

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW
with GEORGE SKLAR

by John O'Connor
for the

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JO: Was Halsted Welles there about that time?

GS: Yes, Halsted Welles was there. As a matter of fact, there was quite a group at the Yale Drama School at that time. Elia Kazan was in my class and his wife, Molly Day Thatcher, who is now dead. Albert Maltz, with whom I collaborated on a couple of plays. And Michael Gordon, who became a director and has been making movies out here, but was with the Theatre Union in the thirties and the Group Theatre. Alan Baxter, who was with the Group Theatre as an actor and then came out here and for a time was a leading man.

JO: I can remember him.

GS: His career was sort of short-lived. But it was quite a class actually. There were a number of people.

JO: Is Albert Maltz still alive? Do you know where he is?

GS: Yes. He's around.

JO: We haven't been able to get an address from him. I don't want it right now, but if you have an address.

GS: Yes.

JO: I'd like that.

GS: I don't know if any of his things were done on the Project.

JO: No, there was--the name went through me when you mentioned it earlier. I thought of it and now I can't come back to it. Yes, there was a play.

GS: One of the names I mentioned?

JO: No, Maltz had something done by the Project, and I can't remember what it was. There was something in rehearsal also, it seems to me when the Project closed.

GS: I'm not sure, unless it was one of his one-acts.

JO: Yes, it was a one-act. It's a shorter one.

GS: Private Hicks. Was it anything like that?

JO: No. How did you happen to become involved with Federal Theatre? I guess what year was that class, that Yale class?

GS: The Yale class was the Class of 1932, but I was there before that: 1929, 1930, 1931 or 1930/1931 and was supposed to get out in 1932. Albert and I did a play called Merry-Go-Round at that time and left the school in the middle because it was produced simultaneously at Yale and in New York, so I went to New York.

JO: In this new collection there's a copy of Merry-Go-Round.

GS: Oh, there is?

JO: But I think that's the only one. Who produced it in New York? Was that Theatre Union?

GS: No. It was an independent production. It was produced by an associate of Phil's, as a matter of fact, Walter Hart, who was co-producer and co-executive, (...)whatever he was, whatever the title was. He produced it with Michael Blankfort I think was co-producer. It was done originally at the Provincetown and then brought uptown.

JO: That's right. I guess I knew that. In 1932.

GS: And that caused quite a lot of ruckus. Yes. Because it was an attack on the Jimmy Walker administration. He was at that time Mayor, but under fire. Roosevelt was then, was Governor, and he had set in motion an investigation. It was called "the Seabury Investigation," and they were digging up all kinds of things about the connection between Jimmy Walker and Tammany Hall and the underworld and that kind of thing. So this was not something you wanted (laugh) at this time. So we opened at the Provincetown and we got very good reviews, and had offers immediately to bring it into one of the Broadway theatres from all the theatre operators even long before we did. And what happened was that

the Shuberts, Erlangers and all the people who owned theatres, were very anxious, to have this come in. And we finally decided to go into one of the Shubert theatres and called back Shubert and got the response that he was sorry but that they had just booked another show into it. And he offered us several of his theatres, and they'd all just booked shows. So we went to the second lot. Everyone had just booked a show. This was in the height of the Depression, the depths of the Depression. All the theatres were closed and had been. I mean, all these grand offers were suddenly disappearing. So what finally happened was that we found one guy who owned one theatre. He was completely independent and he apparently had been overlooked. (Laugh) So he didn't know anything about this and knew the reviews and he knew what the play was. He was glad to have us there. So we had the scenery rigged up to fit a bigger theatre and set a new opening at the first theatre, which was the Avon. And on the night we were supposed to open, about 7:30 a flock of mounted police came clattering down the street and padlocked the theatre for fire violations. (Laugh) And that was that. It just rose all sorts of hell because the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union), Roger Baldwin's Civil Liberties, and the Producers' Association, the Dramatists' Guild, the Authors' League, everybody got together that night. We had a midnight session, and they organized it. They called it "The Committee of 1,000" and everybody issued statements and everybody undertook speaking assignments. We went to all the churches and every place we could find, and there was a week that the theatre was closed. And finally Jimmy Walker, who would make statements like "It's a lousy play anyway," decided that this was counterproductive. So then we went on, and that's the history of that.

JO: Was that revived later in the thirties, do you know?

GS: No. It was done in a number of university theatres, but it was never done, as far as I know. It was done, I think, in England; in London there was a production. And just about five years ago, there was a production in Germany of the thing. Someone pulled it out of the hat. I don't know where they got hold of it, but they decided to do it, and it was done there and done quite successfully. It sold as a movie also when it was done originally. Universal bought it and changed the title. They also changed the end of the play. The whole point of the play was that they hung this guy up in his cell, you know, and this was supposed to be tantamount to a confession of guilt. This was just a kid who was a bellboy, and he was the fall guy to cover up for the underworld, for the racketeers who were involved in the murders, which was what the thing was built around. In the play of course, it had this grim ending, with this silhouette of the body hanging in a cell. They cut him down.

JO: What was the new title for the thing?

GS: It was called, oh, my God, have I forgotten? Let's see, what was it called?

I should remember. I'm drawing a blank on it. I'll remember in a minute.

JO: But Stevedore was then the next big one?

