

1 I: Okay, can you tell me your name and how you spell it, please?

2

3 GS: It's Guy, as in Fawkes; and Sprung as in spring has sprung.

4

5 I: Brilliant. To start off I was interested in how you found yourself in a
6 synagogue starting a theatre company.

7

8 GS: Oh, God. It's the Fall of 1971, so it's actually we're closer to the end of
9 World War II than we are to now, so it's quite far away and my memory
10 will be...maybe will have an agenda, as memories do, so I do apologise if
11 some things end up wrong, because memories are very self serving.

12

13 I had graduated from McGill and had done a lot of theatre, and had given
14 myself a year to decide if I wanted to work in theatre; and through my
15 German professor – I'm bilingual in German – I got a job in Berlin for eight
16 months. And then my girlfriend came to London, she was going to take an
17 MA at the University of London, in Special Ed. And so we came here.

18

19 And I met at a kind of a writers' sort of workshop – free workshop –
20 somewhere; I met Steve Gooch, and I was telling him that I really wanted
21 to direct this Brecht play and I was trying to get in. And as a colonial at the
22 time, you know, you were pretty snobby about colonials, the British
23 theatre, oh, you say orientated; no, you say orientate. Well, you know,
24 really it's orientated, really; to which of course I would reply, well, actually,
25 as Shaw said, American is now the language and English is the dialect.
26 But anyway... So there was that constant looking down; and especially
27 since I'd come from German theatre at the time, even more looking down,
28 you know, the Brits were a bit of a snob.

29

30 So Steve, a good Brecht addict, he'd done a couple of translations and
31 he'd worked at the Royal Court and so on, and he gave me...he said,
32 well, there's always Maurice Colbourne, who's living in a synagogue in the
33 East End of London; and so he gave me a number and I phoned, and got
34 this Yorkshire deep accent, hello, Steve this, and yes, I understand you
35 have a space, I've a play I want to do; and Maurice says, well, as I'm
36 looking down on the space it's vast – anyway, I can't do the Yorkshire
37 accent, I apologise – so we met. And I said, Maurice, why don't we turn
38 this into a theatre.

39

40 He had planned rehearsals and things like that, and he was living in the
41 women's gallery with his girlfriend, Clara, who's a theatre designer. He
42 had graduated from Central, he was a big, tall, like even...even, he was
43 six four – I'm six two, or I was at the time – with a slow speaking Yorkshire
44 accent, working class; and I was this naïve North American Canadian who
45 believed that things could be done. Right?

46

47 I: Yeah.

48

49 GS: And I was up against a world here in England where you had to cross
50 your Ts and Is, and people didn't really believe. So it was a marriage of

51 Maurice's – he was a fabulous actor, had real genuine character; and
52 Central had been perfect for him, it wasn't RADA and it wasn't LAMDA; it
53 developed and strengthened his self, who he was, his being – so it was a
54 really good marriage. And his craft and my Canadian, hey – Andy Hardy –
55 hey, let's do it, let's do it, come on, we can do it.

56
57 I: Yeah.

58
59 GS: And of course we started working and building a theatre, and I said I want
60 to do Jungle of the Cities, and he read it; and somebody had told him that
61 it was a good play to do. So he said, okay, we'll do Jungle of the Cities
62 [sic] as the first shot. And yes I was very much, you know, I believed, as
63 Brecht did, that theatre should be a combination of entertainment and
64 politics and education. And I also believe personally very strongly that
65 theatre and community – I mean the best theatre throughout history,
66 whether it's the Greeks or whether it's Shakespeare, it's always about
67 issues that deal with the community that you're playing to, so the strength
68 is between the audience and the stage – and so I kind of thought, well,
69 yes, we'll do left-wing theatre for the community and we'll start off with
70 Brecht. And Maurice didn't want to know about all that political bullshit, he
71 was an actor, er let's do it. And there was a good part for him.

72
73 [05:15]

74
75 And in the other side of the women's balcony was another actor was living
76 there, Michael Irving. Michael, at the time when I met Maurice and when
77 we started building the theatre, he was away on tour somewhere. He's
78 actually another really fine actor, they'd both been to Central together, so
79 they were friends; and from what I was told they had moved into the
80 synagogue with an idea of maybe rehearsing and building shows there
81 and so on, and taking them out. And then I convinced them that, hey, we
82 can turn this into a theatre.

83
84 And the synagogue on Alie Street, at the time there was a three-floor,
85 maybe four, frontage – was built in the '30s – so that the actual
86 synagogue part was in the back yard, hidden from the street; obviously in
87 the '30s anti-Semitism was pretty strong, so that the idea of not having the
88 synagogue too in your face in the street was really how it was built. At the
89 time, as I later found out, there were in the '30s something like 30-odd
90 empty synagogues in the East End of London. The biggest one was up
91 Brick Lane, it was called the Great Synagogue, and it had actually started
92 out as a Huguenot church, and as you probably know, it's a mosque now.
93 So the synagogues were a kind of a symbol of the evolution of the East
94 End.

95
96 So we rolled up our sleeves and we said, we're going to do this; and at
97 the time you had to start it as a theatre club in order to get permission to
98 perform; and it was the Federation of Jewish Synagogues who had rented
99 it out. But they had...as from, you know, us as non-Jews we felt a little bit
100 awkward in the space because there were...the bimah was still there,

101 there were all sorts of, you know, the prayer squares, and all sorts of to us
102 religious paraphernalia were still lying around; in fact on...around the
103 women's balcony, in gold lettering, were still everybody who had donated
104 to build the theatre, like there were careful annotations of... Believe it or
105 not, there was somebody called Fanny Blow, who had given threepence
106 in order to build the synagogue back in the 30s.

107
108 And so all around the – it was pretty much a square, I guess about 40 feet
109 by 40 feet, with the balcony, the women were up top and the men in the
110 bottom, and the bimah was facing north; the bimah being where the holy
111 scrolls were, the Talmud and so on, were put during the ceremony. And
112 around the women's balcony was in gold lettering everybody who had
113 originally donated.

