

## TRANSCRIPT

Geoff Wilson (G) : 'On the Couch' with Winnie Pelz (W)

A Friends of the South Australian School of Art Event, held at the Bradley Forum,  
University of South Australia, Monday 24<sup>th</sup> March, 2009.

W *I see many, many familiar faces here tonight and many of you will have heard stories about Geoff and I can assure you they are all true. We'll talk later about the children he has in France.*

**Much laughter.....**

*And the very quirky sense of humour for which he's well known.*

*But, I thought we would start gently. This is not an ABC interview where you go for the jugular. This is an opportunity for Geoff to just tell some of the wonderful stories, so Geoff I'm going to be really kind to you tonight and we're going to start at the beginning ... where you became interested in art and what led to your career as an art teacher.*

G I won't go back to my days in kindergarten in Fremantle, Western Australia. My parents were living in Melbourne and came to Adelaide in about '41, and I enrolled in Adelaide High which was on Currie Street. And I had a wonderful class teacher called Alex Ramsay who ended up being the head of the Housing Trust in South Australia. And I must have been doing some drawings in first year – probably drawings of the school and other things, mainly buildings, and he saw these and he got in touch with a Senior Master in Grote Street, a colourful character, Tom Bone. His nickname was 'trombone'. And he had a brother teaching at Theby [Thebarton] Boys Tech. He was called Hamilton, so he was called 'hambone'. And 'ham' married a wonderful girl called Norah.

Well anyway, my class teacher Mr Ramsay brought Tom Bone over to see me and he said, 'Look, if you like you could join the Saturday morning landscape classes at the School of Art'. Now I would have been 14 or 15. So, he told me what to buy and I joined the class one Saturday morning out at the old Exhibition Building on North Terrace. Then he said, 'Now find something to draw and then later I'll come around and show you how to start a watercolour. And I sat there for 3 hours drawing a whole lot of steps....there was a lot of junk around that old building, and I scrubbed and rubbed and finally I had a drawing by the end of the morning. And he said, 'Now next week, I'll show you how to lay down a wash'.

Well, I went home on the double-decker bus down at Plympton. And I thought what he really said was, 'When you come next week, you can lay down and wash'. Well, my mother always said when I came in, 'What happened today, what happened?' And I said, 'Well, next week he wants me to come and lay down and wash!' And Mother said, 'I'll get you a cake of soap and a towel and off you go'. And she wanted me to take an enamel basin!!! But I refused.

Well, anyway, I went back, and Tom was dealing with some of the other students – they were all older than me, and I put my towel down on the grass and the cake of Lifebuoy on top. And Tom eventually came along, looked at me – he might have thought I was giving him a hint, but he said, 'Oh okay, I'll show you what to do'. Well he took my paints ... I don't know how I had them – in a box or on a plate. He mixed up a pool of colour. He didn't tell me what colours to use or how to mix them and he proceeded to "plop" this colour on my drawing. He did that for about 2 minutes and then he said, 'You have a go.' Well I thought all you had to do was to mix up any colour and plop it on, which I did. And after a minute, the 3-hour drawing was absolutely ruined!

Now when I think back at that time, if I had been shown how things work, how to judge tone, what colours to use to get the right tone and how watercolours can be worked it would have been a much better start.

In a way looking back that is a lesson on bad teaching. And I went on from week to week, doing some plops on a drawing and nothing really happened. That was the start.

**W** *Well, the lesson in bad teaching certainly informed you later as a teacher. I think many of us in this room, and many people in Adelaide, would remember you as probably one of the greatest teachers, so something along the way influenced you to think very differently about teaching and to develop an approach to teaching that is hugely successful. Where was your first teaching appointment?*

**G** I'll tell you something that happened earlier. Eventually. I went to the Senior School of Adelaide High in Grote Street and I was given a choice of doing Intermediate Art or doing a second language eg German or French. I chose art. Many of the lessons were in the afternoons. The art room was in a corner of the girl's school years and often I was the only student there.

And Tom would come in and say, 'Well you do this and that...he never said too much at all. I remember I got bored, and I took some chalk and drew on the blackboard a sort of composition of cones, spheres and pyramids, and I left it there. A couple of weeks later, Tom became ill, and Jeff Smart, who was a young art teacher at Goodwood Boys Tech was sent over as a replacement.

