

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Valerie West – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Sophie Bush**

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Stage Management, production, theatre administration. Lindsay Anderson; Alan Ayckbourn; ballet; British Council; choreographers (Frederick Ashton, John Cranko, Peter Wright); choreography; Lily White Boys; Kenneth MacMillan; National Youth Theatre; New Cranks; Old Vic Theatre; Royal Court Theatre; Sadler's Wells Ballet; Sadler's Wells Choreographic Group; Saved; Share My Lettuce; stage lighting; Valmouth; Ninette de Valois; touring (America, Communist Bloc, West Africa).

SB: OK. So I suppose first of all I wanted to ask you, when you went into theatre - because you actually went into theatre in 1945, didn't you -

VW: Yes I did. Yes.

SB: Was that kind of an ambition that you wanted to go into theatre, or was it more just any job?

VW: I was mad about ballet.

SB: Right.

VW: When I was still at school, I was going to go to university and then I got whooping cough and I decided I would go and have a secretarial course. And, well, while I was there, in London, I went to ballet all the time. And I also started Russian at the... at the... place where I was studying. And I made some little dolls, about that high [gestures], of ballet costumes and a friend who had a little gallery said she wanted to sell them in the gallery so I wrote to Donald Albery, who was the Executive Director of the Royal Ballet and said, 'could I have a look at some of the costumes', and he sent me round to the wardrobe and we got on very well. And when I finished my course I wrote to him and said, 'Please, I want a job'. And so he gave me a job – the Vic-Wells Trust used to be behind what is now the Noel Coward Theatre. It was called the New Theatre. It's where the ballet and – ballet companies mainly, not the opera so much – and the drama companies performed there. And so I would go there in the morning, pick up the post, get on the bus and go to Sadler's Wells and work all day at Sadler's Wells. And come back in the evening. And then go home. And while I was at Sadler's Wells, it was just the end of the Sadler's Wells Ballet's stint there and they were about to move to

Covent Garden. And one of my first jobs was to type out [Marius] Petipa's instructions to Tchaikovsky for the Sleeping Beauty, which is the ballet they opened with. And then, because there was no ballet then, and there were operas with dance in them, they wanted to set up a small group of dancers who were then called the Sadler's Wells Opera Ballet. And it's now become the Birmingham Royal Ballet - same company. So that's what I was, sort of office girl, and that was it. And then somebody went sick on tour and they said, 'oh, Valerie can go out and be an ASM'. So I went out and my first job was cutting colours for the spots. And that's how I got into stage managing.

SB: Was it normal to kind of make a transition from a secretarial position...?

VW: Not really, no. I don't think so. Well, nothing's very normal in the theatre world.

SB: No.

VW: And I was secretary and Deputy Stage Manager, touring with the company... until 1954. Oh yes, well, when I was first at Sadler's Wells, they were doing... it was the second season of Peter Grimes and they wanted walk-ons. So a friend and I became the little creatures who rush around in the beginning of Peter Grimes.

SB: Was that your first time on stage?

VW: It was great fun. Yes. And then the boy who played the assistant to Peter Grimes, who fell down a cliff, his voice broke and he couldn't do the scream. So I had to do the scream. So I was auditioned by Benjamin Britten. [laughs]

SB: Wow! And that was when you were a stage manager.

VW: That's right. My early days, yes. That didn't last long.

SB: At that time, were there many women working in stage management?

VW: Umm... Yes, a few. Yes, oh yes, yes.

SB: It wasn't too much of a male-dominated profession?

VW: Not... well, there were a few. There weren't very many Company Managers, you know, the level... I was Assistant Stage Manager, then you get Deputy Stage Manager and Stage Manager and then Company Manager, and so I started right at the bottom, but I didn't get up to Company Manager, because my job changed then.

SB: And you were – you did some lighting?

VW: I did lighting, yes. That was my interest, particularly. And we had this little group, which Ninette de Valois agreed to our doing, between the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden and the Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet, at Sadler's Wells, and for people who wanted to try their hand at choreography. So we were called the Sadler's Wells Choreographic Group, and we put it on on Sundays, at Sadler's Wells. And organising that was quite fun too. And, as I said [on my CV], I did design the lighting for Kenneth MacMillan's two first ballets for the group. And, I mean, he'd never done anything before, and it was amazing – it came out of his head, you know, ready-made, perfect little ballets. One was taken into the Sadler's Wells repertoire and the other one to the Ballet Rambert.

