

Galop and Stonewall Housing Oral History Project

Interviewee: Neil Bartlett

Interviewer: Philp Cowell

Place of Interview: Brighton

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Key

FH: = Interviewer, Fiza Hassan

SP: = Interviewee, Susan Patterson

[time e.g. 5:22] = inaudible word at this time

[5:22 IA] = inaudible section at this time

Word 5:22 = best guess at word

PC: Can I first ask you to tell me your name, and also where and when you were born?

NB: My name is Neil Bartlett and I was born in Hitchin in Hertfordshire in August of 1958.

PC: Thank you very much.

<Part 2 starts>

Neil, could you tell me a bit about your background?

NB: How far back would you like me to go?

PC: Starting with growing up would be great.

NB: Starting with growing up. Well my childhood was spent in Chichester in West Sussex. We lived just up the road from the Festival Theatre. My father was a lecturer by that time, although he'd started life as a PE teacher. My mother didn't work until my sister and I (I have one sister) were teenagers, and then she worked part time as a dinner lady. My father was the first member of his family to receive a higher education. I would say they started out as very lower middle class and we ended up as middle middle class by the time I left home.

Chichester is the whitest town in the world. That's my background. I never saw anybody except white people when I was growing up.

There were good things about growing up in Chichester but I couldn't wait to leave. I won a place to Magdalen College, Oxford. I went to Oxford University and when I left Oxford ... at Oxford I'd been engaged in what I would now call performance art with a bunch of mates, and when I left Oxford I went to the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School for a year, to do a director's course, which turned out not to exist, because in theory I wanted to know about conventional theatre having done very unconventional theatre. The course confirmed my suspicions that I didn't like conventional theatre at all and, with a bunch of friends, I set up a theatre company in 1982 and we toured around this country and indeed Europe and North America in an old van that we borrowed off

someone, doing fairly extraordinary productions of a Brecht play, *The Jungle of Cities*, and a very wonderful melodrama from 1905 written by Aspazia, the national poetess of Latvia, because one of our number was Latvian. And then I kept on doing theatre and I started making notes towards my first book even then, and then through a mutual friend I met Pete Ayrton, who was just about to set up *Serpent's Tail*, and he asked me to write my first book and twenty years ago, twenty years ago and seven days, I met my partner, James Gardiner, so that's about everything.

I work in the theatre and I write books and I have a husband. That's all you need to know.

I Can you tell me just a little bit more about the company that you set up in 1982? What was its name?

NB: Yeah, it was called The 1982 Theatre Company, there were eight of us ... (This noise is me opening the door to let my very old bull terrier into the garden.)

I And what's the bull terrier's name?

NB: The bull terrier's name is Ivor, so if there are barks it's the dog and not me!

There were eight of us, we'd, quite a few of us we knew each other from Oxford and ... then a couple more people joined us who'd been to Cambridge. An extraordinary group of people. Alan Scholefield who is now Honest John's Records; **Banata Rubas**, a leading theatre director now in Riga, Latvia; Annabel Arden, who went on to set up *Complicité*; Annie Griffin, the film maker; Sean Cranitch of the Irish Cranitch acting dynasty. So a pretty great bunch of people and we were a collective, there was no director and no nothing, we all did everything and we borrowed the van off one of our number's father and toured around art centres doing these two shows, and actually the company ran until 1984. We also did some Shakespeare production at the University of Essex and at the Pegasus, which was a community theatre in East Oxford. I got to play Cleopatra in 1983 or 1984. I also got to play Bianca in *Othello*; still I think one of my favourite jobs in the theatre. I'm not quite sure what the audiences made of a six-foot Cleopatra. I was very much a **clone** by those days so I didn't shave my moustache off to play Cleopatra. Japanese makeup and a kimono and a big Freddy Mercury moustache. I enjoyed it! <Laughs>

And some of those ... that set the ball in motion. After the 1982 Theatre Company then with three other colleagues I set up *Gloria* and *Gloria* was in existence from I think 1988 to 1998 and did the next tranche of work and started working in bigger places.

I So it sounds like it was very exciting – and I'm interested to hear about the 1982 Company, it sounds like a really exciting ... did it feel like you were ...

NB: Oh it was fantastic, it was fantastic! I mean I was in ... it was fantastic. I mean we were all, we would all have identified ourselves as feminists, I was the only gay person in the company but I was very out and very active as a gay, so I never lived in drag but I was performing in drag in the shows, the shows were incredibly sexual, women playing men, men playing women, all the costumes were from junk shops, the plays were outrageous. I remember when we were

on tour in Germany people called the police just because we were walking down the street. I had rat-tail hair, a bit Michael Clark rat-tail hair and I was a big fan of Siouxsie and the Banshees so I wore geisha makeup most of the time. I remember taking my makeup off to go on stage and yeah, fabulous, and that ... being on the road with the company took me to New York for the first time in 1980, late in 1982 and I walked down Christopher Street for the first time and that was amazing, being exposed to that ... really full on gay life, whereas at Oxford although I had known gay people and there was a gay club of an incredibly antiquated kind in Oxford and I did all the things that ... you know, I was cottaging, I had crushes on people, I had a gay tutor at one point who was ... Alan Hollinghurst the novelist, so I wasn't a gay virgin, but seeing American gay life in full flood and then when I came back and then I was living in London sleeping on people's sofas and moving around and then I got a flat on the Isle of Dogs, a council flat, which I shared with Simon McBurney and ... yeah, it was an extraordinary time. I can't remember ... always been bad at chronology, but we were living under Thatcher and so ...

