

CITY OF SYDNEY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
SYDNEY FESTIVAL DIRECTORS
TRANSCRIPT

Name: Lieven Bertels

Date: 24 June 2015

Place: Redfern Community Centre music studio

Interviewer: Martin Portus

Project Manager: Catherine Freyne

Reference audio file: Bertels, Lieven REF.mp3

Duplicates: Master and Reference audio files held in
City of Sydney Archives

0.03 **MP:** **It's the 24th of June [2015] and I'm interviewing Lieven Bertels in the studio of the Redfern Community Centre in Sydney. My name is Martin Portus. This is for the Oral History Project on the fortieth anniversary of the Sydney Festival by the Sydney City Council. Lieven is, was the Director of the Sydney Festival 2013, '14, '15 and next January this will be his last festival in 2016. Lieven, when you were announced as the new Festival Director in mid-2011, you were forty, a Belgian musicology graduate, later a classical music radio programmer. You'd spent seven years being Artistic Coordinator of the Holland Festival in Amsterdam. How did you make that Festival distinctive?**

LB: I think I came in as part of a new mob at Holland Festival at just an interesting time, which is nothing of my doing. It was just that it so happened. Pierre Audi who is a Lebanese opera and theatre director had been running the Dutch National Opera Company – that was in Leo's second Sydney Festival, anecdotally – for a long time and was suddenly invited to take over the Holland Festival as well. And, of course, he didn't want to give up his role as the Director of the opera company and so he was allowed to do two things at once. He was actually doing three jobs because he continued and expanded his career as an Opera Director and was suddenly also in demand to do productions at the Metropolitan Opera and in the Paris Opera and in Munich and in Italy.

1.54 So out of the blue I get this phone call - would I want to join his team? And he compared it to a kind of political arrangement: "What if I've just been made the king of the Holland Festival? I need a Prime Minister. Would you come and be my Prime Minister?" And I liked that. I was running a concert hall at that time, which had started from scratch, which was a terribly exciting program in Bruges where we had built a new concert hall, the Concertgebouw, the first modern building in the historical city of Bruges for almost a century, a very important civic project to build a large scale art centre there. And that was on the rails. I had enjoyed it but I also realised that running an arts venue certainly as a startup is an extremely demanding thing: you are sort of 24/7 involved with it and you can't get away from it. So with a young family I thought "Actually, a festival sounds nice", took the call and went to form a new team in Holland. And it came at a time when the Holland Festival was in a bit of a crisis, an existential crisis. It was very much asking itself what the role of the Festival was when it was about fifty six years old.

MP: It's one of Europe's oldest modern festivals and [has] a specialty in music, as you have.

LB: Yes. It's as old as the Edinburgh Festival - that started in '47. They actually share one Director. Peter Diamond ran the Holland Festival and really put a stamp on it and also ran the Edinburgh Festival very successfully for a long time.

3.36

But it was still somehow clinging onto that shine of the past, of a mixture of big divas. Maria Callas, when she sang in Holland, it was part of the whole Festival. When Maurice Béjart started his big ballet company with modern ballet and modern dance, they would come to the Holland Festival. And then a very avant garde taste in theatre and contemporary music with a lot of commissions from the post-war modern classical composers, the Stockhausens and the Berliozs and so on, and it was struggling with that because audiences had dwindled or started to dwindle. And we came in and Pierre thought "Okay, we need to put the arts at the core of this Festival again." Because the solution that people had sought in the years prior to that theme was very much to go into pop and rock music and crossovers - classical music with something added to it. It had become a bit light on its feet and very flexible but also a bit unclear in its vision and mission. So we came in and Pierre was very clear that he wanted to bring it back as an arts festival, to commission new work, to produce new work, and to do works of scale that were site specific. And that last part was very exciting for me and also I think very useful for me to develop skills to take to Sydney.

MP: But it had earlier a mix of classical and pop and rock. On one level, that's a bit of your own signature in the remaking of the Festival, wasn't it, to play with a mix of different musical styles?

LB: Within projects, yes, there's certainly a trend going on in classical music, that opening up the curtains and the windows to other sounds and other genres and artists has certainly happened. I wouldn't take any credit for that myself as a programmer; it's just something that happens within the art forms.

5.52

But what had happened specifically in Holland was that it had become very influenced by very narrow trends. It was always very trendy and trying to play on the last trend, the flavour of the month, but not very successfully because it had alienated itself a little bit from its core audience.

MP: What do you think the board of Sydney Festival saw in you?

LB: It's a good question. We would have to ask them – all these people are around. I've never had much conversation post the appointment about that particular question. Maybe I'm too afraid to ask; I might not like the answer. I think they were ready for an international flavour again and that's something that is in constant flux and it's cyclical in festivals. I can see that boards are cyclical in that decision-making as well. When they have a local director they tend to long for and yearn for the international and when they have an international director they will probably think it's good to also include a local artist or curator for the Festival. So I think that's a normal cyclical thing. After Lindy who was very well-connected in Sydney and was an Australian, of course. It was time again - - -

MP: And an opera theatre director and a practitioner.

LB: Exactly. And suddenly people probably thought it would be good to have somebody that was probably regarded more as a professional festival curator and not a practitioner, and with an international flavour.

7.36 **MP: It's interesting you talk about that cycle because you came at a time when there were a higher percentage of foreigners running festivals in Australia than before, with Jonathan Holloway in Perth and David Sefton then in Adelaide. There's a disadvantage and an advantage, I suppose, of being an outsider.**

LB: Absolutely it is a big disadvantage and an advantage. I sometimes even make the distinction between being an Anglo or a non-Anglo foreign director because I think it's one thing to say "Oh, those two others, Jonathan and David in Perth and Adelaide respectively, are foreigners" but I would argue it's actually more of a distance psychologically if you're not born in an Anglo culture. And that was certainly also for me a disadvantage: there's a steep learning curve in working in the Anglo cultural world. I had some connection to that, obviously professionally in my international network and I had also done part of my university education in the UK - I have a degree in musicology or in composition from Durham University in the north of England – but, yes, for me that still was quite exotic.

MP: What was European about you in your perspective, coming from the Holland Festival and the influence of that, and in your program and in your outlook that's not Anglo – what is that?

LB: Well, an openness to other languages. If you come from a very small language community such as Flemish you are forced to therefore embrace other languages. So it's quite normal for an average Belgian to speak three languages well and then maybe have a fourth and a fifth. And that helps in the arts.

MP: Very awesome for an Australian to hear because we're not linguistically competent.

9.36 LB: Well, you are in a completely different way and what's not there in width is there in depth, by knowing your own linguistical history much better. And we sometimes miss those kind of connections and subtleties. Which makes it very different for me to connect to the canon of English theatre than it probably is for anybody else in this country. But it gives me on the flip side the opportunity to read Spanish texts in Spanish and not in translation or to go and explore German theatre in its original language. So there's these advantages and disadvantages that are obviously very clear. Regardless of that, it's funny that even if you then move back to Holland, as I will do now, you again get that question – "But you're not from here." And that's become a sort of *fil rouge*, as the French say, a sort of thread in my career that I will always get the question, "But you're not from here. How are you going to understand the local politics?" And that's just what we are: we are carnies; we travel around with a circus tent of ideas and we do our tricks but we will always have to learn the lay of the land some way.

MP: What about your characteristics more personally, again the qualities that you bring to being a festival organiser? You've described yourself as very "hands-on", indeed in the character of a kind of boy scout, the Belgian Tintin cliché character. Are you a bit of a Tintin, are you?

LB: I think I'm a bit of a Tintin. I don't know whether that's a good thing or not - I'll leave that for others to judge. But, yes, I'm quite a pragmatic, hands-on festival director and arts professional, I think, Swiss pocketknife handy and ready to dig in. I enjoy every aspect of festival-making. I like to sit down and think about it and have a concept but I also actually like to get involved in the practicalities of it, the production, the finance, the fundraising. And that's why festivals for me at least are so interesting. Because you have such a wide range of aspects and things that happen around a festival - it's very hard to get bored.

12.00 **MP: What possibilities did you see, given that background, coming to a 35-year-old annual summer, highly summer, festival in a hot climate country at the bottom of the world?**

LB: Well, I should pre-empt my answer with saying that I had actively been looking at trying to find a job in Australia before. I had started conversations with a number of festivals and in total truth – and this is a true story and the people in the board know this – when I got a phone call from somebody saying "This job is open. You should put your hand

up. Have you thought about this? This is the recruitment agency. Talk to them”, I thought “That’s a great dress rehearsal if ever I want to put my hand up for the Melbourne Festival.” And then you land yourself the job and that’s the true story.

MP: Did Melbourne later come knocking?

LB: An important - I had been knocking on Melbourne’s door before, unsuccessfully. Just probably too early in my career and that’s the honest truth.

MP: But it’s interesting as a European you were drawn to the nature of that European festival in that more European city.

LB: Exactly, that’s my point. And that’s the big cliché and then you come and live here and you understand that as a European you don’t actually like Melbourne all that much because it’s faux-European or it’s wannabe-European and people want you to love it as a European and you go like “Why would I because if I want Europe I’ll go to Europe”. And I got to love this city.

13.40

What I loved about the particular challenge of this festival when we got speaking in earnest about the role during the recruitment process, was very much something that was quite exotic to me, which is exactly this very dynamic mix between high art and low art, but from a point of view that isn’t actually about a hierarchical ladder but that has definitely shifted that ladder ninety degrees and put it on its side and sort of has all these art forms and forms of expression, cultural expression shoulder-to-shoulder. And that’s really what I love about the Sydney Festival, what I loved back then when I embraced it and still love and I think makes it quite unique in the international landscape is that ability to turn a festival in summer mode with that unique mix of opera, dance, theatre but also these Domain concerts and these weird pop-up things and to have that kind of frisson and buzz.

MP: So it’s very distinguished, is it not, internationally in the degree of outdoor spectacle and free events?

LB: It is quite unique, absolutely, not just for that mix but also the scale on which it happens. Yes, a lot of festivals have an outdoor concert. Very few arts festivals have, you know, two or three or four of these massive Domain concerts of that calibre and on that level and to be able to present them for free. And that mix is actually what makes Sydney Festival unique.

MP: Lindy Hume had done quite a lot to steer the Festival to a more Asian interest that is often talked about in festivals but not often done but she did that. That's an element that also interested you?

LB: Absolutely.

MP: Even though you came from Belgium?

15.30 LB: But I tried to, certainly in the arts component of the Festival, done exactly that in the Holland Festival and before that in the Concertgebouw in Bruges in my programming. I had a very keen interest in Asia and I had actually very proudly presented a number of traditional art forms that hadn't been in continental Europe at least for a long time, and tried to present them with the highest possible quality. And so that was definitely something that I included in my mix when I pitched to the Sydney Festival board.

MP: And that's how it works, is it? They don't just ask you about yourself but they actually ask you to pitch a festival?

LB: Of course. Well, you try and give examples of what things could be and it's always fun reading three years in because, of course, you'll see that only fifteen per cent of that has happened – such is life. But, yes, in this day and age people want to know what they're buying, I guess, and so you come with some ideas. You also in that conversation have an opportunity to prove that you understand some of the numbers. Because people can pitch all kinds of crazy ideas but it's for a board to decide whether that has any connection to the local reality and whether people want to go as far as perhaps some of the candidates might pitch.

MP: And show some financial perception, I suppose, of marketing. Looking at Festival papers, board papers, over the last few decades, the year in which you arrived and the subsequent years, the board, as boards often are meant to do, of course, are talking about finance. But this board really talked about finance. Something was really shifting in the figures which must have alarmed you when you actually first sat down after the departure of Lindy Hume, January 2012.

17.27 LB: Well, I've never been averse to looking at figures and trying to understand them and I've always had a keen interest in that aspect of festival-making too, without necessarily wanting to have the responsibility for the business side of things. But I think it's good as a curator or as a programmer to also have an understanding of what can and cannot be expected and how these figures look and should look and could look. But, yes, certainly when I came in there was still a feeling of

– I wouldn't necessarily say there was a financial panic but there was certainly a concern about the - the word we have often used, I think, in those first twelve months was - about the financial sustainability of the Festival. And there had been some good critical analysis of where the Festival stood in the wider landscape of Sydney when I came, and that information was shared with me. But one concern was clearly the increased what's referred to as the "festivalisation" of our landscape. So everything is now a festival and there were way more festivals in 2011 than there were in 2004 or in '93.

MP: We would be talking about the Festival of Dangerous Ideas, the Vivid Festival, the Sydney Fringe - - -

LB: Vivid Festival, oh, yes, and a whole range - - -

MP: - - - eventually the new one as of last year, the Fairfax Spectrum Festival.

LB: All kinds of food events, everything now is called a festival - probably your furniture outlet calls it a Spring Festival of Couches and Benches. It's certainly become a marketing thing to festivalise everything. And with that there was also increased pressure on government funding. There was a clear forewarning that not all the money that had been there for Lindy's last festival would be there for me. That's something I only learned after I had accepted the role as these things go.

19.38 **MP: Indeed, she had an expanded budget in 2012 for that festival.**

LB: Yes.

MP: But how did those budgets change in your first two festivals?

