

# THEATRE ARCHIVE PROJECT

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## Jean Miller – interview transcript

**Interviewer: Emily Blakey**

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Actress. Bellain's School of Dancing; costumes; films; Margot Fonteyn; Hermione Gingold; Michael Miller; orchestras; pantomime; salaries; Theatre Royal, Windsor.

EB: Jean Miller, thank you for participating in the British Library Oral History Project. Firstly, could you give me some background about how you got into the theatre.

JM: Ah, well, how did I get into the theatre...well, I was very, very lucky because my uncle John Counsell had the Theatre Royal Windsor and so there was always that, and my grandparents lived in Folkestone and brought me up and Grandpa had a boys' school and Granny used to go down and help at the theatre of the Leas Pavilion on the Leas at Folkestone. She and Mummy used to put up actors in the summer holidays that were acting there, there was Robert Marley I remember, a big fat famous actor, and all sorts of different ones so there were always theatrical people around. Oh and [Owen] Ayers, who you'd never have heard of but he was a matinée idol – he used to stay. And then I started, and although I was at a boys' prep school I went dancing which was the only girlie thing I did and I used to show off. We used to have French boys in the summer. There used to be six of us and we used to sing and dance to them and I think I liked showing off. [Laughs] My mother once took me to Bobby's which was a big department store in Folkestone and she went off to spend a penny and when she came back (I was three years old at the time) I was singing on the stage, so there must have been a bit of a show-off in me. So anyway, I kept winning cups and medals and certificates. And then my Uncle put his first pantomime on in 1938. It was called Boom! and I danced and sang in it. It all sort of seemed perfectly natural to me, because somehow it always happened. The next year my Aunt Mary Kerridge - she was quite a famous actress - she wrote Aladdin and she played Aladdin in it. I was Widow Twanky's... I played one of Widow Twankey's children. I have photograph here, which you can't see, but I'm dressed as a seed pearl in Aladdin's cave holding a silver balloon - I don't think it ever went pop! I think if you look very closely you can see garter marks round my legs. I used to wear socks.

EB: Lovely costume.

JM: So that was that, and then the war came and the war had come when we did that. My Uncle went off to the wars and he became Chief Historian in the war in the end and he [drew up] the peace treaty in Nuremberg at the end of the war, and he had to invent it in the war. He had to invent it as no one had ever done it before, which was a bit

complicated. And all through the war I danced in pantomimes and acted in [the] holidays and things. I got a scholarship to Bellain's School of Dancing as a founder pupil when I was 13. Anyway, off I went with a trunk and danced - we danced all day. We did one hour's lessons. Nobody really cared in the war. Somebody taught us who grew vegetables to help the war, came in and taught us. [Laugh] And we had a Mademoiselle once a week - think I behaved very badly probably. Our ballet mistress had been with the Russian Ballet and she used to come down looking very haggard and worn because of bombs and the blitz was on, windows broken, houses blown up, trains late, and all the horrors of war. And we used to wear blackout material - which you had over your windows - you weren't allowed to have any light coming out - and we all wore black because then we didn't have to [use] coupons. We wore awful tunics made of blackout material.

EB: And what about after the war?

JM: What happened after the war...? Well, the war ended and I left my ballet school which is now quite famous, it's a school of [dance] and drama but I was a founding pupil when it was just the Bellain's School of Dancing. Michael Ball was there with my youngest daughter when she was there. Anyway, I went for an audition for Sweetest and Lowest, which was the naughtiest show in London and Hermione Gingold had been in Sweet and Low, Sweeter and Low and I was in Sweetest and Lowest. I got the audition, so one just thought life was very easy: just sit on the stage, danced and acted. And I got it.

EB: It's harder these days.

JM: Well, I was very lucky. And it was a revue. I don't think they do revues now. And Hermione Gingold was hysterically funny. I can't really describe her, she was so extraordinary. Her hair was clean, she was wearing a wig and she had lots and lots of American GIs in her dressing room.

