TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW
with DALE WASSERMAN

by Mae Mallory Krulak
for the

RESEARCH CENTER FOR THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT
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DW: What I find here is my stage manager's script of Johnny Johnson.

MK: So you did work on the production of Johnny Johnson?

DW: Oh, yes. And I was also stage manager on the Nativity plays and I find my work scripts of those. Sometime in the past I had a flock of 8 x 10 photos of various shows that I worked on with the Federal Theatre, but they seem to have disappeared. They exist somewhere. I haven't located them. What I did locate was a lot of shots of rehearsals that I saw that I was making with my own camera. And I have both the shots and the negatives if they are of any interest to you.

MK: All of this would be just great, of really great interest to us. Would you start out and tell me how you got involved with Federal Theatre and if it was with the Los Angeles unit through your whole experience with Federal Theatre.

DW: Well, I was living on rooftops in Los Angeles and had gotten involved with theatre through left-wing activities. And at the age of about 18 or 19, I was working with various action theatre companies in Los Angeles. The Contemporary Theatre was one, the so-called Rebel Players was another. It was real street theatre then . . . not /so/ late an invention as people think. And when WPA (Works Progress Administration) came along, I, like a number of others who had worked on the fringes of theatre and tried to make a living at it but not really succeeded, got into Federal Theatre. I think I was only 19; I may have been 18 at the time I got in there. I had a director's classification, I believe, but there were no shows for me. I was too young and I was unknown and certainly the truth is, not experienced

enough. Very cocky but inexperienced. . . . So I worked as a stage manager. I was assigned to shows as a stage manager there. I don't think I could name the list of shows that I worked on. It included two O'Neill plays and a great extravaganza called The Teller of Tales based on Arabian Nights, I think, which was rather curious because I'm in the midst of writing /a/ movie on Scheherazade for Universal at this moment, a very different, a very erotic one.

Two very interesting things happened to me there. One, I was assigned to the Yiddish Theatre as stage manager. Well, that was a comedy . . . as an assignment because I knew not a word of the language and I had no background in the culture. However, it was rather fun but it was harrowing insofar as I learned that writing down cue lines and memorizing cue lines was almost useless. They rarely spoke the same line twice. But they did plays both in Yiddish and English, sometimes interchangeably. They did Awake and Sing that way, for instance, both languages.

MK: Did you have a part in Awake and Sing? Or were you stage manager?

DW: . . . I was stage manager of that. I also had played parts from time to time but only very minor ones. I never had any real interest in acting.

The other thing that happened to me in Federal Theatre, the beautiful opportunity that opened was really in lighting. I have a natural interest in lighting. It seemed to me the least exploited and the most fertile for development in theatre. I asked for an assignment to Myra Kinch's dance company in terms of doing stage management and lighting, mostly because there was an opportunity to practice lighting.

Then I got rather good at it. It was an opportunity to experiment without too harsh criticism and since there weren't many people that knew much about it, it was a nice, exciting field to follow. And the reason for my specializing in lighting after the Federal Theatre was actually the training or the self-training that I got while there.

MK: So that did become your special field in Federal Theatre?

DW: For several years. That's how I ended up with a dance company, how I ended up with Katherine Dunham for a number of years. She actually had, as I remember, sought me out because she had heard that I could do dance lighting. And then with a number of other companies I did lighting. I think I got my first Tony on Broadway for lighting. I also worked for S. Hurok on quite a few of his exotic attractions, staging and lighting.

MK: And was that mainly his dance attractions? Were you doing the ballets?

DW: Not necessarily. I did do the ballets and I did do, oh, the Bali Java Dancers and I can't really remember. A Filipino company, I'm sure. But also I would take over a company like the Azuma Kabuki and whittle their 16-hour show down to two and a half hours and relight it Western style, something which Kabuki had never seen before. It's traditionally performed in flat white light.

So it was a skill that I was able to develop on Federal Theatre and it became very useful later.

MK: Did you work with George Izenour any or were you your own person and George Izenour was doing some other things?

DW: George, as I recall, was in general charge of that theatre on Treasure

Island in San Francisco during the Fair. I was there with the Myra Kinch company and I think we did two performances a day. . . .

MK: Was that American Exodus? Is that what you all were doing there?

DW: American Exodus?

MK: Does that sound like a title? (Laugh)

DW: Yes, it does. (Laugh) Was that a Myra Kinch?

MK: I think so.

DW: Very likely. I don't make a specific association, but the title is very familiar. George did the experimental and very advanced design and installation at the theatre. It was a reactance electronic dimmer system at /ā/ time that such a system was almost unheard of. It had bugs and troubles and so on, but it was in general an exciting and original design. George was quite brilliant.

MK: Well, recently he didn't talk to me but to someone else who was wanting to hear his memories of Federal Theatre. And he really said that gave him his chance and he would be on the assembly line in Detroit if it weren't for having had that good experience in lighting. I don't know. (Laugh)

DW: May I ask, where is George now?

MK: He's at Yale. He's in New Haven on the faculty at the Yale Drama School.

DW: Of course. I've heard that from Yale students and it rang a bell. I should have remembered.

MK: He's still doing research and lighting theatres. I think right now he's gonna light a theatre somewhere in South America and one in a Middle Eastern country, I think.

DW: Well, George is an authentic pioneer in stage lighting. I'm not so

sure in the lighting itself, that is in the artistic execution of lighting. But certainly in the means of control and of presetting and of handling complicated shows, he was pushing steadily toward something that simply didn't exist then, and that was computerized lighting of shows, taking away the variability from individual and manual handling of lighting and giving it over to electronic control. The materials didn't quite exist for him to do it perfectly then.

MK: Because now what? There can be timed lighting?

DW: Now the lighting on Broadway shows, for instance, is truly computerized. There's a system called SAM and someone whom I knew in lighting very well years ago, Theron Musser, has developed it, I think, to something close to perfection so that Broadway shows are entirely preset, allowing only for variability of speed of cues because its performers will vary. Otherwise, the entire show is preset and really run by a computer.

MK: If you would talk about the Yiddish unit and what Adolph Freeman was like, if he was the guiding light as the director of the Yiddish unit because he got it started under the Federal Theatre. Here's another one called Relatives.

DW: Yes. Many of these same questions about the Yiddish unit were asked me by George Medovoy who was, I think, getting his doctorate by doing a thesis on the Yiddish Theatre, Federal Theatre unit. And I had the same trouble remembering then. I don't know why it was. It was just that productions became a blur since they were so continuous.

MK: You were working awfully speedily, weren't you? Productions were coming?

DW: It was a stop-and-start affair. It would depend upon the budget and inner politics of the project and the why's of some things being done or canceled and so on is mysterious to me, and was never very interesting, as a matter of fact.

Yes, Adolph Freeman was the director of the Jewish unit. I don't know his background before being director. I don't think it was quite as distinguished as some of the more famous names in the Jewish theatre. He was a highly dictatorial and a very inflammable man. In fact, life with the Jewish unit on the Federal Theatre was like guerrilla warfare. It was very noisy; it was very exciting. There were enormous passions being spent in all directions, /the/ least of /them/ on stage.

MK: (Laugh) Lots in the planning.

DW; Highly temperamental people.

MK: Who were some of the others beside Adolph Freeman? Was it like an ensemble company?

DW: No, it really ran a range from very good to god-awful. There were some people in it who were really amateurs, I think, with some bare theatre experience and others, such as Paula Walter I recall, for instance, would have been a fine actress in any language. It was a pretty motley assemblage. I think they were at their worst when they tried to do productions in English. The style overwhelmed the production then. The acting style of the Yiddish Theatre is very florid and noisy and wide and in its own language seems acceptable. In English it became at least a little phony.

MK: Well, were you doing some productions in English just to widen the audience appeal in the hope that other people would come?

