

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

<http://sounds.bl.uk>

## Mike Churchill – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Charlotte D'Arcy**

**13 November 2009**

Theatre Manager. Actors; audiences; backstage technology (lighting, scenery, sound); cinema; Lord Bernard Delfont; Front of House; Harvey; Cameron Mackintosh; Prince of Wales Theatre; refreshments; souvenirs; James Stewart; theatre-going; theatre maintenance; theatre security; theatre toilets; ticket agencies.

CD: OK, so hi Mike! We're here to talk about the Theatre Archive Project and I'm just wondering, first of all, how did you – like when you were young – get involved with the theatre? Did you go to see shows?

MC: No. I came into the theatre very much by accident. I've always been dealing with people ever since I left school and I first left school without too many qualifications. I went into the shoe business.

CD: [Laughs]

MC: Yes. I used to work in a shoe shop in Croydon and I did reasonably well there initially. Then the company that had the shoe business were opening a boutique in the King's Road, Chelsea, in the sixties and I left home and took a bedsit in Queensway and I said 'I've arrived!' basically. The only trouble is that I arrived too well and went to all night parties and goodness knows what and ended getting into work later and later and later and ended up getting fired. So I thought 'Right, I need to get into a business where I don't have to get up early in the mornings!' because I liked the nightlife but I didn't like getting up in the mornings.

So I thought 'Well, I'll see what we can do' and at that time I was about 17, I suppose, and I thought 'cinemas, they're always looking for people – ushers, usherettes, that sort of thing'. So I walked around all the West End cinemas. But I've never written a CV in my life – never written one. I went out and sold myself basically. I'd knock on someone's door and say 'have you any vacancies? Yes or no?' Yes – interview; no – no interview. Fine.

I got a job at the Odeon Haymarket, which doesn't exist any more – unfortunately it closed down. I was taken on as a doorman and I progressed through there and became chief of staff. After a year or so I thought 'Hang on a minute, I could do well here – I must get onto management'. I was coming on to 21 years of age then and I thought 'I want to get into management', so I managed it, and got Assistant Manager of the Astoria, which has now been knocked down, and the Dominion, which is now a theatre

but was then a cinema. The Dominion-Astoria was a multi-unit run by the Rank Organisation. You used to do a couple of hours at one and, with the film change, you'd dash over the road to the other one, because the staff were the same.

Then I got the opportunity to go to the Odeon Marble Arch, which at that time was a wonderful, big D150 screen and was very luxurious and comfy. It's not a multi-screen cinema, but then it was great. The only trouble was that, by then, I'd been with the Rank Organisation for about seven years and I couldn't get any further in the cinema business because the policy at the Rank Organisation was: 'OK, if you want to have your own cinema you have to go out into the sticks and work your way back into the West End'. I thought, 'Well, all I've ever known is West End business – what's the point in me going out to Odeon Kilburn or Lands End or goodness knows where, getting beaten up every Saturday night by roughs, and trying to find my way back?'

So an opportunity arose from a pal of mine who was managing the Prince of Wales Theatre. In fact, he'd worked for me for a while as my box-office manager at the Odeon Marble Arch. He was very unfortunate though as he couldn't really add up very well and he was having a lot of problems with his accountants – the wages were always turning up later and later and later and it was causing all sorts of problems. So he said to me 'I know you want to move on but you can't move on at Rank's, why don't you come and work in theatre?' So I thought 'OK, fine' and I was taken on as assistant manager-cum-wages clerk for £40 a week back in 1974 and I thought 'This is great!' Now, I'd had a lot of experience working with people but never live shows because in cinema you push the button, it starts, and everything's fine – a whole different ball game.

Within four weeks of my going into the Prince of Wales Theatre, the general manager went down with a burst appendix and suddenly I had the Prince of Wales Theatre on my own over Christmas with four weeks of live theatre experience. The Danny la Rueshow was on, capacity business, and there wasn't anybody else on. At that time the theatre was run by Bernard Delfont and he actually didn't know that much about running theatres; he was a very good impresario – he put on shows all over the country – but he didn't actually run the theatre. He left that to the individual managers. So I found myself in a position where I had to learn very, very quickly and that's basically how it all started. He came back after about three months because he was not at all well, so I had three months on my own – six days a week, thirteen hours a day. Not very good for personal relationships, but it was exciting because at that time -1974/5 - you didn't have all this hierarchy going on, all this health and safety business – you ran it by the seat of your pants and used common sense - or you hoped you used common sense!. You also had to use a lot of personality because your staff are very reliant on you; you're only ever as good as the staff you've got and I'm a big believer in the fact that all problems that you've got stem from management. If you go into any place, a theatre, a cinema, a shop, a garage, if you've got staff that aren't up to scratch it means that management isn't up to scratch. It's a knock-on effect; if you have good management, you'll have good staff I reckon.

So I evolved a way of handling live theatre staff and because I didn't have any theatre background experience I was basically making it up as I went along. So I thought that if I was visiting the theatre as an actor or a musician or whatever, how would I like to be handled? I used to make it my business every time a new show came in to introduce myself to them. I'd go into the dressing rooms and say '...sorry about the size of the rooms... it is a 1937 building and there are limitations, but if you have any problems...'. So by introducing myself over, which was something they were apparently not used to – you'd never see the Front of House Manager if you were backstage if you're part of the visiting company. It was 'them' and 'us' and I didn't like that – we were all in the same game together; all the front of house would be nothing without the artists and the artists

would be nothing if we didn't have a front of house. So why don't we just go to the pub and socialise? So that's how it all started.

