TRANSCRIPTION OF THE NATIONAL THEATRE ARCHIVE'S ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS ARTHUR, CONDUCTED BY (THEIR EX-COMPANY MANAGER) ROSEMARY BEATTIE AND UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF IT'S THEN ARCHIVIST GAVIN CLARKE. RECORDED IN 2012. CONTAINS SOME MINOR CORRECTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

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"*Chris Arthur I'm delighted to meet you at the National Theatre today and what we are really going to discuss. Is your time spent working at the Old Vic, but before we get there we're going to talk about your earlier career and how are you became interested in theatre. You trained and you graduated in theatre design at Wimbledon School early on in your life and I wondered how you became interested in that particular aspect of design?"*

My mother was a romantic and whist working in the civil service, at least once performed in Rep. at Sheffield when it was essentially amateur, and she had a great love of theatre and possibly some of the other arts.

As a kid one went to the local junior public library, because the war was on, books were expensive and we didn't have much money. The local public library was a wonderful place to feed ones appetite for books and to socially settle in to something. Otherwise we grew up in street society .The library had started a little puppet group in the Junior section of the public library and I joined the group, which was fun but we hadn't a stage. Sometime around 1946 a friend and I then built a glove puppet theatre, which was sort of like a big cinemascope version of a Punch and Judy booth on castors. (It had to be on wheels because it needed to be stored in a room at the back of the library) and then we'd wheel it out for happy group meetings and put on little performances in the school hols , and I subsequently met a chap (of about the same age as myself) who owned a wonderful professionally-built demountable marionette theatre in which had lights, using mains electricity a record player and all , which we toured to fetes, parties and what1ever, and I was his partner in that enterprise for several years. The junior library also ran a little drama group and my mum directed some of the plays. Taking part in a couple of them was the son of one of one of our neighbours the young David Hemmings (he and I pretty much grew up together.) I recall David enlivening one of our groups variety performances when, at the age of

12 he sang “They try to tell us we’re too young”, and it all went from there. The theatre bit and the puppet bit and the rest became endemic.. Very few had a TV. During in the school holidays we always went as to see a pantomime somewhere, and some of them were really wonderful.
In those days, the cheapest seats were in the ‘God’s, the upper circle (or even above !), you could visit the special little Gallery Box Office, buy your ticket (which were only available on the day of performance), and put down a ‘stool’ in the line with your number on it outside the theatre in morning and be free to go away and do something else, instead having to queue all day, So it was queuing without people, you went back about 40 minutes or so before curtain up and took up your place In the line.
It was great and so exciting then to actually see a performance, even though one was often peering down at people the size of ants, to actually see a show. Often you could only see the downstage part of the performance and sometimes if somebody went upstage then you could only see them from the knees down and you had to guess what their top half was doing. Nevertheless it was The Occasion.

“*So there was an interest a big interest early on your life*.”

I used to go to Kingston Empire on my own during my teens and watch all the variety shows from the ‘Gods’.

“*Yes it's nice to go to Kingston. That's funny because yesterday I was driving through Kingston on my way to Richmond and there is the front of the building still saying Empire and I wasn't sure of its history and if it was for musical hall or variety?”*

I can no longer remember the names of the most of the artistes I saw perform there. One name which has stayed with me was that of Michael Bentine doing a wonderfully inventive stand-up comedy act. His only prop being a cylinder vacuum cleaner.

“*Anyway having graduated from Wimbledon School of Art you were called up for your national service end once again, and you said your notes that your role was that of an artist for the army*

which intrigues me. I wonder if could you just explain little bit how about how it came about and what your duties were ?"

Yes, that that is probably recording of it itself and is rife with anecdotes. There weren't too many artists for the army in the world, and it was to say the least, somewhat surprising that I had my own studio and indeed worked very hard for the army, but I think that's a separate subject for another recording

"No that's fine"

For just an instant, can I backtrack to Wimbledon School of Art?

"*Yes*"
Because there were things then that one feels are sadly missing from this training today. In his inaugural lecture the Head of Department said 'To work in Theatre you've got to be Dedicated!' Being cool teenagers we were sort of yawning behind our hands and saying 'Oh God! For Christs sake, it's only a job' The trouble is, as you and I know too well. he was right
We were taught that (1) the designer was responsible for absolutely <u>everything</u> visible (including the lighting and costumes), and (2) most importantly that we were the servant of the play and the director and it wasn't about <u>us.</u> it was about making things work and right for the play and the director's intention .

"*Interesting*"

Those were the key tenets of the 4 year course. When I see some productions today, now being old and bigoted , one thinks 'Oh for Gawds sake!' The other aspect of particular interest is that it was based on 'if you're not able to do it yourself how the fuck are you going to be able to tell tell other people and get the results you want'. You had to be able to be articulate.Therefore we learned pattern making, cutting and tailoring, millinery, dyeing, bleaching, painting and scene

building, lighting, technical drawing, and the rest so one had the entire armoury, not exactly at one's fingertips but you knew what was involved.

'*Yes so very very good understanding of what people had to do to mount a production*."

Yes absolutely, and like drama schools we put on some very polished productions.

