



Fitzroy History Society Oral History Project 2015-2017

Transcript of interview with Rose Chong

(Interviewed by Rosa Simonelli and Marion Glanville from the Fitzroy History Society at Fitzroy on 28 October 2015)

Rose Chong describes herself as “a maker”. She studied dressmaking and then design at an art school in the UK, and opened her costume store on Gertrude Street in 1979, making costumes for the film industry, and for rental for parties or other occasions.

In 1979 the area was rough with both heroin addicts and boozy customers at local bars. That has changed, and new businesses have made their contribution and the demographic of the population has changed too. She is pleased that the area maintains its diversity, and the popularity of the Projection Festival (begun in 2008) is attracting more artists.



START OF TRANSCRIPT

- Facilitator 1: ...other researchers if they want to, but the History Society thought that they should get recording of people, long term residents.
- Rose Chong: Yep, well I'm not a long - I moved in here, into this shop, in '79. Does that qualify me as...
- Facilitator 2: That's 36 Years ago Rose, I think it does.
- Rose Chong: Yes, yep. So, alright then, so long as I'm qualified.
- Facilitator 1: Yes, well I don't know who put your name...but I said oh, I know her. You only know me by sight I think...but I'm, I've been around for a while. [0:45]
- Rose Chong: The Fitzroy History Society, I don't know why it is but every time they've got something and I think that looks really interesting, we'll go, there's a reason why we can't go, and we're away, we've got to look after babies. Min's got a mother who's really sick and it's just, it happens every single time and I think oh, well that'd be really good. ...I get the newsletter with the... That's why I know what's happening. I'd love to go to them. They had a walk just recently...which would have been really good and, oh, I took my granddaughter away and, anyway.
- Facilitator 2: Life sometimes gets in the way.
- Rose Chong: It gets in the way of, yeah, living.
- Facilitator 1: So you came here, you said, about 1979. You opened the shop, when was it, '80?
- Rose Chong: I think it was '79.
- Facilitator 1: It was when you were first here.
- Rose Chong: '79, yes. Yep, because before that I was in Queens Parade. You know, there used to be a health food shop there called Soul Food and it was a big, big building with three stories on the top and I was on the top floor. It's since burnt down actually. [2:00]
- Rose Chong: Yep, and on the ground floor there was a health food shop, when health food was new and exciting, I mean everybody's into it now but, and the owner of that shop asked me if I would like to, if we would go into business with him and we bought this building.



Facilitator 1: This one?

Rose Chong: This building. Then he decided he wanted to move on and I couldn't afford to buy his share so we sold to an investor and then some years later I managed to buy it back from her. So I'm lucky, I'm so lucky. I mean nobody then imagined that Gertrude Street would be anything other - and the reason we chose this place was because it was cheap. It was the closest to the city, cheapest, and in those days nobody would let their kids come and do work experience here because it was so dangerous and so creepy.

This was the Macedonian Social Club, then there was the Albanian Social Club that was up here and then there was the Lithuanian Social Club and they were actually gambling clubs. They sold Nescafé but that was it, there was no - there wasn't any food or anything like that, it was cards.

Facilitator 1: You'd think they'd need a little bit of food [laughs].

Rose Chong: Well you never saw food, and you didn't go in there unless you were in the group. I don't know anybody that - it wasn't like you just drifted into the Macedonian Social Club for a cup of coffee, a cup of Nescafé [laughs]. They were really seedy, they were really seedy. I meant the facilities - it was all men - and the facilities out the back were as rough as guts. It was pretty confronting. There was a fire escape at the back there and the men, I saw them do it once, they'd just get to the top of the fire escape and wee into the garden. It was pretty awful, it was pretty awful [laughs].

Facilitator 2: Were you living next door?

[4:35]

Rose Chong: No I didn't live next door. I didn't move into next door until '96 when that became available. But, so that was, yeah, I've been here near-, well it'll be, it's 19 years, mm, living here.

Facilitator 1: Right, and so you did all your training in England, did you?

Rose Chong: That's right, I was trained as, I was apprenticed as a dressmaker and then I went to art school and did design. So I'm lucky I've got both strands. Nowadays people are usually one or the other, there's not very many people - and actually now I can, I'm sort of more of an artisan. The design side of it, it's useful to have it but it's not really my number one thing. I'm a maker.



