

1 I: If you could tell me your name and spell that, that would be great.

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3 CB: Chris Bond. C-H-R-I-S B-O-N-D.

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5 I: Thanks. Can you tell us about how and why you came to be involved with
6 the Half Moon?

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8 CB: Well, I'd seen a few shows in Alie Street, when Rob Walker was running
9 it, and I'd known about it for a long time; and I was doing a show called
10 Trafford Tanzi about a woman wrestler, which had started in Liverpool –
11 no, started in Manchester – and had toured and gone to the Edinburgh
12 Festival; and it fetched up at the old Half Moon on Mile End Road, and we
13 played – I can't remember how long we played there – but while I was
14 there I was approached by Neil Cooper who was the production manager,
15 and Graham who was the general manager, and said did I know they
16 were looking for an artistic director and would I like to apply for it. And I
17 said, well, I'll only apply for it if you guarantee I get it if I apply for it; and
18 they said, yeah, we promise you.

19

20 So it was a stitch up really, and I felt a bit guilty going to the interview,
21 because there were a lot of my mates were there and it wasn't really a
22 level playing field. But at the time I had Trafford Tanzi at The Mermaid,
23 and I had also just directed, I think, Blood Brothers maybe was still playing
24 in the West End, that I'd directed up at Liverpool, or if not it was on... No, I
25 think it was on tour actually by then. So I was headhunted really, and I
26 agreed because it was a new theatre opening and I needed a fresh job, I
27 thought. After the Half Moon I went freelance, I thought, I don't want to run
28 another building; but at the time I thought, yeah, I could probably
29 contribute something to this.

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31 I: You directed many shows in the '80s during your time as artistic director,
32 ranging from Dracula to Sweeney Todd, Moll Flanders, As Is, Love on the
33 Plastic, Poppy, and Destiny, just to name a few. Can you tell us a bit more
34 about this canon of work? Maybe starting with Poppy?

35

36 CB: Starting with Poppy. Well, Poppy was almost the last show I did, it was the
37 first revival it had had since the RSC did it, had done it some ten years
38 before, when it was an incredibly acrimonious production, the director,
39 Terry Hands, the writer Peter Nichols, and the composer Monty Norman,
40 all fell out and quarrelled about it. And it had never been done since,
41 although people had tried to do it, but nobody had managed to get Monty
42 Norman and Peter Nichols into the same room.

43

44 Now I knew Peter Nichols a bit, and my wife Nicky knew Monty Norman a
45 bit, so we managed to get them into the same room and to actually keep
46 them from hitting each other long enough to agree that we could do a
47 production of it. I wanted to do it I think principally because my dentist,
48 who lived three doors down from the Half Moon, was a lovely man called
49 Mr Lee, who was Chinese, and he was always talking... I had such
50 terrible teeth that he was always fixing my teeth, and talking to me about

51 the shows and how interested he was; and I thought, well, maybe we
52 should do a show about the Opium Wars for my dentist; which is the kind
53 of thing that I kind of often think really. And I also think it was a cracking
54 show and hadn't really been done justice by the RSC.

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56 So we decided to do it. I mean it was completely mad because it's
57 absolutely huge in scope, and I don't know how many people we had, I
58 guess we probably had about 15 or 16 in the cast, something like that.
59 And technically it was extraordinarily difficult, Ellen Cairns designed it and
60 did a lovely design with a lot of silks and cloths and things, but we still had
61 to kind of fly people in...and then obviously there was no flying machinery
62 or fly tower in the Half Moon, so I do remember the first rehearsal when
63 David Fielder as the Emperor of China and Tina Marian as Queen Victoria
64 started being cranked, winched up on this kind of chain.

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66 [05:08]

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68 And the production manager, who by that time was a man called Jim
69 Niblett, kept saying, it's going to be all right, it's...ooh...it's going to be all
70 right; and you could hear the chain kind of creaking a bit and coming
71 down a few inches and then going up again. But, yeah, it was fun. It was
72 fun. And Josie, Josie Lawrence, played Dick Whittington in the first
73 production. She was local, and I guess you've probably talked to her,
74 because she was sort of right through the Half Moon from way back, and
75 then she came back to do that, which was lovely.

76

77 I: Can you tell us a bit more about your rehearsal process and the
78 methodology?

79

80 CB: Right. Well, that hasn't changed much. I'm a fish and chips director, I
81 would say, what you see is what you get. I'm a great one on...I'm one of
82 the best directors you'll ever meet on scene changes; the stuff in between
83 I don't know, there are probably people do it better; but I'm a great director
84 of traffic. And I never use a blackout in a show, I believe in kind of
85 continuous theatre, as hot and strong and in your face as I can make it.
86 And most of my play choices don't have a third wall involved in them
87 anywhere. I'm not of the naturalistic school; I have done the odd
88 naturalistic play but I don't think I do them terribly well. I do a lot of
89 musicals, I can't really envisage doing a show without music now, or
90 laughs; but I do like passion and fun.

