - where Phantom of the Opera is now - and all the agents were there, because they could go for one afternoon and see the whole... So I did a play, the Swedish sailor, in a play by Eugene O'Neil, The Long Voyage Home. And Albert and Peter Bowles were sort of some rather suspicious long shore men at the back of the stage who gave me a Mickey Finn. And Albert did a bit of The Taming of the Shrew and Peter O'Toole - no, Peter Bowles! - did... anyway. You all had bits to do. And then at the end there were the judges. I think my year there were Margaret Leighton, Edith Evans and Eric Portman, who were famous actors, and then you all went and hung around for about two hours and then you assembled back at RADA and were told what you'd won, if anything. And the four that you wanted; there was the gold medal, the silver medal and the bronze medal. Gillian Martell won the gold medal. Dicky Bryers - Richard Bryers - won the silver medal. I won the bronze; I think because I counted up to ten in Swedish in the play and foxed everyone! And then the next thing was the Emile Littler Award, which I think was five hundred pounds, which Albert won. And then there was a contract for H.M. Tennent, which I won and Albert also won a year at Birmingham Repertory and that's where he went off to. So that's how it started.

RN: So you won the Bronze and the contract?

KB: I won the Bronze Medal and I won this contract. But I didn't... I mean, my first job, it was awful. Well it's... you know, people think - it's because of television - instant fame, you know, instant celebrity. The drudgery of beginning your life in the theatre, it's actually terribly important. I mean, I was an ASM and I was understudying two actors, who if I had ever had to go on for either of them, it would have been a disaster. I couldn't have played either of them. One was an Etonian, and I had no i... none of those sort of graces. I'd just come out of the army and I'd been a sergeant in the army and I didn't know... I had no idea how to play somebody from Eton. And the other was a vulgarian, what do you call them? On a motorboat, who interrupted the Henley Regatta. I couldn't have gone on for either of them. It was awful. I dreaded it! And I used to sit in my room. And I was the Assistant Stage Manager and you're a dogs-body. But it's good. You don't realize it's good at the time, you think it's awful. But it's good for people to understand the nuts and bolts of the theatre. And now I direct a lot and I take the most enormous care with all the people who are the crew, who run the show, our stage managers. Our life, in that play, is in the hands of technicians. Sure, it's true, if all the lights go out you can do it in torch-light or whatever, you can do it. In the end, two actors on a plank with passion can do it. Normally you are dependent. I mean if you think of those musicals. If you remember when they were doing *Sunset Boulevard* recently, they had to cancel it because someone's cell phone was operating the machinery because the signals got crossed. Well we live in that kind of age. You know?

RN: Is it different in terms of today...

KB: Yes.

RN: Where you would have to be an ASM? Did you have to be an ASM?

KB: Well, yes it is different, I'm sure. But of course I'm so much older - I don't know what it's like to start as a young actor these days in the theatre. But I know that the aims... One of the problems, and I read in the newspaper the other day, and I think it said something like 64% of girls under the age of fourteen would rather be on *The X Factor* than study Medicine or Law. They all want to be a celebrity. I mean, they want to be abused by Simon Cowell. That doesn't seem to me an ambition worth having. But the theatre demands - or used to demand - that you knew a lot of crafts before you could control a performance on stage. It wasn't just about being right for that song, or right for that moment, or right for that character in *Coronation Street*. Although funnily enough, the other night, it was *Dame Joan*, Joan Plowright's eightieth birthday on Sunday, and there were a lot of people there. And Charles Sturridge was there; the original director of the wonderful *Brideshead Revisited*, the first one. And he'd come to see a play I was in some years ago. And we were talking about *Coronation Street* and I said, 'You know, I often watch it and there was one extraordinary scene, where Elsie Tanner (an actress called Pat Phoenix) was talking to Mike Baldwin about her life'. And I said, 'Whoever directed it, the camera didn't move, it just stayed on this wonderful piece of acting'. And Charles Sturridge said, he said, 'Actually, you know, I directed it'. And his son is a lovely actor, so you know. But, it's a different ball-game now and if you go, well I don't go now because they either want me or they don't want me. But kids go for these casting calls and you don't have to be able to play Hamlet or want to play Hamlet to be in *Emmerdale*. But all my generation always saw, whatever one did as an actor - one always saw a sort of classical... it was as if you saw your life stretching out like a long ribbon ahead of you. At the beginning there was maybe Lysander, or Demetrius, or Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*. Then a little bit later there might be an Orlando and a bit after that there might be a Prince Hal or a Romeo or a Mercutio, or whatever. A bit after that there might be your first Henry V. And then at the end, always at the end, looming

