

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## A.K. Bennett-Hunter – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Natasha Lewis**

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Stage Manager and Production Manager. Audiences; backstage crafts (carpentry, electicals); Lyric Theatre, Belfast; Soozie Copley; Irish plays and playwrights; Jeeves; Haymarket Theater, Leicester; Phoenix Theatre, Leicester; lighting; Mary O'Malley; repertory; television; Trinity College Dublin Dramatic Society.

NL: Just wanted to start with a bit of a general question really about how you first got into the theatre and what your early experiences were.

KB: Well I started in Ireland, because I was born and brought up in Belfast and I went to Trinity College, Dublin and did lots of student plays there and when I finished I just sort of rang up the Lyric Theatre in Belfast and got a job...

NL: Ah! [laughs]

KB: I'm not sure if that's possible now...! And it was called Stage Director, which was a term which by then was not really used in the UK or in England - and it's still used to some extent in Ireland - but it was sort of Stage Manager, but it was more than that because Production Managers in that size of theatre even in England didn't really exist at that time so there was a bit of production management as well. And I stayed there for a bit, a bit more than half a season and then I went on tour with a company going around schools doing cut-down Shakespeare in Northern Ireland.

NL: So was it at university that you mostly got into... were you interested beforehand or...?

KB: Well it started at school really – I did a lot of music and I did a lot of drama when I was acting at school. And at university I mostly directed.

NL: Mm-hmm.

KB: And I sort of – it's very difficult, they're both very time-consuming activities, so the music sort of went to one side and I think to begin with I probably wanted to be a Director and I got a place on the Bristol Old Vic Director's course...

NL: When was this?

KB: This was 1970. But I'd already done a four year degree so I couldn't get any money, so I got a job. And I got quite a good job on the first phone call I made.

NL: Well! I hope that happens to me! [laughs] Did you have... You went to university in Dublin...

KB: Yeah.

NL: So were you going to the theatre a lot at that time? That was before '68 wasn't it?

KB: Yes and I did before. My parents took me to local operatic shows and I got quite interested in opera, which I later worked in, and Sadler's Wells used to tour to the Grand Opera House in Belfast and I used to go and see their shows... In fact as a schoolboy I saw a production of *Così fan tutte* which I subsequently took on tour as Stage Manager ten years later, the same production. And there was more theatre going on then in Belfast than there has been for some time since. There was the old Ulster Group Theatre which was then being run by a comic called James Young, who did sort of comedy farces that were very much based on Northern Ireland and the Protestant/Catholic thing and it was all very funny and everybody loved it and that ran at the Group Theatre, and The Arts Theatre was also running as a sort of rep and the Grand Opera House obviously took big touring productions, did a big pantomime and so on... And the Lyric had come out of... It was run by a lady called Mary O'Malley who had started a theatre in a room in her house - it seated probably about 30 or 40 people - in the fifties and she'd developed that and raised the money and built the Lyric which was relatively new at the time and it's just being rebuilt, just being pulled down. And actually the three theatres that were sort of quite important in my career - which were the Lyric in Belfast, Leicester Haymarket and the Young Vic - have all been either pulled down or rebuilt or completely changed, which is kind of quite interesting because they were all fairly new buildings at the time.

NL: Yeah.

KB: And they've all needed to be redone.

NL: Going back... I mean, that's interesting how Belfast Lyric started...

KB: Yeah.

NL: I mean, do you think that kind of D.I.Y. origins fed into the sort of mood, of what was put on and things?

KB: Well, she was a very interesting character, Mary O'Malley and she was very much a Republican and she was very keen on the old Abbey writers, and in fact it was in the Lyric's constitution that every year they had to do a number of Yeats plays which used to be called the Yeating season. I mean they're not very dramatic, and some of them are one act - they're poetry rather than drama - but there were two or three weeks every year where this had to be done. But she did a lot of current popular stuff. We did Christopher Fry's translation of *Peer Gynt* the year after it had been done at Chichester; we did *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* quite soon after...

NL: Is this in the seventies?

KB: Yes, this was 1970, '71... quite soon after it had been done at the National. But we also did O'Casey and some local writers and things. So her particular influence was very, very strong...

NL: Yeah.

KB: Particularly on that kind of Republican thing and it did make a difference, because it was sort of identified as a Nationalist theatre...

NL: Yeah.

KB: which caused certain difficulties from time to time as you can imagine, because that was just at the time when the Troubles had just begun and were quite significant and things were going on.

NL: So politics came into it quite a lot?

KB: Yes, yes.

NL: Do you think the politics of the time informed the type of plays that were chosen?

