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Talking Theatre

Interviews with Theatre People

Richard Eyre

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Richard Eyre

TALKING THEATRE

Interviews with Theatre People



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John Gielgud

1904—2000

Actor and director. John Gielgud performed all the major Shakespeare roles, and was instrumental in introducing Chekhov to English audiences. In later life he acted in plays by Alan Bennett, Charles Wood, David Storey and Harold Pinter. I interviewed him on the stage of the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, well before the start of filming the rest of the interviews—'in case I drop off the twig,' as he put it. He seemed then—the summer of 1998—to be eternal. He warned me that he was 'just an actor' who'd never had an idea in his head, which was typically self-deprecating. No one could have mistaken Gielgud for an intellectual, but although his conversation was showered with actorly anecdotes, it was impossible to discount his mercurial intelligence and his extraordinary recall of theatre history, even if life outside the theatre had passed him by.

When he died, there was a move by well-meaning friends to organise a gala and memorial service. He hated all such occasions and, modest to the last, his will expressly forbade staging one. If there had been a celebration of his life it should have taken the form of a mass gathering of actors vying with each other to tell anecdotes about him in his all-too-imitable voice. This—from Judi Dench—is a favourite of mine. She was in the canteen of the BBC rehearsal room at Acton with the cast of her sitcom. She waved to Gielgud, who was rehearsing for another show, to join their table. He came over and sat down. The group became silent, awed by his presence. The silence was broken by Gielgud: 'Has anyone had any obscene phone calls recently?'

Would you say the real father—or mother—of the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company is Lilian Baylis?

Well, I think she didn't know her arse from her elbow. She was an extraordinary old woman, really. And I never knew anybody who knew her really well. The books are quite good about her, but except for her eccentricities there's nothing about her professional appreciation of Shakespeare. She had this faith which led her to the people she needed.

Did she choose the actors?

I don't think so.

She chose the directors.

Yes, she had a very difficult time with them. There was Robert Atkins, who was a real tough old pub-drinking monster, that she put up with, but she was able to cross swords with somebody like him without being afraid. She had no fear, that was remarkable about her, I think.

And with Robert Atkins she did all thirty-seven plays of Shakespeare.

Yes, I think she did.

Which is something that no management would dare attempt in London now.

And she went through bombings, and the theatre being destroyed, and moving, and opening Sadler's Wells, the most adventurous things. Sadler's Wells was absolute hell—we hated it—but we all went because she was there, and we all obeyed her. But she never had a definite effect, and yet she must have had a sort of spiritual effect, I suppose.

You became an actor-manager with a season in '37/'38, when you did Richard II*,* The School for Scandal*,* Three Sisters *and* The Merchant of Venice*.*

That's right.

It's almost identical to a season that the National Theatre or the RSC might put on without any embarrassment, so in some way is it fair to see your company as the precursor?

Well, I suppose I had a sort of matinée-idol public.

But was it regarded as an adventurous repertoire?

It was considered rather daring, because we engaged the people for forty-three weeks or something like that, and we had a permanent company of about fifteen, twenty people.

Did you enjoy the business of being the management?

Oh, I did, yes very much. Because—

You were the director as well.

—particularly as I hadn't got to pay for it. And I had a nice flat and a great deal of attention paid to me. And I had a lot of friends in the company.

It's hard for us to believe that there was ever a time when Shakespeare wasn't very popular, in the same way it's hard to imagine there was a time when Mozart wasn't very popular.

It wasn't till John Barrymore came from America and did *Hamlet* with a complete English cast—except for two characters, I think—that suddenly it was box-office.

You talk often about how you love the frivolousness of theatre and the make-believe of it. It's true that that's partly what's attractive about it, but this century has seen a number of people constantly turning the frivolity of the theatre to seriousness. Whatever you say about yourself, you've made the theatre seem serious. And one of the ways you've done that is by your championship of Chekhov, most of whose plays you've performed in or directed. When did you first encounter Chekhov?

