



Cambridge Arts Theatre

Interview data sheet: Behind the Scenes Project

Ref no: THM/258/

WAV files ref: COATES7322

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

Interviewee's surname: Coates

Title: Mr

Interviewee's forename(s): Norman

Gender: M

Occupation: Theatre Designer

Date(s) of recording, tracks (from-to): 7 March 2022

Location of interview: Fitzrovia, London, UK

Name of interviewer: Dale Copley

Type of recorder: Zoom H4N

Recording format: WAV

Total no. of tracks: 1

Total duration (HH:MM:SS): 00:26:08

Mono/Stereo: Stereo

Additional material: None

Copyright/Clearance: Assigned to Cambridge Arts Theatre.

Interviewer's comments:

Abstract: "The books which span the back of the shop were all fake..." Norman Coates explains the role of the Theatre Designer, shares some early memories of Cambridge Arts Theatre, and

	discusses the staging of the Arts Theatre's 2016 production of <i>84 Charing Cross Road</i> .
Key words:	Design, Drama, George 'Dadie' Rylands, Shakespeare, <i>Ages of Man</i> , <i>A Princess Undone</i> , James Roose-Evans, Frith Banbury, Set, Props, Costume, Lighting, <i>84 Charing Cross Road</i> , Stephanie Powers
File	Summary
00:00	Norman Coates introduces himself as a theatrical designer, his work has focused on drama, he designs sets and costumes.
01:37	Coates recalls his first experience of the Arts Theatre, seeing plays. When visiting as a tourist he might see a matinee, or else be invited to the Arts Theatre to see a show that a friend has worked on. He knows it as a famous theatre with illustrious alumni.
02:12	Coates met George 'Dadie' Rylands for a weekend, they were both house guests of a mutual friend. He recalls Rylands was very famous for his Shakespearean productions with The Marlowe Society. 'He is often talked about as having reintroduced Shakespeare in a funny way to the mainstream theatre by his brilliance really and his love of Shakespeare and his ability to stage Shakespeare in a very acceptable way". Coates explains he knew of Rylands before he met, which made him rather intimidated to meet this great intellectual figure. He knew Rylands' one man show <i>Ages of Man</i> and indeed had the John Gielgud recording of it as a young man growing up in Cape Town, South Africa.
03:30	What was your impression of Rylands as an old man?
03:33	Coates recalls it started badly as they were sharing a lift down to Hampshire, Coates got the time wrong and Rylands was kept waiting, it was a silent car journey! Nevertheless, he was a wonderful man. Coates remembers Rylands spent most of the weekend pulling up weeds from the garden of the house where they were staying.
04:22	Going to the Arts Theatre as an audience member, early on in your career, do you have any memories of the building, an impression of the space?
04:24	Coates remembers the Arts Theatre building. "It was very plain, rather like say the Fortune Theatre in the West End, modest and the Foyer was rather restricting in a way...A rather dowdy place. It has changed." He recalls what a central part of Cambridge it was.
05:09	What was your first professional experience...?
05:11	Coates summarises his early career. He trained as a painter rather than a designer but did an apprenticeship with a Ballet in the design department. He came to England as part of a pop group. He subsequently answered an ad in <i>Time Out</i> Magazine to be a Theatre Designer at the Almost Free Theatre. The job involved designing, building, and painting sets. He remembers it as a bohemian time, but an exciting time for new writing.
	Next at the Kings Head Theatre in Islington, Coates remembers a production of the musical <i>Mr Cinders</i> which was done on an incredibly small stage, the play transferred to the Fortune Theatre in the West End. Subsequently Coates was Associate Designer and later Head of Design at the Palace Theatre, Watford. And then the other world of regional touring theatre, and later commercial touring shows, Coates spent a lot of time working in provincial 'rep'.
08:52	Can I ask about the difference between designing for a touring production and designing for a single stage?
09:05	Coates describes the challenges of designing for a touring production. 'You don't always know where the show is touring to and even if you have

