Interview with Robert Schnitzer and Marcella Cisney
November 17, 1975
Interviewer, John O'Connor

RS: Hallie Flanagan mentioned it in Arena.
JO: That's right.
RS: John Houseman doesn't like to be reminded of that fact.
JO: There's a new book by a man named Malcolm Goldstein—I think he's in Queens-called This Political Stage and he mentions it for about a page or so.
RS: There's no doubt I wouldn't claim to be the director that Orson Welles was. But there is also no doubt that my prompt script was circulated by Hallie Flanagan. And to everybody's suggestion, Orson took it and ran with it and made a touchdown with it.
JO: There's a brief article even in that Federal Theatre Magazine about it. One thing I'd like to get clear or straight is what your various roles were. You started as a supervisor in Delaware?
RS: In Delaware, yes. That came out of my having the summer theatre there, the Robin Hood Theatre at Robin Hood Barn. They were organizing a Delaware Federal Theatre unit in Wilmington and I was approached by the woman who had been made the chief of all the arts projects for Wilmington. One of Hallie's assistants came to see me, also. The Federal Arts Projects had their own sub-chiefs, and she asked me if I'd be interested. All I'd heard was the standard Equity attack on it, which at the beginning was not at all cooperative, as you know. She asked me to go down and see the State Director of WPA (Works Progress Administration); they were all politicians, of course. I thought, ''Well, why not go down?" I never turned down a job if it looked good, certainly investigated it anyway. I went down and waited for him to say, "How did you vote in the last election?" but he didn't. He asked me two questions: "Do you believe in putting people to work at the things they've been doing?" which was an enlightened attitude for a politician. I said, "Yes."
And he said, "Do you think you can handle it?"
To that I knew the answer was, "Yes," being very young! So with that I became the Director of the Federal Theatre unit in Delaware. Then I began to assess my assets and they were mostly old vaudevillians with a few legitimate actors who had given it up some time before. It was not at all a distinguished group of performers. At the same time I thought, "What constituency do we want to serve?" I thought certainly one of the legitimate things was to work with the schools. So we began to plan a production that we could take around to the schools. We had to earn the right to have a paying audience with the Federal Theatre and we didn't have any such permit at the time. We built ourselves a theatre. The arts projects had been assigned an old mansion in the heart of town and the top floor apparently had been a ballroom. Anyway, it was clear, the only open floor on the whole three floors. So we built ourselves a stage and a theatre. Of course, no fly space, but we had wing space.
I asked the schools what they were studying this year. It was Julius Caesar, and I thought, "Well, let's try it." We tried it and I thought, "Oh, these guys, they can't—" and I began cutting it and cutting it because I thought it was too difficult for them to get across. And it was interesting that, as rehearsals progressed, these old duffers would come to me and say, "Bob, I can say that line. Let's put it back in." So we ended up with a very good one. Then, in the same way, originally I thought, "These people won't know how to handle togas and look like anything but hams in them. Let's try it in modern dress." As soon as the thought struck me, of course, all the parallels came into view. It was pretty obvious once you thought about it; so I put all of Marc Anthony's boys into black shirts and Brutus's into the khaki of democracy. Also I happened to have a very

good actor who looked like Mussolini.

JO: I've seen a photo of him.

RS: This raised a little hell when we finally opened it because there was a large Italian Catholic population in Wilmington, and they had a Catholic Father who was a very good politician. We were then still on speaking terms with Mussolini, of course. He decided that this was an "attack on a friendly nation" and so forth, and made all sorts of political protests. I invited him to come and see it. He implied that we'd changed the lines which we had not. The fact that it was appropriate was the fault of history, not my fault! I invited him to come and see it and he announced to the press that "there are certain places about which you make up your mind without attending." So I thought maybe I ought to run ads saying, "come to Schnitzer's Whorehouse" but I didn't. He carried it to Washington and Harry Hopkins called upon Hallie Flanagan and said, "Hallie, put 'em back into costume, for God's sake, won't you?" And, she was always a great defender of her people. She was a great leader because she took the heat herself and she helped you do your best. She said, "Harry, we won't put 'em back in the nightshirts. If you tell us to stop it, we'll stop it but we won't put 'em back in the nightshirts!" And so we ran and then the opposition announced that this was a takeoff on Mussolini. I did a little quick thinking and said that I had picked my actor in my Julius Caesar to look like the Naples bust of Caesar; if Mussolini prided himself on looking like the Naples bust, it was not my fault. So we ran it and I think we took it to the schools and people came to see it, also. After a while we did well enough so I was called down to Washington. I had never met Hallie; I was called down there, I went in fear and trembling, wondering what I had done wrong. They were in the old McLean mansion that's been torn down now. It was the place where Harding had supposedly chased a chorus girl around the balcony and she'd fallen three floors and died. And there in the ballroom was the office and down at the far end of this room was a huge desk with a little woman behind it. I marched down there, sat down and said, "What have I done?"
She said, "Nothing. We think you're doing pretty well and we want to take a look at you." She took me with her all day on her rounds to see various projects in the Washington area. Then in the afternoon, I guess, we came back to the office. And she said, "Well now, what do you need to do a better job?"
So I said, "a, I want the right to charge admission. I think we're good enough to and I think we can bring in a little money, give me some thing more to play with. Because we could use that money for better production expenses." She said, "Okay."
I said, "Well, then I must add an accountant, and I have just the person in view." It was the accountant for the WPA State Director in Wilmington. (Laugh). She said, "Well, we'll ask to get him for you. Anything else?" I said, "You're not paying me enough." They put their heads together and finally said, "Well I think that's right." And I went home just zooming. (Laugh). I got on one of the crack Pennsylvania trains and I wanted to get off at Newark, Delaware, where the train didn't stop. I wanted to stop because this accountant was a girl, a very able woman, and she was working backstage just for the hell of it at the University of Delaware (Newark) performances as stage manager or something like that. I wanted to tell her that night because I'd said to her earlier, "Would you leave the state office?" And she, being a theatre buff, had said, "Yes." So I got the conductor to stop the train for me at Newark. I don't believe I've ever felt more important in my life! I went backstage and told her... This is beyond your queries about Caesar but it was the thing, I suppose, that brought me to Hallie's attention. Then the next year I was taken down there to be an assistant in Washington and stayed at that post for over a year. They were just building the World's Fair in San Francisco and were building a Federal Theatre. I went out to supervise the building of the theatre and then to organize the attractions for

