

**Interview of actor Toby Gordon, 12 July 2016
at the National Centre for Early Music, York**

MAS: Welcome, Toby Gordon, and thank you for coming in to the National Centre for Early Music. We are going to talk about you playing **Lucifer** in the Mystery Plays in the Minster, and then we are going to talk about you playing **Jesus** in the Mystery Plays in the Minster! I'm Margaret Scott, I run the archive here at the NCEM about the Mystery Plays. Can I start by asking you about our connections with York?

TG: Yes. I come from York originally, I was born here, grew up here, went to primary and secondary school here and then to York College. I grew up living in Clifton.

MAS: And what about your connections with the Mystery Plays?

TG: I first saw the Mystery Plays when I was ten, in 2000, I saw the last production in the Minster.

MAS: Ah, the Minster, in 2000, yes.

TG: Which I think maybe was a bit overwhelming for me at 10! But I've got some vivid memories of it. And then in 2002 my secondary school Drama Club performed in the 2002 Wagon Plays. We performed in between the plays, as a way of entertaining the audience, we acted as medieval apprentices who were enthusiastic to see the Mystery Plays.

MAS: So you were out on the streets as it were?

TG: Yes, yes. And through the Museum Gardens, when the wagons were in there and through Deans Park. So that was a nice a nice way in. And then in 2006 I helped out as a wagon pusher, for the 2006 Wagon Plays, which is – of all the things I've played in the Mystery Plays - one of the most demanding.

MAS: Pushing the wagon?

TG: On a hot weekend, I can tell you!

MAS: (Laughs) They're solid wood, those wagons, they have to be solid so that people can jump up and down on them!

TG: Absolutely, and they've got things on top. So there's kind of, a special mention for those people who push those wagons, it's not easy. And then in 2012 I was in

my first fixed stage production of the Mystery Plays. I played one of the soldiers crucifying Christ, in the Potters' cast.

MAS: You were in the Potters? Yes, because there was a Potters and a Carpenters' cast. So if I look at our 2012 photographs I will find you in there?

TG: For sure, for sure. There was one, there's certainly a photograph of myself and Ferdinand Kingsley [Jesus] that was on, that was in the *Press*.

MAS: Right! I will definitely have that, we keep press cutting as well, obviously.

TG: Well, that will be around. And then I went away to train as a professional actor, after the 2012 production, that was my last piece of community theatre in York.

MAS: So do you think being in that community theatre gave you the desire to be a professional actor?

TG: A hundred per cent, yes. The York theatre scene is so responsible for that, for me wanting to be a professional, yes, even for understanding that professional was a thing you could be! [Laughs] So it was great, yes.

MAS: So you went to LAMDA?

TG: I went to LAMDA, yes, in 2012, and had a fantastic time there. I was lucky enough to work with the director Philip Breen while I was there, on one of my showcase productions. And when I heard that he was going to come and direct the Mystery Plays in 2016, and that they were going to be in the Minster, I thought "Wow, I shouldn't miss out on that!" Try and be involved in that.

MAS: Yes, they only announced it in 2015, didn't they? It seemed quite sudden, to me anyway.

TG: It did, and its, it seemed like they announced the team and they announced the venue, and suddenly this thing was going to be happening. So it was starting to get involved. Which I think might have been a good thing, to kind of galvanise people's energy to do it, that they were kind of unveiling this thing that was going to happen.

MAS: Mmm Yes. And people love York Minster, they want to be involved.

TG: Yes, and people had such fond memories of the last time it was in there.

MAS: Yes, the Millennium Play was rather special. Mmm. So tell me, what was it like working with such a large cast and indeed such a large amateur cast?

TG: Well, it was, er, it's very unique to have a cast this size. Professional productions don't, they don't ever have this many actors and we had, we started off with about, I think about 200 performers in the company, er, some of which were not able to complete the run in the end but most did. And it's just so vast, it's just such a huge.... One of the things that I like about the Mystery Plays, it's that you have the ultimate mixed ability group, or the ultimate mixed experience group.

MAS: Yes.

