

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Jacci Hamilton – interview transcript

Interviewer: Alan Lane

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Theatre-goer at Golders Green Hippodrome and Sheffield Playhouse during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

JH: My name is Jacci Hamilton. I've been going to the theatre for about fifty years now. I always loved it and the more I go the more I love it. There's still some great performances going on and I do remember one or two from quite a long time ago. [...] The thing that I always remember to tell people is I saw Paul Schofield play Lear and it was absolutely mind-blowing. It really was. I can see him now and this must be forty odd years later. I can see him carrying Cordelia on- I can feel the weight of her, I can feel the way he walked with her. And it really was something quite special.

AL : Where?

JH: It was in London. I forget. I lived in London for a period in the late fifties and early sixties. And I went to a few theatres at that time. I lived in Hendon and I worked in a hotel and we had a poster up for the Golders Green Hippodrome. And because we had a poster in the hotel we used to get free tickets. And the Golders Green Hippodrome was the place where anything that had toured and was going into the west end it stopped at Golders Green Hippodrome before it hit the west end. Or if it had been on in the west end and it was going to tour the country the Golders Green Hippodrome was where it went. So we saw quite a few things that had been in the west end but I can't say anything particularly comes back to mind. But I remember we did see quite a lot of stuff at that time.

AL : The Golders Green Hippodrome? Is that still there?

JH: As far as I know I have to say I don't go back there now. The place I worked isn't there....I remember at that time we thought we won't go and see The Mousetrap , it'll be coming to the Golders Green Hippodrome. And it's still going!

AL : What sort of building was the Golders Green Hippodrome?

JH: Not as good as the Lyceum but that sort of thing. And old proscenium arch. And they had, I'm sure they had, well they probably had variety but at the time I knew it, it was plays and it was largely plays that were going to tour or had been touring and were going to the West End.

AL : Anything else?

JH: Well earlier than that. I come from Sheffield and so my first theatre-going was in Sheffield. We used to go to the Empire- that was a variety theatre. And it was the kind

of thing where you have a singer and a comedian- you know all that stuff. And a novelty act. It was very good and very popular. You know you queued all down the side.

AL : Where was that?

JH: On Union Street

AL : How many did it seat?

JH: Well it was three tiers. Like the Lyceum.

AL : So at that time The Crucible obviously wasn't there?

JH: No, the Lyceum was there. It goes back a hundred years. But the Empire's totally gone now. But I don't ever remember plays there I only remember variety acts and a Christmas Pantomime. They always had a Christmas pantomime there. And if you get someone who is a bit older than me you might get some comment about the Hippodrome but that was always a cinema in my day.

AL: The Empire and the Lyceum- anything else?

JH: The Playhouse. Townhead Street . Bottom of West Street. That was a smaller theatre and I suppose it was a rep. It was the same people and one week they were the maid and the next week they were the lady. A bit more imaginative than just Wilde and Coward. Because there was, at the same time, at the Lyceum Harry Hanson Court Players and that was a rep. And that was quite a conventional thing. The scenery was always a French window at the back you know. And they did all different plays and they did have Coward and Wilde- I can't remember Shakespeare but we used to go there and that would be in the early fifties when I was at school. Because on Monday nights they did two for the price of one and in the gods it was 1 and 6. So it only cost us 9 pence each....9 old pence each. And in the gods at the Lyceum at that time the first two rows were padded and had a back but from three rows to the back you just sat on the steps and leaned against the person's behind you knees. It was great.

I'm almost certain I saw Donald Wolfit in a very flamboyant role but then that's all Donald Wolfit did isn't it. Big coat, big hat, bug gestures. I cant remember what it was but...

The court players had a season and then they had this...like I say I'm sure I saw Donald Wolfit and he wouldn't have been with the Court Players. They had touring productions.

At the same time the Playhouse was there and they didn't have well known players and I don't believe they had touring productions.

What springs to mind there is that you got to know the cast quite well if you went regularly. Because they would often be in the bar so you talked to them. On a Thursday lunchtime they all went to lunch at the Four Ways café and we used to go there. You know its stupid but I can see them eating potato pie....They were fairly accessible. Performances there: I remember a Macbeth where they were dressed in space suits, white suits and I think one of them was called John Pickles....So its not only modern directors who have mad ideas! Even the 1960s they thought that Macbeth had been done so many times so they did it in a....That was all the professional theatre. There is quite a tradition of amateur theatre in Sheffield .

AL : Well, there are still five or six venues that regularly produce amateur shows.

JH: The Lantern, The Merlin and both are reasonably well equipped....

AL : When did the Lyceum change?

