

1 RW: Well, I was there right at the beginning of the Half Moon Theatre, I knew  
2 Maurice Colbourne, he was a friend of mine; and he said, come down;  
3 that he was building a theatre. I went down the East End, well, actually it  
4 was part of the City really, Alie Street, and I went in this derelict  
5 synagogue. And it wasn't like a derelict building, and it wasn't like a half-  
6 built building, it was like Dante's Inferno, there was lumber and garbage  
7 and rubbish everywhere, clouds of dust; and in the middle of it stood  
8 Maurice covered in dirt and dust. He was a colossus of a man, he was like  
9 six-five, powerhouse of a guy; he stood there in the middle of this and  
10 said, what do you think; like that. And I looked, and I couldn't believe it.  
11 And I thought, in my head I thought, they're never going to make this into  
12 a theatre. But they did.

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14 And some time after that meeting at the Alie Street synagogue they  
15 opened up and became a theatre. And the incredible thing about it was  
16 the architecture of it wrapped the audience around whatever you were  
17 doing, it pushed the audience into the action in a really powerful way. And  
18 by accident that theatre became an absolute cauldron of intense activity.

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20 And it was a couple of years after that that they got into a bit of trouble,  
21 they were in danger of losing their Arts Council grant, and they asked me  
22 to come in, rather cautiously, on an ad hoc basis, do a production, or  
23 maybe a couple, and I started work there; it was very depressed, people  
24 had very low morale, and it was tough there.

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26 But we started off. And I should point out that the East End had this  
27 tradition of agitprop theatre, there was always some theatre going on  
28 there, and it was left wing, critical of governments, supporting working  
29 people, supporting trade unions, and we became part of that tradition. And  
30 I should say, there was a meeting, a little bit earlier than that, couple of  
31 years earlier, a rather important meeting where the Arts Council became  
32 aware of what we call now fringe theatre – or we called it then fringe  
33 theatre – and invited us in there, I think there was me, there was Belt &  
34 Braces, there was the early fringe companies, and they said, we want to  
35 support this movement.

36  
37 And I remember a man in a suit said, we have £5,000 and we're anxious  
38 to get it to you. And we were heartened by that, it was it marked a sea  
39 change because instead of grubbing around in cellars for no money at all,  
40 we had a little bit of money, we had a little bit of money to keep the theatre  
41 open. I mean we were paid at that time £27 a week, and we had an equal  
42 pay policy, everybody got the same; and we maintained that all the seven  
43 years I was there.

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45 And so I was looking for new plays about current events. I did Juan Vera's  
46 play about Chile

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48 Okay. I've talked about some of the influences on me, Grotowski...

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Okay. I'll start again. Talking about what was going on in the latter part of the '70s. I started in '76, went to '82, and, you know, Grotowski was important, a kind of Pina Bausch in Germany, an extraordinary revolutionary dance, he remade the dance language essentially. And an important, very important influence for me was Joan Littlewood, who ran the Theatre Workshop for years and years and years touring, and finally settled at the Theatre Royal, Stratford; and I worked there, I worked backstage and I was a lighting assistant occasionally, and I walked on in some plays and so on; it was a fabulous experience.

The thing about Joan was, although she could be autocratic and eccentric, she also was a genius director; and every show she did was a celebration of life, it didn't matter if it was a comedy or a Ben Jonson, or whatever it was, it celebrated life. And I've been trying to do that ever since what she achieved; an incredible model.

But there were several important things about what she did. The single most important for me was that because she was a Brechtian and she was looking to the audience for that engagement, her shows, although they were respectful of text, to some degree at least, the main drive for her was to connect down through the fourth wall and connect with the audience, and she was extraordinary at doing that.

Oh What A Lovely War, of course, was an incredibly moving document, and it reached down to the audience and demanded their attention, demanded their commitment; and again it was a very remarkable thing, it was in opposition to what I think the bourgeois theatre of the '40s, '50s, where the audience were essentially passive, they were recipients of something; and she did not allow that, and she wanted that communication between the people out there and the actor.