GS: Well, no. What happened then—this is an interesting sequence, and I will start to go into it unless you think it's too much to tell. But I think that what evolved partially from that, and with a parallel thing going on in the scene at the moment, was that there was a group of people who were mostly writers, playwrights, but other people who were politically oriented toward the Left who were very much concerned about the Depression and everything that was going on and wanted very much to organize a theatre which would be a theatre that was socially oriented and which would be accessible and available to the ordinary guy at prices that he could afford. In other

words, people who could not afford to pay the price of a theatre ticket, but who could go to the movies, for instance. So we set up finally an organization called the Theatre Union, which had a price scale of 35¢ to \$1.50 top. And we did do what the Federal Theatre, of course, did on a national scale later. But we did succeed in bringing in a new audience, people who had never been able to go to the theatre. And it was a very exciting phenomenon, actually, because their response was a much more simple and outgoing thing than the more sophisticated audience of Broadway theatres. And we also in the Theatre Union gave away blocks of seats to the unemployed through unions and so forth and got in all sorts of people who would never have thought of going to the theatre, I mean, seeing that kind of a thing. So in a way I think this was a sort of prototype, a model, that Hallie Flanagan, who was very much aware of these things and was herself not only a director at Vassar, but had herself written plays which had a social point of view. She was definitely aware of and influenced by--I mean when the Project became a possibility, when she was approached to head it.

So after Merry-Go-Round, when the Theatre Union became an actuality (noise) also, and that was Peace on Earth. That was an antiwar play and we opened in Eva Le Gallienne's old Civic Repertory Theatre, which she had closed. It got terrible--we got slammed all over the place. And with notices like that, any play would have folded the next night. But what we did was scrape enough money together in 25-buck and \$50 donations to keep the play going for two weeks, during which we'd pay for the house. And we invited everyone connected with any organization which was, you know, left of center; of course all peace and anti-war groups primarily, but aside from that, all union groups we could reach and fraternal groups that had a left-of-center orientation and what-not.

We offered them blocks of tickets at half price, which they could sell at full price to their membership. And they could make a little bit for their kitty, and we could begin to run the play. It worked and I think it was the beginning of the whole goddamned, you know, benefit system, which is double-edged. I mean it later became a monster. (Laugh) But it worked so effectively with us that Peace on Earth, which was dead from the notices, ran 23 weeks down there and was brought up into a Broadway theatre for a few weeks after that run. And the critics, who had just put thumbs down on the thing originally, were invited back after 10 weeks and sang another tune, not too much about the play itself but about the wonderful new audience and the excitement that the play caused. And the overtones, the vibes were a little different about the play. Well, by this time we had developed a benefit audience to the point where before Stevedore was put on, which was the second production, we could sell six weeks of seats in advance as an unknown thing. And of course with Stevedore, we didn't have problem with bad reviews. We had rave reviews. It was really a successful production in every way, and that, of course, caused a lot of excitement. It was a black play.

JO: FTP did it in Seattle. They did quite a number of plays.

GS: Yes. We just heard that it was going on here. It was done in San Francisco. It was done out here, I think, too.

JO: I think it was also Denver. I think they've changed the endings. We don't have a copy of the play, and I read it in the Lincoln Center Library. And if I remember correctly, at the end the white union comes to the aid of the black.

GS: Yes.

JO: The end of this is a little grimmer. It was put on by the Seattle black company, which was a very good company. The white union doesn't make it in time.

GS: Oh, that's interesting.

JO: It doesn't show up at all. It leaves them at the black barricade and fighting when the curtain comes down.

GS: That's interesting as hell. There was a lot of controversy about that ending, I mean about the Marines to the rescue. But of course at that time you had to take it in context of what was happening. And what was happening was that the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) (laugh) with John L. Lewis was being organized, and this was the breakaway from the American Federation of Labor. And this was a progressive group, and it was a period of upsurge for unionization. There was a lot more enlightenment in those groups, in the unions, which were CIO unions. They were much more left-wing and much more politically oriented. I mean, the other unions were bread-and-butter unions, and that was it. Politics didn't come into it. But these definitely had education programs and so forth. So that actually the chances for blacks being admitted into a union which had not existed before were becoming a reality, too, although the bigotry was still prevalent---I mean, there was no question about that, because those things don't die so easily--was mitigated and the unionists were being educated to some degree, to the degree to which, in an isolated instance, a thing like this could happen, that whites could come in and fight with a bunch of blacks who were being attacked. Of course, Stevedore was also done in London with Paul Robeson when he was there. And at the time we were quite excited because Eisenstein, the Russian movie director, was working on a script with Robeson also. It never was made because what happened at that time was that Stalin decided that the country needed a continuity of the history, national history. And so he started with Nevsky, Alexander Nevsky, and Ivan the Terrible. He decided that

they had to have the historical films to build up pride in nationalism, so this was dropped. King Vidor also was very close to doing it, but he couldn't convince Metro Goldwyn Mayer. Anyway, that was that.

JO: How long did Stevedore play that first time in a theatre? Do you know?

GS: It ran approximately a year.

JO: And the London one opened up during that time?

GS: Yes. And also Stevedore went on the road afterwards where we did the Eastern circuit. We went to towns like Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, Washington. We even went to Toronto. It was terribly well received. It was that kind of a rousing sort of melodrama which really had an audience. The Theatre Union production at the Civic Rep was just--I mean, people had never seen reactions like this in the theatre, especially from these non-educated theatregoers, people who came into the theatre, saw things like this for the first time. They'd start cheering, they'd start whistling, and when they got excited--we had two balconies, and they had wooden floors. And they'd start stomping, and when you get a couple of hundred people doing this, it's electrifying. So that was really what made a terrific impression on me, terrific, the fact that there was a new vitality in the theatre and with stuff that was very pertinent. And the Theatre Union didn't last too long. It started in 1933, and it went about four years. Of course, one of the reasons it closed--it really wasn't the reason. It would have closed anyway, but it had no reason for existence once the Federal Theatre came into being.