Well I was sitting in the class doing English and one day there was a knock at the door, and the class teacher got up and opened the door to a man and then he said, 'Oh, Geoff Wilson you're wanted at the door'. I remember I blushed furiously, I used to blush a lot. I don't so much these days 'cos I haven't got so much blood in my veins.

I went to the door, and there was a young man, in a raglan sleeve coat and a snappy pork pie hat and he took me out of the classroom and he said, 'Did you do those drawings on the art room blackboard?' And I said 'Yes'. And he said, 'Well come over to the art room', and he said 'What artists do you like?' And I said, 'Well the only ones I know are Heysen, Streeton .....'. And he said, 'Have you ever heard of Cezanne or Gauguin'. And I said 'No!' And he said, 'I'll write you down a list of books you can get from the Mortlock Library'. He wrote all these names down and they didn't mean a thing to me. And he said, 'Look them up, 'cos he said they'll give you new and different aspects about painting. I put it in my kitbag, hopped on the double-decker bus to Plympton and I never ever saw that list again. If I had got those books out I don't think I would have made any sense of them.

Finally, at the end of 1944, Tom Bone said, 'What are you going to do when you leave school?' And I said, 'Well, I have no idea!' 'Well you could become an art teacher, they get plenty of holidays and you can paint'. And I said, 'Well that sounds pretty good to me'. Well, a week later, he said, 'I don't think that's such a good idea ... you could become a junior architectural draughtsman'. And I said, 'Well, that sounds good too'. Well in the *News* that week, there was an advertisement 'Wanted: Junior architectural draughtsmen' at Hassell and McConnell, and they were a big firm. So I went in for an interview with my folder and talked to them. And they rang me up and said come in again ... I think I had short pants on at the time. And they said, 'We're going to take you on, but we don't want you to stay a draughtsman, we'd like you to do the degree part-time, it will take you six years. And they said, 'We won't pay you anything for couple of years', and they said, 'If you're going okay we might offer you something'.

I think that was the practice and my parents weren't well off. And I went home and I thought well, I'm going to have to go teaching. So I went in to the Education Department and they said 'You start at Woodville High School as a junior teacher'. And off I went. War was still on, and I got a call up for a medical I think in May and of course the war was practically at an end. The next year, 1946, I started at Kintore Avenue Teacher's College. I don't think there's another school in between.

**W** *Now you finish Teacher's College. Did you go overseas first? You went to England and did you start teaching art ... teaching from England or was it the other way around.*

G Well, when you were a student Winnie in the sixties, there was an intake of 90 first year potential art teachers. Well in 1946, my first year at Kintore Avenue, there were only two men doing the art teacher's course, Max Birrill and myself. It was a two-year course with an option of a third Year. In the end we had to nominate where we would like to teach. Well I put down the Art School and there I was only twenty and they said 'Ok, you can go there'. Well, luckily some moves happened out in the Secondary Schools and I was sent to Croydon Boy's Tech and I stayed there five years. And then I met a couple of characters in a coffee shop in town and they said they were going overseas. And I thought, well, that doesn't sound too bad. So, at the end of 1953, we got on a ship in Melbourne, a fare of 80 pounds in an eight-berth dormitory on a deck below the water-line and off I went. I had no plans. We got off in Genoa and bummed around Europe for a while and ended up in London.

W *Did you teach at all when you were in England?*

G I did a bit of supply teaching. I tell you, the schools in London in the '50s, they were wild. And one day, I was sent to a girl's secondary modern school and the head mistress said to me 'Do you know Ronald Searle?' And I said, 'Yes, he's a wonderful cartoonist'. And she said, 'Do you know his girls at St Trinian's?' I said, 'Yes'. And she said, 'Well, that's our girls!' And she said, 'I'm going to get the deputy to give you some paper and pencils, and we're going to give you the toughest class we've got' which I think was a class of second year girls. Oh I said! I went into the art room, and as soon as I opened my mouth, there was an accent that was strange to them and they didn't say a thing for that lesson. But, later in the week, they came in again, and I could feel they were going to be problems - they wanted to know all about me. I think one even asked me for a date. And I thought these are going to be a wild group. And the headmistress said, 'Look the art teacher is pregnant', and I said, 'Well, I haven't been here that long!' *Much laughter.*

And she said, 'If you would like to stay on'. I said, 'Oh no, I am going off to Europe and I wouldn't be able to spend the time', and off I went - I left.

