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An Interview with Frank Barrie

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An interview with

Frank Barrie

Who appeared in the Festival Playhouse
At Wright State University,
Dayton, Ohio, November 1985,
In a performance of his one-man show

Macready

Written by Frank Barrie and based on the life of
the English actor William Charles Macready

Interview conducted by Abe J. Bassett, Chair,
Department of Theatre Arts
Wright State University

November 6, 1985

Introduction

Frank Barrie, a talented British Actor, came to Wright State University in 1985 to present his one-man show, *Macready*, and to speak with acting students about creating their one-person senior thesis productions.

While on sabbatical in London in 1980, I saw him perform *Macready*. Because my Ph.D. dissertation was “The Actor-Manager Career of William Charles Macready” (1793-1873) I struck up an acquaintanceship, which became a friendship. In 1985, I arranged for Frank to perform *Macready*, not only at Wright State, but also at two other Ohio universities.

Frank was born in 1936 in North Yorkshire, England, and made his acting debut in 1959 at age 17 at the York Theatre Royal in a production of *Henry IV, Part 2*. He has performed in many plays of Shakespeare, has been a member of the company of The National Theatre, and has traveled the world performing. He has also performed in television but without joy, as he explains in the interview. He is a University graduate, majoring in English and Philosophy, and was active in the Debate Society, having been recognized as an outstanding debater.

The Interview

BASSETT:

Today is November the 6th, 1985, and I am speaking with Frank Barrie.

Frank, at what point in your life did you do something that gave you permission to think of yourself as an artist, or to begin going in an artistic direction?

BARRIE:

I remember when I was four years old—I was taken to a Burlesque theatre in my hometown. It was the first visit I had to a theatre, and there was somebody on stage singing “Chattanooga Choo Choo,” in a spotlight with an orchestra. I remember how the tremendous feeling of excitement that I had. I mean an excitement unlike anything else, ever! And at that point, at four years old, I kind of knew that’s what I was going to do. I was going to be on stage all my life.

And indeed I had this conviction, but I strangely kept it to self and never told anybody. I didn’t know anybody in the theatre, I had no family in the theatre. I thought that actors were gods; different from the kind of people my family was. But nevertheless, the conviction never left me, and all through my childhood and teenage period.

I used to go to the theatre and carefully observe how the performers did it. How they came on to a stage, and how they walked on a stage, how they sat down on a stage, how they addressed an audience. And I used to go along with a little notebook, as a matter of fact, and write little things down that had occurred to me, that were effective, so when finally I did become an actor, I was self-trained to a remarkable degree, and I took to it like a fish to water.

My first job, Abe, was rather strange. I was going to University, and I had a vacation to fill in, and there was the local theatre there, a very good professional company, lots of very good people worked there: Trevor Howard, Michael Renney, Phyllis Calbert, all big names in England. They did a play a week, and I felt that at that time I was ready to be an actor. There was no evidence that I was any good at all.

However, I literally knocked on the stage door of the theatre, which shows how ignorant I was because you don't knock on stage doors because there's nothing on the other side except a passage way. This time there was something on the other side. It was the director of the theatre, and he was passing the stage door on his way to the office because he was about to sack an actor who couldn't learn his lines. This was Wednesday; the actor had been brought up from London specifically for this part. The play was to open on Monday. So I'm knocking on the stage door, the director opens the door. "What do you want?" he said. I said, "I want to be an actor." I remember he looked very sharply at me and said, "Can you learn lines quickly?" And I said, because of course one must always be positive in the theatre, "Yes!" "Well," he said, "come in and read this part."

So I went into his office. I must have been physically right for the part, that must have been his first reaction, and also it saved him an awful lot of phoning London and messing about and waiting for an actor to come out right. So I read the part, and he said, "Right, you can play that part. Come to rehearsals."

So immediately, at the age of seventeen, I was in a rehearsal with professional actors, reading a part. I learnt the lines fine, and we opened on Monday, and it was a great success. I had all the confidence of youth—that leaves you of course, as you get older.

BASSETT:

What was the part?

BARRIE:

It was a North Country comedy and I remember it was called *Home and Away*. It was all about winning a football pool, a play of no stature at all, but as a performer I seemed to go over very well and got exit rounds and that sort of thing. So they kept me on for the whole of that vacation. My family then pressured me, quite rightly, to go to University, which I did.

But every vacation after that I was taken back into this professional company. I remember I was paid 10 pounds a week, which was quite a lot in those days. So that kind of got me through college and I became a kind of local celebrity. And that was my start in the theatre. I can't think of a more fortunate and lucky start, because I didn't have all this dreadful period most actors have—and my own daughter is having it at this time—all the dreadful pressure at interviews and auditions and all that! I was straight into it, and I'll always be grateful for that.

BASSETT:

When you went to University, there were no drama classes, and you didn't study drama?

BARRIE:

I didn't study drama. I studied English and Philosophy. There was a drama club there, and I remember I went to see them perform, and by then I had performed with professional actors and I thought I really don't want to be involved with those people, because they're not as good as the people I've been working with. I'm sure you agree, Abe, that the only way you improve is to work with people better than yourself, and these people were not better than myself.

