

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Lynda Bellingham – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Cath Badham**

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Actress. Actresses; audiences; auditions; Calendar Girls; comedy; critics; Mark Field; language; Rebecca McCutcheon; Ros Povey; Romeo and Juliet; Philip Ridley; rehearsals; reviews; theatre-going; Trafalgar Theatre Studios; Vincent River.

CB: OK, so I'd like to welcome Lynda Bellingham to the British Library.

LB: Thank you.

CB: Who's very kindly agreed to talk to me about Vincent River, by Philip Ridley.

LB: Yes, indeed. Thank you.

CB: And I suppose I'd like to start by asking you when and where you first discovered Philip Ridley's work; whether this was the first time or not?

LB: It was. I'm ashamed to say it was, and when I went to see the director and the producer at the Old Vic I went off to the library and got the complete works of [CB laughs] which are assorted works and read them and absolutely loved them and I... What amazed me, well I think it was an, I think it's an age thing, probably, really, that they're... that they're not the kind of play - unless in these circumstances - I was going to come across, and reading them I felt... I did, I felt... not old in a nasty way, but slightly removed from some of the emotions maybe, because he's so powerful and so extreme and insistent - in a way that only youth can be, in a sense - and very direct, very black and white in many ways just off the top, and to read them I felt as though I was reading about my children, my sons.

CB: Yes.

LB: Something that they would relate to much more than me, so in that sense it was a real discovery.

CB: And did you... when you went for the meeting had you already got the part at that point, or was it a case of if you had read the play and not enjoyed it you could have turned it down or....

LB: No, no I hadn't got the job. [CB laughs] Aaah no, and I think it's quite interesting how many times these days now one has to go and audition and I've a lot of friends of mine who've been in the business as long as I have - it's my fortieth year - who say, 'Well, I'm not going to audition.', and I always audition if it's asked because I think it's the only way of going to meet new people, and people's perception of you is sometimes slightly skewed, so I was very happy to audition and I went and met Rebecca...

CB: Rebecca's the director.

LB: Yes, that's right. I can't remember her second name.

CB: It's McCutcheon.

LB: McCutcheon. Rebecca McCutcheon, and Ros Povey was the producer and I went and read and they... and chatted. And we had a long chat about it actually, and it was great and I liked them very much and I loved... I love the play and it... there were a lot of reasons why I was thrilled to be there and I couldn't understand quite why they'd found me - I discovered that later, when I talked to Ros Povey about it - but I was really keen to do it. And then in fact they'd got two young actors they were interested in for the boy and Mark Field was one of them. I can't remember who the other one was now, but and they asked me they... I can't think. Did they offer it to me and then ask me to read with the two boys? I think they, I think they did. I think they said, 'Yes, but would you read with the two boys and, and we'll make a decision then as to which way we are going to go'. But as I say, it was a shock to be asked to audition in the first place. I'm always amazed when anybody ever knows who I am [CB laughs] frankly, so I was thrilled.

CB: You've already... sort have... perhaps slightly touched on it, but Anita is, you know, not perhaps the character that you have been known for playing, I mean...

LB: No. I think my problem... I think in this day and age especially, it's all about branding for a lot of, and I... which is something I abhor and I can't understand how we've got to this level, really. Certainly on television we have, not so much in the theatre, but nevertheless you tend to get an image without even realising it and I'm very aware that the biggest mistake I made from that point of view was doing the Oxo commercials.

CB: Mmm.

LB: I had ne... if somebody'd said to me, you know, 'If you do these, it's going to kind of taint you.', I don't think I'd have done them. I wasn't that keen about doing them at the time [CB laughs] but again, you know, it was money, it gave me a chance to do other things. I did a couple of one-woman shows, I did a thing at the The King's Head in Islington for Dan Crawford Catherine of Sienna. So there was, there was a method in my madness.

CB: Yes.

LB: However, there I am, stuck with this image and also that and a combination of being very good at comedy - I think comedy is never taken seriously and you're somehow regarded as less than serious....

CB: Mmm.

LB: if you do comedy, so to find myself, you know, suddenly there with a view to playing Anita was just thrilling. Of course, it wasn't... it's not a surprise to me in myself because it's like people say 'Oh but, you know, you're very mumsy.' and I've always said 'But mothers go evil and bad and dark as much as they get good and round and plump and loving'. And it was just a question of trying to persuade somebody or finding the right part and Anita for me was just a dream come true.

CB: So, you've got the part and it's not necessarily a part that, you know, we would associate with you, but there you are, first day of rehearsals. How do you begin to take those words off the page and begin to form a character with them?

