

John M Hall, interviewed by Mike Tyler, 25 April 2001

SIDE ONE

MT Today is the 25 April 2001. My name is Mike Tyler and I'm speaking to Mr John Hall on behalf of the University of Sydney York Mystery Plays History of Performance Research Project. Thanks very much for agreeing to do this interview, John. I wonder if I could just start by asking you to introduce yourself – who you are, where you were born, how long you've been in York and how long you've been associated with the York Mystery Plays?

JH Yeah, fine. I'm a Lancastrian by birth. I came from Clitheroe in Lancashire, in Ribblesdale.

MT Lovely.

JH I came to Stockton-on-Forest in January 1969 and set down roots here and been here ever since. My first involvement with the Mystery Plays was in 1988, which was in the Museum Gardens. I played Pontius Pilate. I had to learn to ride, I came in on a big white horse, which was great fun. In 1992, in the Theatre Royal, I played Herod. It was an amalgamation of the two Herods, actually, but was, to all intents and purposes, the same guy all the way through, and the same again in 1996 in the Theatre Royal - again I played Herod. This time I auditioned not knowing what part I wanted really, but was eager to get involved with the Millennium project especially, with Greg Doran and his team and my audition piece was Lear's Curse of Goneril and anyway that got me the part of God so it can't be bad! So there we are, that's me up to date I think.

MT Now you came in 1969. There's quite a gap between your arrival in York and your first involvement as a performer with the plays. Had you seen any productions in that interim period.

JH Yeah, I'd seen one and that was in the open air and it was Simon Ward playing Christ. It was that production. I can't just remember which year that must have been, but maybe the late 1970s, early 1980s. Yeah, early '80s I think. [1984]

MT That was quite an interesting production. Had you been involved with amateur theatricals at all during your time in York?

JH Yeah. Yeah, I'd been involved really since I was at grammar school. That's where it all started and when I went to college at the tender age of 19, I got involved there and played King Lear when I was 20. (Laughs) Followed that up with John Procter in The Crucible when I was 21, so I had quite a kick start to an amateur career, I think. But I then went to Manchester and got involved with quite a few good theatre groups there. But like most amateur drama groups, if you are male, youngish and breathing you are going to get a pretty good part, you know. And, yeah, I got quite a few good parts with Green Room Theatre, an experimental theatre, and what have you. Bolton Little Theatre.

All in that area around Manchester, doing things from Osborne to Shakespeare. Which was good experience. I came here and there's a very thriving group in the village. It's only a small village, but it's got a very talented group, they're a great crowd.

MT The Stockton Players?

JH The Stockton-on-Forest Drama and Choral Society to give it its full grand title. And I got involved with them right away and have been involved ever since, and still am. We do perhaps three productions a year. In addition to that between 1971 and 1985 I was a member of a folk band as well, the Foresters Folk Bank. That's still on the go. And we played live in the York, made the obligatory LP and that sort of thing, but that was good experience because (?). So I guess I've remained actively involved in one way or another in theatre and music.

MT I'd forgotten that you were associated with the Foresters, actually. I've actually got your obligatory LP tucked away somewhere. Do you know, I can't remember the name of the guy who's a teacher or ex-teacher who taught certainly my sister-in-law and, I think, my wife as well.

JH It would be Brian Uxberry (?) Tall guy with glasses and a beard.

MT That's the one. Is he still involved in?

JH He's a good mate of mine, still involved, yes. We meet him up in the gym at Courtneys (?) together. He's a lovely fella.

MT Right, that's brilliant. You have taken me back a bit.

JH Oh, yeah!

MT So, you made this sort of progression from a very active local acting group into the Mystery Plays. Now, you've got quite an interesting record of having performed in all the permutations of venue for the Plays which, I think, there are one or two people around who have, but certainly it's not a huge number of people who've done Museum Gardens, the Theatre, wagon plays and of course York Minster as well.

JH Yeah.

MT Let's think about them in sequence. What was it first of all that attracted you to a production like the Mystery Plays as they were in the Museum Gardens?

JH I'd seen them once and been impressed and what I wanted to do and what I've done occasionally with other things, is to move into the York area when there's a big production like that on. Like Ragnarok, Tales of the Norse Gods, I did that twice. We did that once in the Minster and in the Guildhall. I did Ibsen's Vikings of Helgeland with Michael Winter, who was the director of the Theatre Royal. They're a great crowd in the

village and I get involved with that and with the set building and with the lighting and the sound and the acting, with everything. It's great fun. But occasionally, if I see the opportunity to get my teeth into something rather bigger, if you see what I mean. It sounds conceited, but I want to extend myself in other areas, shall we say. And I saw that in the Mystery Plays in 1988 and thought I'd go along. And of course it was great fun because I had to learn to ride and, you know, having to make your entrance on a big white horse.....(both laugh)

MT Who was the director that year?

JH Stephen Pimlott. He's gone on to grand things, hasn't he? Victor Banerjee was Christ and he was a great bloke. He was a great bloke to work with.

