Interview of Mary Coyle Chase
August 9, 1979
Interviewer, Karen Wickre

KW: Today is August 9, 1979. This is Karen Wickre talking with Mary Coyle Chase at her home 505 Circle Drive in Denver, Colorado.

MCC: . . . top balcony of the old Broadway Theatre in Denver. . . Mantell. He was a famous Shakespearean actor, and his wife was Genevieve Mantell. So as I say, I sat in the balcony, spent my dollar, and I was hooked from then on.

Oh, my own background. Let's see, I had a--all that has been my family. We didn't mention it, you know. It was considered a disgrace in those days for anyone in the family to go on the stage. I continued to be interested in it and during the WPA Project, when they decided to do one of my plays, that was when I first met Andy Slane. The plays were being done in an old burlesque house called the Baker Theatre, now torn down. There I met Andy Slane and one day he found a 24 sheet in the basement.

KW: Which is?

MCC: A 24 sheet was a big sheet, you know, they put on billboards then to advertise shows. And he said, "This woman looks like you." And I looked and there was this woman, Miss Kitty Coyle, behind her--she was the featured singer behind her row of chorus girls. It said, "Fresh from six weeks' triumph at the Alcazar in San Francisco." And there was this mysterious aunt my father would never discuss with me. So that was the production of my first play, Me Third, and Andy was the director.

KW: Was that the first play that you had written and produced?

MCC: The first play I had ever had produced, yes, and I had been a newspaper reporter, married the city editor. And while I was waiting for the birth of my third child, I wrote this play, Me Third. It was later done in New York as Now You've Done It.

KW: Yes, I read that.

MCC: So Andy and I became great friends. He was erudite on the history of the theatre. I think he read every play that had ever been written. So he directed this one and we had a big success with it in Denver. The only thing I knew about Broadway was the mother of a famous Broadway director, Antoinette Perry, for whom they named the Tony Awards, was in the theatre. So I got her address by calling New York and sent the play to them along with the Denver notices, and they took it to New York. It didn't succeed; we rewrote it a lot. Anyway, who knows why a play succeeds or fails on Broadway? But it only played about six weeks. I got dreadful notices, and my husband said to me, "It's like a man being thrown from a horse. If you don't get right back on, you never get on." So I sat down and wrote another play called Sorority House and while we couldn't afford to wait for it to be taken on Broadway, although there was Broadway interest, I sold that to the movies. RKO made a film. Then I wrote a couple I didn't get any reaction to, and then I wrote Harvey. By that time Andy Slane had left Denver and gone to San Francisco and the Federal Theatre Project was no more.

But I did, I was very fortunate. The Federal Theatre Project then, I believe, it was 1936, was created to mostly, as I understand it, to give work to actors out of work. And we had experienced vaudeville people, stock company actors.

KW; From the Denver area generally?

MCC: Yes, from the Denver area. So it was an excellent cast. And then ambitious young people locally who had never been in the theatre and this was their first chance. So it came off very well. The Denver critics loved it, so did the people. We did a good business there. The WPA played it in several places in California before it was taken to Broadway.

KW: Oh, did they?

MCC: Yes. They played it in San Francisco. I've forgotten the names of the other

places.

KW: I knew it had gone to somewhere on the West Coast. I didn't know where.

MCC: I believe it was San Francisco, and I believe it was the Alcazar.

KW: Yes. That was a Federal Theatre place at the time.

MCC: Yes, and of course it was strange that that had been where my Aunt Kate had played also.

KW: How did you in the beginning, had you studied playwriting at all? Or how did you originally get your ideas as to, you know, to put things in dramatic form?

MCC: It was instinctive, I believe. I had read a few books on it, mostly William Archer. I was influenced by him. I still think he's written the best book there is on the subject. He was a London critic who wrote this book in 1912 called Play Making. I was influenced by that and then wrote my first play.

KW: Were you at all interested in or did you admire playwrights of the time?

MCC: Oh, I was completely stage-struck from the time I was 11 years old, but I hadn't mentioned it to anyone. I seemed to know enough to keep it a secret. But then I'd gone into the newspaper business. I went to college at D.U. (Denver University), majored in Greek and Latin because I wanted to learn English grammar, and we were told then that that was the best way to learn it. Then when I was 16 I went to work on a newspaper. I had entered college at 15 and then at 16 I wanted to really get into the swing of things. And I wanted newspaper experience because I wanted to hear the rhythm of speech from people in these dramatic situations of life.

KW: You did this then with an eye towards--

MC: Oh, always, always.

KW: That's interesting.

MC: But I never mentioned it to anyone. I knew where I was heading, so it was a deep

thing with me. It still is. Oh, I'd done a few writings, little stories when I was about seven years old. I didn't know about the theatre.

KW: Did you find yourself reading contemporary playwrights much?

MCC: I did, and I went to all of them I could after I was grown up. I went to everything I could afford to go to, and I read.

KW: Who were your favorites?

MCC: Let me see, I was very--

KW: Among the playwrights.

