

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Nick Hern – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Alec Patton**

**25 June 2007**

Publisher, academic and theatre-goer. Actors; Bristol Old Vic; Bristol University Drama Department; Chips With Everything; Glasgow University Drama Department; Heinemann; Hull University Drama Department; National Theatre; The Old Vic; Harold Pinter's plays; publishing drama; refreshments; Royal Hunt of the Sun; Royal Shakespeare Company; Peter Shaffer's plays; Kenneth Tynan; The War of the Roses.

AP: ...say for the record, this is Alec Patton interviewing Nick Hern on 25th June. Just start out... yes we're rolling here. This stuff terrifies me!

NH: Yes, me too.

AP: Start out with your earliest experience with theatre, either as a spectator or as a practitioner, going to... I mean, that you remember.

NH: Yes, yes sure. Well, if pantomime counts, my parents religiously took me to the circus one Christmas and then the following Christmas it was the pantomime. So my first experience was pantomime I think. Actually in some ways I think I value the circus more [Laughs] but that was my first...

The first theatre I remember going to, very, very early on - I mean, really early on, before I was six - I remember being taken to a children's play called The Silver Curlew in a theatre in Camden Town, which may even now be that music club at the north end of Kentish Town, which I've since been to more recently to see Bananarama perform. And my father took me; I think my mother may have been pregnant with my brother. And it must have been a matinée. It would have been about 19... it would have been before 1951, and what I chiefly remember was there was almost nobody there, we were one of about six or seven people in the whole place. And they'd done extraordinarily well, because I still remember the Silver Curlew, who was played by a woman in a kind of silver leotard, and being very graceful and birdlike on the stage. So that's it.

Then I think we can cut to when I was doing school plays. And I remember being taken by my parents to the Old Vic - I must have been about 12 or 13 I think, so that places it [in] 1956 - to see Shakespeare. And for the life of me, though I've tried, I can't remember which one it was. But that bore quite good fruit, because then when I started to get interested in theatre and was doing school plays again, I remember going... taking myself off to the Old Vic. So this is something about 1960 I think, when there was a resident company at the Old Vic doing Shakespeare. And I could have tried - and

probably should... can if you want - dig out programmes for those if you need them. The way we'd better play it, probably, is you'd better come back to me if you want programmes of any of these, because I have actually managed to hang on to programmes of most of the stuff that I've seen from that moment on, from late teenage.

Then the next thing, I think, I remember was [at] my school – which was a boarding school – [and] not enlightened, but there were a few liftings of the Alcatraz mentality. In the sixth form we were kind of taken up to London – we were about 25 miles outside of London – [as a] small party of six or seven. And we were then allowed to choose where it was we went.

And I remember choosing to go to the Royal Court, which even in my locked-away environment in boarding school I knew was the kind of place to go. And I saw Arnold Wesker's *Chips with Everything* in its first [production]. So that would have been probably 1962.

And I was very... I mean, I was very, very struck with it. I was lucky because I was [determined] to go to the Royal Court whatever was on, and I happened... you know, I still think actually it's his best play in terms of the structure. I mean, those autobiographical plays we all know about are amazing for [their] passion, but I think they're probably a bit clunky, and they get by on [that] passion.

But my memory of *Chips with Everything* - which actually I don't think I've seen, [though] I may have read, since - is that it was quite a well-constructed story. And it was very, very athletically done. I remember that was one of the chief things I remember. God, you know, the stage...! Up 'til then it had mainly been men in tights, you know: and it had all been up here in the mouth, it had all been about the words. And I loved the athleticism and... there's an episode in it where they raid the cookhouse...

AP: Yes, there's a thing... that it's all silent raiding the cookhouse yes.

NH: Yes, yes, that's right. And that stays with me. As I say, I haven't seen a production since, so that stays with me, the way they kind of combined the climb over the fence, it was just lovely. It was terribly liberating, these young – presumably quite fit – actors. Wasn't there a story at the time about them being trained by a Regimental Sergeant Major?

AP: I hadn't heard that.

NH: Yes, there was. And it actually made the papers. John Dexter, as I now know it was, although at that time I had no clue even very much about who... well, I kind of knew who the directors were, what they did but I had no... [Dexter had] got in a Regimental Sergeant Major with a... I think I can even remember his name, I think it was Regimental Sergeant Major Britton, suitably. I may be collating two news stories, but he was famous for having one of the loudest voices on parade. And he dragooned these actors, and they did drill with him.

NH: Yes, there was. And it actually made the papers. John Dexter, as I now know it was, although at that time I had no clue even very much about who... well, I kind of knew who the directors were, what they did but I had no... [Dexter had] got in a Regimental Sergeant Major with a... I think I can even remember his name, I think it was Regimental

Sergeant Major Britton, suitably. I may be collating two news stories, but he was famous for having one of the loudest voices on parade. And he dragooned these actors, and they did drill with him.

And then I went to Bristol University in 1972 in the October... 1962... 1962. And to study drama, at that stage, you had to do another subject with it.

AP: Yes, was that the Bristol drama department?

NH: That was the Bristol drama department, which had been...

AP: So that was quite new at that point.

NH: ...which had been set up not very many years before. And there were... I think there were three permanent members of staff, and otherwise freelancers were brought in [to] teach things like Theatre History, and Design, and Costume and a certain amount of practical work. [We also] went up to the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School and had voice and [other] lessons up there. So it was very much put together - actually not unlike small publishing. [There was] a small core of permanent people and then masses of freelance staff from whom they bought services.

I went to read drama there; German was the other half of my degree, and I started - probably it's fair to say - started theatre-going in a pretty regular way. I think, though there's probably one or two holes, I saw everything at the Bristol Old Vic between October 1962 and when I left in June 1965 - pretty well everything.

There was a permanent company there, I think initially under the direction of Val May. I'm not quite sure who took over. The resident designer was someone called Graham Barlow who... I met him later in my career. And... there was a permanent company which kind of... I'm not quite sure whether it reassembled... whether it used the old fashioned seasons, and reconstituted itself in September. And I don't know what happened in the summer months because I was never there in the summer. Whether they actually brought in productions or whether the company performed the year round... But the company sort of... some members stayed on - like over a second year - and some left and were replaced.

