



Cambridge Arts Theatre

Interview data sheet: Behind the Scenes Project

Ref no: THM/258

Collection title:

Interviewee's surname: Mitchell

Title: Mr

Interviewee's forename(s): Brian

Gender: Male

Occupation: Theatre Volunteer

Date(s) of recording, tracks (from-to):

Location of interview: Cambridge Arts Theatre, Meeting Room

Name of interviewer: Lewis Long

Type of recorder: Zoom H4N

Recording format: WAV

Total no. of tracks: 1

Total duration (HH:MM:SS): 00:47:53

Mono/Stereo: Stereo

Additional material:

None

Copyright/Clearance: Assigned to Cambridge Arts Theatre.

Interviewer's comments:

None

Abstract:

Brian Mitchell had been coming to Theatre for 30 years and became a front of house volunteer when he retired. He reflects on the breadth of productions he has seen in his six years as a

	volunteer, summarising Cambridge Arts Theatre dual role in hosting professional touring productions alongside student theatre. He notes the increasing trend for diverse or 'blind' casting in the productions he has seen. He explains his volunteering role is audience focussed and notes that different productions attract different types of audience. He is particularly excited by new writing and thinks it has an important role to play in attracting new or younger audiences.
Key words:	audience, pantomime, touring productions, students, Christopher Biggins, Matt Crosby, Wayne Sleep, schools, The Greek Play, Cambridge Operatic Society
File	
00.00	Brian introduces himself. He has been in Cambridge for about 30 years and has been to the theatre in this time before becoming a volunteer. He says his wife saw an advertisement in the Cambridge News looking for volunteers. Brian says that this was towards the end of the refurbishment. He applied and recalls it was Grace [Hadley] who interviewed him. He then got appointed and this was around 6 years ago. Brian says that he worked in the Arts before, as an arts manager for an organisation as well as in the arts funding system. He says he had also been a consultant in arts projects. Brian thought that he'd be giving something back to the arts by volunteering, and he was retired at this point and thought it was a good thing to do.
01.57	Brian can't remember what the first production he helped out on was. He recalls starting in November, only a couple weeks before the pantomime. He says most volunteers will tell you how many years of pantomime they have done and Brian has done six. He says he did a couple weeks of shows but cannot remember what they were. Brian says that this is because they see shows every week and only a handful stand out.
02.36	He says the production of <i>La Strada</i> a couple of years ago stood out to him. Brian recalls volunteering for this for two nights and came with his wife for a third night. He says that the show itself was on for a fortnight. <i>Wise Children</i> also stood out to him. He says that most shows are forgotten unless he looks back at the programme and then he remembers in more detail. Brian says that he remembers the pantomimes because they're seen several times. He remembers the shows because of their quality.
03.33	Brian says that most of the volunteers aren't bad critics because they see so many plays, meaning they can see what's wrong with them. According to Brian they make comments such as 'Why can't the director see that that's what is wrong?' He says that most of the plays are problematic from this viewpoint, but mostly the productions are high quality. He says

	that you don't often see obvious problems with them, it's often a personal thing; you like it or you don't.
04.24	He comments that there has been increasing flexibility about ethnicity and gender. Brian remembers one production where there was a young woman playing an old man, and she did it very badly. He recalls talking to Ben [Thurbon] about the complaints of her acting. But Brian says that it has become increasingly unimportant and recalls the Greek play last year using a woman to play the male lead. He says that she did it so well it didn't matter. He thinks that everyone has got used to it now and it is noticeable that it's not an issue. Brian says that he is not keen on musicals such as <i>Sweeney Todd</i> , but the Cambridge Operatic Society's production of <i>Sound of Music</i> at the arts was good and he enjoyed it. He says he enjoys most of the productions. Brian then talks about his opinion of musicals.
07.41	Brian says that some people don't like pantomime, and that there is a man he works with who doesn't go in to see it. He says that it's pretty much the same every year because they have a formula, which is successful. He says that when he first came to the Arts they put on the Christopher Biggins pantomimes, which was about 20 years ago. He says that because they are written by the same people every year they have a formula that works. Brian says that they have made them slicker: using less words, more singing and movement. He says that there hasn't been a big change in recent years to the formula.
09.18	He recalls the actress playing Gelsomina in <i>La Strada</i> was amazing and compares her to seeing a young Charlie Chaplin for the first time. Brian says that he can't remember any names. He says that one of the things about theatre is that it is often an unforgettable experience, seeing a well-known actor from the TV on stage and leaves him wondering why they want to do it night after night as it seems like a drag. He says that you can sometimes see why as they receive an audience response. Brian says that these don't happen all the time but do occur often. He says within a season he sees 2 or 3 stand-out actors/actresses. Brian says he is always amazed when well-known people appear on the stage as it seems hard work.
11.40	Brian reckons that many actors start out in the theatre and then like to go back to it because of the response they get. He has always felt that the well-known actors get something out of it and that is why they keep coming back. Brian says that most plays involve people starting their careers, and comments that being in the theatre isn't an easy life.
13.05	He mentions that the Arts gets shows that are either going to the West End or are coming from the West End. He is unsure of whether it is different. He mentions that most of the audience

