

THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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Joy Cox King – interview transcript

Interviewer: Phillipa Wilson

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Theatre-goer. Amateur acting; Birmingham theatres; Grand Theatre, Wolverhampton; My Fair Lady; play-goers clubs; theatre-going; ticket prices; Variety; well-made plays.

Phillipa Wilson- Mrs. Cox King, do I have your consent to place this interview for open access in the National Sound Archive?

Joy Cox-King - Yes that's fine.

PW - Ok then, I'm just going to ask you about your experiences of theatre between the time 1945 and 1968. When did you first start going to the theatre?

JCK – Well, I started going to the theatre after the war, after '45 of course because during the war, the theatres were closed and being bombed in Birmingham, I lived in Birmingham at the time, so it was after the war really... and the first show I went to see, it was at a place called The Hippodrome. In Birmingham we had a Hippodrome which had a huge stage and could have big shows on, and then we had a very small theatre called The Repertory Theatre, and then a middle-sized one called The Alexandra Theatre. So this first one I saw was at The Hippodrome because at The Hippodrome they usually did sort of, they were acts really, you had singers and dancers and speciality acts. And I was taken there with my Mum and Dad shortly after the war (starts to laugh) And I'll never forget it because they, this speciality act came on and this lady, who was very beautiful and exotic from some far away place, and wore very little, she had these huge snakes. And these snakes sort of wrapped themselves round her and she did a sort of snake act, for want of a better word.

PJW – Oh right!

JCK – And I was absolutely terrified! My Mum was terrified too and we just sat (laughs at the memory) and held hands and shook until these snakes had been taken off and my Dad thought it was really funny.

PJW – How old were you at this time?

JCK – Yes well I'm just thinking, you see I would have been eleven when the war finished, so somewhere around about twelve-ish I should think

PJW – So is it about 1946?

JCK – Six –ish

PJW – Yeah

JCK – Yes forty six- ish, yes. My Mum and Dad were very keen on the theatre actually. And so after that snake lady, Miss () was her name, we then, my next experience was a pantomime and that was also at The Hippodrome, and that was lovely, because I

suppose today they would call it pro-active in that they'd say (using different voice) 'where is he?', and they'd shout 'he's behind you!' and they'd say 'where? I can't see him!' And we'd shout 'he's behind you!' and he'd say 'I can't see him!' and we'd scream 'he's behind you!' and you just felt you were sort of part of it, so I loved that. So the theatre had really got me, really. And then there was this smaller theatre, The Repertory Theatre in Birmingham. It was a little bit shabby actually, and quite small, but it was very comfortable and we used, we used to go there quite a lot really. (Pause) I was thinking about that and I wrote something about it here. I was saying I think I liked it because aft- during the war, everything was very drab and very dark. And it was lovely to go to the theatre because it was a touch of glamour. You'd got lovely sets, and you'd got lovely costumes. And you'd got stories often set in really rather pleasant surroundings, so that when the curtains would go back you'd often hear 'aaah' (exclamation of wonderment) because the set was beautiful, it would be some lovely manor house, or something like that. So it was a (pause) very, a very nice experience and also of course (laughs) there was ice-cream at the theatres which we hadn't had during the war. And you know the little cartons of ice-cream you get now if you go to a show, and they're about a pound, they were four pence, four old pennies, and that's approximately (pause) two and a half pence (laughs) in today's money for an ice – cream! So, could I, I've actually got a few, a few programmes. I haven't got a Repertory one; no I haven't got a Repertory one. (Examples of the programmes are shown. These were photographed.) So after the pantomime, I think the next big one I went to, was (pause) was at The Grand Theatre in Wolverhampton. These were two really special ones. It was (), a ballet really and it was the Royal Ballet but what was so special about it, was that the choreography was by Frederick Ashton, who was the choreographer, and is still regarded in ballet circles as tops. So I suspect somebody who collects Frederick Ashton memorabilia would quite like that! (Laughs) That one. And then also at the same theatre, I had my first taste of Opera. It was () and () that was beautiful. As I say it was my first experience of Opera and my first experience of Ballet, were at The Grand theatre in Wolverhampton.

PJW – Do you find that, when you were experiencing theatre, did you tend to go and see more of those sorts of things rather than actual plays?

