

CITY OF SYDNEY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
SYDNEY FESTIVAL DIRECTORS
TRANSCRIPT

Name: Leo Schofield

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0.00 **MP: My name is Martin Portus and I have with me Leo Schofield, Director of the Sydney Festivals 1998 to 2001, four festivals. The date is May the 11th in 2015 for this interview which is happening at the studio of the Redfern Community Centre in Sydney for the oral history project commissioned by the Sydney City Council.**

Leo, what were your early impressions of the Sydney Festival back in those days when it was the Waratah Festival, so-called, with a parade? It had floats, there was a Hyde Park Fair, wasn't there? You were in your early forties – this was the exciting late '70s – you were running a marketing company, you had already started being a restaurant reviewer. What was the Sydney Festival like then?

LS: I think I'm not unkind to the memory of Stephen Hall if I say that it was patchy. It had an odd genesis, just a group of interested businessmen, including retailers like John Walton and a few other figures around town. They had started it as a kind of – it was a very old fashioned sort of celebration. It reminded me almost of the parades and the ceremonial arches and the like that they had when the Queen arrived in the '50s. I thought that there was always something in the program that one wanted to see but not a lot. And it to me lacked any kind of real focus. Most of the stuff that I wanted to see and that I went to see was in the Seymour Centre of all places and very little use was made of the Opera House.

MP: As you jibed a bit later, it was the Festival of Chippendale, the suburb of the Seymour Centre.

LS: Yes, indeed. I remember how tacky the floats looked - there was always a Miss Waratah. Mind you, if you judge them against the Mardi Gras floats now which are just uber tacky and there's no design to them anymore. But these ones were sort of very commercial. I can remember seeing one where a lot of ladies were dressed in sort of pale blue leotards and they were being the "living flames" from the gas company. The gas company had a particular ad which talked about the living flame and an invisible hand switched on the gas and these blue flames came out and the next minute there was a Busby Berkeley-like setup, a lot of women in leotards with their arms up in the air in a pyramidal sort of fashion and leaning out as living flames. Well, they had a float of living flames which I remember quite vividly. There was a huge waratah too. I guess it's a spinoff from the Jacaranda Festival or the Tulip Festival at Bowral; it was symbolised florally.

2.46 **MP: And in those early days in the '70s then, what sort of arts element let alone Australian element?**

LS: Not very much. And, of course, we arrived back in Australia in 1965, having come from London and experienced our first trip to Europe – when I say “our”, I mean Anne and I, Anne Schofield and I. We were married in London and we just immersed ourselves totally in cultural pursuits in England. Before that in the '60s it was very much a do-it-yourself society as far as the arts were concerned. I was involved with university drama and a couple of events and plays that I directed over at the old Independent Theatre in Miller Street North Sydney and nobody was paid anything - I think two people were paid on Doris Fitton's staff – but one wanted to do something in the theatre and was fascinated by it and that's in fact where I met Anne initially. And that followed on after the university plays, of course, and it was a particular time at the university which I don't think would ever come again when a lot of people were there, still in a kind of backwash from the war and maybe trying to recreate the 1920s, I don't know.

MP: You were a second generation Sydney Push, weren't you?

LS: Yes, yes, but it was quite common. Clive James wrote scripts for the university revue, Robert Hughes painted sets for me, a whole lot of activity. Bruce Beresford was in it, John Bell did *Twelfth Night* for us and Ken Horler: lots of people who went on to actually pursue careers in the arts, dallied. And most of didn't ever do our degrees – certainly Hughes didn't and I didn't finish them.

4.00 **MP: Tell me a bit more about the Sydney Festival as it developed then into the late '80s. It had significant arts elements by that time.**

LS: One or two. I can't remember a great deal from it. I mean I think the best festivals that I've experienced, there's always some one element, one item on the board that is just such a standout like the amazing *Mahabharata* in Adelaide or some of the Janáček operas that were premiered there. They were exceptional, exceptional sort of makers for those festivals and I can't remember a great many from Sydney other than, say, the *Steward of Christendom*, that marvellous play with Donald McCann, which was by – who's the guy - - -

MP: The last few years of Stephen Hall's regime.

LS: Yes, last few years of Stephen.

MP: There was a quote in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, describing it in the late '80s as a “people's festival” where a typical program taken from 1989 combined a motorfest, a ferrython, the Coca-Cola

Bottlers Dance Hall, offal-waving Spanish experimental theatre group, La Fura Dels Baus, which was fantastic, I remember - - -

LS: Yes.

MP: - - - and the premiere of David Williamson's *Top Silk*. It was a sort of motley match.

LS: Well, very much a mixed grill, I think, and it reflected the commercial involvement with branding of particular elements of the festival with the corporates and a corporation's name - it was a way, I guess, of getting money. It wasn't a substantial budget and it was always difficult to bring attractions from overseas and as such I think it lacked that sort of sense of scale and bigness and boldness that I think festivals always should have, I mean something that's a bit off the wall if you like, and becomes the marker for that event.

MP: When did you later sort of dream of running it?

LS: I didn't ever dream of running it, strangely enough. I was flown to Adelaide to discuss the possibility of directing the '88 Festival, the 1988 Bicentennial Festival.

MP: In Adelaide?

6.59 LS: In Adelaide. And I was heavily patronised by an interview committee who asked kind of odd questions. I think I'd been recommended by Len Amadio and a couple of other people there. There was some lady judge who was a bit of a force in the whole thing. But I clearly didn't impress people sufficiently. I never thought of doing it but once I'd been asked to put my hand up for it I was quite keen on the idea but I missed out on that one. It was given to Lord Harwood, which I thought was a bit of an odd choice, even though he brought *The Mahabharata*. But he was a bit of an odd choice for a celebration of Australian work. And I had in fact proposed it in that informal interview that one of the things I would want to do would be something that took Europe and Australia and made connections because it was the anniversary of European settlement. And one of the things I did propose was to have Neil Armfield do all of the three Mozart / Da Ponte operas. I'm a great admirer of Neil's work. But that would have been really interesting and it would have taken what was always the core idea of an Adelaide Festival in those days: a central opera. It began, really, with the *Tosca* with Marie Collier and John Shaw. And there was always a good opera at the heart of every Adelaide Festival program and it seemed to me just O.K, just triple that and do all three of them in interesting productions by an Australian.

MP: Iconically you're an opera man – we'll get to that, as a signature of you. But it's interesting about Adelaide – I didn't know that – because you then cut your festival-making teeth at the Melbourne Festival for three years before Sydney.

LS: Exactly.

MP: And many in Melbourne had a similar reaction to that committee in Adelaide, regarding you as a sort of a marketing man, a restaurant reviewer, an arts novice, really.

8.04 LS: We know all of that, we know all that. I was hardly a novice, I was not an audience novice. I was a totally Grade A professional as a member of audiences. No, I actually had an invitation from Melbourne to fly down and be interviewed. The seed had been planted there a couple of years beforehand and I thought "Hmm, have a shot at it". It was a period of my life when I felt like a change and there it was. And I must have impressed somebody. But I think the festival there was really on its knees – well, I know it was.

MP: In what way? Richard Wherrett had finished being the director of it.

LS: Yes. Richard hated Melbourne, to be absolutely frank; he didn't like it one little bit.

MP: He, of course, is the former director and founding director of the Sydney Theatre Company.

LS: Of the Sydney Theatre Company and before that the Old Tote Company, of course. But Richard loathed it. He didn't like the people, he didn't like his board and he certainly didn't like the general manager – nor did I – but the thing was he didn't grab Melbourne. People were excited when he first went down there and he had a very good theme for the first festival, which was the Columbian year. It was '92 and he did some really interesting things to do with Spain and the New World and some interesting Calderon and really good stuff. But it didn't click. And then his second festival was kind of catastrophic. He brought a Romanian company and he opened with *Titus Andronicus* which was just a bit too much heavy duty for the audiences down there - there were big walkouts at the interval – and I think he was disillusioned and Kennett was disillusioned and he didn't want to stay. He was given a three year contract but he didn't want to stay for the third year. And I may have just been behind the wicket when somebody threw a ball and I caught it and he was bowled out and I was bowled in, more or less.

MP: And you went to Kennett, then Premier, I gather with quite a clear marketing plan of what the festival can do for Melbourne?

LS: Absolutely. Well, it's just the basic thing that now is insisted on by almost every funding authority and that is a business plan. I remember walking up the steps of Parliament House in Spring Street with a colleague and he was clutching an easel and I had all the big flipcharts. And we set it up and I ran through it all with JK and he was impressed.

10.10 I talked his talk. He didn't question what I might put in there, quality-wise, and so basically I got the nod. Then began the real struggle, which was money, because Robert Ginn who was then the general manager held all the purse strings. He came to me and he said "Well, here's your budget" and it was four hundred thousand dollars. I said "Well, that'll pay for one event, Robert, and I'll go out and get the rest."

[32sec edit]*

MP: You were very successful in Melbourne. You matched the Melbourne – was it still called the International Festival then?

LS: It was called MIFA then, the Melbourne International Festival of Arts.

MP: You matched it to the character of Melbourne. So as we get closer to matching the Sydney Festival - that's the four you made to Sydney – what about Melbourne, what was the match there, how did you do that?

LS: Well, Melbourne - that festival originated under John Truscott as the third leg on the Spoleto / Charleston / Melbourne.

MP: Italy, America and Australia.

LS: And it was really the Italian community in Melbourne that went over to Spoleto in Italy and saw what Menotti was doing and said "That'd be great. Let's have more of it". And Menotti was the original artistic director of the Melbourne Festival and stuff that he brought in and *Ariadne* with Alessandra Marc and Ben Heppner and *Elektra* directed by Bruce Beresford.

11.36 **MP: As a composer he had an interest in music - - -**

LS: Yes, of course, of course.

MP: - - - which you were to emulate in a way.

LS: Well, the emulation process is a bit more extensive than that because the Edinburgh Festival under Harwood and Bing always had an opera

as its major calling card – and we'll get to why or why I think it was – and then with the arrival of Frank Dunlop to direct it it took a real veering towards theatre. And I remember going to one of his Edinburgh Festivals and being disappointed both at the quality of the theatre but also at the fact that there was no opera. I mean he did Menotti's *The Telephone*, I think, or some small opera but nothing of any substance and there wasn't a proper theatre for it either.

MP: So if you look at some of the things that you did in Melbourne, *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* by Richard Strauss with designs by David Hockney, that was a big hit, wasn't it?

LS: Huge, but that was the third year. By that time I'd softened up the audience a bit to accept that and it was a big cost. It began, really, when I spent all of that first four hundred thousand dollars on bringing Robert Lepage's production of Bluebeard's productions of *Bluebeard's Castle* and *Erwartung* as a double bill to Melbourne and it was a Canadian Opera production. Richard Bradshaw was their musical director, a very distinguished English conductor. The singers were fabulous but nobody had ever heard of them. One of them went on to stay, Rebecca Blankenship. I knew of her father who was a distinguished Wagner singer. But she went on to become part of his just general Ex Machina touring group. But they were wonderful singing actors that he had in both those shows and the shows were fabulous. I was so proud that they'd been seen in Edinburgh the year before and they'd got twenty seven per cent houses and we got eighty seven per cent in Melbourne. And that suggested to me there was a bit of a hunger for this sort of work that wasn't going to be seen, not part of the quotidian programming of any local company, whether it was Victoria State Opera or the Australian Opera as it then was.