And the people... the sort of people I can remember are... Michael Jayston, Richard Pasco and Barbara Leigh-Hunt - husband and wife. Christopher Benjamin was there, who I've just seen in a play at the Chocolate Factory playing an old actor. [Laughs] God! Oh, Anna Carteret was there as a juve, she must have been 18... she was probably my age actually. And I remember... she played Polly Peachum in Beggar's Opera, and she had to sing and she could not sing for toffee. And actually she wasn't a very good actress at that time. And it really shows that you can learn on the job, because she's actually really a rather good actress now. I can look at programmes and give you the rest of the cast, but those are the ones that sort of stay in my mind. You know, a lot of them went on as it were, to do other stuff.

And the repertoire there was... was actually not unlike the way that the regional theatres make up their programme now. It was a mixture of new plays and classics. Probably slightly more revivals than you'd get now, and I think that's probably because of Arts Council pressure [nowadays] to favour new work, I don't know. But it was quite

a good education, because there was always at least one Shakespeare. I think maybe two a year. Shaw I remember seeing. Ah, I remember seeing Major Barbara, The Apple Cart, and there was Restoration Comedy. Probably saw some Sheridan... certainly saw She Stoops to Conquer. Actually I think I saw that at Theatre Royal, Bath with Gawn Grainger in it. And some modern plays... I think there might have been a play by Alun Owen that I saw there.

But anyway, the picture is of a rep that had a stable company, a resident... very much a resident creative crew – a resident designer, resident artistic director – almost certainly resident everything else, you know, functions that I didn't know about then: costumes... a wardrobe mistress and so on and so on. I think they played for three weeks, which was quite kind on the actors. It wasn't like your weekly rep, and that was because it was a big city. I mean, I think at that time - you'll know - that there was probably still weekly rep at the beginning of the sixties. But in a bigger town like Bristol with quite a famous theatre – I think Bristol Old Vic, for an actor, was quite a good posting. I mean, Stratford hadn't really kind of come on stream as... the place to work outside London that gave you as much prestige as working in London. And I think being at Bristol Old Vic was not a bad date. And it was also good... solid work as you would likely be there for a year or more if you wanted it. And you got a good diet of plays yourself. So as a young actor, you went through the repertoire and probably got a very good training that way, looking at it from their point of view.

From my point of view of course it was an education, it was like an evening class, every three weeks a new play. As far as I remember, seriously, quite well done, apart... poor Anna Carteret who I should not single out in that way. And I was no particular... I mean OK, I was studying drama but I was [not] training to be an actor. We did a bit... sort of actor stuff on the side. But from my perspective, it was good. You know, the quality was very high. And some of the plays were as... some of the productions – one I remember particularly of Comedy of Errors with Russell Hunter playing the clown part – was amongst the best productions I've seen, probably not excelled until the Trevor Nunn production, much, much later. So there was some really good stuff. And I was seeing Othello for the first time – I think that was Christopher Benjamin, blacked up of course. So you know, I was seeing a lot of stuff for the first time.

And meanwhile because I lived – my parents lived in London and I would return to London every vacation – I could do crash courses in theatre in London. And the National Theatre, as you well know, under Laurence Olivier – at the Old Vic – which I'd already been to a couple of times before – was just kicking off. I mean, I can't remember whether it was autumn '62 that they did their...

AP: I believe it was '63 was the first season it was...

NH: OK, right. Whatever, but before that... I joined the mailing list. I remember – probably still have – some of their mail shots. They were just like today, they were very, very distinctive and they used a big, bold, sans-serif face which might have been a form of Helvetica. And they were enormously... I don't know who was behind that, but somebody had said, you know we... they did what is now *de rigueur* for any organisation: they really branded themselves. Even though they didn't have their own theatre they were working very hard on publicity, the posters. And if you look at the National Theatre now, they're doing exactly the same thing. In some ways they really just look like updated versions. My memory tells me that.

And because I was on the mailing list, I booked to see everything that I could possibly see in those vacation periods – so there was four weeks at Christmas, four weeks at Easter and about eight weeks in the summer. But before that I do remember very, very vividly some friends of my parents lived in Haslemere which was within the kind of wider catchment area of Chichester. I think it was the summer of '63, when the National Theatre, under Laurence Olivier, tried out two or three productions at Chichester before taking to them to the not-yet-open Old Vic.

And I saw *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* there, with Robert Stephens, again directed by John Dexter funnily enough, but again I didn't know until later. But that knocked my socks off, that *Royal Hunt of the Sun*, and I remember again stories in the press about Robert Stephens who had previously... who I did know as an actor from the movies. I think I'd seen him in... I think he'd played... he played a weasely boyfriend in [the] film called [A Taste of Honey] I think. And he played kind of spivs because he was quite slight and had a very nasal voice. And this man had been taken – again you know presumably, John Dexter – and he'd done again what is now current but then was very unusual, he gone to the gym and he'd done bodybuilding and so on. The thing that Tony Sher did before doing the *Richard III*: that Tony Sher was also not a physical actor until he did that. And Robert Stephens, you know, because he had to play the whole play stripped to the waist, and... and wearing body make-up [to make] him look like [this] kind of God figure, Atahualpa.

But that and the way that Dexter used the auditorium, which of course was also new to all of us, and [which] since discovered was based on Guthrie's theatre in Minneapolis and all that. But the way that he used the vomitoria to get the actors... you know, Pizarro's soldiers [to come] through the auditorium, up the aisles, which when you're sitting in... that fan-shaped theatre was... better than people running up and down the aisles in a proscenium arch somehow, because they seemed to come in from everywhere. And also because the level of light spill off the stage was greater, so you could see them, you know, across the theatre. So anyway, so that was pretty crucial.

I regret that I didn't also see the *Uncle Vanya* there with Michael Redgrave. And I didn't catch up with that in London, I missed that one, though I was very happy with my *Royal Hunt of the Sun*. I may have got the chronology slightly wrong, but anyway I did see that in Chichester and it was one of the ones that was going on at the National Theatre. Then it actually becomes a huge blur.