EB: And what about you?

JM: We didn't have GIs in our dressing rooms! There's a book [points] [by] Hermione Gingold Growing Old Disgracefully. She sent me to Angus McBean to have my photograph taken and he's now dead, but he was terribly famous. They've just given him an exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery. I've dried up!

EB: I was going to ask you, actually, about your husband...

JM: I haven't got there yet!

EB: Oh right! OK!

JM: So I had lots of boyfriends and admirers. And I then went to my uncle's theatre at Windsor and joined the rep. It was a fortnightly rep. It used to be weekly. So that was quite a luxury and I acted in everything from Shakespeare to Christopher Fry to farce – a fairy every Christmas. I always seemed to be the Fairy Queen. And then I starred with Dame Flora Robson and we did a tour in a rather terrible play called Autumn.

EB: Why was it terrible?

JM: It's not a very good play. But that was quite a thing to act with her. Except she kept forgetting her lines! Then the Festival of Britain arrived - which was 1951 - and my Uncle put on 1066 And All That. Do you know 1066?

EB: Yes...

JB: It's a musical. "We're the girlfriends of King Canute. How do you like my bathing suit" - that sort of thing. There's a photo in my book of me doing the can-can. I suppose it was in Henry VII. I met somebody called Michael Miller at rehearsals but I called him David the first day and I called him David and he was playing Henry VIII and I was Anne Boleyn. That evening he asked me out, and the next day he proposed to me and... I said - 'Oh, I might think about it' and then about 6 weeks later we were married - and everybody was horror struck!

EB: In the one night!

JM: Not one night – nothing like that! [Laughs]

EB: No I don't mean that!

JM: So Michael was acting but we were always being parted. Michael went off acting in Ring Around the Moon written by Christopher Fry – do you know it?

EB: Mmm, yes.

JM: And I played it at Windsor - the young girl in it, a lovely part, can't remember what she's called. And then we decided we were going to leave the theatre and go and do the good life long before The Good Life was done on television. And we went to Jersey as I'd been born in Jersey and at that time we didn't need millions and we had a huge Georgian house, several acres, and we grew potatoes and flowers and we went broke, inevitably. But we managed for seven years. We were completely cut off. And we both gave up acting so we could be together. And then you see The Good Life now on television, and think 'Well, we did it long before'! Lots of nice surfing on the beach. Was a terrific relief to leave the theatre and all the worries and terrors. Anyway we went

bust, so back we came plus a baby called Polly and then I had two more children and Michael went back into the theatre.

EB: He went back, but did you?

JM: No, no. I was busy with nappies and scrubbing floors and cooking and going for walkies and reading Beatrix Potter. I think I'd never had a proper home as I'd lived in a boys' school, so to me... although it was a rented house it was a home. I could sit by the fire, it was cosy. At the boys' school we always went in a crocodile everywhere, and sat in our dining room having bread and jam. Quite different to now - people would be horrified I think. We only had cake on a Sunday. Anyway, so then what happened – Michael did a lot of television. At that time there always was an historical series on BBC 1 at about five thirty in the evening. Things like Hereward and the Wake, The Three Musketeers and The Count of Monte Cristo, Children of the New Forest. Such a shame they don't do them now. So he did a lot of those.

EB: But he didn't necessarily go back to the theatre?

JM: Oh yes he did theatre as well. He was doing an Agatha Christie when I had my second child. He was doing that at Windsor actually. Oh yes, because if you're in the theatre you just have to go wherever. Then he started doing quite a lot of films.

EB: And I believe you shared a dressing room with Margot Fonteyn?

