

CITY OF SYDNEY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

SYDNEY FESTIVAL DIRECTORS

TRANSCRIPT

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0.00 **MP: It took a bit of chutzpah, I suppose, to apply for Sydney. You were running the Dublin Theatre Festival 2000 to 2004.**

FL: Yes.

MP: You were about thirty four when you applied for a festival in Sydney that was in its budget six times or so what Dublin was.

FL: Yes, yes, I guess. I mean it happened and I did a sort of relatively informal phone interview and then I was coming over to Australia. I was actually taking a little bit of time out in that year and I was coming here for about three or four weeks, going to all of the cities, and I was asked to come into Town Hall for an interview which I thought would be kind of a follow-up from a phone interview, would be something that would be relatively one or two people to sort of take it to the next stage and I remember going across the road to Woolworths across the road from the Town Hall because I didn't have a shirt. I'd just been on the road, I looked like a mess, I literally bought the shirt, put it on on the outside of Town Hall and had been out with Neil Armfield, I think, the day at a matinee in Belvoir so I was very casual – I literally thought I was going in for a chat – and then I went in and got brought into the chamber and they were all there. It was the Lord Mayor, it was Roz Packer, it was government and everyone was there and they said "We're ready for your presentation now, Mr Linehan". So it was very surprising. I kind of hadn't realised it was quite at that stage of the process but then in a strange way sometimes that's a good thing because I did have kind of an idea as to what I wanted to do so I went "Well, I'll just have to busk it". So it wasn't that I was kind of making up things on the spot, it was just that I didn't necessarily have them in that sort of very prepared sort of structure but that was good, I think, because that ended up being perhaps more of a conversation than me just talking.

2.13 And that was in about February of 2004, I guess it would have been, and then I went back to Europe and then it was literally a few weeks later - we were back and forth and we were back and forth - and then suddenly – I always remember because it was St Patrick's Day, I flew on St Patrick's Day, and then I was back in Sydney and we were doing the press conference. It was incredibly fast when it happened and it was really, really exciting but obviously I had a lot of rearranging my life to do. I still had a year to run on my Dublin contract and things so it was a lot of kind of getting down on my knees and begging to my board

in Dublin to release me from my contract and then just trying to figure out – you know, moving to Australia's complicated. So, yes, it all happened very, very quickly. I mean yes, there was a degree of chutzpah in terms of the budget but at the same time I'd been working in this industry since I was sixteen so I'd done kind of commercial projects, I'd done lots and lots of different types of things.

MP: You'd been General Manager at the Tivoli Theatre.

FL: Yes, I'd run sort of a commercial theatre, I'd produced shows independent of my work at the Dublin Theatre Festival so in that sense the thing that actually scared me more than anything was the idea of when they said these big outdoor events.

MP: Because you're not used to those in Dublin?

3.53 FL: Not used to them in Dublin but also just hadn't done them. Like the idea of programming an orchestra or programming a band or programming a theatre company, it's not exactly the same everywhere but kind of the systems and the processes and the protocols are the same. Putting something in the Domain for sixty or seventy thousand people was just like I went "I've never done that before". So the board gave me a bit of comfort on that because I was kind of expressing anxiety on it and they were sort of saying in particular "Oh, those Domain concerts, we've been running them so long that operationally you don't have to find the grain on it because there's people who do that". But that was always it. But since then it's been interesting because like when I arrived here I was "the theatre guy" and people were going "Hmm, what are we going to do with this theatre guy?" and then by the time I'd left a few years later I was "the big event guy" and so I'd go to other things and they'd go "I don't know. You're the big event guy". And then I started doing lots of rock and roll stuff and then suddenly I was "the rock and roll guy" and you do realise that a lot of the principles are the same regardless of the scale.

MP: Your background, your father was a film critic and turned art editor, your mother an actress.

FL: Yes.

MP: In that background and your own professional background, what did you draw on in those early days when you had to quickly do presentations to boards, talk at press conferences? Before you really knew the Sydney Festival, what skills made you qualified to advance this festival?

FL: In the early period my parents were very involved, we all kind of learnt the piano and my brother was a pianist and all the rest. But also my parents did a lot of revue, the *Beyond the Fringe* kind of revue, that sort of late '50s, early '60s college revue and became quite famous in Ireland in that sort of localised way.

6.21 So it was interesting because on the one hand there was great intellectual rigour but on the other hand there was this whole world of comedy and also the end of vaudeville so they were very involved in sort of the final years of vaudeville. And so I grew up with quite a broad view of art and I didn't realise at the time that that was unique, that you would kind of go from lots of comedy and popular music and all of that straight back into Mahler and Shakespeare. And so I think that there's always been in my family a kind of respect for all these different forms. And so that's always been, the starting point has always been that you've got to be incredibly respectful to begin with. But you have to understand it - you have to understand the audience, I think is the other big part of it, is the relationship with the audience. And certainly kind of growing up in that vaudeville tradition – I remember talking to some of those old vaudevillian performers and they would say “Look, you stand the show but you stand in the theatre in this way and this is the way this theatre goes because you've got to play it this way and then you've got to play it up here and then you've got to play it down here” and so they knew the audience better than anyone I've ever kind of understood. And then my mother has this neurosis about empty theatres, so she just cannot abide them, so she'd come off stage and you'd say “God, it was a great house tonight, wasn't it?” and she'd say “I don't know. I think there was like four seats up here at the back”.

8.11 Which is funny because we came across the same thing with Neil Finn in the Opera House recently: he'd just come off raging about the fact that he saw six empty seats. So you were always, I think, growing up just very conscious of having enormous respect for the audience and then enormous respect for kind of the history of a place as well. So it's kind of strange in a sense because coming from a European tradition which is very hierarchical in the arts and in France or Germany the commercial side of the arts and the subsidised side, completely different worlds. But I think there's kind of a combination of the two that I was brought up in which was particularly helpful in Sydney because those distinctions are not as pronounced in Sydney as they are elsewhere.

MP: It's interesting you talk about audience because I read that you're an admirer of Diaghilev and that you saw yourself not as a

creative producer so much as an impresario, someone who's a communicator between artists and audience.

FL: And again that kind of comes back to the old kind of school producers that I kind of grew up with, the big men with the cigars, whatever, and the flamboyance and I often say it's a little bit like you're a diplomat moving between the audience and the artist: you know how to speak the languages of both but you're not really completely in either camp.

10.04 And I think that festivals in particular, I mean all festivals are in context, they're nothing else. We haven't got a building, we generally haven't got a company, all we have is the context that we wrap around it. And somewhere between the context you wrap around it and the combination that exists within it, somehow it either becomes greater than the sum of its parts or it doesn't. So probably more than anything else, the producer role – and I think the role of producer has been misunderstood recently to saying “administrator” – I'm a very bad administrator. And my mother still doesn't really understand what I do but still she assumes I'm kind of filling out ledgers and things. But there are wonderful artists who if left to their own devices will put something in the wrong theatre at the wrong time, discuss it in the wrong way. And I think that when someone arrives into a theatre a large amount of the kind of experience of that work will be defined by what their understanding is of what they're going to, how much it cost, what the room is like, what time it's on, what they did that day, what they're doing later. I think in performance - artists generally just go “I just want to be in the darkened room” but there is this huge amount of kind of context around it which will define whether people will like it or not. And in a festival – and that's why Wagner founded Bayreuth because he said “You can't finish work and come to my operas. We need to get out of the city, we need to be in this setting, we need to be not going to work during the day and you come completely rested and then you've complete focus and then afterwards you go to dinner and that's what's required” so that's what I think the role that I had was.

12.09 And that's obviously someone like Diaghilev who, as you say, was not an artist – probably closer to being an artist than me because he was kind of this ridiculous polymath – but nonetheless I think that that job is misunderstood a lot of the time, where organisations can divide things off into “Well, this person does the marketing and this person does this and this person does that” and it is that kind of oversight which - that's always what I wanted to do, it's always kind of the thing I was best at.

MP: I'm interested in when you began to learn what the Sydney Festival really was. After the 2005 festival when you had to start

planning, what were you learning about the nature of the Sydney Festival, how it was governed, budgeted, appreciated, run, what sort of festival was it?

FL: Well, I remember the governance of it was kind of amazing because when I got it first Bob Carr was the President and Lucy Turnbull was the Chair so you kind of just arrived into this town and here were these kind of towering intellects, it was kind of amazing and it was kind of “This is fantastic”.

MP: So that’s a board that’s distinctive because all elements of patronage, government funding, whether it’s from state or council or sponsors are represented on that board?

FL: Absolutely. And it is a represented board, essentially.

MP: Or was.

FL: So it was Channel Nine, the City and the state. And then there was sort of a system of alternates whereby because people like Bob Carr couldn’t come they would send senior civil servants. So the fact was that on the board there was a real degree of seniority and in fact, the fact that a lot of the alternates were senior civil servants made it a lot more powerful in one sense than had just the politicians been there.

