

INTERVIEW WITH TERRY POWELL

[MF]

So this is Mary Franklin on the 23rd of January 2026 at 21 Abbey Road, Witney and today I'm interviewing Terry Powell. Thanks Terry. So let's start off by hearing about how you came to be in Witney.

[TP]

Oh well I was born at the jail in Oxford um in 1946 and um I moved, I was brought home to 35 Schofield Avenue and I've lived there ever since.

[MF]

Oh really? Okay so um so you've stayed in the same house but around you Witney has changed hugely.

[TP]

Yes.

[MF]

So what what is particularly significant to you?

[TP]

Right um well I grew up, Witney was a market town. Everybody seemed to know everybody else and obviously there wasn't the huge housing developments that we've got now. I mean I now consider Witney really as a satellite town of Oxford and probably London where people use it for commuting.

I could walk down Witney High Street as a youngster and I knew every shopkeeper in Witney to say hello to. When I was nine, ten, I used to walk into Witney on a Wednesday evening to attend the life boy group at the Methodist and of course television when I grew up was children's hour that was one hour a day between five and six. So the rest of the time I used to go out and play with other children, used to play games in the road because there wasn't many cars at the avenue, games on on the land, recreation land, Westfield Road and um life was entirely different.

It was a much slower pace and as I said everybody seemed to know everybody else.

[MF]

Yeah I think that that's very true. Yeah. Um so I don't know how much has changed in your road and whether there's a sense you know is there still a sense of community?

[TP]

Not as much, no not as much. One thing that did change last week actually is the Oxford County Council decided to stick some trees on the verge outside which they no longer mow anyway and Geoff, my next door neighbour who does mow it, it's now going to take him longer because he's got to mow around the tree but anyway um that's a recent change. Not a lot has changed at the avenue although obviously um since I was born everybody's had extensions put at the back because the gardens in Schofield Avenue are quite big and the intention always was that um in the one that I live in which was built in 1938 that it was a vegetable garden at the back and a flower garden at the front.

So not a lot has changed really only structural things.

[MF]

Okay um as a boy or a young man were there particular um points in the year or events in the year that um you would always look forward to or things that you would go to to do?

[TP]

Um yeah uh I became a member of the Methodist church as a child and on a Sunday a bus used to come round and collect all the children and take us to church and because of that I became a member of the Life Boys which um is sort of I suppose equivalent to what the what the um Cubs in Scouts were and um so I remained a member until I went to secondary school of Life Boys and then I didn't go on to um the Boys Brigade.

[MF]

But I see it was a feeder was it for the boys?

[TP]

It was yes yes um I did find out later from a friend Ken Mumford who most people in Whitley knew because he worked at Woodgreen school when it was built in 1953 and he was a church member until he died. Ken did tell me the idea behind the um Life Boys the BB was actually to prepare young people for World War Three and I suppose then I realised what all the drills and skills and saluting the flag was really all about. It was training young people to maybe serve in the military forces.

[MF]

I had no idea that that was the case.

[TP]

Yes oh yeah I didn't know until Ken told me probably about five years before he passed um that that was the idea that um I think you see a lot of people admired the Hitler Youth how it influenced young people to be dedicated to their country and the

morals and it and to take instructions and I think there's a little bit of well I think we've got to prepare for World War Three with Russia behind that thing on all of the young people's organisations.

[MF]

Yes you can understand where that thinking would come from.

[TP]

Yeah.

[MF]

On a lighter note did you ever go to Whitney Feast?

[TP]

Oh yes every year um at primary school we used to get half a day off on the Monday so the feast was Monday and Tuesday and local schools were given Monday afternoon off to actually um attend the feast. I think it was primary schools only.

[MF]

And did you have a favourite ride or stall at Whitney Feast?

[TP]

John Wilson's Gallopers was my favourite.

[MF]

Was that the uh the horse the carousel?

[TP]

The carousel with the horses that went up and down yeah loved it. Now of course you need to be flung into the air and get far more excited than um I ever was at Whitney Feast.

