

50 Years of the Stables
Griffin Theatre Podcast Series

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C O M P A N Y

Episode Six: *Children of the Stables*
With **Sacha Horler, Hilary Bell** and **Lucy bell**

From being babysat by the Stables's next door neighbours to witnessing rowdy post-show parties in the street, hear stories from artists **Sacha Horler, Lucy Bell** and **Hilary Bell**, who grew up in and around the Stables, and followed in their parents' theatre-making footsteps.

Hosted by:
AC - Angela Catterns

Guests:
HB - Hilary Bell
LB - Lucy Bell
SH - Sacha Horler

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

Angela Catterns (AC): In this episode we meet some of the children of the Stables: Hilary Bell, playwright; Lucy Bell, actor; and Sacha Horler, actor. Welcome to our 50th anniversary podcast.

HB, LB, SH: Hello.

AC: Fabulous to have you here. So, can I ask each of you to tell me little bit about your parents and how they were involved with the Stables - Hilary?

Hilary Bell (HB): John, our dad; Ken Horler, Sacha's dad; and Richard Wherrett banded together in (I think) 1970, to say, "Let's create a theatre where we put on new Australian work and classics." It was basically whatever they wanted to put on and felt people should see. Lillian Horler, Sacha's mum, and our mother Anna Volska, were deeply involved doing everything, basically: making costumes, building, performing, doing the legal side, administration, everything that needed to be done. Meanwhile, Sacha was about to be born and I was three and Lucy was one.

Sacha Horler (SH): You were ancient...

[Laughter]

HB: I was ancient...

[Laughter]

AC: She was nearly an adult.

[Laughter]

SH: I think the thing that struck me, is that we say, “putting on Australian works”, but because they had all been at university together, where everyone just does Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde. Their [parents] big thing was “but couldn’t we have Australian *voices*” and they weren’t heard on the Australian stage. You would import your lead actors from Britain who got on a boat and came. You didn’t hear an Australian vernacular, you just didn’t hear an accent on stage. So, I think for them it meant a lot. There weren’t really, and correct me if I’m wrong, Australian playwrights, they weren’t called Australian playwrights.

HB: There were two I think, there was Alan Seymour, Ray Lawler...

LB: There were, but ...

HB: There were just no dedicated spaces for them.

SH: But they weren’t their pals, because they [their parents] would just turn to their pals and say can you write? The story that I love, is when Ken was trying to find somewhere deeply central and they had found an old whore house that had been a stable, which had holes in the roof. They thought, “That’s the perfect spot for a theatre”!

HB: I think it had been a garage as well.

SH: A garage as well, at some point. The story I got, was the reason they got a good rent was because there were actually holes in the roof and they had to plaster it down and make it - I don’t think the council could believe that someone really wanted to rent it at that point on the corner of Nimrod Street in Kings Cross.

AC: Sacha your mother told me about taking you to the theatre when you were a tiny little baby and stashing you under the table when she was selling tickets. Do you know about that?

SH: I think all of us, the children of the Nimrod were meant to just “shut-up” and “hurry up”. It was certainly a different time... it was the 70’s where you just went along with your parents. Obviously, a lot of “Get under there shhh and then ‘yes, how can I help you?’”

[Laughter]

LB: That’s right, I was remembering that thing of faking sick days, when I was bit older not one. But yes, being at school and faking sick days so you could go to rehearsal and knowing you had to sit completely quietly all day - “don’t say a word”. We got really used to being quiet and watching.

SH: In the dark... As long as you can have a Violent Crumble from downstairs it was alright.

AC: Who minded you, do you know? Were you left to fend for yourselves?

SH: Do you remember the old ladies?

HB: Yes.. Mrs...

SH: I don’t remember their names.

LB: Mrs White?

HB: Two lovely old ladies next-door.

SH: Isn't that Cluedo, Lucy?

[Laughter]

LB: Colonel Mustard looked after us.

