

## **JAMES GLEESON INTERVIEWS: ELAINE HAXTON**

22 November 1978

**JAMES GLEESON:** Elaine, could we begin by talking a bit about the biographical material?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, James. I was born in Melbourne in 1909.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Exact date?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** The 9th of September. No, the 26th—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Twenty—sixth of September.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. I was brought here when still in arms, and so I never think of myself as a Victorian.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So the family settled in Sydney?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Sydney. Yes, yes. I went to, you know, the local public school and I left when I was 14. Hated school. Only too happy to leave. I went to the Tech, East Sydney.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Any history of art interest in your family? Brothers, sisters, mother?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. My father studied at the Victorian Art Gallery School with the intention of being a painter. But as the family grew, those ideas were thrown away.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** But he was very knowledgeable and had a great interest in it all his life and was very happy for me to do it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So there was that background of interest in art in your family?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes. Then I went to the Tech for one year.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was that at the time of Raynor Hoff?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** He was Director—

22 November 1978

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What year was that? Can you remember?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Oh, I'm no good at arithmetic.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, it would be what, 14 years, 15 years after—

**ELAINE HAXTON:** 14 years, yes. I went really on my 14th birthday. I couldn't get there quick enough.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well now, let's work that out. That's 1909, '29, '33. Would that be it?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Oh, no, it wasn't as late as that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, no, no, of course not. My arithmetic is bad—1909, 1919, '23.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. That's more like it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Nineteen twenty-three.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. I worked for Raynor Hoff. I couldn't you know, there was very little money and so I had to go out and work too. But at first I worked for Raynor Hoff, as his assistant.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Because I was studying to be a sculptor originally. That was very interesting. I found him a very good teacher.

**JAMES GLEESON:** He was there in my day too. I remember him quite well.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. He, you know, was always lending me books and he educated me in lot's of, you know, interesting ways. Not only just how to sculpt, but how to read and theatre too, you know, he was always very interested in theatre. Well, the salary he could give me was not very great.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** So then I went and got myself a job at David Jones as a fashion artist.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** I was then 15 years of age, where I worked like a beaver and hated the long hours. You know, you worked from quarter to nine till six o'clock,

22 November 1978

and nine o'clock on Fridays and one o'clock on Saturdays and you never stopped working for one minute and you got very little. Two pounds, I think I had to start with. Then by the time I left I think I was getting four pounds. But then I decided to branch out on my own, and I joined a group of artists who had a studio, commercial artists. They were very strict. Three men and I we worked there together for another year and I did very well, made much more money. So then I hopped it off to England.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That would be what, in the late twenties or early thirties?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, it would be about '30, I suppose. Thirty, yes. Then I got a job at Thompson's in London, in advertising, and I studied. I'm remembering this very bad. I can't remember who I studied with.

**JAMES GLEESON:** McCulloch's mentions that you studied with Iain McNab.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Iain McNab, yes. At night.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** I worked in advertising really all the eight years I think I was in London. I'm not talking loud enough?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Just hang on a moment—

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, well I worked in advertising.

[technical problems]

**JAMES GLEESON:** Sorry for that interruption. Now, this was London in the thirties.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes. I travelled a lot of course in Europe looking at the galleries, enjoying myself generally for that four years. You'd like this all brief wouldn't you?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. Then I decided to come home to see my parents, well about six months before war broke out.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** But I went first to the United States, and looked at the galleries there. Then I went down to Mexico where I stayed for about four or five months. I arrived back here the day before war, so that I was stuck here, fortunately, but I didn't think so at the time.

22 November 1978

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did you know—

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Because my whole life was there, you see, in England. I felt I had no contact when I got back here.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What other artists, Australian artists, did you know in London at that time?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Oh, John, John Passmore.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, and Arthur Murch.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Bill Dobell?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, of course, and Murch.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Eric Wilson?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes. Well, I didn't see so much of Eric, but the others I did. We were all continuing all together, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, it must have been a very stimulating—

**ELAINE HAXTON:** And Duncan, you know. Alison Rehfisch.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, George Duncan.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** George Duncan. You know, we saw a lot of each other, here and there, socially really more than any other way. Then I started to work again in advertising here. I was not the right age for doing any war work, you know. So they didn't really know what to do with me. So I did a little air raid warden, you know, which was quite ridiculous. Then I went up to New Guinea towards the end of the war for the Dutch Government, with Darya Collin. You remember her? She was a Dutch dancer and Esmee Monod. The Dutch Government sent these two dancers and an Australian dancer and an Australian pianist, and I had to manage them and make a set as best I could.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. Was this the first time you'd worked in the theatre?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** No. The first time I had worked was when I did a concert at the conservatorium for Esmee and then I worked for the new theatre during the war. I did a very nice play, and I cannot remember the name of the producer now, but it was *Happy as Larry* by Donna McDonna? Lovely play. It was in an old church down near the railway.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, I remember that.

22 November 1978

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, and it was a great success. It got marvellous reviews. Interesting doing theatre work during the war, because materials were short. When I did the play at the new theatre which was, oh dear, can't remember. I should get my little list out. Could I do that perhaps?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes. We'll turn off. So that you had done quite a bit of theatre work before you went to—

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes. Then I went to New Guinea twice. I was there when the war ended. I hitch-hiked back, because I really didn't belong to anybody. Then set about going back to America, which on my first time there, I found it too hectic. It wasn't, I thought, a place for me. Although I enjoyed all I did and everything I saw but I didn't see myself working there really. But anyway I thought I'd try it again. Well I stayed in New York for two years, and I worked for *Vogue* and *Harpers* and painted, did all those odd things.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was this, what, sort of '46, '47?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, '45, '46, '47.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Because I remember meeting you in London, it must have been end of '47, '48.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, it would be the end of '47, I think, yes. Well *Vogue* offered me a job but just after the war there were so many people coming from Europe to work, that it was hard to get your working visa. I went down to Washington for a while and waited. Then I got tired of waiting so I went back to London, where I met Dickie, married, and I came back here.

