

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Theater People from Ohio

Personal Experience

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ROBERT VARGO

Interviewed

by

Carol Mills

on

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M This is an interview with Robert Joseph Dennis Vargo for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Theater People from Ohio by Carol Mills, on December 10, 1981, at 8.30 a m.

Mr Vargo what would you like to start talking about? I would like you to start somewhere when you were little Tell me about your parents and where they came from

V Well my first conscious recollection is somewhere back in 1940 or 1944 or 1945, drinking a glass of cherry pop in a bar That is my first conscious recollection of life There was one minor one before that which was my dismantling my mother's bedroom set while she napped I do not count that one as a major one

M Was she in bed at the time?

V No, she was in another room napping -- in the front room, as I recall -- and I was enamored of the little jewel-like pieces in the drawers in her bedroom set. I was, from very young, I was crazy about gemstones and little precious, semi-precious looking stones, and pieces of glass that looked like semi-precious stones I decided those should be in my collection So, as Mommy napped I took apart her entire bedroom set.

M With what?

V. Oh a screwdriver or something That was one of the big events in my earlier life But my parents background, as far as that goes, is sort of typical, I guess, for this area. My father came from a large family, Hungarian in descent, from the East side. My father is the exact opposite from what I am, he is extremely athletic, he likes to shoot defenseless animals, things like that. Not to the point of destruction, I do not mean to suggest that he is a deer hunter type individual, just an outdoors man Which is good for him because at his point in life now and his retirement, he is still very active in that so that is okay.

M And there are a lot of defensive animals left to get

V. Yes, he usually gets his limit, he is very good. Hunts, fishes, and does all that His family was large, as I said He had several brothers and sisters and most lead a typical immigrant mother-father sort of life Both of his parents came from Hungary, he was a first generation American himself My mother is very similar to my father in background. large family, 13 children My mother is Serbian-Croatian background from Campbell and she was somewhere in the middle of that brood, I do not know exactly where she fell But also very ordinary, basically poor, I guess, background, both families

- M Do you know how either one of the families, their mother and fathers came to America? Did they come through Ellis Island or did they come through Philadelphia, or Boston, or somewhere?
- V I believe that my mother's parents came through Ellis Island My grandfather was here first, and then he sent for my grandmother And then on my father's side, they may have come elsewhere because I remember mentioning it and they did not seem to recognize what I was talking about They were not all that fluent in English anyway.
- M. We have done a survey on the people that came through Ellis Island, that is why I was curious
- V Yes, but that, in a nutshell, is the background Croatian on one side, Hungarian on the other I really do not identify with either one of those backgrounds for some reason. I think it has a lot to do with, with two things first of all being extremely independent as an only child, and secondly, hating my relatives. Not wanting anything to do with them, finding them terribly boring and uninspiring So I more or less did obligatory things like went on Thanksgiving and went home and that was it, you know
- M I can truthfully tell you that I always thought that you had some sort of placed genealogy because I like to think of you as sort of the Duke of Youngstown
- V Well, there may be a Duke back there somewhere, but he had to be illegitimate, I am sure I do not know where that would fit I am exact opposite, I am paradox Looking at the rest of my family, I do not belong in that family at all. As a matter of fact I do not belong in the theater at all because that whole thing was a fluke anyway, how I first started doing that That was accidental When I was very young -- talking about two or three years old -- I used to, to the point of distraction, sing constantly Drive my parents crazy, especially my mother And then they got to the point where they decided, I was going to do it anyway, so they started enjoying it And from there my mother heard or read, I do not know exactly which, of regional auditions they were having in Cleveland for a show and she mentioned it. I started crying that I wanted to go and try to do it So she figured I was stupid, but she took me anyway and I got it
- M What was it?
- V It was a production of Musical Review Now there is a play by this name but it should not be confused with that This review was called Too Many Girls And it featured a little girl, a Judy Garland type, I guess Myself and

an adult cast There was two juveniles and adults.

M What did you do in the production?

V I said a terrible rendition and did a tap dance, too I Won't Dance

M Is that when you tap danced on the steps?

V Yes, up them steps I will never forget that because it was really quite bad But I guess there was something When I was little I was extremely cute It was not until adolescence that nature decided to play cruel tricks on me I was sort of a little round faced and big blue eyes and big smile and the chubby cheeks, and I guess that was in 1949, around there, when I started

M Would you tell us the name that you were called at that time? I remembered it once you told me Your stage name

V Well, when I first joined Equity, there was already a Robert Vargo who was a stage manager somewhere, he worked once a year or whatever, but he was still in the union so I could not use my name I used my middle name, which was taken from my cousin's boyfriend, who I really admired a lot, Dennis, who she married later on. And I used his name, I used Robert Dennis, instead of my own name

M So then how old were you when you got your Actors Equity Union Card?

V I was six

M Six years old? That is not usual for this area

V And it cost, when I was six years old, it cost \$35 to get into Equity

M Well, that certainly is different now, it is \$500 Okay, so what happened after that?

V Well, I did that for approximately three months, incidentally that where the Fantastics was in New York.

M You did that in New York?

V Oh, yes

M Oh, the auditions were in Cleveland.

V Yes, the auditions were in Cleveland and Chicago and I think LA, I am not

sure if they did a West Coast or not

M The same Sullivan Street Place at 110 Sullivan Street? Very renown for Greenwich Village Theater Do they still do the Fantastics there, three times a week?

V Yes

M Do you have any memories of New York City, from that age?

V I remember being intimidated by it I was not used to a big city I was used to Youngstown, Ohio, where I had grown up Even though I was born in Cleveland, I was just there momentarily, as far as time goes I was used to the trolley tracks running through downtown Youngstown and four or five theaters and a soda shop and that was it Strauss and McKelveys and that was the town In New York, of course, were all these overwhelming structures and people going to and fro It was always busy, even back then in 1949, I recall My most vivid memory of New York, that year, was when Al Johnson died Can you recall that?

M Oh, yes, of course I recall it

V I remember him dying because I used to like him when I was young And I Used to have all of his records and listen to his records I did not realize at first, the wrong speed, something was wrong with our record player Everything was 78 rpm there, you know, you did not have all these different speeds And there was something wrong with the gear in the record player and it ran fast, about 10 or 20 percent fast I thought he had a high voice.

M. Where did you stay? Where did your mother find lodging?

V Well that was not up to her, it was up to the producer I am trying to remember the fellows name who was in charge of our production

M They are still going big, they are really at their peak now

V They always have been But this is a college fellow that they hired, Schwartz or Shine, I am not sure which it was, but he did not survive very long This show was his beginning and his end.

M So you were talking about Mr Shine?

V Yes, he was the producer and the company manager, too It was up to them, of course, to provide us lodging We were at the Ansonia, for awhile And then there was a boarding house down by the Playhouse that we moved to a couple of weeks after that, for some reason, I do not know

what the reason was I think they wanted us all to be in the same building closer to the theater I do not remember the name of that I think it is torn down

M Can you remember, the Ansonia is a very imposing structure on 73rd Street and Broadway, and they now hold major amounts of auditions there for all companies growing up

V. They did then, too

M Oh, they did?

V Yes, yes

M. It also has some old residents living there from years back, that have apartments there It is a fascinating building Do you recall anything weird about it or odd?

V No, I just recall it being very big and very fancy, very ornate People there were very friendly I remember that because I was afraid, going there to live I thought I was going to live there the rest of my life I did not know any better I did not realize that all the years ahead of me were like a week here and a week there and two days here and two days there So I thought I was moving into a new world. But they were very friendly, very nice They are all theater people, basically, at the Ansonia They were then, I do not know how they are now

M. I think they still are In one way or another

V. And after that, after that first production, I then did a couple other juvenile things I did, Pipe Dream, which was a real fiasco. That went on tour, unfortunately I was in that for three months Then after that, I did a series of children's things I did a lot of radio things, I did some commercials, I did a couple of juvenile voices, I did have to check my letters for this one, but I did a rubber ball I was a rubber ball I remember doing that for like 10 episodes, being a rubber ball I do not know what happened to that, whether it ever aired or what But a lot of strange little things I did some modeling when I was little., for clothes, that are, of course, considered ridiculous today

M How were you educated? Did they have a tutor for you?

