

1 *This transcript is of two interviews with Steve Harris, the second interview begins on*  
2 *page 8, line 352.*

3

4 SH: ...they'll all be part of the story. Kind of like that, you know.

5

6 M: We are very good to go here.

7

8 SH: Are we? Okay.

9

10 M: So is everyone comfortable?

11

12 SH: Does this go?

13

14 M: That's not in shot, now if you're going to do some hand movements  
15 [voices overlap 00:09]...

16

17 SH: Okay. Thank you very much. Don't drink it, please.

18

19 M: So if we start with the asking and spelling, that'll be fantastic, and we'll be  
20 good to go.

21

22 SH: Yeah. Okay.

23

24 I: What's your name?

25

26 SH: My name's Steve Harris.

27

28 I: And how do you spell it?

29

30 SH: Do you want the Steve, or the Harris?

31

32 I: Both.

33

34 SH: Both. S-T-E-V-E and then H-A double R I-S.

35

36 I: Okay. Steve. Can you give an overview of how you've been involved with  
37 the Half Moon?

38

39 SH: Okay. I was director of the Half Moon Young People's Theatre from 1985  
40 through to 1989.

41

42 I: How and why did you get involved with Half Moon?

43

44 SH: How? How. Well, I applied for the job, I was doing some...I was actually  
45 teaching, I was head of drama at an East End school, and I was also  
46 working for the Royal Court Young People's Theatre, part time. So this job  
47 came up and it just so happened that I was ready to leave teaching at the  
48 time; so I'd been touring as an actor for 15 years before that, and I'd been  
49 teaching and loved it, but I'd wanted to get back into theatre, so the Young  
50 People's Theatre was something that I had heard about, and I'd taken my

51 young people to see some of their work; and I was really impressed and I  
52 thought, this sounds like a lot more fun than going in and teaching every  
53 day, so I decided to apply and I got the job.

54

55 I: Describe your strongest memory of the Half Moon?

56

57 SH: Yeah, the strongest memory. I think the strongest memory was walking  
58 through the debris that was where the old Young People's Theatre was,  
59 as it were, and that was a building site; and so we stepped across all of  
60 the bits and pieces that were there, to be shown the Young People's  
61 Theatre, it's a brand new Young People's Theatre, and it was tiny. And so  
62 I was very disappointed, I remember feeling incredibly disappointed  
63 because it was probably about, maybe about 30 feet square, and within  
64 that there was a tiny space for work, and it was totally inadequate. So I  
65 think the first, really the strongest memory I had when I first started was  
66 disappointment; then that turned into a great feeling in the four years of  
67 working with wonderful people, fantastic sets of actors, directors,  
68 designers, youth leaders, teachers, as we started to do a great deal of  
69 work and went touring – and largely around Tower Hamlets – but also  
70 where we'd built up a lot of the youth theatre work.

71

72 So we started off with one small youth theatre and then we had two youth  
73 theatres every night from Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday,  
74 Friday; and it was great. And so the strongest, for the kind of – by the time  
75 I was kind of leaving – was that we had worked with whole sets of people  
76 who were not used to working in theatre, so we had employed actors from  
77 Asian backgrounds, Afro-Caribbean backgrounds, which was quite  
78 unusual. We had a company called Double Exposure which was a  
79 culmination of my actors with Graeae Theatre actors, Graeae Company  
80 working with disabled actors, and so we'd formed a special separate  
81 company called Double Exposure, which is part of the Half Moon Young  
82 People's Theatre history.

83

84 And so we had a whole sets [sic] of people who we'd been working with  
85 who were new to us, we had to open up our practice to take on board the  
86 fact that we were working with people who were deaf, or they were blind,  
87 or they found it difficult to move around the space, and so that was a  
88 challenge for all of us, but it was exciting. And so we started then also to  
89 work in different languages, so Sylheti, Bengali; we started to work, kind  
90 of discover ways of working in which we were not used to working that  
91 way.

92

93 [05:02]

94

95 And so it was exciting for us to do that new work and explore it, and  
96 sometimes get it right and sometimes get it wrong; but I think everyone at  
97 the time felt that they were pushing themselves outside of their comfort  
98 zone. So those are kind of special things that built up over the time. And I  
99 suppose the final thing was finding the potential of a new home when the  
100 old Half Moon actually, the main house theatre of which we were a part

101 actually failed and they went into liquidation, they lost all their money and  
102 they closed; and we as a company managed to spend a little time in  
103 Dame Colet House – which was a community centre up the road from  
104 here – but we'd secured here, and we started work on patching up all the  
105 holes that the rain came in; and it was freezing cold, so...but it was lovely  
106 to feel, as I was leaving, Debbie, who was coming in as the new director  
107 had this wonderful space, which was a nightmare but nevertheless is what  
108 you have today after all the work that's gone in from everyone. It feels like  
109 a good thing, it's taken maybe from '89 to now to get to here, so all the  
110 people who've worked – including yourselves, and they were fantastic –  
111 that this place was going to be turned into luxury flats, but now it's your  
112 Half Moon Young People's Theatre.

113  
114 I: Now can you remember any of the performances that you took your  
115 students to see at the Half Moon?

116  
117 SH: Performances I've been to see? Well, I'll pick out one, which I wasn't here  
118 for, I took my students to see it from, they were from an East End school,  
119 and I took them to see like a show called One Big Blow, and it was about  
120 miners, Welsh miners; and we were doing A-level drama and so I took my  
121 sixth form to see it. And we saw it at a place called Alie Street, which no  
122 longer exists, it was where the Half Moon Theatre was based, and it was  
123 tiny, and there were no lights, they had a car with headlights on that they  
124 used for the lights, which was lucky because it was based in a mine so  
125 there weren't many lights anyway; but it was tiny, and ridiculous, and  
126 wonderful.

127  
128 And it was a company who were called The Combination, and they'd got a  
129 connection to the Half Moon for many years previous to this, in the 1960s  
130 and '70s, so you had some really good actors; but again it was theatre  
131 without any frills, it was purely the actors on stage, no lighting much, you  
132 know, just the car lights from car headlights, nothing, no, nothing really to  
133 disturb the fact that you walked in. And I guess – I'm looking at you now  
134 and thinking – the actors were about as far away from you are from me,  
135 so they were right in your face; and all their costumes were, they had,  
136 they each had – there were six of them – and they all had pairs of  
137 underpants on, and that was their costume, because they were supposed  
138 to be miners underneath the ground, picking out coal.

139  
140 And most of the singing, they did a lot of singing in it, and it was acappella  
141 singing; and I can remember all of the young people I took began to laugh  
142 immediately they saw six blokes in their underpants in their underpants  
143 coming out towards them; and the actors, instead of dying and looking  
144 terribly upset, they just came right up to your face and took the audience  
145 on. And they were fantastic, and my young people absolutely were blown  
146 away as they sat frightened and rigid with fear with these actors right in  
147 their faces who took them on; and then quite a lot of the script was in the  
148 form of acappella singing, which was just sensational. And so I can just  
149 see, I can just see my students, as I sat there, completely bowled over by  
150 just acting, actors who could take you on, they needed nothing more; and

151 they took them on. And my students at the end just clapped and clapped  
152 and clapped, and just loved this work. And for me that's always the kind of  
153 style of Half Moon young people, the Half Moon Theatre productions,  
154 which was forget all the other stuff, it was people going out performing  
155 straight to your face, and you just fell in love with it, absolutely fell in love  
156 with it. So I'd say One Big Blow.

157  
158 [10:22]

159  
160 Afterwards, those actors, they were taken by the musical director and he  
161 turned them into a company called The Flying Pickets. And The Flying  
162 Pickets, you won't remember them, but they became a very, very well  
163 known singing, acappella singing group – for a while – and I  
164 met...because I knew quite a few of the actors later on, and I said, what  
165 was it like; and they said, well, it was all right being The Flying Pickets. I  
166 said, you're actors, did you really want to go on tour being, you know,  
167 singing these songs; and they went, oh, no, it was terrible; I said, well,  
168 why did you do it; they said, well, we get paid nothing as actors and we've  
169 been on tour for three years, and we've bought a flat each, we've  
170 somewhere to live. And then they all went back to theatre again, so they  
171 had two or three years of being singers, and then they bought themselves  
172 somewhere to live, and from then they went back to theatre; and they've  
173 been in theatre ever since. So there you go.

