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BBC History: John Tydeman

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FRANK GILLARD INTERVIEWING JOHN TYDEMAN

2nd November 1994, Broadcasting House London

INT This is Frank Gillard talking for BBC History with Mr John Tydeman, who came into the BBC in 1962 and spent I suppose more....

TYDEMAN '59.

INT '59! Came in in 1959, correction, and spent then much more than 30 years in Radio Drama, retiring as Head of Radio Drama fairly recently.
CHAT When you came in Val Gielgud of course was Head of Drama I take it. Val was really the man who created the Radio Drama Department, didn't he? A few people like R.E. Jeffrey and others were there at the beginning, but it was Val who took it over and made something of it and had the vision. Tell us about Val and the legacy that he left when he finally retired?

TYDEMAN Well, Val was Head of Radio Drama for... Val Gielgud was Head of Radio Drama for over 40 years er.. which is, I mean in fact even now over half of its life. He was very young when he came, obviously. Was a man of the theatre, slightly old-fashioned perhaps, other worldly, very proud of his er.. Polish ancestry. He was of course from a famous family, from the Terris on his mother's side and the brother of John Gielgud er.. and fancied himself as a playwright in the theatre and in fact had a certain amount of success er.. as a playwright of popular plays. Was also an actor, although I think a terrible actor having actually seen him act on film - not one of the world's great actors I'd say, certainly not in the same league as his brother. Um.. but he.. I think the great quality that Val Gielgud had was that he trusted people. That where he didn't know he'd say, "Well I don't understand this myself, but I mean you know you tell me that Sam Beckett's a wonderful.. wonderful playwright and so I go with it. I go with it." He had a very old-fashioned way of speaking, actually. He was one of those people who said, "Garl" and "Larndry" and if

becoming marginalised in a sense. So it concentrated on a lot of new writing, and the exciting new writers both continental, European essentially, American of course because it was in the days of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller there, but also in this country it was the great encourager of people like Pinter and Beckett, partly perhaps not just because they were word orientated people, partly perhaps because of the existence of the Lord Chamberlain. And one tends to forget that the Lord Chamberlain was with us, his dead hand on the theatre, until 1968, so therefore these young Turks who wanted to go to extremes of expression of language etc., found themselves restricted in the theatre, but could in fact write for radio. In fact there was a play of Harold Pinter's called 'Landscape' that the Lord.. the Lord Chamberlain banned because it had I think about three 'f' words in it as we say, and he refused to cut them and so that play was originally done on radio. (YES) And I think that censorship really did encourage a number of people to look to radio which in those days was infinitely more liberal than the theatre, to write for it. And of course another attraction is that you don't have to write for radio or for television the full pull of a 2 hour play which is terribly difficult, but you could write something that was anything from 20 minutes up to 3 hours. But you would write shorter plays and in fact you know the ideal length for a radio play is something perhaps between 45 minutes and 60 minutes.

INT Was there any great controversy about continuing with radio drama in the light of the arrival of television? I mean so many radio services in countries overseas dropped creative radio altogether, they just became mechanisms grinding out gramophone records, commercial announcements and news flashes.

TYDEMAN Yes, well of course in America it died because radio was essentially there to sell soap, I mean I'm not just talking about soap operas, but I mean it rode on the back of advertising revenue and of course the advertising revenue in the States went immediately to television. So radio in the States died and it had been very healthy. I mean if you think of Orson Welles, Mercury Theatre and all that. In

Europe it went into a kind of intellectual ghetto, incomprehensible plays er .. for minority audiences. Now the really wise bird in preserving radio drama as strongly as it was preserved in this country was Martin Eslin, because Martin who came from an intellectual academic critical background, well-known for having written this book, 'Theatre of the Absurd', you would ^{have} of said, well if ever anyone was for the intellectual theatre it would be Martin Eslin. But Martin being a wise bird said no we must preserve our popular base, because my preserving the popular base appealing to the large audiences, which increasingly we discovered were in the afternoons and not in the evenings when television was the big competition - by preserving this popular base Martin Eslin maintained that yes that gave us the right to do the more demanding work. So we never really went the way of the European countries where radio withered, it didn't die, but withered because it thrust itself into this ghetto of the difficulty arty farty play. Um.. and perhaps it's also because in this country we're slightly suspicious of culture which we tend to think of as having a 'k' and pronounced kulture or kultrure in the French. That this sort of.. not sort of being the English way of doing things.

INT Did you find any radio staff wanting to drift away to television? Was there an erosion of staff?

TYDEMAN Er.. a number went. Donald MacWhinney I suppose was the chief exponent. I mean Donald who wrote what is still the best book on radio, 'The Art of Radio' and was a very, very, very fine radio director. It was he who was largely responsible for those writers like Allen Owen and Harold Pinter and Beckett coming to radio. Donald did go to television and became a television director, and an immensely successful television director. Another very fine radio director, Michael Bakewell, who was the Assistant Head of the Radio Drama Department at one time, went to television as Head of Plays. But I don't know, I think that in Michael's case, Michael Bakewell's case that radio was a medium more suited to his personality. I mean of course a number of people did both, particularly out of London in the

regions. Certainly in the West Region as it then was called, the West Region and er... the North Region, people were what is now fashionably known as bi-media and they would produce in television and in radio. And I thought actually that that was a kind of ideal. I did that myself for a period of time that I directed radio and television, but I did find that it was very hard to maintain this sort of basis because the tempo of work was so different. (YES) But a number of people went er... to television. In those days of course television was different. I mean television was not as it now is, I think, a purveyor of film, rather than a creative medium of itself. It was a creative medium of itself then and Donald was involved in this thing called the Langham Group where they experimented in television with just one camera moving about. And it concentrated much more on the word, and I think that there was a kind of television drama that existed. I mean it existed not only in the BBC but also the independent companies. One thinks of Sidney Newham and 'Armchair Theatre' and so on. And a number of the writers had come from radio and it concentrated on heads. I mean I think one of the best television plays ever er... were a quartet of plays by David Hopkins called 'Talking to a Stranger' which was four different looks at the same event. Very much an extension of a radio play where you're seeing the faces, but alas the television play has... has largely died, which I think is a great pity. I don't think television has explored itself as a medium.

