PART 1

This is Felicity Morgan interviewing Mr Anthony Steel on Friday, 11 May 2007, at his home in South Australia, about his contribution to the performing arts during the Dunstan Decade, particularly relating to his time as Director of the Festival Centre and as Artistic Director of the Adelaide Festival for the years 1974, ’76 and ’78.

This recording is being made for the Don Dunstan Foundation History Project and will be deposited in the Flinders University Library, Don Dunstan Special Collection and in the State Library of South Australia.

Anthony, good morning. Thank you very much for giving us the time for this interview. I wonder if I can start by asking you to give us a brief personal background and what were the circumstances that led you to being approached to come to South Australia, which I believe was 1972?

It was indeed. I started off life after my education working in my family’s steel firm, and it took me five years to get out of that and the way I got out of it was quite fun and also indicative of the future in some ways. I was working at a branch of our family firm in Cumberland in Workington, and nearby a marvellous Hungarian–Jewish refugee called Miki Sekers, who became a very famous silk manufacturer, was living and making his silks. And he built in his garden a small theatre – I forget how many it seated, say between 100 and 150, something like that – called the Theatre at Rosehill, and he had a lot of the world’s greatest musicians, particularly, coming to perform there.

I became a great friend of the family and attended all the concerts and was wined and dined in the house afterwards and met all these people, and eventually and inevitably I was promoted back to head office in Sheffield and I used to escape from Sheffield, which was my home town, back up to Rosehill for the weekend whenever there was a concert on. And one evening after a concert, latish, Miki and I were the only people left in the drawing room; I guess I was into my third or fourth glass of brandy; and he said, ‘You know that I’m on the board of the London Mozart Players?’ And I said, ‘Yes, I do.’ And he said, ‘You’ve got contacts in the musical world. Their administration is in an awful mess. Do you know anyone who would like to run them?’ And I said, ‘Yes, I would.’ And about as little as six weeks later I had grown a beard, bought a French deux chevaux Citröen, was living on a houseboat in Chelsea and running the Mozart Players and forty thousand employees of the United Steel Companies of course thought I’d gone completely out of my mind.

And what year was that?

That was – when was that? That would have been about – well, mid-’60s, anyway.

Right.

So that’s how I started in what was the musical world initially, exclusively the musical world. I went from there to the – tell you very briefly, as you asked me to – I went from there to the
London Symphony Orchestra and from the London Symphony Orchestra to the Royal Festival Hall. And what happened when I was at the Festival Hall was that Len Amadio, then the head of the Department for the Arts in South Australia, was sent by Dunstan to London – as one did in those days, of course, turn towards London – to look for two people: one to run the Festival Centre, which was being built; and the other to run the Festival, because the previous Festival, presumably was 1970, had ended up in pretty much I believe financial disaster and, although it was a purely private organisation, the board had come to the Premier to ask for help, to be bailed out, and so he very much held the cards.

Len having been working for the ABC for a very long time before he joined the Dunstan team was also musically-inclined, above all else, and so the people that he went to see in London were, naturally enough, in the musical world. And after a bit he began to realise that a number of them had said, ‘You should be speaking with Anthony Steel.’ Now, why they said that (Laughs) I still don’t know; but they did. And we finally met, Len and I, at lunch at the Aldeburgh Festival, where I used to go every single year, and we chatted and he told me about these two positions that were going to be advertised and they would be advertised in The Times newspaper amongst many other places and I would be very welcome to apply for either. So that was that. Off he went back to Adelaide, presumably.

Then what happened next was that advertisements appeared in The Times for the position of the first boss of the Sydney Opera House and I thought to myself, ‘If I’m going to go all that way I might as well go to a town I’ve heard of and I’d better apply for this job.’ And I did so, and at the same time – no, not quite at the same time. What happened was that I was short-listed and I then wrote to Len saying that I wasn’t interested in coming to Adelaide.

And the Sydney Opera House or the New South Wales Government sent a small team of people around the world interviewing in various places – London and New York, I don’t know where else – and I got on very well with them and I’ve been told, although I have no evidence as to the truth of this, that I was recommended for the job by that interviewing panel but that at the last minute the politicians in Sydney got cold feet and thought they must appoint an Australian, which is fair enough. So there I was I’d missed out on Australia altogether.

You’d fallen completely between two stools.

Between two stools. But, fortunately for me, the South Australian Government obviously hadn’t thought much of any of the people who’d applied for either of the jobs because eventually I got a letter from Len, looking very much as if he was slightly on bended knee, saying that the jobs were still open and that Dunstan was going to be in London the following month; would I be prepared to meet with him? So I wrote back quickly and said, ‘I would love to meet him.’ And I was working at the Festival Hall, and as I walked over Hungerford Bridge in my lunch hour to meet with Don at South Australia House in The Strand I said to myself, ‘If I’m going to go all that way, I want both jobs.’ And we met, and we chatted for a very short period of time, and I told him this, and he accepted it just like that, without any further questioning or argument. So I thought, ‘I’m sunk.’ (Laughs)
Fantastic. And your rationale, then, for wanting both jobs? Did you fear that, if you just got appointed as the Festival Director, you would have a limited life and it was a long way to come for maybe – – –?

I don’t think I thought as sensibly about it as that in any way at all. I simply felt that I’d like a bit more money than was suggested for either and that if I was going to do both clearly I wanted a bit more money than was offered for one. I’d felt for some time at the Festival Hall that it was – I was thirty-nine – that it was time I was boss of whatever I was doing, which I wasn’t there, and so this just seemed like an ideal opportunity to – I mean, I wasn’t all that desperately keen to come to Australia, so I thought I’d stick my neck out and make this condition and for some reason (Laughs) it was accepted.

Oh, that’s absolutely tremendous. Well, seeing as how we’re talking about being the boss of two organisations, one of my questions was that by the time you arrived in 1972 I understand that the responsibility of running the Festival Centre had been transferred from the Adelaide City Council, which has originally been involved in it; it was then a statutory authority and become known as the ‘Festival Centre’ with a six-member board under the presidency of John Baily.

A Trust, under the chairmanship of John Baily, to be precise.

Sorry, yes, the Festival Centre Trust. But there was also a Festival Board of Governors, was there not?

Which was still a purely private organisation.

Right, right. How did you find that situation, as it were, being a servant of two masters? Was that tricky?

Well, I’m glad you asked that question because it enables me to correct one slight bit of misinformation I gave you, and that is that when I asked for both jobs Dunstan – and he accepted the condition – he said, ‘Immediately you will be CEO of the Festival Centre; I am not in a position to offer you the job of Artistic Director of the Adelaide Festival; however,’ he said, ‘I’ve got them on the end of a piece of string,’ or words to that effect, ‘and I can promise you that within a short time after your arrival in Adelaide you will be given that job as well.’ And for some reason again, I entirely accepted his word. And of course he was as good as his word.

So, to answer your question, when I arrived in Adelaide I was only responsible to one body and I couldn’t mention the question of the Festival to anybody, obviously.

No, right.

I found my six trustees, four of whom were appointed by the Government and two by the City Council, to be the most wonderful collection of people to work for. They were all so excited at what was happening and what they’d been given the job of looking after that they were absolutely on-side from the word go. They were simply terrific, and I enjoyed that enormously.
And then, however long it was afterwards – six months maximum, probably less; yes, I’m sure it was less – Dunstan had told the Festival that he would bail them out provided that they appointed me, and I was initially appointed I think for the whole of that first Festival of mine only as ‘Artistic Adviser’, I was called, because I already had a job. So he was kind of putting me in gradually to both jobs. So therefore I was very much more responsible, in a funny way, to the Trust than I was to the Board, whom I only advised, after all. Theoretically.

Did you work in tandem with somebody else, then, if you were the adviser was there somebody else who was actually the Director of the ’76 Festival?

No, I guess there was a General Manager. I certainly didn’t appear on an organisation chart of the Festival at that time except with a very long line to the left or right. So that means that I eased myself in to the dual position quite easily, really, and it worked extremely well. And by the time the first Festival was over everyone accepted that I was going to go on doing both jobs and the name of my job with the Festival was changed to Artistic Director and nobody, least of all me, found anything odd about it because by then it was running that way anyway.

Yes. Well, that was a very astute thing for Don Dunstan to have done.

He was a very astute man.

Yes; smoothing you in like that –

Yes.

– and not ruffling feathers and so on.

That’s right.

And that was very much the kind of person he was, I understand.

I think so. [Although] I never found him an easy person to get on with.

Did you not?

No. Socially. In a work situation, he was perfectly extraordinary because there was no beating about the bush at all; he came straight to the point, he gave his decision straight away – I have a marvellous story about that I must tell you in a minute. I found I was very uncomfortable in social situations with him because he was shy. He was very shy, really, and I’m shy too; and we never became friends. We became ‘close colleagues’, I would put it, but never – – –. I mean, it doesn’t mean to say I didn’t see him socially; of course I did. But I can’t say that I ever became a close friend in the way that a lot of people did.

But before I forget, if I may, I must tell you this story.

Please do.
The architects used to come to our monthly Trust meetings to make a progress report and on this occasion the architect, Colin Hassell – a very, very, very nice man – reported that they had discovered that the number of fly lines – because remember we’re only talking about the big theatre; the other two were built subsequently –

That’s right, yes.

– the number of fly lines available in the Festival Theatre was going to be insufficient for the big touring companies like the Opera Company and the Ballet Company who’d have to bring four or five – because they both toured at the time – had to bring three or four productions with them at once, all of which had to be hung in the flies and brought down as required, and that he regretted to report to the Trust that to correct this situation was going to cost another whatever it was, let’s say couple of hundred thousand dollars. And there was general consternation, and eventually I was deputed to write to the Premier and give him this bad news.

After that meeting – it was very early on in my time here – after that meeting I said to the Chairman, ‘Can you just give me a piece of advice? I don’t even know how to address this man in a letter.’ And he said, ‘Well, you’ve got a number of options. You can say “Dear Mr Premier”, “Dear Mr Treasurer”, “Dear Mr Minister”, “Dear Mr Dunstan” or “Dear Don”.’ (Laughs) I think I said, ‘Dear Mr Premier’ and I told him the problem, laid it out in writing, and then I got a call from his office only a few days after saying could I come and meet with him on this matter at such-and-such a time. So I turned up in his office and he listened, as he always did, extremely well in complete silence, just interrupting from time to time with a ‘Yes’, ‘Yes’, ‘Yes’, to show you that he was with you. And I finished my tale and there was a pause. And he said, ‘Cabinet meets on Monday; you should have the money by Wednesday.’ And that’s what happened.

So he was decisive in his decision.

He certainly was.

That’s a remarkable story.

Yes.