13.38 **MP: It's a very European, urbane city, isn't it, Melbourne, before we come to the character of Sydney, which might not be like that. Can you reflect that in programming?**

LS: Yes. I think they like to think that and they like to think of themselves as extremely sophisticated and in many ways they are. They saw it as a city of considerable style whereas Sydney was a bit more rough and tumble in the view of Melburnians – possibly true. But they wanted something that I think reflected their sense of themselves and something that possessed the city. And I know it might seem extraneous to lots of people in the arts but I think there are many little tricks that one could pull out of the hat to give that sense of an occasion. I mean even in the simple physical presence of banners. And I remember in the first

Melbourne Festival I just went to the City of Melbourne and I just chose colours for that year and – I still do - - -

MP: Knowing you, you choose the colours.

LS: Yes. And then they planted all of the civic plantings so all of the planting around the Arts Centre and in the gardens opposite reflected those colours.

MP: And in programming? We're not just talking about Floriade.

LS: No, no, no. Well, we did have a thing called Floriade because Melbourne saw itself as being the Garden State, which is what it still describes itself as, and John Truscott had done a couple of big shows over in the gardens and I continued that tradition. And it was a pretty snappy festival and there were things there. And the other little trick was really a marketing trick and that is really about a unique selling proposition. And the unique selling proposition for much of the work I did in Melbourne was exclusivity. People had to come to Melbourne to see the work if they had any interest at all in it. So it did draw large numbers of people from interstate.

MP: And in a time in the '90s when the enormous number of festivals was almost like reaching its peak, climaxing with the Olympics. You mean we've had a lot more since? Is that what you were about to say?

15.40 LS: Yes, we've had a lot.

MP: They never stop. So as they never stop, at this particular time in the mid '90s is exclusivity really important?

LS: Yes, critical because in every festival that I can see in the world that is successful there is some touristic element, some link in terms of financing, and it's mad to deny that. I think it was one of the points that – what's his name – the kid that took over from – the young man, Ralph Myers – he made a point to talk about - - -

MP: The retiring artistic director of Belvoir Street?

LS: - - - yes, and how he was the only one in sneakers and jeans and everyone else was in a suit. Nothing wrong with those suits if they can give you the money that you can do the work that will provide the city with a satisfactory outcome. All the festivals that I happen to think are superb have a strong tourism component to them, Edinburgh, Bayreuth, Salzburg, Tanglewood. I mean it boosts local industry, restaurants, all

of the knock-on effect from the tourist dollar is much more pronounced with an arts event than it ever could be with a football event.

MP: The knock-on, that's interesting, how the arts cause that.

LS: Yes. They fly into a city for one football match and sometimes don't even sleep. They just stay up all night, boozing, and get a cheap flight back. And there's no substantial economic benefit to the city from the visitations. Whereas if you can get people to stay two or three days and enjoy the city – that's the key thing: you've got to be able to provide experiences for them – but also a sufficient suite of events that attract them, you can always get them to stay a little bit longer. In the Brisbane Festival recently we banked on people coming up on the Friday for the opera and we had a good Saturday night and a good Sunday night but some stayed on for the Monday because we had another opera.

17.35 **MP: This is the Brisbane Baroque Festival that used to be Hobart Baroque until you left Tasmania and you've now moved it to Brisbane.**

LS: Yes, sure.

MP: And just now it's just had its inaugural appearance in Brisbane.

LS: But that exclusivity thing, Robert Ginn was outraged at the fact that I paid Barbara Cook a seventy thousand dollar fee to come and perform exclusively in Melbourne.

MP: Cabaret artist, very well-known at that time.

LS: Well, I mean many people tried to lure her to Australia and weren't able to do so. But I was able to do a deal through some connections in New York and bring her to Melbourne and put her on in an iconic Melbourne building, in Myer's Mural Hall, which had been used more or less for storage and a bit of a hairdressing salon and I managed to persuade Peter Wilkinson to spend a quarter of a million dollars. I said "Don't give us any money. Just do up the room and give it to us for free" so we had a really glamorous, highly Melbournian room. And "unique" is another word as well as "exclusive". If you can find venues that provide a unique stage or area for a performance then - - -

MP: It's true. Festivals are very good in linking venues, sometimes out of necessity - - -

LS: Absolutely, yes.

MP: - - - which, of course, we'll get to when we talk about Sydney. But also at that time as well as exclusivity you were talking about the

accessibility being a very important part of a festival. And then oddly also challenge. Don't they compete, the demands of risk and challenge and perhaps difficult work and accessibility?

LS: Yes, but you can balance that out. I mean everybody's talking about risk but there comes a moment when you don't take any more risks and the premiums rise. I mean, essentially if you could have something for everybody. I remember Anthony Steel rather disparagingly, I thought, said that one of my festivals had "high-brow, low-brow, middle-brow, no-brow". Well, I don't have a problem with that at all. I mean it's called an audience, isn't it? I think an audience, it's not a sort of horizontal slice of a population, it's a vertical.

19.43 **MP: I'd like to come back to that element of risk when we talk more about Sydney. But how were you approached for Sydney? Because amazingly – you talked about Anthony Steel – he took over at very short notice in 1994 from Stephen Hall - but within a year or so, his successor, you, was already announced. How were you approached and why, do you think, to do the Sydney Festival?**

LS: Well, I know exactly how I was approached to do the Sydney Festival. It was a supper after *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* with Bob Carr and his wife and a few other people who'd come down to hear the opera.

MP: Well, lucky it had been a successful night.

LS: Well, it was a successful festival though. And of course, when you started to get banners outside newsagents saying "Strauss Opera Festival Triumph", I mean that was all over Melbourne.

MP: Good start.

LS: It's a good start and I remember Roger Covell for the first festival wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald* - - -

MP: The *Sydney Morning Herald* music critic.

LS: - - - yes, he wrote "Canadian opera stuns Melbourne" or something like that; it had that headline effect. And I didn't see myself as needing to support work in the sense - I wanted to present the best and hopefully it would have an impact on local performers to lift their game.

MP: I'd also like to talk about your interest in local performers vis-à-vis the big visiting opera. But what did Carr like about you, why did he want you, Premier Carr?

LS: I don't know. He just thought I'd done a good job in Melbourne and "We'd better get you back to Sydney" sort of thing.

MP: And you had the support of Frank Sartor who was then Lord Mayor and chair of the board of the Sydney Festival.

LS: Yes, I did, I did. And then soon after that they gave me the Olympic Arts Festival which had been in the hands of, what's his name, Jonah Jones, I think.

21.32 **MP: That's right.**

LS: I mean that was a really difficult job to do, the Olympic one, but we'll leave that, we're not talking about that. But Sydney, I felt that something could be done with Sydney, if you like, and I wanted to come back, I had an interest in coming back to Sydney. Bronte House, inter alia.

MP: Yes, that's where you lived in Sydney.

LS: Well, I didn't until - I got it at the end of my Melbourne stay and I had a grandchild that I wanted to see more of and two more on the way. And I just felt the pull of family. And I was offered a seven year contract with Melbourne.

MP: Seven years?

LS: Yes, by the then chairman, Harold Mitchell, he said "We want to keep you here" and whatever - but the lure or at least the tug of Sydney and family triumphed and I left. But I think it was a good idea; several people
- - -

MP: That's a very conservative decision to like you – not to like you but to want to nail you into place for seven years running a festival, isn't it?

LS: Yes, yes. I was sorely tempted and I might have done if I'd been able to get up a Ring Cycle there which I'd mooted about ten years before it actually happened with the Opera Australia. But I wanted Simone to do it, and - - -

MP: So within months of your appointment at the Sydney Festival for 1998, you had accumulated for that festival a budget of 10.2 million when the 1997 Festival run by Anthony Steel was 6.4 million. So a massive increase in money. And you had a stated expectation then that you were going to sort of exceed Adelaide's Biennial Festival budget of 11 million. How did you achieve that increase so fast – what did you do?

LS: I'm not a bad fundraiser, I don't think; I've got a reasonable track record of selling. It's the old advertising training and marketing and I had a good run of doing that in Melbourne. You can imagine how I felt about being

given four hundred thousand dollars. I just pinned up notices around the office saying “No dough, no show” and I just went on the rampage.

23.42

And in that first year, Martin, in Melbourne I did over a hundred and thirty talks to rotary clubs, women’s clubs, all the posh clubs of Melbourne, army and navy, Australian Club, whatever. I was in demand because I’d been a notorious figure – or painted as such – by the Melbourne arts establishment and therefore people were curious to see what kind of person was going to come and what he or she might do.

MP: You were demonised in the first year quite a lot.

LS: Totally, totally. I went through three phases then. Pariah first year, second year hero, third year traitor because I left and. It was a really rapid ascent and descent.

MP: But to Sydney’s benefit you brought that financial acumen.

LS: Yes.

MP: How did you raise the money?

LS: Well, because you just went to the people who had the money, like American Express, and you asked them for three hundred thousand dollars.

MP: To do what, do you say?

LS: Well, to sponsor something. I mean I made a list of everything that was in the Festival and put price tags against it and “You can have this for that and here’s the deal. We’ll give you this publicity, that publicity, this number of tickets and you can have your name on it and you’re part of this big deal”.

MP: You were itemising those benefits to them very clearly; their chunk of profile.

LS: Yes, of course. And they all like that idea because they had special clients and they have needs to their – I hate the word stakeholders but people who are their clients who they would like to impress. And there were little things like backstage tours and things that we would do.

MP: You doubled sponsors from 40 to 77 in ’98. You got the state contribution, which had always been fairly parsimonious at seven hundred thousand, to 1.5 million, so that’s more than doubling it. And you got council up [from] a modest fifty thousand to then six hundred and fifty thousand for the ’98 Festival. How did you handle the politicians – in the same way?

25.35 LS: Yes, pretty well. Just - I was very fortunate to have both Frank Sartor and Bob. Frank was a bit nervy after one festival. Of all the festivals I've done, I've only ever lost a swingeing amount of money, taken a swingeing hit, was the one on a piece of work that I thought was one of the best things I ever brought to Australia.

MP: I think we'll get to that. That's in the festival that followed the great success of '98.

LS: Yes.

MP: So not only did you have a huge budget but you actually made a surplus in '98. And actually planned for a festival going against the tradition of the Sydney Festival by expanding it from 17 to 23 days.