91

92 In terms of process I think casting is probably 75 per cent of the job, if you
93 get the right people in your company, or you're casting one-off, you can
94 get a mixture of people who gel together, then that makes life an awful lot
95 easier. I work with the same crew most of the time that I can, I assemble
96 people; I've worked with Ellen Cairns for 30 years, I've worked with actors
97 like George Costigan, I've done 50 shows with him; I've probably done 30
98 with David Fielder. Yeah.

99

100 Is that enough? Otherwise, I mean I just go at it really. When I took over
101 the Half Moon I directed the first five shows on the bounce, which was
102 tough because you do, you rehearse one, put it on, start rehearsing the
103 next one; and five is a lot. At the end of that I went off to Denmark to do a
104 show because they pay so much better and I couldn't afford to work at the
105 Half Moon if I was doing that for 48 weeks a year, it wouldn't pay for a
106 man with five children, which I was then, let alone one with eight, which is
107 what I am now.

108
109 I: Can you remember any of the casting decisions for Poppy?

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111 CB: Casting decisions for Poppy. Gosh. Well, my now wife was the first person
112 to be put in place, just as she is in the show I'm directing at the moment,
113 because I like working with her. I remember asking Josie if she'd come
114 and play Dick Whittington; and Peter Nichols was very keen on an actor
115 called David Ross to play the Dame, so I said – I wanted to be
116 accommodating because Peter and Monty needed to be kept onside and
117 everything – so he got to play the Dame. And an old mucker of mine from
118 the North was Ted Clayton and played the kind of heavy guy; old friend
119 David Fielder played the Emperor of China. Gary Shail, the kind of sort of
120 Cockney whizz kid, who was in Quadrophenia, elderly Cockney whizz kid,
121 he played opposite Nicky.

122
123 Then there were four people who had to sing really well, I think I let
124 somebody else come – I can't remember who MDeed it now – but I think I
125 let him choose the singers, there was a sort of quartet of singers. I've
126 probably forgotten somebody and they'll be really upset.

127
128 Then when I came to redo it we had Louise Gold play the Josie Lawrence
129 part, because Josie wasn't available. And Bob Mason took over as the
130 Dame, who was a very different kind of Dame. That's about all I
131 remember of the cast.

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133 [09:58]

134
135 Oh, Ayub Khan, yeah, who is now a really famous playwright, he played
136 the Emperor of China's son or something, he was great, I liked working
137 with him.

138
139 I: Could you tell us a bit about Dracula?

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141 CB: Dracula? Dracula I wrote really fast for a friend of mine called George
142 Costigan, who was running the Little Theatre in Bristol. And I went to see
143 it and I saw this amazing young actor, and I thought, well, I want to have a
144 go with him. So when I took over the Half Moon, and I had two shows to
145 do in the old building – before they opened the new one – I thought, well,
146 Dracula, be ideal for this. So I rang up Danny Day-Lewis and said, do you
147 want to do Dracula again; and he said, yeah, I loved it, yeah, I'd love to.
148 And so he played it, and while he was playing it, in the evenings he was
149 filming My Beautiful Laundrette with my stepbrother Stephen Frears; I

150 mean that was a pure coincidence but Stephen's film career and my kind
151 of theatre career kind of run parallel, although he's a little bit older than
152 me.

153
154 And we also had Peter Capaldi as Jonathan Harker; and Pete was
155 somebody I had met, and I cast in the tour or Blood Brothers, because he
156 described himself as a psychedelic hillbilly singer when he came to see
157 me first – I think that's what he said – but he's great. And he was great
158 too.

159
160 And the rest of the cast were again old mates from Liverpool really; Vicky
161 Hardcastle, Bob Mason, and Judy – help, Judy, lovely Judy, I can't
162 remember her second name, that's appalling – and Richard Ireson, who
163 subsequently became an agent.

164
165 I: Can you remember what the rehearsal process was like?

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167 CB: I think we laughed a lot, I seem to remember Peter Capaldi and Bob
168 Mason there was one scene they couldn't get through for laughing. And
169 after the first time that you've said, come on chaps, come on, take it
170 seriously, you just give up and say, well, you'd better get it there for the
171 first night. I think it was rehearsed very fast.

172
173 Judy Holt, that was her name; that is her name, she's on TV a lot.

174
175 I think we probably had two and a half weeks, maybe three, to do it in; it
176 was a breeze really, yeah, there was a big soundtrack, recorded music –
177 I'd do it live now if I was doing it again – but apart from that, yeah, it was
178 really a breeze.

