George OGILVIE

This is Felicity Morgan interviewing Mr George Ogilvie AM on Friday, 16 October 2009 at his home in Sydney about his contribution to the development of the performing arts in South Australia, specifically as Artistic Director of the South Australian Theatre Company between 1972 and 1976 during Don Dunstan’s premiership. 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 morning, George, and thank you very much for agreeing to be part of this project.

It’s my pleasure. Thank you, Felicity.

Now, you say in your autobiography, *Simple gifts*, that your time in Adelaide would be ‘the best of times and the worst of times’ and, with your permission, I’d like to explore those extremes just a little bit – and the bits in between, too.

Of course, of course. I wrote the book several years ago now, but that’s exactly how I would describe Adelaide for me, the four years in Adelaide: the best *and* worst of times, yes.

Well, now, just to take it back to the year 1970 when Don Dunstan and his Labor Government were swept to power, between then and the time that you arrived in Adelaide Don Dunstan introduced many changes, legislatively, socially, culturally, not least of which was the bill that was passed by both Houses to ‘nationalise’ the South Australian Theatre Company in April ’72. Can I get a sense of you, not being in South Australia before you arrived in ’72, how did you feel about the new broom that was sweeping in the State?

Well, from over here, where we were – I think I was in Sydney at the time, because I’d been of course involved with the making of the Melbourne Theatre Company with John Sumner during the ’60s and so in 1970, ’71, I left that company and came to Sydney and was doing some independent work. So for us here in the theatre we heard about this extraordinary man called Don Dunstan and wondered if there was another politician ever to be like him, already, because he was a man who, perhaps more than any other politician – even more than Keating, although he was pretty good – but Dunstan seemed to think that the arts should be a natural form of life, rather than simply a piece of entertainment, but something that we needed,
something that the culture needed. And this was extraordinary, this was extraordinary. So you can imagine that, when Colin Ballantyne actually rang me – he’d come to Sydney and he rang me in 1972, early that year, or was it late ’71? Anyway. Could he possibly have dinner with me? And I said, ‘Yes, by all means’. I’d known his daughter, who was an actress, a very fine actress, Ellie Ballantyne, down in Melbourne for quite some years.

Is that Elspeth Ballantyne?

Elspeth.

Oh, yes.

She was part of the Melbourne Theatre Company, you see. So that through her I knew that Colin Ballantyne was very important in the amateur theatre scene in Adelaide. Very important, that word, for Adelaide.

Yes, indeed. In fact, you’ve introduced the second question that I had and I’m glad you’ve explained who Colin Ballantyne was because he played a big part in your life, actually, didn’t he?

He certainly did.

Anyway, go on with your story.

Well, over dinner, Colin then informed me that the intention was for a building to be built housing a theatre in which a permanent drama company would be placed and it would take several years to do it, and through Don Dunstan talking to Ballantyne came the message, ‘We want you to come over and spend a couple of years getting a company ready to go into the new building’.

Now, the ‘new building’, of course, was the –

Was the Festival Centre.

– yes, which was actually currently being built, wasn’t it?

That’s right. That’s right.
And Don Dunstan I believe had been instrumental in expanding it from a single, large auditorium –

Exactly.

– to have the other drama spaces and so on.

To have the other one, to have the Playhouse. Indeed. The Festival Theatre was already on its way and Colin informed me that, not only that, but they’d planned to put another theatre; so that not only did they want me to come over to put a company together but they wanted my advice in terms of the Playhouse itself.

Interesting.

In the building. Which I thought was extraordinary –

Yes.

– you know, to be asked, somebody who – I mean I’ve been in theatre all my life, but nonetheless to be asked any form of advice on that level was an extraordinary thing.

And made you feel proud and excited?

Oh, very. (laughs) Well, I was thrilled, absolutely thrilled, particularly because at that stage I was thinking actually of going back to England and working in England. I had the opportunity of doing some directing in England and I thought, ‘Oh, well, I’ll go back to England now that I’ve finished in Melbourne’, you know. And Sydney wasn’t in fact very interesting to me at that stage, though I’d done a little work at the NIDA drama school, *et cetera*. But Adelaide fascinated me because I didn’t know Adelaide, I had no idea. I’d never been there – no, that’s wrong: 1957, as a member of the Elizabethan Theatre Trust Drama Company, at the first one in Australia, formed because of the visit of the Queen –

Yes.

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1 NIDA – National Institute of Dramatic Art.
– we did a tour which included Adelaide, and we did *Hamlet* and *The relapse* there in Adelaide, and Paul Rogers had come over from England to play the roles. We needed English people to play the leading roles, of course, in those days. And we performed in Adelaide in the old theatre – I’ve forgotten the name of it.

**The Royalty or Her Majesty’s?**

Majesty’s, I think.

**Opposite the markets.**

It was huge, a huge theatre, without any airconditioning. I will never forget it as long as I live. And we were in thick Renaissance clothes. (laughter) So the entire theatre was filled with waving fans as this poor audience nearly died in the heat – and we *were* dying onstage – in that dreadful heat that can happen in Adelaide, as you know.

**That’s right.**

Summer heat. However. So I went over to Adelaide with Colin to talk, to have a look at things and to meet people. I met people like Len Amadio and other people who happened to be on the board that was getting things together. And I also met Don Dunstan for the first time in my life, and I was thrilled to meet him, and I found him awesome, actually: he was so simple and so direct and so easy to talk to. All he said to me was, ‘I want a good company in this city, I want a good company. Will you come and make it?’ So I finally, of course, said yes.

**Now, I believe the bureaucracy kicked in because you actually had to go through a formal interview, didn’t you –**

Yes.

– with a formal panel –

Yes.

– and I think Len was, was Len on that panel?

Yes, he was.
He was Don Dunstan’s government representative.

That’s right.

And presumably because Colin Ballantyne – correct me if I’m wrong – had already been made up as Chairman of the Board, is that right?

That’s it. So it was all prepared before I got there. Now, apart from Don himself – I must admit to you that I would have done anything if he’d asked me to do it, Don Dunstan; when it came to anybody else there, including Colin, I wondered.

Even right back then at the beginning?

Even right back then, I wondered. Because I appreciated exactly what Colin was doing and I’d known people from Adelaide, actors. I’d known Dennis Olsen, Teddy Hodgeman, et cetera. I mean I’d known a number of people who had been or were Adelaide actors who’d come over to the Melbourne Theatre Company or Sydney and I’d met and actually worked with them, so I knew a little something from them. And what I knew about them – and I think, Felicity, here we come to the core of what turned out to be not such a good thing – – –.

Can I just stop you there for a moment, so that we don’t race ahead too quickly?

Sure.

Colin Ballantyne was a very good friend of Don Dunstan’s, I believe, in terms of theatre and – – –.

I believe so.

Yes. And do you think Don trusted Colin Ballantyne?

I don’t know about that, because whenever Don wanted to talk about the theatre, it was by myself. Whenever he wanted to talk about the future, it was by myself.

Was it?

Yes. It was very interesting, Felicity, it was very interesting, because we never had the conversation, and perhaps we should have; but, as I was on the verge of signing the contract, it did cross my mind, somehow or other, to ask some rather pointed
questions about theatre in Adelaide at that time, because Peter Batey was already head of a company, a professional company, working in various theatres and I’d met Peter, and so I backed away a little because I kept wondering, ‘Why aren’t they asking Peter Batey to take over the company? What is wrong?’