Then when the General Manager had been back for a while he wasn't at all well and he actually ended up dying and I was asked to take over - this was by Richard Mills, the Chief Executive for Lord Delfont as he was when he died. He said, 'You've got administrative experience. The Rank Organisation, we have to say, have been extremely good - they've taught you all the paperwork and all that sort of stuff', so I was able to step into that side of it very easily. Then they said, 'You've got the keys, run it!' and for pretty much 20 of the nearly 30 years that is exactly how it was. The changes really only came when Cameron ultimately bought the place, and that's the reason I was ultimately made redundant because a) I think he prefers to have slightly younger people around, and b) he also recognised the fact that I'd had the responsibility for the building for all that time as licensee. His way of doing business is more to run things from head office - he doesn't want individual units to have individual personalities. Perhaps that's a little bit strong but, quite rightly, he wants to be in control of it all as he's invested an awful lot of money in the refurb of the Prince of Wales Theatre - it was over £7m - and they really have done a beautiful, beautiful job of it. It really has been brought back to actually how I think the original architect would have liked to have seen it. The amazing thing about the Prince of Wales Theatre is the speed with which it was built. A brief history:

On that site there was a very notorious musical-type of place up to the late 1880s but it was an absolute cesspit, apparently. Then a theatre was built on the existing footprint that the Prince of Wales Theatre now has in 1884 and it was opened up as the Prince's Theatre. Now the reason that it was called the Prince's and was changed to the Prince of Wales was because there was a Prince of Wales Theatre, in Tottenham Street (which is off Tottenham Court Road near Warren Street Station) but that closed down in 1886. There's various thoughts as to why it closed down - some said it was unsafe but I don't know the actual facts of that. So the owner-management, whose name now escapes me, was a good pal of the Prince of Wales at that time and he got royal dispensation to get the name of the Prince of Wales Theatre transferred from the theatre in Tottenham Street to the current site. So in 1886 the Prince of Wales Theatre name first appeared in Coventry Street and it stayed there 'til 1937.

In the 1930s in general theatre tended to go very much into the Follies - there was an era of the Follies where all this stuff was coming over from France and the audience were loving the stuff. The manager of the Prince of Wales Theatre thought 'we'd like some of this', but the trouble with the old Prince of Wales was that it was only about a 600-seater theatre and was designed almost like the Albert Hall - it had about four levels of stalls: a grand, a royal, an upper and corridors going round it, so the seating in the auditorium was actually quite minimal compared to the amount of areas to reach the seats and the bars and the smoking rooms and vinery and all that sort of stuff that you used to have. So they said, 'I know what we'll do; if we want to get in on all this Follies stuff we'll just build a new theatre'. Well, the show finished, they closed the theatre, they demolished it, they built another theatre on the same site and opened with a new show all within nine months.

CD: Wow!

MC: No health and safety worries in those days!

CD: [Laughs]

MC: You can see photographs of Gracie Fields singing to the people that were actually on the ironwork – they're just sitting on ironwork with no crash helmets on or anything like that. But that's how things were in those days

CD: Yeah.

MC: So the building was built very, very quickly in 1937, and since 1937 and up 'til 2003 (when it was majorly refurbished) not a lot of work was done on the building because nobody actually took responsibility for it. It was leased out an awful lot to various different companies. When I was working there it was Trust House Forte, it was First Leisure Corporation, it was Bernard Delfont Ltd, so nobody really cared too much about the structure of the building and it did start to deteriorate. When I joined there I managed to get things going a little bit, but there's a limit to what you can do with your on board handyman and painter and that sort of thing but we kept the place looking reasonably tidy. The toilets were very inadequate; when the 1937 Prince of Wales was first built it only had four sit-downs for the ladies in the stalls and three in the circle and that's for an 1100-seater auditorium. In the late sixties I think another four cubicles managed to be squeezed into the stalls area but even so... but that still left you with only [counts 8... 9... 10...] 11 cubicles for the ladies' use. The gentlemen had a few cubicles but they didn't need them so much. It was one of those things that was a 'leftover' from the Victorian period, because in the 1800s when you went to the theatre, if you were a lady, you had so much finery generally and corsets and stuff like that that you just did not go unless you were at home and so this is why very few of the really old theatres in London have actually got adequate toilet facilities, because you didn't do that sort of thing in those days. [laughs]

So that was one of the things that was radically improved in the Prince of Wales, and many other things as well like sight lines, access [it's now got disabled access, it's now got a lift on board], the old stalls bar is actually used as a separate little venue from time to time – they can do little one-man shows and that sort of thing after the show is over. They've done a really good job on it now and I've very much enjoyed my time there.

But anyway, so going back to your original question...

CD: [laughs]

MC: ...I got into theatre by accident purely and simply having been at the right place at the right time and wanting to not get up early in the mornings. Well, of course once I took over the Prince of Wales and founded on my own I didn't have much night life from then on at all – you're doing 13 hours a day. But then I was growing up and having just left home originally and moving into Chelsea... it was great. It was a turning point in my life and, as I say, I've spent 29 years in that one building. I look back on it with some fondness but I don't miss it now. I really don't... Gimme a question.

CD: I was just wondering... You were saying [before the recording] – I can't remember the name of the actor – something about him not coming on stage if people were smoking.

MC: Ah, Jimmy Stewart.

CD: Yeah.

MC: James Stewart came to the Prince of Wales Theatre in 1975 and reprised his film role that he made his own in Harvey. The show ran a whole six months and it ran for 208 performances and he never missed a single performance. I don't think he really ever understood who I was though... He was a very big fan of tennis and Wimbledon was on in the course of his run and I got a call down from him saying that he would like to have a television in his dressing room. Now in those days you couldn't hire short-term televisions, it wasn't a feasible thing to do in 1975. So I thought 'How am I going to keep this icon of the cinema world happy?'. I thought, 'I know...!' and I went out and I bought a little portable television set myself and I rented it to him and I worked out a rent; I thought, 'If he's going to be here for six months I'll get it paid of by the time he goes [laughs] and I'll have a little telly for myself', which is all well and good, but tellies were quite expensive then and my wages weren't all that good at the time, so I had to buy a second-hand one. Anyway he was happy because he could watch his tennis. But every once in a while something would go wrong with it or the signal wouldn't be quite right because he'd move the wire or something so he's phone down and say [puts on an accent] 'Err... the televisions not working er...' – [half whispers] he did used to talk like that with these long gaps and at times it was a little bit frustrating because you kept wanting to finish his sentences for him. So I used to go up and say, 'OK, I'll fix it' and I luckily was able to get it going again no problem but being a little bit practical. So I think he always thought of me as the TV repair man!

