This is George Lewkowicz for the Don Dunstan History Project for the Don Dunstan Foundation, interviewing Mr Peter Tregilgas on his work with Don Dunstan, particularly in Melbourne, particularly there as Don was the head of the Tourism Commission, I think it was, in Melbourne in the early ’80s. The date today is the 12th March 2009 and location is the Rob Roy Hotel, Halifax Street in Adelaide.

Peter, thanks very much for doing the interview for the Don Dunstan History Project. Just for our record and for those listening to this interview later on, can you just talk a bit about yourself so we’ve got an idea of your background and your education and how you got into the position that you did with Don?

Thanks, George, and no, it’s my pleasure to be able to assist with the Dunstan Foundation. I had several good years working with Don and to that extent I was also able to claim that Don was a friend.

My area was my involvement in arts and cultural development. I grew up in Adelaide and born in 1954, I did most of my undergraduate work at the Flinders University, during which time I was the Social Activities Officer which put on the bands, the craft shows, the film nights, et cetera. But I didn’t get to know Don until later, but of course I grew up with the Dunstan legend, and of course at Flinders University there was the famous Super Don painting that was well-positioned in what was called the Airport Lounge – Airport Lounge by name only because it looked like an airport, not because (laughs) you were about to take off, of course.

From the Flinders University I moved on to being one of the early Directors of the Adelaide Fringe. In those days it was called ‘Focus’, of which Frank Ford was my Chair, and I was the Administrator/Director of the Fringe for the 1980, ’82 and ’84 Festivals, and it was at this time I actually got to meet Don for the first time, really, in 1980 for the ’80 Festival, and I’ll talk about that in a moment. From there then I worked for Don in Victoria when Don was the Chair of the Victorian Tourism Commission. And then, after Don had resigned from Tourism Commission, he returned to Adelaide and sometime later I also did and asked him to be involved with the Tandanya, the Aboriginal Cultural Centre, for which I was the inaugural Director, and Don played a very important role essentially assisting and mentoring me from
there. And my current position is that of the Executive Director for Arts Access, which is arts and disability, here in South Australia.

Thanks very much, Peter. That’s a pretty extensive set of experiences in the arts, particularly one of the areas that Don was very interested in. When did you join Don’s staff in Melbourne and what role was it? You mentioned you did work with him there. What year was that and what was the specific role?

Well, I joined Don in mid-1984, in fact it was May 1984, after the Fringe of that year in ’84. I was interviewed for the position and took up a role as Festival Consultant for what was a newly-formed unit in the Tourism Commission which was called the Festivals Unit. Don had two special units in the Tourism Commission that reported directly to him – and that really was directly to him and not to the General Manager – and that was the Special Projects Unit, which was in relation to a range of planning and architectural development concepts; and the second was the Festivals Unit.

Now, the Festivals Unit I shared with a fellow consultant whose name is Grahame Dunstan (no relation) was famous – or should I say infamous – for his work as the Director for the Aquarius organisation or what became Nimbin, but Grahame was very important in terms of festivals because of his ability to develop community and bring that into the public focus.

But Don’s interest in the Festivals Unit was that events that were occurring in Victoria at the time – the peak of these was the Moomba Festival and the Ballarat Begonia Festival – were pretty moribund affairs, and they were tired, and Don did have a vision that events were attractors for the community in the same way as the Adelaide Festival was and that our job was really to develop cultural product that could then be packaged and developed as a tourism asset to Victoria.

Just to get an idea of the scale of the Commission, how many people, roughly, were working there? Was it a big organisation, or – – –?

Oh, yes – essentially it’s a government department and sort of still is – – –. It appears to come in and out of government direct control, although it really is always under control, sometimes it has an independent chair, other times it seems to be a department; currently I think it’s a department. But there was at least a hundred, if
not more, people working. Now, when I came there it was located in essentially three different places: there was the head office in Bourke Street, it was 500 Bourke Street; it had the VicTour offices, which of course were the information and tour booking services in Collins Street, just before Swanson Street; and then they were about to move into the World Trade Centre – this is pre-casino, pre- that further development – and when the two special projects units commences we were literally in the World Trade Centre (laughs) on our own and did amusing things such as – these are the anecdotes of work – in fact, we had a carpet bowls championship or challenge between the Bourke Street team and our team and we asked people to dress up in their bowls outfits, et cetera, et cetera, so we had a bit of fun.

So that implies a quite flexible culture or some background to it. Can you recall, when you were working there, whether there was more of a feel of a quite flexible organisation, not hierarchical like the old systems?

Well, on the contrary, it was hardly flexible.

Oh, I see.

Flexible in the sense that we had two special units come in whose job it was to essentially be flexible and entrepreneurial and to try to create new events and activities – and we can explore those as we go, both the festivals and the special projects; but the rest of the organisation was really very hierarchical. Tourism is essentially a product-driven industry and the focus, of course, was on selling tours through the VicTour offices, so that Don’s role as the Chair in that sense was really much more about developing the product, of which, as I mentioned, the example in festivals was very limited. The Special Projects Unit’s focus was some big long-term activity and also some short-to-medium-term. For example, in the big long-term, we were talking about – there was a major report done for the St Kilda redevelopment, much of which is only really coming into place now, and so of course this is twenty-plus years on. There were some medium-term projects such as the whole Chinatown zone, but that included the Chinese Museum – and the Chinese Museum in that sense Don particularly saw as a cultural focus because, in that sense,
while you can reinvigorate the area, he felt that it still needed an attractor to come to
the facility.