SB: So you could tell at that early stage that he was going to be quite a talent?

VW: Mmm, yes. And Peter Wright also was one of the group/company, and I lit his ballets too. And there were several other ones. That was very interesting indeed.

SB: How did you go about your designing process?

VW: Well I had been... if you're an Assistant Stage Manager, or a Deputy Stage Manager, you have to look after the lighting plot anyway, particularly when you're touring, you see. You have to make sure the lighting is as the lighting designer planned it. And it's just a question of doing it for yourself, really. Yes, it was interesting.

SB: Because you did some very interesting sounding tours. You mentioned, on your CV, that you toured to America.

VW: [mock groans] Oh yes! Well, you see the Royal Ballet - well, it wasn't the Royal Ballet then, it was the Sadler's Wells Ballet - did their first tour in 1949, to the States - a huge, huge success - with the impresario, Sol Hurok. And then I think they went again the next year. And the third year, Sol thought he was going to make a little bit of money, so he asked for the Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet, and we were publicised as: 'The Fabulous Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet'. And it was a tough tour. It was a very tough tour.

SB: In terms of the work-load?

VW: Well, yes, absolutely incredible. We were one night everywhere. Several places we arrived in the town, did a matinée with one programme, a different programme in the evening, and then moved on in the night, you know? We went everywhere by train.

SB: So how did you all the sets and things?

VW: Well, it was all attached to the trains.

SB: That's incredible!

VW: So it all had to be packed up after the show and loaded onto the trains.

SB: How many, sort of, stage hands would have been on something like that?

VW: [laughs] Well, there were a few provided by Hurok. There was no lighting man. There was a Wardrobe Mistress. There was a stage carpenter, and that was about it.

SB: So, a lot for...

VW: And we couldn't take anything – there was me, and there was the Stage Director, and our own... did I?... I think one of our own Wardrobe Mistresses went. Not sure about that, I can't remember. But all the lighting equipment was stuff which Sol Hurok had had for years and years and years. It was very ancient stuff.

SB: And you had to do a lot...

VW: And we had to do it all...

SB: of physical, lugging it around...

VW: Yes, yes.

SB: and attaching it to trains?

VW: It was very tough, yes.

SB: But it was very well received, you say, in America?

VW: Yes, on the whole it was. I mean, the places we played in were not proper theatres, most of them. They were huge baseball stadiums. So if you were sitting in the back of the circle in a baseball stadium, it was like a little postage stamp, looking at the stage, it was so far away.

SB: How did you find the reaction from those venues to the British company coming in?

VW: Well, they were fine. I mean, they were always very helpful. And I think they were used to having, I suppose, musicals and other variety type shows, as well as baseball. But we played in, for instance, we played in the San Francisco Opera House and we played in a Chicago proper theatre. Not many other ones. Well, we did New York at the end, and we played in one of the Broadway theatres there. But mainly it was just trying to get it on somehow.

SB: So what was morale like, sort of by the end of that?

VW: It was OK, it was OK. Dancers are very nice, yes. But it was tough. It was really tough. And, you know, sleeping on trains is not fun. [laughs]

SB: No. But I guess you got to see a lot of - but then I suppose if you're only in a place for one night at a time...

VW: Yes, well, yes. We played a week, I think, in San Francisco. We had a week off in the middle of the tour, which was Christmas time. Because we started in Canada, in October, and just Christmas time we ended up in California and so we had a week out. And some of us hired a car and went down into Mexico, which was quite fun. And we opened on Christmas Day in Los Angeles. Yes, when the Royal Ballet - the Sadler's Wells Ballet - had been... lots of fashion firms had given them clothes to wear, to publicise their fashion houses. And they did the same with us too, which was quite nice.

SB: Mmm. But you were probably ready to come home at the end of seven months.

VW: Oh boy, yes! [laughs] Well, seven months is a long time.

SB: It's a very long time.

VW: Yes, it really was, yes.

SB: Did you do any touring within this country with them?

VW: Yes, oh yes, certainly, oh my goodness, yes. I can't remember the date of it but - yes, I suppose it was the end of the forties that I started doing stage managing... yes. And then it must have been about '49, I guess, '48 or '49, we were touring, and we were touring in the Potteries in Hanley. We were playing a week there, and it was only at the beginning of the week that there was a fire in the theatre. It was an electrical fault in the roof. And the lovely fireman poured water into the roof, and so the roof fell down, and all our set and costumes and everything were wrecked. So, we had a date in Cambridge the next week. And so I was sent down to London to try and find a

repertory. And so I was borrowing costumes, and the company were rehearsing like mad.

