

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Bill Ritson – interview transcript

Interviewer: Ewan Jeffrey

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Theatre-goer. The Birthday Party; Cambridge theatres; celebrity; censorship; Club Theatres; London theatres and productions; Royal Shakespeare Company; theatre-going; Variety; Waiting for Godot.

EJ: First of all, could I ask if I have your permission for this recording to be stored in the National Sound Archive in the British Library?

BR: Yes you do.

EJ: Could you give me some general details of your experience in theatre, how you first came to be interested in theatre.

BR: I think I've always loved it. I was born in 1935, so I grew up during the Second World War when it was Hollywood films and black and white English films, and I loved going to the cinema, and then started going to the theatre as a child with pantomimes and that sort of thing. We lived in Newcastle and then I went in the late forties a lot to the Newcastle Empire, which was Variety shows with all the Variety stars of that period – Norman Evans Over the Garden Wall, Revnell and West, Jewell and Warriss, and I saw Laurel and Hardy when they came on one of their tours in late '48 I think. They only did Newcastle and I think Leeds and the London Palladium, and also I remember Ted and Barbara Andrews, one sang and one played the piano and they brought on their little daughter Julie [laughs]. I then kept going to the Theatre Royal in Newcastle which was a beautiful theatre which I loved going to during my school days. Hippo Dancing I remember, Robert Morley and Wilfred Hyde White. The first London theatre I ever went to was Her Majesty's to see Jack and Jill when I was a very small boy, and then South Pacific [with] Mary Martin at Drury Lane, Call me Madam at the Coliseum and then The King and I at Drury Lane, and after that I started getting into plays and really enjoying them. The first play I ever saw in London was when I was doing my National Service, Separate Tables with Eric Portman and Margaret Latham at the St. James', which no longer exists. I remember I sat in the upper circle, it was seven shillings and the programme was six pence, and that's one of the great moments of my life, seeing that. My first Stratford was in 1956 when I must have been 21 and that was Alan Badell's Hamlet and Harry Andrews as Othello. From then on I never really stopped I think, and then once I was ordained – oh in Cambridge days I did a lot, I used to perform, but in a very sort of amateurish way, and then go to the Arts Theatre and I remember seeing The Birthday Party which is another great experience, Pinter's Birthday

Party on its very first production, before it came into the Lyric with Richard Pearson and Beatrix Layman, and who were the main - John Slater and John Stratton were Gilberg and McCann. It was extraordinary. I loved it. I can remember Richard Pearson banging a drum even now. It was a terrific experience, and then it was a disaster [laughs] and I think somewhere I've still got - which I kept - Harold Hobson's review in the Sunday Times, which... he and Tynan changed it and it was all right but it was too late to save it I think.

EJ: That's right, yes it was.

BR: But that was great and then around that time, I think - '57 or '58 - there was a touring version of Look Back In Anger came to the Arts, and I saw that and loved that. I remember a play by Bernard Kops called The Hamlet of Stepney Green with John Fraser, which I saw at the same time. I also started going to the West End, going up from Cambridge. The Comedy Theatre in 1957 became a sort of club to put on Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and A View from the Bridge and Tea and Sympathy because the censor wouldn't allow them, and so I went to see A View from the Bridge with Anthony Quayle and I think Brian Bedford, and Megs Jenkins and Tea and Sympathy there. And after that there was more... We'd moved to Manchester in these days, whilst I was at university, and so I started going to the Opera House and The Palace in Manchester and saw touring things there. At Cambridge itself I saw Derek Jacobi and Clive Swift in Midsummer Night's Dream when they were undergraduates, which I remember. The Flowering Cherry I saw in the West End at the Haymarket then, with Ralph Richardson and Wendy Hiller. The thing I really remember about that was that Andrew Ray was playing the young boy, but he wasn't, and the understudy came on who was Peter McEnery, who I've sort of followed ever since, which was rather nice. I saw at Manchester a touring version of The Entertainer, and I saw Waiting for Godot at Cambridge. Then I went to Lincoln, to the Theological College and the Lincoln Theatre Royal did plays, so I saw Taste of Honey and Roots and those sort of things there, which was great. Then back to the West End and Albert Finney in Billy Liar, and The Music Man with Ann Johnson; Finney again in Luther, and then the Royal Shakespeare Company had started - Peter Hall had got that going - and I saw Eric Porter and Christopher Plummer in Beckett. I kept going to the Royal Court as well in those days, and there were the things at the Haymarket... I loved the Haymarket, my eldest nephew is now the manager of the Haymarket so I have a thread of affection there. A lot of the early RSC sort of Troilus and Cressida with Dorothy Tutin and Michael Hordern, and Max Adrian in John Whiting's The Devils which they did at that stage. A play by a man called David Turner I saw, called Semi-Detached which Lawrence Olivier was in, but he wasn't and very rarely do I see understudies, but his understudy was an actor called John Thaw and that was the first time I'd ever seen him which was long before he became well known. Skelfield's Lear I saw with the RSC then, and a playwright called James Saunders who wrote something called Next Time I'll Sing To You which was at the Criterion, which I remember loving. Then it's the early sixties so it's the beginning of the National down the road at the Old Vic, so I kept going there. I was then working in Bedfordshire or Hertfordshire and I saw Peter O'Toole's Hamlet and Joan Plowright's St. Joan, and she was in Hobson's Choice with Redgrave and Frank Findlay, and the great Uncle Vanya with Olivier, Redgrave and Sybil Thorndyke and everyone. Max Frisch's Andorra with Tom Courtenay and The Recruiting Officer with Maggie Smith and Robert Stephens, and the Olivier Othello, and The Master Builder with Redgrave and Celia Johnson, and then Noel Coward's Hay Fever with Edith Evans and goodness knows who - a wonderful cast. Much Ado with Robert Stephens and Maggie Smith and Finney

