

CITY OF SYDNEY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
SYDNEY FESTIVAL DIRECTORS
TRANSCRIPT

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Date: 17 April 2015

Place: Aldinga, Adelaide

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Audio file: Steel, Anthony REF.mp3

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

Recorder: Marantz PMD 671 Digital Recorder

0.04 **MP: O.K, my name is Martin Portus. I'm here with Anthony Steel, the Director of the Sydney Festivals 1995 to '97 and I'm talking to him in his Aldinga house outside Adelaide and the date is the 17th of April 2015.**

Anthony, could we begin with the circumstances of you being appointed quite late in the cycle of festival director making to run the 1995 Sydney Festival as late as March. Why was it such short notice, just nine months that you had to get up that Festival?

0.48 **AS: Yes, less than that, really, to the crucial moment when the brochure has to go to press, more like seven and a half months, I think, and it was largely because the board decided in its wisdom that it had had enough of Stephen Hall for one reason or another, the main one of which probably was that the previous Festival had a deficit of about half a million, I believe. And so having done that they needed somebody to look after the next Festival at very short notice and I was hanging around in Sydney, doing nothing special.**

MP: Stephen Hall founded the Festival in 1977, so he had a long track record. Why did the political favour at the board level, government level, whatever, change against him so quickly, besides the deficit?

AS: I don't know, to tell you the truth, but it could have been that it had been the same each year for all those years and they wanted a bit of a change. And the odd thing about my appointment was that there were two completely different reactions to it. One thought that it was a very good idea and that I had done good festivals around the place and this was an opportunity to improve the standard and status of the festival in Sydney, the other thought that it was an extremely conservative appointment. Who was right, I'm not going to say because I'm not sure.

MP: What was your brief, do you think?

AS: The only brief I ever had, really – as you so rightly say, it was all arranged in rather a hurry – the only brief I ever had was “Keep it popular”. It was something that made my heart sink but I understood why: it was Sydney, it was January and above all else it was sponsored heavily by Channel Nine.

2.48 **MP: We'll discuss the implications of where the money comes from and how that works at a board level. You started when you were**

sixty one, my age, and you were considered already a veteran artistic director. You'd run five Adelaide Festivals, the Singapore Festival of Arts in '83, you'd founded the Brisbane Music Biennial in '91, you'd run the arts component of the Brisbane Expo 1988 and founded the Festival of Australian Theatre in Canberra. Every Festival director has to feed themselves so besides that reason why take the job in Sydney?

AS: Oh because I absolutely love running festivals. I would run a festival of any kind anywhere if I thought I was competent to do so and I was living in Sydney at the time. So it was heaven sent from my point of view. In fact, I was living at Palm Beach and quickly had to abandon that lovely place and move into the city when I was appointed. But I was wondering what on earth I was going to do next. So, as I say, this came as a great gift.

MP: I remember you describing to me your first Festival as a work in progress and that you had to jump on a plane and you'd spent seven weeks travelling to twenty one places or something, going to people that you knew and saying "Help". In what way was your first Festival a work in progress in changing the Festival from what it was? I'm interested in you reflecting on what it was that you came into.

AS: I would call all three a work in progress, frankly. I think we who ran those three Festivals were the bridge between Stephen Hall's approach, which for the best reasons was a little bit of the face-painting-in-the-park kind of approach with some international theatre rather incongruously thrown into the mix, to what I considered to be a more up-to-date late twentieth century, cutting edge kind of program.

5.02 We never quite achieved that over the three years and why we didn't will become evident over the next minutes but that's what I was aiming for. And if you look at those three programs they got better in that sense each time than the previous one. But they never quite made it, I don't think.

MP: Is there a tug of war about this debate that seemed to be very prevalent at the time of your appointment about whether it's a sort of an arts elite festival or whether it's a popular festival?

AS: That's right, and, as I say, thanks to Channel Nine I was told to keep it popular. And don't forget that at that time Carnivale, the local multicultural festival, was part of the Sydney Festival. They had been married unwillingly a year or two before. And that was a complete drain on things as far as I was concerned because that was, again for the

best of all possible reasons, a local, suburban, multicultural affair. And it didn't fit my plans for an international arts festival. But we had it, whether we liked it or not.

MP: Sorry, just on Carnivale, this is a festival that I think two years earlier was married into the Sydney Festival. During your regime, "Carnivale" was taken out of the title and effectively taken out of the program; it was buried.

AS: Well, I'm afraid I worked towards that end with some considerable difficulty but eventually the Minister for the Arts, Peter Collins, said "You may take Carnivale out of the title provided you don't do it before the next state election". So this enabled us to remove "Carnivale" from the title in the following year. But for my first year it was "Sydney Festival and Carnivale".

7.10 And I had many, I suppose you could say, unpleasant conversations with the people who ran Carnivale because they saw as clearly as anything that I didn't like them – not that I didn't like them but that they didn't fit what I wanted to do – and they could see that my heart wasn't in Carnivale at all and they were right.

MP: And multiculturalism, Carnivale was multiculturalism. It was a very popular, kind of political ethos at that particular time, wasn't it?

AS: Yes indeed, which is presumably why Carnivale was initiated in the first place. But I said at one stage in a rather bureaucratic press release "In line with its mission statement, the Festival will continue to be popular and broadly-based with unique events which will relate to the multicultural richness of our society. The multicultural nature of New South Wales and of Australia is a fact and the 1995 Sydney Festival and Carnivale will reflect that fact in a new and exciting way". By which I really meant I wished that Carnivale had never been married to the Sydney Festival, I wish they would go away and do their own thing separately so that we can get on and indeed continue to have parts of the program from all and any cultures around the world but at a much higher professional level.

8.49 **MP: This seems a very distinctive signature of your festival making wherever it is and an early mark in Adelaide as well, that you actually brought productions not from the western hemisphere all the time, that they came from an array of different countries. And that continued at the Sydney Festival. Was this the sort of ghost of Carnivale or is the good art making that you continued as a festival director?**

AS: Oh, good art making. I hope the good people at Carnivale liked it too.

