

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

<http://sounds.bl.uk>

Peter Cheeseman – interview transcript

Interviewer: Kate Dorney

11 November 2004

Former artistic director of the Victoria Theatre, Staffordshire talking about his experiences with the Lord Chamberlain.

KD: I'd like to start by asking you about your experience as a theatre director in the 1960s, specifically when you were running the Vic in 1968. With the Theatres Act coming in and the end of censorship, can you recall what happened after the act was passed?

PC: Well, it was a relief because we didn't have the hassle of having to get a script across to the Lord Chamberlain before we opened, because as virtually more than half our programme was new plays and we were working on them actively up to and after the opening, rewriting them and so on, it was impossible often - or very, very difficult - to get an accurate script that the author was pleased with. That's just the way creating new plays works and so the script that went to the Lord Chamberlain was in some senses unfinished. So it was a great relief when we didn't have to do that. We were required, as I remember, by the Arts Council as a conditional subsidy, it seemed to be a condition under which the act was approved that the source of new scripts, the existence of new scripts was safe-guarded because you had to send one to the British Library at some stage after the opening. I don't think... it didn't specify any longer before the opening. I mean in the Lord Chamberlain days of the... authority of the Lord Chamberlain's office you simply had to get the script before you could show the play in public and there were some plays that we had a lot of trouble with, particularly when Peter Terson came to write for us because the language used and the topics covered were much freer and much wider and much more vigorous and frank than had existed heretofore, as it were. But I don't remember anything else other than we were required to do it as a condition of subsidy and that when the subsidy responsibility was devolved to the Regional Arts Boards the same applied. Now we simply did as we were told and the odd thing is that hearing that this deposition by everybody was very unusual and that we seemed to have ended up being the only good boys or something.

KD: Yes, pretty much.

PC: Because we used to get letters from the British Library or sometimes telephone calls. I think certainly I noticed that we probably hadn't deposited the script. Now I can't give you chapter and verse, it's something I never thought about, it's a sensible arrangement, very sensible and practical arrangement to make sure we got that... the country had

copies of original scripts that would otherwise go astray or be forgotten because there's an enormous amount of work that never gets done twice. And it does represent a dramaturgical reservoir that somebody should tap. I mean, in organisations like the TMA [Theatrical Management Association] or SOLT [Society of London Theatres] that preceded TMA - it became part of TMA - but there were various schemes to try and get second productions or third productions of plays that had been premiered at a member theatre, and the Arts Council sponsored a scheme for the first - second - production of such plays, I seem to remember at one stage. So there was quite a lot of concern that those types of new plays, which were often the result of an Arts Council commission or an Arts Council-assisted commission shouldn't be lost just on one production that might not have been terribly good or might have been a good one but nobody noticed it. There are a number of plays that are always from regional theatre and a great number of artists who came out of regional theatre, actors, designers and directors. But it represents a pretty important contribution to the nation's stock of drama and this seemed like an excellent dodge to ensure that those scripts didn't go awry... go astray. How many people use the British Library stock of plays that have been produced and sent there I don't know. It sounds as if nobody else did but us. A handful of people, it doesn't seem worthwhile going down there.

KD: Well I think as time went on the script depositions became more regular from certain people, but from everyone I've spoken to it was certainly a reactive process rather than a proactive process, and the people I've spoken to have said that they would wait to get a letter and then they would send the script in.

PC: A letter from British Library?

KD: Yes.

PC: How did the British Library know that the play was on?

KD: Well the reason they know now is because of The Stage. They go through the forthcoming attractions in The Stage. I don't know how they did it right at the beginning. I guess they'd have used something like the Theatre Record or...

PC: Yes, well London Theatre Record hasn't been going all that long time. It certainly didn't... about half through my career that started, but not any earlier. I think mid-seventies.

KD: Oh really? So was there anything before that that would have collected...?

PC: I mean, the London Theatre Record has a regional section, and so far as I know that was pretty comprehensive but... there were magazines like Plays and Players, Theatre World and...

KD: Encore.

PC: Encore and one or two that came and went with New Theatre Quarterly and so on. And London Theatre Record with its regional appendix as it were or section was the most comprehensive. I mean, Theatre World would noticeably concentrate on West End successes with a sort of extra story, with the plot of this latest light comedy in the West End set in Surrey, a set with French windows...

