

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Pamela Binns – interview transcript

Interviewer: Ed Charlton

22 March 2010

Actress. The Beaux' Stratagem; Birmingham Repertory Theatre; The Blue Bird; censorship; David Garrick Theatre, Lichfield; Fings Ain't Wot they Used T'Be; The Ghost Train; The High Bid; Barry Jackson; Ann Jellicoe; Stephen Joseph; pantomime; Roy Plomley; repertory; Shakespeare's Sir Thomas More; stage food; touring; Kenneth Tynan.

EC: So, can we start talking about your first experiences in the theatre? You mentioned you began as an Assistant Stage Manager at the David Garrick Theatre in Lichfield.

PB: Yes I did. I went in the holidays, and I think it must have been the Easter holidays the first time, because that was when Ken Tynan was directing, which of course was very exciting, an enormous pacer. I mean, he scared me to death meeting Ken Tynan for the first time. He had a very sort of, like a scowl, he was enormously thin and his suits, his jackets flapped and he wore these very bright colours. I remember him in a sort of purple suit. But, of course, I was very new, very fresh, all of sixteen or seventeen and he just took a great delight in embarrassing me. I mean it wasn't very difficult, he used to send for me in the prop room and he'd be sitting - always with a cigarette in his mouth - 'Oh Miss Binns, Miss Binns'. And what he did, although he was directing in Lichfield, he used to go to London every weekend and he used to make me go and telephone all his lady-loves and make all his assignations for the weekend with him, which was acutely embarrassing for me because I knew he was having a roaring affair with the leading lady at Lichfield, you see.

EC: Really, wow! So have you got any other kind of anecdotes from your time...?

PB: Well, yes. When I went back in the summer holidays he'd left - rather thankfully. Oh, Tynan during that time was preparing his famous production of The Beaux' Stratagem and he asked me as the ASM to get him a copy of The Beaux' Stratagem. Well, I went to every bookseller in Lichfield - there were only two - and I went to the library and they hadn't got it but I myself, personally, had a copy of plays, seventeenth and eighteenth-century plays. So, in desperation I lent it to Tynan and he used that for his production of The Beaux' Stratagem, and I've got it now with all his notations in, in pencil, and he gave it back to me. And I suppose actually, I hadn't really thought, but I suppose really it's worth something is it, do you think?

EC: I should imagine so, yes.

PB: I could probably sell it on eBay. I mean, there are all Tynan's notes for his production of *The Beaux' Stratagem*.

EC: So, it's got all of his kind of...

PB: He made enormous cuts, and what he was going to, because he had each character dressed in a different costume for a different period, and all that is in there.

EC: That's wonderful isn't it? So, as ASM for Tynan you were just doing his kind of whimsical kind of...

PB: Well, yes, for that Easter holidays it was mostly doing Tynan's bidding. Then, I went back in the summer holidays and Tynan had left, and it was John Harrison who was directing, and I got my first part on the stage because at the Lichfield Repertory Theatre every September they celebrated Dr. Johnson's birthday and that year they put on a Garrick's version of *The Taming of the Shrew* and I played a sort of lady-in-waiting-cum-ugly-sister called Plumante in that. And, of course, there was a little princess and I was furious I didn't play the princess. That went to a much prettier little girl ASM, but that was my first real stage experience.

EC: OK, so you'd always had a feeling that you wanted to go onto the stage at some point.

PB: Yes. You know I did plays at school and my brother and I used put on plays at home, and I'd always wanted to, and there I was in the theatre.

EC: Lovely. So, ASM was your kind of starting point for going into the theatre.

PB: Yes, I was very much a student ASM, and then of course I started properly in the November; that was when I really joined the company, and John Harrison had gone by then. It was Geoffrey Wardwell who was directing then.

EC: Can you remember what kind of year that was?

PB: I think that was still 1949, the end of '49 you see. And then I joined properly, and they gave me two pounds a week because I was living at home and I was a proper student ASM, and I joined and they said you must understudy Cinderella. So, I thought, 'Yes, yes, of course, I'll understudy Cinderella, learn all the lines', you know. And then I was doing proper ASM things: sweeping the stage and making the cups of tea, because they had awfully good people up at Lichfield. Tynan got a man called Frederick Valk,

who was a very famous Othello of his time, went up for Tynan, and Donald Sinden and his wife were up there at one time, and Lionel Jeffries was up there at one time. Because I read once, I don't know if it was Lionel Jeffries autobiography or just an article about him, and he said, 'Oh, it was such a thrill to tread the boards Garrick might have walked on'. Well, of course, that was a myth because it was a converted cinema and now, alas, it's a furniture store. Anyway, I started off and I was having lunch on Christmas Day and the theatre rang up and said, 'Oh, the girl playing Cinderella has had a car accident, you're going to open tomorrow, Boxing Day as Cinderella'. Well, very new to the theatre, I thought, oh, of course, this is what always happens, I mean, the understudy gets the chance, takes over. So I said, 'I'll just finish my lunch and come down to the theatre'. And so I opened on Boxing Day as Cinderella. And, there can't have been much news because all the Midland papers had nothing much else to do, they all splashed me over the front-page, so it was a wonderful beginning of the theatre and it's been downhill ever since!