**JAMES GLEESON:** When was that, was it in the forties?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** No, that would have been in '47.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Forty-seven.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, I met Dickie shortly after I got back, almost immediately, you know. Although I didn't come back straight away, I came back in '48, I suppose. Well finally we were married. Then I worked in advertising for a while and then I painted, you know, had one-man shows, always at the Macquarie.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Then I did a lot of theatre work.

**JAMES GLEESON:** When did you become interested in printmaking, when did that happen?

22 November 1978

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Oh, well, I'm not quite sure of my dates, but I think that would have been about early sixties anyway.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see, as late as that?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes. Oh, yes, middle sixties I should say. I got to the point with painting that I felt I needed a break, a new technique. In a strange way at the age of 14, I decided I wanted to be a lithographer, so I wrote for a scholarship to the Ultimo Tech, where they taught printing, and signed it E. Haxton. Then I got my scholarship, but they didn't realise of course I was a girl. So I turned up about a size smaller than I am now – they nearly had a fit. I was highly indignant. So I gave away printing until this late date.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Where did you study then?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Well, I went to the Willoughby Art Centre.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh. yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Betty Rooney and Sue Buckley, you know. Very good, it's a good school, you know, particularly for printmaking, very good. I used to go two days a week. I decided to start with lithography which was what I'd always wanted to do. I didn't take to it. The result is always to me rather like a reproduction. I don't like that, that rather shiny oil, the printing ink, you know. So I gave that away. Oh, well, I did woodcutting, and linocutting and etching and that was the one for me.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Etching?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** And woodcutting, but mainly etching, you know. Then I went in 1950 – no '69 – I went to Paris and I worked with Hayters, in Hayter's Studio, you know, Atelier 17 for four months. I was very lucky because he won't take you under two years, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** But Dickie was going over on business, so I had a little flat on the island, and he would come down for the weekends from Germany or wherever he happened to be, you know. I worked like a beaver because I had to get everything done, you know learn all I could. They all thought I was mad, of course. But it was very interesting. Marvellous, you know, teaching. He wasn't there very much, but I mean very good people.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Staff, you mean.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, very good. I learnt so much about printing that of course they couldn't teach me at the Willoughby because it's really, you know, small.

22 November 1978

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** I learnt their technique of colour printing, you know, where you roll the colour on and only make one print, and get about five or six colours on one print, you know. Which I loved, but you need a lot of equipment, which I brought out with me but it's the gelatin rolls in this climate they just go like a Dali watch, you know, they go and slither off the roll. So I gave that up. But then I went to Japan and I studied.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was this in the seventies some time?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** This was the same year.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Same year.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Sixty-nine, yes. I went from Paris to Tokyo and then up to Kyoto.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Kyoto.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. I studied with a very famous woodcutter there called Tokariki. I didn't care for his style of work, but he was technically a superb man and it was hard to get in anywhere for teaching unless you speak the language in Japan, you see. Well, he didn't speak English and I didn't speak Japanese but you know artists make themselves understood.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Exactly.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** That was interesting. I lived an entirely Japanese life, you know, I had to work sitting on my knees. One had to bow to the master when you arrived in the morning, and you had to walk out of the room backwards, bowing as though to royalty.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Really?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, oh yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** He was a famous master was he?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** He was a famous master, and he only took about three students at a time, and it was considered a great honour. He also used those students for his kind of printing factory next door, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Really?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. All his reproductions you get a famous print. He used to produce these things, oh yes. It was quite a sort of commercial arrangement

22 November 1978

really. But as far as his studio and his teaching was concerned, it was a very, very serious matter.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did he teach the traditional style, you know, ukiyo-e style?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes. How to print from that graded way and, you know, how to cut and how to sharpen your brushes because they shave them with a knife, you know, to get just the thicknesses they want and all that kind of thing, and how to use paper. It was terribly interesting. I loved it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** How long were you there, Elaine?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** I was there for two months. You know, when after all you are an established artist, it's very easy to learn quickly.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Of course.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** You know, you don't need much time. I did a lot of woodcuts whilst I was there, and for a long time afterwards.

**JAMES GLEESON:** But now your favourite medium is etching, is it?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, for printmaking. In a way I think equally woodcutting, but I'm finding it very difficult to find any wood here which is suitable.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What do they use in Japan?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Well, I use a New Zealand wood called Jelutong and it's a softwood, has almost no grain. I don't like using the grain, as the Japanese didn't either, you know. It interferes with what you want to say. It's all right for abstraction. It's beautiful then, you can use the grain just the way you want it. But I always find this interferes with what I'm wanting to say.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** But it's not very wide. It comes in sometimes 14 inches wide, in long planks, or 12 or 10 inches. Well, I used it by making a big print by using the joins, because you never can disguise them no matter how carefully you stick them together. So you could easily, you know, use them this way, or make a pattern of them. But it's nice and easy to cut and it's absorbent. It takes the colour very nicely.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What did they mainly use in Japan?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** I can't remember the name of it, but it's a very similar wood. Very white.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Similar characteristics?



22 November 1978

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, but it's stronger and not so soft as the one I use. But I can't get it any more because it has holes in it, they tell me, large holes. I thought perhaps some terrible plague of insects. No. They said, 'Oh they always throw their spears at it, they're always at war these days, and so they make all these big holes in the trees'. I said, 'I don't care about the holes, I can use the holes', but they just don't import it any more.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Is that so?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, and paper becomes a difficulty now. Woodcuts are very expensive to make. The paper I used and I bought about 18 months ago, a whole quire; I paid \$4 a sheet which is bad enough. But when I went to buy it two weeks ago, because of the Yen, it's now \$14 a sheet.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I know that paper; I've been using it too. It's astronomical.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Absolutely out of this world, you know. In fact, they're not importing much Japanese, you know, inks and brushes – very few indeed – so I've sort of given it away at the moment. The other thing I forgot to tell you, that I did study theatre design when I went in '45 to New York at the New York School of New Design.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** New School, it was known as the New School.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The New School.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. It was a summer school or a night school, rather than a daytime school and you could learn all forms of the arts, music, writing, theatre, rather than painting and that sort of thing. That was very interesting. They had an old theatre on the East side down by the water and you used to practice there, and design and make. So that's where I first started it. My father, when I was about eight used to continually make me little theatres out of boot boxes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah, yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Beautifully painted, you know, with the red velvet curtains and the gilt fringe and the little boxes, you know, at the side of the theatre. So I played with those for a long time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see, so it's in your blood.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. But I never thought of being a theatre designer and it came by accident, I think. Then once I'd done a little I then wanted to know more about it.

