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TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH BABS McMILLAN THURSDAY, 11th SEPTEMBER, 2025

Recorded in Melbourne. Interviewer: Dr Cheryl Threadgold

CT: This interview with Australian theatre practitioner Babs McMillan was recorded on Thursday, the 11th of September 2025 for Theatre Heritage Australia. The interviewer is Doctor Cheryl Threadgold.

Babs McMillan, thank you for agreeing to share your wonderful story.

BM: My pleasure, thank you for the invitation.

CT: Babs, you are an Australian stage, film and television actor, director, playwright and teacher who has been working continuously in the entertainment industry for 50 years. You have performed in shows for organizations such as JC Williamson and the State Theatre companies of Melbourne, Queensland, Adelaide and Sydney, and many others. And your numerous television credits include shows like *Silent Number, Prisoner, Homicide, Young Doctors, Division 4,* and again many others. And you have film credits including *My Brilliant Career, Oscar and Lucinda, Babe, Hating Alison Ashley, Cliffy,* and again you've done many more films. And you've also directed plays for the Queensland and Melbourne Theatre Companies, NIDA, the Victorian College of the Arts, the Edinburgh Festival, HIT Productions, Gasworks, the touring show *The Buddy Holly*

Story and, again, there's a lot more to talk about. You've been the Director of Drama at the National Theatre Drama School, a panellist on the Artistic Advisory Panel for Malthouse Theatre, and on the New South Wales Literary Awards for Drama. And again, you've done more in that field as well. What a superb contribution to Australia's theatrical scene.

Now, rewinding back to the past, were you interested in the performing arts as a child?

BM: Yes. Emphatically yes.

CT: So did your Mum let you study in any form?

BM: No, it was never anything formal. Because when we went to England, I was four. And we had to fit into a new culture, a new environment and so on and so forth. We met lots of new people. And my parents were very social. We always had a lot of people in the house who were from very different backgrounds, but usually had music, theatre, love of the arts in common. And we moved among these people, really all my remembering life, which was a great richness. It really, really was. And they took us to things. As I got a bit older, of course, and they took us to the pantomimes at Christmas at Drury Lane. And when we did move to Edinburgh a few years later, we'd go to the Tattoo and to the Edinburgh Festival and see all kinds of things. They took us … they took us on wonderful, what daddy used to call 'expotitions' in quoting Winnie the Pooh, of course, and because they enjoyed it, and our enjoyment and our learning came from their enjoyment and the sort of conversations we would have afterwards. And of course, we would have questions of things we hadn't understood, or they would be explained to us going on depending on where we were. So it was always there.

CT: Mmm …

BM: And my parents were great opera lovers, and my mother was a singer, my father was a very good actor, and he attracted those sorts of people. And when we were living in England, one of our favourite guests who would come and visit was Uncle Bill, who in real life was Leonard Weir. Australian beautiful tenor, who was the original Freddie in *My Fair Lady*. And Uncle Bill and Auntie Beverly came visiting, she looked exactly like Veronica Lake. She was, we thought she was so glamorous and gorgeous, and he was always, always good for half a crown as well. (LAUGHS)

So, you know, their visits were very, very special, and they were the sort of people that we grew up with. It was a very embracing adult world. So that became, I think, a great part of why, I was always interested because these people were interesting, and they were interested in us. We were all included as children, and I think, you know, that made an enormous impact on me as a child.

CT: Did your parents … did your parents see your success in later years?

BM: Oh yes, they did, they did, they did, and they were very, very supportive from the get-go. There were never any issues about what I wanted to do with my life. Which I knew quite early on and never changed.

CT: It was meant to be by the sounds of it, definitely. Now you grew up in England as you said when you moved there at four, to Scotland, and Hong Kong. So do you think, as well as all the colourful people in your life that growing up with those different cultures in the different countries – also contributed to … well maybe it didn't contribute to your decision to decide to do acting because you loved it all the time, but it would have given you a broader outlook when you embarked on it.

BM: It very much did, because when we first lived in England, we lived in Surrey. My father worked in in Australia House and was away a lot on his on his job. So we relied very much on our social circle in a village essentially, Caterham was in a village. And so we went to the village school. And mingled with those sorts of children. I mean, there was still a great deal. This was in the early 50s, so there was still a great hangover from the war, and many, many children were from broken families and parents who had for various, you know, very sad reasons, drifted apart. And we were still in 1954. The last thing that came off the rationing was meat. And so, food was still tight. They relied on the milk at school and the school lunch, and for most children, that was their food of the day.

CT: Gosh

BM: And we were so fortunate in the way our mother fed us. And she, when meat finally was - I think it was late ‘54 - that it was finally off the ration. And cuts of meat that the housewives had never seen before - they didn't know what to do with them. And so she used to have cooking classes in her, in our kitchen at Avondale High, just for our local neighbours. All of whom were wonderful people, and the ladies would come and have coffee and mum would show them what to do with a with a scrag end or something that they've never seen before.

CT: What a lovely thing to do.

BM: Well, it was very, it was that sort of community. It was very village-minded and a lot, a lot of the women were single parents. In our, in our terrace, in our terrace community.

CT: So, did you finish in Hong Kong … your growing up?

BM: No, we didn't. We moved from, we were in England for about three years and we did move on to Scotland. We were there for another three years and that was a whole community again. A very, very different world that again we had to adjust to. And again, we were the outsiders because my father worked in the city. He worked in Edinburgh, he drove a car. We lived on the local laird's estate; the Earls of Wemys and March were our landlords. We went to the local school. Where the kids were miners' kids, farmers' kids. Tough, they were tough, and we had the odd fight. And we were also again very, very aware that they were in a different world, particularly the children of the mining families. And the school we went to was a three-classroom village school. And all the three staff members that we had, had all come out of retirement following the end of the war because there were no teachers. And they were in their 80s.

CT: Gosh.

BM: Our headmaster was in his 80s and Mrs. Blake, our teacher who I'm not sure taught us what, she used to sit up, bring us up the front and feed us chocolate. So, you know, which was, which was lovely for us, but it was lovely for us growing up.

But the thing was, that every once in a while, the sirens would go off at the mine, which signalled, you know, a catastrophe basically. And the children would just go, they would just leave, just stand up and go. And it was, yes, they lived with a lot of that sort of stress. And it was hard for us in a way to invite them to our house because we lived so differently. And they felt shy about coming and that. So we did what we could in the playground and, we did have friends, but again it was a different culture that we had to adjust to. And again, I've certainly looking back felt more about different people and how different people react and interact.

And then when we moved on to Hong Kong, well we came back to Australia first, and that was my first time in Australia as of an age to have any memory of it. When I was 10. Which was, you know, difficult to form a bond with this country in later life, it really was.

CT: Yes, even though you started off here.

BM: Yes, but I've never really clicked back in many ways. Many subtle ways that I'm subtly aware of.

CT: Interesting, So, it was moving with your dad's work was the reason you moved around?