EC: Oh, really. So, what was your next role after Cinderella?

PB: I think... oh, I only ever played very few other parts at The David Garrick, because by then they'd got at least two other ASMs. I played Bicky in Little Lambs Eat Ivy, and got my first bad notices, very deserved. And I played the French maid in French Without Tears. And, the one thing, actually, the old manager at Lichfield said, 'I'm making you a probationary member of Equity'. And I didn't realise how important that was because in those days it was completely closed-shop. To have got into Equity was absolutely wonderful and I didn't realise at the time but I should be very, very grateful to him because he stood me in very good stead later on, because come the summer, I thought, 'Ooh, I'm not acting very much, I mean time is passing me by', you know, 'Come on, I've got to act'. So, I gave in my notice and everybody said 'You are mad to throw up, you know, a proper job'. But within three weeks, I got a job through an advertisement in The Stage with The Hill Players. And I think I only got the job because I'm small, because the leading man wasn't very tall you see. And it was the last of the old stock companies. We didn't even have scripts, we had what they call 'sides', you know, with our parts, just ourparts with the cues, not the whole play. And there was Gerald Hill and his wife, she was very fat and really didn't play much, but Gerald Hill still played all the leads. And there was a permanent character-man, Victor Rae, and a permanent character women, Maisie MacFarquhar, and then they had us young people which they sort of changed every season. But it was wonderful experience. I was acting every week, playing all the leads in Ivor Novello's The Rat, and I Lived With You and we did The Bells. When I say I played in The Bells, people think of course I did it with Irving but, you know, we did The Bells, so.

EC: That's magical.

PB: It was wonderful experience.

EC: So, you were at The David Garrick for...

PB: From about November to about June or July.

EC: OK.

PB: And then I got this job very quickly, and did a two or three month season with them. And I got four pounds, ten shillings, and I had digs in The Potteries, and I gave the lovely lady two pounds, and it was meant to be just for my bed and board but she was always saying, 'I've put a pie in the oven for you'. So, really she fed me as well for two pounds, I've never had as much money since. I mean, I felt so rich. I used to buy dresses in the market off the stalls for about a pound. Oh, it was wonderful in those days.

EC: Sounds great. So, so you were still doing, was it rep theatre?

PB: That was weekly rep, yes.

EC: Weekly rep.

PB: Weekly rep, and then I went with The Hills again and did another month, again weekly, in Rhyl, and then I was out of work again. And I'd never been to London, didn't know anything about agents or anything, my only thing was The Stage, which was my Bible. And I answered another advertisement at Christmas and got a job in a pantomime; three shows a day, eighteen shows a week. And that was Tommy Bradley's The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe, and I was the second girl, Polly Perkins. I've never been much of a singer, so really I mostly did all the dialogue for everybody. And there were specialities, 'Somebody and their Feathered Friends', and Lesley Barr was Father Time. Oh, and there was a marvellous stage direction in that, for me: 'Exit upstage, laughing as if not caring', which I think is a good thing to carry through life because I mean it was pretty ghastly, three shows a day. It was really tatty. That was the sort of show that television, when it came along a few years later, killed off, and a good thing really. The standard was so bad.

EC: I was going to ask you, you had, you seem to have done a lot more television in recent years.

PB: Oh yes, I got into television very early on and I really did a lot of television.

EC: So you think that the television had a positive effect on the theatre, to get rid of this?

PB: I think those dreadful sort of pantomime tours, it was a good thing to get finished. I mean there were children in it, these troupes of children. And it was pretty terrifying. They got their bed and board and half a crown a week, which they sent home to their mums. And the whole purpose of them being there was because the mums needed the half-crown. And they all used to sleep in one bed together. And, you know, I can

remember them sitting in the wings blue with cold. I think it was a good thing all that's finished.

Oh, when I was in Wakefield with that, my mother did come up to see me, and, of course, at three shows a day I was busy at the theatre so the landlady showed her into my digs. And she went into my room and there was a man in my bed, and my mother said, 'Ooh, what are you doing here?' And he said, 'Ooh, it's my bed in the day, your daughter has it by night'. You see, that's what it was like.

EC: That's how it works. So, you did a lot of touring around then? You talked of Wakefield.

PB: Yes, and Accrington and Barrow-in-Furness and all those places, yes.

EC: Quite small rep theatres?

PB: Oh, well those were touring pantomimes, you see. Touring pantomimes.

EC: OK, yes. When did you move to London then?

PB: Well again, when that pantomime finished, I was very out of work and somebody - we've got to 1951 now - somebody told me write for a play that was being done for the Festival of Britain called *Your Trumpets, Angels!*. So, still living at Lichfield, I wrote for an audition and I got an audition and passed that for the juvenile girl, and then a second audition, and then a third, and then I got the juvenile girl in this play that Southwark Cathedral put on for the Festival of Britain. So that was very, very exciting. It was directed by somebody called Doreen Woodcock and there was special music by Christopher Le Fleming and I played this lovely juvenile lead called Amoret, and a man called John Wyse, a professional actor who really played the lead, who used to run the Boltons Theatre Club in those days. And there was a wonderful character actress called Gwen Nelson, who played a social worker in it, and she taught me an enormous amount about acting. She taught me to keep still, not to move my head, to really listen to people. I owe Gwen an enormous amount.

