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START AUDIO

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Denise Coffey: Hello whoever is listening. My name is Denise Coffey. I'm 74 and a half years old. I was born as a surprise, in 1936. My mother thought I was too much cake, she hadn't noticed she was pregnant.

The king abdicated on the 11th December. My mother, like a lot of ordinary people, didn't know anything about Mrs Simpson and all that. The king abdicating was a huge shock. As a result of which I was hurtled into the world, weighing two pounds, three months premature. From that day to this, it's been quite a struggle to insist on staying in the world.

My father was Royal Naval Air Service in World War One, then Royal Air Force until 1949. Interestingly enough, I don't know when you'll be listening to this but, at the moment all the trouble is in the Middle East. In the 20's and 30's that is where the British, with the Royal Air Force as the force there, kept watch. Afghanistan, the North-West Frontier of India as it was then, now Pakistan, Iraq, Aden, Libya. Well, what do you know?

So my background is military, peripatetic, brought up in [digs 00:01:34] and married quarters just going from place to place. Grand training for the theatre, you can imagine.

Of course, World War Two was in full swing for most of my childhood and teenage years really, because rationing went on until the 50's and so on. Historians know all that stuff. My

parents both ran away from home. So I don't know, really, any more about them except that.

00:02:08

Interviewer: Tell me about your education, was that disrupted because of the war?

Denise Coffey: Well I suppose it was greatly improved because we would go from England to Scotland, back to Scotland, England. I was always with the wrong accent, with the wrong red hair. I suppose it was handy because if I didn't learn the accent within about 10 minutes, and even if I did, trouble in the playground.

What I learned in one country didn't apply to the other. When I arrived in Weston-super-Mare when I was seven, I'd come from a very fearsome regime at Arbroath High School in Scotland in which there was no playing and singing and sitting about. It was, "Do your sums, etc."

The very severe lady teacher, I remember, said, "If you can learn to read and you can do sums, you can do what you like, you can do anything, you can be anybody." So we all thought, "That's good, who will we be, who will we be?"

I got to Weston-super-Mare, where it was all singing songs and going around the playground telling stories. I thought that was just very peculiar. It didn't seem like school.

Later on, I was at Dunfermline High School, which is a very ancient school in Scotland, not a local school. It's a very famous grammar school founded in the 15th century by Robert Henryson. That was a school that was devoted, again, to pretty concentrated learning. "You've time to play later," was the motto.

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We learned Latin when we were 11. I learned German and French. We didn't quite know about German because it was 1948. We thought, "Oh well, I suppose we better." A very good all-round education but my mind was set on the theatre.

00:04:14

Interviewer: Where did you get that inkling from, to go into the theatre or to perform? Did that come quite early, can you remember the sort of-

Denise Coffey: Yes, we were stationed at RAF Locking at Weston-super-Mare in Somerset in 1944 or 3 I suppose. We went into Bristol to see the pantomime. I think you'll find a lot of people in the theatre say, "The first pantomime I saw, that was it, I wanted to do that." It was the Hippodrome at Bristol, 'Cinderella'. The chief comic, playing Buttons, was a scots comic called Alec Finlay.

I had my kilt on of course. We were sitting at the end of a row. It's a strange thing, if you've never been in the theatre and you don't quite know what it's supposed to be about, to find this place where people are playing a story and singing and dancing. We were sitting at the end of a row in the stalls. I went and stood in the aisle looking at the stage and wondering how Alec Finlay could make all the people laugh at the same time every time. I was looking up into the theatre at people laughing, looking at him.

He finally said, "Here, what's that wee kilt down there? What are you doing, who are you?" "Denise Coffey," I said because you learn to say your name and your present address. The first thing I learned, anywhere we went new, was where we were living in case I got lost. I'm able to repeat addresses.

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So he said, “Oh, you’re a wee Scottish kilt?” “Yes,” said I. My mother said, “Sit down.” So I sat down. When we came out, I said, “How did he do that? How did they do that?” I can still the song from the song sheet, from ‘Cinderella’. It was perfect. I said, on the bus on the way back to Weston, “That’s what I’m going to do.” Eight years later, that’s exactly what I was doing.

00:06:16

Interviewer: How did you make the transition from seeing that first pantomime to training? Did you have to persuade your parents to let you do it?

Denise Coffey: No, no, because they were wild people. They married by declaration in the court, which you could do in Scotland then. You went into the dock, the two of you, and the magistrate or whoever was judging would say, “Do you want to get married?” “Yes.” “Will you keep the laws of the land?” “Yes.” “You’re married.” Marriage by declaration, it’s actually… I don’t think it happens now.

They’d both run away from home. They understood, kind of… I don’t know, I never asked them, but they probably thought it was just a wild dream I was having. Perhaps I wouldn’t live that long to do it, being a puny creature at the time. Yes I did, and yes I did.

At Dunfermline High School, there was a theatre called the Opera House. A small… Quite a large theatre in the town. There was a company, a rep company. They were playing ‘Macbeth’. They wanted people to be pages and servants and stuff like that, so all the keen actors in the school rushed to audition. I was one of the servants.

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A man from Cowdenbeath- I don't know how well you know Fife, but it's in Fife. At that time, it was very much a mining village. A man from Cowdenbeath was playing the man who was asked by King Duncan, "Whence comest thou?" The reply was, "From Fife, great king, where Norweyan banners flout the sky and fan our people cold." But the man said, "From Fife, great king, where Norweyan banners flout the sky and fan our people cold." It got sustained applause, which I don't think it ever had before. The English actors were completely baffled. These lardy actors were saying, "What is this?" It stopped the show every night. That company, that was my first little outing on the stage.

Children's Hour was a great thing on the radio. I don't know if it's possible to imagine what a gigantic part of people's lives the radio was. In the 50's, of course, there were the sort of envelope-sized television sets with live plays that nobody could hear or understand because by the time you'd squashed your nose to the set ___[00:09:02]. It was only posh people who had that anyway.

