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**TRANSCRIPT OF ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH JOHN WOOD - AUSTRALIAN ACTOR,
SCRIPTWRITER, DIRECTOR, PRESENTER AND AUTHOR.**

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INTERVIEWER: DR CHERYL THREADGOLD. TECHNICAL PRODUCER: RAYMOND SIMMS.

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CT: This interview with award-winning Australian actor, scriptwriter, director, presenter and author John Wood was recorded on Friday, the 19th of December 2025 for the Theatre Heritage Australia Oral History Programme. John Wood is interviewed by Cheryl Threadgold.

John, thank you so much for sharing your story for the Theatre Heritage Australia Oral History records.

JW: My pleasure.

CT: Now, your dedicated contribution to the Australian stage, television and film industries for over 50 years is remarkable. Thanks to your dedicated work and versatility as an actor, the stories of a diverse range of many fictional, true-life and historic characters have been brought to life on stage and screen for half a century. Among your awards of recognition was winning the prestigious Gold Logie in 2006 for your role of Sergeant Tom Croydon in *Blue Heelers*, amongst others, of

course. And in 2004, you added dancing to your talents when competing in episodes of *Dancing with the Stars* on Channel Seven. And in other shows you've been involved in such as in 2012 where you appeared on a personal level, you shared your family history in the TV show *Who Do You Think You Are?* traveling to Sweden.

Your life experiences and hard work in the real world have cleverly balanced with your successful professional acting career. And significantly, you have always prioritized the importance of family with your wife Leslie, and two daughters, Meg and Lexie, and now grandchildren. John Wood, this great story began on Bastille Day, July 14th in 1946. Tell us about your early family, do you have any siblings?

JW: Yes, I have three siblings, and they're all still with us, which is nice, so hopefully I'll be seeing them in the next week or so over Christmas; it's the only time we ever really get together. I have a brother and two sisters - Ian, who's two years younger than me. And then Glenys, who's two years younger than him, and Kay, who was actually christened Elizabeth, but we call her Katie, is two years younger than Glenys - so there's two years between each of us, and apparently there was a stillborn boy named Steven between me and my brother, so ... Mum and Dad never really talked about that. I mean they, you know, we knew about it, we found out about it,

CT: That was sad.

JW: ... but they never talked about how they felt about it and ... I can only imagine. Terrible.

CT: Absolutely, absolutely. So, you started off living in Port Melbourne, is that right?

JW: Yes, 32 Stokes Street. Which was with my grandfather, my Mum's father's house. His name was Bill Lobb. And my grandmother's name was Lucy. She was, her maiden name was Cruz ... which of course is Spanish derived from De la Cruz, and you know, I believe, you know, she was probably a child of the Armada. As many people were in Britain. In Elizabethan times. But she died when my mother was 11. And my mother was taken out of school. At the time she went to Nott Street State School in Port Melbourne, and she was taken out of school to look after her father and two brothers at the age of 11. Which is horrible. Anyway, she survived and met my father, who actually came to stay with them when he came down from Piangil, which is up near Swan Hill. He was related by marriage to the family. One of his uncles married one of Mum's aunties, I think.

CT: Oh that was nice. There was a connection already.

JW: There was for them, yeah. He stayed there when he came down to enlist and I've got a lovely letter that he wrote from London. Written in pencil on Army paper. After he'd been released

from prison camp. He was taken prisoner in Greece in 1942 and wrote this letter to Mum when he was released in 1945, I think and ... Yes, so he came back to Port Melbourne, and they got married and I came along a year later, so.

CT: Well, that was terrific, a big celebration on Bastille Day. John, you then moved to the Croydon area, is that right? Your Dad came from Swan Hill and he liked the country?

JW: Yeah, he wanted to get back to the country, so they initially bought a block of land somewhere in Altona. I don't know where exactly, but her brother, Mum's brother Ken, her older brother, bought a block of land there and built there. And his two daughters grew up there. Bev is still alive, she was born the same year as me. And she had an older sister who was slightly disabled. And yeah, so I mean we didn't see the family all that often because Dad decided Altona wasn't country enough, so he bought a house out at Croydon - in Diana Street, Croydon.

CT: So moving forward to your professional acting career, I mean it started in your 20s, and has impressively continued for over half a century, but even as a youngster, it seems that you knew you loved theatre way back then.

JW: Yes, I had, look I don't know where it came from, I think it partly came from, Mum, who was a huge movie buff, you know, she was ... she had a crush on James Stewart. And she and a couple of my aunts, they weren't real aunts, they used to work with Mum at the Swallow and Ariel factory in Port Melbourne. And Auntie Nell was in love with Clark Gable, and I can't remember who Auntie Josie was in love with, she was in love with one of them as well. Probably Alan Ladd or something like that,

CT: OK

JW: But Mum was quite a movie buff, and she used to collect cigarette cards, and my favourites were the cigarette cards that depicted Hollywood actors and you know, the people that I really admired were people like Humphrey Bogart and Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn and people like that. And I was quite knowledgeable about Hollywood movies back then, and I used to, well I got quite ill in the second year I was at Ringwood High. I went to Ringwood Tech. initially because Mum thought I was good with my hands and would be an excellent cabinetmaker. I'd be shithouse at that sort of stuff. My lasting abiding memory is being hit over the head with a piece of wood by the woodwork teacher, who said at the time he belted me, 'What the bloody hell do you think you're doing with this?'

CT: Oh gosh, he'd be in trouble now if he did that.

JW: Well, he would, but anyway, that ...

CT: But there was a good side to that school, wasn't there, John, because you had an English teacher who encouraged the class to perform, is that right?

JW: That's right. Yes, we had 12 one-act plays and instead of just reading them, the teacher decided that we would perform them for the rest of the class. So we had to, we had to read everything to see which one we liked. And the one I really liked was called *The Doctor from Dunmore*. It had 12 people in the cast and he didn't want anybody to do that because it was too difficult, but I wanted to do that so, I cajoled a few of the other kids into being in it. We were an all-boys' school at that stage and, some of us had to play middle-aged women. Yeah, I had great success as a middle-aged woman when I did *The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin* many years later, 2020 I think it was.

CT: You're so versatile, it's amazing. Going back to *The Doctor from Dunmore*, did you direct it as well? You wouldn't have had any training to do that?

JW: No, no. In fact I set the stage up and I knew that the sofa had to be angled, but I angled it the wrong way. Anyway, but we sort of got through it and we got - John Ellis came in. He was the Third Form English teacher, Dave Donaldson was the Fourth Form English teacher, our year, English teacher. And I don't think it was Fourth Form, I think it was only Third Form we were in Anyway, John was an amateur actor and worked at the Arrow Theatre in Middle Park, which at the time was still owned by Frank Thring as far as I know. And John came in and we got 90 for *The Doctor from Dunmore*, which was the highest mark any of us had ever had for anything.

CT: What wonderful encouragement. That's terrific.

JW: Yeah.

CT: So it was starting off, even though you're at a school where you didn't really want to do the woodwork, there was certainly a benefit, which is fantastic. And in Third Form, what about *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*? Were you Stage Manager and Narrator of that?

JW: I was ... the Stage Manager was a character in the play that sort of narrated the play, I think,

CT: Oh OK

JW: ... and the character was called the Stage Manager and I think he sat, I think I sat at the side of the stage while the others sat in a pretend car driving to Trenton. ... and I sort of narrated it a little bit from side stage.

CT: So school must have been very special in your life at that time, when you were realizing you recognized you had this love of theatre.