BM: Yes. When he was posted to Hong Kong, that was in 19, end of '63. So, it was a fascinating time because it was the height of the Cultural Revolution

CT: Oh, gee.

BM: And it was all happening over the border. And I absolutely adored Hong Kong. I loved it. We couldn't fit me into an English curriculum school because they were just so different, so I did correspondence school. With Blackfriars School in Sydney and that was an absolute blessing to me. My parents were my tutors, but I had to do all the research, all the writing, every subject was an essay, tasks and things, and it gave me such discipline.

CT: I was just going to say that would take discipline, doing that course. Yes.

BM: … and I really thrived on it. And coming back for the last day at high school in Canberra was just a culture shock, you know, it really was.

CT: So, you graduated from school, and then did you go straight into the Independent Theatre in Sydney?

BM: I graduated from high school in '67 and I did a bit of work for the rest of that year, while we waited for exam results and sort of decompressed from school. But yes, I did, I always knew that I was, I didn't want to go to university. I was offered a university post and I wasn't interested. And with my parents' blessings, I went to Sydney the following year, '68. My sister had already set up a flat there with other girlfriends. So we were four girls, four batching girls

CG: Oh terrific.

BM: in Manly in Sydney. And I wasn't interested in NIDA either. I just didn't want to go back into a structured environment. I wanted to be a part of the world with all these other influences that had come at me in my, you know, incredibly rich adolescence. I mean, really. And I wanted to at the same time, pursue what I wanted to do with my professional life.

CT: How long was the training at the Independent?

BM: We were three years there.

CT: Three years.

BM: Yes, it was night training obviously because it was very much Gertrude Johnson's philosophy for those who want to work or have to work and still want to train, still have ambition. It was a terrific school too, I have to say.

CT: Oh, isn't that great?

BM: It was a terrific school. The formidable Doris Fitton.

CT: So, did you go into theatre then or did you then decide to go to England and further … ?

BM: No, I stayed in Sydney for quite some time after graduating before I got the *Charlie Girl* offer. So, I had about a year after I finished drama school. And I did everything that came along, and a lot came along in those days. We did things that people got up - co-op shows, pantomimes and all sorts of stuff that, you know - that was happening in the heyday of the early '70s, yes. And then the JC Williamson job came along. The audition and then the subsequent success with the job offer and it was down to Melbourne.

CT: Well done. So did you play a role in *Charlie Girl?*

BM: Yes, I played one of Charlie's two sisters.

CT: Oh terrific.

BM: Yes. Me and the glorious Anna Bowden. And the lovely Geraldine Morrow was our … was *Charlie*.

CT: Oh, how beautiful.

BM: We still greet each other. The first thing she says to me every time we meet is 'There's my sister.'

CT: That's lovely.

BM: Lovely, yes.

CT: So, what happened after that? When did you go to England to train in directing … ?

BM: It didn't happen till the '80s. I went back to England in '74, I think it was, '73 or '4, and I was there for three years working as an actor. And that was a fabulous time to be in London. There was a lot of grassroots stuff working … happening there. Workshops, people creating, it was a time of the ICA, the Institute for Contemporary Arts, which was very theatre-generatively minded, and people like Edward Bond were workshopping plays there. And oh, there was another playwright's name I've forgotten, forgive me, but there was a lot of work being generated. So, there were lots of opportunities to work with people in process, as well as, you know, working in established jobs. And that was again, another fabulous learning experience.

CT: What an exciting time in the industry.

BM: It was a very exciting time to be in London.

CT: Yes. Good on you. I was going to ask if you ever considered the risks of a theatre career regarding financial security, but I would say you were dead set on working in theatre from the beginning really?

BM: I was, I was, and like every actor under the sun, you know, we've all done odd jobs and whatever it took to pay the rent kind of stuff, you know, call centre, and I did a lot of work with my accountant in London when I was there in the '70s. And it was really the nuts-and-bolts stuff. I mean, literally filing and answering phones and being charming and fending them off, so, you know, he, didn't have to deal with them. But that was a sort of regular thing that came along. And I did a lot of cabaret, just stuff and stand-up comic stuff just around the clubs, nightclubs and the, you know, the sort of student hangout venues. All sorts of work that was there and was worth doing because it was all still a-learning.

CT: Yes, the whole time,

BM: All the time. And meeting all kinds of, of wonderfully inventive and creative.

CT: People who you would adapt to so easily.

BM: Well, they were just so fascinating, you know, people doing extraordinary things in places like the Tram Shed down at Woolwich Arsenal where I did a lot of work. And I think that was, I think the Tram Shed was where the first performance of *Taste of Honey* happened. Sheila Delaney's play.

CT: Oh, OK,

BM: But I'd have to check my facts on that, but it was an extraordinary place.

CT: Well, moving back to Melbourne just again because we were talking about *Charlie Girl,* I see you were in *Godspell.* Was that when it was at the Playbox or when it went to Her Majesty's?

BM: No, no, that was in '70 about …

CT: Was it '71? Her Majesty's in '73?

BM: No, I wasn't with it then. No, no. We played in, I don't know if the theatre was called the Playbox, so maybe they changed it before or after, it was then known as the Richbrooke. And it

was - on I can't even remember where it was now - George or Pitt Streets. But I can't remember where the Playbox was in Sydney.

CT: I thought this was Melbourne.

BM: No, no, it was Sydney.

CT: Oh OK, because we had a Playbox Theatre in Melbourne as well.

BM: Yes, you certainly did, but the theatre in Sydney where we were at was the Richbrooke.

CT: Right, OK.

BM: And that was, that was a very interesting experience. Collette Mann,

actress Collette Mann, who had been in the original production, directed by Sammy Bayes, Col did our staging. She recreated the production

CT: Oh that was great.

BM: and was also in it. Yes that was quite an experience. It was a great show to do, a very tough show, a physically very tough show.

CT: And you toured with *Doctor in the House* as well, that was in Australia*?*

BM: That was *Doctor in the House*, that was a riot, yes, that was a fabulous time, that was so much fun. The boys came out from England, the TV stars of the day, Robin Nedwell and Geoffrey Davies. They were the two lead doctors and my gorgeous friend, the late Gary Down, wonderful actor, was the third wheel doctor. And then I was the matron's frightful niece who was determined to get Robin's character, you know. Lovely Benita Collings was in it. Yes Frank Lloyd, John Cousins, it was just everybody, it was too much fun.

CT: What fun you'd have touring.

BM: So much fun. We were in Melbourne at the Princess for about three months, and we were in the Old Elizabethan in Newtown, which was a wonderful theatre to play with, you know, felt very privileged to be in such a historical house. You know, it was really amazing.

CT: So when you're on tour, do you all stay in the same place together?

BM: Oh, usually, yes, they usually put us up in apartments or the same pub or whatever it might have been. We're usually around each other.

CM: It would be a riot I would imagine.