V They had a tutor for me and I had this marvelous woman who was in charge of me, who, I did not realize at the time, but was a famous woman Famous lesbian, who did not know I guess they felt she was harmless

enough. But she turned out to be a very important influence in my life because she taught me in the course of that production, and she worked with me into other shows after that. She taught me how to handle myself backstage, because a little kid in a theater, you need to know. There are a lot of situations you are exposed to that you really cannot handle, coming from Youngstown, Ohio, or anywhere. And she made me, by the time I was 10 or 12 years old, fairly worldly wise. I knew how to handle myself and I knew how to do it without hurting people's feelings or causing problems, which is a secret. I mean it is easy to say, you know, "Flake off, leave me alone." Scream for a policeman, or something, but if you can handle it on your own on a one to one basis -- which she taught me how to do -- then it is a lot easier.

M: There are no repercussions either, which there always are the other way.

V: But she taught me about getting along with theater people, understanding theater people, and surviving back stage, which is an important lesson to learn when you are young. It has helped me even to this day, there are things that she taught me that I still remember.

M: What are some of those survival tactics? Can you tell me something about those?

V: Well, she always used to say that the theater people are not too smart, and a lot of people said that. I am not sure that it is true about all theater people. Of course nothing is true, all generalities are false, including this one. But she was correct in that a lot of chorus people, a lot of the gypsies and people that you work with on a mass level, not the stars or the producers or the directors, but the dancers, and the singers who are just bodies and who consider themselves bodies very often, they do not have a real sense of identity in the production sometimes, they tend to be, not too bright. When they do stupid things and you have to be able to cope with them and handle them and make them feel that you accept them. The interesting thing about that is that you get to the point where you do accept them. I mean, you do not think of them as less than you or less than anybody else. They, unfortunately, feel that way, very often.

M: And continue to

V: Yes, they do. But you do not feel that way and the secret is how you perceive yourself and how you perceive them. And getting along with everyone in the production is very important. I learned that very young. And that really came in handy for me, when, quite a few years later, I did the nephew, Patrick, in the touring production of Mame. I do not know if you saw Mame or not.

M Not with you

V I did it with Silvia Sidney

M I have seen it though

V I was old for the part, but I was small, I was always very small physically. That was an experience, and I had problems in that tour that I could handle and I could solve because of the things that I had learned previously

M. How old were you? A teenager? Early teens?

V. Yes, I was 13 I was 12 or 13 But I looked younger, considerably younger I looked about 10 or nine I was always the smallest one in the class, from the second grade on up to the seventh or eighth, and then I grew a little bit and then I was the medium one in the class So I used that to my advantage, when it came to doing other parts. Then I went from doing other parts to doing sort of chorus parts. It was interesting how that happened, because I went from a juvenile person to doing chorus work almost over night. It did not seem right to me, I felt funny being in the chorus But I had been studying voice all along, I studied voice for almost 13 years, which is a long time I originally wanted to go into opera, but then I decided that I wanted to eat regularly, so I did not pursue that But I did continue my training in a classical manor Unfortunately, I do not sing anymore because I do not act that much anymore I do not do musicals as a performer anymore I enjoyed singing It was a real gratifying experience to be able to do.

I had some good teachers, again, excellent teachers My best one was from Pittsburgh. Again, Schwartz was his name A lot of Schwartz's in Pittsburgh And he was a very fine teacher, singer himself, tenor I am a tenor But that jumps ahead a little bit, prior to that I was going out of a show and back into school, back to being a normal person, and went all through St Joseph's Grade School which is no longer existing in Youngstown, it was on the corner of Wick and Rayen, where the Newman Center is now That used to be our church, which was St. Joseph Church That was my church And the school was right next to it It was on the opposite corner, by the Ohio Bell building, which is now a parking lot

M Was that a Hungarian Church?

V No, it was sort of a German, Irish-type of church And then I went out of there into Ursuline High School I had a completely Catholic background which I think is very fortunate because it gave me a lot of discipline that I needed Discipline that you do not get in public education



- M That you needed?
- V Yes, I needed. All young people, children need discipline. There are no two ways about that. Psychologists agree on that one thing, if nothing more. Discipline is very important from the very dawn of existence and that, if it is exerted on a regular basis up until five or six or seven years of age, then you have won the battle, more or less. You have done your best.
- M Well, I suppose that you have had this said to you. I know you have had this said to you because you sandwich 90 activities per day. Any given day somebody can ask you what you are going to do. You have your life well organized without it being boring. And it is kind of a paradox, and many people marvel at your extreme rigid self-discipline with yourself, while you still have an openness about you. Probably you learned that simultaneously between that and in school. It is a very rare chance to get both sides.
- V I guess that is true. Talk about being bored though. The students mention that to me today a lot. I can never remember my entire life being bored. I do not know why that is. There were all these things that I wanted to try that I had not tried, that I used the time to do. I never was the type of person that slept a lot. You know, a lot of people slept their lives away. My entire life I have slept like five or six hours. Even as a child.
- M I understand you, because I do that also. I find that is sometimes difficult to find other people that do it so that you can do the things you want.
- V It is. Most people sleep their lives away, and that would frustrate me if I did that. But I always used that time that I had. I have never been bored, I never sat around and said, "Gee, I have nothing to do, I am not happy, I am bored." I never have been that way. I always had things to do and I always found things like cleaning. I get a great deal of satisfaction out of cleaning my bathroom. People do not understand. First of all, if you own a home and you bring people in to clean, you understand. So you clean yourself. And I clean myself, I always have. I always will, until I drop, because I do not like the way other people clean. They do not clean as well as they would clean for themselves, and that is not good anyway. So I tend to want to do all that myself, and I do. I enjoy that. It is very gratifying. I like to paint, like walls, not pictures, because I cannot paint. I am not an artist. But I enjoy doing that. I like painting and doing things around the house. It is relaxing for me. It is one of my hobbies.
- M I enjoy hearing you say that because you are known to have the best.

organized and most productive and creative school drama department in this area I know you are modest enough to say that may not be true But it certainly is in you, you have had the reputation for years You take undisciplined children that have no direction and you channel hundreds of them through the theater department into learning discipline and learning to use to their advantage some of their abilities that they have been squandering

V That is because the theater is an excellent teaching tool for learning discipline and people do not realize that And the benefit they get, primarily 90% of that experience is the fact that they are working in the theater, and that they are doing it as professionals would expect a professional to do, not as children would do it We expect -- I say we, I am talking about myself like I am the department because I am -- but I expect them to do exactly what I would expect a professional to do No more, no less And they realize that as they progress in their rehearsals, and that is, I think, the main benefit of what they derive, is that I treat them as I would treat adults or professionals I do not expect any less out of them

M And they always, usually live up to that?