Well, I did *The Cherry Orchard* at Oxford, and we all thought it was very mad; we were told that at the first Stage Society performance a lot of people had walked out. We rehearsed a little longer than usual, more than two weeks, I think. We all thought it was going to be a terrific flop. And then the Oxford papers gave it good notices and some of the London critics came down and saw it, and we moved to the West End and ran all through the summer. We were so surprised because it was the first time Chekhov had ever been given for a run, I think.

Do you have any thoughts about why Chekhov has taken such an extraordinary hold on the English imagination?

Well, I think that people suddenly realised how very, very English or rather Irish, Russian writers are. And of course the books were so much more read in cheap editions: people began to read them much more. Everybody had to read *War and Peace*.

Chekhov is the *modern writer, in the sense that he cast the die for the shape of modern writing, but the other writer who's done a similar thing is Brecht.*

I never understood Brecht or Beckett, and I've never understood why everybody says that *Godot* was such a great play. The only one I ever thought I would like is *Happy Days*, which I've never seen, but I read it with great pleasure. I also heard on the radio a one-act play by Beckett about somebody catching a train, which I

thought was wonderful [*All That Fall*]. They tried twice to persuade me to play *Endgame*, but I said I can't act without my eyes and I have to be [*chuckles*] blind on the stage and I couldn't do that.

Your first West End appearance was in The Vortex*, when you took over from Noël Coward. Did it seem to you a revolutionary play?*

Oh, it was considered very improper, and it was very much in the feeling of the bright young things: I went to night clubs and the Gargoyle Club and all that, and led a sort of semi-Francis Bacon existence for a short time. But I always had an enormous zest for everything to do with the theatre. And I was anxious to learn the new style of production.

Did it have the effect in its day that Look Back in Anger *had in 1956?*

Well, I suppose it did. I loved *Look Back in Anger*, and I remember Olivier suddenly going to see it a second time and being very impressed with it. I met Osborne, who was always rather nice for some obscure reason, and I always rather hoped to do something of his.

Was there a long period between The Vortex *and* Look Back in Anger *when theatre didn't seem very challenging?*

I don't know. I've worked all my life so hard, been so busy and so anxious to get on with the next play and try this play and that play, and a few films as well, and quite a lot of broadcasting… I was so occupied, and have always been until this last year or two. And I find it very odd not to be, not to have my diary full of engagements.

I'm sure you would if you could.

Well, I don't know. Now they won't insure me because I'm too old.

Did you feel that the Royal Court era—that whole volcanic eruption of talent—passed you by?

I did and I thought I was going to have to go to Hollywood and play sort of… as Cedric [Hardwicke] had so sadly done.

Play the Pharaoh?

Play old gentlemen and kings and things. I was fortunate not to have to do that. I always rather cocked a snook at the cinema.

You did the film of Julius Caesar *directed by Joe Mankiewicz, which I admire enormously. Do you regard that as a successful translation of Shakespeare to the screen?*

I think it's one of the best. I saw it again after many years. It isn't bad at all, except for the last part of the battle, which was done for tuppence in the last two to three days. But the main part of the film I enjoyed very much, and they were all very sweet to me. I got on excellently with Brando and with Mankiewicz, and the girls were very charming, and it was very exciting to be in Hollywood and see all the stars and I made quite a lot of money, and it was a new experience altogether.

Did you help Brando with his performance?

One day I did. He only had one scene in which I appeared with him. We worked on that one day, and he said: 'What did you think of my performance?' And I said: 'I don't want to discuss it.' And he said: 'Oh.' 'Let me think about it,' I said. The next week I wasn't working, and they came to me and said Brando had just done the speech over Caesar's body and 'It's so wonderful you must come and see the rushes.' So I went and saw them, and I didn't like what I saw at all, but I naturally didn't say so. But he then said, would I help him with the speeches in the scene we had together. And so I did. I didn't know he was really listening, but the next morning he'd put in all the things that I'd suggested to him immediately. He was bright as a button. But I would have loved to have worked with him over some of the rest of it. They were all so pleased with him, but naturally I didn't interfere. I didn't want them to think I was teaching them how to speak Shakespeare.

I've always liked the liveness of theatre, so I've never been keen on recorded versions of theatre performances.

