

**CITY OF SYDNEY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**  
**SYDNEY FESTIVAL DIRECTORS**  
**TRANSCRIPT**

**Name:** Brett Sheehy

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**Place:** Redfern Community Centre music studio

**Interviewer:** Martin Portus

**Project manager:** Catherine Freyne

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City of Sydney Archives

0.00 **MP: My name is Martin Portus, I'm with Brett Sheehy who was Sydney Festival Director for four festivals 2002 to 2005. It's the 29th of September [2015]. This is the oral history project for the Sydney City Council and I'm talking to Brett at the Redfern Community Centre.**

**Brett, tell us about your learning curve. Through that very long apprenticeship you were lucky to have six years at the Sydney Festival, first as Deputy to Leo Schofield but even earlier to his predecessor, Anthony Steel and you came to that after a range of jobs at the Sydney Theatre Company. How did you see the festival change from those very early days of Anthony Steel?**

BS: Yeah. Look, I was so fortunate. At Sydney Theatre Company my work had been mainly on the artistic side with dramaturgy, literary direction, etcetera, with a little bit of kind of contractual stuff around that. But what I hadn't developed significant, if any, kind of skill in really was all of the financial side and budgeting, etcetera. So when Anthony first brought me in in 1995, the first title I had there was Administrator, which was very managerial. It was like program managing, although I had program manager, terrific one, working with me as well. But Anthony kind of gave me my first understanding of really the scale and scope of producing. And he was so patient with me. He would take me through line by line these budgets in these kind of Excel spreadsheets, etcetera, and that was kind of incredible groundwork that really was the springboard, I guess, for the rest of my career. And I've been so lucky to go on to be Executive Producer, Artistic Director, for a couple of companies.

**MP: So you're quite a money man on the making of individual productions?**

2.02 BS: Yes. And I mean Anthony also had tremendous faith and he would kind of throw you to the lions a little bit and just say "Run with this. Make it happen. Let me know if there are any problems". So he gave us incredible freedom and, to his credit, when there were problems he would always very clearly articulate how they could be resolved and what you should do. He was also someone who told me or taught me very much the importance of the personal one-on-one contact with artists. He used to forever be saying to me "Don't email, don't write, just telephone them." And obviously because we were dealing with overseas companies that meant being on the telephone at 11pm at night or sometimes 6 or 7 o'clock in the morning. But it really was invaluable advice because it gave me a chance not only to have direct contact with

artists and their agents, but just the understanding of how much the relationship for a festival depended on that kind of contact and the personal, rather than it just being management to agents and so on.

**MP: Because you understood the artistic process. You weren't exactly an arts practitioner that Lindy Hume very distinctively was a practising artist later - - -**

BS: Yes.

**MP: And Leo was a sort of a raconteur person, a man of taste, but he was no practitioner; he didn't come from the arts - - -**

BS: Sure.

**MP: Nor did Anthony. Well, Anthony Steel came from an administrative background like yours. But you had your foot in the artmaking camp.**

BS: Yes, and I was lucky for that because obviously having done dramaturgy at Sydney Theatre Company and Richard Wherrett there, and then Wayne Harrison after him, both again being so generous in their mentoring of me, allowing me to just wander in and out of rehearsal rooms, etcetera, at will. And understanding the process of making the art. But also, really overcoming my insecurities and learning how to speak to artists in a very comfortable way. Because as a kid who pretty well arrived in Sydney from the Gold Coast in god, 1993, early '94 - - -

4.14 **MP: You were escaping the prospect of being a lawyer, weren't you?**

BS: I was, and I was also escaping Joh Bjelke-Petersen, quite seriously. Because we'd had a lot of issues, not only being a gay man but also issues around street marches, had been arrested, all of those things. So there was all of that and I just loathed that government. So I got away from all of that, came down here and within twelve months of landing in Sydney I had a job at Sydney Theatre Company. And so I was deeply insecure, incredibly nervous. And, yes, so I was able to overcome all of that and learn the language, I suppose, of the making of art, if that makes sense, which meant that I was very at ease finally when I landed at Sydney Festival in making contact and speaking with artists.

**MP: It's a hard question right at the beginning but in that six years that you were an apprentice to Steel and then Schofield, how did you see the Sydney Festival change?**

BS: Look, I think both of their tenures very much reflected the men. And Anthony's great love, I suppose, of diversity, his great love of a

multiplicity of cultures being on stage in his festivals was palpable. He exposed me to works and even nations with which I was completely unfamiliar. So that was kind of astonishing and I don't know where that came from in him. I know he was incredibly well-travelled. He can manage to speak, I'm pretty sure it's nine languages - I think he speaks five or six fluently. So he's such a kind of polymath and a man of the world in many ways. And I think his festivals reflected that. Although – and I think he'd be the first to say this – he wasn't too enamoured of the prospect of raising money or finding resources to make more happen than what we were limited to making happen. So what he taught me was, I suppose, stretching the budget and making every cent count and doing the most you can on limited resources.

6.28 And then Leo came in and he was, "Well, why do our resources need to be limited?" And he'd had the advantage of having directed three Melbourne Festivals, I think three Melbourne Festivals, where he'd kind of swept that town off its feet. I mean there was such resistance to him when he came in as a Sydneysider, as a so-called "marketing man" – air quotes – but, you know, he was so erudite, so knowledgeable. He has an astonishing brain and encyclopaedic memory and I think Melbourne just couldn't believe what had hit it, actually. And he then kind of began at Melbourne Festival, the process of working very closely with the corporate and philanthropic communities in Melbourne and raising huge amounts of money for that festival. He brought all that up to Sydney. So the first thing I was doing when Leo came on board really was tucking a – and, look, PowerPoint probably wasn't even invented them; I'm probably making this up but it felt like it – so in 1998, which was his first festival, so we started working together at the start of '97, putting together the 1998 festival - and I just remember going round town with Leo and sometimes without Leo and the sponsorship team with what felt like a laptop and PowerPoint tucked under my arm. And I think we were doing round about 60 to 80 presentations a year. I mean that's how many corporate boardrooms we were going into, just raising the money. And we were said no a hell of a lot to, but we were also said yes to quite frequently. And I don't know what the actual figures are but my feeling is that Leo probably almost doubled the size of the program budget with the funds that he raised.

8.04 **MP: Yes.**

BS: What that did, I suppose, negatively was I think it meant that our Premier at the time, Bob Carr, didn't see much of a reason to revisit the government support, because Leo was doing such an amazing job of raising all this money. And, look, happily I inherited from Leo all of those corporate relationships and those philanthropic relationships. But I did

still also try to work with government to increase funding – and we're probably coming to that sometime later.

**MP: Of course. That's a big thing. And it's been a very distinctive festival because it survived on, relatively to other festivals, a small amount of government funding.**

BS: Yes. And Leo also – sorry to jump in on you again – but just in terms of the kind of work: I mean Leo was very enamoured of the “highest of the high arts” for want of a better phrase.

**MP: Yes.**

BS: And his introducing me to opera companies from around the world, theatre companies at the absolute kind of top level in terms of production values. And the expense of productions that we were bringing in, whether it was *Elektra* or a production from Covent Garden or whatever, extraordinary works.

So I just felt I had such an incredible apprenticeship with Anthony in the kind of, you know, world global sphere. And then in Leo very much in art forms I wasn't very familiar with - because theatre had been exclusively the art form I'd worked with - and so he opened my eyes to all that. But both of them, interestingly, were incredibly, I think, men of the people. I mean outdoor work was so important to both of them, as it was to Stephen Hall before them. And Anthony started presenting, I think, those productions on the forecourt. Leo absolutely followed suit and likewise presented the big free forecourt productions for, you know, twenty five, thirty thousand people a night, however many we could cram onto the site. So they both had that in them as well.

10.09 **MP: And this is what makes this festival unique worldwide - - -**

BS: Absolutely, yes.

**MP: - - - those free outdoor spectacles.**

BS: They sure do.

**MP: And can I take you back to Stephen Hall's time where they began?**

BS: Yes.

**MP: Now, Anthony Steel and Leo Schofield have both spoken a little disparagingly about the Stephen Hall years and the kind of “mixed grill” I think was Leo's description of the final festivals. What legacy do you think Stephen Hall left after eighteen years' running the festival?**

BS: Look, I think his legacy is the fact that the Sydney Festival still exists, actually. I imagine – and my sense, because I was in Sydney from when Stephen was festival director from '84 to I guess almost a decade before Anthony came and took over – even though I wasn't attending as much of the festival as I would later, my memory is there were times when there were some serious financial challenges for Stephen Hall. My memory is there were times when there was serious talk about "Does Sydney even need a Festival?" And that he kind of kept it alive and on track for that period of time says everything to me. I think I owed my job to the lineage of the three of them unequivocally. And had Stephen not been there, or not been there for that period of time, I think this entity, Sydney Festival, could well have died.

**MP: So those three predecessors finally with Leo, passed you an event which was by then the largest annual cultural event in Australia, reportedly - - -**

BS: Yes.

**MP: - - - with an audience of more than two and a half million, what were your priorities?**

12.04 BS: Gosh, O.K, and I'll be frank with you – I know you'll expect me to.

**MP: Of course.**

BS: I'd never be anything else. Look, my priorities were, I suppose, shaking that shadow first of all. I mean Leo was so famous, so talented and so successful and no one knew my name from a bar of soap let alone who is – I mean I was youngish at the time – kind of "Who is this kid?"

**MP: You were forty two.**

BS: Yes. Certainly not a kid then - but I probably felt like one, coming in after Leo. And I just remember so often reading in media pieces and hearing literally on my ear "What chance has he got? Enormous shoes to fill. Not possible", etcetera, etcetera. Having kind of Irish-Catholic fighting lineage in me, that just kind of set me off. And I was determined to prove myself but prove myself by, I suppose, differentiating myself from what Leo had done. And that just really was not that hard to do because it was just a matter of trusting my instincts: going with what I loved, which for any individual is different from what other people love, and infusing the festival, I hoped, with a personality that was distinctively me. Not in a megamaniacal way but in a way of feeling that "If I love this, other people will love it too".

**MP: But you did very distinctive things in that first festival, which was your signature. Do you want me to tell you what they were?**

BS: Yes, remind me.

**MP: No, not the things themselves – we'll come to that – but really that first festival of yours really appealed to a younger demographic.**

BS: Yeah. And, look, that was the mission definitely. And so it should have been: given that there was perceived generational change, of course there should have been audience change as well.

14.11 **MP: We just might insert here that it was an interesting thing that festivals around Australia were going through a similar generational change: Leo to you, Sean Doran in Perth, Jonathan Mills in Melbourne, Peter Sellars in Adelaide, all around that year 2000, all people in their thirties, forties.**

BS: Exactly, yes, yes, good point. And so it was Sydney's turn. And I mean there were a few kind of key things that we did: the David Byrne celebration in that year – I think that was in that year – was one of them, certainly in the first couple of years. I mean it's hard for me to separate '02 from '03. But, you know, bringing in as a major event Def Poetry Jam which we brought straight in from New York which just went kind of crazy at the Metro; starting to work with bands like George; even though generationally he's a generation ahead, but Jon Lord absolutely from Deep Purple coming in and doing the symphonic music; Asian Dub Foundation coming in and doing the soundtrack to *La Haine* live out at the Enmore - all of those sorts of events, I think, started to stamp the festival for a new generation. And certainly my peers, I mean anyone wants the approval of their peers, and I wanted my kind of, you know, girl peers and boy peers, who were my age, to have a great time and to say "Brett, that was terrific". We all want that, we all want kind of approval and acknowledgement. So I was out to please them as well.

I was out also, I suppose, to make a mark. I kind of had thought about this long and hard, about how I might in another way distinguish my work. And I kind of felt that if I could focus to some extent on debuting for this country, artists who'd never been seen here before, that would be a cool thing to do.

