TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW
with MAXINE BOROWSKY

by Diane Bowers
for the

RESEARCH CENTER FOR THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT
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Transcribed by Rhoda Durkan
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[DB: … conducted by Diane Bowers at Mrs. Borowski's home on June 2, 1976.]

DB: First of all, could you tell me how you became interested in costume designing?

MB: My background was art school in Philadelphia, Philadelphia School of Design for Warren, which was the oldest women's art school in the country. I went there and was interested in the theatre. Now, what really sparked me was the young man I was going with, who was Marvin Borowsky, who was also interested in the theatre. So that when I finished art school, I went to Yale in 1928. And Marvin graduated from college in 1929, so I was in Yale a year before he was. And this Yale at that time was George Pierce Baker. You've heard of him, no doubt.

DB: Was that what they called the "47 Workshop?"

MB: That was the 47 Workshop at that time.

DB: You must have had sane very famous classmates also.

MB: Yes. It was not a separate school as it is now. It was a department of drama, and they'd brought Baker. If you know all this, shut me up. They'd brought Baker down from Harvard and Harkness had endowed the Department of Drama to get him away from Harvard. The school was interesting in its setup because Baker was very non-academic, and he was interested in getting professionals into the professional theatre. It was the first theatre school in the country. There was a small department, I think at that time, maybe a little bit later, at Carnegie Tech, but that was it. There were no schools of the theatre or departments in academia as there are today.

DB: And he believed in experience rather than the academic approach?

MB: Well, his objection to the academic approach, he believed in creative working rather than working for grades or accomplishing 2500 years of the theatre in three months kind of thing that you get in academia. He also objected to

grades, and his approach was professional. He wanted a professional school. The reason I got into design there--I'm not a writer; Marvin was a writer--

I was interested primarily because of my background, my art school background, in design. And the reason I got into costume design was because at that time it was worth your life for a woman to get into scenic design. And also, to get into the union in *New* York at that time, it cost 500 bucks, which I didn't have. So I went into costume design after leaving Yale, where I was for two years, with no degree--you could have gotten a certificate. Incidentally, the other thing Baker did not require while it was a graduate school, there were 125 students in the school, of which 25 were women. He insisted upon having women. The Yale fathers didn't want them, but he figured that, with a school in theatre, you had to have a few women in the school.

DB: Did you have to have an undergraduate degree since it was a graduate--

MB: Generally that was required, but I had a portfolio which I took up and had an interview. And he took people who didn't have an academic degree. I got a certificate at the art school where I went. Now they give degrees, you know. Everybody gives degrees. But I had no union cards. So I was there for two years, and I've never collected my certificate but I've got one some place. Maybe it's in the files in an airplane hangar some place. (Laugh)

DB: It may be.

MB: Yes. But anyhow, from there I went to the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, and I *Was* the costume director there where I was for a year. Then Marvin had been at Yale one of the two years I was there and then he went and stayed another year. He finished at Yale and we organized a theatre and this was one of the first off-Broadway theatres.

DB: What was that called?

MB: Midtown Players. Do you know about that?

DB: I've heard of that. I don't know really anything about it.

MB: Well, it was a Yale group and it was a cooperative group. And this was the bottom of the Depression, you know. So that at any rate, we got enough money. We ran a summer theatre in Arden, Delaware which you probably know. Did you go to the University of Delaware?

DB: Yes, I did.

MB: And Marvin and I got married at the end of my year in Chicago and I didn't go back. As far as the second question, you'd better let me look at that.

DB: Okay. Where did you receive your training essentially is what it is.

MB; Well, it's essentially Yale.

DB: Did you work with Bob Schnitzer at the Arden-was he involved in the Arden, Delaware?

MB: That was after my time, honey. That was in 1931. Schnitzer's name I know. But Marvin was nominally head, Jerome Mayer, we had Bugs Meredith. We had Rhea Mooney, who became head of the Abbey Theatre. And we had quite a good company that year.

DB: Did that lead into the Federal Theatre?

34B: Now wait a minute.

DB: POI sorry. Am I getting--

MB: That's the Depression. So we came to New York and we did one production, which was critically accepted. It was a new play by a Yale playwright. It wasn't top-flight, but it was a young group and we were approved by the critics. But we figured that it was not a hit, which we of course were aiming for, being young and enthusiastic. We were all in our late twenties. So we had enough money for another production. Nobody could agree on the play. You know, it

was one of those groups; there's always a hassle over everything. So we decided, well, we'd bust up before we disintegrated which was bound to happen. These were all artistic natures, believe me.

I was interested to see that Morris Ernst, who was the great lawyer who won the James Joyce case, you know, great, wonderful man was our lawyer at that time and he worked for *us* for nothing. You know, it was a really fantastic group of people, and even somebody like that, you know. So that we all kind of went our own ways and finally Marvin got tied up with the Group Theatre. He was writing at night at the same time and then he got a-- no, Elmer Rice first, I think. He went as an assistant stage manager to Elmer Rice, and then he got tied up with the Group Theatre. And I got a job with Kiviette, whose name you may know or may not know.

DB: It's just slightly familiar.

MB: Top-flight musical comedy costume designer and company in New York. And this was Of Thee I Sing. All the musical comedies of that period, of which there were a lot, you know, and good ones. It was the period that's now being revived, the music's now being revived. So that I worked with musical comedy, Roberta, which was my big break because the boss got sick and I got to do it.

(Laugh) That's another way where I learned the New York theatre, you see. I'd worked in Chicago at the Goodman Theatre, which was repertory company, professional repertory company, and children's theatre and school. I also had to teach. This was to keep the unions out, of course. So that I worked with Kiviette, oh, for two or three years. What are the dates on the Federal Theatre?

DB: 1935-1939.

MB: That's right so 1934, in 1934 I got an acute sinus infection and I had to quit.

I was out for about three months and also business had gone to hell. Times were really tough.

DB: This was right in the middle of the Depression?

MB: Oh, yes. And Marvin was working--then he worked with Elmer Rice for a couple of shows and then he was stage manager for the Group, assistant, I think, not top. He worked with the Group and I worked with Kiviette. And then I did a couple of free-lance things after I got over my--in those days they had no antibiotics and you just suffered through, if you survived. (Laugh)

DB: Oh! Sounds awful.

MB: It was. And then, who was it who called me? It may have been Kate Lawson. No, it was Elmer Rice called Marvin and wanted him to go on the Federal Theatre. And he was one of the--

DB: For New York City, he was the director.

MB: Yes. This was New York City, yes. So Marvin was, I think, working for the Group, and he was also selling zippers for the United States Rubber Company. So we weren't starving, and I was doing an occasional show, you know, a production, costumes. There was no union at that time so that if you could get a job, you did it, you know, with no problem. And then through Elmer Rice somehow I got called. Kate Lawson called me because I had a background and she asked me if I'd organize the Costume Department along with Bill Jones, whom I had known at Yale whose name was on that sketch. Bill was a very talented young man, very talented, and he was the artistic director, I think, and I was the administrator in the sense of the organization, you know. So that we had this, as you probably know, great warehouse over on, was it 48th Street, East 47th? You didn't know about the warehouse?