- Facilitator 2: In the '80s you worked on quite a number of films...some of them shot around here, usually when they wanted to recreate a much older Melbourne.
- Rose Chong: That's right, that's right.
- Facilitator 2: Melbourne in the '30s or the slums of the...
- Rose Chong: Well we went all over the place in those days and I only really did period films, I'm a bit out of touch with contemporary and always have been so yeah, there were films made around here. Quite a lot of interiors, but do you remember in, I think it was in, was it Bell Street or Victoria Street? There was a big, those - it used to be a big theatre and I've... The Universal, and then it became...
- Facilitator 2: Absolutely, they had a cinema there as well.
- Rose Chong: That's right and they used to do quite a bit of work there, they had some studios there that used to do quite a bit of filming in because it was cheap. But mainly we used to get everything ready here and interview the, do the fittings and stuff with the actors and then they'd be shot all over the place. But we've had quite a few famous [6:55] people, famous actors who weren't that famous at the time. Nicole Kidman came in here and...
- Facilitator 2: Greta Scacchi.
- Rose Chong: Yeah, Greta.
- Facilitator 2: I remember you made a gown for her to wear to the Cannes Film Festival.
- Rose Chong: Yeah, that's right, that's right. She actually comes back and visits actually, which is really sweet. Guy Pearce and Russell Crowe and, I mean they've all come in here but when they were babies, really, and we were all babies.
- Facilitator 2: I was going to ask you, how did you find working from here when you first moved in? The area was a rough, a rougher area than it is now. Because I grew up here it never struck me as rough, it was just what life was, but how did you find the people, your interactions with them?
- Rose Chong: There have been periods when it's been quite seedy and for a long time down the other end - Gertrude Street was, the only stuff you could buy here was heroin. You actually couldn't buy ordinary stuff but that seems, that changed when the Builders Arms changed hands. The Builders Arms was notorious. I've always worked in this room, this has been my domain and I've looked out of this window



and seen bodies in the street and we've just gone, shall we go and do something about it? No, someone else will. I mean it was so commonplace.

But then it changed hands and went, and for some time it was the [Franco Kotszo Room 8:47], do you remember that? It was in - and a different class of people came...not rich people...

[8:55]

Rose Chong: Oh, it was great. Yeah, it was the Franco Kotzo. It changed hands...

Facilitator 1: Was that with all the red...

Rose Chong: Yes, yes.

Facilitator 1: Because it looked like his shop.

Rose Chong: Yeah, well he didn't own it... Do you remember Franco Kotzo?

Facilitator 1: Oh, yeah.

[Laughter]

Rose Chong: Well that sort of brought different people in and then other people had the guts to sort of buy into a business and make it a bit better. I mean now the only people who are left from the good old days are the billiard people, the people - oh, is he still there? The barber across the road.

Facilitator 1: Yeah, I was going to [unclear] the barber.

Rose Chong: Yeah, those are the two long term people. But the Iron Works had been here for donkey's years and they've recently... they've recently moved out.

Facilitator 2: I think the father became too old, really, to keep running the business and...

Rose Chong: Yeah, he had a lot of problems and it was a bit of an anachronism here, too, because they needed truck space and there was always arguments about parking.

Facilitator 2: So as the area changed you were witness to all of that.

Rose Chong: Yes. [10:23]

Facilitator 2: What really stands out for you?



Rose Chong: In terms of the changes? Well I think what we've been lucky about is that no-one's ever had the idea of getting rid of the housing commission which means that we have across the board here. In some other places that go upmarket the older residents don't feel welcome anymore and that isn't the case here. We've still got our local characters. You see African families walk down here, the indigenous community's still got a big presence in this street and so you don't feel - I mean occasionally there's places, like if you go to South Yarra you don't feel nearly sort of hip enough.

Facilitator 2: Well-dressed enough, well-groomed enough [laughs].