DW: It was an experimental attempt to alternate and I don't know precisely why, since the very notion of having the Yiddish Theatre had seemed to me tied in with preserving a culture and a language that is really only — I don't think the language has existed for more than 70 or 80 years. And there's evidence that it's dying out now so why the Yiddish Theatre would be asked to work alternately in English and Yiddish, I have no idea. It did not seem like a good idea; it still doesn't.

MK: When you had a part, like you're on the playbill of Uriel Acosta, for example, were you doing the performances in English or did you learn some Yiddish?

DW: Both. I learned the lines phonetically in Yiddish, which I did not speak, and I'm sure I couldn't have had very many lines or I could never have gotten away with it. (Laugh)

MK: (Laugh) So maybe that's why you were never a lead actor in the Yiddish Theatre.

DW: I was never interested in being an actor at all. Theatre interested me for many things but curiously acting was the one aspect of it that has not interested me. I think the reason I stopped being a director is that I really don't like actors and I don't have great empathetic feelings for them.

MK: Well, how did you happen to become a stage manager? Was lighting a big part of the stage manager's job?

DW: It was the technical and mechanical control of the stage which interested me first. The stage as a machine interested me, the technical possibilities. So on my own, I began studying stage

design, the technical means, the machinery and then gradually narrowed down to lighting as being the most interesting of all possibly exploitable aspects of operating that stage machine.

MK: Did you find that you had good/free range and/you could experiment as stage manager, say if you wanted to monkey around with the stage shape and things like that?

DW: Yes. The degree of inefficiency actually made lovely openings for experimentation and for intrusion into territories that normally one would have been kicked out of. The theatre is generally highly disciplined and departments are kept pretty much unto themselves. But no, I remember working with an O'Neill play, for instance, when the lighting was poor. The director said to me, "Have a whack at it." And when the running of a production simply didn't mesh, didn't work, I was called in as a trouble shooter several times to wield the whip and get it operating. And I did have a flair for that. I was very good at the disciplinary and organizational end of theatre. In fact, I was so good at it that I think it retarded a major career for me until I saw that it was not a good thing to be good at.

MK: (Laugh) Well, tell me about some of your friends that were in that L.A. Federal Theatre. Did you get the letter I wrote you when I said I would love to know what happened to Mary Virginia Farmer who worked with the Southwest Unit? Well, here we are 40 years later and I'm very interested in who were the women getting chances, just as a personal interest. And she -- from what I've found, she was a very original, experimental sort of person. And yet I don't know what happened to her.

DW: I'm afraid I don't either. Nothing very prominent happened to her or I would have known it. The only people, particularly women, in the Federal Theatre that have recurred in my life, that I have clocked activity on, mostly went into the academic field. You must realize that my knowledge of them is pretty much limited to the Federal Theatre in Los Angeles. It may not have been true of the people in New York and Chicago but most of those that I did keep track of down the years went into academic fields and turned up in universities, . . . active in drama departments or English and speech.

MK: Who were some of those? Can you think of anyone especially?

DW: I'm afraid I don't have that/ good a memory./ Yes, Marcella Cisney, for instance, is a name you would know and is an old friend of mine. And she was with Federal Theatre, not in Los Angeles, I don't think.

MK: I don't think so. Maybe in New York.

DW: It would have been Chicago or New York, I believe. And typically, Marcella turned up in a very good and important post at the University of Michigan and at other educational institutions. But very few of these women -- Mary Hunter was with Federal Theatre, wasn't she?

MK: I don't know of her though.

DW: And she subsequently became something of a producer and a little more of a director but without any solid or sustained success either. I do not recall many women except performers who went on as forces in the theatre.

MK: Did you know Marcella Cisney after she married Bob Schnitzer? I mean, it makes me --

DW: Yes, I knew them --

MK: I realize that Bob Schnitzer was in California, got to --

DW: Bob was. Yes, I know them both quite well and for many years.

MK: Did you know him when he came out to Los Angeles? Although I think he got sent to Treasure Island to work on the Exposition more than to --

DW: I knew him but I never worked with him directly. Federal Theatre was curiously compartmented. Often we were concerned with our own shows and hundreds of other people drifted in and out of the -- on the periphery, and we knew that they were there, but we didn't really know or work with each other.

MK: Before you found your niche with the dance unit, what other units did you work with besides the Yiddish unit?

DW: I worked with individual plays. I was simply sent from -- assigned to a production at the will of the production manager, whose name was on that list you saw. It's gone out of my mind at the moment. He was in charge of assigning stage managers.

MK: Would it be someone like Gilmor Brown or Ralph Freud or someone like that?

DW: I knew Ralph Freud very well. Gilmor Brown is somebody I associate only with the Pasadena Playhouse. Jerome Coray was more directly a supervisor of mine.

MK: What is Jerome Coray like? A colleague of mine has talked to him, but his wife had just died recently and so he said wait and come to see him later on. But was he actually a director of plays or a supervisor?

DW: No, he was not a director of plays. He was an administrative

supervisor. I don't recall the exact title but he was most closely in touch with the production management.

MK: And would that be the level that artistic decisions were made on the, say, what units we'll have or --

DW: Those decisions were more in the hands of Ole Ness in Los Angeles although Jerome Coray certainly was involved with them and later Ralph Freud was and also later --

MK: George Gerwing, was he?

DW: George Gerwing, yes. And later Alex Leftwich also came in.

MK: Well, I was looking through Arena this afternoon and according to Hallie Flanagan, Alex Leftwich was the person who destroyed Federal Theatre in California.

DW: We had the notion that he was sent out there to deliver the coup de grace and I don't know how true this was. It may have been that that ax was ready to fall in Washington anyway. I'm sure that nothing happened locally in Los Angeles that had any bearing on the political situation.

MK: Well, she first mentioned that in early 1938 a note came that Judgment Day was going to be postponed and then the word that Gilmor Brown was going to be fired and no longer be part of Federal Theatre. Do you remember that as an event? That Judgment Day was, became a censorship trial case and then the word came out, 'No, Judgment Day can go on stage" and it did go on.

DW: Was Judgment Day a play?

MK: It's a play by Conrad Seiler *, I believe. But I don't know much about it.

* Elmer Rice.

DW: No, I do not recall anything about that at all.

MK: But then I think that was maybe a year before Alex Leftwich, or at least six months.

DW: There was much hostility. The political lines within the theatre project were drawn very sharply and there was much hostility and antagonism among people. For instance, Mary Virginia Farmer's unit was generally disliked strongly and very actively by the older professional people who considered that it was made up of radical and communist upstarts who had strange notions of how a theatre might be created in a communal way. And as a consequence, that unit became rather precious and incestuous and was rather ostracized by the rest of the project. This happened with several units though. The Myra Kinch Dance Unit fortunately, because nobody knew anything about dance, was left pretty much to itself. So we had a rather happy time of it, all of us with that unit.

MK: Well, I was just reading a book recently that made me think that a dance unit could become a very political vehicle. That was Robert Vaughan's book called Only Victim, and I never thought of dance as a political weapon. Do you think Myra Kinch was thinking in those terms?

DW: No. Myra, whom I know very well, is absolutely apolitical. I have been and worked with dance companies that were strongly political. I did work with Lester Horton, for instance, and that was a politicalized group. And I worked with several other dance companies that concentrated on what were loosely called "social themes," but were in actuality propaganda of one sort or another, generally operated

to the detriment of the choreography, may I say.

MK: When Federal Theatre ended, did Myra Kinch's unit just end or did she try to have a private dance unit?

DW: No, like many other units that came into existence under Federal Theatre, they made a very strong attempt to perpetuate themselves. A very few did so, in one form or another, but I notice that they only did so if there was a strong, talented individual who would have maintained a continuity regardless. No, I even remained with the Kinch Unit after the Federal Theatre, working at other things, too, of course. But any time that she had performances or tours, I would come in and handle them and do the lighting and so on. Then I moved from that to two or three other things and actually there wasn't much of a gap before Katherine Dunham asked if I would join with her, go on the road.