EC: So most of your training, would you say, was done through performance?

PB: On the hoof, yes, yes.

EC: No formal training as such?

PB: Well, only little bits. I had voice lessons later and...

EC: OK, and you think that helped you with going into rep, to have a kind of...

PB: Oh, rep was the most wonderful training. We who had it were very privileged. I mean, they haven't got it today.

EC: Yes, which some people think is a bit of a shame for theatre actors.

PB: Oh, I think it's a shame that young people haven't got it. I mean all they can do is hang about and wait for two lines on television, isn't it?

EC: Yes, it's not really the best training platform.

PB: Yes, it's not like having three plays in your head at the same time like we did, you see.

EC: Yes, do you think that affected the quality though do you think, doing quite so much, so many plays?

PB: I don't think the standard was very high, but we were learning our jobs. And you learnt to play an enormous different sorts of plays, you know, different characters.

EC: Yes, sounds wonderful. So, you're coming to London to do the Festival of Britain?

PB: Yes, I did that and Queen Mary came to see it, which was a great excitement, we all lines up outside Southwark Cathedral and curtseyed to her.

EC: Was it a great excitement for the Festival of Britain?

PB: Terribly exciting. I mean, that was marvellous, yes.

EC: Did you find that there was a lot of theatre directed towards the Festival of Britain, in the celebration, that wasn't... wouldn't necessarily have occurred otherwise, do you think?

PB: I think so, because plays were put on specially. I mean, I think... didn't Christopher Fry write *A Sleep of Prisoners* especially for the Festival, I think, as well as our play?

EC: Yes, so you've got that kind of energy, post-war energy for the Festival of Britain and for the theatre.

PB: Yes, Yes.

EC: And do you think that was helpful in terms of giving the theatre a new drive?

PB: Oh, I think it did, yes. I mean, I think we were all very jubilant after the war, you know. This was really the celebration for after the war which, you know, had been pretty grim, and pretty grim for a few years afterwards.

EC: So had long do you think it took for theatre to really come to a fore and develop after the war?

PB: I think it was sort of coming to, you know, it was about '49/'51, I think it was coming to then.

EC: OK, and do you have any recollections of the effects of censorship during that period, do you think? Or is it...

PB: Well, just a bit further on, yes. I was in *The Children's Hour* at The Arts Theatre Club, and, of course, lesbianism couldn't be mentioned. I mean, that was why *The Children's Hour* by Lillian Hellman was put on at The Arts, which was a club theatre. I played one of the children in that you see.

EC: OK. So, after the Festival of Britain you're based in London.

PB: Yes, desperately out of work. I couldn't get another job for love or money, so I signed on at the Italia Conti Agency because I always looked terribly young. I didn't play children, because I always had a bosom, so I played teenagers for years and years. So I signed on with them and they got me a job dancing in rep at Amersham. Amersham, very splendidly, were putting on a production of *The Tempest*. I mean, I think they were only a weekly rep probably, we had a fortnight for that, and I was just a dancer, one of the reapers in the masque. And the other one, who travelled down with me from the Italia Conti was Johnny Briggs who later became world-famous as Mike in *Coronation Street*. As far as I remember it was a very good production of *The Tempest*.

EC: OK, so when do you think you got your first major role on the stage?

PB: Well, *Amoret* was. But, you know, it didn't lead to anything. I mean, I was as out of work as ever after that. And after I'd been to Amersham, I think I did another terrible pantomime.

EC: OK.

PB: Playing the Cat. What possessed me to think I could play a cat in Dick Whittington? That was in Wales, we did only do two shows a day, so I suppose that was a step forward. And I answered an advertisement for 'Cat, own skin'. Hadn't got a skin of course. Once I got the part, sight unseen, I hired the cat skin, which, of course, cost a good part of my salary and when it came it was a great shaggy thing, like Nana in Peter Pan. It wasn't really a cat at all. What made me think I could do it, I really don't know, because to play a cat in pantomime - or Mother Goose - requires years of skill and training. They're all highly accomplished people who do those animals, and there was me pretending to be a cat, it was rather awful. And they said, 'Well, you must walk round the rim of the dress circle. The cat always does'. I said, 'Not Pygmalion likely.' And this blessed skin, of course, got so soaked with sweat, two shows a day. I got a cold, then I got bronchitis, and I think then it turned to pneumonia. Then, of course, no understudies, so I had to keep going. And the digs were so awful. And I'd made friends with the girl who played the accordion, and was the Fairy, and she'd given up on digs completely, and when we got to Rhyl for the last week, she was living in a beach hut. And she said, 'Don't do digs, come and share the beach hut with me and I'll look after you', because I was very ill by then. So we shared, and lived in the beach hut with the waves, you know, crashing against it. It was much better than digs. And she was awfully good, and fed me slices of orange and somehow I got through that last week. And then we couldn't get home because it was Wales. There were no trains on Sunday but we got home on Monday and that was the end of that.