DB: Well, I knew that there was something.

MB: Which was turned into a workshop. It was over on the East Side in Hell's Kitchen, on 48th Street, I think it was. I couldn't tell you the number, but there was the scenery, there was costumes, all the technical shop was in that building. And you'll find records of that sane place, I'm sure.

DB: Probably at the National Archives.

MB: Yes. So that we had a huge loft, and this was the central--I'm not answering any of the right questions.

DB: That's all right. Don't even look at that. That's really just for me to go by.

MB: Well, I'll go back and check these. This was the central workshop for the whole New York Federal Theatre. Everything that went through the scenic department, went through the lighting and so forth was in this one building.

DB: So that you were, all the costume designers were there.

MB: The costume designers were attached to the separate theatres, but the making of costumes, the budgeting of costumes, the shopping, whatever, was accomplished through the costume workshop on East 48th Street.

DB: How were you--if I'm not skipping ahead—how were you assigned productions? Did somebody just call you up and say, "Work on this or—

MB: Well, for instance, the--somebody'd call and say—oh, no, if we could get a designer; if somebody would call and say, "Humphrey and Weidman are doing Candide. Give us a designer," you see, then we'd see if we could find a designer. Bill did more than I did because I had more seven copies of seven copies of seven copies work to do.

DB: Administrative, yes.

MB: And social work also, which was a problem because of the personnel. Now, the personnel came through what we now call relief, WPA (Works Progress Administration) and anybody who had worked in the theatre, including cleaning up the toilets in

a theatre, were assigned. And if they couldn't find any place else to put them, they dumped them on me.

DB: Is that right?

MB: Yes. (Laugh). So I had a variety of people, also people who had been in the dress business or tailoring business or whatever and didn't have jobs, if they could sew, if they could cut, if they could drape or whatever, they sent them to the Costume Department. So that I had Italian tailors, I had Jewish tailors, I had Greek tailors. I had all kinds of blacks, from Jamaica, from Harlem, from wherever. I had all levels. I had all the old--what did they call them? Costume mistresses, you know, that were attached to a show. Wardrobe ladies, yes. I had a great variety and most of them were sad people. Sane of them were young and, you know, hadn't been able to get jobs. A lot of than were very old.

DB: And were out of work?

MB: Out of work and couldn't get jobs. And I am so much for the WPA, in spite of all the politicking, because of the dignity it gave so many people, you know, that they didn't have to starve. And they were getting—what was it-- 2^5 bucks a week, something like that. You probably know what the--

DB: $22 something.

MB: Yes, and I was getting a huge salary of $39 and something because I was an administrator,

DB: That was good.

MB: I think that was the top salary as a matter of fact. I think the very tops got maybe as much as 50 bucks a week. I don't remember. But this was the level. But those were the days when you could live and feed two people on $5 a week, which is what we did (Laugh) in those days. It doesn't seem possible today.

DB: No, it really doesn't.

MB: No. I mean, a lamb chop was 15c and if we really blew ourselves, we had a lamb chop, you know. So that I don't remember how many people were in the workshop. You probably have records. Well, we set the whole thing up as a regular dressmaking and costume workshop. I mean, we had cutters, we had drapers, we had finishers, we had sewing machines, operators, and so forth. And the trick was to find out who could do what.

DB: And this was your job essentially, running the whole shop?

MB: Yes. That's why I say "social worker" also because there were so many problems. For instance, this would probably never be in the records, but I used to have problems of blacks fighting blacks.

DB: Is that right? You mean the Harlem blacks or Jamaican?

MB: The Harlem blacks against the others and, you know, throwing knives and scissors and things. This happened in my shop. I mean, there was violence there. And the Italians getting mad at the Jews. Now at one point--what was his name--Colonel Scmerveil? You've come across his name?

DB: Yes.

MB: Who was head of labor for New York State for WPA, I think. I was asked to come and appear before Colonel Samervell for being anti-Semitic. So it seems I finally found out why I was anti-Semitic. I couldn't speak Yiddish.

DB: So they'd say you were anti-Semitic?

MB: I am a Jew.

DB: That's kind of a difficult thing to call--

MB: Well, it seems--there were labor problems like you can't imagine. There was a group--this was the beginning of the Commie Party, the first time I was aware of it and the way they functioned. But if I would try to transfer

somebody out of my shop—trying to run an efficient shop for all these theatres was a problem in itself. But trying to get efficient help was another problem. If I had somebody who was not producing, I would try to move them to someplace else. There was a group, and I can't remember the name of it---it'll come to me at 3:00 tomorrow morning—which was-

DB: Workers' Alliance you're not thinking of?

MB: That's it.

DB: Workers' Alliance.

MB: Thank you. Who had reported me to Somervell because apparently there were some difficulties with some Jewish tailors--they didn't know I was a Jew--because I' couldn't speak. Yiddish. And they didn't know I was a Jew, so they reported me to the labor thing because I was trying to transfer troublemakers, inefficient people out into other areas. So I went over to see Katie Lawson. Now I can't remember where those offices were. You probably know, the administrative offices. And I said, "Kate, call Somervell and tell him I'm a Jew and see what he says." (Laugh) So she picked up the phone and she called him and she got him. And she said, "I've got Maxine Borowsky sitting in my office here." Well, Borowsky, you see, could be Polish, it could be almost anything. "And she wants you to know that she's a Jew." So there was a long silence on the phone and he said, "I don't have to see her." And that was it, so I never had to appear. I was really anxious to appear, but I thought he should know I was a Jew and not an anti-Semitic Jew. (Laugh)

DB: Well, could you go back to the people who had complained of this and talk to them? Or didn't you really know who did it?

MB: Oh, I'd come in at 9:00 in the morning and there'd be a committee sitting out there from the Workers' Alliance. "Why have you done this to so-and-so?

Why didn't you give so-and--so a job at designing?" Or "Why don't you move them up one step?" This went on all the time. When I say I was a social worker--

DB: You really were.

MB: Oh, yes. It was personnel problems that had to be taken care of as well as all the taking care of the various theatres, you know, and getting the costumes out. It was a huge job. I was enthusiastic and I loved what I was doing. So in that sense, it was no problem, you know. It didn't get me down and I did what I could. And it was only realizing why I had been—now Bill wasn't. Bill's name was Jones Bill was a WASP, and he hadn't been cited for being anti-Semitic but I had because I had more power, you see, and they wanted to get me out of there. And Bill was not as definite a person as I was at that time, and probably would have done anything that the Alliance told him to do. I don't know, I shouldn't even say that. Bill's dead and he can't speak for himself.

DB: Do you think there would have been problems, no matter who was in charge of the--

MB: Definitely. There had to be because there was so much--what's the word I want--lack of security within these people. I mean, a lot of them had been through a lot of--and sane starvation really--of trouble, of family troubles, of no jobs. This was a pretty awful period. Of course, I tell my kids, you know, and they say, "Oh, Mom!" And I don't think enough has been done about what it did to people. In many ways I think--how old are you?

