

CWOW

INTERVIEW WITH JOYCE HYTNER

This is Rose Levinson. I'm talking with Joyce Hytner. The date is December 6th, 2022.

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Your husband is in the hospital now. What does this mean for you?

It means that it's the end of the longest chapter of my life.

How many years?

Well, we got married in 1954 when I was 18. At the end of December, on December 19th, actually. 68 years.

You seem to me, and we've only just met, to be dealing with this with equanimity and acceptance. You're not frightened. I guess I'm projecting partly my own responses.

I think the equanimity is partly due to the fact that he's been at the end of his life for the last three months. I feel that we've both of us had enough time to deal with it. He's nine years older than I am. So barring accidents, there is inevitability about him predeceasing me. Almost more importantly for me, my only daughter died a couple of years ago, aged 60, and that was a different kind of experience.

That was impossibly wrenching, whereas this is inevitable. So you're 86, 85?

I'm 87 on Friday.

87, okay. Anything else you want to say about losing this companion of most of your life, Joyce?

Well, I've known him for 70 years, so I will leave you to deduce what that means. There is nobody else left in my life that I have known for 70 years. So we lived in Manchester, which is where I met him, where he was born and I was born.

And the last remaining relative who lived in Manchester also died this year. So I have got no connection with my hometown anymore. And when we moved to London, we changed our lives. My husband was a barrister and the friends we've got now are the friends we made when we moved to London.

So my husband, as I say, is the longest serving member of my family and friendship.

Since we're on this subject of death, talk about your own death. When you think about that, what comes up for you, for yourself?

Well, it's very interesting you should say that because I think that the reason for the equanimity is that when you are the age that I am, you understand that you have lived longer than the Shakespearean three score years and 10. Is it three? So every year that you add on to that is a bonus year.

And you just don't feel, I don't feel the same way as I would have felt years ago. I'm not scared, and nobody wants to leave. I don't really think about it with any fear, put it that way.

### Are your affairs in order?

Yes. I think that, again, the advantage of being older, is that you don't feel the same way about putting your affairs in order as you would when you were 50. Wills and things. Also, wills change. And if you make them at the stage I'm at now, you assume that nothing much hopefully is going to change.

### Do you think about it?

Of course I do, but not with any, not with any worry.

### Any religious aspect to this?

I do nothing about it. I do belong to a synagogue. I belong to Maidenhead Synagogue. It's pure superstition. The thing is, I feel completely racially Jewish. I think that's the thing. So with me, it's nothing to do with the religion really, it's to do with the race.

### Where's your parentage from?

Grandparentage was... Well, my father was, his father was from Russia. And my mother, I'm not sure because her mother and father had lived in this country. We've not done a lot of work on them.

### Talk about your work. Tell us what you're doing and what it's been like.

Well, I'm a flibbertigibbet really. I mean, talk about the ball rolling in my favor. When I first got married, I had four children. And I got bored even with four children, which is a shameful thing to say.

So my father was worried about me and bought me a little shop. And I went on being a shopkeeper until the early 1980s.

### What kind of shop?

Well, I started off with a children's wear shop because of having all those children, I knew about children, children's wear. The next shop was to do with interior decorating because I thought I knew a lot about that.

Needless to say, I never made any money out of the shops, but I did enjoy the actual physical thing of getting up in the morning and having a place of work to go to. Although I

employed people in the shop so that I didn't have to be there all day, which was a bit of a cop out.

But in the early '80s, my life changed very much for the better because the children were more or less grown up because I had them so young. And we lived in Manchester, and there was a television company in Manchester called Granada. Well, it's not really there anymore. It's there as a production company. The studios are in Manchester, which is a great bit of luck for me. And I'd been introduced to various people in our social life from Granada.

So in those days, I had a lot more, well, I suppose I've still got a bit of cheek, but in those days I had a lot of cheek, and I was much younger. And I wrote to the chairman and said, I'm a middle-aged lady. I was 38, I suppose. I'm a middle-aged lady, not quite past my best. Please will you give me a job?

And again, in those days, I got a letter from his secretary saying, "Come in and see us." And I went and saw him and he said, "What do you think you can do?" I said, "Give me a try." So he said, "Okay, you think of something to do and I'll give you a job." I had just that last week been to a literary lunch in London.

I wrote to him because there were no emails in those days. And I said, "Why don't we do Granada literary lunches?" And he said, "Great idea. If you can arrange them, you'll get a secretary, an office and a salary." And that's what I did.

#### Who were some of your interviewees?

Oh, well, there were so many. I mean, there were really so many. Who did I talk to? There was literally nobody that published in the early '80s that on their publicity tours didn't come up.

I mean, the Duke of Marlborough, all those kinds of people, we did it three at a time. I mean, it was extraordinary. And they all said yes, because again, in those days, that was a great way of getting publicity. Also, I didn't say, Joyce Hytner would like you to come. But if I said Granada, that opened every door.