But in terms of the special projects groups, I think we actually start getting to the
nub of what Don was trying to achieve, in the sense of that he’s no longer a
legislator, he’s an administrator. And so he had to work towards getting a range of
regulations and scenarios changed. St Kilda was the perfect example where the baths
were turned into Jean Jacques Restaurant, and this is of course right on the beach, so
while it’s been a kiosk style of operation it hadn’t been fine dining, and Jean Jacques
was well known as a fish character, and of course the concept was to sort of emulate
the Doyles of Sydney a bit. So Don was not adverse to the idea of a bit of copying, if
not plagiarism, in that sense.

But again the key issue here with the issue of regulation was particularly the
Chinatown one, whereas the Chinatown, which of course exists in Little Bourke
Street – Little Bourke Street is between Bourke Street and Lonsdale Street – was
being turned into car park city. It was really a laneway which was a feeder to a range
of multistorey car parks, either existing buildings or to be developed, and this was
potentially losing that whole character of the very strong history that Victoria has,
through the Gold Rush, of the Chinese culture and how it had settled into Melbourne
and played not only a role in the food, which was a key interest of Don’s, but also in
things such as tailors and herbs and medicines and some of that more alternative
area. So Don’s focus was on Little Bourke Street – and it’s one of the key issues he
had to achieve – was to regulate so that Little Bourke Street would no longer become
essentially a car park feeder and could become a cultural precinct; and he tried to top
that of course with a cultural facility that would be a continuous attractor.

So his role – you talk about him being an administrator, that has connotations of
getting into a lot of detail on that, but was he more the policy and strategic
thinking type? How do you resolve, if you like, the pressures on thinking about the
detail but also about the policy and the strategy? Presumably Don was the ideas
person and the figurehead.

Yes, pretty well. Clearly Don, as the Chair, was the driver of, again, a range of
creative vision – again, not dissimilar to how he presented himself in South Australia
– and the examples were the Chinatown, the St Kilda precinct, even concepts such as some of the heritage homes – Purumbeet and some other facilities around regional Victoria, too. He wanted to breathe life into those facilities, in the same way as he attempted with Ayers House to not just have it as a staid home for the National Trust but actually have people use it, and certainly the role of restaurants and catering was a key component of that.

As an administrator, though, and one of the issues that I had to confront was that, certainly being in awe of D.A.D. when I first came – and who wouldn’t have been, when I was the age I was, to have joined Don? – you of course think that he is capable of everything and actually don’t appreciate, necessarily, that he needs that sort of adviser and more detailed administrative support. Because what he was also looking for from those special projects units weren’t actually the detail people; he recruited people for both of those units, in the Festivals and the Special Projects, who were very creative in themselves, because he felt that they had to really crack new nuts. And the example is in the Festivals Unit not only did we review Moomba and Ballarat Begonia and some of those regional things, but we tackled bigger pictures like the Spoleto Festival, or now called the Melbourne International Festival, and the concept of bringing almost a ready-made festival through, what was already a dual-city festival through – in Spoleto in Italy and Charleston in the United States – but to bring a third wing to that for the Spoleto Melbourne. But also we at the same time were able to develop projects, very creative projects, such as the Melbourne International Comedy Festival. And I’d have to say that part of the reason the Comedy Festival came about was through my own work, but the beauty with Don was that he would allow people to explore creative vision where he thought it was appropriate, and we were able to put that project all the way up to Cabinet and ultimately win funding for that. And the concept was very simple: in that period, Victoria, Melbourne, had lost its media. Stokes was in Western Australia, as was Bond, and the infamous Spanish Connection “Skase” was in Sydney. Melbourne had lost that base of media, and so part of the concept was about to ensure that
Melbourne could create product and continue to create product for a television market. Comedy was seen in that sense that everyone had a sense of humour. There were some very strong entrepreneurs in the Melbourne comedy scene growing through, and the idea was “everyone had a sense of humour – every ethnicity, every age group”. And also there was a fear that one of the problems of Melbourne International Festival, Spoleto, it would only attract a small élite, and the concept of comedy was that it was broad-based and, again, particularly that it would be able to attract people from around the world to visit it.

So, back to answering the question about the detail: he did not see it as his task to manage that detail. He became frustrated when others didn’t pick that up. But, as I point out, he really recruited more for a creative, entrepreneurial side.

So what did he add to what you were doing, for example, when he’d have this idea or you have the idea and he’d say, ‘Well, okay, go for it’, and what would happen after that? How did he interact on it?