KD: Loamshire.

PC: Yes. But I don't think there was any comprehensive survey printed of them, even in The Stage, of regional work.

KD: Well, I think that's the problem. I don't think there is still. It becomes very hard to find out what's new. It did occur to me actually when you were speaking earlier, do you think anyone suspected that sending your script to the British Library might be a kind of means of censorship in a more benign form?

PC: No. Well, if we did think it, it never happened. It seemed to be a completely and utterly sensible and wise device to make sure the scripts didn't go astray. So I don't think any of us... well suspicious-minded people you know working in the theatre, just a bit self-centred or very self-centred.

KD: I also wondered how you kind of interpreted the act, because the act is very loose in terms of what it says is 'A copy of any new play performed in a licensed space must be deposited with the British Library's manuscripts department'. It doesn't specify whose responsibility that is so it's interesting... did you see it as your role as the kind of artistic director?

PC: Who else's?

KD: The literary manager, the general administrator, the playwright himself or herself?

PC: I mean, I don't think the playwright was conscious of it, one of two might have been. 95% of regional theatres and all the small scale highly creative touring theatres don't have literary managers. Literary managers are officers of theatres who have bloated subsidy I would say - bitterly!

KD: Maybe. I don't think the RSC would say that.

PC: No, they have their administrators and literary managers and all the rest of them and people who bring trays of tea round and all that sort of thing. But I mean it was the

chief... well, no we didn't have chief executives then, thank God, it was the theatre director or the artistic director's responsibility, unless they told us to pass it down to some minion but usually there was no minion to pass it down to. You're talking about quite economical levels of staffing in most of our cases. The step between the national companies and the half dozen... the big ten or whatever they're called at any period of time who have rather generous staffs, good boys and girls of the arts world get all the problems as it were. They have these things but an awful lot of the most adventurous theatres didn't have them. So one would see it as the theatre director or the artistic director's responsibility or the general manager. It just depends on relationships. Sometimes the two posts are equal in status, which I think is dangerous; and sometimes the general manager is in charge of the theatre manager, which is cock-eyed in my view - but one of those two people. And if you're really big you might have a literary manager. You just expected him to be the chappie who did it.

KD: Well I was thinking maybe that some theatres operated on the Royal Court basis that you gave someone a kind of title of 'Literary Manager' and paid them a few pence a week to look over the scripts but while training them in-house.

PC: Yes, but looking at the body of theatre as a whole of producing theatre, those people who had that luxury are in a distinct minority, so there's nobody like that. I mean often theatres... medium to small scale theatres like I ran would have people to help the... with their script reading, perhaps an assistant director on bursary from independent television, a trainee director or an assistant director on an Arts Council scheme. Or a friend, or a schoolmaster - or the theatre director's wife in my case! - and my senior colleagues, the leading actors. I remember I phoned Peter Terson because he sent a script and I had Bernard Gallagher - the actor - a very distinguished actor who worked in the company with me in the early days. I passed that to Bernard to read, the play that Peter had sent to me and he gave it back to me saying, 'This is truly superior' and we ended up doing 25 of Peter's plays. So we operate on... it's quite a load, particularly if you get a reputation for doing new plays. You get an awful lot of text, and being a small staff probably directing every other show or three out of four or something like that, it's a lot to do. So you wanted some help but paying was out of the question. Sometimes people used to get paid five quid a script or something like that to get them read. But so many of the plays that you were sent were just drivel and plays set after the nuclear holocaust with characters called The Woman, The Soldier, Death and so on. We used to get a lot of them. We just read the first page and thought 'Oh God' and sent it back.

KD: And did you write anything on them or you just send them back?

PC: Well we kept reading reports. My [first] wife used to do that painstakingly. But she was so sympathetic that she used to send kind letters. We tried to write to everybody so Joyce used to send kind letters to six foot actresses and hopelessly misguided playwrights who wrote plays about death and the nuclear holocaust and The Woman and The Soldier. The result was that they would send five scripts and Joyce made life-long friendships with these huge actresses and... really! Because if you're six foot four and an actress there's not many parts you can play except Volumnia and Queen of the Amazon.

KD: Not many leading men that can match up to them.

PC: That's right, a seven foot man!

