

ABClisten, podcasts, radio, news, music, and more.
One of my earliest memories as a child is from the early 70s.
I was very young and I was in the family car
as it was zooming along the Carl Expressway
across Circular Quay in Sydney.
And I can remember looking out of the window of the car
and seeing the massive white sails
on the construction site on Ben Long Point.
And I asked my dad what it was and he said,
that is the Sydney Opera House, son,
and it'll never be finished.
But it was finished just six months later
and it joined the ranks of the world's
truly great buildings.
The Sydney Opera House looks like it was built
by a pharaoh or an emperor.
Its scale is breathtaking and it looks great
from every angle like a movie star.
Helen Pitt is here to tell the story
of how the Sydney Opera House came to be,
of how this wildly ambitious project
was conceived by a working class premier,
an unknown Danish architect and a conductor
that was hounded out of Australia after a sex scandal.
Helen Pitt has drawn on new information
and diaries and letters that reveal how miraculous it was
that the thing ever got made in the first place.
And Helen's book is called The House.
Hello, Helen. Hi, Richard.
Now, you were a kid when the Sydney Opera House opened.
You were there on that day.
What do you remember of that day?
Well, I was an eight-year-old on a ferry out on Sydney Harbour
and we were typical Sydney Siders
waiting long and hard to see the beautiful sails
of this building opened.
So what I recall was a load of people on the harbour
in bikinis and champagne corks popping
and big red ribbons floating in the breeze
from the top, the big two shells.
And I do remember too that a whole load of pigeons
were let loose at what was called the big flap.
It was the thing that they recruited all these pigeons
from all over Australia to take part in the big protest

of the announcement of the building opening.
And then also hundreds and thousands of balloons,
big red balloons that because of it being so windy,
got blown straight out of the heads.
So it was really choppy.
I do remember feeling a little bit seasick
and my dad held my hand and took me out on the boat
and pointed atop the big shell and said,
look, there's a guy, Blackfella atop the big white shell.
And so that's when the whole thing began
and I can certainly recall the joyous feel
of everyone on the harbour just sort of waiting there
to see what the queen was going to do, what she was wearing.
It happened to be a duck egg blue dress
and all the various people that were taking part
in this occasion, it was really the biggest event
to take place in Australia at the time.
And that Aboriginal man standing on the topmost
side of the opera house, who was he?
That was Ben Blakely.
He was the star of Matlock Police,
an Aboriginal tracker on Matlock Police,
but he was actually the man that was pretending
to be Ben along.
I am Ben along, the spirit of your people lives
and will continue on forever and ever.
Ben along point was where Ben along's hut was
in the early days of Australian settlement.
And it was also where the first performance
took place by convicts.
And so it had lots of reasons for being there.
But Ben Blakely stood up there on top of the shell
and proclaimed, I'm Ben along, the spirit of my people
lives here and their dance and song survives.
Going back, looking through the records,
looking through the old newspapers from the 1950s,
when do you start to see the cry go up
that Sydney needs an opera house,
a proper palace of culture?
Yes, well, it was really the arrival of Queen Elizabeth II
in 1954.
So, you know, 1.8 million people in Sydney,
a million of them gather around the shores of the harbour.
A million people.

More than half of the city came to welcome the Queen
as she came on board on the steamship Gothic
into the harbour.
And she walked up to Martin Place
and laid something at the cenotaph.
And then everyone realised, well, look,
we don't really have anything really fancy to show her.
You know, there was no cultural place other than the town hall.
There was the Tivoli down the road, wasn't there?
Yeah, there was the Tivoli, there were a whole, like,
sort of small musical theatre-ish type of things,
but nothing really grand.
And so that year, in the wake of her visit,
a group of Australians, mainly led by Nugget Coombe,
who started the Elizabethan Theatre Trust,
which was the forerunner to the Australian opera.
He sort of lobbied hard of the Menzies government,
who was clearly enamoured by the Queen.
And they were hoping for a sort of Elizabethan age
to dawn in Australia at that time.
So it was very inspiring for cultural people
to take up this sort of mantle of, like,
maybe we should get something going.
And so that was really the year that it began.
And at the end of that year,
it was when the move for the opera house really began.
So now we have to bring in the first kind of
great, grand, genius, tragic figure here,
which is Eugene Goossens.
Eugene Goossens, who was the conductor
of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra at the time,
and also was the manager of the Conservatorium of Music
in Sydney.
Tell me a bit about him and how he was brought to Australia
and what kind of his importance in Sydney culture at the time.
Well, Eugene Goossens was a big name.
In America and England, he was a Belgian-born conductor
who had been brought to America to conduct
the Eastman Kodak silent film orchestras.
So he was like a rock star there.
He was mobbed like a movie star everywhere he went.
And he performed at the Civic Centre in San Francisco
at the end of World War II.
And all the world leaders were gathered