SB: To do a different show?

VW:p; Different, it had to be different shows, yes, because we had no set or costumes for the existing repertory. I can't even remember what the repertoire was, but it was - I know we opened with Sylphides in Cambridge, but I can't remember what else we did. Terrible.

SB: So how long would it usually take you to put together a show? How long a sort of rehearsal period would you have?

VW: Well, I mean, the company rehearse all the time, you see, so, well, it's difficult to say really.

SB:; How often would they change the shows then if they were in repertoire?

VW:p; Oh, I see. Well, if you were doing a tour you would have, say, one full-length ballet - if you had a full-length ballet - we had Coppélia, and then, a triple bill. So you would do that half the week. And that would stay for the whole tour. And then you would come back and either have a holiday, or then start rehearsing another repertory for the next tour.

SB: And this triple bill, that would be three shorter pieces?

VW: That would be three short ballets, yes.

SB: Was that the kind of new work you were talking about?

VW: Could be, yes, yes. Can be new works yes. When we went to America we had Coppélia, which was our full-length. We had a slightly shortened version of Nutcracker. And I think we probably had one short ballet to go with that, because that was two scenes, you know, two sets. And then we had two, if not three, programmes of shorter ballets.

SB: And what kind of audiences would you get in those days? Would they tend to be an upper class audience or...

VW: Hardly! [laughs]

SB: a varied one?

VW: No, well... you see, during the war, the Sadler's Wells Ballet didn't perform in London very much, or very rarely, and they toured all the time. And they were based 'Up North'. And because they toured so much they really showed ballet to regional audiences, who would probably never have seen it. And it did an awful lot of good for ballet.

SB: And were the regions hungry for that then?

VW: Yes, they were, they were indeed, yes. And then they used to come and play at the New Theatre, and the opera used to play at the Shaftesbury Theatre.

SB: So, towards the end of your time at Sadler's Wells, you moved into public relations?

VW: Mmm, that's right.

SB: Do you want to talk a bit about what that involved?

VW: Yes. For that I was doing opera and ballet, so that was very interesting. And, well, it was writing press-releases and programmes and that sort of thing. And arranging photo calls, for new works and things.

SB: Did you enjoy office work as much as the backstage work?

VW: Umm... yes. But the backstage work, it was good, but it was a bit of a dead end, really. Because, if you didn't want to be a director, where did you go? You could become a Company Manager, and then you were sort of stuck, really. And so I learnt a lot more doing the publicity work as well. And that was - it was very useful.

SB: No, I was just going to say: and eventually you were made redundant from that?

VW: Mmm, yes.

SB: Was that quite a blow, because you'd been there for a long time?

VW: Well it was a bit of a blow. I'd been there 12 years, and it was a bit of a blow. But then I got these jobs in the West End.

SB: Did that come quite easily then?

VW: Yes, well through – it's who you know, really. The person I collaborated with at Covent Garden for the Choreographic Group, her husband was a Stage Manager for Michael Codron, and that's how I got my first job with him. And with Maggie Smith and Kenneth Williams. I didn't know what had hit me, because the whole of the rehearsals, we were just laughing the whole time. We took ourselves very seriously in the ballet, but Kenny was such fun.

SB: Were they well known at that stage?

VW: Yes... well, Maggie had done a sort of variety show in New York, and had been very well-received there. And Kenneth was quite well known. And it was a sort of - it was a revue. The sort of thing we don't do nowadays, but it was a revue.

SB: Was this the Share My Lettuce?

VW: Share My Lettuce, yes.

SB: So, is that just a joke title then?

VW: Yes, well, they were just short pieces, and the running joke was, there was a rabbit was part of the cast.

SB: A real, live rabbit?

VW: A real, live rabbit, yes, yes. And that was Kenneth's rabbit, kept coming on, and that was 'share my lettuce', yes.

SB: So did your job as a Stage Manager become complicated by the live animal element?

VW: Yes, yes – we had to keep replacing it, of course. [laughs] Yes, it was very different from ballet, but very, very busy, because when you're doing a revue you have a whole lot of different numbers, and the lighting is built on those numbers, and every time they change the order of the pieces, you have to change the lighting plot.

SB: What theatre was that in?