CD: [Laughs]

MC: I don't think he really ever sussed me as the theatre manager, but it was fine. I mean, he was such a professional; he was practically deaf and didn't have very good eyesight at all. He had planned out and stepped out the entire stage - if any of my stagehands were to put a piece of scenery in the wrong position he would bump into it. He had it so set in his mind exactly where everything was, and it was a very clever set as well because it was basically two sets, one inside the other. There was the doctor's offices and there was him at home and we managed one of the quickest scene changes every day because we had the three walls of the office all flown completely as one so when we had to change the scene from one room to the other the tabs would come down. As the tabs were coming down the office was coming down about six inches above it and literally fitting inside the other three walls that were fixed to the stage. As soon as the tabs came down the stagehands en masse came on and moved furniture and others brought on furniture. When the tabs came down they used to bounce once, twice and go up again and the room was totally changed. It always got a round of applause – I mean, we were so proud of that because it was quite a heavy set and it was all done by hand, nothing electric at all because everything was on counter-weights and so on. It was brilliant.

But that show, again, had a lot of very interesting memories for me because it's about an imaginary rabbit; [this man's] family are trying to put him away in a nut house because he keeps seeing these rabbits because he likes to have a drink. That's basically the story of it. I used to be standing in the foyer when the show came out and at least twice on every performance I would be approached or be asked by someone (because the staff would point them in my direction) – people would be saying 'Who played the rabbit?' They're looking in the programme for the rabbit – they were so into this performance that they physically saw the rabbit themselves; you'd get doors opening for no reason at all and the way Jimmy used to watch something going across the stage, well, you would actually believe he was seeing somebody walking across the stage. Some of the audience really started getting into it and they thought, 'Who played the rabbit?'. There never was a rabbit but it was just brilliantly done.

That was the first time we also got into souvenirs. In the seventies you didn't do much in the way of souvenirs – nowadays it's mugs and posters and all that sort of thing. I actually did a deal with a little local shop that had handmade floppy rabbits and we sold them at the end of the show and they went like hot cakes! The only thing the company did wrong on that one was that they didn't do a souvenir brochure. Now the only time that man has been on the British stage – they could have done a potted history of him, a bit of information about the show as opposed to the film. In those days a programme was about 30p but you could have sold it for £1-£1.50 for the souvenir brochure but the producing management didn't want to go down that road. To me that was a big, big waste because it could have taken an awful lot more revenue.

Very happy show and it ran very well, as I say, it was a 98% capacity for the entire run, and the poor old understudy...

CD: [laughs]

MC: ...used to stand in the rear stalls during every single performance – all 208 performances – I still remember his name, Hugo DeVernier. A lovely old boy, but he never actually got onto stage to play [laughs]. Jimmy Stewart... Lovely, lovely man. He had his 70th birthday with us at the time and very professional. Of course, that was my first new show coming in as well – first time I ever did a fit-up, get-out, something I'd never known in my life before. So, when the Danny La Rue show went out I thought, 'Well, I need to know what's going on', so I stayed up all night and watched them dismantling all the stuff and helping out if necessary. Then I was about 23/4 years of age and this was magic! I was in charge of one of the best-known theatres in the West End, the one that everyone who comes to London passes because you've got Piccadilly Circus, Leicester Square, and ours was the street that joins them together and it's the only theatre on the street.

It was a very steep learning curve but you had to put yourself out, and I learnt an awful lot about how backstage works as a result – we used to go up in the flies and help out there. I tried, over the years, to get myself into the frame of mind that I would never tell anybody to do anything that I could not do myself. I used to take out ice-cream trays when we were short staffed and sell ice-creams on the interval - why not!? At the end of the day you're looking after your public; they pay good money to come in and why shouldn't they have a good time? If you can have a bit of a good time with them as well, why not!? I've stood in the wings on curtain calls – one New Year I was even dressed up as a nun because I was going out off to a party afterwards...

CD: [laughs]

MC: ...You'd wish everybody "Happy New Year" from the stage and they'd all be laughing at you – 'bloody manager, he's mad again!' You'd see the show out that way, by wishing everyone Happy New Year – and I had a moustache and beard at the time and dressed as a nun it was a little bit weird...

CD: [laughs]

MC: But, again, you could do it then. Business today is a whole different ball game; everything has to be terribly prim and proper, and to my mind there isn't the same personality. If you go into a theatre now, the chances of you getting shown into your seat... It doesn't happen. Everybody got shown to their seats at the Prince of Wales right up until when we closed out.

You don't want the problems with double bookings. I think I was probably responsible for initiating the checking of agency tickets back in the seventies, because agents used to be absolute buggers. If you were a good customer of Harrods, for example and said [puts on an accent] 'Ooh... I want tickets for such and such a theatre', the agent would look in his books and know he hasn't got any tickets but he would write out the ticket anyway and take the customer's money because they know that the theatres have house keeps and things like that who will try and sort it out and make sure the customer gets into a seat. This used to happen an awful lot and then you'd get mistakes made and all that sort of thing.