JO: Do you think you lost that much of the audience?

GS: Yes, because the Federal Theatre was doing a much better job than we could ever begin to do. They had the resources there. Well, what I was saying was that the Federal Theatre really made the Theatre Union unnecessary, and what we were doing, they were doing all over the country, with full resources which we couldn't command at all because we had no money.

JO: How did it happen that the Federal Theatre produced Life and Death of an American?

GS: I wrote it for the Theatre Union, and it was scheduled to go on in 1936.

At that time John Howard Lawson had written a play called Marching Song, and these were the two plays we were going to do that season. They started with Lawson's play, and that finished it. It just didn't go.

And we were so vulnerable financially because we had done several plays after Stevedore which did not do well, particularly one by Brecht.

JO: Which one was that?

GS: The Mother. It was an adaptation of (Maxim) Gorki's novel, The Mother.

It had some wonderful things in it, but the audience wasn't--Brecht had not been done in America before. There had been one production of Three Penny Opera, which lasted, I think, eight days or ten days, and that was it. Then we did this, and although it ran about five or six weeks, we lost money on it which we couldn't afford to lose. Then we did a production called

Bitter Stream, which was also an adaptation of an Ignazio Silone novel, Fontamara. I don't know whether you're familiar with that.

JO: I know the novel; I don't know the play.

GS: Yes. The adaptation was by a guy called Victor Wolfson, who was connected with the Theatre Union. And that didn't go. Albert Maltz's play, Black Pit, also. It was very controversial because its leading character was an informer, and what he was trying to do was to show how a man was forced into a situation of informing. But this was attacked right from the start, so that didn't help us any. And Lawson's play, which had a beautiful quality in the writing--I mean, it had a sharp poetic imagery in it--just was not dramatic enough, and it just didn't hold up in production. And by that time there were other reasons to consider closing. There began to be schisms within the organization, political things were going on. Because we prided ourselves in the beginning, and were a united front grouping in actuality. Everybody talked about a united front, but when it came to putting it into action, it just never happened, but we were. We had the complete spectrum from Communists and known-in-town Socialists to Liberals of all kinds. We had an Anarchist on the Board.

JO: Why did an Anarchist go on the Board?

GS: It's an anomaly, but it-- This was a girl called Eleanor Fitzgerald.

She was an old ham by that time. She had been the mistress of Alexander

Bergman. Do you know that name?

JO: Yes.

GS: He was then Emma Goldman's--that was the connection there. And she had been involved in the Provincetown when it was originally set up when one acts of O'Neill were being done. So it was really a broad cross section, but at the end, towards the end, a few of the people on the Board became Trotskyites. And there began to be political infighting, and that didn't help things at all. Of course, this always happens in organizations.

JO: Did you stay in the Civic Theatre? Did the Theatre Union stay there?

GS: It stayed there until the last play when we were forced out because the people who owned the property decided to raze it, and they put up a parking lot. So we moved into a theatre called the Nora Hayes, which was on 42nd Street, but it was above the--I forget what the name of the theatre was.

And when it was apparent that we couldn't go on, I submitted a play to the Project. And at that time, George--was it George? You must know the name of the guy who was in charge then. He was the last person who was the executive in charge of the Project. George Kondolf.

JO: Oh, I'm sorry, yes.

GS: Kondolf. He was then--Phil Barber had resigned, Phil and Walter Hart had resigned, and George Kondolf had taken their place. And he welcomed the play; he was very excited about it as a matter of fact, and it was put into the works. I was quite divided about it actually. I was delighted to have it done on the Project because it would reach a bigger audience, for one thing, and two, because it was a very demanding play technically. It had an enormous cast. It was a multimedia thing long before multimedia things were

being done. I mean, it used not only songs, but dance movements, and it was a multi-scene thing. It had a fluidity that was almost cinematic, and hell, you just couldn't do it in any theatre. I mean, Broadway couldn't afford to do a play like that. So it was a godsend as far as I was concerned. They had a full orchestra, you know, musicians. The one misgiving I had about the thing was that Kondolf and I guess the director, who was a guy called Charles K. Freeman, wanted me to rewrite the ending. Now I had been very much aware of the fact during the period that the Theatre Union was in existence that we were beginning to fall into formula, and it was beginning to be too pat. You know, in the beginning conditions are terrible, you organize, and then you run into opposition, and you either triumph or you're beaten. That was the simplistic thing, and you usually ended up with a strike. It was Waiting for Lefty kind of thing with everybody getting workers. I wanted to get away from that, which is why, for instance, Paul Peters and I, after Stevedore, instead of doing a straight play, wrote a revue, which emerged as Parade. I don't know whether you know anything about that.

JO: No, I know the name, that's all.

GS: Well, Parade was a satirical revue with a definite social point of view, which we also wrote for the Theatre Union but which the Theatre Union just couldn't see the themes. I mean, they were used to thinking in these--

JO: Formula terms?

GS: Yes, formula terms, and to have a song-and-dance thing with chorus girls and what-not.

JO: Was it a revue of contemporary events?