It’s absolutely fantastic. By the way, Anthony, if you want to stop at any point I’m happy just to turn off and we’ll recommence.

Yes, sure.

Well, that’s just a terrific story to start with. I was just on that very first, the beginnings of your arrival here. In the years before the Dunstan Government South Australia was known to be rather a conservative state and of course Adelaide was known as the ‘City of Churches’, and I wondered what your impressions were when you first arrived. Was Adelaide a very staid, conservative place, or did you feel that the spirit of the times, with Gough Whitlam having just or about to be if not already elected, and in the performing arts there was a new wave of Australian drama, there was new film, there was
contemporary dance, a whole lot of things were happening in other parts of the country: was that happening here in Adelaide when you first got here?

I don’t know that I know the answer to that question because, you see, I came from London which was certainly the hub of the world musically then – still is, to a large extent – and it was a pretty daunting prospect, coming to this small, isolated town that I knew absolutely nothing about. I was brought out for a week during the ’72 Adelaide Festival before my family and I moved here permanently a couple of months later, because the Trust sensibly said, ‘If you come here at that time you will meet everyone’s who’s anyone in the arts in the whole of Australia, so what a marvellous opportunity.’ I came here for a very hectic week then went home again, and then we came out in I think May.

But I, as they say, to such an extent ‘hit the ground running’. I had so much to do, so much to take in and was so, I must say, quite quickly amused by the fact that I seemed almost to be the second most newsworthy person in the State, after the Premier, that –

That was a question I was going to ask you later, yes.

– I just didn’t have time to worry about whether this was a wilderness so far as the arts was concerned. I was far too busy, far too full of my own importance and had far, far too much to do to worry about things like that. And then it took me literally years to even have the time, let alone the inclination, to get interested in Australian politics in any way at all. I remember being in Melbourne – I forget when, but when Whitlam was Prime Minister, certainly – being in Melbourne and being in a rather smart restaurant with a friend of mine, and it was one of those restaurants with banquettes so that you’re kind of sharing a table with the next-door party, you know?

Yes, yes.

And I think I’d had a drink or two, and there was a man at the next-door table who was smoking a cigar and I got more and more irritated by this as the smoke blew across onto our table, and I started making slightly loud remarks about him. And eventually my companion leant over and said, ‘Ssh. That’s Malcolm Fraser.’ And I said, ‘Who the hell’s Malcolm Fraser?’ (Laughs) So that’s how much I knew about politics.

And did he stop?

That I don’t remember. I should think not.

So that’s how much I knew about politics, and it took me – not quite as long, obviously, but a fairly long time before I had a chance or time to look beyond the borders of South Australia. Because I was, after all the architect’s client, you know, I was representing the client, and that meant that the vast majority of my time was spent in design work and dealing with the unions, constant meetings at Trades Hall on South Terrace and all that sort of thing, and that was my first –

Well, that brings me nicely to my – – –.
– because I was the first employee of the Trust, except for a great friend of Don’s, Dennis Smith, who had already been appointed as the eventual Production Manager but who in the meantime dealt with the builders and so on, on a day-to-day working level.

Right. Well, talking about the building brings me to a question I’ve got here for you, which was could you describe your first tour of the complex, the place that was going to be the hub of it all, where you were going to work?

Well, it was a building site.

Absolutely.

It didn’t have a roof.

Oh, it was that –

Oh, yes.

– it was only that in the early stages?

Yes.

Okay.

It may perhaps just be having the roof put on. I remember another story when I was driving down Montefiore Hill and the roof was black, and whoever I was travelling with in the back seat of a taxi said, ‘It doesn’t look very nice’, and I said, ‘Oh, no, no, no, don’t worry about that.’ He said, ‘It looks like a black elephant squatting by the Torrens.’ And I said, ‘Well, don’t worry about that. The roof’s going to be painted white.’ And the taxi driver said, ‘That’d be right – a white elephant.’ (Laughs)

What was the question?

I was just wondering how you felt about the complex – I mean the site, its position in the city and were you excited by its design?

Yes. I was, I was very excited, and I was particularly excited by the completely pragmatic and rational approach of the architects – the two of them, because there was Colin Hassell who was head of the firm, and John Morphett who was the design architect, who designed the place. But they were both so good about the practical side of things and I still think it’s just about the most practical theatrical complex in Australia. And I also think inside the Festival Theatre is the most handsome theatre in the country, and I still think it is thirty years later.

You think it outshines the Opera House in terms of – – –?

Good Lord, yes, inside. No doubt about it, yes.
The way that it’s been purpose-built –

Yes. Yes.

– and the size of the spaces and so on.

Yes. Just quickly to compare it, the Queensland Performing Arts Complex I think is not interesting; the Melbourne complex works very well but is vastly over-designed inside by John Truscott, I think; and I think the Adelaide Festival Centre, which after all was extremely good value for money, it’s got everything you need. It’s as flexible as a now perhaps slightly outdated place of that kind can be and it’s extremely handsome.

Well, I’m glad that that was your first impressions –

It was.

– because it would have been awful, wouldn’t it, if you’d arrived and you’d gone, ‘Oh, no, this isn’t going to work as a theatre’ or ‘It’s not going to work as a festival complex.’

No; I was very excited by it and eventually, quite quickly, I was even more excited by the fact that the theatre consultant, Tom Brown, who eventually became I suppose my closest friend in Australia – he’s dead now, unfortunately – was terrifically good at his job. He was also the theatre consultant in Brisbane and Melbourne and lots of other smaller complexes around the country, and the architects took note of every single comment he had. I mean they were really good. They were marvellous architects as far as the client was concerned.

Terrific. Staying just on the building for a minute but bringing Don Dunstan in, I read that the original Festival Centre was going to just be a festival hall, a huge, 2,000-seat lyric theatre, but it was – – –.

Well, rather – sorry to interrupt you – I think initially they were thinking more on the lines of a concert hall, just.

But also good for other things, too – ballet and so on. Was it not Don Dunstan that initiated the idea of an actual theatre, a dedicated space for drama – – –?

Oh, it was indeed, it was indeed, yes. But originally it was going to be just a concert hall in the days when they were going to build it up where Carclew is.

Yes.

By the time it shifted to its eventual site I suppose they were thinking of a multi-purpose theatre, which I still think was absolutely the right decision for Adelaide, and the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra now – quite rightly, from their point of view – is going as hard as it can for a purpose-built concert hall. That’s their job, of course they should do that; but it would be madness in a
city of this size to have a purpose-built concert hall of 1,500 seats or whatever as well as the Festival Theatre. Then they would be white elephants.

But it was Don Dunstan that brought in the – I don’t know about the Space, but – – –.

Yes, because that was thought up at the same time. The ‘drama complex’, as it was called – in other words, the other two auditoria – were entirely his idea, yes.

And that was prescient because that went hand-in-hand, did it not, at the same time with the South Australian Theatre Company being revamped into a State-run, statutory authority.

Quite right and that was the idea of the Playhouse, that it should be a home for this new body that he set up. And it has remained so since.

And when I interviewed Frank Ford he said it was a truly remarkable little theatre complex, drama theatre complex, because it had workshops at the back –

Yes.

– all sorts of stage –

Machinery.

– painting and preparation areas –

Yes.

– and costume-making areas and so on. I believe, though, Frank was very disappointed and it sounded extremely sad that that’s actually all gone now and it’s filled with computers and offices.

Adam Cook is trying as hard as he can to get that decision reversed –

That’s a good thing, isn’t it?

– and have the theatre company brought back altogether inside that complex, which of course is a good thing, yes.

Yes. Oh, that’s good to hear. Okay. Should we have a little break for a minute?

Yes. Would you like some tea or coffee or water or gin, or – – –?

END OF PART 1: PART 2
Resuming the interview with Anthony Steel, this is recording number two. Now, where were we? In the field of the arts, Don Dunstan outlined his program of reforms in his 1970 policy speech, where in essence he saw South Australia as becoming the artistic centre of the country. Do you think over the next decade his program was over-ambitious, or do you think his vision was largely realised?

Neither of those things.

Okay.

Certainly don’t think his program was over-ambitious; it was unusually intelligent and far-sighted, and he achieved a lot of it. What was the second part of the question, what was the wording of it?

Do you think his – the vision, his vision…

Oh, did he achieve his vision?

Yes.

Well, I don’t think he did because it’s not the sort of vision that you achieve in a couple of minutes, is it? You need a long, long time and he’d really left the political scene before he could have possibly achieved it all, I think. However, there were certain things that came together. The first is that Adelaide had this festival.

That’s right.

And apart from Perth, which I never count as being in Australia really, it’s so far away, (Laughs) there was no competition of any kind. I mean, Adelaide’s was quite clearly the best festival and the largest festival in the Southern Hemisphere and the second most important festival in the world and all those things that people used to call it and for some reason keep on calling it; and so it had that advantage. It also had the great advantage which we all know about, and that is the topography of Adelaide –

Yes.

– the way the city is laid out –

You’ve mentioned that, I think.

– and the fact that he had the sense to build the Festival – they had the sense to build the Festival Centre where it is built so that fitted into that general pattern. You can walk from venue to venue; it’s an ideal festival city like Edinburgh, or any of those places – Avignon – that really work as festival cities. So he had those advantages. He then had, undoubtedly, a vision and he had started to implement it. I think of things like attracting people to come and live here, a whole lot of people who worked in the arts came to live here because of Dunstan; then there were
examples like finding a job for Richard Meale so that then to my mind the most interesting composer in the country wouldn’t go and live somewhere else, and his antennae were out all the time for that kind of opportunity. And then he, as we’ve already said, set up the South Australian Theatre Company as it then was, and all the other things he did were wonderful.

However, the disadvantage has been that all his successes have been living on that reputation. And it makes me so angry nowadays when you still see people say and you still see the newspapers declaring that Adelaide is the ‘arts city’ or the ‘arts capital of Australia’ or any of these nonsensical things, which are no longer true at all, unfortunately.

Now, let me ask you this, then, in relation to what you’ve just said: is it because other cities are doing better, or is it because of something that’s happened in Adelaide which is making it collapse?

It’s largely because other cities are doing better.

Oh, okay. Now, do you think that’s – size of community obviously has something to do with it?

In other cities?

Yes. Sydney’s now got, what is it, nearly five million people and so on.