He was actually running the company that was then nationalised, if you like, by the State.

That’s right.

It had the same name, did it? Was it called the ‘South Australian Theatre Company’?

I don’t think it was the SATC, I’m not sure. I’m so sorry, I can’t remember that.

Yes, and I should know that myself, too. But yes, so Peter Batey was the Director.

I enjoyed Peter, I thought he was very nice. But suddenly, when I spoke to him, he said to me, candidly, ‘I’d worry, if I were you, just a little about the amateur status of Adelaide’.

I’ve got quite a few questions on that because it’s a fascinating phenomenon in Adelaide. You did in fact come down, I believe –

Yes.

– as a guest director.

That’s right.

When Peter Batey was in the top job.

Peter asked me to come over and do Ben Jolson’s *The alchemist*, and I did it with Dennis Olsen and Teddy Hodgeman and several other people – the rest were an Adelaide cast – and we had great fun doing that play. We did that play. But, as you can be aware, when a director goes over and does the play, he’s absolutely in a cocoon of rehearsal rooms and getting the play on and all the rest of it, and it was great fun and Peter was lovely to work with and we had a good time. So we finished that and I was none the wiser.
Was that prior to you having the overture and the contract and the interview and so on?

Yes.

So you didn’t know you were going to get that approach?

No. Otherwise I think it would have been too embarrassing, from my point of view, thinking about Peter, you know?

I wonder if there was any – I’m not trying to develop a conspiracy theory here – but I wonder whether or not you were brought over –

Yes.

– to look at you and see you firsthand.

Yes.

Do you think that’s possible?

Absolutely. Absolutely right. Absolutely it was, absolutely it was. But it happened a second time, you see, it happened a second time. Because after all that, and then Colin approaching me and all the rest of it, and I did ask him, ‘What about Peter?’ But they thought perhaps no, they wanted somebody else. Now, I suppose I didn’t question this inasmuch as, you know, what do you say? You know. I mean, you can’t say to them, ‘You don’t think Peter’s good enough?’ or anything like that. It was a very difficult time. And I wasn’t sure whether in fact Peter wanted to stay there or whether he wanted to leave.

You’d never had the opportunity to have a dinner with him on your own or anything?

No. No. And I think to some degree he avoided it, which was nice of him in a way, because he just wanted to see what would happen.

Did he interview for the job, do you know?

I have no idea, Felicity. I’m sorry, I have no idea.
I just wondered if afterwards you happened to know who the shortlist were, because I believe there were two or three others besides yourself.

Yes. Yes, I believe so, but I have no idea who they were. I’ve no idea who they were.

Okay. So you’d got these reservations. On the opposite side of that, what was your vision, and did it come from what you’d spoken to with Don, or did you have this great blank canvas that you wanted to fill?

(laughs) I think there’s probably truth in everything you’ve said. I’d been with John Sumner for some years in Melbourne, the Melbourne Theatre Company.

The driving force.

The driving force. And the very thought of having my own company, I must admit, was a very healthy feeling. I loved the thought of it, I must admit, and I thought, ‘I should be able to go into this world and do my own thing’. And so of course that adventure in Adelaide became wonderful, and particularly with a man like Don Dunstan.

And then came the news – and this is, frankly, why I signed – I was given the news of what the Government, what Don Dunstan’s Government, was prepared to do: they were prepared for me to audition and gather together a company from all over Australia, not just Adelaide, from all over Australia, to use anybody I want to as a company, with a company of players of about 15 or 16 actors, and they were going to give me enough money to rehearse that company for six weeks without any thought of performance. Now, that to me is the kernel of Dunstan’s vision, that he knew –

And that came from him, did it?

– that came from him – he knew; he did, he knew that that’s what it would take to get a company really starting to go, to create a company. And so they invited me over once again, the second time, I said the second time I came over, to do an Australia play with a few of the people that I was interested in, actors. And we did it at the Union Theatre and it was David Williamson’s Jugglers three, and I brought over
John Hargreaves, and using several actors from Adelaide and a few other people – which I can give you all the names of those – and I did a production of the *Jugglers three*. And on opening night Don came with me, he sat with me.

Ah! Well, that was an enormous support for you.

Oh! We saw the play, opening night, finished, the audience applauded and Don turned to me and said, ‘We’ve got a company’.

You’re making the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

It was extraordinary. Unforgettable. Unforgettable.

I thought you had already signed and were actually the Artistic Director by the time [of] *Jugglers three*, but you’re saying that pre-empted that, did it?

I’m trying to think of the signature and everything, whether it happened – no, I think you’re right, because I wouldn’t have asked actors over unless I was prepared to say, ‘I want you in the company’.

Yes.

I must have signed before that.

Now, *Jugglers three*, in fact, when I was reading your history and Peter Ward’s history, I thought there was a touch of irony in that because in fact you came – not you yourself, but as a triumvirate.

That’s right.

Can you talk a little bit about that?

But of course. I suppose because of my experience with John Sumner as well, that we worked that Melbourne Theatre Company together as two directors, alternating player, I knew perfectly well that coming to Adelaide I couldn’t do every play, I couldn’t do it all. And I knew then that that’s impossible – I mean, apart from the fact that I needed an administrator anyway, which I didn’t have, and that was something else. At the time I’d been speaking to an actor but also somebody who’d begun to work with children, called Helmut Bakaitis, and he was very interested in
working with young people. And I put this forward to the Board, to Colin Ballantyne, to say that I would like to have Helmut as part of my team to begin young theatre, youth theatre – which of course he did, brilliantly, when we started; I mean he was amazing – and I said, ‘And it also gives me a chance to put the company into schools and to do work for schools through Helmut, who would take care of all the youth program’. Well, they loved the idea.

Well, it was an amazingly good kind of mix, because Don Dunstan had acquired the ownership of the property Carclew.

And he gave it to Helmut.

Yes.

I mean this is the extraordinary thing, you know.

Yes.

We had a look at Carlew and Helmut fell totally in love with it and insisted on being part of that world. So [Helmut] came out.

And then the third member was more to do with the literary world than the theatre world, I’m talking about Rodney Fisher, and he was a friend of Helmut. I met him and he came to see many of my productions, and he was at the time at the head of a very large bookshop, bookstore, and his knowledge of the theatre – the theory of the theatre and of the plays, *et cetera* – was astonishing, absolutely astonishing.

And what role did you see him play?

Well, as in fact the literary manager, if you like, of the company; but at the same time he was very keen on the idea of directing, and I thought, ‘Well, I can teach him as my assistant, in a sense’, you know?

So you wanted him there almost to seek out good scripts and to work out which plays – – –.

And to work out what to write in the programs – in other words, in many ways a sort of – what do you call them?
You mean some sort of administrator, are you meaning? An artistic — —?

You were saying about scripts, finding scripts, finding plays; every theatre company’s got one.

It’s not a repetiteur, is it – no, that’s not the right word.

No, that’s opera.

Yes, that’s right. You mean a dramaturge?

That’s it, a sort of dramaturge, to do that. So I thought, ‘Well, the three of us, then’. So I put that trio to the idea of the Board and they consented immediately, I mean there was no problem whatsoever.

Well, there was obviously no money problem.

No. No.

Because that was three salaries where they thought they were going to pay one and they ended up paying three.

