YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Theater People from Ohio

Trumbull New Theater

O. H. 624

TED KROMER

Interviewed

by

Carol Shaffer Mills

on

January 9, 1982

TED KROMER

Ted Kromer was born in Cleveland, Ohio on June 19, 1927 to a family who later moved south to Warren, Ohio. Ted is another of the dedicated citizens of the Warren, Ohio area who has given so much of his life and time to the Trumbull New Theater located on Route 422 in Warren, west of Niles-Cortland Road.

Ted says that he spent an "uneventful" childhood, and was quite shy, thereby never forming any really close friends in his youth. He is amazed that now he has so many friends in theater, and finds himself now so at ease in public, both at the theater and at antique shows, which he now manages and promotes.

Ted went to Warren G. Harding High School in Warren, Ohio and always had an interest in theater. He has directed dozens of TNT productions over the last 25 years.

Ted is directing the current production, "The Shadow Box," which opens on January 22, 1982 at the Trumbull New Theater. We literally interviewed him in the middle of a rehearsal, which was most gracious of him, to be sure. He is quite excited about the production of this play, as it was a subject of many awards when produced on Broadway as well as a subject of controversy, as it deals with "death and dying" in a most unique way.

Ted has tried in the last few years to draw himself from putting so <u>many</u> hours in at the theater so that he might have more time for his other loves, antiques and photography. He left a steady, well-paid job with a big corporation in order to have a more satisfying emotional fulfillment from his work, even

though he had to take a cut in income, a truly enviable step that many have not the courage to take. We wish Ted the very best in this endeavor, as well as at his continued triumphs at Trumbull New Theater.

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INTERVIEWEE: TED KROMER

INTERVIEWER: Carol Shaffer Mills

SUBJECT: directing, acting, shows, antiques

DATE: January 9, 1982

M: This interview is being held in Warren, Ohio at Trumbull New Theater which is called TNT in this area. This interview is being held for Youngstown State University's Oral History Program with Ted Kromer who is a director and who has also acted in plays in this area for years. The interviewer's name is Carol Shaffer Mills. It is January 9, 1982 and 1:00 in the afternoon.

Ted is going to start with the beginning of his life.

K: The beginning was in the late 1920's in Cleveland, Ohio. I probably had a pretty conventional childhood. I was the only child. I remember my father being affected by the Depression, being on WPA (Works Project Administration) and things like that. He finally got into working in the steel mill. My grandfather was a superintendent in one of the steel plants in Cleveland. Both parents were from Western Pennsylvania originally. My mother's family came to Cleveland probably because of the steel industry; they followed it there. But they had known each other casually in Pennsylvania. He came up here to follow her, as it was.

About the only thing I know about myself as a child that I remember with any great degree was that I was moderately shy. I didn't have a great circle of friends or anything like that. I never fell into things at school. When I was in my middle teens, because of the Second World War my father was transferred here with the company.

M: Here to Warren?

K: Yes, it was an advancement for him. So we came here, and I transferred into school.

M: The show that Mr. Kromer is directing at the moment is "The Shadow Box", and I would like him to tell you about it.

K: The man who is my assistant on this show, his mother died a year ago of cancer when he was home in the seat for Christmas. They knew it was coming; they had known for some time. He went to see the production of this at the Youngstown Playhouse with friends so that he would have some backup, but he said that it wasn't as bad as he thought it would be. We talked about it for a long time before he got involved in this production because you do get to that point where death is the only comfortable solution to a problem. A lot of people are going to think about this play. If you go with the standard advertising line in Michael Christopher's play about death and dying, it is terrible, but it is definitely a play about hope. There is an incredible amount of humor in these characters.

M: Why don't you tell about what the basic premise of the play in involving the whole set and how the people live?

K: It takes place technically in three cottages on the grounds of a hospital in California, and they are technically hospice cottages. You have three patients who are terminally ill. In one case you have the father who is ill, and his wife and teen-age son come to visit him. In another one you have an elderly women who is blind and confined to a wheelchair and has a lot of other problems and her single daughter who is sort of trapped there looking after her because the other daughter has died; but in order not to upset the mother, they haven't told her. The other character is divorced from the one wife he had. This guy tried to pick him up one night outside of a gay bar somewhere. The guy who was hustling found somebody here who cared about him as a person; so he stuck with him through his illness and was going to stick with him until the end and then his first wife appears. She comes to see him. She is apparently pretty far out and a bit of a nut and a lush. We assume she has money because she jets off to Hawaii at the end of the thing; she has to catch a plane before the hangover hits her. So there are three widely varied groups of types of people. We are finding the play is definitely not at all about terminal illness; it is about the people who happen to have it. I think the illness is secondary although it is obviously a prominent part of the play. It is not a depressing play; that is the thing that I think a lot of the people don't think.

M: I have seen it. It is very warm and also very good dialogue.

K: Very funny, yes. The character of Felicity, the old gal . . . One of the guys in the play has never acted before, but he is a clinical psychologist. He had counseled people who were

in this situation at one time as a part of his work, and that is why he came out and tried out for the play. He has never acted before, only psychodrama, and he is just fantastic. He has been a great source of technical information.

M: What is his name?

K: Frank Ghinassi. He is on the staff at Hillside. He is in charge of their in-house alcohol program. I said, "Am I making the old gal too peppery, too many sparks?" He said, "No. Before the end there is quite often a lot of energy. She can't be constantly in pain and moaning and depressing." The ones who are sick are basically very alert although Felicity's mind wanders. She is under the effect of drugs at times. There is a lot of natural humor. I kept saying, "Cut me back if I get too carried away." I love to do comedy, but it is all very real.