Rose Chong: Yeah, and here it's - I mean if you want to you can go across to Moon Over Water and spend \$500 for a meal for two people, but, so that - so we do have people, I mean they're still going strong, I mean they're going strong. But, so we've got those, that - it's actually calmed down a little bit from when it was heaving nightclubs on the corner of the road here and for some reason that has just toned down a little bit. It used to be, you used to have people - it was a sea of vomit on Sunday morning all around this corner. But that's calmed down and I don't know why. I mean people were despairing about it and then it... I mean things move on. I think you'd be hard pressed to buy heroin here now, you'd have to go somewhere else.

Facilitator 1: Well I think that the police did move them on. So Richmond got a bigger...

Rose Chong: Yeah, they got a serve, didn't they?

[12:30]

Facilitator 1: But I read once - I don't think I thought up myself - that part of why the heroin's not sort of focussed in one place is mobile phones.

Rose Chong: Oh, they can go anywhere now.

Facilitator 1: They don't have to be in one place. Soon after I moved in there were the big hot spots for selling heroin, it was a University of Melbourne study, was outside the supermarket, Coles/Woolworths, and at the end of Webb Street, they were the two spots... and then mobile phones came in and...

Rose Chong: Gracious. They moved away. Rose Chong Well once - I think it was probably 20 years ago, this was before the Builders Arms changed hands - the police came and said they'd got their eyes on somebody and could they use this room as a vantage.



It was great fun. I'd finish my work and the cops would come in and they'd set themselves all up with their cameras and what have you and then they'd make themselves cups of tea and they'd stay here all night with their cameras. So then in the morning, morning, and it, like I mean it must've cost them a fortune, because...

Facilitator 2: I've seen that in films, I didn't realise it happened to you.

Rose Chong: They really did it. But the thing that used to crack us up was they, I don't know, I mean detectives look like detectives whatever they do somehow and they would walk into the shop at six o'clock with detectives written all over them and I was amazed that the people across the road didn't twig. Then we said look, you need to disguise yourself and we gave them...

Facilitator 1: The right place to be. [14:19]

Rose Chong: Rose Chong plastic bags to come in with. But it was hopeless. They were so sweet, they used to clean up, they were so careful about cleaning their coffee cups and their pizza boxes and stuff and then when they left they gave us a great big bunch of flowers. It was...

Facilitator 1: But did they get their man?

Rose Chong: Actually they did, they did. It was when the Eastern European people were involved in all of that and they did get a Mr Big of some sort, I don't know. Yeah, so it was good.

Facilitator 2: So you actually migrated here from England... and got this one cultural shock, then you migrated to Fitzroy and another cultural shock.

Rose Chong: That's right. [Laughs] Well when I first arrived my husband was a struggling student at Melbourne Uni and he got - I met him in England. We were in Cambridge and I was lured over here and we lived in Scotchmer Street. Which again, North Fitzroy was nothing, it was nothing special and we rented there...

Facilitator 2: What year was that?

Rose Chong: That was '73, and then we moved to Clifton Hill and babies and what have you, and then we spent 13 years in Coburg because we needed a much bigger house. Then the boys grew up and I was sick of having their motorbikes and everything everywhere so we moved, that's when we moved back here. But when I first set



up this business here I was commuting from Coburg and the boys were at North Fitzroy Primary School and they'd come on the tram and meet me here and we'd go back together. Those boys are now 40s and so that's a while.

My grand-, one of the, my baby boy has come back to roost and he lives next door here with his wife and two kids and that little boy's just started at North Fitzroy Primary School. Yeah, so - did your kids go to North Fitzroy? I can't remember.

[16:44]

Facilitator 2: My grandkids did. My children went to Rathdowne Street because I'm in Hanover Street...

Rose Chong: Yes, I remember.

Facilitator 2 ...and I don't drive and as you know I worked all the way through. So I'd just cart them across the park and then, it was just a five minute walk across...the park, it was easier. But my grandson went to North Fitzroy.

Rose Chong: Did he really? So you've got older grandchildren, have you now?

Facilitator 2: Well he's at Northcote High now so he'll be 15, oh, he's just turned 15 that's right, we had a birthday party. So yes, and my kids are the same age as yours, yes.

Rose Chong: Gracious. Yeah, they grow, don't they?