MCC: O'Neill. Oh, right from the first. When I was about 21 I saw his one-act plays done by a local group of school students, high school students. And despite their inexperience, the plays themselves were so magnificent I was completely overwhelmed by them, and I still feel that he is the greatest playwright we've produced. And I was overcome with the power of the script. I saw Where the Cross Is Made and Isle and there was another. I believe it was Moon of the Caribbes, his three one-acts. That was before I'd ever written one of my own.

Then of course I got involved in the newspaper business and the glamour of that, and it's a very glamorous type of job.

KW: I imagine.

MCC: Then I married the city editor and had three children. While I was waiting for the birth of my third child I wrote Me Third.

KW: How did you go about getting the play accepted by the Federal Theatre? Or did you go to them first?

MCC; Yes, I went to them first and I showed the play to Andy Slane. There was a man who was the state director named Karon Tillman, and they decided they wanted to do it. Oh, it was Andy who pushed it. He was the one who

took it to Tillman, and then Hallie Flanagan, they sent it to her. I think they had to get her okay on those things. I'm not sure.

KW: Do you remember anything about the National Play Bureau? Does that name mean anything to you?

MCC: Not a thing.

KW: That was sort of the administrative arm in New York that would do sort of what you did. I mean, they would solicit plays and send them out to the regional Federal Theatres in the country.

MCC: Oh, no, I never heard of that. No, my contact with it was Andy Slane. I'd been down there and I had watched some of the plays they had done like Sinclair Lewis' It Can't Happen Here and so forth. So I submitted this play to them.

KW: And you didn't have any qualms about it being a relief project?

MCC; Oh, none at all.

KW; Some people did. (Laugh)

MCC: Oh, I had only one thing which I think is true of all playwrights. They want to see it on the stage in order to find out they've been wrong and where they've hit it and where they haven't. So everything I learned then about the working theatre I learned there in that experience. I learned from Andy. I was even so gauche that in rehearsal after the actors had rehearsed a scene, I spoke to them directly and told them I didn't think that they had done it correctly, and then he had a very nice, polite talk with me later and said that if I had any criticisms I should tell them to him and he would tell the cast. I was not to address them directly. Well, you know, I didn't know any better, but I have never, never done that again.

KW: What was their reaction? Do you remember?

MCC: Very cold and they didn't like it at all.

KW: How was this group working together?

MCC: Excellent.

KW: You mentioned a variety of backgrounds.

MCC: Oh, they were excellent. We had one man from burlesque and he played a comic role, and we had a man who had been in the Denim Stock Company, played an older character man. He was excellent. And then the leading man they brought from the WPA in San Francisco. And then the leading girl was a local youngster, very good, and the older character woman had played in stock, had had a good deal of experience. So I was very fortunate that most of the people were experienced actors. And of course Andrew Slane had, he had read every play ever written. He knew everything about the theatre and about how certain plays had been played. He knew which famous old-time actor had played Iago with the medallion one way and the cloak one way and how another actor had played it with different gestures and different costumes. It was fascinating to listen to him and I listened to every word he said, and his wife was an actress. She was not in my play but I saw her in Anna Christie later on when they did it. Oh, it was a great experience for me and it was a terrific experience when my play flopped in New York with all that--

KW: The rewritten version?

MCC: Yes. Well, I don't want to infer that that was the reason it flopped. It had entertained a Denver audience, but a New York audience is something different. In those days they didn't have television, so there was not the uniformity of taste throughout the country that there is now. So a sophisticated New York audience didn't respond in the same way a Denver audience

did and of course I was crushed but you have to get over it.

KW: But as you say, it was educational.

MCC: It definitely was. What I learned, that was really the school life where I learned, and you learn more from a flop than you do a success.

KW: Yes, all the different things that can affect it I suppose.

MCC: I remember one critic. I believe he was on the Brooklyn Eagle. He said something that has later amused me a lot as, as I remember it. He said that I was a pedestrian playwright and I worked with a will and elbow grease but no imagination. Of course these things are very public. When you fail in the theatre, it's a public disgrace, so considered.

KW: But usually relatively short-lived, I would think.

MCC: That's right. People forget about it, and if you're, you know, if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.

KW: Yes. So you had known Andy Slane at the University, right?

MCC: No.

KW: No, you hadn't?

MCC: No, I'd never known him at the University. I don't think he ever went to the University.

KW: I believe he did and didn't finish. That's the story that he told on the tape.

MCC: Maybe that was it. I'm sure that he would know that. But he had been a director of a group called the "Community Players."

KW: That's right.

MCC: Before the WPA Theatre came into existence.

KW: And you met him somewhere?

MCC: No, I had never met him until the WPA.

KW: Oh, I see.

MCC: That was my first meeting with him, and I approached him and asked him to do this play, showed it to him. And then we became friends.

KW: I see. Did you have dealings then—you mentioned Karon Tillman. Did you have other dealings with him or did you work--

MCC; Only as part of his production and later we became friends. He'd been a Shakespearean actor and had been in the company of Sir Philip Andreve, and his background was entirely different from Andy Slane's.

KW: He'd been in Canada, I believe.

MCC: Yes, he had been, and he was a Southerner and I became friendly with him, too and learned from him a good deal about Shakespearean performances. But I really got a thorough education in practical working theatre first from Andy Slane and then later it was added to by Karon Tillman.

