

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

<http://sounds.bl.uk>

## Brian Murphy – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Alec Patton**

**8 January 2008**

Actor. Audiences; auditioning; Clive Barker; Brendan Behan; John Bury; foreign reception; Lillian Harrison; Joan Littlewood; Oh! What a Lovely War; The Quare Fellow; Royal Academy of Dramatic Art; rehearsals; repertory; Shakespeare; television; theatre-going; Theatre Workshop; West End theatre.

AP: This is the interview on... Alec Paton interviewing Brian Murphy on the 8th January, 2008 And before we get started, it's all right... just to make sure it's all right for the British Library to use this interview on its website, and put it in its archive?

BM: Right, yes.

AP: Excellent, great. So just to get started, the way this works, it's completely led by you...

BM: Right.

AP: ...I mean what you feel like talking about. And I suppose probably just a... unless there's anything else you prefer, to start out with how you first became interested in the theatre.

BM: Right. My parents were very interested in theatre. They were... As far as I remember, because I'm getting pretty ancient now so memories get longer, and stretched, and distorted, but I think we went to what was known then as variety theatre – legitimate theatre. I'm talking about back into the forties, of course which was badly affected for particularly the male population of England because of the war. But variety was still flourishing. And my parents went... Variety was very much a family entertainment. And although some of the more suggestive dialogue or jokes by the comedians, most of which went over my head as a youngster, but it seemed to me, in retrospect to be pretty innocent. So I think it was there that I first got the smell, the sniff, of the greasepaint as we used to call it then – don't use greasepaint anymore, except in cinema. And it was magical for me.

And then later my parents, as and when they could afford - because the West End of London was quite expensive in comparison, a trip to the West End of London would have enabled me to go to see some more legitimate fare. And that excited me even

more. I think that one of the first plays that I saw was Bernard Shaw *You Never Can Tell*. And I got very excited; we went to a matinee of that, very excited about that. And I thought I could be at least as good as the leading man. And I practiced when I was home. I could have been all of about eight or nine.

And such was my ambition that I decided that I would mark my own productions in my parents home – my home as well. And I concocted a stage. Now we had in the garden, we had an air raid shelter, built of brick with a roof – concrete roof. I don't think it would have sustained a direct hit from a bomb, but it was supposed to protect you from any fallout, and you know shrapnel and things of that sort. So we used to assemble there at night whenever there was an air raid, but later when the raids... and we got on top of the war and it seemed that perhaps it was going in Britain's favour, I ransacked the shelter and used the bunk beds – these made an ideal platform for a stage. So I put that up in a basement room in the house, and covered it with some boards – I don't know where I got the boards from, I can't remember – and converted that into a platform for a stage. And I think, with the help of my parent – mother in particular – put up a curtain that I could hide behind and pull. And I used to charge my fellow friends a halfpenny to sit on the floor to watch my offerings, or a penny to sit on the Welsh dresser. The Welsh dresser being a place where you put cups and saucers, and hung things like that... And it provided a sort of dress circle – grand dress circle. And so they were charged a penny. I tried to involve them in some of my offerings, but they didn't seem to be interested at all. They were built to be an audience, and I was built to be a performer, so we were quite happy with that.

And I used to offer things that were probably being on currently popular on the radio - I'm talking before the days of television. And we'd all sit at home and listen to the programmes like Dick Barton, Special Agent and things like that. Most of it was sort of a light entertainment I suppose, because we were particularly in needful of something light and entertaining because of the war. But with each offering and each piece of practice on my part I was getting fired up with this ambition to be an actor, but I was too young obviously.

But I was encouraged because of my efforts, and they discovered at school where I used to volunteer for the Christmas offerings and things of that nature, and seemed to be encouraged... they thought perhaps that I was... had the makings of a sort of actor. So I, after leaving school I was encouraged to go to evening classes. I was too young to go to any... I think... as far as I remember there was only the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art that was offering full-time education and teaching for drama, and I was too young for that.

But a teacher from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, a Miss Lillian Harrison, back in 19... goodness gracious when was it? Probably about '44, something like that, '44... '46 maybe, just after the war... I lived in Southwark, which was obviously a very historical borough as far as theatre was concerned, because of Shakespeare's early theatres resided in Southwark. And they decided, just after the war, that as an extra curriculum for education, a Shakespeare Festival. And it would involve Lillian Harrison going round to all the local schools and recruiting, from the local schools, children that could mount a play that she was going to direct. And the play chosen was *Midsummer's Night Dream*, much easier and appropriate, and got lots of people in it, particularly for children. And I think the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, at the end of this particular week's offering provided their play as well.

So most of the week was taken up with schools from different boroughs and places, but our offering was from the borough of Southwark, and Lillian Harrison. And I played *Flute the bellows mender*. I seem to remember that I was off for about two weeks in

rehearsals. I loved and adored the rehearsal bit, and I thought this was exciting, and I could get up to all sorts of tricks and things. And during the fortnight I got taken rather ill with bronchitis, and I was laid up. But when my parents left the bedroom, I jumped out of bed, even though I was wheezing and coughing and spluttering, and practiced what I could be doing in a *Midsummer's Night Dream*, improvising like mad and thinking about what I thought to be silly, funny tricks to do. And I withheld all these practices from the next bout of rehearsals – nobody saw what I was going to do. Now, in *A Midsummer's Night Dream* of course all the clowns, all the workmen, artisans, are given the opportunity to appear in front of the Duke, and [give] their version of 'Pyramus and Thisbe'. Well not only did we present Bill Shakespeare of 'Pyramus and Thisbe', but part of it was Brian Murphy's version of *Pyramus...* Flute seemed to - as far as I remember and look back on - dominated the proceedings. I don't think Bottom got a look in! But of course what I heard in reaction to all my antics was this wonderful gales of laughter, including from the cast, because they hadn't seen it in rehearsal. And they thought it was wonderful. As I learnt much later it was almost sinful what I had done, because you must always show your hand and do everything in rehearsal, and not suddenly surprise your fellow artists on the night. Well I learnt better later on. But at the time it was forgiven, because I was only about... I don't know, about 13 or 14 at the time.