LS: Yes. Well, that gave me two weekends, you see, although you could have two weekends with 17 days too, but I just thought that you could pace it. I'd learned in Melbourne: The Melbourne Festival was wedged between the football finals, the Grand Final and the Spring Racing Carnival. So I tried to get a kind of curve to the work so that you opened with the bigger, more – don't want to use the word “cerebral” but the more thoughtful or rarer or challenging works to open with. And then put around that other sort of temptations for during the day and made the package very attractive. And then segued out of that through the following week into something a little lighter at the end so that the people that were coming down for the Spring Racing Carnival would then not just fly in on the Friday for the derby on the Saturday, they'd come for the last few days of the festival and that's where you put the likes of Barbara Cook, you see.

MP: And you got those audiences that came to other events and you got that crossover, you achieved that?

LS: Sure, sure, sure. And it was boom business for restaurants and for hotels. And so to have all of those people saying to the state government, “This is fantastic for tourism” - - -

MP: It was a very good calling card for Sydney?

LS: Yes.

MP: And then you had to make a program for a city that you've described – and you've described Melbourne well – but what about Sydney? You've described sort of the dichotomous nature of Sydney which needs to be addressed in your programming.

27.40 LS: Yes.

MP: As we move to that first year of programming, how do you deliver a program that's dichotomous?

LS: Well, you put a bit of Handel in, a bit of Handel, a little bit of Bernadette Peters. They're polarities, you know, to have a Broadway star with a poppy band and two days before that a concert version of an unheard of Handel opera with Les Talens Lyriques.

I mean Anthony's description may have been pejorative, you know, the "high-brow, low-brow, middle-brow, no-brow" but I think that's a terrific compliment. I think to actually find something that has a big spread of audiences is very pleasing. The Sydney Symphony vacated the Opera House in January traditionally. You didn't have an orchestra to play there and there was sort of patchy programming - it was programmed by the House. So to bring in something like the Russian National Orchestra for four concerts was a really kind of daring thing. Russia's a pretty magical brand anyway. But what it did was open up a closed shop to other punters. I remember sitting next to Mary Valentine who was the general manager of the SSO. We were sitting together and watching the audience go bananas, a completely full Opera House going bananas over Pletnev and his protégé, Alexei [Nikolai] Lugansky – he's become quite a big name.

MP: In the Russian National Orchestra?

LS: Yes, in the first Festival. And I said to her "How many of these people do you think are subscribers to the SSO?" and she said "I think about eleven". I mean the reality was that row after row that we knew from other concerts – because the management usually sat in Box U and you could look down from the side and see where everyone was dotted throughout the stalls – and we didn't know anybody very much in those audiences. But they came out of Bondi, all of the Russians, and from the outer western suburbs but also with other people because the programming was very, very good.

29.46 **MP: But in the conversations even I've had so far with other festival directors, classical music is not usually central to a festival. It's usually considered, an orchestra like the Russian National Orchestra, too expensive and left to a kind of normal year 'round cycle of attention to classical music - as though you can't do anything special in classical music. That's the kind of received knowledge that many people would say about festivals.**

LS: Yes.

MP: You say completely different. You've programmed festivals around classical music.

LS: Yes. Well, there was a hell of a lot of pop stuff in my festivals, always. There's always been cool pop stuff or the stuff that's branded. In the Brisbane Baroque we had had a Handel thing. It wasn't called "Handel", it was just called "Heavenly Handel" and it packed out QPAC because it's "greatest hits". I mean done to the right standard there's nothing wrong with them at all. There's nothing that says a festival has to be stashed with rare repertoire, [it's enough] if it's got rare performers. I mean Russian National Orchestra hadn't been before and never came again.

MP: But it doesn't sound very risky or challenging, just to talk to another kind of element.

LS: It is risky because of the money involved in it. Everything's a risk, flying a whole orchestra from Russia.

MP: Well then how did you afford that?

LS: Because we had quite a lot of money and massive ticket sales.

MP: And with the help of Channel 9, the sponsor.

LS: Of course, of course.

MP: That's Channel 9 at this stage and for some sixteen years was a sponsor.

LS: Yes, and we did commercials, Martin. We treated it like a product and there were commercials of that orchestra playing familiar tunes. I mean if I brought *Turandot* to the stadium I know what I'd do: I'd make a commercial that had *Nessun Dorma* on it and a bit of spectacular footage.

31.30 **MP: Other things in that year around this theme of music - you mentioned Handel's rarely performed chamber opera *Admeto*.**

LS: It's not a chamber opera, it's a full-scale opera.

MP: Full-scale opera. There's usually a reason why things are rarely performed, isn't it?

LS: Yes.

MP: Is that a risk too?

LS: Yes but I've just presented something that lay fallow, something by Handel, that lay fallow for three hundred years in this opera, *Faramondo*,

up in Brisbane. Sensational reviews - I mean people are saying it's the best opera they've seen in decades. If you market it correctly you can sell it. And the backwash, I couldn't afford to bring back the wonderful Les Arts Florissants who had been here, William Christie's group but there's an equally interesting group called Les Talens Lyriques run by the harpsichordist Christophe Rousset who used to be with Christie. So I could bring them, could afford them. Brought the orchestra and the singers.

MP: Speaking of affording, in '98 you also did ten dollar prom concerts at the Town Hall. You were doing concerts in the Art Gallery of New South Wales recitals, an orchestral concert of Beatles music, complete Beethoven string quartets, footy matches - - -

LS: But that was a sensation. There was not a ticket to be had for those Lindsay quartets and people who loved chamber music, knew about them, their reputation was sensational, particularly in the Anglophone world. And everybody knew they were on the verge of disbanding and they did so a year or so later. But the Lindsays did those late quartets in the St James Church and they were magnificent, magnificent events. But there was gospel music, the McCullough Sons of Thunder were there.

MP: And the permanent fixture of the Sydney Festival is the Domain free concerts which are symphony concerts – [these] remain. Jazz was cancelled by Anthony Steel but you started a new Domain concert of country music, at least for that year, from Tamworth.

33.36 LS: Yes. Well, it was good for sponsorship - most of that was underwritten. No one understands the cost of doing those free concerts. I think the base price was about three hundred thousand dollars to put up that huge Kevlar tent and then all of the crowd control stuff and catering, God knows what. They were an immense cost to do those things. But they were part of the spirit of Sydney and I would never have touched them, you know, would never have said "I'll apply the money to something else"; I would rather have that degree of accessibility. I don't believe that anybody is converted by those concerts to go and hear something in the Opera House. I think there's a level at which people can approach classical music and that's one level and there's another where you can buy a ticket and go into the Opera House.

MP: Different directors have had different responses to the maintenance and cost of the Domain concerts. As you've said, I think Anthony Steel said it cost him at that time one in eight of every one of his dollars. How did you manage it financially, how do you make them underwritten?

LS: Well, I went and made a presentation to American Express and we kind of zhooshed them up a little bit with a much nicer VIP area with very good food and we could duchess their people - they were on the side, not in the middle, not in the mosh pit area. There was a nice sort of VIP area very discreetly tucked away at the back. I know that going to the opera I didn't like going into a VIP seating thing in the opera which was plunk in the middle. I felt embarrassed to be there while other people had a rug to demarcate their spaces for twenty four hours, forty eight hours in advance. So we moved it over to the side and just did a much more stylish presentation to satisfy them. Some of the money they gave obviously was used for entertaining but a lot of it was an add-on above and beyond that.

35.31 **MP: Let's look at some other things that you had there which pick up some themes of ongoing festivals, both before and after you. Irish theatre, the Sydney Festival's always dominated by Irish theatre and you did the *Leenane Trilogy* that year - you did three of them from the Druid Theatre of Galway.**

LS: Well, that was this tradition that Stephen had brought - he had brought the Irish companies. He was the first to present the Druid Theatre Company from Galway and he brought that wonderful *Steward of Christendom* that I alluded to earlier to the Seymour Centre. He was the first to bring Théâtre de Complicité – theatre was his strong thing. Anyway, the Irish theatre somehow, no matter what we did, it sold out. I had seen the *Beauty Queen of Leenane* at the Royal Court and I was aware of the other two plays that the young Martin McDonagh had written. And by making it a trilogy we were able to do an all-day event which people love. You know, they love going morning, noon and night – most did. I remember Gillian McClelland [?] said to me “I've just read *Angela's Ashes*. I'm over this culture”, she said, after seeing all that angst of the *Leenane Trilogy*. But that was wonderful; totally sold out.

MP: Actually, there was a time of those festivals where people had a long attention span and they quite liked the huge feast of things that went for hours - whereas it's shorter nowadays.

LS: That's true of the Sydney Film Festival. People went morning, noon and night in rather Spartan conditions as far as weather was concerned.

MP: So that's the Irish. And flamenco's another great theme of the Sydney Festival.

LS: Of course.

MP: And there you are, you were kicking off in that first year with the so-called Spain's Lord of Fandango, Joaquín Cortés, who I remember – long black sort of pants and shoes and long black hair and not much else.

LS: Torso.

MP: Torso, a lot of torso acting.

LS: Well, look, he created a sensation in Europe and toured around and I'd seen him there – I'd seen him in Holland or somewhere performing and it was an electrifying performance and that gives you a box office. You can't function or have a budget without some stuff that's going to give you box office. And I would rather have some big marquee names and big events than have the sort of festival that Lieven's been doing when there's so much stuff you don't know where to start.

37.50 **MP:** The current Festival Director.

LS: Yes. The last one, there was only one thing. I went to see two things. I went to see the *Kiss* thing from Belgium [*Kiss & Cry*] and I went to see the wonderful Latvian choir.

MP: Yes.

LS: They were magnificent, the Latvian Radio Choir.

MP: Why weren't you attracted to anything else in this last 2015 Festival?

LS: Well, a lot of it it's just not my taste. I mean a lot was made of the Kate Champion fat work.

MP: Huge dancers.

LS: But that's no different from what we'd done with the other company that had sort of odd shapes and things, the Joffrey Ballet in Melbourne.

MP: Back in 1998 another great theme - these are sort of predictable themes in a way – dance circus, it's just everywhere and it sort of started around that time. And you had Jean-Baptiste Thierrée.

LS: And his son was in this year's festival.

MP: His son has been a constant visitor to the Sydney Festival this century. You had dad, married to Charlie Chaplin's daughter, last century. It's a popular mix, isn't it, to mix dance and circus into a kind of physical theatre? There's a lot of it about.

LS: Yes, a lot of it about and it's flavour of the month, like installation art or performance art and video installations. They weren't around when we were doing those festivals in Sydney. But I suppose if they were I'd include them now. But we had a little program of arts but we tended also to find out what the other companies were doing and umbrella it. And I think that's a great way to build a festival program into something of substance. If you know that Geoffrey Rush in *Kidstuff* or whatever that play that he did and - - -

39.39 **MP: That was *Small Poppies*.**

LS: - - - yes, *Small Poppies*, all of those works, the presenters were willing to time them to go into the Festival because they knew that they'd have that extra marketing muscle to fill their houses. And I mean we did it. It didn't take very much from those companies. We used them - We promoted them, in effect. They were going to happen anyway but the extra boost that they got from being in the Festival was quite substantial.