Well, probably one of the best examples, which is probably not well-known at all, one of the concepts that we tried to explore in the Festivals Unit was the notion of developing an international expo which was the International Garden Festival. Now, Victoria was known as ‘The Garden State’, although that was seen a bit like in South Australia being ‘The Festival State’ in terms of the numberplate issue, so it was a bit twee. But Don certainly recognised that, on an international scale and on the statistics, there was massive interest in gardening as a leisure time activity, and that the numbers that went through international projects such as the Glasgow International Garden Festival and the Liverpool International Garden Festival in the ’80s, early ’80s, were most significant, and particularly in the area of urban renewal. They did amazing jobs in Liverpool and in Glasgow, and Don was very interested in this. And the area that we identified – and this was coincidental that we were at the World Trade Centre, which is on the western edge of what was the city at that time and literally were able to look out the window and go, ‘Someday, son, this’ll all be yours’ – (laughs) and we pointed to the central dock and Victoria Dock and said, ‘What about this as a site?’ Now, as it turned out, that project didn’t come off,
although we did a major resource study; but Don’s interest in this area was twofold:
one was, ‘Get the money from Canberra’. So Don’s interest in that sense was if there
was a capacity for a national event of that scale, of course Victoria wouldn’t be
paying for it, it would be a national project of which maybe considerable
infrastructure support could be brought into it. And the second, of course, is that
Don had the connections that could get a proposal all the way through to Cabinet.
Now, while he wouldn’t be presenting it, in that context, he certainly had the
capacity to do that.

And nationally was it the Hawke Government then?

No, we were –

Fraser?

– no, sorry, it must have been end of the Hawke Government because I was dealing
with Barry Cohen on this particular exercise. Yes, indeed it was the Hawke
Government, because there was another event which in fact we invited Bob Hawke
to come to, which was called the Antipodes Festival – again, another event that we
developed, but this time for the Greek community, as the name might sound. But the
concept of that event, again, was more focused on second-generation than the first
arrivals, so the idea was the celebration of what has been contributed to the State, and
the focus was around Lonsdale Street as the centre for Greek activity.

But adding to that in terms of that International Garden Festival and that zone,
that report and that process was put in the hands of Robert Fordham, who was the
Deputy Premier under the Cane Government, and he was the Minister for
Development. What was interesting there is that, while there was some sympathy for
the garden festival concept, it really did expose the idea that the area west of the city,
as in the Spencer Street Station and all of those docklands, was a viable opportunity
and particularly as we presented that area. Now, of course, the history now has it
that we’ve now got the Telstra Stadium –

A sports cathedral, yes.
– sports cathedrals and more high-rise developments than you could imagine, and this again shows the level of vision that was involved in it.

Yes, right, interesting. And just to get back to the question, part of the question, the interaction Don had with what was being worked up: what sort of things, apart from the original idea perhaps or he might have heard it from somewhere else and ran with it, what sort of value-added did he put to the process himself?

Well, firstly, these projects weren’t put up in a maverick sense; they were evaluated, there were reports and papers – the concept paper for the Comedy Festival, there was a major research paper prepared for the International Garden Festival, all of which would be well-documented. Now, the role that he played in those, though, depended upon where he sat. The Garden Festival, for example, he actually chaired certainly during one component of it in order to get it moving, but we divided that up into planning and then operational – you know, other areas – but of course he retained always the area of involvement.

Did you see him chair?

Yes.

What was his style like?

Well, he was a very open chair. He allowed the business to be done, he allowed the voices to be heard, and that included some voices of opposition, but once a decision had to be made it was final and that was the end of that story.

He was good at summarising?

He didn’t use to do that, really. He didn’t use to particularly then go and, ‘Point one, two and three, this is what we’ve got’; no, he let other people do that. He was certainly, in the context of chairing a meeting in a creative vein, encouraging to ensure that the right person that should be heard was heard. I remember on several occasions – for example, I’d be invited to a meeting on festivals and there would be some very important people at meetings, other ministers and whatever – and he would feel that the nub of the issue hadn’t actually been covered and he would
ensure that I, for example, or members of the Special Projects Unit, would be able to put their two bob’s worth in, in an appropriate presentation, and sometimes in an *ad hoc* manner, that would fill in some gaps.

One area which is important to appreciate, though, is that he was a delegator. In his management style he was a very good [delegator], the example being Moomba was probably one of the most established and Establishment sorts of events that Melbourne could have. The meetings were held in the Melbourne City Hall, there was thirty-plus on the committee – if you’d made the Moomba Board you were doing pretty well. There were councillors, there were important people there, *et cetera*. So this is one of the – it might seem as a bit of a joke now, but it was a good seat to have. What was interesting was there was one government representative on this board, and Don appointed me, and this caused quite a stir because of course they expected him. Now, his game in that was obvious: that he wanted to be able to have the trump card when the time came (laughs) –

*Of course, yes.*

– and there was a time that came that he needed that trump card there, which was particularly as we went to review the Festival, one for its gender balance, two for the sheer numbers of people who were simply on that committee, and three the value of that event in terms of the tourism dollar and the capacity to attract people and was this reflecting of the culture of Melbourne. So there were several examples of that, and a further example to that was again I was appointed to the Spoleto International Festival’s board rather than Don. Now, Don remained an open door, he expected me to report – and that was the point, I reported directly to him – so I was his ears and eyes, as were other members of units.

**And did you talk about tactics and things like that to get stuff through?**

We did, to a degree, yes. The example was when we were talking about an international garden festival he offered various little pieces of advice, such as – you know, the famous story that he learnt from Thomas Playford: ‘Never have a royal
commission unless you know what the answer is’, in other words, ‘Never do a study unless you know what’s going to happen’. And he also made the point, in relation to the Garden Festival, that the resources for such a project at such a level because of the international exposition requirement would come from Canberra and that he felt that the most important nut to crack on that point was Barry Cohen and the Department of Arts and Culture.

