Maurice Elvey (film director) 11/11/1887 – 28/8/1967

by admin — last modified Jul 28, 2008 04:49 PM

BIOGRAPHY: Maurice Elvey was one of the most prolific directors in British cinema history, directing over 300 feature films between 1917 and 1953. Elvey began his career on stage as an actor, and he also acted in his directorial debut, The Fallen Idol (1913). He later became known for his historical-biographical films, including Life Story of David Lloyd George (1918). By the early 1920s, Elvey had become the chief director at Stoll studios, where he worked particularly on literary adaptations. His career in silent cinema culminated with the well-regarded Hindle Wakes (1927). In the 1930s he Elvey was involved in the production of numerous 'quota quickies'. Faltering eyesight eventually led him to retire in 1957. SUMMARY: In this brief interview he talks to Ralph Bond about his early life working in London, his early career as a stage director with the Adelphi Play Society, and his conversion to film on a trip to America in 1912. Elvey talks about some of the high points of his career as a silent film director, particularly the making of The Flag Lieutenant (1926) and High Treason (1929). He talks about working conditions within the 'quota quickie' section of the industry, offering memories of figures like Julius Hagen. Elvey muses interestingly on the changes in working conditions which he has observed during his extraordinarily long career in British film.

BECTU History Project - Interview No. 110

Transcription Date: [? Pilot Project]

Interview Date: 1963-10-01

Interviewer: Ralph Bond

Interviewee: Maurice Elvey

Tape 1, Side 1

Ralph Bond : This is a tape-recorded interview with Maurice Elvey, who is certainly one of the pioneers of the British film industry. Even the doyen of the British film industry. During his lifetime, Maurice has made at least 150 films. Maurice, I gather you were born in 1887, and I wonder if you can tell us something about your early days.

Maurice Elvey : I will, but I don't like to remember them very much. I try and forget, but I suppose the experiences I underwent formed me, for good or ill. I never went to school. My early life, my young life, my childhood life, was spent avoiding school board inspectors - uniformed men who came round and tried and captured you, and made you go to a local board school somewhere. Well, of course, if I was at school I couldn't work, and if I didn't work I didn't eat, so you escaped for that reason. Not because you wanted to get away from the restraint of going to school. I was actually working when I was 9 years old in the streets of London. I expect you've all heard the Flanagan and Allen song, "Underneath the Arches." Well, I know those arches; they're actually between Northumberland Avenue and Villiers Street, underneath Charing Cross, er..., railway viaduct-thing. And that is where I slept many, many, many, many times. It was damn cold, and full of fleas, but that was some shelter. The great problem, of course, was that if you did earn a few coppers - never a few shillings, that was a lot of money - if you did earn a few coppers, the problem was: did you find somewhere warm at night, or did you eat? Well, at that age, of course, you ate - when you could. Well, all these... hardships one didn't realise were hardships at the time. But I'm not sure that they weren't very good for me. I'm not sure that most people today aren't over-educated. I think life is the only real education, but, however, this is getting off the track. What would you like me to tell you?

Ralph Bond : Well, you obviously had hard times in those days. What was your first real job, apart from earning hard coppers?

Maurice Elvey : Well, my first real job - the first job I really remember - was being a page boy at the Hyde Park Hotel - which is still there. And, of course, this was wonderful. I must have been then, I suppose, in my very early 'teens. This was wonderful because of course I had about 9 meals a day - you could always cram something. And we all slept together - that is, the males - in a large dormitory at the top of the building, which, of course, meant that you were warm.

Ralph Bond : And how long did this go on? Were your ambitions higher than to be...

Maurice Elvey : Oh, I hated it! I hated the uniform. I was very rebellious, like all teenagers should be. And I couldn't bear the implied servitude which this uniform forced upon me. But, of course, it was very lucky in a way because I remember the thing that changed my whole existence was an American who left the Hyde Park Hotel in a four-wheeler - I presume to catch a train. I presume he had a wife; I don't know. I'd know his face again if he walked in this room today. I remember him with the utmost gratitude because he looked at me - I must have done an errand for him, and got back in time, or something - and he said, "You're a bright spark," or words to that effect. And I must have said, "Thank you sir," and he said, "Do you like your job?" and I said, "No sir!" and he said "You would like to get out of that uniform, rig," - or whatever he called it - and I said "oh God, yes," or words to that effect. And he said, "Alright! If I give you five English sovereigns will you throw that uniform away this afternoon and go out and get a real job?" And I said "Yes sir!" And he did, he gave me five English golden pounds. And I walked

out of the Hyde Park Hotel the moment my turn of duty was done that day, and I never looked back in the whole of my life.