114
115 And so we were constantly shipping all these holy relics back to the
116 Federation – they were on Leman Street – to the, you know, saying, don't
117 you want this; and, here's the T-... I think there were even a couple of
118 Talmuds or something lying around; we were... Anyway...

119
120 So there we were, and we were so shy about – respectful – that we
121 actually covered in paper all the balcony so that when we painted it we did
122 not eradicate the original gold-lettering donations.

123
124 So Maurice and I started this out; then Michael came back from his tour
125 and joined in. And it was a cast of ten I think, it was mainly Maurice and
126 Michael's friends that I started to audition, and Maurice played the father,
127 Michael played the lead part, Garga. Jungle of the Cities is one of Brecht's
128 early plays, it's pre his very distinct political Marxism; it's set in a mythical
129 Chicago and it's peopled by these incredible characters: Shlink, who was
130 born on the Yokohama and raised on the Yangtze in Guam, so you can
131 already see geographically it's mythical, and supposedly from Chicago
132 you could get a boat to Tahiti – which of course you can't.

133
134 Anyway, that's Brecht's compilation; and the beginnings are his trying to
135 deal with capitalism, and it was all the older man, Shlink, tries to change
136 Garga's opinion on a book, is that your opinion, I would like to buy your
137 opinion, is ten dollars enough – that was Peter Gordon as Shlink – it was
138 a great production actually. And Maurice's girlfriend, Claire, did the
139 design, a whole Bridget Riley; we ripped off corrugated iron as the back of
140 the set, and then they painted all these coloured lines down it, and when
141 you put lights on it you could change the colour, and because it was on
142 corrugated iron it was like that the hot air rising off of the black tarmac of a
143 Chicago hot street on a hot day and it was just kind of fuzzy.

144
145 [10:48]

146
147 And then we basically, for the set, it was all scaffolding; so I became a
148 master scaffy builder because we just went around to all the building sites
149 at night and whipped all the scaffy off and put it into the theatre and built

150 our set. So right from the beginning we had a good relationship, as it
151 were, to the East End.

152
153 I should say that – back up a little bit – when we started to convert the
154 space into a theatre, building risers and anticipating about 90 seats, I
155 think, I decided at some point that we needed some peer publicity, so I
156 thought we would start small; so I got in touch with the East End...East
157 End Examiner...East London Examiner...anyway, and two young
158 reporters, wide-eyed Eastenders, came down and did an interview, and
159 Maurice and Michael and I were there, hammers in hands – and if we can
160 find, I hope we can, because it's an iconic picture of the three of us there
161 – and it was the back page, and the title was *Old Synagogue gets into the*
162 *act*, and there were these hippies with long hair and cameras. And the two
163 reporters from the East End knew exactly what they were doing, and they
164 set us up; so, a collective of actors in the East End of London are
165 transporting, and they're doing a German play, Brecht's *Jungle of the*
166 *Cities*, et cetera, et cetera; interview, this and that, picture.

167
168 They published it on a Friday, immediately went to the Federation of
169 Jewish Synagogues and said, so what do you think about this play that's
170 going on. And of course the rabbis just blew a gasket. And we had the
171 young sort of secretary, and then this federation – the very old, it's more
172 orthodox Jewish segment – and they said, that's it, we're cancelling it,
173 they can't do it, no way can a play go on in a synagogue.

174
175 Okay. So next week, billboards all over the East End, *Jews ban German*
176 *play in synagogue*; and of course these two wide-eyed reporters, whose
177 names will be on that article – whose names I've forgotten – knew exactly
178 what they were doing; and so they had a story that they could then get,
179 they got a by-line in the Guardian, and in the Times, and everywhere,
180 based on *Jews ban German play in synagogue*.

181
182 And of course the rabbis were never going to do anything. And there's
183 something about theatre in a synagogue, and the Maccabees, and the
184 Greeks being essentially the enemy of the Jews and therefore you can't
185 have theatre in the synagogue because of some 200-year-old enmity that
186 goes back. But we just said...we just did it anyway; so we went on.

187
188 I: Were you scared when you saw that article? Did you think that you
189 weren't going to be able to put on the show? Or did you have faith that...

190
191 GS: Well, we were sort of nervous and worried; but, you know what, we kind of
192 figured that the rabbis would never want a real publicity, that in fact the
193 billboard thing had already scared them off. And they never shut us down.

194
195 In the original lease there was no mention of converting it into a theatre,
196 so we were sort of breaking the rental lease that Maurice and Michael
197 had.

198

199 But the other thing of course is that we financed it...in that picture – if we
200 can find it – in behind us there's a pile of lead; and Maurice's girlfriend,
201 Claire, had a black VW bug with a skylight, and that's how we transported
202 a lot; so we'd be seen, this thing would be putting around the East End as
203 we got bits and pieces of props and furniture and whatever, and of course
204 some, you know, two-by-fours, and lumber and everything would come
205 out of this Volkswagen; that was our transport truck at the time.
206

207 [15:07]

208
209 But it also...what we discovered was, in behind us – and if we go there I
210 can try and show you the place – there was a Victorian warehouse that
211 was being pulled down; and there was a huge, you know, the gutters up at
212 the top of the roof were all lead; so we initially went into the building to go
213 after desks and chairs and stuff, and we got a few of those; and you had
214 to go out, you went out of a window from the synagogue itself, and then
215 climbed up once, you know, just enough, that we could scramble up onto
216 the roof, across a roof; we built this sort of bridge into the back end of a
217 row of empty houses that were being...of condemned houses, down the
218 stairs, across the alleyway; and then we broke into this Victorian
219 warehouse and started taking things that we needed for a set and so on.
220 And then discovered this lead on the roof, and so we would just rip it off,
221 bundle it up, and drop it over at sort of two in the morning, it would make
222 this huge...it would go down three, four floors, and go whoo-whump; and
223 then we would all sort of wait for a beat, nobody heard it, nothing; so then
224 we would carry it back up the stairs, through the empty house, over the
225 bridge, across the roof, and in the back window.
226

