

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Braham Murray – interview transcript

Interviewer: Adam Smith

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Director. 69 Theatre Company; actors; The Arts Council; Johanna Bryant; Century Theatre; the Lord Chamberlain; choreography; Michael Codron; The Connection; Tom Courtenay; Michael Elliot; Endgame; Lord Gardiner; Hang Down Your Head and Die; Terry Jones; Long Day's Journey into Night; Robert Lindsay; Loot; Oxford University Drama Society (OUDS); Oxford University Experimental Theatre Club (ETC); Mary Rose; Mia Farrow; Michael Meyer; Helen Mirren; musicals; The Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester; set production; She Stoops to Conquer; sound design; David Wood; Casper Wrede; David Wright.

AS: This is Adam Smith speaking to Mr Braham Murray on the 5th November 2009. Before we begin can I just thank you on behalf of the University of Sheffield and the British Library Theatre Archive Project for participating.

BM: It's a pleasure.

AS: Right, so we'll begin at the very beginning. Just before I start, we're looking at 1945 to 1968.

BM: Right.

AS: But I'll do a bit of background first.

BM: OK.

AS: Do you remember your first experience of theatre?

BM: The very first experience of theatre was pantomime, many many years ago. I can't remember which one. Sorry.

AS: That's all right. And, do you recall any of the plays you saw as a young man?

BM: What do you call young?

AS: Adolescent? Teenager?

BM: Oh, hundreds! I was stage-struck, and I went to go and see every single play that I could in London within a week of its opening. So I saw masses and masses of plays.

AS: Did you live in London at the time?

BM: Yes.

AS: Right.

BM: But I was at school in Clifton, in Bristol. This was during the holidays. At Clifton we went to the Bristol Old Vic continually. It was the period when Peter O'Toole was there and so on and so forth, so it was also a pretty golden period.

AS: Fantastic; were there any plays that stand out particularly in your memory?

BM: Well, the play that made me decide I really had to go into the theatre, which was a play I saw when I was sixteen at the Lyric Hammersmith; the company was called the 59 Theatre Company and they were presenting Ibsen's Brand starring Patrick McGoohan in the title role. And this was 1959, when things like that never happened because there was no National Theatre, there was no RSC, so it seemed that kind of play very rarely happened, and it was a life changing experience. That's the big memory I have.

AS: What was it particularly about Brand?

BM: Well, apart from the fact that it was obviously a sensational production, it spoke to me. It said 'you're not alone in your battles' - I didn't have a particularly happy childhood. I felt very lonely. I was an only child, and suddenly I wasn't alone. Suddenly there was this extraordinary play. It was as if everybody that had directed and designed it actually had done it for me. And I thought 'Gosh! If theatre can do that I want to do that.'

AS: Patrick McGoohan, how old would he have been at the time?

BM: Oh, quite young. It was before The Prisoner or anything like that. So he must have been in his late twenties, or about thirty, or something like that.

AS: And what was he like when he was that young?

BM: Well, he was an extraordinary actor, and it was just awful that that was it! He hardly did any stage after that. He did a disastrous Iago at Stratford and then was taken over by television, and although he kept on saying 'I'll be back, I'll be back,' he wasn't. The money was the thing.

AS: Was it Brand that initially drew you to theatre?

BM: No, I was already crazy about theatre and I was already seeing every play I could; marking them all out of ten. And Brand was the first one to get ten.

AS: Right, and at which point did you decide to make theatre your career?

BM: Well, I'd already thought by that time that I was going to be an actor, oh, from about a year or two before that, because I was acting at school, and then I started to play Brand at school. Which I did disastrously. But I had my first taste of directing, because there was this scene with villagers, when they stone Brand, and it was no good. The boy that was directing it didn't know how to handle it, and I thought 'Oh golly, if they can't do this properly I can't act the scene.' So I took over and that was it, I knew I was going to be a director.

AS: That was your first experience of directing?

BM: Yes. And I knew then, in that moment, 'This is it. I don't want to act. I want to do this.'

AS: Did theatre play a large part in your time at school?

BM: Oh yes, absolutely. I was in house plays, school plays... I eventually directed the Masters in their annual play. I directed the French Society play and I went to university in order to direct.

AS: That was at Oxford University?

BM: Yes.

AS: What was your experience like at Oxford University?

BM: Well, I went to Oxford University to direct because I was told that was the best way of getting into directing and that's what I did, at the expense of everything else, and eventually I did a show called Hang Down Your Head and Die, which transferred to the West End and then went to America. and I left Oxford, declining to take the degree. So that was it. Oxford was directing.

AS: I think I read that you were president of the Experimental Theatre Club?

BM: That's right.

AS: How was that? What did that involve? How did you become president of the Experimental Theatre Club?

BM: There were two big major societies at Oxford which ran a different way from now. There was the OUDS and there was the ETC: the Oxford University Drama Society and the Experimental Theatre Club. The OUDS did the classics, the Experimental Theatre Club was meant to be experimental. What happened was you were invited to join the committee if you became someone quite well known in University theatre, and I directed from my second term - ETC productions and OUDS productions - and then you were eventually elected. Obviously every year there was a new president and I was elected president by the then committee. And I decided we'd better be experimental, which is why we did this show Hang Down Your Head and Die which we made up ourselves: improvised for about six months and then put together as a script. And so, again, absolutely wonderful.