LB: I think the process of rehearsal is one of the most difficult to describe to anybody outside that room... you're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't really,

because you're going to sound like a completely self-indulgent... The interesting thing about Philip Ridley is that he is very lyrical. There are scripts - there are modern scripts that are easy, in a sense, because you are talking in rhythms that are natural to you, the choice of vocabulary is very usual. What you've got with Philip, especially with the boys part are these long, long, long two or three pages of dialogue...

CB: Absolutely.

LB:; that are descriptive. That would be brilliant, actually, on the radio because they conjure up smells and sounds and visual sights that are just phenomenal. Now the danger as an actor is to wax lyrical and lose sight of the person. So I think we... well, we started - Mark Field and myself and Becky... she actually threw me into disarray by doing actioning which is something now - my son was doing at drama school - I've never done, which is where you look for the verb in each sentence. Well, that just takes forever as far as I'm concerned and I am slightly snippy about intellectualising scripts. Of course you have to use your intellect, but there's an instinct involved here, or there is for me. That at the end of the day you can't teach it. It's a rhythm. Now whether my comedy... my sense of comedy is that, you know, you can't do comedy if you don't have timing, and again somehow purists of theatre tend to pooh-pooh that, as though I'm going, 'Da de da de da de da de da da, boom boom'. It's not that... it is to a degree, but I find that rhythms are very, very important and if you don't always or you can't sometimes quite grasp what the essence of a sentence is or a scene sometimes just doing it rhythmically will take you into it from a different angle and you will become it whether you meant to or not. Physically it's like some actors use physical methods, they have a hump or a limp...

CB: Yeah.

LB: or a, you know, different shoes or they, or they do it from the outside in. It doesn't matter how you do it - or the inside out - or whether you approach it though an intellectual point of view or an emotional point of view: whatever gets you there, really. But certainly that first week was very hard for me, actually, because it, I was taken into... completely out of my comfort zone...

CB: Right.

LB: as it happened.

CB: Did you then find in the later part of rehearsals that that different way of working had helped you, or did you find that you just had to go back to your sort of basic principles and work from there?

LB: I have to say I really did get quite thrown and I got quite uncomfortable and one of the things that... I can get very negative once I get [CB laughs] and you figure, 'Oh no, no!' and you haven't got time in three weeks to be negative...

CB: Absolutely.

LB: and there was an awful lot to learn as well. What turned it around for me actually was Philip took Mark and I and Becky, the director, on a tour of Bethnal Green.

CB: Right

LB: And you know, he's very precise...

CB: Absolutely.

LB: about locations and I had no idea how much this was going to help me, that the distance walked from and where... opposite there... the public toilets actually aren't

where they were, but then there was a similarity, there was a broken-down... there's an old tube station...

CB: Yes.

LB: entrance...

CB: Shoreditch.

LB: that, yes. So all those things really, really helped me and that day... I'll never forget - vividly - going into a cafe and having a coffee with Mark and it was run by this East End family, Italian actually -

[Interruption]

LB: East End family who... and they all recognised me off the telly which is, you know, slightly daunting [CB laughs] because they talk at, you know, talk to you...

CB: Yes.

LB: in front of the whole cafe, but equally I really did feel and understand Anita's back, her... backdrop, not her background really, but the backdrop about living in a small community, because mostly when you live in London you don't live in communities any more where people know you actually to say good morning...

CB: Yeah.

LB: vaguely to say good morning to...

CB: Yeah.

LB: but not you know, across the hands, across doors, across windows or... and that day I determined to actually go back to what I know, which was to take this woman and the loss and take it right back down to an emotional level which was how would I feel if my son had been murdered...

CB: Yeah.

LB: one of my sons had been murdered and I went, and I was able then to build my character emotionally round the actioning if you like. I do understand it...

CB: Mmm.

LB: I absolutely understand it and I think it has a value. I just think, like all these things it's how much you use it and how much you let it take over and sometimes, like a lot of things in life, the more you talk about it the more daunting it seems. It's better to get up and do it.

CB: Absolutely. So you've already said that you think Philip's language is very lyrical. I'm constantly amazed by the imagery that he manages to portray with that language and the way that he manages to almost create beautiful images out of a particularly nasty situation. And with Anita we start off in this sort of weirdly anonymous moment where there are two characters on stage and you don't actually know whether they are mother and son or what. How does that sort of... It's a weird way to start a play in a way.

LB: Yeah, but it's a fantastic way in terms of atmosphere and tension. And we did go for that. You don't know who's threatening who.

CB: Mmm

LB: You know, is this woman? Has this woman? Are they mother and son? Has she kidnapped him? Has he kidnapped her? Who's going to do bad to who? And I think tension and suspense are very inherent, actually...

CB: Mmm.

LB: in a lot of Philip's work, not... he doesn't write thrillers but there's... it's not suspicion is it? It's... but there's wariness.