MK: Would you tell me some stories you remember about being with Katherine Dunham? Because she had hepatitis when I met her the other day, she is in very poor health and really couldn't talk very much and was mainly there as a figurehead because the day was in honor of her. And Ruth Beckford was acting sort of as a cushion to keep Katherine Dunham from talking much.

DW: That's too bad because she is an astonishingly articulate woman. She speaks beautifully. She is frighteningly intelligent. She is an exceptional person in many ways, both as a woman and as a creative artist. I was with that company, oh, really from starvation on upward, and frequently back to starvation again. It was, you know, the pendulum kept swinging. Eventually we began to do quite well

though after Sol Hurok took over the management of it.

I joined Katherine in Los Angeles. We played petty tours up and down the coast and scattered dates trying to stay alive, trying to keep the integrity of the company. Because Katherine without the company would be like a pianist without a piano. The company was the instrument on which she played and through which she created, so it had to be kept together. It had to be kept in constant training and the financial aspects of that were horrifying.

MK: What size group was this?

DW: It would vary. At its smallest, it was perhaps 16. At its largest, it would go to 40. A full show, when we were on the road, I think had about between 32 and 40 people in it.

MK: Had she gone from Chicago straight to the West Coast and tried touring on the West Coast as a good spot?

DW: No, she went from Chicago to New York actually and to a show called Cabin in the Sky, which you may remember. At the time I met her, she had come to the coast with Cabin in the Sky. Most of her company was in the show although not employed directly by her, and she was in the show playing a role, Georgia Brown. The first time I saw her was in that show. Then she divorced herself and company from the show on the Coast and decided to set up her own tours, try to keep the continuity of the company. I really don't like to speak for Katherine because she — if you are able to speak with her — will speak so beautifully for herself. And her view of things is very, very different from mine. Katherine was a pioneer in the presentation of authentic Negro culture, theatricalized but still with authentic roots

on stage in America and really should be treated as a separate phenomenon. . . . Katherine and I sometimes . . . were very good collaborators and sometimes we were very antagonistic, competitive actually in a way. I controlled or tried to control generally the presentation of the show, . . . the look of it to the audience, the lighting, the routining of it so that it moved at high speed and was no longer a dance company presenting segmented numbers but was truly a show with its own dynamics and no real dead stops in it.

MK: Did that also happen when you worked with Myra Kinch? Did she have a good sense of making a dance program a show instead of segments?

DW: No. Myra was an excellent choreographer, particularly in the fields of humor and . . . .

(End of side 1, continued on side 2)

No, Myra Kinch was basically a modern dancer with an unusual emphasis on humor and satire. And what she presented was dance concerts. With Katherine Dunham we pushed steadily from the beginning toward the combination of major choreography and ethnic material into real show form. And eventually it became Broadway show form and eventually the same critics that said that we were magnificent and marvelous and unparalleled, said, "Well, you're getting awfully commercial." That's an open question as to whether anything was lost by being commercial. I don't think so. I think being commercial, in a sense, merely brought us an audience of several million instead of several hundreds.

MK: And was that when Sol Hurok decided to take Katherine Dunham's troupe under his wing?

DW: That happened actually sometime during the war. I had been in the Army briefly and then back out of it and had been directing shows in Chicago and rejoined Katherine when I found the Army wasn't going to need me any longer. Hurok — we were playing the Chez Paree in Chicago, a night club, one of those desperation bookings again. And Hurok sent his right-hand, May Frohman, to look at the company. She thought it might be worth a three-day booking in New York and we got /that/ booking at the Martin Beck Theatre. But Hurok didn't really know what he had. I'm not sure he had ever seen it himself. At any rate, when we opened for our three-day booking, we stayed, as I remember, about 14 weeks, and then we were really rolling as a show.

Katherine was very prominent in Federal Theatre, of course, but she was in Chicago.

MK: Yes. Well, that's what I hope, that she'll feel strong enough in a few months to be able to talk about that and remember --

DW: I hope so because there's an absolutely invaluable piece of history that has much to do, both with Negroes in theatre and how those cultural roots were nurtured at times and almost died of starvation at others.

MK: Well, do you think that Federal Theatre was a time when they did get nurtured?

DW: Yes, oh, yes, definitely. Federal Theatre was a wonderful lucky thing because it kept alive possibilities in people who would never have made it otherwise, who would never have ended up in theatre at all. I myself might be one of them; I'm not sure. I'm not absolutely sure. I was

getting along, barely, but living on about $10.00 a week while trying to practice one's art is — you may not survive that too long. So Federal Theatre gave me two excellent opportunities. One was to stay alive, which was rather nice, and the other was a chance to learn arts that I didn't know, that I was primitively ignorant about.

MK: So it was a good training school?

DW: It certainly was. It was very important for me and it was fortuitous and a beautiful piece of luck when it happened.

MK: Would you tell me about some of the types of people who were in the Los Angeles Federal Theatre? Were there lots of young people who had come to be in the movies and couldn't get a job?

DW: It was the most heterogeneous collection of people ever seen. I don't think that anybody could define the kind of people there because in type they ran the gamut from old, hard-shelled commercial theatre people to young, would-be theatre people who, rather like myself, suddenly had a chance to find out whether they could make it or not. I would say . . . 99 percent or more did not make it and did drop out of theatre subsequently but it didn't really matter. There was the 1 percent that was saved by Federal Theatre.

MK: Well, was there a large, sort of pathetic group of the older actors who were not being hired to be in movies any more or vaudevillians, that type of --

DW: Yes. There were many of the older actors and there was a dividing line also between them and the younger ones. They had a rather fierce resentment of the younger people who were struggling to begin in theatre when they felt that they had been cheated out of their

natural livelihood and that their abilities were precious and unique. Frequently they weren't; frequently they were just rotten. It took me a while to understand how bad an experienced actor or an experienced person in the theatre could be, that experience did not necessarily point to excellence at all. I was rather young then and I think it took me two or three years before I understood it. I was rather in awe of experience at first.

MK: Well, that was a valuable thing to learn, too.

DW: Yes, it was. It was learned at forced draft, high speed, and every day.

MK: How was the vaudeville unit that Eda Edson ran? Did they do some good things?

DW: I have very little recollection of it. I do recall that we used to borrow people from it for other shows whenever we needed specialties, but I recall very little of it otherwise. And I don't remember that it ever worked doing full shows. They seemed to do little units that went around town performing this and that.

MK: Like the hospitals and that kind of --

DW: Yes, and schools on holidays and so on. But I remember borrowing tumblers and fire eaters for a show when I needed them. But otherwise I knew very little of that unit. I think it was a rather sad unit as such because in its -- it was passé already at the time and there were not many places for those people to go.

MK: Did you know Yasha Frank very well?

DW: I knew Yasha extremely well. He was a very close friend of mine all through his life, right up to his suicide.

MK: Was that in the fifties? Do you know when it was that Jacqueline Dickson died?

DW: My impression — I saw him in New York frequently when I began writing for television. Yasha was still directing in television; he was really a pioneer at directing in television. He was directing when you couldn't move cameras. Then he married and withdrew from the business, I think rather bleakly and in disappointment. My impression was that his death was in the middle fifties or a little past that.

MK: Have you at all kept up with the woman he was married to? I've just been real interested in finding out more about Yasha Frank because he seemed like a genius. And yet people don't really, the ones I've met don't know much about him.