16.02 There were some artists who kind of seemed to be on the annual Australian festival circuit, international artists, and they were incredible artists, doing great quality work. But they would come back every two, three years and appear at one of the festivals. And one thing which stuck in my brain from when Richard Wherrett was mentoring me at Sydney

Theatre Company, he said to me one day “The two theatre companies in the world I insist that you see the work of are the Schaubühne in Berlin and Theatre du Soleil in Paris” and I said “Why?” and he said “Because they’re the greatest theatre companies on the planet”. And he said “Peter Stein (then at the Schaubühne) and Ariane Mnouchkine (at Theatre du Soleil) are the two most astonishing theatre makers on the planet”. And I said to him “Well, how come they’ve never been to Australia?” and he said “Well, no one could ever afford to bring them. They’re huge companies and huge undertakings”. But that was like a red rag to me and I thought “O.K, let’s change this. I refuse to kind of take no for an answer”.

So I contacted Theatre du Soleil immediately and the answer was “No, we’ve been asked 19 times to come to Australia” - because Ariane began the company in 1964 - she’d said no every time. And then I remembered kind of the personal thing that Leo had taught me. So I got on a plane, went to Basel and Ariane was performing in some huge airplane hangar or something, echoing the Cartoucherie in Paris, and she agreed to meet me before, during and after the performance. And I remember at the end of it I just kind of poured my heart out about how much it would mean to me, selfishly – forget about what it means to her – but I just kind of poured my heart out and said “If there’s one thing I could do in this country of Australia, it would be to present your work.” Because the show I saw was the *Flood Drummers*. I’d seen in 1987 her big piece on Ghandi at the Cartoucherie just as a kind of kid travelling the world.

18.00 **MP: What is the Cartoucherie?**

BS: It’s an old munitions factory on the outskirts of Paris which she took over in ’64.

**MP: So Theatre du Soleil was based there in Paris?**

BS: Yes, that’s where they’re based. So, I’d seen her work before. And there was this incredibly emotional moment where I’d just sat through a four hour show, we were sitting together afterwards, having a drink together. And she just put her hand across the table and kind of held my arm and said “Brett, I think we should try to make this happen”. And it was as simple as that. And from then on she was on side. When I saw the first budgets I nearly had a heart attack. I think it was eighty five to travel because there were so many production people as well as - - -

**MP: Eighty five thousand?**

BS: No, eighty five humans.

**MP: Eighty five people, sorry.**

BS: Yes, eighty five people to travel. Look, I can't remember what the budget was.

**MP: And these are all actors who are dressed as puppets, aren't they?**

BS: Yes.

**MP: And it's in a set – this is the *Flood Drummers* – it's set in China in 1000AD - - -**

BS: Yes, exactly.

**MP: - - - and in a set that's flooded with water.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: Seems to be the fashion of the time.**

BS: Yes, it was.

**MP: And it was interesting. So it's non-English speaking theatre too.**

BS: Yes, absolutely. And so obviously we subtitled it and it went crazy. It completely sold out and the company was then invited back three years later by Kristy Edmunds in Melbourne with another production that she'd begun working on while she was in Sydney.

And, look, all credit to Bob Carr for that. I mean, even though he didn't increase our annual funding, in my first year I did go with Chrissy Sharpe, who was our General Manager then, and asked for a meeting with him, and said "There's this company we have to present and it's going to be a deficit of about five hundred or six hundred thousand dollars but you've got to trust us, it's so important to this country that it sees this company". He wasn't too pleased with that. He thought we were having just a very relaxed first time meet and greet with the new festival director and all I did was ask him for a significant cheque. That said, though, the cheque arrived within a couple of months.

20.02 **MP: Pinned to that particular production?**

BS: Absolutely, and my promise that we would deliver that production. And then again to his enormous credit he saw the production – not on opening night; he saw it about a week later – and I got a telephone call at seven o'clock the next morning and it was him on the telephone. And he was "Brett, this is Bob Carr" and I was like "Oh, God. Yes, Mr Premier". He said "I just want you to know it was worth every cent and I've just had one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life in the theatre".

**MP: Oh, isn't that wonderful?**

BS: It was fantastic. And again for an insecure forty two year old – I'm always insecure – it was just, yes, great kind of validation, I guess.

**MP: Now, you staged it in the Royal Hall of Industries - - -**

BS: Yes.

**MP: - - - which was interesting. You went to the old showground in Sydney, the now Fox Studios area, and the eternal quest of trying to find venues in Sydney - - -**

BS: Yes.

**MP: - - - the difficulty of having large enough venues that are free, but also the necessity of inventing new places to do theatre, particularly if you're attracting new audiences. Was this in your mind too?**

BS: Very much. And I just knew the excitement because I'd had the advantage in these jobs that I'd had of travelling the world and seeing work in non-conventional spaces. But then again, you know, even Stephen had done it. I'm sure he presented La Fura dels Baus somewhere - I could be dead wrong about this.

**MP: Somewhere actually also in that showground area?**

BS: Yes, that's my memory of it.

**MP: And there were these Spanish actors coming at you with chainsaws, walking through the audience.**

BS: Yes, absolutely, *Suz/o/Suz*, I think the production was called.

**MP: Yes, that's it.**

BS: So I certainly wasn't the first but, yes. And the other thing that I was really aware of was that even though Circular Quay is a gift in terms of audiences - if you put on any outdoor work there or artistic installations you're guaranteed in January of at least one million people, I think - I think the actual figures are something like four million people pass through Circular Quay every January, astonishing - so you're guaranteed of that. But in a city the size of Sydney, we actually didn't have a massive program budget still. I mean we were, I think, the fourth or fifth in Australia; I think the other capital cities had larger program budgets.

22.09

And so I thought "You can either blow everything and blow the whole program budget just on Circular Quay and make that go off, or you can start looking at satellite precincts, really, rather than venues". And so we

ended up with the satellite precinct out at Fox, out at the Showgrounds, a satellite precinct at Homebush, which then moved to Parramatta after that, and I think the kind of Parramatta-Homebush ones have still survived. That said, though, and to be very fair, I remember in the wrap-up of, I think the 2004 festival, the editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the headline was something like “A city in search of a festival”. And they felt I'd gone too far and I'd kind of diffused it too much and they were hungry for the festival being brought back and having a centre of gravity very much in the CBD, locked in there.

**MP: Your march west we'll come to, because that's one of your initiatives, to take the festival west and to Parramatta. But just in the Royal Hall of Industry still, and in that area, you really did make that a focus. You had a huge kind of world music sort of dance party at the Hordern Pavilion with kind of DJs spinning Nigerian music and Brazilian hip-hop and things like that.**

BS: Yes. We had fun. And, look, that was just wanting to duplicate the great joy that I, as a gay man, had had at the dance parties at those venues.

**MP: Around Mardi Gras, of course.**

BS: Absolutely, yes, and they were always out there. They began with the RAT – do you remember the Recreational Art Team?

**MP: Yes, the RAT parties.**

BS: Yes, Paddington Town Hall, I think was the first ones, then they moved over to the Showground. So I was also wanting to duplicate that experience and to see if, you know, with music from around the world and even with theatre – I mean we did the *OBS: Macbeth*, another La Fura dels Baus show out there - - -

24.00 **MP: So they came back this time a bit more respectable and they did *Macbeth*?**

BS: Yes, absolutely.

**MP: And indeed they came back a bit later in the Sydney Festival's history and even more respectably did a Verdi opera.**

BS: Yes, absolutely, yes, yes. So that relationship, yes, that had begun with Stephen; Stephen began that relationship.

So that was important to me too to try to kind of duplicate the thrill and excitement that I'd felt in artistic experiences, to whatever extent they are, at dance parties, and try to give kids that kind of thrill as well through international art.

**MP:** So it's presenting theatre in new places for new audiences. But you're dealing – and this was a significant thing for Leo, wasn't it, during Leo's time but also for you as well, what he called "venue security", the access of the festival to the regular theatres like at the Sydney Opera House. But you had to – for most of your time the Capitol Theatre, the Lyric Theatre were unavailable.

BS: Yes, correct.

**MP:** The new Carriageworks complex in Redfern hadn't opened at that stage.

BS: Yes.

**MP:** And the newly built Sydney Theatre in Walsh Bay, that was still in the pipeline.

BS: Yes. That didn't come for a while.

**MP:** So you had a lot of problem with venues, didn't you?

BS: Yes, we did. And so it was kind of "Well, we'll have to build it somewhere else and they will still come". And happily it worked. And I mean it's expensive to do that. I mean Ariane Mnouchkine, her standards are the most impeccable in the world. And we essentially had to completely recreate her theatre, the Cartoucherie, in the hall out at Fox with everything that that venue in Paris could do - technically, lighting-wise - plus have the division of the food from the milling area from the theatre area, the kind of three sections. So it was expensive to do but kind of well worth it, I think, in the end and somehow we made it work financially.

26.00 **MP:** So it was your version of a rarely performed old opera - which would have been what Leo would have done - as a centrepiece for the festival.

BS: Yes, yes, sure.

**MP:** He left you with an international reputation for the festival which made those sort of overseas conversations a little easier, I suppose.

BS: Gosh, yes, yes.

**MP:** But also - you must have learnt from him what he called to me the "boardroom cha-cha", which was the raising of the sponsorship you were describing before.

BS: Yes, yes.

**MP: Were you intimidated by that at first, at having to do that when you did it, having to do it solo?**

BS: Look, happily no, because Leo had mentored me so specifically, with first of all taking me with him to pitch after pitch after pitch, and then sending me out on my own.

**MP: This is matching sponsors to individual productions?**

BS: Absolutely, yes.

**MP: It's very kind of artistic and particular.**

BS: Yes. And so what we would do is in any year – the other thing we were doing is we were presenting really the shortlist. So we were presenting often eighty or ninety potential productions which would crystallise down to the final fifty or sixty, and trying to figure out in there, where there might be appeal or might be a fit with a sponsor. And, you know, the need of sponsorship even then – and it's shifted even more now – but even then it was no longer just putting a logo on a page or putting a sign in a foyer, it was much more than that. Corporate entertaining had to be wrapped around it, often there were kind of specific relationships between the staff at the company, the sponsoring company, and the team at Sydney Festival, etcetera. So, happily, by the time, by, gosh, February 2002 - which I think was probably the month that Leo left the office - by that time I'd done it so many times, I felt completely comfortable doing it. And I guess I was confident enough in the program, that it would be a program that appealed as well, so, yeah. Happily.

28.04 **MP: And you got there. You raised some four million dollars, which is what he'd raised the year before.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: And you did it in a rather tough post-Olympic sort of tighter sponsorship market, didn't you?**

BS: Yes. Look, it was tighter. I mean once the Olympics went, there was a malaise across the city. I mean you were here – I think we all felt it. We had Olympic hangover which every city, I've since been told, can suffer for one, two, three years afterwards. And I think we were feeling that very keenly. But I also think that may have worked in our favour a little bit, because I think people were determined to fight against it and to actually say, you know, "Let's pull ourselves out of this kind of fog and take Sydney by the horns again into something new".

**MP: Did you get new sponsors, particularly matching kind of groovier productions aimed at new audiences - did this bring sponsors that were kind of new generation?**

BS: It did, and I wish I could remember them all. But I remember it was just at the kind of burgeoning, I suppose, of the dotcom generation, and I remember being frequently amazed at the youngness of these CEOs who were running companies. Look, they were probably my age but from what I'd been used to in Sydney corporate boardrooms for the decade before, they seemed incredibly young. And there were a lot of young people, women and men, running very kind of young-thinking companies. So they responded really well to the music program, the contemporary music program, to things like Def Poetry Jam, to bringing in DJs and DJ Spooky and Asian Dub Foundation, all of those things. So that was kind of a no-brainer that that's where we would look to get support for that kind of work, and it happened.