I had a situation towards the end of the Danny La Rue show where the show had already started and I was about to go down to the office and start the paperwork up when a coach group arrived – the Northern Ladies or something. They were all a little bit tanked anyway because they'd had a case of some sort of beer on the actual coach, and they'd been delayed on the motorway, and they were well, well angry for being late. They were even angrier when – luckily they'd actually come after the show had started because if they hadn't have done there would have probably been a punch-up in the auditorium – their tickets were double booked. The seats that they thought they had were already taken – the agency had double booked the entire coach full, we're talking about 48 people. I ended up in the fracas there of actually having the sleeve of my evening suit ripped off by a lady that was that angry with me.

CD: A lady?

MC: Well, you have to be nice to their face! We ended up all amicably – I took them all down to the bar and I sat them all down with a drink and I explained the situation of how things work and how, when they get back to Leeds, they ought to find their ticket agent and give them a good seeing to [laughs] because it wasn't our fault. I was able to persuade them that it wasn't, but we got into a situation where this was happening an awful lot. Usually the people who were first sitting in the seats were the ones whose tickets weren't actually valid. So, we actually initiated ticket checking for agency tickets; we put aside a window and anyone with an agency ticket was directed over there and we said, 'would you mind just taking it over there, we just want to check your tickets to

see if they're all right'. We used to stop about 90% of the problems then, which meant, of course, that we could start on time.

And that was another big beef that I used to have, that I still have with some theatres; you advertise a time to start at such and such a time... Let's do it! If people can't get there on time, they haven't taken sufficient thought of the weather or traffic or whatever – not our fault. Why should other people be held back who have trains to catch and things like that? So we always used to be up on time, or within a minute or two. The only time it went wrong was on first nights. First nights, of course, are always a different thing. You don't have a paying audience in on a first night; they're all there to be seen, or to show off their latest mink or whatever it is, and so you expect those to go up a bit late. The show is earlier anyway because the press need to do their stuff and get it to copy.

So I initiated a few things, I think, because I wasn't in theatre; I'd come with a cinema background and no live theatre experience. People used to say, 'You can't do this'... Why not? 'Well, it's never been done'. Classic example: [I can't remember what show] people used to say 'haven't you got anything to eat?' Now I thought, 'Well, there's times when people have to dash from the office and get straight here, they'd like something'. Well, what can you do that isn't going to be offensive to people? So I thought, 'Oh, well we'll have some sandwiches available, some sandwiches in the bar. Why not?' I did a deal with a local café round the corner – he used to supply me with fresh-done sandwiches every night, I used to pay cash for them, I even got them sale or return but I never returned any. [Any that weren't sold after the interval were given to staff at cost]. So, it was paid for out of petty cash and the profit was banked as profit.

I didn't ask for anybody's permission or anything and about a month or so later I got a phone call down from the accounts department saying, 'We've got these Miscellaneous Items you're banking, yes?' and I said, 'Yeah', and they said, 'Well, what is that?' and I said, 'Sandwich sales', 'Sandwiches? We don't do sandwiches', and I said, 'Yes we do', 'You can't do that', and I said, 'Why?' and they said, 'Because it's not theatre', I said, 'You've seen the revenue we're taking. That's profit' – I mean taking money out of petty cash, buying the stuff, reimbursing the petty cash and banking the balance difference. I was told physically by the board to stop it. But they were fresh sandwiches – they were fresh that day (though nowadays it's a bit different) – and we used to sell them for about a pound and they cost me 30p to buy in; 70p per sandwich was a clear profit. I mean we never used to order a lot, we'd maybe get through 50 of them a night; supply and demand.

So I'd come in with a different viewpoint and as a result also, though, I didn't mix with theatre people very much either. I didn't go to shows; I only saw four of my own shows over the 29 years because being in the auditorium and seeing the show isn't what I'm about. In fact, one of the times I actually went in to see a show I got called out again because there was a problem they wanted me to help out with.

CD: [Laughs]

MC: You're there to run the building, to look after your punters, to look after your staff and to make sure it all works and I didn't do this business of [puts on an accent] 'Oh darling, let's all go down to the pub...' or 'If you let me have tickets for your show I'll let you have tickets for mine' and all this sort of thing. The amount of stuff that used to go on between the theatres... I couldn't get into that at all. A producer puts his show into your theatre, he pays you a rental and there's various contracts that are involved so the

tickets aren't yours to give away. They belong to the producer. It's his money. All right, if there's space and you're not going to sell them anyway then that's fair enough, but you get a hard line within the box office that used to insist on 'Why can't we come to the first night?' and all this sort of stuff. They're forgetting their place; their job is to do whatever their job is. If you can get a little something out of it – a perk – then fine but it's not to be expected. So, as I say, I had a totally different outlook to most people in theatre and as a result over the years I was known by name but very few people actually met me, which had its advantages because on the odd occasion when I wanted to see a show I'd phone my box office up and say 'Can you see if they have any student standbys for such and such a show coz I fancy going and seeing it' – I never ever asked for a comp in my life. What used to happen was the box office manager used to phone me down and say 'Yeah, yeah we've got some tickets for you on such and such a day' and I'd say 'How much have I got to pay?' and he'd say 'They'd like you to come as their guest' because they wanted to meet me. They wanted to find out who's that bloody Churchill who's been at the Prince of Wales all these years who we never see?

So it was rather nice as I used to get entertained a little bit. A manager who'd I'd never met before would say, 'You're Mike. I've heard a lot about you. Would you like a drink?' and all that sort of stuff. It was interesting from that point of view, but I would not get into that clique, I wouldn't get into that. At the end of the day, particularly towards the end, you've done your 13-hour day and I don't particularly want to go out and have drinks with everybody. Back in the seventies and early eighties absolutely! It was a learning curve; it was a requirement. Lord Delfont used to say, 'Look after your stars'. I mean, I'll even go so far as to say the situation was a little bit strange in the seventies and early eighties. I was actually given a bottle of scotch a week by the company; this was to maintain an alcohol level in my system. The reason for this was an instruction when I'm standing in the foyer and the show's coming in that if I saw anyone I recognised I was to approach them and ask them if they'd like a drink in the interval. The reason for this, Lord Delfont used to say, 'As they have worked for me, are working for me, or might be working for me in the future. So, therefore, if they come to my theatre I'd like them to have a good time'.

