BECTU History Project
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Interviewee: Sheila Whitaker
Interviewer: Stanley Forman, Manny Yospa
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[0:00:00]
MY: This is a BECTU history project, it is the twelfth of June 1996, this is recording number 385, Sheila Whitaker.

[0:00:38]
SF: Sheila, the first bit is really about your origins; your family, where, when, parents, class, you know, whatever. So you were born.

SW: I was born 1936, in Thornton Heath, I think it was.

SF: Is that Surrey?

It's sort of south London, yes, on the way to Croydon. It wasn't necessarily quite so much a part of London as it is now of course. But in fact, the sort of formative years which were really the war years, the bits I remember when I first began remembering anything, were spent in Kent and in Harrow in I suppose what would be a sort of lower middle class/middle class area. And so those sort of years from three to nine were war years as far as I was concerned and there are various memories I have about that, one of them being that my parents decided that they did not want – I have an elder brother who is six years older than I am – but my parents did not want either of us to be evacuated. They felt it was…

SF: Dangerous.

Well, potentially, but also children should be with their parents, so they took the risk that we might be bombed out, which ultimately we were, right at the end of the war. But we stayed in London and I suppose my enduring memories are of every night being put to bed in bed because my father particularly was not going to allow the Germans to affect our lifestyle, but of course, inevitably a few hours later we had to be carried out to the shelter.

SF: That's an Anderson shelter I presume…

Yeah.

SF: …or something for the bombing.

It was a… we shared it with the people next door and it was a concrete shelter. And then eventually when things really began to get much more difficult, for about nine months or a year, towards the end of the war my mother and brother and I went up to live in Cheshire, near an aunt and an uncle, found people we could stay with, which was actually, they had half of a manor house, which sadly has since been pulled down, a lovely old house. And there was a farm at the back where I used to work. Then we went back to London, then about six months after we got back to London a bomb dropped right opposite and I'm one of those people that didn't hear the bomb. This apparently does happen. I was sound asleep.

SF: You were fast asleep, yes?

Didn't hear the bomb which was only…

SF: Was too close.

…twenty yards away and all the window was blown in, in pieces on my pillow, so of course when my mother and father got themselves out of all the rubble they thought the worst had happened, but apparently when I woke up, all I could manage to say was, 'What's going on?' So I was alright.

SF: And none of your family were hurt?

No, fortunately we got through the war unscathed. So that was my, you know, up until about nine or ten, really my memory is of…

SF: Was your dad in the forces?

No, he wasn't, he was too old. My parents were quite old actually, you know, they had me late. My father was in the First World War, in the cavalry. Along with I think four or five other brothers, of whom one was injured and was never quite the same again, but the others came through it. But my father was one of fourteen, my mother was one of one.

SF: Was that a Catholic family?

No, not at all, quite the opposite. I have to say, one of my regrets is I never quite found out from my father why my grandparents were so…

SF: Prolific.

Yes, exactly. She actually had seventeen and fourteen survived. Mind you, it was that time of course, the end of last century. Apparently, nevertheless, although I have all those relatives, we actually had very little to do with any of them, only about two brothers that we had anything to do with.

SF: What about school?

[04:58]
Well, school of course during the war was an elementary school and again, most of my schooling was spent in – again, I can't remember what you call it – it was one of those shelters that are half underground and then a round top.

SF: Yeah, Anderson.

That's the Anderson. And covered with glass.

SF: Yes, yes.

So I mean every day there would be an air raid warning and off we'd all troop into the Anderson and picking up whatever we wanted, drawing or books or whatever. So a lot of my schooling was in fact spent in an Anderson shelter rather than the classroom.

SF: Was it a happy-ish time?

Yes, actually it was. I mean oddly enough it was a happy time. I mean from a child's perspective, I mean I guess one doesn't know anything else. I had a happy childhood and

I suppose in a way since I grew up with the war I didn't know any different. I can always remember when I saw my first banana, which was at the end of the war.

SF: Yeah, you remember. Right, so early childhood and then…

Well, and then…

SF: …your education resumes.

Yes, but my father, his job, they moved him around the country from, you know, he was a manager of whatever. And we went first to Manchester, lived in Chorlton-cum-Hardy for about two years, and I passed my, whatever you called it then, scholarship, and went to Whalley Range Grammar School. But I was only there about four months and we had to move, well maybe six.

SF: Was that a girls' grammar school?

Girls' grammar school. But I moved in the first year when we moved to Cardiff and I went to Cathays High School there.

SF: Because with dad's work?

Yeah.

SF: Got it.

And we were there about five years. I mean again, that was a very good school, I mean a very interesting school. We lived right opposite a park and of course in those days in Wales you couldn't do anything on a Sunday, and so my brother and I were playing football one Sunday in the park and wondered why there wasn't anybody else there, and of course we were stopped from playing. And the other thing…

SF: They didn't try to arrest you, they didn't put you in jail for playing football?

No, no, no. Politely pointed out that it was Sunday and the city fathers didn't agree with anybody doing anything on a Sunday. And the other thing is, it was the first time – it wasn't actually the first time, I mean in London during the war I'd seen the occasional black baby in the arms of a black… but they tended to be, even at that age one knew that they were more… they were clearly diplomatic people I was seeing, but there were a lot of pupils, particularly in my form, from Tiger Bay.

SF: Yeah, of course. Shirley Bassey's region.

Exactly. So of course there was one black girl in our class and two or three of Arab – I don't know that they were completely Arab – but certainly of Arab origin, including the sister of the boxer, Erskine – what was his name?

SF: Joe Erskine?

Was it Joe… Anyway, whatever. So that was, I suppose, my first opening up to other cultures or other nationalities.

SF: Did you experience racism? I don't mean on you, but on them during the school years? Was there much racism?

I wasn't aware of it, no. I mean maybe it was because there was only one black person and therefore in the sense she wasn't a threat. I'm sure there must have been racism down in Tiger Bay or wherever, but I think it was actually more to do with a class thing than a race thing. If you're the only black, I guess it is a question, oh you come from Tiger Bay, which means it's a class thing rather than a race thing. But certainly, I wasn't aware of any teachers that exhibited any racism. Which was good. And I have to say that Olwyn, this black girl, was the most extraordinary athlete I've ever seen in my life. The tragedy is that nobody found her and trained her. Extraordinary.

SF: She wasn't trained up?

No.

SF: Ah, what a pity.

Anyway, so I was there for five years to O levels. Well, School Certificate as it was called then.

SF: Yeah, School Cert, yes.

And then my father was moved again to Birmingham, which was happy timing in the sense I just went straight into a sixth form in Birmingham and was two years in the sixth form and did my A levels. I was offered a place at university to do history. In fact I got a scholarship.

SF: Which one?

Birmingham.

SF: Birmingham University?

Yeah, to do history and I was offered a scholarship. But I sort of thought I wanted to go out into the big wide world and earn a living, you know, the usual mistake that people make.

SF: So you never went to Birmingham University?

No. One…

SF: They had some very good historians there like Roy Pascal and a whole clutch of very fine historians at Birmingham.

Well, the history mistress was very keen I went and it probably would have been good if I did, but I didn't. And partly because one friend of my father's, his daughter was at the BBC and suggested why didn't I go to the BBC, you know, you can work your way up from whatever. So I took a secretarial course and then didn't get a job at the BBC.

[10:11]
SF: Did not get a job with them? Sods.

Well, I walked in and the Personnel Officer who was, I mean you could tell, she just didn't like the look of me as soon as I walked in, so that was that. So I ended up, my first job was in an insurance office – was it the Imperial Life of Canada? Something like that.