Tell me if you need to stop and turn the...

AP: Yes. No, I was just looking. No, I think it's fine for now but I may need to switch the batteries.

NH: Yes, just hold up your hand and I will stop in mid-flow.

AP: Yes.

NH: Frankly, it's a kind of... blur after that, in that I saw an awful lot but I would need to go to programmes or go to a list of productions to date them. I mean, I can... get a list of the National's productions and say, 'Yes saw that, saw that, saw that.' I mean, if you're interested we can do a supplementary interview with me sitting in front of a list.

But I remember Joan Plowright in Saint Joan, and of course I remember Olivier as Othello. Those stood [out]... I mean, those are the things that... but it's possible that they stand [out] because I've been reminded of them since. And there was... oh, there was a terrific production of The Recruiting Officer, which I think may have been by – I think it was Bill Gaskill – with Laurence Olivier as Brazen, [with] Robert Stephens and Maggie Smith in the cast.

And the thing about that National Theatre Company, at the beginning, was that it was actually a repeat of something that I'd become familiar with at Bristol – again, there was a permanent company. And I didn't know this, but now famously they were largely new actors, but being given quite... you know being trusted with main parts. So for instance I remember Derek Jacobi being about as funny as it's possible to be in Peter Shaffer's Black Comedy, which... I remember as a kind of a high point in... you know, just laughter in the theatre.

AP: And that was John Dexter again.

NH: That was it really. You see, isn't this extraordinary? Isn't this extraordinary? And so there was Derek Jacobi, Anthony Hopkins, Maggie Smith, Robert Stephens. I would like to say that I spotted Michael Gambon in small parts but actually I didn't – though I know subsequently that he was there. And of course Joan Plowright was part of the company as well.

I was aware, sort of aware, in the background that Kenneth Tynan was kind of having an effect on the repertoire. I mean, I had been reading him in The Observer as a critic, and was aware of when he left to go to the National Theatre because that would have been a story... that was a story in the press. And he started writing a column for The Observer which wasn't... which probably wasn't called 'Notes and Murmurs' but might have been, because he wasn't allowed to do crits any longer, because of course he was part of one organisation. But he did continue to contribute thoughts about the theatre. So I was sort of aware of him as a figure.

And as I say, it's a kind of wonderful blur. Most of it, of course, you know, you would expect me to say this because that's what people of my age always say – I saw it from the cheapest seats of course – but... I can say that not really knowing any better, it was great you know. I mean, whether the performances really were bigger than they are now, so that they were playing to the... nth row in the upper circle, I couldn't tell you. But they were certainly good enough for me, and very electric.

I do remember seeing – this would now be much later - Equus there. And having seen and loved Royal Hunt of the Sun and Black Comedy... I went with my parents... I took my parents; I was now taking my parents rather than the other way round, because I was the drama buff. And I took them up, and in the interval I remember turning to [them] and saying, 'This is a load of bollocks isn't it?' And them agreeing, and that was kind of... that was the end for me and Shaffer. I mean, it was like the Emperor's New Clothes... But that was... a later disappointment, even though the production values – John Dexter again – were stunning, but... it was smoke and mirrors you know, it was a brilliant production that obscured a really rather tedious and, I thought, hollow play.

Oh! I remember a Crucible. God! I remember a Crucible. A Crucible that was so... even though I knew... had read the play... a Crucible that was so passionate that my... that the person I was with, whether she was my girlfriend or my wife at that time I'd need to check the dates. But we both came out in a kind of revolutionary fervour. We both said

if a policeman had come up and tried to stop us doing anything, we'd have had his helmet off in no time. We were so passionately aroused by this wonderful production. I think that was a production by Laurence Olivier – I think he directed it. And that sings out in my memory. OK, so that's the National Theatre, and there's lots more detail if you want [to] wring out of me.

At the same time Peter Hall was not only establishing himself in Stratford but had also decided to open a London base for the Royal Shakespeare Company as you know, at the Aldwych, which I think at that time, looking back, I think it's amazingly bold and, I mean revolutionary actually. It was a step... which has altered the history of the Royal Shakespeare Company, and possibly actually of the theatre in this country, in London. For a company that up until then, I think, had been perceived as sort of tourist theatre. I think - though I don't know - I think Mozart and Salzburg are something of the same sort of thing.... It's good stuff because it's Shakespeare, because it's Mozart, but there's a sense that it's sort of gift-wrapped or it's sort of not quite serious...

AP: I know what you mean, so there's a bit of a museum feel to it.

NH: Yes, well done, that's probably the word. And to have the idea, to give the company a London home, and to start doing modern plays as well as Shakespeare was, as I say, revolutionary. And I did see lots of stuff at the Aldwych, again from the gods. So much so that we got to know that if you came out of the entrance to the upper circle - which was quite a long way up Drury Lane - you were actually nearer the pubs than you were coming out of the main... because...

AP: Is that right?

NH: ... there are no pubs in the... or there weren't any pubs in the Aldwych. So if you wanted a drink in the interval, you had to head back into Covent Garden. And we discovered that we could actually get to the nearest pub and back in the interval without having to pay theatre prices, without having to fight our way to the bar. And in fact we got very good [in] all the theatres at knowing where... to get a drink in the interval that wasn't in the theatre, and get back. And also in some cases where to eat before.

It's unbelievable... how [it] long took [for] there to be any place... any eateries around the South Bank. I mean, the South Bank was still suffering from having had the Festival of Britain there in 1951, which was on a cleared site. And then the Festival of Britain packed up its bags, and with the exception of the Royal Festival Hall, kind of went away leaving the National Film Theatre under Waterloo Bridge, which was tiny... just one auditorium tucked under the arches of the bridge. And there was no National Theatre building, so that was all there was on the South Bank. And then the Old Vic sort of sparked into life with National Theatre. But there was nowhere. There was one Italian restaurant, very nearly under the railway that crosses Waterloo Road... It was an Italian restaurant and it was terrible, but it was the only one... the only place you could get anything to eat on... I think on the whole of the South Bank. Oh, there was possibly a restaurant in the Royal Festival Hall which we considered to be out of our price range. But that was some of the reality of theatre-going then. You had to be serious about it because there weren't all the trappings that there are now. And it took... it still took ages. I mean, even when the National Theatre building was built, it was still difficult to get anything. And that slew of restaurants that now are... behind the National Theatre

you know, Chez Gerard and Pizza Express and so on, they took ages to come. Anyway... and also the ones in Coin Street of course, that wasn't there.

