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John Bell (JB): John Bell, J-O-H-N B-E-L-L, President and CEO, Tampa Theatre.

Laura Landry (LL): Perfect. Alright, so we're gonna start with some personal history. So, what made you want to pursue a career in the arts?

JB: Well, I got the theatre bug in high school and decided to major in theatre in college. But I knew early on—although I enjoyed acting and directing and those things, I never wanted to live that life, that life of an actor, because it's, there's a lot of rejection involved. Um so, I was intrigued with the notion of arts administration only because arts councils were becoming a thing, particularly in North Carolina, where I grew up. Uh and so, I was just intrigued by this notion of uh the management side of the arts business. Um, so that's what I focused on, and I was fortunate to get uh, my first job out of college was at the North Carolina Arts Council. Um and uh I've been fortunate to stay in the arts administration side my entire career.

LL: Um and so, you mentioned growing up North Carolina. Um so, on our call the other day, you said that your dad was a minister, you sort of grew up playing around an empty sanctuary.

JB: Right.

LL: Can you talk about that? And then how that kind of parallels where you work today?

JB: Yeah, well, my dad was a Methodist minister, which meant that we moved, like every four years, like clockwork, to a new town and a new church. And so, growing up, my playground was the sanctuary. The empty sanctuary during the week and then, of course, the, the church was filled on Sundays. And after I began working in historic theatres, I began to realize that there was this sort of similarity between uh the buildings in that an empty theatre felt to me much like an empty sanctuary. Uh and I think that has to do not necessarily with the architecture but with the sort of sense of humanity that's in both of those types of buildings and the sort of spirituality that coincides with that. So, I, I think, I've, I've always thought that there was a parallel between churches and, and theatres.

LL: So how did you eventually end up at the Tampa Theatre?

JB: Oh, well, after um, after I left the North Carolina Arts Council, I um took over the management of a historic theatre that had just been saved in Greensboro, North Carolina, it was the Carolina Theatre, built 1927, same era as Tampa Theatre. Um, and I got that job when I was twenty-five. And I was really full of myself, because I thought, "Well, clearly, I'm brilliant, at twenty-five they gave me a movie palace, right?" And then I realized pretty quickly that the only reason I got the job was that nobody else in their right mind would take it because it was a basket case. It was in debt, there was no staff, and programming was almost nil. So, um, I had some success there, stayed for six years, and became more aware of sort of the other historic theatres that had been saved around the country. And this opportunity came up in 1985, and I had been aware of Tampa Theatre. Uh, and I knew it was a significant building built by an important architect and it was a bigger market so, I threw my hat in the ring and was fortunate enough to, to get the job.

LL: And, you have been here ever since?

JB: I have been here ever since.

LL: Can you talk about um when you first felt that connection like maybe I'll be here for a while?

JB: Yeah, you know, I never, I never really thought about um you know, I never mapped out a life career like, I'm going to stay here five years, and I'm going to move on and do that kind of thing. I just go to work every day and do the best I can. And after about ten years, I realized this is not a bad place to be at all. And I've certainly had other offers and opportunities pop up, but I've never been interested simply because it's such a spectacular building to walk into every day and the community dearly loves this building. There's this love affair between the community and this building. Um, and so, for thirty-eight years, I've walked into the, the theatre and it's not a bad place to walk into every day.

LL: Yeah. That's a great way to put it. Um, do you remember the first time you stepped into the theatre and what you felt?

JB: I do it was during my sort of final interview for this job and um I was brought in by Art Keeble, who was the director of the Arts Council at the time, which was governing the theatre at the time. And I remember walking in and just stopping and it took my breath away, literally, I remember gasping. Um, because I had been in many historic theatres before but there was something really special about walking into that foyer and to this auditorium. Um, it's just awe inspiring. So, it was love at first sight for me.

LL: Alright, so when did Tampa Theatre first open?

JB: Tampa Theatre first opened its doors October 15th, 1926, and that was after a year and a half of construction. It was much anticipated. Uh, but it was a, it was a big deal 'cause I mean movies were a big deal in the twenties but then to get a major movie palace like Tampa Theatre being built, uh, was, was a big deal for Tampa.

LL: Mm-hmm. <Affirmative>. Um, and what type of films did the Tampa Theatre show initially?

JB: They were silent films originally, but of course, back then they weren't called silent films because all films were that way. It wasn't until talkies¹ came in several years later that they, the early films began to be called silent films. But that meant that the theatre um had an orchestra and a theatre organ. So silent films, the irony is that silent films were never meant to be silent. They always had live musical accompaniment. And so, in the early days, the silent films are on the screen, but you had a live pit orchestra playing the score, or the Wurlitzer² chipping into that or sometimes playing solo. So, when we replicate that experience today, the first timers who've never seen a silent film properly, in a movie palace with a lot of musical accompaniments, are just blown away, because it's a completely different art form. But I, I do tell people don't ever watch a silent film on television, because it's terrible. (John Bell laughs). It's not nearly the same experience. Uh, but the silent films were, you know, they were captivating for people, just the moving image was captivating. And then coming to a grand movie palace, like Tampa Theatre was just a spectacular experience for people then.

LL: Yeah, I bet. Um, so, you talked a little bit about this, but can you paint more a picture of what it was like to see a film here back in the day? About how it is constantly rolling, and you had to wait in the lobby?

JB: Well, I wasn't here in the twenties.

LL: Right. (Laura Landry laughs).

JB: But from what I understand, you would buy a ticket at the box office, and then you would get in line in the lobby. The lobby had no concessions, and it was just a, a queue space where people were lined up to come into the auditorium. And going to the movies then people consumed them differently than we do now—we watched from the beginning and to the end. But then they were just sort of constantly rolling this film and so people were constantly coming and going. So, when a couple would leave in the middle of the film, then the orchestra floor captain would call out to the lobby and say, “send two more in” and then an usher in a grand, a regal uniform with white gloves, would come get them and escort them to their seats. And then they would sit, and they would watch the film until the end of the show. And then they would stay and watch the beginning again until the point where they came in, then they would leave. So, it was this sort of, the theatre was always filled but it was sort of a constant ebb and flow of people.

LL: Yeah, that's so different. Um, and then the unique thing about Tampa Theatre is that it was the first commercially air-conditioned building in Tampa. Why was that?

JB: Because they could. The building was the first air-conditioned public building in Tampa because um there was so much money in the movie palace era to build these places. So Paramount³ money built Tampa Theatre. Uh and the studios were awash with cash. So, for them,

¹ A slang term referring to sound film.

² Referring to a Wurlitzer theatre organ.

³ Referring to the film company Paramount Pictures which was founded in 1912.

it was a competitive advantage. Uh, and they would do this in any city. By the time that technology was developed, they would air condition their theatres. In Tampa, it was a big deal because, you know, it's Tampa. (John Bell laughs). And so, it had a profound impact on people, they just couldn't stop talking about manmade air, uh and how special it was and "oh, you've got to go. You've got to go see this, this place. You gotta go feel this place."

LL: Mm-hmm. <Affirmative>. So, you talked about sort of the, the beginning of moving images. Um, is there anything that you want to elaborate on there? About how the movie palaces—

JB: Yeah, I think to understand why movie palaces were built to begin with, you sort of have to understand that the moving image was brand new to human beings, right? It was only around 1900 that people began to see moving images in the way of film. Um and it was just as it is today, it's addictive, people could not get enough of it. So, the studios pretty soon became an enormous business with so much cash. And they realized, we need bigger and better places in which to show our films than these little nickelodeon's⁴ that they were showing the early films in. So, they began to invest in the construction of bigger and more elaborate theatres and by the 1920s it was like totally out of control. The studios were competing with each other to see who could build the biggest and grandest theatre. Uh and Marcus Lowe, who was a movie palace mogul, one of the early MGM⁵ executives, said it best when he said, "We sell tickets to theatres not movies." Because it almost didn't matter what was on the screen. It was about the theatre which theatre you were gonna go to. And in the case of Tampa Theatre, it was clearly, by far, the most elaborate theatre in the region and so, it became the go to sort of premier theatre and movie palace.

LL: Yeah, so to that point, there was more than one theatre on Franklin Street.

