BEHP Interview No 145. Sydney Newman

Sensitivity warning: Sydney Newman uses fairly robust language and expresses some opinions that might seem harsh or out of tune with more recent sensitivities. DS 2023.

Because Sydney sometimes thinks more quickly than he speaks there are times when sentences appear unfinished as a fresh train of thought takes over. The background murmurs of agreement or encouragement from the interviewers have mostly been ignored.

[NB: Around page 13 there are some sections where there is a problem with the recording. These are noted in the text. DS]

Alan Lawson 0:00

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Interviewer Norman Swallow (NS) with Alan Lawson (AL), recorded on the 19th of June 1990.

Side One

NS: Sydney where were you born? And when?

Sydney Newman 0:49

Well as the saying goes to quote an old joke, I was born in bed with a naked woman, I hope to die the same way. [Laughter] I was born in Toronto on April Fool's Day 1917, Toronto, Canada 1917. And so now 73 years of age.

AL: And education?

SN: Hardly any. I did not get to primary grade. I did not go to highschool, I did not go to university. Thing was that when I was about seven or eight years of age, I was at home and I had the mumps. And I found a piece of paper, did a drawing of a cheap statuette of Jackie Coogan as *The Kid* and I did a drawing of it and my sister thought I was a genius. And so it fell on my head, I wanted to be an artist. And I realised I could get into a special art course at a technical college without having my entrance into the highschool. What do you call highschool in England, whatever. You know what I mean?

AL: It's a grammar school.

SN: So, so I went to this school and I became an artist. And I wanted to be a fine painter. But I couldn't make any living: couldn't because my parents were extremely poor. My parents were European born, so I was a first generation Canadian born. And so I then became a graphic artist. And to keep alive I did stage sets for local left-wing theatre. I did window displays, I did posters for foreign films, which didn't have any advertising materials in English. So I got an introduced to the works of Eisenstein and Pudovkin, and films like Churpia [?] which you guys are old enough to remember. And so I did posters, these were lithograph posters, and I used to draw them as they couldn't afford to do them as photo- lith. [Photolithography] I had to draw them right on these plates. And doing that -and also as a child at primary school, the Art Gallery of Toronto had special classes on Saturday morning for talented children who were plucked out of primary school and allowed to go each Saturday morning, I was one of the lucky ones. And I lived in a very poor district in Toronto, but fortunately, it was right near the major art gallery. So I was, I went to it, and then it was run by a man called Arthur Lismer, who was a very famous Canadian painter of the group called the Group of Seven. And when I went to art – er, when I went to taking art and about 15 years old, when I was about 15. I used to work at the art gallery helping the children and cleaning pots of paint and stuff like that. And I became very interested in photography. And I was be- I became the official photographer of the group of the children's art classes. And Lismer one day said to me, he said, “Why don't you make a movie?” And I said, “Well, I've never made a movie.” He said, “Well you take photographs, don't you?” I said the same thing. I said, “But I don't have a camera,” trying to get out of it, terrified. And he said “I'll get you a camera.” “Okay,” I said “okay.” So he got me a Bolex with a turret mount with these lenses poking out. Am I going on too long with this?

AL: No, no.

SN: And, and I made a movie. And I edited it on one of those hand cranked viewer, viewer jobs. And just absolutely found it the most thrilling thing in the world: editing film. It was pure magic. And that went to my head. I did this when I was about 16 or 17. And I fell in love with it. And I decided that I wanted to become a cinematographer. So, in 1938, I went to Hollywood. And I went there with a letter to the Cinematographers Union from Aneas [?] Favell, Union head, who was head of the Artists Union in Toronto. I also went with a letter to the distributors of Russian films in the United States and I also had a letter to Russell Birdwell, who you may recall was the most terrific promoter in

Hollywood. And he was the one who had set the whole campaign for *Gone with The Wind,*

Russell Birdwell, I said, that was the name. And I went down there with no money at all, I went by bus. And the union was [for] signing me up. And then they discovered that I was not transferring from the New York Local, [union branch DS] which they were deprecating. This is interesting, because it's the Hollywood Local said, they couldn't take me because I was not affiliated to the New York local, which they deprecated and thought down, less of. And then told me it would cost me $500 to join the union. Because it was pretty much a closed shop. And of course, I didn't have that money. And then I could never get to- got to meet Russell Birdwell, who was one of my best connections. And I went to the Soviets, to try to get work doing posters, and I ended up nearly being taken as a courier by them. And that's a long story, which I won't go into detail and saying, God, I didn't get caught up in it. And then I had a friend working at Disney's, and he- and they were hiring people by the hundreds at the time, they had just come to - *Snow White* was a terrific success. And they were doing *Bambi.* They were doing *Bambi* and planning whatever was around at that time, and I took the test, and they offered me a fantastic job as an animator. And which they were going to start me off at $18 a week, and within three years, I'd be earning $350 a week. $18 a week, then I might say was a fabulous amount of money. But of course, they knew I was a Canadian, they said, I'd have to get a work permit in the United States. And I couldn't get one.

And I then wrote them and told them that and they thought they'd give me another test to see whether I had talents which no other American possessed, which would be the only way I could get in the United States. And I worked, the test was I had to design and do a storyboard for four 10-minute cartoons. One of *Donald Duck* one - three of them had to be based on Disney characters. And one I had to invent my own character. And I did over a period of three months, I did something like 500 drawings. These are key drawings in pencil, as well as about 15 in colour. And I got a sweet letter back, saying that they couldn’t, they thought I was wonderful, but they could hardly claim - and they said ‘Don't feel bad about it. But you're only 21 years of age. So don't feel bad that your talents can't be duplicated.’ The United States said however, if the original deal goes through this, if you can get in the United States legally, the original offer still holds. Anyway, I won't go into a whole long thing because - I will - this is interesting, it’s a reflection of my character, I guess. My brother was a bellhop, a bellboy in the largest hotel in Toronto, the Royal York Hotel,

you know, bellboys or porters are terrific. They can get anything. So I went to him and I said, “Can you help me?” He said, “Yeah.” I said, “There's a, an American consul in Windsor [Ontario]. Maybe I better not mentioned the town. There's an American consul, who’d have you pad [cross DS] his palm with $700? No, the rule was that 10,000 people, Canadians could enter the United States without any qualification every year, and 10,000 Americans can enter Canada without any qualification. And when I learned about this, I asked the American Consulate in Toronto, who put my name down on that list. And I said, “By the way, how many are there on the list already?” He said 50,000”.

[laughter] So that ruled me out on that. So my brother figured he could pad the palm of this unknown consul in the smaller town in Canada and I then up to that point, I had been very choosy with what graphic artwork commercial artwork I’d do, but I now did everything. And believe it or not, within about two months, I was earning about $100 a week. I can claim at that time around 1938-39. I was one of the highest paid graphic artists in Canada. And so I gathered together $700 in about three, four months, I gave the money to my brother. And then, like you can see it in large capitals on the screen, THEN CAME THE WAR. This is in the end of August in 1939. And suddenly a lot of my friends about my age disappeared from Canada. And their parents had shipped them off to the United States believing there's going to be instant conscription. And I figured if I go to the United States, my brother goes ahead, people are gonna think I'm bloody coward. So I got in touch with my brother. I said, “Wilfred stop the deal” Wilfred said, “Sydney as matter of fact, I haven't given the money to the guy yet, because he's been on holiday.” So I got the $700 back, and then I kept on working. And then one day, I went to the cinema. And there was a thing called *Canada Carries On* and it was a 20-minute short about Canada. Like I saw it over again and over again, and read the credits. And saw it was made in Ottawa. And that the writer of it was a former art critic I knew who had in fact, he'd written an article, I was a post script and in one of his articles he's written about me as a painter. And so I wrote him: his name was Graham McInnes. I wrote him in Ottawa. And he told me, … I said “I want to make films. I didn't know they were made in Canada.” He said, “There's a man here called John Grierson, who's got the National Film Board of Canada, and come on up, at least … write them and get a job.” And then he said, “as a matter of fact, why don't you come up?” So I took my first aeroplane flight in my life in 1939, no its 1940, forgive me, and I flew up to Ottawa, and I met Grierson with, I had a whole portfolio of my photographs, he looked at the

photographs. He said “Very arty, very arty, very arty, very honest. Not bad laddie, very arty, you know, [he’s] a scotch [Scottish]. And. And then he said, “Well,” he said, “I can't give you a job now.” He said, “We're not hiring anybody.” But he said, “Would you like to do some war posters which will be turned into slides to run in the cinemas?” So I did some graphic artwork for the National Film Board. And then next summer, on July the first as a matter of fact, on July the 30th, or whatever. On June the third, I got a telegram, ‘job open for you at NFB come immediately.’ And I turned up on July the first.

NS: 1940

SN: 1941 forty-one, forty-one And, and, of course, I didn't know and Grierson of course, was a fabulous character because he- what he had done, he had working there the Englishman Stuart Legg, names you may know, and Arth- Stuart Legg and Raymond Spottiswoode and a cameraman called JD Davidson and Stanley Hawes. These are all part of Grierson's old documentary mob, and they were the only ones who knew how to make films. There were no Canadians there, who know fuck all. There were some there were ahead of me, and they had had six months training under these guys. And then I've turned up and I turned up, you see. I won't go into that history. But the point is that it's all in what's his name's book, not Rotha, but [Henry] Forsyth Hardy's book, I won't go into that detail. So I started as a splicer boy, and the urgencies of the war, really within, in six months-time, I was, actually I directed the Prime Minister of Canada in a film, William Lyon Mackenzie King. And wrote it and edited it and then I was given a job to do for nine months, I did news clips, little three-minute items that were inserted into the American newsreels, the Canadian editions thereof. And I had to write them, shoot them, edit them, record them, every one a week, I did this for nine months non-stop, by which at the end of which, of course, there wasn't anything about film I really didn't know that is, that was longer than three minutes.

And then I went out as assistant to Julian Roffman, who was making war training films. And I worked – I was a one-man crew, he had us shooting … the nine ball [possibly a reference to a variant of pool, played as a race. DS] and, and I was his assistant. And so he was the producer, the director, the writer, the cameraman, the editor, and I was the assistant producer, assistant director, assistant camera and so on. And we did one on winter warfare, which was very arduous in the snow and all that and very freezing weather and I did another one on ‘*Messing’* - on food in the army. And, and then I joined the

Canada Carries On unit as a director in which Stuart Legg absolutely was monstrous and nearly destroyed me by tearing my film to pieces and putting it all together again. And it worked. Really It wasn't until years later that I really began to have an understanding that this man was - he worked like a black. I mean he is. He just worked and worked and worked. He re-edited my film [for] 36 hours non-stop. And I hated him, because he was so nasty to me. And I thought very much about these Brits among ourselves, because we didn't really particularly like - we respected them. Didn't really like them, except Stanley Hawes. We adored Stanley. I don't know whether you even knew him-

AL: Yes, I did.

SN: He was a lovely man. And, but the others we didn't particularly care for. And I figured out why these people work so hard and why was Legg so nasty. And I finally figured out, they've all felt guilty. Here they were in Canada, with loads of whisky, steaks, everything, you know, the fat of the land, while their relatives, wives, - no their wives were with them, but their relatives and friends were having the bombs and the shit kicked out of them by bombs from the sky. And they had it easy in Canada with whisky and so on. So they had to work to assuage, I suppose their sense that they should have been back there. And that's why they worked so hard. And so I've learned I learned everything from Raymond Spottiswoode, and Stuart, and Stanley Hawes. We all did. The Film Board grew, of course, from when I joined it, I was the 41st member of the staff. And by the time Grierson left in 1945, I think there must have been five or 600 of us. It was a wonderful group of marvellous different kinds of people.

I'll tell you an amusing story about Grierson, which involves me, for some reason that every six months I got a raise and Grierson had a very funny idea, the first people he hired and again, we're really artists and creative people. And after about six months, he realised that we weren't, we weren't cutting the mustard. We weren't sharp and with it. So, he decided that he had to hire a bunch of journalists to give our films immediacy. And suddenly the place was inundated with a lot of top Canadian journalists, who of course, were being paid twice as much as us. But every six months, I was getting my modest raises pretty good. And then he suddenly thought, Grierson, about half a year later, these journalists, they got no philosophy, there's no philosophy and those guys. So you had a bunch of artists like me, he had a bunch of newspaper men who had no philosophy and he said, I gotta hire guys that think: suddenly, we're inundated with a bunch of PhDs who are economists, philosophers, stuff

like that. And I was working one Sunday. And of course, these people came with the top money. They were getting about $380 a month, and I was just been raised to $160 a month. And I was working one Sunday on my Movieola editing a film and the door opened. And I heard “Newman what's wrong with your stomach?” I always whistled, and it was “whistle in your stomach.” I didn't know whether whistling in Scotland is regarded as a sin on Sunday. I don't know. “What are you doing, laddie?” Place was dead was quiet. And he’d come in to do some work. He said, “What are you doing?” And I showed him what I'm doing on my Movieola. Oh, he made some comments. And we were living in-, we are working at a dreadful old building. And I looked, “I said, you know, I'd love to shoot a real action film out there with all those roofs with people running all over those roofs.” And he said, he said, he said “Syd You're the Harry Watt of Canada.” Something like that. Then I thanked him very much for the raise. And I said, “I guess it's the last raise I got to get for a long time.” He said “What do you mean? “I said, “Well, hell,” I said, “you've just, you just hired people are getting so much money, these PhDs.” And I said, “I'll never be able to match them.” He said, “Laddie,” he said, he said “what you've got” he said, “you'll be able to hire a PhD anytime in your life.” Which was a wonderful thing to say to a kid of 20 what was I, 22, 23 at the time? And of course I was a totally uneducated guy in the formal sense.

And, and then, 1944, I was made producer of *Canada Carries On* which is what I should explain *Canada Carries On* was a series of 20-minute shorts that went in the cinemas 12 times a year. One every month and Legg had been doing them and of course when, when we looked as if we were losing the war, gonna lose the war, we were, these films were being run in 900 cinemas in Canada every month. While by 1944 [it] was pretty clear why we're gonna win the war. And the cinema owners said, “Well, fuck this government propaganda, we don't want to stock you and all that.” So the bookings were down to 190 when I took this series over. And I should mention in all fairness that the first six months there was me and a chap called Guy Glover, who were the producers, but then Guy left after six months, and I was left holding the bag as it were. And I remained the producer of *Canada Carries On,* right up until I left the Board in 1952. By which time the bookings were up to about 900. Because I gradually put a lot more and more Canadian content in, they were less International, the way Legg was doing them. And it was a lot more original shooting because originally there were made largely out of stock shots. Because we're in the early days, we had no cameraman, we had hardly any

equipment. We also actually we made stuff out of stock material. And, and then about 19, I was now becoming pretty smart. By smart I don't mean in a, in a cheap sense, but I was coming reasonably intelligent about the business. And I realised that one of the biggest problems and the fights I was having with the cinemas to take *Canada Carries On* was a big problem, was getting the films to the audiences. And then I learned that there was something called television, which was going on in New York. So I went to - now Grierson had left the Film Board –

NS: So, what year are we in now, Sydney?

SN: We are now since we're now about 1946/47. And Grierson had left of course, and Ross McLean was the government film commissioner and Ralph Foster was the deputy. And I went to these guys, and I said, "Look," I said, "I think television is a marvellous means of distribution. Because we make the films that will go into people's homes. We won't have these goddam middlemen in it, the cinema owners." Those crappy distributors and all that stuff. I might add that one of my successes, reason for success, was that I made the Columbia Pictures distributor, my friend, I actually used to listen to him. I'd run a cutting copy for him, he'd say, "Newman" he says, "Do we have to look at those fucking wheat fields again? Who gives a shit about wheat fields? Do people, people" he'd say, "Oh," he said "you love those close ups of those meshing gears with the oil squirting out." He said "Who give a damn about that?" I learned a lot from that guy. His name was Harvey Arnie. [?]

So I was convinced that I ought to go to New York and look at television as a distribution medium. And I went to New York and had discussions actually with the vice president in charge of programming at NBC. And he was very keen, because I went back to Canada and I said, "Look, we might if we offer these guys offer first refusal on all our films, they will take someone from the Film Board on a on a training basis for a year." and it ended up where I was chosen. And I went to New York, and worked at NBC for one year. And this of course, was 1949, 49/50. It was the beginning of the golden period of American television. And over that year, I spent, I put in about two weeks in the news department because I knew all about news because, I should explain, in Canada, I had become in '47, the executive producer in charge of all films for cinemas, and that included news-

NS: For the Film Board

SN: For the Film Board, that included news and that included two series: *Canada Carries On* and another series called *Eyewitness.* I was also…, which is responsible for tourist films, and I was the guy who did the populist stuff for the mass audience. All the others were doing 16-millimetre films for rural circuits and schools and stuff. And so that's why I only spent two weeks in New York on news; I spent four months in a drama department. I spent two months in light entertainment, which didn't interest me much. And I literally spent a whole year on OBs, outside broadcasts, which was always a one day stand so I even if I was following a drama, I could take one day off and do a rehearsal and do a thing and I did; the first drama I did a series as a junior, my job in all these cases just a 'hanger-onner' here, but worked on the on a series called *New York at Midnight*, or called *City at Midnight*, which was live documentaries, which went on the air at 11 o'clock at night and finished at midnight. And the first one we did involved a doctor, it was who lived, who was a rich Jewish doctor. And he was, there was a war was going on … in Palestine or something. In 1948 and this Jewish doctor was wondering whether he shouldn't give up his rich practice in New York and go and fight with the Israelis. And the drama was that he comes down to the lower east side where he was born, … to see it, what it is to be a Jew. This was an NBC programme, I mean, and, and the show called for locations in a synagogue, in an old shop where they sold religious shawls and books and things. And another, and there was a little apartment that we had, of course, with the length of the cables, we had to find these three together-

NS: 26:00

And this was live you said live?

