

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Brian Legge – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Kate Bullivant**

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Theatre technician. Belgrade Theatre, Coventry; The Coliseum; Billy Cotton; Tyrone Guthrie; Howard and Wyndham; Peter Hall; Kiss Me, Kate; Moss Empires; musicals; Nottingham Playhouse; repertory theatres; Royal Festival Hall; Royal Shakespeare Company; Royalty Theatre, London; The Empire, Sheffield; stage lighting; Strand Electric; tours; Peter Ustinov; variety; variety managers; weekly rep; Julie Wilson.

KB: OK, this is an interview with Brian Legge. Can I just confirm that we have your permission to conduct this interview?

BL: You do indeed.

KB: Then I'd like to begin by asking how you began to work in the theatre?

BL: Well, I always decided I wanted to work in theatre but not for a theatre. I knew working for a particular theatre would be very restricting and rather boring, particularly in the West End theatre with the long runs. I always wanted to work for a firm called Strand Electric who were the major firm in stage lighting. It had been founded by some theatre technicians in 1914. It was very theatrical firm, but it was a manufacturing firm. I wanted to do that from the age of about twelve.

I did a lot of amateur work and things like that. In fact, I suppose my [first] professional experience came before that - 'professional' as so far as I got paid for doing it! - when I was fifteen. That was lighting variety shows for the hop-pickers who used to come from the East End of London down to Kent and it was their kind of working holiday on [The] Whitbread [Hop] Farm in Kent [which] put on these top-rate variety shows for them to keep them on the camp in the evening. I am very proud: one of the people that appeared in one of these shows was George Robey and he was an old man, and he only played one night, but I shall never forget him, because in a wet marquee with one thousand people in it he didn't need a microphone and wouldn't use one. But I'm rather proud to have lit George Robey. But I really started working for Strand Electric as an apprentice in January 1950. I was helping them to rewire the London Coliseum, which was not very far from Head Office just around the corner. Head Office was in King Street in Covent Garden and at the time the American musical Annie Get Your Gun was running at the Coliseum. Well, for the day job I used to work for Strand Electric rewiring the building, in the evenings I started working for the Coliseum on what is known as 'shows', where you're paid for what you do for a particular production [corrected by interviewee 'performance']. And I was very lucky, because the Chief Electrician - Eric

Gridland - there was very good to me and moved me round various different jobs so I gained a lot of experience at very early age, thanks to one man. It was good fun, but excellent training for a youngster. Of course, I was earning more money lighting shows than I was for Strand Electric. There was one snag - the mid-week matinée, when in theory I was working for both employers simultaneously, but the Strand Electric foreman turned a blind eye. Good fun of course, the leads in the production were Dolores Gray and Bill Johnson and I actually had a third little sideline job for Bill Johnson - he used to pay me something like half a crown for every ten autograph books I signed for him. He reoccurs later on... well, it was not so much later because when I was still working for both people at the Coliseum... the next production was Mister Roberts, a quite serious play. Memorable, because it had the best realistic set I have ever seen - which consisted of a ship - a cargo ship - from the bow forward, full size, on stage! Quite a complicated plot, a drama with comic relief.

KB: Did you prefer working in dramas, comedies or variety theatre?

BL: It doesn't make a blind bit of difference to me in the slightest. Lighting is there... it is to assist the performer, actor or variety act in their performance. You assist in the best way you can, without drawing attention to yourself. I hate to say it, but if you notice the lighting, then it's lousy because it shouldn't draw attention to itself.

KB: Oh, OK.

BL: After Mister Roberts came one of my favorite musicals: Kiss Me, Kate. Unbelievably, at the Coliseum there was so much old equipment, which was there from when it was built in 1904, so I had the only lighting control [corrected by interviewee: the additional temporary lighting control]. The only technician that could actually see it was on a perch platform above the prompt corner - and I had 24 portable dimmers and I was the only person able to see the stage lighting! Lovely show, it had its ups and downs. On the first night, they discovered the notes of the overture as originally written had to be the same as the National Anthem, so the audience stood up - as did the Duchess of Windsor! [corrected: Kent] - and collapsed when they got to the fifth note! That was easily rectified of course. But Bill Johnson was back at the Coliseum playing Petruchio. Kiss Me, Kate is a mix up of a company touring Taming of the Shrew and on how this reflects on their private lives as well as their acting. It was a rather good show. Well Bill Johnson played the Petruchio part and Patricia Morrison was playing Kate/Katherine - I'm sure she would have insisted on Katherine in full! - Bianca was played by somebody not even on the billing called Julie Wilson. On the first night of Kiss Me, Kate it went very well, and it took about four curtain calls. Then somebody in the audience shouted 'What about Julie?' And Julie Wilson - who wasn't even on the billing [corrected: deleted] - she came forward and took seven curtain calls. Whereupon the curtain came down and Patricia Morrison went for her eyes! [Laughs] But in fact Julie Wilson had the best part, playing Bianca - she had all the best numbers to sing as well. That one night made her. You don't often see that happen overnight - one performance.