MT How did the mechanics of getting involved work? Presumably you went along and auditioned, did you? Was your acting group contacted directly or did you respond to . . .

JH I think I saw it in the *Evening Press* and I'm not sure whether Brian Uxley, who we spoke about earlier, because he'd been involved before, whether or not, it might well have been Brian who gave me a nudge as well. I'm glad I did. It was a great experience and working with people like Stephen Pimlott is a big learning experience, particularly because I like to direct myself. To watch these guys who are really imaginative and so good at getting the best out of people, that's a skill. But from an acting point of view, the outdoors isn't as good as indoors. Obviously you're at the whim of the weather. In that production we'd to hurriedly cancel several times because of violent storms, even bringing trees down, and lightening dancing around the scaffolding. But, even though you're miked up, your voice dissipates in the open air. You can't stop some of the scenery flapping. But moving into the theatre was a totally, totally different experience. I was Herod, who's not the pleasantist of characters as portrayed in the Bible. It may not be historically correct, but the impression had to be a pretty nasty piece of work, and I enjoyed that in the theatre, being able to take the voice right down and be, you know, really sinister whereas outdoors you've got to declaim everything. Inside you obviously can be far more subtle and I liked it. A lot of people said, particularly the audience said "Oh, it's not the same in the Theatre Royal, not the same. It doesn't have the same picnic atmosphere. We can't huddle freezing in our sleeping bags after the sun's gone down." Things like that.

MT Because it was a difficult transition wasn't it, I seem to remember, in 1992.

JH Well it had nearly packed up. The plays nearly floundered, didn't they?

MT Had you been involved in the run up to that, because it was a fairly late change from the Museum Garden venue?

JH It was. But for us it worked. For me particularly it worked. I enjoyed it. I like the Theatre Royal.

MT What was, what was your feeling when you heard it was going to be in the Theatre rather than the Gardens.

JH I was looking forward to it. But purely from a selfish point of view, as an actor, from an actor's point of view. I knew that my portrayal of that particular character would be enhanced by moving indoors, because I wouldn't have to declaim all the time. I could be far more sinister, being quiet, and it seemed to come off.

MT Were you familiar with the Theatre Royal? You would have known the building, but had you performed on stage there before?

JH I performed on stage at the Lord Mayor's Gala, I think, when I was with the Foresters. We'd played a stint in there. But I hadn't actually performed as an actor on the stage, no. That was quite a thrill. Struck the boards eh!

MT Who was the director in 1992? I should know this.

JH I can see him now. A Scotsman. I'm terrible at remembering these names. It'll come back to me when we've finished. [Iain Forrest]

MT I know 1996 was John Doyle, because you came back and reprised. Well, I don't think it's fair to call it a reprise really, because it's a different script and a different cast and a different assembly, so it was the same in name only. Or am I putting words in your mouth there?

JH Oh, no. Liz Lochhead made quite an input into it. She's a canny young woman. Have you have you spoken to her?

MT I haven't spoken to Liz, no.

JH She's a livewire.

MT I heard... We're jumping about a bit here, but I've heard from a lot of people, I've heard a lot of people's views on the relative merits of those two modern adaptations, Liz Lochhead v Mike Poulton's, which is 1996 v 2000. I mean what are your views? What is your perspective on those two different treatments?

JH Quite frankly, I only noticed a few differences in the script. Maybe that's lack of observation on my part, but there were some lines in the 2000 one which I have to wonder why they were put in. They were of the modern idiom. When the devil says "Oh, bollocks!" Now, we're told, all right, it's a medieval manner, it was used in medieval times and therefore.... I'm not a prude, don't get me wrong, but I don't think we're in the business of pushing the bounds of theatre and making provocative [changes] in the Mystery Plays. Those sorts of little things, minor adjustments, didn't really sit easy with me, but, don't get me wrong, Mike Poulton is a smashing chap and I liked him a lot. But having said all that, I return to what I said earlier, I didn't notice that much

difference. All right, the selection of the plays - because there are forty two, is it, something like that – which plays the director wants to pull out and to use is always going to be different. But as far as the language is concerned there were sections, I couldn't quote them to you now without the script, but sections where it had obviously been tinkered with. It was said – I never heard it said by Mike Poulton himself – but it was said of the changes that they were to help a modern audience understand better the Play.

MT Right.

JH But if that were the case, what about the rest of the play? We're still about "Ding the dastards down!" and all that business. If you are going to bring it bang up to date, you're going to have to do the whole lot, not twiddle with bits here and there. That was my impression.

MT Mmm. Now dipping back again to 1996 – did you meet Liz Lochhead at all? Did you have much contact with her?

JH I met her twice and she was very complimentary about my use of a (obscure) in Herod and she was very energetic, full of fun, great person to work with, I would think. But like a lot of energetic, artistic people, probably a bit unpredictable! (laughs) No, she was lovely. I was really impressed, I liked her sense of humour.