174  
175 I: Can you tell us about some interesting people who've – sorry, I can't read  
176 [inaudible 11:30]. Can you tell us about the [inaudible 11:42] that worked  
177 here at the time?

178  
179 SH: The...? Sorry, I didn't get that. The...?

180  
181 I: Yeah, [inaudible 11:48]...

182  
183 SH: I do the same, I can't see anything actually, so...

184  
185 I: Can you tell us about the building [inaudible 11:56] that worked here at  
186 the time?

187  
188 SH: The building...?

189  
190 I: And [inaudible 12:02]. Yes.

191  
192 SH: Okay. The building and – other people...

193  
194 I: Yes.

195  
196 SH: ...who worked here? Uh-huh. Okay. I don't know of anyone who worked  
197 here, I don't think. I think the people who I knew in the Half Moon up the  
198 road, which I'll show you a picture at some point, there were quite a few  
199 people who, if you can imagine that we're in a tiny little space, so we did  
200 most of our work away from the building because there just wasn't enough

201 space. But some of the people we worked with was...we worked with  
202 Angela Carter who was great, a great writer, and we did a show called  
203 Vampirella, which...and we were the only company, theatre company she  
204 would give the rights to, it had been a film, but I would think...and...but  
205 after, after I think late '70s, but in the '80s we were the only people that  
206 she...she wanted to work with, and she was a great writer; we'd just...I'd  
207 just written to her and asked her whether we could do it, and she came  
208 and said, fantastic, yeah, I'll work with you; we were eerr, we were all kind  
209 of, this is fantastic. And she was great.

210  
211 And Ruth Sheen is someone who we've worked with a lot, she was in the  
212 1970s in this company, and she worked – and continues to work – with a  
213 great film director called Mike Leigh; and she lives on the Isle of Dogs,  
214 always has done, and she's a Dogs girl; and I'm sure if you see her at  
215 some point she'll talk to you about time I don't know about, but she was  
216 always a great person within the Young People's Theatre; and worth  
217 talking to because she bridges that time between the Half Moon not  
218 having a young people's theatre and starting it, so she will know a great  
219 deal more than I will.

220  
221 And I suppose what I did was I like to employ people locally so I used to  
222 steal students off theatre courses, especially local college courses; so  
223 Barking College had a little, I think it was not a huge course but it had a  
224 good drama course and I went down or we saw some work, and I stole a  
225 woman called Josette Bushell-Mingo who is a wonderful actress, and she  
226 came and she was fantastic, she came from an Afro-Caribbean  
227 background, really great voice, great actress, totally impossible to deal  
228 with because she was just so much energy, which was fantastic.

229  
230 [14:56]

231  
232 And people came to see us all the time when they were on tour, just  
233 around Tower Hamlets, and someone spotted her and so they took her off  
234 and she was the lead in The Lion King; much to my annoyance because  
235 she was supposed to be in one of our shows, and went off and started  
236 doing that kind of stuff. She is now at the National Theatre in Sweden, she  
237 married a Swedish guy.

238  
239 And, do you know, there's loads of people who've come through, and  
240 have gone off into working in theatre; or not necessarily working in  
241 theatre, but working in areas that are adjacent to theatre, so some dance,  
242 or kind of anything in the arts. And there are a lot of people have come  
243 through this place.

244  
245 One of the things that it's not just being actors, and I mean actors are fine  
246 but there aren't many jobs I don't think for actors in this country, so we  
247 started a technical training scheme here; and you had to work for a year,  
248 two terms, and you had to learn sound and light engineering, and you had  
249 to be unemployed but you had to come from Tower Hamlets. And when  
250 we set the scheme up hundreds and hundreds of people wanted to

251 be...and came...applied; most of them weren't from Tower Hamlets, they  
252 were from very nice bits of Camden and Westminster and stuff like this,  
253 and we had to turn them all down and say, no, the people who are going  
254 to come on this course come from this borough, and they must be  
255 unemployed; always 50 per cent women, 50 per cent men; at that time not  
256 many women in the technical side of theatre.

257  
258 And it was a great course, we ran it for three years with money from the  
259 Sainsbury's family trusts, and we started off with about 20 people each  
260 year, and because it was so hard we ended up probably with about 12 or  
261 13 who survived the year; and of those they all got jobs. And so many of  
262 you, that the people who come from Tower Hamlets now are at the Royal  
263 Opera House or the National Theatre, quite a lot of them now are in senior  
264 positions; so it was a really good course.

265  
266 And I certainly think if one could keep running that kind of course it would  
267 be great, but it cost money, it cost quite a lot of money, and after a while  
268 the Sainsbury's Trust wanted to take their money elsewhere, which was  
269 their prerogative; but I'm sure there will be, if you find out where people  
270 are at the National Theatre and all that there will be somebody from this  
271 borough, women and men, which will be great.

272  
273 I: Can you tell us about when the theatre closed?

274  
275 SH: The theatre closed. Yeah. The theatre closed...largely I think the theatre  
276 closed...I mean it's kind of...I can't remember, about '88, '89 it closed.  
277 The theatre had always been a theatre without money; and I said to you  
278 that it started at Alie Street – which has now got a huge...it's in Aldgate  
279 East, it's now got a...I think there's a huge insurance company that's on  
280 top of it – it had money to move out, they bribed it to move out, and with  
281 the money they bought what was the place in Stepney, which was a  
282 Methodist chapel, and some space next to it; and so someone had the  
283 bright idea of actually building a theatre which kind of came onto the street  
284 – which was a great idea – but theatre people are really terrible in general  
285 in terms of building theatres, what they're good at is putting on plays, and  
286 unfortunately it was a great idea badly organised, so that throughout the  
287 time I was there actually we had a building site, and a main house was  
288 built which was really a breeze-block shell but which won lots of design  
289 awards for architecture, it didn't do much for us as actors is my feeling.  
290 And also of course we had this little tiny thing on the side which was  
291 called the Young People's Theatre, which was not great.

292  
293 So I think an awful lot of people who were running the main house, they  
294 were under huge pressure to put on wonderful theatre, which they did  
295 very well, but at the same time they were suddenly running a building firm  
296 and they were not very good at it; and so I think in the end that struggle to  
297 run both things cost them dearly and they really lost control of really the  
298 financial side of the company.

299  
300 [20:00]

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And that was...it's sad, because that has a fantastic tradition of I would call it poor theatre, that is you don't need anything but yourself to stand up and start performing, you don't need all the props, you just need that vision of being able to perform some right words that you authentically speak and away you go, and you just need that strength to do a little bit like the One Big Blow I was talking about, you need to believe in the work and trust yourself and you go for it. And that was the exciting work.

And somehow it disappeared at that time, there were some good shows at that time. I remember coming in one day and we had a company meeting, and this man stood up and said, I'm disgusted, I cannot go to the toilet, he said, I cannot go to the toilet just before I go on stage because there is no lock on the door and I'm...you know, so several times I've been sitting on the toilet and the door has opened, and I feel terribly embarrassed, and I don't want to do that; and we all looked a little bit down, because they were temporary toilets, they were just...you know, and everybody went, yeah, yeah, yeah, okay, well, fine, we'll, we'll do this. And he then said, if it happens again I'm going to hit the person who is supposed to be sorting out the toilets. And it did happen again, and so we used to see him kind of running round looking for the production manager because he was going to hit them. And this was a kind of...this was the kind of tension people were having, running around in a theatre where absolutely nothing was...stayed still.

We had a bus, as I say, two buses that were the administration, and it became confusing, and I think so tiring, to run a theatre in that kind of space; so in the end I think people were tired and they lost the inspiration that they'd had before; and that was a shame. And I think then it's those that funded, the big trust – not the big trust – the Arts Council who funded it decided, okay, this isn't going anywhere, we can't justify giving them a grant that at that time, then the company disappeared.

But luckily the work of the Young People's Theatre was of such a high level that the Arts Council came to see us and said, well, we like your work, you're worth survival; and they transferred the grant that they gave to the Half Moon, which was quite a decent grant, of which the Half Moon Young People's Theatre had very little, and they gave the grant to us.