Ralph Bond : What did you do with the five pounds?

Maurice Elvey : Well, that was a lot of money. You could live then for six or eight weeks on that, you know, at my age. And I took a room in the Adelphi, just off The Strand. And I remember I paid half a crown a week for it, and it had nothing in it whatever, not even a chair. And there was some water on the landing. But, it was my own, and I had a corner. And it was in the middle of theatreland, which I'd always been obsessed by - the theatre. Don't ask why, I don't know. But I was. And then, eventually, I got a job, of sorts, working a printing press - printing machine, rather - which used to print visiting cards at a shilling a hundred. And I was exhibited in the window working this machine, and I got twelve shillings a week. It was in Garrick Street - again, you see, theatreland - opposite the Garrick Club, and I used to see my great idols of the theatre, and I used to spend sixpence to go up in the "gods" and applaud. George Alexander, Lewis Waller: all these people who meant everything in my life at that impressionable age. And I got twelve-and-six a week for that. And one lunchtime - I mean, you've asked for this, so you might as well have it! - one lunchtime I went out and I walked past the stage door of what is now the Strand theatre; it was then called the Waldorf theatre, next to the Waldorf Hotel. And I saw a bunch of people - there were no queues in those days - and I was curious, and a man said "They are engaging 'supers' for a new play, a new production," - it turned out to be Hamlet, incidentally. And I said, "What is a 'super?'" He said, "Well, you walk on," as it was called then - we call them extras now. You were a walking-on gentleman - and you got a guinea a week, mark you! And you only worked six nights and two matinees: this was a miracle compared to twelve and sixpence for umpteen hours trundling away at some filthy machine! So I never went back to that. And I remember I had to pay the super-master half a crown out of my weekly wages which was no more than his due, I think, because he was acting as an agent. And then, of course, I had the most extraordinary experiences for a young lad at that age of listening to Shakespeare every night.

Ralph Bond : So, that's how you started in the theatre, in walk-on parts?

Maurice Elvey : That's how I started in the theatre, and I determined never to leave it! Then the next job I got when that came to an end was I went to an agent in Regent Street - one of those large fur-collared gentlemen of the old school, with a curly top hat. His name, believe it or not, was Mr. Kelsom-Truman - and he looked it! He sent me off to Nottingham to be a chorus boy in a pantomime. He asked me if I could sing. Of course, I said "Yes," and I'd never sung a note! And there I went up, and I got two pounds a week. And being an ambitious sort of lad - I must have been - I understudied the Demon Rat - ha ha - and eventually became assistant stage manager. I remember the first lines I ever spoke on the stage. I had to go on for my understudy [sic] one night - you see, these are the things you never forget; all the intermediate years fall away from you, but these things last - and I said my first lines. The Demon Rat was thrown up through a pit with green light underneath: you know, the pantomime of Dick Whittington. And he says - he still does in some old-fashioned pantomimes - "the sea, the sea, the open sea,// It may be stormy, but -// It always must be open,// For there is no door to shut!" And this I said with due solemnity.

Ralph Bond : Maurice, I'm going to break in on your theatrical reminiscences for a moment - we'll come back to them - but I believe 'round about this time you became very interested in the old Clarion movement, and met a lot of the early socialists. Is that so?

