

## Kenneth Christensen

**Daniel Schindler** [00:00:09] All right. So it is August 15th, and this is an oral history with Kenneth Christensen. Hi, Ken.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:00:17] Hi, Dan, It's a pleasure to be here today. It really is. I am so thrilled to be here in Virginia City and to talk about the Virginia City players. What a incredible group of people that have converged on this town over, what, 60 years?

**Daniel Schindler** [00:00:34] I think it's 76 years.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:00:37] 76 years. This theater company has been entertaining people from all over the world. Really, when you look at it. My name is Kenneth Christensen. I am associated with the Virginia City players as a musical director and a pianist. And I came here in 1988. That was my first season. I worked consecutively from 1988 to 1994, did a brief stint in 1996, did the full season in 1999 and then a half season in 2000. What was interesting is that my career in Virginia City was supposed to start in 1984 when the Brewery Follies. And I should clarify that I was the musical director at the Brewery Follies. The Brewery Follies started in 1984, and I was hired at that time to play the piano in the Brewery Follies. And at that time, Bruce Hurlbut was the director of the Virginia City Players. But what ended up happening is there was a complication in my graduating from Montana State University with my undergraduate degree, and I had to go to summer school so I could not come here in 1984. And consequently, Bruce hired me in 1985, and he hired me in 1986 and he hired me in 1987. But due to complications, I was not able to come to Virginia City. And so finally, this all happened in 1988, and I am so happy that that opportunity was presented to me. And what was really interesting about it is that, at first I wasn't going to do it, but there was a gut instinct, so to speak, that said, you know, you should of you should try this. And so I did. And boy, am I glad that I did that because it was a huge, that experience was a phenomenal effect on me; had a phenomenal effect, I should say, on my professional career.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:02:45] Can you talk a little bit about. What the show was like in 1988, and you can even go into how you've seen it change.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:02:55] Yes.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:02:57] What did you walk into in 1988.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:02:59] Well, I knew what the Brewery Follies consisted of because I had seen the show in 1987. I'd come down here with a group of friends and we saw the show. The show was designed at that time to be a variety show, but in a cabaret style. And so the the content of the show was vintage, meaning, you know, songs of the late 19th century, early 20th century, but also modern and contemporary music at that time was allowed to be performed into the Follies. And so the show was very eclectic. There was Broadway music, you know, there was vaudeville music there. There was modern contemporary music. It consisted of of two female voices and two male voices and a musical director and a piano player. And it was very sophisticated, I would say at that time it was under a different directorship than it is now. So Bruce had an idea of what he wanted the Follies to be. Actually. I don't know if you know this, but it was the Follies were created as an overflow for the Opera House. So the Opera House at that time, you know, the shows were sold out every single night and people would be traveling through Virginia City as tourists. And it's like, we're going to stay here. Let's go to a show. The show was

sold out. So the Opera..., excuse me, the Brewery was a place for people to go to if they couldn't get tickets to the Opera House. And so in 1988, the directorship changed. And so Bill Koch took over at that particular time. And so I think the emphasis more was again on variety, but more so on comedy, more dancing, more more interaction with the audience. I think that is the biggest change that has occurred over the years was the interaction with the audience. And so that style pretty much maintained itself through my tenure as musical director.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:05:27] What did you find most exciting working here? What drew you back? Because you worked here many summers. So what kept bringing you back to do this?

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:05:37] What drew me here were several things. One, the people that I worked with, I worked with some amazing people. You know, I think back off of names. You know, Paula LaCote, who was just brilliant, and Eric, I can't remember Eric's last name was in that cast. Eric Haynes, Eric Haynes, and of course, Mike Verdon. Mike is just absolutely brilliant. Mike and I in those days were sort of like Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon in the show. We really worked very, very well together and we played off of each other a lot. I was sort of the straight man and Mike was the comedian, and those were just wonderful experiences. So the people that I worked with were just amazing. Not only that, but the people of the community. There was some wonderful people back in those days that lived here in this community that added so much color to the whole experience. And we had just wonderful times. We almost became family. I remember community members would host us for dinners and host us for picnics and host us for barbecues and we they just we became so intertwined with them. And it was really a lot of fun. We worked very hard in those days. We produced two shows during this, the production of the second show. We'd be rehearsing from 930 in the morning until five, and then we'd break for dinner and then we would perform a show that night and then we would do it again, you know, for a 2 or 3 week period. And, you know, we worked hard, but we also played hard, too. For a young person in those days, it was really a lot of fun.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:07:45] You talked a little bit about community. A lot of people that I've talked to have sort of pinpointed community as a reason they've come back and the reason that they're drawn to this town. Can you talk a little bit more about what the what you feel the show means to the community?