And we formed a...because we were a department in the Half Moon, but we became, as you are today, an independent company; and suddenly we were an independent company with support from the Arts Council for all the work that we were doing, which performance work, work with young people, and touring work, absolutely wonderful. So we survived from the wreckage of the Half Moon.

But we were all, I think, shocked at the way the Half Moon itself had gone. But we felt at the time we were, if you look back to the start in Alie Street, which was early 1970s, we felt we were carrying on very much that tradition. So I think it's great.

351  
352 I: Okay. Alexia, I think we should stop there because...  
353  
354 M2: Okay. Is the door shut?  
355  
356 M: Yeah, we're all good to go Steve, thank you very much.  
357  
358 I: Hello. What's your name?  
359  
360 SH: My name is Steve Harris.  
361  
362 I: And could you spell that, please?  
363  
364 SH: Yeah. Which one would you like? The Steve...?  
365  
366 I: Both.  
367  
368 SH: Both. S-T-E-V-E and H-A double R I-S.  
369  
370 I: Can you tell us how you've been involved with Half Moon?  
371  
372 [24:58]  
373  
374 SH: I was involved with Half Moon from around 1984 till around 1989, as its  
375 director, of the Young People's Theatre. But that was also associate  
376 director of the main house theatre.  
377  
378 I: Can you tell us why you got involved with Half Moon?  
379  
380 SH: Why. That's an interesting one; probably because I used to teach in a  
381 local East End secondary school and one of the favourite places I would  
382 take young people – I taught drama, head of drama – and I used to take  
383 all of the people, young people I could get to come to the theatre, which  
384 wasn't that many at the time, theatre wasn't particularly something people,  
385 young people wanted to do after school; so I would take them down, as  
386 many as I could, to what was called Alie Street, The Half Moon Theatre,  
387 Alie Street, which probably could...you could probably get five people in –  
388 I'm exaggerating, but you probably couldn't get more than about 50  
389 people in – and we saw the most exciting theatre, the best theatre that  
390 you can imagine.  
391  
392 And of course it was so close, and you had very, very interesting, very  
393 well known people, who later – I don't suppose they were that well known  
394 at the time – but they later went on to become important and interesting  
395 actors; but I think more importantly they were the kind of actors committed  
396 to working in the East End – and I'm sure for very little money – doing  
397 radical work, work, new contemporary work a lot of the time, and  
398 sometimes some classics, but certainly some new radical work, and not  
399 always from English playwrights, sometimes they would be Italian,  
400 French... So the young people that I had were blown away, and I still

401 remember taking most of my young people to see Steven Berkoff do East;  
402 and the shock, to hear language that they probably used on the streets  
403 themselves but were shocked to think that it actually could be said in a  
404 theatre. And it took a little while for them to settle down, but soon they  
405 began to listen to some of the poetry that was in that language, and they  
406 loved it.

407  
408 They also saw a group who were a mixture of two companies, 7:84 and  
409 Belt and Braces, and they were two radical theatre companies that are  
410 well known in this country, who were doing a piece of work which was  
411 called One Big Blow, and really it was about Welsh miners; and it was  
412 done in acappella, and it was largely acappella songs, and it consisted of  
413 I'm not sure how many people, men, not particularly men with great – well,  
414 how shall I put this – not particularly men who were all great Adonises, in  
415 pairs of white underpants, because they were supposed to be miners  
416 underground; and if you can imagine taking an East End group of young  
417 people to see them you can imagine that there were some fairly whoops  
418 of...and jokes, which of course the actors took on the audience  
419 straightaway and came right into their face, and blew them away with how  
420 tremendous they were and how serious their work was, even though at  
421 times it was very funny.

422  
423 There were great issues there that had a resonance for that audience,  
424 and the audience – that's my young people – just loved this work; and so  
425 they, afterwards, the group who were putting on that performance became  
426 The Flying Pickets, they became a singing group. So out of that group I  
427 think came a different kind of art form where they sang a lot of radical  
428 songs; but most of them drifted back into what they should have been in  
429 the first place, theatre people. So we had a really rich, rich groups [sic] of  
430 people who were performing for us in small spaces, cold, sometimes  
431 badly lit, but fantastically exciting. And so when the opportunity arose to  
432 actually apply for a post with the Young People's Theatre I just couldn't  
433 resist it.

434  
435 I: Thank you. Can you describe your strongest memory of the Half Moon?

436  
437 [29:43]

438  
439 SH: Strongest memory of the Half Moon. I think it's less...I mean I could say  
440 some things about the Half Moon building that I was taken to. When I  
441 started with the Half Moon it was in transit from the Oxford House where  
442 essentially it was in a nice community centre and had some rooms, but it  
443 wasn't particularly exciting, and it was certainly not on the same site as  
444 the main house theatre in Alie Street. So I was brought in just as they'd  
445 moved more or less onto the new site which was up at Stepney, and it  
446 was a building site, so I kind of think for me that side of things was kind of  
447 interesting but not that interesting; more interesting for me was the people  
448 I met.

449

450 And so I met groups of actors, designers, people in the theatre business  
451 who were working for the Half Moon main house but also Young People's  
452 Theatre, who were committed to working in the East End, for very little  
453 cash, I have to say, but were terribly exciting and interesting artistically.  
454 And so suddenly from being in a school, which was great, I was suddenly  
455 surrounded by people who were committed to putting on work, I think  
456 really high-quality work, theatre work, in the East End, which of course  
457 was really, really exciting. So I think it was the people I met first of all  
458 within the theatre.

459  
460 And then later it was the kind of people I met all around the East End who  
461 we worked with largely when we were doing work out in schools, but also  
462 because we ran the East End Festival for many years, and that was a way  
463 of opening up the theatre, generally in August where we kind of kicked out  
464 the main house...from the main house, everybody, no one goes to the  
465 theatre in August, it's too sunny; so we would have the East End Festival  
466 where we would programme from the Half Moon, we would programme  
467 maybe 70 different venues all the way around the East End, and we would  
468 have all kinds of stuff from.

469  
470 And that's when we started meeting people from different art forms,  
471 different cultures, different ethnic groups, which was really exciting  
472 because we had no idea what we were doing, and it meant we could I  
473 think really start to feel we were embedded within the community; and  
474 especially that went for, I think, the Half Moon Young People's Theatre  
475 because we were going out into the community on a regular basis, we  
476 were working in youth clubs, we were working in schools; we were  
477 working with people in the community who were coming in to do youth  
478 theatre work, but also throughout the year the East End Festival  
479 preparations meant people were always coming in, people were always  
480 coming in. So I think it's people, people, and people.

481  
482 I: Could you describe a particular play or project you felt was most important  
483 for the company?

484  
485 SH: Yeah. Well, I think it would be wrong to pick out just one, although I will  
486 do. I mean I know people like to say, well, what was the most important,  
487 was there a turning point; I'm not sure there were. It was interesting to see  
488 how we developed the types of performances we were doing and the  
489 content, and I'd say one of the big ones was that we often worked with  
490 really interesting people who were not used to working on young people's  
491 work; so the nice one I think that I would probably pick out is working with  
492 Angela Carter on Vampirella, because why would Angela Carter allow a  
493 theatre...essentially a theatre in education company to work on her work,  
494 why would she think that we would do justice to it.

495  
496 And it was great to work with someone who came from a totally different  
497 genre, you know, kind of novels; but it was fantastic, because we were  
498 then...she gave us the freedom to work on the piece in a way in which we  
499 could workshop it, we could move it around, we could change it, we could

500 add things. And instead of being precious she said, yeah, that's fine, let  
501 me see; but basically this is a collaborative piece of work. And this is from  
502 someone who we all admired but who immediately said my word is no  
503 different from yours, I did the original work but essentially could you, you  
504 know, you can...you just need to get involved and we'll look and we'll do it  
505 as a collaborative piece. And although we worked most of the time without  
506 her, she would come in at times and just look at the work, yeah, okay, no,  
507 I don't agree with that.