Maurice Elvey : Yes. Well, of course, my stage background - well, it wasn't a background - my stage occupation directly lead to this, because I soon determined that to be an actor was far too precarious, and, besides, I was too fond of bossing other people around to go on for too long doing what I was told by other people. There weren't any producers in those days, you know, but, still, there were people to tell you what to do: they were known as stage managers. But this lead me to put on... I found a benefactor, a man called Pennett-Elkington, who enabled me to form a thing called the Adelphi Play Society, which is all to do with the background I'm coming to - trade unions, etc. And Elkington... we took the little theatre which was in the Adelphi, a very famous little theatre. And, of course, you could hire it then for two pounds a performance, and it was a charming theatre. I was very avant-garde, you see. I was the sort of - what shall I say - the Peter Brook of my period! I produced plays by Chekov, Strindberg, Ibsen and all the... what were then the new dramatists of the day. Inevitably, this brought me into contact with the best sort of minds of the day. Believe it or not, it brought me into contact with H.G. Wells: the greatest influence in my whole life. It also brought me into contact - through Wells - with the Sidney Webbs, with the great man Bernard Shaw himself - who, at that time, was running a curious organisation called the New Reform Club. This cost you, I think, five shillings a year, but really it was a trap to catch the eager young minds like mine, and indoctrinate them into Fabian socialism. Thank God! Because this is what happened to me. And Shaw apparently thought I had something in me. As a matter of fact, I must have had; I wasn't conscious of it at the time - I took all these things for granted. Because he prevailed upon Granville Barker - probably the greatest producer the English theatre's ever known - he prevailed upon Granville Barker to send me to America to produce Bernard Shaw plays actually in big Broadway theatres. This was remarkable! Now you see what I had always known was that the underdog - underprivileged, call it what you like - had a damned awful time. You could get out of it. I did, but then that was because I think I had some peculiar stamina - mentally, not physically. And I determined, and realised, at that time that the new thing called Trade Unionism was the only way out for people like me - I was quite selfish about it - for what is known as the worker. And this indeed was the case. Now that led me to meet all sorts of people, great men like Robert Latchford. There was a man! The old type trades unionist and Labour man who really knew, and fought for what he believed to be right. I even went into Fleet Street. I'll never forget... I've still got the cuttings of these things and I'm very proud of them; I've kept nothing, as I say of the intervening years at all. I've got the front page of the Clarion, that remarkable newspaper, in which I share the front page of the Clarion for, oh I think for about six weeks, once a week, with Neil Lyons and Robert Latchford, and I was only a kid. This is extraordinary!

Ralph Bond : Tell me a little more about America, Maurice. You went out there to stage George Bernard Shaw's plays?

Maurice Elvey : Yes, I think you might find this interesting. The first play we were going to produce - or I was going to produce - for Mr. Barker (I still think of him in those terms) was Bernard Shaw's 'Fanny's First Play' - a forgotten play, but an excellent play. We rehearsed this with an English company - or, rather, I rehearsed it, because Mr. Barker, of course, stayed in

London - aboard the ship The Masabre [?], I remember it was. It took the best part of a fortnight to get to New York! We rehearsed it when we weren't sick, then we rehearsed it again for a week when we got to New York. And it came to the dress rehearsal on the Wednesday - we were going to open at the 39th Street theatre, just off Broadway, on the Thursday night. Now, this play was put on by the Schubert brothers, one of the great managements of that period. Lee Schubert was a very far-seeing and artistic man, and he'd seen this play in London, and wanted to stage it on Broadway. But his brother Jake Schubert is probably the toughest American [adopts American accent] I have ever met. Except, possibly, for a tougher man called Mr. Brady who was their third partner.

Ralph Bond : Was this "Diamond" Jim Brady?

Maurice Elvey : No, it wasn't "Diamond" Jim Brady; this was another partner, but the type was the same. I hated 'em. But, however, when the dress rehearsal was finished, naturally I came down through the pass door into the auditorium where they had been sitting through it - this was the Wednesday evening. I said "Well, gentlemen, any comments?" They said "Yeah! Ya' can't open with that like it is!" It's got a prologue and an epilogue in which the English critics come on, and they discuss the play - the author of which remained anonymous in Bernard Shaw's play. They said "Ya can't do that. Now we must rewrite this and put in the famous American critics of the day, and meanwhile we'll bring in a curtain raiser from out of town so that the evening is not too short for the audience who've paid their money!" I said, "I'm sorry gentlemen. My instructions are..." and I produced my letter written in Bernard Shaw's own handwriting - I had this for many years afterwards - saying that not one comma must be changed. And they said, "OK, ya' don't open on Thursday night." So I said, "Thank you very much gentlemen," and left the theatre. I didn't dare tell the company; my world was at an end. This was the end of me. I remember very well - this was the first time I had ever been really drunk - I wandered round the New York of those days on my own and I finished up God knows where, but they found me. I had been round, it appears, to their transport office in their great big office building - in the Knickerbocker building, round the corner on Broadway - Schuberts', and told their transport manager to find transport back to England for the whole of this English company on the Saturday - this was the Wednesday night. Well, of course, it was the best thing I could do: I'd called their bluff, without meaning it. And, of course, they found me, and, of course, we opened on the Thursday in the original version. And, believe it or not, it ran sixteen months!