And I was encouraged, believe it or not, that Lillian Harrison said, 'Well, you've got the makings of a comedian or an actor'. And she said 'I'd like you to see Sir Kenneth Barnes', because Sir Kenneth Barnes was the Principal of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art at the time. And I did go and see him, along with three others also chosen. But because of my age I could not be accepted at the Academy, I had to be at least 16. So I was encouraged to continue my lessons at school, and my extramural activities in evening classes at the borough polytechnic, which was also in Southwark, and is now, I believe, a university. So I went there in the evenings, and continued these classes, sometimes with Lillian Harrison and sometimes with another teacher. And I did all sorts of things, straight plays, Shakespeare. But one year later, I think, I got to do another Shakespeare clown, Lancelot Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice*. And apparently I did it so well - I can't remember on this occasion whether I'd learnt the lesson not to... no, I know I did put some funny things in on the night, because remember we only did one performance, so anything went. And I did it, and I got a great reception it seemed to me. But I also, as it turned out, won a bursary. And this would have enabled me to have gone to an academy. But again I was still too young, so it was put on hold.

And when I eventually left school, at that time it was probably about 15, I took up gainful work – my parents weren't wealthy, so I needed to be working – and continued my evening classes. And the bursary had to be, as I say, put on hold. But then of course came National Service in this country. And from the age of just 18 through to nearly 21, I served Her Majesty. And I kept up my drama by going to the same borough polytechnic where now obviously new teachers were taking over, and I was now a mature student. But I continued my interest in drama and theatre. When I'd left National Service they endeavoured to see if I could take up this bursary. But unfortunately the bursary was now extinct, and they couldn't award it retrospectively.

So I, on the savings that I'd made from being a member of Her Majesty's forces, I went to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. I actually got in again. And I was encouraged. But I didn't get a bursary, or even an award, or a grant of any sort, because a) they weren't available – this was in the fifties, arts grants were not liberal... local authorities were not liberal with arts grants. It was thought 'oh, you'd need to be somebody with independent means', which my parents weren't. And meanwhile they'd also returned to Portsmouth and Southsea, which a resort on the southeast coast. And they hadn't

returned there for long, so we didn't qualify even as residents for any handouts of any sort. So I had to survive within the first year on my meagre savings, and doing other sort of jobs. All of which compounded my ambitions.

I actual fact used to walk from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art to one of my digs - my room - which was near Queensway, which I think was about five or six miles possibly. And I used to walk on that on a good summer's day. And I never thought I was hard done by, I thought they've accepted me to be an actor, and that's what I've chosen, want to be, and I'm allowed to be, and this was just the price to pay. So I used to walk on the good days, muttering the lines that I was supposed to utter the following day, and enjoyed it for as long... and then my money ran out, and of course it was no longer possible for me to continue at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, so I had to find gainful employment of other sort – doing all sorts of weird and wonderful things. Anyway that's the start to my life.

AP: Right.

BM: Where else shall we go now?

AP: So right, so we've got... so you've left the...

BM: I've left the Royal Academy.

AP: You've left the Royal Academy...

BM: And now I've got to find some employment. Yes, well as I say I found some odd jobs to do, including working for Odhams, the publishers at the time... I wasn't particularly qualified academically, so my offers of jobs were pretty limited. But I managed to keep body and soul together and pay the rent. And it was then decided, one of... who became a mentor of mine really, he was a teacher at the borough polytechnic, but he also ran the evening classes, and he said 'there's a wonderful theatre', he said, 'out at the southeast of London, and it's called Theatre Workshop. And it's run by a wonderful woman called Joan Littlewood'. I hadn't heard of any of this at all. It really was off the beaten track. I'd hardly heard of Stratford East - I thought when he said Stratford he meant Stratford-on-Avon, as most people did at that time. And so I was taken out by Tom to see one of their performances. The performance I remember, it was Richard II, had Harry H. Corbett, who became famous as one of the Steptoe and Sons, becoming a son. But he was a very fine actor as we discovered. And he was playing Richard II. And they seemed to me... The theatre was a quaint old theatre, it was a good 100 years old, even then, but it was in disrepair. It was falling apart. Some of the chairs were held together by nails and things like that, or on a good you'd probably put your hands underneath so you didn't spring backwards. And I watched.

Now the first innovation was that when we went into the theatre the curtain was up. And I had never been into a theatre where the curtain was up. And I could see the set. And my first reaction was can't they afford a curtain. But soon my attention was grabbed, because I was now looking at the set, and I was scanning it and thinking 'oh that's interesting, I wonder what they're going to use that for', and things. And suddenly

you realise of course that's quite a cunning move, because instead of when the curtain goes up, now you've got all the actors exploding on the stage, and you've got to take in who's who, what's what, and the set – you've got the set out of the way, you know seeing. And then suddenly the actors did explode on the stage. They tore in. Not as if they'd made an entrance, they had come from somewhere – I don't know where. But the row that exploded on the stage had been taking place somewhere else, and was just moving across. And I literally – it wasn't difficult – but I fell out of my seat with excitement. I think the one sole surviving nail fell out! But I couldn't believe it, it just grabbed you.