And, in dealing with some of these very senior people, what was his style generally, if you happened to see him do that? He was now an employee of the Government, if you like, not the Premier anymore.

Well, the truth was I have to say I didn’t see much of that, because he did most of that work, having been given his brief, and then he did that as a one-on-one with John Cain or as a one-on-one with Robert Fordham. So he made his own deals, of which he would then come back and tell you the results.

In terms of Don as a personality, might be to deal with for a short while, my history of him goes from when I was working with the Fringe, and in fact it was in 1980 that I first met him. I was the Director of the Fringe, Bob Lott and Tony Brooks actually, as part of that Fringe, brought out a group called the Cambridge University Footlights, who were full of contemporary stars, actually, and have now made their way in the major comedy series of the UK. Now, we presented this at the Norwood Town Hall. Now, Don had resigned in ’79, so as we come to the ’80 Festival was he well, how was he going to go, et cetera? But he was there at the opening night at the Norwood Town Hall, at which I thought, ‘Here is my opportunity to meet the great man’ – thinking, of course, that he’d be like Prince Charles. I simply fronted up and said, ‘Hello, my name’s Peter Tregilgas, I’m the Director of the Fringe, it’s a pleasure to meet you’, and then expected an answer back something like – who knows? My answer I got back was, ‘Yes?’

Right, yes.

(laughter) To which, of course, I had to make further conversation, to which his response was something similar to the previous one. So that was pretty difficult for
me to handle because of course I guess you have an expectation that somebody in public life has a persona which is full of greeting and generosity, but that’s not particularly as it was.

In my time when I went to Melbourne and was interviewed for the position and took the position, Don was very complimentary of me and the work that I’d done with relation to the Fringe, in that he had clearly observed the Fringe and watched how it had grown, and this is partly because of my second meeting with Don is that we asked him to become the Patron in 1982, and in fact – yes, we asked him to become a patron of the Fringe in 1982 and in fact speak on our behalf on a funding issue. So Don, despite his health issues – what’s it called? Narcolepsy –

Yes, go to sleep.

– so he came to my office with the Chair, which was Frank Ford at the time, and what he did was he sat in my office as I briefed him – this is the first time I ever had briefed him – and he appeared to be literally nodding off. And we then confronted the media at a public event in Rymill Park where we’d had a significant role; he of course, talked with enthusiasm; but what totally amazed me was that Don literally spoke word for word slabs of the briefing that I had provided, so that, while there was a perception that he was not quite with-it, he was a hundred per cent, if not more, there; he was simply using that as a concentration vehicle.

And I had similar experiences then again when I was in Melbourne. He was not a great conversationalist when you – for example, once I had to go to Ballarat, another time I had to go to Rutherglen in the North-East of Victoria with him, so I travelled with him in the vehicle. He received the briefing in a similar way to as I’ve just described in terms of the Fringe, in that he completely closed his eyes, focused on what I was talking about. But then what was interesting is that, as we travelled there for a couple of hundred kilometres beyond, we didn’t speak a word. So there was no passing comment, as in, ‘Ooh, that was a nice hill’, or, ‘Isn’t it green?’ Absolutely no interest in any of that style. But again, once we got to our venue, was able to interpret exactly the issues, had analysed the pluses and minuses of the cost
implications and had brought them to a very clear focus. So in a working environment it was really – as long as you understood that.

However, on a social basis, my first connections were – when I was first in Melbourne, he had his – I can’t remember, perhaps it was his sixty-fourth birthday and he invited me to his home in East Melbourne, or his rented home in East Melbourne. I’d have to say I thought I’d hit the A-list. But again what surprised me is that the people who were there were not the A-list; it was just interesting people that Don had collected and brought around and had come there from around Australia, and of course there was those that he’d met in Melbourne. And what I learnt at that function and at several others, then, in a more social environment – and I’ll have to add in here, in terms of the social environment, one of the things that was particularly interesting for me was that he brought across from Adelaide a woman by the name of Andy Thorpe. Now, Andy Thorpe was a radio personality and had had a very strong role and connection with Adele, and I understand Andy nursed Adele in her last months and so Don had a very close association with Andy, and he probably felt very isolated in terms of his friendships and needed a confidante such as Andy, and Andy and I hit it off on a personality base tremendously and we actually shared a house – despite twenty-five years’ difference in our age, and so it was like taking your mother to events – and we laughed and had a fantastic time. So I became more closely-associated with Don in a personal basis, largely to do with Andy, and as a consequence I was able to sit with him more socially. But again, as I say, in the social connection, Don was terrific if you talked about him and asked questions about an experience or an example. (background music increases in volume, break in recording)

We were talking about the social connection with Don in terms of his private life. His time in Melbourne, I suspect he was lonely to a fair extent, but he did build a good group of friends, particularly some of those in the gay community, and was able to make those connections. It was at this time, of course, that he also met Stephen.
Cheng, yes.

Cheng. But he had several parties at his East Melbourne facility, generally related to his birthday. But the other occasions, of course, that we’re talking about are his work life, and that means that I had to dine with him on several occasions, where of course if he was in a good mood and if the focus was to a fair degree on him he was very forthcoming.

