TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW
with GEORGE KONDOLF

by Lorraine Brown
for the

RESEARCH CENTER FOR THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT
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GK: Do you want to give me any idea in advance of the questions you're going to ask so I can be thinking of them? Or how would you want to do it?

LB: I think what I'll do is--

GK: Just talk?

LB: --just begin by having you talk about where the Federal Theatre did fit into your career, how you came to Chicago, how you became associated with the Federal Theatre Project, and then just talk about Chicago in a general way, whatever occurs to you, and then move on to New York, if that seems like a good idea.

GK: Sure.

LB: Is that all right?

GK: Sure.

LB: Let me begin by asking you, Mr. Kondolf, how did you first become associated with the Federal Theatre Project?

GK: Well, this is just a guess, but I have often thought about it and I think it happened this way. I had just produced a play with Dwight Deere Wiman who was a very prominent and successful Broadway producer. We had co-produced the play and it failed and I was out of work. And I have often felt, though I've never verified it--I think Hallie Flanagan or Harry Hopkins, or someone, went to Dwight Wiman because of his prominence and asked him if he would consider the job that was eventually offered to me. And I think that he, being very impulsive, immediately thought of me. And they went to me because of offering it to Dwight. Now, this is pure guesswork and I had often meant to ask Dwight if that was what happened. It would be rather typical of him anyway to do that. That's all I know about it.

LB: What about the Chicago Project as such? Hallie Flanagan in her book talks about the difficulties of getting started. For instance, the censorship of the Model Tenement, that first play. What kind of problems, when you took over in Chicago, what things do you remember were particularly trying or particularly difficult? Or perhaps you didn't find it that way at all. Maybe it was just Hallie Flanagan's experience before you came.

GK: As I told you earlier, I don't recall any particular difficulties.

I recall a sort of harassment problem from the vaudeville department. The director of that department wanted to expand it, and I don't think Hallie Flanagan or I were particularly interested in doing that. I think vaudeville was sort of slipping nationally, and I think we felt we would be doing almost

a disservice to encourage vaudeville in that sense of expanding it. But there was a lot of pressure put on me to do something about it, and I don't know that we did anything particularly. We kept them working and

I remember seeing a few vaudeville acts and that was it. And we used some of them in the revue I produced.

LB: You said you had your own special show that, that one of the things that was a positive change in the Chicago Project was your play, this musical that you put on. So would you like to talk a little about that?

GK: That was a musical called Oh Say Can You Sing, and it was an original musical, and developed by myself and the writers and a fairly well-known composer called Phil Charig. I brought those three people out to Chicago, and we all worked together. I don't know what else to say about it, but it became a big revue and by our standards, it was enormously successful.

LB: And there was something you had mentioned, I know, in the car caning over, that what Chicago had done was so many things that had been done before. And the innovation as far as this was concerned was that it was something new, brand new.

GK: I think they had, and probably correctly, repeated plays, rather simple plays, and plays that had become kind of stock favorites. So that seemed to work certainly pretty well in providing employment, but I don't believe it had generated any particular local excitement.

LB: Whereas this play certainly did.

GK: This did, and a few of the other things that were done after that did.

LB: We've talked about the different kinds of theatre also in Chicago that you encouraged. We'd spoken about both the Yiddish Theatre that you had mentioned coming over and the Negro Theatre. I wonder if you could talk about those for a bit. Was there a Yiddish Theatre in Chicago before the Federal Theatre?

GK: Yes, there was. As a matter of fact, I believe there was more than one theatre, but the Depression had put them out of business. And as I think I told you, I was very much impressed by the two people, Adolf Gardner and his wife, Jenny, who came to see me and urged me to create a Yiddish Theatre Project. And I was so impressed with this team that I did it. There was no problem in getting it approved as I recall. I think I explained what- thought was a real need to Hallie Flanagan and others in Washington And they gave me the approval to go ahead with it. The Gartners produced an original Yiddish musical that actually became a hit, not only among Jewish people, but I think among the general public and had a terrific score. I know I loved it and my knowledge of Yiddish is very minimal.

LB: Then it was quite different, the kind of plays they did in Chicago in the Yiddish Theatre from the New York project. There seemed to be, from what you said, a different focus, more interest in somehow keeping alive

Jewish acting traditions and stories and that kind of thing.

GK: Well, in New York I had a feeling that politics seemed to be very important. I never paid too much attention to it, frankly, in New York. I didn't really know the people, the directors and he… of it, I didn't like them. I wasn't able to communicate with them really. I thought their objectives in many cases were political and not theatrical.