JW: Yes, I guess I did, look I don't know why, but I sort of, it was a carry over from those years of watching all those Hollywood movies and Mum knew everybody's, you know, every actor's name, you know. So she would regale us with whom ... with people like Billy Gilbert who was famous for sneezing ...

CT: What about Laurel and Hardy? you enjoyed the simplicity of their slapstick?

JW: I loved Laurel and Hardy and I partly loved it because they, when we watched it, Dad would just fall off his chair laughing, and I always felt if I could ever give him that level of enjoyment, it would be fantastic. So ...

CT: So, in Fourth Form, your Intermediate year, you moved on to Gilbert and Sullivan, that was something different?

JW: Well it was, yes, it was the first time I'd ever felt embarrassed about being on stage because I had to sing The Defendant song. And the chorus of The Defendant's song is Tink-a-Tank, Tank, Tinka-tank, Tinka-tank, and I thought that was very poofy. And so did all my mates and I was not ... But you know, like I actually sang it at Russell Street for Tom Brown, who was the director of NIDA and I got in, I got into NIDA on the, on the strength of that song, so ...

CT: That was fantastic. So in your quest to become an actor back at that time when you've just finished Intermediate, you envisaged a link between theatre and literature, and believed that by attending Ringwood High School, that you could Matriculate and then study a Fine Arts degree? That was an interesting vision you had there as a youngster.

JW: Well, I had no idea how to become a professional actor and neither did anybody else. John Ellis, who would have had the most knowledge, didn't know how to become a professional actor, because he never ever became one, although he ended up running The Church Theatre, which was a professional theatre based in Hawthorn. And a lot of professional actors worked from The Church, including me. I worked from there later. He also founded Melbourne Youth Theatre with his wife Lois and ...

CT: Yes, we'll just talk about that in a moment which is terrific, but you had to make a decision to change schools which is a big thing when your brother and sisters were at Ringwood Tech where you were attending. What did your parents say when you wanted to change?

JW: Well, they ... They were OK about it. Dad never said anything, well the only thing he ever said about being an actor was 'I don't know what you want to do that bloody acting for, it's a bloody sissy sport.'

CT: Oh ... he didn't understand at the time.

JW: Well, he didn't, but he did later, of course But I just felt that I had to, you know, like I wasn't cut out to be a cabinetmaker, so I went to Ringwood High ...

CT: So you were introduced to Shakespeare, but you mention in your book that one of the teachers turned 40 kids in your class off Shakespeare with her rendition of *Macbeth* in front of the class. What happened?

JW: Well, she wasn't an actor by any means. I mean she was a teacher and she was probably a good teacher, although I never came out of her class understanding clear thinking in any way, shape or form. But she was a terrible reader. And you know, I don't know if she's still alive, but I hope she's not too offended by my ...

CT: It probably came from her heart, from within.

JW: Yeah, it probably did and she was ... I actually remember putting up my hand and saying, 'Miss Bullen can we read it? Can we perform it with each other?' And she said, 'No, no, you wouldn't understand it.'

CT: So is that how you think Shakespeare should be presented to secondary students?

JW: I think Shakespeare is written to be read out loud. No doubt about that, and the easiest way to understand it is to read it out loud. It just sort of comes naturally to anybody that does read it out loud, and ... Yeah, look I think it's it's wonderful, wonderful writing, there's no doubt about that, but it's ... I'm not the first person to have thought so, but ... it's very hard to comprehend when you're listening to it, you know, unless you're actually peaking it yourself.

CT: Yes.

JW: And I found Miss Bullen's reading of *Macbeth*, although I really thought the play was fantastic, you know,

CT: You recognized that, that's terrific.

JW: I thought it was a fantastic piece of ...

CT: So it's great you were introduced to it at that time ...

JW: Yes, oh look, I thought it was a wonderful play and you know, people like the Witches and you know, Banquo and Fleance and all those people, they were really interesting characters. Anyway I can't remember what year I got ill, but I, anyway, I failed. I failed the first time ...

CT: You talk about that in your memoir *John Wood, How I Clawed My Way to the Middle*, which was published in 2020, and you do talk about becoming ill the first time and you failed Leaving. That was really sad because you were there for a purpose and you were trying hard.

JW: Yes, I missed an entire term. With shingles and of course Mum, you know. She had all those old stories about people who had shingles and if the shingles met up, it killed you and all that sort of stuff. And you know they'd link around you, anyway, I think that's an old wives' tale,

CT: But very painful.

JW: That is, is incredibly painful, yes. And so I missed an entire term. The one thing I do recall from the Headmaster, whose name was George Ormandy. George was a big old man, he was like Bruin the Bear, you know, a big bald, huge man who could pick up those concrete benches, and he'd pick them up and move them from one place to another, and I thought, *Oh God, that bloke's strong*. So anyway ... but he used to make speeches on Monday morning assemblies that, you know, it's not just a question of, getting the end of the year exams right, you've got to get, you know, you've got to pass first term and second term and I'd just missed all second term, so I thought, *I'm doomed* ...

CT: It wasn't your fault, I mean you couldn't help it.

JW: No, but you know.

CT: It is what it is and was what it was.

JW: It happens, happens to lots of people, I'm sure.

CT: Well, I think they might send work home now and maybe be a little bit more considerate perhaps.

JW: Maybe, I don't know.

CT: So except for English, you wrote in your memoir that you found school subjects dull, the other ones, but then an exciting thing happened at the end of your second Leaving year when someone dropped out of a play at Ringwood Technical School, in the French farce, *The Fish*.

JW: Yes.

CT: And although you weren't a student, they asked you would you go in it and you said 'yes' because you just wanted to do it and you enjoyed it.

JW: Yes, I did, I had a wonderful time and ... But it led to failing Leaving for the second time. And I couldn't, I couldn't put Mum and Dad through any more of that because we weren't wealthy enough to afford me failing at school, so ... I actually left school and got a job. Well, Luke and Singer, initially, which was you know, operating big machinery, a press. That made brass parts for taps and various other things. And then I got a proper job, but by that time I'd met Leslie and ...

CT: Oh yes, we want to talk about that because you write about meeting Leslie in your memoir and you say that you were 15 or 16. And you saw your future wife Leslie crossing the street and you write, 'I've never seen anyone so beautiful.' I thought that was so lovely.

JW: Yeah, she's the most wonderful woman, she's great.

CT: She sounds fantastic and I remember reading where when Leslie needed to graduate and she had to direct a play, your friends thought so highly of Leslie and by then they were professional performers, they all wanted to help, of course you helped as well. And it must have been a very classy student production with all the professionals performing in it.

JW: Yes, it was

CT: That was testament to how highly they thought of her.

JW: Well, there were you know, yes, a lot of professionals. Myself, Shane Porteous, Lex Marinos,

CT: Gosh

JW: ... well Lex had done the Drama course at the University of New South Wales. And Leslie was doing that as part of her degree. So we all knew Jean Wilhelm, who was the Doctor of the Arts there, so we helped out. I think Gillian Jones even did a bit of a gig in it.

CT: Oh, that was terrific. That was really good. Now going back to young John, young John Wood, you eventually became a clerk in the Victorian Railways at 16. Would you like to talk about that - because you were carrying a gun!

JW: In a calico bag, yes.

CT: Oh my goodness.

