EAST MELBOURNE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH

Nora Riches
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East Melbourne

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[Side A of tape]

Thank you very much for being prepared to tell us your story. We do have the questions that you have seen and have read. And may we follow those?

Yes.

Well, Nora I think you have told us where you were born – Hampstead was it?

No, I was born in Birkenhead, in Grange Road West. We were there only for a very short time and we then moved to Prenton, which is also in Cheshire. I vaguely remember it. I can't quite remember the school I went to there. Oh yes, I first went to a kindergarten which I can't remember what the name of it was, but I was there for a short time until I was about seven years old and then I got rheumatic fever which crippled me and I had scarlet fever which gave me rheumatic fever and for two years I was in bed and during that time I read poetry. I became addicted to poetry and to plays. I read practically all Dickens. Everything that was in the house that was readable I read. I became quite proficient literally. Then when I recovered and returned to school I was behind in everything except literature for which I could recite, and can now and I remember going back to school and them saying, "Well let's hear what you can say". "Well, what would you like – Hiawatha?" [recites passage from Hiawatha "By the shores of Gitchigoo…]

From then on I became a damn nuisance because I had got, and still have a memory for which I can almost go back and play every part I ever played on the stage. I've got that annoying memory which irritates everybody whose forgotten everything and I get into a lot of trouble for remembering it. And its been a curse throughout my life.

What were some of the highlights of your career, your acting career, do you think? Were there any that stood out? It was a long career, I realize.

Well I think in *The Cradle Song* where I played it twice, as a nun Yes, and I think I've got the photograph of the nun. Yes, I got marvellous notices. "Nora Peachey

gave a brilliant performance as a nun, we were most convinced except that she crossed herself from right to left instead of left to right." I've got it here somewhere. I might have a photograph of it somewhere.

And then you travelled to Europe? Was that right?

Europe! I didn't play in Europe. I never acted in Europe. We spent our honeymoon in Montreux. Arnold and I were married when I was twenty [c.1928]. He was quite a lot older, he was nearly twenty-five. But he had become well known. He had already won the British Empire Award the year after Laurence Olivier. So I was merely a sort of also ran compared with him. When we married and between times he had time off and I was between jobs so we decided to have a honeymoon a little bit after we were married and we went to Montreux. I'm just trying to think of the name of the hotel in which we were staying and it was occupied annoyingly, irritatingly….almost interrupted, by Stravinsky who was staying there at the same time composing his most famous piece. His wife was with him and she was bored with him and she insisted on coming on walks with us to our great despair, well, not despair, but to our rather great annoyance that she should be there. She was younger than he was and he was an irritating old man, only absorbed in himself and he is one of the most outstanding memories that I carry of the honeymoon period.

…And it was produced by Stanislavsky. It was the first play that he produced in England and I played it at the Lyric Theatre with a well known actor of the time, Maurice Evans, who went afterwards to America and became quite well known and famous there.

At that stage my career was cut short. I became very ill and I had to go into hospital and they discovered that I had a growth on my left ovary. And I was operated on and I was in hospital for three or four weeks and during the latter part of the time that I was there the specialist came into see me. She was a very interesting woman. And she said, "Oh by the way, I don't know if you realize it, but you are also pregnant. I nearly dropped dead. I said, "I can't be I'm booked to play, I'm booked for the summer season at Stratford-on-Avon. I did the audition and I was the only one chosen, I'm not going to have that baby." And she said, "I'm afraid it's too late, because you are about four months pregnant." Oh, no my life here. "Another day, goodbye." And that was really how my professional career was cut abruptly short because after I had the child it was very difficult to go back to the theatre. So instead of that we bought a large old house on Havistock Hill on a fairly short lease and I decided that we would live on the ground floor, the garden floor, it had a beautiful garden with steps down and beautiful trees, and the rest of the house I would turn into individual flatlets, which I would let to my dear theatrical friends. Well, each room I made into a complete bed-sitting room with its own little cooking equipment and its own bell, and I had a bell system. And I put an advertisement in the Hampstead Times describing these flatlets and saying nobody over thirty need apply. I was about twenty two at the time, I did not want old people. Well, I filled it with the most interesting people one of them who was, later on I will tell you, all kinds of people took these rooms and we all became extremely good friends but we always had maids but in England everybody seemed to have a maid even if you were poor. I can never think of a time in any house where we didn't have at least one servant,T in those days and I had a wonderful nanny and she was, of course, always dressed as a nanny. She

