

Hollywood and Back

Reminiscences by George Coulouris

Transcript of a talk broadcast on BBC radio (Home Service) in 1962

PART I

I've had a very mixed up life. I was born in Salford in 1903 and of course that was in Edwardian times, but Salford wasn't very Edwardian. I found myself, a little boy there; with a Greek father an English mother - they ran a restaurant called the Kings Restaurant opposite No. 8 Dock Gates. And I remember a photograph of that restaurant: my mothers in Victorian costume, two waitresses in bib and tucker, and there was a huge blackboard with a chalked up menu. Every day, Oxtail soup, 2d. Steak pudding, 6d. The steak pudding I think was very good. My mother had to work really hard.

Now I don't suppose she ever imagined herself married to a Greek - my father was born in a little village in Greece near Sparta; he prided himself on being almost a Spartan. He was always talking about the story, you know, about the boy who was eaten by a wolf while he was making polite conversation.

And my mother came from Knutsford.

My father had to leave home because there was no food, no money - you know, a peasant starving community, he had lots of brothers - I forget how many, a lot of them died. He came to the America of those days - (England) and started work as a dock labourer without knowing a word of the language.

Just about the same time, I suppose, my mother was starting out into service - that was the fate of most of the young girls, perhaps one daughter in every family, at least of a certain level, went into service. The most my mother ever got was £12 a year. But she never regretted it and didn't think she'd been had or anything, because she thought the people she worked for taught her such a lot about manners, deportment, speech, everything, and she'd never hear a word against any of her employers. Eventually she went as a chambermaid into a Blackpool hotel.

My father meanwhile had left dock labouring and started in the food business - lots of Greeks do. And he'd become the head chef of this same hotel, and one day my mother must have been in the kitchen for some errand or other, and she saw my father running around the table, furious, with a chopper in his hand, after a kitchen maid who had done something that he didn't quite

approve of - and I think that she really felt he had something. So, they got married and after a time opened the restaurant - Kings Restaurant.

The other thing that was interesting about the Salford of those days was that - I don't think it exists any more now - it was a sort of strange slummy wild romantic place. I tried to fit in with the other kids around, but I was half Greek and they always held me at a distance and they'd always insult me if anything at all went wrong. But I remember the places we used to play: there was a funny old ruined paint yard that you could clamber over doors of, and there were all kinds of disreputable older boys who sort of told us things we shouldn't be listening to; and then there was a woman who had the reputation of being the bad woman of the row.

One evening I was playing in a room with a boy and suddenly another boy rushed up to the window and said: Arthur Evans has just been burnt to death. And then: Charlie Rogers has had his eye put out; Arthur Roberts has been electrocuted - he was in a factory and he touched some wire, 100,000 volt wire, and he was finished. So it was very exciting and in a way romantic.

My father never felt there was enough money in the restaurant, so gradually my mother took over most of the catering work and my father began to buy things from the tramp steamers. You see the Greek steamers came in and he was friends with - could speak the language of the captain, and he would buy rope from them and sell it at a profit, and he kept gradually extending the number of things he bought. And he would buy damaged goods and refurbish them. He bought at one time ten tons of horse hair and it was put in a warehouse - huge mountains of horse hair, and I spent a whole week then clambering up these mountains and jumping down from the top of them - you know, it's a marvellous feeling, you land soft, no hurt from the fall. I must have been filthy but it was fun.

I was on holiday in Scotland with some friends, when I was at school later, and I was suddenly called home to do some work, and I had to spend days and days picking up strands of stuff that looked like blonde women's hair that had been drowned and hanging them on the clothes line all day long. I was really absolutely furious.

At one time we had some cigarette

papers, absolutely soaked, we had to dry them. So suddenly I thought: the YMCA boilers in Manchester. So I spent the whole of one New Year's Eve in gym shoes hopping about on rather hot boilers spreading out this cigarette paper. I don't think we over sold them but it was a good try.

I told Charlie Chaplin when I met him in Hollywood some of the things that my father did - I thought it would be amusing conversation at the dinner table. He looked very serious and said: I think your father was heroic.

Now during the First World War there were so many ships torpedoed that there were always supplies of damaged goods. My father made a lot of money - he lost it all afterwards in the slump after the war, he didn't understand slumps and booms, he thought he was a genius because he was making so much money.

I was able to go to Manchester grammar school and that was a real turning point in my life because it was a different world altogether. I was changed in every way by this school. When I'd been at the school some time I went into the school play. I think gradually I'd been thinking of being an actor, and I was always doing imitations of Sir Frank Benson and everybody thought it was marvelous, and one time when a master asked the boys "what are you all going to be?" when it came to my time the other boys yelled out: an actor, an actor! And that sort of made me feel good and I thought well, probably I should be an actor if they feel as enthusiastically as that about it. But that was a very very strange ambition in my environment at that time.

My father wanted me to be a businessman - all Greeks want their sons to be businessmen. And I was increasingly interested in - you know, intellectual things, music, books, I thought, I will be leaving school shortly and what shall I do? I can't go down to this junk yard and start scrubbing corned beef tins for the rest of my life and doing deals. So finally I said, I want to be an actor or a journalist.

He was absolutely astonished - he walked up and down saying, we send him to the grammar school, we give him a good education - now he wants to be an actor - an actor, an actor or a journalist. I said well a journalist, a journalist. So to show me how silly my ambition was to be a journalist he brought a journalist home to talk to me. The editor of the Pigeon Fanciers Gazette. And he assured me that there was no money in journalism - so that finished that. So there was only acting. My father wouldn't hear of

it, so I talked to my mother and she was rather romantic about acting - she'd heard of Henry Irving, they'd both heard of Henry Irving and Mrs. Langtry and she felt it was rather marvellous that I wanted to be an actor. At any rate she really helped me. She said, I'll send you what money I can if you go. I got my own good suit, a terrible looking suit but it was my only good one, and I was working in the office at the time, and I went around to all the people who owed money and collected all the bills I could which amounted to about £20 - I remember I gave one woman a discount because I said pay now and I'll give you 10 per cent, just to get the extra money for the train that night.