That’s right. But they also realised that, if I didn’t have those two people, I’d have to find them somewhere anyway, in order to do it. And they all had very specific roles to do, you know? So that’s how I decided that we’d start. So the three of us arrived.

And, just talking of people, Rex Cramphorn came along at one stage fairly [soon].

Only as a guest director.

Oh, he never stayed as a permanent arrangement.

Oh, no, no, no, no. He came and did a few things with us, which was wonderful, but only as a guest.

Okay. Now, so you all arrive here and you get six weeks of getting the company together.

Right.

I gather that must have been one of the best of the times.
It certainly was, because we found this wonderful old – what do you call them? Where the minister lived, of a church. Two huge church halls, all joined together, plus the house he lived in.

Right, the rectory or something.

The rectory. And so Helmut and Rodney and I lived in the rectory and created our office in there.

And where was that?

At – what’s the name of the suburb?

Is it on the west side or the east side, do you remember? Norwood? Near the city?

Yes, but out this way, towards the airport, if you like.

Oh, okay, somewhere near Hilton – – –?

I’ll have to look it up, Felicity, I’ll have to look it up.

Yes. I don’t think it said it in either of the two books where actually it was, but it could have been Thebarton or Hindmarsh or – – –.

Thebarton. There we have it.

Yes, Thebarton, okay.

And it had a yard and all the rest of it –

Lovely!

– and it had a sort of kitchen area in the middle and two halls on either side. I mean it was perfect. Because in the kitchen area we would read plays, talk, and it became a green room, as it were, and in that hall one play was rehearsed, that hall another play was rehearsed.

Wonderful.

And we had all these things going all the time. And the rectory had an office, we had our secretary there to deal with it. So we were all central in Thebarton. I cannot tell
you how wonderful that was, I cannot tell you. And it’s very strange – can I skip right to the present?

Yes.

I have read about them in the most extraordinary way, because those two years, where we didn’t have a theatre, were the best of times. In other words, we performed everywhere – various theatres, we just had to choose a theatre that seemed to be right for the play.

This was my very next question: did you feel freer?

Oh! Totally! We had such freedom, because at Thebarton, you know, our place, that was ours. That was ours, you know, absolutely ours. They paid for it and everything. We had the actors and they could relax there and all the rest of it. And also, very importantly, we were all contactable with each other. We could all contact [each other].

So the 15 of you – was it 15, approximately 15?

Yes.

You came together, you were rehearsing different plays –

Yes.

– and then one was ready and out it went into Theatre X and then – – –.

And we kept on rehearsing back there. So we just went out to a theatre. And of course it is interesting that the New Theatre of Scotland is doing exactly the same thing. They’ve established an enormous theatre company, with everybody, with a place to do all that sort of thing, but no theatre; they just go to any theatre that is necessary. The amount of freedom is – – –.

Because some of the theatres in Adelaide were pretty dreadful, too, weren’t they?

Oh, shocking! The old Union was a shocker.
Did you know that the Union – this is a complete aside – the Union has just had the death knell?

Really? It’s taken all that time.

Yes, the University’s going to – it’s just had a refurbishment as well. There’s a lot of people who are rather upset about it.

It was a dreadful theatre to work in.

Well, it’s a lecture hall.

Yes, of course it is.

Not a theatre.

Course it is.

But anyway, the University just said, ‘No, there’s going to be a new’ – I think it’s a science building going in there –

Oh, right.

– so it’s going to be given the chop.

Oh, right.

But there’s quite a few people that are rather upset about that.

(laughs)

Anyway, back to theatres: yes, so you’ve just performed anywhere there was a space and could get a booking, I presume.

Exactly, exactly. And also, of course, with Helmut along with that, I insisted on the entire company spending some of their time in schools. And so we did workshops and invented stories and with mime and all the rest of it, because, you know, I’d had years of mime in Paris, and I used all that to invent stories; and we had little scripts, and Rodney got scripts together, et cetera, and we started to work on schools.

The other thing we started to do was programs of poetry and song, and this is where Robyn Archer began, she began with us to sing; Margaret Roadknight came over to do folk singing with us; and we did scenes, we did shows, in David Jones –
you know, anywhere, anywhere. We tried to penetrate into the society of Adelaide with everything that we could do. Well, I mean to have that opportunity with Don was incredible. And I often met him after that and we often had dinner together, and he just seemed so pleased with the progress that was being made in terms of our theatre.

Yes. Now, this brings me to the point I noticed in the histories – we have a season that runs from sort of February now and finishes in kind of October.

Right.

But in your day it was split into two seasons, wasn’t it?

That’s right.

The year was divided with must have been a break in the middle.

A tiny break, yes.

How did that work, was that a good way of working?

It was because it just allowed you to breathe and to gather things together and to get the rest of the next season together, you know? Instead of having to do a whole year like that, to divide it up, it just made it easier to control and to get a season going, you know?

Yes. It’s just interesting that it’s been changed over time.

Yes.

I don’t know when the change came. Another question – this is something that I’ve taken, actually, out of your book – and in your memoire, and I’m paraphrasing, you say that in Sydney the actor is primary; in Melbourne it is the text that’s considered the most important; whilst in Adelaide it was the audiences that were your masters and you were there to serve them but you did not know how. Can you tell me about the plays you selected and how they were received by both audience and then, subsequent to that of course, by critics – or critics first and audience second?

Yes. Well, critically – and perhaps critically is the worst of times in many ways. I mean I’ve had critics all my life and once you get used to not being understood or
appreciated and all of the rest of it, you know, our life is full of it, and that’s okay, that’s fine. But what I discovered over the first season of plays was that they didn’t want us there. They did not want us there. They were perfectly happy with their amateur status.

Tell me about the amateur business.

Well, it’s very strong and I had no idea how strong. I should have realised that with Colin, of course, because he was so much a patriarchal figure from the amateur world. And then I met many of the people who were amateur actors and I felt as if they wouldn’t let me get to know them, they thought that they were a different world from the professional world that I was — —. It’s very difficult to talk about, Felicity, because so much of it was just a feeling; but everyone there, everyone, seemed to be part of that amateur world.

I’m not an Adelaidean, either, and only ten years ago it struck me still as being very entrenched, and there is a certain, from my point of view, defensive business going on with the amateur theatre.

Yes. That’s the right word, that’s the right word, that’s the right word. And I would put forward plays, for example, as ideas to the Board, which I had to do, and members of the Board would say, ‘Oh, yes, we’ve done that, that was done quite recently’. And I’d say, ‘Where?’ ‘Oh, at so-and-so, at so-and-so.’ I said, ‘Oh, you mean the amateur societies?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Oh. So we shouldn’t do those plays?’ And before the first season had completed itself I thought, ‘I think I’m up against something so entrenched that I’m not going to survive it’.

Yes. It goes back to Old Adelaide, really, in a way. I mean the Rep had been going 50, 60 years by the time you even got there.

Exactly.

It had just had its 100th birthday.

Exactly.

And it’s been continuous.
Exactly.

And then there’s all sorts of other ones that have come and gone.

And it’s very interesting, Felicity, that those actors who had been part of that, who truly wanted to get into the professional world, came to audition for me and got into the company. Very fine actors. People like Julie Hamilton, Daphne Grey, Patrick Frost, I mean all these people suddenly appeared and – I have to say this straight away: Daphne Grey and her husband made Adelaide endurable for me.