LB: I'd be interested in hearing you talk about that as far as your objectives in Chicago or later in New York. How did you see the Federal Theatre and its importance at that time? What were your hopes and goals? What did you want to bring about as you took over both of these projects? Did you have a kind of vision of the theatre, what it meant to you, what you had hoped to achieve? Because I think there were probably as many different visions of perhaps a national theatre, which was Hallie's dream; perhaps the idea of regional theatre, which seemed to be part of what Elmer Rice was interested in. And I just wondered about your own vision or what you hoped that the Federal Theatre would become.

GK: Well, I hoped that it might eventually become a national theatre. I thought it was a good opportunity for that. And I think my interest in it was primarily to make it as good as I could, to create shows that people would want to see.

LB: Without the political overtones?

GK: Yes, I felt that would really hurt the whole project terrifically, that their interest instead of worrying about whether the show was good, the concern very often seemed to be were the right people employed and was the message gotten across and so on. This was a period when anybody who was really Left or extremely Left had no place to go but either become a

---Stalinist or a Trotskyite. It's quite different from the situation today and there were even Trotsky and Stalin fights on the project. And many of the times when I would go to a theatre to see a rehearsal, there would be not a rehearsal but a political meeting and a local commissar would be there working with them which,

of course, infuriated me that they would do it on government time and also do it instead of working and rehearsing. Their job was to do the

play and it seemed to me that it took just that much longer to get a show on in New York.

LB: You had mentioned the beginnings also of the Negro Theatre and we talked a bit about Ted Ward. Was there any Negro Theatre in Chicago at all to speak of before the Federal Theatre?

GK: I don't believe there was, and I'm not sure, as I look back, that there was even a Negro Theatre in the Federal Theatre Project. I think it was developing but hadn't been or approved. Now this, the records will

straighten. But that's my impression.

LB: What were the plays that were done, the black plays that were done in Chicago? We had talked about Big White Fog.

GK: I remember that. I think that was written by—

LB: Ward, Ted Ward.

GK: I thought that was a pretty good show.

LB: That was moved, wasn't it, from one theatre to another? There was sane controversy about moving it and then it didn't do as well once the theatre

was changed. Do you recall anything about that? I don't know that it's terribly important.

GK: I don't really recall anything about that. I think we moved shows to other theatres exactly the way a commercial manager would move it if it seemed to be a better location or if a new show coming in needed a theatre that, let's say a play that had had a pretty good run was utilizing the theatre at that time. We would try to move it. We would try to put the play in the best possible situation we could. This was just perfectly normal theatre operation.

LB: You also did the Swing Mikado in Chicago, which certainly created a lot of furor and excitement in the beginning.

GK: Well now, that was after I left.

LB: Was it? I see.

GK: Yes, it was. I don't know who created that but certainly Harry Minturn, who followed me as the director of the Chicago Theatre, had a large hand in it. He may have even started it, I don't know. But it did come to New York and it did quite well.

LB: That was like the voodoo Macbeth, really a very wonderful opportunity for black actors and actresses.

GK: Yes, it was.

LB: How did you feel about being--you said that it was Harry Hopkins who came out to Chicago and convinced you that maybe you should move to New York and take over the directorship of the New York project. Were you pleased to do that? Did you see this as really a good opportunity for you to move out of Chicago or move into better and bigger theatrical things? Or how did you feel about it?

GK: Well, I felt bad, personally about moving. But I recognized more challenging activitiy. And the New York project was obviously much, much bigger in every respect.

LB: That's a general sense around the country that things in the Federal Theatre were really, more exciting things were happening in New York in a general way.

GK: Right.

LB: Was this also true of Los Angeles, or was Los Angeles pretty well thought of?

GK: I don't really remember. I believe—and I may be wrong. I think in the rest of the country, they tended to do safer, kinds of shows, children's theatre and plays that had been done and had been quite successful. I'm sure that determination was made by the local situation and by the unemployed theatre people who were there. The important thing was we had to keep them working, You can't wait too long for an ideal show.

LB: What was it like in New York by the time you got there? Now, you see, Hallie Flanagan says everybody was gone, there were so many resignations. You had brought, as your assistant, James Ullman. Phil Barber took over producing, the production of the play. What was the situation when you got to New York?

GK: Well, he didn't take over. *As* far as I was concerned, he didn't take over the production of the plays. He may have--

LB: Helped out?