[MF]

So it must have been quite a thing for that sort of fun fair.

[TP]

Yes well it was traditional um yeah and it was a highlight of the year like Christmas was and Easter and things like that particularly when you were very limited with television and of course absolutely no social media whatsoever.

[MF]

No but the freedom to play.

[TP]

But the freedom to play in the country and on my friend's farm and doing things that you certainly wouldn't be allowed to do now under safeguarding and health and safety um that was the big thing I think that children miss today.

[MF]

Um what are your hopes for Whitney um for the future?

[TP]

I it's difficult because I read yesterday actually that one of the old Whitney firms another old Whitney firm a Dennis Green's carpet they closed for good. I've heard on the grapevine that another old traditional firm is possibly going to close shortly but I won't mention it and hope they don't. But a lot of all the um what I might call useful shops like Ironmongers and um well even um dear old Miss Downevo that sold everything to do with dress making for years and I just think that um it would be nice to have family-run businesses back but I honestly don't think we're going to get them.

[MF]

Yeah what do you what do you remember of Miss Downevo?

[TP]

Vera right well my grandmother moved to Whitney during the war and she opened a sweet shop which is the shop next to the evangelical church and as a very young child I obviously used to be pushed down in the push chair to see Gran in the shop and Vera Downevo was a very great friend of my grandmother's and she always remembers me popping into the shop with mum to get various ladies things and um she always had a sweet for me.

[MF]

That's certainly something you'd remember as a child yeah yeah okay and have you got memories of that sweet shop?

[TP]

No I haven't no I was too young for that um yes I can sort of remember a tree and a goat at the back and that was it.

[MF]

Okay so if you go out now into Whitney have you got any sort of places that you usually head for that you like to go to?

[TP]

Not really in Whitney um I go to Hilltop Garden Centre quite a lot for breakfasts and meals because I sort of like the atmosphere there and I've got to know the people very well but I don't frequent the centre of Whitney these days.

[MF]

And do you know why that is or is it something?

[TP]

I don't think there's anything there that um what can I say that I'm really drawn to anymore I think it's changed so much that I think a lot of the useful shops as I call them have gone and you know we've got state agents, banks, nail bars, vape shops etc etc none of which I'm really interested in.

[MF]

Very much okay shall we move on to talking about uh Whitney drama?

[TP]

Whitney drama right okay um okay my introduction to Whitney drama was fairly unique because my grandfather was a very famous actor he was part of a duet called Rusty and Shine and they played the music halls on in all the major theatres and although my mother wasn't the least bit interested in drama at all I think it then jumped a generation up to me and I became interested in it from a very young age from doing um nativities at the primary school when I got to the secondary school we actually then had a big stage to perform things and I became part of that eventually while still at school I designed my first stage set which was to be the trigger for thinking could I do this anywhere in Whitney and I must I think I must probably went to see Ken Mumford at the time and said about it he I think it was him would probably give me Isabel's address which was 5 the Flats Wood Green and cycled up there on my bike found the flat number five knocked on the door and the door was answered by this very bubbly lady who invited me in and offered me these rather nice chocolates but I don't remember what they were and we took I said I'd like to join Whitney Dramatic Society and I was 14 then and she said well you can't join Whitney Dramatic Society at 14 darling because the joining age is the leaving age of school which is 15 however if you'd like to come and paint scenery with me on a Sunday morning I think we can arrange something I didn't know at the time she was actually chairman of the Whitney Dramatic Society but anyway what she tells me but I don't remember is I actually ate all of her sweets not one or two of them in other words I sat there and finished them off and the following Sunday I cycled down to the Corn Exchange in Whitney I'd never been in there before and there I was in this very large dusty looking hall and the scenery was stacked on the side of the stage and we had to bring the scenery down the steps in the centre and onto the floor and from there I was shown how to mix scenic powder colours with size so that the colours stuck together onto the canvas and how to stir it on the gas ring that was upstairs in the buffet room then and how to mix the colours and I very quickly learned that if you mix size with powder paint it very quickly turns to gel so you have to get on with it you have to really apply that very quickly so I started there and then they were doing Cinderella and I wasn't obviously invited to any rehearsals or anything because I couldn't be a member but I remember Isabel