Is that right?

Their home became my second home, and he was a great surgeon, and it became my second home.

So she, as an actor, translated from the amateur to the professional world.

Well, she was professional in England, you see –

Ah, right.

– so she knew the business very well and couldn’t believe that we were actually becoming a real professional company when she’d just been able to do a few amateur things there.

Did you knock back a lot of the people that came for auditions?

No. No, they didn’t come near me.

So there wasn’t a sense that you were shunning them?

Oh, no. Oh, no, no. I invited them – and in fact I started workshops and wrote to all the amateur societies saying, ‘Please come and do a workshop with me. Let’s get to know each other’. No. No. No.

Isn’t that strange.

So strange. And I think that that was principally one of the things that I – you know, I remember turning to Len Amadio one day and saying, ‘I just find this place called Adelaide extremely difficult to live in, because I thought I was here to create a
community theatre, only I’m here to realise the community doesn’t want me’. ‘Oh, don’t worry about them, don’t worry about them’, they say. Look, it’s one of those things, Felicity – I get a feeling, you see, that I was invited to Adelaide obviously through Don, which I will forever be grateful for, but everybody else around him – and I think I might have used it in the book – but they really did think that Adelaide was the poetic centre of Australia in more ways than one. And by the time I was halfway through the first season I realised it was nothing of the sort; that it’s a big country town, a huge country town, with very ordinary nice people in it who wanted just nice plays. And that, to me, was the shock. I realised they don’t want an intellect to push into, you know, and ‘let’s do things that we shouldn’t do’ and all the rest of it because they’ve got to learn all those sort of things; they just wanted nice plays.

Comfortable.

Comfortable plays. So that eventually – and it took me a long while to do it – eventually – one play, if I may say so, one play that I did, which the audience adored, stood and cheered, and I thought, ‘If I’d known this 18 months ago, then it would have been a different world for me’, because they did a production of The Winslow boy, Rattigan. But we did it with a most superb design and with Brian James and some wonderful actors and some Adelaide actors in it, and it was perfect for the Adelaide audience, they adored every moment of it – so they should, it’s a great play.

Yes, it’s a wonderful play.

A wonderful play. And I realised then that more Rattigan and more people like him is what should be fed in for theatre rather than something that’s strange and upsetting, you know?

Yes, and in this presumably you had complete control over each season, as it needed to be programmed.

Except for the Board.
Now, did you talk to the Board, who presumably either had come from the amateur theatre or were in the business world?

Business world, mainly.

Right, so not much background in what plays were – – –?

Apart from Colin, no.

Right. And did he sort of tick-tack with you about, ‘Look, that’s not going to go down very well’, or, ‘That’s a great idea’, or – – –?

No. He was a wonderful old man, he did love the theatre desperately, so much so, and he loved the idea of me being there with the theatre and the professional – you know, he really loved it; and so the plays from his point of view, like mine, were, ‘Oh, yes, let’s do that – oh, yes, that sounds wonderful’, you know. And I suppose – dear, oh dear (laughs) – to some degree I was sort of fighting some vague thing that I wasn’t in control of, in a peculiar way.

And even people who became great friends, like Daphne Grey, did you ever say, ‘Look, what do the audiences want here?’ or ‘Tell me about Adelaide and direct me where I should be going in terms of the next season’? Did you have anybody to kind of – – –?

Well, I think that I generally got the sense that what we should be doing is, ‘Ah! Well-made plays’. But at the same time she was such a good actress, Daphne, such a wonderful actress, that she also wanted adventure.

Yes.

You know, it’s a natural thing to do, it’s a natural thing. And I remember one play I did with her which we did at the Union which was fantastic and that was fairly successful. I think it’s very difficult to separate the audience from the critics in Adelaide because sometimes the critics were so cruel for no reason whatsoever. I cannot tell you how awful it was. It was just mind-boggling, some of the things they said.

That’s a very interesting thing you say that, because I would say now the critics are pretty mealy-mouthed. They hardly criticise anything, I think because they’re
all so wrapped up in not wanting to cripple audience numbers or subscriptions and so on.

Well, there was none of that back in the ’70s, I can tell you.

They were pretty acerbic, were they?

Oh, absolutely. I think most of them wanted the Playhouse to be given over to the amateur societies.

Is that right?

Yes. Oh, quite sure of it, quite sure of it.

Did you acknowledge any of the critics or did they come from a world that had no background in theatre?

Well, they seemed to have a lot of background in amateur theatre and seeing amateur theatre, but I never met one in Adelaide of any sort of true intellect, if you know what I mean. I mean no, I didn’t find anyone who knew about theatre in any possible way, not in the way that I knew, anyway.

That professional/amateur world and the divide between, I did some drama donkeys’ years ago when I was young and my teacher had been a professional, and I was involved with amateur theatre, and I remember her saying – I must have been all of 13 – she said, ‘Never forget one thing if you’re interested in going on the stage: the amateur theatre leaves off where the professional theatre starts’, and I’ve never forgotten it. Would you agree with that?

Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. And also in Adelaide during that time, I might as well mention this one, because there was a third item: Flinders University and Wal Cherry.

Indeed, yes.

Now, I’d known Wal for years. I’d worked with him.

He was the Professor of –

Drama

– Drama.
At Flinders University.

Yes.

Now, I first knew Wal at the Union Theatre in Melbourne and I was an actor in his company for two years. We got to know each other very well. He’d just come from the university, he was a cheeky, wild theatre person, so that when I came to Adelaide and discovered that he was at Flinders University I thought, ‘How wonderful! What a connection!’ None. There was none. I would ring him, he’d say, ‘Oh, come on up’, but I wasn’t invited to do any work up there with the students; he didn’t come down and see any of the work that I was doing in the profession; and once again you had that feeling of separateness going on in the most extraordinary way. And I said to him one day, I said, ‘What are you doing? What are you doing?’ And he said something in a newspaper at one stage which was very anti-the professional company that we had, and so I was rung by television people to say would I do a little debate with Wal on television. I said, ‘Certainly. Certainly, of course I would’.

Yes.

Well, finally, of course, Wal said no, he wouldn’t do it.

Was it to do with territory and fiefdoms and –

It’s all to do with that.

– little power blocs and so on?

It’s all to do with that, all to do with that, all to do with that. Very much to do with that.

It’s extraordinary, isn’t it – in that nascent sort of environment as well, which was – –.

Yes. But to some degree I think, Felicity, drama companies in Australia have always had to some degree a rather bad connection, if you’d like to put it that way, with
universities. I mean the VCA\(^2\) – I mean the university would love to get rid of the VCA down in Melbourne.

**Would they?**

Oh, they’d love it. ‘Get rid of it. We don’t need it.’ And they want to control it, just as the university here wants to control NIDA, which they don’t, but they’re getting there, they’re getting there. And so gradually you get drama companies sort of being sucked into a university ambience, which means exams and all sorts of bureaucracy that have got nothing to do with drama.

**You’re suggesting it’s not a happy mix, but it could be.**

It’s not. I’m not sure about that. I’m not sure, really, because university really is about drama in theory, on the whole, and that’s got nothing to do with a drama company in reality because they’re putting on plays and the difference is amazing.

**Yes. Getting back to Don, now, you’ve told me that very poignant story that he saw with you at *Jugglers three*.**

Yes.

