TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW
with JOSEPH STATON

by John O'Connor
for the

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JS: Androcles and the Lion. Yes. (Laugh) We got a telegram from Bernard Shaw about that. We were the first colored group to do that show and he congratulated us. This wasn't a very good show, because we wanted to put our own version to it, but we had a new manager then and he wanted to do it his way. Let's see.

JO: Who was that then? It was changed.

JS: O'Connor, a fellow named O'Connor.*

JO: No relation to me. (Laugh)

JS: From California. Eleven of these people are dead.

JO: That's one of the questions I had. I hate to hear it so--on the other hand, who is still alive? Do you know any of these people, if they still are alive, their addresses?

JS: Their addresses? No. It's a funny thing. You know, you don't associate with people because after I married Mrs. Staton in 1944, I got into the Masonic end of things. And I just worked so hard in that that I--these other people weren't concerned with it, you know. So they live in one part of town--now we've had an oldtimers' picnic. We've had three of them and I've seen people I haven't seen for 30 years. Really, 30 years, and they live right here in Seattle. Some of them came back from different parts of the country, you know, to attend and it was really interesting to see some of the people. Some of them you couldn't recognize, you know, because they'd just changed. They'd completely changed.

Now this show, Stevedore, boy that's a powerful thing. Oh, that's a powerful thing. People became so engrossed in that last scene that they came up on stage and helped us build a barricade. That was really something! Really something. This is the funeral scene here and I came in there, very serious

*Edwin O'Connor.

and I'll be darned if I didn't come in there and the preacher says, "You're a godless man, Black Snake Johnson." And I said, "That's right."

"You ain't got no respect for the Lord."

And I said, "That's right."

He said, "You're going to roast in the fire of Hell."

And I was supposed to say, "That's right." No, I said, "I think you've got something there" at the end. Everybody just screamed and boy, oh boy, oh boy. Next evening Mr. James* came into the room where we were changing, getting ready to put on a show. And as soon as he walked in, everybody got just as quiet as a mouse. He walked directly over to me and looked down at me and he says, "Joe."

"Yes."

He says, "This is Stevedore, not a minstrel show." He turned right around and walked right out. Nobody said a word 'til he got out the door and then, oh, boy! There was about 20 men in that room and each one of them got up and imitated how he came in and spoke to me, you know. Oh, boy. Oh, boy. I'm telling you it lasted until I finally got mad enough to fight him. And then they calmed down but oh, gosh darn, they did a beautiful job of imitating him. Jeez! I was wrong. You know what I mean, I was wrong. It was one of those things, one of those things.

Did you read this story of Stevedore?

JO: Yes. It is a powerful story.

JS: Oh, yes.

JO: And I had met George Sklar, the man who wrote it, just last weekend.

JS: Is that right?

JO: He's now in Los Angeles. He's still writing plays.

*Burton James.

JS: I wonder if his show was as--Hallie Flanagan, she didn't see Stevedore. I don't think she saw Stevedore. I don't know whether she saw it or didn't see it. And there was a Jewish lady that was one of the big shots in that thing and I forget her name. But anyhow, she said that I was the best natural actor she had ever seen. She just couldn't understand how people could act without training. In New York, you know, competition makes you good. But here they just picked us right up off the street.

JO: That was, I guess, my first question, is how you got into the Federal Theatre.

JS: Well, they put on a show here called In Abraham's Bosom before the WPA (Works Progress Administration) theatre and it actually got Mr. and Mrs. James* out of the hole, this colored show, In Abraham's Bosom. It was a cute little show about Noah and the Ark, you know.

JO: Noah was the first show.

JS: No, it wasn't Noah. It was, oh, gosh--we did it again. We did it again on WPA. Why can't I think of the name of that show? Anyhow, we put on this show for them and my buddy got a job going to the Far East on a tramp schooner. There was no work around here, you see, in about 1932 or 1933. And he asked me if I'd take his part. That gave me three days to learn it, you know. He said he didn't want to put these people in a hole because they were such nice people and so on. So I memorized his part and went out there and put on this show. And it turned out to be very nice and they made a lot of money off it, you know. It got them out of the hole. So when the Federal Theatre came up, they decided they'd take a chance at it and they formed this Negro repertory theatre group. And one of our first shows was Noah and the next was Stevedore, if I'm not mistaken, yes.

