

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW
with CLARENCE TALBOT

by Karen Wickre
for the

RESEARCH CENTER FOR THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT
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KW: I don't need dates particularly.

CT: Well, that's good.

KW: Dates I can even tell you, as a matter of fact.

CT: You probably could.

KW: More just how you got started, what your theatre background was up to that point. This is a program with some pictures of you.

CT: Oh, my word!

KW: And how you learned about the Federal Theatre. And from then, what you remember.

CT: From now on it's total blank. (Laugh)

KW: Some of these might help. (Shows pictures).

CT: My word! How you ^{have} gotten ahold of these things! It's amazing.

KW: That's a story in itself.

CT: Oh, yes.

KW: These are just kept together so I'd know what was what.

CT: You have the dates on these things as to when they started?

KW: Yes.

CT: What do you want to know first?

KW: Well, what was your theatre background up to that point and where were you and how did you hear about the Federal Theatre?

CR: Well, I had had about three seasons in stock and one season in circuit one of the rep with/ very fine western dramatic companies that was the Moroni Olsen Players. They were doing nothing but very fine pieces of theatric literature. Then I came back and went to school. I was going to the University of Washington at the time, and I decided that I would lay out for a year and go back into broadcasting.

And the University called me — the Drama Department at the University of Washington — and wanted to know if I'd be interested in going to Tacoma as a district supervisor for the Federal Theatre Project. Frankly, up to that time, I hadn't heard much about 'em.

KW: Who called you? Guy Williams?

CT: I think it was Guy Williams.

KW: Or Glenn Hughes or. . . .

CT: Well, Glenn was head of the department there at the time. Frankly, I don't remember just who made the call. I think Glenn had an idea. I had been working with the off-campus theatres there. One little theatre we had off campus, studio theatre, seated 60 people. And we made enough money in one year on that that Glenn Hughes could afford to build his Showboat Theatre down on the waterfront. So it was a rather successful operation. That was the year we had Frances Farmer with us for our director.

Anyway, I think Hughes had an idea that to get me a job to tide me over the summertime and so on would get me back in school earlier. Well, it didn't quite work out that way. (Laugh).

So I went to Tacoma as the district supervisor and project director. The project there was a joint — they had a sponsorship setup in most cities, and the Drama League in Tacoma was the local sponsoring group. And we had a small building down in Old Town, down by the old fishing wharves. It was two store buildings side by side. One of them we built the theatre in and the adjacent one we used for rehearsal hall, construction hall, offices and so forth.

And we did a series of — first when I got in there we were doing a

series of evenings of one-act plays. Then they got the bright idea that they would make this a showcase for Northwest playwrights. And Northwest playwrights who had a piece that they wanted to stage would present it to the state offices in Seattle and if it was approved, they would assign it to us to put into production.

And from there I don't recall how long in months exactly — it was pretty close to a year — that the Tacoma Project lasted. Well then, of course, we did It Can't Happen Here and oh, a couple of the other

KW: Do you remember In His Image? Too Lucky? Girl Wants Glamour?

CT: Yeah.

KW: M.D.? I couldn't find anything on that.

CT: That was one I wrote.

KW: Yeah, that's what I thought. But you don't have a production bulletin for some reason. In fact, most all of those you were the director of the play.

CT: Yes.

KW: And an actor in some?

CT: Well, we didn't have a very large company, so we handed out parts to everyone who could play a role. And I was the stage director and producer on the show.

KW: How was that to have those multiple roles? Was it complicated?

CT: Not for a dyed-in-the-wool theatre bum. If you/ ^{were} the type of individual who thoroughly enjoyed doing anything around the theatre, why naturally this came off very well.

And they decided to consolidate the theatre project in the state of Washington and put them all under one roof in Seattle. So they

closed the project in Tacoma, moved it lock, stock and barrel to Seattle. And I was then the project director for the white dramatic company. They had a variety unit in Seattle as well. This outfit would get together and put together variety entertainments that they would take out to oh, field houses in city parks during the season, of course.

KW: That was made up of like old vaudevillians and that kind of thing?

CT: Yes, dancers, jugglers and the variety act type of thing. And then they had a group of Negroes. We were not enlightened to the point where we referred to them as blacks or anything else. They were Negroes, and they didn't know what in the world to do with them. So they set up a Negro dramatic company as well. So they had three companies out of the Seattle Project and I had charge of the white dramatic company.

KW: They didn't mix for any productions?

CT: No, they didn't mix. Of course, mind you, this is 40 years ago.

KW: Oh, I know. Occasionally I gathered there were some kinds of plays where you needed both blacks and whites.

CT: Yes.

KW: But as a rule there were separate black units.

CT: Yeah. That seemed to be the pattern we were following.