508  
509 [35:03]

510  
511 And what happened was that in a sense you were working with words that  
512 appeared in a book first of all, and we were translating them, taking them  
513 out of the page onto the stage; but what was great was that we were  
514 actually allowed to be part of that process. And that workshopping  
515 process I think was something that we all enjoyed. And it was similarly we  
516 would work with that kind of...we'd work that kind of way when we went  
517 into workshops and doing bilingual work, because it stopped the actors  
518 coming in and saying, okay, where's my script, fine, I learn the words and  
519 I perform; no, no, we were moving much more into saying, what's the  
520 content, can we generate this content, who should be involved in  
521 generating this content, and then how do we mould it through theatrical  
522 process into something that is a performance, that is not a piece of social  
523 work, it's nothing, you know, it's not a piece of journalism, it is a piece of  
524 theatre.

525  
526 So that I think was very exciting for us, that we could do that with Angela,  
527 but we started to do it with all kinds of work; and I think...I think people  
528 judge it for themselves, but I think it got great reviews; but you'll have to  
529 ask the actors who finally were involved, if you get hold of any who were  
530 involved, because I think they will say it was a great time for them too.

531  
532 I: The work you were involved in was very much focused upon young  
533 people; to what extent did the parent company influence the work?

534  
535 SH: Yeah, it's difficult...I mean the parent company did influence the work  
536 because we ran, or the company was run as a collective, as it were,  
537 together – I say a collective – but it ran collectively. We had company  
538 meetings where we were all together, we were involved in working with  
539 the main house sometimes, and sometimes whoever was made house  
540 director at the time would work with the Young People's Theatre; so there  
541 was always a crossover.

542  
543 There was a great deal of interest from actors who were working in the  
544 main house, but also I think in the work that the young people were doing,  
545 that's both the kind of theatre in education side, but also because there  
546 were a lot of young people there, who sometimes got in the way of the  
547 main house, there were lots of very excitable young people there on the  
548 youth theatre side, and there were an awful lot of them so we didn't know  
549 where to put them most of the time; and we had a tiny space to do work,

550 we had maybe a hundred young people and the space for about ten of  
551 them to work with, so we always used to work in the bar, which used to be  
552 quite interesting, especially when the punters were coming in for the main  
553 house. So there was at times...there was never enough room; but there  
554 was always enough room for conversations and chats between the main  
555 house and the Young People's Theatre about the work.

556  
557 And a lot of that work was about artistically what we were doing. I think  
558 there was a lot of interest in the fact that we were often, as it were,  
559 touring, we always toured around the East End. And there was a kind of  
560 intimacy that we had I think with our audience that the main house always  
561 was trying to find when it tried to bring people in to the Half Moon. And  
562 that was always a struggle for them, I think. And I hope that everyone felt  
563 that we were on the same team, and I think increasingly...as things got  
564 tougher I think increasingly it brought people together rather than  
565 separated them. There was a great deal of thunder came in there, and I  
566 just wonder whether that I've actually said the right thing. But I think there  
567 was a great deal of interest artistically in what we were doing; it  
568 sometimes went the other way, the Young People's Theatre actors  
569 sometimes took [inaudible 39:33] the main house productions.

570  
571 But I'd say we had a job to do which was to some extent quite separate,  
572 and I think we built our professionalism around that, and it wasn't  
573 necessarily the professionalism that was required in the main house.

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575 [39:54]

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577 I: We are keen to hear about the particular plays that the YPT company  
578 created; do you have any particular memories that you can share?

579  
580 SH: Well, I mean I was thinking...they all seem to fade into one kind of great  
581 mass; I don't like to pull any out actually. I mean I think...I'm trying to think  
582 are there any exciting artistic things that I could talk about. But I think  
583 really the big things that I felt were most important is how did we  
584 artistically communicate with a population that we were going out to – an  
585 audience – with a multitude of languages. And it was very clear to us, as  
586 our youth theatre, the diversity in our youth theatre became one of our  
587 major positive things that we developed, and also that we were taking  
588 work out to schools. Many of the schools during that time were receiving  
589 more and more immigrant young people who had not got English as a first  
590 language. How did we respond to that? There were also it was clear that  
591 theatre for some of the immigrant communities was not something that  
592 they understood was important or interesting, or even felt that it was a  
593 good thing, that there was a certain amount of suspicion; so we had to  
594 decide really how to approach working artistically and still being able to  
595 communicate.

596  
597 And I suppose really what it meant was that we began to look at the make  
598 up of the actors that we had, the company, and so we began to look and  
599 say, we need actors who actually have some language skills, some

600 Bengali skills, they may have skills in different languages, and we need to  
601 start reflecting the changes in and the kind of diversity within the East  
602 End, the population in the East End, because it was important that we  
603 didn't – I think it's true to say, just before I arrived it was pretty well and  
604 all-white company – it just didn't seem, you know, it seemed a barrier; it  
605 may not have been a barrier but it seemed to us a barrier, that if you put  
606 four or five people on stage who are white within a community that has a  
607 huge diversity in it, you're already maybe creating a barrier that just wasn't  
608 necessary.

609  
610 And so we started to recruit new actors to our company, to the Young  
611 People's Theatre company on permanent contracts, which was quite  
612 something for those actors coming in, either from an Asian background,  
613 an Afro-Caribbean background, maybe a Turkish background, but all  
614 kinds of backgrounds, and started therefore to develop work where we  
615 were not dependent always on a writer. We started to do work in which we  
616 started to say, okay, how do we put this together, how do we create  
617 something, and we will have a writer along with us; but we didn't  
618 commission writers as we might have done before, or even work with  
619 someone like Angela, we started to actually say we really need to start  
620 generating work in which the language is central to what we're doing and  
621 is the language allowing us to communicate what we want to  
622 communicate and are the characters that we develop ones that strike a  
623 chord with the audience that we're now getting in those schools. And I  
624 think in a way it would be wrong to pick out any particular performances  
625 because I think that work, the strength, the kind of artistic strength that  
626 work was taken on was taken on later.

627  
628 In a way, I think the work artistically was okay but I think it developed  
629 much more strongly after that period, that '84, '89 period; when I was  
630 there I don't think, you know, artistically I can claim any great quality in the  
631 work that I was doing, I think the actors did most of that. We did, I think...I  
632 went to see some work after that which I felt was always developing  
633 artistically.

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635 [44:58]

636  
637 And I think that's continued, and I think that's been...was a great  
638 foundation, but I think artistically the work that's gone on in the last 15, 20  
639 years has been the high point artistically of the company. So I would kind  
640 of I'd want to dodge the question about the art and leave it for others  
641 really to say what they felt about it; and I think there are other who are  
642 probably better at actually saying those kind of things. I'd rather kind of  
643 say I think we communicated fantastically well, I think that work did inspire  
644 a lot of young people who did not have English as a first language, it  
645 opened up theatre for them, a theatre world and a drama world; and I  
646 think the Half Moon Young People's Theatre has built on that and I think  
647 it's added artistically quality every year, as it were, it's built on those  
648 foundations. But I think the real artistic successes, I would say, are  
649 probably in the last 15, ten years.

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I: Can you tell us about the development of the bilingual work and other plays that the Half Moon created?

SH: Well, I think I've kind of jumped, haven't I, I've jumped into the bilingual, which I think was fantastically important for us. I'm not sure that there's much more to say about that work other than it sounds very passé now like everybody of course wants to do it, has been doing it; but that work wasn't being done at the time. And there were lots of questions about why we should do work in which language on stage there were two or three or four languages going on; and the people did not feel like, well, how would people understand it. Well, that was our job to actually make it so that actually people did understand, and yes they had to wait and work maybe, to actually listen and find out what was going on; and that was always a challenge but it was a great challenge artistically but it was great because you don't have to tell the audience everything straightaway, they have to start unpicking the work for themselves.

And the joy of unpicking it when it's your language and everybody around you, you look around you, and you don't speak English, I mean maybe you speak Bengali maybe, and you can see that other people who don't have Bengali suddenly they don't understand that but you do; it was a great way to engage those audiences. And it also brings up – oh, it brought up – big issues about communication, about culture, and about how people rub along together, and misunderstandings, and how I think as much as there's a diversity, clearly a great diversity of cultures and of languages, but the human experience is pretty similar for everybody, and if you can feel some kind of compassion and some kind of understanding you can get to that point where it may be a different language, it may be a different set of rituals, it may be all kinds of things that you don't understand, but through a piece of theatre you begin to see that in fact there is, it's very similar, this is similar to my family, my brother, my sister, this is that the problems I have at home with my mother, my father, we all share those same worries, those same problems. And I think that's why the bilingual, or trilingual work – as it was often the case – that's a great way to...that's a great gift to give to an audience; but the audience do have to work, and I think artistically that's totally justifiable.

