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| A drawing of a face  Description automatically generated | |
| **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:** Harding  **Title:** Mr  **Interviewee’s forename(s):** John  **Gender:** Male  **Occupation:** Retired | |
| **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):** 00:27:48  **Mono/Stereo:** Stereo | |
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| **Copyright/Clearance:** Assigned to Cambridge Arts Theatre. | |
| **Interviewer’s comments:** | None |
| **Abstract:** | John Harding, a former History Teacher at The Leys School, first visited Cambridge Arts Theatre in 1961-2. He shares memories of the Theatre from his younger days, both as an audience member and as a performer. He speaks about the evolution of the Theatre from that time until now and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the industry at large. He ends by reiterating the importance of theatre and what it has taught him. |
| **Key words:** | The Greek Play, *King Leo*, Oxford, Stephen Siddall, McKellan, Sleuth, Opera, Richard Strauss, Culture, Clive James, The Cambridge Actors, John Whiting, *The Devils*, Richard Pearson, Free-lancing, Andrew Blackwood, Gilbert and Sullivan, Broadway Musicals. |
| **File** |  |
| **00.00** | John introduces himself. His earliest memory of Cambridge Arts Theatre was coming up from school to watch the Greek Play two years before he became an early graduate, possibly 1961 or 1962. His thoughts on the play were positive, though, as he did not study classics at school, he did not particularly understand the content. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, he brought his godson to see a marvellous production of *Opuscules*. |
| 2:16 | John studied history at Emmanuel College, Cambridge as an undergraduate. He did not visit the Theatre regularly as he was very involved in college drama and ran his college’s dramatic society. In those days, colleges were very insular and most student entertainment was done within. He claims that the city was a very different place and there was virtually no night life at all. There was a cinema across the road, ‘The Regal’, however he did not go out that frequently. |
| 3:36 | John was not necessarily interested in theatre when he was younger. In his last term at school before he got a place at Cambridge, he had a term to ‘knock around’ and they were doing a production of *King Leo*. John explains that he had never acted before in his life. Just for fun, he auditioned, and was cast as the Doctor that comes on in Act V. He went home for Christmas and thought no more of it. Then, all the cast were called back for further auditions as the person who was meant to play Leo did not receive a play at Oxford and was, therefore, having to work more towards A-Levels. John was cast as Leo, a big leap from his original role. He was thrilled with the idea of acting. Later, there was a young member of staff who oversaw the production: Stephen Siddall. He was the ‘guru’ of amateur dramatics. |
| 6:53 | Between 1968 and 1976, John started going to virtually everything at Cambridge Arts Theatre. Those were ‘the glory days’, he explains. New productions transferred from the Arts to the West End. [Ian] McKellan made his name at this time and John saw him perform before he came to London. He mentions that there weren’t particularly roles for women, and it was rather male dominant in those days. |
| 9:41 | A production he remembers very distinctly was in 1966 and was a take on an opera called *Sleuth*. Richard Strauss rewrote it as a standalone opera. John explains that it was extraordinary as it was a 4-hour long piece which nobody had ever done before. Clive James had a role in the piece which people enjoyed as he was an important cultural male figure within the 1960s. ‘It’s hard to explain how important Clive James was regarding the culture of Cambridge.’ James was completing an undergraduate course at the time but was a lot older than the rest of them and had come over from Australia. He and Pete Atkin ‘did everything’. |
| 12:15 | Very soon after he saw [Griff] Rhys Jones perform in *Charley’s Aunt* and the original production of *The Dresser* with Richard Pearson. He claims that there was a consistent quality when it came to shows and productions that he saw at Cambridge Arts Theatre. |
| 14:01 | John thinks that the Theatre has lost its spirit over the last couple years. Prior to this, he says, Andrew Blackwood ran the Arts in the spirit in which the Theatre was originally established by [John Maynard] Keynes. John says that he does not come half as frequently as he did in the past. It’s a regional theatre with some interesting productions like *Four Quartets* but a lot of stuff he is not really interested in. He cites the fact that the Theatre has lost the roof garden and that previously everyone knew everyone: it was family gathering space. With all the changes, John claims, it is a far more cramped space. |
| 16:45 | To John, the Arts was his weekly dose of culture. It was where he learnt to appreciate great directing and great acting, not so much the plays themselves. It was later that John discovered opera and he switched to going to opera. John argues that opera is two-thirds freelance and that there was no furlough system for freelancers during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, he says, most people have left the profession and now there is no one to start it up again. He calls this a ‘total disaster’. ‘No one sees the value of culture anyway… What’s the future?’ |
| 19:06 | John explains that after the pandemic it made everyone desperate to get back. Streaming and ‘zooming’ makes you appreciate live performances and live interaction. For example, John says, during a meeting you need to be able to sense what other people are thinking, to be able to read their facial expressions to know if someone would like to say something. |
| 20:42 | During John’s time at The Ley’s, they attended some school trips to the Arts Theatre. Every year at Cambridge Arts Theatre, Andrew [Blackwood] gave Steve [Siddall] a slot to direct a show. John says Siddall must have directed 12 to 15 consecutive plays at the Arts. The play that John took part in which he is the proudest of was a performance of John Whiting’s *The Devils* in which he played the nasty role. He did a lot of acting with Steve [Siddall] at The Leys. He says that performing was wonderful. One thing he believes passionately is the importance of drama for children and engaging kids with drama from a young age. |
| 23:35 | John wasn’t taught drama at all from a young age and his parents weren’t really interested in the arts. He was brought up on Gilbert and Sullivan and Broadway musicals, so this was a world he predominately discovered for himself. He never wanted to pursue acting professionally. ‘It’s important to know your limitations. There’s no way I would’ve been any use at all’ Teaching history was going to be his life, and he never wanted to do anything else. He was a medievalist. John mentions that his acting past helped him within the role of teaching. |
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