

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Norman Rimmell – interview transcript

Interviewer: Alec Patton

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Theatre-goer. A Taste of Honey; Brendan Behan; farce; Good King Charles' Golden Days; Old Vic; opera; pantomime; Theatre Workshop; Unity Theatre; variety.

AP: Recording. All right, so this is Alec Patton interviewing Norman Rimmell on the 28th August. Right, so Norman just to begin let's just start out with your early memories of the theatre, sort of when you first became interested in the theatre.

NR: I first became, I suppose conscious of the theatre, at the age of about four or five. My father was a member of a local youth organisation which put on annual pantomimes, and they rehearsed in my house.

AP: How fantastic.

NR: And I can remember one particular Christmas, I can't remember the name of the pantomime, but they had some really terrifying costumes. Someone was dressed up with a skeleton's costume, and someone else had a very realistic and ferocious looking wolf's head. And these props were stored in the porch-way – hallway - of our house. And I remember my parents being out on one occasion and I was too frightened to go past them, because the sight of these things was, to me as a child, was terrifying. I didn't actually appear in these performances, but I've no memory of actually seeing them. So that was before the war. That was about 1938/39, something like that.

AP: And where was that?

NR: That was in Dagenham, in Essex. After that I suppose my next memory of the theatre was actually during the war when an aunt took me to, again to a pantomime, at the Coliseum Theatre in London, which is now the English National Opera. This must have been about 1942/43, at the height of the blitz, but no-one seemed to bother. And the performances went on. And I can't, to be honest, remember the name of the pantomime, but I remember going quite distinctly.

Also during the war – my father was away in the forces – my mother took me to the nearest theatre which was... well one of the nearest theatres, which was the East Ham Palace. In those days most suburbs of London had their own variety theatre. There must have been a couple of dozen of them situated all round the suburbs. And they would

put on acts, sort of concert type acts. People would be singing solos or duets, and there would be magicians, there would be various sort of comedians and so on. I remember being actually quite bored of these performances. I remember at the side of the stage they would have a number that kept coming up saying Act 1, Act 2, Act 3, Act 4, and I was sort of counting them, seeing how many it was going to be until the end. [Laughs] So that wasn't very interesting.

I suppose my next memory after that would be just after war. And my father came home from the forces, and he took up his interests... he was always a great one for joining local community groups. And they would organise trips to the theatre in London. I mean, as you probably know, Dagenham is an eastern suburb.

AP: Yes.

NR: And it was quite easy to get in. And they would have coach parties going to the various theatres. So we would go often as a group – 20 or 30 people would land up at various places. One I particularly remember, there was a Unity Theatre which was not far from here actually – Mornington Crescent. I don't think it's any... I don't think it's there any more. It was an amateur theatre, but of very high standard. And I remember seeing Robert Tressell's Ragged Trousered Philanthropist, which you probably know of, which is still performed today. This Unity Theatre was in fact a very left-wing theatre, as you know something about it I expect, yes.

AP: Yes, yes.

NR: And in addition to Ragged Trousered Philanthropist I remember seeing a bit later on – this was probably when I was about 14/15, no older than that, in my later teens – Nekrassov, a comedy actually Jean-Paul Sartre. I mean he's not noted for his comedies. But this was at the height of the Cold War, and it was... the subject was a sort of espionage. It was a kind of a spoof espionage comedy, actually taking the rise out of the American Intelligence, and the French Intelligence in particular, because Jean-Paul Sartre was French. I remember that being very interesting. I quite enjoyed that.

AP: Yes. And so when was that?

NR: That would have been... actually that was later. That was in the early fifties. That would have been about 1954, yes, yes, about 1954. And I also saw at the Unity Theatre another production, I can't remember what it was called, but it was... the subject was the colour bar in the States – the racism in the States at that particular time. And I remember being quite impressed by that. And also... and another one played there which was based in... yes, it was on the trade unionists who were transported to Australia in the early 1800s, from down in the South West. I can't remember the name of the place now, but it was quite a well known incident in British history. These people were sentenced for trying to form a trade union, and they were transported to Australia. But after they'd been there a couple of years their case was reviewed and they were brought back again. And a play was made out of that. And that was also at the Unity

Theatre. So you can see the kinds of things that they put on. They all were quite left-wing and political.

AP: Yes. And were the coach parties going to the Unity Theatre?