22 November 1978

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes. Well, Elaine, could we have a look? Two of these main paintings we have at the moment of yours is Toni—

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Oh, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Now, that's Toni Blaxland of course.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. Not like Toni today. Have you seen her?

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, I haven't.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** She's immense.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Is she?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Like Maisie, you know, an enormous woman – fat, tall, strong.

**JAMES GLEESON:** How old was she?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** She was just 14 then.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Fourteen then.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** I shouldn't have said that on the tape.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, it doesn't matter.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Mm?

**JAMES GLEESON:** It doesn't matter.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Oh, yes it does. You must wipe that off.

**JAMES GLEESON:** We won't publish that.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** No, no, no.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This goes into the archive, we only use information for these.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Sounds awful. I must remember about that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What year was it? Was it '45 or '44?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** That would be about '44, I think.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Because it was reproduced in that Syd Ure Smith—

22 November 1978

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Maybe a little bit earlier, maybe '43 or '44, because I left in '45.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. So it's either '43 or '44. It was in Syd Ure Smith's book, you remember?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes, yes. It's a nice photograph of it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It is.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** I'm not a portrait painter. I didn't want to do this portrait, but Helen wanted me to do it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** He wasn't at all happy about it. I think she was, but I'm not sure.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Is it oil? It is oil.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** It's oil, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** On canvas?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** No, it would be on masonite.

**JAMES GLEESON:** On masonite.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, I think we have the other facts, the measurements and so on. So I think that's all we need to know about that at the moment. The other painting we have of yours is two—

**ELAINE HAXTON:** From Amy Morrison did you get that?

**JAMES GLEESON:** We bought it from Barry Stern Gallery.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Oh. Don't know where he got it. Yes, well it belonged to Amy and Al Morrison.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, did it?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. Well, it mightn't be the same one.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's a fairly biggish one, you know – oh, like that.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** I don't remember it. No, I'm thinking of a lovely little one.

22 November 1978

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, no, no, no.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Lovely. I think Al Morrison has that. Alistair Morrison.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The little one.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The one you're thinking of.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, this is a biggish one. It must be, I think, at least, oh, a yard high – an upright one. A very beautiful one that we got from him.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Oh, isn't it terrible. I must come and look at it one day.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I'm sorry. It's out on loan at one of the official establishments, Government House or the Lodge or somewhere, and I haven't been able to get a photograph.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Is it looking down a street?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, oh well, I remember it vaguely. I've got the drawings of that, I think.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah, have you? Can you remember the year it was painted?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** I should think about '42.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Forty-two. Because we've got—

**ELAINE HAXTON:** It would be the war years.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It was during the war?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Mmm.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did you go down to Tilba Tilba?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. Well, I stayed with Cedric Flower's parents.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah, I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** They had a beautiful farm. You know, with the sea in front of it and the river running almost encircling it.

22 November 1978

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** I did a lot of paintings. They used to take me out in the car. That was the local village. The cheese factories and the charming stores.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's a famous subject in Australian painting, because Cedric did a number of them.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Oh yes, he would, I'm sure.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. Oh yes, I adored it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So it was during the war time that that was painted.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. You know, I probably went down for a couple of weeks holiday or something like that, because you couldn't go away anywhere else very much. Not interstate. It's strange how one forgets a particular period. Because I always forget this one that Alistair has, but both he and Amy, you know, think it's the best thing I ever did. It's only about that big, but it's funny, you know, I have to think hard about it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I'm sorry we haven't got a photograph of this one, but I'll get one and show it to you and perhaps we can get some more facts about it. That would have been oil on masonite too.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Because in wartime, I remember canvas was almost impossible to get.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. I'm sure it must have been masonite. I can't think what else. Sometimes I worked on paper.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I think this would be too big for paper. It is a fairly sizeable painting.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** So it was either that or three-ply, something like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, we can check on that. Well, now perhaps we'd better turn to the theatre design. We're in the process of photographing every sheet.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Oh, how lovely.

22 November 1978

**JAMES GLEESON:** But we have only gone a little way so far. It's going to take months to do. So but perhaps if I ask you about the individual productions, that might recall things to you. We're buying them, as you know, in a series of groups from you.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** In the first group there was a sequence of designs for *Journey to the Moon*.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, that's the one I've got here. Yes. Well – let me see – I can't remember the dates for these.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** But they would be the late fifties and sixties, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It was a ballet?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Now, look, I went to China in '56 and when I came back I did *Journey to the Moon*, so that would be '56 or '57. That sort of time, I think. I had done quite a lot of theatre before I went to China. But the *Journey to the Moon* was Borovansky's company. And Paul Grinwis was the principal male dancer, a Dutchman really, but had been brought up in Brugge, in Belgium, you know, and lived most of his adult life in Paris. So one never thought of him really as a Dutchman, you know. He also was a very good choreographer.

**JAMES GLEESON:** He did the choreography for this?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. Now, he did *Romeo and Juliet* which Bill, Bill—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Constable?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. Bill Constable did that. I did *The Three Devils*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, which was his next ballet. Then I did *Journey to the Moon*. All these were full-length ballets.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, were they?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** All like, you know, four, five acts.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** So one did the sets, the ground plans and the lighting plans. These things are done separately these days, you know, they have a special

22 November 1978

lighting expert. But then it was up to the designer to give a plan for lighting. You had many lighting rehearsals, because then we didn't know that much technically about how to write down a lighting script, you know. So you tried it out.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Through trial and error.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes. But mainly really it was the electrician who was most helpful in these. Really what I would give him or any designer at that time would be only suggestions. Of course, the director would do this too. Then you painted these, you designed the costumes, the sets, the costumes, and the lighting, you did the ground floor planning, and then you painted the set.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. You did it yourself?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. This was an enormous job. They were 41 feet, 42 feet long.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Where was it produced?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** The old Empire, I think it was called, down at the railway, you know. Wasn't it the Empire?

