

SPEAKER: M1

The copy right of this recording is vested in the BECTU History project the name of the interviewee is award winning costume designer Julie Harris. The name of the interviewer Roy Lansford the date 21st August 2000.

SPEAKER: F8

No light no keylight no.

SPEAKER: M2

When and where were you born?

SPEAKER: F3

I was born in 1921 which is three years after the First World War. Totally different worlds. In no way can relate. Now what kind of upbringing to what happens today. I went to kindergarten. I mean you don't even hear the word kindergarten I had a nanny. Then I went to boarding school when I was quite young because I was an only child and probably very spoiled. So it was good thing I went to boarding school and then I stayed there until I was about 16. No 14. And then I went to another day school by which time I was starting to decide what I wanted to do. And I had always been in love with Clark Gable and film stars and I thought I wanted to be an actress. I wanted to go on the stage. There's so much going to be a film star to be an actress on the stage. Anyway my father thought that wasn't a proper thing to do and I must do something to earn a proper living. So I decided then that I would be a fashion artist. Now today nobody in their right mind would be a fashion artist but that's what I thought I would do. You see back in those pre-war years and I'm talking of the 1936 37 girls. Some went to university but not very many. And you then went to finishing school or you did a domestic science course or you did a secretarial or you got some other kind of job. And I went to work for. First of all I did do some. Art school I went to Chelsea Art School. I didn't think I worked very hard I wasn't a great artist and the fashion course was just taken by Graham sutherlands wife Kathleen who I'm not sure knew a great deal about fashion but it was all there was in the evenings and then I won a competition in the Sunday paper and I got a scholarship to go to a dress designing school in dress making now I never learned to dress me and to this day I'm not very good at saying. I found it quite useful not to be able to say in the wardrobe because you were never asked to do anything so firmly. No I can't sew. And people then rather wondered I mean them jumping time. But people wondered how you could know about clothes if you couldn't make it but I've had many many years in clothes and you begin to learn. And I went to work eventually for someone called a court dressmaker and that was in the days when debutants went to court to be presented and they had three feathers in their hair and a long train and long white gloves and rather lovely evening dresses. So that was the beginning of my real fashion life. And one day into this shop where I work came Greta Gynt who was a great film star of the thirties and into the 40s very beautiful. I was absolutely stunned by this lady who had false eyelashes which I'd never seen before. She was very beautiful and wearing lots of silver fox fur and she was having some clothes for a film and maybe then I started thinking Oh. Perhaps I would like to design clothes for films. I mean then think about it. But I suppose we all think perhaps still do that we can do it without any bother. So I then started thinking this is what I like to do. I did lots of sketches and sent them off to people like David Lean and Alexandra Korda and they all came back and we thank you very much. Very nice.

SPEAKER: F4

But then the war came and I left that job because the shop closed and I used to go out dancing as other young people did. The chaps were on leave and I went on a fateful night to the Cafe de Paris when that was bombed and that there were a lot of casualties about 60 people they think were killed including Ken snake hips Johnson who was the bandleader and quite a few of his band and it you know it just was the most horrendous experience. But all these things rather than fade in one's memory I was injured. I got an injury in my arm which was double luck. Lucky I wasn't killed but lucky I got this arm injury which is my left arm because I draw with my left hand and it didn't do it any damage beyond a bit of a mess. So after that was over I then my call up into the ATS was deferred for a while and then I was called out I think it was the end of 1942 and I went up to Harrogate to learn to be a lady so it's never very good at my wartime. I don't think I did anything very brilliant but I ended up being Corporal Harris. But.

Was Well just at the end of the war when I was in London and they used to go to the Overseas Club dancing on Thursday nights with my friends. And you stood around and you got picked up by whoever there was to be picked up. I mean you wouldn't think of doing it today and then more came in the blackout a total stranger but my friend met a Polish gentleman who worked for the Poli film industry. Who knew. And his name Kleenman at Gainsborough Studios. Who was the production manager. The studio manager. And so cutting long story short just even before I got demobbed I got an introduction to Gainsborough's Studios and I travelled along and my uniform was taken on the set of the Wicked Lady which was being filmed with Leslie Arliss doing the directing. And so then it really really got into my blood. I mean the smell of the whole thing and standing in the lift with James Mason I thought this is the place to work. Anyway nothing happened of that. I got my demob came out and I first of all worked in a Canadian officers club for a brief while then I went to Nathan's the costumiers. Now that was beginning to be really useful stuff to learn. And whilst I was there I heard from gainsborough and would I go for another interview and they wanted an assistant for Elizabeth Hattenden.

