

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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George Biggs – interview transcript

Interviewer: Harry Jelley

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Theatre Manager. Blackpool theatres; Bronson Albery; Donald Albery; ballet; Box Office; cinema; Bernard Delfont; farces; Harold Fielding; Lew Grade; H.M. Tennents; Prince Littler; Lord Chamberlain; musicals; the National Theatre; opera; producers; provincial theatre; repertory; Royal Opera House; stars; Stoll Moss Empires; Summer Seasons; theatre owners; ticket prices; variety; West End theatre.

HJ: This is the interview of Mr George Biggs by Harry Jelley on the 29th of April. I'd like to start by asking you what your first experience of theatre was and how you got involved in the theatre?

GB: My first experience of theatre, really, was as a kid of about 7 or 8 and I was introduced to theatre through pantomime. My family used to take me to the Theatre Royal in Birmingham, which no longer exists. They used to do big, spectacular pantomimes, that's where it first started.

HJ: So were you from a theatrical family?

GB: No, none of my family went into theatre. My father was an optician, my mother came from a farming family, my brother was into teaching, my sister was into nursing; I was the dunce so I went into theatre. [laughs]

HJ: So when you first got involved in theatre, did you have the mind of having a career in theatre or were you concerned with just getting a job, as such?

GB: I think probably when I left school it was just a matter of getting a job. But, of course, I left school in 1949 – no I didn't, 1952! - so I didn't really get any experience of the theatre until 1955, of working in theatre –

HJ: And...

GB: Which was in Cheltenham.

HJ: Right, what was your first role working in theatre?

GB: I was a trainee manager at the Gaumont Cheltenham, which I believe is now the Odeon Cheltenham, which was in Winchcombe Street and that particular cinema used to do 3 weeks of films and 1 week of theatre, and the theatre was variety shows.

HJ: So as a trainee manager what roles did you have?

GB: I was really just an odds-body; doing whatever comes along. Checking box office, counting unsold tickets, all that type of stuff; it was more accountancy work.

HJ: You mentioned that the theatre did three weeks of cinema and one week of theatre. Would you say that was relative to the rest of the country? Was there a predominance of cinema showings over theatre?

GB: Yes, I think the whole thing came about because television didn't really take off until 1953 with the coronation of the queen. Nobody before that date really had a TV because the sets were so expensive. After 1953 television became quite a big area of people's entertainment and cinemas got quite slightly worried thinking that their audiences would be glued to television sets rather than coming to see a film so they thought they would introduce, in their larger cinemas, one week of variety so that they could capitalize on that and help balance the books.

HJ: So was variety viewed as an important part of entertainment? Something that people were involved in?

GB: Yes, variety was very important even through the forties. Most cities had two or three theatres and most small towns had one theatre. There used to be two very large variety circuits: a number one circuit and a number two circuit. The big stars used to play in the number one circuit, so they would go to Manchester, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Southampton, Great Yarmouth; all those big places. During the summer months, because nobody went abroad in the 1940s and indeed the early fifties, everybody had holidays in England so Blackpool had seven or eight theatres and they used to do summer seasons. All the seaside towns used to do big summer seasons which were all variety shows.

HJ: And were these populated with big stars? Were the stars of variety –

GB: Well, the big stars came from the radio because everyone used to listen to the radio as there was no television.

HJ: So there was a star culture within the theatre?

GB: Yes.

HJ: Right.

GB: But it was really based on the radio stars. They had big radio programmes like Raise a Laugh and Educating Archie and all those types of things and those big names used to come to head the bills in variety.

HJ: And what are your fondest memories of variety? The big stars – the big performances that came round – did you manage to ever speak to them?

GB: No, no I never saw them. I used to see the variety shows in Hereford, because we had a variety theatre in Hereford. I used to see variety shows when I was on holiday, usually once a week. Names – people probably wouldn't recognize now a days. They were all big stars in the radio world and everyone wondered what they looked like because, of course, from being on radio you couldn't imagine what an artist looked like so they used to flock in to these Variety theatres. Five shillings used to be the top price, which is 12½p in today's money [laughs] but it was quite a lot of money.

