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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:** Ghazi-Torbati  **Title:** Mr  **Interviewee’s forename(s):**  Zak  **Gender:** M  **Occupation:** Writer/Director | |
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| **Abstract:** | Zak Ghazi-Torbati is a writer, lyricist, and actor who has performed onstage at the Arts Theatre in the Greek Play and with the Marlowe Society. Formerly President of the Marlowe, Torbati discusses the difficulties of staging a student production on a professional stage and recalls working alongside upcoming and established writers, composers, and directors like *Six*’s Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss and Jermyn Street Theatre’s Artistic Director Tom Littler. |
| **Key words:** | The Marlowe Society, ADC Theatre, Corpus Playroom, University of Cambridge, *Rumpelstiltskin*, Footlights, Tom Littler, *Measure for Measure,* Lucy Moss, Toby Marlow, *Edward II,* Caroline Steinbeis, Cheek by Jowl, *A Winter’s Tale,* Emma Corrin, Jonah Hauer-King, *Antigone, Lysistrata,* Boris Johnson, Donald Trump, *Hot Gay Time Machine* |
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| **00.00** | **You studied at Cambridge as a student?** |
|  | Torbati introduces himself and explains he studied English and Education at Magdalene College from 2014-18. |
| **00:22** | **You were involved in student drama…?** |
|  | Torbati says he was heavily involved in student drama. |
| **00:28** | **Were you a theatre person before you went to university?** |
|  | Torbati explains although he had always loved theatre there were limited opportunities at his home in Wales. At Cambridge University there were many opportunities and a buoyant scene; the ADC Theatre, Corpus Playroom and Arts Theatre meant there could be five or six shows on a week. He did not expect to be as involved in the student theatre scene as he became. |
| **01:06** | **How did you get involved then…?** |
|  | Torbati initially got involved as a way of making friends. He auditioned for the Footlights Panto and was cast as the Dame, controversially so as the role did not normally go to a first year. He valued the chance to meet like-minded students in other years, although it could be hard to balance with academic study. ‘I just had the best time’. |
| **01:58** | **Can you talk a bit about the differences between the different venues in Cambridge?** |
|  | Torbati explains that the fact that the ADC and Corpus Playroom are student venues ‘makes them a little more chaotic’, the bigger shows go to the ADC Theatre, who also have a later show at 11pm. The ADC put on big performances with limited technical/get in time, ‘so always on that first performance, you were like, what’s going to happen’. Torbati remembers a production of *Rumpelstiltskin* where a planned revolve did not happen, and the cast were left sitting backstage. He describes the Corpus Playroom as a smaller, fringe space. By comparison the Cambridge Arts Theatre is a professional theatre, and his experience of working there as a student was that their productions were held to a professional standard, although this added pressure, it did reduce the chance of last-minute problems. |
| **03:35** | **What was your first production at the Arts Theatre?** |
|  | Torbati produced the Footlights at the Arts Theatre. His first performance at the Arts Theatre was in Tom Littler’s *Measure for Measure*, a Marlowe Society production; he notes that Littler later also directed *Romeo and Juliet.* Torbati explains that it was stressful for him because he did not audition for the show, but instead took over a role after someone dropped out. He was playing a serious role which he was not entirely comfortable with. Nevertheless, he valued the experience for the professional rigour it involved; he highlights the technical rehearsal as hard work but worthwhile; he also mentions how the luxurious the dressing rooms felt after the student venues. |
| **05:04** | **When did you join The Marlowe Society board?** |
|  | Torbati explains he applied in his second year, and worked as education officer, he ran workshops with schools on *Measure for Measure*. When, the following year, no one wanted to be President of the Society, Torbati and a friend decided to do it together. He was aware it would be a lot of work as, alongside the Arts Theatre production, the society organises a showcase, which is performed in Cambridge and in London. |
| **06:05** | **When you know you are producing a show for the Marlowe Society, what is the first contact you have with us?** |
|  | Torbati explains his first contact would be with Chloe [Brindle, Programming and Production Manager] and Dave [Murphy, Chief Executive]. Before picking a title for the show, they would meet to discuss the society’s finances. Chloe and Dave suggest a list of play titles, and professional directors for the Society to work with – they then pick a title and a director. During Torbati’s presidency they chose to produce *Edward II* and work with director Caroline Steinbeis. The society put together a creative team and then organise the logistics of accommodation for the cast during the rehearsal period. They rehearse for 3-4 weeks. The first two weeks are full-day rehearsals as term has not started yet; once term starts, the rehearsal schedule has more limited timings. |
| **8.30** | **What about the marketing side of things?** |
