

Theatre Archive Project interview guidelines

Dr. Alec Patton (aypatton@gmail.com)

Making contact with your interviewee

If you have a phone number, call them. You can (and should) email them or write a letter as well, but you are more likely to reach them quickly on the phone.

When you call, explain that you are from the Theatre Archive Project and that you would like to interview them about British theatre between 1945 and 1968. Read up on the project before you contact them, so that you can explain it to them.

If your information says who passed on their name to us, it may be worth mentioning that name to them.

Ask them how they were involved in theatre between 1945 and 1968. This information will be invaluable to your pre-interview research. However, be careful not to let the interviewee start giving a detailed 'pre-oral history' on the phone. It's unlikely to be related in the same spontaneous way when they're being recorded - there will be a sense of having 'already told you that'.

Arranging the interview time and place with the interviewee:

1. If there is a British Library Interview day coming up and your interviewee lives in or near London, you can suggest that both of you attend the session. Mention to them that we will refund their train fare. Don't set a specific time unless they are only available at a certain time (We'll set a time for all the interviews once they've all been set).

2. If they can't make it to the interview day, or do not live near London, you will need to make an alternative arrangement with them. It's often easiest (and most comfortable for them) to interview them in their home.

Important: Tell them that the interview will be recorded and they will be asked for signed consent afterwards to allow the project to use it (more on this later).

3. As soon as you have set a date and a place, tell me so that we can book your train and make sure that a recorder is available for you on the day.

4. Once you've set your day, work out how you will identify each other (if you aren't interviewing them at their home). Here are a few possibilities:

- If you have your interviewee's email address, you can email them a current photo of yourself, so they know who they are looking for.
- You can tell them you will be wearing a distinctive article of clothing, conspicuously holding a particular book, or even making a sign with their name on it (just make sure you remember to do so!).

5. It's a good idea to send a letter of confirmation to your interviewee before the interview takes place, stating the date, time, and location of the interview, and reminding the interviewee that you will be bringing recording equipment. This is courteous to your interviewee, and will help to avoid confusion.

Pre-interview research I - general context

It is important to go into the interview with a basic understanding of post-war British Theatre history, as well as some facts about your interviewee.

Dominic Shellard's *British Theatre Since the War* and Michael Billington's *State of the Nation* are two books that provide excellent introductions to the period, and both can be borrowed from the University of Sheffield library. You can also look at Jim Fowler's *Unleashing Britain: theatre gets real, 1955-1964*, which gives a good, quick overview (and is also available from the library). Finally, just go to the library and browse the following call numbers: 792 and 822-823 – you'll discover interesting information that a more tightly-focused search wouldn't uncover.

RESEARCH HEALTH WARNING: The aim of the Theatre Archive Project is to get information that goes beyond the established narrative of the period. Any book you read about British theatre is, by definition, an already-established narrative, so if your questions imply that this is the script your working from, interviewees will tend to give you what they think you want to hear (that is to say, the narrative we already have). You need to let them tell their story on their terms. The background research that you do will guide your responses to their questions, because you will have a context for understanding what (and who) they are talking about, but it should not determine the shape of the interview.

- This is equally true of any module on post-war British Theatre that you might have taken. Your interviewee probably didn't see *Look Back in Anger/Waiting for Godot/Saved/Taste of Honey/The Birthday Party* when it opened, and they probably didn't care that much about it until it became part of the established narrative of postwar British theatre. If they did see it and did care about it, they'll probably tell you anyway - so don't ask them out of the blue about whatever play you've been studying.

Pre-interview research II - learning about your Interviewee

Prior to the interview, do some background research on your interviewee. A good starting point is simply to Google their name. If you can't find out anything about them specifically, use your initial phone conversation as a basis for research into the people and events that they want to talk about (for example if the interviewee has mentioned John Gielgud, do a bit of background reading about him).

You should also look at some of the 200 transcripts that have already been produced on the project website (www.bl.uk/theatrchive). Once you know a bit about your interviewee, you can search keywords such as their name, theatres where they performed or visited, or productions that they were involved with, to see what other interviewees have had to say about them.