coming up to say actually I'm looking for two pages for the ballroom scene I just would you be interested in being a page for me and because I was obviously very oh I'm going to be in it oh I'm going to be in it yeah so I agreed to do that and Isabel actually made my very first costume it was pink with a white ruff and it was made out of lining taffeta which most of Whitney Drama's costumes were at the time and as an extra treat I had a white taffeta one for the finale pictures of that don't exist but that was my first introduction to acting with the society as well as painting the scenery and then the following year I was 15 I could join as a member and I played the cat in Dick Whittington with the famous principal boy Pauline Wilsdon and I went all the way through that as a principal character and then I just stayed on to do Aladdin I was in that and painted the sets for that and very gradually Isabel trusted me to paint a little bit more of the scenery but a little bit more detail on the scenery and from there when society moved into the Langdale Hall I took over then as the pantomime designer for all of the Whitney Drama pantomimes and stayed as the designer for Whitney Drama pantomimes right up until 2010.

[MF]

Gosh that's quite quite a career and so when you started doing the the scenery first of all you were doing the paint which would be the base for those scenes yeah and then the actual scenery how did Isabel go about explaining what she wanted?

[TP]

Well here we are darling here's that size brush and now in there and then in there and there darling and then just a quick swirl and that's what she showed you and that's what she expected you to do on all the scenery that was like the piece that you started working on and then gradually I did more sort of line work black line work with her we work on separate pieces on separate trestles and when the society was forced to make a decision when the Corn Exchange first closed do we carry on or do we use the Langdale Hall? That is when Isabel said to me I want you to design all the pantomimes for me darling and paint them I won't have time to write the scripts direct the shows make the costumes and do everything else so she handed the design construction and painting of all the sets in the Langdale Hall over to me.

[MF]

So when you think about painting you're painting up close yeah it's going to be seen at a distance how do you go about that?

[TP]

Um well from my experience with Whitney Drama I wrote to a I actually yes I wrote to the New Theatre Oxford funnily enough just find out about how they painted their you know their pantomime sets and who did it etc etc and I met a guy who I worked with much later called Barry Stead he was the manager and I was invited to go to the New Theatre on the number 54 bus from Whitney to Oxford and Barry pointed out that in fact they didn't paint any scenery at the New Theatre Oxford it was what

is known as a receiving house it didn't have its own workshop but he put me in touch with the Bernadelle font organisation who staged pantomimes at the New Theatre.

The New Theatre has a stage that's exactly the same size as the London Palladium and was built to take London Palladium pantomimes as soon as the new sets came out of the Palladium it was always the first stop because it also had a revolve the same size as the London Palladium and anyway I wrote to the Delfont organisation at the address and I got a reply that I needed to write to a Mr Todd Kingman who was the designer at Key Studios in London and ask him all the questions that I'd asked the Delfont organisation you see so I wrote to Todd and I can remember it now I got this wonderful embossed envelope that said Key Studios in blue and opened the envelope there was this letter typed on blue paper with blue type ribbon and I'd never seen that before and it was a long letter about how the House of Cards collapsed and how they got Humpty Dumpty out of the egg and all sorts of things like that and an invitation to go to studios in London and meet him so here I am the boy from Whitney haven't been to London ever on my own before you know sitting on the train hoping I get the tubes right and then meeting Todd at his studios and we looked at the models for the Cliff Richard Cinderella that was going to be going into the Palladium that year and of course I did models for my sets for Whitney because Isabel always did models but I'd never seen anything like this it was like mind-blowing and then I went a couple of times more just to see how it was coming on how all the big stuff was being painted on the paint frames and all the hard built scenery was being painted and I was sort of adopted by Todd because he got two daughters at the time that were at least a bit interested in in scene building and scenic design although one became a portrait artist later on in life and bit by bit I became more involved in discussing ideas for the next pantomime and had wonderful lunches up in London with him at the Triano that was opposite the studio and eventually did more and more with him as what I suppose now you'd say as a concept designer and it got to the point where apart from my teaching work and a break from it when the studios closed and Todd went freelance I went freelance with him and we ended up doing quite a few shows before he passed and that was all really due to the interest that Isabel had shown in showing me various techniques in scene painting and design and all the early work she trusted me with to put the shows on on the Langdale Hall stage and then later on with the Society on the Corn Exchange stage in Whitney so I think really started from that.