CB: Yes.

LB: There's an animal, feral wariness that is very weird because he doesn't have it as a person. He's a very gentle soul and yet you don't feel as though you ever get close to him.

CB: No.

LB: Incredibly charming, interesting, open about his work, but guarded. And this fascinated me because I am a very... a very middle class, very open, trusting, stupid [laughs] you know, naive in a degree kind of person. And that's what I give off and hence probably why I never got [CB laughs] the right kind of roles but again I'm a great believer as an actress that if you create a persona for yourself in day to day life you're never ever going to achieve the truth of the character because it's got to get through another layer. So I'm stuck with it and I just have to rely actually on fortune and the kindness of strangers...

CB: Yeah.

LB: to give me the chance to. So that... she is... it's abso... that first scene and she goes to the door and she calls him in. She's as threatening as he is. And I deliberately gave her that, that aggressive, brittle front, because obviously, as the play unfolds you... almost working backwards... you have to work back from her cry at the end.

CB: Yes.

LB: Which is every actors dream to do: a guttural, earth shattering... and that used to absolutely... it was the one thing that terrified me because I didn't want to, to overdo it. It had to be real and it had to be shattering and it had to make people squirm in their seats, but - and it was only going to work - and the closeness of the studio at the Trafalgar Theatre Studios is that it meant that it had to be so layered that performance, I couldn't... that if I got to the end of the play when I had to do that and I hadn't got it right, I was in trouble, really, because you could never manufacture it and I think there was only once that I actually wasn't there...

CB: Mmm.

LB: wasn't ready to do it, so I didn't do it really. Which obviously, you know, I did something, but it was heartbreaking not to get there but I knew I wasn't going to get there and it's wonderful and exhilarating and awful at the same time, but to be made to work that hard as an actor...

CB: What do you think... I mean, the character of Anita... she has so many facets to her. She has... What do you think she sort of says about her own attitudes but the attitudes of other people as well, 'cos she is sort of representative of the world outside.

LB: Yes she is, and she's representative and she's also a victim of what other people think and I think this is so true of so many of us on different levels you know. The 'what will the neighbours think? How does somebody perceive me?' And what makes somebody eccentric and interesting and as opposed to... as opposed to a slapper, say, or

a less than desirable person, and she again... He writes... he completely comes in from a different angle, you know, he was very close to his mother...

CB: Mmm.

LB: ...and again when boys and mothers - and I know this from my own children - it's an incredibly complicated relationship that most people just wouldn't choose to examine because it is too difficult to examine and it is all, it combines sexual, emotional, instinctual. They are subjects that actually for an open society we don't deal with at all. We want people to be in boxes.

CB: She shocks from the moment that she... you know. One of the first questions that she asks Davey is, "Is this about sex?" ...

LB: Yes.

CB: ...you know, and...

LB: Because... but she's right in a way...

CB: Yes.

LB: you know, and it doesn't... it's just that... I suppose people are more polished. If you go into a room you could line up all the people opposite you and know actually instinctively whether it was sexual, whether it was suspicious, whether it was aggressive whether but the social... the social mores don't ask you to do that, you know, you don't say, 'Are you shouting at me because you fancy me?' you know. And she... that's what she knows, and there's an element of her that... that it's a simplistic thing that's, you know, it's like, you know, "oh you're working class and you smoke, you drink and therefore you must have low morals", and it's like if you're gay I mean... the whole gay element of cottaging and lavatories and dripping of a cistern and white tiles and the smell is so horrible on one level, and why is it, and... it's interesting 'cos it's so appropriate at the moment with the, with the kind of horror of gay bashing that's... and the fact that it, you know, it seems to be... how can it be on the increase? But of course it is because ignorance... and I honestly think in our society at the moment - the reason we need people like Philip Ridley to bring us back, is that if we are not careful, this whole branding thing, we brand and package everything so that it becomes completely meaningless and superficial, so all the dark side of human nature is kind of pushed aside and he makes us look at that.

CB: And he makes us look at it in a quite intense way as well, I mean his language... he almost makes something beautiful out of something really very nasty.

LB: Yes, oh yes.

CB: The whole long speech that Davey has at the end which is where sort of the truth of Davey and of Vincent is finally revealed must be one of the hardest things for any... to ever to sit and listen to.

LB: Yes. And she... and I used to listen to it every night, because that's as I say... you can only do it, you can only get to her reaction by listening and imagining it. And again, in the main people don't use their imaginations very much anymore. They... their... which is why I love radio and why radio is so important I think is that... and you... And it was for the audience because a lot of the people in that audience... And it's like when they say "young people don't listen and can't visualise things and have a low concentration", you know, they can... I disagree. It's just that they're never given it any more, and what he gives you in that long speech is the chance to imagine for yourself, each to hear it, to hear the... and the wood and the sticks and the wha... and I said the blood and the... it's so visual - it's like a film with a voice over in my... and I used... All

the time she's pra... she... he doesn't get there, he doesn't get there to... and you know it's him, but it... he doesn't get there does he? And eventually he takes you to this edge of the abyss and you have to fall into it.