"*That's all very interesting. Well, when you completed your national service which must be in by about 1960. You worked as an art teacher at a girls secondary school somewhere. Obviously having graduated that that gave you the ability to to do that work".*

Much to my horror, yes. I'd been able to escape from the army on Thursday morning and as I was only just down the road near Aldershot I was home before lunchtime and my mother said 'Welcome home. I bet you're glad that's over! Have you got a job?' and I said No, and she said 'Have you got any money?' and I said 'No they've been paying me 27 (?) shillings a week'. She said, 'Well, we haven't got any money', I said 'No, just give me a couple of weeks and I I'll settle down'. She said. 'I've got a job for you', and like many young gentleman, I said 'Oh God! What!' and she said 'Teaching' and I said 'No, Never never never in a million years!. Anyway I've no idea how to go about it!' She said 'You've got a degree, which means that you'll be on the top salary scale and that's £20 a week' and I thought Wow!. So, I've never been too slow in revising my preconceptions . 'Which school is it?' She said 'Tolworth Secondary Modern', (a school which I'd briefly attended for just a term during the transition between primary and grammar schools). I naturally assumed that it was the boys section. My mother said 'Your interview is at 3 o'clock this afternoon." Which left me with very little time to change and get there, I said 'May I borrow your bike?' she said 'Yes, of course' and as I was getting onto her bike and preparing to pedal away she said 'By the way, it's the Girls section!' whereupon I fell off the bike, tore my trousers on generally made a mess of myself. But there wasn't time to do anything about it so torn and bloodied I cycled off. I was ushered in to the head 's study. She said 'Its awfully nice of you nice to come. When can you start?' And that was the extent of the of the interview and at that moment I thought if I think about enormity of what I'm about to try and do I will never do it, it's

preposterous. So I said ‘ Tomorrow ‘and she said ‘That's terrific!’ I went in next morning and as the head was taking assembly I was met by the deputy head who said ‘I will take you to your Art room’ and I said ‘Have we got any syllabuses progress charts?’ She said ‘No no you'll be fine’ and slapped me between the shoulder blades, whereupon I shot in through the door and 30 girls stood up and said “Good morning Mr Arthur “. VERY scary! . Anyway it worked out and I only did it for a relatively short while, because I thought teaching is a trap and if I’d spent all this time preparing for theatre then go for the theatre. There was an ad in The Stage for an assistant designer at Dundee Repertory theatre, I applied and they rashly took me on.

“*That was going to be my next question because I knew that was what happened but I wasn't quite sure how it happened and it was as simple as that, you saw the ad and off you went*”.

I did submit a formal application with examples of my work.

“*And you got the job, so that was really the start of your your life in real professional theatre. The only thing I was going to ask you, when when you had sort of decided that this was what you really wanted to concentrate on at that period in other words, the design, working in theatre, how has that become, just something that you knew you wanted to to do more in, or had it always been maybe what do you thought you would like to do?”*

it it was just a sense of rightness one felt at home in theatre and absolutely gave it a go.

“I think of you also around that time became appointed designer. You were appointed designer with the Century Mobile theatre and you worked with them in around 1961 and then again a couple of years later for the theatre festivals in Cumbria”.

Yes the first Keswick Theatre Festival. The Century itself is unique and it is a mobile theatre. There's no canvas involved. Giant lorries, enormous trailers, hydraulic rams, 225 tip-up seats, built-in dressing rooms, generators …the lot. Underfloor heating. Way way ahead of its time ! I can

go on for some considerable time because it is unique and it still exists and is all set up at Snibston Discovery Park in Leicestershire all set up and it still stages performances.

“in those days that must've been an enormous luxury. I wonder where where the money came from to mount something like that?”

it was scraped together by actor Wilfred, Harrison and engineer, John Ridley (who designed and oversaw the actual construction) and built by volunteers out of ex War Dept stock, and it was just an amazing thing. Very strange to look at from the outside but the second you went in you found yourself in a very nice auditorium. Fully insulated; the walls and ceiling were aluminium fibreglass sandwich to cut out noise and heat. The auditorium had perfect sightlines, with steeply raked tip-up seats.

“ Were there several shows that were in a repertoire.?”

We would play repertoire and you would live in your own (specially converted) showman’s caravan or half caravan. The kitchen and dining caravans linked end to end. When the triangle (or bell) rang you’d stop doing what you were doing and go and have your meal. The only person on the entire company who had one job was to cook. Everyone else multi-tasked which included emptying the chemical loos after a schools matinee (not exactly anyone’s favourite job!) and you’d sell tickets, light the boiler, man the bar, change the scenery and all the rest. Indeed I could give you a complete interview about setting it up, taking it down and moving it.

“*Yes well okay, we'll save that for another time but once again that that is absolutely fascinating and can I just sort of go back a year really, to 1962, when you say you felt the need to come back to London for various reasons and one being quite truthfully, the fact that, obviously jobs in London theatres paid better than in the regional theatres. Your first appointment in London, in a London theatre was as Second Electrical Dayman at the Mermaid theatre. That was followed by the same position at the Cambridge Theatre, also in London, and my next question is going to be what was it that made you switch from design to lighting?”*

Leading up to the job at the Mermaid I had finished the summer season somewhere, and I had been out of work for three months (and I've been out of work only once in my life) because you've been working in the sticks you got sadly out of touch and trying to find a design job or a design associated job which with no contacts whatsoever was extremely difficult and my parents were once again finding themselves somewhat stretched supporting me. I needed to do something so I started phoning around.