W *So this was the first of your children that you fathered overseas. But, we'll talk about that later Geoff. So, you came back to Australia when?*

G No, I stayed there three years. I had a wonderful time. I mean if I'd been smarter I should have saved up my money and gone to an art school. However, we were away from our parents for the first time. We were living in bedsitters. There was always a party. We met people from all over the world and some of them didn't stay long, we liked them, and then off they went. I did a bit of supply teaching and I got tired of that. Then I became a building labourer and later I worked as a bar porter for the Jo Lyons groups famous at that time.

And, there was an arrangement between the government of Australia and England that you could work or teach for two years without being taxed. Well, that time had finished and I was beginning to get letters from the tax department, and I thought, I'll go off to Canada. So, I went in - it was one of those ten pound immigration things. I went in for a medical, and I had no idea what I was going to do in Canada.

And then my mother wrote me a letter, she used to write fairly often, mainly 'I hope you're not drinking too much'. And I would write back and I would say, 'Single malt whisky is wonderful on Weetbix!', which made her a bit nervous!! And she wrote me a letter in which said she was in a Housing Trust flat which had two bedrooms - my parents were separated - and she was frightened they might take the flat away if that other bedroom wasn't used. I had a feeling she thought I was wasting my time, which I was in some senses. And so, the Suez crisis came on and the Egyptians closed the Canal, and I went into the Bank of Adelaide and I said, 'I don't s'pose you would be able to get me a seat or a berth back home. 'At this time there is no chance, they said. And then four days after they rang up said 'We've got you a berth', and I had three days to pack up my gear and home I came.

And, I remember I arrived on a Monday. I was stoney broke. On Thursday I went to Croydon Tech which was the school I left when I went overseas. The headmaster was out on the oval, he spent more time on the oval than inside, and he said, 'G'day Geoff, what are you up to?' I said, 'I'm just back, I haven't got any money', and he said, 'Look the art teacher who replaced you is going in for an operation. I'll ring the Department and see if you can finish the year ... it was October. And he came back and said, 'It's okay, you start on Monday' which was exactly one week after I got off the ship.

I walked in to my old art room – it was three years since I had left for overseas, and the teacher's cupboards that I had painted some designs on, were still there ... the curtains that my lads had lino-blocked were still there swinging in the breeze. I think a couple of drawings that my students did three years previously were still on the wall. I looked over the oval, and I thought what's happened to the three years, I haven't been anywhere. Anyway, that was the time when I should have walked out and done something else.

I went to the door, and what happened, there was a line of first year boys all standing in a row with their kitbags, looking up at me, and I said 'Come in', and that was it, I was back doing the same thing.

**W** *We're glad you did though Geoff. We're going to skip a few years and talk about when you went to the South Australian School of Art, and that was when it was still on North Terrace?*

**G** Yes, after I left Croydon, I did three years at Theby [Thebarton] Boys Tech., and then two years at Mitchell Park. Now, the year before I went down in 1960, Albie Smith was the first art teacher there. And he got a job as a lecturer, I don't know whether it was at the Art School or at South Road, but he said, 'Look, they're going soon to need more lecturers in Art, so look out for advertisements in the Advertiser'. So, I applied at the end of 1961. I commenced in 1962 at the School of Art, Exhibition Building, North Terrace.

**W** *So, tell us what it was like. I mean it was a pretty run-down building. Some of you will remember, but for many of us it is a very distant sort of memory.*

**G** Yes, I did a bit of part-time teaching at night when I was still teaching in Secondary schools. I took classes in Lettering and Antique Drawings. After the classes I would walk around the school; I would walk into all the studios. I was interested in what was going on, and I remember Helen Mac had some interesting things on the wall, and I was curious about that.

But I soon realized that my training in the '40s was rather thin and there I was at 35 starting as a lecturer at the Art School. Had my thinking and understanding changed since I was a student? I don't think I had changed my thinking at all.

