

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Barbara Young – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Ruth Lumsden**

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Actress. Accent; Bradford Civic Theatre School; Bertold Brecht; censorship; European drama; folksongs; Frank Hauser; Johnny Noble; Rudolf Laban; Joan Littlewood; Ewan MacColl; The Method; playwrights; Stratford East; Theatre Workshop; touring; The Travellers; Uranium 235; Welsh audiences.

RL: This is an interview with Ruth Lumsden interviewing Barbara Young, and firstly we are just going to talk about how you first got into theatre. What was your first memory of it, first experience?

BY: Of getting into theatre?

RL: Or being interested in it at least, what started you off?

BY: Well, I was always interested in it, from being a child.

RL: Right.

BY: Both my parents used to do amateur operatics...

RL: Oh right, yeah.

BY: and they used to... There was always music in the house, my sister was a pianist and I used to have elocution lessons because I thought I'd quite like to talk posh - because I came from Brighouse, you see, and you didn't talk posh in Brighouse...

RL: [Laughs] You can't tell.

BY: No, and I remember at school one little girl calling me a [imitates northern accent] 'stuck up snob' one day. But I think I overdid it slightly. But in my day, when I started out you weren't allowed to have accents in the theatre, you had to lose them and I went to a place called the Bradford Civic Theatre School...

RL: Right.

BY: ...which was run by a rather marvellous woman called Esme Church. And I don't think it existed for longer than about five years, but it produced some extraordinary people like Robert Stevens and Glenda Jackson - all sorts of people - and it was really rather marvellous. But one of the most marvellous things about it was it had a gentleman by the name of Rudolph Laban who was the founder of most of the modern dance that we know today, and I was lucky enough to be taught by him when I was 15 years old - no 16 - because I won a scholarship to theatre school. And... the thing I remember about that experience is Mr Laban, and it was through him that I was recommended to Joan Littlewood in Theatre Workshop...

RL: Oh, wow!

BY: Because they taught Laban in Theatre Workshop - they used Laban - and he had his dance studios in Manchester right next-door to where Theatre Workshop had their house at that time, and after my two years at theatre school - I don't know how much I learnt really, I think I talked most of the time but I did learn something I guess, I certainly learnt from Mr Laban...

RL: [Laughs] I'm sure you did.

BY: I then ended up going with Joan Littlewood.

RL: And what year was that, that you joined Theatre Workshop?

BY: That would have been '49, '50 - something like that.

RL: So, was she in Stratford East by this point, or was she still...?

BY: No, no, no, she was in Manchester. She was in Manchester and we used to tour the Welsh valleys in the back of a lorry and sing a lot of folk songs because Ewan MacColl, who was the writer in residence, as it were, of Theatre Workshop - very much in residence actually! - was a great authority on folk songs and all people like Alan Lomax and Big Bill Broonzy used to come and sit in the back of the lorry with us and we all used to sing.

RL: Yeah.

BY: And I think I very nearly got expelled from the back of the lorry for doing a jazzed up version of Frankie and Johnny, which I didn't realise you weren't quite allowed to do

- it had to be pure folk music, and I rather liked the jazz! [Laughs] But it was a great experience, and now, as I am getting quite old and I am doing Coronation Street and five episodes a week of Family Affairs - which I did for six years - people ask me how I do it and I say 'well because I learnt in the back of a lorry travelling around the Welsh valleys with Joan Littlewood, and I guess that was the best experience anybody could possibly have.

RL: And what is your image of Joan Littlewood, what was she like, how was your relationship with her?

BY: Well, it was very good actually. I was the youngest and she did like to tell me what to wear, and how to wear it - and she did pinch my best coat which she... well, she didn't pinch it, she said it was going to go into the wardrobe and I didn't need it. And then she wore it when she went off to Edinburgh to do something and I remember seeing my coat disappearing out of [Laughs] the back door thinking, 'that's mine!'. But she was very... she was an extraordinary person actually. I think I was quite frightened of her at the beginning, I think we all were. She used to wear the hat on one side and she used to tug at the front of her hair a bit when she was giving you criticisms and she would hang on to the hair for quite a long time and you'd watch it and you'd think, 'Oh my God, what's she going to say now?' and then you'd get this critique which was always extraordinary actually. But she was a wonderful person to be with and to work with, and they all were in those days in that company. There was some fairly extraordinary people there. Harry Corbett came out through that and Avis Bunnage and Harry Greene, George Cooper, Howard Goorney. Lots of wonderful people, and I was very young and I found it extraordinary because it was politically very orientated to the left as well, which was something I'd never really come across and so I found that fascinating too.

