This is Felicity Morgan interviewing Mr Rob George on Wednesday 9 March, 2011 at his hotel apartment in Adelaide about his contribution to the arts in South Australia during the period of Don Dunstan’s premiership, specifically in the field of theatre.

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 Rob, and thank you for taking the time to do this interview.

My pleasure, Felicity.

Rob, for future generations who listen to this or read the transcript, I should point out that you are now a well recognised writer, director and producer for stage, film and TV with many credits under your belt including the run-away success from the 2008 Adelaide Festival called Lovers & Haters – a musical play, I think it would be called?....

Yes ...

...co written and produced by you and your partner Maureen Sherlock, which looked at, no less, the turbulent times of Don Dunstan. There’s lots more to talk about that, but first could we go back to your past; could you fill us in a little on your early background and how you became involved with the theatre in Adelaide in the seventies and where, I understand, you met Don Dunstan.

OK Felicity. Well, I did Arts at Adelaide University and got involved in theatre then, although I suppose I’d been slightly involved prior to that at school……are you getting a good signal there…hello, hello, just testing…..

Yes, no it’s fine

I think you’ll find that pretty good…it’s just funny …last night at Maureen’s show\(^1\) where I am working on Alzheimer’s the Musical, I’m the stage manager where basically what I do is press a button so we change the projected backdrop, and I was sitting there thinking that the first time I was in the Arts Theatre was in 1967 for the world recognised production by Pultney Grammar School of Julius Caesar in which my role was changing the back projection that we had from an overhead projector…and here we are some 45 or something years later…

The world turns!

….or it doesn’t turn very much at all!!

For the record, the Arts Theatre is the little, well not so little actually, it’s a five hundred seat theatre in Angas Street, Adelaide.

Yes. Run by the Adelaide Repertory Theatre

Correct.

So I had a bit of an interest at school and at university I got involved in the Footlights Club which put on the Uni reviews, and there I linked up particularly with Steve J. Spears, who went on to write The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin amongst others, and Robyn Archer was also a member so it was a very dynamic little group there, and also then with the Adelaide
Teachers College Drama Group we did various things and at the end of my time I wrote…well in 1973 Maureen and I were posted to Burra High School to teach…

**Burra, in the Flinders Ranges, the Lower Flinders Ranges?**

Mid North, yes…and while we were there it was a bit of a cultural desert I guess, and Clare, the town of Clare, which is about 25 kilometres away, was having a one act drama festival and we entered, not having a play, but we entered, and as time went on we thought we’d better have a play, better get a play, and there weren’t very many plays to chose from in the library at the Burra High School and there was no other ways of accessing plays in those days, so I wrote one. It was a little bit of a cheat in a sense; I sort of modified a couple of the review sketches that Steve and I had written and it went on from there. So we put my play on, which was called *Prompt,* and the basic premise of the play was a couple, it had to be a couple because that was Maureen and me, and a prompt sitting on stage who was the only other teacher interested in being in the play. And the play is a young couple doing the play and then they forget their lines and they call for a prompt. But the prompt, instead of having the script in front of him, has a newspaper in front and reads out the next line in the newspaper which leads essentially to the next review sketch if you like and then a big argument develops between everybody. It was actually pretty funny (laughter) and pretty absurd,(laughter) and it still gets done around the place. And we won everything apart from Best Set, I think that was the only thing we didn’t win (laughter). And that was a lot of fun.

And the next year I was working in the Research Branch of the Education Department as a Research Officer which was the most, a very unusual, working situation. The Head of the Branch - we had our own little floor in Pirie Street - and the Head of the Branch, a guy called Noel Wilson, was a very enthusiastic hippie, so it was all thongs and jeans and dingle-dangles round his neck…

(Interference on tape) *It’s OK, keep going*

….and this was quite funny because at the time he was on about the second level of the Education Department, he was Head of the entire Branch, and all the others were stitched up in ties and everything, but Noel was always very casual. Casual to the extent that his girlfriend also worked in the Branch, although no, I took over from her, but she had been working in the Branch and they had a mattress in one corner of the room, the office, in case they got enthusiastic about doing things! (laughter). The general philosophy of the Branch, of Noel, was that the Research Branch was there to conduct research that schools requested, but because he was such a hippy no-one ever requested anything. So the Branch actually didn’t have anything much to do. We did get involved in a couple of national programmes but that was about it so there was quite a bit of spare time on our hands so I wrote, started writing, a full length play while I was in the office.

I could interject with all sorts of rude things about what happened to the mattress and how did you manage to replace his girlfriend etc, but I won’t.  But I won’t (laughter)

No, no, (laughter) I only replaced her in terms of research, not in any other way (laughter). So I wrote a play called *Les,* which was about a guy called Les who reads a *Cleo* magazine and does the quiz on ‘Are you a lesbian?’, and he scores 100 % so he realizes he’s a lesbian and moves in with this woman in a caravan with a couple of old, well these days we’d say Alzheimer’s patients, and that was pretty funny but not very well structured, but we put this on at the Little Theatre at Adelaide University. Earlier in the year we’d put on the first production in the Little Theatre called *Snookered* which was a Footlights review and that was the inaugural production there and later in the year we did *Les.*

**Inaugural production because the Little Theatre had only just been built?**
Yes, yes, it was the first production in there

Right

And I think certainly Les was the first locally written play to go in there, apart from the review.