V There are very few that do not rise up to the occasion. Those who do not are usually those who cannot, who are going as far as their ability takes them And, of course, we have had experience very recently with people from the local playhouse coming in to see our production of Grease, and then going backstage and telling the students how terrible they were That is a good example of something I have always harped on, and that is this is high school and there are students, and this is a learning experience for them

We are not here to present a professional production If it turns out being professional, well and fine, but that is not our aim Our aim is to give young people a chance to do theater, which is a unique experience And nothing more or nothing less. And if somebody comes off, maybe not as well as they should or come off differently than somebody else feels they should, that is really not important That does not pertain to the issue at all What is important is that the kids get the chance to get up there and try it and do something that he has not done before

M Well, many schools have token drama departments, but I would rather you say just how thorough the training here is I know a student taught under you when I was going to college These children learned every facade available, they cannot learn this much in any apprentice program I think, that I have ever seen in summer theater

- V The reason they learn it is because they have to do everything. Since I am a one name department, I have to be everything. I have to be the director, dialogue coach, producer, costume designer, set designer, head technician, head electrician, audio man. I have to do everything, janitor, whatever. And the reason I have to do all these things is because I do not have anybody else in my department to help me do it. And I have to then delegate all these various jobs to the students, and they become lighting directors at 14 years old, which is an experience you do not always get. Usually it is some teacher who does the job rather poorly, does not know anything about the subject. And doing it my way, the subject has a chance to begin as a freshman or sophomore, by the time he is a senior he has lit five or six shows and he usually is a lighting designer. He could go into a community theater and set up lights for a show, which is unusual.
- M. Many of your students have done that? I mean have gone on from leaving this school and immediately they have had jobs in professional theater and regional theater?
- V. I have had several who have done that. See, that is not the point of our program either, and people do not understand that. The point of our program is not to train people to go into the theater. It is to expose them to the theater, which is a massive enough challenge in itself, to teach them that the theater is viable, not only as an occupation but as a pass time, as an expression of artistic ability, whatever it might be or how small it may be. And even if they do not have an artistic ability of such, they do have other abilities, technical or whatever they might be. They can do props, they can do lights, they can do whatever. And they can still be part of the theatrical experience, which is a unique experience, as you know. And that is what we are to teach them. Not that they should go into it, I discourage that. I never have encouraged a student to go into the theater, with one exception. I have never encouraged anybody to go into the theater for a living because you cannot eat regularly, it is not realistic.
- M I remember you telling that to me when I was way past high school age.
- V Way past.
- M Way past! But you have also encouraged people and given them support when they were determined to try it. But you have been very realistic in your advice. I know you gave some to my own son and me, many times. I think that your opinion is respected because you level with these kids.
- V Well see, they want to go to college and they want to major in the theater. First of all, to go to college is a good idea for many people, not for everyone. But if you go to college, it is wise to merge from that institution with a piece of paper that is going to get you somewhere. And a degree.

in theater will get you nowhere

M I know, I have one

V Right Not even necessarily into a graduate program of theater, which you would think it would automatically do It is really a rather useless degree because in this state, specifically Ohio, there are very few teaching positions in the theater in the high school level So you are talking about going on to teach it on the college level, and there are not that many university situations in Ohio The ones that do exist are sort of self-contained, and they have their own people and they tend to perpetuate themselves And their graduates come back and teach, and they go to another associated university and teach, and it is a very closed circle sort of situation that people do not realize while they are trying to get into it So I do not encourage that at all. I encourage they major in something useful such as English or something else they are strong in and then minor in theater perhaps, and then also have a double minor That is always a good idea. That is never going to be a useless time spent It is going to come in handy someday And education, of course, is a lot of shift In the next five or ten years there are going to be more teaching openings, because the old ones have to die off sooner or later and, believe me, we have a lot of old ones

M I am waiting for some of them to die

V Your time is coming

M We have just spent a minute talking to a student that talked to Mr Vargo. And I was remarking on his ability to get children to cooperate with him, happily They do all sorts of adult duties, and seemingly very willingly, and I was wondering what his suggestions were

V The reason they do what I give them to do is because number one, they know it has to be done, number two, they know I think they can do it If I did not I would not give it to them And, of course, kids always appreciate a chance and look for chances to do things that they can be approved for They want to be able to do things that they can complete and then someone can say to them, "That was right; you did that right." That is important to young people When you give them opportunities to do things, not very often they do not do them correctly and they get quite a, not tongue lashing, but I can be very difficult when I have to be

My main difficulty today is with students who do not listen I mean, I give them instructions in detail on what to do and they will proceed to do it exactly the opposite of what I have told them And then, of course, I get very unpleasant with them because I have to make a point, that they, in order to do a job, have to

listen And then half begin to do something and not complete it In other words, do it correctly the first time you listen, and understand what you are supposed to do And they do not do that all the time

M: But a lot of times I have seen you work with children where, if they do something wrong, but they have made an earnest effort, somehow you convince them, "Now that is fine, you have done the effort Now just take your time and do it over again "

V. Sure, sure that is correct

M I do not think a lot of kids get that at home They get too much criticism and they become negative and do not try

V Well, they get more criticism from me than they could ever get in five home lives The reason for that is that we do more There is more going on here at any one given time than anyplace else in this school building Right now, this period, you have some students sitting in class daydreaming You have other students working on stage You have other students going out on errands to buy things we need for productions You have other students working on patron sheets, tallying those up for the program You have other students, I know one boy had to do some work on a tape recorder today that I showed him how to do They will be cleaning that for the rehearsal They are all doing little things that they have to do so that there are so many things going on that if 50 things are going on simultaneously, you can bet your life that 30 of them are going to get done incorrectly So those 30 people are in for a hard time because they know that I want it done my way Not their way, my way And they get used to that pretty fast If they do not like it, they do not come around But they like it and they come around

M. I know they do Your office has always been a haven for the students Not a haven to hide out in, but I think it is because they are treated with responsibility, they have to behave the right way And they seem to flock to that I think it should be used much more often in school I remember you did not use to think you would stay in the teaching profession

V I still do not think I will stay

M. But every year I see you doing it again.

V You see me doing it again?

M You are so young that you could retire fairly early.

- V. Well I could have retired several years ago but retirement, to me, that is a dirty word. I am the kind of person who will die at a business meeting with a pen in my hand or at rehearsal taking a note. I could not sit by the fireplace. The reason I continue to teach is, number one, it keeps me in touch with young people, which I enjoy. I enjoy young people much more than I enjoy people my age or older, because they are not recognizable as human beings. Also, I think that I have something to give them every year. I also have quite a few business interests in this area. I have my fingers into a lot of little pies. And in order to watch those, I have to be here, in this area. I would be out of touch with a lot of different things that I consider important that I have to watch, that are financially important to me, that I have an interest in. As well as people, I have an interest in. And I would not want to be too far away from them. And so I am here. But that is on a year to year basis, sometimes on a week to week basis. In the last several years there were several times where I notified the board that I may or may not be here a month from now, when things are possibly coming to where I might decide to do something else. But I come back because I want to be here.
- M. You had a major role in the recent Youngstown teachers strike, in so far as you were a negotiator?
- V. No, I was not a negotiator.
- M. It seemed like you were always
- V. Well, I seemed that way because that is part of the job. When I do something like that, of course I try to be as authoritative as I can, which means I learn all the facts. I know all the issues, I know how we stand, I know how they stand. I know what we said this morning, I know what they said this morning, so I can comment on it because you are going to be asked about it. And being a spokesperson is actually much more difficult than being a negotiator, because negotiating, all you have to know is what everybody is doing and why they are doing it and who did what to whom and what is right and what is wrong, and what you feel and what you do not feel. You are speaking for all teachers, you have to be very careful in that situation. But it is not a negotiator it is a spokesperson.
- M. I see. Well, I was only here for some of it and I was wrong about that, I am sorry. Do you feel that turned out to an advantage?
- V. The strike issue? Yes, the strike was necessary. The Board of Education of Youngstown failed to realize -- continues to fail to realize -- that in order to have education you need only two things, the student and the teacher. That is all you need. You do not need buildings, you do not need books, you do not need any

of these things. All you need is a one on one relationship with a teacher and the student. And their priorities are a little out of whack. And they do not see that the teacher is their prime employee. They do not see that the teacher is their prime employee. They do not treat the teacher as a partner in education. They treat the teacher as property or as a servant. Then you have a serious moral problem developing. And that is what happened in Youngstown schools, the Board of Education has given custodians, the janitors, a seven percent raise and came to the teachers and said, "Sorry, no money for you, you bite the bullet this time." Well, when it comes right down to it you do not need custodians. I mean, we could all go over to the students houses and meet at a different home everyday. Five or six students, or 10 or 12 students, and have a wonderful school system. We could do that without custodians.

M Take that back to a 100 years ago

V See what other school systems do that our does not is they utilize what we call zero budgeting. In other words, they start with the money that is available to them from taxes and from the state, from local and state revenues and the first thing they budget is teachers salaries. That is the first thing. Everything else is secondary. So their perspective is incorrect. In other words, their most important employees are the teachers. They see to it that they have the best paid, the best qualified. As a result, they have teachers who will do the school system proud, as it should. Then everything after that -- buildings, the physical facilities, the programs, the custodians, the football programs, the buses, all those other things that you can live without very easily -- are secondary, and those are treated on that basis. But the teachers come first and their salaries come first. They are paid well, they are paid in keeping with their background and their preparation for their job, in order to keep them. Because you do not keep good teachers.