it. We brought people in from several coast units. We brought a black stage company from Los Angeles and a dance company from San Francisco and a Living Newspaper group I think from somewhere up the coast, Seattle probably. We produced in the daytime revolving one-hour shows: one-hour dance program, one-hour Living Newspaper, one-hour something else. Then in the evenings we did Hall Johnson's Run, Little Chillun, a black show. We had a man directing that who was a grand little director, Jester Hairston. He is still going around organizing choral groups. But this black unit, where so many of them were Ph.D.'s, were being very proper. I don't know whether you know Hall Johnson's Run, Little Chillun?

JO: Yes.

RS: Finally, this old fellow about five feet tall, directing the thing, said, "Come on, let's get Negroid." (Laugh). After that, they belted it.
– Well, I don't know what you need.

JO: It's that kind of thing. Let's go back a bit. What was your job as an assistant in Washington? Were you based in Washington?

RS: Yes, I lived in Washington and I was her second assistant at first. She had a deputy and I was the assistant to the deputy. My main job in those times, until he left, was analyzing reports from all over the country. We did a very thorough reporting job. You know, people think that our profession's a very slipshod one, but as a matter of fact it doesn't have to be. And certainly administratively, if you're going to live, you have to be tight. So we got in reports from all projects around the country and I was constantly analyzing them for their finances, their use of plays, their use of people, their proportions – because as you know, we had a certain portion of non-relief people all that sort of thing digesting that and passing it on to Hallie, and using it for reports to Congress and people like that.

JO: Was the other deputy then Bill Farnsworth at that time?

RS: No, Bill was there... it was Howard Miller. And then, when they started building the World's Fair, they sent me out there. I had another one of those things with a politician who was running San Francisco the way he wanted to run it. I walked into his office and he said, "Well, I don't need anybody from Washington to tell me how to run this. I've got perfectly good Federal Theatre men here in San Francisco who could do the Island also, Treasure Island." I said, "I'm sorry. I've just been told to come out." He said, "You've got two strikes against you already." I said, "Well, give me that third strike." And I went to work. I must say I was very proud that when I was called back to Washington he protested it.

I was called back when they set out to kill Federal Theatre. I went back to do a lot of analysis and to strike down statements such, as that we were "doing nothing but radical plays." It turned out that something like three percent of our productions had had any political cast to them at all! I think it was three, or maybe five. Anyway, I went back to do that but well, as you know, it was a question even Harry Hopkins joined in and threw the baby overboard to lighten the sleigh. It was, I suppose, "Let Federal Theatre go or else let them kill all the Arts Projects." Because Congress wanted a sacrifice and the theatre is most susceptible. Afterall, you can't be quite sure that music is attacking you; but when, in a Living Newspaper on housing, an actor representing Senator So-and-So gets up and quotes the senator from the Congressional Record: "If you gave those people better houses with plumbing, they'd fill the bathtub with coal" which is what one bastard said they don't like to see that done! So theatre was far more vulnerable than music or art, and they just had to throw it overboard.

Here again, Hallie was such a hell of a leader. When they began cutting back, before it was actually wiped out entirely, one year they had to cut New York alone from 10,000 to 5,000 people, or something like that. She didn't send word

up to the New York director to do this. She went up herself, called a mass meeting and said, "I've got some bad news and I want to tell it to you personally. Before she went up there, she had said to Harry, "Instead of that, why don't all of us who are directing WPA cut our salaries by about 30 percent, all the non-relief people?" Bit that didn't go with Harry Hopkins and the other politicians, of course.

JO: How were her relationships with Harry Hopkins?

RS: Very close with Harry. He picked her.

JO: And Aubrey Williams and some of the other Washington people?

RS: Well, Williams was not so close. His primary job, as I recall it, was to be politically savvy for the President. But Harry was a very close friend of hers, though he too recognized the political needs first. And if it was going to antagonize Congress to the point of wrecking the whole program, he was certainly not going to stand on principle. This was Hallie's problem and earned her glory, that she stood on principle.

I feel that our unions—I was then a menfoer of Equity, still am; I'm also now a member of the Managers' Union ATPAM, and I've always felt very strongly for the unions—but I felt that the unions and the professionals generally were very foolish at the first. It was only when they saw suddenly that they were going to lose jobs for possibly 20,000 members if this thing was wiped out that they sent Tallulah down to sit on some senator's lap and started some propaganda. But it was far too late. I suppose on the other hand, they would never have had Hallie if they were willing to play ball because Harry first went to the old-line people, you know, Elmer Rice, Lewis and other well-known theatre people. They all turned it down. Oh, they couldn't be bothered with something that was not going to have the best of the profession. So he went to Hallie and said to her a similar thing that was said to me, "Do you believe in this kind of thing and can you do it?" She was full of imagination and I dop't think it could have been done nearly as well by somebody else; a remarkable person.

JO: In the closing, hew much of it was a problem of, not communist infiltration—

RS: That was used as an excuse.

