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Joan Plowright – interview transcript

Interviewer: Andrew MacKay

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Dame Joan Plowright. Actress. A Taste of Honey; audiences; Chekhov's plays; The Country Wife; creating characters and emotions; George Devine; The Entertainer; favourite roles; Old Vic Theatre School; Sir Laurence Olivier; John Osborne; the National Theatre; Roots; Royal Court Theatre; Rudolf von Laban Art of Movement Studio; Kenneth Tynan; Orson Welles.

This interview has been edited by the interviewee; the transcript thus differs in places from the recording. Also present is Patricia Doyle (PD:) who sometimes contributes to the interview.

AM: So, Dame Joan, it's a privilege to be here with you. I'd like to start by asking you perhaps something about the actors that you admired in your youth, when you were studying at school, and perhaps going into the Old Vic Theatre School. Is there anybody that you particularly admired – female actresses perhaps?

JP: Yes, well obviously all of us at the Old Vic Theatre School admired Peggy Ashcroft, Edith Evans and Sybil Thorndike. They were our heroines. And the men of course would be Laurence Olivier, Michael Redgrave, to name but two. But... no the training at the Old Vic Theatre School was of course classical, so one was rather centred on the Old Vic Theatre Company. And in fact they were still rehearsing at the Old Vic Theatre when we all turned up there, which was...

AM: That must have been amazing.

JP: in 1949 went through the stage door of the Old Vic, to become a student at the Old Vic Theatre School. And then we were moved out to West Dulwich, to a huge building there, because the theatre was going to be renovated. It had suffered bomb damage. And I remember the students forming a chain from the top of the theatre, room 43 I think it was, right up at the top, right down to the bottom, clearing chairs. And as we were swinging them round to each other, down various flights of stairs, members of the Old Vic Theatre Company were coming up to that room to rehearse. And I remember swinging my chair round into the chest of Michael Redgrave.

AM: [laughs] What was his reaction?

JP: [laughs] Only being told afterwards who it was. And then somebody else went up and then two of the boys at the bottom of the stairs held up a door mat and shouted 'Laurence Olivier walked on this'. Yes. And we were all students together.

AM: Wonderful. And when you say the training was very classical, for anybody who doesn't know what that means, what was...?

JP: Well it was a training for classical theatre, for...

AM: Okay, so Shakespeare and...

JP: Shakespeare yes, Molière, Chekhov. It was a very extensive training, and one that would fit an actor for any company, any period, whether it was classical, contemporary or even musicals, because we had classes in fencing, acrobatics, art of movement, dance, speech delivery, voice, singing, and style classes where you learnt the style of text, you know to be able to deliver a text in the style that was necessary. You can't do contemporary kind of rhythms in Molière. [laughs]

PD: Improvisation – you did a lot of improvisation you said as well.

JP: Yes.

PD: And based on Stanislavski. The training was based on Stanislavski.

JP: Yes. The speech delivery classes, the improvisation classes were comic improvisation where there was a huge pile of clothes and masks and you dressed yourself up in something and became whoever you wished or whatever sort of character you wished. And you would then join six other people, say sitting around, and you were told you'd be in a dentist's waiting room and you were to work out a scene.

AM: Gosh.

JP: And then there was animal improvisation where you had to become an animal.

AM: Did you favour any particular animal?

JP: Well... [laughs] I became a boxer puppy, simply because we had one at home. But I was accused of mimicry sooner than becoming it.

AM: [laughs]

JP: But I do remember one actor who didn't believe in it at all, sitting perfectly still. Because you all had to kind of perform your animal at the end of a show, and the rest of the students and the staff would be able to tell you or not what animal you were. He just sort of crouched down and did nothing whatsoever, and we were all very puzzled. And when Michel said at the end, 'Well I'm afraid we can't tell what...' he said, 'Well, I thought it was quite obvious, I was a chameleon and I changed colour five times, and if you didn't see it, I'm sorry.'

AM: [laughs] Wonderful.

JP: So...