So - my mother knew I was going away and as we went upstairs to bed that night I sort of patted her on the bottom affectionately, meaning I'm going. And I got my bicycle, my three-speed gearbox, oil bath bike and a camp bed - I don't know what I supposed I was going to do with the camp bed, I think I thought I could take a bare austere room, put the camp bed in it and I'd save money. And I left a note for my father on the hallstand saying: as you refuse to help me in any way towards being an actor I'm forced to go away. And a train arrived - Euston station. I saw these funny prefab huts that they had there and I sat there under the clock - I thought eight o'clock, he's getting up now, now he's going downstairs, he'll see this mysterious note, I've done it, he knows I've gone away now. What must the atmosphere be like at home?

So I'd got to London. Well, I thought, I'll go to the London Central YMCA - I must have been a very big YMCA boy in those days. Then the first blow fell - I couldn't get a room there, and it was very important to get a room there because they were only ten shillings a week I think in those days. So I had to look for lodgings and I found a room in some strange place in Camberwell, and thought now I must start to be an actor. So I went around reciting for everybody - I wrote letters in the leather arm chairs of the writing room - I always remember the smell of the London Central YMCA writing room. I don't know what I'd have done without that place. Robert Atkins at the time was at the Old Vic, and he saw me. So I - he was there amongst a lot of scaffolding, I think they were rebuilding the Vic at the time. So I started on my piece that I always recited for everybody, and I said: "Oh, pardon me thou bleeding piece of earth that I am meek and gentle with these butchers" - went on to the end. Atkins said, um, yes, where are you from? I said Manchester. What were you

doing there? My father's business. Can you go back? My heart sank to my boots. He told me why. I had a Lancashire accent - no one had told me, you know, your best friends won't tell you.

And I couldn't get a job anywhere - oh, I think somebody - Charles Darren - did, and I recited with this terrific accent. But he didn't mind that because he was only offering me thirty bob a week. So he said, we'll take you, you've got a lot to learn, your gestures are terrible, everything's wrong, but I'll give you thirty shillings. So I thought, this is not enough to live on. At any rate I decided I wouldn't do it.

So I thought, what am I going to do? And at that time I happened to meet an Armenian who had also run away from Manchester, the same suburb, and he had become a waiter. He said I know the maitre d'hotel of the special a la carte restaurant on the Majestic, this big liner, where the millionaires go. Sometimes he has vacancies, for assistant waiters, why don't you go and see him? So I went to see this man - he had a house in Regent's Park, and said, Mr. Dennarez, I would like to be - I would like to have a job on - in your restaurant. So he said: vous parlez francais? I said, oui. That was all. I couldn't speak a word of French. He said, I'll let you know, I'll let you know. I thought he won't do anything about it unless I do something. So I heard he was on the six o'clock boat train to Southampton to get on the boat. So I took a platform ticket, a penny platform ticket, went along the train until I saw him in the carriage, opened the door and said please, Mr. Dennarez, will you - will you give me a job? I really need a job badly. And that did it - to my horror. He sent me a wire saying: join the ship. Well, I'd really got myself into a mess because first of all I didn't know anything about waiting - they asked me of course, what is your last experience? I said Ciro's - somebody told me to say Ciro's, so I said it. And all the service was conducted in French; I was assisting my chef to serve at one table: Somerset Maugham, Goossens, Basil Dean. They always had porterhouse steak for lunch, I remember that, and a special little menu was written out for them. The order would be given to my chef - the chef would give me the order written out in French. I would then rush along miles away to the galley where there was a - the chefs were waiting with a board with all the numbers of the tables and hooks - he would put my slip on to the number of the table and then I would have to wait for the food, rush back and then get it. I would get the food - as I say I didn't know

French, I didn't know one dish from the other - I would take the food, go all the way back and find I'd got the wrong dish. And this was another terrible blow to my chef - he was practically frantic by the time the trip was over.

We got to New York and I took a look around New York, went to see 'The Thief of Baghdad', Douglas Fairbanks and saw this strange place that looked rather like a German film metropolis, you know, to us in England at that time it seemed a sort of - 1984 - as 1984 seems to us now. So I only stayed there and came back with the ship, and then of course I was fired when we got back to Southampton. But he was very nice, Dennarez, he said, when you have learnt the service a little better and French a little better perhaps we can use you again.

I went back to London and I found a wire waiting from a letter I'd written to the Continent from an ad I saw in the Telegraph: Berlitz teachers required. And it said in the wire, do you prefer to go to Trieste or Lucerne? So I looked at the map and I thought well, Lucerne is nice, mountains. So the next day I got on the train - I didn't realise that I was taking with me a very full-fledged Lancashire accent to inculcate into all those innocent foreigners in Lucerne. I don't know whether you know anything about the Berlitz method: it's entirely oral and it consists in the teacher having to shout from morning till night, from about eight in the morning till ten at night with a few hours off here and there. And you say to the pupil: what is this? Is this the pencil? And the pupil is supposed to say, no, that is not the pencil, it is the book. Who are you? Who am I? This goes on interminably. There are pictures of the Venus de Milo, pictures of a monkey. And they say, Venus de Milo is beautiful, the monkey is ugly. So I kept on doing this - with a waiter, there were lots of waiters there wanted to know a few words for the tourists. So I could see the man didn't understand in spite of all my efforts, and finally I said in Italian: <words missing from transcript> He said, yes. Well, I said, what is this? Venus de Milo he says, naked.