GK: Well, produced a certain play. He was on the Board. I don't know whether we called that Board of Directors. I have a feeling that he found a little niche for himself after having been the director and he was perfectly happy and satisfied with it. I don't recall that he did. Of the people I worked with mostly and relied on, one was Morris Antrum, who was an extremely talented actor, director, producer, and Charles Freeman. Those were the people that I relied on am: I thought talented.

LB: My colleague, John O'Connor, interviewed Charles Freeman yesterday.

GK: Oh, did he?

LB: Yes. He lives up in Connecticut.

GK: Yes, I know him very well.

LB: Do you keep in touch then?

GK: Yes, we've been trying to get him down here for a long time. He's a theatre critic now for a newspaper chain. Perhaps you know about it.

LB: No, I didn't.

GK: And we do correspond. Morris Antrum died, unfortunately. He was a great soul, a wonderful guy.

LB: So that you didn't feel any lack of good assistance at all.

GK: No, my relationship with Phil Barber was perfectly satisfactory but he never really helped me very much.

LB: You were on your own when you got there?

GK: Oh, yes, absolutely. As I say, I got help mostly from Freeman and Antrum and my own administrator Archie Hill who was in charge of production costs.

There were some very talented women--maybe you can help me there--that I relied on and used a lot.

LB: Was Ethel Aaron there? Ethel Aaron helped with audience, I know.

GK: I just remember the name. My concentration was really totally on the production. It really was. That was the thing that interested me and the actual merchandising of the show was quite well done.

But that was delegated. There was really enough work in the production, with all these shows going on at the same time.

LB: I know Hallie said the four shows running simultaneously were _One-Third of a Nation_ and the Bernard Shaw _On the Rocks_ was going. The other two were Prologue to Glory and Haiti. That's a lot of plays to have going at one time.

GK: Right. Well, except for Haiti, in a sense I produced all those. I got 'there when One-Third of a Nation was under way, but I followed through with it. They had a peculiar arrangement that apparently had worked all right in the past. They had a group of writers for One Third of a Nation, as I recall and the best writer was a playwright called Arthur Arendt. And he finally finished the job. He was a very talented man. And Prologue to Glory was a play that I had carried around with me for years and I could never interest anybody in getting it done commercially. I wasn't sure that it would go commercially, but it was written by a charming man, who was a very shy man who was the head of the theatre in a big Texas university. Do you know who I mean? E.P. Conkle. He was a wonderful guy but excessively shy. When Prologue to Glory got the best notices probably of any of the New York productions--that's my memory--it got four stars in the Daily News and genuine raves. It was really a beautiful play. It could be revived, I would think. Anyway, you'll probably want to cut a lot of this out, but I think it would be interesting to you. The opening night of that show was really quite sensational and there were demands for the author and he had disappeared. Either I found him or Morris Ankrum or someone like that found him hiding in the men's roan downstairs. He just was too embarrassed to cane out on the stage. He might not like that, you know, like that in the tape, but I say this with the best intentions in the world because I thought he was really a terrific human being, a wonderful and talented man.

LB: But just shy?

GK: Just shy.

LB: That's a wonderful story. Was that your favorite then of the plays that you were involved with? Or do you have a favorite?

GK: I don't know that I really had any favorites. Incidentally, Jim Ullman did not--he did not quit the Theatre Project while I was there, and I was the last director. I think he may have indicated to me that he was going to leave it at sane later date.

LB: He stayed with you until the end?

GK: Right until the end, and he was an invaluable assistant and worked--he was the assistant director of the project and worked very closely with Morris Ankrum and Charles Freeman and people that I worked with.

LB: Could we talk a little bit about Paul Edwards and the controversy there? We started when we were coming down to talk about him and then you had mentioned the fact that you really never did understand him. There seems to be a lot of confusion and controversy about that man. Anything that you would have to say about him?

GK: Out relationship was quite pleasant. I had the feeling that he supported me. I think that his interests were not the same as mine. He was an administrator and he wanted the project to work and work politically, I believe. And I think that's all.

LB: Was it your sense that he was anti-union? Or didn't that come across particularly in your, as far as you knew?

GK: I don't recall that. I think he might have had very good reasons to have been anti-union considering the situation.

LB: You were talking about picketing going on?

GK: Oh, that was constant, really. The real union-and this is the thing that may have hurt the project more than anything--was the Workers'

Alliance, which as near as I could determine was a direct arm of the Communist Party, and they had gotten in there well before I arrived. And there's no question in my mind but what the actors that were put on the project were picked by them, whether they had any experience or not. And the conflict we had when we had to--when the appropriation came up and it was cut, that's when we had all the problems because the Workers' Alliance was so powerfully organized. But as far as actors were concerned, they weren't the project was not really designed to take care of people who wanted to be actors. And Actors' Equity suffered as a result of that. There were many legitimate.