So when I went in the first day, Doug Roberts said, 'Okay Geoff you're going to do Lettering 3. He didn't tell me why. 'You're going to do drawing, and you're going to be helping Helen, Helen MacIntosh in Design, and then you're going to do Painting 1. I said, 'Well okay Doug. Listen have you got a course for Painting 1?' and he sort of blinked, and he said, 'Oh no, don't worry about that', he said, 'You just get a few objects and stick them up and let 'em have a go.'

So in a way, over the time I was there I had another education. I had to do something about it for myself, 'cos I was always embarrassed to go into a class and not be able to say something or tell them something. And in a way, I think I re-educated myself.

**W** *So who was the big influence? I mean Helen MacIntosh was a person who played quite a role didn't she?*

**G** She had been overseas and worked in Canada and England. But ... Helen had a wonderful honesty and a wonderful dedication to what she was doing. And I shared the office with her up until the time she retired. And we used to get an off lesson occasionally which is like a secondary school. And she would be

in there planning things about colour and so on. And so I thought well I better do something like that as well. And she said when I started, 'You want to do your own thing or follow what I'm doing?' And I said, please let me follow what you're doing. So then gradually, as I got the swing of it, I was able to add a few things that she might use. But we got on very well. She was the sort of lecturer who would come in the morning and wipe down all the plastic top tables. That's something that doesn't happen too often. But a wonderful dedicated person. And after all of those years when we argued about colour and other things, the last week before she left, she said, 'Geoff, I think I've just found out how to teach colour'. She took all of her notes home ... and at the end of that week she burned the lot. Even then, she felt that things were going to change.

**W** *Because she was such a hard taskmaster? Set such high standards.*

**G** I mean she had a wonderful aesthetic sense. I remember before I became a lecturer, I did a night class with Lettering 3, I remember I went down to the Museum and made some studies of some New Guinea heads which then I made into a poster about the Museum. Now, the little studies were quick gouaches, not too detailed, and I think she liked those. Of course when I enlarged the damn things.... ? she tried to say, 'Well you haven't quite got ....You see I didn't' understand really what she was driving at, and I think sometimes the students didn't know quite what she meant either. Very hard to explain. But, high standards and a wonderful training for me.

**W** *I just want to digress for a minute. When the art school was on North Terrace, there was a sort of a cultural malaise around it, and you were part of a group with Albie Smith, Des Bettany, who played at the old Palais Royal. Is that right?[laughter] Go on, tell us about it!*

**G** Ask me again.

**W** *The group that you were involved with Albie Smith and Des Bettany.*

**G** There was the Fine Art Department and Graphic Design Department. An earlier head was Paul Beadle, an English artist who had other English staff especially in Graphic Design. So when I came in 1962, I think Dick White was there, Meg Douglas, Charlie Reddington, a livewire American , and Doug Roberts, Helen Mac, yeah, that's about it .....and oh, one who started the same year with me was Max Lyle, and I think Franz Kempf. I can remember Max used to take a class seemingly at 4 o'clock and from the carpark, I could look down and see Max teaching rather earnestly and I thought 'this guy knows a lot!' He was also in his first year as a lecturer at the School.

**W** *So then the big shift occurred to Stanley Street.*

**G** Well, we only had the one year at the Exhibition Building and then we went over to Stanley Street. And Stanley Street really was a glorified secondary school. Of course it had good aspects, but it really didn't work as an art school. The old school, everybody looked back on that with a lot of love. It had a casual air: it was falling down, but it felt right as an art school.

**W** *And there's a great nostalgia now around Stanley Street after it was pulled down. But you're right, as a building, it had bad air-conditioning, it used to get those cast shadows in the front studios, it really didn't work well. So, there's a widespread feeling that they were the golden years and somehow it's all associated with that campus. So, what contributed to that sense of these as the golden years?*

G Funny, I sat down this morning, 'cos I knew that question might come up and I jotted down a few things.

W *Oh, you've actually made some notes!*

G Well, when you talked about the golden years it seemed rather an elaborate over-descriptive title and I always thought that the '60s ...