I happened to get through to the production manager, a gentleman called Roy Todds. at the Mermaid and as you said in those days ; 'Got any jobs ?' and he said 'What have you done?' And I told him. He said 'Can you change a plug ?' We need an electrician.' Right, I'm your man. My training had involved lighting and had been wholly practical, so It wasn't a great shift . So the Mermaid put me on. The Mermaid was quite an exciting place, it was the very first theatre in London to be open to the public around the clock and the restaurants and bars in the foyer, provided lunches and drinks for city workers, we put on school performances in the afternoons , we showed movies, afternoons and weekends we accommodated conferences and whatever. besides our usual show. And, as to this very day in our smaller theatres, electrics dealt with EVERYTHING electrical and mechanical from the drains to the air-conditioning to the lamps electric to what whatever, loo cisterns and boilers, the whole thing, besides the show and it's lighting and it's maintenance. It was a lively life there.

"*So your hours must have been fairly amazing because none of us had a real union rules then did we?"*

But it it's all relative, at Dundee Rep which was fortnightly. I worked out that I put in 155 hours every eight days, which was pretty considerable.

"*Absolutely*."

And production weekends were certainly a 72 hour non-stop thing. Most days started around 10 in the morning and finished when the curtain came down at the end of the show.

" *I remember around this time I was working at Stratford Upon Avon for the Royal Shakespeare Company as an assistant stage manager, and then a stage manager. Looking back on it, you know that we we we just worked non-stop, and you thought nothing of the fact that you would start address rehearsal at about 11 o'clock at night and maybe finish at about two or three and stagger home around 4 am, and then back to the theatre a few hours later. it was just part of our lives, wasn't it?"*

The great difference between your role, and mine is a foot soldier was that you didn't get overtime.

" Oh no."

Whereas the great relief and the incentive for those of us working on, let's say, the stage staff (or similar) was that we got overtime, and that changed everything.

"*Yes, of course, absolutely understood. And then I have noted that you went back to the Century mobile theatre in in 1963 for the season at Oxford but this time you were the big chief electrician and engineer."*

Yes,

"*So you are obviously made your mark in the world of lighting*"

Tiny pond, the big (and only) fish.

"*But useful*"

It was the just a name. The were just two of us on the Century staff . Hilary Young (the son of variety bill-toppers Nan Kenway & Douglas Young) who, was basically front of house in general manager and myself dealing with the electrical mechanical side and the theatre was basically a dry hire to Iain Mackintosh's company (not Meadow Players), but something akin to that (maybe Prospect Productions?) whilst Oxford Playhouse was being refurbished, who had hired us for a summer season. It was an interesting time and we were set up on the little green beside a thatched pub on the river Thames and out of town. It was really very bosky. I went into the thatched pub for breakfast about 10 in the morning (not liquid breakfast).

"*No no I understand. Well there we are. We've already talked a little bit about about the union state of play at that time, and I can remember that we were in the same situation, if you wanted to be an actress or a stage manager, you needed to be a member of that union which was Equity and you can only be a member If you are in a job. It's sort of pretty impossible task, and the same applied with the union for the technical staff in those days, which was NATKE on exactly the same set up. But you were lucky on that score because you say that you managed to become a member of the union once you are working at the Mermaid theatre."*

Paradoxically, whilst the Mermaid theatre is indisputably in London, it wasn't classed as part of The West End and therefore union membership wasn't mandatory.

" But it was good a good move that you actually join the union at that time. And so later on now in 1963, coming close to the start of your life at the old Vic. You went to the union office to see what vacancies there were, and the vacancy which came up that day was at the Old Vic and off you went. But I'd love you to tell me the story about how you started at the old Vic because that's just weird, it's just lovely. So over to you".

I arrived to the stage door, the stage door keeper was the wonderful Ernie Davis, the doyen of all stage door keepers, and said 'I've come about the job' and he said 'Oh yes' picked up the house phone and a few minutes later, a small, rather wizened looking gentleman with sparkling blue

eyes, and looking very tired came up from the basement and said ‘I am George Evans’. I said I’m Chris Arthur and I’ve come about the job. and he said ‘Oh well it's very very ‘ard work and there’s loads of overtime. I mean, you know it's tough. When can you start?’ And I said ’Tomorrow’

“For and second time in your life”.

He said ‘Right. 9 o'clock ‘ere tomorrow morning’. I returned next morning, George came up and said ‘Come with me’, we went down to the basement and into a locker room filled with guys changing into working clothes and after a few minutes George came back in again and said ‘Let’s ‘ave you all up on stage now’. i followed the herd we went up to the stage and I was given a broom and found out that I was a ‘stage hand’ and had joined the stage staff, which was because the lady at the union office hadn’t really looked at the cards carefully when she’d said ‘What branch are you in?’ And I’d replied Dayman’s Electrical, and she’d said ‘Oh yes, let’s see dayman, dayman, dayman’ and had forgotten the Electrical bit. Anyway a few weeks later, I transferred to the electrical department.

