

## 020 Wysing 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Podcast: Jenny Brooks Transcript

Harold Offeh: Hello, my name is Harold Offeh and this is a special podcast recording from Wysing Arts Centre. I'm going to be conducting a series of conversations with a number of people associated with Wysing Arts Centre, marking the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Wysing. I'm going to start off by talking to Jenny Brooks who was one of the founding members, founding artists of Wysing Arts Centre. I have a number of questions that I'm going to be asking each of the interviewees, but first of all just to welcome Jenny. How are you Jenny?

Jenny Brooks: I am very well thank you and glad to be here.

HO: Thank you for agreeing to have this little conversation with me.

JB: It's a pleasure.

HO: We're in the recording studio at Wysing which is very cosy, and I think this is Jenny's first time in the recording studio?

JB: Yeah.

HO: So, we've just been commenting on being here. \*laughs\*

JB: Yes.

HO: Okay, so maybe we'll start. So with this first question, can you describe Jenny, your first night you've spent at Wysing. Perhaps just describing some of the experiences you've had...

JB: In the farmhouse...

HO: Yes, in the farmhouse. I mean this is also an opportunity to talk about the origins I guess of Wysing.

JB: Yes, I didn't have a night in the farmhouse for a long time because the co-founders – Age and Annie Bunnetat – moved from London to live in the farmhouse and to be onsite for the setting up of Wysing. But I was, you know, in and out of the farmhouse and it made a great impression on me and on all of us when we first saw the farmhouse, because it's such a very special building. Late 1600s I think or maybe even earlier. It was just beautiful; the interior absolutely lovely character and I think what I felt was that it felt just right for us.

HO: How did you come across it? Who discovered it first? Where you just in the area or did you know about it previously?

JB: Well we all looked individually at magazines and papers and things like that. But one day I was looking in the newsagent and I saw the farmers weekly, which I bought, and it was in there. So, we thought oh let's go and visit it. We went, not all four of us. I think it was just me and Adrian probably, and maybe Annie as well. The word space kind of hit me immediately because it's just so big and spacious.

HO: So what was here? It was just the farmhouse and.....

JB: The farmhouse, what is now the window room and the kitchen was an old woodshed that was kind of half falling down, and...so that was the stable block. The other side of it is still very much as it was. Then it was all converted to make one building.

HO: Were the four of you already looking for a project, to set up something? Were you on the lookout? I'm sort of wondering about the origins of the four of you working together and...

JB: Yes, well the first decision was that we wanted to start up an Art Centre and wanted it to be a place for artists to do their work and develop. We kind of got the philosophy first in a way, except that it had to fit with a site. We went to about four different places to look at and Wysing was the first one and Adrian and Annie said, 'Oh it's really good, it's just right we must go there.' I said well you're not meant to just look at one place, so we went to a few others and actually none of them had that feeling of what a good place it would be to set up studios for artists, with the fields and things. So that's how we arrived there. We'd already decided to set about creating studios for artists, affordable space for practicing artists.

HO: Did that come out of particular experiences you'd had previously? I guess it's easy to forget about what the context was 30 years ago in terms of studio provision or access for artists to space.

JB: What the sort of motivation?

HO: Yeah.

JB: I only did a foundation course. It was a two-year foundation course and I didn't carry on, but that foundation course made a very big impression on me and I really enjoyed it. It wasn't all easy, but I really enjoyed it and also it was partly from that. It was also that I felt that artists aren't respected enough and that Wysing should be a place where artists are respected and appreciated, to get on with doing what they have to do.

HO: Wow! I mean it seems incredibly generous and self-less at the time, or now it does, but also then at the time in terms of the four of you coming together for this endeavour. And just the amount of work it took. Could you speak a little bit about that? I'm quite fascinated, I mean we're sitting here now at Wysing Arts Centre which is this kind of campus site with lots of buildings. Beautifully planted, really nice warm spaces, but when you arrived it was just the farmhouse and some fields and

some stables and things. Can you just speak a little bit to that process of transformation?

JB: Yeah, I'll try.

HO: \*laughs\* It's a lot!