And while I was at the Seattle unit I was one of five directors that was picked. Now, who picked them I don't know. It was not a contest that you entered or anything you made application for. But I was one of five directors out here on the West Coast that was picked to participate in a Rockefeller grant for the experimental summer session

at Vassar. So I went back there, and while I was at Vassar I found out that I had lost my position in Seattle. Why? No reason ever given, but would I take a job as state director in Iowa.

So I went back to Seattle and packed my toothbrush and we drove to Des Moines, Iowa. And where the Seattle projects were pretty well organized — I don't remember who the state director was for them at that time, but he was a guy who had had considerable experience in theatre management.

KW: George Hood?

CT: Hood, yeah. What a memory you have! (Laugh)

KW: With me it's not memory; it's just study. (Laugh)

CT: So the companies were pretty well organized. They had the variety in it. They had a chap that had formerly been the leading tenor for the American Light Opera Company by the name of Harry Pfeil, P-f-e-i-l. And there was a guy who really had a background in professional theatre, you see. So we had enough elements of professionals there that we had a certain cohesion and a certain functional capability, a functional potential that made it a viable organization. It worked.

And I got to Iowa and nobody, outside of the people on the project there, seemed to be very much interested in whether they had a Federal Theatre or not, you know. "Well, we've got funds for it and we've got it established." I don't know what happened to the director that was in ahead of me at Iowa.

KW: Don Farran?

CT: I don't know. I never knew him. But anyway, I came into a situation which was then — how would you say it? Dry rot hadn't set in but it was separating out. It was not staying as an homogenous group.

We looked around for a suitable building and I think the state director of the Arts projects was a woman named Jessie Hanthorn. And in discussing this with her, the Federal Theatre Project was told that there was just no place in town that we could get for a theatre. There was no abandoned theatre or dark theatre that we could get into on a rental basis or anything else. There were no store buildings that we could get into and remodel, even on a primitive artsy-craftsy type of theatre project basis.

KW: What had they been using? Do you know?

CT: I don't know. They'd just been. . . .

KW: There was something going on before but what I don't know.

CT: Up to the time I got there, the background on that project in Iowa is lost in obscurity. I honestly don't know. Anyway, we decided to — it was an all-white company — and we decided to make a touring company out of it; that we would take the theatre to the hinterlands.

Well again, we have to put this within a time frame of reference. For example, we did Eugene O'Neill's Ah, Wilderness. And at that time, 1936, 1937, there was some dialogue in the script that we thought might be a little earthy for a non-metropolitan, non-sophisticated audience. So we went through and gently rewrote this a little, you know, to soften it.

Well, you can imagine what happened when we took Eugene O'Neill up into True, Trere, Storm Lake, Boone, Ames, some of these towns in Iowa. And people would come in off of their ranches to the local town hall to see Eugene O'Neill's Ah, Wilderness. And they'd get back in their cars and go home and wonder what in hell they ever came to town for, you know.

I mean, even though we had tried to temper this down to a point they

could identify with. We played a parish house in Indianola, which was just across from Des Moines. And I didn't get there for the opening night. We were booked in there for two nights, and I got over there the second night about 5:00 to see how they were coming with the setup. There were no seats up and all the props were in crates and the scenery was all packed up. I said, "Hey, what gives? Don't you know you got a 7:00 curtain tonight or 7:30 curtain?" whatever it was.

They said, "Not tonight."

I said, "Why not?"

"Well, the parish priest was in last night and saw our opening night and we closed right after the show." (Laugh) Opened in one and closed in the alley.

So this was the type of reaction that we were getting in Iowa. Now, this was in accord with the recommendations that we were getting from the national office.

KW: The play selection?

CT: Yes. Now, Hallie Flanagan — I don't know whether — is she still alive?

KW: No, she died in 1961.*

CT: I shall try not to speak too unkindly of those departed.

KW: Well, you can if you want to.

CT: But Hallie Flanagan, of course, was a good personal friend of Eleanor Roosevelt. And she was placed in charge of a program which was designed to reemploy and rehabilitate professional theatrical people. And while she may have been a theatre buff by nature, her

*She died in 1969. KW, ed.

skirts had never been sullied by the crass commercialism of the professional theatre. In other words, we had a woman in charge of a national program who honestly did not have any knowledge, any depth knowledge of what the needs of the professional actor or a professional performer were. And she felt and expressed this on many occasions — Hallie Flanagan had expressed this — that the reason the American theatre had not survived was because it had not stayed contemporary.

KW: I've read that.

CT: It had not grown; it had not given the public new things. So she embarked upon a program to try and bring new theatre to the public.

KW: Yes. Her background was college theatre.

CT: Right, which I feel was a mistake. Now, to introduce things from new authors or works that had not been well established in theatric literature, great. Every play was a new play at one time. But she did this with a total disregard for what would happen at the box office.