JM: Oh yes, but that's journalists making a story out of nothing... when I was in Sweetest and Lowest and I went to London every day to dance and act and sing I used to go to ballet classes in West Street just near the Ambassador's, just off Cambridge Circus, and there were these ancient, very dirty, dusty, huge studios which I'm sure are not like that now, and we all shared a dressing room. It didn't matter whether I was in my class in one studio and Fonteyn or whoever in the other, we all shared a dressing room so I shared a dressing room with Fonteyn. They all smoked, I might tell you, in the dressing room like troopers. And Fonteyn had a little black mini covered in mock bamboo, like a bamboo chair. Terribly smart. And she was very, very sweet. She was absolutely lovely. So that's the story of me sharing a dressing room with Fonteyn.

EB: Still that's quite something - I don't think many people can say that really.

JM: And I was taught ballet. Hilda Lumley, my ballet mistress at school, she'd been with the Russian Ballet, and she'd been taught... [by Legatt who] taught Pavlova so that goes back a long way. And my headmistress at school – she'd been taught by somebody who'd been taught by Isadora Duncan so I had a great sort of background.

EB: Did you prefer dancing to acting?

JM: Well, I always thought I was going to be an amazing dancer, but I haven't got completely straight knees and you have to be absolutely perfect physically to be a ballet dancer, so that was why I went into revue. I loved acting. But I've liked all my life. I've had a very hard time at times, but I love it all. I mean, I don't really like being a widow but I enjoy it. I don't really like being ill but I enjoy it. I do enjoy my life. Well, you bloody well have to don't you!

EB: I certainly do like your paintings.

JM: Well, my sister was a scenic artist and my brother-in-law was a very famous art director in films. Would you like to know about that?

EB: Yes.

JM: He was put up for an Oscar for Ryan's Daughter. He made his name with Genevieve, I don't suppose you've seen it? About the car who goes to Brighton. It's a wonderful film. Anyway he made his name. He'd just come out of the Air Force when he made it and that was his first and it made his name. He did Fiddler on the Roof, all sorts of films, he worked for Disney, all sorts of things. So Michael acted, my brother-in-law was an art director, my sister was a scenic, my uncle and aunt were actors and directors, my two cousins were on the stage. Then Polly, my youngest daughter was until she had an accident. And her father-in-law - great grandfather-in-law...? grandfather-in-law! - was somebody called John Loder who was an Old Etonian Englishman and he went to Germany and Marlene Dietrich wanted somebody with a dinner jacket. And of course being an Old Etonian he had no money but he had all the right clothes and he was a very good looking man and he went into films, starting with Marlene Dietrich. And then he went to Hollywood and he was very famous but [is] forgotten now. He had five wives and one was the very famous Hedy Lamarr. Does that mean anything to you? It's like saying he was married to Marilyn Monroe, practically, a very beautiful, sexy woman. So it's all gone on round me.

And my husband then had a car crash which put paid to acting and... he had to learn rather quickly how to do some things. We went to auctions and bought paintings so again we were always visually looking at things. You buy something for a pound and sell it for two pounds and so you go on. But quite, I suppose, frightening with three children, but never mind. I'd rather know what it's like than not. What else would you like to know?

EB: What was your favourite costume?

JM: My favourite costume! I have no idea. What would it be? Well I've got a picture of me as a fairy. Let's see what you think. That one's all right, bang in the middle. [Points] Dick Whittington.

EB: Is that you in the middle there?

JM: Of course that's me, I'm the Fairy Queen! And behind in the chorus is Katie Boyle who became very famous. You probably haven't heard of her. She used to do the Eurovision Song Contest because she was Italian – she could speak English-Italian. She was a Viscountess. She was Lady Boyle.

EB: And this particular dance was in between 1948 – 50.

JM: Yep. I was right in the middle. Of course I was on my pointes! Fairy Queens have to be on their pointes!

EB: That's a beautiful dress.

JM: So that's a beautiful dress. I can't remember what my dress...there's me modelling.  
[Points]

EB: In 1949.

JM: I wondered if you'd like to take that, as long as you promise to send it back - to give you a little idea.

EB: Fantastic. A very rich life.

JM: Well no not really, it's getting richer at the minute and a bit exhausting.

EB: I was going to ask you about the plays. You've mentioned already 1066 And All That...