At one of the appropriation times or perhaps at both--I think there were two times when we needed new appropriations. That's when the agitation, picketing and sit-ins and everything would occur, certainly influenced if not completely controlled by the Workers' Alliance. And my problem--at least this is the way I felt and felt very strongly--was to fire them and save the legitimate actors. And I did the best I could in that respect and had problems about it with Phil Barber and other directors. They seemed to be with them and I wasn't. And I know by the time the project ended, we had a lot more professional actors on it than we had had before.

LB: That's a pretty basic conflict to have in the project, isn't it?

GK: It is, and it really was there. And I'm sure that when you talk to people, you may not get this point of view, but I felt very strongly about it and we managed to make it work.

LB: How did Hallie Flanagan--was she involved in this at all? Or did you have the encouragement from her to somehow take this line? I'm just wondering where she stood. Do you feel she supported you or was that your business as director to handle this?

GK: It was my business as director to handle it. I think she stayed out of it.

I think Hallie Flanagan was--I'm just trying to think as to--I would say she was a liberal Democrat who believed you could work with these people--and I don't question that belief. She managed to work with them fairly well. I think they influenced her to a certain extent, but as far as I can recall, I don't think she ever interfered with me on this or anything.

She was really a lovely person as well as being very talented and people liked her enormously.

LB: Did you get to know her quite well in--

GK: I felt that I did. I was told by--Jane Mathews, is it?

LB: Yes.

GK: TO my surprise, Jane Mathews told me as though I knew it, that Hallie

Flanagan did not want me to be the director of the Theatre Project, that she had sane other candidate in mind. Whether this is true or not, I have no idea. But I think it was taken out of her hands by Hopkins. think he just did it.

LB: He was the one who approached you in Chicago, you said.

GK: Oh, yes, absolutely. I don't think I heard from Hallie Flanagan about it except that she went along with it.

LB: There's nothing in the material that we have that indicates that that was Hallie Flanagan's feeling.

GK: Right. But this was Jane Mathews. I was really terribly surprised because I was very fond of Hallie Flanagan and all her behavior--it could be that one she got to know me, she liked me and went along with it, which I think must have happened, if Jane Mathews was right. No, I was extremely fond of her and used to see her whenever I could. I enjoyed company and it seemed to be mutual.

LB: So that, going back for a second to this controversy, maybe as Hallie Flanagan says in her book that there were never better productions than the four plays we just talked about it, you'd say then probably the reason those were so good is because you managed to get really professional actors into the New York project, that the quality went up as a result of your determination too--

GK: Well, that sounds highly conceited and everything, and I'm not too sure about the time elements there. But it's interesting that, with the exception of Haiti, those three shows that she nominated as being the best were all shows that I produced. You know, they were done at the time when I was there. One-Third of a Nation had been started.

LB: I think Phil Barber worked on that, didn't he, before you got there.

GK: I think he did, and then I think he continued to work on it. I'm not sure. But I know that Arthur Arendt, who was a very talented playwright, I think he told me this, that he said this committee--writing by committee didn't work and he told them he either was going to do the job and finish it, or he was going to get out and they could get somebody else. He was very tough about it and he was perfectly right. We finally got it on, I think in large part because he was the final author and the editor.

LB: Howard Bay worked on that, did he?

GK: Yes.

LB: Howard Bay worked for you subsequently?

GK: Yes, he did, as a matter of fact. Howard Bay's a very talented designer. *As* a matter of fact, I would consider he was one of the most talented designers in the theatre and always has been. He was sort of in the group with Lent Ward and Phil Barker and so on, but quite apart from that, he was an enormously talented guy, and as far as I know still is. I just read a review recently--I can't tell you what the show was--in which he designed the scenery. Very, very talented guy.

LB: What about, as you're thinking now, sometime later, 40 years later, about the Federal Theatre, what kind of effect do you think it had? Was it an important experiment? Did it somehow or other set a direction for American theatre that was worthwhile? With this time lapse, how do you think about it and its importance?

GK: I think it was important in that it had an opportunity that a commercial producer does not have of experimentation. And of course Hallie Flanagan believed in that very strongly and she was certainly very right about that. And various theatrical forms that hadn't been done before were tried out on the Federal Theatre and worked pretty well.

LB: Certainly the Living Newspaper itself was a new form altogether, wasn't it?