SH: Mrs Mustard... [laughter]

HB: There were two lovely old ladies, who lived in the cottage next door -

SH: Who didn't like the whole theatre gang in the beginning, they thought they were lascivious, you know, ex brothel, theatre, very similar.

LB: And they were lovely, they used to give us those Nice biscuits.

HB: I remember that too.

HB: They were probably won over by the fact that there were babies to look after. We were probably the bridge.

LB: We were there quite a bit.

HB: I remember being babysat by Chrissie Koltai, she was a choreographer and dancer.

SH: Just back to the thing that my mum says, like to always say I was in a basket underneath the box office.

AC: You have no memories of that?

SH: No.

AC: Bit too tiny perhaps, later?

SH: Later, yes.

AC: So, when you were growing up were you aware that your lives were slightly different to other kids at your schools?

SH: Lucy do you remember when Dylan and I... So the girls, the Bells were always a year or two ahead of me...

LB: We were at the same primary school, same high school.

SH: Same everything. I remember being at Glenmore Road Public School, when Mr. Monarchs did his "Welcome back everyone" and Dylan and I, as proper theatre children-

HB: Dylan was Jackie Weaver's son.

SH: We clapped. “Marvellous!” we thought, “Wasn’t that a good way to start the day. A speech, we know what that’s all about.”

LB: A monologue.

SH: I also remember one of you or both you [Bells] running up and saying “It’s not a play!”

LB: No clapping.

HB: Shhhhh....

[Laughter]

SH: “Don’t applaud,” and I thought don’t be ridiculous that man stood up in front of a crowd-

LB: Made a performance.

SH: So, I think we were quite different.

HB: I don’t think we were aware of it.

LB: No.

SH: No, I see that now.

HB: It wasn’t until our mother was on the...

LB: *The Restless Years*.

HB: *The Restless Years*, that’s right. That really impressed people at school but theatre was kind of a bridge too far.

AC: Although I think there is story Hilary about being picked up by your mother after you had a fight that day with a boy at school.

HB: I did, a boy kicked me or maybe I kicked him, and I came out blinded with tears. I would have been... well it must have been 1971 because they were performing *Hamlet*. My mother came to pick me up and I was so blinded with tears I didn’t even look at her and I got in the car and I looked and she’d had this long black hair all down her back and it was cropped -

LB: Shaved almost, wasn’t it, like a crew cut.

HB: Almost yeah it was very, very short. It was for Ophelia, so she was going to wear a wig when she was sane and take it off when she was not. It was enough to shock me out of my tears, I remember that very clearly.

[Laughter]

HB: I also remember the name of the boy who kicked me – Miles.

LB: Just in case you are out there, Miles.

[Laughter]

SH: Did you get in trouble? Lucy you said you were very quiet in the auditorium, but I had terrible stage whisper and I don't know if I have ever improved on it. I would always go "LOOOK someone is standing in the wings."

[Laughter]

LB: While you were watching the shows.

SH: Yes, and then people go "Sacha they can hear you". I remember getting in trouble for being front and centre down stage in the Nimrod (in the small theatre) when Henry Szeps was doing a show and he had some stupid joke about a banana and a sporrán. I said, "WHAT'S THAT, a BANANA in SPORRAN?" [Laughter] He was furious at me afterwards and I thought "Oh did I get the joke? [Laughter] Did I get the laugh, and he didn't?" I wasn't very good, or very quiet.

LB: I remember being very, very quiet and being proud of myself of how quiet and focused I could be. Then going to the theatre with school audiences later on and just being so horrified and embarrassed that the kids were making noises. I was thinking "Where are your manners?"

AC: They didn't know how to behave in the theatre?

LB: Nooo.

AC: Do you think it was a privilege being allowed to hang around the theatre during rehearsals and performances?

SH: Yes.

LB: Of course, absolutely.

HB: Amazing, yes. I don't know if we figured it was then, but certainly looking back it absolutely was.