TG: In that you have people who are consistently working professionally in, as actors or directors or designers or be it whatever, and then you have people who have never been involved in a project like this before, have never been on a stage before, have never been backstage before. And these people work together and get to know each other, and because it's a long rehearsal period you really get to know those people. Er. So it's both a big thing to meet that any people and to know you're going to work together, it can be daunting - but it's also very exciting, because you look at all these people, all these people and we're going to have a shared goal, a common goal. And that's such a strong uniting force. So that's great. One of the things about it that I was aware of, is that in early rehearsals, you have an implicit audience of 200 people for the scenes that you're rehearsing.

MAS: Mm, right. So all the other cast members are what, are watching?

TG: They can be. In some of them, you might have to do a scene in front of that many people. And you've got to factor that in. A normal rehearsal room doesn't feel like that. That's an audience bigger than some small theatres.

MAS: It is. But you're a professional, you had performed in front of 200 people, but these amateurs wouldn't have done.

TG: No, indeed. So I think it's difficult, you know it can be very daunting in the early stages of rehearsal. I was amazed at how quickly everybody seemed to adjust to that. From the youngest person to the oldest person, everybody seemed up for it.

MAS: [Laughs] I think the young ones might be *less* inhibited!

TG: Well, you're probably right about that!

MAS: I certainly couldn't do it! And tell me about performing in the Minster, because it's such a huge space, and the acoustics are very difficult.

TG: Yeah, the main thing, I think, is the acoustic. One of the early discussions that Philip McGinley and I had about what we were going to be doing here was that it is, largely speaking, a voice performance, partly because the text needs to be clear, the poetry of the text needs to be clear. And the acoustic of the building..... the sound engineers referred to a 6 second decay.

MAS: That's the reverberation into the roof before the sound ...

TG: That's how long your sound, if you're pumping out sound in a loud and muscular way, that's how long that sound's going to hang around – and interfere with whatever you might be saying next. So the approach that we settled on – and it did take a lot of work, the first few times it's very unnerving to hear that decay, to hear the sound system itself and to try to adjust that, with the strange thing anyway that humans have with hearing the sound of your own voice! Er we learnt, I think we'd all learnt by the end that the way to do it was to tighten consonants and leave, try to leave off putting too much pressure into the big vowel sounds that you might have sometimes in the Mystery Plays and maybe to make sure that you ... It may be easier with a character like Lucifer or with a character like Jesus, but maybe to make sure that the consonants and the shape of a word like that is the important part, the important part of what you're doing. That's where your focus is.

MAS: So you can't declaim in long loud vowels, although for the part of God, say, that must be very tempting?

TG: The Mystery Plays asks it, from some characters, absolutely, so I think we had to learn where we could do that and where we couldn't and there are some places where you *can*. God [Ian Small] could walk on and say Ego sum Alpha et Omega [loud] because he's got the space, the space is afforded to him at that point. But if you're in a slightly more urgent moment of drama and maybe there are lines flying from different people, all of whose voices have different characteristics then it doesn't help to have *my* voice still ringing when you are speaking.

MAS: Mmm yes, I can see that. Obviously I heard the performances, I heard it early in the run, twice, and I do gather that some of the actors got more used to it as the run went along.

TG: Yeah, and I think inevitably that was going to be the case. And I hope that, I hope that, had we done it for 82 performances [laughs] rather than for 41, then it would get that little bit crisper every time.

MAS: [laughs] Yes, yes indeed. You referred to the script as poetry, is that how you see it?

TG: For sure. I think the Mystery Plays is. And whoever the, whoever adapts the text – so in 2012 it was Mike Kenny, this time it was in 2016 Mike Poulton – they have to, they have to have an attitude towards that poetry and they have to make certain choices. Erm, but the Mystery Plays itself, whilst the metre kind of varies, it does have a consistent heartbeat and a consistent rhythm and I think that's what partly would have made it stay in the minds of the medieval audiences, when the Mystery Plays was an educational tool.

MAS: Yes.

TG: It's that those internal rhymes, the alliteration, the assonance are the things that make it clear, the phonetic structure of the language as well as the meaning of the words themselves. Er, so I think what a fixed stage production offers, which I think maybe the wagon plays don't, is the opportunity for that script to flow as one epic poem.

MAS: Right. Yes, because obviously the wagons obviously chop up the play?

TG: Yes, they by necessity stop and start and they by necessity are separately produced, they are individually designed, individually cast, so you.... If you've got Jesus played by 8 different actors you've got 8 different voices there and all could be beautiful voices but it doesn't carry the same kind of poetic through-line that you'll get if you hear those words in one voice for one evening.

