

KW:

Today is October 24th, 1977. And this is Karen Wickre talking with Lenore Kingston at the Pacific Pioneer Broadcast Archives in Hollywood, California.... Um, why don't you tell me first about your early theater experience or your training and stuff before the Federal Theatre?

LK:

I had grown up in Los Angeles. I had been in Vaudeville as a child singing and dancing in the Vaudeville houses up and down California. However, I went to public school, but we usually worked weekends. I did that. And, um, I dropped out of the Vaudeville when Vaudeville died and I went to school and I was going to the Los Angeles city college, which had a magnificent drama department from which many, many people came, who have made it very, very well in the business. And we had there sort of a stock company there. We did a play a week in a nice little theater and Harold Tournay was the head of the department assisted by Jerry, Jerry Blunt. And it was very, very good. Uh, I had planned to become a drama teacher in a high school. That was my idea of being something very exciting, but I had gotten a D in physics. oh!, oh!. And UCLA wouldn't take me.

LK:

So I had to go over to the Chapman College to take endocrinology, anything in science. So I could get in UCLA when, uh, it happened that universal pictures was having a talent search and Mr. Tournay was going to be in charge of that, um, particular, um, summer out at universal in San Fernando Valley. And I, I kept begging him to take me out to meet the casting director. And he said, Oh no, we want the. They only want pretty pretty people. And I was, I would consider myself a character actress comedian. So, um, eventually he decided he would take me out and let me meet the casting director. The casting director was sort of a tough old bird as they were. And he looked at me across the room and he says, they tell me, you can act, can you? And I said, Oh yes, sir.

So, uh, they put me in this, um, summer school and there were about 20 of us there and we would rehearse boy, girl scenes. And every Friday night we would do a show for all the producers and directors on the lot. And they would pick the pairs they want the actors they wanted and let the others go. And I was kept on the entire, um, the entire summer and four of us received contracts. And I was one of them. Now, before you jumped to the conclusion that, um, this was absolutely marvelous, you might, I might point out to you that they let Alan Ladd go and they let Tyrone Power go...

But anyway, I had a contract at universal for a year and I did odds and ends and then came, um, the great day when I was given a wonderful part in a Frank Baraze picture, like the girl next door, great character. And everyone said to me, you weren't going to do that for the stock company player salary, you're getting, are you? And I said, why not? I said, Oh, with a part like that, you should be better get an agent. So I, um, looked in the phone book under agents. I didn't realize it, when you had a contract, a contract at a studio stock player that you had to run the, the lot [not sure what she is saying] and you could go around and make friends with all the directors. And I just stayed home and until they called me, Oh, was that dumb? Uh, so I looked in the yellow pages under agents, and I saw an agent who had been a booking agent when I was a child.

LK:

And I called up and said, I have a party [inaudible] film. Would you like to be my agent? Oh, this man would be my agent. Yeah. But two days later, uh, the people, the casting office called me and said, um,

we're sorry, but you're not going to play that part. The producer didn't realize how important the part was. So he's bringing someone out from New York with a name. My heart was broken. That's too bad. Do you know who will replace you? I think it was Muriel Kirkland who is of course, very good. I think that's who it was, but I can't really remember. Anyway, meanwhile, uh, I don't remember how I got into the Federal Theatre, but somehow rather, um, I was not eligible because I was not in the proper financial situation you were supposed to be in, but apparently they had a method of, they could have a certain percentage of their casts, uh, brought in from the outside rather than the regular people.

LK:

And they were short on engineers. [not sure what she is saying here] So I was called to ask if I would be interested in going to San Bernardino and a stock company. And indeed I would, the opportunity to be in a stock company was very nice. So I went out there and, um, for many, many months, and I cannot remember how long, but apparently according to your notes here, it was 36. First. I started in the summer of 36. It looks like to at least December of 36, so that'd be 67 months or so. And I went out there and I lived I made friends with Hazel Miller who had been known on Broadway as Kay Miller. Um, Kay. And I roomed together and I grew to be so fond of her. She was a woman of tremendous experience in the theater. In fact, in, she had been very active in Broadway. She was one of the white rats of equity, you know, when they first started that she had been, uh, popular and she knew and had worked a great deal on Broadway. She was the original Tondelayo in white cargo. And I...