**Was he a regular?**

Yes, he certainly was. Oh, he certainly was.

**And he came backstage and talked to you all the time?**

Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes. Yes. Often. Often. And I would never – let me say this: not once did I complain to Don, not once, because I thought the problems I had in terms of what was there had nothing to do with him. You know, he offered so much to us, I didn’t want *him* to be disturbed by any of that. But then, you see, people like Peter Ward, they seem – Peter, I like Peter a lot, thought he was a nice fellow, and he was obviously Don Dunstan’s assistant in many ways and all that – but they seemed to want me to become part of a certain echelon of people in Adelaide that felt to some

\(^2\) VCA – ..... ..... .....
degree superior with poetry and art and all the rest of it, like a hierarchy or something, you know? And I sort of refused because I thought, ‘That’s not what I’m here for. I’m supposed to go out to the community, I’m supposed to do things for ordinary people’. Do I make sense?

Yes. It’s funny, you’re following in almost exactly where my questions are leading and I was going to say, ‘Were you welcomed into the arts and artistic fold?’ You’re now sort of saying that they wanted you to be in that –

Oh, yes.

– but did they welcome you, were you invited to people’s houses and so on?

Yes, yes, I was. Not many parties, no, but some, yes. I was so busy, anyway. But I have to say it, I sort of rejected it.

Because of a sort of a sense of [élitism], you felt it was a bit élite?

Yes, because it wasn’t the Adelaide I was discovering that was in the audience. It was something else.

Where was your audience coming from?

I have no idea at the moment. Certainly middle-class –

Yes.

– it’s such a middle-class town. But nonetheless they all came, they all came. I’ll never forget the opening night of – what was that extraordinary play that I hated? I did it because it was very popular, about the boy and the horses and the psychiatrist.

Oh, Equus.

Equus. I’ll never forget that night, opening night of Equus. My publicity man – (laughs) sweet man – at interval, and I was in the foyer just sort of thinking about what I’d seen and all the rest of it, burst out of the theatre into the foyer, saying, ‘We’ve done it! We’ve done it!’ I thought, ‘Oh, dear god’.

They liked it?
They thought it was the most wonderful thing they’d ever seen. So I thought, ‘Ah, well’. It was at that moment I think, Felicity, that I thought to myself, ‘I wonder if I belong here, truly. I wonder if I really should go and let somebody else do it, somebody who is perhaps closer to them’. I was infinitely grateful, and I have to say this, at the end of my four-year contract, I was infinitely grateful. I was determined to play it out, but – – –.

Before we get to that spot I’ve got a few more things. Just talking about your audience, do you think you brought in the audiences from say the areas like Salisbury and Elizabeth that were GM³ employees?

No! I remember going out to Elizabeth and discovering this enormous English colony there. Nobody had told me about that, nobody had said a word! And I said to the Board, ‘But those people out there – – –.’ ‘Oh, leave them alone.’ I mean – – –.

Yes, insular. Élite.

Exactly.

This is going on the record.

(laughs)

I’m not sure that Adelaide’s changed that much, actually. Now, let me go back to my – do you mind if we have a pause for a sec?

Please – – –. (break in recording)

Just going back to Don Dunstan, you said in your book that he gave you sincere encouragement. Other than him attending performances and so on, did he give you the encouragement in other ways?

No, he left me totally alone in that way. He trusted me, I knew he did. He trusted me to do what he thought should be done, which is to get a good company going and do some good work, that’s all. That’s all he asked for.

But you did have social contact with him, did you not?

³ GM – General Motors Holden’s.
Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes.

Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Well, I mean we would go to a restaurant and talk and he’d ask me about theatre, what was happening. He just loved getting all the detail, he loved being informed about the company and what it meant for us, and particularly when it came to the theatre itself and how the theatre was, *et cetera*. And I think it was the only complaint I ever made to Don – also at the same time saying, ‘But there’s nothing one can do about it’ – at Thebarton, as you can imagine, we were all together, including whatever office staff we had, I mean it was all part of the same thing. In the Playhouse Theatre, rehearsals were – (sketches) there’s the theatre, as it were –

Yes.

– there’s the rehearsals, corridors, my offices, artistic offices, another little rehearsal room, all this over here. Over here, administration, on the other side of the theatre.

Separated.

I never saw them. Unless I went over, because they wouldn’t come over to me. I had to go over constantly.

So you cut through the theatre to do that?

Yes, we cut through the theatre.

So there was an alienation sort of set up.

Yes, there was, immediately. Immediately. The administration answered to the Board, not to me.

And just staying with that finger plan that you’ve been drawing there on the paper, you had a lot of good workshops, though, did you not? You had engineering, costume workshop, they were all onsite?

Oh, we had everything. We had everything. Oh, yes, we had everything. That was the wonderful thing: we had everything. Wonderful wardrobe, workshops, everything. Everything we needed we had. But I wanted more connection with the
way we did the theatre – you know, what can we afford? What’s the best thing to do? What can we do? Now, he tried, my administrator, Wayne Madden. We were separate, we were a very separate thing altogether. I mean he was very friendly, very nice man. And he’d try to do everything that I wanted. There was no sense of ‘I’m doing my job, you’re doing yours’, but there was just no connection as such. (laughs) I remember towards the end of the four years, when I was having some rather not-very-nice meetings with the Board and I was very happy to think that I was leaving – very much to do with Kevin Palmer in those days, but I can explain that – and I remember going over to Wayne’s office one day and his secretary saying, ‘Oh, George!’ I said, ‘Can I see Wayne?’ ‘Oh, y-y-yes.’ It was so unusual. So I walked up the steps and there was Wayne. ‘Oh! George?’ And I said, ‘Have a chat?’ ‘Er, yeah.’ We never had chats. And I said, ‘Well, you’re perfectly aware that my time is finishing off and I’m having a fairly bad time with the Board and with Kevin’, and he said, ‘It hasn’t been too good, has it?’ And I said, ‘Where did you go wrong, Wayne?’ He said, ‘I beg your pardon?’ I said, ‘Where do you think that you’ve gone wrong?’ ‘Oh.’ And he had the grace to grin and say, ‘I don’t think I’ve thought about it’. I said, ‘No. No, you probably haven’t’. And I left him.

Oh, my goodness.

It was very difficult. Kevin Palmer was brought out, and I thought it was a good idea –

Going right back now.

– going right back to the building of the theatre – and we were getting to that point of ‘we’ll be going in soon’, and the Board thought a Production Manager would be a good idea. So did I, I thought, ‘Well, that’s great: a liaison between the theatre and us’. So Kevin came out.

Now, you were going to be tenants in the theatre.

Yes.

The theatre company was a tenant in –
That’s right.

– what was called the Playhouse.

Yes.

Okay, so you paid rent –

Yes.

– and you occupied all the rehearsal –

Yes.

– and the administrative spaces.

Yes.

Okay.

Yes. And then Kevin came out and he started to work and for a while it seemed to be fine. And then I discovered, gradually, that Kevin was criticising what I was doing with the company, to others, and to members of the Board, like some sort of terrible rumourmonger thing going on. And I questioned the Board one day and I said, ‘What’s going on?’ They said, ‘Nothing – no, it’s fine. Kevin is a very fine man, he knows exactly what he’s doing and all the rest of it’, and I said, ‘Oh, really?’ And I said to the Board, ‘Does that mean you don’t think I do?’ ‘Well, you know, George, you’re fine, you just go ahead and – – –.’ And suddenly, because of the theatre, Felicity, you know, I suddenly realised – and it goes right back to a theatre company without a theatre –

Yes. Yes, indeed.

