

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW
with AUGUSTA WEISSBERGER SCHENKER

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for the

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MK: Paula Laurence called me up and talked about things she remembered. And I know that she must be married to someone who does things in theatre. Is he an official of ANTA (American National Theater and Academy) or something?

AS: I don't think so. Charles Brodie. I don't think so.

(Interruption - trouble with tape recorder)

MK: Shall we get started? What I'm planning to do is ask you questions about what you remember about Federal Theatre and just have your recollections. But just to get started, I was thinking that you would tell us how you happened to have a job with Federal Theatre, how you happened to apply for the job of secretary.

AS: I didn't apply; it was given to me. I was supposed to be a teacher of kindergarten and primary grades. And there was the Depression and there weren't any jobs. And lots of people had said to me, "Oh, if only you could type and do shorthand, I'd give you a job." So finally I thought, "Well, I have nothing to lose." So I went to secretarial school and I was a complete dud. Because you know, shorthand you have to learn by rote and I kept thinking all the time.

MK: Completely mixed up the rote.

AS: And it was terrible and my typing was at the stage where I was just beginning to correct mistakes. The Federal Theatre was being formed and I met John Askling, who was the head of personnel. I met him one evening; I had known him quite well and he was a great admirer of my mother's who was a quite extraordinary person. So he just assumed that I was like her and he said to me, "How would you like to work for two weeks for nothing?"

(Laugh) I was convinced that nobody would ever pay me anything anyway so I said, "Okay." I'd heard vaguely about the Theatre; I don't think it had gotten much

publicity at that time. But I assumed that everybody on the Project was on relief. There was a 10 percent quota actually of which I became part and Houseman and Welles and Virgil. But they thought I was on relief and I thought they were on relief. Anyway, so he assigned me to Houseman, whom he had the greatest admiration for, and he thought that would be very good. I was an absolute dud as a secretary. The first thing that Houseman gave me was a four-page letter to Archibald MacLeish.

MK: What did you do to that? (Laugh)

AS: Oh, wow! You know now I wonder how I actually was able to type four pages! It was full of mistakes, but he felt very sorry for me because I was young, but I looked ridiculously young in those days. I had very red cheeks and, you know, I was very innocent. And so he felt sorry for me, thinking I was very poor and you know, all of that.

MK: Because you were about 21 or 22, something like that then?

AS: Yes. So then I remember we were in an office on Madison Avenue and 28th Street, more or less, something like that, a big, tremendous room, and there were a whole lot of desks. We were waiting for a theatre up in Harlem and we finally got the word that we could go up there. And Houseman asked me if I would like to go, move up there with them. This was, I don't know, about two months after. Still I think nobody had any money. This two weeks business was prolonged for a very long time because nobody was getting anything. And I remember my first impression of Houseman. He has a very delicate skin and he needed -- it looked as though he needed a shave, as though he hadn't shaved in a week. Actually he has to shave about twice a day. So he came in with these pink cheeks and quite a stubble here. I remember this as though it were yesterday and he was wearing a raspberry colored shirt. He was dressed

in very European style, even though he had been in this country for years and years and years. Raspberry colored shirt, a beige cashmere sweater which his aunt had made for him. He must have been wearing a jacket under it but anyway, a very tight fitting brown tweed coat and a fedora hat that had a tiny little hole here (points). And he looked to me like a poor, seedy, needy producer of 45 or 50, which of course he was nowhere near that, very unsuccessful and I felt very sorry for him, which was very fortunate for me because I never fell in love with him. (Laugh) Because to me somebody who was a failure was not attractive. He didn't have to have money because you didn't think of anybody having money in those days. But at least he — so I was sure that he was very down and out and I felt very sorry for him.

Anyway, we went up to Harlem and we had to open up the theatre, physically, literally, clean it up.

MK: It must have been a mess.

AS: It hadn't been used in — actually it felt as though it hadn't been used in 40 years, but it had been used just recently, oh, within the last two or three years. I saw something that it had been used about 1930, I think. So that it was only a question of about five or six years but it had fallen into disrepair. It probably wasn't left in good condition when it was closed up and it was terribly dirty and everything.

There was one other white girl on the project and the white people were Houseman, Orson, Virgil, Paul Bowles — no, no, Paul Bowles was brought in downtown — Abe Feder and Manuel Essman, who I think has died. Do you know if he's died?

MK: He's one of the people I still need to track down.

AS: Well, I think Feder could tell you about him.

MK: How about Nat Karson?

AS: Nat is dead. Nat's widow is married to Jim Backus, the television actor, Henrietta Kaye. She was a beautiful girl.

MK: Because wasn't she on the Project?

AS: Yes. She was in, oh, I think she was in Horse Eats Hat.

MK: I think she was.

JM: Don't we have a playbill from Horse Eats Hat?

AS: Henrietta K-a-y-e.

MK: And she was Mrs. Nat Karson? And now she's Mrs. Jim Backus.

AS: Yes. I don't know whether she still is, but I know that she was.

MK: But that would be the way to start tracking her down I would think.

AS: Yes or -- well, Nat was white and Essman -- Nat did the costumes for the Negro Macbeth.

MK: Who was the other white girl there?

AS: Somebody named Taft. I'll think of her first name. I made a terrible break. We were riding up to Harlem in the subway -- I didn't know she was living with a black man at the time. She was very unattractive, very bad skin and fat, just, you know. John Askling had said to me, "Now, when you go up to Harlem, you mustn't go out with any black men." Or "You mustn't socialize with them" or something. "Because white women have a reputation for liking black men."

So I said, "Everybody knows I'm a virgin." (Laugh)

MK: Is that why John Houseman says that in Run-through? (laugh)

AS: Well, I don't know. So he said, "Well, I don't care what they say about you below 110th Street but above 110th Street, you're just a white woman." (Laugh)
So I probably was repeating this to her that we mustn't go out with black men or something. And then it turned out that she was living with a black man.

Of course, I'm sure, being very, very catty, that no white man would have --

MK: Gone out with her.

AS: -- noticed her. Zepora? No. Strange, some strange first name.

MK: What was she doing on the Project?