JO: That's right.

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*Burton and Florence James.

JS: Noah was a very good show. It was cute as it could be and a lot of spirituals sung in it and so forth. But when you finally get down to An Evening with Dunbar--you see, I had taken some of his poems and we illustrated them. And honest to goodness, they were absolutely riotous, you know. That ante-bellum sermon for one. This church scene, you know. And this boy came in church there and there his girlfriend was with another fellow. So after church was over, they have this fight scene outside the church and it was the comicalist thing you ever saw in your life.

Then we had a dance sequence. There was a dance years ago called Wappsie when I was a little fellow around eight years old. So I remembered those steps. My mother used to take my sister and me to everything because there were no babysitters in those days, you know. So we knew all the dance steps. So I took this old Wappsie and we made it into a dance routine. In those days, wherever in the country it might have been, if they said "Wappsie," that meant that everybody formed a big circle clear around the dance floor, see? Everybody did the same thing. It was absolutely beautiful, absolutely beautiful. So this turned out wonderful and Doris Booker--she's dead now--beautiful voice. She sang one of Dunbar's poems, "Sleep well, my love--" "Good Night." Paul Laurence's poem, "Good Night." Howard wrote the most beautiful music for that. I'm telling you, there's some music in that WPA that's in your possession, I guess, now. Some of that stuff is gorgeous. No kidding, some of that stuff is gorgeous. I don't know whether it can be used any more or not or can it?

JO: I think it can. I mean, that's one of the things we're trying to do is get people interested in reviving these plays and putting them on again. We haven't the music yet, but I'll try and find out. I'll drop you a note.

JS: I didn't know whether they put the music along with the other things in the theatre.

JO: No, it's separate from it. There's a script, I think.

JS: Musical script?

JO: Yes, there's a script that has the words. And that would be what you've done. But the musical score isn't with it, but there are musical scores in another box that we haven't gotten to. So I'll write to you.

JS: I took one of his poems called "The Letter." It was a letter that a little fellow wrote to his mother. We were on the chain gang, you see, and we had fluorescent paint on the hammers. And all the lights were off and you could see us hammering in unison, you know, and singing in unison. And the lights come on and we had a song that I put together called "Bucket Boy," something like "Water Boy," you know, a little different. Then when we read this letter that this fellow had written his parents and we tease the heck out of him about it and having a lot of fun. And somebody says, "The boss is comin,'" so then we had to get back to work, you know. And by that time the lights are getting dimmer and dimmer and dimmer and we go back to hammering and singing. And it turned out very nicely, very nicely. We did wonderful here.

JO: You did a lot of shows. Was that because, was it the Jameses that--is that why there were so many shows?

JS: No. You see, Mr. and Mrs. James--Mrs. James had an opportunity to go to New York to a big meeting and the powers that be didn't choose her. They chose a fellow--I forget his name, but he no more should have gone than the man in the moon. And it just broke her up, so she called all together and said she was finished.

JO: This was for an administrative part role? Or was it a part in a play?

JS: What, Mrs. James?

JO: Yes.

JS: No, she and her husband were directors.

JO: No, I know that as far as—what was she going to go to New York for?

JS: Well, just some big meeting they were going to have. We never did know for sure what it was. But anyhow, she would have represented Seattle, you see, and they sent this fellow instead. And that just shook her up. You can see her viewpoint. But we ended up doing Taming of the Shrew. That was our last show. She came down to see it and she went into hysterics laughing at that show. It was the damndest thing. I put that one together.

JO: Yes. How did you change that or how did you adapt that?

JS: Well, I started out making it local, like all these little towns around here, you see. And so one of the fellows who was our director at the time, he didn't want it that way, so he took over and rewrote the whole darned thing to suit himself.* But he used the Negro version, the ideas, you see, but he actually wrote the words to it, I'm going to tell you in front, like it is. And the funny part about the whole show was that the girl that played Kate weighed around 190 pounds, had arms like a boxer, one of these husky girls, you know, five by five. And I used to try to teach her to slap my face with her fingertips and she just couldn't do it, she just couldn't do it. So I got so I had to roll with the punch, you know. So this last night of the show, no the first night I threw cold water on her and boy, she got up fighting. She got up fighting, I'm telling you. It was really something! So after that they said we were going to get warm water. We did. So the last night of the show I decided I was going to play jokes on all of them and I got a Shasta bottle and was going to squirt my servants, you know. And I took a cake of ice and I had the lady stage manager set it back there so no one could see it

*Richard Glyer.

and let it melt so that water was ice cold. So when they came on, these fellows came on stage--oh, we had a cake that my buddy would fall into and it had white icing on it, you know, and during this dance, the "Shoeing the Mule" dance, it was called. He'd fall in this cake and that ended the wedding party. Well, this last night these fellows come on there, you know, and I've got my eye on the and I've got this Shasta bottle behind me, you know.