And I know that work has been carried on, and continued to be carried on and developed. And, as I say, people think it's pretty passé now, but that work was not going on in the main house, that work was going on in the Half Moon Young People's Theatre; that work was not going on largely around the country, there were one or two companies but only one or two, who I think had the, well, probably had the chutzpah to actually do this kind of work, because people did not at first understand why you would possibly do that. And so, yeah, so I think it came from again the fact that we were intimately involved in our community here, we all lived around the place, I lived just up the road, most people lived here, and so there was no separation from that community.

700 [50:08]

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702 And having the Young People's Theatre touring work was great, but also  
703 the youth theatre work was fantastic because we saw people in the youth  
704 theatre and then we saw them again next day in the school. So it was we  
705 felt there was no difference between us as the Young People's Theatre  
706 and our East End community, because we come from that East End  
707 community, we lived in it, there was no difference, you know.

708

709 I: How did the company engage formally with the changing communities,  
710 especially the Bangladeshi community, including the outreach worker?

711

712 SH: Right. Well, we did employ a Bangladeshi outreach worker, largely  
713 because we were doing all of the East End Festival work, okay there was  
714 work that was going on in bilingual, trilingual work and all of that youth  
715 theatre, we had youth theatre teachers who had Bengali as their first  
716 language; but in real terms I mean the East End Festival was the big one.  
717 And I remember turning up to a great, my first, I suppose my first  
718 introduction to the community, and I was being introduced to it by a youth  
719 worker; and the youth worker...I walked in, of course I didn't speak  
720 Bengali, and I'd totally expected them of course to speak English; and  
721 there were some quite a new immigrant community who kind of went,  
722 well, right, what shall we do, then; and it was a bit of a stand off, until a  
723 couple of people who were second generation actually said, okay, look, let  
724 me say what's going on, right, the first thing is let's sit down and have  
725 something to eat and drink; and we ended up taking hours to have a  
726 conversation.

727

728 And so it was a bit of a surprise for I think most people who were not for  
729 instance from Bangladesh, or, you know, they weren't... And there were  
730 times when the experience that I had living in the East End was one that I  
731 thought most people had, until I went out with my outreach worker in the  
732 car, and we were shouted at and screamed at on a regular basis, and we  
733 passed up through Globe Town and people came out and threw things,  
734 and people grimaced in the most appalling way – men and women, young  
735 and old – and I was shocked and said, well, this is appalling; he said, well,  
736 this is my experience every day, what's your experience. And of course  
737 that's I think bringing people into the company whose experience even of  
738 the East End was so different was a bit of a wakeup call. And so I think we  
739 did, we started to really take seriously what it was like to live in a  
740 community in which, for instance, the BNP used to actually be quite strong  
741 in Globe Town, and it was a fairly heavy time.

742

743 And so we began to become I think much more rooted in the political  
744 struggle and actually saying, well, part of being here is to be part of the  
745 local community, where do we stand, who do we stand with; and through  
746 that the East End Festival, we began to work just with – on a very basic  
747 level – with many, many different types of groups, ethnic groups, and  
748 looking at their artistic expression. So it was a wonderful time because we  
749 were being educated; we for the first time were going to music, listening to

750 music we'd never listened to before; we were going to hear musical  
751 instruments that we'd never seen before; we were being involved in  
752 cultural events in which we understood nothing about the rituals and we  
753 had to actually just throw ourselves into it and be part of it; but we weren't  
754 leading it, we were facilitating what was going on.

755  
756 And we ended up with I think a big festival, annual festival, which took  
757 place over two or three weeks, but throughout the year people were  
758 coming in to do rehearsals, people were asking us all the time to come out  
759 and look at things; we were seen as being open; and I think that was so  
760 important, the threshold of the Half Moon was open, people walked across  
761 it who probably don't walk across most theatre thresholds because it isn't  
762 for them. And the Half Moon was always for them, because it was a bit of  
763 rough and ready, because it hadn't got nice fancy seats and everything  
764 else.

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766 [55:19]

767  
768 And we were often, I mean we were often criticised by some elder  
769 members of the community who would say, oh, and I'm not coming to  
770 your place, it's disgusting, it's filthy, and it doesn't do this and it doesn't do  
771 that; but in general I think people actually said, this is great, I feel I can  
772 walk across this threshold, my children walk across this threshold; and  
773 many of them did, and they went and told their parents and then their  
774 parents came in and saw shows in the evening, which they probably  
775 wouldn't have done before. So we were a big conduit I think for audience,  
776 building audiences, for the main house as well as our own productions,  
777 but for the main house; people came in, they sat around in our bar, and  
778 we'd have to shove them over the one side whilst we were still working,  
779 and sometimes they'd...you've got to go now, they'd say, to some...you  
780 know, and we'd say, look, could you just wait a minute, we're involved in  
781 a...we're doing a workshop at the moment – there was never enough  
782 space – but it was always full of good humour and jokes, and shouting a  
783 lot of the time; but it was a great place to be, you never left in the evening  
784 late feeling I've had a normal day, there was always some strange stuff  
785 going on.

786  
787 So I think we were enriched by the way the community was being  
788 enriched, and the diversity was something; we all had challenges but  
789 working together, sharing stuff together, it was the way that I think – I think  
790 for all of the company – they felt more comfortable and more comfortable  
791 with that diversity; and certainly I did. And I used to go round in a very  
792 large car, which we had, we'd put together with a young club, it was called  
793 the East End Festival – or the TEEF-mobile, when I think about it now –  
794 and it was put together by a youth club just down the road and ourselves,  
795 and it was full of...it was painted, hand painted, and the hand-painting  
796 was done by all of the groups that were involved, and so you would have  
797 groups, the Bangladeshi groups, you would have Jewish groups, you'd  
798 have Turkish groups, you would have a whole range of groups and they'd  
799 all do their particular piece of art work; so everything was on that car.

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And we had big loudspeakers and we used to go round and advertise in that two or three weeks that what was going on. And it was stripped out in the middle, there was just an old seat in it, it was completely illegal, and how the heck the police... The police just ignored us and hoped that we didn't crash. And it kind of represented I think the best in the East End, which is people rub along, rough and ready, it's okay, but people are being, actually are being pretty good to each other; and I think that will do for me, you know.

I: The company developed a technical training strand that was very successful over the years; can you tell us about that?

SH: I can. And I think really it was...because our job within the youth theatre was not to create actors and actresses, it was to really enrich the lives of young people, and if there was any kind of notion about empowerment some kind of empowerment; to give them something where we were not training young people to be actors and actresses. However it was clear that when you looked both on stage at the time, but also particularly backstage, you very rarely saw any diversity in the workforce; and there were a lot of young people who often said to us, well, I don't really want to be, you know, I don't really want to act, can I hold a microphone or a lantern, or can I do this; and they were really good at it; or can I be involved in moving things around on stage, I don't want to be on stage; great. And it was a way for them to edge in a lot of the time, in the end they would probably take an acting role, but they would never be someone who would want to actually take a leading role.

[59:42]

And that was going on for a long time before we kind of thought, there's a lot of talent here, there are people who now have been doing this for a year or two years, they're really good at what they're doing, we don't need to supervise them any more; but we're not giving them anything which actually accredits what they're doing, and actually they're now looking for...maybe coming up to a time when they're looking for a job, they may be at a time when they are of an age when they're looking for a job, and we're not really helping.

So Chris Corner actually put the whole thing together. Chris was somebody who'd worked with us on different programmes and I knew his work, it was really great stuff; and he just knew this work completely, and he designed a course, a 12-month course, for anybody who was...young people in Tower Hamlets who were unemployed, about 20 young people, you had to be unemployed; which was a little bit difficult because it was a full-time course; and nevertheless the government said at the time you had to be available for work; so we kind of finessed things a little bit. But they certainly had three full days where we set up the Young People's Theatre just like it was any studio theatre, and those people came in, and

849 they worked on shows, they worked on youth theatre shows; we gave  
850 them some work also in the main house.