KB: To some extent, I mean she did do as I say *Peer Gynt* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and the mainstream stuff that anybody would have done, but there was this allegiance to Yeats and to O'Casey and Synge and those Irish writers were also very much part of the repertoire.

NL: Do you think coming from Ireland gave you a kind of Irish take on theatre?

KB: [pause] I think to some extent... I mean, all the great British playwrights - with the possible exception of Shakespeare - were Irish. I mean - you know this - if you go back Congreve and Goldsmith and Shaw and Beckett, you know, right the way through even now to Martin McDonagh, Conor McPherson you know all the great British playwrights have been Irish - Oscar Wilde - so there was a great theatrical tradition in Dublin, it was great being there as a student, there was lots of theatre going on, lots of interesting things, new plays got done there quite quickly. Rolf Hochhuth's *Soldiers, Necrology on Geneva* which is about Churchill's implication in Sikorsky's death during the war wasn't allowed to be done in the UK - censorship had already gone - but nobody would take it on but I saw it in Dublin so they went there instead.

NL: What year was that?

KB: That would have been '68 or '69.

NL: Mm-hmm.

KB: So there's a great theatrical tradition in the South although less so in Northern Ireland. There's a very big amateur movement in Northern Ireland and that's where the drama tends to come and certainly in those days James Young was very popular but that was a very localised kind of humour about being in Northern Ireland so it wasn't in any way sort of mainstream. So that's a bit odd... I think it probably for me came in school because there were a few teachers there who were very, very keen on doing drama and we did things like *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Crucible* and Shakespeare and you know all those things and that was really the thing that got me into it.

NL: Did you start off acting then?

KB: I started off acting at school, but interestingly enough I never really saw myself as a performer although my career took a turn that I couldn't have predicted I suppose - I thought I was going to be a director - but it was never about performing and I did very little acting at university.

NL: When you were at university - I was just looking at - the Dublin Film Festival was going on at that time...

KB: Well I don't know about the film festival, certainly there was Dublin Theatre Festival...

NL: Oh sorry, yeah I meant the Dublin Theatre Festival. [laughs]

KB: yes, was a big thing and the Dramatic Society at Trinity... Trinity now has a drama department and they're just starting a theatre school which will start next year but at that time there was no drama department, there was no official way to do drama so it

was all just student societies, but we did a lot of shows. We did about four shows – terms were about seven or eight weeks – and we'd do four productions in that time every term...

NL: Wow, very prolific!

KB: and we also did a show during the Theatre Festival, which was out of term-time so some of us would come back early and do a show which was on the fringe of the theatre festival so yeah that was quite important.

NL: So there were crossovers?

KB: Yeah, yeah.

NL: Did you go and see much theatre? Professional theatre?

KB: Yes, yes I did. Of course, we used to go the Abbey and see shows like *Soldiers* that came to Dublin and you had to go and see it because... And I remember seeing a production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* for example in The Gaiety and there was lots of stuff going on.

NL: What was the... If you could describe – it might seem obvious – but, how it's changed, describing a theatre experience from the start of the evening to the end of the evening at that time in Dublin.

KB: I think the striking thing about Dublin is that people tended to turn up late, the shows would go up late and people would still be coming in, something which I much later discovered with an Afro-Caribbean audience at Stratford East. I mean, it's a good thing in a way, because it just meant that theatre-going was more a part of everyday life for both those groups, both the theatre-goers in Dublin at the time and also the local audience at Stratford East later on. It became just a thing you did – it didn't have the formality...

NL: Yeah.

KB: that we sort of expect.

NL: So was it more inclusive do you think?

KB: Yes I think it probably was. It was more embedded in – I mean it was probably still fairly middle-class – but it was more embedded in the culture than I think it probably ever has been in England.

NL: Why do you think that was?

KB: Again, the theatre tradition in Ireland is different. I mean when O'Casey was done at the Abbey in the early part of the twentieth century there were riots and walk-outs and you know and... well we had a riot in Birmingham over that Sikh play in Birmingham recently, but it's a very unusual thing to happen in this country but Ireland has a tradition of getting quite engaged in its theatre.

NL: Yeah. So do you think it kind of informed people's discussions in the pub and things then?

KB: Yes I think so and people still – I mean I've done quite a lot of consultancy work for the Abbey in recent years – and you'll still find people in the street or in the pub who will have written a play or have an opinion about what's going on although they won't necessarily have been to see it but that won't stop them from having a strong opinion about what's going on.

NL: Was there a lot of writing about the plays in newspapers and things?

