

**50 Years of the Stables**  
**Griffin Theatre Podcast Series**

**GRIFFIN  
THEATRE  
COMPANY**

**Episode One: *In the Beginning***

With **Ron Blair**, **Lillian Horler** and **Anna Volska**

In 1970, a passionate group of indie theatre-makers got hold of a run-down Kings Cross building and turned it into a theatre. Hear about how the legendary founders of the space made the Stables Theatre the nexus of Australian plays.

**Speakers:**

**AC – Angela Catterns**

**LH – Lillian Horler**

**AV – Anna Volska**

**RB – Ron Blair**

**Angela Catterns (AC):** *2020 marks the 50<sup>th</sup> birthday of Griffin Theatre Company's home, the Stables Theatre. I'm Angela Catterns. Join us as we celebrate the anniversary in this special series of podcasts, where we will hear about the theatre's history, and talk to some of the country's most celebrated artists.*

**AC:** Lillian Horler, Anna Volska and Ron Blair were all there at the very beginning. Ron how did you get involved? What was your role?

**Ron Blair (RB):** Well, role is a grand word for ah [laughs]. What happened was, John went away with Anna (AV) to England to work in the Royal Shakespeare company.

**AC:** John Bell?

**RB:** John Bell did.

**AC:** Who I think you went to university with?

**RB:** I did, indeed and we kept in touch. Occasionally he would write a letter, describing life at the Royal Shakespeare company. He then one day said that I would really like to come home, and work in the Australian theatre. I remember I would see Ken Horler fairly regularly, who by this stage was certainly married to Lillian who is sitting next to me here. I mentioned this to Ken, about John wanting to come back. He said do you have the letter? I said here it is and I gave it to him. It was an aerogram I think, one of those old-fashioned aerograms. It was the last I saw of the letter Lillian you won't be surprised to know.

When John came back he had a job at NIDA, he was in charge of acting at NIDA. While he was there he was working with Michael Boddy who was also a teacher at NIDA. At this stage Robert Quentin, a professor, had rented a little revival church hall, which was then called the Jane Street Theatre and was part of the Old Tote. What happened was they were looking for things to put on and John spoke to Michael Boddy about it, and Michael knew

Bob Ellis very well, and they worked up this exuberant concert about an Australian politician called *King O'Malley*. It was a knock-about piece, of no great importance but certainly full of joy and "Australian-ness". And this was, to everyone's incredible surprise, it was a huge hit. When I say huge, I mean to say that this small revival hall was packed, for the very short season! Because everyone was hungering for something fresh, and Australian. We were a bit resentful, that we couldn't find something Australian. I mean, the art world had gone ahead with Australian painting without having to constantly look at Constable or Turner. It didn't seem to be a problem in the art world, why was it a problem with us?

So, to cut a long story short, I had written review scripts at university. Ken said, "I've taken a lease on this place," and John, Ken and Richard Wherrett, who I had met at university in the early 60s. But, he'd gone to England to get his training, as did John. Ken said, "Would you like to get involved in this project, we are cleaning the Stables" – number ten Nimrod Street. Which I remember being full of rubbish including a run-down old car with its wheels off. One of those soft top cars from the 30s, you know. As I was working with John cleaning the walls one Saturday - a very dusty business it was - I said, "What plays are you going to put on?". He said "Well, I don't have any." I thought: "Ah."

Of course since Michael Boddy was involved in *The Legend of King O'Malley*, which had been a success, John had asked him to get involved in the opening play which was about the English air ace Bigglesworth. Again, it was concert knock-about thing and has never been revived. It couldn't bear to be revived really. But John said, "Would you like to do some scenes?" and I said I would love to. He gave me, with Michael Boddy, gave me a bit of a sketch of what the play was about. It was really about, Biggles, Ginger and Algy and Matron all coming out to Australia on a kind of a RSL tour. So, I wrote some scenes and gave them to Michael Boddy, but also, I gave the same scenes to John. John said to Michael Boddy, "What do you think?" he says "I don't know, I don't think we can use those." John said "I like them actually, see if you can fit them in." He did fit them in and I met with them regularly until the show took off.

