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Alexandra Palace Television Society

Interview with Stuart Latham : Actor, Stage Manager, Producer – Appeared in 42 Pre-War Drama Productions

Interviewed by Sylvia Peters

Audio Wav file – 28/08/1993

Sylvia: Stuart Latham has had a long, distinguished career in the theatre, in radio and television as an actor, a studio manager and, ultimately, as a director with arts at the BBC for many years and finally joined Granada Television where he was the first ever producer of *"Coronation Street"*.

Before we begin, can you clear up a little mystery for me – why is it we always call you 'Harry' but you were always known professionally as 'Stuart Latham'?

Stuart: Well that was Sybil Thorndike's fault. Practically, my first job was the best double in all Shakespeare's plays Mercutio the apothecary in *"Romeo and Juliet"* where Sybil's younger daughter, Mary Casson, was playing 'Juliet' and when it came to making up the programmes, Sybil said "Harry Latham", we can't use that it sounds like a band leader, haven't you got a middle name? and I said, "Yes, Stuart" and she said "That's it!" and I've been stuck with it ever since.

Sylvia: Well, it's the early days I want to go back to Harry in 1936, the beginning of television in this country, how did you get into that?

Stuart: Well, I first went up to Alexandra Palace in August 1936. At the time, I was the Stage Manager and playing the small part of the messenger Herald in T S Elliott's *"Murder in the Cathedral"* at the Mercury Theatre in London and Ashley Dukes, the Manager, was approached by the BBC if he would lend his company to come up to the Palace so that George More O'Farrell could have a trial run as a television director and off I went with a few props and costumes and the cast and we did it and I was paid the princely sum of £6 – the BBC's always been generous – and after that I knew one or two of the heroes who were in their first band of directors and I found myself working on a lot of programmes, usually as an actor, a lot of the time as a stage manager or a studio manager. I was, I suppose, the first in the world at that and in about 1939 when the War closed public television down I'd take the part in one way or another in 42 live transmissions. So I had quite a bit of experience.

Sylvia: Yes, I take it you rather enjoyed it and that's why you went on doing a lot it.

Stuart: I was fascinated by it. I've never understood the detailed mechanics and technique of it, but it was very exciting. I don't think anyone today realises how brave the original directors and technicians were. No-one in the World had ever done tried to do it before and they had to make up the camera as they went along, find how to do things and we relied on quite a large core of actors, all of them very good actors, who were prepared to have a bash at this strange new medium. It was quite a shock to the system.

Sylvia: It must have been terrifying. It must have been the worst medium to work in.

Stuart: It really was a bit of a monkey puzzle. There's a famous story that you know of a director (who I won't name – you can if you want to), that was so overcome by the complexity of it all on a live transmission that he got up from his seat in the control room and went out onto the parapet of Alexandra Palace and was only stopped at the last minute from chucking himself off.

Sylvia: Yes, but somebody else took control and carried on and so it still went out.

Stuart: I think that is a tribute to your sex because, apparently, his PA (I don't know who it was) she or he was a remarkable character, just took over so the programme went through to the end.

Sylvia: Yes. You acted and you stage-managed there and then you did direct television, didn't you?

Stuart: That came after the War and four-and-a-half years in the RAF.

Sylvia: Oh. I was just going to ask which one you found the most terrifying?

Stuart: I think, without question, being a director because of the feeling, possibly an inflated ego, of having total responsibility of what was going on and the thought that if you stopped, then everything stopped. Frankly that scares, but they really had to piece it from the beginning. Years and years later when I went to New York for the first time on behalf of Granada Television, the number of Americans who asked me if we had television in this country really got on my wick and I said, "I was doing it in 1936, the first people in the world" and regret to say that some people did not believe me.

Sylvia: This is quite true. We were the first television service in the world weren't we? In England?

Stuart: Yes and I never had experience of the drama department or the drama side of it. I did appear in a couple of reviews with Valerie Hobson and Graham Payn (Noel Coward's friend) and Nelson Keys who was a very popular comic and such a juvenile in review and that was highly enjoyable but, otherwise, it was strictly drama.

But what an incredible range of drama it was that they did in those days. I mean – Shakespeare – there was "*Romeo and Juliet"*, which I seem to remember *"Julius Caesar"* in modern dress, *"As You Like It"*, I remember that as being a rather damp squid, *"Twelfth Night"* where Harold Clayton whose both Studio A and Studio B agitated actors were dashing from one studio another, and at one stage the Viola (Barbara Lott) was lurking in the corridor having been back to the dressing room to make a change couldn't remember which studio she had to go in and was hovering until someone dashed out from Studio B saying "This way, this way" and the poor girl went in. But then, not only Shakespeare - *"Murder in the Cathedral"* was done again as a proper transmission …

Sylvia: Yes, a live show.