JO: Did you have a sense that it was gonna be—the 1938 election was caning and what— RS: Yes, the election, but it wasn't killed by the Administration. They had to let it go, let us say, because the wolves were gaining on the sleigh. So they had to throw the baby over if the sleigh was going to get across the Siberian wastes with Federal Art and Federal Music and Writers' Project. It was the people like McCarthy, that kind of person, in Congress. Federal Theatre was too verbal for them, and they made a lot more of it than—well, there's that famous line when one of them said, "This communist Christopher Marlowe that you've been producing, who is he?"

JO: It must have been terribly frustrating. I mean, you had your own little experience with the priest to deal with.

RS: Yes, to sit in the gallery in Congress and watch them, or in a hearing room where Hallie went on with all sorts of solid evidence. It's true that in the early days the communist Party did try to take over just as it exploited the whole Depression, and there were probably plenty of communists. But it was opposed, and the people who were leaders in the theatre, the people who carried weight, who ran the theatre, were radical only in the sense that they were liberals and forwarding-looking people and humane people. They believed that people should be free to express themselves and that this was an opportunity for America to have a national theatre. We never thought that we had the best talent. The best talent was still able to earn a meager living on Broadway and that was fine. This was a supplementaryoperation, and whenever a unit was able to take itself out, as Welles did with the Mercury Theatre, Hallie and the rest of us were delighted. It was just great. It proved one of the points, one of the

reasons for our existence, that we had given people of talent the opportunity to get together and develop themselves into a working unit. And of course, many of the people who've been tops in the business were developed by Federal Theatre.

JO: When you were in Washington, did you have much contact with regional directors? I was thinking of people like Paul Green or E. C. Mabie.

RS: Oh, yes, all of them. I did a lot of traveling around for Hallie, too, and out to the Coast seeing Ole Ness and many other people.

JO: Hew was the Regional Theatre?

RS: Well, it varied greatly in quality, not only depending on the material available but also on the atmosphere of each place. There were certain units that did nothing but Getting Gertie's Garter. Well, they were serving their audience, and with the people they had. There were others that were highly original, experimental, in places where an audience could accept that and where the leadership had that bent of mind. As you know, any theatre, your theatre or any other theatre, takes character from its leadership. For instance, Mabie was a tough old man, a reactionary if I ever knew one, but a very good theatre man. And he saw to it that there was as good work as could be done, but it was hardly very advanced, experimental. There was a man—his name I forget new—in San Francisco—he wasn't Regional; he was with the City, a man that the WPA director wanted to handle Treasure Island also—who was an old stock-canpany producer, so that's what he mainly did.

JO: They all seemed to have a good /theatre/ from what I've gathered.

RS: I have found—I was looking around—a collection of publications. I think you probably have them all, but I might bring it down and let you look through them and see if you want to take any of them to look at for a while.

JO: Thank you. You might do that in a moment. I think we might have the first couple of issues of the Magazine and other publications. How about Paul Green and Samuel Selden and the North Carolina unit?

RS: Well, of course, that was where Paul really started his historic pageant dramas. We all knew Paul as a very good man in that field who did some very interesting pioneering work, and Sam backed him up.

JO: Was Frederick Koch associated with him, too?

RS: Yes, as I recall it. Sam's still around, isn't he?

JQ: Yes. In fact, he's been on the West Coast but he's visiting in North Carolina this November. I'll try to get down there.

RS: I must apologize for my fuzziness. I console myself by telling myself that throughout my professional life I ’ ve had to learn so many things so fast that when it was over, I wiped the slate clean automatically.

JO: That’s good, and I also don't think you're that fuzzy (laugh). How was the relationship between the Regional Theatre and the New York Theatre then? I have a sense from a few people from New York that I've met that tliey think of the Federal Theatre as the New York Theatre, you know. They don't think of the Regional Theatre as it was.

RS: Well, there was then much more—though there still are plenty of remains— of the mutual snobbery between New York and the rest of the country. George M. Cohan, do you know that famous saying of his? "When you get west of the Hudson, it’s all camping out." (Laugh) And certainly at that time they felt it very strongly, I did myself when I came out of Federal Theatre and was looking for a job. I was offered a job as Director of community Theatre in Kalamazoo, Michigan. I thought, "Kalamazoo, that's a vaudeville joke." But I went out because, again, I believed in looking at things very carefully before you said No. Jobs were not that frequent, so I went out and I found in Kalamazoo a very lively town... and it is, it still is, a very good community theatre there. Some of the Upjohn pharmaceutical family are based there and built them a beautiful theatre. So I went out very happily, and this really began a

life for me of having one foot in the regional and one foot in Broadway; and being a centipede, one foot in the academic, one foot in the amateur, one foot in the very thoroughly professional cctunercial theatre. And I've always, my whole life, been the Devil's advocate in the other camp, trying to knock their heads together, because I think it's the only profession where we tear each other apart. For instance, a doctor who practices 9:00 to 5:00 on Park Avenue does not sneer at his colleague who teaches at the Physicians and Surgeons College at Columbia University. But a so-called Broadway actor will sneer, at an actor—(would in those days; it's getting less now as jobs get fewer in New York and the regional theatre has made more progress)—would sneer at anybody who was teaching in a college or was playing anywhere but in New York; and vice versa. When I went out to Michigan to start their first Professional Theatre Program in the University as a supplement to the academic, I found my colleagues in the Theatre Department were telling their kids that these caimercial people had no ideals, no standards, and so forth. But' I was constantly saying, "I have never known, let's say, a violinist in an orchestra, in the New York Philharmonic, who didn't play his heart out. The fact that he was being paid for it didn't make him any less of an artist,

JO: I can remember sone of that at Michigan from the University Players toward the PTP.

RS: Well, to get back to your question, it was very strong in those days between the Broadway crowd and the rest of the country.