Facilitator 2: Yeah. But you've always lived in areas that have been full of migrants and so quite vibrant because of that, I imagine.

Rose Chong: It's very strange. If you, I mean wherever you go in Melbourne it's like, it can be, like going into a different, like going on holiday to a different city. You can go to Springvale, you can go to - where do we go where it's all Indian people? Frankston.

Facilitator 2: Dandenong. [17:57]

Rose Chong: Dandenong, Dandenong.

Facilitator 2: Surrey Hills, a different world.

Rose Chong: That's right and it's...

Facilitator 1: Footscray would be different.



- Rose Chong: Yes, yep. Well two of my sons live in Footscray and if I didn't live in Fitzroy I'd probably live in Footscray. I can't imagine living south of the river, just can't. We very rarely go there anymore. We used to go to Theatre Works, it's a theatre at the other side, but we get all into a snarl up with parking and we can't cope, so it's too much [laughs]. I know there's sea over there, which is nice, but [laughs].
- Facilitator 2: Yes, true. With the changing demographic in Fitzroy, you've already commented on how that's not really impacting on the character of the area very much, is there anything you actually think that Fitzroy's losing by becoming more, in its process of becoming more gentrified?
- Rose Chong: It is a bit rough on young people that want to live here because, I think I read in the paper, for every one share house room there's 38 people apply and it's the most difficult in the whole of Australia, is Fitzroy, to get a room. So I've got youngsters on my staff, for instance, who would love to live closer and just can't afford it. I mean I think that - but I don't know how you fix that, you can't fix that. If you sort of make it cheaper somehow, which is impossible, then all the people that have coffee shops and stuff would also - you've got to have one with the other, really.
- Facilitator 2: But the problem there is that as you've pointed out, once upon a time if you didn't have a lot of money you could live in Eltham or Fitzroy and they're both suburbs that have quite a lot to offer. Whereas these days you need to go out to Melton to be able to get comparable value and there aren't any services there. So that is a really serious problem.
- Rose Chong: It is a problem, it is a problem and I mean when we rail about it then I have to stop and say, this is my fault. Because I had four boys [20:28] and I've got eight grandchildren and it's my fault, really. We should have all not had kids. That's, I mean or aren't we allowed to have one, we're allowed to replace ourselves and I've overdone it. So that's the cause of...
- Facilitator 2: [Laughs] I'm thinking that mea culpa is beyond the scope of this... interview but I see what you're saying, I'm almost as guilty. I only had three kids and I only have five grandchildren but... [laughter]
- Rose Chong: You're to blame. Of course we want them all to live close but luckily...
- Facilitator 2: But you've done the right thing, yours are in [America].



Rose Chong: Well luckily for me, I'm very lucky, I've got a son - and that was because 20 years ago when I was doing renovations on this place I wanted to find out who owned the property next door. I managed to go to the Council and find the, and these people didn't have a telephone. They were market gardeners in Werribee. So I got into the car and drove out and said, do you mind if we do fencing and stuff like that? Then the bloke said, I don't mind, I want to flog the place, it's a nuisance to me.

So I said well, I'll buy it then and I came back and told my husband, you should know that we've just - and he was appalled, absolutely. I remember him saying we're ruined, we're ruined. But it was fortuitous, really. So that's where he lives, in the flat above there so that's how we - we look after his babies, he changes our light bulbs for us [laughs].

Facilitator 2: It works out beautifully.

Rose Chong: Yeah, yeah it's good.

Facilitator 2: With your kids, do you know how they feel about Fitzroy? Is their attitude to Fitzroy different to yours? [22:34]

Rose Chong: This boy loves Fitzroy. He had a brief sojourn in Preston where somebody told him when you have babies you have to have a lawn and he then worked out you have to mow it and said could he come back.

[Laughter]

So that one loves Fitzroy and the other two are in Footscray. One I think would come back here in a heartbeat because his wife works with Circus Oz and we would, and he's investigated selling Footscray and moving back here but the sums didn't add up. The other family's pretty happy in Footscray. Then my number three son lives in Noosa. So he had a little restaurant just down here and then a tragedy happened and so he actually can't handle Fitzroy at all. He's still not really over it. Our little granddaughter died of cancer.