GS: Oh, yes, very definitely, going into all the things, you know, all the alphabet agencies of the Administration, the FDR Administration, and attacking everything that was haywire on the scene. And it was very strong in what it had to say, and it wasn't just comedy routines. We also had serious

emotional numbers. We used a technique called the "mass chant," which had been developed by a group--well, it was originally developed in Germany by the "Blue Blouses" and then was taken over here by a group called first "The Workers' Laboratory Theatre," then the Theatre of Action, who did very interesting experimental work. I mean, for instance, the avant-garde work of today which is socially oriented, some of it, like Megan Terry and so forth, they have a lot to learn from those amateur groups that existed in the thirties. They were far advanced. The Teatro Compesino is just way behind what they were doing. Let's see, let's get back to where we were. We were talking about--oh, I got sidetracked with all this--

JO: Today's avant-garde?

GS: Today's avant-garde.

JO: Those groups. That's one of my general theses, is with the thirties experimentation, obviously novel and can't be duplicated.

GS: There was a thing called The Newsboy, which the Theatre of Action did. Do you know that?

JO: I've seen it.

GS Oh, Jesus, that was a stunning thing! That was a combination of Jooss ballet and everything. As a matter of fact, it was a montage really.

It was a collage or whatever you call it. They needed to do a play and the director, a guy called Al Saxe, couldn't write it. And he began to think in terms of the social plays that he'd seen and scenes from them, and he wanted to put them together. And he used this newsboy shouting the headlines of the day. He came to us, to Albert and me, for instance to ask if he could use a scene from Merry-Go-Round, which they did use.

They used the third-degree scene, but it was done in different context, of course. What happened was we had a third-degree scene because this bell-

boy was--they were trying to get a confession out of him. But they had this stream of people going along the street, and they would freeze suddenly into formation, you know. And then they'd become a breadline or they'd become something else. Well, at one point these people walking along the street, some whites bumped into a black and swore at him or something and just knocked him down. And suddenly there was a phalanx of guys standing over him, and you went into a third-degree scene. And that's what he did. It was a brilliantly conceived kind of thing and worked out very well. As a matter of fact, we included it in Parade. It was one of the

numbers that we wanted to include because we thought it was so brilliant, and it hadn't been seen by a regular theatre audience. And when the Theatre

Union turned it down, we auditioned it for the Theatre Guild. And the Theatre Guild--which was in a very nebulous state at the moment, I mean, they were having a "down" period--sort of remembered that they had initiated

the Garrick Gaities and that Rogers and Hart had emerged from that and given them a new lease on life. And they suddenly thought, "Well, maybe this is what we need at this point." So they went gaily into it, not realizing what the hell they had. And here we had songs "For the Left to the President,"

which was a very strong song of protest sung by a black. And we had this mass chant, which was a lynching number in which we described with great vividness a lynching and which Helen Leslie, who was one of the directors of the Theatre Guild and one of their actresses, was all for it. She was fighting to the end to have that in, and the Board began to get cold feet on that one. That was

the first thing they got cold feet on. Then when we opened in Boston, we had two weeks in Boston to break it in, Newsboy, which was in it on the opening night, had a mention of Sacco and Vanzetti in it. And Governor Fuller, who had been the judge on the Sacco-Vanzetti case, was in the audience. It was

a Boston blue blood Brahmin audience, and as soon as you heard those names coming out, you could hear this gasp coming out and the audience seemed to rise about an inch or two inches out of their seats. And we counted 36 people walking out at that point. Well, that number went out that night.

You see, we had no control over it. The Dramatists' Guild gives the playwright control over legitimate play material, but with revues where it's different numbers and usually by a number of different people, you had no control. The producers can yank numbers out and they can substitute numbers by other people if they want. And so this began to happen. That went out, then the mass chant had to go. Then we had this wonderful black singer called Avis Andrews, who did this "Letter to the President" number, and she did a number as a maid, a song which she sang about her mistress called, "You Ain't So Hot." They loved Avis's "You Ain't So Hot" because it was comedy, but "Letter to the President" was another matter entirely. So they began substituting numbers which had nothing to do with, you know, with social commentary. And, hell, it was the thing which made it have a distinction and unity. And it was being loused up by their fear. They picked a day when Paul had to go to New York to see his psychiatrist and I was holding the fort with Jerome Moross, Jerry Moross, who did the music. And we had decided that we were, there was a point beyond which we would not go, and if they pulled one more number, we would renounce the show, we'd call in the press, and we would threaten to picket the show, we would picket it if it went on. And that happened that day. He was in New York and they announced this, announced

they were going to pull "Letter to the President," whereupon I got up and made my little speech and said I was going to do all these things. And Jerry and I took a walk along the Charles River ready to throw ourselves in (laugh) and came back about two hours later. We were being paged all over the goddamn

place, and Lee Simonson, who was in charge--he was in direct charge of that particular production, and he had done the scenery for the play; he was a damned good scene designer--was a guy who really was on the scene and making final decisions. We saw him; he was paging us and we went to see him. He said, "Look, let's not resort to threats. I mean, let's see if we can't handle this." He said, "I've been on the phone to New York, and I've talked to the other directors of the Guild. And they've decided to let 'Letter to the President' remain in the show, but let's not do this thing." And he said to me, "George, I know, you're a nice Jewish boy who likes to be loved. (Laugh) But let's not get excited." Anyway. So the show went on, was brought into New York, and it was a mixed bag. It was--they had brought in a number of things which sort of just wouldn't let the thing jell into what it should have been. It should have had an integrity of its own and a unity, a concept, which they really destroyed. It had damned good things in it. Jimmy Saddle was wonderful except that he didn't know what he was doing. We had a number about a Liberal and we did it on a tightrope. And he sang this song walking this tightrope. We had a copy of The Nation, which was exposed to the audience and the audience could see it, and this identified him. And one matinee Jimmy appears and he's got a copy of The Saturday Evening Post. So we went back and said, "Jimmy, what in hell are you doing?" And he said, "Well, it's a magazine, ain't it?" Anyway, this is the way that show was done. It ran for about eight weeks, and that was it. But it was the precursor of Pins and Needles, which was done a couple of years later and which did have a unified point of view and which was damned good.