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, Her Majesty's.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, Her Majesty's, yes. It was, I think, then the Empire. The biggest theatre we had then.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** They were 42 feet long, every back cloth, and 24 feet high. When you have five acts, that's a lot of canvas you cover. But it's not only that, you do the wings, which there might be anything from three to six on either side, so that's 12. So that's really more than the backcloth. And, of course, the sky pieces, which would always be six of those in a theatre of that length, depth. So there was a lot of painting to do. One did it on the top of the Theatre Royal. It had the best, you know, scene painter's studio. But you couldn't work on Wednesdays because there was a matinee and they'd here the flop, flop, flop of the brush, you know. You couldn't work at night, you see, because of the same thing. When you were very late you stayed up and worked in the early morning, you know, to get it finished.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You did it all yourself? You had no assistance?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, I had – oh, what did we used to call them? Splodgers. Young students interested in the theatre and, you know, been through the Tech, and they would mix the paint for me. It's all very smelly because you mix it with rabbit glue, you know.

22 November 1978

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, yes, yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** You have very big buckets, like that, or the old poi, which you can't buy now. That was a very handy one to hold, you know, and it took the big brush. The canvas was hung behind the stages at the Theatre Royal on a roller and a winch, and you wound it up. We had continual fights because these boys were always extremely tall and thin and I, being short, you know, I was faster than they were and I always wanted it up a bit, so they'd put it up beyond where they wanted it, you know, or needed it. It was extremely hot up there because it had a tin roof and you used to nearly die of heat.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It must be.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Then there was another paint studio and that was over at the old Tivoli which doesn't exist any more either. Although that was a more spacious and more comfortable one, but not as much gear as winches and things like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** And not as good a light.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What was *Journey to the Moon* about? A fantasy, I take it?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Oh, well, you know, it was just about the time when going to the moon got going, the modern going to the moon. Well, this was a beautiful ballet and I think one of my most ingenious bits of designing. Everybody loved the look of it, but they thought they were going to see a modern *Journey to the Moon*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Where it was a seventeenth century. A scientist who, you know, was working out how he would get to the moon, and so it was entire fantasy. Very beautiful.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It wasn't by any chance based on a book by Cyrano de Bergerac who wrote some sort of science fantasy about a visit to the moon?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Well, it might have been. I don't remember that. I think he might have based it on that, as you said, and then developed the story himself because he nearly always wrote his own story. Oh, it was a great success. But, you know, visually and in every sense musically, the dancing was beautiful, the choreography was beautiful, it just wasn't a success. Oh, and of course, I think on the first night or the night before Borovansky died. That depressed everybody too.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, I see. What year was that?



22 November 1978

**ELAINE HAXTON:** I would have to look it up, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see, yes. Well, we can check.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** But it would be in the fifties?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** I think it would be more near '60. I think '60.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Who wrote the music, by the way? Or what music did they use?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Various.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Various sorts.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. I would have to look it up in my notes, which I couldn't find for this morning. But it really was a beautiful ballet, but it was really the only one that didn't run for any length of time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Is that so?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, the next one that we have in that first group is a *Folio of Designs for Hassan*, a play.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. Well, that was never done and it was just purely, you know, something that I have always wanted to do.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You liked the play itself.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Oh, yes, love it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's a lovely play.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** For sort of a romantic designer like myself it's the perfect thing, you know. So that was purely an exercise done for myself.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** During my lifetime, I suppose, whenever I found any, you know, reference of that period and that country, I made lots of drawings. So a lot of those drawings are, you know, from museum pieces and things like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see, yes.

22 November 1978

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Through me, but I mean basically they were the puppet designs, because it was also used very much in Egypt, you know, for puppets.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Those very big puppets they used.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** In the museum in Cairo – which I didn't see them there but I saw them reproduced somewhere – they have a lot of these costume drawings for the puppets, Hassan.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** So I've never yet done Hassan. I suppose it's too late now anyway.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's the flecked one, a beautiful one. The other group are for a film, *Daughter of Silence*.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, well, that was a book by Morris West and Morris, I think that was the first film he made. At that time he was breaking down the novel to a film script and he wanted for his own use to have it visually broken down too.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Because he saw it more, you know, in real life, on stage terms than in the film technique which he then wasn't of course, very—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Familiar with.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Familiar with. So, it was a very nice commission. I did all those drawings for him, you know. Those are only the sketches. I did very much more finished ones for him, which he has.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** It was made into a huge book like this, you know, with the scripts and the scenes and so on.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** And was used in the film. The idea was that I should also be employed on the film. But it never came to that. But it was a very interesting thing to do.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So that's ballet, play, film.

22 November 1978

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You cover a lot of ground.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes. I did a lot. I did opera and musical comedy as well.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, the next group is a *Folio of designs for Romeo and Juliet*, the play.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Oh, that was also an exercise. That one I did purely, you know, to keep my hand in, as it were, as I've done a lot of Shakespeare like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. The only Shakespearean one I did was *Twelfth Night*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** For Hugh Hunt.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Actually performed.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** When you design a play like *Romeo and Juliet* in your mind, do you research the period? You know, do you look at costume design of that period?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Well, when I'm doing it entirely for myself, I don't go to that much bother, but when I'm doing it for a production, I like to be quite exact about that. I work in the way that Hugh Hunt taught me really. I like to get the model done first of the sets and then I like all the costumes done. Then I like to have a consultation or rehearsal with the actors and introduce them to the set and say, 'Well now, you, Juliet, will come in here and this is the kind of chair you sit in. We're having it made early so that you can sit in it and get comfortable in it'. You know, these are very important things for good acting.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, of course.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** And this is the kind of dress she'll use. I nearly always armed myself with reproductions of the period, you know, paintings of the period so that they could see how people wore them and how they moved in them. Because at that stage, and I think still, the Australian artist is not very good in the historical play. They feel too dressed up. They don't know how to move, and to hold the drapery. So I like to do all that first. They had to familiarise themselves with the costume. To every rehearsal I would have them look at the costume before they went into the rehearsal. Then they would be given to the, you know, the dressmakers to make, the wardrobe mistress. They would all be made and I