KB: Yes there were, and the shows we did in Trinity always got reviewed in the press you know. It was a really good grounding – although I didn't train – and we discovered it for ourselves basically – in how to put a play on or how to run a theatre.

NL: Yeah. What do you think are the key things that you learnt?

KB: Well, they're probably not much use now... [pause] What did we learn? I suppose to some extent the kind of discipline of putting something together and having a deadline and having an opening night and you know getting the audience in, selling tickets, publicity, all that kind of stuff which we had to do. I mean we made it up as we went along, but it was quite good.

NL: Was there quite a close group of you doing...?

KB: Well - you can imagine – doing that amount of plays every term there meant quite a large amount of people, but I suppose there was only a relatively small group who actually ran it but obviously there were lots of people who'd come and act in a play or direct something or do publicity or run the front of house, you know, there were lots of people who did various things, did the lighting.

NL: Yeah. Did you get a good turnout at your plays?

KB: Well it was very small – I think it held something like 60 – but we'd manage to get 60 people most times.

NL: That's all right then! [laughs]

KB: [laughs]

NL: And did you read your reviews?

KB: Yes. I'm ashamed to say I still have some of them. [laughs]

NL: [laughs] Ah, that's brilliant! Were they positive?

KB: The ones I kept were!

NL: [laughs] Writing history! Do you think at Trinity people were keen to have an Irishness about the plays that were put on?

KB: Well Trinity at the time was a very different place to what it is now. Now there are about 10,000 students, then there were only about 3,000. And it was divided more or

less about a third and a third and a third between Irish, Northern Irish and English. There was a very large group of English students, which I think is largely not true any more, so that gave it an interesting kind of mix really and it meant that there wasn't a fantastic Irishness about the theatre in Trinity at the time.

NL: Yeah, OK. When you went to go and see plays, while you were at university, who did you go with? Did you go with the people with who you'd be putting plays on...?

KB: Yes I suppose mostly, yes.

NL: Do you think it formed... Did you take ideas?

KB: Oh I'm sure we nicked things mercilessly, yes there's no doubt of that.

NL: Have you got any specific memories of...?

KB: No! [laughs]

NL: [laughs] So was it stressful putting plays on in Trinity?

KB: I think it probably was, but we had absolutely no concept of stress at that time and at that age.

NL: Yeah.

KB: Probably about the age you are now... No, I don't remember it as being stressful, I just remember it being more fun than doing any work!

NL: [laughs] How did the process work? Did you have auditions and...?

KB: Yeah yeah yeah.

NL: How long would it take you to put on a...?

KB: Well the first one of the term got done obviously very, very quickly and was designed for that purpose. I remember we did – it was a very popular form at the time – a bit like the sort of shows that The Tricycle do now – verbatim theatre, you know, edited things and there was a play called In The Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer which was about Oppenheimer and his doubts over, you know, making an atom bomb and so on and so something like that where it was set in a court room and you could have notes

– I mean we'd try and learn it – but it was something that could be put on fairly quickly in a couple of weeks at the beginning of term. And then obviously the show at the end of term was a much bigger event [inaudible] I mean we did The Alchemist for example, Romeo and Juliet, sort of more traditional bigger shows with a longer rehearsal period.

NL: Which were your favourite to do?

KB: Well I won a prize for my production of The Real Inspector Hound so I have to say that that was my favourite... And then there was the Irish Universities Drama Festival which is a bit like the NUS Festival here and in my final year at Trinity – the hosts would move round various colleges around Ireland - and Trinity was the host so we had all that to organise and there was a whole series of one act plays in the afternoon and a whole series of other plays in the evening from all the different colleges...

NL: That sounds brilliant.

KB: So that was quite a big event.

NL: Was your prize for direction then?

KB: Yes, yes.

NL: And why do you think you won the prize?

KB: Because it was so good of course!

NL: [laughs] Why was it so good?

KB: It's just a very funny play and I had some good actors and everyone liked it and the judges liked it.

NL: Fantastic. [pause] My notes are a bit disorganised, as always. The sixties was kind of seen now as being a bit of a golden era for theatre, would you agree with that?