When it's on tape or screen, it's depressing when one's old: you can't believe you did things so badly. But I'm sorry there aren't certain records of certain things. I'm sure there were some things I'm proud of having done. And there were certain parts I would like to have had immortalised. I wonder if I'd done a complete version of *Hamlet*… I didn't care for Olivier's *Hamlet* film at all. And the Orson Welles films were fascinating but never satisfactory.

I love your performance in Chimes at Midnight.

Welles was awfully interesting, and I loved working with him. He was a real theatre man. And impossible conditions, always in debt, always in trouble with women, always out of sync with everything. But he was wonderful company.

What saved you from playing pharaohs in Hollywood? Was it Oedipus *with Peter Brook at the National? It was a very daring production. How did Peter work with you?*

Well, we never knew what was going to happen. He wouldn't tell us what we were going to wear, the scenery was all done twice, and it cost a fortune. Larry

was very angry because it was letting them in for huge expense. We rehearsed in this horrible sort of drill hall down in Waterloo Road. Brook brought records for us and made us do improvisations and we did Tai Chi every morning. It was a nightmare, like being in the army or something. But I trusted him and did whatever he told me.

A lot of actors have resented the rise of the director, and with ample justification probably, because there's always a reason for resenting the rise of a bad director. But you've always regarded it as a partnership.

Yes. Both the actors in the company and people I'm acting with. I mean, the only people I've ever had violent quarrels with are two or three actors who I worked with, who wouldn't play my game at all. I've said: 'I can't play this scene if you won't speak up,' and they just, you know, gabbled through the cues. I've found that coordination between actors and actresses is so important that if you don't find it it absolutely baffles you: you don't know where you are. And you never want to work with them again. Just three or four that I could mention because they let me down so much.

But do you think that comes from the actors not wanting to communicate with an audience?

I think a lot of actors think that it's rather cheap to deliver too definitely to the audience.

Alan Bennett's play Forty Years On *brought you back into working with young writers.*

And it also made me feel that I'd learned a lot in the war, to have played to the troops and, you know, gags and doing numbers and all sorts of strange things I'd never done, with a spot of Shakespeare now and again: that widened my scope very much.

And during the fifties you did a play of Tennessee Williams at a time when he wasn't established.

The Glass Menagerie.

What attracted you to Tennessee Williams's work?

I met him in America several times, and I met him at the time of *Streetcar*. I saw a rehearsal of *Streetcar* with the original cast, with Jessica Tandy and Marlon Brando. Kazan [the director] invited me to come to see a rehearsal with no costumes and a big cabin-trunk on the stage. I was always rather fascinated by Tennessee, but awfully put out by the fact that he was so drunken and tiresome, you know; after ten minutes you began to be bored with him, because he'd tell you the same story about the lobotomy of his sister and all this stuff.

But there was a vigour in his writing that wasn't in a lot of English writing at the same time.

Yes, but I thought it was so overwritten. I always longed for him to cut and pull together. He used all his mannerisms to such an extent it was like a terrible box of show-off fireworks.

And would he not cut?

I don't think so. I think he rewrote everything. Wrote it five times, you know, and wanted to rewrite the whole thing again. All his plays were done again and again with different backgrounds and different companies.

And were you interested in Arthur Miller's work?

I found him awfully sticky. I've never seen *The Crucible*. I did see *All My Sons*.

'Sticky' meaning melodramatic?

I found him awfully sort of stodgy.

Moralistic?

Like Shaw.

You don't like people who try and teach you.

No, I don't really, I don't. It just makes me feel very ignorant, which I am.

You worked with Harold Pinter and David Storey.

That was a miracle. I loved *Home*, which I almost turned down because I didn't think Bill Gaskill liked me. And it was Lindsay Anderson and David Storey himself who kind of… I was frightened of Lindsay.

Who wasn't?

I'd met him on two occasions, and he'd snubbed me terribly, so when I heard he was going to direct it, I thought he won't want me. But when we did *Home* and it came off so well, I was of course mad to do something else. Then came *No Man's Land*, which I read in forty minutes and just jumped on it.

What's always struck me about the way you speak Shakespeare is that you always let the meaning lead.

