

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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James Severns – interview transcript

Interviewer: Jamie Andrews

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Read other interviews about the first production of Harold Pinter's *The Room* [here](#).

JA: OK, it's the 25th January, 2008. I'm Jamie Andrews, and we're in the Chicago Marriott, Chicago, Illinois, United States.

JS: Fairmount there but... Alright there, whatever. Introduce myself?

JA: Yes.

JS: I'm James Severns in Chicago, talking to Jamie Andrews.

JA: Great. And this is part of the project, the Theatre Archive Project, to do with the first performance of *The Room* in 1957. So Jim, we're going to start off really by looking at how you got to be in Bristol, in 1957, studying there. So can you just look back and tell us a bit about the trajectory that got you there.

JS: Yes, well after I'd gone through college as a midshipman, I took a commission in the Marine Corps. And after serving in Korea, not very long, I was wounded and retired. And went back to... As an undergraduate, even though I was a midshipman, I'd done a lot of theatre at the amateur group there at Purdue University. And after I knew I had to find a new profession I didn't quite know what I wanted to do, but I thought well... after bumming around Europe for about three months I came back and went to graduate school at Indiana to do an MA in theatre.

And there I met John Lavender, who had come over. He was a technician – a stage technician – from the University of Bristol. I got to know him quite well. And John suggested that I might want to go to the... do a year's study at the University of Bristol, which had a drama department. As I understand the first one in the UK. So I went and

wrote to them, and they accepted me for a year as a graduate worker, after I finished my MA...

JA: Can I just ask how... what was John Lavender doing over in Indiana then?

JS: Oh he had... One of the professors there – and I can't remember the man's... Herbert... it's been 50 years. Anyway he'd gone on... Herbert... oh I should know his name, but anyway it may come to me in a moment. Herbert had gone to Bristol as a guest lecturer for a semester, and he met John. And John was the most ingenious fella. He made swords, for example, on his own forge there in Indiana – very ingenious. And I got to know John, and then with him the professor I had that contact at Bristol. That's how I got interested in it.

JA: OK. And whilst at Indiana, were you aware of Bristol and Bristol University, or was it only through this connection with John?

JS: Well no, the only connection was John and the professor.

JA: Right, OK. And just before we move on to you getting to Bristol, you said you were doing your MA in Theatre Studies. Can you just talk a bit about what that meant? Was that contemporary, contemporary American, or the classical tradition?

JS: Well, in the American theatre system at that time, it was fairly general. Actually I did a creative dissertation. I'd written a play, and I produced it and so forth as my thesis. But I had general courses in either history, playwriting, a couple of tech courses, acting and this sort of thing. So it was more or less general in that sense.

JA: OK. And so you wrote and you were accepted to Bristol. So what year would that have been that you went over? Would that have been the academic year starting '56?

JS: '56 it would have been, I believe, yes.

JA: Yes, OK.

JS: And we just got there and the so called Suez Crisis occurred, and so forth so... yes.

JA: Yes. Can you remember your first impressions of Bristol? What you were expecting and how it lived up to it? I mean, it was a very different place in '56 than it is now.

JS: Well I didn't... as I say I bummed around... After I got out of the Marine Corps I bummed around Europe, and I'd gone to Britain for a few weeks anyway. So it wasn't

entirely unfamiliar. I'd never been to Bristol. So I came in and I stayed with John Lavender and his wife for several days. I know one thing, my first impression was, I got in about noon and we had lunch, and then about towards evening they said it's time for tea. And I thought 'my goodness, tea'. And I had this layout of sandwiches, and I thought 'well, I don't want to eat too much, because I'm going to be filled for dinner'. So I practically had nothing to eat, and had some tea. And along around eight o'clock it occurred to me, 'tea' was the evening meal in Bristol!

JA: That was all there was, yes.

JS: So I was hungry. So I said, 'Ah, I think I'd like to take a walk before I got to bed.' 'Fine.' So it was, 'Don't get lost.' So I wandered around thinking 'I'll find a restaurant'. And at that time, you know provincial English cities, there was nothing open after eight o'clock. So I went to bed hungry. [Laughs] But I learned.

JA: You learned your lesson.

JS: But it had nothing to do with the university. But...

JA: No it's interesting. OK. Was Bristol... was the evidence of wartime damage still quite obvious in Bristol by that point?

JS: Oh yes. Yes, yes. The first place I moved into in Bristol was with Phil, an American – another American there. And we found a place on The Crescent, The Royal Crescent, which was beautiful.

JA: Yes.

JS: If you know Bristol. Overlooking the valley and so forth, the... what the hell's the name of the river there?

JA: The Avon.

JS: Yes, of course. And it didn't work out, because the people we were... the owners of the place we had a... above them, and they... absolutely silent. In fact they complained about flushing the toilet at night, and you know this sort of thing. So we were there a month. I still remember the place for gorgeous views and so forth. And it was furnished. And believe it or not on the fireplace there were two bronzes – one was Cromwell and the other was Charles I, so...

