

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Salem Community Theater Project

Theater Experiences

O. H. 792

PENNY CALLISTO

Interviewed

by

Arlene Hasson

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: PENNY CALLISTO

INTERVIEWER: Arlene Hasson

SUBJECT: origin, problems, attendance, lawn buffet,
advertising and promotion, ticket sales

DATE: June 1, 1982

H: This is an interview with Penny Callisto for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Salem Community Theater, by Arlene Hasson, on June 1, 1982, at 6:30 p.m.

Penny, could you tell us a little bit about your background?

C: I was born in Buffalo, New York in 1946. I've lived in Salem all of my life. I went to Salem Schools; I went to a girls' college in New Jersey, moved to Syracuse, New York and met my husband, moved back to Salem in 1974. I've worked in radio and television all of my working life.

H: Do you have any children?

C: I have two children, a daughter Sarah, four, and a son Christopher, three.

H: In your work in television and radio what did you do?

C: I had done camera work, on-camera work, film work in television. On radio I was manager of traffic, copy, and programmed the computer.

H: Was that your training from college?

C: Yes.

H: Did you have any background from high school?

C: No.

H: When you came to Salem in 1974 what kind of outlets did you

find for your theater background here?

- C: At the time, the Memorial Building Dinner Theater was very strong and very successful. Unfortunately, it didn't last too long after we moved here. It had been in operation about five years before we moved here. In Fall of 1977 three of us from the original dinner theater decided we would get together and start, along with Cathy Verhoff, our former director, Salem Community Theater.
- H: Then you were on the original board?
- C: Yes.
- H: What prompted you to go off on your own? The dinner theater had dissolved by then?
- C: Yes.
- H: What was the reason behind that?
- C: Internal problems, problems with the director, nobody seemed to know where the finances were going. It just broke from there.
- H: That had been connected with the City Parks and Recreation Department?
- C: Yes.
- H: Had you worked with Cathy Verhoff before in the dinner theater?
- C: No. She was not involved with the dinner theater.
- H: You had gotten to know her?
- C: No. Our first Salem Community Theater board meeting was the first time I ever met Cathy.
- H: What was the purpose behind the formation of the Salem Community Theater?
- C: Community entertainment. Years ago Salem had a theater, Salem Players, but it has been a long time since Salem has had any theater outlet.
- H: Had the Memorial Dinner Theater been successfully economically?
- C: We were never out to make a profit. We had no expenses. We were permitted to use the Memorial Building stage and gymnasium. The Memorial Building is a civic property; it is used by Kiwanis, Rotary, Lions Club. The dinner theater was part of their recreation so we really had no expenses other than building materials, props. We were permitted to spend a little money,

but that was about it.

H: You didn't have to pay operating expenses like lights?

C: Absolutely not. They owned us.

H: When you decided to go into the Salem Community Theater what was your first plan of attack? What was the first thing you thought you ought to get underway?

C: Our first production. We weren't financially in a position to do a lot of publicity. We had a few ads in the paper and that was it. We put together a season and opened in September with "Godspell". Our first board meeting was in July. Within six to seven weeks we had a show on.

H: Where did you perform that?

C: At the high school.

H: Where had you rehearsed?

C: All over Salem, wherever anyone would let us. At the time we were renting the vacant American Legion Hall downstairs. We did most of our rehearsing there and occasionally if they were booked for a single night we moved into the junior high. We were not permitted in the high school for rehearsals until the week of dress rehearsals. We were in the Sunday before the show. Mostly the American Legion was where we rehearsed.

H: Cathy was already with you by that time?

C: Yes, she was our director.

H: Was she getting paid for this?

C: Yes.

H: How did you get your operating funds originally?

C: We counted on people donating from the beginning, and many did. The little money we made just seemed to keep us going.

H: After "Godspell" what did you do from there?

C: "Jacques Brel" in February.

H: That was performed at the American Legion?

C: Yes.

H: That was the bad one?