You've got to be awfully sure of your material. I've found a great deal of Shakespeare very hard to follow and very difficult to act. But if a part appealed

to me pictorially then I immediately grabbed it and that was all. I've never lost my very childish attitude towards the theatre, which is so-called make-believe romance, or pretending to be somebody else and having people round me who were also in the same kind of dream world.

You had an instinct for Shakespeare even if you didn't fully understand him.

I think I always saw everything in theatrical terms—entrances and exits and applause, sensational groupings and colour and light. And I was always fascinated by all the attributes that made me want to be a director, because I wanted to govern the look of the thing, which mattered so much to me.

You seem to be able to play Shakespeare as fast as he thinks and very, very few actors can do this.

I never thought of it. I only know that when I played *Midsummer Night's Dream* again at the end of the war—I was tired and getting old and I played Oberon, which I'd played on my head at the Old Vic years before—that I was very bad, and by that time I was beginning to repeat a lot of tricks which at intervals I've always done. I've always tried to listen to people who said: 'Don't use your mannerisms and your kind of stage tricks and your long vowels and sensational climaxes and things: try to be real.' Edith Evans was the great example of sorting the sheep from the goats, so to speak. She would hold back on all emotion until she wanted to show it; then she would show it to you for a minute and then she would slam the shutters. She did it as Rosalind when she was fifty and she gave an extraordinary performance that I'll never forget. I admired her beyond words, although in many ways she was rather a limited sort of woman. Very encouraging but at the same time very strong, and rather lacking in the kind of—

Not very generous.

She was very good to act with but on the other hand I never felt very warm acting with her. I don't think she allowed you to.

At the age of twenty-five you did your first Old Vic season, and you played—am I right?—you played Romeo, Orlando, Mark Antony, Hamlet and Macbeth?

Yes, right.

In the same season.

We only had three weeks' rehearsal, and of course we only gave about nine or ten performances. We had the ballet one night and the opera had another night, so we didn't play every night, which was a help. But the company was not very first-rate.

And the second season you played a twenty-six-year-old Prospero, Antony, Richard II, Benedick and Lear—but not Hamlet.

Well, I suppose I'd had enough of Hamlet by that time. I'd played a complete version and a cut version, and we'd moved to the West End, and I'd quarrelled with old [Donald] Wolfit, who played the King and was very jealous and very stupid, and I didn't admire him at all, although I thought he had great power. He was rather a sore thumb in my company.

Because he belonged to a Victorian tradition.

He did the old thing of shaking the curtain before he would come on for his solo call and things like that. I didn't realise how much he resented me. I was of course rather conceited and vain and he probably had every right to resent me, but he did it rather unpleasantly. So he was rather a thorn in my flesh during the *Hamlet* times. But he was very good as the King.

That was the first Hamlet, but your 1934/5 Hamlet—that was the great Hamlet. It defined the part for the twentieth century, certainly until the early sixties.

Well, that was my own production, which was very daring. For many years I enjoyed directing just as much and was very proud of the few things that I thought I brought off as a director. But the critics never gave me much credit for directing, and I thought that was rather a compliment in a way, because the direction wasn't too apparent.

Wasn't too obtrusive?

I didn't think it was. On the other hand, it wasn't very creative. In some ways I think I was better in America. I did it in New York in '36 and worked with an almost entirely American company, only two English actors besides myself in the cast. It was such a challenge that I really enjoyed it enormously, although I stayed up too late at nights and got frightfully tired and all that. And then I came back to England and had rather a bad time for about ten years, I think.

You were a powerful reason for getting me interested in the theatre. I think I must have been thirteen when I heard you on the Third Programme doing Prospero. I must've read a Shakespeare play and I couldn't make head or tail of it, but you made me understand it perfectly. I wondered if you could retrieve my childhood for me by doing Prospero's last speech.

Which one?

'This rough magic I here abjure…'

[*pause*]

No, I don't think I can do it.

No?