CB: Absolutely. One thing I've found fascinating about that end section it's almost as if Anita becomes Vincent.

LB: Yes.

CB: She... and she does... she sort of takes control of the storytelling by sort of becoming Vincent. How, I mean, it's sort of almost like a change, it is a change of character in my head.

LB: Yes.

CB: Do you feel that it was?

LB: Yes. And her... The... Again, I can only go on instinct, and this is something I slightly fell out with the director, but I - you're right. He... the sexual... the moment they kiss...

CB: Yes.

LB: ...is a kind of turning point. And it's a... you've got... it is, I feel, what if I can put myself into a position of would I stand in a public toilet? I can understand...

CB: Mmm.

LB: It's about... it's about each human being facing their sexual needs. Not their emotional needs, their sexual needs.

CB: Yeah.

LB: And sometimes when you've only been fed physical and not emotional you... it's like some people emotionally become very needy. This is... you honestly hope to find something through... through your body [?] and men very powerfully have erections. Women, women have nothing outwardly.

CB: No.

LB: And when they kiss... it's so exciting...

CB: Yeah.

LB: ...because it opens their minds. It opened... it opens both of them, it and people, "Ooh you know." [CB laughs] It's not about that you know, it is about... but I think this is where people like Philip Ridley... have so much to teach and we have so much to learn about sexuality, in the sense that anything is OK now... and yet it's like... there are generations now that just have no comprehension of themselves. You know, girls who walk round city centres at night in a very short skirt... the gap from their vagina to their chin, you know, which contains their sexual organs and their soul and they've got a head on top of it and legs underneath it they don't examine it at all and neither do young men. And young men have no understanding of... and what Philip does - and the gay thing it is so marked and so... Actually, you know, it's not helpful if you like, it's so not gay, G-A-Y, that's the interesting thing, why? How did that word ever, you know. And cottaging? All the words, [CB laughs] you know, they're all horrible words. And yet there's a triumph about this...

CB: Yes.

LB: ...there's a triumph. And Davey running away from that... You just see this public lavatory like a monument like a... it's like Milton [CB laughs]. It's gothic...

CB: Yes.

LB: To me, when he describes it, the whole incident is gothic and momentous and not of this world and yet boiled down, it boils down to we are, as human beings, scrapping around in the gutter, you know, we are really no, no better...

CB: Yeah. I find it fascinating that all the way through the play we're going backwards to go forwards.

LB: Yes.

CB: There's so much reminiscence, from the story of the great aunt right through to the story of what happened on that night. How... Did you find that that helped, those stories sort of helped you negotiate your way through everything and... it's almost like a battleground...

LB: Mmm.

CB: ...between the two of them. Who's got the... who's got the most right...

LB: Interesting.

CB: ...to the grief because of their back story.

LB: Yes, I agree and I think the interesting thing about memory when it's used is the fact that as people... my memory of an incident and your memory of an incident anyway are going to be completely different, so there's conflict straight away.

CB: Absolutely.

LB: But in that conflict, understanding. And I think, yes, by taking you back and by telling these stories it's like the characters gain courage from referring to, you know, it's like, 'Well this is OK 'cos I did this and well, that would, I would be allowed to do that because they did this,' and it... I think we all need to remind... I think again we don't, as human beings, remind ourselves enough...

CB: Mmm.

LB: about where we come from. We're always moving on, you know, let's move forward.

CB: Yeah.

LB: I'm a terri... as a person I'm very bad at absorbing incidents and experiences that happen to me enough before I move on.

CB: Mmm.

LB: And if they're not very nice or I'm finding them upsetting or I don't like them I'm very good at putting them away. What I'm learning to do, and what I do as an actress is get them out...

CB: Yes.

LB: later, and therefore you have that kind of hindsight and you have that removal. And I think that's important in the descriptive passages in Vincent River, that you... if you were telling them in the present neither would be clear in the description nor the event. They'd kind of get squiggly.

CB: Yes.

LB: And what he does, is you're... because you're trying to remember something, you... you're very specific...

CB: Yes.

LB: And that helps the narrative and the emotions.

CB: I... one of the things that I thought about was that I wondered how long it had been since Anita had told the story of her love affair with the married man and, and the day when she found all the pins and whether in fact this was the first time that...

LB: Yes.

CB: she'd said it for years, if at all.

