

I was born in Streatham and moved away quite quickly after my birth, but my grandmother still lived there so I was always going back to Streatham and I knew Streatham as a child very, very well indeed.

It was a rather, a rather fascinating place; it's rather different to the Streatham that it is today. It was quite... they had sort of rather grand ideas about themselves - they thought of themselves as being the Hampstead of the south, and there were patisseries and there was a delicatessen run by French people, and all that kind of thing and it was a bit genteel, you know, and one of the lovely attributes of the area was this magnificent theatre, the Streatham Hill Theatre, which I would go past of course, every time I took a bus to see my grandmother.

But as a very, very, very little boy - I think I must have been six or something like that, so that would be about and it knocked me sideways. I thought it was just the best thing ever. and I was aware of the beauty, or rather the majesty, of the building. It's just a magnificent kind of a palace really of a theatre, but a people's palace you know. It's not... there was nothing grand about it at all, it was just absolutely open and celebratory and colourful, and all of these things. But my great memory of the panto which starred then very, very famous actor called Jimmy Edwards who was a big television and radio star, and had been in the music hall and all of that kind of thing, with his famous handlebar moustache, and he said this, what I believe now was an improvised line, in which I suppose he was playing the Sheriff of Nottingham or something - I don't remember that - but he said somebody mentioned "The Queen" - it was set in England - someone mentioned the queen and he said "Oh don't talk to him about any silly old queens" and I think he made that line up to make his fellow cast members laugh. But I was outraged at the age of six, I was absolutely outraged, and I leapt up to my feet and I said "How dare you say that about our Queen!"

I was obviously a big monarchist at that time, and the audience thought this was very funny, and my family dragged me back into my seat, but that's my great memory of a show there, because that was the only show I ever saw, and of course I have no way of judging now, but it seemed as if it was done on a magnificent scale. There were lots and lots of people in it, and there was an orchestra and everything. I was very, very thrilled.

It was a very grand theatrical space and it's wonderfully designed by an architect, who's Australian by birth, called Sprague, who was responsible for many of the best theatres in the West End, and this was his last theatre - I think 1929 - and it was, I think, maybe he wanted to go out with a bang, you know. It was just... it's a splendid, it's splendid, it's a splendid place, and it's lovely that it was, you know, in the suburbs so to speak.

It would have been perfectly marvellous in the West End, but that was the end really of the epoch of shows, and theatres actually in the suburbs, and of course before it became the bingo hall, it had been the num... the first stop for shows which had ended their West End run and went on a tour - and so I do remember West Side Story being there. I remember that very well, I think that must have been 1957, and it was such a massive hit that show, and the theatre, the Streatham Hill Theatre, was bigger than the theatre in which it appeared first in the West End. So you know it was a major touring venue.

It's funny to think that a show would tour... it only took you, I mean, half an hour to get to Victoria from Streatham Hill, but no Streatham Hill was, you know, a separate date, and the

big shows all came there. I was aware of something too - this is much later really when I knew a bit about theatre history - that it had been opened by a very, very, very famous West End star called Evelyn Laye, a very much-loved woman and her nickname - she had this - it was Boo, so she was she was known as Boo Laye, and the fact that she'd opened it really tells you how big a deal it was that that theatre had come to be built in Streatham.

I think my visit to the theatre as a little boy certainly gave me an idea of what a glamorous place a theatre was, and I've always been drawn to that aspect of the theatre. I love it, I love that it's the buildings themselves are rather beautiful, and in fact I wrote a book about it called the Great Theatres of London with wonderful photographs by Derry Moore, which do show that the whole idea of a theatre was not simply what happened on stage, but the whole transition from your daily life and the street outside, into this kind of wonderland in a way, and I'd certainly never seen anything like it at the age of five, and I was absolutely knocked sideways by it.

I can't think that it made me have any aspirations to become an actor, but I didn't have any aspirations to be an actor until much, much, much later till I was in my twenties, but certainly I adored the kind of spirit of it, and maybe it was that that made me ask people to take me to the theatre thereafter, because then I did branch out a bit and went to London to the Scala Theatre to see Peter Pan and other shows, you know.

My family weren't a theatre-going family at all, but for these special events and at Christmas, yes we went. It's a great thing to have a local theatre. I mean this one's on a terrifically grand scale but it's a very important thing for any community, in my view, to be able to have a place where all your neighbours go to the theatre, but when you go to a theatre in the West End of London, by definition almost it's going to be people from all over the place which is a good thing too, but in the case of a theatre like Streatham Hill Theatre it's something to be proud of, something to be interested in, something where you can follow, especially if - I don't think it's ever happened at the Streatham Hill Theatre - but if there's a resident company there.

But you can certainly... you have a sense of it's rather wonderful. It's almost the equivalent to what happens in a church, which is where you get the whole community, used to anyway, gathered together, and where they became a unit, became an entity, when they attended the services, or listen to the sermons, or any of that kind of thing. Similarly in the theatre, you're told the same stories, you know, you're connected by the experience that you're having there in the theatre, and I hope very much that the theatre will return to that relationship when it becomes a theatre.

It's a very big space and it's a lot to ask, I mean, to find 2,000 people to fill that every night all year would be very difficult but I think there are many, many, many purposes to which that magnificent building can be put. For example, it would be perfectly possible to stage plays if you brought in the safety curtain - the stage is so big that you could actually have seats on the stage and you could create a little theatre in the round, or indeed do all kinds of things with design.

You could make it into a very adventurous space but I would hope, and it's something I've said from the moment I became involved in the, you know, drive to bring the theatre alive again as a theatre, I hope that at certain points in the year it might be possible to put on,

probably, the panto would be a very good example of that, or community theatre, you know, local groups who can command great loyalty from their audiences and so might at points in the year actually be able to use the whole theatre, and that I think would really encourage more people to come, because it's a complete entertainment, you know, it's not just what's happening on the stage, it's the delight of being in that splendid building.

So, I wouldn't think it's a good idea to try to rebuild it too much. You want to keep it, to maintain its unique character - it has a very, very special character, Streatham Hill Theatre, and that's what we hope to bring back to life.

<http://streathamhilltheatre.org/simon-callow-talks-about-streatham-hill-theatre>