PD: You said it was very... quite harshly critical too, your training, that you had to take it on the chin.

JP: Yes, it was. It was arduous, very hard and they were very critical. They were there to make you aware that your instrument, which is your body, your voice, had to be properly tuned. The movement classes for instance, we were all put into a navy blue swimming costume, exactly the same, men and women. And you were up in a room where everybody sat, and each student walked around in this awful costume, while people criticized the bodily movement or said where there was weakness. I mean it sounds awful, but it was a way of getting over that kind of initial embarrassment of exposure in a way, which you know, you later will do in a performance.

AM: Yes, and if you can get past that kind of criticism then you can deal with anything.

JP: Exactly. It was to break down inhibition and it was very hard to endure sometimes.

AM: I can imagine, yes. Did you have any particular favourite playwright, plays that you liked to perform when you were at the Old Vic? Was there any particular part of the classical training that appealed to you more than others? Or perhaps you were...

JP: I can't remember a favourite. I was interested in everything you know. I mean the fact was the school had a director's course, a stage management and lighting course, and costume design, so it was self-sufficient. And we had classes in how to move in a crinoline for instance, because you can't run, as you do in a contemporary fashion in jeans, in a crinoline. It looks very ungainly and unattractive, and it's not meant. So those were all very interesting. And each term, at the end of each term, you would do about three plays in a term: you would do a Shakespeare, you would do a Molière, you would do a Chekhov.

AM: So Chekhov was the most modern that you would do. You wouldn't get anything post Chekhov?

JP: I'm trying to think. I don't think we did anything, no. No, Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg, all that, that collection, and Shakespeare, Molière, Webster. Yes, it really... but you see, in classical theatre, in Shakespeare, you do need to be able to do everything: you need to be able to sing, dance, do acrobatics. You know, there's always parts...

AM: Absolutely.

JP: in Shakespeare where you need all those accomplishments.

AM: Fantastic. And, as a student at the Old Vic, how aware were you and your contemporaries of other things that were going on outside this very classical kind of training – this very classical kind of theatre?

JP: Oh, we were encouraged to go and see variety and music hall, to do with the comic improvisation classes. We were encouraged to go to art galleries and look at painting. It was in fact an education as well as a training for theatre. And of course we would go to the theatre. We saw everything at the Old Vic because we got to the dress rehearsals. And Laurence Olivier was doing *Venus Observed*, and as he was on the board of the Old Vic Theatre School, because he had officially opened it, he was a friend of the three men who ran it: Michel Saint-Denis, George Devine and Glen Byam Shaw. They were running the Old Vic Theatre as well as the school, so that we were at a great advantage really in that we were being trained by people who were still running a theatre and enduring criticism themselves, which we could all read. So that these men, who to us were gods, were being told off in the newspapers for not doing very well on a production.

AM: So in a sense there was a sort of a quite a family feeling, you were all in it together.

JP: Yes, yes, there was.

AM: Just rolling back a little bit, the influence of your mother, I know that you've written in your memoirs that she was a big influence on you, she was very interested in the arts generally...

JP: Oh...

AM: Sorry... I was just going to ask you how big an effect you think she had on you in wanting to become an actor? Was she very encouraging of that?

JP: Yes, my mother would take me off to Nottingham or wherever a ballet company or the Old Vic were visiting when I was still a schoolgirl, because she loved it so. She also formed an amateur dramatic society and was a very renowned amateur actress in the town. And she did plays, as they called it, with us as children, so that I learnt sort of fairly early on that I felt rather confident on stage. I felt more confident being somebody else on stage than I felt being myself in real life.

AM: Interesting.

JP: And that was where it began I think.

AM: And your father, was he appreciative of these family plays?

JP: Oh indeed he was. My father was editor of the local newspaper, and he was sort of you know PR for the opera, the amateur opera society, and for my mother's company. He was very, very supportive. I mean he did tend to be worried about the theatre, because his own experience as a cub reporter in Gainsborough was when several chorus girls were stranded there and not paid, and he had to sort of help them out with money to get home. So he thought it was a very precarious profession.