BM: Oh, it was an absolute riot. Absolute riot, but when you're in the show as we were on the road with things like *Flash Jim Vaux*, that was a tour for the Arts Council of New South Wales. They were with the splendid Jonathan Hardy, Maggie Kirkpatrick, you know, people like that. We were on the road, glorious Terry Clark and Nick Enright was our ASM with eyes like saucers, God bless him. And it was, that was another hoot of a tour. But we would drive for miles. I mean, we drove from Bourke to Broken Hill and by the time we got to Broken Hill, the ground was full of red dust, you know, we had to shake everything out, put the set up, go on and do the show. It was a riot, an absolute riot.

CT: Did you travel in a bus or were you in a car?

BM: We were in a minibus with a set in it such as it was, you know, uh. Wonderful times.

CT: So, Melbourne Theatre Company, you've been involved in shows for them too - *In Duty Bound*?

BM: Yes, I did a lot with the company back in the day. I really did and it was a wonderful time.

CT: So you were in demand, weren't you, Babs? Did you have an agent yourself?

BM: Oh yes, yes, I did, and that was thanks to the beautiful Aileen Britton, a wonderful actress, wonderful actress, and she was extremely kind to me. And when I was still a student at the, well just graduating from the Independent, I was given the understudy to another lovely actress, Gillian Owen, who was also one of our tutors in the school, a RADA trained actress who'd had a West End career. And it was a production of Noel Coward's *Suite in Three Keys,* which is a triple bill. And so I was to cover Gillian. And she unfortunately did fall ill, so I got on, and Aileen was the other member of the company and the lovely Rick Hutton. So, it was three three-handers. And Aileen was very sweet and kind to me indeed. And I met her again on the set of *My Brilliant Career*. She played Sybilla's grandma in that glorious film. I do love it. And she was very kind to me. She introduced me to Gloria Payten, who was the agent of the day in her company International Casting Service in Sydney back in the day.

CT: Wonderful.

BM: And Aileen arranged an interview for me with Gloria and Gloria accepted me as a client. And I bless her every minute of the day, because she gave me such a fabulous start.

CT: Life is interesting how things happen if they're meant to be, I think, and that was meant to be.

BM: Oh, she, she was a wonderful lady, wonderful. I've had wonderful mentors come and go in my life. Sue Nattress was another one.

CT: And of course, we'll talk later on that you have now been mentoring up-and-coming people as well yourself - so you've been giving back, which is terrific. But back to your performance career. *The Elephant Man*. That sounds interesting.

BM: Yes, that was a very interesting play, that was done at Russell Street with Robert Van Mackelenberg playing the Elephant Man. It's on the life of John Merrick, who suffered a grossly disfiguring disease which affected his entire body, and he was finally taken off the street and out of the freak shows, into the London hospital, where he was treated until he, frankly, mercifully did die. But he became the toast of London, as was the fashion in the Victorian time. And was visited by royalty and by theatre stars … yes …

CT: Oh

BM: – yes, because it was the thing to do. And so, it's a story of the Elephant Man, as he became to be known, because of his gross facial disfiguration. And no one had ever seen anything like it, and people would come and take one look and scream and faint, and you know. And he was exposed to all this until he was taken into the London hospital, where he was also, certainly to a certain extent, on display. But they treated him as best they could with what they knew about such a condition which no one had ever seen before, but it's extremely rare, thank God. But it was a beautiful play. And it said a lot about a lot of things.

And a lovely company. Geraldine Turner was also in it, and as I say, the lovely Robert van Mackelenberg.

CT: Sounds a great play and *Gulls*, you were in *Gulls*, now was that about people with brain injury?

BM: Yes. That was Robert Hewett's. Well, one of Robert's first plays and certainly the first, no, I beg his pardon, the second play that was produced by the company. At the MTC directed by Bruce, Bruce Miles. And Simon Chilvers and I, Robert Essex, and Monica Maughan, we were the quartet of characters and a very interesting play dealing with my brother who was seriously brain damaged but was fascinated by the seagulls on the beach. We lived by the sea.

CT: Oh, that's where it comes in. OK.

BM: So, it was to do with altered states and different dealing, how one deals as a lay person with someone with such difficult and fragile mental health. A beautiful play.

CT: It's a big responsibility to be storytelling in that field, and if it's done well, it's very special.

BM: It's a very special play indeed and the other thing about it is that the other two characters are mime performers, who at times appear as the seagulls. So, there's a running motif through it as well. It's a delicate, very rich play, it's beautiful.

CT: It would have to be done very well I would think.

BM: It was, it was beautifully done.

CT: *Top Girls,* you performed in that, was that in the Sumner Theatre?

BM: No, that was another Russell Street.

CT: Another Russell Street …

BM: That was back in the in the '80s and that was fun too.

CT: You must have a big Christmas card list at the end of the year. Does everyone who's caught up in shows send cards?

BM: We just wave as we go by.

CT: You couldn't keep up with it.

BM: No, we couldn't never, never keep up with it, no. But that was great fun. That was the first time I met Pamela Rabe. That was one of Pamela's first when she arrived here, yes, in Australia. And lovely Genevieve Picot. Yes, gorgeous people like that.

CT: You must do a lot of waving I think when you see people. Babs, you also worked for the Queensland Theatre Company doing *Three Sisters?*

BM: Yes, that was another lovely production. I've worked with such wonderful people. It's one of my favourite plays, one of my absolutely favourite plays. And I've directed it a couple of times and I've played Olga in that production. And one of my tasks in workshopping in drama school was Masha. Beautiful play, beautiful play. And that was a joy to be in, that was directed very nicely by Alan Edwards, beautiful production

CT: By who did you say?

BM: Alan Edwards.

CT: Alan Edwards. The South Australian Theatre company also have benefited from your talents.

BM: South Australia … that was, that was a riot.

CT: *The Time is Not Yet Ripe.*

BM: *TheTime is Not Yet Ripe*, mm. It was a very, very interesting experience, *The Time is Not Yet Ripe*. Directed by Peter King. And Peter had a very particular, a very particular image for this play, and he wanted it to be a sort of knockabout Victorian. Melodrama. Slightly pantomime, I don't quite know what one would have called it, but there were outrageous things like people getting angry and bashing, beating up the backdrop, smacking things, smacking the furniture around, all kinds of insane things went on. And the fabulous Paul Blackwell who was one of my favourite people, one of the funniest people, played a one-man crowd. Which was a very clever thing, which was a cutout of a figure, but it had about six heads on it. And he'd run and he'd flop heads; he'd flop whichever head it was down and be the head over the top. It was an absolute showstopper every performance. And the other thing that we did was a production of *Romeo and Juliet*.

CT: Oh, OK.

BM: Yes, there was an interesting time in South Aus, but I absolutely loved *The Time is Not Yet Ripe.* Never been in a production quite like it again.

CT: So you saw a bit of Australia. You were back in Sydney, the Sydney Theatre Company for *Pygmalion* and other shows?

BM: Yes.

CT: Just amazing.

