PART 1 OF 2

This is Felicity Morgan interviewing Mr Justin MacDonnell on Monday, 19th October 2009 at his home in Sydney about his contribution to the development of the arts in South Australia during Don Dunstan’s premiership, particularly in the development of the South Australian State Opera Company. This recording is being made for the Don Dunstan Foundation Oral History Project and will be deposited in the Flinders University Library Don Dunstan Special Collection and in the State Library of South Australia.

Good afternoon, Justin, and thank you very much for taking the time to do this interview.

It’s my pleasure, Felicity.

To set the scene in context I think perhaps we should mention at the outset that the organisation that we now know as the State Opera of South Australia was originally known as the ‘Intimate Opera Group’, or ‘IOG’, and then ‘New Opera of South Australia’ or ‘NOSA’ [pronounced ‘know-sa’].

Correct, yes.

And also, for the purposes of the archive, when it was an intimate opera group it was amateur?

Sort of.

Oh, okay. Let’s start.

I would say it was pro-am. This predates me, of course –

Yes.

– although I overlapped with that period, and I think I can remember something of the history of the Intimate Opera Group, but it had been going, oh, I would think about 20 years before New Opera started, or before it morphed into New Opera would be a better way of putting it because many of the people were involved in both. But I would have said throughout its history it certainly drew on the services of people who were – well, almost always – of a professional standard and people who were professional in their music-making in other respects, so they were teachers at
the Conservatorium; they were people who regularly appeared on the concert platform for the ABC;\(^1\) many of them were members of the Adelaide Singers, which was the professional singing group that was maintained by the ABC in those days, full-time group of eight or ten singers. So there was a body of professional singers in Adelaide throughout that time on which Intimate Opera Group drew. It may not have always paid them very professional fees – although I’m sure it would have always paid them something – but certainly they were in all other respects professional people, rather than doctors who sang, if you see what I mean.

Yes, yes. I do, I do. It was really in respect to not their standard or their professionalism in other musical fields –

Yes.

– but actually to do with being paid.

And of course most of it was prior to the ready access to government funding. There was some, but ready access was difficult.

Indeed.

Yes.

Well, we’re going to get onto that, quite a lot of that.

Sure.

Now, I wonder if we could just go back to you and IOG because, from my reading, I understand that you got involved first in the late ’60s. Where were you working at the time?

I was working at Flinders University. I was in the Drama Discipline, where I had been – I think I went to Flinders in 1968 and I was there for three or four years, something like that. I don’t remember exactly the years, but I’m pretty certain I went there in 1968. And I was involved obviously, through that, in a great number of arts activities in the city, principally in drama but also to some extent in music; and I was

\(^1\) ABC – Australian Broadcasting Commission/Corporation.
also concurrently doing a higher degree there, so I was teaching at the university and doing some administration and doing some higher degree work, research work.

So my recollection is that I became involved, to the extent that I became involved, with Intimate Opera Group – apart from as a member of the audience and seeing their work – through a committee which Flinders University – – –. Well, actually, there were two things that happened, I suppose: one was a committee which the university had which was called something like the ‘Music Advisory Committee’ or I forget – – –.

That’s the note I’ve got.

Oh, well done!

‘Flinders Music Advisory Committee’.

There you go, yes. And I was on [it], for reasons which I now don’t recall, I was a member of that committee, and we were looking around for various – and basically what the Music Advisory Committee did was present occasional concerts at the university in the Matthew Flinders Theatre because, while theoretically the university had a music department, in fact it was a pretty odd arrangement and this was a kind of supplementary activity. And, for example, if Musica Viva was bringing in an ensemble that had a bit of spare time in its itinerary, they might present it for a lunch-hour concert at the university and things like that, and a certain number of local artists appeared under that banner as well. And I don’t recall why now, but I urged to the committee to invite Intimate Opera Group to come and do a performance there or to make a production there – no, it was to do something that they’d already done; and they did a performance – – –. Do you know, I want to say it was a Donizetti or Rossini piece?

I’ve got two titles here, I don’t have the librettist or the composer. I have The telephone and Three’s company. That was your first sortie.

Oh, was it? Ah, well, there you go, I didn’t remember that at all. Okay, if that’s what we did, that’s what we did. In that case, there must have been more than one
that happened, because my recollection – and maybe this had nothing to do with the
Music Advisory Committee – I remember Intimate Opera Group coming and doing
another double – – –. No. Maybe as a result of this visit we invited them back, or
we developed some kind of an association with them subsequently, and this was
more with the Drama Department, now that I think about it.

Right.

Maybe as a result of them doing that first performance.

Because we got on next to the Festival in 1970, which was only some months later, I
believe; were you involved in that?

I don’t know. Tell me – – –.

The IOG did *L’heure espagnole* and *The old maid and the thief*.

But that was at the Festival.

Yes, that was at the Festival.

No, I wasn’t involved in that. No, the next thing I remember – I remember that
season, *L’heure espagnole* and *The old maid and the thief* – – –.

Can I just stop you there for a second, because the reason that I wanted to speak
about that was because, according to what I read, this was the first time that the
Intimate Opera Group had actually received any financial backing or guarantee,
and they got a guarantee from the Elizabethan Theatre Trust and a small grant
from the Australia Council.

And I think it was directed, or they were directed, by the late Stefan Bynall[?],
correct?

Quite likely, quite likely.

Yes. And that would have been the connection with the Elizabethan Theatre Trust as
well, I would think. No, I was not involved with that; I remember *seeing* it, but I had
no direct involvement. And by then I knew a number of people involved –

Indeed.
– with Intimate Opera Group: people like Kathleen Steele Scott, who was the president or the chairperson or whatever her title was; and Elizabeth Wood, who was a musicologist for University of Adelaide; and a couple of other people whose names – – –.

Because it was, from what I read, the first step of IOG into being paid, into being, if you like, starting to get up the ladder of professionalism – – –.

It’s probable, yes.

Okay.

That’s very likely. But I don’t have any direct memory of that –

That’s all right.

– but it’s entirely possible that that is the case.

Okay. Now, after the Festival in 1970 Don Dunstan and his Labor Party was swept to power, as you remember.

Yes.

He was a huge supporter of the arts, and I wondered if you had any association with him in that first couple of years of his premiership and how did he translate his interest in developing the opera company, do you know? Did you have dealings with Len Amadio, for example?

Oh, yes, yes, yes, I knew Len well before then. I knew him when he was at the ABC –

Absolutely.

– and before he went to work for the Government, and he became a friend and remains a friend, I’m pleased to say, of many years. I guess I got to know Len almost immediately after I came to Adelaide because, of course, we had many mutual friends in Sydney, where he came from originally – – –.

And where you came from originally.

No, I come from Queensland.
Oh, do you? Okay.

But he comes also from a very distinguished musical family and he was very well-known, well beyond the ABC, in the arts and music and we got to know each other very rapidly after I first went through introductions through mutual friends, I would think, although I don’t exactly remember now. And, in any event, when he went to work for the Government, which I guess was 1970 if that’s when they came to power –

Not very long after Don Dunstan was appointed, yes.

– right, and he of course was a very good friend of Don Dunstan’s and remained so for all of his life – for Dunstan’s life, I mean – so yes; and my recollection is that all of the initiatives that I was involved in with the opera company and the transformation of the opera company were all done through Len.

Yes.

I mean he was the prime mover, as far as I was ever concerned, and he was certainly the intermediary, if that’s the right word, between us and the Government and I would think between most organisations in the arts and the Government. I mean he had a very broad portfolio, because I think when he started he might have even had tourism or something in there as well.

He did, and then he dropped that at some point, yes.

Yes. I mean he had a very busy life. But he was right in the Premier’s office, not even in the Premier’s department, I think he was in the Premier’s office – though he could I’m sure tell you that for certain – but certainly he had what seemed to be almost unlimited access to the Premier.

That’s my understanding from him, yes.

And clearly he was very influential in the shaping of arts policy at the time and I would think – my impression was always – that Dunstan listened to him very – I mean, you know, that he was a trusted adviser.
Yes, indeed. In fact, I was just looking back at the transcript of the interview I did with him, but he was very, very quick to tell me that it was Don’s vision that had developed the opera –

Yes.

– and I guess you wouldn’t know that, necessarily.

I don’t. I don’t recall ever having had a conversation with Dunstan about it. Now, that isn’t to say I didn’t; but I don’t recall it. But if I did it must have been of a fairly elementary nature. I certainly never recall ever having a conversation with him of any depth about it. All of those would have been with Len and, later, other members as the department grew or as his office grew with other people working for Len in the department.

Okay.

But I don’t recall ever discussing – other than at a purely, you know, like the way you do when someone comes to a performance and you do a meet-and-greet and thank-you-for-coming. But I don’t recall ever having had an artistic discussion with him, certainly.

Okay. I was interested in the, if you like, the sequence of events, of whether you heard from Len that there was an interest in making up the company – and if you didn’t remember it, that’s fine.

Not that I recall, more than any other aspect of the arts.

Okay.