and everyone thought, wow, that guy is great.
So everyone scrambled to get him as a guest conductor.
And one of them was Charles Moses,
who was the head of the ABC at the time.
So the ABC was just in its infancy.
He was the general manager of the ABC from 1935
to the late 40s.
So he really knew that they needed to get classical music
in between the sport and the news on the radio.
So they thought we need him as a guest conductor.
So he got him as a guest and then he convinced him
to come to Australia by luring him with a salary
that was more than Ben Schiffley,
the Prime Minister, earned at the time.
Wow.
By combining the role as head of the Conservatorium
and the head of the symphony.
So got him out here in 1947 and he proclaims,
I'm gonna make the Sydney Symphony Orchestra players
more famous than cricket players.
And that was kind of a motherhood statement if you like,
but he really did.
You know, the subscriptions just grew overnight.
20,000 people packing the town hall.
You couldn't get a seat to the symphony.
It had to be, you know, willed to you
by a relative who died.
It was really the hottest ticket in town.
Such was the demand for classical music in Sydney,
led when the orchestra was conducted
by this glamorous figure.
Precisely.
You know, he was a really major figure in,
and he'd been lobbying Charles Moses for years,
seven years it took him to finally get a meeting
with Joe Carl, which was in the wake of the Queen's visit.
So he really, it had been his baby
because he felt that the town hall where he was performing,
it just wasn't set up for the right acoustics
for his orchestra players.
And you know, not only that, you've got to remember,
we had the six o'clock swill happening then.
You couldn't get an alcoholic drink at night
after a performance.

So people would be ducking across the road
to pubs in George Street.
And it really wasn't a great setup at all for everyone.
So Charles Moses finally capitulated
to his constant demands and arranged a meeting with Joe Carl.
And that's kind of how it all began.
So Goosens nagged the head of the ABC
to arrange a meeting with the Premier of New South Wales.
Nag, nag, nag.
Nag, nag, nag.
And that's how he made it happen.
He's a fascinating guy, Goosens.
Like you showed that he had friends.
Igor Stravinsky was a friend.
Nelly Melba was a friend.
He went fishing with Pablo Picasso.
I mean, this is the kind of guy he was.
He must have made a real noise when he arrived, so to speak.
Why, how did he come to the conclusion?
How did Goosens come to the conclusion
that this opera house would have to be on benalong points?
Well, he would go for a walk daily
in the Botanical Gardens with his secretary.
He was Eugene Goosens the fourth.
And there had been, you know,
many of them before him is from a long line
of conductors in his family.
And so he'd walk daily with the secretary
and they'd get to the turnaround point,
which was the turnaround point for the city's trams
at that point, benalong point.
And if anyone remembers, it was this sort of old building,
Fort Macquarie, it was known as.
You know, probably the most beautifully located tram
turnaround spot in the world at the time.
And he'd say, it must be here.
It absolutely must be here.
Now, there'd been several sites that had been discussed
as potential places for the opera house.
One was above Winyard Station,
because they thought that would be great
for public transport access.
Another one, George Molna,
who was the editorial cartoonist at the Herald.

He was also an architecture lecturer.
And he set his students a task in 1951
to draw a building that would be an opera house
on the side at the end of Oxford Street near Hyde Park.
So there were many options that were being flouted at the time,
but it was really Goosens that wanted it at benalong point.
So when he finally got that meeting with Joe Carl,
Joe Carl said, well, we can't,
because the Maritime Services Board is going to be there.
We've got plans to put a big international terminal there.
And he said, put it on the other side, which he did.
So that's why the passenger terminal is now
on the other side of Circular Key.
Indeed. Well, it was Joe Carl listening to Eugene Goosens, essentially.
So this brings the Premier of New South Wales,
Joe Carl, into the picture.
I fell in love with Joe Carl a little bit reading your book.
I fell in love with him as a figure.
Tell me a bit about him, the kind of man Joe Carl was.
He was an extraordinary man by all sounds,
by all accounts.
He had nothing more than a piano in his Marrickville home.
That's the extent of his musical knowledge.
However, he really understood Sydney people, I think.
He was a gifted orator.
He left school at 15.
He worked in the railways at Everly Street, Round Red Fern.
And he rose in the union movement,
but largely thanks to his skills as a public speaker.
He went to WEA, he joined debating teams.
You can tell throughout the book, I think,
when you read a Joe Carl speech,
how gifted he was at communicating.
And it was only in the later days of his premiership,
in the sort of nascent years of television,
that you got to see him really perform well,
because he was a great television performer.
He was great on the radio.
He just had the capacity to sway people
by his convincing skills as an orator, I think.
So he really was crucial to getting this thing up.
He was a real do-it-too, that was the other thing.
He actually got stuff done.
Got stuff done. People loved that about him.

It's like federal labour at the time.
They were in perpetual opposition.
But labour in New South Wales had a governing mentality
in those days and knew how to, seemingly,
knew how to get things done.
I want to quote from one of his speeches here,
when he announced his support for a Sydney opera house.
He said, I'm just quoting him here.
If we in our lifetime did nothing more
than express our love of the arts
by providing a building worthy of them,
even when names are forgotten,
the building will always remain as a testimony
to what was done in the year 1954
by a group of citizens
for the encouragement of talent and culture.
God, it's kind of long to hear a politician say,
use words like that these days.
Oh, I know. Don't be long for it.
Even Nugget Coombs, when he was at that public meeting
in the November of 1954, said,
if you are the man that gets the opera house
on this harbour in Sydney,
your name will live on for 400 years
as the name of the man that put Sydney on the world map.
Well, unfortunately, his name lives on
in the Karl Expressway, you know, which girots it, right?
Visually girots, circular key,
but that's kind of in reading all the old Herald files
and the interviews that I did,
I actually talked to a lot of the state parliamentary reporters
in that era, and they said,
Joe Karl was an extraordinary man.
Well, I just love the fact that the pharaoh of the opera house
tend to be a man who liked to drink and to smoke
and to bed at the races and sing along at the piano
around his marital home.
Completely, completely.
Unlikely bedfellow with Eugene Goosens,
but completely worked out in terms of
they had a great respect for each other.
But also, he insisted that it had to be for everyone,
a house for everyone, not just the wealthy,
it had to be a house for absolutely everyone to enjoy.