LB: Yeah. Well I did it... I took it that she'd never told it and again there was this... Again it's a theatrical licence. You know sometimes you have to have a back-story and you have to have, you know, well 'why do I do this and where's she come from and why would she be telling this now'. That whole thing, that set, that empty flat, the lack of light, the nowhere to sit. There was nowhere to get comfortable. All... to me it was instant. It gave it that these things did only come... that this was, sometimes these things happen. You find yourself talking to somebody and things come back to you... and it's really important that you - and I think she needed him to unlock her grief also because I think she - I they both were - had been walking about for the three weeks or whatever it is. What is it?

CB: He says, she says it's eighteen weeks

LB: Eighteen weeks, that's right.

CB: that he's been following her.

LB: That's right. And they talk about something that's happened, that happens just after. It...

CB: His mother's funeral.

LB: That's right. You're lock... I think you are locked sometimes in grief and a lot of people never get out of it, be it a divorce, a death and what this does, which gives it it's hope I think - because otherwise it would be just be too dark...

CB: Mmm.

LB: and too dreadful - is that it releases it, that you really feel at the end there's a glimmer, that they will rise above it and maybe will look af... will have a relationship. I don't think you can say exactly what, you know, or whether it would be constant or on a regular basis, but they've made a connection and that come... that's what that's about, that he releases that and those stories she tells just they've been knocking on the door...

CB: Yeah.

LB: and she just couldn't get it all out.

CB: I mean the end is also as ambiguous as the beginning in that the lights go down before he's walked out of the door.

LB: Yes.

CB: Yes, he's been given his jacket but he doesn't go and yes, you know there is that. You... I mean I've never seen it, but as a reader I felt, 'Ooh, I wonder what's going to happen next?'

LB: We... and we played it... you've got a choice really to play... you could theatrically just... not give anything away, be completely ambiguous. But I think, as I say... we gave him the jacket... I gave him the jacket... at one point we rehearsed, I think, he looked back at her... and then I think we did it that we, I look at him... and the way I

saw it was very much as a mother with her children that you do say... you have to permit them to go. You don't expect anything from them, but there is a cord, there is an umbilical cord that is there, that he could come back to her. She forgave him. All that had been said had been said...

CB: Yes.

LB: and there was a connection that was not broken. I think and that's all I think it needed, in a sense, but you felt that she would survive and he... would he? How would he cope with his life? I think what's interesting is it wasn't a ha... it's not a happy ending but I think you feel that he has a chance... if life is kind to him - and that's all we ever have, to steer him towards somebody who would be kind to him and offer him an ongoing emotional level on which to learn to live, that he would survive.

CB: Yes.

LB: You know.

CB: And I think she will survive as well.

LB: She survives because she is a mother and she has to survive.

CB: Absolutely.

LB: And that is a really interesting thing, I think, about Philip Ridley's understanding of women and our roles and where we go wrong sometimes that you can intellectualise about women in society and equality of women. If you take women off the pedestal - which is what has tended to happen in the last twenty five, thirty, forty years in this country... A lot of society's problems, I think, come from we're off the pedestal and if you look at countries where we're still on the pedestal... they don't have the same kind of violence actually. And she... What you... Much as I... I don't say that women... I hate that thing "Oh you've never had children. You don't know." I think there's a fifty/fifty either way for or against having children, [CB laughs] but if you've had them I think it's true to say that you are much more aware of your place in the great scheme - you are... Whether you like it or not, that umbilical cord is there, not just with you own children but somehow with human beings, with humanity, it's... But why else would we be the ones to give birth, it's such an incredibly basic thing.

CB: Philip, I feel, gives both Anita and Davey some fantastic tools to work with and those are the words he gives you...

LB: Yes.

CB: to say. Did you... tell me just a little bit about, you know, how you reacted to the language and the...

LB: I knew I had to get it right. You know, this is another thing... you do scripts, as an actor, that aren't very good, that you try the rhythms that are there and you can't learn it because it's just not right, and again you can't describe it so sometimes one alters words. Now the thi... What tends to happen, I think, with bad actors is that they always alter the script to suit them, because that's all they know. And that's not the joy of acting, you know, the joy of being an actor is finding a way through and so... But Philip is not necessarily easy to learn because it is so descriptive and so wordy.

CB: Mmm.

LB: But once... And of course, you know... if you break a character down... But what's clever about him - and what makes him great I think - is he does away with all the obvious. It's... so awful talking about acting, actually, because [CB laughs] it feels so

vulnerable, but you know you can very easily go for the obvious and do it well, you know, and there are lots of very successful actors who do the obvious and do it well.

CB: Yes.