I discovered, I don't know how, that you could audition for Children's Hour in Edinburgh at BBC Edinburgh. So I wrote in and got a reply, "Yes, come along with a poem and a piece of stuff of your own choice." I went there, over on the train to Edinburgh. From Fife, it was only the… There was no Forth Road Bridge then anyway. I'd have to have thumbed a lift.

Yes, a letter came from [Francis Campbell 00:09:40], head of Children's Hour, "Yes, we would like you to be in a series called 'The Hut Man'," which was a nature study programme with two children. I was to play the boy, having a light and rough voice. Helena Gloag, I think, played the sister. This hut man took these children for rambles in the countryside. It was kind of, "What is that animal called, hut man?" "It's a tiger." "Oh, let's run away."

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___[00:10:18]. It was thrilling, I was all set at last, I was going to be on the BBC.

About two weeks before the date of the recording, my face turned bright green and I was in agony and very ill. I refused to believe it because I had to get to Edinburgh, hadn't I? My father, who was from Cork in Ireland, said at one point when in his 60s, "Nobody would know I come from Cork, I have no accent at all." Anyway, he said, "No, this is what you call stage fright." I said, "Really? Maybe I don't want to do this after all? Agony, agony."

My Scottish mother, thank goodness, dragged me into the doctors on the way to the station to do the broadcast. It was peritonitis. I was loaded in an ambulance saying, "I can't do this, I have to be at the B-" I woke up two days later saying, "BC." So I missed my first chance at a whole series of the 'Hut Man'. That was it, my career was over.

00:11:28

Interviewer: What age were you?

Denise Coffey: I was 15. They were very good actually, they sorted out other things for me. Then I went to drama school in Glasgow, the new College of Dramatic Arts had just set up in a lot of dusty old rooms at the top of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music with mavericks from London, Colin Chandler and John Groves who were running a maverick theatre in the Bolton's Theatre in London. That was three years on a… Fife County Council were one of the very, very, first enlightened councils. They considered that training for the theatre was a perfectly possible and proper thing to do. In fact three of us from Dunfermline, in different

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years, all went to the college and then launched into the wide world.

00:12:24

Interviewer: What did you have to do to get into your training course? Did you have to pass an exam or an audition?

Denise Coffey: You had to do an audition. The first year, I was too young really. I was determined to be there when I was 16 or 17. It was ridiculous, but they said, “Come along.” I had an interview in the director’s office. He said- You have to understand the Fife accent is not an accent, it’s a whole language. It’s quite old Scots. The trouble is they talk like that all the time. When he said, “What are you going to do?” “Juliet,” I said.

I raced up the steps in his office, to where his lavatory was, and leaned over the balcony and said, “Thou knowest the mask of night is on my face, else would a maiden blush bepaint my cheek for that which thou hast heard me speak tonight.” He said, “I think, maybe, you’d better come back next year and have a think about it.” I said, “Okay.”

I went back the next year, and was conducted down some steps, this time, into what I thought was a large room by a very superior second year student who obviously looked at me as if I was some kind of beetle. Not that kind of beetle, the squishy ones.

I was standing in this room, and a voice from nowhere said, “What are you going to do for us?” I turned around. There was a void, a black void. I was on the stage of their theatre. I went, (makes noise) “Oh, is that a theatre?” The sound of people falling off their chairs, the director and the co-director. They said,

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"Yes, you're on the stage." "Oh," I said, "I see." "What are you going to do?" "Portia". "Yes." "The quality of mercy is not strained, it droppeth as gentle rain upon the place beneath. Twice blest, it blesseth him that gives and him that takes." This laughter, rolling about in the aisles.

They said, "What else are you going to do?" I said, "I don't know." They said, "Come here and talk to us." They were so sweet because, I mean, obviously somebody two feet tall with bright red hair speaking incomprehensibly wasn't the ideal student. They were good, they took a chance.

It was wonderful training. We did Checkhov, which no one was doing at the time. This was 1957. Constance Garnett had just done all the new translations.

Colin Chandler was a great Checkhovian director. I was playing four parts in one of the plays. I was late for a rehearsal. He said, "Where have the four of you been?" I said, "Playing bridge." That was alright, I got off with that one. Terrific people. Bill Simpson was there at the time, he became Doctor Finlay.

We had some Fulbright scholars with us from America. They were chaps who'd been in Korea and were suffering battle fatigue, they were really poor chaps. I suppose they thought it would make them feel better being among us lot. One of them stayed on and married a Scots lass. Bill O'Connell is in every film that Clint Eastwood does, he's back in America. The other poor chap, he was in a bad way. It was good for us because all our boys, of course, had done their national service. It was an interesting mix of older people and younger maniacs.

00:16:17

Interviewer: This lasted what, three years?

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Denise Coffey: Three years, yes.

00:16:20

Interviewer: Then, after that, did you start hitting the West End or did you stay up in Scotland?

Denise Coffey: I don't know about anyone else, but I just like to see what happens next. I don't make plans. One of the final exams in the college was to create a radio piece, of five minutes, to show off what voices you can do. As you know, "Mine was like that." Well, "No, it was like that now."

There was a programme that had just started on Scottish BBC radio in Edinburgh called 'Scope', which was an unusual programme. Its title gave its raison d'être, it was the scope to investigate anything, discuss anything, see what's happening to anything, anybody. James MacTaggart, who of course later became a very influential person in radio and television, was the inventor. I think he invented it himself.

I thought I'd do a send up of it. I loved the programme because it dealt with everything, it was way ahead of its time. A half hour every Thursday, I think, on the radio. I did my piece, which was about possible moon landings, with silly voices and stuff, a pretend documentary. My tagline was, "Unfortunately, we're not able to film the moon landing because the moon is full tonight, thank you." I called it 'Spoke, the magazine' in the past tense.