MT Er, in 1996 I remember it was quite a stylised interpretation of Herod. I seem to remember it being described as a sort of Jack Nicholson style. Which was certainly something that photographically came over very strongly. Was that a conscious decision? Was it your choice, was it something you were steered towards, or was it something that came out? .

JH It came out! The reason for that is that in 1992 the role was more prescribed for me. I was a cross, I guess, between Sadam Hussein, an SS general (laughs), Idi Amin, all those sort of bully boys rolled into one and they dressed me accordingly. Either that or a theatre or hotel commissionaire you know (laughs) with braids and a peaked cap. Yes, but a strutting military dictator – a strutting bully. And when I knew I'd got the part again I thought 'Right now that was fine, that worked, but now I want to take a different angle. How far can I go with this?' And the director was quite happy. I talked to him about Herod and he said 'Yes, I'm fine with that' and when that style materialised he was happy. What I tried to do was to make the second Herod unpredictable – an element of the psychopath. Not just an out and out bully, but that he.... To make you feel that he would really be capable of pulling one of these children's heads off himself if need be. He would be capable of anything and that sexually, er, his sexual orientation wasn't too specific either. Because in 1992, in the scene at the trial of Christ, Herod has a line 'How dost thou like it, eh?'. Now in the 1992 play I was sort of stalking round him with my back to the audience. It was Robson Green, who will admit himself he was probably not.... I mean he is a great actor, but that particular role may not have been the best bit of casting that there ever was. Anyway I had to go and hit him in the midriff and you know

he doubled up. And as he was doubled up I said ‘And how does thou like it eh?’. But in the second production in that trial scene I thought ‘God!’. I discussed it with Rhona. I said ‘Look, I want to bully him. I want to degrade him totally, but I want to do it with a kiss’ Not a sexual thing, but almost a rape of him. And Rhona said ‘Well, what do you, what do you [obscure]? But yes.’ And I spoke to Rory [Mulvihill, Christ in 1996] about this. He said ‘Yeah, I’m happy, that’s fine.’ So I spoke to John Doyle about it and he said ‘If Rory’s happy and you’re happy, we’ll go with that.’ And you could hear the audience gasp and it was a really magical moment, was that. I kissed him. ‘How dost thou like it?’ Knowing that I’d literally raped him with that kiss. So I enjoyed pushing out, pushing the role, you know if you say there’s nothing this chap wouldn’t do, bloody hell, how far do you go?

MT Because John Doyle has been described to me as someone who is very, his interpretation’s very visual and it certainly was a visually strong play.

JH It was! The lighting, the red-hot lighting and things like that in those scenes.

MT Do you think that that helped everything to grow towards a logical sort of conclusion? The performance comes out of the way in which he builds the atmosphere. I’m perhaps asking that poorly. Was that something that you were aware of in rehearsal? Because I see it in the finished product.

JH Now, there’s a lot you can’t be aware of in rehearsal, as you are probably aware. I don’t know what your involvement in theatre and on the stage is, but there are several stages of progression. First of all you get your part, you’ve got it, you’ve auditioned, you’ve got the part. Somebody gives you a script and you go away then your first rehearsals are blocking your moves. Right here are the moves and it’s all very mechanical. But alongside that you’re reading and you’re thinking ‘Well, what would this character do in that situation? Where did he just come from? Has he, you know, has he just come walking along?’ And so you’re thinking in parallel. Then it goes up a gear. You put your books down and you start to struggle with the lines. You forget all your moves because you’re concentrating on the lines and then when the two come together it all improves. But then, then they put a costume on you and you move onto the set with the lights and it takes off. Something else, its not the same any longer. It (imitates rocket taking off)! And finally with a audience in front it further grows still. It’s, it’s, it would be impossible to portray just what you’re going to do and what the effect of what you’re going to do is when you are at the beginning of the process. A lot has to happen. There’s a lot of negotiating goes on. There’s a lot rubs off on you from other people around you. You get a lot of inspiration from other people’s ideas and I love that period, that growth, you know.

MT You’ve obviously got very fond memories of that production, then. Just the way you describe it.

JH That one, yes, because I was lucky. I was given the opportunity several times to have the audience in the palm of my hand. Now really Herod (laughs), Herod should not!

This is really *not* about Herod, it's about somebody a lot bigger than him, but because of the way John Doyle wanted me to be evil personified.... I think you can be more evil than Satan, you know, this chap! And he gave me that licence to do that. Yes, I did enjoy that. Largely because I felt, as I said to you earlier, that I had to build. All right the first Herod, the 1992 Herod was strutting and (mimicking of Herod) and very fierce and things like that and frightened everybody, but *this* guy was far more sinister. Oh so capable of evil!

MT That's an interesting comparison that you draw there and it's a point that I've discussed with other people as well: this idea of the contrast between the evil humans and of course Satan, who is, on paper, the very manifestation of evil itself. And yet it's been suggested to me that Satan is a sort of quite lovable character in some ways. He comes over as the rogue and the sort of pantomime character almost.

