



Cambridge Arts Theatre

Interview data sheet: Behind the Scenes Project

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Interviewee's surname: Charters

Title: Mr

Interviewee's forename(s): David

Gender: Male

Occupation:

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Abstract:

A longstanding supporter of Cambridge Arts Theatre, local businessman David Charters reflects on what has changed at the Theatre during his long association. He describes in detail

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| | the capital campaign of the 1990s and the financial and logistical challenges the Theatre faced at this time. Charters led the community fundraising campaign and remembers the different approaches employed. |
| Key words: | Arts Cinema, rebuilding, community campaign, Jonathan Lim, John Maynard Keynes, Griff Rhys Jones, Rory Mcgrath, John Major, Lewis Isaacs, John Fairbairn, Cathy Phillips, Clive James, John Major, Dave Murphy, Dadie Rylands, Matt Crosby, Biggins, Cyril Fletcher |
| File | |
| 00:00 | David was born in Liverpool and moved to Cambridge in 1973. |
| 00:59 | David was an occasional attender of the theatre. He lived in a village near St Ives with two young children so did not come into Cambridge that often. He was inspired by the theatre manager in the 1970s/early 1980s Jonathan Lim who had given a talk to the Cambridge Business and Professional Men's Club, which met every month at the University Arms Hotel. David was taken by his description of the theatre and what it did at that time, which was different to today, and what its problems were. David went up to him afterwards and complimented him on his talk. David says that this was the beginning of his close interest with the theatre. His business partner was a regular attender. David describes him as a single man living in Cambridge with a lot more time that he did. He said the theatre was fun and that he had seen a lot of famous people over the years and enjoyed it. |
| 02:21 | David says that it was always an awkward building and that it looked nothing like it does today. He says that from the street it looks similar but in those days the box office was on Pease Hill and it took up most of the entrance. David says that if two people came in and started chatting then nobody else could enter the theatre as it was just a narrow entrance. He says that to get from one side of the theatre to another there was no ground floor route, people had to go up to the fourth floor through the roof garden and down the other side. David says that this changed later on. |
| 03:12 | David says that a big problem for the theatre was that it was built on Kings College land. John Maynard Keynes was the bursar of Kings. David says he saw a copy of a letter written by Keynes esquire to the bursar at Kings College saying he was thinking of building a theatre and asked if they had land in Cambridge. He got a reply from Keynes saying they did have land that was suitable. David says that the theatre always had the problem of Peas Hill at the front of the theatre and it not being parallel to Kings Parade. David says that this is why the Arts Theatre stage is one of the smallest in the circuit. He says that the stage has a sloping back wall which means that a lot of |

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| | <p>the visiting companies couldn't get onto the stage and that the 'get-in' was terrible due to access. David says that the theatre used to miss a lot of quality productions because of this. In 1993 the land that caused the odd shaped stage went on sale. David says that it was Corpus Christi college's land in the yard of the Eagle Pub, where people still have their outdoor drinks today. He recalls that at the time Corpus were about to redevelop the Eagle yard and the Robert Beldam Building was going to be built. They offered the land in this instance to the theatre.</p> |
| 05.32 | <p>The earliest play that David can recall is <i>An Inspector Calls</i>, which still comes back every couple of years with the same set. David says that it had a famous television actor in. He remembers seeing <i>The Women in Black</i> and says that it was scary. David says that once the children grew-up they became regular donors, attenders and life expanded. He says that they didn't come that often for a number of years as finding babysitters in the country was hard and he came home from Cambridge after work.</p> |
| 06.36 | <p>David talks about his relationship with Johnathan Lim, something which he explains wasn't a personal relationship, but more because of supporting the theatre. Explains that his company always held their meetings within the Theatre's rooms, a place that is now the Maynard Bar. His business partner had closer links within the theatre and John Maynard Keynes</p> |
| 08:16 | <p>Explains he isn't sure if Corpus Christi college bought or leased the land, but they made it available for the theatre and tells of how they loosened the mortar within the back wall of the theatre and managed to get Griff Rhys Jones and Rory Mcgrath. At this point, no one knew who Rory Mcgrath was.</p> |
| 08.45 | <p>Griff Rhys Jones and Rory Mcgrath were both in The Marlowe Society and were performers with the Cambridge Footlights. David explains that Griff Rhys Jones was tasked with getting in a mini digger, whilst films crews from BBC and ITV news watched on and make a "breakthrough" into the back wall of the Theatre.</p> |
| 09.23 | <p>David explains that this demonstrated the Theatre was in a shocking state. Mentions his relationship with John Major, prime minister at the time. It was he whom first proposed the idea of registering the theatre with the National Lottery, which he believed would be extremely beneficial and the theatre would have a strong chance at qualifying for funding from them.</p> |