	<p>is from the local region, so he is unsure of how different it is. Brian says that being in a university city doesn't make that much difference to the theatre. Brian discusses touring theatre.</p>
15.26	<p>Brian says that the student productions put on at the Arts are very good, and mentions <i>Oedipus</i>, which was well done. He doesn't think that most of the Arts audience is connected to the University. Brian comments that we are in a parallel world with the university on one side and sites like the Arts on the other. He sees a difference between the student and touring plays, however both can have good and bad productions. He says that expectations for the student plays are lower than for professional companies.</p>
18.19	<p>He says that crazy things can occur in the audience during pantomime. Brian recalls seeing a woman appearing at the door, who turned out to be Matt Crosby's landlady. She recounted that there had been drinking before and during the performance Matt made a reference to this as he knew she was in the audience. He says that there hasn't been anything that exceptional off the stage. Brian recalls one show which had a 45-minute interval, as it had complicated stage equipment (a reclining chair) and they couldn't get it to work. He says that the curtain goes up like clockwork, and there is a 20 minute interval in about every show. Brian says that things don't normally go wrong on stage. He recalls that sometimes they go wrong during pantomime but they make a joke of it if Wayne Sleep forgets his lines or something similar. Brian also recalls that towards the end of one pantomime season they'd had a cast party and were all doing crazy things such as taking each other's lines and tripping each other up. He says that during the serious plays nobody messes around.</p>
22.19	<p>Brian says that there are regulars who come to the theatre and remembers one woman who came for many weeks who always sat in the front row. He says there aren't a huge number on his Wednesday night shift but thinks there would be more during the matinees. Brian remembers one man in his 90s who had been coming for decades. He explains that 'regularly' means one or two times in a season, not necessarily every week. He says that the people they see regularly are often on complementary tickets with the volunteers. Brian says he notices that when they have opera for a week every year, they attract the same people who would come 3 times for the 3 different shows performed. He compares the price of a ticket to the opera at the Arts to the price at the Royal Opera House. Brian states that the opera performances are always well attended. He says that this is the same for the dance performances that are put on once or twice a year. Brian mentions that he thinks there are members of the audience</p>

	<p>who come to genre specific shows. He mentions <i>The Woman in Black</i> and the shows on curriculums that attract school groups. He says that the nature of the play is important in deciding who comes.</p>
27.49	<p>Brian agrees the Theatre is important for local schools but notes that - with the exception of pantomime - schools attending the Theatre are bringing, often, a limited number of pupils, for example those studying for an English literature A' Level. He recalls he did not go frequently to the theatre as a child, although he worked in the Arts he was not a real theatre fan. Coming to volunteer at the Cambridge Arts Theatre he has enjoyed it much more than he thought he would and particularly values it for the theatre's unique atmosphere.</p>
30.19	<p>Brian does not think he has seen too many 'bad' productions – although some plays appeal more than others. He likes to see new work. He enjoyed <i>Girl on the Train</i> but otherwise would say he had seen too many murder mysteries, and seeing a literary adaptation was only exciting when it was really well-done.</p>
32.48	<p>Working front of house, Brian seldom encounters actors. The volunteer front of house role is audience focussed, welcoming, solving problems, enforcing the bag policy. Brian notes office staff do not have this week-to-week connection to the audience. Brian says rarely does anything go wrong with the audience. He remembers one time a member of the audience was on the phone in the auditorium, he had to tell him to put the phone away, eventually the audience member left the auditorium.</p>
36.20	<p>Another night someone had collapsed in the interval and had to be removed from the auditorium. But generally audiences were well behaved. He notes that audiences have paid good money to be there and deserved to enjoy it.</p>
37.14	<p>Occasionally audience members will chat about the play – if they have seen the play before for example. Even if volunteers are busy they are happy to engage in conversation. Volunteers often get audience feedback and at the end of the production they get together with the front of house manager and debrief. Normally the comments are very cohesive and if one volunteer has heard something all the comments align. It is rare to hear negative comments but Brian thinks that if something was wrong with the production the Theatre would get the message pretty quickly! And it would influence what they book, and so the audience numbers would give an idea.</p>
39.51	<p>In response to a question about new writing. Brian remembers <i>The Father</i>. He explains often plays come from the West End, or are part of a long tour, but he likes new writing. He also likes a really good production of a well-known work, he remembers</p>

	<p>the Robert Icke production of George Orwell's <i>1984</i> favourably. He agrees with the interviewer that different plays attract different audiences and that new writing does attract younger audiences which he thinks is important for the future of the Theatre and the Arts. Curriculum linked plays which also have a role to play for attracting schools. Generally he thinks the profile of the audience at the Arts is older.</p>
44.07	<p>Brian thinks it is very important that theatres attract new and younger audiences. However, he recognises putting on new writing represents a financial risk. Revisiting earlier comments on 'blind' casting he suggests television is now following theatre's trend for 'blind' casting which he has seen become more popular in the last few years. He concludes that theatre audiences are very open to diverse casting.</p>
47.53	<p>END</p>