like some dreadful thing is King Lear. And you go along that ribbon and you'd veer off it to do a play on Broadway or to do a play in London or to do a film or something. But always there'd be this ribbon of classical theatre that one trod. And all my contemporaries, that's what they wanted to do. I don't think that that ribbon is there now, and I don't know that actors, young actors, have that idea of a whole life ahead of them.

RN: Yes, I see. If we could talk a little bit about some of your earliest plays that you were in. I have Tea and Sympathy...

KN: [Laughs]

RN: and Change of Tune noted here. And basically I would like to know what the average day was like working in these productions.

KB: Well, Tea and Sympathy was the first... It's so odd looking back now. It's an innocent little play Tea and Sympathy. But in it, the boy - it's all set in an American school, in New England - and in it the lead, the young man is suspected of being less than manly and the reason for that is he's been seen sunbathing in the nude with a young teacher. And the teacher is sacked. Nothing has happened, quite clearly, but there is the stigma for this young boy. I played - I was fearless about playing Americans. I never stopped playing Americans with my all-purpose American accent. I wouldn't do it now if you paid me millions! I'd never been to America. And I played a sort of American rugby, football, jock, bully. I mean nineteen-year-old, eighteen-year-old at school. And the fascinating thing is that the play couldn't be done because of the accusation of the boy being less than - the word homosexual wasn't mentioned at all - but the boy was less than manly. And at the same time, a great play of Arthur Miller's, View from the Bridge, couldn't be done because Eddie Carbone accuses Rodolfo of being effeminate and kisses him on the lips. It's a shock. And at the same time Tennessee's, one of Tennessee's wonderful plays, Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, couldn't be done because Big Daddy gets Brick, his son, to reveal he was in love with his friend Skipper. So these three plays, which all seem very innocent now, couldn't be done. They had to be done in club theatre. The Comedy Theatre was turned in to a club theatre and I think people paid five shillings more on their ticket to be a member. It's preposterous. Anyway, anyway, that was my first play in the West End. I'd done some repertory in Cardiff and Worthing. In Worthing I had a perfectly terrible - I did the play that I had understudied on the road and then I took over the Etonian boy when it was done in Worthing. And in the play also was Ian Holm, who is now Sir Ian Holm. We all did our rep. So anyway, that was Tea and Sympathy. Yeah, that was my first play in the West End.

RN: Do you remember what year that was in?

KB: Yeah, 1957. April, 1957.

RN: Did you find there were big problems with censorship in general?

KB: Well we didn't think about it. We were just the actors. There was, clearly. I mean it's most interesting that they've revived a play of Terrence Rattigan's now, Seperate Tables. And the second play, the man is accused of making a pass at a young girl in a cinema. And they've re-written it and said Rattigan always wanted it to be a man who was actually trawling along the promenade picking up young boys. I believe that that is not true. I believe that Rattigan, who is a pragmatist, would not have written a play that could not have been performed. They were very innocent plays. But the Lord Chamberlain's power was very strong.

RN: Did it concern actors as much as it concerned...

KB: No. The producers? No.

RN: What was the audience reaction to the early plays? Were the audiences large?

KB: Oh yes, it was packed, the theatre in those days. But now of course you look down the 'A', 'B', 'C's in the newspapers. It's all musicals; all people wanting to pack in to Les Miserables. It's terrible. It's terrible. The plays were full. Theatres were full with plays. With wonderful actors.