NR: Yes, yes, yes. All these...except the last one, the Nekrassov, I went there on my own with a couple of friends. But the other performances, they were all coach parties. I was trying to think... oh and the coach parties also went to other variety theatres. I remember going to... I think it was the New Cross Empire. That was just after the war.

AP: What did you think of those? Were you still not...?

NR: When I was getting into my teens I enjoyed them a bit more, yes, yes. I mean when I was 15/16, something like that, I enjoyed them a bit more, yes, yes. So they were my earliest memories of the theatre, yes.

AP: So the coach parties, they had quite a range to the shows they went to.

NR: Yes, they did, they did, they did. Yes, yes. I mean they were... it was a very working class area, Dagenham, as you probably know. But the people who went they were all very interested in the theatre. I mean Dagenham, a vast council estate, but council estates in those days were rather different I think than they are today, because most people in those days did not own their own houses. Most people actually lived in rented accommodation. So you had a far wider range of people living in council estates then than you would now.

AP: Sure, yes.

NR: I would guess nowadays most people who live on council estates are right of the bottom of the social pile. But that wasn't the case fifty or sixty years ago.

AP: Right. And was it... so you... coach parties went to the Unity Theatre, went to variety theatres, do you remember any other theatres or shows people...?

NR: Yes, we also went to Sadler's Wells. And I saw my first opera... Sadler's Wells... then it was based near Islington. And we saw... goodness, my memory's going... Die Fledermaus, which is a very good introduction for a teenager to the opera.

AP: Yes. And what did you think of it?

NR: I thoroughly enjoyed that. In fact, I had already heard some of the music on record before I went. Because I remember as we went in, and we were listening to the overture, whispering to someone, 'Oh, I've got that music at home'. And saying, 'Shhh, you don't talk during the opera.' you know. [Laughs] I was about 15 at the time I suppose, something like that so that was quite enjoyable, yes. So that was an introduction to the opera as well.

AP: Yes. And did you ever go to the Old Vic do you remember?

NR: I went to the Old Vic once. And this was in my early twenties. I think it was *Midsummer Night's Dream*, but I can't remember who was in it. I must have been about 21/22 at the time. That was would have been about mid fifties yes, yes.

AP: So going from... now your father... was it your father who done the pantomimes?

NR: Yes, yes.

AP: And did he go back to performing and directing?

NR: Well as an amateur yes he... and in fact was producer for an amateur drama group... again it was a cooperative drama group... no it wasn't, it wasn't cooperative. It was a drama group that was organized by the local council. It was a local authority thing. So it was a kind of a youth club – a local authority youth club. And he was producer for this club. And he produced a number of sort of light plays and light comedies, and so on. I didn't take any part in these actually. But I can remember sometimes they would come to our house to rehearse and so on.

AP: So that takes us up to... we're now in the early fifties...

NR: Yes.

AP: ...going to see the Sartre at the Unity Theatre. And so at that point you were what, sort of late teens?

NR: I was late teens/early twenties, yes, yes. And when I was 18 actually I enrolled in the Air Force, did two years National Service. But I was stationed at West Drayton, which is just the other side of London, for two years. So it was a very convenient place for getting into London. And although you weren't paid very much – 28 shillings a week, would you believe it, £1.40 a week! – but it was sufficient. In those days theatres were very... quite cheap. And I never had any financial problems in going to the theatre.

And at that time, I suppose my main memories of that particular period – this would have been 1951 to 1953 – going to Sadler's Wells quite a lot. You could go to Sadler's Wells in those days for the opera for two shillings, which was ten pence – a good seat

for ten pence. And I went, I suppose, three or four times a year, and saw you know the main pieces of the operatic repertoire over that period.

Also used to go down to the theatre at Windsor. They had a theatre there that specialized in comedies, particularly Arthur Pinero. Are you familiar with Arthur Pinero?

AP: Sure, yes.

NR: These early 20th Century farces he used to put on. And they were extremely well done. And also there was another theatre at Richmond in Surrey, just outside London, which I think they did a wider range of plays. I can't remember anything that I saw in particular there, but used to go there occasionally. And also as I was in the Air Force we used to get free tickets sometimes for theatres in London. And there was one particular theatre, the Whitehall Theatre, that used to put on the Whitehall Farces. You know remember... you know about these do you?

AP: Yes.