DW: The question as to whether he was a genius: no, I don't think so. I think Yasha was a compendium of many fine talents and they were limited. He was a pretty fair writer, and he was a pretty good director, perhaps a little better than pretty good. He had a marvelous magnetism with people. He was kind of a pop-eyed gnome of a man, a very peculiar little man and seemed to be very attractive to peculiar little women. He was very good with children's shows which was, of course, what he did chiefly. He did an excellent Hansel and Gretel I recall and a Pinocchio and a number of other things. I think Yasha's problem--it sounds as though I'm pontificating on somebody else's life here, but I knew him really very well—was that he had no talent major enough. He had too many small talents and none that was overwhelmingly strong. He was a highly intelligent

and a very charming and vivacious man.

MK: And was it directing of children's programs that he mainly did in television or all kinds of directing?

DW: I recall it was almost entirely children's theatre that he did there. There may have been other things. I simply don't remember them. He was also up at the theatre on Treasure Island in San Francisco when I was, but his were children's shows.

MK: Some of the other units were the classical unit with Jerome Coray — well, that would mean that he was doing a little directing but as you recall, he was mainly an administrator.

DW: He may well have directed but I recall almost all my contacts with him -- and occasionally that was being called on the carpet for some outrageous thing I had done -- was as an administrator.

MK: And what were Gareth Hughes and Maude Fealy doing?

DW: I worked very closely with Gareth Hughes. In fact, the script on the table there is actually where I met Gareth, the nativity plays. And I met Gareth again many years later. Gareth was a charming man and an excellent director /with/ a very unfortunate personal life in some ways. I shouldn't say anything like that, should I?

MK: Oh, I think you should. I don't think that that's not relevant. (Laugh)

DW: The truth is I'm not sure whether Gareth is still alive.

MK: Well, I'm not sure either. I really don't know that.

DW: But I can tell you where I last saw him and it was typically bizarre. I was with Katherine Dunham; our unit was playing the Mapes Hotel in Reno. I got a mysterious call to come to some other room in the hotel and I went and the door opened and I was confronted by a very handsome

priest. And it took me a while to realize that it was Gareth and he told me that his -- it was a new incarnation and he was Brother David. I even went to look at his charges. He worked with the Indians up near Pyramid Lake in Nevada. He simply dropped out of the whole life he had known of theatre and movies. Gareth had actually been quite wealthy at a time. I think part of Odin Street and the land where the Hollywood Bowl is was owned by Gareth in his heyday in the movies. But that was the last I saw of him in the new incarnation as Brother David, missionary to the Indians at Pyramid Lake. I've lost track since and that was many years ago.

MK: Because when did you stop working with Katherine Dunham, in the late forties?

DW: No, I would go back intermittently. We would have strong differences and I would go off and do my own shows. I became a producer and opened my own production office in New York in 1945. But periodically, as Katherine was doing a new show, we would compose our differences and I would go back and perform the same functions in the new shows. And then I simply got too busy and developed too much of a life and career of my own to continue doing that. I was with the company in Haiti and I lived in Haiti with the company when it was our headquarters. We built and rehearsed our shows there and that was a fascinating life. It's very nice to have a resident voodoo priest in your rehearsal headquarters.

MK: (Laugh) Makes you feel more secure?

DW: (Laugh) It did. Yes, we needed it.

MK: Did she buy Habitación Le Clerque?

DW: Yes. At the time we leased it./Later/she did buy it. And it's now been turned into an enormously expensive hotel, I understand. I think she retains an ownership of part of the property there, but I'm not really sure. With the exception of letters very far apart, I'm not that closely in touch with Katherine any more.

MK: Because he was also part of Federal Theatre, would you tell me a little about John Pratt, her husband.

DW: Yeah. John was, is a very dear friend of mine. We've simply lost touch now. John is a truly brilliant man, a fantastically talented man. I would say that his talents, unlike Yasha Frank's, were major talents but that his nature, unlike Yasha Frank's, had /no/ drive /or/ aggression in it and that he never brought any of his talents to maximum potential, nor did he give a damn about it. When he met and became allied with Katherine, that became his life; designing for that company and living in the rather bizarre way that company lived became John's life. And he never desired another. . . .

MK: I know that they're still married. So that he has never done anything separately on his own?

DW: Perhaps never or so rarely that it really doesn't count. He could have. He could have had a very major career. He was . . . a major artist.

MK: Well, to go back to Gareth Hughes and what you did with him, tell me about the religious cycle of plays.

DW: Yes, that was quite fascinating. We did the Nativity plays and we played them in cathedrals and churches large enough to take it. And

We would invade. . . a cathedral with our company of actors. . . our load of lighting and so on and try very softly to convert it to a theatre. We felt somewhere between a theatre and religious experience with those plays done quite beautifully, directed exquisitely. Gareth was very talented, and his knowledge of medieval mysteries, religion plays was superb.

MK: What makes me wonder if any plays were put on film. Were there any that you know of?

DW: Never, never to my knowledge, no. I think it was talked about from time to time, but I personally don't know of anything being put on film.

MK: Had Gareth been a commercial director before Federal Theatre? Someone who. . .?

DW: He had been a very prominent and wealthy, or comparatively wealthy, actor long before. Various scandals came into his life, and continued coming in, and they rather broke his career. And he had come on hard times at the time of Federal Theatre. He was much better known as an actor, I think, than as a director, although he directed very well. He brought a sort of an English precision and elegance to what he did.

MK: Because was he English-born, or was he California-born?

DW: I'm not. . . He's Welsh. Yes. Rather proud of his Welsh-ness, and believing in its druidic mysteries. He carried some aura of that about him.

MK: Was he around middle-40s or something like that when you worked with him?

DW: I think so. Yes. That, at least, or perhaps more. And when I last saw him, which would have been, oh, I guess middle-50s or so. . .

MK: When he was Brother David?

DW: Yes. I think he was in his sixties and upwards at that time. That was a long time ago.

MK: Was there this sort of openness to ideas so that Ole Ness would be amenable if Gareth Hughes was real interested in mystery plays, then Gareth would suggest having a mystery?

DW: Well, only within reason and only insofar as the material was innocuous. I think that the dead hand that lay on the Federal Theatre Project was politics. And it was mysterious because there were so many possible ways of offending that it led people to do much less than they could do because of the fear of offending and of being fired or of being excommunicated.

MK: Was it sort of the shadow of Colonel Connolly himself or any special person? (Laugh)

DW: I do not know who Colonel Connolly was.

MK: He was the WPA person for Southern California.

DW: Oh, really? Well, I only know that there was some right-wing, faintly Fascist force out there that was hovering over us and /that/ crippled thinking and best efforts because of the danger of giving political offense. On the Project I was known, perfectly justifiably, as a radical, and consequently there were a number of things I was not allowed to do. I was met with a lot of frowns, including some from people who could have been helpful to me or from whom I might have learned.

MK: But it was just their own little fear of radicals?

DW: Groups antagonistic to each other sprang up and they were fueled by

these incoherent fears, political fears coming from outside. And all of them, I think, really had their roots in economic fear because most of these were people who had been hungry or afraid or homeless and they could be frightened very, very easily and were.

MK: That reminds me of -- I talked to a woman the other day. She had worked with Ralph Chessé on the marionettes in San Francisco. She had spent her whole time with the San Francisco unit. What was Blanding Sloan like? Did he run his marionettes for Los Angeles? Did you have any --

DW: I only have a faint memory of the name. I'm afraid I don't know. There was a marionette unit and I remember seeing some of their work but I really don't recall the personnel.

MK: She talked about Ralph Chessé in those terms, as a person who had been homeless and radicalized by --

DW: Yes, and the name rings a bell, too, but I can't recall specifics. I think there were many like that.

MK: Does Edward Gering sound familiar? Because I read his name as the head of the Experimental Unit and I thought he would be tied in with Mary Virginia Farmer.

DW: I don't know. I don't know specifically what he did. Mary Virginia Farmer was very specifically a unit called the Theatre of the Southwest, or it became that. And Edward Gering, I knew the name very well, but I never had any contact and I don't know what he did.