It only had one little sting in the tail, though. [Sighs] I had to drink whatever they drank at the same rate that they drank because, as Delfont said, 'I don't want anyone saying that the manager tried to get them pissed'. So if you had someone that came in who was a gin drinker I had to drink gin, if they were into scotch I had to drink scotch, and if they had three scotches in the course of the interval I had to have three scotches as well. I mean, now you couldn't get away with it, because it's not politically correct and plus the health and safety point of view and you're not allowed to drink and blah blah blah... But we're talking about the late seventies – early eighties and I have to say that after about six years I was practically alcoholic. The scotch I used to drink in one sitting – a bottle, neat; on a Tuesday I used to sit down at ten o'clock and do the salaries for everybody, which used to have to be done by hand before computers and you'd have to add it all up on a Kalamazoo system and you'd have to press hard so it would go through all the carton papers. You're doing about 120 wages, which used to take about six hours and I used to sit down there on a Tuesday and do it right the way through with a bottle of neat scotch, no ice, and it would all add up. If I tried to do it without the scotch it used to take me longer and it was really, really strange. You'd get this mindset going. Happy days, but I got myself out of that mindset eventually.

MC: You were expected to entertain. You'd a phone call down from an artist like, 'we're all going off to a restaurant and we'd like you to join us'; 'Oh that's very nice, thank you very much'; 'It's not going to cost you anything'; 'Ah, yeah, but...' So you'd meet up

with them at the Stage Door afterward, you go shooting off to a restaurant at Greek Street or whatever and you'd be staggering out of a restaurant at three/four o'clock in the morning. The artist would be going home, going to bed – he doesn't have any theatre 'til about six o'clock in the evening. The number of times I've come out of a restaurant and thought 'There's not point in me going home' – I've gone to the office, laid down on the office floor, gone to sleep, eight o'clock the cleaners have woken me up and you start another day. But I was young and it was exciting and the fact that these well known people wanted my company and wanted me to join them as part of the entourage – the hangers-on, the groupies if you like – 'Oh, we've got the manager with us'.

And that was the other weird thing about being a theatre manager; you'd get introduced to people about parties or whatever and they'd ask, 'Oh, what do you do?' 'I run the Prince of Wales Theatre', 'Oh, have you got any tickets?' – that was the first thing so many people would say! The moment they knew you were in theatre they wanted something. I'd think to myself 'How bloody rude'; 'Who do you work for? Oh, Rolls Royce? Can I have a car?'

CD: [Laughs]

MC: It's the same thing, isn't it? Why would you automatically ask for something from someone you've only just met? But that's how it used to be. Things are well different now. The prices people have to pay now to go to the theatre frightens me. It was getting bad enough by the time the theatre closed down because you've got a show that isn't going to be to everybody's taste and you can never tell it until you've seen the show. Some people rely on critics' views and that sort of thing but others think 'We'll go along and see it'. If you spend £20 on a ticket and you don't like they show you put it down to experience. It was getting to £40 by the time I was... It's now getting to £60. Now that's an awful lot of money, especially if your seat isn't up-to-scratch if you haven't got a good view, if the temperature isn't right, if the toilets aren't... And what about the prices they're charging in bars now? Ah, I think it's absolutely scandalous!

I go to the theatre very rarely these days mainly because I can't relax in them. I got into the theatre and immediately start looking; the housekeeping isn't right, it needs painting round the corner there; look at the state of that uniform, when was the last time that was cleaned?; the carpets are a bit threadbare. You know, I can't relax in it! Immediately your management hat goes on and you think 'Oh no, no!'. I remember being appalled one time coming down the rear staircase from the Upper at the Palladium and the paint was flaking off the walls in the exitways and I was mortified and I thought 'You've got people from all over the world coming to the London Palladium to see this particular show, and they're going out through an exitway where the paint is flaking off the walls. How is that going to leave a memory on them?' Theatre is theatre, it's supposed to be magic, it's supposed to be there to be enjoyed and not to be spoiled by shabbiness and dirt and rudeness. I still have great difficulty going to the theatre and particularly when I see the price at the bars.

I was always pretty reasonable; I think I was the cheapest in the West End as far as bar sales were concerned. By not charging a lot and making sure that everyone got served you still made an awful lot of money. I used to give all my staff commission. Bar staff used to get 2.5%, so every £1 that was taken they got 2.5p. That adds up in the course of a week. They were getting maybe another £30-40 on top of their wage, all right it was taxed but they got commission. Usherettes got commission on programs and ice

creams so they sold it, they went out of their way; they didn't stand at the back chewing gum... they went out when the queue was gone with the ice cream trays and they would be walking up and down the aisles, 'Anybody else want an ice cream, programme sales, souvenir brochures, records?' Give somebody something to give them an incentive to sell. Bars in particular.

I had this huge long bar in the Prince of Wales Theatre, a beautiful big, long bar. When I first went there staff couldn't give a monkeys; they wouldn't persuade anybody to come up to the other end at all. I made that one bar into four separate units; four separate staff; four separate lots of stock; they were responsible for their own particular stock, they had their own tills, they had their own commission. It wasn't pooled – what they sold they got commission on. Before you knew it they were saying, 'I'm free! Anybody else? Next please, next please'. We never had the situation where people had not been served by the end of the interval. We approved the situation when we had *Aspects of Love*. In *Aspects of Love* we actually took in one year, in the bars £1 million. Now when you bear in mind that the bars only trade eight hours a week because you've got your incoming of three-quarters on an hour (from when the doors open to the show) and you've got a 15 maybe 20 minute interval but that its. So per show you're running an hour, maybe an hour and five minutes. So maybe eight hours–nine hours a week we actually took £1 million in the bar. It was First Leisure then and at the annual meeting I was actually given a little pin to stick in my lapel to say I was a 'First Leisure Millionaire'. I didn't get any money for it [laughs] but it shows what can be done if you give the staff an incentive. You look after your staff they'll look after you. As I said earlier, you're only ever as good as your staff, your staff are only ever as good as the show. We're all in the same boat together. Good times.