JO: Did you know or work with either Phil Barber or George Kondolf?

RS: Oh, yes, Phil I knew very well. I didn't work with him but I had contact with him. He was in New York, of course. As a matter of fact,. I've seen him every once in a while since then. And George did you say?

JO: Kondolf?

RS: Kondolf, right you are, Kondolf. George was a very nice and a very able guy and one of these old-school gentlemen with the high collar—his high stiff collar I remember—and did very good work. And Phil was a fine administrator. Marcie, don't you want to come in and join me and Mr. O'Connor.

JO: We got a letter frcm Phil Barber and he said that we should certainly talk to both of you. He spoke quite highly of both of you.

RS: Where is Phil now?

JO: I think he has a place up in...

RS: He gave up the place at Tanglewood, Lenox.

JO: I think he's back up there on a farm acreage.

RS: Oh, because he was running a very nice lodging house in one of those old mansions,

JO: I think that he's in that area but has bought some land.

RS: Dr. O'Connor says that Phil Barber wrote him a note saying that he should talk to both of us. Phil tried to find the FTP records and found that in some cases, some of them had been put into damp basoments loosely. And Hallie thought it was a deliberate effort to destroy them.

JO: The crucial part of the collection she was able to take to Vassar with her while she wrote Arena. But the rest of it was in the basoment in the Library of Congress.

MC: I wonder if Bob Baron could have had anything to do with crating it? Because he once talked to me about being so disturbed about it's all deteriorating.

He got a group together. There was a rescue effort, I remember. Isn't it lucky that you came across them!

JO: So we're now in the midst of sorting—the stuff was just thrown in the crates—sorting it out, sorting plays and radio scripts and the blue production notebooks and things like that.

MC: Did you come across some of the original One-Third of a Nation and the

other– JO: There's a tremendous amount of material. There's lots of playscripts in mimeo and in typescript and a lot of the research material that—publications.
RS: Here I find something labeled "Flanagan Letters." "To Regional and State Directors from Hallie Flanagan." I wrote half of these myself.
JO: This is one of the scripts that was lost that we now have a copy of.
MC: Oh? What is the play?
JO: The Tea Million. It was a Living Newspaper. I don't know if it was produced or not.
MC: There was an early Paul Green one-act Hymn to the Rising Sun that I remember very well. Chalk Dust was another. And the one about John Brown. There were more obscure but very interesting plays.
JO: You saw Chalk Dust? What did you think of that production?
MC: As I remonber it, it was/very progressive production. It was considered a very strong comment, very strong play. Have you found a copy yet?
JO: Yes. We have some photos of the production, too. The photos are awkward.
MC: They're not well posed?
JO: They're not well posed. some are.
MC: There were a lot of good people in that production who later made reputations,
I also was there the night that Marc Blitzstein with the whole company of Cradle Will Rock walked from one theatre to the other because he wasn't able to open in one theatre and he just improvised it in another.
RS: That was the genesis of the Mercury.
MC: That's right. Will Geer was in it and a lot of people who have since become famous.
JO: He started to build that group through the Federal Theatre.
RS: "Sound research."
JO: Oh! That's interesting.
RS: Of course, it's well out of date by now.
Well, that's it. Is any of that useful to you or have you seen it all?
JO: The publications I've seen. I don't know about these letters. I might write you again about them. It looks like letters from Hallie to the Regional Directors.
RS: "Brief filed by Hallie Flanagan for the Committee on Patents."
MC: Well, there might be something useful.
RS: If you want to take it along, fine. Just send it back to me after you've used it.
JO: If I remember correctly, you were at either Vassar or Snith for a while with Hallie Flanagan?
RS: After the Kalamazoo jdb Hallie asked me to go as her assistant to Vassar. Then next year they,induced her to go to Snith. So I was with her also in Snith that next year. One year at Vassar, her last, and her first year at Snith; then I went into the Red Cross and over to China during the war.
JO: But she stayed there a number of years.
RS: She stayed there until she retired.
MC: She had a very sad death. She had Parkinson's and it made her face very immobile. It would be difficult to communicate because she shook so much.
It used to grieve me because I admired her enonnously when I was a young actress. I tried to model myself on her and I thought how unjust life was when I saw her. I think a lot of it was a kind of martyrdem that she suffered toward the end in the Federal Theatre. They just crucified her down in Washington.
JO: I get the sense that it was the necessary sacrifice and that the frustration of having to stay quiet and not being able to respond to all the charges even if they are–
MC: It builds up in youl And now it's very ironic to see as this Recession has

come on so many references to "What we need is a federal writers' project and a federal theatre project." It used to be an embarrassing thing to even mention working on Federal Theatre. Now, as the economy has changed, it becomes romantic and nostalgic much, much too late.

JO: Another irony is that we have—there's myself and another, a woman on the faculty who found the collection and who have been working most on it, but starting this past October 1st, we have two CETA (Comprehensive Employment Training Act), which is a federally-funded job training program, to staff us with a curator and a research editor.

MC: So it's gone full circle and they are now putting money into it again.

JO: I'm very thankful they are. I mean, we're getting a lot of work done.

MC: What is your plan, your goal when you have a chance to sift it all through?

JO: Ok. Right now what we're doing is simply operating somewhat like librarians or archivists, getting this collection in shape. But ideally, there'll be a research center at George Mason for the study of the Federal Theatre and the arts projects that can be used.

RS: Ted Hoffman tried to persuade them that they were not the people to do it. Imagine! The only people in America who have done it!

JO: What else can you tell me about Hallie?

RS: What would you like to know about her? I knew her very well and kept up with her all the time up to her death.