VW: Where did we open, now? We opened at the Lyric Hammersmith, I think. Done several shows at the Lyric Hammersmith. And we went to the Garrick. And the Savoy - no, it doesn't exist any more, Savoy. Not the Savoy Theatre – Saville! The Saville Theatre, but I don't think it exists any more.

SB: And were you DSMing – were you cueing?

VW: Yes, I was... And then with the same management, Michael Codron, I did Valmouth, which was a straight musical, so it was a little bit simpler. And the other ones, the John Cranko's New Cranks, that was a musical, but it was like a revue. So that kept changing a lot. John... I knew John Cranko, of course, because he was a choreographer with the ballet company. A dear, dear friend.

SB: Right. And how long were those productions usually on for?

VW: They played as long as the audience came, really.

SB: Right, commercial...

VW: Share my Lettuce, well, I suppose a year or two.

SB: Oh right, a long time.

VW:; Yes, Valmouth was quite successful. We did that also at Lyric Hammersmith and that came in - where did that come into? I can't remember. That was a strange show, but it was very good. New Cranks was not successful, unfortunately. His first one, called Cranks, was a big success, but the New Cranks didn't work so well.

SB: Was that another revue type show?

VW: It was a sort of revue, yes it was. And Lily White Boys was sort of half-revue, half-musical.

SB: Yes, could you maybe tell me a bit about that, because I couldn't find very much information about that.

VW: Well that was at the Royal Court. That saved me from having to be an actress. I was about to go and be a sort of ASM and walk-on actress, and I was terrified of it. And then I got this offer of the Royal Court for the Lily White Boys, so it saved my bacon. It was - who wrote it now? I will have to look it up for you.

SB: Yes, I did read who wrote it, but I can't remember.

VW: ; Yes, I can't remember. It was directed by...

SB: Lindsay Anderson.

VW: That's right.

SB: Oh, and the writer was Harry Cookson, is that right?

VW: Who?

SB: Harry Cookson? Or is that wrong? It might be wrong.

VW: Don't know that one.

SB: OK.

VW: No, that's right, yes, Lindsay Anderson, who was an absolute bastard to work with. He got more kindly later on but he was not the easiest person to work with.

SB: In what way?

VW: Well, he was – he loved the actors, but he hated the staff.

SB:; Oh dear. Right.

VW: So he would take everything out on me. Anyway, we became quite friendly later on. So we just did that at the Royal Court for about four weeks.

SB: I read that there was some sort of controversy between the writer and the director, that...

VW: Very likely, yes.

SB: Right.

VW: I can't remember who wrote it now – does it say in your notes?

SB: I thought – I'd made a note that I thought says Harry Cookson, but if you don't recognise that name...

VW: No.

SB: I might have got that completely wrong. Never mind.

VW: I shall have to look at the - my memory's absolutely going.

SB: So, what was the Royal Court like at that time? Was it a different feel of a place to work in?

VW: Yes, absolutely, yes. I mean I had known – George Devine was the boss man of the Royal Court, and I had met him at Sadler's Wells before. It was a very interesting place to work, because it was all dedicated to new work, and so it had a real feel about it. The show was good. There were some very good people in it, as well as Albert [Finney].

SB: When you say it had a real feel about it, is there any...

VW: Well, because, I mean, you see, it wasn't like working for the repertory company, like you would in Sheffield, for instance, or even like a ballet company. The shows were cast as was necessary, by the new work. And so, over the course of rehearsals you became a sort of family, but then, when it was over, it was over. That's how it is in the theatre.

SB: And did you feel there was any sort of 'feel', to do with the quality, or the way the writer was treated, that felt differently?

VW: I can't remember. Well, I should - probably Lindsay was just as difficult with the writers as he was with us. But I honestly can't remember – who wrote it?! That's stupid, isn't it? I should remember. I should have looked it all up.

SB: Oh, it doesn't matter. I'm sure there's like a record of that. It's more important to get your kind of opinions on things. That's fine.

VW: Yes. And that I think was about the last thing I did - oh, there was another silly musical, which was simply awful. Only one I think, yes, which I don't mention.

SB: Did you find that you often did musicals, because obviously you could presumably read music, which as a DSM...

VW: I could follow the music, yes.

SB: So you end up doing a lot of musical theatre and stuff like that?

VW: Mmm, yes, yes, quite, yes.

SB: And then you moved into working for the British Council?