GK: Yes, and I think that form with variations became--it may have influenced or was the genesis of documentary films. I know I had never heard of a documentary until after the Federal Theatre Project and its form was quite similar to it.

LB: What other kind of thing occurs to you? Were you thinking perhaps of the arena theatre or a theatre-in-the-round in that way? I was following up on what you meant by experimentation, really.

GK: Right. Now, we did a play and I can't remember much about it. It was a one-act play. We did it in Chicago and it was very advanced in technique, and I thought it was great. As a matter of fact, unofficially I co-directed it with a charming girl who I think had gone to Vassar and Hallie Flanagan knew her. And I can't remember her name now, but she wanted to do the play and then she called me in or asked for help and we both did it. I remember the actors walked all over the theatre and up and down aisles and came from every place and so on. It seemed to be a lot of fun and it seemed to do pretty well. I can't even remember the name of it. Isn't that terrible? Well, there were just too many plays for you to remember the whole thing.

Now I'd like to tell you a story which you may want to use, but I don't know whether you'll want to tape it or not. (Interruption)

One of the most complicated and difficult shows the project ever attempted was Sing for Your Supper, a vast musical revue which took months and months to get on. One of its great problems was political. The objectives, to me, seemed to be political rather than creating a good show, and we always had that conflict before we could get the show on. One day I came to see a run-through of part or all of the show, I don't recall, and I noticed a brilliant young dancer in the show and suggested to the director or the people who were in charge I was talking to, that we do something about this man and surround him with greater material because he was so good. They agreed to do that. Several weeks later I came and he was no longer in the cast and I asked why. Well, he didn't work well or was non-cooperative or something. It was Gene Kelly who had been--I'm sure he was non-cooperative with that group and he was, as far as I know, just plainly fired. But I don't know that any of them would admit that, but he has since admitted it to me that he was fired. (Laugh)

LB: That's a wonderful story. (Laugh) wonderful, awful story. That's incredible.

GK: It really is. Well, I think a point can be made about that. I don't think you can have an artistic project that can be dominated or influenced by politics. And that's what happened in the New York Theatre Project, in part of it anyway. And certainly it was very apparent in Sing for Your Supper.

LB: And so then in terms of the lessons to be learned from that Federal Theatre experience then is the difficulty, let's say, in dividing, keeping apart the art, the theatre and the politics. And you seem to be saying that--

GK: They just don't mix.

LB: They don't mix and this--

GK: They mix perfectly in Russia and in the European Communist countries because they have a different point of view completely and use art for propaganda, purposes. And the attempt was made here to do that on the Theatre Project and it became very obvious on many occasions. And I'm certain that that hurt the Project terrifically. Congress became very aware of it and decided against putting any more money in it.

LB: Were you involved--obviously you were and heard about Hallie's appearance before the Congressional committee. Again, those seemed like very difficult times for the Federal Theatre, not to be able to defend oneself and again not to really somehow or other correct a lot of the allegations made. What was your sense though of that, the way it was finished out? (Interruption) investigations. When it was closing down, they were sort of on the track of what happened in Congress and what happened when I guess Mrs. Woodward first was called on to defend the Project, and then Hallie came on herself.

GK: Right. Well, I can recall at the time I was told by Hallie Flanagan and Mrs. Woodward or whoever, to be prepared to come to Washington, and I was. But they said they could arrange for me not to come because actually they were--I don't know whether it was Sing for Your Supper, but there were a couple of big openings that were driving me crazy. We really worked very hard on that night and day. So luckily I never had to come. Hallie and Mrs. Woodward were enough for them.

So I think we were all concerned with it. At the time I knew the details and I think they were up against a terribly difficult situation. The Project had obviously gone very Left insofar as its influence was concerned. And the things that I'm telling you were suddenly becoming apparent to the public and they didn't want it. So I think they had to fight all that.

LB: So this was really just the fact that what you had described before as usual practice had just, because it was New York, close to Washington, suddenly become visible to the public. Other people could see--

GK: Oh, I think so, I think so. People talk and the average actor-it's very difficult to generalize, of course. But in this case, I would say the average actor tends eventually to become quite conservative. He really does.

And I don't think they are politically Left or anything. They may be Democrats and they may be liberals and so on, but they also talk a lot. And they could see what was going on, and towards the end of the Project an organization was forming stemming from Equity. Equity was furious at what was happening to their members and understandably, and they were after me all the time, and I agreed with them. And they found ways and means to help me and to use their influence to see that their actors were used as they all should have been, without any question. And I just think that they're very vocal people and they talk. And it got around to the public. That's one way it could have happened, and the stagehands also would consider them a bunch of Reds. They didn't recognize a lot of these people as actors. They hadn't seen them in the Broadway theatres. So I'm just guessing now, but this was probably how it got to the public and from the public to their representatives in Congress.

