

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Barbara Eifler – interview transcript

Interviewer: Katie Hopkinson

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Stage Manager and Executive Director of the Stage Management Association. Carmen; Chester Mystery Plays; Earls Court; English Theatre in Frankfurt; English Touring Theatre; Equity; Greg Hersov; John Tams; Mike Kay; Munich Biennale with Jonathan Moore; Northern Mystery Plays; opera; Orchard Theatre; Pete Goodwin; rehearsals; repertory theatre; Royal College of Music; Royal Exchange Theatre; Royal Opera House; SMA magazine; spectacular theatre and opera; stage management; Stage Management Association; stage management contract; subsidised repertory theatre; Theatre Clwyd; The Crucible Theatre, Sheffield; The Everyman Theatre, Cheltenham; VE Day celebrations in Hyde Park; Francesca Zambello's Tosca.

KH: OK, just to start off, can you describe your earliest memories of the theatre?

BE: Oh, my earliest memories of going to the theatre are probably – because I grew up in Italy - and it was probably going to Milan, to the theatre, because I lived about 40 miles from Milan and there wasn't a theatre in the town where I was growing up, and I do remember going to see Brecht's Berliner Ensemble with Helene Weigel who was still alive then, playing Mother Courage. I think that was probably one of my earliest ones.

KH: Oh right! That's fascinating. So did you go much then?

BE: Not that much because it was, you know, not that easy, because it was a bit of a distance. But so as a teenager I did go to various things. I do remember the Berliner Ensemble more than once and going to see shows done by Georgio Strehler who was a very famous Italian theatre-maker, his Tempest, and that must all have been in the seventies before I left home. So... and lots of concerts, I went to a lot more concerts, and to opera at the Arena of Verona, which... I don't know if you know about that? It's an open-air Roman amphitheatre, and every summer they do a festival of opera there and it's absolutely magic because you bring your picnic and you sit on all these ancient Roman sort of benches, and you bring your own cushion and your picnic and you can buy candles, you see, so when it gets dark you have this huge thing with everybody having their candles. Magic!

KH: Oh wow!

BE: Oh yeah, definitely. If you ever get the chance of going! [laughs] So those are the kind of theatre things that I experienced when I was young but I didn't actually know that one could work in theatre, that hadn't crossed my mind.

KH: Oh right. So when did you realise that you did want to work in it?

BE: Well that took quite a bit more time. When I was 17 I came to Britain to go to university and I went to the University of Kent at Canterbury and there I made some friends who were in the drama society, so I liked that and I got involved with that, but my English wasn't good enough to be on stage which is what everybody naturally assumes you wanted to do, so they gave me some jobs backstage and this was sort of my 'Wow!' moment about backstage, because they got me to ring the telephone in this play about Joe Orton called Cock-ups, and so it was fine in rehearsals, they gave me the script, they marked it up, where my cue was for ringing the telephone, and then when it came to the performance, I was nervous or I didn't follow the script, or whatever - I didn't do it you see! So these poor actors were stuck on stage, trying to make something up because the phone didn't ring when it was supposed to! And eventually someone nudged me and I rang this phone but this was the 'Wow!' moment, because you think it's all about the people who stand on stage, but actually if you don't make the phone ring they've had it! [laughs] So do you know what I mean? It's a power that you can abuse which you wouldn't normally, but what I'm saying is, you kind of felt 'actually, behind those people on stage there's all these people that make it happen and who pull the strings - who hold the strings' - you know. And so that kind of sold me, on that. And then - I mean later when I was at university and my English was better - they did let me go on stage, but I wasn't very good and I didn't particularly enjoy it! [laughs] So, I'd kind of discovered what I like. But after I finished my degree, I kind of went and did what my parents wanted me to do, which is do a degree in Germany, and I really didn't enjoy it.

KH: Oh right. What degree was that?

BE: Well, it's not what I was doing, which was German Literature and English and Drama, but it was just... I just didn't want to live in Germany because I'd really made good friends here in England and stuff. So... I had a boyfriend who was a stage manager, you see! [laughs] So in the holidays I went to see him in Devon, and he was one of the stage management for Orchard Theatre who were touring Devon and Cornwall and Dorset - they don't exist any more, now - and they just toured, they sort of... one and two night stands to tiny village halls and tiny theatres and stuff like that. And so I just kind of went and spent my summer holidays there from university in Germany, and I thought 'This is absolutely brilliant! You know, I want to do this!' And I remember that's where I learnt about prop-making, and the three people who were the stage management there, they did the props, they built the set, they did the lighting, they put all the sets in, they chatted to the old ladies in the village, they blew up the electricity supply and then they patched it all up again! And it was great! We just used to tour in this van and we had a fantastic time. So I thought this was what I want to do. So that's when I finally applied to drama school and I did a post-graduate thing at the Welsh College of Music and Drama, I did a post-graduate course.

KH: Oh, right. And did you enjoy that?

BE: Oh yeah, yeah. That was great. And my parents were totally unsupportive because it's not a proper job! And the idea - I think it's changed a lot now - where nobody sort of has jobs for life really, but the idea then for them that I would be a freelance stage manager, was just totally alarming. Do you know what I mean? Where nowadays everybody has insecure jobs, so it's different, but my parents' generation, do you know what I mean? You got a job and you had it and that was fantastic, and you stayed with it. So I think that was the main thing so they kind of extracted a promise so that if it wouldn't go well I would kind of go and do something else. [laughs] But it went very well, I got work, so that was alright. So yeah, when I came out - in fact I went back to Germany - I was the first stage manager for the English Theatre in Frankfurt.

KH: Oh, wow!

BE: Which of course was perfect because I spoke German and English, and I knew about stage management. And that was run by an American woman called Judith Rosenbauer, who'd kind of built it up with two other people, but it was kind of just starting to get bigger. I mean, now they have like their own purpose-built theatre and stuff, but then they were in a converted warehouse and things, so that was the kind of job where you did everything literally. There was one technician who did the lighting and the sound, but I was doing everything else: looking after the actors, doing anything backstage, tearing the tickets at the beginning, serving drinks in the interval, [laughs] washing the shirts during the day and ironing them, and you know, just about anything.