INT As it settled down then we had a Radio Drama Department, we had a Television Drama Department in the BBC, was there any kind of relationship between television drama and radio drama?

TYDEMAN We kept trying it on a kind of official basis, because we felt that something was falling down a hole, so every now and again there were great lurches towards co-operation and we would have dinners and informal meetings etc., and interchanged ideas. But the nature of man being what the nature of man is, and with the pressures of life, it began to fall away, you know the repeat... we're going through another phase now with the buzz word 'bi-media'. But it really happened by

to be one of the old-fashioned actors etc. But he was a great actor and on radio you could say to Wolfitt, um....Sir Donald..... I'm assuming..... INAUD.. and he would find in a quieter way the truth. He was a terrific radio actor. And of course I mean radio suits someone with a beautiful voice like Gielgud and Edith Evans, Peggy Ashcroft. Er... I mean the majority of er.. actors of course come across as well on radio as they do in the theatre because there is no such thing as a radio actor or a theatre actor or a television actor, there is only an actor. But there are some actors who are more favoured er.. by film say. I saw an actor last night who on film is terrific but in the theatre, nothing. I mean Elizabeth Taylor for instance, I saw her in the theatre - nothing. Um... and there are some radio actors who as I say get lost in the theatre because they lack a physical potency.

INT I'd like to get into this archive some idea of the sheer volume of output of your Department. I mean can you give us any indication of that?

TYDEMAN Well, it was er.. let us say last year, which is the year that I most remember, that's 19.. 1993, er... we produced over 14 hundred hours of programming, which was about 2 thousand programmes and the basic staple diet of radio drama has always been the single play and last year we did 420 single plays of varying lengths, which is an enormous amount. And add to that series, serials and of course the ongoing soap... soap opera - 'The Archers'. So there is a terrific amount of drama. I mean it is the largest drama producing er... outlet anywhere in the world, I mean television, radio or whatever. Oddly enough the one who comes second closest to the BBC in terms of radio drama is Poland, which has about 12 hundred hours.

INT But you need a big department to maintain that output. How big would the department be?

wasn't the only Department that produces Drama. A certain amount of Drama was produced by... is still produced by the Light Entertainment Department and of course the public doesn't always know whether it comes from Light Entertainment or from the Drama Department. But they have only ever done 30 minute serials and nothing else. So for the Light Programme it was er... series and serials and I think I am right in saying soap opera. I can't remember whether the 'Dales' which was then going was on Radio .. on the Light Programme or whether it was on the Home Service. I think that it was on the Light Programme. And also on the Light Programme there was a marvellous thing that was instituted which was a 15 minute series of plays called 'Just Before Midnight' which ran every evening, every weekday evening at a quarter to midnight, hence 'Just Before Midnight', and it was a marvellous nursery for writers. But of course there was an awful lot of productorial puff er... in engineering this series that unfortunately dwindled from 5 a week er.. to 3 a week to 2 a week and then to none - rather like the knights in 'King Lear' they were... what need one, it went. But it served a great purpose in encouraging writers who had written popular... I mean Tom Stoppard in fact was one of the early writers for it, who went on to write other things.

INT

What about the Home Service?

TYDEMAN The Home Service of course the... the great two main staple diets, the classic serial, a 60 minute serial which happened twice a week. It would have its outing in an afternoon and a repeat in an evening, and these would be dramatisations of not only Dickens, Trollope, Zachary all of whom are excellent. But also foreign writers, Balzac, Dumas etc. And that I think was a kind of backbone of the.. the Home Service, the old Home Service. And then of course there was 'Saturday Night Theatre' which rather like its name suggests um.. tended to come from theatre, tended to come... this was part of the Val Gielgud tradition, came from the popular theatre and the... the brow range was actually pretty wide. I mean it would go you know to Sophocles at one end and Henry Cecil at the other end with a large number of

dramatisations of novels as well, particularly detective novels of a popular nature - you know the Agatha Christie, Margie Allingham kind of ... they were the sort of main post. Then there were two afternoon, this was in the 60's, two afternoon outings, 'Wednesday Matinee' and 'Saturday Matinee' and these were plays of about an hour er... which tended to be in my opinion rather womens magaziney and not a very high standard of writing but were very popular. And then there was 'Thirty Minute Theatre' as well. At that point I don't think that the more demanding er.. 'Monday Play' had been developed. I think that came later when it moved to becoming Radio 4 and there then came about a lot more drama. Of course there was always the thirty minute serial - one must not forget a great debt to Francis Durbridge and the Paul Temple series. I mean there's never been anything like Paul Temple, and if we play Paul Temple now it feels rather like sepia film, it still is immensely popular....

INT

What about the Third Programme then?