What was the group you were doing Les with?

With Les, it was the Circle Theatre Company that was Maureen, Malcolm Blaylock and me basically. And others involved in that production in Les, were Lindy Powell, who’s now Adelaide’s leading barrister and QC, and Arwed Turon, another leading lawyer, and Malcolm and Maureen, that was it. But that was my first play written in the Research Branch.

Right

And the booking office for the Circle Theatre Company was the Research Branch so Noel Wilson would answer that particular phone with “Hello, Circle Theatre Company”! (laughter) They sold tickets from the Research Branch! I don’t think they do that any more (laughter)

No, you can’t imagine that happening nowadays! And this was seventy…?

Four

Seventy four, so it was right in the middle of Dunstan’s tenure as Premier

Yes.

I wonder if he knew what was going on in the research Branch of the Education Department?!

Well, this is a sort of little theme of mine – I don’t think he was all that interested in locally written plays. Don was a great supporter of high art, but not the low art that we were involved with, in my experience.

Yes, what about that – would you like to talk about that from your own experience?

Well, I’d written quite a lot of plays in Adelaide and some were quite…some were pretty minor and unsuccessful but Les we did at the Little Theatre and then we did it at The Space and it was, I think, the second Australian play in The Space and the first South Australian play.

The Space being the small venue in the Festival Centre which had only very recently opened at that point.

Yes, yes, that opened in ’75, and we were one of the first productions in there. So basically we opened the Little Theatre and we almost opened The Space. Then I had Percy and Rose in 1982 at the Adelaide Festival, and the first two plays the Stage Company did were Errol Flynn’s Great Big Adventure Book for Boys and Let’s Twist Again, which were both my plays and Don didn’t ever see…I don’t think Don saw anything that I ever wrote and yet they were quite important plays.

But he was involved in the theatrical scene, maybe a bit before your time, but did you cross his path as he was being a thespian himself?
No, No. I mean he was just a student when he was doing that – he’s was a lot older than we were. His thespian days would have been in the fifties.

Um, yes, yes of course

Perhaps someone you could talk to would be Jane Ballantyne, Colin Ballantyne’s daughter, and Don virtually lived with them when he was growing up.

Yes, did you remain in this, what you call the ‘low theatre’ the whole time or did you cross paths with Don, for instance did you go to the South Australian Theatre Company’s first night in the Festival Theatre [Playhouse] when he said the poem³?

No, no, we were never really part of that world; we were very much alternative, student-y side of it. We went to the first night of the production that George Ogilvie did at the Playhouse, but that was a different event when Don did his John Bray poem⁴.

Wasn’t that the same night, before the curtain went up? What was that play, Jugglers Three, wasn’t it?

No, Jugglers Three was in the Union Hall, I saw that. That was a David Williamson [play].

Oh that’s right, I’m getting confused

It was one of those… The three.. it was one of those Commedia dell’ Arte, you know⁵ …

Yes, that’s right, yes.

We did see it but we wouldn’t have been there with Don….

So tell me about you and Don

Oh there’s nothing to tell about me and Don really. My only real anecdote is that we had a whole world of activity going on that he really wasn’t particularly a part of…but to contradict that to some extent he did set up an arts funding situation that we then tapped into. I mean Circle Theatre Company got some production investment – I think we were one of the first ones - from the Department of the Arts, after it was set up.

This was under Len, Len Amadio?

Yes, and I got money to write Let’s Twist Again for the [SA] State Theatre Company, so I got a writer’s grant and we got a company grant of $3,000 or $4,000 but that was the first time that anyone had, that those things had existed.

Did you get opportunities to go into the ‘high art’ areas like the Festival. Did you get invitations to be part of the Adelaide Festivals, back in those days with your plays?

Well, Percy and Rose was in the Adelaide Festival but it was in ’82, after Don…

Right, after Don

And prior to that (pause) I’m trying to think, what was the Stage Company doing….. See, Circle Theatre Company did a few things; we did Young Mo in The Space which was hugely successful, played by Steve J. Spears. That was in 1976, and we took it, unwisely, to Sydney and did our dough and that was sort of almost the end of our [Circle Theatre] Company, and then not long after that the Stage Company took up and I was on the Board of the Stage
Company which initially operated out of the Sheridan Theatre in North Adelaide, on Mackinnon Parade, North Adelaide.

There were a number of small theatre companies, another one that operated out of that little theatre in Hilton.

Theatre ‘62

Yes, that was…well we virtually took over that Theatre ‘62, but that was…oh I’m trying to think of his name…it will come to me. Don was a bit involved in Theatre ‘62, but, if I might be so bold as to say that was probably a more gay theatre company than our theatre company was.

