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| **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:** Allen **Title:** Mr**Interviewee’s forename(s):** Kevan**Gender:** M**Occupation:** Director/Choreographer |
| **Date(s) of recording, tracks (from-to):** 7 March 2022**Location of interview:** Cambridge Arts Theatre Office, London**Name of interviewer:** Dale Copley**Type of recorder:** Zoom H4N **Recording format:** WAV**Total no. of tracks:** 1 **Total duration (HH:MM:SS):** 00:27:44**Mono/Stereo:** Stereo |
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| **Abstract:** | Choreographer Kevan Allen was a self-declared ‘snob’ about Pantomime before coming to Cambridge Arts Theatre. He has now worked on nine Pantomime productions for the Theatre. He explains his creative process and reflects on a life working with movement. |
| **Key words:** | dance, movement, choreography, pantomime, Panto Babes, Michael Fentiman, COVID  |
| **File** |  |
| **00.05** | **If you could just introduce yourself?**  |
|  | Kevan Allen introduces himself as a Director/ Choreographer/ Creative and Artistic director who works across the arts. He explains the difference between movement and dance.  |
| **00:37** | **And how did you come to this amazing career?** |
|  | Allen explains how he was introduced to the performing arts through his older sister’s Saturday drama class, he originally went along to try to gain confidence as he was a shy child. He particularly took to the movement elements of the class and began to focus on this area. His dance teacher recognised his talent and Allen began to take more and more dance classes, initially at Essex County Council dance classes and later auditioning for a grant to go to arts school in London. He trained at the Arts Educational School for three years. Whilst there he formed his own dance company purely to get his Equity card. He enlisted college friends as company dancers, and won eight contracts over the summer holidays, so by his final year at college he and his friends had their Equity cards. Allen reflects on how hard it was to gain an Equity card at that time.  |
| **02:19** | Allen went on to work professionally as a dancer when he left college and alongside this choreographed his company. Over the years his choreographic work expanded, he found it easy: ‘like a duck to water’. |
| **02:38** | Allen explains how his company worked whilst still at college. His peers did not question his ability. They made their own costumes, ‘we spliced the music on our cassette tapes at the time, it was fun’.  |
| **03:26** | **Any career highlights in this early period?** |
|  | Allen struggles to pull out one moment. He left college in the 1980s, during the pop music MTV video era, a boom for dancers. His first big gig as a dancer was in a big music video for Olivia Newton John. He went onto to dance with Duran Duran, Culture Club and Boy George, Elton John, lots of major artists, he was performing in two or three videos a month. They were big budget productions, and it was amazing to be a part of it. He reflects that at the time he did not realise how historic it was going to be! |
| **04:20** | Choreographically, his big break was choreographing the arena tour of *Jesus Christ Super Star* which toured the world’s arenas. He has done *Royal Variety Performances*, ‘a bit of everything’. |
| **04:44** | **And so how did you first become involved with Cambridge Arts Theatre?** |
|  | Allen jokes that at college he was a snob about Pantomime! He never thought he would work on a Panto. He took a job at the Royal Shakespeare Company and worked with Michael Fentiman, the director, who was going to direct the Pantomime at Cambridge Arts Theatre that year. Fentiman asked Allen to be involved and reluctantly Allen agreed, citing his good relationship with Fentiman and Cambridge Arts Theatre’s close proximity to his home in North London. Nine years on, Allen is still choreographing the pantomime for Cambridge Arts Theatre. |
| **06:00** | Allen reflects that as a child he was never taken to Pantomime, his parents preferring serious theatre, so he did not really know much about it before he came to Cambridge Arts Theatre. Now he recognises Pantomime’s importance for hooking children and young people into the theatre. |
| **06:31** | **Is there anything movement-wise, choreographically, that is distinct about Panto?**  |
|  | Allen says that you need to do things which are repetitive, so the audience can pick up things and follow along. He tries to think of it like a musical and believes this is what people like about his approach. For Allen, storytelling is key to successful choreography, and he is careful to understand what is happening in the story and character development. He likes props, ‘I call myself ‘prop heaven, Kevan, because I always say… lets have more props!’ The Dame is a great character, but you have to be aware of the costume and bear those restrictions in mind. |
| **07:51** | **Not everyone in a Panto is a natural dancer, they have come from a variety of backgrounds, how do you work with that?** |
|  | Allen says this is often the case with productions generally. You have a core of ensemble who are dancers but otherwise people are brought into a cast for all sorts of different abilities. Allen enjoys the challenge of working with the person in front of him, he tries to get the person on stage to feed into the process, so they are confident in what they are performing because this gives the best results. Allen also explains he tries to give the performer the acting behind the movement, actors are often receptive to this approach.  |
| **09:37** | **Please can you take us through the process from your appointment to what we see on the stage.**  |