Now, in larger cities, Los Angeles, New York, Mercury Theatre, you know, all the rest of this jazz, you were playing the numbers racket. You had enough people that would go to the theatre regardless of what was being shown if here's something new. Well, let's go see what it is. But if you got into the provinces of the United States — and I'm speaking in terms of provincial attitudes — people who went out and spent a couple of bucks for a theatre ticket expected something that they could understand in the area of conventional theatrical entertainment. They wanted mysteries, they wanted comedies, they wanted romantic stories. They would still buy Daddy Longlegs. They'd

still buy The Prisoner of Zenda and you know, all of these things which is — nothing wrong with them.

Just to digress for a moment, some time ago we got into a discussion of what is good theatre. And we were discussing some of the old bills that might be revived or brought back again. And I said in this discussion — I think it was with a group of community theatre people who were starting to organize a play-reading committee. I suggested that something like Seven Keys to Baldpate would still be good theatric entertainment today if it were done well. The whole — "Oh, good heavens, no! Oh! I remember seeing that as a child in a stock company, you know!"

KW: That was the only objection?

CT: Well, yes. It's an old play and they had seen it a long time ago and "Oh, no! Seven Keys to Baldpate!" And it wasn't more than a couple of weeks after that that Hallmark Theatre did it on nationwide television in about a three-hour special. And instead of having a playwright go to this remote lodge to write a play in 24 hours, they had a TV writer go out there to write a TV show. That was the only difference to contemporize it, you see. But the basic elements to good entertainment were still inherent in the piece itself. So those of us in the field, when Hallie Flanagan sent out a recommended list of plays for a season or "We urge that you give these your consideration" type of a memo, those of us in the field interpreted that as almost a mandate. That this season you will do plays from this list only. Don't think for yourself. These are the ones that we have cleared the rights to at a national level. These

we can get for you. These we've got royalty agreements on that it'll only cost so much to do, and you will do a play from this list was our interpretation of it. I don't recall having talked to any of the other directors or producers in the whole setup that did not share that, that when a "recommendation" came down from Hallie Flanagan's office, that was tantamount to a directive that you will do this.

Well, what really took the rag off the bush as far as I was concerned was one winter we got — Hallie Flanagan sent us a rather lengthy little memo in which she was looking back at the morality plays that were done at Christmas time. And wouldn't it be a nice thing, aesthetically, culturally and yes, even spiritually, if the Federal Theatre Project were to take the theatre to the people at Christmas time, take them into the public squares and wagonstage them like they used to do. You know, put them on wagons and build your scenery on it and stage these in the open so people could come to the public square and see these morality plays.

KW: It's a little cold in Iowa then. (Laugh)

CT: And completely disregarding that you can't take angels in gossamer wings and hang 'em out to dry in the middle of an Iowa winter. I mean, it was just; you know, totally unrealistic. So that winter, as I say, the project in Iowa — I dwell on it because it was quite significant to me. I had had no experience previously in any type of government work.

KW: This involved a lot, I know.

CT: So I felt a little like a fish out of water on how you organize this

thing, how you get things done. If our local administrator says, "There is no theatre available; we've looked, forget it. Don't waste any time on this. Go ahead and make a touring company out of it." This sort of thing. Well, I figured that's the way to go. Here's a chain-of-command kind of setup that you follow.

But the project there was not well supported. It had no community sponsor. It was an unsponsored project of the WPA (Works Progress Administration) exclusively. And it, so far as I was concerned, seemed to be deteriorating rapidly. Now, as I say, I am primarily interested and qualified in the areas of stage direction, production and acting. At that time, I had not had administrative experience. I look back now 40 years later and see where I might have been able to do something as a strong administrator. I might have been able to do something to salvage that project in Iowa. But at that time, with the backgrounds I had and the training I had, I was in over my head so far as how do you fight city hall.

KW: Well, you had to deal with the state WPA administration which wasn't always sympathetic.

CT: Yes, that's right. Yeah, the Arts projects — you know, the music, history, etcetera, etcetera, and theatre — the five Arts projects, so far as the rest of the Works Progress Administration is concerned, were an offbreed bunch of cats. They didn't even belong under a Works Progress program. They weren't contributing anything. So in high dudgeon, I resigned from the Federal Theatre projects as a matter of principle. I could not go on in the face of such ridiculous things as "let's wagonstage a Christmas morality play in the middle

of Iowa," you know.

We took one show to Davenport, Iowa in the middle of the winter. I think it was Arms and the Man. We played that a few places around. As Arms and the Man went into production, I was taken violently ill in Des Moines and had to turn the production over to the rest of the company. And we took that to Davenport at which point Hallie Flanagan came out to see it.

Of course, I had been under the doctor's care and I got an okay to drive to Davenport. You see, that's halfway across the state of Iowa. And frankly, it was a god-awful production. The sets had been built so that any back lights shone through the set. You know, no masking for back lighting in entrances or anything like that. It was just a bad show. It wasn't up to the quality of things that we'd done even with the one-act plays in Tacoma.