KH: Everything, yeah! [laughs]

BE: But, no so that was quite interesting. What they used to do - I don't know whether they do now - four shows in a year. So they had quite long runs, once you got there, and what would happen is that they'd rehearse them in London and then they would bring them over, so you'd just have them for a couple of weeks' rehearsals there, do the technical rehearsal, and then you would be up and running. And for me though that was just far too long a run. I never, sort of, I never worked in the West End, because I thought that's just too boring, I can't do that, whereas there's people who just have a better temperament suited to that. So I just find it more interesting, the whole rehearsal process, and getting it up and running, and then I kind of go, 'All right, can I go and do something else now?'. [laughs]

KH: Yeah. So what kinds of length do you like working on then?

BE: Well, the normal kind of stuff that you do in rep would be four or five weeks or something, that's fine. But if I thought I've just signed a year's contract to do Oliver, I think that would really depress me. Do you know what I mean? [laughs]

KH: [laughs] Yeah, I do know what you mean, yeah!

BE: But, like I say there's people who love doing that, and that's fine, I'll just leave it to them! [laughs]

KH: [laughs] That's fair enough!

BE: Yeah. And so, I mean that was the reason why later I did touring, because even if you do three months' touring, that is a different venue every week, so there's different challenges or nightmares as there might be, and so... do you know what I mean? There's something new involved in it every week. Anyway, so I did a year in Frankfurt and then I came back here, and you kind of get told at drama school that you should start as an Assistant Stage Manager, and so I thought I'd better apply for ASM jobs, but nobody would have me. This is probably because by this stage I was about 25, and I just wonder whether people thought I was sort of over-qualified, because I was older and because I'd done a year in Frankfurt, where I was the only stage manager so I did everything. So really, really what I wanted to be was a Deputy Stage Manager, and so I thought, 'Right, I'm just going to apply for those jobs! If nobody will have me as an ASM, I'm just going to apply as DSM!'. And I got a job at The Crucible. And in fact the production manager, who's about to retire now, was there then - that's Rob McKinney - and Ali Fowler who's now there as associate producer, she was his assistant then. So yeah, so I went there and I was DSM on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* with two fantastic actors called Russell Dixon - he's from the north-west, he's from Oldham, near Oldham, don't know whether he's still working - and Gillian Hanna, so that was great. And then they asked me to stay on for the panto, with Bobby Knutt. Does Bobby Knutt still do pantos at Sheffield do you know?

KH: I'm not sure, to be honest!

BE: But he was a sort of, you know, he was a very old-fashioned comic who'd been doing the working-men's clubs and stuff. But he was very popular in Sheffield so he'd always play kind of the dame or whatever character in panto, he was incredibly popular. So I did panto. And of course for me as a foreigner, this was my first experience of panto.

KH: Oh yes?

BE: I didn't really know about panto! And that was very funny because Rob McKinney, the production manager, who's this very dour Scotsman, kept telling me that I needed to be more jolly, because stage management also do the calls front of house for 'Ladies and Gentleman, the show's about to start', and all this sort of thing. And he'd come and tell me that I needed to cheer up more for panto! [laughs] Which is very hard when you're doing two shows a day and it's ten o'clock in the morning so there was a bit of a competition backstage to see how cheerful I could get [puts on cheerful voice] 'Ladies and Gentleman! Boys and Girls!'. Anyway, so I did panto there, and then I did a TiE show, I don't know whether... do they still have a Theatre In Education company, The Crucible? I don't know.

KH: I don't know either actually.

BE: No, so I did a show for them. And then I did the show that I think I enjoyed most in my entire career, which was the Northern Mystery Plays, which was adapted by John Tams, and directed by Mike Kay, who was then the associate director of The Crucible - Clare Venables was the artistic director when I was there. And it was a fantastic show. John Tams also wrote the music I think, which was played by a folk band called The Rogues Gallery. And it's just one of those instances that don't happen very often, where, you know, the right artistic and technical and everybody came together, and it was just a completely happy and fantastic show. And there were people who came back to see it four or five times, because they thought it was... So the Northern Mystery Plays was kind of an amalgamation from different, you know those different cycles of mystery plays, and so John had taken some from the Chester, and some from the York, and Wakefield is another one isn't it? So he'd kind of put those together, and it was absolutely brilliant, so that was probably the show I enjoyed the most ever, doing that.

KH: So was that because of the people you were working with?

BE: Yeah, because the show was so good. I mean, what happened is that between the director Mike Kay, and John Tams who'd adapted it and wrote the music, they'd captured the sort of popular element of it, but there's a serious point because it's a bible story, do you know what I mean? They have a serious point, but the way they are written, the Mystery Plays, is as popular entertainment and they'd kind of managed to capture that really well. So when you've got a great show like that, everybody loves working on it, do you know what I mean? And it just happened to be a really good company of actors that got on and were particularly well suited to it. So no, it was just brilliant. And like I say you could tell from the audience coming back they got that feeling. It all went a bit horrible for Mike Kay after that because he was asked to leave The Crucible and also his son and his wife committed suicide shortly afterwards. So he was left with a teenage daughter, and I think he went and worked as a freelancer again as a director, which he'd done before he came to The Crucible, but a few years later he had an accident and died, leaving this daughter who was still a teenager. And actually some staff at The Crucible, from the workshop and design department, set up a trust for Gemma Kay, and wrote to anybody who had ever worked there, including, you know, people like me, and lots and lots of us chipped in, lots and lots of small amounts of money as we could, to help Gemma go through university, and help her get settled, which worked! So she did it. Because like what a terrible time, do you know what I mean? As a teenager your mother and your brother commit suicide, and then your father dies. So it was a... so good woman. But yeah so it just shows there's a lot of loyalty and support for the people you admire, do you know what I mean, in theatre, and none of us, you know maybe some people could afford to chip in more than me, but I just thought oh well, at least if I do a bit, do you know what I mean? And I think everybody did that, and so you get a result, don't you? So anyway, so I had a lovely time at The Crucible. One of the people who was my Assistant Stage Manager was Jonathan Church, who's now the artistic director of The Chichester Festival Theatre, so he started as an electrician, and then he became stage manager, and Clare Venables gave him the opportunity to direct something in the studio, and he's gone up and on from there. So that's what's good about these sort of things is that people like Clare and others, they take a chance on someone and give them the opportunity to do that sort of

thing, and look where it can lead! ... What did I do after The Crucible? Have you got my CV there? I can't remember! [laughs]

KH: [laughs] I do have it somewhere! I'll just get it.