JA: Oh right. Hedging their bets then!

JS: So then we moved into this place quite close to the university. Upper Berkeley Square – number 10 Upper Berkeley Square. And it was bombed out on both sides. But this Georgian house below, we had the top couple of floors, and below were two offices, which were closed during the night, which meant we got no complaints about partying. It made it a very good place to go for... I think it was... I don't mean to overstress it, but I'm sure it wasn't continuous, but I'm sure there was three gatherings a week at least.

JA: Right, OK.

JS: And so forth. So it's quite... And Phil Bronze and an actor who became... under the name Claude Woolman, but then he was Claude Jenkins, we shared this place.

JA: Right. I think when we communicated before I arrived in Chicago you said something, that you had access... because you were a retired serviceman you had access to tax free alcohol?

JS: Yes, as a retired regular officer I get all the... you know, the privileges of any of the other military. Kind of indecent of me I suppose, but I could actually ride the trains free by showing my ID, just like British military or American military serving in England. It was illegal, but you know... I also had access to the so-called wine mess at the American Naval Headquarters in London, which meant I could buy a case of liquor a month. But this would be 12 bottles of imperial quartz, which is quite a bit of booze – and very inexpensive if you pay no tax at all. I also could get a case of wine. So every month I'd go into London, see a couple of shows, and come back with my two cases. So this made a lot of drink around. And I know it may come as an ugly surprise, but there are some theatre people and writers have been known to take a drink, particularly if it's free. So the result was...

JA: It's still the case.

JS: Oh really? How surprising. Anyway really I think Bristol was quite active in the theatre at the time. The theatre there and the school was, I think was quite active. And I really admit of that generation, I got to know - at least briefly - a great many of them: Richard Harris, Peter O'Toole particularly. Writers...

JA: They would come round to the parties at your place in Berkley Square.

JS: Oh yes, as a matter of fact the interview with Henry Woolf that I... [background noise] The interview with Henry Woolf that he mentioned that Harold Pinter got plastered that night drinking Canadian Club – and I don't remember it specifically – but if it was Canadian Club, I'm sure it was mine. And it was probably at my place, although I don't specifically remember whether that's where it was. But I wouldn't be a bit surprised.

JA: OK. So is it fair to say that through these parties the university, maybe more academic group, were mixing easily with the actors, the people at the Old Vic? It was an easy relationship?

JS: Yes, there was no... as a matter of fact we had good contact with the Old Vic School there at Bristol. And we got to know those people. And there was no real split between the academic... And yet you know we had some first rate scholars: Richard Southern, he was a guest; but H.D.F. Kitto, I studied Greek drama with him; George Brandt; Glynne Wickham who was probably the... who certainly the time, would have been a leading expert in medieval theatre; and so forth and so forth. So it was well academic.

But we did a lot of shows. One of the best experiences, the Americans got together over the Christmas, the mid-winter break. And all Americans, some of them at Bristol coming up from other universities, or studying in England, and we did a show – performed it at the Festival in London. And it was a smash hit I tell you. It was... in fact I think it was Tennents... we got such good reviews. Harold Hobson I know gave us a review something like 'I would take any one of these American actors to three John Gielguds' or something like that. Because it... well, you know the British theatre was shifting over to the... with Osborne and those plays. And that group of actors...

[Background noise]

JA: OK, this is the second part of the interview with Jim Severns. We'd talked about your arrival in Bristol in 1956, about the theatre professionals that you socialised with. And I'd just like to talk a little bit about the theatre scene in Bristol at that time, and indeed in England. Did you go to many plays at the Bristol Old Vic, and can you remember the kinds of plays that they were receiving at the time?

JS: Yes, well I... yes, I think I probably saw every major production that the Bristol Old Vic did at that time. I can't remember them all: Othello, there was a play... I mean I'm not sure which one it was, but it a play about the troubles in Ireland. I don't know whether it was The Quare Fellow or not, but... an actor named... it was Rachael Rogers was – er, Roberts - was with that company. I don't know whether you know that name?

JA: No.

JS: She did pretty well in films for a while though, Australia... I don't know what... And I can't remember the name of her husband, but he was very good actor. I remember he played... I think he played Iago. And I suppose the person who became the most famous at that time, he was a junior actor in the company at the time, but that was O'Toole – Peter O'Toole.

JA: Can you remember seeing him?

JS: Oh yes, yes.

JA: Did he stand out in that genius sense?

JS: Yes, yes. He was... you either loved him or you hated him. I know a few people said 'oh, he's too much of a show off', you know too mannered and so forth. But right from the start I thought 'there's a really fine actor'. And of course he went on to a major career. The last time I had some contact with him, the last time we had a very good time in New York once for the fight between Ali and Forman. And anyway it's a long story, and you wouldn't be interested in that, but it was a good time.

JA: OK.