That’s right. Exactly, yes. And as far as festivals are concerned, which is by no means the be-all and end-all of the discussion I know, but just to take that as an example because I know about it, all politicians saw that this was a good thing politically, a good thing economically for the city, a good thing for tourism, and most of the other festivals were set up entirely for those reasons and they don’t have the extraordinary support of the community that the Adelaide Festival to my mind does have; on the other hand, they nearly all have budgets that now equal or surpass that of the Adelaide Festival; they most of them happen annually rather than biennially; and they are – I won’t, as they say, go down that track. But I think the Adelaide Festival now is at a complete crossroads and if it doesn’t pull itself together and if the Government doesn’t realise that it is in distinct danger of losing its reputation as the most important festival in the country, if indeed it hasn’t done so, then that’ll be the end of that, just about.

That’s not a very good prognosis, is it? And it brings me to wonder that, in the Dunstan Decade, in the ’70s, when you first arrived and then for the subsequent Festivals that you directed, Don Dunstan took such a very important part, didn’t he? And you talked about his vision: there was an enormous impetus, swell, going on in the performing arts, and he and his development officer, I think, Len Amadio – do you think that he, Don Dunstan was the sort of pinnacle of the whole structure of the performing arts and encouraging all the new things that were going on, or did he let Len Amadio largely drive the thing, or was it Dunstan that drove it?

No, no, no, no, no. It was Dunstan that drove it.
Was it?

Oh, yes. It was Dunstan that drove it. Len was a marvellous public servant because he didn’t behave like a public servant. He was ‘one of us’, so to speak, and he was generally on our side. But then, you see, so was Don. So Len was carrying out his employer’s wishes all the way along the line; it just so happened that he was a very good person to do that job.

So Len Amadio was just a terrific conduit through which to carry forward these ideas and all the new things that Don was thinking about.

 Entirely so. I’m not suggesting that Len didn’t have ideas of his own, of course he did.

Absolutely.

But they worked very, very closely together. They spoke the same language. I mean, how often do you have a politician to whom you can talk person-to-person intelligently about the arts? You know, not very frequently.

And was that the case for you? Was he open to ideas from expert – did he take expert advice well, or – – –?

Yes, I think he did. I’m not sure that I ever gave him advice. What he was so good at was understanding the responsibilities of different people, different organisations. I always remember the time – I forget the context, but the time when he said to the Chairman of the Festival Board, ‘The job of the board of the Festival is to look after the bank balance and hire and fire the Artistic Director.’ End of responsibilities. Whereas now you will find in all arts organisations – and they’re doing it because the politicians tell them to – you will find that they’re interfering much, much more, they’re interfering in the kind of – not always; not everybody and not in every organisation – but the tendency is to take a much more active part in what the place does, and that is really a disaster. Can I tell you another story?

Absolutely, I’d love you to. So you’re saying that Don Dunstan actually let well alone.

Exactly.

He’d engaged you as the CEO and then you were subsequently –

Responsible.

– responsible.

For example, when to one of my festivals in the ’70s came the play *East* from London – and it wasn’t even at my invitation; it was touring Australia; it was a Berkoff, Steven Berkoff play and it was touring Australia and it was in Melbourne before it came here but I knew the play and I knew that I would love to have it in the festival program – it was full of filthy language. And it opened in Melbourne for a short season and so people read the papers, you know, and the next thing we
knew the Festival of Light was holding candlelight vigils outside the Playhouse and in Parliament they were demanding my resignation.

**In the Parliament of South Australia?**

Yes. Oh, yes. For having this filthy piece in my festival program. And Dunstan simply ridiculed them and said, ‘It’s none of your business and we’ve appointed this man to program the Festival. If we don’t like what happens, then we’ll get rid of him. But it’s absolutely none of your business,’ was his line.

Yes.

And purely incidentally, what these various campaigns did, of course, was to ensure that the whole season of *East* was sold out when it did get here.

**Marvellous publicity.**

(Laughs) The best of all.

**Yes. Did you find you had pieces in all your Festivals that were a bit contentious, or –**

I tried to. (Laughs)

– **was that the only instance?** Yes.

Well, when I say ‘I tried to’, I didn’t, but I tried – when I assembled a program I tried to find something that was contentious, for exactly that reason. And also it was bound to happen because, as I have said *ad nauseam* over the years, the job of a festival is to stretch the –

**Challenge.**

– challenge and stretch the knowledge and imagination of the audience, and you can’t do that if you produce Noel Coward all the time. So it was almost inevitably bound to happen in my program. And my programs to start off with were pretty bad I think, actually, because I really had no experience outside of music. I was a proselytiser for contemporary music, according to one report. But I was doing what Dunstan wanted, certainly, by putting programs of that kind together and they got steadily better – I believe, I hope. But certainly that was the sort of program he wanted the Adelaide Festival to have: he wanted it to be challenging and he wanted it to be completely up-to-date.

**Contemporary.**

Yes.

That’s interesting because I had maybe the wrong impression, that Don Dunstan was actually interested in what I suppose you could describe as the ‘high arts’ – the sort of
Shakespearian drama end of the drama side or the beautiful Royal Ballet and major symphony orchestra sort of things. So I hadn’t realised that he was more cutting-edge, more interested in that.

No; I think you’re absolutely right that that was his own personal taste, but he knew that that wasn’t the job of a festival.

Okay. And he was already in that mindset before you arrived. You didn’t have to talk him into it or didn’t have to win him round, as it were?

I’ve no idea what the answer to that is. My guess would be that I did win him round, that he heard me talk often enough along those lines and came to think that that was what a festival should be doing. But I’ve no idea whether that’s the case or not.

Right. He was pretty keen, I believe, on expanding the whole arts scene, in the wider sense, to a larger audience, and he developed some – he re-founded the Arts Council of South Australia, I believe, and he established various regional arts centres.

He did indeed.

The State Theatre Company went touring in those – and other ones as well. You would have been involved in some of those in your role – at the Festival Centre. What part did you play, if any, in the development of those things outside of Adelaide?

Very little. Initially, if I remember rightly, you’re quite correct, that it was – in a formal sense; there was a relationship between the Festival Centre and those satellite centres, if you like. We were supposed to advise and even program, I think, according to the Act.

They were kind of designed with the same-size theatre so – – –.

Oh, lord, yes. Yes, the same-size stages. Yes, of course that’s perfectly true; but that was just complete good planning and good sense. But in the event we had very little to do with them, very little.

That’s interesting, because when the Theatre Company, for example, wasn’t on-stage in Adelaide and was in, I don’t know, Port Augusta or Whyalla or wherever, that meant that your stage was dark, so that would have actually involved some other kind of production going in there?

That for me was an extremely good thing because it meant that you could vary the fare and you could offer your audiences different things from different parts of the country or from overseas sometimes, and indeed we seized those opportunities, I believe, as well as we possibly could. That was a good thing, from my point of view.

Yes, because you had variety coming in to your stages –
Yes.

– and keeping the stages alive, of course, was a most important –

Indeed, yes.

– commitment that you had to make.

As my most recent and current successor is doing again now –

Yes.

– after such a long time in the doldrums.

Yes, it has been in the doldrums, hasn’t it? It’s good to see, it’s good to see. Given all the things that Don Dunstan did, would you put how he saw the arts and the community and good for the communal welfare of South Australia, would you say that was a very high thing on his reform agenda, the arts in general?

Oh, I would indeed, yes. Of course it was, yes. That was one of his great qualities, was his ability to look at every aspect of the life of the State and to see where in his opinion it needed improving or helping, and the arts was, I would have thought, high on that agenda.

It seems so. Of course, politicians are not always perfect people.

No.

And we don’t love them all, and we have – sometimes I think we have to be a little bit cynical about motivations. Do you think that Don actually believed in art for art’s sake –

I do.

– rather than any political agenda?

As you say, you can’t separate the two. With a politician you can’t ever quite separate the two, can you? He was a very good politician and obviously everything he did must have had some kind of political aspect to it, inevitably. But I firmly believe that he was in favour of ‘art for art’s sake’, as you put it: very much so, yes.

That must have been such a nice thing, then, for you, so exciting and confident-making and so on to work with a man like that.

Of course it was. It made all the difference to the job. I don’t think I would have lasted here half as long if I hadn’t had that kind of – hadn’t known that that kind of political support was available to me if I needed it. I remember one little instance, and it’s only a very small one, but my festival program had just been announced and I was speaking on This Day Tonight –
Oh, yes?

– and Clive Hale was interviewing and he said, ‘Tell me, Mr Steel, your program has been accused of being élitist and not for the people: what do you have to say to that?’ Well, the word ‘élitist’ has always been like a red rag to a bull, because all it means to me – because all it means – is ‘the best of its kind’ and I can’t see any harm aiming for that. But what I said was, ‘Of course the Festival is not for the people – in the same way as a cricket match is not for me.’ Meaning you can’t hope to, nor should you attempt to, please all the people all the time, because if you try to then you water down the whole thing. But the listeners of course, the viewers, were not pleased (laughs) and when I left the set and went back into the hospitality room the phones were running off the hook with complainants, to such an extent that I answered a couple of them and I picked up one and this woman with a German accent said, ‘Would you please tell Mr Steel to take two months’ notice.’ I said, ‘Certainly, madam,’ and put the phone down. But that was a huge kerfuffle for twenty-four hours, as these things are, and I remember talking to Don the next morning and him backing me up to the hilt.

You had quite a lot of personal dealings with him, then, through your time here?

Yes, I did, because he was the boss and so naturally I saw a lot of him from time to time and equally I saw a lot of him at the Festival Centre. I saw a lot of him during festivals, and I saw quite a lot of him socially from time to time. But it was when we were talking business that we got on best, I think.

Interesting, that, yes, but it didn’t actually sort of go over into a personal friendship.

Not to any large extent.

No. I had actually read that you believe that you were supported by Don Dunstan’s Government. He understood the worth of the Festival to the State in many ways, not just financially or not just politically, but financially, educationally and culturally. There was a holistic approach to his support.

Indeed. And that’s really what we’ve been talking about in the last few minutes, I suppose.

Yes.

And it contrasts, if I’m allowed to say this – it can always be cut out, anyway – with an example from more recent times when, since the last Ring cycle – which is another very important thing for South Australia on all kinds of levels and I would have thought that on the international level it was just about as important as anything that happens in the State, certainly in the arts – the Government still hasn’t pronounced on whether it’s going to support a revival of that production. And the only reason that it’s dithering for so long is because it ran over-budget very badly. Don would never have thought twice about it. He would have dealt with the budget problems, in one way or another – and I don’t simply mean by writing a cheque; he would have fired the people he thought were needed firing, if indeed anybody did, and he would have completely understood the huge value to the State of something like that. What would you have to spend, as a state
government, if you wanted that entirely-favourable publicity to be spread around the Western world as it has? What would you have to spend? You know, you'd have to spend millions –

Oh! Millions.

– and millions and millions and millions –

Yes, millions.

– of dollars. And they’re offered it on a plate and they complain. They complain because it doesn’t look good in the books.