CD: I'm just wondering... You mentioned a little while about how you only saw a couple of shows at your theatre. What ones did you see?

MC: I saw Harvey.

CD: Yeah.

MC: I watched that a few times maybe also from the back but literally five or ten minutes at a time. To actually physically go in I went in and sat and I watched that one. I went in and sat down for *Copa Cabana* coz that was an amazing staging. Em... *Aspects of Love*, I sat down for that one. I mean, we were closed down for six months setting that up because the stage had to be completely taken out and rebuilt and we had to extend the orchestra pit, which meant doing alterations to the dressing rooms underneath so it was a big job to do that so I watched that one. Just for fun, actually, I sat and watched *Godspell* coz that was a whole different type of thing. All right it was a revival and I had seen *Godspell* when it first came out with... God! I can't think of his name now but I can see his face. Anyway. [Mutters 'A singer'] But I saw that at the Wyndhams Theatre back in nineteen hundred and frozen stiff whenever that was. Seeing it again in your own theatre was a bit fun seeing the kids run and go up and down the aisles – it was a totally different type of theatre. To actually leave your office it meant you had to go in on your day off if you actually wanted to sit there because you're running it with a very short...

I mean, I had an Assistant Manager and myself and between the two of us we used to run the entire business, and that's part of the reason why I ultimately got made redundant. It was because over the years, the 29 years, I had of course accumulated quite a tasty salary coz the staff wages went up every year and my wages went up every year – I couldn't have my staff earning more than me. So by the time the theatre closure came I was on quite a tasty salary and I know that the new management that came in actually came in at less than two-thirds of the salary I was on when I left. So Cameron's not daft, you know. But there again I don't think that man got so much responsibility because he's being told what to do by Head Office. I'm really happy that Cameron recognised the fact that I would find that extremely difficult to do; if you'd been running one building your way for 29 years [interruption] to be suddenly asked...

CD: OK. [Laughs]

MC: [Laughs] To suddenly be asked to do as you're told and to listen to orders from Head Office. Now I couldn't have done that. [Pauses] So where was I? Completely thrown me that has... Er...

CD: Redundancy.

MC: Yeah. They ended up actually... I think they have three, maybe four managers there now compared to the two that there were before.

CD: That's not right.

MC: Well, different requirements, and I suppose I was very flexible with the hours I worked; I never sort of said, 'Oh, it's five o'clock and I'm going home' coz at the end of the day it's your baby almost. I treated it as if it was my business, as if the profits were going to me, as if they were my staff, and so nowadays I don't suppose people take same attitude. I was very lucky to go into that business at the time that I did and I saw it through a period of extreme interest not restricted by fire regulations, health and safety.... I mean, I'm really surprised that artists aren't required to wear helmets on stage because of the amount of equipment hanging over them – something's going to happen one of these days! It's gotten to a stage where the paperwork aspect was overtaking the job; you will very rarely see a manager standing in the foyer. Now to me it was very, very important; you've spent £60, you're going in to see a show, you should see at least who's in charge of that building, because if you've got a problem you want to know who you've got to go and speak to. I stood in that foyer every time I was on duty. Everybody who walked into that theatre - 1200 people - had the availability to see me.

Of course in the late eighties when we had all the bombings going on in London, we were very hands on and we used to physically body-search everybody that came into that building. We were lucky with the Prince of Wales Theatre because it was quite a narrow entranceway and foyer and I used to take one door, my catering manageress - who looked after the usherettes - would take another door and we'd split the 1200 people - 1100 actually - in two queues – men through one door, women through the other and we used to pat them down and check in handbags and it went all right. We

used to go up late at that time, but we had the pillar box blew up that was outside what was then the Swan & Edgar's in Piccadilly Circus and bombs were going off all over the IRA business. We wired all our doors so if anybody came through an exit door we could tell straight away and get it checked out. Things were quite tight and you had to sort of think on your feet, you couldn't rely on Head Office... I had to take decisions. Nowadays they expect you to pick up the phone and speak to somebody in Head Office 'Can we do this? Can we do that?'

I had a situation one night when I was sitting in the office looking at the closed circuit TV. That's another thing I started in the West End: nobody else had closed circuit TV. I put it in the Prince of Wales and it has got quite a good system now even in the new building. And I looked up and saw all these police officers appearing in the foyer and I was thinking 'What's going on there?' And the house phone went, 'Mr Churchill there's some police officers here who want to speak to you' and I thought, 'Oh God, well, there you go'. Went up the stairs and they took me over to one side and they said 'We've just had a notice from the press office that a coded warning had been given for your building and it's due to go off at such and such a time. What are you going to do about it?' Now at that time we'd implemented all sorts of checks; we used to do checks under the seats before the house opened, we checked all the lavatory cisterns, literally anywhere where anybody could have put a package in the course of the day. Also we locked up a lot of areas during the day as well, and we had a lot of controls in place and I turned round to the police officer and I said, 'We're not going to close'. The show was on at that time and all the staff were standing around and I said 'No, we're OK. Thanks for the warning but we'll carry on'. Then the police officer looked at me and looked at my staff and said 'OK, well I'm going to move my people to a safe distance and we'll wait for the time limit'.

CD: Nice!