BM: Yes, I went back there for quite a few years, when I was actually on the NIDA faculty for several years. I'd been in Sydney for a while when that job appeared. And I had been working with the company which was fun and whatever else was going on, another production that I was a part of was a freelance play called *Scam*, which was based on the life of Alan Bond.

CT: Oh. Interesting.

BM: Yes, it was a very interesting play, a very satirical play, which we did at Belvoir. And it was around that time that I got more interested in directing … That was one of the triggers, really. That period in Queensland was really what triggered me to think*, I think I want a change of direction*.

CT: Oh, OK.

BM: And I actually applied to the Drama Studio from Brisbane. I sent my application in from Brisbane. And when I got a green light, I just dashed back to Melbourne to pack a few things up and get out of town. But yes.

CT: So, they were lucky to have somebody so experienced in the performance area to come in from a directorial perspective.

BM: Yes, it was. It was an interesting mix of, I think there were five. We started out with five directing students, but one of us moved over to another course.

CT: Oh OK.

BM: … went on curiously enough to become an extremely good director and filmmaker. So, you never know where it's going to go, do you?

CT: I think you would do well in anything you do. How long was that course, the directing course in England?

BM: That was an intensive, that was a one year. It was a one year of post-grad design, very intense with a wonderful overseeing tutor, Peter Kenvyn who had also been a very good actor - he's still a very good actor.

CT: Were you able to work in the daytime?

BM: Oh no, it was full-time, it was full-time and so it was a year. Of study, intense study and a lot, a lot of projects. Peter made us work very hard indeed, and of course we had a great supply of outsiders coming in. We had Patrick Tucker came in from the RSC who did a lot of Shakespeare and text work with us. We would cross over with the movement teachers, with the voice teachers, sit in on those classes. We had master classes with people like Mike Leigh, extraordinary Mike Leigh. And he also came later in our training when we were working on productions. Short, you know, one-act play productions, but we had to, we had to find a 15-minute play, and a student, a couple of students, whatever it took to do that. All by ourselves and it had to be presented.

CT: And you had to find the students?

BM: We had to, we had to sort the whole thing out. Sort what props we wanted, you know, so on and so forth, and this was one of our sort of mid-season things. And Mike Leigh, terrifyingly enough, was there to come and watch our rehearsal process, which was very confronting.

CT: But from then on, I bet it was terrific.

BM: A very, very amazing man and when he visited Australia to work on a TV series in Sydney, I was on the NIDA faculty at the time. And I got in touch with him and said, 'Would you come and talk to my directing students?' and they had a fascinating, revelatory several hours with him. He was very generous.

CT: How lucky they were.

BM: Yes, yes, they were.

CT: Babs, you mentioned going to those movement and singing sessions. I was going to ask you; have you ever been interested in training in song and dance?

BM: Oh, I trained as a singer.

CT: OK. Because your mother was an opera singer, you said.

BM: Yes, my mother was a lovely singer, and I trained with Florence Taylor in Sydney, while I was still working at drama school. Actually, still at the Indie. And I was working in the Department of Health through the day, Commonwealth Acoustic Laboratory - I know, and …

CT: Good on you.

BM: … and doing, yes, having singing lessons with Florence, who was a wonderful teacher. She'd had a wonderful career herself. And she was a great technician and a very clear teacher. Then I picked up with another vocal coach in London while I was there. In the '70s when I was still working as an actor. So I worked with other vocal coaches in London. And I found that - it was wonderful because there were so many different approaches. And Florence would give me a very clear musical education and a very classical voice approach. And I worked also with coaches in London who are more geared to a stage sound, you know, so that you could engage the chest and not rely on the head voice and things of this nature, which again, widen your repertoire.

CT: So you had that wonderful foundation to be able to do that.

BM: I did, I did to be able to do that and I've done a lot of singing over the years and been very grateful that it was something else I could do from time to time, because supper clubs are still all the rage in London and we used to go.

CT: Amazingly versatile.

BM: We were lucky back in the day, we really were. There were endless opportunities.

CT: But you had to be able to do it as well.

BM: This is true.

CT: So, after stage, well at the same time, concurrently, you started working in television and film in the 1970s. How did you find the transition from stage to screen?

BM: Oh, it was certainly something you had to get your head around, there's no doubt about that. And the technology was very different. I mean, when the first long-term television job that I had, I'd done ads and things like that, but the first sort of lengthy commitment was *Young Doctors*. In the early '70s. And it was the last season of it, which it was, it was a wonderful time. It was so much fun. But the studio was in Milson's Point. Where the train goes by on the harbor bridge … and the ferries go by with the tooting on the harbor … and we didn't have a soundproofed studio and the studio was not air conditioned and the cameras were very old indeed and sometimes had to sit down and cool off, so the shooting schedule would go right out the window. It was fabulous. It was fabulous, I worked with lovely, again wonderful people, wonderful people.

CT: And you did shows like *Cop Shop* and …

BM: Yes, we all did an episode or something, I mean, it was a really bad month if you didn't get your Crawford's episode or an ABC radio something. Maybe an ad, you know, all the other things were there, the 'bread-and-butter' jobs as we used to call them.

CT: A wonderful time.

BM: Yes, it was rich pickin's.

CT: Now *Prisoner*, you were involved with *Prisoner* from 1979 to 1986? Do you want to talk about your role?

BM: No I wasn't in it, I was only in it for a year.

CT: Oh, so the records are wrong, that's the whole season. You can't believe everything you read.

BM: OK. I was in it for a year.

CT: OK, as Cass Parker.

BM: As Cass Parker, yes and that, that was again a wonderful experience because every actress in the world I'd ever worked with was in the cast. Caroline Gillmer, Betty Bobbitt, Jude McGraw, Elspeth Ballantine, Annie Phelan, they were all there, you know, and it was all, Oh, Collette was still there as well.

CT: Terrific.

BM: Yes, so it was Old Home Week and that was great fun and we had some fabulous directors as well there too, and the wonderful Denise Morgan writing the scripts in the script rotation. We had three or four scriptwriters.

CT: And you worked with Sheila Florence?

BM: Of course.

CT: Raymond (Technical Producer) might remember Sheila Florence. She was working at the ABC in the '60s as a Floor Manager. She was versatile too.

BM: She was extremely, extremely versatile. And she was quite the fixture by the time I came onto the scene, which was I think three or four-years in. And Sheila's character was very well established, and she was her usual extraordinary self. She really, really was a miniature mini tornado. She's a force of nature.

CT: The audience loved her, didn't they?

BM: They did, yes, they did.

CT: So I mean there were a lot of other shows too, Babs weren't there? Rafferty's Rules …

BM: Yes, those are things that were sort of one-offs, you know, there'd be a day's work here and there, you'd go along and do maybe a couple of scenes all shot on the one day and that was the job. But with *Prisoner*, that was your weekly rep. job. You know, we were there shooting OBs as well as in the studios, so we were shooting next block's set of OBs and films, doing the filming in the studio for the current block, so it was a continuous, you know, what country friends is this.