JS: But since then he got married and the mother-in-law took over him, kept him well away from old friends! [Laughs]

JA: I see, OK.

JS: Which was probably a good thing for him!

JA: What was the... I'm interested in the kinds of people who went to the Old Vic. Was it relatively, for a student's salary, expensive?

JS: You know, I don't really know. The Old Vic... you mean the theatre, not the school?

JA: Yes.

JS: The theatre was, I think was very much... I think it had a high reputation at the time as one of the better of the provincial reps. And it seemed to me as I recall, the production quality was very high, and I can't really know of the general audience. There was a popular theatre there too that had the roadshows and that...

JA: The Hippodrome would that be?

JS: Hippodrome that's it. But this was the... I suppose it's the same sort that still attracts theatre, but terrific, popular, mostly people of I would say upper income and probably... intellectual pretensions anyway, would make up the major part of the audience. But as I recall the audiences were good. I mean they were pretty well filled out.

JA: OK. And this is 1956, Look Back in Anger had premiered, I guess in the May of that year. Beckett had come to England a couple of years before. How much did you know

about this new, vibrant English theatre when you came over, and how much did you discover very quickly?

JS: It was very exciting in that way. I'm not an expert in this area, but I mean I really think there was a notable shift in the direction of British theatre. And this is an anecdote that might be interesting in relation to this. Years later I was having dinner one night with an actor named Bob Lang – I don't know whether you know that name – but Ted Hardwicke, who was the son of Sir Cedric Hardwicke, who was of course well known...

JA: We've actually interviewed him for this project.

JS: Who, Ted?

JA: Yes, Edward Hardwicke.

JS: Oh. And anyway I remember him saying, you know he said, had it not been that shift, we actors who were doing more of the old style, we would be the stars instead of people like O'Toole or you know that other bunch of in yer... what we now call in-ye-face acting – at least in Chicago. And before the noise drove us off I was pointing out that you know, we did that student show in London. And most of these guys were professionals. I acted in it. And it was... it got such a good response, because again we were American in-ye-face actors. Quite different from the whole classical actors that were thought of as... the well rounded voice and so forth and so on. You know we were grinding it out, and we got a terrific response. As a matter of fact Tennents wanted to pick it up and do a commercial run with it, but we couldn't get work permits.

JA: Oh right, you needed a work... of course, yes.

JS: They couldn't get that many work permits. So one wonders what would have happened if we'd have gone to a West End hit, I don't know.

JA: Sure, gosh! Can you remember... I mean, you arrived in autumn '56 I suppose, you'd already been around, you said you'd bummed round Europe a bit before. But had the plays... I mean, this was very recent, but had the plays of this new realism, and people like Osborne and Wesker, had they reached American consciousness yet, or was it only when you arrived in Britain that you realised that there was something new and fresh going on?

JS: Yes, I don't think I was really much aware of that until I got there. As a matter of fact I wrote an article for a little magazine called Encore... no, no... yes... Encore. And I think I was... I think it was called 'An American looks back in anger' or something like that. And well I was pointing out that this kind of, let's call it gritty theatre, this non-affected or realistic, however you... new wave, whatever you want to call it, this move that it was really... we were fairly used to that sort of thing in the United States. And it hit

Britain like a ton of bricks. I really do believe so. There was a lot of commentary in the newspapers, and so forth, with particularly Osborne's play, *Look Back in Anger*.

JA: Absolutely.

JS: But that wasn't the only thing. For example at the university they did projects called *Living Newspaper*, they did some of those. And this often led to that sort of realistic... I don't know when you talk about what is realism and acting, you figure the... every generation's called their new acting more realistic. I mean it's... what would have... if you work backwards, how could it have been acting 200 years ago if we call... you know if every generation becomes more and more realistic, where did it start? I think it's a question of perception and the way you look at things. But this was definitely a shift, I do believe, away from Noel Coward and the well-made play, the West End hit of popular stuff – although there is of course still some of that. You know, Ray Cooney's plays and this sort of thing.

JA: It's interesting though, sort of someone like you who's fairly well educated in American theatre, this new movement didn't come as a shock to you...

JS: No.

JA: ...in the way that I think it did hit a lot of English theatre-goers quite hard.

JS: As I remember that obscure article that I wrote for *Encore* – and I believe that was the name of the magazine...

JA: Yes, that was it.

JS: ...the point I was making is that ... [Laughs] 'So?' You know, yes, it's great, but it's not really that new – at least from the point of view in America.

JA: Yes, that's very interesting, yes.

JS: Yes. Oh by the way, this is nothing to do with it, but I know a good joke about *Encore*. Apparently the two guys – and I don't remember who they were – were trying to raise some money to keep the magazine going. And they sent a note to Peter Ustinov, and he said 'yes, he'd make a contribution, but if only they published a French edition called *Again!*' [Laughs] Which may or may not be true – it has nothing to do with the point at hand.