Yes. This is getting off the point a bit but it’s an interesting little aside: with the Ring cycle my understanding was that it was hoped that the South Australian Opera Company would be able to on-sell it to other centres in order to recoup the initial investment.

That was certainly one of their hopes, and it evidently hasn’t happened so far, no.

No. It’s interesting, that, isn’t it?

Yes. Which is a great shame, because it deserves to be seen more widely. Still.

Yes.

And had it been in Don’s day I would have thought that he would have been a part of that sales pitch to the rest of the world, personally.

Yes, it’s likely that he would have been –

Yes.

– from what I know about the man.

I’m sure.

He would have been wholeheartedly behind it.

And he would have taken a personal interest and a personal part in it.

Yes. And he would have considered it to be his responsibility to take a personal part.

Of course he would, quite right.

Yes. There have been detractors about Don Dunstan: that he took on too much, that he suffered a bit of arrogance and a little bit of hubris, perhaps; and I know that his flamboyance upset some people. Would you like to make a comment about that at all?
I don't know that I have a comment, really. I thought his flamboyance was entirely entertaining and I’m glad he was like that. And as for hubris, have you ever met a politician who isn’t arrogant to some extent?

That’s perfectly true, yes. I have heard that there was a conservative element in Adelaide that just thought he was the bottom of the barrel.

Of course there was. Of course there was, and of course there inevitably would have been. So what?

Well, it was sort of crash or crash through –

Yes.

– and he certainly crashed through.

Yes, indeed.

There probably wouldn’t be – I’m putting words into your mouth now and I don’t need to do that. I wonder whether there would be many people that would stand by their hostility towards Don Dunstan now, in retrospect.

Yes, that's an interesting thought. I guess most of the ones who would have been inclined to stand by their hostile opinion are probably dead and gone.

Yes, perhaps that's true. I wanted to ask you about some of the other initiatives of Don Dunstan’s. Now, I know you say you weren't immediately involved. Did you, for instance, have anything to do with the reorganisation of the Australian Dance Theatre? I believe South Australia and Victoria took on a joint funding role which lasted for a number of years. Was that in any way – were you involved in any way with those kinds of initiatives?

I think it was probably after I’d –

Oh, was it later?

– left for California, I think. Even if it wasn’t, I certainly had nothing to do with it. But it’s another very good example of just sensible, lateral thinking on behalf of the Premier, it seems to me.

Completely. And then there was, of course, the opera company which had been the New Opera –

Yes.

– and that became then the State Opera Company.
Yes, yes. And I do think that festivals in the ’70s had something to do with that, because I threw New Opera in at the deep end –

Did you?

– and they did three – no, two, because the Australian Opera did the third – but they did two main stage productions in those three festivals and they were both highly successful artistically and I think that undoubtedly encouraged the setting up of State Opera.

So when you were planning the festivals, did you try to get a balance between local, national, international?

Well, it was part of my brief.

Was it?

Yes. Contractually I had to do that. So I did, yes.

Yes. And you weren’t disappointed?

Certainly not by them.

No, no. Excellent. You were actually employed by the State Government, were you? Is that who were your employers?

No, no, I was employed – as far as the Festival was concerned, I was employed by the Board of the Festival.

I’m sorry, I got confused there. I was actually meaning at the Festival Centre.

Well, I was, insofar as it was a statutory authority, yes.

So your associations with Don Dunstan as the Premier and as the Minister of Arts, which I believe he was for a number of those years –

He was indeed, for all those years, I think.

– yes, would have been quite tight-knit.

And the Treasurer, as I said earlier.

Yes, exactly.

So you did have everyone in one person. It was very useful. (Laughs)
I’m racing through my questions here because you’ve already answered some of them in other answers. When you were involved with the Festival Centre, your main tenants then were, what, the ASO and the State Theatre Company were the two?

I suppose that’s right. And, as I suggested earlier, the National Opera and ballet companies.

Who were touring at that stage.

Who were touring, yes.

Right.

Could still afford to do it.

And then the two other spaces – the Dunstan Playhouse when it wasn’t tied up with the State Theatre Company was available –

And the Space all the time.

– and the Space all the time...

That was where our, that awful Australian word, ‘entrepreneurial’ nous came into play, yes.

And that was more an experimental space for small performing groups, small theatre companies?

Yes, exactly, yes. And in the Festival Theatre we had a role to play in that regard, too, because the regular ..... didn’t take up six nights a week, by any means.

For the first Festival you did, you only had the Festival Theatre, which opened in 1973?

‘Seventy-three for the Festival Theatre and fifteen months later for the drama complex - the Playhouse and the Space.

So you had a Festival tucked in there where you only had one auditorium, is that right?

Let me think. In ’74, yes.

That must have been a bit of a tight sort of scheduling squeeze, if you only had one major auditorium.

I suppose you’re right, except the Festival had been run on that basis even without that one major auditorium since it started in 1960, so it was already an improvement in that we had the Festival Theatre available to us in ‘74.
Well, indeed. And wasn’t it Robert Helpmann who had been so frustrated with the lack of decent venues here which really was the impetus that got the whole Festival Centre moving?

Yes.

I read that he had been the person that actually approached you. That’s obviously not right?

Well, Len Amadio said something on the same lines, too, but I’ve simply forgotten about that if it happened. I remember meeting him in his London apartment somewhere just off Sloane Square, but I can’t remember when or why.

Well, anyway, it was important, I guess, that he was making agitations about –

Of course.

– new venues and so it all fed into the same kind of building blocks.

Indeed.

You already said, and I wanted to quote back to you, you made a speech at the Currency House Seminar in 2003 and you said that once every two years the Festival Director is second in importance only to the Premier. And it was like that for you, was it?

It was, very much so, yes.

It must have been enormously exciting –

It was.

– in those days.

It was. That was the only way that, as we touched on earlier, it’s the only way that made the transition from London to Adelaide, I was going to say ‘tolerable’, but much more than that. I just enjoyed it all, hugely.

And other than the contentious things, which were good and they put the bums on the seats, did you find that people were flocking from far and wide to attend the Festival? Full houses, that sort of thing?

I think not entirely because I was trying to edge the program forward so that it wasn’t so immediately attractive, to put it bluntly, to the punters. But certainly we had very good houses and it was, as we’ve already said, the only festival in Australia apart from Perth, and people always came from all over the country, just as they do today.
That’s right, that’s right.

So you see that’s part of why it’s possible to stretch the experience of the public, because you have to a large extent got a captive audience. They’re going to come to the Adelaide Festival anyway, and they’re sort of looking for a challenge to some extent.

Absolutely. And coupled with the ease of getting round and the neatness of this city for a festival – you can walk to everything – it all makes it most attractive.

It certainly does.

And you’ve argued time and time again, I know, that Adelaide should be the premier festival and let the other cities do something else.

Well, of course it has been the premier festival, as we also said just now, until recently. I mean, it’s been unchallenged as the premier festival. That was the reason for saying in that same Currency House speech, I think, that it would be nice if the Federal Government would designate it to be the national festival.

Yes. With the other states with their larger populations, no doubt their bigger state budgets and wanting to draw people in from overseas, there is a strong possibility that Adelaide might sink, which would be a very sad thing.

It would. Well, it already can’t claim to be necessarily, year by year, any better than the Sydney or Melbourne Festivals, depending on who the directors are in each city, at any given moment.

That’s true. We haven’t got on to the ancillary aspects of the Festival. I wanted to talk to you about that. Of course, the Fringe came on board and Writers’ Week came on board, and then at some stage, maybe after your time, there was a whole contemporary visual arts element and an educational element. What was around when you – – –?

Well, Writers’ Week was.

Oh, that started right at the start, did it?

I think it might have gone back to the first Festival.

Ah, did it?

I’m not sure. But it was certainly there in place. And there’s only been, to my knowledge, one attempt – I’m not sure whether this is a good thing or a bad thing – maybe two attempts by any Festival Director to, so to speak, interfere with the programming of Writers’ Week. It has always been looked at by the Festival organisation as being a thing apart that runs itself, and that’s the way I looked at it. But Barry Koske certainly and possibly Robyn Archer did try to have some influence, without a huge amount of success, I think. I suppose it is such a successful organisation that it seems silly to tamper with it.
Yes. And those two tents are just, each year, are growing.

Yes.

They seem to be growing smaller as the crowds get larger.

That’s right.

The interesting thing, of course, is that it’s free –

Yes.

– whereas at all the other festivals you have to pay your ticket –

That’s right.

– buy your ticket before you can get entry.

Yes.

And I wonder whether that may happen in Adelaide. I hope not, because I think it’s outside the spirit of what Writers’ Week is about.

Yes, I quite agree. Quite agree. I don’t think it’ll happen here. As far as the Fringe is concerned, that did start in my time. As you and Frank doubtless talked about, it was originally called ‘Focus’, is that right?

Yes.

I think the first one was called ‘Focus’.

And I can’t remember when he said that was. Was that ’76?

I don’t remember, but it was in the ’70s certainly. And I remember very well welcoming it at the time. I think it’s got completely out of hand now.

You do?

Yes. I think it’s got out of hand politically, because it seems to me that the Government – certainly the media – are much more interested in the Fringe (Laughs) than they are in the Festival, and that it runs the risk now – the Festival runs the risk of being completely swamped by the Fringe, particularly now that it’s gone annual, simply because there’s so much of it and because it’s so much easier to get a grasp of in one way; in another way it’s impossible because it’s got such a huge program you can’t find your way around it. But people know that what’s there is going to be something that they’re likely to enjoy and they can always go down to the Garden of Earthly Delights or whatever it’s called. I think the Fringe is a terrific thing, but I think it
has too much political backing, if that doesn't sound a silly thing to say or a sour thing to say, at the expense of the Festival.

Well, yes. I do tend to agree with you, actually; and the fact that it starts a week early, it's already gathered momentum. Of course, ticket prices are –

That's right.

– considerably cheaper. Frank [Ford] was saying that the Fringe now, there's way too much comedy in it –

Oh, yes.

– and unfortunately it's veered over to almost be sort of like a kind of comedy festival.

That's right. But there again, the people who run the Fringe can't do anything about that because they have no control over the programming. It's first come, first served. But I can't help feeling that Dunstan, whilst completely welcoming the Fringe with open arms, as I'm sure he did at the time, would have paused to consider the effect that it was having on the reputation of the Festival and whether he shouldn't just try and adjust the balance a little.

Yes. Balance was probably an important thing to him. And that doesn't mean to say he was trying to please all the people all the time –

Not at all.

– but achieving a balance is a political tightrope, isn't it?

Yes, exactly.

You think he achieved that?