It wasn't a large audience there, because Theatre Workshop wasn't well known, and indeed was hardly ever reported on by the national papers. But I thought 'this is remarkable'. They didn't appear to me - even in my callow youth - to be actors, they seemed to be people. They weren't wearing fancy costumes, the costumes were rumpled, they weren't sort of pristine silk and satin. There was a rival production going on at the Old Vic with John Neville in it, which up until then, before I'd seen Stratford, I thought was fine. It satisfied my leanings. But this was totally different. This seemed to be a rag bag of costumes, but not costumes, these were clothes that these people wore. And the language was dry but it was not beautifully spoken and toned, but was muscular and energetic, and drove the play along, and the arguments along. And it changed the course of my appreciation of theatre almost overnight. And Tom introduced me to one or two members, and said, 'Look, I think you should audition'.

AP: Now what was his full name, Tom...?

BM: Tom Vaughan. Tom Vaughan. Who was... as far as I remember now, was the classics teacher at the borough polytechnic, but did drama for the evenings.

So I auditioned for Joan one fine day. I was at Odhams I think. I think it was a Friday, yes it must have been a Friday. Now of course the theatre, there was nobody in it. When I'd first gone there, there was an audience there and the theatre looked as if it was live, and now this is a dead... there's nothing more dead than an empty theatre you know, devoid of actors, audience and everything. It's like... it feels like a tomb, come to life at night or matinées when it suddenly filled with excitement. I struggled up on this stage, and I could see even there that the walls were seemingly peeling with old paint, and there was dripping. And there was an oxyacetylene lamp dangling from the flies to provide light and heat. So I clung very close to the centre stage - not a bad lesson one, the best place on the stage is centre stage! - and I gave my all, including my audition pieces that I'd done for RADA, thinking 'well, it got me into RADA it'll probably get me through here'. Big mistake, because Joan in her youth had gone to RADA, and when she was about 16 and she turned her back on it, she said 'that's not for me, all that middle class Victorian hangovers', and she left. And as far as I remember she walked to Manchester, on and off and hitchhiked on Sunday and got herself employment in Manchester. So any offerings that I got via the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, as far as she was concerned, without, finished, didn't do me any good.

But what she did do, she said 'yes all right. Well, I've heard all that, will you improvise for me'. I had hardly even heard the word improvise, but I knew when she described what she wanted that I had done it – harking back to my days of the *Midsummer's Night Dream*. And I thought 'oh, this is fun' - I could use my own words. She wanted me to be an electrician or somebody who'd got pushed onto the stage totally by mistake. And I did all sorts of things, and I enjoyed myself. And I saw even then that

she'd perked up, she was more interested suddenly in what Brian Murphy had to offer than his version of Shakespeare and so on. But nevertheless she said, 'well, you're still rather young, and I think you've got a lot to learn, and I'm not sure that we have a place for you in here where you have to work very hard, and I need very experienced people and things. But I suggest that you continue practicing. What other interests do you have?', and I said I like drawing and things. She said, 'Well, do anything that's creative and artistic, do that. Go out, watch people, look at people in the street and do all those things'. So it seemed to me that was the big elbow. I'd been encouraged but there was no place. That was Friday.

Saturday morning a telegram arrived – this shows you what date it was; we had telegrams in those days! And the special knock of a telegram boy, and a telegram arrived and said, 'Join us on Monday'. I thought 'My God that's wonderful!'. I mean, I don't know to this day whether somebody had dropped dead, or got taken sick, or whatever, or Joan had a sudden turn around of mind, but... So I did, I joined her on Monday. And we entered into our very early relationship.

I was not prepared for anything that Joan... that the way that Joan worked. Not from my experience at RADA certainly, and not from my experience on the amateur stage. Joan introduced me... of course our bible was Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares*, this is what we read from each day. We did classes in Laben who I hadn't even heard of, we did voice... but it was wonderful, what I was now getting was a proper education in the theatre and all its needs – a voice, physicality, and mind development. It was like going to a drama school, but in the evening of course one eventually did a play in front of an audience – well they were pretty few, the audiences were in those days, the beginning of. But I did not know what she often was talking about. The points of reference I had no idea. But it was an education I would think, looking back on it, be like the best of a university education, but related to doing something practical as well. We read books. And those early days we did the classics. And the first play that I ever did was a translation of Lope de Vega called *Fuente Ovejuna* translated into *The Sheep Well*. Of course what I'd also learnt eventually was Joan and her partner, Gerry Raffles, and John Bury who was the designer, that they had communist links until Russia marched into Hungary and then people got disillusioned, and so those interests were severed. So there was very much a socialist attitude in as far as Joan was concerned in her theatre, and in her choices of theatre.

But we did the classics. In that first year we did *The Good Soldier Schweik*, which was a book by Jaroslav Hasek – Czech book, wonderful story about the Czech soldier. And we did *The Italian Straw Hat*, and what else... we did *Edward II*. So I had a grounding in many of the classics. I was mostly playing small roles, and in many cases many small roles. I often found myself coming on and meeting myself going off. I used to have to quickly double. But Joan encouraged that. And it also, it seemed to me, broaden my particular talent that I hoped was developing.

Audiences started to develop there, because they could start to afford to spend a little bit more money on advertising. But we didn't really hit the jackpot until Brendan Behan came into our life – an Irish poet, writer, reprobate, ex-member of the IRA – who sent a script to Joan. It was called *The Quare Fellow*. The quare fellow is a slang word, meaning the man who's about to be hung. And the play was a rambling day - two days - in the life of prisoners in Mountjoy Prison in Ireland, and the run up until the execution of this particular prisoner. And in that day we got to meet the prisoners, some of the prisoners, and the way they behaved, and they way they didn't behave, and their attitudes towards each other, and finally to the hanging of the prisoner.

