

## AJ Kalanick

**Daniel Schindler** [00:00:08] This is Virginia City's Oral History Project interview with A.J. Kalanick. Hi AJ.

**AJ Kalanick** [00:00:15] Hey. How are you doing?

**Daniel Schindler** [00:00:17] I'm great. Can you start by telling us a little bit about yourself and how you got involved with the Players, when you got involved with the Players? What did you do for them?

**AJ Kalanick** [00:00:29] I mean, I was a farmer and ranch kid. I grew up in Fort Benton, Montana, and for some reason I had always had an interest in in the theatrical arts. I think I did my first play when I was in the third grade. It was kind of an old school production and they did a production of Avida. yeah. Was it a Avida? No, it was. I got it confused. Anyway, it was with all these Roman emperors and all of that. And I was like the third spear chucker from the left and, you know. But that got me started to hear the crowd roar, you know, and and all of that. And it was still just a high school production, but it lit the fire. After that, I got involved in school plays and my class was very into that and so we did a lot. Our class would produce a school play every year on its own in not a multi class production. And so when I got out of high school, you know, I really wanted to pursue a theater career, but I kind of went, Yeah, it's not a logical way to make a living, you know? So I pursued a degree in agricultural business from Montana State and, and then worked on an Ag-Econ degree and finished Ag business was all but diploma on the Ag-Econ went out went back home to go work although always in the back of my head it was this theater and so. You know, you leave home for four and five years. Things change. And so I joined my brother-in-law. We did some construction work. I went back to MSU, got a second degree in Communications, and then went to work for the university. And at that time I auditioned for a couple of university productions, got cast in shows that you can't do anymore, like Annie Get Your Gun and a few things like that. But then I was also cast in Of Mice and Men. And that is really the show that that turned my whole life around as far as theater goes. And. I ended up teaching at MSU for a while, went into university administration. They paid for my master's degree and all the time I had my hand in theater. At one point there had been a community theater in Bozeman and they were there is an old chapel there, the Old White Chapel, and that had been a bookstore. And and so I don't know what the wild hare was, but with the community theater, we moved in there. I was hired as their executive director and we built a little theater in there and we started doing plays there. That's when I ran into well, actually, I ran into Bill Koch from Virginia City when we were doing Annie Get Your Gun. And so through with that, Bill and I became fast friends. He and I, we, you know, we built fresnels out of plywood. It's amazing what you can do when you just have no money. And, you know, we we'd go up to Joel Janke at MSU and get their strap would after strike and then we'd go down and build a set out of it. And then when Bruce Hurlburt left Virginia City, Bill called me and Bill got hired down there. He called me and said, Are you interested in coming down? So I went down. I think well, actually, I mean, let me rewind, I think Hurlbert interviewed me the first year I went down there and I was working in the box office and Bill was was company manager.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:05:08] Would that be '87?

**AJ Kalanick** [00:05:10] Man, it had to be 86. No, that were 85 or 86. Yeah. And. They all meld together. And so while I was in the box office there, Bill started putting me on stage during the performances after I'd gotten all the tickets taken and everything for the night.

That next year he hired me as company manager. And then I. So Bill was, was a company director and I was a company manager. And so rode herd over, you know, all of that. And it just, you know, it was. Totally excited with that. The. Missoula Children's Theater. Bill and I both decided to go go to grad school and so we both applied to the U of M and we both got accepted. We got over there and the scholarship money that had been promised wasn't there. Bill ended up quitting that Fall quarter. I, you know, kind of tough it out. And then ended up leaving U of M in the Spring of that year because of a conflict that I won't go into at this point. But it was between myself and the dean of the college and it was over family and, career. And so at the end of that, I had been doing some movies. I had auditioned for a number of films. They wanted, U of M wanted me to stay and work in their summer front theater, Riverfront Theater. And I was already at back at Virginia City. And so we parted ways then. But, Missoula Children's Theater there became familiar with me through my time in Missoula. And so they hired me to go out on the road. I did a year of Pinocchio where I played Stromboli and Geppetto and never had a U.S. play date. I was out of country for the entire tour and went back to Virginia City after that and did another year. And then Bill and I put VC out on the road on a on a tour. That fall of 91. And we toured all across the state of Montana, and it hadn't been done since the late 40s, I believe. And it was a ton of fun. Everybody showed up. They they, you know, are very familiar with Virginia City from the, you know, its heyday well. And at that time we were packing the Opera House out on a regular basis and the Brewery was doing well. And so the that road tour show was a combination of players from the Opera House and the Brewery, Mike Verdon and Barb Stube and a bunch of us were out on the road together and Bill and I. And after that ended, I kind of decided, you know, I'd come through Billings on one of the tours and we played where we'd re-opened the old Fox. We were the first company to go back in there after it was a movie theater and.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:08:48] The Players tour.