again, and John Armstrong's Last Goodnight which I saw Finney in at Chichester, and Peter Shaffer's Black Comedy with Finney and Lynn Redgrave and Derek Jacobi - a wonderful cast - and Royal Hunt of the Sun, that was a great time. I just loved going to the Old Vic, I always sat in the upper circle, I just loved that. The RSC was going at the same time, I saw The Wars of the Roses, a great play, we went on a Saturday morning and afternoon and evening which was terrific. Modern plays, I mean David Rudkin Afore Night Come they did and I loved that. What else? I don't know... it just goes on and on.

EJ: No, it's fascinating. I'd like to pick out a few things if that's possible.

BR: Yes, yes.

EJ: Perhaps I could start with Pinter, because I'm fascinated you actually saw the first...

BR: So am I, I mean, now that I think of it.

EJ: I wonder if I could ask a little bit about that. Can you remember why you decided to go and see the play, and what other people were saying, perhaps, before the play, whether there was some kind of anticipation or whether it's something you stumbled across.

BR: I can't remember. I know I went to see it because an old school friend of mine, who was at university in Newcastle in medical school or something, was coming to stay and I thought I'd better entertain him, I'll take him to the arts theatre, and I just don't know whether I'd heard of this play, or if there'd been any publicity, or what happened but we went to see it and as far as I remember there was a fairly good audience, and I remember that he found it a bit odd but that I absolutely loved it for some reason [laughs]. As I say, I can remember Richard Pearson vividly as Stanley, and these other people coming in and it was all - I don't know, there was something about it which gripped me, the feeling of menace, and it was funny and I love the things that he does in that way.

EJ: Did that spark an interest, perhaps, in a particular style of theatre for you? Listening to all the names and all these productions, I'm trying to find my way through it in some way, did you have a favourite playwright or actor or director? What guided you to see particular plays?

BR: I don't know. I think I had lots of favourites, I've always had very catholic tastes; that I'll go to Shakespeare or modern drama or musicals or anything. I love acting and all the greats have all been favourites of mine I think. I usually know who's directed the things I go to see, and I do follow... and certainly as time went on, Trevor Nunn and people like that I rush to see, things that particular people have directed. I'm very interested in the writers, so that once I'd discovered Pinter I went... some years after

that I remember going to The Homecoming with Michael Bryant and Ian Holm I think, and Paul Rogers. Peter Hall was the first one of that, at the Aldwich.

EJ: How does that compare with The Birthday Party? Did you feel prepared in some way?

BR: I felt prepared yes, and again I've seen both quite a few times now and I just love it all. I find things quite funny which a lot of people around haven't. On the other hand I do love going to things which start off by being funny – Ayckbourn things, which start off funny and then aren't any longer. I love things like that, when half the audience is still laughing and half has realised that it's become quite painful. I suppose now my greatest favourite is probably Alan Bennett. I did see the original Forty Years On, which just comes into this period, which I remember seeing twice I enjoyed that so much.