JW: It was, I worked at the dining car depot, which is right at the end of Spencer Street railway yards at the end of the yards where they finish at Dudley Street, and then across the road is Festival Hall. So, I used to have to do the pays, and you know, the dining car depot was where they serviced all the interstate trains. We had the *Spirit of Progress* and the *Aurora* and the *Overlander* from Adelaide and we had a laundry there that did all the sheets and stuff for the trains, and there was a butcher and a baker. Max the butcher was very proud of his meat and Bertie the baker was very, very proud of his pies. They were very nice, and Railway pies were fantastic. They were made on the premises there, and then they went by train to, you know, all the big stations like Albury and Jugiong and those sort of places, and Railway pies were very famous and we used to get them for free.

CT: Did they give you one?

JW: Yes for morning tea. They were fantastic.

CT: Gee.

JW: Bertie and Max would constantly argue with each other about the quality of the meat that Max was providing. Anyway ...

CT: It sounds like you worked with some wonderful people and characters, and you mention the laundry people and I guess there'd be catering people, and it was a wonderful education for you to see the cross-section of society there.

JW: It was fabulous. The other place I worked, of course, on and off, from the age of 14, during school holidays was, Angliss's Abattoir at Footscray, which is where Dad got a job when he came back after the war. And the great thing about it was, they paid adult wages.

CT: Oh that was good.

JW: Yeah, it was fantastic and the characters that lived and worked in that joint were unbelievable, you know, like, there were a lot of criminals in the place.

CT: So you mentioned this, that they followed the lambing season or something, what was it called the killing season?

JW: 'The lambing season', you know, up and down the east coast, so ...

CT: So, what criminal element - was it just coincidental that they happened to be of a criminal style of life?

JW: Well yes, I mean one of them was a bloke who had been to Carey Grammar. You know, which John Ellis had been to Carey Grammar, and I believe John Elliot had been to Carey Grammar, and this guy just had a small gang and they used to steal top-quality meat and sell it on the black market. But you know, there would be, you know, there was a 45-minute lunch break. And guys would run in the sort of heat we had yesterday and today, they would run in all their - we wore an eiderdown suit and overalls to work in the freezers, and they would run, from the factory up to the local pub with cuts of meat inside all their clothing, and they would sell it up at the pub, and drink as much as they could, and then run back eating a pie. The record for the most pots in one lunch hour was 19 pots. A guy named Harry Ghan, and Harry came back and he was Irish and he just, you know, like I remember him standing in one of the chambers, singing in this amazing Irish tenor voice. You know, and then passed out,

CT: Then he passed out,

JW: Then he passed out.

CT: But you didn't get involved in any of the actual killing of the animals, you were in the cold storage area?

JW: Cool storage.

CT: Cool storage. And what about the gun? Can we go back to the calico bag?

JW: Well, I had to, when we did the pays, they sent out the pays for all the girls in the laundry and the bakery and places and me and another clerk whose name was Costello. Danny Costello, I think his name was, we had to do the pays, organize them and put them in little envelopes and give them out. Whenever pay time was and then at the end of the day, the gun had to be returned to Spencer Street. Not the station, but the big building beside it, you know,

CT: You were 16 years old, I mean, had you had any training how to use the gun?

JW: No, no, no, I don't think I ever handled it, anyway. I mean it was in the calico bag, and I just carried it and took it back to the headquarters at Spencer Street, on the corner of Flinders Street.

CT: Did your sense of theatrics think that it was rather a theatrical thing to be carrying a gun or were you worried about it?

JW: Well, it was ... I didn't like the idea of having a gun, particularly. I don't know what attracts, I mean, God, when you, when we were kids, we used to pretend we had guns all the time. Made our own homemade rifles and stuff, you know, to play cowboys and Indians and war and stuff like that.

CT: But the real thing's a lot different though.

JW: They sure are and of absolutely no interest to me. I am ... Well, we can, we've just seen what they can do.

CT: You could imagine the OH&S now giving a 16-year-old a gun.

JW: I can't imagine it happening now.

CT: No. So working with food has played quite a part in your life at various times and here you were issuing meal tickets, weren't you at one stage in the Railways?

JW: Meal tickets?

CT: Meal tickets, yes, green, blue and pink.

JW: Yes, pink for dessert, green for soup, I think, and blue for main course and then pink for dessert. And that was at the Railway workshops at Newport.

CT: OK.

JW: Which I ended up at yet again many years later after the Police Station in *Blue Heelers* was bombed, we moved from the house which had been the old Sergeant's quarters in Williamstown, we moved back into a section of the Newport Railway workshops.

CT: Wasn't that lovely? That was terrific, so you started seeing some theatre then, I mean you would have been earning money, and you probably went to Melbourne Uni and saw one of the shows there and *Hamlet*, did you see *Hamlet* starring uh Kevin Colson?

JW: I did, yes. Yes, I don't know Well, that was Melbourne Theatre Company who at that stage performed at

CT: The Union, perhaps?

JW: The Union, yes.

CT: And George Whaley's *Macbeth*, you were a man about town going to the theatre at the Emerald Hill ...

JW: Emerald Hill that was, yes, and I saw Michael Boddy and John Derum and, Michael ended up being our History of Theatre teacher at NIDA, and John Derum of course I worked with on several occasions as an actor. Later, uh, he was in *Hamlet on Ice*, which we did at The Nimrod. Along with Lex Marinos and Graham. Oh God, what's his name ... *Auntie Jack*.

CT: Oh ...

JW: Yeah, Graham and Rory O'Donoghue, Rory O'Donoghue and Graham,

RS (Tech Producer): Bond.

CT: Did you say Bond?

JW: Graham Bond, yes, he played Buttons in *Hamlet on Ice* and beautiful Bob Horner, he played Queen Gertrude. I played Horatio, who was an Aussie surfer. Gosh, Kate Fitzpatrick played Hamlet.

CT: Oh, how interesting.

JW: Yeah, well she was and she was in love with, Horatio, so she'd been to Wittenberg to have a sex change operation. And ...

CT: That's very clever writing, isn't it.

JW: That was Michael Boddy.

CT: That's fantastic. So a very positive event in your quest to become an actor was when, as you just said before, John Ellis, with his wife Lois, had returned from England and started the Melbourne Youth Theatre for players under 26, based at both the Melbourne Teachers College in Bouverie Street, is that how you say it ... ?

JW: Bouverie Street, Melbourne Teachers College

CT: Bouverie Street and Monash Rusden

JW: Rusden, yes.

CT: Now you didn't give up. You're very clever. You didn't give up your regular paying job, but you performed in many shows for this company, and you also directed. It sounds like you had a good life balance at this time?

JW: Well, it was. Yes, it was. I mean, you know, like I was, Leslie and I took over the cafeteria at Rusden. And ran the cafeteria to make a living and to be near, you know, where John Ellis was working, so ...

CT: and to be near your love of theatre, that's fantastic. You did the cooking as well, -you did cooking?

JW: Well, we did, I mean we probably just made toasted sandwiches, I can't remember now, but anyway, we sort of ran the, the cafeteria at Rusden Teachers' College, and then one day Lois turned up with a piece of paper that was an entry form to NIDA.

CT: So how did you feel about that?

JW: Well, it was, I probably thought I wouldn't get in, because the only stipulation to get into NIDA was that you had to have Leaving, and I didn't have my Leaving Certificate, but .. I did the audition, I sent away the form and did the audition and ...

CT: And this was at Russell Street Theatre, this was a big deal if you were doing it there, I would think.

JW: Yeah, I don't think I'd ever been there at that stage, or maybe I had. I can't, yes, I think I had. I'd been there to see *The Knack and How to Get It*. With wonderful actors like John Greig. And oh God, he played Charlie Cousins in ...

CT: Robin Ramsey?