LB: So it was inevitable, just--

GK: Inevitable.

LB: —a question of when it would happen.

GK: In fact, I was amazed, really, that it lasted as long as it did. I really was, under those circumstances. There was a tremendous opportunity there that was missed and I don't blame any specific person. I don't blame Hallie Flanagan. She may not have realized the degree of it. They may have been too powerful for her. They were powerful enough for me, I can tell you that. You know, they used to picket my apartment to an extent where the whole street had to be closed off. Did you know that?

LB: No, I didn't.

GK: Absolutely, and one time--it happened to be Washington's Birthday, and so I took the day off and left early. But that day I was buried in effigy with a big coffin, up and down the street. I would come home certain nights and I'd see this mob. And I had World War I guards who would have to break a path for me to get through to my apartment.

LB: And this all came out of the--well, the focus for it then was the Workers' Alliance? They were the ones who were organizing it?

GK: Yes, in large part, maybe not a hundred percent. But they were agitating and fomenting. They didn't want to be fired and they put the pressure on me as though I could have done much about it and you know yourself politically you can't do anything about it. Congress decides and that's it.

LB: So this was a very unpleasant time for you?

GK: Very, very tough. *As* I say, luckily on this particular day, I was under the impression they broke into my apartment---I could never prove that completely--to look for evidence of some sort, moral or sexual or something that they could get on me. And I could never prove it that they did, but I know that they came over the back fence--I had a ground floor apartment with a garden--on a couple of occasions. (Interruption)

LB: Did the thing go on pretty much from the time you arrived in 1937 until the end, maybe not as severe as you described this last little bit, but you had a feeling that this was pretty well under way and pretty well organized even when you first arrived?

GK: Well, I think all the techniques were known and I think they were applied in a very organized way when they wanted something. Mainly they were concerned with employment and you can't blame them for that. And they wanted the employment to come from the Workers' Alliance. These poor people had to pay dues and everything for it. If you wanted to become an actor, you joined the Workers' Alliance and you paid your dues. And they got you work or in most cases did. So that when the Project was up for an appropriation, they would agitate and put tremendous pressure to try to keep their jobs and keep the jobs for their own group. And there was no pressure group for Equity, unfortunately.

LB: So when the word would cane of a budget cut or something was in the wind, then it would all start?

GK: It would all start and they'd put it all on me, and I imagine on Paul Edwards, too. They learned very quickly where I lived and so on. We had dangerous situations up in my office. I had a couple of World War I guards there outside of the office all alerted for any kind of action that a confrontation could provide. And we had to call them any number of times.

LB: You must have been afraid for your life.

GK: In retrospect, I was always. Never at the time somehow, that didn't seem to bother me. Later on I would make up in the middle of the night and I would think about it. Any number of times when I'd come into the office, they'd be picketing and handing out placards, "Kondolf's a Fascist" and all this kinds of stuff. "Unfair to--" and they always had grievance committees, very carefully selected, with every ethnic group represented always. You know, the whole thing was so part it was just ridiculous. You know what I mean?

LB: Yes.

GK: It was so apparent, and they attempted, of course, to take up all your time. Now before they got to me, Archie Hill, the administrator for the Project, was the head of the Grievance Committee. I mean, representing me, and he tried to take a lot of the head. But occasionally, it would spill over and they would insist that I see than and so on.

LB: It's an interesting foreshadowing of what we know very well now to be standard disruptive practice.

GK: Ch, yes, absolutely.

LB: And it started at that point?

GK: Right

LB: They would care into your office and attempt to just stay in the office, sit in or just whatever--

GK: No, making demands. The Newspaper Guild gave me a lot of trouble. That particular branch was wildly leftist. Since then apparently it's a perfectly good, controlled union that makes sense. But certainly that particular group at that time wasn't.

LB: Had they been the same people who were involved in the Living Newspaper?

GK: Maybe some of them, but they were always fomenting. There was a man called Isherwitz or something like that, I remember, who seemed to be the leader. Apparently the technique is to always have a few demands that seem perfectly reasonable, but then it goes on to things that are just impossible.

LB: So you expend all of your energy--

GK: Fighting them.

LB: --fighting all the things that don't make any sense. By the time they're got you softened up, you'll agree to what they stuck for, I suppose.