– the moment the theatre began to really take shape I realised that it was a monument to real estate; that, somehow or other, it wasn’t there for drama, it was there to expose Adelaide as a wonderful place that had deep blue carpets and beautiful things in the theatre. And I suddenly realised that I would lose my freedom. This is before I even got into the theatre.
Yes, and I must backtrack here. It was Don Dunstan who particularly wanted to have that additional wing, if you like, on the Festival Centre complex.

Yes. Yes, absolutely.

Do you in any way think that it was a monument to him? Because I wouldn’t have thought he was a proud man; what’s your take on that?

No, I wouldn’t say so, I wouldn’t say so. He had a wonderful vision about doing drama in Adelaide. I don’t think he even thought, like me in a way, about the amateur world and just what it would do or what it wouldn’t do for the theatre and just what bad connections would be made, in fact.

In fact, probably was he trying to emulate, because I know he deeply admired iconic – if you like that terrible word – institutions like the Royal Shakespeare Company –

Yes.

– was he trying, in his way, to do something like that?

To some degree. To some degree, yes, he wanted that to happen. But the problem is in wanting that to happen what happens, of course, is that the businesspeople take over: that the building of the theatre and all the rest of it and the comfort for the audience and all the rest of it became supremely important and one had to be very careful. And gradually the Board kept saying to me, ‘You can’t do plays like that anymore; you must do plays that are going to pull the audience in’, and suddenly I realised that we were narrowing ourselves down.

The tail was wagging the dog.

And I recall in planning the first season it was just a nightmare. A nightmare.

This is the first season in the drama theatre.

In the drama theatre. It was a nightmare of planning, because I wanted Adelaide to be proud of this place and to know that something really adventurous was going to happen, and I knew Don was going to open it. So trying to choose plays for that first season proved monumentally difficult, you know, because Adelaide loves a bit of
classic drama, you know, all that, they love that. So I thought, ‘Well, we’ll do a beautiful comedy like *She stoops to conquer*, we can get the cast in’, and it was highly-successful.

**And *The Winslow boy* was there in that [season]?**

No, not in the first season. Pity it wasn’t. But then I had an idea. Now, I have absolutely no excuse for this, this was my idea, I persuaded the Board to let me do it, even though certain members of it disliked the idea intensely, but I gave all the sorts of reasons why I wanted to do it. I said to them, ‘Now, what I want to do, I want to go back to the beginning of theatre. I want to go back to the beginning. Like it’s the beginning of a theatre company, it’s the beginning of a new theatre, it’s the beginning of a whole complex of things; let’s go back to the beginning’. And I said this to the Board, you know, and I think to some degree they thought, ‘Wow, hmm’. I said, ‘I want the audience sitting there in that Playhouse, which will be packed on opening night, all well-dressed, and I want the curtain to go up and for them to see a *totally* empty stage. *Totally.* Bare walls, ropes, just totally – wings, everything – just to see it’. And I said, ‘And into that space I want Don Dunstan to walk and introduce it’, which is what happened. It was so moving, it was absolutely wonderful. But the audience to some degree, Felicity, (laughs) were a bit bewildered because they wondered what they were going to see.

**You had the Board’s complete agreement with this rather dramatic start?**

Oh, yes.

**Oh, good.**

Oh, yes. And there were odd things on the wings, but no people. Don finished his speech – we timed it – Don finished his speech and we heard the bells ringing, little bells ringing, and suddenly out of the wings all the actors dragged these four *Commedia dell’arte* carts onstage, all on wheels, turning them round to create four doors like caravans, sets, and we did this old cuckoo play from farce, really. Let me show you.
Let me have a look at the photo.

There’s two of them.

Oh, yes. Yes – and the title of the play?

Three cuckolds.

The three cuckolds, that’s right. And that came from – that was Medieval?

Yes, Medieval. Way back, way, way back. And we’d rehearsed and done it – - -.

(leafs through photographs) I don’t think I’ve got a thing of the set here of it.

Goodness me, these take me back! Oh, my god, it’s all too much. All too much.

For the recording, I’ll just say that George is looking through an enormous array of photos while we’re talking.

Yes. (indicates) That’s an example of Helmut’s work with all these young people.

Oh, how fantastic – yes, doing body and movement and all that stuff.

Absolutely amazing.

Yes, fantastic.

Absolutely amazing. I’m sorry, I haven’t got a thing of the set here.

It sounds totally enchanting.

Yes.

With the carts and becoming the doorways.

Yes. (indicates) There’s a tiny photograph, but that’s one of the carts, you see –

Ah, right.

– with steps, in other words like gypsy caravans.

Yes. And it was masked, some of the characters were masked?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes – Commedia stuff, you know? With masks and – – –.

So there was lots of in-and-out of the doors?
Oh, yes; and swinging over, ropes coming down and swinging onstage with ropes. The cast had a wonderful time and, to some degree – I mean, you know, (laughs) the typical moment – – –. (shows photograph, laughter)

We’re looking at a very funny shot of one of the actors, who looks like his feet are stuck to the floor and he’s leaning in the slanting, almost a falling-over. It’s very funny, it’s a very funny picture.

It was beautifully done. The cast were wonderful.

And these are all from *The three cuckolds*. Tell me about the opening night, though, tell me about the buzz, the feeling, Don’s own performance and so on, because you were right there at the heart of it all.

Yes. It’s very difficult for me to say this, but I think I have to. I think it failed. I loved it for what it was; the actors were wonderful. And it was very funny and they had some very funny things – we used trapdoors, people coming out from under the stage, we did all that. And Don was most complimentary afterwards, you know, and I think some people sort of loved it and understood why I’d done it, and understood. But, generally speaking, the critics didn’t like it at all, they wondered what the hell we were doing. What on earth were we doing? They had no connection with the past in that way; they didn’t see the reasons why. I mean, you know, the rest of the season was fine and we had quite a good season, in fact; and it developed and all the rest of it. And I think, Felicity, over the time, over those two years, we developed a very loyal subscriber lot, you know?

Yes.

Very loyal indeed. And I got a lot of letters from people really loving the sort of adventures that we gave them, you know? And so I’ve got nothing to regret that way, we did some wonderful plays.

No. And the fact that you did a play where you could let the audience see the workings, the inside workings of the theatre –

That was the whole idea.

– and you were showcasing it.
That’s the whole idea, the whole idea of the night was that. But not a single critic said anything like that.

Were you able to put any publicity out beforehand –

Yes.

– about why you were doing the – – –?

To some degree, but not much. Not very much. I was hardly ever asked for an interview, ever, in an Adelaide newspaper.

Is that right?

Yes.

See, that pre-publicity sets the critic, at least they’ve got something to cling onto, if they can’t write themselves.

Yes, but it wasn’t like that.

No, no.

We were those ‘foreigners’, you see.

Interesting. How was Don’s – – –?

And I’ll tell you what didn’t help with the echelons: the triumvirate. If I’d been there by myself I think I would have been seduced into it, to some degree. But because there were three of us they saw that as a sort of very separate party, a very separate thing.