MP: So how do you distinguish between shows that you pick up and make as part of your festival and those you leave on the fringe? Because the Sydney Festivals, originally Stephen Hall had pages of umbrella events of not particular high quality standard, often community, actually Carnivale multicultural type shows very originally, and there was a lot of those sort of shows. This is a different sort of umbrella-ing you're talking about.

LS: It always seemed like spotty programming to me. I like bigger, bolder, more substantial brushstrokes of programming and no guilt programming, if you like. I mean I know that sounds cynical but there's no point in padding it out with little bits of stuff that are highly uneven; it's best to aim for a smaller number of large, lighthouse events on the whole.

MP: Whether it's Sydney Theatre Company doing the Irish play, *The Weir* in one year or whether it's Belvoir doing *Judas Kiss* or Belvoir doing *Cloudstreet* - - -

LS: I must say we put three hundred thousand dollars into *Cloudstreet*.

MP: Well, let's talk about *Cloudstreet* in that first year because that was the most astonishing theatrical experience and became an international hit. Based on Tim Winton's novel, of course, directed by Neil Armfield and done in association with Belvoir and Black Swan Theatre in Perth. What role did the Festival play in it, in developing it?

41.35 LS: Major, major, we started it. I'd already bought *That Eye, the Sky*, which was done in a little theatre in Darlinghurst with David Wenham and Richard Roxburgh – you might remember - - -

MP: Yes, I remember it.

LS: - - - it was called something-*Pig* – a mad name for the thing.

MP: It's a Tim Winton novel again.

LS: Tim Winton thing, *That Eye, the Sky*, and I brought that down to Melbourne because I saw it here in Sydney and took it down there and I thought it was worth seeing. So I was familiar with the adaptation work of Justin Monjo who did that. And really my first act when I took over or knew I was going to be doing the Sydney Festival was to invite Neil Armfield over for a coffee and I'd moved into Bronte House. We sat on the back thing and I said "I have nothing programmed and I want something from you and what have you got?" He said "Well, I've been discussing *Cloudstreet* with so-and-so but it's going to cost a million dollars to do it." And I said "Well, if we can get the Perth Festival to do it, as long as we have two festivals doing it we can get all the money, we can get the million dollars." The bulk of that million, six hundred thousand went into that one production. So we were able to do it then with box office. But for me that was a dream start. It was the *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* of its era but more powerful and more wonderful and resonated not only with local audiences but with everybody else.

And, look, there are certain things, Martin, that you can only do in a festival, like all day stuff. An all-day *Nicholas Nickleby* or the forty Rosary Sonatas in a church over four hours with the violinist retuning after each sonata, they're festival events. They're not going to be on Musica Viva's program, they're not going to be anywhere else except in a festival because you need the money and the promotional muscle to do them there and get a full house.

MP: That was a very impressive landmark for you in that first festival. But how deliberate has been your investment generally in festivals in Australian work? It would seem to me not a priority of your festivals - - -

43.38 LS: No, it's not.

MP: - - - to actually commission local work and to leave some legacy for local artists and companies which many other festival directors – Robyn Archer comes to mind – would express as really a very important function of a festival.

LS: I think that is turning the festival into a de facto funding body and I don't think festivals exist to do that. I think festivals should exist to showcase the best that is available in any particular genre, whether its existing, or whether on the strength of its creators, it's a reasonable bet to fund it. I didn't say it, Richard Walsh did, but he said that "Commissions are the rusting hulks of used cars that litter the front yard of Australian culture." And I think there's a great deal of truth in that. If I think of the Bicentennial Festival in Sydney, where they did *Vast* with all the dance companies getting together and Graeme Murphy's choreography - sunk without trace. I think one is hard put to find historically or even in recent experience, work that has been commissioned that has had life beyond its immediate ephemeral appearance in a festival program. It's a tough call, isn't it?

MP: It is a tough call and you answer it frankly but isn't it a way of capturing the mood of the moment rather than doing a rarely performed opera by Handel or a lot of string quartets by Beethoven?

LS: I don't think so. Well, it was a more conventional choice, the Beethoven. But as far as the Handel's work is concerned, that was a revelation to anybody that saw it. First of all, we were able to include Australian artists and an Australian orchestra for it. I mean, gosh, not many chances like that come along for somebody with a bundle of money and say "Here you go, Erin Helyard - you conduct it, you've got this Orchestra of the Antipodes. We need natural horns. Fly them in from Perth. We need this artist; boom boom, pop them in".

45.39 And we had essentially a high Australian component to that performance up in Brisbane - we had eleven kids that got the break on stage as extras, trained by Paul Curran who's got an international reputation. So I think that's money better invested in the future of Australia, and in encouraging, particularly young people, to participate in festivals. It's a better investment than giving some whiz-bang kid some money to go and do something that may or may not work. I mean I think you stand a better chance of getting somebody involved or getting local artists involved and give them a break to perform within an international context, than it is to try and whip something up from tours. I don't think there are that many wonderful, non-derivative directors around for any kind of work or artists - I mean I've not seen the work.

MP: Or new playwrights?

LS: Or new playwrights. But I mean there's new plays being done all the time. Why duplicate the work that Belvoir's doing, the MTC and the STC's doing? They're all doing it, they're all doing commissions of new

works, bundles of it. There's plenty of money for them. It doesn't have to necessarily be in a festival.

MP: It's really interesting because I wonder -

LS: It's a pious thing and Robyn talked about it. I haven't seen anything - I've seen work that's been done and it's so boring. It might be a good presentation on paper but it's boring and it has no life beyond and it leaves no impact. And I'd far rather bring some amazing production like whatever, *Ten [Three] Lives of Lucie Cabrol* from Théâtre de Complicité.

**MP: So contemporary theatre, in this case from a European company -
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LS: Yes, of course, of course.

MP: - - - but tested and tried.

LS: Yes, but also don't forget that that company first came with a magnificent production of *The Winter's Tale* in one of Stephen's festivals.

47.37 **MP: That's right.**

LS: And sensational, with Simon McBurney in it and Kathryn Hunter. And that led to connections with the STC. But it also showed people a new way of staging Shakespeare, minimally in the round which they did down at the Seymour Centre and lots of doubling of parts. I think you could see the influence of that work of McBurney's in *Cloudstreet*, where a kitchen table becomes a boat.

MP: To some extent I suppose your attitude there is defined by you not coming from the arts industry which makes you a very unusual festival director.

LS: I think that's great because I can sit outside and say "Yes, no, I think that might work". Of course I'm going to make mistakes - everybody makes mistakes. You've always got a turkey on your hands somewhere or other. And there's many, many an idea that's gone down the gurgler for reasons of costs or timing. It's quite odd to think that you can get together a terrific festival in a specific amount of time, with people coming from every corner of the globe in a narrow window of two weeks or ten days, whatever, and just bring it off. And I think it's great to have a cultivated individual, which I think I am, with broad tastes. There are certain things I don't like - I don't like jazz all that much but I've programmed jazz; I understand there's a market for it. But again it's with the best - it's like Chick Corea or someone like that.

MP: So you're not from the arts industry, you're from a marketing, if you like, media background more, and your connoisseurship is pretty high quality but it's personal, not professional.

LS: Absolutely. But how can it be professional? There's no handbook of festival directors, saying "Thou must". Essentially, it's always going to be a matter of taste. But also of, I guess, a kind of balance, and, look, it's not being done for the artists. I wouldn't say "Fuck the artists" but really, I'm interested in a paying public, I'm interested in what impact it will have on a public, how you can make people who've paid ninety dollars for a ticket happy.

49.45 **MP: But you have been called "The great shopping trolley festival director, travelling the world and filling up the trolley". The sort of skills that you describe, does that create that sort of festival director?**

LS: I don't think I am. I think that's a misdescription. You may as well say the same thing about, say, BAM [Brooklyn Academy of Music], which has been a nursery/hothouse for experiment and work and the same names continue to recur there. There's great brand loyalty there to Lou Reed and Robert Wilson and Philip Glass so that when Harvey [Lichtenstein] - what's his name - I'll think of it in a second - the guy that used to run that festival at BAM, the Next Wave Festival in New York, he did something absolutely radical. He brought Les Arts Florissants and baroque opera into the BAM mix. But previous to that there were the commissions, the tripartite commission from the Thalia Theatre in Hamburg of the Robert Wilson pieces, *The Black Rider*, whatever, *Rocket Man* [*Time Rocker*] and *Alice*, whatever, those three that he did. Only one of the three were any good and had a life beyond the festival - the other two were dogs. But also Twyla Tharp and Pina Bausch were regulars on that thing. And that's just the shopping trolley walking down the same aisles.

It's so easy to say that because there are always going to be elements that you pick and I have no problem with that. You are exposing a local audience to what you believe personally. I mean is there any other way to do it? Because it's not on a market research basis - what you think personally is worthwhile and will stimulate audiences, stimulate them to laughter, to tears, to memory, to all sorts of things. But essentially my concern is with the audience. What do they want, how might we lead them somewhere, how can we take an audience that's never heard of Schoenberg or Bartok, never heard a note of their music and bring them to see two really keystone modern works in *Bluebeard's Castle* and *Erwartung*?

52.06 And you can only do that by marketing. There is no other way to lure them. You've got to assure people that they're going to see something of quality. And if you look at all those brochures, all of them contain quotes from other companies – of course they've been tested and tried. But to generate any of those productions from scratch, you'd have a festival program that's closer to a brochure. I mean by bringing in readymade work and maybe sometimes with recasting and restaging it or remarketing it, you could actually present a wide spectrum of work that is not predicated on commissions. Someone may have commissioned it and I've joined in a couple of times with commissions with other festivals. But for the most part, I'm interested in work that has proved to be of worth and which can be shown to an audience who hasn't been exposed either to the work or to the director or to the actors or the directorial ideas – new ways of producing or directing stuff.

MP: Let's talk about some of the challenges of even pushing the trolley around and trying to fill it and trying to keep you on your toes - - -

LS: It's not a problem if you love what you're doing. You see, I'm on my toes all the time. I am interested in everything that goes on in the performing arts and the world of music. I read incessantly. There was a time when I did travel more to see more but I know what's going on, I know exactly what's on in Glyndebourne this season, I'm interested in the fact that Barrie Kosky is following in the footsteps of Peter Sellars and doing an oratorio, Handel oratorio, *Saul*. Sellars did *Theodora* - a dream cast, David Daniels.

53.39 **MP: It's interesting to talk about Barrie Kosky because at the time when you were making festivals in 1996 he staged a very influential Adelaide Festival - - -**

LS: Yes, sure.

MP: - - - as a sort of naughty wunderkind.

LS: Yes. If you look back on that, that had a lot of interesting and challenging ideas but there's no central thing that actually whirled that away. He was originally very keen on the idea of it and now, of course, in his career in Europe he is doing quite radical and rare things around both the Komische Oper where he works and in other places in Europe. And Bayreuth – he's going to Bayreuth with *Die Meistersinger*.