“Yes the right department”

And my old friend John B Reid from Elecs at the Mermaid was already there.

“ *I remember John. At this point it would be lovely if you just sort of give a little description of what your working life was like; and that’s quite a hard thing to do I know. But I know for a start obviously you worked very long hours. I know that there were a lot of change overs going from play to play at the old Vic and I think life must've been pretty difficult and also somewhat dangerous for a lot of the staff working backstage because once again in those days, there wasn't really anything much in the way of health and safety, it was more reliant on peoples common sense I think, but I know that you also at one point did have a pretty nasty accident. I don’t want to go into any gory details, but just want to to highlight the fact that it wasn't all just plain sailing. Looking at life in a lighting department in the theatre now, those years just seem so, so long ago”*.

It was about 50 years ago. Oh Boy!

"*But was it for a start, a happy place to work in the Old Vic at that time ?"*

I think so.

"*Was it a good feeling among the people you worked with?*"

We were all of the same tribe, which makes a major difference. Everyone understood the game. You knew that this was normal. I mean tougher than normal, but normal. We knew the way things went and happened so we just got on with it.

" For a start they must've been, I suppose, no restrictions on your hours of work each week?"

There was the basic working week after which you got overtime. And according to the way things worked out that would be at either time and a half or even double-time in exceptional circumstances. it was considered normal. The most telling thing for me, was that I needed to buy strong and well made shoes, (largely because my particular of responsibility was dealing with the entire front of house lighting rig, so involved a hell of a lot of stairs, a lot of ladders, and great deal of climbing on a daily basis). By the end six weeks both their soles and heels would have been totally gone, and need to be rebuilt, and by the end of three months the uppers would have gone too and one had to get another expensive pair.

"Yes. And presumably nothing like an allowance on those days either?"

Exactly!

"Ha, ha, ha! Yes so I know that, as I didn't join the Old Vic until the end of 1974 and obviously we're talking about some few years before that, but even when I joined they were still days when there would be a matinee performance of whatever, and then everything will be shunted out of the

theatre and onto a lorry outside and then the evening show would be brought in, and when I joined there, people didn't think anything about that. And didn't give the impression of thinking anything about that. It was , as you were saying, quite normal. That's what we do, and then we get to the end of the week and then at the weekend will probably start putting together the next new production and so it goes on and on and on. So it must've been very hard work for for everyone and I've got quite a good picture of of life then when I interviewed Douglas Cornelissen because obviously he saw a much bigger picture having been in in in charge of so many different departments, both backstage and everywhere else . So anyway, you worked at the old Vic for five years and I know you said that when you started that the lighting equipment was fairly antiquated until about 1964 or 5, your friend Richard Pilbrow, worked with Strand Electric to devise a new control system and do you think that was a big improvement to the lighting department that time?"

it changed the dynamic, it didn't actually make things easier.

"No"

Not at all, to achieve a real leap forward would still be several stages away. It was a step in the right direction, but basically was conceived by somebody who didn't have to use it on a daily basis and came from a different direction.

"Yes"

The second system was more more reliable.

"Yes"

On the other hand if one is having to look at 360 tiny levers in serried ranks, some with tiny indicator lights and some without; it was a hell of a lot to take in, especially if you had a fast cue sequence. It was really a test of about everything in ones head. If the 2nd operator needed to

check and move a 120 different little leavers at speed and three times over it could be pretty daunting.

"*How many people do you think there were in that department around the time headed, by Lenny Tucker?"*

I think there were between six and eight.

"*Yes. It's not an awful lot really if you think of the amount of work that was going on.*
So having joined the company you you gradually were promoted, you became first electrical dayman, (very nice all these titles), senior electrician and then touring chief electrician which sounds terribly grand."

"*What I also wondered was how much you felt part of the productions that were being put on. Did you feel involved with the shows themselves or or not?"*

That's a very good point. With some one felt a degree of involvement with a lot of others, no. There wan't time to really mull over these things. It was a case of of doing it, as with any job on any production. Some speak to one and you feel really comfortable with them and another were more testing.

" *Did you did you get to know the actors and the directors who were there at that time?"*

I did, yes, because of my hobby as a snapper. Which opened an amazing number of doors.

"*Obviously somebody has stuck out in your mind though before the photography part of your career which was Franco Zeffirelli?"*

Yes.

"*When he was at the old Vic because you make great mention of of of him, and obviously he he was there to direct a production of Much Ado do with Albert Finney, Robert Stevens and Maggie Smith, and then you tell a wonderful story about the visit of his Italian production of Hamlet. Can we just have a little bit of of of of a laugh over that because it's a lovely story".*