I mean while we were on tour with the 1982 theatre company I remember we ... after we'd done the Brecht and the Aspazia we did a production of *Mistero Buffo* by Dario Fo, which was a bare bones production. We could perform it anywhere and we did it at the Riverside Studios, we actually did it at the Arts Theatre in London for a short run in the West End, but we did it at Greenham Common I remember, our tour took us quite close to Greenham Common and we stopped off and did it at the mixed camp in Greenham. And <pause> I mean looking back the things I remember ... you know, you remember the minor's strike and ...

Then when I came back to London I got a job ... there was an advertisement for a part-time office worker for a company called Consenting Adults in Public, who were a radical gay fringe theatre company who toured, who ran workshops in a clapped out community centre somewhere off the Holloway Road, and from a kitchen table in someone's house in Stockwell ran this little theatre company. And they did the first ever play which treated of AIDS in this country, a piece called *Antibody* by Louise Parker-Kelly and I think that was in ... I'm just looking at my notes now, 'cause as I said, I can't remember when things were ... no ... isn't on the list, 'cause I didn't create it, I was only an office worker. But I think it was early in '83 and we toured student unions mostly, was a piece about AIDS, it was the very first days of the AIDS epidemic, which I'd encountered in Toronto in '82 when I was performing there.

And then I got involved with a thing called *September in the Pink*, in 1983 the GLC funded a London Lesbian and Gay Arts Festival, which was a huge deal, howls of outrage in the Evening Standard and we had meetings in County Hall which were incredibly stormy, it was all very controversial. I mean now it's ... when we take it for granted, of course the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival has posters all over the Tube, but I can remember a) there was very little money, but also the amount of controversy. I did a show at the Cockpit Theatre and I remember making announcements after the show on a couple of nights because people had been harassed leaving the show, and advising members of the audience that they wouldn't be welcome in the pub across the road and that maybe they would not walk to the Tube station singly. I mean I haven't remembered that for ages, but I know I did that. I can remember going on stage at the curtain call ... and you can't imagine that happening now. So it

was a very different world, but I was having the most fabulous time. It was wonderful.

Pina Bouche came to London for the first time at Saddlers Wells, that was a big event in my life. Seeing Michael Clark dance, Derek Jarman's films, Fassbinder's films getting distribution in London for the first time. Those were ... going dancing at the Bell, the Eurhythmics, seeing the video for *Smalltown Boy* by the Communards, so yeah ... it was an amazing time.

I Sounds like a completely heady mix of lots of different things and I'd like to ...

NB: Yeah, but you know I was in my early twenties, so of course it was heady, yeah.

I You've raised a lot of things there. Thank you so much.

NB: You're welcome.

I It sounds like there are some memories you've not had for a while. I'll go back to that in a second if that's alright, but just to go right back to you mentioned the book, your working on the book, I think you meant the Oscar Wilde.

NB: Yes, that's right.

I I was quite interested in your performance work, but this is when you're really starting as a writer as well, isn't it? Could you tell us more about that?

NB: Well it was, as I say I met Pete Ayrton, who was at Pluto Press but he was just in the process of leaving Pluto and setting up *Serpent's Tail*, and I had been scratching around the idea for a book, having left Oxford. I went to Magdalen as I said, which was Oscar Wilde's college and while I was there I'd done a performance piece dedicated to him actually in his old living room, which is now the junior common room, which we used illegally for a performance with this boy who I had a mad crush on at the time in a sailor-suit and naked boys and someone covered in lilac blossoms and girls smoking **Sabran** cigarettes, it was all rather marvellous I think. So I was really interested in Oscar and I was starting to keep notes about an idea of a parallel tracking of his experience of London as a gay man and my experience of London as a gay man, and I met Pete and ... I pitched the idea to him and he commissioned me to write it. And I wrote it in the bedroom of a very ... rundown is the polite term, council block just off the bottom of Burdette Road at the top of the Isle of Dogs. I used to cycle every day to the British Museum, where I had to sit at a special table because the books from what they called ... what was it called? I remember the press mark is CUP so I think it's something cupboard, where if you read dirty books, in other words books by homosexuals, you had to sit at a special table and people were ... oh yeah, I was in my early twenties so people were always trying to pick you up, saying, 'I couldn't help noticing you were sitting at the special table. What are you reading?' And it would be, you know, 'I'm very interested in John Addington Symonds too'. So yeah, I used to ... I was living on the dole like everybody else I knew, I was doing my theatre work and I'd be in the reading room at the British Museum all afternoon, then I'd cycle home and then I'd get dressed up and go out usually to the London Apprentice by then, and walk home at one o'clock in the morning and then write. And that was the way I wrote my first book.

I Thank you for that. Moving on slightly to a different topic now ...

NB: Yes?

<Part 3 starts>

PC: You talked a lot there about Consenting Adults in Public, all the sort of slightly more ... gay activism work. I just wanted to bring up the word 'activist' which before we started recording we talked about whether you are actually an activist or not. Could you put yourself in context?