MP: But in talking about Kosky and a few other allusions you've made to the Adelaide Festival, it has always been a kind of premier festival, originally every two years and just lately every year. Did

you in Melbourne and then in Sydney work yourself to be very distinct from Adelaide?

LS: Of course. The city itself makes it distinctive, I mean your actual physical surroundings. The nature of any festival hinges a lot on its particularities, physical and in terms of the culture of that city. Adelaide interested me a lot because in Anthony's festivals there, which I thought were marvellous - - -

MP: Anthony Steel's festivals?

LS: Anthony Steel's festivals.

MP: He was one of the rare people who've done about four festivals, the last one in 1986.

LS: Yes. But he brought a lot of stuff in the way I did. I mean he brought the Fires of London in and that's no different to bringing the Lindsays – it's just they did contemporary work. But they were also a splendid company, Peter Maxwell Davies' company, Fires of London. They did *The Madness of George III* or whatever it was, *Songs for a Mad King* [*Eight Songs for a Mad King*] and they had Randolph Stow's *Miss Donnithorne's Maggot* and they did *Pierrot Lunaire* and it was decidedly modernist.

55.32

I mean Anthony didn't have a great interest in western classical music but he was interested in a lot of experimental work. But still those festivals were distinguished by some exceptional centrepieces. Moshinsky's production of *Wozzeck* which was sensational – conducted by Stuart Challender as I remember – no, Edward Downes did it. But then there was the *Excursions of Mr Broucek* and *Katya Kabanova*, there was a slew of Janáček operas done which often brought a lot of people from interstate into Adelaide, which was good. But not just the arts community, whatever that may be.

MP: Can you just talk about some of the sort of disasters? The planning difficulties you have in planning a festival across a range of, the luxury of even four years. You were very keen, for example, on getting the *Peony Pavilion*, which is a twenty two hour Chinese opera.

LS: *Peony Pavilion*, yes, eventually nearly broke the Perth Festival.

MP: So Sean Doran did have it at the Perth Festival in 2000 - - -

LS: Yes.

MP: - - - but you'd been negotiating for about two years to get it earlier, didn't you.

LS: Sure, and it was a three part deal. We pledged money with the Lincoln Centre Festival, which John Rockwell was running at the time, and with the French festival called Festival d'Été – no what is it called – Josephine Markovits – I'm trying to think of the name of it [Festival d'Automne à Paris]. It's kind of one of those festivals that's died, had a lot of avant garde work again in the BAM mode. But it was John Rockwell's concept and he asked if we'd go in. I met him at Bayreuth and we talked about it. Met him in Frankfurt, actually, seeing a production of *The Ring*, and we talked about whether or not it would work.

MP: Not to develop the work - it's already developed.

LS: No, it wasn't developed, no. It was a different production. It was quite a sinister thing that happened. It was done by an expatriate Chinese director who was putting it together in China but when it was premiered in Shanghai the cultural minister pulled it. It was just quite scandalous. I mean it was going to be done first there, then go to New York, then to Paris, then here.

57.43 **MP: It was in France, though, in '99?**

LS: Yes. Eventually they got it together but in a different sort of way. I'm trying to think of the name of the guy who did it - he ended up doing bits of opera here and there. But the one that I think went to Perth may well have been the officially sanctioned version from Shanghai.

MP: So there was a censored version?

LS: There was one that had a particular director – I'm trying to think of his name now - but anyhow, look, when they fall over you tend not to stand by the corpse, awaiting burial.

MP: You had a huge success with the '98 festival and a huge budget and it won the budget back and got a surplus of some hundred thousand. Then in the following year, 1999, you had a very big deficit.

LS: Seven hundred and fifty thousand.

MP: Now, that must have been a big shock for you.

LS: It was, but it was a caution. I got the money back. In fact we got it back with interest the following year. But the problem there was this extremely ambitious but ravishing production of *The Return of Ulysses* which had

again been taken from Amsterdam to Edinburgh and had been a big success there.

MP: From the Netherlands Opera Company.

LS: Oh, it was a magnificent production, quite the most wonderful production. And in terms of nobody had ever seen – well, there had been a staging, I lie. Roger Covell did a staging of a it, a semi pro-am one at University of New South Wales with Gerard English as Ulysses. But it was not done the way – the one that we brought was part of a Monteverdi cycle done by Pierre Audi and it was given really fantastic international exposure. It went to BAM, went to Edinburgh, it went just about everywhere. So that lost money.

59.30 **MP: And you put it in a casino, in a new Lyric Theatre in Star City.**

LS: I didn't deliberately put it there. Having engaged to do it, I wanted to do it in the Capitol and the wretched whatever his name is, Jacobsen, Kevin Jacobsen, had it pencilled for something. And he rang me after the brochure had gone to print to say, "Oh, you can have the Capitol now". I said "I've already put the brochure to print. I can't do it." And I think that just too many people who are interested in opera and most of the opera-going audience just didn't want to a show in a casino. I mean it's found its niche now and if you had a huge name like Kevin Spacey – people went to see him there in that theatre. But mostly it's *Strictly Ballroom* and *Priscilla* and it's all that sort of stuff.

MP: It's dangerous, isn't it? That production lost you three hundred and twenty thousand.

LS: Yes, a lot of money.

MP: That is a lot of money on one production.

LS: Yes. It was a fabulous production, most luxurious casting I think I can experience.

MP: And again there you are, doing a kind of popular, accessible festival but doing an obscure – if I can call Monteverdi that – baroque work, opera.

LS: Yes, but it was a magnificent piece and it deserved an airing. It got fantastic reviews and those that saw it rated it as one of the best experiences of any of the festivals that I've done. And in terms of a production, it had to be influential, it was influential. For somebody whose work has never been seen here before – he directed the Almeida

Theatre before he got into opera – he was essentially a theatrical director, Pierre Audi.

MP: If you look at other highlights of that festival in '99, along with *Return of Ulysses*, you've got flamenco, you had Campanas flamenco again. Any Irish theatre – you must have had Irish theatre in there somewhere. I think you've missed out. You had Young Vic's *Grimm Tales*, *Woyzek* physical theatre - - -

LS: That was a Polish thing that I'd seen in London.

MP: Vietnamese water puppets returned.

LS: They were a huge hit but that was a disaster as far as the Immigration Department was concerned.

61.32 **MP: What, they didn't get in?**

LS: Somebody up in Vietnam wouldn't issue the Australian visas on a weekend, so we had to go public and it got very messy but we won the battle.

MP: You had outdoor spectacle, Els Comediants.

LS: Now, I inherited the notion of there needing to be a unique element of the programming, which was big outdoor performances. And every one of the festivals I did had one of those, either a processional element, there was one called *Titanic* there, there was Els Comediants, there was another one, a French one, with huge inflatables. Each year we did those on the steps of the Opera House, on the forecourt of the Opera House.

MP: This is an impressive legacy, really, of Anthony Steel on the forecourt of the Opera House.

LS: Anthony Steel, yes, and it was part of his program that I chose to continue because I thought it had a lot of verve and excitement and it was spectacle – Sydney loves spectacle.

MP: Does this make the Sydney Festival, as we talk about so many festivals in Australia and indeed around the world, fairly unique that it's got this outdoor spectacle and elements of free festival events like in the Domain?

LS: Yes, it's unique in that. It's a summer festival. Sydney is dichotomous in the sense that it's both a metropolis, sophisticated metropolis, and a resort. I mean there are very few places you can think of in the world where world business goes on and where it's got a London-Paris-New

York-Sydney bracket of leading cities and, you know, just ten minutes from a beach. And people are walking around the city in thongs and shorts and others are in business suits. So it's, I think, two types of city telescoped in Sydney and it gives it a unique atmosphere.

And also the other thing that has to be said is that I tried to bring it back to that ring that ran from the Domain around the forecourt of the Opera House and included the Opera House and then 'round to the Sydney Theatre Company in Walsh Bay. And just concentrate it there. I'm not a big fan of the notion of taking it out to Parramatta because that becomes the Festival of Parramatta.

63.37 **MP: That's interesting because after Stephen Hall, Anthony Steel deliberately gave it that Circular Quay focus and had great dreams of that being almost like the dress circle of the festival - - -**

LS: But they didn't use the Opera House enough.

MP: Outside he did – but you say not inside?

LS: Not inside. But inside it was critical. I remember we had a survey at the beginning of my tenure and seventy five per cent of Sydneysiders never set foot in the Opera House – they were daunted for one reason or another. And Richard Bradshaw had said to me in Melbourne, "Every audience excludes another one". Whatever the audience is, how it's composed, it's excluding people that don't fit into that compositional mix.

MP: And so how do you square that with your ambition to have a bit of something for everybody in a festival?

LS: Well, you can, you can. You don't have to frighten an audience off. We had fourteen performances in the Opera House. People loved going there but something had to be made tempting for them to go there. So you can have an *Admeto* and you can have the McCollough Sons of Thunder doing gospel or a shout band as long as you can pique an audience's curiosity. A box office is a critical part of all of this. We don't have the luxury of the budgets of the European festivals. We talk about six million, ten million; the budget for Salzburg is forty five million euros.

MP: Wow.

LS: And that's perceived as an investment in tourism in a country where the primary industry is tourism.

MP: So, relevant to that '99 Festival also is this issue that you talked about at the time and that really was of concern to the board, of venue security, so-called.

LS: Yes.

MP: The access of the Sydney Festival to decent venues, which has plagued festival directors in the past – and I don't know about in the more recent past. But you were very keen to have the Festival having first access to the Sydney Opera House in January.

65.36 LS: Sure.

MP: That must be very controversial - - -

LS: No, no.

MP: - - - because other companies are kicked out then, aren't they?

LS: Well, no one was kicked out – there was hardly anybody there. They were doing *Mostly Mozart* – that was dead in the bum – a bit of *Mostly Mozart* concerts picked up from the downtime at Lincoln Centre. There was some idea that they should bring the Seattle Orchestra in or Gerard Schwarz used to come in and run the *Mostly Mozart* Festival in summer.

MP: Presented by the Sydney Opera House themselves at that time?

LS: No, no, no. In summer he did it, then it was picked up by the Opera House but there was nothing of any substance on in January. But once I showed what could happen – and it wasn't me but once the Festival demonstrated that there was a market there, and a big one, family market, lots of people, for popular culture, could come in. And it was a question then as the festival withdrew from the Opera House, the Opera House Trust itself began presenting things like Cuban dance companies and popular stuff. The stuff that I was programming, they programmed and made money out of it.

MP: As they do to this day almost in competition with the Festival.

LS: As they do to this day, yes, and it's now a key part. If you're running the Sydney Festival you couldn't get the Opera House anymore because they're making a profit out of what they do themselves. But it was really our turf that demonstrated that there was a January market for all sorts of performing arts.

MP: What was your shortage then of venues at that time?

LS: Well, there was no proper theatre. I mean you've got a rotten opera theatre but in any case it's always occupied by the Opera Company in January. The Opera Company was spectacularly uncooperative over *Ulysses* - I think there was envy - - -

MP: Not giving up the Sydney Opera House to do it, you mean?