I learned a lot. I was a very young man then and I learned a great deal about being a boss of a project, of how to get the best out of people by giving them their credits. Part of this was something that I already believed in. But she carried that theory out. If you were working on some kind of project, a show or a script or whatever, and she had come to see it or read it, she'd say, "What would happen if you did so-and-so?" or "What do you think about that?", drawing it out of you. She always made you feel that you could excel, that you could outdo yourself. I thought this was great leadership and I tried to follow it when I was in a situation that called for leadership.

JO: Did she have strong either thematic or dramaturgical views that—do you think there was a coherence to the Federal Theatre at least in either originality or—

RS: No, I don't think that she felt that it should be. I think she had a very strong dedication to the theory that America is a conglomerate country. We're eclectic; we've taken our culture from all over the world, after all. She felt very strongly there should not be one standard dictation from Washington; that her job in Washington was to promote the ability of the various units to do their best, and to fight for them when somebody tried to put than down.

And you've seen this double line of responsibility. In Delaware I was theoretically responsible to the State WPA Director, who was a politician and who knew more about putting people to work with shovels and concrete. But I also had a responsibility straight to Washington, ignoring him. All the state administrators hated this very, very keenly since they were usually politicians, sometimes very able men, sometimes not. So they were constantly fighting to get more control, also because there were jobs to be given. Those of us who were running units were constantly fighting some state director who was sending us the son of one of his best vote-getters who wanted a job. We would say, "(a) What's your talent? And (b) what's your record?" because we did try not to take people who weren't justifiably considered to be theatre people. . .

. . .The man who was in charge of the whole Federal Building at Treasure Island (interference - static) and the whole government program in the government building was George Creel, Woodrow Wilson's chief propagandist and righthand man and a great operator in his time. In those days any government office you went into had a picture of President Roosevelt. But Creel had a picture of Wilson over

his desk. He'd say, "That's my President!" You know, I can't help understanding. I felt it strongly when people were going all out for young Kennedy. I felt like saying, "Roosevelt, that's my President." (Laugh) JO: How successful was the San Francisco—

RS: Very. I gave George Izenour his first opportunity to make an electronic switchboard. Here was this mad magician of electronics who had an idea for a switchboard that ran with—at that time it wasn't solid state—it was tubes, bulbs rather than rheostats. So I said to Hallie, "What about this?" She said, "Go ahead."

And so he had his first switchboard out there. Then Yale gave him a laboratory and took him on. But the Federal Theatre at Treasure Island had the first Izenour switchboard prototype.

JO: Do you think that because there wasn't the conmercial demands or that kind of commercial line for you to toe, that there was a different either atmosphere or encouraged that kind of experimentation?

RS: Yes.

JO: Or "experimentation" is a bad word; possibly testing or innovation.

RS: Yes, I think that's true. I think the way we were under pressure all the time because our budgets were very tight—what was it, 10 percent that we could spend for everything but the salaries? And what was it, 5 percent of the places could be for non-relief people? And those of us who were running it particularly were very conscious of the need for having successful productions, because the more money we took in, the easier it made it for us and for the whole program. I must say, there was a team feeling. This was one of the things that Hallie could develop, an absolutely "gang feeling" that we were all out for something together. I've never in my life felt that peak of idealisn and of accomplishment that we were doing something for—I can say that of those days without apology—for humanity, for our country. Nowadays you have to be pretty cynical.

JO: At least in your case in-Delaware and when you were a deputy in Washington, you'd then argue that people weren't going to Federal Theatre because it was free or because there was nothing else to do. You could charge and it would still—

RS: Oh, yes, there was very good income in many instances. Of course, the commercial boys felt it was "unfair competition." And yet a lot of us felt that it was not, that what it did was create an interest in theatre more widely...

MC: I have a clear recollection of their standing up all around me and singing back and forth from the bleachers and Blitzstein conducting the whole thing at the piano and having a marvelous time. A great sense of spontaneity and participation, not only in the actors, in general. There was a conscious sense that history was being made, a sense of youthfulness and creativity and of taking very little and making something with invention and resourcefulness out of it. Everybody felt pride in that. There was a family feeling about it, too, because we were all making $23.86 a week and so we all lived in the same simple way. Most of us lived down in the Village in little one-room apartments and had to count our pennies and went broke before payday. So there was a great sense of camaraderie and Bohemianism in the good sense of a creative family working together.

It seems to me there was a lot of interchange between the Artists' Project, the Writers' Project and the Drama Project. There was a good deal of crossfertilization. It was the kind of theatre that we are only reaching out for now, trying for, as though it were a great novel discovery, you know, Multi-media things. What impressed so many of us then was that it was made out of such unpromising material to begin with. Bob was describing to you how he had to take old vaudevillians and retired fifth-rate actors.

Pinocchio was another work that I remember. Frank—

RS: Yasha Frank. Yasha Frank had a great technique. He'd take all these old

vaudevillians who had had, each of than, a 20- or 30-minute act they were no longer up to the act. But he'd take about three minutes of the climax of their act, which they were still able to do, and he'd run them into children's shows like Pinocchio. Maybe a dozen of just about three minutes of the essence of these great vaudeville acts—

MC: These old boys, you know, their whole lives were wrapped up in that moment of "Then I wowed 'em in Altoona!" Frank had such invention that he evoked ability and creativity from what at first seemed very unpromising. You were always pulled down by the fact that you had to use a certain percentage of tired deadwood. Yet even those people were reinvigorated. It began to give them a new life.

I look back on it all as a memorable time and I certainly look back on Hallie as a woman like an Eleanor Roosevelt. She was that kind of a person.

RS: But very different physically.

MC: Nothing like her physically, but the spirit, the soul, the dedication and the drive, the way she had of kindling everybody who worked with her, was very much like the way you felt when you met Eleanor Roosevelt.