NB: Are we recording now, still? Yes? I mean I wouldn't ... I don't think I've ever used the word about myself, although journalists and other people have used it about me. I was active, I did go on demonstrations a lot and there have been particular things that I did which other people might ... where my work as an author and as a theatre worker has foregrounded what you could call activism. In a sense, to be doing radical gay theatre at the ICA in the early 1980s and then the at the Drill Hall, and to work in drag and then to do a performance where you talked about AIDS and took all your clothes off ... that was pretty activist. I mean the purely activist things that ... I was one of the team of unpaid volunteers who helped make the first International AIDS Day in London happen. I didn't organise it, I was just in the office doing whatever had to be done. I worked for Consenting Adults in Public as an office worker and running the workshops. That was a job, but it was pretty out there. I was ... minimally active, I would say, in the Clause 28 campaign. I think the most important thing I did was whenever I gave an interview or did public speaking around my theatre work or my books, I always <pause> I was always categorised as a gay artist and ... you always got that question in every single international, 'Do you think of yourself as a gay artist, or as an artist first and gay second?' and I always said, 'No two ways about it – I think of myself as a gay artist.'

I'm older and wiser now, but I used to get incredibly angry about all the very prominent gay artists both in theatre and publishing who kept their heads down in the 1980s and who didn't come to the meetings for Clause 28 and if asked, 'Are you a gay artist?' would say, 'Oh no, no, I'm an artist who happens to be gay.' Or in lots of cases would just make it clear before the interview started that that question was not to be asked.

They're all out now, which is fabulous, and they're very welcome and marvellous, but we could have used their help as well.

I never made a piece of work *because* I wanted to make a political statement. I ... made pieces of work that could be experienced as political or cultural ... not statements 'cause no work of art is a statement, but yeah, I was very in your face. But I wasn't ... none of my work was agitprop. I have done ... occasionally people have asked me to write a piece especially for a benefit or a fund raiser, and in that context I will tailor something to a very specific issue, but that was ...

What else? Fund raisers. If fund raisers are activism then I'm definitely an activist! I've done the ... I used to MC a lot and I MC'd a lot in drag and in semi-drag so CND, at the Ritzy, Brixton I remember doing all in swimwear; I've spoken alongside Vanessa Redgrave in Trafalgar Square. I think that was Clause 28. I've done introducing people at the Albert Hall for Stonewall, lots of

pub gigs, lots of ... that's one of my main memories of the 1980s is fundraising, bucket rattling. I mean World Aids Day, that was a lot of bucket rattling, took a lot of rolling up of the sleeves.

So I don't know if ... if you asked me to name the activists of the period then I would say Simon Watney, a great man; Peter Tatchell; Michael Cashman in a different way, in that he chose to become a professional politician but to really pursue gay rights as top of a civil rights agenda. So that's my idea of activism, and I never gave up my life for it, although other people I'm sure would go, 'Of course you're an activist! Stop being so cagey! You were constantly causing trouble.' <Laughs>

PC: Can I ask you to talk a bit more about what you call your office work in the Consenting Adults in Public? Just give me more of a sense of who was involved and what ...

NB: Well the company was the project of a guy called Eric Presland, and as I say it was in his house, I think it was in Stockwell and everything was done round the kitchen table and we rehearsed in the front room in a room that somebody scrounged from somewhere, it was a kind of loose collection of people, no professional actors involved I don't think, although maybe there were a couple of people who were not big professional actors, and I ran workshops which were ... purportedly theatrical workshops but were really about using role play improvisation for self-esteem and just any excuse really for gay confidence building. And it was very specific – I think the company must have got a grant from I don't know where, maybe Greater London Arts or possibly the GLC, I wouldn't know that (Eric would know, Eric Presland), to employ a part-time office worker to do the work of running the workshops but also organising what office there was, which as I say was half a kitchen table, and liaising with the tour venues, which were student unions. So I did the bookings and then I went out with the show and was stage manager really, and if ... I don't think I ever went on but I helped with rehearsals as well, so it was Jack of all trades. It was a very small operation, but it was a big thing to have had the foresight to realise that this was going to be a huge thing in all our lives and to do a show about it, which was just trying to get the message across, 'This is happening – you need to find out about it and you need to make sure you don't get it.' Which is a message we still have failed totally to get out to the young people of today, but we're doing our bit.

PC: Do you remember the audiences that would go to the shows?

NB: Tiny. But not ... I mean if you play in a student union, students ... yeah, students and young people, and then we did performances at the Cockpit I think, although I might be confusing that with my own work there in September in the Pink, but I think we did shows there, and that was ... City Limits readers, that's people who read the gay page of City Limits, that's who came.

PC: You talked about September in the Pink; I'd like to go back to that if that's alright – that sounds really important.

NB: It was an important moment I think. God, it's a long time ago <laughs>, what can I remember? We had an office, most of the people who were doing it had no idea what they were doing, and running a festival and how to spend a grant and how to do budgets. I was an office worker and coordinator. We had

this money to give out – you know, the GLC gave us money and then if you were a fringe theatre group you could apply to put your show on ... gosh, you know, I can't remember <laughs>, I can't remember what we ended up putting on. I know I did a show. I did a show at the Cockpit with my friend ... it was the first time I worked with my friend the visual artist Robin Whitmore, that's how I met Robin, and we rehearsed in a basement in Hackney and put together six ... I was living on the Nightingale Estate in Hackney, six gay men doing a gay show using text from the 18th century, 19th century and 20th century, it was called *Dressing Up* and I devised it with the company; it was my first ...