And we tried to do that at the Half Moon, we wanted to speak to those people, we wanted to act on them in a certain kind of way. And that was our task, that was our project, and that's what we tried to do.

Okay. Well, English theatre in the '50s and '60s, was rather static, behind a proscenium arch, and the acting was mostly from the neck up; and that was something that the fringe was in revolt against. And I was taught, by a Laban trained movement teacher, [inaudible name 08:54], a fabulous teacher. And I was influenced by Grotowski, who was sort of a crazed Pole, I think, who demanded actors had this expressive body that spoke, that worked; and that's what I looked for in actors and wanted on the stage, I want them to be telling the story.

And an important part, again, of Joan Littlewood's work at the Theatre Workshop – she was a Brechtian, I guess, she actually played Mother Courage actually on a tour of the West Country I believe – but obviously the finest dramatist of the 20th century. And his theory about spectators was important to me, and important I think to the Half Moon.

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102 [10:05]

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104 But the German word was *Verfremdung* effect, and it got translated into  
105 English as alienation, which was not a good translation because it wasn't  
106 alienation he was seeking, he was seeking engagement – *un engagement*  
107 – he was seeking engagement, he wanted the spectator to be sitting back  
108 with a cigarette, evaluating, not sitting there and a tide of a story washing  
109 over the spectator, he wanted them engaged and evaluating and  
110 considering what was going on up there. And I think we were trying to do  
111 that; we didn't have a fourth wall in that sense, we didn't have a  
112 proscenium; the Half Moon was a small space, we were...as we came on  
113 or went...or exited, we were trampling over people's feet.

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115 And I mean a case in point is the show that we opened, the Welsh chapel  
116 on the Mile End Road, our new venue, while the new theatre was being  
117 built next door, we wanted to open it with Hamlet, the classic story that  
118 you open new theatres with; but we wanted to do it in a radical way, forge  
119 a new language. And we didn't have any seats so we did it as a  
120 promenade production, we had three huge stages and the actors played  
121 on each stage, and then moved to the next one, pushing through the  
122 audience.

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124 And I remember Frankie de la Tour was an incredible Hamlet, she would  
125 arrive at the new stage, up the stairs, and she would gently move the  
126 audience who were sitting, they would sit on the edge, and she would  
127 move them off, and then she would start the scene. And yeah, it was a  
128 radical reworking, maybe it wasn't the greatest production but she was  
129 utterly remarkable. I remember I used to, during the run I saw her quite a  
130 lot, but I would drive down to the Mile End Road to catch the last act  
131 because it was so moving and so powerful what she did. And it was also  
132 quite interesting, she didn't do it persiflage, she didn't play a man, she  
133 played a woman playing a man, she had a blouse, she knew she was a  
134 woman, and yet she played Hamlet; it was a wonderful, wonderful  
135 embodiment of that role, quite remarkable really.

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137 And then I'd like to talk about for example Pal Joey. Now this is a classic  
138 Broadway musical, but it has very dark noir undertones, it's about a  
139 successful older entertainer falling in love with a con man really, and Sian  
140 Phillips played it, and incredibly well, and rendered the score beautifully.  
141 The lyrics were written by Lawrenz Hart who was a dark noir cynical  
142 character. And Denis Lawson played the young lover of the older woman,  
143 and he was pretty remarkable too.

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145 But again we took...I took the idea of the chorus line, the identical women  
146 in a line, and we found actor/dancers of all different shapes and sizes, fat  
147 ones, tall ones, little ones, and they performed wonderfully.

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149 [14:53]

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151 And again out of necessity, because we didn't have a big cast, we didn't  
152 have 30 actors to play the roles, they carried the story, the plot, they  
153 carried all the little bits in between; and it was remarkable, and it was an  
154 assertion I think of individuality of women, no, they can't be codified into a  
155 uniform line, it wasn't Radio City musical, 40 girls identical; and they were  
156 all individuals and they worked really hard. And it changed the feeling of  
157 that show and it made it very, very dark; as I say, it opened in the Welsh  
158 chapel; and I remember Sian Phillips's entrance wasn't on the stage at all,  
159 we did have a stage but it was at the side of the theatre, and the wall was  
160 running with damp, peeling and filthy, and this incredible elegant vision  
161 was leaning up against it and starting the show, or making her entrance.

