

ANDREW ALLEN'S ORAL INTERVIEW WITH BRIAN LAUL ON 6 JUNE 2023 AT H J DALEY LIBRARY

AA Good afternoon Brian.

BL Good afternoon!

AA Let's start Brian with where you're from, your birth and your early childhood.

BL I was born in Madras in South India they know it now as Chennai and I spent my early childhood... went to university there ... began working there and then came to Australia in Christmas of '97.

AA What sort of childhood did you have over in India?

BL Absolutely fantastic. I mean it was the time when there were a lot of ex pats there so the international schools were flourishing. So it was great. Very early in life I mean I had something like 28 or 29 nationalities in my class. The only common language was English. It was really interesting. You did French for a second language from KG and not an Indian language so it was good when I went to high school.

AA Did you know much about Australia in your childhood?

BL Not really, no we knew more about America than Australia because we had strangely enough American studies for some reason on our curriculum very early. So Australia wasn't really a big thing. I think my first sort of encounter with Australia would have been when I was little and a show called the Tintookies came from Australia. I forget what they were called at that time, I think it was called the Australian Marionette Theatre. They merge later with the Elizabethan. A guy called Peter Scriven was the pioneer of marionettes in Australia which of course I did not know as a kid but later on as a journalist we met when he toured South East Asia. So when I came to Australia there were really only two people that I wanted to meet. One was of course Peter Scriven and the other was Barry Humphries. I met Barry and we became lifelong friends and Peter was too late to meet, he had passed away. But I did meet the lady strangely enough who had an urn with his ashes in it and she made me my first puppet for a performance I did here which was a teapot for Beauty and the Beast.

AA So you were friends with Barry Humphries.

BL Yes we met under strange circumstances. I told them there's two people I wanted to meet. One's dead and you're alive. (laughter) That's how our friendship began.

AA Can I go back to Madras? So what did your father do in Madras?

BL So Dad was in the navy, the Indian navy. Highly decorated officer in the navy. Mum was a housewife for a while but she was in the media very prominent in the media for many, many years off and on. First in the print media, she was the

head of advertising of the largest newspaper in India, The Indian Express. Then she went on to become Vice President of the largest network of television in South East Asia which was Sun TV. So my background I guess was I had grown up in the media boardroom. As a little kid there was no-one to leave me with. Sit and play in the corner while all these adults have their big meeting.

AA Were you a close family?

BL Yes my mum and I were exceedingly close and I think what I've learnt from her was many, many lessons early in life. A woman in Indian corporate life in the 70s, 80s and 90s was not a common thing I can tell you. In Delhi it was a male dominated thing. So for her to reach what she reached and do what she did at that period in time I think is remarkable.

5 mins

AA That is remarkable yes, something to aspire to I guess for you.

BL For me it was someone to learn from. And she was never selfish about sharing life lessons early in life. So I feel very, very blessed that I could actually by default really be with her through that journey, I feel very blessed.

AA Is your father still with us?

BL No they separated when I was very little for reasons best known to them which I don't go into. But mum and that part of the family, we've always been very close.

AA So coming to Australia what were your first impressions when you arrived here?

BL I came to Australia really just for the fun of it. I had no intentions of staying. I was doing exceedingly well as a journalist in India. I mean I was a columnist for every...I boast not. But if you went to any stand and picked up a magazine the chances are I would have an article in it. So I interviewed everyone from Mohammed Ali, Mother Theresa, every single great in Indian cinema to date. Dilip Kumar, Amitabh Bachan, A.R. Rahman who just recently won an Oscar for music, (indistinct) actually. The nice thing I guess there were friendships made. That's what I value. It was not just the journalist and the great, and I think that's where again I feel very blessed because before the age of 21 I had met that number of people that I could learn from. It is very humble to interview a man like Ali, it is very humbling. I digress for a moment but this has stayed with me my whole life. Because when I met him he was there and there was mountains of paperwork, pamphlets he was preaching Islam and he was signing each one of them. I said Ali really you will never get through this, why don't you just print your signature. He said because the person I give this to believes I signed it, so I will and so he did. The life lessons were very immense. I mean Mother Theresa, I was blessed to be in the presence of a saint. Rukmini Devi Arundale a pioneer of Indian classical dance, she is an all-time great. We spent days on end together and again became friends. I think I became friends with her parrot before her, but anyway. (Laughter) M.F. Hussain, arguably one of the greatest Indian painters that has ever lived.