|  | Allen explains that after he is appointed, he is sent a rough draft of the script, there are big holes for the musical numbers. The first discussion is what songs will be part of the show, Allen explains that some songs just are not available because it is too hard to get the copyright. Once the songs are picked, Allen works with the show’s Musical Director to create a version of the song which works for the movement. At home Allen works with the music and the script to really understand the number and come up with initial ideas, prop list etc but he does not do steps until he is in the studio with the performer. In the studio, they begin with a rough piano version of the song. It is choreographed during the rehearsal period. The final piece of the puzzle is during the technical rehearsals, when Allen and performers hear the pieces with the band for the first time, this can lead to a final set of changes to both the orchestration and the choreography in order to ensure the movement works completely with the music.  |
| **12:09** | Allen says that at Cambridge Arts Theatre it is a very collaborative creative process, it is a small theatre, and you feel like part of the family. Allen explains that with some other pantomimes, their production can be something of a formula with script and set lifted from an earlier production with limited creative input, but this is not the case at Cambridge.  |
| **13:16** | **Over the last 9 years, any challenges difficult moments?** |
|  | Allen describes the two years of producing Pantomime under COVID restrictions. In 2020 there was only a week for production rather than the normal two. The Theatre produced a reduced Panto with no interval or ensemble. More generally, Allen explains he is sympathetic to directors, but because he also directs himself sometimes, he has to bite his tongue. There have been abrasive cast members. During one production of *Cinderella*, one of the ugly sisters failed to appear and the understudy had to perform for the whole run. But generally, these unforeseen circumstances are not common.  |
| **15:34** | **Can you speak about the role of the dance captain?** |
|  | Allen explains that in an ensemble of six, there is always a dedicated dance captain who acts as Allen’s right-hand person when he is not on set. They help particularly with the child performers or ‘Panto Babes’, Allen explains we can have 30 child performers at the rehearsal stage. The dance captain is there for the cast if they have any questions about steps or choreography and can make quick decisions on Allen’s behalf about small issues that arise during the run. If understudies are required, the dance captain will re-rehearse and re-block the show. |
| **17:02** | **Do we tend to pull the dance captain from your company or people you know or is it open auditions?** |
|  | Allen says it is always open auditions for the dancers. But the dance captain is usually someone he has worked with before, or worked with the theatre before.  |
| **18:30** | **We are very proud of our child performers in Cambridge, when you first meet them how does that go…?** |
|  | Allen explains the dance captain auditions the child performers from Cambridge local children. When he meets them at rehearsal he will begin with some simple movement. He explains that unfortunately, his time with the young people comes at the end of the day when they, and he, are often not at their best! There are two corps, with ten children in each. Every child has a double in the other corps who they can speak to if they forget a step. Allen says he finds working with the children fun as, regardless of ability, they all really want to get it right. |
| **20:42** | **Can you tell at that age whether they have any natural ability for movement?** |
|  | Allen says ‘absolutely’, he can tell within ten minutes. He explains a technique whereby he gives the children 8 bars to devise their own moves, he says  |
| **21:58** | **A favourite Panto title?** |
|  | *Cinderella*:‘it is two Dames for the price of one’.  |
| **22:22** | **Any other memories of the Arts?** |
|  | Allen remembers his first year at the Arts Theatre. They rehearsed in the Theatre, in the rehearsal room above the main auditorium, on matinee days they had to be very quiet. ’We weren’t allowed to jump, sing, talk… well, when you are trying to create something under this time pushed thing… it was quite hysterical, I kept saying “this is madness”.’ He recalls another year, during the 3-day technical rehearsal, the cast were in full costume and mid-run, when the fire alarm went off. The cast were ‘turfed out into the street’, in full costume and make-up, it was winter so it was freezing. They ended up being pushed into the theatre’s storeroom [15A Storeroom] ‘Twenty children, all the cast, all the creatives, all the band… squashed in this room, and it started to snow outside… you can’t make this up!’  |
| **24:34** | **I wanted to end by asking you about your pandemic experience, what it has done to the industry, where are we going from here?** |
|  | Allen notes that coming to the interview was the first time he had come in on the Tube without wearing a mask! He notes the devastating effect on the industry. For him personally, a devastating impact was a complete loss of work in the USA. Everything closed bit by bit. He thinks he faired better as a creative, than the performers did. It was difficult for people who are used to being highly social to suddenly have that taken away. He now believes work is starting to come back, but people are nervous of producing, there are lots of things in workshop. The big West End shows have cut their staff, increasing the workload for those that are left, but this has been necessary because the Box Office return is not where it was pre-pandemic. He is complimentary about the Arts Theatre’s decision to put on a Christmas show in 2020 saying the creative team found it heartening at a difficult time.  |
| **END.** |  |