LS: Well, not collaborating with us. I tried to do a collaboration with Glyndebourne and I had a couple of productions in mind and tried to talk to Moffatt Oxenbould in particular but they stymied it. They said "Oh, no, we've got to have local artists." And I encountered that again with both the STC and the Opera Company in trying to put together a program for the Olympics.

67.37 **MP: So the Sydney Theatre Company as in the Drama Theatre in January in the Opera House - and you couldn't have collaborations with them?**

LS: Well, we did have some collaborations with them. But, honestly, the real problem was that the Opera House is no good for opera and it's no good for ballet. It's cramped; it's a *jeté* and a half across, and they used to have to hold mattresses there if people bounce off the stage. There's no expansive feeling that there is in Melbourne or Brisbane on a big stage. And even those stages are somewhat smaller than the ones that most companies are used to working with in Europe.

MP: And, of course, you commented in Melbourne that just as Melbourne's Regent Theatre in the mid '90s was being reopened with great aplomb, Sydney's Regent Theatre had long since been pulled down - - -

LS: Yes.

MP: - - - expressing the approach to theatres of the two cities.

LS: Oh, it's scandalous, it's scandalous. I can remember, I'm old enough to remember some wonderful theatres in Sydney. The Palace, which was a genuine theatre in Pitt Street, the Palace Theatre next to Adams' Hotel. The State could be wonderful but the government needed to buy or compulsorily purchase the building behind to expand the backstage areas. The State is still the best long term possibility but now that they've turned it into a bit of a – Gowings is a hotel and all that sort of thing – the State is used as just a shelf of a stage.

MP: It's a what?

LS: A shelf. It's like a mantelpiece, it's so narrow.

MP: And that leaves the Capitol Theatre which was renovated and Anthony Steel did the first show there in its renovated status. But it's constantly booked by commercial producers for musicals.

LS: Of course, of course, and the musicals are in there for six months. It's a problem that I face up in Queensland too, looking at holes between *Wicked* and the revival of *Les Miz* [*Les Misérables*] and *Strictly Ballroom*. You've got to grab little opportunities in between those to try and time them to go with a festival.

MP: In your time, though, as festival director, the new Sydney Theatre opened in Walsh Bay, the Sydney [City] Recital Hall opened at Angel Place.

69.36 LS: Not in my time, I don't think.

MP: All right, O.K, soon after. So are things better now for Sydney Festival?

LS: Yes, but they're still not proper theatres. The Recital Hall is not a proscenium arch theatre. And most work that you want to do or bring in is going to be better – unless it was created for a theatre in the round – is better in a proscenium theatre. Anything out of Europe is likely to be out of a proscenium arch.

MP: So you've got the problem of venues, you had the problem of Monteverdi in the casino.

LS: It's a lovely theatre, by the way, with a beautiful - - -

MP: The Lyric Theatre in Star City?

LS: The Lyric Theatre, I think it's a beautiful theatre. People think it's a bastard of a theatre but I don't. I think it's very like the one in Edinburgh now. It's kind of lozenge-shaped and I think the views were good and the acoustic was terrific and backstage was marvellous. It really worked brilliantly as a theatre. It just happened to be in the wrong place.

MP: I just had wanted to ask you about after the '99 Festival, how the board responded to that Festival and you in seeking tourist - - -

LS: The board trusted me, the board trusted me.

MP: But they made a few measures, did they not, in the governance of festivals for the future? They established a need for a reserve fund for the first time, didn't they?

LS: I don't know about that.

MP: They formed a financial committee, whatever that means.

LS: Yes. Well, I rely on the accountants to tell me whether anything's viable or not. I'm not a bean counter. I'm trying to get an overall, overarching

view and not be obsessed with the idea of whether we can or can't afford it. If it's really good, let's go for it and see if we can raise the money to do it, that's my view. And in fact after that, Frank really wanted to cut *Electra* out of the next program.

MP: That was your big opera for the next one.

LS: The big opera for the next year. And the point about that was really that it was Simone and Deborah Polaski and the SSO. It was a big deal and in the event it sold every seat in the house for the performances. It was magnificent. But I then went and had a word – I shouldn't put this on the record, should I?

71.37 **MP: Well, my answer would be yes.**

LS: Well, I spoke to Bob Carr about it and he spoke to Michael Egan and they found an extra million for us.

MP: To contribute to pay for the deficit?

LS: No, just to support the Festival in a new program. And we budgeted then to repay whatever the shortfall had been. It was not helped by the journalists here - they just rejoice – everything's measured on box office. Fortunately, there aren't too many arts journalists still practising but I remember somebody was slightly jubilant - I don't know who it was, who was the journalist, but he talked about Verdi's *Return of Ulysses* – I can remember that's how well-informed he was on the work.

MP: Forgot the "Monte" part.

LS: Monte, yes.

MP: Also at that time, though, there was a resolve to establish a general manager in the Festival office. We earlier talked about the division between General Manager and Artistic Director in festival management.

LS: Brett was managing the Festival.

MP: I thought he was Deputy Director.

LS: He was Deputy Director, yes. We discussed the arts thing but he ran all the budgets.

MP: And when Chrissy Sharp became in 2000, General Manager for the first time in that nominated role, that wasn't a particular new change.

LS: No, all's good, all's good. I mean they all shared the ambitions for the Festival to be wonderful and a jewel in Sydney's crown.

MP: Tell me a little bit about co-presentations, like with *Elektra* at the Capitol Theatre, that you brought in the management of the Capitol Theatre to strategically spread the risk and profit-share, by kind of differently calculating audience capacities and investing on different levels of that.

LS: Sure, sure. But also they had a box office percentage, so you were able to do it that way. You know, it's in their interests as well as ours to make sure the house is full.

MP: How does that work?

LS: Well, there's a different case each time. I mean often it works on rent remission. They co-produce with you and so you don't have to just come in as a casual hirer and pay full rates. I mean it's like a hotel: you do a deal with a hotel and you say "I've got a hundred and fifty people going to come in here. What's your rate going to be?"

73.50 **MP: And if the capacity of the theatre is over, say, sixty five per cent they then get an income?**

LS: Yes. Once it hits a certain level which is required to balance the books with the Festival, then you split the percentage above a certain amount, you split the excess with the presenter, the co-presenter.

MP: Right. So that actually protects you from risk, that would make someone like Frank Sartor pleased about *Elektra*.

LS: Yes. But it makes me very pleased. I remember when Ian and I first brought the Paris Opera Ballet, we shared it with the Capitol Theatre. We got a percentage to them, they made money, and in that case even the advance that we got from Events New South Wales or Tourism Events New South Wales was paid back. Two hundred thousand dollars we got to kickstart that event and gave it back to them.

MP: Your program in '99 included quite a few very glamorous umbrella events as part of the financing.

LS: Cirque du Soleil.

MP: Cirque du Soleil was fantastic. But weren't you promoting events like Cirque du Soleil's staggeringly successful *Saltimbanco* program, which I gather had a box office in Sydney of seven million dollars. But isn't that stealing audiences from you? You don't get any of that seven million.

LS: No, but we got the benefit of them moving the times. I can't remember exactly what the financial arrangements were but we did some deal with

them, but not over the whole event because we just had the opening and it ran on from there. I mean it's pretty well run its course now, I think, Cirque du Soleil, I don't know. But it just beefed up the program. I don't know that I was ecstatic about it. You can, I think, judge my degree of enthusiasm by the position it occupied within the program, right at the back of the book.

75.40 **MP: It looks good to associate the Sydney Festival with a Warhol exhibition at the MCA, a Cézanne one at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.**

LS: Sure. Yes, why not.

MP: This is the visual arts included in a festival. And often visual arts are left out. But you're not benefiting from the audiences, from the dollars that go to those exhibits.

LS: No. We're benefiting, though, from the overall image that derives to a festival from having some big names to it. Tony Ellwood understands the value of a name like Warhol, and his first act when he took over the art gallery up in Queensland was to inaugurate a Warhol show.

MP: Yes, O.K.

LS: I mean people aren't there sitting, judging you on that and I don't think the audience can on the whole differentiate. I don't think the audience that we got for the opening – and we got a big slice of tickets, I think, for Cirque du Soleil, as I remember - the audience isn't sitting there, saying "That's an umbrella event. Who's paying for that?" It's just - they look at the overall festival. And it's no different, really, to sharing productions that are happening now all over the world, where works are a co-production between three opera companies and they're going from A to B to C at some stage. It's no different from a commission in a sense.

MP: But you're not being influential in the MCA doing Warhol or the Art Gallery choosing to do Cézanne, it's the luck of the draw that they exist and you make a branding decision to associate yourself.

LS: Yes, yes. Well, what happened was that they actually, both the MCA and the Gallery began to program stuff specifically for January because it's a holiday month, everybody's on holidays and there are huge numbers of tourists in the city at that time so it's an attractive offer.

MP: And that's what the Sydney Festival has delivered to January and Sydney, isn't it? And that was its original intention. So the daggy parades that you were lampooning in the beginning, the original intention was to bring shoppers back in January.

- 77.38 LS: Shoppers, yes, a different sort of shopper. But I think that was retail driven, really, rather than restaurant and hotel driven.
- MP: Let's look at that time in 1999 when you were planning for the 2000 Festival, your third. You were very busy at that time.**
- LS: Shocking.
- MP: You were director of the Sydney Festival, you were still Chair, I think, of the SSO.**
- LS: But I gave it up at some time during '99, I think, as I remember.
- MP: You were artistic director of the 2000 Olympic Games Arts Festival, 'The Harbour of Life', which launched its program in September, and of the Paralympics Festival which happened some time later. And you were also a regular columnist, as you were for the two decades before, with the *Sydney Morning Herald* but rather controversially moved to the *Sunday Telegraph*. How did you keep all the balls in the air?**
- LS: I don't know. I'm a workaholic, I think, but I love what I do. I mean anything that gets in the way of it, I easily give up, I think, even now.
- MP: So you shed things, you say no to things?**
- LS: Yes. As of now I have the Brisbane Baroque to work up, I have a new proposal – well, not a proposal – I've been invited to propose a new festival for Sydney, not to replace the Sydney Festival, supplementary.
- MP: At what time of the year, can I ask?**
- LS: Winter, which is easier, strangely enough, to do. And I had to create a festival which is not contingent on conventional theatres. And in addition to that I'm back on air with Foxtel Arts, introducing their arts programs.
- MP: And you had time for an eightieth birthday or two last week.**
- LS: I did.
- 79.31 **MP: What about in that period, though, did you have conflicts of interest? How does that work in the arts? Did you have conflicts of interest? How do you do programming that's distinctively different for the Olympic and Paralympic Festivals from the Sydney Festivals at the same time in the same city, expressing the same character of the city?**
- LS: Well, that was the most challenging thing and I didn't get my way, across the board, with the Olympic Arts Festival. It was very much a low priority

for SOCOG. They just wanted to have some token events that they could take international delegates to. They were not too fussed about quality and much of what we'd originally envisaged went by the board. I was left in the end with the unhappy decision to just have the local theatre company and the local opera company do what they wanted to do, not what I suggested they might do. And in fact the STC, I wanted them to do a *Hamlet* with Hugh Jackman. He's a wonderful Shakespearean actor and he hadn't become a Hollywood star at the time and that would have been a magnificent thing. I also wanted to bring a *Parsifal* from Berlin but conducted by Simone Young and Kosky was again it for whatever reason. He seems to be perfectly accommodating doing Wagner at Bayreuth but he wasn't going to do Wagner here, and he spoke out against it. But that didn't influence it, I think. What influenced it all was the money.

