

1 JT: John, J-O-H-N, Turner, T-U-R-N-E-R.  
2  
3 I: Brilliant. Thank you. Can you tell me...  
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5 JT: I generally get it right.  
6  
7 I: Can you tell us about how and why you came to be involved with Half  
8 Moon?  
9  
10 JT: I'll do the how. I was on tour with the circus that I was artistic director of,  
11 Circus Senso, in Leith Walk in Edinburgh at the time of the Edinburgh  
12 Festival; and they brought the circus up because the criticism of the  
13 Festival locally in the council chambers was that it was too much for the  
14 international audience and not enough for local people, and so they  
15 brought in the circus that I was artistic director of, deliberately to be a  
16 circus which of course festival-goers could come to but of course so could  
17 local people. And Leith is a high density poor section of Edinburgh.  
18  
19 I was there when I got a phone call from a friend of mine, actress Kate  
20 Versey who used to work at the Half Moon – or maybe still was – and  
21 said, they're looking for an artistic director, John, would you be interested;  
22 I said I would be interested but I'm still involved in this tour so just keep  
23 me informed. So that's how I came to know about it.  
24  
25 Why. The Half Moon began in roughly the same time as the company that  
26 I was with at the time, the Combination, we were in Deptford at a place  
27 called the Albany Institute, what was...it was then known as a  
28 neighbourhood action centre, a community centre; and they wanted to  
29 start up a cultural development programme and they brought in this  
30 theatre company, fringe theatre company, the Combination, to facilitate  
31 that programme, in fact two of us became paid employees of the Albany  
32 as cultural development officers.  
33  
34 So we opened and started our theatre, the Albany Empire, at roughly the  
35 same time that Maurice Colbourne and a group of his acting friends and  
36 colleagues were starting up the old Half Moon. And there was tremendous  
37 respect across the river, I mean we both knew our attempt was to take  
38 theatre out of the centres of cities into the communities and to speak to  
39 local people about the things that affected their lives.  
40  
41 It went further than that, actors from the Half Moon came to the  
42 Combination and performed there, performers from the Combination went  
43 to the Half Moon and performed there, writers went back and forth. The  
44 first play I worked on with the Brighton Combination, Aristophanes' The  
45 Wasps, was adapted by Steve Gooch who later came to the old Half  
46 Moon and was a very successful playwright with them. So it was a very  
47 symbiotic relationship, so that when – to come back to the how – that  
48 offer...well, it wasn't an offer then, but an interest, became clear to me it  
49 was something I would do in the bat of an eyelid, if I was free. And time  
50 suddenly became conducive to throwing my hat into that ring; and then

51 when it became clear that what I could bring, which was basically a  
52 community theatre policy to the job, was...which I wasn't convinced of, I  
53 mean the Half Moon I didn't think of particularly as a community theatre  
54 operation, but they were very excited by attempting a community theatre.  
55

56 That's my answer to the first question. Oh, I could read you something,  
57 would you like to hear something about the early years of the Half Moon?  
58

59 I: Yeah, sure.

60  
61 JT: It's from Cathy Itzin's book, Stages in the Revolution, Political Theatre in  
62 Britain Since 1968. The Half Moon Theatre in Whitechapel had opened in  
63 1972 – yeah, that's right, it's just the same – but came to prominence in  
64 1973. The aim of its cofounder actor Maurice Colbourne was to create,  
65 quote, a rehearsal space workshop with living accommodation inspired by  
66 the alternative society of the '60s.  
67

68 Do you know anything about the alternative society of the '60s?  
69

70 I: [Inaudible 04:51].  
71

72 JT: One of the domestic arrangements was young people living together in  
73 the same house, sharing cooking, sharing responsibilities, and sharing  
74 fun, and life development.  
75

76 [05:07]  
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78 But the potential of the place – we're now back at the Half Moon, not  
79 hippy communes – but the potential of the place as a natural theatre soon  
80 became apparent and they mounted Brecht's In the Jungle of the Cities.  
81 Which reminds me that the thing that distinguished – I've talked about the  
82 similarities between the Combination and the Half Moon – the  
83 distinguishing factor was the Half Moon's main inspiration, it seemed to  
84 me from the outside, was European theatre influences; our main  
85 inspiration was American theatre influences, so San Francisco Mime  
86 Troupe and Café La MaMa was ours. So we were different but similar in  
87 aspiration, if you like.  
88

89 The initial idea was to gather a small ensemble of actors evolve the show,  
90 tour it with financial support, then come back and play it in the space and  
91 test the water. When Jungle of the Cities opened it played to good  
92 houses, and from that first success the Half Moon went on to become one  
93 of the most important left-wing politically conscious London venues and  
94 producing companies under the direction – and I'm sure you've gone  
95 through this – direction of Pam Brighton in the early '70s, under Robert  
96 Walker in the late '70s.  
97

98 I'll read a little bit more, because it ties in with what I said earlier. One of  
99 the Half Moon's most successful early productions was Steve Gooch's

100 adaptation of Brecht's The Mother, a production that was to influence  
101 many a political theatre work subsequently.