AA I'm amazed by the people that you have spoken to, that's incredible. Especially Mother Theresa, was she easy to talk to?

BL She was wonderful to talk to. The challenge with these people is to ask them a question they haven't been asked before. How do you do that? Millions of journalists around the world have asked them every single thing there is so I was going with an attitude that really I want to learn from you. I wanted to learn, I wanted to take away something for myself, to learn from. Those sort of discussions can go on forever and they form friendships and I am blessed that to date a lot of us are still friends.

AA Did you ever interview any cricketers, Indian cricketers?

BL Yes I did. Cricket is not my big thing I am more into the arts and into music and that sort of thing but I have friends who are cricketing greats. They know my ignorance of the game. I have played a bit of it but not professionally.

AA I guess I'm showing my bias.

BL The arts and music were my thing, I played music in a band for a while when I was young.

AA So when you came to Australia where did you first go to?

10 mins

BL Campbelltown. I came to Australia really because there was a festival of Australia in India, and we did the tech. Actually I was running a company there and we did events and we did production and so the tech fell on us to do. I saw some of the tech plans. I was talking to the guys over email and I went don't you want to up your game bit. It's not that we don't have the gear, we have the gear. They went "oh does India really have this?" "Yes we do" That's how it started, that's how this whole Australian thing started. They went you should come there and really experience it. Alright. So we came. In my mind I walked around for six months like a tourist because in my head I'm like, six months and I'm going back. So I came with one suitcase. Because I didn't pack my home up or nothing. My wife and Chris was a little baby then and I said we'll have a holiday for six months we can afford it, and then go back. I never went back because I saw there was opportunity for what I wanted to pursue and that was children's theatre. There was immense opportunity here. I'm not saying there isn't opportunity in India but you must remember that India is divided by language. English is meant for the metros, was, it's a bit better now, a lot better now with the globalisation. So there wasn't really much future in that and I wanted to leave journalism for that. If I left it for anything it was for children's theatre. I saw the immense possibilities here. So within a year of coming I had booked the Independent Theatre in North Sydney and I did a production of the Wizard of Oz. My own take on the book.

AA And your wife was happy to be here too?

BL Well she was happy because she has a brother here. That's why Campbelltown because he is a GP and he has had his clinic in Campbelltown for as long as

anyone can remember. So he said Brian for your lifestyle Campbelltown is far from the city (laughing) in the late 90s. So come to Campbelltown because it's easy for you I'm here but then you ought to find a home closer to where the buzz of the city life is. He said that's what I would think you would do. To be honest I enjoyed the place. I like the fact that I can go into the noise and come back into the quiet.

AA Yes, that's what I like about it too. You are close to everything, you are close to the beach and you are close to the country and the city.

BL Exactly. Honestly we have the best of every world you can think of in Campbelltown. As the years went I sort of became more entrenched in the community here and there is a lot that you can do from a personal capacity, a lot that one can give. So I said well this is a great place to be.

AA Do you think it's unfair that we get a bad name sometimes?

BL It's highly unfair. If I could swear on tape I would. I have said this publicly, openly and that was one of the main reasons why I started Good Morning Macarthur, was to tell local stories. There are young people here are doing fabulous work, why do they get a bad rap, why not look at the good. Honestly, they're doing stuff that people in other localities aren't doing. So then you can't...Oh yeah we'll just paint everyone with the same brush and no that's wrong. So we started Good Morning Macarthur to tell their stories to get them out there and I started then the Young Champions Awards to acknowledge the excellence of our under nineteens .

AA That's what I wanted to ask you about how that started.

15 mins

BL It started because going back a page for a moment. With the Wizard of Oz I ran a great season at the Independent Theatre. I ran a great season following that at the Seymour Centre. This was all from when I went to hire the Independent they told me that no-one like me had hired the theatre before. Now I knew what that meant but I pretended I didn't. They said no-one would want to see your version of the Wizard of Oz because it's a classic. You're not doing the original. I said but that is not the original, if you want the original you have to go back to 1901, that was the original. Anyway I did my version of it where, the tin man was a rapper, the scarecrow is a country singer, the wicked witch rocks, the lion sings the blues. I know it goes with the characters. It did exceedingly well. The Seymour Centre not realising at that time that the Lyric was going the launch a version of the Wizard of Oz with Nikki Webster and big star cast. I was up against that and I definitely didn't have the million bucks that they had so I did the next best thing I could. I called up some friends in the US who I knew and said you have got to put me in touch with someone to do the Wizard of Oz. They put me in touch finally through and through friends with one of the last living munchkins from the 1939 movie Margaret Pellegrini the flowerpot munchkin. I spoke to Margaret on the phone and I said you are coming to Sydney.