14.25

But it was a system that actually worked quite well because we had sort of people who understood how to work that governance end of things and we would get through business very, very quickly and they were powerful people but as people well know, Bob Carr was sort of a great intellect but he wasn’t sort of munificent in terms of the funding. And I think it’s quite funny because I had a situation in Ireland once with a minister who got appointed and knew nothing about the arts and everyone was throwing their hands up in the air but, of course, it gave him free rein to really support it because he would go “Look, the arguments are making sense. It’s not for me” so no one ever thought he was playing favourites with one of his own kind of interests and in a sense I always thought Bob Carr was kind of particularly cautious in relation to that because he wanted to say “Look, I’ll just deal with this in the same way as I deal with any other area”. And so we had Bob and then Lucy obviously left very quickly and then Clover came in and Clover was just fantastic as well, so in the governance end of it I really liked the governance end of it I have to say. Even though there was sort of a lot of internal politics going on within it it still meant that there were people at the very top of organisations who if any of them started to kind of get a little wobbly they were right beside you – you could see

it in their eyes – and you could maybe kind of have the conversation; you were constantly in contact with that.

16.15 **MP: A few words to describe the festival itself. What sort of festival was it?**

FL: It was a curious beast in that there were all these different parts to it. And clearly the Domain concerts which were - the main kind of public expression of them - were very well produced. But to be honest they didn't get a great deal of love. They were seen as a picnic in the park with some nice music in the background and it just did its own thing. And then there was some really kind of high-end, ambitious projects that required a lot of subsidy like *Black Rider* or Ariane Mnouchkine.

MP: A big theatre dance, high profile, expensive, high art piece?

FL: Exactly, like something you'd see in Avignon or Vienna so, yes, a signature piece by a really important international artist working on a scale which you wouldn't normally see in Australia. So that was a very legitimate thing to do. I thought it was very well managed and I thought that the level of kind of presentation and delivery was excellent.

MP: Its marketing?

FL: Very strong. And marketing in Australia is very strong generally and Sydney's a very visual town. And you have to because the palette here is just what it is. If you go out with sort of muted kind of browns and whatever, you just can't because look at the bloody harbour.

18.14 That was the other thing that - it just struck me and I kept looking at it. I kept going "We're just going to get upstaged by this all the time". It's like sort of walking around with a ridiculously good-looking person all the time. It's just so spectacularly beautiful. The other thing I thought about the festival was Sydney is a very kind of seasonal town. It has a calendar and it's incredibly loyal to that calendar. It's not to say new things can't get added to it but, you know, if you went away and came back twenty years later you know those fireworks will be going off that bridge on the 31st and it'll be spectacular and it'll be beautiful. And so it's almost kind of like an old fashioned season in Europe - it starts here and finishes on Mardi Gras and that's the way it goes. And then, of course, new things have come into that thing. But I always thought the festival in a sense suffered because even though it was as big as something like Tropfest it didn't have the big thing, it didn't have that big date in the calendar.

So - I thought it was really good. I thought that it wasn't quite getting whatever that kind of cumulative kind of point is, the tipping point where

it is understood by the famous taxi driver kind of test. That it was respected and it was respected in various pockets and it was very well delivered, but you still got into a taxi and you'd say "I'm going to work for the Sydney Festival" and they go "What's that?" Or they'd say "What's that, and doesn't Leo Schofield run that?"

20.09 **MP: Last century.**

FL: Yes, but Leo's sort of one of those enduring characters. You'd say "We do the Domain Concerts" and they go "Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah". And it was very constricted financially. I sort of moan a little bit about Bob Carr but he also did push through funding increase that was badly needed at a critical moment in the run-in to the 2006 festival just before he resigned, actually, and it was a serious leap. It was below three million dollars in terms of funding and within that you had to do the Domain Concerts which were a seven figure undertaking. So when you started to take the Domain Concerts out and then you started to take kind of just some of the other kind of free stuff we did out, the actual level of subsidy was really small. And it was an extra bit of breathing room and it just was like it was enough for us to be able to say "We're going to do these other four or five things". And, I don't know, if we hadn't got that in the run-in to 2006 I think things would have been very, very different. And that's why I think Brett's view – I can't speak for him but it would have been "We're so tight here that we need to put everything, we really need to make an impact and we need to make an impact on this sort of scale". Whereas with that we were able to do some of those big projects but also we kind of had just enough to be able to sort of say "Look, let's spend twenty thousand over here" or "Let's spend twenty thousand over here" and it wasn't sort of our backs were completely to the wall. So that was really critical at that particular moment.

22.17 **MP: In that first year how do you, arriving in a country – you were the Sydney Festival's first foreigner as a director - - -**

FL: Yes.

MP: - - - what's the process by which you understand a city, decide who to listen to, who not to listen to, learn local tastes, talents to collaborate with? You have to do that very fast.

FL: Yes. I mean it was not bad appointment. I mean as I say March 2014 for a January 2016 festival was quite good. I mean I always watch it because about March is – like we're heading into March now and Lieven finishes in '16 so technically that should be made now. I mean Australian festivals are infinitely better than their European

counterparts. The Europeans have got better at this but the succession planning has always been far superior. And also Brett was really generous and he was going off to do Adelaide or something but he was really happy doing it so it was kind like it was just a happy changeover and Josephine Ridge was kind of the key person in that.

MP: That's the General Manager?

FL: Yes, and Josephine just knew everybody and everything and she just guided me through kind of "Who are we going to meet, when are we going to meet them?" and she just lined it all up and just did as I've just done in Edinburgh, a year of meetings. You just go and you talk to everybody and most reasonable people are fine if you decide not to work with them as long as they get a hearing; the issue is if they feel that they weren't properly consulted. So there was a lot of that.

24.02

I mean I listened to Leo a lot, I have to say, because I think he had a really good understanding of Sydney and what works, obviously overlaid with Leo's own personal tastes which are quite different to mine but nonetheless we got on really, really well. Neil Armfield's a great friend of mine.

MP: And at the Dublin Festival you hosted his wonderful production of *Cloud Street*, the Tim Winton novel.

FL: And *Small Poppies* later on with Geoffrey Rush. So, yes, Neil and Rachel Healy who was at Belvoir at that time as well, were great kind of points of contact for me. But then you just go to a lot, you just go to a lot and you just watch. And in a sense it was easier because I didn't really know anyone here so I was going to a lot of stuff on my own and no one knew who I was and that is the ideal situation to be in. I always think at the end of every performance there's this moment of truth where everyone stands up and just as they're going out the door they turn and they go "What do you think?" and they go "Meh" or they go "It was good" or whatever. But if you can walk out of an auditorium with an audience that's when you get the absolute truth. Because a couple of days later it's all got blurry or they get influenced by other people. So I mean I literally would just walk the streets of the city a lot. I'd just go to events on my own, I would go to performances on my own and, yes, just watch. Particularly, though, walking the city because it's an unusually laid out city and it's a hard nut to crack. And spend a lot of time in the venues as well, just try to understand the venues and try to understand what works in them and what doesn't work in them. And then have a look at previous festivals and what people responded to and what they didn't.

26.15 **MP: Even by February 2005 you were talking to the board and giving a kind of checklist of some of your priorities. One of them was cheaper tickets and that's what you achieved in your first festival with the shorter, about an hour, program for twenty dollars to see about an hour length shows.**

FL: Yes.

MP: What were some of the other things that you were starting to form as priorities?

FL: I didn't necessarily expect this but I felt that some of the big outdoor events were an opportunity that weren't being grasped fully and that if we looked on them as seriously as we looked on what happened at Sydney Theatre or in the Opera House and spent proper money on them we could do things on a completely different scale and really take ownership of them and wear them with a lot more pride. And I kind of saw that there was possibilities within that. I think that because Sydney Festival doesn't have – you know, there's always been lots of talk about should there be a fringe festival etc – and leave it for others to work out why that doesn't work but it didn't work. And people have tried in the past and it sort of fell by the wayside. So the other thing I was aware of was we can't create a fringe, a fringe is a different thing. But clearly there's an area of programming that requires a kind of lightness of touch and a lightness of access that no one else is going to provide. So it was that thing.

28.10 And the low priced tickets was also about the fact that there is a huge audience that exists at a ticket price and one of the great mistakes people make is they go "Oh, we'll do it for under 25s – they're OAPs". The truth is that there are lots of people who will go to something at a certain ticket price, not because they don't have the money, just because that's all they'll pay for that. And it exists in a realm which is the same as a little bit more than going to the cinema, maybe going to a gig in the Metro. They have an urban cultural life that exists somewhere between twenty bucks and fifty five bucks and so I just felt that there was an enormous kind of audience that existed within Sydney but they were never going to spend ninety dollars to go and see Robert Lapage in the Sydney Theatre, it was just never going to happen. So we were losing a big part of the sort of cultural landscape.

