

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Richard Franklin – interview transcript

Interviewer: Ting Wu

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Actor, Director, Writer. Approaching drama texts; Century Theatre, Keswick; Michael Crawford; Peter Dews; Doctor Who; drama school; emotion in acting; RADA; repertory theatre; stunts; theatre company hierarchies; theatre traditions; voice; Webber Douglas School of Acting.

TW: This is the interview with Richard Franklin on 22nd of March 2010. Today I would like to interview Richard Franklin about theatre between 1945 to 1968. Shall I just start by asking what was your first experience of theatre?

RF: Oh. Well, my very first experience of theatre was at the age of seven wearing a sheet at school playing a ghost, in a play called The Ghost of Jerry Bundler. [Laugh] But I think it was more little boys rushing round in white sheets and screaming, frightening each other.

TW: It's quite interesting.

RF: But it was just school things, I think. To answer your question more seriously, I think the first memory that I have of actually impersonation, of getting into another character and living in another world, another life, was probably at the age of about five. And then I can remember a damson tree had fallen down in the garden - we lived in a quite remote country place in the Chiltern Hills in England. This damson tree had fallen down. I imagined it was a magical tree and I went around annoying all the adults casting spells on them. I was in a different world altogether, but I can actually remember that as being - it wasn't just playing, I was actually escaping. And I had power over the adults, over the adult world.

TW: So you can get power from it?

RF: Yes, I think there is a power thing in theatre actually. And that there's not only a power over the audience, there's a power as well over the other actors, because I'm not too shy now, but as a child I was very shy - very shy well into my drama school. But the wonderful thing about being in a scripted play is that someone has written down words for you to say, and nobody else can speak when you're saying them. So that gives you a lot confidence. Quite seriously it does; I mean, I'm not one of these actors who wants to

be the centre of attention and the life and soul of the party and the person leaning on the bar in the pub and you know, that's not me. Anyway, I don't like that sort of thing. And I'm not... that's not the way I do things but I don't feel shy or nervous now about talking to people and that has come through the confidence I've got playing characters on stage.

TW: Yes. So performing on the stage can give you more confidence.

RF: Oh, very much so! Yes! I mean, I think... I have done quite a lot of drama in schools - drama workshops - and I think... I mean, in fact I wrote a paper once when I was living in North - in East - Yorkshire, which went to all 22 secondary school headmasters and mistresses because I was running... I was Director of a youth theatre at that time in that area, the East Riding County Youth Theatre. And I was also made drama adviser for Humberside, which was a new big county. I felt very strongly that the value of creative drama for all children - not just people who wanted to be actors, but... for two reasons. One reason, it gave them a sense of fun, and people having fun tend to be much easier to teach in other subjects: Mathematics, French, Chinese - anything, you know. It's a very useful... Drama can be a very useful tool - drama workshop - in getting over interpersonal difficulties, learning subject difficulties, social difficulties, all sorts of things. It's hard actually to convince academics sometimes. Because they say no, learning mathematics or something is... 'we can't waste time with drama'. I think they are wrong because if you do the right drama it can actually put people in a frame of mind in which they learn much quicker.

TW: Yes. You joined the RADA in 1963?

RF: Yes, I think yes. That's right.

TW: And you started academic drama there?

RF: Did I start?

TW: Academic drama.

RF: Academic, did you say? It's not an academic course and this is actually another thing. In nowadays, there is a big change between when I was in RADA in '63 to '65 and drama schools today - RADA may be the exception because it's very rich - but in order to get funding, drama schools have had to pretend that they are a university BA course. This is rubbish...

TW: [laughs]

RF: It's nothing whatsoever to do with drama. Academia is for critics, writers, directors possibly, but not for actors. Acting is a gut business, it's emotions, and it's conflict of emotions. And actually if you do it too academically, you have to get rid of that academic approach to a part or a play. I think you know it's all about money. Drama schools today can't get funding unless they are a BA course and that forces them into all sorts of ridiculous exam and things.

TW: Yes. So could you be able to tell me a little bit about your training in RADA?

RF: Absolutely. Can I just say one other thing about the last question we were talking about, the question about academia in drama?

TW: Yes.