JCK – Well, of course, (pause) sometimes you'd just be invited you know, as guests with friends and that, so you would just go and see what they go and see.

PJW – Did you go quite regularly to the theatre?

JCK - Yes, quite regularly but mainly to see plays because my parents loved plays

PJW – Oh right

JCK- And I'd go with my parents. And (pause) this is a programme from, again from The Hippodrome in Birmingham and you can see the size of the cast, there's forty people in that cast. And Tony Britton played Henry Higgins oh! And he was absolutely gorgeous when he was, when he was a young man. And he played it beautifully. Look at that, isn't that gorgeous!

PJW – He is nice looking!

JCK – Ooh he is lovely and he had a voice that was, it's, I always think of it as like chocolate really (laughs). He has this wonderful voice. And of course he went onto be very big in television. (Pause) Also, I think my, my favourite theatre had to be The Alexandra in Birmingham, and I couldn't really tell you why (pause).

PJW – Was that, was that the largest one? Or was that the one that was-

JCK – The middle one

PJW – The middle sized one

JCK – The middle sized one, but it had been done up, or re-furbed, as they call it today. And so it was, it was a lovely experience to go to The Alexandra.

PJW – Was the overall experience - sorry to interrupt- was the overall experience very nice then?

JCK – Yes

PJW – Did you go as it, was it, almost a treat to go to the theatre, would you get dressed up?

JCK – Absolutely, I, I've made a note of that. I've said it really was (pause) how, people didn't just turn up, (laughs) you know, in jeans and trainers. You made an effort and you got dressed up. I mean my husband used to (laughs) put his bow-tie on when we went to the theatre and he'd buy me a box of chocolates, and we'd go and have a meal, possibly before, or sometimes after the show, depending on how long the programme was. And it was a real treat to go to the theatre because it was quite opulent really, you'd got these beautiful (pause) velvet curtains, and often in those days you had music too in the interval. With live musicians

PJW- Yes

JCK- A little trio or something like that. (Pause) That was lovely and also what I found was, was very interesting, on the back of every seat in The Alex Theatre there was a pair, they call them opera glasses, they were like this (indicating memorabilia of which there are photos) but you couldn't sort of adjust them, they were set, they were really like glorified magnifying glasses, but if for some beautiful young man like (laughing) Tony Britton on the stage you could have a closer look! And you had just put a sort of coin in, and I can't remember how much, and this clip, clipped back, and you could use them while you were there. So that was very nice too. And then there was a bar of course, and (pause) the whole experience was pleasant really I felt. And the plays, (pause) I felt, I was really brought up on plays that had a beginning and a middle and an end.

PJW- What they'd call a well-made play.

JCK – Oh, well yes and I really still like those sort of plays because I suppose that was what I was brought up to appreciate. And you'd, you would come out of the theatre, in that sort of evil had been, had its retribution, and good had come to the fore and you thought yes, that was really good! And you'd then be talking about it for days afterwards with the people you'd gone with.

PJW – So it would have quite a big impact on you?

JCK – A big impact really, it did. So these were three programmes (these are indicated again by the interviewee and photographed) The Hostile Witness, The Right Honourable Gentleman and Roar Like a Dove

PJW – When do you go and see these?

JCK – These were in May 19, May and June '66. Now what was so nice about The Alexandra Theatre was, it was like a repertory company in that there was a group of actors and actresses, which came together as a group, a company, and were at the theatre for a whole season. And every fortnight they did a different play, so they were actually sort of playing one play in the evening and rehearsing for the following fortnight.

PJW – Yeah

JCK – And you'd go, so we used to go, every fortnight.

PJW – Did you go with your husband was that?

JCK – I, well I used to go with my parents until I was married, and then after I was married my husband was very keen on the theatre too. (Pause) So, so that it was lovely in that you got to- it was the sort of the sort of family feeling almost (laughs) because you'd seen these actors play so, so many parts you know, and sometimes they just played a butler or a gardener, or a very sort of small part and then the, another time, they, they'd play the lead. So in a way it was a sort of apprenticeship in that they learned their trade by doing it.

PJW – Yes

JCK – Which I thought was very, very good really. It was super.

PJW – (Pause) Are there any other major productions that you can remember from the period that really stuck out in your mind?