DB: 26.

MB: Well, you're young enough to probably not have had parents who came--you came out of parents who were probably in the Second World War.

DB: And a little bit of the Depression.

MB: But very little.

DB: Right.

MB: Very little.

DB: Right, very little Depression.

MB: And I was 22, 23 when I got out of school, you know, and that was 1931, which was the deepest part of the Depression. And my whole generation is well aware of it, much more so than your parents' generation I would think.

DB: Yes, that's true.

MB: Because probably--I don't know how old your parents are, but they probably are World War II generation.

DB: Yes, that's true.

MB: Which means they were kids, young kids.

DB: They were little when they were going through that, so they really don't know.

MB: Yes. Well, they know. They probably had a little bit from their parents. But anyhow, (laugh), I've lived too long, I'd say (laugh) and probably seen too much. (Laugh)

DB: Well, that gives a nice perspective.

MB: Yes, I guess it does.

DB: To get to the other end, besides the administration, you did work on some shows. Could you tell me--

MB: I. worked on--I don't remember what I worked on. The way we did it, when you said you had charts, we used to do charts. That was the way I did a show anyhow, which was casts, which was numbers of costumes, which was fabrics that, were being used, which was a color chart of what was being used, which were swatches. I mean, I used to do a big chart like this, which is a 20 x 30 sheet, Since the sound won't know what "like this" is. (Laugh)

DB: No, it doesn't have a seeing eye in it.

MB: And also the budget. We had to work out the budget for the production. I mean, there was the Ballet Theatre, which I remember. And I think Bill and I did the Weidman thing because we wanted to. You see, Sammy Leve, Howard Bay, there were other designers. There was the Yiddish Theatre.

DB: Experimental, the Living Newspapers, all those units.

MB: That all came through my shop. Orson Welles, for instance. Everything came through my shop. Orson would come up and he'd do sketches. Fantastic man! At that time he was 19 years old.

DB: Was he impressive then?

MB: He was very impressive. Here was this round, chubby-looking, like he is today only this was--he looked like a 12-year-old kid, and so talented that it oozed out of him, you know, and this wonderful, deep, rich voice in this what looked like an overgrown 12-year-old kid. He was a fantastic draftsman, incidentally. He designed all his own things. They were made in the shop, but he could do a sketch. I wonder if there are any there.

DB: There are some. There are some sketches.

MB: Did you find some of those sketches?

DB: Yes.

MB: So he did--I don't remember--what was it? The--

DB: Faustus.

MB: Faustus. He did Faustus.

DB: Macbeth.

MB: Macbeth. Was that the black Macbeth?

DB.: That was the black Macbeth.

MB: Yes. All this went through my shop. My shop; Uncle Sam's shop.

DB: How did you research costumes for a show? Did you--

MB: Oh, well, this is how any costume designer works, depending on whether--what was it in the cathedral? I saw it mentioned there.

DB: Murder in the Cathedral.

MB: Murder in the Cathedral. You go back and you look at the paintings of the period. You look at drawings of the period. You look at architecture, you look at sculpture. You look at--if there are any drawings, you know. This is the way you research a costume.

DB: I see.

MB: And this is the way you do any production. I mean, if you go back to do a production of the thirties, you'd go back and look in Vogue Magazine probably today or look for photographs of the period. Or if it's 16th century, you'd go look at paintings of the period, you know. Or if it's Italy, Renaissance, you'd go look at paintings of the period. This is the way you research anything like that.

DB: Did you design your own fabrics?

MB: We did some painting of fabrics. No, we used very inexpensive fabrics as a matter of fact. And the one thing I learned at Yale was how to make flannel look like damask (laugh) which nobody bothers any more, you know.

DB: They just buy damask.

MB: But we learned how to dye, and I did have some dyeing going on up there. We learned how to use—which was part of theatre costume designing--use fabrics that would, under light, you see--you can do so much with light.

DB: Yes, so that was a combination of lighting and on your fabrics?

MB: Yes. So that we did do some dyeing of fabrics, which is very special. The fabrics came from almost any place, from the fabric stores and companies, usually wholesale, in New York.

DB: So you could get them very cheaply?

MB: No, not very cheap. Depending on the fabric, you know, depending on how much was being used. You know, you may just want one piece of five yards. We had shoppers, incidentally, in the shop who would go out if somebody wanted something that color, bittersweet. And it had to be dull.

DB: It had to be dull?

MB: A dull fabric, not a shiny fabric. Not satin, not sateen. It had to be a dull fabric and it had to be this color and it had to drape in such and such a way. So you sent the shopper out with a color swatch like that and said, "Go get me swatches and bring back."

Then they'd bring back these swatches. They'd go to mill-end places, they'd go to the regular wholesale places, and bring back swatches. And from that, we'd then give that…

DB: . . . swatches and you'd have to--

MB: Swatches and the designer would select the swatch… the fabric.

DB: Yes, to make the costumes.

MB: Yes, and then it would all be ordered through the workshop. And when I say seven copies of seven copies, that was a problem, believe me. On everything, you know, every penny that was spent, there was—now this was an amusing story. I don't know whether you'd get it from anybody else. We had one problem. We had vaudeville, as you know. We had a man who was an elephant trainer and he had an elephant. And he was classified, you see, as a circus performer, so that we could do something about his costume. But the poor elephant needed linseed oil to keep his hide from drying out. I went to every department. I went every place until I could find some petty cash. There was no way of buying

linseed oil, one, which was the costume for the elephant, you see. They dumped it on me because they figured that was the Costume Department. (Laugh)

Finally, I found sane petty cash so we got linseed oil to rub the elephant down and also found enough money for hay to feed the elephant. Now those were the kind of things (laugh)

DB: You can laugh about it now.

MB: I can laugh about it now, but this was very tragic for that man. It really was. (Laugh)

DB: I know it was, I really do.

MB: No, that's all right, it is. But that--you see, for him a costume was no problem, but to keep the elephant eating and to keep the elephant's hide from drying out—that was his costume, you know. And that was one of the problems, one of the many, you know, offbeat things.

DB: As a costume designer and your costume designers who worked for you, did they

and did you design costumes considering the person who was going to play the part? Or did you just--

MB: The character because you never could tell who was going to play the part. In the Orson Welles setup, you know, you knew pretty much who was in that group.

You knew who was in the Ballet Theatre. You knew generally, after it really got going, in the Yiddish Theatre and the French Theatre, in whatever the special groups were. You have people who are now past prime in motion pictures

who at one time were in Federal Theatre, who were then youngsters, you know, coming along. Generally, there were difficulties in fittings and "I don't like

that color" and "I can't wear that" and that sort of thing, which is normal with any would-be actor or actress or even an accomplished one. There were more difficulties with the would-be than with the pros, (Laugh) always. But the

designs were done in consultation with the director. Directors usually knew what they wanted and what they wanted to get out of it. I mean, or in consultation with the scenic designer, which is the way any production was done. It's done today, I think. I don't know. You would know better than I. Have you been involved in any college stuff?

DB: In costume design? No.

MB: No, I mean in college productions.