MP: O.K. So eventually Carnivale was taken out of the program but it was also taken out of your budget to some extent, wasn't it? You continually complained in your regime of a very low state funding level during the Festival and when Carnivale left didn't Premier Carr, who was ironically also the President of the Sydney Festival, withhold a hundred and fifty thousand for some future Carnivale which never happened?

AS: That's right, that's right. Well, that was reasonable enough, I suppose. That had presumably been the budget for Carnivale or something like it in the past. And so if the event was to disappear it was fair enough that the budget went with it. But the budget of the Sydney Festival at that time was inadequate, there's no doubt about that. To do the kind of program that I felt it should be presenting, it was inadequate.

MP: In the last two years, your two Festivals, it was about seven million.

AS: Far too little, far too little. And the Premier was not interested in listening to our pleas for more money which, of course, is his right and privilege. I always had the feeling and still do have today that it was to some large extent myself as Director that he disapproved of. Because there was this rather peculiar situation when my eventual successor, Leo Schofield, was at the time running the Melbourne Festival and Carr went over there and was, as you might imagine, much wined and dined by Leo and then said publically – these weren't his words but what he meant was "It's time that Leo came to Sydney to run our Festival", which I didn't think was a huge vote of confidence in me.

11.34 **MP: We'll get to your successor, I suppose towards the end of this conversation but your successor was very good at raising private money and your predecessor, Stephen Hall, was very good at raising private money.**

AS: Both of them were terrific at it. I have always been very bad at it because I hate doing it. I've always said in all my jobs that I'm very happy to go along to meetings with potential sponsors as Exhibit A to enthuse about my program plans but I cannot raise money. I just don't like asking people for money. And maybe these days, now in 2015, that makes me a very bad festival director.

MP: You did have other talents, of course. And you were dealing with, as you said, a very small budget, a parsimonious state

government that did increase the money to the Festival with Leo Schofield taking it over.

AS: And Leo, of course, raised a lot of money himself.

MP: And also at your time a council who was fairly cash-strapped, unlike the wealth of the Sydney City Council today.

12.48 AS: Yes.

MP: Can we talk a bit about how those forces were represented on the board when you arrived in March 1994 to take over with short notice? What was that board like? People talk about it as being very politicised.

AS: When I arrived, the Festival was still run by that thing called the "Sydney Committee" which consisted of the great and good in Sydney society. Now, they weren't remotely interested in the Festival or its program, whatever shape it took. They were interested in being on the board of the Sydney Festival. And to tell you the truth it didn't really impinge a great deal because it met very rarely. There was something called the Executive Committee that met more frequently. And the Lord Mayor of the time is always Chair of the Festival just as, as you mentioned, the Premier at the time is always President of the Festival and that still continues to this day. Luckily, Carr and Sartor - - -

MP: Frank Sartor, the Lord Mayor at the time.

AS: - - - Frank Sartor, the Lord Mayor, got together and got rid of the Sydney Committee. And the Sydney Festival Limited, or whatever it was, was formed. This was very, very much easier from my point of view to deal with. Except that Channel Nine, thanks to Stephen Hall, had recently agreed to a sponsorship of seven hundred and fifty thousand a year for a long time, a dozen years or so, and in return for this had two seats on the board. That is disastrous in every way. It's disastrous as an idea and it was disastrous in the way that it was carried out.

14.47 And Bruce Gyngell of television fame was one of those, and he was unfailingly courteous and sensible. The other man on the board from Channel Nine was only interested in "keep it popular". He was only interested in the ninety five per cent of the population that they reckoned looked at Channel Nine in the summer and therefore he wasn't interested in the program either except to keep it popular. And there was a notorious moment in a board meeting when I tried to get rid of – to cut a very long story short – I tried to get rid of the concerts in the Domain because I don't think they have anything to do with art at all.

MP: When you started there were three concerts in the Domain, jazz, opera and symphony.

AS: That's right. They were, as a *Sydney Morning Herald* subeditor rightly described them once, as tribal picnics. A hundred thousand people turned up. The back rows, indeed most of the rows, were canoodling, drinking, eating - doing anything but listening to music, which was obviously reproduced and pumped through loudspeakers. Everything that is anathema to a serious arts festival in my view. I tried to get rid of them and Jim - was that his name - Blomfield, who was the other Channel Nine person on the board said straight away "If they go, we go". So they stayed, as you might imagine, and they're still there today. We had no control over the programming. The Sydney Symphony programmed theirs, I guess Opera Australia programmed theirs, and maybe the Festival had something to do with the jazz in the Domain which I canned anyway. They were not a good idea, I thought, but they had to be there or we would have lost seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars of Channel Nine money.

17.04 **MP: Frank Sartor was also keen on having the free concerts, the three free concerts?**

AS: He probably was but I think he would have been amenable to getting rid of them. When I say "getting rid of them" I only suggested that they did not need the umbrella of a festival to sell themselves. Any time in good weather they would have done huge business. That was my rationale for getting them out of the Festival program.

MP: And reportedly they took one dollar in every eight from your budget at that stage?

AS: That's right, they did.

MP: That kerfuffle over the Domain concerts, how has that changed how they've evolved because of course they still continue. You cancelled the jazz one, the symphony and the opera one still continue. How have they evolved from that period because of what you did?

AS: As far as I know they've evolved only to the extent that the Festival now has quite a big hand in the programming of them, whereas as I mentioned we didn't. That, of course, doesn't alter the fact that I don't think they should be there at all.

MP: What other forces were happening at that time on the board because also as well as Channel Nine having two representatives, the state government had two representatives and the council had

two representatives. Who else was on that new formed board that I believe began about September '95. Was that it?

AS: No. There were a couple of independent members too who were usually the easiest to deal with because they didn't have their own row to plough.

MP: And did it seem to you a very politicised board when you began?

18.48 AS: Depends what you mean by "politicised". I only felt that the state government had its interests, the City Council had its interests, Channel Nine as we've already said had its interests. None of them was really particularly interested in the Festival, it seemed to me. And I think I'm right in saying they had been used to the festival director, i.e. Stephen Hall, producing the kind of program that they felt completely comfortable with. And that was precisely the kind of program that I did not want. So naturally there were tensions.

