INTERVIEW WITH LES ALLEN

[MF]
This is Mary Franklin on the 10th of December at 21 Abbey Road, Whitney, and I'm interviewing...

[LA]
Les Allen.

[MF]
Thank you, Les. So tell me, how did you end up in Whitney? Are you a local person?

[LA]
Not particularly, but I actually came to school in what was then Whitney Grammar School, and that really was my first involvement with drama in 1967, and I was actually part of the team who constructed the sets and did backstage work on the school productions, and that was first when I sort of really came across Isabel Spencer, and because she did all the costumes for the school shows and also designed the sets, and also the woodwork teacher John Woodward helped him build in some of the more substantial bits of scenery, some of which were in fact quite heavy.

Being more of a technical guy than an actor, I became involved in lighting and rigging, as well as set construction, and Glyn Edwards, who's my physics teacher at the time, was also very interested in the technical side, and he actually showed me how to record and edit music and sound effects, and we used reel-to-reel tape machines, splicing blocks, razor blades, and splicing tape, something which probably people today haven't even seen or even heard of, and I fucked him, probably learned more about music and the format of classical and pop music by basically cutting bits out of it and then joining pieces up in order to make music long enough or short enough for production in the use in the shows.

[MF]
So you mentioned that you got interested in drama through school. What was the set up at school for teaching drama? Was it part of your weekly lessons, or was it something you did outside of main school hours?

How did that work?

[LA]
It was mainly out of school hours. I mean it depended which set or class you were in. Some people did art, which sort of incorporated some of that, particularly on the design side.

I sort of came into it really from the set construction side, i.e. woodwork, because I was quite a keen woodworker, and so I sort of came in that way. Being technically minded, and my father was an electrician, I was quite at home with all the dimming equipment and the way the lighting actually functioned, and it was as I went on that I really learned more about the theory of stage lighting, because it's not just a case of putting a lamp up and shining it straight on, and if you've ever played with a torch or anything like that, you will notice that if you put the torch underneath your chin, you look spooky.

If you hold it in front of your face, all the features of your face go flat, and if you're lit from above, it can also be a little bit surreal. So the best way to light the face is always from two directions, just to bring out all the features. So I learned all that from school, and also my involvement with Whitney Drama, and particularly Terry Powell, who was extremely good at lighting and technical design.

[MF]
So when you were part of the school drama group, who was leading that at that time?

[LA]
It was mainly Isabelle Spencer, and although a lot of other teachers actually became involved, either in producing it or directing it, so it was quite a sort of team, I suppose, of like-minded people really, and typically the shows could be something from Shakespeare or even some other playwrights who mainly were also involved, I suppose, in the subject matter for English literature, stuff like that.

So very often you'd get the book, and occasionally there would be a production that related to that book.

[MF]
Okay, and then the performances were at the school?

[LA]
At the school, in the hall, yes, for parents, exactly that, yeah.

[MF]
Can you tell me a little bit more about Isabelle Spencer, what she was like as a person, as a teacher?

[LA]
Oh, I mean, as a teacher, she wasn't exactly my teacher, but I was involved with sort of the work that she did, but I mean, she was tremendously talented. I mean, had definitely a flair for artistic design and costume design, and I believe she also made quite a lot of the costumes, and I know she had a lot of involvement in that in Whitney Drama as well.

[MF]
So was Whitney Drama already established at the same time as Isabelle Spencer was leading the plays at the school?

[LA]
I would have said yes, certainly. I mean, I don't know the in-depth history going back to 1946, because I wasn't here, but it seems like the way the society progressed, it probably wouldn't have got even off the ground without people like Isabelle Spencer, Peggy Wilshire, Annette Auty, and Terry Pound. They were the ones that really sort of drove it and built it up over the years.

I mean, the society that I came into was quite large, typically probably about 40 members, and the membership spanned all walks of life. I mean, there were town councillors on there, there were, you know, retail shop owners like Harry Dyer, bankers, and most of it there was quite a lot of families involved. You know, it wasn't just the parents, it was also the children that came through as well.

[MF]
And was there a connection at that time with the dancing school?