Yes. In the case of the Fringe and the Festival it would of course have been a political balance for him. But also it's knowing where the scales have to come down a little more on one side because that side is, in the end, for all reasons, a bit more important.

Yes.

And I think he would have come down on the side of the Festival and just helped to keep its reputation where it ought to be.

I was going to say we haven't used the word 'excellence' this morning, and yet that is – Don Dunstan's name often goes hand in hand with the word 'excellence'.

Yes. And that's something that in funding for the arts more generally – not only in this country but let's stick to this country – used to be one of the important catch words, that you were
expected, if you applied for a grant, it was because you were doing something that could be considered of excellence. Now, it’s much more – much more important? – maybe not, but it’s equally important to make certain that it has wide appeal and that it balances the books and all those sorts of things which, in the end, are nothing to do with it.

I want to talk about something magnificent and it’s a quote from Robyn Archer, who was just a young university student. She was taken by the ‘shock of the new’, she wrote, when she saw a couple of magnificent and daring events at one or two of your Festivals. One was a pianist and a grand piano being lowered by crane –

Oh, yes.

and the other was a cellist playing on an ice cello.

Yes. (Laughs)

Were they the same Festival?

They were not, I think. I think they were not. They certainly came from completely different places. The cellist was Charlotte Moorman, who was brought to Australia to tour Australia by John Kaldor – John Kaldor the silk manufacturer who knew Miki Sekers very well, who – well, at the moment he is commissioner for the Australian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, but he has a vast collection of contemporary art, not all of it Australian, and he has over the years brought a huge number of important artists to Australia including Christo –

Christo, yes.

who wrapped the cliffs outside Sydney, he brought him; and he brought Nam June Paik, the Korean video artist, and Charlotte Moorman, who might have been married at the time – I think that’s why they came together. And she did all kinds of extraordinary things with her cello. In Elder Park she sat on a swing and the cello had its own swing and they were pushed so that the two occasionally came together and where they did she hit the strings with the bow. Then she did a video thing, too, when she was topless and there were two video screens here and she played her cello and Nam June Paik did his video work; and then the ice cello, which was absolutely wonderful, when she was entirely naked and she was sitting just outside the main entrance to the Festival Theatre as all the audience were coming in for the performances, with this ice cello in front of her which she was pretending to play whilst it melted around her.

The other woman was Marilyn Wood, who was a kind of – forget what she called herself, how she described herself as an artist – but she was very much an outdoor, large spectacle for the general public kind of performance. And her husband then was a pianist, and this grand piano that Robyn remembers was hanging from the end of a crane on the Plaza of the Festival Centre and he was playing it in tails, you know? (Laughs)

Marvellous. Those are not the sort of images that you imagine came out of a traditional, conservative society; they are really exciting –
Exactly.

– daring and excellent, lovely little added touches to what was going to happen inside the auditorium. And encouraging, I guess, that it wasn’t all about the European side; these people might have been from Europe, but it was innovative and cutting-edge –

Exactly.

– and thoroughly excellent. Tremendous. Absolutely tremendous. And I suppose over the years you did see changes in how far you felt you could go –

Oh, very much.

– or what you brought in.

Very much changes in audience perception of what they enjoyed or even what they would put up with. Oh, very much so, yes. And Robyn [Archer] is always saying that it was my Festivals that started along that path. Of course everybody now, any festival director worth his or her salt, is trying to push the envelope, or whatever they say, as they should.

Well, there’ve been a lot of changes since you left.

Exactly.

Some not for the quite so good.

Well, yes, but — —.  

We’re getting sort of at the end of things now. I wanted just to ask you a general – which we’ve touched on, but a general question: do you think that Don Dunstan’s arts programs brought good people to the State? You mentioned earlier that they did and I wondered if you could give me a bit of an idea other than Richard Meale who those people might have been, either permanently or temporarily?

Oh, dear, my mind goes a complete blank.

That’s all right. I thought there might have been – well, it brought you, obviously.

Gil Brealey, who ran the Film Commission or Corporation, whatever it was called. My mind has gone a blank.

No. Because other people have said it brought, and you mentioned right at the beginning that it brought, good people here –

Yes.
– lots of interesting and good people.

Yes.

Maybe they don’t live here like you, they haven’t made their home here.

No, I think that’s the answer.

One of the people, of course, that’s recently arrived here is the Nobel Prize Winner, John Coetzee –

Coetzee, yes.

– and he thinks Adelaide’s wonderful, I believe –

Yes.

– although he hasn’t told me personally, but I believe that.

Yes.

It’s good, it’s very good. In one of the advertisements the Labor Party put out during the 1975 State election, you were here, it stated, ‘Under Don Dunstan’s Government, the State of South Australia has become a symbol to Australia and many other places in the world for enlightened and concerned leadership.’ Would you like to comment on that? Don’t forget it was an advertisement for the Labor Party put out by the Labor Party; but it made some claims and I wonder what you thought.

I think in the case of, if you’re looking at it in an Australian context, that that is completely and utterly fair. It’s hyperbolic to take it beyond these shores, perhaps, although South Australia has a history, hasn’t it, of being first in many things like votes for women and so on?

That’s right, that’s right. Certainly from a state point of view you’d agree with that?

Oh, lord, yes.

I don’t think there’s been another state government that’s been quite like it, has there?

No, no. No, no. No, I entirely agree with that.

Now, just a few little things. I believe that Don Dunstan himself was quite a keen stage performer. I wanted you to tell me about the famous instance in 1974, I think, when he performed Ogden Nash’s Carnival of the animals while sitting on top of an elephant at the Zoo.

He wasn’t sitting on top of an elephant, was he?
I’ve read that.

I don’t think he was. I don’t think he was, no. That wasn’t my idea. But I was certainly attracted by it as a sort of suitable oddity for a Festival program to do the Carnival of the animals in the Zoo, and I can’t remember – probably Peter Ward’s idea or somebody like that, somebody close to Don, I think. And it was inevitably a huge success. There was only one performance, I think, because of his availability more than anything else; I’m sure we could have sold it out more than once.

I’m sure you could have.

And it was just great fun. He declaimed the narration extremely well, as I knew he would, and the animals joined in quite vigorously, which was great fun, but I don’t remember the elephant.

I might have read something that wasn’t accurate; because I wasn’t here and I didn’t see it, that’s what I read. He performed at subsequent Festivals too, I believe, is that right? Did he do something with Keith Michel at some – – –?

Wasn’t that at the opening of the Playhouse?

I don’t know.

I saw a clip of that just the other day somewhere.

Oh, did you?

Yes. It was great fun.

That was on the ABC?

I suppose. And they were both in top hat and tails with canes, I think, and they did a kind of song and dance act, which was highly amusing. I don’t know that it would have fitted into a Festival program, but it was certainly – – –. I think it was the opening of the Playhouse, in which case I must have been there.

You must have been, yes. Well, that shows a man – it shows his total commitment and involvement, when he’s prepared to –

Make a fool of himself! (Laughs)

– well, make a fool of himself – but say, ‘Okay, this is what we’ve got. We’ve got a new Playhouse and I’m going to stand on the stage and – – –.’

Yes. I’m not sure it was the opening of the Playhouse but it was some occasion like that. At the opening of the Playhouse, I’ve just remembered, he read a poem specially written for the
occasion by John Bray, the Chief Justice. That's what he did, I remember now, in front of the curtain before the curtain went up.

Yes, and to read a piece of poetry or declare something open with an artistic endeavour has far more resonance than just making a boring old speech.

Of course. And he understood all that. He understood.

I wondered, and I know you've given me a few, but do you have any other personal stories or anecdotes that you'd like to have recorded?

About him?

Yes.

I'm not sure that I do, off the top of my head.

I know it's a hard thing to [do].

Yes. I'm not sure that I do. I can remember a complete – not the sort of thing you're after at all; but I can remember that after he'd resigned and he'd come out of hospital and he went to Perugia to live for a year and learn Italian and so on, I was in that part of Italy and I got in touch with him and I went to his digs and had dinner with him. And I remember very vividly, without being able to give you any chapter and verse, that that was by far the easiest time socially that he and I ever had together. I think he was enormously grateful that I'd, so to speak, taken the trouble to come and visit him, and it was just entirely relaxed, natural, entertaining dinner such as I don't remember having with him ever before.

He'd left the politician behind.

I suppose that was it, yes.

Because he was a very charismatic person, wasn't he?

Indeed.

And I know he got involved in a restaurant endeavour, is that right?

Yes.

Yes, he sounds like he would have been a great guy. Just to sum up, if you're happy that we finish on the next question unless there's anything more you want to say –

I don't think so.
I was going to ask you if you'd like to make a brief summary of your years working here in the performing arts in South Australia during the Dunstan Decade, just briefly: I mean, happy, exciting, testing, frustrating, exhausting?

I think to some extent I've done it already. It was exciting and it was exhausting. But to keep – and to repeat myself, inevitably – but to keep to the subject matter of this conversation – – –. I'll tell you what I'll tell you: some time towards the end of that stay in Adelaide I was short-listed for the Edinburgh Festival and I went to Edinburgh to be interviewed. It was the year that they gave it to John Drummond in the end.

That would have been 1979, '80?

No, it must have been earlier than that, I think.

Your last Festival here was '78.

Oh, my last Festival was '78 and I left straight afterwards for Los Angeles.

Oh, did you?

Anyway, I went up into the room, which had an enormous Victorian oak table, very, very long table, and on one side was the entire City Council with the Lord Provost in the middle, and opposite the Lord Provost was one chair, which was for me. And they talked to me for forty-five minutes and then at the end the Lord Provost said – I can remember it, I can picture it and remember it as if it was yesterday – the Lord Provost said, 'Mr Steel, over the last forty-five minutes we've asked you a lot of questions. Do you have any questions for us?' And I said, 'Yes, I've got one. I've spoken to you a number of times about the support that I have enjoyed running the Adelaide Festival in South Australia from politicians and particularly the Premier. Not only financial support' – because Edinburgh Festival was renowned at the time for having very stingy support from the Council – 'Not only financial support but political support and what I might call “moral” support. Could I expect the same kind of support from you?' I was out of the room in thirty seconds.

Is that right?

He just gave some very, very short, polite reply and stood up and said goodbye. (Laughs)

And that says it all.

Yes.

Yes. And shortly thereafter you left South Australia to go to Los Angeles.

Yes, that's right.

To take up a role with the – – –.
Los Angeles Philharmonic, yes.

Very exciting. Just one thing, Anthony. I’ve realised that I’ve been a bit remiss: your main interest and knowledge was in the music field.

It was when I came here.

Yes. Is there anything you want to say about the way the music industry and the music field in the Symphony Orchestra and so on went in your period here in those first eight, nine years that we haven’t touched on?