JO: Yes. In substance, I think the Federal Theatre tried one, too.

GS: Yes, Sing For Your Supper.

JO: Yes. Sing For Your Supper. Kondolf was the--

GS: That's right, and Earl Robinson was involved in that. He did "The Ballad for Americans" for that. Incidentally, Earl Robinson did the music, Earl Robinson and Alex North, who was a damned good composer and who has been doing scores for movies mostly, did the music for Life and Death of an American when it was done on the Project. It was, now let's see, Parade was done in 1935. I wrote Life and Death of an American the next year, and then I kept rewriting it for the Theatre Union. I must have done five different versions of the thing. Now I'm getting back after a long discursive thing as to why I had misgivings about changing the ending for the Federal Theatre. They wanted to do precisely what I was trying to get away from, which was a formula. I had the central character after the war--he was a flier during the war. I had him become a test pilot, and I had him working as a test pilot thereafter. And he was killed in one of those tests. Kondolf and the director, Freeman, decided, no, the Independent strike, Independent Steel strike--was it Republic Steel or Independent Steel?--Republic Steel strike, which had been such a bloody massacre, ought to be in the thing instead. So we went right back to the formula. We ended up with a strike and the guy got killed in the strike, which I didn't really want. This was rehash, you know. I thought the other, especially trying to do it in terms of the American independent soul kind of thing, you know, the American dream where you were your own guy and you made it on your own. And you ventured into new fields and what-not, with a test pilot, I felt was much more of a symbol that had meaning. Well, anyway, that's the way it ended up. I mean, they persuaded me.

JO: How did the crash occur in your earlier version? Was it that he was testing a new plane?

GS: Yes. And things were not adequately being handled because it was the Depression and, you know, they were cutting down on people, and they were doing things with spit. And he went into a plane that wasn't ready to be tested, and that was it.

Anyway, I have some of those, I think most of those versions, too, the early versions, somewhere. But although the play got mixed reviews, it was, as far as the audience was concerned, we played to full houses all the time. And it was just too bad that we were the last play that was done on the Project, and the ax fell then.

JO: That's a play that would have, I think, certainly have toured in the way that Stevedore did.

GS: Yes, unquestionably, because it was a natural, you know. They wanted spectacle, and they wanted it. You see, that was an interesting thing also connected with Life and Death of an American because just about the same time I wrote it.

Kaufman and Moss Hart had written American Way, which was very similar, almost completely similar in concept, because they were doing an American story at the beginning of the century. But they were showing a group on the "up," you know, a group that was rising, whereas I was doing the worker who never really got very far. And they did theirs on a grand scale, too. This was done in a theatre which didn't ordinarily house regular plays. I think it was a theatre that did some opera work and what-not. It was a huge theatre, and done with a very large cast also, although they didn't use music and any of the other talents which went into mine. But it's very interesting, just this past year a guy from the University of Michigan called me out of the blue and said, "I am doing a thesis on the social theatre of the thirties, and I don't want to do a comprehensive job. I don't want to tell everything that was going on. I picked two figures which to me represent the two things that were going on in the theatre of the thirties. I picked George Kaufman for the Broadway theatre and I picked you for the social theatre." And he asked me if he could have an interview with me--he couldn't afford to come to L.A.--over the phone. He had a hookup, a tape going there. So we talked for almost two

hours. Then he later sent me the thing, and it goes into a comparison, The American Way and Life and Death of an American. It does a very good

analytical job on the points of view and the differences and the similarities in the thing. It's quite fascinating, as a matter of fact.

JO: When did this happen? When did he call you? I'm curious.

GS: Let's see, just about a year and a half ago, maybe a year ago. April 5, 1974 is what he's got. The thing on the comparison of the two plays is interesting. I think it's toward the end of the thing. Of course, it goes into Life and Death, there, too.

JO: I think who also does this, although I was looking for a copy around here and couldn't find it, is, do you know the book by Malcolm Goldstein called, This Political Stage? Oh, you have it. Okay.

GS: This is a fascinating thing that this happened. Within the past year and a half or two years, the social theatre of the thirties, which had been buried by the whole McCarthy syndrome, and which had disappeared really from textbooks, from all the places that it would have had a normal mentioning, you know, where it would have been written about, it suddenly ceased entirely. Now John Gassner was the social critic of the thirties and later of course he was the anthologist and textbook writer of the theatre entirely, I mean, covering the American scene. Now John Gassner had written about all these things there at great length in his textbooks originally, but as new editions came out during the McCarthy period, these things were edited out so that all mention of the Theatre Union, for instance, was no longer there. I mean, people don't know there was such an organization as the Theatre Union. They draw a blank on it now, but it was really a very important organization, even though it didn't have the impact