LB: So we lost considerable funding. We lost over a million from state funding, which was specifically earmarked and ring-fenced for Festival First Night and over half a million from the City. First, there was a kind of forewarning that we would lose it all in one. And then a negotiation process started in my first months, which was obviously hindered as well with the departure of Josephine Ridge, so I found myself suddenly – well, immediately - - -

MP: The Executive Director.

LB: - - - the Executive Director and an Executive Director that had been with the Festival for around ten years and had really grown in that role and had come to really own that role very, very much. And that was a bit of an interesting time for me because, of course, the board was very quick to address this and help appoint a new Executive Director and I was very

glad I found myself with Christopher Tooher who came in from Bell Shakespeare. But it was certainly a scary time for me because it's in those six months between a festival and when you go to print with your next program that you need to know what money you've got in the bank and that you need to negotiate those kind of relationships. So those first six months were certainly interesting. It was a bit of a rollercoaster ride for me and we had to quickly have those conversations with our major stakeholders, the City and the state, to ensure that that money wouldn't go in one big whammy and that we would be able to at least slowly transition out of Festival First Night.

21.33 **MP: And it's a problem because there seems to be a lot of uncertainty in your period, coincidentally, about sponsor commitments and the sponsors are attracted to the free events and if you get rid of the free events - - -**

LB: Exactly.

MP: - - - particularly the glorious Festival opening night that had been running now for five years, they have less inclination to give sponsorship.

LB: So it's not coincidental.

MP: I'm just suggesting you weren't to blame.

LB: No, but what happens is, of course, that in any festival that tries to do things that it offers to an audience for free – because “free” doesn't exist, everything costs money, but if you offer it for free you need a good layer of base funding, which typically comes from a public stakeholder. And that will allow you to attract corporate and philanthropic dollars on top. And Sydney Festival has and had a great track record in doing so. I think it's one of the most successful I've ever seen in terms of turning government dollars into add-on investment from corporate partners and philanthropic donors.

MP: But historically it has a long record of getting little government funding and a lot of commercial sponsorship.

LB: Exactly. But the commercial sponsorship still requires at least a sort of expression of faith and trust from your public stakeholders. There's two things that play: there is a sense of real stakeholdership, which is a kind of almost like a feeling of a responsibility, a civic pride in your festival. And we have to remember that this Festival, of course, was founded by those two stakeholders, the state and the City – and as long as that pride is matched with a good layer of base funding it will allow you to go out into the market and find other dollars. But the moment that trust seems

to crumble, even if it's just a perceived crumbling of trust, immediately these sponsors think "Well, we might be out of here because that might be a dead end little cul-de-sac. Let's do something else".

23.42

And specifically with big projects like Festival First Night, you're absolutely right that it's much easier to attract corporate money because of the buzz you create and the momentum you get over a short period of time. With the principal sponsor at that time, there was no hiding that ANZ, the bank that sponsored Festival First Night with a really considerable amount of money, was very happy to paint the town blue, which was their corporate colour, and make it very visible that that was owned by them as the principal sponsor. So we lost ANZ because we lost Festival First Night. So you get a double-whammy. If you lose your government dollars and they say "We don't want you to do Festival First Night any more" you immediately lose a major corporate sponsor.

MP: And what about Zip [9sec edit*]? Did they stay with you?

LB: Yes, they stayed with us and they ended in beauty, I would say. Zip transitioned out, but ran a beautiful race with us. And that was very much the personal commitment of the founder and owner of Zip.

MP: Michael Crouch.

LB: Michael Crouch. And Michael stayed with us and then when he sold his company, became a private philanthropic donor, so that was a very different rationale and a very different relationship as well.

MP: So a very difficult thing. You had a tradition – not that you like the word – a tradition of five years of having the Festival First Night. What did you replace it with?

LB: I think probably my biggest error in my first year was to try and replace it. I think I was too scared to call a spade a spade and say "Listen, this is not going to work. This is going to be Lieven's first festival. We're not going to have any of this."

25.32

We weren't ready to transition any other element of the festival into what it could potentially be in the future, which we found in year two. So we did something which was called Day One, which was going to be a smaller version of Festival First Night with what remained in terms of sponsorship and government funding, what we had scraped together. And it only partially worked. I think what we did do was we proved that you can still do free programming and free events and things in the city that will bring large crowds together without necessarily betting on this one day.

One thing that I was very concerned about – and it was actually something that I remember very clearly during Lindy’s last Festival First Night – I was running around the site, as you do as an incoming Festival Director. You’re the guy, you know, lurking behind the trees and sort of looking at “How does this actually work? Where are all these people coming from? What is this?” And I remember that David Sefton was also in town and he said to me like “What did you inherit here? How are you ever going to better this?” Because this was at a point where we didn’t know that the funding was going to be cut. And so he was sort of saying “Gosh”, because it was absolutely at its peak in 2012 but it was at a peak that could have potentially become dangerous to the event itself. And again I’m quite a pragmatic, practical person; I was genuinely concerned about the security of the crowds for Festival First Night. So even if we had had the money, the big question became “Would it sustainably be able to grow it any further?” because it was bursting at the seams quite literally. The Domain site, despite what people might say, cannot really hold much more than between sixty and sixty five thousand people.

27.29

There are these great records of people claiming that there were more than a hundred thousand people in the Domain. Well, that’s probably physically impossible. It’s only a twenty five thousand square metre park. Take off the stage and everything else - - -

MP: So what did you have on that? You had a Fun Run in the Domain and you had a free Domain concert and you had a huge rubber duck floating on Darling Harbour and associated events around that. It was pretty tame, wasn’t it, in its critical reaction?

LB: Yes. The Fun Run, the duck was a huge success, though, and that got us really into something else which is big public artworks or installations.

MP: But Jeff Koons’ *Puppy* was a lovely example of how Anthony Steel way back did the same thing.

LB: Exactly. Well, it was very much John Kaldor who came to the Festival and that’s the other thing that, of course, is always interesting in the Festival history, is that there are so many things that happen in the Festival that are part of the Sydney Festival but that aren’t necessarily under your curatorial control or aren’t necessarily your idea. The rubber duck very much was an idea of ours and Florentijn Hofman had only done this in a couple of cities before. But the one thing we changed – and that was where the knowhow of Festival First Night came in handy - was we said “Florentijn, this is great. You can pop this rubber duck in Darling Harbour and we’ll probably get the Sydney Harbour Foreshore

Authority” – SHFA as it’s colloquially known – “to chip in some dollars and do this project with us. But that actually is pretty tame. It’s just floating there. What about us staging this big theatrical event to welcome the rubber duck?” And that was the part of Festival First Night that sort of transitioned into Day One that worked really well.

29.20 **MP: And the duck came back, of course, the following Festival and was floating on Parramatta River.**

LB: Exactly, and very much to the delight of the Parramatta City Council who had begged us to take the rubber duck there.

But that first version worked really well and we had fifteen thousand kids waiting in the sun, screaming for rubber duckie to come in. That was a very good event, actually, it worked really well. And, funnily enough, one of the successes of Sydney Festival that I think is less visible but due credit to people in the team that work in that department: that also took off on social media and on the internet. We made the news in more than seventy different countries with the arrival of the rubber duck on prime time television around the world.

MP: That’s important. You also started thinking at this time, I gather, about the Royal de Luxe’s outdoor spectacle, *Land of Giants*. It seems to be a continuity through your whole four years to be very distracted with bringing in these giants to Sydney and Royal de Luxe made quite an outdoor spectacle way back again in Anthony Steel’s Festival. Are they coming for your last and fourth year?

LB: They are not coming for the last and fourth year because they did their big thing in Perth. What happened with that was that I sort of inherited that because Lindy had started those conversations with Royal de Luxe and Josephine had prepared a beautiful, beautiful presentation that I took on with her. And that was one of her last acts, really, with Sydney Festival was to go and pitch this to the new state government here in an attempt to find additional funding, the rationale being “If you want to transition out of Festival First Night, at least let’s do this as a one-off, let’s do this giant spectacle”. And it came at absolutely the most impossible time because it was so obvious that the state government first wanted through go to at least one cycle of cuts and savings and reductions in funding before there would ever be a view on any surpluses. And there was no way we could pitch that in too.

31.32 **MP: And it’s an expensive act, wasn’t it?**

LB: It is a very expensive act.

MP: So bread and circuses at a time of austerity is not a good look, is it?

LB: Wrong look, wrong message, wrong timing, impossible. We were hopeful to bring it in another guise for the opening of Barangaroo but then the timing didn't align, we had all that.

MP: We are still waiting for Barangaroo to open.

LB: Exactly.

MP: Are you doing anything in your fourth and final Festival for the opening of Barangaroo?

LB: We are working on doing something with the public part of Barangaroo because one third of it, roughly, is public land and is governed by a state authority called the Barangaroo Delivery Authority. And we are actively working and presenting a big project with them, which is very exciting.

MP: It will in a way, I suppose, continue the arc of activity that's always been traditionally the Sydney Festival from the Sydney Opera House, Circular Quay, the Rocks, around Walsh Bay and now Barangaroo.

LB: Barangaroo, absolutely. Absolutely, and I think it's that dynamic as well. Again it's quite cyclical. But the Giants for us came at the wrong time and then Perth Festival was still riding on enough of the mining boom, it seems, to also lure - - The way these things go in this country is clearly: you need somebody with a certain economical interest that isn't purely economical; there needs to be a political impetus to make an investment, and James Packer decided he was going to spend a million dollars on the Giants as a gift and that was never going to happen - - -

MP: This year was this? This is, yes.

LB: Yes, Royal de Luxe in 2015 had the Giants in Perth. Coincidentally, it looks very likely I'll be working with them again in Holland.

33.27 **MP: Right, okay. The cycle continues. So, the pressure was on though even just looking at the board papers in December 2012: You still had a lot of financial pressure, uncertainty, about the budget or the box office, you're well short of sponsorship, talking of reducing acts in the Festival Paradiso, which you'd move to the Sydney Town Hall, talk of cancelling shows. That's a very late time in a cycle to be making such cuts or considering such cuts, isn't it?**

LB: Not really. I wasn't too fazed by it. It wasn't very different, at least for me from Holland Festival. I think the one thing that the board and the

management team were after was a bit of stability and one thing that had happened was that people had gone from highs to lows year on year and that cycle had to be broken.

MP: Of deficit and surplus?

LB: Yes, and living hand to mouth a little bit. The Festival had certainly grown in turnover but it hadn't built a very - - -

MP: Sizeable reserve?

LB: There was no sizeable reserve. Some of the things that were artistic successes or at least perceived artistic successes were also financial disasters. If you think of, for instance, *All Tomorrow's Parties* on Cockatoo Island it left - - -

MP: The Nick Cave curated event?

LB: Yes.

MP: Was that in 2012?

LB: No, that was in Fergus' last year in 2009 and that left a financial crater that Lindy had to pick up and actually never overcame in her time financially.

35.22 **MP: She invested quite a lot in *Beautiful Burnout*, a boxing ring show in 2012 which lost a lot of money.**

LB: Yes. So that was sort of what had been going on for the last five, six years, was that there had been artistic sparks but again, in the words of the board, there was no sustainable model. It was really trying to build some reserve, not always sail so close to the wind financially, and brace for tougher times ahead. So one of the tasks that was given to us, obviously, Christopher Tooher and me, was to come with a proposal that would make it a little more sustainable and would create a view on at least a bit of a reserve. So that was again on top of losing money we also had to build in more safety. So hence all this talking about numbers in the board.

MP: So what did you suggest - as we move towards talking about your first program in the 2013 Festival – what did you do that expressed that financial caution and method of building the surplus?

LB: Well, I think one of the things that I've definitely tried to do was to deliver my program earlier so that we could get a better understanding of the actual costs and implications and live sort of accordingly. One of the things that had tended to happen was that the curatorial freedom to

program till the last minute had gone a bit crazy and people would travel all the way to September to put something in the brochure, literally out of their suitcase when they came from the airport. And that created a bit of stress in the Festival team. And I've been able to bring, I think, my seven years of experience in Holland and been able to use my network to say "I can deliver these festivals just maybe four to six weeks earlier", which then gives a bit of calm to sit down, do the numbers, tailor your festival program to an actual budget and build in those things and not have to rely on contingencies.

37.36 Because one of the things that had become the norm a bit was "We'll do a rough budget. We'll build in a bit of a contingency and then we'll see how we fare". And, of course, what you end up doing is you always spend the contingency and then some more. And, of course, on top of the box office fluctuation - because a show might be successful, might not be successful, that's the norm and that's the normal cycle as well. So by bringing it forward a bit, by getting the team to embrace that shift in cycle - subtle shifts but I think a shift to deliver the Festival a bit earlier - we've been able to plan more cautiously to make sure that the actual contingencies built into production budgets are really just that. They are only spent in case of force majeure, out of your control things, not changes because "We actually should have known but we didn't know at the time". That has allowed us to hang onto our contingency in the budget much better and that has become the de facto reserves that we could build. So over those last three years, '13, '14 and now '15, we've been able to set aside some money and to start to build not quite the reserve that we hope for - so I think in the future this reserve needs to still grow - but to at least have something. So that when you have a terrible year where in a perfect storm you have your centrepiece that doesn't deliver and you have a major bad weather event - because that's the other thing - - -

MP: Yes, you do have a storm.