Did he ever talk about why he went to Victoria and not stayed overseas or thought about taking up a position in South Australia on something? I understand some were offered to him but he didn’t want to take them up.

No, he didn’t tell me a lot, but I remember he certainly said that he was very interested in the idea of yachting, and so he was really keen on the idea of the Port Philip Bay and he was able to get a yacht. But mind you, again, actually, (laughs) as circumstance would have it, he found himself on the bay when a sou’westerly came up and realised there were very few safe moorings, and so back to regulation, one of the things he did as the Tourism Chair was ensured that a range of safe mooring opportunities became more available on the Port Philip Bay.

Interesting – direct experience.

(laughter) Direct experience.

Just getting back to some of the projects you worked on – I’m not sure whether we covered this or not – what was the sort of advice you were giving him in your work? Some of it would have been, I’ll say, technical, creative advice and others I don’t know, but what did you have to advise him about that he might have forgotten about or needed to pick up in the work he was doing?

Well, probably – this is one of my responses I’ll think of something better the moment that you go away – the role that we had to play was – and admittedly, Victoria’s cultural scene, although extraordinarily rich, its range of assets and its perception of itself was very poor. There’s the classic argument about Sydney–Melbourne. Melbourne saw itself as the poor cousin to Sydney, didn’t have any assets in that sense, and had struggled with the concept to think that its own culture was in fact one of its key opportunities. And the irony is, of course, that that’s
exactly what’s making it a very cosmopolitan and visitor-based city now and it didn’t necessarily need the icons. At that time there was some very good forethought going on in the Government, particularly in the Department of Environment, and the whole South Bank proposal was being developed, including arts precinct developments beyond where the Ministry for the Arts went into the ballet building, into the area now of course where the Malthouse is, the Melbourne Theatre Company, Museum for Contemporary Photography, ACCA[Australian Centre for Contemporary Art], and of course the new concert hall, and of course there was the whole VCA¹ – the whole arts precinct was being mooted at this time. So then add to that issues that were being conceived by Don and one of the beauties of him was his capacity to take on this broad range of things and not necessarily take an ego view that this was his project and therefore to pump this one through; realising that all of these things had merit. He did argue for a range of priorities. The St Kilda one he thought was extraordinarily important and it did take a long time to move, and you might remember again at the time that St Kilda was also the drug and prostitution precinct of the city at the time.

**Ackland Street.**

So he felt that, and knowing of course this was the best swimmable beach within proximity to the city, too, and of course the beachfronts along Middle Park and those other areas needed to be further developed. But he also again had the capacity to accept that projects like South Bank, which he had very little to do with, or seemed to have little to do with, should also get a place in the sunshine. (break in recording)

**In the work you and Don were doing, and others of course, what were his relationships with politicians more broadly – you mentioned he would go and talk to the ministers and get deals done, but just more generally – and the public servants, was there a cooperative atmosphere or were things made difficult for Don and yourself and others who were trying to get things moving?**

¹ VCA – Victorian College of the Arts.
I think we should do the classic separation of powers here. I think we need to separate the public service to the political environment. (telephone rings, break in recording) Let’s deal with the Victorian Tourism Commission and that component first. We’re now dealing with what was a high-flying politician that’s come in from interstate. He doesn’t know Victoria, he doesn’t know the way we do things here, and so there was quite a lot of resistance at a whole range of levels. The General Manager of the Tourism Commission, whose name was Graham Schwarz[?], was actually a very pleasant man and really did try to facilitate a lot of Don’s work, but he was a real grey-shirt and it took him a lot to allow the freedom that Don needed, and was not necessarily prepared to put up the real energy to make things happen. And this is the issue: that Don was no longer a legislator where he could thump the desk and then a range of advisers would come in and polish things over; he really didn’t have the administrative support. Now, the special projects units again were brought in with special skills, not necessarily with administrative skills or political nous, again in that advisory capacity, and so it was really on when issues like the interview with Jana Wendt came to the fore about the Chinatown Museum did many of us who were close then, did many of us actually realise that Don was in trouble. We actually didn’t realise that there was a backwash, particularly of the public servants. In order to facilitate his activity, we hadn’t necessarily anticipated that we needed to be both his advisers in an astutely political sense as well as creative in our own skills zone.

In regard to the political scenario, John Cain of course had invited Don to take the role of the Chair of Tourism. I’m sure that Don, and the discussions I had with John is that Don had a view that Victoria was a not dissimilar climate to South Australia and that he could really do a lot for the place. And John Cain I’d have to say in general was quite supportive. Not so some of the other fellow ministers. We had the similar Victoria–South Australia antagonism, and of course there wasn’t necessarily the great degree of political recognition. Even though Don had been one of the
shadow men in the famous photos of the Labor hierarchy (laughs) at the time, there was maybe not the same sort of level of respect.