DB: Oh, just on the periphery, not really involved. But I'm curious about that, just how the organization--so you really didn't work as much with the actors as you did with the director and the scenic designer?

MB: Oh, you had to work—yes. You had to be there for dress rehearsals. You had to see that everything, you know, you'd have a dress parade. And then you'd have the costumes under the lights.

DB; To see what they looked like?

MB: And dress rehearsal. Yes. And if it was vaudeville and somebody couldn't dance in this thing, you know, or somebody couldn't do splits or whatever--

DB: That was pretty serious?

MB: That's right, you know, and those things all had to be considered.

DB; Was it a long day for you?

MB: at, you know, at that time there was no 40-hour week. That was actually the beginning of it. We worked 8:00 to 5:00 theoretically five days a week and 8:00 to 12:00 on Saturdays and because of spreading the employment was the beginning of the 40-hour week in that period. Now, when I was working with Kivie, I was on a 12-hour day. You know, you'd go into dress rehearsal,

you'd go out of town with the show. You'd work all night when you had a dress rehearsal and were opening the next day, you know, while they set lights, while

they did this number, while they did that. No, there was no such thing as a long day or a short day.

DB: You just worked?

MB: You worked and everybody did, everybody did really. There was such tremendous, wonderful enthusiasm because they had--old Uncle Sam had finally gotten into the arts. I mean, this was true on the Writers' Project and the Painters' Project. You know, the arts were being recognized and the artists were not being treated as second-class citizens for the first time. It didn't last, but at any rate, it was the beginning of the recognition of a certain kind of American culture which hadn't existed before. But these people were people and they were starving. And these people needed jobs, and these people had skills. So this is how the Federal Theatre, I think, was born. I don't know the beginning of the whole bit. I think Elmer Rice was in on it and Hallie Flanagan. I don't remember. You could tell me better than I know. I knew at the time.

DB; But obviously you think then the purpose of the Federal Theatre was to put--

MB: People to work period. Just as it was to build an airport or a street or do a mural in a post office. It was to put people to work. It wasn't to develop American culture, believe me, but it was the first time there'd been any concerted work in well, even music, you know, in this country. It was the first time there was any recognition of the artists.

DB: That's an accomplishment, that's for sure.

MB: Well, it was the beginning of something. It was the beginning of ANTA (American National Theater and Academy), which really--we thought we were going to have a national theater; we thought we were going to have national opera; we thought we were going to have subsidized orchestras. Well, we do but they're all not by the

Federal--I mean, you're getting grants from--

DB: National Endowment for the Humanities.

MB: National Endowment. And I saw in the paper this morning where on your income tax now, you can specify a buck or two bucks. If you paid too much tax, it can go to the National Endowment for the Arts or the Humanities, which I think is wonderful. I'd rather give it to them than to the politicians. (Laugh)

DB: That's right, I agree.

MB: But I think that's good. I mean, then we may have the amount of money for the National Endowment for the Arts and for Humanities. It's so small. I don't know what it is in this year's budget, but it's minimal compared to what it should be or what it is in any small country in Europe.

DB: And you don't think that's very good to have a--

MB: I think it's awful. I think these are the--I think the future of the country lies in the arts. Science, yes, I give you that but not in the Pentagon. (Laugh) if you don't want these cracks, you can edit them out.

DB: No, I think this is fine. This is what we want to hear about.

Do you think that the costume designers and the scene designers and all the technical end worked, were very cooperative with each other? You say you had problems within your department, but was there a lot of cooperation?

MB: Oh, sure. Look, there are always personality problems in the theatre. You know, you've always got prima donnas.

DB: Because of the artistic nature of these people?

MB: It's just the nature of the people. It's not necessarily artistic. (Laugh) I mean, they may be artistic and they may not be. It's the nature of people and working in a group. It really is, and I'm sure you've been around enough to know that, that you have what you consider an ideal situation and then you

have somebody there who's a thorn, and that's it, you know. (Laugh)

DB: But generally, they did cooperate?

MB: Oh, yes, there was tremendous enthusiasm and everybody wanted to make this the best production, you know, it could possibly be.

DB: Obviously—you say that the costume designer attended the dress rehearsals and was involved with the production end of it. How close was the beginning sketch generally to the finished garment?

MB: Oh, it was always very close.

DB: It was?

MB: Oh, yes.

DB: So that you started off and it really stuck, you stuck with the idea? There weren't a lot of changes?

MB: Well, you would have conferences with the director. Now, if he would say, "I want to get this mood or I want this quality in this character, there would not be essential changes in design. There may be in fittings, rarely in color, unless something just didn't work, which could happen. You know, you can pull some boo boos, too. I mean, if you're decorating your house, everything may go wonderfully and everything may be fine and then you get one thing that you think is a fine idea and it turns out to be awful. So this can happen, too.

DB: But generally it was pretty close.

MB: Oh, they all had to be pretty well planned because an awful lot of work came out of that shop and it had to go through in a limited time, you see. There was the time element, too. So if you had to turn out 60 costumes for a production in a month-

DB: It had to be well planned.

and such a country. What do they mean it's no good?" These are the kind of things that would happen. So anyhow, what happened was--this is Roberta, which has nothing to do with this, but to tell you what can happen—they closed the show. And Gordon was a real pro, you know. He was the producer and finally he said--they got a man named Hazard Short. Maybe you've heard of him.

DB: No, I don't know that name.

MB: He was a fine director of musical shows. And Jerry had directed Roberta, wanted to make it a little show and an inexpensive show. Then Max Gordon decided that he was going to put a lot of money into it and he got more money. And I remember when Hazard Short came in, we redid the whole show. This was when I got my big break. But I remember at that time doing a set of costumes for the show girls which were pallettes angles, completely spangles. You see them all the time today. At that time you didn't. Now those costumes cost $300 at that time, which was a terrific amount.

DB..: Apiece?

MB: Yes, at that time.

DB: That is a lot. It sounds like an incredible amount of money for a costume.

MB: It was at that time. No we used to use, for instance Kiviette, we'd use a lame or something like that, or a metal cloth. It would come from Paris and it would be 50 bucks a yard. Even in those days you could get fabrics like that, you know, which is the difference in--you asked me what the difference was. We didn't use those kind of fabrics.

DB: For the Federal Theatre?

MB: For the Federal Theatre. And our labor, you see, now in the professional theatre I think-my God! I think a draper who was top-flight in the--or a cutter

MB: Yes. It was a matter of good planning and consultation with director, with designer, with lighter, lighting man, woman.

DB: Since you also designed costumes for commercial productions, do you think there was any difference in designing for the Federal Theatre and designing for commercial? Was it in volume?

MB: The b sic philosophy was the same. The amount of money was very different.

DB: Really? You had less?

MB: And this was even in the Depression. For instance, when we first did Roberta, Max Gordon was the producer and I don't know whether these names mean anything.

DB: That means a little bit to me.

MB: And Jerome Kern?

DB: Yes.

MB: You know that name?

DB: Yes.

MB: Who was a doll.

DB: Oh, I'll bet he was, a tremendous man.