No, I don’t think so. Certainly nothing that involved Don. I mean, the Symphony Orchestras were all still a hundred per cent ABC-owned. They were narrow-minded, impossible to deal with, very unco-operative and it was hard to make much progress, frankly, and I wouldn’t think there was a great deal he could have done about it.

No. It was under a federal jurisdiction, I think, at that stage.

Yes, it was indeed.

Even though they were state orchestras –

That’s right.

– they were also tied up with the ABC.

Yes.

I just didn’t want to stop the interview before I’d asked that question.

No, no, indeed. No, I can’t think of anything. And as for music more generally, apart from the Conservatorium, there wasn’t a great deal in Adelaide, I don’t think, really.

No. You did have to rely on overseas concerts doing tours.

Yes.

And once you had your lovely Festival Centre you could offer them a nice venue.

That’s right. (Laughs)

Perfect. All right. Well, I think that just about brings me to the end of the questions that I have, and unless there’s anything else that you think that – – –.

No, I can’t think of anything. I’m glad we remembered that Edinburgh Festival, the end of that interview there, because it had a lot to do with Don, didn’t it?
Yes, it absolutely did. Yes, it’s a very telling little story and that holistic approach and that real sense that ‘This is our Festival, it belongs to this town, it belongs to this State, and I’ll jolly well make it work by all the support I can give it’, and I suppose that’s really what you were saying.

Yes. Precisely.

Well, it’s been lovely interviewing you.

Oh, it’s been fun. I’ve enjoyed it. Thank you.

Good. Well, thank you very much indeed.

END OF PART 2: PART 3

This is a continuation of the interview with Anthony Steel, tape 3. Thanks, Anthony.

This little anecdote is relevant because it refers to my lack of feeling of comfortableness with Don in personal dealings with him. Channel 9, for some extraordinary reason, at one stage gave me a weekly television program, with absolutely no research support and nothing but just a studio and a camera, you know, but it was a terrific opportunity and it was inevitably fairly late in the evening, but still. It was called Behind the scenes – not a very original title – and on the whole I interviewed interesting people who happened to be in town. This was every week. And the very first one I thought, ‘I must interview the Premier for the whole half-hour.’ And I got myself ready and he turned up in the studio and he plonked himself down in the chair opposite me and it was just about the first time – not the first time I’d ever been on television, but certainly the first time that I’d ever had a kind of responsible role on television. And I got the cue and I looked at the camera and I said, ‘Good evening, everybody, and welcome behind the scenes.’ And nothing else came out of my mouth. And he sat there and he sat there and he didn’t help in any way at all.

For how long?

I don’t know; for probably thirty seconds and seemed like ten minutes. But eventually I got myself out of the problem. But it’s just that I remember how completely unhelpful he was in that situation. He just sat there glowering, as if to say, ‘Yes, well? What happens next?’ (Laughs)

Goodness me! I wonder, was that his shyness, too, do you think?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes, there would have been nothing nasty about it at all, I’m sure it was just his shyness.

Isn’t that interesting.

And the fact that we were somehow never completely at ease with each other.
No. Such an interesting thing you say that, and yet you got on so well with him –

Yes.

– as a business colleague.

Indeed.

Have you often sort of pondered and wondered about that?

I don't think I have a great deal, it was just one of those things.

But that sort of uneasiness went away when you saw him in Italy.

Yes.

Well, he had a very early death and it was very sad.

Yes, it was, indeed.

But you came back after your sojourn away.

Yes.

You decided South Australia was the place you wanted to be?

Well, I came back to Sydney and lived in Sydney for twenty years –

Of course, doing Sydney Festivals.

– but did two more Adelaide Festivals before my Sydney Festivals.

So you call Australia home now.

I do. There we are. (Laughs)

END OF INTERVIEW.

PART 4

This is a follow up interview with Mr Anthony Steel recorded on Tuesday 17 July, 2007, at his home in Aldinga, specifically to talk about the opening of the Festival Theatre on Saturday June 2, 1973.

Anthony, you were the General Manager of the Festival Theatre at that time?
Right. Now, before we get into the nitty gritty, can we get one little confusion ironed out. Back in 1973 am I right in understanding that the complex we now know as the Festival Centre was then called the Festival Theatre?

Not really, no; because the drama complex containing the other auditoria was already being built then, so the whole place always was the Festival Centre. However, since the big theatre was the only one that was functional from June 2, obviously most people were referring all the time to the Festival Theatre. The Festival Theatre is part of the Festival Centre.

Right. I hadn’t realised that the other two spaces and the exterior space were already under construction at that time.

They were, yes. They were at an early stage of construction, but they were under construction.

Right. Well, I’d like to hear from you about all the openings that you’ve told me about, and there were three different ones I believe, but let’s go back to the opening, the grand opening, of the first one which is the Festival Theatre. In the preceding weeks, it’s not hard to imagine the long days you were putting in – can to talk us through some of the highs and lows of that period when you were facing a deadline like that – it must have been quite a time for you?

It certainly was. But as a matter of fact it was something of a relief when finally we knew what the opening day was going to be! Originally it had been planned, and I think publicly announced, as going to be opened in March that year. And the plan was to open it with a new ballet by Robert Helpmann with music by Richard Meale who was then resident in Adelaide also. And this did not go well this project because, largely because, and I’ve suffered from this subsequently with Richard, he’s not particularly good at meeting a deadline (Laughs). And I remember a time when Len Amadio and I flew over to Melbourne where Bobby Helpmann was making a film for television of a ballet, with the Australian Ballet, and we met in a hangar at Essendon Airport where they were filming, and his mind obviously wasn’t on our subject at all – rather naturally it was on the filming he was carrying out at the time. So to cut a long story short we finally decided we had to abandon that project. It was just as well that we did because we then suffered quite a bad builder’s labourers strike. Largely because, I think, we had been stupid enough to, well we hadn’t, but the government had, been stupid enough to publicise the opening date so the builder’s labourers really had us in their power and they went on strike about all kinds of silly things. The architects and I spent most of our lives in those days, it seems to me, at the Master Builders Association on South Terrace having meetings with the unions. Eventually we got over all that and felt confident to announce an opening date. So by the time that that happened, and I can’t remember precisely how far ahead of June 2 it was, everything from then on in a way was plain sailing. Although, of course there was a huge amount to do, not the least of which was getting all the staff together, in which task I had a huge amount of help from Len Amadio and people who knew who was available in Australia a great deal better than I did, since I was a new arrival. And all that went remarkably smoothly, and somehow I can’t really remember many traumas leading up to opening night. The only one that comes into my mind was that I became fanatical about things being dropped on the carpet. I don’t mean coffee, but just little things that
you see sitting on the carpet and I would bend down always and pick them up when I saw something…

**Like little scraps of paper?**

Little scraps of paper or something like this, in the weeks leading up to the opening when there was no public in the building it didn’t matter what the carpet looked like. I finally decided that I’d better take myself in hand when I found myself doing the same thing in the Ansett terminal in Melbourne! (loud laughter).

But otherwise it was immensely smooth. The next little incident I remember was on opening day when Tom Brown of Tom Brown and Associates, who were the theatre consultants for the whole Centre, and who became my closest friend in Australia later on, was quietly there all day and he came up to me at one stage and said ‘You must have something to eat before the show tonight’ and I said ‘I’m not going to have time, Tom’ And he said, ‘Well, leave it to me and I’ll get a sandwich. Come to your office at, what time shall we say, 6.30? Would that suit you? Let’s say 6.30 and I’ll have a sandwich ready for you.’ So I turned up in my office at the appointed hour and there was my little low table groaning with caviar, pate de foie, champagne, smoked salmon. I took one look at it and burst into tears! (Laughs).

**What a wonderful gesture of him to arrange that.**

But after that everything went incredibly smoothly really. There were two hiccups: one mattered and one was just funny after the event. The funny one was that the VIP party, including the Prime Minister, got stuck in the lift

**In the complex, in the Festival Centre?**

Yes, in the theatre. I think it was during interval, but it doesn’t matter when it was, but I know it slightly delayed the next lot of proceedings. They weren’t stuck for very long, fortunately. I’m glad I wasn’t in the lift because I have terrible claustrophobia.

The other one was that the young man who was working the, for the time, extremely sophisticated lighting board, got a fit of nerves during the performance of the third act of *Fidelio*, and for about, well it seemed like hours as you can imagine, but for about a minute probably, the lighting cues were a few seconds behind the action.

**Oh dear.**

That was a pity really, but nobody remembered that, and after the event it didn’t really matter. Otherwise it went *extraordinarily* smoothly and it was, I thought, although I say it myself, a really good programme to have chosen. Nowadays I’m sure they would have commissioned a piece from an Australian composer, which would be an entirely worthy and sensible thing to do. We didn’t do anything like that, we stuck to Beethoven.

**So I believe. Actually I was going to ask you about that. There were one or two press reviews that it was an odd combination, even though it was an all Beethoven. Dr Enid**
Robertson in the papers that I picked up suggested it was an odd combination and I think there was one other critic who said that as well, being *Fidelio*, not the *Ninth [Symphony]* that was on, but the *Fidelio* dungeon scene was a rather low, slightly depressing thing to put on.

There’s nothing depressing about it – some of the most glorious music ever written, but the point of course was this: the first half indeed started with the dungeon scene, it was the whole of the third act of *Fidelio*, and so the audience was seeing the place as an opera house. The director, Stefan Haag, had very sensibly, well for various reasons, had very sensibly made sure the set was extremely simple. It was trucked on from the wings and it was small, and he’d left the stage open right to the back, so that you could see the back wall, so they got an impression of the scale of the place, because it is an enormous stage. And a nice little touch was that somebody had scrawled an anti-nuclear, *nuclear*, sounds like President Bush (Chuckles), nuclear symbol on the back wall and he left that there, and indeed he had it lit so the audience could see it. That went extremely well except for this little hiccup with the lighting cues. Then the audience came out into the foyer and the interval lasted rather longer than a normal interval, but they didn’t mind because they were being plied with champagne anyway. Then they went back and they found themselves in a concert hall.

That was an interesting thing to do, that you showcased the stage as two different...

Of course, of course, and because they’d never experienced anything like it before it was absolutely astonishing to the audience when they came back, having been out for a couple of drinks and been to the loo, back they came into a completely different place. Because in the interval a huge team of stage hands, much larger than one could normally afford, had struck the set which didn’t take a minute, erected the orchestra shell, set out the orchestra, erected the seats for the chorus and we then had the Beethoven *Ninth Symphony*. And once I’d seen the official party back into their seats I ducked backstage and joined the tenors in the choir!