So then we get to 1955,
and Eugene Goossens is suddenly destroyed
by a major scandal.
Tell me about the scandal, please, Helen.
This is quite an extraordinary story.
My publisher calls this the 50 Shades of Eugene chapter.
It's kind of best read in the privacy of your home, perhaps,
but Eugene Goossens, because he was a guest conductor,
went around the world constantly,
and he was with his third wife in Sydney,
and he was finding it all a little bit of a stayed,
a bit boring, and so he would go back to London quite regularly.
And when he did,
he was asked to bring some pornographic material back with him.
He befriended the woman that's known as
the Witch of Kings Cross, Rosalie Norton, and her partner,
which ran, as supposed, or an alleged,
according to the tabloids at the time,
Witches Coven in Kings Cross,
which was quite notorious at the time.
Yeah, she was practicing sex magic.
Pan worshipper, and yes.
Yeah, pan worshipping pan.
Sex magic, it was called,
which is actually technically a euphemism for oral sex.
However, no one knew really what that was at the time.
Order what you like.
That's what Eugene called it,
and he'd write these really racy letters to her.
Anyway, he did have a whole load of pornographic material
hidden away in what looked like musical scores,
you know, to say, Brahms on one,
and names that looked like someone else's on the other.
And so, when he brought them back into the country,
he was ambushed because the tabloids got wind of this.
There was a raid of the home in Kings Cross,
and they got word, and he was completely ambushed.
Take it away to the vice,
questioning by the vice squad,
and it was an extraordinary embarrassment for the ABC,
you can imagine.
He was just coming back from London
after being knighted to that so...
So, Eugene, yes, that's right.

So, that was all put through the courts,
and he was disgraced.
So, that meant he had to leave Australia.
He left Australia, and it was...
He appeared in court and just said,
please, just sort of let me leave the country.
And two of his students, final year students at the con,
Richard Benign, and a typist that he plucked out
of the typing pool, Joan Sutherland,
who they actually obviously became enamoured of each other
and married, and also enamoured of Eugene Goosen.
So, they went to visit him later in his life in the early 60s,
and he was just destroyed by the public scandal
of the whole thing.
You know, it was just a huge embarrassment.
And people forget that he is the man
that gave us the Sydney Opera House,
because his name was sort of blackened by the scandal.
So, that's the first great man to be emulated
by the Sydney Opera House.
So, the committee was set up by the state government
to find a design for the Sydney Opera House,
and they had some finalists,
but to sort of help them decide they brought in
a world-famous architect, a man by the name of Aero Saranen.
Now, he was a guy who designed amazingly beautiful,
biomorphic buildings all over the world,
a huge international reputation.
And they brought him, they flew him to Sydney
to help them make a decision.
Please tell me the story of what unfolded there.
There were four judges.
There were two from Australia and two from abroad.
The one from abroad was Leslie Martin,
who had done Festival Hall in London,
and the other two were Cobden Parks,
who was Henry Parks' son, the government architect.
And the other one was Harry Inger Mashworth,
who was the dean of architecture at Sydney Uni.
And so, they called in this superstar,
the Aero Saranen, who was renowned for the Gateway Arch
in St. Louis, Missouri,
and also the General Motors building in Detroit, Michigan.
And he really was the man's man of modernism.

He was extraordinarily well-respected in America.
He was on Time Magazine cover in 1956.
He really was the man in architecture.
So, he was flown in and he arrived late.
The judging had begun on a Monday.
He flew in on the Friday, took him forever to get here to.
And so, he sort of waltzes into the building
and at the Art Gallery of New South Wales,
where the judging took place.
And there were 233 entries from all around the world.
Carl had set this international competition
to get a design for the building.
And obviously, overwhelmed with choice.
A bit like the judges in the Archbowl competition, I imagine.
You know, they're sitting there, no, no, no.
And they had a pile of rejects
that were already established on one side,
the three had gone through.
And he sort of flipped through them.
And he came across this one that was quite striking.
Now, at the time, he was working on the TWA terminal at JFK,
which if anyone knows, it's kind of,
it's rounded and very, very vault.
Like it's quite similar to the Sydney Opera House.
And the irony is they'd actually met.
He and the architect that he eventually chose,
obviously, Yorn Watson,
because they're both Scandinavian
and Utsun had visited him in America.
So perhaps, you know, he recognized his style.
I don't know, but he could certainly see that it stood out.
But here's the thing, Helen.
It wasn't one of the finalists, was it?
Utsun's design, or was it?
I don't know, it wasn't.
So there was this pile. No, that's right.
The pile was on the rejects.
They hadn't even got to discussing the finalists,
because it was 10 days' worth of judging.
But it was certainly not in one of their preferred lists.
So it finally got pulled out from the reject pile.
So he just went flick, flick, flick, flick, flick, flick.
Yeah. Oh. Yeah.
Now, this is a disputed story,