JB: There were by my count six other theatres within about two and a half blocks of Tampa Theatre. Uh, and there was the Palace, the Bijou, the Grand, the Strand, uh and they were all successful. Tampa Theatre, sort of, you know, made the others all of a sudden feel inferior but nonetheless, they still sold, sold tickets. Uh, but they um, you know, Tampa was very condensed then, there were no suburbs. It was basically Tampa and Hyde Park and Tampa Heights and that was it, right? And so, uh, this was the central business district, the only business district, (John Bell laughs), pretty much. And so that's why not only retail was here, but the theatres were downtown as well.

LL: Mmmm. <Affirmative>. Yeah, and how do you think that affected sort of like the cultural and artistic growth of Tampa?

JB: How did Tampa Theatre?

LL: Yeah.

⁴ The nickelodeon was the first type of indoor exhibition space dedicated to showing motion pictures in the United States. These spaces were usually converted storefronts that were changed into small theatres. These spaces charged five cents for admission hence the name "nickelodeon".

⁵ Referring to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc which is an American media company that specializes in film and television. MGM was founded in 1924.

JB: Tampa Theatre sort of put Tampa on the map, it was not only a nice ego boost for the citizens of Tampa to have such an important theatre built in Tampa. Uh, but it became noticed um, by the studios because Tampa Theatre was doing so well and, you know, it was still it was an era of, of progress and growth and tremendous growth of the 1920s, almost unbridled growth. And so, Tampa Theatre just sort of added to that? And it was, it sort of democratized entertainment, right? Because one of the things that I think is most ennobling about movie palaces and the Tampa Theatre is that it wasn't built for the rich or for the elite. It was built for the common man and woman who had never had access to something this opulent and grand before and for ten cents, or twenty-five cents, you could get in and be treated like royalty for two hours and escape whatever troubles you have and come in and just to have a grand experience.

LL: Mmmm. <Affirmative>. Yeah. Um, so that was the 1920s. Um can we move towards the thirties and the forties? Talk about what changed in those decades.

JB: There is a common misconception that movie theatres thrived during the Great Depression of the thirties and that's not really true. Um some of them closed, Tampa Theatre survived. Um, and it survived through promotions and gimmicks. They had a thing called bank night, which was basically a lottery every Friday night, where you could win ten bucks, or a toaster, or something but that attracted a ton of people. Um, but it sort of survived the Great Depression and then we go into World War II, and in the forties this was the place where people came to get the war news, right? The newsreels. Uh and so there was a surge again in attendance in the forties, while uh, the war was raging.

So, this was how people got their news, the visual news anyway. And um, so there was a boost in the 1940s to the attendance. In 1948, there was a Supreme Court decision that busted up the, the studios. So, before 1948, a studio like Paramount, they could produce the movies, they could distribute the movies, and they could exhibit the movies. So, they owned theatres like Tampa Theatre. The Supreme Court ruled in a consent decree that you can do two of those things, but you can't do all three because that's a monopoly. So, the theatres went away from the portfolios of the studios, they became independent and began to form change. But that was a sea change for the industry and is one of the reasons why a theatre like Tampa Theatre will never ever be built again because it's the economic conditions are completely different. Not only the industry, but in society and, and worldwide but um, that was the sea change.

LL: Um, and then can you talk about sort of the um, what happened equally to downtown in the fifties. And kind of—

JB: In the fifties. In the post war era, uh there was a boom again, but it was a boom that began to spread out from downtown. So, the suburbs began to arrive, right? And, and so the more spread out the city became, the more downtown went into some decline. It, it wasn't a quick decline, but it was noticeable. And this is the same story that happened in every city around the country with the growth of the suburbs and, um, and so, by the sixties, the theatre was already showing signs of decline. It wasn't being as maintained as well. Um and so, by the early seventies, the operators just said, "This makes zero sense anymore from a business standpoint." And what was happening around the country to movie palaces, like Tampa Theatre, was rather alarming because they were, remember they were all built in downtowns. They're sitting on prime real estate and the

reality is that the land underneath those movie palaces and Tampa Theatre is worth far more for some other type of development, if you knock it down and built something else, than the theatre operations were worth. Um, so that's why the theatre became endangered and, and that's why many of them across the country just got knocked down.

LL: Mm-hmm. <Affirmative>. Yeah, so you're talking about how this is a trend across the nation, but something different happened in Tampa, to save it?

JB: Yeah, in Tampa, something wonderful happened where the community once they heard that there was the possibility that Tampa Theatre might be demolished, citizens began to form committees. They began to call their city council people. They began to call the mayor's office trying to figure out some way to—you got to save this building. You can't let this thing go away. And so fortunately uh, we had great civic leadership at the time. Mayor Poe⁶, got it and he understood that it was an important thing to save. He, Mayor Poe told me once that, that he, you know, he said, “I'm not an arts guy and I don't know that I'll be attending Tampa Theatre very much.” But he said, “I realized that downtown was in such decline in the early seventies, that we had to send a signal to the business community that the city was not going to abandon downtown Tampa. And Tampa Theatre was the place where we could plant our flag.” And so, he said, “That's why I wanted to save it.” It was certainly beautiful and worth saving in its own right. But really, it was a move to send signals to the business community that downtown was not going to die.

So, we also had a great, we also had great leadership from Lee Duncan, who was City Council at the time, and he sort of took this under his wing. And they, Mayor Poe and Councilman Duncan helped negotiate a deal for the city of Tampa to accept as a gift for the sum of one dollar the theatre from, from the operators. And so, they struck that deal and of course had to be approved by city council. And then it took city council three years of debate to figure out whether or not that was a good deal. So, by a four to three, city council vote, Tampa Theatre still stands today. If one vote had gone the other way would be a parking lot attendant.

LL: (Laura Landry laughs). Oh man. Um, were there any other uh, public servants or community champions that are of note in that effort?

JB: Joan Jennewein⁷ was very involved with that. She was sort of the passion behind the scenes of, of feeding the civic leaders the information that was needed for them to make the case. And there were, there were many others. The group Tampa Preservation Inc. was formed around the drive to save Tampa Theatre, because there was no preservation organization up until that point. But I think the potential loss of Tampa Theatre opened the eyes of a lot of people that, you know, there's some important buildings in Tampa and certainly started with Tampa Theatre, but there are others that need some attention as well.

LL: Yeah. And then shortly after it got put on the list of the National Historic Register?

⁶ William F. Poe (1931-2014) was the mayor of Tampa from 1974 to 1979.

⁷ Joan Jennewein (1931-2019) was a long time Tampa civic and arts leader who was an advocate for historic preservation in Tampa and led efforts to revitalize Ybor City, streetcar lines, and the Tampa Theatre.

JB: It was put on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978. And then, in 1988, the city of Tampa adopted a landmark ordinance. And this was one of the first two buildings to be a landmark. Same day as Plant Hall⁸ at the University of Tampa. And Tampa Theatre, we were the, the first inductees into city landmark status.

LL: Oh, wow that's great. Um so, you mentioned that it was sort of like a, a flag was planted here sort of a lighthouse, did that work for downtown?

JB: It did. It did. I mean, you I don't know that you can draw a straight line, but it's pretty clear that if 1976 was the low point, 1977 is when Tampa Theatre reopened. Since that time, at least, it least within the two blocks surrounding us there's been more than four hundred million dollars of private sector investment, and residential towers, office buildings, hotels, restaurants, all kinds of retail. So, you know, and every single one of those tout their proximity to the Tampa Theatre as a selling point. Every single one of those developments do. So that tells me that it did have that type of catalytic effect. Uh, and there, there are other projects that have helped downtown grow as well. But Tampa Theatre certainly lived up to what I think Mayor Poe hoped it would do, which was to attract attention and investment back in downtown.

LL: Yeah. Uh, that's such a great story. What do you think it says about Tampa's community? That it rallied to save the theatre.

JB: I think you can tell a lot about a community's values, simply through those places which it chooses to preserve. And when they choose a place as beautiful and as special and as meaningful as Tampa Theatre, it says a lot about the soul of this community. That Tampa values things that are important to them and if this is important to them that says not—it's not just about Tampa Theatre, it also speaks to the soul of the community as well.

LL: Um can you give us an overview of the relations with the City Arts Council and any other governing bodies that the theatre is associated with?