102

103 So you can see he does his adaptation of Aristophanes' The Wasps in  
104 1970. In 1972 – or some time after 1972 – he's doing Brecht's The  
105 Mother, at the Half Moon. So you can see how people are going back and  
106 forth. Yes? Where was I?

107

108 I: Shall I move on to the next question?

109

110 JT: Yeah, I can always go back if I remember something that I haven't told  
111 you.

112

113 I: Yeah. I'll just let you...I'll let you put that down.

114

115 JT: Okay.

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117 I: Can you tell us about the first show, Regeneration?

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119 JT: I can. And it was – I've just been reminded downstairs – the first show I  
120 produced at the Half Moon. It came to me...I was looking for a piece  
121 which really would tie in with the history, which I loved, of the Half Moon.  
122 And I should tell you, I have just travelled here on the DLR from Lewisham  
123 through London's Docklands, direct here. Now when I used to come to  
124 work, in 1989, there was Northern Line to Circle Line, to the Mile End  
125 Road. Right? There was no direct access from South East to East, you  
126 know, for those pedestrians like myself who don't drive cars. Now by dint  
127 of London's commercial city, built in Docklands, we've got direct  
128 communications.

129

130 Docklands still retains the name of the docks, which was a huge industry  
131 in the East End of London, with a huge community of people who worked  
132 there. When I came to work at the Half Moon as artistic director the docks  
133 were closed, they had just closed and the regeneration of Docklands was  
134 on its way, and there was a campaign going on – and I knew some of the  
135 people in the campaign – to stress to the developers that the needs of  
136 local people needed to be addressed in the plans for their redevelopment  
137 of Docklands: affordable public housing; community spaces; community  
138 facilities; and work, and replacement of this huge industry which had been  
139 moved out. So that was the environment, the social environment. And my  
140 whole background in community theatre had taught me that what the real  
141 subjects for your theatre should be – I hate to use the word should  
142 because you should never use that in art – might possibly be, should be  
143 considered to be, the issues which are most concerning local people, who  
144 are not theatre goers, you know, one of the big things we were all trying to  
145 do was bring non-theatre-going audiences into our theatres; now you  
146 don't do that by taking your stimulus from literary sources, your sources  
147 are the lives of the people themselves, that's what you try and put on  
148 stage.

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150 [09:51]

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In comes this play called Regeneration, about the redevelopment of London's Docklands, and it was brought in by one of the best young directors around at the time, Stephen Daldry, and the writer Jonathan Moore, and I had a very good meeting with them. And Stephen said, the play needs work but I think it's very exciting; and I had read it before the meeting and I said, it is very exciting and I know what you mean about needing work. And of course both of these comments are kind of implied criticisms of the script, but we're both saying it's exciting.

Anyway, successful meeting, and I basically said we can do it, possibly not shaken hands on it, but I've said to myself this is a runner and this is how we should start at the Half Moon.

I then have another meeting at the writer's request with him, saying he wants to get rid of Stephen Daldry and he wants to direct it himself. Now this is really difficult for me because I had directed a lot of my own plays, right, so I can't use the professional one which is, well, it's considered not very good for a writer to direct his own work because there's a certain degree, which you may lack objectivity when you're looking at your rehearsals and whatever; but I can't use that argument because, you know, I'm an honest bloke and I know I've directed my own stuff. Anyway, Jonathan Moore convinced me that he should direct his own play.

Let me tell you something about another reason I did it. I've told you about the redevelopment of Docklands, I knew this man – camera, can you see Jack Dash – Jack Dash was the leader of the dockers, and the dockers had fought, as you can imagine, the regeneration plans as best they could, and when they realised they were losing the battle they'd moved on to the battle for the support of the community. And so I took the play to Jack Dash and said, tell me what you think of it, I'll come back in a week. Jack, at the time, was retired from the dock union but had become president of the Old Aged Person's Union – in fact we'd had him at the Albany – and just to give you an example of what a brilliant man he was, he made a speech to old people at the Albany and said, in the East End of London – something like this, it's probably not a quote but I'll get the gist right – in the East End of London we judge a family by how well they look after and take care of the weaker members of the family, I mean the old and the very young, if we were to judge this government by those standards we would consider them not the kind of family which we would want in our community. So very simple, very logical, but a beautiful way of describing the situation.

So anyway, I take it to Jack, and a week later I came back and said, what do you think, Jack; he said, well, I don't know a lot about theatre, son, but this is the story of our people, our community. So I thought, that's it, we're going for it.

199 Just to give you a little bit more flavour of what a marvellous man Jack is;  
200 because if you ever want to know about the history of the docks, read this  
201 book, it's a marvellous [inaudible 13:39]. But I'm just going to give you a  
202 little bit of the man: he's closing his autobiography; I thank you dear  
203 reader if you've read so far, for your interest and patience. May I offer a bit  
204 of advice, especially to the young; read and learn the history of the British  
205 labour movement, the working class, its struggles and development, its  
206 twin creations, the trade unions and the cooperative movement, from  
207 which has developed the finest principle of humanism, international  
208 brotherhood. Which is about the nicest thing that one generation can pass  
209 on to the younger generation, I think. And the book has on the back: good  
210 morning brothers is the salutation with which Jack Dash always begins his  
211 addresses at the London docks, demagogue or hero, ignorant  
212 troublemaker or cultivated man, who has addressed students at nearly  
213 every university in Britain; Jack Dash is presented to the public in all these  
214 lights, and seldom a month goes by in which his name does not figure,  
215 and sometimes writ very large in the newspapers.