MB: A real wonderful gentleman. And Jerry directed Roberta first time out.

DB: Oh, I didn't know that.

MB: And where did we open? I think we opened in Philadelphia, and it was a bomb. Max had tried to do it on a minimal budget. Now you can't do a Paris fashion show on a minimal budget. So finally--as a matter of fact, even the music was criticized. And I. remember after the opening night and the criticisms--you know you'd have conference after conference when you were out of town with a show—and Jerry really rolling on the floor because they were saying the music was no good, the critics. And he said, "My God, it's been good for generations. I mean, so-and-so is an old folk song, you know, from such and

maybe got 50 bucks a week. And a finisher or an operator got $15 a week. That was the going salary.

DB: So that really is a lot of money compared to what—

MB: Well, the labor was a lot of money compared to what it cost in the workshop.

DB: Essentially, that was the difference then, just in the amount of money you had to spend and could spend in the Federal Theatre?

MB: Oh, yes.

DB: It wasn't in the professional approach or the--

MB: Oh, no, no, no. There were some amateur what we would call as pros "amateur" groups, but the whole approach, the whole philosophy was professional. It really was.

DB: Do you think--talking about professional quality--do you think the Federal Theatre plays were of any less professional quality than the commercial ventures? Or did you consider them equal?

MB: Yes. Some were and same were not. Now Faustus was wonderful, I remember. I remember the black Macbeth. I remember Eubie Blake, I remember a musical they did. What was it called, Swing It?

DB: Swing It. Swing It and then they did Swing Mikado, which was opera, Gilbert and Sullivan.

MB: Yes, those were great. These were pros doing these things. Norman Lloyd was then a youngster and he was the backbone of the--

DB: Living Newspaper.

MB: —Living Newspaper.

DB: And they were obviously very good productions.

MB: Excellent, excellent, and this was something that was very new and very exciting in the theatre at that time.

DB: Do you think thats essentially a difference there, that the commercial

theatre couldn't afford to experiment--

MB: That's right.

DB: --as easily as the Federal Theatre could?

MB: Yes. And there were things done that wouldn't have been done in the professional--what was the name of that play by--was it Sinclair Lewis?

DB: Oh, It Can't Happen Here?

MB: That was done in the Federal Theatre. It wouldn't have been done on Broadway.

DB: Why?

MB: It was too--what's the word I want?

DB: Controversial?

MB: Controversial will do, yes. There were things like that that could be done in the Federal Theatre. No. And the quality. When I go to the Mark Taper, for instance, today, I see stuff that couldn't touch stuff that was done in the Federal Theatre. That's, the Mark Taper is--

DB: Right down in Los Angeles.

MB: Yes. And that is the so-called Experimental Theatre here. That's the--have you seen this?

DB: I haven't been to it. I missed it.

MB: How long are you staying?

DB: Well, I'm leaving tomorrow morning.

MB: Oh, that's too bad.

DB: 1'w just been too busy. Next time I must stay longer.

MB: But at any rate, I've seen things at the Mark Taper that are really amateurish compared to stuff that was done. But the Federal Theatre was mostly professionals. Sane of it was lousy, you know, and sane of it was amateurish. And of course, it was tremendous. I don't know how many groups there were.

You know that.

DB: An awful lot and a variety and perhaps that's what it is, when you have such a variety and offer so many types of theatre for so many people that you're

bound to have sane bad productions. Did you notice--well, you worked for the Federal Theatre for--

MB: Until 1937.

DB: 1937 when you left. Were there any organizational changes within, say, the administrative end while you were part of it? Did you—

MB: Yes, there was a lot of stuff going on in Washington at the time, you know, people leaning on their shovels and what-not. (Laugh)

DB: I heard the one About the termites had eaten the shovel.

MB: Oh, I hadn't heard that. (Laugh) But at any rate, there was always--it was a political football, it definitely was. And I think--now, I knew sane of the people that were involved here in the Los Angeles, which was very small compared to the New York one. But I think they were phased out in 1938, weren't they?

DB: I think they started. There was a phasing out process.

MB: it was beginning and when I left, I think there were an awful lot of political shenanigans going on.

DB: Is that why you left? You just--

NB: No, I left because I was pregnant. I was six months pregnant. I stayed till I was six months pregnant and then my husband came out here as a junior writer for Metro, so I followed him out and had my babies out here and have lived here ever since.

DB: But the organizational upsets didn't really affect you then as much as, say, sane other areas?

MB: No. I wasn't fired and they didn't close up the shop. They did, I think, in the next year. Was it 1938?

DB: It was 1939 when they finally closed.

MB: Yes. Well, I think it was beginning. But also, I think what was beginning to happen was that people were beginning to get jobs. The Depression wasn't over really until the 1939/1940, 1941 really until the Second World War. That was the beginning of the increase in, well, war materiel and jobs and more money. But I think it was a political football, always was.

DB: And there were hirings and firings and layoffs and--did that bother you when--did you have to let some people go that you remember, in the Costume Department because they'd say, "Well, you have to cut back?"

MB: No, that hadn't happened.

DB: Oh, well, that was good because--

MB: I left in May of 1937.

DB: And that was Christmas 1937 so you did miss that really.

MB: I missed it. Yes, the people I wanted to get rid of I couldn't. (Laugh)

DB: Well, I guess you were allowed to choose who you would lay off. Maybe that was--I don't know.

MB: Well, I think probably I would have, but as far as I remember, I didn't have to lay off anybody.

DB: Who took your place? Do you remember?

MB: Bill was still there.

DB: So he really took on the extra burden?

MB: Yes, yes. I haven't really looked at all those questions. Maybe theres something. Let me see them.

DB: Well, I'm going to ask you. Is that all right?

MB: Oh, okay.

DB: All right. I know where I am and I can just go from that.

MB: Fine.

DB: Hallie Flanagan says in Arena—have you read Arena, Hallie Flanagan's Arena?

MB: No, I've never read it.

DB: She says that you're a very highly imaginative designer and--

MB: Well, thank her. (Laugh)

DB: I'm sorry, she's dead.

MB: I know. I knew her but not well. I didn't know her well.

DB: Were you encouraged to be innovative and experimental on the Federal Theatre?

MB: Yes.

DB: Nobody said, "Hey, now you--

MB: "No, no, you can't do that"? No, nothing like that.

DB: Oh, that's terrific that you had that freedom.

MB: Yes. Well, it's because nobody knew enough. (Laugh)

DB: Oh, to say--

MB: You know, it was a matter of budget. That would stop certain things, certain effects, certain experiments. But no, no. You know, Congressman Whats-his-name who was head of the--

DB: Dies?

MB: Somebody like Dies wouldn't know enough. He could complain but how would he know you can't do that in the theatre, you know?

DB: Whether you remember it or not, you worked on a number—designed the costumes for a number of Federal Theatre plays.

MB: I don't remember really. I have no record of it.

DB: You don't have a record of the ones you designed for?

MB: No. Do you know?

DB: Charles Weidman was a very wonderful man, you were saying.