SF: One of those.

But it was awful.

SF: This was in Birmingham still? It's still in Birmingham?

Yeah. And then I got a job in a factory and that I suppose was the beginning of some kind of political education.

SF: Big factory?

Pretty big, it was machine tools and things like that. I mean a typical Birmingham factory, I mean there are obviously many less of them now than there were.

SF: Were you on a lathe? I mean…

No, no, no, I was in the office, which is when you… But then I moved to a job in Coventry and that's I suppose where I really began to understand politics because it was a situation where we were sitting up in the office and there was a canteen, but there was one canteen for the office staff and another for the people on the shop floor. I mean it was only a small factory, couple of hundred at the most, and I could never understand why we all had to eat in different places.

SF: Was there a good trade union in the factory?

There was a trade union. I have to say that my memory of it, and to some extent I was politically naïve, but my memory of it was that the guy, the main shop steward, was one of

the really militant and in a sense that was, that worked negatively, it worked against him. I mean the employer…

SF: A dogmatic militant?

Well, dogmatic and…

SF: A Scargillist?

Yes. I mean almost to the point of being counterproductive. Well, he was counterproductive because the local management were not bad actually, they weren't whatever. I mean they were part of a group that had a headquarters in London and subsequently they behaved very badly, but I think locally they could have got a lot more if the guy had been more open to discussion and there wasn't… to my memory there wasn't an anti-union ethic within the local management, except that this guy just drove them bananas.

SF: It's happened before.

Yeah, afraid so. There's a lot of damage been done to the union movement as a result, I think. I mean one can be radical and have very strong views but still be open to talking.

SF: Did you consider joining the Labour Party at that time?

No, what happened there really was, because I was one of those people that was really interested in what was, you know, they were using machine tools, they were making things. So I used to go down to the shop floor and talk to the guys there and they were always staggered that I would go down. They'd say, well you're the only person from the office who ever comes down, which I could… And then you see I also then realised that we might take on an office junior of sixteen years old, who immediately if they were sick would get, they could have sick leave with pay or get holidays and would start work at nine thirty in the morning, and all these guys, some of whom had been working thirty and forty years, had to clock on, had to clock off, which the office staff didn't do, if they were

away sick too long they didn't get paid. And suddenly all the inequalities became apparent.

SF: It deepened your sort of class, in quote, class awareness?

Yeah. And the way that people were just treated so differently because they were doing a different kind of job, and I could never quite understand it. And I was there about three years, but in the end the factory closed, the head office closed it, and I have to say…

SF: Went broke? Sort of?

It wasn't making enough money, but it was the way they did it, which was just completely closing it down without giving people much, any warning. And I can't remember all the details of the injustices, but I was really angry about it and in my naivety I can remember writing to the chairman of the group of companies saying, this is really not the way… because I was being treated okay, it was again, mainly other office and the shop floor. And so he asked me if I would go to London and talk to him, and I can't remember now actually whether in fact he paid my fare, I don't think he did. And I can always remember going to see this guy, his name was something Brown, an extremely tall, good looking, elegant gentleman, and the head offices were in Stratford Place, just off Oxford Street, that lovely building.

SF: Yes, I know it.

And I went to see him and afterwards I realised that what he really wanted to find out was what was going on, he wasn't interested in any injustice. And actually he subsequently died about two or three years later, or maybe a bit more, and of course he had an obituary that said how wonderful he was. And what I should have done was written a letter saying…

[15:09]
SF: A little footnote.

Exactly. Anyway, so that was, for me it was okay, but it was again a learning curve. Anyway, I then came back to London.

SF: How old are you now, roughly?

Twenty-two, twenty-three.

SF: Had the cinema, the industry – not the industry – but films, impinged a great deal on you?

No. I mean films had, one of my first film memories is of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, which of course came out during the war.

SF: Yeah, indeed.

And terrified the life out of me. That scene where there's the witch in the wood and… And also of course, towards the end of the war, I saw *Henry V*, which my mother took me to, because my mother enjoyed the movies. And so we went and I was only about seven or eight, and loved it. So I enjoyed the movies, but I have to say I wasn't completely obsessed with them.

SF: Were you avid, did you regularly go?

No.

SF: No.

I just enjoyed them and it was part of my life and that was it. Anyway, I came to London and did all the things that one does when one is young in London I suppose, including in those days of course there were no, well there were very few coffee bars anyway, but the ones that there were either closed at ten o'clock at night, or even if they didn't, if they closed a bit later, it was alright if you were with a man, but if you weren't, you weren't allowed in them. It was just outrageous. And that reminds me, when I used to live in Birmingham and particularly the period when I was travelling to Coventry, I didn't

actually have that many friends because most of my friends had gone to university. And, I mean I had something of a social life but really I didn't have that much, I tend to be to some extent a solitary kind of person anyway.

SF: Had you become aware of feminism in a most crude form?

Well, in a sense, yes, because I was on my own a lot of the time, not having made new friends after school because they'd all gone to university, and being somebody who is very happy with her own company anyway, I was on my own quite a lot of the time. And sometimes I'd be driving home back from work and I'd feel like going for a drink. Well of course as a single woman, even at seven o'clock at night, if you walked into a pub, well you're not supposed to be in there.

SF: They looked at you, yes.

So I suddenly realised this and I thought why is it, because I'm on my own, I can't go and have a coffee, I can't go and have a gin and tonic – I was into gin and tonics at that time – so I determined, and for about a year, once a week deliberately I would go into a pub and have a drink and dare them to say anything to me.

SF: It's amazing. What was it… 19…

That would have been mid fifties.

SF: Mid fifties? Yeah, yeah.

So I used to do this and nobody in the end actually said you shouldn't be here, but I used to… the bar people and the people in the pub used to give me very funny looks, you know, what's she up to. And I would sit there for at least half an hour with a gin and tonic and then I'd move on because I felt I'd made my point. And it was just one of those little battles that one does.

SF: What jobs were you in in the London period, in that initial London period?

Well I was, again, I was still a secretary and I started off in a company that sold, of all things, earth moving equipment. That was in Berkeley Square. Then I moved to an ad agency for a short time, but that was a disaster, I mean they were dreadful. Well, he didn't want a secretary, he wanted a handmaiden, I think.

SF: Cups of tea?

Cups of tea, yeah. Nothing sexual, but all, you know, cups of tea and making sure his flat in London…

SF: The sweeping up?

Yeah. So that lasted about five months, I think, when I saw advertised a job to run the collection of stills and designs and posters in the archive.

SF: Here? I mean BFI job?

Yeah.

SF: The National Film Archive.

Yeah. And it said 'degree preferred' and I hadn't got a degree, and I thought oh, there's no point in… But one friend particularly kept saying, well, I mean just try, if you don't try you won't get it. Oh, the other story I wanted to tell you, in London of course in those days, again, you couldn't, you know, if you walked into a coffee bar or even one or two women together, you were whatever, but you couldn't get coffee after about ten o'clock at night initially and there was one, when I first came to London there were four of us, two girls and two boys who used to spend…

SF: You shared a flat together?

No, no, no, but there were boys and girlfriends. And so we used to drive to London Airport every night to get a cup of coffee. And when I think about it, you think to yourself, why… I mean when you got there the coffee wasn't that great.

[20:07]

SF: Bizarre.

That's what you had to do in those days to have a cup of coffee late at night. I used to have a lot of late nights to the point where if my boss was away and things were quiet, I have to admit, to my shame, that I used to fall asleep on my typewriter. However, so I applied for this job…

SF: As long as the typewriter wasn't too hard…

No, well I can sleep through anything, including a bomb. So I applied for this job because I was very interested in film, I was a member of the National Film Theatre and I would go to the Academy and wherever one went, the Everyman, and so… Then it was in the days of Ernest Lindgren who was the curator…

SF: Ernest Lindgren, yeah, he was then the king of the archive.