216  
217 So anyway, on his recommendation, on my own instincts and my own  
218 experiences, we went into rehearsal with Jonathan Moore's Regeneration.

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220 [15:02]

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222 It was playing very long in rehearsal. Have you had Jonathan Moore  
223 interviewed?

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225 I: I'm not sure.

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227 JT: All right. He'd be interesting. I think he's brilliant, he's a brilliant actor, and  
228 I've read other of his plays and seen other of his plays, and they are  
229 brilliant. And this was brilliant, it was just extremely long. And so the  
230 cutting process for me as producer, him as director and writer, was  
231 sometimes quite tough, and possibly we didn't cut it enough. But it was a  
232 big sprawling epic that involved the story of a young man realising his  
233 livelihood was disappearing as fast as he could see and also the  
234 machinations of developers, in the same play. And it managed to have tap  
235 dance and song, song and dance in it as well.

236  
237 I: Could you tell us a bit more about the staging of the play?

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239 JT: It was set on the scrap yard. The stage management at the Half Moon  
240 were aghast when the set started to come in on the back of a lorry.  
241 Welding equipment was used to build it. It was extremely cinematic, it was  
242 truly, in the modern sense of the word – and the theatrical sense of the  
243 word – epic, as a piece of theatre. It was not well reviewed, if memory  
244 serves, but what it did do was it gave my beginning a very strong basis  
245 with the community, and with the dockers' union. I mean the first night  
246 was full of trades unionists and their families, and it felt very...I felt very  
247 proud.

248

249 I: Could you tell us more about the audience response?  
250

251 JT: It's very interesting, if you go to see theatre, after most plays – and this is  
252 a huge sweeping generalisation coming here, I hope your camera is wide  
253 enough to pick this one up – most of the conversation that an audience  
254 comes out with is how well so and so played their part, or a moment,  
255 wasn't that good when so and so did that. In this, after this the  
256 conversation was all about what's going on in their community.  
257 Immediate, it was almost as if the play didn't stop.  
258

259 There was a nice warm comforting bar at the Half Moon, and a little  
260 garden outside the bar, and on good nights, you know, warm nights, even  
261 given the fact that it was quite a late finish, conversations would go on and  
262 on and on, about the issues, about the effects on families, about the  
263 future, the potential future.  
264

265 I: Your play Circus Moon was a very successful Christmas show during the  
266 time you were the artistic director; can you tell us about this?  
267

268 JT: Sure. Well, the circuses that I directed were human circuses, there were  
269 no animals, apart from a puppet teddy bear, that's all we had; and the  
270 puppet teddy bear was on a stick and it could walk with the stick, and if  
271 you did it well you'd forget there was a man behind it going like this, or a  
272 woman, in this I think it was Tessa Crooket doing it. And you could talk to  
273 it and you can make it jump through hoops. So that was our animal. So a  
274 human circus, human skills, trapeze, juggling, at the Half Moon,  
275 marvellous table sliding; two artists from No Fit State Circus in Wales,  
276 who are now, you know, they are one of the best – probably the best – in  
277 the country, in No Fit State. And they play the Roundhouse, I mean  
278 they're really great, if you get a chance go and see them, they're on most  
279 years they'll come to the Roundhouse.  
280

281 So let me just run through the skills: trapeze; web – do you know what  
282 web is? a single piece of rope and generally...a lot of the artists come  
283 from gymnastics, right, and then they reinterpret their gymnastic skills and  
284 their physical flexibility to circus skills – a single rope, there's a strap  
285 hanging a quarter of the way down it, and then a person here twirls the  
286 rope, and generally a woman acrobat up here starts to fly out and then  
287 does tricks, hangs from, you know, swings up, ties in to her feet and then  
288 flies out again, it's very exciting; and we set it all to a jazz-funk score.  
289

290 [20:12]  
291

292 And I was in it, as well as writing it I was in it. And so it's tied together.  
293 What I did with circuses, human circuses, I made them tell stories, without  
294 lines, so that you had a narrator but they didn't have lines. I'll read you a  
295 little bit about the gestation of Circus Moon. Oh, I'll read you a bit about  
296 Circus Moon, if you like, would you like to hear this?  
297

298 I: Yes.

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JT: Circus Moon was the last show in the Half Moon Theatre. Wrong. During the 1980s the vogue for animal-less circuses reached the UK – Circo Senso started in '85 – this circus show depicted, quotes, theatre returning to the streets – now we're talking about Circus Moon – although of course it was indoors, the performing area was stripped back to the breeze blocks and the fake broken wall added with a gauze as the sky it looked like a rough car park on a housing estate, the show opened with a car driving in and exploding and a bar bursting out; all circus apparatus grew out of this street environment in an improvised manner. Okay.