LB: And then there are lots of people who go very tricky and unobvious but they become so tricky and unobvious that it doesn't ring true. And I think a great performance - and one that pays dues to the writer - is somebody who comes out the other side and makes it look incredibly easy. So that the storytelling and the descriptions that he takes you through and the language he chooses to use which you would, if you were on a bad day you'd go, [LB uses slight East End accent] 'Oh well my character wouldn't say that.' [CB laughs] 'Why wouldn't your character say that?', 'Well you know he lives on a council estate, so he wouldn't know that word.'. Well it's probably true. He wouldn't... You know, it's like swearing. People use swearing because they haven't got a... they haven't got a knowledge of language to use... and sometimes if you have a wonderful knowledge of language you, the only word to use is the "c" word, say - that is the only word that will fit that. But, so you've got to stop all those preconceived ideas about... and that's the wonderful thing about theatrical licence...

CB: Yeah.

LB: basically. And why again reality drives me mad... about reality television, about... because reality is quite dull and... obvious. Why we have theatre, why we have books is to take ourselves into somewhere more special and different and that we're not likely to go on a day to day basis, so what you do as an actor when you learn this language is you're taking yourself to an ama... and the challenge is to absorb it, as a character to speak it as though it is perfectly natural for two people to sit in a room for an hour and a half and tell stories to each other in these... and the audience accepts it and doesn't think for a minute, 'God this is... oh, I'm in the theatre.'. You know that's always a challenge a lot of the time with non-theatre-goers, 'Ooh it's so not real, it's not, you know.'. [CB laughs] And then of course once you go with the flow he does it all for you. You don't do anything. I mean, that's what's so exciting as an actor, and I have to say that I've done quite a lot of rubbish in my life [CB laughs] and learnt to make rubbish sound really quite plausible, so for me one of the greatest things of all was to realise that I hadn't got to do, in essence, as much work as I would have for a lesser play. I could just be in these rhythms and these descriptions and little stories.

CB: You talked earlier about the fact that obviously you've done quite a lot of comedy and the element of comic timing. Now Philip does have a reputation of his plays being very darkly comic at times and immense timing in there. Did... I suppose it was very nice having a straight play, as it were that, did have these elements of rhythm and you could draw that experience into it.

LB: Well, you see, this is my challenge and I'm not in a position, sadly, to do it enough to show people what I mean. But I think when you are inherently comedic you can't help but find the comedy, and I did it unknowingly sometimes in that play. We'd get a laugh. Now people will laugh in tragedy for relief, for release and I think that's the important thing that you instinctively deliver a line sometimes, perfectly straight and then it gets a laugh, say, from an audience or in life you say something and someone will snigger or snort. And you think 'why do they do that?'. And the secret is to think if it's useful to do it again and keep using that laughter, that comedic moment. Now, I do believe that a lot of actors somehow think it would lessen the seriousness of the play if they get a laugh; it worries them. And if they saw anything in... of comedy in... they'd ignore it whereas I would embrace it just because that's my way of communicating.

CB: Just in the first couple of pages...

LB: Yes.

CB:p; there's a fantastic moment where Anita asks Davey if he's had anything to eat and he says, 'No', and then Anita says, 'Well I'm not offering...', and then a page later, 'Would you like a drink? I'm offering.'

LB: Yes.

CB: And is that, I mean...

LB: And that first "rat-a-tat-tat" of that opening dialogue...

CB: Yes.

LB: used... people... because they weren't sure, you don't know what's going on and they want... to break and that's where comedy is so brilliant and laughter is such a useful tool, because you can turn laughter into tears, you can... And I know I have it naturally as an actress and I know I... actually I... What I have learnt is not to use it as a panacea for everything. I don't, but I just knew when to use it in... and a cigarette or a laugh of yourself and this is something I can't explain to you, but I just know that makes me a better actress, sometimes, for these kind of things than a very straight actress, or somebody whose regarded as a very straight actress because life is funny and people in very serious dark places in their life... if you look at any... if you look at Orton, you look at the truly, truly comic moments in life have been based at some point on something very, very dark.

CB: Yes. Just someone slipping on a banana skin is funny...

LB:; Is... yes.

CB: but actually...

LB: Yes. Is breaking... Somebody falling over and banging their head on the ground is so not funny in a sense, but... and birth and death are funny, you know that's how we deal with them.

CB: Anita also uses it very much almost as a defence mechanism as well. The joke that she tells, this really, you know, horrible...

LB: Yes. Yes! Well the joke, you see that, those kind of jokes, it's the head joke isn't it?

CB: Yes...

LB: the baby...

CB: about the baby...

LB: yes...

CB: being actually born, being...

LB: being born...

CB: and it's deformed and it's an ear [CB laughs] and it's deaf.