MB: He was a wonderful man. He was a very warm man, he was a very considerate man, and he was a very kind man, and I thought a magnificent dancer.

DB: Yes. So that you wanted to do the dance costumes for Candide?

MB: Yes. I remember doing those, and there were times when we would have to step in with somebody elses designs and vary them a little bit, but never to the point where it would usurp the designer's original material.

DB: So you really were kind of a supervisor? _

MB: That's what it was. I think that was my classification.

DB: Supervisor for the Costume Department?

MB: I think, because otherwise I wouldn't have gotten $39.

DB: No. You would have been at $22, eh?

MB: Yes.

DB: Obviously Bill Jones was...you worked with him a great deal. Do you think there were any problems when two costume designers were working on the same production? Did you have any problems like that with him?

MB: No, Bill and I worked beautifully together.

DB: So that it wasn't the artistic nature of the, "Hey, thats my idea."

MB: No, no, no, never.

DB: Never with Bill Jones?

MB: No.

DB: He must have been a terrific man. Was he?

MB: He was a darling. He was forever young.

DB: He was young in the Federal Theatre, too, wasn't he?

MB: Yes. He was at Yale when I was there, and he was a highly sensitive man.

MB: He was a--you can cross this out -- homosexual.

DB: Oh, was he? I don't think he'd be offended by that now.

MB: Well, he's dead; it doesn't matter. I don't know that you need to have that. That's why I say cross it out, but to show you I could work very well with him. He was very talented, very talented, and a fine designer. He really was.

DB: So that you just really had no conflicts at all with him when you worked on Candide and Prelude?

MB: He died of cirrhosis of the liver, poor guy.

DB: Oh, did he?

MB: Yes.

DB: That's another thing we've learned about a lot of the designers, both in the scenic--

MB: What, alcoholics?

DB: Yes. Scenic design and costume. It must have been the times and a lot of other things.

MB: I. don't know where they got the money for the liquor and there was no liquor at those times. Yes, there was. Prohibition was over. Yes. But he died, oh, I guess in the forties, early forties. He was a young man, very young man.

DB: As a costume designer, did you have to work, be able to get along well with the seamstresses and the wardrobe ladies?

MB: That was the major problem. It was a matter of personnel, getting along with than and getting than to turn out the work that you had to turn out.

DB: How did you approach that? Was it, "Say, listen, I'm the boss, and you have to do--"

MB: No. You know better than that.

DB; I'm just trying to get your reaction.

MB: Something the Womens' Libbers should learn, believe me. Use your old feminine charm, that's all.

DB: When you'd compliment them, would they do a good job?

MB: Well, of course, of course. This is a matter of getting along with people.

I: mean, the fact that you're getting so much out of me. Its not because you're threatening me, is it? (Laugh)

DB: ***No.*** Of course I'm not threatening you. (Laugh)

MB: No, you know, if you work with anybody, no matter what it is, its the way you handle people. It's a sense of respect for another human being, which is all that it amounts to.

DB: Yes, but things then did get better, a little bit, when you were working with the people on your staff.

MB: Oh, sure, sure. You know, it's not that I had them eating out of my hand. There was always trouble, but it got so that we had the place so well organized that when we had to turn out something in a week or two weeks or a month or whatever for this production or turn out for that production--these things were all going at the same time, you see—we were able to do it.

DB: You must have been pretty proud of the machine. It was very well oiled and apparently run fairly--

MB: I did a damned good job of it. I really think I did. (Laugh)

DB: I think that's terrific. Could you tell me about some of the designers you worked with? You mentioned Bill Jones. Do you remember anything about Mary Merrill?

MB: Mary? Yes. Mary was at Yale with me and up until a few years ago, Mary was doing TV.

DB: She's now working at the /Museum of the City of New York

Shes still quite active.

MB: So you've talked to her?

DB: Wye talked to her.

MB: She's a wonderful gal. I knew Mary from the time at Yale and then I'd see her occasionally when I'd go back to New York. Throw me some more names.

DB: Okay. You don't remanber anything about Hudiakoff?

MB: I don't even remember the name. Isn't that awful? I don't remember The Apostle.

DB: That name isn't very familiar to me either.

MB: I don't remanber The Apostle.

DB: What about Miss Lucy? Does that name ring a bell?

MB: No. Whos Miss Lucy?

DB: That's just a name I have down here. Someone did some research on these people. It's just "Miss Lucy."* I have a list of names. I have Charles Hawkins down there. Do you remember him?

MB: No. Stoner rings a bell, Glidden rings a bell. You don't know how many people were in that outfit.

DB: Yes, there must have been an awful lot of designers who worked for you.

MB: Phil Barber, . . .

MB: …Because I got the Yale Alumni thing, you know, from the Drama School just last week and Phil's first wife had died and she was a cutie.

DB: Did he meet her at Yale Drama School or was--

MB: Yes, Mary--oh, damn. Well, his first wife he met at Yale Drama School, and then he married another gal who was—what's his name; used to be a Metro--his sister. And I don't know whether--I haven't seen Phil in years. I see

his name occasionally on TV.

DB: He's still very active.

MB: He is?

DB: Hes written a novel and is trying to get it published. We've talked with him. Hes very, very busy.

MB: Hes a nice guy, very nice guy.

DB: Do you think he was a good administrator?

MB: Oh, yes.

DB: Did he handle problems well enough?

MB: Yes.

DB: Do you remember anything about J. Howard Miller who was Hallie Flanagans assistant--

MB: I remember the name.

DB: --along with Bill Farnsworth. I don't know whether you had to work--

MB: No, I didn't work with than much. No, if I got through what I had to get through--actually, most of my orders from up above came through Kate Lawson. Have you seen her?

DB: Yes, we talked with her. So she was your immediate superior?

MB: Yes. She was in charge of all the technical work. At least I remember that she was. Am I right?

DB; Thats right. She was in charge of--

MB: So that I'd meet these people at conferences or one thing and another, but I never had a lot to do with them.

DB: You didn't really get down to Washington. You were really based in New York City and you didn't--

MB: No, I was in New York.

DB: And that was it?

MB: And I think I got up to Poughkeepsie for a couple of **meetings**. No, I met these people and knew them, but Kate was really my superior.

DB: How do you think she—did she do a terrific job?

MB; Oh, she's a wonderful, wonderful woman. Have you talked to her?

DB: Yes, we talked to her a few months ago. What do you remember about Hallie Flanagan? You said you met her just a couple of times.

MB: At these conference things, you know.

DB: What did you think of her?

MB: She was very dynamic, very knowledgeable, and a great pamphleteer. (Laugh)

DB: You mean, she liked to get out little brochures on—

MB: All the time. (Laugh)

DB: "Hey, you write a brochure about costume designing," that sort of thing?

MB: No, she never did it to me. (Laugh) No, you know, it was-but she was very dynamic, very wise woman, I think, in the way she was a pamphleteer. In that mean that she handled the politicians very well.

DB: Which was probably important in her position.

MB: It was the most important thing.

DB: Do you think she did a good job of running the Federal Theatre?