**AC:** So, more on *Biggles* in a short while. Lillian, so your late husband Ken came up with the idea for this theatre. When was that, and why was that? I think he had experienced theatres in Europe – were Australian theatres lacking at that time?

**Lillian Horler (LH):** All of these people had known each other at university where they had done an enormous amount of theatre. I met Ken when he crashed my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party, that was in 1963, when he had just come back from England. At the time in the 1970, when Nimrod had started, we had been quite involved with the Central Street Gallery and lots of art things.

There was an artist called Jim Crawford and he apparently told Ken about this place, which was full of rubbish that was available for lease for 17 dollars a week. Ken had already decided that what he needed to find, was something which had to be within two miles of the GPO.

So, he took out a pin and whirled it around and this place seemed to be very good. But the idea for an Australian theatre, I think was a joint idea between John, Ken and Richard by then.

**AC:** Anna do you remember Ken asking for your husband John Bell's help with this new theatre?

**Anna Volska (AV):** What I remember was, Ken ringing up and John teaching at NIDA so he wasn't at home. Ken saying that he had found a beautiful intelligent woman that he had married, because we weren't up to speed with all this. Also, a space in Kings Cross, that he wanted to do something with, and whether John would be interested. I said well, as soon as he gets back he will ring you. That was the first connection.

**AC:** Fantastic!

**RB:** To give you an idea how small Sydney was at that stage -

**LH:** Everybody knew everyone.

**RB:** Everybody knew everyone. Tony McGillick, who was involved of the Central Street Gallery and was the prime mover with his half-brother John White and various other painters including [Brett] Whiteley. I worked in advertising in an agency called Brown and Bruce and the artistic director of Brown and Bruce was Leo Schofield. And McGillick used to sort of jeer at us for talking about the idea of an Australian theatre. and he said "You've gone on and done it."

**AC:** So here you are, basically building a whole new theatre from the ground up. From a building filled with rubbish at 17 dollars a week.

**LH:** It has to be said, in the meantime Richard Wherrett had brought with him, from East 15 Joan Littlewood's theatre in London, two young men. One was Chris Haywood and the other was Larry Eastwood who in the end had built the first theatre in the state but he was material in the clearing up as well.

**RB:** His seats are still there that he built.

**AC:** Is that true?

**LH:** Oh yes!

**AC:** Tell me a little bit about the process, everybody is volunteering their time. I understand Lillian is making some beautiful sandwiches.

**LH:** Yes but, I was very busy working bringing in the few dollars that we lived on. Whilst Ken, who was at the time already a very important civil libertarian, was also trying to do the odd job. But he kept doing pro bono work for the council of civil liberties, which he helped set

up. So, he was away a lot of the time, so these guys got on with doing it and he supplied lots of know-how and contacts.

**AC:** And where did the materials come from for insistence?

**RB:** There were no materials to begin with except some cement. I remember turning up and Ken had said to wear good solid footwear and to bring some garden gloves. And something to put on your head. So, I did, and I was directed to climb up a ladder and scrape all the dust and all the old -

**AV:** It must have been Kalsomine -

**LH:** It was Kalsomine -

**RB:** All the old Kalsomine off the bricks and that's why all that dust was in the air. When we had done that, to then to smear the cement onto the bricks.

**LH:** I have distinct memory of a ladder up against a wall and me heavily pregnant with Sacha. Bag washing the walls with cement.

**RB:** Smearing the cement on with hessian on your hand. I remember the lime would get in and under your glove -

**LH:** Drip down -

**RB:** It would eat into your wrists. After a couple of weekends of this one had significant Christ-like holes on the wrists. [laughter] Smearing this lime and cement on the walls, to bind the brick work together. And there were people around that I had never seen before.