BE: That bit is quite easy!

KH: Are there any other places that stood out to you that you can remember?

BE: Oh well, lots, I'm just trying to remember in what sequence where I went after The Crucible.

KH: I've got your CV here!

BE: Oh you have? Good. 'Cause did I go?... Oh yes, oh this is the only place that stood out for me as not being a happy experience is The Everyman Theatre in Cheltenham.

KH: Why's that?

BE: I'm just trying to think what... well firstly, I did - because it was a repertory theatre, a subsidised repertory theatre with a sort of permanent stage management team - so they took me on and I had to do ASM-ing duties on the first two shows, and this is where I realised that thank God I'd never got an ASM job in the first place, because I wouldn't have stuck with stage management! I'm just not good at propping, I did not enjoy it because it involves going to beg, borrow and steal lots of items and I just find that I just couldn't do that, do you know what I mean? Whereas there are people who are just brilliant at it and I just couldn't bring myself to go and ask people for things, [laughs] I just find it really difficult. And as for prop-making I'm just not very good. So, the first two shows I had a miserable time because of that. And then the third show I was DSM on, but it didn't have a very strong director, and so it wasn't a terribly good production. And anyway, we got it up and running, and because it hadn't been very tightly directed, and the company were quite insecure, I think in retrospect that's what it must have been. But they basically, they sort of tried to play it more for laughs than probably should have done. I think it was A Chorus of Disapproval... yes it was, which is an Alan Ayckbourn, which is very funny, but because I think they were insecure they kind of, it got sloppier and sloppier and there was lots of more kind of playing things for laughs, and it just got out of shape a lot. Now, DSMs every night write a show report that goes to the rest of the departments in the theatre and to the director and so to say you know whether something's gone wrong, whether it's technical, even to draw to their attention, as I did then, that the kind of show would benefit from the director coming in and giving the actors a few notes. So I did that, so then I was summoned to the next stage to the Artistic Director, to say that my show reports were too depressing.

KH: Oh dear!

BE: Now, this just absolutely was the straw that broke the camel's back as far as I was concerned with Cheltenham, because show reports aren't designed to be cheerful marketing bulletins! They are supposed to tell you what, if anything, is wrong with the show so you can put it right, which is what I pointed out to the Artistic Director. And then, I just, I resigned. [laughs] And it's the only time ever I've resigned from a job because I just thought, 'I am so depressed, I'm really not enjoying this, you know, there must be something else out there'. So of course then, returned to London, panicked, 'Nobody will ever employ me again!', as you do...

KH: Yeah!

BE: You know! And then, but someone did... who did? Oh yes, that was then Clwyd, I went to Clwyd, which was fantastic. I loved working at Theatre Clwyd and I did a lot of shows there over the next, must have been two or three years. So the first one I was there I was DSM, that was The Constant Wife with Cheryl Campbell, and then Theatre Clwyd, what did I do there? Pygmalion and Sailor Beware... blimey! School for Scandal directed by Maria Aitken, one of the few directors I didn't really get on with.

KH: Was it for any particular reason?

BE: I'm really not very sure what it was, but I just, I think I didn't take to her as a person and vice versa. It was perfectly civil, but do you know what I mean? But sort of cold, whereas some directors you really kind of, have a good relationship, like Janet Suzman, who I worked with, who directed Death of a Salesman with Timothy West, again that was for Theatre Clwyd. That was fantastic, I thought she is a fantastic person and I really enjoyed working with her. And then I went to, oh yes, a show called The Choice directed by Annie Castledime, I did at Clwyd. Was that the last one? Yeah I think it was. So yeah, that spans, yeah about four years. Blimey that long! Yeah about four years, on and off, I did shows for Clwyd. Who's... Toby Robertson was the artistic director still when I started, and then by the end, by the last show it was Helens Kout-Howson, who's the immediate predecessor I think of the current one. Anyway, so that was good, it was a very traditional subsidised repertory theatre in that, it would have a season of plays that it produces, it also took in some incoming stuff, it took local amateur productions in that it hired the theatre to. Because it's stuck on a hill, outside this town called Mold, it's very isolated but it means that as a company and everybody in the theatre, sort of you bond quite well. Do you know what I mean?

KH: Yeah.

BE: So it is like a family. You are a bit stuffed if you haven't got a car and you work there, because public transport: not good. And it was one of those theatres that had been built in the seventies, and it was actually very well-built, do you know what I mean? It had enough space, it had a big stage management office, it had an office for a production manager and the company manager and it had big workshop for the set and workshop for the props, and it had... the main house, I think seats between six and

seven hundred people and the studio, two or three hundred. So it was just well-designed and it was a nice space to be in. You know, because, we all went through a phase of thinking "oh seventies buildings are horrible, and they don't look as pretty as Victorian buildings, theatres" or whatever. But actually, in terms of being practical, it was very practical. And because it was situated on a large empty hill, actually you had space, they built it big enough! And you could take the set straight off the stage through the workshop, through these giant doors, straight into the lorry if you had to. Do you know what I mean, if you were doing a tour. So easy from a lot of those points of view. Yeah, so that was, I enjoyed that, and at the time when I started they had a permanent company manager as well, and then lots of sort of freelance stage management like me that came in. But because they had a constant person in charge there who would know how the theatre functioned, and looked after the company, who saw that as his sort of primary function, and he was really good at that, Maurice Greenham. He also looked after us as freelance stage managers who would come in, and he'd pass on all the information, so there was a lot of continuity there despite the fact that most of us were freelancers, a lot of us came back again and again. And it worked for the theatre, because I mean there would usually, or very often they'd rehearse in London. Because Clwyd is stuck up on a windy hill in Wales, it would be easier to kind of rehearse three or four weeks in London, then come up there. Because you just get more actors to sign up for it if it means not being away from home for quite so long, you know?