[LA]
Yes, the Pantomimes always involved a dancing school of one form or another. I mean, typically ballerinas, Corinne Bailey, and some of the modern dancers as time went on with the Jules Tew School of Dance.

[MF]
Can you remember what your first production was that you were involved in? Would that have been at school?

[LA]
Yes, and I can't remember for the life of me exactly what it was. I thought, hang on a minute, yes I can. It was a Ticket of Leave Man, 1967.

[MF]
Okay, what type of production was it?

[LA]
It was... I can't.

[MF]
All I've got is the programme. So, do you have a particularly sort of memorable production from those early years?

[LA]
I think they were all memorable. I mean, bearing in mind that I was learning all about it. They all had their different challenges, you know, either in sound or in lighting, or in set construction.

So I didn't have a favourite one. In the school days, I just loved doing it.

[MF]
So, can you tell me a bit more about processes that you would go through to create the sort of effects that you were looking for in a production?

[LA]
Yeah, sure. My first show with Whitney Dramatic Society was in 1975, when I was involved with the Double Bill, which was Phoenix Too Frequent and Women of Troy. This was carried out in the Langdale Hall, and the Society had, by then, managed to overcome the sort of shortcomings of the hall.

And basically, to actually put a show on in there, you had to bring in all the staging and platforms, erect those, and then build your set on it. The set was an actual fact made in the old fire station, which of course is down behind the existing Corn Exchange. The flats were mainly canvas covered or calico covered, and depending on the place, sometimes skimmed with hardboard.

Terry Powell did most of the design, while I and a team of others handled most of the construction. We also went over to spraying paint to create the shadowing effects, and then of course the detail was lined in on the top, so it gave the scenery a very professional look. And obviously in pantomime, when you've got all the glittery scenes, lots of theatrical glitter was used to create stunning scenery.

And the cutouts, for example, what you might use in Aladdin in the cave scene to make it sparkle.

[MF]
And how long would it take, how long would you have to create that sort of set?

[LA]
Typically a pantomime set, we used to start in June. So there was three productions a year, basically. So the whole year, basically, we were sent, you know, working on sets for one of those productions.

So, you know, pantomime was in June, and then sometimes that also coincided with the October production, and then there was one in the spring as well. So yeah, it was quite busy in the workshop.

[MF]
So you'd be working on that set outside of the hall, presumably?

[LA]
Oh yes, yeah, to take it all in, yeah. And the same applied when, obviously, the Society moved from the Langdale into the Corn Exchange.

[MF]
And this, of course, wasn't your full-time job, this was your hobby?

[LA]
Yes, well, and others, of course, you know, it was a big team. But the effects that we produced, I mean, they were, quite honestly, professional. And that's what made the pantomimes and Whitney Dramatic Society show famous, really, in the locality.

[MF]
Is there any particular set or something you managed to create that you're particularly proud of?

[LA]
I'll be honest, my favourite show is Aladdin and Cinderella, mainly because you can build the magic into it with lighting and sound, and also pyrotechnics. Because there were flashpots at the front of the stage, particularly in the Corn Exchange, for sort of appearance of the baddies and the good fairy and other things.

[MF]
So how did they work? Did you create those from scratch?

[LA]
Well, the flashpots are basically, you can buy them off the shelf. They are pyrotechnics, commercially available, which is used in professional theatre. And with it, of course, comes the very rigorous safety requirements of actually operating them.

You don't just let them loose on anybody. Somebody needs to know what they're up, but in full view of where the acting area is, to make sure you don't scorch somebody. Because it's gunpowder.

And stars mixed in, you know. If you've been to a professional show and seen it, then that's what we were using.

[MF]
Okay. And did that change over time, what you were allowed to do as health and safety became?

[LA]
Not really. I mean, the thing that really messed it up was the change to the new Corn Exchange, where basically the stage was taken out. So you haven't got the proscenium arch anymore.

And it just isn't suitable. Plus the fact, you know, people are a bit cheery about having pyrotechnics in buildings, especially after some of the disasters that have happened overseas in nightclubs, you know, where it's killed a lot of people. Also, I mean, modern fire alarms will actually sense theatrical smoke and not activate.