CT: Sounds a bit like *Bellbird*.

BM: Absolutely.

Ct: Were you in Bellbird?

BM: No, I was too late for Bellbird. Yes, but Annie was in it, Annie Phelan was in it.

CT: Oh yes, of course she was, so this was an exciting time. You talked earlier how different it was Australian television drama was developing.

BM: It was, yes it was, it was early days but some very good stuff was being done. Really, well, 'innovate' is an odd word to use, but because it was young, everything felt very innovative,

CT: Absolutely. It was groundbreaking.

BM: … and it was groundbreaking in it's absolutely own way. And finding out how to do it, you know, how does this actually work? Because I remember watching Wimbledon as a child on television that was, you know, that big, black and white, and that was it. And all of a sudden, we're dealing with this extraordinary technology which is in everyone's home and everyone has an opinion.

CT: Yes, they take ownership.

BM: Yes, so suddenly our world got very much bigger.

CT: What do you think makes Australian TV series such as *Prisoner* so popular overseas? Which you know very well.

BM: Oh it's extraordinary. I did an event in Birmingham last year. The *Prisoner* fan clubs are all around the world. And the fandom is huge. And every year there's two or three conventions or whatever one might call them, of fans, particularly in England, and they come here. Fans have flown over to Australia to come to attend events when, you know, it's announced who is going to be on the bill and what have you. And so, I was invited last year. And I went over and we were in Birmingham, and there was a lovely turnout. There were about 100 people, I suppose 80 or 100 people who'd been to every event. And they ain't cheap, you know, they pay for their tickets and they come along and, they are so grateful, I mean this is what gets you after a while. The stories that they tell us, after we've sat there and had our chat and you know, we've taken some questions, but when you get time to actually mingle with them and they come up and talk to you and ask a question they only want to know the answer to, you have a very different dialogue with

them, and they ask about the character and how do you do this and how do you do that, and what was it really like cutting off David's head with a shovel in the garden shed, which I did because I was playing a psychotic.

CT: Oh …

BM: And they all want to know those, those sorts of ins and outs and, and you get from them what the attraction is. And now in the UK it's generational. They've grown up with it now for over 30 years or whatever it is, you know. 'Oh yeah, I used to watch it with granny and then mum and then this and that and the other, you know, and now my kids are watching it.

CT: What a special part to play in people's lives.

BM: It's amazing, isn't it?

CT: And you don't really realize it's going on in their lounge rooms until you actually get to talk to people directly.

BM: Exactly. And like I say, the fan clubs have been going on for absolutely ever and the conventions just get bigger and bigger and you think, *oh,* and this is it. And people say, 'well, why do you think', as you ask, why, why do we think it is so successful? And I think with *Prisoner* particularly. Because I watched some scenes of my own which they had for as a part of the event, of course, which I hadn't seen for years. And in a way I got it because I thought what we did, these people were real, you know, the real stories, real people, and the production values were very, very modest, one would have to say. It wasn't glitz and you know, high drama, high tech drama. It was all about the people and their stories. And a lot of the stories were very sad. My story was very sad, as it turned out.

CT: So that makes it more relatable to viewers when it's about the people.

BM: And they really form a pact, you know, they have a pact with you that this is going to be all right. And they really feel for the characters.

CT: Oh, that's beautiful.

BM: It was quite, I mean, I was really, very, well, basically, I was quite overwhelmed to tell you the truth by some of the things some people said to me, about the fact that they'd … At one instance, a woman said, 'I'm a psychiatric nurse and I've now become a trainer in certain psychiatric disciplines, particularly.' And she said, 'We use your character as an illustration of psychosis.'

CT: Oh, how special. I don't know how you felt, but well it was good - how believably you'd portrayed her.

BM: Well, the thing is you never know where the work goes, do you?

CT: You don't

BM: and what it means to anyone. You just don't know, we just do it, it's a wrap, it's done. But his story, we have no idea about.

CT: If you hadn't met that lady and heard that, you would never know how many others are out there with stories.

BM: I was, I was really astonished.

CT: So do you ever get recognized in the street in Australia at all for your roles?

BM: I did occasionally. I got bailed up in David Jones once.

CT: Did you?

BM: Oh yes, which was, which was just very funny. But my favourite recognition was in Malacca, when I was in Malaya. And I was … I'd just gone on a day trip to Malacca and there was a bus full of Dutch tourists. And I was, I literally got off my minibus that the little driver brought me down, dropped me off. We were going to go and walk down the street of Malacca and just mind my own business. And all of a sudden in the background this voice says, 'Cass! Cass!'

CT: Of all the places

BM: I know, tourists in Malacca. So I signed lots of autographs in Malacca which was very sweet and they were lovely, they were lovely.

CT: Oh, that's such a good story, thanks Babs. Now, um, your film work, your credits show a variety of movies ranging from *A Brilliant Career* which you loved to *Babe, Pig in the City*, and to *Cliffy*. It sounds like you have a favourite in *My Brilliant Career*

BM: I loved *My Brilliant Career*, but my favourite is *Oscar and Lucinda*.

CT: Oh OK.

BM: Mm. Because I thought when I read the book, I thought the book was absolutely fabulous. I, I really, really loved the book and then I heard that there was going to be a film. I thought, how on

earth are you going to do that, how can you do that? How can you make a film of something that's really quite elusive. And you know, ephemeral. I don't quite know, how are you going to do that? Well, of course, it was Gillian Armstrong.

CT: Just amazing. So you played Mrs. Judd?

BM: I played Mrs. Judd, yes, who was a nosy hateful person. And the interesting thing about Mrs. Judd, was that I had to erupt into a scene between Oscar and Lucinda, outraged at something that she had done. And I was to erupt through the window. Of this room. Which wasn't a French window with a door, it was a small, fixed window. And I was wearing a crinoline.

CT: Oh. (LAUGHS)

BM: So, by the time we'd worked out the physics, which we did, I managed to make it work, but we had to do take after take after take. And it was getting more and more difficult because it was starting to hurt, frankly. It was a real like you would. It was a tiny, it really was tiny window. And of course I was corseted, the full catastrophe. And we finally got it in the can, but the next morning I was literally black and blue from the knees down. And I showed the unit nurse, and she said, 'Oh, well that's the windowsill.' I said, 'It's the windowsill.' We agreed it was the windowsill.

CT: That's dedication too I would say,

BM: You know, it's just things that happen. You never think, you just think, oh yes they're going to go through a window, fine, but then you see the window and the size and you and the crew, you think this is not going to be good. So we worked it out.

CT: And in *Cliffy* you played Merle, that was a totally different style of movie of course?

BM: Of course. Yes, very different.

CT: Who was Merle?

BM: She is the local bartender and pub owner and the publican where everybody sort of gathered to celebrate and cheer him on and do all that, yes, it's a nice role.

CT: And what about the movie *Babe Pig in the City*? You were the Matriarch.