JW: Robin Ramsey and Noel Trevarthan and Lyndall Rowe. I think it was Noel Trevarthan - is that the right name? He got up and made a speech at the end of one night and he made a curtain speech condemning the Vietnam War. And our involvement in it, and I think that was the end of his life as an actor, really. John Sumner didn't agree with actors making curtain speeches and anyway ...

CT: So you presented this monologue and then you were asked to sing and you sang the song that you'd sung for Gilbert and Sullivan at the school, which is fantastic. It must have gone down very well with that gentleman Tom Brown, who was head of NIDA at the time. How did you receive the good news that you were successful? Did it come by telegram or letter?

JW: I think it must have come by letter. I don't recall. But I do remember packing everything I owned into my old MG TF.

CT: And they gave you a scholarship didn't they too John, \$6 a fortnight?

JW: \$6 a fortnight, yeah,

CT: Which was a lot of money in those days.

JW: Well, it wasn't that much.

CT: Well more than it is now.

JW: It's more than it is now, but yes.

CT: So then you had to pack the car and, that was a big thing for Leslie to do too, to go to Sydney?

JW: Yeah, well she came up a few months later. Which was great. But I arrived in Sydney with everything I owned, like you know the record player and everything, stacked down the wheel well on the passenger side of the car and everything else in the back and my guitar over the top of my head. Yeah, And I had about \$43, I think.

CT: Oh my goodness. You found accommodation which was good.

JW: Yeah, it's great.

CT: And I see that you both became friends with Joanna McCallum, the daughter of Googie Withers and John McCallum, you mentioned that in your memoir. I mean that that was lovely to have that connection too, wasn't it? I would think.

JW: Yeah, she was Joanna was quite remarkable. I haven't seen her since. When we finished at NIDA, I think she got a job at Melbourne Theatre Company. I was offered a job at Melbourne Theatre Company and the Old Tote and I decided to stay in Sydney at the Old Tote, just to see if I could make a go of it without having to rely on my parents. Yes ...

CT: So with NIDA at that time, was that situated in the grounds of the University of New South Wales?

JW: Yeah. But it's much grander today. Yeah, it was all well it was only, we were at the actual Old Tote, the Old Totaliser building up High Street opposite Randwick Racecourse and the theatre there was called the Old Tote. And that was run at the time by Robin Lovejoy and Robert Quinton, who was the Head of Drama. But they built a theatre called The Parade, which was on Anzac Parade on the other side of the road. And they've now built a huge building there. I remember asking John Clark, who was the head of NIDA at the time, I said, 'Who did you get to design your building, Albert Speer?' And he didn't think that was very funny.

CT: So you mentioned in your book that NIDA students... that there was a problem that they weren't allowed to join any of the mainstream university clubs or societies, not even the film society, so they were rather exclusive at NIDA?

JW: Well, they didn't want us being ruined by bad actors, I suppose. Look I don't know, I don't know what the reason behind that was, but we couldn't join the film society and there weren't any drama groups in the university at the time, we were it.

CT: So what was the culture like for students at NIDA at that time, like ... were there hippies, because that was the time it was, drugs?

JW: Well, drugs, no, look, everybody was very ordinary, I thought.

CT: Great.

JW: You know, we were all Just very ordinary, they were all ordinary people like I'd known when I'd been in secondary school and they were from all over the country. So there were there were wonderful people like Aubrey Mellor, who was from Queensland. And Aubrey eventually went back and was part of, he was the Artistic Director of QTC. After Alan Edwards had been there, Alan had been our acting teacher at NIDA ...

CT: So everyone was there to be serious and knuckle down and learn the craft of acting?

JW: Pretty much, yeah, so we did Voice classes and Speech classes. Joe McCollum was a speech teacher and Joe was very interested in the young girls; the voice teacher was a woman named Harriet McNamara; Margaret Barr was the movement teacher - she was an amazing woman, she was already well into her 60s by the time she was teaching us, and she could still outmanoeuvre just about all of us and ...

CT: So at the end of that first year, were the numbers reduced?

JW: They were, there were 36 of us in the first year. And that was reduced to 14 in the second year.

CT: Gosh.

JW: And I managed to get through along with mates like Paul Weingott and Drew Forsyth and ...

CT: Well done, John, haven't you done ... ? I mean, you were just meant to be an actor, obviously in your own way.

JW: In my own way, I think so, , that's ... I wish people still thought I was an actor, they don't much anymore. I'm too old.

CT: Oh no, I don't think that's right. They remember all the, the roles you've played.

JW: Yeah, well, that's um. There's not much work around anymore, I'm 80 next year.

CT: That's a fine age, congratulations. Well, it happens to everybody.

JW: But anyway,

CT: That's quite young, that's the new 60 actually, so I wouldn't worry about that too much. But I haven't you just been working recently, you were in Western Australia? You are still in demand.

JW: I was in Western Australia doing a rock and roll show with a bloke named Dave Allen. And we haven't been paid yet, which is very tedious.

CT: But it'll be in the post soon, I hope.

JW: Well (LAUGHS).

CT: Oh John, that's... gosh NIDA, it was just meant to be - your going to NIDA and did you ever do a bad performance at NIDA?

JW: Oh yes, I remember Paul Weingott and I doing something or other - we were a couple of characters in a Flemish play and I remember we were over made-up and making funny, you know, doing silly voices and it was a terrible performance from the pair of us, but Paul was the son of Owen Weingott, who was one of the finest actors I've ever seen.

CT: Oh OK.

JW: But I haven't seen him for a while. He lives down here now, but I haven't seen him for a little while. I must give him a ring to see how he's survived the ... The Bondi massacre. I mean he wouldn't have been there, but it was a, you know, shocking business.

CT: Yes, which of course happened on the 14th, the 14th of December 2025. Your graduating play John, *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller. You were Judge Danforth, and was that directed by John Clark?

JW: It was, yeah, with Joanna as Elizabeth Proctor.

CT: Oh, lovely.

JW: And a bloke named John Allen as John Proctor. And Drew was Reverend Parish. And we had a Jamaican girl in the cast who I can't remember the name of the character she played. But she certainly figured in the credits. It was great - Gil Tucker was in our year and ...

CT: So this was a showcase for the producers and people and agents to come and have a look?

JW: Yeah.

CT: And were you offered work after graduating from NIDA?

JW: Not immediately. I couldn't even get an agent. I think I was ... I think they, the agents thought I was a bit up myself, because I think the two audition speeches I did, one was from *Macbeth* - which is probably not a good idea for a young actor to be doing as an audition piece - and there was a piece from a play I'd done with Max Gillies in the Melbourne Youth Theatre, a play called *Eh?* by Henry Livings, and it was a piece about Tyrannosaurus Rex and their residual forearms, but it was ... Tony Taylor had done it - I played the leading character named Valentine Brose, who was played originally by David Warner. I think David Warner played it initially and I played it at Melbourne Youth Theatre, and ...

CT: So, you did eventually become a client of an agent - you became Faith Martin's 14th client?

JW: Yes, actually none of the agents showed any interest in taking me on and I went and visited her, at her offices in Milson's Point. And she agreed to take me on, which was great.

CT: I bet she was glad she did in the end too, my word. So, did you receive an offer in 1969 on graduation, from the company Fauna Productions who had just produced the *Skippy, the Bush Kangaroo* series?

JW: Oh yes, that was for a show called *Barrier Reef*. It was initially going to be called *Minus 5*, I don't know quite why, but it was about a group of scientists on a replica of the *Endeavour* sailing around in the Whitsunday Passage. And there were three of us, myself, Tristan Rogers, who I noticed died a couple of years ago, and there was somebody else, and we were university students that snuck onto the boat, you know, and uh. But I mean I thought God, if this is what working as an actor's like, I really want this, you know, like sailing around on a sailing boat in the Whitsunday Passage,

CT: All expenses paid ...