So I thought I'm going to do something else, some other outlet for that kind of performing drive that actors have, so I became a debater. I debated a great deal and I went all over England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales debating and I became President of the Debating Society and I actually won a cup as a student for the best debater, the best student debater in England.

I remember when I left University, the people who judged that competition, and they were very high-level people, the Prime Minister was one of them, someone suggested that I might become a newscaster for the television. So I did a test for this and they very sweetly said to me after I'd done the test "You have too much personality to be a newscaster." But you know, I knew what they were saying. They were saying I was no good. It was just a kind way of doing it. So I went straight back to

into the theatre, I joined the Bristol [Theatre] because I'd done a lot of work and met directors. I was there for . . . quite employable at the time.

BASSETT:

Frank, after that burlesque experience, and as you were growing up, you said you went to the theatre frequently and observed. Was this in York?

BARRIE:

It was all in York where I was born and brought up. Very fortunate to be born and brought up there because it is the most beautiful city. And with a tremendous history about it and, of course, there was a great cultural life there. I know years later—I think I told you this—I had the most extraordinary experience when I was playing Thomas More in *A Man for All Seasons*. I played it in York Minster, that wonderful medieval cathedral. I was taken to where I was to change, which was the Chapter House, which was the circular part of the building. And I say down in the stone seat and the verger said to me, "That's where Richard III used to sit when he took councils of the North." A few years later I was to play Richard the III and for an actor, these kind of immediate experiences feed your imagination and I somehow felt, in a curious way, that I had more right to play the part because I sat in his chair. It's strange isn't it?

BASSETT:

Well, once you had graduated from University, a regional theatre took you on?

BARRIE:

Bristol, which of course is a very high quality theatre and still is.

BASSETT:

And how long were you there?

BARRIE:

I stayed there for three marvelous years. I was taken on for a musical. I had to sing and dance. That was one of the very few auditions I've ever done. I wouldn't call myself a singer, I must say, but I can put a song over. They did ask me to audition for Ramble in *Lock Up Your Daughters*, which is a wonderful sort of bawdy, 18th century piece. And I was the leading man in that, which I got really through recommendation, but also through auditions as a singer. My ambition had been to go to the Bristol. I'd read a book about it and it had fired my imagination. It's the oldest theatre in England and extremely beautiful. And I just thought "That's were I want to be" and so I put everything I'd had into that audition and I kind of persuaded them that I could sing. I even persuaded them that I could dance, I don't know quite how.

BASSETT:

You had no particular training in dance or singing?

BARRIE:

No, none at all. But I had plenty of confidence and a certain amount of natural ability. I must say, I do seem to have a lot of natural ability. My weaknesses were that I would be too solicitous of audience approval. I would do cheap things to get laughs and employ cheap techniques to get rounds of applause. There was a good deal of the coarse actor in me.

On the other hand, of course, the audience loved it because I'm afraid the lowest common denominator of an audience is always the easiest to tap. And I must have got away with it, even though it was in a quality theatre. I suppose in a way, I always advise very young actors to do this; you've got to make an impression, haven't you? It worked for me rather well because playing these

parts, I was obviously sort of a big performer. So the directors think in terms of giving you big parts, right? But if you're given a small part and you play it with wonderful discretion and unselfishly, then nobody's going to think, "My God we've got to give them a lead." They're going to think "We must find another nice, little quiet part for them." My talent was a bit unruly, so I was given a string of amazingly, marvelous parts to play as a very young man.

BASSETT:

Did part of the regimen at Bristol include structured study? Were there classes that older actors taught?

BARRIE:

No. Not at all. You hardly ever find that in the English theatre. My generation was one of the first generations of actors who were not given an enormous amount of help from the generation above us.

Obviously, now and then someone would give you a little acting tip or just say the odd sentence which would fire your imagination of perhaps tone down your excesses, but at that time the older actors had lost confidence. There had been a great deal of emphasis on the new style of drama, symbolized in the tremendous fuss made about method acting. And the older generation of actors felt that suddenly they were on the shelf, and so they felt rather embarrassed about giving advice to younger actors like myself, and I must say I did miss that a great deal.

Later, I went to the National Theatre from Bristol. Laurence Olivier, who had come see me play Richard II, asked to join the National Theatre. Then I thought, this is the greatest opportunity, because Laurence Olivier will be teaching this company. Well he didn't, you know. And you had to kind of bully him to give you some advice.

He would never volunteer. He was rather shy about doing that. Again he felt the older actors' common feeling that perhaps they're a little old-fashioned, you know. They all feel this, it's extraordinary. But I do remember saying to him specifically one time, he gave me a bit of marvelous advice actually, because I had this line in *The White Devil* and I didn't know what to do with it and he was at a rehearsal. And I said to him "I don't know what to do with this line. What shall I do with it?" And this was his advice; "Well baby,"—he calls everybody baby—"Well baby, if you don't know what to do with the line, you'd better not do anything."