that the Group Theatre had in terms of a technical contribution to the theatre, in terms of introducing the Stanislavski Method and so forth, and carrying on a continuity in the actors' studio. But what we did have, what we did contribute, was a theatre which had a point of view which was concerned with the scene and with people, with the ordinary people, and which had an impact, not only on the audiences, which were in some measure, large measure, new audiences, but also on writers, on playwrights. I mean, not only the contemporary writers who were already established, for instance writers like Robert Sherwood and Lillian Hellman, whose work was definitely, you know, sharpened in terms of their social point of view after we came into being, but for instance, a guy like Irwin Shaw, who had been a soap opera radio writer, and who was a friend of Jerry Moross--Jerry Moross had done incidental music for Stevedore. He arranged the songs that were sung, the spirituals and what-not. And Irwin Shaw, a younger writer who was then writing his first serious stuff aside from his soap opera stuff, did Bury the Dead directly under the influence of what was happening in the Theatre Union. And he gave me--I was then, one of my jobs in the Theatre Union was playreader. He brought me the script immediately he finished it, and I was excited as hell about it. And again the Board of Directors of the Theatre Union was myopic about it. I mean, they couldn't see doing a 45-minute play. How are we going to have an evening? I said, "You get another play." Well, it just wasn't, you know, orthodox. They just had no imagination about it. There were too many political people on it, that was the trouble, not enough theatre people. I got in touch with Ben Irwin, who was the head of the New Theatre League, which was sort of heading up all these amateur groups which were doing social things, social theatre, and he published it in New Theatre Magazine. Then it was done by a group. Incidentally, the title originally was called Bury the Nice Stink, and

I said, "Irwin, you can't do that." (Laugh) ..And I suggested Bury the Dead instead. Anyway, it did have that kind of impact. Also, we had Sunday nights at the theatre when the play was not in performance, in which we sponsored a variety evening. And we would invite people to do sketches, and the Theatre of Action would bring in their stuff. The New Dance Group, Miriam Blecher's group, who later became my wife, would present a few numbers.

JO: Who were some of the people that influenced you? Just like the Theatre Union had its influence, how about the other way around?

GS: The other way around. Well, I think I was influenced a great deal by the New Playwrights, which was a group at the end of the twenties sponsored by-- they got their money from Otto Kahn (laugh), who is a Wall Street financier who was interested in the arts. It was very fascinating the way he came in with them and went along with them. And they operated in the Cherry Lane Theatre, which is still in existence in the Village. They included Lawson, Mike Gold,-- I don't know whether you know him--a guy called Faragoh, Francis Faragoh, a guy called Emjo Basshe, and the Siftons, Paul and Claire Sifton. And they were doing so-called revolutionary plays which had a lot of excitement. They were sort of wild in their point of view actually because they were romantic revolutionaries, and their knowledge of economics and of Marxism and so forth was practically non-existent. But they considered themselves, you know, way up on it. Not all of them, I mean. Mike Gold, for instance, was much more and Lawson became, after he had been attacked by Mike Gold for being frivolous and doing plays which had no meaning after he'd started doing plays which had meaning, he really settled down and began to study. And he really became involved politically. He went down to Harlan, Kentucky, when the coal miners' strikes were on and became involved in the Scottsboro case and things like this. Well, I was at Yale at the time as an undergraduate, and although I didn't go

to New York or see their stuff, I read their stuff. And technically, they were more revolutionary than they were in their concept. This influenced me a great deal because I always wanted to experiment, and I always did experiment and still do. So they were an influence. I was influenced by some of the Germans, by Ernst Toller, Man and the Masses, by Gerhart Hauptmann, The Weavers, by the expressionists in Germany, Kaiser and the others and of course by O'Neill, who was the big American figure, the first one really, of dimension. And he was a mixture. He had a social point of view. He also as he got older got more into the psychiatric approach. He was interested in the subjective of his characters more and more and the mystic element. He was an influence, certainly those early sea plays.

JO: How about Paul Green? Was he?

GS: Yes, Paul Green had started, and he was an influence also. I remember being very much impressed by--I was already in the Yale Drama School and writing already. We went down to see a Group Theatre production of a play called 1931, which was written by Paul and Claire Sifton, which dealt with the Depression and which was one of the, I think, the better things that they had done, although it was an utter failure and it didn't last at all. I think it was off in a week. But that made a very deep impression on me. Lee Strasberg directed it, and it was one of the things he did supremely well. Then of course I was influenced by novelists, by the fiction. Now Galsworthy had a great deal of influence on me. He was very much a socially-aware writer. H.G. Wells had an influence. I was influenced a great deal by Thomas Wolfe and by Scott Fitzgerald, you know, people who ostensibly did not have a social point of view but who were damned accurate in their reflection of their milieu and who gave a class awareness without intending to, perhaps. Because by their utter fidelity to what they were writing about, they gave you in some ways a much clearer picture of what was going on economically and in the social aspects

than polemicists, you know, political people. For instance, I consider J.P. Marquand, who was a popular novelist, and who was Republican and reactionary in his point of view, to be a social novelist because his truthfulness about his characters who were Harvard graduates, who were upper class people, carried the wrong comment. You know, if you were at all a thinking person when you read it, you saw what the society was, what the stratifications in society were. And I was very much aware of this. I was influenced by James T. Farrell, you know, by Studs Lonigan, that kind of thing.

JO: How about cinema? Was cinema something that you then went to? Or was there some relationship between—

GS: Oh, cinema was a very early influence with me. In fact, very important, because for some reason or other--we lived in back of a movie theatre. The tenement house in which we lived was sort of adjacent to it, and I used to see everything, either through passes or we'd sneak in. But I saw everything, and I developed an awareness of technique. I began to watch pictures and to try to analyze what made them tick, I mean why something was successful, why something was not successful. And at that time the New York Herald Tribune, on its Sunday movie page, had a column of letters. And they discussed things about what was happening in the movie world. And there were quite a few others which had comment about technique, and I began sending in letters. I was in high school. I began sending in letters, and they were always published. The original critic at that time who conducted this column was Harriet Underhill. Later she was succeeded by Richard Watts, Jr., who was--

JO: Underhill?