At one point I have the wife of the family group who has come out . . . She is a bit of a complainer, but she had built her whole life around her husband. Last night I suddenly realized in this one tirade she starts into in the second act that she can't play it whining and complaining; she has to get mad at him saying, "Damn it! You are going to die and leave me. What have I got left but a closet full of photographs and some dirty old furniture?" So I have her getting mad at him and pounding him. She says, "Damn you! I want to get up in the morning and get you breakfast even though you don't eat it and you won't talk to me and I hate getting up. I want to have to talk you into going to the movies." I have her get mad at him. Then it lessens when he finally snaps her out of it.

M: I think this play received a lot of comment, didn't it? It is remarkable that most of us don't think much about our demise.

K: Yes.

M: It is coming, and this play deals with it right up front.

K: Yes. It is the standard line about the minute you are born, you start to die. I think too many people probably make too much of it. When my father died, he was in such terrible condition; it was obvious he was ready; he wanted to go: I could tell that. My mother fortunately simply went to sleep reading a book when she was in the nursing home and died in her sleep; you just couldn't ask for more. The nurses just thought that was beautiful; that was the way to do it. They found her with her glasses on and the book on her lap. Thank God, because she was a very gentle, quiet sort of a person, and she had been through enough with the heart

condition that she didn't need to die in a panic. She just went in her sleep, and that was fine. After you have been through a couple of those things and see it is the only solution, you figure it is just a natural part of life.

M: Would you tell about the situation in this play before you go to some other subject that these places are set up for people who had been told that they couldn't be saved?

K: Yes, it is environment for them to live out their lives comfortably, and they are able to have family with them if they want it.

M: They can keep their family or they can have visitors?

K: Yes.

M: They also have others in the same situations themselves to, I imagine, reinforce their situation and make them comfortable, is that the basic thing behind this?

K: Yes, I think. I haven't done any background research on hospices, but I know if I would go too far off the track, Frank would be there because he has worked in that atmosphere.

M: This play will open in a couple of weeks.

K: Yes.

M: I would like you to talk about when you first noticed about yourself that you were interested in acting or in theater.

K: When I was in junior high school, I was in a play or two, but not after we moved here. I used to go to plays. Shortly after I got a job in industry when I was in my early twenties; a gal who worked there was involved with this organization which was just in its beginnings. They did summer pop concerts. They had a second floor balcony sort of, and they would perform on that. It would be just like a one or two evening thing in warm weather. She got me to buy a ticket and go to one. The next thing I knew she had talked me into going to a meeting. The next thing I knew another guy and I who were both very new to the thing had suddenly agreed to build a set even though we had never done it before. In those days, it was a very small, definitely amateur group.

M: What days were those, roughly?

K: Around 1950, 1951. The group was founded about 1949. The first set we did was for a little western melodrama called "The Curse of an Aching Heart". We built in a building up at Copperweld

Steel. It is the elegant, little house that is out in front of the plant now. We stored stuff up there. One of the Pendleton's neighbors was an executive up there, and he let us use the space to store. We had to paint scenery and stuff there and then haul it around to wherever we were working. We were working in a rented church hall then on the second floor. I really don't remember too much of the detail in how we ever got through it. The other guy who helped build it had some background as an artist or thought he was an artist.

M: What was his name?

K: Gene Pape, I think. A lot of those early days . . . I was working a conventional job for about twenty years.

M: As what?

K: In the accounting or payroll office in the steel industry.

The theater group sort of bounced around and rented some auditoriums for a while and finally came up with the idea that we had to start saving money. We bought this land out there, the basis of it. People said that nobody would go out there for anything because it was out in the country.

M: Tell me where that land is.

K: It is what we call the strip between Warren and Youngstown. It is like the strip area outside of any town with its shopping centers and restaurants and motels and stuff.

M: This was known all across the nation. People talk about this strip.

K: Is it?

M: Yes. It is very successful. The properties have increased.

K: People think this property we are on is worth a fortune, but it is not that big. We have this chunk here and the offset at the bank. It is an impractical piece of property for a large development, especially when there is land like this sitting over here going to waste with the economy what it is; so we are not sitting on a gold mine by any means.

M: Would you tell the exact location here? Where is it situated?

K: It is on Route 422 about a mile west of Route 46 between Warren and Youngstown.

M: Closer to Warren.

K: Yes. Actually, technically we are within the city limits of Niles because they pulled a fast annexation when the mall was built.

M: The Eastwood Mall you are talking about.

K: Yes.

M: I would like Ted to tell any details about size that he might know or Tom Schroth the architect . . .

K: He could probably tell you more about the actual building. I could, but he would be a little more accurate.

M: It is in a very nice location for people who wish to go there.

K: It is a good traveling area. It is a shame there isn't public transportation, but it seems as though people get here anyway. We are in the second part of the building. The first part--the inner lobby and the auditorium and the stage area--is twenty-five years old next March; so we are having a little celebration doing "Death of a Salesman" again. It was done in the beginning; we are reviving it. We are having a big birthday party one night and inviting a lot of the original patrons who helped out who are actually almost forty years old in a sense, but the building is twenty-five.

M: Can anybody come to that who wants to pay for the tickets?

K: No, that will strictly be invitation only; it is very exclusive. We decided to have one special, fancy blast. We still have some of the founding members. In fact, one of the founding members is currently our president and is playing Felicity, the older gal in the play.

M: Who is that please?