TYDEMAN

The Third Programme, well the great advantage of the Third Programme, and I speak as one who was educated I supposed by the Third Programme, I lived in the country and didn't get to the theatre much and it presented you know the great international repertoire. I mean I can remember hearing 'Peer Gynt' at about 4 hours, it was always one of the ideas of the Third Programme was the play should last for as long as it needed to last. So not only was the presentation of the international repertoire, things that the theatre simply could not afford to do and wouldn't do you know for the sake of box office, some of it was pretty recherché, it was pretty academic, rather Oxford and Cambridge perhaps. But then there was also the encouragement of the new writers in this country, Beckett of course was there in the 50's and on into the 60's, and Pinter also. But also the international, particularly European theatre and European writers, when the Absuridsts - Ionesco and Adamov and people like that. And it was of course Radio 3 that ... this was the days of Val Gielgud, were the first people to do Jean Anouilh who became a kind of Boulevard success but as then considered to be you know a little bit difficult. But the great thing

few of his plays are published, but a very, very remarkable writer. But you would then give plays to people and hope that they wouldn't say no to them. I made myself extremely unpopular when I first joined the BBC and Donald MacWhinney was then the Assistant Head of the Department, and it was he who assigned plays, and he gave me... he..... END CASSETTE ONE SIDE A

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CASSETTE ONE SIDE B
JOHN TYDEMAN continues...

TYDEMAN ...asked me to direct them, and I being a sort of rather snotty nosed arrogant know-all from Cambridge, said "Oh I don't like any of those..." and turned them down. And I didn't know the mutterings that were going on behind my back, "You know who is this jumped up young chap who thinks he knows everything." And Donald was absolutely brilliant. And he said, "Oh quite right, actually all 7 were shit.... and you know, you shouldn't do them. Do what you want do." And by God I learnt a lot from him. I mean don't do what you don't want to do because you won't do it well and be honest, if something isn't to your liking say so because a play can always been written off - although unfortunately in radio we don't write off or did not write off as many plays as we should, because it was a chancy.. it's a risk business.

INT Let's have a word about relations with the Network Controllors. I mean you were Head of Drama but you couldn't always guarantee absolutely that a given play would go on the air, you had to go and sell it to the Controller. Were you a good seller?

TYDEMAN Well, the relationship with the Controllors depended of course upon their personalities and it depended upon the network. Radio 4 tended to pursue a policy of delegating to the Head of Drama the filling of the allotted slots that you were given, and therefore as is the tradition in the BBC if you made a boo-boo everything was retrospective. If of course you had a play about which you were concerned because of its subject matter, then you would discuss it with the Controller, er.... and... the Controller of Radio 4 and I found that.. nearly always immensely supportive. Of course, there would be a lot of in terms of (in inverted commas) that word censorship, self censorship which is perhaps dangerous, but as Head of Department one would act as censor and one would of course refer - I mean language had to be referred, 'f' words were referred. But I remember when I first began, I mean

the way that language has changed and the audiences tolerance towards it. I mean I can remember the word 'damn' you deleted from a script, and 'bloody' you had to refer and 'bugger' you had to refer. But these were words, I mean I'm afraid that language is one of the great British sticking points, but it is the area about which audiences are most sensitive. In the early days, in the Dales which I directed for a short time, er... they didn't drink really. I mean Mrs Dale might have a sherry but that was about it. The... society has changed not only in terms of what happens as far as characters are concerned, but again that tolerance towards language. But with the Controller of Radio 4 one would discuss big projects, obviously. I mean if as we did you were going to do 'War and Peace' in 24 hours, that's a Hell of a lot of airtime, or if you were going to do Anthony Pole, 'Dance to the Music of Time' and over 20 episodes the 'Forsythe Saga' - many episodes - you would discuss that. And in fact serials, in one's endeavour to create a kind of a planned schedule over the year, or looking ahead over 2 or 3 years, so that you had a lot of variety in the mix, but you would discuss all big projects with the Controller of Radio 4. And also, I mean more in theory perhaps than in practice, um.. the storylines of the soap operas, like the 'Dales', like 'Wagoner's Walk' in its day, and like the 'Archers' today. But basically one was left alone and one was trusted. And I think that that word 'trust' is one of the most important words in the BBC process that you must trust - a Head of Department must trust his lieutenant and those above you must trust er.... And you know when trust begins to go well then I think certain lights are in danger of going out. The relationship with the Controller of Radio 3 was always different because the er... most of the programming of course on Radio 3 is music, classical music, and the majority of controllers don't know a great deal about music, the Controllers of Radio 3. So they tended to leave that to the musicians and therefore they put their finger too much, I think, into the pie of words, because words they understood and they thought they knew more about plays than the Drama Department. I mean there used to be enormous rows er... with all Controllers er.. and I can think of Howard Newby, of Stephen Hearst, of Ian MacIntyre, John Drummond, the Controllers I worked with. They all wanted to interfere, they all thought they knew better - sometimes they were