KW:

How did she end up at San Bernardino? Riverside, do you now?

LK:

I have no idea. I never did figure out what was she had moved out here and I don't, I think, Oh, I know she was a friend of some lady named Kingsley who worked out here in the casting department. I believe. I just remember the name Kingsley. I could be wrong, but a very lovely lady. She had red hair, as I remember, she was the one who selected me. I think that's how Kay somehow knew about the Federal Theatre, but she was a very fine addition to the stock company because she was a good character actress and could play old, um, old ladies, very, very well. She was thorough professional out there. Um, we did the usual routine of playing one play for a week. I think sometimes we moved between San Bernardino and Riverside, but we played one play each week. We were rehearsing another and studying a third. So it was the, the old fashioned stock routine. Um, all the people in the company, uh, seemed to have had good experience. I don't think they were all a Broadway, uh, experience.

KW:

You think they had been mostly brought from Los Angeles though?

LK:

Perhaps? I think so. I think they had all lived in this area or they wouldn't have been eligible for them.

KW:

I wonder whose idea it was to develop a stock company there.

LK:

I wish I knew. Yeah, I don't know, but it filled a great need out there at that particular time in San Bernardino and Riverside, uh, live theater was a thrill. And I think the plays were well attended as I recall and very well-received it was a non-sophisticated audience because San Bernardino is it, was it 70 miles? No, it isn't rural. It's a small city, but that was 70 miles East of Los Angeles. So it was entirely separate from Los Angeles. And we had these various directors. I am reminded here as I looked at these programs, um, Peg O' My Heart, of course. I remember because I believe the director, Kenneth McDonald's selected that play for me because I had read here and I certainly enjoyed that very much. And he was a very, very pleasant director in this other man. Um, what is quite [inaudible] a bit, uh, Jack Lee. Jack Lee directed now he was the father of Barbara Lee, who was in some of the shows. She was a very distinguished leading lady type and Cod [not sure about the first name] Miller was another, I see he did the haunted house as I look at the names in the company. I wish I could remember better, but I remember Arthur Latino as a very nice leading man type, very pleasant man. And, um, Phil Daikan, he also played leads Uh, he had had, I believe Broadway experience. Some of the other people seem to have come from similar stock companies and things of this nature.

KW:

So they were used to that kind of schedule. Oh yes. Did you have any trouble adapting to it or...

LK:

Oh, no. None at all. Because having been in Rodale [not sure what she is saying here] as a child, I was accustomed to discipline. And when I was at LA junior college, we had in effect the similar stock company and Mr. Turney had been a hard task last year. Uh, so I was, um, and I had also done radio. Let's see. So I was pretty well indoctrinated into fitting into this kind of...

KW:

Do you know if, um, you came at the beginning of this unit in San Bernardino or was it already going?

LK:

I have the feeling it had not been going too long as I recall.

KW:

And did it last after you left? I don't know. I haven't really researched the unit itself. I do not.

LK:

No, no, but it was a very, um, pleasant experience for me. I learned a lot from doing it and as I said, it filled a very great need in that community because live theater there, it was. So if they wanted to keep actors working and they wanted to keep theater alive, they did a good job.

KW:

And when you were out there, you more or less stayed out there, you didn't do any kind of commuting or anything.

LK:

I had a car. Oh. A Model A Ford. And I would drive home weekends. Now we had no freeway then. So after the last show on Friday night, Kay, who would come in also with me, Hazel Miller and I would drive

in, sometimes we'd drive Phil in. He had friends in Hollywood and we'd drive in and we would have to go back on Sunday afternoon, but my folks lived here. So I liked to come home, but we had a nice apartment there and I lived there and enjoyed it.