AM: So he was being a real father there and worried about that.

JP: Yes.

AM: But your mother was very encouraging. So then you go to the Old Vic, and was it what you expected it to be? Your ideas of acting and training to act, were they...?

JP: I had no idea really what the training would be like. I had only been told... you see, I went to Rudolf von Laban Art of Movement Studio, which had been recommended by a brilliant man called Wilhelm Marcvalt who was a refugee for Nazi Germany, where he'd worked with Max Reinhardt, and had been made county drama advisor in Lincolnshire. And I did a summer course with him where there was a representative from Laban, the Art of Movement Studio, and they thought it would do me a world of good to go there first. I don't know if you know anything about von Laban, but Matthew Bourne, who did the male Swan Lake, was a student of Laban.

AM: And you're there for a summer before?

JP: I did a summer drama course with Marcvalt and the Laban representative. Then I went to the studio for about six months, before I did the audition for the Old Vic Theatre School.

AM: Right. You were well prepared then for the Old Vic. That's great.

JP: I think really for choosing the drama school to go to my father had talked to various people, including Marcvall, who were all hearing about this new Old Vic Theatre School which was run by practical theatre men – you know, who were running a theatre. And the general impression they gave my father was that RADA had become what they called 'a finishing school for young ladies' and that the one that they all favoured was this new one for... pretty newish – I was group four.

AM: So your father approved of that recommendation and that's where you...

JP: He approved the recommendation. He didn't know much about it either but... And there were very talented people, very talented young people at that school, though not the sort of people who, as at RADA, who kind of go into being film stars. Not that I'm not against film stars, but you know what I mean. But when the Old Vic Theatre, well the school, was closed down, because the Arts Council decided they couldn't give a grant any more... and I don't know what the trouble was but there was a great uproar. They were going to take away the grant for the school and it was very sad, because you know it was providing the future Old Vic Theatre Companies and Young Vic with the type of actors who could cope with anything.

AM: Yes. So after leaving the Old Vic you go to Croydon do you – Croydon Rep?

JP: No, no, no, I didn't. No, I got one job at Croydon. I mean Croydon was, I think, weekly rep or fortnightly rep.

AM: Right, okay.

JP: No, I just... I was, as they call, "spotted" at the student show and just asked to go for two weeks. You're talking about my first professional job was just that. [laughs]

AM: Yes, at Croydon. And then did you go to Nottingham you were saying? You might have gone to Nottingham Rep.

JP: I did...

JP: Moby Dick with Orson Welles in London.

JP: Okay, yes. So after that first job, which was very short, I actually went back in to the Old Vic Theatre Company and they were going to do a tour of South Africa. I went in to do small part and understudy – there were about six students from the school taken on. So I was there for a year. And then I was at Nottingham Rep, because repertory played a

very big part in one's training in those days. And you know, critics used to go out to the first night of Bristol Old Vic, or Nottingham or... And actors would go out there, I mean well-known actors, to try out a big part. Albert Finney played Macbeth at Birmingham and his father was heard to say, in the auditorium, 'That's the best Macbeth I've ever seen' and his mother said loudly to everybody, 'And it's the only one'. [laughter] Where was I?

PD: At the Old Vic, and I know you played Cobweb in the Dream and a witch in Macbeth and you were touring South Africa. That was the year of...

