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| **Interview data sheet:** Behind the Scenes Project | |
| **Ref no:** THM/258    **WAV files ref:** | |
| **Collection title:** Behind the scenes: saving and sharing Cambridge Arts Theatre’s Archive  **Interviewee’s surname:**  Rhys Jones  **Title:** Mr  **Interviewee’s forename(s):** Griff  **Gender:** M  **Occupation:** Comedian | |
| **Date(s) of recording, tracks (from-to):**  **Location of interview:** Cambridge Arts Theatre  **Name of interviewer:** Katherine Moar  **Type of recorder:** Zoom H4N **Recording format:** WAV  **Total no. of tracks:** 1 **Total duration (HH:MM:SS):** 00:35:19  **Mono/Stereo:** Stereo | |
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| **Interviewer’s comments:** | “If you want to make a mark, go on and do something – don’t wait to be asked.” Griff Rhys Jones reminisces about his formative years performing as an undergraduate at Cambridge Arts Theatre, describes life on the touring circuit, and offers advice to the next generation of student actors. |
| **Abstract:** |  |
| **Key words:** | Cambridge Arts Theatre, ADC, Footlights, Robert Benton, Douglas Adams, Edinburgh Festival, Marlowe Society, *Bartholomew Fair, An Evening Without,* Stephen Walton, Gilbert and Sullivan Society, Judy Birdwood, Festival Theatre, Andrew Blackwood, Mike Arnold, Jenny Arnold, *The Jew of Malta,* John Chapman, *An Hour and a Half Late,*Dadie Rylands, University of Cambridge, Declan Donnellan, Nicholas Hytner, Roger Michell, Peter Cook, John Cleese |
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| **00.00** | **What is your earliest memory of Cambridge Arts Theatre?** |
|  | Rhys Jones recalls seeing several shows at the Theatre during his time as an undergraduate. However, students were often more interested in seeing their peers in productions at the ADC and college theatres than coming to the Arts. His first experience of performing at the Arts came at the end of his first year of university, when he appeared in the Footlights Revue: ‘Every Packet’. Rhys Jones believes it was rare for a first-year student to perform in the Revue; he was encouraged to audition by Robert Benton, who was president of the Footlights, and Douglas Adams. Rhys Jones knew Benton and Adams from school. He performed in the Revue during his second and third year also. In those days, the Footlights had a two-week run in Cambridge leading up to the Edinburgh Festival. Rhys Jones also directed a Marlowe Society production of *Bartholomew Fair* a year or two after leaving university. Jones returned to the Arts with a show called *An Evening Without*, a late-night cabaret-style show of highlights from previous Footlights Revues. Later, Rhys Jones performed in a show directed by Stephen Walton which was raising money for the Lottery Appeal. He has not performed at the Arts since its refurbishment, except possibly for the celebration of the Theatre’s reopening. |
| **6.00** | Rhys Jones recalls that the Arts had a strong connection to student theatre when he was at Cambridge. The Gilbert and Sullivan Society, the Marlowe Society and the Footlights would put on their shows here. This meant that students got to know staff at the Arts quite well. The costume department was then run by Judy Birdwood, ‘an amazing woman’. The Arts had a large store of costumes at the Festival Theatre which had had its heyday in the ‘30s and was left deserted by the ‘70s; costumes from the Arts Theatre filled the circle. The ‘man in charge’ was Commander Blackwood [Andrew Blackwood]; the legend was that Blackwood had been a commander in the Catering Corps which was one of the reasons he had been appointed to his role because the restaurant and bar were such important spaces parts of the Arts Theatre at that time. Rhys Jones says that he and his friends ‘lived up there’ during his second and third year ‘planning and doing things and spending enormous amounts of money on food and drink’; he remembers the face of the chef ‘very, very well’. He felt ‘totally integrated’ into the life of the Arts Theatre. Rhys Jones describes the technical staff as ‘saints’ for dealing with the requests of 20-year-olds. The head of the technical department was Mike Arnold, and his wife Jenny was the Theatre’s choreographer. Rhys Jones was struck by the experience of working with ‘real people with real jobs’ as opposed to fly-by-night students. Rhys Jones describes the Footlights at the time he joined as ‘rather seriously amateur’ with people ‘talking about The Profession and make-up and equity costs’; then it ‘became rather camp’; and then it became’ ‘a comedian’s world’, dominated by ‘joke-smiths’. He recalls there was a rule that they could only discuss the title of the show for half an hour a day – there was always pressure to pick a funny title. |
| **11.55** | Rhys Jones remembers performing in the Marlowe Society production of *The Jew of Malta*, directed by John Chapman. The staff were ‘incredibly patient’ dealing with students ‘taking over the stage and spending twice the budget!’ |
| **14.30** | **Was there a sense of significance in performing on a professional stage as a student?** |
|  | Rhys Jones thinks it was very significant to perform on a bigger stage and a professional stage with a professional crew and lighting ring: it ‘required that you stepped up; you couldn’t get away with just wandering feebly onto the stage.’ For that reason, the Footlights and Marlowe Society brought in professional directors to ensure it all came off. Rhys Jones is grateful for the opportunity to direct the Marlowe Society production of *Bartholomew Fair* as a recent university graduate. |