SH: It's only once you are reflecting back, that you realise that you were having the gypsy theatre life, and that you thought that it was normal to see people going and out of character or put on a costume, be a different person in the foyer than in the show or even have playwrights yell about things... It was normal.

AC: Do you remember any specific rehearsal or productions from the days when you were children at the Stables?

SH: At Griffin [the Stables] I remember my mother being famous for getting more bums on seats. [Laughter] She is famously known, so many people have told me.

LB: That's right, squish up..

SH: Move up, there is more room!

LB: Didn't she have a stick or broom?

SH: No, she had her voice darling she didn't need one! [Laughter]

HB: Metaphorical stick.

[Laughter]

SH: She had a metaphorical stick. [Laughter] The other thing I remember so distinctly about that theatre was the pole.

HB: Oh yeah.

LB: Yes, yes, yes. There was a big supporting beam -

SH: That was there for 10 years at least.

HB: Yep.

LB: Oh yeah.

SH: It was right in the middle of the sightline.

LB: It was at the entrance wasn't it?

SH: Yeah. It was a triangular stage and the pole was right at the entrance for the actors. So, all the actors had to come up with creative 'pole acting'. [laughter]

HB: "How do we get around it?"

SH: "How do we act with it and use it?" I sort of missed it when they lifted the roof and moved it away. But it was very synonymous with that theatre.

LB: It was, "How are they going to use the pole?"

HB: Yeah.

AC: Do you think it broadened your mind growing up this way, with the association of this theatre?

HB: I think the people that we met, who were mostly very liberal minded and very progressive. I remember having a conversation with friend of mine in year eight, so we would have been thirteen or fourteen, and she didn't believe that The Village People were gay. [Laughter]

SH: How did you know? I didn't know.

HB: She actually didn't know what gay was. She was Chinese and she said, "We don't have gay people in China." I thought, "Wow, where do I even begin to unpack this with The Village People?" So, I think things like that, that we just took for granted from a very young age.

LB: Also, just being exposed to all those stories, I mean we weren't allowed to see every play.

SH: I was.

HB: You did?

SH: I remember the Bells, there were somethings that were no allowed to see.

LB: What did we miss?

AC: Were they a bit too risqué?

SH: You weren't allowed to see the Stoppard where she comes down nude on a moon.

HB: Yeah, we saw that.

SH: You snuck in did you?

HB: I guess I did!

LB: Oh no I don't I think I saw that. Also... we aren't in a theatre, so we can say Macbeth, there was the Manson *Macbeth* which we didn't see at the Stables. You [Sacha] probably weren't born and I was two. I remember somethings being too scary or we would say "Is it going to be boring?" So, there was that sort of call as well if they didn't think we would like it.

SH: If you were lucky you struck up a good relationship with the bar staff and certainly when we moved to the big Nimrod I pretty much thought I was working in the bar at Nimrod because I was good at collecting glasses. We had a whole party thing... our house was constantly famous for the big parties that happened. So, I kind of lived in this world that was quite night time. Although we all went to school and had days off when we needed too.

AC: Did you play theatre as children?

HB: Absolutely...

SH: I think they did [Hilary and Lucy], I was too young. I remember you guys had a troupe and I was just looking from afar.

HB: Absolutely, we had the Bob Theatre Company, with Kate and Lucie Blinco and Miranda Otto.

SH: And we put on shows.

HB: Dylan was roped into it, Khydrick Becher was roped into it at one stage -

LB: Like all children do, we did put on shows all the time. I remember you [Sacha] doing shows at our place, where we would make everybody sit down and watch. We had costumes -

HB: And Emily Russell, Robin Nevin's daughter was part of them.

LB: We did constantly put on shows whether they were at home or at the theatre.

HB: But we took them very seriously, so we did charge money [laughter] and draw costume designs -

AC: Did you really, sell tickets?