JA: OK, so shifting now from Bristol and the theatre scene actually to your course. You were there, you'd arranged, and you'd been accepted to study for a year.

JS: Yes.

JA: What did your study entail?

JS: Well at that time, again I don't know what it would be like now, but at that time graduate work in the British... well, the British universities were structured quite different from the American universities. So we didn't have as much of this kind of form where you take a course in this and that, and so forth. People that I remember studying with, I think... probably one of the... certainly one of the outstanding scholars in classic theatre – Greek theatre... Greek and Roman, but particularly Greek – was H.D.F. Kitto. And I read all the Greek plays, but we had a weekly - seminar I guess you'd call it - and go in and... I'm not sure how long I did this, you know for one semester, or whether it was the whole year. I remember being... I thought it was a great experience, I felt I really learned a great deal about Greek and classical drama. Glynne Wickham had a number of lectures and so forth on medieval theatre, and Richard Southern, he wasn't like... a faculty, but he was a theatre scholar at the time – historian. And I remember him lecturing. Of course George Brandt. And so it wasn't the structured course in the American sense in that way, it was primarily a series of lectures and so forth. And when I went back to the States to study for my doctorate, it was a real problem of translating the British system into the American system. On what kind of credit was I going to get towards my doctorate?

JA: I see, right.

JS: Again I've been so... this is 50 years ago, and I'm not quite sure if that has changed, or what shifts have taken place. But at the time it was quite informal relatively.

JA: OK. You've mentioned medieval theatre, Greek theatre, can you remember to what extent did these lectures engage with, well contemporary or even just 20th Century theatre, or was it very much looking back at the historical?

JS: No it was... the course work was primarily academic that is... Although no, the medieval stuff, we did a number of reconstructions of... as I recall it was not of the... not the Miracle Plays, the Mysteries, right. And I know I played Pontius Pilate in one of them. And in fact we went over to the International Festival and played over there at... I can't remember the name of the city, a small city on the French-German border... ah hell... it's 50 years. It was one of the cities, it was squabbled over for years between the French and then Germans, and I'll be damned if I can remember the name of it now. But we played there, and we played in a couple of medieval halls in country estate houses that had... that were you know 300 and 200 years old that where they supposedly, originally they could have played these plays, and that sort of thing. So there was that connection, but there was not the... it was not a close... there were no direct production courses in the curriculum. As far as I recall the department encouraged you to write, and they had that squash ball court – what we now call a black box – and this sort of thing.

But the structure was so much different than American universities; it's a little hard for me to compare it.

JA: Yes, or course, yes. So you mentioned the squash court in the Wills Building, which was where the Drama Society had their production space. It was a disused squash court. How did you first become involved with the Drama Society?

JS: Well it was so embedded in the... now, if I recall now, there were almost two drama societies. There was the one that I would be associated with, who were primarily people studying theatre on the academic basis, right. These were the people that used the squash ball court. But there was also another drama society of people just doing it for fun, rather so much than I suppose professional training. And they played at the student union. And there was an old stage in there, with a rig stage, and they did shows in there.

JA: That was the old... that would be the Victoria Rooms. That was the old student union I guess, yes.

JS: Yes, that's what it was called, yes. And I saw a couple of productions in there. But it was a different sort of thing. Most of the people involved in the one we're talking about, were really closely associated with the department. And I'm not quite sure what the administrative relationship was, but I think you could almost call it a departmental theatre in that time.

JA: Yes, well that ties in actually I think with what other people have told us. I remember Auriol Smith making that distinction between the two societies. So you were involved with the, as you say the almost the in-house drama department, let's call it that.

JS: The in-house drama... yes, yes. I did some acting. For example I played Garcin in Huis Clos... No Exit.

JA: Ah right, Pinter himself played that role later actually on BBC television.

JS: You're kidding?

JA: Yes.

JS: Well I'll be darned. Yes, I was... in fact a couple of people said 'oh I didn't know you could act'. And I thought hey... I think I was... I felt pretty good about it.

JA: OK. So you were acting, you mentioned you were in Huis Clos, that's interesting. So Huis Clos I guess was premiered '42. This is kind of off the top of my head, so...

JS: Oh yes...

JA: And I think it took a couple of years to get to Britain because of the war. So that implies does it that the kind of plays that were being produced were pretty contemporary. Or was that an anomaly?

JS: Yes, the stuff that you saw in the black box... there was a name for it and I'll be damned if I can remember other than the squash court at the... It was... they didn't do the general classic line. A lot of it was very experimental in nature. They did Living Newspaper stuff, and they did... well they did a couple of... it seems to me they did a Molière in there – not one of the majors, but one of the very [inaudible] things, the Commedia dell'arte that he wrote, and maybe A Doctor in Spite of Himself there was, or something. But generally it was very... it tended to be very experimental I think.

JA: So experimental and apparently open to the European tradition from those examples you've given.

JS: Yes, yes.