K: Martha Murray. Her husband Paul and she were married at the time the group was founded. They were among the families who sort of raised their kids within the group. They are both retired now. He is going to be on the light bridge during the show.

The theater started out as a study group at the YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association) under the leadership of a gal named Dorothy Gmucs. The YWCA put restrictions on them, obviously especially that many years ago. So they went to Frances who was known to have some professional background through the Cleveland Playhouse.

M: Frances Pendleton, that is?

K: Yes. She gave them some guidelines for starting, things like

you pay your way from the beginning; so everybody chipped in a quarter every time they met to try to build a bank account. In those days a quarter meant something. The Pendleton's had sort of two living rooms, one at the end of the other, and they ended up doing some invitational one acts seating the people in the one living room and playing against the double doors to the back living room. The first show they did out of there . . . They did "Hay Fever" there, and I guess the Cancer Society invited them to bring it to the high school for a benefit or something. This principle of always having the money to pay your way has been a pretty strong thing. We have never had trouble borrowing money from the banks when we needed to such as for the stagehouse addition at the back and things like that. We have a damned good credit rating.

M: Which is very unusual.

K: We have never had a problem on bills because we have always had treasurers who looked after things properly and generally had good, tight budgeting. Probably our whole budget is less than when the managing directors of some community theaters make in a year. We always pinch pennies. Sometimes a director who has his own money and wants to squander it on a show will do it, but the majority of us don't. On this show so far we have spent a lot on lumber, but props, wardrobe, and stuff are going to cost us next to nothing.

M: Would you please tell the concept that I was introduced to when I came here in 1962, I believe? I was fascinated to learn about everything that was done backstage . . . Everybody works and chips in. There are work days.

K: Oh, yes. When we first built this buildiing--when we tore our set down just to save money--the gals would be sitting on the edge of the stage with a hammer just straightening out the nails as the guys would pull them out of the sets. We found ourselves on this show doing that. If you needed a nail and there was a bent one laying there, it was easier to straighten it than to get another one.

The idea of not wasting money has always been kind of a guiding point here. Nobody ever gets paid. We did hire a professional director once a good many years ago. We thought we ought to try that once, and he did a nice job, but he proved to us that we were doing just as well most of the time and sometimes a little better.

M: That you were able to function on your own.

K: Yes. In fact at one rehearsal I remember he was standing on stage running a bunch of people doing things and giving a big performance to get people cracking. Our own directors can do that.

M: I would like you to break it down to some of the duties that a director does, a stage manager, and things like that. I don't have any information on that on the mechanics of being in theater, not all the glamour, but the work and the people who do the work.

K: Directing out here is a little different than it is in most theaters. In most theaters I think there are people assigned to a lot of specific production jobs. At one time I acted as producer for a couple of directors, but nobody ever returned the favor for me; so I quit doing it. The director out here is basically responsible for everything on the whole production. If you don't have somebody to build the set, you have to get off of your duff and do it yourself. For the Columbus Players Club people literally apply for the right to design and build sets. They have more people wanting to do this than they can use. Here we are just the opposite at this point. There was a time when the people would come running to you and say, "What show are you going to do next year? I want to build a set." Anymore, it isn't like that.

M: Why do you think that is?

K: One of them left us and went to work in the theater. The guy who is doing this set doesn't have that kind of time anymore. If the play appeals to him specifically, he will get involved. In this set he loves the play. I said to him, "Why don't you design this one since you are going to design 'Death of a Salesman'? If you can come up with some units that can be reused, that will save you time, and some of your guys can help us build it."

M: You are talking about Tom Schroth.

K: Yes. So what he came up with was a basic three level unit that is going to be simply remodeled and redecorated and will play in both shows. It is going to work. I'm glad I get it first. We are using it in a very abstract sense, a very fragmented sense. I think they will be very literal for "Death of a Salesman". We are just leaving it isolated in the middle of the stage where I am sure they will have the towering buildings and that factory feeling around it when he does that show. Since he is playing Willy in that show, this gets him that far ahead of it. He has some of his friends who help him here all the time working.

M: Because he is a local architect?

K: Yes, he designed the theater, and he has been in shows and has designed and built a number of seats and has done some lighting.

M: Would you tell about the chain of command from the director

on down and just what is needed when people come to see a show and what happens before that moment when the curtain . . .

K: How do you mean? From the beginning of directing a play or just . . .

M: You get an idea to do a play; you read a script, the whole steps.

K: Well, we have a play reading committee. Anybody who wants to . . . Most of our directors are homegrown. I learned to direct here by assisting as stage manager for both Farnces Pendleton and Dorothy Gmucs. I only did some one acts which were done for the membership. Finally I was assigned a three act and it worked fairly well. Then on my second one I got in over my head, and somebody else had to finish it. So I had to go back to doing one acts. I finally got to do a three act, an original written by Paul Kimpel who is now on the staff at the Youngstown Playhouse.

M: What was the name of that?

K: "A Walk on the Water". It was about an African missionary who came to this country. It was the reverse situation. It was a decently clever play although the second act seemed to repeat the first act, but it was received very well. Paul sort of sat back and let me feel my way. The show worked pretty well, and from then on I have been on my own. I have done comedies and dramas; I don't do the classics because I don't have any training in them. Somewhere along the line, I guess I devleoped a feel for it. This is my twenty-fifth play along with the twenty-fifth year of the theater.

M: Tell how much of your private time is devoted to this.