M Can you give me an example of a few cities or a few townships that have that in effect?

V I cannot give you names off the top of my head, but it seems to me, from my research from the strike that the city like Cincinnati for example, uses zero budgeting. And a lot of smaller cities do. Cities in this area, townships, such as Poland, Canfield, Jackson Milton, Austintown Fitch, all of these school systems, their teachers make more, starting teachers, than the Youngstown teachers do. They are smaller school systems. And we are larger and they make more starting. And you realize, of course, in the city of Youngstown that a garbage collector still starts out over \$2000 higher than a beginning teacher. That tells you where parents put their priorities when it comes to their children's education.

M I am reminded painfully that a dear teacher friend I just found out, is leaving town tomorrow and going to Los Angeles to get a teaching job in the middle of the

year, and he is being videotaped at his school today because he has donated so many wonderful teaching programs with these reading problem students and yet is not valued enough to them that they would do anything. They are just going to tape him and think they can clone him.

V Exactly.

M That is not going to happen

V No

M But he has tried to make reasonable demands and he participated in the strike and he feels that he is not getting remuneration for what he has done. And he established a whole new program here himself, under the aid of one of the Federal Grants. Of course, those things are removed, so he is leaving. There is a great loss in reading, which is a major problem.

V Reading is a major problem, and remedial reading at the high school level and junior high school level is a serious problem and is needed, but is non-existent. We have students coming in to our schools who do not speak English, and there is no special program for them. We had a boy in, last year I taught a basic English class because they were short teachers for one class, so I was lucky enough to receive that honor. It was sophomore basics, which means students are having a hard time in first year English and they are back into basics in their second year. It is not a regular English class. I had a boy in that class who was from French Morocco, who spoke very poor English. He spoke some French. I could at least tell him to shut up and sit down and that much. He understood that. But he was competing with other students on the same level and in classes in their own language. And this year we got two boys from Korea in school that do not speak English. I do not know what they are doing here, to tell you the truth, but this is the kind of situation that exists in the schools and, of course, it is more important that we should have yellow school buses. But our priorities again are out of whack. We need teachers that meet the needs of the students that we have. And we do not begin to approach those needs yet.

M Since you have worked with this so much, I call it loosely communication. You know, I consider drama communicating also. What do you think is the reason that so many children, and going on into junior high school, cannot read? It is just they cannot read. They go from grade to grade but they do not perceive what they are reading.

V Well, first of all, let us divide students into two groups: the majority and the minority. A majority student is a student that comes from an average background, average home situation, and I am not being nebulous when I say average. I mean the kind of home situation we can both look at and identify with.



and say, "Well that is pretty much what we are all exposed to " Then we have the minority student who frequently comes from an extreme poverty situation, in many cases, does not even know who his parents are, or her parents. Living with a sister or a grandmother or someone other than the parent Or living in a foster home or whatever These are the two extremes you are working with Know when you deal with the majority, their problem is, that during the early years, first, second and third grades, even kindergarten, that the basics up into the fifth and sixth grade are not established In this school system they are not There is no testing procedure, as such that is detailed enough to tell us that when a student gets into the third grade he has acquired most of what he should have acquired from the second grade We do not know that The policy in the school system now is to pass him on

Now the problem with the minority student is that you again must pass them on because if you hold him back then right away you will have 30 blacks or Puerto Ricans, or whatever, people from Appalachia, or wherever they come from Minority types would be up here screaming and yelling that you are prejudice and that you are singling them out and that you are persecuting their children There has to be a standardization of what is required at each grade level, there has to be a testing program after let us say the second grade and after the fifth grade and before high school and in the middle of high school and getting out of high school Four or five times in the students educational lifetime, he has to be tested on what he has acquired And if he has not acquired that, there has to be a special program, a remedial program, to give him that

Now comparing the public to the public background that I have had, when I was in elementary school the nuns that I had, and then I was fortunate to have Notre Dame nuns who were not cooky nuns Who were normal people And you can get some nuns in the convent because there is nowhere else that they fit into society So they must go into the convent The Notre Dame nuns, and Sisters of Notre Dame were fortunately down to earth people With a great love for students and kids A great love of what they were doing and a great knowledge and background I did not have one teacher in elementary school that did not have a masters degree And that is phenomenal Everyone of our sisters had a masters degree or better, was studying, doing doctoral work

M At St Josephs School?

V At St Josephs Elementary School And that is amazing And we had marvelous discipline You were told what was expected of you, if you did not do it you were punished It was that simple You either did it or you were out It was good-bye it was private school and they did not have to like you and if you did not like it you did not conform Now a lot of people say that conformity is bad, well that is a lot of non-sense, because when you are discussing a child, conformity has two different contexts and you must apply it in its own context. Conformity, for a child, is not only desirable, it is necessary. A child must learn to conform in order for that child to learn to be free This goes back to the 1960's when people were

-- they are doing it today, but not as such great numbers-- when they were all moving to communes and living off the earth, escaping society and becoming free. Well, you do not become free by running away from culture, you survive in it. You become free by learning the culture and learning to cope with it. You do not cope with it by escaping it or trying to. You do not run off to the woods and pretend it is not 10 miles away from you because it is and you are still part of that. I do not care if you go 100 miles away from it. You could live in Yellowstone National Park or out in the wilderness in Canada, you are still part of a culture. You will depend on that culture for something sooner or later. Either food or shelter or other people coming into your environment from that culture again, coming in contact with you. You do not conquer it by running away from it. You have to, first of all, conform to it, be part of it, learn it from the inside out, learn the rules, and then you can, what it boiled down to, manipulate it for your own benefit, which is what existence is all about. Manipulating the status quo

M I am reminded of many of our contemporaries who did that in the 1960's, and I have been thinking of what dismal failures are.

V Of course. And see students in the Catholic school at the time when I went through them, were not laid out and that. They had to do things as they were laid out and there was a reason for everything. You were not always told the reason, because you did not deserve to be told the reason. This is the way it is done here at St. Joseph's School, and if you do not like that, they will call home and we will have you go over to Elm Street School, which existed at that time, or wherever else you wanted to go. Go to public school but do not bother us. If you want to be in this school then you do things our way. And part of that way was drill, drill, drill on basics; basic grammar, basic math. Punishment, for example in the Catholic Schools was two or three of the multiplication cards which you had to write out. Two times two is four, two times three is six, eight times four, you know, and on and on. And all these different things, 13 or 14, or 20, I do not know how many it was. The whole series is on these little cards you printed out. Then every other day you would have a reading test. Every other day, from the first grade until the fifth grade, I had a reading test. Where I would read something, I would answer questions on it, I had a new vocabulary. Constant drilling in the basics in the public school, they do not do that.

M Do they still do that to some degree in the Catholic school?

V They still do, and that is why the Catholic schools are, to a great extent, more desirable than public schools, in this area especially. They do not do it to the extent they used to because, unfortunately lay teachers, as they are called, which many are non-religious, are infiltrating the Catholic Schools.

M And ruining that

V Ruining it, because I am not sure they are being required to tow the line as much as they used to be either. I think there is too much latitude. It has to start at the top. The degree that this will be a discipline school system and a degree that this will be the course of study, has to come from the top. When there is a strong leadership at the board level, from the superintendent, from the director of curriculum and from those individuals, then it trickles right down through the whole structure the more it becomes diluted, and by the time it gets down to the student it is colored water instead of oil. And that is what happens in the Youngstown schools. Going back to the testing program, I was on the perspectives committee, about seven or eight years ago, there were about five of us. We decided what would be taught in the Youngstown City Schools in English for the next 10 or 20 years. We laid out the program.

M You did? I was not aware that there was such a thing.