JA: Would you say that divided itself from the wider society, who you said were doing it more for fun? Were they doing more obvious kind of canonical plays?

JS: Yes they... I don't remember exactly what they did, but they were doing more plays, let's call it popular for lack of a better term. Sort of more traditional theatre, of a previous traditional theatre up to that time.

JA: OK, interesting. So you've talked about your acting. Now you mentioned that in Indiana previously you'd written a play. Was it on your mind to write a play while you were in Bristol? Was that something that you were regularly engaged with, or...?

JS: Well I don't know. I think I may have had some talent as a writer, but I had a real problem with writing. I love having written, and I hate writing. It's just too damn much work. I know a friend of mine who's a... the wife... a good old friend of mine who's married to a popular novelist, Maeve Binchy. And I remember once her saying, oh you know... I said, 'Oh you've got a new book.' Maeve said, 'Yes, but it's a job of work.' And maybe I'm too lazy to be a real writer, although I keep packing away. And I did a couple of other plays and got them produced, but obviously there was no notable success but...

JA: While you were at Bristol?

JS: No. No this was afterwards.

JA: Oh afterwards, sorry. Right, yes.

JS: No I kept... you know, I kept writing and... But the writing, it's... I'm a slow, slow bleeder when it comes to...

JA: So I mean the play that was performed as part of this double bill was called *The Rehearsal*, can you remember what prompted you to actually begin writing that play? Was it a commission from the society or other way round?

JS: No. [Laughs] As a matter of fact I think... as I recall, we were having, let's call them seminars – meetings, it wasn't really a highly structured course in the American sense – of playwriting. And I believe I was with Wickham. I guess I can say it; the poor man has probably been dead for 50... not that long, because he was considerably older than me.

JA: Ten years or so.

JS: Yes. But Wicky Dicky as we Americans rather called him behind his back – loved the man, I know – but he came... one of the things he said, 'look for something on the street that you hear, a phrase and see what you can make of it'. I just happened to hear some... I'm walking down the street there in Bristol, some girl saying to some young man, 'Well anyway that's what the doctor told me.' And so I just went in and I wrote this more as a class exercise. And the girl who... they were going to do this programme, and she just picked it up, and I said 'sure, go ahead'.

JA: That would be Auriol Smith would it?

JS: Yes. That's the name. And I was on my way to... me and my American buddy Phil, who was my room mate, and two Australians, John Clarke – who went on to be a professor in the Australian theatre – we went to the continent and hired a car. At that time Americans who were on half-pay from retirement, also the GI bill, we had a lot of money. It was indecent. But we went to the continent. I came back on the night that the damn thing opened. So I walked in. I wasn't involved in the rehearsals or anything.

JA: So Auriol had...

JS: Pinter's play was better.

JA: [Laughs] Well... Auriol then had picked up this play because of your class exercise. And then as far as... from what you're saying, she or someone else, must have organised casting, rehearsal, production...?

JS: Yes, I had nothing to do with it.

JA: You had no hand in that?

JS: No.

JA: OK, that's interesting. Can you remember then, you say... I mean, in a very Pinteresque way actually, you say that this play of yours started from a phrase, an overheard phrase in the street –and quite a bleak disconnected phrase. Can you remember how you built your play around that? I mean we don't have a record... well you have a record of the play, but I haven't been able to read it.

JS: I'll give it to you.

JA: So there's no other record. Can you explain a bit how it progressed?

JS: Well all right. [Laughs] Basically it was an actor and an actress are rehearsing a play. And she... it's a reversal. The doctor told me it involves pregnancy right. And this is... so they take a break, you know, they're rehearsing a scene... hopefully it starts out as though we're doing a play like that. Then a voice from the back of theatre says, 'All right, can you do that scene again.' And so the director...

JA: This is Noises Off... avant la lettre?

JS: Yes, the unseen director. And then he says take a break. And then the actress grabs the actor and says you know, with kind of a reversal of forms in the play... The initiating play, she's really a tart, and he's kind of an innocent young man who's unfortunately got her pregnant. And the flip flop of course is that she's a relatively innocent [inaudible] who's been made pregnant by this leading man. So that's how it ends. And you know so it's... you use the phrase twice in that sense, it has...

JA: Yes, twice in each...

JS: Very mechanical really, it was...

JA: So how did it tie together at the end then? Which...?

JS: I read it the other day. He just walks out, you know he's not going to do anything about it. He's just 'to hell with you', you know.

JA: It sounds quite a technical play then.

JS: Yes, it was class exercise essentially. I think I wrote some better stuff later, and earlier. But it was... and really it's always kind of shocking when you haven't seen rehearsals and so forth, to walk in and see one of your plays. Well, see one of your plays... woow...!

JA: Is it the first time... you said you'd written a play in Indiana, was that produced or was this the first time that a play had been produced?