MC: Nice. And the time limit passed and nothing happened but this was a very valuable exercise to the staff, though, because I was able to say to them at the staff parade after the show came down and everyone had gone home, 'Now you understand why I've been badgering you so much to do these checks' - I was able to turn round and say with my hand on my heart that 'I believed we did not have a threat because I trusted you all to have done your job right' and that was a hell of an involvement of the staff who suddenly from 'Yeah we've been doing all this stuff, we've been thinking it's a bit of a joke' to all of a sudden when there's a real situation and because we said that we didn't find anything we carried on. Now it was a big, big learning curve for them then, and it was one of the best things that had actually happened to us. There you go.

I did clear on one occasion. We had a situation that was a bit different and I have to remember the actual background details to it... But I went up on stage and I actually said, 'Ladies and Gentlemen due to circumstances beyond our control we find it necessary to close the show and empty the auditorium, so could you please...' We had this set procedure and we emptied it all out. It was before the show had started, that's right, and the incoming was on board and we stopped anyone else from coming in. We'd had a warning then, and this was in the early stages before we had so many sophisticated checks, and so I thought, 'Right, we'll start up late. We'll stop anybody coming in, the people who were already sitting there would move out, we'll have a good search round, and we'll reopen'. We actually cleared the house out then, we did our checks and everything and we ended up starting about 20 minutes late and anyone who

didn't want to come in we gave their money back no argument – if they were nervous about it then fine.

But it was my very fond memory that I was pulled up in front of the managing director the next morning who said, 'Mike, er, from last night's show report I see that you cleared the house'. I said, 'Yeah'. He said, 'The policy here is not to clear' and I said, 'Excuse me, can I have that in writing?' and he said, 'Oh there's no need for that, no'. I said, 'Look, I'm the licensee, I'm in charge of the building so unless I have something in writing that tells me I'm not to do something I'm supposed to do, then I will see it how I see it at that time. I'm not going to go on the front page of every newspaper and see "Prince of Wales Theatre Blown Up – Manager Refused to Clear"'. You have to make the decisions as you see them on the ground at that point in time, so I said, 'If you cannot give it to me in writing I will do it my way or' - a very theatrical gesture of mine - I threw the keys on his desk and said, 'you run the building'. I mean, looking back on it I'd only been in the building, I suppose, for three years, I wasn't really established then I was still fairly green. I got away with it.

But they decided then that no, I will do what I think according to the situation at the time, which is what you have to do. You can't phone up somebody at home at nine o'clock at night and say, 'we've got this problem at the theatre, what shall we do?' Unless you're there you can't make a proper judgement. You've gotta be the person who's got the controls in place, who had implemented them and can make a decision on them. A third party... it's not right for them to make the decision on your behalf coz at the end of the day it's your face that's going to be splashed across the news media. Of course I was particularly concerned at the time because what an IRA coup it would be 'Prince of Wales Blown Up!' – they don't have to put the theatre in and it would sell an awful lot of newspapers. So you have that pressure. [laughs]

CD: So I was wondering, you obviously know a lot about the backstage stuff and everything that was happening there; is there anything you know about the lighting or the sound or the design?

MC: To a degree. I mean, sound is something that was always brought in by the producing management. In fact, generally, West End Theatre these days has nothing available onsite at all. The producer wants to have his sound in, but if it was a musical - we mostly did musicals... so the director wants a particular sound – there is not enough money in the world to put in sufficient equipment on site for a theatre because you wouldn't be able to deal with all the various things. So lighting and sound is hired in according to the requirements of the show and it is the responsibility of the visiting management and has nothing to do with the theatre. The theatre will supply the staff. I mean, I had a chief electrician and three others, and a master carpenter, a head flyman and two others, and according to the show requirements you would then take on operators or stagehands or whatever. We supplied those, but the equipment is hired and paid for and ordered by the producing management; we maintain it and we operate it.

Sound is totally different. Sound comes in, again, by the producing management and they also have their own sound operators. It's a very particular type of skill and producers have their own people that they like to use to get the sound that they want. So the theatre, then, basically doesn't get slapped with anything; if the lighting designer cocks up with how the lighting works, well then that's down to the lighting designer. We can only work according to his script, if you like, but the lights are put in place and

hung by our staff and they're operated by our staff but they're paid for by the producing management.

MC: We had very little stock – I mean, yes, in the old days you used to have your own lanterns and all that sort of thing. With technology marching on, with all these Verrey lights and all these things that move, that are computer driven, every show's got a totally different requirement. This is one of the reasons why, nowadays, you can't put on a show for less than £1 million because of the grid alone - what you need to hang up in there - it's quite amazing: you build extensions to stages, even all the scenery comes in. We don't have really proper carpenters anymore; I used to have a property master years ago who used to make stuff that broke on stage but nowadays it's all hired in and if it breaks then you hire in another one. The days of having your own workshops in the commercial theatre is gone.

In the suburbs it's a little bit different; they'd still make a lot of their own stuff and store a lot of their own stuff as far as scenery is concerned. I mean if they build something for one show and it's not wanted or going somewhere, they'll store it and use it for something else. Some stuff turns up in pantomimes years and years and years one after the other. Of course you've got totally different things like the Royal Opera House and so on where they have massive workshops and build things specifically rather than putting it out to tender with outside contractors. So I learnt a lot about how it all works and how it's all put together but the bottom line is that it wasn't supplied by us. So if it went tits-up it wasn't our fault, basically! [laughs]

CD: Do you mind if I go slightly off-topic and ask you about the audiences. Did you see a change in the audience throughout the period – like the kind of people who went and the kind of reactions they had?