LB: - - - you do have an actual storm, that might cost you a lot of money, and you have a couple of mishaps in terms of artists missing flights and sets not arriving and what-have-you in festivals, you are financially prepared for that.

39.30 **MP: Part of the exposure is the enormous cost of the free events, particularly the Domain concerts. Could you talk a little about those first years of how many you decide to do, how you get support from hopefully - well, it's an ongoing battle or discussion, say with the SSO, about who's going to cover the most significant costs of that half a million dollar concert, free concert, that it does in the Domain.**

And you're even in 2013 starting to pass 'round the buckets to raise money in personal donations. And you actually got quite a lot of money in the buckets.

LB: Yes. First of all, I would defer in saying that actually it's not so bad to do these free things in terms of your programming because at least you know what they cost and you're not relying on any income.

MP: That's true.

LB: So you spend the money and you spend the money. If we all agreed that that's what we want to do, we made a birthday cake and we eat it, that's clear. It's actually much harder to open a restaurant and start selling birthday cakes because that's where the financial risk is. So in terms of risk and peace of mind, free programming is actually nice to do because once you've all agreed that you want to spend the money on something, from there it's just a matter of cost control and, most importantly, having fun with curatorially coming up with a good program. Having said that, yes, you do inherit quite a few traditions, including, say, the Domain concerts. There's a lot of smoke and mirrors around these events because they're part of Sydney Festival but not all of them are organised or paid for by Sydney Festival. When I arrived there were three proper Sydney Festival controlled, paid for and organised Domain concerts. There was Festival First Night, there was what used to be Jazz in the Domain, which had become Summer Sounds in the Domain and there was Symphony in the Domain.

41.29

And then whenever Opera Australia's concert in the Domain would fall within the Festival period we would try and make it part of the Festival as an umbrella event. But we wouldn't have any curatorial control over it or pay for it, for a very mundane reason which was that at one point we had a sponsorship disaster with conflicting sponsors between Opera Australia and Sydney Festival. If you have two different car brands, they don't want to be sharing the limelight. It's not about divas, it's about sponsors – that's Opera in the Domain. When I then arrived we were losing Festival First Night so we put the opening night concert back in as Summer Sounds. So we didn't have three, we had two again, so one pop-rock-world music concert and one classical concert with Sydney Symphony. Again, the sense of ownership is an interesting discussion in a city. You arrive somewhere and you feel that in public opinion, this is very much Sydney Symphony's concert. Nevertheless, when you look at the production budgets, Sydney Festival pays for all of the infrastructure, which is well in excess of half a million dollars for one night, and then pays Sydney Symphony a fee, albeit a symbolical fee – it's not perhaps the full cost of a symphony orchestra – still quite a substantial

fee., And that has been an ongoing argument between the two organisations; there doesn't seem to be a solution in sight but it is just one of those things that you inherit.

MP: About the fee?

LB: About the fee, about the way it's programmed, who gets to decide who actually conducts and what the program is.

MP: So the Festival has had shifting control over the nature of the program that the SSO does?

43.20 LB: Yes. But interestingly I came well-versed as a musicologist and Lindy, of course, knew her stuff as well. So at least over the last two directors we've had people that had an interest in classical music and wanted it to be part of the Festival. And so we've been able to have very fruitful conversations and I think the relationship has been very good with Sydney Symphony. So we somehow ignore the facts a little bit, that there is still that friction about who pays the bills and who gets the sense of ownership over it. At the end of the day a lot of people that come to these events don't worry too much about who's actually putting the show on. They want to see the show. So if we all agree that Sydney Festival is the body that needs to deliver this and if public stakeholders, especially the state government, feel that these Domain concerts are an important part of cultural engagement – and I would agree with them on that; I think they are, I think they're quite beautiful. I know that predecessors have tried to kill them off. I quite like the Domain concerts for their ability to engage a really large audience with classical music. And if you look at the programming it really is quite remarkable. How many concert organisers can say they had a piece by Ligeti performed for twenty five thousand people and people were attentive and respectful and loved it?

MP: We'll talk a bit about your significant signature as a Director in the contemporary music program and classical music. So that's interesting that a significant contributor to that is that Domain concert. But just finally on the point of the huge infrastructure required to mount these concerts, that you have every year to do the same infrastructure: there's been an attempt to try to make it permanent and to get funding to make it so, hasn't there? But that's so far fruitless?

45.25 LB: Sadly. I wish that this city had the wisdom of building some permanent infrastructure and then learn from mistakes made in other places and not make it into a fenced-off entertainment quarter but keep it as a civic meeting place.

MP: And also a park, though. You wouldn't want to destroy the park.

LB: Exactly. But there are beautiful examples of that. If you look at the Millennium Park in Chicago where the museum sits and Anish Kapoor's beautiful silver sculpture – what's it called again? It's like quicksilver, kind of – the name escapes me [*Cloud Gate*] – but the big Anish Kapoor work in the Millennium Park. Next to it sits Frank Gehry designed beautiful concert stage. But it's used for concerts as well as yoga classes, civic gatherings, speeches, very much what the Domain originally was.

MP: Yes.

LB: The Domain, of course, was a gathering space and we, I think, should build something that is a modern day version of a kiosk or a permanent stage. You could even design it so that the auxiliary buildings around it actually disappear into the ground if you don't need them and then hydraulically pop up, you know, your toilet buildings and your backstage and your front of house tower and all of those ugly bits that you don't want to see. Well, technology allows us to build something that disappears into the ground and comes up when we need it. It's a proven concept and we can still play a game of soccer or Frisbee on top. But if we had that, yes, that cost would come down and we would actually use it more wisely and more responsibly. Now, what we need to do is, of course, to try and pay for that cost and we need to stage more and more events because the more we can share the cost with other events the cheaper the cheaper it becomes per user.

MP: Talk to me about that first program then when you finally got the pennies worked out – all this talk about pennies. What did you get right about the Festival?

47.29 LB: I think a couple of things worked really well. One thing was to put our money where our mouth was and to actually zoom in on the essentials of a festival. And for me those essentials are obviously a sense of celebration: it needs to be celebratory, it needs to be a party. It needs to not spread itself too thinly geographically and one of the strengths of the Festival, I think, is to embrace site-specific programming. If you look at what festivals can do better than any continuous venue programming, it's these things. It's creating a sense of excitement and to do things in unusual spaces or to use existing spaces in an unusual way. And if I then look back at the 2013 Festival, I look at things like in the success of the giant rubber duck but also something like *Semele Walk*, the beautiful opera production that we mounted in Town Hall. Of course, many people had been in Town Hall - - -

MP: So this is Handel's baroque opera to Vivienne Westwood's kind of outrageous costuming, a German company - - -

LB: A German company.

MP: - - - KuntFestSpiele Herrenhausen.

LB: Yes. And what I liked about it when I first saw it and why I thought "This is Sydney" is because first of all I was very keen to bring back classical music. When I arrived I think I might have said publically but I certainly internally felt very much inspired by a number of my predecessors and by Leo Schofield and I didn't know Leo before, we hadn't engaged a lot, but I liked his approach to classical music in the Festival. It was bold, it was brave and I felt I wanted to bring back classical music because we had sort of phased out of it a bit.

MP: What's brave about it - is it the way you do it? So you do Handel but you do it with Vivienne Westwood's costuming?

49.24 LB: Yeah. It adds something that would never otherwise happen to Sydney. Opera Australia, where it is at the moment, will never present a production like that, wouldn't take the risk on it, wouldn't come anywhere near it. So essentially if Sydney Festival doesn't bring out a production like that, nobody's going to bring it out; it's just not done here. So that's an important role. That's why we are still at the forefront of performing arts presentation. Not just that particular company but the idea of presenting a baroque opera in a contemporary staging in an original venue in the best possible way, with the best possible singers on period instruments. Almost nobody here does opera on period instruments. There's only one professional – serious, large, professional period instrument ensemble, the Australian Brandenburgs, which coincidentally started from within Sydney Festival. So we can still make a difference as a Festival: we can add things to the roster that wouldn't happen without us.

MP: I suppose that's an argument for La Fura dels Baus coming back after coming to the Sydney Festival in the late '80s with chainsaws and pieces of meat. I remember it. But they came with the production of a fairly conventional opera, I suppose, Verdi's *The Masked Ball* but it wasn't a conventional production.

LB: It wasn't a conventional production and it was again - sometimes we seem to take credit for things that we're not responsible for. This was very much an Opera Australia production, so here we have to give them credit. It was Lynden [Barber] in his wisdom who saw the force of international co-productions. So he mounted this with a world premiere

here in Sydney, and it then went on to some really important opera houses abroad - it went to Sweden, I believe, and it went to La Monnaie in Brussels. And it sort of shows how artists can shift in their career - when they were very avant garde and doing crazy things on the forecourt of the Opera House, they have now become mainstream enough to actually mount a Verdi in the Opera House in the Joan Sutherland Theatre and to get a round of applause from the subscription base. So that's sort of what happens and that's sometimes also the risk of nostalgia for names. People might remember artists as being in their prime and, you know, shockingly fresh. Well, artists like anybody else sometimes lose that freshness so the nostalgia needs to be handled with care.

51.57 **MP:** **You tick an Asian box or at least a North Asian box, with the *Peony Pavilion* and a second work from the Northern Kunqu Opera Company in China. This is interesting because the *Peony Pavilion* was something that Anthony Steel way back in the mid '90s was pursuing and then Schofield late '90s. There was all sorts of fuss about the controversial production that the Chinese didn't approve of that took hours to perform. This was a shorter version.**

LB: Yes.

MP: **Was it a safer version?**

LB: It was a more traditional version. I have a keen interest in trying to show traditional Asian art forms in their original form, very much like you would perform baroque music on period instruments, without making it unnecessarily dry. The '90s production was a [Chen Shi-Zheng] production – sorry, the name escapes me – this happens.

MP: **It was very controversial.**

LB: It was controversial. It was extremely long. It was very beautiful but it was extremely difficult to mount. It was a very demanding and hard-to-bring-together-production and one thing that everybody always forgets is how hard actually it is to bring international productions here because of the tyranny of distance. And it really does your head in if you come here.

53.31 **MP:** **The costumes and sets are out of circulation - they're at sea a long time.**

LB: They are at sea for at least eight or nine or ten weeks and then a week of quarantine, typically around Christmas when it's not at its fastest processing time in Port Botany. And then it needs to go back as well, so essentially a company loses their sets and costumes for twenty two

weeks, which is more than half a season. So we need to ask a company to retire their production for half a season just to do one short stint at Sydney Festival. And that's not true if you're in Hamburg or Brussels or New York.

MP: Just other things in that Festival, Heiner Goebbels' musical theatre work, again a signature of yours of musical theatre, going by the Aboriginal name of -?

LB: *Eraritjaritjaka.*

MP: You do that with a good spin. And that had a mixed reaction critically but I suppose you Festival Directors like things when they have a mixed reaction critically?

LB: Yes. I'm sure other people have said that before. Yes, we do. Listen, you don't aim for a mixed reaction, you aim for five star reviews. But you also accept that in pushing the boundaries – which a festival should do – some productions might ruffle feathers, some productions might feel uncomfortable to some members of the audience and some people don't know where to put things. Like a lot of people in the audience love to pigeonhole stuff and measure it up to what they've already experienced. So if they experience something new people get more or less comfortable with that. And *Semele Walk, Dido and Aeneas* the year later, those kind of productions do create debate. I love it when professional reviewers can't actually agree and when you get the lukewarm three star review and the massively enthusiastic five star review and people are almost fighting on social media about who's right.

55.28 **MP: Yes.**

LB: That's what a festival should do; that's a true festival piece.

MP: You have Irish theatre or this year you had Irish dance, *Rian*, which was a curious mix of sort of Celtic and West African sounds in dance. That was not a big hit but it was kind of interesting you doing Irish dance, not theatre and the Sydney Festival is obsessed with doing Irish something every year.

LB: Well, it's more atypical for me, perhaps, as a Belgian. It's one of the very many flavours that you can present [that] I don't have a particular drive or passion for. But this was a particularly good production. It was actually a huge audience success. That's the other thing that's funny in the writing and rewriting of history is, of course, that you will find a reviewer that hates it with some energy and then they fail to actually recollect that the audience were stampeding and standing ovations on every night. So that's the funny thing about something like *Rian* for instance, I will want

to go on the record and say together with all these people in the audience that that was a huge success in the Festival because people actually loved it and understood what it was about. But it might not have ticked all the boxes of the particular dance reviewer in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and, sadly for them, the Sydney Festival isn't there to please them, the Sydney Festival's there to drive its own agenda.

MP: Can we just appraise then in this year the contemporary music program, which is incredibly astonishing just looking at it. You had French jazz, Indonesian rock, a Lithuanian quartet of amplified cellists, US Dirty Projectors - a band in the Opera House, a Belgian pianist doing Satie, a Japanese funk and soul band, Norwegian multi-instrumentalists Lindstrom, Spanish rock and roll flamenco, whatever that is, lots of cross-influencing. You kind of need to be a student of composition to orchestrate this variety, this cross-influencing, don't you?