We had one interesting event in the run of Kiss Me, Kate because of the scene changes. There was one scene, once again featuring Julie Wilson, as Bianca singing 'Why Don't You Behave' - which is seven verses - and she started on side of the stage and slowly worked her way across the stage and then goes up the spiral staircase at the opposite

side. And the Coliseum was a very wide stage, so four on the flat, three going up the staircase. Now because the next scene... this [scene] was supposed to be backstage of the theatre but it was played very far onstage [corrected: downstage], about ten to twelve feet from the footlights - a very big cloth, it just had some bricks printed on it and a 'No Smoking' sign: a typical backstage view. There was a spiral staircase on either side of the stage on what is known as a 'boat truck', which is a very shallow rostrum which has wheels underneath and pushed on sideways. One night - it wasn't the first night, fortunately! - Julie Wilson in the wings waiting, a bit of the bottom [interviewee: rail] of the cloth came down from above and stuck on the top of one of the spiral staircases. So there was this curved wall and two spiral staircases. Julie Wilson comes on, and because I could see what was happening I didn't bring up the stage lighting - just a follow spot on her face - to hide the mess. The unfortunate thing was, as she got into the song we knew she was going to go up the spiral staircase and sing another verse on each landing. Alf Ward the Coliseum Stage Manager grabbed a saw and went up the spiral staircase in the dark sawing away at the bottom rail (which is the bottom piece of the cloth) and poor Julie Wilson was following him up the same spiral staircase, with just a spot on her face singing her heart out. And there was sawdust coming down in front of her face as Alf Ward sawed through the wood. The wood actually broke exactly on the applause!

KB: That was lucky.

BL: Very lucky it was! And that endeared Julie Wilson to all the theatre staff I assure you. From Kiss Me Kate I actually had to do National Service in the Air Force. Go back a bit first, because... meanwhile, to The Festival of Britain in 1951. Important to my generation because we might have won the war in theory, but [the] Austerity of the war was continued - there was still food rationing in 1953 [and] on clothing and things like that! Recovery after the war was really slow, the Festival was really the first thing that was quite mad and entertaining and was not part of Austerity. Now it didn't have much impact outside of London - much more impact inside London - it even had a dome, the Dome of Discovery, which was considerably better than the Greenwich Dome in 2000, or was it 2001?! [Laughs] But the Royal Festival Hall was built as a major concert hall. Officially it was designed by the Chief Architect of the LCC [London County Council], but in fact it was the man who did most of the work was the architect, Peter Moro. And it was intended to be just a concert hall. Fortunately a few months before it was due to open they appointed a manager, a Mr. Bean. Mr. Bean was a very sensible man and didn't come from the LCC, or the civic world, but he knew his entertainment world. He knew there was no way he could make the Royal Festival Hall viable with just classical music. And at the very last minute before it opened, alterations were made so there could be other forms of entertainment in the Royal Festival Hall. We were all very fortunate Mr. Bean had that foresight. But there were snags with the Royal Festival Hall, because it was staffed by employees of the London County Council, and the Festival Ballet normally have a season at Christmas at least, and sometimes in the summer as well. Unfortunately this didn't really go with the London County Council terms of employment - the staff worked on shift work. So you would have a dress rehearsal in the afternoon, and when it came to the performance it was completely different staff. Very difficult, and there was nothing Mr. Bean could do about that. The same type of thing happened at Christmas and Boxing Day - these people didn't have to work public holidays you see. The amount of times I lit the Royal Festival Hall on Christmas! It was usually Where the Rainbow Ends. The thing was, for a performance there was always a need to be... a large amount of scenery in the middle of the stage and the back of the

stage [as] there had to be something to hide the organ console. But there you are, it was fun and an experience.

KB: So you said about your National Service, how did that fit in with your theatre career?