And I often remember that. You know, sometimes you think, "Oh, this line . . . I can't get any color out of it, I don't know what the emotional color is, I don't quite know why it's there." But I have discovered that if you just say it, then, it has its own volition. And it is an area of mystery in your performance, you know.

The definition of ham acting, I think, is that the actor gives too much information . . . tells the audience what they've got to think all the time. Sometimes if you give them a bit of puzzling and enigmatic acting, then their imaginations are more stimulated. Greta Garbo had a whole career based on that. She didn't make her mind up about anything and it's riveting.

BASSETT:

I have a question, to follow up an earlier topic, about early starts. Are there any genes that you've inherited from parents or grandparents or great-grandparents that might be artistic genes?

BARRIE:

Well, there might be, I mean my story is really rather sad as far as the family goes because I'm illegitimate, and my father is illegitimate, and his father was illegitimate so we're kind of a long line of bastards. I certainly know who my father was but I don't know who my grandfather was . . . neither do I know who my great-grandfather was. So, let's face it, it could be anybody, couldn't it? Well my mother's side is a bit more clear and they didn't ' have anything to do with theatre. They were engineers. They actually owned factories up in Yorkshire.

BASSETT:

What did you study at the University?

BARRIE:

English and Philosophy, which was the right choice for me. I love literature. It's one of the reasons I'm an actor because it gives me the opportunity to literally immerse myself in words. Those are the kind of plays I like doing, those which have some literary stature. I noticed in an interview once that Ralph Richardson, who sadly died last year, said that he felt that what he enjoyed doing as an actor, was "illustrating literature." I thought, "My God, that's what I feel like." It doesn't sound too ambitious, does it, but it seems to be my kind of guiding star.

BASSETT:

Have you done any writing in your career? Besides *Macready*?

BARRIE:

Yes I have. As a matter of fact, I'm writing a script now. I write scripts for the Victoria and Albert Museum about country houses that they own and they are performed in the houses. I've done a lot of these; I do one about Wellington quite regularly at the Duke of Wellington's house. These are not plays—they are dramatized histories of the house. One concentrates on the personalities who lived in these houses. And of course it gives me the wonderful excuse to dive into a lot of historical research, which I enjoy enormously.

Creative writing I've done very little of. I did write a play at University that they did and they sort of thought it was good. I wasn't in that, I just saw it. But I've been very busy as an actor and I still like acting.

BASSETT:

Frank, I'm fascinated with the fact that you have made a career without training. In your years as a professional actor, did you in London or other places, seek out coaching lessons or advice of master teachers in any of the aspects of theatre?

BARRIE:

No I didn't, I'm afraid. I don't say I'm afraid. There are plenty of actors in England who aren't trained. It's getting rarer and rarer, but certainly people of my generation, there were many actors who were not formally trained. We are trained insofar as we have to do the job. That's the quickest training there is. After all, if you're going to be paid to do a job, you've got to do it well or they wouldn't employ you. So you learn very quickly and you may not learn in a formal, detached setting. You learn in a practical setting. For instance, you have to learn about breath control and clear speech if you're going to play a great Shakespearean part because there's no way of playing it without. So you're kind of learning as you're doing it.

And I must say that I don't think that formal training would have been quite right for me because I was really rather arrogant as a young man. I don't think I would have taken kindly to someone telling me what was wrong with me in an abstract situation. You can take any amount of criticism for a performance that you've presented to an audience. But if I was in a classroom doing voice exercises—going through a speech—and someone was being very critical of me, I think I would tend to not go anymore.

And I would tend to think that it's the paying customers who matter. It's a weakness in me and I think I've overcome it. You certainly lose arrogance as a performer when you've been at it for a few years. The ego side, the showing off side of acting, is less and less a part of one's makeup as a performer as one gets older.

BASSETT:

Why is that?

BARRIE:

Well, you learn humility . . . you learn real humility. You learn your limitations, and if there is something that you're very good at, you, of course, tend to under-estimate that.

At the beginning of your career you're very concerned with what you can do and proud of it—and why not? But when you've been at it for a bit you're more concerned with what you can't do and that gives you the kind of humility that I think an important artist of any kind has to have. Certainly the greatest actors I've worked with—and I've worked with most of the great English actors—they all seem to me to have an extraordinary amount of humility.

Genuine humility. They will give you the stage if it's yours. They will not try to distract attention from you during your important bits. But they are kind of beyond scrambling for the limelight.

BASSETT:

In terms of training, your daughter Julia, has just completed her training in the past year, have you had discussions with her about her training?

BARRIE:

Yes.

BASSETT:

Has it been effective for her?

BARRIE:

I think that Julia's training—she went to the Bristol to school. Now they're very careful to say that this drama degree is not a professional training for the stage. They say it is an academic discipline. Well that's all right in theory, but in practice, the kind of people that they take into their department are the ones who want to be committed to a professional theatre career. They definitely are. It is acknowledged as the best drama department in any university in England. The competition is intense and they only accept one out of every fifty applicants. So the ones who get in tend to be the ones with the most ambition and also the ones who definitely want to make a theatre career.