JW: ... being fed fresh coral trout for lunch and stuff like that, it was just magic, yeah.

CT: That is just terrific. So, what a wonderful location. You are known for trying to do everything the first take. Is that still the case? No fluffing the lines. How does this work out with your fellow actors who mightn't work that way?

JW: Look, I think all actors try to get it in the first take. I mean, it's pretty boring having to go over and over and over to get the lines right; But, I mean most actors, most actors do the work that they need to do to get it in the first take and ...

CT: Do you mention somewhere in your book that there are some actors, maybe more overseas, who like to keep repeating doing the takes so they can get themselves as best as possible so that they are a little bit more prominent in the scene. Have you noticed that happen?

JW: Oh yes, that does happen.

CT: Not everywhere though.

JW: No, not everywhere, but you notice, I mean if somebody's pouring you a brandy or something and they keep bugging it up, you think *Why are they?* you know, and it's just so that they can get their lines perfect ... But anyway, look, it's, you know, these things happen.

CT: Yes, it all works out in the end

JW: and some people you know like I don't try and win a scene as such, I just try to get it right and work with the other actors. I mean the whole, the main enjoyment of being an actor in my

opinion is working with other people, you know, it's ... one man shows are - you know, they're a bit ho-hum really, but you know, working with other actors to create a moment that people will remember is fantastic

CT: Yes. John, you mention in your memoir that you refer to a working-class background for yourself, and you've always been aware of it, throughout your career. When visiting Broken Hill with *Major Barbara* in 1970, you went to the gallery of Pro Hart, and you saw Pro Hart as another working-class man. Do you think this real-life down-to-earth background has contributed to your ongoing success as a versatile actor?

JW: Well, it certainly helped with playing lower-class characters, but ...

CT: But you've played the Prime Minister, you've played Mr. Menzies as well, so you can do anything.

JW: Well, yes, you can, but I ... yes, Pro Hart was an interesting bloke. I only met him once, but I was a jobbing actor and he was a jobbing painter, I think. He ... yeah, a terrific painter. Anyway.

CT: At the end of 1970, you and Leslie were married in Melbourne in a church near your homes.

JW: Yeah.

CT: So you came home for that and then went back to Sydney.

JW: Yes, that's right. Yeah, we did.

CT: You were very optimistic, it seems, which was great. You described yourself as not having a lot of future prospects 'but endlessly optimistic' and that paid off, because I mean look what happened. I think you're one of our most prolific actors in Australia when you look at your record, what you've done. At that time work did come your way, didn't it? You played to schools, and Richard Wherrett restaged *Oedipus Rex*, and you were on guitar.

JW: Oh yeah, that was at the Jane Street Theatre.

CT: And your daughter Meg was born on the opening night.

JW: She was. Twenty-sixth of November. Oh and I remember, and of course we didn't have mobile phones in those days, and I remember Shane Porteous and I dashing around to the

nearest phone box to find out what was going on, and Meg had ... we'd missed, we'd missed the birth by 15 minutes.

CT: Oh no.

JW: ... which is, you know, which is a bloody bore because I spent the whole day there. I went to the hospital with Leslie, at about 6 o'clock in the morning, they wouldn't let me in. Well, these, were the days, you know, that men weren't expected to be at childbirths. And so we waited around all day, or I waited around all day, and every time they came in, to even take Leslie's temperature, I was sent out of the room and then they wouldn't bring me back in. They'd said no, and I eventually had to get to the theatre for the half hour call.

CT: Didn't it start three quarters of an hour late for some reason?

JW: Oh yes, I know Jane Street Theatre, not much difference to this, the size of this room, it was a little tiny theatre. It was the first theatre where *The Legend of King O'Malley* was performed. Directed by John Bell, Michael Boddy wrote it and John Bell directed it with a cast of people mainly from the year before I was at NIDA. And uh sensational, but this night of *Oedipus* which I have to say wasn't a very good production. We'd done it, it at the old Tote, at the Science Theatre at the University of New South Wales with Sir Tyrone Guthrie directing, and Ruth Cracknell and Ron Haddrick as Oedipus and Jocasta and me as a very ocker Man from Corinth, you know, that brings the news that the king has died. The King of Corinth has died. And that ... It leads Oedipus to understand that he's married to his own mother. Jocasta is his mother and yes, but anyway ..

CT: You'd remember that opening night for quite some time, I would think.

JW: Oh yes, well, I still remember it vividly. It was pretty bad, we were pretty, you know, like Robyn Nevin and Jacqui Weaver were in it. Me and Shane Porteous and I've got a feeling Gil Tucker might have been in it as well, but anyway, it's ...

CT: Mm, what great memories. Well, over the years you've also been asked to teach acting to others, but you've resisted this. Is there any reason for not wanting to teach?

JW: I don't have the qualifications to teach, I don't think, you know, that's the main reason and ...

CT: You have the university of life, which of course, you've done it.

JW: Which of course true, yes, but um. The thing I've always felt about acting is that you can either do it or you can't. And if you can do it, you don't need to be taught. And if you can't do it, no amount of teaching is going to help you, so.

CT: Well, that makes sense.

JW: And you've never wanted to work overseas either, which is implied also in the title of your book *Clawing My Way to the Middle* because you didn't want to go, 'Going upwards as you refer to like Broadway and London and whatever, so you're happy entertaining Australians, which is terrific.

CT: Well, it's probably what I'm best suited to do. It's yes, I mean, it just it was just a natural ... A couple of people that I've known over the years think I've got the best Australian accent that anybody's ever had in the Australian theatre, so whether that's true or not, I don't know. But I mean, you know, the way I speak today is very much the end result of years and years and years of being in the business and uh,

CT: Mm.

JW: But I dare say I was pretty rough and ready as a youngster, you know, in terms of my vocal ...

CT: And that would have suited the right roles, which is wonderful. Now John, you also turned your hand to writing and you applied for an Australian Literature Board grant and received \$12,000 and that was around the time you were auditioning for *Power Without Glory*, which was early 1970s, wasn't it, about 1974, and very commendably you ended up paying it back after you were cast in *Power Without Glory*, which Raymond, our TP would remember from the ABC. And you would have had limited time to write and nothing to show. That was a really good thing to do.

JW: Well I was, yeah, I just sort of thought, you know ... I was amazed that I got a Literature Board grant, I didn't think ... I'd written *On Your Marx*, which had been performed at Nimrod, and was then later performed at The Pram Factory and The Hole in the Wall in Perth. But if I ever get around to it, I'll revisit it and rewrite it one day because it was a bit of a shemozzle, it was um, ... I started writing it as an attack on real estate agents who were at the time demolishing all the old sandstock houses, mansions in the Randwick area and replacing them with apartments. And there were, I think on the local council, there were 32 estate agents on the local council, running the council and setting up the business and I thought that was outrageous, so I wrote a play, which was *On Your Marx*, but the first play was called *Housie*. And the Groucho character was the devil, and he joins up with a couple of his sidekicks, Harpo and Chico and he just keeps forcing people

into smaller and smaller buildings, and finally into the janitor's locker and then he blows it up. And it's you know, so ...

CT: Definitely a social message there.

JW: Well, there certainly was, and the second play was a totally different play, it was called *Bigotry VC* and was a bit of an attack on Menzies really, where the Marx Brothers pick up this dero in Kings Cross, lock him away in a room like this, with Harpo riding a pushbike that powers all the machinery and recording the life story of this dero who wins the war for Australia.