Oh, and you think that might have been the attraction?

We weren’t part of that world. Whereas Theatre ‘62 was run by John Edmund⁶…

And was Chris Winzar involved with that?

Chris Winzar was involved, yes, but we were a little bit later. It was set up in 1962 originally, that’s where the name came from.

Oh that’s where the name came from, I hadn’t realised that.

Yes. And there was a controversy at one stage because across the road from Theatre ‘62 was a restaurant that Don sort of took over on behalf of John Ceruto and they set up…that was his sort of first involvement in a restaurant and that is the subject of the John Ceruto book; that Don pulled some less-than-ethical strings in order to obtain the lease on behalf of his good friend.

Um

But you’re not allowed to say things like that (laughter). It is interesting you know, he’s untouchable in some ways.

Do you think that’s fair, that he’s untouchable?

No, I don’t. I think he’s an incredibly interesting character and that’s what we tried to address in our play, you know this person…..

Do you want to say…..

Okay, okay, yes

……before we get on to Lovers & Haters, which I really want to do, I wanted to try and flesh out how your paths crossed with Don and I think you’re suggesting perhaps not too much at all?

Not too much at all, no. He rarely came to see anything that I was involved in, or that the Stage Company was involved in. I think I can only remember one instance where he came to a Stage Company production and that was [when it was] a fully funded professional company pretty much, when it had become the resident company at The Space for a while.

Right, right, and your Circle Theatre Company had morphed into the Stage Company?
Yes, essentially. Some might disagree with that, but more or less. I was the writer for the Circle Theatre Company and the first two plays that the Stage Company did were my two plays.

He [Don] was very important in the theatre though in South Australia wasn’t he? I mean in setting up the government entities?

Yes, oh yes. He was a great driver behind it and a great supporter of it and had a great love and interest in the theatre, but not at a sort of grass roots-y area that we were in. That’s my interpretation.

Yes, A lot of other people have suggested that as well – that he loved things like the Royal Shakespeare Company and those very grand organisations, and liked to be a patron in bringing them here and so on..

Yes, yes. He was pretentious, let’s face it. (laughter)

Do you think his policies were pretentious, his arts policies?

He was pretentious, terribly pretentious. I remember hearing Don being interviewed on the ABC – FM I think it was, you know one of those ‘your selection’ – an interview and you select the music, and Don wanted them to play Songs of the Auvergne and he said “Of course I introduced the Songs of the Auvergne to Australia, no-one was interested until I began to push it…” you know all that sort of stuff.(laughter) I must admit my blood curdles when I hear that sort of stuff.

Was that very late on in his life?

Yes, that would have been the mid nineties or early nineties or something.

Right

I’m just trying…I had a half a thought in my mind there about Don and the early times….um….oh that’s right….. we had all been involved in left wing politics, well Don was Premier so it must have been the late seventies, seventy eight or something like that. Well, we were all pissed off as local performers that no-one was getting a go at the [SA] State Theatre Company; they were all bringing in interstate actors to do everything, and the SAFC would bring interstate actors in and no-one was doing locally written plays at the flagship level. Well, Malcolm Blaylock was on the Unley sub-branch of the ALP, Maureen and I were on Actors Equity Branch and somebody else was on another sub-branch of the ALP and we all put this motion. We put a motion basically calling for more local performers and writers to be involved in the major theatre companies and our intention was to shove it up Don. And we put this through State Council at the big State Council meeting and it looked like it had this very widespread support because it had three or four sub-branches, and the Union was involved (laugher), and the motion was proposed and Don seconded it! Totally took all the wind out of our sails – we were wanting to have a debate about it - but there’s was no debate because he had seconded the motion. (laughter)

But it led to nothing?

It led to nothing, no, of course not. It never does. And now it’s a bit ironical because I get it now we live in Melbourne: there’s all sorts of things I can’t do now we live in Melbourne (laughter) I’m not a local! Anyway, that was a bit of an expression of our frustration that it was grandiose arts not ordinary arts that Don was interested in....
Yeah

Subsequent to Don there was a Liberal government and Murray….

Tonkin..

No, not Tonkin… I’ll think of it in a tick because his son has just retired as a Federal Minister, what’s his name, yes, Murray Hill, Robert Hill’s father. Murray Hill was the Arts Minister after Don, and we much preferred Murray. He came along to everything, he and his wife, they’d sit through the most outrageous productions and say “oh wasn’t that interesting…” He was really supportive.

Whose government was he in? Bannon’s?

No, no, he was Liberal

Oh he was Liberal, okay, okay…

So there we were all us… (laughter)…

Lefties

Alternate left-wingers, and Murray would come along, and we’d have interesting conversations and say interesting things. Don never came. Never. I am sure Don never saw any play that I wrote.

That’s rather a shame. So Murray Hill was in [David] Tonkin’s government?