K: Not nearly as much as used to be. Up until about the point where my mother was sick I did a lot for a long time. I was employed as sort of a managing director for a while which was of value to the theater in a great many ways because of the jealousies you run into in organizations like this. Everybody will recognize this; you cannot work for your friends. There is no way you can please everybody. I ended up in the emergency room one night with fibrillations from the tension; I knew at that point that I was getting out of it at the end of the year. Since then it [the theater] has strictly been volunteer with the exception of paying the part-time janitor. Martha, who is now president, was president for a year when I was an employee, and she has noticed the difference. When she first went into office in midsummer, she was spending as much as four hours a day on theater business just getting the season organizaed and getting things running.

M: A lot of people who aren't involved do not realize the work that goes into putting a prodcution on. It is not just rehearsing the actors and making costumes. I have been amazed at how few people really understand what goes on backstage.

K: We are lucky on this one. It is modern costumes with no changes, and I can get by with a minimum amount of furniture and a simple, fragmented set. I have done literal sets myself. You light up the sky with candles and stuff like that. I can do a box set fairly easily. For a long while there I could borrow furniture from a furniture store here in town which made it great. He trusted us, but he went out of business; he retired. I just tried today to borrow a simple, little, round table for the kitchen. I tried five furniture stores, and none of them will touch it because the Kenley Players destroyed everything they borrowed from the furniture stores.

M: Is that right?

K: So they just made a flat rule; they don't loan to anybody. I think probably part of the problem could have been the schools too.

M: So then you have to go to people's homes, don't you?

K: Yes, I got everything for the show within the membership, luckily, on this show. There was some furniture borrowed for the first show from a furniture store in town, and somehow it got damaged and cost us $50; so I don't know if they would loan to us again or not. If I do the show I want to do next year "The Lady's not for Burning", we will make that furniture out of a few 2 x 4's.

You tell the play reading committee in writing what plays you would like to do next year. They research plays; they also take suggestions from the membership. They all present a well-researched group of about twenty-five plays to the board, and the board has letters of application for people who want to direct. The board sits down; if they know the directors, they don't have to interview them. If they don't, why, they should.

We had the instance several times in the last few years where a director was assigned a show without proving to us he could direct, and we received some disasters. It is the old theory of having to prove yourself first, and that really is a good one. We have let it slip. As the building has gotten bigger and the group has gotten bigger there is a lot less attention paid to detail.

M: That always happens, doesn't it?

K: Yes, yes. You can get too big. I don't want to see us get any bigger. I knew it was going to happen.

M: What is the membership here now?

K: I'm going to guess. Last year I think we had about sixty dues paid members, but some of them you see once or twice a year. Then there are people who never want to be members but are active because they don't want that responsibility. The only difference between being a member and a nonmember is $6 a year dues and the right to vote at the annual meeting.

M: Six dollars a year?

K: It has been that way from the beginning. It is 50¢ a month. We were just talking recently at a board meeting about increasing it. I don't know whether we will or not. It won't make that much difference.

M: What work are they entailed into doing?

K: They who?

M: These members as opposed to the people.

K: Basically whatever they want to do. It is a volunteer organization. With directing a play, you can't make a volunteer director direct a play he doesn't want to do. If you don't get volunteers for jobs, you search around and try to talk somebody into doing a job.

M: You said that some people don't want to be active.

K: They don't want to be a technical member. They will be active, or there are members who pay their dues but hardly ever come around. Maybe they will come see a show, or they will usher one night, but that is the most they want to do. They feel they are expressing their interest as best as they can. Quite often it is the people who don't know what is going on by being out here in the firing lines who come to the annual meeting and vote and don't know who they are voting for; or they are voting for somebody because they like them, but it has nothing to do with whether or not they are fit to administer the group.

M: Whether they are a worker.

K: Yes. We have had a couple of years--and this is nothing against the individuals, basically--where people who were very tied down with jobs and one was married but had no children became president for a year; and they were both very interested in being on stage. The administration of the group suffered--the day-to-day business. That is why we are fortunate now to have a gal like Martha who was

a teacher and also an executive director of things like Muscular Dystrophy and things of that type who is really sharp as a tack and on the ball and energetic and wants to stay busy. She is doing jazzercise and the whole bit. She has grandchildren; so she is no kid technically, but to talk to and deal with, yes.

People come and people go. We have a junior workshop. Out of that we sometimes get teen-age kids working in shows. One of our members was a neighbor to this kid. When he was twelve or thirteen, they saw him doing puppet shows in his garage. They were impressed with the originality. His parents just didn't know what this was all about; they couldn't understand it. The wife of this couple who were members conned him into getting into our junior workshop for a year or two. From that when he was about fourteen or fifteen, he got into a play. By the time he was sixteen I had cast him in "Once Upon a Mattress", and he just turned loose. When he was seventeen, he was the lead in "The Boyfriend," and he went on to Kent State and studied theater and got into dance over there.

M: What is his name?

K: Rick Balestrino--Richard Balestrino in professional circles. He worked on a cruise ship one winter. He was part of a group of kids at KSU (Kent State University) who were incredibly talented. There was another one in there named Dennis Deal from Kent who is now doing commercials. He did the musical arrangements for one of the recent Ben Bagley albums; he is an incredibly talented guy. He wrote an original muscial. It was a 1930's movie musical version of "MacBeth" called "The Lady Has Her Plan". Cybil MacBeth, the wife who was the woman behind the man . . . They did it over there in a little cellar theater, and we were just captivated by it. We brought the kids over here and had them audition pieces from it for the board. We ended up . . . I directed it the next year.

M: When was that?