MP: And again with your eye for an audience you were talking about the need even early to appeal across groups and this is the origins of a very strong contemporary music program that you've brought to all your festivals.

FL: That was responding to a really interesting thing happening around there, see, someone like Antony Hegarty but then you had people like Sufijan Stevens and Justin Vernon and Joanna Newsom, a lot of people, good musicians, performing music which worked in a more formal setting, be it City Recital Hall or even the Spiegeltent whose music actually worked really well in the festival context.

30.01 I mean angry boys with guitars is a different kind of a thing. But there was an explosion of that and there was an explosion of also just other types of music like Animal Collective and a really ambitious kind of independent music scene was just exploding all over the place. So it was also just responding to that and that was just a really exciting time because all of those kids kind of hung together in New York at that time and they really were completely independent in the way they were being managed. So they just loved the idea of coming out and doing something interesting. So in a sense that was driven by that type of music as opposed to me thinking "Well, we should do music"; it was a response to what was happening. And then I think that there's been an amazing tradition of really great independent promoters in Australia. Which doesn't exist – I mean in Europe it's very wrapped up with the big huge Live Nations and that but people like Tim Pittman and Inertia and James Browning, these guys have been for years just bringing people in and doing kind of small club shows with them. But curatorially they were really smart people. And it was also just saying "Wow, let's just hitch our wagon here because these guys are doing great work and they're not really making any money out of it and they're doing it for the love of the music and so let's just try and be part of that". And even people who were doing big things like Fuzzy Guys and that just had a really interesting view on electronic music. And then so suddenly we could come in and say "We've got this venue. Let's try and do this thing" and start those discussions.

32.09 **MP: So you found new venues in Sydney to host this? This is the Becks Bar was one – but others?**

FL: Yes, Becks Bar was there, the Spiegeltent and the surrounding tents. Not necessarily new venues but really pushing kind of things like City Recital Hall as to what we could actually do in there. And some of those worked in there and some didn't. We tried to use Sydney Theatre Company for like a show, the Go-Betweens and that. That was the other side of that music thing which was just about - just when I landed in that four of my favourite bands of all time were from Australia, which was the Go-Betweens, the Triffids, the Saints and the Bad Seeds so it was just trying to figure out how to wangle them in. I mean you know Brett had done a big project with David Byrne and he'd

had everyone in *Came So Far For Beauty*, everyone from Rufus Wainwright to Nick to everyone was in that so I wasn't sort of reinventing the wheel in terms of this type of programming, it was more that we started to really kind of layer full seasons within it. And it was dangerous. It was a bit - I think on the one hand I think it was great, on the other hand it's difficult even the first year when we just did the project, the three concert project with Elvis Costello, immediately people sort of said "Well, who's the Elvis Costello this year?" It does have this problem with it which is when a festival announces, just by being the festival it will get a certain amount of oxygen in the press. And sometimes that means that projects by Akram Khan or whoever, the Mali, suddenly get oxygen and a profile they never would before. The problem is even if it's only a part of the program, if you've got Bjork or Florence Welch or whatever, of course that became the story.

34.16 **MP: So you get intimidated by the celebrity high profile culture that you create?**

FL: Well, the celebrity of those artists is all that the press will run with. It's natural – you know, the photo editor's there and there's some gnarly Russian actor and, you know, Bjork, you know where they're going with it. So it's kind of like you're just trying to hold onto the reins of it as much as you possibly can because it can just run away and everyone can get delighted and suddenly sponsors love it and everyone loves it and there's times with it where I kind of feel it got a bit out of control.

MP: That would be interesting to get to at the end of this conversation but we're talking about Elvis Costello in 2006 and then Lou Reed's *Berlin* in 2007, later Brian Wilson, Grace Jones, these were high profile acts.

FL: They were very high profile. And doing interesting things. I mean we did try and make sure that in each case there was a reason for bringing them: they were doing something new or they hadn't done anything for twenty years. Particularly with Elvis Costello where we did *Juliet Letters* with Brodsky Quartet and then we did a terrible concert with Sydney Symphony – not Sydney Symphony's problem, it was because Elvis' voice had gone – and then we did just a straightforward rock and roll show.

MP: And this was despite whispers - this is a test for a festival director - you hadn't seen Grace Jones' show?

FL: No, but Grace has only done one show in twenty years and then just we suddenly got this word back that she'd just come out – it was Massive Attack's *Meltdown* – and that out of the blue she'd come back

and she was just out of this world. And she hadn't been to Australia for twenty years, she hadn't done anything. And then it was just kind of, yes.

36.17 **MP: So that's a risk you took.**

FL: We're always taking risks. And the truth is, particularly if you're in Australia, you can't see everything. And that's where your relationships with people becomes really important because you do have friends and colleagues around the world who know what you're trying to do and who if they go "Seriously, you're covered on this. This is going to be amazing" you know that they're not going to let you down. So I think even more than anywhere else I've worked that network, that international network, became absolutely critical.

MP: But some people who might be whispering that Grace Jones and indeed Lou Reed were erratic or past their prime, perhaps?

FL: Well, it depends what they're doing. I thought the project with Lou had enormous integrity because obviously he wanted to revisit this album which had been dismissed by the critics and a lot of people around him wanted to sort of say "Look, this is a great album. We need to come back and we need to give it a live life and shine a light on it again". So it's very much a part of the kind of cultural landscape at the moment - is people revisiting areas of rock and roll that they feel kind of have been not properly touched upon. The other thing, of course - and we won't get into this too much - because everyone has access to all music now, generationally people don't own music. So when I was young, I would go down and what was available to me was what was in the record shop in Dublin which was what happened to be in the charts then.

38.09 Right now, if someone's eighteen they have all of Grace Jones' music and every bit of music in history. So that music exists in a way which is kind of not generational. There's times where we've done projects where I've gone "Ooh, this is just like you know, dad rock, awful people kind of getting drunk and remembering when they were eighteen." But then if you went to Grace Jones it was very much about kind of queer culture in the twenty-first century so that was a different kind of a thing but, you know, you're always walking that line.

MP: Back to 2006, your first festival was very successful, made a profit of some three quarters of a million. What were some of the things that you got right in that first year? The Domain concerts particularly had a very distinctive stamp on them, didn't they, again musically?

FL: Yes. Well, there's this moment where I always remember kind of sitting at the sound desk with this guy who'd been doing it for years. And it was all these New Orleans bands and it was the Dirty Dozen, I think, who are a real party band and they just started doing this kind of "Get up, get up, get up" and suddenly the whole Domain stood up and I just saw him go like this and I said "What's happened?" and he said "They've never stood up before. We have no plan for this". And, of course, all the aisles just went whoomp and the Domain concert had never turned into a full sixty thousand mosh, like shoulder to shoulder crowd, dancing before. It was great and nothing went wrong but like the Domain - the only aisles were sort of a nice little ribbon or something to tell people to picnic on this side and it was amazing because it was suddenly that thing I was trying to say about taking those concerts seriously. And we'd spent some money on it - I think we had three bands on that night and that was a big, big moment, that was a really exciting moment.

40.24 I think we were lucky because things like Robert Lepage's show, which I really liked, hadn't opened when we booked it. So I think what I tried to do in the first year was just try and make sure it was really solid.

MP: Solid?

FL: Yes, really solid so that over the period of time if people were attending - they may not like everything but they recognise it was good. It wasn't like "Geez, that was awful". They might say "That wasn't for me" so you could go to whatever - and particularly when we got down to some of the smaller work but something like Declan Donnellan's *Twelfth Night*, Robert's *Andersen Project* - - -

MP: This is a rationed version of *Twelfth Night* - - -

FL: Yes, I knew that.

MP: - - - which began the tradition, really, in your festival of having something, a classic from Middle Eastern Europe.

FL: Yes, yes, which is also just my territory but a lot of it was, yes, just trying to find pieces that I would feel confident about in that first year and have a program that I would feel confident about.

MP: And the physical theatre clown, James Thiérrée?

FL: Yes, yes. And again kind of just doing great work. And it was interesting because there was a real anxiety, I think, from our marketing guys that there were people who we've programmed before. So James had been there before, the Ballet Boys had been there

before and they were over with Sylvie Guillem and one or two other things so they were kind of a little bit jumpy about it but, of course, no one cared.