Now I thought their training for professional actors at any rate, which is the one I was most aware of, because I could see them when they did their plays and I could see what level their acting was at, I considered to be deficient. I just didn't think it was practical enough. Julia, for instance, has left there without any proper voice training, and I think she needs some. And basic things like how to move on a stage and all that. I felt that their weakness was far too much theory.

I used to go to these plays and think that they really weren't very good and then afterwards you would meet the students and maybe the director who was sometimes a student and sometimes a member of the staff, and they would tell you what their interpretation of the play was. You would then think to yourself, well, that interpretation did not show itself in the production and you're fooling yourself if you think it did. And quite often it didn't because the performers were not technically adept enough to get that interpretation over.

So as for professional training I did not think it was good. It's value of course will come later on, because all of that wonderful groundwork in the history of the theatre and the theory is very feeding to your imagination and your soul when you've been acting for about four or five years.

BASSETT:

What will Julia do now as a young performer or as a would-be performer? How will she proceed?

BARRIE:

In England, she will have quite a difficult time now because there are so many young actors. When I came into the business, there were 6,000 members of English Equity. There are now 36,000 members of English Equity and not many more jobs. 90% of the profession is out of work at any given time. Most of the out of work are, of course, very young people because that's the bulk of the profession. So she will not find it easy. There will be intense competition for that kind of age group parts, which she's right for. She's been left a year and extraordinarily fortunate.

She spent six months at the Bristol playing fairly small parts, and now she's been at Salisbury Playhouse which is kind of one step down but that's alright because she's been playing leading parts there and has gained that kind of experience. That job just came to an end this last Saturday and she's now out of work and depressed and worried and all the other things that happen when actors are out of work.

So she will be writing me and of course Dad will be ringing up people.

BASSETT:

And does she ask Dad for acting advice or acting help?

BARRIE:

Yes, she does. She did at the beginning, but now she 's realizing, quite rightly, that she must find her own way of doing things. She mustn't come back from rehearsal and say "Dad, how should I do this?" too often. And after all, Dad might be wrong. So she's having to find her own way and I think she 's right to do that. I know I did.

But I'm very careful not to interfere too much with Julia's talent because her talent is very different from mine. She doesn't have this thing I had at the beginning of wanting to make the big effect. Her weakness is she doesn't make enough effect. She's being extremely truthful inside, and I know she is, but it comes over as really rather bland, you know.

I think it was Guthrie who said to Alec Guinness, "Look, what you're doing is all very good, and there 's nothing wrong with it. But with an audience, you've got to take hold of their jaws, open their mouths, and shove the medicine down their throat." And you do sometimes, you just do. They're not sitting there thinking, "Is this going to be the most beautiful, delicate experience?" They're sitting there frankly bored, worried that their evening is going to be wasted and hoping that something interesting is going to happen. Part of your equipment is to hit them between the eyes.

BASSETT:

Frank, I think in describing Julia you're really describing [all] young people, it's not just Julia. But I think that's what we see in our young actors. Probably the influence of movies and television. They're cool, quiet, truthful, honest, small . . .it's hard to get them to be big .

BARRIE:

That 's true here, is it? How interesting.

BASSETT:

I think so.

BARRIE:

Yes, I suppose most of the acting that the young people have seen is in close-up on a screen. So of course they would be turning to thinking in terms of minimalism, won 't they? I do think, I mean I've certainly done a lot of television work and some film work; I do think that they are extremely different techniques. Just wildly, wildly different. And it's no good thinking of stage acting as just a bigger version of television acting. It's different. You have to have infinitely more technical equipment to do it.

BASSETT:

Have you performed on television?

BARRIE:

Yes, a great deal. I've played over a 100 parts on television. One of my first jobs when I did television, I know after I left the National I was in a soap opera because I wanted to make some money. You know, when you work in these companies you're getting marvelous experience and all that. But after I'd been there a bit I needed to buy a house and I thought I must make some money so I went into one of those soap opera things for six months and I did make enough money to buy a house, but artistically it was terrible for me. I was deeply unhappy. And I couldn't accept the ridiculous nature of the job insofar as people took me to be the character that I was and rush up to you in the street and address you by the name of the character. I was playing a doctor, and I used to get hundreds of letters with people talking about their medical symptoms. This was so silly for me I just couldn't bear it and I left after six months.

BASSETT:

You know, in many respects, London is a small town, not in population but the theatre district is small. When I was there, on several occasions I would see an actor walking on the street that I had seen earlier perform, which surprised me because I wasn't expecting that. When you were at the National, for example, or when you have performed frequently in London, do people come up on the street and say "Oh I saw you in such-and-such a play?"

BARRIE:

Yes they do. The kind of people who come and see you after you've been in a play are rather different from the ones who've seen you on the television. They tend to be rather nice, interested people and one is happy to meet them. Of course we have a very different attitude to actors in England from the way you do in America. I mean, we've been acting for so long that actors are . . . well, they're not idolized like you do in America. A big star here gets people all a-flutter and excited. But in London, we see a lot of them all walking around as you correctly say. So one doesn't get too sort of thrown by that.