W *Geoff, I think you've come unhooked. No? Can you still hear him okay, because the microphone is down under your foot!..... G: I thought that was my zither(?). W: Put it on your shirt.*

G I watched a TV program on Sunday, it was a sort of new 'History of the world' and it was remarkably similar to an article in the *Australian* newspaper. And, in the Australian and on the TV, they were talking about the beginning of the '60s decade. And you know, when you were talking about this golden age....I always thought the '60s at art school somehow were the best and the happiest. Only some things stay the same. But in 1962, if you want to talk about the golden age, the USA and the Soviet Union, mainly over Cuba, was about to bring the world to a nuclear war. We were vaguely conscious of it. Then suddenly, Jackie Kennedy persuaded France to lend the Mona Lisa for three months to Washington. Now a year later, in 1963, her husband was assassinated. I don't know why I wrote this down, but....I think in 1963, I'm not sure, the Beatles were in town, ('64) practically the whole school went down. (W: *'Except me!*) About that time, 1964, London was called the swinging city of Europe, Carnaby Street and Pop art was on the way. Now we knew something about it this mainly through the art magazines and maybe a lot of TV programs, but the students were picking up on that and things were beginning to happen and changes made. And the new staff coming into the Art School, myself, Max Lyle, Franz Kempf, Charlie Reddington and others.

W *So the broad context was of a lot of social change at the time. How much did that contribute to the sort of energy that people talk about? Or were there other factors that really contributed?*

G Well, I think all these things added up ... I mean for instance, later Geoff Brown came, Barrie Goddard, Tony Bishop, Ian Chandler, Ivan Pedersen, Syd Ball. Now Syd Ball had won a big Sydney art prize, probably about '66, '67. It was a *Canto*, and heralded a new interest in hard-edged colour initiating from the USA. He had a great affect on the school. Barbara Hanrahan came and did some part-time teaching along with Bob Boynes and Ian Chandler.

And then we had two men from the States: Ken Hall, Tom Coates, in about 67, 68.

And that happened, and then the Columbo Plan was on so we had a lot of Asian students, particularly in the Graphic Design. Helen Mac arranged evenings which we called Asian nights where the Asian students cooked food. And we had two or three of those things. And the staff formed a band. Des Bettany was playing mouth organ, Dave Dallwitz was on piano, Albie Smith playing the T-box base and singing. And I was playing a drum. It was a nice easy interchange between the staff and students.

And then secretly, I did two TV ads for Cooper's Beer. (W: *They weren't very secret*) I was nervous about this, because I thought the Education Department wouldn't take it too kindly if they saw me drinking beer on TV. I must admit, I got drunk twice doing this. But I didn't tell anybody. And one day, walking up the stairs, a little girl who I didn't know called me and said, 'I think I saw you on tellie last night'. And I said, 'Not me, not me. I was hoping of course I would be called back into action, when colour came, but it didn't happen.

W *Geoff, you're suggesting/painting a picture of a context, of social change. And certainly there was a lot of energy. And some terrific teachers. But we could probably say, we still live in times of social change. We still live with the same kind of energies that are happening in the community, the diversity of the*

*community. And yet, there are many people who look back at that time and say it was so different. What was it that made it so different? Or, is it a bit of mythology.*

G Well, I should say it was a hard-working decade. All the staff had to deal with the art teachers, because they were the predominant group, many more than the fine arts. Most of the staff, including the fine art lecturers at one time would have been teaching art teaching students. For instance, the formidable Dora Cant was a tough, no nonsense character ... a wonderful personality is well remembered by the art teaching students. I found the decade a sort of a happy one when I look back on it. We didn't have many arguments with the students. The students didn't have any rights in a sense. We marked their work and the results came out in the newspaper.

W *So what changed. Or did it change?*

G Well, about the end of the year, when '69 came, some students were conscripted to Vietnam. Everything began to change. We stayed in Stanley Street another ten years. Things in the '70 started to change and I think one of the big changes was that the powers to be at South Road said, 'Teachers should be having more academic studies and so there will be a need to reduce the times spent on their art subjects. I remember Tony Bishop and two or three other staff getting together and saying, 'Look, cutting back the time spent like painting and drawing in the present curriculum, will need a new approach. Let's get the students together in the first year, and we'll give them a subject like Work or Food'. And then the whole student body came in to the Design Room and two or three lecturers came in and we said, 'What you have to do is research Food, and we'll stand around and wait and see if you want any help'. That didn't last too long.