RN: Why do you think that was more so then than it is today?

KB: Because I lived, we all grew up, in the age when the theatre was dominated by actors. Now it's the age of the directors. Nobody knows who directed Aristophanes two thousand years ago. Nobody knows who directed one of Shakespeare's plays or Ben Jonson or Wilde.... well, we know there was usually the actor-manager. The function of the director has only come in, in the twentieth century. And there are brilliant directors like Peter Brooke, particularly so. But even Peter Brooke wanted to work with the very best actors he could, like Gielgud or Olivier or Evans. And the actors - we all grew up in a world where first of all we all knew about actors. I knew who Sir Squire Bancroft was. We all did. We knew who Wyndham's - Charles Wyndham - why that theatre was called Wyndham's. We wanted to know that. We knew about David Garrick. I'm now quite surprised when... I mean, that was part of our fascination. It was our link all the way back to those Shakespearean actors.

KB: I have - I was given when I eventually played Hamlet - I actually was given a medallion that had belonged to Sir Henry Irving. For Hamlet. It has a picture of the king on one side, it's big, it's that big [gestures]. And on the other side it has an elephant which is the ancient Danish Order of the Elephant. And it belonged to the great actor Macready who was before Irving. And Irving bought it and wore it before he played Hamlet. Later on, when I was having lunch at John Gielgud's house, before he died, there's a portrait of Philip Kemble who was Sarah Siddons's brother, in Hamlet. What's he wearing? My medallion. And they weren't mass-produced. So holding it in my hand when I played it was a direct link back to the middle - the early - nineteenth century. And when I told John Gielgud, he said, 'What are you going to do next?' I said, 'I'm going to direct Lady Windermere's Fan'. He said, 'Oh, my Great Aunt played her in 1892!' I mean, this wonderful thing - it's in the History Boys, where Richard Griffiths character says, 'Pass it on. Pass on your knowledge' - I learned, and it's now every actor that I know learned, you could not do a performance for a week on stage with Paul Scofield or John Gielgud, Ralph Richardson without - not consciously - they weren't showing off. But you watched, you observed. It was Judi Dench who said the other day; you didn't rush back to your dressing room, you wanted to watch them on stage and see that's how they do it. That's how they - that's how you - and so you pass these bits. Because John Gielgud had been the definitive Richard II, and perhaps Hamlet, actors always went to see him. Ralph Fiennes went to see him before he played Richard II, saying 'Come on, give us some tips'. Famously, he said to somebody - Alec Guinness I think - you know, when he was going to play King Lear, 'For God's sake, you know, find a light-weight Cordelia, because you've got to lug her around in your arms forever!'. Practical tips. So when I went down to see him about Hamlet, he said, 'Well you've got to' - he didn't talk to me about 'In the first scene you do this; in the second...'. He said, 'You've got to pace yourself, Keith. It's a very, very long part. So in rehearsal you'll explore every moment and it'll wreck you. And that's fine. And you'll put that scene away. You can't experience it every night if you're playing it eight times a week. So you have to find moments when you rest. A perfect example is, when you come on the audience is fascinated by you. And then the ghost appears. And you will then sink to the floor or something because the focus has to be on the ghost. While he's telling you what happened. And while you're doing that, lying on the floor, he said, 'Stop. First of all breathe. Think about where you're going to have dinner that night; who you're going to