- C: Yes, it hurt. A lot of the cast, at times, wouldn't make it to rehearsal or Cathy would cancel rehearsal because the weather was so bad.
- H: How long after that did Cathy stay with you?
- C: For the next four and a half years.
- H: She didn't quit for a time in between?
- C: She did, yes. There was a six month period where she had resigned. She got through that season shortly after they closed "Superstar" she resigned. We were without her for two productions and she was back.
- H: What did you do in the interim?
- C: Bob Vensick, who is drum instructor at the high school, directed "Promises, Promises," and Judy Roth, who is a board member, directed "A Thousand Clowns."
- H: How was the original board set up?
- C: At the time it was a matter of calling people on the phone and saying "Would you please be on our board?"
- H: What were the responsibilities?
- C: It was almost a matter of coming to a board meeting and seeing what needs doing. We had no responsibilities; we did everything.
- H: There was no real structure then?
- C: None. That didn't happen until the past year.
- H: Was your husband actively involved at that time too?
- C: Quite actively.
- H: As time went on how did the theater change?
- C: We grew and the more growing we did the more obstacles and pains we found. We felt we were being treated quite terribly by the high school, by the administration. We were trying to bring something to Salem that hadn't been here for years. We were being charged anywhere up to \$1,300 for that week to do a show. We felt as the taxpayers built the new auditorium the least we could do was go back to the community, and not necessarily free of charge. We were paying for a lot of things we didn't think we needed to pay for. Over there we had janitorial services, extra security. I know that the people that worked didn't seem to mind. The administration probably saw the majority of the money that they were charging us.

- H: How did the theater change as time went on?
- C: We grew. We did three seasons outside of what we now call our own theater anywhere we could do them.
- H: You found that the cost of finding a facility was a problem. What other problem was involved?
- C: Moving sets. McKinley School was another place we rehearsed at. We would build sets there and they had to be transported to the high school or the junior high. We had no heat at McKinley. Then we rented the Moose Lodge for a while. We thought we might buy that for a while, but that didn't go through. We were using their basement to build sets and store them. We have literally stored and built all over. One of our main problems was we found people saying, "We never know where you're going to be next." We did "Godspell" at the high school, "Brel" at the American Legion, "Virginia Woolf" at the YWCA, "The Boyfriend" at the junior high, and the "Superstar" at the high school.
- H: Did you encounter any competition?
- C: No.
- H: Have you noticed any great difficulty other than financial?
- C: Our greatest difficulty still is getting people in here. We have tried paid advertising, nonpaid publicity, gimmicks. I doubt very much if we're reaching fifteen percent of the community. They see it, but they are just not sure about us.
- H: What techniques have you used to try and get additional publicity?
- C: Other than paid advertising we have bought ads in The Morning Journal, Salem News, Vindicator. We have bought a lot of radio and used the Channel 21 "Today" show. We try to save that for the musicals because it's an added expense and we know after the musicals we can pay. We've sent public service material to twenty radio stations. We're trying now to cut the advertising budget and see how much people will do for us. It seemed to work this time. For our last production, "Butterflies are Free" everything we did was nonpaid. We released balloons with numbers in them. No one ever returned a balloon. With the numbers we made some good offers; free season tickets, free tickets to the show, a season ticket with fifty percent off for the second season ticket.
- H: I can remember when you were first opening you had a promotion prior to performance which consisted of an outdoor buffet?
- C: We had one and it was almost a disaster. We thought we would have a lawn buffet before "Westside Story". They had put a tent

up two days prior to this which went through a thunderstorm and the high school cafeteria window. We had to put another one up the next day. We didn't do it again because we didn't make any money.

H: Would you have made any money without the tragedies involved?

C: I don't think so. We had anticipated many hundreds of people coming to the buffet and then going to the show. I think there probably wasn't enough promotion. Our greatest downfall is not getting enough promotion.

H: The use of the marquis, do you find that that is any advantage at all?

C: We feel it is not changed often enough. We have closed shows and that particular show with the dates on it is up a week later. There is something going on in the building all of the time and it should be changed. It is an advantage; people do look at it.

H: How do you advertise your classes?

C: Flyers mostly. Also in the newsletter that comes out prior to any production. We get good coverage from the Salem News and The Morning Journal. They're being quite good to us.

H: How do you get your mailing list?

C: It started back with "Godspell". We kept names and addresses of anyone who had anything to do with the theater. Mostly it was patrons, former casts and crew, people who make reservations for a show who don't have season tickets.

H: Do you find that you have the same clientele?

C: Yes, for the most part. There are season ticket holders, but we do find people who come to show after show and pay at the door.

H: Can you give us an average on attendance?

C: The first two shows we did in Salem we sold out seventy-five percent of the shows.

H: What were those?