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163 And that show, it was important, it played to packed houses there, and it  
164 moved to the West End and played for a year there. And I'd like to say  
165 about the move, and although I treasured and loved the fringe – as it's  
166 called – fringe theatre, the freedom of it, going down the basement theatre  
167 in Greek Street in Soho, going in curious little spaces to make theatre,  
168 there was a freedom about it, you didn't have to be an actor, you could go  
169 and make...you could make your statement wherever you wanted to  
170 make it.

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172 But the Half Moon, we wanted to be a considerable theatre, we wanted to  
173 matter, we wanted to speak and talk to the East End. And as I've said, we  
174 took some criticism for doing that, why are you doing Hamlet; well, you  
175 know, I'm not going to prejudge what working people in the East End  
176 might enjoy; that was my attitude. We wanted to make the best possible  
177 theatre we could make that had, if you like, a Marxist perspective, we  
178 wanted to deconstruct a classical theatre, and that was our project, what  
179 we wanted to do.

180  
181 I might mention another production, which was a double bill at the old Half  
182 Moon in Alie Street in the old synagogue. We did a double bill which really  
183 stretched our resources actually; we did Kleine Mahagonny, the  
184 Brecht/Weill; I think the opera is called The Rise and Fall of the City of  
185 Mahagonny, but there is a chamber version of it, a Songspiele I think it's  
186 called, and so we took the Songspiele and set it in a kind of Bunuelesque  
187 dinner party, and the story unfolded round the table, and people leapt up –  
188 Maggie Steed was in it, wonderful – and a lot of other good actors; Robin  
189 Hooper, Robin Soames I can remember; some others. And we yoked that  
190 together with Woyzeck, both of which I've translated, although  
191 Mahagonny I did with the two Robins, Robin Soames and Robin Hooper.  
192 Robin Hooper actually played Woyzeck and that was one of the  
193 remarkable things about the extraordinary imagination of Micky Bearwish  
194 our designer who I don't know whether it was his idea or mine, or we  
195 came upon it, but on the wall hung a huge tank of water, like a goldfish  
196 bowl, and Woyzeck, at the end, climbed the wall, sank into the water,  
197 submerged, and there was this strange foetal shape in the water, bubbles  
198 rising; and it was a rather remarkable image, I believe, you know, we were  
199 close to drowning him, of course; we had a long nice slow – a slow fade –  
200 as he submerged himself. Gave him enough time to come up for air.

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202 [20:27]

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204 And, as I say, both of those shows, they're big plays even though they're  
205 relatively short; and they were incredibly demanding on the actors and the  
206 resources of the theatre at that time.

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208 So what I really wanted to say was that although we were fringe, we were  
209 not well paid; but we wanted to be mainstream, we wanted to speak to our  
210 audience, we wanted to draw them in to the theatre and say to them,  
211 we're not fringe in the sense of being superfluous to requirements, we're  
212 actual, we're there, we're critiquing society, we're saying things about how  
213 you live. And that was our project, what we wanted to do.

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215 And I'd like to say something else, that in the course of local writers we  
216 had Billy Colvill who did Back Street Romeo; Dave Marson who did A  
217 Couple of Slave Camps, which was about recruiting working people into  
218 camps during the Depression, when to earn their benefits, to earn that  
219 small amount of dole, they had to go and live in a camp somewhere; and  
220 it was pretty grim; and his research and his play about it was  
221 extraordinarily powerful.