179
180 I: Can you remember any of the choices that you made with the creative
181 team? So maybe the staging or the costume.

182
183 CB: I think that one wasn't designed by Ellen, I think Billy Meall designed that;
184 he was a designer that I worked with, again in Liverpool, because prior to
185 running the Half Moon I had run the Liverpool Everyman, and the
186 Liverpool Playhouse sort of one after the other, not both together like they
187 are now. And so Billy came down to do that.

188
189 I imagine it was probably lit by Jim Simmons, Jimmy the Red, who was
190 the Liverpool lighting designer. I don't remember who did the costumes,
191 it's lost in the mists of time and so many shows really.

192
193 I: Could you tell us about Sweeney Todd?

194
195 CB: Right. Yeah, Sweeney. Well, I wrote a play called Sweeney Todd in 1968,
196 it was the first play I wrote. Well, Sondheim saw at Stratford East, made it
197 into a musical; and the rest, as they say, is history.

198

199 I'd done it before. After it flopped at Drury Lane, I mean it did well on
200 Broadway but when they brought it to Drury Lane it only ran three months.
201 And, well, I thought that the production was all wrong for this country, so I
202 decided that I would do it up in Liverpool when I was running the
203 Playhouse, that was the first time, and I did it in a coproduction with the
204 Watford Palace and the Liverpool Playhouse; and it was very well
205 received and I thought it was good. So when they said what do you want
206 to open the Half Moon with, I said, well, I think we'll do Sweeney, because
207 unlike now when everybody does it, and nobody would touch it with a
208 bargepole really because of what had happened to it at Drury Lane. And I
209 mean it was a crazy choice to open a new theatre with really because
210 technically it's very difficult.

211
212 But, yeah, we somehow got it on, mostly with the cast that I'd done it with
213 before, I thought that was pretty essential because I knew it was going to
214 be hairy getting it on. And indeed it was, we were still building fire exits
215 and trying to make the seats safe, when the audience were coming in the
216 first night. And the actors were living in a portacabin and drilling holes in
217 the walls of Florian's building to try and fix blackout blinds over the
218 windows and things like that.

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220 [15:44]

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222 But it was a great success, yeah, it sold out for however many weeks, I
223 forget how many, and we could have run and run it really. And there was
224 talk of transferring it to the Astoria, but unfortunately I'd been a bit naughty
225 and had ripped Hugh Wheeler's book apart and inserted some of my own
226 original dialogue in, which I preferred to his, so Sondheim tried to make
227 the peace between us, but it was all getting a bit out of hand. And then the
228 guy at the Astoria said, oh, well, I want this cast change, and that cast
229 change; and I said, I don't want to talk to you about that because if you
230 want to produce the show that's one thing, if you want to tell me to do my
231 job then that's another, and anyway I've got another show to do.

232
233 I: Could you tell us about Moll Flanders?

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235 CB: Moll Flanders was written by my first wife Claire Luckham, who'd written
236 Trafford Tanzi which had just finished at the Mermaid. And it's a famous
237 book, and I thought she'd done a good job on it. We did it as a musical,
238 with a very small cast because by that time we were running into financial
239 problems; I think there was probably eight in the cast, which for that story
240 was quite small.

241
242 Lovely design by Ellen of a four-poster bed with Latin tags sort of over it
243 and drapes and things, and the whole stage as a mattress.

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245 The production didn't work, I think it was because I was too safe with it;

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And I think I was too safe with the production. I hired singers and I allowed the MD, who was Graham Pike, who is a good mate of mine who I still work with, to kind of say, you know, he can really sing, he can, and I don't think the acting was quite strong enough, apart from Nicky and my old mate Ted Clayton. Some of the others were very good singers but I didn't really feel they were good enough actors to do my kind of work; they were very good actors in their own right, but it wasn't out-front enough for me.

The lighting board crashed in the interval on the first night, which didn't help, because it began to look pretty ordinary. Yeah. And they subsequently did it up in York, and I think it was rather better than the one I did.

I: Can you tell us a bit about As Is?

CB: As Is was brought to me by a commercial management, New Palm Productions, which was John Newman and – I've forgotten the other guy's name, but John Newman was the man driving it – he'd seen the play in New York and he wanted to find a home for it in London. And he came to me, and I said, yeah, I liked it, I read it and I liked it, I said, yeah, I will do it. And it was...I think it deserved rather more attention than it got, quite honestly, I thought it was a better play than the one Martin Sheen did, whose name escapes me, but it was The AIDS play, in commas, this was the second AIDS play really; the first one I can't remember what it was called. You'll know, what was it called, Chris?

C: It was called...

CB: Well, that play anyway, the one Martin Sheen did. Well, this one, yeah, it was set in New York, a very kind of gay theme; and I just thought, well, if nobody else would do it we should do it.