BASSETT:

Frank, in travelling around the world, you're keenly aware that each country seems to have its own national characteristics. Each people do. Speaking of America and specifically American actors and American theatre, how would you characterize the American actor vis-a-vis the English actor? What are the chief differences?

BARRIE:

Well the American character, the word that always comes to my mind and I always find it to be so when I come here is enthusiasm. Their commitment and enthusiasm is the striking thing. Beyond that, if you want me to be more specific about the difference between English actors and American actors, and of course I've worked with both, is that I think English actors tend to be more instinctive than American actors. They don't do quite so much homework. They don't, for instance, make lists of what their character was doing as a child or what they had for breakfast, which I know a lot of Americans do and I approve of that. I think any kind of work you do on a part is bound to be helpful sooner or later. But we are much more instinctive, and we will, for instance, at a first reading of a play, read it with energy and conviction. Even if we've never read the part before—say the scripts arrived that morning. We will still give a performance. Now I think that's useful because you find something out.

You find what internal drive the writing has; you don't put yourself in front of the writing. You give the writing a fair chance. On the other hand, the weakness of that is you can reach a performance too quickly and the performance may be shallower than it should be.

The American weakness, on the other hand, is to act the work that they've done on the part instead of the part. To put their research in place of what the author has given them—the clear message that the author has given them. They will sometimes be very busy acting in irrelevance.

I also find that American actors tend to be slower than English actors in their actual performance rhythms. When I watch, say, an American classic, I will say nothing about the modern American plays which, of course, you do a million times better than we do, but watching them do a classic, one's instinctive reaction is why don't they get on with it.

What are these pauses for? I think as we're in now what one might call the post-method era, what has happened is that people have got rather bored with the method, like they get bored with any theory that becomes very fashionable, and they've thrown out what's good about it and that is total identification with the character which I believe. What they've left are the funny pauses. So now, in a classic, you will often see someone finish speaking and then there will be deadness and you will not know who you are supposed to be looking at. And then another character will reply. Now that little pause in between has put the play, as we say, on the floor. And so the other actor has to work too hard to pick it up. I believe very strongly in what we call overlap. Invented, of course, by Americans . . . The Lunts.

BASSETT:

The rate of utterance for English actors is faster too.

BARRIE:

It is, it's much faster. We really are expected to get on with it and I, as an audience, am grateful when actors do get on with it. I mean, part of my training, as one talks about training, I mean obviously I was given tremendous help throughout my career by various people, although not on a formal basis, but one of my experiences which was most valuable to me was doing *Measure for Measure* directed by Tyrone Guthrie, who, by the way, I think is the greatest director I've ever worked with, unquestionably. Very, very practical man.

His golden rule was that we had to speak ten lines on one breath. Some of the actors, in the beginning, thought this was going to sound too rushed. But you know, the odd thing is that after about two weeks rehearsal when we were all doing ten lines on one breath, it wasn't rushed at all. If everybody has the same rhythms of speech it gives the play tremendous vivacity. The cues are picked up and the extraneous pauses are removed and the information of the speeches comes over with greater clarity and a most interesting side result of this was that *Measure for Measure* lasted two hours and we didn't cut a line.

BASSETT: Really.

BARRIE:

Yeah. So maybe when Shakespeare says that "Two hours traffic on the stage" maybe he really meant it.

BASSETT:

Frank, ten lines on one breath, that's an enormous distance.

BARRIE:

Yes it is and at first you can't do it. After a bit you can. That was the rule.

BASSETT:

Are there any tricks to that or just practice?

BARRIE:

No, just finding out exactly where you're going to take your breath and take a big one. Always breath just as the person you're going to pick your cue up from is finishing. And you take a big breath, and you do the abdominal thing and the back and all this sort of thing. And you do have enough, yes, you certainly do. It was terrific for me, I must say, that experience.

Very exciting.

BASSETT:

That's where you learn to bow on the ninth line.

BARRIE:

That's right, to bow on the ninth line. Yes, as you know if you slightly bend your waist you will have a little bit more breath and there's an inherent excitement. I don't quite know why, but there's an inherent excitement in hearing an actor say many lines without breathing. The audience may not, and indeed isn't conscience that you're not breathing. All their getting is a kind of excitement in the air. It does work.

Guthrie was very impatient, by the way, with people who were taking up rehearsal time with their problems. I remember we had an actress in the play, a very fine actress, and he gave her a move—he was very dictatorial about all of this, very dictatorial about everything in the theatre, but of course he had the authority of experience and a great career so he did what he wanted—and he gave her this move and she said to him "I just don't feel this move," and he said "I'm not interested in your feelings, dear, just a little more nasal resonance." That's him in a nutshell. Not interested in theory, interested in technique.

And as I said to your students yesterday, there's a great misconception about what technique is, isn't there, especially in America? They think it's something cold that you put on the lovely warm yeast of acting. When in fact, they're both happening at the same time.