Sydney Newman 26:04

And I went out with the director and producer and, and by God, they found- they had to change one of the locations from a little shop of one sort to another sort. And then we arrived in the morning about seven o'clock in the morning, there was police protection. This was at Rivington and Orchard Streets. I don't know if you know where that is. It's the Lower East Side, which is really the melting pot of all the Jews and foreigners and so on who used to come to New York at the turn of the century. In fact, my mother was sent there from Austria. She lived on that very street actually. When she was a little girl. And would you believe it? We actually did that show. And at nine o'clock it started to piss with rain. We're gonna go on the air at 11 o'clock. And of

course, the cables began shorting you know, the big connectors. And it was the first time in my life I saw how brilliant technicians are in getting out of trouble. We were losing cam- we had lights, big lights, next to the water running, pouring down not in hell prepared for that. And of course, it was wonderful because all the lights were illuminated or taking off the reflection on the street. But the technicians were wonderful. What [do] we do about the shorting of the cables, a guy puts up with that as well, takes out a French safe, a condom. He unhooked the connector, snipped the end off of the contraceptive condom, put it over one side, put the thing put the condom over the other and made it waterproof. And we ran out of them. And I had to run to a chemist and buy some more because we never had enough. And we did the show and it was really remarkable was the first drama documentary I was involved in television.

NS: Sorry, when you say drama documentary-

SN: It was a drama. It was an actor who pretended to be. I'm sorry, it was Doctor-

NS: So it wasn't the doctor himself. I mean,

SN: Oh no, he was dead! He was a revered hero you see in 1949 because he died in the struggle and it was whatever that war was in Israel. 1948. I guess that's when it got its independence.

NS: Yes, exactly. It was 1948.

SN: And I've worked on on six different shows that were done called *City at Midnight* one in the YMCA, we had cables going into the swimming pool into one of the rooms, a lobby and so on. And one about, we did kind of murder mystery thing of no we didn't, it was kind of a murder mystery which took place in the headquarters of a big taxi company, which is quite interesting. And, and I learned a lot about drama and I,Oh yes. And each month I'd send reports back on I would send them about eight reports. The one on OBs was about maybe 20 pages long the report on drama which is about five pages, because drama didn't interest me much. It was the OBs it was the actuality because I was still documentary minded you see. And then I returned to New York [self-corrects] to Canada and discovered the Film Board had, the film Commissioner had been fired. His name was Ross McLean, fired for harbouring communists because it was all, the McCarthy era was beginning: terrible. And, and also, Ross McLean had wanted the Film Board to take over, to run

Canada's television which was being talked about. And the government had said to McLean, “You stay out of it that's going to be done by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.” So when I came back to Canada, I was told we're not interested in television at all. We're not gonna touch it. So all our boards, it was all for naught. So I stayed at the Film Board another- until a committee was set up between the BBC-the CBC and the Film Board and I was a member of that committee. And I figured that-

NS: BBC you said.

AL [in background]: No, CBC.

SN: I meant CBC sorry. I make that mistake often: CBC. And I was part of that committee talking about how we could work together. And I figured out I said, I said to my boss, I said, “Look, if we don't, if they, if they buy one camera, that Film Board, that will, it'll mark the end of the film board sooner or later.” And I pointed out what I understood to be the situation in your days, and England. I understand that the BBC went to the COI and said, “Give us a newsreel.” And the COI - I think was called COI then - said, “No, we won't do it for you.” They regarded television as being either stupid or ridiculous or [it] wouldn't last. This was in the ‘30s. And then the BBC bought movie cameras.

And of course, it's, you know, probably the largest film industry in England at the BBC. And I had heard this, I'd learned about this, and I pointed out the threat. So what I said was “we must do the news for the CBC television.” So I have, since I was in charge of news for the Film Board, I worked out a whole schedule of, of, costs, and which I was going to present them with five 10-minute, newsreels of coverage across Canada. And it was going to cost them something like $15,000 a week.

NS: Was this on a daily basis, or weekly basis?

31.45

SN:

It will be five a week, that's meant, you know, and I said that we were I said we would give them the material, and they would top and tail it with their own on-camera. Now, would voice a story for the studio, they would top and tail or do the linking. And we had the meeting [and it] was $15,000 a week. And the reason we could do it so cheaply was because we already were spending that feeding the American newsreels with Canadian stories. And we went to this

meeting, and Ernie Bushnell [Ernest L. Bushnell] who was chairing the meeting, he was head of the, CEO of the CBC, he was general manager. He said, “Oh me and Alphonse Ouimet, who later on became the president. He was the chief engineer, but he was the one who was masterminding the whole move into television. Very nice and both interesting guys. Alphonse is a lovely guy, actually. Bushnell was an interesting guy. And ‘Bush’, who was chairing the meeting said, “Are you joking?” he said, “we can’t spend $15,000 a week” he said “our budget is for all programmes.” We’re budgeting at $400 an hour. This is 1951 that this meeting took place. And so, they- nothing came of it and then my reports as a matter of courtesy had gone to the CBC, reports I'd written from New York, and I was offered the job of going to CBC as head of OBs. And I left what had been 10 and a half marvellous years for me at the Film Board and went to the CBC. I'm leaving out an awful lot of detail obviously, as to the precise circumstances, my departure but to hell with that. You can follow through later if you want. So – god I'm talking myself silly –

NS: I’ve got something to ask you shortly but let’s go on:

SN: I went to the CBC. And we were trained for six months by a man called Rudy Bretz who was brought from New York and he'd written a book on the techniques of television, and - who wrote the Seven Lively Arts? A wonderful man, wonderful man.

N**S:** American?

SN: American, oh yes. He has his famous book called The Seven Lively Arts. The things on the tip of my tongue can't remember it the moment I hope so. And, and he gave us lots of lectures and we had experiences with all of us got behind the camera. We alternated between being a cameraman, being a sound boom operator, and being a director. And then we went on the air in September, and I did in fact, the first image that appeared on the screen was the title upside down, which I insisted that my OB titles come from the studio, which was quite revolutionary because in New York all the captions were done on the road and the wind would blow the things. I said “No, have it come from the studio.” Then they came to us. And I might [add] it was my show, was a first show on Canadian Television.

NS: It was upside down?

SN: No, no, the slide was upside down in the studio!

NS: I understand, not the show.

SN: Why, I got partly to blame for what he did with me. As a matter of fact, you know, his father was, you know the name Murray Chercover? He's the present President of CTV. And he's just retired. He was in charge of master control whatever the machine was. So, I did OBs for two years. And I did them with people like Marshall McLuhan. I did all the big, I did hockey games. I did *It's Hockey Night in Canada* with Foster Hewitt [noises from mic] and it was sponsored by Imperial Oil. So, I got my first direct acquaintance with sponsorship on a personal basis. Of course, they had a lot of that in New York. I learned a lot about that in New York. By the way, I did the fights every Friday night with Jimmy Powers. And I worked as assistant handing him cue cards as I learn all the tricks, where he sounds so smart and wise on the air, but he's with me to follow up [like] punch, bolo punch. So I'd look up the cards under 'B' by and give him the card "Oh, he said the bolo punch was first used by Jake LaMotta in 1947, you might like to know, and I was feeding it to him. Anyway.

So I did OB's and I did it with Marshall McLuhan. And, and I did [background mic noise] Banting of Banting and Best [who] invented insulin and stuff like that, [section may be missing due to mic noise] and I got bored doing it. I got bored doing OB's [it] was [all] the same and I started to drink. Because, you know, once you've set up cameras doing one hockey game, and you've done five hockey games, you've improved the camera positions. After I don't know how these producers-directors go on year after year doing bloody sports. And I've never liked sports, particularly. I mean, [more noise] are you sure your tape is working alright? Okay.

And, and it so happened at that time, the Head of Drama, who was doing General Motors Theatre, which is the biggest show they were doing sponsored by General Motors. And I applied for-, and he didn't get along with the advertisers at all. And he was making a lot of foolish mistakes and you know, didn't really understand; he was too 'fancy Dan', too high-class ideas. High-class in terms of popular audiences, and I went to the boss and I, and he was promoted out of the job. And the job was left open, they couldn't find anyone to take over drama. So I went to Fergus Mutrie, who was the Director of Television and I said, "Take me." He said, "What do you know about drama?" I said "Nothing." I said, "I used to do stage sets in a theatre, so I can read a play. But," I said, "But you know, Ferg, I'm the oldest person to direct a television series." I was now 37 years of age. "And" I said, "I know cameras, as you know,

inside out because of my film experience" I thought all you had to do with drama was shoot it. It never occurred to me there was things like a drama script, and acting and all that. So he had nobody else to give it to and I was also very trustworthy and reliable and all that.

[To Alan Lawson] "You okay?"

And so he said, "Okay, I'll try you out for four months." And here's where Granada comes in. And so I took over drama and one of my producers, one of my directors was Silvio Narrizano, Another one was 'Hank' Kaplan, Henry Kaplan. Do you remember him going? And incidentally, Wilfred Fielding, whom you will know, was one of my cameramen on OBs in Toronto and Tom Spaulding who was the head of design at Granada - anyway, Granada had simply robbed the CBC in Canada. I think there were more Canadians at Granada than they were Brits those days, mostly recruited, recruited, by the way, by Harry Watt, I think. Yeah.

And so I learned, I kept my mouth shut and I watched how Silvio worked and I watched how Kaplan worked in Drama I watched how David Green worked who was a British director we had [unclear] gradually, I began to read scripts, and understand them and relate them to the acting, and to the director, and so on and so on. Meanwhile, I was keeping the advertising agency we're funding for General Motors, at bay. And after about six, nine months, I realised I needed help on story editing. So I've hired a man whom I trained to be a story editor. His name was Nathan Cohen. He was an outstanding drama, critic in drama. And I trained him about the television side of it, the visual side of it. And after about a year, I became a real drama producer, I was now 38, I'm 37 years of age, 38. And that was the first experience I had of actually running drama -

AL: What year was that?

NS: 1955

SN: 19-, the end of 1954. And 1955. And - your tapes still running?

AL: Yes, yes.

SN: And we did. The great thing that I can only claim is we did some, a lot, of interesting, we did some interesting plays, we won big audiences. The most outstanding writer was [Distortion on mic] Arthur Hailey. Does that mean anything to you? Arthur Hailey who wrote the *Airport* pictures? And so on?

Well, I produced his first five plays. He was a Canadian, yes. And in fact, when we did his play *Flight into Danger*, it was a fantastic success.

And what else can I say about that period that: I'll tell you one interesting story about the evils of advertising. We did a play written by a young French Canadian about some French-Canadian kids who were smuggling American cigarettes into Canada And one of the police, I should explain that in Canada, there are local police who handle local crime. And there's the Federal Police, which handle crimes that cross the border, that's the RCMP. [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] They also handle the Northwest Territories and stuff like that. So smuggling is a federal offence. And these kids were picked up by the RCMP. And one of the cops was a bit of a sadist when I say a bit of sadist, I mean, it was so delicate, I mean, not like today with law, you know. But still, in those days, it was very bad. And I recognise that I have a political problem if my cops were dressed in Royal Canadian Mounted Police uniforms. So I put all my police in ordinary clothes. Because I'm a good politician. I'm aware of these political problems and didn't want any bloody trouble. So we put the play on. And a play was a great success. The trouble was the head of the RCMP knew that it was his men. And one of them was a sadist, the public didn't know. But he knew. And you know what the silly fuck did, the Commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, he sent a letter to the President of General Motors, and said that you've offended my force, with your drama last night? And I want you to know when next we're going to place our order for cars, which you know… is not inconsiderable, we will consider very carefully which car we will buy, which brand of car we will buy. Well, you do know they do buy hundreds of cars a year. And the President of General Motors went right up like this a straight investigation. The advertising agency had of course approved my script, which they had to do. I couldn't get away from that. And somehow or other, the President then sent that same letter to the CB- to the president of the CBC, who fortunately, I knew, Davidson Dunton he was the best president the CBC ever had. And Davy Dunton somehow smoothed the oil of the General Motors who are threatening to withdraw the show which is 39 one-hour dramas for each of four years.

[AL asks for halt to change tapes.]

SN: Right.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

SN: So that's one aspect of commercial television where sponsorship is involved – I hope to God it never happens in England. Bound to of course in the present government. [Conservative. DS] And of course it's here – when we see the news there's a credit to Powerglide or whoever it is.

But I'll tell you another story that is even worse about sponsorship interference: a young kid wrote a play for me called *The Runaways*, about a poor boy who falls in love with a rich girl and her family are absolutely opposed to the marriage and the two kids run away to Buffalo and get married. It's a very charming, light love story. And, as was the custom I had to send these scripts to the advertising agency in advance, purportedly for the excuse that they were going to help publicise the show and, actually, they were vetting it. And the Head of, Director of, television and radio broadcasting of the agency phoned me and he said "Sydney, we liked this play but don't put it in the schedule just yet." And I said "Why?" "Well, don't ask me, you've got plenty of stuff, don't put it in the schedule." OK. I'm a very amenable guy. Sidney Furie – the writer of it was Sidney Furie. Do you know the name?

AL: Of course.

SN: Just a hairy assed kid, twenty-one years of age, twenty-two at that time. He said "When's it going to go on?" I said "Take it easy, I'll put it in the schedule." Two months goes by, I call the agency. I said – Hugh Harler [?] was his name, I said "Hugh, I've got to put it in the schedule, I'm running out of stuff." He said "Sydney, please – don't. Not yet." I said "OK, alright. Tell me why." He said "I can't tell you why." Fine. So I delay it again. Sidney Furie is going bonkers. And we're all set to go. Finally, I call the agency guy. I said "Hugh, I'm gonna put it in, you can fuck yourself, you can complain to my boss, you can do whatever you want, I'm going to do it." He said "Oh, I'll take you to lunch." He took me to the fanciest lunch place in Toronto, drowning in Martinis and oysters, and he won't tell me, and I beg him, and he finally tells me as a fact that the Chairman of the Board of General Motors, his daughter, [no] his granddaughter ran away with a poor boy and there was a scandal in the family. And I said "Well, the Chairman doesn't read my scripts." He said "No, but the senior, the guy in charge of advertising and public relations is the sponsor for the show. He'll get the shit kicked out of him if he allows it, and he's the one stopping it." And I – and they said "You can't put that show on, and if you do Sydney, General Motors will pull the whole series." So I went back to Sidney

Furie and I said “Sidney, I’m terribly sorry, I can’t put it on and I can’t tell you why.” I said “I will give you back the script, you need not pay me [back] the money that we paid you.” He said “Fuck you. I’m so bloody angry.” Went and raised the money and shot it as a feature film, which incidentally he directed. I could tell you more hairy stories about my experiences with advertising. And I’ll stop there. Anyway, then, BBC - after I’d been doing this job for about three, three and a half years - the BBC bought 26 of my dramas for running by kinescope [Telerecording. DS] and they were complaining that a lot of the words we were using were offensive to English ears. Like ‘fanny’: which in Canada means if you kick someone in the fanny, you kick them in the ass – fanny in England can mean c**t. [My censorship. DS] A lot of things like that. Anyway, the suggestion is, I go to England and meet with the Head of BBC Drama whose name was Michael Barry, and discuss these questions, and could I avoid using them in the future plays because the BBC wanted to carry on taking the stuff. So I had my first trip to England in 1957, and I met this courtly, lovely gentleman, the kind of guy who always kept a handkerchief in his sleeve-

NS: Michael Barry, indeed.

SN: And he looked after me for two weeks, one week with Elwyn Jones who was delegated to look after me, and one very important incident, which I want to repeat because it is very important for my future in England – well, two incidents – and then we’ll stop, because I’ve got to take a drink of something.

He said “Of course, you’d like to go to the theatre, dear boy?” Of course it never occurred to me that I wanted to go to the fucking theatre, I never liked the theatre – I was a great set designer but crazy city… I said “Yes, yes.” He said “Well I’m going up to Stratford this Saturday to see one of the Shakespeare plays, I’ll take you along.” And then he said “What would you like to see in London?” I said “I don’t know what’s on.” So Elwyn said “Perhaps Mr Newman would like to see John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*.” I said “Oh, I’ve heard about that, yes I’d like to see that.” We went to the Royal Court [Theatre] and at the end of Act one, at the bar I discovered that drinks are left at the side of the bar, nobody steals them: a revelation. In fact in Canada there are no bars in theatres. So it was a great revelation to me, my first theatrical experience in England. So we are sitting there drinking our brandies, and Michael says “Well, what do you think of it?” “I think it’s absolutely marvellous.” “Oh do you?” I said “It’s terrific I’ve never seen such, I like those people, I understand those people – what happens in the theatre, there’s always a wall between me and

the characters – but not this one, it's great!" Then it occurred to me he'd probably taken many guests a third time and all he would say was "I can't stand that character Jimmy Porter, all he does is complain." That was Michael Barry's comment…

NS: Oh really. Michael Barry said that.

SN: Michael Barry, oh yes. "I can't stand that Jimmy Porter fellow. Why doesn't he do something – always complaining." [Laughter]. That's story number one. Anyway, I got finished that week, and was about to return to Canada and it was the hight before and I'd said they'd give me a nice farewell dinner: courtly, wonderful people the BBC was - in those days anyway.