CT: Oh wow. Interesting.

JW: Yeah, anyway, there was far too much in both shows, you know. They were never meant to be together, but it was decided to do them as one show *On Your Marx* and I think it just left people a bit befuddled.

CT: It may well have done at that time, yes. Maybe now the time is right, who knows? Well, your acting career has resulted in a prolific number of performances in theatre, television and film. Now I Googled and up came *Wikipedia*, which, you know, can be very helpful at different time, certain times, and your many stage productions also include musicals. You've done musical shows such as *Cats* and *Chess*. And your TV work covered around 47 shows and an incredible amount of episodes. I mean, for example, you may correct these, I don't know, but it said 23 episodes of *The Doctor Blake Mysteries*, 511 episodes of *Blue Heelers* over 12 years, 86 episodes of *Rafferty's Rules*, is that correct?

JW: Yeah, it would be around about that. I don't know.

CT: And that was over 5 years.

JW: Yes.

CT: 21 episodes of *Power Without Glory* and 12 episodes of *The Truckies* plus all the other series where you might have done one or two episodes here and there. I can't imagine any other actor who's done so much, and in film, there were 18 movies listed under your name.

JW: Really?

CT: Yes.

JW: Gee, I wouldn't have thought there were that many,

CT: Oh -well there were, I would have thought maybe you're going to add more. Now your writing also has created. 26 episodes collectively for different series for series such as *Blue Heelers*, *Cop Shop*, *Prisoner*, *Truckies*, *Sugar and Spice*, and *Flash Nick from Jindavick*, which was in 1974. That is an amazing contribution to the Australian performing arts, John.

JW: Yeah, oh well, I think Max Gillies was in that episode of *Flash Nick*. That was Graham Bond and Rory O'Donoghue as well that created that show and my episode was called *The Man in the Iron Mask*. And it was basically about Ned Kelly, and I think Max might have played the character.

CT: Now you, you've have played such a variety of roles, and you have played Hamlet on stage. How did you feel playing Hamlet with the different monologues and, looking at the audience?

JW: Oh well, it was pretty terrifying to actually ... because, well it was Aarne Neeme directed it. No, it wasn't. It was a guy named Michael Latimer, who was an English actor that I'd met on a TV series that I was doing at the time. It was set in a magazine office.

CT: Oh OK. Something different.

JW: It was a spin-off from Tony's other series. And I think it was Tony Morphet who wrote it, but it was called *Dynasty* which was about the Packers, and then this was about a magazine called *Catwalk*. And Michael came in and did an episode of that and he decided that he wanted me to do *Hamlet*, so ...

CT: Wow.

JW: Yeah, but it was, you know, it's with a whole lot of old mates as well as people I've never met before, but yeah, anyway, it was John Trenaman as Claudius and Joan Bruce as Gertrude. I was Hamlet, of course, and there was ... Lex was in it. And a whole lot of Ted Robinson's mates, Lex and Arnie and uh. Ah, Tony Youlden, who'd been, uh, you know, I'd known since The Melbourne Youth Theatre days, um.

CT: Do you ever have reunions of all your friends?

JW: Not really, well, uh, so many of them are now dead. Lex died 18 months ago. And our daughter Lexis's named after Lex.

CT: Oh, that's special,

JW: And yes, Lex was a really close friend for years.

CT: So John, you know, your theatre here, *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, you did musicals, *Cats* and *Chess*, and then you did *The Real Inspector Hound*, you played the Bishop of Basingstoke in the 25th anniversary concert of *Jekyll and Hyde*. And what about *Mono*, this was more recent in 2022, you were touring in *Mono*, it was a series of monologues, is that right?

JW: Yes, it was There were three of us in *Mono*. It was a spin-off from a show called *Senior Moments* that had been written by Angus FitzSimons, who's Peter FitzSimon's cousin. And Kevin Brompton. And Kevin was a producer and Angus was the director. And *Mono* was something that Angus did by himself, it was a series of monologues with myself. Initially myself, Max Gillies, and Noelene Brown.

CT: And did you tour the regional areas?

JW: We toured regional New South Wales, yes.

CT: Great.

JW: And some of the monologues were very funny, and some of them were not so funny, but you know it was great to do and then, Noeleen and Angus had a falling out - Angus tends to fall out with his female actors, and, so Noeleen got the arse and we did it again with Jean Kitson.

CT: Oh, OK.

JW: Who was fabulous, but she also fell out with Angus and ...

CT: Oh dear.

JW: Yeah, anyway, that's ...

CT: But the audience probably loved it when you turned up and performed for them.

JW: ... pretty much ...

CT: and that's the most important thing.

JW: There were a couple of great monologues, one of ones I had that I loved doing was a Policeman, a Police sergeant in the dock. Trying to give evidence in a case. I can't remember what the case was about now, but ...

CT: You'd be in your element. Was it a New South Wales policeman or a Victorian Policeman?

JW: No, a New South Wales policeman.

CT: Well, talking about your Police roles, I mean 12 years on *Blue Heelers* is a wonderful thing. I mean you would've been like family, and you must've been very very close and then it culminated with your award of the Gold Logie, is that right?

JW: Yes, after 10 years straight of nominations, I finally won.

CT: You had 10 nominations and you won, which was well deserved. And was it at a time when *Blue Heelers* was actually finishing?

JW: It finished shortly thereafter.

CT: That's ironic really.

JW: Yes, it is. It finished, it was 2006, and I think it we'd just been informed that it had been axed.

CT: Oh. That must have been devastating to everybody working on it.

JW: It was a bit of a blow, but you know, we did get 12 years out of it, I see in the *Green Guide* yesterday that Alan Fletcher has been doing *Neighbours* for 31 years.

JW: That's an amazing ...

CT: For the one series, absolutely.

JW: Well, it's just phenomenal, you know, what a great way to, you know, to have your acting career, to be famous and, to be working from home. That was the thing I loved about *Blue Heelers*, was that I was working from home. So I could go home every night, despite the fact that, you know, it often involved going all the way home from Werribee, but ...

CT: And you have mentioned how much you enjoyed working with your co-actors, Lisa McCune and William McNnes.

JW: Yes, they're fantastic actors. William ... the characters he's played on *The Newsreader* and the thing that Deb Mailman did, uh, the political show - where he was ... I can't remember ... He was a Labor Party person, but you know Bill was always a Labor Party person anyway

CT: He'd be in his element then, that's good.

JW: Yes, but Lisa's just a sensational actor, she's ... And she does the work, you know, she does all the bloody hard work, you know, that you need to do to stay at the top of your game; and Bill's a sensational actor, I mean it's just, it's for him it's a bit like falling off a log, I think. It's just there for him and you know, people like Martin Sacks, you know, Martin has to work a lot harder than Bill to get the same results. But it just seems to come so easily for Bill.

CT: Do you keep in touch now?

JW: I haven't, I keep in touch with Lisa because I've written her into a show that I've been writing that I'm hoping to get up in the coming 12 months or so. It's called ... it was originally called *Home to Roost*, but it's now called *Curtain Call*. And it's about a group of actors living at Rushall Park. Which was developed of course by George Coppin. And that book that Simon ...

CT: Simon Plant

JW: Plant ... Yes, it's really terrific, the journey to America, but you know, Coppin was an amazing person. And we owe him so much, really.

CT: Oh, that's great. All the very best with that, John. It's really probably hard to answer - do you have a favourite show out of all these? I mean there's hundreds of episodes you've done and shows - do you have a favourite one?