LB: Well... That... He... Again 'Oh I don't have that sort of sense of humour,' one would say but a sense of humour actually covers, I think you find in the main, covers every... and she uses that. That's... if you want to break that down though of course that is a moment where Philip Ridley the writer is allowing himself theatrical licence to put a joke in because it's theatrically viable and if you rea... you know, if you're going to be really picky in a sense she, would she have told that joke? And would she tell it well, 'cos the thing about joke telling, you know, when people tell jokes in a situation like that

I always think, 'Mmm'. I don't know, I don't think I know anybody apart from actors or stand-up comics [CB & LB laugh] who can tell jokes well...

CB: Yeah.

LB: actually, and if you're going to have a joke in the middle of a scene it's got to kind of come out well, otherwise the embarrassment of it falling flat affects the rest of the scene. So to me that was always a... that's a theatrical moment to me, but it's real because the energy in it is real but those would always be hiccups if you like in rehearsal and you'd think, 'Oh I'm not sure about this bit.'

CB: Yes.

LB: I'll scoot round this bit for a minute' [CB and LB laugh] - You know there are always markers and places where you'll, 'I can't do this, I'll leave that one for a minute.' [CB laughs] and then gradually you bring them back in to the fold and think, 'No, no, no I can do it - I understand where she's coming from.' and you... and again if you do it and believe in it then the audience will believe in it.

CB: Yeah. There's a whole... I found when I was reading it there's a whole thing about the senses in it. I think that's really important. Bringing that out sort of making the audience sort of smell the smells that Philip is describing, in particular the moment with the maroon shirt where she almost tortures Davey by making him smell it. How do you sort of... it's that use of the fantastic language again, isn't it?

LB: Yes. That shirt... again, personally I found very difficult to do because personally I don't do things like that [CB laughs]. Don't ask me why? But, so... and it's such a... I completely understand it and wish I could, you know... it's like people, you know, who do it and you see moments in films or plays where people smell their lover's... and they smell... Yes, he's not only got Anita challenging Davey but he's challenging the audience. And the thing about the Trafalgar Theatre Studios, and doing that play in such a small space made it even more uncomfortable because you feel so powerfully that there's a smell and because of what you're talking about it's not just a pleasant smell of, it's not about aftershave, again it's not about the niceties in life, it's about sex, sex, sex, sex, and more sex and you're in a room, virtually, with 70 people - I could sit on the lap of the man in the front row [CB laughs] you know?

CB: Yes.

LB: And you're all having an experience and I think that's the crux of it, isn't it? That you know we're talking... we're talking about this. My whole, ultimately, attack on that play was sexual... my energy was sexual... I mean I... it's you know, I haven't thought about it for a couple of years so it's... And I'm in a very different place now to where I was then.

CB: Yeah.

LB: But I think that for me was ultimately the... It is finding an energy and his plays - I'm sure it's different for everybody, but for me his plays... it's a sexual energy that is required. And how much you use it, or sit on it or never mention it or throw out in a gre... it depends how you... but that was from the off... from the opening line to the kiss, to the falling to the ground and the cry was all sexual.

CB: If you want to look at it in sexual terms I suppose you've got foreplay, then the actual act leading to a climax and then the moment afterwards where...

LB: Yes.

CB: You know, there's the silence because you don't quite what to say if you look at the... you know you could see the play structured like that.

LB: Yes, yes. Absolutely. And of course, you know, it's very different to sit and talk about a play like this and I said quite honestly when you asked [CB laughs] me to do this, 'Christ! You know, you're not going to make me look stupid are you?' Because I would read a play, and analyse it, and write about it intellectually very differently. I mean it's marvellous that you know, we're... obviously that's you... that's what you want to do. When you're in it... it's just really important to me in a play to make people believe it but also to make them, perhaps, have an emotional experience that they've never had elsewhere or outside that theatre, or, you know. Be it either love... I mean, the classic, you know, I've just done Calendar Girls and it is exactly what it is on the tin there's nothing, there's nothing difficult about it, you know, and it was a true story, it makes people laugh and within that people have little dramas and we all have dramas and we all deal with them. Philip has, you know... where does Philip come from? What is his private life? What, you know... you will never know. Nor is it my business to know. But what is amazing is that he can... his writing will make people perhaps understand a little more parts of society that they will never go to, never communicate with, never... you know, and things about life... that there's... and they'll never, ever understand in a million years but they come out of that theatre feeling emotionally connected to those characters for that hour and a half...

CB: Mmm.

LB: and that's what's so exciting.

CB: You obviously enjoyed playing Anita.

LB: Oh I loved it. But it affected my... You know, this is the other thing about theatre is you get this great gig, you know, two hours a night [CB laughs] and then forget about it, but I carried her round, you know, for... And I would love to have done it for longer. I'd have loved to have done it as a run in the West End, but equally I couldn't imagine where we would have done it other than somewhere like a studio...