KW:

They are more or less stayed there. Now, the next credit that you have is the famous Johnny Johnny, Johnny Johnson, nearly six months later.

LK:

Yes, I was called in apparently to, as I remember I was called in to play this part in Johnny Johnson. It was really the female lead. It was the ancient nucleus [not sure what she says her]. Um, Brian Morgan was Johnny Johnson. And as you know, it's had a huge cast and it was musical and I was supposed to sing one song in this. And I think I must have told them that, although I had some, um, comedy numbers in vaudeville, I was not a proper singer, but they had everything. They had a singing teacher. Very nice lady who and I, it seems to me, we must've rehearsed this thing three months or we worked on it. Must've been you and I had all these singing lessons. I think finally on the dress rehearsal they decided I should talk the number with the music playing in the background because I was very unhappy trying to sing, but we rehearsed and we rehearsed more or less, um, in, in groups somehow I remember a large waiting hall where all of the actors had to sit and wait day after day after day until they were needed.

LK:

And there was the usual amount of complaining that any waiting actors make, you know what George C. Scott said about movie actors? No. They are paid to sit around and wait. Well, it was a great deal of sitting around and waiting the, um, uh, Ms. Farmer, who was one of the directors, um, seemed to be very interested in the method type of acting. And she sent me down to the Los Angeles public library to research everything I could find about world war one and Mary Pickford, because she said that the role I played was typical of a girl who would have idolized Mary Pickford. So I spent a great deal of time at the library and looking through, uh, through old, um, magazines and newspapers. I, I didn't quite enjoy that sort of thing. All I wanted to do was rehearsed. So we could do the show properly when the time came.

KW:

And all these, these other classes and things were [inaudible] mean, they were cutting into the rehearsal time.

LK:

I don't really know what their arrangement was. I'm sure I did this when I wasn't needed, because as you see, the cast was so large and there were so many scenes yeah. That it required a lot of actors to be sitting around waiting or doing something else. There was a great deal of fitting going on. They had their own wardrobe designers. And I remember in this picture here, all of these costumes, I can remember many, many fittings for them. They went to great effort because they had the time and the people to do it. Um, we seem to have had time for everything, but actually rehearsing the show mechanically, if you know what I mean, the movement and the, uh, uh, most of us felt that we wished that the, there had been more emphasis on the nuts and bolts of getting a show on the air. I mean, I, I'm a radio and television performer, I say on the air, uh, on the, on the boards, because this was in the big Mayan theater downtown, which was a beautiful theater and huge. And, um, it seemed to me that, uh, we

could have used a, um, a general or something to get this show on and all the people on the board, and yes. Do you remember?

KW:

Um, she was well-known for Ms. Farmer was well-known for these, uh, improvisation. Oh, yes, we did a lot of that. And all the animal parts that everybody, people have mentioned that to us as being a real hallmark of her style, that you would learn these animals.

LK:

Well, I don't remember the animals, but I remember we never rehearsed the lines themselves very much. We rehearsed something else, like the lines, like pretend that you're in this situation and then work out your own improvisation. Well, this is just fine if you didn't have to get a show on, but our reaction, most of the actors felt that we were not prepared in the actual lines and the scenes themselves as written. Yeah. Um, for a show of this nature, which, uh, was so complicated, I think most of us would have preferred to have had them rehearsal. However, that's, um, a minor matter. It was very interesting experience. We played it a long time, as I recall, around a long time, [inaudible] it seems to me it went a long long time.

KW:

So, audience reaction was very good.

LK:

It was a play that, um, you know, what it's about, it was about the soldier and who, um, I think he didn't want to fight. He didn't want to fight. And he was trying to understand, and they would have these stylized scenes of all of the generals of the nations and the leaders of the nations. And it was sort of a, a political discussion more or less, but it wasn't musical. And, um...

KW:

Do you consider it, what do you think it was controversial at that time?