BL: Well, National Service, we all had to do it. Two years - it was [later] reduced a bit to eighteen months - and I was very lucky as it worked out. I was an apprentice, I could have got deferred till I was twenty-one, but at the apprentice rate of pay it was better for me to do my National Service at eighteen, nineteen. And my living expenses were paid. And when you are that age you are very age-conscious, someone two years older than you is really ancient. [Laughs]. So I did my National Service in the Air Force. In fact I'd been in the Air Training Corps school, which got me out of the square bashing training. But when you finish that you go to the personnel selection - what trade are they going to train you in. Well, I had a bit of luck. When I went through the door to see the officer who would choose, it ended up being a guy the same age as me who had been in the same school as me, and in my last year he had played Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*. Now, he didn't want anyone else to know he had played a woman's part, and nothing was ever said, but he gave me the choice of what job I'd like to do! So I opted for radar and spent nearly two years in Yatesbury in Wiltshire. Because... Officially I was a instructor, but in fact what I did was run an RAF Theatre with a captive audience of three thousand people! And we actually had two companies alternating, so we did a play with one company, a play with the other and then a variety act [corrected: show] and repeated and repeated and repeated. The two companies were formed because actors too had to do National Service and we could get them posted onto our staff if they wanted. Many of them chose to and some variety acts too, so we ended up with professional companies, really entertaining everybody else. The strange thing was, sometimes we'd indulge ourselves and do a play we thought would lose money. And it always seemed to make more money! The stronger drama was more an attraction to the people than the light comedies and the farce.

KB: Really?

BL: Well, farce is much more difficult to do. It always surprised me, but I enjoyed it. We had a radio line through to BBC West of England and they used to do a broadcast from the Little Theatre - the Yatesbury - on occasional Sundays. One of the broadcasts was one of the first appearances of Benny Hill. He had a strange life, because in the same year he appeared in the Chiswick Empire way down the variety bill; four months later he came back to the same theatre as top of the bill - a very fast rise did Benny Hill have! Well, far more fun than tinkering about with any form of radio!

KB: And more money than working as an apprentice!

BL: Yes. But I finished that and returned to Strand Electric and off we go again. That is when I went up to Sheffield to rewire the Sheffield Empire, which was a variety theatre. And surprise, surprise I also worked for the Sheffield Empire in the evenings for the shows, which gave me a good six months experience of twice-nightly weekly-change variety. This was a strange world... a good experience, but was an experience which was

soon to disappear. In those days 80% of major theatres were controlled by three major companies: Moss Empires, The Stoll Corporation or Howard and Wyndham. Howard and Wyndham were the up-market... and not so much variety - they did on occasion to fill in, but were doing quite major productions and touring it round their theatres and their affiliated theatres. The three companies I mentioned all had the same directors – Prince Littler, Emile Littler and Stewart Cruikshank. They were different companies, but if a variety artist made a mess of a performance in the variety theatre he was condemned from all the rest of the theatres as well. In fact, Moss Empires was very well run – not just a money-making machine; it was a very well run company. Every night, the timing and response of each performance was reported back to head office – that way they nurtured the best and disposed of the not-so-good.

Part of the strange world of the variety theatre was the barring clause. All the companies worked this barring clause. Basically, if you appeared at the Sheffield Empire, you wouldn't be permitted to appear at another theatre within a thirty mile radius for four weeks before your date in Sheffield and after your date. Howard and Wyndham terms were much stricter - not in time, but no radio or film showing or television appearance six weeks before and after. They were a very responsible firm. As I was saying, Howard and Wyndham was the up-market end of the business, taking what was known as 'number one' tours. Sometimes really a variety bill all around one man, which toured as a company rather than individual acts. If you were the last act on the bill you were top of the bill, if you were first on after the interval you were last on the bill because half the audience were still coming back to their seats! This was a world which slowly disappeared, that had been a very successful part of the entertainment industry before and after the war austerity. A 'get away from it all' and that... and there was nothing on television to keep you at home because there were few televisions. I was very pleased to have taken part in that. Television [then] had very little impact on the theatre attendance.

Before I go on to that, I should say [that] running in parallel with these companies with the touring theatre there were about three hundred weekly rep companies. Now, some of them were very good - some of them - and many of them were otherwise. Good ones were the Citizens' Glasgow, Playhouse Liverpool, Manchester, and I cannot forget the Rep Birmingham (I mean the old Rep Birmingham) and there were certain centres of excellence – Cheltenham, and the favourite theatre of 'actors' was the Theatre Royal Brighton, which was a well-run theatre, really run by H.M. Tennant. Shows coming into the West End would play two weeks prior to London at the Theatre Royal Brighton or two weeks after the London run. But these were exceptions. Most reps were little more than two planks and a passion, and they could, if they were non-profit organizations, get a small subsidy from the Arts Council. This was a lot of them - many of them were [unprofitable] even if they did not mean to be! But this [subsidy] was only £1000 a year maximum so hardly much of a subsidy. It was valuable in areas of Scotland where the population is thinly dispersed, and helped Dundee Rep Company to have a second company that toured round.