[MF]

So all of your learning was through but all hands-on learning wasn't it with the benefit of Isabel and others who you know had more experience and knowledge so no formal training in any of this?

[TP]

The only formal I wasn't trained as a scenic designer and I wasn't trained as a professional scenic artist. I was trained by Larry Nolan who had his workshops in

Ensham and used to build scenery for the Meadow Players who used the Oxford Playhouse as their base. I was trained to scene build properly and to canvas in fact I will say he always said I was his best canvasser so I did train professionally to build scenery.

[MF]

So what does it mean to canvas?

[TP]

Well when you build you build wooden frames for the scenery the shape that you want and then you put canvas over the top of them and then you paint on the canvas what the scene is going to look like. But yes I did train professionally with Larry and later on in life he built some of the sets that Todd and I designed together to go into the Palladium and elsewhere so again there was a sort of connection there that was carried on.

[MF]

So all through this time it sounds like you were working really closely with Isabel because you built up that trust.

[TP]

Yes.

[MF]

Can you tell me a bit more about her personality and how that would have shaped the society?

[TP]

Yeah yeah Isabel was I suppose you'd say a one-man dynamite that exploded in various directions with directing, writing, scene design and painting, costume making and design. Isabel could do virtually anything except obviously she didn't do the building side she didn't do lighting or sound but everything else was Isabel and the productions that were done in the society I suppose really from 1946 onwards until the last Aladdin that she did in the Langdale she directed, produced and had the say in exactly what was done. She just knew how to handle people she got she was a senior mistress at the Henry Box and obviously she controlled staff their children but she just had this knack of making you do what she wanted you to do in a very nice and often complimentary way.

If she wasn't sure of anything but she wasn't over impressed she used to say well I think it needs a little more pacher and then left leaving you to wonder what she really wanted you to do and you always knew whether she really liked something because she would go oh oh oh that's not just what I imagined so if she was okay with it she'd say lovely darling and that would be it. So you always have the indication of how she felt about what you were doing for what she used to call her

shows and they were shows to be honest and everybody in the society knew that they would be Isabel directed shows even though while she was deciding what to do or writing a new script whatever she would say to the society right Monday night club night get some sets of plays from the Oxford County Library and you can all you know do some play reading and see if there's anything there that you liked but members knew that what would happen was one Monday night Isabel would arrive with a great flourish a little bit later than the starting time 7 30 and very often would throw a set of scripts down in the middle of the room so that you had to go and pick one up and you knew that was it that was what you were doing and even though somebody would perhaps pipe up and say oh well um actually we quite liked this particular play that we read and Isabel would say particularly if it was a play I don't think so darling I don't do potboilers and nobody really knew what a potboiler was although one of the members defined it a potboiler as a play that Isabel didn't want to produce so yeah she was um a great character and you always knew that once she'd set her mind on doing something or that is what the society would do and the other members were they accepting of that they were um because they knew that I think they knew they needed Isabel's in energy and enthusiasm for it to actually get it on um most members I suppose and the same applies today were really there for acting to have an acting part in it and um they knew that if okay Isabel's going to do this well I'll get a part in it so we'll go with that you know we'll go along but um she was a sort of mum to the Whitney Dramatic Society and if anybody wanted to argue or make a suggestion she'd always turn around and say oh I don't think so darling mum knows best so that was another um phrase you often heard and uh a lot of the things that she did write and she wrote obviously all the pantomimes um things like Tale of Two Cities um she wrote script for that and she didn't stick always to publish plays um although she did auditions you sort of knew who might be playing the part before the list of characters went up on the notice board by how the readings went at the first read through and I played a number of dames and a couple of villains for her in panto and particularly the dame scripts the later dame scripts came out you see and it would have dame dames obviously first entrance and then she'd write dame does five minutes so to the rest of the members and myself it was obviously that I was going to do it again because she used to say when I queried and said look um there isn't any um there isn't any introductory script Isabel you've just said five minutes she said well yes darling but I I write the most exciting introductory scripts and you never use them so so you know she had all this about her but yeah I mean I think in a way she always prepared members for how she wanted to cast it before the official cast list went on the wall do you think