227 I: Wow.

228
229 GS: And then the next morning we would sell it; 65 shillings the hundredweight
230 was what we could get for lead at the time in the spot merchants, who of
231 course, the spot metal merchants in the East End, as I'm sure you know,
232 were just about as bent as you can get; so there was one time – because
233 we'd carry it all in the Volkswagen – and there was one time when we
234 were dumping it on the...you know, the guys would say, so, er, where
235 d'you get this, then; and Maurice was the cool guy, really cool, well, yeah,
236 we just, er, redoing our roof; oh, yeah, redoing the roof. And we'd put it on
237 the weight. And at one point I realised, wait a second – as it went from
238 one ton to the next level – wait a second, that doesn't quite compensate,
239 something's going wrong here, so just take it back off again. And this spot
240 metal guy said, what, what, what, what; yeah, let's separate the...before
241 we switch over to one to two ton, just let's add it together. But of course
242 they had some kind of switch on their scale and they were going to short-
243 change us. Anyway, so somehow or other I twigged that.
244

245 But that's how we – I don't know what – hundred pounds, hundred pounds
246 or something, yeah, I don't know; which was a lot of money in those days,
247 that's what we made; that's how we financed the set.
248

249 And the first production was a split the box;, at the time Equity was okay
250 about having full-Equity actors perform even without a contract, on a split-
251 the-box thing – I’m not sure whether it’s...I know in Canada you couldn’t
252 do it, I don’t know whether it’s that you can still do it – but at the time a lot
253 of actors wanted to be seen. So Peter Gordon was quite a respected
254 actor, he played the lead; Will Knightley went on, I’ve seen him in Royal
255 Court shows and so on; there was a good group of very strong actors.
256 And it wasn’t a bad production, given the...and it kind of put us on the
257 map; and it was interesting because there were a couple of other Brecht
258 shows on at the same time, and a few of the reviews – which I’m sure we
259 can dig up – basically said, you know, this is the only Brecht show in town.
260 And I think Vanessa Redgrave was playing Polly in The Threepenny
261 Opera at the time, directed by her husband, Richard. Anyway, so that was
262 the first show; and if we go to the site we can I’m sure dig up some more
263 stories.

264
265 But it was all, you know, I was a pretty green director with a certain
266 amount of instinct and a very clear vision for that particular show; and I
267 was very fortunate that someone like Maurice and Michael, who are
268 genuinely top-of-the-line actors, were able to be part of the show. Maurice
269 very quickly did a couple of others, the next, the big hit that we did was
270 the Wat Tyler show. But he was very quickly snapped up, played the lead
271 in a series called Gangsters; and for him the Half Moon was how he kind
272 of made his career.

273
274 [20:04]

275
276 I: He got his break.

277
278 GS: Yeah. And that’s worth a lot. And of course...where are we? What would
279 you like to know?

280
281 I2: Sorry, can we take a moment, just a second.

282
283 P: Yeah.

284
285 GS: Yeah.

286
287 I2: Thank you for this. I think that it would be really good to just go back a
288 little bit to the story about how the community came into the space.

289
290 GS: Okay.

291
292 I2: Is that all right? There was a street worker you talked about.

293
294 GS: Okay. Yeah.

295
296 I2: And [inaudible 20:39] question [inaudible 20:40]

297
298 I: How shall I word that?

299
300 I2: And maybe a little bit about the dynamic of how you created the
301 company...
302
303 GS: Right.
304
305 I2: ...and actually that would be really interesting, that page.
306
307 P: Yeah. No, I think that would be interesting. I mean from the point of view
308 of the building, I'm still not...so just to get...be clear about it; the building's
309 been rented...
310
311 GS: Yeah.
312
313 P: ...from a community of Jewish elders.
314
315 GS: Yeah. Federation of Jewish Synagogues.
316
317 P: Yeah. Who don't want you performing plays there, really; but they kind
318 of...
319
320 GS: They just ignored it. When approached by these reporters they'd made a
321 statement; they never interfered or did anything.
322
323 P: Right. So you just carried on regardless.
324
325 GS: Carried on regardless.
326
327 P: So maybe what we could do in terms of the questioning is pick up from
328 that, saying...so you're just there.
329
330 GS: Yeah.
331
332 P: The Jewish organisation is ignoring the fact that you're there. How did you
333 move into the next step, then, to involving the local community in the
334 theatre.
335
336 GS: Right.
337
338 P: Do you think?
339
340 I2: Yeah, I think so. And also the politics at the time, because I think that
341 there's clearly a really left-wing agenda...
342
343 GS: Yeah.
344
345 I2: ...going on, which people will find surprising actually, because it was very
346 radical at the time.
347

348 P: Yeah. And also I think they probably won't understand it very much, so
349 you might have to explain a little bit about that too.
350
351 I: Yeah. So how the community was incorporated in the kind of...
352
353 P: Yeah. And then Guy might like to put that slightly in terms of the politics of
354 the group as well, I guess.
355
356 I: Okay.
357
358 P: Is that okay?
359
360 I: Yeah. Sure. So how did you...
361
362 I2: Just could you – sorry – just could you shift...
363
364 GS: I'm sorry.
365
366 I2: Yeah. Just...yeah, that's it, lovely.
367
368 GS: I'm sorry.
369
370 I2: That's all right.
371
372 GS: I'm thinking, you see. I think with my bottom, so I shift.
373
374 I: So how did you incorporate the community at the beginning of the theatre,
375 and also with regards to the kind of political agenda at the time?
376
377 GS: Again, I say this in hindsight; a rather naïve Canadian whose idea of
378 theatre was community based, working with two very good actors who
379 basically wanted to do good theatre. And so, again, the hubris, I hope
380 you'll apologise, but we kind of saw Stratford East as the competition – I
381 did, I don't think too many other people – and we weren't really a
382 collective. In the beginning Maurice and Michael and I sort of operated by
383 a very uneasy kind of consensus; and Maurice had a play he really
384 wanted to do, Alkestis – which was the next show after Jungle – the
385 Greek tragedy. Michael did a kids' play. But I was pushing to try and get
386 the community involved.
387
388 And at some point I'd discovered that the final meeting in the Peasants'
389 Uprising, 1381, took place at Spitalfields, and we used to go, when we
390 were working, if we had the money; and it was 25p, we'd go to Spitalfields
391 at two in the morning and have a bacon all-on, and that was our treat for
392 having done a good day's work; and because at the time money was
393 extremely tight, I know I was living on virtually nothing.
394
395 So when I'd heard that Spitalfields was where Richard II and Wat Tyler,
396 and the rebels met at the end of it, I said, oh, let's do that. So I did a lot of
397 research in the British Museum on the history, and found out some

398 absolutely wonderful songs, [singing] another year it may betide this
399 company to be full wide and never an order to abide, Christ may send
400 now such a year.