I came out of the studio, there was this chap. A hugely handsome chap, not that I noticed at all, who said, "Was that you doing that send up of 'Scope'?" "Yes it was," I said. He said,

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“I’m James MacTaggart, I’m the producer.” I said, “Oh, I love the programme. You can tell,” I said to him, “I love it so much, I wanted to do a pretend one.” He said, “How would you like to come and be a freelance reporter with us?” “No, no,” I said, “I’m going into the theatre.” With a capital T obviously. “Oh come,” he said, “give it a chance.” I did three years. It was maybe three months with the programme, then I’d do other things.

Scotland had a tradition of… I don’t know what- A mixture between concert, part, and variety. It was very robust theatre, twice nightly, singing, dancing, very rude jokes, and fun, fun, fun. I found myself roped into that by chance, again. Then, occasionally, there’d be the odd thing in the theatre, just… You know, a young person starting out.

One day, I was in our office. I loved ‘Scope’, it was very… Sometimes it was quite dangerous and demanding, the stories that we followed up. The process of that programme was that we had reporters who brought in the stories. The editor would then edit those pieces so that there would be question and there’d be answer, the question in brackets. Eddie Boyd, our scriptwriter would then write a script to go with it. Leonard Maguire, one of Scotland’s finest actors, would do the narration. It was unlike the usual feeding in live pieces, it had its own technique.

I would be, let’s say, in a vox pop saying- I think this is actually in an archive somewhere in the BBC. There was a great debate about potatoes one year, that they were not satisfactory. I was asking people, “What do you think of the potatoes this year?” This woman said, “Wet, wet, watery.” That little poem went into the archive.

Eddie Boyd would write a snappy piece. Leonard Maguire would say, “And she said,” You’d hear, “Wet, wet, watery.” I wouldn’t take any part in it at all. All of us were collectors, as it were.

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I came into our office one day, and looked across the well of the building. It's a very handsome building, BBC Edinburgh. There, in an office across the way, was a man sitting at a desk looking earnest. A procession of my friends, actors, showing off on the other side of the desk. I said to our commissionaire- We had a commissionaire with medals, I think, a sergeant major. I said, "What's going on over there?" He said, "Oh, it's a man from London auditioning people for a new television serial of 'Redgauntlet', Walter Scott. I said, "Could you take him a note from me?" "Yes," he said, "Of course I will." He put it in his… He went over. I was at our window, looking across into the office to see our sergeant major going ___[00:21:41].

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00:21:45

Interviewer: Showing them the note, yes?

Denise Coffey: He gave him the note, gave him the note. Then I saw this man reading it and looking baffled because the note said, "If you look out of your window you will see me looking out of my window, I want to meet you." So windows open, looking at… "Hello." "Hello." "Come on over." "I'll be right with you." I was right with him, and read one of the parts and got the part and went to London. That's the first time I was there.

In London, when I got there looking for somewhere to stay, I noticed all the, what were called, boarding houses all had little signs in the window, "No Irish, no theatricals." And sometimes in chalk, "No Blacks." So I got two out of three. London was still very- I was quite surprised, it was very drab and… Paint peeling off and bomb sites everywhere, of course, still.

00:22:45

Interviewer: This would've been about 19-

Denise Coffey: '58.

Interviewer: '58, right, right.

Denise Coffey: '57 or '58. Years later, when I was working at the Mermaid Theatre down in the City of London, I still walked through a bomb site every day to get to work. The city was quite battered and down at heel, but filled with excitement and good, extraordinary things.

00:23:08

Interviewer: Let's just backtrack a little bit, back to 'Scope'. A little bit more about the production process, it was a half hour programme every week?

Denise Coffey: Yes.

Interviewer: Presumably-

Denise Coffey: So, of course, we all know that means 26:30.

Interviewer: It still is. (Laughter)

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Denise Coffey: (Laughter)

00:23:26

Interviewer: This was a combination of pre-recorded pieces and live inserts?

Denise Coffey: Correct. Well no, live- Yes, that's right, live inserts.

00:23:36

Interviewer: Yes. Tell me something about the technical process of putting that programme on the air.

Denise Coffey: Well we had the usual desk in the studio. Our engineer was called Phil. We once went on a… We took a recording car and went to the Isle of Islay, he and I, to do a documentary on the island. He was with 'Scope' in the studio as well. It was tape, of course. He was so expert that he was able, just, to hold the tape back with one finger and let it go on cue, which cut down a lot of rehearsal time as you can imagine. You can imagine what it was like cuing in a machine going (makes noise). Phil was always there, so it was a great team.

Jimmy MacTaggart left after… In fact, he'd left before I joined 'Scope'. He went to television. In fact, later, he directed the first Dennis Potter play, which was called 'Pack Up Your Troubles', which was Glasgow Television. He got all the old gang around him to play in it. Dennis Potter was there too, at the beginning of his writing career.

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00:25:00

Interviewer: Was it a formal kind of work process, or was it friendly or collaborative, what was the feel?

Denise Coffey: It was all of the above. The programme had its tail up, it was very popular and unusual. Gordon Smith took over as producer. We would go, depending how many of us freelancers or contract people were around, in in the morning, having read the papers, and see what was the story that we might follow. That would be, what, three days a week.

Then a rehearsal for Eddie Boyd and… [Jack Ronda 00:25:42], who was the editor, was the selector. He was a scientist by training, so he was very good and keen of intellect. Eddie Boyd would shut himself in some kind of cupboard, with full strength Capstan cigarettes which took the paint off the doors, and he would write the script. He was an unusual writer, he was like a kind of Scottish Raymond Chandler. He had a very sharp style of writing.

Then Leonard Maguire would read the script and we'd have a rehearsal in the morning, a run-through in the afternoon, it went out live as I recall, at 7:30 in the evening.

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00:26:32

Interviewer: Tell me about the sort of feedback you'd get from listeners, was that very important to you?