[MF]

knowing the people in the society she'd actually written oh she wrote yeah she wrote for people

[TP]

you could tell she wrote for certain people in the society in a certain way in a certain way she

[MF]

wanted it played so you went from playing the page boy in your costume which you didn't sound

[TP]

entirely thrilled about to playing the cat yeah the cat was lovely the cat was lovely um because it was a nice character part um I was Tommy the cat I think and I had a name in you know I was a page boy you know um yeah so when she asked me to do the cat I was really chuffed about that

[MF]

yeah and she played uh played the pantomime dame I played a few times yeah what do you think makes

[TP]

a good pantomime dame oh um a good pantomime dame and I know obviously now I know still know a few we've lost a lot of good panto dames recently but I still know a few um it's really how you work with your audience how you get your audience involved that's what makes a good pantomime dame and talk going back to Isabel reminds me of this incident where I was pantomime dame again and um one of the members said oh well um it's obviously who's going to be pantomime dame again this year and Isabel said well yes it is darling but um he puts bums on seats

[MF]

because of course it needed to make money to cover its costs you have you see the pantomime

[TP]

made the money so that plays could be performed which always tended to lose money Whitney has never had an audience for plays and I don't think it still does Whitney's always been pantomimes and musicals that have attracted audiences and one year when Isabel was challenged we were doing Breath of Spring which she was directing and people were saying well look you know is there anything we can do to get people in to see this play so Isabel decided that what we needed to do was to do a big publicity stunt round Whitney shops have a Breath of Spring with a new lawnmower have a Breath of Spring with a new dress have a Breath of Spring so we did a big campaign Isabel and I together um I think it was about 10 shops had big posters in the window you know and we still didn't get an audience so as Isabel said well there we are darling we've done the best we can we can't do any more people don't like plays in Whitney but the society continues to put on plays they do um they have a much well the Methodist where they normally work now it's a much smaller audience capacity I think it's about 90 they have in there now but you know Langdale Hall you could get 250 in and the Corn Exchange as it was when as it was um originally when I first joined I think it was about 250 60 then when it was

refurbished the first time by David Stew when he was mayor it was 201 with the retractable seating now it shrunk again um I think they get 130 in there max now but that's retractable seating but they've brought stage forward onto the floor

[MF]

so um they've reduced the capacity anyway so um pantomime involves a certain amount of song yes and dance oh yes how did um how did Isabel sort of create that music aspect of the panto was there a live live musician always always live music of course you

[TP]

that was way back before the days of recorded musical backing tracks or karaoke style backing so it was usually piano and drums minimum

[MF]

okay um but then Whitney Dramatic Society uh didn't put on musicals no a reason for that I

[TP]

think the reason for it was the cost of royalties of doing something like a Rodgers and Hammerstein or even an Oliver or maybe an Annie um the royalty costs were very high also Isabel wasn't she didn't like musicals they weren't her favourite things to produce or direct so I think the reason we didn't do it in a society at the time was the cost okay but she

[MF]

must have loved every other aspect of it because she she joined or was a founder member do you think of Whitney Dramatic Society when she came to work right yeah when she came to Whitney

[TP]