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:08:03] I think the show is very important to them. They, you know, it was a source of entertainment, but because of the audience participation, they felt a part of the show, that they were part of the show. And I think that's what drew them back constantly. And so they would have relatives come and visit them that weekend, or they'd have family reunions and friends that would come and visit them in Virginia City, and they would bring all those people to the show. Mike was notorious for audience contact numbers in the front row that we commonly referred to as the hot seat. And we would constantly have local people come up and say, Well, you know, my father in law is coming or my mother in law is coming or or so-and-so is coming, and can we put them in the hot seat? And, you know, will you vamp them and this and that and everything else? I think that that meant a lot to the community and the fact that that we lived here, you know, for some of these community members, we would frankly frequent their shops if they were business owners or, you know, support their businesses and things like that. And so we became very involved in the community. And, you know, they reciprocated in terms of coming and seeing us and, you know, we would support their businesses and the like.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:09:26] For those of you who don't know, because it's it's not, it's not performed a lot; the cabaret style production that you see down there. Can you describe from from your point of view at the piano what that means? A cabaret style production?

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:09:40] What a cabaret is, the original, from what I understand and correct me if I'm wrong, but the cabarets were variety shows. They were very popular between the two world wars in Paris and in Berlin, from what I understand. And you would have, you know, a very, very small cast. It wasn't a huge cast, you know, maybe a couple of singers and a piano player and it was in a nightclub atmosphere. So alcohol was served. Of course, we do that at the Brewery, beer and wine. And so it was in in an atmosphere of of sitting at a table, you know, in the cabarets back in those days. They would have little lamps on each table. And in some instances they had telephones you so you could call together the other table. But you were in a bar atmosphere, a nightclub, let me put it this way, a nightclub atmosphere. And so it's very festive. It's it's subdued lighting the content, the music that was performed was sophisticated in the sense that it had a lot of double entendre to it. It was very suggestive, but yet in a very sophisticated way as time moved on, from what I understand, the cabarets got just a little bit more risqué in the sense of content. I believe that at certain point in time there was even involved a little bit of nudity. So that sort of gives one description of what a cabaret is or was at that particular time.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:11:28] How did that style adapt down here?

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:11:33] It was a hit. It really was. I remember in 1987 when I first came here, it was so different because nothing like that had been produced. And so, I mean, yes, you had the melodrama at the Opera House and you had the vaudeville, which is a completely different idiom. And then now you're in a place where you're in the Brewery and you're sitting at a table and and you can have a bottle of wine or a bottle of champagne, which they were serving back in those days, a beer or whatnot. And then you would you would sit back and you'd be entertained by a small cast. It was very intimate. And I think that that was very attractive to the audience members. I think they loved that intimacy. They didn't feel, you know, when you're in a huge theater, the separation between audience, orchestra, pit and stage, you were right there.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:12:32] That's what I was sort of... I have said before that I've learned more in the years I worked here about how audiences react to performances than I have in any class.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:12:42] Sure.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:12:43] ... just because they're right there. And watch it , it's immediate.. "That worked... oh, that didn't work", you know right away. It's interesting you were talking about the sophistication of sort of classic cabaret because that was something else that struck me as a, as a young, not performer, but young theater person was, was I sat at the light board and watched you all perform and you did Rhapsody in Blue, this intro to Act two.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:13:12] I've forgotten about that. Yes.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:13:15] And that blew me away that we were doing this sort of risqué cabaret show. But then there was this.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:13:25] I had forgotten about that.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:13:26] Or Claudia would perform an aria.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:13:29] From an opera. That's right.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:13:31] Yeah, I had forgotten about that. And it stopped the audience.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:13:37] That's right. I totally forgotten about that. And, you know, things like that did occur in those cabaret styles. You'd have a violinist, concert violinist come in and play, you know, a Paganini etude or a pianist would play a Chopin etude. You would have things like that of that nature. And I think that what was really extraordinary at the time I was here when when we would do those classical, if you will, performances. Is that. At the time the talent was recognized. And it's like, well, we need to we need to present this. And, you know, George Gershwin, the 1920s, that would that would fit in. You know, Claudia sang if I remember she sang that beautiful aria from Glitter and Be Gay, wasn't it? Leonard Bernstein.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:14:40] I think it was, yeah.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:14:40] And and then, of course, we did. We did some hilarious... Where Claudia was totally serious. We were doing German art song. We did Robert Schumann's song called Widmung, which meaning dedication and it's a love song. And Claudia came out and sang it formally in perfect German and I played the piano for that and Mike was the translator. And of course, he never translated it literally. He translated it into the most comedic prose you've ever heard in your life. And the audience was absolutely on the floor laughing. And every night it was different. We never knew what was going to come out of Mike's mouth in terms of that of that translation. So there you have the seriousness of classic art song, and then you have the brilliance of Mike's comedic timing. It was just it was incredible. It was I mean, and of course, Claudia, Claudia and I were trying to be so serious. You know, it's like The Carol Burnett Show for those of you who remember Tim Conway and and Harvey Korman trying to keep a straight face, it always didn't work.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:16:04] And you were part of the show, too.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:16:06] Yes.