MP: We have in front of us the programs from the Festival of your time and you apparently were very adventurous about a design for a poster for that first Festival. I believed you had in mind a rather startling androgynous image with wings coming out of someone's face and their tongue sticking out. Channel Nine didn't like that either.

AS: No. Mr Blomfield thought it would appeal to two per cent of the population, not the ninety five per cent that they were aiming at so it was canned. It was a wonderful image and it would have gained terrific publicity, both for itself and for the program. I forget what we came up with in its place but nothing nearly so good. And there's an example of board members just looking after their own interests.

MP: What other goals did you have for the '95 Festival as we build towards talking about that program? In the short time you had to get that one up, what were you intending to do?

AS: Well, what I succeeded in doing was shortening the period of the Festival which used to run from New Year's Eve to Australia Day, which I thought was far too long. So I cut it down to, I think, three weeks that year.

20.53 I also managed to get more international programming. And that's about it, really, but as you say I only had a very short time. Even over the three years, as I've suggested earlier, we didn't achieve what we set out to achieve but we moved the Festival, I firmly believe, in the right direction. And that enabled my successors to pick it up at that stage and take it to where it is now.

MP: A lot of umbrella events were eliminated physically out of the program itself, out of the Festival. You made a conspicuously smaller festival, didn't you - - -

AS: Yes.

MP: - - - both in the time at which it ran and also what you identified as what was the Festival in its identity?

AS: You're right, because I feel it's so important that the artistic director takes responsibility for anything that is in the official program. We did not get rid in the first two of those Festivals, I think, entirely of what used to be called "umbrella events", simply because of the shortness of time and the shortness of money. For example, we packaged together and presented as our own and contributed financially but didn't take the full risk on a series of the very good jazz concerts that were happening in Sydney anyway at that time. But we only did that where I was happy that the standard was high enough to be included in my program. I would much rather have included such things in the program and taken absolutely full responsibility. But for pragmatic reasons that wasn't possible.

MP: You gave the Festival very much a CBD focus. We talked earlier about with the collapse of the Carnivale component bringing it in from the suburbs, in from the communities, if you like, to the presentation of professional arts but within a CBD focus.

23.00 AS: That probably originated from my tenure as director in Adelaide where, as we all know, the city is so compact and so perfectly organised to running a Festival in the CBD practically – a little bit outside but not far. And I felt particularly in a place as sprawling as Sydney with so much going on in high summer that the Festival needed a focus, that the locational focus, obviously, should be the harbour. Another thing that we never entirely succeeded in achieving, I did have many conversations with one European agent about having a really spectacular event on the harbour itself. That would have pleased me hugely. But it fell through because of lack of budget, as usual. I had one very impolite conversation with my Chairman on the telephone when he knew I was going to come along to a board meeting and put this proposal to them and he knew very accurately that we couldn't afford it so he stamped on it right outside of a board meeting. And he was probably right to do so but it disappointed me very much. So although we managed to focus things 'round the harbour in the following two Festivals, we never quite achieved that aim either.

MP: We'll talk about how you did that but the politics of spreading the Festival goodies around the city, the politics of having a significant part of the program at Parramatta which now exists, of people's access to the arts, this was not a concern as you shrunk the Festival back to the CBD focus?

25.07 AS: Well, I'm afraid to say that that has never been a concern to me. I think the artistic director's primary responsibility is to the program. And the program for the kind of Festival that I like to put together doesn't necessarily fit the suburbs, to put it bluntly. I quite understand the recent move to have Parramatta as a secondary focus and it seems to work very well. And I perhaps wish we could have done that. Parramatta wasn't quite the city that it is today then and it would have been nice to be able to do that, perhaps, with a sufficient budget. But I do think it's very important to have a geographical focus and that meant forgetting about the suburbs.

MP: You were blessed in 1995 with the opening of some long overdue new Sydney venues, weren't you? Venues has always been a problem, hasn't it, in finding a place for the Festival wherever you're putting it?

AS: Indeed, indeed. Yes, the two main ones were the revived - - -

MP: The Capitol Theatre.

AS: - - - Capitol Theatre.

MP: Which only opened in the nick of time, didn't it, in January '95?

AS: It most certainly did, yes; we were the first people in - and such a spectacular refurbishment.

MP: Staying with that for a moment, who did you have to open that very significant event?

26.48 AS: A French dance company, Philippe Decouflé, and it fitted that stage - you needed a lot of room - it fitted that stage beautifully. Whether it ever managed quite to rival the extraordinary refurbishment of the theatre itself I'm not sure because everyone was coming into the theatre for the first time, of course, since it was redone.

MP: I remember the night. It also was with that French company a very popular, modern mix of dance and acrobatics and to some extent was a signature work of many other similar types of works which have come to the Sydney Festival since.

AS: Yes. And also in my time because much though I wished it hadn't, I had to keep in mind all the time "Keep it popular". So Philippe Decouflé's company is as a matter of fact an extremely good example. It was something whose artistic worth I was extremely happy with but I knew that it wasn't going to frighten the natives.

MP: What other new venues were happening?

28.00 AS: Well, the main one, again programmed not by me, was the Starfish Club which was a theatre that the Sydney Theatre Company made in the basement of Pier 4 to celebrate their tenth anniversary – the tenth anniversary of the Pier 4 complex, not of the Sydney Theatre Company. And they provided a program there which was a huge success. It included the trash and junk percussionists, Stomp, and the famous Tap Dogs, directed by Nigel Triffitt in Perry's *Tap Dogs* which was a premiere that was just extraordinary. It swept all before it and went all 'round the world several times after that.

MP: Yes.

AS: So given the lack of venues and the lack of budget, that was a terrific bonus from my point of view. It was a very good example of me being very happy with the artistic content of what happened there but also knowing that it was going to be extremely popular.

MP: For reasons of collaboration and for budget, you were making co-production deals with the major companies in Sydney and in important venues like the Sydney Opera House, the Sydney Theatre Company as you've just explained, the Entertainment Centre, Belvoir, the Seymour Centre. It surprised me that this hadn't happened much before. Is that your feeling?