**LH:** Friends of friends. Anthony's girlfriend, Jackie Garland.

**RB:** There was guy there who Ken had done some pro bono work in court, the publican.

**LH:** There was a pub on a pro bono case for a man who lived on the border of New South Wales and Victoria and could not get beer supplies in those days. The pub with no beer. He donated or came and worked on the place too. There were lots of other people.

**RB:** Angela Vice, who became a judge, came in.

**LH:** They provided the first piano that we ever had.

**RB:** Did they? Keith Whatman -

**LH:** Keith Whatman was a demolisher. I think he was brought in to cart away -

**RB:** All the rubbish -

**LH:** The rubbish and in the end, he presented Ken with a \$3,000 cheque to much publicity as well, for the theatre.

**AC:** So, do you remember the time? Was it a happy time? Was it wonderful fun, everyone getting together and working towards this common goal?

**LH:** It was absolutely wonderful, I thought.

**AV:** It was extraordinary. One of the things, you were talking about you earning the money Lily, what was remarkable, was it was the first companies that payed actors during rehearsal.

**LH:** Well Ken's ambition in the theatre was threefold. He wanted Sunday drinks, he wanted to be open on Sundays, neither of which you could do on Sunday's trading in those days. And he wanted actors to be paid rehearsal money and to be paid Equity minimum - I'm not sure if it was Equity minimum - but, anyway, rehearsal pay. It was unknown in Sydney for an actor to receive rehearsal money in those days.

**AC:** Where did the money come from then?

**LH:** It came from loans from Ken and me carrying it for quite a while until they were able to repay us out of grants and so on. When we opened the theatre, I had been a lawyer so I organised all the things like the articles and the association. Ron was an original member there were 100 original members and it had to be a company limited by guarantee which couldn't pay its profits out to the so-called shareholders. So there were various tasks we all did.

**RB:** I was member number five!

**AC:** So, let's talk about a little bit about *Biggles*, which was the first ever production. Can you tell me a bit about the play?

**RB:** As I said, it was a knock-about piece of nothing. Piece of fun, with a few songs, we just stole songs that were in copyright, I think Izzy and Ozzy and Izzy Lizzy. An old slouched brown hat.

**AV:** [*singing*] Just a brown slouch hat with the side turned up, and it means the world to me. That's it yes.

**RB:** That was of course from an Australian musical, I'm trying to think of the name of the guy. Wallace? Anyway, the Izzy, Lizzy, Dick Bentley sang with Barry Humphries.

**LH:** More importantly, Anna danced it with Jane Harders.

**AV:** That's right, we did. I made the costumes and I remember that Michael Boddy who was in the show, had a neck size of 28 inches. I remember making his collar!

**RB:** Some neck!

**AC:** I'm sure you would remember something like that. I understand that the Christmas Eve production was very special? Do you recall that?

**AV:** I remember that we had about ten members in the audience.

**AC:** So it was not a busy day.

**LH:** Under Equity you had to have 12 or something or the actors could refuse to go on.

**LH:** Someone called Jim Reed.

**AV:** Tim Reed?

**LH:** Not Tim Reed... Anyway, there was someone sitting there from a wealthy family. He said he would pay for the house.

**AV:** I don't remember that, but I do remember saying would like us to do the show or should we just stand around the piano and sing the songs. And that is what they opted for, having a few drinks and singing the songs. Which was nice.

**AC:** So you are being paid for your performance by then? Was that unusual?

**AV:** We were being paid. It was extraordinary. I mean being paid during rehearsal.

**LH:** Ken had three goals. We had to be open on Sundays and you had to have a liquor licence.

**AV:** Did you have to have liquor licence?

**LH:** Of course, we did.

**RB:** The only way to get a drink in those days was to go to the Newport Arms or be a bona fide traveller and go out to the airport. The amount times I went to the Newport Arms for a drink was ludicrous.