RL: I mean, she believed it was the People's Theatre, wasn't it...

BY: Absolutely, absolutely.

RL: Moving around. And I've read a bit about the fact that sometimes there was a bit of a struggle between what you were portraying and what your audience... how your audience reacted. When you were going around touring locally, and how did your audience respond, to your company?

BY: Well we... I remember - gosh! When we were in the Welsh valleys, I remember being sent round miners' canteens to sing them some songs from a ballad opera called Johnny Noble. And I was very inexperienced about this kind of thing, but I could sing and I could play the guitar a bit so I [sang], a lot of teacups were rattled and it was [loud voice] 'quiet please, quiet' and it was, like, two thousand people in this canteen, all went very quiet - and I did notice that Howard Goorney, who had escorted me to this do, was standing right at the back exit, [Laughs] as I discovered later, to make a very quick [getaway] in case he had to. And I sang my song and actually I got very nice applause and they were very sweet. I'm not sure how many of them came to see the show. Their wives did - a lot of their wives came, and their daughters, and their children. A lot of the

men, I think, thought it was a bit daft, a bit silly. But after a while, after they realised the content and what we were actually saying to them and showing them we did get audiences. And of course we used to live - the actors used to live with a lot of the miners and their wives.

RL: Oh, you stayed with them?

BY: Yes, we stayed with them. So you got some kind of respect - which you hadn't bargained for - very often, with miners and their wives saying 'I wouldn't have your job for all the tea in China,'. You know, 'are you still working, are you taking the set down at 11 o'clock at night and you are going to move on the next village the next day!', you know, because even they didn't work quite as hard as that. It was a fascinating experience, and I remember playing a little village called Ystradgynlais where there was a Communist town council and a tiny cinema and it showed things like Daughter's of Red China, all the Communist films which you could watch, and we always used to say - all of us - that if anything happened and a bomb dropped, that's where we'd head for because we could kind of hide in the mountains there! [Laughs] It was quite extraordinary experience actually.

RL: And, did you feel that you were doing quite important work?

BY: Yes, you did, you did. It felt, it felt it mattered - and you mattered, oddly enough. Unlike what happens very often when you're young and you go into the commercial theatre and you literally are chosen, sometimes, for the size you are, or the colour of your hair, or whether you match up with the man who's going to play your father, or all things that don't really do much for your self-esteem and your pride in your work, or yourself, you know. You have to be lucky in the commercial theatre, I think, to be chosen for your ability and your talent. But Joan actually respected that and that's what she used. She got to know you, and of course, Ewan was writing - very often writing on the spot - so he could write for the people he had there and their particular abilities, and their talents, which was very unusual.

RL: So how long were you with the company for then, in total?

BY: Well, I was with her for about three years...

RL: Right.

BY: and I did the very first Edinburgh Festival with her, with a play called The Travellers, which Ewan MacColl had written and it was a... we played at the Odd Fellows Hall, which I think is now one of the best venues. It was very much a Fringe venue in those days and it all took place on a train, which they set up down the middle of this hall and the audience was on either side and we were all on this train, which was rather marvellous.

RL: So like a traverse stage?

BY: Yes, yes it was. Yes, it was fantastic, and that was very exciting because Joan, of course, and Ewan knew lots and lots of people like [Sydney Goodsir Smith] and Hugh McDermid and all the Scot poets who used to all get very drunk and wander around talking in Gaelic which was fascinating, [Laughs] in the middle of the night - lovely! So that was very exciting to do that and how that's blossomed, that festival, since those days, yes.

RL: And then you moved to Stratford East with the company for...