AA What did she say?

BL She said I don't even know who the hell you are. She said I just love the sheer guts of it I'm coming to Sydney. Sent her an air ticket, borrowed money.

AA So it all worked out.

BL I brought her into Sydney for my opening night. I got media I could never have paid for and she went one further. Because I was doing my opening night for the Make a Wish Foundation because I saw the fantastic work that they did in India. And I said, it was not just the profit from the opening night I said whatever I take through the door you can have. Margaret said I've never heard of that before I'm going to act. She actually played a munchkin in her replica costume of the '39 movie and that's how I started my life here.

AA I'm speechless I can't believe it, it's amazing what an incredible story.

BL I went on to tour a smaller version of the thing. I've done, I've closed off at 5,002 shows worldwide. Travelled the length and breadth of Australia performing not just the show, because I realised as I travelled the country towns, immense talent again. Teachers with immense talent but no resources. And you know the performing arts it's not a book thing, it's a doing thing so we said right we will come here we will do workshops and we'll give you performance opportunities. We will bring the show here and you can be part of it. I know the joy that it brought those kids, I still get emails. That's how we started. I floated a not for profit called Rainbow Crossing. Rainbow obviously for the wizard of Oz and then from the pedestrian crossing I was standing on Oxford Street when I thought of doing it. So that's how it got its name. That not-for-profit took the show to the length and breadth of Australia and New Zealand.

AA You must be very proud of that, you must be very proud of the whole thing.

BL I am because we did it unfunded. I'm not one who believes that you depend on a government to provide you money or else I can't do it. You can self-fund and I think any project that comes from the grass roots, yes it needs help to get off the ground of course it does but if it has to sustain itself into the future it's got to help itself. That's what we did with the show.

20 mins

The Australian government sent us to represent Australia in China, in America, South East Asia, India of course because I stuck up my hand the moment DFAT said India. Whoops. (Laughter) And when I say "I" I talk of our family unit. Often I say I but I really mean we, because my wife has been an integral part of this whole journey. My son has grown up and been an integral part of this whole journey. Honestly I think without that family support and that unit I would not have achieved what I achieved.

AA Yes, it's very important isn't it to have that. How do you find time to sleep Brian?

BL That's why I've done my health into the ground. I finish work at three o'clock every morning. I have a business called Oz Funland which is based in Leumeah

and I work in a little office there. They have given me a few square feet that I can work in. I leave between on average 3 every morning. There's so much to do.

AA Not enough hours in the day for what you want to do obviously.

BL Even in Campbelltown there is so much still to do.

AA I really admire your passion, I love that. You are doing a wonderful job, you really are. I don't know where to start I'm just amazed with everything that you have done. How do you feel about receiving the Citizenship of the Year Award was that a thrill for you?

BL Yes, I'm not going to say I feel humble, because I feel very proud about it. To me it validates work we have done. It's two levels. One, it validates what we've done, the second is, it shows young people that you do the right thing you give back change your aspirations a wee bit to be more community and the community will recognise you. Don't do it for that, there are what I call anyway Facebook charities. My challenge to all of them is do work for six months without a single post on Facebook. Get out there and get your hands dirty. There's so much to be done. All of us are experts in our own field but if we all got together and gave back - wow.

AA You're right yes. If we could go back to Good Morning Macarthur? So that's been running now for quite a few years hasn't it?

BL Six years, yes we started that over a cup of coffee with a friend of mine. I did a thing called Celebrate Campbelltown, it was one of those crazy projects. I mean I'm not an historian but I love reading history because it gives me perspective on today. I think that the work you do is also incredible because it's saving those stories that will get lost.

AA That's right.

BL And then we are going to miss them. The next generation and the next generation after...the next generation will be lucky because they will be orally told them and told them and then what happens. So I think you are doing a fantastic job in saving that for the future. I was talking to a friend of mine and I said I'm going to do this thing Celebrate Campbelltown and he said what are you celebrating what aspect of it. I had this thing about going around some of the old houses. I prefer the modern houses put it that way. I was trying to read up from the library something about the old world. I wanted to do a DVD and put a little bit of the story of all these houses on there. That's what we did. I put a thing on social media if anyone in the community wanted to dress up in period costume and be part of it. We won the Champions of the West Award for the project. That's where Good Morning Macarthur started. Because with that I realised there were all these stories and people talk. You know over 150 people put their hand up to come and be part of it. So you know, talking to all of them and hearing their stories and I went this is amazing. What a community we live in.