Stuart: Yes, a live transmission and W H Auden and Christopher Isherwood's *"The Ascent of F6"* – very exciting that was - with Royston Morley and Royston also did *"Peer Gynt"* by Ibsen in a heavily shortened version and Peter Ustinov (a young Peter) played Peer Gynt and I've always remembered because I was stage managing along the xxx whilst playing the bridegroom, he got badly thrown in one scene and I knew he was about to try or make it up and found out, after the transmission, that what had thrown him was one of the stage hands or prop men (it being the BBC) they were all neatly turned out in light, white coats and he was going about his proper business setting things and it proved immensely distracting and poor Peer Gynt couldn't get enough of his high line

Sylvia: He kept seeing a white coat.

Stuart: Yes, he kept seeing a white coat flitting about, so ..

Sylvia: Yes, nothing could throw you and as you had no form of recording you just had to plough on whatever was happening.

Stuart: Yes once the thing had started it just went ahead and, hopefully, finished sometime or other.

The directors' approach was sort of two-fold. There were the ones who were brought up on theatre and pointed a camera, hopefully, at well-prepared and rehearsed actors – as I said they were darned good actors – and then there were others whose inclinations led them towards film (which has largely taken over these days), and the grammar of making television pictures was based by people like Desmond Davis and Marr on a film technique but, nevertheless, the performance being continuous and live – from the actors' point of view – was much more like their customary work in the theatre. The only thing was they had to do terrible gyrations to position themselves for the camera.

Sylvia: Well, I presume this is why they were all so marvellous. I mean you couldn't have had actors who weren't very good. I mean, in order to get through they had to be superb.

Stuart: Well, I quite agree. A lot of the names are forgotten now, but uh ..

Sylvia: Tell us some of them.

Stuart: Well, I have particular memories of a very fine actor, Ernest Wilton, who, surprisingly, because he was really a Henry Irvinesque, Shakespearean at heart, absolutely fell in love with television and he did several plays, most of which I worked on or played in, and one of them was Pirandello's *"Henry IV"* where Ernest played the mad Emperor and I was one of the four ghastly young men who served him as parts of (mumbling), but Ernest was truly terrifying in the part and the four of us used to find our skins crawling with terror sometimes when Ernest was really at it, and the senior cameraman was so hypnotised by what he was seeing through his viewfinder that he couldn't move his camera and there was very nearly chaos which Ernest, like the old trouper he was, rose above, readjusted himself and continued to tear a passion to tatters.

Sylvia: When you were stage managing or studio managing in television, did you have to give prompts to artists and, if you did, did you have the cut-out key that they used to have?

Stuart: Oh Lord, no! That was quite a lazy venture and I remember, particularly, Lewis Casson, I forget what the play was, it may have been "*Julius Caesar"*, suddenly turning majesterially straight into camera and saying, "I've tried, prompt please!"

Sylvia: This went out?

Stuart: And that went out (laughter).

Sylvia: The audience must have loved it.

Stuart: Well, it was always for the actor and the director xxx age and experience and most actors, I think, came to love it and although I sound like and old fuddy-duddy, I think a lot of the life has gone out of television these days because you can always start off, you can always re-take, you can patch it up, whereas in those first years at Ally Pally, you just had to take a deep breath and act.

Sylvia: And the adrenalin flowed. I think this is what it lacks today and I've even heard youngsters today saying that in a live show you really have to be on your toes and get the adrenalin flowing and you don't with a recording.

Stuart: You don't, and I talked to young actors and young directors and they can't believe that one ever did it live. They find the thought of it absolutely terrifying! (Laughter).

Sylvia: When you were first there, I mean in those early years there was hardly any money was there, so what sort of sets did you have for the plays? I mean, were they very poor?

Stuart: They were perhaps not much above what might be called weekly rep standard, but the designers rapidly learned and there were some quite imaginative things done. I remember

one play where they tried, there were so many scenes, to do it all back projection and, splendid idea, and at the dress rehearsal some quite lovely shots came out with the back projection and the actors in front of it but, for some reason, (I never found out why) the back projection broke down completely and the whole cast looked as if they were playing in a swimming bath or a public lavatory.

Sylvia: But, they had to go on!

Stuart: They had to go on!

Sylvia: What about … can we come to after the War because you weren't here for the War time years and then did you go back to the theatre or did you feel the urge to go back into television?

Stuart: I went …. I was happy to take anything I could get and I went almost immediately on being demobbed up to Sir Barry Jackson's at the Birmingham Rep as a director, and from there I went to the Bristol Vic which Hugh Hunt was just starting up and then Michael Barry, who had become Head of Drama at the Palace, rang up and asked if I would like to go on a training course and become a television director and I didn't hesitate, I just said "Yes".