AS: Yes. I'm not sure that I even realised it hadn't happened before. But certainly it's something that I've always tried to do. And it only makes sense, financial sense, if you can do some kind of a joint production with a venue and we did that as much as we possibly could, I suppose.

MP: And you did some very distinctive work in the Concert Hall by actually making it a theatre space in the Opera House, didn't you?

30.07 AS: Yes. Well, we'd had a very good example of that when Australian Opera, as it was then called, had done, I remember, *Aida* but I think it did other productions, turning the Concert Hall into a theatre because of the inadequacy of the Opera Theatre for very large-scale productions. So we did that in each of the three years, yes, and that was just a way of getting over the venue problem and it worked very well for us.

MP: So the Barcelona dance company - - -

AS: Yes. Not dance, it's kind of Spanish popular opera. Zarzuela were there the first year and they were a very great success. In fact, I brought Zarzuela back to Australia later on.

MP: And companies like that, to pick up our earlier conversation about the ghosts of Carnivale and your interest in the full spread of an international program, that's a good example, isn't it?

AS: It is indeed.

MP: And meanwhile across at the Entertainment Centre you were staging the Guangdong acrobats from China.

AS: Yes. They happened to be touring around, I think. And again I keep on coming back to this business of "Keep it popular" because I couldn't forget about it, thanks to Mr Blomfield largely. And they were a great success; we had very, very good houses and good reviews. And I was happy with it.

MP: Also you continue - or did you begin? - the never-ending tradition in the Sydney Festival of staging Irish theatre?

AS: Well, you may well say 'Did I begin or did I continue?' because the Druid Theatre Company had been programmed by Stephen Hall for the previous year and he'd had to withdraw the invitation when financial troubles hit him. And I was able to re-extend that invitation and *Sty of the Blind Pig* was another production that was a huge success.

32.21 **MP: And then that followed the following year – just to leap into '96 – with the *Steward of Christendom*.**

AS: With the *Steward of Christendom*, yes, a really beautiful piece, I thought, with the most terrific Irish language beautifully spoken.

MP: Irish theatre is usually popular at the box office through its endless reincarnations at Sydney Festivals?

AS: Yes, yes, yes, it is, yes.

MP: Why? Is it the nature of the Irish theatre or the nature of Australians and the Irish amongst us?

AS: Well, I think it's a bit of both those, really. Irish theatre seems to attract people and, of course, there are an awful lot of Irish around. I like Irish theatre, certainly. You can get too much of a good thing, of course.

MP: Classical music is an issue that always seems to come up when I talk to artistic directors about the place of classical music. There needs to be a place for it but there often isn't a place. And festival directors at various times have grappled with where to put it, if to put it at all, and most have abandoned it, yourself included. Classical music was not a component of the '95 Festival or indeed the two after.

AS: No, not a great component at all. I know more about classical music than I do probably about any other art form so it's a bit of a surprise to me as well as others.

MP: Because of your previous employment, working in three classical music positions, essentially, in London.

34.11 AS: That's right, that's right, and Los Angeles. Let me think. Yes, I had quite a lot of classical music in my early Adelaide Festivals but I then began to consider that twentieth century festivals, late twentieth century festivals, should really be about contemporary work. And Beethoven and Mozart are well catered for now across Australia during the rest of the year. So my musical programming tended to become more contemporary. Now, in Sydney it was again a matter of budget. You speak of other festival directors abandoning classical music and they have to a large extent - but I think very sensibly - because the ones that I'm thinking of anyway are theatre people. And so much better to just ignore things that you know little about and care less about than to feel you have to cover them in some way. But in Sydney I would have loved to have done more contemporary music – and by “contemporary music” I mean contemporary classical – but the money wasn't there; it's expensive.

MP: I'm a theatre and a dance critic but it always slightly surprises me that festivals lead with theatre and to a lesser extent dance rather than any other art form. And yet many people don't go to the theatre. Why is it so important as a signature at a festival time?

AS: Why is what so important?

MP: Theatre, doing theatre.

AS: You say people don't go to theatre. They do during festivals on the whole. That is one of the great things about festivals, that people will stick their necks out and go and discover things, I think. Whereas if it's in the course of an ordinary annual season and they know not much about theatre they may think twice.

36.19 They will go to theatre in festivals, thank goodness. But I regret the absence of contemporary classical music in contemporary festivals. Nowadays it seems that the music is concentrated on rock music, for want of a better word, about which I know nothing. And some of it may be absolutely excellent of its kind. But it is there to the exclusion of what I consider to be more serious music.

MP: But that's an opportunity to express interest in whether a festival brings a young audience or not.

AS: Yes, of course it is. But, you see, I don't think that's the right end to start. I think you should start always with the artistic director presenting to the public what he or she likes best and knows most about, feels most confident about. And if the public doesn't like it that's too bad but the public on the whole will come, as we were just saying, because it's a festival. That is the festival director's great opportunity. Nowadays, you will find that festival directors are hired, it seems to me, almost as much for their ability in sponsorship and marketing as in their artistic achievements. And we all know why - it's because government money is getting harder to come by and sponsors like to keep it popular and I just think it's arse about face.

38.06 **MP: Your '95 Festival was very successful financially.**

AS: Yes.

MP: So you ended with a surplus of some four hundred thousand. So that's not bad after a deficit of a half a million of the Festival just before.

AS: No. I guess we were lucky more than anything else because as we've been saying there was very little time to put the program together. Yes it did go well. And for the eleventh time I have to say that because in the back of my mind or even the front of my mind was the requirement to keep it popular that also helped.

MP: When did you become satisfied, in doing that Festival or the following ones, that the sort of marriage of the values that you've been expressing about Festival making, of what the very best is in the meaning of "elite", with this drive that you constantly talk about of having to make it popular?

AS: In Sydney not till the third Festival, I think, looking back on the programs. The second was better than the first, the third was a lot better than the second. As I've suggested already, none of them met my ambitions but three years is not a long time.

MP: We'll come to that then when we talk about your third and final Festival. Were you becoming convinced as you moved into planning for the '96 Festival that the Sydney Festival was in the right place of the year? There was a debate at the time about whether the Festival should move, wasn't there?