|  | Torbati says that it is always a struggle to get students to come to the Arts Theatre. The Theatre is much more part of the town than of the university so there is not a great tradition of students coming to see shows there. It was difficult to find a price that would suit the students. The Theatre’s marketing team were responsible for publicity in the town and the Marlowe Society would organise some publicity among students. |
| **9.50** | **How to get students to come to the Arts Theatre has been a recurring question. What do you think is preventing students from coming?** |
|  | Torbati thinks it is a combination of the ticket prices and a psychological barrier about coming somewhere new. It is a professional theatre so ticket prices are higher; however, students will sometimes pay 18 pounds to see a show at the ADC, which is not far off the price at the Arts. Torbati thinks that going to the Arts seems more of a ‘cultured activity that they don’t have time for’ than ‘just popping to the ADC’. |
| **10.45** | **Did you ever see any of the professional productions at the Arts?** |
|  | Torbati had the pleasure of seeing a number of shows. He especially enjoyed Cheek by Jowl’s production of *A Winter’s Tale*. He saw the Panto every year he was a student. He always thought it was remarkable how much ‘good stuff’ played at the Arts. |
| **11.15** | **Were there any challenges that arose from the disconnect between professional and amateur theatre?** |
|  | Torbati explains that it was difficult when there were industry professionals working on a student production because they had no budget. He remembers an incident when he rented a room in Trinity College for one of the sound engineers; the room was on a hallway with a shared bathroom and the sound engineer was not comfortable sharing a bathroom with a group of students. Torbati understood his point of view but could not do much to help. Another time, a sound designer’s accommodation in Magdalene had been double booked by the college and all her belongings had been removed. Torbati spent the next four hours helping her to find her things. However, most people were very understanding. |
| **13.10** | **Does the Arts get involved in the artistic direction of the play?** |
|  | Torbati thinks that it is mostly left up to the students. However, there is a lot of communication between the director and the theatre manager. The director of *Edward II* wanted there to be no interval during the play, but the Theatre made an objection as they get revenue from sales at the bar during the interval. In the end, a compromise was struck: the play ran straight through but there were moments to get drinks. |
| **14.10** | **Is there anything else you would like to say about the Marlowe Society?** |
|  | Torbati explains that it was very energy consuming being President of the society. The society is prestigious and has many illustrious alumni, but its finances are not what they used to be; there is pressure to maintain the same level of prestige with a smaller budget. It is tricky to find someone willing to produce such a large show; if they cannot find anyone to take on the role, it falls to the committee – this happened in Torbati’s third year. It was all-consuming but ‘the best experience of [Torbati’s] life’. |
| **15.20** | **Do you want to name check any of your contemporaries who we will see in the future?** |
|  | Toby Marlow, who co-wrote *Six* with Lucy Moss, composed the music for the production of *Measure for Measure*. *Six* opened at the Arts Theatre after a successful run at the Edinburgh Fringe. Torbati wrote another show with Marlow and Moss. Emma Corrin and Jonah Hauer-King both acted in plays in Torbati’s time. |
| **16.15** | **Can we talk a bit about the Greek play? Could you explain for us what that is?** |
|  | The Greek Play Committee puts on a play in Ancient Greek every three years. They put on a double bill – in Torbati’s year it was *Antigone* followed by *Lysistrata*. The cast rehearse for four weeks in the summer. They must learn their lines in Ancient Greek. Torbati played Boris Johnson and had to tap dance with his friend who played Donald Trump. The Greek lines are ‘burnt into [his] memory’ (he recites some). It was hard but amazing fun. Torbati learnt everything by the sound and did not always know what he was saying. Some actors knew Greek and were able to ad lib. Many members of the audience speak Greek so there is pressure to get your lines right. |
| **20.45** | **Do you have any other memories of the Theatre before we move on?** |
|  | Torbati remembers the stage door manager, Roger, who was always very friendly. He is grateful for the experience of performing there as it was good to be in a professional theatre, where everything works and there are nice dressing rooms. |
| **22.00** | **What have you been up to since leaving Cambridge?** |
|  | Torbati has worked with Kenny Wax Productions. They took a play which Torbati co-wrote with Marlow and Moss, called *Hot Gay Time-Machine*, to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Following that, they were offered a 6-week run at Trafalgar Studios. After a break from writing, during which Torbati completed a course in wine, they submitted the play to some television companies and won a competition which means that it may be turned into a series. The pandemic allowed Torbati to focus on writing projects and to meet over Zoom with prestigious producers who he would otherwise not have been able to meet in person. |
| **END.** |  |