JB: So, when the theatre was first reopened, it opened under the auspices of the Arts Council of Tampa at the time, because the city was smart enough to say, "Look, we'll, we'll save the building and we'll provide some support for you know, taking care of it. But we don't know anything about, (John Bell laughs), operating a theatre." So, they had the good foresight to go to an Arts Council to operate it. So, for the first um, many years it was operated by the Arts Council of Hillsborough County. It was operated by the Arts Council of Tampa, until the early eighties when that transformed into the Arts Council of Hillsborough County, same organization, different name. And uh, that arrangement stayed in place until 2010. So, the Arts Council is a fine organization, but it's not a fundraising organization. And it became apparent to all of us at the Arts Council in the theatre that to get the theatre where we needed to go, we needed to raise money. Um, and so, we had an amicable divorce from the Arts Council. We went through a governance transition to a nonprofit organization structure. So, we struck a new operating agreement with the city of Tampa. So, the city of Tampa still owns the theatre, but we have, the

⁸ Plant Hall is the main academic and administrative building for the University of Tampa. It was originally built between 1888-1891 by Henry B. Plant as Tampa Bay Hotel.

nonprofit, has a long-term operating agreement with uh, with the city to operate it on the behalf of the citizens.

LL: And then I do have a follow up question. So, when were those relations with all the three at their best or worst?

JB: I, I think one of the more troubling times for the theatre after I arrived was actually in the first couple of years. Because, you know, if we think the film industry is changing today, it's always been changing, and it was changing in the in the mid-eighties. So um, back then, you, if you wanted to see a movie, without any dog food commercials, you had to come to a theatre like Tampa Theatre that was showing repertory films. But that was changing because cable was beginning to enter the marketplace. We have things called VCRs⁹, where you could go to a store and rent one and bring it back and watch it at home. Um and all of that began to erode the, the need for people to come to a theatre to see an old movie.

So uh, there were some touch and go times. Um, the couple of years after I got here. And it became apparent to me that we needed to change the programming mix and switch to a mix that included first run films and not just repertory films. So, we made that switch in 1988 and immediately began to turn around the fortunes then. So it wasn't that the relations with, with the gover-, although there were some interesting board meetings when we were losing all that money. (John Bell laughs). But um, you know, being able to turn it around in '88 certainly um, certainly was a very important thing, not only for the theatre, but for me, (John Bell laughs), to be able to turn it around.

So um, I, I think the relations with the city had been very strong over the years, certainly if I measure it by the relations that my colleagues have with their civic governments around the country. It's remarkable in Tampa, how supportive the city of Tampa has been. Some administrations have been more friendly to the theatre than others, but none have been openly hostile. So, I think that um the city recognizes now more than ever, what an asset the Tampa Theatre is. It's such a unique building, and it's got Tampa on the outside and seven story high letters, right? It's, it's an iconic piece for the city. And it's a prideful piece. So, I think that, that people are proud of the building. And I also would like to think that they're proud of the programming that has evolved in the building as well.

LL: For someone who wouldn't know what a repertory like programming is, can you sort of explain that? And just say that in a different way.

JB: Sure. Repertory film programming is basically a fancy way of saying old movies, classic films. In other words, something that's not in a first run theatre right now. So, anything can qualify under that if it's not really currently playing in a, in a cinema somewhere. Um, so classic films, um is an easier way to say repertory. Uh, but the repertory program that I inherited when I got here was a sixteen-millimeter projector that showed one film one time and then the next night, it was something different. So, it was sort of constantly changing. And if it was great, you didn't matter if someone said, "Oh, I saw this film and it was great", because you couldn't see it

⁹ Videocassette recorder.

anymore, because we had already moved on. So that's the downside of repertory film programming, is that um, it's just sort of one and done.

LL: So, Tampa is obviously a very diverse city. That has very diverse routes. How did Tampa Theatre intersect with that diversity over the years?

JB: Well, shockingly, Tampa Theatre was a Whites only theatre until 1964. That contrasts with what many other southern theatres that had a segregated balcony, which was bad, bad enough. But I honestly think being Whites only was even worse. Because a Black patron could not walk through those doors until 1964. Um, and I don't know the math, but I know that we've, we've been, uh, it was Whites only for those first three, three and a half decades. Uh, but since then, for the majority of its history, now it's welcomed all. But that's a troubling part of uh, not just Tampa Theatres history, but sort of Tampa and the South's history of segregation.

And, and when I, when I tell that story, on tours, people are sort of shocked. They don't, it's sort of out of sight, out of mind. At least if you're White, it's out of sight, out of mind. But I've run into many Black friends who have said, "Oh, yeah, I remember that." And thankfully, they, they don't hold it against me, because, (John Bell laughs), they know I wasn't here. I wasn't responsible for it. But it's um, you know, I can't imagine being in those shoes and, and having to be turned away like that. So um, it's a story that's not uncommon across the South, you have that. And in Greensboro at the Carolina Theatre, there was a segregated balcony that was finally closed around 1964. Uh, but I don't know that it's any better or worse, I kind of think being Whites only is worse.

But you know, I think in many ways you can, you can tell the history of Tampa through the lens of the Tampa Theatre, right? Because part of what led to the construction of Tampa Theatre was the sort of Florida land boom, right. And the tremendous investment that was beginning to flow to Florida was the impetus for Paramount to build this theatre. And then you can look at the Great Depression through the lens of the theatre and what was happening here then. You can look at how citizens were coping with the war. You can also talk about segregation because that's part of the story of the theatre. So, in many ways the, the theatre is a little bit of a mirror of Tampa's history.

LL: Yeah, um. What about the Hispanic population in Tampa? Were they regular patrons?

JB: I believe so. Um, you know, that's, that's, I don't have a good answer for that. My assumption is that that it wasn't no Blacks, no Hispanics. It was just uh, they wanted to ban Blacks from coming into the building. That's my assumption.

LL: Okay. So, moving on to the architecture. Who was John Eberson¹⁰?

JB: John Eberson was a genius. He was the architect who built Tampa Theatre. He was born in the Austrian Hungary empire in 1875. That's now actually part of Ukraine. He reportedly went into the Army and decided that wasn't for him. So, he went AWOL¹¹ jumped ship came to

¹⁰ John Eberson (1875-1954) was an Austrian-American architect known for his movie palace designs in the atmospheric theatre fashion.

¹¹ Absent without official leave.

America, became an architect, settled in Chicago. And so, in the early, early part of the movie palace era, John Eberson was designing theatres and he became very popular with the studios that were financing them, because he was figuring out ways to deliver these theatres at a lower cost than his competitors. So, most of the movie palaces built in the 1910s and early twenties looks suspiciously like the Paris Opera House because they were just copying European theatres.

Uh, but Eberson had this idea that instead of spending money on gold leaf and crystal chandeliers, he could create an even more magical place if, and cut costs, if he got away with the chandeliers did away with them and did away with the gold leaf and he created an atmospheric. So, an atmospheric is what Tampa Theatre is, which means that instead of the chandeliers there's a huge nighttime plaster sky with the auditorium studded with twinkling stars. Uh, and it's dimly lit. The effect is that you're in a Mediterranean courtyard at night. It's very romantic. Uh, and it's very magical. But he figured out a way to deliver his theatres at a cost of ten to fifteen percent less than his competitors. Because he wasn't using solid marble, he would use things that look like marble, or if he in the case of Tampa Theatre, in our, in our lobby, we have these checkerboard tiles beneath the chair were, chair rail that looked like Italian tile, but they're not. They are just simply plaster squares that were scored when they were wet to create the grout line. And then stencils were painted on. And they look like Italian tile, but they don't cost the cost of Italian tile. So, they're all these little sorts of things that we have discovered.

And we've realized that what he was doing was he was building a set, right? He was building a theatrical set that was an illusion. And it made perfect sense because just as what you're watching on the screen is an illusion so is the environment, you're sitting in. And so, he was just a genius at creating these, these illusions in atmospheric theatres. He only designed about twenty to twenty-five atmospherics in his lifetime, he designed a hundred theatres in his lifetime, but only about twenty to twenty-five atmospherics. And we know, from talking to his family, that this was his favorite theatre he ever designed. And we tried to squeeze out of them. What, what was it about Tampa Theatre that made it his favorite? And they said "We don't know." So, I have my own theory. My own theory is that most of his theatres by, by the mid-twenties, these theatres were around the country were enormous. In most cases, they were twice the size of Tampa Theatre. Uh, but Tampa Theatre was a weird piece of land, and it was a small spot on which to plop an auditorium. So, he had to make it smaller than he was typically uh designing. And so, our theory is that what this building lacked in scale, he decided to make up for in ornamentation. So, every square inch of Tampa Theatre has something going on. And it's, it's uh, just really magical.

LL: Yeah, I really liked your kitchen sink analogy. (Laura Landry and John Bell both laugh).