AS: I think I read that your first play with the Experimental Theatre Club was The Connection?

BM: Yeah, Jack Gelber's The Connection.

AS: How did you come to be doing that so early in your time at Oxford?

BM: Well, as I say, I went to Oxford in order to direct, and I just hustled. I danced with the female members of the then ETC committee, like Esther Rantzen, and I pitched and pitched and pitched, and I think they were taken with this idea. The Connection, for them, was incredibly experimental. Well, it was for me, because it was a very free-wheeling, improvised show with a jazz group in it about shooting up heroin. And it created huge controversy in Oxford, and I think they thought 'Gosh, this is interesting, we'll give him a go.' So now I think, 'My God! Why did they let me?' but they did.

AS: And you went on to do, was it The Hostage?

BM: I think *The Hostage* was next, that's right. That summer. That was the first Playhouse production, the first full-scale major production, yes.

AS: And then *Hang Down Your Head and Die* was the one that was really successful?

BM: And it was the very last one.

AS: Who was the target audience for these plays? Who would come and see them? Could anybody come and see them?

BM: Anyone could come and see them in the Playhouse, or anywhere, but when you did them in the Playhouse town and gown could come and see. Absolutely. And *Hang Down Your Head and Die* got extraordinary national coverage, and therefore got packed houses for a two week run. Which was unusual; to have a two week run for an undergraduate show.

AS: What was the improvisation stage like? How involved were you with that?

BM: Well, what it was, was that we decided to take a theme, which in this case was capital punishment, which at that time was still prevalent in England, and do a show about it. And it was going to be a total theatre show, with singing, dancing, actuality recordings with the general public, extracts from the Royal Commission on capital punishment, and anything else we could find, so different people with different expertise did research into... folk songs about hanging, for example. And collated all kinds of material, from the Commission, from all the different centuries. Capital punishment used to be for so many different crimes: impersonating a Chelsea Pensioner on Westminster Bridge was one! And we collated the material, we would meet each week, for two or three nights, and we would see what we could improvise and what we could come up with. Eventually we thought we would do it as a circus, where the ring masters were the establishment figures and the white faced clown was the condemned man, and the strongman was the hangman, we were inspired by [*Oh What a Lovely War*], Joan Littlewood... you know... and slowly we amassed this vast amount of material and then David Wright, who was the prime writer, and I went away and tried to fashion it into a script which would actually only be two and a half hours rather than a whole day and a whole night. And that's how it worked. So it was a very exciting time, and we had some very wonderful people in the cast, like Terry Jones and Michael Palin, you know, the Pythons. So it was pretty splendid.

AS: What would you say made it such a national success? What was the difference between this play and the other plays?

BM: Well it wasn't a play... I don't know what you'd call it, it was like *Oh What a Lovely War*, and it was done with huge passion and all kinds of material, like written songs but also specially composed songs, written by David Wood, you know, the children's

playwright, a wonderful playwright, who wrote some incredible songs, so it was a huge spectacle and quite unlike anyone had ever experienced. And I think it was the passion, I think people were really knocked out by our attack on capital punishment. And I know that members of parliament came to see it, because it was the next year that the bill abolishing it came through. And Lord Gardiner was very much on our side, because the Lord Chamberlain tried to censor our script, Lord Gardiner got them to reinstate it... So it had a huge effect.

Lord Chamberlain?

BM: Yes. At that time all scripts had to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain, and I think we were in the third week of rehearsal when our script was sent back with two thirds of the script with a red line through it. And I phoned Lord Gardiner, who was the chairman of the Committee for the Reform of Capital Punishment, and he said 'When are you going into see...' - you didn't see the Lord Chamberlain you saw his assistant controller, Lieutenant Colonel Penn I think his name was - 'when are you going?' he said, I said 'We're going Thursday', and he said 'I'll be there, along with Lord Ted Willis and the then Shadow Home Secretary [Kenneth Robinson]. And they turned up, much to the alarm of the Lord Chamberlain's office, and Lord Gardiner simply said 'Look, there's going to be a general election soon, Tories will all be out, and I'll be Lord Chancellor, and at that moment I'm going to abolish your office. So, I suggest you treat these people properly.' And we made our pitch, and two or three days later the script arrived back with most of the cuts re-instated.

AS: I was just going to say 'Is there a way around the Lord Chamberlain?' but I suppose directly challenging him is a way of doing that...

BM: Well you had to do that, and about two years later I was doing Joe Orton's *Loot*, and the first production - which had failed miserably on the road, the Lord Chamberlain had cut it to shreds - and I said to Joe 'I'm going to see the Lord Chamberlain, I know them,' and I walked in and they just said 'Oh no, not you again'. And we got all the cuts back in, so that's how you did it, and then the year after they'd gone.

AS: Fantastic. And this play attracted the attention of Michael Codron?

BM: Well, no, Michael Codron had already done the first production, which had gone on the road and failed, and then he phoned me up because Michael Codron had done *Hang Down Your Head and Die* - that we are talking about -

AS: I meant *Hang Down Your Head and Die*.