Ralph Bond : Sixteen months? That's a remarkable achievement Maurice!

Maurice Elvey : Well, Bernard Shaw was Bernard Shaw.

Ralph Bond : Quite! I believe that while you were in America you saw your first moving picture. Is that right?

Maurice Elvey : Yes. This was not on that occasion, because I went to America again. I went to America again in 1912, where I was acting again for Julia Neilson and Fred Terry, and they had a very famous play called 'Sweet Nell of Old Drury' which they decided to take to America. They... this had been running for years in England, you know, 'Sweet Nell of Old Drury' - damn good entertainment! On Broadway it ran precisely two weeks: they hated it! Then, while I was

there, there were some things called moving pictures, and I determined to go and see one. Well, of course, the one thing that has seen me through most of my tribulations and mental troubles - and God knows I've had a few - was my love and appreciation of music. This had been ingrained in me for years and years and years. I went to see a film of Wagner's 'Flying Dutchman'. It must have lasted all of four minutes. And this was in a converted shop, and the score of the 'Flying Dutchman', believe it or not, was played by someone on one piano! But, however - it was a silent picture, of course - I did see a most extraordinary thing for those days. Of course, now, we know it's only an ordinary double-exposure, but there really was a ghost ship upon a real ocean, and I was that kind of young man, I determined that the theatre was much too circumscribed and old-fashioned for me. And I determined to go into the moving picture business. I came back to London, with the Fred Terry company, and went into the picture business. ***

Ralph Bond : And what, do you remember, was your first film?

Maurice Elvey : Oh well! First of all, it had to be something which you could sell. It was more difficult in those days than it is now because you had to produce the most utter rubbish, because it was that kind of a public. It was still in the very, very early, novelettish stage - I'm talking about 1912. It was not until Griffiths [sic] came along and lifted it into the realms of something remarkable, an art in itself. I made 'Maria Marten', or 'The Murder in the Red Barn'. Now the reason for that was that this was a most popular melodrama of the period, and it was made for some people called er... - oh, dear, oh dear - oh, the Motograph company! They had a building in St. Martins Lane, Upper St. Martins Lane. Who they were, how I came into contact with them, I haven't the slightest idea, but I did. And I wanted to make it because, of course, The 'Murder in the Red Barn' really did happen. It's all in the [?] Calendar, and it took place in a village in Polstead in Suffolk, where, at that time, the original barn - red because of the colour of the thatch - and the cottage of the murdered girl, Maria Marten, actually still existed. So I made what was to become... I made the first of what was to become the typically English movie: the picture with actors, but founded upon a documentary story, with a real background. So I went and made that, and it was quite a big success.

Ralph Bond : You made it on the location I believe?

Maurice Elvey : Made it on location. Must have cost... oh, a lot of money, I should think £250. I remember my leading man got five shillings a day.

Ralph Bond : Well, we'd better not remind Equity of that! At this stage, Maurice, I'm going to mention, for the record, some of the many many films you made during the period we're talking about: 'Florence Nightingale', 'The Life of Nelson', 'The Hound of the Baskervilles', 'When Knights Were Bold', 'Mademoiselle from Armenti£res', 'Quinneys', 'The School for Scandal', 'The Water Gipsies', 'The Lost Chord', 'The Wandering Jew', 'The Flag Lieutenant', and 'Hindle Wakes'. Do the mention of any of these titles revive memories?

Maurice Elvey : All of them! Ha ha, all of them! What was the first one?

Ralph Bond : 'Florence Nightingale'.