22 November 1978

would correct them, because sometimes you know, they add their own little bit. Or maybe the director, or the – like David Lichine was terrible.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was he?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. He would go down—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Keep changing things.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, he'd go around to the wardrobe and alter something entirely and I would come in the morning and say, 'What's that you've got hanging up there?'. Oh, you know, 'That's Clara's nightgown', and I'd say, 'No, it isn't, throw it away'. We fought the entire, you know—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Good lord.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Like the fishwives we were. We yelled at each other all the time. But I would first of all go and choose all the materials. This took a long time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Of course it would.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** You know. Because I found that the wardrobe, whose job that is to do, had no sense of colour. So we'd look at something pink and there was only one pink as far as they were concerned you know. So I had to do all this. Then I'd start on the sets. The properties first because they had to be made. And designs for embroidery and that sort of thing took a long time. Then work on the sets. Oh dear, and they only gave you six weeks for any play, any production, and you worked day and night. It was terribly hard work, and not terribly well paid then. Not as well paid as they are now. I still don't think they're well enough paid.

**JAMES GLEESON:** For the work involved.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** No.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, then we come to *The Cats*, a ballet of 1962.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Well, that was Paul Grinwis which he did for the Arts Council, I think.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Full-length or short ballet?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** No, a short ballet, which they toured around the countryside.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** It's a little fantasy about the sort of ladies of the town and their pashays, you know, but they're all cats. So I had to make masks, well make up for them so that they looked exactly like cats. They did too. It was wonderful.

22 November 1978

Paul produced that both in Paris, all through Africa, and Brugge and in London. Yes. It was a great success. That would have been...

**JAMES GLEESON:** Sixty-two we've got here.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, that would be right, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Can you remember the music that was used?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** No, no.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No. Not to matter. Next one is the *Folio of designs for the Shoes of the Fisherman*, another Morris West project.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** What was it?

**JAMES GLEESON:** *The Shoes of the Fisherman*.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, but what are the designs?

**JAMES GLEESON:** A *Folio of designs for the Shoes of the Fisherman*, a film containing 30 shoes—

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Oh, yes, that's right. He did that at the... no he didn't. That's right, that was the one I did the designs for. The other one, *Daughter of Silence*, I've mistaken these two.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** The *Daughter of Silence* was produced at the Independent.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, as a play

**ELAINE HAXTON:** As a play.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So what you really were saying about *Daughters of Silence* applied to *Shoes of the Fisherman*.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Daughters of Silence* was really a play that Morris produced—

**ELAINE HAXTON:** For Doris Fitton at the Independent.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. Ah, well now we'll clarify that.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

22 November 1978

**JAMES GLEESON:** So we've really come to the *Shoes of the Fisherman*.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Now the next one's an opera, *Madame Butterfly*.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** With Joan Hammond.

**JAMES GLEESON:** This was for the Elizabethan Theatre Trust, was it?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. It was directed by who? Can't remember. I always wanted to do *Madame Butterfly* anyway.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, it's a lovely one.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** But it was the most disastrous thing I ever did.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Really?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** In the end, well, mainly Joan, who's a beautiful a singer, you know, beautiful, and a very great star, but extraordinary difficult to work with. Very, yes. So in the end, there were four or five directors. They all gave it up.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, Lord.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** She interfered with the design and everything and I thought, 'No I'm not going to be beaten on this' I would have been happier to have given it up, I think. But she had too definite ideas about what wasn't her—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Style?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** No. So we fought all the way through that. Everybody fought. It was a very unhappy production.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah that's a pity, isn't it?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** She altered it in the end and I wouldn't go even to the first night, you know. Because they put it on in Adelaide and when I arrived for the first night, there it was all altered, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, so you weren't happy about that?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** No. Well, I was about what I did, the original designs. I wasn't happy about the final as it turned out on stage, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was this one of the festival performances?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

22 November 1978

**JAMES GLEESON:** It was. One of the earlier festivals, I think.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes I think it would have...well no I think perhaps it was before that. When did the festival start?

**JAMES GLEESON:** I'm not sure.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** No, I'm not either. It either would have been the first or—

**JAMES GLEESON:** It opened in Adelaide.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** It opened in Adelaide, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And it came then on to Sydney and Melbourne.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes. Oh, it ran for a long time. But, no, the sets were lovely you know, and she just pushed.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, that happens.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** She wouldn't wear the beautiful costume I had. She had a kimono, which her mother had given her in about the early 1920's when she first sang. It was her great role anyway. She sang it beautifully, beautifully. But this was always a good luck charm to her and she wore it all the time. But it wasn't a true Japanese kimono. It was what women of that time wore as a dressing gown round the house, you know. The Australian version of a kimono in crepe, you know cotton crepe.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The sort of things—

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Rather vulgarly printed pattern so-called Japanese of chrysanthemums and things on it, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, I know the type, yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, and I designed this beautiful costume and I was always careful with designing costumes that could be worn, that would move easy and be light in weight. And it was all of that, and she wouldn't wear it. She did finally wear it, because when all the costumes came on, she just looked out of place, you see. It looked rubbishy. Not a great sense of colour, she wanted to spray all the colours down. I mean, the bright colours upset her, I think. I can understand that. After all, she was the star, she was having to perform her best. I can understand that. But it was unfortunate.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, yes. Was that the worst experience you've had as far as designing for the theatre?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes, yes.