42.14 So, yes, it was very much about – and I always try and do that – I think that in your first year with a festival it's very difficult to recover if you have a bad first year. And it sounds very prosaic but financially if you have a bad first year - it's like the difference between if you're running a venue and you do something that goes wrong: it's like flying a plane, you know, you can right it slowly but when you're running a festival it's like being shot out of a cannon and there's nothing you can do. If you've got it wrong and you've launched, you're pretty much heading in the wrong direction. And then that creates enormous insecurity thereafter. So it was trying to, as I say, not structurally do anything that would be radically different and then just try and program into areas where I felt we were sort of guaranteed as much as you can be a successful kind of outcome. Not even necessarily at box office but more just in terms of just that the work would be solid.

MP: It's not a strong presence in that 2006 festival of Australian work. There was Australian community theatre, for want of a better term, of the Urban Theatre Projects in Bankstown in western Sydney and the Big hART, interesting company, doing work in a Surry Hills housing estate but that's about it for strong Australian work.

FL: In terms of theatre I'm trying to think was there anything else. No, I don't think there was that much.

MP: And then always an issue in festivals that seems to have slightly haunted you, particularly with your interest in music and doing different things in classical music venues was "Where's the classical music?"

44.03 FL: Oh, yes. Straight decision, straight decision. We couldn't do it well, I don't think we could do it well. And so we were doing a bunch of recitals in Government House there. And Sydney's a good classical music town. And so you're doing kind of daytime recitals in a town that has the Brandenburg and the ACO and the Sydney Symphony and I just felt that "Well, we're actually kind of a poor man's Musica Viva here" and we don't have the money to do it in any other way so "We will just decide not to do it and we'll be kind of straight about that". Similarish in visual art as well in the sense of this is a town with an amazing Biennale. So what is it that we're doing that is adding to what the MCA or the Gallery of New South Wales or the Biennale hasn't got covered,

you know, what is it that we're bringing to that? And it seemed very little to me. So again it was a question of deciding, making the choices.

MP: And what lesson did you learn from that first festival in Sydney? People obviously liked it. The board did: they extended your contract and committed to giving you the 2009 festival to do as well and gave you a little rise. What did you learn?

45.50 FL: What did I learn? I think it sort of emboldened me a bit and made me think that this is potentially a much bigger festival than I had thought before. And that the actual capacity of the festival to be able to sort of speak very broadly, just even in marketing terms – you know, we had this microphone which was reaching a huge amount of the population but we didn't necessarily have an offering for all of the population. So I felt that if we could kind of combine that huge public profile and presence and sort of channel it towards work that different kinds of groups of people might see, that this could actually be far, far bigger. There was a couple of things happening as well. It was around then that the whole kind of "Sydney empties in January" thing was ending. I don't know why that is but it was; you could feel it ending. It was also an incredibly prosperous time here and young people in particular had an enormous amount of money. You're talking about the time when every major rock or music festival went on sale and would sell out the next day. I'm talking about Big Day Out would go on sale, sell out the next day, put on another whole day and sell that out as well. And not just a lot of money but an awful lot of ticket buying power. So I just had a sense that this can be much bigger, this can reach much more people – and I thought the organisation had a bit of capacity in it as well – I thought this actual group of people are kind of talented enough to be able to take on more without us actually having to just employ loads more people or spend much more on marketing. So I thought within the marketing structure, within the administrative structure, we had the capacity to grow the event purely just by expanding programming and without all those other knock-on kind of things.

48.22 **MP: You commented to the board in February just after the 2006 festival that it's "program driven", the festival and it has the challenge of sustaining quality of performance. What did you mean by that? I mean aren't all festivals program driven?**

FL: Well, they are but the thing is the Sydney Festival brand, for want of a better word, did not guarantee attendance. In Edinburgh at the moment I could put on something that no one had heard of and be relatively sure that it would deliver a certain amount of audience. Sydney was still going "I will have a look at the program and if there's

something I see that I like I will go". Not exclusively, I mean we did have things where people would take a risk with us but it was still very much "I like the look of that one. I'll go to that". You know, we could just fill the program with unfamiliar things and people would still go on the ride with us.

MP: You did change the branding, in fact, of the four festivals that you did in front of this other four festival programs that have a smoky, slightly grungy aesthetic and you've picked up the term that "This is our city in summer".

FL: Yes, and I can't remember who thought that up, I have no idea; I don't think it was me.

MP: But it's good for a brand, a brand of pleasure and a brand that ultimately people might learn to trust.

49.53 FL: Yes. I mean I remember the discussion – we had this very high-blown discussion about this, I'm sure it was very pretentious. And I should remember who did the design because it was a really tiny company and a really brilliant guy – anyway, we'll find out later. But it was a bit like kind of as well kind of coming out of the beginning of the 2000s: design started to become more and more kind of ornate and quite heavily Photoshopped and there was a lot of kind of early animation. The thought was, well, to go against that. And actually that you'd get much more cut-through if you did things almost like you weren't using any technology. So it was kind of like the way you used to have, where you'd look at sheets of Perspex and things and that most of the designs should look like we almost kind of got stamps and just stamped it on it so it was almost kind of an anti-design or certainly anti-process. We didn't want it to look processed in any way. We wanted it to look like kind of a really rough and ready billboard poster rather than anything really shiny and that but to do that in a way which was really elegant and then to sort of say things in these very blunt, almost kind of dumb ways like "This is our city in summer." But just to be obvious - kind of but really blunt. And each of the shows would have some kind of sense of everything was so polished and so beautifully sold and presented to people and everything was visually spectacular and exhilarating that we tried to – I mean we couldn't do this completely but pull back. Initially we were saying we'd describe every show in three words. So this was the idea: it was "Sydney Festival 2006" and then everything would be that, be boom, boom, boom.

52.01 **MP: Did you know that that aesthetic had impact?**

FL: Yes, I think it did but there were also clever things like the flags around the city. The guys went "These are flags. They're not printed brochures, they're flags. So what are flags, what are the country flags? Like they're usually like a yellow star against red because flags are not, they're a different thing" so they said "Let's just take a colour as well and let's just run with a colour and just pummel it to death so that we own it. And we drape everything in that colour and we try and change that year after year." Which was risky in a way because usually the standard thing is you've got a colour and that's your brand and you stick with it over many years but they said "No, we'll change it each year but we'll just go crazy in terms of it". So that was the sort of rationale behind it. Yes, it seemed to really work, I have to say.

MP: The designers were Feeder and The Property Agency.

FL: That was it.

MP: I didn't ask you, did you get through the 2006 festival unscathed or did you have any kind of major disappointment or shock?

FL: The Elvis Costello Sydney Symphony concert I thought I'd die because his voice was gone. And it was good of him to go and do it but it was a mess, it was such a mess. And actually coming out of it I thought "I'm going to get skinned alive for this, I'm going to get murdered" - and I don't know whoever he brought over to conduct but it was under-rehearsed and it was just a shambles. But then it never really happened. I don't know if we had enough kind of goodwill in the bank at that point to get over it but I personally felt that that was when I was going "Oh, we got this far", it was at the very end, "but this one's going to drag me down" because it was really bad.

54.06

But it was strange in a way. I don't know if someone like Elvis Costello, in a sense, kind of, it's the thing about people who have big profile rock and roll identities, people associate "It's them, it's their shortcoming" or "It's their great show", it's not necessarily yours. So in one sense there's a negative in it in that if they have a fabulous show you don't necessarily get the reflected glory. But if the show doesn't go well you don't necessarily get the blame either. But most of it went well. I had a bit of a fight with Sylvie Guillem at one point.

MP: The choreographer?

FL: The dancer, Sylvie, yes, but that was sort of friendly. That was just about the nature of contemporary dance and the whole notion - because the big vogue around '06/'07 was for dancers who aren't dancers - choreography but not dancers. And she's obviously kind of

the great athlete of contemporary dance so we had a bit of a row one night. But it was great.

MP: And some people just didn't turn up.

FL: Who didn't turn up?

MP: Well, Hegarty gave you very short notice of pulling out.

FL: He did show up but what happened was Antony, he'd been a last minute addition to the *Came So Far For Beauty* concert in 2005 and I'd already heard of him at that point and I just knew he was amazing. But he was a delicate creature and he was the complete hit of it. And then we had him booked for three shows in the State Theatre and he won the Mercury Prize and it all went crazy. And so suddenly this guy who'd been doing these little things down in the Village in New York was this major star and he had all this pressure on him. And he just wrote and said "No, I don't think I can come" and this was the night before the launch. And so those are very delicate situations because on the one hand you have an artist who's clearly having a bit of a crisis, on the other hand - - -

56.13 **MP: A crisis of success.**

FL: Crisis of success. Lots of people have crisis of success. And also some of them don't have shows. Like they've got a thing where they play on a piano in clubs and suddenly they're booked into two thousand seat venues. But then you also have the question of "Are they in breach of contract?" so you have to walk this very delicate line of kind of carrot and stick where you're persuading and all the rest. So after all of this back and forth with everybody here, I just wrote him this big long letter, saying "This isn't - I'm not booking you for a gig. This is part of a curated festival and if you weren't there I'd have someone else there in that particular place", that statement I'd be making about it, "so it's not just a question of we've lost dates in a venue, it's a question of the actual kind of curatorial shape of the program has been damaged." And then he just wrote back and went "Oh, it's O.K. Yeah, I'll come".