KB: Well, yes... I didn't start doing professional theatre until 1970 and I think what happened after that – what happened at the end of the seventies and the eighties – was really very bad, which probably with retrospect makes what went before look even better than it was but it's hard to judge, I was just doing it. I wasn't in very senior positions and I'm not sure that I can judge that really, but what I do know is that things got quite bad in the eighties in terms of funding and the perception of theatre and theatres were being forced... encouraged to open restaurants and find other sources of

funding and so on and so on, and very often they weren't very good at it because they were good at being theatres, they weren't necessarily good at being restaurateurs and gift shops and all the other things and I think theatres didn't really... The theatre community didn't really stand up for itself enough, it said 'Oh well, we've got to adopt these Thatcherite models, and we'll try and make them work' when it has - I think, clearly - has been proved to have been a mistake. It's easy to say with hindsight but it took everybody's eye off the ball, because they were trying to do things that weren't the core activity and actually they weren't necessarily very good at and I think lots of things suffered because of that. Now whether that made what happened before look better, I'm not really sure. I remember one of the seminars on this project, and Alan Plater was asked what it was like to be part of the Golden Age of British Theatre and he said 'Well, we didn't think of it as a Golden Age, to us it was just another Thursday.' [laughs] And I think that is probably just about right.

NL: When you were going to see theatre in the sixties do you think it was taken for granted almost then? That there was funding...?

KB: I really don't know about the sixties because I wasn't involved in that kind of thing, but I think certainly in the seventies there was a feeling that you know, in the end it was going to be OK whatever happened, and I think largely that was true. But there are things like... for example, I was Stage Manager when the Haymarket opened in Leicester, and we had a permanent company of about 30 actors, which just hasn't happened since really - or not for a very long time - and even in the late seventies when I was Production Manager at the Young Vic we had a permanent acting company of 26 who were doing TIE shows - education shows - going out in a Transit van, there was a studio theatre, we were doing kids' shows in the afternoon and shows sometimes in repertoire in the evening. We did an enormous amount of work, with a permanent company of 26 actors. Now, that's all different and some will say it's a terrible loss but it's just different.

NL: Yeah.

KB: I mean, I went to the Young Vic on Saturday night and saw a terrific show under completely different circumstances, so you know in a way it's just different.

NL: What do you think are the biggest changes?

KB: I think that's the biggest change: the idea you have a regular company of actors. There're all sorts of reasons for that: some of them are economic, some of them are because it's harder now to get actors to commit to a long period, a long engagement out of London - or even in London - so that means that's harder to do. Interestingly enough the RSC are going to back to having a long-term resident company which they haven't had for a few years but which of course they had at that time in the seventies. There's an awful lot to be said for it, but circumstances today make it harder to achieve.

NL: So your first job was Stage Manager...



KB: Yes. I mean it was kind of ridiculous to be sort of like in charge from my first job, but of course I didn't know any better so I thought 'yes of course'. [laughs]

NL: Yeah.

KB: But it was partly because the Lyric was in a rather peculiar place, and it was partly because it was Belfast and all sorts of reasons, but it was quite good and again it was seriously learning on the job. And I'd never done any stage management before, I'd never done any stage management at Trinity...

NL: Mm-hmm.

KB: And there were people who did... you know, there were people who were interested in that and that's what they did as students, but you know I never did. But I got sort of interested in it and then when I moved to England that seemed to be the easiest way to get a theatre job...

NL: Yeah?

KB: just to keep on doing that.

NL: What did the stage managing involve? What were your responsibilities?

KB: You mean at the Lyric?

NL: Yeah.

KB: Well it was kind of everything because there were only... Although it was a professional theatre, because there were a limited number of professional actors in Belfast and very few professional technicians, some of the actors worked part-time... I hesitate to call them amateurs, I mean they weren't – they were all Equity members and so on – but quite a few of them had other jobs and some of the technicians had other jobs as well. So there only, I think, three of us who were permanently on the staff, and there was no Production Manager and there was one Carpenter who worked in a disused cinema, built the sets there...

NL: What were the other people's jobs?

KB: Well I think they were probably called ASM – Assistant Stage Manager...

NL: Right, yeah.

KB: I can't quite remember, but we all just sort of did it. But it wasn't in any way typical I subsequently discovered.

NL: Yeah... wow! [laughs] And there must have been quite a lot of pressure – did anything ever go wrong or anything?

KB: Yes, it was very pressured and as I say – Mary O'Malley – it was her theatre and she'd created it and got it built and was Artistic Director and was a very, very strong figure and she was a woman that a friend of mine subsequently described someone else as, but it fits her perfectly well – “a woman of iron whim”. And she used to direct plays as well but she was a bit sort of autocratic and capricious, and she'd just decide strange things and sack directors and...

NL: [laughs]

KB: [inaudible] the theatre and all sorts of weird things.

NL: A bit of a loose cannon?

KB: Yeah and that was sometimes very stressful – I mean especially because I didn't really have any experience, I didn't know any better.

NL: Did she know you didn't have any experience?