MC: It depends very much on the show. If it was a fairly big musical the sort of people you would get are always much of a muchness. Suddenly something would come along, though, and inspire a lot of people who had never been to the theatre before. I'm thinking in particular of 'Allo 'Allo - the television show - and we had that for a year with the television cast and we did phenomenal business and we had a lot of people who came to see that who'd never been to a theatre before and who spent an awful lot of money during the interval because they were so used to, on the advert, going to make themselves a cup of tea and all of a sudden here they were and they had a situation where there'd be a stop in the middle of the show and they'd go and buy ice cream and sandwiches. So it does vary an awful lot depending on the type of show you're putting on.

I do get a little bit miffed with the way some people dress, though. I think that if you're spending £60 you can at least make an effort to look as if you have £60, you know what I mean? People would come into the theatre with backpacks and all this sort of thing – how comfortable can you be? I mean that's just a personal thing but at the end of the day why shouldn't people come and see it dressed whichever way they want. Then, of course, you get the real fans; you get the people who come two or three times a week for the entire run of a show and sometimes they'll go a little bit strange as well and dress up like their favourite characters.

In audiences generally there's always going to be somebody that's going to be a problem. When you've got 1100 people you're going to have a problem with at least

one or two of them – law of averages it has to be, you can't please everybody. So something used to happen every day. Either they'll faint, or they'll fall over, or they'll be sick, or they'll be abusive, or they're drunk, or have a heart attack or whatever. I've had three people die at the Prince of Wales.

CD: You're kidding.

MC: No, no. One was very, very peaceful; third row from the stage, middle of the aisle and we'd cleared the house and he was still sitting there. Another one was not so much fun; a lady had been taken ill and was on her way down to the ladies toilet and she's actually keeled over in the doorway of the ladies toilet five minutes before the interval. Now bearing in mind the Prince of Wales only had one ladies downstairs and one ladies upstairs and she'd gone and flaked out in the entranceway and she was still alive at that point and we weren't sure whether to move her or not and all of a sudden we had a lot of people wanting to use the toilet and refusing point blank to go elsewhere or to wait. I had a situation where some people were actually stepping over this woman and I used to think, 'how would you feel if that was your mother lying there?' So you'd sometimes get very angry with people and think, 'Where's your humanity? Where's your caringness?'

I have to tell you one thing, and I'm not having a go at women at all, but the graffiti was always worse in the ladies [laughs]. Make of that what you will, I won't say any more about that. [laughs]

CD: [laughs]

MC: Audiences... they're fun, but there's always somebody that you've got to be a little bit wary of and you can spot them usually. I used to stand in the foyer with the fireman - coz again the fire curtain had to come down and be seen to come down and up in the course of the performance, and I used to have him in the foyer with me because he was in a uniform that looked a bit policeish – nowadays everyone has security in the foyer but in those days you didn't. I'd have him stand there as well and we'd watch people going in and I'd say to him, 'Right, check where they're sitting. I think we're going to have a problem with them before the night's out'. Eight times out of ten I'd be right. I'd get a phone call up, 'Somebody in seat so and so and such and such is not well' - or 'is making a noise', or 'is drunk' and I'd check it out and it's exactly the seat numbers I'd sussed out beforehand.

In fact, sometimes it actually got to the stage where you'd go and check them out before the show had started; if you thought they weren't quite, shall we say, sober you could actually make the effort and remove them before they became a problem. You have the right to refuse admission, at the end of the day, and it doesn't matter how much they shout and yell, 'Sorry, we don't want you in here. Here's your money, thank you very much, get out' and if they don't want to get out the police will remove you, simple as that. That was always the thing; you had the right to refuse admission. It doesn't matter who they are, how rich they are, or how famous they are or whatever. 'Don't you know who I am?', 'I don't care, I don't want you here', 'You can't do that...'. At times you've got to stand up for yourself for the good of everybody else. It'll upset some people, but if you've got 1100 people and you've upset five of them because of

what you've said to them it's far better than if you have 100 upset because they were in the area and were being disturbed during the course of the show. There you go.

CD: We've gone over an hour, but I'm just wondering if there's anything else that you wanted to add that particularly stands out when you were at the Prince of Wales that might be worth putting down?

MC: Not really. I really regret that I did not keep a diary to be quite honest. If I'd have sat down and written a couple of sentences every night about what happened that night it would make very, very interesting reading. You forget so much, this is the thing, because no two days are ever the same. I've had friends of mine come to me twenty years down the road and say, 'Do you remember that day when such and such and so and so happened?' I'd completely forgotten and suddenly it rings a bell and I think, 'Oh God, yes!' and it's gone completely and it was quite an interesting thing and I'd think, 'How did I ever forget that?' because you just have so many memories you can't think of them all and some of them, of course, are things that happened that it would be wrong to speak of now. I had situations with artists, with well-known people... but you also have to maintain a confidence.

That's another big factor, of course, in theatre particularly with your artists and so on; they have to trust you and it's very, very important because they're under the spotlight all the time and they don't need somebody putting out a little word about them, 'Do you know what they've been doing during the interval and blah blah blah... I could tell you a story!'. And I could tell you stories. And I won't, and I wouldn't dream of it because, again, this business we have nowadays where everything gets reported and the press are always out to try and find some scandal. There was a lot of scandal around in the eighties, there was an awful lot of scandal and some of it was blatantly criminal but hey, it was fun at the time!

CD: [laughs]

MC: [laughs] I don't think I'd better go any further down that road! I can't think of anything to be quite honest, but at times I wish I'd kept a record because there was so much and I really had a wonderful time to have lived through that period. To have had the one job in the one building for 29 years – it's a shame it didn't quite to get 30 because that would have made a nice round number but the building closed down and that was that. But it is a lovely building and if you haven't been to see Mamma Mia...

CD: [laughs]

MC: ...go and see it at the Prince of Wales. Seriously. It's a wonderful show and the building is so suited to it now. It's brilliant.

CD: Cool. Thank you very much for talking to us Mike!

MC: That's all right. You're welcome.