Did we pay ourselves? We must have ... everybody was on the dole, I didn't know anybody who wasn't on the dole. What other works were on in the festival? I can't remember ... it was interesting, as well as all of us who knew nothing about what we were doing and didn't know, also peripherally involved with the festival were people from the 1970s wave of gay liberation in London, the people running The Oval House for instance, who'd seen it all before and been through all the arguments and all the battles and were very burnt out, very angry a lot of them; and I remember incredibly stormy meetings, one in particular at County Hall, where I remember we discovered that we didn't actually have a treasurer and no one really knew what was happening to the money. But the work did happen and ... I think there were about twenty people of work in the Festival, theatre pieces and music and the GLC did fund a Lesbian and Gay Arts Festival, and I think that that commitment of Ken Livingstone in particular, because he really pushed it through and he welcomed us into County Hall, he came to one meeting once; that idea that you could be welcomed into the Labour Party and into the GLC and there was a way forward that ... which meant that the radical politics of the first wave of gay liberation, Lesbian Separatism and the radical drag activists, that there was going to be a way of keeping that energy but that it was going to lead to .. the change in the law, which is what we none of us thought would ever happen. I don't think anyone ever thought ... the energy was of anger and protest and dissent, not, 'We have to calmly, patiently work and one day it will happen,' 'cause I don't think any of us ... it seemed incredibly distant. A lot of anger and a lot of fabulousness ... I mean there were ... yeah, fabulous people around.

PC: Anger and fabulousness?

NB: Always a good combination!

PC: <Laughs> It was quite interesting that memory that you say you hadn't had for a while of being on a stage and warning people about ... I just wonder if you can go back to the material experience of that; what must that have been like? I mean that's so different from today, isn't it?

NB: Well it was normal. I mean some people would have said we were asking for trouble, we wore a lot of make-up and we were loud, and I wore ... if not semi-drag I wore ... you know, I was never out without a pearl earring and eye shadow. But we weren't asking for trouble, we were just asking to be normal young men having fun in London. I mean god, punk had happened for god's sake!

Yeah, it was a very hostile world. It was ... <sighs> It's very difficult to talk about it without rose-tinted glasses 'cause everyone was getting on with it. It

was a time of extraordinary creativity. If you look at the gay artworks in London in the 1980s, from Derek's work to ... I mean I've mentioned some of these people, to Michael Clarke, to Leigh Bowery, to the Pet Shop Boys, that was my world, and there was also the beginnings of so much other work. It was a fabulous time. We were all having love affairs and fabulous sex lives, we were going out every night, so it wasn't all gloom and doom, but Uno, my boyfriend at the time, was a teacher and he had to be incredibly careful at work, constantly police himself and his conversations with his colleagues. You had to watch your back all the time.

I didn't know anyone who hadn't been beaten up. That's the simplest way of putting it. It was just a fact of life. I'm not saying you got beaten up every day but everyone got harassed sooner or later, or in the crowd that I was running with everyone got harassed sooner or later, and things would get better. Frankie Goes to Hollywood, how fabulous! Paul Rutherford, the most beautiful man in town. Fantastic! I was a big Frankie fan and used to dress like Paul Rutherford, and I remember being on tour with Complicité on the Orkney Islands and being harassed by a group of school children, 'cause they knew I was gay, 'cause I was dressed like ... I had the same moustache as Paul Rutherford and a check shirt, and having abuse shouted at me on the pier in Kirkwall, on the harbour wall, which of course I thought was terribly funny and didn't bother me at all, but on one level it wasn't funny. My boyfriend and I got beaten up one night on the way home from Back Street, the leather bar at Mile End.

I mean they're very different phases. I mean '83 was very different to '88, because by '88 the AIDS crisis was in full flood and the murderous hatred of Mrs Thatcher and her minions and the press ... if you think of ... if you think what Derek Jarman had to go through, being vilified and abused and denigrated for making the work that he did, and that still ... it makes me incredibly sad and incredibly angry that he of all people was treated like that. I mean god knows, he rose above it and achieved wonderful things, but the whole thing of when I published my first novel, 'Oh, it's a gay story. How do you feel about writing a *gay* story?' I mean now I meet young people who find all of that quite surprising.

To sidetrack slightly, I've just been workshopping a project at the National Theatre for the last two weeks, which is a love story between two men, and we showed the results of the workshop to a group of people from the National Theatre on Saturday. Lots of feedback about the show, it was really moving, it was really this, it was really that, nobody mentioned the fact that the two protagonists were both men. It's not that they didn't notice. Of course they noticed! But they loved it. And they didn't ... and that kind of took me aback, I have to say. This was the formative decade of my personal life and my professional life, and being gay was the most ... humungous issue. Everything was an issue. How you walked, how you talked, how you dressed, when I went for my job interview to take over the Lyric, Hammersmith, the second question I was asked at the interview was, 'Are you gay; do you intend to turn the Lyric, Hammersmith into a gay theatre?' There's a part of me that wants to be reasonable and say that was a legitimate ... that was the board members' job to find out what my intentions were and so on, but it did ...