KB: Yeah, I think that's probably why I got the job! [laughs]

NL: [laughs]

KB: And that's why I didn't last even for a whole season – I went in the autumn and left to go on this tour sometime in the spring – because it got... And also – over that Christmas – we played *Death of a Salesman* on Christmas Eve and opened the next play – I think there may have been a weekend, a Sunday or something – but we opened either on Boxing Day or the day after... I mean it was just completely crazy! First of all, who plays *Death of a Salesman* on Christmas Eve? And we had 48 hours to get it out and get in the other one and dress rehearse it and open which was *The Rivals* I think... you know and that was just kind of crazy.

NL: So in at the deep end...

KB: Yeah.

NL: from the start?

KB: Yeah.

NL: Do you think that was a good grounding?

KB: Yeah I do, I think it was great and you get things terribly wrong and actually it sort of didn't matter [chuckles] and that was really good.

NL: So Mary O'Malley, as well as... she seems quite creative?

KB: She was – I mean she'd built the whole thing up from nothing you know from play readings in a room in her house to having this theatre built you know and then having a whole professional repertory company. I mean you can't knock it – it was extraordinary stuff. And there were some very talented people there – there were some very good directors, some very, very good actors – but it was just a bit strange.

NL: [laughs] Do you think she influenced you at all?

KB: [laughs] Well I suppose the fact that I'm here, the answer's probably no! But I don't know... but when I meet people who are at The Lyric even today and I say 'Oh I had my first job at The Lyric', the first thing they always say is [excited tone] 'Were you there when Mary O'Malley was there?'. You know, I mean she's dead now but the legend lives on.

NL: Yeah...wow! [laughs]

KB: She was a sort of Lilian Baylis in a small way.

NL: Yeah.

KB: That are sort of odd and eccentric but actually made things happen... And they're just rebuilding – they're spending tens of millions of pounds rebuilding – a new Lyric Theatre which is going to open next year, so you know it just goes on – without her it wouldn't be there!

NL: And I guess if she's... I guess there's quite a lot of freedom for new ideas?

KB: I wouldn't... freedom's not a word I'd immediately associate with her.

NL: OK.

KB: [laughs]

NL: [laughs] OK! Why not?

KB: Well because she was kind of autocratic and she made her mind up and...

NL: OK.

KB: that's what happened you know. It wasn't in any sense collaborative.

NL: Oh right, yeah. Did directors approach her with things then?

KB: Everyone... Oh I see what you mean...

NL: I mean, I guess if you're never sure what she's going to go for...?

KB: Yeah.

NL: She sounds like quite a character. [pause] So I guess there wasn't anything like a typical day in that job then?

KB: There wasn't at all, no. But of course the thing was – because we were doing three or four week runs – and there was only the three of us – it meant that we were rehearsing all day and doing a show in the evenings so you know, that was the typical day really.

NL: Mm-hmm.

KB: Come in in the morning and go home at 11. And interestingly enough – something now which never happens is that... I was talking about that Christmas period – but every show closed on Saturday and opened on Monday so we always did a turnaround over Sunday and Monday.

NL: So you were working seven days a week?

KB: Well, yeah. Often. I mean, certainly every third or fourth week we were.

NL: Yeah.

KB: And very long days and all night – I mean you'd do the get out after the show so... I mean it'd be completely illegal now, apart from anything else.

NL: Did it seem like hard work or was it...?

KB: I didn't know any better so this is the great thing – I supposed that this was how it must be...

NL: Yeah.

KB: [laughs] And actually it didn't get much better for quite a long time, I mean even in other places... The one big thing that happened as far as I was concerned around that time was there was a big Equity campaign called the Living Wage Campaign and the Equity minimum – I'm not certain of these figures – went from something like £7 a week to £20 a week over night and that made an enormous difference to everything really.

NL: Yeah, so that was in the seventies?

KB: That was in the very early seventies – I can't remember... I taught for a year when I first came to England so I was kind of out of it, but when I'd stopped doing it, it was before and when I started doing it again it was after, so it must have been in '71, '72.

NL: Oh the Conservatives brought that in did they? [laughs]

KB: [laughs] Yes. I don't know how it came about but it happened anyway.

NL: And what was your next job after...?

KB: I had about 18 months out for personal reasons, and then I ended up in Leicester and again I went to the theatre which was The Phoenix and I got a job, but this time I was ASM so I kind of went back to the beginning again and did a season there which was a rep season. Much the same set up as The Lyric but there were two stage management teams and a General Stage Manager, so there were seven of us altogether and there were two electricians - and in the end three – and they had their own workshops where there were three or four people... So it was a bigger – much the same sort of theatre, much the same size of theatre, much the same repertoire, much the same length of run – but it was a more grown up sort of exercise.