RF: I've guest-directed. In other words I've been asked to go into a drama school to direct a play and then left. But that was one drama school, which very sadly is now closed because it was a very good school. It was called the Webber Douglas Academy. It is now no more; it was privately owned and then it was sold to Central School, and has now disappeared.

TW: When did you direct there?

RF: I didn't go there, but it was during the period after I had left RADA - some time after I left RADA, I think it would probably be in the eighties? I'm very bad on dates. But the point of the story is that I was asked back about seven times to direct plays with straightforward drama students. But once I went back there and the principal had me in his office and he said, 'This time I've got a university one year graduate course, and I want you to knock stuffing out of them'. And the thing is, it wasn't unkind... but the point is they all came with good degrees, sometimes very very clever degrees and they were approaching text from a very academic point of view. And that is wrong way to approach a text. For example... I mean when I get a new script, I disappear from sight from my friends, I will go into a room by myself quietly - no music, no nothing - and I will just read the play. And I just... My first feeling; my instinctive, intuitive [sniffs] smell of the character is actually the most important thing one gets. And that is emotional, that is a gut feeling and afterwards you can start intellectualise if you want. But the important thing is the emotion.

TW: Emotion is quite important.

RF: Sorry. Now you are asking about RADA.

TW: Yes.

RF: And the training.

TW: Yes.

RF: Well, I absolutely loved RADA. Drama school... I would say any good drama school is tough. If it's well run, it's tough. Because the hard thing is not just the technical side of being able to do things physically very cleverly, or manipulating your voice or your body or whatever. It's not just that. It's getting to know yourself, accepting yourself. Because until you actually...

[Interruption]

RF: The tough side of a drama course I think is learning to look in the mirror and be honest about what you see there. Because metaphorically, you have to really strip naked, you've got to go down to the bare, clean blackboard and then start drawing pictures on it. You can't be covering up metaphorically or hide in corners of your character. You have to see and accept and then build on that. And that can be hard.

TW: Except for that, what were you doing there? I mean, in RADA.

RF: Well, the drama course is very varied. I mean, it's not just a question of getting a part in a play and playing it, by no means. It's a lot of physical work. Learning how to use your body to best advantage - to the best advantage of the character that you are playing - because different characters have a different way of using their bodies. Also the voice, a lot of voice work... I mean, the single most important thing for an actor is the voice, is the word. And how you use your voice, how you breathe, how you produce a good tone - the best tone you are able to, how you are able to adapt it for different types of character. There's a lot of voice work and a lot of physical work. And then, there's a lot of interpretation. Because frankly, it doesn't matter much what the actor feels, it's what the actor makes the audience feel that counts. And you can be going mad, going through absolute torture, crying and screaming and shouting and the audience frankly they can just sit there and say 'Well, what the hell's all this about?', you know.

TW: Yes.

RF: On the other hand, you can be doing a long speech and really thinking about the shopping list, but putting it across in a way that the audience are very moved. Actually I don't say literally thinking of the shopping list because the other thing that you have to learn is concentration. As you see, there was an interruption with a voice outside a little while ago and I allowed myself to be thrown, so my concentration wasn't very good at that point. But had I been playing a character, [snaps fingers] the character would have been dead for that moment.

TW: Yes. Did you have eye contact with your audience when you were performing on the stage?

RF: Well occasionally you do, it depends. On the whole - one would say 90% of the time, no, you don't. I mean, if you are talking to the audiences, you will tend to probably get their eye level, but go just away from them. Because if you actually transfix some body, it's a bit nerve-wracking, for the person who's being transfixed. But you have to make it look if you are talking to... if it's that sort of play.

TW: Yes.

RF: But I mean, they talk about the fourth wall – in an old... many places don't have a formal set now but I mean if you go to see a play by Oscar Wilde, or Sheridan, or something like this - or Somerset Maugham - very likely it will take place in a drawing room or what-have-you. And the set may very well be what we call a 'box set', with three sides. But obviously one side is open because your audience look in.

TW: Yes!

RF: But you have to perform as if there is a fourth wall.

TW: And did you win the Jenny Laird Prize at RADA?

RF: Yes, indeed, the Jenny Laird Prize.

TW: Can you tell me something about it?

RF: Well. It was really nice for them to give it to me. It was for "distinction in a minor role".

TW: In a minor role?