GK: I think that's what they--that was the hope. They would have sit-ins. I was caught once very foolishly at a dance show and apparently I went to it without any bodyguard or help. And they saw me there, so they locked the doors and held me there and insisted I come up on stage and answer questions. And I just refused to do it. And so they--I don't remember too clearly. I think they attacked me with the typical all kind of stuff verbally and I just sat there and waited it out. Later I had a chance to go and I left fast. I figured I didn't have a chance in the world with that mob.

LB: It's amazing that you had to think in terms of bodyguards at that point. That was quite a difference, wasn't it?

GK: Well, when I went to a thing like this, I don't know that I consciously always..

…But we actually did have the equipment of bodyguards during the sit-ins and the firings that we had to do.

LB: You never know when something like that is going to get out of hand, do you?

GK: No.

LB: Well, Harry Hopkins was right about New York being light years away from Chicago, then wasn't he?

GK: Yes, he was. Incidentally, he became ill about that time and he came to New York at least on one occasion and maybe several and sort of a secret word would go out. I was to call a certain number and he would be there. He didn't want anybody to know it, and I would go up and talk to him. I never felt that I knew him too well, but I liked him very much and

has tremendously impressed by him. I was convinced at the time that if his health had been good, he might have been the next President.

LB: Is that so?

GK: Yes, I think he had all the capabilities for it.

LB: Do you think that he had ambitions, that he would have somehow, had he not been ill, pursued it himself?

GK: I think so, I think so. He was the--what's the royal or term for the--

LB: Prince consort?

GK: No, but Roosevelt, he was the--I tell you, my memory is really going. Anyway, I believe, and I haven't any evidence of this at all, that he was Roosevelt's favorite. And I think Roosevelt was so powerful then that he could have named him if he wanted to. I've never read any of his biographies, but I should at some time. I thought he was just a great man, really.

LB: Did you see Hallie and Harry Hopkins together? Was that also a very warm relationship?

GK: I would assume it was.

LB: But you never saw them together?

GK: No. Well, insofar as it was possible, I tried to avoid that king of social and political thing. It was just tough enough to do the job without adding to it. And I avoided speechmaking and all that whenever I could. Sometimes I'd get trapped into it and had to do it, but I didn't--now, Hallie Flanagan was a brilliant speaker and she enjoyed it and that was her metier. She could do it and she was great for the Project in many respects and that was one of them.

LB: What other strength did you see in Hallie other than- well, obviously she had a vision about this national theatre. But if you had to talk about her as a theatre person, how would you sum up Hallie Flanagan? Was this: a good choice in your judgement to head this project?

GK: Probably it was, because there were really more problems in a project of this kind than just providing jobs. I think she had sufficient imagination· to see the possibilities of something like this for a national theatre, and undoubtedly it was certainly her idea to branch out and try new forms of the theatre and so on. I'm sure of it.

LB: Did she have the reputation for being a good administrator as far as the Project was concerned or is that hard to determine?

GK: It would be hard to determine. I wouldn't say that that was one of her great talents. I mean, it all depends on how we define administrators. Now maybe Paul Edwards would be a great administrator. I don't know, but he and Hallie Flanagan were entirely different people, of course.

LB: But it was her presence as a theatre person that was really crucial to the Project, wasn't it?

GK: Well, she had tremendous drive and personality and a lot of charm and was very warm to her friends. She was basically a hell of a nice person by all standards. If one would think of her as a theatre person and putting her suddenly in Broadway, that's a different thing entirely. I don't know what she could have or would have done then, but in terms of a national theatre that had more Important objectives, let's say, than just making money, she would be very good.

LB: This is obviously what Hopkins had in mind in choosing her, wasn't it to head the Project?

GK: Very likely, very likely. She was also a very good friend of Mrs. Roosevelt, as you know, and I believe got her support and probably needed it in the job.

LB: I guess Mrs. Roosevelt, we had heard in California, had even promised, "Well, there will be an appropriation for a national theatre," had really had a belief in that.

GK: Mrs. Roosevelt? Yes. I think there would have been except for this thing we're talking about. I think they killed it themselves.

LB: This is why nothing came of it?

GK: Oh, yes, absolutely, in my opinion. Well, you know, we've been over this before, but I just don't think you can mix the two, certainly not in this country you can't.