W *The shift to Underdale and the changes to the curriculum. What was your response to that. I mean it was a radical shift. As a teacher, and somebody who had come through that golden era. There must have been highlights or was it a difficult time.....was it just frustrating? Tell us a bit about it.*

G I took a year off in 1973 and I just went overseas and had a lot of fun. And when I came back in '74, some students I had never seen before came around and said, 'G'day Geoff'. And I thought ... not that I wanted them to call me Mr Wilson ... I'd never ever seen these characters. I took them for painting and so on and I could see there was a new feeling in the air. To sum it up, perhaps in education generally there was a feeling about doing your own thing. For example, one could say to a student, 'Think of something to do or make and if you have problems, come and talk'. So the form of teaching that I had been used to was being changed, even abandoned.

So we all moved to Underdale in 1979. That was the worst year I ever had at that school.

W *What was so bad about it?*

G Oh, I think everybody was trying to fit into a new environment. The students were restless. There were a lot more mature age students coming in to do the course. And mainly because of emotional upsets I was handing out more tissue papers than cartridge paper. By then I was the head of the Painting and Drawing department so any problems with the students came to me. It seemed then that I was spending more time with these problems than I was teaching. I did some teaching with senior students. Looking back I don't think I was a good head of the department; being an administrator wasn't my thing. And then the students seemed as I said before, wanted to do their own thing, I guess that's the best way of describing it. There were more problems arising mainly from the new ways that we devised to conduct assessments. The students put up their work in the gallery and the staff would sit with these students and discuss their

work displayed. A kind of mixture of teaching and assessment which was a far better interactive way than how assessments were done in the past. Many of the mature age students were women, many married, with their husbands not really understanding why they wanted to be at an art school. So sometimes they would break down in tears and later I would take them to my office with the subject lecturers and try and sort out their problems.

**W** *Geoff, I sense that you are struggling to describe what it was like at Underdale at first. There's a level of discomfort in the way you are describing it. Some of it is that you are saying the students wanted to do their own thing. What you are saying is that they probably lacked a sense of the constructed direction that the old art school might have had. Some of it was the changing times. How much of it was that you were changing. How much was society changing and that kind of tension...the generational tension.*

**G** Yes.... I was losing my hair which was a great problem. I was always concerned about what was going on. Again, I would walk around the other departments, to see what they were doing, especially sculpture seemed to have a much more meaningful approach. They were trying things out quite differently to what I was doing in painting.

Things were changing; there was an interchange of new staff and the lecturers from my previous art teaching department were still around sharing mainly the studios of the big painting building.

I remember on one of my trips to England, I was feeling uneasy with life generally, even in my own work. And I remember I used to go the Tate Gallery and listen to a man called Laurence Bradbury. He'd give a talk for an hour starting at three o'clock and ending at four. He'd come in right on the dot of three and he'd state the subject and with slides give a precise lecture, not too detailed or academic. The English lecturers that I ever heard were generally first class.

And I thought this guy seems to have a kind of wisdom, maybe I should have a chat to him about my lost feel. Eventually, I went up to him and said, 'I would like to have a chat with you'. And he said, 'Well, look I'm a very busy man. Maybe we could have a coffee or something after one of my lectures'. I said, 'Well that would be fine'. And then I thought about it all. What could I ever really ask him. And I realized I couldn't ask him that question, 'Where am I going with my work? What's going to happen to me?' It all seemed too vague. So we never did meet up. Those feelings lasted some time.

**W** *I would like to talk about your work. We're going to run out of time – we could go all night. But, I would like to just talk about your work.*

*When you had your retrospective a couple of years ago, the early work was magnificently loose free watercolours. Wonderful stuff. I was actually blown away by it. And then the work you developed while you were at the art school became much more constructed, much more deliberate, more thoughtful and it kind of reflected what you were teaching. It was more designed. How conscious was that?*

**G** Well, when I was doing these watercolours, as I said earlier, Tom Bone never really gave me constructive advice. For instance, the great English watercolourist Turner, when he was fourteen or fifteen was put in the care of a Dr Munroe with a group of young men and asked to render architectural drawings. They learned how to draw the buildings, to put on the washes and build up the images to a required finish – a wonderful technical training for him. But of course, Turner had that great flair and imagination which lifted his watercolours to greatness. But it was a kind of a start. At nineteen, I saw in the Mortlock Library a book of watercolours by the then young Andrew Wyeth. He died this year – painted that famous tempera 'Christina's World'. His watercolours had a wonderful dramatic looseness in the spirit of Winslow Homer. I thought they were wonderful and desired to be equally loose.