401
402 [25:04]

403
404 Anyway, songs like that that I found in the British Museum. And then I
405 took the whole research to Steve Gooch who was already working on a
406 couple of other projects. And we went to the Whitechapel bell foundry,
407 and we got some old bells that they gave us for the music, and we created
408 this show, Will Wat, if not, What Will, that was about the Peasants'
409 Uprising. Michael played Wat Tyler, and Maurice played John Ball, who
410 was the kind of the theorist, and Wat Tyler was the warrior; and Mary
411 Sheen played Richard II; and everybody pranced around on broom
412 handles for horses; and at one point I think a third of the audience was
413 declared dead because of the plague, and so on. And it was just a
414 magnificent piece of history, and of course very left wing; and at the time,
415 you know, the right and the left in England were getting more and more
416 sort of separated.

417
418 So if Jungle had done something in terms of people's noticing us, then
419 Wat Tyler really put us on the map and kind of declared what we were
420 after. And I think somewhere in one of the reviews you'll even find that
421 John Mortimer in the Observer actually said it was one of the best things
422 he'd seen as a critic.

423
424 I: Wow.

425
426 GS: So, to me that was just an attempt to...because it happened in the area,
427 how do we get the community involved, you know, by doing things that
428 happened in the area. And what happened was more and more the
429 community started coming to us. So a group of left-wing lawyers down on
430 Cable Street started talking to us, for instance, about helping them out
431 with the relationship, there were a lot of the younger kids who were
432 getting...the police had a vendetta against them. So we created a show
433 that was basically about the rights of the kids, the legal rights, and we took
434 it around to various community centres, and stopped the dance in the
435 middle of it, and do this very brief show that illustrated all the kind of
436 conniving and tricks that the police, the coppers, could – it's called Spare
437 Me A Copper – and Billy Colvill wrote it, working with the lawyers; and we
438 took it around to the community centres and did it there, and a lawyer
439 always accompanied us and would be there for question and answer; so
440 the dance would stop, we would do the show, question and answer, and
441 the dance would carry on.

442
443 And those kind of community things started happening more and more. I
444 joined the squatting movement in the area, so I liberated a house on
445 Parfett Street; and that was a whole other occupation, but it also of course
446 it alienated certain areas of the community. The next-door neighbour, the
447 morning after I'd broke into the house and we'd settled into it, the

448 neighbour called the police, and the police knocked on the door and said,
449 what are you doing here; and I said, I live here; and he said, okay, thank
450 you very much; and went away. And so we lived there for three years, and
451 I think some of the houses ended up being bought by the council. We
452 actually were taken to court by the owners of the building; there were a
453 whole slew of empty buildings in that area because a property was trying
454 to amass enough empty buildings to be able to rip them down and build
455 condominiums or whatever. And at the time, because of the British laws,
456 which were that if you were squatting and genuinely living in a place the
457 police could not kick you out without due process, there were hundreds of
458 thousands of empty houses in London at the time, and hundreds of
459 thousands of people living on the street.

460
461 So the squatting movement was a very natural reaction to an absolutely
462 ridiculous situation. And Parfett, Myrdle Streets became the centre of an
463 East End sort of left-wing movement that ended up with food co-ops and
464 political meetings and so on. And eventually they took us to court; the
465 judge sided briefly on our side and said, you can't evict these people until
466 you know what you're doing at the building. Then the owners went back
467 six months later, got an eviction order; and by that time we had barricaded
468 the houses up. We had a BBC radio reporter on the inside, because the
469 owners were stupid enough to tell us exactly when they were going to
470 come and evict us, and in Myrdle Street they had barricaded the houses
471 up, and we were entering the houses through the second floor, and
472 ladders and so on.

473
474 [30:16]

475
476 And when they did come they had a TV camera, we had a radio crew
477 inside, and we had got about 250 sympathisers, and it was a huge thing;
478 and they came and they evicted us. But in the meantime I'd liberated
479 another house just six doors down, so our friends just took all of our
480 furniture out and put it in the new house; and they had to go through the
481 process again of getting another eviction order in that house.

482
483 There was a time, too, when they evicted a group of other people and
484 they put guard dogs in; and so that evening, after they'd put the guard
485 dogs in I would break into the houses, we got a guard handler, he brought
486 his truck, and we took the guard dogs. He went away with six guard dogs
487 free and for nothing, and the houses were reoccupied.

488
489 So, you know, the poll tax was coming up, there was a very strong left,
490 right movement; the Irish movement was still strong, in fact some of the
491 squatters were very left-wing Trotskyites and they were associated
492 with...they had a kind of...I think the Fourth International and the IRA had
493 some kind of a partnership, and there were some members of the Fourth
494 International in one of the other squats. And one morning we woke up and
495 the Bomb Squad had... They were totally different from the eviction,
496 they'd broke into all the houses, cut the telephone lines, broke into the

497 one place and took a couple of guys off. So that was a different scale of
498 justice happening at the time than the nice eviction policemen.

499
500 I: So this kind of left-wing big part of your life, that definitely affected the kind
501 of artistic direction of the theatre?