JB: Yeah, let's just throw everything at it.

LL: Um, so, we were talking to Gary¹² earlier, and he was saying that it's actually really well built. So even though it's plaster, and you know, you don't have the stone and the wood, it's still got good bones.

¹² Referring to Gary Ratliff, former Stage Manager at the Tampa Theatre.

JB: It's a very strong building. Structurally, it is, there's not a thing wrong with it. I mean, it was, the structure underneath all this beautiful plaster work is structural steel, reinforced concrete. It's a very strong building. There is a story about uh, one of John Ebersons's theatres in the 1950s that was torn down. It was in Chicago, and it was the Paradise, and it was a big monster of a theatre. And um so, it was demolished in the mid-fifties. But the general contractor for the demolition company thought, "Well, it'll take me like four months to knock this thing down." So, they bid on it based on that. They did not realize that the blueprints which showed a one-foot column, that column was actually three-feet. And so, the bottom line is it took that company eighteen months of trying to knock it down, and they couldn't. That company went out of, went out of business and went bankrupt. I believe the owner committed suicide, and then it took another company another six months to complete the demolition. So, the lesson is, don't tear down a John Ebersson theatre. (John Bell laughs). One because you can't, and number two because you shouldn't.

LL: Can you share with us some of your favorite details?

JB: My favorite details may be just whatever catches my eye that day. There have literally been times that I walk through the building, even today, and I notice a small detail that I've never seen before. And I just stop, and I look at it, and I admire it. And I go "huh, how about that." Because there's just so much going on, uh that it's difficult to really think you've seen all of it. I remember I was here about fifteen years, before I noticed or realized a particular detail in the lower men's lounge. So, in the lower men's lounge, there were these weird sconces, they were asymmetrical, and they just sort of had a bulb on one end. And I thought, "Well, that looks weird." And then I saw an old historic photograph where the sign for the men's room did not say men's room, it said "smoking parlor", because you could smoke in the building. And men would go when smoke their cigars or whatever in the foyer of the men's room. And then when I went in there again, I noticed that those asymmetrical sconces were pipes. They were smoking pipes, and the light bulb was screwed into the bowl of the pipe. And I'd never picked up on that before. But that's an example of you can walk through this building a hundred times, a thousand times, and you'll see something different. Um, but I do think when, when the carpet was restored in 2017, to the original pattern, that they, that may be one of my favorite elements. Just simply because it just all makes sense now, right? When we had a solid carpet before, it was nice, it was okay, because it was you know, carpet. But when you saw the original design go down, then it was like, "Oh, well, yeah, this all makes sense now."

LL: Mm-hmm. <Affirmative>. Yeah. Can you talk about the feeling that Ebersson wanted to evoke? Can you talk about the love that maybe, talk a little bit more about that feeling?

JB: Yeah, Ebersson wanted to design places that were mysterious and romantic. Um, and, and sort of prepared you to be receptive for entertainment, right? He wanted to transport you, right? So whatever troubles you had that day, once you walked through these doors, you were in a different place, and in a different time, and none of that mattered. So it was, it was a very conscious effort on his part to design places that would do that. And in Tampa Theatre's case, he succeeded mightily, because the minute you walk into the Tampa Theatre, you're someplace else,

right? And, and you're relaxed, and you're ready for whatever's going to be on that stage or the screen.

LL: Can you describe the ceiling?

JB: The ceiling is a sky. So, the sky is uh, studded with these little ten-watt light bulbs that form the star field above the sky, both in the lobby on the small scale, and then the auditorium on a grand scale. So, the sky um, I'm often asked if the sky is, "are those actual constellations? Is that what?" No, no, I think they were busy, like two days before they were opening. And they just drilled a bunch of holes in random spots. We've actually brought in astronomers and said, "Look at this, does this—?" And they said "Nah, it's nothing, it's just a mess." (John Bell laughs). But it's, it's a wonderful mess. It's a wonderful mess up there. But again, that effect, which looks like a million bucks, right? Because I've actually had people actually say, "What do you do when it rains?" Because the effect is so real looking that they don't realize, something most people do but a few people don't realize, that it's not real. Um, but it's a cheap effect. It's like a little light bulb sitting over a drilled hole and little casing and it costs like you know, a buck to do that. But it looks like a million bucks.

LL: Yeah. Are there any, did any of his other atmospherics have a sky?

JB: All the atmospherics have skies. That's one of the defining features of an atmospheric is that you have a sky, and you don't have the chandeliers and things like that hanging from above. So again, the atmospheric again, he was creating different—he had different styles of atmospherics like we're definitely sort of a Spanish Mediterranean theme, although they're there're really ten different styles of architecture in the building, but more than not, it's Spanish Mediterranean. Uh but there are others that have more of a Moorish feel. Um, but they're all old-world Europe, right? So, but they all had different themes, but one of the defining features was that you were outside in some courtyard.

LL: Um. Can you talk about the gargoyles and their abs? (Laura Landry and John Bell both laugh).

JB: Love the gargoyles. The gargoyle, and the children love gargoyles too when we have school children that come in for a field trip. And it's usually pretty early in the morning, they will come in and third fourth graders will look up and they'll see the gargoyles in the lobby and then one of them will go "oooh". Then pretty soon you have five hundred children going "oooh" because they are attention getters. The uh, the restoration work that was done on them revealed that they were far more three dimensional than we had first imagined. Uh, because they had been painted out over the years in some sort of stone-gray thing. And they just, yeah, they were gargoyles, but they weren't particularly three dimensional. So, when the restoration on them was done, we realized with all the shadowing that went on that these guys have abs they've been working out (John Bell laughs). They are, they are really, really fit gargoyles. So, uh they are, again, one of the defining features of the building. I actually had an architectural historian once tell me that, well, when a gargoyle is on the inside of the building, it's not a gargoyle, it's a, it's a grotesque. And I thought that was pretty harsh. And um, we're still gonna call them gargoyles.

LL: Yeah. And then another um, really interesting story I thought, was the, the dead bird dealer? (Laura Landry and John Bell laugh).

JB: So, we have birds throughout the building and the birds are there, the same reason that there're flowering vines and trees, right? It's a garden, right? It's a Mediterranean courtyard, right? So, there're birds. And in the lobby, there are two stuffed macaws. And the macaws had deteriorated over time. So, it was time some years ago that we had to get new ones to replace them. And so, we thought, "okay, well, we'll just get two more macaws, right? How hard can this be?" And then we realized it's hard because macaws live a long time, like, I don't know, seventy-five, eighty years? We're not going to kill a macaw just to stuff it for decoration, although we needed it. So, we just put the word out to like Busch Gardens and the San Diego Zoo and all these other places like, "Hey, we need, if—put us on your on your waitlist," right? "we'd like first dibs." And so, the word had gotten out that six months go by, and they finally get a call. This is true, from a dead bird dealer in New York. I guess that's what it was. And he said, "Hey uh, I understand you're looking for a couple macaws?" And I said, "Yeah", he said, "I got a couple macaws for you." I didn't ask any questions. And we paid the man. And we got them, and we installed them.

But I tell that story on tours, because it points to our philosophy of restoration here, that we want everything to be authentic, you know. I could have had a ton of fun if I'd gone to Michael's Craft Store and gotten some Styrofoam and a glue gun and some fake feathers and built me a macaw, but it wouldn't be authentic. So, in the public spaces of this building, everything that we do is going to be painstakingly authentic. If they were real macaws there, we're gonna put real ones back. If it was a walnut handrail, walnut is going back. We're not going to substitute a cheaper type of wood. Uh, because, you know, one of the reasons that the theatre became endangered was that, economically, it doesn't make sense. That's hence why we're nonprofit, right? But it didn't make sense because it's got so many competitive disadvantages. It has a single screen; the seating capacity is too big for some things too small for others. Tiny stage, zero parking, right it's got all these things going against it. But the one advantage that we have over every other venue is that we are the authentic historic theatre. And so that's what we lean into 100%, because that's our advantage.

LL: Oh, so the, what I thought was also interesting, and sort of like connecting it back obviously to Tampa, um the coat of arms. Talk about why, why the decision was made to include Tampa, a homage to Tampa in that.