SPEAKER: F2

Elizabeth Hattenden was the queen of dress designers then I mean she she did all the Gainsborough's Wicked Lady Man in Grey all those costumes films and she was sort of doyenne of all the. Dress Design. Well actually in those days there weren't very many dressed designers. And it was only after the war when I was there and she had an assistant called Doris Lee who subsequently married John Fox? and there was Joan Ellicott and there was Phyllis Thornton and we all eventually made it but we were initially friends assistance so all our sketches were exactly the same way that Liz is to. On tracing paper and varnished. But eventually particularly when gainsborough's stopped making pictures and it became just Box Sidney Box and there was Pinewood we all went to Pinewood and Liz went her way and she did other films like Chitty Chitty Bang Bang which had probably one of her last films. And Joan ellicott eventually went to the BBC and Phyllis Dalton who had two Oscars she did Dr. Zhivago and recently Henry the Fifth. So we all sort of went away and did our own thing.

SPEAKER: M2

What was gainsborough like to work for?

SPEAKER: F4

It was lovely. I mean things I suppose by today's standards of making films. It was Toy Land which it was happy and there wasn't the pressure. There wasn't the money. Nobody was paid these fantastic salaries particularly stars even were not and designers. I went I earned seven pounds ten shillings as an assistant and then I kind of got up to about 20 25 pounds at the beginning of the fifties and there wasn't the money to spend on costumes. I mean if you had a thousand pounds in the budget that was a lot of money then. Things moved out there. I can't believe what it costs now but I'm sure it's just never enough. I mean there was never enough for us. We were always whingeing about it and I'm sure designers today say they don't have enough even if they have a couple of million.

SPEAKER: Designers today owe what they have today to you. You had to struggle to get that far.

SPEAKER: F1

Therefore. I suppose I don't know as they say they were not a lot of designers abo ut but gradually there became a whole sort of little nest of us there was Maggie Firse? and there was Bumble Dawson and Joan and Phil the ones I've mentioned. But in a way. And Tony M endelsohn there probably was only us because there weren't that many films made and so we kind of rotated more between us and it was then in the 60s perhaps when it began to broaden out and other designers came in. But the whole approach to costume. It grew rather as the film's got bigger and there was the American CO American productions as well. And of course when I first started clothes were still rationed so we had coupons to think of and every costume we did you had to indent for the number of coupons. So you always put in a few extra things extra petticoats extra pairs of stockings stockings not tights. So that you would have some coupons to spare but one would be walking about with about 2000 in your pocket. And I mean on the black market they would have fetched quite a lot of money. I mean they were sort of worry and you had to make a return to the Board of Trade for every coupon you used.

SPEAKER: F4

So you used it for what and return the ones that you hadn't used so all that kind of thing I mean it all takes so long doing budgets and getting the film off the ground. That's how one would have had time for that fiddle dee dee I don't know.

SPEAKER: M2

You worked for the Rank Organisation?

SPEAKER: F1

Then after the Ostrers it then became Sidney Box. And then when I went to Pinewood It was Rank. But I never saw Rank himself. I mean he wasn't the person involved. There were people like Elton John who was the executive producer who did have a certain amount flair I think. But otherwise you dealt really with the producer and the director of whichever film you were working on. And it varied as to who had the most say. Sometimes the producer wanted to know everything and sometimes he just left it to the director. The one you least got their own way was the costume designer because you had to please so many different people.

SPEAKER: M2

You were nominated for your ability long before you got the Oscar?

SPEAKER: F2

Yes. In a way. But of course the Oscar did make a difference. Only for the next year or so it will go on. I'm just so pleased now to say that I had it. I mean to have done 45 years in the industry with nothing to show I would sort of mind I think but it just went from film to film. There wasn't too much pick and choose. I had a contract with a rank organization in the fifties. To do two films a year and look after their contract artists for the Venice Film Festival the Cannes Film Festival. Personal appearances I mean the likes of. Diana Dors.

SPEAKER: M3

And. Diana Dors was always being photographed. I mean wherever she went she was sort of Spice Girl of the day. Yes.

SPEAKER: F3

And there was one one dress for instance that she had that was dyed blue to match her car and it had Fox dyed blue to match the car. I mean and in a funny way it sounds terribly extravagant but the cost was a lot.