22 November 1978

**JAMES GLEESON:** That would be very unhappy.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** I enjoyed working best with ballet dancers because they are taught to be very obedient and what the director says, or what the ballet master says, or the designer said, is what has to be done, you know. It was marvellous. You could put the costume on them, and say, 'Now you wear it this way', and they never forgot. But with actors, sometimes unhappy about what they were wearing, they just didn't feel comfortable in it. I understood that. When I thought they were just for fun I would alter it. But with opera singers, they were impossible to work with.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, the next one's a ballet, *Parades* of 1962.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, well that was *Parades*. Now, that was done by, who was the choreographer for that?

**JAMES GLEESON:** I don't know.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, that was, oh, I can't remember. A ballet school, the Australian Ballet Company, I think it's called. That was a number of short ballets which were designed for fill-ins in short operas.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** You know, they were putting on two small operas and they wanted little fill-ins, you know. They were delightful ballets, each one very short. One of them an Australian ballet on a sheep farm, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** With the shearing shed and the men in riding gear and it was a very nice one that and one was a Finnish scene. I can't remember them all now. One was a sort of Degas ballet school one, you know, set with the sort of ballet master looking like that famous painting. A man with that little white beard and white shirt.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did you do them all?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, I did them all.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You did the whole set.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. And, anyway.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The next one is one of the Shakespeare plays you did that was performed, *Twelfth Night*.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. That was lovely.



22 November 1978

**JAMES GLEESON:** Who performed that?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Who performed in it?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, and where was it?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Oh, it was at the Elizabethan Theatre.

**JAMES GLEESON:** At Newtown.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** It was Hugh Hunt who directed it. Oh dear, I can't remember the names of the people. One was, she lives in Canada or America now, and is a very famous actress.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, Caldwell, Zoë Caldwell.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, Zoë Caldwell. Yes. The other one is always on the air now. Tall, thin, rather Jewish looking girl, you know, a very handsome girl.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I know her.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** She's married to the painter.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Rod Milgate.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Milgate, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What's her name?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** She played the main part of the girl masquerading as a boy, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes. Oh, heavens I know her name. Dinah Shearer.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Dinah Shearer, that's right. Shearing, Shearing, that's right, yes. I can't remember who took the male parts, I'm afraid. But it was a beautiful production. Very stylised is what Hugh wanted. He was a very exact, you know, director, producer. It looked beautiful, as costumes are in the New South Wales Gallery.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, are they? The actual costumes?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Except, you've got one or two, I think.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** But the main collection.

22 November 1978

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, really, in the New South Wales Gallery.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What period now did you set that it? Was it Elizabethan period?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. Yes. I can't remember the date of that. My period really but, yes, lovely costumes, you know, all embroidered and the doublets and the stockings.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** The set was very nice. I used it rather like a fan really, you know, with side pieces and just a very long distant view at the back on the backcloth. There were many entrances, and it worked very well indeed. It looked very pretty.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Coppelia*.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. Well, that was done for the Victorian Ballet Company, who were, well, I don't know whether you would call them entirely professional. I think they were, but they were a small company. I think attached somehow to the Borovansky School.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Well, I just designed those and sent them down for them and they produced... I didn't make the sets or anything.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, I see. They painted them down there, did they?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes, and made the costumes down there.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. You just provided the sketches.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes. These were jobs which really one was paid very little from, but one wanted to do it anyway for them.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Another ballet, *Sea legend*.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Oh, yes. That was also an exercise of mine, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It was never actually performed?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** No, no. No, never performed. It was one I think I wrote myself.

22 November 1978

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So you invented the scenario, the whole thing.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The next one is *Happy as Larry*, a play that you've already mentioned.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That was done at that little church up near the railway station.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes. I met the producer the other night. Well, that was done a long time ago, so I certainly didn't recognise him.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What was his name?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** He's now a computer expert or something.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Is he?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. He came up to me and, you know, thirty years ago.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Goodness me.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** He was a very, very good stage designer. I was sorry to hear he was computing.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Then there's a *Folio of projects for ballets*. I suppose those would be again things that you—

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. I'd think, 'Oh yes, I'd like to do that'. You know, I like that period. It had possibilities and I'd do that. Sometimes one was asked to do a production by J.C. Williamson's you know. These were mainly operas which then you would find that the Italian company which was being imported, wouldn't do it unless you used their costumes, you see.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Their sets. The sets would be painted here, but that was part of their deal.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

22 November 1978

**ELAINE HAXTON:** So one never got to do it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** *The Nutcracker* ballet.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. Well, that was a Borovansky and they brought out David Lichine to choreograph, as choreographer, and Paul Grinwis was the prince in that. Kate Gorham was Katie. Clara rather.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** That was a full-length ballet. For all these, all the ballets, I also used to do the front curtain, which nobody uses any more, but which is a delightful opener I always think for ballet. So that was extra work, you know. I can't remember how many costumes, hundreds, I had to do for that ballet. It was a huge success. It's a lovely ballet, you know, for adults as well as for children, I always think.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That was done in Sydney and Melbourne?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes. Yes, it travelled all round, but it opened in Sydney at the Empire. I had a little more time on that because it was so very long, yes. Oh, yes, it had, you know, great reviews and everybody loved it dearly. I think that was... no that was the second ballet I did for Borovansky. The first one was—

**JAMES GLEESON:** *Journey to the Moon*?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** No. *The Three Devils*.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, *The Three Devils*. Now, the sheet from *The Shoes of the Fisherman*. Well, that would belong to that other one.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** And two sheets of studies for *Romeo and Juliet*.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** A theatre poster and a *Folio of designs for The Boyfriend*.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Oh, yes. I've forgotten *The Boyfriend*. I had a principle that I didn't want to do anything I'd ever seen, for fear of being influenced.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, it sort of conditioned the way...

**ELAINE HAXTON:** I like to read the play, or the script, whatever it is, first, and see it my way.

22 November 1978

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** But that is very hard in the traditional theatre, because nearly everyone has always seen it. So they say, 'No it's not like that', and I had this difficulty with David Lichine. I had never seen *The Nutcracker* and I had my version of *The Nutcracker*, which we did use. But when it came to this one... what was it again?