VW: Yes. Then as I said, Jane Edgeworth, who I worked with me on the Choreographic Group, by then she was working with the British Council, in the drama department. And when I finished at the Royal Court, she suggested that I should put in for the British Council. And I was there for 27 years.

SB: What did that involve then?

VW: Well, it was, as I say, planning and organising groups of theatres, companies, touring abroad. Promoting Britain, really. I mean, the largest part of the British Council's work is English language teaching and the cultural part of it, cultural exchange, was in support of that, more or less. And we were supported by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Some of our funds came from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. And so there were a lot of drama and dance tours. There were three of us in the department. Jane was the director - well, eventually she was the director - and we had three tours officers, of which I was one. And then we had a librarian and someone who looked after foreign visitors in the theatre world.

SB: And you were based in London?

VW: Hmm?

SB:; You were based in London?

VW: Based in London, yes, yes, quite. And we tended to concentrate on different parts of the world. I mean, I specialised in Africa and the Far East and Eastern Europe. And other people did India, for instance, and Europe. And, well, as I've said here [CV], 'identifying companies and groups for overseas touring'. And companies would come to us saying, 'we've been invited to Japan', for instance, 'and we need some money', and that was - the easiest part of it was just doling out a bit of money. But some of the work that we did then - I don't think they do it now any more - was actually commissioning tours. For instance, if you want to tour to Africa and you want a company that is able to put up with the sort of conditions that they would get there. It was very interesting - they wanted something in West Africa, which was one of my first ones. And the Foreign Office people, the High Commission, consulted all the business people who were exporting to West Africa, and said, 'what sort of show do you think would go down

well? Would you like variety shows?' And they said, 'no, we want Shakespeare'. And so Shakespeare's what they got. And so we commissioned a tour from the Nottingham Playhouse. And they took Twelfth Night, Macbeth and... a Shaw... Arms and the Man. And we toured it all over West Africa. That was in 1962, 1962/3. And that was amazing, absolutely amazing. And I toured with it for most of the time, because it was quite tough and our people on the spot - all these countries where we toured to, they all had British Council representatives and British Council staff, but they didn't have Arts Officers, and so they didn't know very much about how to put on a show. So I went out with it and that was, it was amazing.

SB: What kind of venues were you touring to?

VW: Well, school halls mainly. The first place – we opened in Lagos, and it was a biggish hall. And we'd started with Twelfth Night. And we didn't know what it was going – you know, what the reaction was going to be. It was a school audience. And when the two twins came on [at] the end, the whole audience threw their programmes in the air with delight, and it was absolutely lovely. And we got a tremendous reception everywhere, it was just great. And we did another one, a couple of years later, with a different company, the Bristol Old Vic, and - The first thing I did actually, when I joined the Council, well, the two things. When I first joined the council, The Old Vic were about to go to Russia, and my boss, Jane, was going with them. And the scenery got stuck in Holland with a strike. So it was an awful job trying to get it out, so that was what I was landed with the first time. [laughs]

SB: Welcome to your new job'.

VW: 'Welcome to your new job', yes! And the first thing I went with was the National Youth Theatre to Berlin for a festival, and that was...

SB: So what year was that?

VW: when Berlin was still divided.

SB: Yes. What year was that?

VW: Hmm? What year was it? It was '61. It was just, actually, after the Wall had been built. In fact, the Wall was still not complete, really. They hadn't cleared the sides of the Wall, so that on the East, the blocks of flats and things were right up against the Wall. And people used to come and wave to their people in the West.

SB: So which, sorry, which side did you go to?

VW:; West, of course, West. But I did go into the East. A music critic I met there took me into the East, and saw a wonderful production of Britten's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. But it was very strange in the East. But I've been there several times whilst it was still East, still Communist.

SB: And what did the National Youth Theatre take there?

VW: They took *Julius Caesar*, a modern-dress production of it, very good, excellent, yes, excellent. And several people - I mean, they were just young people who liked theatre, you know? But some, quite a few of them, went on to become professional. John Shrapnel is one. He's still there. Still working.

SB: And was that part of some sort of exchange, or was it just...

VW: No, no. The National Youth Theatre used, to work in the holiday time, of course, because of course... And they had done this production by Michael Croft, who was the director of the National Youth Theatre, and it was a very successful one, and they were invited to this festival, theatre festival in Berlin - annual festival. It was a great success. Dealing with the lads was quite a job.

SB: With the what, sorry?