AS: Well, we were both hired as secretaries. She really was a stenographic secretary but what happened was when we got up there and we saw how bad the theatre was, the first thing was to put the theatre in condition and get the back stage working. And so Feder and Essman were in charge of this and they asked Houseman whether they could borrow me. And so I worked with them for the first, oh, I guess until Macbeth started rehearsing in the theatre. Because Macbeth kept being delayed and delayed. It was the thing that was supposed to open the theatre and it was perfectly obvious that it wouldn't. And so I did some work I suppose for Houseman and Orson, but we had a little office, Feder and Essman and I, that was a dressing room right off the stage. And it was very tiny and I was right away an administrative secretary, an executive secretary. Everything that had to be done I had to do. And I practically never did any typing so that my typing deteriorated, such as it was. It went from bad to worse. (Laugh) I remember something very funny -- oh, Teddy Thomas.

MK: I have his name down to ask you where he might be.

AS: Yes. Well, he's in California and his son, Michael Tilson Thomas is --

MK: And that's his son?

AS: Yeah. And I introduced his parents so I'm Mickey's godmother.

MK: How wonderful! Well, you have a wonderful godson. (Laugh)

AS: He's a nice boy. (Laugh) So his address is 5000 Whitsett Avenue, North Hollywood. And Houseman could have mentioned him more in his book than he did.

I thought that wasn't very nice because he really was very, very helpful. And he and Feder were very good friends.

So Teddy and Houseman and Feder and Essman were arguing about something. And they came into this little office and were arguing about something and this, mind you, was 1936. My God, 40 years ago! You weren't even born! Neither of you were even gleams! (Laugh) And Essman had a very cute, funny way of talking and Feder was always screaming and yelling at people. So they were screaming at each other and they either said "shit" or "fuck," I don't remember which. And then they looked and they all of a sudden realized that I was in the room. And they looked at me and they were so embarrassed and I used to blush very freely and I began to blush and began to _____ (laugh) They were very protective about me and Feder was always yelling at everybody. One reason that I was able to get along with him and with Orson was I never took any of this personally. I don't know where I got this kind of understanding but I didn't. So Feder used to yell at me and one day there was almost a revolt. The black stagehands were ready to lynch him for yelling at me. There was -- the mother of one of the actors, Wardell Saunders, who's probably dead, I don't know, began to bring soup for lunch. She used to bring big cauldrons of soup and sell soup. And it was in one of the stage boxes that she had her little restaurant. It was wonderful in the winter and there were very few places to eat around there anyway. And so one day at about 3:00 in the afternoon, I walked over there to get my lunch, to get some soup, and Feder began to yell at me. What did I mean by not finishing what I was supposed to be finishing? And this was just too much for the stagehands and they ganged up on him, these big guys, the ^{Kinnard} ~~Kanard~~ brothers, and they really wanted to do him physical harm.

MK: (Laugh) Did you have to come to his rescue?

AS: Probably. I don't really remember what happened. And then -- oh, I don't think this is very interesting.

MK: Oh, it's fascinating. Tell me some about Teddy Thomas.

AS: Oh, he was darling. Well, his father was Boris Thomashefsky, a very famous actor, and Teddy dropped the last part of the name because he wanted to get ahead on his own. And so very few people -- nobody connected them naturally. And he was a man who could do anything. Well, he was brought up in the theatre and knew everything about the theatre. And he was a very sweet guy and very, very good-natured and very helpful. And anything you wanted -- one of his favorite stories is they needed some sand for the ballast for the wings, I guess. And they told me to order some sand and I called up and the man said, "How much do you want?"

And I said, "Well, how do you sell it?" And he told me and I said, "Oh, we'll take a yard" or whatever it was. Anyway, about five or six truckloads of sand -- (Laugh) I don't remember that. I remember it vaguely but every once in a while Teddy repeats it, (Laugh) how it kept coming in.

MK: Backing up to the stage?

AS: Backing up to the stage. He was a very nice guy.

MK: Now how did he end up being with Feder? Were they classmates or --

AS: I don't know how that started.

MK: But then did he go on and do theatre work afterwards, do you know?

AS: No. What happened was he was Paul Muni's cousin. Well, he couldn't get started in New York, as I remember, he really couldn't get anything. Even then the theatre was a very small world. There were very few jobs in it relatively speaking. It was enormous then compared to what it is now in question

of employment. Let's see, we went to Project 891 in 1937. I don't know whether Teddy was invited to go to California by his cousin or whether he just decided to. I have a feeling that Muni must have said, "Why don't you come out here? You can do much better." And he went out there but I remember he was still connected with Project 891, which was 1937 to --

MK: When The Cradle Will Rock came out in 1937, then that's when the end of 891.--

AS: Just a second, 1935 to 1936. That was the spring of 1937. Did you say 1936?

MK: No, the spring of 1937 was The Cradle Will Rock. And/^{then}that would be the end of --

AS: End of us. It wasn't the end of the Federal Theatre I don't think.

MK: No, no, it didn't end until 1939.

AS: No, but it was the end of Project 891.

MK: And then you went on to the Mercury?

AS: They had already had ideas of starting the Mercury to do Shakespeare, lots of Shakespeare. Oh! What happened up in Harlem was that I got to be a bigshot. I was raised on the secretarial level so that I had the title of what I was doing actually, what I'd been doing all along, and I got much more money. Then Virgil came to me one day and he said, "les boys," Virgil and Houseman and Orson, were getting this new project and would I come with them? "Les boys" would like me to come with them. So it was a big thing for me. Oh, do you know Carlton Moss?

MK: Yes, and he's been interviewed already.

AS: Well, Carlton was -- I don't know what he told you. He was sort of assistant to Houseman,

MK: You see, I'm not the one who's talked to him so I don't know first-hand.