**AJ Kalanick** [00:08:49] Yeah, Players tour. And I kind of went, you know, it'd be nice to get off the road for a while, you know, settle down because you're only as good as your last show and, you know, you're living without any health insurance or anything like that. And I saw that this company, Costco, was opening up. So I said, okay, let's go deal with, you know, I so I turned in an application, figured out, never hear from them, hit the road with... We were still touring. We're coming in to Helena, We were playing there and I stopped at the Huskie truck stop to get gas because I was driving the tour truck and I go to pay for the fuel and she says, Your name, A.J.? And I go, How do you know? And she said, Well, your mother just called and said, you need to call Costco in Billings. And because I had no... that was before cell phones, you know and so they had no idea where I was to call, but I'd left my Mother's phone number. So she thought the only place I'm going to catch up with him is a truck stop. And so she thought of the only one where I would possibly stop. Talk about a small world and what we used to do before cell phones. So I rented car, drove back to Billings, got hired, and when I was there, after we finished the tour, I got hired and I went to work for Costco in Billings. And that's when my introduction to Billings Studio Theater and I went up and started. It was not easy to get cast. There is a huge talent base in Billings. So off we went and we developed a huge relationship with each other. And then fast forward. I mean, I continued to do movies and things like that and work with Bill. Bill. You know, we always, you know, shared furniture and costumes and things like that. And developed in... 2011, Eric Hendricks resigned from BST and I applied. They did a national search. I fortunately was hired and for the next 13 years, I was the executive director there. And so with that, I worked with theaters all across the country. All across Montana especially. But like Grant Street, we did work together in Fort Peck Summer Theater, Great Falls Summer Stock. I've worked with all over. During

that time I also went to University of Wisconsin and took some classes there remotely and on some extended studies type thing. So. You know, it was kind of a. I loved special effects work. And so I got involved with that and designing props. I designed the blood knives for Jack the Ripper for the national tour of that. And then from Virginia City, Chris Itram and I became close, close friends and he was the technical director down there at that time. And so we did some co-work together. And, you know, it's just kind of. You accidentally slip into a career, you know.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:12:38] You do. So you you started working down in VC in '85.

**AJ Kalanick** [00:12:42] 85 or 86.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:12:44] What was your first impression? Had you been to Virginia City before?

**AJ Kalanick** [00:12:47] I had. I had. And I loved the charm. I loved the charm of the Opera House. And at that time, sitting there in row M, fortunately because I had some legroom, and going. Okay... They're missing the boat here, this could be done here. You know, of course, you're always analyzing it. But I so thoroughly enjoyed it that when Bill asked me to come on board, I just said absolutely. There is no question. And you become a jack of all trades As company manager. I was also the stage manager for the productions. And so you've got the role roll drops that are on manila hemp lines and, you know, so you end up with a handful of of rope slivers all the time.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:13:46] I remember that. Because that was when we were working on, I think it was Frankenstein, backstage I learned about hemp ropes that way.