Yes, you were a wedge, a pincer movement –

That’s right.

– that had put yourself into Adelaide.

That’s right.

How was the feeling with that, no doubt rather toffy, audience that was there on the opening night, what was the general feeling about Don? Because Don had his own critics and Don had a lot of people that were quite disparaging about him.
Yes. And there was quite a bit of that as well.

Was there?

Yes, there was, indeed there was. I wondered how long Don would last.

Indeed, indeed. Well, this, of course, was fairly early on in the piece.

Yes.

Well, it was ’74, wasn’t it, when the drama theatre opened.

Yes.

He had a good few years up his sleeve. He was considered to be a sort of traitor to his class and all that sort of thing –

Yes, yes, yes.

– and not part of the Establishment. But it was a wonderful piece of theatre, wasn’t it, when he came on?

Yes. It wasn’t until I invited Robin Lovejoy over to do Blythe Spirit and I did The Winslow Boy and there was almost a whole season of comfortable plays – Major Barbara, you know, and really good modern classics; at that stage I realised that that’s where our audience was. And I was very happy to do them, very happy, I love the plays; and we did some very fine work in those two years, some very fine work.

You’d got the measure of it, you think, by then.

I had.

You’d got the jolly measure of the audience.

I had. And the Board – they did ask me did I want to apply for another season, they did ask that. And I said immediately, ‘No’, and I talked to them. I just said, ‘I think it’s up to somebody else now because I’ve been up and down like a yoyo for these four years and I think that’s enough’.

Yes, indeed. Now, going back, though, to 1974, the opening of the drama theatre.

Yes.
I suspect that that came into the ‘worst of times’ because in both your book and in Peter Ward’s history are documented some of the difficulties of that time you had with the Board, to the point, I understand, that you were ready to hand in your resignation and you were also going to take Helmut and Rodney with you.

Yes.

Or they agreed also to leave.

Oh, yes, they agreed.

So you were going to leave en masse.

That’s right, that’s right.

That would have been quite shocking. It would have been shocking for Don Dunstan, too.

And it’s all to do with the planning within the new theatre, Felicity, you know – and it happens everywhere, I believe: that once the new theatre rises from the ashes and it takes on an altogether different sort of identity in a way, you know, it somehow didn’t belong to the theatre company even though we were going into it; it belonged to the people who can control it and do things with it.

Yes.

And therefore plays that the Board would easily have said, ‘Yes, of course!’ to me before, were knocked back by the Board, saying, ‘No, no, no, no. That’s not what we want’.

From my reading I understand you had enormous support from your core cast, your core group of players.

Oh, they were most wonderful, wonderful. They were wonderful.

In fact, they said, ‘We’ll go on strike if anything happens to George’.

Yes. Yes, they did. They did. It was a very bad time, Felicity, a very bad time. But they also realised just how much support I did have, among the people who counted in order to keep their theatre alive.
Well, it would have been completely shocking for Don Dunstan’s Government, because he outlaid a lot of money on the theatre company, a lot of money on the drama [theatre].

    And let me say straightaway it’s only because of Don that I stayed there. Otherwise I would have gone.

So it was.

    Oh, yes.

I wondered about what it was that prompted you.

    No question I would have gone. But I believe I owed it to him to continue for as long as I could.

Indeed. Well, it would have been politically very bad for him. I think his detractors would have really said, ‘Look at all this money that’s been wasted and it’s failing’, and so on and so on.

    Absolutely.

Did you ever have any conversations with Don about these terrible difficulties?

    No.

He kept completely at arm’s length?

    He did, he did.

Let’s move on. You’ve told me about the opening. And you’ve more or less told me about being in the Festival Centre, so I think you’ve covered that: the alienation and so on.

    Yes. Well, it was really strange because the Festival Centre itself and the Festival Theatre, it was like a totally foreign body, had nothing to do with us, nothing. And only when it came to the Adelaide Festival was I then approached by Anthony to say, ‘Well, of course, we need to do a play’. It’s what they’re doing with Lear. ‘We need to do a play that combines the SATC with the Festival Centre.’

Yes – although Lear is not because it’s not going into the Festival, I don’t think, is it?
Oh, no, no, I didn’t mean that. Oh! I see what you mean. No. But it’s still to do with the Festival, apparently, it’s still a combination.

**Oh, is it?**

Yes, so I believe.

**Oh, okay.**

So I’m told in the email, anyway.

**Oh, okay – because it starts – when does it start? In a couple of weeks, doesn’t it?**

November 5.

**Is it going to go back again? Is it coming back again next year for the Festival?**

I wouldn’t have a clue, I’m sorry.

That’s a little bit interesting. You did, though, extend your contract, according to Peter Ward, until June 1977, although you resigned early.

Yes.

**What was it that prompted you?**

Just the season, just trying to finish the season and not leave people in the lurch, and to give the Board enough time to find somebody else and all the rest of it – you know, all those things. All those things.

That was very generous of you.

Well, I just thought it was my job to do it, you know? To make sure that I didn’t leave – I didn’t want to leave them in a ghastly lurch, let alone Don Dunstan and the Government; I needed to make sure that it was going to pan out all right, that their next one would take over and it would be all right.

**And at some point before you left, though, both Rodney and Helmut in fairly quick succession decided to move on.**

Absolutely, yes. There was no question for the three of us that we belonged together as a triumvirate, we’d worked together, they were totally supportive of me, *totally*. I
mean both Helmut and Rodney were absolutely part of what I believed in, you know?

How did you feel after they’d gone? Did you feel sort of lonely, embittered – – –?

No, I was sort of – yes, I did, of course I did. I was drinking too much. In fact, when I left Adelaide I have to say to you I wanted to give the business up. It was so awful. I was in a fair mess.

I think you’re incredibly generous, actually, in your memoir. I think you question your own abilities, your own decisions.

Well, Rodney says this to me. He says, ‘You should have said a lot more’.

I think you’re very, very generous. I want to bring up something that you say in your book. John Sumner, your old friend, the force behind the Melbourne Theatre Company, he said – and I just wonder, I want to talk a little bit about his advice when you talked about running a theatre company –

Oh, yes. (laughs)

– he said, ‘You don’t belong to the business of running a theatre company; you belong to the rehearsal room’.

Yes.

Talk to that for a few moments, will you?

Well, it took me those four years in Adelaide to realise how right he was. I’m just not the right person to run a company, I don’t think. I love rehearsing plays and I love directing and I love teaching and I love actors. But that’s my life, that’s my world. To have to associate with boards and money and theatre contracts and all those things, I realised over the time in Adelaide that I wasn’t properly equipped to do that. I’m not hard enough, you know, I’m not tough enough. I think that’s it, you know? It’s one of those things. I was grateful that when I left I determined then, and I’ve continued that, I would never run a company again. I will always go and work for them, work with them, whatever, but never run it. No.
No, and from what you say that whole sort of construction, the physicality of that new home, even though it was well-equipped and all the rest of it, it actually seemed to squeeze you, did it, it alienated you to the point where you felt intimidated, almost?

That’s right. Absolutely.

That’s extraordinary, yes. It’s a very interesting insight into the notion of a theatre in its own space –

Yes.

– rather than how you were before: free and – – –.

Yes. It’s really extraordinary. And that’s the point, you know. Since then I’ve often thought, ‘God, I could have run a company as long as we didn’t have a theatre’.