BM: Well, yes, yes, that was a lot of fun too, but that was working with… I've worked with so many animals; I tell you, this was working with a capuchin monkey.

CT: Oh no,

BM: Yes. In *Prisoner* I had snake, I had a snake, I had a mouse, I had a cat.

CT: Oh golly.

BM: Yes, it all came to a sticky end of course because things like that happen in prisons. But the monkey was a little bit more difficult, I have to say. Because it had to be on my shoulder.

CT: Oh, goodness gracious. Well, there's no doubt about your versatility, Babs McMillan.

BM: I found that a little bit heavy going, I have to say.

CT: So have you ever sat in a cinema and been recognized by anyone?

BM: No, not in the cinema, no.

CT: I suppose the lights are out, but you know it'd be funny if they (the lights) come up and they go, 'Oh, that's you, and I just saw you up there!'

BM: Sometimes in the theatre foyer, but not, not in the cinema, no.

CT: You've had a very busy performance schedule over the years. Did you sometimes have to juggle more than one job at the same time?

BM: Well, you see, life in the Melbourne Theatre Company, when we were working in the, in the '80s, was a continuous job. We were rehearsing through the day, rush home and have dinner, go back to the theatre for the night show. So … which was how actors love to live, we loved it, you know, and we really were a company. And we played from, you know, backups to major roles, everybody, you know, it was all that kind of thing, and it was wonderful. And the one night that we had off was Monday night when the bump out would happen and the bump in would happen and so we had Monday nights off and that would be spent around the corner at the Ath. watching what they were doing or at Russell Street or we were at the Ath. So we're always old home week. We were all very tight. But between gigs, you know, if you were working at night. And it was some, we did a lot of co-op work back in the day too and not paid of course, but the work was what it was about, so you work through the day, you found something to do. Of course, call centres back in the day were our life's blood. You could go in and out of a call centre more or less on a monthly basis, and we had one in Sydney that was full of actors. Full of actors. And somebody said one day, 'you know, if a bomb drops on this place, there goes half the Sydney acting community.' But there was always something to do.

CT: And weren't they lucky to get all the beautiful voices, the lovely speaking voices.

BM: We're all on the phone all day and you know, doing all that kind of thing, but oh dear. But you know, it was work and it supported what we chose to do, so no arguments, absolutely.

CT: Do you have a preferred performance genre out of live theatre, TV and film?

BM: Oh, I always love being in the theatre. I love being in the theatre, and I love the job of the theatre, you know, that we're there for the people who've come, that's the contract.

CT: Do you particularly enjoy working with the works of Australian playwrights?

BM: I've enjoyed them all. I have loved the work of Australian playwrights that I've been privileged to do. Michael's lovely *Away*. Beautiful play, and Robert's play *Adman*, which was a very good play, Robert Hewett's play *Adman*. And I enjoyed Robert's other play which we directed as a tour for HIT Productions with lovely Ailsa Piper and the glorious Carol Burns, you know, two wonderful actors to work with and another good play from Robert. So yes, I have enjoyed that aspect very much, but I love everything that I work on.

CT: Whether you're directing or performing?

BM: Whether I'm directing or performing, but they are two very different roles obviously, you know.

CT: You were resident director for the Australian tours of the *Buddy Holly Story and Daylight Saving …*

BM: I directed *Daylight Saving* yes.

CT: So is it challenging to plan the staging ahead, you know, when you're on tour and you haven't seen the venue or do you have photos of the venue to do the planning?

BM: That is the production officer's job.

CT: OK.

BM: Yes. What brief I'm given is that you know, there's no entrance on the left side of this venue or whatever it might be, so we sort of, work as coherently as we can from the beginning to make sure that we're fairly universal wherever we're going to go, but sometimes it doesn't work out, you know, it's then the actors have to adjust. Every time we're on the road, the first thing we do is go and look at the venue and sometimes think oh, this is going to be tough, we can't do this, this or

the other, we'll have to do that, you'll have to change that entrance. There's always a way you can solve it. Yeah, you know.

CT: Oh that's really good to know. So, Babs, you've also directed shows as you mentioned before for students at the National Institute of Dramatic Art, NIDA, and the Victorian College of the Arts. Do you enjoy working with students?

BM: I love working with students.

CT: You mentioned before how you love being mentored, so now you're giving back.

BM: I love working with students. I've loved working with my students from day one and that's what I loved very much about the, the role of the National Theatre too.

CT: Mm, so we're just going to come to that. So you directed quite a few productions at the VCA?

BM: Oh yes, we did, we did a bit that was mostly with excuse me. With the graduates. *Dutch Courtesan* that we did and *The Love of the Nightingale* is a lovely play by playwright Timberlake Wurtenberger, beautiful play.

CT: And *A Month in the Country* and *Come Back to the …*

BM: *A Month in the Country* and *Come Back to the 5 and Dime, Jimmy Dean.* They were second year productions for the second-year students at VCA. In the studio theatre, they were great fun to work on. Two very challenging plays for very different reasons, but the kids were wonderful.

CT: You've got an incredible memory, you know, Babs, you are not referring to any notes really that I can see, and it all just comes back. Just ask you a question and you know the answer, which is fantastic. And productions for NIDA?

BM: Yes, NIDA was a very interesting chance production-wise because I worked then with the third years, the graduate plays. And also with the second-year end-of-term plays, so by the time they get to the end of second year, they've got some stuff going on, you know, and by the time you're working with the third years who are going to be graduating, they are ready to step off. So you can have different levels of the task. And a couple of the things that we did with the third years were musicals which we constructed from existing songs, or classic songs, etc. and wrote stories around them. And so I did two of those. And which showcased everything that they could do. And they could do a lot. We had tappers, we had musicians, we had, you know, they could sing, they

were certainly singing and acting and dancing at the time, you know. And they were all movement savvy because of the glorious Keith Bain. The wonderful, wonderful Keith Bain, who was head of movement.

CT: But how lucky were the students because you've gone through all that yourself in the past and you understand the levels required

BM: Absolutely, I totally relate to that and to their frustrations. I mean it's, you know, teaching students is very much a mentoring role too. You have to, you have to draw on your own experiences, not that you can superimpose, but you can recognize the sorts of dilemmas and problems and issues that they have because you've certainly met them yourself. And someone's helped you. I've learnt something from someone else of everything I now know.

CT: That is so special, you know, Babs, you haven't - I mean with all due respect to university courses which are fabulous - but you came through working on the job.

BM: Absolutely. And I still believe in that way for our training. I really do. I'm all vocation as far as acting goes and I'm slightly at odds with the current trend. But that's another conversation.

CT: Another conversation, yes. In 2001, Babs, you became Director of Drama for Melbourne's National Theatre, and you introduced an accreditation of a Diploma, of Drama or Dramatic Acting, when you took over that role. Now what was the purpose of introducing that diploma?