JH Yeah, yeah, quite likeable.

MT Sort of bumbling.

JH A fallen angel isn't he? It's a character I'd like to play. People ask 'Oh, what would you do the next time? You've been God now, what will you do next time?' I say 'There's one character I haven't been, there's one character I haven't, I would dearly like to play [Satan] and that's it.' To really make use of my voice.

MT How would you take that character? Where do you think you.....? Let's put you, let's look hypothetically. John Hall, director of Satan, where would you take it - where would you take that character?

JH As far away as possible from pantomime Mr Nice Guy. As far away as possible. I would hope that the director would allow the contrast to be made with Lucifer as God's favourite in heaven. That fall, that transition – could be such a powerful thing. It has been done, don't get me wrong, but I... I'd put an awful lot of pain into that transition and then maybe the lines aren't as nasty as they could be but I'd certainly like to go as far as I could in making them nasty. I mean, he supposed to be The Man isn't he? I mean, you've got your Herod and you've got the priests and things like that who are corrupt but, come on, he's supposed to be....(laughs).

MT I feel that the lines *are* there. There is certainly enough scope and I understand what you're saying about where you would take this character. I feel that the lines are there, particularly if you look at episodes like *The Harrowing*, which tends to be something which is condensed a little bit and skipped over because we struggle now with the theology of it. But there's plenty of scope there when Satan talks about how we walk east and west and (obscure). There's lots to go at there. So, do you feel that the way in which Satan is treated and certainly in contrast with these very evil human characters, do you feel that reflects a sort of modern problem with Satan and the idea of there being a focus of evil?

JH I honestly have never thought of it in those terms. Maybe I haven't thought about it deeply enough, but I have been conscious with each production that, had I been directing, I would have taken the evil further. I mean it's not just in the words, it's in the delivery and in the degree of contact with others on stage. I mean, I refer back to that kiss I told you about, for example, and the audience as one - there was a great intake of breath and a holding of that breath at that particular moment. That sort of physical contact that may not be brutal or violent but it's shocking in its context. So yeah, I would look for areas where this guy was able to make the audience's flesh creep a little more.

MT There was an interesting treatment in 1996, where we had Dave Parkinson playing Satan and of course a very physically striking Satan as well. He's a tall, gaunt fellow with a ravaged face, and yet John Doyle gave him quite an interesting treatment by having . . .

JH Letting him keep his wings. And changing colour gradually.

MT Lets him keep his wings and gradually scorched him.

JH He took up the whole bloody dressing room with those wings! (Laughter)

MT I forgot, you were sharing with him, weren't you?

JH I know all about those wings and the colours. I think they're tinted with pale blue on the photograph I have of myself, yes.

MT It was an interesting thing. Because another facet to that, which I'd forgotten, was that although Dave was Satan as Satan, there was somebody else playing Satan's Serpent, a young lady [Jenny Burrage-Smith] whose name just escapes me for the time being. That is an interesting portrayal because you've got Eve being tempted by a female serpent, which is an image which comes up in certain medieval iconographies. It's present even in the east window of the Minster..

JH I didn't know that. (Coughs)

MT Thinking about 1996, it attracted quite a lot of media attention and ballyhoo because one of the things that John did was to cast another very strong local actress in a role that you were to later take on yourself. Ruth Ford in 1996 played God and that stirred up a fair bit of attention.

JH Yeah, she got a lot of stress. She herself was put under an awful lot of stress. I mean she is a confident and competent actress, but I know for a fact that she was very, very stressed some nights, going on. I mean we'd to give her shoulder and neck massages to try to ease her tension, because she became aware of the torch that had been given to her to bear. She was well aware that there were those in the press and elsewhere who were going to have a field day if she faltered and if it didn't work. So that's a pressure to be

under. I've a lot of respect for Ruth. She said to me this time [2000] at rehearsals 'I shall be watching your every move!'

MT (Laughs) Not to put you under any pressure!

JH No. Not to put you under any pressure of course!

MT So of course in 2000 you made the transition [to God] and you became, in recognition of a long service, a good guy.

JH (Laughs) A good guy, a good guy!

MT How did you feel about that? I mean was that a part that you were looking for or was that something that you was expecting? Because I mean you go along and audition. You knew with your track record you're going to get something to get your teeth into.