I got a phone call at my hotel, Mr John Nelson-Burton. I don't know if you know the name. He said "My boss would like to meet you, Dennis Vance." I said "I'm terribly sorry but I'm flying out tomorrow morning, I've got to be at the airport at eleven-thirty or something like that." It was now eleven o'clock at night. He said "Well can I come and talk to you tomorrow morning at your hotel room?" I said "Well if I'm packing, sure I don't mind." So he came and he said "Why don't you bring your bags, I've got a car waiting outside, I'll take you to meet Dennis Vance and we will drive you to the airport." This is great. So I met Dennis Vance-

NS: That's ABC, isn't it?

SN: It's ABC: offices on… Regent Street. And I meet this wonderful, flamboyant, piss and vinegar character. And he says that John Nelson-Burton is producing this thing called *Armchair Mystery Theatre,* and "John has been worked to death – he can't cope with it and would you like to come to England for two years and take over *Armchair Mystery Theatre* as it's producer?" I thought 'that's very interesting' and I said "I'll think about it" and then they drove me to the airport and I went back to Canada with my head half-whirling with these ideas. And then negotiations began, by letter, and I ended up with a two-year contract, and being paid £5,000 a year, which in 1958 was a fortune. And I also got an interest-free mortgage to buy a house; and this expense account. No questions asked or anything. And my wife and I came across, in a suite aboard The Empress of England, it was called, and my children then flew three weeks later and I was here in England. Stop. [Pause for drink]

[Some mic problems and Alan Lawson heard to say he would "fix it later"]

NS: Sydney to follow up what you were saying, before you come over to the United Kingdon, I'm very-, I'm quoting you, one of the things I've read about from you, not that long ago. About Grierson, to begin with: you admired his belief – this is your statement, you admired his belief in social responsibility, and then you said Canada – this is in Grierson's day – Canada became a stronghold of socially committed documentary. You said. You wrote this at one point. And then later on-

SN: Stronghold. You mean-

NS: Well this is your phrase – I don't know. 'Canada became a stronghold of socially committed documentary.' That's in the days of John Grierson.

SN: Yeah.

NS: And then later on, which leads to what we were coming to, 'I always attributed to John Grierson respect for audiences and social awareness in the plays I produced in *Armchair Theatre.'* So this kind of link – you haven't really talked about. Or your own feeling about communication and that kind of thing: I mean social responsibility, Grierson, it must have influenced you a great deal.

Again – briefly, sorry, television, according to you was 'a mass audience or nothing. Most of the audience have little experience of the theatre and not much of the cinema. Television drama should reflect on the world familiar to the mass audience.' This is you.

SN: Well Norman, I was going to be talking about that in the introduction to *Armchair Theatre* you see. But to go back to Grierson: I should explain that my concern about social welfare and so on, really started before I met Grierson, because I was very, very leftist in the thirties. I never joined the party, thank God, I never made the mistake of being a joiner, but the fact is I did work for a left-wing theatre who were doing plays by Cliff Odets, *Waiting for Lefty* and plays by Irwin Shaw, very much socially committed plays, I think some of them were – no play was actually pro-communist, but all were leftist and all, you know *Waiting For Lefty* is a union situation; and also my interest in art, a lot of the art that had come out of Germany, like Hirschfeld [John Heartfield? DS] cartoons, collages, satirical things, and also at the Film Board, Grierson had given home to many Europeans who had fled Europe, and one of them was a man names Ernest Borneman, who had written [as Cameron McCabe DS] a book called The Face on the Cutting Room Floor and he loved film and he was German and he was one of the kids that were picked up in England as a

potential danger to the Germans and [inaudible] educated and of course Churchill wrapped them all up and sent them off to the colonies. Well-

NS: The Isle of Man?

SN: Well, Canada or Australia, see. And this guy had done a little work for Grierson in the thirties. And from this camp, this kid had written to Grierson and said he'd like to become a film maker and Grierson got him removed. From the internment camp, and this guy introduced me to Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht, because he had the actual Telefunken recordings of Mack the Knife and so on. So, I was already very much influenced by art as – and I was doing posters for Russian films - so I was very much influenced by art as in the service of the people, that kind of ideology. And then I come to the Film Board and here's Grierson who is talking about propaganda films to beat the Nazis, and you've got to talk to the people because it's the people who are going to make that, win that, war. And they need steel put in their backs and all our films must emphasise that. It wasn't as if he was talking to the converted as it were, he was talking, he was crystallising a whole sense of teenage jumbled thinking into almost a concrete pattern of art which is useful, in this case the cinema.

And it imbued us all with this notion and we used to joke that there was no time for nuance under Grierson. No time for navel gazing. And he used to make nasty wisecracks about [Humphrey] Jenning's films, which he thought were too subjective, too introverted. And of course we never used actors- I think I may have said nearly enough and he crystallised in my mind art that has to leave a residue of conscious thinking on the part of the audience to that the art would disturb them into action the following day, the following days. And, so when I got into drama at the CBC the feeling was strong in me and I knew it was no use doing plays by Ibsen, or Shakespeare particularly as fine as they were because they wouldn't touch my Canadian audience. My Canadian audiences that should be seeing plays about themselves.

So when Arthur Haley came along – although he was originally a Brit, by the way – he wrote this play about a Canadian airline, with Canadians on board having great trouble landing the plane. And I found other Canadian writers to write about the Canadian experience. So that's the genesis of my philosophy I evolved, with *Armchair Theatre*.

NS: Yes, sure. And *Look Back in Anger* fits into that of course.

SN: Well, that's why I love those [inaudible]

NS: Absolutely, yes. Fine.

AL: And now for a bit on *Armchair Theatre*.

SN: Oh, well I arrive in England and immediately I'm becoming the victim of the vast public relations of Howard Thomas and ABC Television. They planned on a great big press party for me, three weeks after my arrival, and the first thing I did was – I didn't know what the hell I was going to say at this thing – but I sat in my hotel room – it wasn't a hotel room, I'd got a flat, and I sat and I watched every bit of television I could and I saw all the drama, and I thought they were lousy. I thought they were slow, self-indulgent, the cameras never moved, they weren't exciting. They were doing the odd Noel Coward, they were doing Ibsen, all jumbled up, *Armchair Theatre* was, and the BBC in advance of *Armchair Theatre* was doing this. Oh, I forgot to tell you, three days after I arrived, Howard Thomas called me and said "We're promoting Dennis Vance, he's going to become Director or Controller in charge of programmes development" I said "Tell me are you getting rid of him?" He said "I'd like you to become Head of Drama. Do you want to?" I said "Great, providing I can personally produce *Armchair Theatre*." He said "OK."

NS: The word 'Mystery' is dropped now? It's not *Armchair Mystery Theatre* anymore?

SN: When I arrived it was still *Armchair Mystery Theatre* but three days later it then turned out it was a summer series anyway – they did fifteen weeks in the summer of *Mystery Theatre* and then the rest were *Armchair Theatre* itself. No, sorry *Mystery Theatre* was on Saturday nights – don't forget ABC was only a two-day operation: Saturday and Sunday. So he agreed to my being the producer of *Armchair Theatre* as well as Head of Drama. So I looked at all these dramas and I'd gone up – they threw a big party at the Café Royal – they must have had fifty press people there…drinks and everything and Howard Thomas got up and introduced me and he said he was going to 'let Mr Newman alone and do whatever he wanted', which I wondered in my mind whether it was really going to be true, but Howard maybe was playing it safe, if I made any boo-boos it would be my fault, not his, I don't know what, but he said it and I got up and in my own bloody way I said that I didn't like what I'd seen, and I felt that the plays were just – and remember those days there was Armchair Theatre Sunday nights, there was the BBC's major drama on Sunday nights, firstly in parallel in terms of time; there was the commercial companies were doing a Tuesday night a drama series every week. I think there were three or

four single play drama slots and I'd watched them all and it seems to me they don't know who their audience is. Because they are mixing up Ibsen one week and a pretty good play by a young writer called Jack Pulman about real people. And then there'd be a Shakespeare; and then it would be a Terence Rattigan. And I said "All that stuff is confusing and you can't build any audience loyalty." I said something like that and I just generally knocked. I said "I want cameras to move, something exciting on the air, fast cutting, I want big close-ups. I want to see the actors' eyes, not cameras standing far back, like I'm firing at a flat set."

I sat down. Polite applause. Next thing every fucking newspaper says this guy's going to revolutionise television. And he's knocking everything! And they really built me up. I then went ahead to try and follow through on my ideas, and one thing I realised was, I called my staff together, and by the way, I'd inherited Ted Kotcheff, who, I should mention that I had hired Ted Kotcheff in Canada as a stage hand and brought him along from stage hand to floor manager, and from floor manager to director, director of half-hours and director of hours. [i.e. 30 minute and 60 minute drama programmes DS] So I had him there, and I had Philip Saville, who was under a four-picture contract with ABC and I had George More O'Ferrall, who was a lovely man. He could never make up his mind whether he was more or less O'Ferrall [chuckles], John Nelson Burton, Dennis Vance who was –

21.00

NS: [interrupts] and John Moxey?

SN: And John, no John Moxey I got later, and then Wilfred Eades. And I pulled these guys together and I crystallised my speech to them, and I said something I'd never said before: I said "We're not going to do any more dramatisations of stage plays. Everything we do is original." I realised that by doing original plays they would have to be contemporary. And they thought that was brilliant. Wonderful. We all want to do original plays. But of course I couldn't get the bloody scripts. The scripts came in and they were not very good. So I said to my directors "Do it anyway." "But it's a bad script Sydney!" I said "It may be a bad script but until some writers see how bad it is on the screen, we'll never get another play out of them! You do it and make the best you can, throw dust in the eyes of the audience, big close-ups and dramatic music singing, and all that stuff", that I'd learned about from Canada.

And we went on the air that Autumn, and the critics turned on me and they kicked the shit out of me. And of course there weren't that many original British plays so I had to steal stuff, from New York, which I'd convert into British plays, and stuff like that, but the fight went on and I hired Peter Luth as my story editor, and other people like that. But the critics layered me, they really did, but I learned later it was a typical gambit of the press, first they build you up, then they knock you down, then they built me up again, so they got three stories instead of the one. And after we'd been on the air about four or five months, the ratings began to build, and we began to consolidate and the crews were better and we got movement and the set designers began giving me different levels, we got low-angle shots.

NS: You were in the studio in Manchester weren't you?

SN: In Manchester, Didsbury.

NS: Used to be a Capitol Cinema I remember.

SN: Whatever it was, I don't recall.

NS: In my time.

SN: And, gradually, in that first year we built up quite a reputation and then of course Peter Luth once took me to the theatre, a brilliant young writer, he thought, and I saw a play called *The Rough and Ready Lot,* by a kid called Alun Owen, and I didn't like the play particularly because –

NS: It was at the Lyric, Hammersmith? The Lyric.

SN: You're absolutely right. It was a play about an Irishman, an Englishman and somebody else. Some war in Central America and discussing theology and so on. We had Alun out to the studio – by this time I think we'd moved to Teddington- I said "I liked your play." He said "Do you want to do it on television?" Poor kid, poor kid, you know, I said "No, no, I don't want that kind of play, I want a play about today and so on." And I said "I want to do plays about the changing face of Britain." "What do you mean?" I said "I want to show – to me it seems as if England is at a point of great change – a change between a man and his priest, an employer and his employee, and an MP and his constituents. I want the change – where things are changing." This, don't forget, was the year after Suez. [The Suez Canal crisis. DS]. England was in a state of tremendous realisation that they weren't really a big powerful country, you know, and I wanted to dramatise these changing points. And then

Alun told me, he said that “Liverpool’s changing”, the town he knows, and he said “there are no trams to Lime Street.” I said “Big deal. Sounds like an interesting title, what’s it all about?” So he wrote me a play called *No Trams to Lime Stree*t, and it was a tremendous powerful success. Every critic just raved about it.

And an amusing side story I love telling about this, which I want on the record. ABC Television as you know was one of eleven companies owned by Associated British Picture Corporation and ABPC, as you may not have known was 38% owned by Warner Brothers and the Managing Director of ABPC was an American – a Greek American called C. J. Latta. A big teddy bear of an old man, slightly soft in the head – they just gave him a job, “Look after the English staff.”, you know they didn’t give a damn, Hollywood didn’t give a damn and he came to England with his baggage of American morality, and – well he knew show-business and when I read the reviews the following morning after Alun’s play, I realised that I’d really hit the jackpot, and my heart was soaring with the success of it. Every reviewer said there’s something new happened last night, [slaps table for emphasis] and driving out to Teddington from my house in Hampstead, in my Jaguar, paid for by the company – [aside] a mark 2, one of the first mark 2’s, - and I came in and my secretary said – I was beaming you see– and my secretary said “Sydney, Mr Thomas wants to see you in his office right away.” And I walked across the quad, thinking the guy’s going to pat me on the back, he’s going to give me a raise, he’s going to say “You’re wonderful.” I come into his office, he’s sitting their po-faced, and sitting next to him is a furious C.J.Latta. And I said “Good morning C.J.” and “How are things?” No. “Sydney, Mr Latta would like to say something to you.” And Howard is dead solemn, this is his big boss you see. And C.J. says “What was that crap all about last night?”. I said “Why C.J., didn’t you see the newspapers, they’re raving about it.” He said “I don’t give a damn, I couldn’t understand a bloody word!” I said “Well C.J., I have trouble myself with a scouse accent, you’re an American, and I was at rehearsal and there were a lot of words I couldn’t understand.” He said “Don’t hand me that crap, my chauffeur Bert is English – he couldn’t understand it either.” He said “Next time you tell those actors to speak fucking English!” [Giggles]

NS: Tell me about – sorry to interrupt you, it’s an interesting point – you once told somebody, I don’t think it was me you once told about – which is part of what you’re saying about the way television drama for example, yeah, all the

actors play with fully provincial accents like a West End tradition and one thing you changed was that.

SN: Exactly. I was not ashamed of regional accents. Because I knew my audiences and you see, in particular, don't forget, ABC has a Northern franchise, Midlands and the North as Granada did.

NS: Yes.

SN: Howard once said to me "You know Sydney, if you could dop something to recognise our region I'll get in good with Sir Robert Fraser. So when Alun Owen-

NS [interrupts] He was the boss of ITA [Independent Television Authority] as it were?

SN: That's right, he was the Director-General of the ITA. So, when Alun came up with this thing with the scouse accent, and of course, he tells an amusing story about how, when the play was being cast, and I always insisted that the writer be alongside the Director for as much as the writer ever wanted, so when the casting took place, Alun Owen was there, and Dodo Watts, lovely, very good casting director, she said – Alun reports this that she said that the actors would have to be cast with Irish accents, and Alun said "No, they've got to have scouse accents." She said "They're so ugly, nobody can listen to it." And Alun said "Well, how do you think babies get born?" Or some sort of remark like that. And so we cast locals, we cast actors like Billie Whitelaw, and Jack Hedley was in it, Alfie Lynch was in it and who else? There was Tom Bell. A wonderful cast and Ted Kotcheff directed it marvellously well. And we did it of course up in Didsbury, shot in Didsbury, the awful studio floor, we had to avoid stage left because there were bumps; also it couldn't stand the Vinten, the weight of the Vinten crane. And then one of Granada's writers Clive Exton had one play done by Granada, and he didn't like what they'd done with it and he came to us.

NS: And you had Harold Pinter, didn't you?

SN: And then I commissioned Harold Pinter to write his first stage play which was – his first *television* play, what am I talking about, which was *A Night Out.* And gradually [some background crackles] we built up a Hugh, what's his name, the Irishman, er… Hugh Leonard, we built up a stable of writers that belonged to us and I made sure, I put them under exclusive contract, so none

of the other companies could steal them from me. All my tricks I'd learned in New York and my experiences in Toronto all came in handy, and of course I took full advantage of the fact that we followed *Sunday Night at the [London] Palladium*, which was always number one in the top ten of the week, and we followed them. I used to watch the TAM charts to watch the line drop from *Sunday Night at the [London] Palladium* to *Armchair Theatre* there was always a drop, and gradually we levelled out, always number two for week after week. I think in my last three years at ABC, of the 41 dramas we used to do a year, we were in the top ten thirty-seven times, in the top ten and of course once, we even beat the *Sunday Night [at the London] Palladium,* Number one in the top ten. But that was because I felt I knew my audience. I knew that. And it had nothing to do with intelligence. I never assume an audience is not intelligent. But I knew they could be uneducated and I knew they could not have any feeling for culture. So, if I avoided anything that smacked of culture… anyway, that was my whole thing. I knew my audience and I rejected many good plays. I said "my audience won't get it. They won't have no affinity for that subject. I rejected many good plays. And, of course, I did a lot of rotten plays, but by which time we had developed such brilliant technique – my set designers were so wonderful with false ceilings and people up on platforms and lots of low angle shots, and lots of close-ups on faces, the actors really had to act; and I developed a technique of dry rehearsals where the directors had to tell me how they were going to shoot every shot, by a series of arm signals. Two arms together was a close-up, this way [presumably he demonstrates] was a medium shot; this was a wide shot. And you'd have to do this, and I'd make notes and I'd say "Don't have the camera on the guy talking, have it on the guy listening. That's more dramatic."

And of course, I could do no wrong after two or three years, and it was just going great guns.