LK:

I think it might have been, um, frankly I don't remember too well. I'd like to get it out and read it again. A long run though. Yes. I don't know whether they run, it would have run if no one came or not. Maybe that was the plan, but, uh, nevertheless, um, it was very interesting and there were a lot of pleasant, interesting old actors in it. I remember talking to a lot of the old actors in this large waiting room and hearing tales of the theater. They came in all shapes and sizes and experiences.

KW:

How, uh, how do you think they felt about being on the Federal Theatre? Do you think they had problems with it?

LK:

Uh, most actors have enormous pride and, uh, actors always, if you get with them will tell you what they did before. And this was just something, they were temporarily doing jobs that's right. I think the national theater could be very successful if it had, um, had stature, then everyone would want to be in

it. Didn't have this relief. The relief tinge [inaudible] was very painful to many people. And I think many, uh, would have preferred, well, in fact, I know of a couple who had used their original names rather than their stage names, because they did not want, um, people to read that they were working in the Federal Theatre. Again, pride. Yeah. But looking back on it now that was foolish because everyone was short of funds in those days.

KW:

Yeah, exactly. Oh, yes. Yeah. Do you remember, um, any contact with any of the higher ups in the LA project?

LK:

Oh, I'm sorry. I was way down. I was just an actor.

KW:

Um, what was I going to ask you about? Were you in contact with, um, or did you know of, uh, Ms. Farmers, special experimental unit, members of which I think she used in this Johnny Johnson production, um, all Kenny Patterson, Hollis Malone, uh, Betty Arden, Betty... Earl Fallen.

LK:

No, I don't think I did.

KW:

It was apparently a group that was supposed to be doing experimental plays and somehow got folded into this production because it was so large and they didn't really do any, but one official production as, as a separate group that I know of. But I just wondered because it was an experimental group.

LK:

No, all I remember is that most of the actors that I spoke with or that I knew well on this production, uh, none of them was happy, were and I was happy about the, um, method, the method system. Not that they dislike the method system, they just didn't feel it was suited to this particular production.

KW:

How was she, uh, as a director, besides this method business, do you think she didn't have the, whatever it takes to get this many people going? I mean, you said you thought it needed a general. Was she not dynamic enough or

LK:

I'm trying to remember Jerry Corey, the other. You know, I'm sorry I can't remember him. Uh, I remember her, I guess she had a personality. I would remember. Um, I wish I could really answer that correctly. I just can't remember. I just had this overall feeling as I remember that we, we just weren't ready when it got down to the dress rehearsal and we'd been at it for three months, but apparently

KW:

Yeah. The audiences reacted favorably enough to keep it going for a while. Is that right?, I think so. Maybe over time, things got ironed out during the actual play.

LK:

It finally worked when it went, finally got on the air. Here I go again on the air at when it finally got going, because there were a great many experienced performers in the, and I don't mean to, um, to take away from her too much. It's just that I disagreed with the system. And then I think that that type of, um, preparation would be fine for a different type of play.

KW:

Now you said that, um, what you went to Chicago right shortly after the production, right afterwards Did you hear anything about the Los Angeles unit after that, after you were gone?

LK:

I'm sorry. No, I didn't come back again until 1947 and I lost, I used to exchange Christmas cards with Art, maternal and Phil daikon. [not sure about the names] And of course I stayed in close touch with Kane Miller [not sure about the name] he's on there, but, uh, I lost track entirely. I'm sorry to say.