HJ: So what kinds of performances were there? I assume in variety there was a range of...

GB: A lot of speciality acts.

HJ: Right.

GB: Jugglers, a couple of comedians, singers, very small orchestra and that used to be it, there used to be about nine or ten acts and the shows used to be done twice nightly, 6.10 and 8.40 and the bigger theatres did three on Saturday, they used to do 2.30, 6.10 and 8.40.

HJ: So it was a very busy schedule?

GB: In the provincial towns, yes. It was slightly different in the West End.

HJ: OK, in what ways was the West End different?

GB: Well, in the West End the Palladium used to be the big variety house and they used to run pantomimes from Boxing Day till Easter, always with big names – very spectacular pantomimes. Victoria Palace used to do the Crazy Gang shows which used to run for years and years and years. Nervo and Knox, Flanagan and Allen - totally different to

what we see today. Revues were quite big, the Prince of Wales used to do a revue and the Prince Edward - which was called the Casino in those days - would do revues, so it was a very big thing, variety.

HJ: While you were working with a predominant variety schedule did you see that cinema and television was encroaching on the variety circuit?

GB: Yes, it killed it

HJ: Really?

GB: Eventually killed it, yes.

HJ: Was that because people became less enthralled with the variety...?

GB: I think the standard went down.

HJ: Right.

GB: And that killed it, but it didn't kill the seaside towns until people started to go abroad so they were really running seaside seasons – summer seasons – until about late sixties/early seventies.

HJ: And then following this work at Cheltenham and in Worcester – if I'm right, yes? – you had four years out in Australia, was there anything that –

GB: No, nothing to do with theatre except watching it.

HJ: OK.

GB: Australian theatre is quite fascinating.

HJ: Really? [both laugh] Did it change your views of British theatre at all?

GB: Not really, totally different type of audiences, totally different type of plays – very Australian plays.

HJ: Right. After these four years out you returned to England and you got a job at the Royal Opera House, if I'm right, was it easy to get a job back into the theatre or was it quite challenging?

GB: It took about three months to find a job. The Arts Council were advertising a box office position at the Royal Opera House so I went along for an interview and that's what I got.

HJ: So your role in the box office, what did that entail?

GB: Purely selling tickets to the public

HJ: I can imagine without a computer it was more complicated.

GB: It was a manual system where you have big plans for each performance and large books of tickets. Used to have no cheques, no credit cards because they weren't – cheques were, sorry – there were no credit cards so it was either cash or cheque, and that's how you paid for your seats. It was a very exciting time at the Opera House during the period I was there because Fonteyn and Nureyev was just starting in the ballet part of life and the opera we had Maria Callas as Tosca with Tito Gobbi. It was quite an exciting time.

HJ: Was opera quite popular in that period?

GB: No. Old Italian opera was. English opera never worked. Benjamin Britten was just starting... if Billy Budd or Peter Grimes were playing you had a hard job getting rid of the seats.

HJ: So, a hard job getting rid of the seats, would that affect your job – your wage? Was it pay or commission?

GB: It was a pure wage.

HJ: What was the average cost of a ticket at that time?

GB: Normal price for a ticket was 32 shillings and 6 pence, unless you had a big opera star, like a Callas, when it would probably go up to 49 shillings. Fonteyn and Nureyev would probably be 49 shillings too.

HJ: So it was very much reliant on the stars rather than the – ?

GB: In those days the big stars used to draw the crowds –

HJ: Right.

GB: and they had the first visit of the Bolshoi early after the war and tickets for that were like gold-dust.

HJ: Would you say opera was available to everyone? Was there a certain class of person that came or was it very much something that various people in society enjoyed?

GB: I would say it was probably what was known as middle class –

HJ: Right

GB: And the age group would be probably 30-60

HJ: Was there ever a concern that opera should be marketed to younger people or to other – ?

GB: Not at that time. There is now, certainly not at that time.