GS: Yes. He later became the theatre critic. But at first he was their movie

critic. And I kept sending in these letters to him. I remember I wrote a letter about the, Carl Drier's Joan of Arc, and writing about the use of the closeup and the importance of the closeup, and this kind of thing.

Of course I was influenced tremendously by it, and my plays always pretty much showed that influence. I mean, they were always cinematic. I did

multiple- scene things always except for a thing like Laura where when Vera Caspari wrote the novel, we set out to do a one-set conventional play. But now, even now, you see, I was away from playwriting for many, many years.

There was a hiatus when I came out here to Hollywood and began working in movies. Then I got fed up with the movies and began writing novels. Where after Laura was done, it was such a ridiculous experience because Miriam Hopkins was an impossible person, and you found yourself playing games with this tantrum-prone star who was always lousing up the works because she was so insecure. I mean, she was supposed to be an ingénue and she was in her forties. And she was scared as hell that her wrinkles were showing. So in the suspense part when she's supposed to have mood, she would bring in a special lighting man to put on footlights so they would wipe out her wrinkles, which you never do. You don't have this bright light coming up from the foot. You have overhead lighting and shadows in suspense parts. And she would pull things like--I'm getting very discursive, so please stop me.

JO: This is interesting, too.

GS: Well, anyway, she pulled one thing which was unforgivable to me and which is why I got out of theatre really because the whole thing was built to her entrance at the end of the first act. She was supposed to be murdered, and the scene at the end of the act where the detective is sitting on a dark

stage with his back to the audience, with only the light from a cigarette showing and a light bracket under a portrait of Laura which he's looking at. And there is a storm outside and you get rumbles of thunder and lightning. And in one of the lightning flashes, suddenly the door is opened, and you see this white figure in a white plastic raincoat. He looks at it and looks back towards the portrait, and then it's gone. And then a moment later another rumble of thunder and lightning and again this figure there, but this time in the room. And then she pushes down the switch and the lights come on, and it's Laura and she's alive. Well, it's theatrical, it's built towards that, and the mood is important, the lighting is important. Well, Miriam Hopkins decided this was such an important moment she had to have a practical light switch. She wasn't going to depend on the electricians on the board to time it. You know, she had to use her own instinct for the right moment for those lights to come on. Well, what happened was that as soon as she came on the first time, as soon as she let it register, you know, at all, she pulled on a light switch. She didn't wait for the second time, and the lights went up. And her husband who was planted to start applause for the stars--the star had to have a hand when she came on--started applauding. And the play went right out the window.

JO: That's terrible, that really is.

GS: So I said, "What in hell, Sklar? What the hell are you doing? What are you doing playing games?" In the first place I didn't even--you know, I was a social playwright. What was I doing writing, you know, a suspense play? I'm damned glad I did write it. I still get royalties from it, and it was a good piece of theatre as such for the genre. But anyway, I didn't write a play for 18 years after that. Now what started me on all this? I know what it was, about the cinematic technique. Aside from Laura, I had used cinematic technique, and when I did go back to writing plays, it was right after the

Mississippi incidents in which the three boys were buried under that dam, Cheney, Schwerner and Goodman. And I felt I had to write about that. I started out as a novel because I was writing novels at the time, and I saw it was falling into a play form. And I said to myself, "Sklar, who are you kidding?" You know, it's a play, it demands. This is the kind of thing that has to have a direct impact on an audience with live people. It has to scare the hell out of people, and I've got to do it. So I did it as a play, and of course that did use again the cinematic technique. I didn't know whether I'd have a chance in hell for a production. I mean Broadway by that time was already not interested in anything that was serious, let alone controversial. But it was done by the American Playwrights Theatre. It was their selection for 1966, and we had 40 productions done by the time it was closed. So it had an exposure anyway and I started writing plays again.

JO: I'd like to go back to the Federal Theatre now. What were some of the productions in New York you remember in the Federal Theatre that didn't necessarily have influence on you but you thought of as good?

GS: Well, I think primarily the Living Newspaper things. I think their contribution was unique and terribly imaginative, had a hell of a wallop. I mean, it had all the impact of the best film documentaries plus that added something that live theatre does give and does give when it's done imaginatively, when you use a sort of cartoon figure like Mr. Buttonkooper, which was done so beautifully by Norman Lloyd, and use all the excitement and power that you get out of piling up little minutiae that are personal, coupled with objective statistics, and which suddenly come together and overwhelm you. A thing like One-Third of a Nation was an experience in the theatre. It was tremendous. Power was. Those were extraordinary contributions to theatre, and I don't know why it has not been picked up as a form, I mean why it just sort of died with the Federal Theatre. Probably because the economics of theatre made it

impossible.

JO: Partly the size of the cast.

GS: Yes.

JO: But it is remarkable. I mean, the one that was in rehearsal when the Project closed went on. That was Medicine Show.

GS: Yes.

JO: And Norman Lloyd was still in that, and there was somebody else. I can't remember.

GS: Jules Dassin directed that.

JO: Yes. That was done commercially when it stopped.

GS: Yes, when it stopped. Now there has been a touching of it on things like the In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer, you know, that kind of thing. Or even Are You Now or Have You . . . but not in that creative way, not with the full use of theatre with all its resources. Arent was really brilliant at doing this.

JO: The one that was controversial was Injunction Granted. That was one about labor.

GS: Yes.

JO: Do you remember that one?