**LH:** My recollection is that there were no movies on Sundays either. There was no activity on Sundays.

**RB:** The Art Gallery of NSW was open on Sundays.

**AC:** So, some of you had young children, at this stage where they part of the theatre too?

**AV:** They were, they were. When we were very busy or in rehearsal, Chris Haywood would go and collect them from school, which was lovely of him. When was Sacha born?

**LH:** Sacha wasn't born until February the next year, till 1971. But thereafter she used to be in the crib, laundry basket under the box office table, where I was sitting.

**AV:** Didn't the ladies next door sometimes look after her?

**RB:** Miss Flynn?

**AV:** And Miss Creed?

**LH:** You said they did it for you, but they didn't for me.

**RB:** Initially everybody was against the theatre. It would be noisy and bring hoi polloi to the Cross.

**AC:** I was wondering about the neighbours. Did they welcome the theatre into the neighbourhood?

**RB, LH, AV:** No, no!

**LH:** Not initially no, but once they realised that we weren't going to make a terribly big noise and we weren't going to be -

**AV:** Polluting the neighbourhood -

**LH:** Bringing any brothels into the area or anything -

**RB:** There was a brothel across the road, they just didn't want the competition!

**LH:** Oh sorry, yes!

**AV:** There was a brothel across the road, and, when people were, I don't know, drunk or whatever, they would throw bottles on to the roof.

**RB:** When we were doing *President Wilson in Paris*, a play I wrote later for the theatre. A bloke came to the theatre on some Friday night and was furious because he couldn't park his car. All the parking spaces were taken. Anyway, he came raging into the theatre with his wife trying to prevent him. He was screaming and shouting. Anna was upstairs with Max Cullen, in the play performing. What Anna says, because the guy was on the stairs shouting, was, "Let's just stop now for the moment and we will settle this." She said this to the audience and the actors. Everyone went into freeze-frame. Then Max went down the stairs, halfway down the stairs where the guy had come up and said, "I'm Max Cullen, you might have seen me in Number 96," or whatever that television program was at the time. The bloke said, "I've seen you and you are a fucking dreadful actor."

[All laugh]

Max retreated sheepishly back up the stairs.

**AC:** And the play continued?

**RB:** The wife dragged the man away. "Come on Bill!" Because someone had said, "Call the police, call the police." Maybe it was me actually... it was, ha. He said, "Call the fucking cops, what do I care?" His wife dragged him away. And then I said, "Shall we resume?"

**AV:** I also remember when it rained we had to stop the show. Because the rain on the roof was so loud.

**AC:** On the roof?

**LH:** There was a toilet also in the middle of upstairs, right at the top of the stairs. It had to fit in. There was no lighting box or anything, I think the lighting person was in there. I know what Keith Whatman had given us, he'd given us the lights from Her Majesty's Theatre that he had helped demolish. So we had a few lights.

**AV:** But Lily, we didn't have a toilet for some time.

**LH:** That's right, because we couldn't use the toilet because of the noise, it would have become part of the production! We'll do the Max Cullen story. I didn't go to many rehearsals as I was sitting downstairs at the box office with Sacha in a basket. Whenever I did see something it was magical and miraculous. When I did get up there one day and all of a sudden Max Cullen climbed through a window and popped onto the stage, and - "How did he do this?!" I said. "Don't tell me they have put a ladder up out there."

**AV:** They did!

**AC:** A ladder on the outside?

**RB:** It was part of the play.

**AV:** A ladder on the outside.

**RB:** I had written this play and knew that window was there and I thought let's use it as an entrance.

**AV:** It was the only window in the theatre.

**LH:** Onto the stage.

**RB:** It has been bricked up now and there was also a window in the dressing room. I know when Jackie Weaver was desperately wanting to have a wee, she was held backwards out the window. And some guy downstairs looked up and thought it was raining.

**AV:** Oh Ron, Ron you are making that up. He makes a lot up.

**RB:** It's absolutely true!



**AV:** John Krummel when he was desperate for a wee, and every night he used to pee into a paper cup and through the whole paper cup out the window. And there were people downstairs!

