



Cambridge Arts Theatre

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Interviewee's surname: Christiansen

Title: Mr

Interviewee's forename(s): Rupert

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None

Abstract:

Opera critic/writer and Theatre board member, Rupert Christiansen first came to the Theatre in 1972. He was a regular audience member whilst a student at Kings College, Cambridge and shares memories of the Theatre in the 1970s. Christiansen's association was rekindled in the 1990s when he was employed to author a commemorative book about the Theatre. He talks about the research process and reflects on the redevelopment that took place at this time. He concludes by explaining how he came to join the Theatre's board.

<p>Key words:</p>	<p>Oxford and Cambridge Shakespeare Company, Elijah Moshinsky, Sir Ian McKellen, Felicity Kendall, Contemporary Dance Theatre, Andrew Blackwood, Judy Birdwood, costume, Emma Thompson, Hugh Laurie, Stephen Fry, Peggy Ashcroft and Alec Guinness, Cambridge Footlights, restaurant, The Greek Play, ETO, Kent Opera and Opera 80, Festival Theatre, Sir Ian McKellen, Eleanor Bron. Picturehouse Cinema,</p>
<p>File</p>	
<p>00.00</p>	<p>Christiansen introduces himself. His memories of the Theatre range from 1972 to present, he is now on the Theatre's board of trustees. Christiansen describes his first experience of the Theatre seeing a production of 'As You Like It' featuring his school friend Sophie Cox as Celia, by the Oxford and Cambridge Shakespeare Company and directed by Elijah Moshinsky [b. 1946, Australian Opera Director]. Christiansen was in Cambridge for his interview for Kings College, aged 17, he speaks very positively about the play and its wonderful sets but also of the excitement of being in a new city, on the brink of his adult life and the excitement at the new found independence.</p>
<p>02.20</p>	<p>As an undergraduate Christiansen was an active theatre goer attending performances at the ADC Theatre and at the Arts Theatre, 'the Arts Theatre was sort of the grown-up Theatre'. He describes how the Arts Theatre was not popular with students who did not seem to share his interest in professional theatre. Christiansen saw Sir Ian McKellen in 'Tis a Pity She's A Whore' with Felicity Kendall as well as London Contemporary Dance Theatre, then considered very cutting edge. He remembers that dance was not very well attended. The Theatre in the 1970s was shabby, but clean and well kept. Andrew Blackwood, the then chief executive, 'ran it like a ship'. Although Christiansen never went backstage some of his university friends at Newnham College were very involved with the wardrobe mistress Judy Birdwood, sewing costumes for performances.</p>
<p>05.10</p>	<p>Christiansen remembers seeing the Footlights 1979 performance in his final graduate year. This famous performance featured Emma Thompson, Hugh Laurie & Stephen Fry, although 'I don't think they were very good'. An earlier group of Footlights had featured a young actor called Nonnie Williams who was a friend of Christiansen and widely regarded as an upcoming talent. Following an early presenting job at Granada Television she gave up showbusiness, marrying and having five children. Christiansen remembers the Theatre attracted established names such as Peggy Ashcroft and Alec Guinness but with tickets sometimes too expensive to attract</p>

	the student population, the Theatre was predominantly a city institution.
08.40	Christiansen remembers the Theatre restaurant on the top floor of the building. He came daily for lunch as the food was much better than college food, not too expensive and to sit on the terrace and eat and smoke was 'rather groovy'. The Cambridge arts scene was at the time based around film and the arts cinema which held 11pm showings of film classics which regularly sold out. By contrast the Arts Theatre attracted a 'town' audience, quite old. 'The place wasn't very inviting, the foyer was not very glamorous, the entrance was rather sort of recessive, you could easily walk past...'
11.47	Notes he can't remember everything he saw. He remembers seeing The Greek Play in his undergraduate years, 'the Greek play tradition is something unique in the Theatre world and something to be valued'. He watched opera, ETO, Kent Opera and Opera 80 precursor to ETO. He notes the Theatre was always a difficult house for dance because on the small size of the stage. He comments on the variety of performing arts on offer, 'An incredibly good menu'.
13.05	Christiansen recounts how his interest in the performing arts led to his current career as an opera critic and writer. He was friends with Ruth Sapsed, who had previously worked at Glyndebourne, and who was now working at the Theatre under Nicky Upton. In the 1990s, as part of the redevelopment project, the Theatre wanted to do a commemorative book. Christiansen thought this was a chance to give back to the Theatre and agreed to author the book, working on the project with a group of friends. He remembers going to the Festival Theatre on Mill Road [now the Buddhist centre] a Georgian Theatre which had been at the centre of the artistic <i>avant garde</i> in the 1920s. It had closed after the war when the Arts Theatre had come to prominence, the Festival Theatre became a storage warehouse containing sets and costumes. The Festival Theatre building was old style, three tiered, with a dress circle and upper circle. When Christiansen gained access in the 1990s it contained trunks full of costumes, photographs and papers...There had been an academic history of the Theatre written in the 1960s, instead this new commission was supposed to be a coffee table book. Christiansen sought contributions from actors who had played here: Sir Ian McKellen, Eleanor Bron. [R. Christiansen ed., <i>Cambridge Arts Theatre: Celebrating Sixty Years</i>].
19.50	Christiansen recalls there had been a fundraising gala for the Haymarket Theatre which he attended; many prominent actors came out in support. Writing the book ten years later he called on many of the same contacts, he recalls 'it is a place that

	<p>people feel very very fond of... for a lot of the Cambridge graduates this was their first experience of acting in a “proper” theatre’ ‘very exciting for people, appearing on the stage of the Arts Theatre’.</p>
21.40	<p>Christiansen remembers the 1990’s, he talks about how the Theatre became very run down before it was renovated. When the Theatre got the grant for renovations ‘they went a bit mad’. Christiansen reflects that with hindsight some aspects of the renovations were done badly; ‘it went wildly over-budget’, suggests possibly issues with the architect/brief too. He notes, however, that people were impressed when the Theatre re-opened and there was an improvement despite its problems. He noticed problems soon after the re-opening. ‘The figures weren’t working’ and programming wasn’t working to keep up year-round. It was a difficult time for the Arts generally, he notes, but sees the Arts Theatre was “unbelievably resilient”.</p>
24.55	<p>Christiansen reflects that improved rail links to London are a difficulty for regional theatre as people can travel there for shows much more easily now. Christiansen says that back in the late 70’s when he was an undergraduate, before such quick train travel, he was ‘much more excited at the thought of what I could see in Cambridge’. He sees no solution to this other than making the ‘visitor experience’ as nice as possible, but thinks that the renovation of the auditorium will help, and notes that this should have been done with the other renovations in the 1990’s.</p>
26.50	<p>Christiansen recalls how he joined the Theatre’s board about 3 years ago. He met Dave Murphy through a weekend course he was giving on the history of Opera. They started talking and out of the blue he said, ‘would you like to join the board?’’. He had been on the board of the Gate Theatre in west London for 15 years and enjoyed it, so wanted to keep being involved in theatre. Having been on the board for about 3 years he has found that the members represent ‘the cross-section of what Cambridge is now’, and thinks it is a good board.</p>
29.55	<p>Although he doesn’t think the theatre helped him become an opera critic, he does note that it was there for him when he gave up his dream of becoming an actor (he then instead thought about becoming an academic). During that time, the Arts Theatre ‘kept [his]...emotional links going with the theatre’ ultimately ensuring he became part of the arts world. He did not know when he attended as a student of course he would eventually end up on the Theatre’s board.</p>
31.25	<p>ENDS</p>