JO: The Shasta bottle was new this time? You hadn't used it other nights?

JS: Yes, brand new. This was the last night. When they come on there, I got this Shasta bottle behind me and you know what those dirty horse thieves had done? They had gotten umbrellas and had Shasta bottles. Jeez! I lost all the way around. You see, there was no way for me to get them wet. I just couldn't understand it. So I take this pie and I grab this guy behind the neck like I've done all week long, you know, and mash it in his face and I mean I was going to do a beautiful job. And when I come up to his face, he ducked and it went on the floor and then he grabbed me behind the neck and he let me have it. And all four of these fellows let me have that pie in the face. Oh, man, I'm telling you. So we go on into the show and we come to the part where I got this pan of ice water and I threw it on this girl and she come up fighting again only this time not with her hands, with her fists. Oh, man! She floored me right there on the floor. So I come in to the wedding party and I had my six-shooter and it used to scare people every night because I'd come in shooting these blanks, you know. And this night I come in there with this six-shooter and I shoot it off and everybody stops dancing and everything. No sound, no sound. Here my little partner and I--he's behind me, you know, with his trunk. No sound. So I had to holler, "Bang, bang, bang." And this lady

who was the stage director--she was a white lady from the other group. You see, they took our group and cut it down. And they took the white group and cut it down and they put us together. That caused a heck of a lot of trouble at first, a lot of trouble at first. Some of those people had never been around Negroes before or something, I don't know. But we used to have an awful time, awful time and I was the only one that could keep peace between the groups. And this woman, she was the worse of them all. She just couldn't stand the sight of a colored person and she didn't bite her tongue about it, either. So as time went on, you mellowed and we got along until we became practically friends, you know. So by the time we did the last show, we were friends. Everybody was used to working together. That woman was in such hysteria and she knew all week long what I was planning and what they were planning and she didn't tell me and she didn't tell them. She hid both things: Hid their stuff from them and hid my stuff from me. And she got in hysterics and we had to take her home. She just went into hysterics. And Mrs. James was sitting up in the audience and you could hear her screaming over everybody else and she came backstage and made the statement, she said, "I will never forgive myself for letting you kids go, losing my temper and letting you kids go." Because it would have been a much greater theatre group if they were there. She really knew her business, you know, she and Mr. James both. They knew their business.

JO: What happened to Mr. James? What did--

JS: He died, oh, shortly after we were taken away from them. You see, he owned that theatre before he was first in the University. And the University was trying to get that property and they finally just got it. And that just broke him up, just broke him up. So he died right after that and that left her to

fend for herself.

JO: They had a daughter, too. Do you know whatever happened to her?

JS: No. I think she's married and got a couple of kids, but she got into a movie for a few minutes, you know, and then she came back. But she didn't get anywhere in the movies. I happened to see a picture of her. She wasn't a goodlooking girl either and she had freckles, more freckles than you can shake a stick at. But when they showed us the pictures of her that they had taken with all that makeup on, boy, she looked like a million dollars, just to show you what makeup can do. She looked like a million dollars. You couldn't see a freckle on her, you know.

So then we used to put on little shows for kids in the parks and things. You know, the two groups together would put on shows for the kids and things like that in hospitals. They turned out to be pretty good shows. There were some people in our mixed group in that Black Emperor, that's what the name of that was, Black Emperor. Toby Leitch was in that. He was an oldtime vaudevillian. I used to see him when I was, oh, in my early twenties. He had a theatre downtown and Toby's Comedians they were called. I used to see him down there. I never dreamed I'd ever, you know, be on the same stage with him. And there he was on WPA. He taught us a heck of a lot of things about the stage that we never would have known if he hadn't of been kind enough to teach us some of the tricks of the trade, you know. It was very nice of him. We were very, very good friends with Toby.