MP: So he did come?

FL: Yes, he came but it was literally a few hours later he went "Oh, right, I get it. It's O.K, I'll come".

MP: Because I'd read somewhere that you'd wept.

FL: Well, I think I did. Well, it was just the night before and Antony, the fact he'd just won the Mercury Award and he'd been in *Came So Far For*

Beauty, you know, because when you're doing that kind of popular music programming sometimes it just looks like you're just rolling out band booking but there was clearly a strong rationale and there was provenance with the festival and he was magnificent and I loved what he was doing and then I knew then I'd have to stand up the next day at the launch and go "Now, on page whatever it says this guy's coming who you all love but he's not". It would be like, whatever, seven hundred thousand of these things out in the world, mocking me so, yes, it was pretty scary stuff.

58.23 **MP: So presumably, Fergus, 2007, the festival was more confident. What was the stamp of that festival for you? You had an Israeli dance company, Batsheva, which had some controversy to it.**

FL: A little bit. Well, people didn't like it. That was the biggest controversy, the opening show, *Telophaza*. I went to it and I went "This is fantastic. Everyone's going to love this." And then brought it back to Sydney and did it in the Capitol. Like it was on a huge scale and it was like everyone hated it. It was like "Oh, Jesus". It wasn't like we commissioned it and it went wrong, it was just one of those moments where you loved something and you were a minority of one.

MP: So as an impresario with good connections to your audience you temporarily lost it there – is that the only explanation?

FL: I guess. I mean we also did *Mamootot* with them which was fantastic and they're a great company. So, yes, I guess it was just exactly that kind of umbilical cord between the audience doesn't always work. So the programming of dance was always a little complicated in that the logical way of doing it was to try to bring in a major company to perform on one of those big stages. Actually, structurally that's the best way to do it but there are few enough companies in the world that can draw a crowd of that sort or create work of that sort - so Batsheva are one and they're an amazing company.

60.01 So it was funny because there was momentum in that program but there was a lot of things that people - and then there was other things like Christoph Marthaler's work *Seemannslieder*, which I just loved and is very good and it was just very hard. So lots of people just went "Oh, this is too boring". So there were specific works within that but we had the luxury of carrying a surplus in from the previous year so there were things we could do. So we could do the Maly from St Petersburg and *Seemannslieder* and Akram Khan's company and I think Carriageworks opened that year as well.

MP: That would have been important to have another venue to play with and a very distinctive industrial large venue.

FL: Yes. We slightly stuffed it up, though, because we built a rake of seats and we built them at the wrong angle and so for most people in the audience you couldn't see much below the dancers' waists which was really irritating. So we kind of tried to fix it after a while but like it's always opening a new venue's tough but, yes, it was incredible, incredible to have Carriageworks at our disposal then.

MP: And then it must have been an easy choice. You had the Gate Theatre from Dublin doing a Beckett season with solo actors Barry McGovern, Ralph Fiennes and Michael Gambon but he pulled out at the last moment.

FL: Michael pulled out, yes. So it was interesting because when Gambon pulled out Charles Dance came in and people were actually perfectly O.K. with that and it was very different because I've seen it. This is a piece called *Eh Joe*, a Beckett piece that Atom Egoyan directed and it's a recorded monologue of a woman basically telling a man in his dying days what a total piece of shit he was and all it is it's a one shot of an actor's face.

62.18

And Charlie was amazing because he has this sort of faded matinee idol look and it was devastating. But that was fantastic, that was a really strong kind of core to the program. And Ralph doing *First Love* was amazing because it was the premiere, a world premiere of it and he's obviously an extraordinary actor and again you kind of marry the huge sort of profile of an actor like that with a work as intellectually kind of complex and ambitious and it's just dream festival programming.

MP: You brought the Gate Theatre back for the back for the subsequent year as well and there's been a long Irish tradition of theatre being brought to Sydney Festivals. You're aware of that, you had no qualms about yet more Irish material?

FL: No. I mean you've got to bring something of yourself and I think everyone expects that and Irish theatre is very good.

MP: But does it speak to something that's Irish/Australian in us, in Australian audiences?

FL: Yes, maybe. I think that Irish theatre exists very strongly in Australian theatre generally because we're all part of the English language speaking world. I think I only brought the Gate in 2009 and 2007 and I don't know that I brought any other Irish theatre.

MP: Right. I stand corrected. How do you minimise box office risk? As you said to the board prior to 2007, there was obviously some kind of fear about losses and you made only a small surplus, if that, in that year from the 2007 festival. You had a massive increase in programming and production expenses, a huge increase in the number of performances, 270 in the 2007 compared to 180 in the 2006 festival.

64.24 FL: Yes.

MP: You have to minimise risk, how you do that with the box office?

FL: Well, precedent is one of the big ones. If you've got someone who has done a certain amount of business before you analyse the numbers very, very carefully. And a lot of the growth was in areas like popular music and there was plenty of precedent to say "We're going to bring this artist in. This is what they've done around the world". Sydney isn't that different so we weren't sort of saying "Let's do more Flemish theatre". What we were saying was "We're building out the program in certain areas with artists who have a perfectly kind of recognisable track record in this number of tickets." So it's like any kind of risk analysis in that sense. The festival is budgeted very low at box office as well. We had this golden rule: you never budget over sixty five per cent. We kept on going over sixty five per cent but we still had to hold that back.

MP: That's sixty five per cent of what exactly?

FL: Of the total available tickets.

MP: Right.

FL: So now we'd always have a lot of guests and all the rest so it'd probably be smaller than that. But we'd always go over that, which is probably a dangerous game anyway as well because if you're always going over your budgeted figure you start spending it anyway. So, yes, we had a relatively modest risk profile anyway because of that.

66.01 **MP: What about the required different marketing for the interestingly different array of audiences that you're pursuing and that we've discussed earlier? They each require a different sort of marketing, do they?**

FL: Yes, completely, and it all got divided up into the dance audience or whatever else. And some of it just didn't need marketing as well. That's the other kind of great thing was if we did James Thiérrée or Berlin - I think if you're trying to grow a festival one of the things you have to give people comfort with is that every single show is not going to be hard

work. So you have to go “Look, here’s ten of them that are just going to be like a flame hitting a torch” – it’s like kind of six thousand tickets to Bjork were sold in an hour. We could have done another three Bjork shows so it was a ridiculous underplay for an artist like that, the only solo date in Australia.

MP: And you throw away the commercial advantage by only doing it once or twice in the forecourt of the Sydney Opera House in that case?

FL: Well, no, because basically she just wanted to do a special show and there was never going to be any money, really, to be made in it and she didn’t want to do it in the Hordern or something. But again that was probably another seven hundred thousand dollars of box office but seven hundred thousand of which there was nothing surer but that; all you had to do was sort of if you did it in a forest in the middle of the night and didn’t tell anyone you’d sell out. So there were things like that and that’s when you do have to get very serious about risk analysis because there are much bigger box office targets that have a very low risk and then there are much smaller ones with very high risk.

MP: And you don't always have to put your own money into it, do you?

FL: No.

MP: The Sydney Festival historically under its founder, Stephen Hall, had lots of umbrella events and indeed the *War of the Roses*, the huge epics which were staged in your last 2009 festival by the Sydney Theatre Company, they took all the risk and took all the profit, didn’t they?

68.18 FL: I’d need to look at that - we may have taken some of the risk. There certainly was no profit by the time Benedict Andrews had poured all that gold on top of everybody. But we were involved in the commissioning of it, certainly through the fund, through the Festivals Fund. But, no, we did things like joint ventures at the Opera House on the Lost and Found Orchestra. But in general we did try to pull as much of it in to us as possible because I didn’t really want to have a kind of two-tier type of programming, one which was our marketing department frantically pushing the shows where we had the risk and then leaving the other ones aside, which you sometimes see happens in festivals.

MP: That doesn’t help that overall branding of trust, does it?

FL: No, it doesn’t, it doesn’t. So we wanted also to have that clarity of brand around every single show. We didn’t want sort of people going “Well, we’re not picking up your branding. We’ll just give you a little

logo in the corner. We're going in a completely different direction because we're not part of that". So we did where possible try to just say "Look, we will sell the tickets, we will take the risk, we will take the box office".

MP: What did you reflect on after the moderate success financially of the 2007 festival on the challenges which face festivals? Things like freight costs and sort of market and competition pressures are big now for festivals.