Circus Senso began at the Albany – this is me talking, not this book – began at the Albany, it was the last show in my time as artistic director there, and it was directed by a bloke who came over from Australia from Circus Oz, Terry O'Connell, and he made a magic show. And that was going to be it; but it got great reviews and then other theatres around the country started saying, can we have it, can we have it. But Terry had to go back to the States, so Terry asked me, he said, can you look after the show on tour; so I said, don't know anything about circus. He said, don't worry, it's theatre, you'll get the hang of it. And I duly did, and I went off on tour as its artistic director.

So Terry O'Connell later returned to Australia and the direction of Circus Senso was taken over by John Turner, previously artistic director at the Albany. Bruce Cole and the Circus Senso band provided the music which combines classical, Reggae and jazz-funk. Okay, well, it, I mean basically we started out touring to theatres, number one theatres, the Empires and the Theatre Royals, and then...so this is not good enough, we want a tent like proper circuses. So we got ourselves a tent. And we were at a festival on the South Bank, and the hurricane blew up. And Gerry Cottle's circus in Ireland was totally blown away, and ours...we got an emergency call and we all had to go down to the site on the South Bank and literally hang on to the guy ropes, I mean we were just lying out in the pouring rain hanging on. So this is not the answer, not in England.

So we then wound up getting a geodesic dome, and it was the geodesic dome circus that I was in when I got the phone call from the Half Moon. This is almost getting themes coming here, isn't there? So the geodesic dome was the answer really, but very expensive geodesic dome.

So Circus Moon: I think the story of Circus Moon, as far as that it was all based on the walls of Jericho, you know, from the Bible, or the song, [singing] Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Joshua fit the bat...and the walls came tumbling down. And so the story of it was these people who were excluded from society trying to create a society of their own in which they could fulfil their dreams; that's roughly it. And so they were everything from single-parent mum, a homeless punk, street-corner busker, a bloke with a suitcase selling you what from where, we don't know; but those kind of people on the fringe of society creating a world in which they could fulfil their dreams.

349

350 I: And what role did you play?

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352 JT: I was the narrator. And I also wrote some songs for the narration, so the  
353 narration wasn't entirely verbal. Because the great thing about circus is  
354 the continuation of community theatre, the aspirations of community; with  
355 circus you can create a theatre which will appeal not just to the educated,  
356 the literary conscious, but also to the streetwise, because it's nonverbal;  
357 rather like sport in that way, it can cut across everything. And that's what  
358 community theatre is always trying to do, cut across any divides that you  
359 can possibly imagine, old, young, black, white, you name it we'll try and  
360 make it work for all.

361

362 [25:21]

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364 And circus does that, or has the potential to do that. You can still go and  
365 see bad circuses just like you can go and see bad plays, but that's its  
366 potential; and that's what the idea of minimalist narration and then songs.  
367 But largely they were songs about the skills as they were going on, so we  
368 never expected people to stop and listen to the song, the song was part of  
369 the narration, probably sung to the trapeze artist.

370

371 I: What was the audience response?

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373 JT: Well, Christmas, and we were conscious of it being Christmas; it was our  
374 Christmas show at the Half Moon. So children loved the clowns, they were  
375 pulling back in their seats in horror at the danger... The cloud swing, the  
376 cloud swing is the most dangerous thing we did, and that's a huge loop of  
377 rope, and again it's pulled and pulled and pulled and pulled, and a  
378 performer sitting on it, and then it's let go and the performer swings it like  
379 a swing, and then wraps legs, and then dives out over the heads of the  
380 audience; and it's pretty exciting, you know, when that figure is coming  
381 back, at the back of the swing they're hanging down, not quite vertically  
382 down because the rope is swinging, but they're coming across the heads  
383 of the audience, it's very. And all the little children are going...like that.  
384 And it's great.

385

386 I: Could you tell us about Blood Wedding?

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388 JT: Blood Wedding. Yeah. Well, obviously the Half Moon is in the middle of an  
389 Asian community as well, Bangladeshi, and so I wanted to do a piece of  
390 Asian theatre. And I was approached by Asian Coop Theatre, and met its  
391 producer at the time, Harmage Singh Kalirai, he and I became good  
392 friends; and he said they had a project which they had done some  
393 workshops on adapting Lorca's Blood Wedding to an Asian culture, an  
394 Asian environment. And I said, that sounds great, let's do it at the Half  
395 Moon. And so we did. And it was fantastic cast, the best – well, we'd tried  
396 to get the best – British Asian actors, or Asian British actors, that we  
397 could, and we did I think. And they did a fantastic show. And good music.  
398 Very – again I'm going to use the word epic – an epic quality. The Half



399 Moon Theatre, for all...it would still class as a small venue I'm sure, but  
400 the stage was very big, and so you could really get away with sweeping  
401 cast movements, and in fact we used the entrances through the  
402 auditorium and things like that. So it was...it really worked, but it was very  
403 moving.  
404