go to bed with; what you're going to do after the show. And then you come back in.' And it was not being facile or stupid to say 'when you come back from England and you see the corpse of Ophelia and you go in to the shadows with Horatio and you've got to come out firing... Go in to the shadows and just breathe ordinarily. Have a chat to Horatio, "How's it going?" - Whatever... "How's your wife?" And then you come on again'. These are practical, practical tips about playing a huge part. It's gold. And it wasn't patronizing the role at all. It was telling an actor how you can pace yourself. And of course vocally these actors, they had such wonderful voices; the women as well. And the only way you can learn that is to learn it from other actors; to have it passed on to you. You can watch how they project. I mean, the idea of microphones is simply unbelievable. And going back to Gielgud again, who gave an extraordinary performance of Prospero at Stratford, directed by Peter Brooke, very simply. It was such a success it moved him to Drury Lane. There were no microphones in 1958 when he did it. And to see Gielgud, or hear him alone, on stage, saying farewell to his craft: 'I'll drown my...'. The audience had the hair standing up on the back of their necks? Who can do that now? Even in the National Theatre, you know they've had to introduce microphones. I mean, it's unbelievable. So these crafts that we absorbed and were taught are not taught now. And consequently, the standard of acting is often diminished. And also this tremendous lack of... we all knew who Henry Irving was; we knew who Philip Kemble was or Macready and all those names I mentioned. I bet a lot of young actors don't know who they are because they're not taught them. We were obsessed with the theatre, all my generation. We were obsessed with it! We lived it. And I'm talking about the theatre. I'm not talking about celebrity. I'm often asked, particularly in America, 'How did you start?', 'What did you do? I want to be an actor'. And I say, 'I don't know. Things have changed. Also I'm British, I don't know. But do you want to be an actor? Do you want that yellow ribbon? Or do you want actually, truthfully, the red carpet with some kind of golden egg cup at the end?' And if they're honest, that's what they want. They want that celebrity. But it's not; it's a life. When Maggie Smith's husband, Robert Stevens, was playing Falstaff, somebody came to interview him and at the end he collected his things in a shopping bag and went out and waited for the bus home. I used to see Paul Scofield come out of the stage door of what was then the Globe Theatre, now the Gielgud Theatre, to sign some autographs. And I was on the 38 bus and he was on the bus down to Victoria, and then on the train and his wife would meet him. People weren't chasing this mad thing of everybody wants to be on the red carpet with the egg cup.

RN: It sounds like when you were acting in theatres it was quite exhausting to do eight performances a week.

KB: Well it wasn't. It was kind of wonderful. I mean, people have such boring... I mean, think of people who work in shoe shops or in factories. Being on stage, if you want to do that, if you want to be an actor, of course it's wonderful, and you never quite know when you come in... because the audience is different every night. The first month is very easy or the first two, three months perhaps. Then it does tend to get a bit difficult then after four months then suddenly you've got it. And you don't... I'm not talking about auto-pilot. It's a very weird thing with acting, where you come back to your dressing room and say, 'God! I was so great tonight!'. And somebody will come round and say, 'What were you doing? You were so awful'. Another time you'll come back and think, 'God! I couldn't do it'. But somebody will come up and say, 'What a wonderful performance'. So you don't always know, but you long for that muse of inspiration to settle on you. Then the performance is very easy, but the routine of it. Most actors I know of my generation, they like long runs. Certainly I know Judi Dench does; Ian McKellen does, Maggie Smith. It's a wonderful - you come in to a kind of home too.

You want to do it. You get great notices and what am I going to do next? That's not the world that we grew up in. And it upsets me because... well, I'm philosophical about it, but I was talking in New York, in Washington in the play I was directing and I was talking about how wonderful these two, these great American actors; Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, had a theatre named after them - pulled down now of course - on Forty-fifth Street, there's a theatre there that's in the name of a producer, but still. And I was talking about Lynn Fontanne and Alfred Lunt and a play that Noel Coward had written for them. And the youngsters - I suddenly realized that they didn't know who Lynn Fontanne and Alfred Lunt are and who Noel Coward was. And people don't... And directors, very often, they're not interested in the theatre. Most of them are interested in their own reputation and using a play to create some kind of concept that will draw attention to themselves. All the great directors that I worked with, from Orson Welles, Peter Brooke, Glen Byam Shaw, whatever they did was always subservient to the text, to the play. And I go to the theatre quite often. And you know, Zoe Wanamaker is a great, old, old friend of mine - I passed through the National Theatre and she was playing Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and there was a huge poster of her face, directed by, designed by, music by, but not her name. Producers in the old days knew perfectly well, no matter how much we might revere Peter Brooke, or Peter Hall, in the old days it said 'Edith Evans, Peter Gielgud, in...', and at the bottom it said 'directed by...'. Now, we all knew how brilliant Peter Brooke was, but Peter Brooke knew that his name doesn't bring people in to the theatre. I mean, do you know who directed *Les Misérables*?