[*pause*]

I'm terrified now that if I tried to act a part I would dry up immediately. I began to make mistakes and dry up in the last play I did and it terrified me and since then if I pick up Shakespeare and try and do a speech even from *Hamlet*, I find I make mistakes and miss words and miss phrases. And I tried to do a Prospero speech in a pulpit in a small church at some do two or three years ago and dried up in the middle and I was so horrified. And I suppose that kind of memory does leave you.

[*pause*]

—It's very alarming.

Harold Pinter

1 9 3 0—2 0 0 8

Playwright, actor and director. Author of The Birthday Party, The Caretaker, The Homecoming, No Man's Land, Betrayal *and others. I interviewed him on the stage of the Almeida Theatre, where his play* Celebration *had recently opened. For a man who had a reputation for being somewhat curmudgeonly in talking about his work and himself, he was wholly forthcoming.*

When were you first aware of Beckett's work?

I was in Ireland, working as an actor, in about 1951, and I came across a copy of a magazine called *Irish Writing*. There was an extract from Beckett's novel, *Watt*, which knocked me sideways. So when I got back to London, I went to the Westminster Library, which was the biggest library in London: they'd never heard of Beckett. Nor had any other library, in fact. I then went back to Westminster Library and pursued the matter, and found there was a copy of a something called *Murphy* in the Bermondsey Public Reserve Library, and I insisted on getting it out of the Bermondsey Public Reserve Library, and in fact it had last been—read—borrowed, you know, in 1939. This was 1952, I think, by this time. So I decided on that basis I was justified in taking the book and keeping it. It was my one criminal act, as far as I know, and I still have it. So that's when I started to read Beckett: '50/'52.

And did you try and get in touch with the author?

No, good Lord no. No, I read all his novels. I read *Watt*, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and a lot of his short stories. I got hold of everything I could, which was pretty difficult, but I got a lot of it from Paris.

And then presumably you heard that he'd written Waiting for Godot*?*

Yeah, I heard about that. I was in rep at the time, acting again in England. In 1955 that was, but I finally got to see it, and was very… pretty stirred by it.

You saw it in Paris?

No, no, no.

What did you think when you saw it?

I thought it was the kind of theatre that I'd been waiting to see. It seemed to me there were no holds barred, there were no constraints, that the fellow could stand on his head and do what he liked—which he did—twice, [*laughs*] and I was very excited by it. By that time I'd read all his novels, I knew the kind of imagination that I was looking at, so *Waiting for Godot* didn't really surprise me. It certainly excited me, but it was nothing that I didn't in a sense expect, that kind of exploration.

But it surprised you that somebody could do that in a theatre?

Yes, I don't think it was really being done in that way at all. For example, there's a great deal that I admired and admire about John Osborne, but the kind of revolution that is often attributed to him, I've always really thought was actually Beckett's. You know, Beckett opened up the theatre in a way that Osborne I don't think did. That wasn't the point about Osborne; he just stirred everything up, I think, you know, touching on nerve ends of our society at the time. But Beckett—it seems to me the leap he took in theatrical terms was quite singular.

And for somebody who'd worked as an actor and had presumably been in a lot of plays with sets where the walls shook, the fact you could do a play without setting it in a domestic context must have seemed remarkable.

That's absolutely true, and, of course, the tree, which is naked and then has leaves… this kind of theatrical image was wonderful, and I'd never seen it before.

Did you find the language very alluring?

Well, yes. The point, however, I'd like to make is that—without in any way, and by a long, long chalk, comparing myself to Beckett, which I certainly wouldn't do—I was really always interested in language myself, and had been since I had been a boy. I mean, I had already written a novel by the way, and a lot of poems,

but no plays in fact, at that time. But I had that kind of concern about language, and how to distil experience as economically as possible had been my passion since I was about fifteen. So there were roughly ten years in which I had been doing my own thing anyway. So it wasn't a question of: 'This bloke is really doing something that nobody else can do,' but: 'I somehow find myself on the same track.'

And presumably you'd thought the same of Shakespeare?