57.40 LB: I would say that I might have encouraged it but I've certainly not hand-picked all these things because the contemporary music since Fergus has very much become a thing in the Festival and therefore also has gotten some love and attention from a particular member in the programming team. We can't take credit for everything in our Festivals and we have a programming team now comprising of five members, including myself. So there's four other people looking after elements of the program: a head of programming and then people with certain specialities. Somebody looking after outdoor events and special events, somebody looking after the contemporary music, somebody looking after the theatre program or parts of it, including the *About An Hour* series. I think I've looked particularly after the big Festival centrepieces in all these years and I've, of course, also taken some pride in hand-picking the classical music program and the opera and music theatre that comes with that. But that diversity, I think, is something that the Festival owns as an institution. We have become that since Fergus. And that diversity, of course, is an active element of the Festival. We like it, we try and keep it alive.

59.07 Having said that, the landscape has shifted dramatically in a very short period of time. Up until, I would say, 2005, 2006, contemporary music and rock music and indie rock was very much making its money through record sales, and touring served as the promotion of the album. With the collapse of the recorded music industry and the downward trends in sales for CDs and albums - despite downloads and those things coming up - the actual touring has become much more important as an income stream for these artists, and the fees have just grown astronomically. On top of that, what we see is the complete saturation of that market,

both at the presenter's end and at the artist's end. What I mean is that there are just so many more bands permanently on tour because they don't sell any records any more - they need to make their money - including legacy acts, all the oldies coming back. It's no coincidence that the Peter Gabriels and the Stings and the Leonard Cohens of this world are touring permanently, because they too have seen their pension funds dry up in their Greatest Hits albums not selling very well anymore. And so they go on tour permanently. What you get is complete saturation of that market, but on top of that a complete inflation on fee expectations.

MP: So there's not so much competition that it drives down the fees?

LB: No, because there seems to be an insaturable market for this, or at least there is a niche audience for a lot of these niche strands of programming. But what you see is that what was once very special - and we should give David Sefton a bit of credit, for instance, being at the start of - - -

MP: At the Adelaide Festival?

LB: No, before that when he was at Southbank Centre when Meltdown Festival started. That was one of the first, certainly in the Anglo world, one of the first instances of a serious arts venue embracing indie rock music and inviting a curator from that world to curate a festival in a venue like the Southbank Centre Royal Festival Hall and Queen Elizabeth Hall. And that has grown to become what it became in the Opera House and before that - - -

61.33 **MP: - - - when Fergus Linehan left the Sydney Festival and took on that position at the Sydney Opera House.**

LB: Exactly. And that is a trend that we see at festivals in Lyons and in Paris and at the Barbican in London and at BAM in New York. And all these serious arts venues and festivals - including the Holland Festival - have started to do a little bit of bringing the best out of indie music, - the Antony and the Johnsons and the Sufjan Stevenses of this world - into the world of the arts festival. What has shifted since then is that that's become economically almost impossible. There were moments when an arts festival could do that at break-even or even make some money on some of these concerts if they sold successfully. Currently, these concerts need to be subsidised almost more than classical music or opera because of the fees.

MP: Because the fees are very large?

LB: The fees are so large, the competition for punters is still quite stiff.

MP: Because just across the water you've got the Sydney Opera House running their music program, and a busy one now in January, Summer at the House, it's a very competitive marketplace.

LB: Yes, exactly. So that landscape has shifted quite dramatically.

MP: But just to sort of segue then into the Opera House: it's another ongoing relationship that's always being discussed by festival directors, whoever I speak to, about the competition, the open competition for customers and in a music program, as you say in January. The inaccessibility of the theatres to the Sydney Festival because they're too busy running their own program in them. And new outdoor bar and entertainment areas, particularly lately run by the Sydney Opera House and so competing on that front too.

63.26 LB: Let's put it this way: it keeps us on our toes. What happens is that festivals whenever they do something successful - there's a fascinating characteristic of festivals around the world which is that, of course we are very intangible. We are therefore flexible and we tend to go where other people haven't gone before very often. Festivals are more at the avant garde of things - they should be at least, in my opinion - than they are running behind. And so often festivals tend to introduce new ideas. Think of festival villages and cabaret and Spiegel tents. Venues have started to do Spiegel tents now, not so much in Sydney but certainly in Melbourne and other places.

MP: And they came from Belgium, Spiegel tents - - -

LB: Yes, absolutely.

MP: - - - like chocolate and contemporary dance.

LB: And one of the things that happened, certainly, was that the Opera House in Sydney started to do some of these things themselves, including family programming and circus. But that's understandable. I think what is nice about the last four years is that we've actually, I think, come to terms with the situation and we've started a nice grownup dialogue with the Opera House and we've improved the relationship to a point where I think both sides would agree we're actually quite happy with the collaboration. So what felt to me – and I was forewarned when I came: “Oh, this relationship is very difficult and you'll be met with hostility and you can't use the Opera House and they're very difficult people to work with” – and I learned very quickly that, of course, we were in the same market but that's a given, which didn't mean we couldn't collaborate and so we found a modus vivendi or a way to work together and the relationship at the moment is very good.

65.26 I'm very sad to see Jonathan Bielski, the head of programming leave - he's just announced that he will be leaving very soon – but certainly over those four years I've had the great pleasure of working with Louise Herron and with Jonathan Bielski.

MP: Producing what kind of work that are distinctive expressing this collaboration – what do you mean?

LB: For instance, presenting works at the Drama Theatre which isn't the easiest space, that wouldn't have happened without their help. And I'm thinking of allowing local companies to work there but also to co-present works, especially in my last two Festivals, '15 and '14 perhaps more than '13, works like bringing out a French theatre company, Les Bouffes du Nord, Peter Brook's old mob, to present a work there with a younger director or to do a pansori, a Korean pansori.

MP: The version of *Mother Courage*? That was an astonishing work.

LB: It was, and it was only possible through that relationship because we would never financially have been able to make that work in a commercial theatre. So it's those kind of special things where you acknowledge that the Opera House would probably never take the risk on that; we wouldn't be able if we hadn't had access and a bit of support in presenting this in some risk sharing. Because that's the model we've often employed with them - is to present a show where we say "We can pay for the base infrastructure of this, of what happens on stage, we can make it happen but we would love you to share some of the risk in the box office".

MP: Another great tug-of-war in the Festival history is how much to stay huddled around the magnificent harbour as a centrepiece - from the Opera House, to Circular Quay and around to Walsh Bay - of keeping that focus, or decentralising in the name of democracy and access, the festival to other places. Where do you stand on that tug-of-war? And you did boost Parramatta - and you had a government that wanted you to boost the profile of the Festival at Parramatta.

67.33 LB: I think it's funny how perception actually can be different from reality, whether you're inside or outside a festival. What I mean is that with Parramatta for instance people really, including the media, were very much convinced that this was this new thing, we were going to go into Parramatta. And you then look at the reality and how much we had already done in western Sydney all the way since Brett Sheehy, essentially. What has happened and I think one of the things I've been going on about a lot over those last four years is that actually when you regroup it and bring it together and thicken it and make sure that it's

condensated into smaller pockets so you get focus, rather than spreading it out too thinly - people suddenly pay attention. So western Sydney has been a thing for Sydney Festival for at least twelve years - -
-

MP: Yes.

LB: - - - but we have finally cracked it by actually finding one council that wanted to work with us, going to government and say "If we work with Parramatta Council and if we work with you guys, would you chip in some dollars as a kind of matching fund?" And that's what the O'Farrell government in their wisdom have done in Lindy's last Festival, saying "Okay, if you can bring it together and finally make something of this". And I think we have. I think we've very successfully transformed what was a bit of a scattergun approach in western Sydney to have something that has a focus and that actually works. And the next challenge we've set ourselves then from 2013 was to also start programming with some box office risk, not just to do some freebies but to actually start programming.

69.22

I think that the Riverside Theatres in Parramatta are some of the best spaces, especially the bigger theatre there, the actual Riverside Theatre space, which has a capacity of about 750, is a very good theatre. It's intimate, it's well-equipped, I like it a lot, I love to program that space. And we've managed to do three successful shows so far that really found an audience and that's been a particular growth trajectory that has helped us to really consolidate what we've done in western Sydney.

MP: But you get about - are the figures about right? You get half a million from the state and about half a million from council although you're wanting them to put in a little bit more, which they are in more recent Festivals. But the Festival – and there's no reason why it wouldn't – is still supporting that arm of activity in Parramatta is it?

LB: It is, like anywhere else.

MP: Yes, of course.

LB: There's no reason to say "the west needs to look after itself in the Festival."

MP: No, no.

LB: This is a Festival for greater Sydney. And I don't mind too much what the figures are behind it, I want to see quality work presented to an audience that is exploring something new so that they have a great arts experience

in the best possible circumstances. And if we can deliver those things with these parameters we're doing something right. And if we aren't we're doing something wrong; it's that simple. And the interesting thing is when we look at the statistics is that then for the first time people are actually coming into Parramatta from other parts of town to actually see these shows - because we've now started to bring exclusive shows that you can only see in Parramatta.

70.58 **MP:** **So whether you're exploring Parramatta or wherever, could you just talk about how you learn about Sydney? You're a funny foreigner from Europe and you arrive here with your family, two children, go and live on the North Shore – which probably was your first mistake – how do you learn about Sydney tastes and venues, people, the leaders, the people who you should listen to, the people who you shouldn't, the opinion-makers, arts companies, large and small?**

LB: Well, I think it's an important observation to make here is that as a festival director you know actually that one guy that runs the Sydney Festival so of course you're part of a team. And the Festival, and most Australian festivals, I would say, because of their tradition of kicking out their festival directors every three or four years and having that cyclical thing of the new festival director coming in, are very well versed in that transitioning and that training the dog to do new tricks. So what happens – and it was funny for me when I was reading transcripts of earlier conversations you had with some of my predecessors, it was very much in line with that – is that if you come in from abroad, like Fergus Linehan - - -

MP: **The one other foreigner who's run the Sydney Festival.**

LB: - - - exactly – you are briefed about a number of things but also you're taken on these meetings. In your first three or four months, I would say two, three months, there is a whole range of meetings lined up for you. And, of course, that serves a double purpose. Of course it's about the meetings themselves but it's also a great way for you to learn to know your team because it says something about the person making the selection and taking you on that journey so that I find very handy.

72.53 I think the most important quality of anybody that has any curatorial aspiration is always their gut feeling. There is only this little that intellect can cover in making artistic decisions but that actually is true for the decision processes around the artistic decision as well. Hence the meetings you have, the companies you want to look at. Are you desperate to go and see the big arts companies' work or do you want to also discover some of the smaller companies or the individual, independent artists? And that's what happens in those first four, five

months. What's lovely about it is that of course you can be terribly wrong about some of your biases and earlier judgements because you come in with at least some expectations and bias and then you can be surprised and you see some other things confirmed, positively or negatively. But, yes, what happened when I came in was definitely that I had a couple of recce visits before I actually moved here with my family. And Josephine Ridge, Executive Director, had lined up a number of key meetings. There is a bit of formality around it. There is a number of meetings that are also really organised in a very traditional, formal way. There's an official welcome by the Governor who hosts a lunch for the new festival director, which is a way of introducing you to a number of the private donors and stakeholders of the Festival who are officially invited in their roles to that lunch. You have meetings with chiefs of staff and members of cabinet and people around the Premier who, when I came in, was still sitting on the board, and the Arts Minister. And similarly with the City you meet all the City officials in your first visits. And that's quite helpful because, of course, all of them will come with very specific requests, demands, remarks. And then that's all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that then you can start to put together at leisure.

75.05 **MP: So you have to be gregarious, charming, outgoing but also your bullshit sieve has to be kind of acute, I suppose.**

LB: Yes. And sometimes you have to at least pretend to act rapidly because people will want a response and they will want to hear you say what they think are the right things.

MP: Yes, yes.

LB: And it's as much an exercise in - - - There is a great Anglo tradition of never actually talking about the problem. People love to go around the problem. But, of course, it's not too hard to actually come to the problem by hearing people defer an opinion. So you just have a lot of these meetings very rapidly, one after the other, and immediately you see where the problem is, very often in the misunderstanding between parties. So you meet Party A and you meet Party B and you meet Party C and they will all spend at least twenty five per cent of their time gossiping about your next meeting and that's very helpful and insightful. One of the things that was particularly helpful for me, though, and I was also very anxious about, was to actually have a whole two days of meetings with people in various Indigenous communities and groups. And that was something that I couldn't quite understand how important that was going to be. I understood that it was important for Sydney Festival and that Lindy had definitely engaged in a very proactive way. But it was fascinating for me that I could, through the help of somebody

within the Festival team, Loretta Busby, that was then at that point Indigenous Coordinator for everything to do with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programming and the Reconciliation Action Plan. She had lined up two days.

77.17 I remember very vividly that I was extremely jetlagged and it was all very alien to me and it was all very difficult to understand. But it was also extremely insightful to understand what the topics were. And suddenly I realised how little had been done, actually, before Lindy and how hard that was for a Festival to really embrace and how much still could be done.

MP: That's very true, that there wasn't that much Indigenous content in the Festival until then, until Lindy. How did then *Black Diggers* develop, which is a significant work that you steered in for 2014: a QTC production or co-production, directed by Wesley Enoch who has recently been announced as your successor to direct the Sydney Festival in 2017? How did that work develop?