KH: Mmm, yeah.

BE: So, well and the same for the stage management. You didn't mind, because you'd be there maybe four weeks or five weeks, but you weren't there the whole time and you got the chance to go home occasionally. So yeah, no I had a good time at... I think that Clwyd really was one of the best examples of the way sub-rep worked for a very long time, which now there aren't many left that work like that, but then there were loads, do you know what I mean?

KH: Why's it changed?

BE: Money. Some of them closed down and others have just become much less-producing than they were, again for money reasons. So they do more co-productions, that was kind of just starting around about that time in the early nineties. But also a lot more receiving... I mean, Cheltenham, for instance, was a full-time producing house, it's now more or less a receiving house that produces occasionally. So, a very big difference. But really, really what it means is people missing out in those areas because having your own theatre in every area, people were proud of that. And actually by the time I got to Clwyd, because it was a very different environment, I was quite happy to go and ask people for things, in terms of props. Because actually, because it was a small town, and people would know, and they'd know that, do you know what I mean, you'd be organised and you'd return things if you borrowed them for a production, and that they could come and see the show. They'd take an interest because they'd always see the same people again, and the same actors would come back, so it was like they owned the theatre, do you know what I mean, in a way that maybe people now don't get a chance to do. Because it's... do you know what I mean? There just aren't as many, sort of, of their own local theatres around. So a great shame, and that was kind of, you didn't realise at the time when you were working in it, but things have changed a lot since

then, and it was a great system. What did I do after that?... Oh yeah, I started doing some opera. It's quite interesting because the reason, one of the reasons I think they took me on first when I went to the Welsh College to do the post-graduate course is because I score-read, and I played the piano as a child. And they could see that I might have a future doing opera, which I love opera so I didn't have a problem, but you kind of fall into a certain type of theatre and then you always get more work with that. So I was doing a lot of plays in subsidised repertory and therefore I got more jobs in plays in subsidised repertory, do you know what I mean? And sometimes you can get in a bit of a rut like that, and if you want to sort of change direction you need to make a conscious effort to turn something down or to look for something. So anyway, but yeah I got opera, I got a modern opera, which... that's right I got that job because it was going to the Munich Biennale, which was an opera festival, and so they wanted someone who spoke German. And that was directed by someone called Jonathan Moore. It was a new opera and I'd never done new music because I had a piano teacher who didn't really believe in any music written after about 1900, [laughs] you know, so modern music was kind of... and I'd never worked on a modern opera, so you just got a sort of duplicated hand-written score more or less, and there was all these weird squiggles, very alarming I tell you! How are you going to follow that?!

KH: Yeah.

BE: But of course, what you forget when you first look at these things is that you've got four weeks' rehearsal so you're going to hear it and therefore you can follow what the rehearsal pianist plays in your score and you learn to read it that way. And I did go and talk to her as well, to the rehearsal pianist, and go, 'Look, I really don't know about this, can you explain to me what this is?'. Because then the transition you make from the rehearsal piano to the full orchestra, that's the bit you know where you suddenly realise what that small squiggle means, do you know what I mean? Whatever instrument...

KH: Yeah.

BE: And it may be an instrument that you can't hear very well, whereas on the piano, you heard that particular noise quite well. So that's always a challenge with opera, but particularly with this modern stuff I think. So that was quite interesting. Oh and then I did a tour for what was then Cambridge Theatre Company of *The Taming of the Shrew*, with what's she called? Toyah...

Colleague: Wilcox?

BE: Thank you!

Colleague: I know no other.

BE: Well, yeah exactly, you know who I mean?

Colleague: I do!

BE: The pop singer...

Colleague: Yes, yes.

BE: Yes, her! Who is very short, she's very short indeed!

KH: Oh is she?

BE: Yes! And... yeah I know! I mean she was very pleasant but she doesn't like to look short [laughs] in photos. So she will... whenever we did press photos, they kind of have to photograph her a bit from below, do you know what I mean? Makes her look a bit taller. But she's such a lovely girl I don't know why she was worried about it. Anyway so that was quite interesting. That was one of the hottest summers ever, 19... God was that in 1990? That was! And it was so hot that in York, you wouldn't think so, I thought, 'I've got to go and buy some clothes, I am so hot!'. And I remember going to buy like the thinnest thing you could possibly find. And the theatres of course, none of them had air conditioning or anything then, and I had a real problem with the actors and voices which I'd never come across before or after. It was just simple dehydration and we had to just provide gallons and gallons of water because it just got so hot on stage, mixed in with glycerine is the trick I found out then, because that, like my hoarseness now, that's how they would go, just from in the heat, losing too much moisture whilst they are using their voice. And so actually the glycerine, because it helped smooth it, seemed to do the trick. So yes, water and glycerine by the gallon on that tour. The company were lovely but I didn't hugely enjoy that tour from the rest of the team, but that's another story... Oh yeah and then I did another opera, another modern opera, suddenly you then get a reputation that you can do modern opera, do you know what I mean? [laughs] So it's... OK! Which was ghastly, I seem to remember! It was one of the worst things that I've been associated with so we'll skate over that one!