JO: How come they brought the two groups together? Was it budget crunch or something like that?

JS: I think so. Yes. And then they had another budget crunch and they took people who were supposed to be in the chorus and had some people from the

University come out and listen to them sing a few notes of the scale, you know, and listen to them and so forth and so on. And there was one fellow there who has been in our church choir for years and you could hear him--he was a bass--and you could hear him a mile away. We just knew he would make it, you know, and he was one of the first ones they cut out. Yes. His voice just wasn't there. I guess they cut him out and he never was so surprised in his life as he was when they cut him out one of the first ones. So we ended up, instead of having a chorus of about, oh, 25 people, we ended up with a chorus of about 10. And then we broke that down to a quartet in this little musical show that we had. You see, we had to break that down to a quartet because we had to go into vaudeville and also do dramatic shows, you see.

But to show you about Mr. and Mrs. James, when they got us together, our first payday, some of us knew one another but not too well. And some of us didn't know some of the people who were in this group, you know. Some of us were not on WPA and they would allow so many who weren't on WPA. But the majority had to be WPA recipients. So we got paid the night before and we came out and we had changed our clothes and were called into the auditorium. We were getting ready to rehearse some show we were getting ready to put on, Noah or Stevedore, one of the two. And someone complained to Mr. James that his or her purse had been stolen. So Mr. James said, "Now, there's one thing I will not tolerate and that is thievery. We're all one big family here and this we cannot tolerate. Now I want you to spread out so none of you are close. I want you to take up the whole theatre here, just spread out so that none of you are close to another person. I'm going to count to three and if that purse that was stolen doesn't land on this stage, this whole project is dead." So he called for the electrician to cut off the lights and he counted "One . . . two

. . ." Bang! Something hit the stage. Boy, you know, all the lights go up. Sure enough, there was this little pocketbook with this man's money in it and none of us know to this day who took it. But that's one of the things that I will--that's the type of person he was. He didn't have to raise his voice. He just used psychology, you see, just psychology. And he meant what he said. He would have given up that whole darned gang. He would have.

JO: Where did most of the group come from? Were most of the people that were on WPA with him before in this Seattle Repertory or were--

JS: No.

JO: --they WPA people who hadn't had acting experience?

JS: Let's see. In that first show that he had, Noah, that I was telling you about. Not Noah, Abraham's Bosom. That's the show he did. I was trying to think of the name of that. That was the show that my buddy, Herman, was in and when he left town he had me take his part, In Abraham's Bosom. I don't know whether you've read that or not but anyhow--

JO: Yes. Is that Paul Green's play?

JS: Yes. The people who were in that show, none of them were on WPA. None of the group who was in that first production he put on with Negro actors was on WPA. But he was able to use some of us, you know, even though we weren't WPA people because he was allowed so many people who weren't WPA recipients to be on the project and all the rest were. And then they had a youth program, you see, and we had about four girls who were on the youth program. We didn't have to pay them as much as grown people, you know. I mean older people. So that's one way that these programs saved a little money.

JO: In the white group, people like Toby Leitch were old vaudevillians. Were there old vaudevillians in the black group? Were people coming out of the

speakeasies?

JS: Well, let's see.

JO: I'm surprised by it. I mean, when you look at this and you told me that there's 11 people dead, I was surprised because it looks like the black group was much younger.

JS: Well, some of them went into service and some of them just actually--some of these were older people. Some of these fellows were old soldiers and they just passed away. One of them was a soldier who went from our group into service, two of them went into service. One of them was killed early in the war and one of them died while he was in service down in Louisiana.

JO: Did you know Ted Browne?

JS: Yes.

JO: On the Project?

JS: Yes. I knew him.

JO: He's in Boston now.

JS: You know, I was in Boston last year to a convention. And doggone it, I--that's when they were having all that trouble there, you know. The NAACP had all those people come from all over the country to march and all that stuff. And I forgot all about Ted Brown, forgot all about him. I meant to call him. Yes, he came here and he was a barber. And he fell in love with one of the girls who was a Seattle girl and they married. They didn't marry while they were in Seattle,I don't think. I don't think they married in Seattle. But they were so close, you know, that everybody knew they would marry eventually.