222  
223 And so the discovery I made generating those shows, and I didn't direct  
224 them all, but was that I began to understand that each play is a hermetic  
225 world of its own, it has its own laws, its own rituals, its own mythology, and  
226 it informed all the work slowly as we went, I would know that I had to find  
227 the key to making that a world, that didn't exist, was a parallel universe to  
228 the real world, remember this is the world of Margaret Thatcher, who  
229 disgusted me, and I thought she had the effect of reducing British society,  
230 she sucked life out of it. And it's one reason I don't live there now is what  
231 she did to Britain. And so every play was informed by that hatred.

232  
233 I mean, I did another play, called A Short, Sharp Shock, which was a  
234 coproduction between Theatre Royal Stratford and the Royal Court, it  
235 played at both theatres, and I had the whole British Cabinet and Margaret  
236 Thatcher were played by women actually; and that wasn't a Half Moon  
237 production. But the point I'm trying to make is that that powerful critique of  
238 that awful period when Margaret Thatcher was running the country, or  
239 mismanaging the country, impelled the work that we did. And I never felt  
240 that we had to, if you like, try and insert a Marxist critique onto the stage, I  
241 don't quite believe in that; I believe the theatre it has its own laws and its  
242 own rituals, and that perspective informed the work in our little theatre.

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246 Yeah, we were creating a repertoire that was socialist in perspective, it  
247 was talking to people about their lives in a working-class area of London.  
248 And maybe we got some criticism because I did Hamlet, I did Ezra, about  
249 Ezra Pound and so on; but I reject that and I'm not going to make

250 judgements about what working people can enjoy and get something out  
251 of.

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253 And what we were about, what I don't believe is I don't really believe that  
254 theatre, an individual play, can change people's minds, it's not going to  
255 change how they vote, you know, they're going to think that for  
256 themselves; but the perspective of a series of plays, the presence where it  
257 was, in a derelict building right in the heart of the East End, or at least on  
258 the edge of the City and the East End, was what we wanted to say, that  
259 your lives are valuable, that they're worth fighting for, that there's a  
260 philosophy behind this that supports you, supports trade unions; and  
261 that's what we were seeking to do. And we wanted to be entertaining.

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263 And I'd like to mention, in the new Welsh chapel, in the Mile End Road,  
264 when we moved, I did Pal Joey, which is again a laddish Broadway  
265 musical, but extraordinarily dark, like a noir vision, and extraordinarily well  
266 played by Sian Phillips, who falls in love with a con man who's on the  
267 make, played by Denis Lawson. And incredible lyrics by Lawrence Hart,  
268 and such a powerful story. And that show moved to the West End, I think  
269 played for a year and probably made a lot of money for people.

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271 Again I drove to Milan and got the rights from Dario Fo to two of his...well,  
272 two plays of his; one was The Accidental Death of an Anarchist, which I  
273 gave actually to Belt & Braces, I said to them, you do that one, and I'll do  
274 Can't Pay? Won't Pay! – *Non Si Paga! Non Si Paga!* – and I drove back  
275 from Milan with the rights in my pocket there and I was pretty proud to do  
276 that. And I can't remember...driving my little Volkswagen, I think.

277  
278 And again Frances de la Tour, in my opinion one of the very, very great  
279 actors in the British theatre, certainly was at that time, gave an incredible  
280 tour de force. And it was a comic...it's still extraordinarily funny. And they  
281 say about that, by the way, we got a translation done by a fine academic,  
282 but it was not that playable; and we read it in the theatre, and Frankie  
283 said, look, you've got to do a rewrite; so I went home over the weekend,  
284 Friday night, Saturday, Sunday, rewrote the whole play in those three  
285 days and brought it in on the Monday, and we did that. That was again a  
286 show that moved to the West End and played I think for a couple of years  
287 at the Criterion Theatre.

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289 So I wanted to tell you that it's a rather extraordinary exercise because, as  
290 you know better than anybody, the theatre is...you know, a show dies, the  
291 last night, and the curtain down, that's it, it's over, it's finished, there's  
292 nothing left. And I don't have any memorabilia or reviews or anything like  
293 that – and my children are goofing around here, and my wife's showing  
294 me her butt there – but anyway. So, you know, that's informed my view of  
295 the theatre, when it's gone it's gone, it's over, it's finished. And that's part  
296 of the beauty of it, in my opinion.