because, of course, as he said,
he flew off back to America.
And so did the Leslie Martin back to England.
He said, like, it's not really me.
I'm not taking any risks.
I don't have to live in that city.
You know, they're the ones that have to live with that decision.
So it's been a disputed story, because the other judge just said,
oh, no, no, it was us that decided, you know, don't be silly.
However, I did track down his son.
And his son has done a documentary on his father.
And he wasn't a big fan of his father's,
but he said, look, he definitely chose that.
And in some ways, it was the way Eric, his filmmaker son,
had a redemption story with him, because he started to think,
well, you know, he wasn't the best at ads,
but gosh, he's given the world some beautiful buildings.
And the Opera House was one of them.
So he does, it is pretty much the arrow name
lives in anecdotal evidence throughout the whole Opera House story.
John Ortson's great-grandson is named after him.
And Richard Laplatria, who was one of the people
that worked with Ortson on the Opera House,
named his son also a hero.
So the story goes, and I have to say,
I find this entirely plausible,
that he picked it out of the reject pile and went,
there's your Opera House.
Now, when you looked at John Ortson's drawing,
the sketches that he'd done,
a freeze proposal for a Sydney Opera House,
you look at it today,
and it looks distinctly different from the Opera House
that was achieved in the end.
It's got the sails, it's got them sort of over one another,
but it's a little flatter, it's more horizontal,
and the other buildings look more like they're tied down,
they're pinned down to the deck a bit more.
How much detail was in the drawings
that John Ortson had submitted?
Not much.
In fact, the judges said it was simple
to the point of being diagrammatic.
So what Siren did was to go back to his hotel room

and sketch a little more thoroughly the idea
to hand it to Joseph Carl
when he made the announcement on January 29, 1957.
And then also, when the other judges got back to work,
they commissioned Arthur Baldwinson to do a watercolor
because they knew there was so little to go on
that both the press and the people of Sydney
would not be very keen on that.
So this radical design, Orton hadn't really given any thought
to solving the problems, the engineering issues.
Oh, not at all, not at all.
Of building these vast shells
that would have to form the carapace of the Opera House.
No clue, and in fact, Siren was okay with that
because with his TWA design,
he'd just done two or three inch thick concrete,
and that's kind of what they thought that they would do
at the very beginning.
But it turned out that that just wasn't going to fly.
They couldn't do it the way it was built,
so they had to change the structure eventually.
So once it was announced at the gallery in New South Wales,
you pulled out comments from the Sydney Morning Herald there
and the reaction to it, I'll just quote them here.
It was described in the Sydney Morning Herald
variously as quote,
a wonderful piece of sculpture or a haystack
covered by several tarpaulins
which are being lifted up by a strong wind.
Someone else said it was a ray of hope.
Someone else called it the New South Whale, as in WHALE.
Someone said it looked like a sink with plates stacked
in readiness for washing.
Someone else said it's some large, lovely ship
of the imagination.
And someone else said a hideous parachute
which we cannot fold up and put away.
That's fantastic, so it really engaged people
right from the get-go, people loved it or went,
what is that, right?
Day one, you know, even in the rooms of the art gallery,
there was like, oh my goodness, you know,
even Charles Moses in his oral history
to the opera house didn't say it at the time,

but in hindsight, it's like, great building,
but there is no way the ALP is going to give this the go ahead.
You know, most people were like,
when they saw it on the front page of the Herald,
you talk to anyone that picked up the paper the next day
and saw that picture and they're thinking, right, okay,
I don't know quite, I mean, they agreed it was beautiful,
but they just had no clue how that was going to get done.
I know, but God, it just seems so close.
If Sarin hadn't flicked through the rejects,
we would have ended up with some ghastly concrete box.
Oh, I've seen the rejects.
The rejects are really not anything much to write home about.
And we'd be talking now, we'd be like, years ago,
we'd have been talking about tearing it down like a footy stadium
and building something else. Absolutely.
You know, it was remarkable.
It was such a bold move.
And in fact, all the journalists that I interviewed
that were there at the time, you know,
that's been one of the nicest things.
I've gone back to a lot of my predecessors
at the Sydney Morning Herald,
who've been like my deep throats and reporting,
and they have been really, really helpful
in recounting the mood in that era,
because it was a really bold thing to take a risk on.
And they didn't think, you know, like Charles Moses,
they just didn't think it was going to get through the ALP policy.
So meanwhile, meanwhile, Helen, we have in Denmark,
the architect Jorn Hudson, who's done this sketch,
sort of shunted it off to Sydney,
probably not expecting even to get a call back.
How was he told that he had won the competition
to design the Sydney Opera House?
Well, it was a Herald scoop, actually,
because they got to him
before he'd actually been told that he won the competition.
So what happened was the announcement was made,
the premier tells everyone the name,
entry number 218.
So everyone scuttles off to try and, you know,
cover the news story.
And back at the Herald, the Broadway newsroom,

they use this radio telephone system
of trying to call him in Denmark.
And so he has just had a baby,
his wife's just had a baby,
and they're out walking in the forests around Hellebec,
which is beautiful, it's cold, there's no snow.
And the phone rings,
and his 10-year-old daughter, Lynne, answers the phone,
and they say, Lynne, is your father there?
No, can you go and get him?
It's really big news.
Your father's won a prize in Sydney,
there's someone on the phone wanting to talk to him.
So she races off on a bike to go and get him,
and they see her and they're like, what's going on?
I'm really worried when she arrives.
And she goes, you've won some prize in Sydney.
And for Hudson, he'd entered so many competitions
that even when he won, the commissions often didn't go ahead,
but he was still pretty excited about this one
because he'd spent six months working really hard at it.
So he raced back to the phone and he gets on there.
And the funny thing is that this story is recounted
on the front page of the Herald the day
because the first thing he says, the reporter asks him,
how does it feel to know
that you've won the Sydney Opera House Competition?
He says, oh, well, I haven't actually received word of that yet,
but it'll be fabulous.
I can't wait to migrate there kind of immediately.
He knew that he wanted to come here and oversit
because part of the deal of winning the competition
was the architect had to sit
a New South Wales architecture board examination,
but would be brought here to oversee the building of it.
So big party ensued in Helleback.
All the family came and at the time,
he was working with a Swedish architect
by the name of Eric Anderson.
They'd worked on it together,
but, and Anderson was involved in the beginning,
but he sort of dropped out because he came to Sydney
on his first visit with Utsun and didn't really like it.
So, you know, it was Utsun's baby,

so he let him kind of take over.