AS: Well, he was -- and I don't know what his title was; he was probably administrative assistant -- he was sort of assistant to Houseman. And he was the only

black person with whom I had any -- what shall I say -- any dealings? No. But because our work brought us together, we became very friendly and he used to take me to the subway and so forth. And I didn't know he was married to a beautiful girl. He was light and she was also very light, Anne Gray. And she was in the costume department, the Negro Theatre Project. Well, I just assumed that if people were happily married, they were happily married, and nobody would talk about them. So it never occurred to me that there was any gossip about Carlton and me. Everybody knew he was happily married. Well, it turned out that there was, so when this offer came to go downtown and I had this great job and I was making a lot of money.--and I would have had to start in again at \$25 a week or \$23.84 I think was the starting salary -- I really was torn. But he helped me decide. The project was supposed to be all Negro. The point was that these white people were put in charge to get it started and to teach administration and direction and everything else to the Negroes, who had had very, very limited experience.

And so Carlton said that I really ought to go downtown, because the project would become more black and I don't remember. But anyways, I went downtown and I was torn between wanting to go with these people to whom I was devoted. Actually the money didn't mean anything because all along, even when I needed money very, very badly, it was almost more important to me to do something that was interesting if possible. And I lived at home so that I didn't have expenses. I was contributing my little pittance, but if I didn't have a pittance to contribute, we'd still manage. And I really wanted to go downtown.

MK: So that you could have stayed at the Lafayette?

AS: Yes, yes. And so -- now wait a second. I just remembered something I hadn't --

MK: Before we go downtown, let's hear some more about-- at the Lafayette, did you

ever have any dealings with Rose McClendon? Was she in the hospital all the time?

AS: Rose McClendon? I don't --

MK: She was the Negro actress who was jointly the head with Houseman.

AS: Yes, but I don't remember even meeting her. Oh, dear --

MK: She had cancer or something.

JM: She was ill for most of the time.

AS: I know that she was a name. I think I have the feeling that she was a sort of figurehead but maybe it's because she was sick and just couldn't come. I really don't remember anything about her. Please ask me something that I can tell you.

MK: Okay. The first play at the Lafayette, I think, was Walk Together Chillun?

AS: Yes.

MK: And then came --

AS: Another black play.

MK: Conjur' Man Dies?

AS: Yes.

MK: And I wanted to ask about Dooley Wilson who played in that. Is he still around?

AS: Well, you know who -- Dooley Wilson -- wasn't he the one who --

MK: He did "Play It Again, Sam" in Casablanca?

AS: Yes, Frank Wilson he was called.

MK: Frank Wilson?

AS: Yes. We called him "Dooley," although it is Frank Dooley or Dooley Frank. We called him Dooley Wilson. I honestly don't know but you could find out through the Negro Actors' Guild or Actors' Equity maybe.

MK: Okay. Do you remember any special thing about Conjur' Man Dies? I've never heard much about that production.

AS: They had to bring that in very quickly because Macbeth still wasn't ready and as I remember, it was a very -- it was a simple show and easy to put on and they just had to fill in, waiting for Macbeth.

MK: And then finally Macbeth came.

AS: Then finally Macbeth came and we had -- this had been rehearsing out of the theatre and then they began rehearsing in the theatre. And then Orson and Houseman took me back and Feder was furious. I had been lent to him, but he was furious that I wanted to leave him and go back to where I belonged. So for years he cut me dead. Isn't that ridiculous? Not to be believed. (Laugh)

MK: Because you had started out with Houseman and Welles and then when --

AS: And they lent me to him because he needed me and the front office, so to speak, was not very active. But when they became active and Orson needed me, so then we had these all-night sessions. And Orson would dictate to me -- I had a little flashlight -- and he would dictate to me and I would take down these words which were sort of key words, which would mean something to him he assured me. (Laugh)

MK: Would you sit up all night doing that?

AS: Oh, yes. And I remember the first night that we did this and I got home about 3:00 in the morning. At that time we lived on 85th and West End, and I would take the subway from 135th and Lenox to 86th and Broadway and walk a block to West End and a block to 85th. And Carlton always took me to the subway, even if it was at 5:00 in the afternoon, which was very seldom of course. But when I think that today I wouldn't go to Harlem by myself at any time of the day. Well, the first time -- my father was already dead -- and my brother said to

me the next morning that I must never do this again, I must never come home at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, whatever it was. And they weren't at all frightened about Harlem. They just didn't think it was a good idea. So then I began staying out all night because the sessions would last all night and I would type them up and take them down to Orson who lived on 14th Street. And then I'd go home and take a shower and go back up to the theatre. And of course now the very thought of it all exhausts me. But I had so much energy and I would go without sleep for two or three days and not feel any the worse for it.

MK: Because was it real exhilarating?

AS: Oh, it was so stimulating. It was very exciting, it really was. As a matter of fact, at that time I had a beau. We called them "beaux" in those days. And he was quite a bit older than I, a very successful, handsome, virile looking lawyer. And he was very jealous of my attachment to Houseman and Orson, and that was one reason I broke up with him. Because I felt I would pay them to have the job it was so exciting. The whole thing was just so wonderful. I'd always been interested in the theatre because my parents always had been in music and so forth and I'd gone to theatre. I remember my brother had a kindergarten teacher whom I subsequently inherited. We went to the model school and I was allowed to come in when I was four. Oh, my mother started the Parent Teacher Association there. So I went to kindergarten for two years which shows how backward I was. In those days you couldn't be promoted until you were six, you couldn't get into the first grade. So this was a wonderful, beautiful woman. I just found a picture of her the other day, Mary Howe Nolan, a descendant of Philip Nolan. She and my mother were very close and she adored Arnold; she tolerated me. And she used to take him to theatre for his birthday. Our birthdays are a week apart. And gradually she

began including me. So I remember seeing plays of which I really understood very little. We would sit in the first row of the mezzanine. So I started going to the theatre when I was very young, and opera and all of that. So this was a very natural atmosphere for me to -- I won't say natural, but it was something I took to very naturally. And then of course these people were very exciting and stimulating. And Orson was married to a beautiful girl at the time so of course, naturally, I couldn't fall in love with him either. Well, first of all, he was younger than I and he was not my idea of an attractive man with his round face and his stupid little nose, you know, which he --

MK: But was there something still appealing that would make you have a crush on him anyway?