RF: And I mean, the major prizes at RADA were things like the gold medal and the silver medal and this that and the other... [laughs] And I didn't get that, but there's a saying which is usually used to encourage actors who've got a small part in a play: 'There are no small parts, only small actors', and it's very very true. I mean, you can have a part which comes on with a tea tray and says, "Madam, the tea is served" and go. And it's got to be done perfectly. And that is a small part, but if you get a good actor doing it, it would be a part people appreciate for what it's worth - not more than it's worth, but for what it's worth.

TW: What was your part in this play?

RF: Well funnily enough, it was in a Chekhov play, and the play I'm doing at the moment is actually Tennessee William's take on Chekhov, a rewrite. It was the part of Rode in The Three Sisters...

[Interruption]

RF: Yes it was a part in The Three Sisters called Rode, and he was a little army officer, young army officer who was in love with one of the girls and couldn't express himself.

TW: What happens in the course at RADA?

RF: When I was there it was two and half years, it's now three. But at the beginning of the course, they don't let anybody see your work. They pull you apart. And at the end of a year, you feel you're worse then you were than you were when you went. You went thinking you were rather good. And after a year you think you are absolute rubbish and then they have to build you up again. So there is a building-up process in which you start to play scenes from plays or half a play or whatever, but only internally - the public are not allowed to come to see you. And it's only in your last term or two terms that you start being given parts to perform in front of the general public. I was quite lucky and I had a part - one of the parts I was given I can't remember which one it was - but the director saw me... but an outside director came in and saw me in this part and asked me if I would like to join his repertory company, which was starting work five days after I left drama school.

TW: Wow!

RF: That was fantastic. I immediately had 13 months work, playing half a dozen different plays, two Leads, four supporting parts and stage managing as well. So I got a very good feel.

TW: What's the name of the company?

RF: Ah! It's wonderful, a very romantic company. It's called Century Theatre, which now has a posh brick-and-mortar theatre by Lake Derwentwater, Keswick in Cumbria. But when I was there, it was still a Caravan theatre, which again was very romantic really because an engineer and I think two directors—the engineer was called John Ridley and one of the director was Wilfred Harrison, and I think he was from Sheffield. And there was, I think, another director and I can't remember who it was, but they started this project and the idea was to take theatre to some of the smaller towns in the Northeast and West of England, which were economically poor and which didn't have a theatre. And the idea was a good one. They built a Caravan Theatre, in other words, three of the

Caravans butted up side to side and then cantilevered into a sort of 25 degree angle and formed a 225 seat, covered theatre, which is rather rudely known as the tin box.

TW: Oh, yes.

RF: In fact, when the rain came, you couldn't hear yourself speak on the stage because the rain hit the tin roof.

TW: Yes! [laughs]

RF: But the other Caravans used... they had two rooms, a door in the middle, for members of the company. And this long chain of Caravans, when you finished in one town was dragged by a kind of steam engine thing to the next town and then set up in the next town and we played. And it was a clever idea, because not only did we bring immediate drama, but also the local councils had given a very small amount of money each time we went. And so every time we went back, we were given more money and the company eventually was given proper funding in half a dozen different towns in the North. I can't remember them all, but Keswick now has a proper brick and mortar Theatre. So has the Duke's Theatre Lancaster, so has whatever the theatre is called in Bolton. And I think there was a number of places - they never had theatre, and they still wouldn't have theatre if it hadn't been for the Century Theatre introducing it. It was very romantic, it was lovely.

TW: So, you really liked it.

RF: Yes.

TW: Can you tell me your first impression of the people who worked with you in that company, in the Century Theatre?

RF: In the Century Theatre?

TW: Yes.

RF: Well, of course after you've been in theatre a long time, you get to spot and analyse different types. Possibly in a more critical way. It was all new and fresh and a completely different world from one I'd ever been used to. [pause] Theatre people on the whole are very bright... I mean, I don't mean necessarily intellectually bright, but sparky and I enjoyed that. I think also in theatre you find there are moments of tension. You know, you have to learn how to control your emotions, really. I mean I'm talking about personally, off stage. Because, you know, it's very easy to damage the atmosphere - working atmosphere - and it's very hard to rebuild it sometimes. I mean, I have... I can think of people in the theatre who don't work because they make life difficult,

particularly today when time is money. You can't afford to have sort of temperament...No. So I think... yes... no, I found the people— I didn't see the faults. I was rather starry-eyed when I got there, I thought it was all very nice... There are undercurrents in theatre, it's a difficult job to make a living at, and I'm sorry to say that there are number of people who will kill to get a job or to undermine somebody else.