JO: How come he just came out to Seattle? Did he come out to--I guess one of his plays were put on. Did he come out as a director or as a--

JS: No, he wrote something. I forget what he put together.

JO: Natural Man.

JS: Natural Man?

JO: Yes, about John Henry.

JS: Yes. Yes, he did, he sure did. He put that together, he surely did. And I played the part of John Henry in that thing. That was a very nice show, too. That was a great big show. Yes, you look at these people here and it's a darned funny thing about how many people can just--no, there's another fellow that's died is Perry Gilliam here, doggone it. Twelve, there's twelve. Howard Biggs. He was in New York and he played with Noble Sissle 's band for a while. He was writing scores for night club acts in New York. I saw his picture two or three times in our colored magazines, you know. One of those persons with perfect pitch, you know. He was a Seattle boy, born and raised here and he was just naturally a born musician. And we used the Seattle symphony under John Spargrav, I believe it was, in our show, An Evening With Dunbar. They played two or three songs and John Spargrav conducted the music before the show opened. But anyhow, when they first came out to our little hall to rehearse, Howard put his music in front of them and naturally these musicians had never been around a colored conductor apparently. And Howard was a young man and like the rest of us--Howard was about 21 at the time. So they started playing his music in the trombone section. One of the fellows there said, "What in the hell have you got here? How in the world do you expect a trombone to hit that note?"

And Howard stopped everybody and said, "What is that note?"

And the fellow said what it was.

He said, "What's the range of the trombone?"

The fellow said what it was, which is the same thing as he gave at first.

So he said, "Well?"

The fellow took up his horn and went right on and played it. Had no more trouble with him after that. But you see that's where a young mind changes the old way of doing things and they have proven their point just like the young people of today have proven their points. It was hard but they proved their point, you know. And so he proved his point to this trombonist. So after that, no one else gave him any trouble. And so they played all during our show of Dunbar and it was beautiful. I guess the thing about that, I still hum some of the songs from that show. I get to thinking about it because I miss the theatre. I'd like to, in a way, do it again and then again, I don't know.

JO: What happened with Lysistrata?

JS: Lysistrata? Ha-Ha! Boy! (Laugh) We played one night and the line was clear around the block and that did it! People just screamed at that show and the next night we came to the theatre, we had sold out for six months in advance. And Don Abel, who was head of WPA, his wife and the theatre group got together. You know, the business men said it was government in competition with private industry and that did it. She actually was the one who closed that theatre down.

JO; Was there anything that Federal Theatre could do? Was there anything that Guy Williams or any people like that could do?

JS: No. The head man said No, so that was it but they could have made a fortune off of that show, could have made a fortune. And you see the theatre was the only organization where you, where the Government could get a few cents back off its investment, you know.

JO: Yes, that's right. Did that hurt the morale much of the group?

JS: No, no. You see, you can't hurt a person's morale too much as long as he can keep drawing a pay check and eat. But now if they were like in some cities where if the show closes, then you've got to hunt, you know, for other employment, then that would bother you some. We were very disappointed naturally, but we just found another script and started working on another script, that's all, all you can do.

JO: It seems to me, from looking back, that the black group scripts, compared to the white group, are much more, both inventive and with plays like Stevedore, provocative or more socially concerned. Did you have that sense or no? And did that change when the two groups joined?

JS: No. We had no feeling about being provocative about our shows at all. When we did Stevedore, that's what Mr. James wanted to do before he had WPA theatre and he was afraid to do it. He had a big strike on. When we did put it on, there was a big strike on the waterfront and he put it on. Boy, those longshoremen came out there one night and they bought out that show and I'm telling you, it kind of shook us up. (Laugh)

JO: I bet so.

JS: Oh, boy! It kind of shook us up because those guys, they were all for it. You know what I mean but no--you know, when people think, stop and think, they can come to conclusions but first they must think. Anybody can open his big mouth, you know, and nothing come out. Like the saying, "It is better to be quiet and let people think you're a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt." And I've tried to follow that all through my life ever since I first heard it years ago. No one knows what you know 'til you start talking. I'm sure you understand that. You've run into it. So we had gone, the group had gone together and we were ordered to sing Christmas

carols. And we stood in front of the Post Office and sang Christmas carols and Howard Biggs was leading the music. We'd gone up on street corners and sang. There must have been about 35 of us that particular night. And then when we wanted to go get a cup of coffee and two or three spots they wouldn't serve us, the majority of the other group walked out, you see. Some of them stayed, you know and got their coffee. We were very angry about it, but we didn't say anything. We just figured that they didn't know any better and just forgot it. But Seattle wasn't too much different from a lot of other cities in some respects.