KW:

I wish I could help you. Well, it ended not too much longer after that ended. And now, um, um, about a year later, I guess in 38, earlier than the other projects, because they brought in a political appointee as the administrator and he fired everybody and that was the end. Oh, so you didn't miss much? NO. In that sense, um, I know you already told me a lot of this over lunch, but do you want to just fill in briefly what you did when you did leave Los Angeles? What happened to you

LK:

After. I went to Chicago in 1937, I was given a contract at NBC. I was in serials like Don Winslow, Winslow, the Navy, and my..., the affairs of Anthony and untold shows at Chicago NBC for three years until I was married. I went to New York and I continued various radio programs there. I was on against the storm, which was a lovely show, uh, serial, but also in 1941, I started working in television at NBC New York. And I did interview programs on a civilian defense, uh, format. And I did those for, until they went off the air after Pearl Harbor and shortly thereafter, because NBC ceased its um, television programming. At that time, they devoted all of their television facilities to the training of air raid wardens in New York city. And the 3000 sets that were currently in use, many of them were sort of begged and borrowed for the various police precinct houses. And we put on a demonstration of how to be an air raid warden seven times a day for seven weeks. And these poor raid wardens had to go and watch this thing in the various precinct houses, but it actually served an instructional purpose.

KW:

Were air raid wardens civilians?

LK:

Oh yeah, sure. You got an arm band and a hat. You see the, uh, the war was a very, um, definite thing to us. In fact, we, um, managed to rent a beautiful penthouse apartment on the top of a building in New York city. Just because most people were afraid to live that high in case of a bombing. Oh yes. But, uh, I left and I was away from New York. Would you stop it for a minute?

KW:

You were in New York.

LK:

Oh yes, yes. Then I was away during the war. I came back at the end of 45, 46. I did more television there. I did the first shopping programs on television or shopping. I would go up and down fifth Avenue and select the most interesting things from the various shops and show them on television and the advertising manager of the big department stores and so forth were very interested in seeing how, how products would look on television. Yeah, so that was very interesting. I returned to Hollywood in 47 and then continued in radio. And then I did my own television shows out here, daytime programs for several years. What kind of shows? Well, I did, um, a want ad show called the classified column where I had 17 people every day on my program doing their own personal one ads, looking for jobs, selling homemade beds, pronounced, [not sure what she says] lost dogs and cats, giving away kittens, looking for jobs and so forth. And I did a mailbag of household tricks for a long time. How do you know how to do a household trick? And, uh, meanwhile, I worked in television films.

LK:

I did, um, I was three years as Mrs. Weeks on ABC Television's General Hospital program. I did the one ads then again later for, uh, seven years, I did 11,001 minute radio spots of one ads where I would for the calf [not sure what she is saying] WB radio at the time, it was the, the number one station in the nation out here before it went all news. And I did all that from home in my bathrobe because I had all, a lot of recording equipment at home and I would record the people over the telephone and then edit it and add my own questions and make these one minute spots, which, uh, were broadcast 11, as I said, 11,000 times. And I taught at the Pasadena Playhouse. I taught, I taught television production over there and let's see what else. And then I did great many commercials. I was Helen Heart for Raleigh cigarettes.

LK:

Forgive me. Uh, that's the one where you saved the coupons that was noted by med magazine as one of the most obnoxious commercials of the year. Actually I made 16 commercials for them and they ran them for four years, uh, and many other commercials lately. Now that I'm, uh, there aren't so many parts for aging redheads, uh, but I am now vice president of the Pacific pioneer broadcasters. I, my hobby is amateur radio. I specialize in running what we call phone patches for service men overseas for the army. I did 43,000 phone calls during Vietnam and Thailand for a service man. So they could talk to their families back home through my amateur radio station for army Mars. And I am a volunteer at recording for the blind incorporated and happily married.

KW:

That's a great wrap up for, uh, usually at this point I would say, well now, uh, how did, how do you think that Federal Theatre, you know, got you into all this, but in your case, you were already doing things before we can't entirely credit Federal Theatre for your, uh, development.

LK:

I guess your start, I can credit the stock company experience in San Bernardino as a most valuable, valuable experience. Um, the, um, the discipline, the audience reaction and the whole thing I think was very valuable. And I would like to see a federal national theater again, if properly handled could be a, um, a great value to the nation.

KW:

I'll buy that

LK:

Well by that. Thank you.

[End of Interview]