HJ: So was it very much just concerned with keeping opera going or was it self-sufficient as a...

GB: It always needed a subsidy.

HJ: Right

GB: The Opera House re-opened in 1948 - it was a dance hall during the war, a Mecca dance hall. It went back to opera under Sir David Webster in about 1948 and it was called Covent Garden Opera and the ballet was at Sadler's Wells and didn't come into the opera house until probably the mid fifties.

HJ: Was the ballet just as popular as the opera? Did it attract similar audiences?

GB: Ballet was actually more popular than opera in those days.

HJ: And was that again reliant on the stars?

GB: Yes, people would tend to follow dancers and careers.

HJ: Right, so you worked in box office, selling tickets.

GB: Yes.

HJ: Did you have any other roles in the theatre, because I see afterwards you went on to a managerial role, did you start getting involved...

GB: No, not at the Opera House. I just answered an advert in the trade paper.

HJ: So is that how most jobs we acquired, just answering adverts?

GB: Yes.

HJ: And were the adverts put on by the actual theatre owners?

GB: The owners used to advertise.

HJ: So after the Royal Opera House what did you do?

GB: I went to the Cambridge as theatre manager.

HJ: And what did that job entail?

GB: Really had to do practically everything. You had to know quite a lot about accounts because you had to do the wages. You had to know about licensing and licensing laws. You had to know all about box office, which I did, and you had to check all the box office returns and all the money side of life. You had to look after your staff: technical staff, electricians and stage staff and you had the catering side which was the bars and all that side to look after. So you really had to be Jack-of-all-trades.

HJ: Did you ever get that chance to get involved with the actual staging of plays?

GB: No. The theatre is rented it to a producer and the producer puts on the productions. The owner charges a rent for the building plus the cost of all the staff, the heating and lighting, that's how it works, the producer puts on the show, not the owner. Sometimes the owners did, but quite often you had to hunt for a producer who wanted to put on a play or a musical.

HJ: Was that quite easy to come by during that period? Were there lots of producers?

GB: The 1960s wasn't too difficult. They ran into a slight problem in the late sixties when some theatres started to go dark. But plays used to run a long time, unlike today. You got plays that ran four or five years – different class, needless to say. Some of them used to run for four or five years but today probably, if you're lucky, it's probably 16 to 17 weeks.

HJ: The sixties was the rise of the Kitchen Sink and more realist –

GB: Oh yes, we had some great new authors, really helped by the Royal Court which started what is known as the Kitchen Sink dramas. John Osborne was coming in to his prime.

HJ: Did you find that the Kitchen Sink drama opened up theatre to a lot of people?

GB: Yes, to a much younger audience.

HJ: Did those people then commit to theatre as such? Did that just open up –

GB: I think it opened up theatre to a lot of younger people.

HJ: And then after the Cambridge Theatre, what did you do then?

GB: Well, after the Cambridge Theatre – I was there from 1964 – I was moved over to the Palace Theatre [in 1968] which is the big theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue, and I became manager of that theatre which really specialized in musicals rather than straight plays because of the capacity.

HJ: Was it common for people to keep working under the same theatre owner, because you mentioned it was owned by the same person?

GB: I suppose in those days we were slightly more loyal than we are today [laughs] but we did tend to work with the same people.

HJ: Did your role there differ in any way with –?

GB: No exactly the same – bigger theatre – and big musicals were more of a headache than plays because the cast is much bigger so you had more dressing room space and

the staging - which was nothing to do with my side of life, but that was quite interesting.

HJ: Did you see that musicals were more popular than other –?

GB: Musicals always tend to be more popular than plays. Plays, you can see on television. Musicals, you really can't get the atmosphere watching a musical on the television, it doesn't come across and people still like the live experience. The first musical I was associated with at the Palace was Judi Dench in Cabaret.

HJ: Were musicals an aspect of American theatre that came over? Did you see it as a schism of variety theatre, possibly?