JP: Yes, yes. And then rep, it was really... talking about the benefits of rep in those days, which you know it's rather disappeared right now, for people to get that kind of training, where you can make mistakes without being in the limelight. But anyway, after that I auditioned... I had auditioned for Orson Welles once for Othello, for Bianca. He had walked down the aisle and said, 'Who are you? You're very good, who are you?' I wasn't anybody of course. Anyway I didn't get it because there was a Rank starlet who was more newsworthy than me. I didn't get the part that time but they said, 'Mr Welles is very impressed and he'll remember you the next time he's doing anything' and he did remember me, when he was going to do this extraordinary version, his own, of Moby Dick where I played the cabin boy, Pip. Because – it sounds extraordinary – but the conception was of a travelling theatre company rehearsing a play that's just come in a pile of scripts, which is Moby Dick, but originally they were there to rehearse King Lear and I was playing Cordelia. So I was in... it was kind of 18 something or other, this company was supposed to be, so I was in, you know a long skirt and a bustle. So when he gave out parts there was Peter Sallis, and Patrick McGoohan, and Kenneth Williams, all in this production. And everybody was given a script when these new scripts arrived, and Orson said 'well you play that, and you do that, and Miss Jenkins is...' you know 'we don't have a negro cabin boy, so you play Pip, and if you can also play the harmonium that would be helpful'.

AM: And you could do all of that.

[Laughter]

JP: [Inaudible] ropes whistling for the storm and men created a rowing boat in mime.

JP: If you are really possessed by the character you're feeling that character's emotions at the time you say the words.

AM: Right, so you're using a little bit of your own experience of that emotion perhaps as well as imagining and kind of creating a feeling for that character.

JP: Mhm.

AM: Right.

AM: In a sense where does the emotion come from when you're dealing with quite an intense part? Are you creating that emotion yourself, or are you tapping into an abstract emotion, are you finding it from within yourself?

JP: Yes, well let's...

JP: You know, when Patricia said there was a sound that came from the stomach which devastated her in the audience, that is, yes, half your own sense of loss which you have learnt about in life and half just tapping in, you know, to a general feeling of tragedy which is out there in the air, as everybody's experienced it at some time or other. But in a way, and for me that particular part of *Masha* in *Three Sisters* was, I know... when I say helped, moved, by the fact that Larry had gone into hospital. So you cannot in that case separate art from life. They are totally intermingled. But the fact that he comes out of hospital and is better, and you can still produce that sound, is to do with having felt it once, knowing, and the next time it is technique, the memory that makes you able to produce it.

AM: Right.

JP: And it is... I mean it is important to acknowledge technique in an actor's armory because it gets sniffed at rather a lot. You know, people tended to say, 'Oh the Americans are so instinctive and spontaneous and English actors are all technique' but technique is the engine that drives a performance, that keeps it on the go for eight times a week. And, like the engine of a car, it has to be hidden – you know hidden beneath the bonnet. You don't see any effort or technique, you see a performance.

But the engine has got to be in good order. I mean, if you want a Rolls Royce performance you have to have a Rolls Royce engine, and that way you have to keep tuned up – not only the physical body which, you know, you can express grief with your back instead of facing out front and crying with tears splashing down your face and hoping the aud-... you know the audience can possibly be more moved by someone turning their back, sitting at a table and their shoulders going in such a way that you know it's the depth of grief that they don't want to face you with. And that is more appealing to their imagination as well. They just see the back but they, inside themselves, add to what they know is going on, so that they feel the huge grief. But, you know you can't rely on it all the time.

I mean, I do remember going with Larry in New York to see Kenneth Haigh in something. Kenneth Haigh had acted the first Jimmy Porter. He was on in New York in something and he'd had notices about a cry or a something at the end of Act One. And when we went to see it there was no cry, it just finished off. And we went round to see him and we said well you know what happened, we've read about... that you know that cry of pain and outrage at the end of... 'Oh' he said, 'I felt I couldn't reach it and I didn't want to give the audience a lie'. He'd been doing the studio, the Method. And Larry said, 'You know, acting I'm afraid is a lie. You know, I don't kill people on the stage. People get up afterwards and take a curtain call'. You know you are giving the audience a lie but you are making it real, and to say 'oh I didn't feel it last night', and not do it for

an audience, is not what an actor's job is all about. I mean it's... technique is also control – you know your own control. You have your little controller man watching what you do, making sure that if you are in a deeply emotional scene and crying buckets, the audience can still hear what you say, because that's what they've paid for. I mean they've paid to hear Shakespeare's words if you're crying away as Juliet, not your snuffles. And you can do that in the bath, Juliet, and cry a lot and it's all very real. But it's not art.