[20:22]

So we did. And we got George Costigan, David Fielder – these names keep repeating, keep repeating, but I use them all the time, they are my kind of go-to actors – and plus some very good American actors, Ray Shell, he wrote Iced, and he was in Starlight Express originally; and Susannah Fellows, and...yeah. And it was okay; I thought it should have done better, but maybe I should have cast it up, and maybe I should have tried to get stars into it and stuff, but it's not really my kind of style; but I think if I had done maybe I would served the play better because it might have got a transfer on.

C: It was called The Normal Heart?

299 CB: It was called The Normal Heart. That's the one.
300

301 I: As Is was a very different type of show, in terms of topic and style; what
302 made you do that?
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304 CB: I thought the play was good, basically; and that's what I try to do as a
305 director, I try to serve the script, I think that's what a director should do.
306 But I would say that because I'm a writer as well, whereas I guess if
307 you're just a director you think, oh well, I can impose myself on this. I
308 didn't want to impose myself on it, I simply wanted to bring what the writer
309 had written and put it in front of an audience. It's not a naturalistic play, I
310 mean there is sort of talking to the audience, and choric speaking and
311 what have you in between scenes that are more naturalistic than I would
312 normally do.
313

314 But the topic, I thought deserved more exposure than it was getting; it's
315 hard to think 30 years ago we were looking at a campaign, a grotesque
316 campaign by a Thatcher government with sort of tombstones and fear
317 written all over it, which was all the information that was out there about
318 AIDS; and friends of mine were dying of it – and Nicky and I thought the
319 more information that people had and the more rounded a picture they
320 had of it the better, so I hoped that it would contribute to that; but that
321 wouldn't have been enough on its own for me to do the play, but I thought
322 it was a very good play about people in a particular situation, that's why I
323 chose to do it.
324

325 And Ellen and I went over to New York to...God, they screamed blue
326 murder in the board when I said, well, I need to go and I need to take the
327 designer to New York to sort this out, to meet the author and see how
328 we're going to design and do this play; and they thought that was out of
329 order. I pointed out that I had brought a commercial management on
330 board with this production who were providing some funds to help with it,
331 and perhaps under the circumstances they might like to sanction this trip.
332 And they did in the end, so off we went.
333

334 Yeah, I think, for all those reasons I wanted to do the play; and as I say, I
335 think it deserved greater exposure than it got.
336

337 I: What was the audience's reaction?
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339 CB: Very positive; I mean I think we did get an audience, or quite large
340 numbers of people who hadn't been to the theatre before – I mean I would
341 guess that they were gay – and that they had read about the show in Time
342 Out or Gay Times or whatever, and were a new kind of audience. The
343 core audience, yeah, they were pretty much up for anything. They were
344 up for almost anything except shows about gangsters, it seemed to me,
345 because the worst box office we ever did was for a gangster musical
346 called El Cid, it was about one of the Great Train Robbers – it shows how
347 much I know about the East End – I thought, oh, this is bound to go well. It
348 was a catastrophe, it was a disaster at the box office; and I thought it was

349 rather good. It was the first musical – and probably the last in history –
350 where the leading man head-butts the woman in the middle of singing a
351 ballad, which I thought was great, she kept singing with blood pouring out
352 of her nose, I thought that was sort of a novelty.

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354 [25:29]

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356 I: Could you tell us about Love on the Plastic?

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358 CB: Love on the Plastic, that was a piece I commissioned. You get a lot of
359 scripts obviously, in any theatre you run you get sent a lot of scripts, and I
360 got sent one by a woman that I thought, this is interesting writing but
361 there's no way that I can do this. It was six speeches by women who
362 worked in a hostess club, six monologues, basically, from the point of
363 view of the woman who kind of was the manageress of the place, a
364 woman who was on the door of the place; and four of the girls who
365 worked there, two as waitresses and two as whores.

366

367 And whilst I thought the writing was good I didn't fancy doing six
368 monologues because I thought it would be dull, theatre-wise, although the
369 content wasn't dull. So I said to her would she like to try to amalgamate
370 these six characters into a story of an evening, it doesn't have to be a big
371 story, but the story of an evening in this club. Julia Schofield, her name
372 was, and she said yes she would like to try.

373

374 And she had been on the door of one of these clubs, so Ellen and I and
375 Julia, and I think Nicky, I think we all went to this club and sort of spent an
376 evening there kind of drinking at extortionate prices. And that's another
377 thing the board complained about I expect, not only did I go to New York, I
378 went to dodgy clubs to spend the Arts Council's money researching into
379 hostess clubs.