I mean clearly he had a broad interest in the arts. I would say my impression is that if Dunstan had a particular interest in the arts it was in the theatre rather than in music, would be my view. He certainly was passionately interested in theatre and he was certainly very passionate about the creation of the State Theatre Company.

Yes, completely. And of course he’d earlier started a ballet or dance organisation, the Australian Dance Theatre, back before – – –.

No, he didn’t start that.
No, Elizabeth Dalman.

Elizabeth Dalman started that.

But he started funding it. The Government, when he came in, the Dunstan Government started funding it.

I think it probably received some funding before that, although possibly not at the State level. My recollection is – then you could talk to Elizabeth Dalman about this – I mean they certainly existed on very slender finances, but the organisation was certainly in existence before Dunstan came into office and, as far as I can remember, was largely bankrolled by Elizabeth Dalman’s mother, who was Lady Wilson, who was a Bonython originally before she married Sir Keith Wilson, who was a Liberal Federal Member of Parliament and in fact, I think, a Speaker of the House of Representatives. But certainly I think all of those, and ADT had quite a successful touring life before that time.

It did, indeed. Len explained it to me that he really wanted to sort of complete the trilogy, as it were: the dance, the theatre and the opera.

I’m sure that’s right. Yes, I’m sure that’s right.

Okay. Let’s move on now, then – – –.

But what the detailed conversations were I either never knew or don’t remember.

All right. Well, now I’m jumping from there to 1972, when I understand you were brought in as the administrator and stage director to a rather amazing production of Pygmalion.

Oh! Right.

For the Festival.

Something happened in between then, but I don’t know if you want to go into that kind of detail; it’s probably all in Elizabeth Silsbury’s book, anyway, I would think. But we did do another season in between at – – –.
You did another season in 1972, a season where the IOG was awarded a guarantee against loss for another season, and it was a joint production between IOG, Flinders –

That’s right, yes.

– and you did three, three productions: Handel’s *Overture for Xerxes*, Handel’s *Agrippina* and Donizetti’s *The night bell*. Am I right?

No, that’s right. It I think was only two productions; the *Xerxes* was just an overture.

Oh, okay.

The two productions were *Agrippina*, which was directed by one of the staff at Flinders University, and both were designed by one of our staff, a designer called Quentin Hole; and IOG also did *The night bell*, as you say.

**Quentin Hole is the same Quentin Hole who went to the ABC for years and years and years?**

He *was* at the ABC for years and years.

I remember him when I was there.

Yes. He was a very fine designer, very nice man.

**Very nice man, yes. That was where you really got involved with the IOG, wasn’t it, in that year, in that 1972?**

Yes. It was through that, that process, that’s right. *Pygmalion* didn’t really have anything to do with IOG. *Pygmalion* was a production of Flinders University and the University of Adelaide and it arose – if you want to know the gory details – it arose out of a rather loopy research project that was being run by a gentleman called Dean Barnett, whom you may also remember from the ABC if you are of that generation, although I doubt that you are, in fact.

**Dean Barnett I don’t remember, but Quentin I do.**

Yes. Dean was at the ABC for many years. He was a philosopher, a self-taught philosopher, who was appointed to the staff at Flinders University in the Philosophy Department, but he played the harpsichord and was very into, as they say, Baroque
music. And he became involved [in], or he actually generated, a research program into Baroque gesture, and what he was trying to do was use visual evidence drawn from paintings and illustrations and things like that to argue that there was a vocabulary of gesture that was conventionally used, particularly in opera performance but possibly also in the theatre, to convey, I guess you’d say to mime, emotions and passions and various states of performance.

Well, it’s all fascinating stuff but because of the time constraints we have to – – –.

Yes. He did that. Well, that is the origin of *Pygmalion*, because in fact it was an attempt by Dean – and I got roped into this – to stage under as authentic conditions as possible, and it was at the Bonython Hall and it was done under candlelight and with original instruments and all of that, at the 1972 Adelaide Festival. But it wasn’t IOG.

All right. Well, look, after the season of *Agrippina* and *The night bell* you really were quite involved in the company –

I was, yes.

– and my understanding is that you were pretty involved in it from then on.

Yes.

Now, what I’m interested in, having been a successful amateur opera company for some 25 years, what do you think was the impetus for IOG to seek to become professional? Because from what I have read there was both a pull and a push factor: a pull – am I right in thinking that? – that Kathleen Steele Scott, who I’d like you just to speak about for a little bit –

Sure.

– because I believe she was the mover and shaker –

Yes.

– was really keen on developing the IOG into something else.

Correct. Well, you see, it goes back to what I said at the beginning: I think that they had always regarded themselves as being unpaid professionals.
Right.

So I don’t think they saw it as a great leap from the amateur to the professional, but simply a recognition that they could do more and go further and they had a pool of talent which would enable that to happen. Yes, Kathleen, and I would think most of the members of the committee as I recall them, were ambitious to do that and felt that the time was right to do it. And they were prepared to go with it.

Kathleen was an extraordinary lady. She was a singer – not, as she would be the first to acknowledge, not a particularly important one, but she was a singer – but more than anything else she was a person of enormous energy and drive and she was also an extraordinarily amusing person and very eccentric, in a way. But she certainly led that charge, and I think they recognised that they needed to change things in order to achieve that. They needed to build a new management or a new way of doing business, which had all been a bit done, you know, out of Kathleen’s backroom, in a way, in her great generosity, and certainly on a part-time basis for most of those people involved.

But the pull – well, I guess the choice was to start something off completely afresh, which certainly they could have done – the Government could have done, I mean; if they wanted to have an opera company they could have just created one, I guess – or they could build on something that was already there. And they chose to build on it by giving it an initial, sustaining grant to make that happen. It was a fairly modest grant, as I recall, I don’t remember how much but it was a modest sum of money, but certainly enough to set up an office and to start us rolling on some initial programs.

$15,000 I believe, to start with, which doesn’t sound a lot – slightly more in those days, but – – –.

Well, it was considerably more in those days. I mean I don’t remember what my starting salary was, but I’d be surprised if it was much more than about $5,000 or $6,000. I mean $100 a week was a reasonable wage then.

Yes, yes, absolutely.
You know, it wasn’t a fabulous wage, but it was a reasonable wage. I don’t think I had been paid any more at Flinders at that time.

Now, let’s just not run away at that point where you actually transferred across from Flinders. After you’d done those three productions or the two productions and the overture, according to Elizabeth Silsbury’s book, *State of the opera*, Kathleen Steele Scott wrote in a report following that season that it was ‘a significant step towards securing a flourishing future for opera in South Australia with a permanent, professional company’.

Yes.

So that was the springboard, if you like –

Okay.

– or that’s what I understand to be the springboard. I’m interested whether or not she was supported – you said that quite a lot of the performers and the other people associated with IOG were keen; but that’s a different culture altogether, isn’t it, being sort of in her backroom – ——.

Do you know, one of the things that always surprised me – and delighted me, I must say – is how easy that transition was. Most of those transitions are not easy and they usually end in tears because the cultures, as you say, are very different. But in fact my recollection is that it was pretty seamless and that most of the people who had been involved in the past and who chose to continue did so. Kathleen herself became not the Chairman, because they sought an outside chairman for the new organisation, it was a lawyer, a gentleman whose name – Brian something, I don’t remember his name now, who became the chair of the organisation; Kathleen retained the office of President, which was a bit titular in a way, although she chaired the Artistic Committee, as I recall that we had.

That was an important committee, wasn’t it?

Absolutely, absolutely. But people who were on the committee at the time, Kay Gallant[?], who became my assistant, working on a part-time basis, moved over; Mary Handley, who was on the committee, continued – in fact, was the music director and pianist of our first schools company; Laura Harrison, who had been the
stage manager, the technical production person, for most of the productions, also shifted over and worked particularly on the schools and touring companies; Elizabeth Wood, who had been on the committee and, as I said, was a musicologist at the University of Adelaide, for as long as she remained in Adelaide was a member of the Artistic Committee; Elizabeth Silsbury, who had never had an association with IOG, joined it at that time and was also on the Artistic Committee. They’re the people that I most remember. If there was somebody else there at the time I don’t recall who it was.

That’s fine. But was there not also a Steering Committee, a Steering Committee to sort of steer this venture through?

Yes. But the Steering Committee basically was the addition of myself and Elizabeth Silsbury to the existing IOG committee and the acquisition of this independent chairman, the lawyer, whose name I’m afraid I can’t remember: Brian something.

Okay. Because the Steering Committee was, in a way, involved in making the transformation.

Yes, that’s right.

And that included, presumably, things like drawing up a constitution –

It did, it did.

– appointing officers for management –

Correct.

– and administration.

Yes, all of those things. I mean the value of the lawyer whose name I can’t remember is that he drew up the constitution, as I recall – as lawyers do – and sort of did all of that and also eventually steered through the change of name.

Yes. How did you come up with that name, just as a matter of interest?