502
503 GS: It was certainly I was comfortable with the theatre being very left wing.
504 And for some we were not left wing enough, at one point I remember
505 Vanessa Redgrave and her WRP coming down trying to recruit us for us
506 [sic], and we refused; and she called me an old Stalinist; which I wasn't,
507 but in any case I wasn't quite in her political sphere. But at the time a lot of
508 actors were, like her brother, Corin Redgrave and so on was one of the
509 leaders of the Fourth International.

510
511 So we did...and we were then attracting a certain attention as that; that
512 became who we were and so it was expected of us, I think. And when I
513 then, at one point Michael dropped out and Maurice had gone on and
514 become a star on TV, they had moved out of the balconies; we
515 incorporated the balconies into the theatre. And I, in order to get some
516 money from the British Council I then had to make the conversion to make
517 it a proper theatre. At the beginning we were a theatre club, which meant
518 we had to charge 50p membership in order – because the fire regulations
519 weren't up to snuff – so we charged 50p membership and that meant we
520 were a club, which meant we didn't have to have the normal standards of
521 a proper theatre. I think the theatre, the play then cost, you know, 10p or
522 something, you know what I mean; so it was ridiculous.

523
524 There was...a couple of issues that we had with authorities, too, we
525 started to have people coming and proposing ideas; and Dave Morrison
526 working with Ruskin College, a couple who ran the Ruskin Press history
527 papers lived in the area, had become friends of the theatre; and this
528 Yorkshire docker brought us the idea of the school strike in 1915, the First
529 World War was on already; so it turns out that in that year – it might have
530 been '17 – there was a nationwide, in fact in Wales as well, and parts of
531 Scotland, school strike in September, the monitors wanted to be paid, and
532 they were getting too much homework, and et cetera, et cetera. And it
533 was a flash strike that happened, and as soon as...because many of the
534 school kids were actually selling the newspapers on the street, the ten-12
535 year olds, so they would actually see the title, Strike in School in
536 wherever, up north; and so down here in Stepney in the East End they got
537 the idea too; and there were actually quite a number of schools that went
538 on strike in sympathy.

539
540 [35:53]

541
542 And according to Dave the kids in that strike invented the flying picket
543 where the kids from one school would go to the next school and prevent
544 that school from opening out, and so on. And so we created this play with
545 Billy Colvill again, called Fall In and Follow Me; because that was the

546 theme song on their strike marches, was, fall in and follow me; up the
547 West End on the spree.

548

549 And so that was the play. And it was six of the local kids that we recruited,
550 and six of our actors – I think it was the cast of 12 playing teachers and
551 police and authority figures – and of course the moment you hire kids, as
552 you will know, you need a different set of regulations; you need somebody
553 to watch them, you need a separate dressing room, you need all sorts of
554 higher standards, which we didn't have, we didn't have the minimum
555 standards. So naturally when the School Board heard that we were doing
556 a play with kids, especially since it was a left-wing play, they tried to shut
557 us down again.

558

559 So they went to the parents of all the kids and said, you must pull your
560 kids from this show because it's illegal. And at that point it was just...and
561 they'd timed it really nastily, so we did the rehearsals, we were about to
562 go to our first preview, and the authorities clamped down, got to all the
563 parents; and the parents phoned me, and I called the meeting of the
564 parents at the theatre, literally with the show just hours away, the kids in
565 tears because they were afraid they weren't going to be able to do it. And
566 the parents, to a man, said, fuck them, I'm not having anybody tell me
567 what my fucking kid's going to do, my fucking kid's going on the stage
568 tonight. And we did it. And it was actually, again, it was, it's a really good
569 show; which I really suggest, the Half Moon now, take a look at it, read it.
570 It would be great to do for the community now.

571

572 I: How did you recruit the kids?

573

574 GS: We just went and found them, we went to some of the community centres
575 and asked, anybody want to be in a play, et cetera, et cetera, and the
576 word got out. And I can't remember having any difficulty finding six kids.
577 And of course they, if you look at the script there's a lot of it that they
578 improvised, right, because they knew exactly what was going on. And one
579 of the scenes takes place in their kind of little hidden camp and so on, and
580 they knew exactly, oh yeah, yeah, yeah; and they even brought in some of
581 the mattresses from their own thing and started improvising scenes,
582 jumping off the wall onto the mattress... It was neat.

583

584 So yes, strongly suggest take a look at the script. If you go to Ruskin
585 College history papers I'm sure somebody online has a copy of it, I don't;
586 if you get a copy send me a copy too, please.

587

588 [39:03]

589

590 Other community involvement. Very quickly when we created the board of
591 governors in order to become a legal charity I'd put a lot of the community
592 people on. So I'm sure if we go through the papers, Tommy Finn was one
593 of them, there would be a couple of the lawyers on it. And we started
594 getting respect from some of the left-wing community leaders. And so a lot
595 of things happened.

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One was they'd come up to me and say, Guy, do you ever need any building material; and I'd say, sure; and he says, okay, well, come around nine o'clock, building site, the foreman's off – and at that time we had a nice van given to us by some foundation – and so these guys would be working on a building site, I'd drive the van, back it up, the entire gang would come...15 sheets of plywood. Hey, do you need some nails; you know, tons of nails, this...and everything that we needed to build the next set, into the back of the van; close the van, drive around the corner, meet at the pub, buy a round of drinks; and that's how you did business, that's how we got our set materials, in the good old days.

Other community... At one point we were trying to move and get the music hall, Wilton's Music Hall, and we had some fund-raising events and so on; and at that point, because there was a lot of dry rot in the floor, and at that point the floor in the theatre itself caved in; and we were going to have the fundraiser that evening. The building gang came off the site, walked in there with their saws, and then [makes swishing sound] within three, four hours repaired the entire theatre, walked out again. Nothing, you know, and we were able to do the fundraiser. And so we never got Wilton's, that was after my time, but I was...I really, really thought that was the solution to the Half Moon, it should move there. And the movement got relatively closer, but again at some point I'd left and it did not happen.

Other community things: yeah, the very...