But where the real issue was to come, and where you’d obviously expect it, was from the Victorian Opposition; and Prescott, who was the Shadow Tourism Minister and I think Deputy [Leader of] the Opposition, was on his feet in Parliament regularly regarding Don and the Tourism Commission and he was obviously being fuelled by those that were disenchanted. Now, when I say those that are disenchanted, we’re talking – obviously, the simple examples of the festivals area: as I may have pointed out before, Moomba was seen as the pinnacle of festivals in Victoria. This is a one-weekend, all-in carnival down at the Alexander Gardens by the Yarra River. This is not what we now see as a sophisticated event such as the WOMAD or the Garden of Unearthly Delights at the Fringe; this was simply a range of carnival activity and the odd free concert thrown in, and a parade that was made up mostly of commercial activity rather than quality floats, as you’d also see in maybe even John Martin’s or now Credit Union Christmas Pageant. So when there was proposal to develop things such as the Spoleto and the Comedy Festival and these others, which were seen as competition, and the threat of resources being withdrawn from these events, it went all the way to the top and Don forever was fighting a backlash in regard to this sort of thing, and it was minor, petty and full of classic bickering.

Gee. So in terms of the constituencies that might help Don, where was the arts community, the Melbourne arts community?

Well, the jury was out. The Spoleto Festival had yet to arrive. The first one came in Don’s era, and it was a marvellous success, of course. We had Gian Carlo Menotti, it was a marvellous success, his little program of – remember he was a chamber music/opera impresario; but his great success was the Ken Russell’s presentation of Madame Butterfly, and for those involved in the high arts, the opera, this was a very contemporary production which really showed Butterfly had a modern life, in that Russell used his film technique of a creative, neon show shining back at the
audience, particularly after the death of Butterfly, and exposing all the men – the men, in particular, in their penguin suits with tears in their eyes having been possibly being exposed as bounders themselves. (laughs) So that was a great production.

But again, in the development of that, of course what you had, as you also had in Adelaide, was a group of people who wanted to see a more community-connected event. Now, the Fringe in Melbourne, there’d been a Melbourne Fringe who’d set themselves up with a degree of model around the Adelaide Fringe and certainly had seen me during my time at the Adelaide Fringe and because I was there I obviously spent a bit of time and energy with them. But there were another group which was based on the Italian community, and bearing in mind that the Italian community had a strong connection with Gian Carlo Menotti and Spoleto they saw that this was their right. And remember that the only other major Italian event, of course, was the Lygon Street Fiesta, which again was another dirty big street party with a lot of drink and very little cultural integrity. While it did attract people, no doubt about that, from all over Melbourne, it certainly didn’t attract anyone from anywhere else, and this was not Don’s desire; he was looking for international events. So the comparison with – while the Spoleto in Italy was a stand alone event, in Charleston they had accommodated the community by what was called the ‘Piccolo’, the ‘Little’ festival, the Little Spoleto, and the Italian community and certainly some of the bigger players in Italian community, such as (Luciano Bini) – his name will come to me in a second – saw that we should mirror that. Don was probably more in favour that the Melbourne community should respond in its own way, such as allow the Fringe to flourish. And so, for example, when they set up what would be the community event, they allocated an amount of money in the arts scenario, cut it in two, gave it half to the Piccolo (laughs) and half to the Fringe, which was a joke in itself.

But as for the arts community, when I say the jury’s out, the Festival has only just happened, the whole future of the capital resources that went into the arts in the ’80s had not occurred, the arts were still with the begging bowl in everything else.
You’ve mentioned the Italians – Don spoke Italian by then, I think. He’d been to Perugia.

Yes.

How did he get on with them? He’d been very popular in Norwood until the end of the time as Premier and I guess after, when he eventually came back to Norwood; but Melbourne was another scene altogether?

Melbourne indeed was another scene, and again it depended on who was in power or had influence. And so we had the Lygon Street traders, if you like, were a lot of the operators that were seen as those that looked after the Italian community. And of course the voice of the Italian community was Il Globo. Now, Il Globo was essentially a slightly right-of-centre publication and, while they may have acknowledged Don’s good work in the community in South Australia, they didn’t necessarily adhere to his broader social values in Melbourne.

Was Santamaria an influence there at all?

Bob Santamaria?

Yes, Bob Santamaria.

No, not that I’m aware. It’s possible –

Ex-DLP.²

– but not that I’m aware.

And the Greeks?

Well, the Greeks were actually quite supportive. As I say, Don really got behind the Antipodes Festival. He was able to influence Bob Hawke to attend the opening of the first Antipodes Festival, which we did in Lonsdale Street, and it was a marvellous story, actually, because here we have the Prime Minister arriving at the Swanson Street end and vox pop-ing and shaking hands as he walked up towards Russell Street

² DLP – Democratic Labor Party.
end, at which we’re having kittens as the organisers because the stage sound is actually not working yet. (laughs)

Whoops.

And just to prove that Hawke really was in a godlike status, the moment he put his foot on the bottom step, snap, crackle and pop and it all worked. That was more luck than good management on that occasion. But, as I say, Don and Bob Hawke then went back to the Orthodox community’s building, which was just behind it, and in fact there’s a photograph of myself with the two of them, which I’m quite proud of.

Right, good. And of course the Chinese community, and you mentioned the Chinese Museum, but did he have much interaction with the community itself?

Indeed he did. Again, there were detractors. And I can’t particularly offer names on that one, but many saw the vision that he was trying to develop. The first issue is the reregulation of Little Bourke Street, to actually preserve what was a major historic precinct and therefore allow the restaurants and other activities in that street to flourish, to really commence. The concept of developing a museum, Don really did have to fly on his own with it. He did get money through the Victorian Cabinet, but, bearing in mind it was really meant to have been a national museum, he did not get national funding for it, so the Victorians were left to fend for themselves on that project. And of course it was the subject of the infamous interview with Jana Wendt on 60 Minutes.

