

## **Roy Ockenden**

My full name is Roy Ockenden, my date of birth is 21st of September 1935 and I've been in Brighton since then. That's born and bred in Brighton.

(What is your earliest experience of theatre going in Brighton?)

Oddly enough it wasn't until I was about 14 at school, and we came to the Theatre Royal here to see 'Pygmalion', prior to that age, the Theatre Royal at Brighton was for people with money. And we couldn't afford to come to the Theatre Royal, we came to the local Hippodrome sort of thing, but the Theatre scene was above my station.

(Did your interest in theatre start when you saw your first play? how did it develop?)

It really developed quite later in my life, when the firm I worked for, we had an arrangement where you could get cheap seats, for here on a Monday and a group of us from work, used to say how many seats we wanted and alright, my wife and I used to come and we used to come every Monday, and we saw everything - good, bad and indifferent.

(So how do you think the theatre in Brighton changed?)

I don't sort of think, I'd really say from the time I started coming it hasn't really changed, as I say, we used to come every week. And to the point that when I used to come to get a drink from the bar before the show the lady behind the bar used to greet me by name - "Good evening, Mr Ockenden, your usual?" you know, I was part of the family here on a Monday evening. And that lady behind the bar, she used to greet virtually everybody of the regulars, by name it was brilliant. Little family thing.

(And what performance has had the biggest impact on you?)

I think one of the shows I enjoyed the most and laughed at most was the first night of "Jeffrey Bernard is Unwell". It just seemed to wholly come alive. Particularly as in the front row, in a few seats and off centre there was Jeffrey Bernard. He was sitting there with his feet up on the rail, I was thinking how on earth is he getting away with it! And I didn't realise to begin with that it was Jeffrey Bernard there, he reacted with the cast on stage and the chatter and I think if I ever saw that show again it wouldn't be the same. But we've seen lovely things here like 'Evita' with... who was it? David Essex! He did the first run of it and it was here before it went to London.

(Have you ever had any unusual experiences?)

Not really, the silliest one I can remember is, as I say, we used to come as a group from work, and one evening three of us were sent up to the front row and the wife and I were sitting there and this other lady is sitting next to me. And she

nodded off and started snoring! And to see the cast on stage suddenly hear this lady snoring, they were looking and I gave her a nudge and made eye contact - I thought it was brilliant.

(And did you ever see anything risqué?)

Risqué? Yes... What was it called? It was about a Turkish bath, a steam room - ladies baths and there was full frontal nudity on stage here, which is going back far enough that it wasn't done. There was Olive from 'On the Buses' - full frontal, starkers, on the front of the stage! Which, you didn't expect... but then what has happened to standards, the language in today's production! (The History Boys)

(May that be a thing that might've changed?)

Very much so - four letter words weren't used on public entertainment, was it Kenneth Tynan on television was the first man to use the F word? And this was 'Wow' this was something! And now, not really on television it's on stage and it's in the street, and it's every third word, in various areas of the town. It's not the way I was brought up. Yes, that language wasn't used publically, I don't say it wasn't used, obviously it was.

There used to be another Theatre, two or three doors along from here. That didn't last long. But there was, the Grand Theatre. Which did mostly variety and a few things, The Imperial Theatre, that's what it was called, That used to do Opera, things like that and odd shows and then Brighton Hippodrome. Which they're trying to make into an 8-screen cinema. Last time I went in there it was a Bingo hall, they'd taken all the seats out, but all the lights, seating round the edge, the stage and the curtains was exactly as I remembered it from the 1940's. It was still beautiful, And we used to go there through the war. If the air raid siren had sounded, and there was an imminent air raid, people just sat through it. When you came out, to go home, no streetlights, Brighton was in darkness. Brighton was total darkness we used to live quite close to the Hippodrome in Brighton - we used to walk home through the streets. And you had to have your pass. Because if you were below Western Road, going towards Hove, it was a no go area after sunset. You had to have a pass to be walking round. Yes, it was everything, in case of invasion we had to.

(Is the Theatre Royal your favourite theatre in Brighton?)

Oh it is, for me it's the only place in Brighton to come to! My wife is part of a theatre group so we sometimes go up and see shows in London, two or three times a year, all these old wrinkly's pile on a coach and go to London. We've seen some good shows up there. We like 'Lion King'. It's brilliant, me and my wife have been twice, 'cause it's so brilliant the first time we went for a second helping of it. And 'Phantom of the Opera' I've seen that once, with a friend of mine. But the weekly club have been to it twice. And I've seen Phantom three times, and I think a lot of these shows have been seen two or three times - I don't read books. Would you believe in my life I've read five books? That's all I've ever read. On the theory that I've got my own imagination, I don't need somebody

else's! But as my wife will read another book more than once, some shows are worth seeing again.

(With who do you go to the Theatre?)

My wife, my wife with the wrinkly club. 'Retired staff association' - the wrinkly club.

(What impact have they had on you?)

Let's say I'm taken along, a load of the times we go on various outings with the wrinkly club, but most of the time it's my wife's choice of where we go.

(Can you tell me anything more about the history of theatre in Brighton? Something you want to go into more detail with) Just in Brighton, as I say, sitting in here on Monday nights we used to come down. And celebrities in here okay! As I say, we used to come Monday evenings out into the area out by the bar to have a drink and one evening, we were standing there and this lady came over and said "Excuse me, do you mind if I come and stand with you, I don't like being jostled." Dame Flora Robson. All the posters are up outside for her you know, she was famous. But she lived in Brighton, after that evening she used to come and join us every Monday evening "Oh, may I join you?"

(So you met a lot of interesting people?)

Oh yes! We've enjoyed this place is all I can say, any thoughts that anything would ever happen to it - the one in London, do you remember that? A little while ago where part of the ceiling came down? Part of the fancy ornate work on the ceiling collapsed on the audience. These walls here are crumbling. Because there used to be great damp patches and you wouldn't dare lean against it. Have you looked at old buildings in the Brighton-Sussex area that are made of flint? Give them one push and they'll fall over. There used to be another theatre along the road here and it became a cinema for a while and then it was pulled down and something went up there, modern construction but when they pulled it down it was just flint and crumble. There wasn't a solid wall in the place. When someone was saying here earlier the Theatre Royal is over a hundred years old I was thinking 'so it's only been here 20 years longer than I've been here! Mustn't think old. If you think old you are old!

(So you've seen a lot of the Theatre royal during the years)

Oh, yes. I didn't start coming here regularly until the early 70's. I couldn't for quite a few years before that. My second wife, my first wife was ill and died. I nursed her for years at home. But, I'm a firm believer in life after death, and after my wife died I had a life to live. I've had other friends. A friend of mine and family were up on Christmas day and said his wife had just died. And I gave him the life after death lecture that Christmas afternoon, over the phone. I'm a firm believer in life after death. If somebody dies around you... Okay I've got my first wife and

it was part of my life. I've got two children, which we brought up. I've now got great grandchildren. But that's nothing to do with performing arts.

As I say. Born and bred in Brighton It has changed.

(How do you think it has changed?)

I suppose it's changed to fall in line with modern way of thinking. I can get on a soapbox about this, but I won't. We used to come into Brighton, when I was a teenager; we used to be in the bars in the middle of Brighton, out getting drunk every night, not just Friday nights, every night. And now I don't think I would come into Brighton of an evening to have a drink. I go into a pub in Rottingdean occasionally, to one of the pubs there. If I went out for a drink in the evening I'd go to the pub in Rottingdean I wouldn't come to Brighton at night.

(But you're still going to the Theatre)

Matinees. Only to Matinees now.

(When had that changed for you?)

I suppose it's once I got to the point where shall I say I retired. And I was fortunate enough to retire at 57. On full pension, including state pension. That was a good job I had. And yes I've been retired since I was 57. Since then, we've done Matinees.