KW: And let's see, Andy I believe mentioned someone named Peggy Reeve.

MCC: She was the head of all the WPA.

KW: For the state?

MCC: I think so, yes.

KW: So did you have to work at all with her or was that more what they did, Slane?

MCC: No, they contacted her, although she had read this play. She was a personal friend of mine, too. She'd read the play after they had read it and approved of it.

KW: Was that standard, do you know, at all? Would she read the plays?

MCC: I don't know. You know, I can't remember that. I think they did certain plays that were sent to them like Sinclair Lewis' It <u>Can't Happen Here.</u>

I believe they had a good deal of freedom--

KW: That's quite possible.

MCC: selecting the plays, but they would have to get the budgets from her because she had many projects she was head of.

KW: And she seemed to like it? I mean, that was no problem?

MCC: Oh, yes, she liked it.

KW: This morning I was at the University Library reading a dissertation on Denver theatre during the Depression and one thing that that writer mentioned is how the Denver Post consistently ignored the Federal Theatre except for Me Third and I think maybe one other production. That was the only one that they paid any attention to, and seemed to like it, the reviewer for the Post.

MCC: That may have been. Yes, he did like it. He became a great booster of mine later on. When my play, Sorority House, which was my second one, was done by the University out here, he also gave it a very good review. That may have been--I don't know of course--it may have been because I had been on the newspaper here and I knew all the people and they knew me.

KW: Well, and you were also a local.

MCC: That's true, that's true, and I think they were--

KW: I think that makes a difference.

MCC: I think that made a great deal of difference.

KW: There was some prejudice, I think, against the WPA--

MCC: There might have been.

KW: --on the part of local newspapers sometimes.

MCC: Yes, there might have been.

KW: Did you meet Hallie Flanagan at all? Did she come out?

MCC: No, I never met her. I decided after my--I was so impressed with Andy Slane that I did approach a man who had become my agent, a man named Hap Duggan, who was involved with Hallie Flanagan. And I asked him if he would speak to her about having Andy go back to New York and meet her and talk to her about theatre productions. And they did and I think it was the high spot in his life. He'd never been to New York before. Truly a remarkable man and the most generous person, giving out what he knew, sharing all of his thoughts and ideas with aspiring writers, an unusual man.

KW: And of course he was invited to this summer conference that the Federal Theatre sponsored during the summer of 1937. They invited people from different Federal Theatres around the country.

MCC: Well, that was the one.

KW: And Hallie Flanagan of course ran it. It was at Vassar.

MCC: Well, that's the one that we had recommended him. I had spoken to my agent urging them that he be invited.

KW: Then I have a--I'll show you in a minute--I have a program. After Me Third then you acted in Devil's Disciple, is that right?

MCC: I had a bit part. I think I just stood on the stage and said one word or something.

KW Did you look forward to doing that? Or was that a favor to Andy or something?

MCC: I looked forward to doing it but I decided that had I wanted to go that way, I would have been interested in it long before. But it was the right thing to do.

KW: The experience didn't compare really?

MCC: Oh, no, not at all.

KW: I can see why.

MCC: Not at all, although if I had it to do over again, I would have done more acting, I think. Acting experience makes a better playwright.

KW: I would think it would have to contribute.

MCC: Oh, it teaches you economy of speech and lines and gives you more of an idea of the problems of the actor.

KW: How did the audience react to a Shaw play? I mean, what kind of audiences were Denver audiences?

MCC: It was a mixture. The tickets of course were cheap and a play by Shaw always attracts a certain amount of the intelligentsia. So it was a mixture of people Who wanted to go to inexpensive theatre, people who were really interested in Shaw.

KW: Was Denver a good theatre town, do you think, in those days?

MCC: It had the reputation then in the twenties of being not a very good theatre town. You see, it wasn't on the Transcontinental Railroad. It was then known as an overgrown Cowtown, about 180,000 people or no more than 200,000. And although we had a lot of theatre here, vaudeville, the Orpheum,

and the Empress and the Broadway, which was the posh traveling house for New York companies and three melodrama companies, I believe were playing on Curtis Street, and the Denim, which was the stock house. You see, there was no television, the "talkies" were just beginning to catch on. You see, they'd cane in 1928. We're talking about the thirties. There was still

Curtis Street. People still went to vaudeville and they still went to the Orpheum. But those seats were inexpensive, too. But by and large, it was not considered-well, it wasn't big enough to be a hot theatre town,

like San Francisco or Chicago. But it was wonderful.

KW: I was surprised looking through, this man's dissertation included a list of every legitimate theatre production, he called it, between 1929 and 1941 and it's a 200-page list that he's got. Now he included, you know, stock companies traveling through and touring shows and I think Elitch's Gardens.

MCC: That summer theatre.

KW: Yes, all that kind of thing.

MCC: Well, I have since-odd we should be speaking about this now--I have since written a mini-musical about Denver in the twenties in which I have a narrator tell about how many shows were playing. And then we go back and show vaudeville acts from the Orpheum. They come on the stage and do the old-time numbers with standard songs and what played at the Empress and what used to play at the Orpheum.

KW: Is that for production right here now?

MCC: Well, yes, it's just this week I made an agreement with an off-Broadway group to do it in New York.