I think it was a compromise. It was through discussion. I don’t recall who came up with it. We wanted to make a break with the old name, and I think everybody agreed
that that was a good idea, nobody as I recall wanted to retain the original IOG name. We all felt, I think, that the words ‘South Australia’ should appear somewhere, and I think a lot of people just assumed it was going to be the ‘South Australian Opera Company’, and that probably would have done just fine. A number of people thought – and I don’t recall who now, I might have been one of them but I honestly can’t recall – thought that all sounded a bit drab, the South Australian Opera Company, you know. I mean we thought we could probably come up with something a little more exciting than that, although there was the Queensland Opera Company and the Victorian Opera Company and there wasn’t anything wrong with the name, it just seemed a bit ordinary. And I think we ended up with ‘New Opera, South Australia’ officially, even though I personally detest nouns in apposition that was where we ended up with, and my recollection was that it was a compromise.

Okay.

I don’t know that it was fiercely-debated or anything, it was just –

‘That’ll do.’

– ‘That’ll do’, yes. I don’t know that anybody felt [passionately about it]. My recollection was that the whole process –

Yes, it was smooth.

– was very smooth, it was very agreeable; I don’t recall anyone feeling left out, or if they were I don’t know who they were. Oh, the other person who was on the committee was Dean Patterson, who was a baritone: he was a scientist – physicist, possibly – who worked for the Weapons Research Establishment, and he in fact was the only male on that committee, as I remember, and Dean was the other person; and he continued to sing for the company and play a very active role in it for some years to come. So I don’t believe that there was anyone who felt left out, and it had been very well-handled, I thought, it was kind of very well-massed through so that – – –.

Largely due to you, I believe.
Largely due to Kathleen, I would have thought. She was the continuity person there, and I think – no, my recollection would have been that it was Kathleen’s achievement. I don’t know that I contributed much to it.

Well, that’s very modest of you, because actually Elizabeth Silsbury praises you for your unfailing efficiency, your clear-sightedness, your commonsense and your ability to work with former Intimate Opera decision-makers and the newcomers. So she gives you a big boost for that.

Well, that’s very nice of her but I truly – the recollection I have of it was that the smoothness was very much Kathleen’s achievement and her leadership was what did it, and if you think about it that’s much more probable of the two.

Okay.

Anyway, (laughter) it’s not a competition.

When you were in this transition period and at some point some decision had been made, ‘Yes, we will go forward’, was the Government asking you to prove your worth as an organisation before they would indulge you in any money; or were you making overtures to them to give you money? Which way round, I’m interested to know which way round it came.

Do you know, I don’t think I know the answer to that. My recollection again – and I’m sorry, all I can say is (laughs) it was a long time ago – my recollection is that Len indicated to us that the Government had allocated some money for opera, and it was there, not exactly for the taking, but whoever came up with the most plausible and practical proposal would be in with a chance to get it, that’s my recollection.

Right.

Now, again, he has an infinitely better memory than I do.

Do you know if there were other competitors, other amateur operatic companies?

No, I don’t think there were. I have a faint recollection that there was a suggestion that the Elder Conservatorium might harbour ambitions.

Ah, right.
But I’m not sure. The then Director of the Conservatorium, Professor David Galliver, was a singer, a very fine singer, who sang with the company subsequently, (laughs) but he wasn’t a tremendously energetic man and I suspect that, even if he’d wanted to do it, he probably would have had some difficulty galvanising himself to do it; and I don’t say that unkindly because I liked him very much, but he wasn’t a hugely dynamic personality. I have a very faint recollection that there was this – but the person who was there, who was the head of the opera department at the Conservatorium, was a gentleman called Donald Munro. Now, Donald was – ah! My god! Now, I’d forgotten an entire episode. I think we’re going to have to pause for a moment, and I don’t mean pause the machine; I just think – because I have absolutely no idea what the timing of this is. Now, Elizabeth’s book may well tell you.

Well, I’ve got this in 1972.

No, but does the name James Robertson appear there at all in any of your questions?

No; James Murdoch does.

No, no; James Robertson.

No, I’m afraid I didn’t pick his name up.

Okay, okay. Now, I’m just going to have to take back a whole lot of things I said earlier, because I just had a memory.

James Robertson, whom I subsequently worked with in New Zealand, was at this time – he’s an Englishman, a very distinguished British conductor, who was the conductor of the Sadler’s Wells Opera Company when it was reformed just after the Second World War, together with Glen Byam Shaw and people like that and which subsequently went on to be the English National Opera but still out at Rosebery Avenue in the old Sadler’s Wells Theatre. James, at this stage that I’m talking about now, was the head of the London Opera Centre, which was pretty well the place to which young singers went after they’d left university, after they’d done their initial training, went for the completion of their training, and it was a particular lure to
singers from the Commonwealth, so a lot of Australians, New Zealanders, I daresay Canadians, as well as British singers, went there – Kiri Te Kanawa; I mean practically everybody that you’ve ever heard of from the former colonies went to the English Opera Centre. And it was a very good finishing school, and James, after he stopped being Music Director of the Sadler’s Wells, went there as its director and was there for many, many very successful years.

He and Donald Munro, who was the head of the opera school at the Elder Conservatorium – Donald was a New Zealander, a very distinguished baritone, who had been the Director of the New Zealand Opera Company, that had gone into liquidation sometime in the ’60s, I don’t remember what time, but up until then had been a very successful company. Donald, as I said, and his wife – his wife was a violinist with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, she might have been the leader of the second violins, if I remember; anyway, Jean. And James had been the Music Director at one stage of the New Zealand Opera Company. And he came to Adelaide on a visit to see the Munros and indeed stayed with them in their very beautiful house and did, I suspect, some master classes. Now, this was after – – –. Oh, god, I can’t remember now when it was.

The reason it’s crucial for your story, I think, is that Donald hosted a dinner at his place with Don Dunstan, who was Premier; myself; and I want to say with Len. Quite likely.

Yes.

And was this James Robertson there as well?

Yes, and James. That was the whole point of the dinner.

Yes, right.

Donald wanted the Premier to meet James Robertson to get his kind of – not approval, but his view of what was happening, what we were doing and what could happen. It was a lovely evening. And I’d be surprised if Len wasn’t there, although I don’t exactly remember that. But certainly when I said to you earlier that I don’t
remember ever having had an artistic conversation with Don Dunstan that would have been the sole occasion when I did, and it wasn’t really a conversation between him and me; it was really a conversation amongst all of us, because Donald Munro was a very, very distinguished and very knowledgeable operatic person. And James was very enthusiastic about what we were doing and thought we were kind of on the right track and all of that. Now, that must have been very, very early in the company’s history. I don’t remember when – again, Len may well remember it. Everybody else is dead, so the only two people who would remember it are me and Len, and I hadn’t thought about it until this moment.

And that was, do you recall – can you recall whether that was before you’d started to get your Steering Committee and write up your constitution?

I don’t.

I just wonder whether that meal was the impetus for Don saying – – –.

I don’t remember, I’m sorry.

All right.

Until this moment I hadn’t remembered it at all, and it was only just thinking about Donald Munro for a moment that made me recollect it at all. No, look, I’m sorry –

That’s all right.

– and I don’t know how – – –. If Elizabeth hasn’t referred to it in her book, and she may not have even been aware of it, then – – –.

I don’t recall her mentioning it.

No.

But I do want to ask you about another person – – –.

So I should, in fairness, add that bit in.

That’s true, that’s true. James Murdoch also played a part, as I understand, because he was a Sydney-based musician who acted for the Australian Council of the Arts in sussing out organisations who might be eligible for arts funding.
I suppose that’s a way of putting it, yes.

Correct me if I’m wrong.

No, no, no, no, no. That’s actually a perfectly good description. James was much more than a musician, however: although he was an accomplished musician, James was an entrepreneur. I shouldn’t say ‘was’, he’s still very much alive. James was the music consultant to the Australia Council in the very early days – again, I don’t remember exactly when he came back to Australia, but he’d had a very, very distinguished career in Australia in the record industry, in the promotion of new music, primarily based in Melbourne for many years, and he went off at a certain point: he went off to Britain, where he managed a number of important ensembles and people there, notably Maxwell Davis and the Fires of London, as they became, the Pierrot Players originally; and James was a mover and shaker of great moment and an extraordinary energy and vision, and he brought an enormous amount to the Australia Council in terms of its connections with the music community. And yes, he was very good at sussing people out. I knew him before he took on that position, I’d known him before he left Australia to go to Britain – as did Len, of course, who was a very old friend of his.

Not wanting to interrupt, but I’m a bit aware of the time.

No, sure.

I just wonder if he had played a role in sussing out, right in the early days, that first sort of funding guarantee from the Australia Council, the first grant that came.

That was in 1970, was it?

I think it was.

I think that’s too early. I don’t think he was back in Australia by then.

Oh, okay.

No, I doubt that that was James’s doing.
But 1972 the two Handels, *Agrippina* and *The night bell*, that was ’72 and that got Australia Council money as a guarantee against loss.

Yes, but I think that was before the Music Board was formed. The Music Board wasn’t created until after Whitlam came to power in December ’72.

Okay.

My recollection is that all of those sorts of grants at that time came through the Special Projects Fund of the Australia Council, the Special Projects Committee; and if anyone was responsible for getting that money I would have thought it was probably the late Wal Cherry, who was a member of that committee –

Ah, right.