JW: I think Rafferty's was,

CT: The Bush Magistrate - you enjoyed that role.

JW: Yes. Well, I mean, every actor my age would have wanted to play that character and I was just lucky enough to get it because the Drama Department had been developed for Channel Seven by Howard Griffiths, who was the Chief Script Editor on *Power Without Glory*.

CT: And he'd done *Bellbird* earlier

JW: And many other things, you know, and I got the role, which was phenomenal and I thought it was a, I thought it was just a great show, I thought it was beautifully balanced in terms of its comedy and drama and I was working with people that I really admired enormously like Simon Chilvers and, Kate ... God ... It's a terrible thing about age ... the names just keep vanishing.

CT: People can look it up if they want to. That's interesting

JW: ... and Arky Michael was just, I mean Arky was just amazing as Fulvio Frangellomini, And Catherine Wilkin - she was one of my favourite actors ever, and I loved working with her, and I loved working with Simon, and I think one of the great things about *Rafferty's Rules* is that it was so theatrical. I mean we were all theatre actors, the four central actors, we were all theatre actors, and we were given license to act in a fairly theatrical manner, and I think it was fantastic.

But the other news that I have is I've just met a young fellow named Matt Batten, who lives out at Keysborough, who got in touch recently and he wants to reboot *Rafferty's Rules*. Which is, I think is a great idea. Rafferty has come to Victoria, at the request of the government to take over as Chief Magistrate to try and help stem the crime - you know, the crime rate down here and I think, you know, good luck to him. He's got Coral Drouyn writing the pilot episode, and Coral worked on the original series of *Rafferty's* as well as *Blue Heelers*.

CT: That would be great.

JW: I first met her when she was a youngish opera singer at the Music Hall in Neutral Bay in Sydney. But you know, like all my dealings with her over the last 20 years have been as a writer. And she's good, she's great, so.

CT: That's great news, John, all the best for that.

JW: It would be great. Why not? Be doing something like that in my 80th year. Yes.

CT: Good on you, the new 60, don't forget. Now as an actor, John, it would be great to hear your views on some aspects of the acting profession, and these of course could also be helpful for young performers with aspirations similar to yours. So reading your memoir, I've retrieved just a few comments that you have made. Now you describe the ephemeral nature of theatre in your book - here today and gone tomorrow of theatre. So were you aware of this as a young person when aiming to become an actor, like did it worry you that theatre happens and then it's gone?

JW: No, it didn't particularly. It worries me now because I feel like I'm no longer really part of it, but ...

CT: This is where Theatre Heritage Australia comes in, of course, because we're keeping records.

JW: Yeah, no, it's great. It's great to be doing something like this and it's ... As I said, it would be great to, you know, move into my 80th year and do a reboot of *Rafferty's Rules* would be a sensational way to, you know, it's sort of like going full circle isn't it ...

CT: And the show goes on, it's fantastic. Do you regard film as a more permanent record of a performance?

JW: Well, it obviously is, yes. And funnily enough, I mean, you know, I've seen quite a bit of stuff that's been recorded on video of theatre performances so that, for the record, so if they wanted to remount the show, they know where people are moving and when, but they always seem fairly stilted compared to film performances. And yeah, film you know, like ... Oh God, when I think of some of the films that I have seen over my lifetime, you know, from the days of Humphrey Bogart and Spencer Tracy to The Marx Brothers and on. And recently saw Emma Thompson in *Down Cemetery Road*, which is. I mean, you know, Jesus, she's good, a good actor. And Ted Lasso, which I've been really enjoying enormously, it's great scripts.

CT: So, I would say you feel most comfortable in the performance genre of theatre, live theatre. Would that be correct to say?

JW: Yes, I guess it depends. Where and what ... I have very fond memories of the first night of *Art* at the Arts Centre and I did that with ... it's a French play by Yasmina Reza. I did that with Will McNnes and Kim Gynge. And, and you know, like, Will can be a bit of a pest, he's a bit like a blowfly or a mosquito sometimes, you know ... go away, and we were talking just before the show started and I heard the music, coming on and you know, I knew I had to go out there and sit down in front of the audience and chat to them in a minute and I said 'Bill later', and I sort of went, moved across the stage in the dark to the chair that I had to sit in.

And I sat there in a chair rather like this, and I sort of, and the theatre was dark, of course, and I'm aware of all these people in the audience, and paper lolly wrappers going and stuff like that, and I could hear Bill still over in the corner talking with Kim or a stage manager and I was aware of someone moving behind the set, and I just felt *This is where I live, this is my*, I felt so comfortable, and then the lights came up and I had to talk to the audience and, 'My friend Serge has just bought a painting. White ... ' And it's just, you know, I just felt so at home. It was just amazing, an amazing sensation.

CT: You write in your memoir, 'I'm always re-energized when I walk onto the stage of a full theatre. My entire being takes on an awareness and lightness it doesn't possess in daily life.'

JW: Well, the awareness of, you know, like I was just aware in that moment of everything.

CT: You do say the rheumatoid arthritis doesn't hurt either, so that's probably the adrenaline isn't it. But isn't that fantastic, and you mention a sensation of oneness, having the audience taking the same breath and gently exhaling, that's a beautiful way of expressing that.

JW: Yes, I think it's ... that human contact that you have with an audience is ... It's one of the best feelings you can ever have, you know, and the great thing ... all actors love a laugh. If you say something and the audience laughs, you, there's nothing. Nothing feels better. It's just the most amazing sensation, but ...

CT: You're mutually dependent, and you say this in your memoir, you and the audience are mutually dependent, aren't you - the same 'communal communicating community beast.'

JW: Yeah, absolutely, I mean, well if there's no audience, you're not an actor. You know, you can only be an actor if there's an audience that wants to sit there and watch you.

CT: How do you get on with the watches, those smart watches they have with lights sometimes? I heard Todd McKenny on the radio once saying that when people clap, you see the lights in their phones going clap clap clap as well. It doesn't distract you at all?

JW: No, no, well, by that time you've finished the show anyway, you don't have to concentrate on anything other than taking the bow.

CT: You make an interesting observation in your book suggesting that the acting industry reinforces a feeling of having little in common with most people you meet. Do you think that's right? Would you like to talk more about this, because I get the impression you could relate to anybody, but how you feel is another thing, of course.

JW: Well, I don't ... I don't know whether that's a strange thing to say or not. It's ...

CT: I think that went back to when you were young with your friends, you know, and at that time you recognized that you didn't have a lot in common with your friends, but that was what happens with actors.

JW: Yeah, I, look I don't know. Because the other thing about acting is that you do. It reinforces your belief in other people, you know, like.

CT: So that's countering what I just said. So would you like that removed from this interview?

JW: No, not at all, no, it doesn't matter, I mean, you know, like, my ideas on it will all be very different in weeks to come.

CT: And who knows, the reader of your book might have misinterpreted what you meant, so that's another thing, you know.

JW: Yes, of course. The other wonderful thing about, you know, the most, one of the greatest experiences I've ever had is - I did a production of *The Elocution of Benjamin Franklin*, which had been Richard Wherrett's idea to do, because he did the original production with Gordon Chater. And he always wanted to do it with a straight actor. And not a ... he didn't want a gay person playing it. Because the character is, I mean Richard was gay or bisexual or Gordon, of course, was wildly gay and extremely camp. And Richard's brother and father were both transvestites. So, Peter Wherrett, who was the driver. He was a transvestite; he used to dress in his mother's clothes and Richard wanted there to be a difference between the character of Robert O'Brien and the gay community. They're different, you know, and of course the play revolves around teaching, giving elocution lessons to this young boy, Benjamin Franklin. And Robert O'Brien's the teacher and, so I spend, I spent all the play talking an imaginary child. And I've had two or three people come up to me in the years since, telling me what a wonderful performance it was, and 'The little boy was so good! Who was he?'