[00:16:07] You were right in front.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:16:08] I was in the front and then the singers were on the stage. And there was always an interplay going on between between all of us and. There was a lot of ad-libbing going on in those days. And sometimes you would you would experience something that, it was the funniest thing you've ever heard of in your life. And I would start laughing and then they would start laughing and then the audience would start laughing, you know, And you're trying to what is it in the theater world? Not break the fourth wall. Is that is that.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:16:42] Yeah. Yeah. There are certain things where you want that distance and then.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:16:46] Yeah but but there were announced that it was especially when we had an audience that was so involved because they encouraged us, so to speak.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:17:06] Speaking of the audiences, the varied so much because sometimes you would have a lot of locals and they were there. And then a lot of times it is a tourist thing. So how did the audience change what you did?

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:17:23] That affected the show a lot because there were nights that we would have audiences that didn't react. And so you want that energy, you want that energy or synergy, I guess, between performer and audience. And so there were nights that we weren't getting any reaction. And I remember those were very difficult performances because, you know, we were trying to you don't want to try too hard to get them to laugh and to get them react. I think they enjoyed it. It's just that they were a very, very quiet group of people. Here is one event that happened that I will never forget. So this was early, maybe early 90s, and the show had started to morph a little bit more into more of the risqué material. And at that time, we had a lot of bus tours come through here. And we were informed for a matinee show. It was on a Saturday that we were going to perform for a particular religious group of people that were going to come and see a show, our show, which is a whole bus load of them. And so we're thinking, I wonder how this act is going to work. I wonder how that act is going to work. We might have to change this. We might have to change that. Mike was absolutely brilliant, how he changed the wording. How he changed his comedic timing. All the double entendres were a little bit more subdued. That audience laughed so hard, and when they walked out of that Brewery, that's all they could talk about was how funny that show was. And it had diverted completely from its original content. I will never forget that. That was amazing because we were all. Oh, no. Oh, no. You know, we didn't want to offend anybody and that they would get up and leave. They loved it.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:19:42] We think that had something to do with... We weren't tied to a script.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:19:47] No, we weren't tied to a script.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:19:49] We weren't tied to how it had been played before.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:19:51] Right, Right. So the artist was, you know, we were I mean, there was a standard of, okay, I'm going to sing this number and this is the content and this is this is the comedic element in which we're going to present this. But, you know, depending on the audience and depending on how things were going, sometimes there was a lot of ad-libbing going on. So you never knew how it was going to turn out. I mean, there was some consistency, but we bent the consistency a little bit.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:20:26] How do you think working at the Brewery has affected your professional career? Because you're a professional musician, professional educator? How was it influenced you?