– who was the Professor of Drama at Flinders.

That’s right. And somebody with whom you worked.

And someone with whom I worked. If I had to make a guess – now, again, I can’t actually remember when Wal was on that committee and when he wasn’t, but I think it was all prior to – – –. Look, I think there was probably a body of opinion at both State level and at Federal level that said, you know, ‘We’re putting lumps of money into opera in various states’ – I think the Queensland Opera Company was getting money from its State and Federal sources at that stage; I can’t remember where Victoria was at, but probably also it was getting some money; the WA Opera Company had been up and running for some time. I think there was probably a feeling at both levels that they really needed to do something about South Australia, so there was a climate of opinion there.

There was.

But James’s connection with the company was really – well, no, no, he actually did have an important role, now that I think about it, and that was through a production of something called *The young Kabbarli*.

That’s what I’m just getting to now.
Okay. That was James’s big connection, first big connection.

Right. That happened to be, am I right in thinking, the last production for the Intimate Opera Group?

Correct.

But that was an amazing production.

Yes. It was very odd.

Well, one of the remarkable things was that it featured David Gulpilil and the didgeridoo player Dick Bundilil.

Bundilil, yes.

Yes. Can you just tell me a little bit about that?

Wow. Yes.

Because it was pretty exciting, wasn’t it?

It was pretty exciting. I mean today I suppose it would be seen as a very strange activity, but at the time it was rather important. Margaret Sutherland, whose 75th birthday was coming up, had written this piece many years ago with a libretto by Maie Casey, Lady Casey –

Oh, okay, yes.

– who was a children’s writer, I think, primarily. And they were old friends in the Melbourne Establishment, I suppose, and they’d written this piece about Daisy Bates. And I think I’m right in saying it had never been performed, but that may not be correct. Anyway, James was very keen on doing something about Margaret Sutherland’s 75th birthday. He regarded Margaret Sutherland as somebody who’d been very underrated in the music world, in the compositional world; he felt that she had been – there was a number of women composers that he felt very strongly about that had been kind of overshadowed over the years, for a variety of reasons, generational amongst them. Margaret was a rather grand lady who used to answer the phone, when you rang her, she would say, ‘Are you there?’ was her greeting.
And she’d written this piece about Daisy Bates, which James really very much wanted to have done, and he negotiated or set up a deal with whoever it was – was it the ABC? Anyway, somebody was going to issue a recording, he’d done the deal to issue a recording of this piece, and I think maybe with something else of Margaret Sutherland’s on it, because there were various concerts and things, and we were to do the production in Adelaide and then take it to Melbourne, all of which we did.

It was done under very bizarre circumstances in Adelaide, because the only theatre that was available – it was quite late in the year, like I want to say it was December or November, it was very late in 1972, and the only place that was available, of all places, was the Olde King’s Music Hall. Now, how long have you lived in Adelaide?

About 10 or 11 years.

Then you have no idea what this means. (laughter) The Olde King’s Music Hall, I suppose it was a theatre restaurant, actually, that did theatre–restauranty kind of shows. Theatre restaurants were very big in the ’60s and ’70s in Australia and maybe in other places as well, and they had dinner theatre. They were variety shows, it was vaudeville, if you like. And this place was run by a gentleman called Barry Egginton, who still lives in Adelaide and who was an actor and director, and he ran this very successful theatre restaurant called the Olde King’s Music Hall. And I can’t remember – I guess I must have done it, I actually can’t remember now – who conned Barry into letting us have it for two – because, you know, I guess he ran from Wednesday to Saturday, let’s say – so the only nights that were available were Monday and Tuesday. And I remember we had to bump in to this place, which was – I’m sure Barry wouldn’t mind my saying – somewhat garish in its décor, as those places often are, it had lots of red velvet and –

Yes, indeed.

– tinsel and faux chandeliers, and it was what it was, you know, and a bit – not a bit; very – over-the-top décor.
Don Dunstan was actually a very good friend of Barry’s, as I recall, for many years and I guess they would have been approximately the same generation.

**Where was this music hall?**

It was in King William Street, down past Victoria Square.

**Ah, yes.**

Going south it was on the left-hand side, and I have absolutely no recollection of what the name of the street was.

**It doesn’t matter.**

It burnt down some years ago, quite some years ago now. Curiously enough, it was actually owned by Murray Hill, which I didn’t know at the time.

**Okay. Now, Don Dunstan came to that performance -- -- --.**

He did come to the performance and thought it was very odd.

**Tell me what he said, tell me his reaction.**

I don’t remember what he said at the time, but he did subsequently say to me that he thought it had been one of the more bizarre experiences of his life, going to this even by then somewhat-dated attempt to involve Aboriginal art or Aboriginal performance into a Western art form, it was already a bit dodgy, I think I would have to say. It was about the time of the awakening, you know --

**Yes.**

-- when people started to try to treat Aboriginal and Aboriginal artists as less-than-tokenistic, which I think this does, this piece. Nevertheless, we actually had real Indigenous performers in it -- -- --.

**At least, yes, you weren’t blackfacing.**

No, no, we weren’t. And we had David and Dick in it, who’d come down especially from Maningrida to perform in it and it was just after David had made his début, if that’s the right word, in *Walkabout* so he was something of a [celebrity]. He was an
amazing performer and amazing personality. And so we did the piece, anyway, in these rather bizarre circumstances, or rather bizarre décor. And then I think we did a little [concert] – Genty Stevens, who sang Daisy Bates, who was a member of the Adelaide Singers, we did some of Margaret’s songs, and then the performance – or the other way round, I forget which, probably that way around – and we did the same program at the Great Hall of the Victorian Arts Centre, and then recorded it back in Sydney at the Matthew Flinders Theatre, in fact; it was the first quadrophonic recording ever released in Australia, by a most amazing chance.

How astonishing. And it’s a very good point just to stop this tape because it’s only for an hour and I’ve recorded 55 minutes already.

Wow.

So I’ll put this one on stop.

PART 2

This is the second tape of the interview with Justin McDonnell.

So that was The young Kabbarli.

That was The young Kabbarli. And I’d like to talk a bit about you. When did you move across from Flinders, when did you take the leap and become employed?

I guess it must have been either the end of 1972 or the beginning of 1973. I don’t exactly remember which.

Did you go through a formal interview process?

Oh, yes, yes.

Because you were already getting tied up – ‘you’, I don’t mean you; the IOG was getting tied up then in the bureaucracy and having – – –.

Oh, no, no, there was a [formal process]. They advertised the position and I applied for it and I was interviewed for it, and I presume there were other applicants; in fact, I’m sure there would have been other applicants. I’ve no idea who they were, but I have to believe there were. And I got it. No, no, it was a very formal process. There
was not any suggestion that somebody, an ‘insider’ – not that I regarded myself as an insider in that group – was slipped in.

You were obviously the right person for it.

Well, I think I turned out to be appropriate. But I think Kathleen was probably very enthusiastic that I should take it on, but I don’t know what the inside mechanisms were.

Do you remember who was on the selection panel – was Len, for example?

I doubt it, I doubt it.

Wasn’t the Government represented?

Not that I recall. Well, if they were, I don’t remember.

You don’t remember Len being on the [panel].

I don’t. But then I don’t actually remember anything. I remember there was an interview, but I’ve no idea – I mean Kathleen would have been on it, but I have no idea who else was on it.

Oh, okay, yes.

Again, it’s a long time ago.

All right, okay.

But there was an interview, but no, I don’t recall who it was.

So you were engaged as the Administrator, is that correct?

That was the term that tended to be used in those days. I don’t know why. It seemed to be the one that people used for people who were running arts organisations.

Were you a one-man-band? Because you were involved in the repertoire at the beginning, weren’t you?

No – oh, a one-man-band in that sense?

In terms of administration/management.
Well, as I said, Kay Gallant, who had been the Secretary of the Intimate Opera Group – unpaid secretary – because the paid secretary, I suppose – – –.

To do almost the same thing. How wonderful!

To do all the same thing. She had had an administrative job, a part-time administrative job, at one of the schools – Wilderness or Walford or one of those – which she gave up and eventually came to work for the company full-time, but initially she was on, I don’t know, two days a week or the equivalent of that, I think, whatever the deal was. We had rather odd premises – – –.

I was going to ask you next about the premises.

They were pretty terrible. It was an old shopfront opposite Theatre 62 on what was then Hilton Road, which became – whatever it became.

Sir Donald Bradman Drive, is that what it is now?

Probably, yes. But it became something in between. The one that goes out to the airport, anyway.

Yes, Sir Donald Bradman Drive. Now, Theatre 62, Chris Winzar was one of those people.

He was, yes.

And did you collaborate in any way?

Oh, yes, we collaborated a great deal. Yes, absolutely. We shared those premises with Theatre 62. As I said, it was an old shopfront directly opposite the theatre – a rather hazardous crossing, as I recall – and we even shared some staff at various times. We ended up sharing the workshop with them, the wardrobe – we had a joint workshop, a joint wardrobe. We had some office staff, as I recall what we called the Planning Manager or production manager was a shared one with Theatre 62. The secretary – the typing secretary, if you like – was shared; the receptionist was shared. Possibly some other staff.