EC: Whereabouts in Wales was it?

PB: Aberystwyth we started in, and we ended in Rhyl.

EC: OK, and, so after that you returned to London and then, did you?

PB: Well, I suppose I went home to Lichfield first.

EC: OK.

PB: And I did a few odd plays when I got back to London, a few odd plays at the Gate, the old Gate in Westbourne Grove that's gone now. It had quite a good reputation, and I did *The Way of the World* there, and played *Mincing*, and the *Millamant* was Rachel Roberts, who was lovely, very Welsh, lovely. I don't know whether she was married to Rex Harrison then. But on the first day of rehearsal, she told us she'd been very out of work, and her job had been selling contraceptives for dogs. But that was a lovely, a lovely job. And then I did more special weeks. I used to play Amy in *Little Women* all over the country, and I did *Pick-up Girl*. That was another of my specialities.

EC: Did you enjoy touring across the country or did you prefer....

PB: Yes, because I saw different parts of Britain, and, I mean, I went, I used to go and see all the cathedrals and the churches and museums. Yes, it was terribly interesting. It

was a lovely life. And then I got into a production of Aristophanes' The Frogs that Ann Jellicoe did at a club theatre called The Cockpit. I don't think we got paid, but Ann Jellicoe was wonderful, she had marvellous enthusiasm. She got us all going. And I remember we all used to sit on the floor and get rather tired, and Ann used to hand out bars of chocolate to us all. She was a great believer in chocolate for keeping our energy going. And I, of course, was in the Frog's chorus. Ann Jellicoe had done the translation herself. And I was also the Maid to Persephone, so that was a great experience.

EC: What kind of reviews were these productions getting, do you remember?

PB: What?

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PB: Oh, I think, I think The Frogs got very good reviews. It was, you know, rather a classic.

EC: Do you remember any of the critics that were reviewing the pieces?

PB: No, I don't know. Didn't take much notice of them. And I mean in rep - one only got the local ones, they usually said you were all lovely anyway, you know.

EC: OK, so, so you're still touring with...

PB: Still doing special weeks, and special fortnights. And I went to Reading, and while I was there, I got a chance to audition for the Birmingham Rep because when I lived at Lichfield I'd been always writing to Birmingham because it was close and hoped I'd get in, and didn't. And of course, now I'd come to London, of course, I did get an audition. And Reading very kindly gave me the day off rehearsal to go. So I went up and auditioned for Douglas Seale, for Nicholas Stuart Gray, the Christmas play, The Princess and the Swineherd. And I auditioned for the little Chinese princess. And the end of the audition Douglas Seale said, 'Well, you'd better look for some digs before you go back to London'. 'Ooh', I said, 'I've got it?' He said, 'Yes'. Of course I got that, so that was another great step forward. That was another lovely job because we did it from Christmas until Easter. And the Company then, there were five or six absolutely marvellous men who all became very famous. There was Alan Bridges, Bernard Hepton, Richard Pasco, Jack May and Alan Edwards, and of course they all became very famous. Except Alan Edwards, but I believe he did do very good work in Australia, but I can't think why because he was as talented as the others, because, of course, the others, all became household names.

EC: So you think they had a big influence on your career then?

PB: Yes, and I did just meet Barry Jackson. He was still alive then, although the theatre was actually run for him by a very tough lady called Nancy Berman, always pretty terrifying. But I think we were just introduced to Sir Barry Jackson, and probably all but curtseyed. And he never gave notes to the artists personally, he always gave it through the director. And after our dress rehearsal, Douglas Seale said, 'Oh, Sir Barry sent a note for you'. And I was given a beautiful little drawing, and apparently he said, 'Tell the child, this is how Paul Scofield made up his eyes for Lady Precious Stream'. You see, and I've got this little drawing still on this piece of paper.

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PB: No, I don't know. Didn't take much notice of them. And I mean in rep - one only got the local ones, they usually said you were all lovely anyway, you know.

EC: OK, so, so you're still touring with...

PB: Still doing special weeks, and special fortnights. And I went to Reading, and while I was there, I got a chance to audition for the Birmingham Rep because when I lived at Lichfield I'd been always writing to Birmingham because it was close and hoped I'd get in, and didn't. And of course, now I'd come to London, of course, I did get an audition. And Reading very kindly gave me the day off rehearsal to go. So I went up and auditioned for Douglas Seale, for Nicholas Stuart Gray, the Christmas play, The Princess and the Swineherd. And I auditioned for the little Chinese princess. And the end of the audition Douglas Seale said, 'Well, you'd better look for some digs before you go back to London'. 'Ooh', I said, 'I've got it?' He said, 'Yes'. Of course I got that, so that was another great step forward. That was another lovely job because we did it from Christmas until Easter. And the Company then, there were five or six absolutely marvellous men who all became very famous. There was Alan Bridges, Bernard Hepton, Richard Pasco, Jack May and Alan Edwards, and of course they all became very famous. Except Alan Edwards, but I believe he did do very good work in Australia, but I can't think why because he was as talented as the others, because, of course, the others, all became household names.