Well, I had three very nice months in Switzerland in the winter with no tourists, but I didn't want to stay, I had dreams of going to Milan and studying singing, so I took the train to Milan after three months. I started teaching English in the Berlitz school in Milan. I stayed there about three or four months and then it was a year almost I had been away from home, my mother had been helping me, and I was no nearer becoming an actor.

So I went back - and my father had decided then it was irrevocable, that I really meant it, and so he decided he'd help me to study at dramatic school. I did there a bit of "Richard III" for Miss Fogerty at the Central School of Speech Training, and she gave me a scholarship to go there. I was there for about nine months, I found it very strange, I couldn't quite make out what they were playing at, I didn't fit in - the other students thought I was a very very eccentric character. They were mostly colonels' daughters and I felt socially inferior too. I heard them discussing which of the men students were gentlemen in the canteen. That seemed to obsess them quite a lot. At any rate I didn't feel that I could ever sort of become friendly with any of them, except I used to have long talks with Peggy Ashcroft, she was there at the time. And oh, Olivier was there the year before and joined us for a play that we did at the end of the term.

I left the school before the end of the year - my mother died at the time, so I went back to Manchester for her funeral and while I was there I was offered a job at the Rusham Repertory which at that time was run by an undertaker and the theatre was in the yard of the undertaker - the yard - the theatre was behind the yard of the undertaking establishment. And this man there seemed very keen on me and said, join the company. And I played a clergyman in "Outward Bound" and I was full of this new accent that I'd been taught at the Central School, so I suppose I must have sounded terrible sort of Oxford, quite, quite, quite. And we opened and the Manchester Guardian said: George Coulouris should think more of Woodbine Willy and less of the private secretary. Woodbine Willy was a very virile clergyman, you know. And also he shouldn't stand so long with his mouth open. My father read the Guardian every day and it was quite a shock - he thought "this proves more than ever that I was right, he should have been a junk dealer and he should not ever have been an actor". So the man who at the beginning of the week had said you must come with us and play small parts, £4 a week - he called me into his dressing room and said, I think you are terrible and that you should give up this business.

I wasn't in the least affected by this and said, well, a lot of very important people think I'm really very good - Sybil Thorndike, other people like that. So I went down to London to the Old Vic with Baylis, and I couldn't stand the atmosphere in the Old Vic because they were always making you walk on at the opera and give prizes at parish tea

parties and various things, and also I think the very culmination of my protest against the place was that I was the front stretcher bearer in "Richard III" with Balliol Holloway as Richard. I had about two lines - I did the two lines well in rehearsal and then there was a sort of stoppage and whisperings between Holloway and Andrew Lee, and I was then demoted to the rear stretcher bearer with no lines. I thought, oh, well, this is a bit too much. So I went to Baylis and I said, I find I can't live on the money, thirty shillings, I want more money. And of course that did it - you only had to say that to Baylis and it was the finish - out, out.

I sent some photographs to Basil Dean and he engaged me for "Sirocco". Now "Sirocco" was about the biggest and most sensational flop that Coward's ever had. The first night was a catastrophe. I was dressed as an Italian woman in a festival scene, naked to the waist with all kinds of beads all over my chest. And at the curtain I was standing next to Coward and the people were howling for his blood because he'd just attacked the Church of England in Home Chat or something, I don't know. And Coward, with absolute aplomb, bent down, picked up the bead, bowed low to me and handed it to me, while the populace were howling for his blood.

Well, I decided that I didn't fit into the London stage because every time I went to the theatre I always saw people striding around in evening clothes, pouring coffee out from two jugs at once, and giving cigarettes to each other from gold cases - it made me nervous. I thought I'll never be able to do that, I never would, so I'd better go somewhere else. I'd been to the Cambridge Festival Theatre and met an American girl there - she told me that in America you couldn't starve, you were bound to get a job at something if you wanted to work, you could work. I thought well, good, I'll go there.

PART II

I arrived in New York, I was met by the girl I afterwards married; I had with me a trunk; I got to the place where the taxis take passengers and I said to one of them, are you engaged? And he said, no, buddy, I'm married already. It was rather a good introduction to American life because similar things so often happened afterwards.

I had about 250 dollars and I had a room at the YMCA in 23rd street, full of cockroaches, and I found a place where I could buy a ticket for five dollars for meals and they clipped it each time you had something to eat. And then I began to go around New York looking for jobs: I found a little red book with all the managers names in, so I went from office to office and told them I was with the Old Vic and had won a prize at the Oxford verse speaking competition, and I suppose they were rather impressed by an English accent. At any rate I went to one place and there was a man there. he was doing a play. So he talked to me in a peculiar sort of whisper full of suppressed excitement. And he said, we are doing a wonderful play, you know this man sits at a desk and he controls the whole world around him - and he began to tell me the plot. And I said. it sounds like "Measure for Measure". So he sort of leant back and said, you've guessed our secret, it is "Measure for Measure". And we want you to play Angelo, which of course is the heavy lead, the terrible sensualist who attacks the nun. And his wife was directing the play - afterwards she came back to England and did Sagittarius in the New Statesman. Well, she hadn't directed many plays, as I hadn't acted in many, and she began to direct me. And she very shortly reduced me from a sort of - well, human being to some kind of stuffed dummy.

One day when I went there she said, I think you should have mannerisms in this scene, and I shall give you cues for the mannerisms, I want you to raise your eyebrows on cue, and also I think you should gasp from time to time, I will also give you cues for the gasps. Finally, of course everybody else in the cast knew days before, I was really going from the lead to play two lines - come back tomorrow, play Friar something or other. It was very upsetting because it doesn't often happen in England, but apparently they do that a lot in America.

Then I heard about all these summer theatres that were all over America, so I tried to get into one and to do that I said I would play parts and also teach in the school.