SH: Yeah..[Laughter] We weren't stupid! [laughter]

HB: And we wrote songs, we couldn't play anything well enough, so they were all acapella. We took it very seriously. Cried before opening nights because we thought they were going to be terrible.

AC: Did you?

HB: Yeah, nothing has changed.

LB: Nothing's changed!

[Laughter]

AC: So of course, sometimes children rebel against their parent's professions and choose entirely different career paths. Did you ever have ambitions to work in some completely different industry? Lucy?

LB: I do remember later on, when I was in high school and thinking... I mean the thing with our parents they were part of the actual theatre company, there was a stability that actually none of us have in our lives now. We are all freelance. But I do remember thinking that maybe I should be trying something a bit more 'normal' at one stage.

AC: What might that have been?

LB: Well, that was thing everything that I thought was really normal actually felt really exotic. The idea of doing architecture, thought that would be really out there if I tried that. What else did I think of? Oh, design things, and I thought about various options, but I just seemed to fall into SUDS [Sydney University's Dramatic Society] as soon as I got to university.

SH: My parents were both lawyers and so it was split down the middle of "Are you going to follow your parents into the law?" And I would reply and say "Well I would have to get those marks, wouldn't I?" So, I was not going to do that, and I think my parents just wanted me to go to some sort of university. That seemed very important to them. The fact that it ended up being NIDA was sufficient as long as there were some essays written.

LB: Did you go to university before NIDA or did you go straight to NIDA?

SH: I did a year at UNSW, but then I did plays at both NUTS [NSW University Theatre Society] and SUDS because I was so desperate to be on stage twenty-four hours a day.

[Laughter]

AC: Hilary did you have an interest in any other industries?

HB: I did, I was very interested in animals and I still am, and I considered becoming... I didn't want to become a vet because I wasn't interested in the science part, but I thought about being an animal conservationist. In year ten, I did work-experience in an animal shelter and it was the most depressing week of my life. Dogs yowling and cats crying, it was really miserable. So I thought, I want to write musicals.

[Laughter]

SH: I think for Lucy and I, I don't want to say lucky, because we were immensely talented, obviously! [laughter] But to have gone to NIDA meant that we had footing to know that we were taking it seriously, whereas it is much harder and I still think it is when you suddenly announce to your parents at the dinner table that you want to be a creative and that you haven't got some kind of formal institution backing your crazy idea. We were lucky in that regard, don't you think Lucy?

LB: Absolutely. Also going into theatre never felt like a risky option for me, which is ridiculous because it's totally risky.

SH: Is just because we have children now that we think that?

LB: If our children were to go into this business you'd kind of, you know, shudder in your boots a little bit.

SH: Maybe now.

LB: But I never thought it was a risky option, I always thought well I've seen our parents do it...

SH: I have seen the worst -

LB: That's true.

[Laughter]

SH: The unemployed drunks sleeping on the couch saying, "I can never work again."

[Laughter]

AC: Have you all returned to the Stables at various times with your own creative work?

HB: Yeah, a lot actually. So most recently with *Splinter* which I wrote, and Lucy was in. That one was on just last month.

SH: I'm just waiting for Hilary to write me a role.

[laughter]

LB: After today Sacha she'll do it.

SH: I haven't actually done a lot there. I've tried to get back a few times but there always been timing issues. I have done play-reading, and obviously I've lived and breathed in that space a lot. I'll get there. I mean I've been on the boards there [the Stables] but not much. I was more at the second theatre.

LB: At Belvoir.

SH: Yeah.

LB: Yeah Belvoir. I have done a few shows there [the Stables]. I did *Splinter* recently that Hilary wrote, I did *Wolf Lullaby*...

HB: And *The Falls*...

LB: And *The Falls*, both plays Hilary has written. Oh yeah and *Emerald City, Dreams in White*, so quite a few, quite a few.

AC: So, is the place [the Stables] imbued with memories for you?

LB: Absolutely.

HB: Yeah, yeah.

LB: Absolutely, as is Belvoir too. I mean, we investigated every corner.