JS: Yes, it was produced, yes. It was produced, staged, and it was done in the experimental theatre. It was a realistic play. It was about Korea, the war - you know, my war. Ironically everybody who read the play said 'oh, it reminds me of...' - what the hell was that play by Sheriff, R.C. Sheriff?

JA: Journey's End?

JS: Journey's End yes. Of course, same sort of trench. But at the time I was in Korea, it was trench warfare, very much the same. And I'd never read Journey's End, I'd never sent it - I had to look it up. But everybody thought I was copying Journey's End, but essentially it's the same kind of experience of trench warfare and going out on raids, and that sort of thing.

JA: Interesting.

JS: Yes. But I didn't copy the play, it was just I copied the experience without knowing it.

JA: OK, yes.

JS: And then I wrote some plays later.

JA: OK, so I mean I was going to... it seems you had very little involvement in the rehearsal process. You said you were on the continent, and the next thing was you came back. The one question, before we get to the actual production, at this time, this was 1957, and all plays to be performed, whether amateur or professionally, in whatever space, had to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain for pre-censorship. Now I can't find any record - the British Library has the files for the Lord Chamberlain's Office - of your play being submitted. Do you remember being aware of this obligation to submit? Or was it a deliberate decision not to?

JS: I don't think... I think it was just... it compared you know... that seemed like London and something... yes, I was aware of historically, and how the shifts came later and so forth. But I don't think anybody even thought about it. You know, we were just doing it

for this small audience, in this small theatre. At least I never... in fact it has never even occurred to me, 'til now, when you bring that up.

JA: I mean, that would have been... that's how we have copies for several plays for this period. But that's interesting that you automatically said there, this was a London thing, as if it was something that didn't affect smaller provincial productions.

JS: Again, I don't know what other... For example I acted in a show over in Weston-super-Mare. I'd been there only a couple of weeks, I don't know, and somebody said 'oh we got a role, do you want to go over there and act in this show? They have a character for an American, visiting or something. Everybody else is British, but this is an American businessman'. I... probably I was too young for the role. Anyway I go over to this amateur theatre and do the role. I think it was an original play, but I'm not sure whether it was ever... you know it never even occurred to me. By the way, the local reviewer said, 'Mr Severns's performance was excellent, except for his phoney American accent'!

JA: [Laughs] You can't win, can you, with reviewers? OK, well actually before we talk about the production, it's obviously important to remember that your Rehearsal, your play *The Rehearsal*, was being performed as part of a double-bill with the first play by Harold Pinter. Can you remember knowing anything about the parallel rehearsals of his play? Were you even aware what the play was that would be sharing the bill?

JS: No, the first thing I knew Henry talking about it, before you know... I knew Henry quite well. Henry Woolf talking about it, but I didn't know a thing. I mean, I was there the first night. It was as much a wow to me as it was to the rest of the audience, because it was very striking.

JA: Can you remember what Henry said, what Henry's thoughts were then when he told you about this play he'd got hold of?

JS: No, I mean... no, he said, you know there's an old friend of mine, there's this actor David Baron - his acting name - and so forth... Harold and so forth. And he's written this play, and you know... and so forth. And I don't think he showed it to me. I really... you know, and he just was excited about it. But I don't remember any of the details of him talking about... you know anything about the structure or anything. I know it came as a kind of a surprise to me of what... of this sort of thing happening. I suppose it was an unpleasant surprise when I looked at it in comparison... the bad thing that I'd done. [Laughs]

JA: Well what was the... I mean apart from that... let's stick with that. You walked in, it was the first time you'd seen or really knew about *The Room*, what surprised you? What about it was so unnerving or shocking?

JS: Well what was surprising is that Pinter is a very unique playwright. He has that...it's not... you know everybody talks about he gave the pause to the theatre. Yes, and no, but Pinter got... I call it the Pinter understands the scariness of the empty room. There's just a kind of... sometimes there's a spookiness in just existence. You can see that in his plays. Just what are relationships, and you know where do I stand? And sometimes you feel this disconnect. I don't know whether everybody does, but often an empty room, I walk into an empty room and I... there's just a sort of... ah you want to go into such terms as existentialism and so forth, but you know maybe he was influenced by that – that attitude of uncertainty and so forth. I don't know, I'm...

JA: But at the time...

JS: I've read a couple of papers on that idea. I had a seminar in New York; you had to write some papers. I remember doing one on that aspect of Pinter.

JA: But at the time when Pinter wasn't known to be Pinter, when you just saw this play can you remember any other reaction to it? I mean, it's also quite funny. Can you remember that being heightened, or was it more the surprise of...?

JS: No what I remember was that strange abstraction. You know, I directed the play later in the United States, at the university where I was on the faculty. And so yes, now I remember yes the funny and so forth, and the ins and outs. But at the time just one impression. I don't remember the funny from, as I recall, that evening.

JA: OK. Can you remember slotting it into anything else that you were aware of? I mean London reviewers immediately made Beckett and Ionesco as comparators. Can you remember seeing it slotting in, in your mind? Or was it something startlingly new?