So I got to this place which was in Massachusetts, a lovely village called Stockbridge, and we stayed at an old colonial house. The day I arrived there I suddenly saw in the evening a very small girl with a high voice saying, I've driven all the way up from Hertford with a golf tee in my mouth.

It was Katharine Hepburn, she wore jeans, of course it was 1930 - she wore them all the time and she always ate her meals with her knee in front of her between her and the table, and sort of ate her food over the top of her knee and talked in a most extraordinary way without the slightest inhibition of any kind. Of course at that time all this was very new. We all thought she was quite extraordinary. She would come back late at night - she had the next bedroom to us, I was married to the girl who had met me at the boat. We'd go to bed and it would be about two, she would come back and begin to recite French poetry in a very high thin voice for about an hour. She also was married and I think her husband was named Smith - he appeared every weekend and always shampooed her hair and went for ice cream - this was a sort of routine. She was always in the bath tub having her hair shampooed by her husband, and afterwards he would go for the ice cream. She appeared in this season and in one part she was very very good, in the other she was no good - as a matter of fact she left before the end of the season. But I would say to her, why don't you really work? You could be a marvellous actress. So she said, I don't want to be a marvellous actress, I want to be a star.

Well after that I went back to New York and appeared in several plays. I didn't really do anything properly in New York until "The Late Christopher Bean" - after the play was over they needed someone to play it in the film, so they sent for me and this was my first experience of films. It was very early, 1932, the beginning of the talkies. They had no idea how to do talkies because it was as new to them as it was to us going there. I was quite sort of overcome by the responsibility of being in a big studio and feeling that all this overhead was going on all the time - it was rather frightening.

We were doing the film and of course the director, Sam Wood, was rather nervous about making it as good as the play. So Barrymore, Lionel Barrymore, was playing the old doctor, and Drexler was playing the servant. And Viola Bondi was playing the wife. But one day Bondi, who had been advising them as to the way it was done on the stage, wasn't there, so the director sent for me early in the morning. He said would

you come over and do me a favor. I want you to tell Lionel Barrymore and Marie Drexler where the laughs came and how this scene was played in the theatre. And I felt this was absolutely terrible ordeal, to go to these people who'd been working for forty years and had become world famous and I was a relative beginner, to have to tell them what to do in a scene. But they were very nice about it so it passed off very well.

After that I went back to New York to be in plays. I was in a flop with Orson Welles. It was called "Ten Million Ghosts", it was about the munitions industry and one of the causes of the flop was that we had a whole munition factory going full blast in the first scene and consequently nobody could hear a word the actors said. There was a huge cannon about twenty feet long and machinery of all kinds. I dressed in the same dressing room as Orson and he's made a great success by doing a coloured version of "Macbeth" on the Federal Theatre. I'd heard about this boy genius and it rather annoyed me, all the publicity, so I spent a lot of time in the dressing room saying to him, why did you do "Macbeth" with coloured actors? Just to be different, wasn't it, Orson? It was just to be different, wasn't it? So Orson was obviously quite annoyed. This play was a complete failure, we went there on the second night and the theatre was locked up. The play had finished but nobody had told the actors.

Then after that Orson went back to the Federal Theatre which was a theatre organised by the Roosevelt government because there was such depression and the actors were starving. They had to rehearse these plays and they got the same money when they rehearsed and when they played, consequently it was possible to rehearse interminably - I think they got 57 dollars a week whether they were rehearsing or playing. So I saw a production of his, of Marlowe's "Faustus" - he called it "Forstus", and I thought it was wonderful. So I kept ringing him until I got him on and said, Orson, I think this is absolutely marvellous what you've done with this play. And I think the fact that I, who'd been teasing him so much in the dressing room, thought it was good, intrigued him quite a lot. So when he started his Mercury Theatre he sent for me and he said, I'm doing three plays, "Julius Caesar" in modern clothes, "Heartbreak House" and "Shoemaker's Holiday" - what parts do you want to play? Well, I thought that was marvellous, just to offer me a choice of parts. He said, if you want to play Anthony I'll play Brutus; if you want to play

Brutus I'll play Anthony. So I said "I'll play Anthony", naturally, it's the showiest part. So we started the rehearsals and we had very little money. Orson was paying us very little, the whole thing was a desperate venture. We rehearsed in all kinds of places - in an abandoned brewery in Fort Lee, New Jersey, a huge place completely in ruins, and as we were rehearsing big flakes of ceiling would fall on our heads. And Orson always had a lot of sort of office boys and things around that he insulted consistently. He had one man - I think his name was Allen - he was an absolute stooge and ran around like a maniac and Orson insisted on calling him Vaktangoff, because Vaktangoff was a name from the Russian theatre that Orson liked the sound of, so it was always Vaktangoff, Vaktangoff.

We opened in "Julius Caesar" and it was a tremendous success - it sort of went to pieces three days before the opening, I thought it was going to be terrible. I was very upset because we were going to have a baby, I had no money and I thought this is going to be a failure. The previous night Tallulah Bankhead had opened in "Anthony and Cleopatra" and had spent about \$100,000, whereas we spent \$10,000, if that. And the critics had been very scathing about her - they said she - Miss Bankhead got into a barge and went along the Nile and promptly sank. And a man named Dwight Fiske who was singing rather risqué songs at the Savoy Plaza was seen to come out of Bankhead's show in the first interval screaming. "I want my telleger back". The critics said that these people hadn't got as much money as Bankhead, but they've got brains which is more important. So the thing settled down for a run.