380

381 Anyway, yeah, we came back, and again I would say I think it was
382 absolutely right to do the show but I don't think I got it right; I realised just
383 too late what I should have done with it which was actually set it on
384 election night of Thatcher's re-election and actually had a matrix going
385 across the top à la Joan Littlewood, giving us the election results for her
386 kind of last victory. And I think that would have put it into a context in
387 which the punters and the way they were behaving, and the girls and the
388 way they were behaving, might have given us a real revelation of an
389 evening. As it was I thought it was a very honourable attempt to depict
390 that kind of life in a non-sensationalist way, and it gave an opportunity for I
391 think eight actresses, I think there were eight actresses and four fellows in
392 it; and there are not many plays where you get actually to give women a
393 proper crack of the whip, so I was pleased to do that.

394

395 And we had Belinda Lang, and Julia Watson; Glen Walford, for God's
396 sake; and Nicky, inevitably; Shope, this gorgeous African model; Nicola,
397 another gorgeous African girl; Gaby Cowburn. Yeah, it was good, I

398 mean... Oh, Rick Cotton was in it too, he wins BAFTAs these days writing
399 TV plays, but he needed a job at the time.

400
401 I: What was the audience's reaction?

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403 [29:19]

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405 CB: I think they were a bit shocked actually, there was a certain amount of
406 kind of, oh God, do we really want to know about champagne, lice, and
407 just how tacky these places are. Yeah, it was curious, the reaction of the
408 audience; but they were gorgeous looking, these girls, I mean they were
409 done up to the absolute nines, and you came in and you thought, my God,
410 what's happened to the Half Moon, it's all gone kind of glam. And then as
411 it unfolded and they all began to either self harm or kind of slag off other
412 people or attack people with knives and things it all began to go pear
413 shaped. I think, yeah, there was a certain amount of shock. Oh, and we
414 got sued by American Express because I said to take their logo and
415 basically put a sort of pin up on it in the middle of it and call it Love on the
416 Plastic; and they sued. But we pointed out that we didn't have any money
417 and they went away again. I've only been sued twice, once by American
418 Express, the other time by the Rolling Stones for using Satisfaction in a
419 show; and they went away too when they realised there was no money to
420 be had.

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422 I: Could you tell us about Destiny?

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424 CB: Destiny. Well, I thought that's another play that the RSC did and hadn't
425 been done since, and I thought it was a really important play to do,
426 because it's about the rise of the BNP, and the roots of the BNP, and
427 although it takes place in the Midlands it seemed to me that it was very
428 relevant to Tower Hamlets; and I think the BNP must have thought so too
429 because as soon as we announced it they began to get twitchy. And we
430 went down to Lemn Street police station and said we were doing this
431 play and what did they advise, and they weren't really that helpful, to be
432 honest, at the time; so in the end we kind of turned to the Left and said
433 can you send us some muscle in case. And that was a good idea because
434 we had people on the roof, and there were people with knives and things
435 in the street outside, and it got a bit tasty on a couple of nights.

436
437 But I thought it was important. I mean it's a deeply serious play, and I
438 thought I did an honourable production of it; but again it's not really my
439 kind of thing, I realised as I was doing it. It's a massive cast, I used the
440 Young People's Theatre in it as well, because I wanted to do a show that
441 included them in the main house, I chose that one, and they were actually
442 great in it, very good in it. And my relations were not always entirely
443 cordial with Steve and the Young People's Theatre but on that occasion I
444 thought that really worked well.

445

446 And we did get a kind of sizeable increase in the Asian percentage of the
447 audience for that show, it was quite noticeable and I think they were kind
448 of pleased to see it.

449
450 I: Was it tricky to put this type of play on due to its politics? Were there any
451 particular incidents that happened?

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453 CB: Yeah, there were; there was a guy came backstage with a knife, looking
454 for some of the actors, and was disarmed. There were protesters, BNP
455 protesters on the roof for a couple of performances. But, as I say, we did
456 have some kind of...we had asked some friends to come and – and big
457 friends – to kind of be security for us. So the incidents eventually passed
458 off without violence. Yeah. But I mean I don't know what it's like now, the
459 Mile End Road, but it was certainly rough back then, and there were quite
460 a few racially aggravated incidents around the time, but I don't think as a
461 result of the performance, but that was just the climate then.

462
463 I: Are there any other productions you want to tell us about?

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465 CB: No, I don't think so. I mean I dimly remember some of them but it is a long
466 time ago. There was a musical that again my first wife did, of Spend,
467 Spend, Spend, that I quite liked; but it was using old songs rather than
468 original ones. I actually preferred it to the one that went to the West End.
469 But I think because I'd had four sets of good reviews in a row: for Dracula;
470 a play called Scrap, set in Northern Ireland; Sweeney; and Destiny; and I
471 was everybody's darling, they obviously thought I'd had enough, because
472 on the fifth one, which I thought was actually better than some of the ones
473 that had gone before it, they all slated it and said it was terrible. But that's
474 the way it goes, you know, you win some, you lose some; hardly ever for
475 the right reasons.