But but things were not exorbitant then. I mean they were expensive but they weren't over the top. I mean today if you attempt such thing would cost thousands but it was fun doing those things because it had nothing to do with the script or action or what people had to do.

SPEAKER: M4

You could just put them in hope very glamorous clothes.

SPEAKER: M5

You then worked on Casino Royale

SPEAKER: F1

Change. There was a dress of Ursula Andress. Which was because when we first started that fell I mean there were five directors in the end. But with the first one they were going to be all sorts of crazy things. It wasn't a serious Bond film as you know by any means. And there was a moment when Peter Sellers was photographing Ursula Andress. You know she was photographing him and he kept changing his costume from being Hitler to Napoleon to a Toulouse Lautrec which was great fun because all the clothes that were actually used in that film same way of doing it.

SPEAKER: F4

And he really it's amazing how with a full front camera angle it looked as if this man had very short legs. It was absolutely brilliant. But Ursula had on a sort of chiffon gown with feathers and it was my idea because it went on a long time that it would start pale pink and end up deep pink. I mean talking about it now I goodness for it but it seemed at the time it seemed to be fun. So there were four of these negligees made with these pink feathers. But of course when it was cut it wasn't cut in sequence so you really lost point and probably people might well have thought it would have funny print.

So it was a shame. But these is. All. Things Ever Really. And this is this is the. Most difficult thing for you to understand. Is.

SPEAKER: F5

What is the input of the artist to the designer?

SPEAKER: F1

Oh the artist has a lot of say oh I can't wear this or I never wear blue or

whatever. But it varies I mean there were ones like Deborah Kerr who I worked with several times who was a great pleasure to work with and I knew the kind of clothes she liked and she liked what I gave her. So it was pleasure from start to finish because he's a lovely person. And the other one having talked of Andress was great fun and there were lots of laughs fittings. You know if you have a fitting room and everybody's sort of rather solemn and silent It's hard work. But if you work with someone so the second or third time of course it helped because you knew what they liked and then period films. In that sense were easier because there wasn't they couldn't say too much about I want the skirt here or can I have a short sleeve or something. I mean within reason it had to be what was the period. So that was different. I was always fussed up the corset so they're too tight. I can't can't stand that. But in the end they kind of got used to it.

SPEAKER: M2

You had another award waht was it?

SPEAKER: F6

Yes. It was for the Wrong B ox. I mean in those days the award for costume for all their awards were very much for British films.

SPEAKER: F1

Things made here say you didn't have the whole wide open market to contend with. So I got it for the Wrong Box which was the first film that Dudley Moore. Peter. Did good names go. But it was great fun it was an amusing period film shot in Bath. Michael Caine was in it. It was an early Michael Caine So it was nice to have that award it is not a huge amount. There were there were a lot of background dressing but Dudley and Pete and Dudley had lots of. Not a lot of changes but they have had period clothes which of course they had never worn before. And Nanette Newman who looked very good in her clothes and Michael Caine and that was Ralph Richardson. But it's I think when you see it now it sort of holds up it's quite an amusing film. Brian Forbes

SPEAKER: M6

Yes it is.

SPEAKER: F1

Yes it is very beautiful. Yes.

Did you ever have problems?

SPEAKER: F1

Well one one I mean not not as smart. One but one who who always rose above what you brought her in was Dame edith Evans and she did a film called whisperers and she was supposed to be a poor old age pensioner elderly a bit dotty. And we tried many things to get her to look sufficiently down market But she had this wonderful presence and flair and style of in her grand way. I mean not chic or anything but that but a style that she rose above it. And I bought a dreadful fur coat for a pound in Portobello market. But she wore it and she looked like Mrs. Exeter. No. I mean very grand. It wasn't really good at all. And it was a most motha old thing but she just gave it something. I mean some people can do that. Whatever you put them in they look good. Others and men included it's hard to type that you know. Michael Caine once tried to make him look smart it was quite difficult. I think he is better at it now. Well David Niven was marvellous. I mean he he always look good. I'm very particular about his clothes. He was delightful to work with but it was the fist in the velvet glove because what he what David wanted he got. I don't mean as far as clothes went because it happened to be there were all modern films except Casino Royale of course. He had some rather semi period clothes in that but it was all fun and it was something to laugh at.

SPEAKER: M6

And I so enjoyed it. Yes.

SPEAKER: M4

There are many stories of him in his story though.

SPEAKER: M5

So. His.

SPEAKER: F4

Thing is goes on telling stories. And I highly highly entertaining why.