NL: Yeah.

KB: And there was a fantastic lady called Soozie Copley who was the General Stage Manager and who went on to be one of the stage managing tutors at Guildhall – much, much later in her career – and she kind of taught me properly then, having got all my bad habits and making it up at Trinity and The Lyric. I went in as ASM there and that's when I really learned how to do it...

NL: Yeah.

KB: thanks to her. And of course that's another great thing, that you could – there were seven of us – so you could afford to have somebody who was kind of learning. Now

almost everybody goes to drama school and you've really got to hit the ground running when you get your first job, because everyone does need to learn something – there's still stuff to learn when you come out of drama school – but I think it would be very hard for someone in my position to be able to do that now, because there isn't the capacity – everybody's got to be pulling their weight from day one.

NL: Had many of the people you were working with been to drama school?

KB: I don't know, I don't think they had. Soozie had when she was a little bit older. One of other ASMs was actually Lou Wakefield who co-writes that Ladies of Letters that you might have heard on the radio or seen on the telly. She was an ASM - she'd trained as a teacher doing drama but she hadn't trained as a Stage Manager. Another one went on to train as an Actor so he obviously hadn't been to drama school before. No I don't think they had.

NL: How do you think that affected things? [pause] Do you think there was more room for ideas and people's own take on things?

KB: No, I don't think that's true but I think there was more space for us to learn. I mean, not to get things wrong, because we really weren't allowed to get things wrong, but there was more space to learn and of course we needed that space because we hadn't been to drama school! It was just another way of doing it - it was sort of like an apprenticeship – it was a slightly different way of doing it but you needed more flexibility. And the other thing was, that as stage management, we always helped with the get out and the fit up, so we'd help with electrics or we'd help the carpenters or we'd do stuff that – now – probably stage management don't do, or certainly not in the same way and that was incredibly valuable to me later on when I became a Production Manager because it meant that I'd done a bit of everything...

NL: Yeah.

KB: and people now depend on drama school for that experience to do a bit of everything. You don't really get it in a job any more.

NL: So I guess then now you've got an understanding of what everyone does...

KB: Yeah...

NL: and how to solve their problems...

KB: and I mean at the time I hated it, but it was fantastically good experience.

NL: What did you hate about...?

KB: Well because I wasn't any good at it. You know if I'd have wanted to have been a Carpenter I'd have been a Carpenter, if I'd have wanted to have been an Electrician I'd have been an Electrician, and I wasn't any good at those things and I didn't really want to do them, but you had to do your bit you know and obviously they didn't give you anything clever to do but you got to understand how it worked, and certainly we'd make up sound tapes and do sound operation and so on as part of stage management. There weren't specialist sound people at that stage...

NL: Yeah.

KB: until we went to The Haymarket. So all that was incredibly good value, but people get that now at drama schools so again it's just different.

NL: Which bit of stage management were you most attracted to?

KB: Well, I hate props, I've always hated props and I still hate props, I didn't like to have anything to do with props but... So obviously almost every stage manager I meet says

that cueing the show, being on the book as DSM is the best job. And it is the best job, and I enjoyed that a lot.

NL: Sorry, what's the DSM?

KB: Well they're in the prompt corner with cue lights and so on...

NL: Oh right, yeah.

KB: .and they just tell everyone what to do.

NL: Yeah.

KB: And you're running the show you know, you are absolutely the thing on which the whole show depends and I think everybody likes that.

NL: Opening the curtains and...

KB: Yeah, that's right.

NL: Yeah. Is there a certain amount of adrenaline that comes from...?

KB: Oh yeah, no absolutely.

NL: in a live theatre.

KB: Yeah, yeah.

NL: You did a little bit of a stint in television didn't you?

KB: I did a whole series of a dreadful cop show called Target on the BBC.

NL: Yeah I've heard of it, yeah.

KB: [shocked] You've heard of it??

NL: [uncertain] I think so, I might be thinking of something else but... [laughs]

KB: It starred Patrick Mower and the BBC, I think, thought it was going to be their answer to The Sweeney, so we had directors who'd worked on The Sweeney and it was very much based on that kind of thing, but I think it was supposed to be not London – I mean where The Sweeney was all... you know, this was a little bit more gentle but it was very much that kind of thing with Patrick and his sidekick and...

NL: Yeah.

KB: the boss and all those usual things. And I spent six months on the streets of Ealing stopping traffic and calming down irate residents...

NL: But the theatre was for you?