Maurice Elvey : 'Florence Nightingale' and 'The Life of Nelson', of course, were, at their time, landmarks. They... following on, you see, my desire to make films with real backgrounds, Nelson was actually made aboard the Victory. The Admiralty let me have - even during wartime - the Admiralty let me work on the Victory, actually in the cockpit. That's the most moving thing I've ever done, was to reproduce the death of Nelson. This was something that frightened me - I'd never do such a thing again. They did it because they thought it was good for naval recruiting. But 'The Life of Florence Nightingale', that again was a documentary, you see. Now, they used to let me do this type of film - I'm talking about the people who sold them, there were no big distributors then. They were all sold... what you did, you made a film, or some small company made a film - you didn't have to have much money, I mean, you never spent, well, just a few thousand pounds; never ten, such sums were unheard of. But that was largely, of course, because the working people, the technicians and people, got practically damn all. And that was why they were cheap, and for no other reason.

Ralph Bond : And the actors too, presumably?

Maurice Elvey : Oh, the actors got nothing at all - unless they became a star, which [sic] they might possibly reach the large sum of about fifty pounds a week. But for how long? A few weeks? Three weeks at most. Anyway, I was talking about... what was I talking about?

Ralph Bond : Well, you were talking about the type of film you were making...

Maurice Elvey : Oh, yes. Then, you see, in order to be allowed to make this documentary type of film - which were invariably successful, oddly enough - I had to make other films in between, which the filmmakers - as I say, there were no distributors - knew they could sell to the local cinemas up and down the country. Things like 'Her Luck in London', 'A Lancashire Lass', things like that, you know. They were real melodramas: the theatre in those days was very, very primitive outside the West End of London and one or two repertory companies like Miss Horniman. You know, that leads me to the thought of one of the films I enjoyed making more than any other - I made it twice actually, once during the first war, and once a little while afterwards. That is the famous - I still think it's the best - English play of the period, called 'Hindle Wakes'. Again, documentary, you see: I went into the mills, into the streets of Manchester and did it. But erm... what was another one you were asking me about?

Ralph Bond : 'Water Gipsies'?

Maurice Elvey : 'The Water Gipsies'? Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear, I don't want to be reminded of that! The only good thing that came out of 'The Water Gipsies' was it made me a friend - and I still am a friend - of dear Alan Herbert. However, that was made - very unfortunately made - in an unfortunate, er... collaboration I had with Basil Dean. For some reason or other we did not get on. I'm sorry to say that I thought he knew nothing about filmmaking, and he thought I knew nothing about acting. We were both wrong, of course. And I walked out of that film halfway through and said, "well you'd better do it yourself!"

Ralph Bond : You were always a bit of a freelancer, weren't you Maurice? You never really tied yourself up...?

Maurice Elvey : No, the only time I tied myself up, of course, was a little later when I did so much work for those charming people the Bromhead brothers. Oh, marvellous people! And that led me into contact with Victor Saville, who was an exhibitor in Birmingham. He came down to London to get into the film business on the financial side. And, of course, the combination of Victor looking after me and helping me with the creative side of the stories, but otherwise letting me alone, was quite remarkable: we made some extraordinary films. The first war film, 'Mademoiselle from Armenti&#65533;res' - d'you know, this was really remarkable. And then of course it was tragic for me when Victor went off and decided to become a film director on his own.

Ralph Bond : Yes, and a very successful one,

Maurice Elvey : Oh, very successful, yes.

Ralph Bond : But being freelance presumably you felt was better from your point of view in giving you a little more freedom of choice of subjects and methods of making the films?

Maurice Elvey : I don't think that I was as conscious as that. I don't think... I think I found that I could make more films if I just flitted from office to office, as it were. I don't know.

Ralph Bond : How long did it take to make a film in those days?

Maurice Elvey : Oh, the average in those days was two weeks to four weeks. I remember 'Mademoiselle from Armenti&#65533;res' because we made that at Wey Hill, on the plain, and we employed quite a large proportion of the British army! I remember that must have taken us all of six weeks.

Ralph Bond : And that was a long time was it?

Maurice Elvey : That was a long time, yes. Of course, I still think, you know, films take too long. It's all, I think... it's all because the directors - and I suppose the producers too - they don't know what they really want. I think everybody, without destroying freedom of expression - a stupid phrase; I don't know what it means - without destroying freedom to express their ego, I think they should know quite well what they are going to do, approximately, at eleven o'clock next Thursday week.

Ralph Bond : You always prepare your...?

Maurice Elvey : Oh, always fully, as, indeed, you must have known: we worked together.

Ralph Bond : Oh, yes, we've worked together.