Kr That's interesting.

MCC: Yes, I've been very much interested in it because I remember it so well, you know, and the mood of the times, how different it was, you know.

KW: Let's see, did you ever meet Howard Miller?

MCC: Yes, I met Howard Miller.

Kr Did you?

MCC: Yes, indeed, I did. He was with Hallie Flanagan, was he?

EMI: Yes, another administrator.

MCC: Yes. He came out here; he had a sister living in Denver at that time, and he

would come out to see her now and then and I did meet him. I'd forgotten Howard Miller.

KW: For a while he was the West Coast sort of regional director. I think Denver came in as part of that region.

MCC: That's true, yes.

KW: And so I think that Hallie Flanagan probably—well, he knew more about the area.

MCC: True. I think he came here when Me Third opened.

KW: Yes, that could be, that could be. How did you find the working? relationships with the technical people and you know--

MCC: Oh, excellent.

KW: No problems?

MCC: Oh, I had a marvelous time. I mean, the shadows came later with Broadway, but while all this was happening to me it was like Cinderella going to the ball.

KW: There was available equipment and material and all that kind of thing?

MCC: Yes. Oh, they had a set designer and he also designed the costumes. And they had stagehands. Oh, the whole thing, as far as I was concerned, worked beautifully. I don't think one single thing went wrong.

KW: That's great. And you felt free to go to these community people or to Andy. I'm sure you felt free to go to him.

MCC: Oh, yes, I did indeed. No, I felt like I had arrived. I soon found out I hadn't.

KW: That's quite lucky for a first play.

MCC: Yes, it was, it was indeed. As I look back on it now, it was better for me and my writing that it didn't succeed on Broadway because, oh, the failure on

Broadway aroused a kind of a--quickened my fight, my determination and taught me a great deal. And of course I had the great experience then of meeting these two skillful people, intelligent people, Antoinette Perry and Brock Pemberton, who taught me a great deal about Broadway production. So I call them, that was my graduate school and university, the first.

KW: Did you find that they, Pemberton and Perry, were interested in finding people from outside New York to do their shows?

MCC: No, I didn't. I don't remember that. They were interested, as they had to be, in a Broadway success, although they had done many first plays.

KW: It's often that the charge is leveled against New York that they only look within New York to find new people and new plays.

MCC: Well, they were interested in a comedy situation. I say comedy because they did more comedy than drama. And then what they really did often was buy a situation from a new playwright who had a good, fresh idea, and then they would add their expertise to it. And they often took out a collaboration contract entitling them to say 12 percent of what tie author earned. But their names were not on the billing. Kaufman and Hart also did that, too, well, not Kaufman and Hart, but Kaufman by himself often did that. And so did George Abbott. Because after you've been around Broadway a lot your ideas get fewer and fewer, and then from the sticks will come somebody who will put a good comic slant in the situation. But he doesn't know how to get it on the stage, how to stage it. So those men like Abbott and Pemberton and Perry and Kaufman would then polish this up, and it gave the author a wonderful way to learn. And things were not as expensive then. You could raise the curtain on a show for $12,000 or $15,000. So young playwrights then had many opportunities to learn their craft, and that's the way you learned.

With an audience you don't learn anything. You can read all you want about it, but you're still in the library. But you have to--it's that terrifying element, that live audience of your own contemporaries.

KW: That's a test. That's the test.

MCC: Oh, that is the test. That turns the blood to water.

KW: You don't have to go into specifics; that might take too long. But how did they want you to rewrite it for Broadway? I mean, what general things would be different?

MCC: Well, they thought that a Broadway audience for instance would like to look at a beautiful set, so they copied a roam out of the Metropolitan Museum and raised the social status of this family because it had been a small town family of people who were ambitious to get ahead in the town, but actually they had a rather shabby looking house. The man originally was running for district attorney but he was a ne'er-do-well lawyer. So we put it against a beautiful set and instead of running for district attorney we had him running for senator, things like that. But they taught me the structure of scenes, which I had not grasped and how to make something play better.

KW: . . . San Antonio, yes.

MCC: What's Karon Tillman doing?

KW: I wish I knew. We haven't been able to track him down.

MCC: That's what I wondered. The last time I saw him was at Fort Logan the day he went in the Army. Oh, I'd forgotten that play I wrote for the troops, that's right.

KW: Yes, I noticed that.

MCC: A melodrama.

KW: Did you or different people in the Federal Theatre company keep up with news of the other Federal Theatre units around the country?

MCC: I don't remember that we did.

KW: Did you know there were other units?

MCC: Oh, yes, we read the newspapers.

KW: Same people didn't know that, especially in New York. They were not too aware of what else was out there in the country.

MCC: Oh, yes, we knew that.

Mr. C: Well, they did your Me Third in San Francisco.

MCC: Yes, I told Karen about that, and of course there were newspaper articles about Sinclair Lewis's play. Well, that opened the same night in Federal Theatres all over the country.

KW: That's right, yes.

MCC: Oh, yes, we knew about other projects. I don't recall just how much publicity because naturally I was interested in myself.

KW: There was for a while a Federal Theatre magazine that you may have seen, I don't know.

MCC; I don't remember that at all.