EJ: Were there any situations watching plays that you felt the audience reacted in a very negative way; that you've been to a play and found that it hasn't worked for whatever reason?

BR: Oh now that's very interesting. I can't remember. I'm sure there must have been some, something like David Rudkins Afore Night Come and things, which I loved and saw again a couple of years ago when the Young Vic did it. There must have been people around. Two people – this always happened! - I remember when I saw Waiting for Godot at the Arts at Cambridge two people did leave in a fairly noisy way during that, but by then it had done its London run and people knew what they were going to.

EJ: What was your response to Godot? Obviously parallels are often drawn between Pinter and Beckett, how did you feel watching Godot?

BR: I remember I loved it. I love words. I've always been much more theatre than opera because it's not so much the music, it's the words and any sort of word play of the Stoppard type thing I absolutely adore, and sort of outrageous puns and that sort of thing. I think... I hope... I'm sure I loved Waiting for Godot right from the beginning.

EJ: Were you also influenced by critics at all? Did you read what the critics were saying? Tynan and Hobson?

BR: Yes I did, I've always read critics. I do, because – they're not always now, but previews used to be a bit cheaper, so I quite often went to see things before I'd read the critics, but not always. Yes I am influenced by them, but sometimes I'll go and see something which they haven't liked very much and I'll say 'Yes, no, I disagree, I thought that was good'. I love reading reviews and even collected reviews and things like that.

EJ: Yes, well, Tynan... they wrote so well – a pleasure to read...

BR: Yes.

EJ: Going back to the fifties, you saw *Look Back in Anger* as a touring production.

BR: Yes, I can't remember who was in it. Oh yes it was Alan Dobie and Michael Bryant was the other guy - Cliff...

EJ: How did you respond to that? Did it work? When *Look Back in Anger* premiered, people felt that British theatre changed irrevocably from that point. Did you see it that way?

BR: I think it did in a way, because I was at university at the time of Suez and all that sort of thing and there was sort of a feeling of change in the theatre I think. I think I was excited by it and I enjoyed it, but I also still thoroughly enjoyed something like *The Elder Statesman* - T S Elliot you know, verse drama - that was going at the same time or *Rattigan* or *Robert Bolt*, so that I enjoyed the new writers but I still wanted to see whatever *Rattigan* was going to do, the well-made play. But again, *Look Back in Anger*, the words... because John Osborne... the words were so wonderful, and Jimmy Porter sort of shouting out all these different things, that sort of carried me through, because of this great delight in words and writing.

EJ: Can I also talk a little bit about your experience with censorship, because the project focus ends at 1968 when censorship was abolished in theatre. Can you tell me a little bit about the atmosphere of going to see *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*?

BR: No, I didn't actually see it. I saw *View from a Bridge* and *Tea and Sympathy* but not *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, which I missed. I think I just felt that these people - well it was Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, they were writing great plays and I just felt it was outrageous that we couldn't see them, so I wanted to go off and see those. I think I have a very relaxed view, I don't really believe in censorship, I certainly don't believe in people holding placards outside theatres.

EJ: That's a very topical point at the moment.

BR: Well that's right, yes. I think I wanted to see them and Arthur Miller had written this play and I wanted to go and see it, but I remember loving *A View from a Bridge* when I saw it in the first production.

EJ: And when censorship ended and we had things like *Hair* and *Oh, Calcutta!*? Did you go to see those things?

BR: I went to see *Hair*, I have never seen *Oh, Calcutta!*, I don't know why... not because I feel prudish about it... but I enjoyed *Hair*.

EJ: Was there an atmosphere of change? What was it like when censorship finished? Was there a sense of right the stage is now open for anything, or was it inevitable do you think?

BR: I think it was probably inevitable, because it was the same sort of time that the Wolfenden report came out, and they were going to legalise homosexuality and things. There was a much more open attitude to things. I think it was just a sense of relief really, and I was happy to go and see the plays that I wanted to see that I hadn't been able to, or had to join a club in order to do it. I don't think that I was rushing off to see *Oh, Calcutta!*, because Tynan was doing things for the sake of doing them when you're allowed to.

EJ: Perhaps I could focus on when you went to the theatre in the fifties and sixties. Did you go as a social occasion or did you go say by yourself or did you have a meal beforehand? How did you treat the theatre trips? A lot of people have said very different things.