GB: Not really, the English musicals in the forties, probably in the thirties and forties were Ivor Novello, Noel Coward came in the forties and continued until the fifties and then you had Charles Cochran which was way back in the thirties and forties. The American musicals didn't really hit us in a big way until 1947, when the first big musical was Oklahoma! which started its life in Manchester. All big musicals used to have try-outs in provincial theatres before they moved into the West End and Oklahoma! was the one that came into the Theatre Royal on Drury Lane which was a big Rodgers and Hammerstein musical and that was quickly followed with Annie Get Your Gun, which is an Irving Berlin musical, which came into the Coliseum also at the same time, 1947-48, and that really started the big musicals. It was followed quickly after Oklahoma! by South Pacific and Carousel which were enormous successes.

HJ: Did you see the role of the war affecting musicals as an escapist art? Because obviously there was there the realist Kitchen Sink, was there a conflict of the two?

GB: Kitchen Sinks didn't really start until the fifties. In the forties, really, all theatre and all variety were escapist. Plays were done mainly by repertory companies; a lot of provincial towns had repertory companies where you had a different play every week – same company, company of actors and actresses – and they used to do one play for one week and while they were doing that play they were rehearsing for the following week's play. They used to do that and they were very popular.

HJ: So were they –

GB: But they used to concentrate on Agatha Christie and more of the classics.

HJ: Did these repertory – I'm not sure if I'm pronouncing that right –

GB: Repertory companies.

HJ: Repertory companies tour at all?

GB: No they were stationed at a particular theatre and there were two main ones. Derek Salberg who was based in Birmingham, he had a few companies that used to be around the towns in the UK, and the Harry Hanson Court Players were another big repertory company.

HJ: Did these companies come with a following? Were people loyal to a company?

GB: Oh, yes. You used to go every Monday night. I used to go every Monday night. [laughs] When I was at school on school holidays I used to go every Monday night, the whole family did.

HJ: So it was quite a common entertainment?

GB: Yes, and it was a brilliant working space for actors to learn their trade. Everybody started working in the repertory companies and then progressed. That's the way it was as there was no television –and few films being made. The only way they could work was to work in a repertory company to get their grounding. Then they moved on to touring or West End work.

HJ: So did these companies have stars in or it just a stepping stone to becoming a West –

GB: Just purely stepping stone.

HJ: And -

GB: We knew them all because we saw them every week. [laughs]

HJ: Was there then a relationship built up between the audience and the stars?

GB: Yes.

HJ: So you became –

GB: Yes. You don't meet them personally but you get to know them and the different roles that they play.

HJ: In your working career of this period you worked both London and provincial theatres. Did you find a great difference between the theatres?

GB: Yes

HJ: Was it harder work in the capital city?

GB: It was more exciting work.

HJ: Right, a lot busier is it?

GB: A lot busier and much more fun.

HJ: Right, OK...

GB: It was fun job. You worked six days a week, you didn't work 35 hours you worked literally 60-70 hours a week.

HJ: So was it long hours?

GB: Very, very long hours. We used to start at ten o'clock in the morning, usually used to work until one then come back at five and work until the end of the show. Unless you had a matinee, and if you had a matinee you were on from about 10am to 11pm straight through, so they were very long hours.

HJ: So did – I assume the actors were also working incredibly hard in London?

GB: Not so hard as repertory companies...

HJ: Right, OK.

GB: because they had to learn a new play every week.

HJ: Right

GB: While they're doing one play they're learning one play they're learning another play.

HJ: Right.

GB: How anybody can learn all those lines always baffled me. [laughs]

HJ: Was it common for repertory companies to repeat plays? Because you said they are learning new lines, did they do what renaissance theatres would do? They would learn their lines but then have repeating plays?

GB: No.

HJ: So it was genuinely just a brand new play?

GB: Yes. It was only about six shillings for top price seats, 30 pence in today's money.

HJ: Were the price differences quite large between the provincial theatres and London?

GB: London... when I first came to London, the first musical I did in the Cambridge Theatre was Tommy Steele in Half a Sixpence and that was charging £1 5shillings.

HJ: Right.