AS: No. I was never remotely interested in either Houseman or Orson and I was so lucky. Because I was very close to them, particularly with Orson later when we were in Brazil. Oh, that has nothing to do -- that was much later. I was very fortunate in that respect because nothing interfered with my enjoyment.

MK: Well, besides being in the office with them, then you all would be having all-night rehearsals?

AS: Yes, and then work would be done during the day. There'd be rehearsals during the day but the big rehearsals were at night. Orson was really a night creature in those days. I shouldn't say "in those days."

MK: And what was Virginia Welles like?

AS: Well, she had glorious -- some way, you know, you remind me of her. I don't know why exactly. She was dark, she had beautiful blue eyes, beautiful eyes. She was very pretty, a real society girl but Chicago society and she was very nice. Her interest in me was only because I was so wonderful with Orson, helped her. She couldn't have cared less about me, one of those people. I

didn't mind it; I knew it, I didn't mind it.

(End of side 1, continued on side 2)

Again I didn't take it personally. But she was a very dainty sort of person and the combination, because even in those days Orson was heavy. Nothing, of course, compared to what he is today. You see a revival of Citizen Kane. Have you —

MK: It's a different person.

AS: Different person. That breakfast scene with him and Ruth Warrick. That was after the Federal Theatre, Ruth Warrick. But that breakfast scene in which he was so slender. As a matter of fact, in all his early shots in that, the only difference between what he really looked/and that was that he built up his nose, which he still does, to have a straight nose because his nose is --

MK: Do you mean he puts putty or something --

AS: Yes.

MK: -- that builds it up?

AS: Yes. I must ask my brother whether he had an operation and has had his nose changed to be permanently built up. I always forget to ask Arnold that.

MK: Because it does seem like why go to the —

(1 minute gap)

AS: But we've seen him a few times and --

MK: He has so far never answered a letter about saying would he talk to us and be on an oral history project forum about Federal Theatre. Do you think he has happy memories of that time?

AS: Well, he should have in a way because Macbeth was and still is a great, great accomplishment for any theatre, much less for that. And then on Project 891 it was brilliantly successful. People who saw the first play, Horse Eats Hat, said it was better than the René Clair picture.

MK: You know, that's what Edwin Denby and I talked about yesterday? He had seen the movie and he certainly thought the play was better.

AS: And the movie was marvelous! I didn't see it 'til afterwards but that was one of the great pictures, one of the great "in" pictures at that time. And he and other people said it was better. Paul Bowles I think did the music for Horse Eats Hat or was it Marc?

MK: I think it was Paul Bowles.

AS: Yes, Paul Bowles. Virgil suggested him because he was going to Paris or he didn't want to do it or something, I don't remember. Paul unfortunately is dead also, yes? Or is it his wife who died? His wife.

MK: His wife. He's living in Africa.

AS: Oh, yes, that book he wrote was so — oh! Oh, he used to be so beautiful, this man, blond and just — he was always a little strange.

MK: Was he married to Jane Bowles then?

AS: Not at that time, no. It surprised me that he got married but she was strange, too.

MK: That could be a good strange couple. (Laugh) Well, was he a friend of Virgil Thomson's and so Virgil just said this would be a good person?

AS: Well, I don't know whether he was a friend or a protege but he came through Virgil. And it's possible that Marc Blitzstein did, too. Virgil was older than any of them. Let's see, how old would Marc have been/^{now?} I really don't know. Virgil is 80 and have you seen him?

MK: I talked to him in November and he just was wonderful.

AS: Oh, he's darling, he's just great.

MK: And very perky and very happy. It was a week or two before his 80th birthday. Tell me about some of the other people who were in Horse Eats Hat. Was that

Arlene Francis's start?

AS: No, she was in -- now, let's see -- she was on radio, I think. I'm almost positive that she was on radio already in the soap operas. At that time she was married to Neil Agnew who was the vice president of Paramount. And she and Joe Cotten -- you could bring people onto the Project, I think also in the 10 percent, non-relief quota if you couldn't find their equivalent on the Project.

MK: So you'd have to make a case for it?

AS: Yes, and I think Sidney Smith was brought in the same way but Joe and Arlene were -- well, it was Joe's start really because I think from that to Theatre Guild saw him -- but I have to tell you this about Orson. He was fabulous with actors. He was so marvelous. First of all, in the Federal Theatre you had a whole lot of quite elderly people. And they really were old, not just because I was young. But they were people who had been around for a long time. And here was this young whippersnapper, by the time we got down to 891 -- well, he was wonderful with the blacks but I was particularly impressed downtown where I was much more -- I saw much more of him with the actors than up at Harlem. But the fact that they were white actors was the important thing because some of them were old enough to be his grandfather. And he was so wonderful with them. He knew all about their sensibilities and their sensitivities and I think all the actors were on relief. And some of them had been very well known in their day, not stars but really very well known and people who went to the theatre knew them. And Orson knew so many of them by name. And I remember there was one old fellow, Harry McKee, and he was hospitalized and he was in Bellevue Hospital. And Orson made me go there and take a basket of fruit.

(Interruption)

AS: I was just thinking, I don't want to see the tape, but I never could reread letters. I can't bear to reread letters that I write which I sometimes have to. But for proofreading to separate the words -- (Laugh)

MK: And you mean to read it to listen to yourself --

AS: I don't want to see what I -- but anyway --

MK: Tell us about Harry McKee.

AS: Orson either ordered me or suggested that I go to the hospital and take Harry some fruit. And oh, it was the most gruesome experience because Bellevue was -- I'd never been in a ward. As a matter of fact, even to this day I've been in very few hospitals, I mean as a visitor, and never, fortunately, had any experience. But in those days, the ward was like -- it was just ghastly. It was very large and a high ceiling and windows at that end but just sort of little windows, you know, no picture windows or anything beautiful like that. And I had to walk down this long -- he was sort of, almost at the end of the room. And all of these people looked so old and so sick and so poor and terrible. It was so depressing, I can't tell you. But when I came to Harry and he always liked me and made a -- you know.