The one that was fitted, I believe, in the Corn Exchange doesn't have that option. But equally, you know, you do get lots of smoke and stuff like that given up. So it does have an effect on the building over time.

So you can sort of sympathise with the people that are trying to keep it pristine.

[MF]
And earlier you were talking about Dick Whittington and a piece of equipment you made for that. Can you tell me a bit more about that?

[LA]
Yes. I mean, Dick Whittington, for people that know the story, obviously, there is a scene on the deck of a ship and the ship gets caught in a storm. Again, with pyrotechnics and lighting, the mast actually snaps.

So we actually designed and made a mast which actually broke in two. The mast basically was about 12 foot high with a joint and plate and hinge in the middle. And it was activated by a mechanism pulled by a string by whoever was behind the ship's wheel at the time because that was positioned behind the mast.

So that's how that worked.

[MF]
And did it work every night?

[LA]
It did. We never had a failure.

[MF]
Yeah, that's amazing.

[LA]
But we had to design it, obviously, because it had to withstand quite a lot of force as the mast fell over.

[MF]
And how would you say your skills evolved? Because you said when you first started, you were very much learning as you went along, guided and helped by your teacher. So how would you say you progressed over time?

[LA]
Well, I mean, I've been doing this sort of thing now for, well, decades. And I learn a lot from watching other shows. I learned a lot from particularly Isabel, Peggy, Terry in the society.

I mean, Terry was professionally trained in lighting design and stage management and set design. And so I picked up an awful lot from him. You know, I will quite happily admit that.

And from the basics, I sort of also brought in my own sort of blend of what if and I wonder to try different things. You know, and it hasn't just been with Whitney drama. I mean, we've been involved in different shows for different people, including The Round Table in the early days.

And also some other bits and pieces like exhibitions, exhibition lighting. So, you know, going sort of homing in on lighting for a bit and going back to the Langdale, I mean, you basically had to rig and set all the lighting for each show and then take it out afterwards. In the early days, it was basically by rank strand pattern, 23s and 123s, which were lamp type and also floodlights, which were often sat behind grain rows to light the cycle of the set.

There was also a follow spot in use, which was a strand pattern. I think it was either pattern 263 or 264, which had a thousand watt bulb in it and a very short lifespan because you only had to knock the thing and the bulb failed. It was very short lifespan, typically a couple of hundred hours, if you were lucky.

The lighting control then was by a couple of rank strand junior eight wire wound dimmer packs. And if you wanted to dim all the lights at the time, you basically stuck a metre rule across the sliders or any other useful appendage to bring all the lights down together. So it was quite a physical operation.

It's not nowhere near computer driven like it is at the moment. And you had to be quite sort of dexterous in getting things lined up and making sure you didn't nudge the follow spot operator on the way down.

[MF]
Did you have any incidents where it went wrong or nearly went wrong?

[LA]
No, not really. I mean, we were a pretty practised crew. I suppose we had a few sort of instances where we only just got the cue in on time.

But yeah, apart from that, everything went went well. So yeah, there wasn't anything really real disasters there at all.

[MF]
And how did the society evolve over time? And obviously, from your point of view, the sort of things that were available to you were changing. Yeah.

But what about the makeup of the people who were in the society?

[LA]
Yes, I mean, it's basically I think the society, as you know, is sort of moved from location to location. And as I think the locations changed, so did the people. Sometimes it had to, because what we were doing before either wouldn't fit.

And of course, life moves on. I mean, people, for example, in the dancing schools grew up. Some of the people in the cast went to college.

So you've got this continual sort of churn of people that change really being mainly on life circumstances and locations and also the type of shows coming through. I mean, they're sort of really intertwined. Because if, for example, you haven't got, let's say a dancing school, then it limits the shows you can put on.

It's difficult doing pantomimes with the full sort of dance troupe and dance numbers or things like reviews. So it all sort of interacts, you know, and very often you can't do one without the other. And equally, the new Corn Exchange, they've stuck the heating, the ventilation plant in the downstairs changing room.