BASSETT:

Do you have a definition or can you talk about technique?

BARRIE:

Technique is just the how. It's equivalent is asking a carpenter to make you a chair. I mean you wouldn't ask someone to make you a chair who was only good at drawing a chair. You'd ask someone who could use a hammer and a chisel and the tools and just knew how they functioned. And I think to call yourself an actor without having any idea of how you actually move about a stage, how you do the ten lines on one breath, how you clarify certain key words in a scene. I don't want to work with anybody who can't do that. I'm not interested in their feelings.

I think that's another misconception actors can make . . . that they think that if they're feeling something, the audience is. Well, you know, that's not so. The actor who has a breakdown scene for instance and cries a lot is far more likely to turn an audience off and make them detached. The thing I think about is, when there is a crying scene, is to fight it. Fight the crying. And then the audience is much more likely to feel it.

BASSETT:

Play the opposite?

BARRIE:

Play the opposite. I do believe that.

BASSETT:

Well I think that's what younger actors really tend to do, they work very hard at identifying emotionally with the character and they play the emotions. They play the effect and it's almost a dirty word among them, and I think it has been for 25 years since I was in college, the great debate between technique and feeling.

BARRIE:

I'm very bored with it and I don't think it's relevant at all and I get a bit cross with it. I can't bear this division of it. I mean acting is a technique, that's what it is. Feeling something isn't acting, it's feeling something. Acting is being able to reproduce the effect of feeling something and make the audience feel.

Now I think part of the technical process is that you will have felt that emotion at some time. Otherwise it will not be truthfully conveyed to an audience. You will affect it; it doesn't matter where you feel it. You might feel it at home. More often you will feel it in rehearsal. But I don't think it's a good idea to wait until you feel it in performance because the performance situation is a crisis situation and your judgment is liable to be affected by the atmosphere of the evening rather the true feeling of the character.

BASSETT:

Frank, at what point in your career, I know this is a hard question—would you say that you discovered that? When would you have been able to articulate what you've just articulated?

BARRIE:

I would have said about five years ago because I used to sometimes allow myself to be overwhelmed by the emotions of the character in performance and I was doing Coriolanus and I thought I'd been wonderfully good because I had felt it all so much. My wife came around. She'd seen it that night and she said to me "What's happened to your performance? It's dreadful." So I said "But I was feeling it all so much." And she said "Well you were working too hard." And that's when I thought, "Yes, she's dead right." And then what I was doing was busy feeling it all and slowing the thing up . . . sludging it with my dreary emotions. You've got to learn humility and one of the aspects of humility is that you are there, not to display what a wonderful actor you are, you are there to play that character and quite often less is more. So I would think that's when I got quite a shock. It's always good to have someone who loves you who is . . .

BASSETT:

Honest?

BARRIE:

Honest, yes.

BASSETT:

Does Mary [Mrs. Barrie] come to see most of your performances? [A change of tapes caused a slight loss of conversation.]

BASSETT:

When George Grizzard was here recently he remarked that he had been performing for twenty-five years and thought that he was ready for a change of style and so far has really rather enjoyed working with young people.

BARRIE:

Well I do . . . the small amount I've done. I mean, in the summer I was in Texas working with . . . there were a lot of student actors in this production, and they asked me to give a lecture there, and they also asked me to give a few—what shall I say. —“tips” about how to act Shakespeare because I was playing Richard III.

I found that American actors were extremely receptive and really worked extremely hard if you gave them an idea. That's another difference between English and American actors. Americans seem to want advice. English actors, on the whole, don't tend to ask for it. Of course, one has the authority of being English. And I think Americans are, in my opinion, just far too much in awe of English actors. I think what they need is more confidence and just get on with it. After all, it's absurd to think of Shakespeare as some terrible test that they have to go through. Shakespeare is wonderful writing and he 's your ally.

BASSETT:

You said the other day that you think that Americans really do excel in musical comedy?

BARRIE:

I do. Now there, they seem to have bags of confidence. It is their great contribution to the theatre, the musical, and they approach it with wonderful discipline and regimen. Their dancing is superb and disciplined. And their pizzazz, which I think is a part of any actor's equipment, seems to find its apotheosis in the musical. And it seems very odd to me that when they approach a classic work they seem to think all that marvelous stuff that they're good at in musicals is irrelevant. In my opinion, it's very relevant indeed. You need just the same amount of energy, discipline, and pizzazz to do *Hamlet* as you do *West Side Story*.

BASSETT:

You know, the difference is that kids grow up admiring musicals. If a high school does a play it's most likely to be a musical and more people become involved, so most students come to us having done musical comedies and have seen them as opposed to having seen a lot of plays, so from an early age, they're given permission to think musicals more than thinking of dramatic plays and straight comedy.

BARRIE:

Oh, are they? So this sort of bridge is difficult for them. Of course I've done a lot of musicals and what that gives you is an emotional temperature. The music does it for you. The overture brings up the receptiveness of the audience and the performer is lifted up by the music. So when you come to a straight play you kind of miss it, but you can do it yourself. You can do it by technical means. I think a lot of suppressed energies is always exciting in a theatre.

