

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Christopher Knapper – interview transcript

Interviewer: Nicholas Birtles

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Theatre-goer and amateur actor. Actor/manager/producers; A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum; At the Drop of A Hat; Audiences; Crewe amateur theatre; Concert Party; Edinburgh Fringe Festival; Frankie Howerd; Glenda Jackson; Great Hucklow; Lyceum; Mermaid Theatre; musicals; the National Theatre; Nottingham Playhouse; pantomime; L. du Garde Peach; Frank Randle; repertoire; repertory theatre; Sheffield theatres (The Crucible, The Empire, The Lyceum, The Playhouse); Sheffield University Drama; television; theatre-going; The Stirrings in Sheffield on a Saturday Night; World Theatre Seasons; Peter Ustinov; variety; West End shows.

NB: My name is Nick Birtles and I am here having a talk with Dr. Christopher Knapper.

CK: Good, Nick, thanks. Well we are talking here about Theatre, 1945 to 1965 and that is a very good period for me as I was born in 1940 and so in 1945 I was just about conscious enough to go to the theatre. I think my first memory of the theatre was probably right at the beginning of your time period or shortly thereafter. Then I left for Canada in 1966 so my experience really just spans it, by coincidence. I thought we might begin with my very first memories, and like a lot of kids in those days. I should explain that I was brought up in a very dull industrial town that everyone knows because of the railways - Crewe, in Cheshire. You might think 'what sort of theatre would exist in Crewe?' but actually there has been for a very many years a very flourishing professional theatre in Crewe. It still exists, it's called the New Theatre Crewe. I just read a history of it actually. A very bad history but people like Gracie Fields were there, a lot of the stars - famous Victorian stars appeared there over the years and many more modern stars.

My first recollection of it involved two things. The first was Christmas pantomimes and I remember being taken as a little boy by a neighbour who asked my mother, 'Do you think Christopher would like to go to the pantomime?'. This neighbour is still alive and she is in her eighties now. I recently visited her and she still remembers this also. I was so enchanted by this pantomime which I'm sure must have been very poor but I thought was wonderful. What did I think was most wonderful about it? The fact that the sets changed every few minutes. I thought this was absolutely magical. Well, this company was performing I suppose to try to get - to milk - the most out of the Crewe audiences. They did a week of pantomimes and they changed the pantomime they did every night. I was so enthused that my mother and this neighbour agreed that I would go every night. I went to see all these pantomimes and I'm sure that the sets were probably very similar but I thought they were wonderful. So that was my very first memory.

I then used to go as a child to the theatre. It did a whole range of professional shows, mainly variety - in those days it was touring people. But once a year for a week was

something that was very popular in Crewe, which was a musical production that was put on by an organisation called "The Old Studs". The Old Studs - it sounds rather risqué doesn't it, the old studs? But it didn't mean that, it meant the grammar school. There was a grammar school in Crewe and it had an old students' operatic society. This organisation, which still exists, put on every year a musical, a light musical of course. I used to think these were wonderful. They started off with Gilbert and Sullivan when they first began in the 1930s. Then they did things like – among the ones I remember would be Blue Moon. I'm sure you've never heard of that, and Rose-Marie (which I could still sing you most of the songs from but won't!) and The Desert Song. These were very popular and these were all things which had been written in the thirties and we are talking 1940s here, late 1940s. These were the sorts of things that they were doing. They would be quite lavish productions, amateur of course. The Theatre would be packed for these because everybody and their friends would go.

Now there is one other thing from this period which I might mention about Crewe which was that my mother was a very talented amateur actress and in fact on my recollection of Crewe in that period, it seems astonishing today but there must have been half a dozen amateur theatre companies in Crewe. Crewe only had a population of 50,000 and I can name most of them.

NB: Do you think that was common with towns of that size or do you think there was something special about Crewe?

CK: No, I think it was because it was before the age of television where people made their own entertainment. When I think of those, even now I can remember the names of some of the companies. My mother's company was the parent-teachers association from my infant school with a very clumsy long title, The Bedford Street Parent Teachers Association Dramatic Society. They put on popular comedies of the time. I mean we are not talking about Shakespeare and stuff. These groups didn't do Chekhov or anything. But they did popular entertainment, they had good audiences. Mother's company was one. The biggest one, and the most successful, was sponsored by the Railway Company which dominated Crewe. It had its own company called the LMR (London, Midland Region) Players. They had some very, very good actors, that company. Then there were the Ruskin Players, the Occasional Players. These companies would not be able to command a big enough audience to be at the Crewe Theatre. They would play in things like the Corn Exchange, which was in the Town Hall, or on little stages. But once a year there would be an occasion in which all of the companies would put on - jointly - a play and there would be an audition for any amateur actor. They would bring in a professional director and they would book Crewe Theatre for that. So of course that was very exciting. Mother appeared in several of those: When We Are Married which was a J.B. Priestley play - very famous play, still performed. I remember Waters of the Moon by N. C. Huntley, I may have the name wrong of the author but again a famous play of its time. Dear Octopus, that was a very popular play of the fifties, mother was in that. These were town productions sponsored by the town and they got good audiences.

NB: What year was this roughly?

CK: This would be in the early 1950s that this sort of thing was going on. I think it started with the Festival of Britain which was in 1951 that the town decided there was so

much amateur activity that they would sponsor a production of this type that would be put on in the theatre. Gradually over the years that I lived in Crewe, as television came, the audiences for these amateur companies dwindled. I think a few companies remained in Crewe but not anywhere near the number that existed.

NB: Was that a noticeable, sudden shift during the fifties?

CK: I think it was. I think theatre really declined, so did cinema. When I was a boy in Crewe there were half a dozen cinemas. Now there is not a single cinema in Crewe. That decline was very rapid and think it was pretty well television which caused it. Television came to Crewe - and the North - in about 1952, something like that - very early 1950s. From that point theatre activity started to diminish, Crewe Theatre itself struggled. Remember, there was a theatre doing professional theatre but it never quite went under. It was bought by the town council eventually. The building was bought by the town council which prevented, solved, part of the financial problem. It still survives, the Crewe Theatre, to this day. Again, still owned by the Council and now it does a lot of mixed repertory and lots of professional company things and so on, but there was a period during which it really looked as though it was going to go out of business. I mean, they were doing nude shows and stuff like that to try to bring in an audience. The last show I saw there at the professional theatre, which was much later, probably in the late fifties... yes late fifties, was a comedian, a variety show. The reason I went was my cousin had a band at that time, called a skiffle group. Do you know what a skiffle groups were? Have you heard of them?