K: It was the year after the Kent State big shootings; so it would have been about ten years ago. Rick choreographed it. I felt like we came full circle there. He did a marvelous job. He was in the first touring company of "The Magic Show" and then played it on Broadway until it closed. He has not really been able to stay as active in professional theater because it is such a tough field, and he isn't really tall. He is a damn good dancer, but where he belongs is in choreography and directing.

The people who live in the apartment beneath him are into production. They are putting together some kind of a . . . whatever you call a fifteen minute version of a pilot; there

is a technical term for it. It is a capsule version. It had something to do with prohibition and gangsters, and they were doing the thing in an old ballroom in New York. They asked Rick if he would stage a musical number for them. They told him 100 people, and they brought in 160. He had them doing a routine in ten minutes flat. The character man, who had worked in movies for years, came over and said, "How did you do that?" Rick said, "What do you mean?" He said, "In Hollywood, it would have taken them two days to make that many people do that much dancing, and you did it in ten minutes." Well, they kept coming to him for ideas and ideas. When they finished the thing this month, they wanted him to be the assistant director.

M: He lives in New York?

K: Yes, but he is working in the office of one of the theaters. These little things keep coming along and bolstering enthusiasm, and the next thing you know he is depressed about surviving in theater and doesn't know what he wants to do.

M: Well, it is very tough there.

K: He is thirty years old and his life is getting past him. I think he has the creativity to be a damn good choreographer and director. When he was only in high school, he did a production with kids of "The Sandbox" out here that just knocked us off of our feet.

M: "The Sandbox" by Albee?

K: Yes, yes, it was just staggering. If Frances didn't mention it, she should have because it just was absolutely terrific, and for a kid to do it, it was incredible.

M: What age would he have been at the time, roughly?

K: Seventeen, somewhere around there. There is just a lot of potential there. Of course, as we all know the theater is full of them.

The other one I adopted, of course, was your son in his first play "John Rice." Guys that good looking are a dime a dozen in New York.

M: Could you talk a little bit about that? We get people polished in the community; then they go off to New York. That is usually where they leave for.

K: Community theaters are the best places to get your basics.

M: That's right.

K: Don't kid yourself. It is free, and it is right there at home. You can't help but learn something unless it is an awfully bad group.

M: I found that out after I moved to New York three years ago. Many people I had been working with had never done shows because they didn't have anyplace they could try out things so that they could stretch themselves. They thought I was lucky because I had two community theaters within my reach in my home area.

K: John Kenley said more than once to Marge Westbrook that he had a lot of mothers constantly running to him saying, "What about little Johnny or little Suzie?" He said, "You have a good community theater right here in town. They can get it there free."

M: That's right.

K: Start them in community theater.

M: I suppose you are aware that both TNT and the Youngstown Playhouse are known in New York, known by name. Of course, you have some people who have left here and who have gone on to do really well. Maybe you could talk a little bit about some of those, if you would like.

K: The only one I can think of right off the top of my head is Austin.

M: Austin Pendleton?

K: Yes, and you have talked to him?

M: Yes, I have talked to him. He worked here, and he grew up in this community.

K: But then he had the advantage of the family's interest in him. When he graduated from college, he was sort of given enough company stock as presents and things that he had a bankroll, a foundation, for it. He is working at it harder now, I guess, from what I hear because of having a family to support. He does a lot of directing, a lot of work you don't hear about, I think.

M: Yes. I just saw a production he directed at the Cherry Orchard for the whole theater company in New Jersey prior to Christmas in 1981. A lot of people don't realize even though he just finished directing Elizabeth Taylor on Broadway that he then went across the Hudson River and directed in a small theater in Montclair, New Jersey.

K: He goes every summer to Williamstown and directs there, too.

M: Right.

K: Another gal who worked out here was Jeannie Rose. She is now Jeannie Rose Stotter. She was in a couple of musicals. Then she worked for Kenley Players for a number of years, got married, and had two kids. She and her husband live in Florida now. She has periodically come back and done a couple of Kenley shows just for kicks. She got into surgical nursing through her surgical assisting which is certainly a contrast to theater.

M: A lot of people go from this proving ground and this training ground here and move off to situations. I know I got my first chance to do any kind of work here because it was a community theater where they took mothers with children. I was amazed that I was allowed to come. I thought you had to have a special permit to do that, and I was very naive at the time.

K: There are still people around this town who think this is a closed outfit.

M: Right.

K: It isn't. We announce constantly that it is open to the public. There are still people who think you have to know somebody to get involved.

Tryouts are open to the public.

M: How many shows a year do you do here?

K: Five. Very seldom does anyone direct two shows within a year unless it is out of necessity or like when I was an employee, I would do two. I am sort of at the point now where I don't want to have to build sets; this is the thing I hate. I don't mind helping, or I will build a simple box. If there are kids around to help . . . For a long while there I had quite a little following of kids. I was Uncle Ted to a bunch of them, but so many of them have scattered now.

M: That is where the director participates in building the sets usually.

K: Yes. I have nothing against it from the standpoint of being here and being able to know if something needs done. I gave them a whole bunch of little odds and ends--the floor creaked up there, and the steps are wobbling, and all that stuff--whereas maybe in other theaters they would leave them written notes or something.

M: That's exactly what they do.

K: I like the close contact I have by coming to set sessions. I would just as soon be here sitting around than running around on a day like this.

This next week we are going to rehearse Tuesday and Wednesday evenings. Both nights somebody is coming in late; so that means we can't run the play either of those nights; so I'm just going to have to work pieces. That is why tomorrow I want to work a couple of hours, maybe two and a half on each act, and then take a break and then run the play straight through. I'm going to hope to get Schroth, the designer, over her to see it so he can see the people.

M: What time do you anticipate that run-through?