851  
852 But they actually did a huge amount of theory as well as practice because  
853 Chris did not want to create a course that was going to take young people  
854 nowhere, he wanted to give them something in which they could walk into  
855 their first job but not just knowing the practical side, but knowing the  
856 theory. So he did show me, and I have to say I sat there and listened to  
857 him tell me about all of the notions about resistance on these circuits and  
858 everything else, and I just said, great, Chris, yeah, fine, yeah, yeah, I  
859 understand totally – lie, lie, absolutely – and so he actually said, let's get it  
860 together.

861  
862 So in fact we put it together, we went to Sainsbury's, the family trust, and  
863 remarkably they funded it. And largely I think when the first year we  
864 advertised it we had masses and masses and masses of young people  
865 wanting to do it. But they were all from outside of Tower Hamlets – not all,  
866 but the majority – and it just showed how many, as it were, middle-class  
867 kids were actually immediately thought, oh, I can see the benefit of this;  
868 so they all decided to apply. So we put those sadly straight in the bin – for  
869 them – and actually we said, no, it is for Tower Hamlets young people. But  
870 also we insisted that it was for young women, as well as young men; and  
871 in fact that was a big breakthrough as well because there were very few  
872 women on the technical side. Again I mean it sounds ridiculous now, this  
873 was 1980s, you know, women were still finding it difficult to get a job  
874 backstage, you know, they might be an ASM or, you know, something like  
875 that, and they might be on that side, but on the technical side, the real  
876 technical side, you know, were they around the lighting rigs and whatever,  
877 I didn't see any, they might have been but I didn't see many.

878  
879 So we constructed that. Chris ran the course, bringing in again people  
880 from the industry to do specific work. And people, I know, we usually...we  
881 started out with 20 and it was usual for us to end up with 13 graduates;  
882 because we asked so much from people. And I think that quality that we  
883 produced in that course – or Chris produced in that course – was  
884 fantastic, and I know it continued for some time until I think the  
885 Sainsbury's money ran out; so I think they did fund it again but I think  
886 they'd got to a point where it was, well, so should somebody else pick it  
887 up, and I don't think anybody had picked it up. But in that time I think it  
888 was such a great course, really great course, and I'm surprised that I think  
889 the, maybe the journey that we hoped quite a lot of the business, the  
890 theatre business might make in that area, hasn't been as strong as we  
891 might have expected. And again the one thing about the Half Moon was  
892 you could come up from the Isle of Dogs, you could come down from  
893 Bethnal Green, you could come in from Mile End, you could come from  
894 Bow, and you could come up and you could walk across the door, of that  
895 threshold, and do a high-quality course in technical training. And going out  
896 the other end people went to all kinds of jobs, which was fantastic; they  
897 went to the music business; promotions; they went into theatre; they went  
898 to opera; all of those, they'd got jobs, that was the whole point. And I think

899 the Half Moon Young People's Theatre should be very proud of what they  
900 achieved.

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902 [1:05:14]

903  
904 And I'm kind of sad that it hasn't, you know, that it didn't become a  
905 permanent strand of the work; because I think it was necessary. I kind of  
906 think it still is necessary, because I don't think it's actually being...I don't  
907 think the movement towards equality in technical work behind the stage is  
908 as good as you would think it might be. And I know the opera house are  
909 doing work now further out, and they're doing their work; I still don't think  
910 there are going to be many people coming from Tower Hamlets, so I'm  
911 kind of a little, you know, I'd like to see whether the Sainsbury's Trust  
912 would like to come back into it, because they helped create, I mean they  
913 funded a great course, and I think it's probably that it's one that's still  
914 required; and whether one would do it differently now, I'm sure you would,  
915 but maybe together with a local college or whatever; but the fact that it  
916 was happening in a professional theatre venue, that was the big  
917 difference, you know, people walked through the door and, hey, this is a  
918 professional thing. Which is why six or seven people never made it. They  
919 came round again, most of them came round the next year and kind of  
920 went, oh, right, okay, this is not a joke, this is real stuff, fine; and they  
921 generally came round again.

922  
923 But, yeah, I don't know whether this kind of work really continues much  
924 now, because I don't think the funding is there to do it.

925  
926 I: Can you describe how and why the space at White Horse Road was  
927 found?

928  
929 SH: Yeah, I'm not really sure why it was found, other than Alie Street was this  
930 tiny little place, and of course a great mega insurance company decided it  
931 would like to develop the site; so it decided to...we had at the time a thing  
932 called planning gain where in order to invite the Half Moon to move off the  
933 site the incoming developer would actually pay some cash, so it gave the  
934 Half Moon some cash to buy the site up here and a little bit of  
935 development money so that in the end was the notion was it would have  
936 some money to build a new theatre on the site.

937  
938 So I don't know, that was in a sense pre me. It was a perfectly reasonable  
939 place for it to come to, on the main road, in Mile End Road, and a  
940 perfectly great idea to move to somewhere where maybe they were more  
941 permanent; they're probably more legal, I'm not sure what their  
942 freehold...whether they had...I don't know whether they were squatting  
943 there up Alie Street but it probably wasn't much more than that. So they  
944 didn't own Alie Street and so I mean I just think...and it was a great way to  
945 actually build a new theatre in the East End; and remember there wasn't  
946 one in Tower Hamlets, there just wasn't one, the nearest one was Theatre  
947 Royal Stratford East in Newham, so there wasn't a professional theatre  
948 here.

949  
950 And there used to be on the Mile End Road a hundred theatres, as it  
951 were, some of them were actually called...well, they were actually called  
952 pubs but they were full of pubs that had little places for acting, music and  
953 everything, it used to be like that all the time. And now what have we got,  
954 well, we had one. So, yeah, I'm not sure who made that decision to move  
955 up there but it was an interesting one.

956  
957 I: Can you tell us how the Double Exposure programme came about and  
958 how it connected with the Half Moon?

959  
960 SH: Yeah. The Double Exposure came out of some work that I was doing with  
961 Jenny Sealey from Graeae Theatre, and we'd been talking about the fact  
962 that maybe it would be really great to have a company with integrated  
963 casting, with able-bodied, disabled actors; and I think that was very much  
964 something that we'd been thinking a great deal about and that I'd been to  
965 see quite a lot of Graeae's work, and thought there was some really great  
966 actors there. And quite a lot of my actors were leaving at the time and so it  
967 gave me the opportunity to...just the finance, to be able to say, well, if I'm  
968 not paying those actors I can afford to pay some others, why don't we  
969 actually try and put a project together just for the short term.

970  
971 [1:10:02]

972  
973 And so I kind of made a decision to do it, just to see what would happen  
974 when you put people together who, people from Graeae had not been  
975 professionally changed, although they were working in a professional  
976 environment at Graeae they had not been professionally trained. Our  
977 actors had been but were very sympathetic to working together. And so  
978 we decided, yeah, okay, we'll just do it as an experiment, we'll see what  
979 happens.

980  
981 And so we put together a team and the team included director Nic Fine  
982 who had come from...he'd been working with the ANC in South Africa and  
983 been thrown out, as it were; so I'd been working with him on some political  
984 work here, because obviously that's one of the areas that we've been  
985 strongest in, that the East End has always been a big area for refugees,  
986 for migrants and for people who've come from areas where there's been a  
987 lot of political strife. So I was working with him with a group called The  
988 Leaveners who had really very strong kind of youth-based theatre work.  
989 And he had some spare time and he would work cheaply so I invited him;  
990 he'd been directing stuff in Cape Town but he had had to leave because  
991 of the regime there, the Apartheid regime, so he came to work with us;  
992 and he had been doing some work for Graeae, so it made sense therefore  
993 to start to work with this group and to bring in a writer, again as a part of  
994 that collective, and to bring in some people from Graeae and people from  
995 the Half Moon.

996  
997 And so we all met up on a lovely day. And I'm trying to desperately now,  
998 it's an awful...but I've forgotten the writer's name, who has recently died

999 and I'm terrible that I've forgotten his name now...he's from Gay  
1000 Sweatshop. And I'll need a prompt at some point, or I'll need to go back  
1001 and do it. And it worked so well and we learned so much, that everybody  
1002 within the company, that group, outside of the Half Moon Young People's  
1003 Theatre work, and outside of Graeae's work, formed a company and  
1004 wanted to see this company work not just around the East End, which we  
1005 did, we did a small tour, but suddenly they wanted to work around the UK.