NB: Yes

CK: Yeah? Lonnie Donegan the great skiffle king. My cousin had this band called The Crescents and to bump up the audience they put on a variety show in which the top of the bill was a comedian called Frank Randle. Have you ever heard of Frank Randle? He was very, very famous in his day. In fact there is a biography of Frank Randle that appeared about two years ago and somebody wrote to me because they thought I might have been at this performance in Crewe that Frank Randle gave. It was the last performance that Frank Randle ever gave, so it was of interest to this biographer because he had become an alcoholic. All I remember was he was very resentful of the skiffle group which was the other attraction on the bill. He referred to them always as the 'piffle' group to get a cheap laugh in his own act. He had been a very famous comedian, he made films, did radio but not TV. He was actually in a children's comic called Radio Fun which was a weekly comic. Frank Randle was famous enough that he had one of the characters in this comic. Anyway in this show in Crewe he had really come down on his uppers by this time which showed you also what had happened to theatre. The show was unspeakably crude, I mean the act that he gave. My brother told me that he could only be got on the stage if he locked himself in the dressing room with a bottle of whisky and at the time that he would get a call there was a minute before he was due to appear. He would appear, he would do his act - he had a sidekick who did little sketches - and then that was the end of it.

NB: So was that one of the last performances that you saw?

CK: It was one of the last performances that I saw at Crewe Theatre, yes. But they still hung on until there was a bit of a revival. Eventually the Theatre very sensibly, like a lot of these small town theatres, realised they had to get a completely different conception of what they were doing. This had to combine - they had to see their role as a sort of community service which would have theatrical productions, but it would be a mixture of amateur productions, things like the Gang Show, which was a Boy Scout production, and amateur shows like the musicals I mentioned done by the amateur musical society which is still put on in Crewe. And that it could be dark parts of the year and that there would be touring productions, maybe opera, maybe things that were not really theatre at all like the choir festival and a speech, poetry reading type of activity. By changing that focus they managed to keep both the building and the spirit of the theatre alive. I think that was a very sensible thing but it took a long time before that.

There is more other thing that I ought to mention about, before I get to the university years. Do you know, have I mentioned to you Concert Party? Do you know what a Concert Party is?

NB: I've come across it but I'm not fully aware, no.

CK: I'm glad you've heard of it.

NB: I have, through your e-mails.

CK: My mother was a member of a Concert Party in the thirties and in fact they were pretty good. She was in The Society Six, we still have photographs of that, not in this collection of things for you. I could send them for you if you want. The Society Six was a very typical Concert Party. This is a weird phenomenon that is totally unknown today. It was very, very popular in the twenties and thirties. It lasted about as long as the forties and early fifties lasted. There was an absolute de rigueur format for Concert Party. It nearly always had six people and the six people all had different roles. One would be a singer, one would be a violinist, one would be a pianist. The idea being that together they could form an ensemble. The repertoire would be a series of acts, if you like. There would be sketches in which all the company would appear. They would be very simple sketches, very, very... I'll recreate one for you in a minute. There would then be a solo turn, the violinist would play. There would be songs, funny songs, and there would always be an opening chorus and a final chorus. The other part of this, which sounds terribly quaint, they would always be dressed as pierrots. Do you know what a pierrot is?

NB: Yeah.

CK: People think it means somebody who acted on a pier but of course it comes from Commedia dell'arte in Italy. The pierrot would be dressed in these black and white pierrot costumes in the first act and then in the second act in evening dress. I don't why but that was always the way it was, not just in my mother's company, but in all companies. She had done this, but I never saw this, saw her perform, because I was born in 1940 and it had disappeared. They were even interviewed, they were even auditioned

by the BBC. They were good enough to be auditioned. I don't think they were hired and then the war broke out and anyway my father didn't really like my mother's acting career. After the war, concert parties survived a little bit of a while on piers. Hence the confusion about piers and pierrots. If you see the film of *Oh What a Lovely War* you will see this because of the conceit of *Oh What a Lovely War*, which is a show that was done by Joan Littlewood in the sixties. She used the framework of the concert party but this time on a pier – in Brighton I think it was supposed to be. She had them dressed in this pierrot costume but that was just a conceit to use for the background of this anti-war play. It did have in common the idea of all the actors [working as a collective]. I have a programme for *Oh What a Lovely War*, the theatre production of it, and one of the things about it is that it doesn't give the names of the cast. It just says, "The Company", Joan Littlewood and the company. Because they were all equal, there were no stars, that was the idea. They all had equal roles and all collaborated with each other in these different formats. That still existed, I remember as a child going to see a concert party. My mother would take me of course - if there was a concert party going she would immediately go to it. We would go to Llandudno and watch it there. We went when on holiday once to Minehead. The example of a sketch from a concert party would be as simple as this. Somebody would walk onto the stage - one of the six, you know. He would say: 'It's funny how people are nosey aren't they?' He said, 'You know, one person will look up like this and before you know it, everybody is looking up'. The rest of the cast would do this. And then he would say 'Somebody looks at the floor and before you know it everybody would be looking down at the floor. Why are people so inquisitive?'. Then at the back of the auditorium there was a great commotion and of course everybody immediately turned around and the person on the stage simply said: 'You see what I mean, don't you'. That's the type of sketch they did. I mean that's a real sketch I remember from one of these things. It's very simple humour.

NB: Yeah.

CK: A sketch might last five minutes or four minutes you know. That type of stuff. So that was Concert Party.