GB: In about 1966 there was a play put on at Her Majesty's called Right Honourable Gentleman and the price went up to £1 10 shillings and everybody thought that was the end of the world [laughs] 'Oh, nobody will go because it's so expensive'.

HJ: Did you see the role of theatre through this period of your career flourishing in society or diminishing? Or did it just keep a steady pace?

GB: I think we all got very worried by the effect of television.

HJ: Right. Was it noticeable the effect of television when it came in?

GB: Yes, and that's why so many theatres across the country began to close in the sixties.

HJ: Was it something felt mainly in the provincial –

GB: It affected the provincial far more than it affected London

HJ: Right, Is that mainly because in London they would attract a higher standard of plays?

GB: It was a higher standard of production. There were more tourists, what little tourists were coming into London in those days because aircraft travel didn't really start until the late fifties/early sixties when all the big jets started to arrive, which brought more people over. And more people in England went abroad, so the seaside variety theatres suffered as not so many people visited the seaside any more.

HJ: Were the seaside variety shows popular?

GB: Yes, very popular. I mean, Blackpool was supported by eight or nine theatres and they had Wakes Weeks when all the mills in northern England used to close at a certain time and they all went to Blackpool so the place was absolutely full of people. The shows there were quite spectacular. I remember going to see some shows there, it was actually pretty spectacular.

HJ: Were they, in your mind, more entertaining than the big London shows, the variety?

GB: Not as exciting as the London Palladium shows.

HJ: Is that mainly because there was more money pumped into the production?

GB: The production values were much higher and in the early fifties the American stars starting coming over to the London Palladium. Tony Bennett and Frank Sinatra and all the big names came across and we had some big British singers in those days too and they started to take over in the fifties so the whole entertainment scene was changing.

HJ: There was definitely a star culture then?

GB: Yes.

HJ: Yes and did that affect all aspects of theatre? Did you see the bigger actors coming to London and variety?

GB: Yes, it had an enormous effect especially in the American influence, big American singing stars. It started really with Elvis Presley and Rock and Roll with Bill Hayley, Jerry Lee Lewis. They all came across and they toured the provinces. They used to play those big cinemas just for one night and they used to tour all round the country. They used to play the Palladium for two or three weeks.

HJ: With the rise of cinema and the stars of becoming more popular did you find that – like with now a lot of cinema actors are coming back to theatre – did you find that there were cinema actors in theatre?

GB: No. That didn't come on until much later.

HJ: Right. Were the stars in theatre known for being in theatre? Did you have separate cinema stars and theatre stars and radio stars?

GB: Not really. I mean I suppose Laurence Olivier did both as a media star; he was an enormous theatre name and he was the man who founded the National Theatre and the first artistic director at Chichester was Laurence Olivier. Vivian Leigh, his wife, was also a big name in theatre and a big name in films, but there were very few. John Gielgud in those days was really a stage actor, he didn't go into films until very much later as, indeed, did Ralph Richardson. [I went to a theatre in Malvern quite often and saw Donald Wolfit in many plays. He mainly did theatre.]

HJ: During your career in theatre who were the leading stars and names in the business?