Yes, Tonkin’s, yes but it was only for three years and after that it was John Bannon. And Bannon came along to see stuff, but Bannon was quite a close personal friend so it was slightly different. But Bannon was also much more down-to-earth. You wouldn’t ever call Don down-to-earth. So Bannon would come and give opening speeches, lovely speeches, on opening nights and all that sort of stuff, but we never saw Don.

You’re giving me the impression, and it’s really interesting, from where you stood, being an Adelaide University graduate, in the teaching profession and then at the grass roots level in the theatre, that the Premier who really did drive a lot into the arts programme here in South Australia, was himself not a grass roots supporter, and that’s a really interesting thing.

Um, yeah, I think he was quite aloof. Having said that, as you say he did set up the big picture that allowed the other things to come along, and I guess, to be fair to him, what we were doing wasn’t his taste and why should he suffer through things that weren’t to his taste.

He was a pretty busy person as well I suppose, but then every premier is a busy person.

Of course they are. But yes, he set up the structure and the ground work on which it happened and he was the one, as Premier and Treasurer, who allocated money to the arts for all these things to happen and he did have people like Len Amadio and probably to a lesser extent Chris Winzar working for him who knew what they were doing and were quite shrewd, non-bureaucratic operators. I think that certainly the difference between then and now is that it has all become so formal and bureaucratic; anything you do, if you are seeking a grant or an investment or whatever, the hoops you’ve got to jump through, well, it’s hopeless. In those days it was a lot more casual, you know Len would say “Oh yes, well I
can see this, and yes we can probably get $10,000 to you in the next couple of weeks...." that sort of thing.

Yes, there was a much easier avenue into public funding. I've interviewed Len at length and not only is he a delightful person but universally recognised and remembered with great fondness and great admiration. And you're doing the same thing.

Yes, it was just a whole different world; whereas now it's just so tedious to the point of almost not being worth going through the process. And also it's not very productive. I think things happened in more interesting ways in the past than they are happening now. It's just so hard for people to get anywhere.

Well, I would say there's no doubt about, having spoken to Len and other people, that Don absolutely trusted Len with the responsibility of running that Department [of the Arts], and even though he was the titular head, being the Minister, Len was very, very responsible for what monies went where and handled everything in such a responsible way. But that's also an art on the part of Don; to have found Len and put a person that he trusted to the nth into that position.

Absolutely, and be prepared to delegate to somebody he trusted to do those things and not require everything to be approved endlessly up through various committees and so forth. We've just created, and not only in this area, probably all over the western world, but certainly in Australia, this massively risk-averse culture which means we're so risk-averse that no-one does anything.

Yes, well of course there's much more accountability now than maybe there was, and that's not putting a slur on those days, but from what Len says he could nod off, not nod off, sleep, but nod, give the nod, to projects like you're saying and fast track them and so on, and there wasn't that sort of public accountability.

You're right, but the accountability is probably something you've got to question. At the end of the day what is being achieved by this obsessive avoidance of decision making? No one makes a decision.

Yes, tell me now, chasing through, because this is probably a good place to insert Lovers & Haters into the conversation, when you and Maureen were developing this idea, you were part of the official Adelaide Festival, is that right?

Yes

And did you get funding from them, because you were just talking about funding. Did you apply for funding or to become part of the official programme?

We didn't get any funding out of the Festival. We wrote that entirely off our own back and put the production on off our own back. We didn't get any funding from anybody.

So how did you get under the umbrella [of the official Festival programme]?

We got under the umbrella by...well we'd been working on this originally as a film and then we decided to make it a play, and then, I can't remember the exact sequence, we wrote to Brett Sheehy8 and said we've got this play about Don Dunstan and we think it would be great for the Festival, and he wrote back and said yes, it sounds interesting. Eventually he agreed to include it. We did apply for some funding from here and from the Australia Council but we got nothing. It stills appals me actually and I resent the amount of time and effort I wasted on
putting in applications only to get knocked back. And you think why wouldn't we have got it?...when you look at what does gets funding. This was a new play about a very interesting Australian historical character, put on by a professional group, why wouldn't we have got it?...who's saying no? I don't know. I get a bit paranoid about it, but anyway....

Anyway, moving on to your production - what prompted you to tell the Don Dunstan story? I should just say for the tape's sake that it was described in the publicity blurb as: Shining a spotlight on the public and private worlds of the legendary, flamboyant and controversial former Premier of South Australia. So it was touching every aspect of his life: public and private?

Yes, as writers you're always looking for great subject matter, and we'd grown up in that period, we were here, and I was always fascinated, if you like, by Don, and in the eternal conflict that seemed to me to exist in his world: he was clearly a gay man when homosexuality was illegal and yet in the highest office in the state. I can also remember distinctly thinking in the mid nineteen seventies period... that in South Australia... the key moment for me was that the Premier, Dunstan, was a gay man, although he never came out but everyone knew he was, the Chief Justice 9 was a gay man, and a gay university lecturer gets bashed up by the police and thrown in the Torrens and drowns - and all at the same time!

