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File: **1st August 1991 David Lytton**
Duration: **0:15:31**
Typist: **1026**

START AUDIO

0:00:00

Interviewer: David, let's start by saying how did you come to join the BBC at all?

David Lytton: Well I was somewhat lucky, I was asked to join. I had written a play or two which I had produced locally in Stratford-Upon-Avon where I had been an Actor. The acting profession had given me up and I did some school teaching and then I became the box office manager of a theatre, there. Principally I wanted to be a writer all of the time and I had written a play. And somebody came over from Birmingham, Charles Parker, he saw the play, he then asked me whether I would like to adapt it for the radio.

We sat down together and I, under his instruction, began the adaptation. The play was broadcast very successfully. And then one day in my box office there was a knock on the door and a man called Dennis Morris turned up and said, "Are you happy in this box office?" and I said, "Oh, this is only a staging post." And he said, "Would you like to come and join our little feature department in Birmingham?"

Interviewer: Dennis Morris, of course, was the Head of Programmes.

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David Lytton: He was the Head of Programmes at the time. I said, “Yes, well what sort of contract and all that?” And we discussed that. So I gave up the box office and went, ostensibly, to write feature programmes. And this little department comprised Charles Parker and Philip Donnellan. And now it comprised me. There was only one office in this very large building which was appropriately enough, the old School of the Blind. I thought that was a very good place to have a broadcasting organisation.

Anyway, the thing is nobody quite knew what a feature department was there to do. The drama department that was run by or had Peter Dews and somebody else whose name I can’t at the moment remember, it has entirely disappeared, they had a definite brief, Dews had a definite brief. Sport had a definite brief and there was of course ‘The Archers’, they had a very definite brief. But nobody quite knew what a feature programme was, where it fitted into the schedule, there was no such thing in those days as investigative journalism and the BBC would have frowned upon it anyway.

So, there was Charles Parker with a lot of tapes of a medical feature program, I suppose, such greats as Norman Corwin et cetera, The Lonesome Train, and he used to sit playing these hour after hour and discussing with great vehemence what a feature programme was. So I said, “Well, let us try and write a feature programme that is not a drama but it will take in some elements of drama. And let us take say the theatre that I have just left, which is going to celebrate its 35th birthday.” So we did, we wrote what turned out to be a quite successful programme about the theatre. We used actors, narrators, we used sound effects and actuality. Actuality being stuff recorded on the scene of whatever was taking place. (Laughter)This

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was quite successful. We then thrashed around and did some more ideas that I had, which I basically wrote. All this time, Charles was very dissatisfied with the fact that actors had to be employed because he did not think that actors were real. Nor did he think that stuff written by a writer and put into other people's mouths was real. At this time he was a great [deivity 0:04:45] of realism.

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Interviewer: This was about 1956 wasn't it?

David Lytton: No, no this was about 1954 or 5.

0:04:54

Interviewer: But in a period when the Americans, like Corwin, had been writing stuff for John Julian and people like that?

David Lytton: Yes. One or two programmes had been tried by Philip Donnellan by just taking a tape recorder out into the country and recording people doing particular crafts and arts et cetera. But at that time the BBC was very nervous about the unscripted word. Everything had to be written down and then read. If you found a ploughman, for God's sake, and you asked him, talked to him, about what his life was like you then had to write it down and he had to read it. Now the ploughman, by nature, was not altogether literate and was certainly not a good reader so what came out was very stilted. Nevertheless this was the insistence.

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So here we were, we didn't quite know what features were ourselves and whatever we produced there was always great argument and difficulty about where we should put it in the schedule. Was it early evening, could people have it with their supper? As I say we were thrashing about then one day, came to visit us on one of his grand tours which he used to make of all the regions, the Head of Features from London, Laurence Gilliam.

He was a large man, I thought at the time that he was a reincarnation of Edward the Seventh. He had that slow, beaming smile, intensely blue eyes which seemed to see right through you in many ways. And although they had a gleam in them, nevertheless, there was something very, very sharp about them, he would miss absolutely nothing. Well, he came for three days to survey the work of the department.

We would play him tapes, we would discuss it, Charles Parker and Phillip Donnellan and I, always in a bar or a very good restaurant. Just at that time Parker and I were in a bit of conflict with Dennis Morris, the Head of the area, over a programme I had written over immigration, which I had called 'Black on White'.