AM: So, in a sense, there's a real... there's a duty to your audience. You know you have to, in a sense, obey them in some ways. You don't show the cracks, you don't show the...

JP: There is a duty to the audience. Of course there is. And also they... you know, they don't like everything pushed at them on a plate all at once... buuushhh. You want to keep something back so that they think there is a lot more to come and then they are really kind of bowled over, because what will happen when... you know, if they top this – the world will explode. But if you top this right at the beginning and you're exhausted and there's nowhere to go, they have nowhere to go either. They're just as tired as you are, and not very excited.

AM: In a sense it's rather like a love affair in some ways...

JP: Yes.

AM: where you're holding something back from... at the beginning you know, the sense of anticipation. So you're in this interesting relationship as an actor with your audience.

JP: Yes.

AM: Yes.

JP: I mean it's very different you know in film acting from theatre, because in the theatre you have to project, so things are going to be larger than life. They have to be to reach the back of a theatre. It doesn't mean to say they're untrue; they are just, with the help of technique, projected. But in the cinema the camera does the projection so if you do a theatrical performance in front of a camera, it won't work. It will be false and it'll look over the top, because you have to exist in front of a camera because it is doing all that work for you.

AM: Yes, that's interesting. Going back to your beginnings at the Royal Court, how did you... were you auditioned... you were asked to go for an audition for the Royal Court?

JP: Yes, when I'd done *Moby Dick*, with Orson Welles, I went back to Nottingham Rep and I was there when George Devine – who had trained me at the Old Vic Theatre School, along with Michel and Glen Byam Shaw – contacted me and said would I come up to see him and Tony Richardson, who were about to open this company at the Royal Court. And so I got the job and started there on the first day.

I was an understudy in the first play, and then I was Mary Warren in *The Crucible*, and a land girl in the Nigel Dennis play... something else, I can't remember. And then George said he was going to put me on as *The Country Wife* – my first leading part. And so we played that and it was a huge success at the Royal Court and it transferred to the West End. And it was there that he came along with Laurence Olivier to say they were going to do *The Entertainer*, again at the Palace, and Dorothy Tutin was leaving the company and playing Jean Rice, and would I be interested in taking it over. And that was... yes, that was fascinating because I'd also just been offered a contract with the Boulting Brothers, because playing opposite me in *The Country Wife* was Laurence Harvey, who was a very well known film star at the time. And they wanted to update *The Country Wife* to modern London and have him as the gay man about town – no not gay in that sense – [laughter] man about town and me as the country girl coming up to London. And George Devine said 'well, if you do that you will be typecast the rest of your life if you make a success in the film as the *Country Wife*, and you have more important things to do'. So I did the play.

AM: Fascinating. And was it a part that you felt you could really get your teeth into or not in *The Entertainer*?

JP: No, not really. [laughs] I didn't really like Jean Rice very much but... I felt that I owed it to George, if he wanted me to do it, because he'd given me everything so far. And of course the kudos of acting with Laurence Olivier – I didn't know it was going to go any further than that then – was a huge attraction, naturally. But I didn't... no, I enjoyed being in the play but I didn't much like the part.

PD: May I ask if you enjoyed the film, making the film of it, rather more than perhaps than the stage I wonder?

JP: It's just the part is not fully three dimensional.

PD: Yes, yes, it's true.

JP: It's not a very well written part. Osborne didn't write well for women unless it was someone he despised, like his mother [laughs] I'm afraid. He wrote Phoebe extremely well in *The Entertainer*; that was a creation he knew about.

AM: And so being at the Royal Court in the fifties, this centre of a kind of rebellion in many ways, a kind of dissent, social and theatrical dissent, what was that like being there in the middle of it? You were involved in...