KD: So can you tell me more about your relationship with Peter Terson? Was he an unofficial playwright in residence or...?

PC: Well I don't understand this, but I believe Peter was the first resident dramatist acknowledged in that post and I think we had a small grant from the Arts Council - I can't remember exactly now - to help support Peter for a year or two. Then he moved to the district and stayed there for a while. But when he first came he came as resident dramatist with a year's salary and I think that's right, from the Arts Council. And then we had another one after him - Tony Perrin - and then another one after that on an Arts Council grant. But both of them stayed working with us for a number of years. Peter right up until the new theatre and we had a disagreement and he stopped writing for us. But we'd done 25 of his plays by then.

KD: So when did he start?

PC: In 1964 I think when I did A Night to Make the Angels Weep and The Mighty Reservoir, I'll just check the list. He was living in Evesham and working as a sports teacher and he taught P.E on sports days. He used to lose the stopwatch and he had to make up the time so he didn't like it. But he wrote some marvellous plays set in the Vale of Evesham. Yes it was June 1964 when we did the first play A Night to Make the Angels Weep and later that year The Mighty Reservoir in September. That was in our second and third season.

KD: And when did he leave?

PC: Leave?

KD: Or when did he stop? When you moved to the new theatre or...?

PC: He disappeared one day and nobody knew where he was and I can't remember when that was. It turned out he'd gone to live in Whitby. He's a strange chap is Peter. But he got so unhappy and he wanted to move. I think he was feeling claustrophobic. But he set up and lived in Whitby for several years and we did a number of plays set in Whitby or inspired by Whitby; The 1861 Whitby Lifeboat Disaster was one, and other plays set in various places. He was very much a man who writes about place, like a lot of writers do, but things that came out of the place. But he had to leave Whitby because of the stupidity of a young marketing director we had - or publishing manager - who told the Daily Telegraph that the play was about... that the 1861 Whitby Lifeboat Disaster happened because the crew of the lifeboat were drunk.

KD: Oh God!

PC: And so Whitby erupted! Peter - who by then was a great mate of the lifeboat crew - was shunned and ostracised and it was a sort of national scandal. A 15 or 20 minute programme on the television news in May 1970. So then we went on to do *The Affair at Bennett's Hill* which was set in Worcestershire, *The Samaritan* in 1971 and so on. But [inaudible] set in Worcestershire in 1972 and so on, right up until the end... almost one of the last plays we did and he did an adaptation of *Rumpelstiltskin* and I couldn't direct it because I was working on a new theatre and it didn't work out and Peter got very upset and we parted company. It took a long time for us to get together again. They're tempestuous characters.

KD: These writers! Well I'm interested in how his plays caused trouble with the censor with what you said about the language, do you mean the swearing or the kind of general lewdness or tone?

PC: No, mostly bad language. There were two issues in a sort of three page conditions. What happened was you'd either get a clean sheet saying they were sending you the licence...

KD: This is the reader's report from Lord Chamberlain?

PC: Yes. And either the licence signed by him or a letter saying the office or Lord Chamberlain objects to or takes exception to the following items, the speeches or the scenes and we will only issue the licence if you can suggest alternatives or cut them out. And most of them were blasphemies, like you couldn't say 'Jeez' or 'Jesus' or 'God' as an expletive, any of them as an expletive. You could say 'I believe in God' but you couldn't say 'God help us' and things like that. And 'frigging' or 'bugger' or 'twat' or 'prick' or all sort of obscene words but there were some curiosities in this one. There's a great list of these because two of the characters were rough-talking Worcestershire farm regulars in the Vale of Evesham and the exceptions were an entire scene... scene three, rip the entire scene because it dealt with two men ferreting for rabbits and it was rather gruesome, you didn't necessarily have to see it but the dialogue was rather gruesome because the ferret bites the rabbits face and bites its eyes out and so on and things like that. So I asked to go down and see him with Peter to discuss this and it was one of the most amusing events I've ever taken part in.

KD: Was it actually the Lord Chamberlain you saw? Scarborough?

PC: No, it was a major.

KD: The Comptroller.

PC: The Comptroller of the Chamberlain's office. And we had a meeting with him with this very upper middle class army officer who was also the keeper of the Queen's swans I think. But he said 'Oh, it's not even good sportsmanship', he actually said that. And he also said 'It's people like you Mr. Terson who are undermining the very foundations of British public life'!