I should mention - this is something we talked about in our e-mail exchange. I mentioned that Crewe had these amateur companies. Some of the actors were pretty good, I think mum was pretty good herself – but I would think that of course. Even when I'd seen professional theatre I thought these people were pretty good. One of the things that started to happen, the Crewe Theatre that had always traditionally been a touring venue started to engage repertory companies. Do you understand what I mean by repertory companies?

NB: Please explain.

CK: Well repertory was... it's funny I have to explain it because it's so obvious to me, but then again it doesn't quite exist today. Repertory theatres were companies that existed... well, Crewe was a bit small for a repertory company but the bigger towns all had repertory companies. It is a theatre company with maybe 15 actors, fewer in a smaller place. They would mount plays for a season – a season would be maybe 9 months a year, not perhaps in the summer. A repertoire, hence the idea of a repertory

company, of different plays. So you use a basic company which put on a huge number of plays, we'll see it later.

NB: Throughout the year or each night?

CK: Well, good question. Well they would rehearse a play for a week, perform it for a week. They would, while they were performing it, be rehearsing for a play for the following week. There were some quite well known actors that were with these companies. They operated on a shoestring, they had to be totally self-sufficient. They would make a contract with the theatre to occupy the theatre for the year. They would then keep any profits, but it was difficult to sustain an audience, especially as television made in-roads. Of course it was incredibly hard work for the actors... To give you an idea of actors who were there - what is the man who was in *Are You Being Served*, who always played the gay shop assistant? He was one of the stalwarts of the Crewe Rep, but I've forgotten his name [John Inman]. An actor you wouldn't have known but was very successful eventually in the London theatre later called Sydney Tafler had been involved. The most famous person is someone we discussed already who was Glenda Jackson. Glenda Jackson was born near Crewe, in Birkenhead actually. Her first job was with a small repertory company in Birkenhead I think, but her second job as a very young - in her teens - was with this Crewe repertory company. Of course she was completely unknown at that point. She tended to play juvenile lead - that meant the romantic young part. Of course the company composition would have to have people who would fill in a variety of roles. I remember seeing Glenda Jackson when I was a teenager in a number of parts because she was the primary juvenile lead which meant she would nearly always have the lead part. She would play everything from, you know, a young girl in an Agatha Christie thriller and next week she might be Jane Eyre in *Jane Eyre*. The repertoire was pot-boiler, you know, very popular West End type of stuff done after it had ceased on the West End.

NB: So did she make an impact to you back then or was it something retrospective?

CK: Well she did, yes. The interesting thing there involves the amateurs that were in the companies. Very often the company in Crewe was a very small company because the audience was limited. I used to go every week with a group of us from grammar school. They would do OK on a Friday and Saturday night but it would be difficult to fill the theatre all week. Hence they had a very small complement of actors, I think they probably only had ten. It was difficult for them to cast anything that had a cast more than ten. So what they then did if there was a cast larger than that and you couldn't double up the actors - sometimes you would have an actor play several roles - what they would do was get local amateurs to fill in, and they could get a dispensation from Equity to do that. My mother used to do a number of roles with them and that's how, though I never met Glenda Jackson during this period, mother knew her quite well. My mother, and several of my mother's friends who were also actors, were very close to Glenda Jackson and she kept in touch with them for several years after she became much more famous. Yes, I think she was always very successful there and quickly went on from that to better things.

One of the great advantages of the repertory system, because there were hun- . . . I was going to say there were hundreds of companies, that's a bit of an exaggeration but there

were certainly many dozens of these companies all over Britain. So you could imagine if you were an actor in one of these companies, you had a lot of experience very, very quickly. I remember the director of the company coming to the school to give a talk about the repertory company and I guess trying to drum up an audience. Somebody asked him, and this was in the beginnings of method acting, 'Do you ever get lost in the part?'. He said 'Oh my God no!', he said 'If you are acting with Crewe rep, you know, the scenery may collapse at any moment, you couldn't possibly indulge yourself in such amateurish nonsense, you know, you are always aware of the fact that you are acting'

NB: We may have to press on to your university years as time may be pressing.

CK: Let me just give you a couple of things from this period.

NB: Sure.

CK: These are all programmes of my mother's. All very battered but you may as well take them, you know. Bless the Bride, these are musicals. The original Theatre Royal Oklahoma. What was at the Liverpool Empire? Ivor Novello in Perchance to Dream, a very, very famous matinee idol. I'll put those over there.

Yeah, well let's move on to Sheffield. I had acted at school in plays, I suppose because of the influence of my mother. So when I went to Sheffield I started to act with the student drama society. There was quite an active student drama society at Sheffield. I was in a couple of productions and I've got... actually I'll leave the programs with you here. I even have a poster. So we did things in Sheffield but we also took a play for the first time to the Edinburgh Festival, this is the programme. We did a rather risque double bill. We hired a room and there was no subsidy for this, it was all sponsored by the Student Union.

NB: What year was this?

CK: This was 1959. You might think, 1959, wasn't that a pretty important year at the Fringe, because that was when Beyond the Fringe first started.

NB: It really exploded from then.

CK: That's right. We built the scenery, took it down there, hired a hall, marketed it, did all the publicity and put on this double bill – Oscar Wilde's Salome and The Beauty from Samos, which was a world premiere supposedly, although since it was written by the Greek playwright Menander, I don't think we could call it a world premiere. But anyway it was 'the British stage premiere', we said very modestly. That was sort of an interesting year experience just from my point of view because there you would get reviews from the national press because the Fringe was just starting up there. The actors who were on doing real productions, you know, not amateur productions, the legitimate stage productions that were part of the regular fringe, we would get to meet them. I remember meeting Miles Malleon who was a famous comedy actor of the period. A

couple of us met him on the street and asked him if he could come for tea with us and talk about the theatre, and he did. Those were heady days. The next year I was not involved in taking part of the Fringe. The play that had been selected for the next year will interest you perhaps, because it was *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter which had never been performed on the stage – it was written for television. It had been very controversial when it had appeared on television. These were the days when television plays were acted live, they were not recorded. There was only one programme, well two programmes, ITV and BBC, so when this aired it created a lot of controversy. Our group wrote to Pinter to ask if we could take it to the Edinburgh Festival and he said yes we could. Except that *Salome*, which involves the “Dance of the Seven Veils”, had been rather controversial and we were performing at the Epworth Halls which was run by the Methodist Church. So when they found out we were coming back with this play that had bad language in it and was anyway largely incomprehensible, they said we couldn't do it. So we never actually did *The Birthday Party*.