One day, Brian Seidel, who had been taught by Jeff Smart when he was at Goodwood Tech, came to my father's candle factory down in the West End. I was living there when I was a student. We decided to spend the afternoon painting.

We sat out in Grote Street looking back towards the city centre. I'm drawing away in perspective with things receding, getting smaller into the distance, when I looked over to see what Briand was doing. He had taken the same subject as me by had proceeded to bring buildings, even half a mile away, into a sharper focus, up close.

And I realized a lot later that Jeff Smart had taught him something about composition, Cubism and other things. It took me a while to understand such an approach.

**W** *How your work developed.*

**G** No, when I went to art school, as I said earlier, I had a re-education. Working with Helen, working with design - all of those things made me go off and look and try different things with the students. And I suppose I'd be reflecting back to when I was a lad, I was interested in architecture. I started to see the architectural order in pictures, with Cezanne and Cubism and all those sort of things. And so this looseness of the watercolours was put aside. And Jeff Smart said, 'Look, don't give the watercolours up. But you've got to get into oils, it's the major medium.' And he took me one morning to one of his classes, and I took some oils out. And he said, 'Okay, you start something and I'll come around later'. And we were at Mitcham, where the shopping centre is now. There were some big stone buildings previously. So, I set up my oils out and proceeded to paint as if I was doing a watercolour. A kind of swish, swish, quick attack. Jeff turned up and I remember, he stood behind me, put his hands over his eyes and said, 'Oh, is this what art has become? Forgive him Cezanne, forgive him, please'. Well, I was somewhat taken aback. He then sat down, mixed up some colour and painted the top of one of my buildings against the sky. I forget what he said, but it obviously was darkening, lightening, cooling, warming the edges to give the right contrasts. He then scraped off what he had done and said, 'You have a go'.

Well I didn't keep going on with the oils and continued with watercolour. Of course when I started to go out with Dave Dallwitz, he was using acrylics. I tried acrylics for awhile and gradually switched to oils. But if I go on a painting trip for a few days, I'll work in watercolour. But the flashiness of youth isn't there anymore. It's a much more considered, logical approach like a traditional English watercolour, drawn, building up in stages. Not that's a better way, it's just a different way. So I've become more conservative.

**W** *You worked very closely with Dave. Lots of field trips. Worked sort of alongside him. Do you miss him terribly?*

**G** In a funny kind of way, I feel he's still around. Since he died I haven't been painting outside so much. He was a fast painter. He could do, by working with acrylics, up to four studies a day. I'd be still drawing in the composition and he would have already finished on painting. But somehow ideas would be exchanged between us. When I retired in 1982, he said, 'Let's get going'. I thought I'd miss all the contact with the students as I was living on my own. We went up to Piccadilly Valley, took our lunch. We'd sit one side of the Valley with the sun behind our back, and then after lunch, we'd go to the other side with the sun on our backs as before. I did a show in eighteen months and that really got rid of any nostalgia I would have got from all those years of teaching, twenty years at the Art School and already I've been retired twenty-seven.

**W** *You've always been very modest about your work. You've had successful exhibitions, but your prices have stayed modest. Were you ever tempted to sort make your mark on the national scene? Stick your toe in the water and aim for the bright lights?*

**G** No, I remember when I was life drawing with Ivor Hele ... he was a wonderful teacher. And he said,

'What are you doing Geoff?' And I said, well I'm training to be an art teacher. Well, he didn't know what that meant. You see, he'd gone straight into training as a fine artist, and he said, 'Look, you seem to know what you're doing, why don't you become an artist?' And I always thought that my makeup consisted of four cylinders and everybody else had six. And I think if you're going to make a successful business you have to have drive. I never had that.