Oh it's a wonder I'm still standing, it's been *such hard work*. <Laughs> I sound like I'm moaning. Sorry, I've rambled. Where were we?

PC: No, you haven't at all. I'd like to go back to the AIDS crisis. I'd like to move on into your work in the nineties but can we just go back there first?

NB: Yes, of course.

<Part 4 starts>

PC: And talk about your involvement. You took part in London's first International AIDS Day.

NB: I did – what year was it, '86 or '87?

PC: Was it '87?

NB: I'm not sure. You'll have to look it up – you're the historian, you'll have to look it up. I don't know. I've a feeling it was '86 but maybe it was '87.

Yeah, I don't know how I got into it. They must have asked for volunteers. I mean I was strictly a volunteer – I used to go to the office every day and whatever needed doing, I would do it, whether that was some Diva was being wooed to appear at the Wembley concert and she needed flowers delivered to her hotel room, to answering the phones, to making the tea, emptying the bins. There was one particular bit of somebody had the brilliant idea <laughs> of getting all the drag queens who were working London at that time to go on a pub crawl on a bus, and they would descend on each pub and rattle the buckets. Fortunately I wasn't on that bus, because I heard ... I mean can you imagine? After the third pub it was just complete mayhem and butchery.

But I got to meet a lot of those very, very fabulous people, and I remember going to the big gig at Wembley and Boy George sang and George Michael sang. Georgina Hale did one of the introductions and that was fabulous. And again, it had been a struggle to get people to commit to an out ... an out gay event, and a positive intervention, let's do something, people are dying, let's do something. It wasn't like Live-Aid! Mind you, Live-Aid wasn't like Live-Aid – the first Live-Aid was an incredible struggle, but that was a real struggle, organising that Wembley gig. There was a lot of people put in a lot of hours to make that happen. But I was ... I'd been to the Sex and the State conference in Toronto organised by *The Body Politic*. I used to subscribe to *The Body Politic* as well as *Gay News* and again the North American influence where there was this much more powerful, sophisticated, informed (it seemed to me) gay culture, which we needed to learn a lot of things from, although I'm very proud of my roots in a much older British gay culture. But we did learn a lot from how far ahead people ... I mean if you compare where Toronto was in terms of fundraising and political engagement and education work in 1986 and where London was, I mean no comparison. We were a long way behind.

So yeah, I had a fantastic time and I'm glad I did all that. It needed to be done, and it still needs to be done. Last year I went ... it's closed now, been closed by its funding body but there was an HIV an AIDS drop-in and community centre in Brighton called Open Door and I worked there one day a week as kitchen assistant and last World Aids Day, Simon Casson at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern asked me to write and perform a piece for World Aids Day at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, so I still feel engaged in that. I mean ... we're in as bad a state now as we were in 1987, 1988. The infection rates are catastrophic over the last six months, and none of the education strategies,

particularly for young gay men ... well they don't seem to be having any impact whatsoever at the moment. That's my impression from what I read and see. So yeah, I'm very glad I did that. Just that experience of being in a room full of people who'd go, 'Right, we don't know how to do this, let's put on a concert in Wembley. Who's got Elton John's phone number?' Did Elton sing? George Michael sang I'm sure, and Boy George sang, 'cause he nearly lost his voice *of course*, silly girl! I remember that. It wasn't full. It wasn't anywhere near full, which is why we were given seats, the people who worked in the office.

It was quite glamorous. Someone lent us an office in Soho, that's where the office was. Being part of a room full of people trying to make something happen, even though none of you knew what to do, but someone knew somebody who knew how to do it ... that's the way all those things work.

PC: You contrast it to the Toronto setup. You said it was more sophisticated so [5:41 IA] London sophisticated?

NB: No, I remember it all as being very shambolic.

PC: <Laughs>

NB: I mean by the time I got to Toronto the Sex and the State conference was '85 or '86 ...

PC: I've got '85 here.

NB: '85, yeah. I mean I was there as a guest because I'd done some theatre work on tour in Toronto in '82, '83, '84 and it had all been organised, but this, you know, a conference with people who'd come from all over the world at the university of Toronto funded by I don't know, who was it funded by? The university, the city? High powered gay academics from all over North America and further afield, it was fantastic, and I didn't know of anything like that going on in London then, so that was a real eye opener.

There was a definite sense in the eighties, the sky was the limit both artistically, why couldn't a record about gay S&M be number one for weeks and weeks and weeks and weeks and weeks; and why couldn't Leigh Bowery appear in costumes better than anything since Diablo; and why couldn't Michael Clarke take poppers during a performance; why couldn't the Pet Shop Boys happen and why ... no one was taking anything lying down, is my memory.

But one has to be aware of saying it was fabulous – I mean that's why ... as in my first novel, a lot of people were being beaten up, a lot of people were having a terrible time, a lot of people were starting to die of AIDS. So it wasn't all entirely fabulous.

PC: As you know, Galop was set up in the eighties in response to the policing of the time, and we're also doing this project for the Stonewall Housing, and I wonder if we could move on to talk about those things?

<Part 5 starts>

I was interested in your view of policing and housing at that time, and feel free to just concentrate on one.