Don certainly had passion, and when he’d put his mind and his creative energy into something he’d believe it should occur. Now, that doesn’t mean there’s no room for opposition, but he certainly believed that it should occur. And to be putting up the issues related to the financial management of that facility, which had really come through Prescott and his cronies, was not doing anything for anybody. It certainly did nothing for the Chinese community and certainly did nothing to promote Melbourne.

What was the specific issue or issues?
The key issue – I can’t quite remember the full issue, but a quick view of the footage from that will tell you – but it was to do essentially with the financial management of the resources that had gone into the Chinese Museum.

**Where had the money gone, and blown out, or – – —?**

Well, and that there’s always an underspend, overspend, and who were the consultants and – you know. It can always look tacky, no matter how you spin it.

**Was there much – we’ve talked about festivals and that – regional reach on what he was doing? I remember seeing something up at Mildura that Don Dunstan had been involved with. I think it was some sort of museum as well.**

One of the things that Don was very interested in regionally was that Victoria is unique in that it has several what are called animated museums. In Warrnambool there’s the Flagstaff Hill; in Swan Hill rather than Mildura there is the Swan Hill Country Village or something or other, I’ve forgotten what it’s called; of course there’s the Sovereign Hill at Ballarat; and Dai Gum San in Bendigo. Also in Echuca there’s the historic boat wharf. Now, Don was particularly interested to make these – is to breathe again real life into these exercises and not just to make them sort of odd curios. Now, the model, of course, and the lead model, was really the work that had been done in Sovereign Hill. Now, Sovereign Hill is a very unique facility because its period of time is so short and, as a consequence, it really has the opportunity to be very narrow and very focused in its historic perspective. So we’re dealing with, essentially, I think it’s only a five or six-year period that it’s focused on. But the eye for detail is what works in these things. The example is if you go to Sovereign Hill you’ll notice that no-one – the characters, that is, who are the volunteers and some workers – no-one wears a watch, or they’ll wear a fob-watch; or there are no thumbtacks in the notices, they’re always slapped up with a bit of whitewash. These sorts of things. So one of the things that Don asked me to do was to in fact go and review all of these facilities all across the State, so I had a quick look at all of those. Some were pretty stuck in their ways. Sorry, there were some others, too: the Wonthaggi Coal Museum, too. Again, all of which had interesting merit, particularly
probably the Warrnambool exercise and probably the Swan Hill one. Others were a bit light on. But again it was the idea of actually breathing that sort of animation, sound and light spectacles or whatever, and making these real attractions. Now, some took up some of the recommendations, others didn’t. But again one of the problems that this goes with is that when you make up a proposal of that kind it’s got to be backed up with dollars to ensure that that can occur, and there wasn’t really those sorts of resources.

In the festivals arena there were several events around regional Victoria that had some real capacity. One event that had actually – oh, well, a couple of events: one was the Port Fairy Folk Festival, where again we looked at that very closely and it was coming along swimmingly by itself and didn’t really require much contribution, in that it has the capacity to take over a whole town. But the issues that then confront tourism is then infrastructure: is there enough accommodation, are there enough utilities to look after a community which goes from a couple of hundred to many thousands over the course of a weekend? There were other events, too, that he got to look at, some of which were being developed or being looked at the time of his departure. In the North-West, of course, the famous Rutherglen Wine Festival. Now, the Rutherglen Wine Festival came into significant disrepute because it was seen as a swim-through – and in fact more than seen; it was a swim-through – in the early days, and in fact there was legislation in Victorian Parliament banning the Rutherglen Wine Festival. But Don was interested in the idea of developing a North-West regional wine event, much along the lines of, say, the Barossa Gourmet Weekends, where the concept of small is beautiful, so there’d be a jazz ensemble in this winery and that winery and maybe matched up with a restaurant from the city, et cetera. Now, over time these things have occurred, but some of these concepts came a bit unstuck. We certainly had a very close look at the Ballarat Begonia Festival, which was along the Moomba lines, and again these events were – some resources were either put in or taken away, depending upon their real tourism capacity.
Well, just looking over Don’s and yours activity and Tourism Commission’s, how would you generally assess his time there? There’s probably the short-term impact and then the medium-to-longer-term impact.

Look, it may be the result of time and, as we say in the arts business, ‘Timing is everything’, but Don was a genuine innovator and that’s essentially I reckon the reason that John Cain wanted him there. The tourism product of Victoria was very limited. I’ll go back. The role of festivals in that sense was really about adding a cultural capacity to what was a very sophisticated and cosmopolitan place, and therefore being able to put that into a product-based orientation. To that end was he successful? I think that he laid the groundwork for what became Victoria’s event-based recovery through Walker, et cetera, several years later, and particularly events such as – we were trying to look at the International Garden Festival, where they did turn that into buying the event which is the Grand Prix, and as a consequence we had this concept of major events.