RS: something you just said reminded me of the statistics on the number of people we put back into private industry. It was astounding, the nunber of people who were carried along, who refreshed their talents and their spirits and got jobs again in the commercial theatre.

MC: And then the young people who rose in the ranks and made great careers for themselves, as well as the revivified older people. You didn't know that a generation later somebody would sit in your living roan and tape record it for history. But there was a consciousness that you were breaking new ground, that you were doing something rather remarkable which nobody had really intended or thought would happen. Because it was originally just meant to be a kind of welfare.

JO: That's the remarkable thing to me, the two almost opposing principles of (1) of having good national theatre and on the other hand trying to defeat yourself.

MC: I don't think anybody except Hallie would have taken those particular sets of conditions and ingredients and made a national theatre. She was a woman who came with a great deal of vision and a world knowledge in theatre. If your average Broadway producer had been put in charge, he would have thought in ccnmercial terms. It was the fact that this rare woman who had been to Russia right after the revolution and been to all the world theatres of Europe, who had a world vision and who would have been an extraordinary person in the theatre in any age happened, by a freak set of circumstances, to bring that vision to bear on those circumstances and said to herself, "I can take this unpromising project and I can make America see that it can have significant theatre."

Most people thought that she was just an amateur. That was the attitude to her in .the beginning, "this little professor who is trying to deal with all these pros." She had to buck a lot of that feeling. But it was because she didn't bring a narrow, commercial view to it that Federal Theatre became a kind of national theatre and was able to do things it did at its best. I don' t think that the people who were dealing with her gave her the recognition or response that she should have had. I think, only looking backward and seeing what she accomplished, that people are beginning to respect now what she was. But I, a woman in a world of men, where a woman director was rarely heard of— except for Hallie and Eva Le Gallienne and Margaret Webster—these were my role models. So I was very conscious of her contribution. If it had been anybody else but Hallie Flanagan, there would have been no Orson Welles and no John Houseman, none of that roster of notable people. It would have been a muchmore pedestrian, make-work kind of thing.

JO: Were you in New York before the Federal Theatre? Because the thing that proves that, I think, in a sense is that there was a New York Theatre Relief that was just limited to New York City that didn't do anything memorable. You don't

remember it?
MC: No, I don't.
RS: It was called CE—
JO: CWA, I think.
RS: CWA, Civil Works Administration. It was a forerunner of the WPA.
MC: I think it would have been a fumbling, bureaucratic program without Hallie.
RS: It would have been very safe certainly. It would have done nothing but stage so many standard comedies and melodramas.
MC: She was a brilliant person who was just like a fountain of sparks. She set thingsfcoff. I don't know what the Roosevelt Adninistration would have been like without Eleanor who kept caning in and saying, "Now, Franklin, I've been down in the mines and I know that this must be done." She irritated him, but she introduced a whole different level into his thinking. She supplied a kind of spark and idealisn which contributed greatly to his administration. And Hallie certainly did that same kind of thing in Federal Theatre.
She was also extraordinarily open. You could come to her with all kinds of ideas, "I think we ought to go up to Harlem and do a Macbeth or a Mikado." Most people would have said, "All they can do is a kind of jazzy vaudeville' What do they know about such things?" But she said, "I'm willing to try it." Of course, some of it didn't work, but out of that attitude came many remarkable things.
JO: How about other women in particular? I was thinking of Madalyn O'Shea or other wonen in the Federal Theatre.
MC: I didn't know her well. She must have been a good administrative person but she didn't make much impact on me.
RS: To tell the truth, in her administration, Hallie was the one. Howard Miller or Bill Farnsworth were both good managers.
MC: Eddie Goodman had the respect of the artists in the Experimental Theatre. And while not all the experiments worked, nevertheless there was a sense of ferment and accomplishment in the course of those productions. They were important to the writers because they learned a lot in the process. Eddie Goodman was a man who attracted a lot of bright, creative people who were allowed freedom to work. And all of that was swimming upstream because there was always a sense of bureaucracy: "What are they doing with the taxpayers' money?" kind of set mind. The problem was how to do something artistically effective, yet not have them come down on you from Washington. People were always trying to pin a communist label if anything was progressive. And a lot of the people who worked in the Federal Theatre were later blacklisted in the McCarthy era. There were Marxists on the Project, but the bulk of us were actually just young, ardent people who felt the times were very out of joint.
RS: There were plenty of radicals, but they were not Communists. They were radical in the sense of being social liberals and humanists and forward-looking.
MC: They felt there must be a better system and were trying to find it.
JO: What was the relationship between Goodman and Virgil Geddes?
MC: Well, I knew Virgil better than I knew Eddie Goodman,
JO: Was he earlier or was it a different project?
MC: Virgil was in the Experimental Theatre.
JO: That's what I thought. I wondered if one had replaced the other. Was his Popular Price then, possibly?
MC: No.
RS: They did experimental work, in Goodman's.
MC: There was a man who worked with Virgil. . . I just thought of for the first time in years, James Light. Jinmy Light was a director of the Provincetown Players in the days when Eugene O'Neill was a young writer and they were doing his one-act plays. He directed a play by Virgil Geddes, Native Ground. Virgil was an eccentric man who wrote another play which took place in an undertaker's back