25 mins

AA There is so much I have learnt from doing these oral history interviews. Once they're gone they're gone. Someone said it's like a library goes when someone passes away.

BL You lose that whole bit of life. It's similar. That's how Good Morning Macarthur started. And listen in my head I went if 500 people watch this I'll be happy. We get about 90,000 hits on our website every week just in Macarthur. I was corrected, when I was doing a live thing, at that time I said share, share, share because I want to reach 50,000 and the tech held up a board saying you are 76 right now, get your facts right. I honestly believe, my hope is with the growing Macarthur is that it's community run. So i've put up a little studio now where any young person can come in, any person can come and use it for free. It's got every facility. The software in that place is the software I would edit on if I went to any of the major TV networks. So I am blessed that way. Friends in the audio industry are happy to come and mentor some of our local kids. So I'll put it out there on socials.

AA Looking to the future, do you have things in your head like plans you would like to do? I'm sure you do.

BL I wish I could stop them sometimes

AA Silly question

BL No, I do, right now I think there are two issues we all need to face as a community. One is we are growing multiculturally but we are not necessarily growing integrating multiculturally. I think that is one of the while elephants in the room. We need to work to get together, together, together. I sound like a stuck record because I keep using that word but I think that is the key to the future.

AA That's interesting yes.

BL And I think it's something that will never happen politically. Politically it doesn't pay, it pays to have it fragmented. But at the grass roots level it can happen and then work its way upward. So I have been working for a year with a friend of mine to unite Bangladeshi businesses and today they are having a little get together in Rydges, afterwards a big launch next month. We have got 300 Bangladeshi businesses under the Australia/Bangladesh Business Forum. That's the first step. The next step is to form a sub-continent forum of eight countries together at one table, very hard. But it's happening and I think it would be a whopper for Macarthur when that happens. People then are going to see the commonality. And again it's something like the arts. They talk about resilience. Every migrant story is the story of resilience. You're chucked into a strange place. Whatever sustains you, your faith in God yes sustains you, your faith in humanity sustains you, your faith in yourself builds up. And that's resilience. And so I think that's the big vision there. On a smaller scale the Multi-Cultural Children's Festival is one step in the right direction. The children come together, they learn together, they see together and it's not just about ferris wheels and you know.... No you can have a festival without all that and still be very meaningful. You can have a festival that explores games in different cultures, sport in different cultures, and

arts in different cultures. Everyone learns, it's not all about food and ferris wheel so I think that to me is another thing.

30 mins

I am very passionate about business and the arts meeting. Philanthropy is big in a certain section of Australia. It's huge in America, has been for decades. Same thing in India it's huge. I think that dependency of arts groups on funding needs to decrease and they need to learn to cut their cloth according to what they can get from the community around them. Then it will be truthful because it will be what the community wants and therefore it will support it. I tried a small thing with a book trail in Campbelltown down around Queen Street. It was the first time anyone had tried it, just with local authors, highly successful. That was done on a shoestring budget.

AA So you think it will happen, it will gradually get there with that.

BL We will get there, when I say we, I think the community as a whole will get there. I think baby steps, you know the bandwagon begins to roll and people jump on and people jump off but ultimately the bandwagon will reach its goal. I think that's the simplest way to put it.

AA OK Brian so it's all positive though isn't it with Campbelltown. You see a good future for the town?

BL It's highly positive, I have no hesitation in saying that we have some of the best in this area. It's a matter of that. You're raising what's wrongfully a bad rap. What continues to be wrongfully a bad rap. We've got everything.

AA We've got natural resources as well, history and wonderful people.

BL I've had a great journey. I'm just finishing a documentary on Uncle Ivan. That's got easily more than ten years of footage in it, but again what a great story, what a great human story of coming together.

AA It is isn't it?

BL I think those stories will far outnumber the bad.

AA OK that's a nice way to end the interview. I have really enjoyed it, having a chat with you. You are so positive and I love that and I wish you all the best in the future.

BL Thank you so much.

AA Thank you Brian.