If you're interested in censorship, I ran into trouble with Sir Robert Fraser once – several times, but once very seriously which caused the show never to be shown, which I must mention. It was a play called *Three and a Gas Ring*. It was about three women who live on a boat – on a houseboat and Sheila Allan was one of the women and I think Eileen Atkins was the second, and the third was a girl whose name I cannot remember, and they are friends with a randy artist played by Alan Bates. And Alan Bates knocked up the girl whose name I can't remember. And she becomes pregnant and the son of a bitch Alan Bates won't marry her 'cos he's an artist, a sculptor in fact and he won't marry her. And the

play ends with the three girls who say they will bring up the baby... And the ITA took the position [that] this destroyed the sanctity of the family. I've got a hunch that may have come from the Chairman, who was a very outstanding Roman Catholic, what was his name?

NS: At that Time? It wasn't Lord Hill, no?

SN: No no, before that. Very nice little man, actually. I adored him. But it may have come from Robert Fraser, he was the one that-

NS: [Interrupts] Who wrote it, by the way?

SN: A man called Osborne, but not John.

NS: Oh.

SN: I can't remember his first name.

NS: Charles? Charles?

SN: Could be. I don't know. So that play never went out, it was wiped. I mean I don't know whether they were taping then, but anyway it never went out. And another incident when I had a run-in – ITA, they appointed a kind of censor, of programme control, a lovely man called – who the became Managing Director of Scottish Television, er Richardson, no Noel Stevenson. I had trouble with him once, but he and I became good friends. I'll tell you a good story about him and Grierson. Do you want to hear it?

[background assent]

Grierson of course, he and I became good friends when I moved to England because at that time he was doing that show…for Scottish Television, [*This Wonderful World* DS] and Noel Stevenson had become Managing Director of Scottish television and I was at this time with the BBC and I had come up to Glasgow to visit; we were doing a show in the new studio in Glasgow, which was the most modern studio in England [!!] at that time for that brief period and I looked up Noel and said "Come, have dinner together. Pick me up in my office at six-thirty." So I went over to Scottish Television and who do I bump into but Grierson. And by this time I was no longer calling him Mr Grierson, I was just calling him 'Grierson'. I said "Grierson, how are you?" and we sort of embraced, and I said "Look I'm going to have lunch [sic] with Noel Stevenson, come and join us!" He said "Oh, er, well maybe." So I went upstairs, found Noel. He offered me a drink, he was on the telephone or something, and there

was a knock on the door and Grierson came in. And I saw a Grierson I'd never seen before. I saw a humble employee. I didn't see [clicking fingers] that firecracker guy. He was in the office of the Managing Director, he was just simply a guy on one show. I said "Noel, can - I've asked Grierson to join us" and Grierson was terribly embarrassed and said no he couldn't because he was going to -he couldn't make it. He saw immediately that he wasn't welcome. Well, Noel, that night was giving dinner to the Elders of the church, because they were going to do a commemorative programme of Livingstone. You, know, Livingstone – he was a minister of Scotland.

NS: A Scots missionary.

SN: He was in Africa, a missionary. So, Noel had taken me along and I was having dinner with the Elders of the Kirk of Scotland. And who turned up but Grierson, to have coffee with us. And he was slightly pissed, and Grierson should not have been drinking because he had lungs like blotting paper, and he was kidding himself, he was drinking Harvey's Shooting Sherry, thinking he could get away with it. So we were there, the dinner and the interesting thing, Grierson studied for the ministry in his youth, did you know that?

AL: No.

SN: Yes he did. And his joke used to be that the pulpit in the church, the audience wasn't big enough for him, that's why he went into film. And half the guys, Elders of the Church of England [presumably Scotland? DS] were ones he had gone to school with, university with to learn what's called moral philosophy, well they used to teach it, so he [says] "Hello Johnny, Hello so and so." And then he said "Well what are you all doing?" and they said "Well we're going to do this thing about Livingstone, a commemorative programme about Livingstone, a talk show tonight at 10 o'clock." Grierson said "Oh, ho, Livingstone is living with his fancy black boy." [Background laughter] It was unbelievable. Was Livingstone a queer? I guess he was or Grierson wouldn't have said it.

NS: I wouldn't know, I don't know. I haven't heard that before.

SN: No of course not. So we all broke up and Grierson and I got in the car and went right back to the BBC because we wanted to see this Scottish TV programme on Livingstone. And when it was on we watched it, and then we got bored and we turned it off, and he and I went on a – what do you call it – a pub crawl. Wherever we went, every publican knew Grierson: "Dr Grierson,

hello Doctor, how's Dr Grierson tonight?" and the drinks we were given, one sherry after another. I was going very slow, but of course the pubs then closed, and I was staying at that hotel above the railway station, I don't know what it's called

AL: The Central?

NS: It was the Central.

SN: The Central. And I of course living there, I was allowed to drink, so we're sitting upstairs in this great dank room in these stuffed chairs with the stuffing coming out, and Grierson was drinking these – he's getting more and more kind of blurry and sloppy, and then he said "Sydney, I'm really proud of you." I said "Aw, come on." And he said "You've made it laddie and I never did." I said "What do you mean?" He said "You're a member of the establishment now, you work for the BBC. It didn't mean nothing to me, but it was very flattering and wonderful, but what did occur to me was that this guy really felt forgotten, but he was wonderful, known all over the world. But in England he was just kind of nothing: this little Scottish boy, came down to London to change the whole concept of the use of film and he didn't even get a knighthood. He eventually got a CBE, about three years later – I remember sending him a telegram saying "too little, too late." But also at that session he said to me "Of course Syd," he said "You discovered something that never occurred to me." I said "What's that?" He said "You discovered the writer." He said "In documentary all we do is make some notes on the back of an envelope, went out and shot, and did it all in the cutting room." He said "You, you knew the writer and I didn't." And of course I learned later of his failure when he was Group 3.

NS: Group 3, yes Group 3?

SN: Yeah, Group 3. [Talking over] That was very memorable evening for me.

NS: By this time you've moved to the BBC. Shall we-

SN: That's right.

NS: Can we go on to that move – and thereafter?

AL: I think I shall have to –

SN: Shall we change the tape?

AL: No, we've got some time. Where are we in terms of time?

NS: It's 25 past 12.

AL: No, in time.

SN: Oh in time. [NS laughter] In years?

NS: '62?

SN: I became Head of Drama at the BBC in [19]62. The interview with Grierson would have been about '63 I would say or '64.

NS: Can we have your move then from *Armchair Theatre* to BBC Drama?

SN: Yeah, that's really quite a story.

NS: And then carry on from there.

SN: Quite a Story. Well, one day – I'd been at ABC two years and my contract would have been up, except Howard Thomas convinced me to stay another two years with fabulous increases of money. And, of course, I was very happy to stay. My children were all going to private, to schools here and my wife was happy and so on and we had really fitted in to the social, and of course I loved being loved, and I was a person who was being flattered all over the place and I adored, why not, if you don't mind my being so frank and who wouldn't be?

One day a letter came, just after I'd signed the contract, as a matter of fact, for another two years, a letter came, signed Kenneth Adam, saying that he so admired my work and wouldn't it be nice if we met. And he said 'would your secretary call mine? I am free.' and he mentioned three different lunch dates. So I said "why not, it would be nice and I'm a great respecter of the BBC, though I thought their drama was full of shit, although they'd just – no hang on that comes later- so I met Kenneth Adam, he took me to the Scandinavian Club, or the British Yacht Club, or some bloody place – Scandinavian Club; and he was the most charming man and gracious. We'd sit and talk about what I thought of England and he had friends in Canada and all that sort of general stuff and he asked me some questions as to how I handled my dramas which he admired so much, and then we parted. And he said "We must meet again." And it was the most wonderful lunch.

NS: He was Controller of Programmes then, was he? Was he?

SN: No, he was Director of Television.

NS: Director of Television. Sorry.

AL: I'm going to stop you there.

[End of Side 2]

Sydney Newman Side 3.

0:00

SN: …and it seems to me to that I seem to change everything I what I do almost every five years.

AL: Sydney Newman, side three

SN: Yeah, [what] was the last?

NS: So he said –

SN: It was such a wonderful lunch he said we must do it again. I said "Fine." I quite enjoyed myself was a lovely meal it was a nice environment. We had smorgasbord and [inaudible] beer which was lovely, which I love. And, and then, about a week later, I get another letter saying let's meet again. And quite clearly. I wondered why, this is this pretty bloody fast? And it was later that it occurred to me. The first one was to find out the kind of guy was in the kind of attitudes I had to broadcasting and so on. And I learned later he had been sent by Hugh Greene to do this: find out because Hugh had just become director-

NS: Director General of the BBC.

SN: And we met again and after a fiddle-faddle for about 15 minutes. He said, "Would you like to work for the B-?" er, he said "we'd like you to work for us." For the BBC. I said "Oh" I said "that's very interesting." I said "What?", he said, "Well, we'd like you to take over Sunday night drama." I burst out laughing. And I said, "You mean if you can beat them join them." I said "No. Not on your life." I said "I'm very happy in my work. I'm extremely well paid, I do whatever I want." I said for me to do a programme opposite my own programme because they're both on at 8.30 on Sunday nights. I said "You're joking!" And he said, "Well, how'd you like to be Head of Drama?" Just quick like that. I said, I said "Now you're talking." Because quite frankly by now at ABC, what was I doing there? I didn't mention the fact of course, I'd created *The Avengers,* which was of course another phenomenal success. And I don't want to do children's serials. And- but the range was beginning to be - I had everything so well pegged that in a way it was, the job, was becoming slightly routine. And I realised, the BBC, I could I could finally get my hands and do fucking

Shakespeare and find the right slot for the right audience and all that sort of thing, the range of material, I could do it, the BBC would be so much greater. So we had a chat. And I said I'd think about it and discussed with my wife as usual. And I phoned him and I said, “Okay, let's negotiate.” And then they sent Stuart Williams, I don't know if you knew Stuart, administration, [assent in background] darling man. No, first there was, first there was a meeting - No, before the before the negotiations began. I was - Kenneth Adam took me to a sherry bar in Marylebone and I met Stuart Hood and [Donald] Baverstock, and Kenneth Adam left immediately. And Stuart Hood I found to be amiable, lovely sweet guy. And Baverstock was a son of a bitch. He got into a big argument with me about the meaning of documentary and drama being kind of, of no consequence. And what did I mean about drama being socially significant? And of course, they were playing good cop and bad cop. They probably had worked it out. And, but clearly, I passed muster, because then the negotiations began. And I realised that the BBC weren't going to believe the money I was earning. So I took my contract with me. And we met again, it was all done in secret. Nobody knew we were meeting in very obscure places. And when Williams began to start to talk money, I said “Before you do anything” I said, “I want you to read my ABC contract.” He said “Why, I wouldn't think of it.” I said, “No, I want you to.” It was this big thick thing. And he realised right there and then at that point, I was earning something like £8250 a year. He saw that I had an interest free mortgage on my house. He saw that I was on the car scheme for the Jaguar. He also saw that if I left England within four months, three months of the term of the termination of my contract with ABC, they would pay my entire expense of removal to get back to Canada for wife, family furniture, everything. “Well” he said “I'm allowed to offer you up to £6250.” [Alan Lawson chuckles] I said “I'm sorry, that's no good.” I said “I would love to work for the BBC. I'd love the range. And the all of you guys are lovely. But I couldn't take such a drop.”

4:58

SN: So we parted. And then he called me up a couple of days later we had another session I finally got him up to seven [stumbles] £7250. And I agreed to that, which was a drop, a terrific drop, because I'd lose the mortgage thing, I'd the problem with the car and all that. And I'll tell you an amusing story about that: years earlier, I’d tried to hire Elwyn Jones, and I brought him up to ABC

television. And I was offering him money and I said, “What kind of perks? I said, I'll give you a lot of perks. You can have entertainment all day.” He said, “Well”, he said, “I have a perk at the BBC.” I said, “What is it?” He said “Oh” he said “I have a free subscription to the Radio Times and the Listener.” That was the perks he was getting. He said “Oh, they allow me to write opera reviews for- “was it called City Life or some little- what was it then I don't know was it called What's On or something. What's On.

NS: Well, What's on in those days.

SN: Yeah, yeah. I had to throw that little ‘gag’ story. And so I went back to my office and I wrote a letter of resignation. And I made a stupid, stupid, error. I addressed it to the Group Managing Director Sir Phillip Warter with a carbon copy to Howard Thomas. The one time in my life where I really committed a stupid blunder. And I sent this off on Friday, asking to be released of my job. I was going to the BBC and I said a lot of nice things about how wonderful ABC had been to me. Howard Thomas comes into his office on Monday morning, the phone rings. Apparently, he hadn't opened his mail. But Sir Philip had opened. “So, what's this about Newman going?” Howard is embarrassed he doesn't know anything about Howard then calls me, livid with rage. And two days later, I'm told I can't go. I've got a contract. I argued with Howard, Howard said “Sydney if I had my way I'd have you right out of here tomorrow. I don't want you, but the Board, the parent Board are not gonna let you go.” I begged Howard to allow me to address the board itself. He did - he set it up. I had to go down to Golden Square. Because he arrived at, you know, alongside Granada. They kept me waiting outside for about an hour I then finally I was led in all these big tycoons and the table and Sir Philip wasn't chairing but Sir Eric Fletcher was, who later on became the Attorney General of England. As you know, Lord Fletcher, he just died, actually. And, and Robert Clark sitting on my right. And C.J. Latta, up there looking. I heard that he wanted me to go too. Howard wanted me to go, but none of the others did. And the two lawyers Fletcher and I'll never forget Robert Clark saying, “Laddie, you have signed a contract.” And I was so angry. I said, “Look, I've loved you guys. I worked so hard. I brought kudos. That you would treat me like this. Who gives a shit about the contract?” I said, “You owe it to me! You know, I can't believe you'd be like this!” I’m just passionate, you know, I mean, if somebody pricked me blood would squirt across the room. And I said, “Well you watch me because I'm going to have my actors say “fuck” on the air,” and I turned and walked out of the room. And of course, I went back to work but then what Howard did was

he- by that time he had appointed Brian Tesler as controller. He forced Brian Tesler to spy on me. And for the first time, my scripts were being read by people other than in my department- for the first time! And I should explain that I called up the BBC, I called Ken and I said, “Kenneth, I'm terribly sorry, they won't let me go. The guy’s contract still has as 18 months to run.” He said, “Oh, that’s bad.” He said, “Don't do anything. Don't do anything.” He said. “I'll call you back.” Half an hour he called back. He said, “Sydney, we're gonna wait for you.” “Sure you can wait 18 months? “Sure, yes, we think you're worth it.” Geez, that was so marvellous. So marvellous. And I went on working and they were sneaking looks at my plays. I bought two plays from Clive Exton.

9:47

One was called *The Big Eat,* which was a send up of big food company which having was having an eating competition and which was all about consumerism and it was a wonderful social satire. And Brian Tesler said, “So, you can't do it.” And another play which called The Big, er, *The Trial of Doctor Fancy*. He said, “You mustn’t do that either.” I said, “I'm sorry, it's in production.” He said, “Well go ahead and do it, but were not going to put it on the air.” So, I finished *The Trial of Doctor Fancy* and of course, I worked out [my notice]. And then after 14 months, they released me. And this was on, and I turned up for my first day at the BBC on December the 12th-

NS: ‘62.

SN: 1962. Right.

NS: Sean Sutton once said, I've got it here right, “Sydney Newman burst into the Television Centre, like a hurricane.” Sean said. [laughter from Alan Lawson]

SN: Well, I would be like a hurricane because they were so fucking asleep. [more laughter] Anyway, can we break for a bit?

AL: Yeah,

NS: What are we gonna do?

[break]

SN: Of course they weren't. But they were just operating in a kind of way that was so alien to me. But, well, I'll tell you about my very first day, you know, the BBC has this tradition, which still exists that every Wednesday morning the

heads of all department get together. It's called a weekly programme review meeting. And it was the first day I turned up, and apparently I had to go to this meeting. And apparently, - do you know about these meetings?

NS: Yes I used to attend them and-

SN: Of course, stupid of me. And remember, remember that every fourth one was chaired by Kenneth Adam, at which they usually have a guest speaker or some sort of philosophical discussion. And on this day, my first day there, what was the name, Burnett, who had done *Face to Face* and-

NS: Hugh Burnett.

SN: Hugh Burnett. But in those days, you see, when a producer had really finished a really successful series, the corporation was very kind, they'd send the guy off for three months holiday with pay, I think, and a kind of a sort of sabbatical. So Hugh Burnett had gone off to do what he want to do. And for some crazy reason, he had gone to Canada. And he got up to speak, he spoke about Canada. My country and my first day at the BBC, you guys talking about my country. And he talked about Canada as if you and I would talk about Kathmandu or some strange, exotic place. You talked about this amazing thing called Community Antenna. Because you know, Canada was the first country in the world that had cable television, called Community Antenna, it was called then. And he then talked about those dreadful winters. And how those long straight streets with the wind going charging down on to freezing your knackers off, didn't use the word, maybe didn't even use the word knackers. And he said, "You'd think they'd put curves in the streets as we do the break the wind?" And when he finished speaking, people clapped and there was questions and answers chaired by Kenneth Adam and I wondered, should I stand up and say something? My first day, people looked at me, because Stuart Hood said, "By the way, it was Sydney Newman new Head of Drama." So every one sort of [said] "Hi, welcome" zone. So I wonder, should I stand up, speak first down there? And so, I got my feet. And I said, I said I loved almost everything that was said about the country I come from, I thought it was a very good speech. I said, but I want to make one thing, I absolutely agree: those streets are cold in winter, and they're long and straight. But I'd like to remind everybody those streets were designed in the last century by British Army engineers." And it was- they looked at me stunning sounds, a round of applause and laughter. And it seems to me that I've won them all on my fucking first day with that remark. And it's true what I said. The- er, I of course,

I thought a great deal about the BBC over that 18 month wait. Which turned out to be 14 months, and I realised that the worst thing about it was it's just so badly organised and poor Michael Barry. It had a horizontal structure. Everybody, in this 180 staff, were all dealing directly with Michael Barry. And he had Rutherford as kind of, two IC [Second in charge] who did a lot of that-

NS: Norman Rutherford.