JB: Well in the valance above the grand curtain in the auditorium, this grand valance that we replicated off of a design cue that we got from a photograph from 1926 about how the screen and in 1926 was framed with this ornate piece. Um, the architects took that, designed the new valance to go with the new grand drape. And when it arrived, there was a surprise for us in the middle of that they had dropped in a coat of arms and in the middle of that coat of arms. They had decided to drop in the city of Tampa's ship from the seal, the mascot. And they put that in there and I call them because I thought, "That's really wonderful. Why did you do that?" And they said, and these are architects from Cleveland and Washington D.C and New York, they said, "Because we felt like we needed to give a tip of the hat to the community, for saving this

building, and for continuing to support it. Because there're not that many communities that have done this kind of work and Tampa needs to be saluted for that." And I just thought that was a wonderful surprise.

LL: Yeah, that's really beautiful. And then you still have—to your point earlier about the authenticity and the preservation—you still have some of the original like, orchestra music stands, the tapestries. Can you talk about how um it's important to, to keep those things around, although like the intercom systems are longer functional?

JB: Right.

LL: Kind of like a museum and a theatre in one?

JB: Yeah, the theatre is much like a museum and an operating theatre all rolled into one. And that's both the joy and the challenge too because it's got to operate but we don't throw anything out. We, we, you know, and that's both good and bad, because we don't have any place to put stuff. But um, if something original breaks, we don't toss it, we put it in a closet somewhere. And we wait until we can restore it and put it back out. But the um, the music stands the old intercom system that does not work anymore, but we're going to restore it for its looks—I mean, we've got radios now, so we don't need an 1826 intercom system—but all of those things are important. It's part of the fabric of the theatre.

And I will tell you that the other Eberson atmospherics that I've had the pleasure of visiting, they're all wonderful, but none of them have, nearly the original furnishings that we have. We've got it almost all, we've got it all. And it's all here. And it's part of the texture of the building. I remember walking through uh an Eberson atmospheric that had been restored, and it was beautiful, but I was walking through with some staff members from the Tampa Theatre and I kept whispering to them, "What's missing? There's something missing. It's beautiful but what's—?" And then it dawned on me that it's the furnishings. The tables, the lamps, the chairs, the mirrors, all of those original pieces, which are still here make up that fabric and makes—we are by far the most complete, intact Eberson atmospheric in the world and it's because we've got it all. We've got all of these furnishings. And that says something about prior management, it says something about the city's foresight to save it immediately instead of letting it languish for years. But we're very fortunate to have all of that.

LL: So, what were your impressions of the theatre's uh, fortunes when you arrived? You kind of touched on that a little bit earlier. But um, what kind of financial disposition was it in?

JB: When I arrived in 1985, the theatre was in okay condition. Uh, it was doing some concert events, and it was doing its sort of one-off repertory film program, but that program was already in decline. It had good attendance in the early eighties but by the mid-eighties, with the changes in, you know, VCRs and cable coming into people's homes, the appetite for that type of program began to decline. Um, but it was, I will give prior management credit in that they had done a good job of standing the theatre up and getting it up and running. Uh, and my challenge was just to figure out, you know, what's next? What do we need to do? Where's, where's, where's all this going? And how do we evolve and change? So um, it was not a basket case, it was, it was, it was in good shape.

LL: Okay. You the first couple years were challenging, or the most challenging?

JB: Yeah, it was, the first couple of years that I got here were challenging, because when I got here, I, I had moved to a theatre that was on its surface doing really well. Attendance was pretty good. What I didn't fully appreciate when I first started was that the decline in that prior programming model had already begun. And then as I looked at charts from the early eighties and then after my first a second year I realized, "Oh, it's, it's going down, and it's going down, the revenues are going down." So that was challenging to sort of figure out how do we right this ship in the face of all of these headwinds that we've got in the marketplace? Um, and the answer was to, to get back to first run film to give us the ability to, to be more relevant to people. Uh, and it's not that we would totally abandon showing uh older films, but the new films were the way for us to get going again.

LL: Um, how does a nonprofit theatre differ, differ from a private?

JB: I like to say that nonprofit is just a tax status. It's not a business model. Uh I mean, we like to show profit. The difference though really is in what happens to the profits, right? In the, in the case of commercial cinema, those profits are given out to the shareholders, right? In the case of a nonprofit, when we have a profit, we plow it right back into the organization, either into the facility or the mission of the program, right? So, it's just about sort of, it's a different focus. It's not that profits are bad. We love profits, and we've been fortunate to most years post profits. It's just about what happens to those profits when they're posted. So that's the difference.

LL: And then, what are your some, what were some of your most important partners in and out of the theatre, over the years?

JB: Gosh, the city of Tampa is to be credited for being um—I wouldn't say backstopped because it was certainly not a blank check relationship we have with them, but because the city helps to maintain the building, that if we get if we get to a point where we just can't figure something out, or something really major has gone wrong, then the city sends the calvary, cavalry, and we, the city sends their folks and they come and help. So, the city partnership is really important. But other partnerships with many organizations. University of South Florida is their Department of Education. The Florida Center for Instructional Technology, which is the key partner behind our successful summer film camp. They're a key partner. The Tampa Downtown Partnership has always been very supportive. Um, all of our promoting partners, the community, nonprofit organizations, that we have an affinity with. Um, all of those, we couldn't do any of what we do without those types of partnerships. So, in some ways, that's uh, that speaks to the fact that when you're a mission-based community centered organization um, you can have those partnerships that are meaningful. And it's not, it's not always about making money, right? It's about making the community a better place. So that's why those partnerships are super important.

LL: Mn-hmm. <Affirmative>. Um and besides from transitioning to first run films, what were other creative choices that you made in regards to programming changes?

JB: Um, I think in the early nineties, after we had had um a good number of years with first run, um I actually took a chance because all of my colleagues that were running similar film programs around the country they were, they were telling me that there was no box office, there

was no future in showing classic films. And I thought they were wrong. So, I said, “All right, well, we're going to try this, we're going to do a summer classic movie series, and it's going to be on Sunday afternoons at three o'clock. Always on Sunday afternoons at three o'clock, we're not going to throw curveballs at the audience.” And it took a couple of years uh of that model before it caught on. And now it's um, it's one of our most popular series. I think it's the longest running classics film series in the state of Florida now. And, today, any Sunday afternoon, between June and August, you come to the Tampa Theatre around three o'clock, and you'll find at least seven hundred people. And it's not uncommon for us to sell out a film that's fifty or sixty years old.

And part of that is, is it's, it's beyond wanting to see that film, it gets back to sort of what Marcus Loew¹³ was saying, “it's about going to that theatre, not that movie.” Although, the movie does help drive some films more than others. But people love the experience of coming into this building and having that experience, almost like time travel, of watching a film like *Casablanca* on the screen with twelve hundred people they don't know, in the dark. And everyone's seen the movie, but you're all having that communal experience together. And I, I don't take credit for much, but I will take credit for recognizing that there probably was an audience for classic films in a building like Tampa Theatre, not in a modern cinema or nothing. If it were in any other building, certainly not as grand as Tampa Theatre, it probably wouldn't work. But it's the combination of this building, this architecture, and those classic great films. And then once you hit a certain point, you hit this critical mass of people five hundred, six hundred, seven hundred. Then all of a sudden, even, even though six hundred people is only 50% capacity for us, when you get six hundred people in here, it feels full. It feels really successful and then there's this buzz that happens if you've, you know, we've all been in cinemas um that you're watching a film for the first time and the place is packed, and there's an electricity. Not just because you're seeing it for the first time, but because you're seeing it with so many other people. And when you get a big crowd like that, then it's just kind of a magical thing.

LL: All right. So, I think on the phone call we had the other day, you said, “Every day is an interesting day in the film business. (Laura Landry and John Bell both laugh).” Can you elaborate on that?

JB: Uh distributors are uh fickle, and they're weird, and they're having an identity crisis of their own, you know, right now. I mean, you know, they're trying to figure out which way is up with streaming versus theatrical releases and what's that combo look like? And do we go, you know, they don't know what they're doing. They're, they're still experimenting. And so, you know, we just had a case where we had been told that a film that we typically show around the holidays was not available anymore. They were pulling it this year for some special stupid reason. And so, we put together our series, and we announced the series and literally the day after we announced the series, the distributor said, “Oh, no, we changed our mind. You can book it now if you want.” And it's like, really, come on. I mean, they don't. It's just, it's just an odd time. Uh and I suppose that would be a true statement at any point in the theatres' hundred-year history. It's an odd time

¹³ Marcus Loew (1870-1927) was a pioneer of the motion picture industry and the creator of Loew's Theatres and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) film studio.

to be in the film business, (John Bell laughs), because it, because it seems to be there's just, it's different challenges, right? Because it's a constantly evolving, um, media.