I: Is there a reason kind of why you decided to leave?

GS: Yeah, I wonder why. I went...Leicester Square, there was a film on – a Hollywood film but actually shot in Montreal, my home town – Duddy Kravitz; I went and saw it, and it had these wonderful shots of Laurentiens, the mountains just north of Montreal, and the lakes. And I said, well, no, I'm going home; I just missed the... Yeah.

So at that time I was in a relationship with Pam Brighton, she had done a couple of great shows for us; it was a troubled, difficult relationship; but I passed the theatre on to her, so she became the next artistic director. She lasted the year and then I got a phone call and she said, Guy, I'm coming to Canada, I'm on the plane. So that was it, she quit as well; she came and lived in Canada for a while, and we got married; and for a lot of reasons, but...and she had a really successful career in Canada for a...and then she got homesick and she had to come back.

More community, more community...

I: And just saying, now you're back here...

GS: Yeah.

646 I: ...and looking back on where you started it, how does it feel?
647

648 GS: Oh, it's [sigh] I don't know, I don't know how to describe it; I look forward
649 to walking over the site with you and trying to figure that out.
650

651 When we opened the space as a theatre we were...a lot of people
652 contributed in many ways; but there was an actor – not a very good actor,
653 but he was a good plumber – and he hooked up, he connected a gas line
654 to the gas meter in the basement of the synagogue; and we put some
655 space heaters, gas space heaters, in the space. And that's how we were
656 able to heat the place.
657

658 Now as it happened, because there was the front of the building and the
659 back of the building, the building had two meters; and by total accident the
660 second meter that went to the theatre was stuck; so in the four years I
661 was there we never paid a penny for the gas to heat the theatre. And the
662 meter reader would come in, he would see the house meter had moved
663 on, and he was happy; and, well, what's going...oh, there's nothing going
664 on there, okay; so he would go off. So we left the heat on night and day.
665

666 When I was leaving, literally on my way to the airport I walked out onto
667 Alie Street, and they're digging up Alie Street, the gas people; and I say,
668 what's going on; and he says, oh, there's some kind of a leak here
669 somewhere, we've been losing a lot of gas, we have no idea where it is;
670 oh, oh yeah, oh, bye.
671

672 I: Move on.
673

674 [45:14]
675

676 GS: Yes. So, oh, God, the community. Of course there was a fabulous
677 symbiosis, the White Swan two doors away, that was the pub – Ida – and
678 of course we couldn't get a liquor licence; so as soon as we started having
679 people you could go into the pub, get your beer, and take it in, walk that
680 two doors down the street, take it into the theatre; and it worked very well
681 for both of us, I think it probably kept them alive for a long time; that's
682 where we played darts and that was, yes, our sort of our green room, as it
683 were, and yeah.
684

685 I: And if you could tell us about the first kind of youth projects which Half
686 Moon did.
687

688 GS: The summer of '74, '75, a couple of younger people started, wanted to
689 start a youth wing of the Half Moon and use the legal set up that we now
690 had, we were now an official theatre, we were actually getting, I think at
691 the time when I left we were getting more money per seat than the
692 National Theatre, like we were seen as the crème de la crème of the
693 fringe theatre world; and in fact that's one of the reasons also why I left,
694 because when somebody arrived on the Concorde from New York and
695 said...and showed me a brochure where we were the kind of the, what to

696 do in London, go to the Half Moon; and I thought, okay, that's it, I've had
697 enough of that, I've got to get out of here. So that, in combination with the
698 homesickness, I think I just got a little...

699
700 But, so they started, and the very first play that they put together was this
701 play where they went to a community centre down in the Isle of Dogs, got
702 a bunch of kids who had this incredible story of been going over the wall
703 and breaking into the Jaguars that were lined up there, and joy riding
704 them around the docks; and then they were caught and they went to trial.
705 And I don't think it was a heavy sentence but they were sentenced; and
706 they then put this story together of themselves, they basically wrote it. And
707 at the time the two young people who were running that project were
708 having a problem finalising it, and so they roped me in on it; and it was a
709 little ruthless because there was sort of dissent in the ranks and so on,
710 so I just drove the truck down and I said, we're rehearsing, get in the back
711 of the van; and literally threw them in the back of the van. And you
712 couldn't get away with that kind of thing today, obviously, but in the end
713 they were totally grateful, and they did this crazy, amazing show.

714
715 And of course the high point is one of them playing a judge in the court
716 who is... And the big point of the court case as far as the judge was
717 concerned was that the Jaguars that they were joy riding around the
718 docks, these were, Jaguars bound for export; so it was impinging on the
719 British national GDP or whatever. So that was I think the first project, and
720 it took off after that; but it mainly took off more after I had left, and so there
721 will be others who will fill in the details.

722
723 And during Jungle we were of course a magnet for a lot of little kids in the
724 area; and there was a mother of a couple of kids who lived in the Half
725 Moon passage, and she was a sex worker – as they would call her now –
726 and so the kids spent a lot of time we babysat them a lot. And one of the
727 little ones, –I wish I could remember his name – anyway, tiny little guy, he
728 actually watched all the rehearsals, and he knew every line of the play.
729 And you'd hear him walking through the bathroom, or walking around the
730 theatre, saying the lines over again, with a perfect accent, imitating every
731 actor.

732
733 [49:59]

734
735 So he was totally taking it in. And then one day they disappeared, these
736 kids, and we had no idea where they'd gone. And about three months
737 later he came back, hey; and he's walking into the theatre; and what of
738 course had happened is that the social workers had come and taken the
739 kids away from their mother and put the kids into some kind of a camp. So
740 he's walking in the theatre, [singing] what a friend we have in Jesus, oh
741 how happy you will... He'd been totally brainwashed by some Christian
742 fundamentalist church. Oh, my God. Oh... Sorry.

743
744 I: It's okay.