So you haven't even got the changing facilities for, you know, groups of dancers anymore, which is a shame.

[MF]
And what about some other societies that were starting to form to do with drama in Whitney? Did that have any effect on the Whitney Drama Society?

[LA]
I don't know. I suppose the one that was going is now Buttercross. You get a sort of transfer of people between the two.

You know, and that comes about, I suppose, naturally, you know, if people haven't got something to do in one, they might have a go at the other. You know, or they might want to be professionally trained, in which case they'd probably align themselves with the group who does more to develop the actors and acting skills or technical skills, you know.

[MF]
So we talked quite a lot about the sort of lighting and the effects. Near the beginning, you were talking about the work you needed to do to get the music right for the scenes. Can you tell me a little bit more about the equipment that you were using at the beginning?

[LA]
I mean, in those days, it was typically record decks and reel to reel tape machines. Stopwatch necessity, because if you had to shorten back a track, you need to obviously work out how long it is, how long you want. And then you try and look at the structure of the track so you can work where to cut it and also remove bits and then join things back in.

I mean, typically, even operating a show, I mean, I used to mix sound effects together using a mixing desk. And for example, if you took, say, the cave scene in Aladdin, we had a backing track of the sound of dripping water, which sort of gave it a really spooky atmosphere. And also, we recorded Abanaza with Echo.

So he was outside the cave, Aladdin was in. So Aladdin was done live. And as a sound operator, you had to play off against a live actor to get Abanaza's voice in.

So I suppose really, it's the first time that I've ever had to thoroughly learn a script. Because you've got to get it right. If one of us made a mistake, we were sunk.

You can't get out of it.

[MF]
So some interesting rehearsals?

[LA]
Yeah. Although, to be fair, I mean, we never had a problem. I mean, yeah, we did rehearse it.

And yeah, it can be a bit nerve wracking. But on the other hand, you've got a physical piece of tape which is coming through. You can see the leader tape.

So you know where the sound is going to start and stop.

[MF]
And how did that change? When did that sort of equipment stop being used?

[LA]
Well, of course, reel-to-reels went out and then cassettes and mini discs came in. You can still do that. But then, of course, then everything went digital and computer.

And I must admit, there are certain times using a reel-to-reel and a razor blade is easier.

[MF]
And why is that?

[LA]
You use your ears. You don't necessarily need to see the waveform on the screen. It's a bit like using the force.

You can hear it and feel it. But yeah, I mean, typically, the amount of time spent on setting up some of these sound effects is quite long. I mean, it would be nothing to spend something like an hour and a bit mixing down, say, something like a three-minute sound effect.

And equally, we used to create things like coaches and horses. It was typically people stuck in a room shaking bells in rhythm and recording it and then putting on the putting on the sound of the coach underneath it. So it was true sort of, I suppose, foley artistry, really, getting all the sounds together and physically making them.

And also, we used BBC sound effects record as well, because that's always a good source of thunder and other bits and pieces.

[MF]
So you had to be pretty creative or did other... So, or was it more of a collective thing where people would just sort of pitch in with ideas or...? I suppose it was collective, really.

[LA]
I mean, the actual physical doing side of it usually fell to me or to Martin Miles, because Martin was pretty keen on the sound as well. You know, and various other people sort of chipped in. Glenn Edwards as well.

You know, so it was all a... I mean, it was a bit, I suppose, like the radiophonic workshop in its embryonic days. You know, people were just diving in and playing around with things.

And, you know, it's like the guillotine sound effect. Everybody knows how that's made. It's a coat hanger down a steel rail followed by a cabbage cut in half.

[MF]
That sound will never be the same again.

[LA]
No. It's what you perceive to be the same, I think, that most people latch on to rather than what's actually creating it.

[MF]
I think that's very true. Yes. And at what point did Isabel Spencer stop being so involved?

[LA]
Oh, dear. You've got me there.

[MF]
So you joined in the sort of mid-seventies and she was very much at the heart of it then. And she was there for the 100th.

[LA]
Oh, yeah. And beyond. Yeah.

[MF]
Tell me first about that 100th.