And it's also because the change, the pace of change in the film industry is now so accelerated uh, that it's hard to sort of know which way is up. But I do know this. I mean, even though it's challenging, and sometimes frustrating, and we want to just throw things at the wall sometimes, Tampa Theatre is going to be fine, right? We have to be because that's our mission, right? We have to figure this out. But one of the things, if you look at the long arc of Tampa Theatre's history, it's always adapted, right? It's always adapted to changing conditions, whether macro or micro, right? So, uh that's one of the things that I think all management has done at the theatre and, and will continue to do is that the theatre will always survive. It, the programming and how it gets on the screen or on the stage may change and evolve um but that's all, you know, stuff that we have to figure out behind the scenes. The audience, all the audience cares about is that, is something that will give them a good reason to come to the Tampa Theatre. And if, if management does that they'll be there.

LL: Okay, let's talk ghosts. (Laura Landry laughs). Um, tell me about Mr. Foster.

JB: Foster Fenley, what a great name right? But his, his nickname was even better. His nickname was Fink. And he was the projectionist here from the early thirties until he passed away in the mid-sixties. And um, we believe he's the most prominent ghost that we have? Apparently, we have more than one if you listen to the experts. But Fink is the sort of superstar ghost that we have. And it was shortly after he passed away that the replacement projectionists began to report strange shenanigans going on in the booth at very inopportune times for the life of a projectionist. Because the projectionists back then in the sixties, they were having to do changes every twenty minutes on the thirty-five millimeters. And so, they had to be focused on the screen and what was happening to throw the switch at the right time. And it was at those very times when they couldn't be distracted that there would be distractions like a screwdriver rolling off the table behind them, or a door opening and closing and no one's there. Taps on the shoulder, keys jingling, anything. And it sort of made sense they began to realize this is probably Fink because Fink was known as a practical joker in, in life. And uh now in the afterlife he's also a practical joker.

So, we have embraced Fink because first of all any theatre with its salt has a ghost, and we've got several, and Fink is a good one. Because he's a benign spirit. He's not trying to murder our audiences. He's just having fun with whoever happens to be here. So, we've embraced him. We actually still have a mailbox on the second floor of Florida Avenue that says Fink over the top and every now and then if I pass it, I check to see if he's gotten any mail. But today if something goes wrong in the building, if the server goes down, it's a, it's a building wide Fink alert, right? That's just, something's going on, we can't figure it out, let's go fix it. Fink, you just need to calm down. So, we love Fink.

LL: Yeah. And do you have a personal story that you can share?

JB: I do have a per—my only encounter, and I've always been kind of a skeptic, right? With, with ghosts. Others on the staff not so much, they're like all in but I've always been kind of a

skeptic. But my encounter with Fink was very late, one night, and I was completing uh some paperwork after a concert event and the concert was over. This was, it must have been one o'clock in the morning. The crews were gone, volunteers gone, ushers gone, everyone's gone. I'm the only one left in the building. I'm finishing up the paperwork because I don't want to have to leave it until tomorrow. So, and then I realized when I'm about done, I realized, oh, I left a receipt, in an office downstairs. So, I go out my office door, go down the hallway, I get halfway down the stairs, and I hear, like thirty feet behind me the, my office door slams shut. And I just kind of looked at my watch and I said, "You know what, it's one o'clock in the morning, I should probably just go." So, I didn't even turn around. I just went straight out the door. Didn't bother to turn off any lights or anything. I figured it was Fink's way of telling me You need to go home. So, I did.

LL: (Laura Landry laughs). I would too, as well. Um and so any other ghosts? You mentioned other ghosts? Any other ghosts?

JB: Uh, you know, I've been told that at least five other presences that we have. Uh, there's the lady in white on the mezzanine. There's um—and Jill is going to kill me because I'm gonna get all this wrong but uh Jill is actually the, the resident ghost expert.

LL: Oh, okay. I'll have to ask her (Laura Landry laughs).

JB: Yeah. So, she's, she's the keeper of all the ghost stories. Uh but then there's the uh, the man in the fedora, who's in seat three o' eight. Uh, you know, all these presences that are purported to be here actually make perfect sense to me. Because if you're stuck somewhere in the afterlife, this is not a bad place to hang out. And in fact, I fully intend on haunting this place when I'm done. (John Bell laughs).

LL: (Laura Landry laughs). I see. Um, can you tell me about Rosa Rio¹⁴?

JB: Oh, Rosa Rio. So, I met Rosa in the late nineties, and I remember she was standing at the back of the hall. She's, she was a petite woman, and she was, she was an older woman, like older woman, right? And she was here for an event that was featuring the theatre organ, and someone introduced me to her and said, "Oh, this is Rosa Rio." And at the time, I didn't know who Rosa Rio was, but apparently this person introduced me to her and was looking at me like, kind of a big deal. So, then I learned after the show, she went up and she sat at the theatre organ, and she said, "Oh, I think I played this instrument." And I said, "What?" And so, turns out, she started her career accompanying silent films in New York. She went to the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. She was a very accomplished uh organist, and she was a trailblazer. So, as I got to know her down through the years, I, I just, was just amazed. She would tell the best stories.

So, she told the story—so after the silent films, of course, most of theatre organists weren't needed anymore. So many of them transitioned to other things but she was in New York so, she was hired by NBC¹⁵ to be their studio organist for the various shows that they had. So, Rosa was

¹⁴ Rosa Rio (1902-2010) was the stage name for Elizabeth Raub, an American theatre organist who played organ intermissions and accompanied silent movies.

¹⁵ NBC stands for the National Broadcasting Company. NBC was founded in 1926 and is the first and oldest major broadcast network in the United States.

hired to be the studio organist for the shows uh, at NBC. And she said, “She got a call”, uh—the way she got that job is Rosa Rio got a call that the organist was sick, and could she come substitute to play with the orchestra in the radio studio? So, she said, “Sure, I’ll come down.” So, she played, and she did fine. And then the original organist, I think passed away, and so she stayed a little longer. And, but she still wasn’t given the job, permanently and she finally went up to the manager, and she said, “Excuse me, um. Why are you still looking for an organist? Cause I’m here” And, and the manager said, “Well, we were kind of looking for a man”. And she said, without missing a beat, “Well, are you looking for a man or are you looking for an organist?” I thought, okay, well, yeah, she’s, she’s got moxie. So, she got the job. And she stayed there for decades.

And then, so she retired to Sun City Center. That’s when she came to Tampa Theatre for the first time. And when she, she went to play the instrument after a show it was amazing. It was, I mean, there’re organists and then there’re organists, right? And Rosa was just remarkable. And so, she would write and compose, in in the modern day, she would write new scores for the silent films that we would show. And she became a rock star. So anytime we would have Rosa Rio onstage performing for a silent film, the theatre was absolutely packed. Buses from Sun City would arrive. Uh and because, and we would sell out all of these shows. But she was uh, she was a remarkable woman.

I remember being at her home in Sun City for a dinner party once and it was a small gathering. And she looked at me after she had had a couple glasses of wine. And she said, “I bet you’d like to know how old I am.” And I said, “Well, yes, ma’am. I would like to know that, but my mama raised me right, so I know, never to ask.” And she said, “Well, that’s good because when people are rude, and they ask how old I am, I just say, honey, age is just the number in minds unlisted.”” But she felt close enough to me and with enough glasses of wine that she looked at me, and she said, “Next month, I’ll be a hundred and five.” And she was still performing. And you could have knocked me over with a feather I had no clue. I mean, I had always tried to piece together like, okay, so if she started in the early twenties, you know, she wasn’t two then she was—But she remembered when the Titanic sank, as news. And she finally passed away, just shy of her hundred and eighth birthday and she had performed six months prior to that at the theatre. So, she was a remarkable soul and just an accomplished musician, and um, really a trailblazer in many respects.

LL: Yeah, lucky that you got to meet her.

JB: Yeah.

LL: Yeah.

JB: Yeah she was um, she was one of my favorite people on the planet.

LL: What kind of staff did it take to run the theatre when you first got here? And then how does that differ from the staff that it takes nowadays?