**MP: So in clothes, fashion, sponsors in that area too?**

30.04 BS: Yes.

**MP: You worked but were you unsuccessful at working to increase state and city council support?**

BS: I was unsuccessful for state support. Except for that one-off gift to make Theatre du Soleil happen, our government support remained static for my time.

**MP: Roughly about two million dollars in a budget that was about eleven million in that time?**

BS: Yes. City council support increased year by year, I'm happy to say, and that was through a succession – you've probably said this already but the ex-officio chair of Sydney Festival is always the Lord Mayor of Sydney. And so I had in succession, Frank Sartor and then Lucy Turnbull and then Clover Moore and all three of them were so supportive of the festival. All three of them kind of revisited their budgets many, many times internally to see what additional support they could find.

**MP: And it began even more in Hall's day as a city festival more than a state festival.**

BS: Yes, very much, yeah.

**MP: So it always did have that stamp of the City.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: It's just that the state finally came good a little.**

BS: Yes, exactly. No, it was. And Carnivale was wrapped up in it as well in the Stephen Hall and then in the Anthony Steel days. But I even remember – I mean, Frank was incredible. He used to call me “son” – I hope this is O.K. to say – and he didn't mince words. And I remember two or three times after he'd been going through the budgets and seen that I was still maybe three hundred thousand short or whatever in the sponsorship target, or in the overall kind of program budget. And I remember a few times taking a call down at the Rocks and I'd pick up the phone and he'd say “Brett, it's Frank”. And I'd say “Yes, Lord Mayor”. He said “Get your arse up here” and so I'd say “Yes, Lord Mayor”.

32.01 And so I'd put the phone down, so I'd almost sprint up George Street to Town Hall, go into his office and he'd be kind of slightly grumpy but with this kind of wry, or this affection and he'd say “O.K, sit down. So, three hundred thousand, I can't believe you're in this position, three hundred thousand dollars to go. How the hell are you going to put on a good festival for the city with that?” But then he'd just hit the phones with me sitting there and I wouldn't say a word and he'd pick up the phone to, you know, corporate person after corporate person, say “It's Frank here. There's a great festival. We need your support. How are you for fifty thousand?” And they'd say “O.K, here's fifty thousand”. Now, what relationships that was relying on to get that money I have no idea, who owed whom a favour I had no idea, and I don't want to know. But he was amazing. He was just so hardworking and so kind of, you know, with this wonderful kind of gruff affection and he just wanted to make it work always.

And likewise Lucy after that. I remember I was in Chicago once and we had some kind of financial issue and being on the phone to Lucy Turnbull back here and she said “We'll sort it out, Brett. It's fine”. Within twenty four hours it was sorted out.

And in fact another time when I was overseas, was when I had the telephone conversation with Lucy who extended my contract to an additional year. And that was done again – I was in the backseat of a taxi somewhere, maybe in New York and I'd said, look, I felt I could only do it – this is probably significant, actually – I said I felt I could only do it if we could really increase the program budget by a whole million dollars. And Lucy had been talking to Jennifer Lindsay at New South Wales Arts, whatever it was called then.

**MP: Arts NSW, was it?**

BS: Arts NSW [Ministry for the Arts] and, yes, Lucy made the telephone call to me in the United States and just said "I know you said it would take a million. We haven't got a million" – and I think it was eight hundred and seventy, eight hundred and eighty thousand dollars - "Will that do it?" And I'd just said a million as an ambit claim. And I said "Oh, my God, Lord Mayor, that is phenomenal".

34.16 **MP: And so you said yes to the 2005 festival - that was after your three years of the earlier festivals - - -**

BS: Yes.

**MP: And tagged it with that money at the same time.**

BS: Yes, yes, absolutely, which was great. Look, the only kind of financial disappointment, I have to say, I had - and it wasn't even a disappointment, you know, because he's an astonishing guy and was so supportive – but the Premier, Bob Carr, left office, I think, in the March after I finished the 2005 festival. And one of his last acts of walking out the door of the office, I think, was pretty well doubling the grant to the Sydney Festival. And because it had, you know, the Premier's signature, it was done. This is obviously - I'm making it sound more dramatic - but one of the last things he did was sign that cheque and walk out the door as Premier. So Fergus, of course, came in with his grant almost doubled. Of course, I was a little bit jealous of that but I was also thrilled that this thing was going to kind of go on to bigger and more extraordinary things assisted by that grant.

**MP: We'll get to that kind of arc of economic conditions through which you went through. But Fergus rode the pure optimism of the pre-GFC economic confidence, the biggest this festival has ever been.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: One source of funding I'd just like to ask you about is the Major Festivals Initiative whereby two to three Australian festivals are funded to jointly commission and present a new Australian work.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: How did that develop, and how was that significant in your programming?**

BS: Look, my memory is all credit for that goes to David Blenkinsop who was in Perth at the time.

**MP: As the long-term festival director?**

36.00 BS: Yes, and Rob Brookman, who was at Adelaide Festival. And in the early 90s, I think, those two guys started the conversation. My memory is the fund came into existence in '97 or '98, I'm not sure which one. My memory is also that it began at seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year and it stayed seven fifty thousand a year, I think, until this year. And I think Brandis doubled it to one and a half million.

**MP: How many productions do you get out of that?**

BS: Well, still not a lot. But, look, what it did was just in terms of kind of seeding ideas and being able to start the development of new work, it really was useful. And probably in my festival time I'd say there were at least a dozen productions which benefited enormously from that fund. It did require that there were at least two festivals on board. I think that might have shifted now to three festivals, before the money can go to any one of them, to kind of encourage sharing, but also because it's not a massive amount of money, [to ensure] that the money is worthwhile. So, yes, certainly from 1998/1999 - that's when I was first aware of the money coming into Sydney Festival and I was able to make use of it with productions. Likewise, I continued to make use of that fund in the Adelaide and the Melbourne Festivals as well.

**MP: Where you were subsequently director after Sydney?**

BS: Yes.

**MP: I suppose a significant example – were you the first to stage Kate Champion's dance work with Force Majeure?**

BS: Yes.

**MP: *Same, Same But Different* was in the 2002 Festival.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: And then many of her subsequent works in subsequent festivals.**

37.52 BS: Yes. And, look, that fund was able to assist in the creation of that company, really. And that was really an extraordinary thing that happened there. Because Force Majeure didn't exist. They were kind of project by project, getting things happening around the place. But the problem was – and Kate would be better to speak of this than I – but my memory was, she couldn't get company funding because no one knew where to place the company. It wasn't a dance company and it wasn't a theatre company and I don't think even the phrase "hybrid arts" was ever used then, let alone there being an Australia Council board or a New South Wales Arts Ministry board that could fund it.

**MP: We're much more comfortable now talking about hybrid arts, partially thanks to your festivals.**

BS: Well, maybe, maybe. So that was just a kind of thrilling thing to do, to be able to use that fund to actually create a company that was born in that 2002 festival with *Same, Same But Different*. And then *Already Elsewhere* and *The Age I'm In* - I mean various productions happened by that company at festivals around Australia, supported, I think, pretty well in every instance by the MFI, by that confederation fund.

**MP: Let's look at that first festival. You did *Crying Baby*, again with money from that fund, at the Australian Technology Park, again an unusual new venue.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: This is with the Western Australian Indigenous company, Marrugeku, and so that also went to Perth, *Testimony* with the Melbourne Festival, a sort of poetic jazz tribute to Charlie Parker.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: Now, you started to light up Customs House - - -**

BS: Yes.

**MP: You're a harbinger, really, of the Vivid festival which came to kind of compete with you later at the Sydney Festival, and be a separate festival all of its own, lighting up Sydney.**

BS: It did indeed, yeah. And, look, I'll tell you what. If Vivid, which is astonishing – on a world scale it's astonishing – if the seed of that was partly planted way back then and if, you know, Sydney Festival can get a little bit of credit for that, I'm all for it.

40.07

But, yes, look, we decided to - it was Customs House, the State Library, Parliament House – I think there was one more building in the mix - I'd have to look at the *Neon Colonial* to see which ones [Hyde Park Barracks not Parliament]. But, yes, a kind of citywide, I suppose, celebration of using light to celebrate the architecture of the city. And colonial architecture of the city - so we only lit kind of classic colonial Sydney buildings. And did it with Electric Canvas - it was, I think, one of their very first huge projects for Australia. They'd done a fair bit of work in southeast Asia. And I was able to then take that company into Adelaide where they did *Northern Lights*, which was another kind of big light celebration. And, happily, they've gone on to do extraordinary things all over Australia and all over the world as a kind of Sydney-based company.

So, yeah, I was kind of really, really excited by that. And the reason that happened was simply that I guess we were open to it. Peter Milne from Electric Canvas just said “Brett, I hear that you're wanting to do kind of exciting outdoor visual work on the city. I'd love to show you what we do”. And he brought his laptop in one day and I was blown away by it and that's how it began.

**MP: That's a great kind of stake in the ground for Sydney to have made such a company, given that we do so much outdoor spectacle stuff. So much of it is done from France, isn't it?**

BS: Yes, very much.

**MP: The French have got a special reputation for this.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: And you brought a French company to the Sydney Opera House forecourt.**

BS: Yes, with Transe Express, which I think was their Australian debut, again kind of locking onto that thing of, you know, “Are there companies or artists who've not been to Australia yet who I think Australian audiences should be exposed to?”

42.03 So, yeah, not only Transe Express in that year but also Ariane with Theatre du Soleil and I think Les Arts Sauts may have come in that year as well, which are the huge indoor aerial company. But that was all credit, really, to Ian Scobie from Arts Projects Australia and we co-produced with him but he kind of did mainly the legwork on that one.

42.24 **MP: Good. Did you begin this tradition of screening films with music, which became a real Sydney Festival tradition? In that year you did *Battleship Potemkin* with the SSO playing Shostakovich, another hybrid, if you like, in your repertoire of exploring such things, in this case film and music.**

BS: Yes. And then we did the *Joan of Arc* film.

**MP: At the following festival?**

BS: Yes.

**MP: *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and the ACO were playing Richard Einhorn's score?**

BS: Correct. Then we did *La Haine* with Asian Dub Foundation playing live. And we also did [*Ephemera* which featured] a John Adams piece, [*On*]

*The Transmigration of Souls*, which Greg Barrett created a kind of atmospheric film, a kind of abstract film, to kind of background that. Look, I loved doing it. I do think the experiences of the work, the film work and the music work can both be enhanced by the other element being there. But I'm pretty sure, much as I'd love to take credit for it, I think Abel Gance's *Napoleon* had been done maybe five years or so before at the Opera House with the Sydney Symphony. I don't know that for sure but I have a feeling in the back of my head that someone else had done it first, not necessarily in a festival context but, yes, I certainly wasn't the first.

**MP: And indeed the programming of outdoor cinema, not necessarily with music, that was kind of an element of the festival in the noughties which became very strong.**

BS: Yes, absolutely, open air cinema at Mrs Macquarie's Chair. Correct.

44.00 **MP: Forums were very important to you. You wanted to kind of squeeze artists a little bit more for a legacy of communications. They don't just do a show and then go back again at great expense, but they hang around and someone interesting talks to them. Forums were important in your festivals.**

BS: Yes. And that was because, I suppose, what I was very keen to try to do, was have festivals leave a legacy behind in a city, a positive legacy beyond X number of performances happening on stage for those audiences. So very much I wanted the artists in Sydney to benefit to the maximum extent. And I thought that that meant more than just seeing the work of these artists, but actually being able to have a conversation with them - to the extent that you can in a forum of three, four, five hundred people. But I think it's incredibly important and I think that, yes, it's one of the things that is so significant for festivals to do as part of the legacy, to leave behind a conversation happening between those artists and artists in Australia. And I also think it helped kind of cement artists coming back in the future for Australia. And for those companies that I had the privilege of debuting, most of them ended up coming to Australia again, being invited by other festival directors or by myself. And I think part of their wish and willingness to come again was because they felt they'd started to have a conversation with this country, not just with the audience but also with the artists in this country.