EC: So you think they had a big influence on your career then?

PB: Yes, and I did just meet Barry Jackson. He was still alive then, although the theatre was actually run for him by a very tough lady called Nancy Berman, always pretty terrifying. But I think we were just introduced to Sir Barry Jackson, and probably all but curtsayed. And he never gave notes to the artists personally, he always gave it through the director. And after our dress rehearsal, Douglas Seale said, 'Oh, Sir Barry sent a note for you'. And I was given a beautiful little drawing, and apparently he said, 'Tell the child, this is how Paul Scofield made up his eyes for Lady Precious Stream'. You see, and I've got this little drawing still on this piece of paper.

EC: Did you ever make it up to Scarborough?

PB: I never did, because he died fairly soon after that. He knew - he died at 45. But what he did which was so marvellous, anybody who'd known him, he invited, he knew he

was dying, he invited up for either a weekend or for two or three days, and I was lucky enough to be invited. I went up and it was saying good-bye to him, and actually I did meet him in a corridor in the middle of the night. We both wanted the bathroom and I had little sort of private talk with Stephen and that was my good-bye to him and I shall always remember him, and always be very grateful to him. I mean, he was an enormous influence on the theatre.

EC: Did your contact with Stephen lead to any other roles for you, do you think?

PB: Well, yes, because through that I think I met David Campton, who, you know was part of the management, and was his part-scriptwriter and was his great friend, a sort of right-hand man. And David Campton became a great friend of mine, and ultimately David Campton and I were in *The Blue Bird* at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, that dreadful winter of '62-'63. And David played Bread and I played Water, and Fire was played by a man, a dancer called Tommy Merryfield, who's now a famous sculptor, Tom Merryfield. But again, I was terribly excited about being in the Maeterlink, you see, for Christmas again, another Christmas play - just what I wanted. And the Lyric Hammersmith had the most marvellous bookings because, of course, *The Blue Bird* hadn't been done since the 1920s in the West End. You know, it was practically booked out and we were all terribly excited. And it was put on by a lady - perhaps I'd better not say who - anyway, we were all very excited and then the night of Christmas Eve the snow started, and Boxing Day the telephone in the box-office rang all day with cancellations. And the snow that year was piled seven foot beside the pavement so we limped on, you see, with very poor houses and it should have been such a success. And it was a wonderful cast, Pamela Lane played Mother. Oh and there were the pigeons, of course, because we had to have the Bluebird. So they got three pigeons, you know, an understudy and another because you know it was probably three for the price of two because Leila was very keen on money. And what they did, they dyed them in a bucket of Reckitts blue under the stage before the performance. And then at the end one, they were supposed to be homing-pigeons, had to be released into the auditorium and Tyl Tyl - the little boy - says, 'If any of you see the Bluebird, will you let us have him back because we need him for our happiness later on'. And the homing pigeon, it came back and joined us for the line-up for the curtain-call, but the third one, they hadn't realised wasn't a homing pigeon, it was a rogue pigeon. So one night, of course, they got the wrong pigeon and it flew off and didn't come back. And it went to roost up in the rafters of the Lyric Hammersmith - the old Lyric Hammersmith - and the management had to get it with a net, and it was awful. And there were awful things the girl... oh because we did the Boxing Day matinee in aid of the RSPCA, and there was a wallaby in the wings, and it bit the girl playing Light. The girl playing Light had a rather bad time because she was dressed all in white and the woman running it washed her costume and it shrunk. And Light was quite a big girl, and there she was going on in no costume and Leila had to pin her into a sheet, and that was rather a drama. But the awful thing was, come the last week the lady went with the takings and our insurance cards over the roofs. And that was the end, we didn't get paid for the last week, she just disappeared, you see, it had been such bad business. But the worst thing was losing our insurance cards, to lose your insurance cards in those days was far worse than not getting the money because in fact Equity, whatever the group it is, had to pay us for the last week. But our insurance cards had gone forever, and it's an awful job - was an awful job in those days - if you lost them.

EC: Right, so what kind of pay were you likely to receive for a production of that sort? What did you miss out on?

PB: By then, I suppose, I was getting a bit more, probably ten pounds a week. I can't remember. Dilys Laye played the Cat. She was terribly good and she really took on a lot of the direction because the woman was always away, busy doing other things. I believe Maeterlinck meant the Cat to be masculine but, you know, Dilys Laye was so good I'm sure he wouldn't have minded her being female.

EC: So you're in London for quite a while at this...

PB: By then I'd got a permanent base in London. I worked from London. By then I was sort of having agents, you know, had various agents.

EC: So you just, you didn't have an agent for a number of years and then you found one?

PB: No, not until quite late on.

EC: OK. And whilst you were in London, did you get to see many productions. Was there, did you find yourself involved in the theatre world more than just being...