SN: Norman Rutherford, and Elwyn Jones was kind of assisting on the sort of ideological side and Rutherford did the administrative, but every decision had been made by Michael Barry.

14:31

I said - and I realised, of course, the BBC was doing about 250-275 dramas a year, including- what was that stupid thing that took place in a department store, which they'd started, a soap opera? That dreadful show. [inaudible as they talk across each other]

NS: So dreadful, I can't remember it.

SN: It was so dreadful you could, probably couldn't forget it, but what the hell was it? [Possibly *Compact*, though that was set in a publishing house DS] Anyway that was one of them. And there was no devolution of authority and it was driving Michael Barry nuts. So he wasn't doing a good job, he had no time to think. So, I figured out I've got to split it up and have seconds in command over banks of programmes. And then again, just like what happened at ABC Television, how I got removed from doing *Armchair Mystery Theatre* to becoming Head of Drama. About a week or two after I've come to the BBC Kenneth Adam calls me into his office and said, "Sydney, I've got some very good news, the government has just approved our creation of BBC Two. Therefore, you, we're going to go on the air one year [from] now with BBC Two, and you're going to increase your staff by 40%, and your programme money by 40%. So start now." See, I've been there two, three weeks, I'd met the staff, the senior directors anyway, and found them fuddy duddy and slow and there were very few I liked. I liked Johnny Jacobs [who] was pretty good. And who was that old guy who did Quatermass? Rudi-

NS and AL: Rudi, Rudolph Cartier.

SN: Rudi Cartier was good. And about three or four were okay, but in the main…, and of course, one programme was terrific. And that was the one that

David Rose was producing, *Z-Cars,* that I thought that was fantastic. I wanted a dozen of them. And so with this extra money, I immediately made up my mind, I would split the whole department into three departments, single plays, serials and series. And I couldn't find anybody to head up Single Plays, so I thought I'd run it myself for one year. And for Serials, I picked Andy Osborn, who was doing at that time *Maigret*, and he was doing beautifully. And, sorry, I'd made up my mind, I was gonna get rid of their goddamn Script Department. They had this vast script department run by Donald Wilson, who bought scripts, but had no authority over the scripts. And the fucking directors didn't like the scripts, and the scripts wouldn't be taken. And the story of it is Donald Wilson had better taste than most of the directors. So, I got rid of the Script Department but what the hell was I going to do with Donald Wilson? So I offered Donald Wilson, would you like to be Head of Serials? Like a shot, he grabbed it, because all his life had been buggered about by fucking directors and producers. And now he was going to be in charge see!

So I organised them: three departments, I gave every departmental head a business manager, and every departmental head a producer for a run of programmes, and that producer had two or three or four directors. And every producer, every run of programmes had to have its own story editor so the producer could control the material on his own series, his own group programmes. And over a period of three months, I put this whole thing in, in works. And I think by April, there were three departments that work and so I did this all in little over three months. To find the producers, I looked at the work of the senior directors, and guys whose work I didn't like terribly much, I forced them to becoming producers. And I gave series of lectures on how to be a producer. It exists somewhere. I mean, it's- apparently it's quite a good work. I mean, it's was published by the - there was a guy called Tony somebody or other who ran a magazine, it was a television magazine, and he published: the whole article was also published in some international thing, 'How to be a television producer for live drama'. And I did the same thing: [as he had at ABC] I just forced sets to be deepened, cameras to move. And I also sent around a notice to every producer to have on his desk, which was the thing I used to live by: "Look back not in anger, nor forward with fear, but around with awareness".

19:31

Meaning that all plays whether classic plays, contemporary or what had to reflect the reality of Britain today. Some way, even Shakespeare on how to be aware and doing it [that] there was today's audience, and so on so forth. And, and, then of course we I had to be involved with a dreaming up of dozens and dozens of shows that were- none of which would duplicate what will be on BBC One. And BBC One need a lot of jigging around and so on. And I'm now getting so bloody tired and I don't know how I can go on talking. I'm really getting tired.

Well, the big problem with - in creating the programmes with the producer was having a discussion with a producer discussing the likely time of the day the program's going to go out the likely audience we were going to aim for. And to strike a balance between a certain amount of money for children's programmes, a certain amount for popular week- weekly, series, serials, separately, and single plays. And then one of my great, to my great surprise, I discovered that I was also responsible for opera. And for the first time in the BBC opera went to the Head of Drama. By the way, at this time, I was called Head of Drama Group, which is my formal title because I have three departments. And- where was I?

AL: Drama.

SN: Oh, and opera. And because opera was always done by the by another department.

AL: Music Department.

SN: Yeah, there's something in television. And, of course, I had appointed Cedric Messina to be in charge of opera. So after, after about three quarters of a year, and we have done say, a Puccini, and maybe a Verdi and maybe Tchaikovsky or whatever it was, because we were doing about five major operas each year, as well as mini-operas which I had commissioned, because I'm a great believer in original stuff. I called Cedric and I said, "Cedric, it's okay to do Verdi and all that stuff." I said, "Why the hell aren't we doing Britten? Benjamin Britten is the world's greatest living opera composer, and he's British. And we're the BBC! Why the-" and he said, "Well, he won't let us do any." He said "He'll let BBC radio do opera, but he won't let [us]." I said "Why not?" He said, "Well, apparently," he said, "The reason you're doing opera, not the music department is that a couple of years ago, the BBC Television did a production of *The Turn of the Screw*." I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well do you

know the opera?" "No". He said, "Well, the opera's got-" I had actually seen it once. Or heard it on the radio. He said, "You know, the opera is, because it's of sixteen acts. And curtain comes down. And there's, there are act-breaks while they're changing the set. But the music goes right through. And the producer didn't know what to do with the visuals because the curtain was down. So he simply cut the music. And Benjamin Britten was not happy." And he said " The BBC [television?] will never do an opera of mine." So fortunately for me, I had Basil Coleman [who] had actually worked for me in Canada, and I was partly responsible for his being in television there. And he was in England. And I knew he was a fairly good director, he was a very good stage director. So, I phoned him up and I said, "Basil," - I knew that he and Britten and Peter Pears had been at one time extremely close friends. 'Wink, wink, nudge, nudge.' Oh dear, I'm sorry I said that. And so I said, "If you can deliver Britten", I said, "I'll give you a three programme contract." And sure enough, he brought Britten and then when Basil did *Billy Budd* it was magnificent. It was a tremendously good- Anyway, Basil was very good director. And he did some very fine things for me. So that's how we did Britten. Anyway, so I was in charge of opera as well. Well it's a big subject that you want me to talk about, The BBC, I don't know, I mean, what to say.

24:03

NS: Well what is particularly interesting, I suppose, historically, what people remember, is the kind of oh, like, *Cathy Come Home*, like that area, you know? Which are single plays and Kenith Trodd and Tony Garnett and-

24:17

SN: Ah, okay. I'm with you.

Well, my big problem, of course, was the thing that was close to my heart, which was … which was the single play. And the first year I appointed a producer. And I in fact, gave him exactly the same terms of reference I had myself followed. It should be alive, fast moving, contemporary, and deal with a turning point in British society. And he did not do a very good job. He did do such a bad job in fact. For example, for five weeks, week after week, there was a play about some dispute on a factory floor. What audience is gonna watch for five weeks in a row, bloody drama on a factory floor? And I also realised that I couldn't run the single plays to cock. It was all too big a job. So I finally got Michael Bakewell, whom I stole: he was Deputy Head of Drama for radio

under Martin Esslin. So I convinced him to come and join and be Head of Drama, head of single plays department. And he didn't cut the mustard. Too sweet, a guy too gentle. He's got to be a bastard to run talent, you know, and so on. And I forget exactly how it came about, but I had to get in there. And so I finally grabbed Jimmy MacTaggart, whom I had become friends with and his work I loved very, very much. And I said, "Jimmy, you're a good director. But I want you to be a producer. I want you to take over the single play drama. The contemporary series." We were doing other single plays, you know, for BBC Two. We did one called *Story Parade* which was dramatisations from contemporary novels. And so we did other single strands, but the major one was the contemporary one and- I and Jimmy said he would take it on for two years. I told him exactly what I wanted, which was exactly what I had been doing on *Armchair Theatre*. And God bless him. He did what became the *Wednesday Play*. And he did exactly what I had been doing, but he did it in his own way. His stuff was lively, was contemporary was fast. It was amusing, at times. And it was he who brought in Tony Garnett. He brought Tony, he said "I need a story editor and I don't like the guy I've got, who's that old fashioned. And said, I said "okay, I'll agree with that, got someone in mind?" He said, "I think I know a kid who might be good-"

NS: A kid!

SN: and he brought- Well Tony Garnett was a kid then: he was just an actor who had just been in the David Mercer trilogy. And so I'd seen him and I met him and I liked him. And so I said, "Okay, well hire him and we did hire him. And then of course, you see, the important thing about being a boss is you've got to hire the best bloody people you got. And if you hire good people, you're a winner. And I hired a good guy. But I made some good choices at the BBC. And I hired MacTaggart, MacTaggart brought in Tony Garnett. And when Garnett became producer, the *Wednesday Play,* who did he bring in? Kenith Trodd.

27:55

So, all these things this, parlayed one above the other. I'm really rambling all over the bloody place.

NS: No you're not, not at all. But this-?

SN: Oh, yeah. So he just did a good job.

28:11

And then he found lots of new writers because the rule was original writing [only]. I wouldn't allow dramatisations from anything. And he brought in Jeremy Sandford, Nell Dunn

NS: Nell Dunn, yes.

SN: Other writers are now known turned up every now and then, excellence turned up every now and then.

28:37

Well, that's another amusing thing is that, you know, I never- the only person I stole from ABC to come to the BBC was Verity Lambert. She was just a production assistant.

NS: Was she?

SN: She was just a PA yeah. But when I was allowed. Again, I was stuck with this bloody staff that I couldn't move in the BBC. But the moment I got a 40% increase in staff a) I was able to promote juniors who had been waiting for years a chance to direct so promoted a lot of them inside the place. But [b)] they all came over from ABC, the whole bloody bunch, Charlie Jarrott, Allen Cook, Ted Kotcheff. And who have I left out? [mutters] Charles Jarrott, Ted Kotcheff…

NS: Philip Saville?

SN: And Philip! They all moved over with me. Irene Shubik begged me for a job. So she came over. Peter Luke begged me for a job. He came with them. I made them both-, they were my story editors you see. I made them both producers. And it was only Verity that I snaffled. You know, she was just a PA. So, it didn't matter that I'm still true to ABC. Because *Doctor Who* was a story by itself, as indeed, I haven't really talked at all about the creation of *The Avengers.* Because both *The Avengers* - I mean I, I, pride myself that I was involved in England's biggest sellers abroad in television: *Doctor Who* which lasts what? 24 years or whatever –

NS: Still going on.

SN: *The Avengers*, which made more money for that bloody company of mine. And *The Forsyte Saga*, which opened up a classic theatre, whatever it was called.

NS: Yes, I was going to ask you about *The Forsyte Saga*. Can you tell us something about that? It's very famous series, isn't it.

SN: But I will tell you about it and I tell you a terrific story about it, but where was I? I was still talking about *The Wednesday Play,* had we finished with that?

AL: Coming over from ABC.

SN: Yeah, that's right. And, and of course, what's his name? Who works with Tony Garnett?

AL: Loach.

SN: Yeah, Kenny Loach: he had been a director of *Z-Cars*. Well, with MacTaggart. MacTaggart said "I want Loach and Loach moved over into *The Wednesday Play.* And a lot of other bright young guys were moved over: Waris Hussein [BEHP Interview No 655] was also a director of ordinary stuff. And and, of course, Nell Dunn, wrote *Up The Junction*, which caused great furore on which awakened Mrs. Mary-

NS: Whitehouse.

SN: Mrs Mary Shithouse. [laughter] And all that crap went on. And of course, it was a wonderful production, a wonderful play, beautifully directed. And, and then David Mercer wrote *In Two Minds,* which was the story of that dramatises the schizophrenic symptoms of Laing's theory, which worried me about letting it go out, we used to have a rule in the Drama Department that in fact, it was currency of the BBC that any - that, well, I emphasised that my department that all producers were responsible for what they put on the air. But if they were going to do something which they thought was going to be controversial, which was going to get the BBC or the Drama Department in disfavour, they had to report it to me in advance.

NS: That's what we used to call voluntary reference upwards.

SN: Exactly. Very important in drama. And they rarely, I think, in a whole four years, five years at the BBC, I think only maybe three cases were referred upwards. One of them was *In Two Minds*. And when I saw this wonderful play, beautifully acted, I was sick, because - frightened stiff, because the play ends on the most hopeless note of this girl, who at the beginning of the play is quite a nice girl, is having trouble with their mother and father. At the end of the thing she's a gibbering idiot with spit coming on her mouth. And she's on stage. This pompous doctor is talking about her as if she's a piece of red meat. She's

just degenerated into it. And the whole play seems to be was an indictment against the whole psychiatric side of the medical profession.

33:16

Not only psychiatric, but the way they use drugs to pacify the patients, and I was worried sick because I'd had experience in Canada with a play about a mentally ill patient. And I knew bloody well that the that the statistics in England were probably the same as in Canada. That is, one family out of five has probably got somebody in it who was emotionally disturbed. And this play left no hope that the audience would feel that, that the medical profession cannot be trusted. And this is a typical thing. So I went upstairs to I forget who the programme controller was, whether it was Paul Fox or Michael Peacock. I think it was, of BBC One. And I said, "Look, I've got this play that worries me." And Huw Wheldon was Controller of Programmes. And I said "I want you to see it." So, they saw it. We discussed it. And I told them why I was worried about it. And they said I think [muddled]. They said they're worried too. "So, what we'll do is we'll put it out." But in - and what's that thing they used to do at night? Eleven o'clock, what was it called? Late Night?

AL: [In background] A late night slot wasn't it?

SN: Whatever it was. So we'll have a discussion.

NS: [Interrupting] Yes, yes, sorry. *Late Night Line-Up*.

SN: [Continues] We'll bring in the chief psychiatrist – that's right - of Middlesex Hospital. That's right. We'll bring in Tony Garnett, who directed - not Tony but to Ken Loach who directed it, will bring in Laing, the psychiatrist on whose theory it was based and discussion was held, which took a lot of the steam out of the basic attacks. But that was an interesting example of my referring something upward, something referred to me and I referred it upwards. A good solution was found. And it calmed everybody down. I remember that after that summer, middle, toward the end of August, I used to go to give a big press conference about all the total plans and drama for both BBC One and BBC Two.

NS: Which year are we now in?

SN: I would say that about we were past like '67?

NS: You've been known for four years by now.

SN: By now yeah. And maybe it was ‘66.

NS: Never mind anyway doesn’t matter that period. And drama-, I'm a very experienced Head of Drama group. And I got everything going, everything's going beautifully. We're winning all down the line. And I had seen *Cathy Come Home.* It wasn't referred to me, but I was just curious about it. Because I used to get reports every week about progress of every producer. And I used to have them follow up and I was very well organised. They used to meet the producers, once every four weeks. And I used to meet the departmental heads, the three of them every Monday morning. And I used to meet the directors four times a year. So that's how I kept control over the whole bloody place. But always working through the drama heads, the three departmental heads never cutting across their lines. There's another story I could tell you about that. To my great regret. Anyway, I saw *Cathy Come Home*, I thought it's absolutely fucking marvellous. So when I gave this press conference, I said, “Paul”, and I said, “if you liked *Up the Junction*,” [to] this room full of press people, I said, Wait until, you see what we got coming up, a thing called “*Cathy Come Home.*” and Marsland Gander: Remember him? He used to be the doyen of critics for the [Daily] Telegraph. He said, “Sydney” he said, “What do you call that kind of drama? I mean, I mean, is it real? Is it documentary? We don't know how to refer to- I don't know how to refer to it when I write my articles.” I said, “Well call it agitational contemporaneity.” [laughter] Great laughter. And that Sunday, Morris Wiggin-

NS: Sunday Times.

SN: Sent me up. He really sent me up rotten for inventing words that didn't exist like contemporaneity. And he hadn't been, he wasn't even at the press conference. The next day, Marsland Gander really went after me said, Newman used this thing and his contemporaneity. I looked up in the dictionary, he said, that was first used in 1865 by Cardinal Newman, [laughter]

37:56

NS: Another Newman!

SN: Cardinal Newman. And then, of course, *Cathy Come Home*, went on the air. And of course, it was simply staggering in its impact. And I think much of it is due to the extraordinary performances that Loach is able to get out of actors in which they simply don't look as if they're acting. And you know, [Carol] White, the girl who played the, you know, she was nothing but a ‘titty’ starlet

when he found her. And the performance is unbelievable. And, of course, some of the children were his own kids, you know, and, but there was a great furore inside the BBC, about that play because of the mixture of fact and fiction-

NS: Yeah, and television theology.

SN: Yeah. Were you there at the time?

NS: Yeah.

SN: Were you possibly at the meeting?

NS: Oh, sorry, it was '67 wasn't it?

SN: Thereabouts, yeah

NS: No, I was at Granada, then.

SN: I see. And the discussion was as - the result was this, that all the visuals were accurate and so on. But the voice over. Kenny Loach had used actual interviews with real social service workers and that's that was real. So, the result of that great big long discussion was that I was we were never to mix reality with 'contrived' reality.