did lots of things and helped, and it became very successful. So this meant that Arnold was able to go back to the theatre and do a play and he was one of the leading lights of what was called The Late Night Joys, you have probably heard of this, where Peter Ustinov started. It was a theatre club which was patronised by after theatre show audiences in Covent Garden and it was approached on the sixth floor of a very old building in Covent Garden which you entered by a huge, old, ricketty cage, iron cage lift that went tottering up to the top of this building. And the backcloth of the building, they didn't have very much money so they didn't bother with a backcloth they just put a window in and the window was the lights of the stand with flashing at the back of the thing. And all this was wonderful, and it became quite the thing for everybody to go, all the well known people, Marlene Dietrich at one stage was there, but it became quite the in thing for everybody to go to The Late Night Joys and it ran for years and years, its still…, I don't know, I think during the war it moved but it was still quite a going theatre even when the war was on. And there was an aspiring young man, who I told you before, and his name was Peter Ustinov, aged seventeen. He did the most amazing thing called Relief From Marriage, and he turned Mafeking into a dame, and he was very rude about Mafeking. He became one of the great highlights. Life was fun then. I used to go and watch quite a lot and on one occasion, I wasn't there, and Arnold knew I adored Marlene Dietrich and I was at home and quickly the phone rang and he said, "Nora, get down quickly, get on the next train. Marlene Dietrich is sitting in the front row and she is applauding everybody. I am about to go on and she'll applaud me. Goodbye."

What year would this be, please, Nora?

That would be, oh about 36 or 37. It might have been 37. Yes 37. I still have a few handbills.

Nora, we want to hear about your fans.

Well, you see, I sound a fascist if I talk about the people I knew at the beginning of the fascist party. They all started off as labour in the beginning. They got so fed up with nothing happening and unemployment in Britain. At that stage forty seven percent of the people in Wales were unemployed. They were idealists.

Academics?

Yes. Oh yes, oh yes. They were all better educated. Most of them had been to Oxford. And they had become disillusioned with Britain at the time, with the non-activity of the labour party which was stalled at the time. And when they went over, when Mosely went over to Italy he met Mussolini. Of course I had got to know Mosely quite well. He had been a fan of mine, and his wife, when I was on tour. They would take me out and they were wonderful. And when he came back he said, "This is what we need. They have got practically full employment. Mussolini has found the answer. I am going to adopt some of his philosophy." Well, for six months people like Joge and Forgawth, and the well known socialists stayed with him They thought he had got the solution to the great unemployment in England. But then he went over to Germany and met Hitler. And that completely changed Mosley. His wife, his dear wife, was the restraining influence. She died of cancer, and then he married Diana, and Diana went with him and her sister, Unity, as you probably know

became a great fan of Hitler's and thus the introduction of German fascism became his policy in England and all the idealists and leftists left him.

[She talks about she and her husband getting involved in politics, and Arnold standing for parliament.] Well I walked up and down Havistock Hill from our house to the town hall with a sandwich board over my head, back and front, "Vote Labour and Save our Souls, Vote Arnold Riches" giving out pamphlets to everyone passing. Suddenly I ran out of pamphlets, and a young policeman had been walking up and down the side to see what I was doing, and I thought, "Oh, damn it." And I stopped him and I said, "Could you hold my sandwich board while I go and get some more pamphlets?" He was so overcome that he held it while I ran up the steps at the town hall to get some more pamphlets. And I continued barracking for my husband, who, although of course he didn't get in, polled more votes for labour than had ever been known before, and that was just before the war. At this stage I was very much influenced by the political situation and I was a member of the Pen Club. Have you heard of the Pen Club? The famous Pen Club in England, and I put my name down, we did, as a refuge for Jewish Jews escaping from Germany. Well during that time I kept one big bed-sitting room for them and I think I got seven or eight families. I took them as a refuge and they stayed with me. We negotiated with people and relatives they knew in America, and they stayed with me until they moved on. We gave them a refuge, and we fed them and a lot of them came over, but some of them were so rich and so snooty that they made me anti-Semitic. One or two of them came over with jewels and furs and were….ungrateful, completely ungrateful. You know sometimes Jewish people can be very arrogant and this has always made me see the slightest reason why there is such as thing as anti-Semitism, with which, of course, I don't agree but I can understand how it is perpetrated.