LB: Out of a conversation over a good glass of Victorian wine in a Melbourne restaurant - as good art often gets made. This was again one of those meetings very early on. It was probably my second recce visit to Australia where again, as I said, Josephine Ridge was instrumental in setting up a number of these meetings. And she had arranged for me not just to meet Sydney-based artists. We have this beautiful thing called the Major Festivals Initiative, which is a program in the Consortium of Australian Arts Festivals, International Arts Festivals, where with some federal funding we try and come together and co-produce works with an incentive, a financial incentive. If there's a number of us coming together with a good idea, we have a pot of money that we can tap from to get some seed funding and then some development money and then some production money to get these projects up.

79.10 **MP: To showcase at a number of festivals in Australia?**

LB: Exactly.

MP: And this was the case with *Black Diggers*?

LB: But it so happened that we come together about twice a year, sometimes during Festival times, sometimes just because it's time for us to have our next meeting. So we assemble all the festival directors and as the lady-in-waiting when Lindy was still going to present her last Festival, I was invited to that meeting that happened to be in Melbourne. And Josephine in her wisdom said "Let's have a dinner and for you to meet some Melbourne-based artists and arts practitioners and people that you might

know from your past but haven't seen for a long time". So remember that it was Wesley and his partner, David, AD at the Ballet and I think Stephen Armstrong was at that dinner, a couple of other people.

MP: His former partner.

LB: Yes, exactly. And I thought I had missed something somewhere. No, no, I hadn't. And at that dinner people were probing about my – in a conversation with Wesley he was sort of testing, "Do you have any connection to contemporary Indigenous history in this country?" And I admitted "Well, very little but there is this one thing which is that in a village next to where my house in Belgium stands we have an Indigenous soldier buried from the First World War" and Wesley was like "No, mate, you must be wrong because we didn't fight in the First World War". I said "No, no, I know this for a fact there were Aboriginal soldiers in World War II and in Vietnam but also in the First World War".

80.54

And Wesley admitted he didn't know much about that and he was very surprised. He had heard stories about the Boer War but he was not really aware that there had been - because we came to the same conclusion: Aboriginal people weren't even considered citizens of this country. How could they have fought? And so that triggered further conversation and some very initial research – you know, you can find this online. It's not that we had some very profound research but it triggered at least the desire; if the two of us were having this conversation it was probably something that the whole nation wasn't very aware of. And the funny thing, or the fascinating thing, was that when we started it, we gave Wesley this invitation to look at it in his professional role as the artistic director of the Queensland Theatre Company. And if we were to give him some research help could he look at turning this into a theatre production? And so that's probably the longest project I've able to do. Because that's the other reality of coming on board as a festival director for only three or four years is that for these kind of projects you almost need three years to develop them.

MP: Yes.

LB: This started in 2011. We only saw the fruits of it in January 2014 and then it did the national tour in '14, '15.

MP: That's a good point about the long gestation of developing a large-scale local work, Indigenous or otherwise, the time that's required. So this was a work written by Tom Wright about Aboriginal diggers in World War I. It was a large-scale work and it was done by Wesley who also directed *Eora [I Am Eora]*, which kind of mark in the sand that Lindy Hume had a large, perhaps less successful, work that

she'd steered. In what other ways have you or haven't you pursued a varied Indigenous Australian content besides *Black Diggers*?

83.02 LB: I think we've made it part of – and again due credit to Lindy – we've made it part and parcel of our ethos to be open to opportunities to present Indigenous work but to also have conversations beyond just the work. So it's not just about presenting, because there's a number of people that can present Indigenous work, but to also - - -

MP: Outside a festival context, do you mean?

LB: Yes. Or when you present a work to make sure it's not just actually presenting it but also finding money to research some of the stories behind this, which again both on *I Am Eora* and *Black Diggers* did. Now, *I Am Eora* and *Black Diggers* are similar in the way that you can only do projects of that scale perhaps every two or three years.

MP: Yes.

LB: There was a little bit of frustration and parts of the Aboriginal community here in Redfern that I didn't come in and immediately do another *I Am Eora* because around it was this beautiful thing called *Black Capital* which Lindy did very successfully with other smaller satellite programs in Eveleigh in Carriageworks. And we had a fair bit of explaining to do, that it was actually better to make a really big mark with works that are of scale and are important but give ourselves the time to develop them well rather than to do this kind of tokenistic, fancy fare of little programs.

MP: Is that because a festival does what it does best, which is large-scale works when few others can do that?

LB: Yes. And to also develop that work and find partnerships and find donors for it and then make it of scale. But also because good ideas are just few and far between and you'd better wait for a good idea and make a work that is of significance. And it's not always rosy, it's hard work.

84.53 In '13 we had a story that was not an Indigenous work of art but it was certainly an important work about the relationship between Aboriginal Australia and the settlers which was, of course, *Secret River* which was part of my first Festival and which was an MFI [Major Festivals Initiative] commission. So every year we've had works of scale but it's not necessarily that you subscribe to that and then make it something automatic.

MP: It was a very significant Australian work, doing *Secret River*, adapted from the Kate Grenville novel by Andrew Bovell and recently a fantastic two part TV series as well. And you did an

interesting kind of staging of bringing a black Chicago remix of *Othello*, which I really enjoyed in 2014 and that was running at the same time as an Aboriginal retelling done by the Malthouse Theatre in Melbourne of *King Lear*, *The Shadow King*, so that was an interesting juxtaposition.

LB: There's a number of those that you can't claim any artistic credit for because they just happen.

MP: A lot of festival directors talk about this coincidence.

LB: The coincidence.

MP: Not fantastic programming.

LB: No. Listen, there is this romantic idea that we're all sitting there at the easel with oil paint and a beautiful canvas and we paint this beautiful festival. That's only partly true, of course, because there is so much against that in terms of practical obstacles that you overcome. How often do you try and get something for a particular year and you think it ties in thematically with that other project and then one of them falls over but you can do it the next year? This happens all the time. Pierre Audi at the Holland Festival definitely told me never to throw away a good idea. And so a lot of these festivals - you try and establish so much in your first year that actually happens in your second year and that's the learning curve.

87.05 That's also why I've definitely asked the board to consider to appoint directors for much longer, because I think three years is not enough. And that's not out of self-interest. I wasn't interested, necessarily, to stay much longer beyond this fourth additional year. But I do think that in this day and age with the complexities of international co-production and what we addressed for *Black Diggers* for instance, that long process of creating local work, it's in the interest of the festival and the city to have somebody for maybe four or five years.

MP: And so that would be quite a radical change since all festival directors since Stephen Hall at the Sydney Festival have been for a three year contract and two haven't had that extended but the others have - but that's it after four years. This compares to Jonathan Mills, who happens to be a Sydneysider, running the Edinburgh Festival for eight years. And, of course, historically Stephen, so-called Festival Hall, running this Festival as the founding director for eighteen years and old David Blenkinsop running the Perth Festival for twenty three years. Interestingly enough, David Blenkinsop and Stephen Hall both died last

December. How long is a good gestation time? Twenty three years and eighteen years is getting on a bit, isn't it?

LB: I would say so. I think eight or ten years, perhaps, is at the outer boundaries already in this day and age. I think Brett Sheehy was very honest in his launch of his last Melbourne Festival. He said "I've now presented ten international festivals and I think that's a beautiful time" and that was between different festivals.

88.58 I think staying for more than eight or ten years in one city is particularly long and it doesn't necessarily bring many new ideas. But it so depends on the person. Edinburgh certainly has that rhythm, Holland Festival has had that rhythm of around eight or ten years for each director. It's very similar to symphony orchestras: some of them have a new musical director or chief conductor every four or five years and others have only had six chief conductors over their one hundred and twenty five year history. So I think it depends on the relationship with any particular person and the institution. But I would certainly argue for practical reasons that three years is not long enough.

MP: And yet Adelaide Festival, it's distinguished, once every two years, now every year, changes its festival director still almost every year.

LB: Well, not any more.

MP: No, no, that's true, yes.

LB: With changing the model they've actually decided to also make it a three or four year appointment, so a similar model to Sydney. I think it's a bit too early to come to any conclusion as to whether that's the right length for Adelaide. I think they definitely have lost something by going from biannual to annual and that drive, that sense of urgency for everybody, at least in the arts, to go to Adelaide every two years has been lost a bit.

MP: There was a period in Australia's arts history in the '70s and '80s when the people who ran theatre companies and other arts companies were there for a very long time, perhaps too long in terms of the necessary creative turnover of companies. Festivals too need that turnover - but they need longer gestation times, you think?

LB: Yes, a little longer and I think the world has changed. We have to also acknowledge that twenty years ago when you had a job here you were going to cling onto it because there was not that much outside of your job that you could choose from.

90.58 **MP: Yes.**

LB: So you can't expect people to aspire to a really high level of professionalism and be at the top of their field but then also to jump in the abyss all the time if there's no other jobs available. And that's similar in Flanders where I come from but the difference is that we're geographically connected. There are probably more professional arts people outside of Flanders than there are jobs inside Flanders. There's people running the Lyons Opera, the Strasbourg Opera, the Amsterdam Theatre Company. There's so many places that are run by Flemish arts professionals at the moment, be they practitioners or professional curators. But the difference with Australia, of course, is that if you move out of this country you have to move a fair bit and it's not so easy to stay connected to your family and friends and professional circles. That has changed a little bit, though. People are, of course, more internationally mobile now and also this sector has grown tremendously over the last twenty five years so there are now more professional jobs worth considering.

MP: But that's an interesting phenomenon too, that in Australia festival directors, including from the Sydney Festival, move on to run other festivals. And Josephine Ridge left the year you joined the Sydney Festival to become the person who ran the Melbourne Festival. And she was followed by Brett Sheehy who had run the Sydney Festival and he'd spent some time at the Adelaide Festival and so it goes. It takes a very quick mind, I would think, in a festival director to adjust their festival thinking to where they are as they move from city to city and to the variety of festivals. How much do you believe in a comment, I think by Brett Sheehy, that he believes that festivals have got to be really intense about basing their programming on the place and the character of where they are, whether it be Adelaide, Melbourne or Sydney?

93.12 LB: I think that's actually true and I do subscribe to that idea and I do think that a lot of these festival directors before me have proven you can quickly adapt to the city. I would argue that it's double: it's the city but also the festival itself over maybe the first fifteen, twenty, twenty five years develops a character of its own which can still shift but not as radically and dramatically as perhaps in its first years. And then that is something you adapt to as well. If you accept the role of running a certain festival, you will also accept to try and analyse the strongholds of that festival and try and work on that as the basis of your programming. So I would say that Sydney Festival has a character all of its own, as we discussed earlier on: that unique combination of that summery feel and the free programming and then the arts at the heart of the Festival. That's now been crystallised quite beautifully. It took time for Sydney Festival

to find its unique characteristics and its identity and to build its identity. Because it's these two things: some of it you find and some of it you build. But then for an incoming festival director it's something that you embrace and you try and work with.

MP: In preparation for your 2014 Festival there was still a lot of concern. The 2013 Festival made a profit, reserve was boosted - - -

LB: Important note, if I may interrupt. There's no such thing as "profit" in festival-making. There was a surplus.

94.56 **MP: A surplus, yes.**

LB: If only there was a profit. People sometimes misunderstand this in the press: they think that you can run a festival at a profit. Well, after you've subsidised it for at least thirty five, forty per cent.

MP: Yes, yes. So you did have a surplus and you boosted the reserve after the 2013 Festival. But still you had a board that was seeking from you plans for quite radical change, that you implied earlier, and wanting comparisons made to international festivals and where they were at at that stage, talk of converting to a boutique festival, whatever that is, or even closing shop. Why was the pressure on again after you had considerably boosted the reserve on a smaller budget for 2013?

LB: I think I was pretty oblivious to or I was probably not even listening to some of that - I'm happy to hear it back from my own board reports. You go on and do your business and you nod in agreement with your board and then you continue to go on and do your business. I think what they were on about was, of course, again that feeling that there was no sustainable future for us. And so a radical suggestion, which I think came from the CEO of the City at the time, was maybe the time has come for this Festival to end.

MP: So Lord Mayor Clover Moore?

LB: This was the CEO of the City, Monica Barone, and these ideas are vented and it's a way of progressing the conversation. Sometimes you have to say something provocative for exactly that reason, to provoke a good, robust conversation. And it's not a crazy idea. Sometimes it's better to end on a high than to wither away, so I do think that that was a valid idea at some time. The pressure was still on because exactly that little bit of reserve we had built didn't actually change the challenges ahead.

96.52 You can build a reserve by doing less festival but then you also have to ask yourself – because in very simple back of the envelope mathematics, a festival runs at a deficit and is subsidised to overcome the deficit. Certainly if you're an arts festival you need some public money, some subsidy, on top of what you can get in box office and sponsorship and donations. That's one way of looking at it at least. And, you know, if you do less risqué programming and very middle-of-the-road programming, your financial results might be better but it doesn't mean that you've actually presented a better festival, it just means that your financial results were better. So that's the balance we have to find. It's not because it's financially successful that we had a good festival, it's not because it was financially bad that it was a bad festival. There is a more complex matrix to this. But in essence after the '13 Festival, at least what we saw was that we started to understand what the end of those challenges could be, we now knew for a fact that we lost a major sponsor, we knew for a fact that we were transitioning out of the Festival First Night money and again due credit to other people in the team - - -

MP: And the public funding, just losing two million effectively over that two year period, your first.

