

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Salem Community Theater Project

Theater Experience

O. H. 622

CATHERINE VERHOFF

Interviewed

by

Arlene Hasson

on

June 6, 1982

## CATHERINE PHILLIPS VERHOFF

Cathy Verhoff was born Catherine Phillips on July 27, 1953, in Osaka, Japan. Her father, Robert, was stationed in Japan with the military and it was here that he met and married Cathy's mother, Midori, a Japanese citizen. The family soon moved to Ohio where Cathy grew up. She graduated from Wilmington High School, near Cincinnati, in 1971, then entered the University of Akron. At the university Cathy majored in communications and was active in theater. She participated in the Miss Ohio Pageant, and won the Grand Talent Prize at that competition in 1972-1973. She married Nick Verhoff in 1974 and graduated from the university the next year.

Nick and Cathy moved to Salem after graduation, where Nick got a job with the city's public schools teaching children with learning disabilities. Cathy continued to work part-time with the Akron Children's Theater, a group of professional performers who presented plays for high school and elementary children. Cathy soon became involved in local theater in Salem working with both the high school and Kent State University's branch on productions. She took a break from active theater work in 1976 and gave birth to her first child, Nicole, in May of 1977.

Soon after Nikki's birth, Cathy returned to the theater. She was hired as the first executive director of the recently formed Salem Community Theater. She served in this capacity for a year during which time the theater staged "Godspell", "Softy, the Snowman", "Jacques Brel", "The Alchemist's Book",

"The Boyfriend", and "Jesus Christ, Superstar". Because of this heavy schedule, and the many hours of work it required, Cathy decided it would be best for her health if she took some time off from the theater. She resigned from her job in 1978, and studied to be a real estate agent. However, she rejoined the Salem Community Theater in 1979 to direct a production of "Fiddler on the Roof". She stayed on in the job as director when she learned of the theater board's plans to purchase the former State Theater building in Salem as a permanent house. She played a vital role in the establishment of the Institute of the Lively Arts, a school in that new facility. The first stage production in the new home was "The Red Dragon", a play Cathy had co-authored. Cathy was chosen one of the Outstanding Young Women in America in 1980. In 1981 she resigned from her job with the community theater and took a job with the Youngstown Playhouse. In the meantime she continued to serve on the Board of Directors of the Ohio Community Theater Association and was active in the Ohio Theater Alliance.

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INTERVIEWEE: CATHERINE VERHOFF

INTERVIEWER: Arlene Hasson

SUBJECT: directorship, funding, grants, first productions,  
classes, cinema

DATE: June 6, 1982

H: This is an interview with Cathy Verhoff for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on the Salem Community Theater, by Arlene Hasson, on June 6, 1982, at 7:00 p.m.

To start off, could you tell us a little bit about your background? Where were you born and raised and where did you go to school?

V: I was born in Osaka, Japan. I have a Japanese mother and an American soldier father. I was raised until I was about seven in the Akron-Canton area and then from that time until I graduated from high school in Wilmington. I went to high school at Wilmington High School; I graduated in 1971 and went to the University of Akron until 1975.

H: Were you a speech major there, a theater major?

V: I was a theater major the first two years and then I got a degree in comprehensive communication, which is theater, radio, and television.

H: After you graduated from Akron what did you do then?

V: I moved to Salem. That was supposed to be a stopover point for us on the way to New York.

H: You were already married by then?

V: I was married in 1974. We were going to come to Salem for a year or so. As things usually happen we got bogged down here; we had a house and a child and we may never leave.

H: What does your husband do?

V: He is a teacher. He teaches students with learning disabilities at Salem Junior High.

H: Was he involved in theater too?

V: No. When I met my husband I think he had worked backstage on one high school show as just about every kid does sometime along the way. In order to be able to spend time with me in college when we were going together he had to work on productions. He was around all of the time anyway, all of the rehearsals, so he figured he might as well be doing something. He got involved in the theater in that way. He still doesn't even like it.

H: You had intended to go to New York and hopefully become a professional actress then?

V: Yes. I was trained for the classics. I was going to be a great Shakespearian actress by the time I was 25 and I am considerably older than that and I haven't achieved that.

H: What year did you come to Salem?

V: 1975.

H: What was your first involvement here in Salem? Did you just sit at home and be a housewife? Did you start working?

V: I've never sat home and been a housewife. When we first came to Salem I was still working with a children's theater company in Akron, which is called Akron Children's Theater. It is a children's theater company of quite a lot of renown at this point. When I started with them they were very young. I was touring high schools with them and that was just part-time because they didn't have high school tours scheduled every day of course. I was making a pretty good part-time salary on that and then I was substituting at the high school whenever I wasn't touring with the Akron Children's Theater Company. In the summer I worked full-time for Akron Children's Theater in summer stock.

H: Was that children's theater as that one in the community theater is, involving children acting, or was that adults acting for children?

V: It's a professional adult company where the adults are paid to act for children.

H: You put on plays for elementary schools or high schools?

V: Both. We toured with productions for high schools such as "Spoon River Anthology", readings by British poets, readings

by American poets, something called "Shakespeare is alive and well in your school", where we compared Shakespeare with musical theater, for instance "Romeo and Juliet" with "Westside Story", "Twelfth Night" with "Your Own Thing", "Taming of the Shrew" and "Kiss Me, Kate". That was for high schools. For children we did a couple of children's shows. One that comes to mind is "The Mirror Man", by Brian Waite, who is a pioneer in children's theater.

H: Is that still going on? Do they still do that?

V: It's a very successful company now. It is housed in Our Lady of the Elms High School, which is a private girls school. It has a sort of posh high school theater. They have an apprentice program for teen-agers; they have all sorts of classes which are available all year long and some really good people who are working with their company. Some of them have been there dating back to when I was with them. More of them are younger than myself.

H: How wide an area do they cover?

V: They cover the Great Lakes area. When I was with them we traveled into Pennsylvania, and as far south as Cincinnati, into Indiana. I think they travel even further than that now.

H: That gave you quite a broad experience then as far as on-the-road kind of living?

V: Yes, lots of staying in hotels and eating out of paper bags, clothes out of your suitcase type of thing, doing three shows. Maybe you did one children's show in the morning and two high school shows in the afternoon depending on how large a city you were going to.

H: It was definitely a busy schedule. It is a good thing you probably didn't have to be involved every day.

When did you first become involved in theater here in Salem?

V: The first thing I did in Salem was somebody called me through one of the teachers that knew I was in theater and told me they were doing "The Fantasticks" at the Kent State Branch. It would have been the Spring of 1976. They needed a choreographer and I have a dance background. They called me and asked me if I would be interested.

H: Was that the branch that did that? It was their production?

V: Yes.

H: After "The Fantasticks" what did you do next?

V: While "The Fantasticks" was going on I was also directing Barberton High School's musical. I was a guest director for two years at Barberton High School, one year when I was a senior in college, which was 1975, and then in 1976 I was directing "My Fair Lady" at Barberton while I was choreographing "The Fantasticks". I was driving back and forth 50 miles one way.

That summer I did summer stock in Akron and did "The Miracle Worker", which was my last show. At the time I was pregnant and they wanted to continue with "The Miracle Worker" on into the school season, but it's a very tough show physically and I couldn't do it being pregnant. Then I found out the high school here was going to do it and Bob Viencek asked me if I would be interested in being technical advisor there and helping since I had just finished doing it professionally. I said, "Sure." That was the next thing I actually did in Salem. Then I did nothing until after the baby was born.

H: When was that?

V: May of 1977.

H: Then you began to be able to get a little bit more involved in theater again. What was your next involvement?

V: The Salem Community Theater. When the baby was two weeks old I started looking for work. I said I wasn't going to sit at home. I read in the paper that the small dinner theater at the Memorial Building was closing. A few weeks later I read that it was reopening and they were looking for a director. I was looking for work so I went over to the Parks and Recreation Building. At the time I was supposed to talk to Frank Kress, who was the head of Parks & Recreation. I went over there and filled out an application and gave him my resume. He said that was very nice and they would get in touch with me. I didn't think I would ever hear from them again. About a month later I had a meeting with a couple of people who were interested. I think it was Judy Waugh and Chuck Williams who were interested in founding a new community theater, something totally brand new from the old Memorial Building dinner theater. I spoke with them and told them that I was interested in working and they seemed to be interested in my credentials, so that's where we went from there.

H: That was a spinoff from your application with the Parks & Recreation Department?

V: I think what had happened was that Frank Kress told them that they really weren't interested in starting something for the Parks & Recreation. I think that Chuck and Judy were not really interested in being with Parks & Recreations anyway. I think they were more interested in getting a real community theater

going. Frank was just helping them. All of the first meetings were held at the Memorial Building. I don't think it was so much a spinoff as it was a mutual agreement that this time they were going to try it on their own.

H: This was like midsummer of 1977 by the time you were getting down to actually talking to them?

V: It would have been the 1st of July I think.

H: What happened? On what level did you enter involvement with the community theater?

V: That was the first meeting and I think there were two or three meetings before I was actually hired. I wanted to know about them and they wanted to know about me. As soon as that happened I told them that we had to start full force. I said, "If we're going to do it let's plan a season; let's plan a production; let's get going." I explained to them the usual season runs September to June, but we weren't bound by that and we felt that in a small town like this the summer should not be cut out as it is generally. We planned a season that was going September to September. We knew right away, of course, there would be money problems. Our first thought was let's do a production. I had done "Godspell" a few years before and I thought there were several reasons for choosing it as the first show. I explained to them why I wanted to do it as a first show. I said first of all that it was low budget; it's a musical which always draws better than anything else; it's very easy to do; it only takes a combo instead of an orchestra; it can be done literally anywhere and rehearsed anyplace else; and it took young people, and the hardest thing to get involved in theater are the older folks. The kids will always start and they always want to be involved, but it takes a lot to convince older folks that it's going to happen. It was fairly easy to cast; it was easy to mount. It turned out to be a successful production and it was a good idea for the first.

H: Did you run into any problems?

V: I don't think so. As a matter of fact, some of those people from "Godspell" have become lifelong friends. Greg Smith, who is probably my very dearest friend in the entire world and wrote "The Red Dragon" with me several years later, I had met when I was substitute teaching at the high school. I had seen some little, red dots on the inside corners of his eyes when I was substituting for Miss Rafferty and asked him, "You must be an actor?" He said, "How do you know?" I said, "Because you didn't get all your make-up off." He invited me to come see him in "Charlie Brown". I was so impressed with him; he stood out among the cast that I invited him then to come audition for "Godspell" but he was out of town. I had told his father to ask him to come. He came back in town

and he wanted to be part of it but the show was already cast. As always happens somebody quit and I put Greg in there and Greg and I have since been literally the best of friends.

- H: Are there any other people from that first production that have stayed with the theater? Greg has moved to New York but he was with the theater until then. Any others who have been long-range participants in community theater from the very beginning?
- V: Nancy Ford has done many productions with us since then. She was with us for a long time. She is now in Houston. Paul Page I became fast friends with; he did several shows. He is also in New York acting. Sharene Knoedler who was a high school student at that time. Cathy Heller had done several shows for me after that; she has since passed away. Her energy and vitality will always be missed.
- H: We have had some people who have gone on to fairly successful involvement in theater since then.
- V: Greg has not achieved the highest degree of success, but he is the head usher, which sounds funny, but it's really quite a large responsibility, at Radio City Music Hall. He is writing jingles; he is playing with a twelve piece jazz band; he has been taking some workshops under some really fine names like Sondheim, Charles Strouss, Marvin Hamlisch. I actually believe that Greg is the single-most talented person I've ever met in my life. He is my soul mate. Of the people that I've worked with I think there are a lot of them that we might hear from some day in a big way. Greg is my sure bet.
- H: Considering the size of the community that is a pretty good percentage.
- V: Yes.
- H: Probably their involvement at an early period with you and your talent had a great deal to do with that.
- V: I'd like to think so.
- H: Was "Godspell" as successful financially as you hoped it would be?
- V: Nothing was ever as financially successful as we would have liked for it to have been at the beginning because of the high school, because of the cost.
- H: About how much did it cost you to use those facilities and how long were you able to use them? I know from my experience scheduling is always a problem at the high school.

- V: Scheduling was a big, big problem. We could only rehearse in there the final week before. That wasn't always because of scheduling; mostly it was because we couldn't afford anything more than that. It was built in pieces ahead of time and then we always took it in there.
- H: Preassembled?
- V: Preassembled, right. Prefab sets. Actually that's true because they were made someplace else. It seems to me that the smallest amount we ever paid to the high school was \$1,200. The largest amount of rental that we ever paid was \$1,800. We're talking about, in any show, the biggest expense being simply the rental of the high school, not to mention the fact that back in those days when we had no home we had to be renting someplace else to rehearse. Even add a couple hundred dollars then onto that. Rental was our biggest expense.
- H: At those early days did you think about acquiring a theater for the group to use?
- V: Night and day. (Laughter) That's all we ever thought about.
- H: Even from the beginning.
- V: From the very first time we had to rent the high school we knew we eventually had to find a home, that we couldn't continue to pay those costs. My fight from the beginning was with the big bucks. We've gone through a lot of transitions in the board of directors. At that one point the board of directors were even as much as appalled by me saying that we had to get money out of the community in order to get a building, and that there was money in the community, that it was not an impoverished little town. There were industries that are based in this town that could have been tapped that needed tax shelters. Of course, since then we've found things. There had to have been things. I was new to the town and I knew there were things. Of course, since then we've found out about the foundation, which has to give away \$250,000 every year or it gets taken up in taxes. Every town has those. Now I do a lot of little community theaters I go to talk to. Being on the board of directors for the Ohio Community Theater Association a lot of little community theaters will ask me about that. I was recently down in Southeastern Ohio and I was explaining to them that there is money in the community to be tapped. They said, "No, no." I told them it was there and they just had to know where to look and to look hard enough.
- H: When you first started with the community theater were you paid for your work?
- V: Yes, but we dealt in tokenism at that time. (Laughter) The original agreement was for a minimum of \$3,000 and a maximum

of \$5,000 for seven shows. I was literally burned out my first year; I quit. Theater stress is a big topic in the last few years. I was suffering theater stress. I directed "Godspell", ran right into "Softy the Snowman", then "Jacques Brel", then "The Alchemist's Book", and "The Boyfriend." By the time I was finished with "The Boyfriend" I handed in my resignation. I had only received \$1,200 for all those shows and I knew they were trying.

H: What was the cost of admission to a production at that time?

V: I don't remember. I think it was \$2.50 and \$3.50. I also did another show in there I forgot, "Virginia Wolff". "Virginia Wolff" did not draw well, but what "Virginia Wolff" did for us at the Ohio Arts Council was get us \$2,800 in grants. Our very first year we picked up the largest amount for a small, community theater.

H: What does a grant like that . . . what can you do with it? Are there limits upon the application of that money?

V: All sorts of things. The preparation for grants like that were tremendous. You prepare a grant knowing that you're not going to get it for a year and a half at least. Sometimes I think for amounts like \$500, \$1,000, and \$1,500 it just isn't worth it. You can go out and have a bake sale and make that much money. The Youngstown Playhouse gets \$20,000 a year. For them I'm sure it's worth it.

H: Is that an ongoing grant for them, they're assured it?

V: No, you're never assured of a grant there, and you have to do the same preparation every year. Once you have proven your worth to the Ohio Arts Council it's pretty much easy to get money from them again.

H: The Ohio Community Theater Association is part of the Ohio Arts Council?

V: No.

H: How do they relate to each other if at all?

V: There are four major theater arts organizations in this state. There is the Ohio Arts Council, which literally is the distributor of funds; it is a state government organization. A certain amount of your tax dollars goes to the Ohio Arts Council. It is like the National Endowment for the Arts.

H: Is there any connection between that and the national or is it purely state funds?

V: It is purely state funds. It is run the same way the national

endowment is run and their first and foremost pet projects are the big organizations. Let's face it, without funding Cleveland Symphony, the Ohio Ballet, some of those larger organizations that do a lot for us that are nonprofit organizations could not be able to exist.

Another organization is the Ohio Citizens Committee for the Arts, OCCA, which is a lobbying organization; it's a political organization. It is the one that sees to it that there are funds for things like Ohio Arts Council. They are also the ones that fight for or against laws that they put in about how to tax theaters and arts organizations and things like that.

Then there is the Ohio Theater Alliance, which looks out for all theater organizations in Ohio. It is somewhat connected with the American Theater Association.

The fourth organization, the one that we most clearly fall under, is the Ohio Community Theater Association. You must be a community theater doing two or more productions in a year, with a board of directors, and actors that are not paid, in order to fall in that category.

- H: Does the OCCA get any funding from the Ohio Arts Council to operate?
- V: Yes, they get funds. Ohio Theater Alliance also gets funds. OCTA gets funds to do things like workshops, newsletters, things like that.
- H: Sort of basic operating funds?
- V: Right.
- H: Then the various community theaters pay yearly dues to be part of that?
- V: Right. It's minimal; it's \$30, and if you belong to a theater you automatically belong to OCTA, which is nice.
- H: What is your position with OCTA?
- V: I'm on a three-year term on the board of directors. It expires in 1984. I am in charge of making sure that each region has a workshop that lasts at least one day. There are eight regions in this state I believe. I am also in charge of the workshops at the state convention, making sure that we have workshop leaders, so I'm having to contact people all over the state to try to get them up to the convention on Labor Day. It is always on Labor Day and they have 400 to 600 people that attend every year. They had almost 600 people last year. It's the best time of the year for me; it's wonderful.

H: How many members are there on the board?

V: There are fifteen board members and then regional representatives.

H: How did you get your appointment to the board?

V: It's done like a political election. At the convention, just as if it were a democratic and republican convention, there are nominations and there is a lot of stomping that goes on. We had somebody who had been on the board for ten years in this region, Stan Sellengworth from Warren-Trumbull New Theater, and he was resigning. The east region had no representation and somebody called me and said, "Would you consider running for the board?" I said, "Let me think about it." I thought about it for two weeks and they asked me if I had made up my mind and I said I would do it. I didn't figure it would be too bad for my career either. I wanted to make a career in community theater as a director, as an arts administrator, so I didn't think it could hurt that way. I ran and I was elected for a three-year term.

H: Do you get traveling expenses for this?

V: There is no pay; there are no expenses. You pay everything. The only thing I do get is that most of my stuff is tax deductible.

H: You resigned in what year?

V: This was in 1978. I resigned in the middle of "The Boyfriend". I resigned effective at the end of "The Boyfriend." That would have been in the beginning of the summer. What happened was, the board came back and said, "We really want to keep you on at least until the end of the summer. We know that the show you've always wanted to direct is 'Jesus Christ, Superstar' and we know that we owe you \$1,800. We will pay you the \$1,800 to finish up the season and we'll let you do 'Jesus Christ, Superstar' which we know is your favorite show." I didn't tell them this, but I would have done it for free. (Laughter) I resigned for about nine months.

H: From when you were first involved with the community theater and you did "Godspell" until "Jesus Christ, Superstar," where were the productions held?

V: Everywhere. "Godspell" was held at the high school. "Softy the Snowman" and "Jacques Brel" were held at the American Legion Hall. We built a stage for "Jacques Brel" and painted the entry room of the American Legion Hall. "Virginia Wolff" and "The Alchemist's Book" were held at the Y. "The Boyfriend" was held at the junior high. Then "Superstar" was held back at the high school and it was a money-maker.

- H: Can you give us any reasons why, other than the fact that it was a very popular show in itself? What particular publicity was it able to receive?
- V: It got all sorts of publicity. It stirred up the biggest controversy Salem has probably seen since the women's rights convention in the 1800's. We had ministers preaching against us from the pulpit, ministers preaching for us from the pulpit. We had picketers outside at the performances every night passing out pamphlets. I received unsigned letters saying that I was going to hell or would lose my eyesight. It had a huge orchestra, a rock orchestra. We charged \$5 a ticket I believe too. It drew the rock crowd. "Superstar" is a cult show; it really is. There have been different cult shows; "Brel" is a cult show, "Rocky Horror Picture Show", "Tommy". It probably still is one of the best shows that I've ever directed. I was more creative than I may have ever been at any other point in my life. I had a wonderful cast. One of the other things that it did for us was that it brought people into the theater that had never auditioned before because they wanted to be part of "Superstar". We picked up rock musicians that had a lot of reknown in the area, Mark Shearing and Mike Bugara, the Equizzi brothers and people like that. They all have a following of their own. We had sexy costumes and wild dances, and that drew. Any time you put forty people on stage there are forty sets of relatives to come as well. "Superstar" was successful in just about every way.
- H: Then you left the theater?
- V: Yes.
- H: It did continue to have productions?
- V: Yes.
- H: These were just in various places?
- V: They were both at the high school. They did "A Thousand Clowns" and "Promises, Promises."
- H: How did they turn out financially?
- V: I think they were both not very successful.
- H: This would have brought us up to the Spring or early Summer of 1979?
- V: It was Spring when "Promises, Promises" went on. By that time I was at the theater. I felt some mistakes were being made. The board was changing and I felt in some ways for the better. The new board that was coming on was looking to find a building; they were looking long-range; it wasn't a show to show existence.

Things were improving and they had said to me several times would I come back. They were doing "Fiddler on the Roof" which I had never directed and I had a great deal of desire to do. I called Tim Smith and I said, "Would you be interested in having me come back? I just want to come back for this show because I would very much like to see 'Fiddler' be a good show." Tim said yes.

H: What was Tim's position at the time?

V: He was newly elected president of the board of directors. "Fiddler" went on and it was successful and financially successful as well. I think "Fiddler" made a lot of money as a matter of fact. It drew very well. It is a family show. Lots of kids attended. During the run of "Fiddler" Tim and his girlfriend, who shortly later became his wife, took my husband and I out to dinner and said, "The board of directors would like you to stay on this time with salary and continue to be our executive director." My husband said, "Don't do it; don't be stupid." I accepted.

H: In the interim had you been working with theater elsewhere?

V: No. I went to Youngstown State and took realty courses. My freind Judy Waugh, who directed "1,000 Clowns", got me into Bruce Herron real estate. I told Bruce I was going to do one show and that it wouldn't hurt because he was always saying we need to go out in the community and get to know people. I told him it was a big cast and that they might all want to buy and sell a house later. I talked him into that and then even when I took on the job I told Bruce that I still wanted to stay in real estate part-time. I took on the directorship full-time.

H: Did you work in the theater at all?

V: No.

H: That might have been just as well. Maybe you needed that time.

V: I did. I do; I have a tendency to quit every few years and get out of theater. It doesn't take me long to realize, though, that there is nothing else that I enjoy doing as much. Sometimes there is nothing else I enjoy doing at all.

H: By the time you came back then, had there been any talk about what place they might acquire [as a permanent building]?

V: There were all sorts of strange places suggested. Somebody had suggested that we buy a building down near the railroad tracks, an old railroad building. Everyone thought we might be able to turn it into something nice.

H: Were there any other buildings they considered?

V: They considered getting the building that was the Furniture Barn out on Rt. 62. At that point they were already starting to consider tapping the Foundation for funds.

H: What exactly is the Community Foundation?

V: Community Foundation is an organization, to the best of my knowledge, that when people die and they leave money to continue the Community Foundation it goes into a large pot. There is a couple of million dollars in there and it collects interest every year. That interest is given to the community in various forms, YWCA, Boy Scouts, the library, all sorts of things. That money is made to improve the community. If it is not used up, the interest, it is taxed. They will lose the majority of it in taxes, so they give it away. They never have to touch the principal; they only have to give away the interest. There are some very nice people who are involved with the Foundation in this town and they use it fairly wisely. The reason we couldn't go out there was because that was outside of city limits; it must be used within city limits.

The next suggestion, which I still think was probably the finest suggestion of all, was the Grand Theater, which is no longer in existence. They only have parts of the building. The Grand Theater which used to exist down near the Moose Lodge was a great, old theater at one time. It was a great part of Salem's history when it comes to early theater. It is no longer there, the theater itself.

H: Was that already torn down by 1979?

V: Yes. Attached to it was another part of a building that was left. That had three stories, tremendous amount of space. It was in much better condition than this was when we came in here. The second and third floors of this were not to be believed. It hadn't been used in twenty years. There was no heating, no electricity. Instead of cleaning up the floor and putting new flooring down they just built a new floor. They completely gutted it up there and rearranged the shapes of the rooms. That was very expensive. To my mind they would have been better off keeping the other building. We are still very limited for space here. We still do not have fly space in the back. The size of the stage is still quite limited. There is no dressing room. There are a lot of problems with this theater.

H: What would you have had to have done at the other location?

V: Build another theater. There was a vacant lot, adjacent parking, which we do not have here. We would have already had the facilities to rehearse; we would have already had the dance studio.

H: Was there any problem with that building as far as structural soundness?

V: I heard rumors about that, but I think the biggest question was that in the first place the Foundation didn't want to get involved in building. They were more into renovation of what was already here. I think that was the biggest thing. As far as the Foundation was concerned there was no other choice. Should we have been able to pick and choose, the better choice would have been to build our own theater or our own design and had one that was designed to be a stage theater instead of a movie theater.

H: You mentioned the upstairs was pretty well gutted and redone entirely. What about down here on the first floor?

V: The first thing they did was come and clean for three weeks. When it changed hands we came in here and were appalled. There were piles of trash in front of the screen. Two-thirds of the seats were not usable. Some of them were not even there. Some of them swung freely from their hinges. There were cockroaches. The basement was flooded and there were two dead rats floating in it. There was major filth. We cleaned three weeks, painted trim, polished brass that had never been polished. The upstairs hadn't been used for twenty years. I'm surprised the board of health and fire marshal hadn't closed the place down.

H: At this time what position were you with the theater? You were being paid?

V: Yes.

H: Your husband was helping you at this time?

V: He was hired to take over as manager of the cinema then. We knew that we would not start productions for some time. They began to work on the upstairs and I started classes up there in one room with a subfloor while the carpenters were banging away in the other rooms. I was having dance classes up there and Dick Doyle was complaining about the sound of the hammers; he didn't know it was my tap class right above him.

H: Dick Doyle has the ice cream parlor next door, which is a part of this building in a sense that community theater owns it and collects rent from him. So that is an added source of income?

V: Right. We had major budgets and were not getting the sort of money from Dick that would help in a big way to offset any real expenses.

H: Do the classes make much profit?

- V: Yes. I can't say that now because I don't handle the books. When I was executive director I was handling the books also for the classes and they had very little overhead. As far as overhead, there were only two teachers at that time, Buzz Wolfe and myself. I was getting paid a salary anyway, so they weren't having to pay me anymore to teach classes. Buzz was getting fifty percent of everything we took in. That included fifty percent of the recital and fifty percent of his classes, not mine. Actual overhead were mirrors and bars that were at the Grand Theater; those were minimal in cost. So that was making money. Of the three parts of the theater at that time, which was the cinema, the live theater, and the institute of performing arts, the institute was the most successful financially at that time. I knew that it would be because the overhead in the cinema is tremendous.
- H: The renovation, how was that funded?
- V: The renovation was completely funded by the Foundation?
- H: There was a large block of money, \$250,000?
- V: \$150,000.
- H: But this was to be given out over a five year period?
- V: Yes. I think they got an advance also. Stitle and Barns were the major contractors involved here and there was quite a bit of subcontracting too. The building itself is being purchased on a five year land contract, but that is being purchased by the community theater.
- H: They are getting funds for this from what?
- V: From fund drives and selling patrons. The tickets themselves really have to be considered part of the production budget, but the larger contributions, the \$5,000, \$10,000 contributors, the \$500 contributors are the ones who are really paying for the cinema.
- H: Do you have many of those in the community?
- V: They're growing. I'm noticing in every program there are a few more names listed. They've made two payments so far; that is two-fifths of the way there. I'm sure that this funds drive that is coming up now is the one that is going to have to pay the next payment.
- H: When did you resign from the community theater?
- V: I resigned in November, effective December 31, 1981.

H: So you've been out of our community theater for about six months?

V: Yes.

H: What were your major reasons? Was it just that you were tired of the theater again? Did you have a difficulty as far as future plans?

V: I was as close to a nervous breakdown as a person could be without having one. I suffered every physical sign of stress, lack of sleep, edema, swollen hands, palpitations of the heart. It got worse when I got into my next job because I hated that job so much. Since I've been going to work for the Youngstown Playhouse every symptom that I had from July of last year to February of this year has disappeared. I have lost weight since I've gone to work at the Playhouse. I'm a person who tends to eat more when I'm under pressure and under stress. Physically I'm in great shape; I don't have the headaches. I taught twenty hours of classes a week, took all the public relations bookings around this area, and sometimes that amounted to as many as six or eight programs.

H: You went out and did programs for community groups?

V: Yes. They all wanted something different too. Everything had to be rehearsed because I won't let anything go in front of anybody without being rehearsed. I was directing five shows a year plus two recitals, twenty hours of classes a week, handling the books. I was literally working fourteen hours a day, seven days a week.

H: That was just done here? You still had a husband and a child.

V: I had a husband and a child and my child was being dragged around this building. I brought blankets and pillows and she slept in this building a lot. I would get here at 9:00 in the morning and leave at midnight every single night, sometimes 11:00. I never had two consecutive days off.

H: What position do you have at the Youngstown Playhouse?

V: I am administrative assistant to the executive director and I'm also contracted to direct. I'm directing a summer arena show which opens at the end of this month called "Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris." I'm doing that with probably the best cast I've ever had in any show, and some of them are from Salem. I'm contracted to do one of their "a.m. in the p.m.'s" next year, which means I will be directing adults for them to bring in high school

students to see two weeks worth of production. Also I'm directing one of their musicals next year. Depending on availability it will probably be "They're Playing Our Song." If not it will be something equally profitable. It's a combination job. Most of the jobs up there are. All the directors for the coming year work in some other capacity.

The Playhouse is the largest and most successful community theater in the country with a budget of over \$400,000 a year. I just finished with their season ticket campaign and they picked up \$184,000 in that. There are over 6,000 season ticket holders. The Youngstown Playhouse is in every sense of the word professional except they don't pay their actors. They have union musicians, a backstage crew that builds all their sets that are paid, paid designers, four people working on the administrative staff full-time, plus a part-time girl, plus a public relations person.

H: Do you foresee that Salem might have a similar type operation as far as this community? What do you see for the future here?

V: In a small town you must be very careful how you run a theater. In Youngstown you can do almost anything you want. It sounds callous but it's true. There is a certain amount of PR that must still go on. They have 250,000 people in that town and one theater. In a town this size with 15,000 people, you can lose your audience with one mistake. This will never be an operation comparable to the Youngstown Playhouse; it couldn't be. The dreams that some people have here of having a professional company and things are not realistic. As long as you have volunteer help, volunteer actors in a small town, it's going to be pretty much the same; we'll always be struggling here. Once we've got this building paid for then the next goal must be and should be a new, modern facility. If you're not struggling in community theater then there's no point in being around. That's a part of it.

I enjoy not struggling; I think it's nice to have a break. I have an eight hour day. I've been told that when I am in full rehearsal next year for my shows then I won't have administrative duties during the day. It's an ideal situation and I'm sure that it will get very boring after a while because it is going to be too easy. For now it is what I need.

H: Do you see yourself moving up within that group? You mentioned you wanted to stay in the theater, but you mentioned your possibilities of staying in this community?

V: I will not be in Salem the rest of my life. The possibilities are too limited. In Youngstown there is potential for growth for me there. I have been told that I have a position there as long as I want and as long as I do my work. The executive

director and I also have an understanding that what I am doing is an apprenticeship. I'm getting paid a very nice salary to be learning a lot. He understands that I'm using it as a learning experience. He is very flattered that I enjoy what I am learning from him. He knows and I know that if an executive director position comes along again for a community theater, even a small one, as long as it can pay well and I don't have to go through all these growing pains again, that I'll move on. My husband and I have set a limit; if a certain amount of money comes along we'll leave. He is a teacher and his field is much easier to find another job in.

H: I just want to mention here "The Red Dragon". You wrote the play and Greg Smith did the music.

V: I wrote the scripts and Greg wrote the music and Greg and I wrote the lyrics together.

H: That was the first production in the community theater building?

V: Yes.

H: It was an outstanding success?

V: Financially. Artistically it was better than Greg and I had anticipated. There were some glaring errors and we both knew it. There were some casting mistakes and we both knew that. It was a very large cast and a very large production for this small building. The traffic in this building is very bad and some day they're going to have to move out of this building. Every big production is a headache.

H: Do you think the people that are presently on the board of directors realize that?

V: They do. I don't think that until they're ever in a production and get trampled by forty people running into the studio to change their costumes, that they are ever going to realize the difficulties.

I think community theater's responsibility is to fight television, to undo the harms being done by television.

H: I think people like you are doing that very well.

V: Thank you.

H: Thank you for the interview.

The following information is an addendum to the transcribed oral history interview. This information is accurate as of September 21, 1987.

In January of 1984, Nick Verhoff and Cathy ended their marriage in an amicable dissolution. She is now residing in New York City (Queens) with her daughter and new husband. She married September 5, 1987. Her husband, Randy Pregibon, is an architect whom she met when he played guitar for the Salem Community Theater's first production, "Godspell".

She is no longer active in theater work. Presently Cathy is the office manager for the 70 person New York office of the NRDC (Natural Resources Defense Council), a national nonprofit environmental advocacy group. She has retained Verhoff as her surname.