TYDEMAN

Er... no.. no department has any money. The money is with the Controller. Where the money is of course the power is. Er.. however, you would project your budget against the next year based upon the previous year, and therefore you knew that so much money had been allocated to you to spend er... say against that network, against Radio 4. Of course, one never had enough money. But that's... not quite enough is a good thing. To have too much is a bad thing. I think in drama you always need a little bit of grit in the oyster to make the pearls. And although we complain and bellyache all the time, drama people are full of complaints, it is good to have a touch of adversity. But of course if you've got too little then you can't do it, but just to have not quite enough. So the.. the budget was a global budget, but obviously you would identify er... with.. within the department, that you were going to spend it on that, that some projects you would put more too than to others, and a lot of jockeying had to go on against a certain type of play because if you were in fact... I mean if you saw that you were coming in over budget towards the end of the year - my God how do you redress this? Well you knew jolly well that either you could put in repeats which were cheaper or that you could do stage plays for which you pay out the author on a different rate. Now in those days you were talking about really above the line costs, not total costing. I always thought that this was daft. I mean I knew what the total cost was and obviously it was known, but producers and heads basically dealt in the above the line costs which are about one.. about a quarter of the total costs - (i.e. what you pay for the actors and what you pay for the script, because they essentially are your only costs in Radio Drama, the text and the actor, and 60% was on copyright, 40% for the artists. But one needed to remember of course that there was this large part of the iceberg submerged in the below the line costs. I think it's a good thing now, although I think the system that's been introduced is totally daft, but I think that total costing is right and everyone should have a knowledge of what the whole costs, but as a Head of Department of course you did know what it cost, but you didn't actually deal in that money so you only dealt in your above the line... budget money. You would obviously er... put more money towards certain projects and keep it back from other projects. You could determine

the size of casts, you know you could do large cast plays or small cast plays. I think now I think they've got themselves in a bit of pickle by er.. you know costing everything and not actually giving the Departments the flexibility and fluidity to move identified money from one area to another area.

INT I think that researchers of the future would be interested to know in fact what a 60 minute play cost say in the 60's and the 70's and the 80's above the line. What would be your budget for then?

TYDEMAN Well, talking in 1994 money because I... mean the money seems so utterly piddley because of inflation, that the above the line budget now for a radio play, £20,000 is the average total cost for an hour of drama. Er.. and about £5000, I'd say about a quarter, about £5000 would be for the writer and for the actors. So £15000 is your below the line costs, £5000 the money that you actually spend and deal with. It is the cheapest form of drama production anywhere.

INT Yes. And in terms of time, from the moment when you first assemble your cast, how does it run?

TYDEMAN Well, you would budget against spending er... a day in the studio for half an hour on air, so a thirty minute play one day in the studio, 60 - 2 days, 90 - 3 days. Of course there were exceptions to that, I mean if you'd got very complicated plays they would be more. I mean it would never be less. You would then have for... again depending upon complexity but as an average, you would have a day and a half mix down for a 60 minute play, probably a day editing mix down for a 30 minute play. Time.... again, I think that a radio production is like an iceberg that only one tenth of it really is that part that you see which happens in the studio and in the editing channel. A great deal occurs in terms of writing, of re-writing, of preparation, you have to prepare because time, time, time always in... well in radio, whatever the medium, but all the time you are aware of the clock and the clock is also

have to intercut the other actor who comes in at another time. I don't think this makes actually for a frightfully good play. Er..

INT Over the years, over your years I am meaning, you must have seen a fair amount of technical development in studios which has been something you've been ready to exploit.

TYDEMAN Yes, I mean when I first joined the Department in '59, a number of plays were still done live. I mean then Val Gielgud, the Head of Drama, always maintained that there was nothing like a live production. I think he was wrong. I think that okay the adrenaline rushes and you think it's better, but I don't actually think that's the case. I think that.. he always maintained that the actor gives more. Well they might give more, they may not necessarily give better on that kind of high nervousness. There was another well-known popular producer, Audrey Cameron, who again would insist that everything should be done live and did so. And in fact the first production that I did er.. I did live er.. because no one had actually told me about tape - so ignorant and innocent was I. And they said, you'll do this play and because of some kind of silly tradition on the chitty it said 'Thou shalt do this play' it said live or recording and it had a ring round live and a crossed out recording. Well, supposed to do this live. Er.. and in fact the first production that I did were 2 half hour plays in an hour's slot as a matinee. Quite different. One set in a barracks and the other set on a beach. And we did them live. Of course I was more worried about the time getting.... getting it right for time than and everything else. And thereafter the actors said, "Well why the Hell did you do that? You know you could have recorded it." I said, "No, no it says here..." I just didn't know about tape and the editing thereof. But there is no doubt that live broadcasting, well it doesn't happen at all now really, except for the sort of show bizzie reasons perhaps, not good reasons. Now with tape so much more is... so much more is possible with tape and the editing of tape, and the editing of tape is becoming in the new digital age increasingly easy. I mean the whole process has become speeded up and the possibilities are so great that I think in a funny

listeners head and placed it on the wall; whereas a radio play takes place inside the skull of the listener. That is the theatre. And in those early days stereo tended to be taken out of the head and put upon the wall and people became very conscious about people moving to the left and to the right and all that and the ping pong effect. And there was an occasion when one thought that one had actually been able develop stereo not only with lateral movement but with vertical movement. And this was when they were doing a new production of the 'Man Born to be King' in stereo, Dorothy L. Sayers, the play that caused such a row in the War. And when Christ on the cross and there were va... and the disciples were at the foot of the cross and Christ was on the cross. Suddenly it seemed like a miracle, Christ was up above and they were at the foot of the cross. But this was actually a trick of the mind because the listener thought that Christ would be up there and that they would be at the foot of the cross um... they actually heard it as being up there. I mean I suppose it was a kind of miracle. Think of 'Romeo and Juliet' I use it... or used it in lectures..... say we invented vertical stereo and there's Juliet up there and there's Romeo down there and then of course I said to the audience, sorry you've been deceived, it's what the mind says. I mean a lot of ... all drama has about it a certain degree of deception, and in radio you can deceive a great deal because you can't see.

INT The art of suggestion.

TYDEMAN Yes.

INT There was a stereo workshop wasn't there?