Well, Shakespeare did everything, anything he liked, that's the thing about Shakespeare. He had a range of operation which is surely without equal, because he could do that, he could do that, and he could do that, and he could do that. He could really stand the world upside down. As a matter of fact, I'm glad you mentioned Shakespeare, because I was very, very, very engaged with Shakespeare, and the Elizabethans, and the Jacobeans, from all my teens and all my youth and throughout my twenties. I still am, really. [*laughs*] Webster left an enormous impression on me, and I read Shakespeare long before I read Beckett. I was a great reader, you know. One of the things that I'd like to point out is that my own, for what it's worth, my own cultural history was mostly to do with novels, prose. It's true that I read Shakespeare, and I read Webster, and Tourneur, and Ford and so on, but I read a great deal of poetry, and I read a great deal of prose. Joyce had an enormous effect on me, and actually Kafka and Hemingway. You don't live in a vacuum, not if you're that passionately interested in literature. What was on my mind at the time really was a whole configuration of voices, which were coming into me.

What about the climate in which this configuration was taking place? You grew up between two absolutes. The absolute of the Holocaust and the absolute of the Bomb. What did that mean to you as a teenager?

[*pause*]

Well, both things meant a great deal to me. I…

[*pause*]

…the Holocaust was actually a very… I mean, as it gradually was revealed, what had really happened… I must say the Jewish community, of which I was a part, in London, knew much earlier than was recognised or acknowledged in other circles, what was going on in Germany and right through Europe. That had a very strong and visceral impact on me. I was about fifteen when the war ended, and the horror, knowing that many, many people, who were vaguely relations of mine, were dead, had been murdered…

[*pause*]

Because with every Jew who lives in England, there was also the precariousness of how close we all were to precisely that fate. And there were so many other incidents to do with that. What government did, and how they treated Jewish refugees and so on, this was all known to us. But as for the Bomb, it didn't take me more than twelve hours to recognise it as a tragedy for the human race, and I certainly still believe that's the case. Consequently in 1948, I was a conscientious objector against National Service. I was just a boy, you know, but there it is, and I refused to join the army because it seemed to me that here we were: the whole propaganda was to do with another war, you know, and you've just left the last one five minutes ago. Everyone was ready to go. We were being encouraged and all the boys were joining the army; and here we go again, and so on. And I thought, to hell with it, I'm simply having nothing to do with it. I was prepared to go to prison. In fact, I had two tribunals and two trials, and the magistrate fined me twice—or rather my father, who had to find money that he didn't actually have. But I took my toothbrush along to the trial. It was my first, if you like, overt political act. So, well, these terrible things had an effect on me that's never left me. I've never recovered from either, and what interests me now is the way it's very easy for so many people, particularly politicians, to pretend it more or less never happened.

Does Waiting for Godot *grow out of the experience of the war and its aftermath?*

I've never seen it in those terms. *Endgame* I see much more as the end result if you like of a catastrophe, of a world catastrophe. I certainly think the desolation and the survival of the human spirit in *Godot* remains very stirring and very moving: the fundamental thing of being disoriented, dispossessed, disembodied, not knowing where you actually are in a landscape which will, as it were, go on for ever without any boundaries: no walls, no comfort, no security. That extraordinary mixture in Beckett of absolute despair, but not quite absolute, because there's also the immeasurable tenderness of the man in his work, which is acting against that despair.

Everyone speaks of him with great warmth.

He was delightful—I knew him quite well—and he loved gossip. 'What's the latest?' he would say. And he also loved cricket.

[laughs] *Yes, of course. You became politicised in a very fundamental way. What about the optimism of the '45 government? What did that mean to you and, correspondingly, the failure to live up to it?*

It meant a great deal. In fact, I wrote a poem about it recently, called 'Requiem for 1945'. It was published without consulting me actually. The editor, with the best will in the world, wrote as an introduction to the poem, that 'this is a

requiem for the war'. But that's not what I meant at all. It was a requiem for the hopes of 1945 and that extraordinary landslide. Anyway, I can't quote the poem—it's pretty good, I strongly recommend it—but I'm simply saying that it was crushed. I talk in the poem about these people who found the portholes of their room smashed by a sea that snarled at them. In other words, that this could not be maintained, because the powers, the general powers in the world—if you like, capitalism—said 'No.' And [*claps hands*] does that. All my friends at the time were very, very, excited and followed what the Labour government was doing in 1945 with total respect. We found suddenly we were possibly living in a decent society. All those ex-servicemen who voted for the Labour government and overthrew a structure which was redundant and therefore doing a great deal of harm. We had tremendous hopes, yes. I have to tell you I have very considerable contempt for the way New Labour regards and refers to the true Labour Party, and what it was doing. I think it is quite disgraceful.