Wow! Yes, I know. It is. The Proclema Albertazzi company (Anna Proclema & Alberto Albertazzi) from Italy but came over with Amleto (Hamlet) directed by Franco Zeffirelli . As ever when our previous show finished on Saturday night we took it down. When we got it out the Italian lorries we're outside with an amazing number of crew and carpenters and whatever crawling all over. This was duly got in, it seemed to consist of, large lumps of wood and bits of metal and the rest. We were then amazed to find that they were nailing the set together which was something of a jaw dropper for us. Since we'd received no lighting plots nor direction at all, we went and found Franco in the middle of the night. What Is it that you want? Franco said 'I'll be there'. We said 'What do you want?' He said 'Let's 'ave this" so someone would run up to the far side of the Upper Circle and set a spotlight when Franco was happy with it's setting they'd come down again. What would you like next Franco? 'I'd like something from a stage bar no 3', so that was done and we were all running round like ants in an ant heap from one end of the building to the other and there was no discernible plan; eventually we got everything rigged and set (well, sort of') "Can we plot some cues now?". The problem with Hamlet, or rather 'Amleto', was that the script was in Italian, and we couldn't read Italian, but thankfully the story of Hamlet was one with which we were familiar (having worked on the NT's production of it starring Peter O'Toole a few years earlier), so that was something of a relief . Plotting the lighting cues was very much an Italian creative process, and consequently incredibly slow. I think when we got to lunchtime on Sunday, or maybe it was tea time, we'd got two thirds of the way through plotting Act 1 before we had to hand over the stage to enable the cast to familiarise themselves with the venue and rehearse a little bit. This gave us the opportunity to run back over some of the cues we had plotted which was good. Then there were further hiccups on into the night and come Monday morning with the show due to open that very evening; we had two thirds of Act 1 plotted and lit but with 2 major acts still to go, but the cast then needed of the stage. With the curtain soon to go up we said "Franco we're due to open tonight!" He said "Don't worry I'll be there with you and

will tell you what to do" and that's what we did. I think 'shit scared' would not come amiss to describe how we felt under those circumstances . So we went up on the show with Franco in the box with us. We promptly fell at the first hurdle because when the red warning light for the first cue came (sent by the stage manager from the prompt corner) and we waited for the green to go,The red light eventually went out but the green failed appear. In the meantime Franco was screaming at us shouting "Go! Go go Now!' and the prompt corner jabbering at us in Italian. So we did it and it after some chaos eventually worked out that they were using the continental system which meant that when the warning light came on it meant standby and when it went out it was Go.

"*No green light existed at all "*.

No, no. So it wasn't exactly a good start to the show.

" *Can you also mention that there were nice little touches, the fact that he , as at the same time as chaos was surrounding him, he was helping with re-painting some of the scenery "*

Aah. That was earlier when he was directing the National's earlier production of 'Much Ado'.

"Was that 'Much Ado', right."

But obviously to the ability to multi-task and to keep everyone happy was quite something

"I know you had one particularly a rocky time which was nothing to do with you; but the National's first industrial dispute when you found yourself in the centre of that. Unfortunately for you, you were the deputy to the union shop steward who was away, and so there was a bit of a row about all of that."

Yes, it wasn't intended to be a strike. Nobody wanted any performances to have to be cancelled.

But the management had, un-announced, chosen to totally ignore an accepted working agreement, and not to pay people for the night and who had worked all day, and all evening and then had continued to work on right through the night until 5 the following morning, and so understandably the stage staff were naturally unhappy and Sir Tom O'Brien was bought down from down from the union (her being it's General Secretary) and Larry and everyone came to a meeting in the big rehearsal room at the top of the building. And there, after all this time, my mind really goes fairly blank, apart from the fact that it did bump down, apart from that evening's performance being cancelled by the management.

"Yes".

And Larry and Tom O'Brien had a pint in the pub afterwards. Maybe the archives might tell us something?

"*Extraordinary. I don't know and I don't even know who the management will have been at in that time. It might have been Easterbrook?"*

Or George something or Neville Thompson?

"Really, really well anyway the interesting thing is this was to do, with as you were saying, the staff were to be paid for working through the night to a special rate and that goes on to this day and in fact people now have to go round to the different crews and ask them if they are prepared to do an all nighter so that that is carried on to this day, long long time ago, but obviously it didn't come to anything much worse than sadly cancelling whatever the performance was that night and then life just picked up and carried on again".

Absolutely

"Unlike other strikes when we landed in the new building here on the Southbank and some of the strikes and sadly one of them went on for weeks, and did enormous damage.

I just want to talk a little bit about the time with the company when you were in Chichester. When I know that you started off with quite a lot of problems with the lighting equipment and the rig there, which been designed by Theatre Projects especially for that season, but obviously hadn't been designed terribly well. Also you say that there were a few problems with some of the personnel at Chichester, who maybe weren't over-pleased about the fact that you had been brought to Chichester ?"

Yes, I wasn't exactly welcomed by the resident incumbent who felt that his position was being usurped. And to an extent it was, but he was the sort of person who had brought it on himself. Otherwise it wouldn't have happened.

"Yes, but you did have quite a lot of problems with the rig which must have been quite exhausting for you to try and sort out but credit to you; You obviously did get them sorted out and the season went well."

After that the season was absolutely fine

" *Good, and just one other the little thing, we're getting very close to talking about your start of your photography now, but you also I know you can't remember what the productions were when you toured in the UK, but you tell a lovely little story about the time when you were at the Kings Theatre in Glasgow, which is interesting because when I joined the National the time we toured to Glasgow stuck out of my mind I checked it out. We were at the Theatre Royal some few years later so I don't quite know how it changed because obviously when you went to Glasgow you went to the Kings which must have been the theatre that always received the most visiting companies."*

Yes.