JP: Well it was very exciting. Yes, it was exciting to be there at the beginning. Of course we didn't know that it was going to be making history; would be a sort of important change. But indeed it was, because you know the West End theatre had... I mean, what were we going to see, *Venus Observed*, Christopher Fry, T. S. Eliot and *The Lady's not for Burning* and *Cocktail Party* and *Saint's Day* with John Whiting, and Binkie Beaumont was installed in the West End, and it was elegant, and refined, and rather poetic theatre. And what was it, kind of balletic visually, where things like *Ring Around the Moon*, a sort of set that would... very, very pretty – Oliver Messel – for a ballet. But just rather conventional and, for us students then, perhaps a little bit boring. And it was the beginning – I mean that was the sort of... just waiting time. Going to be tipped over with a huge raw energy which came in with you know, the a) *Look Back in Anger* but b) Theatre Workshop, Stratford East and Joan Littlewood. And the temperature changed. And it always is really to do with political change isn't it, when fashion changes in a theatre. It's like Kenneth Tynan wrote about *Look Back in Anger* 'for the first time I've seen people on stage that I've talked to on the Tube and in the pub, and was at college with and...' grammar school boys.

AM: So there was a kind of democratization of the theatre. But it must have been allowed to happen in some way. When one thinks of the fifties one thinks of pretty conventional, pretty conservative Harold Macmillan sort of things, so in a sense the political changes that are happening are ground level and they're somehow affecting the Royal Court.

PD: Well you quite rightly said that it was coming of course from the provinces too, that it was the voice from the provinces – these young provincial people coming in.

JP: Yes, yes, it was a widening out. The West End had been very much kind of upper class and confined to the South. And the North opened up and there was an influx from regional theatre, from the provinces. I mean typified also by The Beatles. You know, it was all around that time: The Royal Court, The Beatles, Theatre Workshop. And it was a different energy and hoping for a different audience.

AM: Right. And so the opportunity to play Jo in *A Taste of Honey*, a very interesting part to play – very acclaimed, garnered much attention – what was it like playing Jo?

JP: Well, I'd seen the production at Theatre Workshop. I didn't know then that Tony Richardson and George Devine were going to take it over and put me on in New York. And I was very excited about it, but I also felt it was a bit tough on the girl who played it originally.

PD: Frances Cuka.

JP: Frances Cuka. But I remember saying to George, 'Well it doesn't seem fair' and he said, 'My dear, it's not a fair profession. If you don't go with it they won't take it because...' I mean, they won't take her because she's not known at all. And it was... it was a great success. I mean, I got a Tony Award as Best Actress; Shelagh Delaney got a

Tony Award for Best Play. We had a really riotous time of success. You know everybody loved it and you go into Sardi's and they've put your photograph near the front. And I do remember... it was apparently the first time that a white girl had kissed a black boy on stage.

AM: Really.

JP: And somebody had said to David Merrick, who was the American impresario who was putting it on – who I thought liked the play and the performances – somebody said to him, 'Do you think it will cause riots in Cincinnati?' he said, 'I certainly hope so or I've lost an awful lot of money'. [laughter] Well it didn't cause riots; it caused a lot of talk, but not riots.

AM: So what were the differences do you think in the way it was received in Britain and received in America? Was it more controversial here or...?

JP: I'm not sure. I mean, I only know my experience of it over there was they loved it. They were probably more ready for it than England. I don't know about the English audience, but I think a lot of the interest and the support for it came from the profession. Not sort of coach loads of audience from...

PD: No, it was very shocking, very shocking.

JP: It was a shock to the English.

AM: I can imagine.

JP: More so than it was to the Americans. They were very interested in it. But it wasn't so shocking – it moved them.

AM: That's fascinating. And were there any obvious differences between the way Broadway worked and the way the West End worked at that particular time?

JP: I don't think so. I can't answer that question; I didn't really know much about the West End. I was in companies. I mean, after Taste of Honey of course we got married in New York, on St. Patrick's Day, because everybody would be doing something else. And the press, who'd been waiting for us, might not be bothered. And then we came back to England and I was pregnant... [laughs] talking about the parts I lost because I was pregnant, including one... yes that was at the Royal Court with Beckett – Sam Beckett.