Whitney Dramatic Society as such didn't exist it was called the social centre players and was part of the Corn Exchange being used as a social centre after the war the Whitney Dramatic Society as such didn't actually exist till 1955 but Isabel came in 46 to teach art at the grammar school um was very disappointed five years later when she was told she couldn't teach art at the grammar school because she'd got a qualifying degree in English so she had to stop teaching art which she loved and start teaching English however um right from the start I think Isabel saw Whitney Dramatic Society as one pantomime two plays a year so it was a dramatic rather than a musical society

[MF]

I see and and she and so was she directing and producing from the start or did she have a

[TP]

different role in those early years do you know yeah she took over the production of Ghost Train in 46 which is the first listed one when something happened and she couldn't remember when I asked her something happened with the director she took it over um and then I think established herself as director costume maker prop maker and scene painter all in one go to get it on I think they had a couple of attempts to get that on for one reason or another um Isabel took it forward and then remained with the group to take that forward into the Whitney Dramatic Society

[MF]

and so she had that extensive role in driving the production of everything yeah from the 40s until um she decided to leave yes that was the end of the 70s yes and and what was happening

[TP]

for her at that time what when time she left yeah um she had started at the Henry Boxers of grammar school she resented the change to comprehensive she found it difficult I think to teach all ability children whereas she taught the top ability children before also I think with the changes coming in all the time with education she decided that she ought to retire concentrate on developing her love and skill in calligraphy and it was also coming to the time when the Langdale Hall well it didn't close actually it was refurbished at the same time as the Corn Exchange but the Corn Exchange had a new stage um and obviously the Whitney Dramatic Society wanted to switch to using that Isabel had also decided she didn't want another change of trying to produce any productions in a new venue so after Aladdin she decided that was the end with Whitney drama and a year later she left the Henry Box School to pursue and develop her skills in calligraphy when she started her famous annual calendar which were very much sought after tell me more about the calendars calendars yes they were all hand-lettered and hand-drawn um they also had a facility against each day for making notes but as Isabel said but I don't expect you to write on them darling so I did she never forgave me for doing it but I used to use it as a write-on calendar they were produced every year she did really well I mean she earned a living out of the calendars alone because they were so popular a lot of them went abroad as well because they were obviously Isabel Spencer calendars designed printed and very very very popular and I will tell you that on Isabel's death when I was one of the people who sorted her estate out we were faced with a whole garage full of boxes of unused unsold calendars and although a few years earlier I tried to make her have a clear out of the garage of the calendars she always said oh no absolutely not darling you never know when anybody would want a back copy so literally I filled a skip full of boxes of old

[MF]

calendars and what did she use for the illustrations for the calendar oh um obviously she did them

[TP]

herself um depended on the month each month had a different illustration um so they were hard

[MF]

paintings yes some of her drawings yes and what did she particularly like to draw

[TP]

always botanical always plants were there some months always had a plant um buildings she quite liked a building um anything really that caught her eye during the year she would just think oh I'll put that on the June page or that one on the September one so she didn't really um I think it was a bit of a calendar full of liquorice all sorts as she

[MF]

described it once and was she a founding member of Oxford Scribes yes oh yeah yes she was

[TP]

what did Oxford Scribes is this to do um calligraphy develop calligraphy and um they produced various pieces for sale and Isabel organised exhibitions of calligraphy some of them were in the Whitney Museum in the room upstairs and then after her death there was a planned calligraphy exhibition which um Rosemary Warner and I took to staging ourselves using some of the very many pieces that Isabel had got um and then we had what Isabel directed as the Oxford Scribes day when we opened her bungalow at nine o'clock in the morning and the instructions were to close it at four the Oxford Scribe members were then they gathered at the bungalow they were then able to take any of the work or any materials they wanted between the hours of nine and four and then um they had to go at four o'clock and as she put it kick them out otherwise you'll never get rid of them and the other instruction was there was to be no chairs available so that they could sit down and

[MF]

have a chat instead of sorting out the art okay and how did um do you know what had um got Isabel

[TP]

involved in calligraphy how did she she's always loved it um she used to letter hand letter and all the programmes for Whitney Dramatic Society's productions and uh she's always always been interested in calligraphy and used to teach it for a while when um she was at the grammar school

[MF]

and from Oxford Scribes was there another organisation was that Windrush?