It was a wonderful play. We rehearsed it, not in the theatre a lot of the time, we rehearsed it on the roof of the theatre. Joan wanted a huge... the equivalent to an exercise yard that a prison would have had, and the stage of course was too limiting in that respect. But she wanted to give us the freedom of being to walk, so we went onto the roof of the theatre, where we could see all the buses and cars and trams, all going past on the outside, and the calls of the market people. But eventually that all fell away as we concentrated on just literally being bored. I mean, that's quite an exercise. We just walked round and round in circles, totally bored, 'til we got bored. First of all of course we started making jokes until Joan said 'stop it,' she said, 'you wouldn't be allowed to make a joke, you wouldn't be allowed to speak. And if you are going to speak you've got to do it so secretly that nobody else will see you'. And so we did it like a game. We spoke... we asked Brendan how they spoke, and they spoke out the corners of their mouth. But of course they had to try and do it when they came behind the back of the warder, the warders. But there were usually two, so one faced one way, one faced the other. So it became quite a sort of game that children play, you know if you spot me you're out. So that's how we played. So we walked... Joan just made us walk round and round and round, 'til eventually each day we did, we got bored. There was nothing we could do except try and endeavour... we also tried to pass cigarettes to each other, those little dog ends, because that was the other thing they were in desperate need of. And that was a... so what Joan was trying to instil in us was what it would be like to be in a prison, not to act

[Interview resumes]

BM: And we rehearsed I think for about six or seven weeks. The play was being rewritten as we progressed. As we discovered more from rehearsals or improvisation, and we discovered more from Brendan himself who came and regaled us with all his stories of what happened, we mounted the production. We didn't know what we had on our hands. On the first night at Stratford East we had all the big criminals from the East End of London – the Kray brothers, notorious people – because they knew it was about being in prison, their interest was enormous. I mean, they arrived in Rolls Royce's and things like that. And what you would call their gun mo's, with their fur coats. Most of the seats had been repaired; they had to be because we were going to have a full house. And IRA had smuggled themselves in. They at one time I think had threatened to blow the place up, but in fact they came in to watch and observe. So you can imagine what a mixed audience. Now compare that to a West End audience of that period, which was everybody in black ties and white shirts and things, suddenly we got villains and IRA members.

And the play, oh it was amazing excitement throughout. At one point, to mark the passage of time, Joan used the National Anthem – the Irish National Anthem. And as it started to play we suddenly heard this sound like machine gun fire. And it was all the seats tipping up; they were all coming to attention. The rest of the audience were dumbfounded, they didn't know what the hell was going on. We got frightened because we thought they were all going to face us and whip out their machine guns, and that would be the end of us. But... and the cheers that went on at the end was extraordinary.

And the next day, because obviously that... all this pre stuff had got into the press, what was happening, and this was a premiere as well, so the national press couldn't miss out on that. There were rave reviews, and said this is... this is yet... we've found another Irishman like Sean O'Casey and people that. And Brendan was suddenly up there

amongst all the Gods of Irish writers. And the play was packed out – packed out for 12 weeks.

We had other plays to put on, but it was then transferred to the West End. It didn't have any stars in it, and it had a company. I think we were probably the only what could be called 'group theatre' in England. Group theatre was known in other countries, but not in England. You've had... we've got bands of actors, rep being together for a year, but this was a group of actors who worked solidly together for as long as possible. This was a group theatre offering. We went to the Comedy Theatre in the West End. We got more or less the same sort of reviews, but we didn't get the same sort of audience. Of course, the audience for the West End, it was much more comfortable middle class, and there were no stars to be seen, so some came out of politeness. So we ran for about three months, and then we went on the road for a little tour. And that was the end of that, until the next offering that Brendan offered of course was *The Hostage*. I'm going to take a pause now.

Remember that Theatre Workshop had no grants from anybody. There was no grants income. We had no grants, no subsidies – there weren't subsidies for the theatre back in those days anyway, but Joan would never have got them, not then, because she was branded as a communist, and therefore not entitled – good heavens!

It was always an embarrassment when Theatre Workshop went abroad. In particular we were invited to Sweden. I remember in my first season we went to Norway and Sweden with *Arden of Faversham*, an Elizabethan playwright, anonymous. They said 'bits possibly written by Shakespeare', but nobody ever really and truly knows. And we played in front of royalty there – the King and Queen of Sweden. And we would have to live on hospitality, because there was no financing of the production. And we stayed in people's homes - but homes that I'd never envisaged before. I mean, these weren't working class homes, or even lower middle class homes – these were very wealthy people's homes who sat down to a meal composed of about five different courses, and six courses. [Laughs] And schnapps, I mean I was drunk within ten minutes!

But we had a good time, and we were made very welcome, and we were very applauded. In particular in France, where in Paris they held an annual festival. And there were several awards given for this, and Theatre Workshop was a great favourite. They had gone the first time with, I think, *Arden of Faversham* - an earlier production of it - and *The Alchemist*, Ben Jonson's *Alchemist*. And the French critics just raved. And they received the Grand Prix award for that particular year. And they were promptly invited back for the following year. And we... as far as I remember, I revisited on three occasions. And they always were given an award. It didn't matter the RSC were also invited, we, Theatre Workshop, was the company. And they identified themselves with Joan's approach to theatre and her actors, and her sort of non-actors.