405 And actually it had an afterlife, in two ways: it was seen by my wife, who  
406 was obviously education director at the National Theatre, Jenny Harris;  
407 and she later produced an Afro-Caribbean Asian production of Blood  
408 Wedding for the Education Department at the National; so it had a direct  
409 afterlife in that sense. And I then did another piece after I left the Half  
410 Moon, at the National, with Harmage as co-producer, Wicked Yaar! by  
411 Garry Lyons, which was about racism in the Bradford cricket leagues, and  
412 that started off at the Cottesloe and then went off on tour around, did very  
413 well.  
414

415 I: Can you remember what the rehearsal process was like for Blood  
416 Wedding?  
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418 JT: Well, as producer you don't actually go into rehearsals that much unless  
419 you're invited. But there was one, I think it was they were trying to get a  
420 ritualistic production, so I do remember seeing some choreographed  
421 walking to give the impression that you're walking miles, you walk very  
422 slowly and take small steps; and that was very...incredibly beautiful.  
423

424 [30:02]  
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426 And the whole, their whole attempt was to give it a kind of dreamlike  
427 quality, and it worked very, very well. I'll tell you a little story from the  
428 rehearsal process, which doesn't rebound all that well on my head; but  
429 anyway Harmage and I were, you know, as I said, became friends; and he  
430 knew a lot of the actors, well, he'd helped to find them. And so the actors  
431 sometimes were in the habit of talking to Harmage in their breaks; and at  
432 one point he brought a couple of the actors over to me and they were  
433 worried about a certain speech in Lorca's Blood Wedding. And Lorca is a  
434 poet dramatist, you know, some of the language is really quite high; and  
435 these young actors were saying – and this is, I think it's a speech to a  
436 moon or something – and it's, you know, dense poetic language, beautiful;  
437 and they said, how are we going to do this. So I said, well, you know,  
438 when in doubt just be as natural as you can. Right.  
439

440 Anyway, later in that day a meeting was called, and the producers were  
441 asked to attend, at which the director said, there is only one director on  
442 this production and that is me. So I thought, oh, blimey, they've just, you  
443 know, that was a suggestion, it was nothing, you know, it wasn't a diktat  
444 on my part, you know, it was just you could try this if nothing else works,  
445 you know. So I then said, he's quite right, you've got that director, and that  
446 director is standing in front of you, and if any actor comes to me and asks  
447 me for advice I'll give advice, but that's all it is, you've got your director  
448 over there. Quite embarrassing, that, you know, possibly, you know, I'd...I

449 thought, oh blimey, I've started a revolution. But I hadn't. And he dealt  
450 with it very well.

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452 I: The very last play to be performed at Half Moon was the Young People's  
453 Company show, River; can you tell us about that?

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455 JT: Well, yes, I can of course, but I should also tell you about the play that  
456 you've missed out, Alec McCowen's Gospel According to Saint Mark,  
457 which comes just before The River. Is it River, or The River?

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459 I: I have River here. [NB: The piece is actually called After The Storm]

460  
461 JT: Okay, so it's River. No, I think your research is better than my memory.  
462 Alec McCowen is one of the great actors of this country, a brilliant  
463 character actor; you would be surprised – I think the whole world is  
464 surprised – by the number of things that he's been in; and certainly  
465 featured very prominently in the films of my youth when I used to watch  
466 films about the Second World War, he was in a lot of them. And great  
467 Shakespearian actor. And at some point, when he was probably in his  
468 sixties, if not more, he developed a show where he performed the Gospel  
469 According to Saint Mark from the St James Bible. Now the St James Bible  
470 is considered, along with Shakespeare, some of the greatest language in  
471 English literature. Here you've got a great actor, but it's not a guinea for  
472 an actor to do it, you know, this is hard stuff, to turn that into moving  
473 narrative theatre, but here comes a great actor who of course can do it.

474  
475 And I was aware of the show, getting plaudits in Edinburgh; and then we  
476 were approached, I imagine by his agent, who said, Alec would like to do  
477 it in the East End of London, would the Half Moon be interested. I said,  
478 yes, of course we'd be very...we'd be honoured.

479  
480 I'm not a religious person but I am a fan of all kinds of theatre, you know, I  
481 love the international theatre that comes into London, performed in Polish  
482 or whatever. And so I was very excited, and it was great, absolutely  
483 marvellous. And he's quite a small man, but he could do something – and  
484 I'll do it very badly – he's trying to tell somebody to leave them, to go  
485 away, and what he does to do that is he turns this way, and they're where  
486 you are, he turns this way, and then he swings right round and points like  
487 that, so his arm seems to be twice as long as it really is; you know, that  
488 just by giving that sweep it's just...it's like a backhand in the tennis, and if  
489 you play tennis, you turn sideways, and you turn side...and then you  
490 extend your arm to get the full force of the shot. He did that with a, you  
491 know, get away from me. Brilliant.

492  
493 [35:02]

494  
495 I: Could we return...

496  
497 JT: The...the River, yeah.