745

746 GS: Anyway, we were so fucking oblivious of what was going on in the real
747 world, we just had to do our thing. You think you're doing something of
748 good, and you don't know how much is just you just doing something for
749 yourself. And it's a fuck that we're... Ah...and we're bombing fucking
750 Syria, and we're killing the civilians, and we're [inaudible 51:38] supporting
751 the Kurds and our ally the Turks are bombing them; and there's...trying to
752 create a [inaudible 51:43]; and the world is totally fucked up. And we
753 thought we were trying to make a change.

754
755 I: Once you were back in Canada, kind of what direction did you go in?
756 What work do you do, and was that political kind of ideology, did that kind
757 of stick with you and continue today?

758
759 GS: [Inaudible 52:09]. There's two levels, politics and theatre, and when I
760 arrived in England as this colonial hayseed it was the craft of British
761 theatre that I learned; and I brought to that my intellectual political kind of
762 perspective. And then working with...because British theatre has
763 something that Canadian theatre unfortunately does not have – and I
764 don't think American does either – but there is a history that is inbred in
765 the craft of acting on British theatre; and what it means is that an actor
766 somehow can judge and find something that is true, for real, that's based
767 inside; and that's what Michael and that's what Maurice had; and that's
768 what I learned.

769
770 And so when I went back to Canada I was able to work with actors in a
771 kind of traditional British way. But then I never lost my continental
772 intellectual perspective, so I have put the two together I think in a really
773 good way in what I do. I've never lost the strength of what I learned here
774 from a political point of view, but I have made a tone of – had to – a ton of
775 compromises; and to me now sometimes it's enough just to put a good
776 play on.

777
778 I tend to work with new writers at the moment, as an English-speaking
779 Quebecer who believes in Quebec independence, I work with English-
780 speaking writers – which doesn't mean Anglophones, it can mean a
781 diversity of cultural backgrounds – to try and help develop plays that
782 speak to those communities. I am trying to show that even English-
783 speaking Quebecers can be good Quebecers by doing our own theatre
784 within Quebec.

785
786 One other, actually very important relationship with the community. Two
787 things: one was we've found this writer actor, Billy Colvill, who was from
788 the area, and who ended up writing a couple of plays for us, in the area
789 where we were going from the old currency to the new p; we did an
790 adaptation of Threepenny Opera set in the East End, and it was called
791 The Three P Off Opera – in those days everything was two p off, or three
792 p, or whatever – so we charged 53 pence and you got three p off, so you
793 only had to pay 50p. And it was an absolute putting the story of
794 Threepenny Opera into contemporary terms in the East End now.

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796 [55:32]

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Billy did a bunch of other shows, thanks to Johnnie Quarrell, who was a writer from the area who at one point also been a docker. We created a show called Get Off My Back – that’s one of the posters actually that I do have still, and that I sent, so if we can get a good...and you could cut it in there – it was story about the history of the river, and from right up to the past to now, from a perspective of the exploitation of the workers who were doing the work in, you know, the whole tea trade, and slave... And it was a wonderful historical pastiche, right up to the latest confrontation on the docks; and was written, as I say, by a former docker, and so on. And that play, we ended up touring it through all the dockers’ clubs and community centres in the area. Johnnie had written particularly the modern scenes in a kind of verbatim reflection of the language of dockers today.

And when we went into dockers’ clubs, of course you were not allowed to swear, it’s one of the rules of inside, so there we would do this play with this graphic language. And I remember at intermission in one of the clubs, I’m standing there at the urinal, and these two big burly dockers kind of squeeze up next to me and say, yeah, you know, you’re not allowed to swear in this club, you know, but it’s all right, you’re doing it for a good cause; and they let me be.

So that was another way that we tried. And that kind of doing that for the community is then why the community would do things like come in and repair the floor and so on. So that it was an attempt to do a give and take.

But then it all stems from my belief that great theatre speaks to the people and about the people, and about the issues that concern the people who are in the audience; and that’s... So, yes, it was politics, and yes it was community; but it was for great theatre, that was the whole point of what we were doing; that when the Greeks spoke about the Persian War, or the Trojan Women, or whatever, it was their community, you know, Euripides had to leave town after he wrote the Trojan Women, it was so contemporary

And Brecht, can you imagine Mother Courage in a bombed-out Berlin after the war, and she says, God damn war; that’s what theatre should be. Anyway. Fuck. Sorry.

I: That’s fine.

GS: Oh, fuck. It’s...[sigh]

I: Well, thank you for...

GS: It’s a little bit too much. Anyway, let’s... What else do you want?

845 I: That's nothing. That's...I think that's good. That's been [inaudible 59:14]
846 it's been great. Thank you so much for speaking to us.
847
848 P: Is there anything else you'd like to say, actually, because...?
849
850 GS: Just give me a second. Well, there will be some silly stories, I'm sure, on
851 the site. But Maurice, oh, God; he'd bought a house in France, had a
852 wonderful girlfriend, was fixing the roof, came down off the roof one day
853 and had a heart attack, and that was it.
854
855 [59:41]
856 Michael is still living somewhere in the East End. My girlfriend – original
857 girlfriend at the time - [Judith Kenura 59:52], she was Hungarian, she was
858 one of the squatters too, she's still in touch with Michael, I think. She was
859 working as a waitress at Wimpy's in, I don't know, one at Piccadilly Circus
860 or something, and she would then be the person that she would give us
861 money whenever we needed it. And at one point, just before we were
862 going to open Jungle, her purse was stolen – and we knew it was the kids
863 from around the corner – and that was going to be our last paint job was
864 going to be money from her purse, that was, you know, £5; and so we
865 went to the mother and said, look, we really need the money; she said,
866 oh, my kids would never steal; come on, we know it was them, and we
867 need the money; so she actually went to them, did you; and they gave us
868 the £5 back.
869
870 I: Honest.
871
872 GS: That's right. And we were able to paint the final set the final time.
873
874 I: So are you in touch with a lot of people from those times, or...?
875
876 GS: Steve; I just had a beer with him last night actually; Steve Gooch went on,
877 he continues to write; he is one of the few writers anywhere in the English
878 language that I know of that is able to put politics and psychology and
879 personality and keep them together. And he has continued to write. If you
880 look at the history of the...you know, he did a lot of plays. The first transfer
881 was his translation of The Mother, the Brecht play, The Mother, which,
882 with Mary Sheen playing the mother; my God, that was a great
883 production. Jonathan Chadwick directed. And it went to the Round House,
884 and that was our first transfer out of it.
885
886 And a couple of other great Brecht shows, Saint Joan of the Stockyards,
887 that Pam directed, and, yeah; so when Pam started working with us, and
888 7:84 had a show come in, one of the guys that squatted with me in the
889 house on Parfett Street ended up being the general manager of the
890 company that did the Dario Fo play that went to the West End, that was
891 the big hit. And so there was a constant connection.
892

893 And, you know, with food co-ops brown rice was the food of the day, food
894 co-ops sprang up everywhere, and we were part of that movement as
895 well. Oh, God.