MK: Then you didn't work with him on specific plays or anything?

DW: No. There was this odd compartmentalizing of units and people in the theatre and often many of us had very little or no contact.

MK: Who did you work with on Johnny Johnson? Or if you have any specific memories of that?

DW: I can't even remember.

MK: Johnny Johnson was written by Paul Green and it's --

DW: And the score by Kurt Weill, yes.

MK: And it's about the young soldier who doesn't want to go to World War I.

DW: And I notice that the billing here gives Paul Green 50 percent billing and Kurt Weill 25 percent. Well, time, I think, has changed that, if I may be malicious.

MK: The scales have shifted, haven't they?

DW: Yes. No, I don't even recall who directed it. I do recall that it was a very difficult and a very elaborate production though.

MK: I want to ask you about some different names that came up. Did you ever work with Max Pollock on productions?

DW: Yes, I remember Max quite well and I really can't recall if we worked together or not. But I rather assume we did because I remember him so clearly.

MK: Because I see he directed Six Characters in Search of an Author.

DW: Oh, yes.

MK: Oh, and James Light who was connected with the New York part of Federal Theatre mainly is listed here as directing Chalk Dust. Were you part of that production?

DW: I didn't work on that. I knew about it but didn't work on it.

MK: Or Class of '29?

DW: No, I don't think I worked on that.

MK: Did you work on the production of It Can't Happen Here that --

DW: I worked on the Yiddish production of it. I think we also performed that in English.

MK: Yes, there were two Los Angeles productions.

Someone who seems to have done a lot of the sets for Los Angeles is Frederick Stover. Do you know about him, if he's alive?

DW: No, I haven't heard his name in a long time and I don't know if he's active. I've not run across him at all.

MK: Were you at all involved with Clarence Muse's production of Run Little Chillun'?

DW: Yes, I came in and helped out on that because I had a great many friends involved in it and I knew Clarence Muse slightly. I don't recall exactly what I did, probably some lighting or technical things because I remember the production very precisely from moment to moment. It was one of those that . . . was . . . fun to work with because of the vitality that was being poured out on that stage.

MK: Were there a lot of black people in the Los Angeles unit?

DW: Yes, there were a great many and, as I recall, in general they were kept rather segregated and did their own material.

MK: That's what I wondered, if they had to do a separate unit or if they were just part of the regular staff.

DW: I think ostensibly they were part of the general pool but in actuality they didn't get very much work unless a production was being put together that was a Negro production. I do know that we could borrow them. I recall being stage manager of a big extravaganza at the Greek Theatre, for instance, in which we used Jester Hairston and his choir

and a number of other people from the Negro unit. But they were, in general, kept as segregated as the Yiddish Unit.

MK: And was the French Unit also all by itself? Did you have anything to do with the French-speaking plays?

DW: No. We used a great many of those people. I'd forgotten there was such a unit until you mentioned it, but there was, and we used a number of them in Johnny Johnson. And it turned out to be a great handicap because their accents were all but impermeable.

MK: (Laugh) Do you know how they happened to be the French-speaking group? Was there a group of French immigrants in Los Angeles?

DW: No, I have no idea. I consider that a real oddity, you know. It might as easily have been a Bulgarian group.

MK: You would think in Southern California, maybe there would have been a Spanish-speaking unit but there wasn't, was there?

DW: No, never, never.

MK: Were there some good classical productions? I'm looking at a Gareth Hughes Everyman and that just reminded me that Maude Fealy and Gareth Hughes were listed sometimes starring in some of the Shakespearean plays.

DW: Starring as actors?

MK: I think. So I thought that he had a chance to act sometimes.

DW: Well, they were both people of authority. I didn't see many of them. The things I was involved with rather kept me away from them. I had no background in classical theatre whatsoever so that material seemed alien to me. I think I really must make the point that I came into Federal Theatre, theatre generally without education. . . .

. . . I'd only had a high school education so that scholastic or academic background I lacked entirely.

MK: And had you come into theatre in Los Angeles as a teenager just through interest in hanging around and saying, "Let me help work on doing whatever there is to do."

DW: Prior to Federal Theatre, you mean? Yes, completely accidentally. I was one of a mob of young people living on rooftops in downtown Los Angeles in the depths of the Depression. And it was an activity that suddenly became available and I had no particular interest or predilections toward it before. But it was there and it seemed like fun, so I started doing it. And the deeper I got into it, the more fascinating it became to me. So before Federal Theatre actually I was sketchily making a living at theatre.

MK: What were some of those groups called?

DW: The Contemporary Theatre was one; the Rebel Players was another; Stage West was still another. But they were groups that were usually rather ephemeral. They would organize and do a production or two and then vanish. We did good plays though. In fact, I directed the first production of Waiting for Lefty actually opening a day before New York. I began actually as a director and then started sliding back.

MK: Were there any connections between New York and West Coast theatres say, Group Theatre having an interest or parallel in a group in Los Angeles?

DW: Not really. There were exchanges of information and rights and so on but no, the theatre people were so individualistic. No matter that

they were radicalized, their egos were still so outsized that they rather denied this sort of connection or/real collaboration. One would think that what the Group Theatre did in the East would be reproduced here in a commensurate way in the West, but it wasn't true. . . . There were quite a few people of that radical theatre, which was the only theatre of vitality prior to Federal Theatre that existed in Los Angeles, that did go on into the Federal Theatre. And you've named a number of them actually already.

MK: So would that be people who had worked like with Mary Virginia Farmer in the Southwest Unit? Some of those?

DW: Yes, the old radical group tended to collect there.

MK: Well, were there people earning money doing commercial things and having fun coming and working with groups like your pre-Federal Theatre groups? You know, like someone who would like to direct but to earn money was doing something else with the unit?

DW: Oh, yes, almost invariably. With movies if they were lucky but generally it was with pick and shovel if they weren't. One really couldn't make a living at theatre in Los Angeles and the only true commercial theatre were the occasional New York road shows. I used to go and look at those and they had, you know, a great air of mystery to me because they seemed so beautifully polished on the outside and so utterly empty and trivial inside.

(End of side 2, continued on side 3)

Silence first 15 minutes.

DW: . . . of a certain period and of a certain time and generally, with the exception of a few classics like The Dybbuk and The Golem, neither of which are very old, by the way, they're folk things and they come out of a folk culture. And they have to do with the stress of the Jew, either in his home town or emigrating. And of those writers who /might/ have been writing for /Yiddish theatre--/ you can take Clifford Odets and translate him beautifully into Yiddish, for instance-because they are really writing in the same idiom in English and they're writing about the problems of Jewish families. And there are many writers, I think, that ... can do that.

But the Yiddish Theatre, with the exception perhaps of the Federal Theatre, didn't do that. It stuck by its classical material and when they didn't play that, they played a particularly trashy form of musical entertainment. And there was nothing in between and it really began to die of malnutrition some time ago. /New/ material was not being written for it.

MK: I was afraid that it didn't do very well commercially because in some of these lists of Federal Theatre productions, there are some of the big names of regular Yiddish theatres so that I felt like they weren't making much money if Thomashefsky could come and work for the Federal Theatre when he was one of the fathers of Yiddish theatre in America.

DW: Yes, big name. I don't think they ever did. They couldn't play steadily, you know, the theatres on Second Avenue in New York which I got to know many years subsequent to this. I found that they never played steadily. They didn't really have runs of things. They could

only announce like four performances of a certain play. And after that, it would be five performances of something else and so on. But they couldn't do sustained runs. Consequently the economics were bad and /if/ you can't amortize costs over a fairly long period of time . . . you're . . . in trouble in theatre.

MK: Well, that makes me think of another thing which is the people who were hired to be playwrights for Federal Theatre. Were you interested in writing at that time?