NS: Why not?

SN: Simple? Well, well, we're talking about '66-'67: everything we were doing you're doing it for the first time. Nowadays of course you do anything you bloody well want. By the way, I personally didn't like the *Stalker* programme [This is a reference to a programme about John Stalker a senior policeman. DS] I thought it was beautifully done. But I think that is a mistake. Because I think that when you're representing real people, who are alive, living in a real situation, as does exist in Ulster. I think you're falsifying the situation no matter how technically accurate you are, because the actors are not the real people. Now, for example, I assume you saw it did you?

NS: Yes.

SN: I mean, [Justice] Harman. I don't know what kind of man Harman is. But I wouldn't trust Harman any further than I could throw that sofa you're sitting on. And you know why? Because TP McKenna, the actor, I would never use TP McKenna unless he's a character who was [in] a good and kind of slimy part. He's a marvellous actor but there is something about the cut of his face. That

means he's sly: his eyes. So therefore, Harman couldn't help but be invested with the characteristics of that actor, which therefore denied me the objectivity of the so-called facts of the situation. So that's my attitude about it. I'm a documentary guy, love documentary, but I would not dramatise real people who are living today. That's me, I can be wrong. People disagree with me. Anyway, that's *Cathy Come Home*.

I don't know there are dozens of stories I could tell about separate plays. I mentioned earlier about this matter referral upwards. And this is a very good story. Who's the guy who wrote *There's a Girl in my Soup*?

NS: Not Arnold Wesker was it? [Terence Frisby. DS]

SN: No, no, no. Anyway, there was a top play on the West End, *There's a Girl in my Soup*. And that writer came to -one day I'm sitting in my office and my secretary said, "Jimmy Brabazon wants to see you". And I knew Jimmy: Jimmy in fact, I had known from the old days of ABC. So, I said, "Sure, show him in." So, Jimmy came in and he was story editor on the *Wednesday Play* at the time. He said "Sydney, I really shouldn't be doing this because I'm really going against Gerald Savory. He was the boss. But there's a -there's something nasty coming up. And I think I'm - Don't- leave me out of it, but I just want you to know something's gonna happen. I said, "Oh, really well, like what?" he said, "Well", he said, "so I'm story editor of a play by this guy who wrote *There's a Girl in My Soup."* And he said to me, that there is a certain line of dialogue that he felt the BBC would want to cut if it appears in the play, but if the BBC was going to cut it, he wouldn't sell it to the BBC. It was a play he was going to write. So Jimmy Brabazon said, "Well, what's the - what's the line?"

42:47

[aside] I'm not going to tell you the line because it's a good story.

So Jimmy said, "Well, it's a comedy. I mean, I don't see anything offensive about the line." So the guy said "Great, I'll now write the play." So, he writes the play. And here's what the play was about. The play was about this woman. This illiterate woman, very impoverished background and pregnant with quintuplets, which comes to the ears of an advertising agency, and they go to this woman and they buy the rights to photograph the quintuplets when they're born, and use them for selling nappies and baby food and everything, cribs and so forth. So, the show was cast, it gets into production. Gerald Savory, the Head of Department gets hold of a copy of the script as was his

wont, to just read the script. He reads this line, gets in touch with the producer: “Cut that line.” This gets moved down to Jimmy Brabazon, who says “there was a book- I convinced, I told him this line was not, it was not an offensive line.” And the producer absolutely agreed with- I forget whether Jimmy MacTaggart was the producer I can't remember now.

NS: I don’t know.

SN: And so, I, so, I thank Jimmy Brabazon for warning me about this. And he said “Gerald Savory wants that line cut.” I said, “I see, I see.” He said “It'll make us look like fools. They make me look like a fool for having said there was nothing offensive about the line.” I said, “Okay, play with me.”

End of Side 3

BEHP Interview 0145 Sydney Newman Side 4

AL: Side 4

SN: Okay, so yeah, so on my Monday morning meeting was coming up with Savory, so he came in, “How are things going?” he said,” Oh, fine.” “Any trouble?” “No, no.” So, I have the list of upcoming productions, and say what about this one here? “Oh, yes, a bit of trouble.” He says “There’s an offensive line and I'm having it cut.” I said, “Well, what is it?” So he described the play. I said, “Oh, let me read the script.” So, he gets a script to me. I read it: Brabazon is right, the producers right, the directors right, Gerald Savory’s full of shit. There's nothing offensive about that line. And this is what it was: when this woman is about to give birth. The advertising agents [arranged] a great big press conference with newsreel cameras. She’s going to be interviewed live on television. And he says to her- and he’s a kind of Eamon Andrews type. And she's totally gormless, naïve twit of a ragamuffin of a girl with a big belly out with five babies. And he says, “Well,” he says, “Where's the happy father? Why don't we see the happy ones?” “Oh, sir,” I won't do the cockney accent. “He is on Her Majesty’s service. He's in Hong Kong, sir.” “I see. I see. And how long have you been married?” “Oh, we're not married.” And the advertising agency guys are going bonkers! These five are going to be- . And, and the Eamon Andrews guy, all flustered said, “Oh, well. I mean, how’d that happen?” She said, “Oh, he told me it couldn't happen if you do it standing up.” And that was the so-called dirty line. And I said to Gerald, I said, “Gerald, it's a funny line in a

funny play. Nobody could make, take, offence to that." He said "I'm sorry Sydney we will get into trouble with that." I said "I don't" - I said "You're crazy." He said, "Sydney, you're wrong." I said, "Okay. I'm going to give you an executor," - I used to have a phrase that nobody had do what I told him unless I said that's an executive decision. I said, "Supposing I tell you, I'm going to make an executive decision?" He said, "Well", he said, obviously, I'll follow what you're saying. But you know what it'll do. It'll make me look like a monkey in front of the whole staff of the Drama, of the whole Single Plays Department. If I ever criticise anything, they'll, they'll say, "Well, we'll go to Newman, and he'll change things." And I knew he was right. I couldn't demean this most important guy I had: Gerald. So, you probably know, Gerald, don't you? Sure.

NS: Yes.

SN: So I said, Oh, shit. All right. Leave them okay. I called in the producer and I said, "I'm sorry. I can't convince Gerald and I've got to go along with Gerald on it." "Sydney you can't do that it'll kill the whole bloody [thing]. I said "Okay." So I got in touch with the - it was Harvey Unna was the writers agent. I took Harvey to lunch. I totally explained all this. I said "Convinced them…, the author to cut the line." Unna tried and came and said "I'm sorry. He won't do it." I said "Okay." And I knew the author, I took him to lunch. I couldn't convince him either. I then finally said to the agent, I said, "I'm sorry, we're gonna put the show up and cut the line." And there was a great furore. And then I told the guys I said, I made a deal. I said, "Look, shoot that scene twice. Once with the line, once without the line." You know what the idiots did? It was the climactic, it was the climax of the scene. They didn't replace the scene. They just simply shot it without the line. So, it ended dead. And we- so I told the author and his agent that we're going to put the play out without the line. With the line, sorry. And he took out an injunction. The BBC fought it. And we lost. And I had to wipe the whole show. And £18,000 above the line went down the drain. And the show never went out, and I did this just to save Gerald Savory's name and the Department's. [Sympathetic agreement from Norman Swallow]

But you have to that kind of thing every now and then, you know.

Got- so we want to talk about- oh, I love this story.

NS: *Forsyte Saga*. You mentioned.

SN: Right. Donald Wilson was approaching 60 years of age and was retiring. And he wanted a real sweetener in his retirement. He came to me with the idea that he wanted to do *The Forsyte Saga*. I said “Are you crazy. Who wants that piece of - that soap opera?”

5:00

Let me explain the reasons for my comment. … BBC One ran the children's classical dramas with the Dickens, *Water Babies*, that kind of stuff. So, when we started BBC Two I said “Let's do an adult Classic Series: we will dramatise the best classical books.” So we did Zola, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Verlaine and so on: great classic writers, Henry James and so on. But at least - so the point is, if I asked you the question, how do you define a classic? So, we decided that anything written after 1900, or [rather] anything written before 1900, which was still regarded as good literature today, we regard as a classic; fair enough, right? So, he wants to do Galsworthy. I said, “Listen, *Forsyte Saga*, a) Galsworthy is not a great classical writer: he's a popular writer; b), he's written some worthwhile stage plays with some social relevance, but who gives a damn?” I said, “Besides, he's a 20th century writer. Definitely. No.” Donald said “Sydney, his stuff is so beautiful. It's such wonderful drama.” I said, “No, no.” He said, “I'll write you a script. And you'll see what I'm talking about.” So, I kill a whole month, he comes back with the script, and I read it. And then “Donald, your full of shit.” I said “This play is you got – you’re introducing 30 characters, what member of the audience is going to get fastened on to any of the characters, it's all spread out?” He said “Sydney, the narrative power in this” - he said, “I'll get you two more scripts.”

So, I kill another two months, he comes back. And any day he's about to retire you see and I still haven't found a replacement for him. And he comes out with two more scripts. I said, “Well, Donald, you're beginning to-” Oh, yeah, another rule that we, that I, had imposed, that no serial could last longer than between four and six episodes. Knowing that in a serial, if you lay an egg in episode one, you're dead for the rest of it. So, when he gives me the two scripts, he said “This, this could go eight, ten episodes.” I said, “The hell with that.” I read these two other scripts. And I said, “You know, Donald, I must confess, it is beginning to really grow on me.” But he's not a good writer. He said, “Sydney, it's so wonderful. It'll go, it'll go for sixteen episodes. It's so good.” And he really gives me a big argument. And I say, “Alright, I'll make a deal with you. If you can come back with two really big names. I'll go with it”. For 16 episodes.

Two days later, he came back with Kenneth Moore and Susan Hampshire. And he had me fucked. And then he said, “It's gotta go twenty-six episodes.” Here's the capper. This is a good story. I then went upstairs to [Michael] Peacock because it was a BBC Two programme. It was in the last days of black and white too, unfortunately. And I said, “Michael, you're the only one who can stop me from doing what I want. On your channel. It’s your money.” I said, “Michael, I just committed an expenditure of £1,250,000 for a 26 weeks serial.” “Have you really?” he said “What is it?” I said *The Forsyte Saga*.” [shouts] “That is a brilliant idea! Brilliant!” And that is the story of *The Forsyte Saga.*

But let me finish this story. This was 19 what 66, 67. Many years later, I'm Canadian Government Film Commissioner, I’m Mr. Big in film in Canada. And I'm invited to go to the Soviet Union to make a speech before their All-Cinema Club. You can't get in unless you're an autonomous republic. So, Sydney Newman, Government Film Commissioner of the Canadian government goes to Moscow. I'm sitting up on the stage and am being introduced in Russian. And that is 1973 or 74. And it's suddenly in the middle of this introduction, which I don't understand, is a big round of applause. I turned to my translator I said, “What was just said, what was said?” [They] said that I was responsible for *The Forsyte Saga*. You're nodding here as if I've told you the story before. Have I?

NS: No.

10:01

SN: I didn't even know that it had played in Russia. Anyway, I made my speech, then the next day I was given lunch by the Canadian ambassador. And I told him this crazy story. I said, “I didn't even know *The Forsyte Saga* had played.” and he said, “Oh, Sydney,” he said “it was tremendously popular, everybody talked about it the following day, it ran every Tuesday night.” He said, “I remember, they talked about everything.” He said, “You know, you'd think they were gonna, they want to kill it.” I said, “Why?” He said, “Well, they didn't subtitle it. And they didn't dub it. They had a simultaneous translation, a woman did a simultaneous translation, like at the United Nations.” And I said, “I can't understand why it was so popular.” I said, Well, you know, Sydney,” he said, “There are three English authors that the Russians adore.” I said, “Okay, Shakespeare who else is in?” “Dickens, and Galsworthy.” “Why Galsworthy?” “Well Sydney,” he said “If you think of *The Forsyte Saga*, it's, it's, it's a man- it's

about property. It's about the takeover of society by the burgeoning middle business class, taking it away from the aristocracy, which epitomises the Marxian theory of the bourgeoisie taking on the-" I said "Oh, for God's sakes, so if so, so he was a Marxist, was he Galsworthy?" But it's an amazing story. And of course, it played in 40, 50 countries. And it's probably the most singular most success the BBC had, you know, what started the whole, it opened the door to British drama in the United States.

11:41

AL: I made the international soundtracks for it.

SN: Did you, did you, did you?

NS: So you've continued in the BBC?

SN: That's right. 50, 70, no sorry, until '68.

NS: Aha.

SN: And then again, the same itchy feet. Everything's going perfectly and I'm getting a little bored. It's all so gorgeously organised, when I get a phone call from Robert Clark's secretary. And, you know, who Robert Clark is, you know, he was now, he had just been made the Managing Director of Associated British Picture Corporation. And he was the guy who stopped me from leaving the company in 1962. And the old fart phones me up, his secretary does and he wants to take me to lunch. And-

NS: Another lunch!

SN: He turns up at the White City, at the BBC headquarters, in about a 1950 Rolls Royce with an old guy driving. And I get in and he asked me to find the restaurant. I took [him to] the restaurant in the middle of Holland Park. And we have lunch and he invites me to go out to Elstree and be his chief producer. At feature films, well, boy, that was really something, and I was ready for it. And my contract, my five-year contract with the BBC was coming up for termination. So, I told him this, I said that my contract is up on December. And we negotiated and he paid me a fucking whopping big amount of money for a three-year contract. By the way, I should say, by the way, remember, I said that ABC, were going to give me if I, if I left England within three months, they were going to give me-

[NS assents].

SN: Do you know the BBC granted me the same thing?

NS: Another-

S**N**: Oh, I didn't tell you about the first meeting here with Huw Greene. I must tell you!

NS: Yes, please. Yes. Let's go back to that.

SN: That's very important. As I waited 14 months, finally I was freed. Kenneth Adam said "You come to the BBC," I think it was a day or two after Boxing Day around Christmas time or something. He said "You come to the BBC at seven o'clock- at 7.30 at night or something, when Huw Greene will be finished with his Board of Governors meeting." So I turned up at the BBC and was met down below by the secretary: the place was quiet at that hour. Went up the lift to Kenneth Adam's office, all dark, someone's table lamp going and they're boozing it up. And then suddenly, there's a sort of a rustle, and the door opens in this great big fucking giant comes in, ducks his head. And he comes toward me and I jumped to my feet, of course, and, and we shake hands. I'm looking up like this [gestures].

NS: Yes.

SN: And then we both sit down, but he did something that I thought so magnificent. He slid right down in his seat until his head was equal to mine, at the same level as mine. And I thought, what a wonderful guy that he didn't want me to look up to him. And we talked and he said, he said, "I've just finished the Board of Governors meeting, the Board of Governors has approved you're being taken on. And therefore, it is my great pleasure to offer you the job as Head of Drama." And I said, "Well, stop one moment." I said, "You know, I'm very disappointed at the money. I said, as you know, I'm dropping." And I figured out I'm dropping about £3000 a year, taking into account the interest on the mortgage and all that. And he said, "Sydney," he said, "I want to assure you, that we are paying you the highest amount equal to what we're paying some of our controllers." I said, "Well, okay, I accept." And I reached out, and we shook hands. And we talked a bit and then I said, "Are there any sort of Terms of Reference you want to give me, or any specific task? You know?" He said, "Yes." He said, "You're known for all the writers you brought into television." He said, "Do you know most of them got all got their start on BBC Radio?" He said, "I want you to bring them back to television, our service, and I want you to find as many more new writers as you can. By the

way," he said, "We found them all on BBC Radio, we want them back in the television service." And it was really tremendous. And I went home just sailing, you know, feeling so good. So I thought I'd tell you that very important story.

NS: Yeah. Very good. Thank you.

16:39

Yeah.

NS: We are now back to [Robert] Clark. The feature film business.

SN: So I finished at the Beeb, and - Huw Greene- usually when a senior person leaves the television service, you know, Kenneth Adam usually throws a party for 'em, a dinner party. Huw Greene hosted my party. Honest, and, and [it] was wonderful was great. You know, you know what those dinners are like with umpteen wines. And it's just magnificent kitchen they have up there. And it was a lovely evening and lovely speeches and everything was just really great. And I went out to Elstree and spent a fortune on actually a marvellous office must have cost him £20,000 for my office. I didn't stint any money knowing the private sector, they've got tons of money, which they love spending on that. I immediately bought myself another Jaguar for their money. And, and I went to work and I worked out a three-year plan. And the plan was that the first year, I would do no production. But I would finish, I would have one completed script budgeted. I'd have a second script completed in the stage of budgeting. And the third year- in the second year, I would shoot two films and get the other two scripts ready now and produce four films, four films in the three years. And I figured I had time to burn and besides, I had the big boss himself loved me, Ken- er, er, Clark and

18:18

AL: Robert, Robert.

SN: Robert, not Kenneth Clark.

NS: Not the same Clarke.

SN: Would you believe it? At the end of my first year. The Board approved my first script. And I was dickering to get Michael Caine to play the lead, it was a lovely script. And they approved my expenses, which believe it or not was £369,000.

NS: Sorry, what was it?

SN: A feature film.

NS: Which?

SN: Well, it was never made. Oh,-

18:47

NS: [interrupts] No, sorry. As a matter of interest.

SN: I forget.

NS: Who was the author?

SN: Peter Luke was the author, but it was based on a book.

NS: Yes.