AS: I thought a lot about that, obviously. During those thoughts, if and when I felt that it would be better in another time of year, I never had the courage or the opportunity to suggest it because there were too many other changes going on and that seemed to be the biggest of the lot.

40.06

On reflection, I think in Sydney it's probably at the right time of year because there are so many visitors. It used to be said, I believe, when the Festival started that everyone in Sydney went outside into the country and to the beaches during January and you'd never get any audiences. Well, that was quickly proved wrong. I think it is at the right time of year for Sydney.

MP: Wasn't the idea that a festival or particularly a festival that is highbrow wouldn't get people off the beaches in January?

AS: That's right. Yes, exactly, exactly.

MP: But somehow the beach theme and the highbrow have combined.

AS: That's true. I'm not sure that even today I would describe the Sydney Festival as opposed to some of its sisters as highbrow. I think the artistic director has to remember that it's in high summer in putting together the program. And I think they have done on the whole.

MP: So as we grope towards talking about elitism and popularism and highbrow, I mean when you started and still in your first year as we're discussing you were yourself considered highbrow, a man with an Oxford education and with an accent and a reserve, if you like, of an English background.

AS: Yes.

MP: Was that difficult for you? Was that the nature of why perhaps you didn't get on with Premier Carr at the time. Or did you have to counter some sort of prejudices about your own impression?

AS: I don't know. I don't remember that on the whole, I don't think so. I was reasonably well-known around those who were likely to be interested in going to festivals. No, I don't think so.

42.10 **MP:** What about the eternal issue in festival making about whether you should have a theme? Your contemporary at that time, David Blenkinsop, who had a very long run as the Perth Festival Director referred once that themes are very dangerous and that they're the tail that often ends up wagging the dog. Did you have an interest in it, did you think, as Sydney Festival gropes towards its newer identity, torn between elitism and popularism or some combination of the both, that there was an answer in having a theme?

AS: No. I don't agree with that at all. I agree entirely with Blenkinsop. Smaller festivals should perhaps have a theme. Big festivals that are supposed to cover all performing art forms – I think David was absolutely right: big danger of the tail wagging the dog. Mind you, when you've put your program together and the brochure's about to go to print, themes emerge and you then make absolutely all you can of them for publicity purposes.

MP: A sort of theme is surely one of your great successes in this three Festival period, which was to give the geographical focus of the Festival to Circular Quay, which is terribly obvious, and to focus on the harbour, front door of Circular Quay. Could we talk now about how particularly in the '96 Festival that you did that? What's the trick, what's the formula?

44.00 AS: The ideal formula is, as I suggested earlier, would be to use the harbour as the stage. But that was much too ambitious at that stage. I wish somebody would do that now, I wish they would.

MP: What do you mean by that?

AS: Well, I don't know what I mean, really, except that I did have this one possibility that I mentioned before of using the harbour as the stage. So rather like the New Year's Eve fireworks, the audience would have been marshalled along the shores and something great would have happened on the harbour. The nearest we got to that, I suppose, was the big free outdoor productions in the forecourt of the Opera House, something they can't do now for security reasons. But that turned out to be a huge success. And it's an obvious thing for Sydney.

MP: What did you do in '96 then that used that forecourt?

AS: Well, the very first production we had there was just about ideal for the context and that was a group from Barcelona, Els Comediants, who had the most extraordinary, wild - and I would have thought from an insurance point of view, practically impossible nowadays - production.

We had thirty thousand people a night in the forecourt of the Opera House, standing up, and the whole production, which had processions of huge maquettes and masses of fireworks going between the crowds - I would have thought highly dangerous, but my goodness it was successful. So we started off with a bang, to put it mildly, in more than one sense of that word.

46.08 **MP: And also a group from Holland, Vis a Vis performing.**

AS: Yes. That was a little more conventional in that the audience, and indeed the rest of those forecourt productions in succeeding years, was more conventional in the sense that the audience sat on the steps and the set was erected in front of the steps on the ground. So you sat and watched like you would in a theatre, which you certainly did not with Els Comediants.

MP: And reflecting that on the other side of Circular Quay outside the Museum of Contemporary Art, talking about the tail that wags the dog, whether it's a theme or not, was of course, Jeff Koons' *Puppy*. Your use of visual arts - and visual arts, of course, is a component sometimes of festivals - but particularly in installations is really interesting in making that outdoor activity happen at the Quay.

AS: That was the idea of using large installations, of course, to help the focus on the harbour and its surrounds. Jeff Koons' *Puppy*, which I think is a marvellous piece, was brought to Sydney by John Kaldor and had nothing to do with me to begin with, but in the end I contributed quite a lot from my budget to its budget. Never regretted it for one second.

MP: Could you describe it? The total cost of it was eight hundred thousand.

AS: Eight hundred thousand, yes. Well, it was - I forget how high - six metre high - - -

MP: Twelve metres.

AS: - - - twelve metre high, I'm sure you're right, statue of a dog made of thirty thousand flowers, blooms, and it had its own watering system behind the flowers. And naturally attracted a huge amount of attention. There've been, I think, several puppies, as it was called, but that very puppy now sits outside the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao permanently.

48.20 Jeff Koons has now become respectable. He gets good reviews from really serious people whose opinions I respect anyway. But the Sydney reviewers hated *Puppy*. They thought it was completely unimportant and not really a work of art at all. I disagree entirely - I did then. Obviously, John Kaldor disagrees too. But it got some really horrible reviews in the Sydney press.

MP: And you had Japanese sumo wrestlers elsewhere – I think it was at the same Festival - holding huge containers.

AS: That's right, that's right, yes. That was around Circular Quay by the terminal and that again was not my idea; it was travelling the world anyway and happened to be in Sydney that month. That was treated with equal contempt by the critics. I saw no reason not to welcome it since it didn't cost me anything and it was by a serious artist. Of course it would have been nicer to commission a piece, either from that artist, David Mack, an Englishman, or even from an Australian better still. But why turn down something that was on offer and would probably have been there anyway; I was happy to have it in the program.