Denise Coffey: Oh yes. We were contacted a lot, people knew about the programme. In fact we were asked, by the police, to record something, not as grasses or anything. Can you remember, you can't, the time when bingo was illegal? It was a great game in the mining districts around about Midlothian and Fife. You know, miners' social hall. The police were supporting the bill to make it legal, because they thought it was absurd. It was wasting their time raiding places and… It was the most innocent of games, as it were. We were asked, would we make our way to one and record it. Which was me with a…

The recorder I'm looking at here, on this table, is very neat and tiny. The, so called, Midget tape recorders that we had weighed two and a half stone. I weighed it at Waverly station one day. I found I had one arm getting longer and longer than the other. It was in its olive, khaki colour, cover with BBC written on it. I made no pretence of not dragging this great thing.

The chaps that were running it got me into their office and said, "What's going on?" I said exactly what it was. That we, on the programme, were supporting them in having this legalised, and we wanted to show that it was a perfectly reasonable kind of entertainment and not worthy to be so looked down on and frowned on. They said, "Do you like your kneecaps, hen?" I said, "I'm attached to them, yes." "Aye, well, watch it." They said, "Have you recorded that, out there?" I said, "Yes, I did." They said, "Oh." I said, "Look, I'll tell you what I'll do." I opened up the case and I tore the tape out, off its spool, and said, "There you are." I'd actually changed tapes, it was a blank. I'd got the real one stashed away.

When we actually put it on the programme, and the authorities and everybody spoke saying, "This is quite right, this should not be illegal." I think it was not, obviously, due to us but due to the swell of public opinion, that no longer was an illegal activity.

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Then there were marvellous things like meeting John Betjemen and interviewing him, Robert Morley, lots of people that came up to Edinburgh. In among the poets in the pub and… Sarah Vaughan, who was the first American I'd ever met and the first Black lady I'd ever met, was great. "Hey Coffey, come in," she said. It was really a terrific mixture of things to do, so I was lucky in that respect.

Being a traveller all my life, anyway, I wasn't ever fazed about having to go away and do things.

00:30:03

Interviewer: I think we'll just make a pause there. So 'Scope' came to an end, you went down to London?

Denise Coffey: Well, for me it did, it continued, winning all sorts of awards in European broadcasting and everything.

00:30:22

Interviewer: You did three years on 'Scope'?

Denise Coffey: Yes, but three months in every year.

00:30:27

Interviewer: Three months in every year?

Denise Coffey: A peripatetic kind of life otherwise.

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00:30:31

Interviewer: But then the final move to London, or a move to London?

Denise Coffey: That was, again, the same producer, I did another series for him, another serial, then another play. So I thought I'd cut the cable and stay on in London.

00:30:51

Interviewer: Was that play- That was a radio play?

Denise Coffey: No, television.

00:30:55

Interviewer: That was to television? So the first move to London was a television play?

Denise Coffey: Yes, it was the serial that I won my way into by seeing the producer.

00:31:04

Interviewer: Right. Okay, well let's pick up ono that. You saw this producer, you auditioned presumably?

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Denise Coffey: I certainly did.

00:31:12

Interviewer: How did that go?

Denise Coffey: Well it was fine, what could he say? He'd had the sergeant major looking at him saying, "There's somebody wanting to see you." (Laughter)

00:31:22

Interviewer: So you got the part. This presumably… Was this recorded or did it go out as live, as they used to call it?

Denise Coffey: Live. Live live.

00:31:32

Interviewer: Right, so real live.

Denise Coffey: Actually live.

00:31:34

Interviewer: Yes. This was where? Where did it take place? Where did it all happen? Was it Alexandra Palace or Lime Grove or was it [Crosstalk 00:31:41]-

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Denise Coffey: Good question, Lime Grove I think. Yes, Lime Grove. Television Centre hadn't been invented yet.

00:31:51

Interviewer: So this was just before Television Centre opened? That opened in 1960, so '59 or something like this?

Denise Coffey: That's right, yes, '58.

00:31:59

Interviewer: What was the part you were playing, what were you…

Denise Coffey: It was a sort of farm lass in Westmorland Cumberland. 'Redgauntlet', I don't know if you know the book. A good adventure, a rattling good adventure.

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00:32:17

Interviewer: Tell us a bit about the production process, this was the first time you'd been in a television studio?

Denise Coffey: Yes, yes. The first time I'd ever been in a film studio was shortly after that.

00:32:35

Interviewer: A lot to learn, a lot to learn?

Denise Coffey: Well yes. Do you remember the Boulting brothers, producers and directors, twins? One produced, one directed. I wrote to them from Scotland saying, "I'm 24 years old. Dear Mr Boulting and Mr Boulting." I put a little bracket around their names, and addressed them as 'you' every time. I got a nice jokey letter back. They said, "If you're in London, come and see us." So I did.

They gave me a part, well it was a walk-on, an extra really, in a film called 'A French Mistress'. Irene Handl, I don't know if you recall her. Irene Handl, who of course was an extremely high up Viennese aristocrat, learned English from a charlady that was in their house. I was supposed to be assisting her mincing things up in a big kitchen.

She was so sweet because the first take we did, a shooting bell goes off in a film studio for absolute quiet [in all 00:33:46]. I didn't know that's what it was, I leapt about three feet in the air and screamed. So I learned, "No, that's alright, it's alright." She said, "It's alright, it's just to let them know." "Oh right, sorry." Laughter all around the studio. She said, "Stick close to me at the end of the day, because then you'll get another day's work. I did, and she did, and I did. That was most kind.

The first time I went on location, in a film called… I can't remember what it was called. Peter Sellers… 'Waltz of the Toreadors'. Prunella Scales and I played horrible sisters. We were supposed to go to Brighton on location.

I arrived at Victoria station with a book in my pocket and my toothbrush in the other pocket, and found Prunella Scales dragging a gigantic suitcase into the train. I said, "You off on your holidays?" "Well we're going on location," she said. I said, "I

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know, I'm going too." She said, "Where's your luggage?" I said, "I haven't got any, aren't we going home tonight?" "No," she said, "we're away for two weeks." I said, "Ah, right." I had to pretend to be eccentric, "I don't believe in luggage," I said.