NB: What year was this?

CK: That would have been 1960, yes.

NB: Did you, so you were in the Fringe at 1960 then?

CK: I was in the Fringe in 1959. That was when the very first Sheffield drama group performance took place but they continued after I no longer was involved with it for several years

NB: Were you aware, when you were at the Fringe in '59, that things were changing? Or was it quite fresh for you, did it feel very vibrant?

CK: Yes, I think it was clear that there was some amazing talent both in terms of playwrights and there were some amazingly good student actors. We never saw the productions when we were there because we were ourselves performing. You know, the Fringe had a particular life cycle, it was two weeks and if you were performing (and *Beyond the Fringe* was on at the same time) you tended not to see it because you were acting at that time. We took this play to Oxford University. Sorry, the *Sunday Times* ran a Student Drama Festival and they hired theatre in Oxford and we got to the finals of that. We took the same two productions there. We were reviewed by Harold Hobson who was the doyen of theatre critics at that time - he was the *Sunday Times* drama critic.

I had the lead in one of the plays and I didn't think I was very good. In retrospect I think I was probably quite bad, but he was very kind in his review so I always remembered that. Very famous people would come and talk at that festival. Arnold Wesker, Ralph Richardson came: Arnold Wesker was a very famous playwright of the period and Ralph Richardson of course the famous actor. So, it was obvious... I think my main impression was that there were people who were taking the theatre far more seriously than I was. I was still, I think, really locked into a very amateurish, fun type of feeling about it. It was also obvious that the type of play that was coming along was different from the sorts of

plays that my mother had been in. I mean we were seeing plays like... you know Six Characters in Search of an Author. We were seeing a lot of avant-garde plays; Ionesco was very much prominent at the drama festival. John Osborne was writing Look Back In Anger at this period. The theatre was changing – it was becoming much more focussed on social concerns and it was becoming more experimental than the type of theatre that I had seen. I think that had always existed in the theatre, after all Six Characters in Search of an Author was written, I think, in the thirties, so there was experimental theatre then, but it was not really much in the mainstream. The type of theatre you saw in the West End of London and in the repertory company - and we'll get on to Sheffield rep later, in a minute - they tended to do stuff that would be familiar to you today. A School for Scandal, Twelfth Night, you know that sort of thing. But now we were seeing these playwrights who had started to experiment – some of them were very political like Bertolt Brecht. I mean you didn't put on Bertolt Brecht in the repertory company at Crewe, you put on cosy, drawing room comedies, some quite sophisticated, but none-the-less they reflected largely middle-class values because the middle-classes were the people who went to the theatre.

So we're getting toward the middle and end of this. I mean I'm now in Sheffield. There's one thing I should mention about Sheffield before I forget, because we've been talking about what's called the legitimate theatre and then amateur theatre. But there was one other type of theatre which was hugely important, though was dying, and that was music hall. Or what was not called "music hall" in England, it was called "variety – "music hall" is what the Americans would call "vaudeville". This is really like going back in time because I'd seen this type of production in Crewe and essentially what this was involved about eight acts. They would hire a theatre or come to a theatre and there would be eight acts. They were completely unconnected these acts. There would be maybe somebody with performing dogs, a juggler, somebody playing the harmonica, perhaps a singer and always a comedian. These acts would tour and they would appear at Crewe one night - not one night, one week - they would then go on to another town the next week. By the way, if you are at all interested in this world there is a very wonderful book about it - which was actually made into a TV series - in the sixties called Lost Empires, by J.B. Priestley. "Lost Empires" is a pun because the theatres that they appeared in - there was a chain of theatres called The Empire that in the fifties still existed and almost every city had an Empire – Sheffield did. When I went there they had a Sheffield Empire and I went to productions. During my first year as a student it closed. That was really the end of variety. It lasted a little bit longer in London at the Palladium. What you saw if you went to the theatre was fascinating. You went into the theatre - there was nobody to introduce this as there was at the Palladium, there was no compere who came on and said 'Tonight we present...'. You had a programme if you paid the sixpence for it and it had a list of acts and there was an orchestra which was a house orchestra there – they didn't tour, they were to do with the theatre. It would start off with a jolly introduction and the conductor would then turn and he would put out a number, which was a very big number, and it would say number one and that meant that on your programme this act was number one. It would start with something very innocuous - very similar, if you ever saw it, to the Ed Sullivan show - that was the American version of it. That, as I say, died in Sheffield – the Empire, last season of the Sheffield Empire was 1958/59.

NB: So you just caught the end of it.

CK: I just caught the end of it. The theatre was demolished. It was just off The Moor, this theatre.

NB: Who did you go see these performances with and were the audiences large or small?

CK: The audiences were different, they were different audiences for variety. The audiences for variety were solidly working class people – these are the people who go on these game shows on TV these days, you know. This was not sophisticated entertainment. They were well attended in Sheffield but the people who went to the Sheffield Playhouse, who we'll come to next, were not the people who went to variety. So if I went to variety I'd go by myself. Friends of mine were middle-class people, they didn't go to that. They'd come with me to the Playhouse, that was a different audience.

CK: Of course there is another reason why variety was killed by television. If you think about it it's obvious. A comedian like Norman Evans - a very famous female impersonator of that period - Norman Evans gravitated OK to radio but when television came Norman Evans had about three acts, and Frank Randle the same, the man I mentioned at Crewe. These people had a repertoire of about half a dozen sketches, but if you were going from theatre to theatre that didn't matter because even if you had seen this sketch a year before it was like seeing an old familiar friend. But if you saw it on television you couldn't use that again you see. The more successful of the variety acts simply became TV personalities like Eric Sykes or, you know, the old style comedians, Frankie Howerd, these people came right at the end of the variety period; I mean, they were very young, they were not the old-stagers I saw. They had often begun by doing these variety acts but they then learned how you could work from a script and how you could be on TV. But these sort of comedies that you see on TV, situation comedies, less so today perhaps, but if you see old shows of Morecambe and Wise and Frankie Howerd, that is directly related to what you would have seen in their variety acts. They would do exactly the same thing on the theatre. They would have a stooge who would play a role with them and they would have a little situation acted out. They would simply transport that from the theatre to radio and then to television, just as Jack Benny did in the United States. The very successful ones made the transition.