[TP]

Windrush Scribes that was yeah that was Isabel's little branch line if you understand which she ran with more local people that was the Windrush Scribe the Oxford Scribe was obviously the bigger group the family group the parent group um of which she had a lot to do with the organisation of the displays and exhibitions and was there did it generate a lot of interest yes yeah it did um they produced the year before Isabel's death they produced a spiral bound booklet of calligraphy which all members contributed to um and that was really her final production because she'd stopped the calendar during the calendar two years before she passed on I think she found that it was getting um a little bit too much to do all the lettering and all the artwork for it the last one was the only one that was ever produced in in full colour all the others had a different colour print for each month oh so a thing a single colour yeah for each month it was coloured in that way but the final one everything was in colour the artwork and everything

[MF]

was was coloured and did she organise all the packaging to send them oh yeah yeah she yeah

[TP]

yeah she did um she did everything um dealt with the orders um got them posted everything else um one thing about Isabel she would never throw an envelope away ever because again as she said well you never know when you'd want an envelope of that size so when I helped um clear her bungalow there was a huge pile of envelopes from floor to ceiling and I had to go through every cut every single one of them open to see if there was anything inside that she'd left and I did find six checks for calendars well after I'd gone through them all and um one or two orders that I don't think had ever been fulfilled but anyway yeah she organised everything but like her calligraphy she never threw anything away because as she said well I can't throw that piece of paper away because you never know when you might need a piece of paper that colour and that size

[MF]

um and when it came to the costumes oh yeah fabric yeah tell me more about the fab yes

[TP]

um well drama after Isabel left had an extensive wardrobe of costumes from the various shows um Isabel would never use a costume twice if it didn't fit in with her idea of the theme of the design of the show so once the pantomime costumes had been designed even though the costume ladies and in those days when Isabel um in the 70s when Isabel was I suppose at her peak production era um drama had headquarters at the old fire station in Whitney which included a club room and of course you couldn't buy any costumes off the peg or the internet so mums and interested parties used to make them from scratch from Isabel's designs going to get

the material with Isabel was always an adventure for well me her and the market traders of Oxford really um principal places to get the material was Mr Luck in the covered market in Oxford who if he saw Isabel approach would try and hide under the counter knowing that Isabel would probably want him to get most of his material stock out so that she could see it in the full there was um two youngsters in Oxford market in the old um cattle market there uh well one would disappear if he saw Isabel first leaving the other one to cope with her wanting bales of material got out for her inspection but she always bought something so she was a good customer she was a brilliant customer but she insisted that um she saw all the material unwrapped so bales of material were no good until she could see the colour and the texture and the pattern and feel what she was going to buy and perhaps with a view

[MF]

to thinking how it was going to appear in the different lights yes yes I had to carry them of course once they were bought she sounds as though she was quite a collector of things

[TP]

yeah I think she came from the era when you didn't throw anything away and she never did um clearing out her garage her uh workplace she called Geneva which was a wooden building in the in her garden and the attic of the bungalow was no easy feat because there were things in all of those places that she kept ever since she came to Whitney but she wouldn't throw anything away even if it was a piece of paper and she cut a hole in the middle of it that piece of paper had to be saved

[MF]

so you knew Isabel from the age of 14 yes right through until she died until she died