**AC:** I wondered if you could describe the backstage facilities apart from the toilet?

**AV:** Facilities? That's a big word.

**LH:** There weren't any.

**RB:** The backstage cupboard.

**AV:** It was very small and still is very small, but it um, makes for intimacy and connection between all the actors.

**RB:** And it's not a long way to the stage.

**AV:** It's not a long way to the stage. Even now they can't flush when they use the loo because it's too noisy.

**AC:** And now then I understand that the council closed the theatre down for a while. Because of the fire risk after *Biggles*.

**RB:** There was one staircase. It is the one the actors use to go up onto the ground floor. For an audience even of 90 to 100 people, if there was any fire - forget it.

**AV:** Now there are two staircases.

**LH:** What happened is that proper plans were put into the council, which hadn't been done previously and eventually certain conditions were permitted and we were allowed to open. Ken's father had a lot of connections with City council so that helped a lot.

**AC:** So after the theatre closed, Nimrod moved to a new home and Bob Ellis and Brooksbank bought the site and ran it for 6 years.

**RB:** You are jumping ahead a bit, because the theatre was re-opened and there were quite a few more productions before we moved.

**LH:** Until the middle of 1974 in fact, and we took productions down to Melbourne, to the Pram Factory.

**AC:** So it was closed after *Biggles* and then you got the permission and re-opened and then Bob and Anne, bought the site and ran it for six years, and then it was secured by the SBW Foundation. Lillian, can you tell me about this?

**LH:** My recollection was that Katharine Brisbane, and I, and a woman called Pamela Paine were all sitting on a professional women's theatre and art foundation. Somehow had a

connection with the first director of Griffin, who was Peter Kingston. I think I got to sit on the board of Griffin at that time. When Dr. Seaborn arrived, I suggested to him that theatre companies do tend to come and go, but the building is unique, and it would be a good idea to put the money into the theatre and find a way of supporting the company with peppercorn rent. So he set up a foundation, called the Seaborn, Broughton and Walford Foundation. Who were friends of his.

**RB:** Old King's boys weren't they? They went to the King's School.

**LH:** Walford was a famous designer, interior designer. He got his legal advisors to help him in forming such a foundation. Mine was forming the idea that I didn't do it physically for him.

**AC:** And it's owned by that foundation to this day?

**LH:** Yes. As I said we only ever had a lease, Nimrod. What happened when Bob Ellis came in, Bob and Anne wanted to buy it but couldn't afford it and in the end Seaborn got it for two hundred thousand dollars, as I recall.

**RB:** There had been changes happening to theatre, there was a central post in the theatre. When John was doing productions, and Ken too, they magically worked around the post and made it part of the play. It was always a sight line problem so when the theatre was redesigned, later on that post was taken out. It was also a terrible sweat box in summer and the ceiling was very low and Lilian used to cram people in - she was famous for cramming people in. Every seat was worth 5, 10, 15 dollars.

**LH:** \$2 were the ticket prices.

**AV:** You used to have a stick to push people along!

**LH:** I didn't have a stick!

**RB:** I still have the marks on my back. [laughter]. But she used to cram these people in -

**LH:** That was very important, so I used to go up every night push people along but I don't remember having a stick! There were two sets of alterations, the first were done immediately when we were allowed to go back in there we were to have proper staircase and six toilets.

**RB:** The downstairs which had been a kind of general space for drinks and stuff, all kind of turned into a giant public lavatory! With lots of cubicles and open to the public.

**AV:** Was the air conditioning put in at that time?

**RB:** No no, later.

**LH:** The air conditioning I think was put in under an alteration that was done by the SBW Foundation. Much later.

**AV:** Made a great difference.

**RB:** John was determined to get air conditioning at Belvoir, the new Nimrod in Surry Hills. He was determined to get it due to the terrible sweating that went on in summer.