Is that because you were operating on a shoestring –
Absolutely.

– **but had some money from the Government.**

  And they had some money.

**Theatre 62 also had some money from the Government.**

That’s right, absolutely.

**So you were sharing your shoestrings between you.**

Yes, more often than not we were sharing the deficit between us, as I recall.

**You made a very nice comment about Chris and said – according to Elizabeth Silsbury’s book – you gave Chris Winzar the credit ‘for shaping the shows that made that transition time so exciting and, at its best, so anarchic’.**

Well, they were all of those things. I don’t remember saying that, but it’s certainly true. Chris was and remains a friend – I don’t see him as often as I would like to these days – but he was an extraordinary influence, a very imaginative person; a terrific colleague, with a (laughs) wonderful and certainly anarchic sense of humour, working in very difficult circumstances, I think. He was working in difficult circumstances. He was the Administrator, I think was his title at that time, of Theatre 62. He had, I think it’s fair to say, an uneasy relationship with John Edmund, who was the Artistic Director. John was a very fine man in many ways, but he could be difficult, I suppose is the right [expression]. He was a person who didn’t make the transition particularly well into a changed world, but I liked him. And he directed for us as well, John directed.

**Yes.**

I remember he directed a production of *Don Pasquale* for us, as I remember.

**Did Chris Winzar also direct?**

Oh, yes, quite a lot, quite a lot, yes. But Chris was more attuned to what we were on about because he was more alive to the contemporary work and the sort of off-the-
wall work that we were doing, the smaller-scale pieces, and so he directed quite a bit of stuff.

Yes, because the artistic policy at the New Opera, it continued with the IOG sort of way that you liked to do things: intimate, little bit cutting-edge –

Absolutely.

– not in the grand.

No, absolutely. I think that’s true. Every now and again we sort of did something a bit bigger, but generally speaking that’s absolutely right. And that was what interested me about it in the first place, was to have a company which was different, to have a company which would stand out from the crowd. I mean I used to say, ‘If we all wake up one day and everyone in the country is doing *Madame Butterfly* where have we got to?’ So making Australian work, doing contemporary work from wherever, work of a certain scale. We always saw our primary goal as to inhabit the Space in the Festival Centre as a kind of not exactly resident company but as a company that could work in that environment, and indeed we *opened* the Space eventually, we did the first season there. And I think that that was something that interested the Government tremendously, that we were making a different kind of statement about opera and about ‘music theatre’, as we preferred to call it a lot of the time.

Well, maybe in your talking it perhaps was Don’s desire to foster a slightly different regional theatre.

Oh, I’m sure it was, I’m sure it was. I don’t know that he was particularly interested – and I don’t know that he wasn’t, but I don’t know that he was particularly interested – in grand opera as such. I think he was probably always more interested in a theatrical approach, in a more intimate approach, in a more contemporary approach. Certainly that was what interested us and what I thought was the role, the place, that the company could play in the broader picture of what was happening at that time in opera, and bearing in mind that the Victorian Opera – which we probably saw as our closest, not rival exactly, but equivalent – under Richard Duvall’s early
period was very much focusing on the Baroque, on early opera, and I thought that was a great idea: you know, if the Australian Opera was going to be doing the warhorses and the standard repertoire and the big nineteenth-century stuff and some twentieth-century and some classical, that there was a role for a company that specialised in contemporary –

Yes, indeed.

– and there was a role for a company that specialised in early music, which is what Victorian Opera at that time was doing.

That was probably a very foresighted thing – not necessarily having continued, unfortunately.

No, it didn’t continue for a variety of reasons, and it’s probable that it was never sustainable in the long term; but it seemed like, as they say, ‘a good idea at the time’. I think all of the companies went – – –. Queensland was always doing reasonably standard repertoire, as was WA; but they were sufficiently away from where we were and particularly WA, which rarely had visits from the Australian Opera so had to be many things to many people. I think that everybody changed. I mean, South Australia went in a particular direction; Victoria ended up doing pretty standard repertoire as well, although I think Richard would probably contest that, but nevertheless moved out of the exclusively-Baroque, anyway. They were interesting times, and I certainly think more interesting times than now. I mean I think that the opera scene then in Australia was more varied, it was more adventurous, it was more speculative, if you like, than it is today, and I think that’s a damn shame.

Yes, it is; and we could diverge down that road for quite some time.

We could.

Getting back to the times we’re talking about, you started – ‘you’, I keep saying you; I mean the company –

The company, yes.

– started its collaboration with the South Australian orchestra during your period.
We did, yes. We did. In a number of levels. I don’t remember when it started, exactly, looking back.

I’ve got ’73 with a query, so I don’t know.

Sounds right, it sounds right. It must have been in late ’73. The story was that in renegotiating the agreement between – I don’t know if you know that, in the days when the ABC ran all the orchestras, there was a tripartite agreement in each city between the State Government, the City Council and the ABC – the Postmaster General’s Department, as it was in those days – that governed those relationships and that was renewable every however many years it is; Len will know how many – five, ten, whatever it was. Anyway, by chance the agreement was up for grabs, it was up for renegotiation around about then, and the Government formed the view that, if they were going to sign on to it again and if they were going to up the ante – and I think there was some pressure from the ABC for the State Government to increase its contribution – the *quid pro quo* was to be that it had to be available for certain other things. One of them was the Adelaide Festival; one of them was the opera company; and it might be the case that one of them was the whatever the choir was called, the Adelaide Choral Society?

Possibly, yes.

Whatever the major choir was. So I think they were the three things that they had to give some time to.

And probably – do you think Len was involved in those negotiations?

Oh, yes, absolutely. And I would have thought that – no, I know he was certainly involved in the negotiations; in fact, I would have said that it was probably Len who shaped them, in fact.

Yes.

I would imagine, with his inside knowledge of the operations of the ABC, that it was probably his idea to go down that track; but again he’d be able to tell you that. But
certainly he had carriage of those negotiations, and frankly I think was probably
tougher on the ABC than someone who didn’t have that background.

Indeed, indeed.

I know he played some very hard ball, as they say, on those negotiations; that I do remember, because the ABC was extremely reluctant to go down that path. And it coincided with another moment of shock for the ABC – oh, by the way, that was at the time when they changed the name as well, to the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, which had until then been the South Australian Symphony Orchestra.

Ah, right. Okay.

That was also part of the deal, that they changed the name. But that was around about that time that Anthony Steel had entered the picture and, when the ABC said that the South Australian Symphony Orchestra couldn’t be available to play a particular concert for the Adelaide Festival, Anthony said, ‘Well, how much will it cost to buy them?’ And that was a tremendous moment of shock for the ABC and I think they finally realised that they were entering a very different world, not just in Adelaide but generally, that the world was changing and that there was somebody who was prepared to say, ‘Oh, well, I’ll just buy your orchestra’. Nobody had ever offered to buy an ABC orchestra before and it was a kind of shocking proposition for these people, for the Rex ..... and the Harold ..... and people like that, who ran federal music and federal concerts at the ABC in those days, and they were quite stunned by that.

Well, they were very, very conservative and very dyed-in-the-wool conservative.

They were conservative but, more than anything else, they had a certain picture of themselves and of the worldview of the ABC – if you were there you would know that the ABC had a worldview of itself which was perhaps not as contemporary as it might have been. Anyway, so yes.

Moving along now to – well, it was good to hear you say that. Moving to performance spaces, venues –
Very hard.

– we’re talking pre- the Festival Centre.

Yes.

Were you all over the shop?

We were absolutely all over the shop.

Including the music hall.

My recollection is, in the first year, which was 1973, we used the Union Hall at the University of Adelaide. Now, the Union Hall wasn’t as you now see it; the Union Hall then was quite a decent venue. It was a venue I knew very well. It was much better set up than it is today and lots and lots of people used it regularly from outside the University – in fact, it probably got more use outside the University than it did within the University. So the first season I think we did there.

The second season – oh, god, I can’t remember what the second season was. Oh, yes, the second season we did at the Festival Centre. It was just after the Festival Theatre opened and we did a double bill there of two operas: we did Rossini’s *Comte Ory* and we did *Albert Herring*, for god’s sake, in repertoire. God, we were bold, weren’t we?

You didn’t do the one act of *Fidelio* that was in the opening show?

Oh, I did, yes, but that was – no, we didn’t do that.

That was the Australian Opera Company?