PB: Yes, I used to go to see lots of things. Of course, in the old days, you know, one used to put these stools for the gallery, and the gallery from a shilling, two and six was it? I mean I saw all those great productions just after the war at the New. I saw Olivier's Richard III, Ralph Richardson in Peer Gynt, and all those wonderful things. And of course, the person who I always thought was so wonderful was Paul Scofield. Just to see him, he was streaks above even Gielgud and Olivier. I thought the one... I mean, when I was young I used to go to Stratford once a year to see him. I was lucky enough to see his Hamlet when I was very young.

EC: What other productions did you see him in? Do you remember?

PB: Then, well I used to go to the theatre a lot. I mean, I was always a great admirer of Edith Evans. I saw her in things. Waters of the Moon with her and Sybil Thorndike at the Haymarket, and Edith Evans in The Dark is Light Enough.

EC: Can you remember any productions with Paul Scofield?

PB: Well his Hamlet, and I saw him play Roderigo in Othello. That was a long time ago, I can't remember what they were.

EC: No, and so how many agents did you have?

PB: Oh, agents, I had lots of agents. I was always sort of taking them. I must say they were pretty useless until the one I've got now. I'm with a lovely agent now. All my life they were pretty hopeless, one was either with very good ones who were too good and really had stars and didn't get you any work or, sort of rubbishy ones who sent the statements on lavatory paper.

EC: So you had, you had to push yourself quite a bit to make sure you got the roles?

PB: I did like getting that job with Stephen Joseph. And I did a production of Sir Thomas More, the first time that was included in The Complete Published Works of Shakespeare. It was the first time, and it was put on at the Theatre Centre in St. John's Wood by Donald Wolfitt and Dorothy Sayers. And I got that part because there was a lot in the Press about Sir Thomas More being included in The Complete Works of Shakespeare that year, and I went to The Times Bookclub in Wigmore Street and looked it up and there was More's younger daughter, and she didn't have many lines, and one of them was: 'See where my father comes, joyful and merry'. So I just memorised that, so I went to the audition with Brian Way and said, 'See where my father comes, joyful and merry'. And he was so amazed at me knowing it, he gave me the part, you know, that's how I got jobs. And that was the only thing I did there, we spent a lot of time being daffodils, we did a lot of improvisation which made me laugh, and there were a lot of other people, we did a lot of giggling. I mean, we didn't take being daffodils very seriously. There was one girl, who we called something which I'd better not say, but she was Queen Daffodil. But... we had Donald Wolfitt's costumes, we did a few performances in period costume and a few in modern dress. But I enjoyed that very much. I think only parts of it, obviously, are by Shakespeare, some of More's great speeches, obviously Shakespeare did write them. Michael Beint was very good as Sir Thomas More.

EC: What was the general reaction to including...

PB: Oh, great interest. And I mean, that, I think there were great notices in The Times and all the papers and enormous interest, it hadn't been professionally produced as far as we know ever before or at least since Shakespeare's time.

EC: So there was a lot of excitement about it?

PB: There was a lot of excitement and publicity about that, yes.

EC: Did you... did you find yourself going for similar roles in plays? You said you went for the daughter of Sir Thomas More.

PB: Yes, I did a lot of these teenagers you see. And this is going right back. The Italia Conti sent me to be Alice in one of the endless television Alices and, of course, I didn't

get it, but we were all hived off as various animals and everyone else was from the Italia Conti or the Sylvia whatnot school. And I said to my friend, 'You'll know me because I'm the only rabbit with a bosom', you see.

EC: But was it something you enjoyed doing, younger roles?

PB: Well, again, it was what was offered, you know, people paid me to do it, so. And I was quite good at playing bouncing teenagers. I did one much, much too late. Somebody, one of these peculiar agents, sent me for an audition for a play called *Wait until Dark* that Audrey Hepburn filmed, and there's a schoolgirl in that and I sent it up in the audition. And it was directed by a man called Richard Carey and he said, 'If you don't have that girl, she's jokey, I'm not going to do it at all'. So I got the schoolgirl, and I was well into my thirties, so I got into my mother's gymslip for the last time, and did a last schoolgirl, and did a special week in that at Rotherham. And I had digs in a Victorian pub, very near the theatre. And they obviously did not take people very often, I had a room on the first floor and it was completely deserted, all cob-webs and dust, and the single light-bulb swayed in the breeze, and it was pretty creepy. But downstairs in the bar, it was jollier, and all the local prostitutes gathered there. And we were doing very bad business, of course. We gave the 'comps' to the landlord but he wasn't going to go, so he gave them to the prostitutes, so they came to see the play. And I met them in the bar afterward, and they said, 'Oh love, you're never going to make it in this business, you'd better join us'. Probably the best offer I ever had but, no, I came back to London.

EC: Thankfully. So what year was that in, do you remember?

PB: Ooh no, I don't remember. Sort of '58/'59, something like that, I think.

EC: And did you, after that, did you...