JH: Oh it must have been about the late 50s. I couldn't be certain because that's when I went away and when I came back it was 66. The Lyceum had been running as a bingo hall and they were always having efforts to get it going again. It had largely failed because so many of the theatre stars refused to tour. You know they all whinged about the theatres closing but actually getting out there and on the road and making theatre happen was a bit few and far between.

AL : So the Lyceum's gone in '66?

JH: I remember very shortly after that they were still trying to get it going and the National came. Because I've got the programmes for that and they did Feydeau. And I think they did- the other one was by [Bousico]. They must have been having a French season.... That was in '66 and it had a little spurt and then it died again.

I can't remember when the Empire went. But the Playhouse remained until the Crucible. That closed because the Crucible opened. They were connected....The Crucible must have been about 75.

AL: 66 the National. Was that successful?

JH: Well it wasn't successful enough to keep the theatre open. But for a fortnight. But at that time there was a theatre, an amateur theatre called the Little Theatre on Shipton Street. But it was a house, like a terraced house and you went up these steep stairs. They'd got two pews that they'd got from a church. And we saw Dr. Faustus. In a room smaller than this.

AL : So fringe theatre was alive and well in Sheffield in the sixties?

JH: Absolutely....It was too dark to see what was going on!

AL : So you were in London between the mid fifties and sixties. Anything else there?

JH: We used to go I think that was before the National, when was that?.

AL: Didn't Olivier move it to London in the sixties because there was a delay in the building-

JH: Oh yes- the only joke that the Queen Mother ever made was about that she kept laying that foundation stone!...I don't recall the National then. But we did go to Lamda. Which was a training ground and you could go there either free or very cheap. And see the stars of tomorrow. I remember seeing Susan Fleetwood. She was good. I always thought she was going to be bigger than she ever became. Unfortunately she died a couple of years ago. But she was a very sensitive sort of actress. But anyway- we went to one or two there. I think it was somewhere near Euston. I'm not absolutely certain. But there was a place that they had and we went to that.

We went to the west end sometimes, not that often because we didn't have the money and so forth. So I don't have lots of memories of that time.

After, I forget, in the late sixties early seventies we went to various places whenever we went to stay with my sister who at one time lived in Croydon and we'd go to the Fairfield. I remember seeing Peggy Ashcroft at the Fairfield. What the hell was she doing at the Fairfield? I remember seeing her there. And there was a very good theatre at Greenwich which was a bit different. They had a lot of unusual plays on. Definitely not West End sort of plays but things that you weren't likely to see elsewhere. They had casts who were very capable who were I imagine doing it because they didn't get the chance to do it in the west end. So they'd take that on for a fortnight because they could afford to do it without earning much for a fortnight. It was a good theatre at

Greenwich and for several years we went there. Saw quite a lot of stuff. I think it was just called the Greenwich

I can't think of any titles. I remember seeing Annette Crosby but I can't for the life of me remember what she was in. No, sorry, can't remember.

Then from the 70's I think when the national was open we used to go down to Margaret's and we'd go up to London to see plays. Memorably to see the Oresteia. This is a combination of four Greek plays made into one. And the National played it as three. No four plays made into three. They played it as three. On a couple of Saturdays they did morning afternoon and night. And I remember going to see that. And that was brilliant....

AL: When was this epic Greek show?

JH: I might be able to find a programme. When was that? I don't know...about 1973 or 4. It was a bad winter I remember. We had to get there through the snow. Put wellies in cloakroom....

I was very fond of these all day things. Do you remember the English Shakespeare Company. Michael Pennington and Michael Bogdanoff? They were going in the 70s and they were on a mission. They were going to bring Shakespeare to the provinces. And they were damn good. And they did quite a lot of work and they toured and at that time we didn't have the Lyceum. So we didn't have a theatre that could take a touring company. So I went to Nottingham. Like you do. A few times to see them....

They did Henry IV one and two, Henry V, Henry VI- whats the one that comes before Henry IV? Anyway they did five plays. They did one on Friday night, Saturday morning, afternoon, night. Blowed your mind....

It must have been the Falkland 's war, '82, it must have been after that because we had Henry V you know- and when we get to the "Once more into the breach dear friends". And everyone was wearing combat fatigues and they all turned round and they had Henry V on their back and they had guns. It was very effective. And one of the leading actors in that group was John Price- not Jonathan Pryce- and he was good. So sad he died so young. Oh he was good. He really could make you believe he was who he was but there still there was something of him. He was good.

And I think Michael Pennington is always good....He was recently in West Yorkshire in Madness of George III. So he's still going strong. But the ESC isn't. One of them wrote a book and apparently the onstage battle was small fry compared to what was going on in the background....

AL: I know you saw Look Back In Anger.