GS: I didn't see it. I didn't see that. Of course, the very first thing, I mean,

which got Rice out of the theatre immediately was the Ethiopia thing. And of course you had the whole interplay of Congress and an artistic thing that was set up. They behaved remarkably well considering. There was interference, but Hallie Flanagan was a hell of a player. She was a great gal, and she could marshal her forces. I was on some sort of board, an advisory board or something. You see, I wasn't part of the Project. I came with a play, but before that she had some sort of, she had advisory boards, she had--and when she got in a jam, she would call them together to get their support, to have the backing of whatever names there were on the Board. Brooks Atkinson was involved. I remember going to meetings with him. But actually the interference wasn't that great. I mean, it did a tremendous amount. Now when Marc Blitzstein's Cradle Will Rock was interfered with, that of course was interference, but in a sense it gave it more publicity and gave it a life that was a help to the play.

JO: Of course they were doing rehearsals in this as Life and Death of an American went into production. Did you have any worries or did other people worry about--

GS: About our censorship?

JO: --censorship or--

GS: Yes. As a matter of fact, one of the people on the Committee, the House Un-American Affairs Committee labeled Life and Death of an American as a subversive play. But it was left at that. Nothing was done about it. But it went into the Congressional Record. I was always being labeled.

Stevedore was labeled subversive. Peace on Earth was labeled subversive.

JO: I remember both Stevedore, on reading those transcripts, Stevedore and Life and Death were both cited.

GS: That was the Dies Committee at that time, yes.

JO: How about Class of '29? Do you remember that play, or Battle Hymn? There were a number of social dramas that they put on in that 1938 1939 season.

GS: I saw Battle Hymn, of course. I don't think I saw Class of '29.

JO: It was four graduates out of college in 1929 and what was happening during the Depression.

GS: I missed that. You see, I went down to Mexico at that period, so that may have been the reason why. I went down the early part of, the last part of 1938 and the early part of 1939. But there were, of course, other things on the

Project, I mean, aside from the Living Newspaper, which I consider the single big contribution. There were things like Murder in the Cathedral, which was terribly effective.

JO: How about the Welles-Houseman?

GS: Oh, yes. Yes. Definitely. I saw the Macbeth when it was done in Harlem and of course it had the two bigs that were in Stevedore, Jack Carter and Edna Thomas, in it, playing Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. A terribly exciting production. Welles had the ability to strip the text and yet not make it bare, you know, keep all the essential good things in it and make it a fast-moving thing that was just breathtaking. His production of Macbeth and of course later with the Mercury Theatre the Julius Caesar were great pieces of fare.

JO: He did the same thing with Faustus, too, the same kind of play, rapid-paced, strong.

GS: Sing For Your Supper was an ongoing thing that took so long to put on, but there were so many things going on with that.

JO: The costumes?

GS: Yes. And a thing like "The Ballad for Americans" emerging from that was, it was a very exciting thing to happen. I remember hearing parts of it when Earl was working on it, and it had a definite excitement.

JO: Do you remember the earlier, it's not quite the same, but a revue, 1935? It was called a Living Newspaper but it was a different kind of play, really. It was a revue of--

GS: Of the events of the year.

JO: Right.

GS: I must have seen that, and I've forgotten what it was now.

JO: It's not of the same quality as the others, but it's much like it.

Did you have connections or relationships with any of the other administrative parts of the Federal Theatre? The Play Bureau? Or the Research Bureau?

GS: Yes, John Gibbs, who was, I think, in charge of the playreading, had been a classmate also of Baker's, and I saw quite a bit of him at the time. I remember talking to James Ullman, who was an executive producer, I think, on the Project at the time and Morris Ankrum, who had offices adjacent to the others. I'd drop in and talk to them.

JO: You mentioned earlier the Theatre Union not only had a commitment towards a theatre audience but also a kind of theatre, left-of-center, socially conservative. How about the Federal Theatre? Do you think it had similar audiences, picked up that part of it? Do you think it had a thematic coherence to a type of play that would be a Federal Theatre play?

GS: I think there was, although it was not committed to any one definite thing and certainly tried to give all kinds of theatre, you know, from carnivals to circuses to T.S. Eliot, I think that there was a leaning towards social material. I think it certainly was evident in Rice. He wasn't there very long, but he started with a controversial thing and his own work certainly was socially oriented. Oh, incidentally, as an influence, Rice was an influence, no question about it. I mean, The Adding Machine and Street Scene and things like that made a definite impression on me. But I think there was a tendency towards the social material. Now I don't know whether it was conscious. It probably wasn't, but you had a bunch of newspaper writers there who had to be used. I mean, they had to do something. And from that evolved the Living Newspaper as a forum. Now I don't think they set out to say "We're going to write plays with social meaning." I mean, I think it had a natural evolution,

but once it took form with one thing, I mean, it led to another in, I think, what were the topics of the day. This was the height of the Depression. The world was, as O'Casey said, in a state of "chassis," and what were the subjects you would pick for a newspaper? You know, these were the subjects. Ethiopia was Ethiopia. I mean, the Italians, Italy, Mussolini had grabbed it.

JO: Phil Barber tells the story that after Ethiopia they wanted him to do

something non-controversial, his coming from the Midwest. He said farming because he knew it was, but they didn't think it would be. So the next one was Triple-A Plowed Under. They thought he would be a nice little boy and do something American on farming.

GS: You see, Hallie Flanagan had a social point of view, no question about it.

Now I think she tried to run it without making it a vehicle for this. But this was part of her natural being, I mean her thinking. And I think she would be more receptive if given...

[End of Interview]