BM: Yes, yes, that's right. Michael Codron's number two saw the first night in Oxford, and he came up to me and said 'Do you want to take this into the West End? Michael will be coming down to see it,' and I went 'Oh, it's like a fairy tale, quite extraordinary.' And that's what happened. Yes.

AS: I've just got to ask, because I actually interviewed Michael Codron in February, and he was fantastic, but what was he like as a younger man?

BM: All I remember, well, all I know is, when he came to see the show - which he did a few days later - Elizabeth Sweeting who was the general manager of the Oxford Playhouse just said 'Be very careful, don't say anything, he'll try and make you talk. Don't say anything.' And so I met him, and we sat in complete silence for about ten minutes, and then he said 'What do you want to do with it?'. So I said, 'I don't know.' And he said 'Do you want to go to the West End?' and I said 'Yes.' And he said 'Right.' And that was the conversation.

AS: That was it?

BM: That was the conversation. There was then very hard negotiations about how little he was going to pay anybody, because Michael was famously the person that you paid to work for. But he was great, he had total faith in us, he put it on in the West End, and we were paid. I mean, I got my percentage... I couldn't believe it, I was twenty-one, and we were in the West End and all that. It was magic! And he was great. I owe a great deal to him.

AS: After it was transferred to the West End, how involved were you with the play then?

BM: Oh, hugely. I even had to go on one night.

AS: As an actor?

BM: As an actor.

AS: What...

BM: Well, Terry Jones sprained something - I can't remember what it was, he was in agony. And I happened to be in the audience, I think it was the day of the boat race. And I went on for the second half, and since I can't sing a note it was a pretty hairy occasion.

AS: That's remarkable. So did you just go as an audience member?

BM: I went in to check on the show.

AS: Right.

BM: Which one does as a director. And I just happened to choose to check on that show.

AS: And ended up on stage in the West End.

BM: And ended up on stage, yes, absolutely. Singing.

AS: What were the main things that you learnt from Hang Your Head and Die?

BM: Well it's very difficult. When you start as a director, generally speaking, you have no idea how people direct. You just get up and do it. And I did it at school where I just sort of decided 'this is how it's going to be done', told them what to do and they did it. And it was quite similar with university students. You kind of were the regisseur, you told them everything. You moulded it, you did it, and in a sense I didn't learn anything from it because it was such a huge success. I thought 'Ah, that's how you direct.'. Which prepared me very badly for working with professional actors, where you should be encouraging them, and you should be helping them to grow, and you should be thinking to yourself 'These guys know more about acting than I do, and they will give a better performance than I could possibly imagine if I treat them right.'. It took me a very long time to learn that because I'd been so successful so early. Which is a very dangerous thing.

AS: I did actually wonder, when I was reading your book, it seems like a profession where you learn by doing, nobody actually says: 'This is how you do it.'

BM: Well, this is the extraordinary thing. Directing, well, directors, never came into being until the middle of the nineteenth century. There wasn't such a thing. And they came into being because shows were getting more technical. Lighting, for example. You were no longer doing everything in daylight, or to candles or whatever it may be. So someone would have to coordinate it. But the fact is that as a director you don't know anything about it. Your actors are your guinea pigs. You learn as you go along through experience. Which is why every director directs differently. I mean, now there are directing courses which... I don't know how useful they are, because there's no rule, every director is different because so much of it is psychology, and it depends on what kind of a human being you are. So, no, I didn't really learn until I became a professional director, directing professionals.

AS: This is just an aside question, but when you approach a new script as a director, what are you thinking? How do you decide what to do?

BM: Well, in an ideal world... you know, a lot of people can't choose. They're offered something, and they're desperate to work and they take it. But in an ideal world, which, thank God, is what I have done for most of my career, because I've been an artistic director where you can choose what you want to do, you choose a play about which

you are passionate, which you like. Like when I saw Brand. You choose a play which you think has something to say to your audience, which you think could be strengthening, and helpful, and positive for them. And which you also are turned on by, in terms of 'I'd love to direct that as a director because I love the way it's written and I love what it's going to call upon.' And that's how you start. And that is the ideal situation.

AS: After you had finished *Hang Down Your Head and Die* you were a young director, and you had a big success under your belt. How do you think you were perceived in the industry?

BM: Oh, the new whizz kid, because *Hang Down Your Head and Die* then went to America, and the *New York Times* said I was the new Orson Wells, and I believed them. Foolishly. And so I was offered West End shows, immediately. And I just took them. If someone said 'Do this,' I did it. And I had flops. Disasters. Because I shouldn't have done the shows. But I didn't know any better and nobody was really advising me. And I slowly began to realise 'You don't know everything there is to know about directing. You've got to be jolly careful about what you do. You don't just say yes to everything.' So at that point everything started to change for me. It started to change.

AS: Can you remember which West End plays they were?

BM: Well, the first one was a revue called *Chaganog*, which actually was quite successful, with two great mime artists. It was a kind of revue. But then I did a play by my great friend Trevor Peacock called *Collapse of Stout Party*, with a sort of all star cast, at that time, and it didn't work. We were on tour and they didn't bring it into London, so that was awful. And then the worst disaster of all was a howl called *Oom-Pah-Pah* which had been a long running hit in France. I thought I could direct anything, and they gave me this script, and it was pretty awful. But I thought 'I can do this', but again it was a total disaster. And the audience booed it on the road, and again the management didn't bring it in, so it was like getting a bloody nose both times. I mean, absolutely awful.