SPEAKER: M6

Yes yes yes yes.

SPEAKER: F6

I mean so often David was one you had to do fittings all over the place and had to go to Paris and we fitted in the Hilton Hotel at the Paris airport because he was going for me to be because so often they were so busy and barely finished the picture before. When you were wanting to costume them for the next one so fittings I mean Petula Clark For instance couldn't come to the country only a certain number of days. So on Goodbye Mr. Chips. We were going to France or to Geneva to do fittings which may sound fun but it isn't. Means a lot of trailing about and all the bits of clothing and all the bits of fabric and the extra things you want to try or have to go as well.

SPEAKER: M4

Everything goes on in films

SPEAKER: F1

Know you. Yeah. I mean everybody in the film is whatever they wear whether it's a monkey on an organ grinder the costume designer is responsible in some way. I mean it may be the supervisor takes over a certain amount but initially the costume designer has to work it all out and organise what is going to be hired what's going to be bought or what you are making and sometimes doing the sketches is almost the least of it. It may be the most agreeable part but there's so much else and sheer physical slog going from A to B in the shops and the costumiers and the stock and breaking through stock and things you've seen time and again you can't face that jacket again. But you rely on the costume is to great extent.

SPEAKER 2 All the boys in Mr Chips.

You know all the boys and then they all had to be bought. They had to be ordered. And. You know it was quite difficult because the boys ranged from 12 to 18 and when you were ordering the size it is how old is a 14 year old boy. I mean they did vary well up and down I mean that became a major. I had a very good wardrobe supervisor Betty Adamson. But getting those boys clothing and the ties and the Blazers and the hats and the Straw Hats which they used to bang about and play football with in the lunch. So you had to have an inexhaustible supply of that sort of thing. I mean that was quite separate from. Designing beyond you wanted them to look right and it was period again it was 20s and 30s and then into 40s. But the whole thing was was very much getting the numbers right of the stock. Because you can fall into just as much trouble because you haven't got enough and it doesn't fit them all as if you've missed designed something.

SPEAKER: M2

There are all sorts of pitfalls for a designer which you wouldn't think actually happened.

SPEAKER: F1

I did. I did quite I did the Wrong Box and Deadfall. And this one I can't think what it was called Whispers. Dame Edith and then the Slipper and the Rose which was one of my favourite ones because it was a musical and it was period. And there was lovely Richard Chamberlain who was just divine and lots of good people like Michael Horden. And. Is my favourite moment in that oddly enough is the mice. And we had some of the Royal Ballet doing being the mice dance and doing my costumes was. Quite difficult but it worked. And I just love that little moment in the film who's the Oscar was Darling Dirk Bogarde and Laurence Harvey. And it was very much of its time sixties. It's still I think it holds up quite well. The clothes were very much on the change from more we'd all be used to and there was Mary Quant There was Courreges in France and there were the little white boot and then with the short skirts and it was Julie Christie herself who was always saying make it shorter make it shorter.

And because her legs were a bit bandy it anyway. She was right. But it was nice to do because it was it was wasn't exactly Cinderella But it she went from an ordinary model girl to the Italian princess. So she ends up able to have the clothes that I felt I understood and loved more than the early ones which were Kings Road. 60s swinging 60s.

SPEAKER: M6

I was always. Yes yes yes yes. No no.

SPEAKER: F7

I don't understand today's clothing at all. I really don't. I wouldn't want to do a modern film today. I imagine that they must buy. I mean we all and I think in my era of doing modern films which I rather stopped doing in the 70s. But we

design things. I mean most of the leading. Lady's clothes were designed but you wouldn't do it today. I mean it just wouldn't be worth it. And clothes don't look designed. I mean look at something like Notting Hill and Julia Roberts clothes. Very peculiar. That's both. That's what you know it's what people wear today. So it wouldn't have done for me to do a film like that. I think I belong to my own period. I mean I was brought up as I was saying in the 30s when there was an elegance in dress and my mother was very elegant. And. Today the young designers. They've never seen elegance. I mean it's a word that isn't used very much and there's certainly not a lot of it about.

SPEAKER: M4

There was a futuristic film.