FL: Yes. And it's funny because you arrive and people go "This is this great big budget – oh but this is what it costs to get a company here". It's like kind of "Oh" because it used to cost us, you know, five thousand in freight to get something to Dublin and suddenly it was thirty thousand. So from that point of view it was tough. There's also a lot of competition between the Australian festivals and at the time as well - - -

70.22 **MP: You used to share. In the old days you used to share productions and costs but exclusivity is now very important, isn't it?**

FL: Not to Sydney so much. I mean it sounds very arrogant but the truth is – well, this was my view then and it sort of seemed to be the case – certain other festivals had to define themselves as wanting to draw people from other states and they needed that point of definition. Whereas Sydney just didn't seem to care if Adelaide had had a show or if whatever had had a show. So it didn't seem to be that important - I certainly didn't push the exclusivity thing particularly hard. But the other thing was the Opera House had just started doing their Adventures in the Dark series as well and that was a bit of a thing.

MP: A January program?

FL: It was a year 'round program of kind of just progressive, interesting international artists of all sorts and dance works.

MP: And indeed after the Sydney Festival your contract, you ran the music program at the Sydney Opera House as a year 'round program. And so arts centres all over Australia now are in competition for festivals because they're all actively presenting at the same time, aren't they?

FL: They are. I mean, to be honest, arts centres dabble in these things and then - - -

MP: Go away again.

FL: You always see it. You see there's a kind of an ebb and flow of it and suddenly one of them will stand up and say "We're going to be like Brooklyn Academy of Music. We're going to program year 'round. This is what's going to happen" and then they get a bloodied nose and they kind of go "Oh, no, we're just going to look after our resident companies for a bit".

72.13 So it's lovely when it happens. But it's an interesting one because the arts centres don't tend to be funded specifically to do that so when they do it it tends to be just because the institution wants to do it. But it's usually dependent on the institution being very financially robust at that time. But that was a moment when there was definitely a sense of "Oh, we're programming in exactly the same territories here", us and the Opera House, but the counter-argument to that is "Well, this will build an audience for international work" and so it's a good thing generally.

MP: And people buying tickets late. That seems to be a trend of the last ten years.

FL: Yes, I think so. I mean jumping out there was no doubt that about the middle of 2008 we really felt the economy falling off the cliff and that crash happened and that was the first time - because we'd been getting very bullish about ticket sales because we hadn't felt the edges of it. We'd push it a bit further and the audience would go with us and we'd push it a bit further and then suddenly in 2008 there was just this sudden kind of caution and the things we were doing just weren't working in the same way as they had before.

MP: But before that in early 2008 you did a very successful festival there where your box office income was now 6.1 million and that's up from 4.4 million in 2007.

FL: Yes.

MP: Sponsorship more than seven million, the festival massively expanded in 2008 before the bad time to come. What was distinctive about that festival? I suppose the big thing was the first night with the whole complete CBD explosion of dance and music for the first night of the festival, all of which was free.

74.11 FL: And that comes back to this idea that Sydney marks its year with New Year's Eve, Grand Final, Mardi Gras, even City to Surf. This was the thing that was kind of driving me mad was that if you got in a cab and you asked a taxi driver what City to Surf was, of course they'd absolutely know what it was, they'd know what the brand was, they'd know everything else but if you asked them what Sydney Festival was

they'd go "Huh, what's that?" And actually a friend of mine from Ireland said the best marketing you can ever do is a road closure because you're everywhere. You're on every news report, you're on all the TV reports, you become kind of part of this thing. And it's like why sports events in Moore Park - if there's a closure of any sort - and obviously Sydney goes into apoplexies if there's a road closure so you get people going "It took me forty five minutes to get home" as if this is some kind of awful kind of thing and it's like "It takes everyone else in the world forty five minutes to get home". But you know the way: ministers have lost their job over the traffic going a bit barmy for a few hours.

MP: It has got a lot worse since you've left Australia.

FL: So it was this sense of, well, how could we get permission to do the one completely counterintuitive thing? And initially we said "We want to stay out of the parks. We do not want to go in the parks. We want to be on the street and we want to close it all". There was also a big discussion going on around pedestrianisation at that time and it was this thing of "Well, what better way to show people? There's nothing will advance this more".

76.05

But then, of course, the pedestrianisation argument was kind of obviously being driven from the City of Sydney and then there was how you get the government on board who sort of saw all that was kind of lentil eating nonsense. But there was a whole discussion around that and then around the same time was the beginning of a discussion about an events body and the whole thing and Morris lemma was getting very interested in the idea of events.

MP: Morris lemma by this time the Premier in place of Bob Carr?

FL: Yes. So we had a chat with the Premier and ANZ were sort of in the wings to come on as a sponsor.

MP: Following the position as principal sponsor that was held by Channel Nine?

FL: Yes, but this is in addition to Channel Nine and Channel Nine were very generous in allowing another big sponsor in at that point. So there was a lot of appetite for a new big event. And if you remember the government kept sort of stumbling out of each year with an embarrassing surplus at that point. So there was money at the end of a particular year so there was basically a certain amount of money for additional projects around. And Melbourne were really starting to get their act together or had got their act together very well on events and New South Wales was beginning to turn its mind to it. So I actually had

a conversation, straight-up conversation, with Morris Lemma in the Domain. Josephine Ridge planned it beautifully, of course - all of this is because Josephine made it happen, by the way - where he went out and made a speech to the Domain crowd which was like sixty or seventy thousand people and he was quite popular and they gave him a big cheer. And then he came offstage and we said "Now, Premier, we need to talk about this event" so it was carefully stage managed so that he understood the scale.

78.10 If you show people it's amazing and so he went "Oh, yeah". So initially I just wanted to keep it on the streets and say "We pedestrianise everything" because we do the big gig in the field, we know we can do that but this would be completely different. Because the big thing is it's the question of the transformative effect: if you do something somewhere where you've never done anything before it just blows peoples' minds. The second time not so much. The third time it's a bit like snow: the more you see it the less kind of exciting it is. So we had loads of discussions and the Premier basically gave us cover on everything. Because we'd sit around in those enormous meetings where ambulance, police, they'd all kind of say how this wasn't really going to fly and then the Premier's Office would go "No, I think it will".

MP: So you had a two million budget and three quarters of that, I gather, was spent on infrastructure - - -

FL: Yes.

MP: - - - like you've described to create a kind of Martin Place disco, a Macquarie Street Latin party.

FL: They're not called discos anymore, Martin.

MP: Martin Place club and live bands everywhere. Three couples got married.

FL: That's right.

MP: A quarter of a million people.

FL: Yes.

MP: Did it achieve what you want to achieve, considering that now the First Night was cut back, I think, 2012, after you expanded it in your time and Lindy Hume beyond? Did it achieve what you wanted?

FL: Yes, it did. That was the scariest thing I've ever done, no doubt about it, because all the way along it was just us kind of going "It'll be great, it'll

be great” for a year and the terrifying thing about free events if you’ve never done them before is sometimes people don’t show up.

80.14 And like if people didn’t show up, if you haven’t sold a single ticket, if a storm comes across people might just look out the window and go “No, I’m not going to that”. So I remember on the night I think Paul Kelly was just starting off in the Domain and there just weren’t people around and I was walking around and going “This is not going to work. Whatever we’ve done, it hasn’t connected. We thought it would and it hasn’t”. And then I remember John Bayley ringing me and saying “You’ve got to get up to the Domain” and I went ‘round the corner to the Domain and it was Brian Wilson and there was like “the big crowd” and I did cry, I just burst out crying. Because it was just like this pressure and pressure and pressure, “This isn’t going to work, this isn’t going to work” and then walk down and realised whether you liked it or not it was working, it was functioning. People were going from site to site and it had connected and again just that thing of the streets being closed was gorgeous. It was kind of you’ve got this idea but you don’t really know it and actually just that moment. Martin Place is so beautiful but it’s not really used in a way which is anything other than like ferrying people in and out of the buses and the trains and everything and just to see it in that sort of way. And also to go kind of to do things in electronic music because obviously the police were terrified because we were doing pretty heavy stuff but to see these huge numbers of kids having a huge night out but no incidents was just amazing.

82.09 And we’d worked that, we knew how to do that. The trick is you keep it short and bad things don’t happen before eleven o’clock. So you need to get it done and out. But it was still something that was such high energy but it proved that we could do that at that level and still deliver a kind of safe event.

MP: Speaking of accidents that didn’t happen, this was a very dance festival and I was interested there was a lot of debate at a board level about how to kind of not be injury-prone as a festival, to explore perhaps cancellation insurance, just the problems of having a dance-heavy festival when you can have accidents and cancellations.

FL: Yes. What year are we on?

MP: 2008. And that the about an hour program of short shows was dedicated completely to Australian dance.