TYDEMAN Yes, Raymond ^{RAIKES} ~~Drakes~~ worked... there were stereo prizes, there was a stereo category in the.. in the Prix Italia which Raymond ^{RAIKES} ~~Drakes~~ won twice to my certain knowledge. I think these things were necessary in order to convince perhaps those higher up that stereo you know was here, that it... like a lot of things that are new you have to convince people that these are going to be runners.

INT I'd like to move on to a word about the Drama Rep. What was it and how big was it and how did you use it and what sort of people were in it and how did you choose them? All those things.

TYDEMAN The... the Rep er...which is now known as the Radio Drama Company, the RDC, but it was always known as the Rep, I in fact changed the name myself, because I thought the Rep sounded reppy and old-fashioned. It came into being because of the War. There had in the mid-30's been created by Val Gielgud a small repertory of actors who enjoyed working in radio, er... whose talents radio favoured. And that existed for a few years. I think it was a group of about 8 actors. But then when the storm clouds were gathering before '39, he realised that we would need a group of actors dedicated away from London, and various people were told that when/if War broke out there would be formed this group of actors and they had movement orders to move. And I think it was about 16 actors and actresses to start with and in those early days er... these dedicated, brilliant actors er... fulfilled most of the roles. Because after the War it was agreed that the Radio Drama Company, the Rep had actually earned its spurs, that it acted as a kind of backbone er... for radio drama insofar as one .. one in three roles, about a third of roles were filled by members from the Company. The... the... size.....END CASSETTE ONE SIDE B

CASSETTE TWO SIDE A

John Tydeman continues....about Drama Rep after the War.

TYDEMAN After the War, the question was well should it be disbanded? Was this something that occurred through Wartime? But of course during the War there'd been such a burgeoning of radio drama and it had been realised the importance of entertainment during the War. And because of the ease of getting good and capable actors, because there was a need to have a company of people really experienced in radio, able to deliver performances with truth er... as quickly er... as was required, it was thought a good idea to keep this nucleus of actors who filled about one third of the roles in all the plays of Radio Drama. And the size of the company fluctuated, but it has always been around the 30 mark. It's being run down now and there could come a point where it is no longer economic. It was economic. So there were good economic reasons for having this company who were on the pay role of the BBC, and the period of engagement again like the size fluctuated. It was initially, of course, there wasn't really any time limit imposed, if an actor wished to remain they could remain. And in RTE in Dublin in the Republic of Ireland, they were... when they were brought on for life, rather like the Comedie Francaise, it then ended up of course with a lot of very elderly actors. So the Radio Drama Company, the Rep, were not lifers. They would have... the policy was that they would have a contract for it was 3 years, then it was reduced to 2, then to 18 months and now it stands at a year, the engagement. This was taking into account the wishes of actors themselves, the majority of whom didn't actually want to be tied up in radio for a period longer than a year or 18 months, but also of course mostly taking into account the listeners who could become familiar with certain voices. On the other hand, that worked both ways, because there were some people who became stars on the Radio Drama Company. In one thinks of names like Norman Shelley, Gladys Young, of Marjorie Westbury. Marjorie Westbury who was known for playing Steve in the Paul Temple series by Francis Durbridge. And I was in love with Marjorie Westbury when I was young and a student and so on. It was one of the great disillusionment's of my life when I met my heroine, Marjorie Westbury, who was a short, dumpy lady er.. in

days it wasn't quite as many, but say there were about 100 a week. And these would be read by ladies who seemed to me to be very old, they probably weren't but they seemed so - Cynthia Pughe, Peggy Welles and Molly Greenhouse. And I think their taste was perhaps on a more popular level. And there was this script of extraordinary freshness, it wasn't like anything else that I'd ever read. It was called 'The Boy Hairdresser' and it was about to go back and by some chance I read it and I went to Donald MacWhinney who was then Assistant Head of the Radio Drama Department, and I said, "Donald, I really think.. I think it's remarkable. I think you're quite wrong to send it back." Donald looked at it and said, "Yes, my God there is a talent here. Well, why don't you see the young man?" So I wrote to this young man, Joe Orton and said, 'Would he come and see me because I thought there were things that needed to be done to the play?' And he came to see me. And he was absolutely like Garry Oldman in the film 'Prick up your Ear' - I mean uncanny. And Joe, of course, I didn't know that at the time, was a joker er... and he was wearing ^{boots} both boots and khaki and he said, "Well... " I said "What have you been doing?" He said, "Well," he said, "I've been in prison." I mean he could change his accent. And I was a bit alarmed. I said, "What did you go to prison for?" He said, "Oh," he said, "defacing library books." So I thought oh well that's all right, I thought it was some violent crime. Anyhow I said you know certainly things need doing to the play. I said, "I don't actually... I don't like the title very much 'The Boy Hairdresser' - I think you can do a better title than that." And anyhow he went away and sent me the script and had changed the title to 'The Ruffian on the Stair' - an excellent title - and had done all the rewrites perfectly and I then asked him to come in and see me because one or two other little things that needed doing and I was going to produce the play. And um... in a most unusual style, you know not like anything else at that time in the early 60's. And he gave me a script and he said, "Er.. I've got this play which I've written, a play for the theatre, but..." he said, "I don't think um.. I don't think it's a radio play." So I looked at it and I just flicked through, and it was 'Entertaining Mr Sloane' and I mean I was just dazzled by what I saw. I said, "Have you got an agent?" And he said, "No, no I haven't." So I said, "Now look," I said, "the best agent in my opinion is a lady called Margaret Ramsey, Peggy Ramsey." I said, "Get in touch with her, say that I