Interviewer: Very quick.

Denise Coffey: Very, very… I was a real [raw totty 00:35:16], as they say, trying to find out about things as I went along.

00:35:21

Interviewer: The technique of acting in a television play, particularly then, a live play… How much rehearsal time did you have? How much time did you have just to get your head around the whole thing?

Denise Coffey: About a week, four days, five days rehearsal. Then I think it was a day in the studio and then another day when it went out live or was recorded, whichever. How would I know the difference, me? Of course, it was black and white with gigantic cameras going (makes noise) and dragging their cables over your feet when you weren't looking. Thrilling, I mean, really. A great company of actors as well, but a lot of things to learn and learn fast.

I was back in Scotland from time to time as well. I was at 'Scope' season and another variety season.

00:36:19

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Interviewer: Let's talk about some of those other TV moments. 'Do Not Adjust Your Set', fast-forwarding about eight years, 1968. Tell us about the… What was 'Do Not Adjust Your Set', for those who don't know?

Denise Coffey: Humphrey Barclay - who, as you may recall, was a very eminent producer and an innovative producer on television in the '60s – had just come from Cambridge University, I think, himself and spotted the bright sparks at Oxford and Cambridge. Which were Eric Idle, Mike Palin, and Terry Jones.

He was looking for another two people to complete the team for this new idea that they had. Humphrey was in Edinburgh at the Edinburgh International Festival. I was playing, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', Hermia of course. I have said I'm two feet tall, Hermia. I put in a joke which involved falling backwards down a long flight of stairs., which amused me and the audience and my chiropractor. Humph saw the show and thought, "That's the one we'll have." I met him and he said, "Would you like to be in our gang?" I said, "Yes, I would."

David Jason, at that time, was appearing in the West End. He was very young, younger than I was. He'd just taken over from… Oh, who is the lad that did all the physical jokes? What's the famous chap that… A sort of feckless, helpless, person that kept saying, "Oh Betty." Who was that?

Interviewer: Frank Spencer.

Denise Coffey: Yes, him.

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Interviewer: Yes. Michael-

Denise Coffey: Michael… Please cut all this out, don't let Michael's lawyers hear it.

Interviewer: I want to say Michael Caine, it's not Michael Caine.

Denise Coffey: No, Michael-

Interviewer: Michael…

Denise Coffey: This is silly.

Interviewer: Yes.

Denise Coffey: Anyway, David Jason was his understudy in a West End play and took over from him. So young Jason, who hadn't trained for the theatre except by being keen and brilliant in local companies, was an electrician brought up to trade. Humph spotted him as well, so that was the gang. And the Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band of course, Viv Stanshall and others. That was the gang.

The director/producer… Well Humph was the overall producer. The director was Daphne Shadwell, who was [in the domain 00:39:13] of the children's television department. It soon became quite clear that this was no children's programme, it

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was far too witty and advanced and naughty and so on. London used to empty at 4:30 on a Thursday, people left their offices and went home to see 'Do Not Adjust Your set'.

It won all sorts of awards, the Silver Rose of Montreux and all sorts of things, mainly due to the lads, of course, who wrote it. The boys wrote it. It was great to be innovators again. I've been lucky in that I've always joined in at the beginning of things, which is the fun part I suppose. Then, of course, the chaps went on to 'Monty Python', and David Jason to a knighthood and brilliance. It was lovely.

I went back into the theatre, which was my really, really, first love. I was the Mermaid Theatre, in the West End, directed by Noel Coward, who nobody seems to remember anymore. The Mermaid Theatre, that was innovative. Bernard Miles starting a classical repertory company in an old warehouse that he funded by sitting by the side of the road with Josephine, his wife, saying, "Give us half a crown for a brick." They did and they did. He ended up as Lord Miles in the House of Lords. They were terrific enterprising, pioneering, days in the theatre.

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I was with the Royal Shakespeare Company for a while, 'The Beggar's Opera'. That's the life of an actor really, just picking up on what to do.

When I first came to London, I used to char in the morning at a wonderful woman's house. They owned a bookshop in St Martin's Lane. I spent a lot of time leaning on a hoover discussing George Eliot and such things. In the afternoon, I was an usherette in a cinema with a uniform that reached way past the tips of my fingers and the end of my shoes. That was good, I saw a lot of films a lot of the time. In the afternoon very few people went to the cinema, which was great. I learned a lot about film, funnily enough, by doing that job, interrupted only by people saying, "Where are the seats?" "Down there."

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Interviewer: 'Do Not Adjust Your Set', let's make it clear, it was sketches, a satirical kind of programme?

Denise Coffey: Yes, it was sketches. If you imagine Monty Python sketches- In fact, I saw some of the old favourites turning up in Monty Python. It was university humour. Humph was from university, and all the boys were. It was new, especially for the 'children's department'. It was the time of the Beetles and everybody, everything had moved up a notch into more exploratory, exciting, ways of doing things. It was really a treat, I have to say.

00:42:45

Interviewer: And you were playing, what, anything and everything?

Denise Coffey: Anything and everything, yes. Yes, that was before Terry Jones donned the apron and the bandeau. It was good, it was really witty and clever and stylish. The Bonzo Dog Band, of course, with their drug-filled songs… (Laughter) Excellent.

I don't know if you've seen a film called 'Sir Henry at Rawlinson End', Viv Stanshall… Or, indeed, you listening, maybe you've seen it? Viv Stanshall created that film years later, in the '80s with Trevor Howard, one of my great heroes. And Viv, himself… A weird, strange, black and- Well it wasn't black and white, it was sepia and grey. Directed by Steve Roberts, who is now in Hollywood. The most weird, crazed, sort of film you're ever likely- It's on DVD, so have a look. That was another extraordinary bit of luck.

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Interviewer: What part did you play in that?