KW: Actually I think Andy said that he didn't see an issue of it until he learned about it later. But they were supposed to be distributed around the country. In fact, I have a little one-page article on the Denver Project. It ran for two years, this magazine. They just had little feature articles on different units and that kind of thing

MCC: I don't. I just don't remember ever seeing this.

KW: If Andy didn't then perhaps it just didn't get distributed here as much.

MCC: Maybe not.

KW: I don't know why.

MCC: But we had in the Me Third, we had also in the cast, to get back to that, I remember now the name Olga Cosgrove, who was one of those involved in the founding of Central City. And she was a woman who had been a member of the Junior League, interested in the theatre, and she played one of the parts. So of course her friends came to see it. I don't think she was a member of the company, regular company. But she played local productions around here, and she was in my play, too.

KW: After Me Third then it was about, I guess, another year and a half until this Shaw play that you were in. Did you keep in contact with the Federal Theatre during that time?

MCC: Oh, I kept in contact with them and I went to see the plays, but I had decided after my flop on Broadway, at the urging of my husband who said, "Sit down and write another play," I did that. And that occupied my time. Then of course I had a young baby. I had two older children and this baby was about six months old when I came back from my flop in New York. So I had to care for him and then write Sorority House after I'd put him to bed and go to the others. And that was done locally and then as I told you, I sold it to the films.

104[7] Did you find there was any kind of liability to be associated with the Federal Theatre or to have had a show with the Federal Theatre, once you had these other dealings?

MCC: Not in any way whatsoever.

KW: Some people have told us that, that for a while they wouldn't put it on their resumes or they wouldn't admit to it, to any connection later, during the forties say or the fifties.

MCC: I can't imagine anything like that and I never knew anybody who expressed those sentiments. They would have done more plays around here but--I'm sure they would have. They would have given anybody a chance who would have taken it. There were not many people interested in playwriting, at least they weren't then. It's a very difficult form.

KW: Andy mentioned that, I think he taught some playwriting classes at Chappell House or something.

MCC: He did and he was excellent and many people went there and listened to him talk about playwriting. They were enthusiastic about it. But I don't recall that he had scripts submitted. Oh, I remember one script he had submitted and the whole thing was printed on one page, and that was--do you remember that one? Some actors sat on a bench and sang "Columbia the Gem of the Ocean." That was the extent of the play. Oh, he and his wife wrote a children's play which they did there.

EN: That's right. That was done elsewhere too, I think. That was another one that traveled,

MX: Yes, I remember that and his wife acted in that. But I never thought of it as anything to be ashamed of and in all the newspaper reviews they all mentioned that this play started at the Federal Theatre.

KW: I think that--well, some people felt ashamed about being on relief, the ones Who were, you know, on relief. And then later on when it became--after the investigation, it became sort of synonymous with Communism in the minds of some people that--you know, I'm talking about the fifties now. But there were people who said during the forties and fifties they would not admit to having been on it and it's only been fairly recently that they have.

MCC: I don't know. You confuse me somewhat. The Federal Theatre Project didn't

extend into the forties, did it?

KW: No, no, it didn't, but its reputation did because the investigation which took place in 1938 and 1939, which is what closed it, that was by the Dies Committee.

MCC: Did that close the Federal Theatre?

KW: Yes.

MCC: That's when they got into those propaganda plays.

KW: That's what I was going to ask you. A lot of people outside New York were not particularly aware of the investigation because they really centered on New York's productions and its way of doing things.

MCC: I was not aware of it.

KW: Well, they did investigate the Federal Theatre. It was a very haphazard job… I read the testimony and more or less Federal Theatre became a scapegoat because the Music Project and the Writers' Project and the Art Project all were allowed to continue on into the war years.

MCC; Well now maybe what was going on in New York later I don't know about.

KW: I don't know that it was that much more.

MCC: Wasn't it after they got into the Living Newspaper?

KW: Well, that was part of the ammunition of the investigating committee.

MCC: Well, that was the thing that stirred it up.

KW: Yes, they noticed it. But at the same time Everett Dirkson was saying, "Look at these play titles, you know, Up In Mabel's Room. Terrible!" I mean, that was really--

MCC: Well, that's an old play.

KW: I know but nobody was reading the plays. He was just looking at the titles. I mean, it was really kind of a scapegoat situation, I think.

MCC: He should come back and look at them now.

KW: Yes. (Laugh) But I think it's interesting that it wouldn't have been that closely followed out here, this investigation.

MCC: We never even heard of it. Well, I don't know, it just never came up.

KW: *Was* there any discussion of touring shows out of Denver to Estes Park or other places from the Federal Theatre, do you know?

MCC: No. I don't believe they did that.

KW: No, I don't think they did but I didn't know if they'd considered it at all.

MCC: Not to my knowledge. They produced a show, they ran it as long as they could run it and they were always in rehearsal with another one. It was like a stock company.

KW: Yes, it seemed to be. I'll show you, I have a schedule of the productions and it really is one right after the other.

MCC: Yes, they worked very, very hard. Of course Andy Slane worked around the clock with those shows.