CT: So you brought him to life even though he wasn't there!

JW: Yes, there was nobody there.

CT: Oh congratulations. That's fantastic.

JW: So it's, you know ... those sort of moments make everything worthwhile really.

CT: Absolutely. Do you have any advice for young performers today who might be young John Wood in their secondary school thinking *I'd love to be an actor, but how do I do it?*

JW: Well ask, find somebody and ask, 'How do you do it?' You know, like it's ...

CT: You have to know the right people, don't you?

JW: Well, you do, and you have to, you have to get a chance to meet them, I suppose, but, if there's nobody in the school that can tell you, then - I don't know, write to me or write to another, write to an actor and say how do you get to be an actor.?

CT: And how do they find the actors, they've probably got very protective agents?

JW: Yeah, it's ... well look I don't know, it's ...

CT: Ask the Careers teacher you're suggesting –

JW: Well, yes

CT: ... which probably you didn't have in those days.

JW: Well, you know, nobody knew, nobody knew how to go about being an actor and when you think of the people that were actors before I ever was, you know, people like Frank Thring and Fred Parslow and, oh God, Graham Kennedy, Noel Ferrier. I remember on *Power Without Glory* I was told Graham was coming in to play a Reporter, you know, in an episode about Les Darcy. Or a character based on Les D'Arcy, and Oscar Whitbread, the Head of Drama said, 'Look, Graham Kennedy's coming in and he's never acted before, so will you look after him?' And I thought, *yeah, of course*. Well, Graham didn't need looking after. He needed no help from me at all. He was a beaut guy, he was really nice to work with, and ...

CT: That was so nice of Oscar Whitbread to ask you to look after him because you mention again in your memoir how difficult it can be for guest performers coming into a series that's underway when everybody's familiar with everybody else, and so that was so thoughtful of Oscar to do that.

JW: Yes, it was great, I mean and one of the, you know, I was asked, on the first day of the read-through for *Blue Heelers*, I was asked to give my advice to the rest of the cast, cos I'd probably had the, I'd probably done more television than anybody else at that stage, and Lisa was only really just starting out, and I said 'Just, you know, treat the other, treat every guest artist with absolute respect because without them we haven't got a show.'

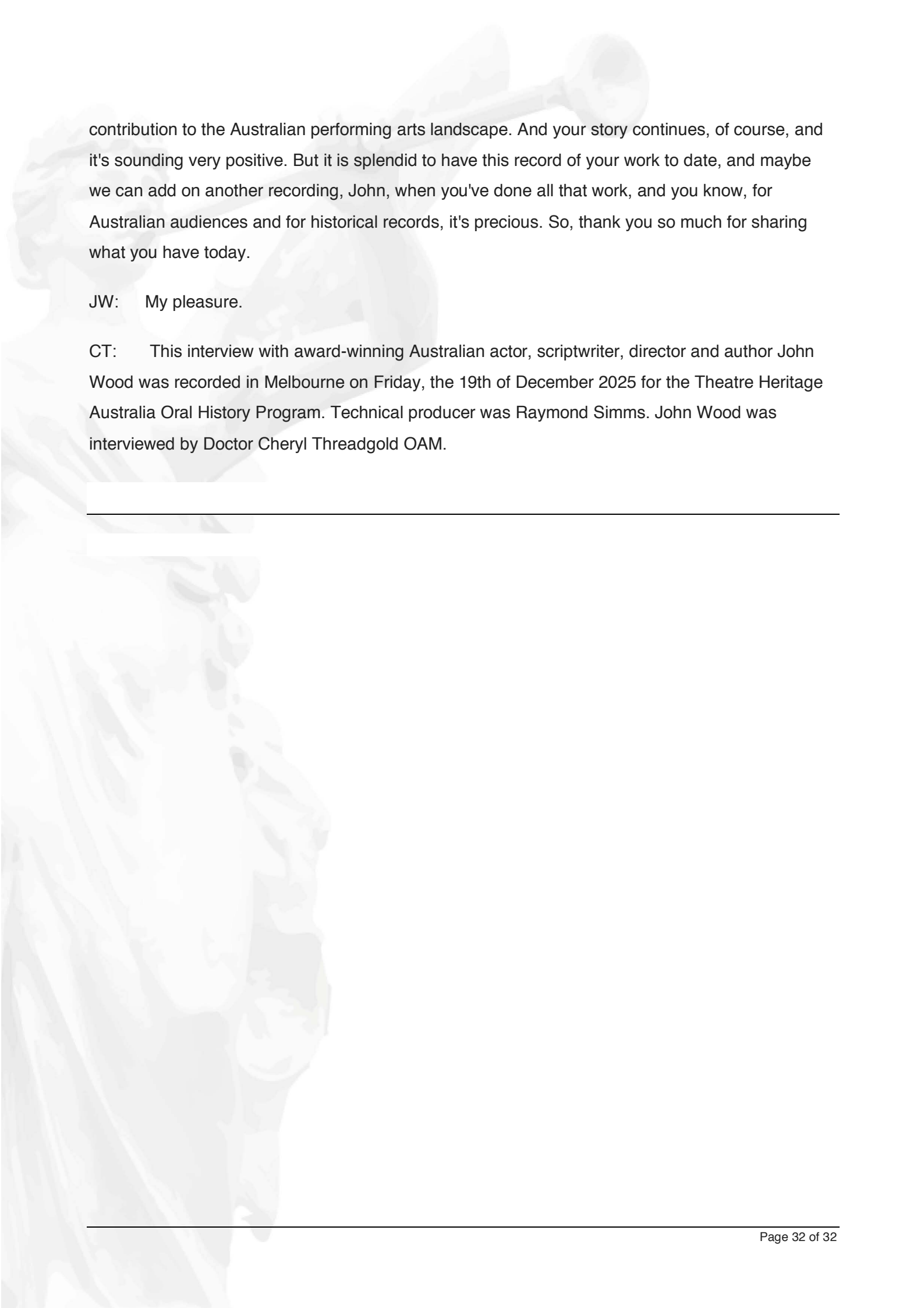
CT: Great advice.

JW: Well, the thing that I loved from moving on from that was that for years and years and years, people have come up to me and said, 'Oh *Blue Heelers* was the best thing I ever worked on', you know, 'We were looked after so well and people treated us ...' and I said, 'Well that's great,' I mean I didn't tell them that was my advice, but you've really got to look after the guest artists because without them there is no show.

CTG: John, it's been great talking to you. Is there anything else you'd like to add to this interview?

JW: I'm available.

CT: Oh, everyone take note. Well, thank you for sharing your wonderful story of fulfilling your childhood vision to become an actor, a very successful actor, and making such a fantastic



contribution to the Australian performing arts landscape. And your story continues, of course, and it's sounding very positive. But it is splendid to have this record of your work to date, and maybe we can add on another recording, John, when you've done all that work, and you know, for Australian audiences and for historical records, it's precious. So, thank you so much for sharing what you have today.

JW: My pleasure.

CT: This interview with award-winning Australian actor, scriptwriter, director and author John Wood was recorded in Melbourne on Friday, the 19th of December 2025 for the Theatre Heritage Australia Oral History Program. Technical producer was Raymond Simms. John Wood was interviewed by Doctor Cheryl Threadgold OAM.