Reading interview transcripts is also the best way to learn how to conduct your own interview, so take a close look at how other interviewers have structured their interviews – what questions have they asked, and in what order? How have they used follow-up questions in order to get more information from the interviewee?

It's up to you whether you prepare questions prior to the interview – it can be a good idea to write down a page of questions just so that you feel more secure, but if you follow your question-list slavishly your interview will be frustrating for you, the interviewee, and anyone who wants to read the transcript or listen to the recording. The best interview questions are nearly always those that lead on from something the interviewee has said.

If you would like help coming up with questions, please consult a member of the project team to discuss a question outline.

Getting copyright permission-VERY IMPORTANT

The interviewee needs to sign a British Library 'Clearance Note and Deposit Instructions' form, which gives the British Library the right to preserve, reproduce, and make public the interview (this form should be included in the box with your recorder). If we don't have their permission the interviews cannot be stored in the British Library Sound Archive and we can't put the transcripts onto the project website.

Before the interviewee signs, you need to explain to them that the interview will be made publicly available by the British Library, including online, so that they can give 'informed consent'. By signing the form, they give the British Library the right to store the interview in the sound archive and post a transcript on the website, as well as to publish the interview (or interview extracts). In addition (to quote the form), the interview will be available 'for use in research, publication, education, lectures, broadcasting, and the internet.' There is a section on the copyright form for restrictions on use if they so wish. In the unlikely event that this happens, they should write their restrictions on the form.

Even after they have signed the form, they will retain 'moral rights' over the use of their interview. This means they can legally object if they feel that their interview is being used inappropriately.

Finally, we will make an effort to contact them if we are planning to use their interview in a publication or exhibition.

If you don't get a signed form from your interviewee, we cannot put the interview into the Sound Archive or post the transcript online.

Structuring the interview

1. Although the best interviews often appear to be casual conversations, they always have an underlying structure. In our experience, by far the best structure is a simple chronology. There are several reasons for this:
 - Most people find it easiest to remember the events of their life in chronological order (to test this, try to remember everything that happened to you yesterday WITHOUT going through the day chronologically).
 - A chronological structure will be simple for you to follow as an interviewer – you will always have the option of saying 'so what happened next?' to move the interview forward or 'Let's go back to...' if you'd like them to elaborate on something they've mentioned already.

Having said this, nobody wants a RIGID chronology. People will think of surprising things at surprising times, and it's important to let the interviewee jump around as they remember particular events. It's your responsibility to keep track of where you are in their life-story and (gently) return them to the chronology.

2. It's generally best to start the interview with a very open question. 'How and when did you first become involved with the theatre' and 'what was your first experience of the theatre' are two tried-and-true interview-starters that get the interview moving along a nice chronological path.

3. IMPORTANT: The project's focus is on British Theatre between 1945 and 1968, so we aren't interested in what was happening in other countries or during other time periods, unless they relate to British Theatre 1945-1968 (so if, say, somebody grew up in Australia and remembers a tour by Laurence Olivier and the Old Vic Theatre Company, we definitely want to know about that! But if somebody worked in, say, Berlin in 1987, we aren't interested, fascinating though their stories about that time and place may be).

How to ask good questions

1. The first rule when preparing questions is not to over-prepare. An oral history interview is not a questionnaire, and if you just go through a list of pre-prepared questions your interview will not be very interesting for you or your interviewee, and it will be deathly dull to anybody who listens the recording or reads the transcript!
2. Much more important than pre-planning a list of questions is having a good lead-off question and a flexible sense of overall structure (see **structuring the interview**, above).
3. As a general rule, the project is looking for *specific stories* and *specific feelings*, but we're less interested in *abstract opinions*.

Here are examples of what this means:

- The question 'Did The Lord Chamberlain ever demand that you change any of your plays?' is an invitation for specific stories.
- The question 'How did you feel when the Lord Chamberlain made you change that line?' is an invitation for a specific feeling.
- The question 'Do you think theatre censorship was a good thing?' is an invitation for an abstract opinion.