TW: Really?

RF: Oh, I'm afraid so. But you don't always know it's happening. All I can say is that the company I am working for at the moment is absolutely delightful. Everybody is very talented and nobody... everyone is trying to make everybody else better, which is how it should be. But it's not always like that.

TW: The competition was so fierce there.

RF: Yes. I mean sometimes, you know the competitive thing and also this ego comes into it. You have to have certain amount of ego to... You've got to believe in yourself to go on the stage at all and dare to say, 'Look at me'! But if the ego gets too big it can be the most destructive emotion - oh, I don't think ego is an emotion, the most destructive characteristic, nasty characteristic. And I'm afraid, you know, that the... as I say actors are prone to ego and sort of... people sometimes get really carried away. You can see it; everybody can see it, it's perfectly obvious. Particularly, it's not always... I was going to say 'the more important the job, the more they are likely to be puffed up'.

TW: Was there much of a hierarchy in the company?

RF: Yes. Oh definitely! There still is, definitely. You get people who in a hierarchical position, so to speak, who pretend they're frightfully sort of democratic and down with everybody else, but they're not really. And I think it does depend very much indeed. It depends on the part. I mean, you know, you may be playing King Lear and you do need to be looked after, it's a hell of a part to play, you know. I mean I've got a lovely part in this, but it's a relatively small part, it's a supporting part - it's the part of Sorin, it's a very very nice part - but I'm well aware of the fact that there are three or four other actors, who've got - four other actors in particular - who have the leads, and one must try to make things easy for them, support them - what a supporting actor is. You need it; it's a nerve-wracking business. But the greatest actors, I mean people I can think of... First name that comes to mind is Paul Scofield, who is dead. Everybody loved Paul Scofield. Very humble, great humility. And now I think of it, actually Anthony Hopkins - a living actor - he has great humility, I think. And there are many others who are great actors. They don't push it at all. They just... I think the best performances - the most profound performances, I think, come from people with humility. Although in some parts, they require a really thick-skinned egotist to be able to put it across.

TW: OK, before this interview you told me that you have much experience in repertory theatres in several cities.

RF: Oh, yes, absolutely. I think that the theatre I just came into - because I was just at the tail-end - sadly, has all but disappeared. The principles are revered and remembered, but the physical situation has gone. I mean, for instance, there were tremendous economic cuts in the eighties, and hundreds of regional theatres closed. Forever.

TW: Oh, what a pity!

RF: Well, it is a tragedy, because this was the training ground, the place where actors cut their teeth on their craft. Some of them were not very good, but the fact is you would have work for a year, maybe two years, and you'd be asked to play some parts that were very unsuitable, but it stretched your imagination and your horizons. And you learnt how you could relate to an audience, how you behaved on the stage. You learnt the craft; you learnt the job. And you see today, you see really talented students coming out of drama school. They've got nowhere to go. Maybe they go into a television series like *Casualty* or something like that. Well, that's very nice for them, they get some money in the pocket and a bit of celebrity if you like - I hate the word celebrity, but it gets some leverage into getting something else. But what they do after that? Very likely - because it's television - they are taken on for their looks, and acting is about more than looks. And when the looks go, when the first blush of youth has gone from the cheek, they [are] just spat out like a pip and then the next lot brought in. And sadly there isn't anywhere for them to go and work for two years.

But I was very lucky, because I had the Century Theatre immediately I left RADA. That was thirteen months. I was then asked to go to Manchester and worked with Braham Murray who now of course subsequently got the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester. I then had a slight - shall we say "artistic dip". I was working, but it was not such a good job. But it was fun and I worked on Plymouth Hoe for Christmas in a little tiny theatre called The Hoe Theatre, played a Prince with red cheeks in a children's play for Christmas. But then while I was there, I got this letter from someone I never even met or heard of. And his name was Peter Dews, alas dead, now; he died prematurely, heart attack when he was director of the Chichester Festival.

TW: I'm sorry to hear that.