JH Well, as I said at the outset, I didn't go asking for any particular piece. To tell you the truth, I wasn't clear in my own mind what I wanted. I'd spoken with my wife and she said 'What are you going to feel like if they offer you Herod again?' And I said I would take it. And she said 'Why don't you go for it then?' And I said 'Well, in the Minster it's a totally, totally different setting. I'll go along with that and see where the vibes take me' I think, if I'm honest, I half hoped that I would be offered the part of Satan, having assaulted the video camera with my curse. Or Lear's curse of Goneril (mimicry). And then when I had this long chat with this delightful character [Greg Doran, producer] he didn't know me and I didn't know him. But he was so interested in what I had to say, in what I'd done. But he was like that with everyone and what's more, throughout rehearsals, he didn't only know your name, he remembered what you'd talked about. And there were two hundred of us! That's an incredible skill, to do that. Greg Doran had that. He knew everybody's name and [sound like clicking fingers] just like that. It makes you feel good, you know, and it certainly makes you have confidence in the guy who's pulling the strings. He was such a charismatic inspirational figure all the way through. Yes. And when they rang me up and told me what part I'd got, initially I thought 'Oh' [sounding disappointed]. Then I thought 'Wait a minute! You've sat in the wings at successive performances and heard those opening lines *Ego sum Alpha et Omega* and thought to yourself I love those lines! I'd love them to roll off the tongue! And here I am being given the chance. Then initial disappointment turned to sort of euphoria and it was 'Oh, yeah!' In fact I had to ring them back, whether it was Jude [Breton] or not, one of the staff had rung me and I said, 'Right, er yeah, fine' and put the phone down. So a few minutes later I rang them back and said 'Look I'm sorry if I sounded ungracious or anything like that, but I'm chuffed to bits in actual fact!' So I was very pleased, very pleased. But I had no way of knowing what I was in for. That place [the Minster] is alive, the building I'm talking about. I mean, no matter what your faith, when you become centrally involved in the Mystery Plays, it's a theatrical experience, but there's something else. It becomes a spiritual experience. Now whether you are Christian, or whether you are Buddhist, there is that element of spirituality involved. I mean, you can't help but get caught up in it and that has happened each time, even

playing the bad guy. You get caught up. But then in the Minster, with that particular setting and with an inspiration and a charismatic figure like Greg Doran as well, that takes your breath away. I am not nervous on stage. It's just one of those things. I've got a lot of confidence on stage, but every night, every performance, I had goose-bumps at the foot of those steps before I went up. I mean, good heavens, you wait in there for the green light to go and the first thing that happens is this immense light hits YOU and the base note of that organ goes out. And the whole set..... you don't hear it, you *feel* it, that organ note, the whole set vibrates. And every actor should have an entrance like that!

MT Mmm!

JH I was so scared of these steps. My costume was great, once the lights hit it, but it was a long frock and going up steep steps, I worried. There was one performance, one performance, when I stepped on [the frock] near the top and on the top step I was swaying to hold my balance, because my heels were not on the step. I was only on the top step with the balls of my feet and I had to (Laughs) I had visions of tumbling back down those stairs and asking 'Sorry, can we start again?'

MT Let's do it again! (Laughter)

JH But that didn't happen. And it was such a profound experience and one that, just talking about it now, I could become emotional, because it's remained with me. I almost had to, if you'll excuse me, exorcise the character later. Not because that I was strutting around thinking I was God, but because something had grabbed hold of me in that place and taken a hold of my emotions as well. One night, for no apparent reason, it hadn't happened before, I'm banishing Adam and Eve and there was this sorrowful music and Adam and Eve were going, going from Eden and I got a picture. an image of them being my own children and I began to sob. I was sobbing and I had to control that and speak over it and, I thought, where's this come from? You know, things like that, just in that building. So, yeah, exorcising. A week later, my wife took me into town and she realised what I needed to do. She went shopping. I needed to go back into the Minster once everything [theatrical] had gone. It was back and there were the Japanese tourists (mimics sound of tourists) and I wanted to cry out to people, you know 'No, it wasn't like this. It was.....' But No, that was the Minster back to itself, normal you know. And then a fortnight after that I took off the beard as well and thought that 'Right, that's it.' But it's not - I certainly go to church a lot more now (Laughs) Whether that's a good thing or a bad thing! Yeah, that had a profound effect.

MT You're not the first person who I've spoken to who has experienced the difficulty of going back into the Minster in the immediate aftermath of the plays. I'm assuming it goes without saying that this is a different something to going back into a theatre.

JH Oh, yes!

SIDE TWO

JH Actually, before we go any further, I've just thought of something.

MT Yes?

JH I'm John M Hall because, I'll tell you why, there was another John Hall apparently auditioned for the part of God.

MT Was there?

JH Yeah, because he's usually with York Light Opera. He's a singer, things like that, and he's very good. I never met him, but I've had people come up to me and say 'Oh, the *Press* thought you were great.' 'What?' 'In *Fiddler on the Roof*.' 'Pardon?' 'It was you wasn't it?' 'No!' So, I'm John M Hall. That sounds pretentious, but we do keep getting confused. We've never met, but people keep confusing us. Particularly as we both finished up auditioning for the same part. Yeah, there's the distinction.

MT Yes, yes, right, right. I'll make sure that I make a note of that one. Now we were talking about this idea of the Minster and there being something special about the space and of course it *is* a special space. There is no other way of looking at it. It has been a special space for many, many centuries. I assume that this is the biggest space that you have ever performed in?

JH Oh yes!