MUSIC

Podcast and broadcast.

This is Conversations with Richard Feidler.

He's a very handsome man, honestly.

He is a very handsome man.

He looks like Gary Cooper in that time.

There's no doubt about that.

He gets a rock star arrival in Sydney.

Like, they cannot believe.

He's just, he's movie star, good looks.

He's, he's, he's European ways, little accent.

He speaks perfect English, but with that lovely sort of accent.

And I guess what's one of the really interesting things

about reading all the old stories

was just how much the people of Sydney wanted this building

and how excited they were to meet him for the first time

at the Town Hall in 1957.

It also reminds me of the Olympics in a way.

There's this feeling, oh, we want this so badly,

but we're frightened we'll fail,

and we'll fright we won't pull it off.

That there's two different things.

Yeah, there's a bit of that, definitely.

But the Town Hall officials said they had never seen

a more excited crowd that day when he was there.

And it was really like the whole of Sydney came to wish him,

well, 2,500 people packed the Town Hall,

but there were people all around the city

sort of wanting to catch a glimpse of this man

because obviously it captured the public imagination.

He received before he came to Sydney

800 letters from Australians saying how excited they were

at his design and his boldness

and what he was bringing to the nation.

There was a huge fundraiser event that was held at the Town Hall.

Tell me what that night was like.

It was a very funny occasion.

So we have the very public situation

where we've got Joan Hammond singing One Fine Day

and we've got the various ABC people, Charles Moses,

addressing the crowd,

and they literally start the fundraiser right there.

So they announce a public fundraiser

and the fact that the lot trees will fund the building.
So people were falling over themselves to give money to this.
So a load of money was raised on that first day.
And then later that night,
they had this little private party known as the Kissing Party,
which was a kind of odd little fundraiser.
So they sort of all got together,
the John Ortson, the mayor of Sydney at the time,
who's Harry Jensen, known as John Ortson,
who's Harry Jensen, known as Hanson Harry or Headline Harry,
whoever depended how you looked at him.
He and the opposition leader, Pat Morton,
they traded kisses for cash.
It was a really odd little story where, you know,
kind of like a telethon, I guess, you know, where,
I'll raise you this, I'll give you \$50 at 50 pounds if you do,
if you kiss me.
So this little smooch-a-thon, it was called,
it raised, you know, half a million dollars.
Wow, you couldn't do that today.
You'd have to work it in reverse like the politician won't kiss you.
It's kind of an odd, yes, given our Me Too campaign.
It's kind of not the sort of thing you'd even expected
to start this public building,
but it was really kind of a colourful little chapter
that's going to have been lost in the history of the story.
As was that meeting, it was really a phenomenal meeting.
So then the soil was broken in 1959, two years later.
It seemed like if it hadn't started then,
even though the designs weren't finished
and the problems had not been solved,
it probably never would have happened, would it?
It would unlikely to have happened now.
So what happened was, as we've said when the announcement came,
it still needed to get through the ALP caucus.
Now, in the first motion, before Utzon came,
the caucus voted 24 to 17 in favour of it.
It's like a bit of a knife-edge win,
a bit like a liberal leadership spill.
You know, the numbers were a little too close
and there was a motion to scuttle it at the next caucus meeting.
So Carl had this brilliant idea
to take it to the floor of the ALP,
to take it to the party and let the rank and file decide.

So the ALP conference comes and it's again at the town hall
and all these blokey blokes of the ALP are saying,
I'm not really sure.
I think this is just for hoity-toity people.
I don't really think we want this.
Rich man's white elephant.
Yeah.
And so it's about to get knocked down.
And then this woman from the Clothing Trades Union,
Ms. N. Napa, is all we know her name,
as stood up and said, you know,
I'm from this small island of Malta
which has the third largest opera house in the world.
Shouldn't we as women be able to raise our children
in the culture of not just rock and roll,
but we want to be able to afford the dress circle.
We want to take our children to cultural things.
And it was so well received.
She got a standing ovation.
Her motion was backed by Kath Anderson,
who was the wife of the Mayor of Waverly,
notorious, really, really sort of strong woman.
So it's the women of the ALP
that got this through the State Conference.
So that's why Utsun, by the time he came,
he said, I'm not coming until you can guarantee me
it's going to be built.
So on that first meeting, when he comes in 1957,
he goes to meet Karl for the very first time.
And he knows he's a bit of a character.
And he's sort of sensing that Joe Karl
is the one that's going to get this thing happening.
So they go up to the Premier's room
and the Premier pops a bottle of sherry
and they start having a little drink in celebration.
And Karl's first question is, when can you start?
And Utsun replies, well, I'm not really sure
how I'm going to build it yet.
I don't know what I need to do to get it built.
And he said, that's not what I ask, Joe Karl.
It comes back as, when can you start?
So he's really keen to get this thing going
because he kind of senses it's a political opportunity for him.
And he wants it done before the 1959 election.

He starts it in March 1959, just weeks before the state election.

Maybe Joe Karl had a sense of his own mortality too.

Perhaps he did. Perhaps he did.

He died not long after that.

He's the second tragedy, really, of the Opera House story, if you ask me.