Now I know some people if they're not painting every day are miserable. I'm miserable if I am. I have great gaps when I don't do anything. And I know that's not good, because if you working constantly ideas tend to flow. When you're painting outside, you're concentrating on something, you begin to see other subjects to do; one thing leads to another. It's that kind of consistency which enabled me to do an exhibition in eighteen months. These days I'm working more inside.

Yes, I've never been ambitious to show. Kym Bonython gave me my first one-man exhibition in 1964 and then another in 1966. In that show I only sold one picture, but it was a start.

*W We can't wrap this up Geoff without me referring to those golden years again. I mean this is when I called you Mr Wilson. And, I was in awe of you. You were this extraordinary teacher. But you were also....you had a bit of a reputation in our group of having numerous dalliances with young ladies. Some of them were students in our group. Had to ask this one! And when I actually asked you about this some weeks ago, you referred to it as, 'They were the years they should have locked us up for fifteen years.'*

*G I think in the 60s there was a very happy, relaxed connection between staff and students. The students used to ask the staff to their parties and vice versa. I know at the end of the year I would ask the final year students up to my place for a barbeque. At the student parties I can remember most lecturers had a students sitting on their knee. It was all quite innocent.*

*But, in the time at Underdale when feminism was strong, lecturers declined to go to a student party. It was too risky.*

*I remember ... I'll give you an example ... there was a wonderful student whose father taught me at Adelaide High, and I knew the family. And she was one of the most I should say, sexiest girls I had ever met and had a wonderful sexy laugh. One day I was in the office [should I tell you this?] and she came over and she said 'Look I've done some prints in the darkroom'. There was a little darkroom next to the history room. 'I'd like you to have a look at them. So over I go. It was pitch dark, a bit of a red light ... maybe that's symbolic. But she grabbed me and we had this pash ... in the darkroom. Yes, well, after I recovered from fainting, Helen took me back to the office. No, that was a little example. But yes, I was forty, and then you were twenty. I was twice as old as you. There was always that sort of tension in groups like that. Now I don't know whether I can tell you anything else.*

*W We might take it off the record. ....You mention the twice as old bit. There's that old saying that you know yourself by the time you've reached forty. You're double that age now Geoff. So, do you know yourself twice as well now by the time you reach eighty.*

*G No, well no, you would hope to. I think I'm a bit wiser. ....????... I'm not political. I like people, I spend a lot of time talking to people. I have a fairly busy life. I've travelled a lot.*

*Yes, I mean people say you should know yourself at forty. And I think it's important that you watch yourself sometimes. For instance, if I swept the floor, which is very rare, I'd go into the pantry and try to find a reward like an old biscuit.*

*At my lowest, I thought my house was terrible and on my eightieth birthday, I told the story that I took a girl down to my bedroom to show her the new Duna cover. She said, 'What wonderful steel blue sheets you've got on the bed'. And I said, well I bought them a year ago and they were white. And she said,*

'Don't you wash them?' And I said, 'Do you have to?' Well, one day, this is true, there was a banging on the front door, about nine o'clock. I opened it, and there was this irate woman who said, 'I'm so and so's mother and I want to see that bedroom'. I said, come down, and she goes down and looks at the bedroom. It had a grey mould on the ceiling plus those sheets and she said, 'I don't want you going out with my daughter. I don't want her to get the plague'. And I said, 'Madam, even the rats are too frightened to come in'. When she was backing out of the drive, I yelled out to her, 'Would you like to come out to dinner tonight?' That's when she crashed into my front gate.

One other story, this is about the bedroom. I always thought I should get a watercolour by Tom Bone and I picked one up in an auction. I've got it hanging in my bedroom. And not so long ago, a woman who I didn't know very well. She came up to see some of my work and I showed her some watercolours that I had in the kitchen. Then I blurted out, 'Maybe you'd like to come down to the bedroom to see my Bone'. Well I've never seen anybody leave the house so quickly.

*W Geoff, all good things must come to an end. We've been going for an hour and I would like to just leave a bit of time if any one has questions.*

**Various people comments from the audience. Much of it quite unclear.**

**Evening concludes.**

**Thanks Geoff and Winnie.**

**Transcript by Dr Jenny Aland PSM**

**Completed Saturday July 4, 2009.**

**Revised with changes suggested by Geoff Wilson, 19<sup>th</sup> September, 2009.**