RF: And he was going to the National Theatre. And unfortunately he had this dreadful heart attack, and never really did anything except West End plays, where he sat at the back and said to Dame This or Sir Somebody That 'Well, do what you like, dear.', you know, which was a shame. But Peter wrote to me and he said I was to forgive him for writing out of the blue, a complete stranger, but he'd seen me performing in Manchester and would I like to join his new company at the Birmingham Rep. Well the new company at the Birmingham Rep included Michael Gambon, Brian Cox, Anna Calder-Marshall, oh all sorts of people - Alec McCowan, Richard Chamberlain, it was an incredible company. And I was there for two years. And Peter was a very, very good director; very hard, very amusing. He was well known for having a whipping boy in the company. You just prayed it wasn't going to be your turn to be whipped because he was very severe... Could be very severe, but I learnt more from him almost than anybody else. He was great. I was in Birmingham for two years; I came to West End with them and played Corin in a very much acclaimed production of *As You Like It* at the Vaudeville Theatre.

TW: As You Like It is a play of Shakespeare?

RF: That's right!

TW: And it was directed by Peter, right?

RF: Yes. Peter Dews.

TW: Yes, you mentioned it.

RF: Who as I said is, alas, dead... Oliver Ford-Davis was in it, all sorts of people in it, Brian Cox. I had a very lucky start. I think probably about that time? [pause] The chronology, I'm not sure of. But it would've been in the seventies. Yes, it must have been - I can tell you exactly; it was in 1970. My agent at the time was at a first night at the West End, and he found himself, by accident, sitting next to an extremely nice senior BBC television producer called Barry Letts, who sadly died a few months ago. Barry was an actor, director, writer and at the time we are speaking of, in 1970 was the producer of Doctor Who.

TW: Oh, yes! You also acted in it.

RF: And my agent said to Barry, 'Are you casting at the moment' and Barry said, 'Yes', 'Are you looking for a young male actor, by any chance?', and Barry said yes, and my agent said, 'What's the part?'. This is an extraordinary story, but Barry said, 'Well, actually we want a young man for love interest. We've got the girl - it was Katy Manning - and we are looking for someone like Richard Franklin. [laughs]

TW: Oh! [Laughs]

RF: And my agent said, 'I represent him'. [Laughs] I mean, it was extraordinary! And so Barry, at 8 o'clock at night in the theatre - in the interval - he said to David, my agent, 'Get Richard to come and see me at 9:30 tomorrow morning'. And my agent rang me in the interval from the theatre in the West End. He said, 'Get down to the BBC and see Barry tomorrow morning'.

TW: Wow, so good!

RF: And I got on well with him and we had three interviews. At one of which... I had fashionably long hair that time, and I was playing a young army officer and Barry leant forward in the desk. He brushed my hair aside and jested: 'Oh, good, you've got ears!'

TW: [Laughs]

RF: But [pause] I mean, it's that sort of significant about theatre because it's so much luck. They always say that if you're in the right place at the right time.

TW: Meet the right guy.

RF: And meet the right guy, then maybe it'll happen for you.

TW: So you are so lucky.

RF: So it was absolute luck. It could've been anyone. But it's a bit frightening, that. There was one actor... I direct as well and one play I directed, there was a young actor in it, who was very good. I can't remember... we had a conversation and he had auditions or an audition coming up and I said, 'That sounds good'. And he said, 'Well, no, I can't do it because I don't want to leave London'. So I said 'Well, that's ridiculous, you must. You've got to be free. If it's a good part, particularly in the early stages of your career, you take what you get and you go wherever'. He said, 'I can't, because my girl friend's an opera singer' [both laugh] 'and she is not doing too well at the moment. And so I've got to pay for the flat'. And he was working, I think, in Dunhills at the time. So I said, 'Well, you've made a decision. Very noble, but it's one thing or the other. Either you go for your career or your private life takes over'. And the awful thing is that he is still working in retail, a very nice guy, very talented guy. But he has never been free to move. So it can be a lonely business. I mean, you can be married. You know how many theatre marriages break up. It's not a good profession if you want a family life. I mean, if you are very wealthy and successful, you can take your wife or if the wife is successful, she can take her husband and the nanny and the children and the dog, just go around the world, but not many people can do that.

TW: [Laughs] Yes, actually. So you went to the West End in the 1970s?