498

499 I: Yeah.

500

501 JT: Okay. The River. Or, River. Part of the community theatre policy that I was  
502 keen on developing – and this is, as far as I know, this is my first year – so  
503 I'd done the story of the dockers, I'd done a show for the Bangladeshi  
504 community, I'd done a show for all the family, in Circus Moon. We'd done  
505 a show...look, this is a theatre, so we'd done a piece of high-class theatre;  
506 but the Bible is pretty popular too, so that's still – I can rationalise to  
507 myself – still community theatre.

508

509 What we haven't done is a young person's piece of theatre. And at the  
510 Albany I was used to working close...I used to, you know, I was artistic  
511 director, but sometimes they'd invite me in to direct some of their stuff. I  
512 also developed a thing where we called it the community show, where the  
513 young person's theatre and the professional company, and a community  
514 company which we set up on a local estate, all came together and did one  
515 big show; and we had writers from all over the different areas of the  
516 community; and I just edited it all together so it became a piece.

517

518 So this was great, the Young Person's Theatre had a show ready to come  
519 in when I was thinking, now we need a show from the Young Person's  
520 Theatre, which I knew had a great reputation, so it wasn't going to be a  
521 problem. Also the other thing was – funnily enough – it was written by Sue  
522 Jameson, who under her...the name I knew her as was Sue Frumin,  
523 who'd been secretary at the Albany and who had had the job of typing up  
524 my scripts for the plays there; here we are ten years later – or more – and  
525 she's a playwright in her own right and she's written this... And again it's  
526 epic, you know, because you span two continents, it was the Bangladeshi  
527 and the East End continent. Well, the East End isn't a continent, but  
528 anyway, you know, it was epic, it was broad and epic in its sweep. And so  
529 I was more than pleased.

530

531 And it's tragic that the Half Moon's grant was cut because – which I wasn't  
532 aware of when I came in – that the Arts Council had been increasingly fed  
533 up with half of the grant going to pay off interests on the debts incurred in  
534 the building of the building; I think that's roughly as I understand it. And  
535 that's not how they saw our Arts Council money going. And the Arts  
536 Council itself was getting cuts, so they had to distribute the cuts; comes  
537 down on community theatre, fine, well, we know who...but anyway.

538

539 So the fact that it became the last thing under my egis I think is quite  
540 appropriate, quite poetic.

541

542 I: What was the play River about, and its style?

543

544 JT: Well, epic. And it's about the two communities. And it's about leaving, and  
545 loss, and arriving, I think that's about as close as I can get now. Any  
546 good?

547

548 I: It's fine. Can you tell us about the wider projects that were happening at  
549 Half Moon at the time, that you felt were important for the company? For  
550 example, the community work, youth, or plays for schools?  
551

552 JT: I was never a big expert on plays for schools, and I will tell you why. I  
553 came from a student radical background, and my degree was in  
554 mediaeval and modern history, but I was at university between '65 and  
555 '68. Now part of my, and the company's, political understanding at the  
556 time was that you didn't work in schools, you tried to find neutral spaces  
557 so that the children's minds were not constrained by the parameters of, in  
558 this case, the educational system; which I don't particularly believe any  
559 more. And I'd seen the work of Greenwich Young People's Theatre, I'd  
560 seen the work of the Half Moon Young People's Theatre, and it was good,  
561 but I just knew I knew nothing about it. I don't think we did anything. Oh,  
562 yeah, we did one piece for schools, and we went to Ken Campbell, of the  
563 Ken Campbell Road Show, and said to him, we want to do something –  
564 this is primary schools – want to do something for young children, we've  
565 never done it before, we've done it on adventure playgrounds but this has  
566 to be, whatever it is, half an hour long, 40 minutes long.  
567

568 [40:03]

569  
570 And he'd said, well, I've got nothing really, except you could do the Do It  
571 Yourself Show. So we did Ken Campbell's Do It Yourself Show, basically  
572 a group of actors take a trunk into a school, bring out a hat and say, what  
573 character does this remind you of; okay, that's one character, you can  
574 wear that; who do you want to put that on; which character do you want to  
575 put this on; which character do you want to carry the bunch of flowers;  
576 which character do you want to wear the veil. Right? So the children cast  
577 it and costume it, and you improvise it through, and then you hand it over  
578 to the kids and say, okay, now it's your play, you do it. And so then the  
579 actors sit down.  
580

581 So that was the only working experience. Most of my education in terms  
582 of the theatre has been a working education. I did not go to drama school,  
583 it's all self taught through experience stuff. So what I knew about the  
584 young person's theatre, young people's theatre here was that they were  
585 good at their jobs; and I knew them as people and they were great, and  
586 they're very hardworking, talented.  
587

588 I: Looking back, your appointment was a bold and appropriate step for the  
589 company, you articulated a desire to shift the company back to its  
590 community focus, very much the ethos that was behind the company  
591 when it was established in 1972; can you tell us about that?  
592

593 JT: What? The early company?

594  
595 I: About your appointment being a bold and appropriate step for the  
596 company, and your desire to shift the company back to its community  
597 focus.