KB: Do you think the subsidies made quite a big difference?

BL: Yes... It also happened in the England in the West Country – again, population is in widely separated areas. I think in the Arts Council very valuable things [were done] in these areas. Some of the others were a rather waste of public money I think. But a lot of that ended with the vast improvement in television. There were relatively few television sets around - there were a few programmes worth watching from dear old Auntie BBC;

they did some variety programmes - not many, but some. Billy Cotton did a variety [radio] broadcast on a Sundays for the BBC. But they had to be done live – even sound recording – BBC would not waste sound recording facilities on the variety department. And Billy Cotton, whose opening lines were always 'Wakey, wakey', that came about because of the BBC! Because he used to be driven down from Manchester or perhaps even Glasgow - from wherever his variety performance was - while all the band members had to come by train overnight and they were all bleary eyed, and this became his catch-phrase for the next ten years! [Laughs] All television was live, except there was a technique of scanning 35mm films [so that they] could actually be shown on TV - it was not done after, because it cost the BBC too much money. There was the Baird system of television which was before [corrected: i.e. pre-Second World War] was not live, but one minute delay, this was because it was taken on film, the film was immediately developed and the film was scanned, all within one minute. Today we are so used to video and recording being so accessible to everyone, it is difficult to remember that television pictures could not be recorded.

KB: Did you do any work for TV, perhaps some lighting?

BL: Well the BBC, yes [corrected: BBC: no; ITV: yes]. The common thing between theatre lighting and television was the lighting control. The theatre did very nicely out of television actually, because television - particularly independent television - paid an awful lot of the tooling costs for the theatre's usage. The technology wasn't that different fundamentally: in the theatre something was always switched on, and you controlled intensity through dimmers; in television in those days you balanced intensity on dimmers and switched it on as required - it was a very simple difference. But the sheer volume required for manufacturing meant a lot of things were made differently instead of being fabricated, they were pressure die cast. The theatre benefited tremendously out of that.

The big change for television happened not intentionally at all - it was the coronation of our present monarch, Queen Elizabeth II. [It was a] last minute idea for an outside broadcast, but it really took the nation by storm - there weren't many television sets around, but everyone wanted to see the coronation on the television. Meaning most houses with a television set had all their neighbours round to see it as well! But that created demand for television sets – which were not usually purchased, but hired, by monthly charge. But it was a bit hard on the BBC: they televised the Coronation, and in the same year – 1953 if I remember right – Parliament started the idea of 'there must a second television channel' – Independent Television – later in the same year. It didn't happen overnight; Independent Television went on air in London first - then spread about the country - in 1955. It spread to different areas - the Midlands, Scotland - considerably faster than the BBC had even put transmitters in those areas. And of course it was totally commercial-based thing. Commercially a company who had been awarded a license for a particular area had no income until they were on air – so most of the 'big boys' went on air within six weeks of getting their license to transmit, and technically, that was pushing it! Quite a few theatres were converted into television studios: Theatre Royal Glasgow for example, home of Scottish Television. And the BBC took fright; suddenly at last they had competition and realized they had to pull their socks up. They took studios over in Hammersmith... you can't really call them experimental studios, it was so the BBC... so they could learn new techniques. Then they took over Shepherds Bush Empire as a television theatre, because there were some productions where you needed an audience reaction. And this was all while they were planning the television

centre in White City. From the performers' point of view, this business of it having to be... Live transmissions were actually an opportunity to... theatre actors and some of them took that opportunity. It is strange how some of them took to an alternative medium, and others steered very clear of it. Those with film experience could take it in. But without recording, you did it right the first time - there was never a second opportunity. The hidden thing [was] that television did plays far better than your local 'two passions and a plank' local reps. They did have higher standards – and this was the end of the rather disreputable rep companies. I did mention... There were some commercial rep companies: Harry Hanson and Arthur Brute [were] just in the commercial. I think Harry Hanson went bankrupt in the end, but he had twelve companies at one time. But not... a lot of swapping theatres: if someone knew a part and they were free then they'd travel up there. But of course variety theatre... some theatres sold out to television, but the major variety theatres survived; what didn't survive was the second-rate variety theatre. They all started doing strip shows, or at least shows which title implied a strip show, and more or less killed themselves off. In 1950s major cities had two variety theatres: a Moss, a Stoll and/or a Howard and Wyndham and also a second rate - not that they'd call themselves that, but a number two variety theatre, with less attractive bills which made a living. These ones were the ones that lost in the variety theatre. And the reps - as I said – was... because of the higher standard they got in plays on television which really killed them. The third rate was killed off immediately the second rate died a slower death. But not all lost to the theatre. Now we'll have to go forward a bit.