MB: What, Arena? I haven't read Arena. I must ask Emmet for it. I'll borrow it. Now I've had other people interview me and I can't remember the name of the young man. He was doing a Ph.D. thesis at UCLA (University of California at Los Angeles) on the Federal Theatre.

DB: Bert Holland? Was his name Bert Holland?

MB: I don't know, honey.

DB: It was probably him.

MB: I don't know, but I've had several people in a matter of 10 years, the past 10 years, or 10 years ago even. So that if you check with the Ph.D. library, you may find some material there of people that are now dead, you know. Because all those things are in the library, I mean copies of the Ph.D. theses.

DB: We'll check that. We've checked a lot of them. There's been an awful lot of work in the past 10 years, like you said.

MB: Yes.

DB: Did you recognize that the Federal Theatre was a national venture rather than just in New York? Or did you really think of it as a New York--

MB: Oh, no, no, no. Everybody was so enthused because we were so excited about having a national theatre. You know, having studied the German Theatre, having studied well, even going back to Shakespeare, you know (laugh)--well, Shakespeare wasn't. But going all the way back in the theatre, these things were all important as far as the countries were concerned. And we'd never had anything like that. We had little stock companies, you know, and road companies of the theatre. But it was all individual productions. We never had anything that was sponsored by the Government. And this was very exciting, the whole concept of the Federal Theatre was very exciting. It still is. It should happen. (Laugh)

DB: I hope we're around. Did you think that there were stronger units in the Federal Theatre than others, say, that were the-what were the strong units of the Federal Theatre? And I'm thinking kind of a Living Newspaper or Childrens or the Yiddish Theatre.

MB: Living Newspaper. Well, these were the ones that got the most critical acclaim, I think. Certainly Houseman and Welles. Give me a few. I can-

DB: Experimental Unit, which was Virgil Geddes and James Light and they did Chalk. Dust, I think, and Murder in the Cathedral.

MB: Yes, that was an important group. The Ballet was important at that time.

DB: But the little ones like, say, the German and the Yiddish and the Childrens?

MB: Well, those were important for this reason: there were all kinds of ethnic groups and many of them had never seen theatre before. They had the truck theatres, you know.

DB: Yes, Caravan.

MB: Caravan. That was important because people had never seen theatre before. And so this was terribly important.

DB: So it brought a new audience to the Federal Theatre?

MB: Yes. That's one I'd forgotten about.

DB: Yes. I think the Caravan Unit was actually started by the Federal Theatre.

MB: Yes. Well, there was the old Chautauqua thing--which was way before your time, even before my thing--which used to be road companies that went to fairs and things like that across the country. You've heard the name?

DB: No.

MB: You haven't? Write it down so you can look it up because I think its something you should know.

DB: How do you spell it?

MB: C-h-a-u-t-a-u-q-u-a.

DB: Chautauqua, Okay. Do you think the Federal Theatre--you were talking about the costume and the technical end, there were a lot of problems, personnel problems--do you think the Federal Theatre was perhaps too bureaucratic, that the Government just got too much involved?

MB: Not until later. Not until toward the end because it was putting people to work.

And there was great enthusiasm for it at first. It wasn't until—when did you say, it started in 1935?

DB: Yes.

MB: The first year was one of tremendous enthusiasm, 1936, 1937 even. When I quit, it was still going strong. But this was the beginning of compromising, Roosevelt compromising with Congress, what was going on in politics really.

DB: So that it just started--it did become a little more bureaucratic as the time--

MB: Oh, sure, sure.

DB: The Government did censor a few of the Federal Theatre plays, like the very first production was supposed to be Ethiopia, a Living Newspaper on the Ethiopian situation. That was canceled because it represented HailieSelassie and Mussolini in the play. What did you think of the government censorship of some of the plays? Were you aware--

MB: I don't remember it, honey.

DB: --that there was censorship?

MB: I'm sure there was. I'm sure there was, and I'm sure everybody was up in arms about it. What else ***was***--

DB: Injunction Granted and remember the John Houseman/Orson Welles play, The Cradle Will Rock? That's Marc Blitzstein's play.

MB: Yes.

DB: That **was** canceled by Federal Theatre and they immediately took it and that's when they left the Federal Theatre, which was in 1937.

MB: Yes, well, you see that was after my time.

DB: That's when you left?

MB: That's when they went into Mercury.

DB: Right. So that you were out by then?

MB: But I assume that the reason it was canceled was because of the background and the people involved. I don't know. Who was it? Harold Rome? No, no, no, it wasn't.

DB: Marc Blitzstein wrote it.

MB: Marc Blitzstein.

DB: I just thought of another thing. Do you think the Federal Theatre dealt with different subjects, different themes?

MB: I remember Injunction Granted. I. do remember that being canceled. And everybody ***was*** up in arms with any censorship. But I think, in allowing it to be canceled, it was the only thing Hallie could do to keep the whole damned thing going.,

DB: Oh, I. see. So that it was a necessary thing?

MB: Yes.

DB: What I was thinking of is do you think that the Federal Theatre introduced different themes in plays than the commercial theatre? Like I know that the commercial theatre was into a lot of the musical comedies.

MB: It was a great period for musical comedy. It was a great period for the--what did we call it--the domestic comedy, for the British upper class comedy, drawing room comedy. I'm trying to think what other plays there were in that period.

DB: That's kind of what I was getting at. Do you think the Federal Theatre made an impression on drama because of the themes of some of its plays?

MB: It didn't develop any writers, did it?

DB: The Federal Theatre? Yes.

MB: Who?

DB: Arthur Miller, Howard Koch, a screenwriter.

MB: Yes, but I mean we didn't get a Eugene O'Neill.

DB: No, we didn't.

MB: Arthur Miller I'll give you. What did he have produced in the Federal Theatre?

DB: He wrote for the Federal Theatre but he didn't--

MB: He didn't have anything produced. Thats what I mean. We didn't develop any playwrights.

DB: Well, there were a number of black--you see, that's another area I wanted to ask you about, the black drama, whether you were involved with that or saw any of the productions. But there were a number of black playwrights, some of whose plays were produced by--

MB: Who, Langston Hughes?

DB: Langston Hughes had a couple of plays.

MB: Yes. He was already a recognized poet, though.

DB: Yes, he was a recognized poet. Hughes Allison, Abram Hill, John Silvera, whose brother, Frank Silvera, was an actor with the Federal Theatre, Ward Courtney, Theodore Ward. The first plays were very good. Some of them weren't produced because they thought they were pretty strong for the 1930's. So that I think if you'd want to say "playwrights," you'd have to deal with more the black playwrights. They introduced black playwrights and—

MB: Yes, but what happened to these people?

DB: Some of them are still writing.

MB: Yes?

DB: Some of them have changed professions, retired. So that I guess that we'd--you're asking me a question; you're interviewing me, whether they introduced a lot of playwrights. I think sane of them will become quite well-known, but they're not now.

MB: Well, if they're not now, they never will be I'm sure.

DB: Shakespeare, well--

MB: I mean, that's one of the difficulties of being a playwright. You have to be produced in your own time. People don't go digging in the archives for old plays that have never been produced, believe me. Or do they?