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| 10.34 | After being pointed within the right direction, the decision was taken to knock the Theatre down. The only thing that remains today is an internal stairwell, which does still stand. David explains how the drains within the basement had all broken and that this wasn't ideal. He also then tells explains how the stage was so small, this meant having to extend it with an "apron stage" for bigger productions. Therefore, this then also meant that money would be lost, as a result of having to take rows of seats out-something that had to be done on Sundays. |
| 11.37 | Theatre had run out of money at this point, so the best option was knocking the theatre down and rebuilding it. However, the issue was the cost: originally, the cost of a stage extension was £300,000 but a complete rebuild £6,000,000. David received a call from Lewis Isaacs , from Hewitsons [law firm], who asked him if he would be interested in helping raise funds etc. |
| 12.44 | David explains the theatre ended up being the first Arts recipients, certainly in the East Anglia and possibly the country from the National Lottery. He thought they would just hand over money, however it was insisted at least £250,000 was raised by the theatre itself. Addenbrookes was raising money at the same time, so this provided heavy competition, as not so many people wanted to donate to the theatre. |
| 14.04 | David explains how his old connections from his own business the first post of call to approach for donations were. Explains John Fairbairn of M&G securities was of fantastic help. He gave £100,000 to the theatre. |
| 14.38 | David explains he was put in charge of the community campaign. He split the Theatre's catchment areas into postcodes and went through the records of everyone who had ever attended the theatre and how many times they had attended. He found the people in each postcode who were the most regular attenders. These ranged from Newmarket, Ely, Saffron Waldon, St Ives, and the villages to the west of St Neots. David then contacted these people and asked if they'd be interested in chairing a postcode and raising money for the Theatre in any way they thought was fitting. Eventually they got them all in, CB1 was chaired by Cathy Phillips who was also chairing the Addenbrookes' scanner appeal. CB2 was a GP called Tony , who got his patients to sign up gift aid regularly. David states that receiving £5 a month for 5 years is better than receiving a cheque for £150. CB4 ran concerts. David then took St Ives and Huntingdon and started a plastic duck race on the river Ouse. He says that this was covered by the local tv and radio. David then recalls how he got the ducks for this race. They raffled a car and got the local MP to draw the winning ticket, he said that the winner didn't want the car but the money instead. David says that they got Clive James to do |

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| | <p>auction at Kings College over a dinner. He says that there was a wide range of prizes; a walk on part in a BBC play, ceremony of the keys at the Tower of London. A sculpture to do a bust of somebody. He says that he did this for 3 years.</p> |
| 19.46 | <p>David recalls doing an event with the Theatre in London with John Major. He says that they rounded up 60 of the wealthiest businessmen around Cambridge, who all came. He describes the event as starting with dinner in Strand and then being joined by Andrew Lloyd-Webber and the Prime Minister to go and see Sunset Boulevard. David says that Lord Archer was sitting next to him, and after this they went to 10 Downing Street. He says that this got the money pouring in and eventually they were able to knock the Theatre down.</p> |
| 21.20 | <p>David recalls that at one stage they discovered that the footings of the building in Bennett Street were not as deep as they thought, and the buildings such as the Bath Pub started to move. He says that it was a difficult site as there was no access to the middle, so they had to put a crane and scaffolding up to remove the rubble from the middle. David says that the architect was Barry Brown, who was an ex-Footlight and a personal friend to Clive James. He says that it was a difficult project, and they closed in 1993 and reopened Christmas 1996 with the pantomime.</p> |
| 22.49 | <p>David says that the Theatre's biggest problem was keeping awareness going. He said that the editor of the Cambridge News, Bob Satchwell supported the theatre with everything they did. David says that the Theatre was always mentioned in the paper and that the audience had started to go elsewhere.</p> |
| 23.35 | <p>He says that the theatre decided to do catering on the third floor, which he thought was a mistake. David says that they opened the restaurant but that it sadly didn't last very long, and that it is still in the Theatre as an empty rehearsal space. He said that the Theatre opened over budget. He says that the contractors knew that they had sold all the tickets to the pantomime for opening night, so it had to open in December. David recalls that the contractors were behind schedule, so they had to bribe them in order to meet the December opening. He says that the Theatre has since remodelled the inside of the building, with all new seats.</p> |
| 25.21 | <p>David says that he was then invited to sit on the board of the Theatre, but at the time the theatre was difficult to manage. He says that they still had the Festival Theatre on Newmarket road, which is now a Buddhist centre, He says that it had been the old Arts Theatre wardrobe building. David recalls that they also</p> |