MP: There was an exhibition as well along the railway that, of course, runs across Circular Quay called 'Urban Details', an exhibition of international artists around the theme of tolerance.

AS: Yes, that was on some scaffolding that had been erected along Circular Quay when they were doing up that bit of Circular Quay, remember, in those days, opposite the MCA, the other side, and it was a very difficult context for Mike Mullins who curated that part of the visual arts.

50.26 **MP: He was originally the founder of the Performance Space in Sydney.**

AS: He was indeed. It was very difficult because of the fact that you had this fence all the way along. He did a very good job and the great thing about it was that thousands and thousands of people passed by every single day on their way to and from the Opera House.

MP: And there were, on poles, that Australian group, Strange Fruit.

AS: Yes, and there were lots of performance art around the Quay as well, yes.

MP: So the serious critics, you suggest, might not have liked the individual arts components of it but that outdoor activity surely made Circular Quay happen.

AS: Well, Circular Quay happens whether you like it or not - - -

MP: Yes.

AS: - - - but it certainly added something and added something festive, I hope. That didn't placate the serious art critics at all. I'd be very interested to know which of those complainants would have a different attitude now if they looked at those works, particularly *Puppy*.

MP: Meanwhile, on the popular elite benchmark across at the Entertainment Centre you had Stars of Illusion.

AS: I'm not quite sure why we did that. It was a very, very good program of the leading illusionists and conjurers of the day from around the world. I did think to myself sometimes "Maybe I'm taking the 'Keep it popular' mantra a little too far with this production". But again, it was very successful. It was well received by critics as well and I don't regret it; I'm just not quite sure why I chose it, frankly.

52.2 **MP: The problem with all this outdoor activity, at least back at the Quay, was when it rains. It rained a lot that year in the '96 Festival and that was a problem in the Domain with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.**

AS: It was indeed. And to some extent it encapsulates the problem with those Domain concerts in those days anyway when, as we've suggested already, the Festival had little to do with them; they just happened. But we were required for reasons that we know about to have them in the Festival program. It did rain. It rained and as nearly always in my experience the audience didn't move. Well, some of them did, of course, but they just sat stoically on, waited for the concert to start. Then the forecast said it was going to rain again and before it even began to rain again the Sydney Symphony Orchestra unilaterally pulled the plug on the concert. Now, I think that was completely unforgivable even though I agree that we had little to do with the concert. As far as everyone else was concerned, it was part of the Festival program and I spent the next few days apologising on the Festival's behalf whilst making it clear that it had not been our decision.

MP: Did you pay them for the full concert?

AS: I suspect so.

54.03 **MP: I think I read in the board papers that there was some compromise. It seemed also in that year that there was a strong Indigenous presence which is something that we haven't talked about. And when you look at the Heiner Müller play staged at the Performance**

Space which was a sort of an adaptation of a Heiner Müller equating an Aboriginal point of view on the republic, which of course was before the referendum to come at the end of '90s and the current politics of that time. Would you like to comment on how much you wanted to answer the call for Indigenous content?

AS: I wasn't answering a call, certainly. I would suggest, bearing in mind our previous conversation about themes, that it was not deliberate as far as I remember. I think it was just by chance that that production with a very long title - *The Aboriginal Protesters Confront* and then many other words - was a good one. Premier Carr enjoyed it very much, I'm glad to say and Ningali and her wonderful one-woman performance happened to be available.

MP: From the Kimberley region?

AS: Yes. I don't think it was a deliberate emphasis on Indigenous work at all.

MP: And then there was the Boomalli artists who created flags to add to the activity on Circular Quay on flagpoles.

AS: Yes, indeed, yes. Again, by chance although now that you mention those three, I don't remember picking those up and making a publicity thing of them at all, which I should have done.

56.00 **MP: Yes. As we move to think about the '97 Festival which had other significant Australian content in it. Your success in Adelaide - even more profoundly, given it was earlier in the '70s - was actually in creating festivals which mixed local and international work which had them sitting next to each other with the Australian work equated with the international work in some way. Did you manage to achieve that in Sydney - was that a concern of yours?**

AS: Yes, I think we achieved it in Sydney but I have to admit that it was probably largely for budgetary reasons that local productions on the whole are inclined to be cheaper, obviously.

MP: But not if you make them, which you did in the '97 Festival.

AS: Yes, you're perfectly right. In Adelaide, by the way, it was a contractual requirement to give equal billing to international, national and local work.

MP: That in itself, given the earlier time is an innovative condition.

AS: Yes, yes, and a good one. Now it wouldn't be necessary because it happens automatically, I think, in virtually every festival. What were you saying before that?

MP: Whether you successfully managed to do it in Sydney, mixing the two, particularly in the work that you created in the '97 Festival, the first one of which was back on the Sydney Opera House forecourt was *Kelly's Republic* by Nigel Jamieson, an opera.

AS: *Kelly's Republic*. That was not an opera, a kind of a happening, really.

MP: Yes.

AS: That was a bold move because it was a very large commission production and indeed did cost a lot of money – you're absolutely right. Not enough money according to the director, Nigel Jamieson, who was constantly at me for extra funds, which I had to refuse and the atmosphere became a little thick between the two of us by the time opening night arrived. It was a very brave attempt to deal on a huge scale with the Kelly story. And it was, I don't know, seventy per cent successful, I think.

58.38 **MP: Much inspired by the Sidney Nolan images of Ned Kelly.**

AS: Yes, yes, indeed. It had everything that opened and shut. It had police bands and lots and lots of people doing lots and lots of things all over the forecourt. It needed a producer, really.

MP: You also staged that year *The Sinking of the Rainbow Warrior* which was expressive of the times politically and the interests in nuclear testing and the protests against the sinking by the French of that *Rainbow Warrior*. That was staged outside in the waters outside the National Maritime Museum in Darling Harbour.

AS: That's right, and on some of the ships there. That was fun; I liked that very much indeed.

MP: That was an opera, wasn't it?

AS: That was an opera, yes, yes. And again a huge stage incorporating two or three vessels and the water and the land, very well dealt with. I'm not sure that it was hugely popular because what contemporary music is hugely popular? But there was so much to look at that we got very good houses and I enjoyed it hugely.