	all the floor plans in front of you, you can't always predict sightlines.' Ultimately the design needed additions which could be added or removed from the sides of the set as needed. Or things angled slightly differently. This exact challenge came up at Cambridge Arts Theatre with the production of <i>A Princess Undone</i> . Coates recalls, 'the set was quite wide and the seating was very wide with a central aisle, and Dave Murphy who was running the Theatre pushed all the seating together and got rid of the central aisle, which immediately improved the sightlines.' It remains the same today.
10:35	Coates describes the process of designing for a touring production such as <i>A Princess Undone</i> . There was a meeting at the Theatre about the project. Coates recalls when you first look at the stage for a project it can feel unreal, you get told things by the Theatre's technical team about the stage's limitations and this can be useful but ultimately you work from the ground plan, away from the Theatre.
11:50	We particularly wanted to talk to you about <i>84 Charing Cross Road</i> an Arts Theatre production which you designed...why do you take a job as a designer?
	"I would say yes to that play anywhere, I absolutely adore it!" Coates recalls he was friendly with James Roose-Evans who had adapted the play. Coates and Roose-Evans had worked together closely on a previous project, and Roose-Evans asked if Coates would design it.
13:35	Coates describes how the creative process worked. An initial start up meeting with the director and technical team might happen at Coates' home. The key part of the process is the weekly production meeting, at the end of each rehearsal week, whereby each creative element of the production reports back on where they are up to.
14:40	During the rehearsal period how much does the design change from the initial concept?
14:49	Coates explains it is mostly props and furniture that change. He recalls working with the famous director Frith Banbury as an old man. Banbury taught Coates that designs should always be assessed by ground plans, because if this is correct the set will work.
16:23	In <i>84 Charing Cross Road</i> there are two distinct locations where the drama takes place, New York and London, how did you go about developing that for the stage?
16:40	Coates explains he had previously designed a set for Salisbury. The set had to be changed for the Arts Theatre because the sightlines were different. Helene Hanff's apartment had to have its entry point changed.
18:19	"I love bookshops so it was a gift". Coates describes how his love of books and family connections to the book trade made designing the bookshop part of the set very easy. He could easily imagine 'the lampshades, the hanging lamps, the metal columns that hold up the upper floors...all those engravings stacked in boxes on the side you could finger through and take along as well..."
19:07	What about the scene changes, it is quite a dramatic scene change...
19:13	Coates describes the challenge of emptying the bookshop within a blackout. 'The books which span the back of the shop were all fake, although they are often real spines of books or plastic versions, 3-dimensional holes, you could take out a few which were very planned...so that could all fly out, revealing 3-dimensional empty shelves with a few books hanging off them. Then the two bookshelves, independent standing bookshelves, left and right of the centre, spun around. But surreptitiously throughout the scene before the big change, books were being spirited off,

	as if someone was cleaning up. Then also in the window, the famous books in the window... they sank down, we had a hydraulic lift we were very proud of, so that vanished..."
20:35	Roose-Evans told Coates that the audience always applauded when the lights came up and the shop was empty... however, Coates recalls he never got an applause!
20:52	In a professional theatre, how do you get from design to production...?
	Coates describes scene painters, the scene carpenters, and a full workshop, but remembers he often asked to join in because he loves painting.
21:59	Anything about that production of <i>84 Charing Cross Road</i> which was unique?
	Coates remembers the actress Stephanie Powers who was able to embody the role of Helene Hanff. 'The real thing'.
23:08	Are you involved at all as the production goes on tour?
23:11	Coates explains after the first move I will be there at the fit up. But not thereafter. Sometimes I get a royalty.
	Can you speak about the effect of the Coronavirus pandemic (2020-2022) on the Theatre industry from your experience?
23:58	Coates thinks a lot of people left the industry, especially older people. He himself considered retirement (although he is now working on another show!) Older people have accepted they have had their day. That creative people have not been able to practice their art has been 'a wound', Coates believes it was especially hard for performers. However, post pandemic, there has been a revival of the fringe, good new writing, 'less Chekov and more plays with funny titles', young people are raring to go and it is coming back...
END	