[18sec edit*]

MP: And this is for a period - was it September 2000, was it, or when was this?

81.14 LS: The one decision that we made was to do it all in August beforehand, and not have it swamped. Because having been not to Los Angeles but to the previous Olympics in Atlanta, I could see what was happening there, that nobody was going to anything, the houses were half empty. There was some nice stuff they had in the program. But a lot of it was the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra.

MP: But in Sydney you brought Ute Lemper and Pina Bausch and Silvie Guillem.

LS: A lot of those - but Pina Bausch was the big thing that I wanted to bring. But in the end the compromise was that Bausch wanted to come and create a new work with all of her dancers up in Arnhem Land.

MP: Robyn Archer would have liked that.

LS: Yes.

MP: But not you?

LS: I loved the idea but the cost was just through the roof.

MP: And no Australian play was done in that time?

LS: But there wasn't one that we might have done. And I was at the mercy of Wayne Harrison.

MP: Of the STC. What did they do? They didn't do *Hamlet*?

LS: No, they did *The White Devil*, Jacobean play.

MP: Jacobean play, O.K.

LS: With Angie Milliken in the lead and – who else was in it? Bill Zappa.

MP: I thought you had a large budget for the Olympic Festival.

LS: I had a rotten budget. It was back to the old Melbourne area, not a large budget.

MP: They were paying you quite well, though, weren't they?

LS: Reasonably, but nothing spectacular. But we lost Los Angeles because the aim was always to try and get the other countries to put something into bringing them and Los Angeles wouldn't pony up anything. We had to pay for everything. But we did have the La Scala Orchestra with Muti conducting. We had the wonderful opening of the Mahler 8 which was terrific, with the SSO.

83.13 **MP: Yes. You also had at that time, remarkable influence. I mean you were truly "Mr Sydney", really, weren't you?**

LS: Well, so they tell me.

MP: And unique for a festival director – we've talked about other unique qualities of being a personal connoisseur if you like, as opposed to professional – but you were also media commentator as well, with access to media contacts and indeed a column for decades.

LS: Only for the media group I was working for.

MP: Well, the *Sydney Morning Herald* in '99 and then Murdoch press later.

LS: Yes.

MP: Did you, as reported, leave the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1999 after constant internal complaints about how it reported on your Festival?

LS: No, not at all.

MP: And particularly how it put the loss that we've been talking about on their front page?

LS: Oh, I was angered at that because there was no qualification and I was furious with them. Yes, maybe, I don't know, I don't know. I thought we'd had fantastic support in the John Alexander days for the Festival.

MP: When he was editor?

LS: Yes. But other editors, I think, were looking for different sorts of stories.

MP: And yet they were a sponsor of the Festival but also provided critics of its events but also reported on its news.

LS: Yes, there's probably a conflict there but, look, nothing serious - it's not like one was taking money.

MP: I like the way you've described the arts media as, well, uninformed but also the equivalent of the gun lobby. What do you mean by that?

LS: They're only looking at negatives. It's always very difficult being part of – I know how the arts media works. And, look, in terms of the structure within a newspaper there's nothing, apart from being a religious editor that would be a minor job, a less awkward job to do anything with. And there's always a “reds under the beds” attitude and everyone's sort of looking for a little snipe – somebody might have whispered in their ear.

85.26 The particular problem I had with the *Herald* was that Brook Turner was prepared to run a story about the Olympic Arts Festival without consulting either Craig Hassall or myself. And they just took Adrian Collette's point of view about ticket sales being bad for *Tosca* for the Olympic Festival. Well, of course they were bad. It was because we were made to have it. They'd trotted out Joan Carden. Moffatt wouldn't do a new work at all for the Festival - nothing at all from the Opera Company that was interesting; it was just the same old repertoire trotted out.

MP: So still you've got a challenge (and not just you, presumably, but other festival directors, or is this a personal thing?) of being able to get the collaborative interest of participating companies to go along with an idea.

LS: I think, well, I just was unsuccessful there. I mean Hugh Jackman wanted to do it – it would have been a wonderful production – but you know Wayne Harrison.

MP: Then STC director?

LS: Yes. Nothing much that you'd rave about about his tenure there. And the same with the Opera Company. I would have thought that they would seek to do a new production or something wonderful and unusual. They just did the same old stuff and it irks me slightly that they're still doing work that is as crummy as it is. I don't know if you saw the *Aida* on the harbour.

MP: The big outdoor event. So this is Opera Australia but you're talking about the Australian Ballet, the Sydney Theatre Company.

87.11 LS: Yes. Well, the Ballet couldn't do anything for some reason or other.

MP: Belvoir has provided you with some pretty strong productions.

LS: Yes, yes, absolutely.

MP: *Judas Kiss*.

LS: But the point is the Belvoir is a company that I admire and their repertoire is really interesting, it's been proved to be that. I don't know who's running it now. Who's running it? Ralph's not there anymore.

MP: He's still there but he's about to be replaced. So you paint a rather provincial, a parochial picture, of the companies trying to get on with each other and get on with you.

LS: No, I don't think that's the case. I mean one went to everybody and said "What would you like to do?" and when they said "*Tosca*", I said "Well, can't we do better than that?" I mean *Tosca schmosca*. I forget what else was on but there was nothing really exciting in the opera offering. We had to go with the local companies, of course, but my powers of persuasion didn't work with them.

MP: So you've ploughed on with your shopping trolley?

LS: No, there wasn't that much of a shopping trolley for the Olympic - - -

MP: I'm sorry. I'm thinking of your 2000 Festival, if you like, in that same year, in January 2000. You made a huge surplus that year. You retired, with a bit of help from the state government coming in with extra money as you said, but you retired the '99 debt. *Elektra* was a big success, you had another Irish play with *The Weir* in happy collaboration with the Sydney Theatre Company, the Nederlands Dans Theater.

LS: They were in the Capitol – they were wonderful. But it was really interesting because – just a little anecdote - I did offer what's his name, the famous choreographer - - -

89.14 **MP: Yuri Kylian.**

LS: - - - Yuri Kylian. I'd taken the company to Melbourne – they'd never been seen in Sydney – and I offered him the choice of either the Olympic Arts Festival or the Sydney Festival. He'd been in the Olympic Arts Festival in Atlanta – he did a big Japanese work there – and he wouldn't go near

an Olympic thing. He said "I don't want to do it. They've got no audiences for us so I'll come to the Sydney Festival".

MP: Well, he was pretty smart in that, it seems.

LS: Yes. And we did have the Capitol for that, we managed to get the Capitol but I doubt that any director now could get it for any set period of time. The thing is that those musicals come and if they can't get in in April they'll go in in August. But the point is for a festival you need to have it for an absolutely set period of time and the Sydney Festival can't accommodate an event that isn't in January where the company's not available. So it's tough. You've still got to bring them in January and put them somewhere, if you think you're going to be good on your program.

MP: In 2000 you had some significant theatre pieces that seemed to have fallen in your lap, did they? Were they umbrella events - when you're thinking about Australia's Daniel Keene short theatre pieces?

LS: No, I'd seen Daniel's work down in Melbourne and I was aware of him. But he just happened to have those pieces. And they didn't do very well at the box office as I recall because he was a darling of Melbourne but not exactly here.

MP: There's a darkness to Daniel Keene that might not be Sydney-appropriate. Wesley Enoch's *The Sunshine Club*, that didn't do so well with the Sydney Theatre Company – that's an Australian work – and Geoffrey Rush, as we mentioned earlier, in *The Small Poppies* in Belvoir.

LS: In *The Small Poppies*, yes.

MP: Do you have a kind of persistent hand in the marketing of the Festival as well?

LS: Absolutely, absolutely.

MP: And the brochures that are in front of us here?

LS: Every single word of every brochure I wrote. It's the old copywriter in me. I just wrote the one for the Brisbane Baroque so I think I can write good selling copy. And every single bit of it.

91.20 **MP: You wrote these programs in front of us?**

LS: Absolutely, absolutely.

MP: O.K. And the design of them, and the look?

LS: The look I created out of - initially I had in Melbourne three companies submit and I went with a company called Emery Vincent for the three Melbourne Festivals that I did. I worked with two guys there, Garry Emery initially, in creating the feel of them. Then I worked with a guy called Ty Bukewitsch, whom I've since worked with in the Hobart Baroque Festival and a guy called Frost – I'll think of his name – Gary, Greg, a New Zealand boy from Emery Vincent [Ray Parslow], came up and established their operation here, and he was the one that created that and he was doing all sorts of logos and everything. Out of a whole heap of "scamps", as we call them, of logo suggestions he just had that squiggle. I went with that and it was a good choice.

MP: And these are big programs.

LS: Yes.

MP: They're a big size.

LS: But when something is not impacting on the consciousness of your potential public, you have to do something about it. So what do you do? You just try to look big, try to look significant. And something about scale is there. You look at the brochure for the Brisbane Hamburg season, that thing that I did over there - there's been five of those international series – that brochure's marvellous.

MP: Yes.

LS: It's so seductive and nobody knew where Hamburg was, a lot of people didn't, and so suddenly - - - If you're offering an unknown quantity, often, people have got to learn to trust you. And one of the ways they can trust you is visually, if something looks very exciting.

93.19 I look at that one again and I think "That's a fucking marvellous brochure" and it's nearly twenty years old.

MP: And as we look finally at the 2001 Festival, your last, when we talk about the branding of a festival and your role in the design and even writing of the brochure, is the Sydney Festival inevitably your own branding and your own personal brand?

LS: It's every director's. The first thing that anybody who follows you is thinking, is they're going to change it; you can bet your sweet arse on that. The minute Adrian Collette got the opera, he changed it from the Australian Opera to Opera Australia - - -

MP: That's a name.

LS: - - - changed the brochure, made it OA and whatever. And then it gets changed back again when someone else gets it. And it's the same with the Festival. Fergus had a different look. And they want to put their own mark on it; not every dog wants to pee in the same space, in the same spot or achieve the same results, to continue the metaphor, it's either to score or get fucked over, I don't know what it is.

MP: Does that make a problem for succession planning and the handover?