"*So I'm not quite sure, as I say, when that stopped and began with Royal, but it doesn't matter, But you took me right back to my own touring days when you knew that one of the most important*

things about getting the show right and running smoothly was to be on the right side of the local crew. So you remember what you did, quite rightly, when you arrived in Glasgow that particular time zone are we in"

Backtracking briefly, that tour involved Coventry, Bristol, Nottingham and Glasgow (in which order I'm not sure). As ever we arrived in the middle of the night as the previous show was going out and getting ours in, you would find the resident your, local counterpart and introduce oneself. It was policy always to arrive bearing some small token because as, especially with the National Theatre, you were bringing repertoire so the local, team were going to have a very hard week. At the Kings Glasgow the local chief was George Armstrong. George was a very nice (very Scottish) person, and very proud of his 'Border Reiver' heritage. George would say 'Come away down to the office'. His office was under the stage and we'd get out the plans to check them over, and I'd open my toolbox, and there nestling amongst the spanners would be a bottle of whiskey and you would say 'Bless me would you look at that' and George would say 'I t*hink* I know where there *might* be some glasses' and he would take a couple of box files from the shelf and hidden discreetly behind them would be two glasses. And you'd pour yourselves a glass each and start working on the plans, and you'd probably have a second glass, but really no more than that, and then you'd go up onto the stage and really get on with things, and to see 'the lads' were all right, and the bottle would be placed in the 'floats' so that anyone who felt in need of inspiration, or a little 'pep up' could help themselves and folk did, which was OK, because the physical graft was so tough and so heavy I don't recall ever seeing the least sign of anyone being the worst for drink. By about 7 o'clock on Sunday morning with people having helped themselves the bottle was empty. Anyway George held it up to the working light, and said "Bless me it's all gone, I think I know where there might be another' disappeared downstairs and came up with another bottle which he'd had in readiness and that would be placed in the floats , and we would work on right the way through Sunday and there would probably be 10 to 15 people helping themselves to an occasional swig.

"*Yes but it is just lovely because it is so true. If you can get on the right side of the people who are going to work terribly hard, a bottle of whiskey was very small price to pay*."

Yes, absolutely really worth its weight in gold.

"Yes. Well are you all right or do you want to have a little break? Are you okay?"

Yes.

"I will carry on a bit then because we were now going to get onto the next stage of your career, which is a very interesting career, and I hope you understand that, as we talk through the years when you proved yourself to be an excellent excellent photographer; and this all started you were working at your Vic in the 60s, and I would love you to tell me how it all began, and then progressed."

I had always been quite interested in photography . My family had only ever had a 'box' Brownie.

"I've still got one."

Oh Wow! I'm being a bit thick. I'm not the brightest. When you see an ad saying this car won of the Le Mans Grand Prix, it implies that if you buy this car, you will drive like a winner of the Le Mans Grand Prix. So one saw camera ads, showing lovely photographs taken with this camera, meaning if you buy this camera you too will take photographs like this. I'm a bit slow.

I fall for these things and because I was earning a considerable amount of overtime and twas unattached and always fancied having a real camera that really worked and took pictures for you I really fancied one and having watched lot's of theatre photographers at work (amongst them Karsch of Ottawa and Angus McBean to dozens of others) one could see that it was all bloody easy; these people just stood there and had all this lovely gear, obviously the camera did it all for them. So I thought 'Bloody Hell! I can do that ! So I took my savings and indeed borrowed a bit more from my father and got this camera (which had all sorts of controls,) and I didn't understand them at all . But it felt wonderful and I shot a roll of film, took it to the chemists and

back came these prints which were quite expensive. (Something in the region of £3) for little rectangles of paper with muddy images, which were quite sharp but some were vey dark and others were too light, so I asked questions and found out that these controls made pictures lighter or darker and one really needed an exposure meter and so I got one and tried again and the next film from the chemist was evenly muddy and evenly relatively sharp but still a bit disappointing and somebody said 'Well you've got to them processed properly' so I took my next reel to a posh shop called Wallace Heaton, in Bond Street and paid a lot more, but they were still muddy, but a little better. So I asked a couple of the visiting photographers who said 'You've got to do it yourself', so I got a little developing tank and tried to load my film in it in the broom cupboard at the foot of the stairs under the stage door, I got the hang of that but working in complete darkness was a real struggle. Once the film was in the daylight developing tank and then in the lulls between cues developed the film with kits of chemicals in the sink in the electric workshop. My results gradually got a bit better. I learnt from further inquiries that in order to get decent prints you've got to be able to do them yourself and I needed to to set up a little dark room at home and so I got an enlarger and some dishes. Yes it was a journey and I made some ghastly mistakes. Still do mark you.

"But that's all part of life. If you don't make mistakes…."

The great thing about having school training was that it taught one inherent, continuous self criticism. Is it right it isn't it right. Why isn't it right? Therefore I how do we make it better? How do we sort it out? Basically it's been an anchor point, a keystone throughout my entire working life.