[LA]
Well, that was Aladdin. And, you know, I've actually got photographs of that. And that was a really good production.

And I believe that might have been the one that had Mike Smith in it, who was from one of the, I think he might have been headmaster, one of the teachers at Woodgreen School. And he absolutely scared the kids with this. He was brilliant.

He was a proper abanazo. Big, big voice, the lot. I think it was that one, but I could be wrong.

[MF]
And where was it performed?

[LA]
In the Cornish Change.

[MF]
And how many nights typically would a performance run for?

[LA]
Well, it's basically in the early days in Langdale, it used to be a two week run. That being the case, you actually had a break midway through. It wasn't a continuous night after night after night.

There was a break. And I must admit, I enjoyed doing the longer show runs because you actually got into the show, you learned it. And, you know, you could get more and more relaxed.

I mean, typically now it's down to typically sort of three or four days. Or three or four shows. The Pantomime, for example, we would do three shows on a Saturday and we do it now.

So you end up the Thursday, Friday, three shows on the Saturday.

[MF]
And sell out?

[LA]
Pretty much so, yeah. Yeah, they're still very popular.

[MF]
And what about the other performances that you did? Would they have a shorter run or similar?

[LA]
Typically a week. But again, I'd have to check on that. You know, digging back through the original programmes and the booking forms.

[MF]
So Elizabeth Spencer was designing costumes and she also did the programmes?

[LA]
Yeah, her and Terry Powell. You know, there were various people sort of got involved in all that side of it, on the artistic side, and all of them were brilliant. They were very, very good.

[MF]
There's a lot of talent in that group.

[LA]
Oh, there is. You know, there was, there is. And also the older programmes typically had a bit you could colour in, you know, and leave at the box at the back for a prize, you know.

So yeah, it was, you know, orientated through family, children. And all of them were typically good family shows. With family humour, silly humour, which is what I like.

[MF]
And opportunities for audience participation?

[LA]
Loads of it. Yeah, encouraged all the way through.

[MF]
All the, oh no, he isn't.

[LA]
That's it. Yeah, and the songs. Yeah, and also some ad hoc from the audience as well, which of course, you know, the actors will feed on.

[MF]
Are you involved in anything now?

[LA]
Yeah, we've basically got a set of LED lighting fixtures, which are starting to replace the ramp strand units. I mean, the strand units, there's nothing wrong with them, but you'll have trouble getting the bulbs these days. Superb lamps, bomb proof.

The new LED fixtures, the society actually did a crowdfunding type exercise. And we managed to get the funds together to get some lighting fixtures and also a new control desk. Because you can't control LEDs off the old type of desk, you know, you've got to have a digital desk.

But with it comes so much more ability to create special effects and scenes because, you know, every single fixture is capable of producing all the colours of the rainbow. Whereas before it was colour wheels or scrollers.

[MF]
And so what are you working on to create for the next show?

[LA]
The next show will be Cinderella.

[MF]
One of your favourites.

[LA]
Yeah, and of course the biggie is the ballroom scene. In the Corn Exchange, that scene was relatively easy because the mirror ball works magic. So it was a mirror ball hung up over the audience with two extremely powerful lights on it.

Then of course, you know, you've got the spots that rotate around the auditorium and you can physically hear the gasp of the audience when it all starts up. You know, it just puts all the magic in. The show will be, the latest show will be in the Methodist Church in the upper hall.

So of course, it's really a challenge as to how we can get the same effect. Maybe not using a mirror ball. But I've got a few ideas and it might be that we, I mean, you've probably seen them on people's houses, these snowflake projectors.

So I've got my eyes on one of those and I'm going to try it out just to see if I can get the same effect. Some of them are multi-colours, which is what I want. So we'll find out.

[MF]
So you're working on that now, when's the production?

[LA]
It's at the end of February, in the half term.

[MF]
Because I always think of pantomime as being sort of over sort of December.

[LA]
Yeah, that's right. Yeah, but a lot of it revolves around when you can actually get the whole half term time is the best time. We found it in there.