MK: He loved a cute little girl. (Laugh)

AS: He was just so thrilled that Orson would think of him. He was just -- it was just -- it gave him a new lease on life. But Orson's tact in handling these people -- whether they were old or young, they were all on relief. And he was the boss and he was younger by far than any of them, even the youngest. And he was really wonderful with them.

And then of course as a director he got more out of people. Agnes Morehead -- this was after the Project -- but she said to me that, 'Orson can get people to do things, actors to perform with an ability that they didn't even know

they possessed." And he was quite remarkable with people, with actors. He really was.

MK: Well then, why does he sometimes have that reputation of being temperamental? Is it trying to be true to his art?

AS: Oh, yes. Orson is really a quite undisciplined person but I learned something from him because then -- oh, no, this was in Mercury that I got married and so a lot of girls were not working and people would not assume that I was working. But if they did ask me and I would say I was with the Mercury, that was all right. But if I mentioned Orson's name, then so many people would immediately begin to disparage him and say the most terrible things. It got to the point where I just would sort of disguise what I was doing if I had to answer a direct question, because I realized that people are jealous of accomplishment, even if it's in an unrelated field. It first happened that there would be theatrical people who would disparage Orson and denigrate him and so forth in a way that -- they didn't know him, they hadn't worked with him, they had no right to say, if you want to put it on that basis. It was jealousy -- I used to think it was professional jealousy but then I came to see that people are very jealous of accomplishment if they have not accomplished very much. It's the psychology of putting people down to build yourself up. And people speak very, very badly of Orson. He is a very difficult person. I worked for him for seven years and when I left him -- he wanted to marry me but I shouldn't leave him. (Laugh) He didn't attract me one little iota.

MK: Was it seven years consecutively?

AS: Yes and exactly seven years, as a matter of fact. And then when -- well, I divorced him and my husband at the same time. (Laugh) I went out to

California from Reno. I spent the summer in Beverly Hills with friends and I never mentioned Orson. To this day it bothers me when people bring him up because it's such a bore to talk about him. I shouldn't say it's a bore but, you know -- so I'm very pleased when anybody says anything good. But anyway --

MK: So what summer was that?

AS: This was the summer of 1945, way after the Federal Theatre. And people would say -- I left him in 1942 when we got back from Brazil. They would say, "What! You worked for Orson Welles for seven years and you're still sane?" Everybody who came to work for Orson left him in disillusionment. I had underling after underling. I had two or three secretaries working for me. We had from the 47 Workshop at Yale -- was it called the 47 Workshop at Yale, too?

MK: Umhm. George Pierce Baker's.

AS: Yes, Baker's. I know it was 47 at Harvard. And then at Princeton also there were many young men who were attracted to the theatre. So we used to get several of these and they'd come starry-eyed. And one after another this disillusionment. Part of it was -- it was not Orson's fault entirely. They would have been disillusioned with anybody. But he -- it's very funny. To this day I feel disloyal, which I shouldn't but he -- particularly if it's for posterity I shouldn't say anything about it. He's a very difficult person with no self-discipline whatsoever.

MK: Like a lot of self-destructiveness?

AS: Yes.

MK: Does he drive people away from him?

AS: Yes, you have to know how to -- you'll meet him and he'll be absolutely delighted to meet you. And he'll talk to you charmingly if you say you want to talk to him.

'Oh, by all means. Call me up tomorrow morning at 11 o'clock.'" And you call him up tomorrow morning at 11 o'clock and he won't be there. And you leave a message and he won't return the call.

But I was very good — this is very immodest of me, but it's true. And the more I see how important people are mishandled, the more I see how good I was. Because I kept him from alienating an awful lot of people and I got him to see a lot of people. (Interruption)

AS: . . . by J. P. Morgan . . . and so this was a great luxury to be doing this . . . the ladies' room had

pink velvet furniture and ivory, ivory chaise longue, ivory frame with pink velvet and little chairs and mirrors everywhere. And then the two desks, Houseman's and mine, were real office furniture, not very good at that.

And you came down the stairs there and on this side here was the john with swinging doors and then you came up here. So of course there was no privacy in the ladies' room at all (laugh). Nobody used it, of course.

I remember hearing Teddy say, "Oh, I have to go and have a leak." (Laugh) And I never heard that expression. (Laugh)

MK: What a fun way to learn about life! (Laugh) And quickly. Much better than reading Henry Miller.

AS: Well, today of course, languages have changed so. Language has changed so that nobody is shocked by anything. I must say that I was very fortunate that my parents both were so well educated. Their vocabularies rather were so good that they spoke marvelously without recourse to four-letter words. And to this day it just never occurs to me to use them. And with all the reading I did, there were many words that I didn't know the meaning of. You know how you can read something and not know a couple of words and still get

the meaning completely. So I was very old when I learned a lot of these words.

MK: Well, I think that you're fortunate.

AS: Oh, Shoemaker's Holiday. Oh, no, no, that was the Mercury.

MK: That was the Mercury.

AS: Yes.

MK: How did your family/^{kind of}become involved with the whole orbit of -- when did your brother become Houseman and Welles' lawyer?

AS: Well, he didn't become Houseman's lawyer for a long time. He became Orson's -- well, I won't say he became Orson's lawyer. As a matter of fact, we met him last night. We all went to see Caesar and Cleopatra which is closing on Saturday and we wanted to see it. So when we heard it was closing, we changed our plans and went to see it last night. He was there also and I told him you were coming. And I said, "You know, I don't think you became involved with the Federal Theatre -- I don't think you became involved with Orson until the Mercury." So then he said no, it was during 891.

MK: Because he was going to law school when you were first working?

AS: Oh, no, he was already graduated and he was with this very, what's called a prestigious law firm, a very big firm. And in these firms, at least in those days -- of course none of them were as large as they are now where they're real factories. And they had access to the higher-ups.

So Orson knew about everything. He knew about medicine, he knew about law, he knew about everything. He didn't need a lawyer but then something specific came up which I can't remember.

MK: I wonder if it had to do with a production or one of his own little profit things.

AS: I don't think he had any profit things in those days.

MK: But something to do with the Hamlet or the Dr. Faustus? Would people get upset because he would say, "Go ahead and work overtime" and not go by union rules and things like that?