JS: Well I'm not sure. Yes, I think it's part of the same movement, but the abstractions in Beckett or Ionesco I think are quite different than those of Pinter's plays. Oh now you know sound like a professor, you know that kind... But yes, I think it's fair to say it's that same post-war movement that kind of you know getting the feet down after that catastrophe, that everything hinged and so forth. But at the time I don't remember thinking 'ah ha', you know 'he's seen Beckett' or anything like that.

Although I remember one of the shocks of my time in Britain was the first Genet play I saw, was a club theatre in London. And one of the girls, she was at Bristol, she had... her father was involved in it somehow, and I went to the opening night of... was it called The Balcony?

JA: Yes.

JS: And when this woman comes out and, you know with this kind of robe thing on. And then she turns to the audience, and she just full frontal nude... I mean at the time... holy Jesus! I mean, the audience... rrrr... you know. Well whatever. But obviously Genet

is quite different to... although I think it's part of the same Weltgeist, you know world spirit, whatever you want to call it, of the time.

JA: OK. Can you remember, you walked into the Squash Court Theatre, can you remember the makeup of the audience? Did it seem to be mainly students or wider background?

JS: I can't remember specifically. But I'm quite sure it was mostly students. As I recall the audiences overall... I know I did a show in there, No Exit, I mentioned it earlier, acted a show in there. And as I recall it was almost entirely students, faculty, this sort of thing. It wasn't the town in general.

JA: OK. And then obviously your play was probably what you were most concerned about. Can you remember, were you pleased with the production, the interpretation, what did you think of the two actors who were taking your parts?

JS: 1) I wasn't... 1) I think right from the writing I knew it wasn't very good, the play. But 2), when you see a... I had another experience with another play I did years later – five, six years later. They picked up a play of mine for an amateur theatre in the French quarter of New Orleans. And I don't know how... I forget how they knew somebody who knew somebody, and they gave them a copy of the play and they wanted to do it. And about four days before the production they finally rang me down, and got a hold of me, and said you know we're doing your play, can we get permission? And I said hell yes. And so I got in the car, and there was my wife, and we went down and... we had a baby at the time, and found the baby-sitter, and we went down to see the opening. And I tell you it had not been produced before, and it's a shock – not necessarily bad – but it's a shock to see a play of yours, of how you see it in your mind as you write it, and then without seeing the rehearsals or anything, all of a sudden just walking in and seeing it for the first time. It's a very... it's not necessarily bad, but it's... you keep thinking is that what I meant, you know, not necessarily bad you know. And you sometimes you see things, you think 'Hey, I didn't even know that'!

JA: Was there an instance...?

JS: And I think I had that same reaction on a minor basis with The Rehearsal.

JA: You must have been quite attuned perhaps to the audience reception, the reaction as well. Can you remember how you thought it was going down amongst the fellow students?

JS: I don't remember. As a director of course you read the audience all the time. You're sitting back there, and you know... but I don't think I was reading the audience that night at all. I just...

JA: Can you remember which went first? Was it The Rehearsal and then The Room, or The Room then The Rehearsal, because I imagine it would make a difference?

JS: I think - and I don't remember for sure - but I believe mine went first. But I'm not sure.

JA: OK. There were a couple of reviewers, we know because the Bristol Evening Post and the World I think were in the audience – at least for one of the two nights.

JS: Yes, I remember.

JA: Can you remember was that surprising that the press would review this relatively small student production?

JS: Yes, and I don't know... they didn't know... as I recall they didn't generally review these... I'm sure I didn't get a local review for example when they did No Exit. A girl named Nova Beer I believe was her name, she was a student there, directed the No Exit, Huis Clos... we did it in English obviously.

JA: Right, OK.

JS: And I'm pretty sure there was no reviews for that. So think... I don't know, Henry must have got busy somehow, or somebody had seen the rehearsal, had say hey... seen the rehearsal of Pinter's play, had passed the word that this is something unusual and worth seeing. Because as I recall, I don't remember any reviews other, from out of that studio theatre.

JA: OK. Interesting.

JS: You know, I just don't remember. There could have been, but...

JA: Well these, the two plays were produced over two nights. Can you remember after... there must have been parties after one or both, do you remember the cast of both plays, their general reaction to how it had gone? And also do you remember Pinter being there, I believe he was?

JS: Yes, I remember... As a matter of fact I think the first time I met Pinter was right after that – at the party afterwards. And I suspect – although I don't specifically remember – I suspect it probably ended up at my place, you know where Phil, Claude and I had this place. Because I know Henry mentioned... I don't remember Pinter getting quite plastered on Canadian Club, which was one of the ones I always brought back from London, so I suspect it was my whisky that almost did Pinter in that night. [Laughs]

But I don't know. There were a lot of parties. And you know, at the time you didn't say to yourself 'this is history', you know. I remember one thing John Gielgud once said - I don't know where I heard this - but he said, 'Oh, when we were young we didn't choose our friends, we just came around.' And you know it's a little bit like that. You know, same way with a lot of these guys, and some of the women that I knew who later became notable names in the theatre, at the time we didn't think that... you know, that we were associated with history in any way. We were just studying, having fun.