NB: Policing, you crossed the street if a policeman was coming, basically. <Laughs> You know Gordon and Sarah Brown recently had that reception for lesbian and gay people at Downing Street and I was invited to that and I was talking to a policeman there, the policeman who did the security on the way in to Downing Street, and there was a queue and I was talking to the policeman and I was saying, 'This is really, really flipping me out!' And he said, 'Why?' and I said, 'Well my only experience of policemen at Downing Street is one of you lot bashing my face into the gates during a demonstration, and now you're saying, "Good evening sir and welcome to the Lesbian and Gay Reception. Gordon and Sarah are upstairs,"' and I just couldn't get my head round it. And I just thought well that's got to be progress!

Policemen were evil, policemen were the problem! Policemen were the problem, not the solution. I don't know, would I have called the ... no! When my boyfriend and I got beaten up on Burdett Road it never crossed our mind to call the police. Not 'cause we were, 'Oh, we'll be outed at work,' 'cause we were both out at work and wanted to be, but because we went, 'Oh well that will just be more abuse.'

The only night I've ever spent in the cells, when I was at college a group of friends and I very foolishly decided we We had dinner in a restaurant in the West End, not a posh restaurant, somewhere off the Haymarket, and we legged it before we paid the bill; kind of thing you do when you're twenty and in London for the night at college. And of course we got picked up on the next street and spent the night in the cells at Bow Street I'm happy to say – quite glamorous! And because of the way I was dressed I ... my friends, who were the ones that I was with, the police asked them if they wanted me put in a different cell because they wouldn't want to spend a night with 'the bender' as they so charmingly put it.

Now I haven't had any dealing with the police and certainly haven't been arrested recently, but I live in Brighton ... that's not going to happen in Brighton. My image of the police now is lesbian and gay police officers marching at Brighton Gay Pride, and I feel absolutely the police are on my side in Brighton. I know that's not a given, that's part of a constant process of negotiation and a lot of people have worked incredibly hard to achieve that, but I now feel that if I was given hassle on the street and I asked a policeman for assistance, I would assume I would get it, whereas then I would have assumed that the police would have sided with the people who were either abusing or attacking me.

I mean James Anderton ... he was a policeman, you know? Swirling around in a cesspool of their own devising. Wasn't that the phrase that he used? And he had a child who was gay, I seem to remember. Didn't he have a daughter who was gay I think, James Anderton? I mean that was ... that was the tenor of the times. So no, I distrusted and loathed the police as a matter of course. And now I think they're on my side. But you know, I live in Brighton and that's probably in that particular department ... I mean we have an active branch of Galop here and they've done fantastic work. There has been a big issue historically about policing gay cruising in Brighton and there are several places in Brighton where gay men have sex outdoors and always have done, and there used to be ... a lot of argy-bargy about how to police that and now I

think the police see their role as being obviously ... there's controlling public offence, but they see their role as their main job is to stop us getting beaten up of an evening, not to harass us. So that's a huge change.

Housing, I mean I was in hard-to-let council housing, and I never particularly had a problem or was discriminated against. The block I lived in, all my neighbours were either Indian or, if they were white they were so poor, having a poof living upstairs was ... everybody was at the end of their tether on that block so I never particularly got a hard time. I mean I got a hard time, I got burgled and I got mugged, but that didn't have anything to do with being gay. No, so I never ... but I never rented in the private sector, so I never had any issues there.

I mean the GLC housing policy was on your side if you were a young, queer artist on the dole, because of the hard-to-let scheme, where so long as you didn't mind living where nobody in their right mind would live, which of course one didn't 'cause you were so thrilled to get a flat, then you were in. That was a fantastic scheme. So no, I never had any trouble there.

And because, as I say, everyone I knew was on the dole there was always somewhere to stay. The informal network of if you had a spare room or if you had a sofa there was always someone sleeping on it, so that's how housing worked in my circle. You moved from spot to spot and gay men are very good at creating and adapting those networks I think, we certainly were. So I never found it particularly hard to find a sofa to kip down on.

PC: Just going back to the story where you were picked up and in the cell that night – were you actually put into another cell because you were a 'bender'?

NB: No! To their great credit my two friends, one of whom was an actor from the 1982 Theatre Company and one was an old school friend, they both told the policeman where to stick it and said, 'No! We're not leaving our sister!'

PC: Do you remember how ... what the feeling was at that moment?

NB: It was all quite casual, it was all backs to the wall jokes and all of that, but it wasn't nice. I wasn't going to say anything 'cause I was in the wrong – I'd done a really stupid thing trying to run out on ... it wasn't like I'd been arrested while I was cruising or anything, it wasn't a gay related arrest, but of course it was horrible.