I got pregnant after I'd agreed with George to do a Beckett play, Happy Days, and it had to be postponed or put off 'til next year, which we'd all agreed on. But then, the next year, I found myself pregnant again and everybody was sort of furious. And Beckett wrote to a friend sardonically saying, 'Perhaps we should wait until Miss Plowright is

past childbearing or the barren beyond engendering'. [laughter] And so somebody else got that role and I missed out on one of the best roles you could ever have, in Happy Days.

AM: But you've written about being a mother as being sort of so much more fulfilling and so much a greater act of creation than anything you could have achieved on stage. And moving into married life and having children, how did you... because you were working quite a lot in the sixties, and how did you manage juggling family life, having these three children – and young children too?

JP: Yes, I did want to have two children and so did Larry. And it was... you know, yes, having a baby is one of the most creative things you can do in life. And they're... you know hopefully there when you go, whereas the parts all disappear. [laughs] But it is an enormous responsibility, which is not undertaken lightly. And if you want to go on working, which I did so much, it has to be made possible for you, and it was. I was a very lucky person because I was back at the Old Vic, my old hunting ground. As a member of the National Theatre Company at the Old Vic, I could play in repertoire, which means I would be on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday matinee and not for the rest of the week. So I could have some time at home with my children. I was also in a position to be able to afford to have help in the house and a nanny, and without that I couldn't have done it. So I was enormously lucky.

AM: And I know that you've said, at various stages, that you felt totally at home with the Royal Court. You felt very sort of welcomed there and that it was a theatre company that was creating theatre for the 20th Century, and so once the establishment of the National Theatre Company is up and going, what were the differences that you noticed or that you felt between the Royal Court and the National? Obviously different aims, but was there anything carried over from...?

JP: Well of course. I mean what is so strange is that I was trained in classical theatre and made my name in contemporary theatre. But I went back then to classical theatre, but of course the National Theatre and at the Old Vic was no longer an Old Vic Theatre Company doing just classics. You know, with Kenneth Tynan as dramaturg the new playwrights came into the National as well. I mean, Tom Stoppard's play, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern* was first done there. Peter Nichols' plays, it was no longer just a home for classics, it was a mixture of both, which is where the training in the Old Vic Theatre School came in so handy. You know, you were trained for any type of theatre.

AM: Right. So this new mission of the National Theatre Company was much more varied and one that was perhaps more suited to you perhaps as an actor?

JP: Yes, probably. I mean it was very... and it still is. I mean the National Theatre under Nick Hytner is doing a lot of modern work – contemporary work. At one point, you know, it almost seemed that they were doing as much as the Royal Court, but of course they do, fortunately, take writers from the Royal Court who've had their plays done first at the Royal Court, into the National, and that way they support them.

AM: So perhaps you could talk us through some of your favourite roles at the Royal Court, but also with the National.

JP: Yes, I think, you know one's favourite roles are often the ones that succeed. [laughs] And my first sort of big success was *The Country Wife* - which I could do on my head, let's face it - then *Roots*. Arnold Wesker wrote, you know a part for a girl that was the equivalent of Osborne's *Jimmy Porter* - *Bettie Bryant*. And that was... you know, really created quite a stir, let's face it. We started it at Nottingham and then came to the Royal Court, and it was directed by John Dexter who was one of the National Theatre's trio of directors, and a marvellous director too. So *Roots* was... really put me on the map I think.

And from there I remember Sybil Thorndike coming to see it and saying to me 'You must play *St. Joan*'. And so there I went on to play that; it was my first part at the National Theatre, again directed by John Dexter. And that too... I mean it is a wonderful part and it also proved to be very successful.