JCK – I think that one that stuck out the most, strangely enough, was *My Fair Lady* because it was so huge.

PJW – Yeah, was that 1964?

JCK – Four, yes. There was such a big cast you see, of forty and it was spectacular really, I'd never seen anything that large on a stage before. So I would say that, as a young person made the biggest impact. I mean I've seen things since, that made more impact, but then that's out of the time limit that you're asking for.

PJW – Yeah

JCK- You were just asking up to '68. So I think, I think that () and that, (laughs) were the two, the two most spectacular things that I enjoyed. Although it was a sort of just nice level of enjoyment every fortnight, just going to see, see what they did each fortnight.

PJW – So for you, would you say the sort of entertainment on at the theatres that would characterise the period would be musicals and that kind of thing and-

JCK – No-

PJW – The spectacle or?

JCK – That was a sort of one off I think, that *My Fair Lady*, I never saw another spectacular in Birmingham I must say, during that time period. (Pause) This was the main thing, (indicating theatre programmes) just plays and the, The Repertory-

PJW – At the Alexandra?

JCK – Yes, and also The Repertory did a similar thing. (Pause) And The Alexandra, again why I liked it so much was because, they started a play-goers club actually, and it was affiliated to The Federation of Repertory play-goers societies and it was a sort of social thing to start with and then they created an amateur dramatic group attached to the theatre. And it was lovely really (laughing) because I trod the boards myself in-

PJW – Oh wow

JCK - In (pause) J.B. Priestley's *When We Are Married*, I played Annie Parker. I've even got my press cuttings (laughs).

PJW – Oh wow!

JCK – So, I think that's partly why I liked The Alexandra, it embraced you.

PJW – Yeah

JCK – You felt really, you belonged to that theatre. It was lovely.

PJW – So there was a general sense of involvement then with the theatre when you were going in, at that time?

JCK – Absolutely, in fact I think (laughs) I'm a bit of a frustrated actress! I think if I hadn't gone to live abroad and then got married I might have perhaps done something in that way because I did love it so.

PJW – What, what time was it sorry, that you were doing the acting?

JCK – This was in the sixties too I think.

PJW – Oh right.

JCK - The sixties, it was much round that time, was it the sixties? Wait a minute. (Pause) '59! '59, it was before I was married yes, '59 when I was doing the acting.

PJW – Oh right. So, did you know quite a few people then that went to the theatre?

JCK – Yes, yes.

PJW – Did you have a lot of friends that would go-

JCK – Yes

PJW – On a regular basis as well?

JCK – Yes, yes, my, it was a sort of thing you did, I mean we all sort of had ballet lessons, we all learned to play the piano, we all did horse riding (laughs) we all went to the theatre! It was a thing you did.

PJW – Do you think its, it was more popular back then, was it, it was more of a, thing people would do more regularly?

CJK – Yes I do, and although though people didn't earn huge salaries like they earn today, the prices of theatre tickets weren't astronomical as they are today. I mean we had somebody come, a well known name, recently come to a theatre in The Lake District. Forty pounds for a ticket! Well I mean, I think that's a bit beyond the pail quite frankly.

PJW – Do you think that places it out of the reach of quite a few people?

JCK – Yes I do, I do actually yes

PJW – Yeah

JCK – As I say, although people, we didn't earn a great deal, the ratio between the cost of seats and things, was not, not as great. I mean look at the price of programmes, six pence and one shilling, you know. And today you can pay about two pounds fifty for a programme.

PJW – Often five pounds!

JCK – Five pounds in London I suspect?

PJW – Well, I think, when I went to the theatre last week it was, I can't remember how much, I think it was about four or five pounds, something like that.

JCK - Yes, just for the programme.

PJW – Yeah.

JCK – Yes.

PJW – So, between '45 and '68, do you think it was, do you think it was more open to a, were there quite a lot of different types of people going to the theatre because the theatre tends to be associated with the middle classes-

JCK - Yes.

PJW – Was that the case or did it appeal to a wider audience do you think?

JCK – Well, I can only speak for myself (laughs) I suppose we were, we were sort of work- well, we like to think of ourselves as middle class but we worked. I mean my father's professional but, so the people, that were in my life, would be similar types of people.