Maurice Elvey : I mean, I think this perhaps prevents one from making a work of genius, but I just wonder how far works of genius are compatible with filmmaking. I don't know.

Ralph Bond : Maurice, you've told us how long it took to make a film in those days, compared with how long it takes to make a film nowadays. What were working conditions like for the people who made the films?

Maurice Elvey : Shocking! Absolutely terrible! With the exception of great men like C.M. Woolf, and the Bromheads, to whom I've referred, most films were financed by people who really had other businesses; they weren't people in the entertainment world. The great Mr. Lasky, you see, of America was I think once a fur merchant wasn't he, and all that sort of thing? They regarded them as something which could be canned and put in a tin and sold in that form. It might just as well have been soup or potted meat, you see! Well, of course, the consequence was - and don't forget, during this period, I'm coming now round about the '20s, the first half of the '20s anyway...Yes, no: the '20s as a whole. There was a tremendous deal of unemployment. And there were no unions - at least, there were unions but not in the film business. Now, the consequence was, you see, that the technicians and the actors had to work, if necessary, all night. A man would hire a studio and, of course, the more footage that could be turned out in that studio in the 24 hours, the cheaper it was for him. Now, the consequence was, of course, as I say, that overtime didn't exist; overtime did exist, but I mean you weren't paid for it. Certain unions - I think the Electricians' Union was really powerful at that time - the unions that were not specifically concerned with the film industry only, they had better working conditions and got overtime, and we were always very envious of this. That is why I was very interested in the early days of ACT, because I realised that it was essential: conditions were dreadful. I mean, people had to get to the studios as best they could; there was no taking them home by bus or charabancs, or anything like that. They just... if they were working late and transport had gone from the particular district - and studios were always in outlying districts like Walthamstow and St. Margarets, you know - they just slept in the studio somewhere. They usually slept on a couch on the set, or something. I remember... talking of the St. Margarets studio, this was run for a long time by an extraordinary figure in the film business called Julius Hagen. Hagen, unfortunately, overreached himself, and made too many cheap films. And in the end this caught up with him because he went bankrupt, and all that sort of thing. But, Julius was a most remarkable man. He let one make strange films - on condition you made them cheaply enough. He was very fond, of course, of working, if necessary - if we would, rather - 24 hours a day. He didn't care. So, I got tired of this, and fed up. I thought it was all wrong. By that time I was able to write my own ticket, and what I wanted in the way of conditions for myself was seen to quickly. So I said, "look, I am not going to let these people work these ridiculous hours, unless they get a square meal in their bellies." And Julius saw the point of this and with his nice wife - they had a big kitchen downstairs, in an old house next to St. Margarets studio - and his cook, who used to come down from London, used to go in in the afternoon and cook enormous joints of pork and beef. And then 'round about seven o'clock everybody was given an enormous free meal with Julius and myself carving away like mad, ha ha! But, however, these conditions were very bad.

Ralph Bond : There was no such thing, for instance, as holidays with pay, or payment during sickness?

Maurice Elvey : Oh - unheard of! Such things didn't exist. People were only employed not from picture to picture but from day to day. I mean, your cameraman - there were no lighting men in

those days; the cameraman did the lighting - your cameraman would be, probably, on a day to day rate; certainly not more than a weekly rate.

Ralph Bond : So, you were very pleased indeed when the technicians union, the ACT, got started, and I believe you were one of its very earliest members?

Maurice Elvey : Oh, yes, yes, yes. I think it arose really... a man called Ridgeway, was it?

Ralph Bond : Phillip Ridgeway?

Maurice Elvey : No, oh dear, what was his name? A director, film director. Oh God, I'll forget my own name next. Anyway, there were two or three of us who got very annoyed because the people who owned the films and financed them used to take them and hack them about, and that sort of thing, and the directors of the period got together... oh yes, Herbert Wilcox, all sorts of us, good heavens above, yes! And we got together and formed a directors' association, which claimed the right to, at any rate, edit the first cut of our own pictures. Out of this, the Association of Cinematograph Technicians derived, and I supported it for all I was worth, and I was one of the people who insisted upon being a member, and I used to use the words ACT after my name, and all that sort of thing, which used to make me very unpopular with most of the employers. But, I was sufficiently in demand not to care a damn, and I didn't, and still don't.