KB: getting extras on the coach and things at 7 o'clock in the morning and...

NL: Oh God! [laughs]

KB: Well, if things had gone slightly differently I might have stayed in television but they didn't. I mean, that job came to an end and very often people moved onto permanent residency – you know, a permanent job – but there just wasn't anything at the time and I didn't do it and I immediately got offered another theatre job...

NL: Yeah.

KB: and so that was that.

NL: Were there many crossovers between the theatre and the television?

KB: Well my job in television was mostly to do with looking after the actors and the extras – supporting artistes – and that's just the same – actors are actors are actors,

looking after them is looking after them. So that was a big kind of crossover. But of course in television if you want a prop you just send eight copies of a memo and it turns up usually so that was kind of OK! [laughs] I enjoyed it! I'm really, really glad I did it because it was a whole glimpse of a different... And most of it – it was all on film, we did some studio days but they were at Ealing Studios – but it was all on film as opposed to television you know broadcasting video. So it was a great insight into how film works which has been – well I'm not sure if it's been useful – but certainly very interesting.

NL: Yeah. So the looking after actors part of your theatre jobs...

KB: Yes.

NL: How did you find that?

KB: Well, it's interesting, my friends... I got very close to designers, one of the things when I became a Production Manager – I thought 'I'm not going to like this because I like stage management, this is sitting in an office and you don't get to do the shows and all of that' – and I discovered designers and I really enjoyed working with designers and felt much more of a... I had more friends who were designers than I ever had who were actors for some reason. But the interesting thing about that is the difference between actors and dancers and singers. Actors – this is a hopeless generalisation – but actors generally have a better idea of stagecraft – or think they do – than the others – and so they're more interested in what's going on and they're more likely to have an opinion about what's happening or how things should be or...

NL: Mm-hmm.

KB: how they should stand or you know whatever. Whereas singers – as long as they can see the conductor they really don't care about anything else and so in a way that's kind of easier because you'll just tell them what to do and they'll do it, you know...

NL: Yeah.

KB: because the music is the most important thing and... It's not to say that they're bad actors or they don't understand stagecraft or any of that because that isn't true, but it's just not their priority and dealing with them is quite different to dealing with actors.

NL: Yeah. I'm guessing at university... I mean putting on plays there's quite a lot of cooperation involved...

KB: Yes, yes.

NL: was there any kind of stresses between people or...?

KB: You mean at university...

NL: Yeah.

KB: or later? Not really that I remember, I'm sure there must have been but I don't really remember that – we all seemed to get on remarkably well.

NL: That's good.

KB: At least that's how I recall it.

NL: Yeah. Excellent.

KB: But there were a lot of people there – at Trinity – who were really interested in it – very interested in it – went on to have a theatrical career. I was Chairman of the Dramatic Society which was called Dublin University Players, and my predecessor was Stephen Remington who ran Sadler's Wells for ten years in the eighties, and my successor was Michael Colgan who runs the Gate Theatre in Dublin and has done for

quite a long time and there were various actors – Dinah Stabb was there, Michael Bogdanov had just finished as a postgraduate student so there were people there who were... One of the early producers of Inspector Morse was one of my stage managers so there were people there who – and her father was an actor – so there were a lot of people there who were kind of fairly serious about it.

NL: Yeah. So did you all kind of share ideas? Was it quite a kind of...

KB: I mean there was – oh dear I can't remember all this stuff – but there was a sort of committee of probably about half a dozen of us and we took submissions from people about what they wanted to do, we put the programme together and we had to look after the finances – we got some money I think from the university, but we had to make it all work financially. I suppose we made a reasonable stab at doing it properly really...

NL: Yeah.

KB: in an odd sort of way.

NL: We dipped into theatre and politics earlier – the kind of purpose of theatre – what do you think about that and has it changed over the years? I mean when you were at Trinity – the reason you put plays on – has that developed or changed or anything?

KB: I don't think my attitude to the theatre has changed at all. I always enjoyed going. I mean the world has changed around it but... With more sophisticated film and more of it and more sophisticated television and more of it, the theatre got misled, in some areas, of being bad television or inadequate film whereas the key to it is it has to be something that could only happen in that minute with those people and that audience, and if you drift away from that – if you get over technical or if you get... if you try and do things that are better in another medium then really you're just "writing your own obituary", to use a phrase John Caird uses, and I think now with things like War Horse and physical theatre and the stuff that's going on at the moment is going back to something that is uniquely theatrical, and that's the key to it and that's what works and that's what always works, and it's what worked for the Greeks and it's what works now. And theatre goes through phases of forgetting that or being seduced by some bit of kit or being seduced by trying to ape some other medium or trying to do something that you know... nicking ideas, and sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't but the key to it is you know – as Richard Eyre says – the scale of the human figure and if you look at War Horse I mean it's very interesting – Spielberg has apparently bought the film rights and the question is – 'is he going to use real horses?' because – no! You know, the whole point of it is that the audience does as much to make those horses real as the puppeteers do and that's what makes them feel good – the audience feel good because they've actually made it work.