No, it was just the Festival Centre itself put it together. I helped them put it together, and indeed there is a funny connection there, and indeed in a moment of – my good friend Stefan Haag directed it, who was about to direct for us in the next season, he directed the *Comte Ory*: he directed it. There were three or four singers from the Australian Opera but it wasn’t an Australian Opera production, it was simply hiring those singers: Ron Dowd – do you know, I can’t remember? – Aileen Fisher, maybe. I don’t remember who the others were, offhand, but it doesn’t matter. And suddenly
we realised we were going to need someone to come on: Jacquino comes on and says whatever he says – you know, ‘The Governor’s arrived’, or whatever he says, Pizarro, who he’s just about to murder; Florestan has to run outside and that’s kind of the unwinding of the plot. It’s not a sung role, it’s just he comes on and sprechts a couple of words in German, and I rang up Wal, I think it was, or maybe it was Lorraine Archibald, out of Flinders and said, ‘I need one of your students just to come onstage and yell a couple of lines in this’, and who was it? Of course, the person was Doug Gautier, who’s now the chief executive of the Adelaide Festival Centre.

Oh, really?

He appeared. Douglas appeared on the opening night.

Well, well, well.

So it’s a nice little connection.

It is a nice little connection.

But no, I helped them put it together but it wasn’t us. What we did do was the testing and tuning for the opera –

Yes, I believe that, yes.

– for the theatre, part of the testing and tuning for the theatre; and then we did the first opera in there, which was this double bill, before the Australian Opera came in later in the year. And then of course the following year, which was 1974, we did the opera for the Festival itself –

Yes, yes,

– which was a very big bang. So we were in the Union Theatre, then we went into – –. Oh, and in between we did a season at Theatre 62, at the end of 1973, which was a music theatre season. So we were all over the place.

That’s so small, Theatre 62.
Yes. Well, it was a small work, or they were small works. So we were all over the place.

Okay. Now, did you go to the opening night of the Festival Theatre?

I did.

Tell me about that, was it amazing, all those – – –?

It was pretty amazing, actually. It was mostly amazing, I think, because of the number of people there who were from all over the country, and of course the Prime Minister opened it, so it was quite a big deal and it was a very impressive thing; and it’s important to remember that when the Festival Theatre opened it was the first of the new, purpose-built venues to be opened. I mean I think earlier the same year the Perth Concert Hall had been opened, which I suppose theoretically was absolutely the first of the new venues; but it was only a concert hall – a very fine concert hall, but a concert hall. The Adelaide Festival Centre was the first of the new multipurpose venues to be opened.

Complex.

Complex – although it was only one venue; it and the Space of course – and the [Sydney] Opera House came later and then subsequently Melbourne and Brisbane. But at that stage it was it, and so it was a particularly big deal, and because the Prime Minister came and he was only a year into office at that stage or whatever it was, and it was a very special occasion, and notable because it was an attempt to demonstrate the rapidity of the turnaround between a concert venue – so they did the Fidelio –

Yes, yes, and then you had a concert in the second part.

– and then they did the Beethoven Ninth in the second half, with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra and the whole shebang, and that was pretty extraordinary. Yes, it was a great night and it was a great weekend, as I recall – – –. But, in a funny kind of way, for me the opening of the drama complex was better, I mean because we were directly involved in it, but that was more exciting.
You actually did do – – –?

We opened the Space.

You opened the Space.

Yes.

Was that the same weekend?

Yes, they did. As I recall, it went like they opened the Playhouse on Friday night with the State Theatre Company, as it is now; and then on Saturday night we opened the Space; and on Sunday afternoon we opened the Amphitheatre.

Amphitheatre. Ah!

All in one weekend.

And that was rather a memorable production in – was it in the Space or the Amphitheatre? – because you did The seven deadly sins by Kurt Weill.

We did.

And featuring none other than Robyn Archer.

In her first stage role, yes.

First time she’d sung from a score.

Yes, I guess so, yes.

And of course we all know Robyn and admire her enormously, yes.

Yes.

She was quite young, I suppose, was she?

Oh, yes, yes. I don’t remember exactly how old, but she would have been in her twenties.

Very exciting.

As was I.
Yes, indeed. Very exciting.

Yes, that was very memorable. So we did a number of extraordinary firsts in that time and it was a very busy period.

Yes, it sounds busy — in fact, one of my questions had you must have been living on a continual adrenalin rush, you must have been so busy.

And quite a lot of booze, as I remember, too. Quite a lot of booze.

As it was in those days.

As it was in those days, oh, yes. We lived pretty hard, I think all of us, everybody did, and I don’t think there were any exceptions to that.

How many of the IOG singers came across to NOSA?

Oh, at various times most of them, I think.

Did they?

Yes. I mean we did a lot of seasons, in those first couple of years, I think of people like Bill Harrison; certainly Genty Stevens; Margaret McPherson, who was a very fine soprano, very beautiful woman; Norma – contralto, mezzo, Norma — bloody hell, I can’t remember her name.

I can’t help you, I’m afraid.

Ray Cocking; Dean Patterson. All of them, yes, all of them, I would say.

So you really didn’t lose any — —.

Daphne Harris was another one. No, they all did — —.

You didn’t lose any momentum — —?

Not in the time I was there. There was a really big change, there was a really big shift after I left; but up until the time I was there, no.

Interesting. Well, it was a transition time, wasn’t it?
Absolutely. That’s not a loaded statement. I mean first of all I can only comment on the time I was there.

Absolutely.

But I know that a lot of the singers that we’d worked with quite consistently throughout that period didn’t seem to get much work after I left. But, you know, these are matters of taste, apart from anything else.

Yes. Now, you’ve mentioned the 1974 Festival – I hope we’re not rushing through too quickly.

No, that’s fine.

You did a production of Janáček’s The excursions of Mr Broucek, which was a story in itself, how you got it. But that’s not quite so interesting for the tape.

No, and it’s well-documented, I think.

Yes, it’s well-documented. What was interesting when I read about this was that the Australian Opera were invited to appear at that Festival and couldn’t or wouldn’t come, and then Anthony Steel asked you, which is interesting.

Yes. I don’t remember, I honestly don’t remember the story now. I suspect the Australian Opera simply wasn’t available, I mean I don’t think there was anything sinister about it. They had performed at quite a number of Festivals over the years and it was always a slightly difficult time for them, just to up-sticks and go to Adelaide, because of their roster, so that was always a bit problematic. I don’t remember the story now, but I do remember that we went through – yes, that Anthony approached us and said, ‘Will you do it?’ And we went through a number of iterations of what might be done and ended up doing Broucek, which turned out to be not only a pretty bold thing to do in itself but also was the first time an opera by Janáček had been done in Australia.

Yes. And that was all a story in itself, of how it came here.

Indeed.

Two appointments you made: I believe Barry Golding came for a year.
Yes, he did.

And then you were responsible for Myer Fredman.

Yes.

Do you want to say something about those two appointments?

Oh! Well, yes, I think so. We had decided that what we were going to do, the next step in our development of our team, was to have a resident conductor and we advertised the position of I think it was called ‘Resident Conductor and Chief Coach’ or ‘Principal Coach’ or something like that. And Barry, who was known to me, applied and got the job. And it was for, initially – because we were only funded annually – I think it was initially for a one-year gig, stint if you like, but with option to renew. Meanwhile, I’d received a letter completely out of the blue – which I nearly fell off my chair, I remember, when I got it – from Myer. Myer was conducting at the Australian Opera. It was in the opening season of the Opera House and he was conducting *The barber of Seville* or something like that – a standard piece that he’d come over to do – and he wrote me this letter and he said – – –.

He was the Musical Director at Glyndebourne, was he?

He was the Head of Music Staff and Chief Resident Conductor at Glyndebourne. He wasn’t the Music Director at Glyndebourne – John Pritchard was still Chief Conductor, was still Music Director then, I think; and then Bernard ..... came.

Anyway, Myer wrote and said, ‘I saw your advertisement. I’m not applying for the job but I just wanted to register my interest with you in general, because I’ve been over here and I’ve sort of done Glyndebourne and I’m not sure that I want to continue there much longer and I’m thinking about maybe working in another part of the world, and so I just wanted to let you know that. And after I picked myself off the floor I wrote back or whatever I did and said, ‘Well, look, I’m going to be in Sydney next week: could we meet?’ And we did, and the rest, as they say, is history.
He then took over after Barry Golding had been there for a year.

Sort of, sort of. It was just a bit longer than that, in fact. Myer was – it was the summer season at the opera, so he was obviously around, it must have been about February when all this happened. And we were rehearsing *The excursions of Mr Broucek*, I remember, because Myer came to a performance of it, and he and Jan, his wife, came over and saw some rehearsal and so on, and then Jan went back to Britain and Myer came over on his own to see a performance, the last performance or something, and was sufficiently impressed to want to start talking. He wanted to get out of Britain, he was over Britain, and he didn’t really have particular ambitions to work with another British organisation after Glyndebourne.

He actually ended up staying for four or five years, did he not?

At least that in Adelaide, I don’t remember how many years. He still lives in Australia.

Does he?

Oh, yes. Absolutely. No, he left Adelaide to come to Sydney, where he became the head of the opera department of the Sydney Conservatorium, where he was for a number of years; and he’s now retired and living in Tasmania.

Oh, right. And there was a very funny incident, wasn’t there, when he completely stopped, put down his baton ——?