JO: What population? Seattle was much smaller then, wasn't it? Did that make it worse or better?

JS: There were only 3300 Negroes here before the war, 3300. And I was with the colored newspaper and they had around 10,000--no, 3,000 Negroes, about 1,000 Filipinos, around 1,500 Chinese, around 3,000 Japanese, about 10,000 Jewish people. I learned all this the hard way because I was getting ads for our colored newspaper and the editor told me to show them this card that he gave me. It showed that we were putting out 10,000 copies a week going to 10,000 people in the city of Seattle. And I went to this man and showed him this card. He reached in his desk and pulled out a government census card that he had and laid it front of me and said, "Read that, young man." I read it and I was never so surprised in my life. He said, "You're young. If you're trying to sell something, hit it on the head. Because a lot of times people you're talking to know more about it than you do." You see? I've never forgotten that, never forgotten that. This man's name was Roy He was a fellow that ran for office every time there was an election and he didn't make it until finally during the war years he finally got to be a judge.

He would lose every time. Every year he would lose, but he stuck in there and kept trying, you know, to get an office. He finally got one during the war years.

JO: Do you think the small black population made it easier for Negroes in Seattle or harder?

JS: No, it's easier when you have a smaller population, it's easier because, you see, your—well, let's see. Seattle had about 300,000 all told,so you only have maybe 15 percent or 20 percent other than white. You see, that's no problem. You know what I mean, this is no problem. So we were all centrally located. Of course, there were a few scattered in various districts, you know, a few families scattered. But most all of us were scattered right in this area down the hill here. Where I am now, we couldn't even go to that school up there. We couldn't go to the school down there, McGilver. We couldn't even go to Minor up here. They had us situated so that we all had to go to the little school right down the hill called Harrison's and another one up the hill here called—it's Everett Meany now, but it was called Longfellow. And then there was one called Horace Mann over here by the ball park and there were a couple down on the way there. So we were all centrally located. Yet and still, I went to school with some of the richest men in this town, business men, you know, went over here at Garfield, most of them. And we never had any problems, never had any problems. That's why I can't quite understand some of the things that are happening today. There were no problems.

JO: What were the audiences like?

JS: The audiences were very good, very good. The only thing was during the summer people would come here from the South and they saw this theatre advertisement, you know, so they'd come out to see this show, Stevedore.

And you know how it started out. Oh, boy! Oh, boy! They used to come backstage and eat Mr. James up. Oh, they used to give him the devil, give him the devil! We'd go out there and we'd see these licenses from various Southern states, you know. And we knew good and well we were going to have a hot time in the old town tonight. But when they saw Noah that was nice because they got to hear a lot of spirituals and see something cute, you know, people with animal heads on and things like that and all that stuff, religious and the chorus. We had a chorus, too, you see.

JO: Were there a lot of musicals? There was one called Swing--

JS: Swing Mikado?

JO: No. Swing Gates, Swing? Remember that? There was a Porgy.

JS: Swing Gates, Swing. Where was that given? I don't remember it.

JO: Here's what I have. I don't know if that's complete. What I have is a list of plays.

JS: Oh, I remember what we did, yes. We had sort of a musical where the girls had a trio and I had a jug band and Howard Biggs played a number on the piano and we had a couple of fellows tapdance. Then we had a softshoe number, two fellows and myself. They were both shorter than me, you know, and we danced in long winter underwear. And there were two or three other acts but it wasn't anything long. It was something given during the summer months, but it turned out to be very nice, it turned out to be very nice. I forgot all about that thing.

JO: How about Living Newspapers? Did you—were you involved in Power or One-Third of a Nation or Spirochete?

JS: No. Let's see now. Let's see, which one was I in. One-Third of a Nation. I was in that one, One-Third of a Nation. I was in that Is Zat So?, James Gleason.

Androcles and the Lion, In Abraham's Bosom, Natural Man. We didn't do Porgy. It Can't Happen Here, I was in that. That was the first time I played a villain.