NL: Yeah.

KB: Without the audience it's just a bloke with a horse on a stick! Once the audience are there, it's real.

NL: So they have to work at it a bit?

KB: That's right and there are all sorts of ways of doing that. I remember years ago seeing a Jeeves Andrew Lloyd-Webber musical which was never a great success but I saw it in Scarborough Stephen Joseph Theatre – because it's in the round.

NL: When was that?

KB: When was that? [phew]

NL: Sorry.



KB: Well, it was when the new Stephen Joseph Theatre opened – whenever that was...

NL: Mm-hmm.

KB: late eighties, early nineties but anyway... and the whole – they all sing, Bertie Wooster sings, other people sing and so on – and the thing about Jeeves the butler, he doesn't sing for quite a long time until the end of Act One and then - the way it's set up – when he does sing he has to be better than all the others – that's the gag. Now of course he isn't actually better than all the others – or not so you'd notice – but the audience have to make that happen, and it was just wonderful because there you are and you've got this bloke and it was a perfectly good performance – does it all perfectly well – but the only way you can show that it's better than everybody else is if he gets more applause than everybody else and the audience did that...

NL: Yeah.

KB: and so they made it work and they were so pleased with themselves – we were so pleased with ourselves – that we'd understood what the gag was and made it happen. Now you can't do that on a telly.

NL: Yeah.

KB: So it's not just about puppets or it's not just about physical theatre – you can do it in a very traditional context – but it is that thing of the audience making a contribution...

NL: The interaction.

KB: and they always do, every show they do – any actor will tell you or anybody who works backstage will tell you that every audience is different and so on and so on and so on, but when they're aware of it – or even if they're not aware, I shouldn't think the audience are aware they're contributing to War Horse – but they sort of somehow understand that they are, and that's always been true and that's kind of what we have to hang on to.

NL: When you were growing up - and you said that theatre was very much around and theatre was very much a part of the discourse – do you think that was because... Do you think that people appreciated that side of it quite a lot?

KB: Well they didn't have so much else to understand. A lot of television drama – even into the sixties – was still rather theatrical and therefore not very good television. I remember in the early sixties seeing Donald Wolfitt in a production of Ghosts on television and you sort of had to leave the room, because he was leaping out the set and it was all very theatrical and very, very big and therefore not very good television. So the competition wasn't the same – the theatre could still be better television than television was...

NL: So it was like telly learning from theatre?

KB: That's right but you can't do that any more, because telly's better telly than theatre is telly...

NL: Yeah.

KB: which sort of wasn't true then.

NL: Yeah. I think we're sort of out of time but have you got anything else that you wanted to add or talk about? Specifically we're meant to be focused on pre '68 but...

KB: Well yes... can't do much more on that really!

NL: Yeah.

KB: But I think it all comes and goes. You talk about it being collaborative – I mean of course that's true, but it's also very much to do with charismatic individuals and I think the key thing that I would say is that the public know some actors but not very many, they know a few directors, they probably don't know any designers or lighting designers, and they certainly don't know about anybody else, and that's not a problem because mostly the other people are not there for that reason. I suppose the interesting thing you asked me about stage management before... The great thing for me about stage management was not taking a curtain call – I mean, you're still there, you're still in the wings, you're still working, you're still making sure that the lights go up and down or the right people go on at the right time and so on and so on, but you kind of know that you did just as much as they did – if not more in some cases – but you've got to... not just not mind, you've got to really enjoy that, and I think a lot of stage managers do get that feeling that they'd actually rather be there knowing what they know, than having a more obvious role.

NL: So you've got to hear the applause and go – that's for me too?

KB: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And if you ever see – if ever occasionally – if there's something particularly spectacular or somebody's trying to be particularly egalitarian and they try and bring the crew on at the end – and they always look as if they wish they were dead rather than being there! And that's absolutely true you know, just don't do it!

NL: Yeah I've done some amateur dramatic stage management and it's always very embarrassing!

KB: Yeah, yeah. Well professional stage management is just the same – just leave them in the dark! [laughs]

NL: Yeah. [laughs] Absolutely. Great, well I think we've covered everything!