AS: That I don't remember but actors are very funny anyway because actors are -- really, of all the people in the theatre, the actors are the only ones who work for nothing. Whenever there's a benefit, it's always the actors who work for nothing. The stagehands have to be paid, the musicians have to be paid. Of course, that's because they're exhibitionists in part.

Oh, I started to tell you about Orson, another reason that people dislike him. In general, actors respond to a director or a producer in proportion, in ratio to what that person does for them. If he hires them a lot, then he's great. If he rejects them, he's terrible. If he isn't interested he's -- and I remember when Orson did Citizen Kane. This is going to --

MK: It all makes the picture look better though.

AS: None of these people had ever made a movie, including Orson, but they all got their start in Hollywood thanks to Orson. And so Orson wanted me to go out to Hollywood. At that time I'd stopped working for Houseman, long before then, because he just wasn't very busy and Orson was very busy. And Orson wanted me to go out to Hollywood. He was going supposedly for six months but I knew it would be more than six months. And my husband, my first husband, was a decorator, had just opened a new shop and I didn't want to be separated from him at that time for any length of time. Well anyway, I knew it would take much longer which, of course, it did. Orson never really came back or left Hollywood. But these people would begin drifting back because their headquarters at that time were all in New York: Everett Sloan, who is dead, and Ray Collins. They were all radio people actually. Anyway, these people

would come back and tell me about how terrible the picture was and how awful Orson had been to them. And he had told them this would be a tremendous part and actually it was such a little part. And it was so stinky and it was so awful and Orson was so dreadful. And he was just Machiavelli and God knows what rolled into one. And oh, he was just

Well, of course when the picture -- none of them had seen -- the print wasn't finished until the last minute. And of course when the picture came out, there they were with marvelous parts. Coulouris had a big part, Everett Sloan had a big part, Ray Collins had a big part.

MK: Joe Cotten became a star, didn't he?

AS: Joe Cotten. Yes. And this showed me -- I mean, this confirmed something that I had felt all along, that actors are terribly, terribly self-centered. They can only see things in relation to themselves and that's why when you go to a theatre to a performance, not of an opera which is a one-night thing every once in a while, but of a steady run. And the performance will be quite poor and it's because the audience doesn't respond and the actors -- a play can be a tremendous hit and if one night the audience isn't very responsive, particularly if it's a comedy where you expect continual response, the performers -- it's very, very difficult for the actors to stay on the right level.

MK: Because they have to feel?

AS: They respond so unless they're terribly disciplined. And also, for instance, we're talking of discipline, when we did Native Son -- oh, that was even after the Mercury but it was called a Mercury production.

MK: But I'd love to hear anything about that.

AS: Well, Orson -- this was the -- Orson type -- what do you call it, the opposite

of type-casting when you cast against type but it has — I've forgotten the name. Because when he did Julius Caesar, he cast Martin Gabel as Cassius and Martin Gabel, particularly in those days, had a very round face.

JM: Not sleek and lean. (Laugh)

AS: And sleek and lean does not mean — "Cassius has a lean and hungry look" did not mean physically lean. But people just assumed it to be that, but he was a brilliant Cassius, brilliant. Then Orson did -- that wasn't only the first thing that he did like that. But in Native Son he had Canada Lee, who's also unfortunately dead, as Bigger Thomas, the black boy who kills the — do you know the story, Native Son by Richard Wright? It was a very successful novel and he kills the girl. She tries to seduce him or something. He kills her accidentally, a beautiful blond girl and stuffs her in the furnace, I think, something horrible. Anyway, it's a very unsympathetic character actually and in those days, 1941, you didn't have to have sympathy for blacks or you didn't have to try to understand them. So Orson said, "Bigger will be an unbearable character. The play will be unbearable if he's acted sort of normally." And he chose Canada specifically because Canada was such a sweet, sweet fellow. But he made him act sweet also and this was one of the reasons that the play was so successful. Because you actually felt sorry for this guy even when he was being a bastard. Casting against type, I think is the expression.

So Canada of course was a ham. Of course he had not very much experience as an actor. He'd been in several things through the years. He was an ex-prize fighter but he was a ham and gradually he began playing to the audience's sympathies and if the audience would clap this much, he'd do a little more and if they'd clap that much (clap, clap, clap) then he'd do still more. And Orson

came back from California after about a month and was furious! So he said to Canada -- gave him hell -- and Canada said, "But the audience loves it." And Orson said something which is very profound really, "The audience will always love it no matter how bad it is, well, if it's anything palatable. The audience is no criterion of whether it's" -- I'm saying this very badly because the audience is a criterion and the audience really does respond. But what he meant was that you could get very bad and the audience would love it. The same audience would prefer it, if they saw the same production better done, they would prefer the better production. But if they don't know the difference and your performance has any kind of validity, they will accept it. But you mustn't be ruled by the audience and that's what's happened to Zero Mostel whose performance, we understand, is terrible and he's a sweet, nice guy. But, we just --

MK: He's not using his own good judgment?

AS: No. Even in the very first production of Fiddler, he was criticized for not playing with the ensemble, not playing with the rest of the cast. He was against the cast. I mean, there wasn't any animosity, there were little murmurings. But it was a marvelous performance. Then when our niece was here from Brazil we went to see it the second time and Herschel Bernardi or somebody else was in it and it was even better because it was much more ensemble acting but now I understand that it's Zero Mostel practically against the company. And he's hammy, so outrageously. Did you ever see it?

MK: Umhmm. It's hard to learn that you could wreck Fiddler on the Roof. (Laugh)
I saw Zero not long ago do A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum.

AS: He was so marvelous in that! You saw the movie?

MK: I saw him do it in person in Washington about two years ago.

AS: Really? I didn't ^{know} / there was a — but that show with Jack Gilson and Phil Silvers and Zero Mostel was absolutely — we cried with laughter from beginning to end. It was marvelous, absolutely marvelous! It was great! And he was brilliant in Rhinoceros and he was brilliant in Ulysses in Nighttown. And he's a very, very good actor but he has just developed delusions of grandeur or something and there is no disciplining him and it's too bad.