JB: We set about fixing the buildings because what is our exhibition gallery now, was a shed. There was a woman running it as a business for farm supplies. She was the only person on site. They cleared out and we went about planning permission and they said if we were going to redo that building, we had to do it exactly the same shape. At the same time, we did the stable block where the window room is and put the new roof on and made the part that was the woodshed into the window room actually. It was open before that bit. There were just four pillars and it was just open. We made that into a room. A friend of ours did the architecture for us which was great. Then we gradually...and we did the top barn, ah, where we are now. This building. We re-did that because it needed a lot doing to it. In fact, it was more redone on the inside, the outside is still original, but it was all emptied out. We put the stairs in and the studios and all that. So, we did that, and we had to get planning permission. They were very suspicious of us. They said that...

HO: The council?

JB: Yeah, we had to mark out where all the parking places were going to be for some reason. They didn't trust us at all I don't think. We decided among us that we'd give it 10 years and see what happened. And Adrian and Annie were brilliant creatively, and anyway...

HO: There were...going back to the kind of sleepover kind of thing, they were the ones who were living on site.

JB: Yes, yes.

HO: ...and you and Terry were away...nearby but not living at Wysing.

JB: Yes, well I came up three days a week and I also did a lot of admin at home. I did that in London. I was all in touch with the Cambridge County Council. All the sort of bits and pieces that you have to do. So, they were on the spot, they were dealing with all of the everyday stuff and making things progress. Then we started doing the beginnings of a programme. We tried to do that as early as we could. Some artists came. We put out ads for studio space and we got someone almost immediately and they came quite quickly actually.

HO: I'm sure, I bet they did. \*laughs\*

JB: And where the new building is now, the black one opposite reception, was an old barn in pretty bad condition but we made them into rough studios. Really, they were very rough actually, but they were cheap and best for the summer, not the winter.

HO: Seasonal studios! Maybe, we can go onto the next question? Is there anything else you want to talk about other than...

JB: I wanted to say we were four founders, we all played a part, and also at the beginning it was very much – what will Wysing be? Obviously I suppose that's obvious really and then we went on from there...

HO: So, you were quite open to what it was going to be...apart from this desire to give art a space and to have this space where artists were respected, you weren't necessarily...how much were you interested in shaping things. I don't know, it just seems to me that it was quite a generous open offer.

JB: Yes, what we said was we wanted serious artists. You know, it's that thing about...I suppose respect for artists. But that's why because you know, often artists aren't respected by other people who don't know anything about it. They think artists are just...you know...and so we wanted to provide for serious artists who did really good work but we wanted it then to be open for experimentation and able to do all that, playful and all those things that are good for making works of art really. I suppose.

HO: No, absolutely! It's just so kind of laudable I think that anyone...well maybe it's the kind of current climate but I think that it's such a kind of laudable, generous, but also necessary ambition I think to have. You know if you think about how creativity emerges, it's really...but also that sense in where there's a kind of professionalism and seriousness that's given over to the idea of art making.

JB: It's the same as Donna has taken it further and further you know in a wonderful way. Be it well beyond where we were then. But that time and space for people to really be able to do their work and not be committed to, you know, every Sunday or every weekend the public coming round and having to open the doors and let them look at artist studios. We didn't want it to be that kind of place, but also the other thing was I had the opportunity to do it. I know it sounds very generous, but I had the opportunity and I always sort of feel that if somebody has the opportunity that's what happens really.

HO: I think you're being a bit modest there! I know lots of people have opportunities, but they don't necessarily use those in the service of you know, quite generous altruistic causes. You could have used that opportunity very much for yourself...gone off to the south of France and sort of bought a castle or something.

JB: Well, yeah, I wanted to do it. I wanted to make a contribution, and everybody wants to do that don't they. Well most people.