SPEAKER: F1

Oh yes rollerball. Yes. Well that mercifully I had John Box to work with. Because he was a brilliant production designer and didn't fortunately want. I mean the whole thing. See it's funny it was done in 1974 and it was meant to be 30 years on or something where we are 30 years on and we're not wearing funny clothes at all. I mean they may be wearing things like that but you know everyone's wearing suits and jeans and I mean much as people were in 1974. So it was fortunate that we didn't go for anything stupid like space age. So close. John said Oh take a rather Grecian air about the evening clothes and things. So it wasn't futuristic. The difficulties in that film were doing the biker's clothes and the leather. And because on the rake. That stadium that they were skating round when they fell we first of all had them in nylon leggings trousers and when they fell the speed was so much that it burned burned their legs and their bums. So we had to change that but two days before shooting and get leather trousers which probably would have been better in the first place. I don't know why it wasn't but there was a whole lot of padding and americal Football padding and helmets and things very. Not me. But I enjoyed it. It was a good film to work on.

SPEAKER: M6

And Norman Jewisson the James Caan

SPEAKER: F1

Yes a sort of slight Spanish flavour about it. It's like yes. And. Yes. And a couple of things that more than them had. Were slightly ahead of their time. But they look alright today. So I think in the 80s I began to do less not necessarily a choice some Be honest but because I partly lived in the country and I didn't seek locations in Long locations I didn't want to. So in a way. Perhaps people think oh she's retired. I'm still not there all the time. I did about four things in in the 80s and the last thing I did which was in 1990 was a television series with Nigel Haver's called the Perfect Hero. And it was a six parts which I hadn't done before. I was moving house at the same time so it was a hectic kind of time but there just was never anything after that. It just suddenly stopped. I know I paint. So I was doing painting then anyway. But I've been able to concentrate on painting which I thoroughly enjoy for a while I did mind to be honest I thought I could do this I can do it but it sort of didn't happen I don't know when we came out of fashion I suppose the years was.

SPEAKER: M2

When is it I see right.

SPEAKER: F1

Well it's probably a certain amount of the younger people who are making the films or we don't want people who've been in all those years you know we don't want to be told what to do. We do. I think maybe a bit of not wanting ones who've been around a long time we want a fresh approach. That kind of thing. Yes. I couldn't do it. Now I'm in the US very long. They always were. It was it was a day without end. Well I think if you're actually working on a film on the unit. Yes. And when people at my costume friends who work say their contracts are for a six day week or unlimited hours.

SPEAKER: F9

Was there any problems health and safety wise with flammabe material?

SPEAKER: F1

No. No. I mean more problems we had going way back to my days at Gainsborough and into the 50s a bit with sound and taffeta and rustle. And there was a huge performance of taffeta dresses that had to have sort of flannelly petticoats and things to keep them quiet. And it is I mean the sound man sitting there with his

headphones making a huge fuss about little bit of rustle of something. But that fortunately when technology got better that that went away. So there was that problem and there was censorship. Problems you couldn't have cleavage in you couldn't have navels.

SPEAKER 2 When did that come in?

Oh I think in the late 50s. It was very much in the mid 50s when I did something called Value for Money with Diana Dors. We had to do two versions an American version which we could. Occur. I can't remember which one it was one could show the navel. Perhaps it was the Americans didn't want to see it. And no cleavage and the English version it was all right. But there were two versions. It was extraordinary and I mean going even further back the whole thing of people being in bed. One had to have their feet on the ground.

SPEAKER: F1 Well what did they do with the cleavage?

Ah well and they had to touch up every single. Little frame of a film to get rid of some of that bouncing boobs of Margaret Lockwood

SPEAKER 2 I suppose Jane Russel changed it?

SPEAKER: F8

It change it but I remember this brooding figure in Piccadilly was this sort of braless dress. And that film wasn't shown for two years after it was made. Was it. I mean it was tucked away somewhere in the time it came out. I think it was all right was they out. Was it The Outlaw. But it was certainly not shown. For a couple of years after it was made but I don't know the reasons whether it was censorship or what. But it made the difference.

SPEAKER 2 Would you do it again?

SPEAKER: F1

Yes I'm sure I would. But do you often wonder. In life there are moments when for reasons you don't know you go along a certain path and you can't jump backwards and say suppose I mean if I go right back to the beginning of what I was saying when I was in the 80 years and I met this chap Polish fellow who got me the right introduction. Now if I hadn't met him or if I had gone abroad in the services I'd gone overseas. Any of those things I would never have gone into films. I can't say whether my life would have been better or not but it was. It was a good life and now I'm mostly hugely enjoyed it.

SPEAKER: M9

Thank you ver much Julie Harris

Duration 35 mins 15 seconds. Text annotated for original Speechmatics version by John Harwood 16/6/17