KB: You've already disclosed how you helped in making [corrected: opening] the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry...

BL: Well, the Belgrade Coventry, it was a very important theatre, it was the first new full scale theatre built in this country after the war. It was a civic theatre - there were some others, but it was the first major theatre built. The Belgrade was also a very brave thing for Coventry to do. It was named Belgrade because there was a lot of support from Yugoslavia, including all the woodwork for the theatre. It also had for the time very much better Front of House facilities for the audience: there were foyers and a very good coffee bar there. I was involved in it, from the electricity - wiring and lighting control. The company who moved in was the... known as the Midland Theatre Company, who previously had no home at all, they just moved round various places. And to some extent that did not get the theatre off to a brilliant start, because the company had to grow into a proper, pukka theatre. Like all things, they cut the depth of the stage which was going to be a large constraint, but of course it wasn't a constraint at the guild after you've been playing school halls and technical colleges. Unfortunately Brian Bailey, who did a lot of work there, was killed in a car crash. There was a lot of difficulty keeping that momentum up. It was a very important thing. Much better than the first theatre built in London: the first new theatre built in the West End was actually the Royalty Theatre.

KB: Why was that?

BL: Well, it was at the bottom of Kingsway. It was the site of The Stoll, which was built as an Opera House - built by [Oscar] Hammerstein the Second – no, the First - but it lost an awful lot of money by 1912. It was very grandiose - it was a cinema for many years; in the fifties it was home to Porgy and Bess, which was the nearest thing to opera that

ever played at The Stoll! In fact, that was due to be knocked down and there was a planning requirement [corrected: decision] that they could replace it with offices, but they had to incorporate a theatre on the site. The theatre that was incorporated on the site was the Royalty, which today is known as the Peacock Theatre. To the theatre technicians the Royalty Theatre was quite important, because it opened everybody's eyes to the fact that architects would design a 1930s theatre auditorium if they could get away with it, (they were rather better at building cinemas than theatre auditoriums). But Strand Electric made an awful mess of it: the stage lighting installation in the Royalty Theatre could have equally been put there in the 1930s than 1960s, and there was a big row internally - which I promoted, I must admit! But it did lead also to - one of the contributory factors to - the foundation of the Association of British Theatre Technicians, which has never been a trade union, it is a loose association of theatre technicians, just to give a voice - I must admit, originally it was to kick architects to build decent theatres! - and it is still going strong. It does do a lot of work on health and safety. One of the things which was lost when the London County Council became the Greater London Council and the same thing in other metropolitan boroughs - the people who looked after the licensing of theatres [corrected: and places of public entertainment] all that they passed out to the borough surveyors who had never been in a theatre - many of them - and... I mean, I'm not knocking them, but they missed what it was all about. But particularly the London County Council, there was core of eight men who looked after theatre licensing; all knew their theatre well, and used to say, 'You can't do that; why don't you do this?'. They got cursed occasionally, but they were helpful rather than just, 'You can't do that. Close the theatre!'. The Royalty Theatre nearly did not open because all the exit doors opened inwards [Laughs] then they reversed them to open outwards - a fundamental safety requirement - and they managed to get the license half-an-hour before it was due to open! It was not a pleasant experience, because in the first production was Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne. Who were... shall we say 'very near their sell-by-date'! In a production called *The Visit*. The real snag was it was directed by Peter Brook. Now, Peter Brook is a marvellous director - he can communicate to actors - but Peter Brook can never communicate to technicians. You can't help the man, because he can't express what he is trying to achieve. Very difficult - always tried to avoid working with him; it has always been a painful experience. In more recent years he has had a more technical man associated with him as a production manager; the communications have improved. An excellent, clever director, but could only communicate with actors - performers I should say.

KB: Were there any companies or people in particular you enjoyed working with?