MAS: Yes, that sounds absolutely right. So, tell me what... Tell me about your original role, which was Lucifer, and Lucifer becoming Satan. You played that for the first 37 performances?

TG: Yes, the first 37. That was a real privilege to play. Mainly my enjoyment of the role came from Lucifer's relationship with the audience, which is I think informed by Lucifer's relationship with himself, really.

MAS: [Laughs.] You mean, he's full of himself!!

TG: Yeah. And but equally he is a very needy character so he needs the audience's attention a lot and when he comes on, he expects the audience's attention. So I think that's a fun character to play. In terms of ...

MAS: And you had the thrust stage, didn't you, coming out into the audience, did that help?

TG: Hugely, yes. It allowed for, it just allowed me to be close to them and to see them and it meant that certain parts of the text I could deliver to individuals.

Certain parts of the text needed to come up and be to a vaster space. But it gave those options. Which if you were in, let's say, a proscenium arch theatre, you just don't have, you don't have the same. You don't have the same reach, the same range of people that you're trying to reach.

MAS: Mmm yes. And the costume? You had to change, costume-wise, very significantly as the play went along.

TG: Yeah, the design for the whole show was incredibly ambitious, Max Jones is a very ambitious designer and I knew that Lucifer was a character that he had very specific design ideas about so I tried to spend as much time with him, tried to steal as much of his time as I could, through the rehearsal period. He was a very busy man, designing a madly spectacular show, so I kind of got him where I could! But I really wanted that to inform what I was doing as a performance, because I think it was... Lucifer was the character that originally appealed to me, when I was thinking about being in this. And I felt fortunate to be able to play it. I thought this is a character that allows a lot of scope for change, for development, to see why he becomes what he becomes, and how that makes him feel.

MAS: And how did you feel when he has those wings taken off him, sort of torn?

TG: I think certainly that's horrific! And when they said to me, We're going to stage the fall of Lucifer so that you fall through a crowd and they rip you apart, I said, Right, OK, well. Obviously that's not only a physically difficult thing for me as an actor, Toby, going through the moves, but it's also an incredible physical loss of status for Lucifer right at the beginning of the Play. I mean, within the first 20 lines. So that makes him such an exciting character to play. Because you've got about 10 lines of mis-placed narcissism with which to set up the character and then you've got this horrendous, horrendous thing that happens to him! And that kind of sets you up, it sets an agenda for the rest of the show. I think it's what makes him such an enjoyable character to play.

MAS: Mmm. And Max Jones conveyed that very well.

TG: Yes, he was so keen on the transformation and the gradual deterioration and the way that as time went by... I mean another thing with the Mystery Plays is that you have to consider this character from the beginning of time, which is his first entrance, to the end of time, his last exit. And you think, he's got to age, he's got to change, he's got to learn - some things. And then there are some things that he doesn't learn, in the same way that we all are as people. But for me, Max's, the extremes of Max's designs for the beginning and the end were so clear and so polarised that it allowed me to see what was going to happen, what the journey was going to be.

MAS: Yes, and it included a fight! Wearing wings!

TG: Yes, a fight wearing steel wings!! Which were pretty heavy. And that was an absolute joy to do, the sword fighting. And I was very lucky, my training at LAMDA has meant that I've been exposed to a lot of stage combat and I was very lucky to be asked by the Phil Breen and fight director Liam Evans-Ford to try to help some of the other people, who maybe weren't so experienced.

MAS: Indeed. I mean most people don't do combat. Even in York, they don't.

TG: Well, we had some very good people and some very fit people and I was fortunate that the actor playing the Archangel Michael, my opponent, was Dinos Psychogios, who'd been to drama school in Greece, where they also do very physical training.

MAS: Oh, I see. I have seen the pictures of him and I knew he was Greek, I didn't realise he'd been to drama school.

TG: Yes, he trained as an actor in Greece and so he was fantastic. And it meant that both of us having to wear the wings were still able to put something together that was a coherent sort of fight and had a story to tell.

MAS: And looked vicious!

TG: Well, I hope so, I hope so.

MAS: And you were asked right from the start to be an understudy, for Jesus? Tell me about that.