It was in modern clothes so Orson thought that as it was in modern clothes he could take a few liberties. So he always went to the restaurant on the corner, and timed his dinner so that he would arrive in the middle of the orchard scene just before his entrance where the actors were petrified waiting for him, wondering if he would come at all - with a big cigar in his mouth, dressed in a big blue suit, saunter through the auditorium and jump on to the stage from the side steps, and the scene would go on. Well, one night - he was always playing jokes so one night I went to do this speech over Caesar's dead body "O pardon me thou bleeding piece of earth" - and I saw all over the stage patches of red. So I thought oh, this is another of Orson's jokes, it's tomato ketchup or something, he's fooling around again. I went through the speech over Caesar

and then later on I was doing the big speech, "Friends, Romans, countrymen" and I was on a podium in the fore part of the stage with the whole back stage bare behind me, with the radiator pipes showing and everything, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Caesar being assisted along the back wall by two of the extras to the stage door. And I found out afterwards that he'd been stabbed by Orson. We had rubber daggers and Orson for some reason decided he would use a real dagger one night, so he stabbed Caesar by accident of course and severed an artery, and Caesar was in hospital for a month. Another time while I was doing the "Friends, Romans, countrymen" speech I suddenly saw a rain shower start, not only on me but on the audience too. The boy Lucius in the play had decided to find out if the sprinkler system really worked - so he lit a match under the wax of the sprinklers in his dressing room, and it melted the wax and of course set off the whole sprinkler system of all the theatre. I suppose this was under the Brecht business of alienation of the audience.

After that I was in "Heartbreak House" with Orson and played Mangel, and he played Shotover. There was one line I had to say - when he gets the girl - "and him an old mummy" which for some reason got a terrific laugh. So I said to Orson, I think Shaw's lines are stupid, you could put other lines in and they'd be just as good. "And him an old mummy", what's funny about that? So one day I said, "and him an old piece of cheese" and of course there was a dead silence, and Orson has never forgotten this, he always talks of the time I tried to rewrite Shaw.

After that I left the Mercury and did other plays on Broadway - I thought it was such a wonderful chance to start a permanent theatre in New York, because we had this Princes Theatre where all the Wodehouse reviews were before - I think it's been demolished now. And it was a very low rent and I think we could have stayed there for a long time, but Orson got sort of I don't know, he felt that it was too small for him or something, he wanted to go on to bigger and better things. It's really folded up after the next season, after "Danton's Death" which wasn't a success. Then Orson asked me to go back to do "Citizen Kane". His career had been in the balance because his radio show had not been sponsored commercially, and then he did this Martian broadcast. Of course that was absolutely accidental, and I mean it wasn't a planned thing. He was doing the show of the Wells' story of the landing of the Martians and they kept announcing that

it was fiction and not a news broadcast. but of course for some reason there was a mass panic, somebody said this was the first time an actor had commercial sponsorship of his radio programme - and they were absolutely dying to get him because they knew he was world famous. He decided he would go to Hollywood - and he had more freedom than I think any other director has ever had. He was allowed to pick his own actors, he could have taken anybody and asked for them to be taken and paid what they wanted. So he asked a lot of his Mercury people and he also got new people like Agnes Moorehead and Everett Sloane who weren't actually in the Mercury plays, about three or four of us were the Mercury people - Joseph Cotton was one of them, I was one, Erskine Sandford, people like that.

So he was going to do a Conrad story, "The Heart of Darkness" - that's the thing we went out for, and we were given five weeks guarantee by RKO to go out there, and we went out. And nothing happened - we just got to Hollywood and we kept going to the studio week by week and getting this cheque. Then Orson called a meeting and he said, we're having a great deal of trouble with the script, can't get a script out of "Heart of Darkness", but we're going to do "Smiler with a Knife" and that may take about six, eight or ten months to get a proper script. You are all going to remain on the payroll until we get the script, and I want you all to regard me as your father. You're here with me, and when anything goes wrong, any time of the day or night you must ring me. So I sent for my wife and two children, took a furnished house at rather a high rent and settled down. In the middle of the sixth week RKO called us in and said, you're off the payroll, it's all finished. We tried to get on to the father, Orson, the father figure, but nobody could find him, he had completely disappeared. No one knew where he was. Weeks went by and we would get together in the evenings, the Mercury actors, and talk about the disappearance of the great man.

You see, we weren't in line for other jobs because we all had the same agent and Orson had told this agent that he must not offer his Mercury actors to anybody else because he wanted to keep them as a body to do his first film. Somebody would say, well, I think he picked up his laundry last week at such and such a place, perhaps if we went there we could find out where he was. Well, finally I ran him to earth, the father figure, in the canteen at RKO. So I went over to him and said, Orson, I'm in a very bad position because I've taken a house and I've got a wife

and two kids, and I'm not being offered for MY jobs. Do you mind if I look for other jobs while you're getting a script? He said, no, no, no, you can't do that. I must have new faces for my film. So I said if I play small parts will my face be damaged enough to stop me being in your film? He said, well, I don't know, it's a problem, but I don't know what we can do about it. So I took a chance and appeared in some other films and it didn't seem to damage my face because he had me after all.

But it was about ten months afterwards that he called me one night and said I want to see you, and I went up to his mountain top house and we - he said come out and look at the lights - this was in the war. He said this is one of the few cities in the world, there are only about two left, where you can see lights this like, this blaze of light down below, Los Angeles. And then he told me the story of "Citizen Kane" and told me I was going to play this lawyer in it, Thatcher, who was the guardian of the boy who goes from about 25 to 80 in the film. And when it got to the 80 part we had a very strange make-up man - Orson had discovered him - Wally Siderman. And I had to go to the make up about five in the morning and have my make-up done, and he started by - I got into the chair and then I would have some kind of mask made of clay over my face with straws through the nostrils and all kinds of - then the rubber would be put on and then he put a silk stocking over my head and on the top of the silk stocking a bald rubber pate. It took about four hours. Then we'd start. So one day when we'd been shooting we broke for dinner. So I went home for dinner dressed as this old man. My wife was in the kitchen, it wasn't very well lit - I opened the door, and I didn't say anything, I just shambled in and went (grunt, grunt) and my wife nearly fainted. I suppose that's one of the few occasions on which an actor has had his wife not recognise him.