MP: Nigel Kellaway, the director and composer and Colin Bright.

AS: Nigel Kellaway, yes.

60.08 **MP: Still outside, you were very successful that year back at Circular Quay with a French send-up of 1950s Hollywood films.**

AS: Yes, Royal de Luxe in a piece they called *Le Peplum*, again staged with the audience sitting on the steps of the Opera House, a hysterically funny piece that sent up, as you say, big Hollywood epics.

MP: And French, speaking of the French earlier, but twenty four people in the cast, tonnes of equipment; the French government contributed the sizeable budget.

AS: And we were very lucky that they did in view of *The Sinking of the Rainbow Warrior* because naturally the French government were not very happy at that production and there was a time when we thought they were going to withdraw their support for Royal de Luxe but they didn't.

MP: They were kind of a natural for you to stage because the French have a reputation of being pretty good at this outdoor theatre.

AS: Indeed.

MP: You also worked on that Festival very much in - getting close to a theme - a theme of water. Could you talk a bit about that?

AS: Well, we've spoken already about the *Rainbow Warrior*, which was certainly on water. And what else did we have?

MP: You had a work in the North Sydney Olympic pool.

AS: A mad Frenchman – again French – a mad Frenchman whom I had brought to a Brisbane music festival. And he specialises in composing music for performance under water so what you hear is kind of gurgles and things - - -

62.12 **MP: Of course.**

AS: - - - so the audience has to be in their bathers. And he did a piece in North Sydney pool and he did a piece on the harbour as well.

MP: Michel Redolfi?

AS: Michel Redolfi, yes.

MP: *Virtual Lagoon* it was appropriately called.

AS: Yes.

MP: And then wasn't there a similar work, *Sonic Waters* – an installation with underwater speakers in another harbour pool somewhere else?

AS: That's right. *Sonic Waters* was in the harbour.

MP: Nielsen Park, I think.

AS: Nielsen Park, with quite a few rather surprised Greek families having their picnics whilst we were all in our bathers, sticking our heads underwater to hear Michel's gurgles. Great fun but serious, serious musical accomplishment as well.

MP: Right, and music, as you say. Also there was a number of concerts. Can you talk a bit about the exploration of the Sydney/Venice theme as though the two cities have something in common. But certainly water is one of them.

AS: Venice in Sydney, yes, *della Laguna*. As you say, it was a series of performances around the city.

MP: Concerts of music, some fourteen concerts. And in a city that again has a problem with venues, you kind of made up venues or made unusual venues appropriate for the staging of concerts.

64.07 AS: Yes. We used the Hotel Intercontinental, we used Goat Island, we used Government House twice and Farm Cove and the base of Mrs Macquarie's Chair.

MP: And you also brought out the Vietnamese Water Puppets, so the water theme was quite big that year.

AS: Yes, it was, it was. It was edging towards what I really wanted in the focus around the harbour.

MP: I suppose the place of music in a festival is important to note here with the '96 Festival because you did have the Gregorian Chant Choir from Spain, Australia's Gondwana Voices, the British opera singer Lesley Garrett. There was a sort of an interest in the voice particularly.

AS: There was. Again, I have to say by chance, absolutely by chance. And there was also the production of Falla's only opera, *La Vida Breve*.

MP: The Spanish composer?

AS: Yes, at the Playhouse at the Opera House – not at the Playhouse, I beg your pardon – at Sydney Town Hall, which was a concert

production but a very, very successful one. And the lead singer in that, Carmen Linares also gave a concert at the Playhouse in the Sydney Opera House. So you're quite right there was quite an emphasis on voice.

MP: And again, ghosts of Carnivale, you had dancers from Brazil, you had gypsy music, again in the Concert Hall, reworking the Concert Hall in the Opera House, gypsy music from Rajasthan to the Nile, Gumboot Dancers from Africa. This was quite a multicultural event, this Festival.

66.02 AS: Yes, but that's what festivals should be. I don't ever say to myself, "Well, it's time we had something from Brazil". You seek out the best work you can find that you can afford and that's available, wherever it may happen to come from. Those two productions at the Concert Hall in the Opera House were particularly successful because they both by chance ended up with the cast leading the audience out in this kind of conga line into the foyers. They were both, I think, particularly the Gypsies, absolutely ideal examples of the "Keep it popular" being also, if not high art, at least very definitely art.

MP: Or having an integrity of place to its source, I suppose, that being very important in the truest of community theatre way, whether we're talking about big works or small works.

AS: Quite right.

MP: How do you find these works? When you think about those works, the dancers from Brazil, the Gypsy music, the Gumboot Dancers from Soweto, when you go shopping as a festival director how do you avoid the rushing overseas and just plucking the best product you can find off the supermarket of festival making? And there must be such a supermarket because there are so many festivals in Australia and around the world now.

AS: And it's a question that's being asked, I think, more and more frequently in Australia. The, as you put it – as lots of people put it – the supermarket attitude to programming is in many ways regrettable, I think. But to take some of those productions that you've just mentioned. Somebody on my staff had heard about the Gumboot Dancers and I did not have a chance to see them perform but I saw videos which was quite enough.

68.11 **MP: They have a relationship, of course, with what you had the year before – or was it earlier at the Starfish Club – with *Stomp* and *Tap Dogs*.**

AS: That's right, yes, yes, a relationship that you noticed that I never had. And the Brazilians, I had heard that the director of the very large and important dance festival in Lyons had been to Salvador de Bahia and seen this company and had enjoyed not only them but the town so much that he bought a house there. So I thought "This all sounds worth going to investigate" and they were irresistible. They were a little bit too like in their appeal, a little bit too like the Africans from the previous year for comfort but they were hugely successful. And, let me think, the Gypsies: I was introduced by somebody to a Frenchman who had put several programs of this kind together. He lived in Perpignan, which is where the French Gypsies come from, the Gitans. So I met up with him in Paris and he had strict instructions from me to put together a program that, as you said, from all those different countries which traced the travel of Gypsies from India to the west. And he had strict instructions to stick to absolutely the echt performances and he did so brilliantly.

