

Interview Transcript:

Tom Courtenay Remembers Streatham Hill



In 1962 when a play finished its run in the West End and then went out on tour, it was usual for the first two dates on the tour to be Streatham Hill and Golders Green. It just so happened with the run of Billy Liar coincided with my first day ever filming the film 'The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner' so on the Monday morning I would be picked up about five in the morning in this horrible musty smelling old Rolls Royce, and set off on a tour of London picking up other actors. I mean, you think me being the lead, they might have put me last but no they didn't and so we picked up James Bolam, Avis Bunnage, Topsy Jane and Julia Foster - I think there may have been one or two others. ...

And so, we arrived and they all got out of the Rolls and I had no idea just how big the theatre was. But there was a set - I saw it from the back - the set of Billy's house plonked in the middle of this vast area which was the stage of Streatham Hill Theatre. Now Billy enters down the hall stairs so I had to climb up at some steps onto a ramp and then come down the stairs for my entrance into the Fisher residence, and he was in his pyjamas, Billy because he was late up, and he had a raincoat in lieu of a dressing gown, and he had a two-shilling piece, which he put in his eye to pretend that it was a monocle.

In theatres, there's something called a rake - the stage isn't flat it's sort of raked from the back down to the front to sort of, as it were, throw the play towards the audience. Streatham Hill Theatre, being so huge the rake was very steep, much steeper than I've been used to, so I went headlong down the stairs. So anyway I pick myself up. He takes the newspaper out of the front door letter box, puts the monocle in his eye, goes into the living room, where Billy's mum and dad are, and he says "Cabinet changes imminent" and dad really says "Yes and you'll be bloody imminent if you don't start getting off in the morning". Billy raises his eyebrows and this two shilling piece falls to the floor and it set off on a journey around the steep rake and I watched it, fascinated as it careered... And there miles away was this audience which you know didn't have much effect on you because they seemed to be so far away. So various accidents happened because the set wasn't used to being on this particular stage - there were flying ducks which used to be in fashion in those days, kept falling off the wall.

And then when Billy's girlfriend Barbara comes. He wants to make up to her but she's, she's eating oranges - it's quite a funny scene - and eventually he gets hold of an orange and he throws it "You and your bloody oranges!" and he throws the orange but anyway the orange again is set off down to the footlights. All these strange things kept happening and I was so tired anyway, slightly hysterical, and then George Cooper who had a sort of good sort of baritone. He was telling his Billy off, it got to him too so he's baritone became so high when he was talking.

He couldn't speak for laughing and then I couldn't speak for laughing and at the first interval, Mona Washbourne - who was in the film but George A. Cooper wasn't in the film bless, how I wish he had been - she had to tell us off because how important the first night in a new date is terribly important, and you've not got to be giggling. That's about as far, much as I can remember of that first night but it was it was a tough one for me and I always think of it as the longest day of my life.

<http://streathamhilltheatre.org/tom-courtenay-talks-about-billy-liar-at-streatham-hill-theatre>