1006  
1007 So we applied to the Arts Council, got a touring grant, and suddenly we  
1008 were adding new members to the company and we were touring. And  
1009 Nabil Shaban kind of encouraged us to tour, he a great actor with  
1010 disabilities, been working with Graeae, he said to me, you know, just go  
1011 out there and start touring. And so we did, and it was fantastic, because it  
1012 was totally independent, as it were, but dependent on Graeae and the  
1013 Half Moon for everything you can imagine; because we didn't have much  
1014 money so we stole most of what we had but we were loaning it, the Half  
1015 Moon Young People's Theatre and Graeae loaned Double Exposure  
1016 pretty well everything that they could, including touring vehicles and  
1017 goodness knows what.

1018  
1019 And for the first time we took this work around some reasonably sized  
1020 venues around the UK. And it caused quite a sensation at the time, and  
1021 because when we arrived at certain venues it was we hadn't told them  
1022 that, yes, we had people in wheelchairs, electric wheelchairs, and we  
1023 needed to get them onto stage; and most of the theatres said, oh, we  
1024 didn't think you'd have people like that, you know, we...you know, yes,  
1025 people in the audience, we've got nice chairs for them, we've got disabled  
1026 toilets – sometimes – but backstage, you mean you want actors  
1027 backstage, I mean these people actually need accommodation backstage;  
1028 and it was part of I think quite a big move at the time, to actually say, well,  
1029 yeah, you know, new buildings are being built, are they accommodating  
1030 actors who have got all kinds of disabilities, so that are we excluding them  
1031 or not excluding them, you know, stand up and say.

1032  
1033 [1:14:57]

1034  
1035 So Double Exposure was quite an interesting kind of development, and it  
1036 did do two or three shows over a number of years; but of course we hadn't  
1037 recognised that – well, I hadn't recognised, but I'm sure others did – that  
1038 there were actors like Ellen Wilkie who had a disease which was  
1039 neurodegenerative; and of course I'd never had someone in my family  
1040 with a neurodegenerative disease, well, I'd no idea; she was great, she  
1041 was a well-known poet, she was a good actress, she was always vibrant  
1042 and wonderful, and she died. And of course, that's what happens to some  
1043 people.

1044  
1045 And then Hamish McDonald, who's a wonderful Scottish actor, and I still  
1046 wish he was here, he was a fantastic actor; diminutive size, but not in  
1047 personality, great personality. And he died.

1048

1049 And so the company began to suddenly recognise that the people who  
1050 were being left were actually...they were actors who didn't have a  
1051 disability; so I think the company, the original company members then  
1052 many of those with disabilities did, you know, two of them died, and it  
1053 became difficult then to keep the core team together, you know, two had  
1054 died; and I think people were genuinely shocked. And so it took a great  
1055 deal of the energy out of the company, and I think a certain sadness set  
1056 in; and I think that was unfortunate because I think then it became, well,  
1057 who is going to take this work forward. At the time I was having to move  
1058 away from the Half Moon's work, with Jenny Sealey who was massively  
1059 expanding the work of Graeae, and so in a sense Double Exposure had to  
1060 stand on its own two feet, and it probably was too early for it to do so.

1061  
1062 And I have to say, sadly I think much of the work in that area has not  
1063 progressed again in the way I would have loved to have seen it progress.  
1064 And there are some good companies out there, but I think again  
1065 artistically, and even in terms of the facilities, artistic facilities for people  
1066 who have for instance wheelchair access onto stages and all that is very,  
1067 very difficult sometimes; but also I think the expenses required to tour  
1068 companies sometimes that have more needs than able-bodied actors isn't  
1069 being funded. It's great that Graeae have been funded but that's not  
1070 enough.

1071  
1072 And so Double Exposure, it was a really interesting company, I think it had  
1073 much to recommend it in terms of some of the arguments that it brought  
1074 up about being on stage was really important. I think for audiences it was  
1075 challenging, and that's great, again it's that kind of radical side of the Half  
1076 Moon, it's actually saying it's really important that we have a company  
1077 that's challenging audiences, it's not creating easy theatre sometimes, it's  
1078 asking a lot of questions. And I think – oh, well, I do know – that the  
1079 capital programme from the Arts Council, which was kind of came on at  
1080 the beginning of the 1990s, and a lot of those capital developments within  
1081 arts centres and theatres and stuff like that, they took quite a few of the  
1082 reports that we produced which actually talked about in order to get a  
1083 grant what's the backstage going to be like in terms of facilities for people  
1084 who, you know, have got any kind of disability.

1085  
1086 And that was quite a big shock for many of the applicants, that suddenly  
1087 they had to provide a space on stage, around all of the, you know, not just  
1088 in the auditorium, on stage, all of those facilities so that there was equal  
1089 access. So all of that equalities work I think was really great, and I think it  
1090 was short-lived, Double Exposure, maybe six years or so, but I think its  
1091 influence quietly was probably a bit bigger than we probably remember.

1092  
1093 [1:19:57]

1094  
1095 I: How did the company find the building on White Horse Road, our present  
1096 home?  
1097

1098 SH: This one? Yeah, well, I think we all try and remember things that are a  
1099 little bit vague, however I remember looking for it because I kind of did  
1100 know that we were going to be thrown out of our site up on the main  
1101 house, on Mile End Road; and so I was looking around the East End for  
1102 an alternative. And this place came up, I was told that this place came up,  
1103 so I came down and broke in, and looked at it; and it was in a fairly dire  
1104 state, there was water coming through the roof and there were trees  
1105 growing here, there and everywhere; but it seemed to have a lot of  
1106 potential.

1107  
1108 It was going to be sold off, and so I talked to some people at the London  
1109 Docklands Development Corporation who knew about this place, and it  
1110 was very uncertain – very uncertain – about what their attitude to it was;  
1111 so I managed to get hold of an architect, and she came down, and I said,  
1112 could you put me some plans together very quickly to show how this might  
1113 work as a young people's theatre. So she put the whole thing together –  
1114 again whose name escapes me – and provided me with some plans that I  
1115 could then present in a kind of formal way to the Docklands Development  
1116 Corporation.

1117  
1118 And so those plans were made and costings were made for its  
1119 development; and I know nothing at that...well, I knew nothing at that time  
1120 about the costs of developing a building like this, so I'm not sure what the  
1121 costing was but it was ridiculously small, I mean it was so ridiculously  
1122 small, that I just thought, oh, great, yeah, we get a little bit of cash, we do  
1123 the whole place up, and it'll be wonderful. And of course it was nothing  
1124 like it, and I'm pleased I've forgotten the architect's name because I think  
1125 she might be embarrassed, because we just moved...well, we managed  
1126 to kind of convince the LDDC that it was viable, that if we took it over we  
1127 would get some capital together and we would develop it and it would be  
1128 lovely and it would all be very, very ritzy and it would be very nice.

1129  
1130 They were, at the time were beginning to look at disposals, they'd been  
1131 around for quite some time and they were looking to wind down. This  
1132 building at the time was not in the London Dockland Development  
1133 Corporation but it was just one of those bizarre things, the zone started  
1134 across the main road here; but somehow this place was on their books.  
1135 And so we managed to get it off their books, but the notion was it was  
1136 going to be a peppercorn rent, in perpetuity, but none of us – none of us –  
1137 were watching the legal side to it at all, we were a desperate company  
1138 knowing we were going to be thrown out, or had been thrown out more or  
1139 less, and we were down at Dame Colet House, and no one was really  
1140 looking at the legal side, we were just saying, yes, please, we'll have this  
1141 wonderful space.

1142  
1143 And so somehow – and I'm still not sure how – legal documents got  
1144 signed and the company moved down into it when it was, well, it was  
1145 awful, there was no heating on half of it, no lighting, and we were patching  
1146 things up; I mean it was dreadful really; well, I began to think, why had we  
1147 ever thought of coming down here. And it was on the cusp of me leaving,

1148 so I know Debbie came down as well, who's the next director, and she  
1149 must have thought what on earth are we doing here.

