



# Cambridge Arts Theatre

**Interview data sheet:** Behind the Scenes Project

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**Collection title:** Behind the scenes: saving and sharing Cambridge Arts Theatre's Archive

**Interviewee's surname:** Walton

**Title:** Mr

**Interviewee's forename(s):** Stephen

**Gender:** Male

**Occupation:** Former chief executive

**Date(s) of recording, tracks (from-to):** 24/02/2020

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**Name of interviewer:** Emily Bowen

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**Interviewer's comments:**

**Abstract:** Former Chief Executive Stephen Walton remembers his early memories of Cambridge Arts Theatre before taking the reins in 1990. He discusses his early career in Stage Management, the Theatre's capital project to refurbish the building and the opening of the Rooftop Restaurant. Stephen Walton also

	expresses his thoughts on Cambridge Arts Theatre's position within the arts in Cambridge, and how the Theatre produced staff who went on to become leading people in the industry.
<b>Key words:</b>	
<b>File 01</b>	
<b>00.26</b>	Walton first came to the Arts as a child to see pantomime in <b>Cyril Fletcher's</b> time. He notes having a vivid memory of Fletcher doing the skit 'there's a hole in my bucket' downstage and then a Dame striptease with many layers of costume. Walton says they came regularly from Norfolk and recalls having baked beans and scrambled eggs at The Whim, which was the café on the corner of Green Street and Trinity street. He also remembers seeing <i>The Wind in the Willows</i> and remembers the scene with the weasels and stoats.
<b>01.38</b>	Walton notes there was a 10-15yr gap in his visiting of the theatre. He was working for a section of the Royal Ballet, called Ballet For All, which did a tour to the Arts. He recalls saving up their touring allowance to stay in better places. Walton notes that Cambridge and Oxford had the best stage crews in the country. He remembers meeting <b>Mike Arnold</b> , Charlie, and Tony, Roger Ryan and Steve Hawkins amongst others.
<b>02.39</b>	Walton then worked for the <b>Cambridge Theatre Company (CTC)</b> as a Deputy Stage Manager. He recalls rehearsing in the ADC theatre for <i>She Stoops to Conquer</i> , which Derek Colby directed, and opened at the Arts. Walton notes they also did the <i>Jack and the Beanstalk</i> for pantomime that year, with John Moffatt writing and starring as the Dame. He recalls Polly James playing Jack, Zoe Wanamaker as Phoebe, Roger Reece as Jack the Lad. Walton recalls they were at the Arts for weeks. He remembers <i>French without Tears</i> also performed at the Arts.
<b>04.14</b>	Walton notes then going in the Prop room. He recalls as you walked into the get in there was a room on the left called the prop room where the Stage Crew would sit. They informed him there was a job going at the Festival Theatre as a member of the stage crew and he recalls working there for two months, building sets for CTC with a carpenter called <b>Roger Ryan</b> .
<b>05.53</b>	He then went on an Arts Council course for stage management and ended up running the Theatre Royal in Bury St. Edmunds. Walton notes that at this time the Arts Theatre and the Theatre Royal were part of a group of East Anglian theatres which would meet two or three times a year. Walton recalls circulating the venues for these meetings, which is how he came to know <b>Andrew Blackwood</b> .
<b>06.59</b>	In 1990 Walton was appointed Chief Executive at the Arts Theatre when Andrew retired. He recalls that the applications closed on the Monday and that he found a quote by Maynard Keynes about the artist being free, which he put on the back of his business card after getting the job. Walton recalls spending the Saturday before with his assistant reorganising the entire application to get the quote as the centre, cutting and sticking parts together as Microsoft was not around.

08.42	Walton says that he doesn't remember the theatre as a child but has vivid memories of the shows. He says that pantomime is an art form which is set by tradition, which involves set routines. Walton notes his disappointment that these routines are being rewritten by contemporary writers, He recalls his time in Bury and states that when hiring a Dame he was not just employing the artist but buying their wardrobe, which would be in the contract. Walton says they were buying the heritage as much as the talent. He recalls Cyril Fletcher not allowing others larger laughs on stage. He notes that pantomime scripts should be no more than 12 pages long. Walton remembers talk of the Arts theatre and CTC becoming one but notes that this never happened. He says that CTC were the resident company at the Arts. Walton recalls the excitement of coming to the theatre as a child.
12.24	Walton says he always wanted to work in the theatre. He recalls his experience with other theatres as a young adult, and the paint used by scene painters. Walton notes sharing a flat with catering students from the Tech. He remembers doing two shows and then going to the Gardenier on Rose Crescent. Walton notes the theatre has been an important part in his life.
15.21	From his time with the Ballet Walton recalls the Arts being one of the best organised theatres in the country. He remembers arriving and having the lights already coloured, the crew already looked at the grand plans and a lot of the work had been done before the get-in began. He notes the Arts has one of the longest get-ins on the circuit. Walton remembers <b>Roger Holmes</b> , who could look at a piece of scenery from the fly gallery and knew how much weight to use to lift it. He says that 99.9% of the time Holmes was bang on. Walton also remembers Alwin who developed dial-a-light, allowing lighting technicians to bring up lights with ease. He notes that the stage was spotless and mopped every day. Walton names <b>Charlie Fisher</b> and <b>Tony Young</b> as members of the stage crew.
18.25	Walton recalls having <b>Roger Golby</b> as a director for his first show as a DSM. He recalls how he got the job as DSM with CTC and how his first rehearsal at the ADC went. Walton says he learnt a lot from <b>Michael Dale</b> and <b>Dallas Smith</b> who worked front of house. He notes <b>Robert Lang</b> directed the next CTC show which had 23 scenes. Walton recalls the Arts stage had minute wing space and during one of the performances there was something on stage that shouldn't have been, and he went on to pick it up and recalls seeing lots of heads in the audience. He remembers that by the time the pantomime had finished its 5-week run all the call boxes at the sides of the stages were covered in flowers. Walton also notes they held parties on the theatre's roof garden and hosted first night drinks, which made the companies feel at home in the theatre.
23.40	Walton remembers the parties at the Arts. He returned to the Arts in 1990. The Arts Theatre was unique at this time in receiving little money from the Arts Council surviving on a bequest from <b>Keynes</b> . (John Maynard) However, this also

	<p>posed a challenge. A further challenge was presented by the small stage space. Walton describes the stage area at this time and restrictions on get-in and get-out by the unions, problems with creating the forstage. He describes the terrible stage of the Theatre's catering provision. Access difficulties via Peas Hill. Creating a bigger stage, technical restrictions, catering and access formed the plan for the 1990s capital project. <b>Chris Johnson</b> (Bursar at St John's College) Chair of the Board at the time negotiated with Corpus Christie College to give a slice of land to the Theatre and the basement. Walton describes the practical difficulties of the building works – need for piling on a restricted site, archaeologists. Negotiating with the Cheltenham and Gloucester Building Society for the walkway. <b>Barry Brown</b> (architect) who had already been working for the Theatre, was appointed. He was a former Footlight.</p>
<b>33.25</b>	<p>Meeting with <b>John Major</b> (prime minister) 14 February. <b>Geoffrey Archer</b> made the introduction. Archer also hosted a charity auction for the Theatre. Major told Walton about the National Lottery. The Theatre then employed someone to write the Lottery application. Walton reflects that with hindsight they possibly did not ask for enough but the fundraising industry was in its infancy and there wasn't the context of major grants. Within two years the Theatre was shut for the project.</p>
<b>38.00</b>	<p>Walton describes the closing of the Theatre ahead of the capital project. Flock wallpaper in the staircase coming down St Edward's Passage. Tired and sad. Laid off 70 people many of whom had been at the Theatre for a long time. The building works started and problems with underpinning and piling were very quickly apparent.</p>
<b>40.33</b>	<p>Walton explains the decision to put a restaurant on the fifth floor. He describes the old roof garden café unusable for half the year. He describes the naysayers – and the hearts and minds campaign. <b>David Charters</b> was a fantastic asset.</p>
<b>43.10</b>	<p>CAT became the go to place for drinking lager and lime! People were critical of the glazing in the new restaurant, and the loss of the old roof garden. There were problems with the catering – possibly with hindsight Walton reflects they might have employed a third party. The context was the Theatre's success in bringing young people into the Theatre. The Theatre hosted 10 trust shows from the University a year, set up by Keynes, the Theatre put up the money, took the risk at the box office and gave the creative control to the student body. The Theatre had a wider agenda to continue this work and expand the sort of programming they did, moving away from a conservative set of plays, a movement led by companies like <b>Cheek by Jowl</b>, contemporary dance... But the programme was fundamentally sound. The problems at the time Walton attributes instead to the loss of catering income.</p>
<b>00.48.45</b>	<p>Walton describes the potential for theatre to be 'collecting points for people, people used to meet here' and his wish to make the Theatre a relevant meeting place.</p>
<b>00.51.10</b>	<p>Walton complements the <b>Foyer project (2013)</b> and the Theatre's future plans.</p>

00.51.56	Walton summarises the changes made during the 1990s capital project. Emphasising the expansion of the stage was essential.
00.54.44	Asked what he would have done differently. He reflects on the new processes involved in getting Lottery funding including the difficulties with procurement, project management but emphasises the importance of what they were doing. There is a reason why this place for so many years produced people who went on to become senior people in the Theatre world. The Arts Theatre was at the top, you had <b>the ADC</b> , you had the reading rooms and the colleges... the ecosystem in Cambridge was there to produce this talent.
01.00.00	Walton remembers a production of <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> in Romanian. The importance for the programme is a balance. The difficulties of project fatigue. An awful winter half way through the project. Walton reflects the Arts Theatre were not the only organisation to struggle with major projects in this way.
01.02.37	He regrets not optimising on the opportunity to meet with <b>Chris Smith</b> (the Culture secretary) -an introduction which would have been made possible by <b>John Newbiggen</b> - to try to save the Arts Cinema and the Festival Theatre. When the cinema was lost <b>Tony Jones</b> was going to run it, but he was always going to retire, both buildings are a great loss. But nevertheless - 'It's here, it's working, it's great'
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