Morris had said, "I had predicted in this programme that within a very short time there would be race riots, there hadn't been one yet." Morris said, "This was going it a bit strong." And I said, "Well, I knew the subject and I have been around." I came from South Africa originally. I had been around in London in the Notting Hill area and I had been around in the various areas in Birmingham where these people were now congregating. And I said, "Within a very short time," this I had scripted into this programme. And Morris said, "No, this was too strong," etc.

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So when Laurence was there, I put to him as an arbiter. I said, “Well, here is the programme and you are the Head of Features, if it can’t be done here in Birmingham possibly it could be done in London, as coming from London.” Because there was this division, the provinces were supposed, really, to report on the provinces. London could report upon the World in its feature and programmes. But there was nothing specifically in this programme to link it to, specifically, with Birmingham. It covered all of the big cities in England that I had seen.

Anyway, after a very good lunch, at a very expensive hotel with Dennis Morris and David Gregan who was the assistant, who was a much broader minded man, I must say, with regards the culture that he thought radio should produce than our other bosses were. We had this lunch and I made some very vehement points.

That evening Donnellan, Parker and I took Laurence to a lucullan feast at the old Saxon Mill outside Warwick. Parker and Donnellan were very excited at having the big brass there. I thought I had made my point about a particular programme so I more or less shut up. They talked twenty to the dozen and we had this meal. Now both Parker and Donnellan were very vehement talkers and very expansive, lots of gesticulation. I looked across the table and I saw the blue eyes getting rather weary.

I went up to the gents where I lingered a little while. Laurence came out and he said, “We must have a little bit of relief from all that jabber.” We walked around, there was a dam there and lovely grounds in the evening. It was, I think, a beautiful August evening. He had only recently come back from South Africa so we had a topic to talk about. We walked around slowly, and we must have spent at least an hour out there before we re-joined the others who were still arguing with

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themselves now, very vehemently about what features were and what they should be, about what Birmingham should be doing et cetera.

Well the upshot of this, Laurence left. I made a contact with him that I thought was quite a warm one. And the argument over this programme went on, they eventually refused to do it. And then they seemed to think that I should assist in the drama department as well as the feature department.

In other words I could see very plainly that they were cutting down the number of features and were trying to separate what they thought of as three very hot-headed young men who, really, they could not place in that very well structured news, sport, drama situation in the School of the Blind on Carpenter Road.

I could see some writing on the wall (Laughter) and I then heard that London was going to produce a feature documentary, biography, of General Smuts, Field Marshal Smuts. And it was going to be done by a fellow, now I forget his name, Stephen somebody, whom I knew to be virtually an alcoholic.

Now, it so happened that Smuts had been my godfather and had been largely responsible for bringing me up in my early teens. And I knew a great deal, therefore, about him. A great deal that a lot of other people would not know. I then sat down and I wrote a very, very cheeky letter to Laurence Gilliam saying that, “If that man did that programme, I had a very good, strong horsewhip above my mantelpiece and that I would use it.” (Laughter)

Laurence phoned me up and said, “Come and see me.” I went up to London, sat down in his office in Rothwell House and laid out why there was only one person who could do this work.

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Was I prepared to leave Birmingham, I said, “Yes, I would leave Birmingham.” But he said, “I couldn’t offer you a position at the moment, but I could offer you a contract for the year.” I said, “I will accept those conditions.” So I went out on the limb and he packed me off to South Africa where I stayed nearly six months. The result of the whole thing was a four separate hour radio biography which won, as they say, golden opinion. Which had everybody of note, including people like Churchill et cetera, in it, whom I had badgered to give me an interview.

Well then, as this was a success Laurence said, “Would I join the department?” I was only too ready to join the department so I moved myself up to London, severed my links with Birmingham and joined the feature department.

Now this was a very strange affair. It was quite unlike what I had just left which had been a kind of chaos and undefined in every way you could think of. Here, the thing had been in operation for a good many years and had tremendous acclaim and of course with Laurence at its head it had the ear of all the very top brass who were only too willing to place the programme. Which were what I discovered to be a very odd bunch in Rothwell House.

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END AUDIO

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