JO: How good a production was that? Do you remember?

JS: It was very good, very good. Mrs. James, boy, she knew her business.

JO: How long would you usually rehearse for one of those plays? How long were the rehearsals?

JS: Not very long, about a month. Now, this Mississippi Rainbow, I was directing that and I was called to 'Frisco to be in a show down there.

JO; Run Little Chillun?

JS: Yes. It seems that one of the head men down there was one of those funny boys and the leading lady refused to kiss him and all that stuff. So the head man from the West Coast there sent for me to go down there. That lasted 30 days.

JO: How was that? Did you meet Clarence Muse down there?

JS; No. No, I didn't meet Clarence Muse. I met Jester Hairston and Jester Hairston was the musical director. I met, oh, the--oh, I can't think right now, the fellow who wrote the music, Hall Johnson. That man talked to me like I had two left feet. You see, they'd take this girl of mine and they were trying to mesmerize her with this voodoo. And they capture me, you see, and I'm out there trying to get to her. And she gets and goes into a dance, you know, and I'm trying to break loose from these fellows and can't get to her. They had about 120 people on the stage. You never heard such singing in your life. Oh, that was grand! Three-part and four-part harmony for each voice. Oh, that was great! And Jester Hairston, he's a man who plays on the, on Mama. If you've ever seen that show Mama, he's one of the

two old men that used to come in quite often. He was the musical director. And each group had a person with a little mouth organ, you know, to give them and that music got good and I held a note about one hundredth of a second too long and Hall Johnson was--and he knew it was me because my mouth was going when it shouldn't have been. Boy, he talked to me like I had--he let me have both barrels. I'll never forget it as long as I live.

JO: Was that during the Exposition?

JS: Oh, no, no. The Exposition was over with when I did that. That was over with then. That island was still there and a lot of the buildings were still there but that was two or three years after that that this show was on. But anyhow, when they came through here, it was a show of their own. It was something like one Bill Robinson put on in Chicago, the Swing Mikado or Hot Mikado or something they called their show. And I found places for them to stay and so forth. That was when I found out why I was sent back here. I wasn't a native son, you know. This young man's people were Californians and in politics a little bit, so there wasn't much I could do. I just couldn't hold it against that weight, you know. So I was sent back here in 30 days after I'd been down there. But I enjoyed being in that show because, you see, our group was so much smaller than theirs. And I ran across more singers than I had ever been around before and more beautiful music, you know. It was something else. You know, a person doesn't realize how great the theatre is unless he's around it. And as you know, the theatre has always played a great role in the lives of people ever since the beginning of time. And you take a stage production or you see something on TV and you can really set the people on fire or you make them ashamed of themselves. A

good example was that Charles Bronson. You remember when he was, some years ago he played the part of a photographer and he used to take pictures of people when they were angry, you know, and so forth. Then he would show them the pictures. And you take a picture of a pretty woman and show her how nice looking she is and then show her how she looked when she was angry and cursing somebody out and so forth and so on. It's the same way, the same thing. The theatre can do wonders for this country. One-Third of a Nation. One-Third of a Nation was one that and I were in, and that was about—Gene, fellow that had the, used to have this theatre around here until the neighborhood got too hot. So he opened up a theatre down by the station there. He was just a kid and he went to see that show. And I was in bed asleep and this other fellow who was supposed to go to bed and it was time for me to get up, you know. And I didn't want to get up so he pulls me out of bed. You'd go to bed with your clothes on. All you could take off was your shoes. And it was time for him to get in bed. And I started talking and I'm mad and he goes on and gets in bed and turns his back to me. So I turn my back to the audience and I reach in my back pocket and I pull out a switchblade, you see. And I switch this thing and that doggone blade jumps out there and you could hear the people just scream, you know. Well now, what I'm trying to say is they knew good and well that nothing was going to happen, but just the thought of what was happening right then and there. And he told me about five years ago before he left here. He wanted me to act again. He said he'd never forgotten that. He said he'd seen all kind of shows, he'd put on all kind of shows, seen all kind of actors, but he never