PB: After that, I sort of got to grown-up parts. And then, you know, doing bits here, there and everywhere. And lots of television, I was very lucky, I was in lots of the BBC television classic series I was in *The Eustace Diamonds* and *Pepys*, I had a lovely part in *Amelia*... there were lots of them I did. You know, it was what came. And then I went, oh I did do some tours. I toured in an Agatha Christie play, the one that's set in the rose-red rocks at Petra, *An Appointment with Death*, and I played that girl having a nervous breakdown, *Ginevra*, because I remember I had to tear a handkerchief at each performance. She was so nervous, she tore this handkerchief to shreds. And the stage management said I was being too extravagant and they couldn't do a handkerchief a night, two a week was my ration for that.

PB: And then I went on another tour after that, by Roy Plomley who did *Desert Island Discs*. He didn't give a damn about *Desert Island Discs*, he wanted to be a West End playwright, that was the aim of his ambition. And this play I was in, I believe, he wrote a lot, was I believe one of his best. It was called *Double Crossing* and it was about a girl who swam the Channel. She was played by Jennifer Phipps, Sonnie Hale directed, and I played her younger sister. And the middle act was set on a boat and we all rocked about

while she was swimming alongside, and it was really quite a good play. And we went all round the sea-side towns and Roy Plomley came with us to every gig, and he was the loveliest man because in Eastbourne I had digs well out of the town and he used to walk me home every night. And I said, 'Oh Roy, Roy, don't bother. I'm all right'. 'No, no, we couldn't lose our juvenile lead'. So he used to walk me home, he was lovely. And then we got to Brighton, and Hartley Power who was playing the lead had a stroke on Brighton pier. They put the understudy on but that was the end of the play, and we limped on to Streatham Hill and Golders Green, and that was the end of it. But I was so sad for Roy because had Hartley Power... that not happened, I think Roy might have just got into the West End with it, and it would have made him so happy.

EC: Was that still a feeling amongst actors and directors and playwrights, to be on the West End?

PB: Oh yes, and I did very little in the West End, yes.

EC: But there was still a kind of feeling that being on at the West End was the...

PB: Was it, was to be there, yes.

EC: What everyone was aiming for?

PB: I think so, yes.

EC: OK, was there anything that you really wanted to be part of but missed out on do you think?

PB: Well, I auditioned twice for the RSC and twice it got down to two of us and each time the other girl got it, so I didn't get it, so, you know, I kept on doing television and films.

EC: OK, whilst you were in London, did you feel like you built up a coterie of actors or theatre goers that you kind of formed a group around and were always together or do you think it was quite loose?

PB: No, I made friends but, you know, I was such a jobbing actress, doing a bit here and a bit there and going here and going there. I never was in a permanent company you see.

EC: OK, so it was more difficult to find a...

PB: Much more difficult, and much more difficult to make friends, yes.

EC: But you still made lots of friends all over the country that?

PB: Well, yes.

EC: Do you keep in contact with them?

PB: A few, yes.

EC: Was there anyone who made a big impact being friends with or that helped you in your career, do you think?

PB: Not that I can think of, no.

EC: OK, do you still speak to many of them?

PB: I've got friends.

EC: Part of the theatre?

PB: Yes, most of my friends are in the business.

EC: Yes, OK. If we go back to some of the rep theatre stuff that you were doing, do you think it was a shame that you were... that it's not still going in the same form that it is now in regional theatres?

PB: Oh yes, for the young people. I mean, it was invaluable training to do, you know, weekly reps, as long as you didn't do too much. I was very lucky, I didn't do too much you see. I think if you did it for too long, but for training for the young people, I don't know what they do today. I'm told they learn their jobs in fringe theatre now, which it isn't the same as rep.

EC: You say you can't do rep theatre for too long. How long did you do it for?

PB: Well, I did so many special weeks, you see, and went back and did odd special weeks, and you know, until quite late on. I was still doing the odd productions here, there and everywhere. I went up to the Flora Robson Playhouse in Newcastle for Julian Herrington and I went up to do a lovely André Roussin's farce, Figure of Fun, and Freddie Jones was in that, and he was famous by then. And Ann Sutfield, who I worked