NB: Because they were able to come up with more material you think?

CK: Ah, they would get script writers to do it.

NB: I see

CK: So people like Frankie Howerd and the better ones of these people were fairly broadly talented. So Frankie Howerd could also do Shakespeare, he could also sing a bit. So we'll see in a minute he was in A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum. The better ones I think started to realise 'I just can't tour with the same old act. If I'm going to be on TV I've got to get script writers, I've got to be more diverse in my talents,

I've got to be able to sing a little, perhaps dance a little, perhaps appear in straight plays and so on.' So these guys...

NB: Diversified.

CK: Survived, you know. But back to Sheffield. I know we can't go on into the evening here. Two things in Sheffield. One is that there was a flourishing amateur theatre scene in Sheffield. And I've put out some programmes for you here. There was an organisation called the Sheffield Playgoers Society. There were many amateur companies in Sheffield, as it's a bigger city. So although it was dying in Crewe, in Sheffield theatre, because there was a much greater population, still could sustain amateur theatre and the quality was better than in Crewe I would say. Not necessarily in acting but the choice of play was much more ambitious. So, I'm looking here, and here is Under Milk Wood was done, Teahouse of the August Moon. These were - you will see the dates in here, I think you'll see the dates, maybe not - but these were done in the late 1950s.

NB: Were these made up of students or were these sort of just working people?

CK: No, by and large these would be local amateur actors. If you were a student you would be welcome to appear in them but you'd need to have a young part, you know, for that. The Caucasian Chalk Circle... So these guys were doing Brecht, they were doing stuff that was rather more challenging. Orpheus Descending by Tennessee Williams. You would not see that type at the Crewe repertory theatre - actually that's not true because I did see the odd Tennessee Williams play, but it was very exceptional. These people were really interested in drama.

And here's a funny one - there was a little company outside Sheffield in Great Hucklow in Derbyshire. Great Hucklow in Derbyshire was the home of someone you would never have heard of but he was a playwright called L. du Garde Peach. Or as my mother would have called him, "Eldegard", as if that was one long name. L. du Garde Peach, and he converted a barn in this funny little village in Derbyshire and he was the great seigneur of this place. He would write - these plays were largely performed by amateurs, but he would write these plays for local people in the village in Great Hucklow and he would have particular people in mind. So it was a bit like - except there was no religion attached to it - the sort of British version of Oberammergau Passion Play, you know. He would write these things and they were very good. And this one was not one of his, this is I mean amazing, an original translation of a play by Vassili Gregorovich Smirnov, whoever he is. The first time in English, it says, and it was performed by the - there were no people named you see, just the list of characters and this was done by the villagers of Great Hucklow. I wish I knew more about that because...

NB: Did they come into Sheffield or did you go out?

CK: No, no. I went out and saw that there because the local amateurs who were in Sheffield that I got attached to - I didn't act with them but I was quite friendly with some of the actors - and they would really go and see each others' plays and would

have an expedition to go to Great Hucklow. I wish I knew more about that but somewhere somebody should investigate the history of that.

Anyway that's the amateur scene. In addition there were two other scenes in Sheffield. One was the Playhouse - I'll just pop these down. Now the Playhouse was a repertory company. It still exists, it's now called the Crucible, but it used to be called the Playhouse - it was in a different theatre when I was a student. And here we've got Crewe failing but in Sheffield; Sheffield is a big city, it has a wealthy population - well it did in those days. It could support repertory very easily, and it did so. You had to book your seats in advance for the Sheffield company and, look at the front of the programme, here's the clue, they didn't do weekly rep, they could do three-weekly repertory company plays because you see there was an audience. Crewe would run out of audience in three nights. Sheffield could fill a theatre for three weeks, or do well enough to survive over three weeks. You could see the repertoire, I'm not going to open all these programmes but - it's not a hugely ambitious repertoire, so we've got French Without Tears, a very popular Terence Rattigan, and you see the dates on these, these are now in the early sixties so a little bit later. C.P. Snow was very, very popular then, he was a novelist - he was a cabinet minister actually, Lord Snow - and he wrote a series of novels about universities. Several were done by the Sheffield company; such The Affair. The Keep by Gwyn Thomas I don't know, then Hobson's Choice. The Masters, another C.P. Snow. Then - I remember this very well, there are recordings of this; if you were really interested I'll dig out the recording and send it to you, it's on a cassette - then they commissioned a wonderful musical play called The Stirrings in Sheffield on Saturday Night, and I even remember [sings] 'The stirrings in Sheffield on Saturday Night' - that was the end of the song. But it had many, many things in it, huge cast, and it was all about the cutlery industry in Sheffield in the 1860s and they researched it, found out people that were really existed at the time and they, it was all set in a series of pubs on Carver Street, supposed to take place there. Just really, really very good and it was revived several times.

NB: Who commissioned this?

CK: The Sheffield Playhouse Company commissioned and acted in it. They did occasionally do musicals. I remember seeing a very good production of The Boy Friend there. In fact a friend of mine who acted with me as a student, who had become a professional dancer was in that. Generally though if you saw a musical like this, there weren't singers, they were actors singing, you know, because they were expected of course to do everything. There were some very famous actors from that Sheffield period. The most famous was probably an actress called Anne Stallybrass who for many years was in The Onedin Line - it was a TV thing, she did that or I don't think she would be around any more. So here's a Bertolt Brecht, Anthony and Cleopatra, there'd be quite a number of Shakespeare stuff, some done for the school audience but others perhaps... not because of the GCE but because there was sufficient audience in Sheffield for that. But in '61, they were still doing Blythe Spirit. That must still be performed every year somewhere, Blythe Spirit. And again I feel - here is another Shakespeare - actually this is not Shakespeare, it's Caesar and Cleopatra by, of course, George Bernard Shaw. So that's just a little sampling of stuff from the Sheffield repertory but that's by no means all I saw, that's just the programmes I've got.