KD: Oh really?

PC: Yes, quote.

KD: What by showing working class life or...?

PC: I don't know. By blasphemy and bad language on the stage, promulgated on the stage and that's what he said 'It's not even good sportsmanship' and it was gruesome and so on. So we discussed this and we rescued the scene and one interesting thing... it's a bit naughty what we did, but there's a character in the play called Dezzel, who was one of the people in this rural pub who plays on his knackers. Now in Cornwall and in some parts of the country 'knackers' is the normal name for two bones which are carved out of pigs ribs or cows ribs and which you put between two fingers of one hand and you rattle like...

KD: So it's a form of percussion?

PC: A form of percussion. Like spoons, people do it with spoons, play with spoons, but when Dezzel was around he was always been teased by people 'When are you going to play on your knackers?' So he didn't like this because 'knackers' means men's testicles which this gentleman was very well aware of so we said, 'Well that's what they're called, they are called knackers' but undoubtedly we were playing on the fact of a double entendre but I remember the door of his office as he graciously showed us off, after a fairly amiable encounter in the end. It wasn't unpleasant, it was just culturally odd, and he said 'I think we can admit knackers providing you make it clear it's a north country term for a variety of castanets', which we tried to. But that's not to say it didn't have its own meaning! So it was a bizarre encounter, but it was generally that blasphemy or obscenity and it was all part of the cultural shift in playwriting that happened as a result of the work of George Devine of the Court as much as anything, and that revolutionary regime of dramatists at the Royal Court like Pinter and West and Osborne and so on.

KD: But do you think... I mean it wasn't the case... you were in the RAF weren't you?

PC: Yes.

KD: That it wasn't just the case that it was only working class people that swore or used bad language at all but somehow that perception has arisen in terms of the kind of theatre...

PC: You mean because I was a young officer in the RAF?

KD: Yes.

PC: Well I mean you've only got to sit on the train with a soldier to know that the cavalry often centres more around the F word and so on, ad nauseum. So it does tend to... obscenities do tend to form a more major part of talk of working men, labourers and sergeants and soldiers and corporals and so on, than they do of barristers and schoolteachers. But we all know that you've got... I mean you're pretty bad. You're a doctor of philosophy, I bet you swear like a trooper, but we all know that but we pretend we don't.

KD: I guess so. I just find it very interesting that it was perceived as being particularly a working class thing and not...

PC: I don't know whether they did. Peter was a schoolteacher and I think they just perceived it as... what's the word I want, not disruptive... undermined which is what he said. Undermined a sort of sense of decency and courtesies and graces and things and noble living and it sort of eroded good manners and so on. I think kids nowadays swear like troopers and it's got worse and worse and sometimes aren't aware of the power of obscene words. And it varies. For instance, the word 'bugger' is interpreted in many ways quite differently amongst or certainly was in my time, by working class people and can be used as an endearment; 'Oh you old bugger', but to upper class or upper middle class it is perceived as... simply as sodomy.

KD: Oh really?

PC: Yes.

KD: Oh. I didn't realise that they kind of preserved that distinction.

PC: Oh yes. At some point in the social scale whether it's not regarded in any form of an endearment, 'Oh you nice old bugger, you' it's a bit sort of rough, that he's got a brave heart, that's all part of being a nice old bugger. Who was it who accused Oscar Wilde of being a sodomite?

KD: A sodomite... The Marquis of Queensberry.

PC: The Marquis of Queensberry. To the Marquis of Queensberry the word bugger - that's what it meant. He buggered him. So I mean now it's commonplace but we had difficulty...you know difficulty in family life now to stop kids saying F this and F that.

KD: Can you recall a specific occasion at the theatre in which you thought, 'Oh right, that's a kind of seismic shift now that people are saying that on stage and no-one's turning a hair'?