Sylvia: And who was playing in them in those days?

Stuart: Royston Morley, one of the old originals and he ran a very good school, very effective. I can remember after we all had a little trial piece of about fifteen minutes, I remember Donald McWhinnie, who is justifiably a big name now, staggering out of his saying "I think I've had a sex change!"

Sylvia: (Laughter) Oh dear. Did they, for instance teach you how to do a camera script or had you absorbed that through working on the floor.

Stuart: Well, in my case, I more or less knew it. In fact, the forty-two that I had done before the War gave me a complete feeling of being at home and what to do and how to do it, which was just as well because my time on the training course coincided with (I think it was The Coronation?) and practically all the equipment and all the directors were out on OB's and Michael Barry suddenly found that he was programmed to do a 90-minute play live from Studio E in Lime Grove which, at that time, was the most advanced in Europe and he rang up Royston and said, "Is there anyone on the course who could do it?" and Royston, bless him or blast him said, me and so I found myself launching Studio E with a 90-minute live play and within two minutes of going on the air, one of the principal actors – a lovely man and very good – knew fatally that he was going to dry on a very long speech, so he dropped his hand on a fellow actor's shoulder and cut to cue at the end. Well, apart from being a bit of a shock, it was during that speech that three cameras were moving out from a room into the garden outside and, of course, I hadn't a chance. I think I blacked out, but Royston Morley was standing behind me, bless him, and pulled it through and the rest of the 90 minutes went very smoothly. After that, nothing could terrify me.

Sylvia: I should think not! Well, Harry I know you write a lot today, quite a lot. What do you feel is the difference, I mean, we know there is an enormous improvement in technology - cameras and all that sort of thing today? What's the difference in the showing do you think, going back to those early days?

Stuart: Well, today the technical equipment is marvellous and youngish directors almost over-indulge themselves using it but, in the old days, it was the quality of what was being performed that took precedence and I don't quite know how to put it but, if you think of the plays that were done in those three years at Alexandra Palace, it's quite astonishing! There weren't many sets in the country, of course, and so it was rather 'elitist' or third programme, but apart from the Shakespeare, Ibsen's *"Peer Gynt"* and Pirandello's *"Henry IV"*, there were a great range of plays of real quality and people had started writing for it.

Sylvia: Yes. That is the thing I was going to say because you see, in the beginning, nobody wrote for television because there was *no* television.

Stuart: Well, I was never quite clear whether Tyrone Guthrie's beast, whose name escapes me now, was something that he had written as a sport and it was done on the stage or whether he actually wrote that for television but, otherwise, until Denis Johnson came along who later, for a time, became Head of Drama at the Palace …

Sylvia: Yes, I remember him.

Stuart: ….. and Denis wrote a lot of original plays for television, and I remember in one of them I had the pleasure of playing the leading part which was very peculiar casting because it was the Pigott Forgeries stories, and I found myself playing Piggot who was a fat man with a beard and I know I've got a beard in these days, but I didn't have then and I was as thin as a cucumber. However, I padded up, sweated under the lights and it was great fun.

Sylvia: Those lights were very hot, weren't they?

Stuart: Very hot. Which reminds me of the crocodile.

Sylvia: Oh, yes. Do tell me that story.

Stuart: Well, there used to be a period in the afternoon for programmes and then a break and then an evening period, and during the afternoon there had been a variety act where an exotic lady, whose name I've never known, had an act involving a crocodile and the poor beast got very, very hot in the studio under the lights and in one of the larger dressing rooms (for some strange reason only know to the builders of the Palace) there was a bath. So they put the crocodile in the bath with a nice lot of cold water and left it. Came the evening, we all turned up to do our piece and Ernest xxx was playing the lead and he walked into his dressing room and in that remarkable, exotic voice of his appeared in the door saying , "There's an alligator in my dressing room".

Sylvia: Did anyone believe him?

Stuart: Nobody believed him for a long time and I was thinking of the interesting problem of how you take an alligator or a crocodile out of a bath, down in the lift at the Palace and where to put it.

Sylvia: That's a marvellous story about an actor you remember, Harry. Is there anybody who produced who, in your opinion, was an outstanding producer in those early days?

Stuart: There were a lot of very capable and exciting men, but, personally, I think the outstanding one was Dallas Bower who I have always felt a near-genius and did imaginative and original things with television which, after all, is just a method of communication. It isn't an art form and Dallas made it look like an art form. Later in life he scripted the film for *"Henry V"* for Olivier and Lord Olivier, typically, did everything possible to supress Dallas's contribution. The reason that that's the best of the Olivier Shakespeare films, is Dallas.

Sylvia: That's something I never knew. I don't think anyone else did either as it was suppressed.

Stuart: You didn't argue with Larry.

Sylvia: Well, thank-you very much Harry.