He won the election and it was in the midst, interestingly, of a huge scandal where the leader of the country party, Davis Hughes, he lost his leadership mantle

because he was considered to have committed a fraud in Parliament.

And so he was kind of like the Barnaby Joyce, the member of New England at the time, and a very controversial character.

But he got re-elected, not just on the back bench.

He didn't become leader of the country party.

But Joe romped in largely because everyone kind of wanted this story.

The real tragedy is that the sod turning happens in March 1959 and Joe's dead by October, just drops dead.

So the soil was broken and the workers,

I like the way the workers are kind of valorised at this time.

This is lovely.

The great American singer, Paul Robeson, came to the site to sing for the construction workers.

On the construction site, Paul Keating went down to see this happen.

But there was a problem with the design of the shells.

And the chief engineer was a fellow Scandinavian, a man named Ovar Arap.

And he couldn't solve the problem of how to construct the concrete shells.

The way Utsun himself arrived at the solution

is this moment when I actually think that Utsun was a genius.

It's hard to explain, but it's all sort of based on a sphere, isn't it?

About using the different parts of a sphere.

That was his chief insight, wasn't it?

Arap was always honoured at him that the shell had to be, it had to be geometric shapes put together.

So to be affordable, it needed to be broken down into big giant Lego blocks, if you like.

And there needed to be a way to construct it.

That was simple.

It could allow for repeated geometry.

But even Arap, in all the thousands of man hours

they put in London to get it built, they couldn't solve that.

So it was actually Utsun who came up with this spherical solution

of realising that if I create a sphere
and cut the parts of the shell from that sphere,
then I can just do the repeated geometry,
which is what we needed in mass production for a building that size.
So that was crucial in understanding how to build the building.
So then the shells could then be constructed from prefab parts
and then assembled onto concrete ribs, and that was the solution.
And in a way, the design that had to be was more beautiful
than the original design.
That's purely subjective.
Absolutely.
What we got was better than the original sketch, I think.
Well, I think so.
This is, again, it's another one of those grudge matches
that you have in Sydney.
So it'd be like the rabbit hose versus the roosters.
You're either on one camp, or you're not.
But I think it is.
And what happened was he used a lot of methods used in boat building
because Utsun's father was a very well-known boat builder
in Scandinavia.
He designed a thing called the alberg dinghy,
which was very much used throughout the world,
in fact, in sea-scouting circles,
which it was a simple form of designing boats
that was very sort of aerodynamic.
And he was a really keen observer of nature, his father,
as is Utsun himself.
Utsun, Joln Utsun was dyslexic.
So he's very much an Einstein kind of character.
He didn't read much.
He was very tactile.
He drew beautifully.
And he imagined the building into existence, if you ask me.
So that's kind of...
His methods of dealing may have been very different at the time.
But...
Yeah, I love the fact he's the son of a boat builder.
And this is why the opera house...
I suppose the idea that you can have a shape
that's not unlike the power of a ship can be,
can exist rather than some, like I say,
another concrete box, which was all the rage at the time.
Now, there was a party.

There was a party on the construction site
held by a socialite with 600 socialites
and 400 workers all wearing hard hats.
Tell me a bit about that night.
Well, this was one of the plans by the executive committee
to kind of make the opera house
not just a high-end thing.
It was going to be pop at the ops.
There was going to be...
Like, to make it a bit more popularised,
to get some pop music happening there.
So Dylan Robinson was this journalist
that had returned from working in London for Murdoch
and wanted to have a party.
And, you know, can I do it on the construction site?
And yes, of course they say.
And it turns into this wild night
where the easy beats play,
little patty plays, and she said,
her parents said,
this is too wild, you're coming home at 16.
And, you know, there were workers
hanging from the ceilings
and all sorts of wild fun things happening.
And it was so scandalous
that there were beer cans everywhere.
And, you know, the next day was a complete mess
and the only person there at 7.30 on time, none of the workers,
except as June Dally Watkins,
the etiquette queen who's there to help clean up.
It was so scandalous that they decided
we can't really do that anymore.
Let's just get the building completed.
Although they had huge, huge neon lights
to get working throughout the night.
You know, it was...
Everyone was working hard at that.
They thought, OK, we can't afford really to have a party
because it's such a public place in the centre of Sydney.
Everyone could watch it.
They had dances from the Pink Pussycat,
the King's Cross strip club. That's right.
And the easy beats playing on the construction site.
This is unthinkable in this day and age.

Well, it is interesting.
And that's why the Paul Robeson performance, too.
You know, we forget that there were all these performances
that took place prior to the actual building being completed.
And it was a young Paul Keating
that hopped on the bus to go down and see it.
Anyone who saw that Robeson performance
was completely blown away.
He sang acapella.
And many people wrote to me because I put a call out
on the Letters page of the Sydney Morning Herald.
You know, can tell me who was there that day.
And so emotional led...
I got such emotional letters, people remembering it
and how proud they were to be there to see that.
OK, Helen, this brings us to 1965.
The building's still under construction.
There's still problems to be solved.
And there's a change of government in New South Wales.
The government of Romanaskans is elected.
And the new Works Minister in charge of the Opera House
is a man named Davis Hughes, you mentioned there earlier.
Why did he clash so powerfully
with the architect Jorn Utzon?
Well, it's really too simple to say it was, you know,
a clash between the European visionary
and the toughest nuts Tasmanian, which is what he was.
It was simply that Davis Hughes felt he had a mandate
to get this building finished,
a bit like what your dad was saying.
Everyone in Sydney had been watching it for seven years
and there didn't seem to be much progress,
because, you know, it's so very public again.
So he said, I want from you a plan
and I want to know the final construction date.
And I guess that had got a bit out of control.
Utzon was working very sort of with some great ideas,
great sort of, I guess, impresario.
And he had these great ideas to involve the people of Sydney
in the actual construction.
Like he'd got these plywood ceilings being built down
on the Parramatta River.
And his plan was to float them down the Parramatta River
on barges so everyone could say, oh, look,