KW: He mentioned something very interesting that I didn't know about <u>It Can't Happen Here</u>. He says when he got the script he really thought it was terrible and he did quite a bit of rewriting on it, which I wasn't aware of. I don't know if we have a script that reflects his changes.

MCC: I wasn't aware that he did that but he could have.

KW: You did see that show?

MCC; Yes.

KW: How did you think it was?

MCC: I thought it was interesting and thought-provoking. It's a long time ago. I don't remember much else about it.

KW: How did the audience seem to react? It was more kind of a social issue.

MCC: Lukewarm. Yes, it was lukewarm.

KW: Do any particular people from the cast or the crew or anything stand out in your mind?

MCC: Yes, Beulah Quackenbush. She was excellent, just excellent. I don't think she ever went on with it or did anything with it, but she had tremendous vitality and she was very good.

KW: I think that Andy Slane said that everyone he knew of, that he had kept up with, the actors anyway, had died. And the only one he knew who hadn't been Earl Cooper. I don't know how exhaustive a list he had in his mind.

MCC: I think he would know that. Earl Cooper, yes, he played a young leading man, I think.

KW: I have a copy of the program for that I'll show you. Maybe that'll bring back some others. Do you know what any of them did say right after the Federal Theatre? I mean in the forties?

MCC; Well, they kept on, you see. Now by the time I wrote Sorority House I became involved in trying to get my plays done on Broadway or in films. And then Andy left town and went to San Francisco. I didn't keep up with it, you know.

KW; Would there have been jobs for these people as actors or technicians, stage-hands, that kind of thing once the war started, in Denver?

MCC: You mean World War II?

KW: Yes. Theatre jobs.

MCC: Oh, no.

KW: I would think they would have had to go into something else.

MCC: No because by that time, you see, the "talkies" were in full swing and theatres began closing and they were closing during the thirties. This was not related so much to the Depression as to the hold the talkies got on people when they

could go down--it was so much cheaper. It was fascinating with the big stage shows when they had big stars coming through for these big stage shows. And the Denim Theatre, which had been a successful stock house in the mid-twenties and so forth, began to no longer play stock. I think they started to go out in the early thirties and the vaudeville houses. Well, the Orpheum continued for a while. It's my memory that one after another had closed due to the talkies. So I don't believe that--I think those people went into other kinds of jobs.

KW: Many people did who later picked up theatre, but during the forties then they were--or during the war anyway--they stopped.

MCC: Yes.

KW: I know that's true. Do you remember anything about either or both The Adding Machine and a play called Censored?

MCC: Oh, I remember The Adding Machine. I found that fascinating. I enjoyed that and that had a good run there. Now the other one you mentioned I don't remember.

KW; Censored. I don't know exactly when they were, but Andy mentions both of them as having trouble from, he says "the powers that be." I don't know who that would mean.

MCC: Now I don't know either.

KW: But he said that as far as keeping them running, they had trouble.

MCC: *No.* Andy would know that better than I would.

KW: It's just curious that in quite a number of cities there were always one or two plays that bothered someone somewhere along the way and the Federal Theatre would get the word to cut it. It's very interesting to see which ones, you know, would affect someone in that way.

I may have asked you this in relation to Devil's Disciple. Had you done

any acting before this small part in that? Or had you--

MCC: No, I hadn't.

KW: But you had no trepidation about doing it?

MCC: Well, it was such--all you did was get up there and stand and I think say one word. It was dull. As a matter of fact, I found it dull. There wasn't enough to do. I didn't have enough of a part. Oh, many years afterwards, Guthrie McClintic wanted me to play the role of the mother on Broadway in my play, Bernadine. And while I would have liked to have done that, I realized wisely that it was too late for me, that I should have, if I had been intending to act, I should have been like Clifford Odets and some of those people and really gotten some acting experience. But I just didn't.

KW: Well, you were quite busy otherwise.

MCC: Yes, with a family and so forth. Then I became--I don't know if you're interested in hearing this or not, but I've been embarked on a crusade for the last 20 years at least for children's theatre.

KW: Oh, I didn't know that.

MCC: Oh, yes. I went to England in 1945. I went there to see about the production of Harvey, and I had an opportunity to see the way the British entertain their children in the British pantomimes which they do after Christmas They do them in London and then they tour them, and it's a tradition in Britain and has been for some time that the top performers will play for minimum because of this tradition, to entertain children. And this all bowled me over, and I became so anxious to do something to push this in this country for the

children and for the theatre. It's my belief that that's the reason Britain has such a healthy theatre today with fine acting--

KW: That's a good point.

MCC: --and fine scripts because they learn to love the theatre when they're children because they see excellent theatre while our children's theatre attempts in this country aren't. I made a study of it; I went all over. I saw what they're offering children and with the exception of a story theatre done by a man a few years ago, I've seen nothing except productions that would turn them off, being put on by people who don't understand the theatre, who know nothing about it and well-intentioned people and people who are fond of children but who know nothing about the theatre.

KW: It's not the same, no.

MCC: So I have--

KW: Did you write up this study somewhere?

MCC: Oh, I wrote the plays.

KW: Oh, I see.