VW: The lads, the youngsters.

SB: Right.

VW: Because they were all quite young. But it was good, yes.

SB: So how did you get - sorry, go on.

VW: How?

SB: I was just going to go - but were you going to say something else?

VW: Sorry?

SB: I was just going to go back and ask you how you managed to get the set out of Holland and all the way to Russia?

VW: Oh. I can't remember, really. It was an awful hold-up, but I think we called on the British Council and the Embassy people in Holland. They managed to get it released, just about in time. That was, I think, the Scofield Lear, which had a fairly simple set. But it had a huge raked stage, but that was stuck and I think they did it without the raked stage, eventually.

SB: Did you ever have any frightening experiences anywhere?

VW: Well, I was in West Africa when the Biafran War was happening. In fact, anywhere I went, there was always a war happened soon afterwards. People used to tease me about that.

SB: Not as a result of the Shakespeare.

VW: So, I had a hairy taxi drive from Port Harcourt, I think it was, to Enugu, but it was a bit of a – it was all right, I mean, it was just rather a long journey.

SB: And did you ever take stuff to places where it wasn't well received, or was it always very popular?

VW: Not really, no, I don't think so, no. No, some of the things that we did in the department were smaller groups doing shortened versions of Shakespeare, mainly for university and school audiences, and one – No, wait a minute, oh I know what it was. We were doing West Africa again, was it? Yes it was. And we had a Shakespeare, but we also had A Man for all Seasons. And we were going to Ghana. And Nkrumah said, 'you can't do Man for all Seasons here', because it was very anti-establishment. And that was the only really difficult thing. I think we just had to go on playing the Shakespeare.

SB: So, you had a sort of dual role as diplomat and artist?

VW: That's right, absolutely, yes, yes, sure. But I used to enjoy these small groups, and I think they did a lot of good. Even... we occasionally sent just two people doing gems from Shakespeare. And they went to schools and universities, and they were always terribly well received.

SB: Do you think it improved people's opinions of Britain?

VW: Yes, yes, absolutely, yes. But they don't do that any more.

SB: Oh, do they not?

VW: But I've been very lucky with the British Council, because I've been all over the place. I've been to China twice. Once with the Royal Ballet, and once with the Old Vic - Derek Jacobi's Hamlet. And that was terrific.

SB: So what exactly did your role involve, once you were out there? Was it more...

VW: Well, it's just being a sort of liaison between the company and the British Council and all the Embassy people, and just facilitating it really. Yes.

SB: And how did you choose work, when you were in this country? Did you go round and see productions and think, 'that would be a good thing to send'?

VW: Yes, yes. We did a lot of work with Alan Ayckbourn. Because he put his shows on always up in...

SB: Scarborough?

VW: He has his own little theatre, still has – Scarborough! It's a Theatre in the Round in Scarborough. And he always puts his new plays on there, well, did. And we had links with an impresario who toured around Holland and Belgium. And we used to take the shows from Scarborough, and he would tour them around Holland, before they were recast and brought into the West End. And that was a good thing to do. It was sort of semi-commercial, really, but that always was good, because he's a very good director, Alan Ayckbourn, and his stuff was very good. Sometimes they were better than the West End versions which followed.

SB: So these things were always, sort of English-language productions that were toured?

VW: Yes, oh sure, yes, definitely.

SB: Was there any element of going over there and working - sort of creating stuff over there with joint collaborations?

VW: Oh yes, yes, well, that was another thing we often did, was sending directors, or directors and designers, to create a production with a local company. Yes, we did that in Russia, and we did it in Eastern Europe. Yes, that was a very good thing to do. And that sort of thing is still going on, and it's a very valuable exchange. Yes. Where else? Yes, I did tour Eastern Europe with the Royal Ballet. And that was one of the last things that Margot Fonteyn did. And of course we couldn't take Nureyev with us, because it was all still very Communistic.

SB: Right, OK.

VW: And he'd fled from Russia.

SB:p; Of course, yes.

VW: But that was a fascinating tour. And then also, I toured with the Theatre Ballet to Eastern Europe, so got to know quite a few of those eastern countries.

SB: What do you think was the most interesting place you got to go to?

VW: Yes... Poland was difficult.

SB: In what sense?

VW: Well, no, I toured with a company from the Royal Court doing plays by Edward Bond, who's a difficult guy at the best of times, and his plays are pretty way-out. And one of the plays was Saved, you know, the one with the baby being stoned?