HO: Yeah,

- JB: You know, I mean artists do. They make a, gosh, you know the world of art makes a huge contribution to the world doesn't it and you know, musicians and things and poets...
- HO: Thank you for doing it. I mean personally for someone like me who has benefitted from being here, thank you!
- JB: Well, as I always say, it was four of us. I wasn't any more instrumental, they put their all into it. They were those kind of people. We all did, but they were brilliant, and Terry didn't do so much early on because he was working full time, so he didn't play such a part, but he was really good whenever anything difficult happened. He was really good, and he did come up once a week, so you know that was a big contribution as well, and he was a really good person to have if, you know, to bounce things off and get good advice and things.
- HO: Group effort! We'll go into the next question which may be a bit related to some of the things we've sort of been talking about a little bit. How would you describe Wysing to someone who has never been here or who has never heard of it?
- JB: I've just written a few things down, just words rather than trying to explain, because I think it's probably just as... space is the first one, privacy as well as community, ideas and sharing, coming together, people coming together, artists coming together, and working individually in your own space and time, and working together. I think it sort of relates to how it is now really. Experimenting, exploring, playing, stories, music, sounds, making, all those things and communicating with each other.
- HO: And were they things that you were thinking about originally, because they speak so much to what Wysing is now in terms of being this space for individuals but also for communities and networks and to allow artist to form networks and to have dialogues and conversations. But also, to be kind of like interdisciplinary, so like visual art, music, sounds, obviously we have a music festival now.
- JB: Yeah, it had all those ideas, but it wasn't so comprehensive as you've described it and as, in a way, Donna has brought it up to. You know, we didn't have...we had lots of lovely ideas, we...Annie used to say, 'Oh, I'd love to get a lot of inner-city kids coming up here and having a great time out in the fields and doing art things'. We had ideas like that but, no, we didn't get to the... it was artists and studios. It was spaces, I think we always felt spaces where the artists could all come together, like in the café, or outside in the fields, you know, things like that, but there wasn't the structure that Donna has, turned it...well not really turned it into, but Donna has and the whole team, have done lots of things where artists come together and discuss and they come from art schools and universities and people who have never done art before. Young, old. We had some of that. I remember we always said that Wysing was for artists of all ages from children to really old, you know, could come here and enjoy it as long as they were committed to it. And yeah...

HO: That's fantastic. Maybe we'll go on to talk about the last sort of question.

JB: Oh yeah...

HO: \*laughs\* This question really sort of comes out of an artist project. The artist Ruth Biel instigated a project where in the farmhouse, artists who were resident are invited to leave a book, a publication as a resource, I guess it's a kind of development of a sort of small library. I was wondering if there was anything you have left or would leave for future resident artists at Wysing. There is a book...Jenny and I were talking before about a poet. Is that right?

JB: Yes.

HO: Nicholas...

JB: Alberry.

HO: Thank you, Nicholas Alberry.

JB: Yeah, very interesting.

HO: Yeah you have an interesting story about that because it's somebody who you know.

JB: Yes I met him once, yeah, he was very interesting.

HO: To say the least!

JB: Yeah so there's a book that he compiled of poetry. He loved poetry and one of the things he said was that people should learn a poem every day, I think it was every day, maybe it was once a week. But...poetry was very important to him. He compiled this anthology and he put in all sorts of things about....yeah a great range. I think it's for every day of the year, because I think it's called Poem of the Day, isn't it? Yeah, he just compiled it, it was part one, so there is a part two as well and he wrote a little history of each, a little miniature history of each with funny little interesting things of each poet on that day. And I think he put people who had the same birthdays as well, I think that's what was at the top of the page as well.

HO: And that is actually in the farmhouse now, so when people are staying at the farmhouse. We just actually had a little trip over there to visit the book. It's actually quite a nice way of marking I think people's time there, because it is like a calendar. There is a poem for each day.

JB: Yes.

HO: It's potentially something that could mark out someone's stay in the farmhouse. Each day you go down and...

JB: Yeah...

HO: ...perhaps have a little look at a different poem.

JB: Yes, I think it's a nice, I thought it would be something people might pick up.

HO: It's a great addition, I think.

JB: \*laughs\* Thank you!

HO: Thank you Jenny. I think that's...

JB: I think that's it!

HO: Yeah...hopefully we've kind of covered a lot. Thank you, Jenny.

JB: Thank you for having me. \*laughs\*

HO: \*laughs\* Good to talk to you, thanks.