RF: That was the first time. Yes. I then... I was there again I think it would be probably in the eighties. I did Same Time Next Year at the Prince of Wales Theatre. That was... Actually, I was actually taken on as understudy, which I don't particularly want to do because understudies are terribly useful, but nobody ever wants the understudy to go on, and when they do, they don't want them to be as good as the principal. You know, it's a hiding to nothing. But on this particular occasion, the actor involved was Michael Crawford, and I had a very powerful big agent who gave me a tip-off that in fact he was coming out of the show after a couple of months: he was only going to do it for a couple of months and get the show going and the he was going somewhere else and I would take over. So that's what I did.

TW: So can you tell me more about him?

RF: Oh, yes! I mean, Michael's very talented indeed. I was going to say, 'as an actor'... I would call him an entertainer more than an actor, in a way. I would say, he is very much Michael Crawford. Whatever he does... But I think that might be unfair; some of his early films, like *The Knack* and so on were fantastic. I know he was acting in that. But of course, he is not necessarily easy to work with. I mean, I got on very well with him, but he's... I think what people call him, the word they use: "perfectionist". And if people don't come up to his standards he doesn't want to know about it. Well, I mean, fair enough, we are all looking for perfection, but he... having done that, of course, he then learnt...

[Interruption]

RF: You are asking more about Michael Crawford. He had this great development in his career really because he then moved into musicals and he was not a singer. Michael was not a singer at all. But now I think the general public will know of him as a singer.

TW: Yes, that's it.

RF: He was actually taught to sing by a very well known singing coach - now dead, everyone seems to be dead we're talking about! - Iain Adams. And he did his - he learnt his singing in order to do the part in *Barnum*, which really launched his singing career. But then you see something like that led on to *The Phantom of the Opera*, which is a musical you probably know. But I mean Michael's amazing. He wasn't just singing *Barnum* - have you seen the show?

TW: No.

RF: Well, it's about a Ring Master in the circus. And he had to do all the circus tricks. He was juggling; he was doing low wire, walking and jumping from the stage to the first floor - a level box via a trampoline - quite extraordinary. And that was singing at the same time. I remember I went round to see him afterwards and I said to him, 'Michael, I didn't know you were a circus performer!'

TW: Yes.

RF: And he said he wasn't, he'd learnt it four weeks before the show.

TW: Just four weeks?

RF: Yes.

TW: That's amazing.

RF: Extraordinary. But because he had a very successful television series *Some Mothers Do 'Ave' Em*. And in which he was wonderful. Oh, yes. So that's acting as well. But he did all his stunts in *Some Mothers Do 'Ave' Em*. So I remember when I was taking over from him I had his dressing room and I was in there very near Christmas and they showed on the BBC all his stunts - they had a programme about his stunts. And I sat there and watched it with him. It was fascinating to see him, watching what he had done. My experience with stunts is less glamorous, shall we say! I'm not a stunt man at all. Although I did learn aikido, at the BBC aikido club because it's a non-aggressive judo, as you probably know, converting the other person's attack...

TW: Yes.

RF: ...to defend yourself, and I did that because although I didn't actually do the stunts with the stunt boys on *Doctor Who* - some people called *Havoc*, marvellous crowd, death defying! - although I didn't do the stunts, if someone punched me in the stomach it's no use just sitting there like a pudding! You know, you've got to react. And if you know what they are trying to do, it helps you to help them. No, I mean the stories of my stunts are always disasters actually. They didn't really want one to do them anyway because again, if I'd have got hurt, they could've lost thousands. You know, because the production, all the filming could have been useless or whatever... on the *Green Death*, which was a very popular story - we filmed in Wales. One of our locations was a small new factory which had never been used, in a little place called *Aberbargoyd*. And one of the sequences was me chasing a baddy over this flat roof. And the baddy jumps off the roof and runs away. And I jump off the roof and run after him. But being a very valuable actor, of course, they didn't let me jump off the roof, but what they did was they had me running across the roof, stopping just before the jump. They put a stunt man in my clothes.

TW: OK!

RF: And then he did the jump. Then I picked it up, jumping on the mat and running away. So I did nothing brave or clever at all, but I tried to do it very well. And when it got to the bit about me, just, putting my clothes on again, jumping on the mat and running away, I thought 'I'll do this really well!'. And I did it too well, and I split the trousers right up the back and it's a brand new factory with plate glass doors. And there were about 200 people watching the filming and I had scarlet underpants on, and the audience, the people who were watching saw the reflection in these doors. Of course, not only did my trousers have to be mended but the shot had to be redone.

