

Brock Peters Interview

By John C. Tibbetts

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John Tibbetts: Hello, and welcome to the Green Room, I'm John Tibbetts, and it is my pleasure to introduce to you Mr. Brock Peters who's here in Kansas City with "Driving Miss Daisy." He's the one doing the driving out there but the car's entirely imaginary.

Brock Peters: Well, not truly imaginary if we succeed in what we're supposed to do. I think the car's fully fleshed out, you should be able to see it.

JT: Good point. Was there ever at any time a desire to actually have say a half-shell of a car or anything like that?

BP: I think that was all under discussion, you know in pre-production plans and determined it would probably be a lot less difficult than having a shell of a car. It would probably be in the way and I think Uhry's great respect, the playwright's great respect for audiences and performers alike determined for us that there need not be anything but the story, but would get in the way of the story.

JT: Which is to say if we need to telephone, there's the telephone coming out of the set. If we need a Christmas tree, there it is but that's all we have.

BP: That's about it.

JT: Yeah.

BP: I think it's theatre in its essence. You know, it's storytelling truly that leaves it to your imagination and I can remember as a child being told stories and being fascinated and really what is evoked by your imagination is sometimes more fanciful and wonderful than having something concretized for you and leaving you nowhere to exercise that marvelous instrument - the brain.

JT: Sometimes we get kind of chained to props and details of sets. We forget maybe there's something else more important.

BP: Exactly and that's what happens with our play that you're allowed to roam freely through your own experiences as the buttons are pushed by the playwright.

JT: It is a deceptive play in that outwardly it seems so unassuming and so simple and so determined not to preach or to point out philosophical truths but darned if this thing doesn't suggest all of those and more.

BP: Absolutely. And that's what fascinates us and keeps us forever energized in performing this play and we've been at it now since mid-1988. And I think it's true for all the productions of the play that exists and there are several and it is that it has

been so truthful and so accurate and so simply projected. I like to use the term “brushstrokes” by the playwright. He plants a seed and then he allows your experience to fill in all the necessary parts of the picture. And it therefore allows him also to get to his points quickly and essentially what he is saying is that there is always love and that is only possible when the barriers are removed. And if we had time and as these two people do, they eventually do fall.

JT: It’s impossible to get through this interview without asking you the inevitable question, and I’m apologizing for it in advance, but what is it like to work with Julie Harris? I know no other way to put it, Brock.

BP: I don’t think there’s any other way to put it. It is a gorgeous experience. It is one of the paramount experiences of my life to work with an actress who constantly refreshes your exchange with her, your interaction with her. And it is just a thrill. You know, I, that’s part of the reason that the play doesn’t tire me. It’s Alfred Uhry’s writing but it’s also Julie Harris’ projection of Daisy. It’s so real and so refreshing and so alive.

JT: Have the two of you worked out any kind of a little code onstage by which you can communicate to each other? Like, let’s slow this down or I’m in trouble or whatever the numerous things are that actors sometimes communicate to each other on the stage without us knowing it.

BP: No, we don’t have a code as such. I think it’s the constant receptivity, the constant openness and awareness is the only code if you will, that allows us to shift gears, if you need. If either of us, and there are three of us in this production, if any of us find ourselves in difficulty with the lines, and sometimes that has happened. A line is skipped inadvertently. And thus far, the experience has been to wherever that person lands with the line, with the next line and that they speak and it happens to be two or three lines down the way, the other picks right up. So it seems, to an audience in any case, that we’ve literally never faltered.

JT: How did the two of you come to be paired up? How do these things happen?

BP: Oh, there are lots of ways they do that but it’s my understanding that when Julie Harris began to agree to do this play and they started talking about who was a likely Hoke to pair with her and she asked the question, had they thought about Brock Peters and they said, yes they had but they didn’t think they could get him. And she said, well, have you asked him.

JT: Just how tough were you to get, Brock?

BP: I didn’t think I was very tough to get. And I was surprised and delighted to learn when my agents told me about this that indeed she had asked for me. We’d worked in a play together called “Handy Dandy,” by William Gibson. And it was a very, very warm and wonderful exchange and experience.

JT: When was this?

BP: Ah, it was about four years ago. And Charles Nelson Reilly directed us in that. And we sort of agreed at some point in the future we had to really work together again and this appears to be the time. We worked incidentally, it's a three-character play, we worked with a very fine actor, who plays her son.

JT: Isn't he great? He is really good.

BP: He is so marvelous. That makes the trio. Stephen Root is somebody to watch, I would say. He, agents are interesting people to say the least and I'm represented by a fair sized agency. Several of the agents who saw him, the agency that represents me, were so taken by him that they told me and said, please tell him how magnificent we feel he is. I said, well, I'd be happy to do it because I, we feel that we in this production.

JT: Let's indulge ourselves for a moment in just one piece of scene painting here in "Driving Miss Daisy." I suppose in picking out a scene, I'm being no different than most others. When she gives you the book, the audience is melting out there. That seems to be a critical moment. What do you think about that? Technically as well as emotionally, that particular scene. That's the reading primer.

BP: Well, if I go backwards emotionally, it is a very special moment. It's a surprise to Hoke. But she's given him a gift. As he says, he didn't expect one.

JT: Not a Christmas present, though.

BP: Not a Christmas present. And a book. He realizes what it means. That prompts him to try to show her that he has been working at reading. So he reads the title of the book at that moment to her, haltingly, slowly. And he stops at a moment to look at her and sees after the first line, did he do all right? And then he finishes. It's a special, special moment, emotionally and so far as the technical aspect of reproducing that moment each evening, again, it comes relatively easy.