Ralph Bond : Very good Maurice. All the films we've mentioned so far were silent films. What was your reaction when sound came in?

Maurice Elvey : Oh, I was greatly relieved. You see my early training was, as you know, the theatre. So that one realised, of course, the limitations of the silent film were tremendous. I mean, for instance, how many variations are there in mime of boy meeting girl and saying I love you. We tried soft focus, out-of-focus, we tried everything. And we really were getting desperate. Sound did not come in because the public wanted it, it came in because the filmmakers decided that this was a new way of telling stories. I'll give you a case in point. One of the most successful films I ever made - I'm very proud of it still - was 'The Flag Lieutenant'. It starred a charming chap called Henry Edwards, if you remember. But this was a most remarkably successful film. Again, very largely documentary: it was made... a tremendous amount of it was made aboard real ships; in fact the Admiralty gave me two cruisers and a destroyer to play with in Weymouth bay! There I missed sound very much, and I did try the most impertinent thing, I think, that was ever done as a gimmick. At the end of the film when all has come right, and virtue is triumphant - that was the sort of films the public liked in those days, in fact I rather wish they still did, but however - the crew of the cruiser - it was called the Tiger - the crew of the Tiger dressed ship. You know, this is a most remarkable sight, with all the flags and the bunting and the whole of the crew lining the decks and the upper decks and the yard arm and everything else. And the marine band plays "God Save the King" - there was a king then. Well, I determined that this should be the final sequence in my film, and we synchronised this cutting of a silent picture very carefully, very carefully indeed to the actual tempo of "God Save the King." And orchestras in cinemas were instructed to play it at that tempo precisely, which they did. Now, the result was, you see, that this being the climax of my film, the whole audience had to stand up. And you know as well as I do, when an audience has stood up and been stirred

by something - particularly the national anthem in those days - they invariably react with a great round of applause, which is as much for themselves as it is for what they've just seen. In fact, in many cases they sang it. Well, now, an extraordinary thing happened. This film was the first Royal Command Performance ever given of any film. It was put on by the Davises, who ran that huge theatre at Croydon, and built the great big Shepherd's Bush place. They had a theatre then called the Marble Arch Pavilion - charming theatre; it was a real "class" theatre, as we used to call it. They put on a charity performance. I don't know what the charity was for, but I know that the King and Queen actually came to see this film and were actually sitting in the theatre when the whole audience had to stand up for "God Save the King." As it did, of course, this was very, very impressive. Now, you see, had sound been invented that would have been easy, but it hadn't been invented then. Actually, the first sound picture was of course 'The Singing Fool', I think - I'm sure it was. I remember going to see that at the huge what's-a-name, Marble Arch, you know, and this was most impressive. Well, of course, it was the end of the silent film - not, as I say because the public demanded sound, but because it was a new gimmick which the theatre proprietors could sell. I was in the middle of making what I consider to be one of my best pictures then: a silent picture called High Treason. In the middle of it sound came in, so we had to turn to, somehow or other, and adapt our equipment to taking sound. With the sound camera we had to put the ordinary silent camera in a booth and wheel it round the studio on little casters. We did have a microphone, and the last half of that picture did have spoken sequences and acting in it. Ours was rather a complicated picture, because we had television... all sorts of things in advance of its period. Unfortunately, we were a long time editing, cutting and arranging, doing all sorts of things, and my rival at that time - and very good friend - was Alfred Hitchcock. Hitch - God bless him - he got out first, with the first English sound picture: the famous production of 'Blackmail'. A very interesting thing about my picture was... looking back, I think I've told you enough to try and convey that I've always been interested in something a little more than mere entertainment. Although I think that is primarily what we should give people - I don't think they want to be preached at - this picture, 'High Treason', was a remarkable thing. It was made in 1927, I think, or somewhere round about then, or '28...

Ralph Bond : '28 Probably...

Maurice Elvey : '28 was it? Yes. It foretold the world as I saw it of 1940, which was the great world conflict which was being... boiling up rather, between the East and the West - vague terms in those days. Now, what was remarkable about it was that it envisages a League of Peace, which was subscribed to... not subscribed to, because you didn't have to subscribe... In all the countries of the world, the ordinary people had refused to fight, any more, each other. Now this was a remarkable thing.