MT I know it sounds a bit silly when you've done open-air performances because by definition it's the biggest space, but this is the biggest stage presumably?

JH Yes.

MT Did that give you any particular problems? We discussed your costume problems!

JH No, the space itself didn't, except that I knew, having worked in the Minster before in the Vikings of Helgerland that you have to be careful with your voice, because of the delay. If you shout in the Minster, you shout up there, you get an echo coming back at you seven seconds later. Now imagine what that does to a dialogue of modern English. Imagine what it does to a dialogue of Medieval English interspersed with Latin! So you use your voice in a There were some people found it very different, there were some people maybe weren't aware of that, but I'd become aware of it with Michael Winter many years before, 1983. 1984, something like that, when we did that, playing a swashbuckling Viking at the time. I had to learn then about this. So I knew with mikes anyway, I could fill that space. The guy who was working the sound, I said, 'Look, those opening lines *Ego sum Alpha et Omega* ideally I would like, I'd like to be off stage. I'd just like them to be a thought in the audience's mind before God actually is. 'I am gracious and great' Certainly the Latin goes *Ego sum Alpha et Omega*. B Greg didn't want that, he wanted me on stage. But we obtained a compromise where the sound guys brought the sound up and I could take my voice down, so that it I wasn't shouting.

[Shouts] *Ego sum Alpha* . . I could say [in a deep voice, speaking slowly] *Ego sum Alpha et Omega* . I wanted to *roll* this out, almost like a caress, if you like, into that big space and that was nice. I don't know whether it worked or not but . . .

MT Well I saw it twice. It did it for me! (Both laugh)

JH Good. Oh, I loved every moment of it, you know.

MT So, how did it feel in that sort of countdown?. It was a tiring run. As I understand it, it was a long run. What five times a week?

JH I wasn't tired. I was too exhilarated to be tired. You get tired afterwards, when you stop, when the adrenalin stops flowing. I didn't find the run up as tiring as the run up in the Theatre. I probably understand why now. Because when I was in the others as Herod, I was also Crowd in other scenes and filled out, you know, everybody did. And for those long, drawn-out, technical rehearsals for about ten days solid before a performance like that. You've these tech rehearsals where you're standing about 'Let's run this one again' der, der, der. They're tedious in the extreme because you don't get into your stride or anything like that. They're necessary. But with this one, I didn't play anybody else, so I was only called for rehearsals in the technicals and the scenes where I was in, which weren't very many. I had a two and a half hour gap in the middle, where I could go off and do what I wanted. I usually finished up reading Harry Potter to a bunch of youngsters sitting in the Chapter House, but that's another story. That's probably why I wasn't as tired. I found those techs in the Theatre, because we were omnipresent on stage in one guise or another, and involved in music as well, they were tiring. But now *this* didn't tire me. I was just, just too exhilarated, enjoying it too much to be tired.

MT Let's take a complete change, now. We've focused very much on the big cycle productions, whereas I mentioned at the start of our chat there you have this unique combination of experience of doing not only doing the big cycle productions, but also having appeared in at least one wagon play.

JH Just the one, yeah, just one.

MT This would have been 1998?

JH Yeah. The Settlement [York Settlement Community Players] asked me, approached me. I don't know whether it was Ruth [Ford] or not, yes, Ruth contacted me. She said, 'Look, we need a big voice.' I said 'I'm not too sure about this.' Well, anyway, I thoroughly enjoyed it. When we actually did it, the weather, it was an awful day, poured down, the wind was howling and I (laughter, obscure). We did *The Judgement Day*. It was the Last Judgement, sorting everything out. I can't put the experience on a par with the other Mystery Plays. You know, it was different, it was fun. Again, it was a discipline there to use the voice out in the open air like that to reach.... I enjoy those.... I enjoy being made to think how I can use my voice to best effect, whether its out there or.... I do quite a lot of 'voice-over' work with a local company who fit out museums and

things like that. You know you press your button and a voice comes on and tells you about this wonderful helmet or whatever and reads a poem out of Beowulf and things like that. I do lots of those things and I enjoy acting with our voice rather than just with our body. And I've got all my teeth in! (Laughs)

MT You're not doing too bad. Now of course the wagon play production is a very different kind of performance altogether. You start, you take your wagon with you, you trundle it around. Was this your first experience of that kind of street performance . . . street theatre?

JH Yes, it was.

MT Did you enjoy it because of that, or despite that?

JH I enjoyed it. I would have enjoyed it more if it wasn't peeing down!

MT It was a truly bad....

JH The fact that anybody at all was at any of the stations! I mean, bless them, there were people there blue with cold and watching us. It was a terrible day. They cut some out, actually, because of the conditions. There were a couple of stations we didn't visit, because everything . . . I think on some of the other wagons the paint was running on the scenery! (laughs, obscure words). Just one of those things... I can't honestly say that I've got a burning ambition [for more] 'Oh, I must do it next time!' I enjoyed it. Maybe it did me some good so maybe someone said 'Well, the guy who played God [in 1998 was OK], why not give him a go at this one?' But, I don't know. Maybe it was a thought in somebody's mind and helped me towards the [2000] part. Ah, maybe it was just that the guy that Greg Doran originally wanted wasn't available, Joseph O'Connor [Jesus 1951, 54]. Sadly he's passed on since.