So we sat up until about 2:00 in the morning in a hotel lobby discussing the future of the Federal Theatre projects in Iowa and no decision was made at that time. It was held in abeyance as it were. I drove back to Des Moines and thought about it all the way back and thought, "This is not worth it. They're asking for impossible results without giving us really the tools to work with." I don't know how this all came about but the chap who was then editor of Liberty Magazine heard about this situation in Iowa and asked me if I would do an article for Liberty Magazine on the Federal Theatre projects. I didn't feel that I had a broad enough overview of the entire projects to really qualify me to do the job. So I backed off from it. I resigned and went to work for KSO-KRNT, the radio stations there.

KW: In Des Moines?

CT: In Des Moines. And as soon as the weather broke so I could drive west, I came back out to Los Angeles. And that ended my experience with the Federal Theatre.

(End of side 1, continued on side 2)

CT: (Remarks re It Can't Happen Here, Tacoma). It was really not a bad show. Now in New York — let's say in megalopolis. We won't put a name on it. In megalopolis, the show could be done well because they had adequate budgets for scenery. You could put the play in a proper setting. They had enough actors to draw upon that they could cast the show well, you know.

In our situation, with a very small company and no money to work with,
we had to say, "Well, there are ¹² parts and we have 12 actors. Obviously, you can't play a 12-year-old girl. We've got to give you a man's part." And we just had to sort 'em out and say, "Maybe this won't fit, but try it on."

This is not making excuses. It is a fact of life, so far as our operation was concerned. We were limited. So I feel that we did a very good show. I thought it was a very good show.

We moved uptown to, I think, the auditorium in the Scottish Rite Building, where the show, instead of being out at the edge of town on the waterfront in an artsy intimate theatre type of thing, you know, we brought it uptown and opened it under situations that would be comparable to a touring attraction coming through and where more of the city of Tacoma would have an opportunity to have access to it because they could get to it easier.

It was greeted with kindly, lukewarm, enthusiasm.

KW: People didn't get upset that it was too controversial or too political?

CT: Not that I recall. We didn't run into the controversial area. We ran into more of an apathetic area because the audiences that we were playing to, both out here in the state of Washington and in the state of Iowa, still were not looking upon the theatre as a sounding board for either social messages or political messages or any of the nouveau concept that Hallie was trying to inculcate into the theatre picture. Now we think nothing about it. We see all kinds of shows: stage, television, motion pictures of social significance. And if it coincides with your own viewpoint as a member of the audience, why fine. If it doesn't, why you just say, "Well, ho hum."

But the attitude of the theatregoer 40 years ago toward the theatric presentation of social significance was strictly one loud raspberry.

They weren't interested in it, really.

like they did
KW: What about the Living Newspaper over in Seattle? But maybe that was closer to home, do you suppose? I mean that had a definite social message.

CT: Well, I think I was still in intellectual isolation over in Tacoma when that was going on in Seattle.

KW: Because that was definitely social but since it was about the industry —

CT: I had no intimate association with that so I couldn't comment on it, you see.

KW: Tell me about M.D., since we have no records on it, for some reason.

CT: Well, I had had three plays that I wrote produced, not by Federal Theatre

however. This was the first one by Federal Theatre and came in under the new authors, new playwrights' deal. It was the story of a doctor whose son had been killed in a — was the victim of a crime. And the criminal shows up to the doctor for treatment. Now, that sounds like a rather trite little old theme. But the switch in this was that there was no way in which the doctor could trap this criminal. He couldn't take him to a hospital. He had to be treated in the office. So under the guise of giving him a tetanus shot, he injects the criminal with an intravenous anesthetic. Now, at that time an i.v. anesthetic was unheard of. Now, of course, sodium pentathol. But 40 years ago this was a laboratory dream that anesthesiologists were looking for, that some day somebody would develop this type of a product which would produce general anesthesia merely by injection into the blood stream. So this, several years ahead of its time, you see, was the product of the M.D.'s research in his own lab. And essentially it was a very simple story plot, but it was almost a character study of this M.D., of his work in developing a new product, his own medical research in his own laboratory, his relationship with his family, what happens when his son is killed. How does he react? Does he take revenge upon the man or what sort of a humanitarian is he? As a doctor what does he do when he is confronted with this sort of a situation? I suppose if I were to see it today on stage, I would think it was a rather dreary little show. But, of course, at the time it was my brain child, you see, and all men's geese are swans.

KW: Was it well received?

CT: Yes, it was. But again, our entire program in Tacoma was quite well

received. But we were under the sponsorship of the Drama League, so we had a certain segment, small as it was, of built-in theatre enthusiasts who would come to shows, who would bring friends, who felt they were participating. "This is part of our program. We sponsor this," you know. So the attitude, the relationship between us and the community was slightly different. We had good press relations in the city and good social and community relations within the community of Tacoma. And it was a very pleasant experience.