JT: In a way

BP: Because it's been set up so well previously.

JT: Yeah, exactly.

BP: But it doesn't need to be manhandled.

JT: You know, a moment ago, Julie Harris told me that when this thing ends in January, and then she caught herself, oh, I don't want it to, though. The time is going

too fast. Do you share that kind of sentiment? I think sometimes this could be a grind for you.

BP: We do. All three of us feel that way. In point of fact, the normal season is from September to June but Miss Harris has other commitments and I know why she feels this way. She'd love to complete that and go on to the other commitments. And so we would. I like to say that because of Uhry's writing, his handling of the subject, and because of Miss Harris' consummate artistry, and because of Stephen Root's wonderful talent, burgeoning talent, if you will, but very strong, that it's difficult to find ourselves coming to an end of it. We're constantly energized by the work onstage, we are offstage, really a family, and it's an idyllic kind of existence in theatre that we don't want to see end.

JT: Have you ever conducted an interview anywhere with anyone where *To Kill a Mockingbird* did not come up?

BP: I cannot think of one.

JT: I guess we won't break precedence then. Just a word, if I may, I, like so many others that you hear from all the time, it's literally one of my very favorite films. Can you look at it as we look at it or are you irrevocably tied to the sets, the lights, you inevitably see the film in a different way than you ever, are you envious of those of us who can see it as a story. See, you see it as a piece of work that you had to do. You see what I'm saying?

BP: No.

JT: Am I making sense there?

BP: You are and I must say, I'm forever the child. I love stories. I remember how I felt when I would sit among a group of children and listen to stories being told by either a teacher or counselor, a librarian and that was always a very fanciful time. And

JT: In fact, that's one of the last films I've seen where somebody actually does tell you a story, you hear a voiceover.

BP: Yes.

JT: A little girl, I believe.

BP: Exactly. And what happens in a case of a film like *To Kill a Mockingbird* eventually, you're divorced from the work itself and you're able to look at it. At least, I am as someone else there. There was a time I looked at it in terms of the lights, the performance and the production. But that didn't last very long.

JT: Of course, inevitably, when you see it, you'll see it with different eyes though. Is there a scene or a moment in the picture either with you or elsewhere with other characters, that you look at and a memory, an association is triggered that we couldn't possibly know? I wonder if you could just share one example of us or with us. Like, oh, that's the scene when that happened or that's the scene we had to keep doing over again or whatever.

BP: Well, it was a picture that was really approached with great care and I think that's the reason it was so successfully realized that the novel was so successfully realized. We rehearsed a great deal before doing the film and then for example we came to the courtroom scene, it was shot for a week from every angle possible without the courtroom being filled behind the railing, behind the witness railing. And then on that Monday morning, when they brought the rest of the atmosphere as they call them now, into the set, we began again. And I was terrified because I thought now I'm going to have to do this all over again. And I don't know if I can do it or not. But it did happen. I suppose you would call it getting on track and once you're able to find that track, the performance takes over the, I don't know, the magic of the mind and brain to release you from the weight of can I do this, can I do that? Am I going to be? It flows and it flowed for another week of tension and tears and ...

JT: How do you feel, and I'm sure you realize this, that To Kill a Mockingbird is still banned from some libraries? When they did a play version here for children's theatre, you can imagine the ruckus. They did it anyway.

BP: Ah, I'm glad they did. It's, it's, you know, it's the society that we live in, the rights are often abused by people who don't care about anything except their perception of what protects them from their fears. I think so much more needs to be invested in education about what democracy is supposed to be about and what its values are and not just let us go willy-nilly along with a brushstroke of information about the society we live in. It should be a cause. We should be trained, otherwise this whole path towards civilization just won't succeed.

JT: And the so-called Children's Theatre is exactly where it should be shown, the play to be enacted, et cetera. Well, finally, Brock Peters, as you drive Miss Daisy, I was so struck by your, your posture on stage. You were so regal behind that imaginary wheel and so proud, it was as if you were a charioteer in Rome parading down the Appian Way. You know, you bring that across. Is that essential to our understanding of this character?

BP: Well, I've not heard him so gloriously described but yes, it is. Because the, the perceptions often times, and I've had it happen very recently, are stereotypical ones that subservience is part of his demeanor but that's not true. You know, there are lots of people who are not lettered are well-read or educated so that they can read, it doesn't mean they're dishonest, it doesn't mean they're subservient. You know, they have to work. We all do. We all have to be employed somewhere in some fashion in order to survive in this society. And so, being employed as a chauffeur is not dishonest

work, you know. Being unlettered is unfortunate and should not be. But it is not a dishonesty on the part of the unlettered person.

JT: And why shouldn't that car be a noble chariot?

BP: Why shouldn't that person have his or her dignity? Why, why shouldn't that person be an honest and good citizen? And why shouldn't that person have the people skills that Hoke does have? They've helped him survive. He knows how to deal with people, he knows how to sidestep and he knows when to confront.

JT: He even knows a better way to the Piggly Wiggly.

BP: Absolutely, absolutely. He's a man of parts and he survives that, situations of it so it becomes a glorious relationship.

JT: We live in an age that's looking for a lot of miles for our gasoline dollar and as the driver in "Driving Miss Daisy" as the noble friend, you give us a lot of miles for our entertainment dollar, Brock Peters. Thank you so much for the experience.

BP: Thank you.

JT: It's been lovely to talk with you.

BP: My pleasure.

JT: John Tibbetts here in The Green Room. "Driving Miss Daisy" at the Midland Theatre, a theatrical presentation here in Kansas City. Brock Peters and Julie Harris. This is John Tibbetts in The Green Room, I'll talk to you next time.