MT That's right. Sadly he passed away at the beginning of this year.

JH So a lot of things transpired, as they often do. But I'm glad they did.

MT Where do the plays go next?

JH Well, either they need to be in the Minster every time and I don't think that's likely from what the Dean had said. I mean, he stuck his neck out this time to get it at the Minster, but oh...But then again, since it was such a success – that's difficult to say with two of your front teeth missing – who knows. You can't really move it back into the Theatre Royal again, after that. The only other space it could go to, but it would be expensive, would be the Museum Gardens under canvas awning. I go to see an amateur Shakespeare company near where my daughter lives at Stamford, not far from Peterborough. I can't remember the name of the company. Anyway, they must have a lot of backing for (obscure?) The audience are seated under canvas awning. You're outdoors and yet you're sheltered from the weather and part of the set as well and when

they do, you know, Midsummer Nights Dream and things like that you've got all this lighting in the bushes and undergrowth. It's wonderful, a wonderful setting. Now to do something like that, it may be prohibitive. I don't know. There was talk of the ... When they moved it from the Museum Gardens into the Theatre Royal one of the reasons was said to be the expense of insurance and hiring in all this seating with all the prerequisite safety regulations. So I don't know. It will be an interesting thing to watch and a brave director that takes it on.

MT I believe the Chester cycle may have been done in that way.

JH What, under an awning?

MT I think they put the whole thing in a tent. It's not quite the same thing, but I think there may be a precedent there to follow. I suppose that begs another question really. I mean, you're very familiar with the York cycle. Have you have you had any involvement with other medieval drama? The productions that you've mentioned to me have been sort of Shakespeare and beyond into modern theatre, but there is a . . .

JH No, I haven't. Not medieval drama, no. I have . . . I haven't seen any of them. I saw, was it, the Wakefield play, televised with what's his name as God on a forklift truck. The guy who used to do it is dead. The actor who did the Tetley Tea adverts. You know, used to be a wrestler. I've a terrible memory for names, I'm afraid. Do you know who I mean?

MT Yeah. Played Bottom in Midsummer Nights Dream? Brian Glover.

JH Brian Glover. That's the fellow. The Wakefield Cycle? Was it [National Theatre]. They televised that as, you know. I saw that, but I know very little about any of the other cycles, I'm sad to say. So I guess I don't have anything to compare ours against.

MT I'll be a bit parochial here and say that I don't think there is anything to compare with the York cycle and I study all the others. That's my day job. (Laughs) One of the things that has been said to me is that there is perhaps a little bit of tension at the moment between people who say that the wagon play style of performance, was the original style of performance. We know that it started probably in the fourteenth century, we know it ran in the fifteenth century, we know it was suppressed in the sixteenth century. That wagon play style of performance is really the purist style of performance. They say that stage productions are in some ways a modern compromise, a fudge, for people who can't cope with the idea of a twenty-three hour play any more, you know, like we used to be able to do. That's one view.

JH Mmm.

MT Another view that's been put to me is that the wagon plays are alright, but they're just a bit of a novelty really. They're heritage, history, twiddle and that what the big cycles have is some kind of official identity. They have this....They are the York

Mystery Plays because of xyz. If I were to put you on the spot and say do you have a view of those plays, how would you respond to that?

JH Yeah, I will respond to what you said just now, but you use the term “purist”. I think that the cart plays would be the purists’ choice. The trouble is they would only probably attract the purist audience, which I am not decriing the purist point of view here, but you wouldn’t be able to command the same size of audiences. I wouldn’t subscribe to the view that people who want to restore the cart plays are playing at some sort of heritage tourist gimmick. I wouldn’t insult them in that way. I think what their interest is..... I think its important to keep that side of things alive, but at the same time, we’re not in the Middle Ages. People now are used to very, very high-qualityes of presentation, whether through television, through theatre or through cinema, and when audiences go to be entertained, then their expectations are high and I don’t think you can achieve that on the carts. You can’t control your environment for a start. Ah, your local craftsmen and women don’t exist in the same way that they did in the old days. There are local people who may be a postman, an accountant, teachers, or what have you, but few of them will be stonemasons or what have you. So there’s a limit to how pure you can get. But I think it still has validity and I would not knock it and I wouldn’t respect people who said . . . who dismissed it as gimmicky. But my own feeling is that when people come, when audiences come to the Mystery Plays, then they should be in for a theatrical treat. It’s the greatest story there is and Greg Doran was perfectly positioned when he said ‘Look, let’s look at what they did in the Middle Ages with the scenery and things like that. They had the best people they could possibly get. They used the best materials they could possibly get. And that’s what we’re doing. The skills have changed, the materials have changed, but the best available at the time, for the most important story ever told. It’s the only thing that’s good enough and that’s good enough for me.’