**JAMES GLEESON:** *The Boyfriend*?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** *The Boyfriend*, yes. Well, nobody had seen it here, but the producer had, and that was difficult because you know, we fought a little bit about—

**JAMES GLEESON:** That was a musical, set in the twenties was it?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes, and it was a great success. But then it was produced really with Borovansky and the... no the Elizabethan Theatre Trust and the Williamson's. Williamson's, of course, were the meanest people in the theatre world. You know, it's easy to say that – everybody else does. You couldn't get, you know, a penny out of them for anything. They didn't take to this play, although it had been a great success, but they decided to put it on because of its success. But they didn't want to spend much money on it. So we had a terrible time, the producer and I, making the sets, and the costumes. For instance, in that period they wore lots of little brass and glass bangles that jingled on them, you know, lots of ropes of beads. Williamson's would only give us, you know, money for one or two bracelets each and a miserable string of beads. But the first night was such a success, of course, then I had to rush all over town the next day and buy hundreds of necklaces and bangles.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was that at the Theatre Royal or The Empire?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** That I think would have been The Empire.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was it?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes. But that ran for a long time, went all around Australia. I never saw very much in the story myself.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, a lot of those musical comedies—

**ELAINE HAXTON:** But it was fun to design. A fun period, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, the last group or the next group is some more of the *Madame Butterfly* designs, which we've already spoken about.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. Yes

22 November 1978

**JAMES GLEESON:** Some more of *The Nutcracker* ballet designs. There are lots of those and sketch books and studies for that.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** But we come now to *The Three Devils, Los tres diabolos*.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was this the first ballet you did?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** That was the first ballet I did and I was commissioned really by Paul Grinwis. That was a fantasy about the underworld and, you know, the devil coming to the village and taking away the maidens and all that, you know, but it was a fascinating story. Highly decorative settings. The scenes in Hell, you know, but that was fun to do. Then the sort of peasant scenes and the village and the maidens and so on. Well, the main thing, you know, in every society there are really devils about to misguide the young – plenty today. That was a full-length ballet and the settings were very unusual for the Australian stage. There were some you know, they were modern, although they were period but the presentation was modern and it was a great success. Very handsome. I did a marvellous curtain for it, you know, and costumes were lovely.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What happens to those curtains and things?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Look, I could cry. You know when Williamson's sold up, nobody thought to go and buy any of those backdrops, done by lots of very well known Australian painters.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Because once I went to the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, and they had an exhibition of, you know, Picasso's curtains, Regina's curtains, everybody, you know and marvellous huge things they are. Hard to store, of course.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Of course they are.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Forty-two feet long. But nobody thought to do this. Mind you, you wouldn't find many of them here because what happens, you do a show, they use the canvas again.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Nobody's ever had the sense to say, 'Now this is, you know, a milestone in the theatre. Let's keep this one'. Wouldn't have cost them that much.

22 November 1978

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no, no.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Only canvas and a bit of paint, that's all, and they'd have had something really worth selling. So I mean, I remember, you know, almost in tears painting out one of Bill Constable's to do a new set.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So they just used them over again.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** They used them over and over again until the paint was that thick you couldn't use them any more.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's very sad.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** They were terribly mean about paint and everything.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes, oh dear.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** They used ordinary powder paint that housepainters would use, you know. If you ordered, you know, some artist colour which would probably cost perhaps two and six pence more, there'd have to be, you know, an absolute meeting about it. It would cost them a lot more money than the paint.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, Elaine, I think that covers the group of theatre designs we've got of yours.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did you do any others that we don't have representations of?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** No, I don't think so because about 1962, I don't think I've done any since then.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No. You've been concentrating on printing and painting.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. It's was never a very well paid job doing the theatre, one did it for love and the smell of the grease paint, all that sort of thing. You were always keyed very high and, you know, the actors and the dancers, it was a terribly interesting life and it was thrilling. But Australian designers have never been given any real credit—

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no, and they've had to go overseas.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** They're purely servants to everybody else and unless, like me, you fight for these things, it's too exhausting. Anyway, in the end what have you got? Nothing except those designs, which I kept. Those are only the roughs, you know, because the model gets broken up into pieces, this piece given to that carpenter, and this carpenter. The drawings get pinched, you know, by the

22 November 1978

dressmakers who make clothes for balls and things, you know. I always had it my contract that I had to get all the drawings back. David Lichine I'm sure took the whole lot of *The Nutcracker*, finished ones.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** What you've got are the roughs.

**JAMES GLEESON:** The preliminary ones, yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes. But I never got one of those back, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** When you embark on a big project like *The Nutcracker Suite*, do you start roughing out your ideas as they come to you quickly, just sketches and then develop them up to a finished state as you go along?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Well, yes. First of all you have to read the script thoroughly and, you know, get lost in it. Then talk to the people, for instance in ballet, the dancers and what parts they're going to have and go to all the rehearsals. Well, maybe a week before I designed it so that I knew what the movement was so that I could design something which they could after all wear, dance in, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Sure.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Then I made all the rough sketches. Then when Borovansky would okay these, which he did... he liked my work. But then for the wardrobe I would have to do a very careful drawing because, for instance, once I did a set of drawings and I drew them in ink and put the colour on them. Then I would put the swatches of material that I'd chosen, pin all those on. They would go to the wardrobe. But the time that I drew it in black ink, they once made a costume with black binding all over it.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That's hard to believe!

**ELAINE HAXTON:** True. I said, 'What's that you've got there?'. I haven't used black anywhere. They said, 'Yes, look, there it is. You see'. The main drawing was in pencil, but I'd outlined the costume to exaggerate, you know, so they'd know where they were. And here was this black binding, hundreds of yards of black binding all over a tutu. So you had to be very exact with these people.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Elaine, it seems to me that, you know, for our fairly meagre theatrical tradition in Australia, we've produced some first rate theatre designs.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Oh, beautiful. Wonderful designers. But the best ones, of course, went away because they could see there was no money here. You see, in England you get a percentage of the takings, the door takings.



22 November 1978

**JAMES GLEESON:** Really?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** It's small but still it mounts up if it's a success and runs for a long time.