**AJ Kalanick** [00:13:54] Yeah. Yeah. And so your hands are always full of slivers in that. And then you ran the light board in the sound board from. Right. I mean, you were two feet off stage running it. And with the roll drops, you know, you would you would set them up that you would like during the olio shows, you would drop the roll drop for the next act to come on. And then you would start in you'd have your hand on it. You'd lights down, drop in, lights up, tie it off or step on it to hold the rope where pull up the other roll drop in back of it so they could set up the next scene. There was like a seven second change between, you know, it was it was incredible. Lots of quirky things happened. I start pulling up the back, the backdrop and there was always a rule, do not stand next to the role drop. Well, here was Colleen Owen and she was standing on the upstage side of the role drop and I thought "God this thing is heavy." And I looked out and here's Colleen with her bustle and dress rolled up in the drop and teetering down towards the floor. And I was like, God. So I got to let that in, you know, she was going, "Help me, help me", you know? That's why you didn't stand next to a roll drop. But, I mean, and then when a scene was going on, I would stand there and there's these overhead beams, just enough room to stand under. And so the joist there, I always rested my hand up on the joist so for a birthday present, one year, they put a door handle up there so I could hold on to it during that. And as far as I know, it's still there. So AJ's handle you saw. But yeah, I mean, it was you learned the guerrilla theater there. I wasn't unfamiliar for when the lights went out, you know, lose power. We only had 100 amps service to the whole theater. And so when that would occur off on stage right. Was this big wood box. Know I say big... 18in, two feet long, and you open it up and it's full candles and you grab two, two by fours leaning against the wall and you put them out where the footlights were and you put all these candles in these drilled holes and light them. And we would finish the show in candlelight.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:16:36] That must have been special.

**AJ Kalanick** [00:16:38] It happened only in my entire time there. I think it happened 3 or 4 times. But when you finished, everybody was like, Yeah. And the audience was jacked, you know, if you are hard of seeing, it probably wasn't an enjoyable ending. But. And I know one time we even opened the side doors and pulled two cars up and shown headlights. In to the theater. It didn't work really well, but, you know, So. But yeah, acting by candlelight was in course at that point in time. We drew a lot of actors from, you know, we had several from New York, we had one from the Royal Shakespeare Company, had worked with them at some point, and they were just like, "Oh my God, I've never I've never acted by candlelight." You know, it's just like, welcome to Virginia City.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:17:39] What was it like living in Virginia City that summer?

**AJ Kalanick** [00:17:44] My first year there I lived up on by the creek on the upper end of town. In one of those little what did they call it.. the hotel of some kind. But right next to the Brewery.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:18:00] Oh, Daylight Village,.

**AJ Kalanick** [00:18:03] Living next to Daylight Creek. And so, I mean, Daylight Creek was literally 8 or 10ft outside my window. And so to be able to lay there at night and listen to the creek babble, you know, it was it was wonderful. But the next year I moved down and I got what is called the Iron Rod cabin. And that was my, that's where I stayed for the rest of my time in Virginia City. It was a two room cabin, but I was the only one there. And so I had kind of a set up like a TV and couch and stuff in one side. And the other side was my bed. It was a small cabin, but when I first moved in, it had a side roof. And what a joy that was. When it rained to listen to the rain on a sodden roof ... some of the most peaceful times of my life. And right outside your front door is the beaver pond. And to step outside and have a cup of coffee in the morning and you see a mountain lion come down the other side of the pond to get a drink and then go back up, listen to beavers slap their tails. It was, it was great. It was also a little loud on some nights when everybody, when the bars would close and all the actors would come home. But, you know, we had a communal shower, boys on one side, girls on the other. And it was very rustic. It was tintage, you know, you would see from the 40s or 50s and. And then the laundry room, laundry house, was right next there, too. And so not a whole lot of money when we did things, I mean, I remember the dryer broke and Bill and I hauled it outside and torn apart. And, you know, we're out there in on the grass. There wasn't a lawn out there on the grass, you know, with the drum pole and everything else. Fixed it, put it back in. You know, it's just it was guerrilla theater, you know, But I some of the most enjoyable times of my life.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:20:18] What are you.... So this year, this summer is the 76th summer and as far as I can tell. And no one has disputed this in any grant application I've put through, it is the longest running summer theater west of the Mississippi.

**AJ Kalanick** [00:20:34] I firmly believe that. Yeah.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:20:37] What do you think keeps it rolling? For this many years. A lot of theaters come and go.