KW: How different was it in Seattle? Was there a built-in audience?

CT: Seattle we were working more as a professional theatre company going into a professional theatre, such as the Moore Theatre up there, and staging the show at a fixed box office; and depending upon advertising and promotion to get an audience in the house in the first place and a good enough performance so that we could keep the show running for three or four days, or whatever the schedule on it happened to be. It was a professional theatre project.

KW: There were so many diverse theatrical groups there. It's interesting that they pulled together to do something.

CT: Yeah. We did Warrior's Husband in Seattle and had a lot of fun with it, a thoroughly delightful romp.

A little sidé note: About a month before we were to open with Warrior's Husband -- you know the bill, don't you? Or do you?

KW: I've seen the program.

CT: Well, it's an Amazon story with characters from Greek mythology woven into it. The warriors are the women and the Warrior's Husband is what happens to the -- the turnaround situation and the guy that's left at

home to wash the diapers and do the dishes, you see. As I say, probably not a great, enduring contribution to theatric literature but a good show.

About a month before we were scheduled to open, a Negro company opened, I think it was at the Moore Theatre, with a rather earthy version of Lysistrata. And this was done in what we would think of even today as a rather modern Afro interpretation: a lot of semi-naked bodies. You know, this brown bronze bit all oiled up to glisten under the lights and so on. I didn't see the show. I got reports on it, but apparently the city fathers reviewed the show and objected to the fact that a lot of the action took place on mattresses that they had on stage. The women who refused to be wives to their men as long as their men were out fighting, you see. So the city fathers had no tolerant overtones even when it came to matters of Art, with a capital "A." So they closed the show. Well of course, once they closed it down, everybody in town wanted to see it. Gee, what about that?

And we were not doing too well with advance publicity so we had -- very much off the record. This was not an official Federal Theatre action. You understand? How in hell are we going to get some people in to see Warrior's Husband? Well, we had a couple of guys that went around to cigar stores and card rooms and recreation places where men talk rather freely. And they didn't say that Lysistrata was going to reopen, but "Hey, you know that show that they closed up at the Moore Theatre the other day?"

"Yeah. I wish I had gotten to see that."

"I heard that they're gonna reopen that and call it Warrior's Husband."

They're gonna open it at another theatre." (Laugh) And it worked. We started a word-of-mouth campaign and everybody who wanted to see the show that had been closed came galloping over to see if this was it.

KW: Were they angry afterwards?

CT: No, because they had good entertainment.

KW: That's what you had to do in those days: improvise especially to unfamiliar audiences, shall we say.

CT: We got up in a little town in Iowa called Storm Lake one winter's day, I think it was Storm Lake, and found that there had been no advertising put out by the sponsoring group in that city at all for a show that was gonna open and play there that night. So we went out to a local printer and we got handbills printed up. And every member of the company went out with an armload of these handbills in a snowstorm and stood on the street and passed these out to passerbys to help build an audience for the show that night.

KW: And that worked? You got enough, a fair amount?

CT: It helped. It sure helped.

KW: So the people in Iowa go out in snowstorms, I guess.

CT: Well, it was just starting to snow that afternoon. And they were out there in the falling snow handing out handbills for their performance that night, which is going back in theatre history a long way where the actors did a parade or a ballet or something to help attract the crowd before they got 'em inside.

KW: Yes, even a Punch and Judy show or something like that.

I should have brought -- we had the special edition of The Federal Theatre Magazine that was on "The First Federal Summer Theatre" I think it was called. But there were a lot of pictures of you and different people hanging around and in the different roles in the plays. I think one of yours was a policeman in It Can't Happen Here.

CT: Yeah.

KW: But it described you in one place as an actor, playwright, photographer and magician, all those things. I thought that was interesting. They had different mentions of, you know, different people. And that's where I found out that you went to Iowa, too.

CT: That night, following the play, there was a cast party reception etcetera, etcetera ad nauseam for Eleanor Roosevelt.

KW: Yeah, I was going to say I thought she came to that.

CT: And somehow or other, somebody just in passing said, "Would you see that Mrs. Roosevelt gets to the punch bowl" or something. So I'm still in this policeman's outfit from the show which she knew me as a member of the cast. But none of the Secret Service men who were accompanying her as the President's wife knew who in the hell this cop was, but it must be all right because he's a uniformed policeman. So I was Mrs. Roosevelt's escort that night for this social function and none of her Secret Service people knew who I was or whether I was qualified to be there or not. I was just one of the actors out of the company.

KW: How was she?

CT: A very pleasant personality, a very nice personality.

KW: Did she like this production?