And then I went and did two shows at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester, which I loved working at. Now that is a fantastic theatre, and I did both shows with Greg Hersov who's still there as one of the three artistic directors. And the first was a version of the Beggar's Opera, which I don't remember that much about that. I was DSM on both those shows, and it's because I got on well with Greg on the first show that they asked me to stay on to do the second one, because it's quite an important relationship that the DSM and the director, because the DSM will be in rehearsals the whole time and very often therefore you find if you have a good relationship with someone you'll stay on and work with them again. I mean it was the same at The Crucible that Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? was directed by Mike Kay and the panto was directed by him and then the Northern Mystery Plays, you know so that was, because he'd said, 'Yeah I like working with this woman'. You know, whereas I mean you know I was saying I didn't particularly enjoy working with Maria Aitken, but actually by that time I was Company Stage Manager, and I wasn't the person that had to sit in rehearsals with her so, do you know what I mean? I could keep a, you know, we had a professional relationship, but it kind of didn't matter if I didn't really sort of spark it off with her. Yeah. So yes, the second show that I did with Greg at the Royal Exchange was

an adaptation of *The Idiot* by Dostoevsky, with a Russian actress in it called Valentina Yakunina I seem to remember. Now, one of the problems was that her English wasn't terribly good, and she really struggled with that. I mean obviously they tried to help her, I don't know why – I mean she was an actress, in Russia, and had recently come over because she'd got married to an Englishman, so she spoke English, but just for acting, it was hard. And so she struggled with that a lot. And the other thing I remember about that is that there's a... the guy who kind of inspired me to become a stage manager, he's called Pete Goodwin, who was the stage manager at Orchard Theatre when I went to kind of do work experience there with my boyfriend. And he's just fantastic because he's one of those people who's very technically gifted, but also he's very calm in any crisis, and you realise very quickly that he's intrigued by making, solving the problems for artists for what they want to do, that's kind of what we're there for, and he's very good at that. And by the time I went to the Royal Exchange he was there as technical manager, and the Royal Exchange, if you might know, it's a sort of bubble, built inside the old building of the Royal Exchange, so it's a theatre in the round. Anyway yes so it's a theatre in the round, so you can imagine that flying things is not easy, right? Because we haven't got a fly tower, do you know what I mean? Like in a normal theatre. So, they wanted though - for whatever reason I can't remember - Greg wanted to fly in these railway carriages. [laughs] I know, just something small and easy!

KH: [laughs] Yeah!

BE: And so they did, I think they found, you know like really old-fashioned railway seats, those wooden things, do you know what I mean? With sort of red leather padding...

KH: Oh yeah. BE: ... you know? And benches. So they found some of those, and Pete – I don't know how – managed to fly those in, on an angle as well so it was brilliant, I just remember that. And the other good, fantastic thing about the Royal Exchange, because it had, most of the audience would be on the ground floor but then there was a gallery which had, the first-floor gallery which had the audience, and then there would be like the second-floor gallery where the stage management, the person cueing the show so the DSM would be sitting and the lighting and sound technicians and stuff, so you always saw everything that went on, because in a traditional theatre, you were hidden behind the proscenium arch, so you don't always have a full-on view, whereas the Royal Exchange you could. So that was fantastic because it was just a magical space. I mean of course it had the bomb after that and it's been rebuilt and I haven't been back, but I believe they've rebuilt it more or less as it was and it was definitely a magical space to do theatre in. So that was the Royal Exchange, that was great. I managed to buy a flat during that time, which was spectacular. Then, yeah then I kind of started on, I did start doing more and more opera, and one of those was the... Harvey Goldsmith who is better known as a popular music producer and promoter, he loves opera though so he decided obviously to indulge his passion of theatre and he put on various operas in huge indoor arenas, in the early nineties. I wasn't... what did I do first? I can't remember. I think he did do *Aida*, but anyway this one that I was involved with was *Tosca* at Earls Court so... big.

KH: Yeah.

BE: And it was directed by Francesca Zambello who's a well-known American opera director, and of course they needed thousands of stage managers, so, well in fact I've got eight written on here. I thought there was more of us but anyway... So this was quite an interesting concept, because you needed different techniques of dealing with things on that scale, do you know what I mean? There were God knows how many children and dancers and extras and singers and chorus and do you know what I mean? Just crowds of people and huge distances, do you know what I mean? Just going from one end of the rehearsal room - which was, we rehearsed in Earls Court too - to the other, you know would a) take you ten minutes, and by the time you did that for the whole of the day you'd be absolutely dead on your feet, you know? So just a different way, you know you have to think about how to do that stuff. So there was a show-caller, and then there was a sort of stage manager in charge, and then there were eight of us, and the way we worked it out is that basically people took on different areas of the stage that they'd be responsible for. So any entrances or exits that would come your way, you would deal with, you would cue people on, and you would make sure they were there in time and all that kind of stuff, and that concept seemed to work quite well. So that was the first one of those I did, I did more of that later.

KH: Did you enjoy doing things like that?

BE: Yeah, no that was, well firstly because it was opera, and secondly because it was a different challenge. I mean, the interesting thing about the job is that there's something new with every show anyway, but if you've been doing it for a while, you know you kind of do fall into pattern, so doing something like that which takes you out, you know you have to start problem-solving all over again on a completely new concept, is very interesting. So it was lovely, and just doing opera, but then doing it on that scale and all the problems associated with that, and that was one of the first few. Harvey Goldsmith had before that, he'd done Carmen that way, but it wasn't the same stage management team, it was a different stage management team, and he did take that version to Australia and Japan, and then he revived it in Britain, and that's when I got involved, because I'd done the Tosca at Earls Court, I then got involved with the Carmen in Birmingham, in Dortmund in Germany we took it to, where else did we go? Zurich, Munich and Berlin I think.

KH: Oh wow!

BE: Yeah. So that was brilliant. And that's the show I met my husband on.

KH: Aww!

BE: Because he was assigned to the same area of the stage as me! [laughs]

KH: Oh that's good then!