Then, the other theatre which still exists was the Lyceum. The Empire had closed, that was music hall. The other theatres had been converted into cinemas and what was left was the Playhouse which later became the Citadel - sorry Crucible, not Citadel, Crucible.

And the Lyceum, and the Lyceum was touring stuff so this was very different from the Playhouse. The Playhouse was just the same company all the time, and a lot of this was - I've put out programmes here and I don't know whether you include this in your study of the theatre because it's really not theatre but ballet or opera. You'd get a whole week of opera by the Sadler's Wells Company, a different production every night and I remember going to see six nights of opera, some of the programmes are here. Starting with Tosca and ending with Carmen. So if you wanted to, as a student, you could get a rapid introduction to opera or ballet.

NB: Crash course.

there was the annual Christmas pantomime. There were productions, I remember going with my mother - you'll see in this collection, I won't bother to open it, you'll see the National Theatre appeared there. Juno and the Paycock with an amazing cast - I mean, I should really try to find that because Juno and the Paycock had - it was directed by Lawrence Olivier and it just had - let me see if I can find it, yes, here we go. I mean it had Michael Gambon, Frank Finlay, Colin Blakeley, people you probably don't hear of any longer - Anthony Hopkins was in a walk-on part in the production, I mean just...

NB: What play was this again?

CK: What year? 1966.

NB: And what play was this?

CK: Juno and the Paycock by Sean O'Casey. Then, in the same production - I saw A Flea in Her Ear with Albert Finney playing the two twins. You know A Flea in Her Ear is a Feydeau farce and it's all based on a mistaken identity because there's two twins and one actor plays the two. So, you know, you could see that type of stuff and the National Theatre did a week at the Lyceum. Then of course every Christmas there was a pantomime there. People you won't remember any more: Jimmy Clitheroe, and David Farren always every year played the villain - he looks very villainous doesn't he? The pantomime had to, of course, have all these acts in it because it had come again partly from the variety world and so the pantomime would be interrupted by somebody doing a juggling act and then, you know, there would always be the comedian - Billy Windsor is no longer known of but he was quite well known then. I bet that you have never heard of Jimmy Clitheroe?

NB: I have.

CK: You have? He was a little midget. He had a terrible joke in there, I remember - this was a very pantomime-y joke. Somebody was supposed to be in one scene and she'd come from the hospital and she'd say, 'We've had a case of gangrene in this week' and Jimmy Clitheroe's reply was 'Well it makes a change from Lucozade'. That was type of joke you would get, you know, terrible sort of joke. But the pantomime is pretty well as

you would see it today. I mean that was a tradition that continued. You know, the community-based jokes still remain year after year after year. With these - somebody would leave a box - you know that sort of thing. And there would be a song on a scroll and everybody would have to...

NB: Sing along.

CK: Sing along. And I've seen some wonderful pantomimes. Morecambe and Wise I think did the best pantomime in Sheffield. I used to take my nephew - I'm sorry, my cousins! My cousins were much younger, and every year we would go and see the pantomime. So that's Sheffield. And we've come to the last bit now which is sort of theatre elsewhere, particularly London because I know you were interested in that.

NB: Just, yeah, I suppose. Variations between the regions and London.

CK: Let me just start with other things from Sheffield because I... when I was at Sheffield I went to lots of other theatres. I'm a bit of a theatre junkie so I went to a lot of other theatres at the same time and I brought some programmes for you to give you some idea. Well that's not, the first one's not theatre at all. But, do you call circus theatre? Anyway I don't know, but I'd thought I'd throw in that Bertram Mills Circus - one of the most famous touring circuses - they of course didn't perform in a theatre, they performed in their own tent which they brought - that was from Sheffield - they brought that. And then here's a selection of other theatres I would go to at the time. The Palace Theatre Manchester, Oh What a Lovely War. These are all in the sixties, very early sixties.

The Nottingham Playhouse had just started up. It had been taken over by a triumvirate that you'll see mentioned in here. It was an odd idea that you would have three directors. Frank Dunlop who probably, might not be known to you but he was a very famous theatre director. John Neville who was probably known to you. Still alive John Neville: he emigrated to Canada, and Laurel and I saw him many times at the Stratford Festival in Ontario. And Peter Ustinov, that's a pretty formidable trio for this regional theatre. And who was in the company, no less than people such as Leo McKern, he was a permanent member of the company. Here is a very young looking Leo McKern and a very young looking John Neville and various other actors you might know. One of the things about the Nottingham Playhouse was that Ustinov wrote a lot of original plays for the theatre there as well as occasionally performing in them. So I've left those theatre programmes out. Here's one that he wrote, unknown today though, Your Life in My Hands.

NB: Was that 1963 as well?

CK: I don't have the date here but it would be around that. You have to be cunning with dates, they never would put the dates on programmes but this looks like... if you look at the back you can see when the next performances are, and actually when you are going through the programmes don't forget to look at the back because very often you'll get a whole repertoire of what they're doing and you can see that they are doing Coriolanus,

the Importance of Being Earnest, Semi-Detached and so on and that will give you the date. And that's how Peter Ustinov looked in 1963. Memento Mori by Muriel Spark. I won't comment on these except to say they were one of the most successful regional reps in the country, the Nottingham Playhouse.

NB: Did you visit the Nottingham Playhouse specifically to see these plays?