A writer of the period who had a lifelong battle against capitalism was Brecht.

Yes, I'm a great admirer of Brecht. I like some of Brecht's plays better than others. I think he was a remarkable writer and a totally, really extraordinary, individual voice, and technically an innovator of the first order, really a pioneer. I know Brecht's poems extremely well. And I think he's a much underrated poet—so succinct, and so telling, and so beautiful. I think Brecht is a great artist. He's clearly slightly unpopular now because he belonged to the wrong side. He took the long view—the wrong view, and so on. Because now, that kind of political correctness, as you know, is a disease, and everyone who had the least—seems to me, both as men and as artists—the least [*sighs*] desire for something called 'social justice', and for looking rigorously at what is actually going on in the world, is discredited very easily. They're regarded as unrealistic, naive and romantic—and also, more than that, subversive. So I'm a great admirer of Brecht.

I saw a production of The Birthday Party *that was the most politicised piece of theatre I've ever seen. It was in Prague in 1969, shortly after the Russians had moved in. In the Činoherní Theatre. It was an unambiguous political allegory. But perhaps to you it's not layered with political subtext?*

Oh. Well, actually, I think it is [*laughs*] slightly layered with subtext. [*laughs*] This was not the view about *The Birthday Party* taken in England in 1958. They just said: 'This is a total load of rubbish, this is incoherent and meaningless.' It's only been much later in this country that another view was taken at all about the play. I did write a letter before rehearsals started to the director, Peter Wood. I think this is quite important from my point of view: the letter does exist, it's been published. He actually asked me, before rehearsals started, to write a short speech of some kind, explaining what the whole damn thing was about, you know. And I wrote the letter saying: 'There's no one in the play who's going to stand up and

say, "Now, you've been wondering what was going on here. And now I'm going to give you the message." It has to speak for itself, and it does speak for itself.' And I said: 'Just put it on the table that Goldberg and McCann are the socio-politico-religious monsters with whom we are faced, and the pressures on any given individual.' I saw it very, very strongly and very, very clearly at the time. So I did realise that it was political. I knew it was political, but I wouldn't just stand on a soapbox and say so.

Did you think that by making it explicit you would diminish the power of the metaphor?

Yes. It would be an extramural statement. I feel that theatre is a living thing. Let the thing live and breathe and speak.

It seems to me so bizarre that it was treated with such disdain. Do you have any explanation?

[*laughs*] No, not really. I think you'd better ask the people who treated it with disdain. But, it nearly put me off writing for the theatre, of course, it was such a total… We all suffer from the critics in this. It's part of the job, isn't it? It's part of the whole enterprise, but I don't think anyone's received a worse body of reviews than I did in 1958. But in actual fact it was a very good education for me, because it was such a cold shower. I had two courses: one was to give the whole thing up, which I thought about, but then, did not. The BBC actually came to my rescue, BBC Radio. I wrote a play called *A Slight Ache*, and then I went on doing it. I must say in my experience—which does go back now over forty years of writing for the theatre, and my plays are done in many other countries—I find that the English reception, both critical and public, is much the most reluctant, much the most guarded, much the most suspicious, much the most irritated.

Is that because we're still dug into some form of social realism?

[*coughs*] I don't see it that way. I couldn't say whether that is the case. What I would propose is that the whole idea of—dare I use the word?—'art' theatre is really a tradition in England which is subjected always to another tradition, which is the tradition of mockery. Particularly if it involves any kind of real, imaginative exploration. Or any political input, you know. Whereas, in my experience in Italy, and in Spain, and in Greece, and in France, it's a totally different story.

Is it a fear of seriousness?

Yes, I think it is.

George Devine was someone who tried very hard to put seriousness on the map.

The project of the Royal Court?