DW: No. No, I wasn't. It was interesting to me in a way but remotely, and it was absolutely alien ground. Actually, I did not become a writer until I was about 34 or 35 and then I did it abruptly. And by that time I had a very good -- you know, I was making a very good living in theatre and there were some things I could do very well. But I was very dissatisfied. I was particularly dissatisfied with directing, first of all because I don't like actors. That's /obviously/ bad for a director. And then . . . -- I got to a certain point and everything I was doing in theatre was the interpretation of somebody else's intention. There was only one creative person in theatre -- I don't know why it took me so long to see it -- and that's the writer. Everybody else exists to interpret and express. So I thought, "Well, to hell with that." This, I think, was the only really brave thing I ever did in my life. I quit in the middle of a show actually, in the middle of directing a Broadway musical and went home and said, "From now on I'm a writer." It took a while, /yet/ it wasn't all that difficult. But first I wrote short stories and features and so on

so I could simply learn syntax and the rules of grammar. . . . Then when I shifted to writing what I knew best, which was theatre, /itself,/ I shifted to television not to theatre/ and began writing for live television and there was no struggle. Everything sold from the beginning. As a matter of fact, my very first play won the award as best of the year.

MK: Oh, really? What was that?

DW: A television play called Elisha and the Long Knives, the first one I wrote. It was /in/ 1954. . . . I was so ignorant--I'd never seen a play on television--I wrote it in one set because that's the way one does it in theatre. You don't use two where one will do. And they thought that was nice. That was the tour de force. (Laugh) I kept my mouth shut.

But I had no struggle with it. . . . It wasn't that I was a very good writer; I wasn't. But I knew my theatre so well by that time that instinctively I wrote in theatrical terms and with theatrical ideas in my construction. Other writers come at it completely the other way. They have educations and they generally . . . have an aptitude and can write well. But they have to learn theatre and it takes a long time to really learn theatre. It's a very subtle thing to learn and I found out that it's very difficult to teach, too, because I've been invited from time to time, you know, to teach it or conduct workshop courses and so on. It's quite difficult.

MK: So do you go to those and say to the people, "Well, first you need to be a stage manager and need to learn lighting." (Laugh)

DW: No. (Laugh) No, because it isn't practical to say that. What I do say to them is that "Until you can express the scene in every way

except through words, you don't know anything about theatre. Words are your last resort.". . . I /try to/ get that thought through their heads, and usually I can't right away. They just don't understand that, that you have all kinds of tools available to you in theatre or movie. I write movies and television. I just consider them forms of theatre. You have all these tools available to you, and speech is only one of them. But everyone starting, you know, thinks that it's all in the word. . . .

MK: When you shoot from medium to medium, is it just a matter of learning the -- well, syntax isn't quite it, but just the tools of that, like to go into television?

DW: It's techniques. The techniques are different. They are markedly different; they're not just a little bit different. Television lies in some middle ground between theatre and movies. You can be more articulate in television than you can in movies, but not nearly as articulate as you can in stage. Also, what happens is diminishing abstraction. Theatre is very abstract; that's its power. I think a demonstration is Man of La Mancha, which I could write for theatre and with almost nothing on stage; the audience believed that they were seeing all those things, you know. They think they saw castles and moats and inns and this and that, and there was nothing there. Have you ever seen it?

MK: I've seen it and loved it.

DW: It's very abstract.

MK: We saw it once in a production in San Diego.

DW: San Diego?

MK: Well, we've maybe seen it several times. (Laugh) I saw it once in

Hawaii, in Honolulu.

DW: Yes, it's played there two or three times. But /abstraction is/ a reason that it never made the transition from theatre to movies, the reason it's a rotten movie.

MK: Was a movie even made of it? I didn't realize that.

DW: Oh, yes. I'll show you a giant poster in there. Most of my things are in Spain, but there are some here that might interest you. You see, it was absolutely abstract and there was no way /to bridge the gap. That/ was a secret I knew and the bidding was going up and up for the movie rights. I was laughing to myself because I knew that would be somewhere between impossible and very difficult to make a movie of it.

MK: Has it been on television?

DW: I wrote it originally for television. It was on television first under the title, I, Don Quixote. It was a two-hour special and Lee J. Cobb played Quixote and Eli Wallach /was Sancho/ and Colleen Dewhurst /played Aldonza./ It was her first big role. Yes, it was after doing it on TV that I realized that /somehow/ I was /writing it/ in the wrong form or /for/ the wrong medium. Yes, that's when I realized I had written it for the wrong medium. I don't know, they ended up with like two casts on television. There was a cast of prisoners and a cast of people in the Quixote story. And I said, "That's all wrong." But I couldn't look at -- television's too real and movies are much more real than television. But those shifts — no, they're not just easy or automatic to make. I mean, you have to learn the techniques and the tools of the other media.

MK: But when you already understand lighting very well, then you can translate your lighting knowledge from theatre to --

DW: Yes, when you understand the machinery. I did understand the machinery because I learned that first. It's curious. . . . It's absolutely backwards, of course.

MK: Well, for you it's been very successful, hasn't it? (Laugh)

DW: Well, it worked. But I still write with . . . much sweat and . . . pain. But I'm very sure of myself in certain things. I am very good at a couple of things and I know it. One is construction. I can construct theatrically, . . . much better than most people. /But/ I don't consider myself a very good writer as such.

MK: Is it something you can verbalize well, how you construct theatrically?

DW: No. No, I don't think I would know how to verbalize it. It's an . . . absolute intuitive sense. . . .If there's something wrong, I hear an alarm bell go off and often I don't know the reason but I stop right there. . . .

MK: Did you come to Man of La Mancha from thinking about Cervantes' life or from reading Don Quixote?

DW: Well, you really want to know? Because it's silly. You want to know how things start?

MK: To me it's been intriguing ever since I've first known of Man of La Mancha.

DW: I did it because some silly press agent put an item in the newspaper when I was in Madrid and said that I was there researching to do a dramatization of Don Quixote. Well, I wasn't there for that reason at all and I had never read Don Quixote and neither has hardly anyone

else, may I say. All /those/ people who know Don Quixote haven't read it.

MK: They just say, "Oh, yes, I know Don Quixote?"

DW: They just say, "Of course I know it." And then you pin 'em down and you say, "Have you really read it?" And if they say Yes, ask, "How many pages is it?" And they say, "Oh, it's long, 600 or 800." Well, it isn't; it's 1600 and most of it is a bore. I've never finished reading it, never to this day.

But at any rate, I began thinking about it and I tried reading Don Quixote and I couldn't. I've read in it extensively, but I've never read all of it. But I got interested in Cervantes and I love history and I love researching. I get carried away by it. And so I began studying up on Cervantes and the more I found out about him, the more I began to think, "Well, if there is a story, if there is a piece of theatre here, it isn't in Don Quixote which has been tried four hundred times, literally four hundred. It's in Cervantes." So I began brooding about how the story of Cervantes could be told and finally the idea just /struck me/ that if I could somehow interweave the identities so that they emerge as fundamentally the same man, I'd have a play. And I wrote that idea out on /one/ page and showed it to David Susskind and he commissioned it instantly for television. After that, it was just a matter of modifying it for theatre. It should have been theatre to begin with. It was too complex for television.

. . .

MK: So did you see it happen on television and then say, "I've got to work on it some more?"

DW: I did. I almost immediately began rewriting it as a straight play

for Broadway. I did it and the play was optioned twice and I was glad it wasn't done because I realized I hadn't gone far enough, that stylistically it wasn't high enough yet. And about the same time, six different people realized that it had to be a musical. So eventually we just got together.