TG: Well, when you say to somebody "I'm playing Lucifer and understudying Jesus" they react in a certain kind of way! For me it was fascinating as an actor and really, really nice to explore both. Because you know they're similar in a way, because they're God's chosen, each of them, but in the way they choose to conduct themselves, their behaviour is so different. Lucifer's such a volatile and as I said needy character whereas Jesus is a much, much stiller presence, a much more ... I mean his pace is his own, he's not constantly reacting to all the stimulus which is being done, he is remaining calm, he's passive, you know.

MAS: And did you rehearse the part of Jesus?

TG: So towards the beginning of the rehearsal process, Phil McGinley was engaged in er, *Husbands and Sons*, *Husbands and Sons*, the D H Lawrence play at the National

[Theatre] so he, his commitments meant he could only be with us on Sundays. So inevitably some of the evening rehearsals, the early rehearsals, I was playing Jesus, or I was playing Lucifer or occasionally I was doing a bit of both. But I certainly would have rehearsals each week, some as Jesus, some as Lucifer.

MAS: That must have been helpful to you, in the event of what happened later.

TG: Yeah. Which... the unexpected circumstances.... But I think the main gain from that was that I managed to form some relationships with the other performers that were going to be on stage with me during the scenes as Jesus, and I think I had... With Lucifer being a large role as well I had made personal relationships with them as a person. But maybe if I didn't have onstage time with that person, the rehearsals as Jesus at the beginning really helped with that. And I was able to be, just able to look them in the eye, you know what I mean? So that was very helpful.

MAS: So you had rehearsed Jesus – but you didn't think you were going to *play* Jesus?

TG: And, certainly by the time I played Jesus I hadn't rehearsed Jesus for a good few months! [laughs] So it might have been rusty!

MAS: So we come to the dramatic events of the final week of the run. On Monday, Philip McGinley, who was playing Jesus, was ill. It was just after the Resurrection?

TG: Yes, it happened during the show Phil was taken ill, and we.... I was on stage at the time, as Lucifer, and we were reaching a point towards the end of the show where I've just delivered a four- line speech as Lucifer and Phil's supposed to interrupt, as Jesus, as Jesus arrives and sets the angels about their task of casting the demons back into Hell. And er, Phil didn't come in with his line! So I thought OK, he's missed an entrance or he's got tangled up in his costume, or something's happened to him. So I thought, I'm just going to have to move the scene on. So I instigated the battle which followed, and we got to the end of that and this was maybe 3 or 4 minutes of stage time later. And Phil's next speech – he's supposed to begin the Last Judgement – and again nothing. And so we all started to get a bit shorter of breath and think 'What's going on here?'

MAS: I'm sure most normal people would panic!

TG: Yes! And John Pemberton, our very, very diligent stage manager came onto the stage and said to the audience "Ladies and gentlemen, we're just going to have to briefly stop the show due to a technical hitch". And so the cast left the stage. And the stage management team were fantastic. And in about five minutes they had explained to the company what was happening, found a contingency plan on how

we were going to finish the show for tonight's audience and we did that. And they said "when we return we'll be going from God's line 'Those that would sin'". And we went on, and God went from there and we finished the show. We did the curtain call without Philip, which was, which had a strange feel.

MAS: Mmm yes, that must have been strange.

TG: And then... the audience seemed to go home happy, from Monday night.

MAS: And Philip was with a paramedic and not at all well?

TG: Yes, he was off stage. So my first thought was, 'Is Phil going to be OK?' So I went up to see if he was going to be OK and there was a para-medic there and I thought I'd best, I'd better leave this for now so I got changed and went home. Yes. People were saying Don't worry, Phil will be OK, we've got just this final week to go. We were 37 shows into the 41 shows by then.

MAS: And everyone was very tired, I should think?

TG: Yes, very tired. And it took, it wasn't till the Tuesday that I knew I was going to be playing Jesus that evening. So I thought, Right, I'd better start working on this, making sure I can do all of this, because there were certain elements technically that I'd not rehearsed. I'd not rehearsed going up on the Cross or carrying the Cross.

MAS: You hadn't rehearsed going on the Cross? [Gasps]

TG: No. Tuesday was the first time!

MAS: Those are technically such difficult things to do!

TG: Yes. It was tough.

MAS: And the Cross is built for the size of the actor.

TG: Yes, and I'm a little taller than Phil, but it was OK. It was OK, that was all fine.

MAS: Phew!

TG: But there wasn't really any time to panic about all that. And I really rather like situations like that. So I thought, this will all be fine. Yes, so we did the Tuesday, and that all involved me doing some refresher work with the script. Although my approach had been to learn it from the outside in. In that all, I remained throughout my experience of the Mystery Plays very familiar with Jesus's early scenes and

Jesus's late scenes of the show. So I knew if I had to do it there was a section which I needed to cram, which was a section of four consecutive scenes in the middle, and I would be able to do it that way. So then when it came to the three-page speech that is the Last Judgment, I would be comfortable delivering that, I wouldn't be suddenly thinking, How am I going to get through this?

MAS: But you hadn't rehearsed Healing the Blind Man very often?

TG: No, no for example, yes. But I thought, These are bits that I can work on with the other actor at the time, whereas the stuff that frames that, that may be slightly less.... the bits that are a bit less about the human drama, I'd thought 'I need to know this text, I need to know this poetry' and make sure we get it all out. I mean Mike Poulton had done such a fantastic job with these scripts, so I thought, I need to know this. [laughs].

MAS: And the audience were told it was going to be you rather than Philip?

TG: Yes, there was an announcement and on the Tuesday night they were so receptive, I think word had maybe got round already but they were very.... They knew that myself and Joe Hopper were York lads who were going to do this for them and make sure that the show could still happen. [doorbell in background.] SO that was, it was a good feeling and we felt they were behind us.

MAS: And that was the Tuesday night. Did you know then you were going to have to continue to the end of the run?

TG: No, no. So we did the Tuesday, and I had the fantastic support of our Community Producer Becky Hope-Palmer who was with me throughout the whole evening. She just followed the Jesus plot throughout the show with me.

MAS: So she in effect prompted you personally?

TG: Well, yes. She had a script with her so that when I came off stage I could look at my next bit and think, well how am I going to do this? So to have her time – and she was doing such a big job on such an enormous production – to have her drop everything else she was doing and devote her time to me, really helped me to get through that Tuesday.

MAS: It is the star part, I'm sure she was aware....

TG: Yes, absolutely, but in a situation with different infrastructure she might not have been there to do that for me, so it was very valuable. And so....

MAS: Then on the Wednesday there was a matinée.....

TG: Yes, I knew Wednesday was a two-show day, but nobody told me whether I was going to be playing Jesus or playing Lucifer that day. So I went and had a beer after playing Jesus for the first time, I thought, 'I've earned this'.

MAS: You did, you did earn it!

TG: I went home and I heard quite early the next day that I was certainly needed to do the matinée performance so I got up early, came in, worked again on the lines. I thought.... though I wasn't totally unhappy with what I'd done the night before, it certainly wasn't perfect. And I wanted my performance to grow, however many times I was going to do it.

MAS: Yes, because the matinées were particularly well sold out.

TG: Yes, I knew that was a full house that day so I thought I've got to keep working on this, make it tighter than it was last night, fit in more to what the company are expecting than maybe I had the night before. And so I worked at that, did the Wednesday afternoon, felt a little bit happier that time with what I'd done. And then the evening, the evening came, and Phil McGinley came in! And I thought 'He's going to be well enough to do it'. But he tried carrying the Cross up the steps and the medical advice was that he should not do the show.

MAS: He wasn't well enough to do it?

TG: No. So I did the evening as well, and I tried again for that to be informed by what I'd done in the afternoon and just thought, We've got one more show after this Wednesday night, but it is the closing show and if I'm going to do this for the close, I want to send it off with a bang. So I think by the Thursday night I felt able to do that. But that was through the support of the entire company. It was through every last person making sure that I was getting through it, and facilitating me.

MAS: Mmm, they all.... What was the most difficult scene?

TG: The most difficult scene, for Jesus, for me? It was the Temptation in the Wilderness, there was the watching... It's a duologue scene, you know. Just two characters...

MAS: Where Lucifer is tempting Jesus to cast himself down, and to turn stones into bread.

TG: Yes exactly. With hunger, and then with hubris and then at the end with kind of stuff.

MAS: And that was normally you doing the tempting?

TG: Yes! And I felt that as Lucifer I'd negotiated quite a rational argument through that scene! [MAS laughs] So to me there was only one answer! But then to take it, to change over and be Jesus, was a kind of unsettling experience. But it did make me feel, it did make me feel the argument from the other side.

MAS: You really felt that? Speaking Jesus's words gave you a different aspect?

TG: Yes, I really did, yes. Yes, I think it has to and that's again testament to the fantastic text that Mike Poulton made, that I could do a scene, I could do this huge scene in the context of the Mystery Plays, as Lucifer and believe what *he* is saying. And then do it as Jesus and understand also why Jesus is saying what he is saying, and why everything he's saying is so important. That was a great thing for me, and I don't think many actors get that opportunity.

MAS: No, wonderful. So I can see that must have been very strange but very rewarding to do.

TG: Oh, it was very rewarding to do, but it was very strange. And the fact that that scene is Jesus's second scene of the evening, second of about fifteen scenes, maybe, it's quite a demanding one, and it also sets, it sets the tone of Jesus as a character. So it was the one I was most nervous about, because I knew it was going to be an unusual experience, like an out of body experience [laughs].

MAS: [laughs] Like a past life recurring!

TG: Yes, exactly.

MAS: So you got to the end of the run, and Philip McGinley wasn't able to come back.

TG: Unfortunately not, no.

MAS: Did he come to the last night party, on the Friday?

TG: He wasn't able to, no. He was already away. But I gather he is well on the mend. I'm very glad because I've had a great time working with Phil, especially doing scenes like the Temptation in the Wilderness. Doing that, the two of us, was a great pleasure.

MAS: As far as we can find out so far, this business of the understudy having to step in and finish the production hasn't happened before. It isn't something that I've spotted in the archive, I will be looking. So you may have made history!

TG: Well, thank you very much! If that's the case, I think then this may be the precedent for it in the future. Because if you say there's no precedent of the understudy going on, well they've never done 41 shows before and even by 37, which is when Phil got ill, I don't know that an actor has ever played Jesus in that many performances.

MAS: I don't believe so, I don't believe so. The nearest equivalent that we have to the understudy is in 1969 when it was an all-amateur cast, when Jesus and Lucifer and Judas rotated the parts and there was only an understudy needed for Judas.

TG: Yes.

MAS: But that's the nearest we've come and that certainly was nothing like so long a run.

TG: I think if they're going to continue to do fixed stage productions, for runs of this length or longer, then understudying is something they really need to think about. And I think Phil Breen, coming from the RSC, brought that discipline with him. Because this is, that's kind of how they work. And it's important to mention, I think, the amount of understudying that went on throughout the company. That throughout the five-week run it was very rare, I don't know if we even did *one* performance where we had the entire company in the places they were meant to be! [MAS laughs] Be that even down to, someone has to bring on a pig. I had to be a monkey going into the Ark as well as playing Lucifer! It's huge testament to how much everybody will cover everybody else if you implement a system like this.

MAS: And perhaps an amateur cast is happier to throw themselves in, in that way?

TG: I don't know, I don't know, I don't have enough experience of professional understudies going on in the same kind of numbers, so I wouldn't be able to say. But I think for the Mystery Plays it is a very useful system. And if you've got the right cast of actors, and you've got all the understudy bases covered, then that's the way to stage it, effectively, I think. And you can actually double-cast, which gives you an understudy naturally.

MAS: It does, yes, as in 2012. Anything else you'd like to tell us about the experience of being in the Plays or anyone else?

TG: For me, it's to mention the actor Rory Mulvihill, who was playing Annas in this production. And he had prior experience of playing Christ in the Mystery Plays in 1996 and Lucifer in the Mystery Plays in the Millennium 2000 in the Minster. So he was a very sound and calm influence, especially over the last week when I had to make that change. And he was just great to have around.

MAS: I know he's a very experienced actor, but he's a solicitor, I think, by profession. But he knows his stuff as an actor.

TG: Yes. And fantastic experience with the Mystery Plays, I was glad to have him on hand.

MAS: Mmm. Well, thank you very much for coming in to be interviewed. We'll have the audio and we'll have a transcription of what you've said. I've found it extremely interesting and I've learnt a lot as well.

TG: Thank you very much, Margaret.

Ends.