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:20:37] That's a very good question, and I can answer that as a concert pianist and as a professional musician and an educator. You know, I trained students to perform. We were performing in those days, eight shows a week. So it was a matter of really building your confidence as a performer, being in front of people every single night, being on your game every single night, focusing and concentrating. Those

aspects of being a performer are very, very important. They really are. And so when you're doing that at the interval, we were... eight shows a week. You really became well trained in terms of being a professional musician that had a great, profound influence on me in the classical world. You know, you don't perform as much. I mean, I should say there are intervals, longer intervals of time between performances. Here it was eight performances a week. And so that really helped me in terms of the discipline of being a performer, practicing, making sure you're prepared, reacting at a split second if something goes wrong during a performance, which, you know, happens all the time. How do you deal with a mistake? How do you move forward? Those sorts of things really influenced me. And also in my career I have performed a lot of chamber music, so I've worked with a lot of other people. This experience really prepared me for that because we were an ensemble and so we all were team players and it wasn't a soloist all the time. It was you were working with a group of people, and that helped me tremendously in my career as a as a collaborative artist. It really has. Yeah.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:22:55] What would you tell a young performer who is. Going to come here to work. Or was interested in the performance and coming here to work. What would you tell them about this place? What makes it special.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:23:11] First of all, I would tell them that they were going to have most likely an amazing experience. They're probably going to discover a lot about themselves. How they react, how they work with other people, how they interact with people in the community. And to be very open minded. And to... to soak it all in, to observe. To see what takes place, how it starts, how the show starts, how it germinates and how it ends up. It's hard to answer that question because you never know what's going to happen. But I would encourage any young actor, any young musician, any young technical director, anybody that's involved in theater and music, if they ever had an opportunity to do something like this, to try it out for at least one season, I think they would learn a tremendous amount, not only about the profession, but about themselves.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:24:35] So the theater company here in Virginia City players as a company has been going for 76 summer.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:24:40] Yes.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:24:42] And this is sort of. What has spawned some of this oral history that I'm working on right now. And what about this town? Because Because this is. You have to want to come here.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:24:55] Sure.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:24:56] It's a tourist town. I don't buy that that is the only reason these theaters have lasted so long. I think. I think that. You know, there's something about here that makes it special other than other than it's on the road to Yellowstone National Park or something like that. What do you think it is about this location that makes people continue to come back.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:25:21] Well, that's a very good question. I'm sure that in the course of your interviews, you've had, you know, former players and people associated with the players give you a little bit of history about how the whole company came together. I mean, Virginia City is attractive, first of all, because it's the second territorial capital in the state of Montana. There's a huge historical presence here. And I think that

draws a lot of people here because of what happened in the 1860s in regard to the gold mining, you know, the era of the vigilantes and the like, and, you know, it had a very turbulent, turbulent beginning. And the fact that it's survived all these years is remarkable. With the help of Charlie Bovey and his wife, Sue Bovey, who resurrected the town and supplied it with all the artifacts and the like. So it's unique in that sense that a person coming here, like myself, for example, I've always been attracted to old things and history and the like, and to come here and work here as a part of the theater. But yeah, to experience the historical aspect to the community I think is really special. To go into those displays and see these artifacts from the 1860s, 1870s, 90s, whatever. The music machines, the mechanical instruments, which from what I understand, the collection here is extremely rare in the world that we have that here. And so for, for me personally, that was attractive to be able to work here. But you had experience all of the external opportunities that Virginia City and Nevada City had to offer. And for me, it was in those days and still is, you know, quite, quite remarkable to come here and and experience that. And so I think, you know, how could you be bored in Virginia City? How could you possibly be bored in this town during the summer months? I always found something to do, to go explore, to go see, hike up to Boot Hill look at all the graves, you know, go to Nevada City, go hiking. You know, you discover something new every day.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:27:50] Plus you get to do your art.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:27:51] And you get to do your art. Yeah, it was the best of both worlds for me. It really. It really was. I remember when they had the old steam train. And, you know, I love trains. And so the railroad museum, you know, all those things. And it was like, you know, I died and gone to heaven.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:28:12] Did you feel you working here became part of that in some way?

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:28:17] Yeah, I did. I felt it was wonderful to be able to to be a part of that tradition. You know, the Virginia City Players created a tradition. And I don't know if anybody told you this. Maybe they have in your past interviews at one time, the Virginia City players, it was the highest paid summer stock theater company in the state of Montana, and it was the most prestigious. Now, back in those days, there weren't very many in Montana, but it had a reputation and so to be a part of that reputation and to be a part of that tradition, I felt very honored. I really did, felt very honored to be a part of that.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:29:08] Fantastic. Yeah. Thank you so much.

**Kenneth Christensen** [00:29:11] It's been a pleasure, Dan. Thank you for having me. It's wonderful to be in Virginia City as I look out the windows and see the storm clouds and the rain all the time, things never change. But thanks again. I really appreciate the time.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:29:27] Thank you so much, Ken.