And they're legend, the number of artists who've come here and have wanted to go and kind of explore Indigenous communities and start conversations with Indigenous artists around the country. I mean Antony, when we brought him, went straight inland after he'd finished.

46.04 **MP: Antony -?**

BS: Antony Hegarty of Antony and the Johnsons. David Byrne likewise started conversations with Indigenous artists.

**MP: David Byrne is interesting. You mentioned him before, of course, from Talking Heads.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: Again this sort of hybrid artist that allowed you to do a concert with David Byrne - looking at an artist's work in its diversity and in a number of different forms, so obviously in kind of workshops and talking forums as well, but concerts and installations in his case.**

BS: Yes, very much. I'd been a fan all my life and I knew that he was an artist and – I think I used the word earlier – but he's one of the great polymaths of late 20<sup>th</sup>, early 21<sup>st</sup> century culture. And I knew he was working in media other than music. I just knew that from watching what was happening around the world and being in New York and seeing stuff that he was doing there. So I was just keen to do a broader celebration of his work than just his music work - which is work in visual art, it's work now in kind of music theatre as well, not relevant to Sydney Festival.

But because of the relationship I developed with him, with his residence here, if you like, for Sydney Festival, I was then able to bring him into Adelaide straight after Sydney where we did the beginnings of *Here Lies Love*, which is the big musical theatre work which is now being performed all over the world about Imelda Marcos. And that was kind of born of that time as well.

So there were ways in which I thought festivals could also help artists start to realise things. And I think that David's – you know, I don't want to speak for him, obviously – but I think his experience of festivals and working in festivals then encouraged him to work more and more outside, further outside the parameters that *he'd* even been working in.

48.10 **MP: This was quite a change from Leo, for example. Because the idea of artist development - which Peter Sellars doing the Adelaide Festival in 2002 took to an almost absurd degree - of making the festival a place of artistic development and rapport between artists and never mind about the output for audiences kind of later. And he resigned before that festival actually took up and it was all a bit of a disaster. Leo, very differently, doesn't believe that the commissioning of local work is a very important thing about a festival, he says. You - - -**

BS: Did he say that?

**MP: Yes, he did say that.**

BS: O.K, because he did commission work. That surprises me.

**MP: Yes, there was some but not so much and it's not a priority for him.**

BS: Right.

**MP: He feels that is for funding bodies to do and it's not the place of a moment-in-time festival place.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: But it was very much for you?**

BS: Yes. And, look, maybe that was because having come out of Sydney Theatre Company where I'd been for a decade, and coming out of working in a company that's making art, I realised how much we used to benefit down at the Wharf in conversations between the different artistic voices, whether it's the director, the author, the choreographer, the lighting designer, the set designer, whatever. And I suppose that's where the kind of hybridity, where it struck me that art is such a kind of multiple pursuit. And if there's any place where you have multiple art forms happening and multiple artists, it's a festival. And so that's a place where one can explore, I think, the commissioning and creation of work. And I think the festivals in Australia have done that wonderfully, especially for work which can't be specifically pigeonholed as "a play" and "a drama" or as one orchestral piece.

50.22 **MP: Well, it's interesting - funding bodies at least originally used to think of art forms in much more separate boxes than now.**

BS: Didn't they? In silos, yes.

**MP: But you say that the festival has the opportunity to explore hybridity, perhaps then?**

BS: Yes, exactly, and that's probably why I was keen to do it and felt that that was a place where work could be created as well as presented. And, look, selfishly I also just didn't want to let go of the thrill and I suppose the risk, the adrenaline thrill, of the creation of new work. I didn't want to work – and I ended up working in festivals for seventeen years – I didn't want to work in a medium where all you did was present other people's work and you had no opportunity to contribute to the creation of new work, albeit with the incredible risk that that entails. Because when you're just importing work or doing existing work, the risk is very minimal.

You've seen it, you've seen how audiences have responded. Yes, it's the case that an audience in Buenos Aires or in Caracas or in Taipei, three places where I had the advantage of seeing other people reacting to work, yes, they're not Sydney audiences. But the odds are if the work has connected viscerally and wonderfully with audiences elsewhere it will do so here also. So, yes, I think that your risk is reduced hugely if you're just presenting existing shopping trolley work from around the world. And I think festivals do have a place in the creation of new work.

**MP: It was interesting in that first festival too, classical music was a very small component of the festival - - -**

BS: Yes.

**MP: - - - which was a significant part of Leo's festivals. You did an international chamber series at Angel Place, which I gather was a rather slow seller too.**

52.07 BS: Look, it was a slow seller – and I can say this because I'm not talking about myself – not for any want of quality. I mean the quality of the program was extraordinary. And the reason it was extraordinary was, knowing that I didn't know classical music well enough, I felt, yet, to actually do a serious classical music program – I mean I knew I could work with the SSO and the ACO etcetera – but drilling down, especially in chamber music I just wasn't skilled, I didn't have that level of connoisseurship yet, and I certainly wasn't going to bluff it. So I invited Michael Berkeley, the British composer, to actually come out and curate the program for me, which he did and he did wonderfully. I mean he's gone on to great heights as a composer - he's now Baron Berkeley of Knighton and also an extraordinary humble and wonderful man. And then I let that be followed by Brett Dean curating the chamber music program.

**MP: The Australian composer?**

BS: Yes. So I certainly thought "Don't try to kid the audience, Brett, that you know about these things because you just don't".

**MP: But you did begin to learn.**

BS: I had to begin to learn.

**MP: And anyway that might have been a slow seller, but we should wrap up 2002 by noting that it made a surplus of nearly half a million dollars and, as I said, you'd matched the sponsorship from the year before and you reached a box office of over three million dollars,**

**which was surpassed only once before at the festival. So you were off to a good start in the first festival.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: You must have felt a bit confident after that.**

BS: It was a happy start, yes.

**MP: Tell me about the impact, though, at the end of 2001 with the September 11 terrorist attack. Meanwhile, the world does go on behind festivals.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: What was the impact of September 11 on your planning for that first festival and the travel of artists, security, planning at venues, the general carefreeness of the Sydney Festival?**

54.11 BS: Yes. Potentially huge. And my emails began literally that afternoon because there were American artists who were in the mix. I mean David is a New Yorker.

**MP: David Byrne, yes?**

BS: Yes. We were talking to Joan Didion at the time. Nothing ended up coming of it but we were talking to Joan Didion at the time. So I immediately shot off emails to all of the contacts I had there because we really didn't know how big it had been or what had happened, just "Are you O.K? Do you know people who've been injured or who've died in this terrible thing?" And there was kind of silence for a couple of weeks, obviously – they had other things on their mind other than my emails. But slowly the responses started coming in and then when I started teasing out of them, "Well, you know, are you still fine to come?" it was "Oh, my God. Of course we're fine to come". And it was so interesting to me because I then started having conversations with the other festival directors around Australia, especially for the summer festivals - because we were all happening in a minute: Perth; there wasn't an Adelaide in oh- - -

**MP: 3?**

BS: There was in '02.

**MP: '02, yes, of course.**

BS: Yes, of course, Adelaide and so on.

**MP: Adelaide and Perth, yes.**

BS: Yes, and they were finding that exactly the same as us, to a woman and man everyone was saying “Well, of course we’re still coming”. And, look, this may sound like a slightly inappropriate thing to say, but I don't care, because there were significant articles in the newspapers at the time about the probability of some of our sporting teams cancelling and not travelling away. And I was like “My God, these artists who've just been through it are actually getting on planes and coming to us. This will be a terrible victory, if you like, for terrorism if we stop even travelling out from here, if we’re so fearful of what’s beyond our borders”.

56.10 **MP: Yes.**

BS: I think as it happened there weren't any cancellations of cricket teams, etcetera, I don't know, but I do remember that was the talk in the media at the time.

**MP: What about security at the festival itself?**

BS: Yes. Look, we were very mindful of it and obviously mindful again after – when did we all go into Iraq? – kind of early '03, so mindful of it very much for '04 and for '05. Especially working with iconic buildings like the Opera House which had allegedly been put on lists of potential targets and so on, but, look it was just a matter of - - -

**MP: So what did you do? Did you have more security around for those outdoor events?**

BS: Absolutely, we did have more security, the police worked very closely with us. Sydney Festival has an incredible relationship with Rocks police, has had from day one, who've helped us on so many issues. Even things in other parts of the city of Sydney, but they've kind of been our point people always and just terrific, calm but solid advice on what we should do.

And, yes, so happily the festivals continued without incident. But it was kind of such a scary time. But I do just remember the tremendous courage of the artists around the world who, as I said, certainly for this country, to a woman and man, not one of them cancelled or said “No, we’re not going to get on a plane and come to you”. And this was all confirmed within just a couple of weeks of September 11, that they confirmed that they were still coming. So that was kind of a great validation of the courage of artists.

**MP: Did it set up a concern about the outdoor spectacle in the Sydney Opera House forecourts? Was security an issue as those crowds became greater and greater, and once random fireworks and music, from the wildest things that Anthony Steel used to set up there -**

**and even he was amazed at the OH&S issues that could have been pointed to - maybe [such things] eventually were [restricted] in those more [security-conscious times] in the noughties?**

58.24 BS: Yes. Look, yes, everything was heightened, yes, everyone was more cautious and, yes, my memory is we had to tick a lot more boxes. But this city is kind of extraordinary in that way. Not the lack of red tape, the red tape is there. But the willingness and the wish to make things happen. And it's palpable. And I just remember state government, local government, all of the stakeholders in every event still pulling out all stops to make sure these things could still – the Domain concerts, for example, I mean such a concentration of people, and the potential security risks there. But no one in this city seemed to wish for any of our life to be interrupted by what had happened.

**MP: The numbers are incredible, aren't they? We should just note. In 2003 your Symphony in the Domain, that was a hundred thousand people.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: The jazz, the other Domain concert, was sixty five thousand people, you calculated.**

BS: Yes, smaller.

**MP: Those are big numbers, aren't they?**

BS: Yes, they're huge numbers and, look, again kind of great credit to my predecessors. I don't know who started Symphony in the Park as it first was called or Opera in the Park, which I think followed Symphony in the Park. I don't know whether they were creations of Stephen Hall with the Opera Company and the Symphony - not sure of the history there. But again, you know, just a fantastic legacy.

60.01 **MP: And they were inherited by Anthony Steel and he didn't want them but he didn't last long against Frank Sartor particularly, trying to cancel them.**

BS: Correct, yes.

**MP: I'm just wondering, while we're talking about the Domain concerts and their style, their content, and the very sensitive collaborations which had to go on between Opera Australia when they sometimes staged operas; the SSO that regularly staged an often very conservative program that they didn't change very often; and the jazz component. So there were sometimes three, sometimes just**

**two Domain [concerts]. Did you have any impact on the development of those Domain concerts? Or did they go on without you?**

BS: Look, I suspect they would have gone on without me. I did interfere, though. I made myself part of the process, I made myself part of all of the discussions about what the repertoire would be. In one of my very early discussions, probably before the 2002 Festival, because I had the job for a long time – they gave me the job in February 1999 – so for two whole years I was director designate so I was able to start those conversations very early. I remember Mary telling me - - -

**MP: Valentine?**

BS: Yes.