MP: In the '97 Festival, we're still having the Writers' Festival which was a component, I think, even that year but it was - - -

70.10 AS: Split after that.

MP: - - - was split after that. The Writers' Festival, just like Carnivale before it, was always a component in the grab bag of events in the Festival.

AS: Indeed.

MP: Was there sort of a reaction, what was the politics about keeping the Writers' Festival within our without the Sydney Festival?

AS: Well, in my time the politics were that it should be within and I was very happy about that. It always went extremely well and I think, as in Adelaide, it benefits from being part of that greater program because there are lots of people in town. But the decision was taken after that, as you say, to hive it off and make it a freestanding affair and that still goes well as far as I know. I had no great opinions about that; in my time it was there.

MP: I read at the time that some board members were concerned that if you take the Writers' Festival out, you as festival director needed to think of some appropriate entertainment or attractions which the type of people who go to a writers' festival would want to then see in the Sydney Festival rather than abandon the Sydney Festival completely.

AS: That sounds like a board member talking to me.

MP: You don't remember it. At this time, even before January '96, more than a year before your contract expired, there was speculation that Leo Schofield was taking over but that didn't happen until 1998, following his appointment to the SSO. This was in sharp contrast to the short notice you had; he had very long notice.

72.07 **AS:** Yes, lucky man, he did.

MP: Would you have liked to have done a further fourth year?

AS: Oh, yes, I would indeed because we would have edged still further towards what I was after. Yes, I would. I may be wrong but I've always thought it was – I shouldn't be unkind to him or unfair to him – maybe Carr wasn't against me so much as he was for Leo. And he really wanted Leo to come and run the Sydney Festival but the board stuck to their guns. My original contract was only for two and they stuck to their guns and offered me a third. But by then, I guess, the call from the Premier was such that I wasn't offered a fourth – nor was I due a fourth, by the way.

MP: Yes. And as you look at the '97 Festival, what seeds would you have liked to have expanded in a '98 Festival if you had have been offered it? What would you have liked to have done more? Obviously a big work at Circular Quay was almost an obsession.

AS: Yes, indeed, yes, yes, yes. Otherwise the mixture as before. What I was trying to do during the whole of my time there was to begin to teach the board that they must expect the unexpected, something that they were not at all inclined to do when I first arrived.

MP: More than other festival boards that you've worked with?

AS: Yes. But they got easier to deal with each year and presumably they might have been easier still the following year had there been one. I think – you will find out from him – I think the great thing that Leo did was to take full advantage of the progress that we had managed to make. As I've suggested already, we didn't get where I wanted to get at all but we did move in the right direction. So he took over a Festival that programmatically and financially for that matter was in good shape and he made the most of it.

74.30 **MP:** And now in summary would you like to think what that legacy was of how that Festival had changed from the original people's festival that you inherited from Stephen Hall, which was described in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, a typical program from 1989 combined a motorfest, a ferrython, the Coca-Cola bottlers

dancehall, offal waving, Spanish experimental theatre group, La Fura Dels Baus and the premiere of David Williamson's *Top Silk*.

AS: There you go.

MP: That was the '89 Festival, that was the type of festival that you inherited. What did you leave behind?

AS: I hope I left behind a festival that avoided the earlier things on your list and a festival that began to concentrate its activities around the harbour and a festival that was trying as hard as it could within the limitations of both budget and board attitude to take itself seriously.

MP: And what was your greatest frustration in that voyage?

AS: Money, or rather lack of.

MP: Just money?

AS: Yes.

MP: And how do you think Sydney's character, its arts and culture around you was changing as a festival director in this mid '90s period, which was a period in Australia of some affluence and some political inquiry and shifting? How do you think the arts and culture of Sydney was changing around the Festival?

76.28 AS: To some extent I've already answered that in saying that Leo took the opportunities that were available to him. Because there was a lot more going on that was not part of the Festival during the festival period. And the thing always with a festival is to make it special and different from other things that are happening at the time. He certainly achieved that. I wouldn't have programmed my Festivals exactly as he went on to do so, obviously. But I come back to the fact that he inherited a problem that was much less difficult than three years before.

MP: And almost finally, what about the impact of the Sydney Festival that you created on Sydney itself and how Sydney saw itself and Sydney's reputation internationally, which was an important consideration, I suppose, given the impending Sydney Olympics and the four cultural festivals which preceded and were a part of that Olympic Festival?

AS: I seem to give the same answer to all your questions but it was that we started to move in the right direction.

MP: What's the right direction, though?

AS: Well, as we have been talking about all the time, to have programs of serious art that nevertheless took note of the fact that it was in high summer and under the banner of "Keep it popular", come back to the same things all the time. And I think the Sydney Festival has maintained those kinds of approaches since then.

78.28 **MP: And to some extent would you agree that the Sydney Festival was working in an environment, at least in Australia, where the major festivals were now entrenched? The new ones had been established, it is a competitive environment of many festivals but in different cities and towns.**

AS: It most certainly is. That, of course, is why the Adelaide Festival went annual, because it felt it had to keep up with the Joneses, the Joneses by then being not only Sydney and Melbourne but also Brisbane.

MP: But Christopher Hunt made this interesting comment, a predecessor or a successor of yours at the Adelaide Festival - - -

AS: Both.

MP: - - - yes, both, running the Adelaide Festival - thought it astonishing that people like me would ask such a question, that there are so many festivals in different cities and only in Australia would Australians be concerned about what's happening thousands of miles away.

AS: But nevertheless in the same country and that kind of approach is particularly relevant to Adelaide, which after all apart from Perth which I always considered to be in a different country anyway, it's so far away, Adelaide was the only one.

MP: And I suppose which is the festival which you most have enjoyed or the place in which you've made a festival that you've most enjoyed, that you've found most satisfying? Is it the city near here where you live in Adelaide?

AS: Definitely, because it has the longest tradition, it has the best understanding from board members and other people that one has to deal with and, as we've already mentioned, its topography is ideal. Definitely.

MP: Anthony Steel, thank you so much for talking to us.

AS: Thank you.

80.32 **[Interview ends]**