this?" You know? "This is absolutely... we've heard this thing on the radio. It's terrific." Anyhow it was taken up by Methuen and well the rest is history. But I subsequently wrote to Sue a rather sort of jokey letter. She would send me purporting postcard, a whole file of them, purporting to be from Adrian Mole, because I had actually said to Sue I think we should change the name from Nigel Mole because it's too like Molesworth, Nigel Molesworth. Anyhow, we umed and ahed and we left it. But then Methuen, the publishers, said exactly the same thing so he.. the name was changed and Nigel became the best friend and the best friend had been called Adrian and there was a change of names. But we had this long jokey correspondence where I'd write back to Adrian and say, "Thank you for your poem... etc., etc., all as a joke. And when the proofs came out for the diary, the first book, Sue sent me a copy and she said, "Oh I forgot to ask John I mean I've used your letters. Is that all right?" I said, "Oh I don't mind at all, you know, I'm not worried about copyright or anything like that..." but they were actually letters from me. She said, "You know they're going to published 7 thousand, poor Methuen, oh they're so nice - Jeffrey Strawn is so wonderful at Methuen and they're going to lose so much money on 7 thousand." So I had then read the whole book and because I thought it was absolutely terrific, I said "Look, is it all right..." this was to Methuen, "if in fact we broadcast at quarter to nine in the morning as a reading 10 episodes from the diary just before it's published?" They said, "All right." They said, "Yes, more than glad." And it was partly because of my friendship for Sue, I suppose, but really because I thought that this was terrific. And I think it was Methuen and Sue would both acknowledge this, it was largely because of those readings which were read by an extraordinary young chap who read the first one called Nicholas Barnes who is Mole and has done all the Mole readings subsequently on radio, that the book shot up into the best seller lists and has now sold millions and it had that kick from radio. One should never really deny the power of radio when it comes to something that is really good, how it will be picked up, how there is a relationship between certainly a book reading public and radio.

INT Well, I suppose quiet a few of the really big names, the writers of today and certainly the playwrights, got the first step on the stairway to fame through radio, isn't that true?

TYDEMAN Oh yes that's absolutely true. You know I mean one could trot out the names of the very well-known. I mean I think Pinter would acknowledge that through Donald MacWhinney he had great encouragement, of course Sam Beckett, there's no doubt about that. John Mortimer. Bill Norton. I mean they are just some of the few who really were found, pushed by radio. One always remembers the names of those who succeed. One forgets the names of those who one thinks may write the second play but don't. So a lot of very good first plays, but it's the second play that's very important, and then it's the third play. And then you know after the third play that you really are with a real writer. I mean that was the case certainly with Tom Stoppard.

INT I can't resist throwing in a personal story. It's your interview and not mine really. But when I was Head of Programmes in West Region, my 'Children's Hour' organiser came to me and said, "I've found a schoolmaster at Mill Field in Somerset who I... he seems to have a bit of gift for this sort of thing. He's never done it professionally but he's sent me one or two plays. I think they're worth developing. I'd like really to commission him to do 5 or 6 plays for 'Children's Hour' and would you put up the money for it?" And I said, "Well I trust you, yes by all means." It was Robert Bolt, you know great international name.

TYDEMAN Oh Robert Bolt wrote 'Man for All Seasons'. 'Man for All Seasons' started out as a radio play. I didn't know it was thanks to you, Frank Gillard. LAUGH

INT Well let's go on because it leads on doesn't it to the Script Unit and Richard ^{IMESON} Steimason. Perhaps we could hear something about that from you.

TYDEMAN

The.. in Radio Drama we depend not only upon those writers that we go out and commission, I'm talking about the living writers, those that we know and those that we commission and those who have contact with us. But also er... a large number of plays, writers, came to us absolutely from out of the blue from the public. And we receive about two to three hundred plays a week which would be sent to the Drama Department and there had been established from way back er... a Script Unit, with a Script Editor. Er... because we depend so much upon the writer. I mean without the writer, let's face it, we would not be and the writer alive or dead, but particularly alive, has to be treasured, nurtured and looked after because without the writer nothing would be. And there grew up a tradition of script editing, of assessing scripts that would come in, of dealing with known writers about rewrites of plays, and when I first joined the Drama Department there was a brilliant Script Editor called Barbara Bray. And er... Barbara was herself something of an academic. I suppose she was more interested in the slightly more rarefied play than in the popular play. Um... she was followed by a most remarkable man, Rich ^{MISON} Steimason, who was Script Editor for over 30 years. He was about 27 when he became the Script Editor. And Richard was a polymath. I mean he loved the popular. He was unbelievably well-read. He had an almost photographic memory. He was a very kind man. He was a great encourager of talent. And he and I worked, we were good personal friends, worked closely together for nearly all my time at the BBC. Unfortunately he died too early, aged 56, in 1993. Um... and he was as it were like a Literary Manager. I had the title changed because I thought that Script Editor because of television etc., had become something of a misnomer, and that really it should be on a par with theatre and should be called Literary Manager which is on the continent is called Dramaturque. But in theatre it's Literary Manager. We actually changed the title to Literary Manager here. And he worked with a number of Script Assistants who would assess scripts, work on scripts, and also had a hand in production as well and they were responsible ... and Richard was responsible for coming up with ideas. I mean many of the ideas for the big serialisations were.. came from Richard. I mean it was his entire that we should read the entire Bible which was subsequently done. It was his idea that we should do 'War