Anyway, going back to the Aldwych, so one saw... I remember seeing a lot of early Pinter there. I was a particular fan of...

[Interruption to recording]

NH: OK, well you asked me why I became interested in theatre really. I don't... I think I was pretty unfocused at that time. I didn't have much idea of what I wanted to do or be very much, except I was very much living life day by day, I think. So it was probably school... I'd done... I'd been in the school play at my first school – my prep school as you all know we call it – where I'd been 'til I was 13. And I'd acted in some plays then which, you know... I mean, God knows on what basis you cast 11, 12 and 13 year old boys in plays.

AP: Yes, this was in London?

NH: This is in the suburbs of London, yes. So I'd done... I'd been... I'd played Silvius in *As You Like It*, [Laughs] Prince Hal in *Henry IV, Part 1*. And we'd then... wonderfully at the end of my final year we did a modern play. Well, it was a 20th Century play from the Samuel French back-catalogue, a sort of rather old thriller, whose title I can still remember, it was *The Crooked Billet* by Dion Titheradge.

But that was great fun and I really felt for the first time that it was kind of fun being on stage in front of people. I mean, it was that kind of buzz. I didn't have all the kind of things that actors – real actors – now talk about, about sort of wanting to explore the psychology of other characters, or you know, they were unhappy in their own skin. I was actually perfectly happy in my skin, I think I just liked showing off.

And so then when I got to my secondary school – the boys' boarding school – I graduated towards the school play. I mean, there was no such thing as drama taught then, it was just... it was you know, it was a very classics based school. And in fact you know I did Latin up until O Level, but then started specialising in foreign languages. But the school play beckoned and I was much more nervous about that. I mean, it was a much bigger school. But I auditioned and then got to play Petruchio in the last production I was in at school – *The Taming of the Shrew* – which again I enjoyed hugely... It's all pretty pathetic looking back; it was very small beer by today's standards. I mean, my sons do... drama as part of the curriculum. No way was I... this was strictly speaking a spare time activity. But that sort of propelled me. That plus the fact that I... was on this course to be a modern linguist and I wasn't really entirely happy with that. I mean, I was academically perfectly sound. I got all the... you know I got good grades – all that kind of stuff.

AP: This was at Bristol?

NH: No, no this is still at school.



AP: This is still... right.

NH: This is still at secondary school... where, as I say, I was specialising in German and French. And I felt the... I felt the kind of iron waistcoat of studying modern languages at university begin to clamp round me. The expectation was that one would go to Oxbridge. And I remember thinking 'God! I really don't want to do this', and going for an interview at Cambridge to do PPE, which was only an attempt to shake off the modern languages because I knew... at that stage there weren't... A Levels that you did to get into...

And I... still don't know how, but a syllabus for Bristol University fell into my hands. It wasn't like they are now; it was quite a slim document. And in it I discovered that they were offering drama as a degree subject. And I talked to my parents, who... I think they very much wanted me – my father particularly – very much wanted me to go to Oxbridge. But they took it very well. I've actually just gone through the same thing myself with... I've got a 17 year old who I wanted to do... I desperately wanted to do science, and he... He's actually saying 'I want to do PPE and I'll try and do it at Oxford because I know you want me to, but actually LSE is the best place to do PPE.' And I'm saying, 'Oh God!'. And he said, 'Well, you'd want me to do a subject that I like at university wouldn't you?' and I said, 'Touché!' because if you do a subject you like at university you excel in it, on the whole. And so [my parents] bought this argument from me... I had to do another... subject as the other half of my degree, which of course was going to be one of the modern languages. So... it was kind of part serious, part playful a degree. And indeed that happened.

And of course I found that the atmosphere in the drama department when I got there, I've explained that it was kind of made up with sticking plaster and sealing wax. But it was... nonetheless it was very... exciting place. It... had an atmosphere unlike any other department because we spent so much time together, you know. We were always rehearsing some play or other, and it was a good community. And indeed my experience later - because I mentioned to you that I went on to teach at Hull University drama department for five years and then Glasgow University drama department for a further two - and my experience of all those places was that they were exceptional in universities because of the amount of work that we... or the time if you like, that we all spent together with each other. So I found that atmosphere very conducive. It offered lots of plays to be in and lots of opportunities to show off. I now know a great deal about acting, and I realise that no way was I an actor or ever going to be an actor, because I was just bold enough to go on stage and speak [the] lines clearly and kind of horse around a bit. But I was enjoying doing that. I was also doing revue. I remember that we... had 'exchange matches' with Cambridge Footlights, and that was of course at the time when people like Bill Oddie and Eric Idle were there, so they came and... did their sketch show in Bristol and we went and did our sketch show in Cambridge.

AP: Oh right, so was there a kind of competitive kind of...

NH: Yes, yes. It's competitive but also more... like an exchange, like you know, like you might be an exchange student, so we usually exchanged shows. They were intrigued to see something else other than Footlights, and we were... intrigued to have Footlights. But also I think we, being the provincial university, we sort of phf, phf, phf... you know, of course we can do much better than that. So there was that... going on, and that was enormous fun. And I wasn't doing very much academic work at the time. I [was] kind of

keeping my nose clean, letting the German slip quite badly, doing the drama fine. And there were classes, at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, and so on, so on, so on. So... I was living and breathing drama.

In fact actually, even before that... I remember when I went for my interview at Bristol... part of it was in German and the professor of German asked me some questions, and asked what my 'Leidenschaft' was, which is my 'passion'. And I said, 'Das Drama.' And I saw the drama man wince when I said that. And of course politically it was a very bad thing to say to the German department, that what I really loved was drama. But however they accepted me, which was good.