LB: Yes. And what we came back with as the proposal was to say “Listen, Festival First Night delivered something to the Festival: a great platform for public exposure and gathering, but with a huge risk because it was all betting on one horse, this one particular day”. The Festival has been fairly lucky with the weather on that day because people think of Sydney in January as this beautiful summer party. But if you look at the statistics there's always at least five, six days where it rains. Had those four first Festival First Night been rainy nights, people would have had a very different feeling about the success of that enterprise. So due credit to Christopher Tooher, my colleague Executive Director, he understood this problem and so we started working together, him from a business perspective and me from a creative perspective, with the programming team and with the development team on something that could deliver the same measure of public engagement.

99.02 And we started very modestly saying “We want to do something that is almost like Festival First Night, not just one night but across the whole Festival. We're going to take the Festival Garden” - which is the place around the Spiegeltent which had been a well-established precinct within the Festival - - -

MP: In Hyde Park?

LB: - - - in Hyde Park – “and we’re going to turn it into a much bigger Festival village. We’re going to double the programmed content in there, the ticketed content, in terms of ticketed shows by adding another tent”. In the first year that was a small circus tent but then it became a second Spiegel tent.

MP: Heavy with music, cabaret and circus program.

LB: Music, cabaret, circus, some talks, some family program. “We’re going to shift it from essentially a beer garden to a family precinct” - and that was the transitional money we still had inherited from Festival First Night budget – “we’re going to use that last remaining bit of City subsidy to bring a major public artwork and we invited Jeremy Deller to present his beautiful *Sacrilege*, the bouncy castle in the form of Stonehenge in front of St Mary’s Cathedral. And so you have these things that comfortably sit between arts and entertainment that are a meeting place as well as an avenue for other revenue. Because then you can bring on commercial partners and sponsors, you can do your catering successfully. And it became a huge success. We had very conservatively aimed – Festival First Night had about two hundred thousand visitors across that one night and we said “What if we can build something that in its first year has a hundred and fifty thousand visitors at least across the whole Festival”, which is much lower per night so much more manageable in terms of cost but without that subsidy “and then grow it to Festival First Night numbers and beyond in the years to come” and to our own happy surprise we hit the Festival First Night number in its first year of the Festival Village. We had over two hundred and twenty thousand people come through, we had many sold out shows across those two tents. Most shows actually sold out, did very well financially, and on top of that sold a truckload of Messina ice cream and beer and coffee and had happy families.

101.24 **MP: And you did better from that catering - that’s significant.**

LB: And that’s not rocket science.

MP: That’s part of the sustainability, though.

LB: Exactly. And you can do festivals that are just about waffles and noodles - and there are a few that are run commercially – or you can have an arts festival that incorporates that and that becomes another revenue stream for you.

MP: And at the other end of the scale, I suppose, when your board was talking about building reserves and things like that, you were talking about staging a part underwater choreographic version of

Purcell's baroque opera *Dido & Aeneas*. It was a hugely expensive risk - back to risk - and to stage that at the Lyric Theatre which is an unpredictably successful or not successful venue in the Star City Casino. You have to keep on being a bit mad and taking risks, even if you're being prudent as an artistic director.

LB: I think it says that on my CV: I am a bit mad and happy to take risks. No, that's part of festival-making. I think it's genuinely at the core of what this Festival does. Listen, you can have balance between entertainment and art by putting everything in the centre and the seesaw rider will stay in balance because everything's around the centre and it feels very balanced because you have the extremes very nearby but it's actually a very unstable balance.

102.59 If you have the extremes quite far apart – I know it's a bit of a physical analogy - but actually the seesaw is way more stable. And I do think that having really profound entertainment that is, I wouldn't say commercial but it's very accessible, as well as having really profound high art in the same festival is exactly what Sydney Festival is good at. So that risk seems huge, but as it shows from our figures, it did actually very well. The key to that is the actual artistic quality. If you as a programmer completely believe that this company is unique – and we were talking here about one of the most established and most successful young choreographers – she's not that young any more, she's now fifty - - -

MP: Sasha Waltz.

LB: - - - Sasha Waltz and her company. And the madness that she had actually never been to Sydney. How come that an artist that has been from Tel Aviv to New York, has obviously been to every single European country, has been to some other of the major festivals in Australia, has never been to Sydney, not just Sydney Festival but never been in this city with her company? That was one of those errors begging to be corrected so I thought that was actually fairly low risk.

MP: Yes, but the board must have freaked out when you - - -

LB: Presented the figures.

MP: Well, yes, and you required triple the attendances of your 2013 sell-out hit, the one with the Westwood costumes, another baroque work, *Semele Walk*. So they must have freaked out at that.

LB: They did but I think the fact that the previous Festival was slightly more successful than what they had seen in recent past gave them peace of mind. And I think Christopher was very good at giving the business rationale behind this and saying "Well, put it in perspective of Opera

Australia. This is actually a fairly small season. It's completely achievable. We will build in the necessary contingencies around this. We'll come up with a good marketing plan." And so we sold that idea to the board and we weren't proven wrong.

105.10 **MP: And just as the board needs confidence in you, Sydney needs confidence in you or the brand of your Festival to go with your choice.**

LB: Yes, and it's a tricky one because, of course, if you only have one bullet it better be on target.

MP: No, it's a very important golden bullet but it worked. Is it not the highest achieving box office show ever of the Sydney Festival? [7sec edit*] In box office takings?

LB: Yes, for a single project. I think the totality of the box office of *All Tomorrow's Parties* was a bit bigger but that was a whole range of things across the island. But, yes, for a single theatrical performance absolutely. It was the second highest because we matched it this year with James Thiérrée's box office so I'm very happy that we could actually improve it.

MP: The physical theatre troupe from France, Tabac Rouge?

LB: Yes, exactly. So you can do these solid pieces.

MP: So you have had a good run. Your key centrepieces - - -

LB: Have worked.

MP: - - - for the last three Festivals, with that one which was sort of a modest version of the earlier ones, the Tabac Rouge physical theatre. But they've all been hits.

LB: Yes. And I'm not thinking too much about it because again to be honest there is so much that is coincidence. James Thiérrée, all of the festival directors were trying to get him with that particular show.

106.48 **MP: And he has been here a number of times.**

LB: And he has been in Sydney very loyally and we could actually use that. We could actually outplay or outbid other festivals, not so much with money because we have less money than the other Australian festivals but with loyalty. James himself and the Compagnie du Hanne-ton were very loyal to Sydney because they had been so well received in the past. And he is as an artist absolutely the box office champion of this Festival in numbers of tickets. There's not another performing artist in the

Festival from outside Australia that has ever sold more tickets in Sydney Festival than James Thiérrée.

But, yes, '14 was again a robust year. Of course, we presented that risk as what it was. We went with great honesty and transparency to the board and actually sought almost dispensation from them to present that work to make sure that that wasn't going to be a surprise. I think that was key to it as well, that we went to the board and said "Listen. Yes, this is triple the risk of *Semele Walk* but, yes, these are the reasons why we think we can do it. And therefore we present this to you, we seek your permission". Which we normally don't do because we're not going to program by board permission. We're going to program in a relationship of trust. But in exceptional circumstances it doesn't hurt to seek their approval so that at least they're aware of it and they understand why you employ unusual measures to go and market it earlier and forge partnerships with Opera Australia, as we did, and launch it early. We launched this with an early campaign in August three months out from our normal launch. Which was another thing that the Festival hadn't done for a long time was to actually use a big theatrical show as its early release, rather than a contemporary music pop artist extravaganza. And that allowed us to also get some of that box office in early and to get onto people's attention and to get into their diaries for January.

108.54 **MP:** **Looking at the other parts of the 2014 Festival besides *Dido & Aeneas*: you had Australian dance with Shaun Parker, so you were developing dance. And then in the following year in 2015 you did a very distinctive work with Kate Champion, her last work with *Force Majeure*, famously about - with a lot of fat people dancing.**

LB: I think what is important in that connection for me is not so much the individual pieces but the fact that there was at least perceived from me, a tremendous pressure on presenting enough Australian work. The first question I thought I would get was "Is this bloody Belgian going to present Australian artists or is he just going to bring his Rolodex of people he already knows?"

MP: **Well, they could have said that a little bit about that first Festival except for the luck of you having *Secret River*.**

LB: Absolutely, yes. And all of what you say is true. Yes, it was luck and, yes, it was one of the few pieces. But again, that's the cyclical nature. You come in, you're appointed in June, July of a certain year and then you essentially have about a year to make your first festival because by July next year you will be starting to write your brochure.

MP: And as we've discussed, you were balancing a lot of financial uncertainties even in that as you're writing your brochure.

LB: But even if you weren't, the chances that you can actually mount a new Australian work in your first festival are very slim because it just takes more than twelve months. Works from idea to execution take eighteen months. If they're international co-productions they take twenty four months. If they're an opera and you first need to have the idea and then the libretto and then the composition and then the work gets made, that will probably take you thirty six months. So in your first festival it's very unlikely that you will have many of those but in my second and third, and hopefully my fourth now, Festival I've definitely managed to present a lot of Australian work.

110.53 **MP: So dance - Shaun Parker in '14 and Kate Champion, dance again in '15. Are you doing a significant work in 2016?**

LB: We are commissioning significant Australian works – can't disclose them quite yet because of when we publish this but yes. And I think it's very important. I felt that pressure and I felt that responsibility. And in a way it's also nice for me to come in here because, of course, it's extremely exciting for me to explore and to work with local companies and individual artists and co-production partners. And I'm very proud that the Sydney Festival will have presented and premiered seven new Australian works as part of the MFI, which is an exceptionally high number across my four years. Because typically there's one every year or maybe one every two years in some of the smaller festivals. Some of it is just luck. *Secret River*, the idea was there before I came in, I inherited that and, of course, the idea was there and it was shared with many festivals. But we managed to get it into my first Festival and it became the world premiere of that very successful play. But if you look at the list it's a beautiful list, from *Secret River* to - I had a Shaun Parker work which was an MFI co-production. We worked together with Adelaide Festival but again coincidentally they couldn't premiere it so we premiered Erth, the puppeteering company, with their small work, *Murder*, which was a new Australian work in my first Festival, on Nick Cave's *Murder Ballads*. Again not my idea – I'm not taking any credit for those ideas. But I've certainly tried to accommodate as much as I could the creation of new Australian work, and I think it is very important for us to do that. And Sydney Festival is well placed to do it because we're at the beginning of a little string of festivals so if a work gets up between us and Perth Festival - - -

112.53 **MP: In January?**

LB: - - - in February and then Adelaide Festival in March, which now is annual, you actually give companies a chance to tour to at least three Australian cities, which makes it very worthwhile.

MP: And you mentioned the Major Festivals Initiative funding that - - -

LB: Helps.

MP: - - - encourages you to do that. It's interesting that Schofield, for example, does not believe that it's important to do Australian work in Australian festivals or to nurture, develop those different priorities.

LB: We disagree. Yes, we disagree on that and it's funny that he would say that for young opera singers. So in his own field of expertise he does want to give chances for young Australian singers if they're on par with international festival level.

MP: Yes, working in international works, being exposed to international standards.

LB: But I think that's what a festival does as well: we create. And sometimes it's hard for smaller companies to understand how that works. But we bring an international work and then we try and bounce off that with the interest you generate amongst the public opinion and the professional media, an opportunity to showcase Australian work that is of that international level. And I would argue that many of those works were.

MP: We should note that in the 2014 Festival you again had very solid classical music with the Academy of Ancient Music from Berlin, the Hilliard Ensemble - - -

LB: Yes, and the(?).

MP: - - - Holland's Apollo Ensemble - - -

LB: Yes.

MP: - - - and, of course, as you've pointed out, the Symphony in the Domain. And that Festival in 2014 - you made a profit.

LB: Again a surplus, not a profit.

MP: Surplus, that's right, yes [8sec edit*]. But the board is still concerned about sponsorship. And there's a sort of shift for the Festival between a kind of focus on sponsorship, like across all arts' financial survival, towards philanthropy.

114.49 LB: We have come to see the end of old school corporate sponsorship. The idea that somebody talks to the CEO of the company, you have a well-connected board member and they have a chat with somebody running a big company and they will tell the underlings to write a cheque. That's done and gone; that's never going to come back. That was almost corporate philanthropy, where people felt it was in their interest and it was needed for them to be seen doing good things. That came with civic pride and civic responsibility and especially in a very tightly-knitted community like Australia in the '70s and '80s there was a lot of that. So we had very loyal business leaders, including the Packer family, that really took that responsibility. And they were amongst the biggest sponsors of Sydney Festival ever. And it came with a seat on the board. But it was really a very classical model of sponsorship. That's completely gone. All of these companies are now run in a very different way. There's different ethics and culture in a lot of these corporations; people are further removed - let's say the ownership is further removed from the day-to-day running of these companies. And the day-to-day running looks at it with a very pragmatic, practical view and only sees value in this kind of sponsorship from a marketing perspective. So civic pride is not a driver to write a big cheque to a ballet company or a children's hospital or a festival.