Um

So to me the central issue, the central interesting thing was – and we had originally called the play – Powerplay – who actually has power in a society? Ostensibly, it's the politicians who make the laws and the judges who enforce the laws, but that's only one sort of power, and that's a sort of hypothetical power isn't it, a theoretical power (laughter), but the real power, the police on the beat have a different power altogether and they carry out justice in their own way and justice doesn’t apply to them. No-one ever got charged with that murder. Everyone knew who did it – it was absolutely ludicrous!!

For the purposes of the tape, just say what that murder was all about.

This was the murder of Dr [George] Duncan who was attacked and then thrown into the river Torrens by unknown assailants, except that they were known to be members of the police vice squad on one of their fairly regular poofter-bashing rounds along the gay beat on the River Torrens near Jolly's Boathouse.

Yes, it was an appalling thing.

Yes, and more appalling was it’s known who did it, but yet no-body was ever actually charged for it because of manipulation of the evidence. Anyway, that's a long story, but to me what an interesting situation... of the public and the private if you like: the public power and the private power in the sense of the public power of the politicians and private power of police as reflected in Don on the two sides of his life.

Yes, because you're talking about the arms [of justice] if you like – the political, the judiciary and the enactment force

Yes, and they're not always compatible

Well, of course on a completely different subject altogether Don and [Harold] Salisbury, the Chief Commissioner [of Police] fell out seriously badly..
But it was related to all that really; they fell out over the issue of secret files and Salisbury’s sort of less-than-candid response to questions. We made the observations before that Don was a good judge of character when putting Len Amadio in his position [as Head of the Department of the Arts] but at other times he was a really poor judge of character and his appointment of Salisbury — a lot of people have stated that it was a really poor judgement as to why he appointed Salisbury - and it was his appointment; he went over to England to interview him and Salisbury was very much your old Yorkshire plod really and couldn’t have been more different from Don and yet Don appointed him. It was a strange appointment. And he showed poor judgement in other areas: his relationship with John Ceruto was another key element of our play

**A key element in your play, yes…**

And a key element in his downfall.

**Yes, Well the Salisbury thing was the sort of start of things tipping against him. That was about ’76, ’77 wasn’t it?**

’78 I think. Early ’78 whereas the murder of Duncan was quite a bit earlier but it had been festering for quite a while and had been fobbed off and a whole lot of things morphed together it’s hard to find a very clear line through it. We tried in the play to get a clear line through it, but we used a bit of manipulation of facts to do that. But essentially it was that conflict. What brings Don apart is the conflict between his public and his private and I think that created a tension that ultimately brought him down - that put him in conflict with Salisbury and his relationship with Ceruto and the book that Ceruto wrote was dynamite and brought Don undone. And he never dealt with it: I mean it always staggered me…have you read the Ceruto book, *Grossly Improper>*?

**That hasn’t got Ceruto’s name on it as author has it?**

No, it’s the two journalists…Oh I can’t think of their names at the moment 10 *Grossly Improper*, yes

Yes, *Grossly Improper*, which is a quote from Don. Essentially it’s not a badly written book and one can’t argue with how convincing it is (laughter). Don dismissed it saying it was “…a farrago of lies…” that was his response to it, but there’s twenty letters at the back, just photocopied letters from Don to Ceruto, I mean…..and he’s never said what was a lie. So you just don’t…I thought he handled it very badly.

**It must have been a fascinating time to be in Adelaide because I understand the electorate were either lovers of Don or haters of Don, hence perhaps the name [of your play]. Do you think in the play, or the musical play, because it’s peppered with songs and show business numbers, do you think you were fair to him?**

I think so. We were very careful to be fair to him. I mean we went to a party a year or two ago and John Bannon was there and he said “I thought you were pretty tough on old Don with your play…” and I said I didn’t think we were, but I know some people in the Labor Party think we were tough – a former Arts Minister very obviously snubbed me a month or two ago when I said hello to her. But everything, everything in the play had a basis in…well, we didn’t make it up, it was based on something real. At the end of the first act there is a song, an almost operatic song in which Don’s secretary character, a fictional character, accuses Don of betraying everyone around him and the line is “…some people think you’re actually fucking John” well, that came from a letter that Don’s senior advisor had written to him at that time. Mostly the lyrics of that piece are straight from the letter.
And the letter is on the public record, is it?

The letter is in the Don Dunstan collection.

Is it. Mmm. Well, that is the public record

We were there doing research and it was towards the end of the day when Gillian Dooley, who runs the collection, said..."You might be interested in seeing this..." (laughter) oooh! this was fantastic!. We were always looking from the outside and you don’t know... were we just picking up tattle... was that what we were hearing... but this was absolutely the truth.

Do you remember as a young man when you were at uni and when you were living here during that time, was there a lot of speculation about all this or could you say you were living in a State that was having a whole breath of fresh air blown into all the conservative corners of the bureaucracy and the way the State ran, and it was a very conservative State. Did you get the feeling that you were in a moment of history with everything breaking out in Adelaide the way it was at the time, particularly in the arts?