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JT: Well, I'll have a bash. I'll tell you one more thing that was quite bold that I tried to do. I tried to form the East End in opposition to the West End. I called a meeting with Hackney Empire and Stratford, and said, let's share our best shows, let's send them on mini tours, you've got a show that's a hit, we'll take it for a week after it finishes there and just extend its life a little bit, it'll be good for the actors and it'll be good for all our companies to share our best work. And the three companies thought generally – as far as I remember the meeting was pretty positive – but nothing came of it as far as I'm aware. So that was pretty bold. But I've never felt shy of being bold.

Now you want me to...why did I want to return it to its original roots? I don't think I had...that that was my perspective, that was just where I...that was, if you get me in I'm going to take it there. Now I imagine they wanted to...you know, they wouldn't have got me in; I mean I...you know, there are lots of...I imagine there were a few other artistic directors on their list, but there were very few who had my experience or degree of success in community theatre. So it would have, you know, that that must have...that must have been their aim and ambition, otherwise they wouldn't have got me in.

There was, there certainly was a community ethos in the old Alie Street vision, but it was interpreted very differently to us, so as I said at the beginning, although we felt like kindred spirits across the river we were aware of each others differences, I'm sure. So I didn't, I didn't think of it as a return to anything, I thought of it as a future development that I could do, and I was pleased that they were, you know, this great tradition of the Half Moon was choosing to develop that way. I think they did...there was something called The Motor Show, which came out I think in the '80s, about a strike at Ford's Dagenham, which I think emanated from the Half Moon, and they'd formed a separate company for it, called the Community Theatre Company. So they had been, they'd – in different ways to us – they'd made their...they'd made inroads into it; and I'm... Yeah.

I: Why do you think the Half Moon went into administration in 1990?

JT: Well, I think I've just answered that. My understanding of it was that the...look, okay, starting from the top down, the Arts Council itself had been cut back in its budget from central government, they were required to make...they had to make some cuts; when they...and I don't know how long they'd been aware of the fact that, well, the figure I've got in my head is 50 per cent of the Half Moon's budget was going on paying off interest on a debt, which was not being paid back, you know, just paying off the interest was...you know, so they said, well, that's not a proper use of Arts Council money.

[45:19]

647 And it's a rock and a hard place, there's no way the Half Moon was ever  
648 going to not, you know, that it was difficult to do any more than that,  
649 pay...I can't see, you know, how they were meant to get there.

650  
651 So that's...and the other thing is that I was put under a provisional year  
652 contract, which I thought was a bit, you know, because I'd just done  
653 whatever it was, 13, 14, 15 years at the Albany, you know, don't you trust  
654 me. Anyway, but it wasn't that, it was the fact that they themselves, I think,  
655 probably had been given a year's probation really. And I totally  
656 understand it, I think it's also incredibly unjust that this bold – and you can  
657 use the word, very flatteringly as regards me, but actually community  
658 theatre itself – was a bold attempt across the UK to take theatre out of the  
659 centre of cities and into the communities and make theatre that was vital  
660 and valid for local people. And that did take a lot of cutting in that period, it  
661 wasn't just the Half Moon, there were others that went.

662  
663 I: Do you think it could have been avoided?

664  
665 JT: Of course, could; but was I surprised that it did?; I was certainly  
666 disappointed but surprised, not really, because it's the weaker limbs of the  
667 tree that get pruned. I think, I mean maybe some of the big institutions  
668 took some cuts as well, but it was, what do they say, last in first out; and  
669 you could say it's the new, it was the newest kid in the theatrical family  
670 was community theatre, so it's still the weakest at that point. I think it's  
671 stronger now, it's that other people may disagree with me, but the strength  
672 of...what's happened is it's kind of atomised, we now have a, I think,  
673 healthy young people's theatre. I think, you know, you look at Graeae  
674 Theatre for disabled people, you look at Asian and Black theatre,  
675 women's theatre, ex-prisoners' theatre, you know, all of that specific  
676 designated work is going on. So, okay, all that is to be celebrated, we  
677 shouldn't say that it's all miserable, especially not a young person like  
678 you, you should still be enthusiastic about this whole commitment to  
679 making theatre viable to everybody.

680  
681 I: Are you able to tell us about the last few months before the doors were  
682 closed?

683  
684 JT: Yes, we worked till the end, and that's all you do as theatre people, you  
685 carry on entertaining your audiences and doing the best job you possibly  
686 can, that's what you do. You yourself know that there's no future, but until  
687 the door is closed... I'll tell you one thing we did, we took a coffin up to the  
688 GLC, I think, or was it the Arts Council, probably the Arts Council, marked  
689 the Half Moon, and gave it a ceremonial burial. I've got an idea it was the  
690 GLC though; well, maybe that's where the grant was coming from,  
691 Greater London Arts.

692  
693 I: What was the reaction of the staff and communities at that time?

694  
695 JT: Well, sympathetic. They have their own problems, I mean I'm talking  
696 about the community now, they have their own, you know, there are other

697 issues that are affecting them in their lives as well, and you should be  
698 aware of that.

