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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:** Maxwell  **Title:** Dr  **Interviewee’s forename(s):** Sarah  **Gender:** Female  **Occupation:** Retired (former teacher) | |
| **Date(s) of recording, tracks (from-to):**  **Location of interview:** Cambridge Arts Theatre  **Name of interviewer:** Lucy St Clair Holborn  **Type of recorder:** Zoom H4N **Recording format:** WAV  **Total no. of tracks:** 1 **Total duration (HH:MM:SS):** 00:16:58  **Mono/Stereo:** Stereo | |
| **Additional material:** | None |
| **Copyright/Clearance:** Assigned to Cambridge Arts Theatre. | |
| **Interviewer’s comments:** |  |
| **Abstract:** | Sarah Maxwell was part of the Friends of the Arts programme from the late 1970s/early 1980s until the programme stopped, and she has seen many productions at Cambridge Arts Theatre. She was part of the Cambridge Amateur Operatic Society (CAOS) and performed onstage at Cambridge Arts Theatre three times. |
| **Key words:** | Footlights, Friends of the Arts Theatre, Cambridge Amateur Operatic Society (CAOS), Gilbert and Sullivan, Agatha Christie, Rigoletto, The Gondoliers, The Zoo, Patience, Oscar Wilde, Somerset Maughan, Penelope Keith, Felicity Kendall, University of the Third Age, Private Lives, Stephen Fry, Once a Catholic, Quartet, Noel Coward, Pied Pipers. |
| **File** |  |
| **00.00** | Sarah introduces herself. She came to Cambridge in 1973 when she was a student at Homerton College. She does not think she came to the Theatre often as a student but remembers attending the Footlights Revue once or twice. After she left university, she and a friend became Friends of the Arts Theatre starting in the late 1970s or early 1980s. This meant on the opening night of a performance you could buy two tickets for the price of one. She was part of the scheme for at least twenty years until it was stopped because it was not financially viable, which she thought was a shame as this was the period in which she came to the Theatre the most (three or four times per season). She would get the brochure every quarter and enjoyed picking out a few productions to go to with her friend. They would watch the performance together and have an ice cream in the interval. She explains that they would try to get the seats in the back row in front of the steps, which gave you a good view and meant ‘you can escape at any time’ or leave quickly at the end of a performance. |
| **02.39** | Sarah enjoyed watching comedies, amateur productions, operas, and Agatha Christie plays. She particularly remembers a production of ‘Rigoletto’ as being very good. She says she does not think the Theatre ever did classical ballet as the stage was not big enough. She came to the Theatre at least half a dozen times per year for many years. |
| **03.22** | Sarah recalls a very happy memory she has of the Theatre when, in 1986, she was asked to be in a Cambridge Amateur Operatic Society (CAOS) production. Somebody had dropped out at the last minute and someone recommended Sarah, having heard her sing, so she became the lead in ‘The Gondoliers’ without an audition. She then played the lead in ‘The Zoo’ a couple of years later which CAOS (now called the Cambridge Operatic Society) staged. The Theatre was then closed for refurbishment so the productions she was a part of moved to the Corn Exchange and she was in three productions there. In 1999, she returned to performing at Cambridge Arts Theatre and she played Lady Saphir in ‘Patience’, her last performance at the Cambridge Arts Theatre. After the Friends programme ended, she stopped coming so often and nowadays struggles with not being allowed to take bags into the Theatre, although she understands there are very good reasons for this. |
| **05.08** | Sarah talks about productions which she enjoyed. She says that she always enjoyed Agatha Christie plays. She also saw ‘The Woman in Black’ which she thinks has been on many times over the years. She also remembers enjoying other thrillers and recalls one thriller (which she cannot remember the name of), where the lady sitting beside Sarah’s friend was so shocked by a character appearing on stage, who was supposed to be dead, that she grabbed Sarah’s friend’s arm. Sarah says of this: ‘they were the best sort’. She remembers seeing a production with Penelope Keith, ‘for fear of angels or something to do with angels’ [Entertaining Angels] and later seeing a production with Felicity Kendal where she played a ‘society lady’. She also liked watching Oscar Wilde plays and remembers enjoying a Somerset Maugham play very much. She says she enjoyed almost everything she saw at Cambridge Arts Theatre because she and her friend used to choose what they wanted to watch very carefully. They would keep all the programmes from performances they went to. |