So they were a success. I did them at Manchester University. And from that, the rest of my life happened really. I left 15 years later.

#### Oh, you did it for 15 years.

Yeah, in Manchester. In Manchester, and Liverpool and Chester, because that was the Granada region, the Northwest.

I left in something like '94 and a friend of mine, friends of ours actually, who was a writer called John Mortimer. And I was having dinner with them one night, and I told him I was leaving Granada. And he said, "Oh, darling, darling, darling, I've just become the chair of the Royal Court. Why didn't you become an officer of the Royal Court?"

And I said, "What will I do?" And he said, "I don't know. Find yourself a job." So it was the second time in my life. This would never happen now, never. For the second time in my life, I said, "Well, I suppose I could do a bit of fundraising." And so he said, "Okay, you're hired." And that was my time at the Royal Court Theatre.

And then when I was leaving the Royal Court Theatre in '99, just before the millennium, I was friends with a young woman doing a similar job to me fundraising at the Serpentine Gallery. And I knew that she had wanted to leave the Serpentine Gallery because she just had her first child. And I called her and I said, "I'm going to start a business that's fundraising through events. Would you be interested in joining me?" And she said, "Yes, I would." And that was the birth of Act 4. And we've been going for 23 years, and we've never had a single argument. Almost better than the marriage. We have an amazing relationship. We've worked for everybody.

We work for the National Gallery. We work for the Royal Shakespeare Company. We work for the Royal Court. We've worked for the Serpentine. You name it. We've done work for nearly every arts organisation in London. The only downside of that is that we were so good when we first started at running these events that we left the handbook with these people.

So we did a huge event for the Young Vic when Peter Brooke was there. Peter Brooke did Hamlet with an actor called Adrian Leicester. We did a huge event for them and they've never asked us back because they learned from us. Ditto the Royal Shakespeare. You're the same age as me, and you will understand this, I do very, very little.

I still flutter around but the women in the office do all the work.

**What have been the things that have made you so successful? Placing yourself in the world? What qualities?**

Well, I think it is glass half full, and I think it is, I used to give the odd talk about the power of yes, but I'm nervous now of saying that. I used to say never, ever say no. Always say yes, because you can always say yes, but you can't say no and then yes.

But I'm very afraid now of saying that because given what young women have to put up with these days, I think for them to always say yes ain't such a great idea.

**xxxFOUR MONTHS LATER.....**

**xxxPicking up our conversation with Joyce Hytner.**  
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**Joyce, when we spoke, it was probably about three or four months ago.**

**And you talked then about your husband being in the hospital, and he was going to die. So how long ago did he die? How long has it been?**

He died on the 7th of February. So that's, I suppose, almost four months ago.

The ending was sad in that until a week before he died, we were able to communicate completely, in a completely ordinary way. And then a week before he died, he started to go downhill quite rapidly until three or four days before he died, when I had an unfortunate experience. The home that he was in had a GP who visited weekly.

And the GP came to see him, didn't examine him, but he had told me that he was in pain. And as a man who had never in his life said that he was in pain, I was very concerned. So I asked the GP if she could put him on morphine, and she said she would put him on liquid morphine, which didn't work. And so the following day, the doctor came and put him on intravenous morphine. Of course, from the time he was put on intravenous morphine, he was no longer able to communicate with my sons and myself, which was hard, very hard, because as a husband and a father and a grandfather, he'd been a great communicator.

So watching him for two days, being unable to communicate, was probably the hardest thing that we had to do.

**It's been four months. Where are you in the grieving process?**

I'm OK, actually, because I'd known for several months that he wasn't going to live as he was 95. I mean, this sounds banal, but the grieving process started months before he actually died. And I think I've probably said before that I have amazed myself about how resilient I am.

I had no idea I was as resilient as I proved to be. So I'm actually okay. I'm extremely busy during the day as ever. I go out a lot at night. I don't like coming back at night when there's nobody there. And I think that's the worst thing about him not being around, the gap between 10 o'clock and 10 o'clock the following morning.

**Did you not see yourself as a resilient person before?**

Well, I knew I was resilient before, because I had a few knocks in my life. He was ten years older than me, so no, that's a lie, nine years older than me. So in the general scheme of things, there was a chance, always, a very good chance that he was going to predecease me. We didn't ever actually talk about it, about the fact that he would predecease me.

I had once said to him that he was rather lucky in that I had looked after him for most of his life. And when he went, there was nobody to look after me. And he chose to ignore what I was saying.

**Who is looking after you beside yourself?**

Oh, the sons are very, very good. They are very good. And I do have a lot of friends. And I, again, I surprise myself in that I'm pretty self-contained. I don't like to be fussed over. In fact, I dislike it. So I think everybody that surrounds me is quite careful about not overdoing it. This all presupposes that one keeps one's health, but I don't take it for granted because that's the most, without question, at my age, the overriding and most important thing.