NR: And in particular one called Reluctant Heroes that was all about National Servicemen. And I think I saw that two or three times, because the tickets were free. So that was '52 to '53. And it was at about that time that I started going to the Theatre... yes Theatre Workshop... not Theatre Workshop... was it Theatre Workshop, East... yes...

AP: Yes.

NR: In...

AP: In Stratford East.

NR: In Stratford... Stratford, East London, yes. And when I... the first few times I went there you could count the audience on the fingers of one hand. You'd go in and there would be maybe a half a dozen people in the theatre.

AP: So how did you find out about it?

NR: I can't remember. I can't remember. Of course I lived at Dagenham, and it wasn't far away. But I don't know who first introduced me to Theatre Workshop to be honest. And then sometime, I think about '54/55, Kenneth Tynan who was the drama critic of The Observer, he went to Theatre Workshop and saw... I'm probably telling you things you already know.

AP: That's perfectly all right.

NR: He happened to see a performance of Richard II which he rated very highly. And they were very good. They were a very good company. And after that you couldn't get into the place. So they went from one extreme to the other. You know, before Kenneth Tynan there was nobody there, after that often you'd... well sometimes you'd turn up and you couldn't get in. All the seats were sold, so you had to start booking in advance. So it became very much a sort of what we call a 'yuppie theatre' after that. People came up from the West End; you know, it was the thing to do to go to Theatre Workshop. But we saw lots of productions at Theatre Workshop. And Gerald Raffles who was the manager, I remember him coming to... after the Air Force I went to do a teacher training course at Hounslow, at the other side of London. I remember Gerald Raffles coming across to give us a talk about the theatre.

AP: Oh interesting. Oh excellent! Right and so then we're getting into sort of mid fifties then.

NR: Yes, yes.

AP: And you were presume... and at some point discharged from the Air Force?

NR: Yes, that was 1953, yes.

AP: Yes, and then you went to do teacher training.

NR: I did teacher training after that until... '54 to '56. And after that I was teaching in Hertfordshire, which is quite close by. So I used to get into London you know for the theatre quite a lot, yes.

AP: Sure. And do you remember any particular... any shows in particular from that period – Theatre Workshop or otherwise?

NR: One that sticks out in my mind was seeing Paul Scofield in Hamlet at the Phoenix Theatre. That was about 1954/55. I think all the productions that we saw at Theatre Workshop were first rate. I don't remember being bored by any of them. I can't always remember who the playwrights were. There was Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'Be, that was a musical. I remember seeing that, and that was very good. The Hostage by Brendan Behan.

Brendan Behan was often in the audience. And my wife remembers - I was probably there but I don't remember this - but my wife says she remembers Brendan Behan sitting in the audience and calling out adverse comments to the actors on stage, and being told to shut up by Joan Littlewood. [Laughs] Because I mean, Behan, as you probably know, was often drunk in any case.

AP: Yes.

NR: But the atmosphere at the Theatre Royal was very nice, because they had this... the bar at the interval, and afterwards the actors and the producer, Joan Littlewood, they would come and mix with the audience. And so it was a very informal sort of atmosphere.

AP: Yes. So was it a particularly good bar?

NR: It was just a typical Victorian theatre bar with... I mean have you been to the Theatre Workshop...?

AP: I have, yes.

NR: Yes, so you know. I take it today it's still the same as it was then, I don't know.

AP: I think sort of pretty similar, but as they've built they've changed it a bit I think.

NR: Changed the bar have they?

AP: I think...

NR: I don't know. I don't know. But it was a typical Victorian theatre bar with all the Victorian decoration and so on. Very cozy, very... not particularly big, I mean about twice the size of this room I suppose. Which I mean it's not an enormous theatre is it Theatre Workshop. I suppose it holds about what, 1,000 people at the maximum I would guess.

AP: Yes.

NR: Yes.

AP: And so had you met your wife at this point?

NR: Yes, interesting, I'd met my wife through a drama group.

AP: Oh right.

NR: I wasn't particularly good at acting. I mean... in fact I'm probably the worst actor in the world. But being interested in drama I joined a drama group at Romford in just East London, and my wife was the secretary of the group. And so that's how we met.

AP: Right. Oh excellent!

NR: And I took very minor parts in one or two productions. But I went along out of interest rather than anything else.

AP: Yes. And do you remember any shows you did there?