1150  
1151 But it did have the one big thing, that we thought we would have it in  
1152 perpetuity for a miniscule amount of a rent; and so our job, the company's  
1153 job, would merely be to raise some cash, a small amount of cash, to do it  
1154 up; because I was so naïve that I just thought that...I thought, well, it only  
1155 costs a few thousand to do this place up. And of course it's more like a  
1156 million or so, I don't know how much she finally raised to do it later on, but  
1157 it must have cost an absolute fortune. I learned a lot later on how much it  
1158 really costs to make a place fit for purpose, and this certainly wasn't fit for  
1159 purpose.

1160  
1161 [1:25:10]

1162  
1163 So in a way I still find it a bit of a blur because we were really  
1164 concentrating on trying to survive as a company because of the shock of  
1165 having been at the main company, as it were, going into liquidation. And  
1166 so holding the company together it was very, very difficult. And so this  
1167 building I think, although I found it and got hold of it I think then, I think  
1168 probably Debbie would tell you more about how it then, the relationship  
1169 developed, and the legal side of the ownership. But I'm delighted that it's  
1170 still here. And given that it was a public building and a Metropolitan Board  
1171 of Works building, and it played a role in the health and welfare of the  
1172 East End, isn't it great that a company like the Half Moon Young People's  
1173 Theatre, with its open doors, still doing that work but in a totally different  
1174 context, it's this is a public building, this is where young people come, this  
1175 is where families come; I think that's a big success story, personally.

1176  
1177 I: Can you describe what was particularly unique about the 1980s and the  
1178 early '90s that made the work of the YPT special or important?

1179  
1180 SH: Mmm. I didn't talk about the '80s, and I do think...well, I've mentioned  
1181 some of those things; I think the fact that we had a space that we opened  
1182 up to families and within those families, young people, people crossed the  
1183 threshold, felt...I don't think many people crossed the threshold in Oxford  
1184 House, it wasn't that kind of building, and it still isn't; but for us, we had  
1185 the ability to say, just walk in, walk in, and we're doing this, this and this, if  
1186 you want to get involved get involved. And so then we were able, people  
1187 were able to walk in in an informal way. I think then we were also then in a  
1188 less informal way we were putting on youth theatres, we had ten youth  
1189 theatres that ran, we had the technical training scheme; and so we met a  
1190 lot of people every day, we were part of their everyday experience. And  
1191 then during the daytime we were touring the schools. So we were meeting  
1192 people in different contexts all the time.

1193  
1194 And then once a year we had the East End Festival, and the spinoffs from  
1195 the East End Festival were great actually, because people came in and  
1196 used the space in all kinds of ways, I mean we organised everything going  
1197 out around different venues, something like 40-odd venues sometimes

1198 and 70 performances. But I mean actually other things happened; short-  
1199 term things came on, people got together, did scratch performances, all  
1200 kinds of things took place. And suddenly out of that we developed the  
1201 New Playwrights' Trust, which was because we were getting a lot of  
1202 young people to write, and new playwrights, and we developed a new-  
1203 playwright group. And suddenly, that came out of that festival, and there  
1204 was a demand, and we responded to that demand; it may not have been  
1205 what we thought we were going to do but we just responded to that.  
1206

1207 So I think we were a responsive company, we were always looking to  
1208 respond to the community we were working for; and it was great that we  
1209 were part of it. So I don't think we actually felt any separation from that  
1210 community at all.

1211  
1212 [1:29:24]

1213  
1214 I also think, politically I think there was a strong – I don't know whether  
1215 you'd call it a...I call it a small p for political – is that people felt committed  
1216 politically to many people's lives here, that the equality, justice, social  
1217 justice, and I think that was important, it meant people worked for a lot  
1218 less – sometimes – and they were committed to a cause, and they felt that  
1219 cause was a good cause; and it meant that they would give their time and  
1220 energy and I could twist their arm a lot of the time – which probably wasn't  
1221 a good thing to do – but in fact it meant that we could do a heck of a lot  
1222 more than you might have thought with the resources we had. And it also  
1223 meant that we had to ask people out within the community to help us, and  
1224 of course people always want to help, you know, if you're open to people  
1225 to being helped, to asking, of course people help.  
1226

1227 And I think it is...and I don't come from the East End originally, but I mean  
1228 I do think an East End that's had a history of three, four hundred years of  
1229 constant rounds of immigration, migration, it does have a way, it does  
1230 have a resilience and a way of getting along, you know, sort of tough  
1231 things happen, but in general people are incredibly...I use the term I like,  
1232 reasonable with each other; people rub along, it's okay. And people do  
1233 want to contribute if you can communicate, if you're open.  
1234

1235 And I think therefore one of the things we did do was to find ways of  
1236 communicating, whether it was in the bilingual, trilingual work where we  
1237 would actually work in the languages, and working with different cultures;  
1238 so we were learning all the time, and we made mistakes, you know, we  
1239 really made mistakes sometimes, and we didn't know at first who to ask  
1240 and what to do, but we learned over time because we were here, we were  
1241 here seven days a week, as it were, every day, we were here, we were  
1242 doing all kinds of work. And so I think what we became is a facility for  
1243 people who they told us stuff and we responded, we didn't always lead  
1244 stuff. So I think it was, for me, and I know for many people at work, it was  
1245 an exciting place to be.  
1246

1247 And I don't think it's ever stopped being exciting, that's the thing. And in a  
1248 sense I think there's been a...I think when I've travelled around the  
1249 country quite a little while, and there are some great youth theatre groups  
1250 and theatre in education groups around the country, but I feel they are  
1251 diminishing. And talking and working with quite a lot of tutors who are  
1252 working in the youth theatre movement and the theatre in education  
1253 movement, they are under pressure, they're...you know, I ran some  
1254 workshops recently in Derby Playhouse, great, but people said they had  
1255 no extra capacity to take on any more, that the amount of pressure that  
1256 they were under because of lack of funding, because of the work they  
1257 were...the quality of the work they were keeping up; again they, as it  
1258 were, are subsidising with their own time and energy a sector that is  
1259 always under pressure. And I didn't feel coming from the '80s, I never felt  
1260 that kind of pressure really, I felt we were in a context in which we had to  
1261 fight for resources but I felt the resources were there and if we produced  
1262 then we would actually manage to pull enough money, as it were, to get  
1263 by; I'm not sure that that's the case any more.

1264  
1265 And getting by, that's not a great thing to look forward to in the future;  
1266 getting by, that's not a great aspiration. And I'd feel that when I look at  
1267 some of the great pieces of theatre that were on the main stage, that  
1268 audiences came to all our youth theatres, everybody came to those great  
1269 performances, that they were radical in the way that they were produced,  
1270 because of the nature of the theatre so haphazard, then part of that  
1271 became part of the creativity, that East End audiences were able to see  
1272 fantastic actors and in their back yard, for very little money. That's a pretty  
1273 good vibrant way to run a theatre sector, as it were, in anywhere. Is there  
1274 much of that going on now? There's certainly some, but I wouldn't say  
1275 it's...I feel it was a reasonably high point and that now the work of  
1276 companies like this are very few and far between, and thank goodness the  
1277 Half Moon Young People's Theatre has gone on to become the leading  
1278 company at the time; at the time we were around I'd say there were many  
1279 other companies that were doing similar work and with similar quality, and  
1280 many of them are not here now; and it's to everybody's credit that the Half  
1281 Moon Young People's Theatre that they've become one of the top leading  
1282 companies in the country. And I don't think we were that in the '80s and  
1283 '90s, I think it was just starting out to do that; and it needed to do that in  
1284 order to sustain itself. So I think we were little, well-formed, a bit ragged,  
1285 but I do think we did a great job.

1286  
1287 I: Thank you for sharing your memories with us today.

1288  
1289 SH: You're very welcome. Thank you.

1290  
1291 M: Cool. Fantastic. Thank you very much. Thank you.

1292  
1293 SH: Very well done.

1294  
1295 M: Thank you.

1296

1297 SH: You were great. You were great [inaudible 1:35:58] big smile, and it's  
1298 great. No, no, because it's great, you know; and you're responding, and  
1299 that's really nice, you know, because I mean I can imagine somebody  
1300 might, as I'm talking, might go to sleep; you'll go, what is he going...

1301

1302 **End of transcript**