BL: I think the most important thing that happened about that time was when the Royal Shakespeare Company decided to open a London outpost. It was... Peter Hall was a part of this and they opened in the Aldwych Theatre; it was altered quite a bit and given a deep forestage. The object was, they were running the theatre of Stratford-upon-Avon, of course, but to keep the nucleus of a company they had to find challenging work, which was not necessarily in the Shakespeare repertoire. This was Peter Hall's effort: in the late 1960s it opened (just) with the *Duchess of Malfi*. Peter Hall was a delight to work for, so different from Peter Brook. A young Peter Hall, a young man, good ideas, but he conveyed to everybody what he was trying to achieve - his vision. Everybody could put their [contribution] in and help. We could all work in the same direction. He was a sheer delight to work with. As he became director of the National Theatre, and became - much to his annoyance - more and more of an administrator, that disappeared... inevitably, I suppose. But it was always good fun. They opened with *The*



Duchess of Malfi just before Christmas, and then Twelfth Night came into the repertoire and The Devils and they played in what is known as repertoire. You know, one performance of this, next night a performance of that. Now, that is what is known as 'short term repertoire' - and then perhaps had a fourth production and one of the original ones that did not receive critical acclaim got dropped out. So you tended to have three, perhaps four, in the repertoire and it continues on and on. Unlike the Germanic drama and opera repertoire - 'long term repertoire' - they do a production, they do a few performances and put it into store and after a year it comes out again. It may stay in their repertoire for ten to fifteen years until someone decides to do a new production. That's long term repertoire. This is the case for opera companies and to a certain extent Sadler's Wells, but that all changed when they moved to Coliseum - Sadler's Wells is so small, the sets kind of got lost on the stage at the Coliseum! That is a different form of theatre and a very expensive form of theatre. But so is short-term repertoire. If you're doing Duchess of Malfi on the Thursday night, and Twelfth Night on the Friday night, and The Devils on Saturday (hopefully matinée and evening) the amount of movement - of scenery and costumes and actors - is very considerable and expensive. And very soon it was, 'play three performance of this, and three performances of that, and maybe just two of that because it is not that successful', but drama repertoire has never really caught on in this country... But it is a terrible financial burden, because of the cost of change. In Germany they have theatres built to cater for it - the scenery does not go out of the theatre, it stays onsite. The only German theatre in this country is the Churchill, Bromley, and all the facilities have never been used - it does not fit into our way of thinking. But Peter Hall's effort at the Aldwych was very important to the theatre overall. This was all part of a scheme: a very good idea by the City of London that they needed to have something to get people to the Barbican complex in the evenings. But the Barbican was a complete disaster: as they were building two main contractors went broke! Started long before the National Theatre's foundations were actually sunk and it opened years afterwards. And actually the Barbican Theatre, when it opened, did not have one piece of stage lighting equipment which was still in current production! [Laughs] It was too big a contract to handle. There is a funny story about it, because the... Peter Hall was with the Royal Shakespeare Company; eventually the RSC moved into the Barbican Theatre, but meanwhile Peter Hall was by then director of the National Theatre. But Peter Hall had bought one of the first penthouse flats at the Barbican, so he actually lived on top of his rivals! The director of the National Theatre lived on top of his rivals the Royal Shakespeare Company underneath! They're all good friends really.

The Aldwych was very exciting... Actually, there was other things going on: at the Royal Court, George Devine and Arnold Wesker... I remember he had a lovely thing, Arnold Wesker: technically, everyone thought that if you could only project scenery and light the actors this would be the cure to all problems of the theatre. But technically it was difficult to achieve it, but everybody wanted to be the first, including the Royal Court and the London Palladium. We made six of these very expensive [scenery] projectors; two went to the Royal Court and two went to the Palladium - they did not know about each other. Arnold Wesker... it was Chicken Soup with Barley actually, and the background was projected and claimed first scenery projection in London. At the Palladium, Liberace had the same projectors which projected behind him as he played piano. At exactly the same time at two different theatres! [Laughs] But it does not work, because the human eye can see the difference between pigment illuminated and an illuminated picture like a television screen or projected background. You look past the actor to the background, and that is not what the theatre is about, is it - the background is there to support the actor! Similarly, Lord Snowden did a production using photographic scenery: it doesn't work, it is too true. The audience expects a certain level of artificiality - a bit over the top - and pure images don't work... abstract images can, as

long as they do not attract too much attention to themselves. Sometimes technology can hide a lot of defects actually.

The patron saint of stage lighting according to me is Saint Loie Fuller. She was a rather stout American actress, who wasn't a very good actress, but made a very, very successful career of basically extending her arms with canes, and veils all over [ed. her body] extending out over her hands and dancing around on stage – but the whole performance was made by lighting, projecting lighting on to the folds of her clothes. There are a few acts today which are more technology than talent, but she kept it up for twenty-five years.