Abstract opinions tend to be fairly generic – there are really only three responses to the third question ('yes', 'no', and 'well, yes and no'), and none of them are particularly interesting. Your interviewee's general opinions will come out of the concrete information that they give you.

4. Don't be afraid to ask questions that seem obvious to you – you're creating a historical document, and what seems obvious now might not seem so obvious fifty years from now. It's generally best to assume that the world knows absolutely nothing about your interviewee.

If you don't want the interviewee to think you haven't done enough research about them, you can frame obvious questions by saying something like 'Just so we can have it for the recording, what was the first play you appeared in?'

5. Continuing on from point 4, make sure you ask clarifying questions if you become confused. For example, if the interviewee begins talking about a play they were involved with, and they haven't said what theatre they performed it in, please ask them where it took place. These little questions make future researchers' lives much, much easier.

Try to make sure you always know WHERE the interviewee was, and (approximately) WHAT YEAR it was.

6. It's important to listen closely to the interviewee. In the process of answering a single question they may mention a dozen different points that would all be worth following up on. The most productive (as well as the most respectful) interview questions are nearly always ones that lead on from something the interviewee has mentioned already.

7. Finally, it can be a good idea to have a few backup questions written down in case the interview freezes up. Chances are good that you won't use them, but they will make you feel more secure when you go in.

8. Here are a few good questions to ask if you're feeling stuck (not all of these will necessarily be appropriate to all interviewees):

- Did you read about new plays in newspapers or magazines? Which ones?
- Who did you go see plays with?
- Describe what it was like to go to a play at _____ theatre, from the beginning of the evening to the end.
- What was a typical day like in your job? [assuming they had a theatre-related job!]
- How did you get your job?/Why did you leave that job?

Safety

As with any time that you visit the home of somebody you don't know, it's a good idea to take a few safety precautions on the day of your interview:

- Make sure someone knows where you are going (address and telephone number) and what time you plan to be back.
- Carry a mobile phone with you, and call your contact if your plans change while you are out (for example, if you stay for a cup of tea after the interview).
- Agree with your contact in advance over what they should do if you don't return when expected and you haven't contacted them to say that your plans have changed.

Recording tips

1. You'll be recording with an Edirol R-09 digital recorder. Make sure that you practice using it before you conduct the interview! If you don't yet have a PDF version of the R-09 Owner's Manual, ask the coordinator to send it to you. This will tell you everything you need to know about recording, including how to position the recorder for optimum sound quality. If you have any further questions, email the coordinator.

2. It's a good idea to do a brief 'interview' with a friend a day or two before the interview.. This will give you a chance to get comfortable with working the recorder, as well as with the feeling of conducting an interview.

3. Make sure you know how to monitor volume levels. You don't want to find out after the interview that you didn't pick up your interviewee's voice, or had the volume so loud that it distorted! At the interview, you can check the volume levels by pressing 'Rec' once. The recorder will begin flashing, and the volume levels will show up on the screen. Just watch the levels as you and the interviewee speak, and make sure they register. Ideally they should reach about 2/3 of the way to the maximum, but you don't need to be too finicky about this.

4. Bring a pair of headphones with you to the interview. That way, you can do a 'sound check' to make sure that you are recording at an appropriate level.

Here's how to do a sound check: Begin recording and ask the interviewee to say their name.

Once they've spoken, stop the recording, plug in the headphones and play back what you've just recorded (make sure the playback volume is up enough for you to hear).

Obviously, you should also do this when you interview your friend a couple days before the interview.

5. Here are a few tips for avoiding extraneous noise:

- Don't record in a room with a glass roof – if it starts raining, it will sound ridiculously loud on the recording.
- Try to keep noisy pets out of the room during the interview. If there's a bird cage, cover it.
- You and the interviewee should be the closest things to the recorder – if you have, say, a packet of crisps on the table near it, you could lose a large portion of the interview to rustling. [note: the clinking of teacups is nothing to worry about].