**MP: Running the SSO at that time?**

BS: Mary Valentine running the SSO. And, look, we looked at couple of models of some things. One of the first ideas I had was that *Battleship Potemkin* might happen as Symphony Under the Stars. And we played around with that for a while. She wasn't against the idea but she talked me round to believing the Concert Hall would give a better technical experience in terms of projection, lighting, etcetera, etcetera. But I do remember her saying at the end of one of my discussions when I'd just exhausted her and was saying "We've got to mix it up, we've got to do this, we've got to do that". And she just said the phrase to me, she said "Brett, it's a free concert for a hundred thousand people. Give them what they want". And I think there was great wisdom in that, actually, and the 1812 - - -

62.07 **MP: So every year they wanted the 1812 Tchaikovsky Overture?**

BS: They did, they actually did and I remember sitting – we used to have this little kind of roped-off area for the hundred sponsors or whatever and I remember sitting there year after year after year and the 1812 would come on and people would have tears in their eyes and they would get so excited. They loved it and who was I to take that away from them?

And, look, I actually love the Domain concerts. I mean the opportunity to actually just put those two words "Sydney Festival" in front of a hundred thousand people, two or three weekends in a row, just as a branding exercise - it's a gift. It would have been madness to cancel them or to disassociate ourselves from them in my view.

**MP: Were you the first to use City flagpoles to promote the festival in 2002 for that Sydney Festival?**

BS: Yes, look, I don't know. As soon as they were all installed we used them but I can't remember what the date for their installation was. But I expect that Sydney Festival, whichever one it was, would have been the first to kind of use them across the city as a kind of citywide celebration.

**MP: That gives me the opportunity to ask you about the program design which is always a signature of every festival and in some way expresses your vision. You still employed the large Leo Schofield sort of sized programs and very bright – lots of text in it, I noticed – and you restored the idea of the festival director doing an intro, which is rather grand - - -**

BS: Yes.

**MP: - - - even though you didn't look grand or write grand.**

BS: Look, I was torn by that, I have to say. It wasn't, you know, "Oh, my God, I can't wait to get my photo and name inside the first page". But I do think coming into the job, looking at probably the expectation of some generational change, a new face for the festival, bringing new audiences in, I wanted to be as welcoming as possible. And I think I felt that if thirty year old, forty year old audiences actually saw as soon as they opened the first page someone like them was introducing this program to them, we might have a better chance than if we have a Premier or a Lord Mayor or whatever introducing.

64.36

So I think previously, yes, we used to have all politicians there. And I had the conversation with them - they weren't kind of dumped unceremoniously and they were like "Yeah. Brett, go for it. Do whatever you think is kind of important to brand it". And that's what we did. But I still do it now at Melbourne Theatre Company with the annual subscription brochure.

**MP: You now run the Melbourne Theatre Company.**

BS: Yes. And I do love to be welcomed into someone's artistic orbit or view if I'm going to dive into these experiences.

**MP: So it's not an ego thing but it's a personalisation thing?**

BS: Very much. And, look, I haven't reread these for more than a decade, I don't know what they say anymore, they probably kind of banged on a little bit about some of the highlights. But I expect that what they did more than anything else was say to Sydney, "This is actually your festival. You own it. Your tax dollars pay for part of it, and probably pay my complete salary, so take ownership of it, come and explore it, get into all the free stuff and there may even be stuff in there for twenty, thirty, forty, fifty

bucks you will enjoy as well". I do remember coming into the job, and as well as those other things I set for myself, like debuting artists and so on, etcetera, I did believe that in every year, that program should contain something for which I could sit down with any one of the then three and a half, now four and a half, million citizens of this city, and say with complete conviction "This is for you". And when you've got fifty, sixty, seventy events, that should be the case. There should be anyone in this city in any suburb that I can sit down with, with a program, and say "Actually - - -"

66.27 **MP: Of any age, diversity, background there's something to match?**

BS: Absolutely, yes, spot on, that, you know, "Trust me. You are going to love this and this is for you". And I've tried to do that.

**MP: I think at this time the Sydney Chamber of Commerce polled Sydneysiders and the Sydney Festival came up as their favourite annual event of everything else in Sydney, so something was working in that respect.**

BS: Sure.

**MP: And it's poignant to remember that Stephen Hall wanted always the title the "Festival of Sydney", the ownership of the Festival of Sydney.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: So finally certainly by your time Sydney was taking it to heart.**

BS: Yes, very much, I think. And hugely, I suspect, because of the outdoor programs that I and my predecessors built, and the expectation began that in January, the city would kind of go off in some way. And then the person who capitalised on it to a level of probably genius was Fergus with Festival First Night which was just extraordinary.

**MP: A hugely subsidised complete opening night that took over the whole city.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: Meanwhile, you just had a tower in the Sydney forecourt in 2003, didn't you, *Sticky*, from Europe, a hundred foot tower, fireworks, music in the Sydney Opera House forecourt.**

BS: Oh *Sticky*. They were two years. *Sticky* was '03 but then I think in '04 was the year that we had the tower which was *Transmission* and *32 Cars For The 20th Century Play Mozart's Requiem Quietly*. And that was the

big laser tower where the space station could see it, so powerful was the laser going up.

68.19 **MP: That was in the forecourt in 2004 festival?**

BS: 4, I think so, yes.

**MP: That's right. Lots of cars and music?**

BS: Yes, all of these silver vintage cars all painted silver and all of them playing, literally, Mozart. It was a Nam June Paik installation and artwork.

**MP: So that's one way to present classical music.**

BS: Yes, exactly. These cars sing to you. And it was one of the times, one of the few times we ran into quarantine troubles. Because one of the cars was found when it arrived on the ports here – I think we'd brought it down from Seoul – I think that was where the installation had last been – found to have a spider and a cobweb in it. So all of the cars, all 32 of these vintage silver-painted cars, were quarantined and all had to be kind of sprayed and disinfected. So I think we were about a day late in installing it on the forecourt of the Opera House and we had our knuckles rapped, quite rightly, because we shouldn't have been bringing in a live creature. But we were bringing in one live little spider in the car.

**MP: Spider in the car?**

BS: Yes.

**MP: Wow, amazing. What did you want to achieve with that second festival, as we kind of look at the program of it? You had again non-English speaking theatre with the National Theatre of Colombia with Garcia Marquez classic set in a bullfight ring.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: Mark Morris Dance Group from New York. You were very keen on that – it didn't get great reviews.**

BS: It did not get great reviews.

**MP: And you've complained publically about the reviews, I remember.**

BS: I remember that. Look, he's one of the great choreographers and it was a terrific work. Look, I probably had a slightly sentimental attachment to that work too, because I was kind of rocked by September 11 and because of, you know, the relationship and following up with the artists after that.

70.08 One of the works that we presented in that program was a work which responded to September 11. And it began with the dancers kind of moving across the floor at a kind of belly, ground level, and slowly rising and then kind of marching across the stage. And it was just an incredible metaphor for any city, New York, which is where he made it, kind of after a tragedy kind of rising up to its full height and going onwards. And that was kind of the core of the program, and I was just very keen to present that. I probably didn't make enough of the politics of that piece when we were kind of talking about it and selling it. I think people perhaps weren't even aware that that's the reason the company was here and that that was the artwork that I wanted people to see, and how he'd responded as a New Yorker to September 11. But, yes, it did not get great reviews, you're absolutely right.

That year, though, I think, was that the Osvaldo Golijov year with the *St Mark's Passion*?

**MP: Yes, from Latin America, so that was in the Concert Hall.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: Ninety four artists involved in that, a huge work, and I gather they were stranded in Caracas and it almost didn't arrive.**

BS: Absolutely. And with strikes going on in Caracas – I can't remember, I think it was the early days of Chavez, I'm not sure, and there was a lot of industrial issues. But look, we did finally get them here. And what I was trying to do there and what I kind of did later in festivals, more so in Adelaide and Melbourne, was look at so-called "heritage arts" and look at the work, the very contemporary work being done in those art forms and how they can speak very directly to contemporary audiences.

71.59 So contemporary opera and indeed contemporary classical works, which is what the *St Mark's Passion* was. It was a work which is infused with completely 21<sup>st</sup> century musical motifs from South America, from Brazil and so on, an astonishing array of instruments. It was part performance, kind of an oratorio, really, and orchestral. And yes, it was just kind of a way of starting to, I suppose, shake off any feeling that our festivals were just presenting the big, grand orchestras or whatever, doing the repertoire of dead white men. And it started to have me personally engage with, I think, or start to be cognisant of the necessity of diversity in a kind of global world and start to explore that through festivals.

**MP: And drawing from the non-English speaking part of that world.**

BS: Absolutely, yes, yes, very much.

**MP: You complained about the reviews about that though too.**

BS: Did I?

**MP: Yes.**

BS: God, I'm a complainer. Man. I don't complain about reviews anymore.

**MP: No, but you have a very good relationship with the media, I should note, that the media seem to like you. You handle the media well, so maybe that gives you the room to complain about unhappy reviews.**

BS: Well, look, if that's the case – and I like hearing it – it's only because I do have, did have then and still do have, a one-on-one relationship with pretty well all of the major arts writers. And that just seemed a no-brainer to me that, you know, we are working in the same world. I don't believe in that separation of church and state, with critics and companies. I think we should be able to – and in fact I have found that critics welcome it, for us to walk up to them in a foyer and have a conversation about something.

74.00 **MP: But generally - I'll just ask you then, about media coverage of festivals and the media's delight sometimes in a failed work.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: Lindy Hume fell foul of that a few times in a very bitter way, particularly in social media times when the wider media can kind of turn on you.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: You didn't suffer that?**

BS: Look, not hugely. I mean, as I said, I got very tough reviews once. John Shand said that we'd shamefully exploited an audience by putting a concert in the Concert Hall at the Opera House for two thousand people when he believed it should have been in a venue of, you know, maybe eight hundred people. He was dead right.

**MP: Yes, yes.**

BS: So most of the criticism was pretty valid. I find it not that often that reviewers are – I mean they can drive down cruelly on occasion and they can be hyperbolic and they can exaggerate massively – but most of our arts writers are coming from a place of loving the art form. And it's not

that often that they write or respond to work in a completely lunatic way; usually there's something in what they say.

I suppose what always gets me, or what they probably don't understand, is usually we know it before they know it, because we're so self-critical and we can see the flaws in the work and they're screamingly obvious to us. Most of the time we hope the critics just don't notice. When they do notice it upset us terribly because in our heart of hearts we frequently have known that anyway.

**MP: Just on the reframing classical music, I thought that was interesting in that festival as well, the London Sinfonietta and the Australian pianist, Michael Kieran Harvey and a hundred metronomes.**

BS: Yes.

76.00 **MP: That's kind of an interesting placement of the work, and you've alluded earlier to the Brisbane band George, working with the SSO.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: And [Jon] Lord from Deep Purple. So you were again playing with classical music in different forms there.**

BS: Yes. And, look, without wanting to sound too Marxist about it, it does come from a core belief I have, that the silos around art forms and indeed any archness around art itself, is incredibly unhelpful and just plain wrong. And I get - as a young guy who moved to Sydney from the Gold Coast who remembered sweating profusely the first time I set foot in the Opera House because it was so intimidating to me, I think I was 24 years old - and I just get how intimidating all of this can be. And at every opportunity that we can break down the silos and make art more accessible, it can only be a good thing. Because opening the doors to anyone to artistic experiences, you can bet your life they will dig and dig and dig and explore further and further and further, and find their own way through art. And it is one of the most significant things in our society because it enriches our lives. So the push to kind of, I suppose, not demythologise but the push to make it accessible, without dumbing down, was something that's kind of driven all my programming, for all of the time that I've been fortunate to be programming festivals or theatre.

**MP: And then in that spirit, perhaps, you took on celebrating Beckett, the idea of doing a program dedicated, again in that case, to an individual artist, not a hybrid one. But that gave you an opportunity for Belvoir to stage *Waiting for Godot* in its fiftieth year - - -**

78.07 BS: Yes.

**MP:** - - - the STC, your old company, to stage *Endgame*, you had international speakers giving an intellectual quality to talking about Beckett, and then you had Beckett on film – you had a lot of Beckett. That’s very thoughtful festival-making. Was it popular?