K: Somewhere after 4:00. We are going to start at 2:00. It might be 5:00; I don't know. He is close enough that if he wants to come and watch it, fine; he can buzz over. I think he should at this point in case he has any ideas. Also we are having trouble with lighting because the kid who is lighting the show has some background in lighting with us but not a lot. He is a moody individual and he is having problems at home, and this is affecting his performance and work on the show. He hasn't seen a full run-through of the show yet. We tech Friday night.

M: Tell what tech is.

K: Tech rehearsals are where you do all of the technical cues like lights and sound and stuff like that and entrances and exits and so on. It is a complex show with a lot of lighting, and he doesn't have nearly half of the lighting hung. In fact when we came in today and saw something he had done, the designer said it wouldn't work and tore it down and redid it. Now it is much simpler. He did with two baby spots what this guy had four big fresnels doing.

M: Say what a baby spot is.

K: Baby spot is a tiny little one, and a fresnel is as big as a sugar canister. I told him last night that he had to be here tomorrow. I said, "When are you going to finish the lighting?" He said, "Either Saturday night or Sunday morning." If he is not here tomorrow and does not produce, the axe is going to fall, and I have people waiting to take over.

M: You do? Someone is in the wings?

K: Yes, a bit reluctantly, but they are going to be willing to do it. The biggest headache I have had, and it is a tempest in a teapot, is that our first matinee will be on Super Bowl Sunday. I have heard people just muttering like crazy about this. I made a phone call to the Youngstown paper and the the Super Bowl game will start around 6:00, and our matinee

is at 3:00. So I am going to be able to put them all to rest.

M: They can race home to get to their Super Bowl.

K: Yes, we are out of here at 5:30, so they have plenty of time to get home to their tube. I was ready to try to make it an evening performance by polling the board and then the cast.

M: What day is that?

K: One week from tomorrow, on the 24th.

M: Your opening is Friday, the 22nd?

K: Right. I don't like two Sunday matinees. I would rather play one Sunday matinee and one Sunday evening at 7:00, but it is structured the other way at this time. For a long while there we played only Sunday evenings at 7:00. Then we tried the matinee, and a lot of the little, old ladies like it. Half of their trip is made in daylight and that helps them.

M: That helps in transportation.

K: Although if the weather is a little bit bad, if it is rotten on the 24th, we won't have much of a crowd. We will be lucky to have thirty orforty people in that house. Even then there will be a husband who was dragged here who will have a transitor radio on if there is a game on. When thelocal football games are on, you will see there are men sitting in there with a radio and a plug in their ear so they can hear the game and nod at the play.

We have had to fight pretty much tooth and nail. A lot of it has been through Frances' kind of effect on industry and the social elite that we have made a lot of good, strong contacts. The arts have just had to fight here. I visited Dayton once to see some friends. It is a bigger city; it is a more sophisticated city. Another thing, Findlay, in the western part of the state, is a small town no bigger than this, maybe smaller, but Marathon Oil and RCA are there; so people come from sophisticated metropolitan areas, and the feeling is entirely different. Their community theater has grown in short order and then very quickly accepted because people are looking for that sort of thing.

M: People need to express themselves through their work. This theater was probably a vent. Do you think it kept your pressure down?

K: Yes, until it reached the point where I was so involved that it handed the pressure back.

M: You were doing too much.

K: It became a pressure valve too, yes. Two years ago I co-directed "Pippin". I was not as aware as a lot of other people were of the two characters, the person I was co-directing with. I found out in short order when we got into rehearsals. By rights if I had had any real common sense, I should have just tossed the whole thing up in the air and walked out. I learned just recently because of the situation that developed, which I won't go into because it is much too complex and involved, but it was sort of a character assassination plot. I learned that had I left the show, one of the leads and some of the other people also would have left. There would have been nobody to do a lot of the dirty work which I did because I knew it had to get done. I wonder now . . . I wish now I could go back and do it over again and do it that way and see how the show would have survived. Up until "Guys and Dolls," our last show, it was our longest running and biggest drawing show. It played eighteen performances in three and a half weeks, and drew the biggest crowds we ever played to.

M: "Pippin" was in New York, I would roughly say ten years ago, is that right?

K: At the most, yes.

M: Within the last decade, right?

K: Within the last decade, yes. Our production worked quite well in spite of all the problems. Then I took last year off.

M: 1981?

K: Yes, the 1980 to 1981 season. I applied to direct but wasn't assigned a show. The person who became president last year I could not have worked under. She and I just don't get along at all; so I almost relish that year off. I came out and ushered once per show, saw the show, and came to the meetings and voted at the end of the year and things went the other way this year. Like a great many organizations of this type, this one is sort of split down the middle in a sense although I think sanity is in the majority.

M: Do you mean artistically split?

K: Politically. Who is friends with who.

M: Politics, that can be a real mess.

K: There are just a very few of these people who cannot be objective. I find it hard myself at times. I know we have lost a lot of members who have seen this. We had a board member a couple of years ago who was an invaluable person, an absolutely brilliant guy who was into engineering and electronics and stuff. He made that light bridge jump up and

sing and dance and turn somersaults. About two-thirds of the way through his first term on the board this whole thing that I mentioned regarding the production of "Pippin" came up, and before the year was over he resigned. He didn't say why. He said it was because of the pressures of work and getting married, but I think he just had his fill of that kind of nonsense. He didn't need it in his life, and he made it very plain.

M: It is amazing to find out how much, as you say, character assassination . . . You get people with temperaments and in many cases they are talented people. Creative people tend to have those.