**JAMES GLEESON:** With someone like Loudon—

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes. Of course much more respected and you get much more help and, you know, a much bigger fee in the beginning. A good fee, you know, and it's worth it. But here it never was from a money point of view. Also in the end what have you got, nothing left except those few rough drawings.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Not even photographs because they don't photograph well in the theatre. They never look like anything.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's enormous time-consuming work, underpaid.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, black and white photographs of a coloured ballet, you know. I mean, nothing, doesn't mean anything. I've got hundreds of them but still don't mean anything.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** But, no, you know, you've have got nothing left.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No, no. Well, I think that covers it. I don't think we ought to embark on the prints at the moment until I get a set of photographs.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Then we can go through those in more detail.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** But just one thing I wanted to ask you about those prints is time and time again it seemed to me that you did many states of each print.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Oh, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** You were sort of experimenting, evolving a way of a final proof.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes. Well, you see, I'm very critical of print making in Australia, particularly painters prints, because they treat the metal as a sheet of paper. They draw on it and then they've forgotten that it's a piece of metal and that you should work on the metal till you've gone right through it to make a good

22 November 1978

print. You should develop it again and again with the acid. If you just want to draw on the surface, why not just do a dry-point?

**JAMES GLEESON:** A drawing.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** A dry-point.

**JAMES GLEESON:** A dry-point.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Well, you only get five or six out of those that are good anyway, maybe 10. But from a practical point of view they etch it. But they put a bit of aquatint on it. There are some people like that wonderful sculptor that does those great big prints. He's marvellous.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, Baldessin.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Baldessin. Yes, marvellous, marvellous. And, you know, the man that teaches. Oh anyway, you know, there are.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Backham, Bill Backham.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Backham, yes. Beautiful technician. He knows what to get out of a plate. But all these prints are being made now, they might just as well be working on paper.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Exactly, yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** But when I went to Hayters for instance, I had to do a plate and etch it 18 times.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Goodness, yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** It was only a small plate, I was not allowed to work on a big plate. I had to use every conceivable technique they had or I could think of. In fact, you have to be inventive. Make yourself new tools and all that kind of thing. I had to work on it till I did literally go right through it. Well, where you go right through it of course you get a pure white which you never get in an etching otherwise. I've often done that to get just a pure white. But it's metal, it's not paper.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes. No, well that fascinates me, you know, the variety of states; the number of states that so many of your work—

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, sometimes the first one was better anyway. You should, of course, take a print of every state. Sometimes I don't. Do you remember that one of the ducks?

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes. Mandarin ducks, weren't they?

22 November 1978

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes. That first state which I've got upstairs is beautiful, just line.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** You know. Lovely.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No colour?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** No, none at all. No aquatint or anything. No tone on it. It's just line, it was lovely. One should take an edition of each state.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** But one is anxious to get on to the next state and you maybe do one or two and you say, 'Oh yes, that's right. Now we'll put this on it'. You know, aquatint it or re-etch it. Another thing they don't do here, they never polished, they never scraped down the plate or polish it, you know. I've got little amethyst tools that shape, and you polish the whole thing and you soften the line, you get a beautiful line this way, you know. Let me see, yes, that print there I did at Hayters. That print is a matter of being in the acid 18 times.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Now, that plate I have, you cannot see when you look at the plate, you cannot recognise any form or shape on it. It's just a matter of undulations. It had to be scraped down so often and then finally printed in this—

**JAMES GLEESON:** Was that the first one you did with Hayter?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** No, it was the second one I did, I think. But then I learnt this colour matter just printing, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** It's a very nice one.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** It's a difficult way to print in the sense that it takes practice. But you can print one colour on, roll one colour on top of another by methods of different rollers – hard, soft and medium. But you can only do it on a plate which has been worked on so often so that you get a lot of levels.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Ah, I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** The soft roller would go into the deep ones and produce clear colour like that.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes.

22 November 1978

**ELAINE HAXTON:** The medium one would go into the second depth and the hard one would go over the whole top of them.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That is complicated.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** It's the cost of the mixing of the ink that they don't mix, each one has to be a little different in its cost. You see.

**JAMES GLEESON:** What a complicated technique.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Well, it's quite easy when you get used to it. But now I find I fiddle around doing it and anyway I haven't got these gelatin rollers.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** But it's fascinating, you know. Sometimes with three colours, when they intermix one on top of the other one, you can get up to about 14 different colours.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Really?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Fourteen?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, from three colours, one mixing on top of the other.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, Elaine, I think that really covers it for now. When I get the other photographs of the prints we'll, if you're willing, have another session.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, I'm sorry my memory is not that good, but now I think *Parades* was not the ballet I was talking about before. No, it was a Grinwis one.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** That was *The Cats*. Oh, a sort of *Punch and Judy* one. There were three, I can't remember which they were.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Well, *Parades* consisted of *Cats*, *Punch and Judy* one and another, a third.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, sort of an Italian Punchinello really, you know.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Yes, yes.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** I can't think what the third one was.

**JAMES GLEESON:** They went together to form *Parades*.

22 November 1978

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** So *Cats* was really part of the *Parades*.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes, yes. The other ones were for the Australian Opera, the ones that I spoke of.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Oh, I see. That group of seven or so.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Yes, yes.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** I'm sorry to have been so confusing about this.

**JAMES GLEESON:** No.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** But it's a long time ago.

**JAMES GLEESON:** Did that group of seven or so have a collective name or were they just individual pieces?

**ELAINE HAXTON:** They each had a name, well Coo Coo was one. You'll see in the collection. And the Ballet Class I think was the Degas one, you know. I can't remember the titles of the others.

**JAMES GLEESON:** I see. So we've got that clear.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** But I will look up my notes and send them to you.

**JAMES GLEESON:** That would be marvellous.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** That would give you more the dates and so on. I think I did put in some programs.

**JAMES GLEESON:** There are some, yes, yes. There are some programs. Well thank you very much.

**ELAINE HAXTON:** Thank you Jimmy. I hope I did it all right.