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| | <p>owned the Arts Cinema, which was in Market Passage, where Baroosh B Bar now is. He says that both buildings were costing a lot of money and that there had been no maintenance for years. He says that he kept urging them to get rid of these buildings to focus on the Arts Theatre but eventually he left them to do it. They did eventually do this.</p> |
| 26.28 | <p>He says that the Arts Theatre used to have a touring company, to produce plays for groups around Britain. David says that all the props and costumes would be piled up in the Festival Theatre. David says that they put on the first ever play at the Festival Theatre and managed to clean the place up enough. He says that it was a beautiful theatre in the round. David recalls putting on a long Marlowe play on there to keep awareness going, but that it was an awful play.</p> |
| 27.57 | <p>David says that they now have a theatre which makes money, which is beautifully managed by Dave Murphy who is an accountant by trade and theatre lover by nature. He says that just after they opened, they lost the two major grants that the theatre had; one from the city council and the other from the arts council. He says that between them they gave over £100,000 a year, which was then lost. David says that this was when the booking fee on tickets was introduced. He says that whilst they were closed the council lost all the revenue from the Lion Yard car park, which was a vast amount. David says that despite this they never reversed their decision.</p> |
| 29.39 | <p>David says that he has always been community minded. He says that the Theatre has always had a good catchment area. David recalls that one person that he knew in the city paid for the new curtains in the Theatre which needed to be fireproof so would have been massively expensive. He says that there were three theatres in town, and that whilst they were closed the Cambridge Footlights went to the ADC and never came back. He says that the Theatre also used to do a lot of amateur productions, which came every year. David says that a lot of these were chased away in the new theatre as a lot of damage could be done on equipment through ignorance. He says that the Footlights used to live at the Arts Theatre at one point.</p> |
| 31.45 | <p>David says that things have moved on and that they no longer have to raise money to keep the theatre going which was Keynes intention, as he had built the Theatre for his wife to perform in. He says that it had cost Keynes £36,000 of his own money to build in the 1930s</p> |
| 32.08 | <p>David's international business has been based in Cambridge since 1945. He says they wanted to help people in Cambridge even though they didn't do business in the city. David recalls 10-12 years ago coming to the theatre and taking all the old photos from all the productions out of their frames, and notes</p> |

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| | <p>that some of them were signed by famous actors. He says it took 7-8 days to remove them from the glass wooden frames, and recalls using half-broken pliers and a hammer to remove the rusted panel pins. David says that at the time the Arts theatre had an old stable in St Edwards Passage, next to David's bookshop to keep the live ponies in for the pantomime. He recall's throwing the wooden frames in there. David notes Judi Dench being one of the actors from the frames. He says this is not surprising as the theatre goes back to the 1930s.</p> |
| 34.08 | <p>David notes that the pantomime has always been popular, and that it is better now than it has ever been. He says Cyril Fletcher took the theatre through the war and Biggins was here for years and now we have Matt Crosby. David says he comes to the pantomime every year, and is friends with Matt Crosby whose real name is Max Watkins. David talks about his links with Matt Crosby's grandmother. He says every year the pantomime gets fresher. David recalls bringing his staff to the theatre as a treat. He notes Dilys Watling playing the fairy godmother and his receptionist, who was drunk, shouted 'hello' every time she walked on stage. David mentions the pantomime is always a big earner for the theatre, and that it would struggle without it. He says he is now involved with Panto Wheels, and notes it is a fantastic project to be involved in. David says it gives many kids the opportunity to come to the theatre, who might not be able to otherwise. He says that they often go away enriched. David notes that the pantomime cast only work together for 6 weeks, and that he is full of awe of their memory. He notes the cast was incredible this year (2019).</p> |
| 38.49 | <p>David notes that <i>A woman in Black</i> and <i>An Inspector Calls</i> is set to return to the theatre.</p> |
| 39.20 | <p>He recalls a special effect leaving him in awe during the pantomime season. David believes it was a horse and carriage during <i>Cinderella</i>. He compares it to Chitty Chitty Bang Bang from the west end, and how the styles are different. David notes the pantomimes are largely written by the cast, and that in Biggins' day he wrote it entirely. He recalls Cilla Black being in the audience and everyone was more interested in her than the show itself. David says that the pantomime is very different now to how it was then. He says other pantomimes he has seen don't compare and recalls the Sunday Times naming it one of the top pantomimes in the province.</p> |
| 41.41 | <p>David says that since coming regularly he has begun to see the same faces. He notes they have stepped up to principle level, which allows them to come first night and meet the cast, which he hasn't done before. David says there is a comradery in love</p> |

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| | for the theatre. He recalls when he first became involved everyone took it very seriously. |
| 42.55 | He remembers the Arts cinema which had a French manager, who cost the theatre a lot of money. David recalls this manager asking to show Japanese films with translation, which was shown to an audience of 7, and the manager feeding back its success. He says they didn't make any money from it. David recalls the cinema used to use back projection, and people would smoke in there. He said very often there was an audience of 20-30. David recalls the theatre used to put on serious plays, and notes this has changed. He thinks there is now a recognition that some of the actors at the theatre have to be well-known. |
| 44.55 | David recalls meeting Dadie Rylands in the 1990s, who had been at the theatre since the beginning. He remembers Rylands didn't approve of the modernisation of the theatre, but David thinks it had to evolve. David thinks it is much more relaxed now, and remembers people dressing up to come to the theatre. He notes that the social conditions have changed and that the theatre has adapted to it. David says that he has written to the papers when people complain about the theatre's booking fee, as it goes straight to the theatre and is needed. He thinks there is a misconception and the theatre should communicate more about what the fee is about. |
| 47.03 | He remembers the hole in the ground during the reconstruction. David says that there was a dozen committed people who drove the project through. He thinks the local press kept the theatre alive. |
| 48.47 | End |