Doesn't always work, of course, because it might be that people are away. So, you know, it might have a detriment effect on the audience. But you've just got to go in and see and promote the show and get the people in.

[MF]
Do you think people want to come and see live performances in the way that they're used to?

[LA]
I think so. I mean, I'm basing that on the fact that, you know, all the houses are pretty full. I believe Buttercross might have struggled with one of their productions because they went for about a two week run.

And I think they had a struggle filling it. But, you know, that is basically hearsay. So I'm not too sure on that.

It's a case of where you pitch it. It's very difficult to work out how far you can run a show on for without, obviously, audiences turning off. People have got a lot more pressures in life now.

I think the main thing is to try and fire up the imagination when people are younger. And bring them in. And I think with what Whitney gets up to, it's quite good for that because there's various I mean, you've got plays, you've got pantomimes.

Some societies only do plays. And I think, you know, you're probably missing an opportunity there.

[MF]
You're still getting a good number of youngsters coming forward.

[LA]
Yeah. I mean, there is a changeover of cast, which is good, you know. So people are coming in.

They're trying it out. And, you know, hopefully they'll stay. But as I say, you know, people have different pressures in life.

And it's not always that they can stay. They will move on to do other things.

[MF]
And you've got people who are interested in the sort of things that you're doing, or the scene building and that side of it.

[LA]
We... That's always the sort of non-glamorous side. And we find that, you know, it's difficult to get people actually to come in and do it.

So what you're faced with basically is, well, for want of a better word, an ageing workforce. None of us go on forever. I shan't.

And I'm looking really to sort of bring somebody else in and train them up, particularly on the new LED fixtures. Because it's a different ball game from the old

halogen fittings that, you know, used to be in the past. And luckily, there's a few people around that are actually interested in doing that.

Set construction is always difficult because you basically need a workshop area to do it. And the Methodists have been pretty kind, actually, because they've let us do a lot of work actually on the stage. Because the stage area isn't used by anybody else.

So, you know, they really have done Whitney Drama a great favour in being able to do that.

[MF]
And I suppose people aren't being taught woodworking at a school like you are.

[LA]
Yeah, you can see it. You know, the skills aren't coming through, which is a shame.

[MF]
It'd be great though, if they can learn things through a drama group.

[LA]
That's right, yes.

[MF]
So what are your hopes for drama in Whitney in the future?

[LA]
Well, I hope it continues on. You know, I would like to see, I think, the Corn Exchange used more for drama. I mean, the Buttercross players are in there.

Whitney go in there, you know, probably on the odd show, probably once every couple of years or so. And I think it would be really good if the council actually concentrated on that and brought it up to a sensible standard where it could be used by virtually anybody. It's not there at the moment.

As I said to you, what went on in terms of pulling the stage out and what they ended up with, I mean, it totally wrecked what was really a very good venue. And equally, I could never quite work out why they still have people going in rain the side to come back to the retractable seating rather than open up a hole in the middle straight from the entrance. You know, they retain that, which I think just creates the wrong impression as you're going into it, because it looks quite a nice facility when you go in, but you have to go around this dark passageway and round a couple of corners before you see where you're going to sit.

And then you have to climb back up to it. You can't do any more. Yeah.

So, you know, so, yeah, I mean, they could do a lot more to it to make it more, I think, user friendly from who everybody's going in there.

[MF]
What do you think it adds having that sort of drama group to a sense of community?

[LA]
I think it gives people a chance to really develop themselves in whatever way they wish. You know, if you want to do acting, you can do acting. If you don't, there's other things you can get on with.

You know, I mean, there's costumes, there's set, there's sound. It gives everybody, I think, a chance of developing another hobby. And I think also, above all, I think it gives you confidence.

Because, you know, when you're sat at the back and you realise if that light's going to come on, it's down to you. You know, it's, yeah, it sort of makes you realise you just ease yourself into it. I never, yeah, I'm always concerned, but I'm never nervous.

So, yeah, it sort of develops you as a person. I think that you just take on these things and you just do it. If it goes wrong, you find a way out of it.

[MF]
Thinking on your feet.

[LA]
You got it.

[MF]
Exactly. That's great.