Yeah. A very good archivist, a very good curator. But I was interviewed by Colin Ford who was then the Deputy Curator. And it was to run this department which was, even then, an amazing collection, but was in a mess, basically, I mean a terrible mess. So…

SF: No-one there?

Well, there was somebody there but really had no sense of how to administer a collection or anything really, unfortunately. And so it was in a real mess, so they wanted somebody to come in and sort it out. So I think I really got the job on the basis of my admin experience, because what I forgot to say is, sorry, I then went to another job before that, which was a group of companies, again as a secretary, but I moved up to being the admin assistant and one of the jobs I had to do there was find them a new headquarters. So I worked with estate agents and went round and found them a building, made a report, and we took over the building, I had to… it was just a new building, open plan, I had to have it designed and everything to go in it.

SF: Lawyers, solicitors and all that.

So I did all of that, and then ran the building. So I had this kind of admin experience. So I got the job, which I then ran for six years and I think we sorted out the collection very well. We acquired a lot of material, including the cels for *Yellow Submarine*.

SF: Where were you physically, Shaftesbury Avenue?

No, that was in Dean Street.

SF: In Dean Street?

Yeah. Shaftesbury Avenue, that was… nobody was in Shaftesbury Avenue then. At that stage it was – which was '68 – it was Royalty House and the other office in Dean Street.

SF: Yeah, I remember.

And so I did that for six years, including I set up the photographic department. We used to send out our stills to an outside photographer to copy and it was very expensive and the quality was variable. So that was when I set up the photographic department at Berkhamsted. And I did that for six years and then wanted a new challenge, but nothing was turning up at the BFI, or anywhere else for that matter, so I took time out for a year, I mean it was a variety of circumstances, but I had a house in Italy at that time so I spent some time down there, not the whole time, and buggered about for a year, basically.

SF: In Islington?

No, I lived in Islington but I was in Italy a lot of the time.

SF: Italy?

Yeah. And just did nothing for a year.

SF: Did you learn the language?

Yes, I understand a lot of it, I don't speak it now very well, but I… and I read it. But I spent a lot of the time there and it was quite good, but then I decided I would maybe, rather than go back to work, maybe I'd take the degree I hadn't taken when I was eighteen. Which is what happened, I went to the University of Warwick when I was thirty-nine.

SF: Was Clive Barker there in charge of media studies?

No, it was Robin…

SF: Drama?

No. Oh, I don't know about drama. I did a joint Italian and English studies and Robin Wood was there doing film, but I mean I didn't do film.

SF: You didn't do film at Warwick?

No, no. I mean I, you know, I obviously knew a lot about film. During my time at the archive I used to be down at the NFT three, four, five times a week, you know, I saw a lot of movies.

SF: Saw a lot of stuff?

Mm.

SF: I'm sorry, did you get to know people like John Gillett and Leslie [Hardcastle] and…

John Gillett, Tom Milne, Leslie. All those are the people are those… I'm just trying to think of all those people around at that time.

SF: Who was then the Director of the BFI?

That was Stanley Reed.

SF: Stanley Reed, yeah.

And that was the time when the BFI was getting larger and there were things that were not right about the management of the BFI. Stanley Reed, then Vernon Saunders was the secretary. And Stanley Reed was a very nice man and in many ways a very good director, and of course understood what the BFI ought to be all about, which I'm afraid has been lost sight of in the last decade, but he wasn't managing well. And I was then chairwoman of the staff, as it was then, the staff association, and again, I can't remember the exact disagreements and grievances we had, but they were proper ones, I mean they weren't just whatever.

[25:20]
SF: There was a famous BFI strike wasn't there?

Well, that was later. What happened during my period was two things: one is that – and I can't remember which came first, I guess the archive, the records if they still exist would say – the first thing was that we decided that we ought to become a union, to have access to the kind…

SF: A trade union?

Yep. To have access to the kind of professional expertise, apart from anything else, that a union provides.

SF: Defence?

Yeah. And so we decided on MSF. It wasn't called MSF then, it was called something else.

MY: It was the Scientific…

Yes, Scientific and Office Workers, or whatever.

SF: ASTMS, ASTMS, Clive Jenkins.

Clive Jenkins. Who was not one of my favourite people, I have to say.

SF: No, I was going to say, may he rest in peace, but he's not dead yet, he's in Tasmania.

Oh, is he? Anyway, we approached, I have to say…

SF: ACT?

ACTT. And I always remember – I forget who was running…

SF: Where are we? '68/69?

Yeah. It was Alan.

SF: George Elvin?

No, Alan.

SF: Alan Sapper? Already?

Yes. And I have to say, that I always remember the letter we got back, basically telling us to piss off. Why would the ACTT be interested in the BFI? It was quite staggering. Quite staggering.

SF: And that was Alan and not George Elvin?

That was Alan.

SF: Naughty, to put it politely.

Very naughty, and very stupid actually.

SF: And dead stupid.

So anyway, we went to the Scientific, as it was then called, and Clive Jenkins came twice to talk to people, because of course we had a lot of people to persuade and the major thing that people were saying was, oh well if the miners go on strike, that means we have to go on strike. That wasn't true, it was a local decision if you wanted to go on strike. So in fact, although a large part of the BFI staff were quite conservative, with a small 'c', we actually voted to join MSF as it subsequently became. But also what happened was, and I can't remember, as I say, if this was before or after, maybe it was before because that's what prompted us in the end to go into the union. There were grievances going on and we were not getting anywhere with Stanley Reed and I was chair of the staff association and of course was in the front line, so I wasn't exactly endearing myself to anyone particularly. And I always remember Stanley Reed and Ernest as my superior line manager, curator of the archive, inviting me to lunch one day, and they took me to Rules, which is a very nice restaurant, or it certainly was then – I haven't been there for many years – and sat down and had this really very posh lunch and of course when it came down to it they were – I mean I'm not suggesting they tried to buy me off, but they…

SF: They were wooing you a bit, putting it politely. They were wooing you.

And I again said, I'm sorry, but I can't possibly do that. Whatever it was they suggested, I can't remember now. So that was a bit of a waste of money on that lunch.

SF: Despite the good wine.

Exactly. And things were going very badly, there were, if you remember, these dreadful AGMs where people were yelling and shouting. So in the end Stanley went and I mean in a sense Stanley, who sadly died not too long ago, must have felt that he'd failed. I mean in some ways he did, but in other ways he was a good director, he understood what was important. But I think it just got too big for him.

SF: He was straight and honest.

He just… it was just too big for him, I think, in the end.

SF: Well he was a teacher and he remained a teacher.

Exactly.

SF: Alas.

And then of course they brought in Keith Lucas, who was a disaster. But by that time I'd left to go to Italy or to piddle about for a year, so when the strike happened, I mean inevitably it was a strike over the dismissal of the deputy curator who had come in at that stage, who was a complete disaster, who I had worked with for a short time before I left. But inevitably, the BFI being the BFI, even then, nobody was arguing with the fact that this guy should go, everybody had agreed that he should go, but it was just the way it was done. They didn't follow the rules, and so they went on strike, which was quite extraordinary to get people going on strike.

SF: I remember the picket line.

I remember that. I came to see them because I, as I say, I'd left then. Anyway, so anyway I then went to university in 1975 and thought well I'll try it for a year and if it gives me what I want, fine, and if it doesn't I'll leave it. But in fact…

[30:02]
SF: Decent degree.