116.40 MP: **But why have the marketers in those companies lost interest themselves in that stage, that more cynical, pragmatic stage of thinking?**

LB: They haven't necessarily but, of course, there is more on offer. The arts market has diversified tremendously. There is a corporate attention span that is not endless. So what you see is that between five and seven years is sort of the duration of any big sponsorship. After that, everybody in the company sort of feels they know what it is, they've had enough of your hospitality and events, they've been to too many functions with the same kind of beers and the same sponsor wine and they want something new and that's the reality of it. It doesn't matter whether you're a sports club or a festival or a children's hospital again, that's just what's bound to happen. So they come and go and it's not all black and white but it's certainly shifting that landscape. And what you see is that a number of these big corporate sponsors really just give the responsibility to the marketing team. So rather than writing one big cheque and wanting gratitude and their name on your flags, people now will come with very specific demands which could include "We want to increase our sales figures. Can you prove that?" So we are talking about key performance indicators rather than sponsorship, we're talking about deliverables, we're talking about slicing up the actual sponsorship into a part that is

the co-sponsorship, a part that is directly aimed at return on investment, "What do we get back?"

MP: And quite a catfight over naming rights and possession of events.

LB: Oh, yes, although naming rights themselves aren't actually very sexy any more. It's very hard. We have to remember that it's against all odds to find sponsorship for a festival to start with because we are selling intangible goods, we are selling the dream. We don't have a venue that you can put your name on, we don't exist for eleven months, we only exist for one month, so if you have an arts company that sits in a beautiful building or a ballet school or again a children's hospital, you have the physical presence. We don't have a lot of physical presence. When we go into venues we don't own these venues, we don't even take them over, we just present work there. So we are in competition with the sponsors that are attracted to those venues, potentially.

119:02 So it's a tricky one to navigate. But what we do have is a number of unique elements that other people don't have, including access to beautiful international work that you don't get somewhere else. The free stuff we put on is still massively attractive to bigger sponsorships, the free Domain concerts, the Festival Village with well over – well, it's probably going to be close to a quarter million visitors coming through in a very short period of time, and very engaged visitors.

One of the things that I believe I promised the board was that rather than growing the Festival in numbers, I was going to try and grow the actual engagement of the audience. It's very hard to quantify, of course, and it sounds a little bit like magical mumbo-jumbo. But it's true that there is a certain ceiling in terms of growing a festival. You can always double it, you can always try and make it bigger but it loses its actual sense of purpose and it loses its focus. We could double the number of dates and it wouldn't feel like a festival any more if it ran into February. Or we could try and go into the Northern Beaches and all the way to Wollongong. I think that actually consolidating the Festival but then having an audience that's more connected to you and engages with you more was a more meaningful form of growth. And I think that's what we're doing now in terms of looking at our sponsorship and philanthropy, is to make sure that that follows suit. That our development department is also making sure that it's about the depth of the engagement.

120.46 And what that means in practice is for instance that in the Festival Village, people love that we have an audience that is not just passing through, they're actually actively engaged with the Festival. They will come with their family and they will do things, they will be in activities with people.

A small example: we had a sponsor that is a brand of sports clothing, mainly aiming, I think, at the female market, Lululemon, and they started with pop-up yoga sessions in the Village in the morning and to their own surprise they had triple the success of what they had aimed for. We had to expand the area that we gave them because there were hundreds of yoga people that wanted to do that in the morning.

MP: Wow. So the nature of sponsorship has changed but how do you explain the rise of philanthropy and the increasing dependence on that – where's that coming from?

LB: Well, sometimes you get what you wish for and I think there is a certain political wish that that's the solution to the problem. So people are advocating that the arts should be more professional about its philanthropy program.

MP: It's wishful thinking?

LB: So part of it is wishful thinking, absolutely. Part of it is also, you know, coming of age as a Festival. We've had a number of donors that we are very engaged with. It has meant a shift in the job description of a festival director. I think if you go back in our own history and if you were to look at the amount of time I would spend in my relationship with some philanthropic donors, that's very different from what it must have been ten years ago or twenty years ago, because there's more at stake, we're more relying on it. The beauty of that is that you can give these donors a real sense of what they've enabled because it's the reality that some of those donations have made something possible that wouldn't be there if it wasn't for that donation.

122.45 We've had a time where there was the token, you know, "I'll do this as a form of civic pride. I'll give you a thousand or five thousand dollars" but it wasn't actually going to make the difference. We're now at a situation where particularly around our fortieth anniversary campaign, one of the things we changed was that both Chris and me have come on as philanthropic donors ourselves, modestly of course. But we felt that that was necessary that we should lead by example and give ourselves. And it has allowed us to say "Listen, for the fortieth anniversary we're going to double our donation and we're going to seek other donors already on board or future ones to do the same and to give double of what they would normally give". And many of them have taken that call and said "Yes, we want to do that". And we've had two beautiful examples of two of the projects we're going to present: one of them, *Woyzeck*, the amazing theatre production from Thalia Theatre in Hamburg, written by Bob Wilson and Tom Waits, that wouldn't be possible if it wasn't for two

of our very loyal director circle friends, [10sec edit*] two individuals in Sydney that say “We want to make this possible because we think that’s a brilliant plan”. What it means is that, of course, you spend a lot of time talking to these people and testing your ideas with them to see what works and doesn’t work in terms of philanthropy.

MP: And those two philanthropists, you didn’t say they’re on the board but they’re on your directors - - -

LB: No.

124.15 **MP: Speaking of the board itself, last year there was much discussion following an Ernst & Young report into changing the board and to taking off the board the representation of the state government and the City Council with the Lord Mayor, Clover Moore, having been the long term chair of the Sydney board. This has all just come into effect in March this year, in 2015, with a totally new board with no representation from state and City Council funders; a board that’s argued as being much more similar to other arts organisations and that allows more easy community representation, more broad representation, and presumably are more attractive to sponsors, speaking of sponsors. Is this board working better?**

LB: It’s a bit too early to tell but I’m very hopeful it will be because it’s exactly that, it’s the coming of age of this Festival so it was about time.

MP: Coming of age? It’s middle aged already and it’s finally got an independent board, if you like.

LB: Yes, it was actually quite late in the day to get an independent board. So we had a bit of a dinosaur board and I think it’s good that the two major stakeholders agreed with that and finally said as much. I think it was to do with the cyclical nature of festivals that we never changed it. The one thing that festivals get bogged down by or get sucked into is you present a festival, you go on holiday for a fortnight or less and you start preparing your next festival. And so the board just accepts that they hear about the successes of yesterday quite literally and then they hear about the problems of tomorrow and never do you stand still and think “But long term what do we need as an organisation? How is this going to be sustainable over four years and over twenty four years?” And that’s finally what has happened, is for people to look around.

126.25 And in arts companies that have a continuous operation, whether it’s venues or theatre companies or dance companies, you have more time to do that. But if you’re so cyclical and you ramp up and ramp down with your team – we are a core team of twenty six, then we grow to a hundred

people, then we shrink to twenty six again – you're completely in that treadmill.

MP: At least the board is permanent.

LB: Well, the board is permanent but they then also feel that they can't change anything because then the whole thing will unravel. And I think finally in their wisdom, two public stakeholders agreed with the independent board members who had hinted at this a couple of times and said "Isn't this time for us?"

There was also an issue, a recurring issue, which isn't to do with any specifics of the current political situation but of a potential conflict of interest. It's not necessarily a conflict of interest but it's certainly a technicality that makes it very hard for your two representatives from those public stakeholders - your state representative, say the Premier and the arts minister, sitting on your board or being represented on the board by somebody, technically, and your Lord Mayor - that even if they mean well for your company they can't necessarily drive that very hard back home when they're back in Macquarie Street or George Street. Because, of course, they will be immediately slapped on the wrist by any opposition saying "You're only doing this because you're on their board". So they can't play their civic role of taking care of the Festival as well as they would like to sometimes because they are on the board. Because it's a perceived conflict of interest. So them not being on the board allows us – not us; we are, of course, just employees – but allows the actual Festival board to go to these public stakeholders in a more grownup relationship and say "This is what we think is the brief that we have" and to come to a form of understanding and contract between, say, the state government and the Sydney Festival about what the future is. And then each can play their own role.

128.39 **MP: So is it a coincidental irony that the major funders of the Festival are no longer on the board while their actual levels of funding have decreased at that same time?**

LB: Yes, it is.

MP: That's a coincidence?

LB: It is a coincidence because the one happened after the other and in the wrong order, I would say. So it is but it also gives this new board an opportunity to look at that and come to some kind of better argument as to what the ideal level of funding should be.

MP: And to take that to government and to council?

LB: Exactly.

MP: About this time at the end of last year, in December last year, Ralph Myers from Belvoir, the departing artistic director of Belvoir Theatre in Sydney, stirred the possum a little in the Parsons Lecture which he gave at that time, suggesting that many state festivals are now dominated by imported artistic directors who have “notably failed”, he says, “to excite enthusiasms by presenting generic, cookie-cutter programs of moderate, balanced, largely imported work, that’s usually pretty dated by the time it gets here”. Do you think he was talking about you?

LB: I guess so - we’re in the same city. I think he was a little frustrated, perhaps, that I hadn’t invited any of his work, I don’t know. We should have to ask Ralph Myers that question.

130.07 **MP: I suppose the serious question is, is the tendency, which we’ve talked about before, whether being a foreign director or not, in a world of so many festivals, in a city of so many festivals, to avoid just taking the shopping trolley overseas – and you’re about to go overseas in a week’s time – and generically just sort of selecting festivals from what’s on the shelf?**

LB: What I tend to find is that there’s extreme naivety about how festivals are actually put together from people outside. And I can’t blame them for that, that’s okay. Just like people have sometimes naive ideas about what cooking actually is. Unless you’ve tried to run a restaurant or worked in a professional kitchen, it’s easy to have an idea about what you think professional cooking is and how that compares to your own cooking. Festival-making is what it is; it’s become a very professionalised enterprise. We’ve spoken about the pragmatism and the coincidence that sometimes goes in. But what I would argue – and I was a bit taken that Ralph didn’t – I wrote him an email because he gave me a twelve hour heads up or forewarning that he was going to say these things, “Lieven, I want you to know that I’m going to say this”. And I thought “Well, I’m a bit taken aback by this so I’ll reply to you in an email” and I never got a reply to that email, which I thought was a bit lame. And then you can, of course, have some silly argument outside of that. But he has actually never had a debate about this. What I did take offence in was that he didn’t actually look at the facts. I would argue that, as I said before, we’ve produced more Australian work in my three Festivals to that point - because we had already announced my third one then – than many of my predecessors combined, including major works that were touring, such as *Black Diggers*, and that we had worked with all these

beautiful local companies and artists with new work, newly produced work.

132.25 Of course the reality is that some of the work you present here is pretty dated. It's a fact, I can't deny that. If you want to bring *Dido & Aeneas*, as I said before, you can't bring it when it's still fresh and in season because you need twenty two weeks. How are we going to prevent a company from playing that work for twenty two weeks in the middle of a German season? So you can only go and see it at some stage - it's always the one or the other. Lindy got crucified for booking a work unseen. She was going to do the unthinkable: she was going to book something purely on reputation. And she got crucified for booking a work unseen and people thought it was highly unprofessional of her to have done that.

MP: This is the show with Malkovich?

LB: It was the show with Malkovich and poor her, it tainted her whole career completely unjustly. It was like ridiculous comments were made about that because she just booked a show. Come on, we all book shows and some of them are duds and other ones are successes and, you know, we don't take credits for the success of the artists on stage and therefore we shouldn't be crucified when it doesn't work out. People made all kinds of grotesque assumptions - that's what happens if you do it unseen. So what's the alternative? You wait till it exists, you go and see it. You can't sit somewhere in July and have it in January – that's not how these things work. So the earliest you can have it is probably eighteen months after you've seen it. So the reality is that there is this nonsensical idea that you go around the world and, you know, "Here comes Sydney Festival, the biggest festival in the world and they're going to set the terms of co-production and they're going to tell the Metropolitan Opera to hold their horses and bring them the best show, please, tomorrow". I thought that spoke of such a naivety in what international festival-making is that it was almost laughable.

134.15 **MP: Thank you for that reply. We've talked a bit about the last Festival that you've done, the 2015 Festival, Tabac Rouge, the physical theatre, being the centrepiece and doing well at the box office. And Kate Champion's work being the choreographic Australian highlight. A strong classical program again, the Latvian Radio Choir, works by Bartok and Bach. The theatre was fairly small-scale but - - -**

LB: It was very pointed. We chose to present a range of things rather than one specific really large-scale work. Next year's going to be different

again. That became a bit of a choice. It didn't start as a choice. Again, it started quite haphazardly but at some point you go "Well, it looks like we already have this and this and this in place. What if we turn it into a series?" And so I had a series of what I would say were theatrical surprises in '15, including the beautiful Korean pansori *Mother Courage*, which was a highlight for many; including the Australian stage premiere of an eighty three year old actor with Les Bouffes du Nord in this beautiful little Chekhov *On the Harmful Effects of Tobacco*. So we had a lot of one and two-handers there.

MP: A very moving work from Ireland, *Have I No Mouth*.

LB: Yes, exactly.

MP: Very confronting social issues in that one.