[TP]

what do you feel you owe to Isabel the the start in life she I suppose you see I've always said to my pupils if they want to go into anything and maybe the theatre or films or anything as a professor you've got to have it you've got to feel it inside it's got to be burning inside you to do Isabel used to say if you haven't got that feeling darling don't do it because it won't work for you and I think she understood that I'd got that passion for theatre I wanted to develop I wanted to do more so she was very encouraging and very helpful with what she did she helped me get my specialist teaching diploma which I then used to go to Avery Hill Teachers Training College on a two-year shortened course for teaching because she realised the only way through at the time was you either had to be at the grammar school doing A-levels to get into teacher training college or you had to do it another way so we decided that I would get a specialist drama teaching diploma that would be what I would use to apply to a teacher training college to make my diploma so that I could teach in state education and that's how we plotted the way through it took slightly longer than most people would take but it was my only way through what I really wanted to do but I couldn't do at the time was train at the BBC first of all in floor

management and then hopefully going on but at the time you either had to belong to the Cambridge University Footlights Club hence you had to go to Cambridge University or you had to have family working at the BBC who could get you in and I had neither of those so I had to go the route of getting the teaching qualification first using that then to apply to a college and say I want to make this so that I can teach it in any state education school I could if I wanted to have used the specialist diploma in a public school at the time because they wanted they didn't particularly want state education qualified teachers but Isabel and Todd Kingman both said you need to get that you need to have that you've always got to have another arrow to put in your bow and they were both right because I was in and out of mainstream education doing work with Todd then I produced Professional Pantomimes with a chap called Peter Elliott at all the big provincial theatres using the ex-palladium sets that I'd done with Todd in previous years but that inevitably ended and I had to go back into education for a while and did manage though on Isabel's advice to leave at 50 so I finished state education at 50.

I was offered I was working at for Bucks County Council then they were going from three-tier system down to two-tier system I was in the middle school system and there wasn't a job for me at a primary school or a secondary school and I certainly wouldn't have got a grammar school in Bucks because I hadn't taught in one before and I was offered a deal that would mean I would get my pension at 50 as if I'd retired at 60 which you know was a limited offer at the time and Isabel said to me you've got darling you've got to go you've got to go I don't know what you're going to do afterwards but you've got to go and I managed afterwards to pick up more professional work I produced immediately produced three pantomimes at Bucklins and got all new designs for, worked for a company that staged in the main American musicals in British West End theatres because obviously I'd been used to designing sets for Palladium with Todd and I'd got design knowledge there and then I started Dramascope in Whitney which was the youth group and I did one-to-one private teaching for lambda exams so yeah that was my sort of passage through so from eating all of Isabel's chocolates yeah to eating to eating the wonderful food provided at her wake because I knew that had to be absolutely the best anyone could ever offer because I'd organised parties for her when she was 80 and 85 at the Mary Box Room and they were again wonderful events for which you had an invitation which always said the time you arrived and then carriage is at because it was Isabel you see and for both of those we had pens to give out to the people who attended one said Isabel 80 the other one said Isabel 85 written on the side of it so I knew what the wake had to be it had to be the big finale that nobody would ever forget because the food would be fantastic the drink would all be paid for and it would be something you never forgot and the setting idyllic looking over the windrush which I know was option two but she would have approved the whole thing she would have approved of well people said to me they came up and said that was an Isabel funeral and this is an Isabel wake so I thought I think we did it.

[MF]

If you could sum up Isabel in just three words what would they be?

[TP]

Talented, enthusiastic, energetic.

[MF]

Is there anything else you'd like to share about Isabel or Whitney or Whitney Drama Society?

[TP]

Not really, I suppose with Isabel it was now you never had a dull moment and one annual event for years was the New Year's Day concert and I always went to see that with Isabel. We later on in her life we did theatre trips together mainly to Stratford-upon-Avon in the old Shakespearean theatre and often went out for lunches various places and I think really she's somebody that I don't think of all the time but I never forget. You know it's um I don't think I'd have done what I did and achieved what I did and worked with people who I did had it not been for the early start with the Whitney Dramatic Society.

I was with them actually for 60 years until the Corn Exchange closed again and after that they went to the Methodist and they're still there and they did the odd one at the Corn Exchange but with the change of venue it wouldn't have been the same for me because I couldn't design or light what I used to do it all would have been too different so I thought no it's time to go like Isabel knew it was time to go after that Aladdin I thought it's time to let them develop a new society new in new premises and in a different way.

[MF]

Okay thank you, thank you Terry.