CK: Yes, I did. I mean Nottingham was a pretty easy drive or train trip from Sheffield so it was easy to get to. Here's another one in Nottingham that was not at the Playhouse, it was at the Theatre Royal Nottingham. Nearly all of these big cities had a place like the Lyceum and a repertory theatre. This was the repertory theatre, the Playhouse, but there was also the Theatre Royal which had touring companies. You might be interested in this, the premiere programme for John Osborne, it was tried out here on the way to London. Luther was the play and Albert Finney played Luther. Peter Ball who you've seen in many, many... James Cairncross was in it, and George Devine who eventually became the director at the Royal Court Theatre which was famous for producing a lot of John Osborne's plays. One of the things that's interesting, Nick, about these times is that these actors and the directors, there wasn't the sharp distinction between the director and the producer and the actor. So Peter Ustinov would act and would direct and would be the impresario who would put up money for the company to operate – what we would call today a producer.

NB: Was that rare or was that quite common?

CK: It was very common and in fact the last of the people I can think of who was doing this was ... now the name is slipping my mind, the Nobel Prize winner Harold Pinter, who not only directed plays but acted in plays and wrote plays. So you had all these roles and when you look through these programmes you'll see - George Devine, he's famous because he put on a series of very avant-garde plays at the Royal Court. He took over the licence – I think he was actually the producer, hired the theatre and so, well yeah, but he was an actor and acted in stuff.

And then, Oxford. I think I must have seen this when I went to that drama festival there. Also on while we were at the student drama festival was, before it even appeared in London, Stephen Sondheim's A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum. Now that's still in the repertoire today. And who is in the cast of that if I can find it? It's a wonderful cast, except... Here we go. I mean a star studded cast of English comedy this; this was a try-out for the West End. So for the Prologue the slave is Frankie Howerd, Senex is played by "Monsignor" Eddie Gray, he was a very famous comedian of the period. Kenneth Connor who had appeared in all those Carry On films was Hysterium, Jon Pertwee - who was originally one of the Goons, not the main Goons but before, way, way back - Jon Pertwee -and he was also in Doctor Who, John Pertwee, very, very early in Doctor Who. So, you know, it's just a wonderful list of... Robertson Hare was Erroneous - I mean just a wonderful cast. Of course that was after it had opened in New York with a different cast, but that revived Frankie Howerd's career, that whole production. He had been an old music hall person who was finding difficulty getting work. He came from the variety stage, actually the Windmill Theatre, the nude show which had a comedian. Then somebody took the risk of casting him in this and it spun off, this production, a TV series called Up Pompeii which was very famous in its day.

Anyway that's Oxford. Then we go to Opera House Manchester where you could get to in a day. Ever heard of Sylvia Syms?

NB: I have, yes.

CK: We saw her very recently. Laurel was very astonished to see her as Peter Pan in this because she is still acting in Miss Marple and things like that as an elderly lady. I don't know whether I'd recognise any of the other cast in here, possibly not. Yes, Vanessa Lee was in this, I don't recognise most of the others in here. Anyway that was Peter Pan with all the flying and so on. Then I've thrown in a couple of programmes from the Royal Shakespeare Company Stratford. They also operated a theatre in London during this period but these are Stratford productions and you might know some of the names. Henry IV with Eric Porter who had made his name on TV much later in things like The Forsyte Saga which is before your time. Ian Holm was in this and a whole bunch of other stars – John Falstaff was played by Hugh Griffith who was a very famous Welsh actor. Roy Dotrice was another name you might know. You might also know Hugh Griffith because he played the Squire, with Albert Finney, in that film Tom Jones, that's a very classic film. So these people - I mean the talent of acting in those days, quite astonishing you know. Here's another one, Henry V, I won't bother to read the cast for you.

CK: Then finally London because during this period I was also going up to London because that was three hours on the train from Sheffield. I sometimes went on business when I was working at the University, in the middle sixties – I was employed by the University from '62 to '66 and so I would sometimes go over there, I was still visiting London. The Pyjama Game. You won't know many of these actors, but Joy Nichols signed the programme. I used to go... I was a backstage junkie you see, and I would get these programmes signed though I don't have the programmes here. But I would also go up to Blackpool, which had a big theatre scene in the summer because all the actors from London in the winter - not the actors, but the variety turns and the singers would go up to Blackpool – people like Harry Secombe who was a comedian of course, Alma Cogan who was a heart-throb singer at that time. They would all go and appear in revue in Blackpool so that was a wonderful place for theatre, though I don't have programmes here. But anyway, back to London. Pyjama Game. They had a - the theatre scene in London was much more sophisticated than it is today. Here's an example, they did a World Theatre Season with companies from all over the place that would just take over a variety of theatres in London in the summer months. This is a programme from that... from '62, '63 or '64, I'm not quite sure, if I look inside I'll find out, but the exact date doesn't matter. This was a company that was run by Eduardo de Filippo, that was a very famous Italian comedy troupe that performed here in London in the sixties. You could fill a theatre with that. It performed in Italian and to understand what was going on you had a little device which... you didn't plug it in, you put it close to your ear and a translator at the back of the theatre in a booth would - live as the production was going on - translate the words into English.

I've never heard of that since, but such was the audience that you could easily find an audience for that sort of thing. Then there were lots of other stock comedies - Ian Carmichael, Dylis Laye, big, big stars in the sixties. Peter Shaffer was an influential playwright in the sixties. He wrote plays like Equus later but - Public Ear and the Private Eye was one earlier. Beyond the Fringe, that one you would have heard of, unfortunately that was not the original cast for that programme. And then there was a

little bit of repertory theatre in London. London didn't really have real repertory theatres for the most part – even the National Theatre did not exist in London in the sixties. I forget the actual date the National Theatre started – but the beginnings of it were the Old Vic. The Old Vic was one of the few places that did repertory theatre, by which I mean they had a standard cast that they hired and they - the same people - mixed and matched in plays throughout a season. But London really was dominated by a different type of theatre. An impresario would hire a theatre, mount a play, very risky financially. If it was successful then it would pay off. A performance I saw in my school days by Flanders and Swann - you've heard of them probably, they did a duo act, satirical - they hired the Fortune Theatre for a week because that was all they could afford, but of course the show [At the Drop of a Hat] was a smash hit, it ran for a year. I remember going with my girlfriend from Crewe to see that and we had tickets for that at six-thirty because they performed it twice in London. In the evening at six-thirty and again at eight-thirty. Or it may have been at six and eight, I can't remember. And we also had tickets for Paul Scofield in King Lear which was done at the Old Vic and so we were going to have to get a taxi and rush, leave the theatre early, and rush down to the Embankment where - you know where the Embankment cuttings or whatever it is, where the Old Vic is. I was enjoying, At the Drop of a Hat so much that we were late for King Lear as I didn't want to leave before the end. I mean it's difficult to imagine how much original theatre there was in London at those days and the fact that you could fill a theatre twice a night you know, not just once – and a terrible strain on the actors. Can you imagine the average Hollywood star appearing in a play for a year twice a night?