Because once that goes, you are then a dependent, and the thought of being a dependent horrifies me.

**What will you do if you did find yourself dependent?**

Well, I'm very, very fortunate in that I will have sufficient resources to be able to have another living with me.

**So you'd have an in-house carer?**

Well, I certainly wouldn't go and force myself on daughters-in-law or sons. I don't think they would find that acceptable at all, and neither would I, in fact.

**How much of your time do you spend thinking about this? Does it just come up occasionally? Do you obsess?**

Very, very little. Very little.

**So you sort of know what you would do.**

Yeah, very little. A complete waste of time and energy to think about it too much. You never know from minute to minute what's going to happen, so there is very little point in thinking about it.

**Beside the happy surprise of realizing how resilient you are and also self-contained, what else have you discovered over the past four months or even before that?**

I've discovered that the saddest thing about my husband, which I do regret, but don't regret, which is a contradiction, is I realized since he died that he didn't adore living in London, as I do, and that actually he came from a provincial town.

He was an extremely successful barrister. It was quite right when he began that we moved to London. He had chambers in London, but he never actually felt comfortable in London. And he would have been happier, if that's a good word, if we'd have stayed in Manchester.

I thought about it a lot recently because I always knew that there was just a little bit of him that felt uncomfortable here, but I never let myself really dwell on it. There would have been no point because we were certainly not going to go back there. But I sort of regret it in an objective way because I still know.

I mean, there's still no way that I would have ever gone back to Manchester, and he would never have gone back without me. So in a way, it's a completely futile thing to think about.

**Any other regrets you're willing to share, either in terms of your relationship or your life heretofore?**

Well, I kind of regret that when he died, he said in his will that he didn't want any kind of memorial. And I agreed to that request. But he was a member of something called the Middle Temple. And I was bombarded with barristers and judges.

In fact, a woman called Brenda Hare, who used to be the leader of the Supreme Court wrote to me and said, "There is no way that Ben's life shouldn't be celebrated." So, we organized or rather the Inn organized a very lovely celebration of his life, which took place in the Temple Church, which is ecumenical.

And we then had a reception in Middle Temple Hall where 200 odd people turned up, and every single person there told me how much they'd admired him, what a difference he'd made to their lives. Young barristers, who are now 75 years old, said that he changed their life.

I regret that I didn't make more of that with him because I just assumed that he was a good barrister, a very, very nice man, and it never really occurred to me that I should tell him that myself. So that's my biggest regret, really. I mean, I just assumed he knew that I knew he was a bit of a *mensch*.

#### Any other regrets?

No, not really. I think I'm very, very fortunate in that because he lived so long and was completely *compos mentis* until almost the end, that we were able to communicate everything.

And so no, I don't really have any regrets. The things I've mentioned are more remorse than regret. I'm remorseful that I did not do either of those two things. Well, I'm not that remorseful because we didn't go back to Manchester.

#### Joyce, what about work now? do you still want to keep going?

I come into the office rarely. I mean, probably once every two weeks. But I'm very, very fortunate in that my colleague, who's the director of the company, as am I, has taken charge. And she does me the courtesy of calling me very frequently, probably just to pamper my ego, to discuss work with me. So I am completely engaged on top of everything that's going on in the business without actually having to get terribly involved.

Act 4 is a company that started organizing fundraising events for other arts organizations who didn't have the capacity to do the events themselves. We still do those events, but they don't form, well, I suppose they are, the core of the business. But currently, we're working for, or Rebecca and Anna are working for, the British Council. The only thing I still do, and I'm hoping it's still going to happen next year, and this year, actually, is that we've still got an account with Netflix, where we organize screenings.

We are mainly involved with the arts. We do do a bit of other stuff, but it's fairly rare. It's a company that was set up to help the arts in the broadest possible sense, and that's what we still do.

We talked earlier about your grandchildren. Are they a central part of your life now, your relationship?

Very much so, particularly with the granddaughters. Well, it plays out in that I speak to one every day, the youngest one, and I speak to the others at least once a week. And as you know, I'm going on a holiday. I've got one gay granddaughter, so I thought that Mykonos was a really very good place to take her to with her friend, not her partner, her friend, because I'm sure that it's very lively there for everybody. But particularly if you're gay, there's a very good scene there. I don't like Kindles, so I'm afraid in my luggage I've already packed three books. They're all American.

Any statements about the 'meaning of life'?

I don't think we can sum up our lives. The only thing I can say, and again, it's so cliché, is I live every day for the day. I mean, I can't do anything else. I mean, I'm the age where if I made plans for a future, a real future, I would be crazy. So I just play it. Play a straight bat, I think, is the word, on a daily basis.

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