**AJ Kalanick** [00:20:44] You know it. You know, people will say theater is a dying art. But, you know, it's been dying for 4000 years. You know, I think what keeps a lot of people

coming back to Virginia City and those that discover it for the first time, there is a quaintness to it. There's an honesty to it. I hate theater, when you watch it and I think every moment is forced and there's a difference when you're doing vaudeville or that or melodrama type theater. Yeah, there's forced moments. But, you know, they're forced and you can still play the honesty. If you if you go into a melodramatic moment and you actually believe what you're doing is real. You come off that way and people are involved in that moment with you. But if you go out there and go, I'm going to make these people laugh and the moment's not real. It's not the same. And so there is a quality of honesty there that you don't find in a lot of other theaters and that any theater I've been involved in, that's one of the major things I push for, is honesty on the stage being in that moment. You can't make the theater. You can't make the audience laugh, but they will laugh with you. If your life is honest and they see they can identify with that moment or a little piece of them or what is happening is so absurd. But that's what makes slapstick work. But, you know, you can't just go, I'm going to make you laugh. No.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:22:39] You think there's something about that melodramatic style that that Virginia City...

**AJ Kalanick** [00:22:44] It's a lost style.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:22:47] It is, and not many people know it any more. If you say it, they know what it is but, they've never see it.

**AJ Kalanick** [00:22:51] It's like the olio show. You know, olios is a lost art as well, you know, And you think of some of the stuff that we did, we had some very creative people and who are willing to step outside the box and just let their head go. And, you know, we did some very funny things. I mean, and there were some very serious moments there, too, because, you know. In putting that show together, that olio show, there are peaks and valleys and you have to take the audience on that, ride. Because if you bring it up here and it's laugh, laugh, laugh, laugh, laugh, laugh, they finally trying to breathe will turn you off. And so, you know, the order of that show, building that show order was so, so important. And there's... like audience contact numbers. They ate that up, you know? Stacey Gordon, you know. I'm not sure what her last name is now, but Stacy was a master at that. She knew and she would come up with stuff off the top of her head. You know, sitting next to a bald guy, or sitting on his lap in the audience and looking over at him and says "You're just cuter in a bucket full of belly buttons", you know, and the whole place would go just crazy and laugh and, you know, two bald guys sit next to each other and she'd stand behind them and pull their heads together and go, Dolly Parton. You know, it was funny. It was hilarious. And there's a talent to that, knowing what is over the line and how far you can take that. My specialty was recitations. I would do old poems. I would do, you know, like The Knot in the Devil's Tail and stuff from the old. And, you know, so much of the population that comes through there, they remembered those. Or if they were for the first time, it was in a style. It's much like cowboy poetry in some ways, but not so far into that, that it is the Baxter Black type stuff or, you know. But it was a. You know. And there is. There is. There's charm. I mean, like when the bikers would come through town on their way to Sturgis and they would be in the Bale of Hay Saloon and they would just be having a grand old time. And I remember, I was playing the sheriff in a show and I had on this long topcoat and six gun on each hip and a badge on, you know, and it was it was in between scenes for me. And they were out on that back deck and they were just loud. And you could hear them in the opera house. And I stepped out back, walked up to them, and I said, "Quiet your ass down!" And their eyes got about this big and I went, "What the hell?" And they all went back inside. And then when I turned around, Pete Walther standing in