for at Canterbury did that. And we were doing a matinée and Freddie Jones dried and went wrong, so he walked down to the audience and said, 'Oh, I've gone wrong. We're going back'. And I was a bit gobsmacked by that because I've never had that before. I mean, people do it now with mobile phones, don't they, but that was the first time I'd actually known it happen but Freddie Jones stopped, went back, and we went on. And then I did *The Ghost Train*, the Arthur Ridley play, which Julian Herrington was directing himself. And he'd got, it was a big cast, an actress up from London, and he hadn't realised... we'd been rehearsing quite a few days, she'd had a terrible accident and couldn't retain her lines. So, he had to completely re-cast it, and he sent for me and said - I was playing one of the juveniles - 'would I mind playing the character lady, Miss Bourne?'. I said, 'Oh no, not a bit', because I knew, ultimately, I would be a character woman, and that was my first character part. So really I was rather pleased. So I played Miss Bourne, and also I knew she slept all through Act Two, which was rather good, she was on stage but pretending to be asleep. But also she had a parrot in the cage, and I assumed it would be a stuffed one, but it wasn't because Julian Herrington loved animals and birds, and he got a real one from the pub. Anyway, there was this parrot in the cage and all went well, dress rehearsal, first two performances. Come the third performance, in the second act, I was supposed to be asleep in the station waiting room, and there I was lying on the bench and the parrot suddenly came to and realised it was missing its chance of stardom. And it started shrieking at the top of its voice, and it screamed and it said profanities and swearwords it had obviously picked up in the pub. And the poor actors couldn't hear themselves think, the dialogue slowed down, stopped, and I thought, 'Oh gosh, I've got to do something, it's up to me'. So I had to pretend to wake up and get the offending bird. And the thing was, we were supposed to be locked in this station waiting room, the door was supposed to be locked but, of course, I couldn't do anything, had to take this screaming bird off. So I opened the door, and I may say I and the bird got the biggest round of applause I've ever got in my life, and I just handed it to the stage manager, who was hysterical by then, went back on and we picked up the play and went on from there. And after that, I did have a stuffed parrot.

EC: So you enjoyed your theatre experiences?

PB: I've had a lovely life, yes.

EC: Was there anything you'd pick out as one of your fondest memories?

PB: Well, doing Constance in *The Twin Rivals*. That was the part. I mean, I wish I'd been able to do it longer and for a run, but there we were. I did a lot of broadcasting quite early on I got into *Mrs. Dale's Diary* and I did that. And I was very lucky because I was her Canadian niece, but I was the only member of the family who wasn't under contract, because if you were under contract to the BBC you really couldn't do other work at all, but I wasn't. So it meant I could do other work. I mean, I remember I did these tours and things, and they were awfully good. They would fit me in because it was only quarter of an hour programme and I just had two or three scenes, and they were awfully good, they would record me in the evening or in the lunch hour, whenever I could fit it in. And that was a very handy source of income because we got an assured repeat.

EC: Absolutely. Is there anything that you want to add that you feel that we haven't touched on yet, that you think is an important part of your career?

PB: Oh, I did some *Son et Lumières*. I played Richard Burton's wife in the *Son et Lumière* for Blenheim Palace. And I was very sad because I didn't meet Richard Burton himself and I should have done because actually I was acting at The Mermaid. And I did some plays at The Mermaid, I used to do some of those school things. They were very wonderful programmes the schools ones I think, they were enormously well-written and interesting. I did one about electricity and one about hearing because I remember I gave a lecture about the ear. And there was a great ear on the stage, because it was there, I could walk inside it and I talked about the ear. And they were done by Bernard Miles's wife, Josephine Wilson. And I did a lot of those and my friend, David Rowley, played the piano in those. And I think it's an enormous shame the Mermaid's gone now. I mean somebody should rescue it, there's that lovely theatre just waiting to be used as a theatre again. It is sad that it's gone. And then through that, of course, Bernard Miles saw my work and he wanted me for a Henry James play called *The High Bid*. And Fenella Fielding was playing the lead, and she wanted a little girl she knew for the part, and Bernard wanted me and he wanted Edward Woodward to play the lead opposite Fenella Fielding and she wanted a leading man she wanted. So I believe a deal was done in the middle of the night and I was swapped for Edward Woodward because if you're going to be swapped, be swapped for somebody good. And Edward Woodward played the lead, and I got the girl's understudy, but I'd had an operation actually, I wasn't awfully well so really I was very happy just understudying. And we all went on as tourists and it was rather a fraught production. Fenella and Bernard used to have meetings, and we used to have to sit in the stalls until midnight while Fenella and Bernard argued, and it all went on and on and on. I think it went quite well, I think it got good notices. And there was a wonderful variety man in it called Billy Russell who played the butler in the house. I think he had a little monologue to himself where he set the clocks in this big house and he used to bring the house down and Fenella didn't like that. And he was wonderful, and he used to come and talk to us in the dressing room and that was all very happy and that was all a great experience.

EC: Sounds lovely. Is anything else you want to add?

PB: Oh, I think I missed out going to Lincoln. I went to Lincoln to do *Fings 'Aint Wot They Used T'Be* because I didn't do many of what you call those avant-garde plays except *Roots*. But I did do *Fings 'Aint Wot They Used T'Be* and played Rosie and, of course, that's the one thing I did sing in and was awful. And I really can't sing, and Nicholas Barter, who was later the head of RADA, was awfully good with me and he gave me private coaching, and took me through the song, and said, you know, its just like speaking except you have music. But I was really so nervous about Rosie's number, she sings 'Where do Little Birdies go in the Winter Time'. And we did it at Lincoln, and then we did a tour but you go on living at Lincoln but you go off in a coach each day to wherever it is. But I must say I was terribly worried about the singing in that though.

EC: You haven't done any singing since then?

PB: No, "as a singer, I'm not a success".

EC: OK, well, shall we leave it there?

PB: Yes. Thank you so much.

EC: Thank-you.