GB: As far as theatre producer are concerned, when I first joined in 1955, it would be Harold Fielding. He was a big musical man and he did Charlie Girl which ran about four or five years at the Adelphi. He did English musicals mostly. He did Half a Sixpence when I was at the Cambridge in 1964. He did one big American musical which was called Mame which was at the Theatre Royal on Drury Lane. He was the big name in musical theatre. Play producers, there were quite a number of them, Peter Saunders who did the famous Mousetrap which is now in its 56th year which started in 1952 and is still running – the longest running play in the world – and he used to do a lot of Charles B. Cochran revues and he also owned a theatre called the Vaudeville Theatre and he was quite a leading light. Producers in the 1960s, probably Michael Codron was probably the leading play producer, he was just starting, and he used to commission writers like Michael Frayn, Joe Orton and people of that ilk. Michael White was another big producer but the big leading light in the forties and fifties, both as theatre owners and producers, were H. M. Tennent which was run by a man called Hugh Beaumont, nicknamed 'Binky Beaumont' for some unknown reason, [laughs] who used to put on all the big plays in London and he had a lease on the Gielgud Theatre - which was called the Globe Theatre in those days - the Phoenix Theatre and the Theatre Royal Haymarket. All the big names, like Gielgud and Richardson, used to be in the plays [he presented, which did very well]. A lot of them ran for years so they were very big producers at that time. The theatre owners really were the Albery family. They owned about four or five theatres, firstly Sir Bronson - he used to produce plays as well - then his son Donald who took over when Bronson died and he also was a play producer. In the provinces variety theatres was the start of the Grade family which really controlled all the light entertainment in theatres in the early fifties. There was Lew Grade who owned Stoll and Moss Empire theatres. Moss Empire had the big theatres in Bristol, like the Hippodrome, and the Manchester theatres, the Opera House and the Palace. He also owned the London Palladium, Victoria Palace and all the play houses down Shaftesbury Avenue were owned by Lew Grade

HJ: So did these producers tend to ally themselves with a particular performance?

GB: They seemed to have their favourite producers.

HJ: Right.

GB: Prince Littler, who owned Stoll-Moss Empires before Lew Grade, always used to work with Tennents – H. M. Tennents – and most of the theatres were filled up with [their producers]. As far as the London Palladium was concerned his brother, called Leslie Grade, owned all the artists as he was an agent and his other brother was called Bernard Delfont. Bernard Delfont used to put on all summer shows around the country and also owned half the Palace Theatre in London and the Shaftesbury Theatre and he also used to produce most of the new, big American musicals. That family really continued right through the fifties and sixties and into the seventies they controlled most of the entertainment in theatres in the country.

HJ: So was it the case that most of the theatres were owned by a few people?

GB: Yes, very very few people. The majority of the theatres were either owned by the Albery family or Prince Littler. His brother Emile owned the Cambridge, where I worked at, owned half the Palace Theatre as well as the London Casino, which is now the Prince Edward Theatre.

HJ: What can you remember of the actors and the stars that came through – the big names – do you have any fond memories of particular – ?

GB: We did a play at the Cambridge in 1965 called A Month in the Country with Emylyn Williams and Michael Redgrave directed and was in it, with Ingrid Bergman and Fay Compton. Yes, we had some big names in plays in those days.

HJ: Which are the productions that have remained with you?

GB: The ones I most enjoyed?

HJ: Yes.

GB: Gosh, very difficult to say. I did enjoy A Month in the Country, probably because it was in a theatre I was working in and it was quite an exciting production to be associated with. In fact it opened at the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre in Guilford, that production, before it came to London. I mean, watching actors like Laurence Olivier doing Othello, when the Old Vic was the National Theatre in those days, which was a fantastic performance. And watching Ralph Richardson, who was such a funny character, doing plays was always a joy. And in the fifties, of course, farce was a very big element of theatre with Brian Rix and Ronald Shiner. The Whitehall Theatre was the home of farce up until the early sixties or late sixties. Those farces used to run five or six

years like *Worm's Eye View* and *Reluctant Heroes*. Nowadays they would seem very old – very dated – but the English loved those type of farces, they certainly wouldn't work today. Sense of humour's totally changed.

HJ: Would you say that while you worked there would be a period when people would focus on a certain type of theatre and only go and see that – so you mentioned farce, did farce come in then everybody change to show farce?

GB: Everybody loved farce.

HJ: Right.

GB: And they all used to rush off down to the Whitehall Theatre to see Brian Rix and Ronald Shiner [in anything they were in]. The difficult thing in the commercial theatre was new plays, it was very difficult to get new plays off the ground, they seemed to like classics or revivals, and that was quite difficult – to get a new play started. Michael Codron commissioning playwrights started to bring new talent in, which was brilliant – [Pinter, Frayn, John Mortimer] – absolutely brilliant.

HJ: Were writers easy to come by? Were there lots of people writing during the time?