BM: Well, the board of the day were very keen that the school should be recognized at the standard at which it now was with Joan's work, Kim's work, and hopefully my continuation. But they felt also, and I felt also, that this was a necessary step for the students that came along on two, on two grounds. One was certainly that it deserved accreditation. And the second was that the diploma would become a secondary pathway, if you like, to those who chose to transition to an academic. pathway. Also, the other thing that it achieved was Austudy. Our students then became eligible for government support because they'd been paying their own way. And this, you know, spoke heart and soul to their dedication to do this. They paid their own way. And so then that gave them a practical support as well,

CT: Which you had done in the past, I guess, you paid your own way years ago. but you made it easier for them. Terrific.

BM: Well, it was there, it was legitimate, it was a perfectly acceptable way for the for us to go and I was thrilled that it that it happened for them.

CT: This was another good opportunity for you to help and work with students and mentor them.

BM: Oh, I loved working at the National. I really, really did. Our students were … Oh, they were wonderful. They were wonderful because they were there for such passionate reasons. They were determined to be there, they were working and studying and teaching and doing all sorts through the day. Some were there definitely for a career. And some were there for reasons. Perfectly legitimate reasons. One of our most gifted students was there because he was intent on being a barrister.

CT: Oh …

BM: And he didn't graduate; he left at the end of his second year. He'd got what he needed, and his studies were becoming increasingly demanding as he went through his Law degree. So, I admired that enormously. I thought, *how practic*al. And you know, when I worked at the Independent. I was going through school with a lovely actor who was likewise a legal-minded eagle who wound up as I think as the Assistant Attorney General in New South Wales or something extraordinary, you know. So, there's all kinds of, you know, pathways that people wind up taking, that can stem from just exploring your own creativity and your courage to do something, and to have the stickability and our kids certainly did, and they were a joy to work with, they really, really were, and we had some very, very talented people there.

CT: When you were the Director of Drama at the National Theatre Drama School, did you personally direct productions?

BM: Oh yes, very hands on and I had a fabulous faculty. I really did. And because again we are so, the school is so industry connected, I could get my chums to come and work with my students.

CT: Oh how fabulous.

BM: Yes, so the dedicated theatre, every term was a dedicated workshop on a given state, like there would be the Shakespeare workshop, the comedy style workshop, the naturalistic workshop, you know, things of that nature for which I would get a specialist.

CT: How lucky they were …

BM: And they'd come and direct for us too. Bruce Miles directed for us, you know, and Tom Healey. Wonderful people wanted to work in the school and my regular faculty members were just stunning professionals, all of them.

CT: All those contacts you made over the years,

BM: all of them, you know, shamelessly, exploited them shamelessly.

CT: Good on you and I bet they loved every minute.

BM: They did love it. My students loved it, they loved it because they could sit afterwards and they'd sit and gossip with them as well, you know, and hear all the inside stuff and get the real feel of the world. So when they stepped out, they had already you know,

CT: They were so lucky.

BM: They were so lucky. And in Industry Week, I'd send them to Equity. And we'd sit, they, they would sit down with an advisor and be taught and trained that their union is about this. I had no qualms whatsoever about bringing in the political aspect of our work, none at all, because they need to know this.

CT: Yes.

BM: And it, you know, I just thought, *how many ways, how many ways are there to make this as rich an experience as we can possibly do, as we can possibly bring off*, you know. And we got, we got it all going on and I was so thrilled at the generosity of my colleagues, and how richly they contributed because they really, really made such a difference.

CT: Well, they could see the difference that was being made with students

BM: They loved the students.

CT: A great collaborative project, well done, Babs.

BM: Now you've also been a panellist and this has included being on the artistic advisory panel at the Malthouse Theatre, would you like to talk about this, or is that confidential privacy?

BM: No, I don't think so, briefly, basically it was as its name suggests, you know, it was kind of a feedback think-tank. Suggestion box for the artistic director of the day. Just sit down and talk about the sort of artistic health of the company and the building and whatever was going on. The season - had the season been a success, if not, why not, what was, what didn't work, Any interesting plays or things that we may have come across to put on the table for consideration. Plays that, Aubrey Mellor was the artistic director at the time, that Aubrey was considering. So it was really just putting

a lot of ideas and in a suggestive but as supportive a way as one could, for the ongoing health of, of the Malthouse which was a dynamo of a joint back in the day.

CT: Your input would have been fantastic, I would think, they'd be so grateful for it.

BM: Well, they had a wonderful selection of people, bless them, and we all contributed what we could, it was there on the table, you know, to be taken or left alone, and Aubrey was very, very open to that sort of collaboration and that sort of input. And it was also very good for us because it was being together in a different mood, you know, it wasn't all about show business, we're talking about other practicalities. Of things that did and didn't work and why.

CT: Oh that's excellent,

BM: Sit down and think, that should have been great, what happened there?

: You know, because sometimes things derail and run, you can never track it down.

CT: That's great for the advancement of the company, which is still doing well, isn't it?

BM: Yes.

CT: You returned to the stage last year, Babs McMillan, and I've read some of your reviews. I heard you described as ‘gorgeous’ and other things. You received highly positive reviews for your performances of Freda in Ron Elisha’s new play *Rootless Cosmopolitans*, presented by Monstrous Theatre at Chapel of Chapel. Did you enjoy returning to the stage as a performer?

BM: Well, I did, I did. And there was a gift of a role, I have to say, and I'd known Ron, well, you know, since we did *In Duty Bound* in the ‘80s. His play was the first play I did at the Melbourne Theatre Company. And I also directed his brilliant play *Einstein* in London. For its UK premiere, as it turned out. And with the great support of the Melbourne Theatre Company who sent me the soundtrack. Incredibly detailed, superb soundtrack that had been put together for the original Russell Street production. Which Bruce directed, with Fred Parslow, Roger Oakley and Gary Dunn. It was an extraordinary night in the theatre, I remember it. And when Ron gave me the OK to do it in London, I was very aware of what I was being handed.

CT: A compliment that they have the faith in you to do that, just wonderful.

BM: Yes, it was very generous of everybody and I really did have a very fine time doing it and working again with Ron and the wonderful Suzanne Heywood who directed. And Ron Elisha and I go way, way back to *In Duty Bound* days. First play I ever appeared in a first appearance actually

with the Melbourne Theatre Company. And then I worked as I say, on *Einstein*, his beautiful play, which I directed the premiere of in London. He gave me the gift of that, which was tremendous experience, it really, really was.

CT: That was a great compliment, that's an indication of how highly respected your theatre making is, you know.

BM: Well, I was deeply grateful to him and, as you know, as these things happen, isn't it extraordinary. It so turned out that where we opened at The Gate, a small theatre in Notting Hill, we happened to open on August 6th, which is Hiroshima Day. And it just occurred to us on the day. It's extraordinary, quite extraordinary. But yes, *Rootless Cosmopolitans* was a fab experience. It really was, working with Anton was glorious, and Sue, Suzanne, the glorious Suzanne Heywood, wonderful director. And it was quite a challenging process because it was a new play and Ron had written it on a very specific theme. And then the October 7th attack occurred. And quite changed the narrative. So, we were working on a play that was essentially still in a way in development.