NR: Yes. Golly, my memory goes and it's the names of them that's the trouble. One particular one, it was a comedy called For Better Or Worse. [Laughs] A domestic comedy and I took the part of a furniture remover. And I think my wife was the producer... no she wasn't the producer, I think she was the stage manager. But she had some role like that. And we produced that actually at the Toynbee Hall in East London. I don't know if you know Toynbee Hall do you?

AP: Yes, slightly.

NR: Yes, Toynbee Hall, it's a community centre I think set up by Arnold Toynbee at the end of the 19th century, in Whitechapel. And they've got a small theatre there. And it was produced there.

AP: Oh fantastic! And so this brings us up to right around the time of Taste of Honey.

NR: Yes. That's right. Yes, that was at Theatre Workshop, yes, yes, yes. And I can distinctly remember the play, partly because the lead – the young homosexual chap – was played by Murray Melvin who my wife knew through the cooperative drama group. She was... this cooperative drama group that we belonged to, it was part of a network of drama groups run by the London Cooperative Society in those days. And Murray Melvin started off as a member of the cooperative drama group in another part of London. So that's how my wife knew him. And Joan Littlewood who was, you know the director at the Theatre Workshop, she sometimes put on weekend drama schools for Co-op. And so my wife met her there. I didn't know the lady, but Joan knew her slightly.

So anyway that's I suppose partly why we remember the Taste of Honey. But I don't remember it being particularly controversial at the time. The program we heard on the radio seemed to suggest that it was central in bringing about a change in the censorship laws, which it may well have been. But I don't remember it being particularly controversial. And we went along and saw it just as another good play that the Theatre Workshop put on. And Shelagh Delaney actually came on the stage.

AP: Oh did she?

NR: Yes, yes, yes. She was obviously at the time about 18 or 19, and she was introduced actually I think by Joan Littlewood on the stage. I think at the end of the performance Joan Littlewood asked her to come up on to the stage.

AP: Right. Was this the first night?

NR: No, it wasn't the first night. In fact we didn't see the first performances, it was a re-run. Now why she was there at the re-run I don't know. Maybe she just happened to be there on that particular occasion. But it was later the same year. I think it was 1958 or about that time. And they put the play on I think in the summer to start with – or was it earlier in the year? Anyway we weren't there. We didn't see the first run. And then it was a re-run that we saw a few months later. And Shelagh Delaney was there. And then I also saw a later play of Shelagh Delaney's *Lion in Love* at the theatre in West London of course, whose name I can't remember. The Sloane... the Sloane... is it...?

AP: The Royal Court.

NR: The Royal Court at Sloane Square, that's right, yes, yes. But after that I've never heard anything more of her, so what she does now I don't know. Has she...?

AP: She does... she's done a fair amount for TV and radio, and a few films.

NR: Yes, yes.

AP: But to my knowledge I'm not aware of any plays for the stage that she's...

NR: No, no, I've not heard of any plays by her since then. But I suppose it was in some ways a groundbreaking play, because few plays were put on in those days about ordinary working class life. I mean that was probably one of the first, and which then went onto the kitchen sink drama, that you know is heard about.

AP: And do you remember the music at all in *A Taste of Honey*?

NR: No, I don't. No. [Laughs] There was music in it was there?

AP: Yes, there's a jazz band just off stage.

NR: Was there? Right, yes.

AP: Now one thing I'm particularly curious about, because Theatre Workshop was known, certainly gets talked about a lot now, for the amount of interaction with the audience. And certainly you mentioned Brendan Behan, one of the famous examples. And also in Taste of Honey at least one of the characters routinely talks to the audience. Was that something that was... did that strike you particularly or did it just...?

NR: It didn't happen very often. To be honest I can't remember it happening, apart from this one incident, quite honestly. Actually you saying, it's just brought back to me the... you were asking just now, how was I first introduced to Theatre Workshop, and now I remember, this was the beginning of 1954 I was in digs at a village called South Ockendon just outside London, and there was a chap staying there who... he was Welsh – he came from South Wales. And he told me about seeing Theatre Workshop before it arrived at Theatre Royal in Stratford. They were a touring company and they... I don't think they had a... they didn't have a particular theatre that they were attached to, but they would tour the villages and towns in Wales, with a coach, putting on one night stands in village halls. And I can remember him telling me about this. So it's possible that it was through him that I was introduced.

AP: Oh right, how interesting.