[Talks of her time in] Fashion magazines while the children were at school earning enough money to pay for their school fees, and I did all sorts of innovation things. I suggested that all the restaurants at that time… I went round them all and did sections for the magazines. [shows typescripts and magazines] Yes, here's one. This one. She had only just come over. She was quite young. I met her and persuaded her to model for him.

This is in the 1950s?

Yes. Liza Minelli. She was sweet, she was such a nice person and I persuaded her to model for him. Bruno Bernini, my darling Bruno did the photographs. She was only about eighteen then. There she is, you see. I did quite a few restaurants I had columns in Flair of recommended restaurants at that time. I didn't tell them I was from a magazine, I just went and had a meal and then wrote them up and once when the magazine came out and saw that they were mentioned several times they would ring me up and ask me to come and have a complementary meal. Because if you tell a person you are writing a review you get an impression of them generally but I went in as an ordinary person and wrote them up. Some of them are relevant today still.

Nora, we were speaking about the 50s but we missed an important part, and that was your arrival in Australia in 1939.

We arrived in 39. How we arrived in Australia was we were on our way to New Zealand to start an arts theatre in New Zealand, in Christchurch for J.C. Williamson where they had established theatre there, an amateur company. Well in 1939, or prior to that, we realized that war was inevitable, so we approached J.C. Williamson and suggested ourselves that perhaps it might be nice to go to New Zealand and form a theatre company. At this stage people in England didn't think war was inevitable but we were involved in politics a little, having brought all these people over from Germany we realized that war was inevitable. So J.C. Williamson said, "All right. It's a good idea. We will give you a two year contract." And then he rang us up and said, "We don't want to waste you two people on the way. Why don't you stop in Melbourne and Sydney? Think of two character plays." So we thought that was a good idea. So we submitted some and they chose two, one was called Jealousy and the other was called Close Quarters. They were both anti-Jewish plays. And they agreed that they would be a good idea to have a six week break in Sydney then in Melbourne. But war broke out on the journey, just outside Ceylon, Columbo the night before, as I explained to you, that I was dancing with [?] in the hush of the night when war was declared and our plans went haywire. From then on we sailed blind. It wasn't until a week or so later that our spirits rose as the ship sailed through Sydney Harbour, in the most beautiful blazing sunshine, and it seemed just like heaven. Wherever we looked there was beautiful houses, and as we stepped off the ship there were pointsettias trees all through the streets Sydney. We couldn't believe it was so wonderful.

Well, we were still optimistic and we looked at several places where we might possibly like to stay and we were being paid under contract – this was 39 pounds each a week, which was at that stage a lot of money, quite a lot. So money wasn't an object, or so we thought, and we went to an estate agent in Kings Cross and he took us around to a lot of very nice places but there was a wonderful, wonderful house right on the river, right on Elizabeth Bay. We fell in love with it and immediately signed for it for two months. We signed for this for two months and I think it was a lot of money for what it was here [Sydney]. I don't know. And on the way back, before we had actually signed he, the agent, said, "You see that big building on top of the hill, called Berkley Towers? There are several flats there. You might like to look at some before you sign for that house." So we said, "All right, we will have a look." And down the side of course there were all the names of the occupants in it. Lo and behold… I said, "My godfather, look who's living there, Bill Freshman." Bill Freshman had been the only man playing with me in The Cradle Song in Hampstead. So he said, "Let's ring." We rang the bell. A voice came through. It was Bill Freshman. "Bill, this is Nora Peachey speaking, and Arnold Riches." "What, good God. Where are you?" We said, "We are just in the foyer." He said, "Stay! Wait! Wait! I'll be down in a minute." So he came down in the next lift. Got hold of us and dragged us up and took us into his wife. He had married. I've forgotten her name, but she had just been diagnosed with T.B. He was devastated and she was lying on a couch. She got up, of course, and made us tea. We stayed for ages and ages and we told them we had taken the house down on Elizabeth Bay and Bill said, "Well I'm directing a film. It's utter rubbish. It's a Dad and Dave film but I'll write a part in for you." So I said, "Wonderful. Lovely" And he said, "Nora, we can't waste you." Because he had played with me in The Cradle Song. So this Dad and Dave thing, he said, "Don't expect anything it's called In Egypt. I said, "What am I going to be?" And he said, "We'll make you the cousin from America. You will play with