JB: Um, we had um, I think, seven full time when I arrived, and then some part time folks for concessions and ticket takers and stuff, just as we do today. Today, it takes a full-time staff of

eighteen and a part-time staff of about twenty-five. Um and we will grow some um but that feels right. I mean, I think if you ask any of the staff members, they'll say we need more help, (John Bell laughs), but, because we're all really super busy. But there's a lot of moving parts these days, there's more things that we have to cover than we've ever had to cover before. From the standpoint of public relations and media to operations and the technology that's involved in running a building, even though it's an old building. It's, it's got to be a modern building from its infrastructure and production standpoint. So um, it's grown, but, but not in a way that it feels bloated at all.

LL: So, uh we're going to transition to programming.

JB: Okay.

LL: So, can you talk about the current utilization of Tampa Theatre?

JB: We are opening our doors more than six hundred times a year, six hundred show times a year. So, it's a heavy mix of film, both new and classic film series. Uh, and then concert events, live events, community rentals. Nonprofits rent the building for a discounted rate. We do school graduations here. We've done weddings, we've done memorial services. I mean, it's a very busy building. So, I think the, the identity of the building is probably more centered on film, because that's its heritage and that's what we continue to do, but we're constantly sort of adjusting that mix as opportunities present themselves to experiment.

LL: Mm-hmm. <Affirmative>.

JB: Um yeah, we do rent out the building for nonprofit organizations to do their thing, uh to raise money or to have their own special events. We have weddings, we have memorial services. Um, we use the building frequently and we're always experimenting with different ways to adjust that programming mix.

LL: So how does this building lend itself more to being, to, to showing films than a big live production?

JB: You know, it's almost sort of by default. One of the unique things about Tampa Theatre that's not necessarily good is that as a movie palace, we have a tiny stage. Most movie palaces of the era had a pretty generous stage and so some of them have been converted to performing arts use. But Tampa Theatre stage depth is tiny. It's like eight feet to the back wall. So that means we can't fly scenery. So, we can't really handle theatricals. So almost by default, if you're going to be an active building, you need to have a robust film program. Um so, we can handle some live events, but nothing particularly huge because again, the stage is very small. So um, you know, that was kind of a shock for me when I got here, even though I'd seen the stage and I knew it, but I didn't realize how limiting that could be in some respects. But I quickly adapted because I just looked at the staff and said, "Well, let's not worry about what we can't do. Let's not think about expanding the stage. Let's not worry about what we can't do. What can we do that's really good? What are we good at? And let's focus on that and let's be the best at that." So that's why we've continued to always have a heavy dose of film and probably always will. Um but to the extent that there are live events that make sense to come in. We love having those as well.

LL: How has popular programming changed or stayed the same? And then if you were to project into the future, how do you think it will continue to change?

JB: You know, I think that storytelling is still storytelling whether it's uh silent film in 1926, or it's a modern-day, brand-new film. They may be made differently, and the content certainly changes, but the real reason people want to go to a film is to learn something or be entertained but it's all story based. What's the story? People love storytelling. They love to be told stories. And so that's the constant, you know? The, the tastes change, just like fashion, right? That changes, you know, hairstyles change but the basis is still the same.

LL: So, you think a hundred years from now, people will still feel that kind of like, same experience of coming into your um, um?

JB: I hope so. I hope that they will and I'm pretty confident that they will. I mean, when the building turns two hundred, I think it will, I think will only grow in value for people as a place to go into experience because who knows how we will be consuming media one hundred years from now. But, um, it's certainly different now than it was in 1926, but yet people still love coming to the Tampa Theatre, because it's a unique authentic experience.

LL: Can you talk about the intimacy? So um, I think I read that it's regarded as one of the most intimate concert venues in the Bay Area. Um how does the design contribute to that?

JB: Well, part of it is that this is where the small stage comes to our advantage. So, one of the reasons that we're considered such an attractive intimate space in which to see a concert, experience a concert, or for a performer to engage with an audience in a venue, is that the stage is really small. Which means that the fourth stage, which covers what used to be the orchestra pit, is in the same room with the audience. So, you're right there together. So, a stand-up comedian, or a singer, they're on the edge of the stage and if you're an audience member, in the very top of the balcony, you're still only eighty feet from the stage. And if you're in the front row of the mezzanine, you're twenty-five feet from the stage. So, it's very close, because you're in the same room with the artist. You're not separated by the moat of an orchestra pit. It's not a big hall, right? And then the architecture is sort of enveloping too, it sort of, the auditorium from the proscenium¹⁶ back sort of wraps around and hugs the audience. So, it has this very tight feel to it and very cozy feel to it. In spite of the fact that it's with twelve-hundred seats, it's still kind of a large space but it does have that intimate feel that's unique.

LL: Can you share some accolades that the theatre has received?

JB: The theatre has been fortunate to receive so many accolades, that it's, it's a long list to the point where now we have to keep it on a computer file and just scroll and keep scrolling because it's a very long list. But some of my favorites are *Life Magazine* named us one of America's twenty-one wonders, which I love. The BBC¹⁷ named Tampa Theatre, one of the ten most beautiful theatres in the world. The Motion Picture Association of America, those guys, called us one of the ten best theatres in the world. And people ask me, "What's your favorite accolade?"

¹⁶ The part of a theatre stage in front of the curtain.

¹⁷ The British Broadcasting Corporation.

And I don't have a favorite except I do like all the ones that end in, 'in the world', (John Bell laughs), those are all pretty special. And the accolades have only seemed to increase over time. And some of that is just the way media has sort of exploded in different ways and platforms but, yeah, I mean, those accolades that have come in? There, there's so many, and I think it's just recognizing that this is one of the great rooms in America.

LL: You mentioned the summer film program. Can you talk a little bit about the other educational programs?

JB: Yeah. The summer camp is one of the best things that we do. Um it's with the University of South Florida and the Department of Education. So, teachers during the summertime uh, come in and they become the camp counselors. So, they're small groups twenty at a time, third through fifth grade, and then another group in the afternoon, fourth, fifth grade, or sixth grade through high school. And in the span of one week, we take these kids, introduce them to each other, move them into pods of groups, small groups, and then they have to figure out what story they want to tell that week. And so, they have to storyboard it. They have to first come up with the idea, right? What's the story arc, if there is an arc. Um and then they storyboard it, they figure out the shots, they make the shots, then they edit, and then by Friday, they've got a little three-minute film. And it, it not that at any one of them, we're not trying to make the next Steven Spielberg¹⁸, although that would be awesome if that happened, but really, for us, what's really important and for the university what's important is that we're teaching these young people the creative process of making a film, making a video. Because we firmly believe, as George Lucas¹⁹ does, that visual literacy is vitally important that it is the language of the twenty-first century and just as the written word has a grammar and structure, so do the visual arts. And once children understand that process, it is amazing the kind of transformation that we see.

I had one parent tell me that she said, "It's wonderful, but I can never watch a movie with my child again, because they're constantly dissecting the decisions the director has made about the camera angle, or the lighting, right, or the music cues, right?" So, they're deconstructing the film in their head, which is a really healthy thing, right? Because we're assaulted by videos and commercials all the time and when children understand now that there's a process and a reason behind the way something is presented to you on film, it's a very liberating and empowering thing for them to learn.

LL: Mm-hmm. <Affirmative>. So, what do you like, absolutely love about Tampa Theatre? I know you probably love a lot, but if you had to pick one thing?

JB: Oh, gosh, I think um, watching the expression on people's faces when they walk in, and you can tell who's been here before, and who is coming in for the first time. Because the people who are here for the first time, will sort of slow down upon entry and begin to soak it in and realize that, oh, this is very different. (John Bell laughs). This is not what I was expecting. Um, and you can see their jaws hit the floor. I, I love all of that about watching audiences interact with the building. One of the things I love is when I see patrons giving their friends, who are obviously

¹⁸ Steven Spielberg is a famous American film director, producer, and screenwriter.

¹⁹ George Lucas is an American filmmaker best known for creating the *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* franchises.

visiting from out of town, a walking tour of the building before the show starts as if they own it. And I love that, right? Because I, it tells me that our patrons and our community has this sense of proprietorship over the building, which is correct, right? They do.

This is their building, and they're proud of it. And I like watching those interactions and people sort of taking in the building. Um, whether or not they enjoy the show is sort of, you know, it's important certainly but it's not as important as how they react to the building, the environment. And I've got many staff members here, uh who their first experience coming to the Tampa Theatre was as a child on a student field trip. And to a person when I asked him, "Do you remember what show you saw?" And they said "No, I don't, but I remember coming into the building. I remember the impact that it had." So, I think it gets back to just why it was built, right? It was built to overwhelm people it was built to just let them escape and let them dream. And watching people do that, have that kind of emotional reaction to being in this environment is really rewarding.