and Peace'. That we should do again 'The Forsythe Chronicles' which is the whole work - television did just not all the books, but radio did all the books. And in earlier days it was the Script Assistants who would turn stage plays into radio plays. It normally meant crossing out stage directions like 'They go to the window' and things like that. Or else writing in things that cover action that you can't see, hopefully, in the style of the author so that you wouldn't notice. I mean Shakespeare is a wonderful radio dramatist, you don't have to write much into Shakespeare. But for some authors you do have to write bits in just to compensate for the lack of vision. And in those early days this was done by the Script Assistants and subsequently it was always done by producers which was much better when the producer actually does his own version and cuts text because the stage play er... that tends to last about two, two and a quarter hours, two hours in the theatre, the best time for that, duration for that is 90 minutes in radio. Which is why a lot of radio plays are 90 minutes. 90 minutes is also the best duration for the dramatisation of quite an easy novel, of a detective novel. But the Script Unit's function was to serve the Department, to come up with scripts, to encourage writers. It acted to some extent like a writing school. It was public service radio at its best. And when people would say you know the many investigations by consultants, and they said, "But you know you spend all this time, all this money, how many scripts do you actually get out of it?" And you say, "Well, perhaps we had 14 last year." And they'd say, "But you looked at 15 thousand scripts and you only got 40 - this doesn't seem to be very cost effective." But of course what they didn't really appreciate were those writers who were being encouraged, whose works did not necessarily reach fruition immediately. Sometimes it can take 2 or 3 years to encourage a writer. And this was a.. a service really.... to the dramatic life of the country. It wasn't just self regarding. It wasn't just about the BBC and what was necessarily going to be on air. I mean we would send writers to agents. We would send writers to theatres. We'd send scripts to theatres. And one could perhaps, if one was being sort of fine tuned in cost effectiveness, say "Well perhaps the cost of that .. it wasn't very large, wasn't... the BBC itself wasn't getting value for its money." But I don't think public service is entirely like that. I think that we're all part of a whole and if one recognises a principle of public service that that is part of it. I'm afraid it's

out of the window now. (YES) And the Script Unit as such is gone. There is no Literary Manager. And I feel a little doleful about the future.

INT Did you ever run schools for radio writers?

TYDEMAN Yes, oh yes. We'd go out and lecture and hold seminars er.. and of course it's... very important that radio drama should not just have a metropolitan face, which is why of course there is drama... half of drama had always come from outside of London so that it doesn't have a metropolitan voice, that it does actually reflect the country as a whole to itself. And now there's this fashionable word, proportionality, etc., and it is aimed that 38% of radio programmes should come from outside London, well radio drama has always had about 50% of its production from the 6 regional centres, the 3 nations and from the North and from the Midlands and it was from the West Country - but it was decided to close the marvellous studio at Christchurch in Bristol and there is now no drama coming from the West Region which had a terrific tradition in drama and I regret that deeply. I think it was a big mistake.

INT Mmm Tell me about the Department in this sense, was it a self critical department? Did your producers listen to other... their fellows, their colleagues' productions and did they ever get a chance corporately to express views?

TYDEMAN Oh yes. I mean analysis I suppose is part of the game because the BBC tradition is one of retrospective judgement, so every er... every week at a certain level we would review the output internally. Every 6, every 3 weeks we would review with the Department as a whole output, producers were required to listen to certain plays which were selected to discuss them. I think that a lot of producers you know don't listen and don't necessarily let on that they haven't listened. Unfortunately, drama directors tend to be prima donnas and it is very difficult to offer criticism without causing offence. So this had to be done with great tact. But I think the people could take it internally more than they could externally

kind of play it will sell very well around the world and you can make.....END
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certain restrictions. I think that when you talk about standards one is talking at different levels. That it should be the best of its type. That if in fact you are doing a detective er.. serial it should be the best that is possible. There is always something to aim towards. If you are doing a Shakespeare play it should be the best that is attainable at that moment. Of course, what was best then, say 10 years ago, doesn't necessarily sound the best now. It's amazing how fashion changes with drama. When you listen to productions of the past sometimes they seem extremely slow, very stagy. So our assessment mechanism changes because of time and because increasingly I think audiences are much more educated than they used to be. They have been educated enormously by television and drama without knowing it. Bernard Shaw said that if you're going to say something, you've got to say it 3 times. Now I reckon you only need to say it once, may be twice. You certainly don't need to say something 3 times. Audiences have become very very quick. You don't have to spell things that you used to have to spell things out. This goes for the theatre too. I mean all drama inter-relates. But I mean the standards have to be the highest. I mean the technical standard of the BBC requirements, the quality of programmes that actually leave the BBC, and are transmitted out onto the air, you have to be proud of them. They have to be of the very, very highest quality. Er... I hope that one wouldn't let, knowingly, certainly, a dud go out. If a dud goes out it is the producer's fault. I mean if a producer says, "I've got an awful play..." you know doing an assessment of production. I said, "That was terrible." "Oh yes, I know it was." I'd say, "Well, why the Hell didn't you come and say so before it went out? Say I'm worried about this. Listen to it." I mean this does occasionally happen and I'll say, "No we can't possibly broadcast that you're quite right." But everything must actually lie with the producer. The producer has to have the responsibility. You've got to trust the producer. And if the producer is going to pull out, allow something to go out onto air once even, you begin to lose trust. Er... and the whole BBC system of referral upwards seems to me the best system available. Trust, trust, trust, trust, trust all the way down the line, but people then have to respond in the right kind of way upwards. They have to trust the person who is senior to them (YES) and when in doubt refer. When in doubt refer.