AS: And at which point did you turn it around?

BM: Well, then what happened was that I was offered another big musical called *Passion Flower Hotel*. Bernard Delfont rang me up and said 'Would you do *Passion Flower Hotel*?' and a voice said 'no,' and put the phone down. I thought 'who said no?'. There wasn't anyone else in the room, so it must have been me. And, there was a copy of *The Stage*, I'll never forget this, that I had at the time, and I opened it, and it asked for an artist director of a company called 'Century Theatre', which was a touring company which in its own put up theatre. Extraordinary, wonderful wonderful thing. And it was about to become the resident company at the University Theatre [in Manchester]. They wanted an Artistic Director, and I applied, and because I was obviously quite well known at that time, as the whizz kid, ridiculously I got the job. I was the youngest Artistic Director ever, I think. And that's when I began to learn. That's when I was doing ten shows in one year, of every kind, and having to really get to know the nuts and bolts of what I was supposed to be doing.

AS: This is about 1966?

BM: '65. End of '65.

AS: The end of 65? What does being an Artistic Director entail? What are your responsibilities?

BM: Ha! Everything. Basically, you are where the buck stops. Obviously, artistically you choose the plays, and you choose other directors that you need, so you're responsible for the entire artistic policy of the company, but you're also responsible for how the company is run. You have what in those days was called a General Manager but these days is called an Executive Director who runs it - nuts and bolts, day by day, and administers the company - but it's your policy. You decide where the money is going to be spent. You decide everything, really. Finally you are responsible to the board, and the chairman, of the company, and it's your head that rolls if it goes wrong. So it's a huge responsibility. And the future of British theatre depends on there being enough people who are good at it.

AS: And you were doing a lot of plays at that time?

BM: Yes.

AS: Did you choose all of the plays?

BM: Yes.

AS: How did you decide which plays to do? Did you look for a theme?

BM: No, it's difficult to create a theme for play after play after play, you get yourself into a straightjacket. The great thing about Century Theatre is that it was playing for most of the summer, the three months of the summer, in Keswick, in the Lake District. So you had a captive audience, there was nothing else for them to do. So they were going to come, and I was able to do pretty much what I liked. I think my first season was Machiavelli's *Mandragora*, a double bill of Ionesco's *The Chairs* and Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, I think we did *The Knack*, we did *Uncle Vanya*, we did *Private Lives*, there must have been another one... I can't remember. But pretty incredible. And we did them, because they were plays I loved, and I thought they would be great. So all I was looking for were plays that I thought were absolutely wonderful, and a variety, so that the audience would get a little bit of everything, because eventually you had all six plays playing at the repertoire in Keswick. And it was a huge success. For the University Theatre, the problem was actually to get people to know that we were there. Nobody knew it existed. And eventually I created a different company to play there, and then the plays were chosen as one-offs rather than plays that were going to be in the repertoire.

And again I just chose plays which I thought were going to be marvellous, like Long Day's Journey into Night, and the classics. The Macbeth's and the Merchant of Venices, which I thought might draw an audience. But I was very young, so I was just going 'I want to do this, I'm going to do it.'

AS: Were there any productions at Century Theatre that particularly stand out in your memory?

BM: Well, I suppose Long Day's Journey into Night, because it is such a great play. And I had a phenomenal actress playing the lead, and indeed Helen Mirren in her first job.

AS: Helen Mirren's first ever job?

BM: Yeah, professional. Yes, absolutely. She stayed with the company for two years.

AS: What was she like as a new actress?

BM: As an actress or a human being?

AS: Well, either?

BM: As a human being all the men were just going [starts panting], 'Where has she come from?'. And she was a fantastic actress. Yeah, she'd already done youth theatre. She'd played Cleopatra and so on, she was just one of those people who knew how to do it and didn't have to train or anything, she just did it. I suppose that [play] was one of the pretty big ones with Century. I've got to remember when it stopped being Century. Yeah, I think that was the big one, The Merchant of Venice as well. That was the first Shakespeare that I did where I went 'Oh I see,' and 'that's what it's about,' and 'that's why I'm doing it. This is how I'm expressing myself.' And I grew up a lot, working with Dilys Hamlett, and indeed James Maxwell, who were wonderful actors, and Helen Mirren. So it made a great difference. I was beginning to work with grown ups.

AS: And by this point, what was your relationship like with actors?

BM: I think I was an engine, a kind of dynamo, that pushed and pushed and pushed. I hadn't yet learned to be gentler, and to wait, because I think one thing... A director is always in a panic, deep down. Because he's thinking, 'Is this going to be all right? Is this going to be good? Have I planned it right? I've planned it for months but now I've got these people, are they going to be able to do what I want?'. You want to be reassured very quickly that it is going to be OK, so you push too hard too early. And I think I was like that. And I was a bit of a martinet as well. People weren't allowed to be late for rehearsal without being screamed out or shouted at and all that kind of thing. But I think

actors were kind of excited by me, and kind of said 'OK, you usually deliver, so we'll do it.' I think it was like that.