BR: Certainly when I was growing up, earlier, in the forties, when we went it was my mother and father and sister and I, and we probably did have a meal beforehand and then went to see the thing and it was a social occasion. I live alone, I've always kept my friendships in good repair and have hundreds of friends and so they go to the theatre with me. I sometimes do go alone but more often I go with somebody and it's not usually a great big social occasion with a slap up dinner beforehand, we'll probably have a meal or a drink somewhere beforehand or afterwards, but for me the play is always the thing rather than the meal. The meal is nice, and if you're meeting a friend you only get a chance to talk really if you have a meal as well, you don't in the theatre itself except in the interval, but it's actually going to the theatre is the thing that draws me.

EJ: I'm trying to isolate what it was really like to go to the theatre in the fifties and sixties. What's different now do you think? What have we lost or gained? What do you think is different today than it was in that period about the whole theatre experience? I know that's a very wide question, but I'm just interested in the difference between theatre now and then.

BR: That's interesting. I'm not quite sure. It used to be nice, in a way, that if one was going, that you could sort of sit on little stools outside and queue and things. Now if I'm going as a pensioner to get a seat cheaply or the same with students you go an hour before and get it, whereas you did have the camaraderie beforehand. What I do sometimes now, which is lovely, is if I haven't booked in advance at the National Theatre is to go and queue early before breakfast in the morning to get the seats which they sell at ten, and then you do get to know all the people who are standing there from seven till ten or six till ten, and you're normally given the front row and you'll chat when you get inside afterwards in the evening, which is nice. I don't know, the audiences on the whole when I go now, they're still very middle aged, middle class. In this period we're talking about, there weren't the theatres in back rooms of pubs and things like that which there are now, which I enjoy going to, they're much more fringe things. I didn't

really do much repertory, because I was near London it was always London so I didn't see the... whereas people went every week to these wonderful repertory theatres and saw the same people week after week doing different things. I'd have loved to have done that, but didn't. I don't know, has it changed? I'm not sure.

EJ: No, I don't know either. It's interesting coming down past The Old Vic and seeing Kevin Spacey's name. Do you think that we've exaggerated celebrity now compared with the fifties and sixties? Were Gielgud and Richardson and Thorndyke really this presence then?

BR: I think they were. Yes you are right, people made a great thing of that. One of the differences is that if there was somebody... Gladys Cooper or Sybil Thorndyke or whoever it was, as soon as they came on the stage, they would get a round of applause whatever the play was, even if it was some really dramatic thing the whole atmosphere would be lost because the audience was applauding, which they still do on Broadway but we've stopped that now and it's very rare. I think that's a good thing, but I think that there are still people who I would put in the same class as them. I mean I go and see anything that Simon Russell Beal is in and I think he is outstanding. I think that people like Juliet Stephenson and Harriet Walter could be as good as Sybil Thorndyke. Judi Dench and Maggie Smith can fill a theatre whatever they're in...

EJ: Yes certainly, and Derek Jacobi as well.

BR: And Derek Jacobi certainly. Yes, when you said 'Do I follow particular people' I mean, Derek Jacobi was at university the same time as I was, so I've followed him right the way through.

EJ: Did you know him?

BR: I didn't know him at all, but I saw him in plays. Ian McKellen and Judi Dench are about the same age as me, almost exactly the same and I first saw them in this period in something called The Promise, a Russian play which has three characters, it was at The Fortune, and there was just the three young Russians, Ian McKellen, Judi Dench and Ian McShane and that was the first time I saw them and I've tried to see both Ian McKellen and Judi Dench in everything since then. And I would certainly – well, they're late sixties now - I would put them on the same level as Gielgud and Richardson and Derek Jacobi, and I go and see all his things.

EJ: That's fascinating. Is there anything you'd like to talk about in terms of theatre that you can remember that we haven't covered already?

BR: My mind always goes completely blank.

EJ: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to put it onto you like that!

BR: No it's just a great love that I have and it's fuelled all my sermons for forty years. If I've seen something I usually get something from it which maybe the author hadn't!

EJ: So do you use the plot or...

BR: I use the plot or an illustration or maybe even just a line or something, which has been quite useful really because when I was at the cathedral at St. Albans, all my colleagues were much better theologians than me, so all their sermons were on the Old Testament or the New, and I was sort of coming out with whatever I'd happened to have seen. Which was fine, because I wasn't on every Sunday so that it made a balance... It might have been a bit much every Sunday!

EJ: Thank you.