My original lyricist for it was W.H. Auden. I still have in my files, secretly, 16 stunning lyrics. The problem with them is that they are not lyrics really, they're poems. So believe it or not, we had to fire W.H. Auden. That's not a nice thing to do. (Laugh)

MK: (Laugh) Well, how did you ever come to Auden as a lyricist?

DW: Because he had been the librettist of many operas and because he was as expert on Don Quixote as I was not. And I thought that the rather literary quality of the whole thing would be sustained by using Auden. I was wrong; he and I differed very strongly because Man of La Mancha is not Don Quixote. It's very untrue to Don Quixote as a matter of fact. And Auden was the scholar, who kept saying to me, "You can't do that." And I'd say, "Yes, I can." And he'd say, "But that is a violation of Cervantes." And I'd say, "I really don't care." And we couldn't go on that way. I knew what I wanted to say and do and he wanted to be true to Don Quixote. So we had to part.

MK: Would you tell me what you think the importance of Federal Theatre was say, in dramatic history, if it was an important chapter in the 20th century?

DW: I think it is a much less important chapter than it should have been. I think it's much less important than people thought it was. I think that its real importance lay not in giving birth to any new body of

literature, theatrical literature, nor in granting some sort of a stimulus to the theatrical art, but simply in allowing a certain number of people to survive and continue their theatrical careers who otherwise might have been wiped out. And its importance, I think, has to be measured in terms of those individuals who did continue from Federal Theatre and saw some blossoming of their talents in theatre-related fields afterwards. I wish that it had been some kind of a formidable release of energy in theatre, but I really do not believe that it was. I think that it was strangled by the weight of politics and all the fears engendered by political stresses.

MK: Would it be possible for that kind of thing to happen today, do you think? I mean that type of federal theatre? I think we're a little less afraid /than we were then, and maybe/ a little more sophisticated.

DW: Well, we're assuming a government-subsidized theatre which is substantially what the Federal Theatre was. I find it hard to believe in its possibility in America. We have no tradition of it. Americans don't even regard theatre in the same way peoples elsewhere in the world do. To us it's an entertainment and a luxury. Elsewhere in the world it's a cultural necessity. It's typical of Vienna, for instance, that after the war the first thing they rebuilt was their opera house, but that would not be conceivable in America. And since the cultural roots don't exist for such an attitude, I find it hard to believe that a federally subsidized theatre could happen in America or that it would be workable.

(End of side 3, continued on side 4)

(Re: a new blacklist and/or censorship.)

DW: Not precisely today but tomorrow, yes. It could exist tomorrow and it could exist in a much more vicious form. I wouldn't doubt it for a moment.

MK: But you think we're just as susceptible to talent here and state of mind? (Laugh)

DW: That we are, you say? Well, yes, I think, you know, we are -- one of the great inherent flaws of democracy is this diffusion which allows almost anything to happen, which allows almost any strong, forceful, purposeful leadership to make tremendous impact, even if it happens to be to a rotten purpose. And I think it can happen again. I think it can and it will. We can't foresee the exact circumstances now, but they surely will exist again. Some time of stress, some time of division, some time of economic problems, you know, deep economic trouble, and it will all exist again. It's an easy prediction because that was not the only time it existed in that form. It's been absolutely cyclical in American history.

MK: So many people say that Federal Theatre, if it had been divorced from relief, if it had just been based on talent or if that switch had happened at a point like midway through and you'd gotten the relief aspect out of the way, then it would have flourished and been the basis for a national theatre. But I don't think you really agree with that.

DW: No. I think that is the purest pie-in-the-sky thinking and I don't agree with it for a moment. Not as a theory -- it's a lovely theory -- but as a possibility of actually happening, not a chance; not then, not even now. Maybe sometime in the future, but I strongly doubt that

because America simply has no brick in its foundation that supports that particular attitude.

MK: And they were only willing to support it as long as it was helping people keep from starving. It was an emergency that brought it into being.

DW: That's right, yes, it was an alternative. As a matter of fact, I think the existence of the Federal Theatre was a great annoyance to the whole WPA. No matter that it was rather small numerically, it was very noisy. It was very public. It was out on display and since it was being funded by tax money, everybody had something to say about it, usually bad.

MK: It was everybody's taxes paying for it, so if you didn't live in New York where a lot was going on, then you felt like you weren't getting your money's worth?

DW: Yes, exactly, with some point, too.

MK: Can you think of anyone you haven't mentioned to me that you could give me any little memory of, Mr. Wasserman? Anyone who is really like an outstanding person or someone who really impressed you?

DW: There were a number of interesting people around. Have you run across Blackie O'Neal, Charles O'Neal?

MK: No.

DW: Ryan O'Neal's father.

MK: No, I don't know of Blackie O'Neal.

DW: Well, he was -- his name was Charles O'Neal. He was very much on the Project. He was up in San Francisco with us, with that detachment that was sent up there.

MK: At the Exposition?

DW: Colorful character, colorful actor, subsequently became quite a good writer. He was the author of Three Wishes of Jamie McCuin which became a stage musical called Three Wishes for Jamie, several novels. Married an actress on the Project and as I say, his son is Ryan O'Neal. And Elackie is a bright, colorful man and he lives down here, I think around Malibu, but I'm not sure. Charles O'Neal. Peter Brocco was one of our mob, still active, still acting.

MK: I was going to ask you about him. He appears in so many things.

DW: Yes, a good character actor. He was part of Mary Virginia Farmer's Theatre of the Southwest.

MK: Did you know an actor named Ray Bailey who played -- I know he was the fox in Pinocchio. I'm not sure what else he was in.

DW: Yes. I have an impression he also played in Charley's Aunt and a number of things. But yes, I used to know Ray Bailey.

MK: Frances Warde is a lady who's still around. I don't know what her name was.

DW: Frances Warde. I don't remember that. The old lady I pointed out to you who does so many television commercials was one of our most musical actresses; Marjorie Bennett.

MK: And she was in Federal Theatre?

DW: Oh, yes, the whole course of it. And she lives in Hollywood and she makes commercials, a delightful lady.

MK: In those days was Charles O'Neal an actor or what was he?

DW: He was an actor and he subsequently became a writer.

MK: Because I got the writing part down and then I realized that I

wasn't sure what he did on Federal Theatre. He was in some of the productions then?

DW: Was there a writers' unit in the Los Angeles Federal Theatre?

MK: Well, not one that I know much about.

DW: I don't believe there was. I thought maybe I --

MK: Well, I know, say, someone like Arnold Sundgaard worked for the Chicago Unit.

DW: Arnold's one of my closest friends, by the way. We collaborate and I've directed several of his folk operas.

MK: He was being paid to write plays for the Chicago Unit, and he wrote one of the Living Newspapers that was produced.

DW: Yes. He wrote more than one, didn't he? I think Spirochete was his, wasn't it?

MK: Spirochete is the one that I was really thinking of, but I think he did write some others. But maybe Spirochete is the one that was produced, and the others weren't.

DW: Perhaps they weren't produced, yes.

MK: But the way it worked in New York and Chicago is that if you were a playwright, they got you to read plays to earn your money so that your plays could be your own property and not the property of the Government. So that, say, once a week you would come in and give a report on five plays and just give your synopsis. And then what you were really supposedly doing all week was busy working on your own plays. And I know that that was going on around the country, but I'm not sure about who was doing that in Los Angeles or who was in charge of that playwriting unit.

DW: I don't recall. There may have been such a unit. It must have been of very low potency though because I just don't remember it and I don't remember any of its works being done. We put together a pageant type sort of thing that would be locally written now and then, but no real plays.

MK: Like that Southwest Unit. Do you think they were trying to write their own material if it was regional?

DW: I think they intended to, yes. And they may have even experimentally done so. I don't really know but certainly nothing much has survived. They did Night Over Taos but that's Maxwell Anderson.

MK: And was The Sun Rises in the West written out here? I don't know.