room. And although he was not really a successful playwright, he also attracted interesting, bright people around him.
JO: Was the artistic production part separate frcm or strongly separate frcm the National Service Bureau and Emmet Lavery and the publication—
RS: The National Service Bureau was a service bureau and you applied to them for the things they could provide in the way of services that you needed and wanted. They didn't determine your program.
MC: Did the Federal Theatre do any plays by Enmet at that time?
RS: Runet was running. MC: I know, but I was trying to remember when The First Legion and his plays.
They were done later. Hallie—
JO: The First Legion, I think, was put on in the Midwest possibly.
MC: Not by the Federal Theatre?
JO: Cincinnati or Detroit or. . .
RS: But your artistic program or pattern in each unit was set by the director of the unit in consultation with Hallie when she came through about once every three months or by correspondence and, to a certain extent, with the regional director.
MC: I worked on the Federal Radio Project for a while, too.
JO: I'd really like to know anything about that because I've just started, we've just opened the boxes of those scripts.
MC: We did dozens of those scripts. We used to do them on CBS and on NBC (National Broadcasting Ccmpany) as I recall it.
JO: The commercial networks would give time? Were they cooperative?
MC: Now that I think of it, most were done on WNYC and the local stations. I think we sometimes played on small stations and sometimes on network stations but I'm no longer sure. And as a result of that, I left the Federal Theatre because I became known to some of the directors and producers at CBS and NBC and they began to send for me for jobs on the networks regularly.
It wasn't until I worked on the Federal Radio Project that I discovered I could play all kinds of roles on the air. I began getting so much work that they called me in and said, "Look, you don't need help any more. Git!
You're on your own, you've been launched." I made a pretty good living after that working for the networks.
JO: Was the radio national or was it just in New York? I have a sense it was just in New York but I don't know that.
MC: I can't tell you.
RS: I think it was in New York but sometimes the theatre units in other cities would do radio work.
MC: I don't remember any more, but I do remember how many capable actors came on thei Radio Project and then went on and made fine reputations for themselves.
JO: Who were some of the other New York directors? How was Joseph Losey? And were there others?
MC: Joe Losey was an extremely brilliant young director even then and everybody knew it. He was much acknired when we were all young. I never worked with him, but you knew who the comers were.
JO: Did you see Halsted Welles' Murder in the Cathedral?
MC: Indeed I did. It was a marvelous occasion.
RS: And we played it also at Snith when I was with Hallie.
MC: I recall also a good actor named Frederick Tozere who played in a play about Egypt. He played the pharaoh in a long-run hit on Federal Theatre. He became a well-known actor as a result of that performance.
RS: I'll tell you somebody you should talk to if you haven't and that's Muriel Rukeyser.
MC: That would be the Writer's Project.
RS: She was, very close to Hallie and Hallie used her poetry in productions

sometimes.
JO: I have her name, I have it right here.
RS: She was very close to Hallie.
JO: Was Hallie, both during Federal Theatre and in her later years—how did the career and family get along? She had two daughters.
RS: She had a very tragic life. Very early in her life she was married to Flanagan and he died—what was it, cerebral, something like that—when she had just known—
JO: Federal Theatre?
RS: No, long before that. She was only in her twenties.
RS: . . .bringing this latent imagination that she had to bear and was doing some distinguished
work. Somebody who saw her work and thought it was worth something brought the man who was in charge of the Guggenheim, that wanderful man, who was head of the Guggenheim Foundation grants for so long. He said, "Oh, I've seen college productions of Shakespeare." But his friend said, "Well, you haven't seen this one!" He saw it and afterwards he went back-stage to Hallie and said, "You're going to be the first woman Guggenheim fellow." And that took her to Russia for the first time. She came back and wrote Shifting Scenes.
MC: Some of that material was published in Theatre Arts at the time, wasn't it?
RS: Then she got the offer from Vassar and was there for many, many years. And just a year or so before she went to Washington for Federal Theatre, she married Philip Davis who was History?—
JO: The Classics?
RS: Classics. That's right. Theirs was a very happy but a very short marriage. A year or so after she left Federal Theatre and came back to Vassar, he died.
MC: And the two girls were not her girls.
RS: Were his. He had three children who were just about so big. And his family and his first wife's family—she had died; he was a widower—wanted to divide the kids up. But Hallie said, "They've grown up together." That is, they were five or six, with one pair of twins. "I think it would be very cruel to separate them. I'll take them all." And the family said, "All right but it's your responsibility. Hallie brought up these three kids as if they were her own. Her own son died very tragically some years ago.
MC: One of those girls married Eric Bentley but is now divorced. The other girl married well also.
RS: And the adopted son is out in Chicago teaching at University of Chicago, I believe or Northwestern, teaching History.
JO: She had a cousin at Ann Arbor. Did you knew that?
RS: Sure, knew her very well.
MC: Mrs. Youtz was a very bright woman 'til the day she died. She had Hallie's spunk and spirit. Hallie was a pretty weman, a feminine woman, charming, petite.
JO: Yes. There are good pictures of her.
MC: I don't think she photographed very well. Again like Eleanor Roosevelt, when you saw her, she was charming. I remember a production that her husband, Philip, wrote, Trojan Incident, in New York at the Martin Beck Theatre, a Broadway house. Howard Bay who, I guess, started his career with the Federal Theatre and who is one of our most distinguished designers, designed the sets and the costumes. He had created long leather leggings for the Greek soldiers. They were of pure glove leather and they looked weird at the dress rehearsal. So they took shears and they whacked 'em off but nobody realized what the legs underneath that glove leather looked like. And on opening night, the curtain went up on a frieze of Greek warriors. And the audience just burst out laughing. There were bow legs, knobby knees, hairy legs. It was the most pathetic collection of male limbs I ever saw on a stage 1 I still remember one Southern soldier. He later played in

Hymn to the Rising Sun and the preacher in another one of Paul Green's plays for the Federal Theatre and he was damned good in that kind of Southern regional thing, but he was no damned good in Greek drama! I can still hear him saying, "Out of ma way, wimnen. Heah ccmes the lord o' you-all, Menelaus!" The audience burst out laughing. Tamiris was a brilliant dancer who did the choreography. She also played Cassandra, the prophetess, and she had two—they were supposed to be torches—in her hands,
but they looked like ice cream comes. She squatted down in the footlights and began applying these things, point forward, vigorously. And my mother-in-law, who was a gynecologist and obstetrician, said, "She's gonna bring on an abortion if she does that!" (Laugh) It simply didn't work fran start to finish! And yet it had some brilliant people connected with it, but everything went wrong. We used to call it "Trojan Accident" it was just so bad.