PC: It's very interesting that you should say that because here... it depends where you are in the country. I would say here I have to be much more careful. I mean I could see the Lord Chamberlain's point in some instances because there's no doubt that here things sort of taken for granted by a London audience would shock a North Staffordshire audience. You couldn't bring your auntie or your mother to see one of Peter Terson's plays uncut or unamended because they would be quite offended. And I remember there was a big row in the district over a play we did by Ken Campbell called Jack Shepherd which was a brilliant piece of theatre that Ken... but at one point the glamorous sort of floozy in the cast turned to the audience and tried to conduct a poll as to whether or not one of the characters should take his trousers off or not. And one of our neighbours in the theatre next door to us, the chairman of the lawn tennis club, Mr. Plum, who was a local accountant, wrote a long letter to the local newspaper complaining of this disgusting scene... being put in a position to vote on whether this man should take his trousers off or not.

KD: And when was this?

PC: Jack Shepherd was I think in the early seventies. It's in the scrapbook [rummaging] I remember some dates. We're great friends now Mr. Plum. I think his wife is called Victoria.

KD: No she's not. Really?

PC: Yes! Here we are. It was December 1968, Jack Shepherd.

KD: So in fact just after the end of the censorship.

PC: Yes. But that was something that wouldn't happen in London, because that might be because the London audience are a little different... you've got a different social mix I think at the play. At a play you've got a broader audience, a less sophisticated audience for a play here than you do in London. There they tend to be with a play, not a musical or a farce or something, just a straightforward broadly aimed play would be generally the audience would be dominated by fairly intellectually sophisticated people. But here you are more likely to get your modest auntie who is not sophisticated at all and they would be shocked by nudity. There were plays or incidents I knew we wouldn't get away with because even if London was watching men's penises and so on or naked woman, here I think the first time we did that was when we did Alan Ayckbourn's *Way Up Stream*, which ends with the two people in the river naked for a moment and we had to be very careful as well. The only time we've ever done it. I think it's happened a little more in the new regime but I've always been careful about because it just would embarrass people here.

KD: And did anyone ever complain about anything else?

PC: From time to time. I mean, it's one of the most interesting files to look at. Maybe every now and again I had to respond and apologise and say 'I'm sorry you were upset by...'

KD: Were you ever visited by one of the Lord Chamberlain watchers?

PC: No. I was prosecuted.

KD: Really?

PC: As the licensee once. I was warned but that was a catastrophe brought about by accident. We, quite regularly used to do one night shows or give the theatre to a... say, an amateur company for two or three days, but not very often. Or we were going away on tour and had to get someone else in, or we'd have a dance troop or a folk music night or the Lindsay String Quartet or something like that. But once we were asked if we would... one Saturday I think it was or Sunday, if we would give the stage to a set of students from Keele for a poetry festival being organised by this group at Keele. And we had a good relationship with the Keele students, they were a very lively lot at this stage and they were very inventive in terms of the relating to the district. So we said 'Yes, that sounds like a nice idea' and I trusted them in terms of the quality of the programme, and we had just come back from the war in Italy so that was about the late sixties - '68, and we had just got back from Italy and we were holding a little party in the countryside at somebody's house, one of us had rented a nice house in the country because he was rather well off. And while I was there, there was a telephone call from the Front of House Manager. I'd arranged this to thank the people who'd stayed behind when we were in Italy and put on a week's play. So I was out there with them treating them to spaghetti bolognaise I remember because they hadn't been able to go to Italy, and the phone rang and the front of house manager said 'Peter you need to get down to the theatre straightaway, there's a man on the stage being obscene'. So I thought 'My God!' so I get there... perhaps I had just got home from this party, so I dashed down to the theatre and sure enough there was a grubby man with long hair and a filthy dressing gown or something in the dim light. He was shuffling about the stage, muttering disgusting piece of prose poetry about a man making love to a corpse in graphic terms. And there weren't many people in the audience but they were rapidly diminishing. One of them went straight out of the theatre and into the police station. So we had to... I said, 'Get them off the stage' to the stage manager and they put the light on and got him off the stage. And I remember then that some of the other students put in a substitute piece which consisted of three of them sitting on chairs or a bench saying 'Too much, too much, too much' in different combinations for about 20 minutes and that was the dialogue!

KD: It sounds awful!

PC: So it was a sort of... it was appalling. So in the end I got a visit from the police and they asked me to go and... because I was the licensee you see, and see them and apologise. And I think I was given a warning that I wasn't to allow an undertaking and I wouldn't allow to take place on the stage. I mean it was awful.