Denise Coffey: I played Mrs E, the housekeeper or a housekeeper, who could only cook chips. “Fried or boiled dear?” (Laughter) And talked endlessly about her late husband’s gigantic tapeworm. That was the main burden of her conversation, which no one was listening to but she continued to say. It was a thrill to work with Trevor Howard, what a great, nice, terrific actor.

Interviewer: Let’s wheel back a little bit, again, to the early ‘70s, 1971, and Stanley Baxter.

Denise Coffey: Ah yes. Stanley, of course, a fellow Scot.

00:44:44

Interviewer: What were you doing for ‘The Stanley Baxter Series’?

Denise Coffey: Oh yes, I’d forgotten about that. Yes, Stanley was doing a series from Glasgow studios. He collected a bunch of us ne’er-do-wells around him. I suggested a sketch one day. He liked it. I wrote quite a few sketches for the show.

Stanley, of course, was like a chameleon. When he came to London, he did a miniseries in London which must have been the most expensive series ever created by the human hand because his costume changes and makeup changes took a long

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time because they were brilliantly done and meticulously done. The musical numbers were tremendous, scored for orchestra and everything, really great. He's a great chap. We still keep in touch now and then, Christmas time and so on.

00:45:47

Interviewer: Again, these were sketches, short scenes?

Denise Coffey: Sketches, quickies, musical numbers. What I admired about Stanley, and still do, he was absolutely meticulous about rehearsing, everything had to be just timed perfectly. Then, one day, there was a sketch we were doing in which he was an old man in his bed and I was his old wife. I forget what the actual joke was, it was a quickie.

Somebody said, "Oh, I saw that on such and such." We reared up, the whites of our eyes shined and said, "Oh dear." We hadn't much time, so Stanley said… The director, David Bell, said, "Oh. Just do, you know, this joke. Blah blah blah blah blah." Having worked in variety, as Stanley had to a more high level, we knew we could trust each other just to get on with it. We did that, that's the only time I've known him improvise. It was great. It was really, really, exciting, like motor biking you know. A live audience, a live show.

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Interviewer: This was 1971, in colour by then?

Denise Coffey: Yes.

[00:47:03

Interviewer: Had you noticed quite a big change in the way programmes were being made by that time?

Denise Coffey: Larger fees, I noticed that. (Laughter) Stanley and I… Stanley was doing Ethel Merman, I think that was the first big colour show he did. Ethel Merman singing ‘Everything’s Coming up Roses’ from ‘Gypsy’ and dragging Baby June, which was me in a pink frilly frock and a bow in my hair and a blonde wig, dragging her along. Every time he hit a high note something would break, like a crossing beacon or a window or people’s car windscreens would cave in.

We were down in the Gorbals waiting to shoot when a shop window was to break. We were standing outside chatting, remarking as you do, waiting. I suddenly said to Stanley, “Have you seen the thickness of this glass? It’s a Victorian shop.” An empty shop that we’d dressed up. So we said, “Excuse us but, when that window breaks, do you think we might be in the way of the glass?” I think that’s more or less what was said.

It was mattresses piled up so that we were protected. They stove the window inward, but we still got tiny, tiny, bits of glass in our cheeks. I was watching the film in the editing room. You see us both just turning our faces delicately, slightly, away. It was a terrific shot, you can imagine.

He redid that sketch, when we went to London Weekend, with… Oh, that terrific young dancer, the little lass… Bonnie, Bonnie-

Interviewer: Langford?

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Denise Coffey: Langford. She was Baby June, she was much better than I was because she danced and swung about. I just kind of… I was kind of towed along like an old dustbin. I was in some of the sketches with Stanley at London Weekend, because he went big time. It was great, it was thrilling for him to have all the things he'd always wanted to have in his shows.

00:49:29

Interviewer: Had the production processes changed by that time, had things become quicker, faster, was it slicker?

Denise Coffey: I suppose the thing is the equipment was much more up to date, I suppose you'd say. As far as… I don't know, maybe I didn't take much notice. The process was easier because the cameras weren't quite so big anymore, and the quality of the sound and everything was greatly improved. That's, that's-

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00:50:06

Interviewer: Less hot, I suppose? The lights were less hot, were they?

Denise Coffey: No, they were quite as hot. They did well, the lights continued their wild career melting actors when possible.

00:50:17

Interviewer: By 1974, you created 'Hold The Front Page'. What was 'Hold The Front Page'?

Denise Coffey: 'Hold The Front Page', really, was a disgrace.

Interviewer: Sorry. (Laughter)

Denise Coffey: It was a programme for children's television, which still existed then. I think it was Thames Television. It was called… I forget what it was called, ABC Rediffusion, I don't know. They all changed their coats and became different firms. My idea was that it should be like a mixture of drawn cartoons, like a moving 'Beano' or 'Dandy', with little sketches and little remarks and daft things. That's all it was.

00:51:09

Interviewer: Fun creating it though?

Denise Coffey: Yes, not as much fun as I thought. It's alright having the idea, isn't it? Then you've got to actually go and do the work. I tell you what it was influenced a bit by was 'Laugh-In', that American show. Fast-moving, silly bright coloured cartoons. I did a whole thing of being Queen Victoria, that could be slotted in at any moment, with her making remarks about what had just been seen like, "I don't think that was very funny," sort of thing. That was Daphne Shadwell again, who was the first director of 'Do Not Adjust Your Set'. That had another director, the second and third series, I think.

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00:52:03

Interviewer: Interesting. Let's look at some of the radio work that you did. 'The Wordsmiths at Gorsemere', what were you playing in that and what was that?

Denise Coffey: Jonathan James Moore- I'm afraid to say the late Jonathan James Moore, who was one of the great, great, producers in radio, who loved radio and created so many terrific programmes for it. We were talking, one day, and I said I'd just been reading the diaries of Dorothy Wordsworth. I said that I'd laughed all the way through because, poor woman, when they moved into Dove Cottage she was running up and down and cleaning and getting it all ready. William was sighing and looking out of the window, sort of thing. I said, "I didn't realise it was a comedy." He said, "Hmm."