Ralph Bond : Indeed!

Maurice Elvey : I don't think it did any good, but of course that was the feeling of the country then. And the feeling of America: they'd had enough of the First World War, this holocaust. It wasn't until we had to fight again - because we didn't want to, I don't think; I didn't... But this was a remarkable picture, and a remarkable forecast of what was likely to happen, and I'm still very proud of it. Unfortunately, the National Film Archive cannot find a copy: it doesn't exist.

Ralph Bond : What a shame.

Maurice Elvey : It's gone. Absolutely gone.

Ralph Bond : So many of the really fine films of the early days seem to have disappeared.

Maurice Elvey : Yes, there's plenty of them still existing, though. But that one particularly - that one and another silent film I made with Victor Saville - bless him - was... it was called 'Roses of Picardy', but it's probably the best war film ever made. It was founded on Mottram's immortal trilogy of the First World War called 'Spanish Farm'. I'd just like to mention that as my favourite film.

Ralph Bond : Thank you. Maurice, one final question before we conclude this session: what major changes of importance do you think you have seen in all your long career - changes of importance to this industry?

Maurice Elvey : Yes, well, of course, the introduction of sound, the introduction of colour, widescreen, all that sort of thing, yes. [Pause] I think the major change of importance to the industry - using the word industry in its broad sense - is, of course, the entire revision and alteration of the system of distribution. You see, in the early days - in fact I think one could say that right up to the... this last war - you made a film and there were very few circuits of big cinema chains of theatres [sic]. There were circuits, but they were fairly small. You made a film, and it was sent out in a tin, and travellers - glib, smooth-tongued travellers - used to take out these tins under their arm, and sell it to the proprietors of fleapits. Or, on the other hand, you gave a trade show, followed by a banquet. They really were trade shows, to which only members of the trade were invited; the public was rigidly excluded. You showed it to members of the trade and then they would afterwards go to the people who owned the film - in other words the people who'd financed it - and they would bid for what were known as territorial rights. That is to say, exclusive rights to show it in Lancashire, Wales, Scotland, and so on, and so forth. Well, of course, this made for great competition. But also it made for quick turnover. You could sell it within a few weeks of having made it, and it would be showing somewhere in Yorkshire, and you'd be making some money. You did not take the money from the theatres according to the bookings. You took a lump sum - almost invariably from the person who'd bought the territorial rights. Now, you see, today we are in the hands of the big circuits, the two big circuits - there are no others. This is a very, very bad thing. You can make a picture today, and it can be a work of genius. It can also be a work that the public would pay a lot of money to go and see. But unless it's been made as part of the routine arrangements - which, you know better than I do what this means - the distributors, the renters, as they're called, and the theatres are all in cahoots together, and unless they have had to do the financing of the picture - indeed, generally unless it's been made in one of their studios, and you've probably employed some of their stars - you stand a very poor chance of it being seen at all, except in some little neighbourhood hall.

Ralph Bond : That's true; and even then you may have to wait anything from 12 to 18 months before you can start getting any of your production costs back at all.

Maurice Elvey : Well, I should say that today it is safe to say that you don't get your production costs back, or any of it back, under two years, and I should think it takes you four years to recover what the negative has cost you. Which is slightly exaggerated, but not much.

Ralph Bond : No, no: you haven't exaggerated very much. I think this is a very true appreciation of what goes on at the present time. It seems to me - I don't know if you would agree with me - that it makes life very much more difficult for people such as yourself - the freelance producer, the independent producer - and something really needs to be done about it.

Maurice Elvey : Yes, yes. Well, I don't see what you can do. You see, this is the age of big corporations isn't it, in every business? I don't know what you can do about it. Whether a government-controlled circuit - such as I've always hoped would happen - would make any difference, I don't know. I think it would. Of course, the trouble really with this long-term waiting for your costs to come back from the public - which is what it amounts to - is that it costs you a lot of money in interest. In fact, I have said on many occasions - I've been derided but I'm damn sure I'm right - that if you're going to spend £100,000, which, for some reason, is normal today, on a picture, it's going to cost you £40,000 to borrow and pay for the £60,000 you actually use and is seen on the screen.

Ralph Bond : Thank you very much indeed Maurice. I'm very much obliged to you.

Maurice Elvey : Not at all!