TW: So do you have such an experience when you performed on the stage? The similar experience.

RF: Funny things that have happened on the stage?

TW: Yes.

RF: Well I'm not very good at funny stories but in Birmingham Rep it was actually, it was a play by James Saunders called *After the Rain*. And I was playing a very authoritarian character, and it was a centre for the rehabilitation of criminals. And one of the things that my character did was to hypnotise everybody. So I was on the stage, with a quite long – sort of couple of pages speech. At the very opening, curtain goes up, I'm there, very sort of authoritarian type. And the whole company were sitting on the stage behind me, the prisoners. I snapped my fingers and they were all in a trance. And having done my speech, I left, went down to my dressing room and was just about to have a glass of lemonade, and someone came rushing down, and said, 'For goodness sake, you've forgotten to de-hypnotise them!'. And there were all these people, they couldn't do anything, because they were hypnotized, so they just sat there. So I had to come back on again and go [snaps fingers] then the play could continue. That's not really very funny. But it is what happened actually.

TW: Well, when were you first involved in the theatre, in your first play?

RF: Well the first was Century Theatre.

TW: Yes. And what is your first part in the Century Theatre? I mean in the play and your part.

RF: Oh, I see. [pause] Funnily enough, I think it was Chekhov, I think did two short plays. One was called *The Bear*, which Chekhov described as "scabby little sketch" and I think I probably agree with him actually. It was a man with a toothache, I don't think I was very good in it. And the other thing we did was - the other half of the bill - was *The Woman of Paris*. I can't remember who that's by. I think I was a little bit better in that. I think that was the actual first production we did. But one of the productions I enjoyed very much there - this is about half way through the season, I think - was *Maria Martin*, or *Murder in the Red Barn*, a Victorian melodrama. That to me is the play that I associate with my first theatre job. It was absolutely lovely. It was great fun. I played a very dodgy fairground operative. I don't know... I can't remember what sort of trick he was playing on the public, but he was pretty dodgy, and he was called *Flat Catcher*. And I got a little cat at that time because actually I decided I'd really spoken enough to the actors. It was a very sort-of tight-knit company and I thought I would rather have a cat to say bad things to rather than say it to other actors. And I called my cat *Flat Catcher*, which is a very silly name because you can't call 'Flat Catcher' very easily out of a caravan window! But the *Guardian* reviewed the play, and they described me as looking like *Sam Willer*, a Charles Dickens character. So actually the cat was known as *Sam*, it was easier.

TW: You really liked that production.

RF: Yes, it was great fun. It was very colourful.

TW: Can you tell me more details about your experience on the stage when you play that?

RF: Any particular sort of type of experiences you had in mind?

TW: I mean, how you contacted with your colleagues? Contacted with the others who worked for the company?

RF: Working with other actors? Yes. I mean that's always a difficult thing, because obviously it's the duty of every actor to make the most of his or her part, and there may well be conflicts of interests. You have to learn how to work with people, and give-and-take. Many actors are very good at give-and-take, some are less good at it, and it's when they're less good at it, that trouble starts really.

TW: How can you manage?

RF: There is from time to time trouble because you know, the emotions are very sort of high peak and the tension is tremendous, I mean it's a nerve-wracking business. You really expose yourself on stage. But no, sort of the best and worst relationships happen on stage I think. Myself, I think it's all about giving rather than taking. Like an interview really, we've been listening to each other, which for me is making this interview very pleasant to have. But if you don't listen to the other actor on stage, you're not going to act very well yourself, because you're virtually doing a sort of one man show, and actually, it's much harder to do that because if you can take from the other person, acting is actually more about reacting.

TW: Yes.

RF: And going back to something to what you said - you asked me earlier on - about the application of theatre, you see this is where I think theatre has a totally universal application in society, particularly in the 21st century, where everyone is glued to a video or a Playstation or something like that - the internet - the contact is vicarious. You could be eating a banana, while somebody is doing their best to entertain on the screen. Whereas in real life you can't do that, you have to respond to the other people, which I think means in real life when you put the Playstation away and you go out into the street, a lot of people are not able to interact. It's very dangerous, apart from anything else. They don't know how to defuse a difficult situation; they don't know how to make the most of a nice situation. People have - the internet or whatever it is has produced sort of a thin invisible wall between people.