SN: But I got Peter Luke to write it. And so just around Christmas time, but exactly 12 months after I'd been there, I got approval to shoot my first picture. And I planned to shoot it in April. And three weeks later, EMI bought up Associated British Picture Corporation. And Robert Clark was dumped right out. And Bernard Delfont came in. And the first thing he did was, he fired my entire staff. He didn't fire me because I had a very ironclad contract. And then he brought in Brian Forbes to do my job. And I went to Delfont and I said, "What about me?" And he said, "Well, he said I want you to take over the whole section of making films for television; it's a medium you know, Brian Forbes, a feature film guy, you know television, you will do it. I accepted that. I was a bit unhappy, but I accepted that. And he never made an announcement. And I nailed him at the Cannes Film Festival and he said, "Oh, I'll make the announcement as soon as we get back, Sydney." And two weeks later, he called me into his office, and he said, "Sydney, we've decided we're not going to be doing any films for television. So I think you'd better go to Jimmy McDonald, who was the Comptroller of Finance and settle up your contract with them. So, I had – all - everything was gone. Even though David, David Attenborough phoned me and said that he was moving up to become controller of all programmes. Huw Wheldon had been promoted to become director of managing, Managing Director of Television. So David moved up to be our programme-

20:47

NS: Director of television, David was Director of Programmes.

SN: Well, whatever, the title took place after the thing, and he said, “I want to put your name on the shortlist as Controller of BBC Two.” I said, “I'm sorry, David. I've had television. I don't want it.” And I tried at that time to strike a deal with Oscar Lowenstein, who was one of the most spectacular promoters of plays in the West End. I knew him socially. We were good friends. And he was of course, also in the film business because he had made *Tom Jones,* one of the big box office hits that England ever had. And - but he said, “Sydney,” he said, “I'm a loner,” he said, “I don't want a partner.” He said, “If I had a partner it would be you, but I don't want any partner.” And I tried a few other things, too, wasn't getting anywhere. When I got a call to come to Canada to become Joint National Controller of Programmes with the CBC - television. I went there and sort of smelled out the situation, didn't like it, looked up the head of the Canadian Radio and Television Commission who was an old friend of mine. That commission is like the IBA here, except in Canada it’s over both the CBC and the commercial sector. So, he convinced me to work for him to write the Canadian content regulations, and he'll pay to bring my wife and family and goods to Canada. So, I left England in 1970.

SN: And I worked for Pierre, Pierre Juneau was his name, Head of the Canadian Radio and Television Commission for five, six months: did a good job. They accepted most of my regulations, not all of them, which was fair enough, because he had a committee - was a Commission you see. And, and then I told him, although I had a year's contract with him, I told him that, I said, “Pierre,” I use the old English cliche, I said, “I'm really a better poacher than a gamekeeper. So, your job here is like being a policeman. And I'd rather make things.” So he- and I said, “I'll see out my year with you, though. But I'll be giving you a warning that I'll leave at the end of the year, I won't renew.” And he was very sweet. And three weeks later, my wife and I were on holiday and I got a phone call from the Under Secretary of State, for the arts, etc. in Canada, a very nice man I'd known called Jules Léger. Later on became the first Canadian, became the Governor General of Canada, actually. And he was at that time as Under Secretary of State. That's, in Canada, that's like a Permanent Secretary in England.

NS: Yes, yes.

SN: And he said, “Would I like my name to go forward as the next Head of the National Film Board?” I said, “You bet!” It's where I was born. What a great honour. And a week later, he phoned me and he said, “Well, I want you to

come meet my minister." So I went up and met Gérard Pelletier, who was a very close friend of Pierre Elliott Trudeau's. And he interviewed me and he said, "You got the job." And I said, "What about the money?" [chuckles] He said, "Negotiate with Jules Léger. And I did and I discovered what my predecessor who was not very good [got]. In fact, he got fired. And my predecessor was earning $24,500 a year; dollars, dollars!

NS: Hm.

SN: And it was just peanuts like £12,000. I said, "Ouch. I don't want it." And we had a great old negotiating session, I finally got up to 32,500 with the status of a Permanent Secretary, the lowest grade, Permanent Secretary. I turned up at the Film Board and they absolutely loved me because for the first time since Grierson they had a Film Commissioner who had a reputation, had a creative reputation. And I was the seventh Film Commissioner. So many years had gone by; and to my luck, Grierson was in Montreal, teaching at McGill University. And of course, I've been seeing him all through my years in England. So, there was my old my old master, just around the corner as it were. And I inherited the National Film Board, which was now about 1100 people, offices all over the bloody world. And Canada alone they had about 30 offices, you know, with libraries, you see repositories of them all over the place. And we had a budget about $10 ½ million a year. And five years later, when I left the Film Board, I had managed to screw out of the government up to 25 million a year. So it was great success in that way.

But unfortunately, I became Government Film Commissioner at the worst possible time. It was the time of the profound discontent of the French Canadians who want to separate from Canada. And six weeks after I became Government Film Commissioner, - the staff loved me -. Six weeks after I was promoted, appointed, the British trade commissioner, Cross, [James Richard Cross. DS] was kidnapped, which you may recall. This is 1970. And two weeks later, and held hostage, and two weeks later, a Quebec Cabinet Minister of Labour was assassinated by the French-Canadian separatists. And here was me who couldn't speak a word of French. My staff were 50%, French-Canadian, and a hard core, probably 20 of them, set out to make my life an absolute misery. And I couldn't call them sons of bitches in their own language, and three quarters of them spoke English better than I did! But they refuse to speak anything but their native French, their first language.

And then the second trouble I got into when I took that job was that the first thing I did was I spent the first two months screening every film they had made within the last 10 years. And, being a methodical guy, I made notes on the films, every film, and I drew certain conclusions. And I got up, I called a whole staff together in the major, the big film studio, had over 800 people there. And I made a speech I laid down the law I said “I've seen-”, Well, one thing I said “you’re-” I said “you're all foolish on the question of television.” they wouldn't have their films go on television, because they were worried about commercial insertions, it would spoil the beauty of their work. I said “Nonsense. We need audiences.” If Grierson could trade with the devil by dealing with cheap Jack commercial distributors and cinemas, why can't we deal with the CBC and commercial television? If you've got commercial breaks, you design your programme around it. I've learned in fact it can enhance the programme.

NS: Well you’d that from *Armchair Theatres*.

SN Yes, exactly. Well, also, my General Motors stuff in Canada, with Procter and Gamble and the other stuff I'd done. And they sat there listening, and I said, “I've seen 249 films. And I'll tell you this, I'm happy to tell you this, that about 15 of those 249 are among the finest documentaries I've seen anywhere in the world. I'll tell you another thing: about another 40 of them are as good as anything made anywhere in the world. As for the other 200: so they're pedestrian. They're ordinary. They don't sparkle. But one thing I'll say about all, all, your work, they stink of probity.” And there was a silence, you could have heard a pin drop in that studio. And I finished my, my, speech which went on for about an hour and a half. Because the very important thing was my real big- I'd been there about three months. And the head of the creative Union. There was one union, [for] the creative and technical [staff], one Union. The guy got up, grabbed the microphone. No, I when I finished, I said “Okay, now let's, throw questions at me. Let's have a- bat some ideas back and forth.” The head of the Union got up and he refused. He's he said “I want no member of my union to ask Mr. Newman a question after his insulting speech.” They were so fucking militant and, and, the French vice-president got up and said, repeated, the same thing in French. I had steam coming out of my ears. I was so fucking angry. By the way, I've got a tape of that. They taped it. I know: a videotape.

30:15

NS: Oh really.

SN: I've got it at home in Toronto. [Alan Lawson laughing in background]

And the man they loved when I turned up, they hated. I had one fuck of a five years, I wasted the first 18 months coping with a French-Canadian problem. I have tremendous fights. And of course, as you know, Quebec was occupied by the Canadian Army. Trudeau sent the Army in and I was protected for six months, I had a guy with a gun in his holster: all of a sudden, I had the, probably, the first car in Canada that had central locking. Because the moment I get in the car, he'd press a button and all windows, with all the doors, would lock, so I can be protected. And I had a little toggle switch, and so did he, which had a siren in the car. So, if anyone tried to break in the car, the siren would go off. And this went on for six months. And of course, I kept the car with a chauffeur for the rest of the five years that I had was which was my term. But I'll tell you what, I didn't do badly in the final analysis because I instituted some fast programmes about language learning films. And I opened regional production offices across Canada. I had a contract with the CBC. So we get our stuff on the CBC. They were always jealous of the Film Board, they still are, you know. And the women's unit, a women's production unit was created in my day. I increased our money or more than doubled our money in the five years. And then, the five years came to an end, which is the proper five-year term. And my deputy became Government Film Commissioner and then, but I was [called by] the Secretary of State who wanted me to work for him. So, I went to Ottawa and became his, his, film chief, as it were, and as a Permanent Secretary. So I was Permanent Secretary in the Canadian government for seven years. But the two years in Ottawa were wasted time I did nothing. And mainly because the Secretary of State, he said "Sydney" he said "The cabinet." he said, "I'm the lowest man on the totem pole." He said "Whatever I want in the way of the arts," he said, "every other department gets prior consideration," which is probably true in England from under Thatcher's government. And, and this was, we're now down to 1977, five years to Film Board, two years in London, in Ottawa, and I moved back to my old house in Toronto, which I had never sold. I should mention, too, that my wife became very, very ill in the last year in England, which is one of the reasons we moved back to Canada, only one. And she – it took her 12 ½ years to die, actually. So, when we moved back to Toronto, she was pretty weak. And I'd, I retired, I was 57 –

33:20

That was '77 How old would I have been?

NS: 74. That would be 1974. You were born 1917.

S**N:** Yeah. So, this we're now talking about 1977. So how old would I have been?

NS: 60.

SN: Just about. So I decided to retire. And, and then immediately the federal government agency for supporting film, the Canadian Film Development Corporation, offered me a job as their Chief Creative Consultant on a three day a week basis, and they paid me very good money. So I was back in the film business, but good and did this for about four years but got bored and bored. And I thought I'd come back to England when my wife died.

Well, there it is, fellas. What's left out?

34:10

NS: Well, what happened then? You're here now. You have done some work since you came back. I mean, you mentioned the opera.

SN: Well, I don't know [they talk over each other] …

This is where, this is where I will get nasty because I had a partnership with Colin Callender. Jeremy Isaacs, I will put this on the record was very, very, marvellous to me when I arrived. And he gave me a whopping sum of money. Because a) while he didn't like my idea, he thought he'd back me anyway because I had an idea I wanted to do a series on the Bloomsbury Group. I may have mentioned this to you. Because I have a concept about the Group as a series of intermingling, of interdependence, of one character on another and as evidenced by the fact that, you know, the, the creator of the British Arts Council was, you know, Maynard Keynes, who was an economist. So why is an economist creating an Arts Council? That's because he was sleeping with, with Craig the, what's his name, the artist [Duncan Grant may be the person Sydney is trying to remember. DS] and he was, he was homosexual. And of course, he's with Virginia Woolf in which they talked art and so on. ... Yeah. And that was the interdependence that made these a wonderful group. And they, of course, were, they, they, had the first exhibition of Modern Art, of French Impressionism in England, and so on, so forth. So, I had this idea.

And well, while Jeremy didn't quite like the idea, he wanted me in England, but he gave me a thing to do four drama documentaries, on Amnesty International cases. And I needed a company to be partners with, a British company because

he could even want to give money to a foreigner, you see. So I have formed a partnership with Colin Callender, which ended disastrously. And I was innocent of the disaster, and I won't go into detail because it's for the record. And then I found another partner. And in fact, he took away from me, the Amnesty things, squeezed me out. But I still had the Bloomsbury thing. And I then found another partner: Andrew Holmes. Did you know ever know Jack Holmes?

AL & NS. Yes.

SN: Yeah. Well, he's the son. Documentary film-maker. Yeah. So forms his own company. So then everybody turned down including Granada, my Bloomsbury scripts. I think they're all full of shit, but all prejudiced against a bunch of poufs in you know, they're all worried about the homosexuality, lesbianism, I guess. I don't know. So that fell through and then I went ahead and was able to sell Jeremy on *The Little Sweep*. And then my relations with Andrew Holmes soured because he was doing that big series about Battle of Britain pilots, [*Piece of Cake*. DS] which he did for London Weekend. And he was absolutely up to his ears. He'd never produced a drama. And of course, it was a big project that was six one hours or seven, whatever it was, and he couldn't give me the help I needed because I was new to the English film scene. I didn't know the right cameras, I didn't know the right people and needed him and I couldn't get him and so we had a tiff and one tiff led to another, another, another. So it didn't [happen], so I left him with *The Little Sweep* and finally managed a year and a half later, to get it off the ground. And it went out as I told you, on Christmas Day at six o'clock, opposite, *Crocodile Dundee*, *Aida* from the Met, and *Des O'Connor* or something: in short, the opera went on the air like a thief in the night.

38:04

NS: Yeah, this is Benjamin Britten. I'm merely saying Benjamin Britten, in case those who are listening don't know.

SN: Quite, quite. Okay, what do you want to know?

NS: The other thing I was going to ask you was that you said an interesting thing about *Armchair Theatre*, no doubt when you went to the BBC: How British society and feelings were changing. After Suez. You mentioned specifically,

SN: That's my sense. Yeah.

NS: I was wondering if suppose, you know, putting back the clock. Suppose you had come over at that age now. And wondering what you would think British television, one-off plays should be about? I mean, granted our political situation.

SN: Well, that's a, that's a marvellous, marvellous question. [background laughter] It really is. I mean, what kind of - Well, for one thing is, you know' that the single player is absolutely dead?

NS: Yes. Well, the first thing is it shouldn't be.

SN: [They talk over each other] Frankly it doesn't exist.

…and if I had, if somebody were to say to me, we want you back in television. What would you do? I'd say, "Well, firstly, I want a one-hour drama series. And I want a guarantee 26 weeks a year. So [that] I can build a loyal audience. You can't do it on one-shots. This was a success of *Armchair Theatre.* It was steady every Sunday night.

NS: Yes.

SN: And when I was watching the TAM ratings, where you see every week I get another 100,000, another 200,000 [viewers]. So I was getting 16, 18 million. And, I mean, you know, Harold Pinter thinks [it's] because his play got the highest was number one of the top 10. He forgets, if you look at the five, six preceding weeks, you'll see the build.

39:54

Where was I?

NS: Well, you were trying to answer my question about-

SN: Yeah, so I would say a) I'd want 26 weeks, b), I'd want to do that largely as continuous multi camera, obviously the only way to get compression and tension and tightness. Because the trouble with film shooting is that you spend so many hours on one shot. When the buggers get into the cutting room. They don't want to throw the shot out!

NS: You'd do them in a studio would you?

SN: I would do them in the studio, or I might do them on location. But I want to do them with continuous shooting with multi-cam. Now in terms of subject matter, which is really what you're really asking [Pause] I would still do *The*

Turning Point, but I'm afraid I'd be largely down-turning. But I would really, I think what I would want to give-, I think this country is at a state of incredibly low morale. I think there's a tremendous separation growing between the rich and the poor. And I would dramatise that as much as I possibly could to waken the Brits up to the fracturing of their country and the destruction of their health system. And the fact that it's an unkind country.

That doesn't mean all the plays are going to be dour. But I think it's a very unhappy country now. I really do. And I think it needs dramatising. It needs more plays about money-grubbing people, more anti materialist plays, which I was doing way back then, really, but emphasising it. But again, to say something which I didn't say about *Armchair Theatre* and *The Wednesday Plays*, those plays were larded with comedies, murder mysteries, social dramas, kitchen-sink dramas, they were- *Armchair Theatre* was known to be a kitchen-sink drama series. We had every kind of play in it. Black comedies, we did many comedies. And of course, many of them were turned into feature films. I remember, one of them was called- what the hell, it was a story about a marriage that's unconsummated. It really was a parody of - it was a housing problem. Because the boy couldn't get it up. Because they're very poor. They live in a small little house. And, and because the boy and the girl who just got married, they can't ever get enough money to live they gotta live with his parents. And their bedroom is right next to his mother and father's bedroom. And here he is, is trying to get it up with his bride and he hears his father's snoring next door. And it becomes a social problem, becomes a problem with the parents of the two get together. Why isn't the girl pregnant? Now we did this and it was a terribly funny play. And in fact was made into a feature film with that young Miles, with John Mills daughter, called *All in the-*, our play was called *All in the Family*. Or was ours called *In the Family Way*? And the feature film was called *All in the Family* or something like that.

NS: Maybe. [The TV play was called *All in Good Time.* DS]

END OF SIDE FOUR

Sydney Newman Side 5

0:00

NS: [off-mic conversation] A book yes.

SN: Oh it will be in the *Armchair Theatre* book? Yes. Which I have insisted be catalogued- [interruption]

AL: Sydney Newman side five.

SN: Yeah.

What did I say while he was-?

AL: we were talking about this the play that was made into a film?

SN: Yeah. Well, I think I'd finished that. And- but the point is, it was really, basically, a film with strong social content. It was a play about lousy housing, which affects the boy who can't get it up because he hears his father snoring through paper-thin walls. And there are humorous ways of getting serious social issues across. And this is what I would really try and emphasise.

NS: Finally, because you said you'll come back to this, that you didn't mention earlier on Sydney, how many awards *Armchair Theatre*, had won? Well, you might go on by saying how many awards? What BBC drama won, and yourself come to that.

SN: Endlessly? I mean, I've got a photograph somewhere: one year I got the Desmond Davis award. Donald Wilson got the award for the producer of *The Forsyte Saga.* John Hopkins won the award for his trilogy play called *Talking to a Stranger.* Judi Dench won the Best Actress Award, actress award, because she was in the Hopkins play; and who played the villain in *The Forsyte Saga*? He got the best male actor, what was his name?