699  
700 [50:00]

701  
702 The staff were largely young, and some of them had been working there  
703 for a lot longer than I, and so for them it was the breaking of a family. But,  
704 as I said, they were young, they could...we all got past it. It was tragic, but  
705 that's probably not even a good word considering there are real tragedies  
706 going on around.

707  
708 I: One of the legacies of this sad time was the emergence of the Young  
709 People's Company as an independent organisation; what are your  
710 thoughts about that?

711  
712 JT: Well, one of the legacies of, I think it's absolutely appropriate, one of the  
713 legacies of the Combination at the Albany is the thriving midi-music which  
714 comes out of our Lewisham Academy of Music. Our disabled company,  
715 which thrives and internationally tours. The Albany itself now is a creative  
716 hub. And all of these are the seeds were set and nurtured as young plants  
717 under the Combination, but now they're thriving in their own right, and  
718 that's great. And also individuals have gone on to achieve – at the Albany,  
719 I'm saying – but this is I'm sure true of the Half Moon. Jimmi Harkishin  
720 who as a young actor was in Regeneration, you know, is a long-running  
721 character on Coronation Street.

722  
723 The success of the Half Moon Young People's Theatre I would imagine  
724 would be celebrated by every actor, every writer and every director who  
725 worked in under the hat of the Half Moon from 1972 on; I'm sure they, you  
726 know, because that is growth, that is potential; and that's how it belongs to  
727 the young.

728  
729 I: Are there any other memories of your time or people you worked with at  
730 Half Moon you would like to tell us about?

731  
732 JT: Well, I treasure the memories of meeting Steven Berkoff, that was  
733 fantastic. And in the days when it sounded like Kvetch was going to come  
734 to the Half Moon after Regeneration, we had a couple of meetings where  
735 he was just highly animated, incredibly intelligent, a passionate man of  
736 theatre; and I thought, this is fantastic, because as I say, I am an  
737 historian, and I was aware of his links going back with the Half Moon, and  
738 I thought, this is brilliant, this is roots, you know, I'm letting the roots of  
739 Berkoff take off again at the Half Moon in its new building. It didn't  
740 happen, but I still treasure those meetings.

741  
742 And the whole experience with Jonathan Moore on Regeneration was  
743 fantastic, I mean this man, young man, had a fantastic vision, tremendous  
744 energy and enthusiasm, and that communicates itself not just to his cast  
745 but to everybody working on that show; and that's great. And it's the kind  
746 of things that the audience can't see, you know, they won't see, but they

747 may get a sense of it because it imbues everything, everybody in that  
748 show with that kind of passion.

749  
750 That wasn't my last circus that I did, because I later took a circus to the  
751 Albany, and then I took another circus, Circus Universe, to somewhere  
752 outside Stratford. So what I was doing with Circus Moon, which was  
753 throwing away Circus Senso, and starting a completely new story from my  
754 imagination for the first time; that's what I later went on to do. Again  
755 completely new, again completely new; with Circus Senso I'd been  
756 changing, changing, developing, changing, changing, change...but it was  
757 kind of organic growth, not revolution. This one was revolution, revolution,  
758 revolution. And that was exciting, and very exciting the first time I did it,  
759 especially considering the fact that some of the people were Circus Senso  
760 performers and they were going, are you sure this will work, John, are you  
761 sure; and it did, it worked a treat. So that was great.

762  
763 [55:23]

764  
765 Some of the comedians that worked on the alternative comedy nights,  
766 talking to Jerry Sadowitz, who you probably don't know, brilliant, brilliant,  
767 brilliant comedian, who also happens to be a brilliant magician; and when  
768 you speak to him, one of the most – well, I think they're all very intelligent  
769 people – but a very deeply thoughtful man, about his work and about, you  
770 know, the state of his art and of culture as we know it. But a lot of them  
771 were, you know, there was... And some of the music that Peter Conway  
772 brought in, who was a promoter for the World Music nights, which was  
773 jazz World Music really, because jazz was really the kind of...led the way  
774 in bringing World Music to this country, it was fantastic music, the quality  
775 of music was just brilliant here; and the audience, the buzz.

776  
777 What that space gave you, because it was just a damn great box, so the  
778 excitement, when excitement starts to build in there it was tangible, it was  
779 fantastic, wasn't broken up by angles, or particularly different sections; I  
780 mean there was a miniscule balcony so most of the audience were sat  
781 together, and it was like football stadia, you know, really just once the  
782 electricity started to go it'd go through everybody, it was fantastic.

783  
784 I: Can you describe what impact – I'll say that again – can you describe  
785 what impact your time at Half Moon has had for you?

786  
787 JT: Well, it's...I...immediately after, I started to teach community theatre, and  
788 I suppose if I'd have just taught it after the Albany I wouldn't have had any  
789 objectivity. Having done it twice with a five-year gap in between I could  
790 then see the difference of approach, the difference, the things I did, which  
791 we didn't do at the Albany, at the Half Moon, so then I was in a good  
792 position to go and teach it in drama schools, and apply lessons that I'd  
793 learned in future things, which is what you do all the time, even though  
794 things may seem unrelated they're all enriching you in some way.

795  
796 **End of transcript**