But we had a good time, and we were made very welcome, and we were very applauded. In particular in France, where in Paris they held an annual festival. And there were several awards given for this, and Theatre Workshop was a great favourite. They had gone the first time with, I think, *Arden of Faversham* - an earlier production of it - and *The Alchemist*, Ben Jonson's *Alchemist*. And the French critics just raved. And they received the Grand Prix award for that particular year. And they were promptly invited back for the following year. And we... as far as I remember, I revisited on three occasions. And they always were given an award. It didn't matter the RSC were also invited, we, Theatre Workshop, was the company. And they identified themselves with Joan's approach to theatre and her actors, and her sort of non-actors.

Joan used to label us all sorts of things in the beginning. As I say our bible was the Stanislavski, and we would read snippets from it and apply it to each... And with a play



we would break it up into sections as advised by Stanislavski, and we'd act out those exercises. And it seemed to work. Later on, when Joan got less strict with her choices of play, and started to make up her own... more of her own plays, and work with authors that were pretty raw - like Shelagh Delaney *A Taste of Honey*, she totally reshaped that, that was an early draft made by Shelagh - Frank Norman, *Fings Ain't Wot They Used T'be*, and probably the finest offering, which almost proved her swansong at Stratford East was the *Oh! What a Lovely War*.

So because there was no money, after these grand moments of triumph, particularly in Paris, we often came back to an empty theatre. There was no money to finance us for another season, and we all went out into the big wide world. And I had to start earning my living in the more commercial set up. I wasn't always together happy. I was happy with what they paid me, because what they paid us at Stratford East was really a hand out of the box office. Many companies today have said to me, when they say can you work for us, we haven't got any money but you must be used to that because this will be a share of the, you know the profits - if we have any. And I said I'm certainly used to... but I said even at Stratford East we did work for money. 'That's not what I heard.' 'Yes,' I said, 'the box office was shared.'. Not waiting for the magic word profit, that creative sort of exercise, but we did share the take. And sometimes the take at Stratford East was mostly made up with the sixpence - the six penny piece was what was the cost of a programme! So sometimes the money from the programme, the money from the box office, and any other source that night, was spilled out onto the table, and it was all shared out at the end of the week. And we'd be paid in six pennies. So one was used to that. But by going out into the commercial world of course, one did get paid better.

And television was now into being, and one got work on television. That didn't please Joan very much, because she said it spoilt us. Her wonderful actors and she said you know that commercialism, you're beginning to act now. She hated... she called it 'acting'. She said 'you're acting now, stop it'. And one knew exactly what she meant. As one got the experience one could hopefully do both. One could go out into the commercial world and act, and come back to Stratford and not act. So it was good for us.

Because of the lack of money... I think in many ways Joan was able to exercise huge economy obviously, and John Bury in his sets... John eventually went to Stratford - the other Stratford - where he could spend thousands on a set. But at Stratford East he could only spend a few pounds. But it seemed to me, because of his genius as a designer, he could produce a set for a few pounds which was perfect and suited the play and suited Joan, or he could produce for you know, at Stratford East, whatever... er, Stratford-on-Avon. But it meant that you cut your cloth according to what you had.

Joan was... Joan wanted people to understand what theatre could and should be about. And if you could find that with her then you were there for life, and you worked for her, and she would constantly want you back. If you couldn't you just went, if it wasn't your cup of tea, and many people did go, and they went on to become big names in other fields. But it was a wonderful training ground.

And it seemed to me the finest - and still for me - moment was creating *Oh! What a Lovely War*, because this was going to tell the story of the First World War. This was back in 1963 when we embarked upon it. It was a radio programme called *The Long, Long Trail*, and Charlie Chiltern was the producer of it. And Joan was away - Joan had taken a sabbatical. She'd had enough working at this old Victorian corset, as she called Stratford East. She said it was limiting. She suddenly decided she wanted to break the bounds. So she went abroad, and went traipsing round the world. And Gerry got hold - Gerry Raffles - got hold of this... the transcripts for *Long, Long Trail*. And we sat round;

many of the old members of the company sat round, and read it. There wasn't a great deal to read because it was geared for radio, so it didn't tell us visually what things could be and would need to be in the theatre. But it gave us the background to the history. And when Joan heard that Gerry was going to embark upon the story of the First World War she came back, and she said, 'well, there's only one person who could do that, and it has to be me'. Of course she was quite right. But she wouldn't attach her name to the exercise. She was supposed to be incognito. We were doing *Lovely War*, but we would not be doing it with Joan Littlewood. Now we had to research, that was the wonderful thing working with Joan, that if you worked on any plays, Shakespeare or otherwise, you had to research. This is why I thought it was like being at the university. And you could choose your subject. I remember at one time I chose... I like fencing, and I like fighting, so I said 'oh well can I do all that?'. She said, 'yes, all right, you go away...'. And then the next day we'd all contribute and put into a pile, or you know as it were, all our information. And we had our bits and pieces, and how appropriate it might be to this play. I can't remember what I did about *Lovely War*... it must have been something about guns or something. Anyway, it doesn't matter. So we all read everything and we contributed. And we each day, we would try something along the lines of, it might just be how soldiers would have felt stuck in the trenches - back to those days of working on the roof and trying to be bored you know. Well, those poor soldiers were stuck in the mud, up to their eyes in water. And we had to get used to that. Not being bright and witty, but just dull. But out of which somebody might come out with a remark that could be regarded as being funny. But it was a long, long process for us to find out how these soldiers had suffered.

Now the brilliant thing about Joan was that she wasn't going to do it... she hated the colour khaki, she said it's not a colour anyway, it's a nasty, awful colour. She knows why it was there, because it was the most one that was synonymous with earth and green and things, it's almost a camouflage. But she hated it, and she said it would be blasphemous for us to portray these soldiers who had died in the war. She said there was only... the only people who die on stage are clowns, because they don't really die. They're clowns that go through the motion of attending to die, or keel over, but they don't really die. And she said that's presumptuous for an actor to do that, particularly with reality. So she and the designer - Una Collins - decided that we would be pierrots. Pierrots had come into being at that time in the 1920s I think, or maybe a bit earlier, so they were very much on par with the period.