FL: Yes. And I'd love to take the credit for it but Bill Harris programmed it rather brilliantly. It was quite funny because I kept telling everyone "I didn't do it" and Bill never really got the credit for it. Yes, there was always that issue with dance, particularly if it's one performer rather than a company. And that was the year, of course, the tragedy of Tanja Liedtke. Where we were doing Tanja's piece and I got a call up in the Gold Coast or Brisbane or somewhere to say she'd died. And she'd just taken over; she was appointed Director of Sydney. She was just this brilliant talent and she died in a sort of freak car accident just in the run-in to it. And they said they still wanted to go ahead, the company, and I sat in at that with her mum and dad – God, that was awful. She was just a beautiful dancer, she was quite amazing.

84.01 But that was a really kind of good season and also we got subsidy for it in relation to the Australia Council because it sold out – I think the entire season sold out – and it was just a great example of again context because people going "You can't sell contemporary dance".

MP: People say that and yet every show sold out - About An Hour, each show devoted to Australian dance.

FL: Opera House twenty five dollars. I mean that was a huge thing with it: it was like "Well, I can go to the Opera House for twenty five dollars and it's not going to be too long". So, yes, it worked really well. It was a nice mix as well, though, because I thought *Kin* was great, I thought Gideon Obarzanek's piece was really good. There was Lucy Guerin, Shaun Parker, Kate Champion, Tanja Liedtke and Narelle Benjamin; it was the A Team; it was a really good program, that.

MP: For the first time, really, this time you had a strong Indigenous profile with the Black Arm Band and Murundak so you're beginning to feel comfortable with the diversity of Australian work?

FL: Anyone who saw the Black Arm Band would just book them – they're just fantastic. And that was the first show and it was magnificent, it was so great, as well as Murundak. I think it was again just responding to projects as they arose and, as I say, it wasn't sort of a particularly kind of strategic thing, it was just that there happened to be some really great things.

MP: At this time at the board level and you were talking about the difficulty of a festival getting too big.

FL: Yes.

MP: So you've talked earlier about the need to kind of grow public consciousness with the taxi driver and everyone else about the

festival and the confidence in its branding and its critical mass but at the same time you're talking about the problems of getting too big. What's the problem of getting too big?

86.10 FL: Well, the problem with getting too big, as I mentioned earlier, was just that the values of the festival kind of incorporated a lot of different types of art forms and it was a moment in time to shine the light on work that was unfamiliar or progressive or whatever else. But we'd stepped right into the mainstream at that point and I think around Festival First Night we were the second most visited website in Australia. It just caught hold. It caught hold in this way where I'd never – you know, you'd always be trying to place press but I'd be going "O.K, I'm doing Channel Seven now and then I'm walking across and I'm doing Channel Nine", like TV live to news. And so we just existed in a different framework and it was like "How would we sustain this and this interesting Hungarian theatre company I found that I think we should do in the Drama Theatre, how do you make sure that something like that can sit within this kind of huge GP kind of profile?"

MP: When media are so, as you've said, distracted by big celebrity, high profile acts?

FL: And, yes, the sheer kind of scale. I mean an arts festival is trying to marry the idea of festival and the idea of art – although interestingly, "art" isn't in the Sydney Festival's title – and it's how do you kind of strike the balance so there isn't just too much celebration. And Sydney is always that mix between the performance and the party after the performance. I don't mean that that's glib, I mean that that's part of what a festival is. There's a social side to it and there's the work and it's the combination of the two that makes it a festival but the question is at what point has the party overwhelmed the show?

88.19 So there is a question within that of, yes, how we could continue to deliver in that way. It was also, to be honest, the institution, everybody was still incredibly enthused but it was wearing us out a bit.

MP: You were having a few HR problems, weren't you, at that time? And when you think you were doing all this with some eighteen staff and that was being reviewed about where your best staff resources and whether to increase their number....

FL: Yes. And we'd sort of built up a separate team for Festival First Night. But by '08/9 we had a very strong core team with Bill Harris, John Bayley, Tanya Bush, Jill Colvin and obviously Josephine Ridge. So we had a very strong top management team but we were just getting a bit tired. It was just exhausting. And there was a certain amount of

“Please stop adding things to the program”. Honestly, in '08 the minute we thought anything up we felt we could raise the money for it. We did this thing, movies down in Darling Harbour which were live musical accompaniment to movies which was supposed to be a drive-in boat cinema was the idea. So the idea was that anyone with a boat could drive into Darling Harbour and we'd have a big screen and we'd do these movies. So it was like a drive-in thing. And that was one of the things that just started killing people because - it was like have you any idea – you've got a thousand boats, like logistically and insurance and what's involved here.

90.08 So we had to start trying to roll back some of the scale of some of those thoughts. And it was just I think we were probably at about capacity in terms of what was possible for ourselves. And to be honest with you, by the time 2009 came 'round I was knackered. It was a strange but it was very sad to leave but at the same time getting that over the line each year was a huge, huge undertaking and growth at that level. So I guess that's what I mean by the scale: that we needed to start to think about, “O.K, we've been growing this at such a pace. Let's plateau at some point”.

MP: And the world helped you do that, I suppose, because of the GFC which emerged in 2008 before the 2009 Festival, your last, and created all sorts of problems of being a much tougher sales environment to sell in. But arts, you've said before, can benefit from bad times if they're at the centre and not peripheral. What did you mean by that?

FL: Well, I think that in bad times people revert back to the things they really care about and you tend to drop off things that actually – what do they say? When the tide goes out you see who's naked so if something is kind of fundamental to your life it will remain when things tighten. But if something is just sort of something a little bit skittish that you do just because you happen to have a little bit of extra money at that time, that's what will disappear.

92.01 So that was kind of what I meant by that. And you will check how central it is. I think that the big thing that happened as well was just that where something was a big ticket price they looked at it twice and I think it hit young people in the city. There were a lot of people in the city, just young people who'd come out of school, gone into the city, got a job and were earning like really good money. And you saw it commercially. You saw that suddenly like Big Day Out, the big music festivals were the first ones to really get hit. And I'm sure if we knew

what we were going into in 2009 at the beginning of it we would have had a good look at it.

MP: Even things like keeping your currency amounts in healthy conditions and trying to buy on the currency, I gather in a few months you lost two hundred thousand dollars just by playing the currency wrong in those uncertain times.

FL: Yes, yes. That shouldn't have happened but anyway – but it still was - those were the sort of swings that were going on - the currency was flying around like that. We were lucky in that we held some of those sponsorships together into 2009. But clearly there was bumpy waters ahead. And Australia didn't get hit like other places got hit. But it became a moment and everybody who was doing Christmas parties suddenly stopped doing it and it became kind of quite unfashionable for corporate organisations to be seen to be entertaining lavishly. So it was sort of a slightly scary moment. I mean we kind of got away with it. It was mostly ticket sales: that was the one that hit us in 2009.

94.05 **MP: So a lot of things were undersold at that festival?**

FL: Not a lot of things, a few key things.

MP: Wheeldon's ballet company - - -

FL: Not so much that. No, funnily enough *All Tomorrow's Parties* - - -

MP: Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds at Cockatoo Island - - -

FL: Yes.

MP: - - - which in other years would have been, according to your logic, a good seller, that was undersold?

FL: Yes. That was problematic and then we had a few... That was the one that was the biggest problem, actually, strangely. I mean we thought the idea of the island would be incredibly compelling. I think actually if we'd done it up in the Domain we would have done much better, I think, for economy.

MP: Because it was a party of music curated by Nick Cave at Cockatoo Island.

FL: Exactly, exactly. And you know I thought - the Saints were playing and all the rest of it and the Bad Seeds. But even though it was a brilliant event the idea of the island was a negative rather than a positive. So you have to kind of constantly think about those things. People were like "Can I get off? What happens if I want to go home?" so, yes, that

was tricky. Other things did extremely well; the box office overall was still very high but we were kind of fighting a running battle with the budget.

MP: And again you brought Chekhov's *Ivanov* from Budapest, *Pinter* from Belarus – that's a sort of signature of yours again – and *La Clique* three times you've had them and they've been here many times since.

FL: Yes. That became sort of the grounding for the whole model of doing the Spiegeltent. And back in 2007 - because the Spiegeltent had been to Sydney for Rugby World Cup and it'd been a disaster. And so there was this accepted wisdom that the Spiegeltent would not work, it would never work in Sydney; it was just it was a Melbourne thing and blah, blah, blah.

96.05

So then when we brought it up we kind of knew – and people were going “La Clique won't work in Sydney” and we were like “This show is made for Sydney, this show is Sydney”. But that meant that that whole kind of infrastructure and the cost of all of that would be automatically offset by the fact that those shows would sell out overnight. And that kind of became the model for doing that. And then from that we brought in a company called Cirque Ici one year and then we put a small tent in there a second year and we just started to do different things with the site. So La Clique kind of grounded that.