the door of the back of the Opera House, just laughing. And I said, "What did...?" I was still confused. He says, "Look at yourself. You had a badge and a six gun on. They thought you were the cops." And, you know, so there's lots of stuff happen like that. Kurt Barley, oh God. Kurt Barley was a guy that lived in Washington and loved the Cremona. He and he was very, very up to... He loved putting all music machines back together and all of that. And so he would come out once a year and see the Opera House, and then during the day he would take the Cremona apart and work on refurbishing it in like the where all the little airlines would go in to a woodblock, pull those out scrape away the oxidized lead and then re-fixate them you know either glue them or something back into the wood blocks and and tune it. And I don't know whether Kurt still comes or not but he, he kept that thing finely tuned and it was, you know... wonderful.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:27:19] That's something haven't touched on is the Cremona. Can you describe for people who don't know what that is... There are only two functioning in the world and this is the only one still in a playhouse.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:27:31] It's the only one still in a playhouse and it's the only one of its style. And I and I think there are a couple of other Cremonas around, but it is very, very rare. And the Cremona was a piano made that, you could play it just like a piano. But then if you kicked on an air compressor that was set outside the building. Compressed air would go through all these lines and you could play it like a pipe organ or all these other things. And there was other attachments to it, like symbols in an aoo horns and all of that stuff. All kinds of sound effects. That piece, that piano came out of the silent movie, silent movie era. And so it was made to accompany silent movies. And so they would do thing, you know, of course, there was other attached things that went along like a thunder sheet, which a lot of people will never know what that is. It's a long piece of tin that hangs from the ceiling of the theater. And then when you want thunder on stage, you grab it and you shake it and it makes sounds exactly like thunder. So with the Cremona and that it and you know, it would, you could do all kinds of things. All kinds of sounds. And so in the opera house we used it for... that was the only musical accompaniment to the melodramas, and the musicals. And then when you went into the Olio show, you know, you could do all kinds of especially comic, you know, like the penny whistle, you know, type of thing. And it takes a skill to play it. You know, you have to learn how to play that. And it was, I loved that thing. I loved playing that. I mean I didn't, I never played it. But I mean, I loved, you know, playing to that. So, yeah. Yeah.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:29:38] I have a question I've been asking all of the people I've interviewed. And because I have a theory that it's not just, you know. Yes, it's a tourist town. Right. Lots of tourists come and see all the show shows. But I don't I don't believe that accounts for the longevity of the theaters in town. What do you think the VC Players mean to the community?

**AJ Kalanick** [00:30:01] It's the lifeblood. Virginia City is not a destination without the Players there. You walk through and you look at a bunch of deteriorating buildings and you, you know, pretend you're in the Old West. But, you know, business picks up. You know, the stores don't close at 5:00 in Virginia City. They stay open until at least the Opera House and the Brewery start their shows. Some stay open later for when they're over. Those businesses wouldn't be there if the players weren't there. You know, the candy shop wouldn't do nearly the amount of business because to get there, if you want to say, I'm going to go to the candy shop, you could go to Red Lodge here out of Billings and there's a candy shop there. There's candy shops all over Montana. But to go to the Cousin's Candy Shop in Virginia City, which does a land office business. It can't be the

sole attraction. You wouldn't drive that far out of your way from Bozeman or Dillon to get there just for a bag of candy. You know, And now they have done. There is so much more that's going on there now. There's people that have moved into Virginia City that are that have the heart of the city at their, you know, in their best interests. And so there's they, you know, have in the winter and the fall months when things are normally dead, they have art shows. They have a Centennial Ball type of thing, New Year's Eve Ball where, you know, people all wear turn of the century gowns and that. And if I could afford to buy a place at Virginia City, I would retire there. Yeah. Yeah. I've got some good friends that live there. And, you know, I say I couldn't, maybe I wouldn't live there year round with this, but the winter months there I love, I love winter. You know, and as much as we love Virginia City in the Summer when everything's bustling, it was very nice to stay afterwards when, and close up the theater and help the town close up when all the tourists were on their way, leaving.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:32:27] I remember that in the Fall, the tone changed