DW: The Sun Rises in the West? Is that the title?

MK: And it was a Southwest Unit production that I thought was the start of trying to document the history of the Southwest, maybe during the Gold Rush.

DW: I don't know. It rings no bell at all.

MK: But when you mentioned Clifford Odets' idiom being so easily translated into Yiddish, Arthur Miller's first job was writing on the New York project. He and a man named Norman Rosten who's done some --

DW: I know Norman.

MK: -- both were those playwrights who would read plays all week and then turn in -- and we've got some early Arthur Miller scripts in which he's much more addressing his Jewish background which later is sort of -- you know, in Death of Salesman that's all left out.

DW: Yes. I know almost nothing about that whole New York thing. I never got to New York until about 1943 or 1944 with Katherine Dunham. When I

came then, it was my first look at New York.

MK: As far as Federal Theatre goes, the big hits back there weren't necessarily brought out,so you never saw them. Is that right?

DW: No.

MK: Say, some of the Living Newspapers?

DW: No. I think a couple were done in Los Angeles.

MK: Was One-Third of a Nation done in Los Angeles?

DW: I believe so. I believe it was.

MK: Was the San Francisco Exposition a big success? Was that a high point?

DW: I don't think financially it was. It ran for two years. I don't really know. While I/was working at the Federal Theatre, I was also moonlighting right across the street for the Shuberts working on the Folies Bergere. So what I had to do was run from one backstage to the other. I wasn't supposed to be doing that, of course.

MK: You were only supposed to work for Federal Theatre?

DW: Yes.

MK: Were the/different theatres in Los Angeles used just for one unit or were they interchangeable?

DW: They were pretty much interchangeable. . . .

MK: The Beaux Arts and the Musart and the Figueroa and all of those?

DW: That's right because I think I worked at practically every one of them. No, they were not assigned to any specific unit. There was some attempt, I think, with the Yiddish Theatre to use the Beaux Arts, which seemed about the right size house, as their home. But I remember we played in six different theatres at least, so it couldn't have worked very well.

MK: Well, I can't think of any more questions to ask you. I'm just appreciating everything you've told me.

DW: Well, the truth it I don't think I know much more about it because it was odd. I felt an outsider with it. I think maybe feeling an outsider with things is something that you live with all your life. You're always feeling an outsider. But I did particularly there because at first I assumed that everybody knew much more than I did and that they were professionals who earned their living in theatre and so on, and /I/ was ready to be very inferior....Later I learned that that was nonsense, that most of them in any time would have been incompetent and there were only a chosen few who really had sparks of talent and could shed light around. But because of that, I tended to /keep/ myself aside and had very little contact with the body of the Federal Theatre. And that was possible. For instance, by getting myself assigned to the Myra Kinch company, I never even had to go physically to the Federal Theatre itself. We operated in our own rehearsal headquarters way out in Melrose somewhere.

MK: Was the Federal Theatre headquarters in a certain spot?

DW; Yes, they began in a dreadful area of Los Angeles, just south of Skid Row. I can't even remember the name of the street but it's an old industrial, . . . shabby area. And there was a giant concrete warehouse building of some kind with great open spaces in it because we were constantly putting up partitions and trying to figure out how to cut out the sound from there, you know, to keep rehearsals from mingling and so on. That was the headquarters for a long time.

Then much later in its career it moved up to an ex-boys' school at the corner of Western Avenue and, I think, Pico, and it died its death there.

MK: So that's what you meant about not having to go to the Federal Theatre itself, not go over to that location.

DW: Not going to the headquarters itself. The more one could stay away from that, the better. And I learned techniques of staying far away from it so my contact was not nearly as deep and wide as many other people's might have been. (interruption)

/The O'Neill is/ about 12 years old now, but it has multiple programs and it runs /a/ National Theatre Institute, which collects exemplary students from all over the country, . . .

those who /intend/ to be theatre professionals. It brings them in for a long semester at the O'Neill mansion in Waterford, Connecticut, where they work under and with theatre professionals and they put in 12- and 14-hour days. But when they get out of there, they're pretty damned good. And it has the playwrights' conference which happens in summer, which is a subsidized presentation of plays by new playwrights selected absolutely without regard to who the playwright is or previous experience or — picked blind by the committee of professionals.

MK: So people send in their scripts and get picked?

DW: Yes. And they will get a professional production there with a fine Equity company of actors and they live with that production. And they rewrite it as it goes and it goes before an audience. Almost all of our new promising playwrights have come from the O'Neill. And

these are the kind of things that are going on that are lively and interesting and progressive in theatre. But nobody looks to the Government, and I'm not sure that we should. I'm not sure that anything, any concept that says we're going to use federal tax money for a theatre is a viable concept in this country or a desirable one. I think it may be very undesirable. Theatre is a community affair. Every place big enough to create and maintain a theatre, which means people, not real estate, should do so. . . . There's an amazing number of fine community and regional theatres in this country now. There didn't used to be.

MK: Well, do you think that Federal Theatre may have helped change the consciousness of the country about theatre?

DW: Perhaps to the degree that because of its extremely low prices, it brought a great many people into the theatre that otherwise would not have seen live shows. And maybe there is some wave of influence from that. Somehow I have to be rather cynical about that, too. I really doubt it. I don't think that any theatre audience was created, you know, and continued in existence, not really. I don't think it exists today as a matter of fact. Theatre is still a rather special form of cultural entertainment.

MK: When I was in San Francisco I met quite a few people who are involved with community theatres up there, and they said the same thing about the scrambling for grants is that they tend to try to push each other down so that it isn't all the community theatres of San Francisco helping each other. They're fighting each other to get whatever money the National Endowment might give or someone might give.

DW: Right. But that's a big city and when I think of regional community theatres, I don't think of Los Angeles or San Francisco which are pretty professional cities. You know, I think of places like Dallas or Wichita, Kansas, or Minneapolis.

MK: Atlanta has quite a few.

DW: Atlanta? Yes, it does. I was just in Atlanta a week ago and looking at the paper, I was surprised to see what was going on there. Yes, I'm thinking of the cities, you know, not the giant metropolitan centers, not the great magnets that draw people as San Francisco does, but the cities that are more truly communities.

MK: What do you think about Preston Jones's trilogy coming to the Kennedy Center? Have you read any of it?

DW: No, I haven't.

MK: It did seem exciting that someone who had spent all of his life in Dallas was getting a big national showcase for his work though one of his plays had come to Arena Stage last year and was really successful.

DW: It also played in Los Angeles. It played here and there. But he's a regional. He really is a regional playwright. He tells his people and their rhythms and their speech and so on. Very good; there aren't many of those any more. We're all getting homogenized.

MK: How about Eugene O'Neill and the plays of his you did in Federal Theatre? Wasn't he living in California then?

DW: I think he was. Yes, he was living at Tao House up north in the Bay area. I can't remember the name of the town.

MK: So he didn't get to come down and --

DW: No. I don't recall that he ever did. I doubt that he ever left that house actually. I worked with The Great God Brown and Days Without End. . . . I lighted both of those and I think, stage-managed them. And that's an induction into perhaps the worst O'Neill, you know, the murkiest O'Neill, the most religious. It bored me pretty badly.

MK: What do you think is the best O'Neill?

DW: Oh, the plays of passion, the plays of direct emotional raw confrontations, not the ones of the murky mysticism and the lapsed Catholic /anguish./

MK: More Long Day's Journey and that type?

DW: Long Day's Journey is a good example of, yes, a direct confrontation of raw selves.

MK: Well, thank you very much.

DW: A pleasure. I'm probably not a typical interviewee but as I say, it was an interesting but an oddly detached thing. While being with it, I tried to keep from being intimately part of it as it seemed to be dangerous to become so.

MK: Well, I would think time bore you out in the wisdom of your not being too. . . . .

(End of Interview)