BE: I know! But yeah I know, so this, it was very interesting because by the time you know we did get to Berlin which I think is '94 and this first one I did was '91, you know, there was a system. We'd worked out how you do these things well, you know, and how you make it work, and it was brilliant. And really - because that was the start of the time when lots of big public events, you know like now it happens every five minutes that you get you know the Queen's Golden Jubilee and blah-dee-blah, all those things with huge spectacle, public spectacle - that was only just starting then really, it didn't exist on that scale. So that was good because actually you applied some of those techniques to those big events, you know. A lot of us, the same people, worked on the VE Day celebrations in 1995, so the fifty years after the war, and that was in Hyde Park, and involved three days of live shows, unrehearsed live shows, on television.

KH: Oh wow!

BE: I know! And it was boiling hot in the summer of 1995! I mean this was May wasn't it? Does it say on here? [Looks at CV] Yes April-May '95, yeah. So, yeah again the distances, how do you herd, do you know what I mean, how do you organise huge amounts of people across these huge spaces? And the people to learn from, incidentally, are the army, because they know how to do this.

KH: Yeah.

BE: And it was quite interesting because in some of these big celebrations, do you know what I mean? There are... what are they called? I'm terrible on military terminology, platoons or groups of soldiers involved in some way. And they have majors who are experienced at that sort of thing and kind of doing the show stuff, the parade stuff. And in fact it was someone called Major Parker who did the VE Day celebrations, who also did kind of... stuff like that, you know royal tournaments... And the absolutely fantastic thing about working with soldiers is that if you say 'I want you to leave at 12:05' they will leave at 12:05! Whereas you try and do this with a bunch of children and you get nowhere. So from that point of view, it was quite interesting learning from the way they organise things and time things. And Sue Banner who I worked with a lot, she was the senior stage manager on these arena operas, and then she was the show-caller on the VE Day celebrations, which led to her favourite cue ever which I think was 'Fly-past go!'. [laughs] because then you get the Red Arrows flying over! Marvellous.

KH: [laughs] Sounds good!

BE: So, yeah so there was a lot of that. Another... have we got time? A really interesting thing that I did was that I worked as production manager on the Chester Mystery Plays. And this is something that happens every five years, usually outside Chester Cathedral, and what they did at the time - I don't know what they do now - is that they gave to a professional director a production manager, and a couple of... oh yes a designer, and I think a lighting person, and anybody else is volunteers, community, amateur, children. And it was 24 plays, that's right - I think I've written it down here - performed by 500 amateurs over three performances in repertoire, OK. So you'd do, I don't know, play

one to eight you know on Monday night, play nine to sixteen on Tuesday night, on Wednesday you'd do play... do you know what I mean?

KH: Yeah.

BE: And then you'd do it all again and all three of them on Saturday, you know.

KH: Wow!

BE: We did that for two weeks. And that was huge. I mean I'd just started doing some production management at Theatre Clwyd, but otherwise I'd not done, this was sort of particular because it was community groups, and it was also not one bunch of people doing all 24 plays. They'd sort of farmed out individual plays to different groups, do you know what I mean? So you'd have the Norwich Players or whatever, no not Norwich, what's it called that town?... Or the Wrexham Players doing one of the plays and then you'd get actually the professional actors from at the Chester Gateway at the time would do another play, and the Dean of the Cathedral and his son did Abraham and Isaac. So it was different people. And so trying to co-ordinate all that, there was a huge amount of, kind of, people coming and going from all over Cheshire, and how do you sort that out on the site? So I learnt an awful lot about doing stuff open-air, of course it rained a lot! Doing things with cathedrals! Now there's a hierarchy to really inspire fear in anybody! Because I suppose again, as a foreigner, I had no idea of the sort of Church of England, do you know what I mean? There's the Bishop, there's the Dean, there's the, you know, whatever the next thing's called... Canons, that's right. And what do Vergers do? You know and there's a Head Verger! And who do you negotiate with on schedules? And you can't rehearse because you've got recorded music when the organist is having a rehearsal or when he's rehearsing his choir, because he gets very upset! And he's definitely someone who doesn't think any decent music was written after 1700, you know! So if you're playing any modern stuff it would be... So actually, most of the job involved negotiating either with the Cathedral or with the local council about the sort of health and safety and licensing and all that, but it was a fantastic job. One of the reasons is that they put me up in the house of one of the Canons who lived in the Cathedral Close. Now, I realised by the end of the job that a lot of these people are not very nice actually, you know!

KH: Oh really?

BE: But he was very nice and so was his wife who taught music at a local secondary school, and she got involved with the music for the Chester Mystery Plays, and they had four very lovely children. So actually it was a fantastic family to put me up with, and I had a great time with them. And then they even found me an office in - I don't know if you've ever been to Chester - but there's a sort of gateway that goes into the Cathedral Close, right? And at the time, in the gateway itself, there was this small room which was empty, you know, nobody had done anything with. So they sort of cleared out the flea-ridden carpet and put me a desk in there, and it was fantastic because you're sitting there and you can look out on the cobbled, on the Cathedral. And also, I could see who was coming and going, you know? [Laughs] I had a good view of everything! So that