Facilitator 2: He will never get over that, Rose.

Rose Chong: He's got two little boys, he's got a thriving business, he's got a beautiful house and the sun shines up there. It's still there though, that pain is still there.

Facilitator 2: That sadness.



Rose Chong: He somehow thinks that Fitzroy had something to do with it, I don't know. He associates that pain with Fitzroy, so he'll never come back to Fitzroy. But he's doing alright.

Facilitator 2: Do you think that Fitzroy still has, or do you think it ever had, a strong community feel?

Rose Chong: I do, I do and I love it. If I walk down Smith Street there's always somebody that I know - traders, fellow residents, customers - and I didn't feel that when we lived in Coburg. We were on a detached house, we had neighbours that we knew but not like this. We have a street party once a year for south Gore Street residents but I think all - there used to be traders' associations here, but they've sort of fizzled out a little bit. Now Gertrude Street puts on the Projection Festival once a year and that sort of... unites us. [25:12]

But we used to be slightly at odds with the Council, where traders would want something and the Council would sort of inhibit it somehow, but the Council now seems to be a lot more amenable. We don't have them actively sort of coming up with harebrained things that are going to stop us. They're actually quite trader friendly but there's always that battle between traders and residents, and I think we've got it as harmonious as it could possibly be now but in times gone by it's been a bit difficult.

Certainly when the nightclubs were all jumping there were difficulties with neighbours. I was always in the middle because I'm a trader and a neighbour and that was always a bit difficult to sort of bridge the gap.

Facilitator 1: Was part of that why the Gertrude Association was formed?

Rose Chong: No, the Gertrude Association is traders only. It's traders only and their big thrust is the Projection Festival. I am not aware that they're involved in any other issues. But we had all sorts of - there was a Gertrude Street Traders' Association, which I think is still logged in at the Council, because I get stuff from the Council from time to time. But some of those traders have moved out, the people that were driving forces. Do you remember where - do you remember Herb who used to run the furniture place which is where Dante, and it was Dante's...

Facilitator 1: Yeah... We did an interview with Menka as well. [27:20]

Rose Chong: Yeah, and he was quite a lively force in the street. There's been a few changes. Manfax used to be across the road where that - I don't know what you call it? The



one on the corner, the nightclub. No, one of those, it was one of those like where Porter's is now, they were there. Then we had a wonderful chemist at the other end of the street with...

Facilitator 1: Close to Brunswick Street.

Rose Chong ...Duncan Reilly. Duncan Reilly was, I was very, very fond of him. He was the grand old man of Gertrude Street and when there were issues in the street we'd go to him and cry and he'd come and sort it out, and he was great. I mean we really miss him and we don't actually have a figure in the street quite, has taken his place really.

Facilitator 2: Perhaps you.

Rose Chong: I [laughs], well I'm only, by virtue of being here for ages. The people in the billiard place, they're pretty good and when we had a bit of an issue with the scale of the new development on... the Manfax site they were the - we all met at their place.

Facilitator 2: The motivators, yes.

Rose Chong: Yeah.

Facilitator 2: You moved into Fitzroy at a time when there were, well everybody was referring to Fitzroy residents as bohemians and there were lots of things happening like on the comedy scene and the arts scene and the street festival scene, all that sort of stuff.

Rose Chong: Yes.

Facilitator 2: What was your experience of those years? [29:22]

Rose Chong: Well I think that is still happening, that is still happening. There's still - I mean the - but that whole independent theatre scene has taken a bit of a battering. Funding, our esteemed government doesn't really foster independent theatre. But the Projection Festival is amazing, really, and growing and attracting artists and it's really grown. I think it's seven years, isn't it? Something like that.

Facilitator 1: Yeah, it was 2008. I went through these [clippings] and made notes.

Rose Chong: Is it really? Is it really?

Facilitator 2: You're both right, it's seven years.



Rose Chong: No, that's really been something that we all work towards and think about and it attracts - and it's a festival that happens when there's no other festivals because it's in the dead of winter. But at the Fringe Festival there were lots of little venues around that popped up around the place. Smith Street has really changed out of - there was nothing much in Smith Street and now that's all sort of come to - I haven't actually been to the new supermarket yet.