BY: I did the very first show, yes, at Stratford East. Yes, I did Landscape with Chimneys. [Later became known as Paradise Street.]

RL: And how do you think the move changed the company - becoming resident?

BY: I think it was inevitable that it would change slightly. It had to get more commercial, somehow, because it was nearer the West End, some of its shows were transferring. It needed money, it needed more money than you need wandering about on the back of a lorry and you're paying your actors two and sixpence for their dinner and a shilling for their tea, you know [Laughs] - you needed more money than that. So it was a different ballgame, actually. It produced people like Brendan Behan and Shelagh Delaney, and all those people. It was different, and it took commercial people very often... just a different feeling. I'm very glad I was there at the very beginning of it. It wasn't the beginning, but it was the beginning for me and being very young at the time I felt it made a huge difference to my life and to the way I viewed just about everything, actually. And in later years... because Joan and I didn't always agree about things - we used to have our arguments and our ups and downs, and I think I was able to give her as good as I got, actually, which was rather unusual...

RL: Oh, good.

BY: Yeah! But later on, she got in touch with me because I was married to a writer called Jack Pulman who wrote all the I, Claudius scripts and funnily enough, had actually been in Theatre Workshop when he was a young actor out of the Army, and had never told me until we were just about to get married. He had sort of hidden it and kept it secret and everyone else kept saying 'Oh yes, he used to be in Theatre Workshop' and I said, 'No, no, no he's a tax inspector and wants to be a writer [Laughs], no'. And then Gerry Raffles, whom Joan lived with and whom she absolutely adored, died very unexpectedly and my husband also died, when he was just 50, 51 - had a heart attack. And for some reason, it seemed to bring us together again, which was rather marvellous and so I knew her in a completely different way in the last ten years of her life. And I have lots of letters at home which she wrote to me - very funny letters sometimes - in different coloured inks depending on how she was feeling at the time. She would change the colour of her ink half way through the [sentence]... and underline things, you know, and tell me who not to have anything to do with - she was very funny. But

as she got older she got much more... I don't know, she was just lovely. She was lovely with young people too as she got older, which I always think is a good sign...

RL: Because she is portrayed as being a bit of a... very strong, almost aggressive. I read a few things about her, and especially there's quite a famous incident of her relationship with Barbara Windsor and how they, you know, fought with each other and she respected the fact that Barbara answered her back. And was that, did you share that sort of relationship, or...?

BY: Very much so, very much so, yes. Maybe it was another Barbara! [Laughs] I don't know, maybe she did it with the Barbaras! But I can remember clouting her, actually at one point...

RL: Really?

BY: Oh yes, because she pushed me. I was late for [rehearsal]... I had a very bad tooth and I had to go to a dentist. We were somewhere on tour, somewhere in Edinburgh [I think], and she didn't accept the fact that I'd been to this dentist and I had a really sore mouth and she actually pushed me, and it hurt and I just lashed out and clouted her one, and I remember Ewan having to separate us. But oddly enough it never seemed to make any difference, that sort of thing didn't bother her, really. What bothered her was when you didn't work properly [Laughs] or you didn't do it right, you know. And I think I managed to nearly always do it right for her - she quite liked the ability, I think. And, interestingly enough, I did sprain my ankle at one point and we were on tour with Johnny Noble and something else and Joan had to go on and do my parts because I couldn't hobble - I couldn't walk. So I sat at the back and took the tickets in the village hall and I sat with my stick with a gold knob on top, looking rather smart you know, and I sat and I had the opportunity for the first time in my life...

RL: Oh! To watch it!

BY: ...to watch it and to watch Joan. And... she was appalling - absolutely appalling - and it was fascinating because I suddenly thought, 'well, I guess you can either do it or you can't'. And no matter what she said, she actually couldn't do it on stage as an actress, but she was brilliant as a director and brilliant as a producer, and all the things she wanted. She could tell you exactly what to do but she couldn't do it herself. And, I think she knew that and I think that was one of the reasons, very often, she would hang onto that thumb which kept you under sometimes, because that was her way of putting herself on that stage, you know.

RL: They've said that about... she performed as Mother Courage once, I think...