MT A very astute man, Greg Doran. I suppose the ultimate and final question - and it is something that is a bit of a search for me - and lots if people have presented answers in different ways - , but it’s the big question that we’ve been working up to really. And that is, what are the York Mystery Plays?

JH You mean what are they today – what have they become?

MT How would you choose to answer that question? How would you choose to interpret the question What are the York Mystery Plays?

JH I would say they are a modern day celebration of something that is vitally intrinsic in not only the religious but the social history of York. All right, for a time they were let go, for a long time they were let go. The fact that somebody’s resurrected them I think is wonderful. I mean they are what they are. They are not something the Americans have sent us or anybody else. It’s a part of York’s heritage and at one time would have been the focal point of the year for many, many people in York, who made their contribution in whatever way it was, whether acting or building or what, just pushing the carts, and I think to celebrate that, albeit in a modern context with large paying audiences, I think it’s a wonderful thing. As I said earlier, whilst I respect the purist point of view, those who

say ‘If we’ve taken these things out the Middle Ages, we ought not to tamper with them, we ought to leave them exactly as they should have been and let’s do it as they were.’ Fine, do that, but if people like myself want to combine that with a major theatrical experience, then I would ask the purists to respect our right to want that. We’re not desecrating the plays – we’re celebrating them. We’re not getting paid to do it. It’s not an economical thing and if anybody doubts whether or not the spirituality is still in it, let them come and talk to those who were actively involved in this last set. I’ve never been the focus of such a strong spiritual experience before. Yeah. [Rev] Hugh Curristan came to me on the final night, just before the performance, and I used to go into the choir in front of the altar, because nobody else went in there, the public weren’t allowed in there. I used to go in there just for a quiet run through my lines and even to have a word with the “big guy” Himself just before I went on to do this. Hugh knew this and he came and I don’t know why, but I asked him if, as it was the last one, if he would bless me. I’m not even of his faith, he’s a Catholic, I’m an Anglican, but I asked because I know Hugh and I respect him. I asked him as a man I guess or a man of the cloth too to bless me on that occasion and he did, and I cried like a baby. I cried like a baby. Dear, oh, dear, yeah. Just [sound like letting out of breath]. A bit like that experience I was talking about earlier, just something . . . something just took the cork off for a moment and something starts to come. But, you know, it’s a bit scary when you’re aware it’s there – it’s in the bottle until the cork comes off. Wow! But it’s still there. It ain’t gone and I can’t say that playing God on the top of a cart quite moved me in the same way. I’m not denigrating that and nor was I cynical about the part in doing it but, no the Minster was something else entirely. As I said it just took my breath away this one.

MT I have some very strong memories of that production. I had the great good fortune to see it twice. The greater good fortune not to have to pay for a ticket either. (JH laughs) It gives you a marvellous liberated feeling and it certainly was something special. I think, in conclusion, and after the depth of the comments that you’ve been making, it’s a rather superficial question, but it’s again something I’m interested in your view on. I have spoken to a number of people who had the great good fortune to be involved in the 1951 production and there is sadly a dwindling number of them. We mentioned that this year has marked the passing of Joseph O’Conor, who played Christ that year. And entirely unprompted I think everybody has said 1951 was a very special year and though we went back year after year, or cycle after cycle – it was triennially and then quadrennially – but it was never quite the same.

JH Mmm.

MT This is an impossible question for you to answer, but do you feel that that depth of emotion could be recaptured again, if the plays were to go back into the Minster?

JH I don’t think you can conjecture about recapturing a emotion, an emotion or depth, otherwise (?) because the sort of emotions I’ve been addressing have been ones which they’ve come at you sideways, quite scaringly. I don’t know. Things that you try to rekindle, or anything like that, whether or not a production could be put on that has the same theatrical and spiritual impact on the people who watch it and the people who take

part, my answer to that has to be yes. Because I tend to be an optimist, my glass is usually half full and not half empty, so I would say, yes. But it's going to need a brave and skilful director and a brave and skilful team around him. The venue, as we said earlier, well will be tricky. I think yes, it can be recreated because..... I mean, the downside of what's just happened is how the heck do you follow that!! The other, as you made mention of it earlier with the 1951, wow, this.... 'I want to get involved in the next one, or I want to go and see the next one.' It has aroused that kind of interest, so I would say yes, it's possible, but it ain't gonna be easy.

MT I think that is the most appropriate note for us to draw that to a conclusion because, of course, what I'm hoping is that when these things make their transition into the archives there will be somebody at some stage sat listening to this who will know what happened next! [laughs] They will see whether that director and that production appeared. I would thank you very much indeed for being so generous with your time.

JH OK, OK.

MT Today is 25 April 2001. I've been speaking to Mr John M Hall . . .

JH You're welcome.

MT . . . on behalf of the University of Sydney. Thank you very much, John.

ENDS