**BS:** Well, it was popular because the elements were popular. I mean to have Neil do *Godot* for Belvoir was a no-brainer. To have STC, the state theatre company, come on board and do a production was a no-brainer. The films were, I felt, would be a curiosity at the very least - and they were a revelation for many people. And the other side of it, which Anthony Uhlmann kind of pulled together, which was the academic side, was again just something that people hadn’t experienced in a festival context. And, Beckett – I mean, what I was trying to do there was again break down those walls around him. I mean he’s a writer I adore and always have, and just enjoy reading just for the sake of reading, let alone seeing the work performed. And I know how difficult the work can be; it’s not an easy night in the theatre, any Beckett play. But the philosophy of the man and the language and the ideas that are being put to us are so important, I think, and so significant. And so I felt that for this festival, Sydney Festival, which is a very celebratory festival, for it to actually drill down and kind of hone in on an artist like Beckett, and look in multiple ways at what he did and what he was saying, I felt was something worth doing. And, happily, all of those colleagues I mentioned before came on board and delivered. I didn’t have to deliver anything in a way; I just, I guess, was the catalyst for pulling it together. But they just all delivered wonderfully.

80.04 **MP:** **Yes.**

**BS:** And it won the - interestingly, whereas now the Helpmann Award for Best Special Event, I think has every single time when it’s been given out, gone to some huge spectacle - that won the Helpmann Award for Australia’s Best Special Event in that year. And it’s probably the Helpmann Award I’m most proud of the festivals ever getting, because it’s such an unlikely and surprising thing that that would be the best special event in Australia at the Helpmanns.

**MP:** **Did you have easy success at building collaborations (as the festival hasn’t always had) with companies to participate? Whether it be your old company - Leo fell out with the STC for a period of time; getting the OA to behave or do something interesting was a challenge for Steel, I remember - - -**

**BS:** Sure.

**MP: Getting Belvoir involved is kind of fairly easy. Was building collaborations with companies big and small, particularly with your interest in involving local artists and in international collaborations even, you were good at that?**

BS: I don't think I was especially good at it but it was so easy for me. Because I'd been in this city's artistic milieu for a decade – well, one and a half decades when you include my early years at Sydney Festival – I mean I had sat at dinner parties with Mary Valentine from the SSO, with Richard from the ACO, Neil was one of my best buddies, of course I knew the whole team at STC backwards. Stephen Page was a buddy from Bangarra, I knew Graeme and Janet so well from Sydney Dance – we were in the same building. So it was just incredibly easy. I mean it was just a matter of picking up the phone and saying “Let's have a coffee” and pretty well in every event fabulous ideas would flow.

82.11 **MP: It wasn't always so, though. I mean when Stephen Hall originally tried, they were all closed up for January and wanted to stay closed.**

BS: Yes. And, look, even Leo, the received wisdom was that the artistic side of Sydney closed for January and all the audiences went to Palm Beach. Obviously that wasn't true. Leo disproved that on day one of his very first festival. And Anthony had disproved it before and so had Stephen, really. But, yes, look, if anything I suppose I just had a fearlessness about making the approaches, but that was only because I knew the people already and I couldn't imagine anyone not agreeing to at least have a cup of coffee and a chat. And usually from those chats, as I said, multiple ideas would flow and I can say in all honesty, usually from them rather than from me. It was just, you know, “Think outside the box. In an ideal world, what's something you've never been able to do, which you think could be a cool thing for the ACO to do or the SSO to do or for Sydney Dance to do?”, whatever. And that's how it happened.

**MP: You did actually work with Opera Australia through Oz Opera, their developmental arm, in a number of operas, *Love in the Age of Therapy* in that year 2000 - - -**

BS: Yes.

**MP: - - - by Paul Grabowsky with Joanna Murray-Smith's text, and then in the following year other operas. You had something called *Two-Up* - so two new Australian plays in *Two-Up*.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: And Stalker Theatre returning again with outdoor theatre. You were pushing Australian content much more than the previous director.**

84.02 BS: Yes, that could well be the case. And, gosh, I suppose I'm trying to figure out how much of that was a conscious decision or how much of it just seemed a natural thing to do.

**MP: Well, you need that cooperation and that collaboration as you've described.**

BS: Yes, you do.

**MP: You have lots of cups of coffee.**

BS: Yes, lots of cups of coffee. And, yes, look, I think it was just inevitable. It was inevitable after working ten years at STC, six years at Sydney Festival before I finally got the job, that automatically those relationships would start to play into the programming, yes.

**MP: I've never asked actually any festival director so far, so let me ask you. What about the Ferrython? We talked about the other great staple which was the Domain concerts.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: The Ferrython, no one would dare touch that, and it was from the very beginning of the Sydney Festival. Did you fiddle with it or change it in any little way?**

BS: I think every one of us had the conversation with whoever was the Lord Mayor at the time going over – is it thirty years?

**MP: Forty years.**

BS: Forty years, O.K. I expect every Sydney Festival director had the conversation with the Lord Mayor at the time, "Do we really have to include the Ferrython? Not that it shouldn't happen but does it need to be part of the festival program?" And the feeling was always, it's a great kind of final punctuation point and I remember – and I won't say which of my predecessors because that would be unfair to them – but one of my predecessors did say to me "And besides, Brett, it means you get to add another million people to the audience for the thing" - because that's how many people line the foreshore of the harbour. And I was kind of sold by that. But look, again it is that issue, without wanting to get bogged down in kind of marketing and branding. But the more people who are exposed to those two words "Sydney Festival", whether they're watching the Channel Nine news that night and they're watching the Ferrython and it's got it on the crawl at the bottom, you know, "Sydney Festival Ferrython" can only be a good thing.

86.16           And I'll tell you what. I actually got sold on it: Anthony presented a group called the Nuyorican Poets Café Live and they were performance poets from New York. They were, I think, predominantly Puerto Rican, hence Nuyorican, and they were still here and had done their final performance, I think, the night before. So they came on the ferry that I was on. And I think there were maybe six or eight of them and they were kids – they were kind of 24, 28 year old kids – and they were so blown away by the Ferrython, let alone when the jets went over, kind of streaming the red, white and blue, whatever, and they were like “This is part of the festival? This is what we're part of?” They could not believe it. They loved it so much and they found it so extraordinary and so over the top and so unlike anything they'd experienced before. I was kind of sold and thought, “Actually, this is a fun thing to do”.

**MP: Well, it's always been a lucky thing that the festival has been bookended by the fireworks at New Year's Eve, if not always being the starting date itself, but ending with the Ferrython and Australia Day.**

BS: Exactly, yes.

**MP: Just some occupational risks of running a festival. I was interested you had the Cuban pianist, Chucho Valdes and he suddenly cancelled in December so he's in the program.**

BS: Yes, yes.

**MP: And he's only here for one concert with his quartet.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: You risked losing and you presumably did [lose] two hundred thousand?**

BS: Yes, you do lose money because you've budgeted to have that income. Depending on how expensive the act is, sometimes when the act cancels you make money.

88.07   **MP: Insurance?**

BS: No, no. If it's like had Ariane and Theatre du Soleil cancelled, I think even by completely selling out that season we were still running a deficit of six hundred thousand dollars. I think it was about 1.2 million off the top of my head to bring it all in, and a complete sell out would only deliver six hundred in box. So had she cancelled we'd have actually made another six hundred thousand dollars back that we didn't have to spend. So it depends on the cost of it but obviously a one-night only kind of one-

person show, yes. You've budgeted to take X number of dollars that you don't take and you have to refund and that's life.

**MP: So how did that end? Because you seemed to go through a long time asking for a medical certificate.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: It was almost like sort of a schoolkid or something. Did you ever get a medical certificate?**

BS: I think we did get a medical certificate.

**MP: Why was that?**

BS: I think that had to do with our insurance.

**MP: Insurance, O.K.**

BS: Yes, I think there was some insurance on it.

**MP: But you do have insurance - - -**

BS: Sometimes.

**MP: - - - that will give you back that two hundred thousand.**

BS: Rarely the full amount but sometimes we have grades of insurance that we're hedging ourselves against a cancellation.

**MP: It's important to note at the end of 2003 Festival that your long term GM, Chrissy Sharpe, she left to move to London with her husband, Michael Lynch where she ran Sadler's Wells as a dance venue essentially.**

BS: Yes, and he ran Southbank London.

**MP: Yes. And she was replaced at Sydney Festival by Josephine Ridge who began ten years as the general manager.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: And then went on a few years ago to run the Melbourne Festival.**

BS: Absolutely.

**MP: And this is her last year in 2015. So you're surrounded by some talented people when you do your job.**

BS: Yes. And do you know what? That relationship between artistic director and executive director is so important. It's important not just in festivals,

it's important in theatre companies, in the orchestras, everything. And if you get that right you're 50 per cent of the way there – I really believe that.

90.08 And I've just been completely blessed with incredible EDs right through all of my festival jobs, and people who believed with me in a particular vision who would, you know, walk across hot coals to make that vision happen. I remember it was Chrissy, apropos Theatre du Soleil and it was so expensive and this was before we'd gone to see the Premier about getting some additional money and we just couldn't afford it; it wasn't going to happen. And Chrissy was the one who sat me down and she said "Ever since I got this job you've said to me the two things you most want to do in festival-land is bring the Schaubühne and Theatre du Soleil to Australia" and she said "Brett, if we do one thing and one thing only, it is still important that we do it and that's Theatre du Soleil". And to have that from the person who's running the whole management budget side of things was just an extraordinary kind of leap of faith on her part and just phenomenal support. And that then gave us the courage to confront the Premier about additional support, etcetera, etcetera. So, yes, great people I've had the opportunity to work with.

**MP: So Theatre du Soleil you famously brought, but you didn't bring the Schaubühne.**

BS: No, I had to wait till Adelaide to bring them and that was only to do with timing. I was aiming for 2005 for Sydney but their international schedule meant that I had to wait until 2006 for Adelaide in March.

**MP: You're still having a good run - so 2003 you made a surplus.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: And so they liked you enough to extend your contract and rang you in America as you were saying earlier.**

BS: Yes, yes.

**MP: You make quick decisions - you have to make quick decisions as a festival director. I gather you brought the *Passion of St Mark* from Latin America, you brought that up very quickly.**

92.08 BS: Yes.

**MP: And as soon as you were told you've got 2005 you rang up *Black Rider*.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: Tell us about your fascination and the speed with which you did that one.**

BS: Yes. Well, look, Michael Morris who's a British entrepreneur, who has a company called Artangel, and they have seeded and developed projects all over the world as producers, he and his business partner, and he had been talking for some time. The Thalia Theatre Company in Hamburg in about 1997 maybe, maybe even a bit earlier, had done this production of *Black Rider* which was the Tom Waits, William S Burroughs, Robert Wilson piece, musical.

**MP: Directed by Wilson.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: Music by Waits, words by Burroughs.**

BS: Yes, all in German at that stage, so its world premiere was at the Thalia Theatre Company in Hamburg. And Michael Morris had had this dream, as had Bob Wilson, of course, as well, and Tom Waits, that it be done in English and have a life as a kind of English work. But they needed a number of partners to do it. I have no idea how he knew I was interested. I think Leo first drew my attention to the company way back, just as a really interesting company. And I was in London and he said "Let's have a coffee together" and I said "Sure". And he says "I'm putting together a consortium". I think they needed five partners to do it. I can't remember the amount of money; it might have been as much as at that stage a quarter of a million each, might have been a bit less, I'm not sure.

**MP: But more for you because they've got to travel to the other side of the world, surely.**

BS: Yes, exactly. Yes, the eventual budget was a lot bigger than that. That was just kind of commissioning the creation of the work again all these years on with a new cast, English-speaking singers, etcetera.