MP: So you've created a huge hub now that's the icon?

FL: A monster.

MP: Another monster that's in Hyde Park and the icon is the Spiegeltent at the centre of it.

FL: Yes, yes, but then it was also just fun. It was amazing in a way that Sydney didn't really have a beer garden. It was kind of everyone was sort of standing outside under the trees going “Isn't this incredible?” and you're like kind of “Well, all we're doing is drinking beer out of plastic glasses under a tree but, yes, it is”. And it's interesting that again it's that transformative effect in those first years where you were kind of going “Oh, this is so incredible” but it was just that we had a place where you could eat and drink and see shows in the park. And it was really exciting initially. I mean it became harder because, as you say, La Clique for the third time was a little bit like “Whew, have you got no ideas?” And it just felt like it was one of those things you'd never really want to just be doing things by rote, you want to try and reinvent them but it also gave us this thing because there was always the Becks

Bar which was in theory the artists' bar and everything else. But it was like fairly pumping kind of dance music and it was a hard thing and there was always that issue of where do you bring people – it's the wrong environment for a lot of people so where do you go for a drink afterward - so it did give us a proper kind of festival club kind of place where you could just go and bring artists and look after people.

98.30 **MP:** **That's certainly a legacy of yours. Another one people talk about that's important for festivals is the building of local collaborations between Indigenous communities, multicultural, leaving a legacy. What do you think your record is there across four festivals in Sydney, so that particularly when it's a big festival as we've described, the festival leaves something behind for local artists?**

FL: Yes, it's always the age old argument, isn't it? There's no city I've gone to where this argument doesn't happen, where on the one hand people say "Well, if you've got this amazing platform and this amazing kind of context, you should fill it full of local artists because it'll give them an incredible opportunity". And then you have a bunch of other people who say "For eleven months of the year this is what we have. For this month we get something different". So they go "Look, the one thing I don't want to see in January is Bangarra because I can see them February through December" so it's always a thing. And I did some work but not a massive amount, to be honest, and it's a big issue with festivals because people come up to you and they say "What are you doing about poetry?" and you go "I have no idea" - it's such a catch-all - and you go "Well, all our job really is is to do a good festival".

100.07 And so we did work with Big hART and Belvoir and Urban Theatre Projects and all the rest and obviously with Sydney Theatre Company. But we didn't make an enormous effort to be completely engaged in the companies of Sydney. I mean we just didn't see that - because it's a hard choice to make - but we felt that our resources and our time and our effort had to go towards either special projects that might involve those people or doing kind of interesting things. I mean obviously we did, yes. When you think back, I think of projects with Kev Carmody and there's some things which are institutional like doing a project with Bangarra. But then there's things like doing something like pulling together the remaining members of the Triffids and doing a show with them and putting lead singers in, which is kind of an Australian project but it doesn't actually mean that we're dealing with any local companies or anything like that. So, yes, there's the whole world of just Australian art and then there's the institutions and we didn't work with too many of the institutions, I'd have to say, during my period.

MP: You've talked about Australia having kind of an engineering mentality, a pragmatism and directness, so that must be kind of constructive to deal with as a foreign festival director but did you have ongoing frustrations with Sydney culture, Australian character, in working with us?

FL: It was the complete opposite to Ireland because Ireland is like everything: it's your past, you carry it around. It's like "Oh, it's like eight hundred years of the British" and everything is referential. And Australia is far less concerned with its past and far more concerned with what is in front of it.

102.07 And so in that sense when I came here I read Lucy Turnbull's book on Sydney and read *The Fatal Shore* and tried to understand the history of the city so much and then I arrived here and realised that most people didn't know the history of their own place. I'd say "Well, what about this place, eh?" and they'd go "I don't know" and in a way that was just incredibly liberating. And it's a glib thing to say but I guess there's some truth to it – I hate generalising. But the idea was that Ireland was just far too much contemplation and not enough execution and Australia was the exact opposite, where you'd say "I've got kind of an idea. What if we did this?" and people would want the budget, they'd want the detail and I go "I don't know" - it was real pulling up the flowers to see how the roots were growing. And that still exists to a degree, that I think people are very comfortable once something moves into execution mode but in that sort of nebulous "What if we kind of did this?" they get very, very jumpy. We have amazing production teams here, the best in the world and once we did this thing called Haircuts by Children, which was basically that, it was nine year olds cutting your hair, and it was outside this barber in Darlinghurst and they said "And one of the kids is going to go out and sell lemonade on a table outside". And then after the meeting I got an email an hour later which was an ICAD drawing of crash barriers, security points and where the children would be and it was like on a 3D renditions of it and everything and it was like kind of "Just settle down. It's just a child selling lemonade".

104.10 And there's a certain amount of that and that was again with First Night where there's a certain mentality which is "all events should be done on a bitumen sort of field with twenty foot towers basically and shade everywhere". And I guess it's a country that grew up in extreme circumstances. Like if you go to the further extreme of that, where you go to somewhere like Spain and I've been to things where there's big fireworks things and people all come in and they're all carrying around wet towels and you go "Why are you doing that?" and they go "Well, you'll see" because when the fireworks go off they put them over

because the fireworks just come flying down on top of them, these burning bits of pyro and it's just kind of accepted.

MP: But in Australia we've got a lot of health and safety regulations well thought out beforehand.

FL: Which is not necessarily a bad thing but I think that was kind of the thing and one of the things. There's a certain type of governmental view which you sort of feel wishes there was just one massive arts body, huge corporate thing that did everything and it's why having a small dance or theatre company in Sydney's so hard because operating at that kind of almost corporate arts level is fantastic in this city. You can sit down and get amazing things done but I often feel from an administrative point of view that there's really struggles with dealing with kind of the granular end of it.

MP: And it's from the granular end which is often the new ideas and the new productions that end up being start.

FL: Yes. So that was always, yes, trying to get people to lighten up a little bit about some things but then once you have precedent it all settled down.

106.11 **MP: So last year you took over from Adelaide's Jonathan Mills as Director of the Edinburgh Festival. Now, Edinburgh, that's kind of the daddy of them all, the festival founded significantly in European-connected Edinburgh, international beacon with a great idealism of unifying the world, a war-torn world after the war, to the unifying role of the arts. Given that and your experience in Sydney, what do you think now is the key purpose of a festival?**

FL: Well, festivals have changed. It's interesting because no one's really setting up big international arts festivals at the moment; they've become far more specialised. It was very much the thing you had: you had a concert hall, rep theatre, a ballet company, an opera company and an international arts festival; that was part of the menu. It's kind of gone out of vogue a little bit but in a way what's interesting is that festivals have changed in that they've sort of moved into the centre. And this is the big challenge we have which is that when festivals were the place you saw Robert Wilson or Pina Bausch for the first time and you saw all of this kind of exotica would arrive and it was unlike anything you'd ever seen before. That has largely changed now where festivals are not the sort of eccentric aunt that comes and stays once a year. What they do is very much kind of at the centre of cultural provision so that has changed things quite a bit. They've sort of grown up in a way, in the sense of they were the sort of slightly more edgy

end of things and in a sense they're being kind of pushed into that because they have these relationships with levels of funding and corporate partners and everything else so the challenge is really how to sort of maintain festivals as taste makers as well as being kind of good observers as to what people want.

108.32 **MP: And not just vehicles of civic tourism?**

FL: Not just vehicles of civic tourism indeed. And, yes, I feel at the moment the whole argument for "the arts" more generally has been weakened and not just because of the economic conditions. I feel that when I arrived here back in 2004 there was a core of very intelligent people in positions of great power who really understood why the arts should be supported and they were in business and they were in politics and they were in civic life generally. And I don't see as many of them now. There were people like the head of cabinet and there were people, as I say, in the City and of course there are people who still absolutely believe in the cultural life of the city but that kind of more nuanced argument about supporting work which will kind of absolutely progress the way we think about art, which is expensive, and may not have any tourism benefits, may not necessarily kind of be able to tie into the creative industries, I feel that that argument is weaker than it's been for a long time; it needs to be kind of revisited in festivals.

110.06 **MP: Is it weaker in Edinburgh?**

FL: No. I mean Edinburgh has an extraordinary relationship with its festivals because it defined the city to a degree in the twentieth century and Edinburgh holds its kind of intellectual credentials very proudly. So it's still there, there's no doubt about it, but I think that "What happens after this recession?" is really the question. And whether the withdrawal of funding over time is purely a function of the recession or whether it is an ideological shift that has happened with the cloak of the recession to kind of mean actually the discussion wasn't had.

MP: Presumably, you'll have to do a little bit more classical music this time in the Edinburgh, your specialty?

FL: I'm going to have to make a very quick phonecall.

MP: We're finished. Fergus Linehan, thank you very much.

FL: Thank you.

111.17 **[Interview ends]**