there goes parts of the Sydney morning,
the Sydney Opera House.
And he was kind of like going to do a very aida-like
operatic thing of bringing them all in through the windows.
But that kind of, it was annoying the New South Wales Government
because even though we were paying for it with lottery,
our own lottery tickets,
so it's kind of like the first crowd-funded building in Australia,
the New South Wales Government wanted it completed
and because they had won a two-seat majority that year
to say, let's get this thing finished.
So he was put under pressure to get it done by David Hughes.
So what was the issue in the end that led to the break-up,
that led to Jonathan saying, I'm leaving?
It was a clash over the use of the plywood,
paying for the plywood mock-ups,
because he wanted to play plywood and plywood mullions
and the mock-ups for the roof.
But also because David Hughes had been made his paymaster
as the Public Works Minister,
he was put in charge of the project,
he simply stopped paying Hudson.
Now, this was a real problem
because Hudson had hired a firm of young architects,
you know, had many people working for him,
but he couldn't afford to pay them anymore.
So it was a clash over the mock-ups and the money.
So after being given this rockstar welcome
and even when he arrived in Sydney to live here,
the Herald boasted, you know, his home,
he was going to live in Bayview Heights,
you know, property heights,
property values to double in Bayview Heights
the moment that Hudson, the Opera House architect, arrives.
He was greeted by the Queen, you know,
he's given a complete welcome,
but after it was taking so long,
he was becoming less and less favoured in the city.
He's becoming a whipping boy, wasn't he?
It was completely a whipping boy
for the political power, the political wins of the day.
So he went to the Minister's office
after sort of several times saying,
I can't work like this, I cannot work like this.

He went with his two, well, one loyal lieutenant
to see Davis Hughes.
And Davis Hughes, on February 28, 1966,
calls him in, has this 15-minute meeting
in which he says, I can't work like this, I go.
And he never actually said, I resign,
but the paper reported it as he resigned angrily
in a verbal interview.
I think my take on it is he probably went away
thinking that he would come back,
that he couldn't work with the New South Wales government.
And certainly the letters I found in the archive,
in Denmark after my two trips there,
I found old letters that, you know,
Utsun died 10 years ago,
so his family have donated letters now
that, you know, in the wake of his death,
we sort of are learning a lot more.
And I truly believe he played politics behind
the Asken government's back,
rightly so, to try and come back.
So his strategy was to wait for a Labor government
to come in in real time, but it never happened.
It never happened.
And, you know, meanwhile, the tragedy of, you know,
everyone's descending on his home in Palm Beach,
and it's just getting crazy,
and he just knows he has to leave.
And I remember Lynn, his daughter,
telling this really tragic story of them going in a convoy
of their citroens, they had two citroens,
her brother drove one and he drove the other,
and they were leaving Palm Beach,
going to the airport that day, and they had to go out.
They left like, he said, clandestinely like a criminal,
because it was such a big media scrum at that time.
And as they approached going over the Harbour Bridge,
she remembers him glancing to the left
for his last view of his masterpiece.
And she said, oddly, there was a cloud on top of the building.
So he never actually saw it for one last time.
And that's the tragedy we all know.
You know, we know that he left
and never saw his building complete.

But I guess I found from reading and interviewing
all the various people,
I just didn't know there were so many other tragedies
associated with the building,
and especially with the one, the guy that took over.
My own take on it is I do think he was a genius.
The way he just envisaged the whole thing
and solved the problem of the sales,
that elegant way he solved that problem,
he was maybe just too proud in the end,
and maybe just too proud.
And I think it was foolish of him never to come back and see it.
I mean, that's just great.
It's still his building.
We recognise it's his building,
even if another architect finished it off.
Well, it's his building on the outside.
It's not really his building on the inside,
which is really an eye-opener for me,
going to Denmark and seeing the interiors of his buildings there.
I think the interior of the Sydney Opera House
is Peter Hall's genius,
and that's something completely different.
Okay, now that brings us to him.
He was the architect who appointed to replace it,
so, ultimately.
Yes, unhappily.
Unhappily.
Tell me a bit about him
and a bit about the tragedy of Peter Hall.
It was a tragedy.
He was brought in by the state government.
They asked three architects,
and they all refused.
He was the third.
And he was a fine young architect.
He had won...
He was probably the best in his era.
He'd won many awards.
He'd won scholarships to Cranbrook,
to Wesley College.
He was really a shining star.
And he was working for the Public Works Department
and Government Architects Office.