You know, another thing Guthrie taught me, which I do, he said, "An intake of breath is the most exciting thing that can happen in the theatre." An intake of breath, and he 's dead right. The theory is that to retain an audience's interest you don't have to be thrilling at that moment. You have to give them the impression that something thrilling is about to happen.

BASSETT:

Right! So it's an audible or even a silent intake of breath.

BARRIE: Yes . . . yes . . . yes . . . so many things . . . I was doing this with these students yesterday, wasn't I? I'm not sure if you were there for that, but I was saying to the class who were doing the one-man shows that there are various technical things you can do to rivet an audience. One of them is to suddenly do nothing, that's kind of riveting.

BASSETT:

If you don't do it too often.

BARRIE:

If you don't do it too often. Oh there so many things, a battery of things that when, of course, you've been acting for money for a long time you have to know.

BASSETT:

You know, I'm curious; did you retain any of those childhood jottings when you went to the theatre to observe actors?

BARRIE:

Yes.

BASSETT:

What kind of things did you write?

BARRIE:

They're very basic because, of course, I was a child. One mannerism that I picked up from a leading actor at the York Theatre—who was a tremendous actor, a wonderful actor—he used to pull his cuffs when he came on, in a sophisticated play, pull his cuffs down, you know. In those days when you were playing a leading part in a provincial company, the audience always gave you a round of applause when you came on. They did me after a few weeks when I first started. So what you have to do was to find something to do during the applause before you got on with the play. And for years I used to pull these dreadful cuffs down. I don't do it anymore. But things like that, you know. Things like when you're walking across the stage, leading with the foot that is on the side of the stage to which you were going. These things give smoothness to the movement and give you a physical elegance, which is quite often appropriate for plays.

Certainly when I came to the theatre we were doing a lot of what we call West End comedies. They depended a great deal on polish and expertise. The writing was not of any stature, but it was there to give opportunity to the actor. Also, in those days, you were mostly well dressed in plays. It was important to make sure that your trousers were pressed and that you looked rather elegant. All that's gone very out of fashion now but it was the public wanted at that time and you have to supply what the public wants, don't you.

BASSETT:

Um-hmm. So, you have been doing *Macready* since 1979-1980 and you obviously enjoy doing it. Do you see yourself continuing to do this indefinitely?

BARRIE:

Well, I have to be careful because inevitably when one does a tour of it one loses other work, which maybe one ought to have done. However, I have this crazy ambition to go on doing it until I'm 80 years old.

Because that's kind of a wonderful idea to me because Macready died when he was 80. And I would kind of be very proud of the fact that I was still do the show which I've given so much of my life to and so much of interest and attention and beliefs . . . there are a lot of my beliefs in that show—with, of course, enormous gaps in between. Because I think it's terribly dangerous nowadays for an actor to go on playing the same part for a long time. Look at Yul Brynner, and he just died. He was forever playing the King of Siam and it was a waste. And it was a waste, wasn't it; he should have been playing a lot more parts.

BASSETT:

You were recently asked to join the Royal Shakespeare but turned it down because it was a two-year commitment.

BARRIE: Yes.

BASSETT:

Was that so awful? Why is that . . . ?

BARRIE:

No. I don't mind a two-year commitment if I'd been playing Hamlet, Lear, Coriolanus or some other enormous lead, but what I was offered was second leads. And I just feel that at my stage in my career, I couldn't commit myself to two years playing second leads. I hope it wasn't arrogance. I think it was just the knowledge that I would not be happy under those circumstances.

BASSETT:

When you leave Ohio, you are going to Virginia and then Texas. Is there anything looming in England? Have you been contacted by producers or directors for . . . ?

BARRIE:

Yes. I'm doing television when I get back, a television play . . . a new play. And I have, I think, three *Macready's* are coming up. Now I don't know what I'm going to do in the New Year. I've been asked to come back to America and this now, for—I think, eight weeks. Well, I love America, but I feel I've done a lot of America. The thing that's persuading me is, I'm afraid, very basic, and it's a lot of money. And that gives you freedom, doesn't it? Money gives you freedom.

BASSETT:

Do you and Mary go to the theatre together to see plays in London?

BARRIE:

Yes, but not as often as we should. I go to the theatre because I feel I ought to keep up with what's going on and to see my friends. English actors are very supportive of each other and one wants to see one's friends working and encourages them. Those are my real reasons for going to the theatre. I think the physical business of getting there and those terrible intermissions I could do without. I don't like them.

I like plays that start and go on to the end and you don't have that awful scrambling. But I wouldn't say I was wildly in love with an evening in the theatre. What is extraordinary is that you see about five plays and without much excitement. The great gift, of course, is when suddenly you see something absolutely wonderful. And that makes you very happy because it confirms that you are part of something, which really matters. I mean, I don't know why some people are in the theatre. I know why I'm in it. I'm in it because I think it is life enhancing. I think it can help people. After all, the first theatre in Greece was for medicinal purposes. It was part of getting better.