an American accent. And I said, "Allright." "Righto, dear." And then he said, "You had better dress like a cousin from America. I'll send you along to the wardrobe mistress." So he sent me along to the wardrobe mistress. And they made the most ghastly looking dress with sparkles all over it. I have never forgotten it, it had sparkles. When Bill saw it he said, "The lines will suit the dress." So my entrance was, " Hello, my glamour has lost its glam." [pronounced "my glarmour has lost its glarm"] Talk about corny. Oh God! Oh God! Oh God! Don't worry, it never saw the light of day. Bill Freshman had a row with the writer, said he couldn't produce such rubbish and he walked out on the thing. The film was never made. Oh dear! Oh dear! Oh dear! So that was an abortive one.

Now didn't Peter Finch come into your life?

Peter Finch, Oh yes. We played the children's hour. We were stuck. When we went to see E.J. Tait, we said, "There's our contract. And we got it for two years." And he said, "Umm. Have you read the contract?" And we said, "Yes, it's just an ordinary Equity contract." He said, "Have you read the small print?" "What?" "Read the small print, please, at the bottom." "In the event of typhoon, act of God, or war, this contract is null and void." So we thought about it slowly. We were out on a limb. Having committed ourselves for this expensive flat and we had engaged a nanny for the baby. I think we had, we had saved a bit of money, I think altogether…. we had the very large sum, which in those days was a lot of money, of 500 pounds, which we lived on until it was gone. Then we applied for radio work, any radio work was well paid, was commercial radio. And we had pronounced, very English accents and 2GB wouldn't touch us. The only place that would give us any work at all was the ABC and the Laurence Cecil, who was an old actor and who had been an actor with the Manchester Rep.and he was the producer there. And he saved our skin. And he …?… and we had only been there for about three weeks and I played a nurse in that play. And the ABC kept us more or less alive with various parts. Peter Finch was under contract with the ABC and he played innumerable radio parts with which I was involved, particularly during the children's hour, the children's session. With Ida Osborne and Mac and Joe. Do you remember Ida Osbourne? Mac and Joe. A long time ago. They were the children's hour. They were two people. They were the introducers, the leading lights of the children's hour. And Mac and Joe arranged the long serials and the various programs and I participated quite a lot in the children's hour for which I was paid the large sum of one guinea for which I had to pay commission to Equity and I think I went home with 12/6d. [$1.25] I had to pay 3s. 6d. [35c] to the baby sitter. So I wasn't making a lot of money in those days. However, during the long, scary children's hour there was a long serial called Fishy Fantasies. Peter Finch…I played Stella the Stealing Starfish and Peter Finch played Silas the Sinister Shark, who was constantly chasing Stella the Stealing Starfish and nearly grabbing her for weeks and weeks on end. And one day Stella the Stealing Starfish looked up from the script to see Silas the Sinister Shark was coming at her with a whole set of large teeth cut in fine cardboard round [his head].

[Side B of tape]

I came in with my daughter and she would sit at the back sucking sticks and sweets that the company would be buying her quietly saying, "Shh! Shh!" and she would be wanting to say "Mummy! Mummy! Mummy!" You see. You can imagine. We had

the greatest fun. It was really worth playing them for nothing. And Peter Finch was a brilliant actor. I got to know him very well because he was deeply interested as I always was, in poetry. And he had a little room, a flat at Potts Point. We were living in the flat at Billyard Avenue right on the water. So I used to come back home with Peter and we used to say "Goodbye" at my steps and he would go home. But we always kept in touch through our interest in poetry. And I used to go sometimes and we would just read poetry together. He was a very intelligent, interesting young man. I liked him very much. There was nothing between us, of course. It was just a professional interest. During that time we also kept… survived by doing the Lux Show for which we were paid seven pounds a week. We rehearsed and we did a proper show on a Sunday night in an auditorium with an audience. And we dressed up for it. Harry Dearth, the young Harry Dearth…he was the producer, he chose the plays, and he was quite pro both of us. Arnold and I played quite a number of leading parts for Harry Dearth. It was a commercial show but it was of a higher calibre than most of them in those days.

The Garnet Carrolls then owned the Princess Theatre. And I think it was that somebody saw us and wanted us and the Garnet Carrolls brought us over and we starred in the play, Giving The Bride Away, which you saw in the photographs, which was a farce, and the actors were Australians who had played in mostly amateur theatricals and they overplayed dreadfully. To our horror. We were accused very much of underplaying and we had several rows with Garnet Carroll because we were not trying hard enough because they liked to see the wheels going around, Garnet Carroll did in those days. And they say six years later when the Olivier company came out here, and of course we knew them all, and they played Garnet Carroll. […?…] And they said, "We're terribly sorry. We underestimated you. We never realized that that was the way it should have been played." So we were up against obstacles and a preconceived idea of real theatre here by so many of the people who were only used to amateur acting.

Nora, what plays...what Old Vic plays did you perform in?

Well it was at The Princess Theatre? No. We only did that one. It lasted for four months. We were brought over from Sydney to do that. The play ended. We went back to Sydney. We had let our flat, or friends of ours took over the flat for a short time in Billyard Avenue, and when we went back and restored that and continued living by our radio work in Sydney. Mainly the ABC and the Lux Radio Theatre.

The Argonauts?

Oh! The Argonauts! The Argonauts were the children's hour. Oh, but you couldn't live on that it was twelve and sixpence a time. Oh, The Argonauts. Yes, I did the Argonauts for years. That's where Peter Finch and I did Silas the Sinister Shark.

That was the Argonauts?

Yes. Oh, yes. The Argonauts! Row, row, row your boat…do you remember it? That was our signature tune. That brings it all back.

So when did you come to live in Melbourne?

When did we come to live in Melbourne? Let me think. During the war we lived most of the year in Balmoral. Do you know Balmoral? It is lovely, overlooking the sea. When I was there I did one or two plays for the Independent Theatre and Doris Fitton. Do you remember the Independent? I played in Dear Brutus and quite a number of plays there. I can always remember the second scene, in the second act of Dear Brutus. It is a dream scene. In the first act Lady Caroline had been extremely snooty at a big party and treated everybody and the butler with scorn and the second act, in the dream scene, which was played behind gauze. The curtain goes up and she has a dream and she is a nymph and the butler is caressing her, and the lines are, "Hark. Ahh, the nightingale there." And he is caressing her. The nightingale was played by Doris Fitton's song from a record off stage. One night the curtain went up, "Hark! Woof! Woof! Woof! Woof! Woof! Woof!. Har..ar..ark! Ah, the hounds are chasing the nightingale." They had put the wrong record on. The things that happened on stage! Of course, it brought the house down. It was long ago. I can remember we had a terrible time because the war was on and we couldn't get home. The last bus went just before midnight and we were miles away, on the other side of the river. And if we missed that bus it was hopeless. And Doris Fitton who was a most mean, stupid woman. She couldn't act for toffee but she ran the theatre quite well, she wasn't a bad producer. She insisted that all the cast stood, while the curtain was down, for God Save the King. And we had to wait while she played the three verses. She said, "I will not have disrespect in my theatre. You stand for the King. Well, I had never done that in any theatre. The King is for the audience, not for us. But we stood for the King. And I can always remember, what was his name? He became a well known writer. He said, "Right, Peachey" They all called me Peachey. "We stand for the King. She didn't say we couldn't take our clothes off." He said, "Are you game for it?" So we stood for the King. He stripped down to his underpants and I had a top and I dropped it as far as the nipples, and lifted up my skirt. Well, Doris Fitton when she saw this from the wings. She said, "You will never play in my theatre again, and you who have desecrated the theatre and scorned the Queen [King] that is the last time you will ever play in my theatre. And it was, you know. It didn't worry me. The things that happened.

[First part of interview ends.]