MCC: I decided that I had to do this, I had to use my professional experience and write plays for children, you know, with my professional experience, that as a starting point of scripts, you have to start with the scripts. So of course the first thing I did was Mrs. McThing, which was a big Broadway success. Then I wrote two more which have not been produced. The Wicked Pigeon Ladies in the Garden is a musical I wrote with a gifted young composer. We haven't been able to get them done.

KW: What's the name of that one?

MCC: The Wicked Pigeon Ladies in the Garden. I first wrote it as a book to see if it would interest children and it did. It was very successful as a book and

I made a musical out of it with a young man named Keith Avedon, who is a very gifted composer. And then I wrote a full-length straight children's play called Mickey which some people in New York are going to do, they tell me. But they couldn't get--this is where the Federal Government should provide some funding.

KW: For children's theatre?

MCC: Oh, and with professional actors and tour these shows the way they do in England, with good performers, top performers. The British pantomimes, they're called that; they're not pantomimes. They have music and dancing. They're based on the old fairy tales for the most part. Vaudeville acts, putting, you know, comic acts with top men of the caliber say of Bob Hope and Danny Kaye in this country. And of course they get great audiences. This to me is the saddest thing in our American theatre that this is not done.

KW: Have you met with any success or--

MCC: I've met with no success. I've talked about it and before me Katharine Cornell, the actress, she talked about it, she worked, talked, pleaded with people. And I told Roger Stevens how I felt about it some years ago when he was out here at Central City. And no one denies but what the premise is true that you have to inculcate a love of theatre early in the children and the young people. And this is how they learn the three-dimensional aspect of the theatre away from the two-dimensional film. I have talked about it until I have become a bore on the subject. Nobody listens.

KW; What's the answer generally that you get profit--

MCC: Well, yes, and yet they get money to fund other groups.

KW: Yes, I was going to ask if you had approached anyone or had any contact with like the National Endowment for the Arts or Humanities.

MCC: Well, I gave up; I got discouraged. I had felt that I had done my part and that you couldn't rely on conversation, which so many people in the theatre do. That is, on the periphery of the theatre they talk. They gather and they confer and they talk. The actual terribly heart-grinding work of turning out a script for children and it is the most difficult kind of theatre to write, is just too hard. And of course in the theatre you gamble, a writer. You're not subsidized. You write and you gamble. You write on speculation. So I thought well, I wouldn't talk, I would produce the scripts and I have these three. And I'm not interested in the money; I don't care anything about that. It's a crime to--

KW: There are not really any forums for children's theatre as such.

MCC: No. This one man with Story Theatre, he was good, Paul Sills. He has done the only--

KW: Where is he located?

MCC: I don't know where he is now. They did do Story Theatre on Broadway for a while and then they did it on the Coast for a while. And out of it came some talented performers like Valerie Harper, for instance. That was her first thing but you can't get--how can you start a tradition? You have to do it with a few courageous people, dedicated people, who will say, "I don't care about the profit. I want to do it because it should be done." Had Katharine Cornell lived and if she could have interested a few more people, and then with the scripts. They always say, "Well, where are your scripts?" So I went into exile and produced the scripts. I have them anyway, so I've done--

KW: You've done your part.

MCC: Well, my voice has not been able to reach them, no matter which democratic party is in power, I mean which party, Democratic or Republican. And of course I have watched, as I'm sure you must have too, from foundations, the big foundations. They've given away millions of dollars to children's theatre and to whom have they given it? Do you want this on your tape?

KW: Sure.

MCC: They have given them to enthusiastic little groups with an ambitious core of inexperienced actors who want to do children's theatre, use children's theatre to get ahead themselves. And this money has provided jobs for incompetents.

KW: And then I think you're right, a lot of people would use it as a stepping-stone and to go--

MCC: And the scripts are nothing. I've seen them. They're nauseating. You watch the children squirm in their seats.

KW: How does the situation compare to puppet and marionette theatres; do you know? Have you had much contact with them?

MCC: I don't know. Now I think they're wonderful entertainment for children. There's one woman in Denver who's very good who puts on half an hour show with puppets, Mary Ellen Rowe. She's excellent; the children are fascinated with her. That's half an hour.

KW: Yes, it is different.

MCC: You've got to offer them a full entertainment and you have to have professional actors-. You have to copy England, who has succeeded so with it. And I think that's one of the reasons they have say 32 theatres that travel.

KW: I think that's really a good point.

MCC: And the respect for the arts, aside from the knowledge of it. Well, now,

they've revived Peter Pan. They're doing that now with professional actors. But one's not enough. You need a repertory company and you need a folio of plays, and this is sad. We shouldn't have gotten started with that because I do get on the soapbox.

KW: I don't blame you though. Let me ask you briefly about Harvey. When did you start working on it and how long that took. I know it was produced in 1944?

MCC: It took a couple of years. I'd given up all hopes of ever getting back to Broadway, but I was just stirred by the war situation and I decided I'd like to write a comedy that would make people laugh, people who lost their sons and others in the war. There was a woman across the street from me who had lost her only son. So I began to think what could I write that would make her laugh again So I discarded idea after idea. One morning I woke up and saw a big white rabbit walking across the room of a sanitarium and I knew that was it and I sat down to write it. And then I took it to Pemberton and Perry. I had many letters from people afterwards who lost sons in the war or brothers, telling me how the play had entertained them. So I knew I had carried a message to Garcia, as we used to say.