LS: No, it shouldn't. I mean I've been going to the Salzburg Festival on and off for a great many years and they've never changed their logo. They've stayed with the consistent one that Reinhardt and co designed back in 1925 and they've kept the same sort of slightly assertive non-pictorial look, using typography or symbolism. They've kept it looking big: there's now a quadripartite publication for opera, concerts, recitals and other ranks – fascinating to see.

95.15 **MP: And does that draw new audiences in new centuries?**

LS: It does, of course it does.

MP: That same design, that same logo?

LS: Well, they reinterpret it. I mean the logo's not what sells it, it's just the feel in the hand. You know how it is: you pick up a *Wish* or *How To Spend It* or one of those glossy publications, or even the *Good Weekend*, and you're attracted and you react to it in different ways. And I developed a kind of, I guess, a personal approach to these things. Never put your biggest item on page two or three, just keep it for [further into the publication] so when people say "Oh, that's nice", I'll say "Oh, and here we have this" and then the big stuff in the middle. If you look at the brochure for Brisbane, it starts off with a gentle Handel, one-off concert, and then you turn the big spread on *Faramondo* and Göttingen and all of that. In many cases it's only a slender number of events that you've got - if you go for the big stuff rather than lots of little rats and mice items, then you can give the proper weight to an event.

MP: Yes.

LS: And you must understand, I think, that every time people pick up a brochure, much of what's in it is absolutely new to them. So can you actually take them through forty descriptions? Or would you rather work with twelve or fourteen?

MP: Yes, yes. Just reflect for me on the last Festival - it made a surplus - as I ask you what you think your greatest sort of achievement,

really, what is your signature Festival? You'd got something right by the time you got to doing 2001.

97.20 LS: Yes. I guess it's a good balance of stuff, I think.

MP: What is it?

LS: A bit of theatre. *Fireface* was the first time Benedict Andrews was introduced to an Australian audience.

MP: He directed that German play?

LS: He directed it. It was written by Marius von Mayenburg. Yes, it was *Feuergesicht* – it's a German play.

MP: With the Sydney Theatre Company?

LS: And it completely reflected everything he was absorbing from the Schaubuhne in Berlin.

MP: And White's *A Cheery Soul* was done as well.

LS: Yes, that was part of the STC's season as I remember. But that was new. The *Ghost Wife* was Jonathan Mills. That was a commission that was shared with Melbourne – we paid for that – and *Death of Sigmund Freud* - it was only a chamber opera work.

MP: *Death of Sigmund Freud* by Andrew Ford?

LS: Yes.

MP: *Ghost Wife* by actually former Melbourne festival director and former Edinburg Festivals.

LS: Yes, Lord Mills.

MP: Jonathan Mills. Is he really Lord Mills?

LS: No, I don't think he's - - -

MP: I wouldn't be surprised - but an Australian who's done very well running the Edinburgh Festival.

LS: He too has had all of these hits and misses. I mean it's just in the nature of the game. Nobody's going to hit the – I mean Kyrgios was eliminated in the first round of whatever he's playing in at the moment. You know, you can just have a golden moment and beat the world's champ and the next minute you're flat on your face somewhere or other - it's the nature of the beast. On paper things look good but sometimes they come out better than they looked on paper, and sometimes they're less successful.

MP: But Edinburgh Festival's a good thing to remember when you note the role of music as a unifying, leading force - - -

LS: Absolutely.

MP: - - - because Edinburgh's a music-focused, international multi-arts festival, isn't it?

LS: But I would argue – people say opera is elite and everything – opera ultimately combines everything: the visual arts, theatre, drama, writing and music, choreography sometimes. It's actually one of those mad hybrids. It's a lot of cross-pollinated stuff in that, you know.

99.30 **MP: I still find it interesting that a Festival that you make accessible in 2001 leads with Mozart's opera which he wrote when he was fourteen.**

LS: It's still a terrific work, beautiful production. It was a model for how to produce an opera. It came right at the end of a year of Mozart's bicentenary celebrations when it was originally seen at Covent Garden. And it was sensational - Graham Vick was the flavour of the month. He doesn't always hit the button but he does some wonderful productions. And that was just an example of how you could do sort of very grand pieces. I think I quoted from Andrew Porter, who died recently, the music critic for the *New Yorker* for a while.

MP: Yes.

LS: There it is. I quoted from him from somewhere or other, "With its sumptuous costumes and sudden scenic surprises, it's one of the most direct, accurately focused composer-true and singer-sustaining productions of our day".

MP: That's not bad when you're fourteen, is it?

LS: No. And it was an opera seria too; you could always actually do it in baroque. I'd forgotten about Robert Lepage, *Feuergesicht*, Matthew Whittet - - -

MP: So Robert Lepage, was here with the *Far Side of the Moon* - - -

LS: Yes.

MP: - - - with music by Laurie Anderson?

LS: This wonderful puppet show, these guys, that's all gone belly up, an ancient tradition, this Brian whatever - - -

MP: You've always had quite a good loyalty to dance excellence at festivals – the National Dance Company of Spain - - -

LS: Dance is really interesting to me because it's one of the few, the very, very few companies that you can get in quickly. Why one's brought all those dance companies up to Brisbane was for a very simple reason: they're easy to get in and out. Dancers just arrive, you've got a three day bump-in and they're on, and they're "camera ready" as it were.

101.32 And because they always have so many people cast in the roles – I mean you do a *Swan Lake*, you don't have to put your Odette/Odile on every night of the week. She'll only dance Monday, Friday, Thursday, and there'll be Mark II, Mark III, Mark IV, there'll be four or five people doing those roles. When we brought American Ballet Theatre there were five Odettes.

MP: And, of course, dance is fairly universal because it's not based on language - - -

LS: Absolutely.

MP: - - - it's a music expression.

LS: Yes. And you still can have turkeys with those, you can have some bad moments with ballet.

MP: Let me just finally finish by asking you just one or two very general questions about Sydney's character and its art and culture at that time, and how you think, over the period in which you were Sydney Festival Director, it changed or went in any particular direction. You talked about uncooperation, a little, between companies and the Festival and with each other. What else was happening in Sydney at that very exciting time at the end of the twentieth century?

LS: Yes. Look, I don't think anybody has really bad legacies or whatever. I think I just made Sydney aware that they had a bloody good Festival and "You'd better get in and enjoy it". I made it very welcoming and I think pretty approachable. Put that in your hand and you look at some of the brochures - - - That was our tool; that's the only way you can sell it. Most of the people weren't here, a lot of the performers weren't here. They don't come until a week or so beforehand, so you've got no vehicle for publicity. That's your primary selling tool.

103.19 **MP: And I suppose the impact of the Sydney Festival on Sydney's arts and culture is really what I'm asking.**

LS: Well, it made people aware that we've developed. I mean, God, when I came back to Sydney to live in Sydney in 1965, it was a pretty slow old town. But the growth has been there and observable: the emergence of not one chamber orchestra but two or three, the growth of the symphony, the growth of the theatre companies has been the most spectacular, of course. And they're still proliferating in pub rooms and things like that. And stuff comes out of that - it's far better - - - Even if I were to offer commissions, it's going to be a value judgement that I would make about a particular director.

MP: But that was an interesting part of our conversation, where you were talking about the influence that you've had, or that the Festival has had indirectly, by raising standards or taking individual artists in areas of excellence or new discovery, often with older works.

LS: Yes. Well, Richard Tognetti had his first stab at an opera. I don't think he's entirely brilliant at it but in that *Mitridate* we gave him and the ACO, the band there.

MP: The Mozart, yes. And the impact of the Festival on your life, what did it do to you?

LS: It's been my life. One night at the Barbara Cook, she'd been particularly wonderful in the Melbourne Festival. We did a week of her performances in the Myer Mural Hall – all the murals were painted by Napier Waller – a wonderful room and a very important historic interior. She thought it was a bit odd that she had to walk by the lipstick counter to go up to her dressing room. But we made a dressing room and put flowers and everything. But we also made it very Melbourne, with Peter Roland – he's the sort of signature caterer there, or was for many years the numero uno party individual – and with Kevin O'Neill, the florist.

105.20 And people walked into that room and they hadn't seen it for fifteen years. It was a place where they did their famous fashion shows back in the '50s and it was a place where they had store-related events. So for Melbourne to go back in and rediscover it was a great source of excitement and pride. And to have Barbara Cook there – a dozen people had tried to get her out – and she was heavenly. She had a wonderful stylist - I'd put her there with a great lieder recitalist. The subtlety, her interpretative power, the quality of what was left of the voice she was able to use so beautifully – she was hitting seventy then and I think we had her seventieth birthday during that Festival.

MP: Why do you mention her when I ask about legacy reaching right back to the Melbourne Festival?

LS: No, no. I was just going to tell you an anecdote, that one night there was a whole table – well tables of Sydneysiders came down and everybody was chatting and there was a great sense of buzz in the place and it went off. You know, sometimes things go off and sometimes they got a nice reception but other times they sort of go off really brilliantly. And I remember Nick Enright coming over to me and saying “You were born to run festivals” and I think I probably was but it took me a long time to get the gig. I love it, I love it more than anything else because it’s not like a daily grind.

And in fact I came off the big success of the Brisbane Baroque and I came back to Sydney and the first thing I did is program next year. I couldn’t stop. My head was absolutely spinning with thoughts about it because there were revelations to me in it and there always will be. And the revelation, apart from the fact that one still had the goods – hardly a revelation, that was a confirmation. But the revelation for me was the Camerata of St John. And I’d known about this little chamber group up there in Brisbane. I’d heard they were good and I knew the reputation of their leader and principal violinist, Brendan Joyce. But I was totally unprepared for the quality of their playing.

107.33 **MP: Is this a local group?**

LS: Local group. And I had an enormous anxiety because we had the opera and we used the Orchestra of the Antipodes for the opera on the Friday night. On the Saturday night we had the Queensland Symphony for the Handel concert and on the Sunday night, I didn’t want to put the Antipodes Orchestra back on the Sunday because they had to play for the opera on Monday. So we went with the Camerata to accompany Max Emanuel Cenčić, who is a highly expensive international singer brought in for that one-off recital exclusively. And people knew how good he was - or every baroque nut was up there for it - and they were his equal. He was world class and so were they and it was a revelation. And it was the first time they'd ever performed in the QPAC Concert Hall - they'd been prophets in their own land.

MP: In their own town.

LS: And people knew who they were and knew of them but didn’t know how fucking good they were. And they were sensational and they’ve got key spots in the next Festival. The first thing, “O.K, what do I do now to give them even more light, more quality?” So I’ve invented a sub-set of Vivaldi works based on the *Red Priest* theme.

MP: So here I am, trying to ask you about the last days of twenty four years ago of you running the Sydney Festival and you're already

talking about the Festival that you did only last month. So you've still got it, which is good news.

LS: And when I know I don't have it I won't do it. When I think I know what I'm doing, I'll keep doing it til I can. I've got a 3 year contract with Brisbane so I'll be 83 when I call it a day, I think.

MP: Leo it's been a long conversation, thanks for sharing it with us.

LS: That's all right mate, it's great.

149.19 [Interview ends]

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