**Oh my, did you really? When *Fidelio* was on stage was the orchestra down in the pit?**

In the pit, yes, so then another thing that happened during the interval was the orchestra lift came up to stage level as they re-set the platform. So it was an incredible transformation from the point of view of the audience.

Yes, well one of the headlines said “An excited 2000 people on Saturday night stood and applauded Adelaide’s Festival Theatre into life on its first night.” So it was bravo all round?

Yes, it certainly was. I think it was a great, great success. Although I didn’t really know because I was far too nervous obviously to notice what was going on, but I think it was a great success.

From all the reports I’ve read, it certainly was. One thing I did notice in the things that I’ve read in the paper was that, to an extent, you had a huge assistance, in a way, from the *Advertiser*: in so far as they did feature articles, information boxes, editorials and so on. That was a very useful thing, and it probably assisted your budget no end, that you got the local press on side in every way, it seems to me.
I think you’re right on one hand, but on the other hand it would have been fairly astonishing if they hadn’t been on side, because it was a very, very important occasion in the life of the state at that time. I think where the Advertiser did do a particularly good job was when, three or four weeks before the opening we threw it open to the public over a weekend and they were able to walk around, you know

**That was a good PR exercise.**

It was, and they [the Advertiser] helped by publicising it.

**I think about 100,000 people came?**

Yes, and that was about one person in every eight in the city at that time which was quite astonishing.

**Yes. Was that idea initiated by government or by you or…?**

I don’t remember. But I’m sure it was my Trust and I rather than government.

**I wondered if it was Len Amadio or even Don Dunstan?**

I don’t remember really where the original idea came from. I don’t remember.

**Okay. From what I’ve read the people of Adelaide embraced the building because there was a clear message that was coming out that it was being constructed to meet the needs of the general public and not for elite groups.**

I stressed that very, very much because it was in all my public speeches and interviews. Apart from anything else… well, two reasons. One because it was true and the second was that it was extremely useful to me because it enabled me to make a distinction, which I went on making for the whole of the rest of that decade, that whereas the Festival Centre belonged to the people of Adelaide and it was our job, our responsibility, to make absolutely certain that there was a wide variety of entertainment made available for all sections of the public, when it came to programming the Festival this was not the case: the Festival had a job to do of advancing the taste of the public and making certain that there was always – that awful phrase – cutting edge work on show. And this was useful for me publicly to be able to make this distinction because there was a lot of criticism of my early Festival programmes as being not “for the people” indeed.

**Mmm. And do you think you were successful in getting that message over of the difference between the two?**

Oh very much so, yes. It took time but…

**I certainly read, in among all these papers somewhere, what was upcoming after the Festival Theatre opening – it was an astonishing array of dance, opera, musical items,**
even, was it Jesus Christ Superstar coming that same year? The Theatre was jam packed with bookings.

Yes, it was, and that again was for two reasons really. Well, parts one and two of the same reason. There was an awful lot that toured in those days; much, much, much more than there is now. And of course, all the promoters were wanting to test out the Adelaide market with this new venue. But I’m glad you mentioned that because in a way the most interesting thing about that opening week was that first of all we saw it as an opera house, then we saw it as a concert hall, then the following night we repeated that programme for the general public – because the first night audience had been entirely an invited one – and then the very next day the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Peter Brook production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* took over for a week. So it then became a drama theatre and it was marvellous to be able to show it off in all those guises in the first seven days.

Fantastic. And what good timing that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* came in the same week! And was that good for the house?

Oh yes. I think it was pretty much sold out.

I can imagine. Can you tell me about the Premier’s reaction to the opening of the Festival Centre and to what it meant to the people and so on. Can you give me any idea – I guess you did have some conversations with him?

I think he was extremely satisfied and extremely pleased with the reaction of the public and the way his initiative had been vindicated by the public really. I don’t remember any specific comments that he made, but he just seemed to be very happy with the whole situation. And so he should have been.

Yes, absolutely. One of the things…I’d like to get on and talk in a minute about how the invitation lists were organised for the opening night because that’s always got a little bit of good gossip attached to it, but one thing I did notice when I was looking at the cuttings there was no photograph, at least not in the days immediately following the opening, [there were] lots of photos and social pages devoted to various people and their ball gowns and so on, but not a single photo of Gough Whitlam and Don Dunstan and I wondered if there were any tensions, or whether they shunned individual publicity?

I can’t throw any light on that at all, and I agree with you, it seems very odd.

Mmm. Mind you there were no photos of you that I could find!

(Laughs) I don’t know why that was so. No I can’t explain.

The official party of which you were a part obviously included the Lord Mayor and his wife, Gough Whitlam and his wife and Don Dunstan and, I believe, his daughter. Tell me about what happened before the opening.
Well, the fact is that I wasn’t really a part of the official party because I started as I intended, and indeed did continue, and that is never to allow myself to be part of an official party because there was too much else to be done. Once you’re stuck with an official party, you’re stuck with the official party. So I’ve made it clear from the word go, and I’ve continued with that for the rest of my life, that I will not be part of an official party if it’s in a place or a context for which I’m responsible.

Okay. That’s an interesting thing…

I mean I can drop in and have a glass of champagne with them, but that’s about it, because I’m on duty.

And you were, you held, the bottom line

Yes. And I can’t take time out on such an important occasion looking after a few people.

They all went to an official dinner, did they not, at Ayers House, across or rather up the road?

They did, yes, and I certainly didn’t go to that. No, not likely. I couldn’t have afforded the time and I couldn’t have sat still for an entire dinner party. I was far too much on edge! (Laughs)

Even to eat the caviar and all the rest of it?

Oh no, I ate that! (Laughs)

So, how do you remember Don Dunstan, was he nervous or ebullient or..?

I recall him as being completely relaxed and enjoying himself. I really can’t say more than that. As I’ve just suggested he wasn’t my prime concern of the evening, but I never heard anything to suggest that he wasn’t relaxed, enjoying himself and entirely pleased.

Yes, I can imagine that. Let’s get on to the people, and there’s heaps and heaps of pictures of the all the great and the good of Adelaide, and the maybe not so great and good of Adelaide and all around. How did that guest list of nearly two thousand invited guests come about?

Again I’m not going to be much help to you because I wouldn’t have anything to do with that, at all, except to cast my eye over it, largely because I wouldn’t have known, not having been here long enough. But, undoubtedly the running was made by my Trustees and the inimitable Dame Ruby Litchfield, or Mrs Litchfield as she was then, would have been absolutely at the top, so to speak the chair of the sub-committee I am sure. They would have put together a draft list and it would have been sent to Len Amadio for the government’s comments and for their input. And I suppose the way all those lists are compiled eventually you arrived at two thousand people who, with more or less agreement, should be there (Laughs).

I’m sure there would have been a lot of jockeying – names on and names off.
Undoubtedly, undoubtedly, and I think the process lasted weeks rather than days, I’m sure it did.

**With two thousand people to consider, yes, I’m sure it did!**

Exactly. But I don’t remember, I may be quite wrong, but I certainly don’t remember any huge complaints of people being left off the list. I’m sure there were some, but I don’t remember any big gaffes being made in compiling that list anyway. But perhaps, as I’ve already made clear, I am not particularly interested in such things. I left that to people who are.

**No indeed. But it was a pretty glamorous kind of a night wasn’t it?**

Oh yes it was. Indeed it was.

**All the women there in their best dresses…**

Oh yes. And that was before I started having a correspondence in the *Advertiser* – a little bit of an argument with Sir James Irwin about dress at the Festival Theatre. He said – no, I think somebody else wrote in that they were disgusted how some people turned up at the Festival Theatre in very casual clothes and this wasn’t the way to treat our grand new theatre. I eventually wrote to the *Advertiser* and said I didn’t care whether people came in bare feet so long as they were enjoying themselves. Sir James wrote a letter to the *Advertiser* saying ‘but I like wearing a black tie’ and I closed the correspondence by replying to that by saying ‘that’s exactly what I mean: if you like wearing a black tie, wear a black tie!’ (Laughs).

**That’s a good response, a very good response. What else have I got to ask you?**

**The next step: You had the public opening, then you had the grand opening with Gough Whitlam, and then…**

No, the other way around - the grand opening first.

**Sorry, I meant the public opening, the public viewing about a week before, yes?**

Oh yes, indeed, yes

**And then there was glittering grand opening. Talk me now through the next stages you mentioned.**

Well, there was a repeat of that programme the following evening and then there was a week of *Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

**And then the opening of the Dunstan Playhouse, or what was called the Playhouse at that time.**

Ah, I see what you mean, yes. Well, that was quite an occasion too, although it wasn’t anything quite so grand in Adelaide terms, but it was an occasion because we opened the drama complex as it was referred to over the October long weekend. We opened the Playhouse on Saturday, the
Amphitheatre, which was the bonus the architects provided, on Sunday, and the Space on Monday. So it was a very, very hectic weekend.

**That was the October long weekend of 1973 or ‘74?**

Four

‘Okay. So about 14 months later.

That’s right, yes. And in the Playhouse the South Australian Theatre Company, as it then was, performed this slightly odd Commedia del‘Arte piece called *The Three Cuckolds*, and now I can’t even remember who wrote it, which wasn’t a terribly happy choice. But I can understand why they chose it because it enabled them to use the Juliet balconies and the traps and everything that opened and shut, which was a good idea. It was a jolly piece so it wasn’t a bad choice for the opening I suppose. Then on the Sunday we had an eight hour free rock concert in the Amphitheatre, and that Amphitheatre was such a lovely place in the good weather months. It’s never used now, I can’t understand why not. It was used up until - I think the last time I remember it being used I think was in the 2000 Festival when there were a couple of companies there including a very good one from India. It just does seem a shame that they don’t use it anymore at all regularly. Anyway, that was a great success because it was free. And then on the Monday we opened the Space with – I forget whether it was already called the State Opera then - no I think it was still the New Opera of South Australia, and they performed, is it Monteverdi who wrote *Tancredi and Clorinda*? And then Kurt Weill’s *Seven Deadly Sins*, and my wife was one of the dancers! And that was, artistically, the most successful of the three. Well, I can’t speak about the rock concert really because I don’t know about rock concerts, but that was a huge success and a thoroughly good way to open the Amphitheatre

**And a good way to reinforce the message of a big general public appeal event.**

Exactly, exactly. Undoubtedly, the most memorable thing about the opening of the Playhouse was Don Dunstan’s speech.

**Have you got it there?**

I have got it here and I’d like to read it to you.

**Wonderful, please do.**

The other bit of contextual remark I should make before I do so is that John Bray was at the time Chief Justice. The remarkable John Bray, a really extraordinary man who was a poet, a classical scholar and Chief Justice, and could often be seen in a tee shirt and shorts cycling down to the beach from his home in Hurtle Square. [Anthony reads]
Your Excellency, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to the Playhouse.