But ... I was used to being stared at and I was used to being laughed at, so it was part of ... it was a fairly normal behaviour pattern I suppose. But it was ... yeah, I just remember it, I just remember it. What a prat! Policemen, men together, you put a ... in the 1980s if you saw three straight men together after dark you knew you were going to get a snigger or an unkind word, and the fact that these particular three working class men happened to be wearing police uniforms in a way is incidental I think. It could just as easily have been ... someone on a buss or someone at ... Although I used to get free bus rides on the Number 19. I sometimes used to go into town in drag, into the West End in drag, and I always used to get my bus ride for free. That sort of rather lovely old East End thing – 'cause there were still enough, 'cause I lived in Limehouse, there were enough old queens and people ... there was the George IV on [9:49] Street and the very old East End queens and high queens and sequins and drag queens culture, for people to sort of know what

that was, and so if you got on the bus there was a lot of, 'Ooh lovely dear, where are you off to?' But equally then you got into the West End and I once has to talk myself out of a very dangerous situation. I made the mistake of walking across Leicester Square to get to the Hippodrome in drag and someone stopped right in my face and said straight out, 'I'm going to fucking kill you,' and I had to talk my way out of it and he was too drunk to do it, but he certainly could have laid me out. My advice would be carry your high heels in your bag, 'cause you never know when you're going to have to run!
<Laughs> I don't know how I didn't get ... I mean when I was beaten up on Burdett Road nothing really ... we didn't get seriously hurt. It was very scary but we didn't ... how I got through the 1980s without getting my face punched in I don't know. But there we are.

PC: That's brilliant, thank you so much.

NB: You're welcome.

PC: We've talked a lot about the eighties, obviously, and perhaps we could talk about the nineties now and also the noughties as well.

NB: Let's just check the time before we do.

Can I say that I'll throw you out at half-past-six?

PC: Absolutely. That's absolutely fine.

NB: Marvellous. And then I'll drive you to the station.

PC: Great. That's very kind of you.

So in the nineties you're getting interviewed for, for example in 1994 you were interviewed as artistic director at the Lyric and you just said earlier that they asked, 'Are you going to turn this into a gay theatre?' so I thought we'd go back to that one if that's alright.

NB: <Laughs>

PC: I mean you obviously did lots of amazing things for the theatre; you turned it round and [11:43 IA]

NB: Well I did turn it into a gay theatre and nobody noticed!

PC: <Laughs>

NB: No, it's not true that nobody noticed it. I mean what he meant was are you going to turn it into The Drill Hall or The Oval House – in other words is it going to be exclusively and militantly gay, which ... er no! Because already ... through the late '80s when I got the question, 'Are you a gay artist?' I would say, 'Well, it's interesting – if I'm doing *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* and I'm taking my clothes off and I'm sharing the stage with drag queens and I'm talking about AIDS, then I guess I'm a gay artist.' But while I was doing that I was also preparing the National Theatre's production of *Bérénice* by Racine, starring Lyndsay Duncan, for which I did the translation. Is that gay? If that's not gay then what happens to me? Do I physically alter as I cross the river from The Drill Hall to the South Bank? There's always been that stupid

thing of you're gay sometimes and not gay sometimes, and I was ... my work speaks for itself and there were times at the Lyric Hammersmith when people went, 'Ooh, this is really gay!' So if I did a play with a famous leading lady in it, the critics would go, 'Oh I see, it's really she's really a drag queen, because Neil Bartlett's gay.' Or if I did, we did a staging of one of the Britton song titles, *The Seven Sonnets of Michael Angelo*, which had lots of handsome young men and people went, 'Ooh, it's gay!' But then when I did *The Dispute* by Marivaux in a co-production with the RSC everyone forgot I was gay, or we did fabulous successful Christmas shows, to which all the whole of Hammersmith brought their kids 'cause the tickets were really cheap, and nobody went, 'Ooh, it's a gay panto, gay panto for gay people.'

But there was that constant ... as somebody said, I think it was Paul Taylor in *The Independent*, tongue firmly in cheek I suspect 'cause Paul's always been totally on my side, said it was, 'Like inviting Derek Jarman to take over the Ealing Studios, <laughs> which is ridiculous comparison 'cause I'm not an artist of Derek's stature or importance. But yes, I think in so far as anyone cares about such things there was a slight ruffling of feathers when I was appointed.

I mean also it was that old thing of, 'Are we going to have gay art on the rates?' 'cause Hammersmith is funded, about a third of the funding comes from Hammersmith and Fulham Council and of course they were worried that they'd get the 'Gays on the Rates' press. They'd been through the 1980s as well and if it had been 1987 instead of 1994 it would have been, 'Poof takes over theatre. Will our kiddies be safe coming to the theatre for the Christmas show because a gay man is running the building.' I mean that was ... that sounds like a ridiculous caricature but it wasn't a caricature. I did a show called *Pornography* in ... when was that, early eighties, sorry this is going back to the eighties, '84, which I did at the ICA and then we toured it, we went to Toronto and we did a couple of British gigs and we went to Manchester and there was a story in the *Manchester Evening News* about ... and the show was called *Pornography* and it was 'gay filth on the rates' was the story, and the police came to the performance. And now you have *Queer Up North* in all its splendour, so yes, times have changed. So yeah, it was an issue, but I mean we'd been through Clause 28 by then, where people were at legal risk of losing their jobs and losing their funding if they were perceived to be ... "prosthelytizing" I think is the word. We prosthelytize. <Laughs>

PC: So the 1990s was very different then, because ... of all the hard work that people like yourself had been doing in the eighties I suppose?