Acting in the theatre is a cathartic experience. It should take people out of themselves. It should make them reconcile their own lives with the world outside. The imaginative world feeds their real world. And I think it can improve their lives and I think that is an absolutely splendid reason for having theatre.

BASSETT:

Um-um. And it's also therapeutic for the performer, as well.

BARRIE:

For me, it is totally therapeutic. I don't know why this should be. I can't pretend to understand it. But I just know that giving a performance is the most health-giving experience. I can start a performance feeling very ill and after five minutes I'm extremely fit. I don't understand it. I think it might be something physical like adrenalin going through your system but I also think it's imaginatively becoming someone else and your own worried, cares, illnesses, seem to disappear. I can't envisage a life without acting.

BASSETT:

If you are ill or emotionally unhappy prior to a performance, you go into a performance and that illness—that disturbance is put aside. When does it come back to you after the performance? Immediately, or the next day?

BARRIE:

The next day. A performance seems to sustain you certainly until you go to sleep. Well it does me. I can't . . . I've never been out of work, mainly because I love acting. Many times one really ought to throw oneself out of work because you have to wait for the opportunity that is perhaps good for your career . . . that's going to take you on another notch. There have been occasions because I've been working I've had to miss something I would rather have been able to do. But I'm just not strong enough, I'm afraid, to do that. I need the experience of acting so much that I keep on working.

BASSETT:

Frank, if you had not become an actor, what would have been the most likely choice?

BARRIE:

I don't think I could have been anything but an actor. It is so much a consuming passion with me and has been since I was so small I knew since I was four that I was going to be an actor and I never seriously or even frivolously considered doing anything else. I was fortunate. I was brought up in England where one could become an actor. If I'd been brought up in some country where they had no tradition of theatre, I would presume I'd have been something else. I am a quite capable person, I must say, in most areas of life so assuredly I would have done something else. But I have the feeling I would have been acting it, you know what I mean? A lot of priests are actors manqué I think. A lot of teachers are and a lot of armed services are.

It's very infrequently pointed out but it's true that soldiers, for instance, are extremely interested in the dressing up side of life. If you go, as I have done, to a regimental dinner, or some social evening organized by the services, what they have all around the walls are drawings of their uniforms. And if you really want to get them interested you talk about what they're wearing. It's quite extraordinary that what we think of as fighting men are, in fact, peacocks. They really are. And my God they fight to get those extra bits of braid on their shoulders.

Actors find all of this very amusing. And we also resent the fact they tend to look down on actors. They tend to think that we're frivolous creatures when, possibly, we think the same about them.

BASSETT:

I love it. Yes, I hadn't thought about that—the peacock—but that's absolutely true, isn't it?

BARRIE: Yes.

BASSETT:

Well, there really is a relationship between theatre and art and life. Art mimics life in many ways that we really don't normally think about, but lawyers, teachers, priests have that flamboyance. I hadn't thought about soldiers, but I think Douglas MacArthur was one of the best actors; he or Montgomery?

BARRIE:

Oh yes, yes indeed. All wonderful performers! Only one performance of course.

I think the big difference between actors and non-actors is that actors know when they're acting. Most people don't seem to realize.

We're all different in different situations. For instance, if the Queen of England came into this room at this present moment, we would both behave in a different manner—a different way. And that is acting. And yet, I don't think either of us would think of it in those terms, but in fact, that's what it is.

BASSETT:

Yes. We assume roles according to the situation. We behave differently and I think those of us in the theatre are a little bit more aware of those changes.

BARRIE:

Yes. I find that actors, on the whole, are very un-pompous people.

BASSETT:

I do too.

BARRIE:

Because we can see through it all and find it amusing.

BASSETT:

Yes . . . yes . . . I like that. I think actor training, even though many of the students who come to us, I know, are not going to be professional actors, I believe that the training they are getting is as valid a training as any university can offer for that person. I think you can come into better contact with yourself in acting than you can, sometimes, in studying other things. I think that's very important. To know who you are, to become . . . to know what it is to be centered as a person. To be able to trust your instincts. To be aware of how you react. Those are things that one learns in actor training. That can only help you as an individual in life.

BARRIE:

I absolutely agree with everything you're saying, and I also think that the situation of being in a play with other actors is a crisis situation. The performance is a crisis situation. And you learn to help each other and support each other and that kind of generosity toward your colleagues will spill over into your private life.

BASSETT:

Yes, in that light, working on a production is such a group effort and you have to learn to be respectful of the people you're working with because they have feelings and points of view that are valid. That is good—to be able to learn how to share with people.

BARRIE: Yes, oh yes! All acting is compromise, of course. What you want to do may get in the way of someone else in the scene wants to do and you have to give and take. You have to get on with the person you're working with and, as you rightly say, respect what their doing. I love doing it, I must say.

BASSETT:

Frank, I think we 'll probably get ready and go downtown now. I've enjoyed this terrifically, immeasurably. Thank you very much.