CT: They put on one hell of a production. They only did the first half of

the show, the first third of it. But, my God, they brought up enough theatre. They had lighting equipment from New York that you could have lit the Hippodrome with it. And they spared no expense. Well, obviously it came off beautifully. They had fantastic theatre lighting that was years ahead of its time, really.

KW: Yeah. Abe Feder, I think, did it.

CT: Yeah. And they brought in so many lights that we spent several days putting new lines up in the grid up over the stage to hang pipes to put lights on, putting up new pulleys and ^{sheaves} and new sets of lines and pretty near rebuilt the backstage thing to accommodate the extra equipment they brought in to do half of a show; which shows what you can do if you have the money to spend and the manpower to do it.

KW: I wonder if that summer is what worked it into such a successful show later.

CT: It didn't hurt.

KW: All the people input, you know, that went on probably made it what it became.

CT: Now, do you want any information on that summer session thing?

KW: Sure.

CT: I'll just broadstroke it for you. Mind you, you've got a bunch of ex-professional theatre people up there in a rather sterile academic environment. And that same summer, this being one of the first of the coeducational summer sessions ever held at one of the big Eastern girls' schools, but since then all of them have had them.

There was a euthenics group, young parents for the most part. They had their children parked in a scientific and hygienic nursery school while

they studied the science of living. And they were taking it all very seriously. Well, the theatre group would sit on one-half of a big dining hall and the euthenics group sit on the other half and like a Quaker meeting, the males shall not mingle with the females or, you know, the groups didn't mix at all. They could have had a lot of fun had they decided — but no, this is your section. You stay over here. And somebody from the euthenics group was always getting up in the dining hall and tinkling a spoon against a glass, you know, call for attention and announcing that tomorrow the Social Director had two scenic trips planned to Bear Mountain. And they'd go into great lengths about this and sit down amidst a round of modest and polite applause, you see, for the dull announcement that they had just made at which point somebody from the theatre group would get up and clank a spoon against a glass and say, "I would like to announce that I have about three good lots in Mill Valley left out in California. If anybody's interested in ^{some} real estate, see me after dinner," and sit down again, totally nonsequitur, you know. It got to the point where everybody on our side of the room was breaking up and everybody on the other side of the room was gettin' their nose out of joint because they felt that we were making fun of these inane bloody announcements that they were making, which in fact it was. But they finally decided that they would have a party one night where everybody was invited and the theatre people would put on the entertainment.

Well, I remember one act, for example, that I think the people from the euthenics group were rather looking for oh, some little ship's concert type of thing, you know. And here were a variety of performers and so

on that were doing all sorts of things. And one red-headed guy from New York City got up and did a fantastic pantomime, a really fine piece of mime acting of a woman getting into a tub of hot water. And the eutheatics people seemed to think that that was not vulgar, but just not quite up to the class of things they had expected to see and the theatre people all broke up over it. You know, they were all lying on the floor rolling in it because the guy was a fantastic mime. So we had these divergent opinions.

Well, in the theatre section, these people came from all over the country and had no indoctrination as to what to expect. So when they got there, they found they were getting courses in eurythmics and interpretive body movement and how you would toss an imaginary balloon to your partner over here and how they would catch it. Now, how would you toss a basketball? Well, that's heavier, different shape, and so on. Without any reason as to why these exercises were important.

So what would happen would be, after dinner some of the gang would go into Poughkeepsie and bend the elbow at the local tavern and put away a few beers and they'd come out and take off their shoes and get out on the lawn in front of this dormitory and go through these burlesque versions of scarf dances and the burlesque versions of passing a bird from hand to hand and their own burlesque version of the balloon dance thing. It's too bad that could never have been recorded on film or something because here were some really top interpretive people that were having fun with something -- not to put it down. This wasn't really a putdown. It was something they didn't understand and the only way they could really identify with it at all was to give it an

application that fit into their ken. And the people who were sponsoring, who were our supervisory people, shall we say our staff people at the summer theatre there, took this very badly. They didn't think it was funny. They'd had complaints that we were keeping some of the other people awake in the dormitory buildings (Laugh). Besides, they weren't supposed to be out on the grass in the first place, and there was a big chap — why 40 years later memory comes back of a name — a big, heavysset Spanish-American type from down in Florida by the name of Luis Aparicio. And whether he had a Spanish-American or a Mexican theatre group down there or what, I don't know. Nobody ever found out much from him. He was ^a very portly individual. And he came to these things and sat through them stoically and never had much to say. And as a result, they felt that Luis Aparicio was not getting anything out of it, that he was a negative influence, and they sent him home.

KW: Gee! I wonder why they didn't assume just the opposite, that he knew — I don't know.