Anyway there were a few repertory companies and Bernard, Sir Bernard Miles (though he wasn't Sir Bernard Miles then) built his own theatre and formed a repertory company. It was called the Mermaid Theatre. This is actually a programme from Her Majesty's Theatre but Bernard Miles had taken it from the Mermaid Theatre and he had a wonderful company. Again Leo McKern was one of these staples – he's the man who played Rumpole of the Bailey but his roots are very, very deep into this type of repertory theatre. He was at the Nottingham Playhouse and then he popped up again at the Mermaid Theatre. There were musicals, with people like Tommy Steele, you remember Tommy Steele? He was a famous pop star who had turned legitimate and became a musical comedy actor and this was a very successful musical [Half a Sixpence] with Tommy Steele and two people you've probably never heard of there. Here's a programme from the show we were talking about from the Mermaid, excellent productions at the Mermaid. Nearly all... well, many of them adapted by Bernard Miles himself from old written, or modern adaptations of older plays. Lionel Bart was also very, very popular at that time. Lionel's mainly famous because of Oliver but he wrote numerous other musicals and these names mean a lot to me but probably not to you, actors called Wallace Eaton and Miriam Karlin and Barbara Windsor who was in a lot of those Carry On films, but here in a show called Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be. Peter Ustinov - apart from running the thing in Nottingham - was also having plays put on at the West End and this was Photo Finish, which is sometimes revived – this is perhaps one of the more famous, surviving of the Ustinov output – Ustinov wrote many, many plays but most of them you never hear of. This one had a very distinguished cast – Edward Hardwicke, Cyril Luscombe, Paul Rogers who's a Shakespearean actor, Diane Wynward, quite a remarkable cast. I said a moment ago that the National Theatre hadn't started, but I see I'm wrong because I have this programme from 1963. It was at that time not performing at the National Theatre but at the Old Vic and Laurence Olivier was the director and here's a very early programme from The Recruiting Officer which is a Restoration Comedy by George Farquhar. We saw Colin Blakely – my wife and I – just the other day in a TV thing. Michael Gambon appears and Maggie Smith is in a walk-on

part and so is Lynn Redgrave. You know, they were just supporting the bigger parts such as Robert Stevens who you have probably heard of and Derek Jacobi who you've probably heard of. And remember, these actors were performing in repertory at the National Theatre, they were not just stars, they had to be there for the next production and the next production you know, so this was quite a commitment.

NB: We're approaching the end of the time, are there any last few things you'd like to talk about?

CK: Well, I'll just leave you these other programmes. You can read them for yourself. Pickwick with Harry Secombe, a show with Joyce Grenfell. My Fair Lady was a big hit. Equus at the National Theatre. At the time of the Lord Chamberlain there was a rather naughty revue called The Lord Chamberlain Regrets, with Millicent Martin and Joan Sims, which was trying to get around all the censorship. And I'll leave you the signed programme with some very distinguished signatures on this – Felix Aylmer, Dame Edith Evans, Rachael Gurney, Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies.

Last thought would be, really, how has theatre changed? I think you'll see how much it's changed just by reading the documentation. I looked – when we came into London I quickly looked at what's on in the West End today and what I see is essentially, virtually nothing original in the West End. There is hardly a show that's not a musical and an old musical at that. A revival of a revival of a revival. There is a wonderful quote from Steven Sondheim who was asked why he stopped writing musicals and whether the audience for his musicals was the same audience that... well, the question was, 'What do you think, given all this – the musicals you've written have got critical acclaim but never have made money and what do you think when you see Phantom of the Opera is still on?'. And this was several years ago and it's still on I think. And he said, 'Well,' he said, 'the audience who go see Phantom of the Opera are probably not going for the same reasons as people who come to my musicals or go to other theatre'. And he was talking about London at the time. The interviewer said to him, 'What do you mean?', and so Sondheim said, 'Well,' he said, 'let me ask you a question as the interviewer, when you have a friend who goes to see Phantom of the Opera and they come back, think a bit more, what do they tell you about their experience?' And the interviewer couldn't answer, or wouldn't answer. And Sondheim said, 'Well I'll tell you what they say. They say we've been to see Phantom of the Opera, we had the most wonderful seats'. And he said, 'They're really showing that going to the theatre has become an act of saying you were there. It's like celebrating yourself in a way, your presence at something, more than actually as a recipient as an audience of a new theatrical experience.' I think he exaggerates slightly because I think there's a mixture of motives. But I think the theatre today is different in the sense that people go to these things to say they've been and it's a very rare occasion. The theatre that we've been talking about - well not we, I have been talking about - for the last hour had a different focus. I think the people who went to it were... perhaps they weren't quite as theatre junkies as I was, but they were people who went to a lot of theatre. They were able to compare experience with experience. They saw this as very similar to reading, it was a way you immersed yourself in another world, except of course a much more dramatic than reading because you had all sorts of other things going on. I think the motivation for going to the theatre is perhaps different. It still survives. I think that's one thing we have to be optimistic about. It still survives, as does the range of talent of acting in England. Laurel my wife, who is Canadian, comments on this when we see a British film or a TV production, or last night Kenneth Branagh in Wallander. You're actually seeing theatre actors, who see

themselves as theatre actors, doing TV, and British TV rests on this vast repertoire of people. So acting thrives but the nature of public theatre has moved almost to the provinces and to fringe theatre. What the people who keep the West End going watch and want to watch is not the theatre I experienced, you know, from the years we were talking about.

NB: Well, I think we may have to end it there but thank you very much.