Undoubtedly, and that all went hand in hand with the opening of the Festival Centre, and with arts grants for people like us with theatre companies for people to get paid for what we were doing. And it reflected in the changing physical environment: you know Edmund Wright House was preserved and not knocked down because of Don stood up for it and I remember someone had a twenty first birthday there in the gorgeous setting, and Ayers House and all those sort of things, so it was reflected at a number of different levels. In some ways that heritage conservatism is one of the most obvious ones that remain, but the Festival Centre became such a centre of activity and a buzz place to be and the bars we’d go to and the Bistro downstairs would stay until 3 or 4 o’clock in the morning...

Well, it certainly doesn’t do that these days!

No, it used to be pretty wild down there for a while, and that was great fun. You’d put on a show you know and we’d stay there drinking. I remember a great story about that actress Carol, oh god, I’m terrible on names...

Carol Skinner

Yes, Carol Skinner. They were there drinking and she looked up and said “...Ah, there’s been an atomic bomb attack...”, “No, No Carol that’s the sun coming up!” (laughter) Carole and some others, reputedly they’d drink until the sun came up and then they’d go off to the producer’s hotel which opened at six and keep going there (laughter).

And was Don ever in these drinking bouts down in the...?

No, he was never a part of that - not in my experience anyway. He was not in that sort of thing. Often the Stage Company would be doing something at the same time as the [SA] State Theatre Company so there would be this mingling down there, but I was only there two or three times.

So you didn’t really rub shoulders with him at all?

We met a couple of times on different occasions. My brother had a little more to do with him because my brother’s older, more Don’s age, still ten years younger than Don, (pause) and Jim, my brother, was quite a good friend of John Ceruto, and Jim’s wife was Adelaide’s sort of ‘golden girl’ of television. I think Don was quite interested in her at one stage so I think
there was a little bit...I mean he [Don] was clearly bi-sexual...so I think there was a little bit of interaction in those ways. But my brother's eleven years older than me and Don would have been ten or eleven years older than him.

Your play, *Lovers & Haters* was a full house almost every night I believe, certainly it was the night I went, but I have heard a great deal of criticism from a section of the Adelaide public who were mostly very big Don supporters who felt that it was grossly unkind to him because he did so much in the years he was Premier that what peccadillos he had in his private life should not have been aired in that way. What do you say to that?

I think that's bollocks! (laughter) We were putting on a play, and a play is about drama and conflict so of course you're going to go for the drama and the conflict. There's no drama in listing off somebody's achievements in legislation, I mean it's not very exciting and that was not what interested us anyway. You can go to Wikipedia and find a list of all the legislation that Don put through, but that doesn't make an interesting play. We wanted to write a play that was about a politician whose public life was in conflict with his private life. And we wanted to write a play where, hopefully, you could take out the name of Don Dunstan and the play still worked as a story about a politician who had an innate inner turmoil to his life and trying to resolve the conflict between the two. That's what to me is interesting and that's what good drama is all about. Good drama isn't about just some sort of banging a drum about achievements, that's up to somebody else to do. That's not a play. A play is about conflict.

(Overlapping) It certainly was a success, but does it have legs to go anywhere else? You think if you take the name Don Dunstan out it could still be a viable show because the difficult part for Don, I suspect, is the fact that he was engaging in something that was officially illegal at the time, and that doesn't happen much in the western world these days.

Well not really, it does! There was that governor of Massachusetts or Maryland or somewhere recently who had to resign because he was claiming to be a right wing thing...but found to be a gay man...It still happens, it actually does happen constantly, even though homosexuality is not illegal in most places it's still looked down upon and also, if people are hypocritical about who they are that sets up conflict...

But that's not something you could put at the door of Don Dunstan – that he was hypocritical – about homosexuality

Oooh, I think he was

Do you?

He never came out to say.....

Go on, go on

Look, I'm just Joe Blow in the street, so it doesn't really matter, but he never actually comes out and makes a statement about...he never admits to being homosexual...and in fact the legislation that was put through - the anti-homosexual what ever it is – the Bill that was put through – was put through by Murray Hill. It wasn't Don who actually put it, he was always very cautious about that.

It was passed through Parliament after Don left?
No, Murray Hill put it, I think it was through the Upper House, he put the proposal while they [Liberal Party] were in opposition. I think it was passed in Don’s reign, but I think it was more Peter Duncan 11 who pushed the Bill through, but I’m a bit hazy on the history of all that. No, I think Don was fairly hypocritical in some ways, but I think, I’m sure, there are dark corners that don’t come out at all; I think there are some things we could have put in the play that we didn’t. I think we treated him pretty well actually. We showed him as a man with an inner conflict, who was charming and lovely and who did terrific things but who had a relationship with a man – why shouldn’t he – with someone he loved that created a love that couldn’t proceed. And he was conflicted by that and it was a difficult resolution - essentially I think - I don’t know if he did betray John Ceruto – but Ceruto then took some revenge. And then later in life, at the age of 59, Don takes up with a seventeen year old Malaysian boy!