CT: Interesting.

BM: And it involved us very closely. And what came together, I think was a very interesting, very strong piece indeed. I was very proud to be a part of it, to tell you the truth.

CT: Excellent, Babs. May there be many more stage performances coming up as well.

BM: It's going to depend on the brain cell if that holds out alright.

CT: Oh, I think you're going very well with your memory here - you remember everything. Now your versatile talents have ensured your long running successful careers as we've just been talking about in performing, direction and teaching. Have you ever thought of writing a play yourself or an autobiographical book?

BM: I've written a lot over the years. I've written a lot of sketches, I've written, you know, sketch comedy, I've written, I have written plays, I've written a one woman play based on a Chekhov short story, which was a glorious thing to do, with the assistance of the wonderful Michael Gurr, another great Australian playwright, but no, I can't think of myself as writing an autobiography because you know, I've been so lucky, I, I look at my life as a success because I've spent my life in the only job I ever wanted, you know. So, I think that my success is that, and I think that everything along the way has just been my great good fortune. And I've just been a jobbing actor essentially, you know, I mean, I think the autobiographies belong to the Oscar winners.

CT: Oh Babs, I think you've got a very good story to tell. Well that's a decision for you to make. What advice would you give to young performers today who are aiming for a professional career?

BM: Well, I feel for them today, to tell you the truth. I think it's, it's never been an easy career, but I think, now with the way so many things have changed about how things have gone about, I think it's become really quite difficult. As I was saying earlier when we were just talking, this notion now of self-filming and selfies that you have to do by way of what used to be a face-to-face audition. I find it extremely difficult for a number of reasons. I think ours is a personal interactive form. And much is lost through a screen. And those are the subtleties, the real, all the real messages that you get from being in the presence of someone. You can't get a personality read, you can't get a temperamental read in the same way that you do when you're sitting down with someone. And it's, it's a real human relationship and not a technological one.

CT: Do you think there'll be a turnaround in the approach?

BM: Oh look, I sincerely hope so. I really do sincerely hope so. I would never find myself satisfied with that process if I was now casting and directing a play. I would have to, have to meet and read the person that I was, any actors, that I was thinking of.

CT: Get the energy.

BM: I mean this is very much a, it is, it is affecting the theatre. I think it's probably more a sort of screen and television discipline as well, all this self- testing and what have you, as I was sharing earlier. You know some actors have the greatest difficulty with it and some younger artists are actually hiring studios and getting people to help them professionally film something, rather than necessarily dealing with the work that they're presenting.

CT: That would be so expensive as well.

BM: Oh, it can be, it's another expense, because back in the day, you know, we used to get paid for doing the screen tests because it was recognized as part of our professional time that we were expending. So that's changed very much. And it's also very difficult now to get representation.

CT: Oh really, with an agent?

BM: Very, very difficult. Most agents' books are closed at the moment. They've had long-term clients who've all suffered during the epidemic, the pandemic, and you know, they just can't take on any more clients at this stage because they haven't been able to really help those that they've had for a very long time sometimes. There's a great feeling about that. So, getting an agent is very

difficult. You know, getting the wherewithal to present your work as a self-tested, whatever, I think is very difficult. So much is being thrown back on young people, so my words for my students when I bid them farewell is that what they'll need most of all, with their training, with their talent, with their drive - they'll need their courage,

CT: Courage.

BM: They'll need their courage. You have to be very brave to stick to something that's going to test you every which way, and this career certainly does that. And you have to be brave enough to recognize that it's not your path. It might not be for you, and that's, that is not a failure. You know, that's something to embrace, and so many times, many of our students have transitioned to other areas of the profession. Some of them are running venues, some of them are project managers, so, you know, they're in event management, they're doing all kinds of things for which their training's given them a very good basis, even in their people skills, if nothing else. And they found ways to be a part of the profession that they have always aspired to, and as long as they have the courage to keep doing that, they'll have a successful life, because success is not measured, you know, in a trophy, it's measured by living the life you've chosen, in my opinion.

CT: Babs, that's excellent advice, absolutely wonderful, thank you for sharing that. Just terrific. So what are the plans for Babs MacMillan in the future, do you have any theatre plans?

BM: Look, if something came along, I'm at that stage now, if something came along that I really wanted to do, I would probably have, yes, I'd probably say 'yes please, thank you for asking.' But I look to putting small things together. I'm looking at putting readings together and events like a book launch that I recently did was, we had a charming, theatrical content, which I love to do.

CT: Oh yes! That was good. I saw that.

BM: So things of that nature, smaller scale things now I think that are frankly less stressful. But are nonetheless enjoyable and of course, it keeps you engaged with the world that you've always lived and worked in. I'm very close to my colleagues and my former faculty members and you know, all the people that I've worked with over the years have stayed in my life as my friends and I'm very rich in that respect.

CT: That's wonderful.

BM: So it's lovely to think, sit down around the dining room table as we did a couple of days ago and think, oh I think we should do something. So we start, you know, pitching ideas and we've come up with this idea of some readings, given, you know, somatic readings, poetry, prose,

whatever we think of, a song if it's relevant, find some appropriate music, you know, put it on somewhere like the Hawthorn Town Hall or, you know, wonderful, stuff like that, yes.

CT: What fun you're going to have doing that, won't the audience be lucky? Is there anything else you'd like to add to this interview, Babs?

BM: Well, I would just like to say thank you to Theatre Heritage Australia for this extraordinary initiative of the oral history. I think it's a wonderful, wonderful thing. I love all the work that they do I think they're doing some of the most important work, frankly, in our profession. Because every generation, as we know, thinks the world began with them. And you know, so much history gets lost, and ours is an ephemeral history. Ours is a history that relies on what's been seen and heard. And the written word is certainly crucial, it's our tool, but we don't live on after it. Once we've dealt with it, that's it. So, thank you, thank you, thank you, Theatre Heritage Australia. I applaud your work to the rafters.

CT: Oh that's really lovely to hear Babs, because as you say this, it is important to record the past and the Theatre Heritage Australia theatrical archives are a good way to do it. Very, very grateful, thank you. Thank you so much for the interview.

Babs your dedication to theatre making and entertaining audiences for over 50 years has culminated in a magnificent contribution to the Australian stage and screen, and along the way, you have also generously shared your talents and knowledge with students from the next performance generation. And once again, thank you so much for sharing your story for the Theatre Heritage Australia archival records.

BM: It's been my very great pleasure and privilege.

CT: This interview with Australian theatre practitioner Babs McMillan was recorded on Thursday, the 11th of September 2025 in Melbourne for the Theatre Heritage Australia Oral History Program. Technical producer was Raymond Simms. Babs McMillan was interviewed by Doctor Cheryl Threadgold OAM.