

## THEN AND NOW

### Conversations with Anthony Field, Producer and Susan Elkin, Journalist.

*Anthony Field CBE was Vice Chairman of Theatre Projects UK and a leading Theatre Management Consultant and West End Producer.*

**THEN**, in conversation Anthony Field.

Lou Stein's amazingly versatile career in the UK has been based on his University education at Northwestern University in Chicago at its School of Journalism where he found he was more interested in fictional drama than factual journalism. He soon transferred into Northwestern's world renowned Speech (now Communication) Department and was mentored by Professor Robert Breen and taught by Lila Heston, sister to Charlton Heston. He won the Department of Interpretation Award upon graduation. In 1971 he made his name in American theatre with an adaptation of 'SNOW WHITE' at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, where she appeared in the nude as a free-living narcissist cohabitating with seven societal outcasts.

His vision then was to run a theatre of his own. He was a guest student at the Moscow Arts Theatre and was invited to observe Ingmar Bergman rehearsing plays at Sweden's National Theatre. Lou's family background of five languages, including Polish, German and Yiddish, was the basis of his interest in international theatre, especially plays from Eastern Europe. With the brash confidence of a young director in 1979 he chose, rather than taking up the possibility of going to the National Theatre as a staff director, to run the Gate Theatre, Notting Hill. Lou established it in Notting Hill in 1979 although on his first visit to its foyer he asked the pub landlord "Where's the auditorium?" only to be told "This is it!" He also founded the Gate at the Latchmere, Battersea (now Theatre 503), the sister theatre to the one in Notting Hill. Ned Chaillet, theatre critic of the Times wrote of his work "**Lou Stein has transformed a room above a pub in Notting Hill Gate into a theatre with a remarkable repertoire. In a space not much larger than a cupboard, he has adapted and presented novels, and resurrected plays that have been grossly neglected elsewhere in Britain.**"

During his time at the Gate, Lou directed many highly noticed productions including 'AT SWIM-TWO-BIRDS' by Flann O'Brien (the first production at the Gate), 'DOWN AND OUT IN PARIS AND LONDON' by George Orwell, 'FEAR AND LOATHING IN LAS VEGAS' (which later became a critical and popular hit in the West-End) and 'GULLIVER'S TRAVELS'. Lou says "I was earning £25 per week and getting half-page coverage in the Guardian. The fringe theatre was much more relevant then than it is now. Significant directors were emerging from regional repertory theatres where they had spent years learning their craft and working with the best young actors and designers in the world.

Having gained British citizenship he was head-hunted to succeed Michael Attenborough at Watford Palace where he spent nine exciting years. "I never considered Watford as an out of town repertory theatre but as a competitor to the National Theatre. We attracted actors

there such as Helen Mirren who scored a particular success in Edna O'Brien's version of 'MADAME BOVARY', West-End transfers of 'A COMMON PURSUIT' with Stephen Fry, 'BUS STOP' with Jerry Hall and the musical 'SPIN OF THE WHEEL' with Maria Friedman. He also commissioned Ranjit Bolt's translation of "THE BARBER OF SEVILLE" with Helena Bonham-Carter and a new version of 'TARTUFFE' with John Fortune.

"You have to keep just ahead of your audiences, not too far ahead and certainly not behind them. When you take up the job of running a theatre you only have so many aces at the outset, then you play your Kings, then Queens and Jacks. But the early 90's were dangerous years with decreasing Arts Council's funds and the closing of many repertory theatres. Suddenly a company of eight actors was no longer affordable and it became artistically deadly to work with only four actors, so I left Watford in 1995 and took up an invitation by the BBC to participate in their sought after three-month television Drama Director's Course at Elstree Studios, more as a moment of reflection and a breather from theatre than anything else. That course introduced me to the ways of the BBC and led to a very productive period of ten years directing, writing and producing as an independent supplier to BBC Radio 3 and 4."

Lou's adaptation of Sandor Marai's recent bestselling novel 'EMBERS' was with a superb cast headed by Patrick Stewart, Sara Kestleman, David Horovitch, Jamie Glover and Jenny Agutter. The emotional music underscoring the story was composed by his wife, the award-winning Deirdre Gribbin. His version of Dostoevsky's 'THE POSSESSED' for Radio 3 starred a young actor named Benedict Cumberbatch.

This led to a period of Lou specialising in contemporary music theatre productions with the composer Deirdre Gribbin, whose award-winning 'EMPIRE STATES' was performed by the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland, and Bruce Springsteen's lighting designer Jeff Ravitz created the rock and roll lighting a perfect counterpoint to the raw power of the piece. Together they have presented 'GRACE NOTES' at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival and 'TRIBE' at the Royal Festival Hall with the London Philharmonia.

The visually spectacular production of 'THE VENUS BLAZING TOUR' capped off a ground-breaking series of concerts which continues to influence how traditional concerts are presented.

The sort of theatrical magic which Lou has created, most recently with contemporary music collaborations, deserves continued support from the Arts Council, the British Council and the Performing Rights Society before we lose the genius, creative imagination and exciting scope which Lou Stein can bring to the cultural future of our lives.

**NOW**, in conversation with Susan Elkin.

*Susan Elkin is a journalist specialising in performing arts and education. She is currently crowdfunding a book about Alzheimer's from which her husband died in 2019.*  
<https://unbound.com/books/alzheimers-diaries/>.

Lou Stein is a theatre director with a long and illustrious CV which most recently includes

five years as director of Chickenshed. So why on earth is he now starting a completely new venture, **Lou Stein Studio**.

“I want to use my theatre directing experience and expertise to train young people with disabilities -especially those with cognitive challenges- so that they’re equipped with skills which will enable them to join the adult world with confidence,” he explains adding that he plans to work with professional actors and theatre creatives to form diverse, inclusive teams who will develop high standard theatre performances together. “Everything we do will have to be professionally acceptable. The strongest work shows real evidence of inclusion and I want to get back to professional work which really reflects diversity.”

Always a man to set the bar high, Lou has directed some impressive large cast work at Chickenshed in the last few years and inspired by his son, Ethan, now 15 who has Down Syndrome, he has very strong views about the importance of inclusion and the celebration of difference. He also has many contacts gathered over many years and plans to bring in a wide range of musicians, designers and other creatives to develop new projects, a number of which are already in the pipeline.

Lou says “I am in the process of launching **Lou Stein Studio** for training, education and professional performances, working with professional actors, theatre creatives and young people with cognitive challenges. The Studio will create work and develop skills to enable young performers with neurodiversity to enter the workplace as adults, bringing learned communication and presentation skills, through performance, with them. The Studio will be a space for developing those skills, learning to use them outside the context of performance, and will be a space for encouraging new conversations in the post-Covid world, where inclusiveness and diversity will be an important engine for society moving forward into a relevant and productive era.”

Well, so far **Lou Stein Studio** is a virtual concept rather than a physical place which Lou sees as an advantage because it means he is very free to plan fluidly but he doesn’t rule out having premises eventually once he has a team and sustainable finance. Underlying all this is the determination to find young people with cognitive challenges, work with them and then, if they have the desire and talent, bring them in to professional productions.

So why now? “The post- pandemic world seems to be presenting opportunities for change” says Lou, clearly convinced that there’s a right time for everything and the time for **Lou Stein Studio** to hit the ground is now. “Many young people need skills to help them overcome their challenges and to live and enjoy adult life on an equal footing in a post-Covid world.”

Well this is the man who founded the Gate Theatre, ran Watford Palace for many years and habitually directed casts of 800 (no that’s not a typo) at Chickenshed. If anyone can do it, he can.