And it was a perfect setting for a clear stage. We had a totally empty stage, with two arabesque pieces in the wings, outlined in bright lights. And the *pièce de résistance* was really was a ticker tape - like the New York Time Square, which now they're pretty commonplace. They're on the underground aren't they; they're on trains which tell you your next station. But that was almost unseen and unheard-of at the time. And it was almost the width of the stage. And on that ticker tape would go the actual facts of the war - the losses of a battle: Battle of the Somme, 200,000 men killed on the first day; gain 100 yards - and all that. So while we were cavorting and being pierrots and pretending to be soldiers and things in front of that, there behind this for the audience was the reality, was the truth.

What we never knew as actors, until we saw the show ourselves later by another company, was the effect that this double image was having on an audience. Because you can as an actor be upon the stage and do things, and get your reaction from them - either crying or laughing. But if somebody's upstaging you, you don't know what the hell's going on. And of course there was... there were photographs, huge photographs, blown up photographs lowered of the actual soldiers who had suffered in that war, and the people. The facts were gleaned during rehearsal.

This show was never set in tablets of stone – every day Joan would work on it, even when it was running at Stratford for three months, and then later in the West End, then on to New York, to Paris. Every day she'd work on it, to either freshen up what was in the show, or throw out some of the stuff and bring in fresh stuff and things. The thing was of course, people did say 'why did you do it about the First World War and not about the Second World War, which is closer to your audience?' So we said, 'well because the facts aren't available' - they were not in the public domain. The First World War facts were which is why they chose the time to do the show.

And the show, when it opened at Stratford East again, was a bit like that night I said of *The Quare Fellow* - there were strange echoes with some of Joan's productions. It seemed to be all the way that Joan had worked in the past, through improvisation, through Stanislavski and variety – she loved the music hall and she wanted her actors to be able to be... she loved the commedia, the actors of Italian and French actors who were able to improvise. She managed to knit all these different methods, artistic manners, in this one particular show, and to recruit a company to do just that. For the core of her main acting people she chose her old company members. But she needed to boost some of the voices, the singing voices, so she got people from the BBC to do that. And she got one or two extra people who were better at dancing. So she had a very rich cast, talent. And when it opened on its first night... now as I said earlier Joan's name was not attached to the posters. It said Oh! What a Lovely War premiere, Stratford East, directed by J\*\*n L\* and so on. But it was pretty clear to most people that it must be Joan Littlewood. And when anybody of any experience watched that show on that first night, they knew who had directed it.

We didn't know, as actors, what effect we were going to have on an audience. When you do a play, particularly a play with just acting it out, you've got some idea what affect you hope it will be, but not with this one. Because we were constantly changing costumes, we were as actors, as pierrots we were playing sometimes soldiers in the trenches, sometimes generals, sometimes vicars, and all sorts of people we had to be, by a simple change of costume. We had a basic costume, the pierrot costume, but we had to have bits like that fellas put moustaches on or tin helmets on and things, and capes over them. And we had in the wings on either side boxes made with our names on them. And in those boxes went our appendages as it were: our moustaches, our belts, our tin helmets, and those things. And the scramble in the wings, if you'd have been there, it was like Waterloo Station – everybody nudging, because the first night none of this had been practiced. We'd got through a dress rehearsal, but Joan changed it after then, before the evening night. She said, 'no, that's not working, we'll have to try this'. Well, by that time we could have done anything, if she'd told us to come on standing on our heads we'd have done it. But we weren't practiced at being in the wings, finding the right thing to put on. And there were many times when people came on with the wrong moustache or the wrong helmet, but that didn't matter. So there was a scramble, and the most happiest, safest and reassuring place to be at that night was on stage – not in the wings where most actors often want to go. We thought 'ah thank God I've turned up, I must have the right moustache on, if not it doesn't matter!'. And we did the show.

There was a strange reaction. I don't think we got any particular or many laughs along the way. We did at once at one point when there was a scene where the recruits were drilled by a sergeant that Victor Spinetti played, who spoke in gobbledegook, because when he heard the tape of a real sergeant giving instructions he said, 'I can't make head nor tail of that, it's all gobbledegook'. And so Joan said 'well do it like then'. And that's how he did it. And that got gales of laughter, and all the soldiers desperately trying to understand what he was saying, and go through those motions. But generally speaking we thought well it's polite, I guess it's done all right. The curtain came down, good

applause, went back to our dressing rooms. There was a friend came in who ran a company, who was a director/producer for television, but he also ran much later a theatre called 7:84, John McGrath. And he came in, knocked on the door, and he stood just within the door, and he was white faced. He said, 'Hello', and we said, 'Oh, hello John, how good to see you.'. Of course actors after a show, all the adrenaline's going and buzzing, you want to know what's happening. 'Did you like it?' and he went, 'I did not realise that we had lost so many lives.'. And we said, 'Oh right...'. he said 'it said, ten million up there.' 'Well yes, yes, that's true.' He said, 'I can't believe it.' and then he carried on in that vein, he hardly... he was just looking shell-shocked. And eventually he turned, and he went out, he turned back again and he said, 'Oh by the way, I just thought you were all brilliant.' and left. And we all said to each other 'do you think he liked it, what do you reckon?' we said 'I don't know, he seemed a bit taken aback didn't he?'.