There was one rather strange scene at the beginning where I find the boy in the snow and we couldn't get anything to look like snow, so we were there for days experimenting with various forms of snow being blown in our faces. Finally we decided that cornflakes were the thing, so we spent about a day having cornflakes whisked over us by these huge wind machines. Of course Orson is a great perfectionist, and some of the time when he is upset, upset at himself, he is not satisfied with himself in a scene, he sometimes takes it out on the other actors. I mean it is not something you resent because you regard it as part of his character and you

just have to take it. I remember one scene we had, it went to fifty takes. And he said to me after one of them, what's the matter with you, you you're giving a terrible performance, like vaudeville, why don't you do it properly? So I said, yes, yes, Orson, all right, yes, yes. And of course he was a bit worried about something he was doing.

After that had finished I was in "For Whom the Bell Tolls" and several others. So I found I had about \$26,000 in the bank and I'd played only small parts. I thought it was time to take a chance on something interesting. I had met an old codger in a film playing a small part and he had been talking to me - he was a German intellectual and he had been talking to me about how wonderful it would be to do "Richard III" in the style of Hitler. So I decided I'd do "Richard III", I would back it myself. Oh, I tried to get backing, but it's very difficult to get backing; it's very hard to say you will probably make something out of this when you know you probably won't. So I decided in desperation to use my own money. I was playing the lead of course, Richard III, and then I fired this old man because his ideas of doing it were so expensive, because of the changes of scenery, the stage hands salaries would have been too great and we would have lost a lot of money. So I ended up being the manager playing the lead and directing - the first two weeks of rehearsal went by, I thought this is very good, we seem to be doing this play quite cheaply. And then people kept coming to me and saying, I want another \$2,000, another \$2,000, in the last two weeks. So I unfortunately in doing the play had so much to do that I devoted no time at all to my own performance, and finally arrived on the first night realising that I didn't know how to play the part, that I was faced with a big theatre, a fashionable audience - my wife in the front row. So I gabbled through it as fast as I could, the curtain hour came down, and I sort of came to my senses an afterwards and I said to my wife, as we were crossing the stage, this is a flop, isn't it? She said, yes, I'm afraid it is. A friend of mine, John Lodge, who afterwards became ambassador to Spain with Eisenhower's government, came to me in the dressing room and looked very commiserating and said well, never mind, you're still young enough to go back to Hollywood and make some more money.

PART III

I went back to Hollywood, and when I got back to Hollywood I had to wait six months without a job because nobody knew me there and the picture which I was depending on - "Watch on the Rhine" in which I played a big part hadn't yet been released.

I was first of all in the play in New York, I got the part in "Watch on the Rhine" because some actor rather stupidly refused it - it's always the case, one thinks one is the choice but of course in most cases they're trying to get somebody else. And this man decided he'd played too many villains so he didn't want to do it. So I got that part. And then when it was done in Hollywood I got the part in the film also because an actor couldn't do it - George Sanders was busy at the time or else I would not have played in the film and it would of course have made all the difference to my whole career in America if I hadn't played that part in the film. Bette Davis played the part that Mady Christians had played - a lot of the cast, the others, were the same as the play. "Watch on the Rhine" was written by a very leftist woman, Lillian Hellman who wanted to bring home to the American people the real - the antagonism, the real sort of forces against each other in Europe, which at that time was very remote from America. And she made the hero a sort of - not exactly a stated Communist, but he obviously was a complete anti-Fascist. And her attempt was to dramatise this clash in "Watch on the Rhine" in such a way as to appeal to the really fashionable New York audience, because obviously she didn't believe that it was any good to have a play down in the theatre down town which was completely leftist - that would attract only a very limited audience. And she managed to accomplish what she wanted to do: they were quite involved, the rich people, they went to see this, they went to see this man Lukas playing the anti-Fascist against me, the Fascist, and he the hero in the play, and I met newspaper proprietors in the try out in Baltimore, the man who said this is a wonderful play you have - and of course it represented the sort of antithesis of his own writing in the paper the next day when I read the newspaper - he really doesn't quite understand the implications of this play. I found that a most exciting play to be in because of this factor.

We played "Watch on the Rhine" for about a year in New York and of course the run was during the time of Pearl Harbour.

Every year the President had a play that he saw - I don't know whether the custom still obtains - and in this year our play was chosen. So we were all packed off to Washington as a unit to play for Roosevelt. My wife was in the audience and she said there were secret servicemen every six seats. Of course Lincoln was assassinated at the theatre, as you remember. We had a gun in the play which Lukas hit me with, and this gun they took away from him and substituted a wooden one. I think we were all quite nervous, we couldn't help being nervous, and I don't think the performance was very good. I'm not sure whether Roosevelt liked it, he probably wanted something a little lighter in the middle of the war. And afterwards we all went to supper, and that to me was I think the most exciting thing that happened to me in America, because he was sort of co-ruler of the whole Western world, with Stalin and Churchill at the time, and yet he sat at his table and we all sat with him and talked to us without stopping as if he hadn't a care in the world. He said that he had translated when he was at Harvard a book of Pretonius and of course as it was Pretonius it had to contain certain rather questionable passages and he said he was always frightened every election the Republicans would get hold of the translation and say this is the sort of man your President is. He said most of the household accidents had been in bathrooms and he couldn't understand the modern vogue to build bathrooms because obviously it had been proved that they were the most dangerous place in the house.

My share in the conversation I think was one mumbled sentence to which he replied: "huh?" And the rest of the time of course one left it to him. Oh, the other thing that was rather amusing was he said, I was talking to one of my admirals the other day about a small island off the coast of New Zealand. And he said, I could see by the rather peculiar expression in the man's eye that he hadn't the faintest idea where this island was.