AS: I noticed when I was looking at a list on the internet of plays that you'd done and actors that were in them that a lot of actors come up quite often, like Tom Courtenay for example. Do you look for a rapport with certain actors, or does that just happen?

BM: Well, I think it happens. You watch actors and you audition actors and you think 'that's my kind of an actor.' You think, 'that's what I call a heart actor rather than a head actor'. An actor that will really go to the centre of the part and do it honestly and has vast talent, and it isn't just his ego showing off when he's on stage, it's something more profound than that. It's also wanting to make a difference. And so you automatically begin to build up a group of actors with whom you feel at home and with whom you want to work with.

AS: Right. And then, in 1969, which is right up to the edge of the period were looking at but it's fine because it's fascinating, you were founding director of the '69 Theatre Company'.

BM: Well, actually, it's better for you, it was 1968 it came into being.

AS: That's brilliant.

BM: It was called the 69 Theatre Company to follow on from the 59 Theatre Company, because it was the same people that founded the 59 Theatre Company, that miraculously I'd persuaded to come and work with me in Manchester, so we called it the 69 Theatre Company. But it was '68.

AS: And at this point you were a Founding Director? Which is different again from an Artistic Director?

BM: Yes.

AS: What was that transition like? How did you come to be Founding Director of the 69 Theatre Company?

BM: Following that night when I'd seen Brand, I knew these were the people I wanted to work with, and I drove them mad. I bombarded them, but also I had become great friends with Michael Meyer who translated that Brand, the great Ibsen and Strindberg translator and biographer, and he watched my work and he said to me 'Well, if they won't come and see your work than you'd better get their actors and actresses to come and work for you and then they'll have to come.' So, Casper Wrede, who was the artistic director of the 59 Theatre Company, I worked with his wife, Dilys Hamlett and

James Maxwell, one of his leading actors [in *The Merchant of Venice*], and eventually they came and they saw. And they loved the University Theatre because they were very much against the proscenium arch, and the University Theatre was adaptable. And eventually they said to me 'Look, we'll just work with you for a year, with Century Theatre, and see how it goes.'. And it was Casper who phoned me up one day and said 'You're doing *Charley's Aunt*, how would you like to work with Tom Courtenay?'. And I said 'ha ha!' and he said 'Come and have lunch, it'll be fine.' And I went and had lunch at this club, the Saville Club, and there was Tom Courtenay, who was already *Doctor Zhivago* and *Billy Liar*, but who wanted to be a proper actor. And he said 'Yeah, I'll come up,' and he came up to this very humble company and he did it. And Michael Elliot came and directed him in *Playboy of the Western World*, and I directed him in *Romeo and Juliet*, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera... with the result that we were asked to form a company to replace Century Theatre, who felt everything was getting too grand; to my complete astonishment. And the Arts Council said, 'Well, Manchester hasn't got a major theatre - a big theatre, it had the Library Theatre, but that was only two hundred and fifty seats - we'll give you the money, run a prototype there, see how you get on, and if it goes well we'll think about making a major new theatre in Manchester.' So that's how 69 Theatre started.

AS: You just mentioned there, briefly, Mr Meyer.

BM: Yes.

AS: Because, in your book I thought that was extraordinary, because he was the man that translated Brand.

BM: That's right.

AS: And you wrote to him when you were very young?

BM: Yep. Well, I wrote to him and said 'I want to play it but my Housemaster wont let me because the translation is so awful, can I use yours?'. And he said 'Yes, and get in touch with me, because this is remarkable that someone wants to do Brand at school.' I didn't get in touch with him for a couple of years, but when I thought 'I'm ready now, I'm going to Oxford,' I phoned him up. I said 'You said to get in touch,' and he said 'Yes, come and have lunch.' So we had lunch. And he was fantastic, he came to see everything I did at Oxford, and he kept open the door to these guys. And we became great friends. And he was my great, great friend for the rest of his life really. Great man.

AS: Fascinating. And when we were talking about *Hang Down Your Head and Die*, you described how you were involved with the writing process, did that happen again?

BM: In later years yes, absolutely. I wrote two shows which the Royal Exchange did, but they were both spoofs, one of which was of *The Three Musketeers*, and the other was of *Dracula*; called *Bats*. So I've done that, and I've tinkered with other people's scripts as

well quite a lot. But I can't write a real play because I've done too many and I end up sitting on my own shoulder going 'No, no, it's not good enough.'

AS: One of the plays that you put on at 69 Theatre Company was *She Stoops to Conquer*, which you put on again later, what is it like returning to a play?

BM: Well, that told me how much I had changed over the years. *She Stoops to Conquer* I did, and it was an enormous success, it went into the West End, packed for six months, and then Tom didn't want to do it any more. Quite upsetting really. Tom called me, he was playing young Marlowe. It was huge. And I did it by saying 'This is a pretty funny play, I can get people to laugh at this,' and I did it. And when I did it again, not very long ago – two years ago? Three years ago – I thought 'This is a wonderful play about a dysfunctional family, about young people escaping the tyranny of parents and about love against society pressures.' And so I did it, hopefully very well again, very funnily, but I did it seriously as a play about that, because all comedy is basically serious. And so I think I did a richer production. And also by now I was working with actors like Des Barrit, for example, who was a privilege to work with. Who you don't say 'Go there, do that and that,' but who you work with and you try to help flower in some way or another. So, although nobody could be better than Tom Courtenay as young Marlowe, and indeed Trevor Peacock in his first big role who was just amazing, I think the overall production was richer the second time round.