SB: Yes.

VW: And another one was... gosh, what was the other one? There were two Edward Bond plays. The other one was more acceptable. But the Polish organisation put us on in Warsaw, and then sent us down to a place called Lublin, which I'd never heard of, and I don't think anybody else had. And they hadn't had an English speaking theatre company since 19 – no, since 1600.

SB: And what year was this roughly?

VW:; Good question. When was that? It might have been after your date... well, it might have been later than '68 actually. Yes, I think that one was later than '68.

SB: Never mind, you can finish telling me about it.

VW: Yes, yes. It's difficult to know where the break comes.

SB: Oh no, that's quite alright. By all means finish your story. What – when you got to...

VW: What?

SB: What was the place – Lublin?

VW: Oh, Lublin. Oh, it was a terrible place. They didn't want us. That was one place that – and the locals in the street were very unfriendly, unlike most places, or even most places in Poland, but they were horrid to us and, oh, well. I think that was one of the least successful ones. Otherwise, most places we went to - I mean, we went where we were sent by the local organisation. We didn't have much choice. We were guided by the British Council on the spot. But if they wanted us to go to Lublin, we went to Lublin. Anyway, otherwise, well, we went to Czechoslovakia - as it was then - and... yes, where else? Yugoslavia. Went several times to Yugoslavia. Because most of these places had annual festivals, and they would usually invite something from England. And sometimes I went with them and sometimes not. Or sometimes you just gave them money.

SB: Were you always pretty sure, all through your career, that you wanted to stay in theatre?

VW: Oh yes, didn't know anything else. Yes, yes, well, it's a good life, really.

SB: Right.

VW: I was lucky at being employed, because an awful lot of people in theatre are not employed a lot of the time. But I was very lucky to have this job with the British Council. So that kept me going

SB: Was there ever a stage, in the sort of more earlier part of your career, when you kind of felt you might go a different way, or that it was a bit too risky, or were you always fairly constantly employed?

VW: No, not really. No, you see, I had this long spell at Sadler's Wells. And that was the beginning of my career. And there was only that little gap, after I was made redundant from Sadler's Wells where I was, like many other people, just waiting for the next telephone call, and looking for the next job. But I was quite lucky, really. How many years was I doing that? Yes, well it was only three years, you see? And I did four, five shows in that time. So it's not bad.

SB: Did you have friends who were less well off, who were more waiting for the telephone call?

VW: When I wasn't working I used to do temping – typing - as so many people did.

SB: Did you used to – because you were based in London for most of your career, all of your career, possibly?

VW: Yes, yes.

SB: Did you used to go and see a lot of theatre as well.

VW: Oh yes, of course. Still do.

SB: Right, what – can you remember any sort of - if we can possibly try and stick within that '45-'68 period – any sort of shows that you particularly enjoyed going to see, or particularly stuck out?

VW: Well, when I first joined Sadler's Wells, and was also going to and fro from the New Theatre to Sadler's Wells, that was a wonderful period when the Old Vic was run by Olivier and Richardson and John Burrell, and then later, by Tyrone Guthrie. And they were wonderful, wonderful productions of Shakespeare, and things like Olivier's Oedipus, and Richardson's Cyrano de Bergerac. Oh, there were heaps of wonderful productions. Yes, it was a very productive time, really. And in the opera and ballet too, it was a very productive time.

SB: More so than it is now, do you think?

VW: No. no, no, not more, not more. But it was quite different and very good. I mean, to be able to see that first Sleeping Beauty at Covent Garden was absolutely marvellous.

SB: How old were you when you first started going to Covent Garden?

VW: I was seventeen when I joined Sadler's Wells. And because there were very close links between the company at Sadler's Wells and the Royal - the Sadler's Wells Ballet, as it was then - at the Opera House, we used to get standing passes to go and see all the shows at Covent Garden, which was marvellous.

SB: And had you been as a child, before that, to see stuff?

VW: Had I been to... well, my parents were very keen on the theatre, particularly my mother... I was evacuated during the war, my school was evacuated to Devon, but whenever I came back on holiday, we always used to go to the theatre. When I was a child I used to go to dancing classes, of course, as little girls do. But I can't remember when I suddenly became mad about ballet. But it was towards the end of my school time.

SB: Was there one time from your career that stands out as being the most exciting, or the most interesting?