**Well, I don’t think we’ll proceed with that.**

No, but in a way, why not? I mean I don’t care, but we have to put those things in perspective: Don wasn’t whiter than white. I think he was incredibly powerful and influential and a wonderfully positive politician, but I think he was pompous and to some extent hypocritical. He had his flaws like we all have.

**Yea**

We tried to explore some of those in the play and I think that’s good and healthy and I don’t think it is healthy to put people up on a pedestal and say, like some people, that he was some sort of saint. I don’t think he was.

**Good parliamentarian, good politician?**

Oh extremely good, an effective parliamentarian and a fantastic social… what’s the word?

**Reformer**

Social reformer, started Meals-on-Wheels, extraordinarily energetic campaigner and reformer. No doubt. And that’s one side, but in the play we can’t do much more than list those things off, and we did some ‘done this, done that’, but there’s nothing in it. But the other interesting thing we found when we were writing the play was Don doesn’t leave any literature behind. I mean his book, Felicia ……now here’s a little anecdote: I found a copy of Felicia in the bookshop on North Terrace, the Antiquarian Bookseller. I parked in Victoria Drive and was heading up Kintore Avenue to buy it when I ran into John Bannon. I said “Ah, it’s funny running into you because I’m just on my way to buy Don’s book”. And he said “Oh, fellatio, yes, I know it well!” (laughter) John probably wouldn’t be too happy, but a few of the ideas in the play partly came out of quite a long conversation I had with John at that point in time. I was a bit worried because I thought there might be more sensitivity about Don than there was from him [Bannon], although that changed a bit later on. But anyway, Don’s autobiography, Felicia, is the most boring thing, it’s just awful, almost unreadable, and you think about Don and think who is this guy? He’s very erudite, incredibly knowledgeable, very well educated but he doesn’t understand what should go in an autobiography. He doesn’t understand what that creative arts process is, if you like. He worked as an editor for Cleo [magazine] for about two editions or something I think, but he doesn’t make a success of anything after his life as Premier.

I was going to ask you about that…and we have to wind up in the not too distant future…he was treated pretty crummily wasn’t he? After he recovered from his breakdown he came back but he wasn’t really offered anything in the way of board jobs or chairs of boards or anything like that, except I think he went on to the Jam Factory board, was it?.....
Yes, but that wouldn’t have been anything…and then he went to Melbourne and didn’t make a success of that

What do you think of the way he was treated in South Australia? Did people close ranks against him, do you think?

Look I don’t know. It is interesting that he wasn’t given some sort of sinecure or something...But you know, I do wonder about him. But just getting back to this...there are no speeches of Don’s where you think, ah there’s great poetry that I’ll need to put in; there’s no Paul Keating Redfern speech. He does great things but he hasn’t left any literature of his own behind that you could grab on to. Essentially what he wrote about what he does is quite mundane and almost...as I say, his book is like a series of reports on committee meetings, which is actually a good example: people criticising our play for not revealing him in the light they think he should be revealed in, he doesn’t reveal himself in much of a light if you like through his own book. It’s just turgid and there’s no place for turgidity in a play. I mean we poured over his book trying to find...where are the anecdotes, where’s the sense of drama in these events...

The light on the hill...

Yes, the light on the hill. Things we could dramatise out of his autobiography and there was nothing there! What you have to dramatise is the broader picture, if you like, of this guy who had this part of his life taking him in one direction and that part of his life taking him in another direction and the two are conflicting and they’re bashing up against each other. That’s what drama is all about and that’s what we wrote about. I know people who think...ah, fuck it...not again (laughter). If that’s what you think, that’s what you think.

Would you ever do a re-run with it?

(Laughter). Well, we obviously did tread on a lot of toes when we did this play. After we got back from the season, and as you say it went really well, I wrote to the Director of the Festival Centre, whose name I can’t think of at the moment, and said, you know we’d had a great season of the play and why don’t we do a return season in Adelaide later in the year.

Because of course it played not at the Festival Centre

No, actually it would have lovely to play in a proper theatre...

It played in Norwood, at the Town Hall (ed. correction – Norwood Concert Hall)

...not in that improvised setting we had, which presented quite significant problems for us, just physically. Anyway we got a “No”. Usually when you send stuff off, suggestions, mostly they go into a big black hole and you never hear anything, or you do get a response back weeks later. I think we had a “No” within in about five seconds!

From the Festival Centre?

From the Festival Centre. I opened the [email] letter, boom, and phew oh!..."No"

Just a straight “No”?

Well it wasn’t a straight “No”, it was basically “No thank you”! (laughter). Well I thought okay, that’s good. So they obviously loved it (laughter)
That’s interesting, really interesting

So I think we trod on toes. Anyway, that’s alright, that’s what you want to do. I don’t care if people were offended by it – that’s too bad – they shouldn’t have been.