CB: Yes.

LB: It had to be a... and a theatre, almost by nature of the beauty of a theatre, a Victorian theatre isn't right either. It needed to... you just needed to hone in on that floor and that window and tho... that's, you know... and that's what's so exciting about theatre and I remember when I was at drama school, you know, being in a rehearsal room, having not come from a theatrical background, it's that whole thing about setting the scene which anybody who's got nothing to do with theatre thinks we're all luvvies and completely off our trolleys [CB laughs] you know, and people go to the theatre in the West End because, [posh accent] 'It's such a lovely theatre and then we're going to go to dinner at The Ivy, let's hope it's not too tearful or too...' you know. Everything is all very lovely and restrained, and this was just raw and I felt raw and in fact makes me... makes me want to cry but... My sister died... during it, and just... and so I... There's this extraordinary thing about death - that's another thing that's in the play - that when somebody dies you feel obliged to have lots of sex, I think, [CB laughs]. I can't... that sounds very simplistic, but the people that are left want affirmation that they're alive...

CB: Yes.

LB: and I think that's another point about this play... is you've got two people very, very, very touched and very, the blood has smeared on them...

CB: Yes.

LB: and they're cleaning it off themselves and affirming that they are alive and indeed that there is a life for them and that's very powerful.

CB: Absolutely. Did you feel like the audience were almost in the room with you or did you... for the hour and a half were they not there?

LB: So difficult, so difficult to get this right [CB laughs]. I've to tell you the first night I don't... oh my God! I think it's the most terrifying thing I think I've ever done ever, ever, ever, ever apart from Strictly Come Dancing [CB laughs] because I remember coming out and you are in the zone, you do concentrate, it's not... you're a level removed but you couldn't help, you can't help but see the first, virtually the three, the first three rows in the Trafalgar Theatre Studios...

CB: Mmm.

LB: so I could see the critics that, the ones that I know I recognised and if it had been loved ones faces it might have been different but to see that harsh, it's like somebody banging you on the knuckles [CB laughs] but there is a way, and this is very gratifying because you know you are concentrating and you are in the zone that you...

CB: Mmm.

LB: There's a part of you that took it in...

CB: Mmm.

LB: and then just dismissed it and just tossed it away but equally, which is the art and craft of acting, you have to be aware of your audience...

CB: Mmm.

LB: so that if you feel that maybe there's a lack of concentration or if you lost them for a minute you have got to make a swoop of the room and draw them back in again so it's... there is a technical level but of course, that's again... you can only learn that by experience and there is something very gratifying again I thought, 'Oh I can do that now...'

CB: Yeah.

LB:; which is wonderful, absolutely thrilling but in the main no... the desire to communicate is there but it's general it's not... but if... but... yeah you just, you're aware... it's like somebody brea... it is like somebody breathing beside you so you're conscious of this breathing and you just want to make sure you keep it there that pulse.

CB: You had some lovely reviews for it. I think there's one critic - I can't remember who it is - said that it was possibly the best thing you'd ever done. Did that give you confidence to sort of, just sort of take Anita and run with her as it were?

LB: Yes. And then I had nowhere to run, sadly [CB laughs] You know, two weeks later it was off. Yes it gave me... and it's funny how you... It was so what I had wanted to achieve in my career and I have a very - I'm very philosophical now about my career - only I could have those reviews and only be seen by a few people in two weeks [both laugh] you know, and disappear into obscurity yet again [CB laughs]. And I forgot but at least thank God, and thank Philip and Ros Povey, the producer I feel, for giving me the chance, because actually if you never get a go at it... If it comes again I know I can do it, so I won't waste time humming and ha-ing about whether I think I can do it or not, and there's an element in your life, you know... I know a lot of friends of mine now at a certain age who are frightened by theatre and frightened by the whole process of learning a lot of lines and it was one of those things that had to be done you know, not only to learn lines, to not have an interval, to jump off the cliff... It is absolutely terrifying

but you have to do it and it's part... it is part of getting older, it is the scariest bit and I'm kind of working on a... I'd love to write about it actually and I wish somebody would write a play about it for people. It's such a complex... it's as complex getting old as it is growing up, it's like growing down [CB laughs] you know and so moving and I notice there's a play... there's something going on at the moment up in Newcastle. They're doing Romeo and Juliet... and they're in their seventies which I think is a phenomenal way to look at and reshape Shakespeare and dialogue or any play to see it from a completely different perspective and I... so I... I was... I miss it, you know, just talking to you about it now I just wish now I could do it again and do it better and have another, you know, bite at it really.

CB: Lynda, thank you very much for spending the last hour with me. I've really enjoyed talking to you and thank you very much indeed.

LB: Thank you Cath. I appreciate it.