LB: I think that was sort of the constant factor in how we put that program together. One of the things that we haven't spoken about that also featured strongly in this Festival again that I take particular pride in is to bring back live music in a theatrical form. And it's not because I thought we had lost it but it's just because I'm very convinced that that's another thing festivals can do so well.

136.13 Whether it's dance or theatre or musical theatre or even a good old Shakespeare, whenever I can, if there is a musical element I will try and program a version or a production of a work that has live music in it.

MP: Or even film, playing music to film.

LB: Exactly. And so over those last three years and again next year I've really looked for works that feature live music on stage. We had a beautiful – and that was a bigger-scale work - work that was from a Belgian company - and that was completely coincidental because I'd never worked with them before – but which was a mixture between film and music and puppeteering and choreography for hands.

MP: This is *Kiss and Cry*?

LB: *Kiss and Cry*, which was an instant hit with the Festival audience.

MP: Yes, of characters played out by miniature hand-acting broadcast on large screens.

LB: Exactly. So it's these kind of surprises, if you want, or original presentation formats that are also an important thing for festivals.

MP: And remarkably you had four Domain concerts.

LB: Yes.

MP: Was there no end of Domain concerts? A very successful collaboration with triple J to celebrate their - - -

LB: Fortieth anniversary.

MP: - - - fortieth anniversary, *Beat the Drum*, and three other Domain concerts, *Summer Sounds*, ones with the SSO and Opera Australia on board.

LB: A lot has happened forty years ago. Like it's interesting for me as a foreigner to see that we've celebrated the fortieth of the Opera House and your youth radio station and this year it's going to be the Festival and the Opera Australia company.

MP: Yes.

LB: It seems like we don't have a lot of cultural history that is much longer than forty years.

MP: No, no. That's a very interesting thing to say about the arts scene in Australia and how it was when things were born in 1975. What happened to Charlotte Rampling? She and a cellist were going to be here with the *Night Dances*, combining the works of Sylvia Plath and Benjamin Britten's music.

138.20 LB: Well, we agreed with her not to say too much about it, but what I can say is that she cancelled because she suddenly realised that she wasn't prepared to fly that long. But she should have realised it at the moment we wrote the contract and put it in the brochure.

MP: We've heard that before but those days we thought were past when people were just sort of intimidated by the length of the plane [trip].

LB: I think she has a double challenge, which is that she is an actress of stage and screen. And she is very attracted to being on stage but, of course, the reality for her - the comfort, let's put it that way - of the ability to edit your performance in film, certainly being away on the stage becomes [mobile phone pings] more pronounced with age. And she had done this particular performance somewhere else and it hadn't gone to her liking - she wasn't pleased with the artistic results and she had blamed the long flights there. And that was only a third of the length it would take to come to Australia. So after that show she immediately said "This is a major mistake. I shouldn't have accepted this. I apologise. I'm uninviting myself; I won't come". Which was very disappointing because, unsurprisingly of course, it was a show that had sold very well and so we

had to cancel and refund. It's all part of festival-making and it's all very disappointing. It keeps us on our toes, I guess.

MP: When you leave Sydney after the 2016 Festival, what have you learnt in these five years that's going to impact, perhaps, your next job, which is organising events in Leeuwarden in the Netherlands for its turn as the Capital of Culture in 2018? How do you do a job like that differently after five years here? Or is it the same not exactly cookie-cutter approach but is it the same - - -

140.30 LB: No, it's not the same. Well, there are parts that are the same and if you dislike that you call it "cookie-cutter" approach but there are consistencies in this because it's a professional job and you do it in a certain way. But there are certainly things that I've learned and one of the things I've learned is I've come from a very, people would say, maybe spoilt world where the actual act of programming can live quite happily isolated from the rest of the business. And I've been thrown in here at the deep end in a time of not crisis but certainly in [phone ping again] a challenging time, perhaps, at least if you have to believe the board papers. I won't remember it that way because I will remember it with great fondness as a time that was also exciting and people were actually very welcoming. But what I will be taking back from that is I think the more lateral or the more connected approach or holistic approach to the making of a festival, where you actually take perhaps more responsibility in, say, fundraising or the practicalities or the marketing, rather than just sitting on your little island as the programmer.

MP: But you said you'd always done that; you started with that quality in the beginning.

LB: Yes, but then you specialise and you grow into the luxurious position of being in this old school arts festival which only deals about the arts. The other thing that really I want to take home is, of course, that beautiful, beautiful uniqueness of the Sydney Festival combining high arts and entertainment without too much thinking.

142.28 People are not overly obsessed with it as well. What I like about the Festival audience in Sydney is an amazing sense of public ownership of the Festival. If you talk about the Sydney Festival, people talk about "our Festival", "my Festival". They talk about their own personal experience, they own it, and they're also very willing to sample these extremes. So you see the same faces, at least in part, in your *Semele Walk* baroque opera with crazy costumes by Vivienne Westwood and then that same evening dancing away in front of the stage in the mosh pit in the Domain. And that's quite rare in other cities so I hope we can have some of that

in Leeuwarden, perhaps, and make this a festival that isn't too obsessed with where these demarcations are between genres and not to pigeonhole different art forms too much.

MP: What do you think the impact of the Festival has been on Sydney's artistic rigour and the rigour of its companies? Is it something that comes and goes and delights in January, but doesn't leave a lasting impact? Or is it having some wider impact on Sydney?

LB: It has many impacts. It doesn't have just one major thing that I can point at. But it has impacted on so many creative people. If you talk to the Kate Champions of this world or Baz Luhrmann, Baz will tell you that he saved up as a teenager to buy tickets to the Sydney Festival. And one of his first acting roles was in a Nimrod production in the Festival. And we launched the career of people that have international careers now that were inspired by what they saw internationally and got opportunities with their own local companies in the Festival.

And it's that combination of seeing work that inspires you. I wouldn't want to feed all the people that felt inspired by La Fura dels Baus and started to do chainsaw theatre - - -

MP: Way back then.

144.40 LB: - - - way back then but it certainly triggered something for many people and we still talk about it.

There's beautiful stories of a young conductor that got a chance to conduct and prepare the local orchestra for when the Paris Opera Ballet came as a private enterprise with Leo Schofield as the impresario - a young guy from the North Shore that actually got into classical music because of the Symphony in the Domain Concerts. His parents would not normally take him to classical music. He became a professional conductor because of the Symphony in the Domain Concerts. These are all just anecdotal but it changes people. Of course it creates amazing social cohesion but it also really fosters people's careers and creates these opportunities that wouldn't be there.

So I think it's much more than, you know, leisurely entertaining people in summer. It's really a profound part of the ecosystem that is the performing arts and arts in Sydney. And I think it has huge potential to do that in the future as well.

MP: The social cohesion argument is strong when it reaches through so many different communities and venues. And in this coming Festival in 2016, you're exploring people's memories and

experiences over forty years of the Festival. In what way is that happening?

146.07 LB: Well, we will be looking at a storytelling project where we're tapping into forty distinct moments of our Festival history which can be told not just by us but also by the audience at large. So we're looking for forty moments in Festival history and there are a number that have become almost legendary: the sinking of a ferry in the infamous ferry race somewhere in the late '80s, I believe, when a ferry just barely made it to Circular Quay, people got off and then it sank in the harbour.

MP: That's right.

LB: That's one of those very funny anecdotes. But there are so many of these anecdotes, both onstage and backstage, that are worth retelling that actually give a good idea of what we are. We're also working on a forty portraits project.

MP: Where are you telling those forty stories – online?

LB: Online and potentially in a publication. We're also working on a forty portraits project where we won't just feature forty iconic faces that have been onstage but again also to try and show that community and social cohesion element of the Festival by also inviting people to be photographed that have other connections to the Festival. We have a volunteer that has been a volunteer with the Sydney Festival for over twenty three years: this person deserves a portrait in our forty portrait series.

MP: Hanging on sites around the city?

LB: Exactly. And then for people to explore these connections to the Festival and to realise that it's a Festival of stories and it's a Festival of people. It's not a Festival of shows and box office numbers and tickets sold and board papers, the Festival is really the Festival of Sydney - which actually the original name is a very beautiful name.

MP: The Waratah Festival?

LB: No, the Festival of Sydney, because we call it the Sydney Festival now.

MP: O.K. I'm going back too far.

148.09 LB: Yes, that's a bit too far, perhaps, for my taste. But people still fondly call it – including Clover Moore, our current Lord Mayor – will always speak about the Festival of Sydney. That's actually a beautiful way of saying it's: it's a Festival of Sydney. I like that.

MP: Are there highlights that you've got in 2016 that you can talk about as well as the return, of course, of the Festival Village and the fortieth anniversary events that you talk about? And as well as *Woyzeck* by Robert Wilson and the music by Tom Waits, *Desdemona*?

LB: *Desdemona* is a beautiful piece for us in that it brings together two Festival alumni in an unlikely collaboration. Here is a contemporary music artist, Rockia Traore from Mali West Africa, who has been in the Festival last in 2013 - she has this amazing, powerful voice, strong female voice from West Africa – who's worked together on a beautiful project with Peter Sellars, director and playwright who's worked himself on this project with Toni Morrison, the Nobel Prize winner, Afro-American writer. And together they've come up with this beautiful idea of taking the original Shakespearean *Othello* and looking at it from a female African perspective. And the rhetoric behind that and the reasoning behind that is that Toni and Peter and Rockia will argue *Othello* isn't the only African person in the play because there is a reason why *Desdemona* falls in love with the African guy. She had an African wet nurse, Barbary, a character that doesn't have any lines in the play but that is explored here.

150.08 **MP: In Shakespeare's play?**

LB: Yes.

MP: I never knew about Barbary.

LB: Barbary, the wet nurse, must have been African and the reason Shakespeare named her Barbary must have been because the kings of Barbary had just visited London prior to him writing the play. And they were just African noblemen that came on a diplomatic mission to London. So there's a historical fact that might have triggered something in Shakespeare to have this African connection, which then explains why this white girl falls in love with the African, the explanation being that she had all the ancient African rhymes from her wet nurse and she understood this culture. And so what we get on stage is Tina Benko, a young New York actress, a white actress, playing the role of *Desdemona*, talking to us from the afterlife in a sort of explanation, very much in a situation like we sit here in a kind of radio studio situation as if she's doing an interview from the afterlife, with beautiful big, fat studio microphones and Rockia Traore taking the role of Barbary and singing to us in her own griot-Malian language and explaining to her what that means and what it is to be African and a wet nurse.

MP: Wow. So the *Desdemona* experience – it's sort of a play/concert in its remaking of a classic with so many cross-cultural roots and live music – it is very much a signature work of your style.

LB: Yes, I think so. I think it's certainly a typical Festival work and it's beautiful for us. What is special about the presentation is that we're actually going to present it not in the Festival season but as the launch activity, which at the time of publication of this interview will be public knowledge because we will put tickets on sale for a special launch season to mark the fortieth anniversary in October. Because we had the opportunity to share this work with Melbourne Festival, which I think is another thing that I've certainly encouraged is to share more work across the festivals.

152.22 **MP: This is being shared?**

LB: Yes, with Josephine's last Festival in Melbourne. And I think this whole bogus argument of exclusivity has gone too far and people are too obsessed with exclusivity. We all take pride in things that we bring out exclusively but we also should be able to share works if we think about sustainability in an ecological sense. And *Desdemona* will be one of those.

MP: Finally, you return to Europe as a knight. You've become a knight while you're here, not in any Australian order but you're a knight in the order of the crown from the King of Belgium. How did that happen?

LB: I don't know.

MP: A recognition of your work in Sydney, of course.

LB: Internationally, I think, and that's at least what it said on the certificate. You get a phone call and people very diplomatically and carefully inquire whether you would refuse any honours bestowed on you if they were to happen, without any specifics. And then there is a long six month silence and then you get another phone call saying that something is on its way. And then they ask whether you would rather have a ceremony in Brussels or whether it would be okay if it was bestowed upon you by your ambassador in the country. And I think this came about because of a wonderful Belgian ambassador here in Canberra who's no longer here – he's currently serving in another mission - and I was very honoured. I must admit that I didn't have very grand feelings. I have a Belgian passport and I feel Belgian. When you are in Belgium it's more specific than that because people will always identify as either Flemish or Walloon or Brussels in their culture. And so in Belgium I would say I'm

Flemish. But when I do travel I really quite enjoy carrying that Belgian passport.

154.20 And certainly culturally, as I hinted at before, we've had great opportunities. And the fact that we are a trilingual country with a trilingual constitution and legal system helps us internationally to operate. And for me this was an amazing opportunity here for instance to work in my third language after Dutch and French and to do this for a couple of years. But I wouldn't rule out that I would also love to work in a French speaking country or somewhere else.

MP: And I joked before about chocolate, Spiegel tents and contemporary dance but you have a government that at least when it was richer was very much behind the export of performance and it was particularly contemporary dance that the Belgians are so well-known for.

LB: You can expect some of that in my last Festival.

MP: Well, Sir Lieven Bertels, thank you very much for all your time and your thinking.

LB: No need to call me Sir, it doesn't come with a fancy title

MP: Oh, it doesn't? Thank you.

LB: Thank you.

155.30 [Interview ends]

** Asterisks indicate where minimal edits have been made in the Reference Audio file and accompanying Transcript for legal reasons and/or to protect the privacy of individuals.*