MK: How long did it take before you went out to California?

AS: I didn't go to California. Oh, so then —

MK: You stayed in New York with your husband?

AS: I stayed in New York, yes, and then Orson at the end of six — well, the war started and he was supposed to do Heart of Darkness.

(End of side 2, continued on side 3)

AS: And ~~this depended~~ very much on the European market because it was an art picture. So with the European market cut off, Heart of Darkness was cut out because it was too highly budgeted for the American market. And so then the troubles began, what they would do. And of course they stayed there so in the meantime — then Orson got to do Mercury Theatre on the Air as a sustaining show.

MK: Were you working for him doing any of the Mercury Theatre of the Air work?

AS: No, I just worked on everything but I didn't do any writing or anything like that. I'm the only person who was in the theatre on the other side of the footlights who never wanted to be on the other side of the footlights. You know, most people start in and want to be — I never wanted to be an actress, never had any desire or anything.

MK: The whole seven years you worked in the midst of —

AS: Never. Oh, I'll tell you once when I was an actress. This was also the Mercury

though. We did Too Much Johnson one summer and Arlene Francis was the girl involved, the wife. The play was very short and also Orson felt it needed some more explanation. You should see the husband discovering the wife and lover. It takes place in about 1905, I think. And so we decided to film a short sequence at the beginning -- a prologue -- of the husband coming in and discovering the wife and lover. But Arlene in those days -- this is before she had a child. I think she has a natural bosom now, I don't know. Maybe she wears "falsies." I know a lot of women develop bosoms after they are married so whether she did or not -- in those days she had practically no bosom. So Orson who used to always make very flattering remarks about my skin -- anyway (Laugh)

MK: You must have had the bosom that he was looking for. (Laugh)

AS: Well, I did and so they dressed me in -- now, what was the name of this guy? I'll bet Denby knows him, cute little fellow, photographer.

MK: Oh, Burkehart, would it be Burkehart?

AS: No, and not Barret Gallagher. Can't remember his name. Anyway, so they dressed me in drawers and a corset and here was my bosom, half -- I guess exposed up to the nipples, pushed up, you know. And they were rehearsing and the photographer, whoever he was, said, "Orson, we're ready to go up on the roof now."

And he said, "Well, let's see Augusta." So I had to parade across the stage and everybody burst into (laugh) -- but somebody told me recently that Arlene -- not recently, a few years ago; I don't know how it came up -- oh, that Arlene was very upset when somebody said it wasn't her bosom. They didn't see my face naturally. (Laugh) That was my one and only stage appearance, theatrical appearance.

MK: What a great one! (Laugh) Well now, how did you happen to go to Brazil?
Where does that come in?

AS: Oh, that was at the very end. The year before we went to Brazil we were supposed to go to Argentina. I think it was 1941. Now's let see, I was just trying to think. The CIA in those days meant Coordinator of Interamerican Affairs and Nelson Rockefeller was the head of it. (1 min. gap)

. . . wanted to make a pass at me.

If I'd reported it, he would have been fired. Then the matter was dropped. I don't remember why. So then Orson read a story in Reader's Digest about the jongaderos. Do you know about them? They're the fishermen in the north of Brazil who go out on rafts, literally rafts called jongardas and they fish on these very perilous pieces of wood tied together. And what had happened was that some of these smarter ones had gotten some fleets together and all of a sudden these jongaderos found that they were working for a few bigshots and were making very, very little money because instead of having their own large catch, they would get very little. At that time Getulio Vargas had become dictator but he was known as a benevolent despot. So they made up a petition and a few of the jongaderos sailed from the north of Brazil to Rio, which is a very perilous voyage on this little thing. And they came to Getulio — in Brazil everybody's called by first names so they came to Getulio and they gave him this petition and he said he would take care of it and he did, I don't remember what he did.

Well anyway, this story was written up in Reader's Digest and Orson found it fascinating. At the same time there was another story called — I don't know — about a dog and a boy in Mexico. So Orson got the idea of making three short pictures. This had also never been done before. He was responsible for so

many firsts I can't tell you. And making three short true stories and the third was going to be in Brazil, the Carnival. So we had to be in Brazil for Carnival time.

In the meantime — we went there in January of 1942 but in the meantime he had been in New York with Dolores Del Rio whom he was supposed to marry. He was here with her clandestinely before she was divorced. Then after she was divorced, they came openly and Dolores met me and was terribly impressed with the good care I took of Orson, which was again her big interest. She wasn't interested in me as a person but just that I — so when she got back to California she said to Orson's partner at that time, Jack Moss, that they have to get Augusta out to California.

So Jack called and asked me would I go to Brazil or he came to New York. I don't remember. Anyway, would I go to Brazil and would I go back to California when they came back from Brazil? So I said, "Well, we have to see." At that time I was having trouble with my husband. And I said, "I don't even know if I'll be talking to Orson when we get back from Brazil." I was talking to him. So he said, "All things being equal, we'll move your" — oh, no, I wasn't having trouble with my husband at the time. I don't remember. Anyway, he said, "We'll move your husband out here." That's it. He had only had this shop for a short time. "We'll move your husband out here and we'll do everything but you have to come." So —

MK: Your husband had to be agreeable to being moved to California.

AS: Well, if he had to move beautifully, I don't think he would have minded.

Well, we had already embarked on a trial separation but by that time I think we decided to come together again. I really can't remember too much. But then we went to Brazil and things went from bad to worse because first

of all, we had no idea that Brazil -- that the phone connections were so terrible. It was incredible until the satellite was put in. To get Brazil on the phone -- my husband, my present and only husband; my second and last husband, I should say, was living in Brazil at that time but I didn't know it. I didn't meet him until after he came to New York. But when he calls Brazil, when he calls his brother, when he used to call his brother who still lives there, it was incredible what went on. You never could hear anything and you would just scream. Finally if you screamed loud enough, you maybe could hear. So it was just awful. Now with the satellite the connection is very quick and very good and all of that. But this was also during the war so it was impossible to make calls, it was impossible to receive them. And then there was the time difference between Brazil and California. Anyway, things were very, very difficult and when they sent Orson The Magnificent Ambersons -- you have the rough cut -- and he started to cut it and he dictated all these things to me, the idea was that he would send a copy of all of his corrections back and they would take care of it in California. Well, things went from bad to worse and he wanted to have scenes reshot with Tim Holt, who turned out to be a very unsympathetic character. And he must be sympathetic or else you lose interest in the story. It was a marvelous picture. And he had such wonderful ideas, wonderful ideas. I could take all of this down because I could take it down in a quick longhand. And that's the way I was able to do Macbeth also with a couple of shorthand symbols.