It’s a very interesting thing, yes, it’s a very interesting thing. Did you play any part in the appointment of your successor?

None, none whatsoever.

Did you know Colin George?

No, I didn’t know Colin at all.

But I believe there was a joint party to welcome him and to say farewell to you.

That’s right, that’s right, and I met him there. He was a very nice fellow. And he’d had a lot of experience in rep in England and I thought, ‘I think he’ll do quite well in Adelaide’, somehow. Because when you think of Nottingham and Sheffield and all those towns in England, I thought to myself, ‘Yes, he knows what Adelaide is in that regard’, you know?

Yes.

‘I think he’ll do well.’

Provincial town stuff.

I was very pleased – yes.

And was Don at the party, do you remember?
I can’t remember – no, I’m sorry, I really can’t remember. I don’t think I remember
the party. I was probably a bit pissed. (laughs)

Just going back to your social things, did you go to Don’s house?

No.

Oh, you didn’t.

I went to Peter Ward’s house several times, but only in the early time. After that, no,
nothing, absolutely nothing. Occasionally I’d go up and see Colin in his little house
in North Adelaide, but that’s it. That’s it. (laughs) We didn’t have that, no. I didn’t
become part of that world.

Yes, interesting. Interesting because Adelaide is made up of a very small number
of people that are in this kind of élite and I think it still goes on today.

Who are in charge of things, yes.

Yes. Okay, so you left, exhausted, and – as you say in your book – drinking too
much and all the rest of it.

Yes.

You almost had a sort of – was it a kind of a nervous breakdown at the end?

A sort of breakdown, yes. Not a total thing, but I was very depressed, yes.

But you had a wonderful experience as a clown in Old King Cole just before you
left: just tell me about that.

Before I left. I thought it was just a wonderful goodbye. Because the young
Englishman, Roger, he’d come out from England –

To take over from Helmut?

– to take over from Helmut.

Roger Chapman?

Chapman. And we liked him very much, he was a lovely, lovely chap, and Helmut
liked him a great deal. And he began to work with the young people and Helmut was
very happy about that. And I got to know Roger very well and then it was he who suggested one day, ‘I’ve got this smashing play, why don’t you play in it?’ And I thought, ‘Oh, yes! Saying goodbye as a clown, how wonderful!’ (laughs) So I did. I played a clown called Twoo[?]. (laughs)

And that was on in the Space theatre, was it?

Oh, no; in the Playhouse.

Oh, in the Playhouse.

Yes – packed with children, packed, yes, it was.

It was a sort of Christmas special, was it?

It certainly was. (leafs through photographs) I’m sorry, just for you I’ll show you a photograph.

We’re having another look at the lovely scrapbook.

That’s me with the girl playing in a box. (laughs)

And they loved it?

They loved it, to distraction, they loved it. I mean they really did, they thought it was the most wonderful, funny thing. I remember singing, ‘Old King Cole’, getting all the words wrong. Well, there were rows of four- and five-year-olds in the stalls, just shrieking with laughter as I got all the words wrong and said all the wrong things, but the song that they knew.

Yes.

That was so wonderful, I just loved that.

Yes, indeed. Indeed. Now, I think in your memoir you said that you have returned to Adelaide once since you left in 1976.

I have.

And did you go to the theatre?
The next time I came round to Adelaide I never went near the theatre, because I was with the South Australian Film Company, that’s where I did *The Shiralee*, it’s where I started to do film work in the ’80s, and so it was a different society altogether, totally. I never went near the theatre, or near any of the people associated with the theatre. No. I couldn’t. Frankly, I couldn’t. I mean I’m amazed that I accepted to go over on November 5 (2009). But since then, Simon Phillips, (Artistic Director of the State Theatre Company of SA – 1990-1993) actually rang and said would I come over to Adelaide and do a production of *Flea in Her Ear*, which I’d done in Melbourne many years before. So Kristian Fredrickson, my designer, and I went over and did that. We had great fun. And it was interesting just to go back in theatre and do something like that there, you know, nice people around and we just – – –. But that’s well into the ’80s. (Editor’s Correction – it was actually 1991)

Yes, and you’d moved on.

Yes, it didn’t matter anymore.

And you mentioned the November 5: just for the tape, just say what you’ve been invited to go over and do.

Well, yes. There was the 35th anniversary of the opening night of the Playhouse, when we did *The Three Cuckolds*, and they’re doing an opening night of a production of *Lear* and they’ve invited me over to see *Lear* and to a party afterwards to celebrate 35 years. And I was very touched by the invitation and of course I said yes.

Oh, that’s absolutely tremendously. Well, that’s a very nice note to end on. I think that’s all the questions I’ve got for you, George, unless there’s anything that you want to add that you don’t think we’ve sufficiently covered. I could put the tape on pause for a minute if you just want to have a think.

No, I don’t think so, Felicity, I think that’s it. I mean the whole incident of Kevin Palmer was most unfortunate, particularly – and he wouldn’t mind me saying this – that my associate, Rodney Fisher, and Kevin became great enemies. They disliked each other intensely and Kevin disliked his work, Rodney disliked him and what he was doing to the company, and indeed I do believe that Kevin was undermining us all during that time with the Board, which was most unfortunate.

And that’s all. I mean I could have said so much in the book, but I really didn’t – there’s always reasons for it, you know? Kevin, when I knew him later on as an
agent, he was a very nice man and he had his reasons, and so did Rodney, and so did I. And it was a most unfortunate sort of conclusion to Adelaide, really. It was the worst of times and I wouldn’t want it to happen again. But we’re all part of that, we all took part in it as well, you know?

But you should also be very proud of what you did achieve –

Oh, I am, I am.

– and gathering that group of actors together, and having that ensemble, if you like.

Very much. I know the actors, the company, did some wonderful work over those four years, work to be really remembered, you know? And, as I say, my Adelaide friends became even better friends, more friends. Daphne, of course, and Jimmy, continued to be great friends, and in fact I invited Daphne over here to be in films and plays that I did. And Julie came over to live here and she’s still a great friend, here. And Dennis, et cetera.

Yes. Terrific, terrific.

And it would be lovely, actually, to see – – –. (laughs) I mean what I can’t wait for, really, is that on Tuesday night – (leafs through photographs) I’m sorry, I’m looking for another photograph, but it’s a very real photograph.

On Tuesday night, that’s on the 5th.

On November the 5th Dennis is playing Gloucester in King Lear.

Oh, right, yes – and John Gaden, of course, is playing Lear –

That’s right.

– and John Gaden is a previous director also.

That’s right, AD. There’s Dennis on the opening night of the theatre –

Oh, look at him.

– with his mask on, playing the old man, and he was so funny. He was wonderful.
I wonder whether he’ll have it in his back pocket to pop on at the party.

I know; one wonders. I’ll take the photograph with me, anyway.

Oh, do, yes. Oh, it’ll be a wonderful night, a wonderful get-together, because I’m sure all those people will be invited – all your original actors and everything.

Oh, I expect so, yes. Who knows?

Yes. Oh, it’ll be terrific. Well, look, I just want to say it’s been an absolute pleasure from my point of view, George –

That’s good.

– and I thank you very, very much indeed.

My pleasure, Felicity.

Good.

I’m so glad that you came here rather than anywhere else, because it’s a nice place just to talk.

Indeed, indeed. Well, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW