

Interview Transcript: Jim McManus Remembers Streatham



Staś Smagala 0:00

Memories of Streatham Hill Theatre. These are some recollections of Streatham Hill Theatre from veteran actor Jim McManus. Jim is also a creative industry supporter of the theatre. So welcome, Jim.

Jim 0:15

Thank you.

Staś 0:16

Your first experience of Streatham Hill Theatre was when you moved to Clapham from Bristol - is that right?

Jim 0:19

We moved up from Bristol. But we lived in South London in Norbury for a while but all over the place, I'm a gypsy.

Staś 0:33

So when you came to Clapham, you joined the Scouts movement, yes? And used to get a bus I believe to ...

Jim 0:40

We were rehoused from, from the place in Streatham where we lived, and we had this place in Kings Avenue, you know, but one of the big mansion houses, which now is, now blocks of, blocks of flats. But I joined the Scouts, top of Leigham Court Road.

Staś 1:03

And used to get on the bus outside the theatre, is that right?

Jim 1:07

Well to get back to my my, my flat, which was in Kings Avenue, I had to walk down to the other side of the one-way system as it is now by Streatham Hill Theatre by Streatham Hill station. And then I could get my bus home to Kings Avenue from there. Coming down the hill, you have to go via the "devil's walkway", which was past the Streatham Hill Theatre.

Staś 1:33

And could you see inside the theatre?

Jim 1:37

Well, I did when I stood - it was a bit of a frustrating view. Because I only ever saw about the last 30 seconds of any show - the glass doors would swing open and you take a tantalising glimpse of, glimpse of the stage from... So, I first watched my first 30 seconds, or a couple of minutes, of the shows that I saw at Streatham Hill was really from the street through flashing doors.

Staś 2:08

Did you ever think that you would then, did you ever think you would be performing?

Jim 2:13

Oh, I was giving shows in the chicken run at my granddad's house in Bristol before while Hitler was trying to bomb us out of existence - the show went on, but the show was moved to the chicken house. I was apparently - we did have an Anderson shelter in the back

garden - and I was told I was forcefully thrown back from the view of the, of the approaching bombers ... looking up saying "plane, plane!".

Staś 2:44

When was the first time you worked at the theatre?

Jim 2:48

About 1950. Because I knew about the theatre. And I'd been to all the theatres, usually to pantomimes and that sort of thing. Brixton Empress, I knew quite well,

Staś 2:59

When you were at Streatham Hill Theatre...

Jim 3:02

Yes.

Staś 3:04

... you played as an understudy.

Jim 3:07

Mm, one of my first jobs in the theatre was a show that came out of Stratford East. And it transferred, transferred to the West End, to the Garrick Theatre, which was 'Things ain't what they used to be' which was the musical. But also, the first time I had been in, in the theatre, in Streatham Hill Theatre, I'd been on the tour of a Stratford East show which was called 'A Taste of Honey'. And I understudied, Geoffrey, which, in those days somewhat scandalously, a gay character. All I can remember about it is the Blue Ribbon, the Blue Ribbon milk bar next to it - a long thing - and the theatre was like you see in the pictures. I've only seen the pictures now, but it was very imposing pillared theatre, and a posh looking foyer. And a staircase, I can remember, staircase to go up, to go up, because bear in mind, all I had was a momentary glimpse between the doors being opened and the fur coats coming out and, and so I never saw very much inside it, but it was, it was, it was a theatre to all I knew the theatre was really imposing. And I mean lots of pillars.

Staś 4:39

Do you remember as an actor, the green room backstage?

Jim 4:44

I was assistant stage manager, and I was so hungry, I wouldn't stray far from the stage. I would listen in to the to the actress chatter which was like manna from heaven to me, to act as relaxed as really talking. And of course, I've been in every time every time there was an opportunity to be in a play. I was in front whether it was in the chicken, chicken run in my granddad's garden, or whether it was in the - I went to Buckhurst Hill County High School, which had a well-equipped, lovely, lovely hall. We had a very successful school drama society. And in fact, several Terence Hardiman is a working actor now. He was our head boy. And one of, I was really flattered because I've been in London doing a play on the fringe. And there was a knock, knock on the door, and that was Terry come to see me. And as time marches on...

Staś 6:01

Did you enjoy your time as a performer in the Streatham Hill Theatre?

Jim 6:06

Oh, yes, yes, stage management and understudy you can ... and stage management is the odd job, and you get the odd jobs. I remember riding, having to go to to, to the West End in a taxi, to pick up the drapes, somebody forgot the drapes. Because in those days, when you went when you after you did a West End run, then that would be the holiday for the for the actors and they would love to go on the tour because they would be Streatham and Golders were the two theatres closest to the West End. And that that's where you was thought, right? If you've been 15 weeks on tour, it was your fortnight at home. So everybody prayed they'd get on Streatham and Golders. And you could do Golders Green. And that was a thing. And I was the one who had to go, because obviously the ASM and I had to go into town and collect the drapes with somebody forgot them.

Staś 7:09

And bring them back to Streatham Hill?

Jim 7:12

To Streatham Hill Theatre and hang them and do whatever. So, I must have known about where the green room was, and I must have because that was the job. Obviously, I was the dog's body and as well as players cast as an understudy.

Staś 7:30

Yeah. Because you also did you did you perform there as Corporal Flight?

Jim 7:35

I think obviously, that's, that was one of the tours that we weren't. I was in the play at the Whitehall Theatre. Yeah. And when that went on tour, of course I was. But by then, I wasn't on stage management anymore. I was a proper actor. And so I had to come out there as an actor, which was a great thrill.

Staś 7:55

And that was in a show called Simple Spyman.

Jim 7:58

Simple Spyman, yes. Yeah.

Staś 7:59

We're you also a stage manager there as

Jim 8:01

Well. I got, I think I might have, I might have graduated up a little bit. But I know I played Corporal Flight. Yeah. Which was my way and everybody did everything - I would have been ASM

Staś 8:15

Assistant Stage Manager?

Jim 8:17

Yeah. That's how I would have got in. And whatever. We're very loyal. The most everybody who was anybody at the Whitehall had come to make their way up because once at the Whitehall it was a job for life. And I was record I was recommended to go - I was a dresser in the carrot theatre. And one of the actors who came in was Wally Patch. And he said, I

was his dresser. And he said, "You want to be an actor boy?" Yes, course. Well get yourself down to the Whitehall then, they're casting at the moment. It was a play that I was in, that I started. And he should go down there see 'em. And see if you can get in, see if get the shows called Simple Spyman.

Staś 9:08

And that was one of the shows that went to Streatham Hill?

Jim 9:11

That was then. Years, years after that. What they will do that they would do - I got into the company that was rehearsed for the tour. And we were rehearsing for the tour while the new show at the Whitehall was being... In our cast, there was Andrew Sachs. There was Timothy West. Two names to conjure with. And they taught me, they taught, me the proper business of touring because I was with them for five months. You know, going to different, different places each week

Staś 9:49

and that was Streatham Hill?

Jim 9:52

Yeah. Streatham Hill. was one of those

Staś 9:53

And Golders?

Jim 9:54

Golders. Golders was the other one. Golders Green.

Staś 9:57

What was the last show that you did at Streatham Hill? Do you remember the last one, was that was that Simple Spyman?

Jim 10:05

It might well have been the last one. [Yeah]. Because it's always ... I'm quite an elderly man. Now, sometimes the memories aren't completely accurate. And I wonder sometimes you say wish fulfilment, but I did play Streatham Hill Theatre. Because I remember, I remember the Tannoy was very tinny

Tinny, the Tannoy?

The Tannoy was very tinny.

Staś 10:30

Great. Okay, Jim, thank you very much for your time. It's been fascinating to hear your memories.

<http://streathamhilltheatre.org/jim-mcmanus-actor-remembers>