And then the Chekhov's: *Masha*, *Sonia*. The Chekhov's, always a favourite of mine. And I remember, you know, part of the Old Vic School training, whenever we were approaching Chekhov, we would have lectures on the history of you know what life was like just before the Revolution. It was necessary to know that in order to invoke that atmosphere of waiting that is in Chekhov, knowing something, that they're all on a precipice, knowing something vital is going to happen and to change. So they are always wonderful parts to play because it's the subtext as much as the actual text that is important and you need to have the history, knowledge of the history of the time, in order to understand the subtext.

AM: Absolutely. And we were talking earlier, off tape, about this sense that when you play all these roles in a lifetime they stay with you, these characters, and if you were to be given a script of a part that you'd played, you would be able to recall this personality quite easily. And so I was wondering whether all these personalities and all these parts in your head were in any way ever a burden?

JP: Well you do keep a memory of all the parts you've played. I don't find them to be a burden. There are some that I would happily forget [laughs] but the main ones, no they are part... it's almost like part of a family, part of your family, that they are kept to the back of your mind in your head. Each one really is a part of your personality, because a little bit of it has gone into that character, so that they are all in a way part of you. But they're not a burden.

AM: Right. That's good to know. And so I suppose it brings me on to one of my own questions, what drives you to act?

JP: Oh.

AM: Where does that motivation come from to create all of these personalities?

JP: Well because very often, you know, we are all full of several personalities. I mean you... Kierkegaard said 'an actor is essentially a hysteric' because he, for two hours, believes he's somebody else. And, in a way, you have to almost have those qualities. You have to you know believe so utterly that the focus and concentration is on that person that you are presenting, not you. So what drives you to do it usually is you know you are a creative, artistic sort of person who needs expression. And you find that you can do it and that you can hold people. I mean you learn that when you first start off, usually in school plays or whatever, and you know people around you know that there is some sort of a talent there. And you know yourself, if you feel safe walking on to a stage as somebody else. So what drives you to do it is a longing.

AM: That's interesting.

JP: I mean it's a longing to express that and to use that talent.

AM: So it's always there and always was.

JP: Yes.

AM: And you were lucky I suppose because you had a mother that was encouraging of that.

JP: Absolutely.

AM: And a father that allowed you to go and do it.

JP: Yes.

AM: Yes. That was interesting.

JP: Yes.

AM: Yes, I'd just like to ask you Joan, if you feel that an actor has a role in society, and if so, what that role might be?

JP: There have always been actors, or strolling players, or troubadours, or story tellers. I think of it as, you know, when two or three are gathered together in whoever's name, there is an experience that is shared. And I remember saying once to someone, 'well, I sometimes feel guilty as an actor playing a nurse that I get you know three times as much money as a real nurse'. And they said 'but you bring to a much wider public the

attention. You bring their attention to the life of a nurse, so that you are a means of enlightenment'.

AM: Right. So, in a sense, you become symbolic of something, like the nurse becomes a symbol of something perhaps, yes. That's interesting.

[Interview resumes]

PD: ...an actress and playing all these roles made you happy.

JP: Oh Lord, I think I've been very privileged, yes, to have such a life. I mean it's magic and I still feel, when a curtain goes up or the lights come on if there's no curtain, the magic of a beginning of what is going to unfold in front of me. What experience I'm going to have and what emotional change there's going to be because of what those people are doing up there together on stage.

AM: So it's like a journey; some sort of adventure.

JP: Yes, it is.

AM: Yes.

JP: And it's also because live theatre, in a way, you know is quite near to the circus tightrope – things can go wrong. In filming, if you make a mistake or things don't look right, they just say 'cut' and go back again. Nobody can say 'cut' in the theatre. Once the curtain's up the actors are on their own. They have to see it through, right to the end.

AM: And is there anything else you might have done if you didn't train as an actor? Was there anything else you think you could have done or you would have been happy doing?

JP: I don't know if I'd have been happy doing it, but my father wanted me to be a journalist. I was quite good at English and won prizes for essays. [laughs]

AM: Great.

JP: But I needed to be an actress; I needed what it gave me. I needed to explore all the I's that were within me.

AM: That's a great one. Thank you so much Dame Joan.