KW: Did it change much from a Broadway production into film? Sometimes they do and sometimes they don't.

MCC: Oh, yes.

KW: I know the movie. Unfortunately, I don't--

MCC: I worked on the movie. It was never as good a movie as it was a stage play. It couldn't be. A play written for the stage is written for the stage. They seldom make a good film. And I don't think that--they tried, of course, but it needs the other dimension on the stage.

KW: What was that experience like working with film people?

MCC: I wasn't out there a lot. I did work on the script, but I didn't stay around for the show.

KW: What kind of changes generally did they require?

MCC: Well, of course, it was a vehicle for Jimmy Stewart and he was, as he says now, he was too young for the part then. They couldn't do anything I didn't approve of, and they didn't really require any changes in it. We stuck to the script, but of course that wonderful cross with the rabbit and the second act curtain when the doors opened, how could you do that for the screen? A film showing a door opening is flat, but when he crosses on the stage and those doors open why there's a hush in the house, then a tremendous burst of laughter. You can't get that effect in films.

I taught some playwriting classes at DU a few years ago, about 10 or 11 years ago. I used to ask the students not to go to the movies if they were trying to write a play or to watch television. You get your mind off into an altogether psychological--

KW: But did you encourage them to see plays?

MCC: Oh, of course.

KW: Well, there are some people-maybe it's not so true of playwriting, but I've heard people say let's say when they're writing songs, they don't want to listen to any other music, you know.

MCC: True.

KW: I didn't know if it would be the same with plays.

MCC: Oh, I see what you're getting at. Well, no, I encourage them to go to the theatre but as a matter of fact when I'm writing a play I don't go to the theatre. But I had to encourage these students because only one or two had

ever seen a live show. They'd seen art films, they'd seen all the French art films. But most of the class had never been to a living theatre, which was another thing that increased my crusade for children's theatre. How could they?

KW: Sure. I can see why.

MCC: You know nothing had been offered to them, nothing that really made them interested.

KW: Let me ask you this: why do you think there aren't very many women playwrights or at least definitely weren't during the twenties and thirties?

MCC: Well, I once had a discussion about that with George S. Kaufman. He and I did a play together, one of my heavy plays. It was not a success, but I did enjoy the conversations I had with him and he told me, he said, "Your sense of structure in playwriting is good. I don't find that in many women. They don't seem to have a sense of structure." And of course playwriting is like, it's w-r-i-g-h-t building. It's like architecture or bridge building in the sense of stresses and strains, and the writing is secondary, w-r-i-t-e, write. He said that he thought it was because they—and he wondered how I'd gotten it. He said, "Did you study a lot of mathematics in college?" I said, "I couldn't even pass geometry."

KW: That's interesting.

MCC: But I did have a--and I wonder if that may be it. I'm not sure.

KW: I don't know. It seems as if--I can't believe many men playwrights have had

MCC: . . . Barrett, probably the best of the women playwrights.

KW: Lillian Hellman?

MCC: Yes.

KW: Yes, and she from that period is also a distinctive figure.

MCC: That's true.

KW: But on Federal Theatre there were women directors, there were women administrators, especially there were a number of children's units around the country with women directors. And there was a Playwriting Bureau in New York that encouraged playwrights. Very little came from women and I don't know whether--maybe it was sort of an offshoot of this idea you're talking about, the children's theatre. Maybe even less women had been exposed to theatre than men.

MCC: True, it might be. You see, I think women are more attracted to the acting. Now Ruth Gordon has a sense of structure. She wrote a couple of good plays. Of course she'd had a lot of acting experience herself. I think it must be that maybe--I'm only guessing here--you have to become impersonal and learn to slash the dialogue you've fallen in love with for the sake of the rafters in the structure. My husband always said in the newspaper business that women were too personal. I'm only guessing about this. I'm sure somebody could be very profound about it. But it is very, very hard and maybe it's the--oh, we can't say women are not patient.

KW: No.

MCC: Look at the novels they've written.

KW: That's right.

MCC: Oh, I'll have to leave it. Playwriting requires broad, almost a service point of view. And I'll just have to say that I can only guess.

KW: Yes. I think that's all any of us can do really. There'd be as many answers as there are people who have tried.

MCC: True. I was trying to think of England. Daphne du Maurier. They have written individual plays of merit. I don't think any woman has become

in any country a top-flight dramatist say, like O'Neill or--I can't think of any.

KW: I can't either.

MCC: I'm surprised it hasn't come out of the Irish theatre. They're so devoted to the drama over there.

KW: Well, is there anything else that I've neglected to ask you?

MCC: It seems to me you've covered the ground thoroughly.

KW: I do want to know if, let's see, Andy mentioned that you might have a stage model unit built by Bill Worley.

MCC: I do, I have it. It's upstairs.

KW: He said if that was true--he wasn't sure. He thought you had it but he said if that's true, that was the only physical piece of the Denver Federal Theatre left because he said the rest was destroyed on someone's orders at the close of the project.

MCC: I have it. Do you want to see it?

KW: Oh, I'd love to see it.

END OF INTERVIEW