**MP: So you were actually commissioning a work like you would do in Australia but you were doing this on the international stage?**

94.03 BS: Yes, exactly. And so he just said "Are you in?" and I said "Yeah, sure, let's do it".

**MP: And it came to you and those four other places, venues?**

BS: Yes, exactly.

**MP: Why were you so entranced by it?**

BS: God. Look, probably a little bit artistically starstruck. To be a fan of Wilson and a fan of Waits and a fan of William S Burroughs and imagine a work created by all of them. And also by that stage I think Michael had given me a very rough, probably not even a complete but an archival recording of that Thalia production, and it was just so astonishingly beautiful. I loved the music; I was listening to the album over and over and over again. So, yes, just loved the idea of it, loved the show, wanted to do it.

**MP: You talked at that stage in the media, talking about big shows, about the need for increased state funding. So you kind of went on and on a bit about it. And you talked about, as you have the Schaubühne from Berlin but also the Paris Opera Ballet, the American Ballet Theatre, “Why can't Sydney have the Vienna Philharmonic?”**

BS: Yes.

**MP: The Frankfurt Ballet you were trying to get but you had problems with getting a venue, I gather, for that. None of these companies came, nor the funding.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: This is a Sydney dilemma. You would have done that in Adelaide, you would have had those sort of companies to Adelaide?**

BS: Yes, more so, more so. And, look, once the funding, once it took the leap from, you know, the two million in state support to around about four million - I remember the Russian *Twelfth Night*, the Cheek by Jowl that Fergus brought in for his first year - huge, and hugely expensive. So I think they started to flow then. Look, it was just the way it was. I mean I think we were a victim of our own success. We hadn't run up a million dollar deficit. I think there was a feeling on the part of government that the festival was doing pretty good stuff, seemed very successful, Sydney was enjoying it. Why bother kind of doing it?

96.19 **MP: Yes.**

BS: And, look, I did something a little bit mean which was unlike me, it was a bit mean. When I got the Adelaide job, I thought “O.K, you won't benefit. In fact, you'll probably be punished a little for it but be really honest”. And in the very first interviews I did when I got Adelaide – because I still had two whole Sydney Festivals to go, they gave me Adelaide, I think, round about December '03, I'm not sure. Yes, and so I still had January '04.

**MP: And this was to do Adelaide in 2006 and 2008?**

BS: 6, correct, yes. And so they offered me the job, I think at the end of 2003. So I had two festivals to go, I had to live in this city through two more festivals, but I thought "What the heck. Just say it". So I actually said "The reason I'm taking this job is because Adelaide Festival is the jewel in the festival crown of Australia and it's the jewel in the festival crown because the state government of South Australia believes so much in it and supports it" to the tune, I think it was then three times the amount, actually - - -

**MP: That Adelaide puts in compared to the New South Wales government?**

BS: Yes, compared to the New South Wales government. I didn't get a fabulous response from the New South Wales government for saying that, as you can imagine, and I still had to do two more festivals with them. But I thought, "It's worth saying". But I think maybe that, who knows, but maybe that was the moment where government started to think "Well, actually, let's get competitive on the national stage in terms of the size and scale and reputation of some of the companies we can bring in". And it may have taken, you know, one and a half years for it to filter down to the funding being doubled.

98.11 **MP: But just on Adelaide and the comparison of why Adelaide can bring such companies because it gets such generous state funding - it was a time when Adelaide was really freaked out financially because Adelaide had lost so much money with Peter Sellars, almost cancelled the 2002 festival.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: Stephen Page had done 2004 on a very small budget.**

BS: Very small budget.

**MP: And you'd got a little bit more money but surely your fiscal rectitude, for want of a better term, practised at Sydney Festival won you the job in Adelaide.**

BS: Yes. Look, I think it probably did and certainly when I was talking to the Adelaide board about what I would like to do there, it was always couched in "Within these kind of financial parameters" and "This is why it will work" and "These are the kind of percentages I think we'd be looking at for this event and this event" and "I don't think we'd be going down a kind of terrible deficit hole".

**MP: That's that bean counter in you from your first few days in Anthony Steel's Festival.**

BS: Absolutely, yes. He put it into my DNA. But then again, I mean I had a great experience with Mike Rann, who again significantly kind of gave additional support for the Adelaide Festivals I did as well.

**MP: The South Australian Premier, Mike Rann.**

BS: Yes, yes.

**MP: What about the fundraising from New South Wales state agencies like New South Wales Lotteries, the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority, Tourism Sydney.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: They're rather fraught relationships. That hasn't been easy for the Sydney Festival.**

BS: No. And, look, I did less of it, I think, than my successors have. I remember we used to get little bits and pieces from those kind of organisations. I think the feeling was very much that, you know, the state government grant was the government grant, and that there should be no expectation on our part to actually chip away in other departments to kind of boost our budget from the global state budget. But, yes, look, it's not something I can remember troubling me very much.

100.20 **MP: I suppose it brings up the argument, though, particularly if you're talking to Tourism NSW or Tourism Sydney: was the promotion of this festival overseas, was its market to overseas visitors and indeed to interstate visitors as much as it was to the population of Sydney who loved it?**

BS: Yes.

**MP: And was that of interest to the tourism bodies and therefore a motivation to fund it?**

BS: Yes, good question. I can't ever remember putting the case. I mean I remember talking to NSW Tourism which was it was then – now Destination Sydney [NSW], I think it's called - - -

**MP: Yes.**

BS: - - - I remember putting the argument to them primarily about national visitation rather than international. I talked a little bit about some regional visitation from English-speaking communities in – my memory is Hong Kong and Singapore most specifically; I thought that was the most likely. I don't remember ever having a conversation with them of, you know, "My God, we will get five thousand international visitors if we can do this".

Why I didn't make that argument I don't know. Maybe in my heart of hearts I didn't believe it. Because Sydney is such a kind of city tourism destination, I'm not sure even if this thing became twice as big again now, Sydney Festival, in the next five years, I'm still not sure whether that would lead to international visitation just for the festival.

102.00 I think it's kind of all wrapped in together with the January experience when there's massive visitation anyway. And I expect government probably thought at the time, and might still think, "For God's sake. Do you know how many tourists come through Sydney anyway at that time of year? Just put your work in front of them and you're benefiting anyway". And, I don't know, that's not something I can remember having.

**MP: I suspect it's still an unexplored area within Sydney Festival - - -**

BS: Yes, yes, it probably is.

**MP: - - - to actually try to pinpoint how much visitation there is for the festival in January just to itself.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: Talk about the challenges then of going beyond the city. Because you were the really first festival director to make the push of the Sydney Festival with 2003 to include Parramatta and to reach to wider western Sydney. And there's been a lot of innovation, particularly by Lindy Hume since, but you were the kind of first to start it. What were the challenges of doing that?**

BS: God. I think the challenges were the presumption that maybe western Sydney wasn't interested in the kind of work that we were doing. I do remember it depended very much, when we were kind of mapping it out internally, it depended very much on the support of the Parramatta City Council and also very much on the support of Riverside at Parramatta. And at that stage I think Robert Love was in the job.

**MP: Who ran the Riverside Theatres, complex of three theatres?**

BS: Yes. And he and I'd worked together at Sydney Theatre Company – he'd been the general manager there - so I had a great relationship with him. And I can't remember who the Mayor of Parramatta was. I remember having relationships with two or three councillors and the Mayor as well who were incredibly supportive and hungry for it to happen. And they put some money in to help make it happen.

104.02 But I also again love the kind of democratisation of the festival, that it didn't just happen in the big glamour venues in the CBD, that it could

happen elsewhere. And I'm remembering now that you've raised it, I remember doing an interview at the time and saying "It's not the Sydney CBD Festival, it's the Sydney Festival and Sydney is massive". And, yes, to start to have a presence in the satellite precincts, as I started to call them, I thought was incredibly important. That said, as I said earlier, not everyone agreed, and that editorial I remember vividly after the 2004 festival, that we were spreading ourselves too thin and the festival should all come back into the CBD.

**MP: But programming for that new audience – well, hardly new, but new for the festival – you did new Australian works, three new Australian works. So Deb Conway did a kind of series of historical monologues.**

BS: Yes, correct.

**MP: You did a jazz show and a kids' show.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: Was that the right vanguard to go out with?**

BS: It absolutely was.

**MP: It worked?**

BS: Yes, yes, it was fantastic. And we also did a piece that Ros Horin had developed - *Through the Wire*, I think it was called.

**MP: The then artistic director of Griffin Theatre Company?**

BS: Yes, which was one of the first artworks looking at the issue of refugees. And, yes, there was a massive audience for that in western Sydney. We also had started doing at Olympic Park the big outdoor events. We brought Transe Express back in 2005 to do a big perambulatory free work through Olympic Park called *The Lazy Kings*, and I think in 2004 we brought out Studio Festi, who were the big aerial outdoor Italian company with the huge balloons.

**MP: This is *Of Angels and Light*?**

BS: Yes, *Of Angels and Light*, yes.

**MP: So as an outdoor sort of spectacle again, an Italian one - - -**

BS: Yes.

**MP: - - - in 2004 and *The Lazy Kings* in 2005.**

106.04 BS: Correct.

**MP: These are huge shows and sort of sixty thousand people over three nights see them.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: But you got a lot of money, didn't you, from the Sydney Olympic Park authority?**

BS: Absolutely.

**MP: So a lot of investment.**

BS: They were incredible, they were really supportive.

**MP: And this was the movement away from the Sydney Opera House forecourt for the reasons of the size - that these things had become so enormous?**

BS: That was why. I mean those events had grown too big to even experience. I remember in the very first year with *Transe Express*, I mean it was I think about thirty metres high, it was suspended from a crane and I think kind of when you're up the side of Circular Quay you could kind of see it. But I remember with *Sticky* people flooding down there to see it. And I think on each night, I would say, a third to a half of the people who'd shown up to see it, could not see it at all. It was just gridlock with human beings – yes, not possible.

**MP: Yes, a bad look.**

BS: Yes. So that was when we decided or I thought "What if we put art installations like *Transmission* and *32 Cars For The 20th Century Play Mozart's Requiem Quietly*, what if we did that so people could enjoy them day and night?" But the actual performance events we moved out to Homebush.

**MP: I don't think it stayed, did it?**

BS: No.

**MP: No. So after your regime the authority lost interest or something but I don't think it continued.**

BS: Yes, I don't know why it didn't continue on, because they were incredibly popular. Maybe the job had been done. Because it was soon after the Olympics, I think it was a great wish to demonstrate that Homebush not become a ghost town, that Olympic Park actually could be a vital living place. Now, of course, concerts, all sorts of things happen out there. So

maybe we kind of broke the ice, and there was no need for the festival to go there again.

108.04 **MP:** **But it was the beginnings, the seeding of what is now a huge program in Parramatta and nearby the Sydney Olympic [Park].**

BS: Yes.

**MP:** **Let's look at the 2004 festival. So you mentioned earlier the Def Poetry Jam - this was a great success. So just to define what it was, it was a sort of streetwise jam of Broadway street poets.**

BS: Absolutely.

**MP:** **Have I got that right?**

BS: Yes.

**MP:** **High youth appeal it had, did it?**

BS: Yes, high youth appeal. Predominantly African-American poets. And African-American performance poets - I mean there'd certainly never been a concentration of them in a festival in Australia before. I had seen the production - God, it had even moved to Broadway by the time I'd seen it. And I was a little bit nervous because the night I saw it, it was completely sold out, but our agent got me a ticket, our agent in New York. And I went to see it, and 95 per cent of the audience were African-American. And so my immediate concern was whether a Sydney audience, which is not full of African-Americans, was going to actually get it and enjoy it. But I just loved it so much. And there are times when you're in a theatre and your body precedes your brain in responding to a work. And you find you're actually on your feet, cheering and clapping before you even think "Oh, my God, will I give this a standing ovation or not?" And I just remember having that visceral moment where I just leapt out of my chair along with the other one thousand people in the theatre, leapt to my feet and was just cheering wildly. And so I kind of figured if I got it, Sydney would get it, and they got it in spades; it was terrific.