I got a 2:1, enjoyed it for three years, wouldn't have wanted to do much longer. Partly because of course, I was very fortunate, in those days you got a local council grant, and I got one. I got 1400 a year, which was more than a standard grant because…

SF: You could live on it.

Just about. Just about. And then I left university and was unemployed for about fifteen months. I like to sort of call it being freelance, but it wasn't really, I was unemployed.

SF: During that period, did you read a lot, did you…

Yeah, I read a lot.

SF: Did you go to theatres and art galleries?

To the extent that I could afford it. I can remember always getting down to my last 40p for my bus fare to go and sign on.

SF: Your parents, were they dead by then?

No, no, they were still around.

SF: But they weren't in a position to…

Oh, well hang on, my father, during that period is when my father died. So in fact as it turned out, the fact that I hadn't got a job or anything was quite useful because I could go down there quite a lot. Because there was one period when my father and my mother were both ill at the same time. And then my father died. And then they advertised the job in Tyneside, in Newcastle for the Tyneside Cinema, for a director of the cinema. And Tyneside has two auditoria about the same size as the NFT, four hundred and something and a hundred and…

SF: Pilgrim Street?

That's right. Lovely old thirties cinema. It was in a lovely old thirties building and I always remember, I went up there and I got the job. I hadn't really got much experience of programming, except I had done some programming at Warwick when I was there for the Arts Centre. Anyway, I got the job…

SF: For the film society at Warwick?

Well no, it was, actually it was part of the university, you know, it was like a regional film theatre.

SF: Yeah, got it.

And I'd done that for a year or two. So I went up there, never having been there, like most of us I'd just been through it on the train on the way to Edinburgh.

SF: Yeah, exactly.

But it's a lovely city, a great place to live. But I always remember going to work, and I had a wonderful time there actually. I mean I got there and after I'd accepted the job, between there and actually arriving, they had this very sweet old man who used to do the accounts, but they suddenly discovered that he'd done them all wrong and there was a £10,000 deficit.

SF: He wasn't a criminal?

No, no, no.

SF: He just got it all buggered up?

He found it, he suddenly realised he'd done his sums wrong and there was a £10,000 deficit, so I walked into that situation. So I walked into a situation where the press were saying, Tyneside in crisis! You know, I remember walking out of the cinema, it was one of the things on the pavement. So I thought, this is a good start. I have to say, having got through that and having done what I think is still probably the best regional programming that there has been, without wishing to appear immodest, the press were extremely supportive, extremely supportive.

SF: The local…

Yes, yes. And Nina Hibbin who'd set it up had started a festival, but I continued to run it but I dedicated it to independent cinema. And that was very successful and we managed to persuade the local council to give the Tyne Award, which was a 5,000 award, to the best independent film, which ran for three years, I think it was.

SF: Was Przibram there?

Who?

SF: Henry [Heini?] Przibram? P-R-Z-I-B-R-A-M. He's the secretary of the local… something.

Don't know him. So I worked there and I always remember that in the mornings I would go in the office entrance, because it was part of this lovely thirties block and had other offices in the building, and it's very rare I had a bad morning there because it was such a nice time I had, lot of hard work, but it was a nice time. But occasionally I'd feel like that and I'd walk up and on the same level as our offices there were some insurance brokers and as soon as I walked up there and saw on the door, you know, so-and-so and so-and-so insurance brokers, I'd think, what am I complaining about. I had my, you know, I started off in insurance, you know, I'm lucky. So that was always very good for me. But I mean people in… I was a bit concerned going up there thinking well, you know, it's the north-east, the Geordies, very strong regional identity, maybe they won't like outsiders. But in fact they're very welcoming, if they like you, they like you and then you have a great time.

SF: And then you've got the history of things like Amber and the Tyne, you know, the…

The Trade films.

SF: …Trade films, they more than tolerate collectives, they cherish collectives, otherwise Amber would not be alive.

Exactly. So it was actually very good. I mean I worked with Amber and, I mean Amber and Trade were a bit suspicious of me, I think they were wondering if I was radical enough. It was the period when everybody was very radical and I was watched with some suspicion. But in the end we actually all got on very well, I was never as radical as they were, but we got on very well and they liked the work we were doing, they liked the festival, and it was good. And I had four and a half years there which were very successful and were great, and then of course they advertised the job of programming in the NFT and I applied and of course also at the same… you did the NFT and were director

of the LFF, and I applied for it and got it. And in some ways I wish I hadn't, but I had to do it. But that whole period, which is now, I've been back at the BFI for twelve years, has not been an entirely happy one.

[35:32]
SF: I'm sure. Well, you've got the worst, the rottenest end of the BFI's history.

I did actually, I have to say, and I think I got a lot of it. Not now so much, everybody's getting it now, but in the early days when I was at the NFT, I think it was almost criminal what they were doing to me.

SF: Just going back to Newcastle for a moment, did you have a lot of intimate friends and…

Yeah, I mean I found a group.

SF: …groups. You know, you weren't isolated when you were up there.

Not at all, no, I made friends there, it was very nice.

SF: And it must have been a wrench to come back to London to the NFT.

Well, it was. I mean I think I would have wanted to come back eventually, because being single, I mean if I had a family I mean I would say to anyone, go to Newcastle and you'll have a lovely life, because there's the Tyneside and the Odeon, so you've got plenty of cinema, there's the Theatre Royal and the Gulbenkian, plenty of theatre.

SF: You're halfway to Edinburgh.

You're halfway to Edinburgh. But there's plenty going on in Newcastle to keep you going. Ten minutes in the car and you're in beautiful countryside.

SF: True, yes.

You can walk across Newcastle in twenty minutes, beautiful city. I mean it nearly got ruined in the way that other cities did, but they stopped just in time, so there's still a lot of the good old architecture there.

SF: And it looks good, those bridges and…

It's wonderful. And the people are very friendly.

SF: Who was running the BFI when you came back?

Tony Smith.

SF: And you got through the interview or what happened?

Yeah, there were two interviews. One, the first one with Tony and whoever, I think actually John Gillett was on it as well.

SF: Was John there?

Yeah.

SF: Was Leslie involved?

Yes, oh yes, yes. And then a second one with Dickie and Tony and I forget who else, and I got the job. And I got the job on the basis that – that was, I joined in the May, and so they'd taken on Derek Malcolm as the director…

SF: Of the Festival.

…Festival for one year, sensibly. And in a sense I don't want to raise old issues, but what… he really wanted to go on.

SF: Oh, I know.

And so he managed to persuade Tony Smith to let him go on and I said no, this is my job, this is what I came to do. It was a very unhappy period, Tony didn't really handle things as well as he should have done.

SF: And right at the start of your period at the Institute, really.

Yes. And of course, it was also the period when audiences for Cinematheques were dropping, so – and they had been dropping long before I arrived, and of course they continued to drop bit by bit, but we tried to hold our line in terms of cultural policy to the best we could, and I still think that in many ways we did some of the best programming there has been. And again, it sounds very immodest but I think the record speaks for itself. But the combination of Derek wanting to hang on to the Festival, the fact that there was somebody else within the NFT who had wanted the job and didn't get it and was very actively setting up antagonism towards…

SF: Who was that, may I ask who it was?

Well, I don't…

SF: You don't have to say anything…

No, I just think other people…

SF: There was someone else?

Yes, who was actively setting up antagonism towards me and my programming abilities.

SF: It's not good.

And it all came down to the fact that I didn't know how to schedule. And of course Tony, you see, was really a man of television and as soon as you mentioned, oh well, Sheila doesn't know how to schedule films, of course it rang bells in him because he comes from television and to a large extent success in television is to do with scheduling. And so he thought, oh, she was no good, and there was a lot of pressure on me, a lot of pressure.

And it was actually a very bad period because there was a lot of press coverage, which was being stirred up by various people about how I was left wing and I was that, and I was the other and…

SF: Evening Standard *stuff.*

Yeah, you know, the usual stuff. Or even one or two of the quality papers were writing articles. I mean for two or three years it was really very difficult and I must say if I ever saw it coming again I would get out, because it really wasn't worth fighting, because… And I would go to governors' meetings and I would put forward proposals, proposals that still would stand today, although the BFI's done nothing about them, and there was never any discussion about what our cultural policy should be, what kind of programming, it was all about, oh the admissions are going down. And then…

SF: I'm sorry, carry on.

[40:01]
Well, one board meeting was hilarious because I was saying, the NFT, we need to rebuild the NFT – this is ten years ago, eleven years ago – it is a disgrace, there are lavatories that you wouldn't go into anywhere else. And all this part of the thing, and Dickie said, well one other governor said, 'Well I'm on the local council and if the lavatories at the NFT, we wouldn't pass them in my local council'. Fine, so what are you going to do about the NFT lavatories? Dickie said, 'Well I agree, my wife doesn't like going to the NFT because of the lavatories'. And I actually have a very funny cartoon that Leslie drew for me afterwards of all these people sitting round the table thinking things like, I wish they'd finish this conversation because I want to go to the loo, whatever. Very funny. But they sat there for about ten or fifteen minutes talking about the state of the lavatories. It took at least nine years before the lavatories, anything was done about them. I mean that's the kind of thing you're dealing with. So it was a very unhappy period, Tony didn't handle it well, in fact he handled it very badly, he allowed Derek to go on for three years. Finally I got the Festival and Wilf Stevenson came as Director.

SF: But then…

Well, I mean I have to say that was the worst appointment they could have thought of and it's been proven, I'm afraid.

SF: Again and again.

Again and again. And he then said that I couldn't do the NFT any more, that they were going to split the NFT and the LFF and I would be the Director of the LFF. And I took legal advice and really staff don't have many rights.

SF: No. Had you signed the contracts or documents…

No, and he, basically it was that or get fired and the lawyer advised me that I could take it to court but the most I'd probably get is about £11,000 the way things were.

SF: With luck.

With luck. So I thought, okay. So not only did I lose the NFT and just have the Festival, but I was taken off permanent staff on to a contract as part of this so-called, one or two special posts, creative posts which are subject to cultural renewal. And when you asked what cultural renewal is…

SF: Wonder what that means.
Exactly. Nobody quite knows. And so I took over the Festival, you know, was taken out of programme planning, set up a separate department and of course it's been an incredible success.

SF: Yeah, indeed. Was Rosa with you then?

Yes, she was dep…

SF: So you had an ally.

Yes, oh yes. She was Deputy of the NFT and the LFF and then came with the LFF with me. At one stage Wilf wanted her to do, if you remember when I left, I was taken on at

the NFT Brian Baxter and Leslie were running the NFT, they wanted her to work with them, work with me on the Festival, and she said no.

SF: Got to go to sleep sometime.

Well, exactly. Anyway, I mean she wasn't going to work for two or three masters, so that didn't endear her to anybody very much. Anyway, we worked together and we were so understaffed the first year she wasn't only the Deputy Director of the Festival, she also produced on the Apple all the printed materials. I can remember one year she was up till eight o'clock in the morning doing it.

SF: Did my namesake Rita Forman do that?

No, no, no, no, no. She was in the NFT doing…

SF: Yeah, of course.

Anyway, so we made a success of the Festival, a roaring success. And so now my contract is not being renewed.

SF: I know.

And it's quite ironic, I was taken off the NFT because I wasn't successful enough and I'm now being taken off the LFF because I'm too successful. So it's a bit of a no-win situation. But I mean one could go on for hours about, not simply the injustices, but the sheer incompetence and mismanagement of the BFI, but I probably would be had up for libel.

SF: Well, I don't know. This won't get you a libel thing. Can we talk a bit about film festivals? Sorry, you want to change reels?

MY: Yes, I want to turn over.

[44:21 break in recording]

[46:47]

At the NFT we really tried to widen the programming and widen the audiences and I think we successfully did both, and in fact somebody who worked in Latin American cinema has just written an article where he has written that Latin American cinema in the last decade has been promoted very largely in this country by Alan Fountain and myself, which I find very flattering. But we did do a lot of work, you know. You know, the whole world was our oyster as far as we were concerned and we tried to do the best we could. It was never good enough, of course. But then you see the problem with the BFI is people didn't really understand, even with Tony, who God knows is infinitely better than what we have now, didn't really understand the issues. The governors don't really understand the issues and increasingly the problem is that there are no checks and balances within the Institute and if you're not careful you end up, which is what we have now, with a director who treats it like his personal fiefdom.

SF: And the membership are passive.

Yeah, and of course the membership is not like it was then. If you remember in those days, something else I forgot to say, in the early days when I was at the stills library there was a saga with Stanley when there was a letter, of which I was one signatory, that was the Letter of the 29, it was called, and then there was another letter signed mainly by people in Royalty House who were the more conservative members that was the Letter of the 17, or something, they were called that. We were saying things are not good enough and they were saying things are wonderful, so that was all part of the upset then. But when you look back on it things were never like they are now. I mean there's just, to the point where frankly now, the BFI has been manipulated by about three people to their own ambitions.

SF: Shocking.

All the restructuring, and it's not just me saying that, that's what everybody's saying. And governors are just sitting by and allowing it to happen.

SF: After all, it's our theatre, it's our National Film Theatre.

Exactly. And this is what I read in *The Observer* the other day about the BBC, about somebody treating it as his own personal fiefdom, and it's exactly the same here and the governors don't seem to be providing any checks or balances. The whole BFI 2000 has collapsed in about two months, and what's happening about it? People are being told they're redundant and now they may not be redundant. You know, there's a scandal going on really.

SF: There's a lot of uncertainty and insecurity around. I mean, I know, I get all the gossip, obviously.

So anyway, when we got the Festival and didn't have to worry about the NFT we really set to and the first thing we did, apart from really making sure we showed the best of world cinema, what we did was move it into the West End, and that opened it up to a whole audience that were not NFT members. Because up till then it had been an NFT event, NFT members. It enabled us to get good American, big American cinema, which in some ways is a hook to catch people because then they go and see other things, but I mean a good film is a good film, I don't care whether it's thirty million dollars or, you know, thirty thousand dollars. So over the years we moved in for a week at the Odeon West End in the two auditoria, then made it two weeks, now we're going the whole Festival. And we've built it up from around 50,000 admissions to over 100,000 now.

[50:15]
SF: Incredible.

And now the balance between members and non-members, it's about forty-five per cent members and fifty-five per cent non-members, buying tickets. So it's been an incredible success story – touch wood and whistle. The industry is very supportive and I mean last year particularly, I mean everybody had such a good time, it was so exciting, the industry was having a good time, the press were having a good time, the audiences were having a good time, the filmmakers having a good time. So I've been extended for one year so that I can do the fortieth, but then because of cultural renewal…

SF: That's this, we're talking about this November? November 1996?

Yeah. That's my last one and, you know, I can't go on because of cultural renewal, although it doesn't seem to apply very much to anybody else. And then subsequently to that of course, they then, as part of BFI 2000, announced that out of the three posts in my office, two of them would go on March the thirty-first. And, ironically, the Festival would go back into programme planning in the NFT, having taken it out five and a half years ago and proved that LFF was a great success, they're now going to put it back in and the Head of the BFI South Bank, who one would have hoped would not have enough time to do it because he would be busy looking after the building and the catering and all the things he should be doing, is going to be the Director of the LFF. So make of that what you may.

SF: That's frightful, is this in a sense to save your salary?

To save my salary and give…

SF: And put it on to his back, sort of?

Well, I wouldn't…

SF: That's it?

Well, frankly there may be some salary saving, but basically it's somebody who wanted the train set to play with, simple as that.

MY: They're not thinking about privatising it are they?

Well, they may well do.

SF: You never know. We'll talk about the future in a minute because there's still a bit of time left, but let's talk a bit about your… do you have – this is a silly question – do you have a mentor in that I had Ivor Montagu for most of my film career?

No, I didn't actually. No, I mean I just sort of…

SF: No-one very special that you sort of respected and trusted and…

There are lots of people that I admire and, you know, not just in programming, but in the film business. But no, I haven't, I've just sort of ploughed my own path I suppose, tried to do what I thought was right. And sometimes, you know, it's easy to feel that you haven't achieved anything and that because of the history of what has happened in the Institute while I've been around the second time, that everything that one has done has been lost and not recognised. I mean not that I was seeking recognition particularly, but somehow you'd like to feel you've done something good and I actually do think we did some good work.

SF: Of course you did.

But then you find, you know, somebody writes an article and says that, you know, I've been whatever, and then this year I've been made a Chevalier in the Order of Arts et Lettres, from the French government.

SF: Mon dieu!

So, you know, you think somebody… you know, I'm a bit overwhelmed by that, I have done a lot around French cinema and quite properly so, but they've recognised it. So you think, well okay, maybe somebody has recognised…

SF: The Japanese did John Gillett, the French have done you!

Exactly. Because, you know, I have worked hard and tried to do what I thought was right. I think the tragedy is I was in the wrong time when we were all going the Thatcherite route and it's affected people such as within the BFI and the BBC, but the real problem is, you wouldn't mind so much people doing all these things if you felt they were competent and knew what they were doing, but I'm afraid they're not.

SF: Well, just developing that theme for a moment, if you think in terms of the near-ish future, there is going to be an election, there could be a new government, but with inverted commas around, and the Minister of the Arts, the Shadow Minister of the Arts is a good, genuinely a good guy, Mark Fisher – I don't know if you know him?

Oh yeah, sure.

SF: He's pure gold as a decent humanist human being and he may have a measure of power, who knows? I mean Tony Blair won't run the world after the next election, even if he pulls it off. So all is not lost, but a great deal has been lost. What do you feel about the world at large, because you've been around? Have you been to the Third World much? I don't like using words like 'Third World', but you know what I mean.

[55:03]
Yeah, I've been to Asia, I've been to India and I've been to Argentina, I've been to Morocco and Tunisia. And China.

SF: Did you do the Havana Festival in Cuba?

Yes, went to Havana.

SF: You like that aspect of the work?

Yeah.

SF: I mean you like aeroplanes and airports and…
Well, I wouldn't say I like aeroplanes and airports.

SF: Hotels and all that stuff.

That bit doesn't appeal to me, but it has been very interesting being able to go and see people in their own environment and work with them and find out about what they're doing.

SF: Did you do silent films at Pordenone?

Well, that was always the wrong time of year because it's October and that's when the Festival's happening so I could never go. I mean I did a tribute to Pordenone at the NFT

and we've done a lot of silent cinema in the NFT programming, including a major retrospective of Cecil B DeMille, which was really very successful. But yeah, I mean we tried to cover the world and all the genres and all the periods and I think did it reasonably well, bearing in mind that some of the time we were running the Festival at the same time. I don't think the programming at the NFT has reached, done anything near as good as… in fact I think it's a disaster area, basically, and of course the admissions haven't, ironically, reached the same. So, you know, to that extent I feel vindicated.

SF: Sorry, you're right. How do you feel about British cinema, and I don't just mean Ken Loach and Mike Leigh?

Well, it's been in a bad patch and there hasn't been much filmmaking going on except via Channel 4 and the BBC, and even then some of it hasn't been that good. But what's good now is there does seem to be, you know, this whole US indie where these people get up and make films come hell or high water and increasingly are making very good films. That seems to be happening here now, at last.

SF: Do you know producers like Sarah Radclyffe, for example?

Yeah, yeah.

SF: Some good people.
Yeah, there's some good solid people. Maybe one would like to see a bit more imagination sometimes, but it is getting much better, much better. And we do have a British section in the LFF because we, you know, it's a top priority to try and help British cinema.

SF: Of course, of course. And Amber still, I mean the regionals still do something, you know.

Amber's about the only one left now, and the black workshops. All the others have gone.

SF: Indeed, and they're terribly worried about their destiny with Channel 4. I don't want to divert your, it's your interview, but I got a letter from Murray Martin and they're highly

upset. And of course when Alan Fountain left to run the Sheffield Film School, you know, the Northern Media School…

Is that where he's gone?

SF: Yeah, oh he's the head of that. And he had a wonderful thing with the students who were presenting their work. And Rod left to become the king of the Irish Film Board and the lovely woman, Caroline Spry, left for God knows what, it took our, speaking purely politically in a narrow sense, it took our allies out of Channel 4. Do you know what I'm getting at?

Oh absolutely, but the point is that they didn't leave, they were pushed.

SF: They were pushed, they were kicked.

And, you know, again you could say well, you know, they'd been there a decade and maybe it's time for somebody else to do what they were doing, but of course what happened is, you get rid of Alan and Rod and what do you get?

SF: Stuart Cosgrove.

Yeah.

SF: Rubbish. Scottish rubbish.

Exactly, who just puts on sex and…

SF: With due respect to Scotland.

Exactly, puts on sex every evening.

SF: Sex and tits.

I mean, terrific. That's really original isn't it?

SF: That is sickening.

It's terrible.

SF: And with Channel 4, you know, the BFI's important and the NFT's important, but Channel 4 is a television channel, it's the only one we've got or have had.

Exactly. The remit is fading into the background I'm afraid. And Michael Grade has to answer to that.

SF: Yeah, indeed. It's withering away.

It is.

SF: And you see, there was a situation where you could lift the phone to Alan, if you had a friend in your office who wanted to get something good on, it got on. So there we are. Now, bad question, the future? This is your last Film Festival. I'm beginning to sound like a bloody BBC interviewer. What are you going to do with your life?

I don't know.

SF: You're fifty, yes?

Sixties.

SF: You don't look… oh, of course. If you deduct thirty-six from ninety-six, well I reckon you've got at least twenty-five years, you've got a quarter of a century ahead of you.

Exactly, and of course the interesting thing is that…

SF: And you've learnt a great deal.

Yes. And the interesting thing is, and it's been very gratifying, is that when it was known that I was going and indeed the whole festival was going, both industry and sponsors have written to Wilf and to Jeremy complaining.

SF: Good.

[59:59]
Yes. But as I understand it, all they've got is the standard reply in which Wilf in his usual charming manner has pointed out how old I am.

SF: For God's sake, but you're not old. Sorry, I'm seventy-five, I have a right to say. I'm not old. Manny's seventy-six.

MY: Seventy-eight.

SF: Seventy-eight. You're not old! It's got bugger all to do with the years.

Exactly.

SF: You are a mature, youngish – spiritually – person, for God's sake.

I know, I know.

SF: And no-one has the right to throw your age at you.

Exactly. The agendas are something else, and that's what's so terrifying. If they've said, look, you've done a great job, we want to do *XYZ* in its place, and it made sense even if I didn't agree with it, you'd say oh… but I mean okay, fine. But they've got nothing in its place, nothing.

SF: And I think, frankly, I mean I'm expressing my own point of view, I think it's too soon for you to write your memoirs.

Exactly.

SF: Much too soon. A decade too soon.

Anyway, be that as it may, I'm thinking about what I want to do. I'm talking to people, I'll see.

SF: But I would hope that it would be something in connection with film or the media.

Oh I hope so, yes.

SF: Do you like teaching?

Not really, I wouldn't want to do it fulltime. I wouldn't mind doing the occasional…

SF: I mean I'm thinking of film, what they used to call media studies.

Yeah. I would be quite happy doing the occasional presentation or lecture or whatever to people, that would be fine, I wouldn't like to do it fulltime necessarily.

SF: What about film theory, in inverted commas?

No.

SF: Semiotics and all that stuff.

Well, I was into it in its heyday and I read it and I understand it pretty much, but I wouldn't want to teach it.

SF: What do you think of journals like Sight and Sound*?*

I think it's a complete waste of time.

SF: Yeah, utterly. I get it every… it seems to arrive terribly frequently now.

Well, it's a complete waste of time, but it's supposedly, according to the Director of the Institute, it's a great success and its editor is upwardly mobile within the BFI, so make of that what you will. I mean, we are living in an era..

SF: I think we're in a, what is to be done situation.

Exactly. I mean the pendulum I hope will swing back and somehow we all have to do something about it, because frankly I think in many ways the lunatics are running the asylum and they're just going through this Thatcherite nonsense without really understanding how to do it properly anyway, and losing sight, even assuming they ever had any sight, of what the Institute in this case should be about.

SF: Dickie Attenborough plays no role any more does he, virtually?

Not that I'm aware of. But then he didn't do much…

SF: Never did really.

No.

SF: So where can one turn? Prince Charles? I mean I'm putting questions to you that I don't have any answers to.

Well, one would have hoped that you could turn to the chairman of the board who would listen, but I'm not sure that, that was the case and maybe it's not now.

SF: Is he a sort of posh lunches chairman?

No, no, no, he's not. He's a very nice man, he's a very, very busy…

SF: That's Jeremy Thomas?

Yeah. Very, very busy producer. I'm not sure he has the time even if he had…

SF: No time to think about the BFI and the traumas.

No. I mean that's always been the problem; the governors never seem to take into account their responsibilities towards staff. I mean to some extent it's quite right, I mean a director doesn't want a board of governors breathing down his or her neck all the time, that's fine, but when things start to go wrong and they must know, then they ought to be doing something.

SF: Ai, ai, ai, ai, ai. Have you ever – we're up to creativity, whatever that means, and making films – have you ever considered, you know, actually, this is a bit of a preamble, if you're buried in films for a quarter of a century or whatever, eventually you realise that making films can be… isn't as formidable as… I mean you can't become an Eisenstein overnight, you can get enmeshed in one or another aspects of making films or making television or something. How do you feel about that…

Well, I never did because…

SF: What might be the creative ends?

Yeah. Well, you see, I always felt that exhibition was creative and I think it is.

SF: Yeah, of course it is.

And I'd like to think that to some large extent I was fairly successful at being creative in exhibition, both in terms of Cinematheque programming and in terms of festival programming. In the last year or two I've thought, well I wonder what it would be like to be involved in one aspect of… I mean for me it would probably be production. If you're a producer there's a lot of boring legwork that you have to do.

SF: But if Sally, with due respect, if Sally Hibbin can be Ken Loach's executive producer, you can, standing on your head.

No, I agree, I agree.

SF: I mean I'm not selling Sally short, she was my party branch secretary.

Exactly, she's a very good producer. No, I'm sure that's true and I suppose one might think, now I need to look at the thing maybe I'll think about that. But I haven't done because I always enjoyed exhibition, I thought it was, you know, everybody seemed to want to go into production but nobody was that keen to go into exhibition and it's, you know, I always remember another senior member of the BFI, very senior member, basically saying well, you know, exhibition, what's so special about that, anybody can do it.

[1:05:23]
SF: Lift the phone.

Exactly. Well, if it were that simple why aren't there more people around. And I think I've done it fairly well and I'm proud, by and large, of what I've done. And it's not that simple and there are things you have to think about, not least how you get audiences for it. And so I've always been involved in that. Now it may be that I'm not going to be involved in exhibition any more so I have to think about something else. So in the last year or two anyway I have wondered, but now I have to say, if I was going to go on in exhibition I'd be perfectly happy to do so. The tragedy is that in many ways the BFI being the BFI, I've never had the opportunity to be able to train people up, because there aren't many there. Rosa Bosch came as a very young woman and learnt a great deal, and I'd like to think some of it from me.

SF: She did a beautiful obituary of Alea, the director, a really wonderful obituary.

Yes, yes, well, it was very good. And she knows her cinema, which are increasingly there are less and less people. But in the end she left the BFI because she couldn't stand it any longer, and so… and now I've got somebody who also would be very good in two or three years' time, but he's going at the end of the year because the BFI decided… so there's nobody, the whole Institute's being…

SF: There's a vacuum there.

The whole Institute is a vacuum. By the time… poor John died, other people are being pushed out.

SF: Leslie, of course who I know very well, better, I mean we were closer than I am to you, much closer, is very unhappy and embittered.

Well, I'm afraid that's true and I just wish he could get it out of his system. I mean I know how he feels because I was obsessed and angry when they took the NFT away from me for no good reason, no good reason at all, because they would never discuss the real issues. I was just the scapegoat and bring somebody in, it looked as if they were doing something about the problem. Well, of course it didn't do anything, and now of course the admissions are wonderful, although they're infinitely less than ever I used to be able to get. And it was difficult, and it was in a sense more difficult for me because I was still in the building watching somebody else run the NFT, but you have to get it out of your system. You know, I'm angry now, but I'm not – and this is true of most people actually – I'm not just angry about what they've done to me, I'm angry about what they're doing to the BFI. But you cannot be obsessed about it. He keeps haunting the place, and it's just not good. And in that sense…

SF: He's his own worst enemy, frankly.

And in that sense they've won.

SF: What sort of – I don't want to talk money – but what sort of deal are they giving you when you leave?

All I got, when I changed from permanent staff to contract, I finally managed to get them to pay up my pension to sixty-five, that's all.

SF: That's it?

Mm.

SF: That's your lot?

Yeah.

SF: Nothing else?

Nothing else. I just go.

MY: Not even a gold watch?

No. Not even that.

SF: Not even a party with bad wine in NFT 3?

Well, they may suggest that, but I don't want it. I mean I may have a party with my own people, I'm certainly not going to have a party that the BFI want to run.

SF: Bastards. It's a bad… we're ending on a rather gloomy note.

Well, I mean, you know, there's…

SF: I mean it's not the end of the world.

No. There'll be other challenges. The gloomy note is not necessarily me, although I may end up unemployed, who knows? I mean, but I'll manage somehow. But the really gloomy note is what they've done to the BFI.

SF: Yeah, of course. Perhaps once you've gone, you know, no-one can throw bricks at you, you ought to tell a few people about it.

Did cross…

SF: You know, in the way, in the frame of truthful…

Well I haven't really, I mean I haven't gone into detail because it's all very, in a sense very boring, but there's so much that's…

SF: Well, it's boring unless you consider that the destiny of our National Film Theatre is at stake and its future.

And not only that, it's the archive.

SF: The staff, it's the archive…

It's the archive, everything.

SF: It's British history.

The information department.

SF: I mean it's a hundred years.

Exactly.

SF: And that's important, and worrying, highly worrying. With or without Mr Getty and the glossy documents that keep being produced.

And have no substance to them whatsoever.

[1:10:00]
SF: So, the future is bleak, isn't it? The immediate future is bleak.

The BFI, I mean I have to say that people are desperately looking for jobs. I mean I had somebody on the phone the other day whose wife works at Stephen Street, and he said, she's just desperate to get out, almost to the point of not caring if she's got a job when she gets out, because the atmosphere is so poisonous. The whole place is a disaster area and it's riddled with a degree of incompetence that is mind-blowing.

MY: Yes, I don't think it's confined to just this area, I think it's generally rife.

SF: Well, it's called Thatcherism and capitalism and all the rest of it. That doesn't mean that Boris Yeltsin is our alternative.

No, no, no. And I have to say that my, I mean what is being said will happen, but I mean my father was saying it and I've been saying it for many years, British management since the war has been appalling, very low quality. And I saw that when I was working in a factory, I saw it in the factories and then I went to this headquarters of a group of companies and I used to attend the board meetings and I've never seen as much incompetence - well, I have to say it's not incompetence on the scale of the BFI – there was incompetence, but more interestingly, if they made an investment and it didn't work, it was just sort of swept under the carpet and, you know, it was people just, again, doing their own thing. The incompetence within the BFI is on a scale that I think is greater at the moment and in the last few years, is on a scale far greater than I have ever seen in quite a long career. It is scandalous, the degree of incompetence. You know, it isn't just simply there are personal agendas going on or politics or whatever, that, okay, but if they're at least done competently, but they're not. It is mind-blowing, the incompetence.

SF: Can I ask – we're running now… I'm aware of time – but can I ask about what might be called high politics as opposed to the low pol… How do you feel politically? Are you involved, do you feel deeply about ecology and what's happened to the world and what's going to happen to the world and do you think much about socialism and people like Blair or people like Tony Benn, who's nearer my heart than Tony Blair, of course? I mean, how do you feel politically?

Well, I feel politically that the world is going to pot and this country particularly has gone to pot and whether it's ever going to be rescued… I just don't know if Tony Blair – if he gets in, *if* he gets in, it's still by no means certain – is going to solve it. I mean my concern, I mean I'm sure I'm not as left wing as you are, but I'm certainly well left of centre, I suppose what I would like to see is a kind of very humanist, informed capitalism.

SF: Yeah. Have you thought of Liberal… Paddy Ashdown?

Well, I have to say, of the three of them I think he talks more sense.

SF: He's the nicest guy.

He's the nicest guy, he talks more sense, he will stand up to be counted and he doesn't necessarily – which is what is happening to Tony Blair, it seems to me – he doesn't necessarily allow the Conservatives to set the agenda. Now, Tony Blair, he's reacting all the time. Everything they come up with, you know, their manifestos, the agenda has been set by the Tories and the media and there doesn't seem to be anything on which they're prepared…

SF: You can almost visibly see him shifting to the right.

Exactly. And there doesn't seem to be anything where they're prepared to stand up and say, this is our agenda. And then when they finally come out and say yes, they agree that teenagers or whatever should have curfew, you think, well what about civil rights? I mean, quite aside from the fact that it's not going to solve the problem and it takes more than just keeping them at home. I mean, what about their civil rights, they're human beings. And, you know, you think… I mean, I'd rather have him, that party than what we've got. I think for one thing they're going to be slightly more competent.

SF: Yeah. Hopefully.

Yeah. And it'll stop the rot before it goes too far, although it's almost gone so far it's irreversible maybe, but, I don't know. I mean I have to say I think in many ways I would rather see Paddy Ashdown there, but in a sense he's got less to lose by standing up to his own agenda and we do need to have somebody else in there otherwise we're going to be a one-party system forever. But it is scary, the ecology is scary. I mean, you know, I do my bit with my bottles and my newspaper and all that kind of stuff, I try to use public transport to some… I have a car, but I mean if public transport was really good…

SF: Yeah, if it worked.

…you know, like when the GLC brought it in, it seemed to be working.

SF: Well, we need a GLC for starters.

Exactly. So yes, I'm not good at being members of a party or a group.

SF: You're not a joiner?

No, I'm not a joiner, that's my problem really.

[1:15:00]
SF: Let's talk about Christianity for one and a quarter minutes. Are you a believer? I mean, don't… I'm not knocking, I have very… they say about Jews, some of their best friends are Christians.

I'm not, I mean I was brought up… actually, I was Church of England.

SF: C of E?

Yeah. Never went to church. I mean my father certainly wasn't religious, my mother wasn't religious and in fact, I always have this memory of I wanted to join the Brownies, so my mother took me along to the local group and we had the interview and the woman said, 'Oh yes, we'll be very happy to have Sheila'. And my mother said, 'Oh that's good'. And she said, 'Well, you'll bring her to Sunday School on Sunday morning'. And my mother said, 'What do you mean Sunday School on Sunday morning?' 'Oh well, this is a church group and you have to bring her to Sunday School.' 'My daughter's not going to Sunday School.' So I never joined the Brownies.

SF: Good for you.

And I never joined the Guides either.

SF: But you wouldn't have got bugger all out of the… you would have got nothing from the Brownies.

Well, exactly. So in a sense it's more of a sort of ethos, a wider ethos than my family that makes me think that I'm a Christian, but then where I stand I don't care what religion anybody's in as long as they… if they want to practise it and they don't harm anybody else, let them practise it. I mean there was a very interesting event in the NFT, part of the Jewish Festival that we're running at the moment, and the discussion was, I mean why is it so difficult for some Israelis to accept that Israel should be a secular state, but if they want to be extremely orthodox Jews they can be extremely… but they want to combine the two. So I'm not a practising Christian. I always remember a friend of mine, who unfortunately died very young, in her forties, she always used to say to me, I don't know what to believe but you have to admit that the mere fact that we're here is so extraordinary that there must be something, presumably, but what the hell it is…

SF: Well, it's a gigantic process of development which started way back with Big Bangs and that became more and more complicated.

But there was something, even beyond the Big Bang there was something, I mean where did it come from? I mean that's the mystery. Is it a scientific answer or is it a religious answer – who knows? We'll all find out sooner or later I guess.

SF: One day. You'll know soon – not soon enough – I'll know soon enough.

Well, you're another decade at least away. So… But no, I'm not practising, I'm perfectly happy for people to practise it as long as they don't try and force it on everybody else.

SF: It's funny, we have yet to have a Christian. You know, we'll ask, throw in religion and philosophy at the end. You're in the same boat as David Robinson and all sorts of people, you know.

I suppose like David and all of us, we try and do the best we can in whatever area we can. You know, I've tried to do the best I can in programming to show the excitement of cinema and also to show what cinema is about in terms of other cultures, issues that it raises, all sorts of things.

SF: In a nutshell, how did you become the Northern Personality of the Year?

It's a good question, I don't know, somebody nominated me, and that was when I was at Tyneside of course, and that was extremely flattering.

SF: They did it because you were wonderful.

Oh, thank you Stanley.

SF: Well, it's a point on which we could end and we have, not even a minute to go.

Well, I hope that was of some interest. I didn't feel I talked enough about programming and film and whatever.

SF: I think more important – I don't know what you think Man – I think it's more important that we got the BFI truthfully.

MY: Yes, and also what we are recording as well was the people, it's your story.

Yeah, okay.

SF: We're not merely into Greta Garbo and John Gilberts and all that stuff.

MY: Thank you.

[1:18:50 - end of recording]