| **16.25** | **Do you think you had an easier time directing the Marlowe having recently been an undergraduate?** |
|  | Rhys Jones recalls that his audition process partly involved bringing together people he knew. One of the advantages of running a student production is that you can have a large cast; in Jones’s production of *Bartholomew Fair* there was a market continually on stage, which enabled him to cast almost everybody who auditioned – they could be on stage running a stall at the market. His production had a cast of around 30 on stage throughout while the action went on in the foreground. |
| **17.20** | **You are now back performing at the Arts in the show *An Hour and a Half Late*; what is it like returning as a professional actor?** |
|  | This is Rhys Jones’s first time doing a provincial tour; it is a new experience to perform in a different acoustic and ambiance each week. He has found it ‘great’ performing at the Arts because it is a ‘very neat theatre’; it is a very good size, has a very forgiving acoustic, and looks very beautiful – a ‘very beautiful auditorium, especially looking out from the stage as a matter of fact’. |
| **19.07** | **How does it compare with the other theatres on your touring circuit?** |
|  | All theatres have their own quirks but there is a particular atmosphere to a good theatre. Rhys Jones notes that ‘these days, theatres are not necessarily rolling in money’. He says that while ‘out front is a luxurious environment, backstage is often not a luxurious environment at all’. Cambridge Arts Theatre is fortunate in being placed right in the town, where there is a lot to do. |
| **20.30** | **How important were your early experiences performing here to the future of your career?** |
|  | Rhys Jones says that the Arts is ‘very important in the history of British theatre’. Dadie Rylands would come to sit in shows Rhys Jones was performing in and complain that he couldn’t hear anything. The interesting thing about Cambridge student theatre is that ‘nobody is in charge’ – ‘there is nobody to take favourites, as there might be in a drama school’. Rhys Jones describes it as ‘a good training’ for professional theatre, especially for directors. He says it is no surprise that graduates of Cambridge have gone on to run theatres and put on productions. There have been discussions about whether Cambridge University should open a drama department; Rhys Jones points out that ‘they have done pretty well without doing that!’. He thinks that part of the training process comes from the ‘free-for-all’ atmosphere. As a student, Rhys Jones was president of the ADC. He remembers formulating a policy to try to solve the problem of low attendance to shows. He thought this was due to the fact student directors would put on less popular plays because they ‘wanted to show off’ instead of choosing plays that people wanted to see. He describes it as a very exciting time. When Rhys Jones started at university, Declan Donnellan was in Cambridge; then Nicholas Hytner and Roger Michell came. There was an ‘enormous amount of theatre going on’. |
| **25.30** | **The Cambridge Footlights has many famous alumni; is that something you were conscious of as a student?** |
|  | Rhys Jones says that they ‘were all very much of the feeling that it was something that had happened in the past but wasn’t going to happen to [them]’. He remembers that ‘every review would start with ‘well, there are no Peter Cooks or John Cleeses here’ or ‘thank god this lot are all going to be doctors and lawyers because they’re not funny’. Rhys Jones thinks that reviewers ‘ought to be ashamed of themselves; they always assume, when they watch undergraduates, that they are making or spotting the next Great – and they nearly always get it all completely wrong’. |
| **26.30** | **We are just coming out of a pandemic; what has the closure of theatres shown you about the importance of theatres?** |
|  | On his tour, Rhys Jones has seen that theatres seating 400 or 500 will be filled by a one-man show; he thinks this is great and would not have happened 20 years ago. Rhys Jones says that television, and especially the BBC, has become ‘quite a controlled medium’ as ‘people are restricted in what they can say and do’ but that theatre still allows people to be ‘experimental and outspoken’, ‘to speak about issues of the day openly and straight-forwardly’. |
| **29.20** | **Do you prefer performing alone or in a company?** |
|  | Rhys Jones says that ‘it is very different being in a play – and much more frightening.’ He describes each play as ‘an exploration’ and says that ‘rehearsal, especially for comedies, is only a partial exploration’ because one can never know which lines are funny when performed to an audience. Rhys Jones considers himself lucky to have always played leading roles because he does not like ‘sitting around waiting to go on!’. |
| **33.10** | **Before we finish, is there anything we haven’t touched upon that you would like to mention?** |
|  | Rhys Jones says that being around the Arts was a very important part of his life; for six years he was in and out of the Theatre. There were some great people there and they did some great productions. He describes it as a ‘very formative’ time. His advice to current Footlights members is to ignore the noise around them saying who is good and bad, or harking back to better days. He describes being in the Footlights as ‘scary and fun’; Rhys Jones concludes with the advice: ‘if you want to make a mark, go on and do something – don’t wait to be asked’. |
| **ENDS** |  |