V In this perspectives committee we decided that there should be more stressing of the basics at the elementary level. And we laid out from Kindergarten through 12th what should be covered. Now we wanted to institute a testing program, around the fifth or sixth grades we wanted to test, a comprehensive test, in English, in their proficiency. We wanted another one before they entered junior high school and another one before they entered high school and another one when then graduated. We were told by the director of curriculum at that time, that could not be done. And we said, "Why?" He said, "Very honestly, because the blacks will not do well, they come down to the Board of Education screaming prejudice, giving us a hard time because we are black, because we are minorities, treating our children badly."

All that nonsense starts over and over, that vicious cycle that we are all very familiar with. We have not gone to the black members of the community, in all honesty, and sat them down and said, "Look, the black children in this town, the minority children, the Puerto Rican children, have a problem." The problem is that many of them come from disadvantaged backgrounds and they have a serious problem with the language, and part of the requirement of this school system is that, when a student graduates, he or she will be proficient in the language, their own language. In order to achieve that we are going to have to make certain demands at each level of their education. And at first this is going to be very difficult on the black children and the Puerto Rican children. But we are going to provide remedial training for those people with problems.

So that when we isolate the problem we can take them aside into special classes and we will give them the help they need. Then parents say, "Well I do not want my child singled out. I do not want to embarrass him." So you are either going to have an embarrassed child in the first grade or second grade, or fifth grade, or seventh grade, or you can have a stupid child that is 20 years old. That is your choice. It is that simple. Our Board of Education had not gone to the black community and to the minorities and made this clear. They have not explained the facts of life to them in an honest, straight forward way. And they

have not gone to them prepared to do something about it. So the result is that we are now passing students on to the next grade having done "whatever we can do with them" and then passing them on, and that is not education.

M I do not want to lead to anything that is said, if you do not want to answer this you are certainly free not to. I am reminded that when I was involved in the schools and this sort of thing went on, the efforts that were made by people to deal with this were squelched or they were fired. There was no two ways about it. If you tried in anyway to institute reform in this area, you were called a racist. And you were not even allowed to discuss it openly, in fact even to use the words that were needed to communicate the problem because the administrators said that this was taken as a racial slur. Well if one is not allowed to discuss a problem, how did it get to that point? Is it fear? Do these administrators have physical fear? I have tried to wonder what is their motivation? Certainly they do not want to produce children that are uneducated. Yet they know it and they hide it. Now I found that a lot of them thought that there would be literal physical uprisings and they would be harmed. That is what one principal imparted to me.

V Well I am sure that in many cases that maybe the case, but the point is that you are dealing with, again -- my favorite expression -- a vicious circle. All our problems in our culture and in our personal life have to deal with a vicious circle. One problem feeding another problem, which then becomes a new problem. And in order to break the cycle, it has to be cut at some point. The point is, who is going to do the cutting? Who is going to do the surgery that is required? It has to be done by the person who is vested with the authority and the responsibility to do that. It has to start with the superintendent and the people at the board. They have to make executive decisions and say, "This is the way it will be. It is going to be this way." Now this is, of course, after receiving input from the community. I mean, you just do not make hobby decisions on your own. You have to get the black people in, you have to get the Puerto Ricans in, you have to get the poor in, you have to get the Jewish people from the north side who have kids at Hayes Junior High and the elementary schools. Youngstown is a conglomeration of many different types, it is multi-faceted background as far as students go. You have to get all those various aspects together and say, "We want to know what you feel, here is how we feel, what do you think about this? And if you agree with us, here is what we are going to do to try and achieve our goal." They have not done that. They have not sought input from the community at all. When they do seek input it is terribly superficial and cosmetic. I mean, the input is disregarded. It has been proven time and time again. Plus our current board goes out of it is way to antagonize the community in anyway it can. Which is an unintelligent approach, politically and educationally. Not an intelligent approach to the job that has to be done.

Going back to answer your question very briefly, there is a lot of fear, because as we all know, the main component of fear is ignorance. When you do

not know what you are doing and you find yourself in a position of authority, in order to keep that position, you have to pretend you know what you are doing And if you cannot deal with a specific aspect you pretend it is not there and if you can do that long enough then you can get to retire from your job and then someone else has to worry about it And that is what we are dealing with in Youngstown

M I know that, what you said, community input I was employed at Hayes School for a brief period And when I found an outrageous situation existing, idealistically, I thought that I should mention it and bring it out into the open Of course, I lost my job, but more importantly, the administrators and the principals there at the time said, "We have community input " Which was a bunch of parents that came into the school and dumped lard cans and flour cans all over the floor and destroyed school property They were called community input

V Right

M And they brought clubs with them

V But see, that was excepted

M The principal was so afraid of them that they literally said that if they wanted to paint the school bright red and hang festoons of garlic off of all the chimneys, he would have let them

V There is one thing that you must never forget, and that is that parents have a right to provide input, but do they do not have the right, nor are they capable of, operating the school system. Number one, they are not aware of all the needs of all the students involved Number two, they do not have the educational background to know how to approach those needs And number three, they have no right to superimpose their value of the entire school system Only part of the school system is black, only part of it is Puerto rican, only part of it is poor, only part of it is Jewish, only part of it is Hungarian, only part of it is Italian, et cetera No one aspect, I do not care if it is even 50% You may say that 50% of the Youngstown Schools are black, which is a fact Still, that 50% does not have a right to impose it is value system on the other 50%

We must recognize the needs of all the students That is what we claim to be doing, and if we do that, and the first thing they insist on is that no tactics, such as coming into a school building and terrorizing the school building, or the principal, or the staff, or the students, or the superintendent or anybody, will be tolerated This is bending the law Now, if you are not strong as the superintendent or the principal to say, "This will not go on in my building," then you are weak and you do not belong If you are not a strong individual, you do not belong in that position of authority, because that is what it takes It takes

someone who knows the law, who knows what is permitted and what is not permitted, and what he will allow and what he would not allow through on it. If he is just going to allow people to walk over him, then he does not belong there.

M But unfortunately, in that instance, that same man is there, though he lost 40% of his staff that year. I among them, and some other people that I thought had some valuable contributions to make to the children. That man is still reigning supreme at that school.

V Well, he will probably reign supreme until he retires. That goes into a whole other area that I am not sure that you want to get into, and that is how the superintendent and the staff of the board follow up on quality control, as far as teachers go and principals. Now there is very little evaluation of any consequence. There is a form that is filled out once a year, every other year, that principals come in and observe a teacher's class, but that really does not tell you anything about the teacher. There is more valuable input to be obtained. It has to come from current students, from students who have graduated, even from parents in many cases, who are familiar with the teacher's work. That is where it has to come from. Not from a half hour session that a principal gathers whenever he can see. That is not liable at all.

M In some cases that I recall from that school, the principal made up the evaluation and they were accepted. And that was excepted.

V Oh yes, it has been done. That is permitted from the top and once again, if things are not clarified at the top, they will not be clarified anywhere else. They are just going to get murkier as they go down the line.

M How do you suggest they change the top here in Youngstown?

V Well, you just answered your own question. The disease, and I use that word, not indiscriminately, flows throughout the community. You see it in local government, you see it in local business, local industry, you see it in the arts locally, you see it in education locally. The only bright spot in this whole community is Youngstown State University. And that is not optimized. But the only bright spot in this community is the University. The only physically impressive thing about the community, it is the only educationally impressive thing in the community, and it is the only thing that I think that has any kind of future, that will do the community any kind of service. I do not think it has begun to serve the community the way it should, the way it can, the way it is capable of.

M What are some of your suggestions that you would say, that could add to its service?

V Well, when you have a University in a small town situation, which this is, this is a small town. If you think 155,000 people is big, you have got a lot to learn. This is a small town. It might as well be Payton Place. Attitude wise as well. The University boils over extensively into the daily life of the community. A good example of that is Ohio University in Athens. Ohio University is involved in the operation in the city schools in Athens, of the suburb schools, of the local government, local activities. The whole town is basically a college town. And as a result, there is a lot of input from the college; a lot of help from the college. Students working in business go out and work with the business in the town to gain experience. Students working in the political scene are working for the government in Athens to get experience. Students in the arts go to the local high schools and work on the productions with the high school teachers. They provide technical assistance, they work with students as part of their training. And they do it extensively, not in token way. That kind of input from the university going into the community, becoming part of it, and providing expertise that it has at its command, getting away from the ivory tower concept that Youngstown has been very fond of maintaining over the past decade. That has got to change.

M I think that is the very thing we are doing now, is one of the more positive aspects of the university -- this Oral History. I am very proud of it. And I think that it is a great way. It is recording what is, not what is supposed to be or what is propagandized.

V Not only what is, but let me add to that, it should reflect what people who have been part of this community, the state of Ohio -- more specifically the Youngstown area -- what people who are from and of this are, what they feel as a result of their educational and their artistic, their cultural experiences of having lived here. Too often there is no input even sought from local people. The University, for example, and I will preface this -- and you know me well enough to know that this is the truth, I could care less as far as my ego goes -- but the university has never consulted me about any aspect of their theater program. And I am the only resident professional living here.

M It is amazing. I know that.

V I am the only person who works in the theater professionally on a regular basis and has done so for almost 30 years now. I have never been consulted about any aspect of the University theater program.

M If I am touching on swampy grounds stop me, but do you think that is ignorance on such a mass level, that everybody would not be aware of your background? Or do you think it is more of a segregation, educational being facet that we all seem to fall into, you know, like this is the

University, what do we need with the high school? I notice a lot of that very childish stuff does go on. Which would you think, or do you have another thought on it?

V It is a combination of both of those. To characterize it in general, it is wasteful, because coming into a new department head in the city. Let us, I hate to do this because we have a new theater department head and I do not mean to judge him, but let us use that department as an example.

M Are you speaking of the University now?

V The University, yes. Let us take that situation: let us say that you are newly hired, head of the theater department of Youngstown State University. The first thing you do before you step foot into your program is you sit down with the artistic powers in the community, and you say to yourself, "What do we need in the community? What do you need from the University? Did you get anything from the University? What are the needs of the students that you are going to be sending to us some day? What kind of program do you think they ought to have? How can we interact with you? What can we do to make your program better? What can you do to make ours better? How do you feel about the University? What is your image of our department? How do you see our department? What is the past history of our relationship with you been? How do you see the future?" All these questions, it is input, and it is not just asking for it, it is acting upon the input. Finding out what people in your community feel, especially in a small community. And again you formulate your attack plan based on the input you receive, and I have to say in all honesty -- and I do not mean to be condescending when I say this or in anyway sound like a total authority -- but I do know what I am doing in the areas that I function in and I think I do it as well or better than most people are doing it.

M I highly agree.

V But the point is that we have a lot of people who keep positions in the Youngstown area who have not the slightest idea what they are doing. We use the arts as an example, we could start at the playhouse and the Symphony and go right down the line. The minute you say that now, you become feeble because the people who are not aware of what could be who can only see what is, get very excited and they are afraid you are being negative. They do not realize that you are being constructive. And they do not realize that your point and your direction is not to tear down. Your direction is to build better than what you have.

M I think some of your problems may be, what is your thought, that these things, unfortunately are regarded as social functions only, you know, like a social prestige, to say have, and I am using an example, belong to the



symphony, without any real working knowledge of the literal function of that

V The reason for that is in the make up of the people, the power structure that runs the organization. And this could be the symphony or the playhouse or anything that you want to choose, The Monday Musical Club, or any artistic associations in town. The Arts Council in Youngstown, it tends to be made up of the well-to-do. And the well-to-do tend to make up the artistic backbone of any arts organization anywhere in the country. That is almost the way it has to be, because of the funding. The money for those would not be forthcoming from any other source. It has to come from people who have the money. And we are not saying that power structures should be done away with. But what we are saying is that power structure should constantly use it is own to replenishing ranks. Constantly higher people who consider it to be its own. And this is a problem in the whole community of course.

But Youngstown again, from politically speaking down for the arts or up to the arts, depending on your perspective, follows the same mistake pattern over and over and over. It is an incestuous, vicious circle in which we continue to replace the same type of person with the same type of person. And there is very little new blood. This is why I say that the University is a ray of hope, because in the University you have a lot of new blood being brought into theater, and that is important. The University, when it went to a state school situation, began to require more PhD's and all Masters degrees on other levels. That is very important because you do not have local people with that background. You have people from elsewhere with that background. And they have to be imported in order to meet state requirements and that is a good thing. And that was the case where a legal requirements forced a community to upgrade itself, intellectually, and we need more of that.

M You are indeed the only resident professional. I am not asking you to blow your horn, although you could do a long solo one if you wanted to, but would you talk some about your other activities besides functioning as the total speech and drama department at Woodrow Wilson High School? You are active in many other theater and business enterprises, in all of your spare time and during summers. Would you please give me some kind of synopsis on it?

V Well, first of all, let us get the business things out of the way because those are the least important. The business things are how I pay the gas bill. I actually live a very simple life, but I like to know where the next dollar is coming from. I have an interest in several restaurants in this area. By this area, I mean Cleveland, Youngstown, Pittsburgh, and the Akron areas. I have an interest in several stores in several malls in this area. I have a little bit of stock here and there, I sit on three boards of directors and I also have partners in approximately a dozen cities that I promote touring things with. That is the business side. That is that. I

keep that totally separate from my life here. What I do, what they are, the names of the businesses, how the businesses are run have nothing to do with my life.

When I have a restaurant somewhere, which I do now in the Pittsburgh area for example, it is run by a manager, in this case a man and his wife, who are capable people, who I am in touch with, who run the business as I see it should be run. Who have complete control of the business and that is how I want it. I do not second guess them, I do not make decisions over their head. They run the restaurant as we agreed it should be run and all I do is check out what they are doing. If I have suggestions I make them, if there is something that I do not like I sit down and discuss it. And that is it, I do not override them whatsoever. That is when people come to me and say give me a job, and I say I do not have any jobs because I do not have any jobs. If you want a job, you go to Pittsburgh and you apply. If he likes you and you work out, he hires you. The fact that you know me does not mean a thing. I never got anywhere because I knew anybody. And I will not help anybody get anywhere because they know me. This offends me on a mass scale and people are always trying to do this

M It is done on a mass scale

V It is, but I would not do it. I do not subscribe to it and I will not allow anybody to use me in that way. Plus, I find it keeps me, on a personal relationship basis, much more open and freer with people. I do not isolate myself from people, because I conduct my personal life alone.

M Because it allows you the personal freedom to be yourself

V: Right. And I can say I am myself with everybody that I know. What you see is what I am. It is me. You know, love it or hate it, but this is me. And it is that way because I keep my business life and other life separate. And my life in the theater, my life in entertainment, is part of my personal life, really. It is more a hobby than anything else. As I told you earlier, I started out acting, I went into chorus work and then I went out of chorus work in my late teen years and early 20's, back into acting again. I did a lot of character work, a lot of musical comedy work. A lot of supporting work, things like Honcho, Man of La Mancha, high roles of that type that I could do. Then, as I progressed through that I got a little tired and I felt ungratified just being an actor, and I got into stage management, I then eventually got into directing, and I have been directing and lighting and staging ever since then. The last 15 years I have been basically a director, stage manager, lighting designer.

M Would you stress some of the areas you have done that in?

V Well, wherever I can be hired. I have worked for about 15 or 20 producers all over the country. I have worked the cities such as, well the

cities I usually work, Boston, St Louis, Atlanta, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Indianapolis, Michigan, Kansas City, the Dallas, Fortworth area and Seattle occasionally. Places where there is work and where I can go and where people know me, and where I do not have to go in and audition and send in resumes and beg for work. If they do not like what I do and the way I do it, then do not hire me and do not ask me to provide pictures and glossies and 30 names of people and a blood test, because I do not have time for that. My life, as you know, is very occupied every minute of it and I do not have time to go through all that nonsense to get work in the theater.