476 [35:16]

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478 I: Could you tell us about Scrap?

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480 CB: Scrap? Scrap was written by Bill Morrison, an Ulsterman who renounced
481 his citizenship and became an Irish citizen at the time of the Troubles.
482 And it was a thriller set in a scrap yard in Liverpool, about the UVF and
483 the IRA; and it's a kind of farce, a wild farce, political, very political; and
484 ends with the UVF heavy guy, he's got the British secret service under
485 one arm and the IRA under the other, and he's got a waistcoat made out
486 of dynamite that he's lit the fuse of. And that's the end of the play.

487
488 It was written in late '70s anyway, when all that was very current and very
489 much... Again it was a very political farce, really, and I loved it. I think its
490 time has gone now because the situation has changed.

491
492 I: Can you remember what the staging was like, what it looked like?

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494 CB: The staging? What it looked like? Yeah, because it was a farce there were
495 loads of doors, I mean literally; there was this club, the first act went all

496 over the place, it was set in a scrap yard but it actually went all over the
497 place; and the second half was set in this club with about eight doors,
498 which looked just like a French farce, except that they were all peeling
499 and there was a bit of neon; and there was a bar; and a lot of running
500 around and dynamite and guns.

501

502 I: What informed the creative choices you made when deciding on the work
503 to be staged at Half Moon?

504

505 CB: Whether I liked them or not. If you hire somebody to be an artistic director
506 that's what they do, and if you hire them you have to let them do what
507 they want to do; and then if it doesn't work then you get rid of them, or you
508 say, oh, it's such a shame but you've got to go because it's not working.

509

510 So basically, because I liked them, because I thought they were theatrical
511 in the right way, not necessarily...not camp, but actually out front, in your
512 face, talking about the issues of the day, whether it be AIDS, the IRA, the
513 BNP, whatever. I mean how can theatre not be political, if it's not political,
514 well, politics is part of everything, absolutely everything, so if a play is
515 seen as non-political you can bet it's on the side of the status quo, it's
516 what I call the theatre of reassurance, which I am not into at all, I do not
517 wish people to be reassured and to come out of the theatre saying, oh,
518 well, that was just what I expected, that was lovely; if you want to do that
519 then watch your favourite TV programmes until the end of the series and
520 then get them in a box set and go and watch them all again and again and
521 again, if you want reassurance. But if you go to the theatre you should, I
522 think, come out feeling more alive than when you went in, ideally.

523

524 I: The work of the young people's arm of the company became particularly
525 important during your time as artistic director; can you tell us why this was
526 the case, and your thoughts or recollections on this work?

527

528 CB: I think because they sort of appointed a full-time director, Steve Harris,
529 that was almost the first meeting I went to after I'd been appointed was to
530 appoint the head of the Young People's Theatre. And as I remember it,
531 yeah, I think Steve was kind of the unanimous choice. And obviously there
532 was much work to be done in that area in terms of young people's theatre.

533

534 [39:57]

535

536 All young people's theatres that are based around theatres, there is
537 always tension because their funding tends to be ring fenced and quite
538 rightly you can't touch it. Yeah. But they also tend – I mean this is very
539 broad brush and people will take offence, but it's not meant offensively –
540 but there is also in all the YPT companies that I've worked alongside, and
541 I've actually worked for some as well, there is always this thing of actually
542 you've got quite a safe job compared to actors who are out there just
543 trying to make a crust through acting in mainstream theatre; and you
544 always want to, although you may not admit it you always want to do that
545 as well, you don't just want to do the YPT bit, you want to go on the main

546 stage too – well, that’s my experience anyway – and I thought we should
 547 try to make that happen; so we did it with Destiny, and also I went, I
 548 adapted...they brought me a story, because I said, no, I care, I’ll work with
 549 you, I’ll do a show with you, you tell me what you want to show, you
 550 choose the subject and I’ll do a show with you.

551
 552 So they brought me a short story called Chubb about a slave in Virginia in
 553 the 19th Century, and I adapted that and I did it with them, and they
 554 toured it; I think it was...I can’t remember what there was...[inaudible
 555 name 41:32] was there, [inaudible 41:34] [Mengel 41:35], and...oh, I can’t
 556 remember his name, the guy who went off to be a vicar on Emmerdale or
 557 something like that, I really can’t remember his name, he was in it. And I
 558 quite enjoyed it. I think they thought I was patronising them, but I wasn’t
 559 really, I had said, I’ll work with you, you choose the subject I’ll do the
 560 show; but when at the end of it I said, right, I’m going back to the main
 561 house now to get on with doing something else...I don’t know. I never had
 562 a great relationship with Steve Harris, I don’t know why, just the way
 563 things are, I think.