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298 [30:08]  
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300 And so dredging up memories of that long battle at the Half Moon, it's  
301 been quite an exercise for me. But what I wanted to say was that our  
302 project was to be in the community, to offer the very, very best that we  
303 could, to let them know that the shows were speaking to them and for  
304 them. And part of that project was we instituted TEEF, it was called, T-E-  
305 E-F, The East End Festival; and it was an open door, we had an open-  
306 door policy, if you wanted to come, bring a band, a comedy act, a play,  
307 you could do that, there was no...you didn't have to register or anything  
308 like that, you'd just book it and in you came and did your show. And so we  
309 placed the facility, the space, the technicians, at the service of TEEF.

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311 And similarly I believe the Half Moon legacy still exists in your work and it  
312 started with one clown, we wanted to have an outreach programme, we  
313 wanted our theatre to go out into schools, and because of finance we  
314 started with one solitary clown. And he went round the schools, did his  
315 show for them, fabulous guy; and I regret now that I don't remember his  
316 name – we're talking more than 30 years ago – and he did amazing work.  
317 And slowly, as we were able to attract finance, grant aid, we expanded  
318 that. At times, curiously enough, the Young People's Theatre, as we  
319 called it, at that time the Young People's Theatre was bigger than the  
320 main house; and they did amazing work, they created fabulous shows,  
321 musicals, trucked them round, it was incredible hard work, they'd truck  
322 into a school in the morning, pack up, truck to another one, play in the  
323 afternoon; and it's fabulous work and very important. And I'm incredibly  
324 happy that that legacy lives on.

325  
326 But it demonstrates, I think, that the philosophy behind the Moon was that  
327 we wanted to go out into the community, we wanted them to come in and  
328 be part of it. And, you know, I could say parenthetically that the foyer of  
329 the theatre, in Alie Street, the old Half Moon, it was a gallery, a photo  
330 gallery, an incredibly good and important one, a photography gallery.

331  
332 And I'd like to say one thing, all this extraordinary amount of work that we  
333 did, and it was a massive load, that we embarked on, was very, very  
334 ambitious, was enabled by the administrator at that time Loesje Sanders,  
335 as she was then called, now Loesje Houghton; and she kept that whole  
336 show on the road, I could be as free, as creative, as wild, as I wanted to  
337 be, I could pick a play and say, this is the one we've got to do; and she  
338 would find the money, she would balance the budget, she would get the  
339 grant and run the economy of the theatre; and it was a very, very  
340 remarkable job she did.

341  
342 When we moved to the Welsh chapel in Mile End Road, alongside it they  
343 were building the new theatre, which I think was a rather remarkable bit of  
344 architecture – but I could talk about that – but Loesje had no office at all,  
345 she acquired a double-decker London bus and parked it alongside the  
346 Welsh chapel, and ripped out the seats and ran the theatre from within  
347 that bus; and she was undaunted by difficulties. Sometimes we had some  
348 very difficult times, I mean if a show didn't quite make its audience that

349 we'd planned it to make, you know, we had to somehow tighten our belts  
350 and make it work; and she was responsible for that.

351  
352 And, you know, my...what I think of as my forte, which was actors creating  
353 something on the stage, was only facilitated by somebody who was so  
354 organised and knew how to manage, how to manage this juggernaut thing  
355 going on; and she did it, was very, very remarkable actually.

356  
357 And it's one interesting thing, that when I left in '82, the theatre was not  
358 quite built, the new theatre, which I regret that I never, although I'd had a  
359 hand in its design, I never directed anything there. But the director who  
360 followed me, he stayed for three months and then threw his hands up and  
361 said, you can't do this job, it's too much; and part of the reason, it wasn't  
362 my efforts or my skills particularly, it was the administration that we had,  
363 led by Loesje, that enabled all that work to go on; the festival, the Young  
364 People's Theatre, the main house; and that was an extraordinary time for  
365 us.

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367 [35:00]

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373 **End of transcript**