LB: It's got to be one or the other. In your mind there's a great difference though, between, well, the kind of things we were talking about, the kind of tactics. It was different than--say, the kind of plays. I'm thinking now specifically of the Living Newspaper. You wouldn't somehow--is that what you mean by a political play? I'm thinking now of One-Third of a Nation or Power or Spirochete. Would you consider that the same kind of thing, the same kind of mixing, the same kind of intrusion? Or in your mind were they attempting to do different kinds of things rather than propagandize, rather than--

GK: Yes. They certainly were, certainly the stories--I'm puzzled as to the choice of words here. Certainly there was great propaganda in those shows. Now I'm not saying that's wrong at all. But I don't know that the propaganda in than had to be pro-Stalinist or anything like that. *As* a matter of fact, with Arthur Arendt, he and I eliminated quite a bit of it that was just ridiculous.

LB: Attempts to put it in?

GK: Oh, it just was so obvious. We threw it out, not basically because it was necessarily too obvious propaganda, but just because it was bad theatre. It just didn't fit and it was just dragged in by its hair.

LB: But then Arthur Arendt certainly recognized the thing that you're talking about as well that there were attempts to--

GK: Oh, sure. Arthur was a great liberal and the Left persuasion on the Project considered him a friend, but he really wasn't. He was a very intelligent guy and he might be considered somewhat Left, but I don't really know. But basically, he was an intelligent man and a good craftsman and he wanted a good show. He knew how ridiculous it was to drag this stuff in, and we never had any problem on that kind of thing.

LB: So your feeling—because I think this is an important point to make--the distinction, it's not somehow or other that you object to putting on plays that had a social message.

GK: Oh, not at all, not at all.

LB: Somehow it's got to be good, authentic theatre as well.

GK: Yes, it can't insult your intelligence. It's all right to have propaganda. The attempt was made to model it after, let's say, the kind of theatre and literature that comes out of Communist Europe that we recognize. The attempt was to make it like that.

LB: That certainly wasn't theatre. (Laugh)

GK: No.

LB: Well, is there anything that you had thought that you wanted to mention about your experiences that I haven't asked you? I anticipate and ask certain things that I've read about, but there may be things that I haven't known about so I couldn't ask you. I think that I should give you equal time to make any kind of statement that you might want to make.

OK: I thought I had made the statements as we went along.

LB: Fine.

GK: You know, I'm trying to be very careful. I don't want to really, at my age and after all these years, hurt anybody,

LB: And I certainly wouldn't--anything you wanted to edit out of the tape, that's perfectly fine. I wouldn't do anything without your permission or make it available to anybody without your permission.

GK: But I happen to feel very strongly about this, the thing that we've discussed, and I just know I'm right there.

LB: No, I think it's very important, because we've done about 35 interviews now and this is the first time I've really gotten into this. There's no one else who can tell us the story, I think. So it's important from our point of view, too, to have this.

GK: Well, the only other person would be Hallie and she's dead.

LB: I think it's hard for us--

GK: And Elmer Rice is dead, too.

LB: Did you know Elmer Rice? Just pick that up for a second. Did you have any contact with him?

GK: No, I'm not sure that I ever even met him, and I would say that he was an extremely talented playwright and a brilliant man. And I have a feeling that, unknown to him, he was sort of taken over by this group. I think that they outsmarted everybody. They got in the Personnel Department, that's really how it all happened. They managed to get some sort of control over that, and I think that being a very liberal guy, I don't think he necessarily examined the whole thing too carefully. They're very clever, you know. They do a damned good job when they want to.

LB: So that that whole controversy about the censorship of Ethiopia was--

GK: I don't know anything about Ethiopia. I've never read it. It's just a word to me. I guess that was done way back.

LB: Right. That was one of the first things. But I just thought in the context of Rice--

GK: Right. Anything you can tell me about that will be interesting to me because I don't know anything about it.

LB: No, I was just wondering if in--certainly that was pretty early in the Project for any—as far as that particular was concerned—for anybody to be working on Rice then. Whatever happened to him happened later on. That was the only point I was making.

GK: Well now, two of the apparently the best shows that were done, were before my time, were done by Orson Welles and--

LB: John Houseman?

GK: --John Houseman. Now those shows weren't political as far as I can recall at all, but they stepped right out the way any good show will step out. The ones that are loaded with political propaganda will die so quickly and become a bore. If you reread them, you probably notice that, it just seems so silly. But they were two men who obviously were really talented theatrical people and they did talented theatrical shows. And that's what the public recognized, accepted and wanted, not this other crap.

LB: I think this has been a very fine interview and I certainly want to thank you for putting it on the tape. And maybe we'll just stop, if that's all right with you.

GK: Sure. If I can think of anything else--

LB: All right.

(End of interview)