He got in touch with Sue Limb, a very clever bluestocking from Cambridge. I think one of her specialities was William Wordsworth. The conspiracy began, she got enthused by the idea. She wrote this series, 'The Wordsmiths at Gorsemere', which was a dreadful slur on the whole Wordsworthian epoch.

I got to play Dorothy Wordsmith because I would've cried and shouted otherwise, obviously. Miriam Margolyes played Stinking Iris, the maid of all work. Chris Emmett played the leach peddler. Every week, there were different people. For example, let me think now…

Oh, of course the most famous one playing William Wordsmith himself, Geoffrey Whitehead, who was brilliant. It was really such fun. People, every week, played… When bad Lord Byro came to their house their carriage shrieked to a stop and bad Lord Byro, his sister, and a monkey climbed out. Dorothy exclaimed, "Oh no, it's a menagerie a trois." (Laughter) It was

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really witty and funny. I think we did two series of it, possibly three.

Then, again, it was… The next series was called… It was about the civil war. The same gang of people. What was it called? Anyway, it was about the civil war. We laughed a lot.

00:54:59

Interviewer: Was that in front of an audience or was it-

Denise Coffey: No, it was recorded and edited.

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Interviewer: Then 'The Burkiss Way', which followed after that for Radio 4, 'The Burkiss Way'?

Denise Coffey: To Dynamic Living.

Interviewer: Tell us about that.

Denise Coffey: To be quite honest, I can't remember very much about… I remember laughing a lot and going down to the Paris Studios and doing sketches. More than that, I can't- I know it's being repeated because I got 4p, or something, a week ago. It's good.

00:55:35

Interviewer: The Paris Studios, though, what was it like working there?

Denise Coffey: Well, it was an old cinema with a shallow stage. I don't know how many people it seated, quite a lot. A faithful audience would be queuing up outside. I worked there with Roy Hudd and Kenneth Williams and… What's the game called? 'Just a Minute', that sort of thing. There were a few ladies who used to come and sit in the front row every time, and screech a lot and cackle a good deal. [I think they were 00:56:12] begged and persuaded not to but couldn't help themselves, that was good. It was a favourite old place, the Paris.

The game, 'Just a Minute', that was quite new I think. There was a programme called 'Press Gang', another pilot. I did a lot of pilots there, which was great. If you were working in the theatre at night, you could just hop along at lunchtime, be silly, and go home again.

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Interviewer: As a place to work, in the Paris Studios, did you get a sense of the atmosphere of the place, that it was rather steeped in radio history almost?

Denise Coffey: Yes, absolutely, yes. It was underground, of course, and had a tea lady, a BBC tea lady. She was good. Meeting Kenneth Williams and Nicholas Parsons, of course…

00:57:14

Interviewer: Recording one of those, 'Just a Minute', did it really happen as it appears to be?

Denise Coffey: Well, no, it took longer obviously. There were more rounds. Derek Nimmo was one of the people… Peter Jones and Clement Freud of course. I remember Kenneth Williams, who was very astute about seeing that the audience needed to be [jollied 00:57:39] up a bit if they were sitting on their hands.

He started a terrible row about… The topic was my idea of heaven, that was the question. Derek Nimmo had to start, he was saying, "Of course I believe, very fervently, in heaven and the afterlife." Kenneth Williams buzzed, so Nicholas Parsons said, "What's your challenge?" He said, "Well it's ridiculous, who knows? Nobody knows, they don't know." He went off on one of those rants that had the audience clutching at their sides and laughing.

He got them all excited and then he kind of nodded his head to the control room and they went back into his pre-diatribe remarks. It was a shame because it was so wonderful. He liked looking after the audience to make sure they're having fun, fun, fun, which is very good. A generous chap. We all had a good time.

00:58:44

Interviewer: Did you notice a difference, working there, than in Edinburgh? I mean, the BBC in Edinburgh, were they like almost two different organisations or did it feel similar?

Denise Coffey: No, it was kind of like being in the army I think. The BBC was the BBC wherever you went. Wherever the flag was flying, there

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we were, “Nation shall speak peace unto nation unless they’re having a row with them, in which case they won’t.” (Laughter) Handsome… I think it was based upon, I suppose, a kind of military hierarchical system at first. Obviously, it’s all different, everyone is civilian now. When BBC Television Centre was built, we were taken round to see these wonders and all got lost in the round corridors, very impressed.

BBC Edinburgh had a concert hall which had very good acoustics and very good concerts as well. It had two studios, a drama studio and a continuity studio and a smaller studio. It was absolutely ___[01:00:05], commissionaire at the door.

One of the vox pops I had to do for ‘Scope’ was… It was leap year day, so my task was to go and ask men… In those days we were so pedantic, men, “It’s leap year day, will you marry me?” Of course, people- I stopped very posh stockbroker kind of chaps who said, “I’d love to my dear, but my wife might complain.” (Laughter) All that good jokey stuff.

On the way back to the BBC, I spotted this man leaning against a lamppost smoking a cigarette. I should have known that, in Edinburgh, if you’re leaning on something it means you can’t stand up because you’ve been in the pub for three days. However, I said to this chap, “Hello there, it’s leap year day, will you marry me?” “Yes, I’ll marry you hen.” He said, “I’ll marry you. I’ve got a lovely caravan out at Murrayfield, we’ll be very, very, happy.” I said, “Well, listeners, thank you very much, I’ve scored at last.” That sort of thing. “So you’ll not be hearing from me again. Leap year day, hurray.” I said to the chap, “Thank you very much.” He said, “Come on, come on.”

He followed me all the way back to the BBC shouting, “I’ll marry you, I’ll marry you.” I had to get the commissionaire to step out of the door of the BBC’s imposing portals, and they were, and say, “Hey you, out. Scott, away with you.” “I wanted to marry

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her." He stood outside like a Romeo shouting up at the building, "I'll marry you hen." I couldn't escape until about 8:00 o'clock at night because he was there. (Laughter) Till the pubs opened again, I suppose. He disappeared. A dangerous life for a young person.