RN: No.

KB: No. Why should you? But I bet you know the name of the sexy boy who was playing the lead.

RN: [Laughs]

KB: But that's right. That's what you go to see.

RN: Yes, that's true.

KB: But they don't like that. It's all about the director. Believe me, nobody... everybody wants to work with a wonderful director with imagination, but the way that they have drawn so much attention to themselves... and they often do a show rather than doing a play. And meanwhile our heritage - and it's a wonderful heritage! I mean, it goes back to the sixteenth century to the Mummers doing the *Mystery Plays*. That's been lost now. That's been lost.

RN: I'm just wary of the time,

KB: Sorry.

RN: No, it's fine. I just wanted to note some of your better-known plays, such as *Avanti* and *A Man for All Seasons*.

KB: Well *A Man for All Seasons* I went in to... I'd seen it in London of course, with Paul Scofield, and I'd auditioned for a part in it. The young man, Richard Rich. I didn't get it. And then I was found by Orson Welles and I went and played Prince Hal on stage to his Falstaff in Belfast and in Dublin. And we came back to England and the following year - no, later that year rather - they were doing auditions for *A Man for All Seasons* on Broadway and they hadn't been able to cast the king with an American actor. It was eleven pages and they wanted a star actor and they'd said... so they got a special dispensation to bring in an English actor and I auditioned. And I got it and I know it was partly... and I know it was because I'd played Prince Hal and worked with Orson Welles. His name was on the handle and it opened a lot of doors for me. And so I went to

Broadway and it was of course... we opened in Philadelphia. And the young President Kennedy and his wife came to see us and... Now Presidents move around with a whole city of people around them. He was a great Anglophile, John F. Kennedy, and he loved the English language. So then we did it on Broadway and it was an immense hit on Broadway. And after that I stayed and did a play by C.P. Snow on Broadway.

RN: What was it like playing Prince Hal?

KB: With Orson? Well on the stage in Dublin it was hilarious. I mean, I just loved it anyway. And he loved me. His wife hadn't arrived from Italy so he was very lonely and so we used to go out every night in Belfast and he used to just roar. I mean, not showing off, but you know I hadn't done an awful lot with my life. I mean, sure I'd been to Korea and grown up in Wales but he was talking about Manolete the great bullfighter or President Roosevelt. I mean, his experience... and he was the most charismatic person. So that was wonderful. And then we were meant to go all the way round the world with it but he hated the company and it folded in Dublin. And then on the boat coming back I thought 'God! I'm going back to washing dishes at Scott's restaurant and the dole, and I'm so miserable'. [Laughs] And I was once, when we made the film later, I was once sitting under a hedge and Orson said to Gielgud, he said - Orson said - 'Oh Keith looks rather sad' and John said 'Oh, don't worry about him, he's Welsh. They've got their own private cloud of melancholy!'. [Laughs] So anyway, I was on the boat coming back and then suddenly there was Orson beside me and he said 'It hasn't worked Keith and it'll never work on the stage, this version but it'll work as a film'. And I'll never do it unless I ask you. And sure enough, a few years later, there we were doing it with Gielgud as my father. It was wonderful. Yeah, it was wonderful.

RN: Sounds it. Talking about the...

KB: And who wouldn't want to do eight performances a week when you go to the theatre and you know you're going to be working with...

RN: Orson Welles. [Laughs] That's true! Within the general period of theatre from 1945 to 1968, did you notice any impression of change?