AS: And you did *Mary Rose* with Mia Farrow?

BM: Yes.

AS: What was Mia Farrow like to work with at that time?

BM: Oh, divine. Absolutely divine. She was perfect casting for the part. It's a play which I love, but you can't do unless you have absolutely the right person. And she, through her agent – we had the same agent – said she wanted to do some stage, and I thought 'wonderful!' And I was having her around for dinner, with company manager Alisoune Brown – a wonderful company manager – and we were chatting away and she started singing. I can't sing in tune, but she started singing 'Mary Rose' and I said 'What's that?' and she said 'It's this wonderful play called *Mary Rose*, you should read it.' And I read it and thought 'Mia Farrow' and went to meet her where she was filming and gave her the script and went 'This is it,' and she said 'Yes it is.' Because it's about a strange girl who disappears out of her family life and away from the man she's about to marry for years. But then she reappears many, many years later when everybody has grown up and is old, but she hasn't changed. She's still a very young creature. It's a very other-worldly play, and of course Mia Farrow is perfect to do it. And divine to work with. I mean, no side to her, no star stuff, nah, straight.

AS: I was just wondering, as an Artistic Director or a Founding Director how involved are you with parts of production like set design?

BM: Oh, a director of a play is responsible for set design. He appoints the set designer, and the lighting designer, and the sound designer, and the choreographer, and who ever else is working on it, because the over all conception of the production has to be the directors. Which is why your designer is an incredibly important person, because the show is designed before the actors start rehearsing. And the costumes are designed before the actors start rehearsing. So that process, which can be very long and difficult, or very quick, depending on who has the best idea quickly, is utterly critical. So that's the director's job.

AS: And I was just wondering how you go about doing the directing and the set design for a play like *Endgame*, which you also did with the 69 Theatre Company?

BM: Yes, well I did that with Johanna Bryant who is my favourite designer, along with Simon Higlett, who I've designed with an awful lot. And she and I knew each other, in fact, I don't know if we were married by then but we were married eventually. And we read the play, and I remember in this particular case she came up with the idea that it would be like the inside of a human skull. The two windows were the eye sockets and so on and so forth, and the back wall was sort of domed, which I thought was absolutely brilliant, because Ham is the head, and Clov is the body. And that's how the play works. In that case it was entirely her idea. There are other cases when it's your idea, like when I did *Macbeth* inside a concentration camp, she had to design a concentration camp. And there are other plays, like recently when we were doing *The Glass Menagerie*, when trying to design a play that works inside a round is a very collaborative process, and Simon Higlett spent weeks and weeks and weeks. So, sometimes it's a long process and you slowly get to your concept together, and sometimes the other person gets the idea. But always you brief the designer. You say 'This is why I'm doing the play, this is what it's about,' especially if you're doing a Shakespeare which has been done five million times: 'Why are you doing it? What do you want to achieve?' and 'What do you need the designer to do?'

AS: A remarkable thing about that idea of *Endgame* being inside a human skull is that when we were studying Beckett in the third year of my degree, we had an image from that play up on the projector.

BM: Oh really? God! Right.

AS: What would you say the role of theatre was in the public consciousness during the late 1960's?

BM: Well, I mean, this I think was the point. The guys that founded the 59 Theatre Company founded it at that time – it's a long complicated story – but basically, they were out of sympathy with what theatre was at that time. It was nihilistic. It was the theatre of despair, really. And they believed, as I believed – that was the other thing about seeing Brand at that moment – that theatre was there to say to people: 'Life is wonderful... Hard - you might have to go right into the darkness to find the light, but it's wonderful.' And all the great plays were about that polarity. Having to find the way forward, however difficult the path might be. And they wanted theatre to be about that.

And we were founded, still, very much in that tradition. The 69 Theatre Company and the Royal Exchange were founded for exactly the same reasons, and were sometimes very much at odds with the prevailing mood of theatre. I mean, Peter Brook for example and his reductive production of King Lear, which robbed it of its redemptive side, was something which to us, or to Michael Elliot in particular, who I remember giving a lecture about it saying 'You can't do that to plays, that's not what an audience comes to a play for. That's not what the Greek theatre did when the Greek festivals were on for three weeks and thousands of people down tools to come and experience the mysteries of theatre.' So we very much wanted to continue that tradition, and built the Royal Exchange Theatre to continue that tradition. It's architecture reflects that particular tradition. So it was a maverick company, which a lot of people were sort of disapproving of because it was in opposition, as I say, to the prevailing trend. But Manchester opened its arms to us. It was one of the reasons we said 'Let's do this outside of London. A) Where you get the right to fail, and B) Where you don't have to be in the trend in order to be successful.' We had a different voice that we wanted to express.

AS: Did you self-consciously try to incorporate the themes and feelings and moods of the time into the plays you were directing or are the plays automatically a product of the time?