But that went on being the case that I spent, you know, 90% of my time on drama. But fortunately I was clever enough in the final exam to manage to angle my answers to most of the essay questions on to figures like Brecht, Frisch, Schiller... you know, in other words the crossover guys...

AP: Yes, of course.

NH: ... the people who were... the German dramatists basically. So I answered most of my German finals paper using what I knew of drama. Most of which I have to confess I'd read in English anyway – in English translation – because I was too lazy to read it in German. But anyway, that got me a first, which was a total surprise to me because I knew that I was very weak in half my subject.

Meanwhile I'd been, as I say, thinking about going into industry, and I'd been talking to people. And I got lots and lots of offers; it was terribly easy to get a job in those days – very easy straight out of university. And so I actually took a job in Unilever working in their advertising agency, which I regretted within about two months of arriving. The only good thing about it was that it gave me two years – 1965... September 1965 to September 1967 – living in London. So that... actually it occurs to me I misinformed you, because... up until that point I'd been going to the theatre only in the vacation. Suddenly I was able to see absolutely everything.

AP: See everything, yes.

NH: For two years I was actually resident in London, which was, I suppose the apogee of my theatre-going at that period. But... as to what I was heading for, I... well you can tell, I didn't know... I was a cork on the water, having made this mistake of going into advertising – admittedly very well paid for the time: for the record it was £1000 a year.

And I got married, as one did in those days, because one just did. Lots of people got married straight out of university. My wife-to-be was still finishing also partly a drama course, but she was a year behind me. So she graduated in '66 and we got married that summer. [We] set up a household in outer London, and... again, did a lot of theatre-going... She'd got a job as a school teacher in Dartford in Kent, and we lived there and we were sort of forever on that last train home seeing stuff. It was... that was when we went to the Old Vic a great deal, and went to this sole Italian restaurant. I [came from] work, and she'd sort of come and join me.

And all I knew was that... up until the time I went into the advertising agency, the best time I'd had in my life had been in the drama department in Bristol University. So like a

child wanting to clamber back into the womb, I set about trying to get back into that world. I had this first which was an unlooked for... [which] in those days was kind of... You poor guys, you've got to get six PhDs before you can even look at a teaching job. But the great thing then was that drama departments were being set up at a rate of knots. It was an expansionist period. New universities were being created. So... there were precious few graduates in drama so I pretty well... I mean, I had two... did I even have as many as two – I had one shot at getting a job in the English department at Queens University, Belfast, which was nonsense. I think they only hauled me over because they were interested... in my background. I mean, they were interested in the drama thing, because I think there was someone on the staff there was toying with getting... you know so they wanted me up there.

But I then fell into a job at the University of Hull because they actually needed someone to come and teach German... the German section of the... They had a drama syllabus which went from A to Z. You started with Aeschylus and came up to Pinter – Pinter and Bond in those days – maybe not even Bond at that stage, but Pinter certainly. And we then divided up... [We] sat in the staffroom and said, 'Does anybody here know anything about Molière?', you know. And we kind of divided up that thing. So I got... all the German drama... because I'd done a special course at Bristol in theatre from the Restoration to the end of the 19th Century, I got all that stuff as... So now there I was, lecturing a subject that really I only knew at undergraduate level, and that was a playing-about level!

But what we did in that drama department, because we were so... small... [At] the time I joined I was only the fourth member of staff. There was head of department, two others and me – the fourth recruit – and there was also someone called a technical director who, you know... if there was a production, did all the lighting and sound and looked after the theatre, and also taught stage management. And again, as with Bristol, such movement as there was was done by a freelance teacher who came in once a week and did movement and voice. And there was a summer school, blah, blah, blah.

So in terms of where I was going, I was now a career academic teaching... what had become... not only my favourite subject, but the only subject that I sort of felt I knew anything about. But I also learnt on the job, because we were so... communal as a department, we all went to each other's lectures. All the lecturers went to each other's lectures. So I... did a drama course again, and again, and again for all the five years that I was there, which was invaluable. I knew nothing as an undergraduate really, academically, but I knew a great deal more after listening. After not only preparing lectures myself on the various subjects that I had to lecture on, but I also got to listen to all the...

And so going to the theatre was a professional activity for me from the autumn of 1967 onwards... It was a keeping up. And because I was the only member of staff in the Hull drama department who had a base in London – because my parents were still there and I could stay with them for free, or rather my wife and I could stay with them for free and do our theatre-going – we were more up with the London theatre. Which I'm sure, I'm genuinely sure helped my teaching. I mean, I'm sure, because... we covered a number of modern playwrights [and] of course, you know the 20th Century theatre was evolving all the time. So that's... if that answers your question...

AP: Yes.

NH: So I found myself, sort of by accident, a career academic in drama. And therefore kind of having to go to the theatre, though at the same time hugely enjoying it, and doing it, you know, just doing it. I mean, just night after night after night going, and... ticking the boxes – good stuff, bad stuff, lunchtime theatre, you know... I mean, just everything... and anything that moved.

There must have been times when I didn't go to stuff because it was too expensive, but I don't remember that. I don't remember that being a problem. I mean, we sat always in the cheapest seats, as I've said. And – I don't know about this, there may have been concessions if you booked on the mailing list – that I can't remember. But I do remember... the activity. The activity of pre-booking was a... crucial part of the armour.

I've just remembered one thing very vividly we went to see at the Aldwych which was the first time they did *The War of the Roses* and we saw it...

AP: Yes of course.

NH: ...we saw it on an all day production. It started at eleven o'clock on the Saturday morning and finished at eleven o'clock that night. And apart from it being pretty magnificent when it went on, we discovered – my wife and I discovered – that by about the second interval of the second play we could speak to each other in perfectly improvised iambic pentameters. It was absolutely extraordinary, and we sort of had the whole conversation during the interval in improvised iambic pentameters, [Laughs] because the sort of... you know, the weight of stuff.

It also actually gave me, for the first time, an appreciation not only of Shakespeare's history plays, but also of English history. Though I'd never studied history, it was one of the very few periods that I can now... I know which king followed which king you know, and why. But I had... but it's Shakespeare's and Holinshed's view of English history, nonetheless that's the view I imbibed.

So that was what we were doing, that's the answer to your question. That's why we were such [inaudible] we weren't doing it as a hobby... because my wife was teaching English... and specialising in drama in her school. So we were a couple of drama nerds, drama anoraks going off and you know, consuming all this stuff.

AP: That's fantastic.

Tape 2

AP: Now, when you were at Bristol were you at all aware of the playwrights like Stoppard and Charles Wood and Peter Nichols who were in...?

NH: Charles Wood I was aware of, though I wasn't aware that they were moving in our midst. No I wasn't. I'm not sure that – you'll have to check the dates – but I'm not sure when... There was, I know now, a little Bristol contingent of Stoppard, Wood and Peter Nichols. And there were other Bristol writers there as well who didn't make the grade in the spectacular way they did.

Charles Wood was done... certainly was done... how shall I say certainly? I think... or am I remembering a Royal Court production? I genuinely, honestly don't know. It's possible that Charles Wood was one of the new plays that the Bristol Old Vic put on. But I think... no, no... I think it was later... You see, I'd left in '65.

What I do remember, I do remember Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Beyond belief – blissful. I mean John Stride and Edward Petherbridge as the two leads... Oh no, I couldn't tell you much about the rest of the cast. But I do remember them and I vividly remember, you know, the first scene and then realising, because you know, one went to it not knowing what it was.

AP: Yes of course.

NH: Can you imagine! It's a wonderful situation. On the stage is opening up this thing for the first time. So that was my first encounter – I think my first encounter – with Stoppard.

Oh, the other thing I was doing was listening to the radio a great deal, and had done since school actually. At school there was a thing on the radio called 'From the Fifties' which Martin Esslin coordinated, and they were most of the more interesting plays of the fifties, were given in radio production. That was when I encountered Pinter for the first time, John Whiting... there was a lot of stuff – I may still have the brochure.

Those were the days when the BBC actually produced a brochure, which was a small paperback book – which wasn't quite as big as this but it might have had sixty pages in it which you could write in and get sent. And it had little essays about all the playwrights that were in the season. So I sure as hell got... and that was my bible for a long time.

Then I rapidly equipped myself with Theatre of the Absurd and Anger and After. Oh yes at my school at Tonbridge I kept getting prizes for being you know, top of this and best of the other. And you got them in – not so much in book tokens – but you got them in an appropriation of money that they would buy books for. And... instead of doing what you were supposed to do, which was buy a hard bound collected Dickens, I asked for Penguin, New English Dramatists, and completed the set. I was allowed, say, up to 15/- so that would buy five or six volumes of New English Dramatists. And I remember going up and getting them. And it was a sort of stack... whereas everyone else had been up and getting, you know one book, I got a stack of books because I'd spent my money wisely on cheap paperbacks. I've probably still got them, they probably still have the little school sticker inside. So I was doing that. So even at school I was making myself aware of drama beyond the curriculum.

AP: And naturally so... and also you're kind of... you were aware a little bit of plays as a published entity?

NH: Yes, right OK, that's another thing. Yes, absolutely. Another accident in my life... so yes absolutely I was aware of plays, plays on the radio... when I was at school, plays on the radio and the fact that you could read plays. And I remember reading, for instance, Look Back in Anger, of which the school library had a copy, I think. Which is pretty... you know, pretty good. Well, this was in 1961 or '62, so for a kind of averagely repressed boys' boarding school that wasn't bad. I remember reading it and thinking

'what's the fuss about?'. Because... particularly if you read it, you just come across a pretty conventional play, and I didn't get it all.

Pinter on the other hand: absolutely electric - The Dumb Waiter for instance. And then I went to see... The Caretaker on a tour; I saw it at Golders Green Hippodrome with Dudley Edwards playing. This was the Arts Theatre production that had changed cast and gone on tour. And I caught it with a girlfriend at the Golders Green Hippodrome. This was before I went to university, so I was still at school then. So I was an absolute Pinter fanatic from the moment I first heard his voice, which was probably on the radio. Then I read the plays in *The New English Dramatists*.

But the publishing thing... accident in my life, my parents lived in a kind of... well, it wasn't even an outer suburb of London, it was within commuting distance of London but it was... on the North Downs in a very small community... very small community. It... had a railway station, a pub and about three or four shops. It was sort of for... really for commuters who wanted to pretend that they lived in the country. As a student returning there from Bristol... though I could get up to London, it was very isolated.

And there were only a couple of local industries. And one of them was Heinemann... was the Heinemann warehouse... because publishers still have their warehouses out of the city for obvious reasons – transport reasons and the cost of the rent. And theirs was within walk... ironically I could walk down a country lane to this warehousing facility. And I just wrote to them absolutely out of the blue. You know, it wasn't that I was interested in publishing, or even particularly books frankly. But I thought: well, it's the only industry locally [and] I can get a job as a packer. As you do when you're at university, you kind of do anything. I didn't really want to work in one of the local shops.

And because I'd said in the letter that I was studying drama at Bristol University – or actually I think it was just before I went up, it was the vacation between school and university – my letter was passed to the drama editor of Heinemann, who happened, for reasons suited to him, to have his office there. He was the only editor who actually worked at [the] office in the... rather than going up to town. And that was because he lived in Brighton, and it was convenient for him to come up from Brighton to this place rather than all the way. And this was Edward Thompson, who you'll see referred to if you read biographies of Michael Redgrave for instance: he published Michael Redgrave. He was John Gielgud's publisher. Michel Saint-Denis, Komisarjevsky. My present partner happens to be reading a biography of Robert Bolt at the moment, and [Edward Thomson]'s in there, because he was Robert Bolt's publisher. There's a thing about whether they were going to publish the screenplay of *Lawrence of Arabia* or not, and the Lawrence estate came down on them like a ton of bricks and the publisher caved in. And... and the writer, Adrian Turner, has discovered correspondence between Bolt and Edward Thompson – it's in the Heinemann archive.

So Edward Thompson became a sort of early guru of mine. He was a drama editor; I didn't know such things existed. And the Heinemann list at that time, as you probably know, had Robert Bolt on it, John Whiting, quite a lot of stuff from the... valuable stuff from the thirties. I think they may have had Priestley because they could also buy educational rights... I do this now: I will publish a play and if an educational publisher wants to publish it we let them do it, because their edition will not compete with ours. We sell ours through the bookshops blah, blah, blah. We will also sell them happily to universities, but we don't do so very well selling to schools. The education book publishing companies... so for instance we've sold the rights to the play of *Coram Boy*, the play of *His Dark Materials*, Rona Munro's *Bold Girls* are all... have bought rights of all the... And Heinemann in those days – this is now the fifties and sixties – was able to

acquire educational rights to stuff like Arthur Miller and so on. So they had very nice editions of quite well known plays.

So that was the outfit I found myself working in as a vacation job. And he had me in the office and I was just doing what we get work experience people to do now. That first summer I compiled a database of schools and colleges, typing it onto an old fashioned machine and creating a template, like a kind of card index that could then be used to mail these places. I can go into the technology if you like, but I don't think you would be interested. So I then went back to him for two more vacations because it was such... it was such a doddle. And he became a bit of a mentor.

And in fact when I... was in my final year at university, I said to him, 'Well, I'd love to come and work for you on a permanent basis.' And he of course looked very cloudy at that point and said, 'Well, I'm not sure that we have a permanent job.' So I went and met the big cheese in Heinemann's rather grand offices in Mayfair I think. Those big London publishers like Heinemann and Jonathan Cape... had some very grand offices in Bedford Square... They cut much more of a sophisticated profile than they do now. Now they're just... big corporates like Random House and Penguin and so on, in big corporate buildings that are indistinguishable from ICM or Rank Xerox. But then they still had this kind of aura of being somewhere between commerce and the Arts. So their offices were a bit like going into a gentleman's club, I mean, it was very much panelled walls and leather armchairs – which indeed it was.

And I went up there for an interview with a man called Alan Hill, who was then CEO or something like that now. And we had a very nice talk. But... there was no opening you know. And God do I know that now because people write to me, desperate to get into publishing... they're desperately keen on the theatre... 'We're... we're full up you know, we have... we can't possibly take on... just take someone on! I'll let you know if there's a vacancy.' And that was pretty much what Edward said. So that contributed to my haring off to... stupidity of it to an advertising agency, I was in a little bit of a huff. 'Oh well!' you know, 'if I can't get a job in publishing I'll...' you know. If not the Muse then Mammon can have me. And so that was another thread in there. But... I never harboured... I mean, if this were fiction my character would harbour a desire to get back into theatre publishing. Absolutely not, I was very happy as a career academic.

And if you want the end to that story, I'd done five years teaching at Hull drama department, and I then moved from Hull drama department to Glasgow University drama department, which was a newer department. So it was like the same thing again, it was joining a very small outfit which I think I kind of quite liked. And... in about the November of my second year up there I got a call from a man called Geoffrey Strachan who was then drama editor of Methuen, to say he'd been suddenly promoted to managing director, because he'd been having extraordinary success publishing Monty Python books and had been making a lot of money for them. And was obviously a very able young man – well I say 'young', he was seven years older than me, I was... probably 29 at the time, so he'd have been 36. And he was being promoted to managing... Did I want to come and be drama editor? I said, 'No thank you very much, I've got a perfectly good job up here, oodles of vacation you know, and I'm living very well.' because we were living in Glasgow, which was a very depressed area at the time, on a nationally pegged salary. So for one of the very few times in my life, I was actually rather well off.

AP: And what years was this in Glasgow?

NH: This is 19... this actual year is... it's autumn 1973.

AP: Right.

NH: Autumn 1973. When I was in Glasgow of course I was seeing the... the beginnings of the Glasgow Cits, which was a very extraordinary organisation – very extraordinary. And I mean one realised it was extraordinary. Now there I saw a lot of really bad theatre there, I have to say. That was because they were pushing at some kind of... they were trying to push out of the way the kind of stuff that I'd been seeing... I mean, I see a continuity between what I saw at the Bristol Old Vic, and what I saw at the National Theatre at the Old Vic and the RSC. But the Cits were trying to do something completely else, and it had a completely other aesthetic, which they were working on but which was by no means satisfactory when I saw it at the beginning – as was often the case with experiments.

So anyway, there was this offer at the end of the phone, and I put the phone down and sort of thought about it and talked to my colleagues – my friendly colleagues and my wife obviously – and decided that I was mad to turn down a job... to turn down the prospect of becoming drama editor at Methuen. So I rang him back and said 'Is the job still open?'. And it was. And so I started there on 1st April, 1974.

AP: [Inaudible]

NH: And the rest as they say is history. Because I was there for 15 years and then set up Nick Hern Books in 1988 – fast forward to the present.

AP: Gotcha! So that's really interesting. You were actually very much kind of the vanguard of the academic – the idea of theatre as an academic pursuit.

NH: Mmm, didn't feel like it but yes. Yes, I mean as I said, I was living... I was living my life hand to mouth pretty much. I didn't have a burning vision particularly but I certainly wanted to do the job as well as possible. And we were, yes we were at the beginning. I think I was serious, and increasingly serious about drama being a perfectly valid academic subject – perfectly valid.

And I could also see, as everybody says about drama in schools, that it does much more than teach you a few things about how a play is structured and how to read Shakespeare. It gives you social skills and communal skills. I've seen it very clearly in my elder boy, who is very, very bright, very academic and was very bookish. And basically had [only] one friend kind of thing. And he did drama and his world has opened up. That's not an excuse for it as an academic subject, but in so far as a university, the old understanding of a university, is supposed to give you an education to make you capable of, you know, being a good citizen of the world. It seems to me drama has a very good claim on... that, a better claim on that than sitting, parsing Latin, frankly, you know.

So... if you'd asked me I... I would have made a passionate defence of drama as an academic subject. But whether I felt I was in the vanguard of anything I don't know. We... we felt a bit embattled, because the rest of the university... the pattern all over the country was that the rest of whatever university it was was at best quietly hostile to



the idea of a drama department – a lot of people playing around wasting time, wasting money, wasting resources.

And [I do] think all the pioneers – and I do regard them as pioneers – who actually set up the departments in various universities in those years... they were doing something special. Glynne Wickham was doing something special, Don Roy in Hull was doing something special, James Arnott at Glasgow was doing something special. I don't know... I'm not quite clear how the drama department in Manchester came about. I know that... its first professor was Hugh Hunt, which was an interesting appointment because... he actually had been an artistic director at Bristol Old Vic while I was there.

AP: Oh right.

NH: And then went to the Abbey Theatre, Dublin. And his next job, I think I'm right in saying, was as Professor of Drama at Manchester University drama department. So... he was a very rare import from the professional... theatre.

AP: Yes, I wanted to ask you about that. How much... what was... I mean, I know that the attitude of the rest of the university was hostile, or at least sceptical, what was the relationship of the new departments with theatre professionals?

NH: Pretty nugatory I have to say. Which... looking back was a very severe handicap, I think, for the students. They tended to get a certain amount of professional instruction from professional instructors. That's not such a stupid thing as it sounds: as I said, at Bristol University drama department the practical courses were given by the people who taught at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School... And we did a number of productions... no we never did productions together, what we did was we coordinated our programmes so that at Bristol if the subject of study for that year – or the theme for that year – was let's say Comedy of Manners, then the Bristol Old Vic's Theatre School students would all have to be in... their programme of productions would be Comedies of Manners and so would the Drama Department's. And so we'd have a whole year's worth.

It was a pretty crazy idea actually. It meant that, particularly for the... acting students, they got to perform in only one type of play for a whole year, which was a complete nonsense, particularly if it was actually something like melodrama. My contemporaries at the Old Vic Theatre School that we were aware of, because we went to see their productions – students – were people like Jane Lapotaire and Tim Pigott-Smith, I remember those sort of people. So there was contact with insipient professionals. And the same sort of thing at Glasgow, where the Glasgow drama department did some academic courses for the students at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama – RSAMD. So the acting students would come and talk to us.

But as for actual members of the profession, forget it, it didn't happen. The only instances I can recall to mind were when a touring show came to Hull and played at the New Theatre, which was what the New Theatre was – it was a receiving house. We would try to get the actors and maybe the director – though of course the director usually by that stage was away working on another production – to come and talk to the students at a sort of lunchtime thing. We'd put on a bit of a buffet, and they came. They were called 'Huddles' which was an acronym – Hull University Drama Department Lunchtime Event, H.U.D.D.L.E. And indeed they weren't compulsory and the students

would kind of come and the actors, whoever they were, would sort of come and talk to... I remember... the one I remember most vividly was a play... I can't even remember what the play was. But a play in which Veronica Lake... do you know who Veronica Lake is?

AP: I have a... yes it's...

NH: The movie star.

AP: Yes, yes of course.

NH: And she was in this play which was on tour to Hull, called Bloody Woman. And I remember she came and talked. But we tended to try it... So that was it, but they were kind of... when they came, even though they were sitting on... actually even worse chairs than you're sitting on now, but you know, those plastic bucket seats.

AP: Yes.

NH: In a rehearsal room in the drama department – a top-lit rehearsal room. They were still pedestalled, they were Gods you know, moving amongst us because they were... And we had no clue. We had no clue about the circumstances of their lives. You know, what actually being an actor meant in terms of how you lived your life. And we certainly had no... or most of us had no clue as to what acting really was. I could give you a reasonable lecture on the dramatic structure of Ibsen's social plays, but I couldn't... I couldn't talk at all about acting because I had no... I mean, I'd just been in these stupid student productions. So we were very divorced from the profession.

And the funny thing was – talking to actors now who did that kind of thing – they were in awe of us. They were nervous to speak, because actors are very... though my contention is that most actors... are extremely intelligent and sometimes intellectual people. They still felt, 'Oh my God! It's a university drama [department], they must know everything about drama. If I open my mouth and say anything, you know, I shall put my foot in it.' So it was a really odd... they were really odd encounters – like Aguecheek and Viola having a duel. I mean they... they didn't [really] make any contact.

The only other sort of semi-professional thing was that increasingly as Hull University drama department got a better and better reputation, we started attracting people who had sort of embarked on the profession a little bit. One student I remember was a man called Bob Carlton, who for some time now has been running the Queen's Theatre, Hornchurch, and you know, has gone into the profession in the biggest possible way – wrote *Return to the Forbidden Planet*.

AP: Oh yes.

NH: So he had embarked on a career as an actor... an actor/director and at the age of about 25 or 26, threw it up and decided that he would like to study drama to give him

an extra qualification so that he could possibly teach with it. And there was a certain amount of that going on. And we had a number of people who'd got a reasonable amount of experience at the National Youth Theatre. One of them in particular I remember, Gareth Armstrong, who'd been... already really quite an accomplished actor. I mean, he kind of really stood out in the university context. But no: long answer to a short question.

And similarly in Glasgow... we kind of had some contact. I think the head of the department, James Arnott was on the board of the Glasgow Cits, but that was about it. Because, by being professor of drama, he was the great and the good. The sort of person you would put onto a theatre board.

What really distressed me however, in Glasgow, was that there was hostility from the department towards the professional theatre in Glasgow. And they kind of boycotted the productions. I went to see them out of curiosity. I mean, they were – as I've said – they were not always very good, but it seemed to be ludicrous to be teaching drama and not to go to your local theatre. I thought that was a disgrace, and was one of the reasons why the department wasn't, I think, as happy as it should have been. It was riven with those kind of petty jealousies that you sometimes get, more often in provincial cities than London.

So the answer is no. I don't know what the situation is now; I mean you'll know better than I whether there's better cross-fertilization.

AP: Yes, I would say that it varies very much.

NH: Yes, I would imagine.