564
 565 I: You said your relationship with the Young People’s Theatre was tricky;
 566 can you explain why?

567
 568 CB: I think they felt they were...well, obviously they thought the work they
 569 were doing was more important than the work I was doing; and I thought
 570 that their work was separate and shouldn’t get in the way of mine. The
 571 board were very pro the Young People’s Theatre – after a bit – and not so
 572 pro me because they found me high handed and arrogant and that I didn’t
 573 take up their suggestions of what we should do in the theatre because I
 574 didn’t agree with them; so there was a kind of distance between us.

575
 576 And I felt they were sort of whenever things didn’t go well in the main
 577 house they were quietly pleased; which is probably sheer paranoia but
 578 that’s the way I felt.

579
 580 I: Ellen Cairns was a designer who became and continues to be one of your
 581 most prolific collaborators; can you tell us about her and others that
 582 you’ve worked with that influenced your practice?

583
 584 CB: Yeah. Well, Ellen, I gave her her first job after she left design college in
 585 London, it must be the...Camberwell I think she went to; and I was up at
 586 Manchester at Contact Theatre at the time, and the first show she
 587 designed from the professional was Trafford Tanzi, which then went on to
 588 – it was a pub show – it went round the pubs and then got into theatres
 589 and then went to the Mermaid for a year or more or...and was done an
 590 awful lot; got to Broadway, and it wasn’t a success there.

591
 592 And, yes, I liked her work. And the show I’m actually...it opened last
 593 week, at the end of last week, she designed that; so we’ve probably done
 594 30 or 40 shows together. We shared an office at the Half Moon, we were
 595 above the box office for a long time, and that was very...we had a line

596 drawn down the middle which we weren't allowed to cross when we were
597 working, but otherwise it worked very well.

598
599 [45:02]

600
601 Other designers that I've worked with. Well, there was a woman called
602 Andrea Montag who I worked with a lot until she left the profession for a
603 bit to have children; and when she came back I had sort of stopped
604 directing as much as I do now.

605
606 Yeah, I've worked with Billy Meall was another; Glynn Kelly. A fair few
607 designers. I mean I think they certainly influence the way I stage things
608 inasmuch as designers have taught me that the most important thing
609 about a design is the dynamic between the auditorium and the stage, it's
610 not about putting pretty things up there or spatially interesting things, it is
611 actually about the distance and the ease of communication that you can
612 get from a good design, which thrusts the story and the performances into
613 the auditorium.

614
615 So in that sense, yes, I have learned to stage things from good designers,
616 principally from Ellen, I would say. Yeah.

617
618 I: What is special about Ellen?

619
620 CB: Well, they're not always brilliant, she's done some bloody awful sets for
621 me that I've cursed her for, a couple of real shockers; but she always has
622 an idea, a concept, and it is always pretty original in terms of she will take
623 an image and build her concept of the show round that image, and it is
624 rare for her to make a bum choice; once or twice I think she has. The
625 current show that I'm doing, which is a country and western musical called
626 The Romford Rose, has as its central image a kind of oversized picture of
627 Dolly Parton, which is perfect for the show. It was supposed to have hair
628 in lights and all sorts, but we had to cut that because we couldn't get it
629 done in time on the tech. But that's an example.

630
631 Last year I did a show, a tiny show with her at the Brighton Festival, where
632 with an absolute budget of about 50 quid she managed to create a
633 fantastic thing which included one wall which had rose wallpaper on it,
634 and managed to go into a suitcase and line a suitcase where an old man
635 kept all the memories of his past life. And that kind of concept pulled the
636 whole story together in a very kind of simple way for a very simple kind of
637 two-man show. So she can do that as well as Sweeney Todd which she
638 designed as a metal cage basically, with metal walkways and ovens
639 underneath, which not only looked but sounded amazing when people ran
640 up and down the metal stairs; and it was great.

641
642 I: What was her best design at Half Moon?

643

644 CB: I think she did an awful lot of good ones, but I think if I had to choose,
645 because she'd done Sweeney before, I'd have to say it was either As Is,
646 or Poppy. Although Love on the Plastic was great too.
647

648 I: Towards the end of your time as the artistic director it became clear that
649 the company was starting to struggle financially in spite of the successes
650 of much of your work; looking back why do you think this is the case?
651

652 CB: Because somebody put all the bills in a box under their desk and never
653 paid them; and because the finances when we finally found out what they
654 were, were so bad that I was given a choice of either shutting the theatre
655 or sacking eight people. And my instinct was to shut the theatre, because
656 I hate sacking people, but in the end I was persuaded that if I made eight
657 redundancies it could go on; so I did. Amongst them – well, ridiculous –
658 Nick Starr, who was amazing, he was the...he and Neil Cooper as far as I
659 was concerned were the Half Moon. And I had to say to Nick, I'm going to
660 let you go; which was ridiculous. And he'd laughed as well, and went off to
661 run the National.
662