"*Absolutely that's what you hear people saying in in all walks of life, who, you know, will never feel that they're completely successful and there's always another step. Something else to be tried out that's that's really good . At some point, you obviously were allowed to start taking photographs of the old Vic but also actors people who were working there. How did that happen? Just by talking to people?"*

I'm not sure. I think that I'd taken some snaps and printed them and people had seen them, and I started be asked to do little things, and occasionally one asked other people. Certainly when it came to the odd occasions of sitting at the side of the circle with a camera during a Tech or dress rehearsal or photo-call one asked ones own head of department first and you asked the show's director, so on and you did not in any way interfere or disturb the rehearsal which was happening in front of you.

"*So gradually with more and more practice, and presumably more and more people getting to know what was going on; did actors approach you with regards to asking if you would take photographs of them? Because at that I can remember at that time actors were struggling madly, never earning enough money and always needing to have new photographs to send to agents or whatever, so there must have been quite a demand."*

Yes , when an actor was in character in character., I'd often be asked to set up some lights underneath the stage during the actual performance and then the actor or actress in question had a break they would nip down below and we would do some shots. This was largely amongst the lesser members of the company; who were nonetheless playing quite good roles, but who hadn't merited front of house images or individual pictures. So it was very much in their interests to have solo shots of themselves. Paradoxically I guess I more or less started off photographing people like Anthony Hopkins, Michael Gambon, Samuel Beckett and so on.

"*So you were doing them a favour but presumably it was also helping you, giving you more more experience in dealing with your photographs like that."*

Yes, you learn.

"There are some interesting points. At that time, John Dexter, a slightly scary director as I recall , but something happened with a photograph of yours that he saw?"

Yes. ‘The Royal Hunt of The Sun’ was the show, which came in from Chichester , where it’s production photographer had been the sophisticated master-craftsman Angus McBean who had been commission by the NT’s press representative Virginia Fairweather. But gritty action was not his thing at all and his style of work just wasn’t right for the show. As I wasn’t on the control desk for this show but had to be ‘on call’ I was allowed to do some snapping, from the side of the dress circle during the dress rehearsal when it came to The Vic. It was a very dark show and my shots were under exposed because there just wasn’t enough light for action photography. So I had to treat my negatives with something called an intensifier to get something printable. By this time I had my little darkroom with an enlarger and dishes etc and I printed them up and felt quite pleased with my results . At this time I’d known John Dexter for a while (and had worked with him on Tommy Steele’s ‘Half a Sixpence which he’d directed) and I knew the man and his personality. We happened to meet. in the basement corridor, I boldly showed him my pics and he had a look and said ‘Mmm, Mmm. Right…May I borrow these?’ and promptly disappeared into the lift with them. And then I started getting calls from the graphics department and the press office and one of my shots became the poster and the programme etc. So two things led to several others.

“ And started to change the course of your career. Very interesting. So all the time you were you were gaining more and more experience and reputation as a photographer. You were still working in the lighting department until such time as you left, the Old Vic in 1968?”

It became apparent that if one was an electrician, you would be always be an electrician who took photographs as opposed to a photographer, because we’re comfortable with labels. We need labels. So I decided to have a go and my darling Lynn said ’If you want to do it, then go for it’.

After 5 years at the National I was becoming fairly frustrated with a with a situation where one was part of the jigsaw which goes together to make a production; and whilst ones own bit of the production might be electrically perfect, the opening of a show has a long period of gestation and if other bits of the jigsaw didn't fit, or get it right then all your efforts down in your corner would go for nowt. Some shows went off at half-cock or didn’t work at all. Yes, after years of opening new shows every six weeks(ish) I thought No, I like the immediacy and the challenge of photography.

"*Interesting. It was a very big step to take. You mentioned Lynn and I'd like to just briefly bring her into our conversation. A very, very special lady in and am I right in thinking that Lynn was working at The Old Vic by this time"*.

Yes that was where we met. She was at The Royal Opera House and various places from '63 and didn't join until 1966.

"Working in the Wig department".
And being Wig Mistress . It was only in my unfortunate role as quasi shop steward when the union sent me to call the brothers and sisters out on industrial action that the dear lady was in the wig room when I arrived there to break the news of the union's dictate when this red headed lady I'd never seen before proceeded to go for me hammer and tongs. So our very first meeting was a blazing row!

"But things, I'm happy to say, improved in a big way."

I'm a great believer in revising our pre-conceptions when its appropriate.

"Absolutely, absolutely"

And she did also.

'I know; but anyway it's lovely just to see you here. You must have felt excited and yet terrified, but as you say by that time Lynn was with you and encouraging you to take the big step. So what happened immediately after you left the Old Vic? Was there a reason for you leaving the Old Vic then? Did a job in photography elsewhere come along at that point ? Was it just time for a change?

I simply became self-employed, and I did a couple of production photographer jobs for NT after I'd left. There was Triple Bill with John Lennon's "In His Own Write" as part of it and there was Larry's production of "Love's Labours Lost", with Joan Plowright, and I continued to do quite a few bits and programme covers for The National Health and various others things for the graphics department. I recently came across a book published by the NT 'A Pictorial History of the NT' up to 1971. I don't think I had a great deal inside but I did all the cover photographs, which I came across only the other day.

"*Chris you have the most amazing collection of photographs which, which Gavin and I have seen now. It's an incredible collection of photographs that don't seem to have been seen, in our opinion, well enough. But at this point when you were freelancing, obviously things started to happen elsewhere …"*

Before I left I'd had my first commercial assignment.