JH: Well you say I saw Look Back in Anger. I can't believe I didn't but I can't remember the original. I'm sure I saw it but I have no evidence I saw it. And Margaret says you can't have seen it- we never went to the Royal Court . So I honestly don't know but I feel I saw it. Because for my age group and I think it's probably a fairly small slice of ages- Look Back in Anger was more than the play Look Back in Anger . It reflected an awful lot about the way we were at the time. And it's quite hard to say this without it sounding very trite. But it was the rebellion that teenagers always go through and that was where we were at that time..... If you could remember the war I think coming out of it you had one perspective. But I can't- I'm just that bit younger and when Look Back in Anger came it just as if it all boiled over- the way we were, the way we thought about things. The rebellion against the old fogeys of politics- it was very interlinked with politics. And I have to say when I saw it again, what thirty years later, I forgotten how unkind it was. If you read it now that is a very unkind play- he says some dreadful things

to that girl. And I don't remember that from the first time round because it was so much about the changing of society. It wasn't about Jimmy Porter, it was about the way we changed. And it must have been about a year after that that I went down to London. Because that's what you did.

AL : Do you think that the two are somehow connected?

JH: I do yes. That's what it was. I was fine at home I don't mean there was any pressure there. But you're 20 it's time to go. So I went.

AL : That's extraordinary though. This idea that the whether you saw it or not is irrelevant but that the production had a life that was beyond the script. How much of that do you think is to do with the press and the way it was reported?

JH: I suppose it was partly. But you see there were lots of things. Other things followed on immediately but that was one of the first things that changed it. The Beat generation was subsequent to that. We weren't reading Kerouac until what- 62? It was part of much more than a theatrical thing. I think it was mostly politics.

AL: I am always amazed by how little press coverage theatre gets nowadays, reviews, great theatre critics and so forth. With that in mind can theatre still excite in the same way? Does it excite you in the same way?

JH: Theatre does an awful lot for me. It still gets me excited. It still makes me want to shout and really get up at times. But you get older so you control it more. I don't see that it affects young people as much but then I don't know many young people....I wouldn't be too sure about that.

AL: It's fascinating that this play had such a power over you. And it is kind of irrelevant whether you actually saw it. It radically changed the way you thought....

JH: I didn't like the film- they were far too old for it.

AL: Aside from Look Back in Anger - what about the Court?

JH: I went a couple of times and I can't remember. At that time which was 62/63 I went to an evening class at Morley college, WaterlooIt wasn't just shorthand and typing sort of college. It had lots of different things. And one of them was this theatre class. It wasn't acting. And the girl who worked at the Royal Court led the class. I can't remember her name. But we went to some plays and we talked about them. I remember doing something with masks and that was very eerie. When you put a mask on what it does to you. I can feel how it changes you. Because you look in a mirror and that's not you that's- weird. Peter Schaffer a double bill- The Public Ear and the Private EyeHe was quite new at that time before Equus . But that was a good pair of plays. I'd forgotten about most of this.

AL: Was the Court at Sloane Square then?

JH: Yeah. There used to be reviews. Great shame they've gone. Lots of small scenes. Joyce Grenfell used to be in them. Like Beyond the Fringe but not quite. Beyond the Fringe was cutting edge. These were a bit gentler. Share My Lettuce was one I remember. They had a rabbit in a hutch on the stage. They were a part of the theatre scene. They were clever and sharp. Not satirical. But funny. There were a couple of West End theatres that did that.... A different genre. A nice way to spend an evening. We don't have anything like that.....

I remember seeing Judi Dench in Anthony and Cleopatra. I've never seen people run about the stage as much. In the National on the big stage. And they did nothing but run

backwards and forwards. It was terribly distracting. Why do I remember that? Anthony Hopkins- he was in it.

AL: Have there been radical differences? I mean not last year there was a Henry V at the National where everyone was dressed up in combats because of the Iraq war like your ESC '82 show- is it all cyclical? Apart from two shows for the price of one at 9 pence!

JH: Oh no there are changes. In the early part of that fifty years regional theatres didn't exist really. It was all generated from London and if you were lucky they came out and performed and that was it. But now regional theatres are doing something different. They're generating things. All right some of it gets put on in the west end but that's not what it's about. Under Jude Kelly West Yorkshire was an absolute powerhouse and I don't know why- well I do- but she ought to have got the National. The difference she made at West Yorkshire Playhouse and they had loads of things that were worth doing. Companies that now exist- like Compass- and Northern Broadsides, who I think are a wonderful company doing tremendous work, fifty years ago we didn't have them. Or theatres like the Viaduct, that say on your ticket "please be sure to wear a warm coat". It's cold in there.

AL: Things have improved?

JH: Oh yes, we lost some things but there are loads of stuff going forward. Things are on the up!