JM: I was in Ring Around The Moon and Autumn.

EB: I was going to ask you about your salary when you were young.

JM: Ah well, when I was eight or nine I think... Well I have to tell you that we had to go to school, we had to do lessons in the morning and we had a matinée in the afternoon and a show in the evening, but we had to be out of the theatre by eight or nine o'clock. And we had to do lessons down in the bar of the theatre and I think I got five pounds at the end of it after about five weeks and three weeks rehearsals. Was nice at eight or nine! And probably a book. And then when I went to London in Sweetest and Lowest I'd never had so much money in my life. The average wage was two fifty a week and I was getting eight pounds a week.

EB: Wow, rich young lady!

JM: I was! And clothes had just come off coupons.

[Interruption, tape turned off]

JM: I think I was rather interrupted by Sir Arnold Wesker's PA, and so I'm not quite sure where we are but that's quite impressive that she walked in at that minute and told us what Arnold was doing – that will be very interesting in years to come. Oh, he's gone to London. Anyway, so I got eight pounds a week and was as rich as Croesus and then I went to the Theatre Royal, Windsor and I got three pounds a week. You had to learn your lines and dress yourself, eat, sleep and live all on three pounds, which we all seemed to do. And when I got married it went up to four pounds a week, so that was what money was like in those days. But we used to have wonderful clothes for plays. One got the bus from Windsor to Pinewood Filmstudios where you went down the long road. And we used to have the pick of all the film stars dresses for a pound. The theatre paid and I think it was a pound a day. If I was going to a dance I used to go there and just hire one for a pound and wear the most amazing clothes.

EB: And you would choose the one you wanted - the nicest.

JM: Oh yes of course, the nicest, they were all grand. They were all designer couture clothes. So that was nice. Life was full of funny things. Anyway, what else do you want to ask?

EB: I was going to ask you if you think British Theatre has changed much over the years?

JM: Well, everything's changed. The way of acting, the way of dressing, the way you used to put thick number nine on, which were Liechner sticks. We had red dots in the corners of our eyes and some funny mascara - I used to use shoe black in a tube as you couldn't get mascara. Theatre dressing rooms were pretty dusty and I don't think anybody had done anything to them since they had been built, and the acting... and the sets wobbled a bit. All the scenery was hauled up by hands with ropes with fly men holding them. So everything was different. The people were different.

EB: How much was an average ticket?

JM: Oh, I think about one shilling and sixpence or two shillings maybe. My uncle had... it said on the front of the Daily Mirror which said: "King sits in the three and six pennies." So there you go, the stalls were three and sixpence. So that's about 17p. We all puffed away on cigarettes of course.

EB: Which you wouldn't get now.

JM: No, we smoked our nerves – we needed to smoke, and you smoked on stage and it was a normal thing to do.

EB: Were you a singer?

JM: I sang appallingly but I did have lessons with a Madam Nicklass Kempner in her little basement in Kensington. She taught somebody terribly famous called Richard Touper, which won't mean anything to you, but he sang 'You are my heart's delight' and all that sort of stuff. He was the pin-up boy of the thirties. But I smoked too much.

EB: You didn't play any instruments?

JM: No, I went to Madame Rose and played the piano but I hated it. I was busy dancing.

EB: Thank you very much, Jean, for taking time this afternoon.

JM: It's been a pleasure. I'm sure if I scratched my brains I could think of other things but I...Oh, we had a beautiful orchestra. The theatre always had an orchestra - a full orchestra - in the intervals and before 'God Save the Queen' - or King - at the end and then the government brought in you had to work. Because they all came from the guard's barracks, they were the guard's band - they were superb. And then they weren't allowed to do it because it was overtime. All this politically correct, so now all you had was a gramophone record. Quite sad.

EB: So thank you again Jean.

JM: It's been an absolute pleasure, and I hope it all goes well.

EB: And good luck with your book launch next week.

JM: Yes, it's all rather terrifying but I am sure it'll be all right.