SH: I look at things there, and especially downstairs, the architecture and even the placement of the bars changed. I think what you have to remember about Griffin is that it was a party theatre. It was famous, and they spilled onto the street, always, didn't matter what the show was, whether it did well or not. People came back to have a drink and see their mates. So it had big culture of community and fun that *we* all lived *in*. And it's funny, because just recently we had a service for my father there and the staff were freaking out because the oldies and everyone were going to spill onto the street. It was like they were going to stop us, and I was like, "Don't you know what this theatre was?" It doesn't matter what the council says, it all has to go onto Nimrod Street for hours with smoking and drinking and annoying the neighbours. That's what Griffin is, and the what the original Nimrod is.

AC: So, you mentioned your own children, do you all have children?

All: We do.

AC: And do you feel that they have a life in theatre ahead of them?

LB: Who knows, who knows.

HB: Well my son is at film school in the States.

SH: Is he? That is great.

HB: So maybe kind of indirectly. My daughter in sixteen and I think she writes but secretly. But I don't know.

SH: My daughter turned to me once, because obviously I've told them how bad being an actor is, and with great fear and slight tremble and tears in her eyes, she said, "Will you hate me if I become an actor?"

[Laughter]

SH: There was an indignant, large pause and I said, "I won't hate you darling but –"

[laughter]

SH: “Reject you outright!” [laughter] “I mean you’ll have to move out.” It’s funny what you pass on, having said that they are very creative thinkers, and I’m sure that came from an insistence of reading, seeing plays. I take them to things that I know are not for their age, to make them listen and think, much more than their friends do. I’m sure you guys do, too.

LB: I have three daughters and actually my seventeen-year-old is one of the ambassador at Griffin so she’s part of that group of young people who go to the theatre to see the shows every month. She really loves it and thinks it is brilliant. Who knows what they will do with their lives.

AC: So, it is obviously an important place in your lives, and in Australian theatre?

HB: Absolutely, I have also been on the board for a long time and have taught there for about fifteen years teaching playwriting. So, it feels very central just as Sacha was saying, it is kind of a community hub in the theatre industry.

SH: It really is, and I think people who have never seen a show at Griffin they are actually shocked about how unique it is. You say “yes but have you actually been?” Because that experience of actually being in that very small theatre....how many does it sit 106?

LB: 106.

SH: And it used to be like sixty or something

HB: Before Lillian got the stick out.

[Laughter]

LB: We need her back.

SH: Because you can watch an actor one metre from you in this theatre and I don’t know if there is any other experience like it theatrically. Also, there is the odd experience that you can actually watch the other side of the audience, while watching the performance which is a kind of meta, strange theatrical experience in itself. Sometimes you see these extraordinary vital energetic performances and people are a metre away from you and there is no other space like it... That’s why I think it remains and people always save it and keep it alive, because there is nothing like that immediacy and the closeness of it. You can’t really explain it to anyone who hasn’t been and plus you have to rush in and get your seat. Make sure you are there.

HB: Try not to get in the front row.

[Laughter]

SH: Or get in the front row and make your first mistake... “God I’m in the front row”.

[laughter]

AC: So, Lucy is it an important place in your life?

LB: Yes, the space is just quite a magical space. I mean I saw a show there last week and that thing of walking up the stairs and thinking, “What world am I going to walk into and what is going to be

played out in front of me?”. It’s an incredibly special space to perform in and to be an audience member in.

SH: I still want to ensure people go and see it and see something there because of that unique experience as the audience. Let alone how great the shows are, just the space is like nothing else.

AC: Fantastic, thank you so much, it has been a delight to have you in for a conversation, Sacha Horler, Lucy Bell and Hilary Bell. Thank you.

All: Thank you Angela.

AC: Thanks for listening to Griffin’s special podcast series, where we are celebrating 50 Years of The Stables. For more anniversary activities head to Griffin’s website: griffintheatre.com.au

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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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