JO: How about the Living Newspapers? You mentioned them before.

MC: One-Third of a Nation was the one that I think anyone who ever saw a Living Newspaper still remembers as being the most exciting. That was the one that just really rocked us all back.

RS: Power was very strong and Triple-A Plowed Under.

MC: They were fine, but there was sonething about One-Third of a Nation.

RS: Well, particularly to New Yorkers. It had a magnificent set.

MC: That was Howard Bay, if I'm not mistaken.

RS: It was done in many places with different sets. For instance, the first product ion of it was at Vassar, as you probably know, when Hallie one year ran a summer session for FIP directors on the Vassar campus. They chose to do a living newspaper, and they didn't have anything like Bay's set. But they had hanging from the flies a dripping faucet, a broken toilet seat, and things like that.

MC: Symbolic things.

RS: All over the country, people did their own variations.

MC: Was it not Hallie's work at Vassar in creating and pioneering that form of theatre that later was taken oyer and done at the Federal Theatre? It started at Vassar, didn't it, in what she called her Experimental Theatre?

JO: That's one of my questions. She wrote a play called Can You Hear Their Voices that she writes as being the first Living Newspaper. Elmer Rice says that it was purely American and it came out of newspapers. Some other people have since said that it was European and I wondered if you—

MC: She was interested in expressionistic theatre; she had gone over to Europe and seen experimental things which very few Americans had,. and was very influenced by them. But my impression is that the whole Living Newspaper technique evolved out of the work she had been doing at the Experimental Theatre at Vassar.

RS: Another highlight was the opening of It Can't Happen Here in, what was it? 40 theatres at once!

JO: I wanted to ask you about that.

RS: It's time for that to be played again, I think.

MC: An updated version. It could happen here and Sinclair Lewis knew it.

JO: How did that go across the nation?

RS: Oh, terrific. But reactionary Congressmen cited it as being radical.

MC: You constantly had to be looking over your shoulder when you did some thing worthy' or interesting or innovative for fear that it wouldn't seem to sone primitive in Washington that you were doing something "revolutionary" or "radical." And this caught up with many good people later on. So many people got trapped by that fact.

JO: Did you knew that both Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams wrote their first plays for the Federal Theatre?

MC: Arthur wrote his first play for Federal Theatre?

JO: Actually it was a Hopwood play. And then submitted to the Federal Theatre and they put it on in Detroit.
MC: What was the title?
JO: For the Hopwood it was called something like No Villains. And then for the Federal Theatre it was rewritten slightly and called They Too Arise. And it's very similar to All My Sons and Death of a Salesman. All those remarkably moral, autobiographical—
RS: What was Tennessee's first?
JO: We don't have those scripts though and they haven't been published—at least I haven't come across them yet.
MC: I wonder if he has a copy. Have you talked to him?
JO: We've written him but I haven't gotten a response. I got a response saying they didn't produce the play. (Laugh)
MC: Where did you say, St. Louis?
JO: New Orleans, the Federal Theatre in New Orleans. He had applied for the the Federal Theatre in Chicago and they didn't accept him. (Laugh) How was New Orleans as a city? We don't have much of their material. I'm surprised by the amount of material out of Southwest, but there's not much—
MC: There were so many writers, a number of them from the Southwest, were rising then. There was a whole Southern writers' movement going on at the time. So it was very logical that there would have been a lot of activity in the Southwest area. But the South itself was still pretty primitive culturally and those cities were terribly hard hit by the Depression. Savannah was a slum and Charleston was hard hit, New Orleans very hard hit. People were having an awful time economically down there. It would be a wonder if they were able to come up with—
JO: As far as I can tell, there was the North Carolina Players which was building on at the University.
MC: At Chapel Hill. It's always the case when you have a fine artistic leader. They had Paul Green and Sam Selden so they had two trained leaders. That was the period though when the beautiful theatre in Charleston, which was one of the first theatres ever built in the nation, was being rehabilitated by the WPA. It was all such an eon ago and I was so young at that time I never dreamed that any of it would be significant or important so I have no connected or collected memories of it. (Laugh) You get historic so fast now that you hardly move on before they're doing theses on you.
JO: One other thing, that there's a woman at George Mason; she has been working with us on this project but she's became very interested in Hallie Flanagan and is thinking about doing a biography or trying a biography . . .
MC: I wish: somebody would.
JO: ... and has been in contact with the daughters. And Hallie has a brother who is living in Evanston and she has written him.
RS: Is it Norman Davis? JO: No, I'd recognize it but—and he has letters and things like that.
The executrix, Mrs. Johe —
MC: You mean Franky's executrix, Johe, Yes.
JO: Yes. Has been wanting to—all those letters for—
MC: Between Hallie and Franky?
JO: To open those letters, yeah.
RS: Her husband is Associate Dean of Architecture—Johe.
JO: Oh, I didn't know that.
RS: I have forgotten his first name.
JO: Herbert.
MC: So she has a lot of correspondence between Hallie and Franky?
JO: Yeah and the woman that's interested hasn't seen it yet but is thinking about—well, she's applied to a couple of places for grants to do research.

MC: Oh, I hope she does. I hope they give her something.
JO: Would you be willing to speak to her if she—
RS: Oh, sure.
MC: Oh, sure.
RS: You know, most of us had a fanatical devotion to Hallie, just fanatical. We would have lain down in front of a streetcar, as they had in those days, if she'd said to.

(End of Interview)