K: Or people who think they are talented and they aren't?

M: Those are the ones who seem to give the most display, aren't they?

K: Yes.

M: They play a number on you, and I suffered much from that myself. Some of the stories I heard about myself I ended up hearing them in New York. I thought I was internationally famous or notorious. They were totally untrue, but they had gone to New York City. You are amazed that a background community theater can generate this sort of thing in some cases.

K: The best thing this particular person did wsa to move out of state. It was the best thing that any individual could have done for this group. One person told me that had I left the show, he was going to leave and so was somebody else.

M: What was the thought behind co-directing? Was it because you were just too burdened?

K: It was a big production. I didn't really have the contacts for music and choreography that he did, and I felt we could work well together because he had been in a show that I had directed, in a couple of them. I thought we could get along and be objective about it, but other circumstances came along.

M: There is nothing like a situation like that to make you really reassess your values.

K: A couple of people really jumped on his bandwagon, and it was really tough. I put myself through a lot of emotional hell, but by God, I'm stubborn.

M: When were you born, Ted?

K: June 19, 1927.

No matter what it did to me I stuck that show out right to the very end. Even closing night when we were striking set, somebody went to the other director who was all dressed up and ready to leave before we had the set struck and said something about doing it. He said, "I'm not the technical director." And out the door he went. He was the artistic director, and I was to do all of the dirty work, yes.

In nearly my thirty years with this organization I would say there are probably only three people who I can think of right off the top of my head that I would be very happy never to see again as long as I live, and there are still a number that I tolerate. I am willing to tolerate just about anybody. These three in particular went out of their way to make it extremely difficult. One of them still does.

M: You are lucky though in that long of time that you only ran across three real bad ones.

K: I realize that my friends never paid any attention to it to begin with. There is somebody in this show who was in that show. He just kept his mouth shut. He is back working for me on this show. There is a person who is working for me on this show who helped this other director on a show he did on his own. He went up to her to thank her for her help, and she said, "You're welcome. I look forward to never working with you again."

M: Those are theater stories, and they do happen.

K: She was quiet, but she said, "I look forward to never working with you again."

M: Did he reply?

K: I think he was caught off guard finally. Somebody read for this play and had been in a show of his and had quit. When I cast this person, a couple of people said to me, "Well, what are you going to do when he walks out on your show?" Before he tried out I asked him why he had quit that one. He said, "I couldn't stand that. All he did was stand around at rehearsals. He wanted a businesslike rehearsal; he didn't want this lying down on the stage and breathing and psyching yourself up and doing bending exercises for half an hour. I'm with the school; get yourself up on the stage and get to work.

M: So am I.

K: That was why he came to read for me. He did a show here for somebody else a number of years ago. I came out one of the dress rehearsal nights to watch. He came out here in the lobby

to finish putting on some item of the wardrobe. He sat down next to me and said, "Well, how is my favorite director?" That told me something. I was quite flattered. He couldn't do the show as it turned out because of a work problem. Somebody else was already covering for him, so we had no problem.

M: Having gone to New York and really totally immersed myself in doing theater and nothing else, I found out how incredible it is of how many people do not get down to work. I was involved in this production. There was a young person doing singing exercises singing, "bubble gum, bubble gum, bubble gum," over and over again. The director would come in between 7:30 and 9:00. We didn't know just when he might arrive every night. He said some smart thing about Ohio theater to me. Then I asked him what time he would be arriving the next day. I told him that in Ohio I was trained to come to rehearsal on time and that if you didn't show up, you better have a good reason.

K: We always say around here that the only excuses for missing rehearsals are work and funerals, both your own.

M: I think it is much more prevalent in good regional and community theater that people pay attention--maybe because they are doing it in addition to their own jobs.

K: They are only doing it for the fun of it and the personal satisfaction.

M: And the love of it.

K: Yes.

M: And they get no money. But in New York a lot of the people who get no money and do that work are very careless about their attitudes.

K: This show has been interesting. My theory is that I don't work well in a situation where I have to give an actor everything.

M: You would like them to bounce something to you.

K: I want to pull it out of them; I want them to give me things that I can work with. I'm getting that from everybody with this show. This gal who is helping with the coaching now is working with the one person who has been a little bit behind the rest of them in concentration. She said last night that she felt she got somewhere. I will find out tomorrow. If he isn't up to the level of the others, why, I have Monday and Thursday nights when I can coach with him.

M: You can work with them individually then?

K: Yes, yes. But the others are doing fine. In each of these three family groups as I refer to them in this play, which is constructed a little bit like three one acts melted together, there is one extremely strong person for everybody to bounce off of: The clinical psychologist who has no theater background; one studied theater in England and has acted and directed, plus the guy has done nothing but musicals. She is the pillar of strength. She gives them a lot so that they have something to react off of. In another one, this guy who I have worked with in plays for fifteen years now is playing off the charcter of his wife. I had twenty-one people read for these nine parts which really surprised me. I was afraid that practically nobody would come for tryouts.

M: Why was that? Why did you have that fear about this show?

K: I just thought it was a little too specialized. A lot of really theater knowledgeable and talented people showed up. I had talent that I couldn't use.

M: A lot of people know theater in this area from the functioning of TNT and other community theaters. I think it has helped them and made them more stagewise. I know in New York they think there is nothing between New Jersey and California. I spent a lot of time educating them to the fact that there were some people out there. Native born New Yorkers tend to think there is a wasteland from the border of New Jersey.

K: One thing about this theater is that we have almost always been willing to stick out necks every now and then. We like to think that out of five shows a year there has to be one for us. We had done a lot of things that, for example, Youngstown Playhouse had never put on their stage.

M: That's true.

K: I heard with "Shadow Box" they were afraid to put it on the main stage. So they did it as an extra production. I really am going to be intrigued to see what kind of business it does. Last night was the first night for reservations. There was practically no publicity. I'm going to be fascinated with audience reaction.

M: What is the price of a ticket here now, Ted?

K: Nonmusical is $4 for adults and $2 for students; musicals are $5 and $2.50. Then, of course, there are season tickets at the various patron categories.

M: You have kept that down?

K: Yes. Youngstown is up to $6 or $8 now for musicals, isn't it?

M: More than that I think; I don't know.

K: They have an incredible overhead and a payroll to meet; so they have to do commercial shows. I guess every time there is a Neil Simon available you have to grab it and do it.

We started building this theater before they had started to build their current building. We were that little group in Warren. They wondered what we were going to prove. We did "A Streetcar Named Desire" years and years ago. Two little old maids got up and walked out and never came back.

M: You have been very representative in the shows you have done at TNT. You do an amazing variety of shows.

K: I think too we have a special problem. We have no proscenium arch.

M: Explain what that is.

K: The proscenium is the frame around the conventional stage. We have a quonset type building for an auditorium. The stage and the auditorium share a common wall from front to back with no curtain although the stage is elevated. Therefore, in a sense you are in the same room with the actors whereas, with a proscenium stage, you are in a different room. There is much more of a relationship between the audience and the actor here. Even at the Youngstown Playhouse you have that proscenium frame around the show. That in a sense creates a division between the actors and the audience.

I can see where a proper local person can go see this play in New York and laugh at some of the language because the New Yorkers were professional people who were very daring; but if they came out here and saw somebody they knew do it, or had it happen fifteen feet from them, it would be something entirely different.

M: I'm glad you brought that up because I don't think that there are many people outside of this field who realize that is a constant headache and problem.

You did "Applause", a sophisticated musical that was written in the 1970's.

K: It had problems.

M: I know it had problems. But it was done in this playhouse in Warren, Ohio. It has not been done at the Youngstown Playhouse; they tend to stick strictly to conventional, older musicals.

K: I love doing plays that I have not seen anybody else do. I

remember when "Fiddler on the Roof" was in Broadway. We went to Detroit to see it because of Austin.

M: Austin Pendleton?

K: Yes, he was Motel the tailor. A few years ago I went to see it at the Youngstown Playhouse. It was just the most conventional carbon copy of the Broadway production imaginable. I was totally bored by it. It was well enough done, but it was just not at all exciting.

M: Did you see the first or second production?

K: First. I didn't need to go back a second time. I didn't need to see a carbon copy of a carbon copy no matter how successful it was. That is not knocking success. Right after that a bunch of people over at Kent State University--it was the last year this bunch of kids we knew were there--did it. This Dennis Deal, who was such a brilliant composer and pianist and so on, choreographed it; he had never seen the production before. The guy who had directed it had never seen it. It was the most innovative production of that show I have ever seen.

M: At Kent State?

K: Yes. They had a flying rig. Fruma Sarah was on the flying rig. She would be over the villagers with her toes hooked over the ridge of a roof with her arms folded. She would swoop through the audience.

M: Could you tell the people who Fruma Sarah is?

K: I don't remember distinctly. She is a character in a dream the Tevye has. They took this little bit of a pixyish girl and put her on a flying rig. She just swooped through that crowd and scattered them like they were ten pins. They brought the people in in the dream . . . They used a fog machine, and they put them all under a big parachute with head holes cut in it. They came in with the fog going.

Tevye has a number where he is pulling the cart and he does a solo. they have the orchestra backstage behind the set. They built a ramp down into the orchestra pit. He did this thing right in the orchestra pit looking right at the audience. He pulled the cart on stage, then.

M: That is clever.

K: He was just completely original. You don't have to conform. That is the thing with this stage of ours with no wings. There is an area behind the stage but no side area.

M: It gives you a challenge; you have to change.

K: We had the ceiling over it. We can build two story sets that fit right in to build them into the ceiling. It has created challenges that are really in far out ways advantages.

When you want to do a musical like "Pippin", you build a bunch of wings. You can bring people in. It limits your staging area. But we made the show work. We have done just about any scale musical to do.

M: How many musicals . . . Do you do one musical a year?

K: Sometimes we do two, and the year before last I think we did three because one of them was "The Fantastiks" which almost doesn't count.

M: That is a strange little show to categorize, isn't it?

K: Yes.

M: Is it in its twenty-third year now in New York?

K: I don't know, but it was our third production of it and I hope it was the last one; we don't need it again. There is too much other good theater.

We did it for the first time in 1964. The fellow has just come back to town. He was nineteen then and played El Gallo. He is the one who has stepped into the role of the interviewer in this show.

M: Who is that?

K: Paul Harley. He has gained an incredible amount of experience in the years he was in Cincinnati, both educationwise and practical theater. It is just remarkable. All you get from him is the voice. He is going to do it from the light bridge where he can see the show. He is doing this over speakers, of course. He doesn't have to do make-up or take a curtain call or anything and he gets to run sound while he is up there.

M: When is this going on?

K: We open in two weeks.

M: You said when you were little you were shy, so you didn't involve yourself much. Now you are doing something--theater--which is a very unshy act.

K: Getting into theater pulled me out of my shell. I am still basically a shy person underneath.

M: Yes, but you have learned. I think theater is wonderful in that, but it teaches you to blend with others.

END OF INTERVIEW