was brilliant. I was there for - oh God, how long was I there for? May to July, yes, so it was quite long. And it was great because most people really enjoyed taking part. I got a load of volunteer students from, I suppose it was Chester College then, it is now the University of Chester, who were dead keen on doing stuff. Two of them ended up doing lighting, and I had about half a dozen helping kind of running the stage and stage management. Oh, and, my friend Pete Goodwin the miracle-worker, the technical miracle-worker, stepped in again because the set was this giant scaffolding basically, so heaven, hell, sort of, do you know what I mean? But it was sort of in a semi-circle, and like it built up to this sort of platform at the top. And at the beginning when God hurls Lucifer down to Hell, they wanted Lucifer to fly! This is open-air mind you! OK so where do I attach the strings?! Fly down from the platform to grass level, which was probably I don't know... 40 foot, 50 foot, I don't know, a long way. So what do I do? I ring Pete and I go 'What am I going to do?!', so he actually lent me a harness, and he came over and we worked out a way of doing it which basically involved ten students hanging at the end of a rope, at the other end of the... so if this was the scaffolding [demonstrates], and he's jumping off here, he's attached to a rope and the students are on the grass behind there, you see, and kind of like... So the performers still had to be brave, because he had to jump into nothing basically trusting that these Chester College students would be hanging at the other end. We had a tiny problem when it rained so much that the ground got muddy and they slipped, OK! [laughs] But I mean they slipped but they were still holding, but it's just that I think he fell a bit more rapidly than he would have wanted to! So, but there we are you see, it can be done if you ring the right people. And people always help you out with that sort of stuff. So what did I do after that? I can't remember... More Theatre Clwyd, more Carmen... Oh, I did quite a lot of stuff with Cheshire Dance Trust at some point which I really enjoyed. Just kind of workshops and summer stuff, more Carmen, more Clwyd. Oh yes, then I started working for English Touring Theatre as company stage manager, and I went to Turkey with them. I did a UK tour and then I went to Turkey which is fantastically interesting, very difficult because as Company Stage Manager on tour you're generally in charge of putting the set up and running the fit-up and the get-out. Well, they found it very difficult to ask a woman, do you know what I mean? [laughs] When you came into the theatre in Istanbul or Ankara, the only women working in the building would be the cleaners.

KH: Really?!

BE: Yep. So, to then turn up and have a woman tell them where the set went and how to put it together, and the production manager was with me because he did the re-lighting, and he was a very nice guy, and they'd always ask him, and he'd go 'Oh, I don't know where the set goes, you'll have to ask her', and they'd go 'Oh, all right then'. But actually, I mean they were all great and they didn't, they weren't horrible to me, it's just that they'd never come across this, it was complete news to them that a woman would know how to hold a makita, you know, and what to do with it, because you had to screw this floor in. And they were a very good and experienced theatre crew who found solutions to the problems we had with slightly less technology than you'd probably would have done it here, just because they obviously didn't have much money. I think one of the problems was that they had a rake in one of the theatres, so we had the door to the stage wouldn't keep open or shut or whichever it was supposed to do, but do you know what I mean? You can solve that stuff with ancient technology, you don't need modern stuff. So, so yeah, no that was very, very interesting to do that.

KH: Sounds it!

BE: What else did I do?... Oh yeah then, by this stage, I guess I'd been working as a stage manager nearly ten years, and I was thinking, you get a bit frustrated because you think 'I'm experiencing solving problems that were set up by people higher up the chain', right? So if you're touring for instance, who did book that tour that closed in Aberdeen on a Saturday and opened in Brighton on a Monday? Right, I mean you just do that logistically, do you know what I mean? If you do a get-out in Aberdeen, it might not have been Aberdeen, it might have been Glasgow, do you know what I mean? And then, how do you get to Brighton for Monday morning to do a fit-up at nine? Is that safe and are you going to be driving all the way there? So I thought well maybe I want to be one of those people who books that tour. So I looked into doing arts management and I found an arts management course at Roehampton College or whatever it was called then, which was two evenings a week part-time, for a diploma for a year. Now that's all very well, but how do you combine that with working as a stage manager when you need to earn money, seeing that you're going to work in the evenings, right? So one of my solutions was that I went and did a couple of shows at the Royal College of Music. Because it's a college they had five or six weeks' rehearsal and then just one week performances, you see, so it meant that for five weeks I could go to college two evenings a week, because they'd just rehearse kind of ten till five, and then just for the week of the performances, do you know what I mean, I'd try and find another solution or not go. So I did that and... I also, that was towards the end of doing that, I got a job as DSM for the Royal Opera House on their production of Carmen which they took to Jerusalem to an open-air venue. It wasn't built for an open-air venue, so what they hadn't realised is that the Sultan's Pool, or whatever it was called, is that it could get quite windy, and I have lovely memories of the production manager hanging off the back of the set trying to stop it falling on top of the singers in the middle of their performance! [laughs] So... but that was, I think got to be one of my favourite jobs simply because going to Jerusalem, and I got the chance of being in Jerusalem for two weeks. You know, brilliant, and we did do a bit of, managed to do a bit of sight-seeing, but it was very, very hot. You had to be incredibly careful, you know, working open-air. It was in the summer as well... yeah, May-June, you know, so very hot. Water was the main thing, and of course also this whole thing about the Sabbath meant that absolutely everything stops, like the hotel wouldn't do dinner, you'd just get cold buffet, all the stuff that was cooked the day before and things. So that was quite interesting. Or you weren't even allowed to operate lifts, right, in theory if you were really orthodox. So I think on the Saturday the lifts were just set to go from ground to top and back, do you know what I mean? They were sort of set automatic so you wouldn't have to press any buttons, so...! [laughs]

KH: Wow!

BE: There was all that kind of stuff, and of course I managed to get... well I don't know whether it was food poisoning, they weren't sure afterwards whether it was Hepatitis A, but anyway it was pretty bad! Me and one of the other stage management on the show got this, and she actually missed the show, but I managed to do it, but I was sitting next to this electrician, and he'd gone and got some takeaway before sitting next to me! [laughs] And I was thinking, 'You better take that away! You don't want me to throw up all over your lighting board!'. But so that put a little bit of a pall on the last two days, but apart from that, that was a great job. And then I went and worked at the Opera House

itself and I did a show with Francesca Zambello who'd directed the Tosca that I'd done years before at Earl's Court, and I got to cue a revival of The Marriage of Figaro which they did as well whilst I was there, and I think that was probably my second favourite job then, cueing The Marriage of Figaro, I could do that forever! And then my last job, 'cause I got married in December '95, and sort of in a break for working on La Bohème for Raymond Gubbay Productions at the Albert Hall, and by the time that finished I was pregnant with my first child, and so I didn't do any more stage management. I'd also finished my course, my arts management course, so actually I'd already started as administrator for the Chester Mystery Plays, the next one - 'cause the previous one was '92, that's right, and I was working on the '97 - but I did hand that over to someone because Charlotte came in October '96, and the shows were like the following summer, and I was realistic enough to think that it would be really difficult to do that with a small baby, and also when you haven't got a clue and you haven't done children before, do you know what I mean? I think it was extremely wise, so I found someone else to hand that over to.

