Leonard Cheshire Resonate Project

File title: 'John' interviews GLC about his life and work

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Start of Transcription

00:01 Man: [unclear]

00:02 John: We start wide on this, do I now?

00:04 GLC: Yes please.

00:04 John: I think so, yes. Right, mark it.

00:06 GLC: Slate 3, take 1.

[pause to 00:15]

00:15 Man: Camera ready.

00:17 John: Action. Leonard, you must have had a frightening shock when you saw the real poverty out in India. As against what we consider poverty here.

00:29 GLC: I think one has to keep everything in proportion. I noticed two dangers - either you can be completely overwhelmed by the poverty, and you can feel that you’ve got to help everybody you can see. You realise the problem is so great that you’d give up. Or you become too emotionally involved, and so you’re not effective. The other danger is that you stay there for a bit and you begin to take it for granted. Like watching disasters on television, it no longer sinks in. And that does happen to a great many people. And it seems to me that what is necessary is that we should retain our determination to do something about it, but realise that we’re limited; that we’re human. Make up our minds what field we ourselves can work in, and just do the best we can, peacefully, and as well as one possibly can.

01:24 GLC: Of course, poverty has its own personal impact on you. For instance, in my case, I realised the necessity of being economical. In fact, in the early days in India, I even used to think twice before getting on a bus - could I afford the bus ticket? You realise that everything you’ve got has got to go a long way. And in a way, I rather miss those days. It was impressed on me that every farthing counted. As you get successful, and things build up, you tend to be much more extravagant. And I’m talking about myself, not other people. I know it.

02:04 GLC: So, what you’re trying to do if you’re out in India is always remember your first impression of this poverty, really, aren’t you?

02:11 GLC: Yes. There’s another thing that it teaches you, and that is that you’ve got to be very careful in the way you help another person. There’s a real danger of being patronising. We talk about other people being patronising, and a lot of us who do that are in real danger of being patronising ourselves. And even the most poor want to retain their dignity. And I know that whenever you help somebody, you’ve got to be very careful you don’t put him in your debt. You don’t make him feel he’s got to thank you. You should leave him completely free, and almost as if he wasn’t being helped at all. Now I know that’s easy to say and difficult to do, but I think this is another lesson that the poor taught me. So easy to rush at them, and throw something at them.

03:02 John: And you really think the poor of India taught you that, not just the disabled in this country, then?

03:07 GLC: No, both, in the same way. I mean, both in different ways. I feel that all those who are in need, or disabled, or whatever it might be, in difficulty of one kind or another, are teaching us the same lesson, speaking to us the same message, but in their own individual way. The poor of India were the first that I personally met, but I mean, I’ve met other poor in other parts of the world - perhaps even poorer. It was just my first experience.

03:45 John: Yes, I remember myself feeling sick, and sick for days, at this poverty. I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing.

03:57 GLC: Well, they’re one world with us, and we’ve got to feel that their poverty is our poverty. We are poorer because they’re living - are left to live in such poverty. At the same time, we’re richer because of the way that they’ve retained their dignity and their cheerfulness and their normality in spite of it. I think as long as we can feel involved with them and want to do something to help them and cooperate with them and learn from them - this is the important thing.

04:29 John: Now, we’ve really been talking in the kind of en masse situation, but I remember the impact Arthur had in Le Court on you. Were there any patients, or residents as we like to call them, who had similar impacts upon you out in India?

04:46 GLC: Well, Pop - dear Pop, as I know him. Because I couldn’t communicate with him because he spoke a completely different language. But in some funny way, we did build a great affinity between us. I had to wash him, and help him, and in an unspoken way I think that we learned from each other. We felt very fond of each other before he died, which was not very long afterwards. He had a very bad cancer. Down in the south, in the home that was building up in the south, the first patient was somebody quite different. He was an ex-schoolteacher, and he wrote a letter saying would we please admit him, he was suffering from shaky policy. And he sent this letter to the Archbishop, who forwarded it to us, underlined in red, “not the only one”. Michael was… he had some nervous disease, I don’t know what his disability was, he could only run, couldn’t walk - and we still correspond, his birthday is the same day as my birthday, and each year we exchange letters. So, from those beginnings, and such different cultures, we have had this personal link.

06:02 John: It always seems to be the personal link in the homes, wherever you are.

06:06 GLC: That’s what’s helped me. The diseases and disabilities in India are just the same as in Britain, except for multiple sclerosis - they have none. Otherwise, a whole range. Others, like leprosy, we were pulled into different fields, but basically, I felt that I was living and working amongst the same kinds of people. The sense of humour was the same, and their ways of walking and moving were the same, and the same sorts of reactions.

06:37 John: What about the children out there?

06:40 GLC: John, that’s a new story, I…

06:42 John: Cut. We can cut and carry on, because I really want to point out that the homes out there seem to run in the same way as they do over here - entirely independent, organised by local committees.

06:56 GLC: I don’t think it’s understood that the homes in India, like all the other countries, do run themselves. There is a feeling that there are a lot of funds being siphoned off from Britain, going out overseas, but it isn’t so. Less than 1% of what we get into our central funds are going out. They raise their own money, they manage their own affairs, they build their own homes - they do everything. And they find their own staff. In a different way, each country is different, each country is entirely autonomous, but it’s theirs. When you go there, you can feel, “this is ours”. For instance, we offered £100 - in those days, when a new country started up, we used to offer them £100. We offered this to Salon, and they said, “no thank you, we’d rather bank the goodwill”.

07:47 John: That’s wonderful.

07:49 GLC: Yes.

07:49 John: But does the government out there support the homes in the same way we get over here?

07:53 GLC: No, it doesn’t. We get a little bit of support, the Indian homes get a little bit of support, but no. The government’s not in a position to do that.

08:01 John: Because it’s so poor itself.

08:03 GLC: So many needs.

08:04 John: Yes.

08:05 GLC: Thank you, John.

08:05 John: Thank you.

08:06 GLC: Thank you.

08:07 John: [begins to speak, the recording cuts off]

08:08: Speech ends

08:11: End of recording

End of Transcription