GB: There was nothing else to write for, so presumably before television came it was quite easy to get writers. When television came along it became more difficult because television paid more money, so writing for the theatre was not so attractive. It became more attractive when the National Theatre was instituted and the commercial theatre lost out because all the playwrights wanted their work done at with the National Theatre or the RSC and the commercial managements had difficulty in producing their work.

HJ: So did the introduction of the National Theatre affect the commercial theatre greatly?

GB: It really affected the commercial theatre very badly. All the new work and all the new good work and all the actors wanted to work at the National Theatre. Firstly because the seasons were quite short and they were in repertoire so they didn't have to work 6 days a week – might have to work 3 days a week – and they would probably only run for a short time so they could fit in other work. The commercial theatre doing 8 shows a week and probably having to commit yourselves for slightly longer was not so attractive to them. So it had a big impact, the National Theatre.

HJ: Was there, maybe, an elitist attitude of the National Theatre? Was it seen as being the 'good' productions went to the National Theatre?

GB: I think the production values always seemed higher because it was subsidised – it was government money – and they had a big budget every year and they spent it wisely. Productions were better – better lit, better scenery, bigger casts than the commercial theatre could afford and that became a problem. The National Theatre was started at the Old Vic and didn't really move into the South Bank until much later. Laurence Olivier started the National Theatre.

HJ: During your career in theatre there was the Lord Chamberlain. How did that affect your job or theatre in general?

GB: I think it probably affected the producers more than the theatre owners because every script had to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain and he used to read them, apparently, or one of his minions used to read them and any swear-words were crossed out – not accepted – and people felt very restricted in the language they could use. He was abolished, or the office of Lord Chamberlain was abolished [as far as the theatre was concerned], I think in about the late sixties and the first production was Hair after the abolition of Lord Chamberlain. That was seen as a major milestone.

HJ: Did the abolition –

GB: He used to licence theatres – the Lord Chamberlain used to licence all the West End theatres, you had to go to the Lord Chamberlain to get a licence to run a theatre and his offices were responsible to ensure you looked after the theatre in a reasonable manner. If a play went on and somebody drifted slightly away from the script it would be the theatre owner that would get prosecuted rather than the producer.

HJ: So as a theatre manager, did you often come across it in that role?

GB: I think probably we would see one of his officers who used to come round once a year because he was responsible for safety –

HJ: Right.

GB: And fire regulations all came under the Lord Chamberlain although he used to devolve those powers to the London Fire Brigade as far as those regulations were concerned. He had architects that used to come round and look at scenery and all that type of thing. The Lord Chamberlain in my day was Lord Cobbold, I think, who was at one time Governor of the Bank of England then became Lord Chamberlain but I never met him.

HJ: Was it something that was omnipresent in theatre?

GB: What?

HJ: The Lord Chamberlain. Was it something that you could not escape it? Did you come up against it often in your jobs?

GB: Not really, no. Never really, I think the producers might have done with scripts but certainly not as a theatre manager, no. He may have seen the theatre owners, which I think they did once a year, but as a – bearing in mind that – as a theatre manager I do not think I ever came across him although he was a figure that one had to respect, needless to say.

HJ: Did you see theatre at the time as a contact business, as it is now, was it something where you had to know certain people? Was it open for newcomers or was it quite a close business?

GB: I think the nearer you got to the top it's like a pyramid it gets [more difficult]. It is really very much a contact business; it was then probably more than it is now. Everybody tended to start at the bottom and work their way up and the major problem is getting beyond a theatre manager, the next level, and that is purely on contacts. Got to have the ability, needless to say, but it's the people you know and producers you know who will probably put in a good word if they got on well with you while you were running a theatre. If somebody was looking for a general manager, for argument's sake, you would probably get your name put forward.

HJ: Mr Biggs, is there anything else you would like to add to the interview before we end?

GB: No, I think we've covered everything –

HJ: Well, it's been a pleasure –

GB: From the period we were looking at. [laughs]

HJ: Thank you very much, it's been a pleasure.

GB: Thank you.