BM: Well, no. I think your job is to try and have your finger on the pulse of the time, and select the plays which you think suit the Zeitgeist of the time. And that's when you're successful. That is when you're successful as an Artistic director, because it automatically taps in. I mean, I remember the famous production of John Barton's Troilus and Cressida many years ago, was at the time of war. I can't remember which one now. But it was electric, because everyone knew it was about now. Last night I saw the opening night of our The Entertainer, and the parallels between that and Afghanistan are extraordinary. Or doing The Miser earlier this year about the economists 'Thrift' and 'Greed' was absolutely the right thing to do because that was what was going on. You don't always get it right like that. Most of the great plays are always relevant because they're about the mysteries of our existence, but you do try to choose specifically for that time.

AS: What do you think the predominant moods and themes were whilst you were at the 69 Theatre Company?

BM: What I've said. What ever we did it was to say 'Life is hard, but we're either going to make you laugh at it and make you feel better, which is comedy, or we're going to make you identify with it and show you how these great plays talked about moving forward and taking a positive view of life.'

AS: Historical narratives that I've read often characterize the period as an angry time, I think possibly with Joan Littlewood in mind, would you say it was an angry time?

BM: Well, what it was, was that the sixties were a time which you could interpret in two different ways. It was of course a hugely liberating time, sexually particularly I suppose, but also the way that young people thought: 'We don't have to be sat on, we don't

have to be told what to do, we can express ourselves.' I mean, the way we dressed, all those things. And of course, the explosion of pop music, a new kind of music. I mean, it started in the fifties, but it was in the sixties where you had the Beatles and so forth. It was liberation. It was completely different from hit parade, which had the The Dam Busters March and things like that in it. So it was a very exciting time, but it was also a very dangerous time, where people could see that it could go over the top. And in fact it did go over the top, and we're still dealing with the legacy of it now. Because the abuse of the freedom was as frightening as the freedom was liberating. And it was a time where people could be angry. Where John Osborne could shout and scream and people could shout and scream, saying 'All that old stuff is crap and it's gone.' And that again was very, very liberating. But I can't remember it as a time where it felt angry to be angry, it felt great to be angry. And as I say, the danger was that you went too far, that the drug thing took over, and you ruined yourself. And still that generation, my generation, today... a lot of people are in trouble, because they never grew up out of it.

AS: I noticed as well that you did musicals during your time there [at the 69 Theatre Company], there was *Erb* and *Catch My Soul*. I was just wondering, as a director, do you approach musicals differently than how you approach plays?

BM: That's right, yes you do. I had to learn that too. You do because the music is of crucial importance, and that has to be learnt first. Choreography is of crucial importance, and takes forever. And so instead of gently nurturing a group of actors and bringing them up to the boil - hopefully at the right moment - and watching them flower, you are much more like a Regimental Sergeant Major arranging timetables for the day; so that your choreographer has enough time, so that the music has enough time to work and so on and so forth. And you get very little time with the actors. You also, until the show is actually put together, can't start to judge the pitch of the acting because it can't be like play acting, because when somebody stops singing on the microphone, the acting has to be able to pick it up from there and carry the show along without it feeling like a dip. So, it's a completely different experience. Nevertheless, you remain in charge. You're in charge of the way the musical director teaches them how to sing. You're in charge of the choreographer, you have to say 'There's too much of this, there's too little of that and it's going on for too long, and I don't think you're expressing what the show should be expressing at this particular moment.'. And there your big job comes when you have to put it all together and turn it into a homogeneous creature. It's an exhausting job, and in a sense not as satisfying because you can't grow it in the way that you want to emotionally. But my God! when it works it's incredibly satisfying because it's thrilling for the audience.

AS: When you direct a play that is perhaps more cheerful, does your demeanour as director change?

BM: Well, I suppose it does. I mean, the play you're doing affects you hugely. I mean, famously when you do *Macbeth* it has an awful effect on everybody and you go through hell doing it. But paradoxically I find now that when you're doing, say, *The Lower Depths*, you'd better jolly well enjoy it and have a lot of laughs. Whereas when you're doing, say, *She Stoops to Conquer*, that's serious. I mean, in farce you find yourself saying: 'I'm not sure... if you cross the room and slip on that banana skin, fall over, do a somersault and knock your head on that ink bottle and spill ink on yourself,'

and they do it, and you go 'No, that's not very funny, why don't you try...' and you try it another way until eventually you say 'Yeah, that's pretty funny.' And then as the weeks go by you think 'I don't think any of this is funny. I wouldn't laugh at this. Christ!' And you tend to get quite serious. So yes your demeanour changes, but not necessarily in the predictable way that you might think.

AS: It seems to me from what you've said, and what I've read, the 69 Theatre Company offered a lot of variety. I was just wondering if you were ever conscious of appealing to different audiences each time, or if you were always playing to the same audience?

BM: Well, no. You don't consciously do that. You are aware that different plays will attract different people. Obviously that's true. But what you hope is that there is a core group of people out there, of imagination and intelligence, who want to experience the spectrum. You are always expressing the same thing, you're expressing life force, it's just a different way of expressing it. But of course if you're doing Noel Coward there is automatically a different audience to if you're doing a new play by Brad Fraser. But you hope, and indeed here at the Exchange we have very healthy season ticket sales, which means that there is a core audience of about four to five thousand people who see everything that we do. Which is great.