LL: Do you, you mentioned during our pre-interview that one of your favorite events was the naturalization ceremony? Can you share that?

JB: Yeah. I'm often asked "What is the favorite show that we've ever had here?" And there's a long list of really great memories that I have, but I think the strongest emotional reaction I had, for whatever reason, was for a naturalization ceremony that we had, that we hosted. And we were turned into a federal U.S court for the afternoon we had about four hundred immigrants who had completed the naturalization process and were becoming U.S citizens. The theatre was filled with them and their families. And so, I was standing sort of down front looking back up at the audience and I was just taken with the tears that were tears of joy that were streaming down the faces of people as they were, had become U.S citizens and they were waving the US flags. And there was, it was just so joyous. And, uh, it's an, it perhaps for some people, that may be an odd answer, because, you know, we've had Jimmy Fallon, and Annie Lennox, and David Burt. We've had this, Ray Charles, right? We've had all of these great performers on the stage and they're all great. I've got my memories of those but for me, the most impactful one, for whatever reason, was that naturalization ceremony.

LL: I think that it's important to talk about COVID²⁰, because that was a huge, you know, thing that people are gonna remember well into the future.

JB: Yeah.

LL: And it affected their community in an unprecedented way. Um, so how did you guys survive during the pandemic?

JB: We survived the pandemic sort of day by day, like everybody else in the beginning. We, we knew that it was going to be bad. We didn't know it was going to be that bad, right? We thought, we knew pretty early on like a month before we had to close that it looked like we were gonna have to close, until it got sorted out. Um, but we could not have foreseen that it would be a full year before we could reopen. So, navigating that was certainly a challenge for us and everybody

²⁰ Referring to the global pandemic of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

else. Um but we were able to do so. Fortunately, we had just experienced a couple of really strong years, so we had banked enough reserves that we were able to, we were able to keep the staff. Everyone got a pay cut, and while no one thanked me for that no one complained either, because I think everyone realized that this is, this is uh, this is bad.

So, we kept um trying to figure out how to, you know, navigate this thing. We have a brilliant staff that figured out how to continually keep popping up in social media and give people opportunities to interact with us from a distance. We did curbside popcorn pickup, which didn't make any money, but it gave us a reason to get people to come by and say hello. And um, we had streamed a silent film, live. And you know, that's the only time that I would encourage anyone to watch a, (John bell laughs), silent film on television. But uh, that was a success. Uh so we just kept figuring it out. We, we partnered with Tampa General Hospital, and their infectious disease folks to advise us. Alright, so if we're going to reopen, how do we do it responsibly, right, what does that look like? What's the social distancing look like? What are the ground rules? We knew all the obvious stuff but then they also pointed to the air quality in the building because we were running an antiquated air handler that we didn't have the right ratio of outside air, we couldn't, you know. So, it was time to replace that. So that was six hundred thousand dollars.

And we got some federal CARES Act²¹ money to replace it. And so, I thought, "Oh, good, we're home free here. We've got this money." And then the Feds told us—because I was going over the plans with them—and they said, "Oh, well, no, we're not going to pay to remove the old air handler." I said, "Excuse me?" They said, "No, we can't, we'll pay for the new one. But we're not going to pay for you to—" I said, "It's the size of a bus. How am I, what I'm supposed to—" (John Bell laughs). So, I argued with the Fed for like a month um, and I got nowhere. So finally, I got some local dollars to remove the old one. This is such a stupid story, but ultimately, we got a brand-new air handler, right. And we finally got it done; that allowed us to open exactly one year to the day that uh we had closed. And it was a slow opening, right? It took us about a year before we really felt like audiences were ready to return. But um, you know, I again, point to the brilliant staff and the supportive board that we have that we were able to figure that out at the time when, you know, no one went to pandemic school, right? You don't, you don't get taught how do, (John Bell laughs), how do you navigate that? Um, but we were able to survive it. And it's just another thing that, that we can now chalk up to the theatre's being able to adapt and survive, right? We like to say the theatre has survived the Great Depression, World War II, all seven police academy movies, and a global pandemic.

LL: Um if you could describe Tampa Theatre in one sentence, what would it be?

JB: Tampa Theatre is a spectacular piece of architecture that is a factory where magic is made.

LL: And then if you could describe Tampa in one sentence?

²¹ The CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act provided emergency assistance and health care response for individuals, families, and businesses affected by the 2020 coronavirus pandemic.

JB: Tampa is an eclectic but tight knit community. It's a community that comes together when it needs to and it's a community whose strength is its diversity. Tampa Theatre is a spectacular architectural masterpiece and it's a factory where magic is made.

LL: Is there anything pressing that I didn't ask you that you wanted to share?

LL: I do want to tell one story that, because I think I skipped over you were asking me like some of the best decisions and worst decisions. One of my worst decisions was one year for the holiday classic series. We decided, and I'll take the blame for it, that we should switch it up a little bit. Why are we going to show *It's a Wonderful Life*? So, we didn't put it on the schedule. So, we announced the schedule, and you would have thought the world had come to an end because my phone started blowing up with people calling saying, "Mr. Bell, I want to thank you for ruining my family's, Christmas." I said, "Excuse me, what?" They said, "Well, it's a, it's a Christmas tradition for us that we all come to see *It's a Wonderful Life* just before Christmas." So, I'm not stupid, I scrambled, and we put it back on the schedule, but it just goes to show you that you don't mess with tradition, right?

And, and it, it you know, *It's a Wonderful Life* is this, and some of the other classics like *Casablanca* are like this, too, it's these, these very well-known films that everybody has seen. And they yet we still pack the theatre for that. And everybody's already seen it but they want to have that experience of coming into the building and seeing it again with people they don't know. And we all cry at the end. Um and there's no shortage of ways to consume media now. You could watch these films on your phone if you wanted to. I don't know why you would, but you could. But I think it speaks well for Tampa Theatre's future that there's always going to be this desire to have these types of unique experiences in this great movie palace.

Andy Huse (AH): You talked a lot about this, you know, being a movie theatre. And this was that was designed as a movie theatre, right? Yeah, at what point did it switch to a performance venue?

JB: When the theatre was being saved in the seventies, there was actually a, a debate because the idea of a new Performing Arts Center in Tampa was just beginning to get some traction, right? And ultimately, that became what is today the Straz Center. Uh, one of the country's great performing arts centers, by the way. But at the time, there was some concern by the performing arts center backers that if Tampa Theatre were saved, would that mean we're not getting the Performing Arts Center. And it was a fair question but it's kind of a no brainer, this theatre cannot handle, at all, most of the performing arts that are out there because of the stage, the tiny stage. So, um, but there was the realization when the theatre was saved that yes, it was going to show some film, but um let's cover what used to be the orchestra pit because with an eight-foot-deep stage we're not going to be hosting um, you know, an opera of *La bohème* here, because the stage can't handle it. So, let's cover the orchestra pit with a fourth stage and that gave us the ability, that gave the theatre the ability to host comedians and music groups, and touring attractions, and some small live events. So, it was never really considered like a true performing arts venue, full blown performing arts venue. So, it was always this sort of hybrid. Um, and even

in the early days, in 1926, there was a live component because the pre-show was vaudeville²². There was you know, but vaudeville didn't require any stage depth, it was all like one or two people going off and on stage like this. So um, it's always kind of been a hybrid, but it's never had its primary focus as a performing arts venue.

You know, forecasting what shape and form entertainment is going to take ten years from now is a challenge, let alone a hundred years from now, but uh if we've learned anything over the last hundred years it's that the theatre can adapt. So, we do know enough about the infrastructure that needs to go into this building uh so that we're positioning it to serve the entertainment needs of Tampa as it grows, whatever that may be. So, we want to make the theatre as versatile as possible. So that as future management takes hold of the building, they have the tools, and the equipment, and the infrastructure. They will have all of that in place to be able to adapt as needed. Now, can we foresee everything? No, but we can, we know what the technology is today and for the foreseeable future. And, um, it's it just about giving management the tools that they need to adapt and keep the building moving forward and staying relevant to whatever the zeitgeist²³ is at the moment.

End of interview.

²² Vaudeville is a type of variety entertainment that features a mixture specialty acts such as burlesque comedy and song and dance. This theatrical genre was mostly popular in the United States in the early 20th century.

²³ A German word referring to the general intellectual, moral, and cultural climate of an era. It literally translates to “spirit of the time.”