NR: Yes. And I can remember him telling me that they often would sleep... he must have known these people fairly well, because he said they often used to sleep in their coach. They were all down and outs, and they... and I think when they first started at Theatre Royal at Stratford they used to sleep in the theatre, which you probably know already. And they used it as a place to live, as well as a place to perform, yes. Sorry, anyway...

AP: So were now sort of in the late fifties with The Hostage and Taste of Honey and are there any... and you were involved in amateur theatre at this point.

NR: Yes, only for a short time. That was for about a year or so.

AP: Yes. Did your wife stay?

NR: Well what happened eventually, we moved out to another village further out of London – Horndon-on-the-Hill – which is about 25 miles east of London. And I think at that point – then we were married – and at that point, that's when I think our participation with the amateur theatre group stopped. But we still used to go from Horndon into London, and to the Theatre Workshop for various performances. That would have been right up until 1961 I suppose. Then we moved a bit further out near to Southend, and then our first daughter came along, which meant that we weren't quite so mobile. You know, we couldn't get out quite as much. And eventually, in 1964, we moved up to Lowestoft, which is right out, 100 miles north of London. And so after that we had little contact you know with the theatre, certainly not in London anyway.

AP: Right. But did you start going to the theatre in Lowestoft?

NR: No. [Laughs] No. There is a theatre in Lowestoft, but we've never actually been very often. Our nearest theatre is in Norwich – the Theatre Royal in Norwich. And they have the usual sort of repertoire of mixture of plays, drama, opera, concerts, and so on. A lot of these provincial theatres... yes. But we go... I go now about once every two or three or years to be honest, so not very frequent.

AP: Gotcha. So are there any other shows you want to mention that you particularly remember from the sort of early sixties/late fifties?

NR: Going back a bit further, if I can go back...

AP: Yes, of course.

NR: Going back a bit further, it was actually when I was still at school this was. We were taken... yes, I would have only been about 15 at the time, so it's going right back to the late forties now. We were taken to the... what was called the People's Palace in... You've come across the People's Palace in the Mile End Road, which is now part of I think Queen Mary's College I think. And we were taken to see a performance of Good King Charles's Golden Days by Shaw, which was very good. The whole class was taken by our English teacher, and you know you might perhaps imagine that Shaw is not something that you know most 15 year old boys and girls would be interested in, but we were. We found it... I think all of us you know really enjoyed seeing that. And so that was an introduction to Shaw, which I became quite interested in. And subsequently became, and still am, a member of the Shaw Society actually.

AP: Oh marvellous!

NR: And occasionally go to their meetings. They meet up here in Conway Hall in London. You know about the Shaw Society?

AP: I don't.

NR: You don't, no, no, no. Right, it's Barry Morse. Do you remember Barry Morse the actor...?

AP: Yes.

NR: ...who died just this year – quite odd. He was one of the leading lights in this, and a number of other... I can't remember... a number of other actors who were lesser well known actually keep it going. But I've always been interested in Shaw's plays, but most

of those I've seen on television rather than at theatre. In fact I was trying to think others... I must have seen some other Shaw plays at the theatre, but I can't remember, no. But certainly Good King Charles's Golden Days sticks in my memory as being very entertaining. I can't remember any others, no. But other plays at all of the sixties... I'm trying to think.

AP: There's absolutely no obligation, I just...

NR: No, no, no. I went to so many that they tend to blur actually. I suppose we went to the theatre probably once every four or five weeks you know, over a period of five or six years. But trying to...

AP: And were there other theatres besides Theatre Workshop that you remember particularly going to?

NR: Well I suppose my main memories, apart from Theatre Workshop, were going to Sadler's Wells actually for the opera, because I was quite interested in the opera. But other theatres that we went to... I remember seeing... yes, I remember going to the Aldwych Theatre to see a play called Mr Kettle and Mrs Moon. I can remember this one. It was a J.B. Priestley play, and that was about 1955. Not a play that I don't think you ever hear about today, but a comedy. That was quite interesting. Just trying to think of them as they you know flash through your memory.

AP: And do you remember anything particularly about Mr Kettle and Mrs Moon or just that it was interesting?

NR: It was a comedy. That was all. It was a comedy, a sort of mildly sexual relationships sort of thing. But I can't remember anymore than that, no, no. No I can't honestly remember anything else.

AP: That's absolutely fine.

NR: Is that OK? Right.

AP: That's fantastic. That's really, really... yes, unless anything else that you're burning to say.

NR: I can't think of anything else, no.

AP: Fantastic. I'll stop...