KB: Yes. Yes, there was a brilliant, brilliant critic who wrote like an angel. But he was corrupt. He was corrupt in his heart; he was corrupt in his head. And he was what the French would call vicieux - "Vicious" is too in your face. And he was called Kenneth Tynan. And he set out to smash the popular theatre. He was himself an illegitimate boy of a rich Birmingham businessman. He grew up with a Birmingham accent and a stammer and he could change his accent but he never lost his stammer. And he hated the fact - not of being a bastard - he hated the fact that he was irredeemably middle class. And the theatre... but England is middle class. The aristocracy don't go to the theatre. They don't! They're bone-headed. And don't tell me that the working class, whatever that is, they don't. They'd much rather sit in front of the television and watch The X-Factor. Good luck to them and so on, but they're not going to the theatre. And Tynan thought that he could smash the middle class. And he did smash it but as a result we having nothing comparable. Nothing comparable, absolutely nothing comparable to what it was. I mean he smashed plays - he went particularly for... well, he went particularly for Terrence Rattigan, who was the most popular playwright at that time. He also went for Priestley, for Peter Shaffer, he went for the middle of the road, middle-class playwrights who gave a lot of plays.

RN: How did he manage to...

KB: Easily. He wrote cruelly and viciously and the other critics were terrified by him too. Very few, apart from a man called Harold Hobson, who wrote in the Sunday Times... I mean, it was like the war games on Sunday. There was Tynan in The Observer and

Hobson in The Sunday Times. And very often they were diametrically opposed. And John Osborne's second wife - third wife - Penelope Gilliat said that, 'You know, Sunday is the... we wake up always to the sound of Harold Hobson barking up the wrong tree. Ha ha ha'. This woman at the Royal Court wrote a play. She wrote a play called A Taste of Honey. Beautiful play. And she said - and it was famously repeated and quoted by Tynan - that she'd been to a matinée in Manchester of a Rattigan play and she thought, 'Well if that sort of tosh can get written then I can write better than that'. And she wrote this play and it was - everybody - the thing that she'd said about Rattigan. It was a great play. Wonderful play! But it was fair, now to step back and look at the long list of plays on the shelf by Terrence Rattigan. But where is the long list of plays by Sheila Delaney? One. But Tynan set out to smash that. He wanted to smash story-telling, middle-class values and particularly the whole of, really, the firm H.M. Tennent. He absolutely went for it, because they were the major, major producers. And I remember, before I'd become an actor in Wales, reading a Sunday paper and it said, 'What do all these stars have in common?' And it said, 'Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh, Paul Scofield, Gladys Cooper, John Gielgud, Edith Evans, Peggy Ashcroft'. They were all in plays produced by H.M. Tennent, which packed houses. Now you get small - if you're a young playwright and you write a play with more than four characters and more than one set, nobody will do it. They can't afford to do it. So you see, very small plays with very small casts. And they're done at The Bush, or Hampstead, you know. But they can't go on anywhere, because when they do transfer on to Shaftesbury Avenue, I mean, they're not up to scratch. So, slowly, by a steady, steady war of attrition, that theatre disappeared. The theatre that I'm sure John Gale was talking to you about too.

RN: Yeah. Before we end, unfortunately, I would just like to ask you what your favourite production working in was, if you had one. Or did it not work like that?

KB: I think I've honestly enjoyed every one of them, to be fair. And they're different of course. Of course I loved doing Sleuth, which was such a huge hit with one actor Sir Anthony Quayle and we did that, well I did that for over two years and Tony and I - it's a very violent play - we never had one cross word. It was magic. It was magic. So that was wonderful, yeah.

RN: What year was that sorry?

KB: That was nineteen... that was outside your parameter, 1970. Or sixty-nine we opened on the road.

RN: And did you work predominantly in London or did you travel around?

KB: No, I worked mostly in London. I mean I did my rep. at Oxford Playhouse, but yeah, London. London, New York are the places I most worked. And now Washington.

RN: Unfortunately the time...

KB: Time is up?

RN: Yeah, is there anything you'd like to add?

KB: No.

RN: Thank you so much.