DB: I don't know. (Laugh) That's a good question to think about that. It hasn't happened.

MB: No. I mean, Eugene O'Neill, S. N. Berman. These are playwrights of the period starting in the twenties, you know. This was the beginning of the birth of the American theatre was this group of playwrights that developed in the early twenties, most of whom came from George Pierce Baker, incidentally.

DB; Well, the Federal Theatre then you don't think developed any playwrights. But do you think:

MB: It developed actors, it developed designers, technical people, producers. Yes, it developed theatre people. Now Miller I never saw anything produced at that time. I didn't know him then. So that he was probably a youngster at the time.

DB; Very young, yes.

MB; So while he may have been writing, nothing ever happened, you see. So that no writing developed.

DB: At least in the Federal Theatre, the writers—

MB: As a Tom The writing developed in the guide books, the Writers' Project and so forth, writers developed. But dramatically, I don't think there were any playwrights that were developed, at least not that I know about.

DB: Could you tell me about your political and social philosophy in the thirties and did it affect your work for the Federal Theatre? Were you a young progressive or were you--

MB: We were quote unquote liberals. We created Social Security. (Laugh) We created the unions. We created these things that have become golems, if you know what that is.

DB: Yes.

MB: Monsters today. Establishment. And are problems today. As youngsters we were idealists. We saw people starving to death. We saw people selling apples.

We saw people in soup lines. So that Social Security was a prime interest of ours at that time. Unions also. I mean, we came out of the period preceding that, which was the dreadful period of the coal miners' strike, the railroad strikes, when none of these people were organized. The railroads were beginning to be organized. The unions were not what they are today, but as
unions they had no power. They weren't Establishment, which is what they are today. I mean, having lived this long, you can see what was an ideal 40 years ago, 50 years ago, what can happen to it. And I still wouldn't say,

> "Do away with Social Security." And I still wouldn't say, "Do away with the unions." I was not a Commie ever. I was not as prejudiced as I am today as far as the Commie manipulations were concerned. Because when I got to be about 40, I decided it was a time of decision making and I wasn't as--I

decided that what the Commies were doing at that time, because I was involved with it because my husband was in the Screenwriters' Guild. And I was seeing

> how they worked and what they did. This is when I became anti-Commie politically.

DB: So it wasn't until later that you--

MB: In a sense we all were Socialists as youngsters and what Roosevelt did was take over the whole Socialist program which put the Socialists out of business. So

> that this, was accomplished in our youth, these Socialist ideals. Now, in the period before that, what you had if a kid was rebelling, he was a Socialist

when he was in college, you know. I came from Philadelphia, I came from a Republican family who had never been anything but Republicans. So it was normal that I became a Socialist. Not that I belonged to the Socialist Party, but I read the New Leader. (Laugh) And as far as my registration was concerned, in New York I voted for the man. I mean, La Guardia ran on the, whatever it was Party, but it was not the--

DB: Progressive?

MB: Progressive, something like that. So that I always voted for the man. It was on the liberal side. I'm a registered Democrat today, but that doesn't mean that I vote for any Democrat that runs.

DB: Now you vote for the person?

MB: I always have.

DB: Well then, actually working for the Federal Theatre was very nice for you then because you thought it was a progressive kind of--

MB: It was a socialist setup, it really was.

DB: The Federal Theatre was closed because the Dies Committee felt that there were Communists in the Project.

MB: There were.

DB: And I was going to ask you if you thought that was true. Do you think it should have made a difference if there were Communists?

MB: No. No. I don't think at that time there were more than 40,000 Communists in the country from what little I know of the period. You know, this great monster, the Communist Party, I think there were 40,000 registered Communists at that time.

DB: So they really didn't have that much influence?

MB: Oh, no. This was a red herring. I mean, Nixon's used it, Eisenhower used it.

Who hasn't used it?

DB: What do you think the real reason then for wanting to close the Federal Theatre was if it was a kind of red herring?

MB: You've heard this term--boondoggling. The artists in this country are and always will be second-class citizens. And this isn't important. This doesn't make jobs theoretically except for a very elite group when you consider the people in the theatre. Now this was before big motion pictures, too, you see, and before TV.

DB: So that it was really just a change in--they wanted to close the Federal Theatre?

MB: Sure. It didn't look good on the books so the Communist Party was the red herring that they used. You know, you know enough about the Dies Committee.

DB: It's amazing.

MB: Well, I don't know if you remember now--you're still too young for that--McCarthy. You know, anything goes as far as--if you can wait around Nixon. (Laugh)

DB: Do you think the Federal Theatre was successful?

MB: I think it was very successful in keeping people from starving. I think it was very successful in giving people dignity and working for what they were earning, taking them off, technically, relief, and making them work for whatever they got, which was relief wages. Yes, I think it was very important as were any of the WPA projects. My feeling that that and CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) were magnificent concepts and damned important because I believe in the dignity of human man. (Laugh)

DB: And that's through work and through accomplishment?

MB: Not necessarily through work, but through being able to be part of a community, whether it be--yes, it's work, I suppose. I mean, I'm not completely gung ho on

the Puritan concept of the work--(laugh)

DB: Ethic.

MB: --ethic.

IF: Yes. Do you think we should have a Federal Theatre again today?

MB: I sure do. I sure do.

DB: Do you think we can?

MB: I don't know. I don't think so, and it's maybe because I'm old and not as optimistic as I was 40 years ago. (Laugh) You tell me.

DB: I hope so. I kind of think there might be a possibility if they continue in the vein where they're saying on the tax forms, "If you want to give a couple of dollars to NEA (National Endowment for the Arts)"--

MB: Well, that's wonderful.

DB; That's a step anyway.

MB: That's wonderful.

DB: It's going to take people working though. It's going to take people really working for it in Congress, I think.

MB: Well, who's going to do it?

DB: I don't know.

MB; Who cares?

DB: We'll have to vote some good Congressmen in.

MB; Yes?

DB: If we can find any.

MB: Yes. (Laugh) You mean a Ronald Reagan who was an actor? (Laugh)

DB: No. I don't think he'd do that, to tell you the truth.

MB; That would be a boondoggle for him. (Laugh)

DB: Do you have any closing remarks or thoughts you'd like to make?

MB: I don't know. I think it was a wonderful experience and in looking back and you making me remember, which I haven't done in years, I think it probably was--if you'll pardon the expression--quote unquote an enriching experience as far as my life is concerned and the people I came in contact with and the kind of things I did. And I had probably a rarified girlhood with a family with money, even after the Depression, but not very long after the beginning of the Depression. So that I had not known the kind of people that I knew in the Federal Theatre. I think probably it made me a much more considerate, kinder human being.

DB: That's saying something.

MB: Because I was aware of the other half, the different levels, the different problems of society. It made me aware of government, of certainly the theatre, the complexities of getting a production on, let alone dozens of them. I guess maybe it made me a little more tolerant.

DB: Of people?

MB: Of people and even of things sometimes. (Laugh)

DB; Thank you very much, Mrs. Borowsky.

(End of interview)