Mrs. Roosevelt wasn't there. I regret that because I'd always wanted to meet her. I think Mrs. McLeish was the hostess - we had chicken a la king - and the food wasn't very good. They took great care that the coloured man in our cast, a very nice man, I've forgotten his name now, was also at the table. When it was all over Roosevelt was in his chair and we all filed past and he flashed on this quite mechanical smile to each of us as we went by, and it was rather a shock after this completely informal talk.

After the play finished I went back to Hollywood. I sat out the six months in

Hollywood and kept writing letters to the income tax man, very charming letters, and my accountant afterwards told me that it was those letters, the charm of those letters that saved me from some kind of drastic action on the part of the authorities. But then finally when I was really hard up I got a sort of strange job in San Francisco playing "Old English" with Sir Aubrey Smith - it was a failure.

The picture "Watch on the Rhine" was eventually released, and when I was seen in this villain's part of course all the producers wanted me for other villains - that's always the case in Hollywood. You get typed with the last part they've seen you in. And I began a succession of pictures in Hollywood, and in a short time I'd paid off the income tax and I bought a house in Beverly Hills, all within a space of a few months, because you know, it's either up or down in the acting business.

This was of course during the time 1941-42-43. And Hollywood was full of writers who were all socially committed, the same way as the theatre in New York was committed. They were faced with the problem of making films of some kind of significance or meaning because of the struggle that was going on in the world. Now of course this had to be simplified to a large extent. I suppose one of the main things was that the Russians, who had been regarded as rather bugaboos, had to be presented in a more heroic way as our allies. That came into things like "Mission to Moscow" and this film they did of the Hellman - "North Star" about a collective farm fighting the Germans, guerilla warfare. Now they couldn't bring in their ordinary writers for that who had been dealing with things on a par with "Up in Mabel's Room", so they had to have these people who were aware of the social forces that work in the world at the time. It was a very strange situation because I felt that the whole atmosphere in America is tremendously unstable always, and I felt - it is fashionable now, this movement, but I wonder what's going to happen in the future?

It was a strange thing to see very left wing people with their portable Turkish baths and houses with columns and every appurtenance of civilised life all, you know, getting really excited about the masses, and I would hear them talk and of course all that changed so completely and they all suffered for their opinions.

I did a lot of pictures, none of them particularly interesting, except perhaps one not for its story which was very obscure, but because it was directed by Clifford Odets who, as you may know, started a movement in the

American theatre during the depression of some kind of relation to life, which wasn't present at that time, starting with "Awake and Sing" about a Jewish family under the pressure of the depression, "Golden Boy" and all the other plays. He was in Hollywood at the time and he was doing a picture called "None But the Lonely Heart" and I had a very interesting part in that. Except that I had to go through quite an ordeal - I took a test for the part with Cary Grant, and Cary Grant was charming. We sat at the table with all the lights and the cameras on, and ready to go. And Odets said to me, do you know any funny stories? I don't tell funny stories, I can't do it, I'm not good at it. I had to think, so I said, yes, yes. I do know a this funny story. So with all this thing ready, Cary Grant sitting there at the table, supper table, I had to tell the story. Naturally it was no good, but he said that's the sort of thing I want in the part. He's the sort of man, he's a very dangerous man, but he's always smiling. Odets was a sort of hero of the people who wanted some kind of powerful writing that meant something, and I remember one evening in Chasens restaurant he was surrounded by other writers and intellectuals, and they were saying to him, Cliff, you're not doing what you should, you should write a really working class play, you must write a working class play. And Odets was booming out: I can't write that way, I must write out of the blue, I must write out of the blue. And finally there was quite a noise going on and a message came from Chaplin at the other side of the restaurant wondering what all the noise was about.

As you can see from all this it was always interesting, exciting and profitable to be in Hollywood. I wish some of the stories had been better because "Citizen Kane" had given me a feeling of how exciting a really interesting movie could be from the actor's point of view. Usually the acting makes no demands on you at all - you go into the make up in the morning and sometimes not even having read the script. You say, what is it today? Yes, I see, I go in, I say hello, how are you? and you get so that it's second nature without any study. And of course if the story was good you'd have to devote some attention to that. A man named Dmytryk did a picture called "Crossfire" about anti-semitism and he said to his amazement the actors were taking the scripts home and really studying their parts because the picture was about something. But of course I must mention that all the time this was going on the cricket was also going on - and the war hit Hollywood in rather a

poignant way - there was a shortage of cricket balls. I used to play every Sunday, I found it a welcome contrast to the gossipy and strange superficial attitude of the studios.

I played lots of Nazis, I played in "Hotel Berlin" I decided I'd played several Nazis so I'd better do something about changing my appearance a bit. So I had my hair, what was left of it, blonded for this. I had to go to the famous hairdresser who did all the women stars, and I found it quite fascinating. She seemed to have tremendous power over all these women, the stare. They were always writing letters to her saying, you, next to my mother, are the person I love best in the whole world. And apparently this was entirely because she was rather noted as a gossip and they wanted to be on the right side of her. I don't suppose it made much difference to the performance - I played other Nazis with black hair, I played in a thing called "The Master Race" which was a strange attempt by a very intellectual director to do something about the post-war situation after the war was over. But I didn't like it very much. I was in a picture with Deanna Durbin called "Lady on a Train" and the director to my amazement - I couldn't quite understand this, I hadn't become Hollywood-ised enough to understand it - said, "George, I've got a wonderful idea for you in the part." And one thinks of some kind of mental approach. So he said, I'm going to give you a white cat and you can carry this cat in your arms right through the picture, whenever you appear you always have this white cat. See, Hollywood has always been mesmerised by the fact that George Raft became famous by spinning a coin continually in one picture. Well, the whole picture sort of crashed so it didn't matter what I was holding. I was left holding the bag instead of the cat.