BE: And after that I didn't work for a couple of years because I couldn't really quite work out what I could do, and how I could do it with a small child. But, I mean my husband realised that I was sort of starting to go slightly mad at home, and actually he saw the advert for this job, running the Stage Management Association, whilst I was in hospital because I'd had a miscarriage. So I applied for the job and by the time the SMA had decided for various reasons, because there were lots of changes, I'd took it, I was pregnant with my second child. But so I started here on the 1st of January '99, and then went off on maternity leave that same year to have my second child. And then Sally came in to do my maternity leave and she's still here now. This is not Sally, this is Kim [gestures towards colleague], but Sally's the other one who's at home today. And yeah, so I've been here ever since, and I had a set of twins as well in 2002 so now I have four children. So yes, this is for me the perfect job, because I couldn't do it without having been a stage manager, but actually it uses all the stuff I learnt on the arts management course, so... and I'm still, you know I can work hours compatible with having a family, and still be connected to what I enjoy doing. So actually one of the things that happened just as I took this job on was that the person who edited the magazine was run over by a truck, on her bike, and died instantaneously. And so one of the things that I found as I started was that they were all going 'Oh my God! What do we do now?'. Fleur was kind of the one who'd edited the magazine and got it all interesting and stuff, so I started doing it more by default, and I found I absolutely loved it. So I've been doing the magazine ever since, and through that I now write for The Stage quite a bit, and I'm sort of co-editor for the backstage pages that they have there. So yes, I mean actually, because of Fleur's terrible accident, I ended up doing that and I really enjoy it. I mean I'm sure I would've done anyway, even if she hadn't got run over. But, so it's like these coincidences sometimes don't they, that take you to things.

KH: So what is it that the SMA does then? Why was it formed? Was it formed in 1954?

BE: Well, it was formed originally by a group of West End stage managers who basically... stage managers were members of Equity and used to get employed on their standard contracts but really they were acting contracts, so they got together to put pressure on Equity to negotiate separate stage management contracts. One of the things about the acting contracts in those days is that actors didn't get paid for rehearsals, they only got paid for performances. Now the point the stage managers made then is that

actually the majority of their work, or the, do you know what I mean? Or the really hard work for them was in rehearsals, getting all the shows and stuff together. So they managed to achieve that within a couple of years, but the whole association thing was obviously found to be such a good idea that they stuck together. And David Ayliff, who's been interviewed for this project, is still honorary life president and he's now 93. He was one of the original founders...

KH: [laughs]

BE: I know, he's still going strong!

KH: Good for him!

BE: So then what the next thing that it developed, it became from a West End Stage Management Association, it became just the Stage Management Association, so it widened to be national. And around 45 years ago, so when was that, Kim? [Asks colleague]

Colleague: I'm sorry?

BE: 45 years ago makes it in the sixties, wasn't it? That they started the free list?

Colleague: Yes it was, yeah.

BE: So the free list is a list of members available for work which gets sent out to employers every month and has been now for 45 years or something. So that's the main way that stage managers find work.

KH: Oh right.

BE: So, once that was established, that kind of was so popular with stage management, that it carried it through. Even so, it was struggling when I arrived, because I think it's just that the world was changing, everything was changing, and the SMA needed to look at sort of more, widening out a bit, in terms of what it was doing. So we've done very well because we've nearly doubled the membership since then...

KH: Oh wow!

BE: And we've introduced lots of new things. Well, the website for a start, I mean websites didn't really exist, do you know what I mean? They were just starting. We sort of got lots of kind of e-mail and website-based stuff. We do lots of training now, and

lots and lots more information and events. And of course it's much easier to organise a lot of this because you just do it online and you have a Facebook group instead of having to post out individual letters, do you know what I mean?

KH: Yeah.

BE: So it's great. And obviously stage managers, we're not a union, so the union bit is done by Equity or Bectu, but what we do is we're just paid by our members to provide the services that they want. So training is what they want, they want information, they want to meet other stage managers, because it's kind of quite a lonely job in a way. You might be the only stage manager stuck in Northumbria with a theatre company, do you know what I mean?

KH: Yeah.

BE: And you find yourself thinking, 'Am I just reinventing the wheel? I'm sure someone's solved this problem before'. so there's that function of bringing lots of freelancers together. Yeah, so we're there to kind of support them in their working lives. And we give lots of careers advice to young people, to kind of make sure that they, if they are interested in stage management that they know which way to go training wise. And I mean, we've widened, it used to be just professional stage managers who were members, but we now have amateurs, we have people who are just interested in keeping in touch with what's going on in stage management, and we have lots of students. Students now means anyone in full-time education, whether they're 16 and at school or 38 and doing a post-graduate something or other. So that's great because a lot of the information especially that we disseminate applies to anybody, whether they're a professional or not. But then we do engage with issues that are particularly relevant to professional stage managers, as at the moment there's a question about discussing stage managers' freelance tax status with the Inland Revenue, so that's kind of, we engage with that sort of thing.

KH: Oh right. So it's evolved quite a bit since it was first formed then?

BE: Quite a lot, yes! But I just think, if it folded tomorrow someone would reinvent it the day after because it's obviously just a good idea, and lots of professions have that sort of thing don't they? Because people feel it's valuable to stick together and discuss their common issues, do you know what I mean?

KH: Yeah.

BE: So yes, and provided it can get enough subscriptions and sales, the training courses are accessible to non-members if they're paying more and publications and stuff, then it will keep going I think for another 50 years!

KH: Yeah! That's great then.

BE: OK!

KH: Is there anything else you want to talk about?

BE: No, I think I've talked for enough! That's enough! [laughs]

KH: [laughs] That's great. Thank you very much!

BE: OK!