896
897 I: Yeah?

898
899 P: Just one quick question is that I just wonder, at the time what did you
900 consider to be a great success, you know, when did you all kind of
901 [inaudible 1:02:38] and think, yes?

902
903 I2: [Can we 1:02:39] ask the question?

904
905 I: Yeah, sure.

906
907 GS: At times we were saying it was a collective and so on, it wasn't a
908 collective; it was an uneasy consensus at the beginning, and then I ended
909 up as the artistic director when Michael and Maurice went their own way.
910 And we each had a different definition of success, I'm sure; and for me
911 that tour through the dockers' clubs, that was one pinnacle, that was our
912 relationship to the community at its closest; and that's what I thought we
913 should be doing.

914
915 But also Will Wat, which I strongly suggest you look at the script, and
916 revive it here with some kids from the area; it's a really strong, strong play,
917 and actually would probably get people to sit up and notice. That was
918 probably in many ways an early – in terms of theatre – that was a
919 success. So there were two different ways of categorising success...

920
921 I: So Will Wat was for you, one of your...?

922
923 GS: Well, Jungle was a great show, by any standard; and Will Wat was crazy
924 use of the space, you know, the audience was, like, part of the whole
925 thing. There were other productions, Joan of the Stockyards for instance,
926 that had a really strong theatrical strength too. Hammers, which was the
927 show about West Ham United, was another...we adapted it from Willie
928 Russell's play about Liverpool, that he'd written about the Liverpool
929 football club; that was, you know, an audience success.

930
931 And then, what's the name of...Davis, who was in the nick, and was an
932 East End campaign – oh, Christ, I forgot – anyway one of the more
933 notorious East End criminal cases where...

934
935 [1:04:5

936
937 P: George Davis.

938
939 GS: Yes, George Davis. Thank you. George Davis is innocent, okay. The
940 assumption was the police had somehow fitted him up, although whether
941 he was or wasn't guilty would be an open question. And that was another
942 big... And the poster from that...oh, actually I should talk about...okay.

943 The poster from that featured a hand with the very iconic London police
944 icon sort of on the sleeve, taking some money in the back, you know,
945 getting a bribe. And the police came after us for that, they were, like, what,
946 I don't...you know, whatever they could do, they were really pissed at us,
947 because the poster was all around the East End, and it was a clear
948 accusation of bribery.

949
950 But at the very beginning, if you look at some of those posters, not the
951 Jungle one, which is silk screen and black and white, but Get Off My
952 Back, or Three P Off Opera, they're, like, 13-colour silk screen posters.
953 And these two young – the young couple – the Red Dragon Print Co-op,
954 approached us and said, we like what you're doing, we'd like to do your
955 posters for nothing. And they would create these works of art where they
956 would literally have to put 13 different colours through the silk screen in
957 order to create one poster; and they would do 100 posters of these.

958
959 And they also at times they would read the script and say, no, no, this isn't
960 left wing enough, we're not going to do a poster for this; it attracted...

961
962 I: Was the police presence an ongoing thing for the theatre or was that the
963 exception?

964
965 GS: No, we could have theoretically have been closed down at any point in the
966 synagogue, I mean we broke so many, contravened so many...you know,
967 like I say, whatever it was, the School Board, or whatever, the child
968 exploitation [inaudible 1:07:18] tried to close us down, but they didn't, they
969 couldn't get away; we could have been closed down at any point. And so
970 it was time to move out of that building, and it was time to move on to a
971 bigger building: that is for sure.

972
973 And Pam could have done it, and I guess it was just all so
974 overwhelming...

975
976 I: It was a big thing.

977
978 GS: Yeah, it would have been a big thing. And it's too bad that the Half Moon
979 didn't get Wilton's, that would have been an interesting challenge, that
980 building; I don't know what it's up to now or whether it's still there or not.
981 But, yeah.

982
983 I: So you've walked round the building, you've seen what Half Moon is
984 today.

985
986 GS: Yeah.

987
988 I: And looking back at the legacy, what do you think; and what do you think
989 your kind of fellow founders and the people you worked with would think?

990
991 GS: Oh, I'm sure Maurice would love it; that's part of the reason why I'm so
992 shook up, it is really wonderful to see that something so positive has come

993 out of it. Yeah, no, it's great. And it's so wonderful that it's the kids doing
994 their own theatre, and that it's a way of... I mean it is...I'm sorry. I don't
995 have a cell phone, I don't believe in that, I think that it grabs...the
996 technology is stealing our imagination and our time; and the fact that there
997 are kids here who are creating and relating, and something live, and
998 something real, you know, I think the ability of mankind to use technology
999 to absolve ourselves from moral things; I mean that video that Assange
1000 found of the Americans killing, you know, just pushing a button and killing
1001 people in the street, and getting a couple of the Reuter journalists, and so
1002 on; they don't give a shit about human beings any more.

1003
1004 So the legacy of some kind of respect for human beings, it's still here, and
1005 that's great.

1006
1007 I: Well, thank you very much for speaking to us, it's been an absolute
1008 privilege and pleasure. Thank you.

1009
1010 GS: It's my privilege.

1011
1012 **End of transcript**

1013