C: Our first production was "The Red Dragon". It was written and directed by Cathy Verhoff and Greg Smith. Our second one was "The King and I". We ran for three weekends and sold out each of the Saturday nights, two of the Friday nights. We don't do well on Thursdays and Sundays. I would probably say we have a fifty percent house then.

H: On Thursdays and Sundays why then do you give those performances?

- C: We have discontinued with the exception of Sunday. We used to do Friday through Sunday two weekends and had many suggestions for a matinee because of the percentage of senior citizens. Many of them do not like to drive at night. If they live near the building they don't like to walk at night. We're offering a 2:00 matinee and they do save money coming to this performance.
- H: Do you offer a lower price as they do with many matinee features?
- C: Absolutely, \$2 for senior citizens.
- H: What about for the general public?
- C: They do not receive a discount.
- H: Do you have a lower rate for the senior citizens other evenings?
- C: No, only on Sunday.
- H: What about the season ticket price?
- C: They have a much lower price. Last year our theater tickets were sold in three sections: A, B, and C. The A season tickets were \$25, the B's were \$20, and C's were \$15. This year we are cutting out the sections all together. It's a flat fee from the front row to the back row. They are \$6 at the door and season tickets are \$20, \$10 for twelve and under and senior citizens. But their tickets are only good on Sunday afternoon.
- H: When you come up with a plan for the season tickets how do you approach knowing what you're supposed to do? Do you have any kind of a plan to follow?
- C: We just try them on our own. This is our third year of season tickets and it has been different every year. This year we have the best of the previous two years I think.
- H: What improvements do you think you've made?
- C: The price, for one. We lowered it. We didn't have difficulty in selling the \$25 tickets, we just didn't sell very many. We sold about 250 tickets. Our goal this year is 2,000.
- H: Do you see that as a reasonable increase?
- C: I think if we sell 1,000 we will be doing really well. I think 2,000 is a little more than we can hope for in this community.
- H: What is the advantage for the theater of having a season ticket sale?
- C: Guaranteed income, and for the most part a guaranteed house.

H: Most people do take advantage then?

C: Yes. We made one major change this year, and for a very good reason; last year our season ticket book consisted of coupons good for one person, one performance, and there was a number. This year the tickets will have the plays on them. In the season ticket booklet there will be a ticket for "Deathtrap," "The Fantastics," "Earnest," and "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum." This was done because we were not drawing on our straight shows. They were saving all those coupons for the musicals. If by chance we should sell our goal and did it this way we would have 2,000 people trying to see and bring friends to see "The Fantastics" and "Forum" and have an empty house for "Deathtrap." If they buy season tickets they get a ticket for that specific show. That was probably one of the best decisions made all year.

We've set a precedent where we're going to open each season with a thriller or a drama, a good mystery, this kind of thing. We want to keep the spirit of the season.

A local attorney happens to carry the name Ghoul, Bob Ghoul. He and a coworker decided they would have a preshow party at Timberlanes. They called it the Ghoul Dracula Party. They brought over 200 people to see "Dracula" in one night. The rest of it we had already had reservations for or walk-ins. Other than that, though, it is unusual for a straight show to sell out.

H: What kind of improvements within the structure of the theater . . . The organization of the board, how has that changed over the years? Has it changed?

C: It has, but I'm not sure that it's anything that I could put my finger on. Our board consists of people who have been asked to be on the board for their specific talent. We have an attorney on the board who does our legal work; we have an insurance agent on the board who does our insurance work; we have a construction worker who does our sets; we had an accountant, but he is no longer with us; he did our taxes and accounting, kept our books. Each of us in our own way has our own specific talent. We are now looking for a treasurer; someone who is trained in finances. We have three board positions open and we would like someone in one of those three positions to act as treasurer.

H: What is the chosen number on the board?

C: I believe the bylaws say fourteen positions with one opening at all times. Many times it has been brought up at board meetings to increase the size of the board. Keeping the number low has worked up until now. I don't remember ever being at a board meeting where everyone has been here; we're always missing one

person. There is enough arguing and bickering now between thirteen, twelve, fourteen people let alone bring another ten or so in.

H: In addition to the board there is an elected executive group besides that?

C: We elect our officers by a nominating committee consisting of the present guild president who occupies a seat on the board, and a chairman, and one other board member. Our responsibilities are slates of officers for election in August, and replacing board members.

H: Of the original board members, how many are still there besides yourself?

C: Chuck Williams is back. He was the first president.

H: Have most of the rest of them continued in the area or have they gone out and moved away?

C: In the beginning we had so few people to do all the work. At that time it was a little more than some people could take. There is not one person on the board who hasn't painted a set at one time or hammered a nail or sold candy. People think we're sitting in a little, ivory tower. We hope to get to the point where we are just a decision-making body. That seems to be the general opinion of what a board of trustees is. We feel we have enough people involved in the theater now that individually we don't have to get out and paint the sets. Believe it or not, people like to do this or like to build or like to sell the candy and see who's at the show that night. I think it has gone about as far as we would like it to go. We're going through a phase right now where people think we're an elite group. I don't think we are. There probably isn't one person on this board who wouldn't give up his position to someone else. As I said before, though, once you're on the board, you're on! You get so involved you don't want to leave.

H: You are incorporated?

C: Yes, we are.

H: There is no financial responsibility on the members?

C: None. Using all the locations we've been in, we were never insured for accidents and this kind of thing. We did incorporate three years ago.

H: The rules for electing officers and that stuff is outlined there?

C: Yes.

- H: What do you see as the biggest success that you've been involved with in the theater?
- C: Just looking around I know what we've accomplished; we have our own building. We have a home. Ninety percent of our accomplishment has been earned respect. We're now reaching Canton, Youngstown, and a good portion of Columbiana County. The people that have seen our productions know that we are. We are not professionals in the sense that we are paid. I heard a comment the other day--the only difference between a professional and a nonprofessional is attitude. And we have a professional attitude; we know we're good. We know we're going to make it. We're never going to be a wealthy organization, but that's not what we're here for.
- H: What do you think would have happened to the building had the theater not acquired it?
- C: I have no idea. I don't think I could describe in words the condition of this building when we moved in, and the things we found in here. Somebody would have taken it; it is a landmark.
- H: The movie theater part, had it already been closed?
- C: No. I believe it was still a movie theater.
- H: What advantages are there to the location of the building?
- C: For production ticket sales alone, people are uptown constantly. They can stop right out front; our ticket booth is outside in the public eye. They know from the marquis what is going on all of the time. We try to keep them alert to what is going on. We found that the greatest disadvantage is Friday night performances, the stores are open and we have no parking lot. On a beautiful summer evening when everyone wants to be uptown on Friday night our theater patrons have to do a block and a half of walking. They're not far away, and they're safe.
- H: What do you see as the future for the theater? What do you think it's going to do in another fifteen or twenty years?
- C: We would like to have the building proper totally renovated. We would like to turn it into a showplace.
- H: Are you thinking about any outside renovation?
- C: There really isn't much to renovate. Our outside as it stands right now needs work, needs some paint. We need to finish the ticket booth. We're hoping eventually to renovate the third floor. We would like to renovate and redo it as we did the second floor.

H: What would that be used for then?

C: Hopefully we would like to get to the point where we need more dance studios and rehearsal halls.

H: Do you feel a competition with the Y and other areas?

C: No. The Y doesn't offer that much in dance for fourteen years and under. Most of their activities are during the day. We like to have activities going all day long if we could.

H: Is there any other group in town that does provide lessons in those kinds of areas?

C: I don't know. We would like our audiences to grow in the future. We would like to have a production run ten, fifteen consecutive nights and sell out every night. We would put the money right back into the theater. We would be buying costumes, sets, redoing offices, redoing rehearsal rooms. We always have expenses, and we always will. I know what our gas budget is now; I hesitate to guess what it will be in fifteen years. Basically I would like to see us stay the same. We do need improvements, but as far as the quality of productions, I don't think we could get a lot better than we are. If we are doing as good as we are now in fifteen years, we'll be doing all right.

H: Do you have any ideas that you might be using in the next couple of years to increase audiences?

C: In the last four months we have hired an executive director. He is a planner. He is organized. He is running our season ticket campaign which starts the middle of this month. He will probably be heading up our funds drive campaign in the fall. He is also directing; he directed our last show and is directing our next show, "My Fair Lady". He is probably one of the biggest improvements we've made around here. He is doing the things . . . He is a front man, our public relations man. Everything from here on in is frontaled through him. Screening new directors will probably be his responsibility too.

H: Is this a full-time position for him?

C: Now he is in Youngstown half of the day, twelve hours, and then he is here the other twelve hours. He is part-time for the time being.

H: Is he trained in this area?

C: Yes, he is. He has been in television and theater probably twelve to fifteen years.

H: Thank you very much.