NS: It was Eric Porter.

SN: It was Eric Porter, Eric Porter won the award. That was one year these are all my guys and of course the Screenwriters Guild, which is the Writers Guild of Great Britain of course gave me the, what's whatever what's this bronze award called? The Zito award.

NS: Which, which one's that?

SN: Can you see it, the bronze thing behind me? [gestures]

1:52

NS: Oh, sorry. Yes. I don't know what it is.

SN: That's the Writers Guild and the Writers Guild, the Great Britain award to Sydney Newman, for outstanding service to writers.

NS: Ah, good.

SN: That fits in with ACT. They're part of ACT. And then of course, I also got the special President's Award which Ted Willis, Lord Willis, when he was president, gave me. And of course, Ted Kotcheff won the award for the Best Director of the Year. Philip Saville did. And Charlie Jarrott did, who's one of my better directors. *Armchair Theatre*, of course, when we did that crazy, wonderful play of Alun Owens in blank verse, which was *Beauty and the Beast*, which we called, what the hell did we call it? It was, actually, it was a contemporary version of *Beauty and the Beast*, the legend . Oh Christ. It's in the one of the *Armchair Theatre* books. [*The Rose Affair*. DS] And we won the Daily Mirror award as the Best Play of the Year: The Daily Mirror award! Giving an award for a blank verse drama.

I did a musical with- called *His Polyvinyl Girl,* in which a man gets trapped in a big department store when it closed at night. He falls in love with one of the mannequins and has a love affair with her. And this was a musical. And it was- the lyrics are written by an American … [stumbles] by an American, Steven Vinava. But the music was written by the present Carl Davis, his first musical job in England. My *Armchair Theatre*, so many firsts, that *Armchair Theatre* is wonderful.

NS: And of course-

SN: And then, then Peter Luke, when I hired him as a story editor, he didn't know anything about plays. And I worked on him and worked on him and of course I'd had four-year's experience in Canada. I knew a lot about it. And Peter Luke started to write and I produced two or three of his plays in *Armchair Theatre*, *Small Fish are Sweet* and several others. And then of course, he wrote *Hadrian the Seventh*, which became a tremendous West End hit, and went on as a Broadway hit. And Irene Shubik, whom I hired as an ignorant Story Editor, who knew nothing again about plays, and Irene Shubik has turned in some of the most distinguished dramas in the country. And of course, there's little old Verity Lambert, who when I dreamed up, shall I tell the story of how the- what would you call it - shit , the daleks?

AL: Yes.

NS: Doctor Who.

SN: Forgive me forgetting their name, but the when I joined the BBC, we used to do a children's classics series on Saturday afternoons at 5.15 after the whole bank of sports stuff. And the sports of course, under [Peter] Dimmock was [getting] terrific ratings. And the children's serial came on, the ratings drop right down to zero. Then at a quarter to six was that jazz programme, that pops programme? What was it called? *Top of the Pops*?

AL: [in background] This was on Saturday was it?

NS: No I don't think it was on Saturday

SN: There was a Saturday programme recorded

AL: Oh, *Six-Five Special*, was it?

SN: No.

NS: Never mind.

SN: Sure it wasn't *Top of the Pops*?

NS: Oh, it might have been. [TOTP was never on a Saturday. Most probably Sydney is thinking of *Juke Box Jury.* DS]

5:33

SN: Anyway, anyway, and the ratings start to climb again. Could I do anything about that dip? Can I come up with it, it has to be a children's programme? But it had to be a children's - so, I thought about it, had to be a children's programme that would hold the sports-loving audience.

So, I asked for ideas from everybody in the department and nothing seemed to please me. And of course, I had always been a science fiction fan. And of course, to me, one of the great gimmicks in science fiction was HG Wells time space machine. So I figured out a time space machine, which was run by an irascible, half-senile old man who had fled from outer space from an unknown enemy. And the poor fucker didn't know how to work the time space machine. And the first episode, and I wrote this, all written out, the man was 746 years of age, and so on, so forth. And when the show opens, it opens with in a classroom in which there are two teachers, a man and a woman, and they're going to walk a girl home, because in the fog, one of the students may bump into this old man. And he's lost. And he says, and I wrote this out, and they say,

Well, you knew so “well, I'm down there somewhere.” So, he takes them into a junkyard. And there's this kooky telephone box. And he said, “That's my home.” And he says, “Step inside” and they humour, the old fart, and they walk in and of course to a vast spaceship inside. And he says, “See.” and he presses a button, and he doesn't know and the thing takes off. And that was the first episode.

And, of course, I have each, each, episode, each serial ran about four episodes. And the trick was to go back in time, which I wrote out, because it had to be educational. And I've laid down the rule we went back in time, so that our contemporary characters of 1962, ‘63, on the shores of White Cliffs of Dover, when Julius Caesar lands in England, or they were back in Rome, when Rome burned by what's his name,

AL: Nero.

SN: Nero. And I lay down this rule when you go to outer space, don't exceed our present knowledge of what conditions are like in outer space. And I wanted them to go to the moon. Say it'd be gravity-less, and things like that. And I also lay down the rule, no bug-eyed monsters, which I always thought was cheap fiction, cheap side, but you know, gigantic ants and that sort of crap. And we did the first episode, four episodes and was very, very successful, but not great. The second episode has the fucking Daleks in it. And the thing took off. Amazingly, everybody fell in love with the bloody Daleks. And the rating shot right up. And when you looked at the graph on the TAMs, the sports like this, [gestures] not a dip with *Doctor Who* and kept climbing and when the teenage programme, pops, … it kept going right up until *That Was The Week That Was* to after 10 30 that night. So, Saturday became the top thing, just because somehow - anyway, I couldn't find, I didn't feel there was a producer in the BBC, that could handle the kind of wit and idiocy of this *Doctor Who* idea and I remembered Verity because she was my bitchiest PA [Production Assistant] at ABC, but she was smart as a whip. And I got along with. We had tremendous fights. But she is, she won a lot of them. Because she was a fighter. And I phoned her up and I said, “Do you want a job? Do you want to be a producer?” “You bet” Imagine a PA who doesn't want to jump from a PA to be a producer and she came into the BBC and she I put her under Donald Wil- everybody was suspicious of her. They thought I was fucking, which I never have, never had any relations with her, but they thought I was, [that] she was my mistress, because she was very pretty girl. She still is a

handsome woman. I had dinner with her, in fact, last Thursday night and people were suspicious of her: Donald Wilson, it took him a couple of weeks to take to her and then of course everything began to work beautifully and she did and was wonderful and the rest is history really.

10:28

And I of course kept an eye on it for the first month or two and then forgot all about it. I mean to me was just another, another, programme. And then I then got involved again when- Jesus my memories going, who played my first *Doctor Who* not Bracknell, not Bracknell?

NS: Yes my memory has gone too on that.

AL: I'm know the man you mean.

SN: Yeah, anyway, when he left.

AL: Pertwee.

SN: No, no, no, no, no. He came years later. Yeah, no. Anyway, I was involved in the casting of Pat, Patrick Troughton, was the second one. How could I forget the name of the first, that wonderful old bugger? Crotchety, he was right he fitted my concept perfectly. Isn't that terrible?

AL: I can see him.

SN: So can I mean we got to get his, I gotta get the name down. I know exactly where - I can do it in a second. No, never mind. I'll just take this off. [The mic]

SN: Stop it for a moment. [He's looked it up] Hartnell, William Hartnell.

NS: Absolutely right.

SN: And he was bang on. Wear about here? [refixes mic] What about *The Avengers*? Do you wanna know something about *The Avengers*? Another world beater? God how I regret that I never owned a piece of both *Doctor Who* and *The Avengers*. I would have been a millionaire today.

AL: Where did that idea come from? Was it from you?

12:01

SN: From me. I conceived the idea. Let me tell you how it grew though. It's marvellous the way television is so crazy. The development of ideas. One day, Julian Bond, a name you will both know, came in with his agent, Felix de Wolfe to sell me on an idea that he said is an absolute world beater. He said " It's a combination of *Emergency Ward Ten* and *Dixon of Dock Green"* and added that any idea that amalgamates those two has got to be a great box office success.

So I said "What's the idea?" "It's called *Police Surgeon*. It's about a doctor who's on first call on to, by, the police." And Julian Bond, not only does he want to write it, he wants to produce it. So, I had known Julian, I bought one or two of his plays and he's a very nice, big, amiable bloke: I don't know if either of you know him personally. So okay, the scripts come in. I like the scripts. And we cast it and we cast Ian Hendry. As the, as the doctor, and he's marvellous. And but Julian Bond doesn't cut the mustard as a producer, he simply can't cope, too ignorant. So, I brought in Leonard White, to be the producer of *Police Surgeon.* And the series - and then Lew Grade for some reason didn't like the series - and we got slotted in the network at six o'clock on Saturday or some dreadful time, or at 6.30. And it really, the series wasn't going anywhere, but I recognised in Ian a real star. So, I said "We gotta do something about that." And so I dreamed - and at that time, I was reading a lot of the James Bond stories, and I absolutely fell in love with the character of James Bond. So, I figured why don't I have this highly moral police surgeon, who's almost prissily moral, versus a paid killer of the state, of an MI5 bastard? A real killer. So, in the last episode of *Police Surgeon*, we had Ian Hendry's secretary shot and he- and Ian is about to be shot - when this guy with a bowler hat appears around the corner and kills the guy who's going to kill the Ian Hendry [character]. And that was the last episode of *Police Surgeon* and we, because I had planned this and I had written this brief of *The Avengers,* of this paid spy MI5 guy who exploits this innocent doctor and gets them involved in all sorts of criminal activities.

And we went on the air with it that Autumn. And it worked. The rivalry between the wisecracking, nasty, but terribly charming Pat Macnee, whom I cast because he's an old friend of mine, I used him in Canada many years [ago] with Ian Hendry. And what also emerged was that one day, Ian Hendry was in my office complaining during … he's complaining about the scripts and *Police Surgeon*. And suddenly, he just- we're drinking and we were walking, he was walking back and forth. I was sitting in the sofa in my office, and suddenly and did a back, about two back-flips. And I said, I said, "How'd you learn to do

that?" He said "Well, I just got out of National Service." And he said, "I used to be in the Motorcycle Corps." And he said, "I learned to do all sorts of tricks while riding a motorcycle."

NS: Gosh.

SN: So I then called in Leonard White, and I said, "Listen, use this guy, his physical dexterity," which he did do, so that got added into the series. And that was, we used it fully in the first season of *The Avengers*; and the second season of *The Avengers,* when Ian became so popular, he was offered a big contract by a film company. So, he asked to be released from the thing. So, the series was, to all intent and purposes, dead. Well, we had - one, it was so popular, and I couldn't kill it. So, I suddenly thought that why not turn Ian Hendry into a woman.

17:00

And that's how that came about. It's really crazy how these things work; I was sitting at home: it was at time of the Mau Mau in Kenya. And I was sitting at home and I saw a news item in which a woman and this was what the woman looked like she was rather- she was about 40 years of age, rather thick set and she had a baby in a kind of papoose in front of her, a white woman, an English woman or a Kenyan, white woman. And around her hip, rather thick waist, she had this great big fucking belt with bullets, and his great big gun holster. And she's being interviewed by somebody and she said, "I was in the kitchen making dinner. And my husband and my two boys were in the other room. And suddenly I heard great screams. And before I could turn around, and two black bodies when shooting past me, out the door." She said, "I went in the other room, my husband's head had been cut off, and my two boys were dead."

That woman just knocked me out: the baby and the gun under those conditions. And so I figured out that I'll replace Ian with a woman: that she will be an anthropologist whose husband and kids were killed in Kenya, and that she was expert on looking after herself, which was- again- was a copy of Ian's dexterity. And what else? Anyway, actually, there's something else I wanted to mention, which has gone out of my head. And so, I told this to Leonard White, to go out and find the woman. And he gave me a list of about eight women. And I wanted Nyree Dawn Porter to play the wife because I thought she was, because she played the mannequin in in that musical-comedy we did called *His Polyvinyl Girl*. I thought she was gorgeous. So he had Nyree Dawn Porter down

the bottom and he had Honor Blackman at the top. And when I was going off on holiday, I said to Leonard, “Show me your list.” and there was the list and I said “Oh shit,” I said “Not Honor Blackman, we don't want that simpering” - she, you know, she was in that series called *Four Just Men* or something and every time she smiled, you know, she used to be a Rank starlet where they teach these starlets to smile all the time. And she had that horribly short bobbed blonde hair. I said, “No, no, put her at the bottom of the list. I want Nyree Dawn Porter.” I went off with my wife and kids to a holiday in Cornwall. I come back three weeks later, I said “Leonard okay. Who’ve we got?” He said, “Sydney” he said “you'll never believe it but we got Honor Blackman.” I said, “How come, you son of a bitch?” He said, “None of the others were available. Nyree is in a play on the West End: we couldn't get her.” I said, “Oh shit. All right, we're stuck. Do a dummy run.” So we did: they taped the dummy run. And they taught her to do some jujitsu tricks. So when she flipped Patrick Macnee and in one scene, over her, her legs part and we saw a little curl of her pubic hair and her panties. And also, she has her blouse torn off and she had a marvellous pair of breasts. And she has her blouse off and there was her enormous breasts in a brassiere, but you could see they were just a bit too large to be really kind of, okay.

I said, God, that's no good. We got to do something about it. I said, “Get her in some bloody clothes in which we're not going to see her parts because she's going to be jumping all over the bloody place.” And the costume department knew that that Autumn, leather was going to be the ‘in’ thing.

21:11

So they dressed Honor in leather. And, of course, we went on the air and she had exactly the characteristics of Ian. She [did]. And Patrick was always trying to lay her and she would not respond. She was a tough, she wouldn't have anything to do with him. So, she disapproved of him morally. And he always thought she was a prissy prude. And it was that rivalry that made that series. The wit came from the contrast of morals between the two. And we did it with Honor for two years. And, typically, what happened was: she got a big film contract and she left and the film series died. I went to the BBC.

And then Howard Thomas revived it and then my story editor was John Bryce. And John Bryce then became the story editor of the film series, and it was he who cast Diana Rigg. And that's a story of how-

NS: Terrific.

SN: Of how a series gets born. It's incredible, isn't it?

NS: Fine.

AL: Looking, looking back. Which is, you know, which of your various bits of career have given you the most satisfaction?

SN: Well actually none stand out. I mean, I, my 10 years, at the Film Board, were absolutely wonderful. My four years, my six years in television in Toronto were really wonderful. I was finding my feet; and my ABC was terrific. The BBC was terrific. And the rest has been downhill all the way. [laughter] Enjoyed – none are the best, they are all great. Until I went back to Canada.

AL: Yes, yes. looking back over it, if you could do it, you know, if you could start again, would you want to change? Do you think?

SN: Well, I can't, that's a question can never be answered. No, I mean-

AL: Wouldn't you do something any different?

SN: No, not a thing. Yes. I wouldn't have sent that letter [of] resignation to the chairman. [inaudible] ABC? [Laughter in background] Yeah. That was a stupid thing.

No, I don't- You see, to understand me, you know, I've just written an autobiography.

AL: Yes.

SN: That's why I'm able to be pretty glib in talking because –

NS: [It's fresh] In your mind.

SN: In my mind. In many ways, I'm a very innocent person. That is I don't - you may not think so. British always think I'm very cunning and all that: I've got an instinct, but the fact is, I'm rather innocent. There's a, there's a naive streak in me. And, and also a belief generally, in my own judgement, and I'm also not pig-headed enough to not take advice from people that work for me. So the kind of innocence I mean, I did things not with any profound awareness. I did things from my gut. So therefore, if I were to go back over again, I'd probably act [in] exactly the same way. I'll tell you one thing. I know I was innocent, because I really fucked up *The Little Sweep*. Because I didn't, I didn't handle Basil [Coleman], right. I was rusty. The last time I'd produced anything was in

1967, which is the Kurt Weill opera, [*Rise and Fall of the City of*] *Mahagonny*. And I was really out of touch. And also knowing too much and being almost a little bit afraid of failure was enough to make me fail. It was my innocence that carried me through. I believe that, I really do. I think innocence is a great quality. That's why young people are so wonderful. They don't, they don't see the pitfalls. And I didn't see the pitfalls largely; Imagine me, insulting all British television in front of all these press people when I first got here, I just told the way I felt. And they loved it. As it turned out, you see?

AL: [Laughing] Thank you.

NS: Let's say fine. And finally, of course, tonight you will get another award. You become a fellow. I think we should put this on the record. You become a Fellow of the Royal Television Society.

SN: I love- what I love of course is the snobbery of England because *Armchair Theatre* didn't get me anywhere but the moment I went to the BBC, immediately I got a letter from Who's Who. So, I got entered into Who's Who. That's typical. You see the BBC must be seen as 'establishment'. And, and then I was invited to become a member, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, which I am, I'm an FRSA. And now I'm a Fellow of the Royal Television Society: I will be tonight.

AL: But I think, yes, I think you deserve our congratulation. Yeah.

SN: I just wished In fact, I just wished to hell I'd gotten an honorary CBE. I think it should have, might have, come my way.

NS: It may.

SN: I doubt that. Doubt that. It's all too late now.

NS: No.

SN: But it would have to be honorary because you know, Canadians can't accept these things. We declared our independence of that many years ago. With that, I would have been pleased with that. But not an OBE I said I don't want one which is what: other bugger's efforts. [chuckles]

NS: Correct.