Oh! (laughs) There were many funny incidents over the years. Oh, yes, when the pit lights went out in the middle of *Turn of the screw*, as I remember, in Her Majesty’s Theatre, and they’d gone out a number of times and Myer was so frustrated by it all that he eventually thought, ‘Oh, bugger it’, you know, and he just put down his baton and walked out of the pit until we got the lights back on again.

Oh, is that what happened?

Yes.

Because, talking of venues, you got your own home, didn’t you, at Her Majesty’s?
Oh, later; not in my time.

**Not in your time, okay.**

The negotiations had started when I was there, but they weren’t complete – well, no, maybe we’d got the venue, but the renovations didn’t occur in my time. Yes, I think actually we’d done the negotiation to get the venue, which the State Government basically bought Her Majesty’s Theatre from J.C. Williamson’s and gave it to the Opera Company to manage. In fact, curiously enough, when I came back to the Opera Company in 1988 to do my rescue mission on them, years and years later, I had the responsibility of giving it back to the State Government – or, rather, giving it to the Adelaide Festival Centre, who now run it and appropriately so. It was a daft idea for the company to be running it. But anyway, that was later, that was after my time.

**Yes. Now, talking about your time, just getting onto, if you like, the end of your time, Elizabeth Silsbury quotes you by listing what you consider to be your proudest achievements, and one of these is ‘leaving when I did’.**

Yes. Yes. Look, I think knowing when to leave is an art, if you like, or a skill if you prefer. I felt I’d done as much as I could there at the time. It was clear to me, I suppose – I think I said to you earlier that I doubted that the model we had was sustainable in the long term, and I think that was right; by which I mean that there was never going to be enough money to sustain the enterprise that I wanted to have, in Adelaide. You could imagine doing it in Melbourne or Sydney, in a bigger city, but the population of Adelaide was simply too small to be able to do something as specialised as that, and recognising that the people of Adelaide also had a right to see mainstream repertoire and someone had to do that, and it was perfectly obvious that the Australian Opera was going to be increasingly retreating from the role of regularly touring.

**Yes.**

And therefore there was a dilemma for everybody, and that dilemma needed to be solved, and Myer understood that as well. Even though his own instinct was for
contemporary work and more cutting-edge work, he knew that the only way it was sustainable was through a gradual move into mainstream repertoire. But it didn’t interest me. And also I thought it needed a different kind of personality, a different sort of management style, than what I could give it, and I don’t think I’m being wise after the event, I mean it needed a different type of person to do it – and I think it got a very different type of person who did it extremely well: Ian Campbell.

Yes.

Ian is a terrific administrator. He’s a first-rate manager and builder of a company, as he’s demonstrated for many years now in the United States, as he demonstrated in Adelaide, and as was very clearly demonstrated because almost the minute he left it started to fall to bits.

Yes, absolutely.

So I think there’s no doubt.

I don’t want to interrupt –

No, that’s all, that was it.

– but I want to ask you just one thing: I mentioned that I’d done an interview with Len Amadio and, in his interview for me, he said, ‘Don decided then that he wanted a guarantee that the Opera Company would be in safe hands and it would be a permanent fixture, so he agreed to legislate to set up the Opera Company under an Act of Parliament’.

Yes.

And my question to you is do you imagine that Don Dunstan might have made that decision because of your departure, because of your imminent departure?

I’d be surprised.

That’s very humble of you.

No, no, no – no, I mean I don’t think humility has got anything to do with it. I would be surprised for a very good reason, and that is that he had already set up the State Theatre Company of South Australia as a statutory corporation. Setting up things as
statutory corporations was something that he felt very strongly about, that was a matter of public record; the South Australian Theatre Company I think became a statutory body in about 1972, possibly ’71 – I don’t remember exactly, but very early in the piece.

Yes, it was about ’72, I think, State Theatre Company.

Yes, and the pattern was already there. I think that it wasn’t anything to do with my imminent departure, I suspect it was more to do with Don’s concern about what happened after his departure.

Okay. Yes, that’s possible, but that was way, way before his departure.

Yes, but you never know. I mean you’re a politician, you know your departure is as close as the next election, and he came very close, very close to losing the 1975 election, remember.

Yes, he did.

Very close to losing it. Indeed, we all assumed he was going to lose it. Nothing is forever and he was only there for another, what, three years.

Well, yes, yes.

So I mean, you know, your departure is as close as the [next election]. But he was, I think, very concerned to ensure that there was sufficient establishment so the Festival Centre was a statutory body, the State Theatre was a statutory body, the Opera Company was a statutory body, the Country Arts Trust: there’s a whole raft of them that became that.

Absolutely.

So there was nothing, I think, particularly peculiar about it. You can make a judgment about whether you think it was a good idea, is another matter entirely; but it wasn’t uncommon. Statutory bodies were the lovechild of the age –

They were, yes.
– everyone wanted to have them. The Queensland Government set up the Queensland Theatre Company as a statutory body. You know, it wasn’t an uncommon move.

Was that in the wind as you were leaving?

Oh, yes, absolutely. No, no, I was all in favour of it. I’m not in favour of it now, but I was certainly in favour of it then.

And so was that actually the driving force or the impetus for you thinking, ‘I won’t be able to work in this new environment’, or, ‘I’m the wrong person to work in this environment’?

No, not in the environment, I don’t think I was particularly concerned about the environment. I know I didn’t think I was the right kind of manager to take the company to the next stage which it was become very obvious it needed to go. I was just not the appropriate person for it; and Ian I think was the appropriate person for it. We’re very, very different personalities and styles of management. But what interested me aesthetically was not what was sustainable, it wasn’t in the longer term in that context. And I wanted to and I was offered a job and I moved.

You did indeed. And no regrets about that?

No, none whatsoever. No, no. You know, everything has a season, or whatever the line is. No, I don’t tend to have regrets about things – not work things. I mean you can have regrets about personal issues, but I think it’s a waste of time having regrets about work.

Absolutely, yes. Because when you did go back for ‘the emergency’, as you call it, in 1988, I believe it was Len that actually persuaded you to go.

Yes, he did.

And you said you don’t want the job, not even temporarily.

I did. Absolutely. I don’t believe in going back and I don’t believe in looking back. And it was extremely inconvenient timing, actually, as it happened. Although as it turned out the fact that the timing was inconvenient did give it an urgency that it
might not otherwise have had, that is there was a point at which I was no longer
going to be available because I was going abroad, and I said, ‘Okay’. It was the
Adelaide Festival I think I was there for –

The ’88 Festival.

– the ’88 Festival I was there for, touring with whatever I was touring with, some
group – I don’t remember what, Ensemble Intercontemporain maybe, whoever.
Pierre Boulez – yes, I think it was Boulez. Anyway, and they approached me, he and
the then Chairman, and I said, ‘Oh, no, come on, I don’t want to do that, I haven’t
got time, du-du-du-du-du, I’ve got too much else on’, and so we left it at that and
then he came back to me – Len came back to me and said, ‘The Premier would really
like’ – it was John Bannon by then – ‘really like you to do this, and du-du-du’, and I
said, ‘Look, on the 1st of June’, or whatever the date was, ‘I’m getting on a plane and
I’m going to Argentina and that’s it. There is no – – –.’

No ifs and buts.

‘And I’m going to be there for months. It’s not like I’m just going for two weeks or
anything, I’m going for an extended period of time and that’s not negotiable. So the
very most I could do’ – I think we were probably like somewhere in March by then –
‘the very most I could do is the next three months for you, but I can’t do it full-time
because I have too many commitments here’. So in the end I did a week-about. And
I thought, to be honest with you – and I don’t know I’ve ever told Len this, and this
does have an interesting Dunstan story attached to it – the one thing that I thought
would be not negotiable, I said, ‘Well, you’re just going to have to fly me in and out
every week and put me up, because that’s the only way I can do it. I have work to do
in Sydney, you know, I have commitments’. And the one thing that the Opera
Company hadn’t managed to blow in all the other things that it had blown was their
airline contra. And so it actually didn’t cost them anything to fly me back and forth
and the one thing they could actually deliver was the fact that they had this deal with
whichever airline it was and were able to do that. And in the end I stayed with some
very dear friends, who happened to live next door to Don Dunstan in Norwood, and
so I saw more of him – and of course he was well and truly out of politics and all of
that by then –

Absolutely, yes.

– ten years out of politics – but I saw more of him during that time than I had for the
whole of the rest of my life.

How interesting!

Yes. And we spent a lot of time talking at that time – I mean, least of all about the
Opera Company, but politics and all kinds of things. And in fact it was at the time of
the Fijian Coup –

Very close to his heart.

– the first Fijian Coup.

Yes, yes, I remember it.

And he was involved very much in speaking out on that at the time. So he was living
right next door and the people I was staying with were very good friends of his and
had been friends before they lived next door, and so that was a curiosity of that time.

