



# Cambridge Arts Theatre

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

**Ref no:** THM/258

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

**Interviewee's surname:** McCallin

**Title:** Ms

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

**Gender:** Female

**Occupation:** Designer

**Date(s) of recording, tracks (from-to):** 25.2.20

**Name of interviewer:** Dale Copley

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**Interviewer's comments:**

**Abstract:**

An established set designer with an extensive repertoire of work, Tanya McCallin reflects on her career in theatre. She describes her time at Cambridge Arts Theatre working with the University's Cambridge Footlights and The Marlowe Society, and her memories of theatre colleagues and creatives during the seventies and eighties.

<b>Key words:</b>	Designer, The Marlowe Society, The Jew of Malta, Cambridge University, Mike Arnold, set design, costume design, Cambridge Footlights, The Cambridge Theatre Company
<b>File</b>	
00.00	Tanya was a Theatre Designer, and after retiring she changed careers and begun working as a Potter.
01.25	Tanya grew up in Australia, and in 1970 came to England to attend arts school in London. Tanya had friends who studied at Cambridge University, so spent some time there. The first production she worked on at Cambridge Arts Theatre was The Marlowe Society's <i>The Jew of Malta</i> in 1975. Tanya's career then moved to freelance and rep work. Tanya immensely enjoyed working on productions with The Marlowe Society and Cambridge students.
03.02	Tanya remembers Mike Arnold as a significant member of staff at Cambridge Arts Theatre, who was the Stage Manager. Tanya says that Mike made the Theatre the greatest pleasure to work in. Tanya remembers building the set design for <i>The Jew of Malta</i> with borrowed scaffolding from a building site near the theatre and old pieces of cardboard.
05.36	Tanya says the first stage of working on set design is the script. She thinks that if you don't respond to a play and it doesn't mean something to you, you should not work on it.
06.46	During Tanya's first four months after returning to England in 1970, she worked as a Dresser at the Royal Shakespeare Company. She says that this experience taught her about how to design. Tanya says Directors normally have ideas on design, and that production budgets and artistic vision influences design decisions. Tanya remembers having a very naïve point of view for her design of <i>The Jew of Malta</i> , but was also very daring. She says she received the best reviews of her life for the production.
08.50	Tanya says she lived a heightened reality in the seventies. She remembers having to be very inventive with design due to small budgets. Tanya thinks that one of the tragedies for designers is having too much money. She says that students who did not get cast in The Marlowe Society productions helped with set design, which was helpful.
10.30	Tanya says she showed Mike Arnold her set design for <i>The Jew of Malta</i> , and they built it on Cambridge Arts Theatre's stage. She remembers that the theatre didn't have a lighting board, and between building the set on a Saturday night and opening the show on a Tuesday night they had very little sleep.
11.35	Tanya remembers the long days and nights building the set, Mike Arnold would cook a meal in the Green Room at 3am for the entire crew to eat. Also, if there was opportunity for a couple of hours of sleep, Mike Arnold would lower the curtain to fold onto the stage so the crew could lie head to toe and sleep within the curtain.
13.05	Tanya explains that Designers were usually hired as soon as a Director is employed. Often a Designer's research and development for a production spans several months, often whilst working on other productions simultaneously. She

	remembers not trusting her own instincts and vision as a Designer and struggling through five or six concepts.
14.00	Tanya says that parallel to set design, a Designer also needs to think about costume. Tanya never thought she would be a Costume Designer, she trained for two years in Architecture so came into the theatre industry from a structural point of view. Tanya says she learnt about Costume Design early on in her career with drawings and visual references from books. Tanya says that it is very hard to design a costume without meeting the actor, you have to start with the actor and then approach different costume design concepts.
17.00	Tanya remembers Cambridge Arts Theatre as an intimate auditorium with red drapes. She remembers the pub The Eagle and the Market Square nearby, and enjoys how central to the city of Cambridge the theatre is. She remembers the offices were upstairs and the House Manager lived in a flat within the building. She says that it felt like a family, and a very special theatre.
18.31	Tanya says that her role as Designer for The Marlowe Society's <i>The Jew of Malta</i> was not a paid position, but she later received a letter thanking her for her work with £150. This taught her a lesson as a young professional that you should accept work regardless of pay and to work your way up. Tanya says she remembers Cambridge Arts Theatre as a very friendly, caring theatre.
19.30	Tanya worked on Cambridge Footlights with director John Lloyd. Having not grown up in England, Tanya found that she didn't understand British humour and found Cambridge Footlights' comedy sketches bizarre. She struggled with design for Cambridge Footlights because the sketches did not relate to each other. She thinks it was an insane project for an inexperienced designer to do, but it was fun.
22.02	Tanya's first job was in Crewe, her previous Tutor was Head of Design and was paid £20 per week and she was an Assistant, being paid £18 per week. She designed and built nine plays there.
23.15	After working at Cambridge Arts Theatre Tanya's next job was at the National Theatre and the Young Vic. She says that she found it a struggle as her pay was low, and the jobs were demanding. She also worked at Hampstead Theatre. She remembers working on fourteen shows per year. She considers this as extremely lucky, as not many Designers could begin their careers that way now.
24.16	Tanya says she travelled back to Australia and worked at the Melbourn Theatre Company. She then met her husband and they moved back to England together. Tanya says she worked on a diverse range of productions all over the world. Tanya remembers working in Oxford, and spent a lot of time travelling between Oxford and Cambridge for work.
26.19	Tanya says she first worked with Bill Pryde on a production of <i>The Homecoming</i> . They also worked together on a double bill of <i>The School for Scandal</i> and <i>The Changeling</i> , which required the same design to adapt to both productions. Tanya says that part of Cambridge Arts Theatre's funding from the Arts Council

	required them to tour their productions. Tanya says that design for touring is very different, as you have to be able to rebuild the set in a new theatre. Tanya says that she also worked with Foco Novo in London, and that theatre company's rule for touring set design was that the set had to fit into the back of one transit van.
30.15	Tanya says her foremost memory of the Cambridge Theatre Company is Mike Arnold and the gruelling schedules. She says she remembers that around 1976 being frightened walking home to her digs because at the time there was a rapist who was raping women in Cambridge colleges.
31.29	Another of Tanya's memories was one day looking down at the floor and seeing a torn photograph of actors in a play. It turned out to be a photograph of her father from 1936 performing at The Festival Theatre. Tanya says that she always felt an emotional connection to Cambridge. Tanya says that her father was an actor before the war, performing at theatres like The Old Vic.
33.09	Tanya says that she always felt extremely happy at Cambridge Arts Theatre, under huge pressure but always supported by both management and technical staff. She says she remembers the theatre being well supported by the town.
36.40	Tanya says that The Marlowe Society always employed professional Directors and Designers. She says she remembers Cambridge as a town for theatre.