And he was dragged in to take over.
And he actually called Hudson and said,
I don't really want to do this.
Can you help me, please?
And Hudson just said,
well, I can tell you what I had in plans in store,
but I can't really tell you
how you're going to complete it.
So he's left with very little.
Hudson left,
and his lawyers handed over plans,
the plans that they were,
but they weren't very detailed.
Four fine craft models.
It didn't tell him very much how to go on.
So we had to begin all over.
And that meant that Peter Hall
had to go travelling all around the world
to opera houses around the world
and consult with various people
on the acoustics and so forth.
And then, of course, Davis Hughes
hops on a plane trip around the world,
the education minister,
all the Asken government people hop on.
And people sort of sensed a gravy chain,
a bit like we have with the light rail today.
I guess people are thinking,
what's happening here?
There's all these consultants being brought in.
Peter Hall completed that building
with very few plans,
with a consortium called Hall, Todd and Littlemore.
They did the glass walls.
They did many of the things that we know and love
about our opera house today.
They did a beautiful curtain of the sun and the moon.
It was a commission for John Coburn.
They did the John Olson painting Five Bells.
It's beautiful.
It's really beautiful.
And so for me, I think the opera house we know today,
the interiors, they're very much Peter Hall's story.
Now, the tragedy of Peter Hall,

it just keeps getting really sadder
because his wife hadn't wanted him
to take on that job at all.
She was an architect also.
She'd studied design at university with him
and they lost their marriage, essentially,
because of that disagreement over him taking the job.
Architects all around the world said,
don't do it.
He did.
And he completed it on time
and completed it with a flourish, I think.
And everyone can remember that day it opened.
It was a remarkable achievement
because he got the unions working together.
He was widely liked by the staff,
all the workers on the staff.
In a way, the doots on wasn't.
Well, it certainly was at the beginning.
When he was doing the plywood mock-up,
when the first segment was put down on place there,
he completely teared up with all the workers there
because he was so happy
that what he was doing was working.
It was a blemish-free segment
and he was certainly popular at the beginning.
But then as the relationship with Arab is disintegrated
and the relationship with the government disintegrated,
he became a more distant figure
and he, in fact, spent less time at Benalong Point.
He went up to Pittwater and worked from an office there
with no phone.
So you can imagine how frustrating that might have been
for people on site.
So back to Peter Hall.
What became of him, though, in the end?
Well, the tragedy of Peter Hall is he left the opera house project
and was bankrupted.
He lost two marriages, in fact,
and he went into business many times over
and ended up drunk and homeless
and was picked up by the Salvation Army on the street.
So here's this man that completed our best-known building,
died at the age of 64,

probably from a broken heart when, in 1994,
an exhibition came around called Unseen Utsun,
which was the plans of what he had done,
what Utsun had had in plan, had in store for the building.
And I think it just was the ending of him.
I've certainly spoken to his family a lot
and they were just completely heartbroken
by bringing up this old argument again
about 20 years after the building had been completed.
So it is really a great tragedy.
And I think what is happening now at the opera house
is a very strong move amongst the tour guides.
Louise Herron, the CEO, has very much tried to reinstate
Peter Hall in the narrative of this remarkable story.
So the opera house was opened in 1973,
as you said right at the start,
and it's been in operation for more than four decades now,
and it's unthinkable to think of Australia,
let alone Sydney, without such a triumph.
You never get tired of looking at the Sydney Opera House.
You're describing a thing of this,
and we've talked about the opera house as being a kind of a bonfire
for the lives and careers of so many people.
Eugene Goosens, Joan Utzon, Peter Hall,
and many others besides that.
These great and amazing people.
But to me, I think, this is what I thought,
I don't think you get a building that great
without human sacrifice on a grand scale.
And really, it's lucky no one was killed.
Oh, it is really lucky.
It is incredibly lucky no one was killed.
There were actually three reporters killed
making a documentary in a helicopter
on an ABC documentary.
But not really, they were not in the construction of it.
That was a remarkable thing, absolutely remarkable.
And look, and with the distance of time now,
we can obviously see there were many,
many great tragedies in the whole thing,
but yes, it's just a remarkable triumph.
And in fact, Richard Laplastia, who is one of,
for whom Joan Utzon was a mentor,
the young architect that worked on his home at Bayview,

he tells the most extraordinary stories about it.
He called his son Aro after Aro Siren,
and he went back to see Joan,
because he always wondered how must it feel
to not see your master police completed.
And he went to see Joan in the old folks' home
with his son Aro, and they hadn't seen each other
in 40 years, and Joan looks down at Richard's
really sort of worker man's hands and says,
look at your father's hands, Aro.
They've won many regattas,
because they were both great sailors together,
sailed together on pit water.
And Rick laughed a bit,
and he didn't really know what to say,
and then he said to Aro, Aro, look at your hands.
They drew the Sydney Opera House.
And I guess I found so many stories like this
that heartwarming stories, when I talked to people,
you know, Peter Hall's second wife, when I spoke to her,
she hadn't spoken of this story in decades.
So it was just beautiful to hear some of these stories
to retold to me.
You know, I know Aro Glass.
I had dinner once with Aro Glass in Bondi,
and Aro was, he's a New Yorker.
It's hard to impress New Yorkers.
He was indifferent to Bondi Beach, the glory of that.
He was just indifferent to it.
He didn't hate it.
He just didn't see fit to remark on it.
And when he came back,
he did a live performance at the Sydney Opera House,
and he said, I can't believe I'm playing at the Sydney Opera House.
This is insane.
I guess that's why I wrote the book,
because I lived outside of Australia for 16 years.
I was an exchange student in Sweden,
where the tiles came from.
I lived in San Francisco with the Araldite,
the epoxy resin came from.
And I lived in France, where the whiskey-coloured windows
were shipped over, you know,
Oscar and Sluice, Indelike too, from France.

And so I guess it was the story that everyone knew,
and that's why I made it my business to retell it,
because it's the story everyone knows about my hometown,
and I wanted them to hear it.

Great to speak with you, Helen.

Thank you so much.

Thanks, Richard.

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