Victoria of course did recognise that it had several major events and major venues of capacity. The MCG\(^3\) was known that it was the home of Australian Rules and they were determined to keep that. The MCG–SCG\(^4\) cricket grounds were solid, and of course the audiences that would come to these things were strong. But again, Don acknowledged that there were strong sporting credits, but a lot of the cultural things, while it was seen as a culturally-sophisticated city, were not there, so part of the exercise then too, though, was understanding that there was a lack of infrastructure and particularly information that would get out to – and sales products that would get out to that. So he was able, again particularly the Spoleto Festival was a good example, was that his concept was in that sense by buying into what was an existing event there were two other countries already connected to that and so there was already a potential audience that would then choose to jump onto the circuit. And

\(^3\) MCG – Melbourne Cricket Ground.

\(^4\) SCG – Sydney Cricket Ground.
this is a quite well-established sort of model that occurs in Europe all the time, so that’s a good example.

Regarding the physical facilities, this is the role of him as an administrator rather than as a legislator. He tried to use his skills to influence Cain, in particular, and was successful with particularly the Chinatown area; certainly got up the St Kilda redevelopment; got things like, as we mentioned, the safe moorings around all of Port Philip Bay; and even little things, down to the people, he was always able to think sort of at the common people level. Out at the Flemington area there was the old Abattoirs Markets, which essentially he got to become a caravan park, in the same way as like West Beach in Adelaide has a caravan, as a Levi Park, as caravan parks very close to the city, this enables people at relatively low cost to visit and be very close to the city and be there, so again he was able to look at common and accessible opportunities as well as the high-flyer.

The physical built form, he probably wasn’t there long enough for many of those things to occur. And of course once the real shit hit the fan – well, beyond the Jana Wendt *60 Minutes* episode, because the heat had already been turned up, therefore more starts to – they start focusing more, and the ultimate, of course, and the ultimate concern, of course, was the infamous ‘Porca Madonna’ incident, which actually shows Don in the true light of his character, I think, in that Don didn’t mind who he was with. He may not have chosen his friends and colleagues so politically wisely and as a consequence exposed himself – of which many other people wouldn’t have been so naïve, maybe – but Don was certainly photographed with the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and as a consequence this was picked up by *Il Globo* in Melbourne, who broke the story – and as mentioned *Il Globo* is a little bit right of centre and let’s say they used to complain that the trains weren’t running on time quite a lot, and so they broke the story – and really at that point, because of that sort of level of political coverage on television and the press, it became untenable for Don to be the Chair any longer and so as a consequence he resigned.
And what was the thread out of that? Was it the Italian community was very upset and that had political ramifications, or it showed – – –?

Well, *porca Madonna* means to fuck the mother of God, and it didn’t go down too well in the Italian community.

**Catholic Church, yes.**

And the Catholic community were not that impressed. But again, as I’m saying, Don probably didn’t realise that he was standing with the character calling himself this name. He knew that he was standing with a group of cross-dressers. But in that sense I can’t say exactly whether that’s the case. But Don approached his colleagues and people with a great sense of equality, and so it didn’t matter if you were wearing a blue singlet and a pair of boxer shorts or whether you were a male cross-dressing, wearing a habit, he was certainly prepared to make contact and discuss your issues with you.

The incident, as I say, was broken by *Il Globo*, got picked up by the Victorian press and my own experience was I’d actually taken a holiday with my wife and I was on the southern beaches just of New South Wales, having actually toured through Gippsland on my way up, experienced some of the coastline of Eastern Victoria, and we saw this come on the television, to which I went, ‘I think we got troubles back home’. (laughter)

**So not long after Don had resigned?**

Don essentially had resigned by the time my holiday was over and, in terms of my environment, I stuck with for the rest of my – my contract expired in the Tourism Commission in about May, as I recall, but then I moved to the Ministry for the Arts for what was a relatively short period and then returned, interestingly, to Tandanya at the invitation of Greg Crafter, to help set up the Aboriginal Cultural Institute.

**Right, good. Is there anything more you want to add? We’ve covered a lot of areas. (break in recording)**
The only thing I’d like to add in a sense isn’t issues related to Victoria. It’s a bit like as I mentioned about Sovereign Hill: the period is quite well-defined and an obvious opportunity for a historian to pick up because it’s such a defined period, and particularly, as I say, between being what was a legislator to then being an administrator. But it was actually the time when he returned back to South Australia, and he chose deliberately to come back to South Australia – not to go to Queensland which he certainly had opportunity to do – sold his yacht, sold everything else and deliberately just moved back to South Australia. And it was in many ways in this time when he returned back here and lived at Norwood did I get to know him even better, because again, invitations to his home for his birthday have very fond memories because again, the people who came to those events was not your A-list, it was just his next-door neighbour and Doug Claessen, who was his former PA. Don, when he took up a friendship, stayed with you as a friend, and I think we all have stories about the last time we saw him and knowing he was ill and probably on his way out, and bearing in mind that Don also had a brush with illness while he was in Victoria, this recurring cancer obviously finally was in his system and got to him.

But he was a man of extraordinary integrity and honesty, but with that capacity to act like a mentor. He really did give of himself a lot. It’s a bit like those in business: you have to ask the question to get an answer; he didn’t necessarily offer it, but if you asked the question he was generous in his response.

Interesting. Well, Peter, thanks very much for that – very good coverage of Don’s time in Melbourne and your friendship with him after he returned to South Australia, to Norwood. Thank you.

Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW.