

A Transcript of Theatre and Sustainability: An Interview with Ian Ricketts

[Evie]

Hello. So first of all, thank you so much for joining us, and for agreeing to this interview. Would you like to start off by introducing yourself?

[Ian]

My name is Ian, and I have been here quite a long time. In fact, I began at GSA in September 1970. And I came to GSA quite by chance really because I'd been an actor, and I had recently married, and I thought it would be a rather satisfactory thing if I could sustain the family more dependably as I did as an actor. But I went to LAMDA, trained, and happened to train with some really rather good actors. Donald Sutherland was one of them, Janet Susman was another, there was a fairly strong vintage. And then I went into rep, and that's where I suppose my real-life experience began.

Because I'd been to school, and then like others of my generation I'd done national service, but I'd been a conscientious objector, of course, and I joined a relief organisation and my experience had been in forestry, and to a lesser extent refugees. Since my parents had two German girls after the war, whose father had been taken by two Russians, and large parts of Germany were starving about 1947, and my parents were hospitable to two girls who had never spoken English and for whom England was the enemy. And that had shaped my feelings further about the way in which we regard the environment and other human beings.

That really had been the only life experience that I brought from theatre. It was very interesting because in this organisation I was given the responsibility of running a forestry unit, and it was comprised of people of very different nationalities, all of whom had to get on with one another and because it was a relief organisation we were living on the minimum of 50p a week, if you can believe it – that's 10 shillings of course – plus ones clothing allowance and two journeys home a year. But it was very minimal, and we lived on a very minimum diet. And no one was ever ill. I didn't remark upon it at the time, but throughout the 18 months that I was running that unit, no man had a day off from ill health, because we were living on a diet and in circumstances that required fitness. Matters of language and practical skills of tending, growing trees as such, they almost came afterwards.

Then I went into rep, and in those days with regional theatre, if one was lucky, one was with a company for about 3 months. But more often, in my case, one was invited for a production, to play a particular part, and then one was once again bread hunting. So, one had to adapt to a place one had never been in before, on equity minimum, which was about £5. I was used to being on minimums, and I used markets, and rapidly learned that the first thing to do when you go to a new town or city, is to discover where the market is. And the chances are, that without ingratiating yourself in any way, store holders will see the sort of being you are and will take some sort of pity on you, or at least they will offer you fruit or vegetables that they wouldn't offer to anyone else, because they know you wouldn't waste

them, and they would give you these for very little money, and one made a relationship with these people.

I had the curious experience of driving through Carlisle, 7 years after I'd been in *The Sleeping Beauty*, and for old times sake going into the market, and being hailed by name by the chap from whom I used to buy apples and bananas, those 7 years previously, and it bore upon me yet further, how interconnected people are at the level of sustaining life. It didn't require a great description or ethos. So, when I came to GSA, I was concerned with people's survival in order to be free to practice their craft. Because although there was more work around, the humble kind in those days with regional theatre, there was still the problem of survival. And it's not a skill in which all actors are well served, some are, they're not always the good artists, they're sometimes very good businessmen. But that's how my concern for the whole being that's distinct from the actor, began.

[Evie]

So, while growing up, you describe your connection with the land, in a way, with the seasons, how has this continued to influence sustainability in your life? Is this something that continues now?

[Ian]

Yes, because my wife and I had a family, have a family, and I was absolutely resolved that our two sons would grow up with an appreciation of how things really are, rather than how the world presents them. And so, from the outset, we found land to cultivate, whether it be an allotment or a garden, we're fortunate to have a garden now, but it's not one that would sustain a family. So very soon after moving to Godalming in 1972, I acquired an allotment, and then another allotment under my wife's name, so we would have sufficient land to be able to sustain life - at least with non-protein food - whatever the indignities of one's work in the theatre, which was always underpaid when compared with other activities in life. All sorts of ironies attached to this.

[Evie]

And as well as physical health, how do you think a connection with the environment can impact your mental health and the benefits that has?

[Ian]

Oh, absolutely without question. One's discrimination is heightened, what comes out of a package is predictable, what you choose from a market stall or what you pick from a tree, that's a matter of choice, and experience affects those choices.

You know full well, that if one's been climbing in the hills and one stops for lunch and one only has a couple of sandwiches and an apple, somehow the relish that one has for that food is indescribable. Indescribable to one who hasn't had the experience of it. And I think all one's food, all one's living really, falls into that. If we didn't have freedom of choice, our

lives would be miserable indeed. So, I see a relation to the earth and a relation to other people as being integral to the sensibility, training, and skill of an actor.

[Evie]

And so, looking forward to the future, and keeping in the context of theatre, where abouts do you see sustainability taking theatre in the future, and where do you think actors sit as part of that progress?

[Ian]

I think they're at an immediate advantage because they know about minimums. We have productions with minimums, no costume, or no lighting and all of that. And we know that the essence of it can be independent of it. And I think that actors are aware that people can be independent of their physical circumstance, and work as communities or with ideas that are unfry with confidence when that conviction is lived out by example.

And I think there will be less luxury as a norm in society at large, quite simply because not everybody can live with the excesses that have characterised the most fortunate. And people who have become adjusted, not only adjusted but have become accustomed to living with levels of consumption that they neither need, not society can afford. And they're unwilling to acknowledge that because of what it implies. And I think that if society is to change, it needs that catalyst that the insubordinate, searching, life relishing actor brings to a subject, to a question. Does that answer it in any way?

[Evie]

Absolutely brilliantly put.

[Ian]

Because it's always going to be individual, and we know that. And we prize the quiddities of those who are most exasperating when they belong to that being, and they can be independent of their quiddities, what makes them odd or difficult, and be emancipated from them, and we all would like to be emancipated from our habitual views, structures and society of course needs that. I mean it's not going to come from lawyers, or accountants or doctors, they're always repairing an order that has in some way fallen apart because people have ceased to listen. They've been swept into action for they've reflected upon the circumstance.

[Evie]

Absolutely. Is there anything else that you would like to add to the Waste is a Design Flaw seminar? Is there anything else that you'd like to say on that topic?

[Ian]

Well, in practical terms, when I began teaching, I realised that almost no one reading a Shakespeare play understood the countryside. And still less did they understand the relation between language and things, and how we use things to illustrate feelings because the abstract world can only be made real by reference to things in the substantial scheme.

A simple example, “my love is like a red, red rose”, well if you know about roses, that has a depth, a renaissance that cannot possibly attain if you only know it as a concept defined in the dictionary or one of those bunches that can be bought - even in the market - without any scent and thornless, without all the characteristics that attain that as a potential image of relationship, beauty, evanescence and everything else. Being aware of it, I thought I would take everyone out. We were rehearsing a midsummers night dream, and I thought I would take everyone out in the evening - it is a play that happens at night - and very few people in the cast had ever been out at night without a torch, and even those who had, had only done so reluctantly, and I wanted everyone to go out and experience the countryside as it is before we interfere with it. And almost always of course we are interfering with it. We’re looking, if when entomologists are looking for butterflies, we look in terms of our use, but very rarely do we present ourselves to listen, hear, smell, and feel without interference.

And so, we took a walk out in the wood at night, without anyone speaking, because the moment you speak you come out of the now, you come into another world and you leave the physical circumstances, so everyone came out at dusk and then we walked on, and of course adjustment to the light, the river and birds, even animals, and that scene of mystery and wonder and apprehension and curiosity is awakened in people in the life, rather than something I said about it. I always tended to talk too much when I did talk at all, and I knew that nothing I said would bring this about, that the experience would be direct for each individual really, in his or her way. It resonated.

It’s a tradition that we’ve sustained for over 40 years now, and one wants people to be friends with not only other beings but the materials from which those beings are dressed and nourished and that we celebrate.

[Evie]

Brilliant thank you so much.

[Ian]

It’s a pleasure.