VW: Oh dear, I don't know. Well, I suppose that the American tour was something. Well it was certainly exciting, but my God, it was hard work! I don't know. There were so many good times. And good work. Oh, I don't know.

SB: What show were you most proud of, that you worked on?

VW: What show? Ooh, I don't know. Valmouth was a great success, but I think probably the Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet was the most interesting. All these new choreographers like Cranko and MacMillan and Peter Wright, and people like that. And Frederick Ashton, of course, we had a lot to do with Ashton. And that was a fascinating time.

SB: Was there ever a sort of negative reaction to those, kind of, new choreographers, and that kind of new work? Were there traditionalists who reacted badly against that?

VW: Well, whenever you're doing a lot of new works some of it lasts and some of it doesn't. You know, you can't have La Fille Mal Gardée every time.

SB: No.

VW: But I mean, Ashton created God knows how many works, but not all of them survive, by any means. But they were all interesting in their own way. And, of course, we did quite a few – even some of de Valois' works are still done occasionally. But she didn't do much choreography later on, when I was with the company. We did her works, but they were existing works, because she concentrated on running the companies. She was a great woman.

SB: And was there anyone in your career who you think was particularly influential, in terms of kind of helping you along your way, or providing an opportunity for you?

VW: Well, de Valois, of course, was a great character in all our lives. She was a wonderful woman. I don't know. I was very glad to see just recently that Michael Codron, who I did several shows with, got a Lifetime's Award at the Oliviers. Yes, he was a good guy.

SB: Great.

VW: It changed, you know, according to where I was. People, different people, helped me.

SB: Yes.

VW: And some hindered.

SB: And were you ever responsible for sort of training-up stage management underlings under you?

VW: Not really, no. One didn't have the funds for that kind of thing, really. I mean, various people succeeded me as Stage Manager with the Theatre Ballet, but they were all people who had had experience of some kind. So it was just a question of handing over. I don't know. I'm not being very helpful, am I?

SB: Oh no, totally, no - you've told me some interesting, fascinating things. I mean, particularly fascinating to hear about all that work that the British Council does. Sounds really like it must have been a very exciting job.

VW: It was very good at the British Council, because it was never the same two days running. You know, you were dealing with big tours, and the Old Vic, or the National Theatre, or the Royal Ballet, but then you're also dealing with little two-handers, tours, around the sticks.

SB: You really must have seen everything.

VW: Yes.

SB: Both from a country point of view, and from an interesting work point of view. So it sounds like a perfect job.

VW: Yes. Well I went to Russia – Oh, I should tell you about that one – No, that's too late, that's too late. It's a later one.

SB: By all means do. If you want to tell me about it, that's fine.

VW: No, it's just that I was in Russia when Chernobyl happened.

SB: Oh wow! Were you nearby?

VW: Well, we were about to take the London Festival Ballet there.

SB: Right.

VW: And I went with the General Manager to set it up in advance, and talk to the Goskoncert, who were the cultural exchange people. And we went there and sort of set it all up, and then came back, and then Chernobyl happened. And the scenery and stuff was already on its way. And the dancers refused to go.

SB: Were they actually going to Chernobyl?

VW: No, no, no, of course not.

SB: No, right, sorry.

VW: No, they were going to St Petersburg and Moscow. They weren't even going to Kiev, which was the nearest place. But the scenery had got as far as Kiev, on the lorries, and that was a bit risky. And then the General Manager and I went back to see if we could rescue some of it, by just going to Moscow, which was the furthest place away, and came back and talked to the company, and talked to the nuclear people. And the company still refused to go, so that was that. So it was cancelled. Very, very sad.

SB: So you really have seen everything.

VW: Yes.

SB: We're sort of coming to the end of our hour. Is there anything else at all that you want to record?

VW: I'm sure there'll be a lot I remember afterwards. But I'm afraid my memory is not what it was.

SB: Well, I'm pretty impressed.

VW: I must look up who wrote Lily White Boys.

SB: Lily White Boys.

VW: I'm sure I've got a programme somewhere. Well, I can Google it. [Christopher Logue who wrote the lyrics and was involved in rehearsals].

SB: Yes, I did try Googling it.

VW: Did you?

SB: Just a couple of things on your CV, I thought I'd have a look. And I could really find very little about it.

VW: Right.

SB: A few bits and pieces, but not very much. So it's interesting to hear your opinion of it.

VW: Yes.

SB: OK, thank you very much. That's exactly an hour.

VW: Well, that's enough.