KD: Strange though, because then a couple of months later it was all over.

PC: Well no, I don't know. It was nothing to do with the Lord Chamberlain. You had to have several licences don't forget.

KD: Well I don't know about that.

PC: You were licensed to put on... and they were intermingled because the conditions... something you couldn't get, permission you couldn't get from the local justices, you could get from the Lord Chamberlain's office. There was something we were allowed to do if we were licensed by the Lord Chamberlain's office nationally that you couldn't get from the justices and vice versa. I can't remember how it worked but I remember the circumstances in which you could serve alcohol in the building were connected to the theatre's licence, the act that was abolished. So that altered as well as the prover of the plays, the system for licensing the restaurant, the bar, all the rest of it was tangled up with that and that changed with the Lord Chamberlain's licence was ended.

KD: You're right actually. I know what you mean. In Britain you can be prosecuted for commissioning an obscene act rather than...

PC: Yes by the local council. I mean you can also... I mean, we had two plays where on the first night we invited representatives of the local authority and for the first night the subsidising local authorities and on this occasion they sent the chief food inspecting officer and there were so many people who came to this first night that we had to go on to some spare plates that had been kept aside for the pre-show supper and one of them had been stored and had mouse droppings on it, which this officer immediately recognised and he took us to court and we got fined £1000 or something like that. Thank you very much, but anyway. And then one of our... a neighbour to our... and close friend of the theatre who was something like the legal officer of the same local authority in Newcastle came to a fundraising do and got a free supper and all sorts of fussing over to encourage him to come to the new theatre and the lasagne that we served had a big drawing pin in it. It had fallen off the kitchen wall and he didn't do anything in terms of saying to us 'Look, this happened', he didn't say a word and organised our prosecution. So that sort of thing could carry on happening. There are all sorts of permissions like you have to have a gun licence, a gun licence situation, the fire authorities for the exits and so on. There's a lot of licences, particularly since the new firearms legislation. What you can use in terms of substitute weapons and so on. That's all subject to licensing permission. Have we exhausted the subject?

KD: I think... or just to ask if you remembered the debate on theatre censorship.

PC: No. Not in any detail, I don't think it concerned us. Those were the days when one never saw daylight.

KD: So you really didn't... you wanted it to happen but that was about...

PC: Obviously we were on the side of the angels I like to think, and you were aware of things like the Lady Chatterley case but the... I mean it was much more important down London where they must never have been able to see naked people on the stage. You know, what Peter Terson called the avanty gardy [sic] who were much more concerned about penises and bosoms and all the rest of it. They were all thirsty for that. They didn't clip our wings [inaudible] the local people weren't ready for it. The further north you got, the more straight laced people were. I mean audiences are very different by response. On two occasions I can think of when I've been involved with working men, as a builder's labourer in Sheffield I remember helping to unload a railway wagon full of bags of cement as a student labourer on vocation when somebody, one of us who was carrying these across, started to swear terribly and his mate said, 'Eh, watch your language, there's women over there'. And a block away, about 300 yards away were a couple of women standing in a doorway talking. And swearing in front of women was an anathema to those people. And miners, much later in the late seventies and we were doing one of our documentaries about the mines and we went to each shift to record the miners pressing their vote to the pit ballot and they came off shift at about six o'clock in the morning. So I went there with a researcher who was a rather glamorous young actress who is a demon on this research, and they made her stand out of sight. At one point one of the... just by the ballot box and one of the miners who was a bit of a joker made her stand out of sight so that people behind him wouldn't know there was a woman there and then teased one of his mates into swearing blue murder until he then stepped round the corner and saw Caroline standing there and he was mortified. Or when you go down underground and the tannoy message would flash round or there was a tannoy message ahead of you along the tunnels 'Woman on the face, watch your language. Woman on the face'. And that's a fact. They were ashamed of using bad language. And this is late 1970s, so it's hard to explain to people down London way and the difference gets worse when you get to Scotland really. And by the time you get to the Shetland Islands it's hopeless: you can't say anything! I'm exaggerating, but those little things matter a lot and I don't see any point in embarrassing an audience. It doesn't inhibit really the breadth and depth of the appeal and human truth and comedy and tragedy that you're dealing with. That sort of sensitivity is very important.

KD: That's brilliant. Thank you very much.