| **06.33** | Sarah talks about performing at Cambridge Arts Theatre, saying ‘that was absolutely wonderful, [I] absolutely adored it because I love performing’. She talks about how it felt singing a solo on stage and taking a bow at the end, saying it was ‘the most tremendously exhilarating experience’. She says the camaraderie backstage was very fun and describes the dressing room that she shared with one of the other leads. She says they used to get ready and then sit and knit until they went on stage. She talks about the actors getting their wigs done in a general area below the dressing rooms, although since the refurbishment in the 1990s she thinks the location of these dressing rooms has changed. She describes her time performing as ‘one of the highlights of my life’, particularly ‘The Gondoliers’ for which she did not even have to audition. She says that Cambridge Arts Theatre was not her first experience of performing in a well-known theatre as she attended dance lessons as a child at a dance school in Knightsbridge and they did a matinée performance at a West End theatre once a year, so she had performed on the stage of the Adelphi Theatre and Theatre Royal Drury Lane. However, she says that this was not the same as being in a major production at Cambridge Arts Theatre. She has always performed and loved performing. She enjoyed seeing backstage when she was performing because it gave her an insight into what was happening behind the scenes when she was an audience member, which she would not have known if she had not performed herself. She knew where the dressing rooms were, how people moved from one side of the stage to the other, and how the scenery worked. She does not recall how this worked at the time, but she had a backstage tour in March 2020 before the pandemic which was arranged by the University of the Third Age, and she saw how pieces of scenery were taken into the Theatre. |
| **10.17** | She wants to support the Theatre and thinks it closing would be a ‘terrible shame’, but it is not so attractive to her to come as it was at a previous time in her life with. She thinks having the Theatre in Cambridge is a ‘terribly, terribly important thing’ and feels slightly guilty she does not support it more, but she would like to and has bought tickets to ‘Private Lives’ in November and has occasionally sent donations. She wishes to support the Theatre more and thinks she would like to work out a way of organising her bags so she could go more often. |
| **11.05** | Sarah shares a quotation of Stephen Fry which she found amusing. Fry said: “appearing on the stage of the Arts Theatre was the nearest thing he’d ever had to an erotic experience”. Sarah says she would not go quite as far as that but says ‘it certainly was one of the highlights of my life’. She says that the Theatre was a very big part of her life at a time and thinks ‘perhaps it could be again’. |
| **11.46** | Sarah had brought in the programmes from the productions she was in at Cambridge Arts Theatre: ‘The Gondoliers’ in 1986; ‘The Zoo’ in 1988; and ‘Patience’, following the break in the 1990s for the Theatre to be refurbished. She also brought a photo album with photographs from both the performance and backstage at ‘The Gondoliers’ which she had kept because ‘it was such a special thing’. She had photographs of the dressing room half-way up the stairs with its own bathroom where she and another lead would do their knitting, and of the communal area where the cast had their wigs done. She had also photographed cards which she received from cast members as part of a tradition they had in CAOS where they would buy cards and small gifts for each other for the last night and they had ‘a sort of competition’ where they tried to make the gifts and cards relevant to parts of the show. She remembers the cast being very close at the end of the production having spent so much time rehearsing for two or three months and performing together for a week’s run with matinées. She remembers finishing shows as ‘a bittersweet time’ because you ‘lived and breathed it [the show]’ so everyone was very close. She recalls how they would swear ‘undying friendship although probably, mostly…it was a long time before you saw each other again’. |
| **14.44** | Sarah remembers one play she saw at Cambridge Arts Theatre which she did not enjoy called ‘Once a Catholic’ which she described as ‘really pornographic’ so she and her friend left at the interval. She says that this was partly why they liked the Friends of the Theatre scheme so much because they only paid for one ticket between the two of them so they did not feel they had lost anything and could always leave at the interval if they did not like a play. One play which she remembers as being extremely moving is ‘Quartet’ which was about an old people’s home for musicians. She says she has ‘always remembered that one’. She jokes that she would like there to be a home for ex-staff at St John’s [St John’s College School, a prep school where Sarah taught for many years]. She remembers parts of other performances and seeing some big names at Cambridge Arts Theatre and she saw quite several Noël Coward plays and some amateur productions by the Pied Pipers - musicals which she enjoyed. She says, apart from the play she mentioned, she thinks that everything she has seen at Cambridge Arts Theatre she (and her friend) enjoyed very much. She also mentions that they used to go to the bar often and you could order drinks in the interval and that the cloakroom was very efficient. |
| **17.21** | END |