TW: Comparing with the theatre today, do you think there are much changes of the theatre during the period of I am quite interested in.

RF: Yes, absolutely I do. I mean, I think this is why it's rather an interesting period you've chosen, because - right up until the eighties actually, a bit beyond your period - there were still repertory theatres, and this is where all the sort of rough edges are knocked off. Very talented people, no doubt, from Drama School, but you've got to learn the business. And it's a business which has gone on for three or four hundred years in Britain, which is why we have such very high standard of theatre, because the skills and the traditions are passed on by experience. But if there isn't a theatre to perform in, you can't pass on the skill; you can only learn it theoretically at drama school, with other people who don't know either. For instance you can see so often now in theatre, if you go to the theatre, you can't hear actors speak, even in the National Theatre. They don't project because an awful lot of actors have never had the opportunity of having to project. All they've done is radio, television, film. And if you project in the wrong way there, it sounds absolutely dreadful. So people have got used to being behaviorist, and sort of mumble and grunt and they haven't got the voice, either it's a voice that doesn't endure, or it's one that doesn't carry. And I said earlier on, I mean, the voice - the word - is the basis, that is the essence. If you speak well, I don't mean [Makes a chesty sound] I don't mean a silly theatrical voice. But if you can make the most of the words, and interpreting words, it's the important thing actually.

[Interruption]

TW: Do you have any particular feeling about your life on the stage?

RF: Very stupid choice. [Laughs] No! It's wonderful and I'm very pleased that I decided to do it. I remember, I mean it's a big decision to make, especially if you come from a non-theatrical family. And I talked to two very established actors, when I was trying to make up my mind. One of them was Susan Hampshire and the other was John Standing. They are both still working, still very well-known. At the time they didn't know each other. And they both said the same thing, 'Richard, if you don't... it's obvious you want to do it' - you know, I woke up one morning, 'This is what I want to do!' - 'if you don't get it out of your system, you know, you'll take to drink at forty. You might be successful, you might be a failure, but at least you tried', so I am very glad I did. The trouble is that you get stuck in it, and you think 'Maybe the phone's going to ring tomorrow and there's going to be sort of fame and wealth and...' The chances are it probably won't. So economically, you have to sort of grind on, I mean, you might be very lucky, and suddenly sort of shoot through television or films [and that leverage enables a real actor to do what he really likes - live theatre on a stage with a live audience.].

[Interruption]

RF: No, I mean it's hard but the joyous moments are tremendous. It's a family. That's another of the sad things, you see, that all these repertory theatres have gone, because you would join a family, effectively, for a year. Now if you are lucky, you will get six weeks with people. Because it's the sort of profession where you are working when other people are playing. You are in the North of England and your friends are in the south. It can be quite lonely, and relationships can be brief. And therefore to be in a

company is a tremendous joy. It is like having a family. And that happens less and less, because it is the nature of the business.

TW: And this will be my last question. Can you, maybe, comment on the theatre? Between 1945 and 1968. I mean the development of the theatre. Can you make some comments on it.

RF: Well, yes, I mean, the change in society has been absolutely colossal. Probably the biggest ever in history, as we know it, I would say between the fifties and the 2010, you know. And art will reflect as well as mould what goes on, but principally, I think it reflects the change in society, and the change in theatre has been very big. Technically, I mean, we've got far more of the television, video, and films. The technical side has developed absolutely enormously. But also people's lifestyle and habits has developed enormously. I mean, there was in the beginning of your period, you got a very social theatre. People dressed, still, to go into the dress circle. And it was very much a night out, and might very well see friends there. It's quite different now. And people go in jeans, you don't necessarily expect to see friends, the subjects are different, the style is different and the taste is different. The principles are the same. And the ability to - the techniques required to be an actor are fundamentally the same, though if you are working in the technical media of television or film, or radio, obviously, you modify. But the essential business of theatre is creating character and relationship between character. And the thought processes and the emotional processes are unchanging, I would say, really.

TW: OK. Thank you so much.

RF: Not at all. It's a pleasure to have talked to you.