663 [50:17]
664

665 It was never quite the same after that, I probably stuck around for a year
666 or so after that; but for me it had gone a bit sour. And well, Poppy came
667 after that, that was very successful; but I had just about had enough of it
668 after that. And I think I kept it going, but it didn't survive my leaving.
669

670 I: Was the theatre too political?
671

672 CB: No, not political enough. I don't think that had anything to do with it, I think
673 at the end of the day it was down to not enough people coming to see the
674 shows. Some of mine worked very well, some didn't. After I left I don't
675 think they worked at all.
676

677 I: Could you tell us about the public funding changes at that time?
678

679 CB: I don't really remember, to be honest, and it wasn't my department; but I
680 know that when the GLC was abolished we got a large amount of money
681 in the last few hours of that, and when that ran out there wasn't any more;
682 I mean it's impossible to run a theatre on that scale without public subsidy,
683 and I don't know what happened after that.
684

685 I: Are there any other memories of your time or people you worked with at
686 Half Moon that you would like to tell us about?
687

688 CB: Gosh. I don't know. You should have given me notice of that question. Oh,
689 there's one show we haven't mentioned, which was good, which I thought
690 was great, it was Elizabeth, it was a Dario Fo play that we did, that Gillie
691 Hannah who played Mrs Lovett for me, translated because she's a sort of
692 fluent Italian speaker and knows Dario and Franca Rame. And that one I
693 really thought was great, but it's another political one, you see, another

694 heavily political play; but I think it's a shame it's not done more often, I
695 mean it is very difficult because it's crazy really, it was, Dario Fo plays the
696 dame in it, and it was written for him to play the dame and his missus to
697 play...so if you don't have two performers who are happy in a kind of
698 pantomime, political pantomime kind of tradition, then you're in a bit of
699 trouble; but it's a great show. So that one should be included among the
700 highlights.

701
702 I: Finally, can you describe what impact your time at Half Moon has had for
703 you?

704
705 CB: Well, I met my present wife there, so enormous, enormous on a personal
706 level. On a work level, well, it was the last theatre that I ran, I decided
707 after my experience there that I wouldn't be an artistic director any more,
708 because I really don't like power, I think it does corrupt; and however
709 much I try to make things as equal and democratic as possible, given that
710 everybody should do the job that they're best suited to within an
711 organisation. But having said that, you want as little hierarchy as you can
712 possibly get.

713
714 I felt that it had gone all a bit sour. I can remember going to company
715 meetings and people getting up on their hind legs and saying, oh this that
716 and the other, this that and the other; and I thought, come on, guys, we
717 are all doing this together, you know. And it's always the bleeding
718 assistant carpenter who's pissed all the time, who gets up and complains
719 loudest; and you don't want to say, well, you're pissed all the time so why
720 the hell should we...you know, why the hell should I listen to what you
721 want to say.

722
723 So, yeah, no, I wouldn't want to run another theatre after... But I don't
724 think I'm very well suited to running theatres anyway, I think I'm really
725 good at directing shows but I'm not really good at...I'm not much of an
726 artistic director. If you want a good artistic director you'd be looking at
727 Jonathan Church or Nick who used to run the Tricycle for years; or Trevor.

728
729 [55:11]

730
731 I: Is theatre different now?

732
733 CB: Yeah. Very different. Working with the company that I'm working with at
734 the moment, it strikes me it's changed out of all recognition. There are no
735 – or practically no – permanent companies any more; I don't know where
736 people learn their trade in the theatre any more because every show
737 seems to be cast as a one off. I think theatre has become more
738 hierarchical, policy is dictated not by artistic directors but by chief
739 executives, who are for the most part ex-bean counters. I think that the
740 current trend of coproduction and touring, and I can understand how it
741 cuts costs or how it may cut costs, but I think it leads to an overall
742 flattening out of what people are doing in terms of their scheduling and
743 their programming, there seems to me to be an incredible plethora of

744 cover songs, musicals, and tribute acts, which I open the brochure for my
745 local theatre in Cornwall and I wade through tribute bands by the score
746 before I come to a ballet, an opera, a musical that I'm not particularly
747 interested in...oh, look, a play I might actually like to see; that I maybe go
748 twice a year.

749
750 Now that's not the whole picture, because down in Cornwall we have
751 Knee High Theatre Company which are fantastically innovative, fantastic
752 company, and I would love to work for them were it not for the fact that
753 one of my daughters is its general manager and I would be cramping her
754 style. So I have to go further afield for my work.

755
756 I: Well, thanks very much for sharing your memories with us today and
757 helping us with the project.

758
759 CB: Thank you. Thanks.

760
761 **End of transcript**