'Traumatic remembering'

Sometimes when people are going through their past in an interview, traumatic memories resurface that have been buried for years. If your interviewee becomes upset by a memory, it's respectful to ask if they would like you to return the recorder off, or if they would like to take a break from the interview for a few minutes (you could offer to make a cup of tea).

However, don't assume the interviewer DOESN'T want to say something just because they find it difficult. Sometimes the stories people find most difficult to tell are the ones they most want to be recorded.

Interviewing tips

1. You can choose whether or not to take notes on the interview. There are a couple advantages of having a notebook:

- You can jot down points that you'd like to return to and explore further when the interviewee is talking. This is much easier than trying to hold all the points in your head!
- Taking a few notes (though not at the expense of keeping eye contact with the interviewee) gives clear evidence that you are interested in what they are saying.

The chief disadvantage of taking notes is that it makes the interview feel more 'formal' and can make some people uncomfortable. Do what feels best to you.

2. Interviewees often tell their entire story in one big rush – if this happens, don't try to interrupt. HOWEVER, the interview is not finished when they get to the end! It's your job to go back through it with them, getting more detail. This is one of the reasons it can be a good idea to bring a notebook!

3. Don't be afraid of silence and hesitation: there may be long pauses, requests to repeat questions, etc. This is normal, and nothing to worry about. When there is a silence, allow time for the interviewee to think or reflect.

4. Try to learn to give non-verbal feedback to your interviewee. For example, nod your head to show your interviewee that you're interested in what they're telling you, rather than saying 'mm-hmm' or 'yeah'. You'll be very glad you did this when it comes time to transcribe the interview!

- This is a good technique to practice when you interview your friend beforehand.
- Don't worry if you find this technique too awkward. You won't mess up the interview if you keep saying 'mm-hmm', you'll just have more to transcribe.

5. Don't be in a hurry to end the interview if the interviewee wants to carry on talking. For some reason, it has often been the case that towards the end of the interview, the interviewee has opened up and introduced an unexpected but interesting angle. It's fine to let the interview carry on for longer than an hour, if it's getting very interesting!

6. After you turn the recorder off, the interviewee may suddenly tell a fascinating anecdote – this happens frequently enough that it's best to be prepared for it. Try to commit it to memory, and jot it down as soon as you have the opportunity – but remember that material like this needs to be treated with discretion, because the interviewee has specifically NOT recorded it – so if you intend to use it in your research, ask the interviewee if that is acceptable.

7. The interviewee may ask you about your own life, interest in theatre, etc. After all they've given you, it's only fair that you answer these questions – just stay off the subject of YOU until the recorder's turned off!

8. You don't necessarily need to rush off as soon as the interview is finished. Your interviewee might, for example, invite you to stay for a cup of tea, and it can be nice for both of you to have a 'normal' chat following the interview.

9. Sometimes interviewees will have artefacts (photos and programmes, for example) that they would like to donate to the project. Let the project coordinators know about this, and we will contact them about it. If they give something to you to donate to the project, just bring it back to us with the recorder (though we can't guarantee that we'll put it in the collection).

After the interview

As soon as you get home, copy the interview onto your computer (or someone else's, if you don't have a computer). You do this by plugging the recorder into your computer using the USB cable in the box, or any USB cable (for example, one that you use for a digital camera). The cable goes into a plug next to the memory card on the recorder (you need to slide back the bottom of the recorder to see it). Once you've plugged it in, you should be able to simply drag and drop the interview file onto your computer.

There are two reasons to do this: first, it means you have a backup copy of the interview (and you can never have too many backups!). Second, it means you can play the recording (using Windows Media Player, Itunes, or whatever music player you have), and start transcribing immediately

Once you've reached this stage, it's time to return the recorder to us and start reading the transcription style guide.

This guide was written by Alec Patton (apatton@gmail.com) with advice from Jamie Andrews, Steve Cleary, Lada Price, Dominic Shellard, and Michelle Winslow.

Elements of these guidelines are taken from 'Oral History Interviews - Overview and Guidelines', by Dominic Shellard (2007)

For more information on the Theatre Archive Project, visit <http://www.bl.uk/theatrchive>



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.