KB: That's quite impressive!

BL: So good for her! And of course the technology was rather more difficult to achieve in her day. All projected things on stage – clouds, flames - they all go back to Loie Fuller. Actually there is a direct line. Her electrician was Percy Bogis, who trained Frank Weston of Strand Electric and he trained Eddie Biddle of Strand Electric. There is the mixture of engineer and artist mixed together and visualisation of how it can look. But it tends to be distraction. It does have a real purpose in St Joan, where the wind and clouds change direction marking a change in circumstances... It is very difficult to achieve: it would be much easier to do with a flag and pull it with some cotton one way and then pull it the other way! But there we are, interesting days.

I suppose the next major thing that happened was Nottingham Playhouse: when that was built it was another... pointing to the future.

KB: Why was that?

BL: It was 1963, and they were quite tied together [corrected: 'the first of the purpose-built regional drama theatres]. Strangely enough, the architect was Peter Moro who did the Royal Festival Hall, but he made a much better job of Plymouth than of Nottingham Playhouse. Nottingham Playhouse it is very dear in my memory because of the first production of Coriolanus, and more importantly the director Tyrone Guthrie. I have told you about Peter Hall and how he could explain to everyone what he wanted and everyone could help. Guthrie was similar, but he was like an animate elderly school master in a public school, who gets the maximum out of everybody without ever raising his voice. The man was very persuasive and drew the best out of every performer. And it was a real joy working with him. Coriolanus is not... well, John Neville was the lead actor - he was there for a long time actually. The very opening performance - to me it was the first performance, but I believe it was a charity preview - was rather interesting too because with a Royal visit like that everybody has to be in their seats half-an-hour before the grand entrance. There had already been a row because the city council wanted a recording of trumpets when she entered the auditorium. Guthrie was having none of it: 'You can have real trumpeters, but you are not having a recording of trumpeters' - quite rightly! – but everyone was sitting there waiting, and we got a phone call: she was going to be half an hour late. There was a hurried conference backstage - which I had to come down from the Front of House, because the lighting control was at the back of the stalls - came down and joined. 'What should we do, should we start Coriolanus or not?'. The interesting thing was, Peter Ustinov had lent his name to the Nottingham Playhouse as one of the directors, but just to help get it going rather than

an active involvement, and he was there. I was rude enough to say 'she must have found a decent pub on the way here!' - because she was a great drinker, was Margaret! - and I remember Peter Ustinov saying 'Well, I'll go on if you like and entertain the audience.'. And I know he went on stone cold and everyone said 'Thank you, thank you thank you!'. Because we had the set for Coriolanus, I said to him, 'What lighting would you like?'. He asked for a pool of light into the centre of the stage and 'Give me a stool, and a table with a glass on it'. Peter Ustinov went on stage stone cold, nothing prepared and just rambled on. And you could not say what he talked about, because he went from one thing to another, just rambled on and rambled on and had the audience eating out of his hand. Such a marvellous story-teller. In fact, when Princess Margaret arrived they did not want Peter Ustinov to go! [Laughs] But he stood in the breach, nothing prepared - just the marvellous kind of man that he was. I can recommend his biography Dear Me to everybody vaguely interested in the theatre, because - unusually for a biography - it is Peter Ustinov: the essence of the man comes in print not just in the spoken word. But Nottingham Playhouse was the start, the first regional theatre there. Others followed of course but not in the same time period.

Well what is the common link between 1950s theatre and today? There is one production. And that is the production of *The Mousetrap*. It actually opened at Nottingham Theatre Royal in October 1952 prior to its London appearance. That theatre seated 1416 people, it must have seemed quite the wrong production for such a large theatre! In November it moved to the Ambassador's Theatre London with 470 seats, and in Nottingham it got slated actually: 'amusing enough little play'; 'little play, no great depth'. If you saw it on the end of the pier on holiday, you would be amused, but amused rather than sent anywhere. And it is still running today: an unbroken run. It did move from the Ambassador's Theatre to the St Martin's Theatre - as those theatres are side by side, it moved about fifteen feet sideways! Virtually a similar sized theatre, but it is quite unbelievable that it has continued - people must be going to it because it is running so long. 1952 to 2007, what a run! Previous record for the longest run of performance was *Chu Chin Chow*, which was at least a musical[-comedy] during the First World War.

KB: Would you say on the back of that tastes have changed or have they remained similar?