better had one.. in terms of one's pocket, had one not remained within the BBC. On the other hand, having been trusted and one has been really given quite amazing opportunities, one has been well-protected. But people allow you to take risks and I think it's that risk taking element with the weight of a large organisation behind you which you know will support you when you take that risk. You are not out there on your own and the fact that you've got support in taking a risk is very, very valuable. So people are hugely aware of the environment. They want to be very, very proud of the BBC. And therefore when sort of sleaze occurs, they feel personally wounded and let down. I think the thing.. it's very important within the structure of the BBC to consult, and it seems to me daft not to consult. It is psychologically daft even if you don't use the information that you've acquired in your process of consultation. That people really do care about the BBC as a whole and there is an enormous amount of wisdom available through experience. And people make changes without the consultation and you can see them doing the same thing again. We've tried that. We've done that. We've done that you know several times and you see the wheel turning and you see things coming back to where they were, new systems coming in. You know they're not going to work because they've been tried and they're going to come back to where they were. And if only people would ask those who think they know, who've been around for sometime, one isn't necessarily right, but apart from anything else I think it's polite that if new things are introduced you're much more likely to go along with them if you feel part of the process even if you've.. you know, if it's been discussed. That there should be.. an atmosphere of secrecy about so much. I mean there's great about accountability to the public, by God there needs to be accountability internally before there is accountability externally. Treat staff as friends. I mean people are not necessarily hugely remunerated er.. within the BBC. It's a decent kind of wage and certainly in terms of drama it is not bad because drama is a notoriously badly paid area and producers er... are rewarded as well as someone running quite a large repertory company you know in a major town in this country, without all the worries that they would have with the Local Government etc., subsidy. COUGH I've got a tickle coming on.

TYDEMAN

Well, it's really about people I suppose, names. When I first joined the Drama Department in the early 60's there was a Features Department run by Lawrence Gilliam. And to me as a young man everybody there seemed like giants. They seemed like giants who spent most of their day in a watering hole around the corner called 'The George' and then after 'The George' would retreat to another watering hole called 'The Marie Lloyd Club' and how work ever got done I don't know. But these... I mean as a young man in one's early 20's, to meet people in this department run by Lawrence Gilliam, like Douglas Cleverlan^{don} who had directed, 'Under Milk Wood', the poet Louis MacNiece was there. He would sort of stand at the bar of 'The George' rather like a disapproving camel. Terrance Tiller, another poet. Rayner Heppenstall, David Thompson the writer. It was an... extraordinary department of ^{disparate}dispirit people who were writers and of course R.D. Smith who was in the Features Department then, but then came over into um... into Radio Drama. And I owe a great deal to Reggie, R.D. Smith, Reggie as he was known as. I don't know, he somehow took me under his wing and I had an office next to his. Whether I was a kind of son that he didn't have I don't know, but he really did teach me a lot. He taught me a lot of bad things, but I hope that I didn't sort of spend most of my day in the pub and looking at the horses in the newspaper and I mean Reggie was... I don't know, he was like a great pollinating bee. He always wanted to bring people together. He had immense goodwill. The only trouble was in bringing people together, he would often leave you with the most crashing bores. I mean he would say, "Do you know so and so.. the most wonderful..." and then he'd desert you and you were left with this person and after 5 minutes you would realise that you were left with one of the biggest bores in history. But they were amazing people. I mean all that Features Department who eventually came to Drama Department, when the Features Department was disbanded, because in those days the Features Department did really quite a lot of drama. I mean it was all the 'Hilda Tablets', the Henry Reed 'Hilda Tablets' were done by Douglas Cleverlan under Features. Louis MacNiece's plays, 'The Dark Tower' etc., and the Dylan Thomas 'Under Milk Wood' were done by

Features Department. I could never really quite understand, this was before I came, I could never really quite understand what was Features Department what they did and what Drama Department did. And then of course there was also in existence the Childrens Department run by David Davis and when that was disbanded David who was obviously very sad that 'Childrens Hour' had disappeared, came to Drama Department. And Drama Department then did a certain amount of production for children. I think that actually I have to say that childrens radio is.. probably has become a cul-de-sac. It isn't because there isn't an appetite er.. for drama or for material for children, it is what time of day do you actually transmit it? It's a problem of transmission. And I know that they then tried to recreate it for Radio 5, childrens drama, but it has to be said that they did not listen. Marvellous productions and I would have thought that really audio for young people, and it is a wonderful medium for the child because the imagination can play, is really for audio cassette and not in my opinion for transmitted radio. So the Drama Department did do childrens programming for quite a time, and of course in the Department when I joined it, there were these people who... seemed terribly old - I mean as old as I am now, but I mean they seemed to be 90 - um.. people like Archie Campbell. They were all quite eccentric. And Audrey Cameron who wore a kilt always and drank enormous amounts of whiskey er... brutalised the actors. David H. Godfrey - the H was very important. A marvellous lady, Betty Davis, who ran 'The Dales' for years and always wore a hat. And I can remember an actor talking about her on the radio actually, er.. said, "Well we know her as Betty the Hat..." and Betty was very upset by this. "Betty the Hat..." She said, "Betty the Hats...!" and she does, she's still alive and... er.... A wonderful woman. But there really were great characters about. Now whether it is because you're young you see these people are being great characters where.... and I don't think that there are the great big eccentric characters now that actually composed the BBC then. And I don't think that's just passage of time. I mean may be one has become one of the great eccentrics one's self,.... one may see one as being an eccentric, but I don't think so. They were full of rich people. They worked hard and they played hard. The great thing was that everything was done in an atmosphere of