**AJ Kalanick** [00:32:28] Because it got quiet. Yeah. And it was very peaceful and. You know. It's a slower pace of life, you know. There's a lot of stuff in Virginia City, there's a lot of history there. I mean, you go back in its heyday when when you. You know. Well, you know, the when it was started, you know, there was a murder a week in Virginia City, you know, and you think of the rough and violent life that was left there when the Montana Repertory Theater put out two production of Cowboy, which is basically the musical story of Charlie Russell. There's a story that was pulled from the Virginia City archives that up in the Thompson Hickman Museum, they had pulled court records about a murder that took place in Virginia City. And this miner came home and and found this guy in bed with his wife. And so he shot the guy and then shot his wife in the upper thigh. And so when he was on trial for murder, they had his wife on the stand and they said, "Were you wounded in the fracas?" And she responded, "No, sir. I was wounded between the fracas in the knee." And so, you know that actual history, that's an actual court record. And that and they put that in the musical of Cowboy. But there are so much of that, you know, so. I love history. John Ellingson. Bless his soul. One of the things that Bill and I did one of the last years I was there is they had a Glacier Park touring car. There's a red 1926 Cadillac car. And so we conned John into firing it up. A unique car because there was no fuel pump in it. If you were driving up a hill in the gravity feed of the fuel, wasn't running to the engine, there is a knob on the dashboard that you had to pump to pressurize the fuel system. And so we you know, we took the Players around through a parade through Virginia City and that and then Bill and I got the idea, taking it to Bozeman for the 4th of July parade and took a little bit of convincing to get John to do that. And then we told them, you know, you can drive the car in the in the parade and you can dress up and be with us. So we got a trailer from, I can't remember the guy's name. He was a welder down there. But we got he had a welding shop in Nevada City. Yeah, but we borrowed a trailer from him and we took my pickup and we loaded that 26 Cadillac on the back and pulled it up over that hill. Oh, that was a hell of a pull. But we took it into Bozeman and we had it in the parade and you talk about crowds going crazy. Here's this 1926 Cadillac touring car loaded with the players. No one had seen it. You know, no one had had been able to see that car outside of being statically displayed, you know. And so here it is, rumbling down the streets. Life gets small at times and we hauled it back and it was it was a great thing. But after I left Virginia City and I went to work for Costco, one of the people that hired me, we got to talking one time and he said, yeah, that his uncle had been had worked at Fort Peck. And when Roosevelt came to tour the project, he was selected to drive this 1926 Cadillac on, to give the president the tour of the dam site. That was the same car. And that was part of the provenance in the history of that car in Virginia City is that it had been the car that

Roosevelt rode in. And so at one point we went up on a road trip and we ended up in Fort Peck and stopped at the dam house there. And in there is a picture of this car and Roosevelt and, you know, you're going.. "Holy smokes", you know, world gets really small.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:37:52] This is been great. Is there anything else you want to share about your time in Virginia City or the Players themselves?

**AJ Kalanick** [00:38:06] What I miss a lot were the locals because they were the color they were. I have always been a person. When you go to pull into town and everybody wants to go find a place to eat, I would rather eat at a mom and pop than go to McDonald's or Burger King or whatever. Because it's real, you know, and there's color and there's stories.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:38:27] Who do you remember from there, specifically?

**AJ Kalanick** [00:38:33] Vi Williamns, You know, every time I would pull into town, you know, in the Spring after being gone all Winter and she was the night watchman and she would come screaming up there in her pickup and I could hear from two blocks away, "Hey, Peaches!", you know? And it was like, God, it's Vi, you know? I loved her to death. Jody Williams, who was also a night watchman. You know. There was the town... If there was if there was ever an Otis from Andy Griffith in Virginia City, it was I'll think of his name in a minute. But he had these eyes that kind of bulged out and is in bald head. And. You know, he was inebriated most of the time, but he had no governor on his mouth. And some of the things that came out were just... It was honest. He was absolutely hilarious and then if you called him on it and say, well, you really insulted that person, you know, I'm sorry. You know, or tell you "Tough shit.", you know. But then the librarian. Can't think of her name. She was a young gal, but I mean, they were real people, you know? And when you came back. They loved the players. And, you know, you made you know, when I left there, I came back, I think was two years later on a visit. And I walked into Virginia City. I walked into the Bale of Hay and there set three guys at the bar. Leda and her husband and Morningstar were all sitting there. Funny. I can't remember their first names, but I know them by that, you know, and they're all sitting there and Morningstar looks up at me. Greg, Greg Smart and Morningstar looks up at me and he goes, "Hey, AJ, back for another season?" I said, "I haven't been here in two years." "No, no. You were here last year?" Yeah. And, you know. To feel that connection, that we were there for 3 or 4 months out of the year. And yet they considered us part of the community. That was wonderful. That was wonderful. It was a home, you know. If I was, you know, Fort Benton is where I was raised. That's home. But my second home was Virginia City. You know. I miss that cabin. You know, I you know, I look at all the amenities I have in life now. And basically I'm a pretty simple man. I can get by with very little and that place touched a place in my heart that I'll never, ever forget.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:41:54] Thank you so much, AJ.

**AJ Kalanick** [00:41:56] Thank you for asking me. Thank you for asking me. I'm sorry if I kind of rolled on for a while.

**Daniel Schindler** [00:42:04] No, no, no. It was fantastic. that was perfect.