A nation’s artists watch a nation’s life
tensely, like springs waiting for release
from too much understanding, joy or pain,
as silence turns the screw. But here, they speak
and seek to make us startled and intrigued
by every jump and tumble of their craft
so that with a cunning sleight-of-hand
the audience becomes their acrobat.
Jugglers of spangled paradox, they can teach
each of us what they also seek to know;
of ways to live, to see, or to endure
mortality’s spinning brightness. Because of this
our government has built these theatres,
trusting that the humanities may here
add to the State enduring quality.
And further, in that long tradition which
requires a theatre opened by a poem,
John Bray composed for us this dedication:
On marble benches open to the day
The Greeks in thousands sat to watch the play,
And, standing underneath an English sky,
The groundlings at the Globe saw Hamlet die.

But you are sheltered from the sun and breeze,

And you are cosseted with cushioned ease

And air conditioning and banks of light,

Confounding heat and cold and day and night.

What older audiences never knew

Technology has lavished here on you,

Be to the drama then what they were in their age,

In hope to rebuild here the glories of the stage.

But here the actors come, prepared to start their mime

And stamp on cloak and mask the imprint of our time.

**Wonderful. Absolutely wonderful. And I imagine he delivered it just perfectly.**

He did indeed. But what an extraordinary speech from a politician! (laughs)

**Quite wonderful. And John Bray composed the section at the end?**

Yes. I’ve been trying to work out what it is: it’s fourteen lines long, but it’s not in any kind of familiar meter or rhyming pattern that one normally thinks of for a sonnet so I don’t really quite know what it is, but anyway it’s a lovely poem. (laughs)

**It’s absolutely charming, but even Don Dunstan’s words at the beginning are extremely poetic. In fact I wonder if...**

They are particularly charming. It’s blank verse of course

Yes, but actually I am wondering - there are lines and juxtapositions of words which sound familiar, but I don’t imagine that Don Dunstan would have plagiarized another thing and turned it...

I don’t think so

... anyway, it’s absolutely wonderful.
It is, isn’t it?

And to deliver this he stood on stage, in his dinner jacket, I presume, and he just left the stage as the play started?

That’s right, yes.

Fabulous, absolutely terrific. Very Shakespearean

Yes. It was remarkable, quite remarkable.

And did he get a standing ovation for it, or at least a decent applause?

He certainly did get a decent applause. He couldn’t really get a standing ovation because he was off, the curtain was up and the show had begun, you see. Dramatic timing that he would have understood.

Yes. Tremendous. I know the theatre was his particular love and so I can understand that he would have wanted to have a very serious involvement with its birth.

Yes, he certainly did.

Now, let me see, where are we. Talking of Don Dunstan, I notice that one of the people that wrote all these gossip columns at the time was somebody called Pat Dunstan. Was there any relation? I wonder, because the name Dunstan is not so common.

I don’t think so. I don’t remember that name at all so I can’t tell you, but I’m sure not. No. I’m pretty certain not. I’m sure I would have known if he or she was. She presumably?

Yes, I would think so, writing the society pages. I think that’s probably all I want to ask, unless you have anything that I’ve forgotten?

Yes. I’d just like to touch on the third opening, which was the Southern Plaza with the controversial [Otto] Hajek multi-coloured sculpture on it. That was chosen, of course, by my chairman, John Baily who was the director of the Art Gallery. We left all such decisions to him really. I think its greatest failing, well not its, but rather its creator's inability to understand the effect of the summer climate on a huge concrete space like that with not nearly enough green. And now it suffers from an absolute lack of attention; it hasn’t had a coat of paint and it hasn’t been looked after properly for a very long time and it does look very sad I think. But at the time it looked rather magnificent. He [Hajek] was a difficult man because he was never sober. He came out from Stuttgart with his entire family including his three gorgeous daughters and was very much in evidence at the opening. We ran a symposium on art and architecture to coincide with his visit, and the opening – this was the last stage, the completion of the Festival Centre – [was going to be performed by the Queen.]

And what was that date?
I can’t remember. I think it was the following March. It might have been March ’75. I’m pretty sure it was March because if was a hot, nasty, hot, grey, windy day. There were about a thousand people invited onto the Plaza, and I can’t resist telling you a story here: I never wear a tie and I was going to be on a little dais in front of that biggest Hajek bit with the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh and my chairman, and Don and Adele, his wife.

Not slipping into the official party, don’t tell me Anthony? (Laughs)

Well, just sitting there during the speeches, yes

Okay (Laughs)

So I thought, well, this is going to be difficult, so I rang Government House and asked if I need wear a tie. The answer was ‘We can’t possibly answer such an important question; you’ll have to refer to the Royal Visit Office in Canberra.’ So I got the number from them and I called the Royal Visit Office in Canberra and I asked the same question. ‘Oh, we couldn’t take a decision on a question like that, we’ll have to refer it to the Palace’, which they did. And the Palace of course said ‘Wear what you like.’ So I was the only man on the Plaza who had not got a tie on. Even Don was wearing one that day!

And long trousers I presume?

And long trousers, yes. And it all went very smoothly. It was a pretty horrible day, but it stayed dry at least and it all went very smoothly and nothing much happened except the speeches. Right at the very end there was a bit of a commotion behind the air conditioning vault, the big Hajek, and out came a half a dozen people carrying a large Eureka Stockade flag. They were very quickly removed and the Duke turned to me and said ‘What was that’? And I replied, I thought with great diplomacy ‘It’s what they call street theatre, sir.’

(Interviewer Laughs)

And then my chairman and I had to take the Queen and the Duke on a complete tour of the Festival Centre which went very well. The only thing I remember about it was my fascination with his camera which, for those days, was very, very small and was made of gold.

This is the Duke of Edinburgh?

Yes, and he kept on snapping little shots as we went around, and then we finished up in the John Bishop Room in the Festival Theatre for afternoon tea. And I remember that in the ladies cloakroom, just next to the John Bishop room, we had been instructed by the Royal Visit Office advance party that we had to take off the plastic seat in the loo and have a wooden seat put on in case Her Majesty wished to use the facilities. Which we duly did and she didn’t! (Laughs) And then at six o’clock I think it was, we took the royal party out of the John Bishop Room and immediately into the foyer of the Festival Theatre where Don Dunstan held a state reception for them. So at that moment, thank goodness, they stopped being my responsibility. But, it was hugely successful day. It went very well, and I think it was on that day, yes, I’m sure it was, that
the announcement was made that we were going to have an organ constructed for the Festival Theatre, which was to be called the “Jubilee Organ”, because her jubilee was that year perhaps? It was coming up anyway, and public subscriptions were invited and it seemed the right occasion. Now there is this rather remarkable organ which is virtually never used, unfortunately.

How was Don, was he comfortable with royalty? Do you think he was at ease with them?

He knew how to put on a good act, and he appeared to be completely comfortable with them. He was a politician, but not only a politician but a consummate politician and he understood the formal relationships with people and he knew how to behave whatever he was feeling inside himself.

The reason they [the royal couple] came to open the Festival Plaza, which was not in its own way such a huge thing, was because they happened to be visiting Australia?

Yes, because they were visiting Australia and because we were able to say that this is the last bit - you are declaring the whole place open. This is the completion of it, and it made it sound a rather grander occasion than in fact it was.

Yes. But I’m sure they were both very gracious.

Oh yes, she likes declaring things open and this was something that needed opening at the time she was here!

And that was followed by some sort of state dinner, did you say?

A state reception in the foyer of the Festival Theatre.

So a few Adelaidians got the opportunity to rub shoulders, to rub the royal shoulders?

They did indeed, yes.

Well, I’m delighted that you were able to give some extra time and I think having your voice on the record about the three different openings is important for the public record as well as for the archive, the Don Dunstan archive, and, unless you have anything you’ve just remembered, or a flashbulb has come into your mind about something you want to add…

No, I don’t think I have. You asked me a couple of times during the course of this conversation how Don reacted to these occasions and I haven’t been very forthcoming, but I don’t think there was ever any doubt in anyone’s mind that it was his achievement.

Yes, even though he was very gracious in acknowledging previous governments for the idea. In the first opening the Advertiser reported some sections of his speech and he did acknowledge the earlier governments of Playford and Hall in the decision to start the Festival Centre, but of course from there…
He took over. Yes. And it was also he who took the decision to move whatever it was that was built from the Carclew site which had been the original suggestion when it was going to be a concert hall only, and make it a much grander affair and move it to a far more sensible position.

Yes, he was certainly responsible for that. It was a really terrific vision and proved by the test of time.

Yes indeed. And I still think it’s as good a complex as I’ve ever seen anywhere else in the world. I think it was somebody called, his name has suddenly come to me, a man called Frederick Bentham who was at the time the chairman, or words to that effect, of the British association of technical theatre people, whatever that might be called. We had another symposium at one stage about theatre design and quite a few of those people came and took part in it, and he said, and it’s on the record, he said then that it was the only theatre complex in the world that he’d seen with which he could find no fault at all.

Is that right?. A pretty high accolade wasn’t it?

Yes. And I think that’s true. It’s had very, very few alterations made to it, from a technical theatre standpoint, apart from obviously bringing a few things up to date since it opened, and the basic structure certainly has remained absolutely the same and it still works superbly well today. Everything about it was that it was so sensibly thought out, so well thought out for the context, you know. There’s a lot of talk now about, particularly from the ASO inevitably and understandably, for the need for a separate concert hall for them, but it’s a nonsense; politically and financially a complete nonsense in an Adelaide context. No-one could justify a separate fifteen hundred seat concert hall. It was the right decision then to have a multi purpose theatre, even though that is less than ideal, and it’s the right decision now.

Yes. Of course the complex has undergone some renovations a couple of years back – mainly the exterior.

Oh yes. But they were cosmetic…

Yes, mainly to do with getting in and out of the building, and the flow of people around the building.

Exactly, yes.

And I think it has improved.

I think it has. I think they’ve been a success I quite agree. But from a practical point of view – from the other side of the curtain, so to speak, it was pretty much spot on when it started and it still is.

I was in the Dunstan Playhouse just this week and I think it’s a very, very comfortable place for an audience to sit and watch drama.
And they’re about to spend lots of money on that, from the point of view of the audience’s comfort, they’re re-doing the seats.

Oh are they. Well, I think it’s a terrific space.

They all are. They all are. The Festival Theatre is so handsome inside. Every time I go in it I think I can’t believe this; thirty years later it still looks terrific.

Well, that’s a wonderful thing to end on – a real championing of Don Dunstan and his vision. Thank you very much Anthony.

END OF INTERVIEW.