**LH:** It was part of the magic of the place too of course originally. People did love it. By the time Nimrod left there, we were packed houses. I was bit cross with John, and Ken and Richard, John and Richard especially, because they had decided to do bigger productions. And for that we needed a bigger theatre.

**AC:** So your children, the ones who as babies slept in the laundry basket under the ticket desk and under the seats of theatre. They are now grown up and do they have a relationship with the theatre too?

**AV:** I'm sure they do, I mean as we speak, on at Griffin is *Splinter* written by Hillary Bell, starring Lucy Bell, so um, it's full of ghosts for them too.

**RB:** Did Sacha ever work at the Griffin?

**LH:** She worked at the Griffin a few times.

**AC:** So, they have fond memories of the place now? Or?

**AV:** Absolutely.

**AC:** So, this is a question for all three of you to answer if you wouldn't mind? What do you think is the importance of this venue and Griffin Theatre Company to Sydney and Australia?

**AV:** It's so huge, one of the huge things in performance is the cringe, combating the cringe, which means thinking that anything that comes from overseas is better or more interesting, or more special. And to have venue that really concentrates on Australian writers - it's crucial. I remember in 1975 at the playwrights' conference, George Ogilvie, who was running the Adelaide State Theatre Company at the time, was asked why he didn't have Australian plays, he said because the audiences won't come. And he was proved wrong again and wrong again by Griffin.

**LH:** I think really that the Australian voice must be allowed to speak. What happened basically is that actors stopped speaking like I do. I was educated before all of this. They all spoke for the part that was written, but in their own voices.

**AV:** Are you saying enough received pronunciation? We didn't have to do English accents.

**LH:** That's right, we didn't have to do English acting with the pommy voices.

**AC:** And Ron, what do you think is the importance of this venue now and Griffin Theatre Company to Sydney and to Australia?

**RB:** Probably Melbourne wouldn't say that at all, they have La Mama down there, that was very important to Melbourne. The interesting thing about that little theatre in Kings Cross or Darlinghurst, is the relationship between actors and audience was a sort of cock pit and it was incredibly intense. It was so exciting that that was reproduced when the theatre moved to Surry Hills. It's represented in parts of Australia, I remember Jake Newby, our stage manager in Surry Hills, when he went to Perth, a theatre called The Hole in the Wall in Subiaco, the relationship between the audience and the stage was much the same -

**AV:** And Twelfth Night in Brisbane too.

**RB:** And Twelfth Night in Brisbane, and the Wharf of course, the original Wharf down at that Richard Wherrett presided over, also took its inspiration from the old Nimrod Theatre.

**LH:** I think that relationship is hugely important. Being able to see the audience's reactions on the sides and the reactions to things. And it was repeated. Ken and I had done a big tour of theatres in England including the Octagon and various other theatres around, seeing possible images of the sort of thing that might be. But really, I think it is the voice of Australian writing. I mean at various times it has been the actor's voice, the theatre's voice and the playwright's voice. I think now the SBW Foundation [Stables Theatre] is about the playwright's voice.

**RB:** There was an actor called Don Crosby who lived here for most of his life, but went to England for a bit and he felt he could only be an actor if he had the received pronunciation. The time I thought "This guy has got real talent" was when I saw him play an Australian in John's production of David Williamson's play *The Removalists* at this theatre. He was playing a semi-corrupt Aussie cop, in the full blast of the Australian accent and it was like, releasing, to see Don do this, instead of having to be polite or be another voice that he had to be in radio. Just remarkable, and my eyes were just opened to the possibility of Australian actors.

**LH:** One more thing too, that I remembered the distance from the audience from the place of performance. I can't see theatre when I'm more than ten metres away.

**AC:** That's wonderful. Anna Volska, Lillian Horler, Ron Blair thank you soon much for joining us.

**RB:** Pleasure.

**AV/LH:** Thank you.

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*The 50 Years of the Stables podcast series was produced by **Margaret Murphy**, hosted by **Angela Catterns** and recorded & edited by **Diamantina Media Group**.*

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