But the fact that I only had a very short period of time to do it, I did it very
quickly. I did some things which were very distasteful to me, including firing people
that I had employed however many years it had been before, which was very sad –
‘retrenching’ would be a better way of putting it: they weren’t being fired because of
anything they’d done; they were being retrenched because of the mismanagement
that had gone on in the company, and I don’t mind saying that publicly, mismanagement of the company, but it led to this terrible thing. We managed to get
it back on track in a remarkably short period of time and it was then that I had great
pleasure in handing the theatre, which had been part of the problem, back to the
Government and saying, ‘We’ve got to offload this. The Festival Centre ought to be
managing it, and here it is. Good night, nurse’. And they thought they were getting
a very valuable asset, but I revalued it the day before we handed it back and took up the revaluation in our accounts. They got the revalued asset, which wasn’t quite as valuable to them as they thought. But that’s the way deals are done, and I just happened to think of that faster than they did.

That’s a wonderful story to go out on.

Yes. I’d forgotten about Don and being there a lot at that time, and that’s the last time I’ve had any dealings with that company. And it was much against my will and a long way down the track and, apart from the people who continued to work there – – –.

But one of the nicest things that happened to me, I remember, in that, was the woman I’d appointed as the receptionist and she’d been there for many, many years – I mean when I say these people were retrenched, because it was a statutory body most of them were full-time – well, kind of permanent public servants, so to speak, and so they had to be reassigned. So most of them like weren’t out on the street. And the woman who had been the receptionist in fact got a rather nice job at the Botanical Gardens – in the same department, you see, it was all part of the same Department of Cultural Affairs or whatever it was called. And I took her out for coffee on the afternoon – I mean, everyone knew that I was going through these motions of downsizing, as they say – and I took her out – Lorna, her name was – and across the road to the Hilton or whatever that hotel on Victoria Square is –

Yes, the Hilton.

– it’s the Hilton, yes, where I took her over for coffee and I said, ‘I’m afraid that I have to tell you that I have to retrench you along with everybody else’. And she said, ‘Well, if I’m going to be fired I’d rather it was by you than anyone else I can think of’. And that was a rather kind of a nice thing, you know, and made easier by the fact that she knew she wasn’t going to be on the street, that they go on the unattached list and then somebody negotiates and someone from the public service comes in and deals with it and counsels them and all of that, so, you know, I mean it was a very
gentle [process], if you like. But she had been there for 15 or 16 years and it was an awful thing.

**But it was very good that three months, week on, week off, you were able to pull the company out of its mess.**

Well, and of course in the course of it we found Bill Gillespie, who became the next General Manager and did a fabulous job of restoring the company.

Yes.

Fabulous job.

**So it’s really only been in poor hands, administratively, managerially, once in that time, between Campbell and – – –.**

I suppose so. I can’t really judge enough about what happened. But certainly since Bill’s gone I think it’s worked okay. I mean they did *The ring* and all of that. Who would have thought it: *The ring*, for god’s sake.

Yes.

Yes, I think it was only that one time when really they just lost the plot, I think. It was really absurd what happened.

**Yes, it probably was. I’m not sure we’re going to be allowed to go there, just because time is a constraint and your phone call is coming in. (break in recording)**

All right. Well, it’s been most enjoyable from my point of view.

Yes, I’m sorry we’ve had to – – –.

**Is there anything that you want to say that we haven’t covered?**

It’s funny, you know, and I suppose in fairness – this is not something you’ve asked me and it may not be something that a lot of people necessarily want to hear – I have in all honesty to say that I’ve always had some doubts about the wisdom – the wisdom? – there has long been a body of opinion that the Dunstan Era was a fabulous time in the arts in South Australia, and I think that’s true, I think that’s undoubtedly true. It’s only fair, I think, to say that a lot of it, a lot of the imagery that was created around it outside of Adelaide was by default, *i.e.* that things were
(laughs) pretty dull everywhere else. And Don certainly seized the moment to take the high ground, as he did with a number of issues, social issues particularly. There was always, I think, a degree of hype in it that wasn’t entirely supported by the facts, to be honest with you, and I think we were all to some degree conspirators in that, if I can put it as gently as that.

And so when people say to me, ‘It must have been a terrific time to be there’, I have a number of responses to that. One of them was, ‘I think it was a pretty terrific time to be anywhere, actually’. The late ’60s, early ’70s, was pretty amazing practically everywhere I ever went. And also one was very young and it all seemed pretty terrific.

**Particularly in the arts in those days.**

Particularly in the arts.

**It was truly at the vanguard of all of it.**

And most of all I have to say because we were making it up as we went along. I would make no special claims for the quality of what we did, I have to say, and I’m sure quite a lot of it was quite ordinary; but I do think it was exciting because of the newness of it. And that I think he captured in a very special way and turned it into a very special kind of message to people. And I think there were aspects of it that were better done than others.

I actually think a lot of the stuff that was done in arts in education was in fact more important than most of the stuff that was done by the companies, actually. I think the stuff that was done out of the Adelaide Festival Centre, for example, at that time, for kids – the establishment of the Come Out Festival and all that stuff –  

**Carclew.**

– and Carclew, yes – I think a lot of that stuff was much more exciting and much more important than much of the work that was being done in the companies. And also in the Education Department itself, with its teaching programs and its
secondments and stuff like that. I’m not the person to talk to about that, but I actually think that was really very exciting.

I think the film industry was a complete furphy.

Do you?

Yes. Complete furphy. Even though dear friends of mine worked in it and one or two not-bad films were made. I regarded, you know, Gil Brealey and John Rorris[?] in his lifetime as good friends and people I admired, but I think it was a furphy.

Well, it’s still going strong.

It’s still going.

Okay.

I guess I’m just saying that I had some reservations about the myth that has assembled itself around the period and we just always have to be careful that myths don’t translate into historical reality. We just have to be [careful].

I think you’ve made an extremely good point and there are quite a lot of people in Adelaide that do mythologise the period.

Absolutely.

I can’t make a comment of my own because I wasn’t there at the time.

No. And many of the people who mythologise weren’t either, I suspect. (laughter) Look, you know, it was an extraordinary time and, by comparison with what had come before and to some extent by comparison with what has come afterwards, it was remarkable. And, you know, I think the people who were brought in to do a lot of that work were pretty remarkable people, but one has to remember that by 1977 they’d pretty well all gone. They’d pretty well all gone.

Gil Brealey, who came in to do the Film Corporation, had gone by then. George Ogilvie went soon afterwards. Richard Meale went more or less at the same time. A
lot of the people, the whole embroglio that happened around ADT\(^2\) and eventually Yap[?] had gone by then. Elizabeth had been moved out. And, if I may say so without humility on this occasion, I had gone.

Yes.

Not that I was brought in to do anything, but I had been part of that mix of people who had. And, you know, pretty well by the end of 1977 everyone had gone.

And at the end of the ’78 Festival, of course, Anthony Steel moved on then.

Anthony Steel, who was the only other person, and of course Anthony was a major part of all of that, but he had gone, absolutely. And we all left Adelaide, not just moved from the jobs but actually left the city. (cat enters, mews loudly) Hello! Sorry about that.

One little pussy cat.

(bell rings close to microphone as cat jumps onto table) Off the table, please.

By chance I happened to be the first, but I’m not suggesting I set a trend or anything like that.

No, I don’t think you did.

I know I didn’t.

But perhaps it was just the spirit of the times and the spirit of the times was starting to — — —.

I think what I’m saying is that I think the tide went out.

Okay, that’s a good way of putting it.

I think the tide went out earlier than most people would recognise. I mean Alan Patience went around for years talking about the ‘Dunstan Decade’, which — I don’t know, I mean it’s one of those historical constructs that you can believe or not

\(^2\) ADT – Australian Dance Theatre.
believe, as you choose. But I think the tide went out well before the decade was
over.

Well, I think you’ve given us a terrific recounting of your memories and the times
that you remember there.

Such as they are.

And thank you for those extra thoughts, and thank you very, very much indeed.
It’s been a pleasure for me.

No – well, it’s been a pleasure for me. I must confess there have been a couple – I
must check a couple of things with Len, things that I hadn’t thought about for years,
like that dinner with Donald Munro. Funnily enough, I was with Donald in New
Zealand when we heard the news of Dunstan’s resignation. We were doing an
audition tour, I was going to take over – indeed, I did take over – the National Opera
of New Zealand, as it turned out in 1979, but in 1978 when he resigned, wasn’t it?

February ’79, I think.

’79, okay, so it was ’79. That’s right. Well, we were in New Zealand and we were
doing this audition tour for the National Opera which, as I said, I was about to take
over. And one or other of us got a phone call – I can’t remember which one it was,
now.

It was rather a memorable resignation.

Yes, it was. And Donald was really shocked, because he was still living in Adelaide.
But I don’t remember who. Maybe Len rang me, or ——. No, I can’t believe Len
would have rung me. Somebody rang me, anyway, and told me or somebody rang
Donald and told him. But I remember it happened and we heard about it the
following morning over breakfast, you know, and we were sitting wherever we were,
Christchurch or somewhere like that, having breakfast and got the news. Maybe
Donald’s wife rang him, now that I think about it: probably Jean rang Donald, that
was probably how it came about. But it’s funny how those things are all tangled up.

Yes.
I’d actually forgotten about all of those things, completely.

Well, it was the end of an era, and I hate to tell you it’s the end of this tape. We have to say goodbye. Thank you so much.

It’s my pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW