YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Theater People from Ohio

Theatrical Experience

O. H. 1069

ERNEST RAYMOND PYSHER

Interviewed

by

Carol Shaffer Mills

on

July 10, 1982

ERNEST RAYMOND PYSHER

Ernie Pysher is a handsome, well-built, successful, young New York actor, who sprang from Youngstown, Ohio. Ernie began doing plays in his teens at the Youngstown Playhouse and was always known by coworkers as an optimistic, enthusiastic, and talented young man who would try anything that was offered in the way of challenge in the theater. His parents, Bud and Ruth Pysher, encouraged both of their sons to express themselves and to reach for the stars. Ernie credits his parents with developing his confidence and honing his talents in order that he might achieve success in his chosen field.

Ernie won a scholarship from General Motors to attend Youngstown State University upon his high school graduation, and he received his B. A. from that school in 1973, with a major in mathematics. Ernie feels that he has this degree to "fall back on" but then as now, his first love is performing.

Erie left YSU and went to the prestigious Jacob's Pillow under Ted Shawn, to study dance and polish his already considerable skills in that discipline. Through dance contacts that Ernie made there, he progressed to dance contracts in New York City. There, he appeared in the revival of "My Fair Lady", and was injured in a bizarre shooting in an attempted robbery of his person, while exiting a subway. Ernie literally took this in stride, walking miles daily, and doing strenuous exercises to strengthen his wounded thigh muscles.

Ernie secured a job as a stand-in to the male lead in the highly successful "Deathtrap" which ran for five years on

Broadway. For the last two years, Ernie has been cast as the young, male lead. He has at the same time managed to manage a high-gear soap opera role in the daytime drama, "Edge of Night" and is kept busy and well-paid between these two acting stints.

Ernie lauds the advantages of New York City as a place to live, and states that one must learn to use the city to one's advantage. His favorite place to use is Central Park, where he bicycles, plays softball ten or twelve times in season, and football in the fall. Ernie's positive respect for himself and for his profession is evident in each action of his highly choreographed life-style. While he has reached an enviable position, he remains truly an everyday, regular guy. His head is in the stars, but his feet are firmly on the ground.

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INTERVIEWEE: ERNEST RAYMOND PYSHER

INTERVIEWER: Carol Shaffer Mills

SUBJECT: Broadway theater, auditions, soap opera work, training as actor and dancer

DATE: July 10, 1982

M: This is an Oral History interview for Youngstown State University Oral History Program. The date is July 10, 1982 and the interviewer's name is Carol Shaffer Mills. We're talking to Ernest Townsend who is a New York actor and has many other occupations and diversions that he is involved in. He is a former Youngstown, Ohio resident. His name is Ernie Pysher and we're going to let Ernie tell us about himself.

P: Alright. At the beginning, I was born in Youngstown, Ohio. My parents were middle-class people of Polish, German, Irish, English. They were very much interested in the arts, although, not very experienced in the arts.

I remember we had a series of the "Fifty Greatest Moments in Recordings" and all this and they were full orchestras that you buy on the television. We used to sit around the supper table and we would play it. The idea was to guess the piece from just the thirty seconds or so that they would play of the overture of Aida. They were very oriented to the arts although as I said, they really didn't have that much experience in them. For instance, we always had Montovanti instead of real classical things. They never belonged to the Symphony Society or they never really belonged to the Ballet Society.

I lived on the West Side of Youngstown which was a white middle-class area. I went to Chaney High School which was very upwardly mobile. Everybody that I went to high

school with either got married after high school or went to college and the whole idea was to go to college. It was very upwardly mobile and that was important.

There was a big arts program in the schools. A woman named Ruth Stevenson who taught at West Junior High School did full length musicals in which we wrote everything. What happened would be that we would learn the songs; like I remember the year that I was in ninth grade, we would learn all these songs like "Basin Street Blues" and songs about New Orleans. But then we would have to put a book together. So we would have to write it. The Youngstown Playhouse was the most influential in the sense that I did a lot of productions there.

M: What was your first?

P: The first production I ever did was "Bye Bye Birdie".

M: How old were you? Still in high school?

P: I was in junior high school.

M: Oh, wow!

P: I was in ninth grade. I did a lot of dramas there which I never would have been influenced before. It's very difficult to sit down and read a drama; it's very boring. But "American Dream" and things like that I would only do because of the Playhouse. I had gotten interested in that after.

I had acted a lot in junior high school, and through the church group we always. . . I went to West Side Baptist Church and Baptists are much more participatory, in this one especially than in any other form of church. I would always have some sort of project to do whether it was just in acting out the wise man or something like that.

M: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

P: I have one brother.

M: Can you tell me a little bit about them?

P: I have one brother who's a doctor, a pediatric pathologist in Oklahoma City. I had a sister who died, a twin sister when I was very young. I don't think it influenced me in any way. She died when I was one year old. My brother was also active at the Playhouse. In fact, my brother did children's theater there. I never did.

M: Where were your grandparents from? Were they native-born Americans?

P: No. My grandparents were from. . . My great-grandfather owned the land in Poland and when the White Russians and the Red Russians fought, he escaped rather than be drafted. He was a draft dodger. They moved to Moosic, Pennsylvania and he worked in the coal mines. They had friends in Moosic, Pennsylvania and they settled there because of the mines and they worked in the coal mines.

M: Yes. They knew they had work.

P: Yes. They worked so they got in. Then my grandfather was an engineer, skilled laborer for the Erie-Lackawana Railroad. That was kind of interesting because that sort of contributed to my independence because my grandmother had a pass; it was good for kids. So my mother would put my brother and I on the train in Youngstown, Ohio and we would change in Binghamton and we would get off in Scranton, Pennsylvania to see my grandmother and we were like seven years old.

M: You just got very used to just being traveled about.

P: Yes. That's it. We always went to Cleveland or Pittsburgh to do stuff. The advantage of. . . See on the other side my family, my father's side was Irish and English, German. They were very hardworking, not. . . My grandfather died when my father was very young and he had to raise the family. They were from Youngstown. My mother came to Youngstown during the war to work in the mills.

M: Oh, I see. She came there deliberately to seek work in the mills.

P: Yes. Well, that and also she was twenty-five years old or something like that and living in Moosic. So, I imagine she came to Youngstown to get away from her family. Well, she had been married at one time; I don't know, this is just conjunction on my part, I never asked her that. But she had been married and divorced and he was a military officer and didn't like the life and came back. They were very stanch Polish-Catholic and so I imagine that caused a great deal of difficulty--divorce. However, she was Catholic and my father was Baptist and when they got married, she changed.

M: What are some of your childhood memories of the Youngstown area besides theater?

P: Mill Creek Park.

M: That was the big thing?

P: Yes, because we lived next to it and in order to go to

school, I had to walk through Mill Creek Park. We always played there. I remember, Ohio's a great place to raise kids. I remember going down to Stellows Field which is now the rose garden and we would play baseball there. In fact, they were going to make it into a parking lot. That was the big fight there when Mrs. Stellows died and we would tear up the stakes because they were in the way of our baseball game. Little did we know that we hindered progress enough that we caused them to change their mind.

M: You were always very athletically inclined, weren't you?

P: I played football and basketball.

M: Because I remembered when I attended college with you, you were involved in, I believe a mathematic program.

P: Yes, yes, my degree is in math.

M: Mathematics for General Motors.

P: In fact, the irony is that I would not be here. If I were in theater I probably would not be here.

M: Right, I would like you to tell about that later because it's fascinating.

P: Well, the theater department at Youngstown turned out teachers. There is a mentality that exists in Ohio about teaching, not necessarily teaching per say, but to make a living doing something. So they trained people to be teachers and to be historians and at that time the man who ran the department had his degree in basically history. He was a historian about theater. He wrote a children's play or something like that. They weren't very interested in active arts because it just didn't make a living.

There's a very. . . Part of the philosophy of Youngstown is to make a living. Do what you do. Not Youngstown in general, but the whole country of America is to make a living and what you do, you go to college to learn a trade. I was good in math and enrolled in engineering. I got a scholarship from General Motors to do anything I wanted. I didn't have to take an engineering course, but I did because I was good in math. After two years of it, I realized that I didn't like it to do it as a career. I mean it was fun, but I didn't want to make a career of it.

My advisor was Dr. Yozwiak who is now the head of the school and I went to him and he had seen me perform with the ballet company, which I'll talk about later, in the Symphony Society and at the Playhouse. I told him I

wanted to go to New York and dance. So he arranged for me to get a degree. I was in the engineering program, and I got enough credits to get a major in math and a minor in engineering, then I got out in three years and I went to New York.

M: What year was that?

P: 1973, I think.

M: When did you become interested in dancing? Was it an offshoot of athletic interest?

P: Well, I was always athletically oriented. I always played football and basketball and, interestingly enough, the reason, I think, I got into dance out of athletics was that after junior high school, the athletics was designed to turn out pro players. They wanted superstars and I didn't want to do that nor did I want to go through the amount of time and effort. Chaney High School turned out great football players who are now in the prosand I didn't want to do that.

So I needed another athletic outlet and I knew Dana Snyder. I would study dance from her and then I heard about the ballet company downtown, and I originally got involved with them because my brother was stage managing the "Nutcracker". He was asked to do that and I worked on crew. I talked to the people there and they said, "Come down and take classes," so I did. I don't think they really expected that I would do it. I would take ballet classes on Saturdays and I enjoyed it. It was a lot of fun. Then I would take jazz classes here and there.

I had studied gymnastics at the YMCA. In fact, I was the Ohio-West Virginia gymnastic champion when I was ten years old. So, I mean, I have done acrobatics and gymnastics, but we had a teacher named Leslie Sasbury who came over when Hungary was invaded, and he took over the program at the Y and he had an attitude that gymnastics was a respectable thing to do just as respectable as basketball. So he built up a very good program at the Youngstown YMCA and that's where I had it. So I had the ability, having done that discipline, I could then understand about putting your foot somewhere or raising your leg. It was the same basic thing except the muscles were stretched more than built.

M: But, what I've always found interesting about you is that there is a mentality, as you say, extant in many Midwestern and across America towns that if your a "jock", I guess that's the word, right, it's unmasculine or whatever to dance. That attitude prevails.

P: Well, that attitude prevailed a lot and it did for me, but the reason why I danced was. . .

M: But you always ignored it. It never phased you in any way.

P: Well, because I knew the truth. I was in a class with sixteen, seventeen girls and all of them beautiful and I would go out with them afterwards. So I had no problems with it as far as relating to the homosexual aspect of it. Homosexuality is not inherent in dance.

M: I don't think so either.

P: Well, but dancers who dance homosexual whom look gay on stage never work. The idea is not to do that. So it isn't inherent. It isn't inherent in a sense that. . . I don't know, I accept Freudian psychology and one would have to expect a dominant parent situation or a dominant mother situation would have to exist in order to have a pension for that.

It is a beautiful art form and it is difficult to appreciate. I think the problem with dance ballet in America is that you just can't watch it and appreciate it. You have to study it for a while and then appreciate it. There is no gut level visceral feeling to ballet. Ballet is an ethereal type art and you have to appreciate the music and the dance together. Modern dance or jazz, African has just a gut level feeling. You can watch it and like it or not like it. The street theater that works in New York is always the guys in Harlem come down and do African dance and they would pack them in at Lincoln Center. Yes, they would perform out by the fountain. There is not much of a gut feeling related to ballet and also, it's not our culture.

M: Right.

P: Ballet is a European culture. In our country it's Russian.

I was very fortunate. What happened in dance was that they accepted me and I committed myself to dancing. I was in high school. Then I started college after my senior year. I worked for the Youngstown Ballet Company and then I worked for Cleveland and Erie and Buffalo because male dancers were hard to find. I could look well on stage. I was very fascial body; I couldn't do outrageous splits like New York City Ballet dancers, but I looked good enough to carry off the work and I was strong and caring. I would throw the girl around and not drop her and I rehearsed very well. I was very quick. I listened to the music and I love the music. The reason why I got to dance is because of the music.

So I worked for all of these companies and I was a star in that way. So I didn't have to go through much crap because I was a star.

M: Didn't you go to Jacob's Pillow when you were. . .

P: Yes, well that's. . . What happened then was Dr. Murray, Dr. Richard Murray, brought in the Manhattan Festival Ballet Company. Now, I worked with them as an actor. I was in the university then and they did "Soldier's Tale". They were going to do a big Christmas thing and they were doing "Aurora's Wedding", which is the second act of "Sleeping Beauty" and I couldn't do that. That was heavy duty dancing. I couldn't do that. But one of the guys had been a Broadway gypsy and jazz dancer and then got into ballet.

Michael Fillatico choreographed a piece. It was done for the university and the Symphony Society. They just built the new Warner Theater.

M: What year was this? Oh, it had to be if they just built the Warner it was after. . . What year would that be?

P: Oh, it would be like 1960. . .

M: 1968 is when the theater, the Warner Theater closed per say as a movie, moving picture theater.

P: Well, what happened was when the Ballet Company came to town I did. . . The first season that they were there, Bill Stabile and I built the "Nutcracker" in the closed Warner Theater. We built it on the stage. We built the entire production for them.

My father came down. I remember that this is the real advantage of my family was that they were very supportive and we were building these sets. He saw that we were building the sets and there was a huge forty foot by sixty foot drop in the middle of the floor. So it was obvious that we were doing this. I remember I said we were behind and my father came down and stretched canvas for me. I would build the sets and he would put canvas on. Similarly, when I got involved in the Playhouse, my parents came over and they wondered what I was doing at the Playhouse and when they came over they liked it and they stayed.

M: They became a quite a well-known and recognized couple.

P: My family has won twenty-six Arthurs at the Playhouse and I've never won one. I never won one. They won it, you know, for crew and for props and stage managing also. Anyway, they became very supportive of it and they liked the arts; they loved it. In fact my mother

built all the props for the Symphony even after I left Youngstown and came to New York.

Well, I built sets for them and then they needed an actor for this piece and they used me and Michael kept on putting in more and more dance. When it was performed, I remember we did it on January 16 because that was the year that the Jets were in the Super Bowl. We had a performance and there were twenty-four people in the house.

M: That was 1969 then.

P: Yes. 1969, yes. There were twenty-four people in the house at the Warner Theater.

M: Because everybody was watching the game.

P: Yes, and backstage we had the Super Bowl on. I remember that. What happened was, Clyde Barnes came in on a Friday night--that was a Sunday the Super Bowl--but on the Friday night that we did the show, Clyde Barnes came in.

M: I didn't know that. Who got him to come?

P: Ron Sacoya. Ron Sacoya was the lead dancer at the Metropolitan Opera. Manhattan Festival Ballet performed at St. Mark's Theater on 8th Street and 2nd Avenue. Barnes is writing an article on ballet. They flew him into Youngstown and he reviewed us and he gave me a very good review, but I didn't know who Clyde Barnes was. So after the show instead of going to a big dinner, I had to drive to Erie because they were doing an arts festival and I had a show the next day at 10:00. So I drove to Erie that night instead of meeting Clyde Barnes. Anyway, I got very good reviews and "Soldier's Tale" became the hit of that show and they sold it to the university and I did it at the university.

M: At YSU (Youngstown State University)?

P: At YSU.

M: When did you do it there?

P: In May, March, somewhere there, April.

M: Same year?

P: Same year. What happened was that they let me, they saw that I danced well and I took classes and I studied with them and then they arranged for me to go to the Pillow. They talked to Margaret Craske and wrote her a letter. Bobby Ossorio was in the audience. Bobby Ossorio funded the Manhattan Festival Ballet while it was in New York

before Dr. Murray took over and he ran the Manhattan School which supports Miss Craske. So Miss Craske, Margaret Craske, was teaching.

Bobby Ossorio is a balletomane. He worked for several ballet companies, but he is also very, very wealthy. His family are the heirs to Domino Sugar and they own half the Philippine Islands. So he funded, from his townhouse on 10th Street, he funded the Manhattan Festival Ballet.

Margaret Craske was a dancer with the Ballet of Roost of Monte Carlo and she had an injury. This is an interesting story because her family is Victorian and she was English and she left the Victorian background to go dance right away with a ballet company. What happened was that she joined up with the Ballet of Roost of Monte Carlo and Shicceti, Rico Shicceti was the teacher. Well, she had an injury. She was hit by, thrown from a horse, or else hit by a carriage and she broke her hip. While she was recuperating, Shicceti trained her to teach. She is now the first apostle of Rico Shicceti. She kept his. . . Shicceti has a strict regimen of adagios and allegro movements and you would learn them. She was a great teacher and a very good influence in my life, really. Not only from a ballet point, viewpoint, but from a just a regular philosophic viewpoint. She also studied in India for six years with Boga. So she had this very mystical kind of approach to things and this was very good for me.

M: It influenced you.

P: It influenced me because one of the major difficulties I had when I came to New York was that there is a little bit too much concern with reality in Ohio. Life does go on within you and without you. In Ohio you are too concerned with the little nuts and bolts of it. Where as if you really are worried about them they do take care of themselves and Miss Craske was good for this. She was teaching at the Pillow. So I went off to the Pillow. My father died that year in June and I went to the funeral and then I went directly to the Pillow.

M: Give me a brief, physical description of the sight of Jacob's Pillow, you know, what it's like there, and the surrounding country.

P: Oh, it's beautiful. It's in the Berkshire Mountains in Lee, Massachusetts. It's at the foothills of the Berkshires in the western part; it's about fifteen miles from the New York border. The area is very culturally aesthetic because all of the people from New York go there in the summer. Stockridge is about five miles away and Lennox Hill Theater, the Stockridge Theater is

there. The Music Barn is there Tanglewood, which is the Boston Symphony's home in the summer is there. So it is a culturally rich area and the Pillow has. . .

Jacob's Pillow is a theater built by Ted Shawn. Ruth St. Dennis and Ted Shawn were married and Papa Shawn had a whole company of male dancers that traveled around the country. He's really responsible for the dance movement in America in that he got funding and created the place Jacob's Pillow and he trained people like Doris Humphrey and Martha Graham which were the first generation of modern dancers, actually second because he would be the first. Haunia Home trained with him, Haunia Home went over to Germany and started modern dance in Germany. All the people in modern dance can be traced through this lineage--Ollie Niccoli from Haunia Home, Merce Cunningham from Martha Graham, Joyce Trisler and. . .

M: I had no idea that it was that far reaching.

P: Well, it was. Papa Shawn started it all. He started everything. It was the first great movement in America, also the whole concept of going away for the summer and studying. It was like Summer Stock except it was dance. He also believed in dance as an art form unrelated to any other art form. In other words, he believed that dance could stand alone. Up until that time, dance was presented with museum pieces, and presented with the Symphony Society. He felt that a dance company could exist on its own and use tapes and only use the music as side effects. In fact, he even experimented with non-musical dance.

M: I see.

P: Also, he was popular at that time for spectacles. He would go to Soldier's Field and choreograph with a cast of 4,000 people marching formations and different colors and all this and they would put on shows like that.

At the Pillow, I lived there and I worked there, I ran the theater. I had a lot of experience backstage because I had worked with for John Kenley. That's another thing about Ohio. When I was in high school, in the summers, I worked for John Kenley which is the big Summer Stock company and I built the sets for him. He liked me a lot and so I worked backstage and I built the sets for. . . We did thirteen shows, seven of which were musicals. So I worked, it was very hard work--big musicals like "West Side Story" and "Sweet Charity". They were all stars that came in. It was a star system, not as much as now with the television star system because they are totally different things. Then there was. . . I worked with Donna MacKecknie when she was did the chorus and Jo Jo Smith and Don Dryer who are

very big now. Michael Bennett was there.

Now the advantage of working for John and the Youngstown Playhouse and my coming to New York was that it showed that it was a possibility to do this. That was a real advantage. In other words, other people had come to New York and survived so therefore, the possibility existed. People made a living and did this as an occupation. That was an advantage. There was. . .

M: And this became a realization to you then.

P: Yes. What happens was it was more than a realization to me because, you know, like Leo Muller who was from the Playhouse and lived in New York would go home for Christmas so I would come to New York and look at his apartment, take care of his apartment because he lived in the Village and he wanted somebody there. So I would be in New York for two weeks and it was a very real possibility to come here to live.

Also, I became aware of New York. I knew what was going on. I love musicals and the musical theater at that time was much stronger than it is now because minimum has gone up because of the cost of living and producers don't want to pay that.

M: What has it gone up to, Ernie?

P: It's now $550. Right now it just went up, just an in crease. The reason when that goes up you are going to have fewer and fewer big chorus shows or you're going to have $40 ticket prices, $50 ticket prices which you now have. So theater is hurting in that way. It's not hurting as a form of theater, but what's happening is that you now have eight character, ten character musicals.

"42nd Street" is a production designed to cost a lot of money and it's going to have to run for a long time. You are never going to see a good Stock production of "42nd Street" they just can't afford it, or "Dream Girls" even. You'll see a good production of "Dream Girls", but it won't have the sets.

But see we have Jacob's Pillow. Jacob's Pillow had ethnic dance because Papa Shawn trained Lamary who was an ethnic dancer. There was Spanish dancing, Hindu Bahatranatrum dancing, Chinese dancing.

Bahatranatrum, it's the eye movements and the hand move ments. We all learn this, different styles that Retha Dehba taught. I studied with Norman Walker in modern, all this ethnic dance including German dance.

M: All at Jacob's Pillow?

P: All at Jacob's Pillow. What he would do is when he would put on a show and every show they had to have ethnic, modern, and ballet. The modern dance was Ollie Niccoli was there with his company, Murray Lewis was there with his company, Norman Walker taught there, Merce Cunningham was there. All these people studied at the Pillow. They would go away for the summer.

The way the Pillow survived was that whoever became the stars at that time, remember that time it was Vallila and McBride, they would go out of generosity to Papa they would do a week free. As Jacob's Pillow would say, "Appearing now, Vallila and McBride," in some piece and they would sell tickets. Now when Papa died--which is the next year, I was there the year before he died, he died in the winter of that year--the Pillow had to change its policy now because they have no, Papa was a star. It was very, it was. . . The interesting thing about this was these are people who did this for a living.

M: Somewhere. . .

P: In other words, you would say,"What do you do besides dance?"

M: Nothing.

P: That's what they would say in Ohio.

M: Right.

P: And here they say, "Well, what do you mean?"

M: "How do you earn money to eat?" That's always the question posed. "What do you do to really earn your living?" That is so often said. But in. . .

P: It's not Ohio. I played football with a bunch of guys on Sundays, Sunday mornings, and one of them is a lawyer. They are lawyers and doctors and stuff and they asked me what I did and I said I was an actor and they said, "Yes, but what do you do to make money?" So it permeates everywhere.

So I came to New York through Jacob's Pillow. I got an apartment to stay in through some people who were there and I sublet from them. I had a scholarship to the Manhattan School and I studied the advanced class in the morning and I would have to take the beginner's class at 5:30 in the afternoon. I had my afternoons free. At that time Gus Sulliman and Peter Saul taught at the Manhattan School, taught classes. So I took their

classes free. I got a job working at Buckley which is a rich private school, sons of the military industrial complex.

So I worked for them. I was a low paid bodyguard, took them to Central Park, and played sports with them and I actually taught them dance, interestingly enough. I wasn't that heavy into it as a teacher. I really have no desire to teach or to choreograph which is why I got out of it. The third graders and the fourth graders loved it. They had a great time.

From Jacob's Pillow, I met people who lived in New York and I got an apartment to stay in for a couple months. I eventually took over that apartment as a sublet. I got a scholarship to the Manhattan School to study with Miss Craske. While I was in New York, I really wanted to dance and I met a lot of people in Miss Craske's place, like in Manhattan School, like Paul Taylor studied there and Carolyn Brown who was with Merce Cunningham.

So I had it in to go take classes with these people and I would because I was tall, good-looking, and athletic. I had an advantage over other people for this particular style of dance. Paul Taylor and Martha Graham are good on tall people. So those were the first companies I worked with. I never really studied acting at that time. I did study voice because I wanted to sing.

M: How come?

P: Oh, just different people. People that I would hear and names would be mentioned or thrown around. Dixie Stewart was someone, the first person I studied with.

M: What I find interesting, Ernie, is that you have sort of a triple threat thing going for you. You can dance and act and, I'm sure, sing. I have not heard you sing, but you also have athletic prowess. So you could function in almost any field in the theater. Now that well-roundedness, I think, has helped you. What is your opinion about that?

P: Well, yes, because the purpose is to work and we're skilled labor, which means that we just go where the jobs are. We don't make up the jobs. Producers make up the jobs; writers make up the jobs, so you have to have a variety of skills.

I think that one of the advantages of Ohio is that it is a real section of real life. You see, you know, growing up in New York or Los Angeles or even Chicago, which is a theater center, they tend to view theater as real life and it's not, really. It's an aberration of life. The

people who are in theater do not have the same values or ideas as people in real life. Also, the purpose of theater, which I believe my philosophy, is that to recreate real life and if you don't know what that is or what those emotional values are, you can't do it. So, growing up in Ohio was good and you can also become sensitive to where there are things that are wrong.

One of the troubles with New York is that people want to do art here for money and you can't do it. They have to do art for art and if you get paid, that's just icing because it's not our job to make money. It's somebody who markets it, who advertises it, who sells it, who rents the theater. It's their job to make money and we just sort of collect for our services.

M: When you raise a family, where do you want to raise the family?

P: I don't know. That's an interesting question. It's now possible for me to raise it in New York because I own a place. I own a club on the upper west side which is big enough to raise a family in and the upper west side has fabulous schools. I don't know. I can't even think of that. I haven't even thought of that really. I'll raise the family where I have the family.

M: Just as it happens, as it comes along.

P: Yes.

M: Well you do feel that you could, to raise one in this city, it certainly helps you to have an apartment that you own and some freedom of movement that. . .

P: Well the reason why owning an apartment is good is that it is usually cheaper to own. I mean I own it outright so my maintenance is a lot cheaper than rent. This is a good city for people if you know how to use it.

M: I would have to say that out of all the people that I know that moved here from Youngstown, you probably represent someone who has learned how to most successfully, as you see it, use the city, not so much that you're using it, you're regrouping with it the right way.

P: Well, the irony is that I lead a very Midwestern lifestyle. We just came from playing baseball in Central Park. I ride my bike everywhere I go.

M: Many people don't think to do that here. They don't act to think that way.

P: Yes. In other words, I maintain my values and my ideas

here. I mean, I play baseball the same way I did at Rock Ridge or, you know, in Youngstown.

M: Talk about your other job since you mentioned going to work and what you do on the soap opera.

P: Yes. I do a soap opera also besides. Oh, I just finished "Deathtrap". It's "Edge of Night". It's on ABC although it's on local access time which means it's not on network time. According to the FCC ruling, daytime network is from 12:00 until 4:00 and primetime is from 8:00 until 11:00. Anything else is up to each local affiliate to choose what they want to put on, although the network offers them things.

Now, "Edge of Night" is in 156 markets out of 212, and it gets about a seventeen or eighteen rating which is great considering the amount of markets it has. It would translate to about a twenty-five or a twenty-six rating. It's a murder mystery. My character is an unheroic type hero. I tell a lot of jokes.

M: What is your character's name?

P: Cliff Nelson. He's a lawyer and a very good lawyer except that he's a little socially inept. I like him because I'm not obligated to be a hero or to preach or to do any of those things which makes soap operas boring. They are very nice to me as far as time. They don't demand that much time from me. I was able to do a Broadway show and do the soap simultaneously.

M: Don't you have it now that you only go to work certain days of the week there?

P: Well, no. I have a two guarantee. It they want me to work five days a week, they'll just have to pay me more.

M: I see, but you do get guaranteed two days. In other words, you're working for Dan Steele there?

P: No. I'm guaranteed fifty-two shows out of twenty-six weeks. So at the end of my twenty-six week cycle, whenever it starts, wherever it finishes, they count the number of shows I did. If I did less than fifty-two, they still have to pay me. They pay me a weekly salary of two shows per week, whatever the salary I negotiate. If I have more, they have to give me a check for overage.

M: Would you explain anything that you think might be helpful?

P: Oh, yes, sure. I have no idea what I'm doing now that I didn't do before and they pay me a lot of money to do

it.

M: How did you make your initial contacts?

P: You just make rounds. There's a rather simple procedure which just takes a lot of time and a lot of effort. That is that you just. . . I got a Ross report and you keep your ears, which is given out by AFTRA with casting people in it. You just pick out ten casting people and go see them, ten agents, and see what kind of positive response you get. Those that don't respond to you positively, ignore; those that you think are assholes you ignore. Stick with all these people that you think are good. Keep your ears open. The idea is to stay in touch with the business through studying acting or through friends. Thursday I play in a Broadway show league. I know all the shows that are coming up because I. . .

M: Keep your ear to the business somehow.

P: You got to keep your ear to the business and then you try and see what kind of lifestyle or what kind of thing you want to do.

M: I would like you to explain the chronological sense of your time here. I don't know for sure, so rather than me questioning you just state it because I don't if you had secure income while you were making these rounds or just. . .

P: Oh sure, yes. I came here to live here. In other words, I worked as a cab driver and I did other things. It seems that people are very worried about making a living. In New York. . .

M: This is the prime fear of most people that are afraid to move here.

P: Yes.

M: In show business.

P: Well, the advantage of New York is that there are jobs like waitering or jobs like taxi driving that are full paying jobs that don't demand all of your time. You can only work on weekends.

Another advantage is that. . . Well just come here and set yourself up with an apartment. You can get room-mates for a while to make rent cheaper and decide what you want. If you truly want a career, then you don't have to ask those questions about "Should I be in the business?" You just are and you put up with other things. Then when you make money, you save it and you

try, you have to treat yourself nicely.

That's the other important thing, too. When you make money, you have to treat yourself nicely, but not so nice that, you know, you can't live on credit. This is an impressive nature about it. If you find that whenever you approach success something happens that you, like you know, you get sick or something, if this continues, then you should examine your attitude towards success. Perhaps you don't even want it and that's alright, too. But if you feel you are successfully motivated and you want to come to New York to try it, then do it. That's important because it's not essential to come to New York to do theater. You can do theater anywhere. We are talking about making a living doing it, and in order to do that you have to be success motivated. That means that if something gets in your way, you eliminate it.

M: That's why I want you to talk because you are making a living in theater.

P: Yes.

M: Making a living.

P: Yes. Well, I discovered that I wanted to dance and I danced well, but I enjoy being around modern people and ballet people so I like musical people better so I go into musical theater. I studied acting with some very, very good teachers because I didn't feel I was trained well in acting.

M: Name some of those teachers when you get a chance.

P: Lee Strausburg.

I was shot in New York. It was a mugging on 92nd Street and Amsterdam and all of the crime in New York is basically personal. It's muggings, people coming up and asking you for money because you meet people here. In California it's all theft because you're out of your house and they come to your house when you're not there. Here, everybody's on the street. Part of the theory of if you want to be in theater you have to ignore certain things and I had to ignore the fact that I was mugged. It's just part of the game.

M: I can that recall when that happened to you. Wasn't that in 1976?

P: Yes, 1976. Well, I was in New York and you're right, it probably wouldn't have happened if I wasn't in New York, but then again, I was on my way to a piano lesson before doing a Broadway show which would not have happened, I mean, I have to be in New York to do the Broadway

show.

M: You're attitude towards it was exceptional because when I saw you there after on the street you were walking to revitalize your leg muscles.

P: Yes.

M: You were shot in the leg and injured and you had to drop out of the show you were in, didn't you?

P: Yes. I took a vacation. Actually, I went back in and finished the run of the show, "My Fair Lady", the Ian Richardson revival with George Rhodes and Christine Andres.

M: Your attitude towards it, had it not been so positive could have. . .

P: Well, it actually helped me in a way. I changed into acting directly. I started studying acting while I was in "Fair Lady". I met a girl who was from the Strausburg Institute, a girl named Robin Segal and she introduced me to people there. I studied there. I really don't recommend it for people because the Strausburg Institute is a little too aware of technique and not reality. They turn out actors and all of the people that Lee has turned out are very good when they deal in weird characters. Robert DeNiro being "Taxi Driver" or Pacino being "Serpico", they're very strong who am I's but not very severe. There is just no reality in what they do.

M: You recommend the HB school though?

P: Yes. I like HB playwrights because Uda Hoggan was a. . . I studied with her. Austin Pendleton was there and I studied with Alice Feeback and Herbert Burgoff and Steven Strimpel.

The reason is that it's cheaper and the class of the attitude is that you're doing a craft and the idea is to recreate real life. So you don't get involved in being weird or exposing parts of you that you don't feel are necessary to expose. You must serve the play or serve the playwright or serve the director. You don't have to serve yourself and I think that is valuable especially since this is an occupation. There is also a craft involved in doing something eight times a week.

M: Would you mind telling what the rates were so people will have something to know?

P: Oh, well, to audit a class was a $1.50 no matter what class it was. I used to go to pick the classes I wanted

to go take and I would audit them for three or four weeks in a row.

M: $1.50?

P: $1.50. I would audit the classes for three or four weeks in a row and then I would ask the teacher if I could join and generally, they let me in. No one ever said no to me. Austin Pendleton's class was $135 for nineteen classes.

M: That's phenomenally cheap.

P: Yes. Uda's class was $65 for nineteen classes.

M: I had no idea it was that. . .

P: But Uda's classes you have to audition for. She chooses.

M: I see.

P: The advantages are that you would take from two or three people.

M: You don't have to be involved in a regular involved curriculum that you enroll and you must take certain things. You can pick and choose. Is that correct?

P: I did. I did because I had certain advantages. I was already a dancer. There was no need for me to take fencing and movement classes when I would just work for Martha Graham.

M: And you weren't a fledgling actor either.

P: Yes.

M: They probably took this into consideration, wouldn't they?

P: Well, there are different groups, I mean even in Uda's classes, there were people who were not good at all. They were only people that she liked. That's another thing; it's only people that she liked. I mean, the best actors in the world don't study with Uda or they don't study with Lee. Lee chooses the people that he likes.

M: You mean they come in and talk to him and then he decides. . .

P: Well, they audition. The famous story is that Lee tells himself is that when Dustin Hoffman did "The Graduate", he did it with Anne Bankroft. They were at dinner one

night and Anne Bankroft, of course, is a studio member and a good friend of Lee's and Lee said, "Well, Mr. Hoffman,"--he calls everybody mister, Jewish guilt--"Mr. Hoffman, we would like you to join the studio and work with us." He said, "Lee, I auditioned for you ten times and you always failed me. I don't want to study with you now." And Lee says, "Well, one got away, you know." He does it and it's true.

Basically the attitude of all the actors in New York is that if you are a good actor you can, if you do good scene, you pass the preliminary and that means that Lee will see you or Uda will see you. Now that Lee died, Ellen Bernstein, I hope, takes over the studio.

If Ellen takes over the studio, it would be good because she has a very artistic nature about her and yet, the studio basically deals in politics. Like they did, an example is, they did "Hillbilly Women" which was put together by a woman named Marilyn Freed, producer. It was about people in Kentucky and all this. Now what they did was that when they got the show together and it was successful and people enjoyed it, they invited Fay Dunaway to come in and look at the project and see if she would do a movie. That's basically how it works.

The irony of the studio is that they all deal in an art and they say that, "We're doing this for creative work," and they don't. They do it for the money. People study with Lee because they want to get into the studio and they want to get into the studio so that maybe Bruce Dern will see them and put them in his next movie.

M: May I inquire? If the total newcomer to New York who had some background, of course and some evidence of talent somewhere, were to go there and observe if they were permitted, they would be eventually granted an audition?

P: Anybody can audition. Anybody can audition for the studio. All you have to do is sign and pay $5. Anybody can audition.

M: What if these people don't know?

P: What happens is you go to the studio and you sign up. You put down you're scene and you're scene partner and every month they audition. They have an audition night. Every month you audition and if you pass the preliminary audition one time a year, Lee comes by and looks at all the scenes, usually in March. The best time to audition is January and February because your scene is together and you're hot. It's tough to do something in June and then in March do it again.

M: Now is that same thing true in HB about the auditions?

P: Well with Uda, it's in August. She starts her classes.

M: That's when she looks at people.

P: What she does she teaches out of her book. It's a whole different technique and she has a very German nature in her. She's a very organized, set sort of style of teaching and there are people who teach her things better than she does because they are better teachers.

M: Tell the names of some of her. . . It's been quite successful.

P: Yes. It was respect for acting. That's exactly what she means. The idea is that it's respect for acting. It's a job and so you do it. If you go to a rehearsal you come with your props, if you don't come to rehearsal late. You have respect for the job you are doing and you would be amazed at the number of people who don't do it because it's close to play. I am doing the same thing I did in Youngstown, Ohio for community theater except that they're paying me, you know, $2,000 a week to do it.

M: Ernie, I think you. . . I would like you to talk a little bit about that. I don't know that you had those experiences but, I for one and many other people, came to New York and got involved in productions much more shotty than the ones I had been involved in in Ohio and found that the people's, there was a lack of respect for showing up on time. The directors didn't come to the rehearsals on time. I couldn't believe it, the directors didn't come.

P: Well, you can do plays anywhere; you can do art anywhere. The only thing why people. . . You see, the thing is the confusion is that people want to make a living doing it and you can't make a living doing it in Youngstown, Ohio. You can make a living doing it in New York.

There is no. . . That is the bottom line; it is your working habits. Basically I think that your type, the type of person you are, gets you your first job or second job. Your talent will get you your third or fourth job and after that it's your working habits. The people who work constantly have good working habits. They're there on time and they're respectable. When you go into an audition, your job is to convince the producer that you can make him millions of dollars. He's going to entrust you with his $3 million show or $6 million soap opera. It's your job to make them realize that you can carry the weight.

M: When one has no track record here, how does one not convince producers but convince oneself to stay with the show that you see that people have no respect for? The script is bad.

P: Well, don't. Why should you do it?

M: Well, that's what happened. I walked out of these two shows after putting. . .

P: Good taste.

M: . . . because they were futile.

P: They were futile. Showcases are bad that way. Now the newest thing that they do are scenes. The night of scenes is easier because if you and another person get together and do a scene, the production values are not so high where you get a bunch of people together and you do it to show off your work. The production values are not so high so you could be a very good actor and go out there and be on a lousy set and look stupid, but a scene is just to show off your work and get people a taste of you so they get interested in you. Also, if there are some other. . .

M: How do you get the space to do that?

P: You get twelve people together, put in $150 a piece and rent the space.

M: I see. You recommend that then?

P: Well, it's the most logical way to do it.

M: Do the producers and agents come to that then?

P: Yes, they do, but also it has to be part of a whole concerted effort. Every month you send out pictures and resumes. It's part of an effort.

M: How did you work with soaps? I wanted you to talk about it. I had an experience where an agent came and signed me backstage at a dinner theater, asked to see me and said when I was there could I please call him. Well, I came, thinking he was just being polite. I did not call him.

P: That was dumb.

M: I thought he was just being polite because his friend was in the show and I was. . .

P: That doesn't matter. Agents, you have great disrespect then, that was your fault. Well, you had disrespect for

the agent as an agent. No agent would walk by and say, "Sign me." They just wouldn't do that. They can say, "Hello" they can say, "You were good." They wouldn't say, "Come in and call him."

M: I did call him. His name was Chip Lably and he worked with. . . I forget the name of the agency. Michael Bloom Agency. I did everything he asked me to do. He took all my pictures. He set up a singing rehearsal to come in to see if I could do that, too. He told me he thought he could use me a lot and then he never sent me anywhere. What did I do wrong?

P: Nothing. Why do you think you did something wrong?

M: I just took it immediately to my own self and. . .

P: Why? That's stupid. Find another agent.

M: Well, it's not easy to do.

P: Sure it is. They're on the roster for it all the time. Just send out pictures. That's your job. Your job. . .

M: It's not that easy. I couldn't. . . I did that for a year and I didn't get anybody but that man who came to me.

P: Well, then do it for two years. I mean, there is nothing to it. It's a job where. . . How long is your life and when do you plan on dying? It doesn't mean anything. The advantage of acting is that you change types maybe at work. A lot of guys that I play baseball with in a Broadway show they are only starting to work now because they are getting to be thirty. Thirty year old Italian is much more interesting than a twenty-one year old Italian, you know.

I don't know, it's a business of persistence, but any business is persistence. The problem with acting is that when somebody goes out to sell shoes, they look at the store, they look at the location, they look at the shoes, they see what things they're marketing, they find out what kind of clientele they want to deal with, they see if the area can support the clientele, they get capital invested behind them, they devote a certain amount of time and effort behind them, they hire a staff, they think in a business line. If one part of shoes doesn't work they cut it out, if one line doesn't work they cut it out, if the hours are wrong, they change them. Actors don't do that. This is a business. It's only a business, that's all. If you wanted to do art, you can do more art at Youngstown Playhouse than you could in New York.

M: You seem to have yourself very well insulated as far as, I don't think you would personally take it injuriously to your Psyche if somebody gave you a bad review.

P: Well, ironically I've never gotten a bad review.

M: But I don't think it would affect your. . .

P: Well, first of all, reviews are only one man's opinion. They're only put up there by producers. They only reason why there are opening nights, the only reason why opening nights exist is so producers can get all that free publicity. Do you know how much money it would cost to get three columns in the Times and the Post and the News plus all that television coverage? Millions. They were a creature invented by producers. So when a bad review comes out, I don't feel badly for the producers.

The actors sometimes are ripped apart and I think that sometimes reviewers feel that they must protect Broadway a bit too much; for instance "Agnes of God" got a terrible, terrible review, but the review was it's equis all over again. It was a different premise, it was a different idea. So what. There the reviewer was protecting the artistic nature of Broadway a bit, you know, too much. But "Agnes of God" is still running. It will go until the fall until Ira Evans' new show comes in and Ira's show was just postponed.

M: What is Ira Evans' new show?

P: "Cantorial".

M: Oh, "Cantorial".

P: Yes. It's a play about a couple. Robert Redford and Jane Fonda took over a house in the Village like "Barefoot in the Park", but it turned out to be an old synagogue that they took over in Soho and there is a ghost there who is a Jewish guy. It's a debate about the Jewish religion.

M: Would you talk some about Ira Evans. He was important in your life. He offered "Deathtrap" which. . .

P: Not really.

M: Would you talk about that.

P: Bob Moore offered it to me.

M: Oh, I mean he had written the play.

P: Yes. Well, Ira is a nice teddy-bear of a guy. He's a

wonderful guy. I got the stand-by for "Deathtrap" out of an open call at a "Backstage". I just read it and went to the audition. I was number 164.

M: Tell us what "Backstage" is.

P: "Backstage" is a Trades. You buy the Trades and you read and you see what is available. Not many good parts are there in the "Backstage" because people don't want to deal. . . In other words, when you want to cast a show, you want to get it done and you want to get on with the show and you don't want to see eight-five people. Equity requires them to do that. Generally shows are cast before they come to "Backstage", but it's your job.

Your job as an actor in New York is to get your name around to get auditions. That's your job and also, to improve your craft. You just have to have faith that you will be successful. Also, you have to have an attitude about what success is. Success, I mean, I own a co-op on 81st Street and Columbus Avenue. There are better co-ops. I could live on Fifth Avenue if I wanted to. I spend my summers playing baseball in the park. I could rent a house on Fire Island, you know. It's a question of what success is to you. That's the question of respect for acting as a profession.

The whole thing that Uda says is true. People would not think of taking the whole summer off from their shoe business, you know. There is a whole attitude that you have to operate with and actors, because they are artists, do not allow themselves the luxury of being businessmen. They feel, "Well I already said what I want. I don't want to think about this bullshit." That's not true. It's not true. You're not an artist. When you come to New York to do theater you're not an artist. You are a businessman. Otherwise, you would have stayed in Youngstown, Ohio and convinced the Playhouse to do something and cast you in it.

M: Where it's safe and predictable.

P: Well, it's not safe and predictable in any way. We're talking about. . . See, when you use the words safe and predictable, you're talking about money.

M: No I'm not because you don't make any money there, but they can go. I think it is a great place where people can destroy their egos.

P: Well, that's true. That's true. I agree with that, too. My point is that danger is very exciting on stage and someone taking big chances are exciting. Last night I saw "American Buffalo" and Al Pacino was in it and he

was good. He was better than Robert Duvall. I saw the original.

M: Closing night last night?

P: This afternoon. I saw. . . Al was better, I thought, than Robert Duvall. He takes many more chances, but he does the same thing. It's not taking a chance with him. It's a rather bizarre character, but it was the same character as Pablo Humbo, but the point is that it's interesting and that's all that counts.

I think that when you come to New York, it's a business, your job is to get the audition. If they take you, that's their prerogative. It's not yours. You don't want to get a job, you want to get auditions, get enough auditions they hire you. I worked. In "Backstage" I found out if they needed a stand-by, I went there. I auditioned six times for them reading the play and they thought I was good and they gave me the job. Then I met Ira. I met Ira at the last audition.

M: Tell us something about the day to day ritual of being a stand-by in a show.

P: Well, the rehearsal period is exactly like any other rehearsal period. They do the play and depending upon the director. . . There was no artsy-craftsy kind of thing and different delving into the part because Ira writes pretty straight. Ira writes a play like a book and you service the play. You just do what's there. You don't have to delve. By the time a play gets to Broadway, you don't have to delve into it. It's in showcases and off Broadway that you try weird things because the play is new. You find interesting view-points on it.

I feel that the purpose of art of a play is to try and find the emotional stakes involved and portray them for people and then you'll be able to touch an audience. They can identify with what you are doing. Ira writes great thrillers and the purpose is to service the play. It's a play about a book as opposed to "American Buffa-lo" which is a play about a who am I. Nothing happens in the play. It's just a bunch of weird people on stage. "Tobacco Road", the same thing. Anyway, as a stand-by, I rehearsed in Boston with them and rehearsed. . .

M: When did you begin that?

P: December 29, 1977 and I finished it on June 16, 1982. So I did it for five and a half years.

M: But you took over the role.

P: I did the role for a year and a half, yes. What happened was, as a stand-by I rehearsed with the company with the other two stand-bys, with the stage manager and then we would get notes and we would watch the show, the production. Now for the first six months after it opened I had to be at the theater. I would go to the theater and I would watch the shows here and there and then I would go upstairs and read. After a while, I said, "I know this play. I don't have to do this," so I just would stay. . . I had to be locatable, which meant that I had to, like I had to be available. So I would stay at home watch Yankee games or else I would go to a play or something like that and give them the seat number, and once every two weeks we would have a rehearsal and I would do the play in the afternoon without props, sometimes with props.

M: Could you give some idea of the pay scale of a stand-by actor?

P: Yes. A pay scale minimum at that time was $450 a week. I got $100 above minimum. When it went up to $500 I got $600. Now, the guy. . . Ironically when I was getting $600 as a stand-by, when they replaced the part, I did not get the part the first time. That's very common because it's easier usually to find someone to do the part than it is to find someone to stand-by because one of the qualities that a stand-by has to have is the ability to turn it on at 7:30 and be there and then turn it off if he's not needed. Also, I have a good personality for it. I have a very even personality. I don't blow up and. . .

M: Steadfast I would think.

P: Yes, it's important to do that. Also, I did the play with twelve different Sidneys.

M: Name some of those gentlemen you worked with.

P: Alright, John Wood, Stacy Keach; Patric Organ was a stand-by, Phil Bosco was a stand-by; Joe Bobmoore was a stand-by for a while, he was a director; John Cullam, Robert Reed, Folly Granger, Bill Keil who was really the only one who was wrong for the role and did it terribly, Don Barton who was very good in it, Brian Bedford.

M: During this time you were able to. . .

P: Well, it was the closest thing that we'll ever get, we'll ever approach in our society.

M: Do you really feel that?

P: Rehearse the role for three and a half years and then do

it? Sure. It's the closest thing that we'll ever get here. It was a great experience.

M: A lot of that is very refreshing.

P: It is, you know, and they don't ever occur here. In Broadway because of the monetary things, most people do a role for six months and that's it and you barely get to know a role by then, you know.

M: Tell the record of "Deathtrap".

P: "Deathtrap" is the fourth longest running straight play. The other three in front of it are "Tobacco Road", "Aves Irish Rose", and "Life with Father", but it's the longest running straight play since television, which changed the audiences needless to say. The only reason it closed was because of Reaganomics. The recession hit New Jersey and Long Island and no longer do you have $40 tickets being bought up by busloads of people coming from out of town. That's really why, otherwise it would have run for another year.

Clifford Anderson. I loved him. He was a great guy. I liked him because he was well written and there were many different facets. Was this guy gay or was he just tricking this guy to get into the play? Was he a good playwright or a bad playwright? It was an interesting thing and I liked it. It was good. To do a good work is great because doing a lot of readings. Also while I was standing by I did about thirty readings or showcases and the projects were all written much poorly, poorer than that type. So it was good to do a good play.

M: You were supposed to your soap and have a ducktail with that.

P: Well, what happened was that I did the show for two years and then I got the soap, so "Deathtrap" was under my belt. I worked on my part on the soap because I would have been written out after three months because my function was finished. I just started telling jokes and they liked that.

The soap is a day to day process. Like on Tuesday I work, I go there at 7:30 and we rehearse the scene. We block it and I'll read the script and give my ideas to the director and everybody will give their ideas and we'll decide what to do about blocking it and shooting it. Then we have a little run through and then the idea is whatever we go for then the technique has to be tele scoped into that one day, whereas it takes weeks on a. . . I have to inorganically decide what I want to do then I have to organically go for it or else you are acting badly. So that's the whole trouble with the

thing. When I'm depressed on a soap, I mean, if I have to do a depressing scene, I generally am quiet and depressed that day on the soap. If I'm up and bubbly, if we're telling jokes and laughing like sometimes we do, I expend so much energy it's unbelievable, you know. You get it up for the rehearsals.

M: I wanted to think about what else I want to find out about you technically because I think you've managed to master many of the problems, overcome them and they're problems that people get discouraged by.

P: Well, the simple. . . It's a very discouraging business, but then life is discouraging. When do you plan on dying, you know? There are people in Youngstown, Ohio who are discouraged. I think you should find your dreams and go for it because God knows they may come true. Your dreams are going to come true in New York. They are not going to come true in Youngstown.

M: What's the best thing you can tell people who do find themselves shirking back working at something else to eat? You do have to eat and you have to have a room.

P: You have to have faith. You have to have faith. That's all. It's the lack of faith which is funny. I find that I am a very faithful person. I have a great deal of faith in things, like I will be successful. That's one thing. These guys would be there playing baseball. I mean, you know, I have faith that if I keep my eye on the ball in the pitcher's hand and I swing through, I mean, you have to have faith on things. I believe in that we are creatures of our environment not our heredity.

M: In your environment then you had a very steady beginning with your parents.

P: Well, yes, but I think the strongest things through my environment was that nobody ever said no. I could do anything I wanted as long as I was able to do it. I would be able to teach guitar out in Liberty Township as long as I got there. Nobody ever said no. I think that's good.

I think that a good solid base is important, but I also think that we are our own keepers. My father was German and on the weekends he and his friends would go out and buy a case of Rolling Rock. They would sit at home and watch the game and they would drink it. Now under todays' standards, that would classify as an alcoholic, but at that time nobody ever knew that. Certainly in Youngstown, Ohio they didn't. All those guys sitting around drinking beer at the softball games. So what. So I could say I had an alcoholic father and I had a

mother who worked. It would be terrible, but you know my family and they were very good. So, it's all in how you take everything, you know.

M: Your family all seemed to love each other so, I mean, like be so helpful towards each other.

P: Yes. That's true. That was really nice. They were and also they were not in the way. I mean, they never really exerted any pressure. I never felt pressure exerted on me, although I was an overachiever so I must have gotten the pressure from somewhere.

M: The thing that I noticed about you is you always just exude an air of "I can do that." Now they've made that into a song in "Chorus Line". That is the feeling I get from you. I can't imaging you saying, "I can't do that."

P: Well, it's good. I think that is what life is about, doing that. I mean, after all life is just the adjustment you make to what you choose to do.

M: I recall one time in the Green Room at the Youngstown Playhouse someone who had said something about this complicated acrobatic leap that someone else is doing and they challenged someone else and you said, "I can do that." Someone said, "You can't do that," and you did it. The person was deeply chagrined, I mean it really upset them bad. They left the room.

P: I didn't know that.

M: Because you weren't even involved in their contest, see?

P: Yes.

M: And by your saying that and then doing that, it nullified the whole reason for their debate, in other words. It always stayed in my mind.

P: Well, I don't know. I've always been confident about things, but I'm very inwardly paranoid. I study a lot. I'm taking the summer off because "Deathtrap" just closed, from doing a play. Now that's having my nights free is unbelievable. I would be. . .

M: What do you do with your nights now that you have them free?

P: Well, that's what I'm saying. I'm taking a course in stain glass making. I'm learning to do that. I'm learning how to play piano, which is turning out very well. I think that what we call maturity, there is a mental maturity that exists in a teaching technique.

That means that people say the same thing to you fifty times and all of a sudden the fifty-first time somebody says it and you say, "Oh, that's what you meant." It's true in dance especially because there is muscle memory that your dealing. You tell a twelve year kid how to do something and he can't do it; you say the same thing to a sixteen year old kid who can do it, you know--not dance, but any sort of teaching.

I taught at the YMCA in Youngstown so that was a good thing because you tend to see the world from an abstract quality. In other words, I think when you get involved with your personal emotions in a situation, that's a luxury that you should afford yourself only when you need to. You should look at the situation real cold, analytical eye and decide the decision as if you were a teacher in that situation. That's advantageous. Similarly, I study a lot. I study a lot of things. I'm taking singing still and I will go back to dance classes, but my attitude has changed.

M: Do you ever just lay around?

P: Yes. That's why I play baseball.

M: No, I mean do you ever literally just do nothing.

P: I take a couple of days off and I do nothing. I just lay in bed.

M: I'm glad to hear that because I was sort of thinking you were some statue type that doesn't ever rest.

P: Well, I enjoy doing things and that is what New York is about. There are people though who. . .

M: You do live in Ohio, too?

P: Yes, exactly right. I was thinking about that and going to say that. People have a perpensity for life no matter where they are. I know people in Youngstown who would drive to Cleveland to see shows and drive to Pittsburgh.

M: I used to drive here to see shows.

P: Yes, exactly. Certainly.

M: Never think anything of it.

P: Never think anything of it, right and I know people in New York who live in their apartment. They never go out of it and go to their job and come home.

M: Do think New York enhances or not enhances, but encour-

ages that impulse for a person to become reclusive once they're here in order for a protection thing?

P: Well, there is a protection thing that exsists definitely. Your apartment is your defense. That's the reason why people are so upset about being robbed. It's because they have been violated, your protection, and certainly mine is. The attitude is that you go out and you do the world and you come back in and you rest. It's possible, but I think if you are that kind of reclusive person, then you're going to have to go about a career in the arts, the business of the arts in a different way. You're going have to find an agent and have someone believe in you and then push them to push you.

M: Yes.

P: You know, because otherwise. . . If you feel uncomfortable selling yourself, whichever is an awkward procedure at best, you've got to come to grips with that and adjust to that and say, "I feel uncomfortable." I say that all the time. I go into an agents office, "I feel terrible being here." They say, "Why?" I say, "I just feel awkward doing this. I don't understand how to do this." Well, I was just telling them my feelings. The point is I was still in that agents office and I was still making the rounds, just that I was going through all this anxiety about doing it.

M: Some people don't even have the courage though to get to the agent's office to say they feel bad.

P: Well, the worst you could do is fail. You see, you have to look at why don't you have the courage to do that. It's because you truly don't believe in yourself. Well, somebody has to be the next Clint Eastwood. Why not me?

M: Certainly more you than me, Ernie. I know I'm still wanting to do character work, but this time I'm more afraid this time and I'm more, more willing to protect myself from injury.

P: Well, then you have to do what you have to do. If you have to come to New York and you have to be a secretary or work in trash for two years, then you have to do that, you know. Everybody has a different timetable. The thing that you have to feel is that you have to have faith that you're going to do it, you know. What does it matter if you win your Tony when you're sixty or when you're forty or when you're thirty?

M: Do you think it's important to have other people that you would have some playback with that have some kind of similar interest in the same thing that you do?

P: Honestly?

M: I've always found. . . Yes, honestly, of course.

P: No.

M: You don't?

P: No. I think you are in this world alone. The reason: if you have people it's great, but if you don't, you are still there.

M: I found that the hardest thing that I had no one who understood what I was trying to do.

P: Well, then you've got to find a different environment. The advantage of New York is that every block is a different environment. Those guys that I play baseball with are certainly different than the people who were sitting at that table over there, you know. Now you just have to find an environment that fortifies you if you need it, but as far as your craft and your work, that's you. If somebody says, "I think you should give up the business." you go find a different teacher. I mean, really. You're not in the business for that.

M: Could you talk a little bit about the. . . Since you know something about it and we found this out by accident, I was mentioning to you the structure of the Morosco and the Helen Hayes studios which I am doing in the other project here and Ernie said he knew something about that. I would like him to just say what he thinks about that subject and give the background.

P: Well, the background of the theaters was that the city of New York, the mayor specifically, wanted to revitalize the Times Square area so he interested several people in building a hotel there. The advantage was that they would get rid of some bad eye sores and the shops that sold those paintings and a couple theaters, movie theaters.

M: Where is that, Mr. Barry Portman from?

P: I don't know. I don't know anything about him.

M: Do you know his background?

P: No, but he's going to build a hotel there. Now the advantage of that is that you would have a Hilton type hotel, 4,500 rooms in the Times Square district. What that would mean is that people would walk out of their hotels and go to the theater. Also, he is going to build a mall above 42nd Street. The idea is that there

will be a walkway ten feet in the air above 42nd Street going from 9th Avenue to 6th Avenue, all the way over to 6th Avenue, going over all of the porno districts, porno theaters. Now if you go all the way down 42nd Street you realize there are only three porno theaters now between 7th and 8th Avenune. There used to be twelve.

The point is that by building this mall over them. . . Now they have a rule about porno houses now in New York. There is a certain distance 5,000 feet between porno houses, so you'll never have a porno district again, but because of the "grandfather clause" anything that exists now, exists now--you can't close it down. So the idea is to drive these people out of business.

Now the Brants hold the Brant theater chain. There are three people that own theaters in the Times Square district: the Schuberts, the Neliners, and the Brants. All those movie houses on 42nd Street are the Brants. The Apollo which just opened up that had "Bent" and now had "Fifth of July" that's a Brant theater. Now the original plan was to tear down two theaters and open up three theaters on 42nd Street. The Amsterdam is going to open up next year with "Show Boat". It will be entrance on 43rd Street, but it is a 42nd Street theater. Now the Helen Hayes is a beautiful theater.

About a year ago, I was asked by, six months before this whole thing happened about the tearing down of the theaters, I was asked by Marion Seldes to go to a radio show, the Barry Farbor show. A woman named Jean Lee, who was from AFTRA, was speaking there on saving the theaters and there was a councilman there and I spoke to him on the Barry Farbor show which is a conservative show. Most of the people there on the show were in favor of tearing down the theaters. So, I went to speak to him and I went down to a city council meeting and I spoke to a planning commission and my idea was to do what they did with the city diocese building: to build a hotel over it.

I felt that the Morosco should have been torn down. I've been in the Morosco and I think it is a terrible theater and it is decrepit and they have a serious problem with flies, but I was trying to suggest to them that they build a 500 seat or 1,000 seat house. What I didn't want done was that they would build a theater like the Minskov or the Yuris because "Deathtrap" or any straight play can't exist in them. It can't run there and the intimacy is lost. For instance, "American Buffalo" was a great play in the Round, but at the Barrymore Theater it was a dud.

Anyway, we could not raise any support. Jason Robards

sent a letter. He was the only person who ever answered. Now, when they came to tearing them down, the recking ball was there it was too late because the contracts have been signed. Just for the sake, that contractor had to protect his job by tearing those buildings. They erected this platform; everybody stood out there and cried. It was a very emotional show and certainly it served its purpose in that now they have a fight in city council to make all the theaters landmarks, but it was too late. It was a large publicity stunt staged by people. Where was Tammy Grimes or Christopher Reeves or Joe Papp when it would have helped? They weren't there.

M: You mean grumbles were heard and they gave no test, they didn't come forward.

P: They didn't think it was important. It was, I don't think the emotional life was strengthened in any way, but the obviously the timing was very politically motivated.

END OF INTERVIEW