JA: Of course. But there must have been some mystery about Pinter. He hadn't been there for the rehearsal process much. You yourself say that you were very struck by the play. So can you remember anything about... you must have been intrigued at this party to see him, to meet him maybe. Can you remember any impressions about him?

JS: The thing I... yes, I have a strong impression of Pinter. He had very black hair, and he reminded... I remember he always seemed... what came to mind with me was sort of a 1920s leading man/actor, maybe Rudolf Valentino or something, because he was very confident and... I don't mean that derogatorily, but maybe a word that... comes to mind would be sleek - he was very composed and so forth. And this is an impression 50 years ago, but I remember he was very composed and dignified maybe. But you know...

JA: Would you say he was at the centre of attention at the party or aloof to one side?

JS: I don't know. [Laughs] I'd been drinking too, remember.

JA: Ah yes, OK.

JS: No, I don't remember anything unusual about that party. I remember some unusual parties. I remember once O'Toole would could drink, I studied... was about ready to kill himself at it, and I hid the bottle - I put it in the oven. And he didn't find it. I remember also I threw a cocktail for some people I had met around town you know. And one was the vice or the... do they call it the vice mayor or something... and some people I'd met at a banquet, and also a couple of people from the faculty. Some of the neighbours had complained about people coming, leaving the parties right. And so they had sent... the coppers had come around and knocked on the door, and yelled please you know, you're disturbing the neighbour. It wasn't the house, it was you know going out in the street. Somebody had... the pay phone and called the cops... 'There's a big party going and...'. A man with a pointed head shows up at the door, and he looks in there and sees all these people. And I never had... they never came around again. I don't whether the neighbour, the old neighbours ever complained about noise in Upper Berkeley Square or not...

JA: Scared them off.

JS: It was just a little tiny triangular... I think they called it a square, but it was actually a triangle of maybe ten buildings or something like that.

JA: Yes, yes. OK.

JS: Oh well that's a...

JA: Just a couple of other things, I know Pinter was in... he was a repertory actor as you said, under the name David Baron. And he was in Bristol a month later I believe in a rep play, Dear Charles, I think at the Hippodrome. Do you remember ever meeting him after that... after the occasion?

JS: I don't remember meeting him. I may well have done, and wouldn't be surprised if he came around again for a drink...

JA: Again, more Canadian...

JS: But I don't know.

JA: It struck me that you said that you had two housemates, Phil, and then Claude who was actually in The Room.

JS: Yes, Claude Jenkins.

JA: Claude Jenkins.

JS: Yes, a [inaudible].

JA: Yes, can you remember if you were living with him, if he talked to you, anything about the rehearsal process, about what he thought about this play he was involved with?

JS: No, I was away the whole time during the rehearsals. And I don't remember him afterward talking anything about anything unusual about the rehearsals. So I just really can't answer that question.

JA: OK. Well it's always... the final question, I guess you had the two performances, did you have any expectations, either for your play or for Pinter's play, as to what might happen after, as to whether there would be an afterlife, if it would be picked up?

JS: Well my play, nobody would pick that up - I wouldn't have picked it up. And so it didn't come any surprise to me that they picked it up. And it was done at the... was it the Court in London?

JA: Eventually in... yes, it went to Hampstead first I think in 1960.

JS: It did... And you know the kind of the standard paperback printings of Pinter, they always refer to that London production as the first production, and I always used to say, 'No, no, no...' I don't know whether it was extensively re-written or not. I don't remember the Bristol version well enough to know what was eventually published, or what was done in London was a rewrite. Whether he did any rewriting I have no idea.

JA: Not a huge amount I don't believe but...

JS: But I mean there was nothing that I noted. And I used to sometimes say, 'Oh yes, Pinter. His first play was done on a double bill with mine. Whatever happened to poor Harold?' you know.

JA: [Laughs] So you were aware of following his career, and remembering where you both started...

JS: Oh yes, and I ran into him a couple of times.

JA: Oh right?

JS: Yes, just... once in New York I saw him, and he recognised me, but ran into...

JA: And he remembered the...

JS: Yes, just on the street. I ran into Osborne too once, in New York, with his new then-wife Mary Ure I believe her name was - a gorgeous blonde. And I was with a girl - and this was before I was married to my wife - and I was... the girl and she was theatre type, so she was terribly impressed with... Osborne said, 'Oh, hello Severns...' [Laughs] Well anyway... so yes it was... But again as I say, we just came around. It wasn't... Nobody looked me up because I had anything special other than I had a lot of liquor. But you know... so it's those things.

JA: OK. Well I think we'll leave it, meeting Osborne in Broadway is probably a good place to leave it...

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