MK: Mainly longhand?

AS: Mainly longhand. And he would give me this and I'd type it up and we'd send it out or he'd try to call up. They just loused him up completely and it was really very unfortunate. Of course, you see, the thing that happens with

Orson and has always been that anybody who becomes his partner becomes his enemy. And he and Houseman have been enemies for a long time. Of course, now it's a very unfortunate thing from Orson's point of view that Houseman, who was an administrator, gets a movie award which Orson —

MK: Academy Award. (Laugh)

AS: And Houseman now gets great praises in acting, which Orson very seldom did. Citizen Kane was brilliant because he took a lot of time and he was able to see himself and reshoot himself as he had to. But in almost everything else — and Orson isn't really a naturally good actor I don't think. It's the least of his abilities. As a director and as a designer and as a conceiver! He sees a project whole, he really does. And I remember his early — I was going to say Roger Hill because that's really — that's where Orson went to school. I don't know how far back you want to go.

MK: It'd be interesting. Would that be back in Chicago?

AS: Yes at the Todd School. And, oh, gee, this is really terrible of me because he wrote a letter to Arnold and he said at the bottom of it, "Please remember me to the" some very flattering epithet — amazing or something like that — "Augusta if she still remembers me." And I meant to write him. Isn't that terrible? I keep on remembering and forgetting. You see, I remember it at the wrong time.

MK: I'll write you a note. (Laugh) "Write a thank-you letter to Orson,"

AS: No, to Roger Hill I wanted to write. And Orson, whenever I talk to him on the phone — in the country we have a house but my brother — his apartment is upstairs and ours is downstairs, but we have the same phone which he always answers unless he's out and in that case I answer it downstairs. And whenever Orson calls, oh, God, he's so affectionate and "When am I going

to see you, darling?" and all that.

MK: When have you seen him last?

AS: I haven't seen him for years. I was trying to think of the last time I saw him.

MK: Do you think he'll ever have a rapprochement with John Houseman, that they might end up --

AS: You see, Houseman never wanted to be an administrator. He didn't mind being an administrator up in Harlem and organizing this thing, which was fun and interesting and different and very exciting and everything like that. And even 891 was more or less all right, but Houseman did not want to do administrative work. He was more interested in directing and so forth but with Orson around, he couldn't direct. And Houseman's main function, or primary function should I say, was to keep Orson happy. Oh, gee, I wish I could find a letter that Houseman -- they used to make fun of my maiden name. They used to call me Weissenbecker, all kinds of distortions. And Houseman --

(tape off)

MK: No, no, he's frisky as can be. /Philip Barber/

AS: He is? Isn't that great? Is he still married to Stephanie Frye?

MK: He has divorced her and he's living alone on this big preserve of several thousand acres.

AS: Up in the Adirondacks?

MK: In the Berkshires, I think.

AS: Berkshires? Oh, Berkshires, yes.

MK: And he's just finished writing a novel, his first novel.

AS: How do you like that?

MK: He was so excited, he came down to Virginia and stopped and came to see all of the Federal Theatre material and just talked and spent 12 hours.

AS: He and Houseman were on very good terms. Phil Barber, of course, was the head and Houseman was always -- they got along very well. Houseman was able to get most of the things he wanted that it was within Barber's power to give. Of course, a lot of things he couldn't.

(tape off)

AS: Unkind to everybody? Well, they were not very nice to her, that I'll say. That's the only thing I'll say in her behalf.

MK: Well, did John Houseman find her? -- You know in Run-through, he says, "We brought this beautiful Brooklyn olive-skinned actress on the Project."

JM: Wasn't it in Horse Eats Hat?

MK: I think in Horse Eats Hat.

AS: Yeah, she's in the picture. She was the --

MK: The girl in the bushes with the hat?

AS: Yes. I have a feeling that Paula was on the Project, was one of the --

MK: One of the 90 percent?

AS: Yeah. I'm almost positive but I'm not positive. Well, what happened was that first of all, the Congress in general was very unsympathetic to the whole arts projects. What's the overall name for the, including --

MK: Federal One, would that be it? It would be the four arts projects.

AS: The theatre, the painters, the writers --

MK: And the musicians.

AS: -- and the musicians. All of these people they considered bums and why didn't they go out and dig ditches? And every six months the money had to be renewed and it was really a terrible thing. And their complete lack of understanding of how these people functioned was just inexcusable. So the time came shortly before Cradle Will Rock was to go on that money really and truly was running out

impossible, at that particular time it was impossible to keep Paula on the Project. I don't remember why, but I do know. And therefore, it was shameful that they did not -- that Houseman would never talk to her and --

MK: That is shameful.

AS: Yes, it really was.

MK: Well, why would the pink slips come?

AS: They were dismissal slips.

MK: I know it but I mean --

JM: They had no money.

MK: So it would just be arbitrary. I mean, it wouldn't necessarily ^{be} that she was less talented than another person?

AS: It may have been -- no, it had nothing to do with talent. I have a feeling that it must have been people who were unemployed at that time, who weren't actively working at that time.

MK: Oh, not in a production that was in rehearsal?

AS: So now wait a second. So when could this have happened because she was in three plays. She was in all three plays we did. She was in Horse Eats Hat, she was in Faustus, and she was in The Cradle Will Rock.

JM: And she also was in Sing For Your Supper, which was really --

AS: Which was not ours.

MK: Yeah, so that meant she was working on the Project in 1939 then because Sing For Your Supper was the last production.

AS: Maybe she got reinstated. But she was very bitter about them and I must say she was right. Now please turn the tape off.

(End of Interview)