The BBC was very much memos and all that sort of stuff. Then, it was a gigantic corporation, so it should after all is said and done.

01:02:20

Interviewer: Did you ever have to go through that rather scary thing that a lot of BBC employees have to go through, a BBC board, the interview for the job?

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Denise Coffey: No, no, because I was freelance and selected by the producer. If anyone had to go before the board, it would be the producer who was unwise enough to lure me into this programme.

There was a woman producer called Kathleen Garscadden, in Glasgow, who was head of children's radio and was a fearsome and terrific, excellent, woman. Stanley Baxter started on 'Children's Hour' with Kathleen Garscadden. We all used to do impersonations of her, she was…

There was another formidable woman who was in the theatre called Sadie Aitken, who was responsible for finding a lot of the venues for the Edinburgh International Festival when it began in '47.

01:03:19

Interviewer: So quite a lot going through BBC in Edinburgh, what was the relationship between the BBC in Edinburgh and the BBC in London? Did you ever feel, at any time, that you were being told what to do from London, or dictated to somehow from London? Did it ever-

Denise Coffey: No, no.

Interviewer: What was the relationship like?

Denise Coffey: We were autonomous in Scotland. Obviously the agreement was there'd be some programmes from London and some from Scotland. Quite a few Scottish programmes were on air for the whole country. There was a very fine essayist in Edinburgh called [Murray McLaren 01:03:58], who gave a weekly live talk on a subject about Edinburgh.

There's a very famous café called the Cafe Royal in Edinburgh that still has a very elegant bar, oyster bar, where you sit up on the stool and you eat at the counter. Murray was there eating soup before going up to Queen Street, which was about 200 yards away.

Grace, the barmaid who was known as Grace abounding by all the poets who frequented that pub, was being got at a bit by the chap next to Murray McLaren. He was being rather rude to Grace, so Murray said, "Please don't be rude to our dear Grace abounding?" The man, by way of retort, picked up Murray's soup and crashed it over his head, causing him to go to the Edinburgh Infirmary for stitches. He arrived within seconds of show time for this live programme which was entitled, 'The Pleasures of Dining Out in Edinburgh'. (Laughter)

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There were lots of poets, Anthony Thwaite came up and visited us. Of course, Sir George Bruce, our head of programmes was a great poet. Then some people came up from London to investigate what we were doing. They were interested in our technique of fast-moving programme. Much like the 'Today' programme but, of course, they're frontline troops, we were hiding behind the hedge having pre-recorded everything. There was a great deal of interest. A lot was going on in Scotland then, politically as well as everything else.

01:05:46

Interviewer: Did the 'Today' programme people actually take some of your ideas and techniques back to the programme themselves?

Denise Coffey: Not really. They have a mixture of recorded and inserts, live rows and set pieces, whereas ours were all recorded. There was no chance of a shouting match. I can't believe it when I listen to 'Today' programme now, two people shouting at each other and no way the listener can tell who is saying what to whom. You're waiting for the thud of fist on nose, but it never seems to come to that. Hey ho.

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Interviewer: Finally, looking back, where would you… Out of all the radio and television and theatre, what's the highlight moment for you? Is there one particular film or theatre piece you worked on, or radio moment, that really sums up Denise Coffey?

Denise Coffey: I think all of it is at the maximum, that's the way I've looked at it. I've been a director, now, for 20 or 30 years before I packed in. That was best because George Bernard Shaw, our household god and hero… I fell in with the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake in Canada, which devotes itself to the works of Bernard Shaw and his contemporaries. I was just as happy as anything. That's the best, I think, because there're terrific actors in Canada, really first class people, great fun, and very, very, good technically, really brilliant. It's sad that they're not really known outside, not like Americans always rushing into films and-

01:07:47

Interviewer: How did you make the connection with Canada?

Denise Coffey: Well I directed Pygmalion at the Young Vic. No, I beg your pardon. I got it through Frank Dunlop's secretary, at the Young Vic, saying to John Neville, who was in charge of the theatre at Halifax Nova Scotia, who wanted Frank to go and do a production of 'Taming of the Shrew'. He couldn't. So John Neville said to Frank's secretary, Vi, who knew all and said all, "Is there anyone that works, kind of, in the same style?" "Oh, Denise will do it, she'll do it." So off I went to Canada. I just loved working with John Neville.

The following year, we added in comedy- Not 'Comedy of Errors', 'Two Gentlemen of Verona' and 'Much Ado About Nothing' in repertoire, that was my foot on the western shore.

Now 'Pygmalion' at the Young Vic, which was a revolutionary idea of having Bernard Shaw as the narrator. I took the film script. You saw Bernard Shaw appearing before you saying the first line, which was, "It is impossible for one English man to

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open his mouth without another English man despising him." That's the basis of 'Pygmalion'.

Lorraine Chase, I don't know if you know Lorraine Chase, she was our third Eliza. She was great because she had to be taught how to speak proper. Terry Wogan asked her, on his show, "Now Lorraine, will you be speaking proper?" She said, "You'll have to buy a ticket and find out, won't you?" They did and she did. She was magnificent. This unusual sort of… In space, with no furniture, no nothing… If he said, "It's midnight" a bell would be heard. He would, like a magician, make it happen.

Word got to Canada about this version of it, so they invited me to do it there for them. I did, and then worked in Vancouver, Toronto, Edmonton Alberta, Calgary Alberta. The theatre there is most exciting, brilliant. If you question me closely, that's where I'd say… Strangely enough, Canada and the Young Vic in London are the great theatre adventures that I look back on. And meeting Samuel Beckett of course.

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Interviewer: That's another story.

Denise Coffey: Oh yes, which we won't tell now. Thank you for listening.

Interviewer: Thank you.

END AUDIO

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