Well, of course that was the effect that that show had had on its audience, which we could not know about because of this ticker tape spelling out the real truth. And the reviews the next day were just... well, if anybody's got any sense or sensibility they'll tear down Buckingham Palace tomorrow night, the Houses of Parliament, and everything. This is the greatest anti-war thing that's ever been done, or made. And indeed as we... it was... Joan as I said shaped it, changed it, altered it.

We went to Paris with it. The first night in Paris... Paris still regaled themselves – they dressed up for occasions in Paris. We were at the Opera House, Sarah Bernhardt Theatre held 2,000 people – totally packed. We didn't [start] at eight o'clock; we didn't start 'til about quarter to nine, because they amble in, and they'd got their chocolates, and they all say hello, wonderful, eat and drink champagne and things, and eventually sit down. Bourgeois audience sitting in front, they were going to watch Oh! What a Lovely War or Joli Guerre as it was in France. And off it went. Well they... I mean they spoke English better than we could speak French, but some of the stuff we did try to learn to do in French. But they didn't miss any jokes, as far as they were concerned. And they saw more jokes because they were at the English expense, which the English didn't always see. And it went well.

But at the end, as we came to the final moment, when there is a line up of French soldiers and the officer in charge says, 'Pour la guerre de France, à l'avance mes amis', and we all start to march forward, and one soldier says, 'Yes it's like lambs to the slaughter.' which is what they said. Most of the dialogue in it was taken verbatim from diaries and things like that. Like 'lambs to the slaughter', and suddenly one soldier goes, 'baa, baa', and another one picks it up, 'baa, baa' and so on, until suddenly you've got a whole line of soldiers filling this enormous stage, because we had add to it, suddenly coming towards the audience going, 'baa, baa, baa.' Apparently it was just a fantastic sight.

And then at the end there was machine gun fire, and we all keel over. Not as soldiers, as clowns, sort of just went... And then we started to come to, very slowly. But by that time, again like back to Stratford East on the Quare Fellow night, there was this enormous noise of machine gun fire it seemed to me, above our track of machine gun fire. And I said to Murray, I said... I thought... Murray Melvin who I was next to, I said, 'Bloody hell, what's that? Are they shooting us?' He said, 'I don't know.' And as we came up we looked out, the entire audience, 2,000 in all their finery and regalia, had come, stood up, come to their feet. And they threw everything at us. They threw their programmes, their gloves, their chocolate boxes. 'Bravo, bravo!' it went on and on and on. And when there was a pause we then sang, as we were programmed to, 'Adieu la vie, adieu l'amour, adieu toutes les femmes.' And of course they went mad again,

because we dared to try and sing in French, one of their songs. And there were tears in everybody's eyes. And the effect...

You suddenly realise that this particular show, wherever we took it... we took it to East and West Germany when the wall - the German wall - was still up... that this was bigger... This show was bigger than anybody in it, and anybody had ever made, and that we were ambassadors for peace. And that was one of the biggest strengths and thoughts and things that Joan could do. And I think made life easier for many who followed in her footsteps. Braham Murray I know in particular did a show - Braham Murray runs Manchester - and he said that he was inspired by this particular show, and he did one about hanging too, and set it in a circus. Suddenly everybody realised that the theatre could be anywhere, do anything, it doesn't have to be contained within three walls, it can be just a... it can be a circus ring. And you can tell a piece of history, providing you've got the right approach to it, and providing somebody like a Joan Littlewood, who I do consider was a genius, in charge of it.

Now it's sad that, strangely enough, I don't think *Lovely War* can be repeated, in any way. Not with that script. It is totally wrong. If anybody's out there wanting to know, don't do that script. Find your own, do what we did, research the war and come up with your own version of it. Don't try and emulate or copy us. You either try to do it better, but probably end up by doing it worse because you won't have that connection. You can't have... many of those lines that weren't verbatim were sometimes the inspired ad libs of the particular actors of the moment, but they've gone down in print. And it's base... because plays of that nature are not literate plays, they're instructions, they're like commedia plays. And you would need to go through the entire process of finding out what that war was about, and come up with your own particular version. It would probably prove to be worthwhile, but nowadays probably you can come up with Second World War, or maybe any other. It would be very relevant today if you could relate it, because so many wars have been taking place any rate. But Joan depicted and could tell you and show you what could happen on stage, with the right sort of ingredients and earthiness and... There we are.

AP: Great. That's fantastic. Now you and Clive Barker were friends I believe.

BM: Yes, yes. Sadly of course Clive died about three years ago didn't he?

AP: Yes.

BM: And he has a library named after him doesn't he, the Rose Bruford.

AP: Yes.

BM: Yes, we joined together. We were at Theatre Workshop together, at the same time. He lent towards stage management, but had to do acting because we all had to do everything. And we leaned rather heavily upon each other, because at the end of a day's rehearsal for *summary* and we said, 'Do you know what she was talking about?' [Laughs] He said, 'No, I think we should go home and try and sort it out.' and we used to. In fact we made life easier for ourselves by getting a flat - just off the Whitechapel

Road, which is not very far from Stratford East – in order to exchange you know, the day's work and events. And work our way through it. Clive was more inspired in many ways, because he went on to a more academic and directorial, and teaching aspect rather than... he wasn't particularly, by his own admission, cut out to be an actor. But he was a huge... gave a huge input, influence, by Joan's efforts and things.

So we did. We actually did... when we did a play... I think it was *The Hostage*, when we were doing *The Hostage* in town, we were at the Wyndham's Theatre, and we took... once a week we took a room round the corner from there, a rehearsal room with any of the other actors who wanted to join us. And we just used to improvise sort of classes and things, and examine scripts and things like that; just to carry on what we thought was Joan's work. And at one time I think we even had ambitions to run our own type of theatre, but I guess we weren't committed enough – well I wasn't too much. But Clive did, because Clive went on to teach all over the world in fact didn't he, and was very clever it seemed to me. And much... the games he's put down, because some of those games that we did in rehearsals and things I don't think were... had been... found any printed form other than what Clive's done. So he's done a lot of work it seems to me, that's very good and useful for students.