CT: And oh, many of us were called into the office for interviews about this unseemly behavior of the theatre group which, if they had known anything about theatrical people, would have known that's the way these people play. This is the way they have fun is entertaining themselves and their friends, you see, with the things they do, the things they know. So the theatre project there at Vassar, in review by the administrative people, would probably be considered something of a fiasco. They got a lot of work done, but I think they would have probably felt in retrospect that there was much of it that was not taken seriously and much of it that was wasted on people that didn't appreciate it. And yet, that was

not really the case.

KW: Don't you think it was good to learn about different regions' experiences and meet these people from other places involved in —

CT: But we didn't have a chance to have any rap sessions with these people, to do much experimentation or discussion with: Do you mix blacks and whites in a dramatic company? Do you have a dance group? Or it's all black or it's all white. Or it's all modern or it's all classical. There could have been a great deal of exchange among these people from various backgrounds and from all parts of the nation that could have proven to be a very healthy thing had provision been properly made for these people to get together under the right sort of circumstances for a real let-your-hair-down type of confrontation or. . . .

KW: Some kind of exchange?

CT: Yeah.

KW: I think I might have a note somewhere that would solve why you got to go there. Ah! The people who went were chosen by the National Policy Board, whatever that is, after lists were submitted by assistant directors. And those who got to go had qualifications and accomplishments which would justify additional training and later responsibilities. That is a quote from that magazine. So someone knew you and knew your stuff.

CT: I would say when we started out under a sponsorship setup and so on, we were doing good work, really good work. And we did some good shows in Seattle. But, as I say, when we got to Iowa I felt that the whole thing there deteriorated.

KW: Let me ask you about a few names. Just tell me what, if anything, you remember about them. The Jameses. Were you there when they were?

CT: Oh, the Jameses were in Seattle for a long time and were very prominent. They started with a private artistic theatre company and then opened what they called the Repertory Playhouse.

(End of side 2, continued on side 3)

CT: The Jameses finally put together ^{under} their own private sponsorship and donors and so on, a beautiful little playhouse which still exists out in the university district in Seattle. And they were doing some very fine theatre, very good theatre, and they were running a pleasant competition to what we were doing from the University with the Studio Theatre and the Penthouse Theatre. You see, off-campus theatrical projects.

Unfortunately, about that time I think it was Florence James became quite liberal-minded apparently and got involved with some groups that were regarded as Communist. And their little playhouse, rightfully or wrongfully — I never knew the facts on it — but it got tarred with the brush of being a Communist stronghold. This is where the Jameses are taking our young people and molding them to Communist philosophy, you see. And that could not be tolerated. Somehow or other, that was a reputation they got that stayed with them. They apparently couldn't shake it, and their patronage from the affluent section of Seattle's theatregoing society, of course, dwindled. I never knew what happened to them ultimately, but they have vanished into limbo at this point, so far as I know.

KW: I don't know what happened to them after either.
How about Edwin O'Connor? Do you remember him?

CT: Don't know the name.

KW: I think he might have come after you were in Iowa. He was the — I think he followed Hood or — he was also a stage director at the same time. How about Esther Porter?

CT: Doesn't ring a bell.

KW: She was a Seattle director, but she went late, too. I think you were already out by then. Glenn Hughes you knew from, I guess, the University.

CT: The University, yes.

KW: Blanche Morgan?

CT: Oh, yes. She was with us on the Tacoma Project. Blanche Morgan was a very talented gal, a designer, and she did our sets for us, of course. Later she went to Seattle and was in the Art Department for I believe it was the Frederick and Nelson Department Store there, which is a Marshall Field store.

KW: That's right, I heard that, a department store.

CT: And a very capable gal, very well qualified, and has probably gone on to more mature successes in the art field, in the commercial art field, since —

KW: I'm not sure. It seems to me she might have stayed with the department store for quite a while. That's what I heard.

Do you keep in contact with anybody at all from those days?

CT: Nope, unfortunately.

KW: I really don't know who is in Tacoma. This is a list of how Federal Theatre started and then we have been adding to it or changing, whatever, just a list of productions and who was where when as near as we can figure.

Seattle is there but Tacoma is in the pages beneath.

CT: (Looks at production lists). Florence James and Burton James. I didn't know that they had ever directed for the Federal Theatre.

KW: They did for a while and then I guess they left to really work on theirs.

CT: Lysistrata, African version. Censored and closed. Hmm. Harry Pfeil.

KW: Yeah. He was what? The head of the vaudeville unit?

CT: Yeah, head of the vaudeville unit. Did the Mikado.

(Reads) May not have actually been produced. Seattle Rep.

KW: What's that?

CT: The Leading Man. We did that.

KW: You did?

CT: Yeah. We did it in Tacoma.

KW: That probably means somebody couldn't find any other records on it but that was easy to happen.

CT: It's amaizin'. That's what it is, 'arry. It's amaizin'. (Cockney dialect)

KW: I even found this here in the Archives, you'll be pleased to know.

Maybe you won't be pleased to know, but I went hunting in the Archives.