**MP:** **I suppose it's an example of - there's two things you often have said in interviews, of having entry points into the festival for different groups - - -**

BS: Yes.

110.00 **MP:** **- - - and we've just been talking about new audiences in Parramatta and the youth appeal of such a show. The other thing you talk about is having an ever deeper social and political conscience - - -**

BS: Yes.

**MP: - - - which is a sort of lofty thought. But when you look at a festival, if you can remember back to 2004 or indeed any work, what expresses that conscience for you? When did you hit the nail on the head of that one?**

BS: In what productions did I hit the -?

**MP: Yes.**

BS: Oh, God. I would hope in most of them in some way. I would hope that most of them are more than diverting entertainment. Of course there's diverting entertainment in there and the free outdoor programs probably more so than any other genre. But I would hope that – I mean even from, God, Mark Morris' piece to John Adams' *Transmigration of Souls* which was again about September 11 - it sounds like I'm kind of locked in there, but it was so impactful on me, just going into my very first festival ever, had a massive impact. God, right though to screening *Death of Klinghoffer* for the first time in Sydney - I mean no one had been brave enough to do the opera. In fact, many opera houses around the world have banned the presentation of it, because it's allegedly sympathetic to the Palestinian cause.

**MP: You staged that in the Sydney Festival?**

BS: No, the film of it.

**MP: The film of it.**

BS: Yes, so we screened it. And, look, I remember getting a little bit of pushback from some parts of the community about the appropriateness or not of it. But, yes, a deeply political work but a very important work, I think.

**MP: Did you feel like that in the 2005 Festival with *Three Furies*, the work about Francis Bacon?**

BS: Yes.

**MP: That was a project close to you, wasn't it?**

112.01 BS: Yes, that was really close to my heart. I mean, because I kind of grew up in theatre on Stephen Sewell, with those great sweeping works, *The Blind Giant is Dancing*, *Dreams in an Empty City*, *Father We loved on the beach by the Sea*.

**MP: Big epic works.**

BS: Oh, yes, and the best titles. Stephen can write a title like no one else on the planet. Because I grew up with all that, I was a massive fan of Stephen's. And I love the work of Francis Bacon. And Stephen and Jim Sharman both had this idea for how you might theatricalise Francis Bacon's life in some way. And it was a bringing together – and in the design especially – bringing together of kind of the visual motifs of Bacon's paintings, with performance and with song. Yes, a really significant piece, I think.

**MP: And that was in collaboration with the Griffin Theatre Company. And indeed you took that to the Adelaide Festival, your first one there in 2006?**

BS: Yes. And what we did – this is about Sydney Festival – what we also did, though: happily the National Gallery for the first time ever, I think, lent out its tremendous Bacon triptych, so we had that shipped down the highway - I won't tell you how much it was insured for.

**MP: On display in the theatre, on the stage?**

BS: No, on display at the State Gallery. So, yes, we were directing audiences after they'd seen the show, to go and see the Bacon works.

**MP: How important was [visual art to] your festival? Was it always a tack-on, visual arts exhibitions, speaking of Bacon and speaking of that triptych? And indeed the other things that happened in association with the Art Gallery of NSW, MCA, Object Galleries, the Australian [Centre for] Photography. I mean in that 2005 festival you had Destiny Deacon at the MCA; a Korean artist, Lee Bul; *Minutes to Midnight*, fantastic, very spooky Australian photography.**

114.03 BS: Yes, yes.

**MP: I've just seen it in Adelaide.**

BS: Trent Parke's suite of works.

**MP: So this was a long time ago, but the same exhibition by Trent Parke. You had Bill Hensen at the Art Gallery of NSW. But you didn't have them, they just happened to be there at the time - is that how it works?**

BS: Not quite. And one that we didn't include, for example, was the Picasso, which Edmund was bringing in at the same time of year. Look, because the planning for visual art exhibitions is often two and three years out, especially if they're kind of international travelling exhibitions, a lot of

those just happened from conversations with Liz Ann Macgregor, with Edmund and his - - -

**MP: Who runs the MCA and Edmund - - -**

BS: Yes, and Edmund [Capon] at the Art Gallery of NSW. God, S. H. Ervin Gallery I worked with as well - I'm trying to think of some of the other ones. And they were very early conversations saying that, yes, I wanted to build visual arts in the program – and I'll get to why in a second – but it would need to be exhibitions - even though they were presenting the exhibitions and paying for them - they would have to be exhibitions which had a very contemporary feel, and ideally had some kind of connection with the kind of work that I was doing in the rest of the program. And so, yes, sometimes we hit the mark and sometimes we didn't. With the Picasso, for example, we didn't, slightly, I think, to Edmund's chagrin that it wasn't [part of the festival program], because the previous two summer exhibitions at the Gallery had been, because they were things that were very kind of close to my heart and that I was passionate about. So it wasn't including them just for the sake of it, like umbrella-ing them up because they're on. They were only ever in there because they were artists or exhibitions of work that I personally loved the idea of.

**MP: But they were in every year.**

BS: Yes, they were every year.

**MP: There was always something like Leigh Bowery the year before was a performance artist survey at the MCA with Tracey Moffatt, and there was an electronic media performance artist, Nam June Paik at the Art Gallery.**

116.05 BS: Paik, yes.

**MP: So you always had something from these key institutions.**

BS: Absolutely. And the other thing that we wanted to do was to start to look at outdoor public art as well. So in a small way we did it with David Byrne with his *New Sins* installations through all of the street furniture in Circular Quay. Then we did it with Cherine Fahd and a suite of her works all through the city inside that JCDecaux street furniture that you can put images in. Then in all the bank buildings in Martin Place – I don't know if you remember – we did the Craig Walsh installation of the bank buildings filling up with water and turning into aquariums. It was just kind of projection video art but it looked astonishing.

**MP: And the banks, didn't they insist that it was perfectly all right provided there were no sharks?**

BS: You've got it, yes, you remember well. And we had no sharks, just beautiful angelfish.

**MP: Angelfish. Interesting instance of bank branding, isn't it?**

BS: Yes. And we also did Michael Riley's *Cloud*, the nine part nontyche I guess you would call it, which we erected above Circular Quay up on the facing of Circular Quay railway station, which was half a football field long.

**MP: Against the Cahill Expressway?**

BS: Yes, yes. So, yes, look, it was a mix of works that we generated and built and produced with the internal work, hoping they would speak to each other. Liz Ann, for example, had Michael Riley works in her gallery when we put *Cloud* up, so they were speaking to each other.

And, look, all of this really came from my very first festival where Anthony had, with John Kaldor, the art entrepreneur, and the MCA and Telstra – it was a quarter of a million each is my memory, all four parties, a million dollar project - and we did *Puppy* on the forecourt. And just the impact that had on this city and how extraordinary it was.

118.11

And I met John because I was administrator of the festival at the time, and I met John, and he kind of started mentoring me in visual art and contemporary visual art, because I was pretty ignorant up until then. And that was when the wish to make visual art a bigger and bigger part of the program began, from those early conversations with John and seeing the impact that *Puppy* had. We never had anything like the impact of *Puppy* again – it's such an extraordinary work. But certainly, I hope that with some of the things we did like Craig Walsh in Martin Place, with the street furniture artworks, with the installations on the forecourt of the Opera House, with *Cloud*, Michael Riley's, I mean I hope that they were kind of significant events for Sydney to enjoy as visual artworks.

**MP: But it's interesting how Anthony Steel began the tradition of the Sydney Festival using the visual arts, irrespective of what's happening in galleries, as a component of visual activity in outdoor spectacle.**

BS: Yes, very much. And it's kind of a no-brainer and it's a gift, because on the one hand you're getting again, visible kind of branding of the festival, but you're doing it with an extraordinary artwork as well. So it's a kind of double whammy.

**MP:** You also produced in 2005 *The Sapphires*, which is a memorable contribution, the Belvoir Street hit about the female Aboriginal quartet of singers going to Vietnam - - -

BS: Yes.

**MP:** - - - and was repeated many times and became the very good film as well.

BS: Yes. And an interesting fact: what I'd not been aware of at the time was it was very first commissioned by Melbourne Theatre Company by Simon Phillips in around about 2000 or 2001 – incredible.

**MP:** Right, great. So what do you think your final signature was, as we finish up, your final signature over those four years? You're creating a lot of new works - - -

120.11 BS: Yes.

**MP:** - - - working across different art forms, a new youth audience that was ripe for Fergus' music program - - -

BS: Yes.

**MP:** - - - the really detailed kind of minutiae of so many acts [in the] music program. And despite your qualms, you seem to have been an impressive fundraiser for the festival. You got Australian and overseas artists talking and working together. The outdoor spectacle tradition was really picked up by you, and was ripe then for the Festival First Night that Fergus Linehan kind of started after you.

BS: Sure.

**MP:** Is there anything else that sort of strikes?

BS: No. I'm proud of all those things. I guess the city was expecting the next generation to kind of take and run with the festival, and I hope I did that. And then Fergus continued it marvellously after me. I hope that over four years I gave as many Sydneysiders as possible, not only a sense of ownership of this festival but, you know, experiences that genuinely kind of enriched their lives in some way.

**MP:** Just finally, you have spoken about [how] the character of the festival always should be determined by the character of the city.

BS: Yes.

**MP: And then you went on to direct, as we've said, two Adelaide Festivals and after that four Melbourne Festivals between 2009 and 2012. You were working then in three different cities.**

BS: Yes.

**MP: Weren't you still going around with your shopping trolley and filling up with festival goodies, irrespective of Sydney, Melbourne or Adelaide? Or are you telling me that they were honed very much by the characters of each of those cities?**

122.08 BS: They were honed partly by the character of each of those cities. There were works that I got to program in all three cities and I would have happily programmed them in any city of the world, because they were just great works of art. But when I talk about reflecting the character of the city it's to do, I think, with the topography of the city, but also the artistic character of the city, depending on the artistic landscape that exists there. So when I look back on these, I do think these four Sydney Festivals, I do think they're quite distinctive and different from the two Adelaide ones and again different and distinctive from the four Melbourne ones. That comes to do with the majority of the Australian work in each of them being work which was created with artists in those cities. So automatically there's a kind of uniqueness and a flavour to the work.

**MP: They bring that local flavour?**

BS: Yes, absolutely. And then in terms of the topography of the city, what you can do in an outdoor and indoor sense or can't do. Melbourne's weather is notoriously shocking and, yes, you cannot build a festival relying significantly on outdoor performance components of that. You can certainly have outdoor visual art, which finally is what we did by 2011, with sculptures in Swanston Street, etcetera. So I think they all feel very different. But I can't pretend that there aren't massive kind of crossovers in all areas. I brought the Schaubühne into Adelaide, I brought the Schaubühne into Melbourne. I brought David Byrne into Sydney, I brought David Byrne into Adelaide. So there are some artists and some artistic events which, you know, just the world should see, come what may, no matter what city you're presenting the work in.

124.00 But I do think, I do think that finally the reason why I suspect every one of Lieven's festivals has felt different from Lindy's, felt different from Fergus', different from mine, different from Leo's, is because something happens in that nexus between a city's personality and a director's personality, and the style and taste of each, and something unique happens, I think, in that. And look, I might be kidding myself, but I think

that in twenty years' time, if I can have forgotten who directed each of the festivals, if you put the program in front of me, I think I would very quickly be able to say "That's Anthony Steel, that's Leo Schofield, that's mine, that's Fergus', Lindy's, Leiven's, and Stephen's, we hope. Not Stephen's – Wesley's. Let's move forward, yes.

**MP: Thank you for talking with us.**

BS: Thank you. It's been a pleasure, Martin, it's been great. God - a trip down memory lane.

**125.02 [Interview ends]**