AS: What were the main outside influences on you as a director?

BM: Well, the guys that founded the 59 Theatre Company... Michael Elliot was my hero - I just thought he was the greatest director. And they had been influenced by Michel Saint-Denis who had run the Old Vic Theatre School when they had been there. So it was them, they were my mentors. It was he and Casper Wrede who taught me and guided me and came to see run-throughs of my plays, and tell me what they thought was right and what they thought was wrong. But until then there were no influences, I was just arrogantly thinking I was the best thing there was: And I was wrong. But you know, I soon found out that wasn't true, and fortunately very early in my career I hooked up with those guys.

AS: Obviously you were very busy during the 1960's, but did you ever have time to go to the theatre yourself?

BM: From, before I was a professional director going as much as I could, I began to develop an absolute hatred of going to the theatre. Busman's holiday! If you're working all day - and for the first few years, you know, I'd be rehearsing all day and then checking up on a production at night - there was no time. And I loathed quite a lot of what I saw when I went, I think most directors do. Because they're very self-centred. So I didn't see very much to be honest, but I did go to the theatre, of course.

AS: Do any productions stand out in your memory?

BM: Yes, just one, and I'm not sure when I saw it in relation to where I was: Bill Gaskill's production of *Cymbeline* at Stratford was extraordinary. There was a lot that he did, and at the National Theatre. I saw quite a lot there. His Recruiting Officer was remarkable, I remember thing that was absolutely great. But quite a lot of things I was disappointed with, because they were not the actors that I respected. They were what I called head actors, the prima donna actors, of which this country has many and they're much revered. And I was disappointed that the directors weren't going for the heart of the thing, but that they were showing off their egos. Oh, and *Raisin in The Sun*, which we're doing at the theatre. I remember seeing that, but that might have been before. That was incredible. I saw that three or four times. And of course Joan Littlewood, who I thought was absolutely wonderful as well but in a completely different way, but I can't remember other than that really. I had to go and see an awful lot of plays because there were actors in them who wanted to work who I went to see. I remember seeing *Jesus Christ Superstar* -which I loathe - twelve times because I was doing musicals and there were always people in it who I had do go and see. And I loathed it. So those musicals, *Evita* and things like that, which I just couldn't bear, and *Cats*, I had to go and see because I was doing musicals.

AS: This idea of actors, sometimes when I read critics they talk about the 'star machine', do you give much credence to that idea?

BM: That being what?

AS: That the audience come in to see the actor?

BM: That is undoubtedly true, that stars are stars, and that they are stars for reason. They have a certain charisma and they have a certain draw. And audiences, when they know there is a star - like when we did *The Homecoming* with Pete Postlethwaite, people would come to the box office and say 'Can we have tickets for the Pete Postlethwaite show?'. And that's always been true, and always will be true. I think the great thing is never cast a star unless you really believe they're right for the role, and I never have. I've always had wonderful actors like Tom Courtenay who believe in the same thing. Unfortunately now also it's television stars. You know, people in a series, they draw. But they're not necessarily very good actors. But at this theatre anyway we avoid like the plague just getting people in because they draw, but we're very keen to get people in who draw. It makes a great deal of difference.

AS: I was just going to say, as an artist, how do you deal with that? But you've just said, you pick actors who fit the role.

BM: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, I did a new play by Edna O'Brien earlier this year that goes into London earlier next year... Brenda Blethyn came to me with the play. It was like a gift. I read that play and I thought it was wonderful, and I thought: 'And Brenda Blethyn wants to do it, we can have a new play and fill the theatre.' Because new plays are very risky. If you have a draw in the play it makes a huge difference.

AS: And you've mentioned television as well. At what point did television start to affect theatre?

BM: From quite a long time ago. I mean, from when I started there are far, far fewer theatres than there were. I would say, a quarter? That was television. And then slowly television and people involved in television became important to the public. And so you took notice. But I remember the first time I directed Bob Lindsay, he auditioned for me and we were having dinner after he got the part and people were coming up to him asking him for his autograph. And I said 'Who are you?' and he said 'Don't you know Citizen Smith?' and I said 'No,' because I didn't watch television. He said 'Well, I'm Citizen Smith.' So it was bingo both ways. But at that stage you didn't really think that television was that influential, so I guess it would have been after the Royal Exchange opened, late seventies and early eighties that it became more and more the thing. And people like Alfie Burke in the Pubic Eye or whatever it was called came and worked... Again, we knew him, and we knew he was an actor, but it helped hugely when he was playing Marker and people knew who Marker was.

AS: OK, well I've come to the end of my questions, but my final question is: What is your fondest memory of theatre during the 1960's?

BM: I think it must have been the first night in London of Hang Down Your Head and Die. It just has to be, because here we were, a bunch of undergraduates, we were in a West End theatre. In those days the papers we printed at about two o'clock in the morning, with the reviews. The reviews were always the next morning. And so we all went down to Fleet Street, and the reviews came out, and we were in heaven. It was unbelievable. It was like a dream. And on that night, unknown to me, and American producer had said she wanted to take it to Broadway. So, you were twenty one, it was ridiculous. It was just magical.

AS: Thank you very much.

BM: Pleasure.