Well, on that subject, when you were accepted by the Artistic Director of the Festival, Brett Sheehy to come under the umbrella of the Festival, was it at that point you had to make the decision to go to the Norwood Town Hall, an unusual venue if I may say so for a play, because you couldn’t get access to the Festival Centre during the [Festival] run?

I can’t remember the exact order of it, but I think we may have (pause), I think he was interested in the show before we may have got a venue, and then we set about getting a venue. But there was absolutely no-where available….

Everything was taken by then

And the only option was either the… the only option that we had was the Norwood Concert Hall, I mean we wanted to be on this side [east] of town, the Norwood Concert Hall or the old one across the road….

The Royalty?

No, not the Royalty, across the road on Norwood Parade

Oh, The Odeon

The Odeon, yes, which is only a 220 seater.

And it was probably full anyway…

Well, no, that was sort of available, but it’s only 220 seats and we had a large cast and musicians… and we couldn’t make the numbers work. We had to get a 400-500 seat venue for it to work so that meant Norwood Concert Hall. That was only thing [available].

No, it worked. I think it was a fantastic success. It worked very, very well and I’m delighted because you put a lot of your own money into that production didn’t you?

Oh yes, yes. We had a lot riding on it. We funded it entirely. I even borrowed some money from my sister to keep the cash-flow going. We did get some sponsorship from some local businesses which was fantastic, organised by someone here and that saved our bacon really, but we ended up with pretty much full houses and we made a small profit, which is pretty good. But we got no government funding at all.

And no repeat business.

No, no repeat offers. But to answer your earlier question, I don’t think it ever will go on anywhere else. It’s a shame it hasn’t gone on in Melbourne because he [Don] is almost as well known in Melbourne as in Adelaide and the MTC should have done it. It was all a Melbourne cast [in the show in Adelaide], but they [MTC] didn’t even bother to come and see it. So… this is the frustration of doing things. You know activists in our world don’t get much encouragement.

Have you taken a video of it?
Yes.

**Are you going to put that into the Flinders [University] archive?**

Well, no-one’s ever asked me. I’ve got a copy if someone wanted to have a DVD I can provide them with one

**Well, it would be nice thing to go into the archive, don’t you think, as it's probably not going to get another run, with live acting?**

They [the archive] may not want it (laughter), because as you know the play had its lovers and haters (laughter). But that’s alright.

**Well, Rob, it’s been a very interesting chat with you. Do you think we should cover anything else? Is there anything else to cover that you think would be useful on the record?**

No, not really in terms of the Don Dunstan Foundation. But at least we’ve mentioned things like the Stage Company and Circle Theatre, and at the same time Troupe was going. We had a very vibrant alternative theatre scene in Adelaide in the seventies and early eighties and much of that is thanks to Don, and maybe if he’d been around the shrinking of that little industry, if you like, may not have happened. I think one of the great shames of Australian theatre, probably Australian arts is that so much now has become focussed on flagship companies; they’ve got rid of everybody else, it’s just the flagships. It’s like the government theatre company, instead of being really the vibrant, cultural, activists groups that are putting things on. I mean at one stage the Stage Company was getting bigger audiences in The Space than the State Theatre Company and not long after that the Stage Company lost all its funding and The State Theatre Company got more. And that sort of procedure has gone on everywhere and now, well it’s absolutely pathetic the arts in Australia with the funding. Somebody wrote an article in *The Age* late last year about Australia Council funding and the vast proportion of it goes to the Australian Opera.

**A huge amount, yes. Well…that’s a bit of another story, and on that note I think we might wind it up.**

Very good.

**And, well I hope when you read this transcript you don’t decide to delete half of it because (laughter) you think it might be too slanderous!**

Well, you can delete it if you think it’s too slanderous. But you can’t slander a dead man anyway (laughter)

**No. No that’s true. Alright, thanks very much Rob**

My pleasure

**End of interview.**

(The remaining few words on the tape do not form part of the interview)
1 Adelaide Fringe Festival 2011
2 The Space opened in October 1974
3 Don Dunstan opened The Playhouse in October 1974 with a blank verse speech followed by a poem written by John Bray
4 John Jefferson Bray QC
5 The Three Cuckolds
7 South Australian Film Corporation
8 Artistic Director, Adelaide Festival of the Arts, 2008
9 John Jefferson Bray QC Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of South Australia 1967 - 1978
10 Des Ryan and Mike McEwan
11 Labor MP and Attorney-General in Don Dunstan’s government
12 Douglas Gautier, CEO and Artistic Director, Adelaide Festival Centre
13 Melbourne Theatre Company
14 Troupe was another alternative theatre company in Adelaide during the 70’s and 80’s. It was started by David Allen and Keith Gallasch with a strong connection to Flinders University Drama Faculty. They performed at the Unley Town Hall, The Space and other venues around town. There was a friendly rivalry between the two companies with Troupe being more openly political in its content than Stage Company.