BY: Yeah.

RL: and apparently that was the same thing, yeah.

BY: She couldn't do it - she actually couldn't do it, it was... Why should she be able to necessarily, you know? She wasn't an actress. She was a very talented painter, oddly enough, as well. She'd studied art at the Slade, I think, before she became a theatre director and she had... She was an immensely gifted woman and she was also a very funny woman and as she got older, she got funnier. She really did get quite, quite comical in her old age, I think, and very good with the youngsters, really, really good. It's a shame - I think she could have gone on to do more things, oddly enough. I don't quite know why it dried up like that, but it did, didn't it, towards the end?

RL: Yeah, sort of around '63 when she left, yeah.

BY: Yeah, it kind of dried up, and I think there was a lot more left in her that she hadn't done. Maybe it was on too big a scale, maybe she wanted things like People's Palace...

RL: Like when you were with her.

BY: Yes, and all that and she wanted to do it on a bigger scale and get the people in, and people just wouldn't give her the money, I suspect is what happened.

RL: Because there was that interesting thing, at the period, of art subsidies and the fact that the Theatre Workshop just weren't given, weren't recognised to be given enough money...

BY: No, they weren't, no, no they weren't. And it was interesting, because when Murray Melvin wrote his book... about this time last year, we had an exhibition at the National in the Cottesloe Gallery, as it were, in the foyer there. And Michael Billington and Nick Hytner and all these people were... it was lovely and Murray's book was on sale and everybody was there and people were talking about how they couldn't possibly [have] achieved what they've achieved now at the National - or anywhere else - without Theatre Workshop. And, it was lovely to hear, but you sort of wanted to put your hand up and say, 'well, it would have been nice to have heard it, actually, 30 years ago, you know!' [Laughs] That's when it would have been helpful. But the people who did help, oddly enough, were Sam Wanamaker and Michael Redgrave...

RL: Oh right, yeah.

BY: ...and they were on tour with a Clifford Odet's play that I'm not going to be able to remember the name of [The Country Girl], but it had Michael and Sam Wanamaker and Googy Withers. They later made a film of it with Bing Crosby and Grace Kelly - and I'm damned if I can remember it, it's awful isn't it? But, anyway, they came to look at us, we were rehearsing Uranium, I think - 235 - in a basement in Manchester, and they were on tour there and they came to have a look, and they just fell in love with it. And

both of them together said, 'Well, if you want to come in to somewhere like the Swiss Cottage Embassy, we'll put our names to it,' and so they brought us in. It was 'Sam Wanamaker and Michael Redgrave present Theatre Workshop' and we did a season - a short season - at the Swiss Cottage Embassy Theatre. And every actor in London came to watch it, and every actor in London offered to work for nothing for Joan because they were so knocked out by it - they had never seen [anything like it]...

RL: It was such a shame you didn't get the subsidies and the money... for the talent...

BY: Yeah, incredible! And it was there, you see. And then we did a short season at the Comedy Theatre in the West End - we actually did play there. But, nothing more happened after that, and I do remember Kenneth Tynan writing a review in which he said some of the actors were good enough to be released from their chains. [Laughs] And I think that that was unfortunately the attitude of quite a few people. They seemed to think we were in some kind of prison camp, you know, which was not the case at all, actually, it really wasn't and... No, it was a fascinating time, absolutely fascinating.

RL: And when did you, when were you able to, you know, show your new talents on the British stage - when did you...?

BY: Well, I came back from Paris, from France, and I... funnily enough the first thing I did was a revue which... I'd never done anything like that in my life before, and it was called For Amusement Only, and it had people like Ron Moody and all sorts of marvellous actors in it. And it was very, very quick and you had to constantly learn new things and people kept handing you bits of paper and saying, 'say this' when you went on, because it was topical. It was not unlike Theatre Workshop, oddly enough.

RL: The improvisation and the...?

BY: Yes, the improvisation ability, you see, was very similar. So, I enjoyed that and most of my really - what I call really interesting work, I suppose, happened at the Oxford Playhouse with a marvellous man called Frank Hauser - who's just died - and he was, he ran this theatre. He transformed Judi Dench from a rather sweet young juvenile into a [formidable] actress and gave her the opportunities to do the things that nobody else would have given her the chance to do, and that's how she developed.

RL: So what time were you with him, what sort of dates?

BY: It would have been, oh, during the sixties, early sixties I suppose, yes, late...

RL: Before censorship and...



BY: Yes, yes and all sorts of amazing people and I did lovely things like Antigone - the Jean Anouilh play - and lots of Shakespeare's and County Wife, all kinds of things. It was, sometimes, you would do three plays in repertory, a kind of season. Doll's House - I did Nora in Doll's House there. I found that very fascinating, I had some wonderful directors to work with.

RL: And at that time, sort of, the RSC started didn't it?

BY: It did.

RL: And they re-did lots of Shakespeare - and the Shakespeare you did, was it taking more of a modern look at it, or was it quite traditional...?

BY: No... We did Antony and Cleopatra...no, I think it was fairly traditional, it was fairly traditional. But it had Barbara Jefford and very good actors in it and... Frank was just a marvellous director and he had wonderful people round him. And, that was a very fruitful period, actually, I really did enjoy that. During that time, one was doing odd televisions and various bits, but basically the theatre - I did some Sadou. I did some Sadou farces in the West End, and then I did a new play of John Bowing's - and I've done a lot of theatre and I'd still like to do some more, actually. I've just done a rehearsed reading of a new play at the Drill Hall, which is the first new play I've done for a very long time, and it was rather good, actually. So, hopefully that will get put on next year.

RL: And how do you think theatre - as a business for you as an actress - has changed from when you were in the fifties with Littlewood? You know, how has it... what do you think the main...? It's quite a big question but...

BY: I do think it's changed a lot, I do... yes I do.

RL: For better, or for worse, or...?

BY: I think what it doesn't do so much, is produce any decent writers...

RL: Right.

BY: ...any more, much. I'm not sure I totally went along with the revolution that Osborne supposedly created...

RL: The Angry Young Men, yeah.

BY: I'm not sure I went along with that, necessarily. It was all right, I didn't think it was all that wonderful and I didn't think it was very much better than Terence Rattigan, actually - if as good - which had been happening before. But everybody said it was a revolution so we had to believe it, I suppose.

RL: Did you do any of those plays yourself?

BY: No, I didn't. I did some Willis Hall... I did Willis, and I've done musicals that Willis has written. Some of the northern writers I've done, because I am northern and I suppose that was inevitable. But, I don't think we, we have... we don't have that many marvellous writers around at the moment, do we? Am I wrong - do you think we do?

RL: No, I agree with you, yeah.

BY: No, I don't think we do. And... that to me is what theatre's all about, really. There's been a lot of other reasons for putting on theatre which are lovely, Theatre Complicite, all those things. Actually, I'd probably rather go and see the Cirque [du Soleil] because they do it better and I don't need to go to the Theatre Complicite, if you know what I mean. I can actually watch them flying around on tightropes and acrobats and it's just as wonderful and just as magical. But for me theatre needs words - I think it does. It needs all sorts of things of course - it has to have the 'other', and the beautiful look and the art, but it does need words. That's why Shakespeare's lasted as long as he has - I'm afraid he just wouldn't have bothered if he hadn't have written those words down, and you know. And, we don't seem to be doing enough of that at the moment, not really. So, maybe we will, maybe there's times for it [again].

RL: And, do you think the audience of theatres has changed at all since the war?

BY: Well, I think probably the National do very well. Nick Hytner's done rather well with the ten pound seats, hasn't he and all that? And I think he's probably attracted a very good and up and coming and young audience there. But, certainly in the commercial theatre it's a disaster at the moment, isn't it? I mean, all you get are telly names and people who've won competitions - I mean, it's ludicrous, you know. [Laughs] I'm sure that you do fill the theatre, but only for that show. I'm not sure you've developed an audience that are going to come back and see something else, without those kind of people in it.

RL: Oh, and obviously, the period we are looking at is 1945-1968, the end being, obviously, when the censorship was abolished and what were your, what were your feelings towards that at the time?

BY: Of the censorship?

RL: Of the end of the censorship, yeah.

BY: I suppose, I suppose it was very important, really. [Laughs] It didn't really seem to make much difference to me, no! I don't think it made much difference to the actors at all, actually, because somehow you can always do what you want to do if you're a good enough actor, and you can get that across to an audience, you know. And the fact that you may have to have one foot on the floor while you're doing it - if you're supposed to be in bed with somebody - is really beside the point, in a way. That's sort of not what it's about. But, I mean, it was very good that it was lifted - it was very good. I do think that an awful lot of rubbish has come in the lifting of it, but then it was bound to, wasn't it? It was bound to, because people would think that was the answer. And of course, it isn't the answer, really. I don't quite know what makes you excited or what makes you... the bottom of your spine tingle, but it's not, not always being able to see everything that's going on. In fact, very often it's not being able to see everything that makes it tingle, so... so who knows, you know?

RL: I think that's really interesting, yeah. Any particular influences... I suppose, for you, it would be Joan Littlewood, wouldn't it? Starting at the beginning...

BY: It would, it would be Joan. Yes, and also, funnily enough, when I was in France with this boy...

RL: Yeah.

BY: ...there was a huge theatre festival at the Sarah Bernhardt Theatre, and I saw the Brecht company for the very first time and I was gob-smacked, I have to say, I was gob-smacked.

RL: What did you see?

BY: I saw Mother Courage with Helene Weigel, who was his wife and the most extraordinary actress I think I've ever seen. And I saw The Caucasian Chalk Circle in which they had a revolution on stage, and they had gateposts, and they put heads on top of the gateposts and they moved. And then they burnt a town, which was on a backcloth it was... and they just put a light behind it and it was on fire, somehow, and those heads were people's heads. It was stagecraft of a kind that I hadn't quite seen before. It was wonderful. And I remember sitting next to George Abbott, who's a very important American producer, and he brought over Mary Martin in an American play, and he was saying, 'well, of course, what they can do, they can, they can do all the political stuff and the drama, they can't do the spectacle, they just can't do it' and then we sat there and watched this town burn on a backcloth and these heads and he went 'oh!'. [Laughs] And they'd brought their own orchestra with them and their own opera singer Ernst Busch, who was the narrator and sang, and he was just spectacular. Because at that point he had a lot of money behind him, Brecht of course, he had the East German coffers to support him. But, it was wonderful and then when they came to London I saw them again when I was in a show at the Apollo Theatre and my dresser was German, and I always remember her saying to me, 'Oh, I wish you could

understand it, because you see, he's really a poet. I just wish you could understand what he's written.'. And apparently he is, he was a poet and the language was beautiful.

RL: So, do you think the British stage almost missed out a bit there? It didn't quite have the...

BY: I think so, I think so, we didn't quite have that. And I saw the Moscow Art Theatre as well, when they came over, and that was another thing that shook me rigid because we laughed all the way through their production of Chekhov.

RL: Because I think sometimes...

BY: We laughed, you see, because it was meant to be funny and when I'd seen it done in England, it was all rather serious, rather terribly serious and suddenly there was these mad people, these clowns, you know - it was wonderful.

RL: Yeah, it seems like, sometimes, the European influence on the British theatre at the point seems to get overlooked a bit? And it seems you've had nice experiences of it...

BY: Just a bit, just a bit...! Yes, that's right and they can... they just go that little bit farther sometimes and they don't always get it right, but when they do it's very exciting.

RL: Yeah, and I think lastly, really, is there anything else you feel like you'd like to talk about that we haven't covered, or anything?

BY: No, I think you've done very well with the questions [Laughs] - very well! It just seems... It's funny because, finally, even doing my rehearsed reading which was in front of an audience, last week, one gets the kind of flutters in your stomach. You can do as much television as you like, you can do as many movies as you like, you are never going to get that feeling anywhere except in the theatre, and it's simply due to the fact that there's a live audience sitting out there watching you, and it's very, very special. Nothing will ever take its place, no, no.

RL: Lovely, we'll end it there, thank you.