And of course as I say, Joan's theatre was totally different from the other type of theatre that was in existence at the time. There was still rep – repertory companies – and that was a good training ground, just to know quickly you could learn your lines. But totally different attitude towards...

AP: Did you do repertory?

BM: Yes I did, I did. That was my other introduction to commercial... [Laughs] not that it paid a great deal of money either. A bit more than Joan could afford. But it gave me the lesson in each week you had to do a new play, and so that broadened ones you know, capabilities. And I enjoyed it, very good for learning process – trying to learn... I actually tried... I actually learnt *Iago*, I had to a play *Iago* in one of our offerings at weekly rep. We were granted two weeks – it wasn't strictly speaking two weeks, it was about 12 days because you've got a weekend in between – 12 days I learnt playing a play in the evening, and learning *Iago*, which is the longest role in Shakespeare. And I had a little... there was of Chord of Temple edition of Shakespeare, it was a pocket-sized one, very handy. And for my costume I told the designer could she make me a little pouch that could contain my Temple edition. So I carried it with me as a crib, so whenever I got into the wings, out came my little... have a look at the next line. [Laughs] On one occasion - because I used to smoke in those days - I remember going into the wing – how casual could you be – going into the wings, and I was having a quick draw on a cigarette then, and suddenly somebody said... and I was studying the lines, and saying all the... and suddenly somebody said quick you're on. I said, 'Oh Christ!' And I took the cigarette and I stuck it behind my ear. And I put the Temple edition into my pouch and marched onto the stage. [Laughs] And suddenly I got a very strange look from Bob Lang who was playing *Othello*. And suddenly he turned on me, long before he gets that fit scene, you know where *Othello* goes mad and started... and he clouted me round the head, and knocked me for six. And we carried on afterwards. And when I come off I said, 'What the bloody hell did you do that for?' He said, 'Because your wig was on fire.'!

[Laughter]

BM: Lots of things happened like that in rep. It was a good training ground, but the best training ground obviously had to be Joan's.

AP: Yes.

BM: So to have the combination of both it seemed to me, it kept me going, which is why I'm... possibly one of the reasons why I'm still working at the ripe old age. [Laughs] How are we doing? Oh my word!

AP: Yes, we've done about an hour so...

BM: Have we? My...

AP: Yes, I think so...

BM: It's probably... go wrong. I think Theatre Workshop, during all that sort of period from its late fifties into the sixties, became more and more fashionable, audiences started to go from other parts of London across to Stratford East. It became quite the place to be. And many, many transfers took place into the West End ever afterwards. And there was a great shake up in the West End with theatre, probably from Joan and the Royal Court, with John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* as always marked as a stepping, altering stone. And the comfortable 'who's for tennis' type theatre was probably... was gone. And theatre was getting more rough and raw. And dare we say more obvious working class actors... There were probably more working class actors than we ever saw earlier on, but they didn't aspire to be working class actors. You had to be particularly speaking, well spoken English and be rather middle class for the sort of roles that were... in particular at the West End. Working class characters were usually relegated to being taxi drivers or chauffeurs or maids or butlers, and things like that. But the theatre started to become more associated with present day. Not always out just to make you laugh or smile, or be entertained.

But also a strong influence upon what was happening too was television. The developing of television, lots of people were staying at home to watch this wonderful new discovery. Not all homes had them at the beginning obviously. But it grew very quickly, and certainly by the sort of seventies there was a lot of interest in television, which was great for actors, because actors could supplement their... Salaries in the theatre had never been particularly high except for the superstars. For the general people, the cast, it would... it could be gainful employment for a possible year if you were in the West End, and a regular salary, but not vast sums of money. But money could be earned, and rapidly and quickly possibly in television.

And that affected what audiences wanted to see in theatre. And it changed their attitude... I think theatre became... it always seems to me, it always struggled to become first more realistic in its presentation, because the theatre that we're referring to, early stuff like the commedia was never realistic – it was clownish, it was poetic. Shakespeare's theatre was more on a grand scale, all his tragic figures are grand figures, they're princes and kings, and people of that nature aren't they? If you want working

class, or lower classes you go to Ben Jonson to see what the Elizabethan theatre was really about in that sense. But we had less of that in more modern theatre, but it was creeping back in again, because of television. Television was realistic, it was more at home with... well more at home, dare we say it, moved from realism to naturalism. And theatre was now moving more to being naturalistic on the stage as well. So much so that some people said they couldn't hear the actors. Others said 'oh it's just like real life'. And like everything else, when there's a new movement it swamps you, there's a huge deluge and everybody's doing it. And suddenly the grand theatre is disappeared, and the actors aren't capable any longer of being able to be really big and grand in general.

So I feel like today there is... except now of course our theatre is mostly music hall, which is more moving back into variety and commedia in a way, because everybody's now got to sing and dance, and by crikey they've got to sing and dance haven't they? Eight shows a week. I can't believe some of those dancers. It's much more physical theatre, and effects. I don't know whether that was totally led by cinema, because the cinema is led by effects and things like that. But it seemed to me that theatre right up to the seventies was undergoing a change, and moving more into the realms of naturalism. And even Shakespeare was being cut back down. Not doing it on a grand scale, doing it in a chamber-like place, talking to each other. Which brought out another area and element of Shakespeare's truths and things like that, but it meant a different type of performance from the actor.

AP: Yes.

BM: That about all?

AP: [inaudible] that should cover us.