NB: Yeah, it's not like the nineties were like, 'Oh fabulous – Tony Blair's been elected and it's all fabulous.' It's been a long, slow ... I mean I think we see ... I mean Blair being elected was a turning point, having lived through the Ice Age, me and everyone else I knew went, 'At last, life is going to be possible.' And that did create an incredible ... the possibility of legislative change for the first time. And that's when it shifted, I think, from, 'This will never happen so our job is to fight for our lives, almost in an existential way,' to, 'This could happen. Therefore we've got to move organising and, to some degree, assimilating up the agenda, because if we pretend to assimilate a bit then we'll get what we want.' And we did. And now we can either assimilate or dis-assimilate entirely as we wish according to who we are and where we are and how old we are, I think. So yeah, it was a very different decade and it was very different for me, 'cause I was starting ... I had been working in small,

oppositional venues, the ICA, The Drill Hall, the Cockpit, pubs, arts centres, whatever, and then I was starting to work at the National and at the Court and then the Lyric, Hammersmith, so I was moving into a different way of working, although it's always two steps forward, one step back. I never felt like I was going legit, and actually working in Hammersmith and saying, 'I'm going to work for a much bigger audience and a much broader audience, not just the kind of crowd who would go and see a queer show at The Drill Hall, but I'm also going to put on Cinderella and I'm going to do ... all of that. I thought that was a radical thing to do instead of saying, 'I'll do another show at the ICA, which will cause a lot of excitement on the back page of *The Guardian*.'

PC: Cinderella's the Christmas show, isn't it?

NB: Cinderella was the Christmas show that I created with Improbable, with Martin Freeman as the best Buttons ever! Fabulous!

PC: Could you tell us a little bit more about that – working with him.

NB: About working with Martin Freeman?

PC: [20:16 IA]

NB: Well it was great. I mean I knew about being a company like Improbable because I'd been a company like Improbable, Gloria was a company like Improbable: radical, opinionated, quite spiky bunch of people who thought it was their right to make work on whatever stage they wanted to, and we thought Improbable and Complicité and Robert Lepage and Tomasha and other people that we brought in, we thought they're great and we've got this 500 seat theatre, playing safe wasn't an option, the Lyric had played safe through the late seventies and the eighties and it gradually had stopped being an effective policy and it was on a downhill slope heading for bankruptcy when Simon and I, (Simon Mellor) were invited to apply for the job. So those were the people that we knew and the people that we admired. But the trick was, we didn't say to Improbable, 'Come and do whatever you want.' We said to Improbable, 'We're going to do a Christmas show, 'cause we have to do a Christmas show and we want to do a really good one. Why don't *you* come and do Cinderella?' And it was a wonderful version of Cinderella, it was very beautiful. Angela Clerkin was Cindarella, Imogen Claire was the Fairy Godmother and Martin was the fabulous, fabulous Buttons, and there was no script – they improvised every night. We had all the costumers and the scene changes and the order of scenes, and the songs, we learnt the words to the songs, but the script was improvised every night. It was a beautiful show – beautiful.

PC: It was packed out wasn't it?

NB: That was packed, packed, packed. That was ... the Lyric was not packed, packed, contrary to popular opinion we had more than our fair share of absolute turkeys, but you know, we did *Splendid's* by Genet, we did *The Prince of Homburg* by Kleist, we did plays which *nobody* wanted to go and see, and some of them we made work rather well and they did OK, but our copper-bottomed hits were few and far between, but we did fine, we weren't trying to make ... We never said, 'We'll do that because that sounds really commercial popular. That wasn't our brief. We were trying to make something extraordinary happen, and we did that a fair bit of the time.'

PC: Just as we wrap up, thank you so much for that.

<Part 6 starts>

PC: In the last five minutes or so, it's a question where the last two words are in speech-marks.

NB: <Laughs> That's quite alright.

PC: What do you consider to be some of your, or what do you consider one of your greatest achievements as a 'gay actor'?

NB: Oh blimey! Well I don't ... I just ...

PC: And it's actually absolutely fine to not answer the question!

NB: Well ... I do know that things haven't changed by themselves. I know that they have changed through the work and talent of ... of an enormous number of people, but I believe almost every ... so many people are ... mean activism includes yes, going to the meeting for the campaign against Clause 28 and saying, 'I will phone up these eight people who I know and I will try and persuade them to put their ...' you know, 'I once did a gig with Emma Thompson and I know someone who's still got her phone number so I will phone her up and ask her to put her name on it.' So yes, that's activism, that's one kind of thing, but ... Regina Fong did more to change the world doing her acts at the Black Cap in Camden Town than the rest of us put together <laughs>. And anyone who walks down the street and doesn't let go of their boyfriend's or girlfriend's hand changes the world as much as someone who attends a Galop meeting because there's a crisis in local policing policy.

You can't separate out ... I don't think, the different strands of the struggle. I think we have to acknowledge that there are many different kinds of heroism, and they go all the way from ... Downing Street to someone just turning round to someone and saying, 'Do you know what? Why don't you just fuck off?' They're both part of the process.

So yeah, I mean I have been, and I continue to be, part of the process of ... you know ... us living the lives that we want to lead in this country. So yeah, that has been a fabulous part of my life and continues to be part of my life.

I am as excited about the other gay artists that I'm going to be working with over the next twelve months as I was about my life at nineteen. Can't be bad! (Click).

PC: Thank you very much.

NB: <Laughs> You're welcome.

<end of recording>