"*Which was ?*"

Nothing pivotal, large display prints for a conference for Trusthouse Forte Hotels.

"Did you did you did you have an agent or anything glamorous like that?"

j wish, I wish. Nothing like that, photographers don't have agents. I was just a jobbing photographer.

"Batting your way around and being offered jobs"

I come from a creative background, so I was asked to create illustrative material of first world war battlefields for Collins books, books flying through storm clouds, things in flames, books buried in blocks of ice , Little Grey Rabbit publicity and so on.

"I find it quite mind blowing because you think photographer at the Old Vic theatre and the National Theatre and then to discover the mountain of other work that you have done over the years, it's fascinating."

I've been a lucky old bugger.

" No I think you're very modest and I don't think you've ever appreciated how much work you've done."

Well if one works in theatre, then basically there's the stage of getting the production on in the first place and followed by keeping the show running. In photography you can sometimes deal with two or three assignments a day, some take 2 or 3 days and you get the odd projects which might take a week or two, so can encompass a hell of a lot of different things in the space of a year. And the other main motivating force behind creativity is called Hunger. If you've got overheads and bills to pay and the rest, and someone says 'Can you do this?' You'd say Yeah! If I were ever to write an autobiography it would probably be called 'Are you free Wednesday?' I've been really surprised at the number things in which I've actually become really interested and excited by when I'd initially thought 'cornflakes'? Oh no. But If you work at it, you get into it.

"I'm just working out the dates but I can't really work out the dates completely. You sort of, Ha Ha! semi retired around 2003 or 4. But before that you also had another big project working at Kingston University, did you not ?"

Yes. I was a job, it was the first real job I'd had in 26 years.

"You don't call photography a real job then?"

For a long time I had 2000 square feet of studio, laboratories and several staff and there came a stage where business had stopped being business. And being self employed there's one person

to make the decision, and that's you. Aah the joys of being self-employed. My dad died. My mum, in her late eighties, said I want to live on in my house, I don't want to go to a 'Granny Hatch" and I thought 'neither would I', and that maybe at the age of 57, it was time for me to grow up and get a 'proper (one and only) job', working normal hours and in the local area. After about 200 job applications I managed to get Kingston University to take me on as THE (one and only) theatre technician for the School of Education. So I found myself designing, scene building, being production manager, lighting, and re-rigging the flying system ….

"The lot!"

We put on rock musicals from scripts as yet unwritten, and a cast of 60, in the space of 6 weeks. Totally unrealistic expectations.

"*But by that time, with a wealth of experience"*

I don't know if that does one any good. I think its much better to be ignorant, because then you are unaware of all the terrible things which can happen and go wrong.

"That just becomes more terrifying".

But the great thing was students. Heaven and Hell! You had to revise your preconceptions. They'd ask questions the theatre equivalent of 'Why is grass green?' I'd think Oh God! and I'd say "Ha ha. That is really a very good question, I don't have time to answer it right now because we've got to get this done, but come back to me tomorrow. And students being students I was confident that by the following day they would have completely forgotten about it. Nevertheless you did go back and check up why a Periaktoi is called a Periaktoi, and that sort of thing.

"So did your photography come into this?"

No at all.

"So that was put to one side from a of a working point of view?"

It was put to one side because I was back working in theatre again, with it a lot of people who had totally unrealistic expectations and knew nothing about that side of my working life.
It's September we're going to write a home-bred rock musical with a cast of 60 and we'll be putting it on for the local schools at the beginning of December.

"A different world"

But we did it! We did it! Nine or ten performances, all of which were completely sold out in the space of an hour!

"I do remember because at that time I used to come over and see you and Lynn at Kingston. Lynn would say Chris is working so hard! And you were indeed working absolutely absolutely non-stop again".

Yes

"*But that's been your life. But now that you are retired, certainly from Kingston University, do you still do a lot of your own photography for your own pleasure?"*

I haven't raised a camera in anger for at least 8 years, and I haven't really thought about it.

" But you have left a wealth of of photography for the theatre…."

Hopefully, one never stops learning about things. I'm learning about digital scanning and the production of fine art prints and so on. If it wasn't for money I would have revisited a lot more of my archive.

"Yes'

It is fun being able to do things which one couldn't do before; or could do before, but only with great difficulty.

"Well you've given Gavin a wonderful idea having brought in some of your photographs and I know he's incredibly keen to try and get an exhibition of your work set up here at the National Theatre on the Southbank which he and I both think would be absolutely wonderful, and a good and right thing to do. So we'll look forward to that day."

That's lovely. Let's see what we can do.

" It is, yes thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you for sharing so much of of your life with me."

I can do open season on boring, believe me.

"*Not at all!. I mean that sort of, I hope, covers all areas unless there's anything else you want to yatter about?"*

I think that I can discourse at length about other boring things, but I think that's another for another time.

" *That's fine, There are always other doors we could open and we discovered a couple of those just talking through your life anyway. You could obviously tell me a lot more about Wimbledon School of Art and you could tell me a lot more about your life as an artist to the Army (which I think is a wonderful title). Thank you very, very much Chris.*