when I pulled that knife out to cut

And what happened is this fellow hears a knife click so he jumps up and slaps

me across the face and takes the knife away from me. Then it blacks out. That was one of those blackouts. In Power there was quite a bit of that. They're on a little stage on the main stage. One-Third of a Nation was a really good show. It was a really good show. You'd be surprised what could be done now with the way things are in some of these big cities. Now I go back East every year because I'm head of all the Thirty-Second and Thirty-Third Degree Masons in this state, and I have to go back East every year to a convention. And when I go to Philadelphia and I went to New York and I went to Detroit, I just didn't believe what I saw. Now I was doing carpenter work right after the war and the city said, Yes, they weren't going to allow conditions to get that way where you build right on top of one another like a bunch of mice. But those kind of--if they wanted to show what was going on and would put on a show concerning living conditions where mothers had to sit up half the night, you know, to keep the rats from eating up their kids, things like that, you know, people don't see that. But these kind of things are actually happening. Now in Philadelphia I found just two blocks from town hippies, colored, Mexicans, Chinese, Japanese, a little bit of everything. So they started moving them out of these old buildings and remodeling these old buildings, gutting them on the inside. Then they would rerent them for $200 a month where they knew the people couldn't come back. So that's what they're doing in a lot of these big cities. I find that they're cleaning up the downtown area and pushing these people farther and farther back. Because as it was, to get home you had to go through these rough sections and to get to work you had to go through these rough sections, you see. I really hope that something like this—well, you see a little of it on TV, you know, a little on TV.

(End of side 1, continued on side 2)

JO: It doesn't have the same kind of impact.

JS: No, no, but it's nothing like this was showing. It Can't Happen Here was, of course, about they didn't feel that this country could turn into a country like Germany. That's what that was all about, your know.

JO: That's the show that opened up all across the country in a number of places at the same time?

JS: Yes. It was pretty rough, pretty rough. But when you get back to An Evening With Dunbar—no, Natural Man. Natural Man, Natural Man, Natural Man.

JO: That was the John Henry.

JS: Yes. I think we had some of our own music in there, too. You'll find some things there that were—the music there was kind of interesting. In this Swing Gate, Swing, Howard got through playing his number, you know, on the piano and I got up there and was supposed to help push the piano off the stage. And I sat down like I was going to play, then I went around to the piano and pushed it closer to the bench and then sat down. I could play my own version, which was one-finger stuff and chords a little bit, you know. And that was when that song came out, "The object of my affection, turned my complexion from white to rosy red," and I started playing that in my version of it, you know, and everybody wondered what I was going to say. And I said, "brown to rosy red." (Laugh) You know I was a half hour before I got away from that piano and Howard got mad at me and wouldn't speak to me for a week. Oh, I played all kinds of crazy things up there. It just shows you—

JO: Was the show built for that kind of improvisation?

JS: Well, Mr. and Mrs. James—as long as it was me or Herman, she knew whatever we did would be in taste and she wouldn't say boo. Because there was no time limit. This was all afternoon stuff, you see, and there was no time limit.

So Herman used to blow a jug in my jug band and he could blow that jug, a gallon jug, so it would sound just like a doggone bass violin, you know. And we had a nice little organization there. One fellow played a guitar and we used to take records like Jimmy Lunceford's "My Blue Heaven" and we'd make our version of it and use things like that in this musical. And a lot of people weren't buying records so they didn't hear Jimmy Lunceford's version of it and it really took them by storm. Just sneaking up on something like that and taking people by surprise, you'd be surprised at some of the things they can do. Now like I remember Jimmy Lunceford came here, I think it was during the war years or just before the war. He went out for intermission and his drummer came in and got to his drum and started beating a little rhythm and then another fellow would come in and he'd start playing to the rhythm and then another fellow would come in and he joined in, you know. And finally the whole band was in there and joined in and when Jimmy Lunceford came on stage the whole band was there. And they played about one more chorus and it just brought down the house. You see, that's the improvisation that they thought of somewhere along the line and every place they went it just took them by storm. It's a surprise, you know, one person start and then another one come in. It didn't look like anything rehearsed. These are the kind of things that we used to do that made some of our shows. We would listen to the comments that different people would make and those who were directing us would listen because out of the mouths of babes come pearls of wisdom. And after all, if I were to direct a white group in a show, how in hell could I tell them how to react to certain situations? You see what I mean?

JO: Yes.

JS: So these people left a lot of the things to us because it made them

look better in the sight of those who watched the show and those who wrote about it and everything else. And we felt natural doing the things that. . . .

(End of interview)