Facilitator 1: I've been there just briefly because I decided it's far too big and I can still go into Woolworths because I can duck in, I know where everything is...

Rose Chong: We know where everything is, that's right, that's right. It might make Woollies lift their game, but what's the - aren't they going to close it down and build apartments, or...

Facilitator 1: I haven't heard, but a neighbour told me yesterday that the - I haven't checked it out yet - that Woolworths, if you've got a pension card will give you 10 per cent off now.

Rose Chong: Oh, really? Well that, I mean they've got to do something, haven't they? They've got to do something.

[31:29]

Facilitator 1: Well the first Saturday that Coles was open they even had face painting for children up at Woolworths.

Rose Chong: Did they really? Well it would be good if they lifted their game a little bit, yep. But this end of Smith Street, from Gertrude Street to Victoria Parade, has always been a bit left behind but the signs are that that's being given a lift. There's a marvellous coffee shop down the other end, Major Major, have you been there?

Facilitator 1: No, not yet, no.

Rose Chong: Fantastic, really good. So it's - I think - I love living in this area, I couldn't imagine - I've just come back from overseas, actually. We had six weeks, because I'm from England, visiting people and it's lovely over there but I just think oh, I'm so glad to be back.

Facilitator 1: No, I can't imagine living anywhere else.

Rose Chong: No. Where do you live?



- Facilitator 1: Webb.
- Rose Chong: Webb Street. I know, yes I know. Yep, I know. There's somebody there who has accommodation to let, I don't know whether she's still got it, she's got...
- Facilitator 1: Oh, there's a... four or five star accommodation, yes.
- Rose Chong: Yeah, you rent the whole house, don't you? It's got...
- Facilitator 1: Yes, I looked up Webb Street and there was this place, yeah. [32:55]
- Rose Chong: Yes, it's called... I think it's called number something Webb Street.
- Facilitator 1: 37 or some number like that, yeah. There's the other one that's south, oh I can't remember the name, but it's not the whole thing. Oh, I can't think what it's called but it's apparently a very nice...
- Rose Chong: The art. Yeah, now that - yes, I've forgotten the name of the person who runs that. She's a Fitzroy identity [laughs].
- Facilitator 1: Well one other thing crossed my mind before, but - let me think. So...
- Rose Chong: [Laughs]. Are you still making films?
- Facilitator 2: Should we - have we finished the interview?
- Rose Chong: What more do you... Is there any...
- Facilitator 2: Do you have any more questions? [34:00]
- Rose Chong: No stone left unturned? Any corner in my life you'd like to ferret out?
- Facilitator 2: Just one thing, what are you working on mainly now? Obviously you're running...
- Rose Chong: Up here I do the mundane which is fix these zips and repairs, and then I make things for the shop, half of which I have no idea what they are. See that dress over there, the one that we've had to paint the orange circles on. It comes from some movie, some - it's, there's a parallel universe that goes on, to do with movies and stuff on the telly and characters and stuff. I don't know what that is, but I just do what I'm told.
- Facilitator 2: So you still do some work for film and television.



Rose Chong: Only - not really, I don't do orders anymore and when - quite a lot of my alumni, people who've been through here and people who worked with me when I was in the film industry are now out there doing it and they've incredibly successful and I'm very, very proud of them. Cappi's won two AFI Awards - and occasionally they ask me if I'll make something, and I do. But I've got grandchildren, I've got a life, and I don't like to have deadlines anymore.

If I promise something, it'll be ready in the morning, then I'm anxious about getting it - so I'm a bit of a coaster these days. But then I get excited about something and decide to stay up and finish it. Do basically I'm up here, I listen to my talking books [laughs]. It's a pretty good life, yeah, and then when something more interesting comes along, like talking to you guys or going out for lunch or something, I can, I just go.

Facilitator 2: That's an invitation, we'll go out for lunch.

Rose Chong: Yeah, we should, we should. There's some old times, isn't there?

Facilitator 2: Yeah. Do you have any more questions?

[36:25]

Rose Chong: Well you could do it over the phone, you've got my... I'll give you my mobile and then you can...

END OF TRANSCRIPT