And that's just a letter, I guess, for plugs. You wanted to write an article for the Federal Theatre Magazine and were hoping for more support.

(Silence while reads production lists)

CT: How about that? Your past reaches up to bite you.

KW: Were you in contact much with Howard Miller or some of the other more southerly West Coast supervisors?

CT: I liked Howard very much personally so I welcomed any opportunity that I had to see him or be in touch with him or get back to him, you know.

Whatever happened to him ultimately, I have no idea.

KW: Well, he's in Los Angeles. I think he was more an administrative type over the years.

CT: Yeah.

KW: He worked for United Way the last I heard and then he quit because he was just traveling constantly. And so I think now he's basically retired. But he's still around. He has a garage full of stuff he's promised to give us. He's in good health and everything, I think.

CT: I'd like to see him again sometime.

Anything else that you think I might be able to provide that would be of any value to you?

KW: How about an opinion? Can you see another Federal Theatre? Would you want to? Do you think we need one?

CT: Well, let's put it this way: I think that the United States muffed its greatest opportunity to have a national theatre by top-level administrative mismanagement or misdirection of the Federal Theatre Project. They had the structure all there, the basic organization was started. They could have put that in such a position that these companies could have been self-sustaining. These actors could, in fact, have been reemployed and rehabilitated, and it would not have been an impossible project to update their thinking to new expressions in the theatric form. You know, new concepts of plays are going to have more social consciousness; plays are going to deal with controversial issues; plays are going to, or the theatre is going to, depart from the mold in which it has been cast up 'til now, now meaning the time of the Federal Theatre Project.

But I feel that with somebody like Hallie Flanagan at the head of it who really didn't have any insight into professional theatre, that it would be like taking somebody who is a weekend pilot with a private license and suddenly handing them a 747 and say, "Fly it."

"Well, there are things about it I don't know. There are things about it I don't understand. I know what gets it airborne and so on, but if this gauge or this meter or this light goes on, I don't know what it means. I don't know how to cope with this thing."

But Hallie had all the self-assurance in the world that she knew what she was doing. And as I say, I think that under federal sponsorship, if they could have run alongside it and, you know, pushed with the foot occasionally to keep it running with grants and subsidies and where they could, get local community sponsorship co-sponsoring a deal to help integrate this into the areas of community interest and community support, I think it could have gone a long way toward developing theatrical companies that would have endured today. Because, good heavens, pretty near every city now has a civic theatre, a drama group of some sort that is serving a community-felt need and desire to either be an actor or work around a stage or go to shows or "Let's do something around a theatre." I think that the Federal Theatre could have been a wonderful thing. There's so much that could have been done with it if the accent had not been so much on departure as on a guided departure from what the theatre had been offering the public. Even when we did a series of ^{new} plays by Northwest playwrights, they were well supported. They didn't have to be carbon copies of Broadway successes. And as I say, if Ah, Wilderness goes well in Denver, Colorado, it might not go well in a more provincial

section of the country.

So, as I say, this little lack of insight which I think was a very, very unfortunate thing. Would I like to see another one?

Yes, if it could avoid the pitfalls that befell the first Federal Theatre Project. Do I think that another one would be forthcoming?

No. Unfortunately and the reason I say that, in missing the boat with Federal Theatre Project, they lost a great opportunity to have a national theatre. Because this country has never been noted for patronizing or subsidizing its arts, in any of its art forms.

Symphonies, chamber music, authors, poets, actors, producers, all have a tough time surviving, let alone finding sponsorship. And in our culture I think we are now so concerned with whether we're gonna buy a new type of bomber or whether we'll make the old bomber carry a new type of missile and how much is it gonna cost. What? Set aside money to employ a bunch of actors? You're out of your mind! Somebody's been shakin' your tree, you know. No way! I just don't think that there is any way that, without a tremendous educational program, that we could get the public around to the point of accepting this or accepting the need for it. But, too bad.

KW: You stayed in radio and communications and that kind of thing?

CT: I stayed in broadcasting and communications. Then in 1958 I went over to England and got my Bachelor of Science in Communications. And a little later on I got my doctorate in behavioral studies. For about 15 years I had my own motion picture company. That is, I was the managing director of Empire Films Corporation in which course of time I wrote and produced more than 300 motion pictures.

KW: What kind of movies were they?

CT: These ran all the way from a short television commercial up to 45 minute to an hour featurettes for sponsorship use, that sort of thing.

I sold the studio and went out as the head of the Audio-Visual Department for American Sign and Indicator Corporation. They work all over the United States. And I left them about four years ago and am now in the process of setting up a communications consultant service. I have a chap up in Spokane who has had quite a bit of experience in this field in New York and for personal reasons came out West — for his wife's health actually and she passed away a couple of years ago. He stayed on. So we're going into the communications field.

(End of interview)