I am fortunate enough to be at the point where I can pick and choose what I do. You know, I can do this show in Atlanta, then I can do a show in Kansas City, then I can take a few days off. I started, in the last few years -- last seven or eight years, actually -- doing something that I really have to get away from, and that is I started stage variety show and do lighting, which I do rather well because I have a very lucrative imagination. I have a great appreciation of color and movement. And that is good for a lighting person. And I have done lighting for people like Mitzi Gaynor, Aretha Franklin, and Milton Burle, and people of that type on their variety shows. And I helped stage their shows. But that kind of work is too hectic for me because it is like two days and three days, one day.

This summer for example I did a split week where I did a production of God Spell for a week and then I went to Vegas with Mitzi Gaynor for three days, did the lighting and staging and worked with her. Then I went back and did a show for a week, then I went back to Vegas again for two days with George Carlin, and worked with him on his show. See, that is too hectic. I cannot do that. I can go a week in each town. But sometimes being a week in each town, if it is over 200 miles I do not drive, because I only have one travel day after a travel day. And I fly to get there on time. Sometimes I will forget if I have my van with me. And I will wake up in the morning and I will go out to get in my car and I will go, "Oh my gosh! Somebody has stolen my car," because I will forget that I did not drive there.

M You very seldom forget anything

V Well it is easier to forget when you are jumping around. And one summer when I was doing, I was doing a show, this was with the Coconut Grove Playhouse which is now defunct in Miami. I was doing a production of Fanny there. Now try to perceive this whole situation. I was in Atlanta doing 1716 with Joel Gray. It was in the evening. During the day I was rehearsing in Miami. So I was going to Atlanta in the morning to Miami to rehearse and coming back in the afternoon and doing a performance. And after the performance, I would go back to Miami and I would wake up in the morning, or sometimes I would sleep over, but I was going through that schedule for a week plus I was doing some commercials in Atlanta,

some voice overs which I used to do a lot of I got to the point where I would come in and say, "What is the show?" or "What are we doing?" And the stage managers are not prepaid, it just means that you have forgotten what show you are doing. Which I occasionally do forget what show I am doing

M. It means you are putting a lot of stress on your mind, on your whole body

V No, I am not a stressful individual

M No, you are totally tranquil You transmit tranquility to other people, but I think you have worked at it

V. Yes, I have worked at it Unfortunately, at the point where stress now is a thing of the past It is just that I have compartmentalized, I have created compartments in my mind for all these various levels I function in And when I want a specific level to function I simply punch it into the computer and it is there, fortunately Now when I get to be senile, God forbid -- which I might, you never know, someday -- then I will not have that ability, but now I do And I can walk into a situation and I can wear many hats, and this is one thing a lot of people do not understand, is my objective. One reason that I do not have some jobs in the community is that some people do not accept the fact that I can wear many hats For example, I was offered a job at the playhouse once, but the requirement was that I would have to stop bringing the touring shows in to downtown.

M Would you talk about bringing the touring shows in, because you were involved in that and that was such a healthy venture for the community I was so pleased about it, as were many other people.

V Well, like many other things in the area, we did not have the backing of enough well-to-do All we did was do what we did well All we did was provide exciting artistic experiences and that is not enough in Youngstown In Youngstown you have to have Mrs so-and-so, and Mr so-and-so, and Doctor so-and-so on your Board of Directors

M Was there not a lot of, I would use the word jealousy? If you do not like that word, I can use another

V. I love that word I love the word jealousy

V Well, I was told very directly -- I do not remember the exact words to quote him -- I was told by Mr Lenhoff who, as you know, is the executive director of the Playhouse When I went into him, he was objecting to our bringing in the touring Broadway shows into Powers He said to the letter

to the Powers Board of Directors in the symphony that, "the Playhouse was going to be harmed by these inferior productions " "Inferior". Now these, of course, are originally Broadway companies, directed by the same directors and produced by the same producers that put the Broadway shows together

M They were in the kept uniform, yes

V Right, and very often exact copies of the New York productions He told me, when I asked him I said very plainly, "Bentley, under what circumstances would you see us continuing to bring the shows in with your blessing?" And he said, "Well honestly, the only way that you could do that is if I was involved with you "

M What does that mean?

V That means if I would take him as a partner, I guess That is all I could conceive it to mean And, of course, I cannot see myself working with Mr Lenhoff in any kind of business arrangement situation

M I would see that even in a broad spectrum response, the only other way I could see it is if some of the Playhouse would join in a financial agreement

V No, it was not the Playhouse, it was Mr Lenhoff

M Oh, just he was speaking for them

V No, he was not talking about the Playhouse He said, "I", not "We". So it was obvious to me that he wanted a piece of the pie or he was going to stick his finger in the pie He was going to mess the pie up So that was not the point, though, we could have existed very well without his blessing That was not important What was important was the business community did not support our venture I brought things into Powers, and I started as soon as Powers opened up, right after it became the Symphony Center

M What year was that?

V I cannot tell you without looking it up

M I know that it was shortly after 1968

V You have to keep in mind that the last 30 years to me, seem like about five minutes And all that has gone on is just layer upon layer upon layer

- M Well, I know it was around 1968, but I am not positive That is when the Warner Theater closed
- V Right Well, in any event, we began immediately, when Powers opened, a full season of touring Broadway shows We started out with six shows And we would do specials like the Glen Miller Orchestra, Guy Lombardo We brought special things in like that Immediately we were shunned, shunned by the business community The Chamber of Commerce would not even let us in to discuss our season, would not even let us in to discuss our season That is the kind of cooperation we got
- M Do you think that they looked upon them as people often times do look upon things like, I am going to use New York, but like, the foreign exotic influence that might have the seeds of debauchery sewn within. What other reasons did they have?
- V. No, I do not think it was that so much I think it was more the case of, "Who are you?" And the fact that I was a professional that had been in the theater for 20 years at the time was not important to them The fact that Doctor so- and-so was not on the Board of Directors and Miss so- and-so of the Youngstown Country Club was not my fund drive director That was what was important to them There is no doubt in my mind to that There was not enough prestige in our organization All we were was a group of young people who loved what we were doing and knew what we were doing But we did not have enough clout, as far as who was on our committee
- M Even though clout is, many times, totally useless in any functional capacity
- V It is usually totally useless Very rare exception
- M And there is always a professional envy of person because it is very rare that a person -- I am not saying go here buttering you up -- but it is very rare that a professional person can function on as many levels as you functioned successfully And I think that frightens a lot of people
- V Let me say that is does, I agree with you It is easy to intimidate people when they even suspect that you know one iota more than they do However, knowing me personally, as you have for quite a few years, I go out of my way not to do that with people
- M You keep a very low profile
- V I do

- M If a person would meet you and not know anything about you, they would think that all you did was sit here and talk to the kids at Wilson and go home. I mean, I have never seen anybody talk less or push themselves less in the public eye.
- V Well, I do that intentionally because what I am telling is not myself. What I am trying to sell in this community and the reason that I am here after all these years is an appreciation of quality in the arts, especially theater, which has not begun to approach. That is what I am trying to see here. And that does not involve selling myself, really. Now some people say, you are wrong, that it does involve selling yourself, that you have to be bought before your program is bought. And that is true to a certain extent, but that is not how I choose to operate. I find in operating that way, you alienate many, many more people than you win over to your side. Especially the little people. The little people, I mean the everyday people like myself and like you, who are the people we really need if we are going to become a thriving situation. The people with money may come and have teas at our openings and may have galas, and winter formals, and that is terrific. I want them to have those things. I mean, they have to keep those people busy somehow. But the people that we are doing this for are the people at large, are the community, are the everyday people. Who really need the environment in the arts. Specifically, in the theater. And the arts, locally, do not involve little people. They involve the upper middle class and the upper class people. They are the people making all the decisions in the arts and they know nothing about the arts.
- M Of course, we know from experience and from reading and from other inputs that it does not work that way anywhere in the world, does it? That the arts are made up from people who have money, necessarily. I mean, they come from the strangest places.
- V They do, but you will notice that there is a strata, there is an obvious strata in the arts, everywhere. From the Metropolitan Opera all the way on down. You have the wealth at the top, which you need -- which, thank God, we have -- that can provide the financial substance to exist. But then you have the wealth selecting those with the artistic ability to make it happen. And the people that are the doers are the former druggists, the former teachers, the former gas station attendants, who are in love with what they are doing, who do it to perfection, those who are the people who are running the game. The others sit back and give their blessing and make suggestions and provide input and provide the money to pay the bills, and the artists produce the reality. Not the people with the wealth. People in Youngstown have not caught onto that syndrome yet. That is the way that it has to be.
- M What would you consider to be an exemplary place like that, that would be known to everyone? Not in Youngstown, I like to think that I live in a

larger community, I live at least in the United States

V Well the Metropolitan Opera is a good example. On the highest level, where you have a man in his 30's being the executive conductor this season, who is a terribly gifted young man. I mean, years ago they would never put someone at that age span in that position. They would consider him to be wet behind the ears until he was at least 50 or 60. And then he would have ten good years and he would die in the middle of his performance anyway. But now they realize, just like American singers, years ago if you had an American name, you would change it. If your name was Joe Swartz, it would have become Joe Swartzanata, you know.

M Because it had no Italian prestige or operatic prestige.

V But today you can have someone like John Vickers from Canada, or you can have Lienti Price from down south. People who are American products with American names who go on stage and out do the best in the world.

M Who do you think was instrumental in changing that, and making that attitude work?

V It just started to happen and this talent began to make itself obvious and began to demand that it be recognized. Our talent in this country was going to Europe, in the operatic scene especially. Going to Europe and playing, and they could not get hooked at the Met. And one day the Met began to look and say, "Something is wrong here our people, this girl from South Carolina is going over to Europe and becoming a star and we have not hired her yet. What is wrong with us?" Same thing with Beverly Hills, where you have her rising to the ranks, singing at the Met, finally. Singing in New York Opera and retiring and becoming the executive director of the New York City Opera, which makes ultimate sense who else better understands the whole process than the artist herself. Plus, fortunately, someone with some business accumulate understands the business side to it.

M In the arts, do you think that is prevalent, as much as it used to be? Some how of Americans, there is a very strange self conscious awkwardness that I find many times that I am amused at. We are in awe of anything foreign of prestige. I know in the arts, it could be the most dismal disgusting tripe, but it sort of revealed. I think we are getting away from that. What do you think?

V Well, we as a country, maybe we as a nation. But we as a city are not



We are still suffering from that disease, too. The Playhouse is a good example. Up until the last few years, if you were out of New York, you could get hired in a minute. Mr. Kenley's players were the same way, if you were out of New York he can hire you in a second. If you cannot even stand up it does not matter but as long as you are from New York you are okay.

M I am reminded of that, when someone from the Youngstown area here went and could not get paid to do anything there or do anything without pay. And then they went away to New York, they had an address there for awhile then same back to live and then they were hired because they were a "New York" person. I find it very amazing.

V That is very amazing. It is also very interesting that a lot of the local people, people locally who ended up running in various art organization, are strictly from out of town. This does not make any sense. Now we talk about bringing new blood in. New blood at the expense of expertise is not what we are talking about. New blood with expertise is a great idea. New blood just for the sake of new blood when you have better blood locally, makes no sense.

M That is what you meant about universally, if they brought in a combination of expertise and new blood.

V Right, definitely. And as long as they utilize, then I think that is hopeful for the future. But in the area we have not done that in all cases. In those cases, we bring people from out of town who do not care about the community or do not understand the unique character of the community. And they do not understand the educational requirements of that organization. I do not think that the symphony, I know that the Playhouse, and I do not think that the Monday Musical Club, or the Fine Arts committee here in town, I do not think that they realize that they have an educational responsibility.

M All right, I have to agree with you. I am sitting here thinking that the only person that I know that has a total outlook on this is you. That is why I wanted to talk to you. You are from here and yet you are in touch. Everybody else was brought in and they do not know the people and they are continually being perplexed as you say by the peculiar local flavor. This is an odd little town. It is strangely cosmopolitan in some areas. And others very basic melting pot things. How would you characterize Youngstown?

V Well one thing that I would like to say very quickly. We were discussing a lot of things. Among other things the arts are politics. And the same problem rose throughout the structure as I said earlier. Our problem is

that we continue to think of ourselves as Youngstown, Ohio. The reality of Youngstown, Ohio no longer exists. I do not know how people feel about this, but I would be the first one to offer to change of the name of the locality. The name Youngstown is so negative in so many ways. You can start as many campaigns as you wish to that say brag a little, or yell by Youngstown, or honk if you love Youngstown, or whatever you want to do. It is all superficial and it is pointless unless there is a massive reorganization in the way we conceive ourselves. Our perspective

If we see ourselves as Youngstown, Ohio, with a border line around us, then we have a lot of little satellites in a center hub. That is not the way we have to envision ourselves for the future. We have to envision ourselves for the future. We have to envision ourselves as a conglomerate situation. As a greater Metropolitan area insisting were all these various facades and types of people. I am always amazed at the people in Boardman, specifically in Canfield, and Poland, too. Those who come into Youngstown every morning, make a killing, and then run back to their ivory tower at night and pretend that Youngstown does not exist.

M Yes, I used to be a barmaid. I noticed they did a great amount of drinking in Youngstown and then went home to their sanctified area.

V Right. They came here to sin and go home to live.

M I always resented that as a Youngstown resident.

V You always resent it? We have to stop seeing ourselves as Youngstown, or as Poland or as Boardman.

M What suggestion of a name? Do you have any in mind?

V No, I have not thought of a specific name. On many occasions I have thought about the reality. For example, the Youngstown Playhouse keeps coming back because of the involved in many occasions. The Youngstown Playhouse can no longer think of itself as the Youngstown Playhouse. The word Youngstown has to be dropped from the Playhouse. The Playhouse has to see itself as a great Metropolitan effort. There has to be people from Pittsburgh, Sharon, East Liverpool, Akron, and all over. People from all over want to be in the Youngstown show. That is the answer, that is the secret. You make it so exciting that those people want to come in.

M Well I know some that come from Columbiana and Salem, they make efforts, I know a man that came from Rochester, Pennsylvania every night. But those were few. They were not appreciated for the tremendous efforts they were trying to make. They were traveling 80 to 100 miles a

night

- V We cannot really use anything that we have seen so far, you or I on the basis of any judgement. We are talking about encourage the situation. And then following through. I do not care if someone came in from Buffalo. So what. I mean, up to now that does not mean a thing. But once we lay a pattern and the procedure of encouraging people from the outlying areas, to come in and be a part of the Playhouse, then you have a new idea.
- M Would you suggest a new system of running it instead of a Board of Directors? I think we both know of people. People that never read a play in their life, select the plays. On the word of mouth. We do not have any people that spend any time educating themselves.
- V When you are dealing with a situation where you only have a board of Directors that has serious background problems, it has to start again with strong leadership. They have to accidentally hire the right person. And I go through this with members of the board every year. I get a phone call and they say, "Let us sit down and talk." And I do and my brain is always available for picking. And I tell them the same things. You have got to get rid of your present administration. You have got to get some expertise in there that will demand the quality that you are capable of. Once that starts to happen, then the quality will flow right into place.
- M We do have exceptional plans.
- V We have exceptional plans everywhere. Powers Auditorium, the University is an exceptional plan.
- M That is true. And yet I have always found, of course I do not have the position of authority in expertise that you have, but I found them lacking in it professionally.
- V Well I find that it is a good idea, for the sake of your own sanity, not to deal on multiple levels in the arts. The only person in authority you should be concerned with is your own. If you are concerned with the personality that you find when you first work with them, they are a terribly frustrating individual, I do not deal with that level at all. What I do is present my personality from what I expect of myself to be picked up by them in this particular situation, and it is.
- M. You are an institution in Youngstown, but it is kind of like a word of mouth thing. It is kind of like this secret of Bob Vargo.

V Well it is really not a secret The point is that I have a great trust in the reality, for lack of a better word, destiny And then the time community wants better things in the arts and wants to change what it has now And are not happy with what it has now, they know where to go, and they will be there It will only be a matter of time

M Well thank you for ending on a positive note It is time for you to go to all your students and me to go off through the snow

End of Interview