Of course the Hollywood problem is very strange. This atmosphere of sympathy to leftist intellectuals didn't last very long. When the counter-wave started I happened to be with a writer who had associated himself with left wing causes, on the train to Hollywood. And he'd just been before a Congressional Committee, and he knew that he was going to lose everything, that he would lose his contract in Hollywood. Eventually he lost his home, his wife left him, and he was facing this prospect. Miles Stone, the director, was there with this writer. So Miles Stone said, I don't know what's the matter with you people. You started out to be a writer, didn't you? I mean you wanted to be a real writer, now you ended up writing this trash for movies, now

the manure heap has been pulled from under you. Can't you go on being a writer, have you depended on that? If you really want to write I'll finance you in some village in New England and you can write the great American novel. I'll finance you for six months if you want. It does symbolise the whole situation when one goes to a place like Hollywood, it's completely isolated and you give up other values completely and you're stuck there, then you suddenly realise when the vogue is over, for example television has taken the place of this, you are faced with the fact that this easy money has gone, what is left for you? What is left of your original idea? You didn't start out to be a Hollywood actor or writer, you find yourself there, and now you have to find out can you function without it? You do these parts, these villains parts. You are always looking over your shoulder and thinking well, have I stayed here long enough? Because the Hollywood people, what they do is this: they say, this guy's terrific, he's the best heavy in the business. So they give you more and more of these parts, and finally one of them is bound to say, well, this guy's always the same, he's a ham. And you're always thinking well, I don't want that to happen, I'd rather be the one to decide that. So I would say to my agent look, if ever you hear that - anything like that, I want to know, I want to be the one to decide to clear out, not them to tell me.

Well, I don't suppose that was happening because this is actually what happened, what caused me to leave Hollywood: two friends of mine, Betty Comdon, and Adolf Green who wrote musicals and had already written "On the Town" and afterwards wrote several other big successes, heard me sing. My hobby was singing, I used to sing lieder, I had an accompanist and we used to go - work with. I'd never sung in public. And they heard me sing one night and they said but you must play the lead in our next musical. So I thought that's very strange, I've never sung in public, it seems rather a risk. But they thought it was a wonderful idea. So time went by and they sent me this terrible script, really awful, full of corny jokes and you know, I thought how can this be anything? So I was so worried, I thought I can't just refuse this, I'll go to New York and talk about it to them and say I don't like it. So when I got to New York they said, oh, you're so silly, a musical depends on the songs not on the script. And then they sang the songs and they were marvellous when they sang them. So I thought oh, this is good, I'll do it. I refused a job, another villain, in Hollywood, a lot of money, I always regret that - three

weeks, I could have stayed there. And then I went to New York and Herman Levin, the producer who afterwards did "My Fair Lady" was still waiting for his backing. And we would have these meetings in which Betty Comden and Adolph Green would sing the songs to a lot of businessmen, they would sit there and then metaphorically the plate would be passed around for them for the money for the musical. They kept having meetings, didn't get enough money. Finally they amassed \$250,000 to do this thing, "Bonanza Bound" in which I played a really ordinary conventional villain which you couldn't do anything with. And the music wasn't particularly good either.

Well, I've never had such a frightening experience in my life. I opened in this thing in Philadelphia, and the music was very difficult, it was almost operatic and I kept saying to the composer look, this is a high F, I've never sung in public. He says, "oh, no, it's all right, you'll do it, don't worry, don't worry". So I found myself facing this darkness with a lighted baton waving in the air. I saw it waving more and more frantically as I tackled these songs because I speedily lost all sense of what I was doing - the conductor I could see was going mad because the baton was waving so strangely in the air. This thing, as you may imagine, closed in Philadelphia, it didn't even open in New York. So I'd left my Hollywood career for a big flop, and I stayed in New York. I thought well, now I'm here I may as well stay because I want to do some real acting and I feel I've got sidetracked. And I went to the City Center with Jose Ferrer to do something interesting - we did "The Alchemist" and "The Insect Comedy" of Capek. I enjoyed that very much - we got very little money but it was exciting after Hollywood and the feeling that you're doing something just because of the money. This was because you liked the plays and liked the parts.

Well, I'd been reading about things in England. That was about - you see, this was about 1946-47. At that time Olivier and

Richardson had started this season at the New and revitalised the theatre here by doing so many wonderful plays, and I read all about these plays and England seemed to be really doing marvellous plays, not only in London but everywhere. And I thought I must go back there because I want to do some proper acting. I started out to be an actor, I used to go around reciting Shakespeare for people and I wanted to do Shakespeare and I've been sidetracked, I've been in America doing modern plays, I went to Hollywood and did all these things, and I've still not done what I really set out to do. We made the decision, packed up all our things, and got the boat and landed January 1949.

I've been back now thirteen years; I've never felt that I was part of the theatre scene the way I was in New York. I think it's an exceedingly difficult thing to make the right connections and also possibly people think well, he's been away eighteen years, we got along pretty well without him for eighteen years, why should we bother now? Those are problems that have to be faced when one stays away from a country a long time. If I had to make the decision again to leave a place where I was - well, shall we say, perhaps more successful, I think I would still make the same decision because in terms of living I feel that I've made a better choice, I feel that I'm not under such tremendous nervous pressure and also, the most important point of all, my children have been educated here. I think they were ten and twelve when we came over here, and they've had a very good education at a tenth of what it would have cost me in America - and not only in terms of cost but I think in other terms. I always had this terrible dread of my son saying to me "aw gee, pop" or something like that. It sounds silly that, but it represents something much more than the phrase or the way of saying it. I think it represents a certain attitude which I didn't want to come into contact with.

So I feel that we've gained tremendously by coming back to live in England.

This scanned and OCR'd version of an original typescript probably includes some errors made in the transcription of George's words by the BBC. (GFC 29/12/03)