BL: Yes, tastes have changed of course they have. Everyone [corrected: Many] thought it changed with *Look Back in Anger*, which was not true at all. But there are some much more worthwhile things in the theatre today. One thing I didn't mention with the variety theatre - from the variety theatre performers' point of view, fifty-two weeks a year was a slog: if they were good they got summer season. If they had a good agent, they got a summer season: they were static for perhaps two or three month by the seaside, in the summer. The one thing that was certain, all the variety theatres - except where one of those three groups I named to you... [corrected: all variety theatres played pantomime at Christmas. Some...] had got two theatres in the same city. Then one of them played a musical the other played pantomime. Even the reps tried to do pantomime in the Christmas [season]. And that is very much dying away now. It doesn't matter what the title is very much, but that is the introduction to the theatre for an awful lot of young children, so do not knock it. The first production I ever saw was *No, No, Nanette* in 1937: I would have been four when I saw it at Southsea, but I still remember it and it probably sparked something off in me. I cannot say 'I was theatre mad at five', but I certainly was by the age of twelve! But I have enjoyed my working life. Meanwhile... I

have not mentioned stage lighting, but it is unbelievable the change between 1950 and today in the equipment used: the amount of equipment used and the methods of control. In those days there was no thing called 'memory control', where you can light the stage, press a button and it will remember it forever. These days you can't live without that. And more and more sources of lighting, where you can adjust the [corrected: tilt and] swivel remotely and even plot it in, because it does not matter too much about... Because one of the things about lighting is that it does not matter too much about the detail. What matters - is important to audiences - is, when there's a lighting change how it ties in with the performers. If you think that one performance is the same night after night, you would be surprised: Monday nights often run ten minutes shorter than the rest of the week, except Wednesday matinées which is full of coach parties. Audiences do vary, and there is something that travels between stage and audience [corrected: and vice versa]; I don't know what it is. I was made aware of it with the Sadler's Wells Theatre [which] became English National Opera and opened at the Coliseum - the Coliseum, which - you may have gathered! - is close to my heart! Anyway, I was there on opening night, and I think it was Rigoletto - every opera I see seems to be Rigoletto! - but it was totally obstructed by this scenic designer, Derek Jarman. It didn't add anything to it, it just got in the way. And I was there on the first night and it was quite an important occasion to me, to see this lovely theatre into a new era. But on curtain call everyone was applauded, when Derek Jarman decided he would prance on the stage - and he was not supposed to - and that was too much for the whole audience, and I joined in everybody else and booed him off the stage! That is the only time that I have ever booed in the theatre and I am quite ashamed of myself, but I was totally justified.

KB: It was regarded as the golden age of British theatre, did it feel like that at the time?

BL: I think it depends on your age. There are certain different things, I think we have a good theatre around at the moment, but I do get a bit worried about there being too much subsidy to make directors hungry. Today it is too easy to waste money... I don't know... There's a marvellous choice, and London is really unique: very fortunate we are here, there have been forty theatres in the centre of London since 1800, and there are still forty today. Not the same forty, but what a choice - there's something for everybody! And that's the main thing. I think I've influenced the German Theatre. The German theatre had a three-year training course for its technicians, and Strand Electric's German company used to pay their fare, and hotel bill for the third-years to come over to this country for a week and I'd show them around. I'd try and speak German, they'd try and speak English and by the end of the week we were the other way round. One of the things was to always take them to a show with some technical interest - but also bearing in mind that they were not fluent in English, so I'm afraid you didn't take them to Haymarket - and then the next day go backstage and show them how it was done. I always remember... it was about the sixth year I was going to do this, I was sitting in the office looking at the paper thinking 'What on earth shall I take them to this year?'. I only said it to myself, looked down at the paper: Jesus Christ Superstar. I said to myself, 'At least they'll know the story!', and I bought fifty-four tickets for it. I hadn't seen it myself, but I took them, and it totally bowled me over, and it totally bowled them over. The techniques used were so different from what they were used to, which was very, very conservative. But that has spilled over into their productions in recent years, that kind of approach, a new look at long-term repertoire. They enjoyed it, and I think it did them good, and in fact caused the demand in German theatre - German drama - for British directors. So it's a small world really. I mean, I opened a theatre in Venezuela... they had

a theatre in principle, but didn't know how to run it. I've trained Arabs in theatre, Turks [too], but you always find someone with that spark and they build on it, whether it's a performer or not [corrected: or a technician].

If anybody surpasses my Saint, Loie Fuller, it's Shirley Bassey. Shirley Bassey is the real professional. She knows - obviously - her music and songs, but she knows what she wants for lighting. And if she doesn't get it, she knows a few Anglo-Saxon words you and I shouldn't want to understand!